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

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**by Geoffrey Chaucer**

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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 wit<sup>1</sup>,  
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 plight<sup>2</sup> his horse about.  
"Lordings," quoth he, "I warn you all this rout<sup>3</sup>,  
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,

---

<sup>1</sup>knowledge.

<sup>2</sup>pulled.

<sup>3</sup>company.

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 shendeth<sup>4</sup> 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 moulede thus in idleness.  
 "Sir Man of Law," quoth he, "so have ye bliss,  
 Tell us a tale anon, as forword<sup>5</sup> is.  
 Ye be submitted through your free assent  
 To stand in this case at my judgement.  
 Acquit you now, and holde your behest<sup>6</sup>;  
 Then have ye done your devoir<sup>7</sup> 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 thrifty<sup>8</sup> tale sayn,  
 But Chaucer (though he can but lewedly<sup>9</sup>  
 On metres and on rhyiming craftily)

---

<sup>4</sup>destroys.

<sup>5</sup>the bargain.

<sup>6</sup>keep your promise.

<sup>7</sup>duty.

<sup>8</sup>worthy.

<sup>9</sup>knows but imperfectly.

Hath said them, in such English as he can,  
 Of olde time, as knoweth many a man.  
 And if he have not said them, leve<sup>10</sup> 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 halse<sup>11</sup>;  
 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  
 Of thilke wick<sup>12</sup>' 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

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<sup>10</sup>dear.txt

<sup>11</sup>neck.

<sup>12</sup>that wicked.

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 avisement<sup>13</sup>,  
Would never write in none of his sermons  
Of such unkind<sup>14</sup> 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 hawebake<sup>15</sup>;  
(*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.

---

<sup>13</sup>deliberately, advisedly.

<sup>14</sup>unnatural.

<sup>15</sup>lout.

## 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 her 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 con-  
founded;

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 dispence<sup>16</sup>.

Thou blamest Christ, and sayst full bitterly,  
He misdeparteth<sup>17</sup> riches temporal;  
Thy neighebour thou witest<sup>18</sup> 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 glede<sup>19</sup>,  
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 selve<sup>20</sup> neighebour will thee despise,

---

<sup>16</sup>expense.

<sup>17</sup>allots amiss.

<sup>18</sup>blamest.

<sup>19</sup>burn in the fire.

<sup>20</sup>that same.

If thou be poor, farewell thy reverence.  
 Yet of the wise man take this sentence,  
 Alle the days of poore men be wick'<sup>21</sup>,  
 Beware therefore ere thou come to that prick<sup>22</sup>.

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 ace<sup>23</sup>,  
 But with six-cinque<sup>24</sup>, that runneth for your  
 chance; (*Note 2*)  
 At Christenmass well merry may ye dance.

Ye seeke land and sea for your winnings,  
 As wise folk ye knowen all th' estate  
 Of regnes<sup>25</sup>; ye be fathers of tidings,  
 And tales, both of peace and of debate<sup>26</sup>:  
 I were right now of tales desolate<sup>27</sup>,  
 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 sad<sup>28</sup> and true,  
 Clothes of gold, and satins rich of hue.  
 That widewhere<sup>29</sup> sent their spicery,  
 Their chaffare<sup>30</sup> was so thriftly<sup>31</sup> and so new,

---

<sup>21</sup>wicked, evil.

<sup>22</sup>point.

<sup>23</sup>wicked, evil.

<sup>24</sup>six-five.

<sup>25</sup>kingdoms.

<sup>26</sup>contention, war.

<sup>27</sup>barren, empty.

<sup>28</sup>grave, steadfast.

<sup>29</sup>to distant parts.

<sup>30</sup>wares.

<sup>31</sup>advantageous.

That every wight had dainty<sup>32</sup> to chaffare<sup>33</sup>  
 With them, and eke to selle them their ware.

Now fell it, that the masters of that sort  
 Have shapen them<sup>34</sup> to Rome for to wend,  
 Were it for chapmanhood<sup>35</sup> 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 herbergage<sup>36</sup>.

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 devise<sup>37</sup>

This was the common voice of every man  
 "Our emperor of Rome, God him see<sup>38</sup>,  
 A daughter hath, that since the the world began,  
 To reckon as well her goodness and beauty,  
 Was never such another as is she:  
 I pray to God in honour her sustene<sup>39</sup>,  
 And would she were of all Europe the queen.

"In her is highe beauty without pride,  
 And youth withoute greenhood<sup>40</sup> or folly:  
 To all her workes virtue is her guide;  
 Humbless hath slain in her all tyranny:

---

<sup>32</sup>pleasure.

<sup>33</sup>deal.

<sup>34</sup>determined, prepared.

<sup>35</sup>trading.

<sup>36</sup>lodging.

<sup>37</sup>relate.

<sup>38</sup>look on with favour.

<sup>39</sup>sustain.

<sup>40</sup>childishness, immaturity.

She is the mirror of all courtesy,  
 Her heart a very chamber of holiness,  
 Her hand minister of freedom for almess<sup>41</sup>."

And all this voice was sooth, as God is true;  
 But now to purpose<sup>42</sup> 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 needs<sup>43</sup>, as they have done  
     yore<sup>44</sup>,  
 And liv'd in weal<sup>45</sup>; I can you say no more.

Now fell it, that these merchants stood in grace<sup>46</sup>  
 Of him that was the Soudan<sup>47</sup> of Syrie:  
 For when they came from any strange place  
 He would of his benigne courtesy  
 Make them good cheer, and busily espy<sup>48</sup>  
 Tidings of sundry regnes<sup>49</sup>, for to lear<sup>50</sup>  
 The wonders that they mighte see or hear.

Amonges other thinges, specially  
 These merchants have him told of Dame Con-  
     stance  
 So great nobless, in earnest so royally,  
 That this Soudan hath caught so great plea-  
     sance<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>almsgiving.

<sup>42</sup>our tale.

<sup>43</sup>business.

<sup>44</sup>formerly.

<sup>45</sup>prosperity.

<sup>46</sup>favour.

<sup>47</sup>Sultan.

<sup>48</sup>inquire.

<sup>49</sup>realms.

<sup>50</sup>learn.

<sup>51</sup>pleasure.

To have her figure in his remembrance,  
 That all his lust<sup>52</sup>, and all his busy cure<sup>53</sup>,  
 Was for to love her while his life may dure.

Paraventure in thilk<sup>54</sup> large book,  
 Which that men call the heaven, y-written was  
 With starres, when that he his birthe took,  
 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 dread<sup>55</sup>.

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 pace<sup>56</sup>,  
 He hath to them declared his intent,  
 And told them certain, but<sup>57</sup> he might have  
 grace

To have Constance, within a little space,  
 He was but dead; and charged them in hie<sup>58</sup>  
 To shape<sup>59</sup> for his life some remedy.

Diverse men diverse thinges said;  
 And arguments they casten up and down;  
 Many a subtle reason forth they laid;

---

<sup>52</sup>pleasure.

<sup>53</sup>care.

<sup>54</sup>that.

<sup>55</sup>doubt.

<sup>56</sup>to pass briefly by.

<sup>57</sup>unless.

<sup>58</sup>haste.

<sup>59</sup>contrive.

They speak of magic, and abusion<sup>60</sup>;  
 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 trowe<sup>61</sup> that no Christian prince would  
 fain<sup>62</sup>

Wedden his child under our lawe sweet,  
 That us was given by Mahound<sup>63</sup> 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 cure<sup>64</sup>,  
 For in this woe I may not long endure."

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'metry<sup>65</sup>,  
 And in increase of Christe's lawe dear,  
 They be accorded<sup>66</sup> so as ye may hear;

How that the Soudan, and his baronage,  
 And all his lieges, shall y-christen'd be,

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<sup>60</sup>deception.

<sup>61</sup>believe.

<sup>62</sup>willingly.

<sup>63</sup>Mahomet.

<sup>64</sup>keeping.

<sup>65</sup>Mahometanism.

<sup>66</sup>agreed.

And he shall have Constance in marriage,  
 And certain gold, I n'ot<sup>67</sup> 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 purveyance<sup>68</sup>,  
 The which the emperor of his noblesse  
 Hath shapen<sup>69</sup> for his daughter, Dame Con-  
 stance.

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 gree<sup>70</sup>, 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 dresen<sup>71</sup> 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,

---

<sup>67</sup>know not.

<sup>68</sup>provision.

<sup>69</sup>prepared.

<sup>70</sup>with good will, favour.

<sup>71</sup>prepare to set out.

And to be bound under subjection  
of one, she knew not his condition?  
Husbands be all good, and have been of yore<sup>72</sup>,  
That knowe wives; I dare say no more.

"Father," she said, "thy wretched child Con-  
stance,  
Thy younge daughter, foster'd up so soft,  
And you, my mother, my sov'reign pleasance  
Over all thing, out-taken<sup>73</sup> Christ on loft<sup>74</sup>,  
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 starf<sup>75</sup> for our redemption,  
So give me grace his hestes<sup>76</sup> to fulfil.  
I, wretched woman, no force though I spill<sup>77</sup>!  
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 crowdest<sup>78</sup> aye,

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<sup>72</sup>of old.

<sup>73</sup>except.

<sup>74</sup>on high.

<sup>75</sup>died.

<sup>76</sup>commands.

<sup>77</sup>no matter though I perish.

<sup>78</sup>pushest together, drivest.

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 pace<sup>79</sup>.  
 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 bet<sup>80</sup> than other in such case?  
 Of voyage is there none election,  
 Namely<sup>81</sup> to folk of high condition,  
 Not when a root is of a birth y-know<sup>82</sup>?  
 Alas! we be too lewed<sup>83</sup>, 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 her<sup>84</sup> 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,

---

<sup>79</sup>progress.

<sup>80</sup>better.

<sup>81</sup>especially.

<sup>82</sup>when the nativity is known.

<sup>83</sup>ignorant.

<sup>84</sup>made an effort.

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 fere<sup>85</sup>,  
 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 lete<sup>86</sup>  
 The holy lawes of our Alkaron<sup>87</sup>  
 Given by God's messenger Mahomete:  
 But one avow to greate God I hete<sup>88</sup>,  
 Life shall rather out of my body start,  
 Than Mahomet's law go out of mine heart.

"What should us tiden<sup>89</sup> of this newe law,  
 But thraldom to our bodies, and penance,  
 And afterward in hell to be y-draw,  
 For we renied Mahound our creance<sup>90</sup>?  
 But, lordes, will ye maken assurance,  
 As I shall say, assenting to my lore<sup>91</sup>?  
 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 fand<sup>92</sup>  
 (Note 8)

And she hath this emprise taken in hand,  
 Which ye shall heare that I shall devise<sup>93</sup>;  
 And to them all she spake right in this wise.

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<sup>85</sup>together.

<sup>86</sup>forsake.

<sup>87</sup>Koran.

<sup>88</sup>promise.

<sup>89</sup>betide, befall.

<sup>90</sup>denied Mahomet our belief.

<sup>91</sup>advice.

<sup>92</sup>endeavour.

<sup>93</sup>relate.

"We shall first feign us Christendom to take<sup>94</sup>;  
 Cold water shall not grieve us but a lite<sup>95</sup>:  
 And I shall such a feast and revel make,  
 That, as I trow, I shall the Soudan quite<sup>96</sup>.  
 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 Soudaness<sup>97</sup>, 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 servage<sup>98</sup>:  
 Thou wilt fordo<sup>99</sup> 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 war-  
 ray<sup>100</sup>,  
 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 lay<sup>101</sup>,

<sup>94</sup>embrace Christianity.

<sup>95</sup>little.

<sup>96</sup>requite, match.

<sup>97</sup>Sultaness.

<sup>98</sup>bondage.

<sup>99</sup>ruin.

<sup>100</sup>oppose, censure.

<sup>101</sup>renounce her creed.

And Christendom of priestes' handes fong<sup>102</sup>,  
 (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 hest<sup>103</sup>,"  
 And kneeling, thanked her for that request;  
 So glad he was, he wist<sup>104</sup> not what to say.  
 She kiss'd her son, and home she went her way.

Arrived be these Christian folk to land  
 In Syria, with a great solemne rout,  
 And hastily this Soudan sent his sond<sup>105</sup>,  
 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 again<sup>106</sup> the queen,  
 The honour of his regne<sup>107</sup> to sustene.

Great was the press, and rich was the array  
 Of Syrians and Romans met in fere<sup>108</sup>.  
 The mother of the Soudan rich and gay  
 Received her with all so glad a cheer<sup>109</sup>  
 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,

---

<sup>102</sup>take.

<sup>103</sup>desire.

<sup>104</sup>knew.

<sup>105</sup>message.

<sup>106</sup>to meet.

<sup>107</sup>realm.

<sup>108</sup>in company.

<sup>109</sup>face.

Than was th' assembly of this blissful host  
 But O this scorpion, this wicked ghost<sup>110</sup>,  
 The Soudaness, for all her flattering  
 Cast<sup>111</sup> 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 stint<sup>112</sup>, 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! sprent<sup>113</sup> is with bitterness  
 Th' end of our joy, of our worldly labour;  
 Woe occupies the fine<sup>114</sup> of our gladness.  
 Harken this counsel, for thy sickness<sup>115</sup>:  
 Upon thy glade days have in thy mind  
 The unware<sup>116</sup> 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 sticked<sup>117</sup> at the board,

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<sup>110</sup>spirit.

<sup>111</sup>contrived.

<sup>112</sup>cease.

<sup>113</sup>sprinkled.

<sup>114</sup>seizes the end.

<sup>115</sup>security.

<sup>116</sup>unforeseen.

<sup>117</sup>cut to pieces.

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 wot<sup>118</sup>,  
 That was not all to-hewn, ere he asterted<sup>119</sup>:  
 And Constance have they ta'en anon foot-  
 hot<sup>120</sup>,  
 And in a ship all steereless, God wot<sup>121</sup>,  
 They have her set, and bid her learn to sail  
 Out of Syria again-ward to Itale<sup>122</sup>.  
 A certain treasure that she thither lad<sup>123</sup>,  
 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 steer<sup>124</sup>!  
 She bless'd herself, and with full piteous voice  
 Unto the cross of Christ thus saide she;  
 "O dear, O wealful<sup>125</sup> 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 drenchen<sup>126</sup> in the deepe.  
 "Victorious tree, protection of the true,

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<sup>118</sup>knew.

<sup>119</sup>escaped.

<sup>120</sup>immediately.

<sup>121</sup>without rudder.

<sup>122</sup>back to Italy.

<sup>123</sup>took.

<sup>124</sup>rudder, guide.

<sup>125</sup>blessed, beneficent.

<sup>126</sup>drown.

That only worthy were for to bear  
 The King of Heaven, with his woundes new,  
 The white Lamb, that hurt was with a spear;  
 Flemer<sup>127</sup> of fiendes out of him and her  
 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 Maroc<sup>128</sup>, as it was her a venture:  
 On many a sorry meal now may she bait,  
 After her death full often may she wait<sup>129</sup>,  
 Ere that the wilde waves will her drive  
 Unto the place there as<sup>130</sup> 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 knave<sup>131</sup>,  
 Was with the lion fretted<sup>132</sup>, ere he astart<sup>133</sup>?  
 No wight but God, that he bare in his heart.

God list<sup>134</sup> to shew his wonderful miracle  
 In her, that we should see his mighty workes:  
 Christ, which that is to every harm triacle<sup>135</sup>,  
 By certain meanes oft, as knowe clerkes<sup>136</sup>,  
 Doth thing for certain ende, that full derk is  
 To manne's wit, that for our, ignorance

---

<sup>127</sup>banisher, driver out.

<sup>128</sup>Morocco; Gibraltar.

<sup>129</sup>expect.

<sup>130</sup>where.

<sup>131</sup>servant.

<sup>132</sup>devoured.

<sup>133</sup>escaped.

<sup>134</sup>it pleased.

<sup>135</sup>remedy, salve.

<sup>136</sup>scholars.

Ne cannot know his prudent purveyance<sup>137</sup>.

Now since she was not at the feast y-slaw<sup>138</sup>,  
 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?

Three year and more how lasted her vitaille<sup>139</sup>?  
 Who fed the Egyptian Mary in the cave  
 Or in desert? no wight but Christ sans faille<sup>140</sup>.  
 Five thousand folk it was as great marvaille  
 With loaves five and fishes two to feed  
 God sent his foison<sup>141</sup> at her greate need.

She driven forth into our ocean  
 Throughout our wilde sea, till at the last  
 Under an hold<sup>142</sup>, that nempnen<sup>143</sup> 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*)

---

<sup>137</sup>foresight.

<sup>138</sup>slain.

<sup>139</sup>victuals.

<sup>140</sup>without fail.

<sup>141</sup>abundance.

<sup>142</sup>castle.

<sup>143</sup>name.

The will of Christ was that she should abide.  
 The Constable of the castle down did fare<sup>144</sup>  
 To see this wreck, and all the ship he sought<sup>145</sup>,  
 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 twin<sup>146</sup>,  
 Her to deliver of woe that she was in.

A manner Latin corrupt (*Note 13*) was her  
 speech,  
 But algate<sup>147</sup> thereby was she understand.  
 The Constable, when him list no longer seech<sup>148</sup>,  
 This woeful woman brought he to the lond.  
 She kneeled down, and thanked Godde's  
 sond<sup>149</sup>;  
 But what she was she would to no man say  
 For foul nor fair, although that she should  
 dey<sup>150</sup>.

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 ruth<sup>151</sup>:  
 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;  
 But Hermegild lov'd Constance as her life;

---

<sup>144</sup>go.

<sup>145</sup>sought.

<sup>146</sup>divide.

<sup>147</sup>nevertheless.

<sup>148</sup>search.

<sup>149</sup>what God had sent.

<sup>150</sup>die.

<sup>151</sup>pity.

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 rout<sup>152</sup>;  
 All Christian folk had fled from that country  
 Through Pagans, that conquered all about  
 The plages<sup>153</sup> of the North by land and sea.  
 To Wales had fled the Christianity<sup>154</sup>  
 Of olde Britons, dwelling in this isle;  
 There was their refuge for the meanwhile.

But yet n'ere<sup>155</sup> Christian Britons so exiled,  
 That there n'ere<sup>156</sup> some which in their privity  
 Honoured Christ, and heathen folk beguiled;  
 And nigh the castle such there dwelled three:  
 And one of them was blind, and might not see,  
 But<sup>157</sup> it were with thilk<sup>158</sup> 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-shet<sup>159</sup>.

"In the name of Christ," cried this blind Briton,  
 "Dame Hermegild, give me my sight again!"

---

<sup>152</sup>assemble.

<sup>153</sup>regions, coasts.

<sup>154</sup>the Old Britons who were Christians.

<sup>155</sup>there were.

<sup>156</sup>not.

<sup>157</sup>except.

<sup>158</sup>those.

<sup>159</sup>shut.

This lady wax'd afrayed of that soun'<sup>160</sup>,  
 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  
 wirch<sup>161</sup>

The will of Christ, as daughter of holy Church

The Constable wax'd abashed<sup>162</sup> of that sight,  
 And saide; "What amounteth all this fare<sup>163</sup>?"  
 Constance answered; "Sir, it is Christ's might,  
 That helpeth folk out of the fiendes snare:"  
 And so farforth<sup>164</sup> 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 fand<sup>165</sup>,  
 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 while<sup>166</sup>  
 And made a young knight, that dwelt in that  
 town,  
 Love her so hot of foul affectioun,  
 That verily him thought that he should spill<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup>was alarmed by that cry.

<sup>161</sup>work.

<sup>162</sup>astonished.

<sup>163</sup>what means all this ado.

<sup>164</sup>with such effect.

<sup>165</sup>found.

<sup>166</sup>considered how to have revenge on her.

<sup>167</sup>perish.

But he of her might ones have his will<sup>168</sup>.

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 dey<sup>169</sup>;  
 He waiteth when the Constable is away,  
 And privily upon a night he crept  
 In Hermegilda's chamber while she slept.

Weary, forwaked<sup>170</sup> in her orisons,  
 Sleepeth Constance, and Hermegild also.  
 This knight, through Satanas' temptation;  
 All softely is to the bed y-go<sup>171</sup>,  
 And cut the throat of Hermegild in two,  
 And laid the bloody knife by Dame Constance,  
 And went his way, there God give him mis-  
 chance.

Soon after came the Constable home again,  
 And eke Alla that king was of that land,  
 And saw his wife dispiteously<sup>172</sup> 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  
 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 devise<sup>173</sup>:  
 The kinges heart for pity gan agrise<sup>174</sup>,

---

<sup>168</sup>unless.

<sup>169</sup>die.

<sup>170</sup>having been long awake.

<sup>171</sup>gone.

<sup>172</sup>cruelly.

<sup>173</sup>describe.

<sup>174</sup>to be grieved, to tremble.

When he saw so benign a creature  
Fall in disease<sup>175</sup> and in misadventure.

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 hand<sup>176</sup> that she had done this thing:  
But nathless 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 motive<sup>177</sup>  
Of this witness, and thought he would inquire  
Deeper into this case, the truth to lear<sup>178</sup>.

Alas! Constance, thou has no champion,  
Nor fight canst thou not, so well-away!  
But he that starf<sup>179</sup> 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 kithe<sup>180</sup>,  
Withoute guilt thou shalt be slain as swithe<sup>181</sup>.

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,

---

<sup>175</sup>distress.

<sup>176</sup>accused her falsely.

<sup>177</sup>been greatly moved by the evidence.

<sup>178</sup>learn.

<sup>179</sup>died.

<sup>180</sup>show.

<sup>181</sup>immediately.

Before whose child the angels sing Osanne<sup>182</sup>,  
 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 lad<sup>183</sup>  
 Toward his death, where he getteth no grace,  
 And such a colour in his face hath had,  
 Men mighte know him that was so bestad<sup>184</sup>  
 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 ruth<sup>185</sup> 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 drede<sup>186</sup>,  
 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 advise<sup>187</sup>  
 Whom that we will that shall be our justice."

A Briton book, written with Evangiles<sup>188</sup>,  
 Was fetched, and on this book he swore anon  
 She guilty was; and, in the meanewhiles,  
 An hand him smote upon the necke bone,

---

<sup>182</sup>Hosanna.

<sup>183</sup>led.

<sup>184</sup>bested, situated.

<sup>185</sup>pity.

<sup>186</sup>danger.

<sup>187</sup>consider.

<sup>188</sup>the Gospels.

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 guilteless  
 The daughter of holy Church in high presence;  
 Thus hast thou done, and yet hold I my  
 peace?<sup>189</sup>"

Of this marvel aghast was all the press,  
 As mazed folk they stood every one  
 For dread of wreake<sup>190</sup>, save Constance alone.

Great was the dread and eke the repentance  
 Of them that hadde wrong suspicion  
 Upon this sely<sup>191</sup> 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;  
 And yet Constance had of his death great  
 ruth<sup>192</sup>;

And after this Jesus of his mercy  
 Made Alla wedde full solemnely  
 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;

---

<sup>189</sup>shall I be silent.

<sup>190</sup>vengeance.

<sup>191</sup>simple, harmless.

<sup>192</sup>compassion.

She would not that her son had done so;  
 Her thought it a despite that he should take  
 So strange a creature unto his make<sup>193</sup>.

Me list not of the chaff nor of the stre<sup>194</sup>  
 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 skill<sup>195</sup> and right;  
 For though that wives be full holy things,  
 They muste take in patience at night  
 Such manner<sup>196</sup> necessaries as be pleasings  
 To folk that have y-wedded them with rings,  
 And lay a lite<sup>197</sup> their holiness aside  
 As for the time, it may no better betide.

On her he got a knave<sup>198</sup> 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.

---

<sup>193</sup>mate, consort.

<sup>194</sup>straw.

<sup>195</sup>reasonable.

<sup>196</sup>kind of.

<sup>197</sup>a little of.

<sup>198</sup>male.

This Constable doth forth come<sup>199</sup> 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  
 He<sup>200</sup> hath the letter, and forth he go'th his way.

This messenger, to do his avantage<sup>201</sup>,  
 Unto the kinge's mother rideth swithe<sup>202</sup>,  
 And saluteth her full fair in his language.  
 "Madame," quoth he, "ye may be glad and blithe,  
 And thanke God an hundred thousand sithe<sup>203</sup>;  
 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 lest<sup>204</sup>."

This messenger drank sadly<sup>205</sup> ale and wine,  
 And stolen were his letters privily  
 Out of his box, while he slept as a swine;  
 And counterfeited was full subtily  
 Another letter, wrote full sinfully,  
 Unto the king, direct of this matter  
 From his Constable, as ye shall after hear.

This letter said, the queen deliver'd was  
 Of so horrible a fiendlike creature,

---

<sup>199</sup>caused to come forth.

<sup>200</sup>i.e. the messenger.

<sup>201</sup>promote his own interest.

<sup>202</sup>swiftly.

<sup>203</sup>times.

<sup>204</sup>pleases.

<sup>205</sup>steadily.

That in the castle none so hardy<sup>206</sup> 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 sond<sup>207</sup> of Christ for evermore  
 To me, that am now learned in this lore:  
 Lord, welcome be thy lust<sup>208</sup> and thy pleasance,  
 My lust I put all in thine ordinance.

"Keepe<sup>209</sup> 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.  
 Which to the messenger was taken soon,  
 And forth he went, there is no more to do'n<sup>210</sup>.

O messenger full fill'd of drunkenness,  
 Strong is thy breath, thy limbes falter aye,  
 And thou betrayest alle secretness;  
 Thy mind is lorn<sup>211</sup>, thou janglest as a jay;  
 Thy face is turned in a new array<sup>212</sup>;  
 Where drunkenness reigneth in any rout<sup>213</sup>,  
 There is no counsel hid, withoute doubt.

O Donegild, I have no English dig<sup>214</sup>

---

<sup>206</sup> brave.

<sup>207</sup> will, sending.

<sup>208</sup> will, pleasure.

<sup>209</sup> preserve.

<sup>210</sup> do.

<sup>211</sup> lost.

<sup>212</sup> aspect.

<sup>213</sup> company.

<sup>214</sup> worthy.

Unto thy malice, and thy tyranny:  
 And therefore to the fiend I thee resign,  
 Let him indite of all thy treachery  
 'Fy, mannish<sup>215</sup>, 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 light<sup>216</sup>,  
 And she was of this messenger full fain<sup>217</sup>,  
 And pleased him in all that e'er she might.  
 He drank, and well his girdle underpight<sup>218</sup>;  
 He slept, and eke he snored in his guise  
 All night, until the sun began to rise.

Eft<sup>219</sup> 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 jewise<sup>220</sup>,  
 That he should suffer in no manner wise  
 Constance within his regne<sup>221</sup> 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 crowd<sup>222</sup> her from the land,  
 And charge her, that she never eft come there.  
 O my Constance, well may thy ghost<sup>223</sup> have  
 fear,

---

<sup>215</sup>unwomanly woman.

<sup>216</sup>alighted.

<sup>217</sup>glad.

<sup>218</sup>stowed away liquor under his girdle.

<sup>219</sup>again.

<sup>220</sup>judgement.

<sup>221</sup>kingdom.

<sup>222</sup>push.

<sup>223</sup>spirit.

And sleeping in thy dream be in penance<sup>224</sup>,  
 When Donegild cast<sup>225</sup> all this ordinance<sup>226</sup>.

This messenger, on morrow when he woke,  
 Unto the castle held the nexte<sup>227</sup> way,  
 And to the constable the letter took;  
 And when he this dispiteous<sup>228</sup> letter sey<sup>229</sup>,  
 Full oft he said, "Alas, and well-away!  
 Lord Christ," quoth he, "how may this world en-  
 dure?

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 spill<sup>230</sup>,  
 And wicked folk reign in prosperity?  
 Ah! good Constance, alas! so woe is me,  
 That I must be thy tormentor, or de<sup>231</sup>  
 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 strond<sup>232</sup>  
 She saide, "Lord, aye welcome be thy sond<sup>233</sup>

"He that me kepte from the false blame,  
 While I was in the land amonges you,

---

<sup>224</sup>pain, trouble.

<sup>225</sup>contrived.

<sup>226</sup>plan, plot.

<sup>227</sup>nearest.

<sup>228</sup>cruel.

<sup>229</sup>saw.

<sup>230</sup>be destroyed.

<sup>231</sup>die.

<sup>232</sup>strand, shore.

<sup>233</sup>whatever thou sendest.

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 stere<sup>234</sup>."

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 braid<sup>235</sup>,  
 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.

"Mother," quoth she, "and maiden bright, Mary,  
 Sooth is, that through a woman's eggement<sup>236</sup>  
 Mankind was lorn<sup>237</sup>, and damned aye to die;  
 For which thy child was on a cross y-rent<sup>238</sup>:  
 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, parfay<sup>239</sup>:  
 Now, lady bright, to whom the woeful cryen,  
 Thou glory of womanhood, thou faire may<sup>240</sup>,  
 Thou haven of refuge, bright star of day,  
 Rue<sup>241</sup> on my child, that of thy gentleness  
 Ruest on every rueful<sup>242</sup> in distress.

"O little child, alas! what is thy guilt,

---

<sup>234</sup>rudder, guide.

<sup>235</sup>took, drew.

<sup>236</sup>incitement, egging on.

<sup>237</sup>lost.

<sup>238</sup>torn, pierced.

<sup>239</sup>by my faith.

<sup>240</sup>maid.

<sup>241</sup>take pity.

<sup>242</sup>sorrowful person.

That never wroughtest sin as yet, pardie<sup>243</sup>?  
 Why will thine harde<sup>244</sup> father have thee  
 spilt<sup>245</sup>?

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 ruthelless!"  
 And up she rose, and walked down the strand  
 Toward the ship, her following all the press<sup>246</sup>:  
 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 drede<sup>247</sup>,  
 Abundantly for her a full long space:  
 And other necessaries that should need<sup>248</sup>  
 She had enough, heried<sup>249</sup> be Godde's grace:  
 (Note 15)

For wind and weather, Almighty God pur-  
 chase<sup>250</sup>,  
 And bring her home; I can no better say;  
 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

---

<sup>243</sup>par Dieu; by God.

<sup>244</sup>cruel.

<sup>245</sup>destroyed.

<sup>246</sup>multitude.

<sup>247</sup>doubt.

<sup>248</sup>be needed.

<sup>249</sup>praised.

<sup>250</sup>provide.

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 tormented<sup>251</sup> was, till he  
 Muste beknow<sup>252</sup>, 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 drede<sup>253</sup>,  
 His mother slew, that may men plainly read,  
 For that she traitor was to her liegeance<sup>254</sup>:  
 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 sond<sup>255</sup>,  
 Ere that her ship approached to the lond<sup>256</sup>.

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,

---

<sup>251</sup>tortured.

<sup>252</sup>confess.

<sup>253</sup>without doubt.

<sup>254</sup>allegiance.

<sup>255</sup>decree, command.

<sup>256</sup>land.

That fallen is in heathen hand eftsoon<sup>257</sup>  
 In point to spill<sup>258</sup>, as I shall tell you soon!  
 Down from the castle came there many a wight  
 To gauren<sup>259</sup> on this ship, and on Constance:  
 But shortly from the castle, on a night,  
 The lorde's steward, – God give him mischance,

–  
 A thief that had renied our creance<sup>260</sup>,  
 Came to the ship alone, and said he would  
 Her leman<sup>261</sup> 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 drenched<sup>262</sup> for vengeance,  
 And thus hath Christ unwemmed<sup>263</sup> kept Con-  
 stance.

O foul lust of luxury! lo thine end!  
 Not only that thou faintest<sup>264</sup> manne's mind,  
 But verily thou wilt his body shend<sup>265</sup>  
 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?

---

<sup>257</sup>again.

<sup>258</sup>in danger of perishing.

<sup>259</sup>gaze, stare.

<sup>260</sup>denied our faith.

<sup>261</sup>illicit lover.

<sup>262</sup>drowned.

<sup>263</sup>unblemished.

<sup>264</sup>weakenest.

<sup>265</sup>destroy.

O Goliath, unmeasurable of length,  
 How mighte David make thee so mate<sup>266</sup>?  
 So young, and of armour so desolate<sup>267</sup>,  
 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 Septe<sup>268</sup>, 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 shaped<sup>269</sup> through her endeleess goodness  
 To make an end of all her heaviness.

Now let us stint<sup>270</sup> of Constance but a throw<sup>271</sup>,  
 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 less<sup>272</sup>.  
 For which this emperor had sent anon  
 His senator, with royal ordinance,

---

<sup>266</sup>overthrown.

<sup>267</sup>devoid.

<sup>268</sup>Gibraltar and Ceuta.

<sup>269</sup>resolved, arranged.

<sup>270</sup>cease speaking.

<sup>271</sup>short time.

<sup>272</sup>caused both high and low to be killed.

And other lordes, God wot, many a one,  
 On Syrians to take high vengeance:  
 They burn and slay, and bring them to mis-  
 chance

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 dey<sup>273</sup>.

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.

---

<sup>273</sup>die.

The fame anon throughout the town is borne,  
 How Alla king shall come on pilgrimage,  
 By harbingers that wente him beforne,  
 For which the senator, as was usage,  
 Rode him again<sup>274</sup>, and many of his lineage,  
 As well to show his high magnificence,  
 As to do any king a reverence.

Great cheere<sup>275</sup> 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 hest<sup>276</sup>  
 Before Alla during the meates space<sup>277</sup>,  
 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'ot<sup>278</sup>," 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 stound<sup>279</sup> (*Note*  
 18)

He told to Alla how this child was found.

---

<sup>274</sup>to meet him.

<sup>275</sup>courtesy.

<sup>276</sup>behest.

<sup>277</sup>meal time.

<sup>278</sup>know not.

<sup>279</sup>short time.

"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 lever<sup>280</sup> a knife  
 Throughout her breast, than be a woman  
 wick'<sup>281</sup>,  
 There is no man could bring her to that prick<sup>282</sup>.

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 she<sup>283</sup>  
 That was his wife; and privily he sight<sup>284</sup>,  
 And sped him from the table that he might<sup>285</sup>.

"Parfay<sup>286</sup>," 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.

---

<sup>280</sup>rather.

<sup>281</sup>wicked.

<sup>282</sup>point.

<sup>283</sup>could be she.

<sup>284</sup>sighed.

<sup>285</sup>as fast as he could.

<sup>286</sup>by my faith a fantasy.

When that she wiste wherefore was that  
 sond<sup>287</sup>,  
 Unneth<sup>288</sup> upon her feet she mighte stand.

When Alla saw his wife, fair he her gret<sup>289</sup>,  
 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 unkindeness.

Twice she swooned in his owen sight,  
 He wept and him excused piteously:  
 "Now God," quoth he, "and all his hallows  
 bright<sup>290</sup>

So wisly<sup>291</sup> on my soule have mercy,  
 That of your harm as guilteless 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 plain<sup>292</sup>,  
 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 wist<sup>293</sup>,  
 That Alla guiltless was of all her woe,  
 I trow an hundred times have they kiss'd,

---

<sup>287</sup>summons.

<sup>288</sup>with difficulty.

<sup>289</sup>greeted.

<sup>290</sup>saints.

<sup>291</sup>surely.

<sup>292</sup>lament.

<sup>293</sup>truth is known.

And such a bliss is there betwixt them two,  
 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 pine<sup>294</sup>,  
 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 nice<sup>295</sup>,  
 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 rede<sup>296</sup> I, he looked busily  
 Upon this child, and on his daughter thought.  
 Alla went to his inn, and as him ought  
 Arrayed<sup>297</sup> for this feast in every wise,  
 As farforth as his cunning<sup>298</sup> may suffice.

The morrow came, and Alla gan him dress<sup>299</sup>,  
 And eke his wife, the emperor to meet:

---

<sup>294</sup>sorrow.

<sup>295</sup>foolish.

<sup>296</sup>guess, know.

<sup>297</sup>prepared.

<sup>298</sup>as far as his skill.

<sup>299</sup>make ready.

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 Con-  
 stance

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 damned<sup>300</sup> 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,

The day goes fast, I will no longer let<sup>301</sup>.  
 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 Churche did he great honor:  
 But I let all his story passe by,  
 Of Constance is my tale especially,  
 In the olde Roman gestes<sup>302</sup> men may find (*Note*  
 19)

Maurice's life, I bear it not in mind.

This King Alla, when he his time sey<sup>303</sup>,  
 With his Constance, his holy wife so sweet,  
 To England are they come the righte way,

---

<sup>300</sup>condemned.

<sup>301</sup>hinder.

<sup>302</sup>histories.

<sup>303</sup>saw.

Where they did live in joy and in quiet.  
 But little while it lasted, I you hete<sup>304</sup>,  
 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 affray<sup>305</sup>,  
 Envy, or pride, or passion, or offence?  
 I say but for this ende this sentence<sup>306</sup>,  
 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 hent<sup>307</sup>,  
 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 herieth<sup>308</sup> God an hundred thousand  
 sithe<sup>309</sup>.

In virtue and in holy almes-deed  
 They liven all, and ne'er asunder wend;  
 Till death departeth them, this life they lead:

---

<sup>304</sup>promise.

<sup>305</sup>some kind of disturbance.

<sup>306</sup>judgment, opinion.

<sup>307</sup>snatched.

<sup>308</sup>praises.

<sup>309</sup>times.

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. Atyzar: 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".