Constance.

KING JOHN, ACT 3, SC. I.

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CONSTANCE.

Constance, daughter and heiress of Conan IV., Duke of Bretagne, was the widow of Geffrey, son of Henry II. of England, and mother of Arthur, his heir. John, the younger brother of Geffrey, having usurped the English throne, Philip of France demanded its restoration to the rightful king—the young Duke of Bretagne; and held himself in readiness to maintain the boy's claim with force of arms.

To chastise this insolent interference with his self-constituted authority, King John invaded France with a large army. At first he was valiantly repulsed by the French and Austrian troops; but, after several indecisive battles, Philip forgot his royal promise to Constance, to defend the rights of her son, and yielded to the strong temptation of selfish interests. He concluded a peace with King John, by receiving in marriage for his son Louis, the Dauphin, Blanche of Castile, a princess of rare perfections, and niece of King John, who dowered her with the very territories that Philip had demanded for Arthur.

But in the midst of the wedding feasts came a "holy legate of the Pope," commanding Philip, on pain of excommunication, to break his alliance with a king who had flouted the authority of the

Church, and set her dignitaries at defiance, and again to take up arms against him—this time, in her name. Philip dared not disobey; but in obeying he lost every thing. Arthur was taken prisoner and carried to England, leaving his wretched mother so distraught with grief and disappointment that she "died in a frenzy" shortly after; the royal child himself, having, through the humanity of his jailer, escaped an assassination planned by his cruel uncle, met his death, accidentally, in attempting to escape from prison.

Louis, the Dauphin, invaded England, and set up a claim to the throne in the name of his wife; but his expedition was unsuccessful. King John dying, poisoned, his son ascended the throne as Henry III.

Constance of Bretagne exists to our sympathy only in her maternal relation; in her affection for her son, Arthur, all other emotions are swallowed up; in him are concentred all her ambitions, hopes, desires; so it is not surprising that we forget the heiress of a sovereign duchy, and her strictly personal misfortunes—which, alone, should suffice to invest her with peculiar interest—to bestow our pity upon the mother of a fair young prince, despoiled of his birthright, and betrayed by those who had promised to befriend him.

Her dramatic situation—"the mother-eagle wounded, and bleeding to death, yet stretched over her young in the attitude of defiance"—may be, critically considered, unsurpassed in sublimity; but its painfulness is too unmitigated to constitute it a source of pleasure to even the most stoical reader.

The spectacle of an utterly helpless being—weak and defenceless only by reason of her sex; with no weapon but words, "full

of sound and fury," availing nothing; perfectly conscious of her impotency, yet resisting desperately to the last—oppresses the mind with something of its own overwhelming weight of forlornness. The only forms of sorrow to be pleasurably contemplated in woman are pious resignation and heroic fortitude; the violent passion of grief, as "torn to tatters" in the person of Constance, defeats itself; the mental exhaustion consequent upon the effort to follow it, is exactly similar to the physical prostration it produces in its victim.

The maternal love of Constance, as a dramatic effect, is very beautiful; but it partakes too much of sentiment, too little of pure instinct, to command our undivided admiration; we feel, as she did, that it depends for its devotion, in great measure, on her son's poetic attributes, of beauty, high birth, and princely presence—not, as it should, on the simple, all-sufficing *because*—because he is the fruit of her womb. The following speech to the boy-prince illustrates our meaning, and has left its impress of unloveliness on our high ideal of Constance; a mother after our own heart could never have found it in hers to give utterance to such a libel on the only love which is indifferent to physical, moral, or mental perfections in its object:

Arth. I do beseech you, madam, be content.
Const. If thou, that bid'st me be content, were grim,
Ugly, and sland'rous to thy mother's womb,
Full of unpleasing blots and sightless stains,
Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
Patch'd with foul moles and eye-offending marks—
I would not care, I then would be content;
For then I should not love thee; no, nor thou
Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.
But thou art fair; and at thy birth, dear boy,
Nature and fortune joined to make thee great:
Of nature's gifts thou may'st with lilies boast,

And with the half-blown rose. But fortune, O!
She is corrupted, chang'd, and won from thee;
She adulterates hourly with thine uncle John;
And with her golden hand hath pluck'd on France
To tread down fair respect of sovereignty.

Constance is distinguished by her imagination, the natural vivacity of which is intensified by suffering till it assumes an almost morbid predominance over every other faculty; this exaggerates even her desperate sorrows, and colors every event with its extravagance—hyperbole is its natural language, and frenzy its legitimate realm. Her eloquence is the declamation of exalted passion, which can scarce find images grand enough to express its concentrated vehemence; of this we have a fine example in her refusal to obey the summons of the kings, after their ignoble treaty has betrayed her rights:

Sal. Pardon me, madam—
I may not go without you to the kings.
Const. Thou may'st, thou shalt, I will not go with thee.
I will instruct my sorrows to be proud;
For grief is proud, and makes his owner stout.
To me, and to the state of my great grief,
Let kings assemble; for my grief's so great
That no supporter but the huge firm earth
Can hold it up: here I and Sorrow sit;
Here is my throne—bid kings come bow to it.

And again, in her interview with their perjured majesties, when they do, indeed, come to her:

K. Phi. By heaven, lady! you shall have no cause
To curse the fair proceedings of this day;
Have I not pawn'd to you my majesty?
Const. You have beguil'd me with a counterfeit,
Resembling majesty—which, being touch'd, and tried,

Proves valueless. You are forsworn, forsworn:
You came in arms to spill mine enemies' blood,
But now, in arms, you strengthen it with yours;
The grappling vigor and rough frown of war
Is cold in amity and painted peace;
And our oppression hath made up this league:—
Arm, arm, you heavens, against these perjured kings!
A widow cries; be husband to me, heavens!
Let not the hours of this ungodly day
Wear out the day in peace; but, ere sunset,
Set armed discord 'twixt these perjur'd kings!
Hear me, O, hear me!
Aust. Lady Constance, peace!
Const. War! war! no peace! peace is to me a war.
O Lymoges! O Austria! thou dost shame
That bloody spoil! Thou slave, thou wretch, thou coward!
Thou little valiant, great in villainy!
Thou ever strong upon the stronger side!
Thou fortune's champion, that dost never fight
But when her humorous ladyship is by
To teach thee safety! thou art perjur'd too,
And sooth'st up greatness. What a fool art thou,
A ramping fool—to brag, and stamp, and swear,
Upon my party! Thou cold-blooded slave,
Hast thou not spoke like thunder on my side?
Been sworn my soldier—bidding me depend
Upon thy stars, thy fortune, and thy strength?
And dost thou now fall over to my foes?
Thou wear a lion's hide! doff it for shame,
And hang a calf's skin on those recreant limbs.

This last speech, to Austria, is a glory of rage, contempt, and sarcasm; we can almost see the archduke of fair promises "hiding his diminished head" from the swelling storm.

There is something in the bewildered, helpless despair of Constance that reminds us of Lear; yet her frenzy is that of a mind distraught, not overthrown—she, herself, draws a fine distinction between the two mental conditions:

Thou art not holy to belie me so;
I am not mad: this hair I tear is mine;
My name is Constance; I was Geffrey's wife;
Young Arthur is my son, and he is lost:
I am not mad;—I would to heaven I were!
For then 'tis like I should forget myself;
O, if I could, what grief should I forget!—
Preach some philosophy to make me mad,
And thou shalt be canoniz'd, cardinal;
For, being not mad, but sensible of grief,
My reasonable part produces reason
How I may be deliver'd of these woes,
And teaches me to kill or hang myself;
If I were mad, I should forget my son,
Or madly think a babe of clouts were he:
I am not mad; too well, too well I feel
The different plague of each calamity.

But it is not in wild ravings, bitter taunts, lofty invocations, or logical arguments, that the eloquence of this unhappy duchess lives in our memory; let us rather turn to those simple, natural strains of pathos in which she bewails her lost child—that universal language which goes straight to the heart of the bereaved mother, whether in hut or palace, and is understood alike by both, by both alike repeated.

The "holy legate" admonishes her for so immoderately indulging her sorrow:

Const. He talks to me, that never had a son.
K. Phi. You are as fond of grief as of your child.
Const. Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then have I reason to be fond of Grief.
Fare you well: had you such a loss as I,
I could give better comfort than you do.—

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And father cardinal, I have heard you say
That we shall see and know our friends in heaven:
If that be true, I shall see my boy again;
For, since the birth of Cain, the first male child,
To him that did but yesterday suspire,
There was not such a gracious creature born.
But now will canker sorrow eat my bud,
And chase the native beauty from his cheek,
And he will look as hollow as a ghost,
As dim and meagre as an ague's fit;
And so he'll die; and, rising so again,
When I shall meet him in the court of heaven
I shall not know him: therefore never, never
Must I behold my pretty Arthur more.
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O lord! my boy, my Arthur, my fair son!
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!
My widow-comfort, and my sorrows' cure!