



wend,            \*determined, prepared\* Were it for chapmanhood\* or for  
disport,                 \*trading None other message would they thither  
send, But come themselves to Rome, this is the end: And in such place as  
thought them a vantage For their intent, they took their herbergage.\*  
\*lodging

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

This was the common voice of every man "Our emperor of Rome, God him  
see\*,                 \*look on with favour A daughter hath, that since the the  
world began, To reckon as well her goodness and beauty, Was never such  
another as is she: I pray to God in honour her sustene\*,  
\*sustain And would she were of all Europe the queen.

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

And all this voice was sooth, as God is true; But now to purpose\* let us turn  
again.                 \*our tale <3> These merchants have done freight their  
shippes new, And when they have this blissful maiden seen, Home to Syria  
then they went full fain, And did their needs\*, as they have done yore,\*  
\*business \*\*formerly And liv'd in weal\*; I can you say no more.  
\*prosperity

Now fell it, that these merchants stood in grace\*                 \*favour Of him  
that was the Soudan\* of Syrie:                 \*Sultan For when they  
came from any strange place He would of his benigne courtesy Make them  
good cheer, and busily espy\*                 \*inquire Tidings of sundry  
regnes\*, for to lear\*\*                 \*realms \*\*learn The wonders that they  
mighte see orhear.

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





chamber was for her parting; But forth she must, whether she weep or sing.

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

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

Imprudent emperor of Rome, alas! Was there no philosopher in all thy town?  
Is no time bet\* than other in such case? \*better Of voyage is  
there none election, Namely\* to folk of high condition,  
\*especially Not \*when a root is of a birth y-know?\* \*when the nativity is  
known\* Alas! we be too lewed\*, or too slow. \*ignorant

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

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

"Lordes," she said, "ye knowen every one, How that my son in point is for to  
lete\* \*forsake The holy lawes of our Alkaron\*,  
\*Koran Given by God's messenger Mahomete: But one avow to greate God I  
hete\*, \*promise Life shall rather out of my body start,  
Than Mahomet's law go out of mine heart.

"What should us tiden\* of this newe law, \*betide, befall But  
thraldom to our bodies, and penance, And afterward in hell to be y-draw,  
For we \*renied Mahound our creance?\* \*denied Mahomet our belief\*  
But, lordes, will ye maken assurance, As I shall say, assenting to my lore\*?  
\*advice And I shall make us safe for evermore."

They sworn and assented every man To live with her and die, and by her  
stand: And every one, in the best wise he can, To strengthen her shall all his  
friendes fand.\*                   \*endeavour<8> And she hath this emprise taken in  
hand, Which ye shall heare that I shall devise\*;   \*relate And to  
them all she spake right in this wise.

"We shall first feign us \*Christendom to take\*;   \*embrace Christianity\* Cold  
water shall not grieve us but a lite\*:   \*little And I shall such a  
feast and revel make, That, as I trow, I shall the Soudan quite.\*  
\*requite, match For though his wife be christen'd ne'er so white, She shall  
have need to wash away the red, Though she a fount of water with her led."

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

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

This Soudaness, whom I thus blame and warray\*,                   \*oppose, censure  
Let privily her council go their way: Why should I in this tale longer tarry?  
She rode unto the Soudan on a day, And said him, that she would \*reny her  
lay,\*                   \*renounce her creed\* And Christendom of priestes' handes fong\*,  
\*take<9> Repenting her she heathen was so long;

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

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

Great was the press, and rich was the array Of Syrians and Romans met \*in

fere\*.                                \*in company\* The mother of the Soudan rich and gay  
Received her with all so glad a cheer\*                                \*face As any mother  
might her daughter dear And to the nexte city there beside A softe pace  
solemnely theyride.

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

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

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

O sudden woe, that ev'r art successour To worldly bliss! sprent\* is with  
bitterness                                \*sprinkled Th' end of our joy, of our worldly labour;  
Woe \*occupies the fine\* of our gladness.                                \*seizes the end\* Hearken  
this counsel, for thy sickness\*:                                \*security Upon thy glade days  
have in thy mind The unware\* woe of harm, that comes behind.  
\*unforeseen

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

Nor there was Syrian that was converted, That of the counsel of the Soudan  
wot\*,                                \*knew That was not all to-hewn, ere he asterted\*:  
\*escaped And Constance have they ta'en anon foot-hot\*,  
\*immediatly And in a ship all steereless,\* God wot,                                \*without  
rudder They have her set, and bid her learn to sail Out of Syria \*again-ward  
to Itale.\*                                \*back to Italy\*

A certain treasure that she thither lad,\*                                \*took And, sooth to

say, of victual great plenty, They have her giv'n, and clothes eke she had  
And forth she sailed in the salte sea: O my Constance, full of benignity, O  
emperores younge daughter dear, He that is lord of fortune be thy steer\*!  
\*rudder, guide

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

"Victorious tree, protection of the true, That only worthy were for to bear The  
King of Heaven, with his woundes new, The white Lamb, that hurt was with  
a spear; Flemer\* of fiendes out of him and her \*banisher, driver out  
On which thy limbes faithfully extend, <10> Me keep, and give me might my  
life to mend."

Yeares and days floated this creature Throughout the sea of Greece, unto  
the strait Of Maroc\*, as it was her a venture: \*Morocco; Gibraltar  
On many a sorry meal now may she bait, After her death full often may she  
wait\*, \*expect Ere that the wilde waves will her drive Unto the  
place \*there as\* she shall arrive. \*where

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

God list\* to shew his wonderful miracle \*it pleased Inher, that  
we should see his mighty workes: Christ, which that is to every harm  
triacle\*, \*remedy, salve By certain meanes oft, as knowe clerkes\*,  
\*scholars Doth thing for certain ende, that full derk is To manne's wit, that  
for our, ignorance Ne cannot know his prudent purveyance\*.  
\*foresight

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

Who bade the foure spirits of tempest, <11> That power have t' annoy land



and sea, Both north and south, and also west and east, Annoye neither sea,  
nor land, nor tree? Soothly the commander of that was he That from the  
tempest aye this woman kept, As well when she awoke as when she slept.

Where might this woman meat and drinke have? Three year and more how  
lasted her vitaille\*?                      \*victuals Who fed the Egyptian Mary in the  
cave Or in desert? no wight but Christ \*sans faille.\*                      \*without fail\* Five  
thousand folk it was as great marvaille With loaves five and fishes two to  
feed God sent his foison\* at her greate need.                      \*abundance

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

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

A manner Latin corrupt <13> was her speech, But algate\* thereby was she  
understond.                      \*nevertheless The Constable, when him list no  
longer seech\*,                      \*search This woeful woman brought he to the  
lond. She kneeled down, and thanked \*Godde's sond\*;                      \*what God had  
sent\* But what she was she would to no man say For foul nor fair, although  
that she should dey.\*                      \*die

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

The Constable and Dame Hermegild his wife Were Pagans, and that country  
every where; But Hermegild lov'd Constance as her life; And Constance had  
so long sojourned there In orisons, with many a bitter tear, Till Jesus had  
converted through His grace Dame Hermegild, Constableness of that place.

In all that land no Christians durste rout;\*                      \*assemble All  
Christian folk had fled from that country Through Pagans, that conquered  
all about The plages\* of the North by land and sea.                      \*regions, coasts







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

\*mate, consort

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

They go to bed, as it was skill\* and right; \*reasonable For  
though that wives be full holy things, They muste take in patience at  
night Such manner\* necessaries as be pleasings \*kind of To folk that  
have y-wedded them with rings, And lay \*a lite\* their holiness aside  
\*a little of\* As for the time, it may no better betide.

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

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

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

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

\*pleases

This messenger drank sadly\* ale and wine, \*steadily And

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

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

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

"Keepe\* this child, albeit foul or fair, \*preserve And eke my  
wife, unto mine homecoming: Christ when him list may send to me an heir  
More agreeable than this to my liking." This letter he sealed, privily weeping.  
Which to the messenger was taken soon, And forth he went, there is no  
more to do'n.\* \*do

O messenger full fill'd of drunkenness, Strong is thy breath, thy limbes falter  
aye, And thou betrayest alle secretness; Thy mind is lorn,\* thou janglest as  
a jay; \*lost Thy face is turned in a new array;\*  
\*aspect Where drunkenness reigneth in any rout,\* \*company  
There is no counsel hid, withoute doubt.

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

This messenger came from the king again, And at the kinge's mother's court  
he light,\* \*alighted And she was of this messenger full fain,\*  
\*glad And pleased him in all that e'er she might. He drank, and \*well his  
girdle underpight\*; \*stowed away (liquor) He slept, and eke he snored in  
his guise under his girdle\* All night, until the sun began to rise.

Eft\* were his letters stolen every one, \*again And  
counterfeited letters in this wise: The king commanded his Constable anon,  
On pain of hanging and of high jewis,\* \*judgement That he  
should suffer in no manner wise Constance within his regne\* for to abide

\*kingdom Three dayes, and a quarter of a tide;

But in the same ship as he her fand, Her and her younge son, and all her gear,  
He shoulde put, and crowd\* her from the land, \*push  
And charge her, that she never eft come there. O my Constance, well may thy ghost\* have fear,  
\*spirit And sleeping in thy dream be in penance,\* \*pain, trouble When Donegild cast\* all this ordinance.\*\*  
\*contrived \*\*plan,plot

This messenger, on morrow when he woke, Unto the castle held the nexte\* way,  
\*nearest And to the constable the letter took; And when he this dispiteous\* letter sey,\*\* \*cruel \*\*saw Full oft he said,  
"Alas, and well-away! Lord Christ," quoth he, "how may this world endure? So full of sin is many a creature.

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

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

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

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

"Mother," quoth she, "and maiden bright, Mary, Sooth is, that through a woman's eggement\*  
\*incitement, egging on Mankind was lorn,\* and damned aye to die; \*lost For which thy child was on a cross y-rent:\*  
\*torn, pierced Thy blissful eyen saw all his torment, Then is there no comparison between Thy woe, and any woe man may sustene.





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

Under an heathen castle, at the last, Of which the name in my text I not  
find, Constance and eke her child the sea upcast. Almighty God, that saved  
all mankind, Have on Constance and on her child some mind, That fallen is  
in heathen hand eftsoon\*                               \*again \*In point to spill,\* as I  
shall tell you soon!                   \*in danger of  
perishing\* Down from the castle came there many a wight To gauren\* on  
this ship, and on Constance:                               \*gaze, stare But shortly from the  
castle, on a night, The lorde's steward, -- God give him mischance, -- A thief  
that had \*renied our creance,\*                               \*denied our faith\* Came to the  
ship alone, and said he would Her leman\* be, whether she would or n'ould.  
\*illicit lover

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

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

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

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

Forth went her ship throughout the narrow mouth Of \*Jubaltare and



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

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

This Alla king had of this child great wonder, And to the senator he said  
anon, "Whose is that faire child that standeth yonder?" "I n'ot,"\* quoth he,  
"by God and by Saint John; \*know not A mother he hath, but  
father hath he none, That I of wot:" and shortly in a stound\* \*short  
time <18> He told to Alla how this child was found.

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

Now was this child as like unto Constance As possible is a creature to be:  
This Alla had the face in remembrance Of Dame Constance, and thereon  
mused he, If that the childe's mother \*were aught she\* \*could be  
she\* That was his wife; and privily he sight,\* \*sighed And  
sped him from the table \*that he might.\* \*as fast as he could\*

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

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

When Alla saw his wife, fair he her gret,\* \*greeted And wept,  
that it was ruthe for to see, For at the firste look he on her set He knew well  
verily that it was she: And she, for sorrow, as dumb stood as a tree: So was





in his grace And keep us alle that be in this place.