

**The Monk's Tale**  
**Geoffrey Chaucer**



**The Monk's Prologue**

When I had ended my tale of Melibee and of Prudence and her goodness, our Host said, "As I am a faithful person, and by the precious body of Madrian<sup>1</sup>, I would give a barrel of ale so my dear good wife might hear this story! She has no such patience as had Melibee's wife. By God's bones, when I beat my knaves, she brings me great clubbed staffs and cries, "Slay every one of the dogs! Break their backs and every bone!" 1900

And if any neighbor of ours will not offer reverence to my wife in church, or is so bold as to offend her, she shakes her fist in my face when she comes home and cries, "False coward, avenge your wife! By God's bones, you shall take my distaff<sup>2</sup> and go spin, and I will take your knife!" Day and night she will be saying, "Alas that I was ever born to wed a milksop or a coward ape, who is mastered by every creature! You do not dare to stand up for your wife's rights!" 1912

This is my life, unless I will pick a quarrel with my neighbors; I must rush from the house or I am lost, unless I were foolhardy, like a wild lion. I know well that some day she will make me kill some neighbor and then flee for my life, for I am a dangerous man with my knife in hand, albeit I dare not resist her, for she is big of arms, in faith, as anyone who injures her in word or act shall find. But let us pass this matter by. 1923

"My lord Monk, be cheerful, for in faith you shall tell a tale. Lo, Rochester stands nearby now. Ride forth, my own lord; do not spoil our sport. But by my word, I do not know your name, whether to call you my Lord Sir John, or Sir Thomas, or else Sir Alban. Of what monastery are you, in heaven's name? You

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<sup>1</sup> Madrian. There seems to be no Saint Madrian. The best explanation of this name to date is that Madrian is a variation on Adrian, who was known in the fourteenth century as the patron saint of brewers. This, of course, would be appropriate in this context.

<sup>2</sup> Distaff. The small stick that is used to hold the thread while a weaver makes cloth.

have a very fine skin, I swear to God; it must be a noble pasture where you have fed: you do not look like a ghost, or even one who fasts! 1934

"By my faith, you are some sort of officer, a noble sacristan or cellarer<sup>3</sup>, for by my father's soul I deem you must be a master at home, no poor cloister-monk or novice, but a governor, wise and wily; and a comely-looking person withal, for brawn and bones. May God bring to destruction the one that first brought you to the religious life. You would have been a great breeding fowl. If you had as great a permission as you have the might, you would have begotten many creatures. Alas, why do you wear such a wide cloak? 1948

May God give me sorrow, but if I were a pope, not only you, but every mighty man, even if his hair were cut rather high on his skull, should have a wife. The entire world is lost; religion has taken up all the best, and we lay-people are just shrimps. From weak trees come weak offshoots; therefore, our heirs are so slim and weak that they can not engender<sup>4</sup> well. This makes our wives want to make a try at religious people, for you might pay better, in terms of Venus' payments, than we can. God knows, you pay with no little coins. But do not be angry, my lord, that I make merry in this way; very often I have heard a truth told in jest." 1964

This worthy monk took everything in patience, and said, "I will do my duty, as long as it is proper, to tell you a tale, or two or three of them. And if you wish to listen here, I will tell you the life of St. Edward; or else I will first relate certain tragedies, of which I have a hundred in my cell. A tragedy means a certain story, as the old books tell us, of one who stood once in great prosperity and falls from that high station into misery and ends in wretchedness. They are commonly in verses of six feet, which people call hexameters. Many are composed in prose, and many in other meters as well. Lo, this description should be sufficient. 1982

Now listen if you wish to hear. But first I beg you to excuse my ignorance if I do not tell these things in order, whether it be of popes, kings, or emperors, according to their times, as they are found written,

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<sup>3</sup> Sacristan or cellarer. Sacristan: Church officer responsible for care of sacred items, including the vessels, vestments, and relics. (Sexton.) Cellarer: Officer responsible for provisions for the monks, especially those in the kitchen and cellar.

<sup>4</sup> Engender. Perform, procreate.

but put some before and some behind, as they come now into my memory." 1990

Explicit.

**Here begins the Monk's Tale**  
*De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*<sup>5</sup>

In the manner of tragedy I will bewail the misfortune of them that stood in high estate and so fell that no remedy could bring them out of their adversity. For when Fortune will flee, none can detain the course of her. Let no man trust in blind good fortune; be warned by these old and true examples. 1998

Lucifer

At Lucifer, though he was an angel and not a man, I will begin. For though Fortune cannot harm an angel, yet for his sin he fell down from his high degree into hell, where he now is. O Lucifer, brightest of all angels, now you are Satan and can never depart from that misery into which you are fallen. 2006

Adam

Lo, Adam was created in the plain of Damascus by God's own finger and not uncleanly begotten of man's loins, and he was lord of all paradise, except one tree. Never was a man on earth of such high estate until he was driven, on account of sin, from his high prosperity to labor, misfortune, and hell. 2014

Sampson

Behold Sampson, who long before his birth was announced by an angel and consecrated to almighty God, and stood in high honor as long as he had his eyes. There was never another such man as he in terms of strength and hardiness. But he told his secret to his wives, for which he slew himself for misery. This noble almighty champion slew a lion and tore him entirely to pieces with no weapon but his two hands, as he walked on his way to his wedding. His false wife so cajoled and entreated him until she knew his secret and treacherously revealed it to his foes, and forsook him and took another mate. In wrath he took three hundred foxes, and bound their tails together and knit a burning brand to every tail and so set the foxes' tails afire. 2034

They burned up all the corn in that land and all their olive-trees and vines as well. He slew a thousand

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<sup>5</sup> *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*. On the fall of famous men.

men with no weapon but an ass's cheek-bone. When they were slain, he was so athirst that he nearly perished; and prayed to God to pity his pains and send him drink, or else he must die. From a molar-tooth in the ass's dry jaw-bone there rushed then a spring, from which he drank his fill. Thus God helped him, as the Book of Judges tells. 2046

At Gaza one night by sheer force, in spite of the Philistines in that city, he tore up the gates of the town and carried them on his back high upon a hill for all to see. O noble almighty Sampson, prized and dear, had you not told your secret to women, there would have been nowhere your match in this entire world. This Sampson never took strong drink or wine, and never did a razor or shears come upon his head, by precept of the divine messenger, for all his strength lay in his hair. 2058

Twenty winters, year by year, he had the governance over Israel. But soon he must weep bitterly, for women brought him to ruin. He told his mistress Delilah that all his strength lay in his hair, and she falsely sold him to his enemies, and while he slept in her lap one day, she had his hair clipped and sheared and let his enemies detect his secret. When they found him in this plight, they bound him fast and put out his eyes. Before his hair was clipped or shorn no bond could bind him, but now he was imprisoned in a cave and made to grind at a hand-mill. 2074

O noble Sampson, strongest of men, once a judge in glory and wealth, now may you weep with your blind eyes, since you are fallen from happiness to wretchedness. The end of the poor creature was this. One day his enemies made a festival and set him to play the fool before them. And this was in a splendid temple. But at last he created dread ruin; for he shook two pillars and made them fall; down fell the temple and all, and there it lay, and it slew him and all his enemies, every one of the princes, that is to say, with three thousand bodies altogether. 2090

I say no more of Sampson. Be warned by this old and simple example, that men tell not their secret to their wives if it pertains to life or limb.

Hercules

His own deeds sing laud and high renown of Hercules, the sovereign conqueror, the flower of strength in his time. He slew the lion and took his skin, and laid low the Centaur's boast. He slew the Harpies, the dreadful cruel birds, and robbed the dragon of his golden apples. He brought away Cerberus the hell-hound. 2102

He slew the cruel tyrant Busiris and gave him to his horses to devour, flesh and bones. He slew the fiery venomous serpent, and broke one of the two horns of Achelous, and Cacus he slew in a rocky cave, and the giant Antaeus, the strong, and the grisly boar, and carried heaven upon his neck for many days. 2110

There was never a creature since the world was made that slew so many monsters. Because of his strength and high virtues, his name ran throughout this wide world, and he traveled to see every realm. He was so strong that no man could stop him. At both ends of the world, says Trophee, he set pillars as boundaries. 2118

This noble champion had a sweetheart, Dianira by name, fresh as the month of May, and, as the scholars note, she sent him a shirt, fresh and fine. Alas this shirt, alas and alack! It was envenomed so subtly that before he had worn it half a day, his flesh fell entirely from his bones. 2126

But nonetheless some scholars excuse her and blame a certain Nessus who made it. Be that as it may, I will not accuse her; but he wore the shirt upon his naked back until his flesh blackened with the venom. And when he saw there was no help, he raked up for himself a bed of hot coals, for he chose not to die with any poison. 2134

Thus this worthy, mighty Hercules died. Lo, who can trust Fortune for a long time? He who follows the ways of this crowded world is often laid low before he is aware. Wise is he who knows himself. Beware, for when Fortune chooses to flatter, she watches to overthrow her man in such way as he would least imagine. 2142

#### Nebuchadnezzar

The mighty throne and precious treasure, the glorious scepter and royal majesty of King Nebuchadnezzar can scarcely be described by tongue. Twice he won Jerusalem, and carried off the vessels of the temple. His sovereign seat was at Babylon, and there he enjoyed his glory and delight. 2150

The fairest children of the royal blood of Israel he made his eunuchs and slaves. Among others was Daniel, the wisest child of all; for he expounded the king's dreams when there was no scholar in Chaldea who knew to what end his dreams pointed. 2158

This proud king had a golden statue made, sixty cubits high and seven wide, to which he commanded

both young and old to bow and pay veneration, or be burned in a furnace full of red flames. But never would Daniel and his two young fellows consent to that act. This king of kings, proud and arrogant, deemed that God who sits in majesty could not bereave him of his high station. But suddenly he lost his dignity, and became like a beast, and ate hay like an ox and lay under the sky and walked in the rain with wild beasts, until a certain time arrived. 2176

His hair grew as if it were an eagle's feathers and his nails were like a bird's claws, until God released him from certain years of punishment and gave him back his wit. And then with many tears he thanked God and at all times in his life was in fear about doing amiss or trespassing further, and until he was laid on his bier he knew that God was mighty and full of grace. 2182

#### Belshazzar

His son, Belshazzar, who held the throne after his father's day, was not able to come to understanding by his father, for he was proud of heart and sumptuous in his lifestyle, and at all points an idolater. His high estate made him feel secure in his pride. But Fortune cast him down and suddenly divided his kingdom. 2190

At one time he made a festival to all his lords and told them to be carefree; he called his officers. "Go," he said, "bring forth the vessels that my father, in his prosperity took from the temple of Jerusalem, and let us give thanks to our high gods for the honor that our elders left with us." His wife, his lords, and his concubines drank out of these noble vessels various wines as long as they wished. And this king cast his eye upon the wall and saw an armless hand writing, for fear of which he quaked and sighed sorely. This hand which made Belshazzar so sorely aghast wrote, "*Mane, techel, phares*" and nothing else. 2204

In all that land there was no magician who could interpret these letters; but Daniel interpreted it then and said, "King, God lent to your father glory and honor, dominion, treasure, and revenue. And he was proud and in no way feared God, and therefore God sent upon him heavy vengeance and bereft him of his kingdom. 2214

"He was cast out from the company of man, his habitation was with asses, and he lay like a beast in wet and dry, until he knew by grace and reason that the God of heaven has dominion over every realm and every creature. And then God had compassion for him and restored to him his kingdom and his own

form. Now you, his son, are proud also, and know all these things. You are a rebel to God and are his foe. You have drunk from his vessels boldly; and your wife and your concubines drank sinfully various wines from the same vessels, and cursedly you praise false gods. Therefore great pains are decreed for you. 2230

“This hand that wrote on the wall “Mane, techel, phares,” was sent from God, believe me. Your reign is over; you are of no consequence at all; your kingdom is divided and shall be given to the Medes and Persians.” And the same night the king was slain and Darius occupied his station, though he had no lawful right to it. 2238

Gentle people, you may take warning by this, how there is no security in lordship. For when Fortune will forsake a man, she bears away kingdom, and wealth, and friends, great and small. What friends a man has in good fortune, mishap will make enemies. I believe this proverb is true and well-known. 2246

#### Zenobia

Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, as the Persians write concerning her glory, was so valorous and so bold in arms that no creature passed her in hardihood, nor in lineage or in other nobleness. 2251

She was descended from the blood of Persian kings; I do not say that she was the fairest of all women, but her form could not be amended. From her childhood I find that she fled to the woods from women's duties. With her broad arrows she spilled many wild harts' blood; she was so swift that she seized them quickly. 2259

When she was older she would kill lions and leopards, and tear bears to pieces and in her arms dealt with them at will. She dared seek wild beasts' dens and roam over the mountains all night and sleep under a bush. Because of her true strength she could wrestle with any young man, no matter how strong he was. Nothing could stand against her arms. She kept her maidenhood against every creature and chose to be bound to none. 2270

At length her friends married her to Odenathus, a prince of that country, albeit she delayed them for a long time. (And you shall understand that he had much the same fancies as she.) But nevertheless, when they were knit together, they lived in joy and felicity, for each held the other dear, except one thing: that she would never agree, in any way, that he should lie with her only once, for it was her full

intention to have a child, to multiply the world; and as soon as she could tell that she was not with child on account of that deed, then she would allow him to perform his fantasy again, and only once, without doubt. 2286

And if she were with child at that time, she would play this game no more, until a full forty weeks were past; then she would allow him to do the same once. Regardless of whether this Odenathus were wild or tame, he got no more of her, for thus she said: it was lechery and shame for a woman, in any other case, if men played with them. 2295

She had two sons by this Odenathus, whom she brought up in virtue and learning. But now let us return to our tale. I say so worshipful a creature, so wise indeed and liberal without prodigality, so active and resolute in war, so courteous as well, was nowhere to be found in this entire world. 2302

Her rich array both in terms of precious vessels and of clothes could not be described; she was clad entirely in gems and gold. She spared nothing, even taking into account all of her hunting, to gain full knowledge of various languages when she had leisure, and the study of books was all her delight, and how she might spend her life in virtue. 2310

And, to treat this story briefly, so valiant were she and her husband that they conquered and held with strong hand many great kingdoms and many fair cities in the orient that had belonged to the majesty of Rome. Never could their foes put them to flight while Odenathus' days lasted. Whoever wishes to read of her battles against Sapor the king and others, and how all these events were decided why she made her conquests and what title she had in that, and afterward of her woe and misfortune, how she was besieged and taken, let them go to my master Petrarch<sup>6</sup>, who writes enough of this, I believe. 2326

When Odenathus died, she held the realm with her own mighty hand and fought so fiercely against her foes that there every king or prince in that entire region was glad if he found such grace that she did not make war with him. With her they made treaties and alliances to live in peace and let her ride and sport at will. Neither Claudius<sup>7</sup> the emperor of Rome

<sup>6</sup> Petrarch. The Italian poet and philosopher Petrarch (1304-1374) was not Chaucer's source; rather it was Boccaccio (1313-1375), who wrote *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*.

<sup>7</sup> Claudius. Claudius Gothicus, emperor of Rome 268-70 AD.

nor Gallienus<sup>8</sup> before him, nor any Armenian or Egyptian, Syrian or Arabian, was so courageous as to dare fight with her in the field, lest she slay them with her own hands or put them to flight with her troops. 2342

Her two sons went in regal habit as heirs of all their father's realms; and Hermanno and Thymalao were their names in Persian. But ever Fortune mingles gall<sup>9</sup> in her honey; this mighty queen could endure no long time. Fortune made her fall from her kingdom into wretchedness and misfortune. 2350

Aurelian, when the governance of Rome came into his hands, planned vengeance upon this queen, and took his way with his legions toward her land; and, to tell it shortly, made her flee, and at last seized and bound her in fetters with her two children, and won the land and went back to Rome. Among other things that he won, this Aurelian, the great Roman, took with him her chariot all wrought with gold and gems, so that all might see it. Zenobia walked before his triumphal chariot with golden chains hanging from her neck, crowned according to her station, and her habit loaded with gems. Alas, Fortune! The whole rabble gawked at her who was once dreadful to kings and emperors. Alas! She that was helmeted in steel in stern onslaughts, and defeated mighty towns and towers by force, shall now, as it were, have a helmet of glass upon her head. She who bore a splendid scepter shall, in turn, bear a distaff. 2374

#### On Pedro, King of Spain

O noble worthy Pedro<sup>10</sup>, Spain's glory, whose majesty Fortune held so high, in truth all ought to mourn your piteous death. Your brother made you flee your own land, and afterwards in a siege through deception you were betrayed and led to his tent and there slain by his own hand; and he succeeded to your kingdom and revenues. 2382

He who bore<sup>11</sup> the coat of arms with the field of snow and a black eagle in it, caught by a lime-twig of bright red, brewed all this sin and cursedness; and the Wicked Nest<sup>12</sup> was a worker of this extremity. He

<sup>8</sup> Gallienus. emperor of Rome 253-68 AD.

<sup>9</sup> Gall. Anything bitter.

<sup>10</sup> Pedro. Pedro of Castile.

<sup>11</sup> He who bore. Bertrand du Guesclin is the villain who deceived Pedro into going to his brother's tent. Bertrand, along with Oliver de Mauny and others, assisted Don Enrique of Trastamare, Pedro's illegitimate half-brother, in assassinating Pedro in 1369.

<sup>12</sup> Wicked Nest. A pun on the name of Oliver de Mauny, i.e., wicked nest in Old French is *mau ni*. This Oliver, an

was not a bit like Charlemagne's Oliver<sup>13</sup>, who always heeded fidelity and honor, but a Ganelon<sup>14</sup> of Armorica corrupted by a bribe, who brought this worthy king into such a snare. 2390

#### On Pierre, King of Cyprus

O worthy Pierre<sup>15</sup>, King of Cyprus, you who won Alexandria by noble generalship, you brought woe to many heathens. For this your own lieges were envious of you, and one morning murdered you in your bed, for nothing but your knighthood. Thus Fortune rules and guides her wheel, and brings man from joy to sorrow. 2398

#### On Barnabas of Lombardy

Great Bernabo Visconti of Milan, the god of pleasure and scourge of Lombardy, since you climbed to such high estate, why should I not recount your ill fortune? Your brother's son, allied to you doubly, both nephew and son-in-law, caused you to die in his prison. But why or how you were slain I know not.

#### On Ugolino, Count of Pisa

No tongue, for pity, can tell of the languishing of Earl Ugolino of Pisa<sup>16</sup>. But a little out of Pisa stands a tower in which he was imprisoned with his three little children, the eldest scarcely five years old. Alas! It was great cruelty to put such birds in such a cage! 2414

In that prison he was forced to die, for Ruggieri<sup>17</sup>, Bishop of Pisa, had made on him a false accusation, wherefore the people rose against him and put him in prison, in such fashion as you have heard; and of meat and drink he had so little that it could scarcely suffice, and what little he had was poor and bad indeed. One day it happened that at the hour when his meal was usually brought, the jailer shut the tower-doors. 2425

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Armorican knight, is not to be confused with the Oliver mentioned below.

<sup>13</sup> Oliver. Faithful retainer to Charlemagne and friend of Roland, both of whom defend the rear guard to the end in the French epic *The Song of Roland*.

<sup>14</sup> Ganelon. The traitor who caused the death of thousands of French troops, as described in *The Song of Roland*.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre. Pierre de Lusignan.

<sup>16</sup> Ugolino of Pisa. The most famous re-telling of this story is from Ugolino's own mouth in Canto 33 of Dante's *Inferno*.

<sup>17</sup> Ruggieri. Ruggieri degli Ubaldini.

He heard it well, but spoke not; and in his heart a thought came that they would have him die of hunger. "Alas!" he said, "that I was made!" And the tears fell from his eyes. His young son, three years old, said to him, "Father, why do you weep? When will the jailer bring us our soup? Do you have no morsel of bread? I cannot sleep because of my hunger; I wish to God that I might sleep forever! Hunger would not then creep into my belly; I long more for nothing, except bread." 2438

Thus day by day this child cried until he lay down in his father's arms and said, "Farewell, father, I must die," and kissed his father and died the same day. When the woeful father saw him dead, for sorrow he began to bite his two arms, "Alas, Fortune, alack the day!" he said. "All my woe I blame on your false wheel!" 2446

His children deemed that he gnawed his arms for hunger, and not for grief, and said, "Father, do not do so, alas, but eat rather our flesh. You gave us our flesh--take our flesh from us, and eat enough." Thus they said to him, and then within a day or two they laid themselves in his lap and died. He also died, starved of hunger in despair<sup>18</sup>; thus ended this mighty Earl of Pisa, cut away from his high estate by Fortune. And here enough of this tragedy. Whoso would hear more of it, let him read the great poet of Italy called Dante, for he will relate it all from point to point, and not lack one word. 2462

#### Nero

Although Nero was as vicious as any fiend lying low in hell, yet, as Suetonius<sup>19</sup> tells us, he held this wide world in subjection, east and west, north and south. His habit was fully decked with rubies, sapphires and white pearls, for in gems he had great delight. Never was an emperor more dainty or proud or sumptuous of array; any robe that he had worn once he would never see again. He had many nets of gold thread to fish in the Tiber when he wished to amuse himself. All that he wished to do he made lawful by decree, and Fortune obeyed him as his friend. 2478

He burned Rome for his amusement, and one day slew the senators to hear how men would weep and cry. He slew his brother, and slept with his sister. He reduced his mother in piteous state, for he slit her

<sup>18</sup> Starved of hunger. In Dante's version he does not die until after he has eaten the flesh of his descendants.

<sup>19</sup> Suetonius. Roman author (c.69-140) of *The Lives of the Caesars*.

womb to see where he was conceived; alack that he esteemed his mother so little! 2486

No tear fell from his eye at that sight, but he said, "A fair woman she was." It is marvel how he could judge her beauty when she was dead; he only commanded wine to be brought and drank without delay. When might is joined to cruelty, alas, the harm will go too far. 2494

In youth this emperor had a master, to teach him learning and courtesy, the flower of moral wisdom, unless the books lie. While he was under this master he was made so intelligent and so gentle that it was long before tyranny or any other vice dared attack his soul. Nero had great awe of Seneca, because he would always scold him discreetly for his vices. "Sir," he would say, an emperor must be virtuous and hate tyranny." 2508

For this reason Nero ordered that he was to bleed to death from both his arms in a bath. This Nero had had a custom in youth to rise in the presence of his master, but this became in time a great vexation to him, and therefore he made him die in this manner. This wise Seneca chose to die in a bath in this way rather than have other torments; and thus Nero killed his dear master. 2518

Now it happened that Fortune would no more cherish the haughty pride of Nero. Though he was strong, she was stronger. She thought, "I am too foolish, in faith, to set in high degree a man so full of vice, and call him emperor; I will drag him from his seat; when he least expects, he shall fall." 2526

One night the people rose against him for his crimes, and when he was aware of it he hurried out of his door alone and knocked hard at a door where he looked for friendship; the more he cried the faster they shut the doors. Then he knew well that his hope had misled him, and called no longer, but went his way. The people shouted and muttered everywhere, so that he heard them with his own ears, "Where is this false tyrant, this Nero?" For fear he was almost out of his wits, and prayed piteously to his gods for aid, but it did not help. 2540

He nearly died for terror, and ran into a garden to hide himself. There he found two churls sitting by a great glowing fire, and to them he began to pray to slay him and strike off his head, that men might not know his body and do shame to it. He slew himself (he knew no better way), at which Fortune laughed and made sport. 2550

Holofernes

No king's captain put more realms in subjection, nor in his time was mightier in every aspect in the field, nor of greater renown, nor more magnificent in high arrogance than Holofernes. Fortune ever kissed him wantonly and led him up and down, until his head was off before he knew it. 2558

Not only all men held him in awe lest they forfeit riches or liberty, but he forced everyone to deny his own faith. "Nebuchadnezzar was god and no other god should be adored," he said. No creature dared trespass against his orders, except in Bethulia, a strong city, where one Eliachim was priest. 2566

But take heed of Holofernes' death. One night he lay drunk amid his host within his tent, great as a barn, and yet for all his pomp and power, Judith, a woman, struck off his head as he lay on his back sleeping, and stole secretly from his tent to the town with his head.

On the Illustrious King of Antioch

What need is there to tell of the high royal majesty of King Antiochus, of his lofty pride and evil works? Nowhere was there such another. Read what he was in the book of Maccabees<sup>20</sup>, and his proud words, why he fell from high well-being and how he died wretchedly upon a hill. 2582

Fortune had so advanced him in glory that truly he thought he could reach the stars and weigh each mountain in the balance and restrain all the floods of the sea. God's people he most hated, and would slay them in torment, believing that God could never limit his pride. 2590

And because they had mightily vanquished Nicanor and Timotheus, he so hated the Jews that he ordered his chariot to be prepared immediately and swore savagely he would return to Jerusalem and cruelly wreak his anger upon it. But he was soon hindered in his purpose. For his threats God smote him so sorely with an invisible, incurable wound, that it cut and bit his guts until he could not bear his pains. Truly the vengeance was just, for he had wounded many men's guts. Yet for all his pain he would not cease his cursed and damnable purpose, but he ordered his troops to prepare themselves. 2606

Suddenly, before he was aware, God daunted all his pride and boasting; for he fell so hard from his chariot that his limbs and flesh were torn and he

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<sup>20</sup> Maccabees. In II Maccabees 9.

could neither walk nor ride, but was borne about in a chair all bruised in his back and side. 2614

God's vengeance struck him so cruelly that evil worms crawled through his body, and moreover he stank so horribly that, whether he slept or woke, none of all his household could endure the stench of him. In this mischief he wailed and wept, and knew God to be Lord of every creature. To himself and to all of his troops the stench of his carrion was loathsome; none could carry him to and fro. And in this stink and horrible pain he died wretchedly upon a mountain. Then this robber and murderer, who had made many men weep and lament, had the reward due to him for his arrogance. 2630

Alexander

The story of Alexander is so widespread that every creature who has discretion has heard somewhat or all of his fortune. In brief, he won by force this wide world; or else folk were glad, by reason of his high renown, to send to him for peace. He laid low the pride of man and beast wherever he came, even to the ends of the world. 2638

Never yet could comparison be made between him and another conqueror. This entire world quaked for fear of him; he was the flower of knighthood and generosity. Fortune made him the inheritor of her honors, and, except for wine and women, nothing could blunt his high purpose in arms and labors, he was so full of lion-like spirit. What praise would it be to him if I told of Darius and a hundred thousand more, kings, princes, earls, bold dukes whom he conquered and brought to woe? I say the world was his so far as one can walk or ride; what more can I say? For even if I wrote or talked evermore about his knighthood, it would not suffice. 2654

He reigned twelve years, says Maccabees<sup>21</sup>, and was son of Philip of Macedon, who was the first king in the land of Greece. O worthy noble Alexander, alas that ever such a thing should happen! You were poisoned by your own people. Fortune played dice with you and turned your six into an ace, and yet never wept a tear! Who shall give me tears to lament the death of high blood and of nobility, of him who wielded the world and yet thought it not enough, so full was his spirit of high adventure? 2667

Alas, who shall help me to indict false Fortune and despise that poison, both of which I blame for all his woe? 2670

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<sup>21</sup> Maccabees. In I Maccabees 1.1-7.

Julius Caesar

By wisdom, manhood and great labor Julius the Conqueror rose from humble birth to royal majesty, and won the entire occident over land and sea by the strength of his hand or by treaty, and made it tributary to Rome. And afterwards he was emperor, until Fortune became his adversary. 2678

O mighty Caesar, in Thessaly you made war against Pompey, your father-in-law<sup>22</sup>, who controlled all the chivalry of the orient as far as dawn of day, and by your knighthood you did capture and slay all except a few people who fled with him. Thus you did put the orient in awe, thanks to Fortune who aided you so well. But now I will bewail this Pompey a little while, this noble governor of Rome, who fled in this battle. One of his men, I say, a false traitor, struck off his head and brought it to Julius to win his favor. Alas, Pompey, conqueror of the orient, that Fortune should have brought you to such an end! 2694

Julius returned to Rome in his triumph, crowned high with laurel. But at one time, Brutus Cassius, who ever bore ill-will to his high estate, made a secret deceptive conspiracy against him, and chose the place where he should die by poniards, as I will tell you. 2702

One day, as he was accustomed, this Julius went to the Capitol, and there this false Brutus and his other foes seized him without delay and wounded him with many wounds, and there let him lie. And he never groaned except at one stroke, or else two, unless the books are false. So manly of heart was this Julius, and so well he loved dignified decorum, that with all his deadly sore wounds he cast his mantle over his hips, so that none should see his nakedness. Thus, as he lay dying in a trance, and knew truly that his life was spent, yet had he thought of dignity. 2718

Lucan<sup>23</sup>, I commit this story to you, and to Suetonius<sup>24</sup>, and Valerius<sup>25</sup> also, who wrote beginning and end of it, how to these two great conquerors at first Fortune was friend and then their foe. Let no man trust long to have her favor, but evermore be watchful of her. Be warned by these mighty conquerors. 2726

<sup>22</sup> Father-in-law. Pompey the Great was his son-in-law.

<sup>23</sup> Lucan. Author of *Pharsalia* in which he records the wars between Pompey and Julius Caesar.

<sup>24</sup> Suetonius. See note above.

<sup>25</sup> Valerius. Valerius Maximus, author of *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, which recounts tales of the Caesars.

Croesus

This rich Croesus, formerly the king of Lydia, albeit he was sorely feared by Cyrus<sup>26</sup>, yet was he caught in the midst of his pride and led to the fire to be burned. But such a rain poured from the sky that it slew the fire and let him escape. Yet he had not the grace to beware until Fortune made him hang, mouth open, upon the gallows. 2734

When he was escaped, he could not refrain from beginning a new war again. He deemed well, since Fortune sent him such good luck as to escape by help of the rain, that he could never be killed by his foes; and he dreamed a dream one night; of which he was so glad and proud that he set his whole heart upon vengeance. 2742

He was upon a tree, he dreamed, and Jupiter washed him, back and sides, and Phoebus brought a fair towel to dry him. With this he was all puffed up, and bade his daughter, who stood beside him and he knew abounded in high learning, to tell what it signified. She began in this very manner to expound his dream. "The tree," she said, "betokens the gallows, and Jupiter betokens the rain and snow, and Phoebus with his clean towel, they are the beams of the sun. You shall be hanged, father, in truth; the rain shall wash you and the sun dry you. 2756

Thus flat and plainly she warned him, his daughter, called Phania. So Croesus, the proud king, was hanged; his royal throne did not help him. 2760

Tragedy is no other thing than to cry and bewail in song Fortune's attacks and unexpected strokes upon proud thrones. For when men trust her, then she fails them and covers her bright face with a cloud. 2766

Here the Knight stops the Monk of his Tale.

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<sup>26</sup> Cyrus. Cyrus the Great.