Introduction

The Man of Law’s Tale, with its border-crossing heroine Custaunce, explores many forms of difference and their roles in creating communal identity. Custaunce, daughter of the emperor of Rome, is married to the Sultan of Syria. Exiled upon his murder, she drifts to Northumberland, participates in multiple miracles, and marries the king and gives birth to his son before being exiled yet again with her child; they eventually reunite in Rome and their son becomes emperor. While the early portion of the tale set in Syria explores cultural identity through the interplay of race and religion, its Northumbrian episode (beginning at l. 505) turns to disability to define spiritual and social boundaries.

The tale places blindness at the root of the Christian history of Northumberland—a part of England—which is pagan when Custaunce arrives. Custaunce has privately taught Christian doctrine to Hermengild, the wife of her benefactor, and the two women have been practicing their religion together in secret. But Christianity does not pass beyond this female domestic sphere until they encounter a “blynde Britoun” (l. 561) on the beach, who begs Hermengild to restore his sight. He is a member of the Briton Christian population that formerly governed the island, connecting Custaunce’s religion with an insular history that predates the coming of the English. Later, a knight who tries to frame Custaunce for murder is miraculously blinded, which leads King Alla to convert to Christianity.

The tale’s use of blindness follows what Edward Wheatley has termed the “religious model” of disability: both the Briton’s blindness and the false knight’s blinding are understood exclusively in spiritual terms. The Briton’s blindness is significant to the scene’s religious message, yet the tale is so uninterested in the man himself that, unlike his sources, Chaucer does not even report that his sight is restored. The blind man exists to demonstrate the sanctity of Hermengild and Custaunce and to impel public recognition of their Christianity; his blindness serves narratively only to demand a miraculous cure. He thus exemplifies what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call “narrative prosthesis”: the tale depends upon disability to disrupt the social order only to eliminate and erase its deviance.

Yet within the cultural system of the tale, his blindness carries great—and double-edged—significance. Since under the religious model disabilities, including blindness, could be understood as signs of sin, the Briton’s blindness might be taken to indicate a spiritual failure on the part of the Britons, earlier inhabitants of the island who (according to Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People) failed to evangelize their Germanic conquerors. Elsewhere, however, the tale reports that the purpose of miracles, even those rooted in hardship, may simply be to demonstrate God’s power: “God lyste to shewe his wondefull miracle / In hire, for we shulde seen his myghty werkys” (l. 477–78). This lan-
language recalls John 9, in which Jesus heals a man born blind and explains that his condition exists not as a punishment for sin, “but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). Disability under the religious model is not limited to being a sign or metaphor for sin; people with disabilities also play a privileged role in revealing God’s truths. And the Briton, despite his physical blindness, shows unique spiritual sight in recognizing Hermengild’s holiness. Indeed, Chaucer goes beyond his sources in noting that blind people can access other forms of vision than the physical through the “yen [eyes] of [the] mynde” (l. 552):

The power of this Christianity out of Britain’s past manifests itself not just as spiritual sight, but by shaping Northumbrian jurisprudence and marking a criminal’s body with the sign of his sin. A Northumbrian knight frames Custaunce for murder and swears to her guilt on “a Briton Book writen with evangiles” (l. 666)—presumably an ancient gospel-book produced by the Britons. Although this artifact carries no religious meaning for the pagan court, the knight suffers an immediate, gory punishment: a hand strikes him on the neck so that both his eyes burst out. This punitive miracle showcases the power of the Christian God so dramatically that King Alla and his court promptly convert. Once again, the Briton past is instrumental to the conversion of the realm. By associating blindness specifically with the Britons, the tale not only shows God’s power but emphasizes the role of Briton Christianity in carrying Custaunce’s Roman Christianity into the English future.

Custaunce herself is a figure consistently marked by her body’s deviations from the norms that surround her. Set apart by her sex, her race, her religion, she fits uneasily wherever she goes. Donegild, King Alla’s mother, is dismayed that her son would marry “so straunge a creature” (l. 700), emphasizing Custaunce’s foreignness; Donegild pushes this language to an almost inhuman extreme when she falsely describes Custaunce’s new-born son Maurice as “so horrible a fendlyche creature” (l. 751). In making this accusation, Donegild attacks Custaunce through her maternal body, seeking to use the idea of a non-normative or “monstrous” birth to redefine Custaunce and her son not just as culturally foreign but outside the category of the human entirely.

Medieval accounts of so-called monstrous births may in part represent a framework for thinking about children born with congenital disabilities. While the Man of Law’s Tale does not actually represent a “monstrous” child—it takes pains to stress the beauty of Custaunce’s son, Maurice—Custaunce is rumored to have given birth to such a baby, a charge that sheds light on the realm’s attitudes toward people with disabilities. In the story of Custaunce and others like it, rumors of a non-normative birth are intended to lead to the queen’s banishment or execution. Monstrous births frequently carried the suggestion of moral and especially sexual deviance: nonhuman offspring might be said to result from sex with an animal or other nonhuman creature. But in Custaunce’s story, the child’s supposed abnormality speaks directly to his mother’s body. Custaunce, Donegild asserts, is herself inhuman: “the moder was an elfe” (l. 754). While this accusation is meant to render Custaunce inhuman and perhaps monstrous, it points to the dangerous power of women’s reproductive bodies that Tory Vandeventer Pearman has analyzed in the Merchant’s Tale. Custaunce’s body and that of her son, Donegild reminds us, are linked: Maurice’s body, in its supposed deviance, reflects upon Custaunce’s; Custaunce’s body has power over her son’s. Even if accusations of monstrous births often prove false in stories like Custaunce’s, they suggest that the intimate biological connection between mothers and children was dangerous to both: if mothers might be to blame for their children’s deviations from bodily norms, both could be excluded from human society.
But Alla, who does not take the bait, offers an alternative model for understanding non-normative births. On hearing that his son is monstrous, the king is dismayed, weeping privately. But he explicitly instructs that both child (“al be it foule or faire,” l. 764) and wife should be kept until he returns; other comments indicate that he understands accepting the child as a religious duty. His attitude falls well short of embracing his “monstrous” child, but his response shows that he understands the birth to accord with God's will, and does not believe himself empowered to reject such a child—a markedly different response than Donegild anticipates. While Alla’s reaction marks the birth of a non-normative child as an occasion for grief, it also asserts a Christian duty to care for such children, and dramatizes a layered human reaction.

That the tale’s two major representations of disability cluster in the English section is telling. The Syrian and Northumbrian episodes parallel each other in many ways, but Northumberland is converted while Syria is destroyed because (as Geraldine Heng has argued) Syria is imagined as irreconcilably racially and religiously different from a “normative” European Christianity, while England’s pagan past is not. In Northumberland, which the tale does not imagine as racially separate from Custaunce or from Chaucer’s English audiences, physical impairment becomes a key category for representing difference. Spiritually charged blindness allows the tale to showcase a long tradition of Christianity in Britain and circumscribe the new community of Northumbrian Christianity; Custaunce’s maternal body shows how disability might be leveraged to exclude people from the category of humanity altogether. Where distinctions of race and religion break down, the tale turns to bodily norms and disability to create and police its boundaries.

Bibliography


[The Man of Law introduces his tale by complaining that there are hardly any tales, except those concerning incest, that Chaucer has not already told. This is followed by a prologue in which he describes the misery that is caused by poverty.]

Here bigynneth the Tale of the Man of Lawe

134 In Surrye° whilom° dwelte a companye
Of chapmen° riche, and thereto° sadde°
and trewe,
That wide-where° senten here spicerye,°
Clothis of golde and satyns riche of
hewe.
Here° chaffare° was so thrifty° and so
newe
That every wight° hath deynte° to chaff-
fare°
140 With hem, and eke to sellen hem hire
ware.
Now fille it that the maistres of that
sorte°
Han shapen hem° to Rome for to
wende.°
Were it for chapmanhode° or for dis-
porte,°
Non other message wolde they theder
sende,
But comen hymselfe to Rome—this is
th'ende.
And in swiche place as thoughte hem
avauntage,
For hire eace,° they taken here herber-
gage.°
Sojourned han these merchauntz in
that toune
A certeyn tyme, as fel to hire plesaunce,
150 And so byfel° the exceltent renown

Of th'Emperoures daughter, dame
Custauence,
Reported was with every circumstaunce
Unto thise Surreyn merchauntz in
swiche wise°
From day to day, as I shall yow devyse."°
This was the commune voys of every
man:
"Oure Emperoure of Rome (God hym
see)
A daughter hath that, sith° the world
bygan,
To rekne as wele hire goodnesse as
beaute,
Nas neveire swiche another as is she.
160 I preye to god in honour hir sustene,
And wolde she were of alle Europe the
quene!"

[They see Custauence themselves and return
home to Syria.]

176 Now fille it that these merchauntz
stode in grace
Of hym that was the Sowdon of Sur-
rye,°
For whan they come fro any straunge°
place,
He wolde, of his benyngne curtesye,°
180 Make hem good cheere, and bysily espie
Tidynges of sundry regnes,° for to lere°
The wondres that they myght sen or
here.
Amonges other thynges, specially,
These merchauntz han hym tolde of
dame Custauence
So grete noblesse," in ernest seriously,
That this Sowdon hath caught so grete
plesaunce°
To han hire figure° in hise remembrance,
And alle his luste,° and alle his besy cure°
Was for to love hire while his lyfe may dure.°

[The Sowdon assembles his privy council, who entertain many a number of options to satisfy his desire for Custaunce, but ultimately, they conclude that the two must marry.]

218 Thanne saugh therinne swiche difficulty
Be way of resoun, for to speke al playn,
220 Bycause that ther was swiche dyversite°
Bitwene hire bothe° lawes, that thay sayn
They trowe that no Cristen prince wolde fayn°
Wedden his childe under oure lawes sweete,"°
That us was yeven° to Mahoun° oure prophete.
And he answered, “Rather than I lese
Custaunce, I wolde be cristened,"° douteles.
I moot ben hires," I may non other chese.
I pray yow, holdest youre argumentz in pees.
Saveth my lyfe, and beth nat recchelees°
230 To geten hire that hath my lyfe in cure,
For in thys woo I may not longe endure.”

[An agreement is reached that Custaunce will marry the Sowdon, bringing with her a dowry; in exchange, he and all his men will be baptized. Custaunce bewails the fact that she must leave home and family to travel to a foreign land, but she sets sail.]

323 The moder of the Sowdan (welle of vices)
Espied hath hire sones pleyn entente,
How he wolde lete° his olde sacrifices,
And right anoon° she for hire counseile sente,
And they ben come to knowe what she mente,
And when assembled was this folke in fere,°
She sette hire doun and seide as ye shal here:
330 “Lordes," she seide, “ye knowen everychone
How that my sone in poynt is for to lete"°
The holy lawes of oure Alkaron,"°
Yeven by goddes massage° Macomete,"°
But oon avow to grete God I hete:"°
The lyfe shall rather outhe of my body sterre°
Than Macometes lawe outhe of myn herte.
What sholde us tyden of° this newe lawe
But° thraldom° to oure bodies and penaunce°
And affirwarde in helle to be drawe°
340 For we reneyed° Mahoun oure creaunce?°
But lordynges, wyl ye make assuraunce
As I shall seyn, assentyng to my lore,"°
And Ishal maken us sauf for evermore.”

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figure appearance, image luste desire besy cure busy effort dure last dyversite difference hire bothe both of their fayn willingly sweete excellent yeven given Mahoun Muhammad cristened baptized I moot ben hires I must be hers recchelees negligent lete abandon right anoon right away in fere together in poynt ... lete is about to abandon Alkaron Qur’an massage messenger, prophet Macomete Muhammad hete promise lyfe...sterre life will sooner leave my body... What... of what would happen to us because of But except thraldom subjection penaunce suffering drawe tortured reneyed foresook creaunce faith lore teaching
[Her council agrees to stand with her. She explains her plan:]

351  “We shulle firste feyne° us Cristenedome to take.
Coolde water° shall nat greve° us but
a lite!
And I shall swiche a feste and revel
make
That, as I trowe, I shall the Sowdan
quyte.°
For thogh his wyfe be cristened never
so white,
She shall have nede to waisshe away the
rede,°
Though she a fonte-ful water° with hire
lede!°
O Sawdanesse, roote of iniquite,
Virago,° thow Semyrame° the secunde;
O serpent under fémyynytye,
Lyke to the serpent depe in helle y-
bounde;
O feyned° woman, al that may con-
founde
Vertue and innocence, thurgh thy
malice
Is bred in the, as neste of every vice!

[She approaches her son, pledges to convert to Christianity, and asks his blessing to throw a feast for the Christians. Custaunce and her entourage arrive with great pomp, and all go to the feast.]

428  For shortly for to tellen at a worde,
The Soudan and the Cristen everichon
430  Ben al tohewe° and stiked° at the
borde,°
But if it were oonly Dame Custaunce
allone.
This olde Soudanesse—kursed krone—
Hath with hire frendes doon this cursed
dede,
For she hireselfe wolde al the cuntre
lede.°
Ne was Surrien noon that was con-
verted,
That of the counseile of the Soudan
woor,°
That he nas al tohewe or he asterted.°
And Custaunce han they take anoon
foot-hoot°
And in a shoppe al stereles," God woot,
440  They han hire sette, and biddeth hire
lerne saile
Oute of Surrye agaynward° to Itaille.°

356  O Sawdanesse, roote of iniquite,
Virago,° thow Semyrame° the secunde;
O serpent under fémyynytye,
Lyke to the serpent depe in helle y-
bounde;
O feyned° woman, al that may con-
founde
Vertue and innocence, thurgh thy
malice
Is bred in the, as neste of every vice!

463  Yeris and daies fleet this creature
Thurghoute the see of Grece,° unto the
strayte
Of Marroko,° as it was hir aventure.°
On many a sory meal° now may she
baite.°
Aftir hire deeth ful ofte may she wayte,
Or that° the wilde wawes° wole hire
dryve
Unto the place ther she shalle arryve.

470  Men myghten asken why she was nat
slayn,
Eke° at the feste, who myght hire body
save?
And I answere to that demaunde agayn;
Who saved Daniel in the horrible cave,
Ther every wight° save he, maister or
knave,°

feyne pretend  Coolde water i.e., baptism  greve harm  quyte take revenge on  rede red (of blood)  fonte-ful water enough water to fill a baptismal font  lede bring  Virago man-like woman  Semyrame Semiramis, an Assyrian queen said to have behaved like a man  feyned false  tohewe cut to pieces  stiked stabbed  borde table  lede rule  woor knew or he asterted before he got up  foot-hoot hastily  stereles rudderless  agaynward back  Itaille Italy  see of Grece the Mediterranean Sea  strayte / Of Marroko Strait of Gibraltar  aventure fortune  mele meal  bait feed  Or that until  wawes waves  Eke also
Was with the leuon° frete° er he asterte°?
No wight° but God, that he bare in his herte.
   God lyste° to shewe his wonderfull miracle
In hire, for we shulde seen his myghti werkys.
Criste, whiche that is to every harme triacle,"

480 By certeyn menes ofte (as knowen clerkys)
Dooth thynge for certeyn ende that ful derke° is
To mannes witte, that for oure ignoraunce
Ye kunne nat° knowe his prudent purveaunce."
But Hermengild loved hire right as hire lyfe,
And Custance hath so longe sojourned there
In orisons,° with many a bitter tere,
Til Jhesu hath converted thurgh his grace
Dame Hermengilde, Constablesse of that place.

In al that londe no Cristen dorste route.°
Alle Cristene folke ben fledde fro that cunte
Thurgh° payens° that conquereden al aboute
The plages° of the North, by land and se.
To Walys° fledde the Christianye°
Of olde Britons dwellyng in this ile:
Ther was hire refute for the mene-while.
But yet nere° Cristen Britons so exiled
That there nere somme that, in hire privetee,°
Honoured Criste and hethen folke bigiled,°

And neigh° the castel swiche there dwelten three,°
That oon of hem was blynde,? and myght nat see,
But° it were of thilke yen° of his mynde°
With whiche men see whan that they be blynde.
Bright was the sonne as in that som-eris day,
For whiche the Constable, and his wife also,
And Custance han take the right way Toward the see a furlong wey or two,
To pleyen and to romen too and fro."
And in hire walke this blynde man they mette,

Croked and old, with eyen faste yshette.°
“In name of Criste,” cride the blynde Britoun,
“Dame Hermengilde, yef me my sight agayn!”
This lady waxe afraied° of the soun,°
Leste that hire housbonde, shortly for to sayn,
Wolde hire for Jhesu Cristes love han slayn,°
Til Custaunce made hire bolde and bade hire werche°
The wille of Criste, a daughter of his chirche.
The Constable waxe abasshed° of that sight,
And seide, “What amounteth° al this fare?”°

Custaunce answered, “Sire, it is Cristes myght,
That helpeth folke oute of the fendes° snare,”
And so ferforth° she gan oure lay° declare
That she the Constable, er it was eve,°
Converteth, and on Crist maketh hym bileve.
This Constable was nothynge lord of thys place
Of whiche I speke, ther° he Custaunce fonde,
But kepte it strongely many wyntres space,
Under Alla, kyng of all Northumber-
lond,
That was ful wis and worthy of his honde°

580 Agayn the Scottes, as men may wele here—
But turne I wole agayn to my matere.

[Satan seeks to undermine Custaunce by making a young knight lust after her.]

589 He wowith° hire, but it availleth noght;°
590 She wolde do no synne by no weye,°
And for despite° he compaseth° in his thought
To maken hire on shameful deth to deye.
He waiteth whan° the Constable was aweye,
And prively on a nyght he crepte
In Hermengildes chambre while she slepte.
Wery, forwaked° in hire orisons,°
Slepeth Custaunce and Hermengille also.
This knyght thorow° Sathans temptacouns
Al softly is to bedde y-goo,
600 And kitte° the throte of Hermengild atwo,°
And leyde the blody knyfe by Dame Custaunce
And wente his weye—ther God yef hym myschaunce!°
Sone aftir cometh this Constable hoom agayn,
And eke Alla, that kyng was of that londe,
And saugh his wyfe disputously° yslayn,
For whiche full ofte he wepe and wronge his honde,
And in the bedde the blody knyfe he fonde
By Dame Custaunce. Allas, what myght she seye?
For verrey woo hir witte was al awey.

610 To kynge Alla was tolde alle this meschaunce,
And eke the tyme, and where, and in what wise°
That in a shippe was founden this Custaunce,
As here-byforn that ye han herde devyse.
The kynges herte of pite gan agrise°
Whan he sey° so benyngne a creature Falle in disese° and in mysaventure.°

[Everyone but Custaunce’s accuser speaks to her good character and cannot imagine that she has done such a thing. Custaunce, fright-
ened, prays for divine aid.]

659 This Alla kyng hath swiche compas-
Pison (As gentil herte is fulfilde of pite°)
That from his eyen ranne the water doun.
“Now hastely doo fecche a book,” quod he,
“And if this knyght wol sweren how that she
This womman slowe, yet wol we us avyse°
Whom that we wole that shal be° oure justise.°
A Briton Book writen with evaung-
iles° Was fette,° and on this booke he swore anoon

honde conduct  wowith woos  availleth noght does no good by no weye in any manner despite
spite  compaseth schemes  waiteth when waits until forwaked exhausted hire orisons their
prayers  thorow through  kitte cut  atwo in two myschaunce ill fortune disputously vio-
lently wise manner agrise to feel compassion or dread sey saw disease suffering mysaventure mis-
fortune fullide of pite filled with mercy, sympathy us avyse consider wole...be wish to be justise
judge evaungiles Gospels fette fetched
She giltife° was. And in the mene-
whiles,
An honde° hym smote° upon the nekke
bon,
670 That doun he fel at ones as a stoon,
And bothe his eyen broste° oute of his
face
In sighte of everybody in that place.
A voys was herde in general audi-
ence,°
And seide, “Thow haste disclaundred
And seide, “Thow haste disclaundred
gilteles”
The daughter of Holy Chirche in heigh
presence.”
Thus hast thow doon, and yet holde I
my pes.”
680 Of this mervaille agaste° was alle the
pres;°
As mazed° folke they stonden everych-
one
For drede of wreche,° save Custaunce
alone.
Grete was the drede and eke the
repentaunce
Of hem that hadde wronge suspeccion
Upon this sely° innocent Custaunce,
And for this miracle, in conclucion,
And by Custaunce mediation,
The kyng, and many another in that
place,
Converted was—thanked by° Goddes
grace!
This fals knyght was slayn for his
untrouth
By juggement of Alla hastyfly,”
And yet Custaunce hadde of his deth
grete routhe.”
690 And aftir this, Jhesus of his mercie
Made Alla wedden ful solemnely°
This holy woman that is so bright and
shene,”
And thus hath Criste made Custaunce
a quene.
But who was woful, yf I shal not lye,
Of this weddynge but Donegild and
nomo?°
The kynges moder, full of tyrannye,
Hir thought hire cursed herte barste
atwo.°
She wolde nought hire sone hadde do
so.°
Hire thought a despite° that he sholde
take
700 So straunge° a creature unto his make.”

715 On hire he gate° a knave-childe°
anoon,
And to a bisshope, and his Constable
ekte,
He toke his wife to kepe whan he is gon
To Scotland-warde his foomen° for to
seke.
Now faire Custaunce, that is so humble
and meke,
720 So longe is goon with childe, til that
stille
She halte° hire chamber, abydyng Cris-
tis wille.
The tyme is come a knave-childe she
beer:°
Mauricius at the fonte-stoone they hym
calle.
This Constable doth com forth a
messynger
And wroot° unto his kynge, that
cleped° was Alle,
How that this blysful tydyng is befalle,
And other tydynges spedfull° forto seye.
He tath° the lettre and forth he goth his
weye.

[The messenger, hoping to be rewarded for his good news, carries these tidings to the
king’s mother Donegild, who invites him to
lodge with her for the night.]

743  This messager dranke sadly° ale and
wyn,
And stolen were his lettres prively
Oute of his boxe, while he sleep as a
swyn,"°
And countrefeted was full sotilly°
Another lettre, wrought full synfully,
Unto the kynge directe of this matere
Fro his Constable, as ye shulle after
here.

750  The lettre spake the quene delivered
was
Of so horrible a fendlyche° creature°
That in the Castel noon so hardy° was
That any while° durste° there endure."°
The moder was an elfe, by aventure,"°
Icomen° by charmes or by sorcerie,
And everyche hatieth° hir companye.
   Woo was this kyng whan he this let-
   tre hadde seyn,"°
   But to no wight° he tolde his sorwes
   sore.
   But of his owene hoond he wroot
   agayn:"°
760  “Welcome the sonde° of Criste for ever-
   moore
   To me that am now lerned in his lore.
   Lorde, welcome be thy luste° and thy
   plesaunce;°

My luste I putre al in thyn ordenaunce."°
   Kepeth this childe, al be it foule° or
   faire,
And eke° my wyfe, unto my home com-
mynge.
Criste, whan hym luste,"° may sende me
   an eir°
Moore agreeable than this to my
   lykynge."
This lettre he seleth prively, wepynge,
   Whiche to the messenger was take sone,
770  And forth he gooth; ther is nomore to
done.

........

778  O Donegild, I ne have non Englyssh
digne°
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye,
780  And therfore to the fende° I the re-
signe;°
   Lete hym enditen° of thi traitorye.°
   Fy, mannyssh,"° fy!—o nay, by God, I
   lye—
   Fy, fendelich spirit! for I dare wele telle,
   Thogh thow here walke, thi spirit is in
   helle!

[The messenger returns by way of Donegild’s
court, where he once again gets drunk.]

792  Eft° were his lettres stolen everychone
And countrefeted lettres in this wyse:"°
The kyng commaundeth his Constable
   anone,
Up° Payne of hangyng on on heigh
   jewyse,"°
   That he ne shulde suffren in no wyse
Custaunce inwith° his reigne° for to
abide°
Thre dayes and a quarter of a tyde,
But in the same shipp as he hir
fonde,
800 Hire and hire yonge sone and al hire
gere°
He sholde putte, and crowde° hir fro
the londe,
And charge hir that she never efte
come there.
O my Custaunce, wele may thy goost°
have fere,°
And, slepyng in thy dreem, ben in
penaunce°
Whan Donegild caste° all this orde-
naunce!°

[The messenger carries the counterfeit letter
to the Constable, who laments that he must
cause pain to someone as good as Custuance.]

820 Wepen bothe yonge and olde in al
that place
When that the kynge this cursed lettre
sentte,
And Custaunce, with a dedly pale face,
The ferthe° day toward hir shipp she
twent.
But natheles she taketh° in good entente°
The wille of Criste, and knelynge on the
stronde
She seide, “Lorde, ay° welcome be thy
sonde!”°

[Custaunce places her trust in God, tries to
comfort her son, bids farewell to the crowd,
and departs. King Alla returns home and
asks after his wife. He uncovers his mother's
deception and executes her for treason. Cus-
taunce drifts for more than five years, escap-
ing an attempted rape along the way through
Mary’s aid, and reenters the Mediterranean.]

953 Now late us stynte of° Custaunce
butt a throwe,°
And speke we of the Romayn Empe-
rour,
That oute of Surrye hath by lettre
knowe
The slaughter of Cristen folke, and
dishonour
Dooon to his daughter by a fals trai-
tour—
I mene the cursed, wikked Soudanesse
That at the feest leet slee° both more
and lesse,°
960 For whiche this Emperour hath sente
anon
His Senatour with roial ordenaunce,°
And oother lordes, God woot,° many
oon,
On Surriens to take heigh vengeaunce.
They brennen,° sleen,° and brynge hem
to meschaunce°
Full many a day—but shortly, this is
th’ende,
Homward to Rome they shapen hem to
wende,°
This Senatour repaireth° with victo-
rie,
To Roome-warde seillyng° full roially,
And mette the shippe dryvynge, as seith
the storie,
970 In whiche Custaunce sit ful pitously.
Nothynge knewe he what she was, ne
why
She was in swiche array, ne she nel° seye
Of hire estate,° though she sholde deye.

[The Senator brings Custaunce back to
Rome, where she dwells as a member of his
household; the Senator’s wife is Custaunce’s
aunt, but does not recognize her. King Alla
makes a pilgrimage to Rome to do penance
for the slaying of his mother. The Senator
joins Alla for a feast, taking Custaunce’s son,
Maurice, with him.]

Som men wolde seyne at requeste of
Custaunce
This Senatour hath ladde this childe to
feste;
I may nat tellen every circumstaunce.
Be as be may, ther was he at the leste,
But sooth° is this, that at his moders
heste
Biforn Alla, duryng the metys space,°
The childe stood lokyng in the kynges
face.
This Alla kyng hath of this childe
grete wonder,
And to the Senatour he seyde anoon:
“Whos is that faire childe that stondeth
yonder?”
“I noot,”° quod he, “by God and by
Seint John.
A moder he hath, but fader hath he
noon
That I of woot.”° But shortly in a
stounde,°
He tolde Alla how that this childe was
founde.

Now was this childe as lyke unto
Custaunce
As possible is a creature to be.
This Alla hath the face in remem-
braunce
Of Dame Custaunce, and ther-on
mused he,
If that the childes moder were aught°
she
That is his wife, and pryvely he sight,°
And sped hym fro the table that° he
myght.

[Ala tries to remind himself that his wife is
dead at sea (as he believes), but he returns
home with the Senator and asks to see Cus-
taunce. He recognizes her immediately, and
after he convinces her that he had no part in
her banishment, they are joyfully reunited.
They then invite her father, the Emperor, to
dinner and reveal her identity for another
joyful family reunion. Their son, Maurice,
later becomes emperor.]

This kyng Alla, whan he his tyme°
say,°
With his Custaunce, his holy wyfe so
swete,°
To Engelond ben they come the right
wey,
Whereas° they lyve in joye and in
quyete,°
But litel while° it lasteth, I yow hete.°
Joye of this world for tyme wol not
abyde;°
Fro day to nyght it chaungeth as the
ryde.

For deeth, that taketh of heigh and
lowe his rente,
Whan passed was a yere, evene as I gesse,
Oute of this worlde this kyng Alla he hent,°
For whom Custaunce hath full greet hevynesse.°
Now late us pray God his soule blesse!
And Dame Custaunce (finally to seye)
Toward the toun of Rome gooth hir weye.
To Rome is come this holy creature
And fyndeth here frendes hole and sounde.°
Now is she scaped° al hir aventure.
And whan that she hir fader hath yfounde,
Doun on hire knees falleth she to grounde,
Wepynge for tendernesse° in herte blithe;°
She herieth° god an hundred thowsand sithe.°
In vertue and holy almesdede°
They leven alle, and never asonder wend.°
Til dethe departed hem, this lyfe they lede.
And fareth now wele! My tale is at an ende.
1160 Now Jhesu Criste that of hys myght
may sende
Joye aftir woo, governe us in his grace,
And kepe us alle that ben in this place!
Amen.

*Here endeth the Tale of the Man of Lawe.*

hent took hevynesse sorrow sounde healthy and strong scaped escaped from tendernesse emotion blithe joyful herieth praises sithe times almesdede charitable works asonder wend part company
Endnotes

1 The text below was compiled by Paul A. Broyles from the digital facsimile of Oxford, Christ Church College, MS 152, available online at http://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/p/7de321ad-3dbb-4869-8402-301709569f27. Errors and omissions have been corrected with reference to the digital facsimile of the Ellesmere manuscript, available online at http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15150coll7/id/2463. Further references to manuscript variants, along with minor emendations, are taken from John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., The Text of the Canterbury Tales, vol. 5 (University of Chicago Press, 1940). Chaucer’s sources, Nicholas Trevet’s Anglo-French Chronicles and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis, are referenced in the notes; Gower’s text is available in this volume, and Trevet’s may be found with accompanying English translation in Robert M. Corræle and Mary Hamel, eds., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, vol. 2 (D.S. Brewer, 2009), 262–348. Footnotes and endnotes are also provided by Paul A. Broyles.

2 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse (University of Michigan Press, 2000); see especially ch. 2.


5 The eyes of the mind were a commonplace in classical and medieval thought. St. Augustine distinguishes three categories of vision: corporeal, spiritual (memory, imagination; experienced by blind people when they see images while asleep or recall dreams), and intellectual (inerrant and concerned with divine truth); see St. Augustine, The Literal Meaning of Genesis, trans. John Hammond Taylor, Ancient Christian Writers 42, vol. 2 (Newman Press, 1982), book 12. It is difficult to be certain what level of insight Chaucer associates with the “eyes of the mind,” but in any case, the phrase specifically assigns to blind people a capacity for vision beyond the physical.

6 Susan Schoon Eberly has shown how many traditional descriptions of changelings and other fairy creatures resemble specific identifiable medical conditions, even suggesting that such figures could lie behind stories like Beowulf. See also Keagan Brewer, “Wonder, Fear, Orality and Community,” Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages (Routledge, 2016), pp. 46–78: “Genetic diversity and consequent physical ‘deformity’, a natural and inevitable part of human and animal evolution alike, was understood through the cultural construct of the monstrous birth” (53).

7 New Haven, Beinecke Library, Takamiya MS 32 (formerly the Delamere MS) tells us that “some were” blind, making the blindness a widespread condition of the Britons rather than a characteristic of a particular Briton, perhaps suggesting that their blindness is understood as spiritual. In the previous line, the number of Britons living near the castle is not specified. The manuscript continues to pluralize the Britons’ blindness until the appeal to Hermingild, which is still in the singular.

8 Some manuscripts read “thick” eyes—an obvious copying error, but one that changes the meaning significantly. By the time of Shakespeare, “thick-eyed” or “thick-sighted” meant “having obscure vision” (see OED, s.v. thick, adj. and n.), and that seems the most likely interpretation here; the reading suggests that the “eyes of the mind” are a poor substitute for physical sight. Yet another manuscript replaces the phrase “thilke yen” with “thynkynge,” removing the idea that blind people might have a different way of seeing and ascribing the Briton’s insight strictly to thought alone.

9 A few manuscripts describe the child as “foulle” or “fouly” instead of “fendlyche,” emphasizing physical and behavioral hideousness over diabolical associations. While in this case the description is false, a non-normative birth does actually occur in another work closely connected
with the Constance stories, the fourteenth-century Middle English romance known as *The King of Tars*. In that work, a Christian princess marries the Sultan of Damascus and feigns conversion to Islam. She subsequently gives birth to a shapeless lump of flesh, which acquires human form only after the child is baptized. The Sultan subsequently converts, and his skin color changes from black to white. Geraldine Heng has shown how *The King of Tars* helps to expose the underlying racial logic of the Man of Law’s Tale and its sources. It is striking that here the allegation of monstrous birth appears in the Northumbrian section, attempting to isolate Custaunce and her son from the Northumbrians, from whom they are not racially distinguished.

In Trever, Custaunce is described as a “malveis espirit” (evil spirit); for Gower, she is “of faierie” (l. 370). Elves, like fairies (the terms were virtually interchangeable, and Chaucer uses them as such in *Sir Thopas*), were supernatural creatures who among other things might mate with humans or harm or abduct their babies. Chaucer’s choice of “elfe” indexes Donegild’s accusation against a series of other uses in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the Wife of Bath’s Tale and *Sir Thopas*, elves are part of a romance landscape which, in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, belongs to an idealized British past. Moreover, in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, the Host describes Chaucer himself as seeming “elvyssh by his contenaunce”—an adjective used to mean “strange” in the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale. Donegild is claiming that Custaunce is a dangerous, otherworldly creature (and one manuscript emphasizes that point by branding her an elf by “nature”).

Some authoritative manuscripts, including Ellesmere, read “and on heigh juyse”—that is, “on pain of hanging and on high judgment.” Here, *jewyse* must instead be the instrument of hanging; it can refer in Middle English to a cross, but the gallows, offered as a gloss in Henry Cockeram’s 1623 dictionary, seems equally likely. See *OED*, s.v. *juise*. 