Micah Koniuszy

Prof. Newhauser

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Religious Implications in The Man of Law’s Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer is perhaps the most well-known English poet of the Middle Ages, providing readers with an intimate knowledge of the state of England during the 14th century. Within what most consider his most illustrious work, *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer comments on such things as the dress of the period, social structure, and religious attitudes. He does this by means of various storytellers ranging from ranks as high as a knight to as low as a miller. Through the use of these characters, and the tales they tell, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* conveys to the reader the superficiality of Christianity at the time. What is meant by this is Christianity as a public practice by members of the various estates, not Christianity as a set of theological beliefs. In particular, the Man of Law, who would be similar to a modern day lawyer, tells a story that is highly religious in its nature. The central character of his story, Constance, converts those she comes in contact with. Two such characters are the Sultan of Syria found near the beginning of the text, and King Alla of Northumberland near the end.

Due to the order in which the stories fall in the Ellesmere manuscript, and their content, the Man of Law’s story serves as a kind of “restart” to *The Canterbury Tales*. When compared to the tale of the Knight, however, it comes across to the reader as somewhat pompous. The Man of Law often interjects his own comments and thoughts into the text, which serves to detract from the pace and grandeur of the tale rather than add to it. This type of self-interest is a prime example of how Christians are portrayed by Chaucer’s poetic work as shallow.