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"Woful Custance": Female Sanctity and the Poetics of Pity in *The Man of Law's Tale*

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Abstract

The question of Custance's female sanctity has garnered much debate for decades; while some find the characterization suggestive, many have a hard time grappling with Chaucer's portrayal of a married, child-bearing Custance vis-à-vis traditional female sainthood. This article contributes to this critical juncture by arguing that Custance's womanhood and victimized dispositions signal a revision of Chaucer's hagiographic poetics via emotions. Following the school of the history of emotions, I divide my discussion into four sections. First, I summarize the critical receptions of Custance's sainthood, observing that most critics call Custance's sainthood into question against the backdrop of early virgin martyrs. I argue that such a critical rendering of female sainthood is problematic, as female sanctity in the late Middle Ages is a highly negotiable term that goes beyond the constraints of virginity and martyrdom. With this problem in mind, in the second and third sections I embark on reconstructing a more diverse hagiographic poetics of Chaucer by examining two of his early texts, the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women*, and argue that in addition to the virgin martyr trope, Chaucer had developed a new, secular discourse of female sanctity informed by the image of a piteous wife. Last, I demonstrate how this new form of female sanctity is orchestrated in the *Man of Law's Tale* via Chaucer's careful engineering of a "woful Custance," the centerpiece of the poem that emphasizes an open, freestanding display of human suffering. I contend that the poem operates on the logic of pity, constantly focusing on the emotional interplay between a piteous Custance and her pitying viewers.

Keywords

Medieval hagiography, female sanctity, Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, pity

Introduction

For decades, princess Custance has remained one of critics' least favorite characters in the *Canterbury Tales* for a specific reason: despite her success in launching a peaceful crusade against Islam, Custance's pliant dispositions—i.e., the relentless weeping and yielding in the face of oppression—have rendered her a passive victim who strikes little emotional resonance with modern readers.[1] Sheila Delany famously calls out the blankness of Custance's subjecthood and argues that she "exists in the reader's imagination [only] as an agglomeration of virtues rather than a recognizable person" (63). Similarly, Gail Ashton describes Custance as an emblem of "victimization, whose idealized womanhood and saintly qualities simultaneously detract from her humanity and augment a pathos which ostensibly inspires a compassionate and devotional fervor" (47-48).

Chaucer's lackadaisical portrayal of Custance has been a topic of much debate, with scholars often speculating a close affiliation between the tale and the genre of saints' lives; they tend to view Custance as a Chaucerian remodeling of a female saint. While this assessment is suggestive, many have a hard time grappling with Chaucer's portrayal of a married, child-bearing Custance vis-à-vis traditional female sainthood, and this generic clash has remained unresolved for decades. This article contributes to this critical juncture by arguing that Custance's womanhood and victimized dispositions signal a revision of Chaucer's hagiographic poetics via the rhetoric of pity. I divide my discussion into four sections. First, I summarize the critical receptions of Custance's sainthood, by which I observe that most critics call Custance's sainthood into question against the backdrop of early virgin martyrs. I argue that such a critical rendering of female sainthood is problematic, as female sanctity in the late Middle Ages is a highly negotiable term that goes beyond the constraints of virginity and martyrdom. With this problem in mind, in the second and third sections I embark on reconstructing a more diverse hagiographic poetics of Chaucer by examining two of his early texts, the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women*, arguing that in addition to the virgin martyr trope, Chaucer had developed a new, secular discourse of female sanctity informed by the image of a piteous wife. Last, I demonstrate how this new form of female sanctity is orchestrated

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[1] Critics have generally recognized Custance's passivity as an intrinsic part of her character, except in the scene where she fights her rapist with assistance from the Virgin Mary. For a more general reading on Custance's passivity, see Delany; Dinshaw 88-90; Dawson; Spearing 719. For more nuanced readings on Custance's assisted agency, see Mann 100-28; Saunders, *Rape* 283-86; O'Connell; Crocker 111-53.

in the *Man of Law's Tale* via Chaucer's careful engineering of a "woful Custance," the centerpiece of the poem that emphasizes an open, freestanding display of human suffering. Moreover, I argue that the poem operates on the logic of pity, constantly drawing attention to the emotional interplays between a piteous Custance and her pitying viewers.

The Problem of St. Custance

Many scholars have commented on the extensive use of hagiographic motifs in the *Man of Law's Tale*, most comprehensively in Michael Paull's article, "The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the *Man of Law's Tale*," wherein Paull contends that Christianity provides the tale with a deliberate sense of aestheticism that reinforces its inherent belief in salvation through the exemplarity of saints' lives. For Paull, although Chaucer derived the plotline from both Nicholas Trivet and John Gower, he revamped the story by adding details "recognizable to his audience as elements basic to the vernacular saint's legend," including the protagonist's high-born status, her physical beauty, the spiritual sublimity, the binary oppositions between Christianity and paganism, a conversion plotline, etc. (181).[2] Paull's reading is crucial, insofar as it supports a longstanding hypothesis regarding Custance's sanctity viewed through the lens of genre and spirituality.[3] In her landmark reading of the tale, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw offers a snapshot of Custance's self-identification similar to that of Paull. As she notes:

> Constance's blankness and pure instrumentality is . . . to overlook aspects of the narrative that suggest she does have some sense of self-consciousness . . . Constance is aware of herself in the community of saintly Christians, daughters of the Church . . . Not only does the Man of Law use language that associates her with the Virgin Mary . . . Constance herself prays to the Virgin, making herself the saintly analogy clear . . . She does have a sense of herself as a saint, a participant in a community whose exemplar is Christ. (110-11)

Despite critics' casual comparisons between Custance and a medieval saint, the

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[2] For a definitive comparative examination of Trivet in Chaucer, see Block; Nicholson.

[3] Paull's hagiographic reading has sparked many significant critical responses. For more, see Spearing; Furrow; Bale; Seal 165-211.

idea that Chaucer deliberately packaged Custance through the saint's life genre sits uncomfortably with many scholars in light of another competing generic influence: romance. Several critics have noted that despite the saintly traits Custance displays, many motifs in the tale indicate Chaucer's conscious reworking of "the Constance Group," a cognate of the romance genre that gained much popularity from the thirteenth century onward.[4] In her study of the romance meme of "Providence and the Sea," Helen Cooper contends that while the Constance stories are "treading the border with saint's life," they have the "capacity to be a full romance," in light of the replay of several signature romance tropes, including the flight from a father figure, the malevolent mother-in-law figure, the rudderless boat, the conversion, the recovery of the throne, etc. (127-28). The seemingly irreconcilable split between romance and hagiography has led to a divergence among critics, with many insisting that the tale must be distinguished from a saint's life. In what follows, I will briefly summarize the criticisms.

First, considering that Cusance's womanhood is exploited to the fullest by Chaucer—she is betrothed twice, consummates her union with King Alla, and gives birth to a son—her eligibility for sainthood seems far-fetched. In her commentary on Custance's feminine agency, Elizabeth Robertson recognizes the tale's shared pathos with the apostolic Church and has more than once compared Custance to the saints ("Constance is aligned with the saints and her behavior is saintly" ['The Elvyssh Power' 172]); however, she is, quite defiantly, reluctant to canonize Custance owing to the problematic representation of her womanhood. As she notes:

> The ambiguity of Constance's nature is . . . enhanced by the often noted generic confusion of the work, *for she is at once a heroine from the romance deeply involved in the secular world and sexualized as a wife and a mother and an asexual heroine from the saint's life* . . . Chaucer is arguably drawing attention here to the problems of secular sanctity, and thus ultimately to the challenge facing those trying to integrate the spiritual and the mundane. ('The Elyvssh Power' 163-64; emphasis added)

[4] The Constance Group is conventionally deemed a romance trope that delineates a generic plotline of a princess fleeing from her incestuous father, albeit the motif of incest was removed from Chaucer. In the context of medieval England, five major texts belong to this group: Nicolas Trivet's *Anglo-Norman Chronicle*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, and Emaré. For more, see Laskaya and Salisbury; Archibald 161-75; and Heng 181-238.

In light of her wifehood and motherhood, Robertson concludes that Custance fails to qualify as a saint in spite of the resemblance; Custance cannot be a saint, at least not in a genre-technical sense ("Constance is not a nun or a saint" [168]; "Constance, a woman who is not a saint" [170]; "Constance, however, is not a saint, although she is placed firmly in the historical past" [172]; "Constance is not Mary or a saint" [174]).[5]

Second, critics are reluctant to canonize Custance based on the issue of martyrdom. In her analysis of the Constance Group to which *The Man of Law's Tale* belongs, Geraldine Heng makes a distinction between the Constance saga and hagiography. As she notes, "the love story into which different forms of desire in the Constance romances fold is *not . . . simply a story of divine love, which would be the subject of authentic hagiography depicting true martyrdom and sainthood*, rather than a romance, a form that merely borrows from hagiographic resources and affect" (183; emphasis added). Heng's reading is tantalizing, as it underlines a particular form of sanctity to which she subscribes: one that is unequivocally tied to the act of martyrdom, a dramatically-charged religious performance by which the subject voluntarily accepts death in defiance of an unjust authority. Although Custance goes through trials and hardships comparable to those of the saints, she is ultimately relieved from such sufferings ("[i]n vertu and in hooly almus-dede / They lyven alle, and nevere asonder wende" [*CT* II. 1156-57]).[6] The fact that Custance is reunited with her father shortly after the death of King Alla and did not die a martyr's death, according to Heng's reasoning, eventually derails the tale from becoming an "authentic hagiography" (183).

By highlighting critics' divergent opinions toward Custance's sanctity, I wish to underscore a critical loophole observed in contemporary Chaucerian criticisms. When read together, it is intriguing to note that critics' skepticism toward Custance's sanctity is largely based off an understanding of sainthood informed by early Christian virgin martyrs, whereby safeguarding one's virginity, defying oppression, and dying for faith are deemed standard entry qualifications. Custance's eligibility for sainthood is thus improbable, for it contradicts the aforementioned generic expectations. I contend that such critical assessments are not entirely satisfactory insofar as the concept of female sanctity remains highly negotiable in the late Middle

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[5] The mainstream reading has been to consider Chaucer's Custance as a clear deviance from the hagiographic tradition given her role as a married princess. For more early landmark readings, see Block; Delany "Womanliness"; Dawson.

[6] All citations of Chaucer hereafter are from *The Riverside Chaucer.* Standard abbreviations for Chaucer's texts are applied accordingly.

Ages. Even though virgin martyr legends did present the most uniform and popular version of female sainthood, the issue of lay sanctity had become central in the late Middle Ages, and Chaucer might have been working with other models of female sanctity beyond the constraints of virginity and martyrdom. Instead of pitting Custance against early virgin martyrs and thus labeling the tale as the "narrator's failure at hagiography" (Dawson 293), I suggest that the *Man of Law's Tale* signals a divergence of hagiographic poetics in Chaucer's writing career, an argument I will examine in the following two sections.

Rethinking Chaucer's Hagiographic Poetics: The Virgin Martyr Plot and Beyond

At first glance, the qualification of the *Man of Law's Tale* for a saint's life seems far-fetched, given that Chaucer had composed a more orthodox saint's life in *The Second Nun's Tale*, one that has been identified as an early adaptation of the life of St. Cecilia in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* ("After the legende in translacioun / Right of thy glorious lif and passioun" [*CT* VIII. 25-26]).[7] For most critics, Chaucer's retelling of St. Cecilia's martyrdom is suggestive: not only was the saints' lives genre extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages—most works being translated from Latin *passione* and *vitae*[8]—but also virgin martyr legends as a

[7] Given that the second nun was never mentioned in the General Prologue and that the tale was briefly mentioned in the *Legend of Good Women* ("He hath in prose translated Boece, / And maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile" [*LGW* F. 425-26]), some critics believe that it was composed prior to the *Tales* (before 1386) and was added to the corpus later. For more, see Reames, 'Cecilia Legend'; Johnson's two articles.

[8] Having recycled various motifs from its Greek predecessors, the *passio* (or acta) was the oldest known hagiographic writing that recounted testimonies of devotees who embraced death in defiance of state oppression during early Christian centuries, and it subsequently contributed to the public imagination of sainthood almost exclusively via martyrdom. The massive corpus of martyrdom literature, however, tapered off shortly after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century. With a significant decrease in persecutions across the Roman empire and martyrdom becoming more of a distant memory for Christians, hagiography gradually took on a new tone that shifted from the showcasing of unjust deaths to the exemplarity of holy lives. *The Life of St. Anthony* in the fourth century is generally considered one of the early texts that concretizes the canon of *vita*. With ample details adding to the early life and death of the saint, Athanasius of Alexandria alternates the sufferings and excruciating death typically observed in *passio* with serenity and the conviction of faith. Despite the distinction, scholars tend to agree that there is hardly any clean cut in the reality of hagiography production in later centuries, as Latin *passione* were often refashioned or translated along with other *vitae*. In fact, one will often find elements of *passio*, *vita*, and their variations interwoven and, at times, used indistinguishably. For a more nuanced taxonomy of hagiography,

subgenre of female hagiography had witnessed a boom in England since the twelfth century. In her seminal work *Virgin Martyrs*, Karen Winstead traces the transformation of the virgin martyr trope in medieval England and observes that between 1250 and 1400, the majority of female saints' stories converged onto a cultural template that portrayed virgin martyrs as invincible in defiance of an oppressing state, and materials pertaining to saints' torture and execution were exponentially sensualized as a result.[9]

In addition to the dramatically charged subject matter, virgin martyrs have come to monopolize what it means for saintly women to be sexually acceptable with their distinct dispositions. Owing to their unyielding defiance in the face of tyranny, the type of female sanctity that virgin martyrs display is grossly ingrained in the image of a virago-virgin, "a charismatic heroine who defies society and humiliates her adversary," and this group of "abrasive, defiant, shrewish, and sharp-tongued" women had dominated the landscape of female hagiography throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Winstead 65; 98). In her commentary on the status of virgin martyrs, Catherine Sanok echoes Winstead's reading and notes the following:

> There is no question that virgin martyr legends define feminine goodness in terms of sacrifice and suffering and that they imagine sexuality as a moral category, indeed as the primary arena for women's moral action. At the same time they replay a sequence of events that centers on the saint's desirable and vulnerable body: the girl becomes the object of male desire; she is exposed as a Christian when she insists on her virginity; her body is subjected to violent torments, though it is either miraculously resistant to torture or miraculously restored to health in witness to the special integrity guaranteed by her virginity; she dies finally when she embraces her martyrdom, represented as union with her divine Spouse. (*Her Life* 26)

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see Strohm; Harvey; Salih.

[9] The 1980s witnessed a boom of scholarly interest in medieval sainthood, mostly encapsulated in the publication of several landmark texts in history—such as Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints* and Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell's *Saints and Society*—that emphasized the social significance of saints as intercessors who negotiate between the spiritual and the corporeal. Amid this cultural fad, scholarship on female saints' lives skyrocketed in the 1990s alongside the maturation of feminist theories. For some early distinguished works in the English context, see Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*; Wogan-Browne.

Given their dramatic exemplarity, not only are virgin martyrs placed at the highest tier of female sanctity, but now it is almost impossible to think of the genre of female hagiography without it.[10]

With Winstead and Sanok's characterization in mind, it is evident that Chaucer's handling of Cecilia is in concert with the virgin martyr conventions, wherein an unruly woman stands up against her oppressors with a superhuman immunity to both bodily pain and emotional infliction ("with a ful stedefast cheere" [*CT* VIII. 382]).[11] The emphasis on Cecilia's impassibility deserves our attention: not only does Cecilia talk Valerian and Tiburce into conversion without the fear of persecution, but in the same manner she persists when she was brought to Almachius' court; in fact, the harsher she is treated by the inquisitor, the more indifferent she appears. The drama of her martyrdom, in hindsight, is anti-climatically painted with a brush of apathy. Upon Cecilia's defiance, Almachius throws her into a cauldron of fire, but the torture proves unsuccessful in the face of Cecilia's intactness.

> For in a bath they gonne hire faste shetten,
> And nyght and day greet fyr they under betten.
> The longe nyght, and eek a day also,
> For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete
> She sat al coold and feelede no wo.
> It made hire nat a drope for to sweete. (*CT* VIII. 517-22)

The disconnect between Cecilia's senses and the violence forced upon her is further dramatized in the execution scene.

> Thre strokes in the nekke he smoot hire tho,
> The tormentour, but for no maner chaunce
> He myghte noght smyte al hir nekke atwo;

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[10] This is particularly so in the context of Middle English hagiography. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne contends that the exclusivity of virgin martyrs in the Katherine Group is unmatched by its European counterparts. For more, see Wogan-Browne 1-18.

[11] Although Cecilia is married, her insistence on virginity remains unnegotiable. In comparing Chaucer's Cecilia story with its predecessors, Winstead notes the following: "Chaucer's [Cecilia story] is more rhetorically polished than any of the virgin martyr legends, *but nothing about its message is new*. Like the virgin martyr legends of the *South English Legendary*, the *North English Legendary*, and the *Legenda aurea*, it celebrates an ideal of sainthood based on the saints unconditional rejection of the world and her aggressiveness in challenging those around her to discard their human modes of perception (*Virgin Martyrs* 83; emphasis added)

> ……………………………………………
> But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,
> He lefte hir lye, and on his wey he went.
> The Cristen folk, which that aboute hire were,
> With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent.
> Thre dayes lyved she in this torment,
> And nevere cessed hem the feith to teche
> That she hadde fostred; hem she gan to preche, (*CT* VIII. 526-28; 533-39)

Despite the fact that Cecilia's neck is chopped, she shows no emotional reaction to the torture and continues preaching before she dies. When read together, Chaucer's Cecilia exhibits a specific force that aligns her with the pathos of virgin martyrs depicted in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which can be characterized as altruistic and stoic.

The Legend of Good Women: Chaucer's Hagiographic Outlier

While the predominance of virgin martyr legends is difficult to ignore in medieval England, it would be reductive to assume that it is the only model to which Chaucer subscribed. In truth, I contend that Chaucer's perception of female sanctity and his rendering of the "legend" genre remain diverse. In addition to *The Second Nun's Tale*, the employment of the term "legende"—a Middle English word loosely designated for hagiographic narratives[12]—can also be observed in Chaucer's other works with surprising liberality, most notably in the *Legend of Good Women* (hereafter the *Legend*). Inspired by Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, the *Legend* is a collection of lives of secular women in antiquity who suffer from the torment of love, and it is often perceived as a "puzzling outlier" by modern readers owing to its complicated textual history (Collette 13).[13] The poem is first seen as a sophisticated dream vision. By prefacing the *Legend* with a fictional conversation among the dreamer, the God of Love, and Queen Alceste, Chaucer uses the dream vision

[12] For a more detailed analysis of the ways in which the term "legende" was employed in the late Middle Ages, see Strohm; Delany, *The Naked Text*.

[13] See also McCormick et al. 3-4.

framework to engage readers with his previous works.[14] As Carolyn Dinshaw observes, "the dream-vision setting, further, encourages us to read these characters as parts of the narrator's own mind. Just as we can understand the Black Knight and the dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* as figures who work through a grief like the narrator's own, we can read the God of Love and Alceste as reifications of the narrator's uneasiness about the reception and understanding—the afterlife—of his works" (68).

Aside from the deft usage of dream visions, the *Legend* grabs critics' attention with Chaucer's peculiar invocation of the saint's life genre. Given that the tension of the prologue culminates in the God of Love reprimanding the dreamer for tarnishing the reputation of love in his translation of *The Romaunce of the Rose* and the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Queen Alceste comes to the rescue by asking the dreamer to compose "a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen" as a palinode (*LGW* F. 483-84). The decision to shift gears to female hagiography is puzzling: unlike Boccaccio, who does not associate his project with hagiography whatsoever, Chaucer's invocation of "legend" here transgresses the genre almost by definition. The dreamer is commissioned to write stories of pre-Christian secular women with a literary canon customarily reserved for Christian virgin martyrs, and this unsettling appropriation has engendered much speculation over Chaucer's intention for decades. In her seminal work *The Naked Text*, for instance, Sheila Delany observes that despite the saint's life genre having an overpowering presence in the *Legend*, its presentation and effect are far from straightforward; Chaucer's reference to the saintly narrative, if any, can only be understood as confoundingly destabilizing, as he seems to be more interested in the structure of the genre, than the actual content. Or, in Delany's words, Chaucer invokes a "hagiographic matrix deprived of saints" (60). She notes:

> Curiously though, no one [in the English tradition] had compiled a collection of lives of female saints, nor would this be done until Osbern Bokenham assembled his legendary nearly a half-century after Chaucer's death. Chaucer's *Legend* is a curious sport in the evolution of the hagiographical genre. Not itself hagiography, it is nonetheless generated by hagiography and the secular gallery of women. It borrows enough from hagiography to provoke a fifteenth-century clerical reader,

[14] In her defense of the dreamer in front of the God of Love, Queen Alceste appears to be a fervent reader of Chaucer with a catalog of his previous works (*LGW* F. 417-28). For more, see Sanok, *Her Life* 42-49.

> Bokenham, to model his own all-female hagiography on the *Legend* . . . (60)

The ghostly presence of the saint's life genre leads many critics to see Chaucer's writing in ironic terms, which insinuates a certain authorial lethargy, if not aversion, toward the genre altogether.[15] Given Chaucer's frequent sarcastic exploitations of the clergies and his pro-reformist portrayal of the Parson, the likelihood of his endorsing hagiography wholeheartedly seems fairly low. As McCormick, Schwebel, and Shutters note, "the poem's heroines are ironic caricatures representing larger perspectives—historiographical, ideological, or hermeneutic—that Chaucer wishes to critique. Irony also accounts for seemingly infelicitous features of the *Legend*, including Chaucer's misreading of his sources, the text's stylistic vacillation between melodrama and humor, and, at times, Chaucer's woefully inelegant verse" (5). Within this line of thought, Lucy Allen-Goss also observes that "the female protagonists are secular saints and their bodies potential relics, but like the 'pigges bones' the *Canterbury Tales*' Pardoner will produce from his purse, *they are false saints, their stories all taken ultimately from pre-Christian sources*" (24-25; emphasis added).

My reading of Chaucer's hagiographic framework in the *Legend* marks a departure from previous scholarship. Instead of reading the *Legend* as a paradox that illustrates Chaucer's potential struggle with Christianity and saintly narratives, I contend that Chaucer's seeming failure at hagiography—i.e., his transgression of generic expectations—ought to be read as a radical reinvention of the genre by which Chaucer replaces Christian virgin martyrs with the trope of the piteous wives. By making this claim, I align my reading with those of Catherine Sanok and Lynn Shutters, whose renewed perceptions of Chaucer's hagiographic writing remain a great inspiration for my work. Early in her scholarship, Catherine Sanok observed that the ways critics in the twentieth century evaluated Chaucer's hagiography were heavily informed by literary formalism, perceiving the genre in terms of a fixed set of themes or conventions, and Chaucer's *Legend* is almost doomed to be considered "a breach of poetic and ideological decorum" by this standard (Sanok, *Her Life* 44).

[15] Note that there exists a major shift of critical opinions regarding Chaucer's employment of hagiographic motifs in the *Legend*: while early scholars read such generic proximity as Chaucer's sarcastic appropriation of the genre which subsequently turns the text into a satire on women, contemporary readers adopt a remedial approach and see the text as less of a satire and more of a parody. For more landmark discussions regarding the said debate, see Kiser 96-131; Dinshaw 65-87; Delany, *The Naked Text* 59-69; Rowe; Lynch 121.

Contra formalism, Sanok reckons that Chaucer's hagiographic poetics must be approached discursively, by which she demonstrates how interpretations of late-medieval female hagiography rely on the interpellation of its imaginary female audiences—from Queen Alceste in the prologue to Queen Anne of Bohemia in real life—and that its gendered address "provides striking, if indirect, evidence of the crucial role that female saints' lives played in thinking about the place of gender in vernacular hermeneutics" (*Her Life* 43). Following Sanok, Lynn Shutters reckons that Chaucer's non-conformity is not about ridiculing the hagiographic canon; rather, it makes space for his contemporary female readers in negotiating between ancient texts and the present. As she notes, "the hagiographic form of the *Legend* can be read simultaneously as an anti-feminist joke at women's expense and *as a means to invite sympathetic contemplation of women in love and the ethical and epistemological quandaries they might face*" (95; emphasis added). Building on Sanok and Shutters, I contend that Chaucer's malleable use of hagiography here constitutes an experimental reinvention of the genre that is more accommodating and progressive, particularly with his replacement of impassible virgin martyrs with piteous wives. In what follows, I will elaborate on these two features.

Wifehood

With the exception of Philomela, in the *Legend* Chaucer underscores the importance of wifehood in all his other female characters, who share a high sense of morality regarding marital union ("And lat us speke of wyves, that is best; / Preyse every man his owene as hym lest, / And with oure speche lat us ese oure herte" [*LGW* F. 1702-04]).[16] No longer focusing on virgin martyrs who prioritize virginity over marriage, Chaucer appears sympathetic toward women who vow to stay in wedlock all their lives, and this representation of marital steadfastness, or constancy, becomes prominent in his rendering of womanhood. In the story of Lucrece, Chaucer prefaces the tale with a praise of her exceptional dedication to wifehood, a quality that allegedly garners sympathy from St. Augustine. As he notes:

> But for to preyse and drawe to memorye
> The verray wif, the verray trewe Lucresse,
> That for hyre wifhod and hire stedfastnesse
> Nat only that these payens hire comende

[16] For more regarding the women in the *Legend* as wives, see Shutters 96.

> But he that cleped is in oure legende
> The grete Austyn, hath gret compassioun
> Of this Lucresse, that starf at Rome toun. (*LGW* F. 1685-91)

To most critics, the reference to Augustine's "greet compassioun" appears to be an obvious misreading of the *City of God*, wherein Augustine, in a long passage, condemns Lucretia for killing an innocent victim and that "there is a significant difference between the 'true sanctity' of Christian martyrs and the illusory virtue of Lucretia" (Kiser 105). However, I contend that this "misreading" ought to be read as part of Chaucer's revision of hagiography, by which he looks beyond the constraint of virgin martyrs and casts female sanctity in a new light by probing the virtuous aspect of wifehood. This authorial attentiveness toward wifely virtues results in a serious conditioning of characters throughout the *Legend*. For example, in the tale of Medea, the most tragic moment of the plot—Medea's revenge killing of Jason's two sons and new wife—is entirely omitted; instead, Medea receives a makeover and is turned into a compliant wife, whose final words register more as a faithful, lamenting wife than a revenger ("Whi lykede me thy yelwe her to se / More than the boundes of myn honeste [chastity]" [*LGW* F. 1672-73]). Even with a much-disliked figure such as Cleopatra, whose public image is that a seductive queen, Chaucer manages to dilute her infamy by highlighting her affection for Antony in marital terms. In her final words, Cleopatra seeks reunion with Antony after death, and the link of their marital affection becomes the very catalyst for such a prospect ("As fer forth as it in my power lay, / Unreprovable unto my wyfhod ay, / The same wolde I fele, lyf or deth" [*LGW* F. 690-92]).

The emphasis on wifehood in the *Legend* is significant, for it signals a shift in attitude toward female sanctity in Chaucer's writing. By revising the lives of secular women through the framework of "legend," Chaucer enhanced the capacity of female hagiography with a contemporary touch that sought exemplarity in married women, rather than in virgin martyrs. To put this in context, I argue that one should think of Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale* and the secular women in the *Legend* as two competing paradigms of female sanctity. On the one hand, while virgin martyr legends continued to be reproduced as a religious ideal for female sanctity well into the fifteenth century, their inherently anti-social sentiments rendered a gap of identification that required interventions, between reading and practice, between early martyrs and their changing lay audiences.[17] Chaucer's *Legend*, on the other

[17] Winstead addresses this very topic in *Virgin Martyrs*, in which she identifies three key stages

hand, mended the gap with his wholesale of wives from classical antiquity, who provided a feasible model of exemplarity from the lives of ordinary women, and his conflation of wifely and Christian virtues can be seen as a crucial gesture by which Chaucer deviates from the virgin martyr plot—one that resists marriage and sex—and explores a new model that resonates better with his contemporaries.[18] While tragedies in the *Legend* take different forms and for different reasons—such as the ill-fated event that befell Cleopatra and Thisbe, the betrayal experienced by Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, and Ariadne, and the rape of Lucrece—what these women have in common is their commitment to wifehood in the face of adversity, and by constantly using marriage as a governing, institutional metaphor, Chaucer is signaling a new type of female lay sanctity by which virtuous wives are equated with the saints.[19]

Pity

In addition to the reinvention of sexuality, Chaucer's wifely saints demonstrate a second feature: i.e., the display of pity. My emphasis on emotions here is crucial, as it taps into an emerging scholarship—commonly known as the history of emotions—that reasserts the crucial role of affect in historiography. I align my reading with this critical approach to re-consider emotions as a crucial, interpretative tool for literary studies.[20] Since Aristotle, pity (*eleos*) has been seen as moral emotion that automatically invokes a drama involving two human actors: the pitied and the

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in the development of virgin martyrs' lives between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries in keeping with their changing audiences: from the monotonous portrayals of virgin lives in the Katherine Group, to the sensational portrayals of abrasive, unruly women in Jacobus' *Legenda*, and to the neo-conservative backlash in fifteenth-century hagiographies such as Lydgate and Bokenham. A similar argument is made in her more recent publication, *Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in England.*

[18] In his commentary on the good women in the *Legend*, Glenn Burger reckons that the late conduct literature has significantly improved women's role within medieval households, emphasizing "marital affection and companionate relations" (72). As he notes, "in constructing such a positive representation of woman's nature and femininity, [these texts] provide the good wife with a crucial role in an emerging late medieval/early modern heterosexuality whose foundation lies in the lay married estate and the household it establishes" (73). See Burger, "Pite rennet."

[19] Although Shutters insists that the *Legend* presents wifehood in diverse natures and that it might not be helpful to jump into homogenization, I intend to solicit a common ground to help characterize the interplay between secularity and female sanctity in Chaucer. For a more nuanced reading, see Shutters 98.

[20] For more regarding the applications of the history of emotions in medieval literature, see McNamer, *Affective Meditation* 3-7; McNamara and Downes; Trigg.

pitier.[21] The pitied is the one who suffers from underserved misfortune, whereas the pitier, typically from a distance, identifies with the sufferer in some way and expresses their sorrow over the suffering and its undeserving status (Konstan 49-50). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle gives an explicit definition:

> Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain at an apparent evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. For if we are to feel pity we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours, and moreover some such evil as is stated in our definition or is more or less of that kind. (1385b14-19)

Aristotle's definition is crucial, as it situates the emotion within a social context; pity is by no means a one-off, let alone random, human response, but a cognitive reaction toward any undeserved misfortune.[22] In the face of the public performance of grief by the sufferer, the viewer is required to temporarily remove his personal feelings—or, what Anne Schuurman calls "a moment of radical selflessness" (1305)—to acknowledge the injustice of the suffering, and to mimic the emotion so as to dignify the pitied.[23]

Nevertheless, since Aristotle the rhetoric of pity has undergone some cultural and linguistic expansions across Europe, which makes any definitional attempt problematic. The modern use of the word pity, for example, is owed to its Old French and Middle English predecessors, which have a strong biblical link: the French word

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[21] Aristotle invokes pity in various contexts throughout his works. For example, in the *Rhetoric*, he discusses pity in the context of courtroom; he argues that the orator must appeal to the audience's pity in order to benefit his case, as emotions have a great impact on judgment ("it adds much to an orator's influence that his own character should look right and that he should be thought to entertain the right feelings towards his hearers" [1377b26-28]). In *Poetics*, Aristotle sees pity as the major vehicle for the tragedy genre to reach catharsis ("The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation" [1353b12-13]). For more, see Konstan's *Pity Transformed* and *The Emotions of the Ancient Greek* 201-18; Nussbaum; Belfiore. All citations of Aristotle are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.

[22] Unlike the post-Cartesian framework that sees feeling and thinking—thus emotion and cognition—as mutually exclusive, Aristotle's model essentially integrates the two. For more, see Saunders, "Affective Reading."

[23] The idea of emotions as performance is attributed to the influence of social constructionism that became prominent in the 1970s, and subsequently formed the theoretical basis of many fields, such as anthropology and the history of emotions. For more on the performativity of emotions, see McNamer, "Emotion" 11-14.

pitié is a translation of the *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord, have pity") commonly evoked in the liturgy, and it was subsequently translated into *pitee* in Middle English by the fourteenth century.[24] And yet, aside from its biblical connotation, *pitee* was extensively integrated with secular literature via the chivalric and the *fin'amor* tradition, to which Jessica Hines observes, "by the late fourteenth century, pity had become a word for describing a [wide] range of affective and ethical responses to suffering across multiple discourses" ("Forming Pity" 49). As a result, *pitee* had gradually lost its specificity over time and was used interchangeably with other cognates, such as *reuth, mercy,* and *compassioun.*[25] Given the complexity of the term, in what follows I shall limit my discussion to the representations of pity filtered through the lens of class and gender, which, in my opinion, give the most popular impressions of Chaucerian pity.

In Chaucer's works, pity is conventionally framed as a class-specific affect reserved for the *gentil*, which translates quite differently between genders.[26] For the male characters, pity is often deemed a virtuous quality of chivalric identity. For instance, aside from his role as a mighty warrior, Theseus is portrayed as a compassionate lord in the *Knight's Tale*. Upon his triumphant return from fighting the Amazons at the beginning of the tale, Theseus is distracted by the wailing of the Theban widows, who appeal to Theseus' pity in light of Creon's cruelty ("Have mercy on oure wo and oure distresse! / Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse," [*CT* I. 919-20]). Theseus responds to their call almost immediately. As the narrator notes:

> This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte
> With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
> Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,
> Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,

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[24] The first instance of *pitee* in the English language is to be found in the anchoritic text, the *Ancrene Wisse*. According to Jessica Hines, Cotton MS Nero A. XIV (also known as the N-text) is the only *Ancrene Wisse* manuscript in which *pitee* is referenced. I use *pitee* as the collective term here, because it is the variant most frequented by Chaucer. For more, see Hines, "Forming Pity." For the translation of *Kyrie eleison*, see Leloup 77.

[25] Scholars have generally identified three types of pity at the time of Chaucer's writing—i.e., the religious, the chivalric, and the *fin'amor* tradition—however, most critics agree that Chaucer seldom follows the conventions. For an early survey of Chaucerian pity, see Gray; Harding. For a more recent nuancing of Chaucer's pity, see Schuurman; Burger; Duprey; Saunders, "Affecting Reading"; McNamer, "Emotion"; Irvin; Hines, "Forming Pity."

[26] See Burger, "Pite" 59.

That whilom weren of so greet estaat; (*CT* I. 952-56)

This episode is significant on two levels: on the narrative level, the Theban widows' grieving is a major plot mover that prompts Theseus to wage war against Creon and thus anticipates the Palamon-Arcite subplot. On the psychological level, by appealing to Theseus' "gentilesse," the Theban widows frame pity exclusively as a *gentil* affect that solicits moral actions from its receiver. Given that the Theban widows are of "greet estaat," they urge Theseus to not only acknowledge the proximity of their abject status—what happened to them could have happened to Theseus had Lady Fortune turned her wheel ("Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel," [*CT* I. 925])—but also take revenge as if the wrong were done to him. Theseus' expression of pity, therefore, is not merely deemed appropriate for his rank; ultimately, according to Glenn Burger, it "establishes Theseus as the natural embodiment of justice" ("Pite" 64). In keeping with the Parson's comments on the nature of gentility ("Ther is no thing moore covenable to a man of heigh estaat than debonairetee and pitee" [*CT* X. 465]), pity is used as a distinct identity marker that ennobles male chivalric subjects.

The symbiosis between pity and male chivalric identity reappears later when Theseus is caught in the conflict between Palamon and Arcite. Upon the Theban brothers' trespass, Theseus makes up his mind to execute them; however, Ypolita and other ladies at the court come to the rescue; they fall on their knees in front of Theseus and break into tears. As the narrator notes:

Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
And though he first for ire quook and sterte,
He hath considered shortly, in a clause,
The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,
And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused, (*CT* I. 1760-66; emphasis added)

As in the previous scene with the Theban widows, the narrative force in this episode is invested in the transformation of Theseus' temper. In light of the ladies' pleas, Theseus' anger toward the Theban brothers is replaced by pity, and the affect causes him to change his course of action and subsequently direct the plot to a new opening.

While pity is considered a desirable addition to male chivalric identity in Chaucer's writing, the affect is central to the making of womanhood, or as Douglas

Gray notes, "*Pite* is a natural affection, which 'runs' especially in the tender hearts of women" (182). What differentiates Chaucer's women from men is that that while men almost always assume the role of the pitier, whose arrival at the emotion is reactionary, women seem to display greater agency in alternating between, and sometimes blending, the role of the pitied and the pitier. In addition to being passive victims as in the case of the Theban widows, women are also portrayed as adept pitiers, whose empathetic power is deemed more natural and consistent than that of their male counterparts. In truth, "wommanly pitee" (*CT* I. 3083)—a phrase bestowed upon Emelye by Theseus—appears to be so penetrating that it has the capacity to trigger pity even from onlookers who are twice removed. In the episode in which Ypolita and the other courtly ladies beg for Theseus' mercy, they first assume the role of the pitier when seeing Palamon and Arcite in suffering:

> The queene anon, for verray wommanhede,
> Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,
> And alle the ladyes in the compaignye.
> Greet pitee was it, as it thoughte hem alle,
> That evere swich a chaunce sholde falle,
> For gentil men they were of greet estaat, (*CT* I. 1748-53)

Yet, it is crucial to note that the performance of their pity immediately becomes another spectacle of suffering that solicits a further audience—i.e., Theseus—to take pity on the pitier ("And eek his herte hadde compassioun / Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon," [*CT* I. 1770-71]). Pity for the female characters, in other words, is not merely reactionary: it is imitative. By blending the role of the pitied and pitier, Chaucer's female characters demonstrate the power of emotion to the fullest extent, and such is the very affective feature Chaucer employs to characterize his wifely saints in the *Legend*.

While early virgin martyrs are subject to various forms of violence during inquisitions and executions, they demonstrate exceptional resilience to both physical and emotional pain ("For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete / She sat al coold and *feelede no wo*" [*CT* VIII. 520-21; emphasis added]). In his commentary on Cecilia's pathos, Robert Worth Frank, Jr. notes the following:

> Though St Cecilia's story ends in martyrdom, it qualifies only marginally as a tale of pathos. *True, she is innocent, and she is helpless against Roman power and is, finally, a victim. Nevertheless, she is too*

> *strong a figure to evoke our pity in any insistent fashion*. . . . But St Cecilia's vigorous, contemptuous challenging of the Roman Almachius has a touch of the heroic. (Some readers think it unduly arrogant, but this is the standard posture of martyrs before their pagan accusers). Her heroic stance continues through her martyrdom to the end. There may be some pathos in her isolation, but it is not stressed. (183; emphasis added)

The female characters in the *Legend*, on the contrary, exhibit great emotional susceptibility in alternating between the pitied and the pitier: i.e., they cry, swoon, and go mad in light of others' as well as their own sufferings. This distinct display of pity, in hindsight, functions as a communicative tool that resonates among the female characters in the *Legend.* In the prologue, for instance, Queen Alceste shows immense pity for Geoffrey the dreamer-poet when he is chastised by the God of Love; she calls her husband out for being unfair and begs him to have mercy on the poet. In light of the Queen's intervention, the God of Love notes the following:

> "Wostow," quod he, "wher this be wyf or mayde,
> Or quene, or countesse, or of what degree,
> That hath so lytel penance yiven thee,
> That hast deserved sorer for to smerte?
> *But pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*;
> That maistow seen; she kytheth what she ys." (*LGW* F. 499-504; emphasis added)

The significance of the God of Love's commentary is twofold: on the one hand, Alceste's pity is viewed as a form of self-identification, by which the queen shows civility appropriate for her gender and class. On the other hand, the passion is seen as an effective mobilizer that prompts the viewer—i.e., God of Love—to alternate his affective expressions. The same literary dynamic can be observed in the story of Dido, in which the queen of Carthage is introduced as an extremely piteous figure. Upon learning about Aeneas' exile, Dido ostentatiously expresses pity over his misfortune ("And in hire herte she hadde routhe and wo" [*LGW* F. 1063]), which later turns into a source of love ("Anon hire herte hath pite of his wo, / And with that pite love com in also," [*LGW* F. 1078-80]).[27] Such characterization remains

[27] The conflation between pity and love is something commonly observed in the *Legend.* In

consistent even after Dido is abandoned, whereby Dido is seen immersing herself, quite self-indulgently, in misery: she kisses the cloth Aeneas leaves behind and swoons twenty times. As the narrator notes:

> . . . whan sely Dido gan awake,
> She hath it kyst ful ofte for his sake,
> And seyde, "O swete cloth, whil Juppiter it leste,
> Tak now my soule, unbynd me of this unreste!
> I have fulfild of fortune al the cours."
> And thus, allas, withouten his socours,
> Twenty tyme yswowned hath she thanne. (*LGW* F. 1336-42)

As with Alceste, not only does Dido's display of pity align with her gender and ranking, but it prompts its onlookers to react to her suffering: i.e., the narrator interrupts his storytelling and takes pity on her (". . . of which I may nat wryte— / So greet a routhe I have it for t'endyte—" [*LGW F.* 1344-1345]).

To summarize, in *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer deviates from the virgin martyr plot and presents a new discourse of female sanctity via the image of a piteous wife, which not only bestow a humanizing touch on Chaucer's female saints, but also calls for a specific ethics based on its affective imitation. Unlike their male counterparts—such as Jason and Theseus who are generally portrayed as pitiless opportunists—Chaucer's wifely saints are not shy about exposing vulnerability when adversities are forced upon them. The pity they either evoke or express structures as a deep, affective syntax that strengthens a broader, communal identity among female characters across tales, and it reimagines female sanctity in terms of its interconnected suffering. Female sanctity, if any, is not confined to the preservation of the body but relies on the interplay between the experience of suffering as a major means of interpellation and the production of pity as an expected response. From this perspective, the *Legend* is far from a parody; it is a radical reinvention of Chaucer's hagiographic poetics.

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addition to Dido, many female characters in the tale are also characterized by their collective display of pity (Cleopatra 669; Thisbe 779; Hypsipyle 1567; Ariadne 1974, 1976; Phyllis 2461). For more, see Schuurman 1303. Regarding Alceste's role as the avatar of pity in the *Legend*, see Burger, "Pite" 69-72.

The Man of Law's Tale: The Legend of a Piteous Wife

If one accepts the hypothesis that the *Legend* is an alternative by which Chaucer offers more "flexibility" to the saint's life genre (Delany 65), I argue that the *Man of Law's Tale* (*MLT* hereafter) fulfills such a vision on a larger scale. In keeping with the literary sentiment observed in the *Legend*, Chaucer consecrates secular womanhood via his deliberate engineering of a "woful Custance" (*CT* II. 978), whose open, freestanding display of suffering solicits pity from its onlookers, and such affective dynamism signals a new form of female sanctity in contrast with that of early virgin martyrs.

The link between the *Legend* and the *MLT* is unmistakable, as Chaucer hints at the union of these two works early in the poem. Prompted by Harry Bailey to initiate a tale at ten o'clock on the eighteenth of April—which is often deemed a second beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*[28]—the Man of Law starts his tale-telling with an apology, claiming that he is running out of suitable stories, as most of them are already covered by Chaucer the poet. Reminiscent of Queen Alceste in the *Legend*, the Man of Law then demonstrates his exclusive familiarity with Chaucer's previous works with an exhaustive catalog.

In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione,
And sitthen hath he spoken of everichone,
Thise noble wyves and thise loveris eke.
Whoso that wole his large volume seke,
Cleped the Seintes Legende of Cupide,
Ther may he seen the large woundes wyde
Of Lucresse, and of Babilan Tesbee;
The swerd of Dido for the false Enee;
The tree of Phillis for hire Demophon;
The pleinte of Dianire and of Hermyon,
Of Adriane, and of Isiphilee—
The bareyne yle stondynge in the see—
The dreynte Leandre for his Erro;
The teeris of Eleyne, and eek the wo
Of Brixseyde, and of the, Ladomya;

[28] See Schibanoff 59.

> The crueltee of the, queene Medea,
> Thy litel children hangynge by the hals,
> For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!
> O Ypermystra, Penelopee, Alceste,
> Youre wifhod he comendeth with the beste! (*CT* II. 57-76)

Considering that Chaucer has the propensity to create self-rivalry in his works, critics typically see the Man of Law as "an object of satire or a surrogate for Chaucer himself" and his self-condescension in the introduction as another literary tactic by which Chaucer invokes a previous work of his only to outsmart it (Saraceni 430).[29] While the issue of self-rivalry is suggestive, what usually goes unnoticed is that the opening block of the *MLT* refers to two of Chaucer's former works with great disproportion. With the exception of one line that alludes to the story of Alcyone and Ceyx invoked in the *Book of the Duchess* ("In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione" [57]), the rest of the passage is dedicated to the suffering wives in the *Legend*. The over-emphasis on the *Legend* in the prologue, I argue, points to a textual lineage that binds Custance with Chaucer's unconventional wifely saints. If the *Legend* is to play a decisive role in shaping the *MLT*, it is its revised hagiographic framework—not the light-hearted, self-deprecating parody—that capitalizes on the suffering of wifehood. Most importantly, Chaucer is consciously operating on the logic of pity, and the contrapuntal positioning between a "woful Custance" and an empathetic crowd, between the piteous subject and pitying viewer, has become the very narrative pattern that Chaucer employs throughout the poem. In what follows, I will focus on several crucial moments to illustrate these points.

'Woful Custance'

Chaucer's intention to use Custance to extract pity from its viewers has been evident since the beginning of the poem. Upon her marriage arrangement with the Sultan, Custance is first introduced to the readers in a state of extreme distress. As the narrator notes:

> The day is comen of hir departynge;
> I seye, the woful day fatal is come,
> That ther may be no lenger tariynge,

[29] For more regarding the narrative voice in the Man of Law's Tale, see Spearing.

> But forthward they hem dressen, alle and some.
> Custance, that was with sorwe al overcome,
> Ful pale arist, and dresseth hire to wende;
> For wel she seeth ther is noon oother ende. (*CT* II. 260-66)

Custance's debut is a distinct episode that contrasts her with the virgin martyrs on the emotional level. While marriage proposals in virgin martyr legends are typically employed as a dramatic tipping point that culminates in a stand-off between a virago-virgin and the state, Custance takes a different path by accepting her father's proposal without resistance. As she notes:

> Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun
> I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;
> But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun
> So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!
> I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
> Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
> And to been under mannes governance. (*CT* II. 281-87)

Given that Custance is both a political and economic pawn between Rome and the Syrian merchants and that the marriage deal is solely negotiated by men at different levels ("I seye, by tretys and embassadrie, / And by the popes mediacioun, / And al the chirche, and al the chivalrie, / That in destruccioun of mawmettrie" [*CT* II. 233-36]), critics in the past tend to see Custance as deprived of agency; in fact, many have suggested that her transactability exemplifies the objectification of the female gender.[30] I wish to bring nuances to this mainstream reading by arguing that Custance is in fact granted with significant agency through her performance of woefulness, and such is of Chaucer's contriving. Unlike Chaucer's other pliant wives—such as Dame Prudence in the *Tale of Malibee* or Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*—who appear to be emotionally inert in the face of oppression from the patriarch,[31] Custance is emotionally expressive when adversities are forced upon her, most notably through a unilateral expression of woefulness *by* and *about* her (*wo* 421, 424, 427, 518, 609, 757, 817, 847, 850, 901, 918, 977, 978, 1068, 1070, 1073, 1161; *woful* 261, 316, 522, 694, 850, 978, 1066; *weylaway* 370, 632, 810; *allas* 267, 281, 303, 309, 315, 608,

[30] See Dinshaw 95-99; Georgianna; Mann 100; Hendrix; Hume 107-27.

[31] For the similarity between Custance's characterization and those of Griseda and Dame Prudence, see Cawsey 101.

631, 810, 817, 855). Considering that Custance will be sent to a foreign country, kept away from friends and families, and is going to marry a man whom she knows nothing about, Chaucer gives us ample reasons to believe in the authenticity of her sorrow. As he notes:

> Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
> That shal be sent to strange nacioun
> Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
> And to be bounden under subjeccioun
> Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun? (*CT* II. 267-71)

The rhetorical framing of Custance's woefulness as a form of spectacle ("wonder"), in hindsight, cannot be downplayed as Chaucer's lazy, uncreative coloring of characters; instead, it deduces a narrative logic that is emotion-provoking. Shortly after Custance's speech, the narrator describes how her onlookers weep out of pity for her:

> I trowe at Troye, whan Pirrus brak the wal
> Or Ilion brende, at Thebes the citee,
> N'at Rome, for the harm thurgh Hanybal
> That Romayns hath venquysshed tymes thre,
> *Nas herd swich tendre wepyng for pitee*
> *As in the chambre was for hire departynge*;
> *But forth she moot, wher-so she wepe or synge*. (*CT* II. 288-94; emphasis added)

The invocation of pity from the onlookers is by no means coincidental: by likening Custance's adversity to the ruins of antiquity, the narrator devises a rhetoric that focuses on the reproduction of emotions: i.e., pity. Just as readers would be saddened by the fall of a distant civilization, they are interpellated to empathize with Custance's suffering in the same vein. In truth, despite their contextual differences, behind each exclamation of sorrow made by Custance almost always lies the anticipation of pity from her viewers.

The Northumberlanders

Considering that pity is a moral affect that demands the presence of viewers, Chaucer manages to install multiple parties to serve as witnesses to Custance's suffering at various stages, and this pattern becomes especially telling with the people Custance meets in Northumberland. The emphasis on the residents at Northumberland is significant, as it contrasts greatly with those of Syria: while none at the Syrian court are portrayed, not even in a loose sense, as compassionate in light of the massacre of the Christians and Custance's subsequent exile, people in Northumberland display more hospitality and thus humanity in spite of their religious differences.[32]

The pagan couple, the constable and Hermengyld, is a point in case. After stumbling upon Custance's ship and seeing her status as a "wery womman ful of care" (*CT* II. 514), the constable and his wife feel deeply troubled and decide to offer her shelter, and the language Chaucer employs to describe the couple is wrapped in the syntax of pity. As the narrator notes: "The constable hath of hire so greet pitee, / And eek his wyf, that they wepen for routhe" (*CT* II. 528-29). The emotional portrayal of the constable and Hermengyld is worth our attention, as pity functions as a prominent identity marker that helps readers to differentiate friends from foes. In his commentary on Chaucer's usage of pity in the *MLT*, Glenn Burger argues that Chaucer deliberates uses pity as a distinct, Christian emotion to contrast its pagan neighbors. As he notes:

> While it links the soon-to-be-Christian pagan constable and wife with the quintessentially Christian Roman aristocrat in a common structure of specifically *Christian* feeling, *pite*, or rather its lack, in the stubbornly Muslim sultaness and pagan Donegild also defines their essential *in*humanity. The *pite* that Custance arouses, then, is first and foremost a defining *Christian* emotion, or put another way, the "universality" of pity embodies the triumphal universality of the idea of Christendom itself, even in the face of temporal and spatial locations that would seem to stand outside it. ("Pite" 62)

[32] It must be noted that the worldview built in the *MLT* is primarily Christo-centric, by which Chaucer spares little sympathy to his religious Other; in truth, almost every character who is in contact with Islam—be it the pitiless Sultaness or the compassionate Hermengyld—is reduced to a foil in service to the making of Custance's canonization. This authorial apathy has raised much discussion in recent years. For more, see Schibanoff; Heng; Bale.

For Burger, while it is true that pity in late Middle English texts can be considered a human response to suffering without distinction of any kind, the constable and Hermengyld's expressions are conditioned by a religious discourse wherein pity is deemed the quintessential affect of Christianity. Unlike the evil, pagan queen mothers in Syria and Northumberland, who all appear pitiless (*routhelees* in ME) in light of Custance's begging for mercy, the fact that the constable and Hermengyld are able to garner pity as pagans indicates their gravitation toward goodness and Christian virtues, and their conversions are thus seen as a natural extension of such innate qualities.

In addition to the constable and Hermengyld, King Alla also plays a key role in exemplifying Chaucer's adept usage of pity. In the episode where Custance is brought to trial for murdering Hermengyld, King Alla is introduced to the audience as a neutral judge:

> Soone after cometh this constable hoom agayn,
> And eek Alla, that kyng was of that lond,
> And saugh his wyf despitously yslayn,
> For which ful ofte he weep and wroong his hond,
> And in the bed the blody knyf he fond
> By Dame Custance. Allas, what myghte she seye?
> For verray wo hir wit was al aweye. (*CT* II. 603-09)

Yet, his neutrality dissipates almost immediately upon Custance's display of woefulness. As the narrator notes:

> To kyng Alla was toold al this meschance,
> And eek the tyme, and where, and in what wise
> That in a ship was founden this Custance,
> As heer-biforn that ye han herd devyse.
> *The kynges herte of pitee gan agryse*,
> Whan he saugh so benigne a creature
> Falle in disese and in mysaventure. (*CT* II. 610-16; emphasis added)

Reminiscent of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*, the literary energy of this episode hinges on King Alla's transformation. Although a pagan, King Alla is saddened by Custance's suffering, and his emotional shift to pity indicates a predisposition to Christian sentimentality. Similar to that of the constable and Hermengyld, King

Alla's *pitee* is portrayed as involuntary ("This Alla kyng hath swich compassioun, / As gentil herte is fulfild of pitee, / That from his eyen ran the water doun" [*CT* II. 659-61]), so much so that it prompts him to intervene in the trial by demanding the false knight to swear on a holy book ("A Britoun book"), which brings the knight to a sudden death as a result of a miracle.

The interplay between Custance's woefulness and King Alla's pity comes to a peak in the following episode. When the false knight drops dead, Custance does not appear triumphant; instead, she feels a surge of pity for the death of her enemy, which, yet again, triggers King Alla. As the narrator notes:

> This false knyght was slayn for his untrouthe
> By juggement of Alla hastifly;
> And yet Custance hadde of his deeth greet routhe.
> And after this Jhesus, of his mercy,
> Made Alla wedden ful solempnely
> This hooly mayden, that is so bright and sheene;
> And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene. (*CT* II. 687-93)

Two aspects of this passage deserve our attention. First, King Alla's pity serves as a distinct literary device that differentiates Custance's journey to Northumberland from that of Syria. Considering how the Sultan's request of his people to abandon Islam in light of his royal engagement with Custance leads to a tragic bloodshed of the Christians, Chaucer's handling of Northumberland suggests a more feasible framework of conversion. By constantly characterizing King Alla as a ruler who is capable of pitying others, Chaucer hints at the possibility of an affective politics without military interventions; in truth, it seems that King Alla's conversion to Christianity and his marriage with Custance would not have been possible if it weren't for his affect. Second, by making Custance adeptly switch roles from the pitied to the pitier within a span of just four stanzas—from a suffering maiden who "stondest in this drede" to a compassionate outsider who "hadde of his [the knight's] deeth greet routhe" (*CT* II. 657; 689)—Chaucer yet again demonstrates the ways in which pity plays a central role in shaping characters as well as the trajectory of narrative. While Custance is portrayed a victimized, piteous subject for the most part of the poem, she demonstrates her capability in reversing the role and taking pity on others. Most importantly, the performance of Custance's pity is staged by Chaucer as another spectacle of suffering that attracts a different stream of pity from an audience twice removed: i.e., King Alla. By displaying pity, in other words, King Alla is not

simply proving himself to be a courteous knight; instead, he is reaffirming the agency of the passion.

The Virgin Mary

Aside from all of the compassionate Northumberlanders, the Virgin Mary is another central pitying viewer, who is evoked in a refined, two-stanza prayer delivered by Custance during her second exile.[33] For many critics, Custance's praying to Mary is by no means coincidental: given that Custance is traveling with her son Maurice on the second exile, her calling out to the Virgin signals a conflation between Custance the secular mother and Mary the heavenly mother, which reinforces the saintly aura of the poem. As Laurel Broughton notes, "By making Custance a mirror of Mary, Chaucer also refashions her story as a miracle of the Virgin, an element not found in Trivet and Gower. These enhanced Marian references connect Chaucer's version to its more distant analogue, the Chaste Empress story. By including these, Chaucer affirms Custance as an example of Marian piety, one that his immediate audience would have recognized and perceived as a positive example" (127). In other words, through her appeal to the Virgin, Custance identifies herself as a second Mary.

Beyond the issue of mirroring, however, I wish to also emphasize the ways in which Custance's imitation of Mary is carefully orchestrated via pity. In the first stanza of her prayer, Custance speaks to Mary about the pain of motherhood. As she notes:

> "Mooder," quod she, "and mayde bright, Marie,
> Sooth is that thurgh wommanes eggement
> Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
> For which thy child was on a croys yrent.
> Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment;
> Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
> Thy wo and any wo man may sustene. (*CT* II. 841-47)

The passage demonstrates a delicate handling of pity by Chaucer: although Custance

[33] There are four Marian references in Chaucer's works. In addition to the *MLT*, the Virgin Mary is also evoked in *The Prioress' Tale*, the prologue of *The Second Nun's Tale*, and an early short poem, "*An ABC*." For a more detailed analysis of each invocation, see Reames, "Mary."

invokes the Crucifixion scene, she shows no interest in the suffering of Christ, which would be the conventional theme for religious compassion;[34] instead, she becomes fixated on Mary's motherly pain when seeing her son on the cross. By turning her attention to Mary, Custance assumes the role of a pitier, offering her support to another suffering mother, and such a gesture has facilitated a stronger imitation between the two parties. As Sherry Reames notes, "Custance identifies herself with the Virgin as a mother who yearns to protect her child, taking the role of the responsible and compassionate adult rather than the helpless child in the mother's arms" ("Mary" 92). The selfless, pitying position Custance takes, however, is suddenly overturned in the second stanza, wherein Custance falls back to the role of a piteous subject and demands support from her interlocutor. As she notes:

> Thow sawe thy child yslayn before thyne yen,
> And yet now lyveth my litel child, parfay!
> Now, lady bright, to whom alle woful cryen,
> Thow glorie of wommanhede, thow faire may,
> Thow haven of refut, brighte sterre of day,
> Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse
> Rewest on every reweful in distresse. (*CT* II. 848-54)

By constantly begging for mercy ("Rewe on my child"; "Rewest on every reweful in distresse"), Custance seeks to form an intimate relationship with Mary, albeit not in a supernatural context. Instead of requesting the Virgin's assistance as a divine favor, Custance caters to Mary's humanity by highlighting the fragility of her "wommanhede." If Mary were to grant Custance pity, the emotion would not be from the top-down; instead, it would come out of their shared experiences as sorrowing mothers who would not bear seeing their children suffer. This call for pity based on resemblance has subsequently provided the tale with an infrastructure for the miracles that ensue. Shortly after her prayer, Custance encounters a pagan ("A theef, that hadde reneyed oure creance" [*CT* II. 915]), who boards her boat intending to ravish her. However, Mary comes to the rescue by helping Custance push the man into the ocean ("But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon; / For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily" [*CT* II. 920-21]). Later, Mary saves Custance from the pain of disorientation by rerouting the boat back to Rome:

[34] See McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.

> Forth gooth hir ship thurghout the narwe mouth
> Of Jubaltare and Septe, dryvynge ay
> Somtyme west, and somtyme north and south,
> And somtyme est, ful many a wery day,
> Til Cristes mooder—blessed be she ay!—
> Hath shapen, thurgh hir endelees goodnesse,
> To make an ende of al hir hevynesse. (*CT* II. 946-52)

In light of the sequence of divine interventions from Mary, many critics have assumed a close affiliation between the tale and the subgenre of Marian miracle (which became popular in England since the twelfth century). While this reading is suggestive, I want to highlight that what lies beneath the making of such Marian spectacles is the poetics of pity; Chaucer's story illustrates the ways in which pity becomes the driving force of causality in miracles and that Custance could never have been saved without it.

Although the presence of the Virgin Mary remains peripheral in the poem, its importance to the characterization of Custance's female sanctity cannot be understated. While most of Chaucer's invocations of the saints in the *Canterbury Tales* tend to be sacrilegious and deceptive in nature—such as Alison's invocation of St. Thomas Beckett in the *Miller's Tale* to bear witness to her adulterous relationship with Nicolas ("That she hir love hym graunted atte laste, / And swoor hir ooth, by Seint Thomas of Kent, / That she wol been at his comandement" [*CT* I. 3290-92])—the Virgin Mary acquires a unique place in Chaucer's hagiographic repertoire in terms of the female sanctity she represents: not only is Mary elevated to the highest tier of sainthood for her inherent innocence and pureness, but her motherhood renders a very feasible model for true imitation among women. Therefore, by having Custance convene a heart-felt prayer to the Virgin, Chaucer indicates a certain, what Burger calls, "female homosociality," by which saintly alliances are formed through shared human affects (Burger, "Pite" 69).[35]

[35] Burger devises the term in his reading of the *Squire's Tale*, wherein Canacee wears a magic ring and is thus able to take pity on a wounded female falcon. While Burger's rendering of female homosociality remains a queer concept rooted in a human-animal divide, I view the term as applicable to my framing of Custance's relationship with Mary. For more on the usage of female homosociality, see Burger, "Pite."

The Narrator

While the Northumberlanders and the Virgin Mary account for distinct witnesses to Custance's hardships, the ultimate pitying viewer Chaucer offers is the narrator, whose empathetic, first-person commentary maneuvers the ways in which Custance's victimhood is conceptualized. The issue of the power of the narratorial voice has been addressed by several critics in the past. In his commentary on the subject, A. C. Spearing notes that one of the features that distinguishes Chaucer's Constance story from its predecessors lies in the forcefulness of its first-person narrator. As he notes:

> The tale contains an exceptionally prominent and pervasive narratorial element, including numerous explicit occurrences of a narratorial first person. (In this last respect it contrasts sharply with Gower's version of the same story, where the interpretative commentary, while very noticeable in itself, scrupulously avoids all explicit first-personal forms.) The *Man of Law's Tale* comments, often for several stanzas at a time, *on the destinal and providential forces at work behind the events it recounts, exclaiming at the lessons to be learned from them, and demanding emotional responses from the readers*. (719; emphasis added)

Spearing's impression of an emotion-provoking narrator in the *MLT* is pertinent to the study in question, as it underscores the interplay between the narrator and the emotional property of his rhetoric. In an early piece on Chaucer's rhetorical style, Thomas Bestul notes that the Man of Law demonstrates great ambitions in reviving the "high style" of the art of persuasion for the purpose of "emotional amplification" (218).[36] The Man of Law's decision to employ rhetoric for his tale seems fitting, as it speaks directly to the nature of his profession; by sharing the story of Custance, it is as if the Man of Law seeks to deliver his case in a legal proceeding and that his goal has been to win over his audience's heart. While the main function of classical rhetoric is to present truth through dialectic, its appeal to the audience's emotions often stands out as a major, accompanying effect, and "Chaucer pursues to a limit

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[36] The high style (or grand style) here refers to one of the three oral rhetorical styles introduced in *Ad Herennium.* For more, see Bestul. For a more comprehensive study of the affectivity of rhetoric, see Copeland.

that aspect of medieval poetic which taught that poetry convinces, not through logical demonstration, but through the emotions" (221). In keeping with Bestul's view, Amanda Holton observes that whereas Trevet's Constance text only contains two instances of emotional rhetoric, Chaucer's *MLT* easily outnumbers its predecessor by dozens. As she notes:

> Chaucer prefers rhetoric which we can class as affective in most contexts, whether there is hagiographical genre-prompting of any kind or not, and indeed he will often deliberately insert it, but it is only when it is brought into commentary that the tone is fully manipulated. (96)

In other words, the function of the narrator's voice in the *MLT* is by no means ornamental; instead, the narrator takes full advantage of his role as an all-knowing speaker, who strategically employs several rhetorical devices—in particular, *exclamatio* and *interrogatio*[37]—to arouse pity in response to Custance's suffering.

In an early episode wherein the evil Sultaness is plotting against the Christians from Rome, the narrator dedicates two consecutive stanzas to the Sultaness and Satan via *exclamatio*, a dramatic expression of sorrow conventionally employed for the arousal of readers' pity (Bestul 209). As he notes:

> O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!
> Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!
> O serpent under femynynytee,
> Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!
> O feyned womman, al that may confounde
> Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
> Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!
>
> O Sathan, envious syn thilke day
> That thou were chaced from oure heritage,
> Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way!
> Thou madest Eva brynge us in servage;
> Thou wolt fordoon this Cristen mariage.

[37] While multiple rhetorical devices are employed, critics have agreed that the combination of *exclamatio* and *interrogatio*—which are often discussed side-by-side in classical treaties such as the pseudo-Ciceroian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*–remains the most powerful duo in the poem. See Scheps; Holton 88-96.

Thyn instrument so—weylawey the while!—
Makestow of wommen, whan thou wolt bigile. (*CT* II. 358-71)

While these two stanzas do not contain any constructive information pertaining to the progression of the plot, they play an important role in manipulating readers' response toward Chaucer's characterization. By calling on the perversion of the Sultaness and linking her deeds with those of Satan, the narrator invites the audience to participate in, and by extension, to agree with his coloring of characters; in other words, through *exclamatio* readers have learned to detest the Sultaness and side with Custance as a result.

After Custance is exiled by the evil Sultaness, the narrator portrays the Roman princess drenched in sorrow, drifting on the open sea. Knowing that all of her courtiers are slaughtered and that her life depends on "a ship al steerelees" (*CT* II. 439), Custance prays to God out of desperation. Yet, this heart-wrenching scene—which runs to only twelve lines—is disproportionately annotated by the narrator with a six-stanza commentary via an extensive use of *interrogatio*, that is, the use of rhetorical questions. As he notes:

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feeste? Who myghte hir body save?
………………………………………..
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
………………………………………..
Now sith she was nat at the feeste yslawe,
Who kepte hire fro the drenchyng in the see?
Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe
Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?
………………………………………..
Where myghte this womman mete and drynke have
Thre yeer and moore? How lasteth hire vitaille?
Who fedde the Egipcien Marie in the cave,
Or in desert? No wight but Crist, sanz faille. (*CT* II. 470-71; 473-75; 484-87; 498-501)

The sequence of these questions comes with a literary significance in two aspects: first, through his constant vouching for the exiled princess, the narrator establishes his credibility as a privileged witness to Custance's suffering, even when she is drifting alone in the sea and allegedly not attended by any physical viewers. The trope of *interrogatio* thus allows the narrator to shape readers' perspectives by presenting himself as the default pitying viewer of Custance. Second, as in the case of rhetorical questions in modern times, the employment of *interrogatio* functions as a dramatic device that strategically hijacks conversations, or as Walter Scheps notes, "the anticipation and refutation of any possible objections to the credibility of his [the Man of Law's] story" (290). By raising unanswerable questions in bulk, the narrator places the audience in a twilight zone, wherein they have no way of differentiating questions from answers, and it subsequently creates an undefeatable logic that can only be understood as a form of rhetorical gaslighting. By interweaving multiple rhetorical devices such as *exclamatio* and *interrogatio* throughout the poem, the Man of Law creates an affective echo chamber, by which readers are instructed to warm up to the acceptance of Custance's mistreatment, and the reproduction of pity is thus a natural result of such rhetorical undertakings.

The narrator's attempt to enhance the emotional component of Custance's misery culminates in the final scene with the reunion of the couple, and the energy of the episode is facilitated through a triangle of pity emanating from Custance, King Alla, and the narrator. Upon seeing Custance's face, King Alla first sinks into a wave of unstoppable weeping, which immediately prompts the narrator to impose a comment of pity ("Whan Alla saugh his wyf, faire he hire grette, / And weep that it was routhe for to see" [*CT* II. 1051-52]). Then, in response to her husband's weeping, Custance is said to have swooned twice, which triggers a second wave of weeping from King Alla ("Twyes she swowned in his owene sighte; / He weep, and hym excuseth pitously" [*CT* II. 1058-59]). Aside from the element of theatricality, the back-and-forth weeping between Custance and King Alla epitomizes the ways in which pity is employed as a means of communication by Chaucer. Through their exchanges of sorrow and pity, Custance and King Alla are constantly swapping roles between a piteous subject and a pitying viewer, and the synergy of their emotional work ultimately paves the way for a final remark made by the narrator. As he notes:

> Long was the sobbyng and the bitter peyne,
> Er that hir woful hertes myghte cesse;
> Greet was the pitee for to heere hem pleyne,
> Thurgh whiche pleintes gan hir wo encresse.

> I pray yow alle my labour to relesse;
> I may nat telle hir wo until to-morwe,
> I am so wery for to speke of sorwe. (*CT* II. 1065-71)

Upon seeing the pitiful reunion between Custance and King Alla, the narrator interrupts his storytelling and makes a sudden address to the readers. The insertion of a confessional tone here is crucial: by admitting to readers that he no longer has the power to continue since his woe is too heavy to bear, the narrator inversely illustrates how pity is the only appropriate and effective response for the occasion ("Greet was the pitee for to heere hem pleyne" [*CT* II. 1067]). By piecing together several episodes in the *MLT* where the dynamic of the story hinges on the emotional interplay between the protagonist and her assumed interlocutors, Chaucer deviates from the virgin martyr plot and provides us with a new possibility of female hagiography; not only does pity bring a humanizing aspect to female sanctity, but it is, as Chaucer suggests, the key to saintly imitation.

Conclusion

This article examined Chaucer's maneuvering of hagiographic discourses through the lens of affect. By revisiting debates centering on Custance's sainthood in the past decades, I reckoned that scholars have had a tendency to conceptualize Custance's sanctity against the backdrop of early virgin martyrs, by which safeguarding one's virginity, defying oppression, and dying for faith are deemed standard entry qualifications. Due to this generic comparison, Custance is often considered a misfit for sainthood and her tale a failed hagiography. I sought to make nuances to this reading via the rhetoric of pity. I expanded on Chaucer's diverse understandings of female sanctity in two of his early works, the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women*: while Chaucer's Cecilia is portrayed as impassible, aligning herself with other early virgin martyrs, Chaucer innovates the trope by employing a long line of wives who are emotionally vulnerable; more specifically, their wifehood is supported by a poetics of pity that demands emotional responses from their viewers, be it from a character in the story or the narrator. Such diverse representations of female sanctity, I argued, not only mark Chaucer's dexterity in bending conventions (as he did so adeptly throughout his career), but also explicate a certain urgency to revise the emotional scripts of the genre in response to a changing audience, from early saintly women in seclusion to the rise of a domestic, popular female readership. With this new framework in mind, I then employed a close reading

of the *Man of Law's Tale*, by which I argued that the poem is consciously operating on the logic of pity. What appears to be a journey of an exiled princess can thus be reframed as a sequence of emotional dialogues between a "woful Custance," by which I hope to add nuance to contemporary discussions of Chaucer's hagiographic poetics.

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