

An ABC

(La priere de Nostre Dame)

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Marian poem in Middle English

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This poem has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference also to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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An ABC

Geoffrey Chaucer

a fourteenth century Marian poem in Middle English, translated by Chaucer from a French poem by Guillaume de Deguilleville

Almighty and al merciable quene · To whom that al this world fleeth for socour · To have relees of sinne, sorwe and tene · Glorious virgine, of alle floures flour – Almighty and all merciful queen, whom the entire world runs to for comfort and the release from sin, sorrow and pain, Oh glorious virgin, flower of all flowers, bastion of strength and beauty, to you I flee in confusion and error. Please help and relieve me, Oh gentle and mighty one, and have mercy on my exhaustion and uncertainty, for my cruel adversary has overcome me.

Bounty has so firmly planted his home inside your heart that I know you won't refuse anyone who asks you for assistance with sincerity, and that you will help me, for your heart is always so generous that you are overflowing with goodwill. You are a haven of peace and refuge, of quiet and of rest. See how seven criminals pursue me! Help me, shining lady, before my ship founders!



Comfort is there none in any but you, dear lady. For Lo! my sin and my confusion – which it would be impolite to bring into your sight – have caused desperate charges to be brought against me, the truth of which might well justify the view that I deserve to be damned, were it not for your mercy, Oh blissful Queen of Heaven.

Doubt is there none, Oh queen of pity, that you are the fountainhead of mercy and of grace. God promised to be in harmony with us through you; for certainly, Oh blissful mother of God, were the bow now bent as it was in days of old, regarding justice and anger, then the rightful God would not hear of any mercy. But through you, we have the grace that we desire.

Ever since I can remember, you have been my hope of mercy, and in the past, on many occasions and in many ways, you have granted me that mercy. But please,

An ABC is one of Chaucer's early works and is a close translation of a French Marian poem by Guillaume de Deguilleville that was relatively new when Chaucer translated it. He may have been commissioned to write it, or it may have been a literary experiment, or he may have viewed it as a work of piety that would be good for his career, if not his soul, but it is interesting to note that the 'high tower of Paradise' may prefigure the high tower of beryl that he conjures into existence in the House of Fame, which houses a female deity.

The text here is identical to a Middle English version compiled by Walter W Skeat from Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.30, corrected by reference to seven other manuscript copies.

lady, let there be mercy on the Day of Judgement when we come before the High Justice. For without your correction now, the good fruits that are found in me may be so few and so small that their paucity will be my undoing.

Fleeing, I run for shelter into your tent. There I will hide from the tempest outside and I implore you not to leave me all alone, although I am wicked. Oh help me in my need! Although I may have acted like a beast, in thought and in action, yet lady, please clothe me with your grace. Your enemy and mine (lady, take heed) seems intent upon pursuing me to the grave.

Glorious maiden and mother, never bitter in any way but always full of sweetness and mercy, help me so that my father is not angry with me. Speak to him on my behalf, for I am too afraid to face him alone. I have done such things on Earth – alas! – that, certainly, he will send my spirit to the stench of eternal damnation unless you can help me.



He decided – please remind him – of his own free will to become a man, in order to have kinship with us, and with his precious blood he sealed this covenant upon the cross, as a sign of his forgiveness to every sinner who truly believes. Therefore, shining lady, please pray for us, then his anger will calm, through the efforts of both of you, and cause our enemy to lose grasp of his prey.

I know well that you will bring comfort and relief, you are so full of generosity. For when a soul falls into error, your pity reaches out and guides them back into health once again, then you reconcile them with their sovereign and lead them out of the crooked street. So the person who loves you will not love you in vain, he will find this fact to be as certain as death itself.

Knight or knave, all who are enlightened with your dazzling name shine like illuminated manuscripts, and whoever approaches you correctly has no fear that his soul shall remain harmed. So, queen of comfort, since it is from you that I seek my medicine and my healing, please don't let my mortal enemy make my wound any worse. I put my recovery wholly into your hands.

Lady, I cannot presume to be able to imagine the grief that you felt as you knelt beneath the cross, or the suffering of your son, but for the agony that you both endured for my sake, please don't allow our common enemy boastfully and joyfully to send to eternal perdition one of those for whom you suffered so much. As I said before – Oh very core of our being! – please continue to cast upon us the benevolent gaze of your clear and piteous eyes!

Moses, who saw the bush burning with red flames, although not a single stick was being consumed, witnessed a sign of your unblemished virginity. You are the

bush upon which descended the Holy Ghost, which Moses believed to be on fire but which was meant as a metaphor. Please, lady, defend us from the fires of hell that shall last for eternity!

Noble princess, unequalled as you are, and have been for all time, certainly, any comfort we may have comes only from you, Oh Christ's dear mother. We have no other melody to delight in nor to comfort us in our adversity, and no other champion who will dare to be our advocate, or to help us for so small a price as only one or two *Ave-Marias*!



Oh you are the true light given to eyes that are blind, the true hope given to those who are exhausted and in distress, you are the treasurer of all mankind's wealth, and through your humility, God chose you to be his mother. From a lowly servant he made you the mistress of heaven and Earth, to be our representative and our protector, and this world has grown to rely and depend upon your goodness for you never fail anyone who is in need.

Previously, I had been moved to wonder why the Holy Ghost sought you out, when you heard Gabriel's voice in your ear. But I know that the Holy Trinity did this, not for our discomfort but to save us, we whom he subsequently bought with his blood so that we should need no other weapon, but only to do penance and to ask for mercy, and to receive it.

Queen of comfort, when I reflect that I have offended you both, and that my soul deserves to sink into the pit of hell: Alas! I, wretch! Where can I run to? Who will mediate with your son on my behalf? Who but you yourself, the very fountainhead of pity? You have more compassion for our predicament than it is possible for a human tongue to express.

Restore me, mother, therefore, and correct me; for certainly, I dare not face my father's chastisement in any way at all, so hideous is his truthful reckoning. Mother, from whom all mercy springs, be my judge and a physician to my soul, for you always have an abundance of mercy to those who ask you for it.

Such is the case that God grants no forgiveness on his own: God, through his goodness, forgives nobody unless you forgive them as well, for he has appointed you to be his representative and mistress of all the Earth, and he has made you governess of heaven. He subordinates his justice to your will. In the sight of everybody he has given you this royal crown.

Temple of great holiness, where people who falsely believe are debarred and where God truly resides, I bring to you my penitent soul. Please receive me. I can flee no further. Oh Queen of Heaven, I am so wounded by the poisonous thorns which the

Earth was cursed with so long ago that I am almost lost. It hurts so badly, as you can see.

Virgin, noble and immaculate, you who lead us into the high tower of Paradise, advise me how I can best win your favour and your grace, despite having dwelt in filth and in error. Lady, guide me to the court that is your bench – Oh lovely bloom! – where mercy is ever present.

Xristus, your son, came into this world in order to suffer his crucifixion and so that Longinus could pierce his side and cause his heart's blood to pour out, and all this was for my salvation. But I am untrue to him and unfaithful. Yet he will not bring about my damnation and this is thanks to you, Oh relief to all mankind!

You are always our shield from vengeance. Isaac's death was a premonition and a prefiguration of Christ's, for he was so wholly obedient to his father that he was prepared to give up his life when asked to do so, just as your son was willing to go to his death, like a lamb. Lady, therefore, so full of mercy, I ask, since he gave of his mercy so generously, that you don't, yourself, be scant in this regard.

Zachariah calls you the fountain that washes sinful souls of their impurity, and I would say that, were it not for your tender heart, we should all be destroyed. Therefore, lady, since you are prepared to be merciful to the descendants of Adam, please bring us at last to that palace that is built for those penitents who have been able to receive your mercy.

Amen.