
*The Canterbury Tales and
Other Poems
Part 9: The Man of Law's
Tale*



by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Contents

THE PROLOGUE	1
NOTES TO THE PROLOGUE	4
THE TALE	5
NOTES TO THE TALE	34

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THE PROLOGUE

Our Hoste saw well that the brighte sun
Th' arc of his artificial day had run
The fourthe part, and half an houre more;
And, though he were not deep expert in lore,
He wist it was the eight-and-twenty day
Of April, that is messenger to May;
And saw well that the shadow of every tree
Was in its length of the same quantity
That was the body erect that caused it;
And therefore by the shadow he took his wit¹,
That Phoebus, which that shone so clear and bright,
Degrees was five-and-forty clomb on height;
And for that day, as in that latitude,
It was ten of the clock, he gan conclude;

And suddenly he plight² his horse about.

"Lordings," quoth he, "I warn you all this rout³,
The fourthe partie of this day is gone.
Now for the love of God and of Saint John
Lose no time, as farforth as ye may.
Lordings, the time wasteth night and day,
And steals from us, what privily sleeping,
And what through negligence in our waking,
As doth the stream, that turneth never again,
Descending from the mountain to the plain.
Well might Senec, and many a philosopher,
Bewaile time more than gold in coffer.
For loss of chattels may recover'd be,
But loss of time shendeth⁴ us, quoth he.

It will not come again, withoute dread,
No more than will Malkin's maidenhead, (*Note 2*)
When she hath lost it in her wantonness.

Let us not moulde thus in idleness.

"Sir Man of Law," quoth he, "so have ye bliss,

¹knowledge.

²pulled.

³company.

⁴destroys.

Tell us a tale anon, as forword⁵ is.
 Ye be submitted through your free assent
 To stand in this case at my judgement.
 Acquit you now, and holde your behest⁶;
 Then have ye done your devoir⁷ at the least."
 "Hoste," quoth he, "de par dieux jeo asente; (*Note 3*)
 To breake forword is not mine intent.
 Behest is debt, and I would hold it fain,
 All my behest; I can no better sayn.
 For such law as a man gives another wight,
 He should himselfe usen it by right.
 Thus will our text: but natheless certain
 I can right now no thrifty⁸ tale sayn,
 But Chaucer (though he can but lewedly⁹
 On metres and on rhyming craftily)
 Hath said them, in such English as he can,
 Of olde time, as knoweth many a man.
 And if he have not said them, leve¹⁰ brother,
 In one book, he hath said them in another
 For he hath told of lovers up and down,
 More than Ovide made of mentioun
 In his Epistolae, that be full old.
 Why should I telle them, since they he told?
 In youth he made of Ceyx and Alcyon, (*Note 4*)
 And since then he hath spoke of every one
 These noble wives, and these lovers eke.
 Whoso that will his large volume seek
 Called the Saintes' Legend of Cupid: (*Note 5*)
 There may he see the large woundes wide
 Of Lucrece, and of Babylon Thisbe;
 The sword of Dido for the false Enee;
 The tree of Phillis for her Demophon;
 The plaint of Diane, and of Hermion,
 Of Ariadne, and Hypsipile;
 The barren isle standing in the sea;
 The drown'd Leander for his fair Hero;
 The teares of Helene, and eke the woe
 Of Briseis, and Laodamia;
 The cruelty of thee, Queen Medea,
 Thy little children hanging by the halse¹¹;
 For thy Jason, that was of love so false.
 Hypermnestra, Penelop', Alcest',
 Your wifhood he commendeth with the best.
 But certainly no worde writeth he

⁵the bargain.

⁶keep your promise.

⁷duty.

⁸worthy.

⁹knows but imperfectly.

¹⁰dear.txt

¹¹neck.

Of thilke wick¹² example of Canace,
That loved her own brother sinfully;
(Of all such cursed stories I say, Fy),
Or else of Tyrius Apollonius,
How that the cursed king Antiochus
Bereft his daughter of her maidenhead;
That is so horrible a tale to read,
When he her threw upon the pavement.
And therefore he, of full avisement¹³,
Would never write in none of his sermons
Of such unkind¹⁴ abominations;
Nor I will none rehearse, if that I may.
But of my tale how shall I do this day?
Me were loth to be liken'd doubtless
To Muses, that men call Pierides (*Note 6*)
(*Metamorphoseos (Note 7) wot what I mean*),
But natheless I recke not a bean,
Though I come after him with hawebake¹⁵; (*Note 8*)
I speak in prose, and let him rhymes make."
And with that word, he with a sober cheer
Began his tale, and said as ye shall hear.

¹²that wicked.

¹³deliberately, advisedly.

¹⁴unnatural.

¹⁵lout.

NOTES TO THE PROLOGUE

1. Plight: pulled; the word is an obsolete past tense from "pluck."

2. No more than will Malkin's maidenhead: a proverbial saying; which, however, had obtained fresh point from the Reeve's Tale, to which the host doubtless refers.

3. De par dieux jeo asente: "by God, I agree". It is characteristic that the somewhat pompous Sergeant of Law should couch his assent in the semi-barbarous French, then familiar in law procedure.

4. Ceyx and Alcyon: Chaucer treats of these in the introduction to the poem called "The Book of the Duchess." It relates to the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the poet's patron, and afterwards his connexion by marriage.

5. The Saintes Legend of Cupid: Now called "The Legend of Good Women". The names of eight ladies mentioned here are not in the "Legend" as it has come down to us; while those of two ladies in the "legend" – Cleopatra and Philomela – are here omitted.

6. Not the Muses, who had their surname from the place near Mount Olympus where the Thracians first worshipped them; but the nine daughters of Pierus, king of Macedonia, whom he called the nine Muses, and who, being conquered in a contest with the genuine sisterhood, were changed into birds.

7. Metamorphoseos: Ovid's.

8. Hawebake: hawbuck, country lout; the common proverbial phrase, "to put a rogue above a gentleman," may throw light on the reading here, which is difficult.

THE TALE

(Note 1)

O scatheful harm, condition of poverty,
With thirst, with cold, with hunger so confounded;
To aske help thee shameth in thine hearte;
If thou none ask, so sore art thou y-wounded,
That very need unwrappeth all thy wound hid.
Maugre thine head thou must for indigence
Or steal, or beg, or borrow thy dispence¹⁶.

Thou blamest Christ, and sayst full bitterly,
He misdeparteth¹⁷ riches temporal;
Thy neighebour thou witest¹⁸ sinfully,
And sayst, thou hast too little, and he hath all:
"Parfay (sayst thou) sometime he reckon shall,
When that his tail shall brennen in the glede¹⁹,
For he not help'd the needful in their need."

Hearken what is the sentence of the wise:
Better to die than to have indigence.

Thy selve²⁰ neighebour will thee despise,
If thou be poor, farewell thy reverence.
Yet of the wise man take this sentence,
Alle the days of poore men be wick'²¹,
Beware therefore ere thou come to that prick²².

If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee,
And all thy friendes flee from thee, alas!
O riche merchants, full of wealth be ye,
O noble, prudent folk, as in this case,
Your bagges be not fill'd with ambes ace²³,
But with six-cinque²⁴, that runneth for your chance; (Note 2)

¹⁶expense.

¹⁷allots amiss.

¹⁸blamest.

¹⁹burn in the fire.

²⁰that same.

²¹wicked, evil.

²²point.

²³wicked, evil.

²⁴six-five.

At Christenmass well merry may ye dance.

Ye seeke land and sea for your winnings,
 As wise folk ye knowen all th' estate
 Of regnes²⁵; ye be fathers of tidings,
 And tales, both of peace and of debate²⁶:
 I were right now of tales desolate²⁷,
 But that a merchant, gone in many a year,
 Me taught a tale, which ye shall after hear.

In Syria whilom dwelt a company
 Of chapmen rich, and thereto sad²⁸ and true,
 Clothes of gold, and satins rich of hue.
 That widewhere²⁹ sent their spicery,
 Their chaffare³⁰ was so thriftly³¹ and so new,
 That every wight had dainty³² to chaffare³³
 With them, and eke to selle them their ware.

Now fell it, that the masters of that sort
 Have shapen them³⁴ to Rome for to wend,
 Were it for chapmanhood³⁵ or for disport,
 None other message would they thither send,
 But come themselves to Rome, this is the end:
 And in such place as thought them a vantage
 For their intent, they took their herbergage³⁶.

Sojourned have these merchants in that town
 A certain time as fell to their pleasance:
 And so befell, that th' excellent renown
 Of th' emperore's daughter, Dame Constance,
 Reported was, with every circumstance,
 Unto these Syrian merchants in such wise,
 From day to day, as I shall you devise³⁷

This was the common voice of every man
 "Our emperor of Rome, God him see³⁸,
 A daughter hath, that since the the world began,
 To reckon as well her goodness and beauty,
 Was never such another as is she:

²⁵kingdoms.

²⁶contention, war.

²⁷barren, empty.

²⁸grave, steadfast.

²⁹to distant parts.

³⁰wares.

³¹advantageous.

³²pleasure.

³³deal.

³⁴determined, prepared.

³⁵trading.

³⁶lodging.

³⁷relate.

³⁸look on with favour.

I pray to God in honour her sustene³⁹,
And would she were of all Europe the queen.

"In her is highe beauty without pride,
And youth withoute greenhood⁴⁰ or folly:
To all her workes virtue is her guide;
Humbless hath slain in her all tyranny:
She is the mirror of all courtesy,
Her heart a very chamber of holiness,
Her hand minister of freedom for almess⁴¹."

And all this voice was sooth, as God is true;
But now to purpose⁴² let us turn again. (Note 3)
These merchants have done freight their shippes new,
And when they have this blissful maiden seen,
Home to Syria then they went full fain,
And did their needs⁴³, as they have done yore⁴⁴,
And liv'd in weal⁴⁵; I can you say no more.

Now fell it, that these merchants stood in grace⁴⁶
Of him that was the Soudan⁴⁷ of Syrie:
For when they came from any strange place
He would of his benigne courtesy
Make them good cheer, and busily espy⁴⁸
Tidings of sundry regnes⁴⁹, for to lear⁵⁰
The wonders that they mighte see or hear.

Amonges other thinges, specially
These merchants have him told of Dame Constance
So great nobless, in earnest so royally,
That this Soudan hath caught so great pleasance⁵¹
To have her figure in his remembrance,
That all his lust⁵², and all his busy cure⁵³,
Was for to love her while his life may dure.

Paraventure in thilk⁵⁴ large book,
Which that men call the heaven, y-written was
With starres, when that he his birthe took,

³⁹sustain.

⁴⁰childishness, immaturity.

⁴¹almsgiving.

⁴²our tale.

⁴³business.

⁴⁴formerly.

⁴⁵prosperity.

⁴⁶favour.

⁴⁷Sultan.

⁴⁸inquire.

⁴⁹realms.

⁵⁰learn.

⁵¹pleasure.

⁵²pleasure.

⁵³care.

⁵⁴that.

That he for love should have his death, alas!
 For in the starres, clearer than is glass,
 Is written, God wot, whoso could it read,
 The death of every man withoute dread⁵⁵.

In starres many a winter therebeforn
 Was writ the death of Hector, Achilles,
 Of Pompey, Julius, ere they were born;
 The strife of Thebes; and of Hercules,
 Of Samson, Turnus, and of Socrates
 The death; but mennes wittes be so dull,
 That no wight can well read it at the full.

This Soudan for his privy council sent,
 And, shortly of this matter for to pace⁵⁶,
 He hath to them declared his intent,
 And told them certain, but⁵⁷ he might have grace
 To have Constance, within a little space,
 He was but dead; and charged them in hie⁵⁸
 To shape⁵⁹ for his life some remedy.

Diverse men diverse thinges said;
 And arguments they casten up and down;
 Many a subtle reason forth they laid;
 They speak of magic, and abusion⁶⁰;
 But finally, as in conclusion,
 They cannot see in that none avantage,
 Nor in no other way, save marriage.

Then saw they therein such difficulty
 By way of reason, for to speak all plain,
 Because that there was such diversity
 Between their bothe lawes, that they sayn,
 They trowe⁶¹ that no Christian prince would fain⁶²
 Wedden his child under our lawe sweet,
 That us was given by Mahound⁶³ our prophete.

And he answered: "Rather than I lose
 Constance, I will be christen'd doubtless
 I must be hers, I may none other choose,
 I pray you hold your arguments in peace, (*Note 4*)
 Save my life, and be not reckeless
 To gette her that hath my life in cure⁶⁴,
 For in this woe I may not long endure."

⁵⁵doubt.

⁵⁶to pass briefly by.

⁵⁷unless.

⁵⁸haste.

⁵⁹contrive.

⁶⁰deception.

⁶¹believe.

⁶²willingly.

⁶³Mahomet.

⁶⁴keeping.

What needeth greater dilatation?
 I say, by treaty and ambassadry,
 And by the Pope's mediation,
 And all the Church, and all the chivalry,
 That in destruction of Mah'metry⁶⁵,
 And in increase of Christe's lawe dear,
 They be accorded⁶⁶ so as ye may hear;
 How that the Soudan, and his baronage,
 And all his lieges, shall y-christen'd be,
 And he shall have Constance in marriage,
 And certain gold, I n'ot⁶⁷ what quantity,
 And hereto find they suffisant surety.
 The same accord is sworn on either side;
 Now, fair Constance, Almighty God thee guide!
 Now woulde some men waiten, as I guess,
 That I should tellen all the purveyance⁶⁸,
 The which the emperor of his noblesse
 Hath shapen⁶⁹ for his daughter, Dame Constance.
 Well may men know that so great ordinance
 May no man tellen in a little clause,
 As was arrayed for so high a cause.
 Bishops be shapen with her for to wend,
 Lordes, ladies, and knightes of renown,
 And other folk enough, this is the end.
 And notified is throughout all the town,
 That every wight with great devotioun
 Should pray to Christ, that he this marriage
 Receive in gree⁷⁰, and speede this voyage.
 The day is comen of her departing, –
 I say the woful fatal day is come,
 That there may be no longer tarrying,
 But forward they them dresen⁷¹ all and some.
 Constance, that was with sorrow all o'ercome,
 Full pale arose, and dressed her to wend,
 For well she saw there was no other end.
 Alas! what wonder is it though she wept,
 That shall be sent to a strange nation
 From friendes, that so tenderly her kept,
 And to be bound under subjection
 of one, she knew not his condition?
 Husbands be all good, and have been of yore⁷²,

⁶⁵Mahometanism.

⁶⁶agreed.

⁶⁷know not.

⁶⁸provision.

⁶⁹prepared.

⁷⁰with good will, favour.

⁷¹prepare to set out.

⁷²of old.

That knowe wives; I dare say no more.

"Father," she said, "thy wretched child Constance,
Thy younge daughter, foster'd up so soft,
And you, my mother, my sov'reign pleasance
Over all thing, out-taken⁷³ Christ on loft⁷⁴,
Constance your child her recommendeth oft
Unto your grace; for I shall to Syrie,
Nor shall I ever see you more with eye.

"Alas! unto the barbarous nation
I must anon, since that it is your will:
But Christ, that starf⁷⁵ for our redemption,
So give me grace his hestes⁷⁶ to fulfil.
I, wretched woman, no force though I spill⁷⁷!
Women are born to thraldom and penance,
And to be under mannes governance."

I trow at Troy when Pyrrhus brake the wall,
Or Ilion burnt, or Thebes the city,
Nor at Rome for the harm through Hannibal,
That Romans hath y-vanquish'd times three,
Was heard such tender weeping for pity,
As in the chamber was for her parting;
But forth she must, whether she weep or sing.

O firste moving cruel Firmament, (*Note 5*)
With thy diurnal sway that crowdest⁷⁸ aye,
And hurtlest all from East till Occident
That naturally would hold another way;
Thy crowding set the heav'n in such array
At the beginning of this fierce voyage,
That cruel Mars hath slain this marriage.

Unfortunate ascendant tortuous,
Of which the lord is helpless fall'n, alas!
Out of his angle into the darkest house;
O Mars, O Atyzar, (*Note 6*) as in this case;
O feeble Moon, unhappy is thy pace⁷⁹.
Thou knittest thee where thou art not receiv'd,
Where thou wert well, from thennes art thou weiv'd. (*Note 7*)

Imprudent emperor of Rome, alas!
Was there no philosopher in all thy town?
Is no time bet⁸⁰ than other in such case?
Of voyage is there none election,

⁷³except.

⁷⁴on high.

⁷⁵died.

⁷⁶commands.

⁷⁷no matter though I perish.

⁷⁸pushest together, drivest.

⁷⁹progress.

⁸⁰better.

Namely⁸¹ to folk of high condition,
 Not when a root is of a birth y-know⁸²?
 Alas! we be too lewed⁸³, or too slow.

To ship was brought this woeful faire maid
 Solemnely, with every circumstance:
 "Now Jesus Christ be with you all," she said.
 There is no more, but "Farewell, fair Constance."
 She pained her⁸⁴ to make good countenance.
 And forth I let her sail in this manner,
 And turn I will again to my matter.

The mother of the Soudan, well of vices,
 Espied hath her sone's plain intent,
 How he will leave his olde sacrifices:
 And right anon she for her council sent,
 And they be come, to knowe what she meant,
 And when assembled was this folk in fere⁸⁵,
 She sat her down, and said as ye shall hear.

"Lordes," she said, "ye knowen every one,
 How that my son in point is for to lete⁸⁶
 The holy lawes of our Alkaron⁸⁷
 Given by God's messenger Mahomete:
 But one avow to grete God I hete⁸⁸,
 Life shall rather out of my body start,
 Than Mahomet's law go out of mine heart.

"What should us tiden⁸⁹ of this newe law,
 But thraldom to our bodies, and penance,
 And afterward in hell to be y-draw,
 For we renied Mahound our creance⁹⁰?
 But, lordes, will ye maken assurance,
 As I shall say, assenting to my lore⁹¹?
 And I shall make us safe for evermore."

They sworn and assented every man
 To live with her and die, and by her stand:
 And every one, in the best wise he can,
 To strengthen her shall all his friendes fand⁹² (Note 8)
 And she hath this emprise taken in hand,

⁸¹especially.

⁸²when the nativity is known.

⁸³ignorant.

⁸⁴made an effort.

⁸⁵together.

⁸⁶forsake.

⁸⁷Koran.

⁸⁸promise.

⁸⁹betide, befall.

⁹⁰denied Mahomet our belief.

⁹¹advice.

⁹²endeavour.

Which ye shall heare that I shall devise⁹³;
And to them all she spake right in this wise.

"We shall first feign us Christendom to take⁹⁴;
Cold water shall not grieve us but a lite⁹⁵;
And I shall such a feast and revel make,
That, as I trow, I shall the Soudan quite⁹⁶.
For though his wife be christen'd ne'er so white,
She shall have need to wash away the red,
Though she a fount of water with her led."

O Soudaness⁹⁷, root of iniquity,
Virago thou, Semiramis the second!
O serpent under femininity,
Like to the serpent deep in hell y-bound!
O feigned woman, all that may confound
Virtue and innocence, through thy malice,
Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!

O Satan envious! since thilke day
That thou wert chased from our heritage,
Well knowest thou to woman th' olde way.
Thou madest Eve to bring us in servage⁹⁸:
Thou wilt fordo⁹⁹ this Christian marriage:
Thine instrument so (well-away the while!)
Mak'st thou of women when thou wilt beguile.

This Soudaness, whom I thus blame and warray¹⁰⁰,
Let privily her council go their way:
Why should I in this tale longer tarry?
She rode unto the Soudan on a day,
And said him, that she would reny her lay¹⁰¹,
And Christendom of priestes' handes fong¹⁰², (Note 9)
Repenting her she heathen was so long;

Beseeching him to do her that honour,
That she might have the Christian folk to feast:
"To please them I will do my labour."
The Soudan said, "I will do at your hest¹⁰³,"
And kneeling, thanked her for that request;
So glad he was, he wist¹⁰⁴ not what to say.
She kiss'd her son, and home she went her way.

⁹³relate.

⁹⁴embrace Christianity.

⁹⁵little.

⁹⁶requite, match.

⁹⁷Sultanness.

⁹⁸bondage.

⁹⁹ruin.

¹⁰⁰oppose, censure.

¹⁰¹renounce her creed.

¹⁰²take.

¹⁰³desire.

¹⁰⁴knew.

Arrived be these Christian folk to land
 In Syria, with a great solemne rout,
 And hastily this Soudan sent his sond¹⁰⁵,
 First to his mother, and all the realm about,
 And said, his wife was comen out of doubt,
 And pray'd them for to ride again¹⁰⁶ the queen,
 The honour of his regne¹⁰⁷ to sustene.

Great was the press, and rich was the array
 Of Syrians and Romans met in fere¹⁰⁸.
 The mother of the Soudan rich and gay
 Received her with all so glad a cheer¹⁰⁹
 As any mother might her daughter dear
 And to the nexte city there beside
 A softe pace solemnelly they ride.

Nought, trow I, the triumph of Julius
 Of which that Lucan maketh such a boast,
 Was royaller, or more curious,
 Than was th' assembly of this blissful host
 But O this scorpion, this wicked ghost¹¹⁰,
 The Soudaness, for all her flattering
 Cast¹¹¹ under this full mortally to sting.

The Soudan came himself soon after this,
 So royally, that wonder is to tell,
 And welcomed her with all joy and bliss.
 And thus in mirth and joy I let them dwell.
 The fruit of his matter is that I tell;
 When the time came, men thought it for the best
 That revel stint¹¹², and men go to their rest.

The time is come that this old Soudaness
 Ordained hath the feast of which I told,
 And to the feast the Christian folk them dress
 In general, yea, bothe young and old.
 There may men feast and royalty behold,
 And dainties more than I can you devise;
 But all too dear they bought it ere they rise.

O sudden woe, that ev'r art successour
 To worldly bliss! sprent¹¹³ is with bitterness
 Th' end of our joy, of our worldly labour;
 Woe occupies the fine¹¹⁴ of our gladness.

¹⁰⁵message.

¹⁰⁶to meet.

¹⁰⁷realm.

¹⁰⁸in company.

¹⁰⁹face.

¹¹⁰spirit.

¹¹¹contrived.

¹¹²cease.

¹¹³sprinkled.

¹¹⁴seizes the end.

Hearken this counsel, for thy sickness¹¹⁵:
 Upon thy glade days have in thy mind
 The unware¹¹⁶ woe of harm, that comes behind.

For, shortly for to tell it at a word,
 The Soudan and the Christians every one
 Were all to-hewn and sticked¹¹⁷ at the board,
 But it were only Dame Constance alone.
 This olde Soudaness, this cursed crone,
 Had with her friendes done this cursed deed,
 For she herself would all the country lead.

Nor there was Syrian that was converted,
 That of the counsel of the Soudan wot¹¹⁸,
 That was not all to-hewn, ere he astered¹¹⁹:
 And Constance have they ta'en anon foot-hot¹²⁰,
 And in a ship all steereless, God wot¹²¹,
 They have her set, and bid her learn to sail
 Out of Syria again-ward to Itale¹²².

A certain treasure that she thither lad¹²³,
 And, sooth to say, of victual great plenty,
 They have her giv'n, and clothes eke she had
 And forth she sailed in the salte sea:
 O my Constance, full of benignity,
 O emperores younge daughter dear,
 He that is lord of fortune be thy steer¹²⁴!

She bless'd herself, and with full piteous voice
 Unto the cross of Christ thus saide she;
 "O dear, O wealful¹²⁵ altar, holy cross,
 Red of the Lambes blood, full of pity,
 That wash'd the world from old iniquity,
 Me from the fiend and from his clawes keep,
 That day that I shall drenchen¹²⁶ in the deepe.

"Victorious tree, protection of the true,
 That only worthy were for to bear
 The King of Heaven, with his woundes new,
 The white Lamb, that hurt was with a spear;
 Flemer¹²⁷ of fiendes out of him and her

¹¹⁵security.

¹¹⁶unforeseen.

¹¹⁷cut to pieces.

¹¹⁸knew.

¹¹⁹escaped.

¹²⁰immediately.

¹²¹without rudder.

¹²²back to Italy.

¹²³took.

¹²⁴rudder, guide.

¹²⁵blessed, beneficent.

¹²⁶drown.

¹²⁷banisher, driver out.

On which thy limbes faithfully extend, (*Note 10*)
Me keep, and give me might my life to mend."

Yeares and days floated this creature
Throughout the sea of Greece, unto the strait
Of Maroc¹²⁸, as it was her a venture:

On many a sorry meal now may she bait,
After her death full often may she wait¹²⁹,
Ere that the wilde waves will her drive
Unto the place there as¹³⁰ she shall arrive.

Men mighten aske, why she was not slain?
Eke at the feast who might her body save?
And I answer to that demand again,
Who saved Daniel in the horrible cave,
Where every wight, save he, master or knave¹³¹,
Was with the lion fretted¹³², ere he astart¹³³?
No wight but God, that he bare in his heart.

God list¹³⁴ to shew his wonderful miracle
In her, that we should see his mighty workes:
Christ, which that is to every harm triacle¹³⁵,
By certain meanes oft, as knowe clerkes¹³⁶,
Doth thing for certain ende, that full derk is
To manne's wit, that for our, ignorance
Ne cannot know his prudent purveyance¹³⁷.

Now since she was not at the feast y-slaw¹³⁸,
Who kepte her from drowning in the sea?
Who kepte Jonas in the fish's maw,
Till he was spouted up at Nineveh?
Well may men know, it was no wight but he
That kept the Hebrew people from drowning,
With drye feet throughout the sea passing.

Who bade the foure spirits of tempest, (*Note 11*)
That power have t' annoye land and sea,
Both north and south, and also west and east,
Annoye neither sea, nor land, nor tree?
Soothly the commander of that was he
That from the tempest aye this woman kept,
As well when she awoke as when she slept.

Where might this woman meat and drinke have?

¹²⁸Morocco; Gibraltar.

¹²⁹expect.

¹³⁰where.

¹³¹servant.

¹³²devoured.

¹³³escaped.

¹³⁴it pleased.

¹³⁵remedy, salve.

¹³⁶scholars.

¹³⁷foresight.

¹³⁸slain.

Three year and more how lasted her vitaille¹³⁹?
 Who fed the Egyptian Mary in the cave
 Or in desert? no wight but Christ sans faille¹⁴⁰.
 Five thousand folk it was as great marvaille
 With loaves five and fishes two to feed
 God sent his foison¹⁴¹ at her greate need.

She drived forth into our ocean
 Throughout our wilde sea, till at the last
 Under an hold¹⁴², that nempnen¹⁴³ I not can,
 Far in Northumberland, the wave her cast
 And in the sand her ship sticked so fast
 That thennes would it not in all a tide: (*Note 12*)
 The will of Christ was that she should abide.

The Constable of the castle down did fare¹⁴⁴
 To see this wreck, and all the ship he sought¹⁴⁵,
 And found this weary woman full of care;
 He found also the treasure that she brought:
 In her language mercy she besought,
 The life out of her body for to twin¹⁴⁶,
 Her to deliver of woe that she was in.

A manner Latin corrupt (*Note 13*) was her speech,
 But algate¹⁴⁷ thereby was she understand.
 The Constable, when him list no longer seech¹⁴⁸,
 This woeful woman brought he to the lond.
 She kneeled down, and thanked Godde's sond¹⁴⁹;
 But what she was she would to no man say
 For foul nor fair, although that she should dey¹⁵⁰.

She said, she was so mazed in the sea,
 That she forgot her minde, by her truth.
 The Constable had of her so great pity
 And eke his wife, that they wept for ruth¹⁵¹:
 She was so diligent withoute slouth
 To serve and please every one in that place,
 That all her lov'd, that looked in her face.

The Constable and Dame Hermegild his wife
 Were Pagans, and that country every where;

¹³⁹victuals.

¹⁴⁰without fail.

¹⁴¹abundance.

¹⁴²castle.

¹⁴³name.

¹⁴⁴go.

¹⁴⁵searched.

¹⁴⁶divide.

¹⁴⁷nevertheless.

¹⁴⁸search.

¹⁴⁹what God had sent.

¹⁵⁰die.

¹⁵¹pity.

But Hermegild lov'd Constance as her life;
 And Constance had so long sojourned there
 In orisons, with many a bitter tear,
 Till Jesus had converted through His grace
 Dame Hermegild, Constableness of that place.

In all that land no Christians durste rout¹⁵²;
 All Christian folk had fled from that country
 Through Pagans, that conquered all about
 The plagues¹⁵³ of the North by land and sea.
 To Wales had fled the Christianity¹⁵⁴
 Of olde Britons, dwelling in this isle;
 There was their refuge for the meanwhile.

But yet n'ere¹⁵⁵ Christian Britons so exiled,
 That there n'ere¹⁵⁶ some which in their privy
 Honoured Christ, and heathen folk beguiled;
 And nigh the castle such there dwelled three;
 And one of them was blind, and might not see,
 But¹⁵⁷ it were with thilk¹⁵⁸ eyen of his mind,
 With which men maye see when they be blind.

Bright was the sun, as in a summer's day,
 For which the Constable, and his wife also,
 And Constance, have y-take the righte way
 Toward the sea a furlong way or two,
 To playen, and to roame to and fro;
 And in their walk this blinde man they met,
 Crooked and old, with eyen fast y-shet¹⁵⁹.

"In the name of Christ," cried this blind Briton,
 "Dame Hermegild, give me my sight again!"
 This lady wax'd afrayed of that soun¹⁶⁰,
 Lest that her husband, shortly for to sayn,
 Would her for Jesus Christe's love have slain,
 Till Constance made her hold, and bade her wirch¹⁶¹
 The will of Christ, as daughter of holy Church

The Constable wax'd abashed¹⁶² of that sight,
 And saide; "What amounteth all this fare¹⁶³?"
 Constance answered; "Sir, it is Christ's might,
 That helpeth folk out of the fiendes snare."

¹⁵²assemble.

¹⁵³regions, coasts.

¹⁵⁴the Old Britons who were Christians.

¹⁵⁵there were.

¹⁵⁶not.

¹⁵⁷except.

¹⁵⁸those.

¹⁵⁹shut.

¹⁶⁰was alarmed by that cry.

¹⁶¹work.

¹⁶²astonished.

¹⁶³what means all this ado.

And so farforth¹⁶⁴ she gan our law declare,
That she the Constable, ere that it were eve,
Converted, and on Christ made him believe.

This Constable was not lord of the place
Of which I speak, there as he Constance fand¹⁶⁵,
But kept it strongly many a winter space,
Under Alla, king of Northumberland,
That was full wise, and worthy of his hand
Against the Scotcs, as men may well hear;
But turn I will again to my mattere.

Satan, that ever us waiteth to beguile,
Saw of Constance all her perfectioun,
And cast anon how he might quite her while¹⁶⁶
And made a young knight, that dwelt in that town,
Love her so hot of foul affectioun,
That verily him thought that he should spill¹⁶⁷
But he of her might ones have his will¹⁶⁸.

He wooed her, but it availed nought;
She woulde do no sinne by no way:
And for despite, he compassed his thought
To make her a shameful death to dey¹⁶⁹;
He waiteth when the Constable is away,
And privily upon a night he crept
In Hermegilda's chamber while she slept.

Weary, forwaked¹⁷⁰ in her orisons,
Sleepeth Constance, and Hermegild also.
This knight, through Satanas' temptation;
All softly is to the bed y-go¹⁷¹,
And cut the throat of Hermegild in two,
And laid the bloody knife by Dame Constance,
And went his way, there God give him mischance.

Soon after came the Constable home again,
And eke Alla that king was of that land,
And saw his wife despiteously¹⁷² slain,
For which full oft he wept and wrung his hand;
And ill the bed the bloody knife he fand
By Dame Constance: Alas! what might she say?
For very woe her wit was all away.

To King Alla was told all this mischance

¹⁶⁴with such effect.

¹⁶⁵found.

¹⁶⁶considered how to have revenge on her.

¹⁶⁷perish.

¹⁶⁸unless.

¹⁶⁹die.

¹⁷⁰having been long awake.

¹⁷¹gone.

¹⁷²cruelly.

And eke the time, and where, and in what wise
 That in a ship was founden this Constance,
 As here before ye have me heard devise¹⁷³:
 The kinges heart for pity gan agrise¹⁷⁴,
 When he saw so benign a creature
 Fall in disease¹⁷⁵ and in misaventure.

For as the lamb toward his death is brought,
 So stood this innocent before the king:
 This false knight, that had this treason wrought,
 Bore her in hand¹⁷⁶ that she had done this thing:
 But natheless there was great murmuring
 Among the people, that say they cannot guess
 That she had done so great a wickedness.

For they had seen her ever virtuous,
 And loving Hermegild right as her life:
 Of this bare witness each one in that house,
 Save he that Hermegild slew with his knife:
 This gentle king had caught a great motife¹⁷⁷
 Of this witness, and thought he would inquere
 Deeper into this case, the truth to lear¹⁷⁸.

Alas! Constance, thou has no champion,
 Nor fighte canst thou not, so well-away!
 But he that starf¹⁷⁹ for our redemption,
 And bound Satan, and yet li'th where he lay,
 So be thy stronge champion this day:
 For, but Christ upon thee miracle kithe¹⁸⁰,
 Withoute guilt thou shalt be slain as swithe¹⁸¹.

She set her down on knees, and thus she said;
 "Immortal God, that savedest Susanne
 From false blame; and thou merciful maid,
 Mary I mean, the daughter to Saint Anne,
 Before whose child the angels sing Osanne¹⁸²,
 If I be guiltless of this felony,
 My succour be, or elles shall I die."

Have ye not seen sometime a pale face
 (Among a press) of him that hath been lad¹⁸³
 Toward his death, where he getteth no grace,
 And such a colour in his face hath had,

¹⁷³describe.

¹⁷⁴to be grieved, to tremble.

¹⁷⁵distress.

¹⁷⁶accused her falsely.

¹⁷⁷been greatly moved by the evidence.

¹⁷⁸learn.

¹⁷⁹died.

¹⁸⁰show.

¹⁸¹immediately.

¹⁸²Hosanna.

¹⁸³led.

Men mighte know him that was so bestad¹⁸⁴
 Amonges all the faces in that rout?
 So stood Constance, and looked her about.

O queenes living in prosperity,
 Duchesses, and ye ladies every one,
 Have some ruth¹⁸⁵ on her adversity!
 An emperor's daughter, she stood alone;
 She had no wight to whom to make her moan.
 O blood royal, that standest in this drede¹⁸⁶,
 Far be thy friendes in thy greate need!

This king Alla had such compassioun,
 As gentle heart is full filled of pity,
 That from his eyen ran the water down
 "Now hastily do fetch a book," quoth he;
 "And if this knight will sweare, how that she
 This woman slew, yet will we us advise¹⁸⁷
 Whom that we will that shall be our justice."

A Briton book, written with Evangiles¹⁸⁸,
 Was fetched, and on this book he swore anon
 She guilty was; and, in the meanewhiles,
 An hand him smote upon the necke bone,
 That down he fell at once right as a stone:
 And both his eyen burst out of his face
 In sight of ev'rybody in that place.

A voice was heard, in general audience,
 That said; "Thou hast deslander'd guileless
 The daughter of holy Church in high presence;
 Thus hast thou done, and yet hold I my peace?¹⁸⁹"
 Of this marvel aghast was all the press,
 As mazed folk they stood every one
 For dread of wreake¹⁹⁰, save Constance alone.

Great was the dread and eke the repentance
 Of them that hadde wrong suspicion
 Upon this sely¹⁹¹ innocent Constance;
 And for this miracle, in conclusion,
 And by Constance's mediation,
 The king, and many another in that place,
 Converted was, thanked be Christe's grace!

This false knight was slain for his untruth
 By judgement of Alla hastily;

¹⁸⁴bested, situated.

¹⁸⁵pity.

¹⁸⁶danger.

¹⁸⁷consider.

¹⁸⁸the Gospels.

¹⁸⁹shall I be silent.

¹⁹⁰vengeance.

¹⁹¹simple, harmless.

And yet Constance had of his death great ruth¹⁹²;
 And after this Jesus of his mercy
 Made Alla wedde full solemnly
 This holy woman, that is so bright and sheen,
 And thus hath Christ y-made Constance a queen.

But who was woeful, if I shall not lie,
 Of this wedding but Donegild, and no mo',
 The kinge's mother, full of tyranny?
 Her thought her cursed heart would burst in two;
 She would not that her son had done so;
 Her thought it a despite that he should take
 So strange a creature unto his make¹⁹³.

Me list not of the chaff nor of the stre¹⁹⁴
 Make so long a tale, as of the corn.
 What should I tellen of the royalty
 Of this marriage, or which course goes beforne,
 Who bloweth in a trump or in an horn?
 The fruit of every tale is for to say;
 They eat and drink, and dance, and sing, and play.

They go to bed, as it was skill¹⁹⁵ and right;
 For though that wives be full holy things,
 They muste take in patience at night
 Such manner¹⁹⁶ necessities as be pleasings
 To folk that have y-wedded them with rings,
 And lay a lite¹⁹⁷ their holiness aside
 As for the time, it may no better betide.

On her he got a knave¹⁹⁸ child anon, (*Note 14*)
 And to a Bishop and to his Constable eke
 He took his wife to keep, when he is gone
 To Scotland-ward, his foemen for to seek.
 Now fair Constance, that is so humble and meek,
 So long is gone with childe till that still
 She held her chamb'r, abiding Christe's will

The time is come, a knave child she bare;
 Mauricius at the font-stone they him call.
 This Constable doth forth come¹⁹⁹ a messenger,
 And wrote unto his king that clep'd was All',
 How that this blissful tiding is befall,
 And other tidings speedful for to say
 He²⁰⁰ hath the letter, and forth he go' th his way.

¹⁹²compassion.

¹⁹³mate, consort.

¹⁹⁴straw.

¹⁹⁵reasonable.

¹⁹⁶kind of.

¹⁹⁷a little of.

¹⁹⁸male.

¹⁹⁹caused to come forth.

²⁰⁰i.e. the messenger.

This messenger, to do his avantage²⁰¹,
 Unto the kinge's mother rideth swithe²⁰²,
 And saluteth her full fair in his language.
 "Madame," quoth he, "ye may be glad and blithe,
 And thanke God an hundred thousand sithe²⁰³;
 My lady queen hath child, withoute doubt,
 To joy and bliss of all this realm about.

"Lo, here the letter sealed of this thing,
 That I must bear with all the haste I may:
 If ye will aught unto your son the king,
 I am your servant both by night and day."
 Donegild answer'd, "As now at this time, nay;
 But here I will all night thou take thy rest,
 To-morrow will I say thee what me lest²⁰⁴."

This messenger drank sadly²⁰⁵ ale and wine,
 And stolen were his letters privily
 Out of his box, while he slept as a swine;
 And counterfeited was full subtilly
 Another letter, wrote full sinfully,
 Unto the king, direct of this mattere
 From his Constable, as ye shall after hear.

This letter said, the queen deliver'd was
 Of so horrible a fiendlike creature,
 That in the castle none so hardy²⁰⁶ was
 That any while he durst therein endure:
 The mother was an elf by aventure
 Become, by charmes or by sorcery,
 And every man hated her company.

Woe was this king when he this letter had seen,
 But to no wight he told his sorrows sore,
 But with his owen hand he wrote again,
 "Welcome the sond²⁰⁷ of Christ for evermore
 To me, that am now learned in this lore:
 Lord, welcome be thy lust²⁰⁸ and thy pleasance,
 My lust I put all in thine ordinance.

"Keepe²⁰⁹ this child, albeit foul or fair,
 And eke my wife, unto mine homecoming:
 Christ when him list may send to me an heir
 More agreeable than this to my liking."
 This letter he sealed, privily weeping.

²⁰¹promote his own interest.

²⁰²swiftly.

²⁰³times.

²⁰⁴pleases.

²⁰⁵steadily.

²⁰⁶brave.

²⁰⁷will, sending.

²⁰⁸will, pleasure.

²⁰⁹preserve.

Which to the messenger was taken soon,
And forth he went, there is no more to do'n²¹⁰.

O messenger full fill'd of drunkenness,
Strong is thy breath, thy limbes falter aye,
And thou betrayest alle secretness;
Thy mind is lorn²¹¹, thou janglest as a jay;
Thy face is turned in a new array²¹²;
Where drunkenness reigneth in any rout²¹³,
There is no counsel hid, withoute doubt.

O Donegild, I have no English dig²¹⁴
Unto thy malice, and thy tyranny:
And therefore to the fiend I thee resign,
Let him indite of all thy treachery
'Fy, mannish²¹⁵, fy! O nay, by God I lie;
Fy, fiendlike spirit! for I dare well tell,
Though thou here walk, thy spirit is in hell.

This messenger came from the king again,
And at the kinge's mother's court he light²¹⁶,
And she was of this messenger full fain²¹⁷,
And pleased him in all that e'er she might.
He drank, and well his girdle underpight²¹⁸;
He slept, and eke he snored in his guise
All night, until the sun began to rise.

Eft²¹⁹ were his letters stolen every one,
And counterfeited letters in this wise:
The king commanded his Constable anon,
On pain of hanging and of high jewise²²⁰,
That he should suffer in no manner wise
Constance within his regne²²¹ for to abide
Three dayes, and a quarter of a tide;
But in the same ship as he her fand,
Her and her younge son, and all her gear,
He shoulde put, and crowd²²² her from the land,
And charge her, that she never eft come there.
O my Constance, well may thy ghost²²³ have fear,

²¹⁰do.

²¹¹lost.

²¹²aspect.

²¹³company.

²¹⁴worthy.

²¹⁵unwomanly woman.

²¹⁶alighted.

²¹⁷glad.

²¹⁸stowed away liquor under his girdle.

²¹⁹again.

²²⁰judgement.

²²¹kingdom.

²²²push.

²²³spirit.

And sleeping in thy dream be in penance²²⁴,
When Donegild cast²²⁵ all this ordinance²²⁶.

This messenger, on morrow when he woke,
Unto the castle held the nexte²²⁷ way,
And to the constable the letter took;
And when he this dispiteous²²⁸ letter sey²²⁹,
Full off he said, "Alas, and well-away!
Lord Christ," quoth he, "how may this world endure?
So full of sin is many a creature.

"O mighty God, if that it be thy will,
Since thou art rightful judge, how may it be
That thou wilt suffer innocence to spill²³⁰,
And wicked folk reign in prosperity?
Ah! good Constance, alas! so woe is me,
That I must be thy tormentor, or de²³¹
A shameful death, there is no other way.

Wept bothe young and old in all that place,
When that the king this cursed letter sent;
And Constance, with a deadly pale face,
The fourthe day toward her ship she went.
But natheless she took in good intent
The will of Christ, and kneeling on the strond²³²
She saide, "Lord, aye welcome be thy sond²³³

"He that me kepte from the false blame,
While I was in the land amonges you,
He can me keep from harm and eke from shame
In the salt sea, although I see not how
As strong as ever he was, he is yet now,
In him trust I, and in his mother dere,
That is to me my sail and eke my stere²³⁴."

Her little child lay weeping in her arm
And, kneeling, piteously to him she said
"Peace, little son, I will do thee no harm:"
With that her kerchief off her head she braid²³⁵,
And over his little eyen she it laid,
And in her arm she lulled it full fast,
And unto heav'n her eyen up she cast.

²²⁴pain, trouble.

²²⁵contrived.

²²⁶plan, plot.

²²⁷nearest.

²²⁸cruel.

²²⁹saw.

²³⁰be destroyed.

²³¹die.

²³²strand, shore.

²³³whatever thou sendest.

²³⁴rudder, guide.

²³⁵took, drew.

"Mother," quoth she, "and maiden bright, Mary,
 Sooth is, that through a woman's eggement²³⁶
 Mankind was lorn²³⁷, and damned aye to die;
 For which thy child was on a cross y-rent²³⁸:
 Thy blissful eyen saw all his torment,
 Then is there no comparison between
 Thy woe, and any woe man may sustene.

"Thou saw'st thy child y-slain before thine eyen,
 And yet now lives my little child, parfay²³⁹:
 Now, lady bright, to whom the woeful cryen,
 Thou glory of womanhood, thou faire may²⁴⁰,
 Thou haven of refuge, bright star of day,
 Rue²⁴¹ on my child, that of thy gentleness
 Ruest on every rueful²⁴² in distress.

"O little child, alas! what is thy guilt,
 That never wroughtest sin as yet, pardie²⁴³?
 Why will thine harde²⁴⁴ father have thee spilt²⁴⁵?
 O mercy, deare Constable," quoth she,
 "And let my little child here dwell with thee:
 And if thou dar'st not save him from blame,
 So kiss him ones in his father's name."

Therewith she looked backward to the land,
 And saide, "Farewell, husband rutherford!"
 And up she rose, and walked down the strand
 Toward the ship, her following all the press²⁴⁶:
 And ever she pray'd her child to hold his peace,
 And took her leave, and with an holy intent
 She blessed her, and to the ship she went.

Victualed was the ship, it is no drede²⁴⁷,
 Abundantly for her a full long space:
 And other necessities that should need²⁴⁸
 She had enough, heried²⁴⁹ be Godde's grace: (*Note 15*)
 For wind and weather, Almighty God purchase²⁵⁰,
 And bring her home; I can no better say;

²³⁶incitement, egging on.

²³⁷lost.

²³⁸torn, pierced.

²³⁹by my faith.

²⁴⁰maid.

²⁴¹take pity.

²⁴²sorrowful person.

²⁴³par Dieu; by God.

²⁴⁴cruel.

²⁴⁵destroyed.

²⁴⁶multitude.

²⁴⁷doubt.

²⁴⁸be needed.

²⁴⁹praised.

²⁵⁰provide.

But in the sea she drived forth her way.

Alla the king came home soon after this
 Unto the castle, of the which I told,
 And asked where his wife and his child is;
 The Constable gan about his heart feel cold,
 And plainly all the matter he him told
 As ye have heard; I can tell it no better;
 And shew'd the king his seal, and eke his letter

And saide; "Lord, as ye commanded me
 On pain of death, so have I done certain."
 The messenger tormented²⁵¹ was, till he
 Muste beknow²⁵², and tell it flat and plain, (*Note 16*)
 From night to night in what place he had lain;
 And thus, by wit and subtle inquiring,
 Imagin'd was by whom this harm gan spring.

The hand was known that had the letter wrote,
 And all the venom of the cursed deed;
 But in what wise, certainly I know not.
 Th' effect is this, that Alla, out of drede²⁵³,
 His mother slew, that may men plainly read,
 For that she traitor was to her liegeance²⁵⁴:
 Thus ended olde Donegild with mischance.

The sorrow that this Alla night and day
 Made for his wife, and for his child also,
 There is no tongue that it telle may.
 But now will I again to Constance go,
 That floated in the sea in pain and woe
 Five year and more, as liked Christe's sond²⁵⁵,
 Ere that her ship approached to the lond²⁵⁶.

Under an heathen castle, at the last,
 Of which the name in my text I not find,
 Constance and eke her child the sea upcast.
 Almighty God, that saved all mankind,
 Have on Constance and on her child some mind,
 That fallen is in heathen hand eftsoon²⁵⁷
 In point to spill²⁵⁸, as I shall tell you soon!
 Down from the castle came there many a wight
 To gauren²⁵⁹ on this ship, and on Constance:
 But shortly from the castle, on a night,
 The lorde's steward, – God give him mischance, –

²⁵¹tortured.

²⁵²confess.

²⁵³without doubt.

²⁵⁴allegiance.

²⁵⁵decree, command.

²⁵⁶land.

²⁵⁷again.

²⁵⁸in danger of perishing.

²⁵⁹gaze, stare.

A thief that had renied our creance²⁶⁰,
 Came to the ship alone, and said he would
 Her leman²⁶¹ be, whether she would or n'ould.

Woe was this wretched woman then begone;
 Her child cri'd, and she cried piteously:
 But blissful Mary help'd her right anon,
 For, with her struggling well and mightily,
 The thief fell overboard all suddenly,
 And in the sea he drenched²⁶² for vengeance,
 And thus hath Christ unwemmed²⁶³ kept Constance.

O foul lust of luxury! lo thine end!
 Not only that thou faintest²⁶⁴ manne's mind,
 But verily thou wilt his body shend²⁶⁵
 Th' end of thy work, or of thy lustes blind,
 Is complaining: how many may men find,
 That not for work, sometimes, but for th' intent
 To do this sin, be either slain or shent?

How may this weake woman have the strength
 Her to defend against this renegade?
 O Goliath, unmeasurable of length,
 How mighte David make thee so mate²⁶⁶?
 So young, and of armour so desolate²⁶⁷,
 How durst he look upon thy dreadful face?
 Well may men see it was but Godde's grace.

Who gave Judith courage or hardiness
 To slay him, Holofernes, in his tent,
 And to deliver out of wretchedness
 The people of God? I say for this intent
 That right as God spirit of vigour sent
 To them, and saved them out of mischance,
 So sent he might and vigour to Constance.

Forth went her ship throughout the narrow mouth
 Of Jubaltare and Septe²⁶⁸, driving alway,
 Sometime west, and sometime north and south,
 And sometime east, full many a weary day:
 Till Christe's mother (blessed be she aye)
 Had shaped²⁶⁹ through her endless goodness
 To make an end of all her heaviness.

²⁶⁰denied our faith.

²⁶¹illicit lover.

²⁶²drowned.

²⁶³unblemished.

²⁶⁴weakenest.

²⁶⁵destroy.

²⁶⁶overthrown.

²⁶⁷devoid.

²⁶⁸Gibraltar and Ceuta.

²⁶⁹resolved, arranged.

Now let us stint²⁷⁰ of Constance but a throw²⁷¹,
 And speak we of the Roman emperor,
 That out of Syria had by letters know
 The slaughter of Christian folk, and dishonor
 Done to his daughter by a false traitor,
 I mean the cursed wicked Soudaness,
 That at the feast let slay both more and less²⁷².
 For which this emperor had sent anon
 His senator, with royal ordinance,
 And other lordes, God wot, many a one,
 On Syrians to take high vengeance:
 They burn and slay, and bring them to mischance
 Full many a day: but shortly this is th' end,
 Homeward to Rome they shaped them to wend.

This senator repaired with victory
 To Rome-ward, sailing full royally,
 And met the ship driving, as saith the story,
 In which Constance sat full piteously:
 And nothing knew he what she was, nor why
 She was in such array; nor she will say
 Of her estate, although that she should dey²⁷³.

He brought her unto Rome, and to his wife
 He gave her, and her younge son also:
 And with the senator she led her life.
 Thus can our Lady bringen out of woe
 Woeful Constance, and many another mo':
 And longe time she dwelled in that place,
 In holy works ever, as was her grace.

The senatores wife her aunte was,
 But for all that she knew her ne'er the more:
 I will no longer tarry in this case,
 But to King Alla, whom I spake of yore,
 That for his wife wept and sighed sore,
 I will return, and leave I will Constance
 Under the senatores governance.

King Alla, which that had his mother slain,
 Upon a day fell in such repentance;
 That, if I shortly tell it shall and plain,
 To Rome he came to receive his penitance,
 And put him in the Pope's ordinance
 In high and low, and Jesus Christ besought
 Forgive his wicked works that he had wrought.

The fame anon throughout the town is borne,
 How Alla king shall come on pilgrimage,
 By harbingers that wente him befor,

²⁷⁰cease speaking.

²⁷¹short time.

²⁷²caused both high and low to be killed.

²⁷³die.

For which the senator, as was usage,
Rode him again²⁷⁴, and many of his lineage,
As well to show his high magnificence,
As to do any king a reverence.

Great cheere²⁷⁵ did this noble senator
To King Alla and he to him also;
Each of them did the other great honor;
And so befell, that in a day or two
This senator did to King Alla go
To feast, and shortly, if I shall not lie,
Constance's son went in his company.

Some men would say, (*Note 17*) at request of Constance
This senator had led this child to feast:
I may not tellen every circumstance,
Be as be may, there was he at the least:
But sooth is this, that at his mother's hest²⁷⁶
Before Alla during the meates space²⁷⁷,
The child stood, looking in the kinges face.

This Alla king had of this child great wonder,
And to the senator he said anon,
"Whose is that faire child that standeth yonder?"
"I n'ot²⁷⁸," quoth he, "by God and by Saint John;
A mother he hath, but father hath he none,
That I of wot:" and shortly in a stound²⁷⁹ (*Note 18*)
He told to Alla how this child was found.

"But God wot," quoth this senator also,
"So virtuous a liver in all my life
I never saw, as she, nor heard of mo'
Of worldly woman, maiden, widow or wife:
I dare well say she hadde lever²⁸⁰ a knife
Throughout her breast, than be a woman wick'²⁸¹,
There is no man could bring her to that prick²⁸²."

Now was this child as like unto Constance
As possible is a creature to be:
This Alla had the face in remembrance
Of Dame Constance, and thereon mused he,
If that the childe's mother were aught she²⁸³
That was his wife; and privily he sight²⁸⁴,

²⁷⁴to meet him.

²⁷⁵courtesy.

²⁷⁶behest.

²⁷⁷meal time.

²⁷⁸know not.

²⁷⁹short time.

²⁸⁰rather.

²⁸¹wicked.

²⁸²point.

²⁸³could be she.

²⁸⁴sighed.

And sped him from the table that he might²⁸⁵.

"Parfay²⁸⁶," thought he, "phantom is in mine head.
I ought to deem, of skilful judgement,
That in the salte sea my wife is dead."
And afterward he made his argument,
"What wot I, if that Christ have hither sent
My wife by sea, as well as he her sent
To my country, from thennes that she went?"

And, after noon, home with the senator.
Went Alla, for to see this wondrous chance.
This senator did Alla great honor,
And hastily he sent after Constance:
But truste well, her liste not to dance.
When that she wiste wherefore was that sond²⁸⁷,
Unneth²⁸⁸ upon her feet she mighte stand.

When Alla saw his wife, fair he her gret²⁸⁹,
And wept, that it was ruthe for to see,
For at the firste look he on her set
He knew well verily that it was she:
And she, for sorrow, as dumb stood as a tree:
So was her hearte shut in her distress,
When she remember'd his unkindness.

Twice she swooned in his owen sight,
He wept and him excused piteously:
"Now God," quoth he, "and all his hallows bright²⁹⁰
So wisly²⁹¹ on my soule have mercy,
That of your harm as guileless am I,
As is Maurice my son, so like your face,
Else may the fiend me fetch out of this place."

Long was the sobbing and the bitter pain,
Ere that their woeful heartes mighte cease;
Great was the pity for to hear them plain²⁹²,
Through whiche plaintes gan their woe increase.
I pray you all my labour to release,
I may not tell all their woe till to-morrow,
I am so weary for to speak of sorrow.

But finally, when that the sooth is wist²⁹³,
That Alla guiltless was of all her woe,
I trow an hundred times have they kiss'd,
And such a bliss is there betwixt them two,

²⁸⁵as fast as he could.

²⁸⁶by my faith a fantasy.

²⁸⁷summons.

²⁸⁸with difficulty.

²⁸⁹greeted.

²⁹⁰saints.

²⁹¹surely.

²⁹²lament.

²⁹³truth is known.

That, save the joy that lasteth evermo',
 There is none like, that any creature
 Hath seen, or shall see, while the world may dure.

Then prayed she her husband meekely
 In the relief of her long piteous pine²⁹⁴,
 That he would pray her father specially,
 That of his majesty he would incline
 To vouchesafe some day with him to dine:
 She pray'd him eke, that he should by no way
 Unto her father no word of her say.

Some men would say, (*Note 17*) how that the child Maurice
 Did this message unto the emperor:
 But, as I guess, Alla was not so nice²⁹⁵,
 To him that is so sovereign of honor
 As he that is of Christian folk the flow'r,
 Send any child, but better 'tis to deem
 He went himself; and so it may well seem.

This emperor hath granted gentilly
 To come to dinner, as he him besought:
 And well rede²⁹⁶ I, he looked busily
 Upon this child, and on his daughter thought.
 Alla went to his inn, and as him ought
 Arrayed²⁹⁷ for this feast in every wise,
 As farforth as his cunning²⁹⁸ may suffice.

The morrow came, and Alla gan him dress²⁹⁹,
 And eke his wife, the emperor to meet:
 And forth they rode in joy and in gladness,
 And when she saw her father in the street,
 She lighted down and fell before his feet.
 "Father," quoth she, "your younge child Constance
 Is now full clean out of your remembrance.

"I am your daughter, your Constance," quoth she,
 "That whilom ye have sent into Syrie;
 It am I, father, that in the salt sea
 Was put alone, and damned³⁰⁰ for to die.
 Now, goode father, I you mercy cry,
 Send me no more into none heatheness,
 But thank my lord here of his kindeness."

Who can the piteous joye tellen all,
 Betwixt them three, since they be thus y-met?
 But of my tale make an end I shall,

²⁹⁴sorrow.

²⁹⁵foolish.

²⁹⁶guess, know.

²⁹⁷prepared.

²⁹⁸as far as his skill.

²⁹⁹make ready.

³⁰⁰condemned.

The day goes fast, I will no longer let³⁰¹.
 These gladde folk to dinner be y-set;
 In joy and bliss at meat I let them dwell,
 A thousand fold well more than I can tell.

This child Maurice was since then emperor
 Made by the Pope, and lived Christianly,
 To Christe's Church did he great honor:
 But I let all his story passe by,
 Of Constance is my tale especially,
 In the olde Roman gestes³⁰² men may find (*Note 19*)
 Maurice's life, I bear it not in mind.

This King Alla, when he his time sey³⁰³,
 With his Constance, his holy wife so sweet,
 To England are they come the righte way,
 Where they did live in joy and in quiet.
 But little while it lasted, I you hete³⁰⁴,
 Joy of this world for time will not abide,
 From day to night it changeth as the tide.

Who liv'd ever in such delight one day,
 That him not moved either conscience,
 Or ire, or talent, or some kind affray³⁰⁵,
 Envy, or pride, or passion, or offence?
 I say but for this ende this sentence³⁰⁶,
 That little while in joy or in pleasance
 Lasted the bliss of Alla with Constance.

For death, that takes of high and low his rent,
 When passed was a year, even as I guess,
 Out of this world this King Alla he hent³⁰⁷,
 For whom Constance had full great heaviness.
 Now let us pray that God his soule bless:
 And Dame Constance, finally to say,
 Toward the town of Rome went her way.

To Rome is come this holy creature,
 And findeth there her friendes whole and sound:
 Now is she scaped all her aventure:
 And when that she her father hath y-found,
 Down on her knees falleth she to ground,
 Weeping for tenderness in hearte blithe
 She herieth³⁰⁸ God an hundred thousand sithe³⁰⁹.
 In virtue and in holy almes-deed

³⁰¹hinder.

³⁰²histories.

³⁰³saw.

³⁰⁴promise.

³⁰⁵some kind of disturbance.

³⁰⁶judgment, opinion.

³⁰⁷snatched.

³⁰⁸praises.

³⁰⁹times.

They liven all, and ne'er asunder wend;
Till death departeth them, this life they lead:
And fare now well, my tale is at an end
Now Jesus Christ, that of his might may send
Joy after woe, govern us in his grace
And keep us alle that be in this place.

NOTES TO THE TALE

1. This tale is believed by Tyrwhitt to have been taken, with no material change, from the "Confessio Amantis" of John Gower, who was contemporary with Chaucer, though somewhat his senior. In the prologue, the references to the stories of Canace, and of Apollonius Tyrius, seem to be an attack on Gower, who had given these tales in his book; whence Tyrwhitt concludes that the friendship between the two poets suffered some interruption in the latter part of their lives. Gower was not the inventor of the story, which he found in old French romances, and it is not improbable that Chaucer may have gone to the same source as Gower, though the latter undoubtedly led the way. (Transcriber's note: later commentators have identified the introduction describing the sorrows of poverty, along with the other moralising interludes in the tale, as translated from "De Contemptu Mundi" ("On the contempt of the world") by Pope Innocent.)

2. Transcriber's note: This refers to the game of hazard, a dice game like craps, in which two ("ambes ace") won, and eleven ("six-cinque") lost.

3. Purpose: discourse, tale: French "propos".

4. "Peace" rhymed with "lese" and "chese", the old forms of "lose" and "choose".

5. According to Middle Age writers there were two motions of the first heaven; one everything always from east to west above the stars; the other moving the stars against the first motion, from west to east, on two other poles.

6. Atzar: the meaning of this word is not known; but "occifer", murderer, has been suggested instead by Urry, on the authority of a marginal reading on a manuscript. (Transcriber's note: later commentators explain it as derived from Arabic "al-ta'thir", influence - used here in an astrological sense)

7. "Thou knittest thee where thou art not receiv'd, Where thou wert well, from thennes art thou weiv'd" i.e. "Thou joinest thyself where thou art rejected, and art declined or departed from the place where thou wert well." The moon portends the fortunes of Constance.

8. Fand: endeavour; from Anglo-Saxon, "fandian," to try

9. Feng: take; Anglo-Saxon "fengian", German, "fangen".

10. Him and her on which thy limbes faithfully extend: those who in faith wear the crucifix.

11. The four spirits of tempest: the four angels who held the four winds of the earth and to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea (Rev. vii. 1, 2).

12. Thennes would it not in all a tide: thence would it not move for long,

at all.

13. A manner Latin corrupt: a kind of bastard Latin.

14. Knave child: male child; German "Knabe".

15. Heried: honoured, praised; from Anglo-Saxon, "herian." Compare German, "herrlich," glorious, honourable.

16. Beknow: confess; German, "bekennen."

17. The poet here refers to Gower's version of the story.

18. Stound: short time; German, "stunde", hour.

19. Gestes: histories, exploits; Latin, "res gestae".