

GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *THE MAN OF LAW'S PROLOGUES, TALE, AND EPILOGUE*

PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH PROSE TRANSLATION BY SIDNEY M. VANMETER AND JONATHAN D. LANNING

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The Man of Law's Prologue

The words of the Host to the company.

Our Host saw well that the bright sun had run the fourth part and half an hour more of the arc of his twelve-hour day. And though he was not very educated, the Host learned it was the eighteenth day of April, that is messenger to May. He saw well that the shadow of every tree was the same length as the erect body that caused it; therefore, by the shadow he made his opinion that Phoebus¹, which shined so clear and bright, had climbed forty-five degrees on height. He concluded for that day, in that latitude, it was ten o'clock.

Suddenly, he pulled his horse about. "Gentleman," he said, "I warn you, all this company, the fourth part of this day is gone. Now, for the love of God, and of Saint John, lose no time, as far as you may. Gentleman, the time wastes night and day, and steals from us, in part secretly when we are sleeping, and in part through negligence in our period of wakefulness, as does the stream that never turns back again, descending from the mountain into the plain. Well can Seneca, and many a philosopher, lament time more than gold in a chest; 'For loss of wealth may be recovered, but loss of time destroys us,' said he. It will not come again, without doubt, no more than will Malkin's² virginity when she has lost it in her wantonness. Let us not grow moldy in idleness!"

"Sir Man of Law," he said, "so have your bliss. Tell us a tale at once, as the agreement is. You have submitted through your free assent to stand in this case at my judgement. Now fulfill your promise; then you have done your duty, at last."

"Host," he said, "certainly, I assent! To break an agreement is not my intent. A promise is an obligation, and I will hold gladly all my promises, I can no better say. For such law as a man gives another person, he should himself use it by right- so the saying goes. But nonetheless, certainly, I can right now tell no respectable tale that Chaucer, though he knows little about meters and rhyming craftily, has not already said, in such English as he can, of old time, as many a man know. And if he has not said them, dear brother, in one book, he has said them in another. For he has told of lovers up and down more than Ovid made mention of in his *Epistoles*, that are very old. Why should I tell them, since they have been told?"

"In youth he told about Ceyx and Alcyone, and since he has spoke of everyone, these noble wives, and these lovers also. Whoever that will seek his large volume called the *Saints' Legend* of Cupid, there may see the large wounds wide of Lucretia, and Thisbe of Babylon, the sword of Dido for the false Aeneas, the tree of Phyllis for her Demophon, the lament of Deianira, and Hermione, of Ariadne, and of Hypsipyle, the barren island standing in the sea, the drowned Leander for his Hero, the tears of Helen, and also the woe of Briseida, and of the, Laodamia; the cruelty of the

¹ The sun.

² A name used in this time period. Here it is used to be representative of any women who loses her virginity.

queen Medea- the little children hanging by the neck, for thy Jason, that was of love so false. Oh Hypermnestra, Penelope, Alcestis, your wifehood he commends with the best!”³

“But certainly, he wrote no word of that same wicked example of Canace, that loved her own brother sinfully. Of such cursed stories I say fie! Or else of Tyro Apollonius- how that cursed king Antiochus deprived his daughter of her virginity. That is so horrible a tale to read, when he threw her on the pavement! And therefore he, deliberately, would never write in any of his sermons of such unkind abominations, nor would I repeat any, if that I may.

“But of my tale how shall I act this day? I would not want to be compared, doubtless, to the muses that men call Pierides⁴- *Metamorphoses* knows what I mean. But nonetheless I do not care one bean, though I come after him with meager fare. I speak in prose, and let him make rhymes.” And with that word he began his tale with a sober cheer, as you shall hear after.

The Prologue of the Man’s Tale of Law.

Oh, hateful harm, condition of poverty, with thirst, with cold, with hunger so confounded. To ask for help makes you ashamed in your heart. If you don’t ask, so severely are you wounded that true need uncovers all your hidden wounds. In spite of all you can do, you must, because of poverty either steal, or beg, or borrow your expenses. You blame Christ and say very bitterly that he distributes temporal riches unfairly. You sinfully blame your neighbor and say you have too little and he has all. “Truly,” you say, “sometime he will pay for it when his tail will burn in the fire of hell, for he did not help the needy in their need.”

Listen to what is the maxim of the wise: “It is better to die than to be poor. Your own neighbor will despise you.” If you are poor, farewell to any respect shown to you! Yet of the wise man take this advice: “All the days of poor men are wretched.” Beware, therefore, before you come to that condition.

If you are poor, your brother hates you, and all your friends flee from you, alas! Oh, rich merchants, you are full of wealth. Oh noble, oh prudent folk, as in this case! Your bags are not filled with a “double ace”⁵, but with “six-five”⁶ that runs in your favor. At Christmas you may dance merrily! You seek land and sea for your winnings. As wise folk you know all the condition of ruling; you have been fathers of tidings and tales, both of peace and of war. I would right now be destitute of tales were it not for a merchant, gone for many years, that told me a tale, which you shall hear.

The Man of Law’s Tale

Here begins the Man of Law’s Tale.

In Syria at one time dwelt a company of rich, and also dignified and honest, merchants that far and wide sent their spices and clothes of gold and satin rich in color. Their merchandise was so high quality and so new that every person was delighted to do business with them, and also to sell them their wares.

Now it happened that the masters of that company had determined they were going to Rome. Whether it was for business or pleasure, no other messenger would they send, but came themselves to Rome; this is the long and short of it. And in such place as they thought convenient

³ This paragraph is meant to explain that Chaucer has told stories about many topics. See Appendix A for further information on the names mentioned in this paragraph.

⁴ This line is references Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which he recounts how nine sisters called the Pierides went against the muses in a singing contest and lost. Due to their defeat, the Pierides were turned into birds.

⁵ A losing pair when playing dice.

⁶ The second highest possible throw in dice.

for their purpose, they took their lodging. The merchants had stayed in that town a certain time, as suited their pleasure. And so it happened that the excellent renown of the Emperor's daughter, lady Constance, was reported, in full detail unto these Syrian merchants in such a way from day to day, as I shall tell.

This was the common opinion of every man: "Our Emperor of Rome, God protect him! He has a daughter, since the world began, to evaluate as well her goodness as beauty, nor was there ever such another as her. I pray to God to sustain her honor, and would wish she were the queen of all of Europe. In her is high beauty without pride, youth without immaturity or folly. In all her works virtue is her guide. Humbleness has slain in her all tyranny. She is a mirror of all courtesy. Her heart is truly a chamber of holiness, her hand minister of generosity in alms-giving."

And all this report was true, as God is true. But now let us turn again to the purpose. These merchants had their ships loaded afresh, and when they had seen this blessed maiden, home to Syria they went very happily. And they conducted their business as they had done formerly and lived in prosperity. I can tell you no more.

Now it happened that these merchants stood in grace of the Sultan of Syria. For when they came from any foreign place, he would of his gracious kindness entertain them well and busily seek to discover tidings of different countries, to learn about the wonders they might have seen or heard. Among other things, in particular, these merchants had told him of Lady Constance's great nobility in earnest detail. This Sultan had experienced such great pleasure to have her image in his remembrance that all his delight and all his earnest concern was to love her, while his life may last.

Perhaps in that large book, which men call heaven, was written with stars when he was born that he should have his death because of love, alas! For in the stars, clearer than glass, is written for whoever could read it that God knows the death of every man, without doubt. In stars many winters beforehand was written the death of Hector, Achilles, of Pompey, Julius, before they were born; the strife of Thebes, and of Hercules, of Sampson, Turnus, and of Socrates. But men's wits have been so dull that no person can well read it in full.

This sultan sent for his private counsel, and to shortly pass over this matter he had declared his intent to them. He said to them, certainly, unless he might have the good fortune to have Lady Constance within a little time that he was as good as dead, and he charged them in haste to devise for his life some remedy. Different men said different things. They argued, deliberated up and down. They produced many fine reasons. They spoke of magic and deception. But finally, in conclusion, they could see no advantage in that, nor in any other way, save for marriage. Then they saw in that such difficulty, on rational consideration, because there was such diversity between both their laws. They said they believed that "No Christian prince would gladly wed his child under our sweet laws that were taught to us by Mohammed, our prophet."

And the Sultan answered, "Rather than I lose Constance, I will be christened, doubtless. I must be hers; I may choose none other. I pray you, cease your arguments. Save my life, and don't be negligent to her that has my life in her power, for in this woe I may not long endure."

What needs greater explanation? I say, by negotiation and diplomacy, and by the Pope's mediation, and all the church, and all the chivalry, that in destruction of Mohammadanism⁷, and in the increase of Christ's dear law, they are in agreement, so you shall hear. An adequate security provided that the Sultan and his nobility and all his subjects should be christened, and he shall have Constance in marriage, and a certain amount of gold-I do not know how much. This same agreement was sworn on both sides. Now fair Constance, let Almighty God guide you!

Now some men would expect, as I guess, that I should tell all the preparations that the Emperor, of his great nobility, had devised for his daughter, Lady Constance. Well men may know

⁷ A reference to Islam.

that such great arrangements cannot be told briefly by a man as was arranged for so important a cause. Bishops had been appointed to go with her, lords, ladies, knights of renown, and plenty of another folk-this is the long and short of it. It was proclaimed throughout the town that every person should pray that Christ may look favorably on this marriage and give prosperity to this undertaking.

The day came of her departure-I say the woeful fatal day had come, that there may be no longer tarrying. But they readied themselves to go forth, one and all. Constance, who was overcome with sorrow, rose very pale and dressed herself to go, for well she saw there was no other end. Allas, what wonder is it though she wept, who shall be sent to a foreign nation from friends that so tenderly she kept and to be bound under the subjection by one whose condition she does not know. Husbands have been all good, and have long been so; wives know that- I dare tell you no more.

"Father," she said, "your wretched child Constance, the young daughter brought up so soft, and you, my mother, my chief delight over all things, except Christ above, Constance your child commends herself often unto your grace. For I must go to Syria, and I will never see you again with my eyes. Allas, unto the heathen nation I must go immediately, since that is your will! But Christ, who died for our redemption, so give me grace to fulfill his commands. I, wretched woman, no matter if I die. Women are born to servitude and suffering and to be under man's control."

I tell you, not at Troy, when Pyrrhus broke the wall before Ilion burned, at Thebes the city, nor at Rome for the harm from Hannibal that has vanquished the Romans three times, was heard such tender weeping, for pity, as was in the chamber for Constance's departure! But forth she must go, whether she weeps or sings.

Oh, first moving⁸, cruel sphere! With your daily rotation that drives and hurls all from east to west that naturally would hold another way. Your driving force set the heaven in such array at the beginning of this dangerous voyage, that cruel Mars⁹ has slain this marriage. Infortunat ascendent tortuous¹⁰, of which the lord is now fallen helpless, alas, out of his angle into the darkest house! Oh Mars, oh birth sign, as in this case! Oh feeble moon, unlucky have been your motions! You are in located where you are not well received. Where you would be in a good position, from there you are removed.

Imprudent Emperor of Rome, alas! Was there no astrologer in all your town? Is no time better than another in such a case? Is there no other choice of the proper time for voyage for folk of important condition, even when an exact date of birth is known? Allas, we have been too ignorant or too slow!

This woeful fair maiden was brought to ship, solemnly, with every attention to propriety. "Now Jesus Christ be with you all," she said. There is no more but 'Farewell, fair Constance!'. She strove to keep her composure. And forth I let her sail in this manner, and I will turn again to my matter.

The mother of the Sultan, source of vices, had observed her son's plain intent, how he would abandon his old sacrifices. She immediately sent for her council, and they came to know what she meant. And when these folk were assembled together, she set them down, and said as you shall hear:

⁸ This refers to the Primum Mobile. In medieval cosmology, they believed the earth was the center of the universe and had spheres of the other planets moving around it. The Primum Mobile was the outermost sphere that contained the spheres of all of the planets and carried them with it as it moved.

⁹ The Roman god of war.

¹⁰ This is referencing the ascendent, or region of the heavens that was on the eastern horizon when Constance was born. The "lord" of this region was considered to be the planet that resides within it. This "lord" would be considered to have control over Constance's fate. This whole section is referring to the belief at the time that the condition of the heavens at your birth would have a huge impact on the course of your life.

“Gentleman,” she said, “each one of you know how my son is about to abandon the holy laws of our Koran, given by God’s messenger Mohammed. But one vow to great God I promise: the life shall sooner depart from my body before Mohammed’s law out of my heart! What should come to us of this new law but servitude to our bodies and suffering, and afterward in hell to be dragged for we renounced our belief in Mohammed? But gentleman, will you make a pledge as I shall say, assenting to my advice, and I shall make us safe forever more?”

They swore and assented, every man, to live with her and die, and stand by her. And every man, in the best ways he can, to strengthen her would try persuade all his friends. And she has this enterprise taken in hand, which you shall hear as I shall relate. To them all she spoke right in this way:

“We shall first pretend to take Christendom- cold water should not grieve us but a little! And I shall make such a feast and revel that, as I suppose, shall pay back the Sultan. For, though his wife is christened never so white, she will need to wash away the red, though she will bring baptism water with her.”

Oh, Sultaness¹¹, root of iniquity! Unwomanly woman, you Semiramis¹² the second! Oh, serpent under woman’s shape, like to the serpent deep in hell bound! Oh, feigned woman, all that may confound virtue and innocence, through your malice, is bred in you, as a nest of every vice! Oh Satan, envious since that day that you were deprived of our heritage, well know the old way to women. You made Eve bring us into servitude. You will destroy this Christian marriage. You make women your instrument when you will deceive.

This Sultaness, whom I thus blame and curse, privately let her council go away. Why should I tarry longer in this tale? She rode to the Sultan on a day, and said to him that she would renounce her law, and receive Christendom from a priest’s hand, repenting that she was heathen so long. Beseeching him to do her that honor, that she must have the Christian folk for a feast. “I will do my best to please them,” she said.

The Sultan said, “I will do as you desire,” and, kneeling, thanked her of that request. He was so glad, he did not know what to say. She kissed her son, and went her way home.

[Part Two]

The Christian folk arrived to land in Syria with a great splendid company. Hastily the Sultan sent his messenger first to his mother, then all around the kingdom. He said his wife had come, without a doubt and prayed her to ride and meet the Queen, the honor of his reign to sustain.

Great was the crowd, and wealthy was the assembly of Syrians and Romans who met there together. The mother of the Sultan, richly and beautifully dressed, received her with as glad a face as any mother might her dear daughter. And to the nearest city there beside they solemnly rode at a leisurely pace. I do not believe the triumph of Julius, of which Lucan made such a boast, was more royal or more splendid than the assembly of this blissful host. But this scorpion, this wicked ghost, the Sultaness, for all her flattery planned under this guise to mortally sting.

The Sultan himself came soon after this, so royally, that it is a wonder to tell. He welcomed her with joy and bliss, and thus in mirth and joy I let them stay. The important part of this matter is what I tell. When the time came, men thought it for the best that revel should cease, and men go to their rest.

¹¹ Mother of the Sultan.

¹² This is a reference to the story of Queen Semiramis as it was documented by an ancient historian named Diodorus. In his account, Queen Semiramis became queen by tricking her husband into giving her the throne. Here, the Man of Law is insinuating that the Sultaness is making an attempt at taking her son’s title and power.

The time having come, this old Sultanness had arranged the feast of which I speak. The Christian folk made their way to the feast, in general both young and old. Here may men feast, behold nobility, and take pleasure in more than I can tell you. But all too dearly they paid for it before they rose.

Oh, sudden woe, that ever is a successor to worldly bliss mingled with bitterness. The end of the joy of our worldly labor! Woe occupies the end of our gladness. Hear this council for your security: "In your prosperity keep in mind the unexpected woe or harm that comes afterwards." For shortly to tell in a word, the Sultan and the Christians were all hacked to pieces and stabbed at the table, except for only Lady Constance alone. This old Sultanness, this evil crone, had done this cursed deed with her friends. For she wanted to rule all the country herself.

Nor was there any Syrian who had converted, who had followed the advice of the Sultan, who was not all hacked to pieces before he could escape. They immediately took Constance straightaway, and they set her in a rudderless ship, God knows, and ordered her to learn to sail out of Syria and back to Italy. They had given her a certain amount of treasure she had brought there, and, to say the truth, plenty of food, and also the clothes she had. And forth she sailed into the salty sea. Oh, my Constance, full of gentleness! Oh, Emperor's dear young daughter! He who is Lord of Fortune, be thy rudder!

She blessed herself, and with a very pitiful voice, she said unto the cross of Christ: "Oh glorious, oh joyful alter, holy cross, red with the blood of the lamb, full of pity, that washed the world of iniquity, keep me from the fiend and from his claws, [until] that day that I shall drown in the deep. Victorious tree, protection of the faithful, that only the worthy may bare, the king of heaven with his fresh wounds, the white lamb, that was hurt by a spear, banisher of fiends out of every man and woman, over whom your arms faithfully spread, protect me, and grant me the power to amend my life."

Years and days this creature floated across the sea of Greece, unto the straight of Gibraltar, as it was her lot. On many a sorry meal did she eat! She very often waited for her death before the wild waves would drive her onto the place where she would touch land. Men might ask why she was not also slain at the feast. Who might save her body? And to that question again I answer: Who saved Daniel in that horrible cave, where everyone but him, master and servant alike, was devoured by the lion before he could escape? No one but God, whom he kept in his heart. God wanted to show his wonderful miracle in Constance, so that we can see his mighty works. Christ, who is a remedy for every harm, by certain means often, as clerks know, does things for reasons that are often unknown to the understanding of men. Because of our ignorance, we cannot have knowledge of his wise providence.

Now, since she was not slain at the feast, who kept her from drowning at sea? Who kept Jonah in the fish's stomach until he was spouted up at Ninevah? Men may well know it was no one but he that kept the Hebrew people from their drowning with dry feet throughout the sea passage. Who commanded the four spirits of tempest that have the power to harm land and sea, both north and south and also west and east, "harm neither sea, nor land, nor tree"? Truly the ruler of that was he who kept this woman safe from the tempest both while she was awake and while she slept.

Where might this woman have food and drink for three years and more? How did her supplies last so long? Who fed the Egyptian Mary in the cave, or in the desert? None but Christ, without a doubt. It was a great wonder to feed five thousand folk with five loaves and two fish. God sent plenty at their great need.

She drove forth into our ocean throughout the wild sea, until at last the waves cast her under a castle that I cannot name far into Northumberland. Her ship stuck in the sand so fast that it would not move for the duration of the tide. It was the will of Christ that she should remain there.

The governor of the castle came down to see the wreck, and he searched the entire ship.

He found the weary woman full of sorrow. He found also the treasure that she brought. In her language she asked for mercy, to sever the life out of her body and deliver her from the woe she was in. Her speech was a kind of corrupt Latin, but nonetheless she was understood. When the governor did not wish to search any further, he brought this woeful woman to the land. She knelt down and thanked God's son. But what she was she would tell no man, on no account in case she should die.

She said she was so bewildered in the sea that she had lost her memory, by her honor. The governor had great pity for her, and also his wife, that they wept for pity. She was so diligent without laziness. And she served and pleased everyone in that place so that all that looked at her face loved her. The governor and his wife, Lady Hermengild, were pagans, as was the rest of the country. But Hermengild loved her right as her life, and Constance had been there so long that with prayers and with many a bitter tear, Jesus had converted through his grace Lady Hermengild, wife of that castle.

In all that land no followers of Christ dared to make a move. All Christian folk had fled from the country because of the pagans that conquered all about the region of the north, by land and sea. The Christians fled to Wales of old Britons dwelling in this isle. There they sought refuge for the time being. But yet not all Christian Britons were so exiled, and there were some that secretly worshipped Christ while deceiving the heathen folk.

Near the castle there dwelt three such Christians. One of them was blind and could not see, except with the eye of his mind, with which men see with when they have been blind. Bright was the sun on that summer's day, for which the governor and his wife also and Constance took the direct route toward the sea, a furlong¹³ or two away, to take recreation and roam to and fro. And in their walk, they met this blind man, crooked and old, with eyes tightly shut.

"In the name of Christ!" cried the blind Briton, "Lady Hermengild, give me my sight back!" Lady Hermengild was alarmed of the sound, in case her husband, shortly to say, would have her slain for her love of Jesus Christ. But Constance made her bold and told her to work the will of Christ, as a daughter of his church.

The governor was troubled of that sight, and said, "What is the meaning of this commotion?"

Constance answered, "Sir, this is the might of Christ that helps folks out of the fiend's snare." And she explained our law to the extent that she converted the governor before it was evening, and made him believe in Christ.

This governor was not the lord of this place of which I speak where he found Constance. But he kept it safe for a period of many years under Allah, King of all Northumberland, that was very wise man and a mighty warrior against the Scots, as men well hear. But I will turn back to my matter.

Satan, that ever lies in wait to deceive us, saw Constance's perfection and plotted immediately how he might pay her back. He made a young knight who lived in the town love her so hotly with wretched affection that truly he thought he would die if he could not have his will of her. He wooed her, but it was to no avail. She would do no sin, in no way. And out of malice he planned in his mind to make her die a shameful death. He waited until the governor was away and secretly crept into Lady Hermengild's room one night while she slept.

Weary and exhausted from her prayers, Constance slept and also Lady Hermengild. The Knight, on account of Satan's temptations, went stealthily to the bed and cut the throat of Hermengild in two and laid the bloodied knife by Lady Constance. Then he went his way. May God curse him!

Soon after this the governor came back home and also Allah, who was king of that land. He found his wife cruelly slain, for which he very often wept and wrung his hands. He found the

¹³ Equivalent to about 1/8 of a mile.

bloody knife in the bed by Lady Constance. Allas, what might she say? For truly because of woe her wit was all gone.

King Allah was told all this misfortune and also the time, and where and in what manner this Constance was found in a ship as previously you have heard related. The King's heart melted with pity when he saw so gentle a creature fall into suffering and misfortune. For as the lamb is brought toward his death so stood this innocent [woman] before the King. This false Knight, who had wrought this treason, accused her that she had done this thing. But nonetheless there was great mourning among the people; they said they could not guess that she had done so great a wickedness. For they had seen her ever so virtuous and loving Hermengild right as her life. Everyone in the house testified to this, save the one who killed Hermengild with his knife. This gentle King was greatly impressed by this witness, and thought he would inquire deeper in this to learn the truth,

Alas! Constance, you have no champion, nor can you fight, alas! But he who died for our redemption and bound Satan (and he still lies there), so be your strong champion this day! For unless Christ performs a miracle, without guilt you should be slain without delay.

She sat down on her knees, and thus she said: "Immortal God that saved Susanna from false blame, and you, merciful maid Mary, daughter to Saint Anne, before whose child angels sing Hosanna, if I am guiltless of this crime, be my help or else I will die!"

Have you not sometime seen a pale face among a crowd, of one who was led towards his own death, where he received no mercy? And he had such a color in his face, that men might know his face that is in trouble among all the faces in that company. So stood Constance, and she looked about. Oh Queens, living in prosperity, dutchesses, and all you ladies, have some pity for her adversity. An Emperor's daughter stood alone. She had no one to whom to make her plea. Oh, royal blood that stands in this dread, far away are your friends in your time of need!

This King Alla had such compassion, as a gentle heart is filled of pity, that from his eyes the water ran down. "Now hastily do fetch a book," he said, "And if the Knight will swear how she killed this woman, we will consider whom we want to be our judge." A book, in which were written the gospels was fetched, and on this book, he swore immediately she was guilty. And meanwhile, a hand struck him upon the neck bone and down he fell like a stone. Both his eyes burst out of his face, in front of everybody in that place.

A voice was heard by everyone. It said, "You have slandered the guiltless daughter of the holy church in solemn assembly. Thus, you have done, and yet I hold my peace!" All the crowd was afraid of this marvel. Like bewildered folk they each stood in fear of vengeance, except for Constance alone. Great was the dread and also the repentance of them that had wrongfully suspected this poor, innocent Constance. As a result of this miracle, in conclusion, and by Constance's mediation, the king and many others in that place were converted. Thanked be Christ's grace!

This false knight was hastily slain for his treachery by the judgement of Alla, and yet Constance had great pity for his death. After this, Jesus through his mercy, made Alla wed very splendidly this holy maid, who is so bright and radiant. Thus, God made Constance a queen.

But who was woeful of this wedding, if I should not lie, but Donegild alone, the king's mother who was full of tyranny. She thought her cursed heart would break in two. She wished her son had not done so. She thought it was an insult that he should take so strange a creature as his spouse.

I do not want to make as long a tale of the chaff nor straw as the corn.¹⁴ What should I tell of the royalty at marriage, or which course comes first? Or who blows on the trumpet or a horn? The most important part of the tale is to be told. They eat, and drink, and dance, and sing, and play. They go to bed, as was reasonable and right. For though wives have been very holy things, they must take in patience at night such necessary acts as have been pleasing to folk that have wedded them with rings. And they must lay a little of their holiness aside on this occasion. It may no better occur.

By Constance he begot a male child immediately. He took his wife to a bishop and his governor to protect her while he was gone towards Scotland to seek his enemies. Now fair Constance, who is so humble and meek, was so long pregnant that still she kept to her chamber, abiding Christ's will.

The time came and she gave birth to a male child. At the baptismal font they called him Mauricius. The governor summoned a messenger to come, and wrote to his king named Alla that this happy event had happened and other events useful to be said. He took the letter, and forth he went on his way.

The messenger, to win himself favor, rode with all speed to the king's mother, and greeted her very kindly in his language. "Madam," he said, "you may be glad and happy, and thank God a hundred thousand times. My lady queen had a child, without doubt, to the joy and bliss of all around this region. Here are the sealed letters of this thing that I must carry with all the haste I may. If you want to send anything to your son, the king, I am your servant both day and night."

Donegild answered, "Right now at this time, no. But here all night I want you to take your rest. Tomorrow I will say to you what pleases me."

The messenger drank heavily of ale and wine. While he slept like a pig, his letters were secretly stolen out of his box and another letter was very cleverly forged, written very sinfully, to the king from his constable that addressed this matter, as you shall hear.

The letter said that the queen delivered so horrible a fiendish creature that no one in the castle was so brave that dared to remain near it for any time. The mother was an evil witch, come by chance by charms or sorcery, and everyone hated her company. Woe was this king when he had seen this letter, but he told his bitter sorrows to no one. But with his own hand he wrote in reply: "Welcome the son of Christ forevermore to me that is now learned in his teachings! Lord, welcome be your pleasure and delight. My pleasure I put all at your disposal. Keep this child, whether it is foul or fair, and also my wife, until my homecoming. Christ, when he wants to, may send me and heir more agreeable than this and to my liking."

He sealed this letter, secretly weeping, which was soon taken to the messenger. The messenger went on his way. There is nothing more to do.

Oh messenger, full of drunkenness. Your breath is strong, your limbs are constantly shaking, and you betray all secrets. Your mind is destroyed, and you chatter like a jay. Your face is turned in a new state. Where drunkenness reigns in any company, there is no secret hidden, without doubt.

Oh Donegild, I have no English suitable to describe your malice and tyranny; therefore, I resign you to the fiend. Let him write about your treachery. Fie, mankind, fie! Oh no by God I lie! Fie, fiendish spirit! For dare I tell, though you walk here your spirit is in hell.

The messenger returned from the King, and dismounted at the king's mother's court. She was fully glad of this messenger, and pleased him in all that ever she might. He drank and filled his belly. He slept and he snored in his own fashion all night, until the sun began to rise. Again, all of his letters were stolen and forged in this manner: "The king commands his governor on pain of hanging

¹⁴ An expression used here to show that the narrator does not want to talk about the small details as much as the main issue of the story.

and on sever punishment, that he should not allow in any manner for Constance to remain within his region for three days and a quarter of a tide. But in the same ship that he found her, he should put her and her young son and all her possessions, and push her from the land and command her that she never come there again.”

Oh, my Constance, well may your spirit have fear, and sleeping in your dream been in distress, when Donegild determined on this plan.

The messenger in the morning, when he woke, went to the castle the quickest way, and gave the letter to the governor. When he saw this pitiful letter, very often he said ‘alas!’ “Lord Christ,” he said, “how may this world endure, so full of sin in so many creatures? Oh, mighty God, if it be your will, since you are rightful judge, how may it be that you would allow innocents to die and wicked folk to live in prosperity? Oh, good Custance, alas, sorrow overcomes me, that I must be your tormentor, or die a shameful death. There is no other way.”

People both young and old wept in all that place when the king sent this cursed letter. Constance, with a deadly pale face, went towards her ship on the fourth day. Nonetheless, she cheerfully took the will of Christ, and kneeling on the shore she said, “Lord, I welcome what you send! He that kept me from the false blame while I was on the land amongst you, and he can keep me from harm and also from shame in the salty sea, although I don’t see how. As strong as ever he was, so is he still. In him I trust, and in his mother dear, that is to me my sail and also my helm.”

Her little child lay weeping in her arm. Kneeling, she compassionately said to him, “Peace, little son, for I will do you no harm.” With that she pulled the cloth from her head, and laid it over his little eyes. In her arms she rocked him quickly and caste her eyes up to heaven.

“Mother,” she cried, “and maid bright, Mary, true is that through a woman’s instigations mankind was ruined and condemned to die, for which your child was torn on a cross. Your blessed eyes saw all his torment. There is no comparison between your sorrows and any sorrow man may endure. You saw your child slain before your eyes, and yet now lives my little child, truly. Now lady bright, to whom all the woeful cry, glory of womanhood, fair maiden, haven of refuge, bright morning star, have some pity on my child, that of your kindness takes pity on every pitiable person in distress.”

“Oh, little child, alas, what is your guilt, that never has committed sin yet, indeed? Why will your hard father have you killed? Oh mercy, dear governor,” she said, “Let my little child dwell here with you! And if you dare not save him from blame, so kiss him once in his father’s name.”

With that she looked back to the land and said, “Farewell, ruthless husband.” Up she rose and walked down the shore towards the ship, and all the crowd followed her. Ever she prayed her child to hold his peace, and took her leave. With holy spirit she blessed herself, and into the ship she went.

The ship was stocked with food, it is without doubt, abundantly for her very long time. And she had adequate other necessities that she should need, praised be God’s grace! May almighty God see to the wind and weather, and bring her home. I can no better say, but into the sea she drove forth her way.

[Part Three]

Alla the king came home to his castle soon after this, of which I told, and asked where his wife and child were. The governor went cold, and plainly told him all of the matter as you have heard. I can tell it no better. He showed the king his seal and also his letter and said, “Lord, as you commanded me under pain of death, so have I certainly done.”

This messenger was tortured until he had to confess and tell, plain and bluntly, in what place he had stayed from night to night. Thus, by reasoning and subtle inquiry, he imagined from whom

this harm originated. The hand was known that wrote the letter, and all the venom of the cursed deed. But in what manner, certainly I do not know. The effect was this: that Alla, without doubt, killed his mother- that may men plainly read- because she was a traitor to her allegiance. Thus, ended the old Donegild, curse her! There is no tongue that may tell the sorrow that this Alla made night and day for his wife and for his child also.

But now I will go on to Constance, who drifted in the sea in pain and woe for five years and more as was pleasing to Christ's ordinance before her ship approached land. The sea cast up Constance and her child under a heathen castle at last, of which the name I can not find in my text. Almighty God, that saved all mankind, remember Constance and her child that have fallen in heathen land a second time on the brink of death, as I will tell you soon.

Down from the castle came many people to gaze on this ship and on Constance. But shortly the lord's steward came from the castle on a night- God give him misfortune! - a thief that had abandoned our faith came into the ship alone and said he should have sex with her, whether she liked it or not. Overwhelmed with misery was this wretched woman. Her child cried and she cried piteously. But blessed Mary help her immediately. For with her struggling well and mightily the thief fell overboard suddenly, and he drowned in the sea for vengeance. And thus, Christ kept Constance undefiled.

Oh, foul delight of luxury, lo, your end. Not only do you enfeeble man's mind, but truthfully you will destroy his body. The end of your work or of your blind lust is lamentation. How many may one man find that has been slain or ruined not for the deed, but for the intent to do this sin? How many weak women have this strength to defend herself against this renegade? Oh, Goliath, unmeasurable of height, how might David so young and destitute of armor make you so helpless? How did he dare look upon your dreadful face? Well may men see, it was but God's grace. Who gave Judith courage or bravery to slay Holofernes in his tent, and to deliver out of wretchedness the people of God? I say for this intent, that right as god sent spirit of vigor to them and saved them out of misfortune, so sent he might and vigor to Constance.

Her ship went forth throughout the narrow mouth of Gibraltar and Morocco, driving sometimes west, and sometimes north and south, and sometimes east for many a weary day. Until Christ's mother- blessed be she! - had determined through her endless goodness to make an end of all her sorrow.

Now let us cease speaking of Constance only for a short time, and speak of the Roman emperor that by letters from Syria had known 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 caused to be killed both more and less. For which this Emperor had sent immediately his senator, with royal decree, and other lords, God knows, many a one, to Syria to take high vengeance. They burned, slayed, and brought them to misfortune for many a day. But shortly, this is the end and homeward to Rome they prepared to go.

This senator returned with victory toward Rome, and sailing full royally met the ship driving, as the story says, in which Constance sat full piteously. He knew nothing of what she was, nor why she was in such a state, nor why she would not speak of her condition in life, though she may die for it. He brought her to Rome and gave her and her young son to his wife, and with the senator she lived her life. Thus, can our lady bring out of woe Constance and many another more. For a long time, she dwelled in that place in holy works ever, as was her grace.

The senator's wife was her aunt, but for all that she knew her not at all. I will no longer tarry in this case. But I will return to King Alla, which I spoke of before, that wept for his wife and sighed deeply. I will leave Constance under the senator's control.

King Alla, who had slain his mother, fell into such repentance upon a day that, if I shortly and plainly tell, came to Rome to receive his penance and put himself in the Pope's control in all things. He asked Jesus Christ to forgive the wicked deeds that he had done.

The news immediately was spread through the town of how King Alla was coming in pilgrimage by king's officers that went before him. As was customary, the senator rode to meet him with many of his lineage, to show his high magnificence as well as to give the king respect. This noble senator entertained King Alla lavishly, and he to him also. Each of them did the other great honor. And so it happened that in a day or two, this senator was to go to King Alla to feast. Shortly, if I do not lie, Constance's son went in his company. Some would say this senator had brought the child to feast at the request of Constance. I may not tell of every circumstance; however, that may be, there he was at any rate. But true is this, that at his mother's bidding the child stood before Alla during the course of the meal, looking in the king's face.

This King Alla had of this child great wonder, and to the senator he immediately said, "Who is that fair child that stands over there?"

"I do not know," said he, "by God and by Saint John! He has a mother, but he does not have a father that I know of." And shortly he told Alla how this child was found.

"But God knows," said this senator also, "I have never in my life seen so virtuous a liver as she, nor heard of a more worldly woman, maiden, or wife. I dare well say she would prefer a knife through her chest than to be a wicked woman. There is no man that could bring her to that condition."

Now this child was as similar to Constance as it is possible a creature can be. This Alla had the face of Lady Constance in remembrance, and therefore he wondered if that child's mother were by any means she that was his wife. Secretly he sighed and hastened from the table as best he could.

"Perhaps," he thought, "illusion is in my head! I ought to believe, of rational judgement, that my wife is dead in the salty sea."

And afterwards he made his argument: "What do I know if Christ has sent my wife here by sea, as well as he sent her to my country from the place she went?"

That afternoon, Alla went home with the senator to see this wondrous occurrence. This senator did Alla great honor, and hastily he sent for Constance. But trust well, she did not feel like dancing when she knew the reason for that message. She could hardly stand upon her feet.

When Alla saw his wife, he greeted her gently, and wept that it was a pity to see. For at the first look her set on her, he knew very truly that it was she. And for sorrow she stood still as dumb as a tree. Her heart was closed up in her distress when she remembered his cruelty. Twice she fainted in his own sight. He wept and excused himself piteously.

"Now God," said he, "and all His bright saints, as surely on my soul as have mercy, that of your harm I am as guiltless as is Maurice my son, so like your face. Otherwise may the devil take me out of this place!"

Long was the sobbing and the bitter pain before their woeful hearts might grow calm. Great was the pity to hear them lament, through which lamentations their woe began to increase. I pray you to release all of my labor. I may not tell her woe until tomorrow. I am so weary to speak of sorrow.

But finally, when the truth was found out that Alla was guiltless of her woe, I think they kissed a hundred times. And such bliss was there between them two that, except the joy that lasted evermore, there is none like that any creature has or will see while the world may endure.

Then she asked her husband meekly, in relief of her long and piteous suffering, that he would ask her father specially if he would be inclined to agree to dine with him someday. She asked him also that he should by means say any word of her to her father. Some would say how this child Maurice brought this message to the emperor. But, as I guess, Alla was not so foolish as to send any

child to him that was of so supreme honor, as he that is of the Christian folk the flower. But it is better to believe Alla went himself, and so it may well seem.

This Emperor had courteously agreed to come to dinner as he asked him. And well I read that he looked intently upon this child, and thought about his daughter. As he ought to, Alla went to his lodging and arranged for this feast in every way, to the full extent of his ability.

The morning came, and Alla and his wife got ready to meet the Emperor. Forth they rode in joy and in gladness. When she saw her father in the street, she dismounted and fell to his feet. "Father," she said, "your young child Constance is now completely out of your remembrance. I am your daughter Constance that you formerly sent to Syria. It is I, father, that in the salty sea was put alone and condemned to die. Now good father, I beg you for mercy. Send me no more into heathenness. But thank my lord here of his kindness."

Who can tell of the pitiful joy between them there since they are thus met? But I shall make an end of my tale. The day goes fast, I will no longer postpone. This glad folk set themselves to dinner. In joy and bliss at dinner I let them dwell, a thousand-fold more blissful than I can tell.

This child Maurice was afterwards made emperor by the Pope, and lived in a Christian manner. To Christ's church he did great honor. But I let all his story pass by because my tale is specially about Constance. In the old Roman accounts men may find Maurice's life. I bear it not in mind.

This King Alla, when he saw his time, came with Constance, his holy wife so sweet, to England by the direct route where they lived in joy and in quiet. But little while it lasts, I promise you, joy of this world, for time will not stay still. From day to night it changes as does the tide.

Who ever lived in such delight one day that he was not moved either by feelings, or anger, or talent, or some kind of disturbance, envy, or pride, or passion, or offense? I say this only to conclude this saying: that little while in joy or pleasure lasted the bliss of Alla and Constance.

For death, that takes his toll on high and low, took King Alla out of this world when a year was passed. Constance had great sorrow for him. Now let us pray for God to bless his soul! And Lady Constance, finally to say, went her way towards the town of Rome. Now she escaped all her misfortune. When she had found her father, she fell to the ground down on her knees. Weeping for tenderness in her joyful heart, she praised God a hundred thousand times.

In virtue and in holy deeds they all lived and never parted. Until death separated them, they led this life. 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 protect us all that have been in this place. Amen.

Here ends the Man of Law's Tale.

The Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale

Our host stood immediately upon his stirrups and said, "Good men, listen everyone! This was an excellent tale for the occasion! Sir parish priest, for God's bones, tell us a tale as was the former agreement. I see well that you men learned in knowledge know what you are about, by God's dignity."

The parson answered him, "Bless me! What is the matter with the man, so sinfully to swear?"

Our host answered, “Oh Jankin, are you there? I smell a Loller¹⁵ in the wind! Now good men listen to me! Abide, for God’s noble passion, for we will have a piece of preaching. This Loller here will preach us something.”

“Now by my father’s soul, that will not be,” said the shipman, “He shall not preach here. He shall not interpret gospel here nor teach. We all believe in the great God. He would sow some difficulty or scatter weeds in our clean corn. And therefore, Host, I warn you beforehand, my fine person shall tell a tale, and I shall ring you so merry a bell that I shall wake all this company. But it will not be of philosophy, nor physics, nor terms of law. There is but little Latin in my gullet.

¹⁵ Reference to a religious group that was deemed to go against Christian doctrine and was regarded as fanatical.

Appendix A

1. Ceyx and Alcyone: two lovers in Greek mythology who defied the Gods to be together.
2. Lucretia: a Roman noblewoman whose rape led to a rebellion that resulted in the overthrow of the Roman Monarchy and the transition to a Republic.
3. Thisbe of Babylon: a heroine from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She and her lover Pyramus run away together. In the end, believing that Thisbe is dead, Pyramus kills himself. When she sees her dead lover, Thisbe ends her own life.
4. Dido and Aeneas: Dido was the founder and Queen of Carthage from the *Aeneid*, and had a love affair with the Trojan hero Aeneas. Aeneas was murdered. After his death Larbas wanted to marry Dido. When Dido refused, he threatened her with war if she did not take him as his husband. Seeing no alternative, she killed herself.
5. Tree of Phyllis: burial place of Phyllis, a Greek Princess who hung herself from a tree when she realized her husband would not return.
6. Deianira: wife of Hercules; she accidentally murdered her husband.
7. Hermione: only daughter of Menelaus and Helen, both of whom were vital characters in the Trojan war.
8. Ariadne: Cretan Princess from Greek mythology who oversaw the labyrinth.
9. Helen: A queen who was said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. She was abducted by Paris of Troy, which was said to have caused the Trojan War.
10. Queen Medea: in Greek mythology, daughter of King Aeetes, and niece of Circe, known as being a sorceress. She killed her children to take revenge on her husband, Jason.
11. Hypermnestra: one of fifty daughters of Danaus. She married her cousin Lynceus. Danaus imprisoned her for helping her husband escape murder.
12. Penelope: wife of Odysseus from the *Odyssey*. She remained faithful for a decade while her husband was gone.
13. Alcestis: daughter to King Pelias, from Euripides's tragedy "Alcestis".