

**Portrait, Preamble, Prologue and Tale  
of the Man of Law**

## Here is the description of the Man of Law from the General Prologue

*The Sergeant of the Law is a successful but unostentatious, high-ranking lawyer who sometimes functions as a judge. We are told with just a touch of irony, that he is, like many of the pilgrims, the very best at what he does, a busy man, but "yet he seemèd busier than he was."*

310	A SERGEANT of the law, wary and wise That often haddè been at the Parvise There was also, full rich of excellence. Discreet he was and of great reverence; He seemèd such, his wordès were so wise. Justice he was full often in assize By patent and by plain commissiõn. <sup>1</sup> For his sciéce and for his high renown Of fees and robès had he many a one. So great a purchaser was nowhere none; All was fee simple to him in effect.	<i>A ranking lawyer lawyer's meeting place great dignity judge / circuit court knowledge</i>
320	His purchasingè might not be infect. Nowhere so busy a man as he there n'as, And yet he seemèd busier than he was. In termès had he case and doomès all That from the time of King William were fall. Thereto he could endite and make a thing; There couldè no wight pinch at his writing. <sup>2</sup> And every statute could he plein by rote. He rode but homely in a medley coat Girt with a ceint of silk with barrès small. Of his array tell I no longer tale.	<i>easy money (pun) faulted n'as = ne was = wasn't In books / judgements W. the Conqueror / handed down could also draw up documents no person c. complain knew completely by heart simply in a tweed (?) bound w. a belt / stripes</i>

## Introduction

---

<sup>1</sup> 315: *patent / plain commission*: technical terms meaning by royal appointment.

<sup>2</sup> 326: "Nobody could fault any document he had drawn up" (*endited*). Clearly line 327 is a deliberate exaggeration.

to  
**The Man of Law's Tale**

The *Man of Law's* tale belongs to the category of romance, and to its subcategory of pious romance, romances being stories of love and adventure in a world where the preternatural sometimes intervenes. In *this* pious romance human love takes second place to love of the divine, the adventures are all trials of endurance in the service of God rather than of a human lover or lord, and the one central character who has the adventures is not a knight but a woman. The tale is, after a fashion, the life of a saint, the kind of woman we see again in the *Clerk's Tale*, a Christian wife who endures impossible cruelties and misfortunes with a saintly patience which finally triumphs over everything. Miraculously surviving in a small boat on the sea for years, yes years, alone or with her little child only, she might well have figured in the **Golden Legend**, the great medieval collection of Saints' lives, rather than in the Saints Legends of Cupid which, the Lawyer rightly says, Chaucer has written earlier to honor the "saints" of secular love. Perhaps Chaucer is writing this pious legend for some devout patroness to make up for that series of pagan stories, **The Legend of Good Women**, as he had written *that* in "penance" for having written badly of a woman in **Troilus and Criseyde**.

It is an old and respected critical practice to see if one can match the tale to the teller, as one can manage to do with a fair number of narratives in the **Canterbury Tales**, but it is difficult to match the successful, prosperous and not noticeably pious Lawyer of the General Prologue with this sentimental tale of female piety. Indeed, the whole manuscript compilation containing the tale is an odd mixture: first the rather pretentious showing off of Chaucer's astronomical knowledge which is attributed to the Host of the pilgrimage, a simple innkeeper, followed by an equally unlikely philosophical outburst by the same Host, followed by a humorous passage where Chaucer has the Man of Law make fun of him, followed in turn by a kind of "copyright" or advertiser's list of works Chaucer has written, followed by a promise to tell a tale in prose which then turns out to be verse (rhyme royal stanzas), and preceded by a prologue deploring poverty, which seems to have little to do with what precedes or follows. The whole thing bears all the marks of somewhat unfinished work

This latter aspect is reinforced by the fact that the tale is not clearly textually connected with what goes before or after, but its positioning may well be Chaucer's tentative effort at providing some diversity in the order of his narratives. The devotion and strenuous virtue of this tale's protagonist are a noticeable contrast to the romping sexuality of the fabliau tales that go immediately ahead of it in the first fragment, and to the stout defence of frequent and

satisfying married sex in the Wife of Bath's long prologue immediately after in the Ellesmere manuscript. The sexual virtue of this heroine is as lofty as her exalted rank.

A weakness for royalty and aristocracy afflicted even hagiographers in medieval times, so our heroine is one of the nobility like many other virgins and martyrs in the **Golden Legend** -- the daughter of an emperor, in fact. Custance or Constance, the well-named heroine of this tale, is not so much a character as a characteristic, a virtue, Constancy. She remains true to God and the faith no matter what misfortunes are inflicted by cruel mothers-in-law (a variant of cruel stepmothers). Mention of cruel mothers-in-law brings up the other category to which the story clearly belongs: the folktale, with unlikely coincidences and impossible adventures often balanced in twos or threes: Constance is married twice, she is subverted by a mother-in-law twice, she is abandoned to the sea twice, she is rescued twice, and so forth. The other "characters" in her tale are almost equally allegorical and lacking in interest for their own sake; indeed all but the most important are nameless, though most of them had names in Chaucer's immediate source. Moreover, the narrator frequently injects himself into the tale with moralizing comments; sometimes expressing a wish for the success of the heroine or uttering execrations on her tormentors, after the fashion of romances that bear the marks of a minstrel's oral recitation, like **Havelok the Dane**, though here at considerably more length. And it is this length of narratorial commentary that the *Man of Law's Tale* parts company with the folktale or popular oral storytelling. It occupies about half of the space; leaving only the rest for the main narrative. This disproportion partially accounts for the lack of vigorous movement in the tale which does, nevertheless, arrive at a happy ending, of sorts

### Preamble to the Man of Law's Tale

*The narrator gets to display his astronomical knowledge*

Our Hostè saw well that the brightè sun  
 The ark of his artificial day hath run  
 The fourthè part, and half an hour and more,<sup>3</sup>  
 And, though he were not deep y-stert in lore,  
 He wist it was the eightèteenthè day  
 Of April, that is messenger to May;  
 And saw well that the shadow of every tree  
 Was as in length the samè quantity  
 That was the body erect that causèd it.

---

<sup>3</sup> *artificial day* is the time the sun is above the horizon. Commentators tell us that on this date the shadow of an object was the same length as the object, a rare event. They also say that the Host or Chaucer has made an error and it is closer to 9 than to 10 o'clock.

10 And therefore by the shadow he took his wit  
 That Phoebus, which that shone so clear and bright,  
 Degrees was five and forty clomb on height; *P = the sun*  
 And for that day, as in that latitude, *climbed*  
 It was ten of the clock, he gan conclude.  
 And suddenly he plight his horse about. *he pulled*

*The Host turns philosopher*

“Lordings,” quod he, “I warn you, all this rout, *all this group*  
 The fourth party of this day is gone. *part*  
 Now, for the love of God and of Saint John,  
 Loseth no time, as farforth as you may. *as far as*  
 20 Lordings, the timè wasteth night and day,  
 And steals from us, what privily sleeping,  
 And what through negligence in our waking,  
 As doth the stream that turneth never again,  
 Descending from the mountain into plain.  
 Well can Senec’ and many a philosópher *Seneca, Roman philosopher*  
 Bewailen timè more than gold in coffer;  
 For loss of chattels may recovered be, *goods*  
 But loss of timè shendeth us,” quod he. *destroys*  
 “It will not come again, withouten dread, *without doubt*  
 No more than willè Malkin’s maidenhead, *M = any girl*  
 When she hath lost it in her wantonness. *loose behavior*  
 Let us not mowlen thus in idleness. *grow moldy*

*The Host asks the Man of Law to tell a Tale. The Lawyer agrees,  
 and makes gentle fun of Chaucer*

?Sir man of lawe,” quod he, “so have you bliss, *for heaven’s sake*  
 Tell us a tale anon, as forward is. *according to our bargain*  
 You been submitted, through your free assent,  
 To standen in this case at my judgement.  
 Acquit you now of your behest; *Keep your promise*  
 Then have you done your devoir at the least. ” *your duty*  
 “Hostè,” quod he, “depardieux, I assent; *by God*  
 40 To breakè forward is not mine intent. *to break my promise*  
 Behest is debt, and I will holdè fain *I will gladly keep*  
 All my behest, I can no better sayn.  
 For such law as a man gives another wight, *another man*  
 He should himselfen usen it, by right;  
 Thus will our text. But natheless, certáin,

I can right now no thrifty talè sayn *no good*  
 That Chaucer, though he can but lewèdly *knows little*  
 On meters and on rhyming craftily,  
 Hath said them in such English as he can  
 Of oldè time, as knoweth many a man;  
 And if he have not said them, levè brother, *dear brother*  
 In one book, he has said them in another.  
 For he has told of lovers up and down  
 Morè than Ovid made of mention *Latin poet*  
 In his epistelès, that been full old.  
 What should I tellen them, since they been told?

*The Lawyer lists the names of aggrieved ladies in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*

In youth he made of Ceyx and Alcyone,  
 And sithen has he spoke of every one, <sup>1</sup> *after that*  
 These noble wivès and these lovers eke.  
 60 Whoso that will his largè volume seek, *Whoever*  
 Clepèd the Seintès Legend of Cupide, *Called Leg. of Saints of C.*  
 There may he see the largè woundès wide  
 Of Lucrece, and of Babylon Thisbe;  
 The sword of Dido for the false Enee; *Aeneas*  
 The tree of Phyllis for her Demophon;  
 The 'plaint of Dianire and of Hermyon, *Hermione*  
 Of Adriane, and of Isiphilee; *Ariadne, Hypsipyle*  
 The barren islè standing in the sea; *where Theseus left Ariadne*  
 The drownèd Leander for his Hero;  
 70 The tearès of Elaine, and eke the woe *Helen*  
 Of Briseydè, and of thee, Ladomia; *Briseis, Laodamia*  
 The cruelty of thee, queen Medea,  
 Thy little children hanging by the hals, *by the neck*  
 For thy Jason, that was of love so false!  
 O Ypermystra, Penelope, Alceste, *Hypermnestra*  
 Your wifhood he commendeth with the best !  
 But certainly no word ne writeth he  
 Of thilkè wick ensample of Canacee, *wicked*  
 That loved her ownè brother sinfully;  
 80 Of suchè cursèd stories I say fie!  
 Or else of Tyro Appollonius, *A. of Tyre*  
 How that the cursèd king Antiochus

---

<sup>1</sup> Many, though not all, of the stories mentioned here can be read in Chaucer's **Legend of Good Women**, largely derived from Ovid's **Heroides**.

Bereft his daughter of her maidenhead,  
That is so horrible a tale for to read,  
When he her threw upon the pavèment.

*robbed / her virginity*

*he = King A.*

And therefore he, of full avisèment,  
N'ould never write in none of his sermons  
Of such unkind abominations,  
Nor I will none rehearse, if that I may.  
90 But of my tale how shall I do this day?  
Me were loth be likened, doubtèeles,  
To Muses that men clepe Pièrides --  
Metamorphosios wot what I mean;  
But natheless, I reckè not a bean  
Though I come after him with hawèbake.  
I speak in prose, and let him rhymès make. <sup>1</sup>  
And with that word he, with a sober cheer,  
Began his tale, as you shall after hear.

*he = Chaucer / purposely  
writings  
unnatural  
retell*

*I'd be unwilling  
men call*

*M = a poem of Ovid / knows*

*a cheap meal*

### The Man of Law's Prologue to his Tale <sup>2</sup>

O hateful harm, condition of Povért! <sup>3</sup>  
100 With thirst, with cold, with hunger so confounded !  
To asken help thee shameth in thine heart;  
If thou none ask, with need art thou so wounded  
That very need unwrappeth all thy wound hid.  
Maugre thine head, thou must for indigence  
Or steal, or beg, or borrow thy dispençe!

*you're ashamed*

*hidden wound*

*In spite of y'self / poverty*

*Either / money to live*

---

<sup>1</sup> The tale that follows is not in prose but in rhyme. Possibly the Lawyer was originally assigned a prose tale such as the *Melibee*, and when Chaucer changed his mind, he forgot to change this statement.

<sup>2</sup> The prologue seems to have little to do with the Tale that follows, though it might be relevant to the prosperous Lawyer himself. It appears to deplore poverty and praise wealth.

<sup>3</sup> Poverty, or rather the poor man afflicted with cold and hunger, is forced to beg or steal in spite of his shame.

Thou blamest Christ, and sayst full bitterly,  
 He mis-departeth riches temporal;  
 Thy neighèbor thou witest sinfully,  
 And sayst thou hast too little, and he hath all.  
 110 “Parfay !” sayst thou, “some time he reckon shall,  
 When that his tail shall burnen in the gleed,  
 For he not helpeth needfull in their need.”

*mis-allocates worldly wealth  
 you blame*

*On my word !  
 in hot coal*

Hearken what is the sentence of the wise:  
 Bet is to die than [to] have indigence;  
 Thy selve neighèbor will thee despise  
 If thou be poor; farewell thy reverence!  
 Yet of the wisè man take this senténcé:  
 All the dayès of poor men been wick.  
 Beware, therefore, ere thou come to that prick!

*Better / poverty  
 y. very neighbor  
 goodbye respect  
 judgement  
 wretched  
 point*

If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee,  
 And all thy friendès flee from thee, alas !  
 O richè merchants, full of weal been ye,  
 O noble, O prudent folk, as in this case,  
 Your baggès been not filled with ambès ace,  
 But with sys cynk, that runneth for your chance;<sup>1</sup>  
 At Christèmassè merry may you dance!

*wealth  
 double aces  
 6 + 5 / you're a winner*

You seeken land and sea for your winnings;  
 As wisè folk you know all the estate  
 Of regnès; you be fathers of tidíngs  
 And talès, both of peace and of debate.  
 I were right now of talès desolate,  
 N'ere that a merchant, gone is many a year,  
 Me taught a talè, which that you shall hear.

*the state, condition  
 of nations  
 & contention  
 devoid of a story  
 If it were not  
 taught me*

### The Man of Law's Tale

*Syrian merchants in Rome hear of the beauty and virtue of the Emperor's daughter*

In Syria whilom dwelt a company  
 Of chapmen rich, and thereto sad and true,  
 That widè-where sent their spicery,

*once upon a time  
 merchants / & reliable  
 far & wide*

---

<sup>1</sup> *ambes ace*: two ones, a losing throw ; *sys cynk* (six cinque): 6 + 5, a winning throw.



140	<p>Clothès of gold, and satins rich of hue.          Their chaffare was so thrifty and so new          That every wight hath dainty to chaffare          With them, and eke to sellen them their ware.</p>	<p><i>merchandise / so good          eager to trade          and also</i></p>
	<p>Now fell it that the masters of that sort          Have shapen them to Romè for to wend;          Were it for chapmanhood or for desport,          No other message would they thither send,          But come themselves to Rome, this is the end;          And in such place as thought them avantage          For their intent, they take their herbergage.</p>	<p><i>heads of this association          have planned to go          business or pleasure</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>lodging</i></p>
	<p>Sojournèd have these merchants in that town          A certain time, as fell to their pleasance.          And so befell that th' excellent renown          Of th' emperourès daughter, dame Custánce,          Reported was, with every circumstance,          Unto these Syrian merchants in such wise.          From day to day, as I shall you devise.</p>	<p><i>as they pleased</i></p>
160	<p>This was the common voice of every man:          Our emperor of Romè -- God him see! --          A daughter has, that since the world began,          To reckon as well her goodness as beauty,          N'as never such another as is she.          I pray to God in honor her sustain,          And would she were of allè Europe queen.</p>	<p><i>God bless him</i></p>
	<p>In her is high beauty, withouten pride,          Youthè, withouten greenhood or folly;          To all her workès virtue is her guide;          Humbless hath slain in her all tyranny.          She is [the] mirror of all courtesy;          Her heart is very chamber of holiness,          Her hand, minister of freedom for almess.</p>	<p><i>immaturity</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Humility</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>agent of generous alms</i></p>
	<p>And all this voice was sooth, as God is true.          But now to purpose let us turn again.          These merchants have done fraught their shippès [a]new,          And when they have this blissful maiden seen,          Home to Syría been they went full fain,          And done their needès as they have done yore,</p>	<p><i>was fact</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>have reloaded</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>always done</i></p>

And live in weal; I can say you no more.

*in prosperity*

*Back in Syria, the sultan, hearing the merchants' report, falls in love with the Emperor's daughter, sight unseen and regardless of religious differences between Christians and Muslims*

Now fell it that these merchants stood in grace *in favor*  
 Of him that was the sultan of Syree; *Syria*  
 For when they came from any strangè place,  
 He would, of his benignè courtesy,  
 180 Make them good cheer, and busily espy  
 Tidings of sundry regnès, for to lere *various lands to learn*  
 The wonders that they mightè see or hear.

Amongès other thingès, specially,  
 These merchants have him told of Dame Custánce  
 So great noblesse in earnest, cerièslly, *in detail*  
 That this sultan hath caught so great pleasance *(So) that*  
 To have her figure in his rémembrance,  
 That all his lust and all his busy cure *all his desire*  
 Was for to love her while his life may dure. *may last*

Peráventure in thilkè largè book *Perhaps in that*  
 Which that men clepe the heavens, y-written was *men call*  
 With starrès, when that he his birthè took,  
 That he for love should have his death, alas!  
 For in the starrès, clearer than is glass,  
 Is written, God wot, whoso could it read, *if one could read*  
 The death of every man, withouten dreade. *without doubt*

In starrès, many a winter therebeforn,  
 Was writ the death of Hector, Achilles,  
 Of Pompey, Julius, ere they were born;  
 200 The strife of Thebès; and of Hercules,  
 Of Samson, Turnus, and of Socrates  
 The death; but men's wits be so dull  
 That no wight can well read it at the full. *no one*

This sultan for his privy council sent,  
 And, shortly of this matter for to pace, *to make a long story s.*  
 He hath to them declarèd his intent,  
 And said them, certain, but he might have grace *unless he had the fortune*  
 To have Custánce within a little space,  
 He n'as but dead; and chargèd them in hie *as good as dead / in haste*

To shapen for his life some remedy.

Diversè men diversè thingès said;  
 They argumenten, casten up and down;  
 Many a subtle reason forth they laid;  
 They spoke of magic and abusioun.  
 But finally, as in conclusiõn,  
 They can not see in that no ávantage,  
 Nor in no other way, save marriage.

*Different  
 debated  
 deception*

220 Then saw they therein such difficulty  
 By way of reason, for to speak all plain,  
 Because that there was such diversity  
 Between their bothè lawès, that they sayn  
 They trowè, that no Christian prince would fain  
 Wedden his child under oure lawè sweet  
 That us was taught by Mahoun, our prophet.

*Mahomet*

And he answerdè, “Rather than I loose  
 Custáncè, I will be christened, doubtèless.  
 I must be hers, I may no other choose.  
 I pray you hold your argument in peace;  
 Saveth my life, and be not recchèless  
 To geten her that hath my life in cure;  
 For in this woe I may not long endure. ”

*remiss  
 in her hands*

*The match is formally arranged, and the lady sets out sorrowfully for Syria*

What needeth greater dilatatiõn?  
 I say by treaties and ambassadry,  
 And by the Popès mediation,  
 And all the Church, and all the chivalry,  
 That in destructiõn of maumetry,  
 And in increase of Christè’s lawè dear,  
 They been accorded, so as you shall hear

*Why say more?*

*idolatry*

240 How that the Sultan and his baronage  
 And all his liegès should y-christened be,  
 And he shall have Custáncè in marriage,  
 And certain gold, I n’ot what quantity;  
 And hereto found sufficient surèty.  
 This same accord was sworn on either side;  
 Now, fair Custáncè, almighty God thee guide!

*his subjects  
 I don’t know  
 guarantee*

Now wouldè some men waiten, as I guess,  
 That I should tellen all the purveiance *expect*  
 That th' emperor, of his great nobleness, *arrangements*  
 Hath shapen for his daughter, dame Custánce.  
 Well may men know that so great ordinance  
 May no man tellen in a little clause *a small space*  
 As was arrayèd for so high a cause.

Bishops been shapen with her for to wend, *are chosen*  
 Lordès, ladies, knightès of renown,  
 And other folk enough,-- this is the end;  
 And notifièd is throughout the town  
 That every wight, with great devotìon, *every person*  
 Should prayen Christ that he this marriage  
 Receive in gree, and speedè this viage. *with approval*

260 The day is comen of her départing;  
 I say, the woeful fatal day is come,  
 That there may be no longer tarrying,  
 But forward they them dressen, all and some. *they prepare to go*  
 Custánce, that was with sorrow all overcome,  
 Full pale arist, and dresseth her to wend; *arises & prepares to go*  
 For well she sees there is no other end.

Alas! what wonder is it though she wept,  
 That shall be sent to strangè nation  
 From friendès that so tenderly her kept,  
 270 And to be bounden under subjection  
 Of one, she know not his condition? *knows nothing of*  
 Husbandès been all good, and have been yore;  
 That knowen wives; I dare say you no more. <sup>1</sup> *always*

?Father," she said, ?thy wretched child Custánce,  
 Thy youngè daughter fostered up so soft,  
 And you, my mother, my sovereign pleasance  
 Over all thing, out-taken Christ on-loft, *except Christ above*  
 Custánce your child her recommendeth oft  
 Unto your grace, for I shall to Syri', *I must (go) to Syria*  
 Ne shall I never see you more with eye.

?Alas! unto the barbarous nation

---

<sup>1</sup> The statement is, of course, deliberately ironic.

I must anon, since that it is your will; *must (go)*  
 But Christ, that starved for our redemption *who died*  
 So give me grace his hestès to fulfill! *his commandments*  
 I, wretched woman, no fors though I spill ! *no matter if I die*  
 Women are born to thralldom and penáncè, *subjection*  
 And to be under mannès governance.”

I trow at Troy, when Pyrrhus broke the wall, *I think*  
 Or Ilion burned; at Thebès the cité; *Ilion = Troy*  
 290 N' at Romè, for the harm through Hannibal  
 That Romans hath vanquishèd timès three,  
 N'as heard such tender weeping for pity  
 As in the chamber was for her departing ;  
 But forth she must, whe'r-so she weep or sing. *must (go), whether*

O firstè moving cruel firmament, <sup>1</sup>  
 With thy diurnal sway that crowdest aye *drives*  
 And hurlest all from east till occident *to west*  
 That naturally would hold another way,  
 Thy crowding set the heaven in such array *force*  
 At the beginning of this fierce viage,  
 That cruel Mars hath slain this marriage.

Unfortunate ascendent tortuous,  
 Of which the lord is helpless fall, alas, *dominant planet*  
 Out of his angle into the darkest house!  
 O Mars, O Atazir, as in this case!  
 O feeble moon, unhappy been thy pace!  
 Thou knittest thee there thou art not received;  
 There thou were well, from thencè art thou waived. *dismissed*

Imprudent emperor of Rome, alas!  
 310 Was there no philosopher in all thy town?  
 Is no time bet than other in such case? *better*  
 Of viage is there no electiön, *journey / choice*  
 Namely to folk of high condition? *Especially / high rank*  
 Not when a root is of a birth y-know? *a horoscope*  
 Alas, we been too lewèd or too slow! *ignorant*

---

<sup>1</sup> The complicated astrology -astronomy of this stanza and the next outlines the unfortunate disposition of the planets caused by the *primum mobile* (?first moving”), that is, in the Ptolemaic view of the heavens, the outside sphere of the nine spheres. At the time of Constance’s departure the position of Mars was malignant in some way, so that her marriage was doomed.

To ship is brought this woeful fairè maid  
 Solémpnèly, with every circumstance.  
 “Now Jesu Christ be with you all” she said;  
 There n’is no more, but farewell, fair Custánce!  
 She paineth her to make good countenance;  
 And forth I let here sail in this mannér,  
 And turn I will again to my mattér.

*The sultan’s mother cannot accept the proposed conversion to Christianity  
 but hides her resistance*

The mother of the Sultan, well of vices, *fountain of*  
 Espièd hath her son’s plain intent,  
 How he will let his oldè sacrifices; *will leave*  
 And right anon she for her counsel sent,  
 And they been come to knowè what she meant. \*  
 And when assembled was this folk in fere, *together*  
 She set her down, and said as you shall hear.

330 “Lordès,” quod she, ?you knowen every one,  
 How that my son in point is for to let *to abandon*  
 The holy lawès of our al-Koran,  
 Given by Goddè’s message Máhomet. \* *messenger*  
 But one avow to greatè God I hete, *I make*  
 The life shall rather out of my body start  
 Ere Máhometè’s law out of my heart!

?What should us tیدن of this newè law *What can come from*  
 But thralldom to our bodies and penánce, *slavery / hardship*  
 And afterward in hellè to be draw, *punished*  
 For we renegèd Mahoun our creánce? *renounced the Muslim faith*  
 But, lordès, will you maken ássurance,  
 As I shall say, assenting to my lore, *my plan*  
 And I shall make us safe for evermore?”

They sworn and assenten, every man,  
 To live with her and die and by her stand,  
 And ever each, in the bestè wise he can,  
 To strengthen her shall all his friendès fond;  
 And she hath this emprise y-take in hand, *try*  
 Which you shall hearen that I shall devise, *this business*  
 350 And to them all she spoke right in this wise:

“We shall first feign us Christendom to take, --  
 Cold water shall not grieve us but a litle!  
 And I shall such a feast and revel make  
 That, as I trow, I shall the Sultan quite.  
 For though his wife be Christened ne’er so white,  
 She shall have need to wash away the red,  
 Though she a font full water with her led.”

*a little**I trust / repay**(of) water*

O sultanness, root of iniquity!  
 Virago, thou Semirame the second! <sup>1</sup>  
 O serpent under femininity,  
 Like to the serpent deep in hell y-bound!  
 O feignèd woman, all that may confound  
 Virtue and innocence, through thy malice,  
 Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!

*subvert*

O Satan, envious since thilkè day  
 That thou were chasèd from our heritáge,  
 Well knowest thou women the oldè way!  
 Thou madest Eva bring us in serváge;  
 Thou wilt fordo this Christian marriáge.  
 Thine instrument (so welaway the while!)  
 Makest thou of women, when thou wilt beguile.

*from Paradise*

370

This Sultanness, whom I thus blame and wary,  
 Let privily her counsel go their way.  
 What should I in this talè longer tarry?  
 She rideth to the Sultan on a day,  
 And said him that she would renege her lay,  
 And Christendom of priestès’ handès fong,  
 Repenting her she heathen was so long;

*abandon her faith**receive*

Beseeching him to do her that honoúr,  
 That she might have the Christian folk to feast, --  
 “To pleasen them I will do my laboúr.”  
 The sultan says: “I will do at your hest;”  
 And kneeling thanketh her of that request.  
 So glad he was, he n’istè what to say.  
 She kissed her son, and home she goes her way.

*as you wish**didn’t know*


---

<sup>1</sup> **Semiramis**: a wicked queen of Babylon notorious to the people of the Middle Ages for her usurpation of power, her violence and lust.

*The Christians arrive with the bride. They are invited to a great feast  
hosted by the sultan's scheming mother.*

390	<p>Arrived been these Christian folk to land          In Syria, with a great solempnè rout,          And hastily this sultan sent his sond,          First to his mother, and all the regne about,          And said his wife was comen, out of doubt,          And prayed her for to ride against the queen,          The honour of his regnè to sustain.</p>	<p><i>retinue          his message          the country          without doubt          to meet the queen          his country</i></p>
	<p>Great was the press, and rich was the array          Of Syrians and Romans met yfere;          The mother of the Sultan, rich and gay,          Receiveth her with all so glad a cheer          As any mother might her daughter dear,          And to the nextè city there beside          A softè pace solèmpnely they ride.</p>	<p><i>crowd / clothing          together          and well dressed            the nearest</i></p>
	<p>Not trow I the triúmph of Julius,          Of which that Lucan maketh such a boast,          Was royaller ne morè curious          Than was th' assembly of this blissful host.          But this scorpion, this wicked ghost,          The sultaness, for all her flattering,          Cast under this full mortally to sting.</p>	<p><i>I don't think            splendid            plotted</i></p>
410	<p>The sultan comes himself soon after this          So royally, that wonder is to tell,          And welcoms her with allè joy and bliss.          And thus in mirth and joy I let them dwell;          The fruit of this mattér is that I tell.          When timè came, men thought it for the best          That revel stint, and men go to their rest.</p>	<p><i>the core of this story            revelry should stop</i></p>
420	<p>The timè came this oldè sultaness          Ordained hath this feast of which I told,          And to the feastè Christian folk them dress          In general, yea, bothè young and old.          Here may men feast and royalty behold,          And dainties more than I can you devise;          But all too dear they bought it ere they rise.</p>	<p><i>set out            describe</i></p>



O sudden woe, that ever art successor  
 To worldly bliss, spreyned with bitterness! *sprinkled*  
 Th'end of the joy of our worldly labor!  
 Woe occupies the fine of our gladness. *the end*  
 Harken this counsel for thy sikerness: *for your own good*  
 Upon thy glad day have in thy mind  
 The unaware woe or harm that comes behind. *unexpected*

For shortly for to tellen, at a word,  
 The sultan and the Christians every one  
 Been all to-hewn and sticked at the board, *cut down & stabbed*  
 But it were only dame Custánce alone. *Except for*  
 This oldé sultanessé, cursed crone,  
 Has with her friendès done this cursed deed,  
 For she herself would all the country lead.

*Constance, spared the sword, is put to sea in a boat.*

Ne there was Syrian none that was converted,  
 That of the counsel of the sultan wot, *agreed with the sultan*  
 That he n'as all to-hewn ere he astarted. *cut down before*  
 And Constance have they take anon, foot-hot, <sup>1</sup>  
 And in a ship all steerless, God wot, *rudderless, G. knows*  
 440 They have her set, and bid her learn [to?] sail  
 Out of Syria againward to Itaille. *to Italy*

A certain treasure that she thither led,  
 And, sooth to say, vitailè great plenty *food*  
 They have her given, and clothès eke she had,  
 And forth she saileth in the saltè sea.  
 O my Custáncè, full of benignity,  
 O emperorès youngè daughter dear,  
 He that is lord of fortune be thy steer! *guide*

She blesseth her, and with full piteous voice  
 450 Unto the cross of Christ thus saidè she  
 ?O clear, O wellful altar, holy cross,  
 Red of the Lamb's blood, full of pity, *red from b. of Christ*  
 That washed the world from th'old iniquity,

---

<sup>1</sup> The heroine's name: on a few occasions I have used the spelling Constance rather than the original Custance when the rhythm of the line requires that the stress be on the first syllable as it is in the modern form of the name.

Me from the fiend and from his clawès keep,  
That day that I shall drenchen in the deep. *the devil  
drown*

Victorious tree, protection of true, *the faithful*  
That only worthy werè for to bear  
The king of heaven with his woundès new,  
The whitè Lamb, that hurt was with a spear,  
Flemer of fiendès out of him and her *banisher of devils*  
On which thy limbès faithfully extenden,<sup>1</sup>  
Me keep, and give me might my life t' amenden.

Yearès and dayès floated this créature  
Throughout the sea of Greece unto the Strait  
Of Marrok, as it was her aventure. *Morocco, i.e. Gibraltar*  
On many a sorry meal now may she baite; *feed*  
After her death full often may she waite, *expect death*  
Ere that the wildè wavès will her drive  
Unto the placè there she shall arrive.

470 Men mighten asken 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  
There every wight save he, master and knave,  
Was with the lion frete ere he astart? *torn before he could escape*  
No wight but God, that he bore in his heart. *No one*

God list to show his wonderful miracle *God wanted*  
In her, for we should see his mighty works;  
Christ, which that is to every harm triacle, *cure*  
By certain means oft, as knowen clerks, *as clerics know*  
Does thing for certain end that full dark is  
To man's wit, that for our ignorance *human understanding*  
Ne cannot know His prudent purveyance. *providence*

Now since she was not at the feast y-slaw, *slain*  
Who kept her from the drenching in the sea?  
Who keptè Jonah in the fish's maw  
Till he was spouted up at Nineveh?  
Well may men know it was no wight but He *no one*  
That keptè people Ebraic from their drenching, *Hebrew / drowning*

---

<sup>1</sup> ?Banisher of devils out of the man or woman over whom your arms extend.”

490 With dry feet throughout the sea passing.

Who bade the fourè spirits of tempest  
That power have to annoyen land and sea,  
Both north and south, and also west and east:  
?Annoyeth, neither sea, nor land, nor tree” ?  
Soothly, the commander of that was He  
That from the tempest ay this woman kept  
As well when she awoke as when she slept.

*always*

Where might this woman meat and drinkè have  
Three years and more? how lasteth her vitaille?  
Who fed th’Egyptian Mary in the cave,  
Or in desert? no wight but Christ, sans fail.  
Five thousand folk it was as great marvail  
With loaves five and fishes two to feed.<sup>1</sup>  
God sent His foison at her greatè need.

*her food*

*St . M. of Egypt*

*without fail*

*marvel*

*his plenty*

*Finally she is driven ashore in England*

She driveth forth into our ocëan  
Throughout our wildè sea, till at the last  
Under a hold that namen I ne can,  
Far in Northumberland the wave her cast,  
And in the sand her ship sticked so fast  
510 That thencè would it not of all a tide;  
The will of Christ was that she should abide.

*i.e. Atlantic*

*a fort I can’t name*

*N. (in England)*

*length of a tide ?*

The constable of the castle down is fare  
To see this wreck, and all the ship he sought,  
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 twinn,  
Her to deliver of woe that she was in.

*has come*

*to split*

520 A manner Latin corrupt was her speech,  
But algates thereby was she understood.  
The constable, when him list no longer seek,  
This woeful woman brought he to the land.

*a kind of currupt Latin*

*But still*

*had finished looking*

---

<sup>1</sup> The miraculous multiplication of five loaves and two fishes by Christ to feed a huge crowd is told in all four gospels: Matt:14:14-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 1-13.

She kneeleth down and thanketh Godè's send;  
 But what she was she wouldè no man say,  
 For foul nor fair, though that she shouldè die.

*G's will*

She said she was so mazèd in the sea  
 That she forgot her mindè, by her truth.  
 The constable hath of her so great pity,  
 And eke his wife, that they wept for ruth.

*confused  
 lost her memory*

530 She was so diligent, withouten sloth,  
 To serve and pleasen ever each in that place,  
 That all her love that looken in her face.

*for pity*

*all who look ... love her*

This constable and dame Hermengild, his wife,  
 Were pagans, and that country everywhere;  
 But Hermengild loved her right as her life,  
 And Constance has so long sojournèd there,  
 In orisons, with many a bitter tear,  
 Till Jesus has converted through his grace  
 Dame Hermengild, constableness of that place.

In all that land no Christian durste route;  
 All Christian folk been fled from that country  
 Through pagans that conquered all about  
 The plagès of the north, by land and sea.  
 To Walès fled the Christianity  
 Of oldè Britons dwelling in this isle;  
 There was their refuge for the meanè while.

*dared assemble*

*the coasts  
 Christians*

But yet n'ere Christian Britons so exiled  
 That there n'ere some that in their privy  
 Honourèd Christ, and heathen folk beguiled,  
 550 And nigh the castle such there dwelten three.  
 That one of them was blind and might not see,  
 But it were with thilk eyen of his mind  
 With which men see after that they be blind.

*weren't totally absent  
 in private  
 deceived*

Bright was the sun as in that summer's day,  
 For which the constable and his wife also  
 And Constance have y-take the rightè way  
 Toward the sea a furlong way or two,  
 To playen and to roamen to and fro;  
 And in their walk this blindè man they met,  
 560 Crooked and old, with eyen fast y-shut.

*To relax*

"In name of Christ," cried this blind Britoun,  
 "Dame Hermengild, give me my sight again!"  
 This lady waxed affrayèd of the sound,  
 Lest that her husbond, shortly for to sayn,  
 Would her for Jesus Christe's love have slain,  
 Till Constance made her bold, and bade her work  
 The will of Christ, as daughter of his Church.

*and urged her to do*

The constable wax[ed] abashed of that sight,  
 And saidè "What amounteth all this fare?  
 570 Custáncé answerd, "Sir, it is Christ's might,  
 That helpeth folk out of the fiendè's snare."  
 And so farforth she gan our law declare  
 That she the constable, ere that it was eve  
 Converted, and on Christ made him believe.

*was puzzled  
 "What is this?"*

*our faith*

This constable was no thing lord of this place  
 Of which I speak, there he Custáncé found,  
 But kept it strongly many a winter's space  
 Under Alla, king of all Northhumberland,  
 That was full wise, and worthy of his hand,  
 Against the Scottès, as men may well hear;  
 But turn I will again to my mattér.

*not at all*

*and strong*

*Another plot against Constance*

Satan, that ever us waiteth to beguile,  
 Saw of Custáncé all her perfection,  
 And cast anon how he might 'quite her while,  
 And made a young knight that dwelt in that town  
 Love her so hot, of foul affection,  
 That verily him thought he shouldè spill,  
 But he of her might oncè have his will.

*take revenge*

*he would die  
 Unless*

He wooeth her, but it availeth not;  
 590 She wouldè do no sinnè, by no way.  
 And for despite he compassed in his thought  
 To maken her on shameful death to die.  
 He waiteth when the constable was away,  
 And privily upon a night he crept  
 In Hermengildè's chamber, while she slept.

*he plotted*

*secretly*

Weary, for-wakèd in her orisons,

*overtired from praying*

Sleepeth Custánce, and Hermengild also.  
 This knight, through Sathanas' temptations,  
 All softly is to the bed y-go, *crept*  
 600 And cut the throat of Hermengild a-two,  
 And laid the bloody knife by Dame Custánce,  
 And went his way, there God give him mischance! *God blast him*

Soon after comes this constable home again,  
 And eke Alla, that king was of that land,  
 And saw his wife despitously y-slain,  
 For which full oft he wept and wrung his hand,  
 And in the bed the bloody knife he found  
 By Dame Custánce. Allas! 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 Custánce,  
 As here-before that you have heard devise. *described*  
 The kingè's heart of pity gan agrise, *was moved*  
 When he saw so benign a creätüre  
 Fall in dis-ease and in misaventüre.

For as the lamb toward his death is brought,  
 So stands this innocent before the king.  
 This falsè knight, that hath this treason wrought,  
 620 Bears her on hand that she hath done this thing. *Accuses her*  
 But natheless, there was great mourning  
 Among the people, and say they can not guess *can't believe*  
 That she had done so great a wickedness;

For they have seen her ever so virtuous,  
 And loving Hermengild right as her life.  
 Of this bore witness ever each in that house,  
 Save he that Hermengild slew with his knife.  
 This gentil king hath caught a greet motive *suspicion*  
 Of this witness, and thought he would enquire  
 Deeper in this, a truthè for to lere. *to learn*

Alas! Custánce, thou hast no champion,  
 Nor fightè canst thou not, so welaway! *alas !*  
 But he that starved for our redemption, *who died*  
 And bound Satan (and yet lies where he lay), *(who lies there still)*

So be thy strongè champion this day!  
 For, but if Christ open miracle kithe,  
 Withouten guilt thou shalt be slain as swithe.

*unless / works  
 at once*

640 She set her down on knees, and thus she said  
 ?Immortal God, that savedest Susanne  
 From falsè blame, and thou, merciful maid,  
 Mary I mean, daughter to Saint Anne,<sup>1</sup>  
 Before whose child angels sing Hosanne,  
 If I be guiltless of this felony,  
 My succour be, for elsè shall I die! ”

*in OT*

Have you not seen some time a palè face,  
 Among a press, of him that hath been led  
 Toward his death, where as him got no grace,  
 And such a color in his face hath had,  
 Men mightè know his face that was bestad,  
 Amongèst all the faces in that rout?  
 So stands Custánce, and looketh her about.

*cornered  
 crowd*

O queenès, living in prosperity,  
 Duchesses, and you ladies everyone,  
 Haveth some ruth on her adversity!  
 An emperorè’s daughter stands alone;  
 She hath no wight to whom to make her moan.  
 O blood royal, that standest in this dread,  
 Far be thy friendes at thy great need!

*Have pity*

*nobody*

660 This Alla king hath such compassïon,  
 As gentil heart is fúlfilled of pity,  
 That from his eyen ran the water down.  
 ?Now hastily do fetch a book,” quod he,  
 ?And if this knight will swearen how that she  
 This woman slew, yet will we us advise  
 Whom that we will that shall been our justice.”

*have a book brought*

*will make judge ?*

*She is saved by a miracle, and is married to a king*

A Briton book, written with Evangiles,

*the Gospels in Celtic*

---

<sup>1</sup> Susannah in the OT book named for her was falsely accused by the elders but was saved by David’s investigation. St. Anne was the mother of Mary the mother of Jesus before whom the angels sings Hosanna in heaven.

Was fetched, and on this book he swore anon  
 She guilty was. And in the meanè while  
 A hand him smote upon the neckè-bone,  
 That down he fell at oncè -- as a stone,  
 And both his eyen burst out of his face  
 In sight of every body in that place.

*he = accuser*

A voice was heard in general audience,  
 And said: ?Thou hast deslandered, guiltèless,  
 The daughter of holy church in high preséncè;  
 Thus hast thou done, and yet hold I my peace! ”  
 Of this marvel aghast was all the press;  
 As mazèd folk they stooden every one,  
 For dread of wretchè, save Custáncè alone.

*in king's presence*

*the crowd*

*punishment*

680 Great was the dread and eke the repentance  
 Of them that hadden wrong suspiciön  
 Upon this sely innocent, Custáncè;  
 And for this miracle, in conclusiön,  
 And by Custáncè's mediation,  
 The king -- and many another in that place --  
 Converted was, thankèd be Christ's grace!

*this poor*

This falsè knight was slain for his untruth  
 By judgèment of Alla, hastily;  
 And yet Custáncè had of his death great ruth.  
 And after this Jesus, of his mercy,  
 Made Alla wedden full solempnely  
 This holy maid, that is so bright and sheen;  
 And thus hath Christ y-made Custáncè a queen.

*and radiant*

But who was woeful, if I shall not lie,  
 Of this wedding but Donegild, and no mo',  
 The kingè's mother, full of tyranny?  
 Her thought her cursèd heartè burst a-two.  
 She wouldè not her sonè had done so;  
 Her thought a désprite that he shouldè take  
 So strange a creäture unto his make.

700

*mate*

Me list not of the chaf, nor of the straw,

*I don't want*



Maken so long a tale as of the corn.<sup>1</sup>  
 What should I tellen of the royalty  
 At marriage, or which course goes befor;  
 Who bloweth in a trump or in a 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 and right; *right and proper*  
 For though that wivès be full holy things,  
 They mustè take in patience at night  
 Such manner necessities as been pleasing  
 To folk that have y-wedded them with rings,  
 And lay a lite their holiness aside, *a little*  
 As for the time, — it may no bet betide. *no help for it*

On her he got a knavè child anon, *he begot a boy child*  
 And to a bishop, and his constable eke,  
 He took his wife to keep when he is gone *he entrusts*  
 To Scotlond-ward, his foemen for to seek.  
 Now fair Custánce, that is so humble and meek,  
 720 So long is gone with childè, till that still  
 She holds her chamber, abiding Christè's will. *keeps to her room*

The time is come a knavè child she bore;  
 Mauricius at the fontstone they him call.  
 This constable does forth come a messenger,  
 And wrote unto his king, that cleped was All,  
 How that this blissful tiding is befall, *happy news*  
 And other tidings speedful for to say. *other good news*  
 He takes the letter, and forth he goes his way.

This messenger, to do his avantáge, *in hope of reward (?)*  
 Unto the kingè's mother rideth swithe, *quickly*  
 And saluteth her full fair in his language  
 ?Madame," quod he, ?you may be glad and blithe, *happy*  
 And thanketh God an hundred thousand sithe! *times*  
 My lady queen hath child, withouten doubt,  
 To joy and bliss to all this reign about. *this kingdom*

?Lo, here the letters sealèd of this thing,

---

<sup>1</sup> He says he wants to dwell on the substance, not on the unimportant details like what courses were served in what order, and who blew the trumpets (at the wedding). He gets past that in the last line of this stanza.

That I must bear with all the haste I may.  
 If you will aught unto your son the king,  
 I am your servant, bothè night and day. ”

*want to (send)*

740 Donegild answered: ?As now at this time, nay;  
 But here all night I will thou take thy rest.  
 To-morrow will I say thee what me lest.”

*Another angry mother-in-law; another plot*

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

*drank deeply*

*secretly*

*forged*

750 The letter spoke the queen delivered was  
 Of so horrible a fiendly creature  
 That in the castle none so hardy was  
 That any while durstè there endure.  
 The mother was an elf by aventure  
 Y-come, by charms or by sorcery,  
 And every wight hateth her company.

*dared*

*evil spirit brought by chance*

*every person*

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

*the will*

*instructed in the faith*

*thy will*

*My will / thy disposal*

?Keepeth this child, all be it foul or fair,  
 And eke my wife, unto my home-coming.  
 Christ, when him list, may sendè me an heir  
 More agreeable than this to my liking. ”

*when it pleases him*

This letter he seals, privily weeping,  
 Which to the messenger was taken soon,  
 770 And forth he goes; there is no more to doon.

O messenger, fulfilled of drunkenness,  
 Strong is thy breath, thy limbs falter aye,  
 And thou bewrayest allè secretness.  
 Thy mind is lorn, thou janglest as a jay,  
 Thy face is turned in a new array.

*is lost / a parrot*

*completely changed*

There drunkenness reigns in any rout,  
There is no counsel hid, withouten doubt.

*Where ...in any company*

O Donegild, I [ne] have no English digne  
Unto thy malice and thy tyranny!  
And therefore to the fiend I thee resign;  
Let him enditen of thy traitory!  
Fie, mannish, fie! -- O nay, by God, I lie --  
Fie, *fiendly* spirit, for I dare well tell,  
Though thou here walk, thy spirit is in hell!

*write  
human or unfeminine*

This messenger comes from the king again,  
And at the king's mother's court he light,  
And she was of this messenger full fain,  
And pleasèd him in all that ever she might.  
He drank, and well his girdle underpight;  
He sleepeth, and he fnorteth in his guise  
All night, until the sunnè gan arise.

790

*dismounts  
very glad  
and loosened his belt ?  
snores in his (ugly) way*

Eft were his letters stolen every one,  
And counterfeited letters in this wise:  
?The king commands his constable anon,  
Up pain of hanging, and on high juyse,  
That he ne shouldè suffer in no wise  
Custáncè in-with his realm for to abide  
Three days, and one quarter of a tide;

*Again*

*severe sentence*

*an hour*

?But in the samè ship as he her found,  
Her, and her youngè son, and all her gear,  
He shoulde put, and croude her from the land,  
And charge her that she never eft come there.  
O my Custáncè, well may thy ghost have fear,  
And, sleeping, in thy dream be in penance,  
When Donégild cast all this ordinance.

*push  
never again*

*be troubled  
plotted*

This messenger on morrow, when he woke,  
Unto the castle holds the nextè way,  
And to the constable he the letter took;  
And when that he this piteous letter saw,  
Full oft he said, ?Alas!" and ?Welaway!"  
?Lord Christ," quod he, ?how may this world endure,  
So full of sin is many a creäture?

810

*takes the shortest*

?O mighty God, if that it be thy will,  
Since thou art rightful judge, how may it be  
That thou wilt suffer innocents to spill,

And wicked folk reign in prosperity?  
 O good Custánce, alas! so woe is me  
 That I must be thy tórmentor, or die  
 On shame's death; there is no other way."

*Constance is abandoned to the sea in a boat once more*

Weepen both young and old in all that place  
 When that the king this cursed letter sent,  
 And Cústnce, with a deadly palè face,  
 The fourthè day toward her ship she went.  
 But natheles she takes in good intent  
 The will of Christ, and kneeling on the strand,  
 She saidè: ?Lord, aye welcome be thy send!

*whatever you send*

? He that me keptè from the falsè blame  
 While I was on the land amongst you,  
 He can me keep from harm and eke from shame  
 830 In saltè sea, although I see not how.  
 As strong as ever He was, He is yet now.  
 In Him trust I, and in His mother dear,  
 That is to me my sail and eke my steer."

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 coverchief off her head she braid,  
 And over his little eyen she it laid,  
 And in her arm she lulleth it full fast,  
 And unto heaven her eyen up she cast.

?Mother," quod she, ?and maiden bright, Marie,  
 Sooth is that through woman's eggement  
 Mankind was lorn, and damnèd aye to die,<sup>1</sup>  
 For which thy child was on a cross y-rent.  
 Thy blissful eyen saw all his tormént;  
 Then is there no comparison between  
 Thy woe and any woe man may sustain.

*(Virgin) Mary  
 True / instigation  
 was lost  
 torn*

---

<sup>1</sup> A reference to the biblical story in Genesis of how Eve got Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit, the Original Sin for which we all must die, a sin that also had to be atoned for by the death of the Man-God Jesus Christ, the son of Mary. Possibly also a reference to the notion that the cross on which Christ was crucified (?y-rent") was made from the tree from which the forbidden fruit had been taken in paradise; and a reference also to the medieval wordplay on Eva and Ave, the first word of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation: ?Ave, *gratia plena*: Hail, full of grace." Mary is the second Eve who helped our redemption as the first Eve had caused our downfall

?Thou saw thy child y-slain before thine eyen,  
 And yet now lives my little child, parfay!  
 850 Now, lady bright, to whom all woeful crien,  
 Thou glory of womanhood, thou fairè may,  
 Thou haven of refuge, brightè star of day,  
 Rue on my child, that of thy gentillesse,  
 Ruest on every rueful in distress.

*indeed*  
*woeful (people)*  
*maid*  
  
*Have pity*  
*Dost take pity*

?O little child, alas! what is thy guilt,  
 That never wroughtest sin as yet, pardee?  
 Why will thine hardè father have thee spilt?  
 O mercy, dearè constable," quod she,  
 ?As let my little child dwell here with thee;  
 And if thou darest not saven him, for blame,  
 So kiss him oncè in his father's name! "

*committed sin / indeed*  
*killed*

Therewith she lookèd backward to the land,  
 And saidè: ?Farewell, husband ruthèless! "  
 And up she rist, and walketh down the strand  
 Toward the ship, -- her follows all the press, --  
 And ever she prays her child to hold his peace;  
 And takes her leave, and with an holy intent  
 She blesseth her, and into ship she went.

*rises*  
*the crowd follows her*  
  
*She makes the sign of the cross*

Vitailèd was the ship, it is no dread,  
 870 Abundantly for her full longè space,  
 And other necessaries that should need  
 She had enough, heried be God's grace!  
 For wind and weather almighty God purchase,  
 And bring her home! I can no better say,  
 But in the sea she driveth forth her way.

*Stocked*  
  
*praised be*  
*(may) God bring*

Here ends Part II

### Part III

*The king discovers the plot, and punishes the guilty*

Alla the king comes home soon after this  
 Unto his castle, of the which I told,  
 And asketh where his wife and his child is.  
 The constable gan about his heartè cold,  
 880 And plainly all the manner he him told  
 As you have heard -- I can tell it no better --  
 And shows the king his seal and eke his letter,

*got cold around the heart*

And saidè: ?Lord, as you commanded me

Up pain of death, so have I done, certain.”  
 This messenger tormented was till he  
 Must beknow and tellen, plat and plain,  
 From night to night in what place he had lain;  
 And thus, by wit and subtle inquiring,  
 Imagined was by whom this harm gan spring.

*On pain  
tortured  
reveal / straight &  
  
intelligent  
Was pieced together*

The hand was knowen that the letter wrote,  
 And all the venom of this cursed deed,  
 But in what wise, certainly, I ne wot.  
 Th' effect is this, that Alla, out of dread,  
 His mother slew -- that may men plainly read --  
 For that she traitor was to her 'ligeance.  
 Thus endeth oldè Dongild, with mischance!

*handwriting  
  
I don't know  
without doubt  
  
allegiance  
damn her !*

The sorrow that this Alla night and day  
 Makes for his wife, and for his child also,  
 There is no tonguè that it tellè may.  
 900 But now will I unto Custáncè go,  
 That floateth in the sea, in pain and woe,  
 Five years and more, as likèd Christès send,  
 Ere that her ship approachèd unto land.

*as C. pleased  
Before*

*Constance makes land once more. Another unwanted lover.*

Under a heathen castle, at the last,  
 Of which the name not in my text I find,  
 Custáncè and eke her child, the sea up cast.  
 Almighty God, that saveth all mankind,  
 Have on Custáncè and on her child some mind,  
 That fallen is in heathen hand eftsoon,  
 In point to spill, as I shall tell you soon.

*on point of death*

Down from the castle comes there many a wight  
 To gauren on this ship and on Custáncè.  
 But shortly, from the castle, on a night,  
 The lord's steward -- God give him mischance! --  
 A thief, that had renegèd our creáncè,  
 Came into ship alone, and said he should  
 Her lemman be, whe'r-so she would or n'ould.

*many people  
to gape  
  
had renounced our faith  
  
her lover, like it or not*

Woe was this wretched woman then begon;  
 Her child cried, and she cried piteously.  
 920 But blissful Mary helped her right anon;  
 For with her struggling well and mightily  
 The thief fell over board all suddenly,

*woebegon  
  
blessed (Virgin) Mary*

And in the sea he drownèd for vengeance;  
And thus hath Christ unwemmèd kept Custáncè.

*unstained*

O foulè lust of luxury, lo, thine end!  
Not only that thou faintest manne's mind,  
But, verily, thou wilt his body shend.  
The end of thy work, or of thy lustès blind,  
Is complaining . How many one may men find  
That not for work some time, but for th' intent  
To do this sin, been either slain or shent!

*lechery  
make faint, enfeeble  
destroy*

*not for deed  
or ruined*

How may this weakè womman have this strength  
Her to defend against this renegade?  
O Goliath, unmeasurable of length,  
How mightè David makè thee so mate,  
So young and of armoúr so desolate?  
How durst he look upon thy dreadful face?  
Well may men see, it n'as but Goddè's grace.

*1 Sam. 17  
defeat you  
lacking armor  
terrifying  
nothing but G's*

940 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 vigor sent  
To them, and savèd them out of mischance,  
So sent he might and vigor to Custáncè.

*See Bk. of Judith*

Forth goes her ship throughout the narrow mouth  
Of Gibraltar and Ceuta, driving aye  
Some timè west, and sometime north and south,  
And sometime east, full many a weary day,  
Till Christè's mother -- blessed be she aye! --  
Hath shapen, through her endèlees goodness,  
To make an end of all her heaviness.

*always moving*

*always*

*trouble*

*The Roman Emperor's general punishes the guilty in Syria*

Now let us stint of Constance but a throw,  
And speak we of the Roman emperor,  
That out of Syria has by letters know  
The slaughter of Christian folk, and dishonor  
Done to his daughter by a false traitor,  
I mean the cursed wicked sultanness  
That at the feast let slay both more and less.

*let us stop a while*

*been informed*

*caused the death of all*

960 For which this emperor has sent anon

His senator, with royal ordinance,  
 And other lordès, God wot, many a one,  
 On Syrians to taken high vengeance.  
 They burnen, slay, and bring them to mischance  
 Full many a day; but shortly, this is th' end,  
 Homeward to Rome they shapen them to wend.

*orders  
 God knows*

*get ready to go*

*Constance is rescued once more*

This senator repaireth with victóry  
 To Romè-ward, sailing full royally,  
 And met the ship driving, as saith the story,  
 In which Custáncè sat full piteously.  
 No thing ne knew he what she was, nor why  
 She was in such array, ne she n'ill say  
 Of her estate, although she shouldè die.

*her rank*

He bringeth her to Rome, and to his wife  
 He gave her, and her youngè son also;  
 And with the senator she led her life.  
 Thus can Oure Lady bringen out of woe  
 Woeful Custáncè, and many another mo'.  
 And longè timè dwelt she in that place,  
 In holy workès ever, as was her grace.

*Virgin Mary  
 more*

980

The senator's wife her auntè was,  
 But for all that she knew her ne'er the more.  
 I will no longer tarry in this case,  
 But to king Alla, which I spoke of yore,  
 That for his wife weepeth and sigheth sore,  
 I will return, and let I will Custáncè  
 Under the senatorè's governance.

*of whom I spoke before*

*I'll leave*

*King Alla goes to Rome on penitential pilgrimage*

King Alla, which that had his mother slain,  
 Upon a day fell in such répentáncè  
 That, if I shortly tellen shall and plain,  
 To Rome he comes to receive his penance;  
 And put him in the popè's ordinance  
 In high and low, and Jesus Christ besought  
 Forgive his wicked workès that he wrought.

*at pope's command  
 In everything*

The fame anon through Romè town is borne,  
 How Alla king shall come in pilgrimage,  
 By harbingers that wenten him befor;

*news at once*

*messengers*



For which the senator, as was uságe,  
 Rode him against, and many of his lineage,  
 1000 As well to show his high magnificence  
 As to do any king a reverence.

*the custom  
 rode to meet him*

Great cheerè doth this noble senator  
 To king Alla, and he to him also;  
 Ever each of them does other great honor.  
 And so befell that in a day or two  
 This senator is to king Alla go  
 To feast, and shortly, if I shall not lie,  
 Custánce's son went in his company.

*warm welcome*

Some men would say at réquest of Custánce  
 This senator hath 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  
 Before Alla, during the meatè's space,  
 The child stood looking in the kingè's face.

*truth / instruction*

This Alla king hath of this child great wonder,  
 And to the senator he said anon,  
 ?Whose is that fairè child that standeth yonder? "  
 ?I n'ot," quod he, ?by God, and by Saint John!  
 1020 A mother he hath, but father hath he none  
 That I of wot "-- and shortly, in a stound,  
 He toldè Alla how that this child was found.

*I don't know*

*& briefly*

?But God wot," quod this senator also,  
 ?So virtuous a liver in my life  
 Ne saw I never as she, nor heard of mo',  
 Of worldly women, maiden, nor of wife.  
 I dare well say her had lever a knife  
 Throughout her breast, than be a woman wick;  
 There is no man could bring her to that prick.

*she had rather  
 wicked  
 that point*

Now was this child as like unto Custánce  
 As possible is a creäture to be.  
 This Alla hath the face in rémembrance  
 Of Dame Custánce, and thereon musèd he  
 If that the childè's mother were aught she  
 That is his wife, and privily he sighed,  
 And sped him from the table that he might.

*could possibly be*

*hurried*

?Parfay," thought he, ?phantom is in my head!

*By God ...fantasy*

I oughtè deem, of skillful judgèment,  
 That in the saltè sea my wife is dead.”  
 1040 And afterwards 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 thencè that she went?”

*to think in reasonable j.*

And after noon, home with the senator  
 Goes Alla, for to see this wonder chance.  
 This senator doth Alla great honour,  
 And hastily he sent after Custáncè.  
 But trusteth well, her listè not to dance,  
 When that she wistè wherefore was that send;  
 Unnethe upon her feet she mightè stand.

*sent for  
 she had no desire  
 knew / that summons  
 Scarcely*

### *Family Reunion*

When Alla saw his wife, fair he her gret,  
 And weptè that it ruth was for to see;  
 For at the firstè look he on her set,  
 He knew well verily that it was she.  
 And she, for sorrow, as dumb stands as a tree,  
 So was her heartè shut in her distress,  
 When she remembered his unkindèness.

*greeted  
 was pitiable*

Twice she swoonèd in his ownè sight;  
 He wept, and him excuseth piteously.  
 1060 ?Now God,” quod he, ?and all his hallows bright  
 So wisly on my soul as have mercy,  
 That of your harm as guiltèless am I  
 As is Mauríce my son, so like your face;  
 Elsé the fiend me fetch out of this place!”

*so surely*

*Otherwise may the devil*

Long was the sobbing and the bitter pain,  
 Ere that their woful heartès mightè cease;  
 Great was the pity for to hear them 'plain,  
 Through whichè plaintès gan their woe increase.  
 I pray you all my labor to release;  
 I may not tell their woe until to-morrow,  
 I am so weary for to speak of sorrow.

*woe in their hearts  
 complain, lament*

But finally, when that the sooth is wist  
 That Alla guiltèlees was of her woe,  
 I trow an hundred timès been they kissed,  
 And such a bliss is there betwixt them two  
 That, save the joy that lasteth evermo’,

*truth was known*

*except for*

There is none like that any creätüre  
Hath seen or shall, while that the world may dure. *may last*

1080 Then prayèd she her husband meekely,  
In relief of her longè, piteous pine, *suffering*  
That he would pray her father specially  
That of his majesty he would incline  
To vouchèsafe some day with him to dine.  
She prayed him eke he shouldè by no way *by no means*  
Unto her father no word of her say.

Some men would say how that the child Maurice  
Doth this messáge unto this emperor;  
But, as I guess, Alla was not so nice *so naive*  
To him that was of so sovereign honour  
As he that is of Christian folk the flour, <sup>1</sup>  
Sent any child, but it is bet to deem *better to think*  
He went himself, and so it may well seem.

This emperor hath granted gentilly *graciously*  
To come to dinner, as he him besought; *as Alla asked*  
And well read I he lookèd busily *intently*  
Upon this child, and on his daughter thought.  
Alla goes to his inn, and as him ought,  
Arrayèd for this feast in every wise *Arranged*  
As farforth as his cunning may suffice. *the best of his ability*

1100 The morrow came, and Alla gan him dress, *got ready*  
And eke his wife, this emperor to meet;  
And forth they ride in joy and in gladness .  
And when she saw her father in the street,  
She lighted down, and falleth him to feet.  
?Father,? quod she, ?your youngè child Custánce  
Is now full clean out of your rémembránce.

?I am your daughter Cónstancè,? quod she,  
? That whilom you have sent unto Syria.  
It am I, father, that in the saltè sea  
Was put alone and damnèd for to die. *condemned*  
Now, goodè father, mercy I you cry!  
Send me no more unto no heatheness,  
But thank my lord here of his kindèness.?”

---

<sup>1</sup> Alla was not so diplomatically naive as to send a child as ambassador to the chief Christian monarch. He must have gone himself (taking the child with him presumably).

Who can the piteous joyè tellen all  
 Betwixt them three, since they been thus y-met?  
 But of my talè make an end I shall;  
 The day goes fast, I will no longer let. *delay*  
 These gladè folk to dinner they them set;  
 In joy and bliss at meat I let them dwell *at meal*  
 1120 A thousand fold well more than I can tell.

This child Mauríce was sithen emperor *later*  
 Made by the pope, and livèd Christianly;  
 To Christè's Church he didè great honour.  
 But I let all his story passen by;  
 Of Constance is my talè specially.  
 In th'oldè Roman gestès may men find *stories*  
 Mauríce's life; I bear it not in mind.

*Alla and Constance return to England together. One last time Fate intervenes.*

This king Alla, when he his timè saw,  
 With his Custánce, his holy wife so sweet,  
 To England been they come the rightè way, *quickest way*  
 Where as they live in joy and in quiet.  
 But little while it lasteth, I you het, *I promise*  
 Joy of this world, for time will not abide;  
 From day to night it changeth as the tide.

Who livèd ever in such delight one day  
 That him ne movèd either conscience,  
 Or ire, or talent, or some kind affray, *Or anger or yearning / emotion*  
 Envy, or pride, or passion, or offence?  
 I ne say but for this end this sentéce: *this message*  
 1140 That little while in joy or in pleasánce  
 Lasteth the bliss of Alla with Custánce.

For death, that takes of high and low his rent,  
 When passèd was a year, even as I guess,  
 Out of this world this king Alla He hent, *he took*  
 For whom Custánce hath full great heaviness .  
 Now let us prayen God his soulè bless!  
 And dame Custáncè, finally to say,  
 Toward the town of Romè goes her way.

To Rome is come this holy creätúre,  
 And findeth herè friendès whole and sound;  
 Now is she scapèd all her áventúre.  
 And when that she her father hath y-found,

Down on her knees falleth she to ground;  
 Weeping for tenderness in heartè blithe,  
 She herieth God a hundred thousand sithe.

*happy  
 praises / times*

In virtue and in holy almès-deed  
 They liven all, and never asunder wend;  
 Till death departeth them this life they lead.  
 And fare now well! my tale is at an end.  
 1160 Now Jesus Christ, that of his might may send  
 Joy after woe, govérn us in His grace,  
 And keep us allè that be in this place!

*never part  
 separated them*

Amen