

bringing multicultural issues into your classes will find this material useful. For the next issue, we would like to solicit responses to any or all of these entries. Please send your responses by April 1 to:

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Because of the length of this issue, we have decided to hold bibliography, book reviews, and the unusually long list of new subscribers until the next issue. We would like you to know, however, that our membership has now reached 600.

MULTICULTURAL SUBJECTIVITY IN  
READING CHAUCER'S "MAN OF LAW" TALE  
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Ethnographically speaking, the "melting pot" theory is outdated in the U.S. by the presence of too many unmeltable ethnics. The "salad bowl" theory has not yet been an adequate substitute either. An apparently flippant question like, "Who will be the predominant 'lettuce' in the salad bowl?," can undermine the latter theory's claim to validity. While arguing for the necessity of a pluralistic approach to reading medieval texts, I seek also to address the problematics of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism as a way of living and pluralistic criticism as a tool of reading are the two sides of the same coin of social practice. A multicultural reading perspective not only subverts the homogenizing effect of the dominant way of negotiating meanings but also opens up the interpretive field for competing viewpoints. When race-class-gender- and sexuality-inflected readings decentralize the dominant meaning system, the question arises as to the theoretical status of each of the rival reading claims. Which is a 'more equal' reading stance towards a particular text?

I am resorting to a story and an image to address the need for and problematics of the use of other voices in texts. I have used the following anecdote from African folklore many times in my presentations:

There was a little boy in an African village who customarily came home from the mission school with excitement about his learnings of the day. On one particular day, he came home . . . with a look of puzzlement on his face. And when he came into his house his father inquired about this. I go to school everyday and the teacher often tells us the story about this lion who they say is the king of the jungle. But this ferocious and strong beast always seems to get killed by the hunter in the story. I don't understand it. If the lion is so strong why does the hunter always kill the lion? The father responded, "Well son, until lions learn how to write books, that is the way the story will always end."<sup>1</sup>

The lions' stories have to be located in texts. These stories do not replace those of the hunters. The former exist as counterstories alongside the latter in the archive. Stories of

the hunted free themselves by having an equal footing with those of the hunter. To place the stories of the hunter and the hunted side by side as dual or multiple voices in the same text can be the goal of a multiculturalist pedagogy in the classroom.

Post-formalist (former) Russian theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and postcolonial concepts of Edward Said on the “polyphonic” nature of texts can be of much help in designing multiculturalist curricula for a classroom.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, Said’s imperative to look at English novels as containers of more than one voice may be applicable to reading medieval texts. Using the image of counterpoint in music, he writes:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but “contrapuntally” . . . In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one, yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, and organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret novels . . . (which are) shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. At this point alternative or new narratives emerge and they become institutionalized or discursively stable entities.

(*Culture and Imperialism* 51)

Giving subjectivity to the colonized, resistant, and native voices in a text and institutionalizing them take place in two different stages. One may not lead to the other as quickly as it is envisioned in this passage. However, Said’s reference to the existence of counterpoints or polyphony in a text, musical or otherwise, is of value in the reading act. The core criticism posed by opponents of multiculturalism is that ultimately a pluralist stance is synonymous with the notion of “anything goes.” The fear level among those holding an anti-multiculturalist position has something to do with the possible collapse of the patriarchal and Eurocentric humanist edifice and the ascendancy of a supposed misrule resulting in a cacophony in the reading act. In short, it is the fear of the unknown, the different, and the loss of known power.

A multiculturalist reader’s task is a sophisticated one that enables readers and students to examine all the possible suppressed or marginalized voices and the projected centralist voice in a text. Alternative stances position themselves *alongside* the provisionally privileged centralist point of view of the text making room for multivoicedness. Marginal voices do not displace the dominant voices; they share equal footing. Disproportionate imposition of the dominant voice gives way to the equitable hearing of many voices in the reading act.

For instance, while teaching Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale,” a multiculturalist pedagogy may employ the concept of centralist and marginalized narratives in the text.<sup>3</sup> The dominant layer of the text, the hagiographical narrative, deals with the story of Custance. It is the tale of a missionary bride from the Latin West sailing to the Islamic East and then to Northumberland. Beneath the dominant hagiographical text is the subordinate text delineating the East.

In order to bring out the submerged voice of the Islamic East, the treatment of the two mothers-in-law needs to be examined separately. These two figures, the Sowdanesse

and Donegild, appropriated by Chaucer from Nicholas Trivet, undergo complex transformations. While the second mother-in-law, Donegild, is an embodiment of a folklore motif, the first mother-in-law, the Sowdanesse, is an ideological construct.

The two traitorous acts attributed to Donegild in Chaucer are her accusation that Custance has given birth to a "horrible" and "feendly creature" (B 751), and the mother-in-law's wicked exchange of "countrefeted" (B 746, 793) letters through a drunken messenger between the young queen and Alla.<sup>4</sup> These motifs are folkloric and can be traced back to a possible early source, *La Belle Hélène de Constantinople* (Schlauch 29, Bryan and Dempster 161). Besides the folkloric motifs built into the character of Donegild in Chaucer's tale, there are references to Donegild's female jealousy towards Custance. Trivet's Donegild "right mortally" hates Custance because King Alla had, for the love of a strange woman "forsaken his former religion which all his ancestors had loyally and entirely kept" (24-26).<sup>5</sup> Chaucer removes the religious motive of Donegild.

In fact, he gives an added perspective to the suppressed religious motive in the reworked character of the first mother-in-law, the Sowdanesse. Trivet alludes once to the Sowdanesse's changed attitude towards Custance that the mother-in-law feels threatened that her religion is already destroyed by the Christians in the Saracen country (8). In Trivet, there is no explicit reference to Islam. However, Chaucer intensifies the religious conflict. He refers to "Mohemet" four times (B 224, 333, 336, 340). There is no mention of the Koran or Mohemet in Trivet.<sup>6</sup> Further, the Man of Law uses the word, "maumetrie," in the sense of idolatry and it is related to Mohemet (B 236). In Trivet, the religion of the Sowdan is unnamed; it is related to the Sultan's "idols and his false beliefs" (6), "ses maumetz & sa mescreauncez" (7). Block says that Chaucer may have gotten the hint from Trivet's use of the word "maumetz." The word means "idols," and it is a corruption of "Mohomet." However, there is no explicit reference to Islam in Trivet.

Moreover, the fictive temporal framework of the story revolves around the latter part of the sixth century. Concurring with Walter Skeat, Block points out that Mahomet was only twelve years old when the historical emperor, Tiberius II, died in A.D. 582 (602). Trivet's Saracen land, then, is pre-Islamic in its use of idols. The Man of Law, on the other hand, gives the impression of Islam as an idolatrous religion through his reference to "maumetrie" in other specific allusions to Mohemet and the Koran in the Tale. This amplified view of Trivet's French version differs from that of William Langland in *Piers Plowman*, where "Sarrasines" "ayther loueth" or "byleueth in o god almyhty" (CXVII, 135).<sup>7</sup> Dorothee Metlitzky makes references to "the core of tolerance" in Langland in "the acceptance of Islam as a monotheistic faith" (197-98). This tolerance is absent in the world view of the Man of Law.

Inscribed as a hostile religious other, the Eastern mother-in-law in "The Man of Law's Tale" is situated in a material world unlike the world of the second mother-in-law, Donegild, whose existence is defined mostly by "marchen" motives.

The Tale has to be treated as a palimpsest containing two layers, the dominant story of the saint and the subordinate story of the Eastern woman. The Tale is a dual voiced text. However, the characterization of the orientalized Eastern woman, caught in the subordinate layer of the text, cannot be traced either to the author or the narrator.<sup>8</sup> The arrangement of the narrative stance produces a constantly decentering subject-position. In accordance with his stated promise in the General Prologue, Chaucer, the narrator, simply

"reherces" or reports the pilgrim narrator's tales. In other words, Chaucer, the narrator, does not take any "personal responsibility"; he is only a "compiler" (Minnis 190-96). This technique of refusal of personal responsibility is reenacted by the Man of Law. He says that he has heard the tale from a merchant (B 132).

Chaucer demonstrates deliberate ambiguity in situating the narrative stance. In this site of speech, compiler and author exchange places. The Custance-material changes hands continually, from Trivet to Chaucer, from the Man of Law to Chaucer, the pilgrim narrator, and from the merchant to the Man of Law. Hence the site of narration is a shifting place of "disavowal" of responsibility. The narrating voice is in process. This voice is constantly displaced. Because of this, the Tale is no longer a center-embedded text, an unlikely feature in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Precisely for this reason, only a center-free analysis can bring out the multiple layers, many voices, and constantly changing perspective of exclusion in the text. The difference between monolithic reading and a multicultural approach is the difference between existence in a closed community and life in a multicultural society.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Grant's "Prophetic Theology," *Kairos Covenant* (131).

<sup>2</sup> See Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* for a definition of "heteroglossia" and the use of polyphonic approach (143). See also Boyarin's "Voices around the Text" for an analysis of the relation between social voices and texts (212-237).

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller analysis of the subordinate and dominant voices in the text, see "The East in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' in my dissertation, *Rewriting the East*, 124-64.

<sup>4</sup> All citations are from Baugh's edition.

<sup>5</sup> Citations from Furnivall James' *Analogues*.

<sup>6</sup> See Block for this reference.

<sup>7</sup> All citations are from Pearsall's edition.

<sup>8</sup> Orientalism is a concept popularized by Said. According to him, it refers to the Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having an authority over the East. See *Orientalism* (3).

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MEDIEVAL MULTICULTURALISM  
THE SECOND OLDEST DEAD WHITE MEN  
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What can the expression “medieval multiculturalism” mean? A number of medieval authors, ranging from missionaries like William of Rubruck to merchants like Marco Polo to pilgrims like Ibn Battuta and Anselmo Adorno, wrote accounts of different cultures, sometimes including aspects of their own.<sup>1</sup> This rich, contemporary ethnographic literature reveals how medieval people viewed the multicultural world in which they lived. Each country in modern Europe also contains ethnic or religious minorities often receiving bad treatment, and in the Middle Ages things were worse. So we might look at French multiculturalism and consider the Bretons, now or then. But if we examine the medieval past where national boundaries were often vague or non-existent, multiculturalism evokes those cultures fated to be absorbed or persecuted by powerful majorities.

Most medievalists would concede that the history of how people in the United States have studied medieval history and literature foreshadowed in an eerie way the current, global approach to multiculturalism. A century ago medieval Europe meant the law, politics, and literature of the Anglo-Norman kingdom, and only adventurous American scholars studied France after the English left for good. Consider that monument to American medievalism, the essays presented to Charles Homer Haskins in 1929.<sup>2</sup> Two essays on Norway and Monte Cassino, and sixteen on Anglocentric topics. Back then the rest of Europe received little attention, and the histories of Jews, women, gays and lesbians, and other groups remained mostly outside the pale. The story over the last decades has been the opening up of medievalism to the entire continent and its people, or the invention of a multicultural Europe. The volume published in 1982 commemorating Haskins' twelfth century Renaissance still emphasized the old canon but had some place for a broader perspective.<sup>3</sup> A multicultural basis for medieval history probably came from French scholars. Historians owe a great debt to the Annales school and Marc Bloch for the noble vision of a total history incorporating the range of sources and peoples making the Middle Ages. This long-term revisionism proceeded by fits and starts and