

Notes to the Nun's Priest's Tale

1. This Tale was originally composed by Chaucer as a separate work, and as such it is mentioned in the "Legend of Good Women" under the title of "The Life of Saint Cecile". Tyrwhitt quotes the line in which the author calls himself an "unworthy son of Eve," and that in which he says, "Yet pray I you, that reade what I write", as internal evidence that the insertion of the poem in the Canterbury Tales was the result of an afterthought; while the whole tenor of the introduction confirms the belief that Chaucer composed it as a writer or translator -- not, dramatically, as a speaker. The story is almost literally translated from the Life of St Cecilia in the "Legenda Aurea."

2. Leas: leash, snare; the same as "las," oftener used by Chaucer.

3. The nativity and assumption of the Virgin Mary formed the themes of some of St Bernard's most eloquent sermons.

4. Compare with this stanza the fourth stanza of the Prioress's Tale, the substance of which is the same.

5. "But he answered and said, it is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." -- Matthew xv. 26, 27.

6. See note 1.

7. These are Latin puns: Heaven's lily - "Coeli lilium"; The way of blind - "Caeci via"; Heaven and Lia - from "Coeli", heaven, and "Ligo," to bind; Heaven and Leos - from Coeli and "Laos," (Ionian Greek) or "Leos" (Attic Greek), the people. Such punning derivations of proper names were very much in favour in the Middle Ages. The explanations of St Cecilia's name are literally taken from the prologue to the Latin legend.

8. This passage suggests Horace's description of the wise man, who, among other things, is "in se ipse totus, teres, atque rotundus." ("complete in himself, polished and rounded") -- Satires, 2, vii. 80.

9. Louting: lingering, or lying concealed; the Latin original has "Inter sepulchra martyrum latiantem" ("hiding among the tombs of martyrs")

10. The fourteen lines within brackets are supposed to have been originally

an interpolation in the Latin legend, from which they are literally translated. They awkwardly interrupt the flow of the narration.

11. Engine: wit; the devising or constructive faculty; Latin, "ingenium."

12. Cold: wretched, distressful; see note 22 to the Nun's Priest's Tale.

13. Corniculere: The secretary or registrar who was charged with publishing the acts, decrees and orders of the prefect.

14. "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness" -- 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

15. Did him to-beat: Caused him to be cruelly or fatally beaten; the force of the "to" is intensive.