The Second Nun’s Tale
Introduction to

THE SECOND NUN’S TALE.

All that we know of the Second Nun is that she travels with the Prioress, and is called her “chaplain” in the General Prologue.

Another Nunnë with her haddë she
That was her chapélain

Her tale, rather like the tale of her superior, is a saint’s legend, but this time of a well-known saint of the early Church, Cecilia, rather than the nameless boy of the Prioress’s Tale. And the story is even more evidently in praise of virgin martyrs than the Prioress’s. Again like the tale of the Prioress, it has a prologue or proem in which the nun addresses herself to the Virgin Mary in a lyric of considerable charm and feeling.

In some ways the Second Nun’s tale is not worked very well into the scheme of the Canterbury Tales. For one thing the narrator calls herself an “unworthy son of Eve” (62), and for another it is clearly regarded as a written rather than a spoken piece since the narrator at one point, in an example of the common modesty topos, asks for tolerance of a faulty literary effort:

Yet pray I you that readen what I write ........
I pray you that you will my work amend. (78 ff)

The usual explanation for these literary lapses is that “son of Eve” occurred in the prologue to a tale that was first assigned to a professional celibate male teller like the Clerk or the Parson. The “writing” slip indicates that the tale was originally written before the plan of the Canterbury Tales was conceived; in both cases Chaucer forgot or never got around to revising them.

The tale ultimately derives from that most famous of the collections of saints’ lives in the middle ages, Jacobus de Voragine’s Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea). A legend literally means something to be read, and the Golden Legend was put together partly as a handy reference book for the use of preachers who, having read it, would have something to say about any given saint on the feast of that saint or on the major festivals of the Church. Written originally in Latin and translated into most of the languages of Europe, it was a totally uncritical compilation of lives that abounded in unbelievably perfect people (many of them virgins), implausible miracles, unlikely coincidences, instantaneous conversions,
unspeakable sufferings of martyrs. This kind of credulous hagiography gave the book a rather bad name with some more critical medieval Christians, and it became a real embarrassment to churchmen like Erasmus in the Renaissance.

The Nun’s narrative begins, as many of Jacobus’s do, with a fanciful etymology. When the lyrical introductory prayer to the Virgin is finished, we get four stanzas of folk etymologizing of Cecilia’s name (l. 85 ff), the kind of unscientific speculation about name origins that was meant as a source of edification rather than of onomastic accuracy. And since several etymologies are offered, the reader or auditor is free to make a choice of the one that pleases most. This practice does not pretend to be more than a preacher’s licence in extracting from all aspects of the story whatever edification it might yield.

MARTYRDOM: Another aspect of the tale that derives perhaps from Jacobus is the offhand attitude to death by all concerned. Having essentially engineered the death of her husband and his brother, Cecilia accepts their extinction with an equanimity untypical of her in any other respect. But inconsistency of that sort does not restrain writers of romance, sacred or secular. Characterization or plot is not their strong point. Heroism in the right cause is what matters.

In this tale we are spared the sometimes excruciating details of the tortures of the martyrs that this kind of hagiography often indulged in. (See Introduction to the Prioress’s Tale). Here the men are despatched with almost bloodless speed, and, when it is her turn, neither we nor Cecilia feel the fire that the “tormentors” set under her. One grotesque feature, however, does remain: the executioner leaves her half dead because, ineptly, he has not managed to behead her in the allotted three strokes. Nevertheless, she goes on preaching with her head half off, and has the presence of mind to make a will. This feature might stretch the credence of even the most credulous to the breaking point. Still, the details of her death are not as racking as the accounts of the martyrdom of, say, St Catherine in the same collection by Jacobus.

The courage of the victims is a prominent feature of these tales, a courage that sometimes strikes us as more than a little belligerent and “rude,” as the governor in this tale calls Cecilia’s aggressive comments. Few readers will now agree with the judgement of the great Chaucerian scholar Root about “the irresistible force of Cecilia’s sweet personality.” Irresistable force perhaps, but sweet personality, hardly. Still, there are martyrs even more truculent than Cecilia in the Legend: St James the Dismembered, for example, has some pugnacious taunt for his persecutors after each limb is severed from his body, a process that takes an astonishingly long time before death finally silences him.
VIRGINITY: It seems a little odd to us that not only simple people in the Middle Ages, but people like Chaucer himself, could presumably find moving and instructive a story where the newly-married heroine equates even matrimonial lovemaking with “villainy”. In the person of the Wife of Bath Chaucer did indeed question the rigorous cult of virginity so marked in this tale and in the Parson’s Tale, and so common in many of the saints’ lives, but it is not mocked or dismissed. Even the Wife does not repudiate out of hand the anomaly of celibate marriage; she just says it is definitely not for her, as she cites St Paul:

he held virginity

More perfect than wedding in frailty:

(Frailty clepe I, but if that he and she
Would leaden all their life in chastity).
I grant it well, I have of none envy,
Though maidenhead preferè bigamy;
It likes them to be clean in body and ghost.
Of mine estate ne will I make no boast.

Cecilia clearly gets married under what we would call false pretenses, a procedure whose morality we inevitably question. But hagiographic romances pay as little heed to such niceties as secular romances. Her blunt death threat to her husband if he lays a hand on her just after she has sworn to be his wife is matched by her combative defiance of all judges who try to force her to sacrifice to the gods, and is equaled her total determination to convert all around her. She is the *mulier fortis*, the strong heroine, and women like her behave differently from the rest of the world.

(W o B, Prologue, 91-98)
THE SECOND NUN’S TALE.

Preamble

THE minister and the nurse unto vices, Which that men clepe in English “Idleness,” That porter at the gate is of delices, To eschew, and by her contrary her oppress, That is to say, by lawful busyness, Well oughte we to do all our intent, Lest that the fiend through idleness us hent.¹

For he that with his thousand cordès sly, Continually us waiteth to beclap, When he may man in idleness espy, He can so lightly catch him in his trap, Till that a man be hent right by the lappe, He n’is not ’ware the fiend hath him in hand: Well ought us work, and idleness withstand.

And though men dreaden never for to die,² Yet see men well by reason doubtèless, That idleness is rotten sluggardy, Of which there never comes no good increase, And since that sloth her holdeth in a leash, Only to sleep, and for to eat and drink, And to devouren all that others swink.

And for to put us from such idleness, That cause is of so great confusion, I have here done my faithful busyness

¹ The syntax of the stanza is a little snarled: “Well ought we to do all our intent (l.6) to avoid (eschew (4) the minister and nurse of vices, in English called Idleness, the porter at the gate of pleasures (2-3), and (we ought to) oppose her by her contrary (4), that is, legitimate activity (busyness, 5) lest the devil (fiend) seize us in idleness.(7).

² Even if people are not afraid they will die.
After the Legend in translation
Right of thy glorious life and passion, & martyrdom
Thou with thy garland, wrought of rose and lily
Thee mean I, maid and martyr, Saint Cecilia.

Invocation to Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God

And thou, that art the flower of virgins all
Of whom that Bernard list so well to write,
To thee at my beginning first I call,
Thou comfort of us wretches do me endite
Thy maiden’s death, that won through her merit
The eternal life, and of the fiend Victory,
As man may after readen in her story.

Thou maid and mother, daughter of thy Son,¹
Thou well of mercy, sinful soul’s cure,
In whom that God of bounty chose to won;
Thou humble and high o’er every creation,
Thou noblest so far forth our nature,
That no disdain the Maker had of kind
His Son in blood and flesh to clothe and wind.

Within the cloister blissful of thy sides,
Took man’s shape the eternal Love and Peace,
That of the triune compass Lord and guide is,²
Whom earth, and sea, and heaven out of release,
Aye herien; and thou, virgin wemmèless,
Bore of thy body (and dweltest maiden pure)
The Creator of every creation.

Assembled is in thee magnificence

¹ The next three stanzas are based heavily on Dante’s *Paradiso* 33, 1-51.

² 43-9: “Within the blessed space between your sides the eternal Love and Peace took man’s shape, He who is the Lord and Guide of the threefold extent of the world – earth, sea, air, which praise Him without end. You, spotless virgin, gave birth, while remaining a virgin, from your body to the Creator of every creature.”
With mercy, goodness, and with such pity,  
That thou, that art the sun of excellence,  
Not only helpest them that pray en thee,  
But oftentimes of thy benignity  
Full freely, ere that men thine help beseech,  
Thou goest before, and art their life’s leech.  

Now help, thou meek and blissful fairè maid,  
Me, flemèd wretch, in this desert of gall;  
Think on the woman Cananee that said  
That whelps eaten some of the crumbès all  
That from their Lordè’s table been y-fall;  
And though that I, unworthy son of Eve,  
Be sinful, yet accepteth my belief.  

And for that faith is dead withouten workès,  
So for to worken give me wit and space,  
That I be quit from thencé that most dark is;  
O thou, that art so fair and full of grace.  
Be thou mine advocate in that high place,  
Therèas withoutèn end is sung “Hosanna,”  
Thou Christè’s mother, daughter dear of Anna.  

And of thy light my soul in prison light,  
That troubled is by the contagïon  
Of my body, and also by the weight  
Of earthly lust, and, false affection:  
O haven of refuge, O salvaïon  
Of them that be in sorrow and in distress,  
Now help, for to my work I will me dress.  


Modest appeal to the Reader

Yet pray I you that readen that I write,  
Forgive me, that I do no diligence  
This ilkè story subtly to endite.  

1 See introduction for a remark about this literary lapse. And see the Address to the Reader below.

2 “I will address myself, i.e. turn my attention, to my work.” This and the preceding stanzas are a Christian version of the classic appeal to the muses for help in telling the story.
For both have I the words and [the] sentence
Of him, that at the sainte’s reverence
The story wrote, and followed her legend,
And pray you that ye will my work amend.

Pious Etymologies

First will I you the name of Saint Cecilie
Expound, as men may in her story see:
It is to say in English, heaven’s lily,
For purè chasteness of virginity,
Or for she whiteness had of honesty,
And green of conscience, and of good fame
The sweetè savor, Lily was her name.

Or Cecílie is to say, the way to blind,
For she example was by good teaching;
Or else Cecílie, as I written find,
Is joinèd by a manner conjoining
Of heaven and lia, and here, in figuring
The heaven is set for thought of holiness,
And lia for her lasting busyness.

Cecile may eke be said in this manner,
Wanting of blindness, for her greatè light
Of sapience, and for her thewês clear.
Or elsè, lo, this maiden’s namè bright
Of heaven and leos comes, for which by right
Men might her well the heaven of people call,
Example of good and wisè workès all:

For leos People in English is to say;
And right as men may in the heaven see
The sun and moon, and starrès every way,
Right so men ghostly, in this maiden free

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1 As with names in other tales, the name of the heroine appears in different forms as suits the writer’s need for rhythm or rhyme: Cecilia (4 syllables), Cecílie (3) which rhymes with Lily; Cecile (2 syllables). In line 222 & 275 the accent even seems to be on the first syllable, but even there with different results: Cécile and Cécily. Similarly, Urban is accented sometimes on the first, sometimes on the second syllable.
Saw of faith the magnanimity,
And eke the clearness whole of sapience,
And sundry workès, bright of excellence.

And right so as these philosophers write,
That heaven is swift and round, and eke burning,
Right so was fair Cecilia the white
Full swift and busy in every good working,
And round and whole in good persévering,
And burning ever in charity full bright:
Now have I you declarèd what she hight.

End of Prologue

The Second Nun’s Tale of the Life of St Cecilia

At a time when the Christian religion is outlawed in Rome, Cecilia, a Christian who wishes to remain a virgin, is obliged to marry

This maiden bright Cecile, as her life saith,
Was come of Romans and of noble kind,
And from her cradle up fostered in the faith
Of Christ, and bore his Gospel in her mind:
She never ceased, as I written find,
Of her prayer, and God to love and dread,
Beseeching him to keep her maidenhead.

And when this maiden should unto a man
Y-wedded be, that was full young of age,
Which that y-cleped was Valerian,
And day was comen of her marriæge,
She full devout and humble in her courage,
Under her robe of gold, that sat full fair,
Had next her flesh y-clad her in a hair.¹

End of Prologue

¹ Wearing a hairshirt was a penitential exercise not only because it scratched the skin unpleasantly, but because it tended to gather lice, animals especially dear to some of the the more unwashed ascetics.
And while that the organs maden melody,
God alone thus in her heart sung she;
"O Lord, my soul and eke my body gie
Unwemnèd, lest that I confounded be."
And for his love that died upon the tree,
Every second or third day she fast,
Aye bidding in her orisons full fast.

"She has an unusual way of avoiding sexual intercourse with her new husband:
a threat and an errand for him."

The night came, and to bedded must she gon
With her husband, as it is the manner,
And privily she said to him anon:
"Sweet and well-beloved spouse dear,
There is a counsel, an’ ye will it hear,
Which that right fain I would unto you say,
So that you swear you will it not bewray."

Valerian gan fast unto her swear,
That for no case, nor thing that mightè be,
He shoulde never more bewrayen her ;
And then at erst thus to him said she;
"I have an angel which that loveth me,
That with great love, whe’r so I wake or sleep,
Is ready aye my body for to keep;

“And if that he may feelen (out of drede),
That you me touch or love in villainy,
He right anon will slay you with the deed,
And in your youthè thus you shallen die.
And if that you in cleanè love me gye ¹
He will you love as me, for your cleanness,
And showen you his joy and his brightness.”

Valerian, corrected as God would,
Answered again: "If I shall trusten thee,
Let me that angel see, and him behold;
And if that it a very angel be,

¹ “If you will hold me with chaste love.”
Then will I do as thou hast prayèd me;  
And if thou love another man, forsooth  
Right with this sword then will I slay you both.”

Cecile answered anon right in this wise;  
"If that you list, the angel shall you see,  
So that you trow on Christ, and you baptize.  
Go forth to Via Appia,” quod she,  
"That from this town ne stands but milès three,  
And to the poorè folkès that there dwell  
Say them right thus, as that I shall you tell.

"Tell them, that I Cecile you to them sent  
To showen you the good Urban the old,  
For secret needès, and for good intent;  
And when that you Saint Urban have behold,  
Tell him the wordès which I to you told;  
And when that he hath purgèd you from sin,  
Then shall you see that angel ere you twin.”

Valerian goes on the errand and is promptly converted to Christianity

Valerian is to the placè gone,  
And right as he was taught by his learning,  
He found this holy old Urban anon  
Among the saintès’ burialès loting;  
And he anon withouten tarrying  
Did his message, and when that he it told,  
Urban for joy his handès gan up hold.

The tearès from his eyen let he fall.  
"Almighty Lord, O Jesus Christ,” quod he,  
“Sower of chastè counsel, herd of us all,  
The fruit of thilkè seed of chastity  
That thou hast sown in Cecile, take to thee:  
Lo, like a busy bee withouten guile  
Thee serveth aye thine ownè thrall Cecile.

"For thilkè spousè, that she took but now  
Full like a fierce lion, she sendeth here
As meek as ever was any lamb to you.”

And with that word anon there gan appear
An old man clad in white clothes clear,
That had a book with letters of gold in hand,
And gan before Valerian to stand.

Valerian, as dead, fell down for dread,
When he him saw; and he up hent him tho,
And on his book right thus he gan to read:
“One Lord, one faith, one God withouten mo’,
One Christendom, and father of all also
Aboven all, and over all everywhere.”

These wordes all with gold y-written were.

When this was read, then said this old man:
" 'Lievest thou this thing or no? Say yea or nay.'
"I 'lieve all this thing,” quod Valerian,
"For other thing than this, I dare well say,
Under the heaven no wight thinken may.
Tho’ vanished this old man, he n’ist where,
And Pope Urban him christen’d right there.

Returning to Cecilia, Valerian is promised the crown of martyrdom with her

Valerian goes home, and finds Cecílie
Within his chamber with an angel stand:
This angel had of roses and of lily
Coronés two, the which he bore in hand,
And first to Cécile, as I understand,
He gave that one, and after ’gan he take
That other to Valerian her make.

“And thou, Valerian, for thou so soon
Assentedest to good counsel, also
Say what thee list, and thou shalt have thy boon.”
“I have a brother,” quod Valerian tho,
“That in this world I lovè no man so,
I pray you that my brother may have grace
To know the truth, as I do in this place.”

The angel said: “God liketh thy request,
And bothè with the palm of martyrdom
You shallen come unto His blissful fest. ”
And with that word Tiburce his brother come.
And when that he the savour undernome,
Which that the roses and the lilies cast,
Within his heart he gan to wonder fast,

And said, “I wonder this time of the year
Whence that sweet savour cometh so
Of roses and lilies that I smell here;
For though I had them in mine handès two,
The savour might in me no deeper go:
The sweetè smell, that in mine heart I find,
Hath changèd me all in another kind.”

*Cecilia and Valerian set out to convert Valerian’s brother, Tiburce*

Valerian said: “ Two coronès have we
Snow-white and rosè-red, that shinen clear,
Which that thine eyen have no might to see:
And as thou smellest them through my prayér,
So shalt thou see them, levè brother dear,
If it so be thou wilt withouten sloth
Believe aright, and know the very truth.”

Tiburcè answered: “Sayest thou this to me
In soothness, or in dream I hearken this?”
“In dreamès,” quod Valerian, “have we be
Unto this timè, brother mine, y-wis:
But now at erst in truth our dwelling is.”
“How wost thou this,” quod Tiburce, “in what wise?”
Quod Valerian: “That shall I thee devise.
“The angel of God hath me the truth y-taught,
Which thou shalt see, if that thou wilt reney
The idols, and be clean -- and elsê naught.”

And of the miracle of these coronês tway
Saint Ambrose in his preface list to say;
Solemnêly, this noble doctor dear,¹
Commendeth it, and saith in this manœr:

' The palm of martyrdom for to receive,
Saint Cécily, fulfilled of Godê’s gift,
The world and eke her chamber gan she weive ; ²
Witness Tiburce’s and Valerian’s shrift,
To which God of his bounty wouldê shift
Coronês two, of flowers well smelling,
And made his angel them the crownês bring.

' The maid hath brought these men to bliss above.
The world hath wist what it is worth certâin
Devotion of chastity to love.’
Then showêd him Cecile all open and plain,
That all idols n’is but a thing in vain,
For they be dumb, and thereto they be deaf,
And chargêd him his idols for to leave.

“Whoso that trows not this, a beast he is,”
Quod this Tiburce, “if that I shall not lie.”
And she gan kiss his breast that heardê this,
And was full glad he couldê truth espy:
“This day I takê thee for mine ally,”
Said this blissful fairê maiden dear;
And after that she said as you may hear.

“Lo, right so as the love of Christ,” quod she,
Made me thy brother’s wife, right in that wise
Anon for mine allý here take I thee,
Since that thou wilt thine idols despise.

¹ doctor: Literally, “teacher.” St Ambrose is one of the Doctors of the Church, i.e. one of its most
distinguished theologians.

² “Gave up (gan weive) the world and her (marriage) chamber.”
Go with thy brother now and thee baptize,
And make thee clean, so that thou may behold
The angel’s face, of which thy brother told.”

Tiburce answered, and said: “Brother dear,
First tell me whither I shall, and to what man?”
“To whom?” quod he, “Come forth with good cheer,
I will thee lead unto the pope Urbán.”
“To Urban? brother mine Valerian,”
Quod then Tiburce. “Wilt thou me thither lead?
Methinketh that it were a wonder deed.

“Ne meanest thou not Urban,” quod he tho,
“That is so often damned to be dead,
And wones in halkés alway to and fro,
And dare not oncè putten forth his head?
Men should him burnen in a fire so red
If he were found, or men might him espy,
And we also, to bear him company.

“And while we seeken thilk Divinity,
That is y-hid in heaven privily,
Algate y-burnt in this world should we be!”
To whom Cecílie answered boldly:

“Men mighten dreaden well and skilfully
This life to lose, mine ownè dearè brother,
If this were living only and none other.

“But there is better life in other place,
That never shall be lost, ne dread thee not:
Which God’s Son us toldè through His grace,
That Father’s Son which allè thingès wrought;
And all that wrought is with a skillful thought,
The Ghost that from the Father gan proceed,
Hath soulèd them withouten any dread.¹

¹ This is the mystery of the Trinity, i.e. three persons in one God, which Cecilia tries to explain: in the words of the Nicene Creed: “one lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, born of the Father before all ages ....and the Holy Ghost who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, and together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.”
“By word and by miracle, God’s Son,
When he was in this world, declarèd here,
That there is other life there men may wone.”
To whom answered Tiburce “O sister dear,
Ne saidest thou right now in this manner,
There n’is but one God, Lord in soothfastness,
And now of three how mayst thou bear witness?”

“That shall I tell,” quod she, “ere that I go.
Right as a man hath sapiences three,
Memory, engine, and intellect also,
So in one being of divinity
Three persons may there right well be."
Then gan she him full busily to preach
Of Cristè’s come; and of his painès teach,

And many pointès of his passion;
How Gode’s Son in this world was withhold
To do mankindè plein remissiôn,
That was y-bound in sin and carès cold.
All this thing she unto Tiburce told,
And after this Tiburce in good intent,

With Valerian to pope Urban he went,

Valerian and his brother are baptized by the outlawed Pope Urban, but they are
captured and told to worship idols

That thankèd God, and with glad heart and light
He christened him, and made him in that place
Perfect in his learning and God’s knight.
And after this Tiburce got suchè grace,
That every day he saw in time and space
The angel of God, and every manner boon
That he God askèd, it was sped full soon.

It were full hard by order for to sayn
How many wonders Jesus for them wrought.
But at the last, to tellen short and plain,
The sergeants of the town of Rome them sought,
And them before Almach the prefect brought,
Which them apposed, and knew all their intent,
And to th’ image of Jupiter them sent,
And said: “Whoso will not do sacrifice,
Swap off his head; this is my sentence here.”
Anon these martyrs, that I you devise,
One Maximus, that was an officer
Of the prefect’s, and his corniculer,

Them hent, and when he forth the saintes led,
Himself he wept for pity that he had.

Refusing, they are condemned, but they convert their appointed jailer.
Cecilia encourages them all to accept martyrdom gladly

When Maximus had heard the saintes’ lore,
He got him of the tormentors leave,
And led them to his house withouten more;
And with their preaching, ere that it were eve,
They gonnen from the tormentors to reave,¹
And from Maxime, and from his folk each one
The falsè faith, to trow in God alone.

Cecilia came, when it was waxen night,
With priestes that them christened all yfere ;
And afterward, when day was waxen light,
Cecile them said with a full steadfast cheer:
“Now, Christes owne knightes leve and dear,
Cast all away the workes of darkness,
And armeth you in armes of brightness.

“You have forsooth y-done a great bataille;
Your course is done, your faith have you conserved;
Go to the crown of life that may not fail;
The rightful Judgè, which that you have served,
Shall give it you, as you have it deserved.”
And when this thing was said, as I devise,
Men led them forth to do the sacrifice.

¹ “Before evening they had taken away the false faith from the executioners, and from Maximus and his household.” i.e. they had converted them.
But when they weren to the place y-brought,
To tellen shortly the conclusion,
They n’ould incense nor sacrifice right nought.
But on their knees they setten them adown,
With humble heart and sad devotion,
And losten both their headês in the place;
Their soulês wenten to the King of grace.

This Maximus, that saw this thing betide,
With piteous tearês told it anonright,
That he their soulês saw to heaven glide
With angels, full of clearness and of light;
And with his word converted many a wight.
For which Almachius did him so beat
With whip of lead, till he his life gan lete.

Cecile him took, and buried him anon
By Tiburse and Valerian softly,
Within their burying place, under the stone.
And after this Almachius hastily
Bade his ministers fetchen openly
Cecile, so that she might in his presence
Do sacrifice, and Jupiter incense.

But they, converted at her wisé lore,
Wepten full sore, and gaven full credénce
Unto her word, and criéd more and more,
“Christ, Godë’s Son, withouten difference,
Is very God, this is all our senténce,
That hath so good a servant him to serve:
Thus with one voice we trowen though we starve.”

Cecilia is now arrested and ordered to sacrifice to the gods.
She contradicts and taunts her judge

Almachius that heard of this doing,
Bade fetch Cecilie, that he might her see:
And alderfirst, lo, this was his asking;
“What manner woman art thou?” then quod he.
“I am a gentlewoman born,”quod she.
“I askè thee,” quod he, “though it thee grieve,
Of thy religion and of thy belief."

"You have begun your question foolishly," foolishly
Quod she, "that woulde two answeres conclude
In one demand. You asken lewedly." ignorantly
Ahmachius answered to that similitude:
"Of whencè comes thine answering so rude?"
"Of whence?" quod she when that she was frained,
"Of conscience, and of good faith unfeigned."

Almachius said, "Ne takest thou no heed
Of my power?" and she him answered this:
"Your might," quod she, "full little is to dread;
For every mortal mannès power n'is
But like a bladder full of wind y-wis;
indeed
For with a needle’s point, when it is blow,
May all the boast of it be laid full low."

"Full wrongfully begun thou," quod he,
"And yet in wrong is thy perseverance:
Wost thou not how our mighty princes free
Have thus commanded and made ordinance,
That every Christian wight shall have penance
But if that he his Christendom withsay,
And go all quit, if he will it reney?"

"Your princes erren, as your nobley doth,"
mad s.
Quod then Cecile, "and with a wood sentence
You make us guilty, and it is not sooth;
For you that known well our innocence,
Forasmuch as we do a reverence
To Christ, and for we bear a Christian name,
You put on us a crime and eke a blame.

"But we that known thilke namè so
For virtuous, we may it not withsay."
To be v. / deny
Almach answered: "Choose one of these two:
renounce
Do sacrifice, or Christendom reney,
That thou may now escapen by that way."

At which this holy blissful fairè maid
Gan for to laugh, and to the judge said:
“O judge, confusèd in thy nicety,
Wouldst thou that I reneyè innocence
To maken me a wicked wight?” quod she,
“Lo, he dissembles here in audience,”
He stares and woodeth in his ádverténce.”
To whom Almachius said: “Unsely wretch,
Ne wost thou not how far my might may stretch?

470 “Have not our mighty princes to me given
Yea, bothè power and eke authority
To maken folk to dien or to liven
Why speakest thou so proudly then to me?”
“I ne speak not but steadfastly,” quod she,
Not proudly, for I say, as for my side,
We haten thilkè deadly vice of pride.

480 “And if thou dreadè not a sooth to hear,
Then will I show all openly by right,
That thou hast made a full great lesing here.
Thou sayst thy princes have thee given might
Both for to slay and for to quick a wight,
Thou that ne mayst but only life bereave,
Thou hast no other power ne no leave.

“But thou mayst say, thy princes have thee maked
Minister of death; for if thou speak of mo’,
Thou liest; for thy power is full naked.”
“Do way thy boldness,” said Almachius tho,
“And sacrifice to our gods, ere thou go.
I reckè not what wrong that thou me proffer,

490 For I can suffer it as a philóspher.

“But thilkè wrongès may I not endure,
That thou speakst of our goddès here,” quod he.
Cecilia answered, “Nicè créâtúre,

It would seem that Cecilia is taunting him to the onlookers for his attempt at being lenient. He appears to be saying “Just do the sacrifice (whether you believe in it or not) or deny Christianity (your denial will only be words) and so you will escape punishment.” He is pretendeding to enforce the law publicly (in audience), but helping her to find a way around it. This and the following are apparently what she means by “dissembles.” He is a foolish judge, she says, to try to turn a good person into a wicked one, to turn one who honors the true God into one who sacrifices to the false gods. Tactful Cecilia is not.
Thou saidest no word since thou spoke to me,
That I ne knew therewith thy nicety,
And that thou wert in every manner wise
A lewèd officer, and a vain justice.

* Cecilia mocks his stone idols *

“There lacketh nothing to thine outer eye
That thou n’art blind; for thing that we see all
That is a stone, that men may well espy,
That ilkè stone a god thou wilt it call.
I rede thee let thine hand upon it fall,
And taste it well, and stone thou shalt it find,
Since that thou seest not with thine eyen blind.

“It is a shamè that the people shall
So scornen thee, and laugh at thy folly;
For commonly men wot it well over all
That mighty God is in his heavens high;
And these imáges, well mayst thou espy,
To thee nor to themselven may not profit,
For in effect they be not worth a mite.”

* She is condemned *

These and such other wordès saidè she,
And he waxed wroth, and bade men should her lead
Home to her house, “And in her house,” quod he,
Burn her right in a bath with flamès red.”
And as he bade, right so was done the deed;
For in a bath they gan her fastè shut,
And night and day great fire they under bett.

The longè night, and eke a day also,
For all the fire, and eke the bathè’s heat,
She sat all cold, and felt of it no woe,
It made her not a droppè for to sweat.
But in that bath her life she mustè let.
For he, Almachius, with full wicked intent,
To slay her in the bath his sondè sent.
A botched execution

Three strokés in the neck he smote her tho
The tormentor, but for no manner chance
He might not smitē all her neck a-two:
And for there was that time an ordinance
That no man shouldē do man such penānce, 2
The fourth stroke to smiten, soft or sore,
This tormentor ne durstē do no more.

But half dead, with her neck y-carven there
He left her lie, and on his way is went.
The Christian folk, which that about her were,
With sheetēs have the blood full fair y-hent:
Three dayēs livēd she in this tormēnt,
And never ceasēd them the faith to teach,
That she had fostered. Them, she gan to preach,

And them she gave her moebles and her things,
And to the Pope Urban betook them tho,
And said: “I asked this of heaven’s King,
To havē respite three days and no mo’,
To recommend to you, ere that I go,
These soulēs, lo, and that I might do work
Here of mine house perpetually a church.”3

She is buried, and her house is turned into a church

Saint Urban with his deacons privily
The body fetched, and buried it by night
Among his other saintēs honestly.
Her house the church of Saint Cecilia hight;
Saint Urban hallowed it, as he well might,
In which unto this day in noble wise
Men do to Christ and to his saint service.

1 The executioner, no matter how hard he tried, could not completely cut off her head even with three strokes.

2 There was a law that said that nobody should be punished with more than three strokes, even a small fourth one.

3 She wants a church to be built on the site of her house, or wants her house turned into a church for ever.