

Notes to the Monk's Tale

1. The Monk's Tale is founded in its main features on Boccaccio's work, "De Casibus Virorum Illustrium;" ("Stories of Illustrious Men") but Chaucer has taken the separate stories of which it is composed from different authors, and dealt with them after his own fashion.

2. Boccaccio opens his book with Adam, whose story is told at much greater length than here. Lydgate, in his translation from Boccaccio, speaks of Adam and Eve as made "of slime of the erth in Damascene the felde."

3. Judges xiii. 3. Boccaccio also tells the story of Samson; but Chaucer seems, by his quotation a few lines below, to have taken his version direct from the sacred book.

4. Oliveres: olive trees; French, "oliviers."

5. "Liber Judicum," the Book of Judges; chap. xv.

6. Querne: mill; from Anglo-Saxon, "cyrran," to turn, "cweorn," a mill,

7. Harpies: the Stymphalian Birds, which fed on human flesh.

8. Busiris, king of Egypt, was wont to sacrifice all foreigners coming to his dominions. Hercules was seized, bound, and led to the altar by his orders, but the hero broke his bonds and slew the tyrant.

9. The feats of Hercules here recorded are not all these known as the "twelve labours;" for instance, the cleansing of the Augean stables, and the capture of Hippolyte's girdle are not in this list -- other and less famous deeds of the hero taking their place. For this, however, we must accuse not Chaucer, but Boethius, whom he has almost literally translated, though with some change of order.

10. Trophee: One of the manuscripts has a marginal reference to "Tropheus vates Chaldaeorum" ("Tropheus the prophet of the Chaldees"); but it is not known what author Chaucer meant -- unless the reference is to a passage in the "Filostrato" of Boccaccio, on which Chaucer founded his "Troilus and Cressida," and which Lydgate mentions, under the name of "Trophe," as having been translated by Chaucer.

11. Pres: near; French, "pres;" the meaning seems to be, this nearer, lower world.
12. Chaucer has taken the story of Zenobia from Boccaccio's work "De Claris Mulieribus." ("Of Illustrious Women")
13. Odenatus, who, for his services to the Romans, received from Gallienus the title of "Augustus;" he was assassinated in A.D. 266 -- not, it was believed, without the connivance of Zenobia, who succeeded him on the throne.
14. Sapor was king of Persia, who made the Emperor Valerian prisoner, conquered Syria, and was pressing triumphantly westward when he was met and defeated by Odenatus and Zenobia.
15. Aurelian became Emperor in A.D. 270.
16. Vitremite: The signification of this word, which is spelled in several ways, is not known. Skinner's explanation, "another attire," founded on the spelling "autremite," is obviously insufficient.
17. Great part of this "tragedy" of Nero is really borrowed, however, from the "Romance of the Rose."
18. Trice: thrust; from Anglo-Saxon, "thriccan."
19. So, in the Man of Law's Tale, the Sultanness promises her son that she will "reny herlay."
20. As the "tragedy" of Holofernes is founded on the book of Judith, so is that of Antiochus on the Second Book of the Maccabees, chap. ix.
21. By the insurgents under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus; 2 Macc. chap. viii.
22. Six: the highest cast on a dicing-cube; here representing the highest favour of fortune.
23. Pompey had married his daughter Julia to Caesar; but she died six years before Pompey's final overthrow.
24. At the battle of Pharsalia, B.C. 48.

25. Word and end: apparently a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon phrase, "ord and end," meaning the whole, the beginning and the end.
26. At the opening of the story of Croesus, Chaucer has copied from his own translation of Boethius; but the story is mainly taken from the "Romance of the Rose"
27. "This reflection," says Tyrwhitt, "seems to have been suggested by one which follows soon after the mention of Croesus in the passage just cited from Boethius. 'What other thing bewail the cryings of tragedies but only the deeds of fortune, that with an awkward stroke, overturneth the realms of great nobley?' -- in some manuscripts the four "tragedies" that follow are placed between those of Zenobia and Nero; but although the general reflection with which the "tragedy" of Croesus closes might most appropriately wind up the whole series, the general chronological arrangement which is observed in the other cases recommends the order followed in the text. Besides, since, like several other Tales, the Monk's tragedies were cut short by the impatience of the auditors, it is more natural that the Tale should close abruptly, than by such a rhetorical finish as these lines afford.
28. Pedro the Cruel, King of Aragon, against whom his brother Henry rebelled. He was by false pretences inveigled into his brother's tent, and treacherously slain. Mr Wright has remarked that "the cause of Pedro, though he was no better than a cruel and reckless tyrant, was popular in England from the very circumstance that Prince Edward (the Black Prince) had embarked in it."
29. Not the Oliver of Charlemagne -- but a traitorous Oliver of Armorica, corrupted by a bribe. Ganilion was the betrayer of the Christian army at Roncevalles (see note 9 to the Shipman's Tale); and his name appears to have been for a long time used in France to denote a traitor. Duguesclin, who betrayed Pedro into his brother's tent, seems to be intended by the term "Ganilion Oliver," but if so, Chaucer has mistaken his name, which was Bertrand -- perhaps confounding him, as Tyrwhitt suggests, with Oliver du Clisson, another illustrious Breton of those times, who was also Constable of France, after Duguesclin. The arms of the latter are supposed to be described a little above
30. Pierre de Lusignan, King of Cyprus, who captured Alexandria in 1363 (see note 6 to the Prologue to the Tales). He was assassinated in 1369.
31. Bernabo Visconti, Duke of Milan, was deposed and imprisoned by his

nephew, and died a captive in 1385. His death is the latest historical fact mentioned in the Tales; and thus it throws the date of their composition to about the sixtieth year of Chaucer's age.

32. The story of Ugolino is told in the 33rd Canto of the "Inferno."