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Logistics, Cultural Capital, and the Psychic Zone of Contamination

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Abstract

This paper reads the *Man of Law's Tale* at the intersection of logistics, cultural capital, and psychoanalysis. It argues that Custance's acts of religious observance participate in the late medieval culture of good wifely conduct and private devotion. Conduct is an embodied state of cultural capital in which self-improvement is indistinguishable from self-investment. In Custance's case, her wifely conduct becomes a racialized cultural capital that she brings to distant lands and effects conversion. Her ship is the space of the Lacanian Imaginary, and her body and flesh are what Anne Anlin Cheng would term a "zone of contamination," a psychic space in which subjecthood and objecthood are merged. As a form of governance, conduct is an effect of capitalism on the self and the collective. The racialized cultural capital that Custance traffics in, rather than offering any pure and stable technique of self-making, is at best a symptom awaiting analysis.

“Logistics is magic,” Clare Lyster (2012) proclaims (55). Indeed, for Pierre Bourdieu (1986), logistics, or the “form of distribution” of the means of appropriation, is the magic that makes capital possible (245). We see an instance of such logistical magic in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, in which the Syrian merchants bring their “chaffare ... so thrifty and so newe” (138) to Rome, where they learn about Custance, the “mirour of alle curteisye” (166).¹ The Muslim “chapmen riche” (135) would return home with stories of her beauty and virtues for their Sultan. In the flow of people and things, what is trafficked is not only economic capital (the *chaffare*) but also cultural capital (the “greet noblesse” [185] of the Christian Custance). As Deborah Cowen (2014) argues, while the movement of things stands in contrast to the circulation of capital in its various forms, “it is precisely the shifting relationship between the circulation of stuff and the circuits of capital that is at stake in the story of logistics” (11). In the nexus of religion and economy, desire is the engine that drives the flow and conversion of capital: the Sultan, having learned of Custance, declares “That al his lust and al his bisy cure / Was for to love hire while his lyf may dure” (188–89). But have her he never will, as the Sultanness murders her son and banishes Custance to the sea. Not only an embodiment of cultural capital, Custance is also the unattainable object cause of desire, Lacan’s *objet petit a*, and the surplus of *jouissance* and signification. She remains magical.

In Bourdieu’s formulation, cultural capital manifests in three distinct states: the embodied state, in the form of the dispositions of the mind and body; the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods such as books, instruments, and machines; and in the institutionalized state, in the form of educational credentialization (Bourdieu 1986, 243). Cultural capital frequently operates through disguise, concealment, and misrecognition, techniques that uncannily resemble those that psychoanalysis seeks to uncover and diagnose if not cure. As converted wealth that is integrated into a person, cultural capital cannot be transmitted instantaneously; nor is the process necessarily conscious in nature. For Bourdieu, “[c]ultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously” (245). While Bourdieu’s use of “unconsciously” is not the same as the Freudian unconscious, his claim about the unconscious acquisition of the intangible aspects of cultural capital gestures toward the psychic dimensions of cultural capital’s acquisition and circulation. And whereas psychoanalysis privileges the stages of child development and the parent-child relationship, Bourdieu points to the family as the locus of hereditary transmissions of capital from one generation to another. In fact, the best hidden form of transmission of capital is that of cultural capital because it is primarily familial and secondarily educational: cultural capital is “linked in numerous ways to the person in his biological singularity and is subject to a hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised, or even invisible” (245). A collection of paintings, for instance, can transmit cultural superiority better than economic capital because it is more disguised.

If, for Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, then, for Bourdieu, cultural capital structures the subject through the symbolic. In its objectified state, cultural capital “presents itself with all the appearances of an autonomous, coherent universe which, although the product of historical

¹ All citations of Chaucer are from Chaucer (1987), by line numbers.

action, has its own laws, transcending individual wills” (Bourdieu 1986, 247). For Bourdieu, language, especially text, exemplifies the objectified state of cultural capital. Cultural capital is an empire of signs, or, the Lacanian Symbolic order. As a semiotic system, cultural capital is subject to the same polysemy, slippage, and inscrutability of the sign. Due to its propensity towards disguise and concealment, cultural capital is “predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition” (245). Cultural capital may be misrecognized as “cultural competence,” thereby hiding its true nature behind the veil of aptitude. Displacement, substitution, invisibility, and transference: these are symptoms awaiting analysis. The analysand is incapable of recognizing the signified and is only able to misrecognize the signifier; hence the necessary work of interpretation and therapy, should the subject seek help. Similarly, the possessor or user of cultural capital may fail to recognize capital as capital; in other words, cultural capital could become a symptom rather than a cure. The transmission of cultural capital, be it the accumulation or appropriation that characterizes liberal humanist possessive individualism, likewise invites diagnostic reading and a hermeneutics of suspicion.

In this paper, I read the *Man of Law's Tale* through the nexus of logistics, cultural capital, and psychoanalysis, and I offer new approaches to teaching the tale that build on the insights of premodern critical race studies, especially those concerning religious differences, and of medieval women's and gender studies. In the first section, I argue that Custance's acts of religious observance participate in the late medieval culture of good wifely conduct and private devotion. Conduct is an embodied state of cultural capital in which the logic of self-improvement is indistinguishable from self-investment. In Custance's case, her wifely conduct becomes a racialized cultural capital that she brings to distant lands and through which she effects conversion. Reading the *Man of Law's Tale* in terms of conduct allows for an understanding of the logic of transmission of cultural capital in the narrative. Next, I examine Custance's ship as the space of the Lacanian Imaginary and Custance's body and flesh as what Anne Anlin Cheng (2009) would term a “contaminated zone,” a psychic space in which subjecthood and objecthood are merged (93). As a form of governance, conduct is an effect of capitalism on the self and the collective. Yet the contaminated psychic state of Custance suggests that the racialized cultural capital she traffics in, rather than offering any pure and stable technique of self-making, is at best a symptom awaiting analysis.

Wifely Conduct on the Move

The magic of logistics underpins the narrative logic of the *Man of Law's Tale*, in which Custance is set adrift at sea yet follows an expeditious itinerary that delivers the human parcel to her destinations on time and undamaged. In the flow if not in the wake, the circulations of religion and commerce become indistinct. The premodern technologies of travel and economies of transport in the tale are by no means the same as modern supply chain infrastructures and logistics. But thinking through logistics allows for a productive reading of how capital—especially in its cultural form—operates in and alongside the psychic dimensions of the romance. Specifically, what is the capital being trafficked by Custance? Reading Custance strictly as a suffering heroine, I contend, risks overvictimizing her and occludes the necropolitical violence of dispossession she unleashes wherever she lands. While there is nothing new about the transport of goods and people, the recent logistical turn offers an alternative

analysis of the imbricated processes of racialization, conversion, and capital accumulation in the tale.² Racial capitalism, according to Destin Jenkins and Justin LeRoy (2021), is “the process by which the key dynamics of capitalism ... become articulated through race” (3). The *Man of Law’s Tale* is symptomatic of the multifaceted, interdigitating configurations of race in the Middle Ages. The *Tale* is not simply a local, English text composed in the late fourteenth century. Chaucer’s immediate sources were John Gower and Nicholas Trevet, and Trevet himself drew upon a French romance, *La Belle Hélène de Constantinople*. In its geographical span across the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic, from Italy to Syria, North Africa, Iberia, and England, as Kathy Lavezzo (2002) has argued, the *Man of Law’s Tale* expresses the trans-European, globalizing ambition of Latin Christendom. Therefore, it might be more precise to ask what kind of *racial* capital, or racialized cultural capital, Custance is trafficking.

Set adrift at sea, Custance becomes a Griselda figure tested by God and triumphing over adversities through Providence. In the flow, Custance experiences both time-space compression in the narrative and time-space expansion in the geopolitics of travel. Condemned to her ship by the Sultanness, Custance travels the Mediterranean for “Yeres and dayes” (463); later, set adrift by Donegild, Custance “fleteth in the see, in peyne and wo, / Fyve yeer and moore” (901–02). Her incarceration is paradoxically concomitant with her hyper-mobility, and her ship becomes the relay point for the tale’s engagement with paleness and whiteness. Paleness does not appear on the ship, only whiteness as religious iconography. Later when she is on trial for murder in Alla’s court, Custance flashes her paleness like a beacon. Paleness functions as an empathic trigger, for “Alla kyng hath swich compassioun” (659). Custance’s pale fragility softens Alla’s masculinity, turning him as fragile as she; and it marks her *gentillesse* as a universalizing cultural capital, in the form of properly gendered conduct that facilitates conversion and racialization. Moreover, it is a moment not only of empathy but of identification and transference, as Custance makes possible Alla’s entry into the Imaginary order coded as Christian and white.

Custance, in fact, behaves like an exemplary wife. Her spiritual regimen resembles closely the private devotion of a pious lay wife in the late Middle Ages, as she prays constantly to the Cross, God, Christ, and Mary. In a pivotal narrative moment, a lecherous Northumbrian knight enters the bedroom Custance shares with Hermengyld when the constable is away: “He wayteth whan the constable was aweye, / And pryvely upon a nyght he crepte / In Hermengyldes chambre, whil she slepte. / Wery, forwaked in hire orisouns, / Slepeth Custance, and Hermengyld also” (593–97). While in Hermengyld’s chamber, Custance grows exhausted because of her prayers. Nicholas Trevet depicts a similar moment in his rendition of the tale: the knight enters the chamber “puis qe Hermegild and Constance fortment endormies après longues veiles et oreisons” [when Hermegild and Constance were asleep after long vigils and prayers] (Correale 2005, 308–09). Custance here carefully models her devotion after the medieval *journées chrétiennes*, daily guides for Christian women, in which the spiritual is enmeshed with the quotidian. In an anonymous French conduct treatise, the clerical author urges women to perform devotion in their bedroom at midnight with “humble sighs, prostrations, and kneelings” (Clark 2001, 176). And in the *Comment on doit rigler sa vie*, included in the *Livret* attributed to

² For summaries of the logistical turn in the humanities and social sciences, see Cowen 2014b, Chua 2022, and Zieger 2018. As Zieger notes, logistics allows the study not only of the flow of goods, people, and information but also “the wider material turn, toward new materialisms, distributed agency, ecocriticism, and infrastructure studies” (Zieger 2018, 751). See also Rossiter 2014, Harney and Moten 2021, and Mezzadra and Neilson 2019.

Peter of Luxembourg, the narrator advises the wife to withdraw into her room in order to clear her mind and senses: “You shall retire into your room as soon as possible and you shall close the door behind you, and you must do so spiritually as well, that is, you must withdraw and gather your senses to you” (Clark 2001, 172).

The entanglement of body, affect, psyche, and difference signals conduct’s capacity to be racialized and trafficked. Even when conduct literature seems free of racial contents, race slips in. In *Le Ménagier de Paris*, for instance, the male narrator cites Susanna from the Old Testament as an exemplary woman who maintains her chastity, only to comment afterward that if “even the wicked [Jews] keep this law [against adultery], we must keep it also” (Greco and Rose 2009, 88). This is precisely the kind of capital that Custance traffics in; for her, racial capital is cultural capital. Her rudderless ship signifies not simply the universal Church but also the logistics space of premodern capitalism, for Custance figures whiteness as a racialized, gendered, and Christianized commodity. It’s not so much that Christianity itself is a form of racial and cultural capital, which it is. Or that Custance’s dermal paleness, or even the feminine coded body, is a form of embodied capital; it is. But rather, her wifely conduct becomes the means by which she is racialized and through which she racializes others (the Muslims in Syria and the pagans of Northumbria). If logistics is control and governance, then Syria, Northumbria, and Iberia in the *Tale* mark the logistical clusters where infrastructure functions either as a transitional or choke point. And these logistical clusters are also clusters of racialized cultural capital.

For Bourdieu (1986), the acquisition of cultural capital is a form of work, and “[t]he work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost ... an investment” (244). As such, self-improvement is part of the psychic life of cultural capital as a mode of accumulation and appropriation. Glenn D. Burger (2018) has argued that while conduct literature for women cannot be fully extricated from antifeminist modes of representation in the Middle Ages, it nonetheless insists on women’s inherent capacity for self-improvement (4). Wifely self-improvement is the self-stylization of the body through discipline. If the goal of the middling laity is to rival if not equal the spiritual perfection of the religious professionals, then the good wife serves “as a kind of limit case for the efficacy of such a negotiation of lay conduct through a chaste self-discipline, both highlighting such hybridity and providing a conceptual mechanism capable of managing it” (Burger 2018, 6). When Custance prays, she participates in the tradition of wifely self-improvement, the accumulation of embodied cultural capital. She is as much performing as “reading” her own body and psyche. For Custance, there is no distinction between material and psychic self-investments.

As an embodied form of cultural capital, Custance’s private wifely devotion racializes her, moves others to emulate her, and then converts them (Hermengyld, the Constable, and Alla). Returning to the climactic pale face scene in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, as Custance stands accused in Alla’s court, she kneels and prays, just as she has done while alone on the ship and with Hermengyld in the bedroom:

She sette hire doun on knees, and thus she sayde:
 “Immortal God, that savedest Susanne
 Fro false blame, and thou, merciful mayde,
 Marie I meene, doghter to Seint Anne,
 Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,

If I be giltlees of this felonye,
My socour be, for ellis shal I dye!" (638-44).

Her prayer moves Alla to tears, followed by conversion, marriage, and reproduction. At the court, in the ship's hold, or in the bedroom, Custance's devotion, like her namesake, remains unchanged. As such, Custance operates as the ideal ego in the mirror stage. Scenes of embodied prayer, Burger (2018) notes, index the ideals of female devotion: "As material examples of these performative reading practices, we might think here of the new embodiment of prayer in the form of kneeling devotees' hands folded together in front of them" (9). Whereas Custance insists on her own immutability and irreducibility, the court and the bedroom become fungible spaces. The ship is a container, and Custance, the containerized. If marriage becomes a form of social capital, the marker of *gentillesse* for the emerging middling classes in the late Middle Ages, then the bedroom is a logistics space of the conjugal psyche. Because conduct literature for women situates itself within the hybrid space of the late medieval married household, one can, as Burger contends, read the scriptural and liturgical references in the narrative, such as Custance's prayers, as directly "lead[ing] back to the household and the domestic sphere of the good wife" (15).

The Zone of Contamination

Cultural capital is not a thing or a body per se, but a relation. As Marx (1992) explains, capital "is not a thing any more than money is a thing. In capital, as in money, certain specific social relations of production between people appear as relations of things to people" (1005). Thinking along Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's (2019) concept of operation that generates networks and connectivities, I would like to suggest that conduct is an operation that creates both psychic and material relationality. Custance's paleness indexes her conduct, which is simultaneously phenomenological, performative, and psychical. Or, we can think of Custance's wifely devotion as a form of care labor of the psyche. Sara Ritchey (2021), drawing on contemporary care studies, has pointed out that "everyday embodied activities, such as prayer ... and domestic chores, participate in a larger care economy" (27). In Custance's case, care labor is indistinguishable from race labor; her wifely devotion racializes her as a white Christian woman of virtue.

If her vessel is a cargo ship, Custance is the cargo container par excellence marked by intermodality, for the box is more important than the vehicle. Custance is exemplary because she is, borrowing Travis Diehl's (2017) characterization of cargo containers, "readymade, modular ... [and] deployable." The experience of the Lacanian Imaginary is primarily a spatial one, as Fredric Jameson (1977) observes. There is "a logic specific to Imaginary space, whose dominant category proves to be the opposition of container and contained, the fundamental relationship of inside and outside, which clearly enough originates in the infant's fantasies about the maternal body as the receptacle of part-objects" (356). The psychic investment of Custance in herself as an embodied cultural capital exemplifies the logic of modular containerization of the Lacanian Imaginary. In this sense, Custance is emptied of individuated psychic contents as she and her ship become indistinguishable. Keep in mind, however, that the content that Custance traffics is unknown until she becomes a fugitive, takes flight, and acts.

For Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital in its objectified state is both a material object and a habitus: “The cultural object, as a living social institution, is, simultaneously, a socially instituted material object and a particular class of habitus, to which it is addressed” (256, n. 7). A habitus presumes structure and positionality. For Cheng (2009), in a reading of psychoanalysis side by side with contemporary critical analysis, objecthood refers to object “both as materiality (such as physical matter and the material body) and as a structural position in a psychical grammar (that is, object as one side of the subject/object dyad)” (94). But because of its capacity for disguise, concealment, and misrecognition, cultural capital as material object is never neatly demarcated from the subject; structural positions are messy. The space of objecthood and subjecthood, for Cheng, is a murky realm of undecidability and contamination (92). The metonymic relationship between Custance and her ship renders her a kind of psychic container and carrier of cultural capital writ large. There is no neat separation between her and the ship; both occupy the zone of contamination, the state of contagion where objecthood and subjecthood blur into each other. The critical task, Cheng proposes, is “to remain in the uneasy domain of *contagion* where conditions of objecthood merge into the possibility of subjectivity, where experiences of profound invasion yield acute moments of self-making” (92).

The Man of Law's Tale conjures a ship of death on which material objects are forcibly juxtaposed with Custance. In a sense, Custance becomes one of the Kleinian “part-objects” in the Imaginary: “organs, like the breast, or objects associated with the body, like feces, whose psychic investment is then transferred to a host of other, more indifferent contents of the external world” (Jameson 1977, 355). When Custance is condemned to her ship by the Sultanesse, the ship is stocked with “A certain tresor that she thider ladde, / And, sooth to seyn, vitaille greet plentee / They han hire yeven, and clothes eek she hadd” (442–44). And when Donegild exiles Custance from Northumbria, “vitailed was the ship, it is no drede, / Habundantly for hire ful longe space, / And othere necessities that sholde nede / She hadde ynogh” (869–72). The ship becomes a contaminated zone where personhood and thingness become indistinct. Set adrift on the sea but not in economic circulation, the treasure and food, like Custance herself, cease to function as forms of economic or political capital.

That is, until Custance kneels, prays, and participates in self-making through conduct. Just as the ship is a space of merged subjecthood and objecthood, so too are Custance’s body and flesh not so neatly divisible from each other; her being is a zone of contamination. If wifely conduct grants Custance a legible body, her physical and psychic capture refuses to let go of her flesh. As Amber Jamilla Musser (2014) contends, “[d]espite its resonance with objectification and the negation of subjectivity, flesh has become an important political space,” and that “[t]o ignore flesh is to ignore how bodies have been made to speak of difference” (20). This political space of the flesh is as much the rudderless ship as the bedchamber of the married household or the court of Alla. It is the contaminated zone of objects and subjects, of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Channeling Judith Butler, Robert L. A. Clark (2001) argues that the body of the late medieval good wife engaging in private devotion functions “as the locus where material and discursive forces are joined and play themselves out” (163). In Butler’s formulation, discourse “produces and regulates the *intelligibility* of the *materiality* of bodies” (Butler 1992, 17). But if discourse constructs first a representation of the material body and then frames an opposition between discursive practice and material practice, this opposition is illusory. Discursive practice “is a material practice, and the effects of discursive practices on material bodies are ‘real’ effects” (Clark 2001, 163). What are the real effects of discourse on

Custance? That is, what are the hieroglyphics of the flesh on her? I would contend that her wifely conduct and self-discipline *mark* her; the transmission of a racialized cultural capital is self-inflicted and self-concealed.

On the invasive reach of modern logistics, Cowen notes “a creeping encroachment of logistics corporations into the intimate space of the household” (Cuppini 2019, 100). The household, like the ship-qua-Custance, is a murky space of subjecthood and objecthood. It is the site, as Bourdieu (1986) contends, of “the domestic transmission of cultural capital” (244), one that is largely invisible, disguised, or misrecognized. Cultural capital itself, in fact, can be conceived as a zone of contamination of bodies, objects, and institutions across time and space. In Bourdieu’s formulation, appropriation of objectified cultural capital presumes access to embodied capital, and cultural capital “always remains marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition” (245). As such, the objectified capital is haunted and contaminated by its previous iterations, including the embodied state.

As a fantasy, the *Man of Law’s Tale* is a story of *racio genesis* that narrates the birth of the “English race” through religious conversion. It is only Custance’s Roman Christianity that can properly authorize England’s religious and racial transformation, and thereby participation in a universal Latin Christendom. After Alla and Custance reunite, they return to a post-conversion “Engelond” (1130) and not to pagan Northumbria. The political succession, facilitated by religious conversion, marks Alla as a cultural and historic edge. Maurice, destined to be a future emperor of Rome, carries the proper cultural and political capital transmitted by his mother. At the same time, Custance’s wifely conduct, as a racialized cultural capital, situates the tale within late medieval economies of lay private devotion. But if Custance herself is already a contaminated zone, then the racialized cultural capital she carries is neither pure nor originary. The *Man of Law’s Tale*, as the Clerk and other tellers of the Constance Cycle have noted, is filled with extreme forms: figurations of exemplarity that are beyond the norm and impossible to emulate. The impossibility of emulation points to a “contaminated zone of subjection and identification” for which psychoanalysis offers “the most powerful language” to “*track* or articulate the affective and imaginary attachments generated by pleasures and pains that live beyond the well-defined borders of self-serving fantasy or its dutiful correction” (Cheng 2009, 93, my emphasis). In other words, the tracking of psychoanalytic attachment is the deciphering of the transmission of cultural capital through its distribution, accumulation, and appropriation. That is, logistics.

Cheng (2009) asks provocatively: “What is psychoanalysis without symptoms?” (87). Likewise, what is body without flesh (which is not the same as body without organs)? Custance might appear as a “body without flesh,” a being marked by blankness and flatness, yet she remains symptomatic. Custance’s self-discipline and self-improvement are her means of making legible her existence as a symptom; it is the culturalization of the flesh into embodied capital. This is her compulsory symptomaticity. The Man of Law reads and glosses her, reflexively comparing her to Daniel in the lions’ den or Jonah in a whale. So long as Custance remains a symptomatic carrier of cultural capital, she invites diagnosis, therapy, and interpretation.

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