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'La Prière du plus grand péril' in Medieval English Literature

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The 'prière du plus grand péril' (hereafter 'prière')¹ appears in the earliest Old French *chansons de geste*, remains a feature of this genre throughout the period of its greatest popularity in the twelfth century, and survives into the thirteenth century and later as a sporadically recurrent phenomenon in certain *romans d'aventure*, particularly those with distinctive hagiographic colouration. Among the various examples of prayers which occur with great frequency in the works mentioned, 'prières' are identifiable on the basis of a number of definitive characteristics, some of them formal, and some, as the descriptive label implies, contextual. A good example is to be found in *Li Coronement Loüs*, articulated by Guillaume au cort nez just prior to his combating the saracen champion Corsolt. Since it is in this encounter that Guillaume suffers the mutilation which furnishes him his heroic epithet throughout a long career of successive martial exploits, its pre-eminence as an occasion of extreme danger to the Frankish warrior is well established:

'Glorios pere, qui formas tot le mont,
Qui fesis terre sor le marbrin perron,
De mer salee la ceinsis environ,
Adam fesis de terre et de limon,
Evain sa per, que de fi le savons,
De paradis lor fesis le don, . . .
A unes pasques fesis procession,
Que d'une asnesse chevalchas le faon,
Si vos sivrent li petit enfançon; . . .
Et en la croiz fustes mis a bandon.
Juif en firent come encriesme felon:
Ne voldrent creire vostre surrection.
El ciel montas al jor d'Ascension.

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Dont vendra, sire, la grant redemption,
Al jugement ou tuit assemblerons. . . .
Et as apostres donas confession;
Mesis saint Pere el chief del pré Neiron,
Et convertis saint Pol son compaignon;
Jonas guaris el ventre del peisson,
Et de la faim le cors saint Simeon,
Et Daniel en la fosse al lion;
Et Symon mage abatis, le felon;
Moysés vit la flame enz el buisson,
Qui n'ardeit busche ne ne faiseit charbon.
Si com c'est veir, et creire le deit on,
Defent mon cors de mort et de prison,
Que ne m'ocie cist Sarrazins felon.'

(ll. 976–81, 988–90, 1002–07, 1013–24)²

The important formal properties of the 'prière' as discernible from this reasonably typical example are the opening address to God, the *credo* which briefly recapitulates the salient facts of Christian redemptive history, the list of figures on whose behalf God has staged some miraculous intervention, and the concluding petition for divine assistance, which may overtly solicit help in acknowledgment of the petitioner's faith as expressed in the *credo*, or tacitly imply that the petitioner merits the sort of divine favour shown toward those privileged to be its beneficiaries in ages past.

All these definitive characteristics, both contextual and formal, are subject to some modification in the course of the schema's evolution. In the *chanson de geste* the circumstance which provokes this specific prayer is typically a Christian knight's encounter with a saracen adversary, an encounter made particularly threatening either because the saracens are attacking in overwhelming numbers, or because the knight faces in single combat a saracen champion of gigantic stature and fearsome aspect. This circumstance may be duplicated in the *roman d'aventure*, although it is commonplace to find the saracen champion replaced by a gigantic rogue creature who has more of a supernatural aura than his *chanson de geste* counterpart. This supernatural element is more emphatically present in the typical substitution of a dragon as adversary, but there may also be a movement towards realism whereby the extreme peril consists of the threat of murder, or of death by drowning, burning, starvation, or other impersonal dangers of this kind. Together

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with a change in the nature of the events occasioning recourse to prayer comes the possibility of a change in the nature of the praying character, since the threat of death from murder or from impersonally hostile forces may affect a female protagonist or her infant ward. And finally, introduction of a female victim uniquely permits the emergence of sexual assault as the danger against which divine protection is sought.

Formally, a number of variations to the schema are possible. Although the 'prière' is conventionally addressed to God, substitution or addition of the Virgin Mary as the agent appealed to for succour occurs with some frequency,³ and substitution of the figure of a saint is a rare but attested phenomenon. Development of the main body of the prayer is also subject to considerable diversification, the most significant shift being a tendency to privilege either the *credo* segment or the list of the beneficiaries of miraculous intervention by God, at the expense — and indeed frequently to the exclusion — of the other. This bifurcation of the parts, found united in the prayer quoted from *Li Coronemenz Looïs* and in other sources,⁴ has not only lexical but also purely quantitative implications, since the *credo* materials have the capacity to be, and in many instances are, amplified to extreme length according to the indulgence of the redactor,⁵ while the list of biblical or hagiographical figures preserved by divine aid from persecution is initially more finite in its scope and is often subject to equally extreme abbreviation. The last of the formal features, the plea for assistance with which the 'prière' conventionally concludes, contributes to the disparity in length distinguishing the *credo* type from what will henceforth be called its biblical-figure counterpart. In the former, this plea may be very elaborately developed, as is the case with the eleven-line coda to the long prayer offered by an abbot for the safety of Huon de Bordeaux when he is getting the worst of the battle.⁶ In the biblical-figure prayer this plea is by comparison very much curtailed, and may be missing altogether. Since it is with this latter type that I shall be primarily, although not exclusively concerned, it will be worthwhile to quote an example illustrating its typical proportions. The example is taken from the Carpentras MS of the continental *Bueve de Hantone*, and is spoken by the wife of the courtier Soibaut, who has been instructed by Bueve's mother to dispose of her infant son:

'Glorieus pere, qui souffris passion
En sainte crois pour no redemption,
Jonas sauvas el ventre du poisson
Et herbergas saint pere em pre noiron

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*Et conuertis saint pol son compaignon
Et suscitas de mort saint lasaront
Et Daniël en la fosse au lion,
La Magdelaine fesistes le pardon
De ses pechiés en la maison Simon,
Quant vos trāirent li mal Jüif felon;
A saint Jehan donnas benëïçon,
Baptisa vos, que de fi le set on;
Si com c'est voirs et nous bien le creon,
Si garissiés mon damoiseil Buevon,
Qu'il ne soit mors ne getés en prison,
Et a sa mere donnés malëïçon,
Que je has si pour l'amour de Guion.' (ll. 658–74)⁷*

Comparison with the corresponding section of the prayer quoted earlier by Guillaume d'Orange will reveal how consistently the schema is preserved, even at the level of specific wording. This may in part be attributable to the fact that this version of the Beves of Hamtoun story, although a comparatively late *roman d'aventure*, is written in assonantal *laissez*, and that both prayers utilize the same rhyming sound throughout.

In medieval English literature, the 'prière' appears, where we might expect it, in Middle English versions of those French *romans d'aventure* already noted as exhibiting its presence. *Sir Beves of Hamtoun* is not derived from the continental version of this romance and does not, consequently, reproduce the biblical-figure prayer quoted earlier from that work. Its source is closer to the extant Anglo-Norman version of the story, containing only a brief *credo* prayer which is also absent from the Middle English version of the story.⁸ The schema in fact makes only a fleeting appearance in this romance, and might escape notice completely were it not for the fact that other instances of its employment aid in identifying it:

'Lord, þat rerede þe Lazaroun,
Diliure me fro þis fend dragoun!' (ll. 2839–40)⁹

What serves to define this as a 'prière' is the context, i.e., Beves's engagement with a dragon which, at the time when he makes his prayer, is seriously threatening his life; the mention of Lazarus, whose name hardly constitutes a list, but who is one of

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the most frequently occurring figures in such lists; and the final plea for divine help, effective in this instance because the dragon attempts to flee as soon as he hears the prayer being articulated, and thereby makes himself fatally vulnerable to Beves's pursuant attack.

There is a richer harvest to be garnered among the Middle English versions of the romance of *Guy of Warwick*. At the moment when *Guy* is about to confront the pagan Danish giant Colbrond in defence of the English realm under the leadership of Athelstan, the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* contains the following example of a biblical-figure prayer:

'Sire, qui resuscitas Lazarun
E del leun guaris Sansun,
Susanne socurustes vers les feluns
Qui ocire la voleient par traisuns,
Garantisez mei de cest glutun,
Que n'aie par li dampnaciun,
E que ceste bataille puisse parfaire
E de servage defendre la tere.' (ll. 11057–64)¹⁰

A very close translation of this prayer appears at the same point in the narrative in the fifteenth-century English version, complete with the confusion over the figure of Samson:

'Lorde, þat reysed Lazerowne
And Sampson werred fro þe lyon
And socurde Susan fro þe felons,
Þat wolde haue slayn hur be tresons,
Schylde me to day fro þe 3ondur gloton,
That y thorow hym haue no confusyon.' (ll. 10193–98)¹¹

The early fourteenth-century Auchinleck MS version of the romance, which is in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas, has a similar prayer in the same circumstance, but properly reinstates Daniel as the biblical character saved by divine intervention from the lion:

'Lord', seyd Gij, 'þat rered Lazeroun,
& for man þoled passioun,

& on þe rode gan blede,
þat saued Sussan fram þe feloun,
& halp Daniel fram þe lyoun,
 To-day wisse me & rede:
Astow art miȝti heuen king,
To-day graunt me þi blisseing,
 & help me at þis nede.
&, leuedi Mari ful of miȝt,
To-day saue Inglondes riȝt,
 & leue me wele to spede.' (stanza 252)¹²

The presence of a biblical-figure prayer is so firmly embedded in the Colbrond episode that it survives into the late *Guy and Colebrande*, a stanzaic romance which treats the single episode of the battle against the Danish giant:

'Christ! that suffered wounds 5,
& raised Lazarus ffrom dath to liffe,
 to grant mee speech & sight, —
& saued danyell the Lyons ffroe,
& borrowed Susanna out of woe, —
 to grant vs strenght & might,
that I may England out of thraldome bring
& not let vnder the danish King
 haue litle England att his will.' (ll. 157–65)¹³

All three of the prayers quoted from the *Guy of Warwick* materials may derive from the same ultimate source by whatever process of transmission is responsible for the different versions of the narrative context in which they are incorporated. Apart from the confusion over Samson and Daniel, they all three list the same biblical characters, and, because the circumstances which imperil the hero are the same, they make only minor modifications to the form of address to the deity, or to the nature of the final plea for assistance. However, we may infer from the fact that a succession of redactors over a protracted period opted to preserve the schema and adapt it to the demands of their particular verse form that the biblical-figure prayer had some ongoing currency in the Middle English literary tradition in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

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That such is indeed the case is demonstrated by the appearance of an extended example of the mixed type of 'prière' containing both *credo* and biblical-figure elements in John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*:

'Conditor O generis humani, Criste redemptor,
Est sine quo melius nil vel in orbe bonum,
Dixisti, que tuo sunt omnia condita verbo,
Mandasti, que statim cuncta creata patent; . . .
Quatuor et vento partibus ora dabas: . . .
Sicut ymago tua tandem fuit et rationis
Factus homo, quod opus sit super omne tuum;
Qui precepta tua veteri serpente subactus
Preterit, et pomi mors sibi morsus erat.
Set pietate tibi quod eum de morte resumias,
Virginis ex carne tu caro factus eras;
Sicque parens nostri generis de carnis amore
Efficeris, nobis graciosior vnde fores.
Vt te credo deum sic esse meumque parentem,
Micius, oro, pater, tu mea fata rege!
Vt de morte crucis te non pudet esse cruentum,
Hoc ita, Criste meis tempore parce malis!
Qui Paulum pelago, Petrum de carcere, Ionam
Eripis a piscis ventre, memento mei! . . .
O superi, fractis', dixi, 'succurrite remis,
Et date naufragio litora tuta meo!
Que genus humanum curavit origine Cristi,
Materiam cure prebeat illa mee!
Te precor, alme deus, sit vt illa michi mediatrix,
Que peperit florem flore manente suo.
Cur mala que pacior nullo michi tempore soluis?
Ecce simul morimur, respice, plaga monet!'
(ll. 1793–96, 1802, 1807–20, 1831–38)¹⁴

There is no possibility here that Gower's 'prière' came to him already incorporated in its narrative context, because the context is very clearly Gower's own invention. He presents it in the form of a dream in which he sees himself, together with those who sought refuge in the Tower of London during the Peasants' Revolt, like sailors

in a ship foundering in a great storm and attacked by a sea monster that is kin to Scylla and Charybdis. The prayer therefore appears in a context of extreme danger which is so precisely conventional as to provide a hostile mythological beast, a sea monster which functions as the marine equivalent of Guy of Warwick's dragon. There is equally no possibility that Gower invented the form of his prayer along with the circumstances which prompted its articulation. The *credo* segment follows the traditional pattern closely (see especially ll. 1815–16, above), and while the biblical-figure segment is brief and shows evidence of some adaptation to the particular threat described (e.g., in the reference to Paul's deliverance at sea, from Acts 27. 14–44, rather than to his conversion, from Acts 9. 3–18), the appearance of the figure of Jonah, who also happens to fit this context, conforms to the commonest pattern for prayers of this kind. We can assume that Gower was familiar with the 'prière du plus grand péril', knew the circumstances appropriate for its introduction, and — if he did not have a specific model immediately available to him — was sufficiently cognizant of its general outlines to be able to reproduce the form exactly.

I want to conclude this survey by examining what may be the most interesting involvement of Middle English literature with the 'prière', that which occurs in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. The story contains one straightforward example of the type of prayer we are discussing. It appears at the point where the heroine Constance has been falsely accused of the murder of the Constable's wife Hermengyld:

'Immortal God, that savedest Susanne
Fro false blame, and thou, merciful mayde,
Marie I meene, doghter to Seint Anne,
Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,
If I be giltlees of this felonye,
My socour be, for ellis shal I dye!' (ll. 639–44)¹⁵

Comparison with the prayer quoted earlier from the Auchinleck MS *Guy of Warwick*, with which Constance's plea shares the feature of citing Susanna and appealing to both God and the Virgin Mary, will demonstrate how conventional is Chaucer's use of the schema here. Since the danger to Constance results from the bearing of false witness, reference to Susanna would appear to have greater relevance to her situation than to that of Guy confronting Colbrond, but concern with the idea of God vindicating right in the context of a trial by combat creates

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some common ground between the two characters' circumstances, and the narrator's lament that Constance cannot fight to defend her own honour and has no champion other than Christ to fight for her, adds an appropriate heroic colouration to the episode.¹⁶

Also at issue in assessing the influence of the 'prière' on the *Man of Law's Tale* are two passages spoken by the narrator. The first occurs at the point when the heroine Constance has been cast adrift in a rudderless boat following the massacre at her wedding feast in Syria:

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feeste? Who myghte hir body save?
And I answer to that demande agayn,
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
No wight but God that he bar in his herte. (ll. 470–76)

Now sith she was nat at the feeste yslawe,
Who kepte hire fro the drenchyng in the see?
Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe
Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?
Wel may men knowe it was no wight but he
That kepte peple Ebrayk from hir drenchyng,
With drye feet thurghout the see passyng. (ll. 484–90)

Where myghte this womman mete and drynke have
Thre yeer and moore? How lasteth hire vitaille?
Who fedde the Egipcien Marie in the cave,
Or in desert? No wight but Crist, sanz faille.
Fyve thousand folk it was as greet mervaille
With loves fyve and fisshes two to feede,
God sente his foyson at hir grete neede. (ll. 498–504)

The other occurs at the point when Constance, set adrift a second time and accompanied now by her infant son, is the victim of an attempted rape by the steward of a lord on whose shore her boat beaches itself. Constance is saved from the steward's sexual assault when he falls overboard into the sea and is drowned:

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How may this wayke womman han this strengthe
Hire to defende agayn this renegat?
O Golias, unmesurable of lengthe,
Hou myghte David make thee so maat,
So yong and of armure so desolaat?
Hou dorste he looke upon thy dredful face?
Wel may men seen, it nas but Goddes grace.

Who yaf Judith corage or hardynesse
To sleen hym Olofernus in his tente,
And to deliveren out of wrecchednesse
The peple of God? I seye, for this entente,
That right as God spirit of vigour sente
To hem, and saved hem out of meschance,
So sente he myght and vigour to Custance. (ll. 932–45)

The first of these two passages in particular looks like some displacement of the biblical-figure prayer. There seems to be a direct echo of such lines from this source as 'Daniel en la fosse au lion', or 'Et qui Jonas en la mer garandis, l Dedens le ventre d'un poisson qui l'ot prins, l Et soz Ninive à terre le méis'.¹⁷ The parting of the Red Sea is mentioned following references to Daniel in the lion's den and Jonas in the whale's belly in three extant 'prières' from *chansons de geste*, as in the following brief example:

'E! Dex', dist Namles, 'qui salvas Daniel
Dedenz la fosse au petit lioncel,
En haute mer Jonas en poissonel
Et conduisistes le grant pule Israel
Par mi la mer sans nes et sans batiel.' (ll. 2046–50)¹⁸

Reference to the miracle of the loaves and the fishes appears twice in similar sources, in *Li Romans de Bauduin de Sebourc*¹⁹ and in *Godefroid de Bouillon*.²⁰ In none of the materials analyzed by Koch and Labande (see footnote 1) is there any mention of Saint Mary of Egypt, and indeed non-biblical hagiography is not a popular source of allusion in 'prières' generally, but a notable exception occurs in the prayer quoted earlier from *Li Coronemenz Looïs*, where uniquely, sandwiched between references to Jonas and Daniel, Simeon Stylites is cited in illustration of

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God's intervention to save one of his saints from the threat of death by starvation. There is no record of the biblical account of Judith and Holofernes having been incorporated into any extant biblical-figure prayer, and, while the name of King David occasionally receives cursory mention (as in the list of those Old Testament figures consigned to hell as a result of Adam's sin in a prayer from *Li Romans de Bauduin de Sebourc*, Section XI, ll. 329–33), the episode of his encounter with Goliath has similarly left no trace on the schema we have been investigating. In this regard, however, it is important to note the evidence which suggests that individual authors felt free to augment or adapt the basic biblical-figure list with references to characters and events from the Old and New Testaments as it suited their purposes. The author of the twelfth-century version of *La Chanson du chevalier au cygne* includes in a single prayer (ll. 3508–36) references to Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses on Mount Sinai, the calf of gold, and David and Solomon, all of which are unrecorded in prayers other than that occurring in this work, and notice has already been taken of John Gower modifying a traditional reference to Saint Paul in order to accommodate it better to the context of sea storm and shipwreck.²¹

'Prières' appeared in literary texts with which we know Chaucer to have been familiar (if we can trust the references to 'Beves and Sir Gy' in *Sir Thopas*). John Gower, a member of the Chaucer circle, shows himself fully conversant with the phenomenon in his *Vox Clamantis*. And Chaucer incorporates a brief version of such a prayer in the *Man of Law's Tale* itself. It would seem, consequently, that the passages at lines 470–504 and 932–45 might be satisfactorily accounted for as free-wheeling — but conventionally free-wheeling — adaptations of the traditional schema, transferred from the hero or heroine to the narrator, and transformed from a prayer for assistance in threatening circumstances to an explanation of the divine source of the unsolicited assistance through which those threats are averted. This is not the explanation offered, however, in the criticism which has addressed the question of the origins of these passages in Chaucer's work.²²

That Chaucer was utilizing some traditional schema in these passages was first recognized by John A. Yunck,²³ who saw the series of rhetorical questions following Constance's first banishment (ll. 470–504), her prayer when unjustly accused of the murder of Hermengyld (ll. 639–44), and the further rhetorical questions following the sexual assault by the licentious steward (ll. 932–45), as a related group of responses which expand a reference in Trivet asserting that on her first experience as a castaway God protected Constance as he had protected Noah.²⁴ Yunck suggested that the scriptural imagery of the Chaucerian passages was derived from a prayer for the dying which he quoted from the modern *Rituale*, but which he

traced back through documentary and archeological evidence to the seventh century and earlier, and which he associated ultimately (pp. 253–54) with ancient Jewish prayers:

Libera, Domine, animam servi tui, sicut liberasti[:]
Danielem de lacu leonum . . .
tres pueros de camino ignis ardentis . . .
Susannam de falso crimine . . .
David de manu . . . Goliae.

He found its typical medieval form in a prayer for the sick from an Ambrosian ritual of the eleventh or twelfth century, which to the instances of the protective power of divine providence cited above adds references to the event of the Israelites' escape from Egyptian captivity, and the figures of Peter, Paul, Jonah, and Lot. These prayers for the sick, the dying, or the dead, as Yunck himself admits, have little connection with the narrative context of the *Man of Law's Tale*, where similar imagery appears rather to explain Constance's providential deliverance from physical danger. To resolve this difficulty, he proposed that Chaucer may have been familiar with the prayer as it was frequently incorporated in saints' legends, 'uttered before martyrdom, not for deliverance from the tortures to come, but for protection from the pains of hell, or for the strength to bear the torture, or even the privilege of undergoing martyrdom' (p. 255). In illustration he quotes from a Latin *Passion of St Philip* the prayer of a priest Severus that he be allowed to share martyrdom with his fellows, and cites some eight other instances in hagiographical literature where the prayer also appears. The prayer quoted from the *Passion of St Philip* is interesting in that it adds to previously mentioned biblical figures those of Joseph and, more significantly, Judith.²⁵ The strength of Yunck's case in accounting for the source of the Chaucerian passages in question lies in the lists occurring in one or another of the prayers he cites, since these provide parallels for most of the events mentioned by the Man of Law,²⁶ and all of the figures except Saint Mary of Egypt. Its weakness lies in the remoteness of the hagiographical contexts from what is happening in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Certainly no-one would deny the profound and pervasive influence of hagiographical materials on Chaucer's narrative, but prayers concerned in an immediate way with the terror and rapture of martyrdom presume very special circumstances not duplicated in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and only marginally more relevant to Constance's experiences than the prayers for the dead or dying.

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Ten years after the appearance of Yunck's article, the fragment of the schema contained in the first passage of commentary by the narrator (ll. 463–504) was further investigated by Robert T. Farrell, drawing exclusively on C. R. Morey's discussion in *Early Christian Art* (Princeton, 1941).²⁷ Farrell, who was apparently ignorant of his predecessor's work, recapitulates much of his evidence, citing the *Ordo Commendationis Animae* and the *Oratio Severi* quoted earlier from Yunck. His only significant addition is to associate Constance with the figure of the 'orant woman, personification of prayer and heavenly beatitude' whom Morey described as forming part of the series of biblical figures delivered from death and from sin in Christian funerary iconography dealing with this particular schema.²⁸ Since he neglects to consider Constance's prayer (ll. 639–43) or the figures appearing in the narrator's treatment of her evasion of the attempted rape (ll. 932–45), Farrell accounts for much less of the evidence for Chaucer's use of 'help of God' imagery than Yunck does. He also ignores the appearance of the schema in hagiographic literature, apparently assuming that Chaucer appropriated it directly from liturgical sources, even though its presence in saints' legends makes this the inherently less likely alternative.

Neither critic acknowledges the occurrence of 'help of God' imagery in 'prières du plus grand péril',²⁹ although this would seem to be by far the most probable source from which Chaucer would have gained familiarity with the schema as he introduces it into the *Man of Law's Tale*. The presence of an indisputably straightforward example of such a prayer in Constance's plea to God and the Virgin Mary confronts us with a choice of three possibilities: either Chaucer was familiar with the biblical-figure list from both liturgical sources and 'prières' and introduced both independently into his story, one in the form of two passages of rhetorical questions by the narrator and the other as an interposed prayer by the heroine; or he knew only the liturgical source, and on its basis invented a prayer in exact conformity with other such prayers appearing in the work of his contemporaries; or, finally, he knew only the 'prière', which he utilized briefly in conventional form for Constance and adapted at greater length for the passages of commentary on her experiences by the narrator. Both logical feasibility and supporting evidence weigh heavily in favour of the third possibility.

Although not prayers, the passages of commentary by the Man of Law occur in conjunction with exactly the sort of circumstances — death by drowning or starvation, or sexual assault — which provoke 'prières' in other contexts. The *Man of Law's Tale*, a secular romance with major hagiographical colouring, is precisely the kind of literary text in which 'prières' are typically to be found. The examples

cited earlier from English literary sources feature male protagonists who begin as warrior knights in the heroic mould but at some point in their career undergo a religious conversion on the pattern of the *Moniage Guillaume*. In French literature, however, 'prières' occur increasingly in connexion with the figure of the persecuted heroine, of the type found, for example, in *Le Roman du Comte d'Anjou*, a story which shares with the Constance legend the motifs of flight from an incestuous parent and the substitution of animals for the heroine's newly born children (see footnote 5). Prayers of the type with which we are concerned are articulated by a heroine falsely accused of murder and in danger of being burned at the stake in *Le Roman de la Violette* (see footnote 5), by another woman in danger of being burned to death because she has spurned the sexual advances of her persecutor in *Orson de Beauvais*,³⁰ by a woman who supposes herself in danger of being burned to death with her infant son and daughter in *Ami et Amiles*,³¹ and by a pregnant woman about to be delivered of her child alone in the wilderness in *Parise la Duchesse*.³² In *Florence de Rome*, another version of the persecuted-maiden tale-type with which the Constance legend is remotely associated, the titular heroine prays to the Virgin for a miracle, and Mary in turn addresses to Christ a prayer exhibiting all the standard features of the 'prière' form.³³

No extant example of a 'prière' containing references to David and Goliath or Judith and Holofernes has come to my attention. However, this fact should not unduly privilege, as a possible source for Chaucer's use of the biblical-figure schema, those liturgical or hagiographical materials cited by Yunck, nor detract from problems attendant on assuming such derivation, particularly those problems having to do with the respective circumstances under which appeals for providential assistance are made. 'Prières du plus grand péril', it is generally acknowledged, originated in the simple schema of the early forms of the *Ordo Commendationis Animae*. Once appropriated for the 'prière', this schema may well have developed in parallel with prayers for the dead or for martyrdom, and according to the same processes of accretion. There may conceivably have been some cross-fertilization. Since no example of a 'prière' occurs in the surviving texts of Trivet's *Cronicle*, which Chaucer is assumed to have used as his source for the *Man of Law's Tale*,³⁴ it is perhaps unlikely that he had before him a single, fully-fledged example of a 'prière' containing precisely those elements occurring in the schema-fragments incorporated into his own story. Trivet's tale of Custaunce, however, furnishes exactly the kind of context in which such 'prières' might be expected to appear, and the fact that Chaucer, like his friend Gower, who also utilized Trivet for his own version of the Constance story,³⁵ was reading such materials demonstrates the

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likelihood that he encountered enough instances of 'prières' to be as familiar as his fellow poet with the form.

In the absence of some single 'prière' containing all the elements incorporated into the *Man of Law's Tale* and appearing in a work with which Chaucer is known to have been familiar, the validity of the preceding hypothesis about the probable source of Chaucer's materials is not demonstrable.³⁶ If, however, a change in form was deliberately introduced in two passages, from prayer by the protagonist to commentary by the narrator, that change has implications sufficiently interesting to merit some brief speculation in concluding this essay. Since 'prières' are highly conventional, having Constance articulate three such prayers in a row would certainly have compromised those individualizing touches which make the heroine an appealing human figure as well as the near-saintly embodiment of the abstract virtue of fortitude.³⁷ The change would also affect the portrayal of Constance by distancing her from those heroic figures who pray to God for deliverance at some moment of extreme peril, and who receive from God the courage and strength to triumph over the adversity besetting them. On the one occasion when Constance does pray directly for divine aid, Christ physically intervenes as her champion with a miracle which protects her passivity. Her other prayers, to Christ (ll. 283–87), to the cross (ll. 451–62), and to the Virgin Mary (ll. 841–54), are for the psychic strength to endure misfortunes which are accepted as the persecuted heroine's lot, and to which no active physical resistance is offered. The episode with the licentious steward is particularly revealing. Had Constance prayed for help in withstanding his advances and then killed him in protecting her chastity, she would have acquired to herself something of the aura of crusading virago. As the Man of Law presents the incident, however, the steward appears to die as the result of his own efforts at molestation, and while Judith is cited as having enjoyed divine protection under similar circumstances, any association of Constance with Judith's militancy is studiously avoided. Augmenting, by comparison with Trivet, the extent to which Constance is witnessed at prayer, while limiting the instances in which she has recourse to 'prières du plus grand péril', is a tactic perfectly in harmony with promoting the sentimentally pathetic tone detected by numerous critics in the *Man of Law's Tale*.³⁸

Of perhaps greater significance is the effect of the hypothesized change on the nature of the tale itself as a religious statement. 'Prières' make their first appearance in *chansons de geste* and contribute to the simple and unmediated piety of those texts, with their vision of a world in which the demarcation between good and evil is clear and unequivocal — *paiien ont tort e chrestiens ont dreit* — and in which

God intervenes when appealed to in support of those fighting to uphold the cause of righteousness. Constance, a Christian princess whose star-crossed destiny drives her from pagan Syria to pagan Northumberland and plunges her directly into the turmoil of warring faiths, inhabits exactly this kind of world. But the Man of Law's rhetorical orchestration of his narrative presents her experiences in a way which subtly modulates how they are perceived by comparison with those of the heroes and heroines of *chanson de geste* and *roman d'aventure*. In his tale the providence of God is not simply demonstrated at the literal narrative level in a series of divine responses to human entreaty. Instead, the narrator's voice intrudes to guide his listener's sensibilities by articulating the assumptions underlying this demonstration. The effect, paradoxically, is to raise the spectre of skepticism which we can suppose the Man of Law's comments were expressly designed to lay.³⁹ Typically, in Chaucer's hands a schema which has preserved its traditional form and function over two centuries is utilized to complicate the personality and performance of a fictional narrator and to ambiguate the effect of the assertively pious tale which he narrates.

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NOTES

- 1 The descriptive title, 'prière du plus grand péril', was given to the particular prayer type which will engage our attention by Jean Frappier, *Les Chansons de geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange*, 2 vols (Paris, 1963, 1965), II (1965), 130. A number of studies have touched on the subject of long prayers in Old French heroic and romance literature, but the most detailed analyses and the most useful bibliographical information are to be found in Sister Marie Pierre Koch, *An Analysis of the Long Prayers in Old French Literature with Special Reference to the 'Biblical-Creed-Narrative' Prayers* (Washington, D.C., 1940), and Edmond-René Labande, 'Le "Credo" épique: A propos des prières dans les chansons de geste', in *Recueil de travaux offert à M. Clovis Brunel . . . par ses amis, collègues et élèves*, Société de l'École des Chartes, 2 vols (Paris, 1955), II, 62-80.
- 2 *Li Coronemenz Looïs*, edited by Ernest Langlois (Paris, 1925).
- 3 As happens, for example, with the prayer of Isembart addressed to 'Sainte Marie, genitrix, mere Deu, dame' in *Gormont et Isembart*, edited by Alphonse Bayot, third edition (Paris, 1931), p. 42.
- 4 Other examples of the 'mixed' type may be found in *Gui de Bourgogne*, edited by F. Guessard and H. Michelant (Paris, 1859), pp. 77-78; *Gaydon*, edited by F. Guessard and S. Luce (Paris, 1862), pp. 42-43; *Aliscans*, edited by F. Guessard and A. de Montaiglon (Paris, 1870), pp. 213-15; and *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, edited by J. Couraye du Parc (Paris, 1884), pp. 63-64.
- 5 There are prayers of this kind, of between 140 and 150 lines, in *Le Roman du Comte d'Anjou*, edited by Mario Roques (Paris, 1964), pp. 27-32, and in Gerbert de Montreuil, *Le Roman de la Violette, ou de Gerart de Nevers*, edited by Douglas Labaree Buffum (Paris, 1928), pp. 207-13.
- 6 *Huon de Bordeaux*, edited by F. Guessard and C. Grandmaison (Paris, 1860), p. 61.
- 7 *Der festländische Bueve de Hantone*, edited by Albert Stimming, Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur, 30, 41 (Dresden, 1912, 1918), I (1912). The italicized lines, not in the critical text, are added from the MS in the municipal library of Carpentras, as recorded by Stimming, 'Anmerkungen', II (1918), 211.

- ⁸ See *Der anglo-normannische Boeve de Haumtone*, edited by Albert Stimming, *Bibliotheca Normannica*, 7 (Halle, 1899), 50–51.
- ⁹ *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, edited by Eugen Kölbing, EETS, ES 46, 48, 65 (London, 1885–94).
- ¹⁰ *Gui de Warewic*, edited by Alfred Ewert, 2 vols (Paris, 1932, 1933), II (1933).
- ¹¹ *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, edited by Julius Zupitza, EETS, ES 25, 26 (London, 1875–76). A briefer version of this prayer, also committing the same error over Samson (the only figure mentioned in this instance), appears earlier in the same romance at the moment when Guy has his famous confrontation with the dragon: 'God,' he seyde, 'of myght so stronge, | That madyst bothe day and nyght | And dyed on tre for synfull wyght | And sauyd Sampson fro the lyon, | Kepe me to day fro thys dragon' (ll. 6888–92).
- ¹² *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, edited by Julius Zupitza, EETS, ES 42, 49, 59 (London, 1883, 1887, 1891; reprinted, 1966). The Caius MS, written in couplets, has a briefer and somewhat different version: 'Lord,' he seyde, 'for thy passyoun, | That savyd danyell fro the lyon, | Save me from thys fowle felloun, | And bryng me to savacioun, | And lend me grace thys ilke daye | (For well I wot that thow maye) | To slee thys thefe with myn hond, | And fro trowage save thys lond' (ll. 10560–67). Only the Auchinleck MS has a prayer of this kind immediately prior to the earlier engagement with the dragon: 'God,' he seyde, 'fader almȳt, | þat made þe day & nȳt also, | & for ous sinful þoldest wo, | & heldest Daniel fram þe lyoun, | Saue me fram þis foule dragoun' (ll. 7222–26).
- ¹³ *Bishop Percy's Folio MS: Ballads and Romances*, edited by John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, 3 vols (London, 1867–68), II (1867).
- ¹⁴ *The Complete Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford, 1899–1902), IV (1902). There is a translation in Eric W. Stockton, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower* (Seattle, 1962), pp. 88–89: 'O creator of the human race, Christ the Redeemer, without Whom there is nothing good on earth or nothing better, Thou spokest and all things were established in Thy name. Thou gavest command, and instantly all things were manifestly created. . . . Thou hast given breath to the wind in its four directions. . . . Finally, man was made in Thine image and that of Reason, so that he might be over all Thy handiwork. Urged on by the Old Serpent, he disregarded Thy commands, and the bite of the apple was death for him. But Thou wert made flesh from the flesh of the Virgin that Thou might redeem him from death through Thy

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mercy. And thus because of our lust of the flesh Thou wert made the parent of our kind, whence Thou might be the more gracious unto us. As I believe Thou art God and my parent, I pray, O Father, rule Thou my fate more kindly! As Thou wert not ashamed to bleed on the Cross of death, so spare me my misfortunes at this time! Thou Who snatchedst Paul from the sea, Peter from prison, and Jonah from the fish's belly, remember Thou me! . . . O heavenly powers,' I said, 'lend help to our oars and provide safe shores for my wrecked ship! May she who cared for humankind by giving birth to Christ furnish help for my cares. I pray Thee, merciful God, that she who brought forth a flower while her own flower remained secure may be my mediator. Why dost Thou loose evils upon me which I never suffered before? Behold, we are dying together, be mindful of us, disaster threatens!'

15 *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, third edition (Boston, 1987). All subsequent quotations from the *Man of Law's Tale* are taken from this edition.

16 For the figure of Christ as a 'champion' fighting a dragon, see, for example, John Lydgate's religious lyric *Quis Dabit Meo Capiti*, where Mary describes the crucifixion in these terms: 'For manhis love he faught a gret batayll, | With his sevene hedys he outrayed the dragoun, | . . . | Thus was my sone mankyndys Champyoun' — in *The Minor Poems*, edited by H. N. McCracken, EETS, ES 107 (London, 1911), 324–29 (ll. 105–06, 109). That there are allusions in this scene to trial by combat was noted by Marie P. Hamilton, 'The Dramatic Suitability of *The Man of Law's Tale*', in *Studies in Language and Literature in Honor of Margaret Schlauch*, edited by Mieczyslaw Brahmer, Stanislaw Helsztynski, and Julian Krzyzanowski (Warsaw, 1966; reprinted, New York, 1971), pp. 152–63. Professor Hamilton also points out that Susanna became associated with legal trials in which an appeal was made to the judgment of God, and that in ordeal formulae her name is linked with those of the three youths delivered from the fiery furnace.

17 Guessard and Luce, *Gaydon*, ll. 1389–91. Rodney Delasanta uses the apparent error on the part of the Man of Law in supposing Nineveh to have been a seaport as significant evidence that this 'pharasaical legalist' has less learning, and a less reliable memory, than he pretends to ('And of Great Reverence: Chaucer's Man of Law', *Chaucer Review*, 5 (1971), 288–310). Appearance of the same assumption in the passage quoted from *Gaydon*, however, would suggest that Chaucer simply appropriated this statement from his source, and was not introducing it as a means of characterizing his narrator.

18 *La Chanson d'Aspremont*, edited by Louis Brandin, second edition (Paris, 1970). Compare 'Jonas jetas del ventre du poisson | Et garesis Daniel del lion . . . | A Moises passas la

mer sanz pont | Que n'i queïst ne chalant ne noton | Quant Tu noias lo pueple Faraon', in Couraye du Parc, *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, ll. 1449–50, 1459–61. The third reference to this particular event is in *La Chanson du chevalier au cygne*, edited by C. Hippeau (Paris, 1874), ll. 3518–20. Subsequent references appear in text.

19 Edited by L.-N. Boca (Valenciennes, 1841), Section 17, ll. 153–56. Subsequent references appear in text.

20 Edited by Baron de Reiffenberg, 3 vols (Brussels, 1846–59), III (1859), ll. 12133–35.

21 Gower's prayer is also of interest for the *Man of Law's Tale* in that the reference contained in the *credo* segment at l. 1802, *Quatuor et vento partibus ora dabas*, parallels the material incorporated in the stanza, ll. 491–97, interpolated into the biblical-figure sequence of stanzas in Chaucer's work: 'Who bad the foure spirites of tempest | That power han t'anoyen land and see, | Bothe north and south, and also west and est, | Anoyeth neither see, ne land, ne tree?'

22 Early critics saw the passages in question as rhetorical elaborations intended to reinforce the emotionalism and piety of the tale. See, in this respect, Bernard I. Duffey, 'The Intention and Art of *The Man of Law's Tale*', *English Literary History*, 14 (1947), 181–93; and Edward A. Block, 'Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*', *PMLA*, 69 (1953), 572–616. Michael R. Paull, 'The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the *Man of Law's Tale*', *Chaucer Review*, 5 (1971), 179–94, discusses the biblical-figure segments as examples of *comparatio* and argues that they reinforce the contemplative aspects of the tale as appropriate to saint's legend.

23 'Religious Elements in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*', *English Literary History*, 27 (1960), 249–61. Subsequent references appear in text.

24 The passage in Nicholas Trivet's Anglo-Norman *Cronicle*, which I quote from Margaret Schlauch, 'The Man of Law's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, edited by W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941; reprinted, New York, 1958), pp. 155–206, reads as follows (p. 168): 'Mes dieu estoit soun mariner, quar par treis aunz entiers fu ele mesme en la graunde ocean . . . puis . . . dieux, qi gouverna la neef le seint home Noe en le graunde diluue, maunda vn vent couenable e enchasca la neef en Engleterre.' The only recorded use of the flood as a theme in 'prières' occurs in Langlois, *Li Coronemenz Looïs*, in an instance of the schema just prior to that quoted earlier from the same encounter of Guillaume with Corsolt: 'Toz

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les fesistes al deluge finer. | N'en eschapa fors solement Noé, | Et si trei fill, et chascuns ot sa per;
| De totes bestes, por le siecle estorer, | Masle et femele fist en l'arche poser' (ll. 713–17).

25 If Chaucer did not recall the prayer from saints' legends, Yunck suggests that other possible sources were available to him, such as the earliest versions of the *Physiologus*. One of these also contains a reference to the deliverance of 'Judith from Holofernes'.

26 The exceptions would be the four spirits of the tempest (for which see note 21, above), and the miracle of the loaves and fishes (see the references to *Li Romans de Bauduin de Sebourc* and *Godefroid de Bouillon*, above, and notes 19 and 20, above).

27 Robert T. Farrell, 'Chaucer's Use of the Theme of the Help of God in the *Man of Law's Tale*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 71 (1970), 239–43. See also *idem*, 'Chaucer's Man of Law and his Tale: the Eccentric Design', in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Essays in Memoriam*, edited by Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca and London, 1979), pp. 159–72.

28 Farrell, 'Chaucer's Man of Law', p. 169, quotes C. R. Morey to the effect that the 'orant woman' vies with Jonah in popularity. Association of Jonah with persecuted heroines was pointed out by Margaret Schlauch, 'Chaucer's Constance, Jonah, and the *Gesta Romanorum*', *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 20 (1973), 305–06.

29 That the series of images gathered in the *Ordo Commendationis Animae* and related liturgical materials is the ultimate source of the similar series occurring in 'prières du plus grand péril' has long been recognized. See, for example, Sister Marie Pierre Koch, 'A Possible Source for the Biblical-Creed-Narrative Prayers', in her *Analysis of the Long Prayers*, pp. 163–73, and J. Garel, 'La Prière du plus grand péril', in *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Pierre le Gentil*, edited by M. J. Dufournet and M. D. Poiron (Paris, 1973), pp. 311–18.

30 Edited by Gaston Paris (Paris, 1899), p. 69.

31 Edited by Peter F. Dembowski (Paris, 1969), pp. 38–39.

32 Edited by F. Guessard and L. Larchey (Paris, 1860), p. 25.

33 *Florence de Rome*, edited by A. Wallensköld, 2 vols (Paris, 1907, 1909), II (1909), pp. 232–33 — quoted in Kevin Roddy, 'Mythic Sequence in the *Man of Law's Tale*', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 10 (1980), 1–22 (p. 13). Roddy associates the figures from this

prayer with those in the first passage of commentary on Constance's misfortunes, and like Farrell, whom he quotes, with the liturgical schema of the *Ordo Commendationis Animae*. The pattern of salvation history, which Roddy perceives as the mythic sequence obliquely invoked by numerous passages throughout the *Man of Law's Tale*, is also the concern of the *credo* segment in the prayer type we have been discussing. There is a detailed recapitulation of these materials in Custaunce's instruction of Hermingyld in Trivet, for which see Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, p. 169. Like *Ami et Amiles* discussed earlier, *Florence de Rome* exists in a Middle English version, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, edited by Carol Falvo Heffernan (Manchester, 1976), but neither English text preserves the 'prière' from its French original.

34 Robert A. Pratt notes that some of the figures mentioned by the Man of Law occur in Trivet, but presumably not in unison in the form of a 'prière' ('Chaucer and *Les Cronicles of Nicholas Trevet*', in *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, edited by E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald A. Hill (Austin, Texas, 1969), pp. 303–11).

35 Under 'Envy', in *Confessio Amantis* (Macaulay, *Complete Works*, II (1901), II. 587–1612).

36 The absence of such a 'prière' in extant Anglo-Norman or continental French *romans d'aventure* and related materials is not demonstrable either, since the available bibliographic surveys cited deal exhaustively with the early, twelfth-century *chansons de geste*, but neglect, or touch only cursorily on, the later and more promising thirteenth- and fourteenth-century works.

37 The issue of conventionality and characterization is discussed by Jacques de Caluwé, 'Les Prières de "Berte aus grans piés" dans l'oeuvre d'Adenet le Roi', in Dufournet and Poiron, *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales*, pp. 151–60.

38 See particularly in this regard Morton W. Bloomfield, 'The Man of Law's Tale: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy', *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 384–90. See also Arthur Norman, 'The Man of Law's Tale', in Atwood and Hill, *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture*, pp. 312–23. Hope Phyllis Weissman, 'Late Gothic Pathos in *The Man of Law's Tale*', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 9 (1979), 133–53, thinks the sentimentalizing is carried to the point of parody, and would regard even the 'prière' (II. 638–44) as contributing to the process of pathetic self-dramatization. In light of the prayer's conventionality, this is certainly not self-evident, although obviously non-parodic occurrence elsewhere does not prohibit the subversion, in the context of the *Man of Law's Tale*, of either this episode or that of the covering by Constance

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of her infant son's eyes. For the latter, see Anne Lancashire, 'Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac', *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1975), 320–26.

³⁹ There is an interesting discussion of the kind of effect perceived here in William C. Johnson, Jr, 'The *Man of Law's Tale*: Aesthetics and Christianity in Chaucer', *Chaucer Review*, 16 (1982), 201–21. Johnson argues that Chaucer's manipulations of the narratorial voice in such passages as those incorporating the 'prière' schema 'implies a defense of poetry as a mode of knowledge distinct from theology'.