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Ethnically Different Mothers-in-Law in Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* and Its 2003 BBC Adaptation

When discussing the question of difference in the Middle Ages, it needs to be emphasised that differences between people were perceived primarily as cultural rather than biological in that epoch. Even though Chaucer writes about the two mothers-in-law in *The Man of Law's Tale* as, respectively, Syrian (i.e. Eastern), and Northumbrian (i.e. Northern), he discusses the difference they stand for as religious and, more generally speaking, cultural, rather than ethnic or, to use the term anachronistically, racial. Robert Bartlett claims that we may refer to ethnicisation and racialisation interchangeably even in reference to the Middle Ages, so the terms “race” and “ethnicity” will co-exist here as well. Medieval race/ethnicity was directly related to cultural markers, so the biological ones were not so important. Quoting Bartlett's formulation in *The Making of Europe*, “while the language of race – *gens, natio*, ‘blood,’ ‘stock,’ etc. – is biological, its medieval reality was almost entirely cultural.”¹ The adaptation of *The Man of Law's Tale* from 2003 is a part of the six-part series for the first time broadcast on BBC One and it modernises the topic of difference that the mothers-in-law in the medieval narrative represent.² After all, the story of Constance Musa, a Nigerian refugee who illegally arrives in the Thames estuary aboard a freighter, is set in the twentieth century, the time of continuing racism, omnipresent xenophobia disguised under the cover of political correctness, and intercultural and interreligious conflicts. All the above has to make this retelling different

¹ Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Exchange 950–1350* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 197.

² The other films are *The Miller's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath*, *The Knight's Tale*, *The Sea Captain's Tale*, and *The Pardoner's Tale*.

from Chaucer's tale. The question of her Iranian mother-in-law, the only character in that role in the film, only confirms this intuition.

In Chaucer, Custance is the daughter of the emperor of Rome and she is traded in marriage to the Syrian sultan.³ As a Christian she is rejected by her mother-in-law, who instigates a slaughter at the feast, during which the sultan is murdered. Custance is set adrift in a rudderless boat and lands in Northumbria. There she is accused of murdering the Constable's wife, she is freed from the accusation and then able to marry king Aella, a pagan ruler whom she converts to Christianity. When Aella is away, his mother plots against Custance. A letter is forged by the mother-in-law in which Aella supposedly orders Custance to be set adrift again because she gave birth to a monster. This time she travels together with her baby son Maurice. In the modern adaptation, whose screenplay was written by Olivia Hetreed, Constance is a refugee, asylum seeker, and illegal immigrant at the same time, even though she cannot seek the asylum formally, since she will be sent back to Nigeria then.⁴ When in Britain, she risks suffering from deterritorialisation, but her religion gives her a home also in the new country. The home is not only a shelter in Nicky and Mark Constable's house, but also Constance's participation in the Christian community in church.⁵ Her arrival by boat means that the boat is both a saviour (she could have been killed in Nigeria during the interreligious riots) and a traumatic experience. She arrives in a dinghy in which she is sewn up like a corpse. In Britain she is confronted with the fact that especially the arrival by boat can wash away all human feelings, including those of her future mother-in-law; it is a situation which is not that obvious in the

³ Brenda Deen Schildgen claims that Rome is "the meeting of East and West" in Chaucer's tale, which according to Carol F. Heffernan illustrates "curious intersections of mercantilism and faith"; Carol F. Heffernan, *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 23.

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⁵ In contrast to Chaucer's tale, where Constance's marriage is a political matter since it "is justified by the missionary zeal of Christianity against Islam in which Constance is decreed by the pope to be the tool of salvation," in the BBC adaptation religion is a private, solely spiritual, matter; Dorothee Metlizki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 155.

case of other instances of illegal immigration. As Mark Constable puts it bluntly, her arrival at his home makes her “a stranger in the house.”⁶ All the above is a development of the topic of rejection because of culture and religion that was already present in Chaucer's tale.

When discussing the question of difference in the context of Custance/Constance and the mother(s)-in-law, Edward Said's theory of orientalist feminisation and masculinisation needs to be mentioned. According to Said the imaginary Orient is not only inhabited by effeminate men, but also masculinised women. Said claims that Orientals are characterized by their propensity for transgressing gender boundaries. Still, he does not take gender into account, as he only states that in orientalist discourse Orientals (for him generally being male rather than female) were believed to be naïve, gullible, emotional, and childish, which put their gender identity into question.⁷ He does not consider the asexuality of characterization in the case of oriental women, who could become feminine rather than disconcertingly androgynous only when they converted to Christianity, and consequently became eligible to be married. In Chaucer's tale this is visible in the characterization of the two mothers-in-law.

In the tale Custance, a paragon of Christian virtues, sets forth to Syria on the day which is disastrous for her:

The day is comen of hir departyng,
I seye, the woful day fatal is come. (II: 260–261) (Benson 91)⁸

Even though Constance's misery has been caused by the Sultan, smitten with her beauty and virtue, and not by his mother, nameless in the text, a lot of attention is devoted to the woman and not the man in the criticism of the tale. From the very first lines referring to the Sultanness, she is con-

⁶ Metlizki writes that in Chaucer's tale Constance “is seen as a woman whose force of persuasion succeeds in converting her heathen rescuer and his wife,” but in the BBC adaptation Mark Constable remains hostile towards Christianity; Metlizki, 155.

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), 107–8.

⁸ All the quotations from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *The Legend of Good Women* will come from Benson's edition and the line numbers in brackets will be taken from it; Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

structed as a reversal of the Virgin Mary, which is accomplished by means of discourse similar to the religious one. The narrator calls her the “welle of vices” (II: 323), which is a travesty of such phrases as “this welle of mercy, Cristes mooder sweete” (VII: 656) appearing in *The Prioress’s Tale*. In the *Man of Law’s Tale* the Sultan gladly accepts Constance’s religion, since he declares: “I wol be cristned” (II: 225). In contrast, the first mother-in-law feigns conversion to Christianity in order to ingratiate herself both with her son and her daughter-in-law. Moreover, it is a strategy crucial to the accomplishment of her murderous scheme, as she reports it to her servants:

We shul first feyne us cristendom to take –
 Coold water shal nat greve us but a lite! –
 And I shal swich a feeste and revel make
 That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite.
 For thogh his wyf be cristned never so white,
 She shal have need to wasshe away the rede,
 Thogh she a font-ful water with hire lede. (II: 351–357)

The mother-in-law is here anti-Christian and anti-European. Christine M. Rose characterises her as someone very strongly opposing exogamy in favour of endogamy.⁹ She objects to her son marrying outside his culture, religion, and ethnic group.

The teller of the tale enhances the negative characterization of the Sultaness when he issues the following often-quoted apostrophe:

O Sowdaness, roote of iniquitee!
 Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!
 O serpent under femynynytee,
 Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!
 O feyned woman, al that may confounde
 Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
 Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice! (II: 358–364)

⁹ Christine M. Rose, “The Jewish Mother-in-Law: Synagoga and the *Man of Law’s Tale*,” in *Chaucer and the Jews*, ed. Sheila Delany (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–24.

The Sultanesse is not only likened to Satan, “the serpent depe in helle ybounde,” who is addressed in the next stanza in the words: “O Sathan, envious syn thilke day / That thou were chaced from oure heritage” (II: 365–6), but also compared to the mythical oriental queen Semiramis and named “virago.” Initially the latter word was simply used in reference to Eve and it was derivative from the Latin *vir*. Even when it did not have the meaning which it acquired in the later Middle Ages, its connotations were negative: *virago* was created later than *vir* and she “brynge us in servage” (II: 358). As for the later medieval denotation, Larry D. Benson quotes *OED* which identifies *virago* as “bold, impudent, (or wicked) woman” and indicates Gaevin Douglas’s translation of the *Aeneid* as the source of another definition: “a woman exersand a mannis office.”¹⁰ Thus, in that context a *virago* is less similar to gullible Eve who could not resist the temptation in the garden of Eden than to a woman who usurps power of any kind. In the light of such ideology women should not be allowed to exercise any power at all, since it will always make them man-like. Virility then becomes synonymous with powerfulness, while the women who are, contrary to nature, sovereigns, inflict suffering not only on men, but also on other women, as it happens with the Sultanesse.

“Semyrame the secounde,” another name used in order to address the Sultanesse, alludes to the legendary militant queen of Babylon notorious for her wickedness and lust. She had two husbands, the second of whom, Ninius, she was believed to have assassinated during a feast arranged for him.¹¹ Then she was able to ascend the throne and rebuild the Syrian (or Assyrian) city, to which Chaucer alludes in his *Legend of Good Women*:

At Babyloyne whilom fit it thus,
The whyche toun the queen Semyramus
Let dychen al aboute and walles make
Ful hye, of hard tiles wel ybake. (706–9)

¹⁰ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 860.

¹¹ Susan Schibanoff, “Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Exemplaria* 1 (1996), 85.

In the quoted remark, which Chaucer inserts at the beginning of the *Legend of Thisbe*, there occur no negative overtones of Semiramis's characterization. Still, Schibanoff insightfully indicates that in *De claris mulieribus* Boccaccio broaches the stratagem that the queen used in order to acquire the position of power in her country: she cross-dressed as her son, Ninius, alternatively known as Ninyan, and revealed the truth about her identity only when she was already the ruler. Then she gained admiration on the part of her subjects. Her lasciviousness manifested itself not only in the number of her lovers, but also in committing incest with her son.¹² The Sultanness has her own son slain instead, but the effect of the comparison remains strong. She is a false mother, pretending affection for Constance in order to disguise her true intentions, since she:

Receyveth hire with also glad a cheere
As any mooder myghte hir doghter deere. (II: 396–397)

The wealth of associations of the Sultanness with other cultural images of women contributes to the effect of racialization of that character, which is not visible in the male Oriental figures, the Sultan and king Aella. Moreover, also the second mother-in-law, Donegild, becomes a highly ethnicised figure even though she is not oriental. That ethnicisation/racialisation of pagan Donegild displays the simplistic nature of the division into the evil Orient and the righteous Occident. Donegild inhabits Northumbria, situated in the north of Europe, but she does not considerably differ from the Sultanness since in the Middle Ages Muslims, Jews, and pagans were all classified as “infidels.” Interestingly, her son's name, Aella, brings about associations with the East, while the Northumbria of the tale does not differ much from the Orient described earlier in the tale. Similarly to the Sultanness, Donegild is also “mannysh” (II: 782) and “full of tyrannye” (II: 696).

Also Aella, like Constance's first husband, the Sultan, converts to Christianity along with other pagans surrounding him:

¹² Schibanoff, 85.

The kyng – and many other in that place –
 Converted was, thanked be Cristes grace! (II: 689–690)

Aella's mother stays apart, like her predecessor pretending true motherly care. Again she is the one who craves for power, which seems almost a stock element of the characterization of heathen women.

Also Leila, Alan King's mother in the BBC adaptation, is very much like Chaucer's mothers-in-law in this respect, since she is also obsessed with pulling the strings. Yet in the modern world she cannot be accused of being "masculinised." Her physicality makes her very feminine and she has the air of an Iranian woman who must have been beautiful when she married Alan's British father and, as a result, became a British citizen. She does not want to be seen as ethnically different from the people surrounding her. In the film's present she is an elderly conservative woman who loathes Constance because of the girl's African identity and unclear social status. She wishes Alan would marry "a nice normal girl" and Constance does not fit the image. Leila looks quite European herself, so perhaps she wants to make herself more "European" than Europeans by acting in a racist manner. If she remembers the rejection she possibly experienced when she immigrated to England, she reworks the trauma by acting like the ones who were xenophobic towards her: she becomes xenophobic herself. She does not know that Constance arrived in England by boat and yet she issues racist remarks about Nicky's relatives. According to Leila, Nicky is "shipping in relatives by the boatload." When Alan reacts "You're such a racist," she retorts "Nonsense, darling. How could I be?" She believes that being an immigrant from Iran protects her against the accusations of racism and xenophobia, so she feels free to reject both Nicky and Constance with her ruthless words. The primary fear of the mother of a son, that of being "abandoned" when he finds a wife or a partner, is strengthened here by the racism of someone who is still an outsider in the British society despite being a British citizen. Also Susan Yager states authoritatively that "Leila [...] is plainly racist."¹³

¹³ Susan Yager, "The BBC *Man of Law's Tale*: Faithful to the Tradition," *Literature and Belief* 27.2 (2007), accessed September 17, 2013, http://literatureandbelief.byu.edu/publications/bbc_man.pdf.

Nevertheless, the adaptation does not rely on Chaucer's plot in making the mother-in-law a murderess. Instead, like in the Northumbrian part of Chaucer's narrative where a knight slain the Constable's wife, Terry, a member of the Christian community who is infatuated with Constance, murders Nicky, and Constance, who again suffers from post-traumatic memory loss, is accused of the murder. All this is yet to the advantage of Leila, who hopes that the relationship between her son and Constance will stop to develop when she is imprisoned. Leila no longer has to pretend friendliness towards Constance in the manner Chaucer's Sultaness did. The modern mother-in-law purposefully uses the past tense to Alan in the courtroom where Terry testifies: "Was that your rival?" From the very beginning of the plot Alan notices that his mother belongs to a different world and coming to her dinner party could be "an interesting cultural experience" for Constance. He realizes that she wants to arrange a marriage for him and that Constance is out of question as a candidate for this, but he slights the situation. In contrast to Chaucer's masculinised mothers-in-law, the modern mother-in-law is hyper-feminine in the old-fashioned style: she wants power at least over the life of her child if she cannot have it in the society. When Leila and Alan visit Constance in prison and Alan suggests that marrying him could make her stay in Britain legal, Leila is terrified and attacks him: "You're getting carried away." She uses a very strong argument to support her thesis: "Think of all the differences!"

When he ignores her reaction and marries Constance out of love and not merely because he wants to help her, the mother-in-law ruins the girl's life when the latter has to go back to Nigeria and needs a confirmation of her marriage to the official on the phone. Leila answers the phone, denies the facts testified by Constance and tells her that Alan does not want any further contacts with her. She pretends that he called their marriage "a mistake." As a result, Constance, like Chaucer's Custance, is abandoned, here in Nigeria, and, to boot, she is imprisoned, beaten up despite her pregnancy, and helped only by a priest who gives a home to her and her baby. The part of the plot which in Chaucer reads like a fairy tale becomes here a realistic account of the mother-in-law's callousness and the all-human violence and cruelty for strangers. Constance's parents were

killed because they were treated as strangers in their own land due to their interfaith marriage: the mother was Christian and the father was Muslim. Now Constance is treated as a stranger since she is deported from Britain and cannot return even though she married a British citizen.

Still, all the things other than the mother-in-law's dislike and spurn are thoroughly reworked in the BBC film. Susan Schibanoff claims that "The Man of Law's overriding aim [...] is to preserve and enhance such difference – between men and women, East and West, Islam and Christianity, ultimately between Western patriarchal culture and the Other."¹⁴ The film does not portray patriarchy any longer, but relationships between men and women are based more on partnership than domination here. The identity of characters in terms of being Eastern or Western is not that obvious, either: Alan looks and acts in a Western way even though he is of half Iranian origin. Constance herself is not a child of one religion only, as in Chaucer, but the daughter of a Christian and a Muslim. The adaptation does not state that certain identity markers definitely make someone a social Other, but rather implies that anyone, including Christians who are called "dregs" by embittered Mark, can be othered. We learn that what made him prejudiced against Constance was not only her illegal immigration by boat, but also her deep religiousness. It was her faith that made her utter to him the words "Please, God, help me" as the first ones when he opened the sheath in which she was lying inside the dinghy. Furthermore, according to Leila, illegal immigrants deserve nothing, so they should be reproached for all the trouble others take to help them. When Leila visits Constance in the immigrant centre, she wants to make her feel guilty when she talks about Alan: "He has been working terribly hard for you." Like king Aella's mother, in the end she also forges a letter. In Chaucer it was a letter from Aella ordering his subjects to expel Custance from the kingdom. In the adaptation Leila may be the author of an email in which Constance tells Alan to leave her alone in Nigeria.

In *The Man of Law's Tale* Donegild, similarly to the Sultanness, transgresses gender boundaries, as Susan Schibanoff claims, and she writes a letter in order to achieve her goal. She masquerades as a man when

¹⁴ Schibanoff, 63.

she writes as her own son in order to send Constance and her allegedly monstrous son, Maurice, into exile. The letter she forges is a symbol of the power she usurps.¹⁵ Still, aspiring to authority has to end up in utter failure: when Aella comes, he slays his mother “for that she traitour was to her ligeance” (II: 895). In the BBC film Leila does not aspire to “masculine” empowerment, but rather uses her feminine, deceptively soft voice to trick everyone and probably forges the email from Constance. The mother-in-law is rejected by Alan when he learns the truth about her intrigue from Mark. He shouts at her about how he feels about Constance: “She is the best person I have ever known. If you cannot accept that, I’m sorry!” The two are reunited in Nigeria after explaining to each other the circumstances of the separation.

In contrast to the original tale, the 2003 BBC adaptation does not focus on the mother-in-law’s ethnicity excessively. We can only guess that her own Iranian origin may be the reason why she treats Constance in a racist way. The Syrian and Northumbrian mothers-in-law were masculinised, whereas Leila is characterised as “feminine” in a negative way: she is simultaneously soft-spoken and dangerous in her intrigues and ruthlessness shown towards her daughter-in-law. In Chaucer powerful women are compared to men, while in the modern version the mother-in-law can be both hyper-feminine and thirsty for control. Her motherly possessiveness leads to the tragic rejection of her by Alan, her only child.

¹⁵ Schibanoff, 88.

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