Tale of Constance¹ (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 spir-

itual 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 impair-
ment 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 di-
verse locations and laws, it is a tale that
speaks to the nearly impossible task of fix-
ing 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 Con-
stance’s constancy. For Gower’s text, as for
Chaucer’s, the fiction of the normal body is
just that.

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1 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 worldes 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,
Of hem whiche usen marchandie,
Sche hath converted, as thei come
To hire upon a time in Rome,
To schewen such a thing as thei
broughte;
Whiche worthili of hem sche boghte,
And over that in such a wise

Of Cristes feith so full enformed,°
That thei therto ben all conformed,
So that baptmes° thei receiven
And alle here false goddes weyven.°
When thei ben of the feith cirtain,
Thei gon to Barbarie° ayein,
And ther the Souldan° for hem sente
And axeth hem to what entente

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

And furthermore 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 tuelle:
Whereof the fader in himselfe
Was glad, and with the Pope avied

The Moder which this Souldan bar
Was thanne alvyve, 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:

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,

Cristes lawe Christendom sawe familiar saying, proverb rihte law Tiberie Tiberius hihte named Cronique historical chronicle enformed trained baptmes baptism weyven fail Bar-
barie non-Christian lands, the Middle East Souldan Sultan ferste first corage desire assised
ordered spousaile marriage, marriage negotiations astat estate, condition lassed diminished sleihte
cunning, trickery double weie of two minds, conflicted thilke that
The Souldan granteth hire axinge,
And sche was glad ynowh:°
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 Dish 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 awes wilde.
Bot he which alle thing mai schilde,
Thre yer, til that sche cam to londe,
Hire Schip to stiere hath take in honde,
And in Northumberlund aryveth;
And happeneth than that sche dryverth
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 kynges Chamberlein,°
A knyghtly man after his lawe;
And when he sith° upon the waue°
The Schip drivende al one so,
He bad anon men scholden go

140 To se what it betoken mai.
This was upon a Somer dai,
The Schip was loked and sche founde;
Elda withinne a litel stounde°
It wiste,° and with his wif anon
Toward this yonge ladi gon,
Wher that thei founden gret richesse;
Bot sche hire wolde noght confesse,
Whan thei hire axen what sche was.

[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 tase by
In the presence of hire housbonde,
Wher thei go walkende on the Stronde,
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 herre afflihte
Thenkende what was best to done,
Bot natheles sche herde his bone°
And seide, ‘In trust of Cristes lawe,
Which don was on the crois and slawe,’°
Thou bysne man, behold and se.’

180 With that to god upon his kne
Thonkende he tok his sihte anon,
Wherof thei merveile 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 Hermyngeald at home abod  
Forth with Constance wel at ese.  
Elda, which thoghte his king to plese,  
As he that thanne unwedded was,  
Of Constance al the pleine cas°  
Als goodliche as he cowthe° tolde.  
The king was glad and seide he wolde  
Come thider upon such a wise  
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 forthgohte;  
And natheles 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 kepe, and told him  
whanne.  

This knyht 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,  
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 hieth faste,  
And doth his ladi understonde  
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 when it cam into the nyht,  
This wif hire hath to bedde dyht,"  

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  

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 fonde his dede wif bledende,"  
Wher that Constance faste by  
Was falle aslepe; and sodeinly  
He cride alowd, and sche awok,  

And forth withal sche caste a lok  
And sikh 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 sterre every man aboute,  
Into the chambre and forth thei wente.  
Bot he, which alle untrouthe mente,  
This false knyght, among hem alle  

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 matiere°
To axe? And thus her innocence
He sklundreth° there in audience
With false wordes whiche he feigneth.
Bot yit for al that evere he pleigneth,
Elda no full credence tok:
And happiest that lay a bok,
Upon which, whan he it sith,
This knyht hath swore and seid on hih,
That alle men it mihte wite,°
‘Now be this bok, which hier is write,
Constance is gultif,° wel I wot.’

With that the hond of hevene him smot
In tokne° of that he was forswore.
That he hath bothe his eyn° 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,
Lo, thus hath god the sklundre° wroke°
That thou ayein Constance hast spoke:
Beknow the sothe er that thou dye.’

And he told out his felonie," And starf° forth with his tale anon.
Into the ground, wher alle gon,
This dede lady was begrave:" Elda, which thoghte his honour save,
Al that he mai restreigneth sorwe.
For the second day a morwe°
The king cam, as thei were acorded;

[The King, seeing her virtue and beauty, mar-
 ries Constance and she becomes pregnant.]

Werof that sche was joiefull,
Sche was delivered sauf" and sone.
The bishop, as it was to done,
Yaf him baptesme and Moris calleth;
And therupon, as it befalleth,
With lettres writen of record

Thei sende unto here liege lord,
That kepers weren of the qweene:
And he that scholde go betwene,
The Messager, to Knaresburgh,

Which toun he scholde passe thurgh,
Rideind cam the ferste day,
The kings Moder there lay,
Whois rihte name was Domilde,
Which after al the cause spilde:" For he, which thonk deserve wolde,
Unto this ladi goth and tolde
Of his Message al how it ferde.°
And sche with feigned joie it herde
And yaf him yiftes° largely,

Bot in the nyht al prively
Sche tok the lettres whiche he hadde,
Fro point to point and overradde," As sche that was thurghout untrewe," And let do wryten othre newe
In stede of hem, and thus thei spieke:
‘Oure liege lord, we thee beseke
That thou with ous ne be noght wroth,
Though we such thing as is thee loth°
Upon our trouthe certefie.

Thi wif, which is of faierie,°
Of such a child delivered is
Fro kinde° which stant all amis:
Bot for it scholde noght be seie,
We have it kept out of the weie
For dreed of pure worlds schame,
A povere child and in the name
Of thilke which is so misbore
We toke, and therto we be swore,
That non bot only thou and we

Schal knowen of this privete:
Moris it hatte, and thus men wene
That it was boren of the qweene
And of thin oghne bodi gete.
Bot this thing mai noght be foryete," That thou ne sende ous word anon
What is thi wille therupon.'
This lettre, as thou hast herd devise,
That noman scholde it aperceive:
And sche, which thoghte 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 makth the Messager no chiere,
But natheles in wys manere
He wrote ayein, and yaf hem charge
That thei ne soffire nocht at large
His wif to go, but kepe hire stille,
Til thei have herd mor of his wille.
This Messager was yifteles,
Bot with this lettre naethene,
Or be him lief or be him loth,
In alle haste ayene he goth
Be Knaresburgh, and as he wente
Unto the Moder his entente
Of that he fond toward the king
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 hisere 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 faiere;
And if that I, thei sein, delaie
To put hire out of compaignie,
The worschipe of my Regalie
Is lore; and over this thei telle,
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 puttreth bothe tuo,
Hireself forthwith hire child also,
And so forth brought unto the depe
Betaketh hire the See to kepe.
Of fourdaie time I sette,
That ye this thing no longer lette,
So that your lif be nocht forset.’
And thus the lettre contrefet
The Messager, which was unwar,
Upon the kinges halve bar,
And where he scholde it hath betaken.
Bot whan that thei have hiede take,
And rad that writen is withinne,
So gret a sorwe thei beginne.
As thei here ogne Moder sihen
Brent in a fyr before hire yhen:
Ther was wepinge and ther was wo,
But finaly the thing is do.
[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 absolution, 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

contrefet fake yifteles giftless weie manner faie fairy Regalie rulership, kingship lore lost cleymen claim forset forfeit kingshe halve bar on the King’s behalf
Was come, and Couste upon his tale
With herte clos and colour pale
Aswoune fell," and he mervileth

750 So sodeinly what thing hire eyleth,"
And cawhte 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 grieveth in his conscience;

760 And thanne he thoghte 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 foryete,
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 kings sihte,
So that the king him ofte sihe.
Moris tofore the kings yhe"
Upon the morwe, wher he sat,
Fulofte stod, and upon that
The king his chiere upon him caste,
And in his face him thoghte 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