

Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"

Brenda Deen Schildgen

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Brenda Deen Schildgen's analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* explores the contemporary worldviews of medieval Europeans. Chaucer, an English court poet, wrote probably his greatest work – the *Canterbury Tales* – at the end of the fourteenth century. It is a collection of 24 tales told by pilgrims as they make their way to Canterbury cathedral. Chaucer frames the tales with a prologue and dialogue between the tales.

Schildgen's book examines the eight tales set outside Christian Europe. Much of the book discusses the medieval view of paganism and the continuing influence of pagan philosophy on medieval intellectual thought. She analyses the "Man of Law's Tale," whose story takes place in both pagan and Muslim lands. (It is worth pointing out here that, although by the fourteenth century the Mongols increasingly were becoming Muslims, the Tartars in the "Squire's Tale" are associated with paganism.) In addition to discussing the tales involving pagans and Muslims, Schildgen analyzes the anti-Semitic "Prioress' Tale."

Drawing on Habermas's theory of practical discourse (in which discussants engage in a discourse where each is aware of and open to the other's perspectives and interpretations), Schildgen argues that the *Canterbury Tales* is an excellent example of what Habermas has in mind. Traditional analysis states that Chaucer does not favor one pilgrim over the others, and Schildgen takes this a step further by arguing that the *Canterbury Tales* incorporates "a range of intellectual and ethical attitudes that thrived in Chaucer's pan-European contemporary cultural and social world." She

points out that the pilgrims' story-telling contest creates a situation of equality not unlike the practical discourse for which Habermas was looking. For her, the stories show a group of people "who can relate, argue, and debate alternative views that do not yield definitive conclusions." The pilgrims represent the spectrum to English society – from a knight to a cook, and from a man of law (lawyer) to a priest and a drunken miller. The speakers' different social classes allow a wide range of topics, genres, and tones. In addition, the work is unique, since Chaucer chose vernacular English over courtly French.

For the modern scholar of Islam, it is Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" and Schildgen's discussion of this primary source that is of the greatest interest. For the Man of Law, pagans are to be absorbed into Christianity, while Muslims are treacherous people who allow women to rule and commit unthinkable acts. They are the Unreachable Other.

The tale divides the world between Christians, centered in Rome, and the lands of "hethenesse." The heroine, Constance, travels to two different foreign lands: Muslim Syria and pre-Christian Britain. Her travels and misfortunes provide the reader with a unique insight into the world beyond Christendom.

As both Schildgen and previous scholars have pointed out, the "Man of Law's Tale" shows that Chaucer had some knowledge of Islam. This story is the only place in the *Canterbury Tales* where Muhammad (Mahoun) and the Qur'an (Alkaron) are mentioned. The Man of Law speaks of Islam as a monotheistic religion in which the holy laws are revealed in its principal text: the Qur'an. The story portrays Islam as being a complete set of laws and beliefs.

By examining Chaucer's earlier works, Schildgen shows that he valued Islamic learning, particularly astronomy. Chaucer also expresses the importance of Islamic knowledge in his "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*. There, he establishes one pilgrim's knowledge by saying that he learned from the writings of Arabs, Greeks, Syrians, and Egyptians. For Chaucer's Man of Law, the learning of the East is useful and should therefore be borrowed, removed from its cultural context, and incorporated into European thought.

In spite of Chaucer's knowledge of Islam and his respect for its achievements, the story is full of contemporary prejudices against and misconceptions about Islam. It begins with the Syrian sultan agreeing to convert to Christianity in order to marry the Roman princess Constance. His mother (the sultana) and advisors try to talk him out of his decision. When this fails,

the sultana plots to murder her son along with anyone else in the court who willingly converts. She pretends to convert before going through with her murderous conspiracy. Her final crime is to put the saintly Constance out to sea in a rudderless boat.

Early in the tale, both the sultana and the sultan's advisors defend the Qur'anic law that the sultan is abandoning. For the Man of Law, this is not a defense of Islam. Rather, it illustrates the "binary opposition" between the two worlds; even the Other knows its Otherness. Schildgen clearly demonstrates that, for Chaucer's Man of Law as well as for most medieval Christians, Islam was the evil antipode.

Schildgen contends that the Man of Law resists all social and political dealings with Islam, even those in the name of religion. The tale condemns Constance's journey to Syria from the beginning, referring to ominous astrological signs. Schildgen points out that this is based on astronomy learned from the Muslim world. Constance herself laments that she must travel to "Barbre nacioun." For the Man of Law, the Other must remain outside to protect Christianity from its "habits that are repugnant to civilized society."

Although the sultana offers religious arguments against the marriage, it is her actions that illustrate the English pilgrim's imagined world of Islam. According to the Man of Law, she makes her horrid plans because she has the unwomanly desire to rule the country alone. Further supporting Schildgen's position is the fact that the Man of Law calls the sultana a second Semiramia (an Assyrian queen who, legend says, legalized incest). Chaucer thereby identifies Islam with Babylon and exotic decadence, painting a picture in which the women of the East are even more depraved than the men.

After leaving Syria, Constance eventually arrives in Britain, where the Christians have disappeared and the people have returned to paganism. Thus the narrative contrasts the Islam of the East with the pagans of the West. Here, Constance converts a large number of natives and marries the king before having further misadventures. The story ends with her son by the British king becoming the Roman emperor. Thus Britain is Christianized and linked to the Christian world's focal point – Rome. Islam, on the other hand, remains on the outside.

In this tale, pagans can and must be converted. This is, after all, a tale of Christian evangelism. However, from the viewpoint of Chaucer's Man of Law, there is no hope of converting Muslims. It is interesting to note that Chaucer is even aware that there are laws against outside proselytizing in the Muslim world. Muslims are forever the Other against whom Christians must define themselves.

Schildgen’s study is a useful addition to *Canterbury Tales* scholarship. She explores the varying views presented by these eight stories and makes her points through both extensive research and a detailed reading of the text. She includes extensive notes and a bibliography. *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales”* provides valuable insight into the medieval English, and by extension European, view of Islam.

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