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



by Geoffrey Chaucer

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THE PROLOGUE

Our Hoste saw well that the
bryghte sun
Th' arc of his artificial day had run
The fourthe part, and half an houre
more;
And, though he were not deep ex-
pert in lore,

THE PROLOGUE

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 quan-
tity
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 con-

¹knowledge.

THE PROLOGUE

clude;

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

²pulled.

³company.

THE PROLOGUE

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 maid-
enhead, (*Note 2*)

⁴destroys.

THE PROLOGUE

When she hath lost it in her wantonness.

Let us not moule thus in idleness.

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

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

⁵the bargain.

⁶keep your promise.

⁷duty.

THE PROLOGUE

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

⁸worthy.

⁹knows but imperfectly.

THE PROLOGUE

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 men-
tion
In his Epistolae, that be full old.
Why should I telle them, since they
he told?

¹⁰dear.txt

THE PROLOGUE

In youth he made of Ceyx and Al-
cyon, (*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 Cu-
pid: (*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 De-
mophon;
The plaint of Diane, and of
Hermion,

THE PROLOGUE

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

¹¹neck.

THE PROLOGUE

Of thilke wick¹², example of
Canace,
That loved her own brother sin-
fully;
(Of all such cursed stories I say,
Fy),
Or else of Tyrius Apollonius,
How that the cursed king Anti-
ochus
Bereft his daughter of her maiden-
head;
That is so horrible a tale to read,
When he her threw upon the pave-
ment.
And therefore he, of full avise-
ment¹³,

¹²that wicked.

¹³deliberately, advisedly.

THE PROLOGUE

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 doubt-
less
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*)

¹⁴unnatural.

¹⁵lout.

THE PROLOGUE

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.

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 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 dis-
pence¹⁶.

Thou blamest Christ, and sayst full
bitterly,

He misdeparteth¹⁷ riches tempo-
ral;

Thy neighebour thou witest¹⁸ sin-

¹⁶expense.

¹⁷allots amiss.

¹⁸blamest.

fully,
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 indi-
gence.
Thy selve²⁰ neighebour will thee
despise,

¹⁹burn in the fire.

²⁰that same.

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,

²¹wicked, evil.

²²point.

Your bagges be not fill'd with
ambes ace²³,
But with six-cinque²⁴, that runneth
for your chance; (*Note 2*)
At Christenmass well merry may
ye dance.

Ye seeke land and sea for your win-
nings,
As wise folk ye knowen all th' es-
tate
Of regnes²⁵; ye be fathers of tid-
ings,
And tales, both of peace and of de-
bate²⁶:

²³wicked, evil.

²⁴six-five.

²⁵kingdoms.

²⁶contention, war.

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,

²⁷barren, empty.

²⁸grave, steadfast.

²⁹to distant parts.

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,

³⁰wares.

³¹advantageous.

³²pleasure.

³³deal.

³⁴determined, prepared.

³⁵trading.

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 her-
bergage³⁶.

Sojourned have these merchants in
that town
A certain time as fell to their plea-
sance:
And so befell, that th' excellent
renown
Of th' emperore's daughter, Dame
Constance,

³⁶lodging.

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:

³⁷ relate.

³⁸ look 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 holi-
ness,

³⁹sustain.

⁴⁰childishness, immaturity.

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 ,

⁴¹almsgiving.

⁴²our tale.

⁴³business.

⁴⁴formerly.

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

⁴⁵prosperity.

⁴⁶favour.

⁴⁷Sultan.

⁴⁸inquire.

⁴⁹realms.

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 roy-
ally,

That this Soudan hath caught so
great pleasance⁵¹

To have her figure in his remem-
brance,

That all his lust⁵², and all his busy
cure⁵³,

⁵⁰learn.

⁵¹pleasure.

⁵²pleasure.

⁵³care.

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,
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.

⁵⁴that.

⁵⁵doubt.

In starres many a winter therebe-
 forn
 Was writ the death of Hector,
 Achilles,
 Of Pompey, Julius, ere they were
 born;
 The strife of Thebes; and of Her-
 cules,
 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,

⁵⁶to pass briefly by.

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 things said;
 And arguments they casten up and
 down;
 Many a subtle reason forth they
 laid;

⁵⁷unless.

⁵⁸haste.

⁵⁹contrive.

They speak of magic, and abusion⁶⁰;
 But finally, as in conclusion,
 They cannot see in that none advantage,
 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

⁶⁰deception.

⁶¹believe.

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
doubteless
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

⁶²willingly.

⁶³Mahomet.

cure⁶⁴,
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'metry⁶⁵,
And in increase of Christe's lawe
dear,
They be accorded⁶⁶ so as ye may
hear;

How that the Soudan, and his

⁶⁴keeping.

⁶⁵Mahometanism.

⁶⁶agreed.

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 pur-

⁶⁷know not.

veyance⁶⁸,
The which the emperor of his no-
blesse
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

⁶⁸provision.

⁶⁹prepared.

town,
That every wight with great devo-
tion
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 tarry-
ing,

But forward they them dresen⁷¹
all and some.

Constance, that was with sorrow
all o'ercome,

⁷⁰with good will, favour.

⁷¹prepare to set out.

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 na-
tion
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,
That knowe wives; I dare say no
more.

⁷²of old.

"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 recom-
mendeth 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:

⁷³except.

⁷⁴on high.

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,

⁷⁵died.

⁷⁶commands.

⁷⁷no matter though I perish.

That Romans hath y-vanquish'd
times three,
Was heard such tender weeping for
pity,
As in the chamber was for her part-
ing;
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 Occi-
dent
That naturally would hold another
way;

⁷⁸pushest together, drivest.

Thy crowding set the heav'n in
 such array
 At the beginning of this fierce voy-
 age,
 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,

⁷⁹progress.

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,
Namely⁸¹ to folk of high condition,
Not when a root is of a birth y-
know⁸²?

Alas! we be too lewed⁸³, or too
slow.

⁸⁰better.

⁸¹especially.

⁸²when the nativity is known.

⁸³ignorant.

To ship was brought this woeful
faire maid

Solemnely, with every circum-
stance:

"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 man-
ner,

And turn I will again to my matter.

The mother of the Soudan, well of
vices,

Espied hath her sone's plain intent,

⁸⁴made 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 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

⁸⁵together.

⁸⁶forsake.

⁸⁷Koran.

Given by God's messenger Ma-
homete:

But one avow to greate 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 cre-
ance⁹⁰?

⁸⁸promise.

⁸⁹betide, befall.

⁹⁰denied Mahomet our belief.

But, lordes, will ye maken assur-
ance,
As I shall say, assenting to my
lore⁹¹?
And I shall make us safe for ever-
more."

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 frien-
des fand⁹² (*Note 8*)
And she hath this emprise taken in
hand,

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,

⁹³relate.

⁹⁴embrace Christianity.

⁹⁵little.

⁹⁶requite, match.

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 sec-
ond!

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!

⁹⁷Sultaness.

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 ser-
vage⁹⁸:

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,

⁹⁸bondage.

⁹⁹ruin.

¹⁰⁰oppose, censure.

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' han-
des fong¹⁰², (*Note 9*)

Repenting her she heathen was so
long;

Beseeching him to do her that hon-
our,

That she might have the Christian
folk to feast:

¹⁰¹renounce her creed.

¹⁰²take.

"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.

Arrived be these Christian folk to
land

In Syria, with a great solemne rout,
And hastily this Soudan sent his

¹⁰³desire.

¹⁰⁴knew.

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.

¹⁰⁵message.

¹⁰⁶to meet.

¹⁰⁷realm.

¹⁰⁸in company.

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 solemnely 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 bliss-
 ful host
But O this scorpion, this wicked

¹⁰⁹face.

ghost¹¹⁰,
The Soudaness, for all her flatter-
ing
Cast¹¹¹ under this full mortally to
sting.

The Soudan came himself soon af-
ter 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

¹¹⁰spirit.

¹¹¹contrived.

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.

¹¹²cease.

O sudden woe, that ev'r art succes-
sour
To worldly bliss! spent¹¹³ is with
bitterness
Th' end of our joy, of our worldly
labour;
Woe occupies the fine¹¹⁴ of our
gladness.
Hearken this counsel, for thy sick-
erness¹¹⁵:
Upon thy glade days have in thy
mind
The unware¹¹⁶ woe of harm, that
comes behind.

¹¹³sprinkled.

¹¹⁴seizes the end.

¹¹⁵security.

¹¹⁶unforeseen.

For, shortly for to tell it at a word,
The Soudan and the Christians ev-
ery 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 coun-
try lead.

Nor there was Syrian that was con-
verted,
That of the counsel of the Soudan

¹¹⁷cut to pieces.

wot¹¹⁸,
That was not all to-hewn, ere he
 asterted¹¹⁹:
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,

¹¹⁸knew.

¹¹⁹escaped.

¹²⁰immediately.

¹²¹without rudder.

¹²²back to Italy.

¹²³took.

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

¹²⁴rudder, guide.

¹²⁵blessed, beneficent.

cross,
Red of the Lambes blood, full of
pity,
That wash'd the world from old in-
iquity,
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;

¹²⁶drown.

Flemer¹²⁷ 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 Maroc¹²⁸, as it was her a venture:
On many a sorry meal now may
she bait,
After her death full often may she

¹²⁷banisher, driver out.

¹²⁸Morocco; Gibraltar.

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, mas-
ter or knave¹³¹,

¹²⁹expect.

¹³⁰where.

¹³¹servant.

Was with the lion frett¹³², ere he as-
tart¹³³?

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
triale¹³⁵,

By certain meanes oft, as knowe
clerkes¹³⁶,

Doth thing for certain ende, that

¹³²devoured.

¹³³escaped.

¹³⁴it pleased.

¹³⁵remedy, salve.

¹³⁶scholars.

full derk is
To manne's wit, that for our, igno-
rance
Ne cannot know his prudent pur-
veyance¹³⁷.
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

¹³⁷ foresight.

¹³⁸ slain.

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 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

¹³⁹victuals.

¹⁴⁰without fail.

¹⁴¹abundance.

Under an hold¹⁴², that nemp-
nen¹⁴³ 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,

¹⁴²castle.

¹⁴³name.

¹⁴⁴go.

¹⁴⁵searched.

And found this weary woman full
of care;
He found also the treasure that she
brought:
In her language mercy she be-
sought,
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 un-
derstood.
The Constable, when him list no

¹⁴⁶divide.

¹⁴⁷nevertheless.

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

¹⁴⁸search.

¹⁴⁹what God had sent.

¹⁵⁰die.

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;

But Hermegild lov'd Constance as
 her life;

And Constance had so long so-
 journed there

In orisons, with many a bitter tear,

¹⁵¹pity.

Till Jesus had converted through
His grace
Dame Hermegild, Constabless 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 plages¹⁵³ of the North by land
and sea.

To Wales had fled the Christian-
ity¹⁵⁴

Of olde Britons, dwelling in this

¹⁵²assemble.

¹⁵³regions, coasts.

¹⁵⁴the Old Britons who were Christians.

isle;
 There was their refuge for the
 meanwhile.
 But yet n'ere¹⁵⁵ Christian Britons
 so exiled,
 That there n'ere¹⁵⁶ 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,
 But¹⁵⁷ it were with thilk¹⁵⁸ eyen of

¹⁵⁵there were.

¹⁵⁶not.

¹⁵⁷except.

¹⁵⁸those.

his mind,
 With which men maye see when
 they be blind.

Bright was the sun, as in a sum-
 mer'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.

¹⁵⁹shut.

"In the name of Christ," cried this
blind Briton,
"Dame Hermegild, give me my
sight again!"
This lady wax'd afrayed of that
soun'¹⁶⁰,
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

¹⁶⁰was alarmed by that cry.

¹⁶¹work.

¹⁶²astonished.

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:"

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 Con-

¹⁶³what means all this ado.

¹⁶⁴with such effect.

stance fand¹⁶⁵,
But kept it strongly many a winter
space,
Under Alla, king of Northumber-
land,
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 be-
guile,
Saw of Constance all her perfec-
tioun,
And cast anon how he might quite
her while¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵found.

¹⁶⁶considered how to have revenge on her.

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

¹⁶⁷perish.

¹⁶⁸unless.

¹⁶⁹die.

away,
And privily upon a night he crept
In Hermegilda's chamber while
she slept.

Weary, forwaked¹⁷⁰ in her orisons,
Sleepeth Constance, and Her-
megild also.

This knight, through Satanas'
temptation;

All softetly 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.

¹⁷⁰having been long awake.

¹⁷¹gone.

Soon after came the Constable
home again,
And eke Alla that king was of that
land,
And saw his wife dispiteously¹⁷²
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 mis-
chance
And eke the time, and where, and
in what wise

¹⁷²cruelly.

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 misaven-
ture.

For as the lamb toward his death is
brought,
So stood this innocent before the
king:
This false knight, that had this trea-

¹⁷³describe.

¹⁷⁴to be grieved, to tremble.

¹⁷⁵distress.

son wrought,
Bore her in hand¹⁷⁶ that she had
done this thing:
But natheless there was great mur-
muring
Among the people, that say they
cannot guess
That she had done so great a
wickedness.
For they had seen her ever virtu-
ous,
And loving Hermegild right as her
life:
Of this bare witness each one in
that house,
Save he that Hermegild slew with
his knife:

¹⁷⁶accused her falsely.

This gentle king had caught a great
motife¹⁷⁷
Of this witness, and thought he
would inquire
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 redemp-
tion,
And bound Satan, and yet li'th
where he lay,

¹⁷⁷been greatly moved by the evidence.

¹⁷⁸learn.

¹⁷⁹died.

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 Su-
sanne
From false blame; and thou merci-
ful maid,
Mary I mean, the daughter to Saint
Anne,
Before whose child the angels sing

¹⁸⁰show.

¹⁸¹immediately.

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

¹⁸²Hosanna.

¹⁸³led.

¹⁸⁴bested, situated.

her about.

O queenes living in prosperity,
Duchesses, and ye ladies every
one,

Have some ruth¹⁸⁵ on her adver-
sity!

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 compas-

¹⁸⁵pity.

¹⁸⁶danger.

sioun,
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

¹⁸⁷consider.

¹⁸⁸the Gospels.

She guilty was; and, in the
meanwhiles,
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 au-
dience,
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?¹⁸⁹"

¹⁸⁹shall I be silent.

Of this marvel aghast was all the
press,
As mazed folk they stood every
one
For dread of wreake¹⁹⁰, save Con-
stance alone.

Great was the dread and eke the re-
pentance
Of them that hadde wrong suspi-
cion
Upon this sely¹⁹¹ innocent Con-
stance;
And for this miracle, in conclusion,
And by Constance's mediation,
The king, and many another in that
place,

¹⁹⁰vengeance.

¹⁹¹simple, harmless.

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 ruth¹⁹²;

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 Con-
stance a queen.

But who was woeful, if I shall not
lie,
Of this wedding but Donegild, and

¹⁹²compassion.

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

¹⁹³mate, consort.

¹⁹⁴straw.

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,

¹⁹⁵reasonable.

¹⁹⁶kind of.

And lay a lite¹⁹⁷ their holiness
aside

As for the time, it may no better be-
tide.

On her he got a knave¹⁹⁸ child
anon, (*Note 14*)

And to a Bishop and to his Consta-
ble 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

¹⁹⁷ a little of.

¹⁹⁸ male.

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 be-
fall,

And other tidings speedful for to
say

He²⁰⁰ hath the letter, and forth he
go'th his way.

¹⁹⁹caused to come forth.

²⁰⁰i.e. the messenger.

This messenger, to do his advantage²⁰¹,
Unto the king'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 sith²⁰³;
My lady queen hath child, withoute doubt,
To joy and bliss of all this realm
about.

"Lo, here the letter sealed of this

²⁰¹promote his own interest.

²⁰²swiftly.

²⁰³times.

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

²⁰⁴pleases.

²⁰⁵steadily.

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 mat-
tere

From his Constable, as ye shall af-
ter hear.

This letter said, the queen de-
liver'd was

Of so horrible a fiendlike creature,
That in the castle none so hardy²⁰⁶
was

That any while he durst therein en-
dure:

The mother was an elf by aventure
Become, by charmes or by sorcery,

²⁰⁶brave.

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.

²⁰⁷will, sending.

²⁰⁸will, pleasure.

"Keepe²⁰⁹ this child, albeit foul or
fair,
And eke my wife, unto mine home-
coming:
Christ when him list may send to
me an heir
More agreeable than this to my lik-
ing."
This letter he sealed, privily weep-
ing.
Which to the messenger was taken
soon,
And forth he went, there is no more
to do'n²¹⁰.
O messenger full fill'd of drunken-
ness,

²⁰⁹preserve.

²¹⁰do.

Strong is thy breath, thy limbes fal-
 ter aye,
 And thou betrayest alle secretness;
 Thy mind is lorn²¹¹, thou janglest
 as a jay;
 Thy face is turned in a new ar-
 ray²¹²;
 Where drunkenness reigneth in
 any rout²¹³,
 There is no counsel hid, withoute
 doubt.

O Donegild, I have no English
 dig²¹⁴

²¹¹lost.

²¹²aspect.

²¹³company.

²¹⁴worthy.

Unto thy malice, and thy tyranny:
And therefore to the fiend I thee re-
sign,
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

²¹⁵unwomanly woman.

²¹⁶alighted.

fain²¹⁷,
And pleased him in all that e'er she
might.
He drank, and well his girdle un-
derpight²¹⁸;
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 Consta-
ble anon,

²¹⁷ glad.

²¹⁸ stowed away liquor under his girdle.

²¹⁹ again.

On pain of hanging and of high je-
wise²²⁰,

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.

²²⁰judgement.

²²¹kingdom.

²²²push.

O my Constance, well may thy
ghost²²³ have fear,
And sleeping in thy dream be in
penance²²⁴,
When Donegild cast²²⁵ all this or-
dinance²²⁶.

This messenger, on morrow when
he woke,
Unto the castle held the nexte²²⁷
way,
And to the constable the letter
took;

²²³spirit.

²²⁴pain, trouble.

²²⁵contrived.

²²⁶plan, plot.

²²⁷nearest.

And when he this dispiteous²²⁸
 letter sey²²⁹,
 Full oft 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 prosper-
 ity?

²²⁸cruel.

²²⁹saw.

²³⁰be destroyed.

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 let-
ter sent;
And Constance, with a deadly pale
face,
The fourthe day toward her ship
she went.
But nathless she took in good in-
tent

²³¹ die.

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,

²³²strand, shore.

²³³whatever thou sendest.

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.

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 tor-
ment,
Then is there no comparison be-
tween
Thy woe, and any woe man may
sustene.

²³⁶incitement, egging on.

²³⁷lost.

²³⁸torn, pierced.

"Thou saw'st thy child y-slain be-
 fore 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 dis-
 tress.

²³⁹by my faith.

²⁴⁰maid.

²⁴¹take pity.

²⁴²sorrowful person.

"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."

²⁴³par Dieu; by God.

²⁴⁴cruel.

²⁴⁵destroyed.

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 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,

²⁴⁶multitude.

²⁴⁷doubt.

Abundantly for her a full long
space:

And other necessaries 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 bet-
ter 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,

²⁴⁸be needed.

²⁴⁹praised.

²⁵⁰provide.

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 com-
manded me
On pain of death, so have I done
certain."
The messenger tormented²⁵¹ was,
till he

²⁵¹tortured.

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 inquir-
 ing,
 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,

²⁵²confess.

²⁵³without doubt.

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

²⁵⁴allegiance.

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 eft-
soon²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵decree, command.

²⁵⁶land.

²⁵⁷again.

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, –

A thief that had renied our cre-
ance²⁶⁰,

Came to the ship alone, and said he
would

²⁵⁸in danger of perishing.

²⁵⁹gaze, stare.

²⁶⁰denied our faith.

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 sud-
denly,
And in the sea he drenched²⁶² for
vengeance,
And thus hath Christ un-

²⁶¹illicit lover.

²⁶²drowned.

wemmed²⁶³ 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?

²⁶³unblemished.

²⁶⁴weakenest.

²⁶⁵destroy.

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 deso-
late²⁶⁷,

How durst he look upon thy
dreadful face?

Well may men see it was but
Godde's grace.

Who gave Judith courage or hardi-
ness

To slay him, Holofernes, in his tent,

²⁶⁶overthrown.

²⁶⁷devoid.

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
always,
Sometime west, and sometime
north and south,
And sometime east, full many a
weary day:

²⁶⁸Gibraltar and Ceuta.

Till Christe's mother (blessed be
she aye)

Had shaped²⁶⁹ through her ende-
less goodness

To make an end of all her heavi-
ness.

Now let us stint²⁷⁰ of Constance
but a throw²⁷¹,

And speak we of the Roman em-
peror,

That out of Syria had by letters
know

The slaughter of Christian folk,
and dishonor

Done to his daughter by a false

²⁶⁹resolved, arranged.

²⁷⁰cease speaking.

²⁷¹short time.

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.

²⁷²caused both high and low to be killed.

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:

²⁷³die.

And with the senator she led her
life.

Thus can our Lady bringen out of
woe

Woeful Constance, and many an-
other 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 Con-
stance

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 ordi-
nance

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 pil-
grimage,
By harbingers that wente him be-
forn,
For which the senator, as was us-
age,
Rode him again²⁷⁴, and many of
his lineage,
As well to show his high magnifi-
cence,
As to do any king a reverence.
Great cheere²⁷⁵ did this noble sen-
ator
To King Alla and he to him also;
Each of them did the other great
honor;

²⁷⁴to meet him.

²⁷⁵courtesy.

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 com-
pany.

Some men would say, (*Note 17*) at
request of Constance
This senator had led this child to
feast:

I may not tellen every circum-
stance,
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

²⁷⁶behest.

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

²⁷⁷meal time.

²⁷⁸know not.

²⁷⁹short time.

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.

²⁸⁰rather.

²⁸¹wicked.

²⁸²point.

Now was this child as like unto
 Constance
 As possible is a creature to be:
 This Alla had the face in remem-
 brance
 Of Dame Constance, and thereon
 mused he,
 If that the childe's mother were
 aught she²⁸³
 That was his wife; and privily he
 sight²⁸⁴,
 And sped him from the table that
 he might²⁸⁵.
 "Parfay²⁸⁶," thought he, "phantom

²⁸³could be she.

²⁸⁴sighed.

²⁸⁵as fast as he could.

²⁸⁶by my faith a fantasy.

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 Con-
stance:

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:

²⁸⁷summons.

²⁸⁸with difficulty.

²⁸⁹greeted.

And she, for sorrow, as dumb
stood as a tree:

So was her hearte shut in her dis-
tress,

When she remember'd his un-
kindness.

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 guilteless am
I,

²⁹⁰saints.

²⁹¹surely.

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 sor-
row.

²⁹²lament.

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,
 That, save the joy that lasteth ev-
 ermo',
 There is none like, that any crea-
 ture
 Hath seen, or shall see, while the
 world may dure.

 Then prayed she her husband
 meekely

²⁹³truth is known.

In the relief of her long piteous
 pine²⁹⁴,
 That he would pray her father spe-
 cially,
 That of his majesty he would in-
 cline
 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 em-
 peror:
 But, as I guess, Alla was not so

²⁹⁴sorrow.

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 be-
 sought:
 And well rede²⁹⁶ I, he looked
 busily
 Upon this child, and on his daugh-
 ter thought.
 Alla went to his inn, and as him

²⁹⁵ foolish.

²⁹⁶ guess, know.

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.

²⁹⁷prepared.

²⁹⁸as far as his skill.

²⁹⁹make ready.

"Father," quoth she, "your younge
child Constance
Is now full clean out of your re-
membrance.

"I am your daughter, your Con-
stance," 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 hea-
theness,
But thank my lord here of his
kindeness."

³⁰⁰condemned.

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
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 Chris-
tianly,

³⁰¹hinder.

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 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.

³⁰²histories.

³⁰³saw.

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 con-
 science,
 Or ire, or talent, or some kind af-
 fray³⁰⁵,
 Envy, or pride, or passion, or of-
 fence?
 I say but for this ende this sen-

³⁰⁴promise.

³⁰⁵some kind of disturbance.

tence³⁰⁶ ,
 That little while in joy or in pleasure
 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

³⁰⁶judgment, opinion.

³⁰⁷snatched.

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

³⁰⁸praises.

³⁰⁹times.

THE TALE

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. 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".