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NOMINALISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON CHAUCER'S
"THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE"

Roger E. Moore

Of the many questions arising from a close analysis of "The Man of Law's Tale," none is more problematical than that concerning theodicy, or the justification of suffering in a supposedly providential world. Chaucer probes this question in other areas of *The Canterbury Tales*, most notably in the Knight's and Franklin's tales, but with the Man of Law's narrative the treatment differs. In "The Knight's Tale" suffering appears *sub specie aeternitatis*, with the affirmation that above all earthly travails is "the First Moevere," who is both "stable" and "eterne" (1. 298).¹ In "The Franklin's Tale" Dorigen's queries about the evil of the "grisly feendly rokkes blake" (5. 868) are subsumed within an ultimately happy ending.² "The Man of Law's Tale," on the other hand, has virtually none of these hints of comfort or resolution. Although the series of reconciliation scenes that concludes the tale might initially seem to constitute a happy ending, these reunions are accompanied almost immediately by the deaths of the characters and thereby provide an appropriately bleak ending for the almost unrelieved series of torments and sufferings inflicted upon the virtuous Custance, sufferings that, as Chauncey Wood tells us, "are extreme even by mediaeval standards."³ Notably absent from this narrative are both a sustained response from God and a sense that Custance's suffering fits into some explicitly stated divine plan. With "The Man of Law's Tale," Chaucer seems to present an especially bleak view of existence and takes the issue of theodicy and suffering to its most extreme form.⁴

One possibly fruitful approach to the bleakness of the tale and its unresolved theological problem is to examine it in light of the skepticism and fideism of late medieval nominalism. In its fourteenth century form, nominalism represented a radical reaction against the extreme optimism and confidence in reason typical of the thirteenth-century scholastics. The

nominalists believed that the philosophies enunciated by Aquinas and other Aristotelians, which emphasized God's adherence to rational rules, and therefore a rational explanation of suffering, usurped the powers and prerogatives central to the divine nature.⁵ Ockham and his intellectual followers focused much more closely on God's freedom and the infinite possibilities inherent in this *potentia absoluta*.⁶ This exaltation of the divine will and power as the primary features of God's nature leads ultimately to divine inscrutability: God is summarily "driven out of the world" and out of human understanding because we can never probe the depths of his utterly transcendent nature.⁷ A radical contingency in both the divine and the human realms characterizes life according to nominalist ideas.⁸

This same emphasis on contingency and uncertainty plays a major role in "The Man of Law's Tale." The remote and often willful deity, the emphasis on human epistemological limitations, Custance's response to her world, and her incessant wanderings in a rudderless boat all suggest at least a tentative, if not more definite, concern with nominalist issues. The congruences between nominalism and the tale suggest that, with Custance's story, Chaucer illustrates the nature of life in a limited nominalistic world.⁹

In light of nominalism's importance in the fourteenth century, we might expect others to have travelled this same interpretive path. But a review of the criticism reveals a conspicuous lack of interest in the tale's possible engagement with nominalism. Although critics have approached the tale from a variety of perspectives, including the suitability of the tale to the teller, the character of the Man of Law, Chaucer's relation to his source, and the issue of genre, almost all have unquestioningly assumed the basic philosophical foundation to be Boethian.¹⁰ Kaske and David, for instance, both claim that the Boethian spirit of "The Knight's Tale" underlies the Man of Law's story, though it here becomes specifically Christian. According to David, "The remote and impersonal order of the prime mover becomes the providence of the Christian God."¹¹ Stephen Manning concludes that Custance has "learned the lesson of Lady Philosophy,"¹² while Arthur Norman states that "Boethius would approve" of the tale's providential message, "for the philosophy is his own."¹³ Kolve continues the Boethian comparisons, but goes a step farther by asserting that Custance, unlike Boethius, "lives out the problem [of suffering] and its resolution."¹⁴ Helen Cooper also finds the tale's worldview to be "providential," and contrasts this with the "vagaries of Fortune and the frenzied human disorder of the preceding tales."¹⁵

Of all the Boethian interpretations, however, perhaps the most unequivocal in their claims are those of John Yunk and Eugene Clasby. Yunk classifies the Man of Law's narrative as "a drama of Providence," and even

thinks that the “real protagonist is God Himself.”¹⁶ Clasby shares Yunck’s confidence in the tale’s message of divine guidance, and finds in Custance the “Boethian heroic ideal.”¹⁷ All of these critics assume that the tale reveals a teleological purpose animating the human realm, a divine plan that demonstrates God’s love, care, and active concern for his creation. Such an assumption is not, however, impermeable to criticism, for in exalting an unqualified optimism it asks us to disregard the tale’s injustice and suffering, that constitute its greater portion. Kaske acknowledges the ambiguity of the Boethian view, for he argues that it requires “a wholesale acceptance of the greatest horrors life has to offer” and “presupposes a strong philosophical digestion.”¹⁸ Considering the extremely dark world of the “Man of Law’s Tale,” it would seem useful to explore it with nominalist philosophical concepts that allow a fuller acceptance of the suffering and radical contingency of life.

Of course it is almost impossible to determine with any degree of certainty what Chaucer knew of nominalist philosophy. An examination of the philosophical atmosphere of the fourteenth century, however, supports the possibility of Chaucer’s familiarity with the movement. As Richard Sullivan points out, the late Middle Ages (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) was not only a period of great syntheses and holistic philosophical positions, but was also one in which an entire range of contradictory ideas and beliefs coexisted in a sort of fruitful tension.¹⁹ Intellectually, the fourteenth century was a time of critical appraisal, in which the philosophical syntheses of earlier days were reevaluated amid the proliferation of new ideas.²⁰ Whittock believes that the late Middle Ages was not “monolithic,” and quotes Wolfgang Clemens’ assumption that England especially was riddled with “philosophical and theological criticism.”²¹ A number of other areas of Chaucer’s work demonstrate a familiarity and engagement with these overall philosophical trends. David Steinmetz, for instance, perceives in the irrational and willful actions of Griselda’s lord, Walter, nominalist ideas of the deity in “The Clerk’s Tale.” Sheila Delany’s analysis of the skeptical fideism in the *Hous of Fame* similarly points to Chaucer’s awareness of the challenges posed by nominalism.²² More important than these specific instances, however, is Christian Zacher’s contention that “the fragmentation, incompleteness, and multiple points of view” found in the *Canterbury Tales* “may well owe something to nominalist habits of mind.”²³ These assertions of nominalist and skeptical postures in Chaucer indicate his possible connection to the dominant philosophical movement of his day.²⁴ Although we cannot claim unequivocally that nominalism is a “source” for “The Man of Law’s Tale,” or an interpretive key that unlocks all of the tale’s mysteries, we can

forcefully argue that, given the prominence of nominalism in the fourteenth century, its tenets affect in many ways the philosophical assumptions underlying this tale.

One of the first indications that "The Man of Law's Tale" reflects a nominalist atmosphere is that, throughout the story, God is remote and indifferent to the struggles inherent in human life. The narrator, the protagonist Custance, and the minor characters frequently refer to God, Christ, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, but the tale offers little indication that these supernatural beings can or will aid suffering humans. The tale makes almost no effort to describe God or elaborate upon his character: Custance mentions "Crist, that starf for our redempcioun" (2. 283), and the narrator voices some vague remarks about "the myghty werkis" (2. 478) of God, but on the whole the references to deity merely assert that one exists and nothing more. The God of the tale seems much like that of the nominalist tradition, a deity about which "nothing can be demonstrated" because "we have no direct knowledge" of God and his behavior.²⁵

There is, however, one impediment to this specific interpretation: the "miracles" recorded in the tale. The narrator believes that Custance survives "yeres and dayes" (2. 463) on the ocean between Syria and Northumbria through God's miraculous power. Custance's trial before King Alla continues the emphasis on the miraculous for, after praying to the "Immortal God" to be her "socour" (2. 638, 644), Custance sees her accuser "smoot upon the nekke-boon" (2. 669) by a mysterious hand; her life is saved, and the entire company is converted to Christianity. A final miracle occurs when "blisful Marie" assists Custance in the struggle against the lecherous steward; the steward drowns, and "Crist unwemmed kept Custance" (2. 924). In addition to these miracles, which are part of the narrative, there are also allusions to Daniel, Jonah, the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, "Egipcien Marie," and the feeding of the five thousand, all of which heighten the sense of the miraculous in the story.²⁶ Since these allusions are not present in Chaucer's source, Nicholas Trevet's *Anglo-Norman Chronicle*, we must try to determine Chaucer's purpose in adding them to a tale in which God seems distant and remote.

The most important fact to note is that these benevolent actions are arbitrary; merely actions of a moment, they do not show themselves to be parts of a larger plan. Miracles are by definition unpredictable supernatural interventions in the natural realm. We cannot help but wonder why God chooses these particular times to come to Custance's aid. Why does he not prevent the murder of the newly converted Christians in Syria and Custance's initial abandonment upon the sea? Why does he not intervene with Donegild

and the letter, thereby allowing Custance to maintain her sanctified and fulfilled life with King Alla? William Johnson problematizes these miracles even further by calling into question their divine character. He thinks that the quality of these occurrences as divine interventions is secondary to the "emotional intensity and intellectual uncertainty" which they engender.²⁷ He points out that Hermengyld's restoration of sight to the old Briton is not even clearly a miracle, while it is impossible to determine who performs the miracle of Custance's protection from the steward: "Mary, Custance herself, or Christ."²⁸ The miracles in "The Man of Law's Tale," then, are not clearly providential expressions of divine power. If they do demonstrate God's active intervention, they perhaps suggest the merely capricious and willful side of his personality, which in the nominalist tradition is known as his *potentia absoluta*.

The divine arbitrariness suggested by these miracles provides one link to nominalism, for one of the chief characteristics of the nominalist God is his willfulness. Indeed, one might say the cornerstone of the nominalist theological program is its exaltation of the divine will over the intellect. Knowles agrees with this estimation, even calling this focus on the "absolute power" of God, the sum of things God could do, rather than the ordained power, or what God actually will do, the "most characteristic part" of nominalism.²⁹ By emphasizing absolute power, nominalist thinkers discovered a deity who is "utterly free," totally unconstrained by logical rules, and therefore one whose actions frequently seem "an affront to human reason."³⁰ Nominalist writings are filled with examples of the infinite possibilities that God might choose to actualize. God could, for instance, entirely reverse the ethical order, commanding us to murder or become irreligious and impious.³¹ A more extreme example lies in *asinus* Christology, which proclaims that God could have incarnated himself, in accordance with his absolute will, as well in an ass as in a human being. Although this illustration is hotly contested, it does give insight into the arbitrary nature of an unrestricted deity.³² Despite the efforts of the new interpreters of nominalism to show God's willingly assumed limitations in His ordained power, in His absolute power God nevertheless is unpredictable, mysterious, and willful.

Chaucer encourages our perception of an indescribable and arbitrary deity by including numerous references to God's will. Of the seven times that the word "will" is used as a noun in the tale, five are explicitly associated with the divine being. We hear of the "wyl of Crist" (2. 511, 567, 825), "Cristes wille" (2. 721), and the "wille" of "myghty God" (2. 813). "Will" is thus connected to God more than any other noun ("grace" occurs four times; "mercy," "justice," and "love" once each).

The emphasis on God's will, and the neglect of other traditional aspects of his nature could, of course, be merely arbitrary or coincidental. A close examination of the descriptions of the deity in his source, however, points to a more definite purpose on Chaucer's part. "Will" occurs in *Trevel* five times, but only twice refers to God's will. The narrator laments the "will of God" (*la volunte dieu*) which allows the sultaness to live (8), and comments on Constance's acceptance of God's "will and ordinances."³³ *Trevel* focuses more on God's benevolent aspects: he speaks of his "love" (*l'amour*, 16, 18), of his grace (16, 34) and mercy (*la misericorde*, 38), and of his providence (*la purveaunce*, 10). In addition to these descriptive terms, *Trevel*'s characters speak of the close relation between God and virtue. God is "the lord of all virtue" (16), who, kind and virtuous (16), imparts virtue to all his followers (18). In *Trevel*'s tale, then, God is benign, rational, and active in care of his followers. These concepts receive less emphasis in "The Man of Law's Tale." Chaucer expands *Trevel*'s tale, and appears to assign priority to God's unfettered will and the uncertain world engendered by it.

Although Chaucer's emphasis on will may initially seem traditionally Christian, closer inspection reveals that this is not the case. The traditional understanding implies a benevolent linking of justice and mercy in God's will, and assumes that this will necessarily involves a coherent, rational plan for humanity. Boethius (whose views on providence represent what we might call mainstream medieval theology) illustrates this kind of optimism because he is certain that God "governeth and enclyneth the brydles of things" and is "the cause that hath yeven hem beinge" (4. metr. 6. 59-60). He learns, through Lady Philosophy's guidance, that behind the flux of existence God rules "by perdurable resoun" (3. metr. 9.3).³⁴ "The Man of Law's Tale" displays little evidence that God's will is just, merciful, or rational; it merely postulates that such a will exists, and remains silent as to its inherent character. Hiding himself behind a veil of inscrutable and arbitrary actions, this God closely resembles the nominalist one.

The extreme limitations on human rationality that appear in the tale also indicate a world strikingly similar to the one described by nominalist thinkers. At the basis of nominalistic epistemology is the proposition that human reason can gain true knowledge only of particular, individualized objects. Ockham and his followers radically dissociate themselves from the realist philosophical position; for them, no "essence" or "universal" nature of things exists.³⁵ Only individual things exist; the mind is able to grasp these objects intuitively, and can make abstractions based on actual contact with them, though such abstractions in no way constitute universals.³⁶ Ockham maintains that "a universal is an act of intellect."³⁷ Taken to its extreme, this

limitation to particulars renders all metaphysical or theological discourse meaningless, for anything that lies outside of the specifically empirical is unknowable. Thus Knowles assures us that for nominalists, "metaphysics in fact do not exist."³⁸ The nominalists offer us, then, a darkened picture of existence, for humans possess few means of understanding the divine.

A declaration of just such human limitations appears in "The Man of Law's Tale." Chaucer often refers to humanity's lack of perception and insight. The Man of Law, as narrator, believes that in "thilke large book / Which that men clepe the hevene" (2. 190–191) is written a clear expression of God's purposes for humanity. He laments, however, that such knowledge goes unheeded because "mennes wittes ben so dulle" (2. 202). The narrator also muses upon human limitations when declaring God's "wonderful myracle" (2. 477) in protecting Custance. He speaks openly of human "ignorance," and feels sure that God "Dooth thyng for certein ende that ful derk is / To mannes wit" (2. 481–482). While we cannot even be certain that the God presented in this tale has a coherent plan, even the Man of Law recognizes the essentially limited character of human knowledge.

Beyond these mere statements of the status of the human intellect, Chaucer reflects on human limitations through the actual particulars of the narrative. The switching of the letters by Donegild (2. 736–805) is a case in point. Donegild completely distorts the message containing news of Maurice's birth, saying that the queen was an elf and that she bore "a feendly creature" (2. 751). Alla accepts this message without question. In the same way, the constable and those in his house wholeheartedly accept the spurious letter from the king and, though lamenting the king's supposedly harsh judgment, rigidly execute the instructions found inside. Chaucer seems to imply here that inherent in humankind is an uncritical acceptance of ideas born out of limited rational faculties.

In addition to this uncritical acceptance, the tale emphasizes impaired vision. After returning to Rome with Maurice, Custance dwells at the home of a senator whose "wyf her aunte was," but "for al that she knew hire never the moore" (2. 981–982). Upon seeing her father, Custance has to declare herself to him, for she realizes she is "now ful clene out of youre remembrance" (2. 1106). Even Alla, who does recognize his wife, acknowledges the "fantome" that affects his mind (2. 1037), something not found in Chaucer's source.³⁹ Going beyond Trevet's evidence of impaired vision, Chaucer's tale further emphasizes the limitations of human knowledge. The addition of such words as "fantome" thus allows Chaucer to comment more fully on the consequences of human limitations. Although this inability to recognize Custance is due in part to the undoubted changes in her appearance

during the years of her tragic pilgrimage, perhaps Chaucer implies something deeper here: in an arbitrary universe mysteriously opaque to human comprehension, even the most basic kinds of knowledge are deceptive.

In developing a nominalist epistemology in "The Man of Law's Tale," Chaucer goes far beyond the typical Boethian position. Although both Boethius and Chaucer present a world in flux, and although both offer portraits of individuals of limited understanding, Boethius suggests a possibility of restoration, of being able to regain sight and comprehend God's plan. This idea is wholly absent from the tale. Indeed, one of the great themes of the *Consolation* is the true perception of the nature of things gained through Lady Philosophy's careful tutelage. Boethius knows that he can regain his sight, and with "the clere syghtes of his corage," "steyen up into the streyte seete" of God (3. metr. 9. 39–40, 42–43). He exhorts us to be mindful of those who, like Orpheus, look back to the darkness; we must, in contrast, "lede [our] thought into the sovereyn day" (3. metr. 12. 61–62) in order to see the divine scheme without impediments. Boethius's text, and the medieval Christianity it helped shape, certainly acknowledge that intense suffering, such as Custance's, is a part of human life; but this suffering is always a part of a God-directed and benevolent cosmic plan. "The Man of Law's Tale" provides no such certainty. Although God may, in his absolute will, have provided a plan for human life, the human mind cannot know it. Even if it could, given God's *potentia absoluta*, this plan itself could be changed at any time. By assuming a nominalist epistemology, Chaucer seems to offer a skeptical assessment of life, one that precludes the solution of theodical dilemmas.

But does the tale leave us solely with a feeling of skepticism? I believe that the answer is no, for Custance maintains faith in spite of the limitations and mysteriousness of the world in which she moves. In her radically fideistic outlook, Custance shows how to behave in a nominalist world, for though the nominalists maintain a skeptical posture, they recommend faith as the only valid response to life.⁴⁰ Knowles feels that it would be a "serious error" to regard Ockham and the nominalists as thoroughgoing intellectual skeptics, because they do believe in the existence of both God and universe; they simply argue that these cannot ever be truly known.⁴¹ One must recognize the futility of rationally probing the transcendent world and put one's hope in a quiet, accepting, yet resolute faith.

Chaucer seems to recognize the validity of this faithful approach to life because he carefully structures the portrait of Custance to illuminate her blindly fideistic worldview.⁴² In achieving this purpose Chaucer significantly adds to the depiction of Constance found in the source, Nicholas Trevet's *Chronicle*. As Edward Block observes, Chaucer takes great pains

to heighten the emotional appeal and personal content of Custance's character.⁴³ At most of the major points in the story (Custance's departures from Rome and Northumbria, the trial scene before Alla, and the "recognition" scenes at the end) Chaucer describes her reactions to adversity, allowing her actually to discourse upon her feelings and state of mind, something Trevet never does.⁴⁴ In order to intensify the pathos of Custance's travails in a mysterious and incomprehensible world, Chaucer calls attention to the paleness of her countenance (2. 265, 645, 822) and to her fear and abandonment.⁴⁵ Johnson reasons that these additions amplify the sense of Custance's isolation in a hostile environment and "highlight" her desperation.⁴⁶

By expanding and deepening Custance's personality and by demonstrating her despondency, Chaucer also intensifies her faithfulness. In spite of the horrible treatment she receives, in spite of the insults heaped upon her "blood royal" (2. 657), she maintains faith. The fact that she cannot discern a pattern to God's actions does not prevent her maintaining faith in Him. She proclaims that God has protected her from harm "although I se noght how" (2. 830). Even at the end of the tale when, after Alla's death, Custance fully recognizes that "Joye of this world . . . wol nat abyde" (2. 1133), she still praises the hidden God (2. 1155) who rules over this mysterious universe. Custance, in her persistently fideistic outlook, demonstrates the only tenable Christian posture in a nominalistic world framed by both God's arbitrary behavior and by the human inability to know.

Chaucer heightens the fideistic character of Custance's commitment not only by adding more poignant material to Trevet's sparse characterization but also by deleting Trevet's depiction of a more assertive heroine. In Trevet's narrative, Constance actively converts the pagans with whom she comes into contact. "Taught the Christian faith and instructed by learned masters in the seven sciences" (4), Constance is a preacher who uses her rhetorical training to propagate the Word of God. When she meets the heathen Syrian merchants, Trevet records that "she preached to them the Christian faith. And after they had assented to the faith, she caused them to be baptized, and perfectly taught the faith of Jesus Christ" (4). Constance evangelizes again when she meets Hermengyld, for "by the mouth of Constance," Hermengyld "listened humbly and devoutly to the doctrine of the faith" (9). In Trevet, then, Constance possesses metaphysical and religious knowledge; she relies not so much on her *faith* as on her *knowledge*.

Chaucer, however, wholly suppresses those parts of Trevet's story which emphasize an active and knowledgeable Custance. He initially excises all reference to Custance's own education, both religious and secular. The Syrian merchants in Chaucer's version are not converted by Custance's

preaching; their report of Custance's *example*, whose "herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse" (2. 167), leads to the sultan's and his nation's conversion. More importantly, Custance does not preach to Hermengyld. Custance's faithfulness, her "orisons" and "bitter teere[s]" (2. 537—in cooperation with the grace of Jesus), are the means of the Constablesse's conversion. In his Custance, Chaucer constructs a protagonist who does not pretend to specialized knowledge of the divine realm, but who instead responds to her world with a faith eloquent in the depth and poignance of its silence.⁴⁷

In significant contrast to the faithful resignation of Custance is the Man of Law's persistent questioning.⁴⁸ Instead of acquiescing to the human ignorance of higher realms, the narrator formulates questions and demands answers. On numerous occasions, he bewails the tragic events of Custance's life. "Allas / Custance, thou hast no champioun / Ne fighte Kanstow noght, so weylaway!" (2. 631–632) declares the narrator as he muses on the victimized Custance at her trial. He complains about Satan, "that evere us waiteth to bigile" (2. 582), and he curses the sultanesse and Donegild, calling each respectively "serpent under femynynytee" (2. 360) and a "feendlych spirit" (2. 783). These outbursts of sentiment differ significantly from Custance's meek and silent acceptance of the vagaries of life. Wood points out that though Custance may hope for an end to her suffering, she *accepts* all things "with thanks."⁴⁹ At each of the three times she is placed on the sea, she enters the boat with "hooly entente" (2. 867), never once abrogating her implicit faith through needless complaint.

Even more important than a mere difference in attitude, however, is the fact that the Man of Law actually questions God's actions and attempts to probe the transcendent realm. He believes, as Wood demonstrates, that the stars have ultimate influence on human life and that the implications of the stars' movements on existence can be known.⁵⁰ His query "Imprudent Emperour of Rome, allas! / Was ther no philosophre in al thy town?" (2. 309–310) implies that individuals with knowledge of the divine plan do exist and that a simple consultation with one of these would have prevented all of Custance's trials and torments. This kind of astrological dogmatism is completely antithetical to Custance's viewpoint, for she never claims to know God's plans for the future. Custance adamantly resists even articulating the theodical question; she never once asks why she suffers, much less declares that she can plumb the depths of the divine mind. It seems, then, that Chaucer intends the Man of Law's comments to illustrate an unsatisfactory position quite inferior to Custance's quiet faith.⁵¹ By exalting Custance's approach to life, in significant contrast to that of the narrator, Chaucer shows

us a world in which faith and skepticism coexist, but where faith is the correct response to an incomprehensible world.

Although Chaucer suggests a world structured according to nominalist limitations in his presentation of God, human rationality, and faith, he perhaps describes this world most poignantly through the theme of wandering.⁵² The first lines introduce the merchants, whom Morton Bloomfield calls the wanderers *par excellence*, men who visit many "strange places" (2.178).⁵³ In addition, Alla, Maurice, and the senator all embark on various journeys and wanderings. By far the most significant wanderer, however, is Custance. Custance's incessant wandering, her passage from Rome to Syria to Northumbria to Rome to Northumbria and back, seems emblematic of the position assigned to the individual in the nominalist framework. In the absence of ultimate certainty and knowledge, an absence that is at the heart of the nominalist philosophy, each individual human being becomes a "wanderer" who can never find stability. Custance's journeys illustrate this point well, for she twice sets out without a guide, in a "ship al steerless" (2.439), and "dryves" her way out into the "wilde ocean," an archetype of chaos and disorder. These journeys are not small voyages; indeed, much of Custance's life is spent traveling from one place to the other. Chaucer records her initial solitary journey lasted "Yeres and dayes" (2.463), while the second lasts "Fyve yeer and moore" (2.902). This lifelong pilgrimage without any fixed destination seems to describe experience in a world governed by an inscrutable deity and populated by humans with severe epistemological limitations.

With this image of the rudderless boat wandering in the sea, Chaucer significantly alters the standard Christian trope of *homo viator*, man the wayfarer, for he appears to question the purpose and direction that characterize the Christian journey. As Gerhart Ladner reminds us, though, confusion and aimlessness are often expected on the human pilgrimage. But at least in the standard medieval formulations of the *viator* idea (especially in Saint Augustine and Gregory the Great), there is always an identifiable road or pathway which one must follow and the knowledge that, through the guidance of God, one can ultimately overcome the suffering and confusion of life.⁵⁴ Such optimistic certainty is, however, absent from "The Man of Law's Tale," for Custance's experiences on the sea emphasize isolation and the utter capriciousness of existence.

V. A. Kolve, in his meticulous discussion of "The Man of Law's Tale" and medieval iconography, convincingly proves that the image of the rudderless boat was sometimes used to express a teleological worldview. According to tradition, St. Mary Magdalene was placed in a rudderless boat

that was guided to Marseilles, where she converted the entire population, and St. Brendan and his followers resigned themselves to God's will and were guided and protected throughout their voyage.⁵⁵ Both of these instances exemplify God's providential control of apparently capricious and directionless activities. Even the common medieval image of life as a wandering boat on the raging seas of Fortune was interpreted according to a proper divine perspective, encouraging humans to look beyond Fortune to the higher Providence that guides all things.⁵⁶

Although the rudderless boat image can in some cases be interpreted in a providentially, here we find little possibility of such an optimistic interpretation. To see Custance's wanderings as specifically guided by God, as Kolve and other "Boethian" critics do, denies the full impact of Custance's isolated situation and the specific attempts on Chaucer's part to delete the providentiality inherent in Trevet's narrative.⁵⁷ In contrast, Trevet seizes every opportunity to emphasize God's guidance. On four occasions he directly asserts God's active involvement: "God was her mariner" (12); "God guided her ship" (32); she was under "the steering of God" (32); God was "her right good and courteous guide" (38). Chaucer's version completely lacks such unequivocal statements. "The Man of Law's Tale" offers only two statements that even approximate the force of Trevet's assertions. Once, the narrator expresses the hope that "He that is lord of Fortune be thy [Custance's] steere!" (2. 448), but this is merely a hope, not a statement of fact or belief and, considering the problematic nature of the Man of Law's other declarations about the divine realm, cannot be accepted as a strong affirmation of God's guidance. Custance's remarks upon embarking on her third voyage, "In hym triste I, and in his mooder deere / That is to me my seyl and eek my steere" (2. 832-833) are again more of a hope ("to me" he is the guide), and do not acquire the authoritative tone of Trevet's statements.

Chaucer intensifies the lack of providential guidance most clearly, however, by eliminating the close contact between God and Constance found in Trevet. As Constance is set adrift from Syria, Trevet notes that not only is God guiding the boat, but he actually communicates with her, and "comforted and counselled her by His speech" (12). Trevet's deity seems traditional, much like the biblical God who establishes covenants with, and acts on behalf of, his people. Chaucer ignores this detail, and consequently suppresses a benevolent and providential conception of the deity. Custance's journeys thus become mere wanderings and show the radical instability of the *viator* in a limited and contingent world. Her travels are, in fact, possibly the most radical expression in the entire *Canterbury Tales* of "Pilgrymes passyng to and fro" (1. 2848), an idea Egeus enunciates in "The Knight's Tale." In

the seemingly nominalistic atmosphere of the tale, Custance cannot discern a purpose to her journeys, and finds them instead only burdensome.

What does this rather bleak view of the human journey say to the pilgrims who constitute the Man of Law's audience? Bloomfield believes the tale exposes the alienation from the world felt by all human beings and finds in the Man of Law's hope that Jesus will "kepe us alle that been in this place!" (2. 1162) an exhortation to the pilgrims to seek stability in their earthly journey.⁵⁸ This is in part true, but I believe there is another, even more important message. Perhaps the pointlessness of Constance's journeys tells the Canterbury pilgrims that ultimately their smaller journey (to Becket's shrine) and their larger one (to Heaven) will also be filled with suffering and uncertainty, and that they will never, until the next life, be able to perceive fully the mysteries of the transcendent realm. The kind of pessimism exhibited here may show us a side of Chaucer to which we would rather not admit, yet this darker side demands acknowledgement, particularly in light of the tale's other nominalist elements. Chaucer ends the poetic portion of the *Tales* with the Parson's Prologue's references to both the "parfit glorious pilgrimage" and to "Jerusalem celestial" and exhorts us to "Beth fructuous, and that in litel space / And to do well God sende you his grace" (10. 71-72), and thus ends on an optimistic note. But we can imagine that at some particularly dark time Chaucer acquiesced for a time in the bleak estimation of human effort and divine intervention implied in the "The Man of Law's Tale."⁵⁹

In a number of areas, then, "The Man of Law's Tale" expresses ideas and themes illustrative of the philosophy of the late medieval nominalists. The tale portrays an inscrutable deity who acts in an arbitrary fashion, sometimes choosing to alleviate human suffering, sometimes remaining aloof. To further highlight the uncertainty that such a deity causes, the tale's characters are unable to comprehend the workings of God. The tale's emphasis on maintaining faith even in the face of such limited understanding, and despite the seemingly pointless wanderings continue this nominalist focus. Perhaps by examining the nominalist spirit that emerges we can better account for the darker vision of this narrative as compared to other tales of similar theme. In the nominalist scheme there is no absolute certainty, no unqualified optimism, no benevolent resolution of suffering within a divine plan. Even to ask theodical questions is inappropriate. The tale's bleakness seems justified, then, within a nominalist framework, portraying a vision of existence with little chance for brightness except for those who, like Custance, respond to life with a blind and unquestioning faith.

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NOTES

1. Numerous critics now challenge the assumption that Theseus offers a "mature" Boethian position which allows us to view suffering from a divine perspective. See especially Edward C. Schweitzer, "Fate and Freedom in the 'Knight's Tale'," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 1-22, and chapter three of V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1984). Although we cannot be certain of the sincerity of Theseus's speech or that Boethius underlies the tale, we can at least acknowledge an attempt, through the invocation of Boethian concepts, to account for suffering and evil.

2. All references to Chaucer are from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3d ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

3. Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 193.

4. For other critical views concerning the especially dark world of "The Man of Law's Tale," see Alfred David, "The Man of Law vs. Chaucer: A Case in Poetics," *PMLA* 82 (1967): 217-225. David acknowledges that in the Man of Law's narrative "the gloomy impression of mutability is even stronger" than in "The Knight's Tale" (222), and he stresses that the "The Man of Law's Tale" relies heavily on Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu mundi*, not, as with the Knight's story, Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* (222-223). Helen Corsa, *Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 134, asserts that although the Man of Law's view of life is "optimistic," it is "more deterministic than humanistic."

5. Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1958), 271. Excellent studies of nominalism abound. Among the more helpful are Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), and "Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism, With Attention To Its Relation to the Renaissance," *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960): 47-76;

David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, (New York: Vintage, 1962), chaps. 26–28; Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought*, and “The Changing Pattern of Thought in the Earlier Fourteenth Century,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43 (1961): 354–372; Paul Vignaux, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Meridian, 1959); David Clark, “Ockham on Divine and Human Freedom,” *Franciscan Studies* 16 (1978): 122–160; William J. Courtenay, “Nominalism and Late-Medieval Religion,” in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); and Armand A. Maurer, “Some Aspects of Fourteenth-Century Philosophy,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* n. s. 7 (1976): 175–188.

6. Oberman, “Notes,” 56.

7. Knowles, *Evolution*, 323.

8. Nominalism is by no means a fixed and internally coherent system, nor is there any consensus concerning its ultimate aims and characteristics. The traditional view of nominalism supported originally by Werner, Denifle, and de Wulf, and, more recently, by David Knowles, Etienne Gilson, and Gordon Leff, finds in the nominalist movement a direct assault upon established medieval theology (Courtenay, *Nominalism*, 27). Among the ideas typified as “nominalist” by this group are “particularism, excessive stress on the omnipotence of God, voluntarism, skepticism, and fideism” (Courtenay, *Nominalism*, 27). For these scholars nominalism destroys the precarious rational synthesis of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and adumbrates the fragmentation and alienation which increasingly characterize intellectual discourse in subsequent centuries.

In the past thirty years, a group of scholars has emerged who challenge the “traditional” view of nominalism and stress the continuity of the movement with earlier currents of medieval philosophy. These scholars [Courtenay cites Oberman, Moody, Hochstetter, Boehner, and Vignaux] believe the traditional view is too generalized and that it ignores certain pivotal distinctions made by the late medieval thinkers. These find much less emphasis on the absolute will of God. While agreeing that nominalism does ascribe such a will to God, these scholars think that Ockham and the others also emphasize the ordained will, that is, the sum total of possibilities which God chooses to actualize (David C. Steinmetz, “Late-medieval nominalism and the ‘Clerk’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 12 [1977]: 40–41). In addition, though the revisionist critics affirm the basic unknowability of metaphysical knowledge typically found in the traditional view, they find more certainty about particular things and that particulars can impart some knowledge of God (Russell Peck, “Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions,” *Speculum* 53 [1978]: 748). Thus the new view attenuates to a great extent the traditional reliance upon a voluntarist deity and a skeptical worldview.

Nominalism is, then, a very controversial term. After close study of these varying interpretations, I have come to the conclusion that much of this controversy is due to semantic differences and the redefining of philosophical terms. Philotheus Boehner, for instance, in his article “The Metaphysics of William Ockham” in *Collected Articles on Ockham*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1958), 373–399, attacks those who deny metaphysical

speculation in Ockham, and then proceeds to what is in effect a redefinition of the term "metaphysics" in order to prove Ockham's involvement in this area. I believe that the traditional view has not been successfully dislodged or superseded by the new critical investigations (indeed, David Clark's taking Courtenay and the new view to task in the notes of his article points to the persistence and solidity of the traditional reading), and therefore I basically adhere to the older descriptions of the movement.

9. Of course the bleakness and pessimistic tone that are undeniably present in the "The Man of Law's Tale" could be due in large part to standard medieval Christian perceptions of the inconstant and Fortune-controlled nature of human existence. This conclusion is particularly appropriate for those who, like Michael Paull, "The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the 'Man of Law's Tale'," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 179-194, interpret the tale as straightforward hagiography. But the tale seems to depart in significant ways from the hagiographical genre. Initially Custance fulfills neither of the two roles available for female saints: martyr or virgin. Chaucer does, in fact, take great care to point out that Custance must come to terms with her sexuality, for she must "leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside" (2. 714) and satisfy her husband's sexual desires. Second, and even more important, Custance lacks the assertiveness and resistance to authority characteristic of female saints. Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 267, emphasizes that "Before Christian women [in the *vitae sanctorum*] could turn to Christ, they first had to turn away from those totemic figures in whom the society had invested power and charisma—father, lover/husband, state/emperor." Custance willingly submits to all of these, and the conclusion of her story depends not upon separation from these entities and a preparation for life with Christ, but upon her impassioned reconciliation with father, husband, and state (origin). These and other minor points make problematic the assertion that Chaucer offers in the "The Man of Law's Tale" a typical hagiographic piece, and allow us to question whether Chaucer illustrates in the tale the Boethian "God-ordered, Christian universe" (Paull, "Saint's Legend Genre," 194) associated with the hagiographical genre.

10. Two important studies examining the suitability of the Man of Law and his tale are Paul E. Beichner, "Chaucer's Man of Law and *Disparitas Cultus*," *Speculum* 23 (1948): 70-75; and Robert P. Miller, "Constancy Humanized: Trivet's Constance and the Man of Law's Constance," *Costerus* n.s. 3 (1975): 49-71. Beichner discusses the legal terminology and situations of the tale, and thereby find the tale appropriate to the teller. Miller sees Custance's life "as a success story within the province of Fortune herself" (65), and detects a congruence between such a philosophically limited tale and an equally limited narrator. Four major analyses of the Man of Law as narrator are those of Richard E. Sullivan, "The Middle Ages in the Western Tradition: Some Reconsiderations," in *Essays in Medieval Civilization*, ed. Bede Karle Lachner and Kenneth Roy Philp, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 3-31; Rodney Delasanta, "And of Great Reverence: Chaucer's Man of Law," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 288-310; Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); and

Chauncey Wood, *Country of the Stars*. For more detail on Chaucer's relationship to the "Tale of Constance" in Nicholas Trevet's *Anglo-Norman Chronicle*, see T. D. Culver, "The Imposition of Order: A Measure of Art in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Yearbook of English Studies* 2 (1972): 13–20; Bernard I. Duffey, "The Intention and Art of the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *ELH* 14 (1947): 181–193; Roger Ellis, *Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1986); Laurel Braswell, "Chaucer and the Art of Hagiography," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blauch (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 209–221; and, most importantly, Edward Block, "Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *PMLA* 68 (1953): 572–616, a landmark study of Chaucer's additions to and deletions from Trevet. See Paull, "Saint's Legend Genre"; Duffey, "Intention and Art," and Morton Bloomfield, "The 'Man of Law's Tale': A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy," *PMLA* 87 (1972): 384–390, on genre issues.

11. David, "Man of Law," 222. See R. E. Kaske "Causality and Miracle: Philosophical Perspectives in the 'Knight's Tale' and the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" in *Traditions and Innovations: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert White, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

12. Stephen Manning, "Chaucer's Constance, Pale and Passive," in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 16.

13. Arthur Norman, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, ed. E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald A. Hill, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 318.

14. Kolve, *Imagery*, 332.

15. Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 121.

16. John Yunck, "Religious Elements in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *ELH* 27(1960): 256–57; 252.

17. Eugene Clasby, "Chaucer's Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic Life," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1979): 228. For similar, though less unabashedly Boethian, interpretations, consult Dorothy Bethurum Loomis, "Constance and the Stars," in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 207–219; Kevin Roddy, "Mythic Sequence in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 1–22; Corsa, *Mirth and Morality*; P.M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *The Art of Narrative* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); and Wood, *Country of the Stars*.

18. Kaske, *Causality and Miracle*, 23.

19. Sullivan, *Middle Ages*, 19.

20. See Philotheus Boehner's introduction to *Ockham: Philosophical Writings*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1964).

21. Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 114.

22. See Steinmetz, "Clerk's Tale," and Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

23. Christian Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 11.

24. For further information concerning the fourteenth century intellectual milieu, consult Armand Maurer and David Knowles, "A Characteristic of the Mental Climate of the Fourteenth Century," in *Melanges offerts à Etienne Gilson de l'Académie Française* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1959), 315–325. Maurer discusses the ways in which fourteenth-century philosophy breaks away from and critiques earlier thought. Knowles takes one intellectual trait, "the drastic extension of an idea . . . to the furthest extremes of which it is capable" (315–316), and traces its manifestations in the controversies over Franciscan poverty and papal supremacy as well as in nominalist thought. Emerson Brown, "Fragment VII of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the 'Mental Climate of the Fourteenth Century,'" in *Traditions and Innovations: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert A. White (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 50–58, suggests that Fragment B2 reflects this overall tendency enunciated by Knowles. Holly Boucher, "Nominalism: The Difference for Chaucer and Boccaccio," *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986): 209–221, tries to situate Chaucer within overall intellectual trends and interprets Chaucer's poetry in terms of the "critical shift in thinking about language" (214) occasioned by nominalism.

25. Knowles, *Evolution*, 323. Ockham writes, "God cannot be so known in Himself . . . we cannot know God in this life in a concept that is simple and proper to Him". Ockham goes on to show that there can be some knowledge of God in a "common concept of Him and others," but that this is still a lesser and somewhat unreliable form of knowledge (*Ordinatio* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964], 114).

26. For analyses of these allusions as part of the medieval "Help of God" tradition, and for attempts to place Custance as "a direct member of the series" (Farrell, "Help of God," 242) see both articles by Robert Farrell: "Chaucer's Man of Law and His Tale: The Eccentric Design," in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 159–172, and "Chaucer's Use of the Theme of the Help of God in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 77 (1976): 227–240. Susan Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "Constance as Romance and Folk-Heroine in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Rice University Studies* 64 (1978): 13–24, offer a convincing interpretation of the allusions. They focus on the figures' typological significance and find that they heighten the degree to which Custance represents a heroine undergoing the initiation rite, one who, like the figures mentioned, suffers "descent and enclosure" before her eventual "triumph" (16). Delasanta, "Great Reverence," uses these allusions, and the errors and inaccuracies that the Man of Law perpetrates in recording them, to buttress his argument for a satirical reading of the narrator.

27. William Johnson, "Miracles in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 28 (1974): 61.

28. Johnson, "Miracles," 63.

29. Maurer and Knowles, "Climate," 322–323.

30. Steinmetz, "Clerk's Tale," 40.

31. Maurer and Knowles, "Climate," 322. For one brief example of the absoluteness of the *potentia absoluta*, see Ockham's argument concerning how God, "without contradiction," can "command that He be not loved for a certain time" (*Quodlibeta* 3, translated in Boehner, ed., *Philosophical Writings*, 162–163).

32. Oberman, *Harvest*, 250; 255–258.

33. All references to Trevet are from Edmund Brock's translation of the "Life of Constance" in *Originals and Analogues of some of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: The Sources of Chaucer's "Constance" and "Thisbe"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928 [orig. 1872]), 1–53.

34. All references to Boethius are from Chaucer's translation in the *Riverside Chaucer*.

35. Courtenay, "Religion," 36.

36. Peck, "Nominalist Questions," 748.

37. In Boehner, ed., *Philosophical Writings*, 46. See also Ockham's earlier view of universals: "a universal is not something real that exists in a subject . . . either inside or outside the mind, but that it has being only as a thought-object in the mind," (*Ordinatio*, in Boehner, ed., 44).

38. Knowles, *Evolution*, 322.

39. See Delany, *Fideism*, 62 on "fantome": "As a psychological term, then, phantom denotes a mental process, or the product of a mental process, which is deceptive in that it does not accurately mirror the phenomenal world." Chaucer's use of this word to describe King Alla on seeing Maurice indicates, especially considering the other instances of impaired vision, his feeling that human knowledge can be, and frequently is, deceptive.

40. Fideism is, however, by no means the only stance developing from a skeptical worldview. For both Pyrrhonic and Academic skeptics of the classical period, agnosticism was the usual alternative to metaphysical uncertainty. As Sheila Delany (*Fideism*, 7) admirably explains, however, the medieval Christian "did not need to limit himself to an agnostic assertion of contingency, but could move to a fideistic statement of the mutually exclusive claims of logic and faith, conceding the latter to be superior." Although agnosticism remained an option for skeptics, such later thinkers as Montaigne (especially in "The Apology for Raymond Sebond,") chose the fideistic solution offered by the nominalists.

41. Knowles, *Evolution*, 324.

42. Robert Miller, "Constancy Humanized," 67–69, questions the extent to which Custance is an exemplar of faith. He thinks that Trevet's Constance reflects faith more fully, and "maintains an impassive dignity" in the face of adversity (67), whereas Custance "weeps . . . becomes pale . . . even complains," and thus, in the (to Miller) Fortune-oriented tale, is "suspiciously inconstant" (67–69). Miller's viewpoint is, however, eccentric to the general critical opinion which regards Custance

as resolute and faithful and is perhaps due to his failure to make a distinction between the purposes of the tale and those of the narrator.

43. Block, "Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship," 589.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. Johnson, "Miracles," 210.

47. For detailed discussions of the ways in which Custance functions as *figura* of faith, consult Kolve, *Imagery*, 308–319, and Albert C. Labriola, "The Doctrine of Charity and the Use of Homiletic 'Figures' in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12 (1970): 5–14.

48. Although there is some debate about whether the tale was actually intended for the Man of Law, it seems likely, if we can believe Delasanta, "Great Reverence," and Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse*. Both contend that Chaucer ridicules the Man of Law by way of the tale, that the Man of Law's stylized protestations against the uncertainties of life are meant as a strong contrast to Custance's quiet faith.

49. Wood, *Country of the Stars*, 197.

50. *Ibid.*, 210.

51. Robert Correale, "A Critical Edition of the Story of Constance in Nicholas Trevet's *Les Cronicles*: The Source of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1971, points out that Chaucer opposes Custance's view with more than just that of the narrator. Custance's father, the sultan, and the sultaness, for instance, all believe that they have access to the ways of destiny; their feeble "attempts to shape destiny beget tragic results" (189–190). All of these individuals serve as significant contrasts to Custance's patient acceptance of life.

52. See Bloomfield, "Christian Comedy," 387–388, for an interesting discussion of the tale and the themes of wandering found in Greek romance.

53. *Ibid.*, 387.

54. Gerhart Ladner, "Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas on Alienation and Order," *Speculum* 42 (1967): 235.

55. Kolve, *Imagery*, 311, 333. William Thrall, "Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the Imrama," in *Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 276–283, discusses the nature of the Celtic clerical pilgrimages at some length. Also see J. R. Reinhard, "Setting Adrift in Mediaeval Law and Literature," *PMLA* 56 (1941): 33–68, for a detailed discussion of the legalistic purposes underlying placement in a rudderless boat. Reinhard links being set adrift as punishment to providence, for he argues that "The idea animating the Roman, Germanic, and Celtic custom of expulsion by sea seems to be akin to the Greek concept of the sea as an arbiter of justice or righteousness" (67).

56. Kolve, *Imagery*, 334.

57. Kolve, *Imagery*, 330, explicitly states that God is "at once rudder to Custance's boat and shipman to her soul" (330). He bases this interpretation on Chaucer's adjustment of Trevet in making God the "lord of Fortune," and thus, he believes, Chaucer announces God's ultimate control of life. This line is spoken by the Man of Law, however, and it is most likely, as Miller argues, that it refers to a

fortune-oriented perspective, not to a providential scheme governed by an active deity.

58. Bloomfield, "Christian Comedy," 387.

59. Another equally important idea may be in Chaucer's mind as he ends the tale. He might intend for his pilgrims to perceive a difference between their pilgrimage and Custance's. Even though their journey to Canterbury has lost much of its religious spirit (see Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage*, on the transformation of the pilgrimage idea in the late-medieval world) the group still possesses two authoritative figures in the Host and the Parson, and does at least have a fixed destination in Becket's shrine. The idea of Christian pilgrimage, both corporate and individual, may not be as completely destabilized as the tale might suggest.