

The Other in Chaucer and at Ground Zero

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

الأخر في كتابات تشوسر وفي "أرض الصفر"

د. مختار شودي

جامعة أم القرى - كلية العلوم الاجتماعية - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

ملخص البحث

يحاول هذا البحث إثبات أن موقف تشوسر تجاه الآخر في رائعته الموسومة "حكايات كانتبري" قد تم تجاهله على نطاق واسع من قبل المؤسسة النقدية الغربية، وأن أي إشارة إلى وجود الآخر تؤخذ على أن تشوسر منفتح ولزعم تقبله للأديان الأخرى.

عند تفحص تناول تشوسر لليهود والمسلمين والوثنيين في "الحكايات"، نزعم أن تشوسر لم يشيطن الآخر فقط، بل يميز أخلاقيات النصارى، وأن تسامح تشوسر المزعوم إنما هو نتيجة لقراءة ملطفة لأعماله. وفي الحقيقة فإن أي تعاطف له مع الآخر يظهر عندما يُبدي هذا الآخر انحيازاً ضمناً لوجهة النظر المسيحية. وبهذا فإن تشوسر، إضافة إلى كونه أول شاعر عظيم، فإنه أيضاً يعد أول من استخدم القوة الشعرية لنشر النصرانية السياسية على حساب الأديان الأخرى.

The Other in Chaucer and at Ground Zero

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to prove that Chaucer's ungenerous stance toward the Other in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, has been by and large overlooked by the Western critical establishment and that any notice of the existence of the Other is taken to associate open-mindedness to Chaucer and to allege his tolerance for the other value-systems. By examining Chaucer's treatment of Jews, Muslims, and Pagans in the *Tales*, it is posited that Chaucer not only demonizes the Other but also privileges Christian ethos and that his alleged tolerance is a result of palliative interpretations of his work. In fact, any sympathy on his part for the Other occurs only if the Other shows a clear or implicit partiality to Christian outlook. As such Chaucer, in addition to being the first great poet, is also the first to use poetic powers to promote political Christianity at the expense of other value systems.]

In the binary, self/other, put Christians, Jews, Muslims, West, East, and similar other entities in the position you wish. This process will yield such binaries as Christians/Jews, Christians/Muslims, Jews/Muslims, and West/East or their reverse Jews/Christians...East/West. In each case, obviously, the first group privileges itself and relegates the other to an inferior position. I am not sure whether anyone has thought of trinaries such as Christians/Jews/Muslims or Muslims/Jews/Christians, (father/son/daughter or mother/father/son etc) though as the current situation of these groups warrants, there is an abundant scope of such combinations, which can show the status of one entity in relation to the other two. Now, instead of using the word "privilege," say the first entity is "othering" the other. That is the sense in which I am using the word "other" in this paper. Actually, I have come to believe that "other" is becoming a euphemism for one's "inferiors," "opponents," or "enemies." Bless their souls, Chaucer's Friar (ll. 1280-81) and Summonor (l.1674) have set for us an instructive example. The Friar says:

"Pardee, ye may wel knowe by the name

That of a Summonor may no good be said."

And the Summoner replies: "Freres and feendes been but lyte asunder."

This game of "othering" has been going on since the very beginning. God/Satan, God/Adam, Adam/Eve or the trinaries God/Satan/Eve, God/Adam/Eve, or Satan/Eve/Adam---well, pick the one that suits your purpose. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been at it throughout history. Each group considers the divine law and will its own preserve and does everything in its power to marginalize, exclude, or demonize the other. In their mission, the success or failure of each has depended on the worldly power each group had enjoyed at a given moment in history. In the Middle

Ages, for example, the Muslims were dominant and had occupied Christian and Jewish holy places. Despite their best efforts, the Western Christians could not dislodge Muslims from the holy land. But the contemporary situation is more or less reversed primarily because of West's mastery of science and technology but also due to Judeo-Christian alliance.

Two responses to 9/11, very different from each other, have a bearing on this sort of "othering." And in that respect, they have an uncanny relevance to the Canterbury Tales. While Carolyn Dinshaw's "New Approaches to Chaucer" explores themes such as violence, misogyny, patriarchy, queerness in "Man of Law's Tale," the main thrust of her argument is that Muslims have been and are unjustifiably hostile to Christian nations, particularly those in the West. She actually suggests that Chaucer's Syrian "Sowdanesse" (l.358) cast a long shadow across history and reappeared as the Arab hijackers of planes that killed so many innocent persons on 9/11. Calling the opening section of her essay "Chaucer at Ground Zero," she says:

No scholar nowadays would explicitly create a fantasy Middle Ages

to supply what is perceived as missing in the present day (though in

retrospect it seems always possible to uncover implicit melancholy).

The role of the medieval in popular discourse around September 11

was much more complex as well: President Bush called the war on

terrorism a 'crusade,' invoking an ominously continuous history of

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

colonialism and bloodshed from the European Middle Ages to the

American twenty-first century; if the White House subsequently

backed away from that rhetoric, the mainstream media referred to

Osama bin Laden as 'primitive' and the Taliban as 'medieval' ... (270-271).

Generally, Dinshaw does not seem to be creating the fantasy Middle Ages; instead, she begins to read in Chaucer's story our modern deviances such as misogyny, incest, patriarchy, and of course Muslim violence. The fact is, however, that she makes a connection between the present violence perpetrated by some of the Arab hotheads and the one of their supposedly (for the reason of this qualification, see below my discussion of "Man of Law's Tale") medieval ancestors had done to the Western Christians as shown in Chaucer. She clearly identifies the violent Other with the "Islamicist" (286). But in Chaucer, there is another violent Other that Dinshaw completely overlooks: the Jews in "Prioress' Tale."

And this is where the second response to 9/11, "Somebody Blew Up America" by Amiri Baraka becomes relevant to a discourse of "othering." The speaker in this poem—if it should be called one—assumes the identity of the lowdown America's other, uses his idiom, exploits his rhetorical poses, and makes the reader realize that he, the lowdown and the marginalized, has knowledge and perception that pierces through the mist and can see the reality behind 9/11 which the rich dwellers of penthouses of New Jerusalem have missed altogether. He lays responsibility at the doorsteps of the primeval exploiters and tormentors of humanity, be they Jews or gentile or of any other cultural identity; but he also dubs Bush as "the fake president" and looks askance at the Israelis

in questions like the following: "Who told 4000 Israelis workers at the Twin Towers/ To stay home that day" and "Who know five Israelis was filming the explosion/ And cracking they sides at the notion." So, in his black dialect, he seems to be pointing to Zionist Israelis, not the Jews as such for he counts the Nazis among the primeval tormentors, as accessory to the crime of 9/11. Lovers of Chaucer, I hope, will forgive me for putting Mr. Baraka's harangue along side Chaucer's work when they find in my discussion below that this whimsy or fact stated in "Somebody Blew Up America" is of the same order of "othering" that Chaucer resorted to in the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the "Man of Law's Tale." In that kind of "othering," the fear of the Other gets an intellectual certainty and appears as a holy rage.

My aim in this paper is to sketch the exact position of the Other in the *Canterbury Tales*, to review how the Western critics have seen and interpreted it, and finally to show that Chaucer's work is defined by a promotion of Christian ethos and a denial of grace to the Other.

Chaucer and the Western Critics

"An immense labor of historical adaptation is necessary before our minds are ready to make the aesthetic approach to Chaucer" (Ransom 1114). Much of that labor has already been undertaken and the path toward aesthetic apprehension of Chaucer's work paved and lighted. Chaucer's attitude toward the medieval monastic order, his comic hilarity, his keen observation of the hidden motives behind human actions, and his allegorical immensities have been in various degrees made available to the readers (see in particular Lewis, Pearsall, Bennett, Robertson, and Brewer). Likewise the aesthetic peculiarities of his work have also been stated in no uncompromising terms. "Alone among his contemporaries," observes Emile Legouis, "Chaucer put art first. He did not seek to direct men, to judge events, to reform morals, or

to present a philosophy." Legouis further asserts: "Poetry was his only object" (131). Chaucer's dedication to the artistic endeavor, to his commitment to entertain, is highlighted by several other scholars. John Livingston Lowes, for example, categorically announced in his lectures that Chaucer "had, to be sure, no message"(199). Lowes obviously thinks that there is no teaching or preaching in Chaucer. H. S. Bennett declares: "Irony is part of his omnipresent sense of humour." Bennett further alleges that "Chaucer seldom allows any topic, however serious, to extinguish his realization that even here laughter may have its place. It is not the harsh, tortured laughter of Swift but more akin to that of Shakespeare." Accordingly, continues Bennett, "The Wife of Bath and Sir John Falstaff would have understood each other" (77). The Canterbury Tales, concludes Derek Traversi, is "the unique comic achievement" (236). Opinions on the nature of Chaucer's work had actually been voiced in the poet's own life time. In a poem written in 1386, Eustache Deschamps had praised Chaucer and had called him god of secular love and "glory of squirehood" (qtd in Brewer 243).

This enthusiastic portrait of Chaucer as entertainer is balanced by some others who see in him some rhetorical postures. A. C. Cawley, for instance, says in his introduction to Canterbury Tales: "It would be wrong to think of the Canterbury Tales as an entertaining handbook of seven deadly sins, but there can be no doubt that Chaucer's serious study of the didactic literature of his day stimulated and also circumscribed his observation of human nature" (xii). Cawley then observes that there is sufficient ground to see Chaucer as a religious writer. "The Retraction," he says,

is Chaucer's 'good ending' to a series of tales orientated by a medieval

Christian view of life: it is the extreme but logical conclusion of

Chaucer's grand scheme to show man as pilgrim in this mortal life,

in which worldly joys and sorrows are seen in perspective against a

background of the 'endlees blisse of hevne'" (xiii).

J. A. Burrow, on the other hand, suggests that despite the serious religious ending in the Parson's Tale, the book on the journey of the pilgrims is a lively source of fun and amusement (48).

In short, as things stand, these are the two poles in Chaucer criticism: one emphasizes his comically aesthetic art and the other brings forward his rhetorically inclined yet pleasurable portrayal of medieval Christianity. Each side desists from seeing any partisan commitment on the part of the poet. In the view of the Western critics, it seems, Chaucer is either a universally comic entertainer or a corrective force within Christendom. By and large, his asides on the followers of other religions are ignored. Actually, as is clear from Cawley's remarks, the Other is subsumed in the Christian experience. In most critiques, the Christian pilgrims in Chaucer's book are often seen as representatives of all humanity. In such commentaries, the shift from "Christian" to "human" very subtly eliminates the existence of the Other. The purpose of my study is to show that under the guise of humorous/aesthetic presentation of individual Christian lives, Chaucer not only promotes Christian values but also puts down the Other. As it seems to me, Chaucer may have been the first literary intellectual to espouse the cause of political Christendom. The historical Christian adversity toward the Jews and Muslims is pretty loud and clear in his masterpiece, the Canterbury Tales. There, a holier than thou attitude is as clear as

daylight; but it is submerged by Western critical establishment under the aesthetic colors of Chaucer's art.

The Jews

Take for example the Prioress' Tale in which all the details are contrived to praise Christian ideas of chastity, innocence, and the miraculous grace of the Virgin Mary and to condemn the Jewish life in all its manifestations. In the story a humble Christian woman's son is shown to be so enamored of the song of Alma Redemptoris that he sings it loudly on his way to and back from school. And the way happens to be a street inhabited by the Jews, whose animosity to Christians is captured by the narrator of the story as follows:

Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,
That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest,
Up swal, and seide, 'O Hebrayk peple, allas!'
Is this to yow a thyng that is honest,
That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest
In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence,
Which is against youre lawes reverence? (Chaucer 377-78)¹

Abetted by Satan thus, a "cursed Jew" catches the boy, cuts his throat, and throws his body in a stinking pit where the Jews relieve themselves. The boy's mother goes around looking for her son. When she calls his name near to that pit, the boy begins to sing O Alma Redemptoris Mater. He keeps singing this despite the fact that he is physically dead. The entire machinery of the Catholic Church becomes active to find out the secret of this miracle. An abbot asks the boy in holy Trinity's name to reveal the cause of the singing. And sure enough, it turns out the boy's love for Christ's mother who had put a little grain on his tongue. The abbot then

removes the kernel and the singing stops. Then the boy is given a Christian burial.

Even this bare outline of the story is enough to prove that the Other, in this case the Jews, do not deserve either honorable mention or respectable association with decent (i.e. Christian) humanity. There are, however, several other details in the story which heap up dirt on the Jews. To begin with, the Jewry's stereotypical role in financial matters is pointed out; for it was established by the lord of that Asian city for "foul usure and lucre of vileynye/ Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye" (CT 375). This role of the Jews to facilitate financial matters in the Western Christendom is matched with the Christian preference for holy poverty. Also the group loyalty of the Jews is shown by their clustering together in a ghetto through which the Christian children have to pass to attend their school. Furthermore, the Jews are portrayed as criminally inclined and good at covering up ill deeds. The dead boy's mother keeps asking them if they saw or knew anything about her son and the "cursed" Jews do not tell her even though they were the ones to hire the boy's murderer. At this point the narrator herself passes a direct judgment on the Jews. She says: "Oh, cursed people of Herod, born again, how can your evil intention help you? Murder will out—it never fails, especially where God's glory shall thereby spread." The narrator closes her tale by invoking Hugh of Lincoln, "also slain by cursed Jews" (CTL 127). Finally, she glorifies the murdering of the Jews for, as she puts it, the ruler of the city would not tolerate such evil doing. Thus, murdering of the Jews is not only exonerated but sanctified.

In addition to this very direct accusation, the ultimate historic guilt of the Jews is almost invariably kept in view in the body of the *Canterbury Tales*. The redeemer who died on the cross is invoked far too often in the book. The words Christ or Crist occurs two hundred and ten times; the words "tree of cross" twenty-five times; the word "Christes" fifty-two times; and when the number of

occurrences of words like “Jesu,” “Jhesu,” “Jesus,” “Jhesus,” “Sone,” and “God” is added to these numbers, the total comes out to be one thousand and forty-one (Concordance, 2716-2849). On the average, that is roughly twice per page of Chaucer’s tales. And it goes without saying that each mention of these words brings home to the reader the entity responsible for what happened to the redeemer. So, along with the intensification of Christian notions of godhead, the condemnation of the Other is also achieved. To be sure, many of these occurrences can be attributed to the general unconscious habit of Chaucer’s Christian pilgrims; but this very fact further provides a proof of vilification of one community by the other. The accusation, the hatred, has sunk unto the unconscious, and has become part of the Christian faith. Occasionally in the tales, the presumed guilt of the Other is used as an illustration of the moral degradation of the Christians themselves. Take, for example, the way Chaucer’s Pardoner describes the moral condition of three Christian youngsters of Flaunders:

Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable

That it is grisly for to heere hem swere.

Oure blissed Lordes body they totere,--

Hem thought that Jewes rente hym nocht ynough. (CT, 348).

Roughly translated, it means that by swearing these profligates tore apart the body of our blessed Lord, as if the Jews had not done a good job. Here the demonization of the Other appears stronger than the denunciation of the Christian ruffians.

Again, take for illustration, the discussion between Proserpina and Pluto that takes place over the behavior of May, the wife of January, in the Merchant’s Tale. Pluto tends to believe that all women are deplorably unfaithful and he refers to Solomon as an authority. To which Proserpina replies:

“What do I care for your authorities? I know very well that this Jew,

 this Solomon, found many of us women fools. But though he found

 no good woman, yet many another man has found faithful, good, and

 virtuous women. Witness those women who dwell in Christ’s house;

 they proved their constancy with martyrdom. The Roman histories

 also mention many a true, faithful wife. But, sir—don’t be angry—although

 he said he found no good woman, I beg you to interpret his meaning

 broadly; he meant that no one is sovereignly excellent except God,

 who sits in Trinity. And, by the one true God, why do you make so

 much of Solomon? What though he built a temple, God’s house?

 What though he was rich and glorious? He also built a temple to

 false gods. How could he do anything more forbidden? By God,

 whitewash his name as you will, he was a lecher and an idolater, and

 in his old age he forsook the true God (CTL 243-244).

This discussion—rather, interpolated material—accomplishes two aims. First, it praises the married life lived as a Christian sacrament, a sort of adoration of “women who dwell in Christ’s house.” Second, it not only denigrates Solomon’s view of women but also his service to the divine temple. In fact, it asserts that his religion was false. And since his temple—his faith—is overtly contrasted with the Church, i.e. “Christ’s house”, the discussion clearly elevates the Christian worldview while dismissing the view of the Other. The story in which this interpolation occurs is undoubtedly about a laughable human situation. A foolish old man marrying a young woman, who satisfies her sexual appetite illicitly, has been a constant source of amusement; but Chaucer exploits this situation to privilege the Christian life over the practice or experience of the Other.

It would be wrong to ignore the amusement value of Chaucer’s book; but, as I am trying to show in this study, it would be equally wrong not to see privileging of Christianity as a strong thematic undercurrent in the *Canterbury Tales*. Of course, the issue of determining the point of view is crucial and it will be undertaken in another part of this study. It is pertinent, however, to examine here the portrayal of another group that is present as the Other in Chaucer’s masterpiece.

The Muslims

Next to the Jews, the Muslims were another target of the ire of the medieval Christendom. For centuries their book, “Alkaron” and their prophet, “Mahoun,” as Chaucer spells Al-Qura’an and Muhammad (peace be upon him), were constantly distorted by both wise and half-witted priests to win the sympathies of their faithful congregations in favor of the Trinitarian Godhead. (The OED, v.6, p. M38 lists more than a dozen distortions of the name of Islam’s prophet). This ire was not limited to the pulpit; it was also expressed on the battlefields in the name of the Holy Crusades. By

Chaucer's century, the attitude of the West to Islam had taken its full shape. As one can gather from Norman Daniel's book *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, the Muslims were regarded as the followers of a false prophet, "the sower of discord," as Dante has put it in his *Comedy*, the defilers of holy places in the Holy Land, and lecherous polygamists (17-35). All this, according to Daniel, was the result of a deliberate campaign to malign the Islamic Other. "The basic tenets of Islam," as he notes, "were well understood by a considerable number of writers and in one way or another deliberately misrepresented by most" (35, emphasis added). Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" provides a typical example of such misrepresentations.

Before I take up an analysis of the "Man of Law's Tale," it seems to me necessary to present the usually accepted and endorsed view in the Western scholarship about this and other tales that contain multicultural materials. To portray Chaucer as an unbiased and objective observer of humanity is the ultimate aim of this scholarship. Literally, every textual detail that may undermine this image of Chaucer is buried under a generalized perception of the poet. Any one interested to review Chaucerian scholarship from the post-colonial point of view will find a concerted effort on the part of the Western critics either to brush off unsavory details or to mitigate their importance to Chaucer's aims. Commentaries on this tale that I have been able to look at fit Edward Said's characterization 'scandals of "scholarship" ' –a scholarship which purports to be objective, but in reality amounts to propaganda (316).

William Paton Ker, for example, characterizes the prejudices of the medieval Christianity found in Chaucer's work as follows:

"The rich chaotic and formless life, the ooze and wrack of the medieval depths, are indeed left behind and cleared away when

Chaucer comes to his own. But no great poet has retained in so

large a part of his extant work the common 'form and pressure' of his own time and the generation immediately before his own (246).

In fact, continues Ker, Chaucer retained in his work the bulk of "common place matter" of his time (246). He believes that the story of Constance has "nobility of temper" (256). In other words, Chaucer's work may contain some of the medieval Christian biases against the Other, but they, Ker maintains, must be looked at as form and pressure of his time and must thus be considered irrelevant to the picture of humanity Chaucer has presented. This, quite clearly, is only a clever apology for Chaucer's prejudice against the Other. Even when the Man of Law's Tale is analyzed at some length, the unpleasant details are papered over to suggest that Chaucer must have been dealing with general human situations. After calling the "matter" of the story "a pious tale of folk-lore origin," D. S. Brewer gives this summary of its plot:

It tells of Constance, daughter of the Christian Emperor of Rome,

who is twice married to a pagan king, twice converts her husband,

is twice betrayed by her irreconcilably pagan mother-in-law, and

twice committed to the sea in a boat without oars or sail. In each

case she is afloat for several years. Her first husband is killed by his

mother but she is eventually restored to the second. (124).

In his commentary, Brewer states: "The Man of Law's Tale says that mothers-in-law are difficult for daughters-in-law; and that strong opinions, especially, religious belief, are divisive in families" (1Brewer 176). The scorpion Sultanness of Syria and the devilish mother of King Aella vanish into difficult mothers-in-law and the Christian-Muslim animosity so graphically presented in the first part of the story merges into divisive social opinions, and the readers are expected, rather urged, to keep eulogizing the Chaucerian poetic achievement in objectivity.

Such attempts to critically whitewash and to universalize Chaucer, I believe, reach its zenith in Brenda Deen Schildgen's recent book, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* and, therefore, I am going to quote a bit extensively from her text, so that the readers may judge for themselves the thrust of her argument. In the book, Schildgen mainly focuses on stories told by the Knight, Squire, Man of Law, Franklyn, Wife of Bath, Prioress, Monk, and 2nd Nun; but, in her discussion, she includes the total ambience of the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. After dismissing the 20th century's effort to see "Christian ethos" in Chaucer, she says:

These tales use the narrative resources of the matters of Thebes, Britain,

and Araby, Christian antiquity, ancient histories, and the miracles of the

Virgin. Exploring alterity, they examine philosophies like stoicism and

Epicureanism and other pagan beliefs including fairy lore. They also pit

Christian teleological ethics and history against the imagined beliefs and

practices of Moslems, Jews, and pagans. As a group, the tales deliberate

on the grand rifts between the Christian or pagan past and Chaucer's present

and between other cultural worlds and the Latin Christian world. They offer

many philosophical views about what constitutes "wisdom" and "lawe,"

while exploring alternative moral attitudes to the Christian mainstream of

Chaucer's time. Their presence in the Canterbury Tales shows Chaucer's

expansive narrative interest in the intellectual and cultural worlds outside

Christianity. Their inclusion emphasizes the enlarged scope of secular

cultural interests in late fourteenth-century England, as the representative

story tellers reveal (2; emphasis added).

By the time Schildgen winds up her discussion, she changes her mind about Chaucer's "interests in late fourteenth-century England." She concludes: 'Apart from the prologue, Chaucer's stories do not construct an idea of "Englishness" or of "England." In fact, she asserts that "Chaucer retreats from any contemporary cultural or political hegemonies. ...[For his] story telling frame permits..."neutrality of worldviews" ' (125)

How much neutrality of worldview there is in the Prioress' tale, the readers can judge for themselves from my analysis of the tale given earlier in this paper. Now, whether the "Man of Law's

Tale" explores the moral alternative offered by Islam or whether it sets up the Islamic Other as an irreconcilable enemy will become clear in the discussion below. Here it is important to sketch the total and final lesson that the Western criticism adduces from Chaucer's work. Partly, it was hinted at in the opening paragraphs of this paper. Schildgen's book presents quite a direct picture. In addition to suggesting an openness toward the Other, Schildgen asserts that 'no matter how invested the characters might be in their positions and attitudes, the collection taken as a whole does not advance a consensus bound to a single dominant worldview' (3). This amounts to saying that in the *Canterbury Tales*, there is notable tolerance for the Other and further that there is no privileging of Christianity over the faith and culture of the Other.

I believe that this perception of Chaucer's work, if not scandalous, is certainly highly misleading because his text, when read objectively, does not support it. In my view, just as the Prioress demonizes the Jews and sanctifies the Christians in her story, so does the Man of Law portray the Muslims as being wickedly intolerant and totally devoid of human sympathy. This is apparent in both the editorial comments and the descriptive details in the Man of Law's tale. Actually the narrator of this story manipulates the events to privilege everything Christian. First, the fame of the virtuous beauty of Constance, the daughter of the emperor of Rome, is shown to have conquered the heart of a Muslim Sultan even though he has never seen but only heard about her from some merchants. When the Sultan wants to have Constance in marriage, the Man of Law puts these words into the mouths of the Sultan's counselors: "No Christian prince would be eager to have his daughter marry according to our excellent laws laid down for us by Mohammad, our prophet." Immediately, the Sultan expresses his desire to become Christian (CTL 92). In addition to sarcasm in the phrase "our excellent laws," that would be enjoyed by Chaucer's audience, the Man of Law here is doing a

lot more than merely inventing a fictional narrative. He is showing how infirm the Sultan is in his commitment to his faith as compared to the steadiness of the Christians. By showing the readiness of the Sultan's courtiers to change their faith, he is suggesting a general state of affairs. A clear inference from this fabulous situation is that Muslims can play fast and loose with their faith if it suits their worldly interests while Christians remain steadfast in their faith. Of course, the narrator describes an exception in the person of the Sultaness, the mother of the Sultan; and here is when he uses all his editorial power to malign everything Islamic. Since this woman wants to resist her son's change of faith for the sake of marrying a Christian princess and since she makes a murderous plot, every possible negative epithet is showered on her by the Man of Law. After calling her a "well of vices," he says:

"Oh, Sultaness, root of all evil Virago, second Semiramis! Oh, serpent in female guise, just like the serpent bound deep in hell!

Oh, deceitful woman, nest of every vice; here is everything within

which your malice can breed against virtue and innocence! Oh,

Satan, envious since the day you failed to conquer mankind, you know

the most effective approach to women! You caused Eve to lead us into

bondage, and you will doom this Christian marriage. Alas, in this way

you make women your agents when you wish to cause trouble" (CTL 95).

The Man of Law actually leaves his narrative and editorially expresses the Biblical characterization of woman of which the Sultanness is an example; it is ironic, though, to note that no matter how virtuous Constance is she too is a woman. But in the opinion of the Man of Law, Constance represents all that virtue which is Christian and the Sultanness embodies all that evil which is Islamic and demonic.

In his effort to apotheosize Constance, the Man of Law throws overboard the laws of probability as well. This he does whether Constance faces the Muslims, seas or Pagans. To begin with, she comes to Syria as the wife of a Sultan who as a rule would have efficient system of governance supported by a network of spies. Is it possible then to believe that such a Sultan would not get a wind of his mother's schemes? Furthermore, if the Sultanness is a veritable evil, how come she spares the life of Constance and puts her in a boat, though rudderless, with abundant supplies? The Man of Law is not bothered by these inconsistencies, for a logically constructed narrative would not serve his real purpose, which is to show how Constance, a virtuous Christian woman, is protected by Christ. He intentionally makes the boat rudderless so that he may assert the helpful agency of Christ, and put these words in her mouth when she is in the rudderless boat:

Oh, clear beneficent altar, holy cross, red with the piteous
blood of

the Lamb which washed ancient evil from the world, protect
me from

the devil and his claws on the day I drown in the sea.
Victorious tree,

protection of the faithful, the only tree which was worthy to
bear the

King of Heaven with his fresh wounds... protect me and give me the

power to amend my life (CTL 97).

Like a long winded priest, the Man of Law dwells at length on divine protection for virtuous Christians. He begins with the question: "One might ask why she was not also slain at the feast. Who saved her? And I answer that question with another: Who saved Daniel in that terrible den...?" Then he elaborates thus: "God wished to exhibit His miraculous power through Constance so that we could observe His mighty deed. Christ, who is the balm for every hurt, often does things through various means for a certain end not clear to mankind because in our ignorance we cannot perceive His wise providence...."(CTL 97—98) No one can or should quarrel with God's providence; but would a non-Christian accept God/Christ equation? Anyway, the Man of Law then asks another question: "Who saved [Constance] from drowning in the sea?" His answer brings in the details of "Jonah in the whale's body" and the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea (CTL 97-98). All the while he is extolling Christ/God's providence and denies the Sultaness any semblance of human feelings.

In his comparison between Constance's life as given in the "Man of Law's Tale" and as it exists in Trivet's Anglo-Norman Chronicles, Edward A. Block has shown that all apostrophes and prayers by Constance to God, Christ, Virgin Mary, and the Cross are Chaucer's additions. He concludes that by virtue of these additions, on the one hand, Constance's character has become more "religious and pious" than it is in Trivet, and on the other, the tale has changed into "a magnificently rhetorical poem, characterized to a high degree by consciously contrived artistry" (586). It must be noted, however, that Block, being one of the "scandalously" objective scholars, ignores the fact that, corresponding to the increase in Constance's hagiographical status, the adverse portrait

of the Other is also considerably intensified. The two mothers-in-law, one Muslim and the other Pagan, begin to look like two horribly hellish figures as compared to Constance's saintly motherhood. Actually, the Terrible Mother as opposed to the loving Compassionate Mother is a particularly intriguing idea in the "Man of Law's Tale." The Sultanness from the Muslim Other and Donegild from the pagan side are portrayed in the story as not only the source of every trouble Constance has to bear but also as the cause of a tragic fate for their own sons. The Sultanness kills her son, and Donegild contrives to separate her son from his wife and child. Now, compare these unmotherly and murderous actions to Constance's care for her son. After she is made to leave Aella's kingdom, she holds her weeping baby in her arms, kneels, addresses the Holy Virgin as "Mother," and says:

[I]t is true that through the instigation of a woman mankind was lost and

doomed to die, for which thy Child was torn on the cross.
Thy blessed

eyes viewed all His torment; there is therefore no comparison
between thy

woe and any woe suffered on earth. Thou sawest thy Child
killed before

thine eyes, yet now my little child still lives. Now, bright
Lady, ... glory

of womankind, fair Virgin, haven of refuge, bright star of day,
take pity

on my child..." (CTL 104-105).

On the authority of Jung, Cirlot states that the mythical Terrible Mother "is the counterpart of the Pieta" (207). Man of Law's Tale clearly enshrines the compassionate aspect of Mother

Nature in Constance, a Christian woman, and its terrible aspect in women representing the Other. If the artistic beauty of the tale and the hagiographic image of Constance are enhanced by changes made by Chaucer, they are certainly achieved at the expense of even a barely human image of the Other.

In his effort to show how Christianity compares with Islam, the Man of Law even ignores a very crucial historical fact. He presents Syria as a Muslim country at a time when Prophet Muhammad had not received his call. According to history, King Aella or Ella started his rule in 560 and he died in 588 (Enc. Brit.[1951] V. 8, 376). The prophet of Islam lived from 570 to 632 and had received his call in about 610, when he was 40 years old (Ali 7-19), and when Aella had been dead for about 22 years. Clearly, the Man of Law or Chaucer himself manipulates in his story the temporal chronology to present the commonly held view of Muslims all along the medieval Christendom, particularly their image notoriously advertised during the Crusades by the Church establishment. All tempering with historical facts and changes in the text introduced by Chaucer have only one dominant purpose: demonizing the Islamic Other and privileging the Christian outlook. But Chaucer's whimsical back-dating of Islamic law does not deter Western scholars when it comes to protecting Chaucer's image. For example, in her discussion of "Man of Law's Tale," Dinshaw asserts that Chaucer's sense of history "includes a more accurate chronology" (284). One wonders how credible this idea can be in face of the fact that Chaucer makes Syria a Muslim country even when the Islamic dispensation had not started in Arabia itself. Chaucer does so because his society readily regarded Muslims as its enemy. Likewise, Amiri Baraka blames the Zionists for 9/11 because in his circle the idea has convincing legitimacy. Needless to say that the judgment of both is based more on whimsy than on objective understanding of the respective situation. But every thing goes when the object of the Self is to demonize its Other.

The Pagans

In the "Knight's Tale," Chaucer gives an impression of accepting the pagan Other; but even there, he does so by peeping through the Christian dispensation. The idea that human soul is wandering in the wilderness of this world and that it answers to or obeys an overarching will of a beyond, whether identified as Greek mythical gods or as Christian Trinity, under girds the structure of the Knight's Tale. Outwardly, the life of Palamon, Arcite, Emily, and others is shaped by Venus, Mars, Diana, and above them by Jupiter or Saturn; but the tale contains enough material that makes the efforts of Theseus not just parallel to but an image of Sacramental living. To begin with, the conquest over Amazons by Theseus and his marriage to their queen Hyppolyta suggests not only a reaffirmation of man's superiority over woman but also a restoration of the Christian social order of monogamous relationship between the sexes that had been violated by these mythical woman warriors. The quarrel between Palamon and Arcite over Emily may also be understood as a dramatic explanation of the same idea. Since polyandry is forbidden their struggle to win her is brought in line with the requirements of monogamy. Arcite who wins the battle is made to die of a fatal fall from his horse, and thus Palamon's chances to fulfil his love are made possible. The final part of the story sounds almost like a solemnization of marriage sacrament between Palamon and Emily. In the "Knight's Tale", according to Robertson, "Chaucer sets the marriage theme in humanistic terms..., suggesting the proper function of marriage as an ordering principle in the individual and in the society, and develops its manifold implications in the subsequent tales" (376-77). Clearly, the pagan marriage rituals in this Tale are transformed into Christian practices.

Moreover, the tale has several Christian terms or notions. Arcite feels himself in "purgatory" while he is in jail and can see Emily daily as she walks in the garden; but he considers himself in

“hell” when he is freed and banished from Athens, being no more able to see his beloved (ll. 1225-26). Also when Theseus wants to put an end to Emily’s prolonged weeping over Arcite’s death, he quotes the words of his father Egeus, which apparently represent Classical wisdom but the whole idea of joy changing into sorrow and human mortality is just as much Christian as any other. And his comparing of this life to a journey full of sorrow is specifically Christian. “This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro” (ll. 2847-48). Despite its attribution to a classical character, this undoubtedly is a Christian perception of life. Actually, Chaucer has ingenious ways of injecting Christian notions into pagan materials. For instance, when he presents Emily praying to Venus (ll. 2297ff.), the idea of Christian virginity and chastity gets mixed up with the love duel between Arcite and Palamon. Or take for example his descriptions of paintings on the walls of the temple of Mars. There all the future deaths or murders or other accidents are present, even those (for instance, death of Caesar, Nero, and Antony—ll.2030ff.) the original writer of the Knight’s tale could never have known. This indeed is a motivated interpolation, for it highlights the Christian idea of predetermination or fore-ordination. Finally, the concept of the First Mover as illustrated in the last speech of Theseus is actually a medieval understanding of the created world. His words quoted below may as well form part of a Christian priest’s sermon:

‘The First Moevere of the cause above,
Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,
Greet was th’ effect, and heigh was the entente.
Well wiste he why, and what therof he mente;
For witht faire cheyne of love and bond
The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond
In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.

That same Prince and that Moevere, ' quod he,
'Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun
Certeyn dayes and duracioun
To all that is engendred in this place,
Over the whiche day they may not pace,
Al mowe they yet the dayes wel abregge. (ll. 2987-96)

This is truly a beautiful description of God's purpose in creation and in starting human history. All who believe in a powerful First Cause (or say God, the Creator) would accept the central point of this speech by Theseus, the pagan: everyone has been allotted a particular time. However, it may be informative to raise a question about the coordinative use of the word "Prince" along with "Mover." Apparently, the two words refer to the same being; but, couldn't a medieval Christian identify the Prince with Christ? If so, who is the first Mover: God or Christ? This may seem an unusual interpretation of Chaucer's text; but it surely is not out of place when seen in the context of other Christianizing efforts already pointed out.

It may be asked, then, in what sense Chaucer accepts the Pagan other? The foregoing analysis of the "Knight's Tale" obviously points to one answer only: when the Pagan has been Christianized. And certainly, that in no way is an acceptance of the Pagans or an "openness to alterity" of other cultures, as maintained in Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" by Schildgen (13). It is rather an imposition of Christian dispensation on the Pagan way of life. It certainly looks like back-dating of Christianity. Chaucer leaves this impression whenever any sympathetic or slightly objective treatment of non-Christian *matere* occurs in the Canterbury Tales. Take for, example, Virginius/Appius affair in The Physician's Tale that is taken from Livy's Roman history. In the original account given by Livy,

almost all action of the story revolves round the corrupt intentions and actions of the Roman judge Appius, who, in order to satisfy his lust, had started false proceedings to declare the beautiful Virginia a slave allegedly belonging to one of his men, Marcus Appius. Since the father of the girl, Virginius, a citizen soldier, was away on duty, she was taken into legal custody until the appearance of the father. The judge even tried to block the father's appearance. But people, who knew the family and the girl, actively opposed the steps taken by the judge. The situation, because of the evil intentions of the judge, became so complicated that Virginius couldn't do much; out of frustration, he requested Appius that he be allowed a few last moments with his daughter. He was permitted, and as he came near the girl he took out his dagger and killed the girl saying: "In this manner, my child, the only one in my power, do I secure your liberty." Then he turned to the judge and said: "With this blood, Appius, I devote thee to perdition" (Livy). In the account given by the Physician, the father and daughter have a long conversation in which the father explains what he intends to do and why. The girl's response is this: "Then give me father time to lament my death a little while. For Jephtha gave his daughter time to lament before he killed her." Then she consoles herself by saying: "God be thanked that I shall die a virgin" (LMC, 284-85). The question clearly arises: "was this pagan girl an avid reader of the Christian Bible that was not written when she was alive?" Or is it an obvious attempt to see the Pagans through Christian lenses? The latter clearly is the case because the former would be historically impossible; though, as we have seen in "Man of Law's Tale", Chaucer's narrator is not bothered by incorrect chronology of history. Anyhow, the original purpose of Livy's account was, in Kiser's words, "to document the political corruption of the Roman patriciate, represented by Appius in his capacity as a judge"; but the narrator in Chaucer's tale gives the matter a Christianizing twist making it look like a punishment of the innocent (133).

A Moot Point: Conclusion

The question as to who is responsible for the image of the Other in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer himself or his imaginary pilgrim narrators may for some be a moot point. Any satisfactory answer will depend upon how much aesthetic distance is maintained by Chaucer as the producer of the *Tales*. Even though, the matter is brought up in every serious discussion of Chaucer's work there is no agreement about it among the Western critics (see, in particular, Donaldson, Howard, and Leicester, Jr. as they argue over it). Dinshaw states this uncertainty very clearly. "The structure of the *Canterbury Tales* has always muddied the issue of authorial responsibility and intention." After discussing various possible themes in "Man of Law's Tale", she concludes: "The issue of Chaucer's intention here will never be clear, given the multivocalic nature of the *Tales*" (285). Robertson, however, suggests that the aesthetic distance, even when determined, does not change the actual implication of medieval perspective because at that time the "attention of the poets and their audiences was directed to the world around them not for its own sake but for the sake of the ideas it suggested" (233). He further maintains that "Chaucer's characters are frequently reflections of a conceptual reality, and the actions of these characters are often more significant as developments in a conceptual realm" (272). It is, therefore, Chaucer who is presenting the Sultanness and the Jews as a veritable evil for they represented the inimical Other to the medieval Christendom. And his purpose, as shown in the discussion above, is to let his audience perceive the Syrians of "Man of Law's Tale" and the Jews of "Prioress' Tale" as such. As for Theseus, the Pagan, he stands for those putative (Christian) faithful of the past who had not yet seen the light.

No matter how narratological tidbit in the *Canterbury Tales* is understood, the fact remains that the temporal reality of the Other is either demonized or transformed into a Christianized conceptual identity. Whether it is Chaucer or his imaginary narrators, the

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

image of the Sultanness, Soloman, and Theseus is respectively of a devil, a false prophet, and a respectable gentile. This uncontroversial fact and the privileging of Christianity remain absolutely clear and relevant in the Tales despite an unmitigated effort by the Western critical establishment to prop up the Chaucerian literary and aesthetic monument. The material evidence of text is enough to undermine such efforts. This conclusion simply purports to show that the cultural hero of the Self does not espouse the cause of the Other. And Chaucer's masterpiece fails to transcend group loyalties.

Works Cited

- A Complete Concordance to the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, vol. 4. Ed. Akio
- Oizumi. New York: Olms-Weidmann, 1991.
- Ali, Syed Ameer. A Short History of the Saracens. London: Macmillan, 1955.
- Baraka, Amiri. "Somebody Blew Up America." <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/>
- Bennett, H. S. "Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century," 1947. Oxford History of English
- Literature. Vol. 2, part 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970. rept.
- Block, Edward R. "Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer's
- Man of Law's Tale." PMLA, 68(1953), 572-616.
- Brewer, D. S. "Images of Chaucer 1386-1900." Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical
- Studies in Middle English Literature, 1966. Ed. D. S. Brewer. London:
- Nelson's University Papers, 1970, 240-270.
- Brewer, D. S. Chaucer: Third Edition. London: Longman, 1973
- Burrow, J. A. "Old and Middle English (c. 700-1485)." The Oxford Illustrated
- History of English Literature. Ed. Pat Rogers. Oxford UP, 1987, 1-59.

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Tr. From Spanish by Jack Sage. New York: Philosophical Society, 1962.
- Cawley, A. C. "Introduction". *Canterbury Tales*. London: Dent, 1958, vii-xiv.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "New Approaches to Chaucer". *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. "Chaucer the Pilgrim." *PMLA*. 69(1954), 928-36.
- *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1951). Vol. 8.
- Howard, Donald R. "Chaucer the Man." *PMLA*. 80(1965), 337-43.
- Ker, William Paton. "The Poetry of Chaucer." *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*. Vol 2. Ed. D. S. Brewer. London & New York: Routledge, 1978, 233-259.
- Kiser, Lisa J. *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*. Hanover and London: UP of New England, 1991.
- Legouis, Emile. *A History of English Literature. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance (650-1660)*. Tr. From French by Helen Douglas Irvine. London: Dent, 1960.
- Leicester, Jr., H. Marshall. "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*." *PMLA*. 95(1980), 213-24.
- Livy. "History of Appius and Virginius": Latin Translation into Modern English, at

- www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/hyst/livy-vir.html
- Lowes, John Livingston. *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Oxford: At the Clarendon P., 1934.
- Lumiansky, R. M. *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: A New Modern English Prose Translation*. New York: Washington Square P., 1971.
- Robertson, Jr., D. W. *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1962.
- Schildgen, Brenda Deen. *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's*
- "Canterbury Tales." Gainesville: Florida University Press, 2001.
- Traversi, Derek. *The Canterbury Tales: A Reading*. London: The Bodley Head, 1983.

By Mukhtar Chaudhary

Notes and Comments:

- 1 All references to Chaucer's text are taken from A. C. Cawley's edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (CT). The Chaucerian language, however, is kept to a minimum and often its modernized prose version in R. M. Lumiansky's translation (CTL) is quoted in the paper. For complete references, see works cited.