Unravelling Constance

Hannah Priest

She seyde she was so mazed in the see
That she forgat hir mynde, by hir trouthe.
~Chaucer, The Man of Law’s Tale

She came from the sea, mazed, amazed — masen — confused, bewildered, senseless. Deceived, deranged, crazed. They stopped and asked her who she was. When they stopped and asked her who she was, she said she did not know. She said she was so mazed in the sea, that she forgot her mind. Her mind — mynde — seat of memory, faculty of memory, individual remembrance. Reason, understanding. Will, desire, purpose. She forgot her mind, when she lost herself. Constance forgets Constance. Constance is lost. Distress teaches us to be inventive, says the nightingale, but blank Constance does not invent.¹

Once, she was Constance. Syrian chapmen found her in Rome, among the other things, specially. The chapmen took their cloths of gold, their satins rich of hew, their chaffare so

¹ I am grateful to Christina Petty and Janilee Plummer, postgraduate students on the Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project at the University of Manchester, for their advice on matters relating to medieval embroidery and cloth production.
thrifty and new, and returned with tales of Constance. Their chaffare — anything of virtue, something desirable. An exchange, a bargain, a deal. So thrifty — well-made, seemly, suitable. Golden, rich of hew, so thrifty and so new, they returned with tales of Constance. The chapmen went to market. Take the cloth and sell the cloth, take the goods and sell the goods. The smooth trade in luxury prevails over gods and geography. Facilitate allegiance in the market. Chapmen exchange satin for Dame Constance.

But now she comes from the sea, so mazed that she forgot her mind. Constance forgotten.

*Take the cloth and pull the threads, unravelling the stitches. The picture isn’t woven, it can be undone. Stitches unpicked from the linen cloth, one thread at a time. Wind the silks around your hand, little by little erase. Fine scissors cut again and again, and the silks are all removed. The picture isn’t woven, and it can be undone. But look — small holes and blemishes, silk smudges and colours remain. Wash the cloth well. Soak it in water. All traces of the picture are gone. The cloth can be reused.*

Constance meets another, a woman wrapped in cloth. She says I have forgot my mind. The other holds a fine needle and a piece of fine spun gold. Constance says I am a wretch — *wrecca* — outcast, exiled. The other says I am Egaré — *esgarée* — outcast, exiled. And the cloth on her shone so bright. They asked me for my name, she says, and I changed it there anon. She takes the needle and couches gold over layers of silk, embellishing, embroidering. A cloth, a story, a name. Constance has no needle. Her cloth is bare, and there is
nothing there to couch. Blank linen, no trace of what came before.

Egaré shows her another woman. From somewhere further east. This woman makes a love-token to give to a Sultan’s son. She takes the cloth and covers it in gold and azure, rich stones on every side. She adds pictures to the corners. Lovers, separated, suffering. Her web charts grief beyond her own. In the fourth, she weaves herself, her lover, to testify their tale. To bear witness, manifest, and attest the truth. Love token bestowed turns to spoil of war, and ends in the hands of an emperor. Egaré wraps herself in the woven words of the Eastern weaver, and coats herself in the testament. When the storms rage at sea, she will use unforgotten stories to cover her own face.

And now another comes. She says her name is Couste. I am a woman woefully bestad, says Constance, I have forgot my mind. I am a woman woefully bestad, says Couste. They asked me for my name, she says, but I would not confess. I keep it woven into me, a cloth, a story, a name. Couste can be recognized, through the traces of my tale. In the word I choose to mean myself, my self-fashioned me, not all stitches can be unpicked. But Constance has no tapestry. The frame is bare, and there is nothing here to weave. Blank linen, no trace of what was there before.

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A nightingale weaves a tapestry. In her youth she had learned to work and to embroider. To weave in her frame a radevore, as she knows women did of yore. She weaves, I am a woeful lady. Constance says, I am a woeful lady. I have forgot my mind. The nightingale stitches, with a pen I cannot write, but I can weave letters to and fro. It takes a year to fill my wooden frame, but then I weave it well. My cloth, my story, my name, and how I was served for my sister’s love. To bear witness, manifest, and to attest the truth.

Constance sees the nightingale's cloth. Woollen threads complete the wooden frame. No threads remain of Constance now. No letters woven on a frame. How is she served for her father’s love? How is she served for her husband’s love? I do not sew, says Constance, I do not weave. Who are you? weaves the nightingale. I do not remember. I cannot testify.

A Greek bird sews the scene the same, though her dumb lips cannot reveal. But grief and pain might breed ingenuity, and distress teaches us to be inventive. Constance suffers grief and pain, and her dumb lips do not reveal. But no ingenuity remains with her, inventiveness unthreaded and washed away. She stitches no scene, she weaves no letters. She has no needle, she has no name.

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The chapmen took their cloths of gold, their satins rich of hew, their chaffare so thrifty and new, and returned with tales of Constance. Golden, rich of hew, so thrifty and so new. She has no needle to embroider her cloth, and she has no shears to cut it. Her threads were pulled by other hands, by many pairs of other hands.

A Sultaness, a cursed crone, first does the cursed deed. Constance’s act of embroidery, sewing Christian yarns on Syrian cloth, is stopped before the needle pricks. The old woman measures the threads of her son’s life, and snaps her shears early. The crone’s Syrian tapestry remains unchanged and Constance unravelling is given to the sea.

Donegild, next, full of tyranny. Her daughter-in-law’s cloth is ready for images to be sewn, and the patterns are now set. But the old queen waits with her own silk, to counterfeit most subtly. Her picture she wrought most sinfully, as she embroiders Constance’s monstrosity. She unpicks the words that her son might say, and invents a new story. The old queen’s skill outstrips the younger’s and Constance unravelling is given to the sea.

Stitchcraft is taught woman to girl. Without a mother, a nurse will do (maybe a lady that men call Abro). Constance says goodbye to her mother, and never learns to sew. It is no marvel, then, that crones and queens can wield their needles with far more subtlety. Constance lacks their skill. She has no needle, she has no name.
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Two women weave tapestries and grieve. One, alone and lonely, sews a funeral robe. She weaves the great web all day. But when night comes she sets torches beside her, and unravels her own stitches. The other, alone and lonely, weaves by night and day a magic web with colours gay. Did you write your name upon the boat? she says. Did you write it on the prow? Go to your house, and busy yourself. Go to your distaff and loom. I have no house, Constance says. I am a wretch — wrecca — outcast and exiled. I have no distaff and I have no loom. I have no warp and I have no weft. I have no web to weave.

Look to the spider, Constance. From her belly, she yet spins her thread, and as a spider is busy with her web of old. Grief and pain might breed ingenuity, and distress teaches her to be inventive. The spider’s web charts grief beyond her own. Europa, Asterie, Antiope. Alcmene, Danae, Aegina. Proserpine, Canace, Iphimedea. Bisaltis, Demeter, Melantho. Medusa, Isse, Erigone. Egaré and Couste, the daughter of the Emir. The nightingale, Ithaca’s queen, the lady in the tower. Other women have been mazed before. Deceived, deranged, crazed. Other women have been mazed before. But they kept hold of the threads to find the way out.

Constance. Constance has no place inside a web. She cannot sew her self. She has no web, she has no loom. She has no silk,
she has no gold. She has no needles, she has no frame. She is the cloth that the chapmen bought. She is the cloth for crones and queens to couch upon. The cloth for kings and Sultans to couch gold upon. She is the blank linen back without the wool, the unpicked square without the yarn.

She has no memory, she has no mind. She has no needle, she has no name. She has no warp, she has no weft. No testament, no tapestry.

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