The Man of Law’s Tale from The Canterbury Tales
(ca. 1387–1400)

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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 wonderfull miracle / In hire, for we shulde seen his myghti werkys” (ll. 477–78). This lan-
guage 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 role of women’s bodies and on social 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 bigyenneth the Tale of the Man of Lawe

134 In Surrye° whilom° dwelte a companye
Of chapmen° riche, and therto° 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 chaffare°
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 disporte,°
Noon other message wolde they theder sende,
But comen hymselfe to Rome—this is th'ende.
And in swiche place as thoughte hem avauntrage,
For hire eace,° they taken here herbergage.°
Sojourned han these merchauntz in that toune
A certeyn tyme, as fel to hire plesaunce,
150 And so byfel° the excelent renown

Of th'Emperoures daughter, dame Custaunce,
Reported was with every circumstauence 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 nevere 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 Custaunce themselves and return home to Syria.]

176 Now fille it that these merchauntz stode in grace
Of hym that was the Sowdon of Surrye,°
For whan they come fro any straunge° place,
He wolde, of his benyngne curtesye,° Make hem good chere, 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 Custaunce So grete noblesse,° in ernest seriously, That this Sowdon hath caught so grete plesaunce°

Surrye Syria whilom once chapmen merchants therto moreover sadde steadfast wide-where far and wide spicerye goods Here their chaffare mercandise thrifty high-quality wight person deynte pleasure chaffare trade sorte company shapen hem made arrangements wende go chapmanhode business disporte pleasure eace benefit, comfort herbergage lodging byfel it happened that in swiche wise in such a manner devyse relate sith since Sowdon of Surrye Sultan of Syria straunge foreign benyngne curtesye generous hospitality sundry regnes various kingdoms lere learn about noblesse renown, noble character plesaunce desire
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 dif-ficule
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 underoure lawes swete,°
That us was yeven° be Mahoun° oure prophete.
And he answered, “Rather than I lese Custaunce, I wolde be Cristened,° doubtles.
I moot ben hires;° I may non other chese.
I pray yow, holdeth 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 en-dure.”

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 wole lete° his olde sacrifices,
And right anoon° she for hire counseile sente,
And they ben come to knowe what she mente,
And whan 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 poyn 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 oute of my body sterre°
Than Macometes lawe oute of myn herte.
What sholde us tyden of° this newe lawe
But° thraldom° to oure bodies and penaunce°
And aftirwarde in helle to be drawe°

340 For we reneyed° Mahoun oure creance?°
But lordynges, wyl ye make assuraunce
As I shall seyn, assentyng to my lore,°
And I shal maken us sauf for evermore.”
“We shulle firste feyne° us Cristendome 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 neede 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 femynynytee, Lyke to the serpent depe in helle y-bounde; O feyned° woman, al that may confounde Vertue and innocence, thurgh thy malice Is bred in the, as neste of every vice!

But if it were oonly Dame Custaunce allone. This olde Soudanesse—kursed krone— Hath with hire frendes doon this cursed dede. For she hirselef wolde al the cuntre lede." Ne was Surrien noon that was converted, That of the counseile of the Soudan woor," That he nas al tohewe or he asterted." And Custaunce han they take anoon foot-hoo° And in a shoppe al stereles," God woot, They han hire sette, and biddeth hire lerne saile Oute of Surrye agaynward° to Itaille.°

Ye is for to tellen at a worde, The Soudan and the Cristen everichon Ben al tohewe° and striked° at the borde," For shortly for to tellen at a worde, The Soudan and the Cristen everichon Ben al tohewe° and striked° 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 hirselef wolde al the cuntre lede." Ne was Surrien noon that was converted, That of the counseile of the Soudan woor," That he nas al tohewe or he asterted." And Custaunce han they take anoon foot-hoo° And in a shoppe al stereles," God woot, They han hire sette, and biddeth hire lerne saile Oute of Surrye agaynward° to Itaille.°

Ye is for to tellen at a worde, The Soudan and the Cristen everichon Ben al tohewe° and striked° at the borde,"

[Her council agrees to stand with her. She explains her plan:]

[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.]
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 known clerkyes)
   Dooth thynge for certeyn ende that ful derke° is
   To mannes witte, that for oure igno-
   Ye kunne nat° knowe his prudent pur-
   
   

505 She dryveth forth into oure occian,°
   Thurghoute oure wilde see, til at the laste,
   Under an holde° that nempnen I ne kan;°
   Fer in Northumberland, the wawe° hir caste,
   And in the sande hire shippe stiked so faste
510 That thennes wolde it nat of alle a tyde;°
   The wille of Criste was that she sholde abyde.
   ‘The Constable of the castel doun is fare°
   To sen his wrak,° and alle the shippe he sought,
   And fonde this very woman full of care.
   He fonde also the tresour that she brought.
   In hire langage mercy she besought,
   The lyfe oute of hire body to twynne,°
   Hire to delyver of woo that she was yyne.
   A maner Latyn corrupt was hire speche,
   
   

520 But algate° therby was she understande.
   This Constable, whan hym lyste° no lenger seche.°
   This wofull woman broughthe he to the londe.
   She kneleth doun and thanketh goddis sonde.°
   But what she was she wolde no man seye,
   For foule ne faire," thow° that she sholde dey.
   She saide she was so mased° in the see
   That she forgate hir mynde, by hire trouthe.
   The Constable hath of hire so grete pitee,
   And eke his wyf, that they wepen for routhe,°
530 She was so diligent, withowten sloughthe,°
   To serve and please everiche in that place,
   That alle hir loven that loken in hire face.
   This Constable and Dame Hermengild his wyf
   Were paiens,° and that cuntrę every-

wight person knave servant leuon lion frete devoured asterte escaped wight being lyste wished triacle remedy for every harm derke obscure kunne nat cannot purveaunce providence occian ocean; here, presumably the North Sea holde castle nempnen...kan I cannot name wawe wave thennes...tyde it would not budge for the length of a tide is fare has gone wrak wreck twynne separate (i.e., to kill her) algate nevertheless lyste wished seche search about sonde providence foule ne faire bad fortune or good (i.e., no matter what) thow though mased distraught routhe compassion sloughthe laziness paiens pagans
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 cuntre
Thurgh° payens° that conquereden al aboute
The plagues° of the North, by land and se.
To Walys° fledde the Cristianyte°
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 byleve.
This Constable was nothynge lord of thys place
Of whiche I speke, ther° he Custaunce fonde,
But kepeth it strongly 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 nught;°
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 privily 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 softeely 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!°
Some after cometh this Constable hoom agayn,
And eke Alla, that kyng was of that londe,
And saugh this womman slowe, yet wol we us avyse°
Whom that we wole that shal be° oure justise.°
[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-
sion
660  (As gentil herte is fulilde 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 ayse°
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 woo  availleth nught 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-
lessly wise manner  agrise to feel compassion or dread  sey saw diseuse suffering mysaventure mis-
fortune  fulilde of pite filled with mercy, sympathy  us ayse consider wole...be wish to be justise
judge evaungiles Gospels fette fetched
She giltifé 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-
And seide, “Thow haste disclaundred gilteles°
The daughter of Holy Chirche in heigh presence.”
Thus hast thow doon, and yet holde I my pes.”
Of this mervaille agaste° was alle the pres;
As mazed° folke they stonden everych-
For drede of wreche,° save Custaunce alone.
680 Grete was the drede and eke the repentaunce
Of hem that hadde wronge suspeccon
Upon this sely° innocent Custaunce,
And for this miracle, in conclucion,
And by Custaunce mediacion,
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 weddyng but Donegild and namo?°
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 eke,
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,
So longe is goon with childe, til that stale
She halte° hire chamber, abydyng Cristis 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 direcete 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
again:v
760 “Welcome the sonde° of Criste for ever-
more
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 agreable 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:v
The kyng commaundeth his Constable
alone,
Up° peyne of hangyng on on heigh
jewyse,v
That he ne shulde suffren in no wyse

spedfull appropriate  tath takes  sadly deeply  swyn swine  sotilly skillfully  fendlyche devil-
ish  hardy bold  any while for any time  durste dared  would have it  Icomen arrived  hatieth hates  seyn seen
reply  sonde  ordinance  luste will  plesaunce  wishes  also  hym luste it pleases him  eir hishe  dignie sufficient
write  traitorye  treachery  mannyssh man-like (woman)
heigh jewyse a high cross or gallows
Custaunce in with° his reigne° for to abide°
Thre dayes and a quarter of a tyde,
But in the same shippe as he hir fonde,
Hire and hire yonge sone and al hire gere°
He sholde putte, and crowde° hir fro the londe,
And charge hire 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 ordenaunce!

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

Wepen bothe yonge and olde in al that place
When that the kynge this cursed lettre sente,
And Custaunce, with a dedly pale face,
The ferthe° day toward hir shippe she wente.
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. Custaunce drifts for more than five years, escaping an attempted rape along the way through Mary’s aid, and reenters the Meditteranean.]
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.]

1009  Som men wolde seyne at requeste of
Custaunce
1010 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.
1020 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.

1030  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.

[Alla 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.]

1128  This kyng Alla, whan he his tyme°
say,°
With his Custaunce, his holy wyfe so
swete,°
1130 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.

1142  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
1150 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.*
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/pde321ad-3dbe-4863-b402-3037e0963f27. 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. Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, vol. 2 (D.S. Brewer, 2009), 296–329. 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 “foule” 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 fourteenthcentury 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.
10 In Trevet, 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”).
11 Some authoritative manuscripts, including
Ellesmere, read “and on heigh juyse”—that is, “on
pain of hanging and on high judgment.” Here,
juyse 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.