

The Man of Law

The Man of Law (referred to here as ‘A Sergeant of the Lawe’) is a judicious and dignified man, or, at least, he seems so because of his wise words. He is a judge in the court of assizes (civil procedures), by letter of appointment from the king, and has many goods and robes. He can draw up a legal document, the narrator tells us, and no-one can find a flaw in his legal writings. The Man of Law rides in informal, silk-adorned clothes.

In his tale of Constance (or ‘Custance’ in Chaucer’s version), we learn of the daughter of the Roman emperor who was married off to the Sultan of Barbarie [or Syria] who has heard of her great beauty from merchants of his kingdom. A marriage contract is then negotiated with her father which requires the Sultan and his subjects to convert to Christianity. Next the Sultan’s mother, enraged by her son’s infidelity to Islam, kills him and the others in the wedding party before setting Constance adrift at sea.

Luckily she fetches up in England on the coast of Northumberia, a pagan country ruled by King Alla—a character based on Chaucer’s understanding of the historical Ælla of Deira who was said by tradition to have converted to Christianity after learning of the miracles associated with her. In the first of these a blind man is healed by her companion Hermengyld. In the second, a wicked knight who attempts to seduce her murders her companion and then blames Constance for the killing. When he displays the bloody dagger as proof, he is apparently struck dead for perjury. Alla’s wicked mother then alters some letters that pass between the Alla and his constable which results in Constance’s being banished.

Forced to sea again, Constance runs aground in Spain. There a would-be rapist—Thelous in the *Confessio Amantis*—boards her ship but and mysteriously falls overboard in this attempt to take her. Next she is discovered by a Roman Senator returning from a mission to Barberie where he has just avenged the Christians slaughtered by the Sultan’s mother. The Senator takes Constance and her child back to Italy to serve in his household as a servant. Meanwhile King Alla, heartbroken at the loss of Constance, goes to Rome on pilgrimage and there he is reunited with Constance. The couple then return to Northumberia and, when Alla dies a year later, their baby boy becomes King.

The tale is based on a story in the *Chronicles* of Nicholas Trive. Its theme of an exiled princess uncorrupted by sufferings was common in the literature of the time. The tale of Constance is also told in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and both versions are similar to the verse Romance *Emaré*. Taken together, they are generally known as the “Constance” cycle. The oldest known variant of this type of story is the *Vitae Duorum Offarum*. More distantly related forms of the persecuted heroine include “Le Bone Florence of Rome”, and “Griselda”. The incident where Constance is framed for murder with a bloody dagger seems to be a direct borrowing from “Crescentia”.

In its character as an uplifting story, the tale follows the pattern of contemporary hagiographies, or stories of the saints’ lives, also popular at the time. Constance, as her name suggests, is constant to her Christian faith despite the tests she undergoes amid pagans and heathens whom she meets on her travels. The Man of Law tells his story in a pompous over-blown style as if he is defending Custance in a court of law. He also uses such recurrent phrases much used by lawyers in defending their clients in court such as “so as ye shal heere” and “of which I tolde” which come straight from the Rhetoric handbooks of the day.