Tale of Constance\(^1\) (1380–90)

John Gower

Contributed by Will Rogers

Introduction

John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* has long been a subject for scholars interested in impairment, disability, and age. A long poem, framed by the relationship between confessor and penitent, *Confessio Amantis* deals ultimately with cure and sickness, spiritual and physical. Amans, the old lover, is given *exemplum* after *exemplum* which are meant to guide him toward healing. *The Tale of Constance*, from Book II, fits this frame very well: a dramatization of the traffic in woman, the tale narrates the journey of Roman princess Constance from Rome to Barbarie (somewhere in the Middle East) to Northumberland and back to Rome, a trip that highlights the duplicity of figures she encounters on her forced journey. Book II concentrates on envy and its dangers, and Constance’s voyages make clear that envy, at least for Gower’s poem, concentrates on sight, and how others see Constance. While she remains constant, the sight of her causes fear, suspicion, and hatred. And tellingly, Chaucer’s own version of this tale—*The Man of Law’s Tale*—again foregrounds Constance as a constant in his narrative, one which remains immovable in the face of geographic and religious adversity.

For Gower (and perhaps Chaucer as well), the tale, then, is ultimately about sight and perception. The tale dramatizes the complex interplay between the senses, highlighting the slipperiness between truth and falsity. In fact, Gower describes eyes numerous times, using verbs depicting sight numerous times, and there is a simultaneous emphasis on hearing—yet one is never consistently associated with truth or its absence. Throughout the tale, listening and reading, hearing and seeing convey how difficult it can be to discern the truth, a lesson which fits nicely into the tale’s moralizations about envy. Here, one might examine the letters which Constance’s mother-in-law deliberately overwrites, creating a false message about Constance and her son, Moris. Even with the ability to see, it is possible to be blind to the truth. Because envy is based on sight—seeing and wanting what others have—Gower’s poem suggests that sight is an ability that is possibly always impaired. In fact, no one truly sees Constance, besides those who attempt to destroy her, those who are physically blind, or those who die or are separated from her as a result of her friendship and love.

By tying envy to sight and blindness, Gower’s tale frequently evokes sight, eyes, and perception. These repeated descriptions of sightedness and blindness are most important for readers interested in impairment and disability. The tale, of course, uses these metaphors of sight and blindness conventionally: to be physically blind is to be spiritually so, a kind of link between the condition of the body and soul. This kind of blindness literally is a condition cured in the beginning of the tale by Constance and her faith, and the Knight who defames her is literally blinded by divine agency when he attempts to pin Hermengild’s murder on her. Yet, even as the treatment of blindness here is rather conventional, it also tellingly is deployed beyond the expected. The blind man cured of his blindness can, nevertheless, see Constance and her faith initially for what
they are: a woman with true faith which has alluded others, who are sighted, in the poem. To be clear, the tale does not seem to view blindness, however, as a condition that does not require intervention. Whether as spiritual or physical, it exists as a condition to be cured or a punishment for immoral behavior, and thus this treatment of blindness appears close to a modern medicalization of impairment and cure, reflecting the religious model of blindness, which Edward Wheatley traces in his book, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability.*

Finally, because the tale emphasizes diverse locations and laws, it is a tale that speaks to the nearly impossible task of fixing norms, in terms of faith, law, and bodies. While Constance is a constant in the poem, she seems to be the only one: she is seen and rarely sees: the poem is mainly interested in reporting how the world sees her. But these diverse, and largely negative, reactions to Constance imply that perhaps, in terms of bodies and laws, there may only be diversity, even in other diverse treatments of Constance’s constancy. For Gower’s text, as for Chaucer’s, the fiction of the normal body is just that.

**Bibliography**


A worthi kniht in Cristes lawe°
Of grete rome, as is the sawe,°
The Sceptre hadde forto rihte;°
Tiberie° Constantin he hihte,°
Whos wif was cleped Ytalie;
Bot thei togedre of progenie
No children hadde bot a Maide;
And sche the god so wel apaide
That al the wide wordes fame
Spak worschipe of hire goode name.
Constance, as the Cronique° seith,
Sche hihte, and was so ful of feith,
That the greteste of Barbarie,
Sche hath converted, as thei come
To hire upon a time in Rome,
To schewen such a thing as thei
broghte;
Whiche worthili of hem sche boghte,
And over that in such a wise
Sche hath hem with hire wordes wise
Of Cristes feith so full enformed,°
That thei thereto ben all conformed,
So that baptemes° thei receiven
And alle here false goddes weyven.°
When thei ben of the feith certein,
Thei gon to Barbarie° ayein,
And the Souldan° for hem sente
And axeth hem to what entente
Thei have here ferste° feith forsake.

[The Sultan hears reports of Constance’s beauty from the converts and plans to marry her]

And furthermor with good corage°
He seith, be so he mai hire have,
That Crist, which cam this world to
save,
He woll believe: and this recorded,
Thei ben on either side acorded,
And therupon to make an ende
The Souldan hise hostages sende
To Rome, of Princes Sones tuelve:
Wherof the fader in himselfe
Was glad, and with the Pope avied
With othre lorde many mo,
That with his doghter scholden go,
To se the Souldan be converted.
Bot that which nevere was wel herted,
Envie, tho began travaile
In destourbance of this spousaile°
So prively that non was war.
The Moder which this Souldan bar
Was thanne alyve, and thoghthe this
Unto hirself: ‘If it so is
Mi Sone him wedde in this manere,
Than have I lost my joies hiere,
For myn astat° schal so be lassed.°
Thenkende thus sche hath compassed
Be sleihte° how that sche may beguile
Hire Sone; and fell withinne a while,
Betwen hem two when that thei were,
Sche feigneth wordes in his Ere,
And in this wise gan to seie:

‘Mi Sone, I am be double weie°
With al myn herte glad and blithe,
For that miself have ofte sithe
Desired thou wolt, as men seith,
Receive and take a newe feith,
Which schal be forthringe of thi lif:
And ek so worschipful a wif,
The daughter of an Emperour,
To wedde it schal be gret honour.
Forthi, mi Sone, I you beseche
That I mai thanne in special,
So as me thenkth it is honeste,
Be thilke° which the ferste feste
Schal make unto hire welcominge.’
The Sultan granteth hire axinge,
And sche was glad ynough;
For under that anon she drowh
With false wordes that sche spak
Covine of deth behind his bak.

[The Sultan’s mother secretly plans the murder of all who attend the wedding, including her son, who is slain. Only Constance remains.]

107 This worthi Maiden which was there
Stood thanne, as who seith, ded for feere,
To se the feste how that it stod,
Which al was torned into blod:
The Dissh forthwith the Coppe and al
Bebled thei weren overal;
Sche sih hem deie on every side;
No wonder thogh sche wept and cride
Makende many a wofull mone.
When al was slain bot sche al one,
This olde fend, this Sarazine;
Let take anon this Constantine
With al the good and hire in fiere,
Vitailed full for yeres fyve,
Wher that the wynd it wolde dryve,
Sche putte upon the wawes wilde.
Bot he which alle thing maai schilde,
In the presence of hire housbonde,
Hire Schip to stiere hath take in honde,
And in Northumberlond aryveth;
And happerth than that sche dryveth
Under a Castel with the flod,
Which upon Humber banke stod
And was the kynges oghne also,
The which Allee was cleped tho,
A Saxon and a worthi knyght,
Bot he believeth noght ariht.
Of this Castell was Chastellein
Elda the kinges Chamberlein,
A knyghtly man after his lawe;

[Constance is welcomed in Northumberland and meets Hermyngheld, the wife of Elda.]

160 Constance loveth; and fell so
Spekende alday betwen hem two,
Thurgh grace of goddes pourveance
This maiden tawhte the creance
Unto this wif so parfitly,
Upon a dai that faste by
In the presence of hire housbonde,
A blind man, which cam there lad,
Unto this wif criende he bad,
To hire, and in this wise he seide:
‘O Hermyngheld, which Cristes feith,
Enformed as Constance seith,
Received hast, yif me my sihte.’
Upon his word hire herte afflihte
Thenkende what was best to done,
Bot hire hees and herde his bone
And seide, ‘In trust of Cristes lawe,
Which don was on the crois and slawe,
Thou bysne man, behold and se.’
With that to god upon his kne
Thonkende he tok his sihte anon,
Wherof thei merveile everychon,
Bot Elda wondreth most of alle:
The open thing which is befalle
Concludeth him be such a weie,
That he the feith mot nede obeie.
Now lest what fell upon this thing.
This Elda forth unto the king
A morwe tok his weie and rod,
And Hermyngeld at home abod
Forth with Constance wel at ese.
Elda, which thoghte his king to plese,
Of Constance al the pleine cas°
Als goodliche as he cowthe° tolde.
The king was glad and seide he wolde
That he him mihte of hire avise,
The time apointed forth withal.

This Elda triste° in special
Upon a knyght, whom fro childhode
He hadde updrawe° into manhode:
To him tolde al that he thoghte,
Whereof that after hi forthoghte;
And thewes at thilke tide
Unto his wif he had him ride
To make redi alle thing
And seith that he himself tofore
Thenkth forto come, and bad therfore
That he him kepe, and told him
whanne.
This knyght rod forth his weie thanne;
And soth was that of time passed
He hadde al in his wit compassed°
How he Constance myhte winne;
Bot he sih tho no sped therinne,
Wherof his lust began tabate,°
And that was love is thanne hate;
Of hire honour he hadde Envie,
So that upon his tricherie°
A lesinge° in his herte he caste.
Til he cam home he hieht faste,
And doth his ladi understande
The Message of hire husbonde:
And therupon the longe dai
Thei setten thinges in arrai,"
That al was as it scholde be

Of every thing in his degree,°
And whan it cam into the nyht,
This wif hire hath to bedde dyht,"°
230 Wher that this Maiden with hire lay.
This false knyght upon delay
Hath taried til thei were aslepe,
As he that wolde his time kepe
His dedly werkes to fulfille;
And to the bed he stalketh stille,
Wher that he wiste was the wif,
And in his hond a rasour knif
He bar, with which hire throte he cutte,
And privel° the knif he putte
240 Under that other beddes side,
Wher that Constance lai beside.
And stille with a prive lyht,
As he that wolde noght awake
His wif, he hath thus weie take
Into the chambre, and ther liggende°
He fond his dede wif bledende,°
Wher that Constance faste by
Was falle aslepe; and sodeinly
He cride alowd, and sche awok,
250 And forth withal sche caste a lok
And sih this ladi blede there,
Wherof swounende° ded for fere
Sche was, and stille as eny Ston
She lay, and Elda therupon
Into the Castell cleped° oute,
And up sterte every man aboute,
Into the chambre and forth thei wente.
Bot he, which alle untrouthe mente,
260 Upon this thing which is befalle
Seith that Constance hath don this
dede;
And to the bed with that he yede°
After the falshed° of his speche,
And made him there forto seche,
And fond the knif, wher he it leide,
And thanne he cride and thanne he
seide,
‘Lo, seth the knif al blody hiere!
What nedeth more in this matiere⁹
To axe?’ And thus her innocence
270 He sclaundreth⁹ there in audience
With false wordes whiche he feigneth,
Bot yit for al that evere he pleigneth,
Elda no full credence tok:
And happeneth that lay a bok,
Upon which, whan he sih,
This knyht hath swore and seid on hih,
That alle men it mihte wite,⁹
‘Now be this bok, which hier is write,
280 With that the hond of hevene him smot
In tokne⁹ of that he was forswore.
That he hath bothe his eyns lore,
Out of his hed the same stounde
Thei sterre, and so their weren founde.
A vois was herd, when that they felle,
Which seide, ‘O damned man to helle,
290 And he told out his felonic,⁹
And starf⁹ forth with his tale anon.
Into the ground, wher alle gon,
This dede lady was begrave:⁹
Elda, which thoghte his honour save,
300 For the second day a morwe⁹
The king cam, as thei were acorded;
[The King, seeing her virtue and beauty, marrieth Constance and she becomes pregnant.]

matrie situation scalundreth slandered wite know gultif guilty In tokne as a sign yhen
eyes scalundre slanderer wroke wrecked felonie crime starf died begrave buried a morwe
in the morning sauf safe spilde suffered ferde fared yiftes gifts overraddel overwrote untrewew false, a liar loth unpleasant faerie Faerie, a fairy fro kindle unnatural mai...foryete may not be forgotten
This lettre, as thou hast herd devise,
Was contrefet° in such a wise
That noman scholde it aperceve:

390

And sche, which thoughte to deceive,
It leith wher sche that other tok.
This Messager, whan he awok,
And wiste nothing how it was,
Aros and rod the grete pas
And tok this lettre to the king,
And whan he sith this wonder thing.
He maketh the Messager no chiere,
But natheles in wys manere
He wrote ayein, and yaf hem charge

400

That thei ne soffire noght at large
His wif to go, bot kepe hire stille,
Til thei have herd mor of his wille.
This Messager was yifteles.°
Bot with this lettre nathelies,
Or be him lief or be him loth,
In alle haste ayein he goth
Be Knaresburgh, and as he wente
Unto the Moder his entente
Of that he fond toward the king

410

He tolde; and sche upon this thing
Seith that he scholde abide at nyht
And made him feste and chiere ariht,
Feignende as thogh sche cowthe him
thonk.
Bot he with strong wyn which he dronk
Forth with the travail of the day
Was drunke, aslepe and while he lay,
Sche hath hise lettres overseie
And formed in an other weie.°
Ther was a newe lettre write,
Which seith: 'I do you forto wite
That thurgh the conseil of you tuo
I stonde in point to ben undo,
As he which is a king deposed.
For every man it hath supposed,
How that my wif Constance is faie;°
And if that I, thei sein, delaie
To put hire out of compaignie,
The worshipe of my Regalie°
Is lore;° and over this thei telle,

420

Hire child schal noght among hem
duelle,
To cleymen° eny heritage.
So can I se non avantage,
Bot al is lost, if sche abide:
Forthi to loke on every side
Toward the meschief as it is,
I charge you and bidde this,
That ye the same Schip vitaile,
In which that sche tok arivaile,
Therinne and putteth bothe tuo,

440

Hireself forthwith hire child also,
And so forth brought unto the depe
Betaketh hire the See to kepe.
Of foure daies time I sette,
That ye this thing no longer lette,
So that your lif be noght forfet.°'
And thus the lettre contrefet
The Messager, which was unwar,
Upon the kinges halve bar,°
And where he scholde it hath betaken.

460

Bot whan that thei have hiede take,
And rad that writen is withinne,
So gret a sorwe thei beginne.
As thei here oghne Moder sihen
Brent in a fyr before hire yhen:
Ther was wepinge and ther was wo,
Bot finaly the thing is do.

470

[Because of the treachery of Allee's mother,
Constance and her child are set out to sea,
in an echo of her escape from the Sultan's
mother. She manages to sail back to Rome.
In the meantime, Allee discovers his mother's
treason and executes her. In order to gain ab-
solution, Allee too travels to Rome where he
is reunited with his wife and son Moris.]

741

Whan al is do that was to done,
The king himself cam after sone.
This Senatour, whan that he com,
To Couste and to his wif at hom
Hath told how such a king Allee
Of gret array to the Citee
Was come, and Couste upon his tale
With herte clos and colour pale
Aswounne fell,° and he merveileth

750
So sodeinly what thing hire eyleth,°
And eawhte hire up, and whan sche wok,
Sche syketh with a pitous lok
And feigneth seknesse of the See;
Bot it was for the king Allee,
For joie which fell in hire thoghte
That god him hath to toune broght.
This king hath spoke with the Pope
And told al that he cowthe agrope,°
What grieveveth in his conscience;

760
And thanne he thoughte in reverence
Of his astat, er that he wente,
To make a feste, and thus he sente
Unto the Senatour to come
Upon the morwe and othre some,
To sitte with him at the mete.°
This tale hath Couste noghte foryte,
Bot to Moris hire Sone tolde
That he upon the morwe scholde
In al that evere he cowthe° and mihte

770
Be present in the kinges sihte,
So that the king him ofte sihe.
Moris tofore the kinges yhe°
Upon the morwe, wher he sat,
Fulofte stod, and upon that
The king his chiere upon him caste,
And in his face him thoughte als faste
He sh his oghne° wif Constance;

[After more than a decade apart, King Allee is reunited with both his son and wife, and Constance with the Emperor. Constance and Allee return to England, where Allee dies, and Constance returns to her father and Rome, where her son Moris eventually becomes emperor.]
Endnotes

1 The text below is taken from Confessio Amantis, ed. G.C. Macaulay, The Complete Works of John Gower (Clarendon Press, 1899). The Tale of Constance appears in lines 587–1613 of The Series. This text is in the public domain. Footnotes and endnotes have been provided by Will Rogers.