The Face of a Saint and the Seal of a King

CHAUCER’S MAN OF LAW takes seriously his role as a narrator, the medieval Latin term for both someone who enters legal pleas and a teller of stories. Indeed, the Man of Law insists he is not a poet, but a lawyer, insulting Chaucer as a silly rhymer: “I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn / That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly / On metres and on rymyng craftily, / Hath seyd hem in swich English as he kan / Of olde tyme, a knoweth many a man.” He then claims that he will “speke in prose,” as is befitting a lawman such as himself (II.96). However, despite his assertions regarding his own authority to tell the kind of story he wants to tell—presumably, a lawyerly one, rather than a literary one—the Man of Law finds himself subject to the Host’s requirement to tell an entertaining tale. In fact, throughout the Canterbury Tales, the Host reminds the pilgrims that the storytelling game is structured by his organization and command, not theirs. In the Man of Law’s introduction, the Host explicitly reminds the Man of Law that he has assented to the Host’s sovereign judgment:

1. II.46–50. All citations from the Canterbury Tales are from the Riverside Chaucer and will be cited parenthetically by fragment and line number.

“Ye been submitted, thurgh youre free assent,
To stonden in this cas at my juggement,
Acquiteth yow now of youre biheeste;
Thanne have ye do youre devoir ate leeste.” (35–38)

The Host’s establishment of his sovereignty over this ad hoc community of pilgrims here not only insists on his status as judge; it more broadly inaugurates a vision of sovereign law and community-formation that the Man of Law himself goes on to parse in his Tale. Indeed, sovereignty and community are central preoccupations throughout the Canterbury Tales. Written at the end of the fourteenth century, when Richard II sought to shore up the coercive authority of the crown even as various legal and bureaucratic institutions emerged to mediate between its sovereign power and the commons, gentry, barons, and peasants, the Canterbury Tales repeatedly depicts and explores how sovereign law might be asserted and protected. The Man of Law’s story in particular deconstructs the complicated ways sovereign authority can both foster and threaten communal sensibilities, focusing on the production of an English “nacioun,” which the Man of Law fantasizes to be a community united by divine justice and protected by the sovereign rule that relies on divine justice.

Curiously and significantly, the Man of Law depicts the requirements and consequences of sovereign law through a well-known hagiographic tale that turns on the treachery of false witness. In this story, the obedient and patient Constance is sent by her father from Rome to Syria to marry the Muslim Sultan there, but his mother ships her off to sea in a rudderless boat. After she lands in Northumberland, her steadfast devotion converts the Northumbrians as well as their pagan king, Alla, who marries her. But after a trial for murder (of which she is falsely accused), Constance is again shipped away in a rudderless boat. Miraculously, she returns to Rome, where she is reunited with her father and with Alla. Repeatedly tested by false accusations, fallible systems of evidence, and unjust punishments, Constance remains patient

3. For example, the Tale of Melibee, which the Man of Law was perhaps slated to tell in early versions of the Tales, depicts at length Melibeus’s deliberations about how to assert his authority to punish the thieves who have broken into his house and beaten his wife and daughter. Likewise, the Wife of Bath’s Tale overtly depicts women’s desire for soveraynetee, while the Clerk’s Tale illustrates Walter’s right to sovereign power over Griselda even as it critiques the severity with which it is performed. See Donald C. Green, “The Semantics of Power: Maistrie and Soveraynetee in The Canterbury Tales,” Modern Philology 84.1 (1986): 18–23.

throughout her ordeals, sure of her devotion to God and steadfast in her belief that divine justice will prevail.  

Specifically, the Man of Law uses the repeated scenes of false witness at the heart of the Constance story to assert the importance of faith in shaping and expressing the sanctity of a community and to explore how a sovereign leader must relinquish his earthly legal power to the authority of divine justice. Indeed, though the story provides an exemplary model of womanly obedience and Christian faith in Constance, the Man of Law’s focal interest in his exploration of nation-building is Alla, the Northumbrian king who defies his mother, his culture, and his religion to marry Constance and produce a Christian heir to his throne. As a sovereign lord, Alla is the “primary organizing figure around whom divergent groups build or contest alliance,” insofar as he functions as the figure through which the Man of Law can conceptualize how Muslim and pagan communities might be subsumed under the aegis of Christian law. In other words, the Man of Law produces in Alla the image of a Christian sovereign that can turn away from a pagan past and transform a “strange nacioun”—the phrase the Man of Law uses to describe Syria—into one that adheres to divine law. The *Man of Law’s Tale* thus explores both how sovereign legal authority can shape a doctrinally bound, divinely sanctioned “nacioun” and how culturally and ideologically distant communities—in this case, Muslim Syria and pagan Northumberland—can be transformed into nations that work according to Christian principles of obedience. The scenes of false witness depicted in the *Tale* illustrate that witnessing is a critical tool in shaping a community whose sovereign authority

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stems from divine justice, one that can claim a Christian heritage and erase its non-Christian ancestry.

The urgency of these scenes draws, in part, upon the many Scriptural precepts that describe witnessing as a way to construct and protect Christian community. Indeed, it would be difficult to overestimate the Scriptural preoccupation with giving testimony and bearing witness as a way of formulating doctrinal unity. For example, Hebrews 12:1 describes saints who can testify to God’s perseverance as a “cloud of witnesses” (nubem testium), while Acts repeatedly calls the apostles Christ’s witnesses (testes). Likewise, Luke requires that witnesses confirm the resurrection of Christ, linking together preaching and witnessing: “And he said to them, Thus it is written and thus it behooved Christ to suffer and rise again from the dead on the third day, and that penance and the remission of sins should be preached in his name to all people, beginning in Jerusalem, and you are witnesses to these things.”

Giving and hearing testimony is fundamental to affirming and repeating one’s faith, and one also bears witness to one’s faith by listening to sermons, remembering Christ’s suffering, and attending Mass. Moreover, witnessing binds members of a community together by offering them opportunities to attest to collective beliefs. The Man of Law depicts witnessing as a way to draw together a unified “nacioun” that is bound by its subjects’ mutual Christian faith and dedication to a sovereign leader. Strikingly, he envisions such community unity by critiquing legal models of witnessing as fallible and divisive.

In the Tale’s first scene of false witness, a treacherous knight accuses Constance of a murder he himself has committed. Although all the physical evidence points to her guilt, Constance’s pale face, a face of innocence and steadfast faith, belies the knight’s accusation. The second episode of false witness occurs after Alla has converted and has married Constance. It depicts the king’s pagan mother, Donegild, repeatedly sending counterfeit royal documents to Alla while he is away at war in Scotland to frame Constance for producing a “monstrous” heir to the throne. Taking up the crisis of false witness, sovereign power, and divine justice dramatized in the first episode, this extended scene conceptualizes false witness not as courtroom perjury, but rather as the manipulation of royal documents and official seals, a crime that was understood to be treasonous false witness by the second half of the fourteenth century. By staging the falsification of royal documents, this episode plays upon contemporary fears about the fallibility of the royal word

and bureaucratic documents at the hands of forgers. The *Man of Law’s Tale* thus yokes together two distinct forms of false witness—courtroom perjury and forged documents—to consider how false witness, in its many forms, is a threat to divine justice and Christian sovereignty. Reading these two episodes together reveals the Man of Law’s overall project to portray multiple kinds of false witness as real dangers to the ability of sovereign law to shape Christian community and protect its boundaries, and, by extension, to register how crucial witnessing is to building a divinely sanctioned “nacioun.”

**False Oaths, Bloody Knives, and Constance’s Pale Face**

The *Man of Law’s Tale* begins in Syria, where a company of merchants tells the story of the Roman emperor’s beautiful daughter, whom they encountered during a trade trip. When they returned to Syria, the story goes, they described Constance so vividly to the Sultan “that al his lust and al his bisy cure / Was for to love hire while his lyf may endure” (II.188–89). Wanting to marry Constance based on her reputation alone, the Sultan consults a “privy conseil,” which argues that it cannot imagine that a Christian prince would permit his daughter to wed a Muslim, since “ther was swich diversitee / Bit-wene hir bothe lawes” (II.220–21). Undeterred, the Sultan agrees to convert rather than lose Constance, and he convinces his barons to do the same. When word of his conversion gets back to the Roman emperor, he agrees to send Constance to live in Syria as part of a peace-keeping strategy between the two nations. Though she weeps that she will be sent to a “strange nacioun,” away from friends and family, Constance nonetheless reluctantly agrees to go, telling her father, “‘Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun / I most anoon, syn that it is youre wille’” (II.281–82). Syria is thus established as a “nacioun” that is alien and barbarous, distant from the Rome she knows. Nonetheless, when she arrives, “she peyneth hire to make good contenance” and perform dutiful obedience to her father (II.320). Upon Constance’s arrival in Syria, the Sultan’s mother, enraged that her son has converted, puts together a welcome feast for the new queen only to brutally kill the Sultan and the converted Christians and ship Constance out to sea in a rudderless boat.

The abruptly truncated episode in Syria establishes the tale’s overall concern with the necessity of constructing and articulating an English “nacioun” based on Christian belief and, by extension, of contending with a threatening power whose royal authority and sense of community is not shaped by Christian virtue. The Syrians’ “strangeness” and “barbarity” indicate both their distance from the Roman world from which Constance hails and the
Man of Law’s dismissal of the Syrians as a people truly worth imagining as a kindred “nacioun.” Geraldine Heng reads the sudden ending of the Syrian episode as an assertion of the radical difference of Syria from England and Rome: “Both Syria and English Northumberland might be heathenish foreign lands to a Christian ‘Roman’ princess,” Heng writes, “but Syria—the ‘Barbre nacioun’—unlike England, presents the prospect of a penultimate alienness, an alienation beyond the pale, by virtue of the race and color of its constituents, even when the aliens have been Christianized.”

Indeed, the Man of Law focuses his attention on those communities that might be successfully absorbed into a Christian “nacioun,” rather than on a truly “alien” nation that cannot be made to attest to the righteousness of a Christian community. Thus, when the next episode mirrors and amplifies the Syrian story in an extended episode of false witness, it suggests that pagan Northumberland is close enough to Christian sovereign law to merit extended treatment, such that the Man of Law can imagine it as a community that might someday bear witness to Christian truths and divine justice.

After the Sultaness ships Constance away from Syria, Constance lands under an unnamed castle in Northumberland, where a constable comes upon her and takes her in to live with him and his wife, Hermengild. As the story details Constance’s transformative effect on the constable and his wife, it also offers a short geohistorical narrative of Britain, saying that no Christians lived in Northumberland anymore, having fled to Wales and leaving the pagan “olde Britons” in the region. Yet according to the Man of Law, Christianity still lurked on the edges of Northumberland: “But yet nere Cristene Britons so exiled / That ther nere somme that in hir privetee / Honoured Crist and hethen folk bigiled / And ny the castel swiche ther dwellen three” (II.547–50). The suggestion of Christians living “in hir privetee” in pagan Northumberland sets up the central issues that govern the ensuing episode of false witness: that is, how witnessing might construct and monitor the boundaries of a properly English, Christian “nacioun.” To imagine a narrative in which a nation of Christians can be imagined, sanctioned, and protected, the Man of Law stages an elaborate episode of perjury that establishes Constance, the faithful Christian and daughter of Roman royalty, as Northumberland’s preeminent witness to divine truth. Significantly, this episode uses two contradictory forms of witnessing to establish divine justice as the foundation for Christian nationhood. On one hand, the embodied testimony of the Christian martyr serves as a critical backdrop for this

scene. Specifically, Constance’s “good contenance,” which she had tried to assume when she landed in Syria, is registered here as her “pale face,” and it functions as a powerful site of Christian conversion. On the other hand, the Man of Law explores the legal authority of King Alla to testify as both inquisitor and judge, ultimately presenting his legal authority as a secondary, earthly model of witnessing that must harness divine justice to authorize itself.

When Constance is discovered by the constable, he finds he can understand her, even though she speaks “a maner of Latyn corrupt,” and he takes her home to care for her (II.519). After living with her a short while, the constable and Hermengild find they are so taken with Constance’s diligence that they are filled with a powerful feeling of grace and convert to Christianity. The Man of Law tells us that Constance’s face is the initial locus of her power to convert: “She was so diligent, withouten slouthe, / To serve and plesen everich in that place / That alle hir loven that looken in hir face” (II.530–32). Likewise taken in by her beautiful face, a young knight finds himself overwhelmed with love for her, though Constance rebuffs his persistent advances. Stung by Constance’s rejection, one night the knight kills Hermengild and plants the bloody knife in Constance’s bed to frame her for the crime. The next day, when the constable finds his wife dead and Constance unable to explain what happened, he goes to King Alla to report the murder. The constable then also admits how he found Constance on the shore and took her in. Alla immediately recognizes Constance as “so benigne a creature,” an innocent defendant who must stand a trial like a lamb being led toward its death. Yet as the sovereign legal authority in Northumberland, he must initiate legal proceedings, during which the false knight gives seemingly incontrovertible firsthand, eyewitness testimony that Constance committed the murder.

The ensuing scene of perjury depicts multiple sites of witnessing and truth-telling: the body of the condemned functions as a witness to God’s justice, for example, and physical evidence, oaths, and the probative claims of a communal voice likewise compete for the authority to expose the truth, both legal and divine. The contradiction between divine law and human testimony crystallizes in the image of Constance’s face, which the Man of Law has already established as a site that can express obedience to sovereign law, stir Christian grace, and even inspire conversion. When the trial begins, a crowd gathers to watch their beloved Constance be tried for the heinous crime, and

11. See Robertson’s discussion of the power of Constance’s face to convert others in “The ‘Elvyssh’ Power of Constance,” 162–63.
she moves slowly through the crowd, headed toward what looks like certain doom. Significantly, the Man of Law takes a moment here to address his fellow pilgrims. “Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,” he asks,

Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace,
And swich a colour in his face hath had
Men myghte knowe his face that was bistad
Amonges alle the faces in that route?
So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute. (II.645–51)

This narratorial intrusion is peculiar to Chaucer’s version of the tale: neither Nicholas Trevet nor John Gower includes it in his version of the Constance story. Examining this momentary departure from the narrative, Carolyn Dinshaw notes that Constance’s pale face is one of many Chaucerian pale faces that denote despair. For example, Palamon’s face drains of blood when he sees Emily for the first time in the Knight’s Tale, and Criseyde pales when she learns she will be traded to the Greeks in Troilus and Criseyde. Dinshaw argues that Constance’s paleness not only registers her anguish; it must also be understood relative to the cultural and religious differences of the once-heathen Northumbrians, so that this particular stanza works to locate her Christian innocence in her facial pallor. As Dinshaw asserts, in the Man of Law’s Tale, “paleness is marked white Christianity” (22).

Constance’s face certainly offers an obvious visual of her Christian patience and virtue, drawing upon the medieval commonplace that links whiteness to Christian innocence. In addition, the Man of Law’s particular focus on the face in this stanza—as Dinshaw points out, he uses the word “face” four times in these seven lines—suggests his desire to counter the false legal testimony that could condemn Constance by asking the pilgrims to imagine the face of an innocent, one that can provide a kind of moral testimony that transcends courtroom practices and exposes divine truth rather than legal proof. Significantly, in a wide range of medieval texts, faces attest both to the possibility of divine revelation and to the way divine wisdom can be obscured in human systems of testimony. When a face does offer access to

12. Carolyn Dinshaw, “Pale Faces: Race, Religion, and Affect in Chaucer’s Texts and Their Readers,” SAC 23 (2001): 19–41. See also Heng, who argues that in the Constance narrative, “the recognition of racially marked differences of color and bodies is articulated through the authoritative, masterful grammar of religious difference; simultaneously, religious difference itself is articulated through the grammar of physiognomy, color, and genealogy, posited on normative bodies and the norm of human whiteness.” Empire of Magic, 232.
divine knowledge, it often embodies the sublime fear and awe encountered by the witness who sees the divine face. For example, Langland’s dreamer begins his search for “kynde knowyng” with Holy Church, noting that when he first saw her, “I was afered of hire face” (I.10). Likewise, for Julian of Norwich, witnessing Christ’s pallid face during the Passion leads to a glimpse of divine grace:

I saw His swete face as it was drye and blodeles with pale deyeng, and sithen more pale, dede, langoring, and than turnid more dede into blew, and sithen more browne blew, as the flesh turnyd more depe dede. For His passion shewid to me mostproperly in His blissid face, and namly in His lippis.\textsuperscript{13}

For Julian, Christ’s pale face enacts both the violence and the grace of his death, and Julian insists elsewhere that seeing his face during the Passion taught her that “we ought se of Him graciously, than arn we sterid by the same grace to sekyn with gret desire to se Him more blisfully” (356–57). In contrast to Exodus, in which God tells Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live” (Ex. 33:20), the incarnate Christ offers a glimpse of the divine face and thus the possibility of accessing divine wisdom in earthly form. By extension, the face of a saint can also attest to divine knowledge, as, for example, the Legend of St. Stephen suggests. When Jews accuse Stephen of having blasphemed the law of Moses in his sermons, they send two false witnesses to “verify” their accusations.\textsuperscript{14} But Christ turns Stephen’s face into the face of an angel to be witnessed by all those gathered to judge the case: “And thanne all tho that weren in the iugement sawe the visage of hym as the visage of an aungell. And that was the victorie of the secounde batayle” (45). Similarly, when the fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook, the \textit{Fasciculus Morum}, quotes the Psalms in its discussion of false witness (“‘You have thought unjustly that I should be like you; I will reprove you and set myself against your face’”), it warns sinners that divine justice will produce the truth before their faces, specifically rebuking false witnesses by asserting the divine face as the site of truth-telling and revelation (167). Faces can even be the site of divine knowledge for priests seeking to manage their unruly congregants. One poem included in the Vernon manuscript, for example, describes a story about a parish priest

\textsuperscript{13}. \textit{The Shewings of Julian of Norwich}, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1993), 589–93.

who, suspicious of two rowdy parishioners, prays “that he might know by the face” which is worthy to receive the sacrament of the altar. At the next Mass, as the priest looks out onto his congregation, he is astonished to see that some have red faces (the tyrants), some black (the lechers), some swollen (the backbiters) and some “pure and bright,” which signify those who are clean of sin.\textsuperscript{15}

But the medieval face does not always operate as a clear sign of divine wisdom; some texts present the face as a hermeneutic crux that must be unpacked. In \textit{Pearl}, for example, the Maiden’s “white face” seems at first to be a clear indication of her close relationship with God, and the Dreamer claims that her face stirs his desire for grace, much like Julian’s encounter with Christ’s face does: “The more I frayste hyr fayre face, / Her fygure fyn quen I had fonte, / Suche gladande glory con to me glace / As lyttel byfore þerto watz wonete.”\textsuperscript{16} Later, when the Dreamer is bold enough to ask the maiden who formed her “fair figure,” he suggests that the beauty of her pale face exceeds human language: “Pymalyon paynted neuer þy vys, / Ne Arys-totel nawþer by hys lettrure, / Of carped þe kynde þese propertez” (750–52). He thus suggests that her face, as an allegorical symbol of God’s love, gestures to the possibility of revelation, a revelation that would exceed the confines of earthly language. However, as J. A. Jackson has pointed out, the Dreamer begins to become infatuated with the earthly beauty of her face, describing her ivory skin and gray eyes with courtly language. By indulging his earthly desire for the maiden and her beauty, the Dreamer disengages the Maiden’s face from the possibility of divine revelation, insofar as her face “is not the face of the Maiden but the face of the Dreamer’s own construction, an obstacle, ultimately, that he creates for himself.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, as the Dreamer becomes increasingly enchanted by the Maiden’s face and her beauty, he transforms her face into an object upon which he can map his own earthly desire, rather than recognizing it as a symbol that can render God’s plan legible. Thus, as \textit{Pearl} demonstrates, a pale face does not always signify Christian virtue or innocence; its signification can shift according to the desires of the observer.


Similarly, when the Man of Law asks the Canterbury pilgrims to imagine the pale faces of fearful defendants as they head toward legal condemnation, he produces a hermeneutic crux that belies the ostensible simplicity of the image. Constance’s pale face ought to convince both the crowd and the Canterbury pilgrims that divine truth can be made intelligible on the saintly body, particularly as torture and death loom.\textsuperscript{18} Yet by linking Constance’s face to the face of an anonymous, fearful defendant—one who, in the Man of Law’s example, could be either innocent or guilty—the Man of Law emphasizes that her white face may not offer a transparent sign of innocence. Notably, such ambivalence about the pale face is reflected in medieval courtroom manuals, which suggested that a witness’s pale face could reveal that he or she is hiding something. As William Durand warns lawyers in his Speculum judiciale: “Often, a face’s paleness, redness, or stuttering made it so that less faith might be given, as in: Oh, how difficult it is not to show crime on one’s face.”\textsuperscript{19} For Durand, the face functions as a bodily site of legal truth, but paleness did not necessarily indicate either innocence or honesty; in fact, a white face could point to the witness’s guilt or even to perjury as easily as it could point to his or her innocence.

The Man of Law may want Constance’s face to function as a symbol of God’s grace as the legal system fails her, but her pale face does not immediately produce any divine intervention into the trial proceedings or into the false testimony that has condemned her. However, although Constance’s pale face fails to function as the immediately legible signifier of innocence and divine revelation the Man of Law imagines, it serves a broader purpose in constructing the Canterbury pilgrims as witnesses to the injustices being perpetrated in Alla’s court. By calling attention to Constance’s face and departing from the narrative action to address the pilgrims, the Man of Law turns the image into an appeal for justice that contradicts the courtroom proceedings he is describing. In doing so, he asks the diegetic crowd and the pilgrims alike to empathize with Constance’s plight at the hands of the false knight. He also encourages empathy for Alla, as both Constance and Alla are confined by the earthly systems of evidence and judgment to which they are subject, systems that fail to reveal Constance’s innocence and thereby fail to enact divine justice.


\textsuperscript{19} “Saepe pallor vultus, rubor & titubatio faciunt ut minus fidei alicui habeatur, iuxta illud: O quam difficile est crimen non prodere vultu” (L.iv.7).
For the Man of Law, then, Constance’s face operates as a call to empathy through which the pilgrims can contemplate the way innocents who faithfully adhere to Christian ideals can be vulnerable to the fallibility of legal practices. Specifically, her face signals how such vulnerability sets the stage to transform the pagan Northumbrians who are witnessing the trial into a unified community that is drawn together through its common empathy for the Christian defendant. Accordingly, Constance’s pale face functions, as Emmanuel Levinas would say, as an epiphanal sign that exposes the radical difference of the Other, wherein the encounter with the face of another produces the possibility of divine transcendence. As Levinas puts it, “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face.”

For Levinas, the encounter with a radically different Other need not result in the violent sublimation described by a Hegelian dialectic (against which he explicitly argues). Rather, an encounter with the face of another arrests that kind of violent revulsion, producing instead a charitable response to another human being. As James J. Paxson helpfully explains, the face is “the visage of one we meet and must not do violence against, the forward sign of the human body we must clothe, feed, and whose thirst we must slake.” With an empathetic and ethical response to the Other, Levinas claims, comes the possibility of divine connection:

The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation. It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan. . . . God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. (78)

Levinas argues here that the empathetic response to another’s face not only opens the possibility of accessing the divine, it also produces a social relationship that calls for a charitable response to another rather than a violent

one. Accordingly, the face can produce a sense of community, producing a mutually empathetic response among proximate people that unifies them via the common recognition of divine presence.

Read through a Levinasian sense of the empathetic encounter with the face of the Other, Constance's pale face signals two contradictory cruxes central to the *Man of Law's Tale*. First, as Dinshaw and Heng make clear, it clearly reveals the *Tale*'s racial and cultural politics, in which the white face of the innocent Christian transfixes and transforms the Muslims and pagans who witness it. In doing so, her face motivates a set of social relationships that establish a clear hierarchy between Christian and non-Christian, white and nonwhite, and, presumably, English and non-English. At the same time, however, it constructs Constance's pale face as the visage of another to whom the audience (both the Northumbrian crowd and the pilgrims) must respond with a sense of charity and empathy. These audiences must imagine a community that reframes the injustices about to take place in the trial with a new ideal of divine justice that emerges from the recognition of God's presence in Constance's face. By asking if they have seen a face like Constance's, fearful of the legal machinery of condemnation and human systems of evidence, the Man of Law positions both the crowd and the Canterbury pilgrims to attest to how these earthly legal proceedings fail to account for Constance's beatific innocence and to imagine her face as the locus of divine justice that will unify them through mutual empathy and conversion.

Thus, the Man of Law's momentary shift away from the narrative to call upon the pilgrims to imagine Constance's pale face turns them into witnesses who can attest to the possibility of Alla's sovereign power to convert and to unite a Christian “nacioun.” Indeed, as Levinas goes on to explain, the encounter with another's face is always a both visual and juridical one, in which such an encounter requires one to bear witness to the vulnerability of the Other. Bearing witness, he says, “produces the commencement of intelligibility, initiality itself, principality, royal sovereignty, which commands unconditionally” (201). Because the face prefigures discursive categories such as veracity and deceit, it can circumvent the ambiguity of the true and the false to which all earthly justice is subject. Thus for Levinas the face attests to epiphanal possibilities and ethical requirements, rather than to the truth of a particular event. Yet Levinas also claims that bearing witness to another's face expresses the unconditional power of command at the heart of royal sovereignty. Its attachment both to empathetic response and to an unconditional royal sovereignty makes the face a crucial sign of benevolent sovereign power as well as of communal unity. As something that must be witnessed, Constance's face operates in the *Man of Law's Tale* as the primary
site of both transcendental divine justice and sovereign Christian community. Accordingly, Constance functions outside the testimonial discourse of courtroom witnesses, which is always subject to varying degrees of truth-telling and deceit.

Nonetheless, Constance must stand trial, and the depiction of the trial focuses on other forms of testimonial authorization: in particular, the oath. When the trial begins, the knight who falsely accused Constance of murder confidently swears on a “Britoun book” and testifies to her guilt. The designation of the oath-text as a “Britoun book” is a peculiarly Chaucerian detail, and it emphasizes that this episode of false witness tries to expose how authentic witnessing can produce a specifically English community that coalesces around divine justice. Moreover, the knight’s oath can be contextualized within fourteenth-century preoccupations with how false oaths can hasten the moral deterioration of the perjurer, unravel social fabrics, and destroy communities. According to Handlyng Synne, for example, taking a false oath turns God and the saints against the blasphemer and distances the blasphemer from his own internal moral compass:

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\begin{align*}
3yf \text{ ðou by god or our lady} \\
Or ouþer seyntys þat ðou sweryst by, \\
ðou dost hym bere fals wytnes \\
Of þy lesyng þat soþ hyt ys. \\
How shulde þey þan helpe þe at þy nede \\
When þou hem draghst to þy falshede? \\
And þyn ynwyt, þyn owne skyle, \\
A$jenseyþ þe þan & euermore wyle.\quad 23
\end{align*}
\]

To swear oaths thoughtlessly, as this wealthy man does, “dismembers” Christ.\quad 24 Likewise, the Fasciculus Morum argues that perjury implicates God as a false witness and that the perjurer “burdens and hurts God by laying sin on him even more than that Jews did by killing Christ and laying punishment on him.”\quad 25 False oaths relive the trauma of Christ’s torture by calling

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{“magis gravat Deum et ledit inponendo sibi malum culpae quam Iudei Christum occi-} \\
\text{dendo et inponendo malum pene.” Fasciculus Morum, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (Univer-}
\end{align*}
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24. The idea that false oaths tear at Christ’s body was commonplace in Middle English didactic literature as well as in visual depictions of false swearers in church paintings. See Miriam Gill, “From Urban Myth to Didactic Image: the Warning to Swearers,” in The Hands of the Tongue: Essays on Deviant Speech, ed. Edwin D. Craun (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2007), 137–60.
25. “magis gravat Deum et ledit inponendo sibi malum culpae quam Iudei Christum occidendo et inponendo malum pene.” Fasciculus Morum, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (Univer-
upon God, Christ, or the saints to act as accomplices in supporting the false testimony. Accordingly, for the *Fasciculus Morum*, false witnesses are worse than the devil, who “dares to commit every evil but does not dare to swear” (167).

Notably, in the second half of the fourteenth century, pastoral writing on false witness increasingly turned to legal exempla to expose the damaging effects of false oaths and lying, offering detailed taxonomies of the ways and reasons why legal actors might turn to perjury. For example, the *Speculum Vitae*, William of Nassington’s versified translation of the *Somme le Roi* from around 1370, devotes some time to discussing false witness in its section on “sins of the tongue,” which includes blasphemy, lying, and gossip. In this section, Nassington describes perjurers as those who “do Godde mare skathe, / For ilk day þai do hym on rode, / And ilka day þay shede his blode / With sharp athes in body and hede” (14148–51). Here, false oaths are thought to function as violent weapons against the body of Christ, wounding the devotional community that coheres around his suffering body. The *Speculum* also pays considerable attention to perjury and suspicious legal practices in its discussion of avarice, listing the specifics of various legal officers’ potential to bear false witness after listing the kinds of criminals who lie and steal for their own gain (such as common robbers and those who aid and abet thieves). For example, Nassington states, “Fals Executours may bi skille / Be called Robbours for þai do ille; / þai suld thurgh Halykirke rede / Mynistre leely þe godes of þe dede / For thurgh athe þai er bunden þarto / And with þa dede godes leelly to do” (6521–26). After condemning false beadle, summoners, bailiffs, and sheriffs—all of whom use their legal status to bribe defendants and thus operate like common robbers—the *Speculum* turns its attention to those who “falshed vses agayne þe lawe”: that is, false pleaders, plaintiffs, defendants, lawyers, and jurors. The false pleader is particularly insidious both because he does not see the sin in presenting false evidence and because he can make others blind to his falsehood. As Nassington puts it, “He charges noght his conscience / To shewe a fals euydence. / His falshed may men noght wele knawe, / For he can couer it with þe lawe. / þarefore in wrange he es mare balde; / A False Auoket he may be talde” (6673–78).

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27. For a discussion of the *Speculum*’s critique of legal officials, see Kathleen E. Kennedy, *Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage in Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 90–92.
Like Nassington’s false pleader, the false knight in the *Man of Law’s Tale* uses the law to cover his treacherous perjury, and indeed it seems that his formulaic adherence to legal procedure and his confident oath-taking would substantiate his claims in the eyes of the court. But the Man of Law describes how, just as the false knight swears upon the book and utters his testimony, a disembodied hand abruptly surfaces and chops at his neck, causing him to fall down and his eyes to burst out of his face. The astonished crowd then hears a voice:

A voys was herd in general audience,
And seyde, “Thou has desclaundred, gilteless,
The doughter of hooly chirche in heigh presence,
Thus hastou doon, and yet hold I my pees!”
Of this mervaille agast was al the prees;
As mazed folk they stoden everichone,
For drede of wreche, save Custance alone. (II.673–79)

The miracle of the disembodied hand convinces the crowd and Alla that Constance is a victim of false witness, verifying both her innocence and God’s ability to make guilt and innocence visible on the human body. Once again, the face is the locus of divine justice, as the knight’s face serves as the canvas upon which God enacts his punishment. Indeed, the fact that it is specifically his eyes that burst out of his face exposes the fallibility of the “eyewitness” testimony he offers the court.

Notably, Gower’s version of the false knight’s condemnation takes a slightly but significantly different path. After the knight swears an oath that his accusations are true, the voice of God emerges to articulate the legal truth of the matter:

A vois was herd, whan that they felle,
Which seide, “O dampned man to helle,
Lo, thus hath God the sclaundre wroke
That thou agein Constance hast spoke:
Beknow the sothe er that thou dye.”

Although both Gower and Chaucer imagine God’s voice emerging to explain why the legal proceedings cannot account for the “sclaundre” perpetrated by

the false knight, Gower omits the bodily “merveille” that spectacularly concludes Chaucer’s version of the episode. For Gower, divine justice supports legal procedure; the voice of God insists that the knight confess his perjury, after which he abruptly but unceremoniously dies. Gower’s depiction of the end of the scene of false witness thus highlights the way divine intervention can reaffirm legal process.

In contrast, Chaucer’s version turns to the divine truth of the “merveille,” a term that indicates wondrous response rather than legal or scientific analysis. On one hand, Alla’s use of an oath-text upon which the knight can verify his testimony (or expose his perjury) demonstrates Alla’s judicial supremacy as both king and judge; indeed, unlike either Trevet’s or Gower’s versions of the story, Chaucer portrays Alla as interrogating the knight and deciding the case. Yet on the other hand, as Lavezzo has pointed out, this scene depicts Alla’s juridical authority as dangerously far from the divine justice that ultimately determines Constance’s fate. Despite his careful inquiries of the knight, Alla is unable to prove the knight guilty of perjury and murder. Crucially, the marvelous intervention of divine justice into his own inadequate juridical system of assessment and judgment spurs him and many others in the crowd to convert to Christianity. Thus, Chaucer’s version of this scene of false witness first establishes the boundaries of Alla’s royal sovereignty and legal authority vis-à-vis the divine truth embodied by Constance’s pale face. It then rejects the legal work of inquiry, testimony, and physical evidence in favor of the “merveille” that indisputably establishes Constance’s innocence. The “merveille” of the disembodied hand of God that emerges to arrest and transform the legal proceedings taking place establishes the power of a Christian God and, by extension, the power of a Christian Constance, over and above the legal sovereignty embodied by Alla.

Crowds, Clamor, and the Marvel of Divine Justice

When the Man of Law turns away from legal analysis to divine marvel, he emphasizes that these happenings occur in front of a crowd (“prees”) that witnesses the marvelous intervention on Constance’s behalf. For the Man of Law, the crowd functions as a potential legal entity, a group of witnesses with
the power to attest to the *judicium Dei* and thus to Constance’s innocence. Moreover, the Man of Law envisions the crowd as a crucial synecdoche for the Christian “nacioun” he wants to imagine. His depiction of a witnessing “prees” draws on contemporary testimonial practice, since crowds had, in fact, assumed a new legal status in the second half of the fourteenth century. In particular, as Scase has shown, _clamor_ came to imply widespread complaint or the collective probative voice of a community. _Clamor_ surfaced as a legal principle at the beginning of the fourteenth century as a feature of inquisitional process. It signified a common complaint of the community, which could function as an accusatory voice. By the 1340s _clamor_ could be used to produce notoriety or _publica fama_, which would initiate legal proceedings by claiming general communal knowledge of wrongdoing. _Publica fama_ was recorded by the production of several bills or writs of complaint or, more informally, by the documentation of widespread complaint signaled by the formulaic phrase “the clamor of the people” (_clamour de poeple_) (Scase 55–56). In other words, fourteenth-century complaint procedure relied on bills that announced common knowledge of criminal activity, or _clamor_, to establish the grounds for having someone stand trial.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, parliament mobilized _clamor_’s claims of communal representation to delimit the crown’s juridical and political reach. In 1376 the “Good Parliament” impeached several royal counselors and ministers by drawing upon the probative phrases “clamor of the commons” or “clamor of the common people,” and ten years later, the “Wonderful Parliament” impeached Michael de la Pole, the king’s chief counselor, based on an “ancient law” that said a king could be deposed if he did not rule in accordance with good counsel (Scase 63–65). The following year, however, a panel of judges appointed by Richard decreed that parliament could not impeach a minister of the crown without the king’s assent, and Michael de la Pole was released from prison. In response, the Appellant Lords lodged formal complaints of treason on behalf of the people against a number of government officials.31

_Clamor_ was thus a legal linchpin in these complex negotiations between crown and commons toward the end of the century. Given its topical immediacy and legal importance, it makes sense that the Man of Law might gesture toward the evidentiary power of a crowd as he explores—even diminishes—Alla’s legal power as king, inquisitor, and judge to determine the case against Constance. Chaucer himself was involved in parliamentary politics, as a

controller of wool customs between 1374 and 1386, a clerk of the King’s works, a deputy forester, and a diplomat to Spain, among other positions. 32 Given his work as a government bureaucrat, Chaucer was very familiar with royal and parliamentary systems of representation, and as Matthew Giancarlo shows, such bureaucratic and political knowledge undergirds his poetic exploration in the *Canterbury Tales* and elsewhere of how political communities formed and articulated themselves. 33 Moreover, as a sergeant-at-law, the Man of Law himself would have been a member of the Order of the Coif, whose members were considered the authorities on parliamentary law and who often acted as royal counsel. 34 He is thus not only in a position to recognize the legal role of a clamorous crowd in the Constance case, but he might also be inclined to see the voice of the people as an important control over the reach of sovereign rule. We might thus be tempted to read his emphasis on the “prees” watching Constance’s trial as a counterweight to Alla’s legal authority and the courtroom evidentiary procedures that will condemn Constance. Perhaps this “prees” attests to her legal innocence and moral rectitude, enacting the Christian unity Constance inspires.

However, despite the legal and literary interest in “common voice” at the end of the fourteenth century as well as Chaucer’s particular dedication to conceptualizing how communities might collectively “speak,” it is particularly notable that the Man of Law depicts this “prees” as silent. Without a clamorous voice of communal complaint, this crowd fails to perform its legal role as community of defendants which might try to protect the innocent Constance from a trial designed to put her to death for a crime she did not commit. We might thus instead read this crowd’s silence as an indication of Chaucer’s distrust of crowds as political and legal authorities. As Chaucer instructs his readers at the beginning of the *Balade de Bon Conseyl*,


33. At the beginning of his tale, the Man of Law says that the “commune voys of every man” spoke of Constance’s goodness and beauty, and he takes this common voice to be so trustworthy that he hopes Constance herself will be made queen of all of Europe (II.154–61). Although Chaucer perhaps means us to understand that the “commune voys” stands in for God’s, as used by a fourteenth-century lawyer such as the Man of Law, the phrase must also gesture to the relatively new practice of admitting public opinion and rumor as the probative testimony of a community. See David Weisberg, “Telling Stories about Constance: Framing and Narrative Strategy in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Chaucer Review* 27.1 (1992): 45–64.

34. Wallace describes the Man of Law’s professional affiliations; see *Chaucerian Polity*, 183. For a longer explanation of the occupation of medieval sergeants-at-law, see J. H. Baker’s introduction to *The Order of Serjeants at Law* (London: Selden Society, 1984).
In this poem, Chaucer contrasts “prees” and “sothfastnesse,” ending with an exhortation to the reader to pursue a spiritual pilgrimage and look to God for “trouthe.” Here, the “prees” is an obstacle to the recognition of truth, instead sowing envy and hate within itself and failing to produce the ethical “trouthe” that is the foundation of justice and community.

Yet the Man of Law’s illustration of the “prees” in his Tale does not suffer such overt condemnation. Instead, the Man of Law seems to suggest that this crowd recognizes that divine justice has taken over for legal process. He thus positions it as a collective witness both to the hand of divine justice and to the false knight’s perjury rather than registers it specifically as a legal entity that must offer courtroom evidence. Its silence specifically suggests that the “prees” can recognize God’s law over and above the legal practices and standards of evidence that cannot save Constance. Instead of offering the kind of clamorous complaint that could either provide evidentiary public opinion or portend unruly dissent, the silence of this “prees” enacts the medieval commonplace vox populi, vox dei, testifying to the miracle that reconceptualizes authentic testimony as an attestation to divine justice rather than the kind of legal witnessing abused by the false knight in Alla’s courtroom.

With the silence of the witnessing crowd in mind, we might also note that the Man of Law uses passive voice to describe the false knight’s punishment. In doing so, he suggests that the vox dei emerges as the primary legal and moral authority in this episode. As the Man of Law puts it, the false knight “was slayn for his untrouthe / By juggement of Alla hastifly” (II.687–88). The syntax carefully positions Alla’s sovereign power between his legal authority and the divine hand of God that has just very publicly killed the knight. The specific agent of the knight’s physical punishment is left opaque by the use of passive voice (he “was slayn”), but the Man of Law also recognizes the power of Alla’s judgment to rule that the knight committed perjury. Indeed, as we shall see, the Man of Law repeatedly uses passive structure when describing legal judgments and punishments throughout his Tale, always arguing on behalf of divine justice while also gingerly affirining the juridical power of the sovereign.
This scene of false witness densely collates multiple kinds of witnessing practices to assert the power of divine justice over and above the apparatuses and procedures of human law. Only the divine hand and explanatory voice of God can intervene in these perfectly standard legal proceedings to protect her against the false testimony that almost condemns her to death. Notably, the oath, a method designed to harness the word of God as testimony of legal truth, is the only part of the legal process that works in this episode. But it works, of course, contrary to the false knight’s desires: rather than solidify his story in the eyes of the crowd and Alla, it calls upon God to intervene on Constance’s behalf. In depicting the marvelous hand of the divine, this episode of false witness insists that Alla’s sovereign power draw its legal authority from divine justice, transforming the pagan king into a Christian believer and, by extension, producing a new Christian community that emerges from and is structured by the beliefs and behavior of its newly converted sovereign. To pursue Alla’s transformation from pagan ruler to Christian sovereign more fully, the Man of Law goes on to describe a very different kind of false witness, one that urgently puts Christian sovereignty and community in jeopardy.

Letter-Writing, Forgery, and Treasonous Mothers-in-Law

After witnessing his trial overtaken by divine “merveille,” Alla is fully convinced of the power of divine justice, and he marries Constance with a newfound devotion to Christ. To emphasize Alla’s conversion, when the Man of Law tells the pilgrims that Alla and Constance married after the trial, he explicitly marks Alla as a Christian subject, rather than a sovereign king: “And after this Jhesus, of his mercy, / Made Alla wedden ful solemnely / This hooly mayden, that is so bright and sheene; / And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene” (II.690–93). With the matter of Alla’s Christian conversion resolved and the authority of divine justice established, the Man of Law’s Tale turns its attention to Alla’s need to produce a genealogical line that will naturalize and extend his newfound Christian sovereignty. Again, false witness becomes the narrative impetus to imagine a unified “nacioun”: now, episodes of false witness emphasize the importance of producing a Christian genealogy on behalf of Northumberland. Specifically, by threatening the sanctity of this inchoate Christian “nacioun,” false witness provides the Man of Law the opportunity to express the importance of witnessing for bolstering the power of Christian sovereignty.
Soon after their wedding, while Alla leads his army into Scotland, Constance gives birth to their son, Mauricius, and the constable sends a letter that describes “this blisful tidyng” along with “othere tidynges spedeful for to seye” (II.726–27). But this message is intercepted by Alla’s mother, Donegild, who remains unconverted. She is, not surprisingly, terrifically unhappy with her son’s marriage to Constance and with his conversion. Constance’s pagan mother-in-law, like the Muslim Sultaness, embodies the non-Christian origins of Alla’s royal line, an origin that uncomfortably exists in the very recent past. While Mauricius’s right to the throne should be indisputable since he is Alla’s first male child, Donegild strives to erase her grandson’s existence from the realm along with Constance’s and to restore Northumberland to its pre-Christian state of pagan sovereignty. She does so by manipulating the royal seal used to authenticate bureaucratic documents, a crime that in the fourteenth century was thought be a severe form of false witness, akin to treason.

When the Man of Law depicts Donegild’s attempt to destroy Mauricius’s claim to Alla’s throne, he needles a particularly sore subject for Chaucer’s audience. Succession to the throne was a major source of worry in the fourteenth century, particularly when the inheritance of the French throne came under dispute during the Hundred Years’ War. In 1337, Edward III laid claim to the French throne through his mother, Isabelle, Phillip IV’s daughter. In response, the French insisted that a woman could neither claim the throne for herself nor transmit the throne to her offspring. The French response to Edward’s claim to the throne inaugurated debates regarding whether women could transmit the royal patriline, and the English, encouraged by the possibility that they could take the French throne, emphasized the English rule that women could inherit and transmit royal bloodlines (Florschuetz 32). Yet the acceptance of female genealogical privilege in England was disputed later in the century, when Edward had to determine his own heir to the English throne. In a letter patent issued by Edward in 1376,
in which he addressed concerns about his advancing age and the death of the Prince of Wales, the rightful heir to the throne, he reluctantly noted that the throne must go to the Prince's only surviving son, Richard, who was then only nine years old. Richard's inheritance of the throne would pass over Roger Mortimer, the son of Phillippa of Clarence, Edward's granddaughter. Edward prioritized the nine-year-old Richard's inheritance because of his more direct—and specifically male—lineage through the Prince of Wales, and he thus suggested that royal patrilines ought to be authenticated through male genealogies. Notably, however, in 1399 Henry of Bolingbroke claimed to be the true heir of the throne by tracing his genealogy to the elder brother of Edward I through his mother.

The complicated dynastic politics of the late fourteenth century turned on the problem of whether to accept women's participation in royal patriline. In the extended depiction of Donegild's attempts to thwart Constance's status as a new queen, Chaucer presents an extreme illustration of the ongoing crisis about the genealogical status of women, and he imagines Constance's mother-in-law as a monstrous example of the threats to community sanctity that can arise when women are considered royal genealogical agents. To offset the threat of a mother-in-law taking charge of the throne's inheritance, the Man of Law pronounces Constance's royal status as divinely sanctioned, baldly stating that “Crist ymaad Custance a queene” (II.693). Constance thus not only displaces Donegild as the reigning woman in the realm, she also draws her sovereign status from Christ. Indeed, the Man of Law explains Donegild’s response to her son's marriage as her devastation that her son should marry “so strange a creature” (II.700), recapitulating the language Constance had used to describe Syria. As Angela Florschuetz succinctly puts it, Donegild’s “hostility arises from a specifically dynastic concern, the potential for her son’s mysterious wife to hijack his lineage by producing a child marked by her own strangeness” (49).

Donegild’s strategy to disrupt Constance’s genealogical privilege and Mauricius’s inheritance is to falsify the bureaucratic devices designed to attest to the will of the sovereign in his absence. Her acts of false witness deliberately seek to dismantle the sovereign Christian community taking


38. As Bennett points out, the principle that a woman could pass a royal title to a son was well established in England, and Edward III himself had endorsed this principle when he laid claim to the French throne. With respect to Edward’s transfer of power to Richard, Bennett states, “Given his advocacy, for over forty years, of the claims of the heir general against the claims of the heir male, the settlement of 1376 would appear a *volte-face* of some magnitude” (592).
shape through Alla's marriage to Constance and their production of a Christian heir. When the messenger encounters Donegild, he offers to include any letter she might want to send to her son in the packet of letters he is delivering; he takes care to show her that he holds official letters, marked with the royal seal: “Lo, heere the lettres seled of this thyng, / That I moot bere with al the haste I may” (II.736–37). The emphasis on the seal here alerts Donegild (and Chaucer’s audience) that these letters are diplomatic missives from the queen to the king rather than personal communications between a wife and husband. Such an emphasis, in turn, frames Donegild’s subsequent treachery as interference with the operations of the state, forecasted when the Man of Law describes her as “ful of tirannye” (II.696). Donegild tells the messenger she does not have any message to send to her son at the moment, but later, she plies the messenger with ale. When he falls asleep, she steals his letters and writes another: “And countrefeted was ful subtilly / Another lettre, wroght ful synfully, / Unto the kyng direct of this mateere / Fro his constable, as ye shal after heere” (II.746–49). Alfred Hiatt has demonstrated that Chaucer’s use of the term “countrefeten” here is one of the earliest instances in which the verb was applied to textual falsification, and it carries with it the specific negative connotations of the production of an imitation with the intent to deceive.39 Chaucer further takes care to note Donegild’s careful machinations by describing the forged letter as “wroght,” a term he pejoratively attaches to magicians in the Franklin’s Tale.

Counterfeiting royal letters in late medieval England was considered a serious crime, one that was, significantly, understood as a form of false witness. Glanvill includes forgery of documents under the rubric crimen falsi, which includes forging charters, royal seals, measurements, and coins.40 A century later, Bracton specifically argues that the forgery of a lord’s seal should be considered treason, a position upheld by the 1352 Statute, which lists forgery as one of seven kinds of treasonous false witness, including plotting the death of a king, aiding his enemies, or violating his wife or daughter.41 Seals were critical authenticating apparatuses in England, either impressed in wax on the document itself or hung from a ribbon or strip of parchment. Clanchy has even described seals, particularly royal seals and those conveying the transfer of property, as “relics,” arguing that they could be “seen and

41. Bracton considers forgery of the royal seal a crime of lese-majesty, “a crime which surpasses all others” (2.334). His discussion of forgery occurs at 2.337.
touched in order to obtain from it that authentic view and feel of a donor’s wishes which no writing could adequately convey."

Indeed, royal seals could sometimes be understood as metonyms for the royal body, thought to be material signs of authenticity through which divine justice could emerge. For example, in one striking twelfth-century commentary on Psalm 4, which asks, “Let the light of your face shine on us, Lord,” the German theologian Gerhoh of Reichersberg writes, “The Lord impressed his face like a royal seal on our faces, mirrored in our spirits, a true mirror when it is pure.” In fourteenth-century English law, the body and the seal were likewise understood as reflections of one another. To take one example, a case from 1328, which describes a man named John Le Gode being brought before the King’s Bench on charges of forging the royal seal, includes the sheriff’s assurances that he has both the body of the criminal and the counterfeit seal. As the sheriff claims, “I have attached his body and the counterfeit seal found on him.” Furthermore, the sheriff asks the king to allow him to pass “the body” onto the Oxford sheriff because he does not know the extent of John’s criminal network:

Therefore, more honourable lord, please allow me to bring the body through my bailiwick and through Berkshire as far as Oxford, for as far as there I dare undertake to bring the body safely so long as I am in my own district, and then let the sheriff of Oxford accept the body by your warrant and safely bring it to the next county, and so from one county to another until the body has come to you and, if it please you, my lord, send one of your serjeants to whom I can safely hand over the body at your order. (33)

John’s body is paramount here, as the sheriff seems particularly worried that this counterfeiter will be able to slip away easily en route to trial. More striking, however, is the sheriff’s abrupt turn from focusing on the criminal’s body to authenticating the material evidence he has at hand: “My lord, I have in my possession the seal, sealed with the seal of the prior of Bradenstoke, and that seal I send you in a pouch, sealed with the seal of the prior and with my own seal, by Simond de Asshe, my chaplain, the bearer of this letter” (32). The almost absurd multiplication of seals illustrates both the need

42. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, 247.
to authenticate legal transactions with bureaucratic seals and the profound worry about distinguishing a counterfeit seal from a real one. In fact, forging the seal was seen as an attack on the king, as violent and treasonous as an attempt to injure him bodily. In the second half of the fourteenth century, claims of counterfeiting became more and more common, and these claims increasingly worry about forging the king’s seal. For example, a few cases from 1367 describe a counterfeiting ring that had not only forged the great and privy seals of the king, the pope, archbishops, and bishops, but had created machines capable of reproducing these forgeries. Fears arose about the easy reproducibility of the king’s seal and the concomitant diminishment of the seal’s power, so in 1371 a petition was put in front of parliament to make the forgery of private seals punishable by life imprisonment.

For the Man of Law, the ongoing anxiety about documentary forgery and the authenticity of the royal word provides him the context through which he can argue that true sovereign authority must come from divine power rather than bureaucratic apparatus. Donegild’s particular forgery tries to destroy Constance’s royal authority as queen by turning Constance into a genealogical disruption and community threat. Donegild’s forged letter tells Alla that Constance has given birth to a monster and even implies that Constance herself is not of this world:

The letter spak the queene delivered was
Of so horrible a feendly creature
That in the castel noon so hardy was
That any while dorste ther endure.
The mooter was an elf, by aventure
Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
And every wight hateth hir compaignye. (II.750–56)

Alla responds undaunted, giving a letter to the messenger that welcomes Mauricius as a “sonde of Crist,” and he implores Christ to keep both his child and wife safe until he can return home. The Man of Law again emphasizes the authenticating, metonymic work of the king’s seal, not only emphasizing that it was written “of his owene hand” but also describing the moment Alla seals his letter and hands it over to the messenger (II.759, 768). Yet once again, Donegild intercepts the messenger, plies him with ale, and takes the

letter. The Man of Law condemns the messenger with an apostrophic aside that suggests he has become, unwittingly, a false witness of the king’s will:

O messager, fulfil of drunkenesse,
Strong is thy breath, thy lymes faltren ay,
And thou biwreyest alle secreenesse.
Thy mynde is lorn, thou janglest as a jay,
Thy face is turned in a newe array. (II.771–75)

His claim that the messenger’s face is “turned in a newe array” recalls the image of Constance’s pale face from the earlier trial. Here, we can read in the messenger’s face his inability to protect the king’s words and deliver them unaltered. Once again, the face exposes the moral truth of the witness, and here that truth is contrasted with the bureaucratic documents the messenger carries. The Man of Law follows up this condemnation with a harsher excoriation of Donegild’s actions: “O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne / Unto thy malice and thy tirannye! / And therefore to the feend I thee resigne; / Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!” (II.778–81). Demonstrating his familiarity with the statutory laws that consider counterfeiting royal seals a form of treasonous false witness, the Man of Law links the messenger’s and Donegild’s crimes against the state through his apostrophic condemnations.

Donegild’s counterfeit letter purports to be a message from Alla to his constable, commanding him to ship Constance and Mauricius off in the same rudderless ship that brought her to the Northumbrian shores. Sorrowfully, the constable complies, with the entire community coming out to weep at the injustice. The restaging of Constance’s cold ejection from Syria presents the non-Christian mothers-in-law, Donegild and the Sultaness, as doubly disruptive to the new “nacioun” shaped by Christian patrilineage. Not only do they exile Constance from their lands and away from their besotted sons, they attempt to shun Christian rule on behalf of their Muslim or pagan communities. Revisiting the critical image from the earlier scene of false witness, Constance here emerges from the crowd with a “deedly pale face,” accepting her fate as Christ’s will and reassuring the crowd by recalling the divine justice that had intervened earlier: “‘He that me kept fro the false blame / While I was on the lond amonges yow, / He kan me kepe from harm and eek fro shame / In salte see, althogh I se noght how’” (II.827–30). She also amplifies her trust in divine justice by calling upon Mary as a witness to Christ’s suffering, and by extension, to her own. “‘Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment; / Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene / Thy wo and any wo man may sustene. / Thow sawe thy child yslayn bifoire thyne yen, / And
yet now lyveth my litel child, parfay!” (II.845–49). Constance links her own “sight”—she cannot “se” how Christ will keep her and Mauricius safe in the ocean—with Mary’s eyewitnessing of her own child’s torture.

Constance’s response to finding herself shipped away in a rudderless boat for the second time, this time with an infant, is to return to her own body as the site of divine justice, which always triumphs over royal law and the bureaucratic devices that support it. Recalling that God had intervened before, Constance reminds herself (and the pilgrims) that her innocence and faith will protect her from the exile, torture, and death Donegild has in store for her. Likewise, when she recalls Mary’s eyewitnessing of Christ’s suffering, she reframes the earlier scene of false testimony as an opportunity to rehabilitate the truth-claims of the eyewitness. When the false knight’s eyes burst from his face in a spectacular punishment for perjury, we were to understand that eyewitness accounts cannot always testify to the truth. In contrast, Mary operates as the ultimate eyewitness, and as such she rehabilitates the evidentiary claims of a courtroom eyewitness on behalf of the kind of divine justice that transcends the royal authority Donegild manipulates.

The third part of the Man of Law’s Tale opens with Alla’s return to Northumberland, where he discovers that his wife and child are missing. He asks the constable where they are, and in response, the constable “sheweth the kyng his seel and eek his lettre,” explaining that he followed what he assumed were Alla’s orders. The messenger is then tortured (“tormented”) until he reveals that he had spent nights unaware that the letters were being stolen, forged, and replaced. “And thus,” the Man of Law states, “by wit and sotil enquerynge, / Ymagined was by whom this harm gan spryngye” (II.888–89). James Landman notes that Alla’s use of torture is unique to Chaucer’s version of the story and argues that for the Man of Law, “it is a reminder of the fragility of the common-law institutions he represents, and of torture’s alluring promise of certainty.” Indeed, by torturing the constable, the Man of Law seems consider the body as an infallible site of truth. But we must note the carefully passive syntax the Man of Law again deploys here: while Alla is posited as a legal authority who can inquire and torture in the service of garnering legal fact, the syntax suggests that the revelation of truth here emerges as much from a judicium Dei as it does from Alla’s sovereign power to inquire and to torture. Significantly, now, as a Christian sovereign, Alla successfully used inquiry and legal procedure to expose the truth, whereas his attempts had failed when he was a pagan leader.

The third part of the *Tale* tracks a series of revelations, and through those revelations, the restoration of Christian sovereign authority and community. Alla recognizes the counterfeit letter’s handwriting (“The hand was knowe that the lettre wroot”), and kills his mother. The Man of Law takes care to assert that Alla commits this act of violence as a king, rather than as an angry son: “His mooder slow—that may men pleynly rede— / For that she traitour was to hire ligeance, / Thus endeth olde Donegile, with meschance!” (II.894–96). Alla’s recognition of his mother’s treachery establishes royal legitimacy outside the documentary apparatus designed to support it. In other words, the tortured body of the messenger and Donegild’s death anatomize Alla’s sovereign power, and they trump the power of the royal seal to substitute for and protect Alla’s status, given the ease with which the seal was counterfeited to serve treasonous purposes. Alla’s return to Northumberland, the torture of his messenger, and the punishment of his mother collectively suggest that in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, documents obscure sovereign power, while the body testifies to it.

With the threat of treason contained and Alla’s sovereign power restored through his acts of authorized violence, the tale turns back to Constance, who has landed on the shores of “an hethen castel” (II.904). There, a thief threatens to rape Constance, but her struggles against him send him overboard and she and Mauricius sail safely on through the strait of Gibraltar. She meets a ship manned by a Roman senator whom her father has sent to Syria to enact revenge on those who killed the converted Syrians. Though he does not recognize her, the senator brings her home to Rome, where the senator and his wife, Constance’s aunt, take her and Mauricius in. Meanwhile, Alla comes to Rome to receive penance for the death of his mother, whereupon Constance’s father welcomes him with a feast, which Mauricius attends.

This extraordinary confluence of events emphasizes both the inevitability of Constance’s return to Rome and the tight link between Rome and the newly Christian nation of Northumberland. Significantly, the Man of Law describes Alla’s first encounter with Mauricius as a face-to-face meeting between sovereigns: “But sooth is this, that at his moodres heeste / Biforn Alla, durynge the metes space, / The child stood, lookynge in the kynges face” (II.1013–15). As Mauricius takes in Alla’s face, Alla stands in wonder at the child’s likeness to his mother:

> Now was this child as lyk unto Custance  
> As possible is a creature to be.  
> This Alla hath the face in remembrance  
> Of dame Custance, and ther on mused he
If that the childes mooder were aught she
That is his wyf, and pryvely he sighte,
And spedde hym fro the table that he myghte.
"Parfay," thoghte he, “fantome is in myn heed!
I oghte deme, of skilful juggement,
That in the sulc see my wyf is deed.”
And afterward he made his argument:
“What woot I if that Crist have hyder ysent
My wyf by see, as well as he hire sente
To my contree fro thennes that she wente?” (II.1030–43)

Mauricius’s face leads Alla to return to Constance’s face in his memory, which in turn shifts the terms of Alla’s powers of judgment. He claims that his knowledge of what happened in his realm (“juggement”) should bring him to the conclusion (“deme”) that his wife has died in the ocean, but Mauricius’s face triggers the possibility of Christ’s power to save Constance. Moreover, Mauricius’s face inspires Alla’s repentance. He weeps with joy when he sees Constance; Constance faints twice and then, with her characteristic saintliness, “hym excuseth pitously.” In response, Alla announces his innocence and the return of his heir: “‘Now God,’ quod he, ‘and his halwes brighte / So wisly on my soule as have mercy, / That of youre harm as giltelees am I / As is Maurice my sone, so lyk youre face; / Elles the feend me fecche out of this place!’” (II.1060–64).

The face thus reemerges at the end of the Man of Law’s Tale as the site of truth and Christian sovereignty, as Mauricius’s likeness to his mother solidifies the genealogical link between Northumberland and Rome and rehabilitates Alla as a righteous king of a Christian “nacioun.” Accordingly, the end of the tale restores Christian belief as the foundation of Alla’s sovereignty, and after Constance reunites with her father, the family returns to Northumberland. By this point in the Tale, “Northumberland” has turned into “Engelond,” and Constance and Alla return the “righte way,” suggesting that their conversion is complete, the promise of a Christian patriline is re-instated, and the sanctity of England’s Christian unity is preserved (II.1130). Only a year later, the Man of Law tells us, Alla passed away and Constance returned to Rome, leaving Mauricius as the heir to the Roman throne and thus further ensuring the deep connection between Christian Northumberland/England and Rome.

For the Man of Law, false witness functions as a crucial backdrop against which claims of legal authority can be tested in the service of conceptualizing a coherent “Engelond” that expresses a harmonious Christian “nacioun.”
The episodes of false witness at the center of the Constance story—and the Man of Law’s particular versions of those episodes—present a central conflict between divine justice and human law as well as between Christian and non-Christian communities. The resolutions offered in these episodes demonstrate that witnessing is fundamental to shaping and protecting Christian community and sovereign law. Specifically, the multiple forms of witnessing the Man of Law features in his Tale demonstrate the importance of the body as a testimonial medium, one that can transcend the claims of bureaucratic documents and royal seals to affirm that divine justice will always triumph over earthly legal procedures. Likewise, as we shall see again and again the ensuing chapters, the episodes of false witness that surface repeatedly in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century pastoral, literary, and legal texts often pit the body and the document against one another as testimonial media that offer different kinds of testimony with different levels of authenticity. Yet the body does not always function as a reliable conduit of the divine Word. For some vernacular texts, such as the Pistol of Swete Susan, the body—particularly the mouth—can be the site of deceptive testimony, just as documents can be manipulated, as the Man of Law cautions.