



Prologue to a Tale

And turnen substaunce into accident

Watch me. It have no such thing as solid ground. The earth is riddled with oil and guano and dead bones, enriched through rot and scoured away by wind or water. This book, though, *this* book rests on bedrock. At the mercy of the subcommittee as I am, I admit what follows is a story and not a treatise, but it came first hand from those concerned. I too was connected indirectly though crucially – even though the thought of using first person sets off all sorts of bells jangling in my head.

That said, I adopt as objective a stance as I can. To say these matters came to concern me closely is not to say I was there at all the critical moments. I pass on what I heard, and errors that slip through are not, strictly speaking, my own. Also, as an academic (apart from a teller of tales), I can't let slip the chance for critical comment, so at this point, readers uninterested in scholarly observation should skip to chapter 1.

But I'll be brief. What concerns me most is plot, but since some people of letters nowadays look down on suspense, I'm prepared to tell you from the outset: It ended, according to a more prominent scholar than I, in catastrophe. Nothing melodramatic about that to my mind, however snootily modern critics wave plot aside. True, accident plays a part in plot, but accidents happen every day, some set in motion millennia before, and

others we stubbornly bring on ourselves – now and then along the dimensions of a visitation (which suggests there are no accidents but only mortal error).

Accident, curiously enough, is what accomplished storytellers centuries ago might have called the sort of cataclysm that lies ahead – *accident*, as distinct from *substance*. Substance was not what you felt firm to the touch; it was an intangible reality beyond our faulty senses. And the material world? Only a trick of physical sensation that made the slippery ooze seem solid: *accident* – the stuff of fabliau or of farce. The fact that we divine substance only through accident is what prompts the “moral” tale I feel called on to relate.