

THE LEGEND OF

Good Women

BY GEOFFREY CHAUCER

TRANSLATED BY ANN McMILLAN

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations / vii

Preface / ix

PART I. *Introduction / i*

Notes / 56

PART II. *The Legend of Good Women / 63*

Prologue / 65

The Legend of Cleopatra / 82

The Legend of Thisbe / 87

The Legend of Dido / 94

The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea / 108

The Legend of Lucrece / 120

The Legend of Ariadne / 127

The Legend of Philomela / 138

The Legend of Phyllis / 143

The Legend of Hypermnestra / 149

Notes / 155

Suggestions for Further Reading / 163

Index / 175

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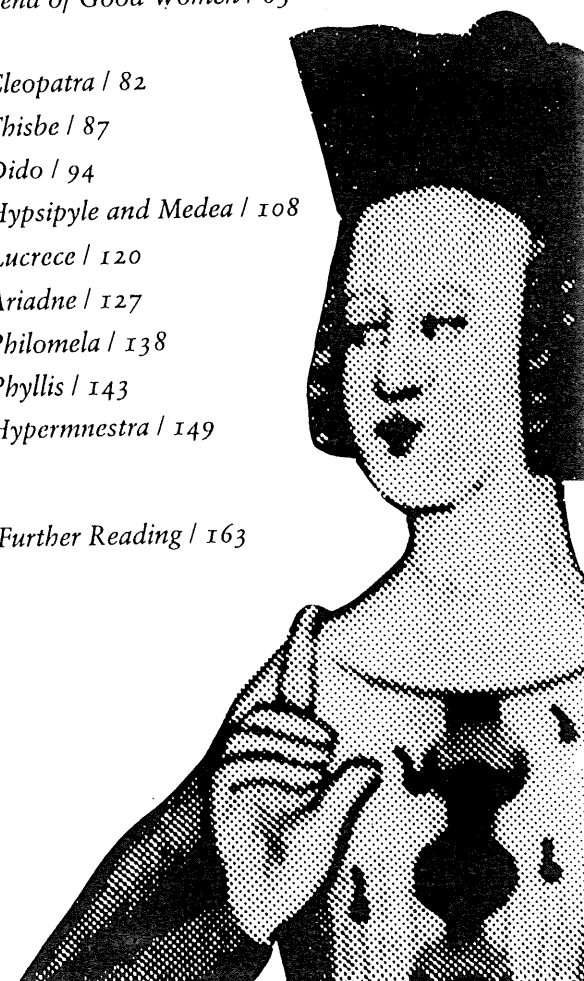
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PROLOGUE¹

More than a thousand times I've heard men tell
 That there is joy in heaven and pain in hell,
 And gladly I agree that it is so;
 Nevertheless, this much I also know:
 That none of those who in this country dwell
 Has been himself to either heaven or hell
 Or knows of it in any other way
 Than reading books or hearing what men say.
 Nobody can come back to testify.
 But God forbid that people should deny
 The truth of what they have not seen befall.
 Even Bernard the monk³ did not see all!
 Nor should men rush to call a thing deceit
 Because they may have happened not to see it.
 If they themselves have failed to see or do
 A thing, that doesn't mean it isn't true.

So we must go to old books that we find
 Through which past incidents are kept in mind;
 And to wise ancients we should pay heed now
 (At least as far as reason will allow)
 Who tell authoritative histories
 Of saints, of kingdoms, and of victories,
 Of love, of hate—so many things, I fear,
 I must refrain from mentioning them here.
 For if old books should ever cease to be,
 With them we'd lose the key to memory.
 To old books we must give the credit due—
 Where there's no other proof, let's think them true.

And as for me, though what I know is slight,
 Perusing these old books is my delight;
 I give them faith, and trust, and reverence
 So heartily, nothing can pull me thence—
 No game can ever part my books and me
 (Save Sundays⁴—even then, infrequently).

But one exception is the month of May;
 Its coming is a special holiday.
 When once again I hear the birds all sing,
 And all the kinds of flowers start to spring,
 Farewell my book, farewell my dedication!
 And then I have a special inclination:
 Of all the flowers blooming in the field,
 To flowers red and white most love I yield—
 Daisies, as they are called by people here—
 This kind I hold particularly dear.

- 45-65) So, as I said before, when it is May,
 I'm not still in my bed at break of day,
 But up and walking as the sun grows bright
 To see its petals open to the light
 As it awakens in the early mornings.
 That blissful vision softens all my sorrows. x
 So I am glad, whenever I am near it,
 To do all that I can do to revere it,
For she is, as it were, the flower of flowers,
 And filled with virtuous and noble powers,
 And ever the same is fair, and fresh of hue,
 And ever the same I love it, old as new,
 And always will, until my heart shall die.
 Although I do not swear, I will not lie;
No hotter love was felt by anyone:
 And when the evening starts to fall, I run, x
 Just as the sun is sinking in the west,
 To see this flower as it goes to rest,
 For she hates darkness, and she fears the night,
 And lifts her full face only to the light. x
 When sun is shining, then she will uncloze.

- 46-96) Alas, I have no English, rhyme or prose,
 That's good enough to praise this flower well.
 But you with skill and cunning, help me tell—
You lovers, who can write of tender feeling,
 Help me, it is to you I am appealing;
 To aid my work you should be diligent.

Description of virtues
 of the flower, left out
 in prologue G.

Flower's fear of
 night, not in G.

No English to
 describe her
 Asks lovers for
 help.

Because you know my efforts are well-meant,
 You ought to help me somewhat in this art,
 Whether with leaf or flower^s you take part. x
 Of poetry you've harvested the best
 Of all the grain, and I pick up the rest.
 I'm lucky if I find an ear that's sound
Of words that you have let fall to the ground.
 And if I might reuse a verse or two
Of some song that was first composed by you,
 Be patient, for you know that I mean well,
 And wish to honor love by what I tell.

This flower, too, I serve as best I might. x
She is the only true and shining light,
 That steers me rightly in this dark world here.
 You hold the heart within my breast with fear,
 With love; and with such power it is done
 That you have all myself, and I have none.
 My word, my work, is knit so in your band
 That as we see the harp obey the hand
 Which makes it sound with careful fingering,
 Just in this way, out of my heart you bring
 A voice, just as you choose, to laugh or sigh;
 Be you my guide and lady, till I die!
 And to you as a god on earth I call,
 Both in this work and in my sorrows all. x

How the flr
 guides her
 and inspir
 not in G.

But to the cause I speak of—the promotion
 Of credence in old books, and of devotion,
And the belief that faith should supplement
What senses and experience present—
 That I shall speak of, when I see my time; x
 I cannot put it all at once in rhyme.
 My busy spirit, thirsting always new
 To see this flower, young and fresh of hue,
 Compelled me with so burning a desire
 That even now I still can feel the fire
 That made me rise, before it yet was day—
 This was the morning of the first of May—

My heart combining awe and glad affection—
 To be a witness to the resurrection
 Of this my flower, as it would uncloset
 Its petals to the sun, as red as rose,
 That in the breast was of the beast,⁶ that day,
 That bore Agenor's daughter far away.⁷
 And down upon my knees I went before it
 And greeted this fresh flower, to adore it;
 Till it had opened, I remained there kneeling
 On grasses sweet to smell, and soft to feeling,
 Embroidered all about with flowers sweet,
 Of such sweetness and fragrance all complete
 That there is none among the herbs and trees
 But by comparison would fail to please.
 For its perfume surpasses all the rest,
 And above all its beauty is the best.

25-170) The Earth had now forgotten its poor life
 In winter, that wields coldness like a knife
 And leaves the naked world exposed to grief,
 Now that the kinder sun had brought relief
 And all that had been bare was newly clad.
 The small birds, which are in this season glad
 For their escape from nets and traps of men
 Think in despite to pay them back again
 For causing fear and loss among their kind.
 And thus they have defiance most in mind—
 To sing against the fowler's treachery,
 The churlish wretch that, with his sophistry
 And selfishness, would gladly have them die.
 This was their song: "The fowler we defy
 And all his craft." And some of them sang clear
 Verses of love, that were a joy to hear,
 In honor of their mates, and in their praise;
 And for the joy of blissful summer days,
 On branches full of blossoms soft as feather
 In their delight each couple came together
 And sang, "A blessing on Saint Valentine,"⁸

For on this day I choose you to be mine,
 And never shall repent the choice, my sweet!"

And with these words their beaks began to meet
 Yielding the honor and obeisance due
 To love—they did their other duties too,
 All that pertains to love and nature free;
 Think what you please, you get no more of me. x
 And those of them who'd lapsed in their devotions,
 As does the tidy,⁹ with newfangled notions,
 Begged mercy of their mates for doing wrong,
 And humbly pledged repentance in their song,
 And swore on blossoms they would sin no more
 If their old mates would take them as before.
 And at the last they came to one accord.
 At first, they found Reluctance to be lord;
 But Pity, through his strong and gentle might,
 Forgave, enforcing Mercy over Right,
 Through Innocence and Graceful Manners' rules.
 Not that their innocence was that of fools,
 Their pity false; the mean is virtue's source,
 As *Ethics*¹⁰ says; this kind I mean, of course.¹¹
 And thus these birds, free of maliciousness,
 Agreed to love, and leave off viciousness,
 And all began to sing of one accord,
 "Welcome to summer, governor and lord!"

Lovers who
 promise not
 sin.

Zephyr and Flora,¹² with their gentle powers
 And tender might, breathed out upon the flowers
 Their breath, that sweetly urges them to swell,
 The god and goddess of the flowery dell
 In which I thought I might, day after day,
 Dwell always, through the lovely month of May,
 Forgetting sleep, forgoing meat and drink.
 Gently, I let myself begin to sink
 Down on my elbow, lying on the grass,
 My mind made up to let the whole day pass
 While I (and this is no exaggeration)

Gave to the daisy all my concentration,
Which with good reason has from men the name
"Daisy" or "Eye of Day" (they mean the same).¹³
Empress and flower of all flowers is she;
I pray that she may have prosperity,
And for her sake all flower-lovers thrive.
Nevertheless, do not think that I strive
To praise the flower and oppose the leaf,¹⁴
Or praise the corn and denigrate the sheaf.
I favor neither in their competition,
And neither furthers me in my ambition.
Who serves on either side I could not tell,
But hope their services reward them well.
For what I tell of has an older date,
Before their parties had begun debate. x

225) At evening, when the sun sank in the west,
And when this flower folded for her rest
Because she dreads the darkness of the night,
I hastened home as quickly as I might
To sleep, and get up early as before,
To see this flower opening once more.
And in an arbor I have planted there,
With fresh-cut turfs arranged as benches fair,
I had my men make up a couch for me;
To celebrate the season's gaiety,
I told them to strew flowers on the bed;
And I lay down, and covered up my head.

I fell asleep there, in about two hours,
And dreamed about the meadow full of flowers;
It seemed that I was lying as before
Watching this flower that I so adore,
When, looking up, I saw from far away,
Yet coming toward the place in which I lay,
The God of Love, and on his arm a queen,
And she was wearing royal robes of green.
She wore upon her hair a golden net,
And over that a crown of white was set,

The narrator
is fully
concentrated on
the flower.
Not in G.

in another place
in G.

With tiny petals that, for all the world,
Looked like a daisy when it is unfurled—
For as a daisy is with petals crowned,
Just so these little flowers clustered round.
One pearl made up this crown, without division,
So that she seemed a daisy to my vision,
The net of gold forming the flower's core.

Of silk were the rich clothes that Cupid wore,
Embroidered in a green and red design
Where sprays of leaves and roses intertwined,
The freshest since the world was first begun.
To crown his golden hair he wore a sun,
Much lighter and more delicate than wire.
It seemed to me his face shone like a fire,
And I could scarcely look, it was so bright.
But what I could make out was worth the sight:
He held a pair of arrows, ember-red;
His wings, like angels', on each side were spread.
And even though men say he cannot see,
Nevertheless it seemed he looked at me;
The look he cast on me was so severe
That I could feel my heart grow cold with fear.
And by the hand he held this noble queen,
Crowned all in gold and white, and dressed in green,
So womanly, so pleasant, and so meek
That in this world, however far men seek,
They will not come on beauty half so rare
In any creature living anywhere.
And thus I now may say, most fittingly, x
This song in praise of her nobility:

Balade¹⁵

Hide, Absalom, thy hair of golden sheen;
Esther, let all thy meekness fall from thee;
Hide, Jonathan, thine amiable mien;
Cato's wife Marcia, and Penelope,

Do not compare your wifely dignity.
 Hide, Helen and Isolde, your beauties fine;
 — My lady comes, who may all these outshine.

Thy lovely body, let it not appear,
 Lavinia; Lucrece, whom Romans claim,
 Polyxena, who paid for love so dear,
 And Cleopatra, with your passion's flame,
 Hide you your faithful love and honored name;
 And Thisbe, to whom love was so malign;
 My lady comes, who may all these outshine.

Hero, Laodamia, Dido, hush;
 Phyllis, who for Demophoön did die;
 And Canace, marked by a guilty blush;¹⁶
 Hypsipyle, by Jason left to cry;
 Your faithfulness you must not praise so high;
 Adrian, Hypermnestra, stand in line;
 My lady comes, who may all these outshine.

10-281) My lady, of all ladies on the earth,
Deserves well this balade to praise her worth;
 The other ladies mentioned are not fit
 To stand comparison; no, not a bit.
 For as the sunlight makes the firelight pall,
 My sovereign lady's worth surpasses all,
 She is so good, so fair, so welcoming;
 May God watch over her in everything.
 For, had she not been near to comfort me,
 I would have died there, almost certainly,
 For fear of Cupid's words and frightful glance,
 As I will tell you when I have the chance.

2-307) Behind the God of Love, upon the green,
 Came other ladies numbering nineteen,
 Royally dressed, with gentle steps and slow.
 After them came more women, row on row,
 So many that it startled me to credit
 (I would not have believed someone who said it)
 That even a third of all that congregation

*Explains how this
 ballad is meant to
 show how this
 lady is superior to
 all. Not in G.*

Had ever lived on earth since the Creation
 Of Adam by almighty God above—
 And every one of them was true in love.
 Now whether this was wondrous, you tell me.
 Just at the moment when they first could see
 This flower called the daisy, with one motion
 They stopped, and knelt before it in devotion,
 And sang as with one voice, "Honor to thee,
Our daisy, symbol of fidelity
In women, worthy of the highest praise!
Of this her white crown is the proof always."
 And with these words, each lady moved with grace
 To sit; they formed a circle in the place.
 First sat the God of Love, and then his queen,
 She who was crowned in white, and dressed in green;
 The others followed suit then and, politely
 And in their proper order, sat down lightly.
 And not a word was spoken for a while—
 About the time it takes to walk a mile.

I, kneeling by this flower, innocent,
 Waited to find out what these people meant,
 Keeping as still as stone; then, finally,
 This God of Love fastened his eyes on me
 And said, "Who kneels there?" With the subject broached,
 I greeted him respectfully, approached,
 And said, "Sir, it is I." "Why are you here?
 And to this flower dare you come so near,"
 He asked me, "seeing that it is my own?"
 It were more fitting, if the truth were known,
 For something like a worm to draw so nigh."
 And I responded, "Sir, may I ask why?"
 "Because you have no such ability.
 It is my relic, full of dignity
 And grace; you are my foe, and speak no good
 Of all those who have served me as they should.
 Your translating creates disturbances...
 And hinders folk from their observances
 On my behalf. The creed of Love you scorn.
 And do not try denying it, I warn:

The Romance of the Rose in your translation
 Can now be read without an explanation;
 Against my law it is a heresy
 Because it makes wise folk withdraw from me.
 You wrote of Cressid as seemed good to you;
 The story makes all women seem untrue,
 Yet they are true as steel can ever be.

335) Think carefully before you answer me.

268- Why could you not have said good things as well
 316) As bad ones in those stories that you tell?
 Was there no worthy subject in your mind,
 Or in your books could you have failed to find
 For me some tale of women good and true?
 Yes, God knows, sixty books—some old, some new—
 You have yourself, with stories worth attention
 In which both Greeks and Romans have made mention
 Of sundry women, and the lives they had,
 Always a hundred good against one bad.
 God knows this fact, and so do all the clerks,
 Who are accustomed to peruse such works.
 What say Valerius, Titus, Claudian?
 What says Jerome against Jovinian?¹⁷
 How chaste are maidens, and how true are wives,
 How steadfast widows are throughout their lives—
 This Jerome tells, nor are their numbers small;
 At least a hundred there must be in all;
 Reading about them, one feels pain and woe
 That for their faith they had to suffer so.

For to their lovers they remained so true
 That, sooner than they'd love somebody new,
 They chose to end their lives in sundry ways,
 And died, as story after story says;
 They died by fire, by water, and by blade
 Because they would not have their vows betrayed.
 At any cost they kept their maidenhood,
 Or else their vows as wives or widows good.
 They did so not to emulate the saints,

But to be virtuous and free from taints,
 And so that men should find in them no flaw;
 Yet all the pack lived under heathen law,
 These who so dreaded shameful imputations.
 So carefully they kept their reputations
 That in this world I swear men could not find
 A man so able to be true and kind
 As was the humblest woman in that day.
 And what does Ovid, in the *Epistle*,¹⁸ say
 About true wives, the labors they went through?
 And Vincent's *Mirror*¹⁹ shows this lesson, too.
 By many authors have these things been said,
 Christian and heathen, whom you could have read;
 You do not have to write the things you do.
 What malady could thus be forcing you
 To write about the husk and not the corn?
 I swear by Venus, of whom I was born,
 That although you have followed heresy,
 As old fools often do, denying me,
 You shall do penance, and it shall be seen!"

Then spoke that noble lady clothed in green,
 And said, "My lord, of your munificence,
 You ought to listen to this man's defense
 Against these accusations you have made.
 A god ought not to let himself be swayed.
 Your deity should keep a stable mind,
 Exerting justice yet remaining kind.
 And were you not a god, as all men know,
 Then it could come about as I shall show:
 This man to you may falsely be accused,
 Whereas by right he ought to be excused.
 For many tattlers in your court are dwelling,
 And many liars, prone to storytelling,
 Who serenade you with denunciations
 According to their own imaginations.
 To seem important, they tell lies to you,
 And envy motivates the things they do.
 Envy is 'laundress of the court,' or so

Says Dante, for she's certain not to go
From Caesar's house either by night or day;
Whoever else goes, she will always stay.

- 72) Also, consider: this man is not smart.
He may have had no wickedness at heart.
It may be he was merely versifying,
Not thinking that his sources may be lying.
Or someone may have told him to compose
Those two works, whom he didn't dare oppose.
Perhaps he has repented by this time.
He has not done so terrible a crime
Translating works of those old, scribbling men
As if he had let malice guide his pen
To make up works himself in Love's despite.
- 08) A lord should weigh these things, who would do right,
And not be like the lords of Lombardy,
Who grow rich solely by their tyranny.
He who is lord or king by natural right
Has no need to use cruelty and might.
Though tax collectors bully whom they can,
A king should not mistreat his loyal man,
Who is his treasure and gold in his chest.
Therefore philosophers have found it best
For kings to rule through justice, not through fear;
Their duty in this matter is quite clear.
A king preserves his lords in their degree,
And honors and exalts them suitably;
It is most fitting for a king to prize
Those who are demigods in lesser eyes.
Yet to both rich and poor he should be fair,
Although their earthly states do not compare.
He must take pity on the poor's condition.
Look at the lion's noble disposition!
For if a lion finds a fly annoying,
He acts not like a cur, bent on destroying,
But waves his tail to make the insect flee,
Causing no hurt; for his gentility,

He will not seek revenge on one so slight.
A noble should let mercy temper might,
Considering each thing by equity,
And thinking always of his dignity.
No lord should ever take the right away
Of any man accused to have his say.
This, for a lord, would be an act of shame.
And even if he does deserve the blame,
But asks for mercy with true penitence
And shows himself, forgoing all defense,
To be prepared to suffer your decree,
Then should a god, reflecting prudently,
Weigh his own honor and the mortal's crime.

And, since there is no need for death this time,
You ought to lighten your severity,
Quell anger, and increase benignity.
This man has praised your law and done you good
In writing poetry, as best he could.
Though his poetic talent is quite meager,
Yet he has made untutored people eager
To follow you, in praising of your name.
He wrote the poem called *The House of Fame*;
The Death of Duchess Blanche,²⁰ an elegy;
The Parliament of Fowls, it seems to me;
Arcite and Palamon²¹ are to his credit—
He wrote about their love, though few have read it;
The hymns he's written for your holy days
Include *balades*, roundels, and *virelays*;²²
And other holy works worth approbation
Include Boethius in prose translation;
The life of St. Cecelia²³ counts also;
And—although it was done quite long ago—
Origen's *Life of Mary Magdalen*.²⁴
He ought to have a lighter penance, then.
His works are great—at least in quantity.
Since you are both a king and deity,
I, your Alceste,²⁵ who once was queen of Thrace,
Ask for this man, relying on your grace,

That while he lives you harm him in no way.
 And he will swear to you, without delay,
 Never again in this regard to err,
 But tell the kind of stories you prefer,
 Of women true in loving all their lives,
 Just as you choose, of maidens or of wives,
 Thus to promote you, rather than oppose
 As he did in *Criseyde* and the *Rose*."

- 4) The God of Love then answered in this way:
 "Madame," he said, "it has been many a day
 That I have known you generous and true,
 Nor have I found a better one than you
 In all this world so far, since the Creation.
 If I can do so and preserve my station,
 I shall most readily grant your request.
 It rests with you, do with him what seems best.
 I pardon him, without more dallying.
 Whoever would show grace, or give a thing,
 And does it promptly, his thanks is the more.
 Decide what you will have him do, therefore.
 Now thank my lady here," he said to me.

- 4 I rose, and then sank down upon one knee,
 And said this: "Madame, may the God above
 Reward you, for you made the God of Love
 Forgo his anger with me, and forgive,
 And also send me grace so long to live
 That I may learn the truth of what you are
 Who have so helped and raised me up so far.
 Yet, in this case, I truly never meant
 To injure love or be malevolent,
 Because an honest person, after all,
 Shares not in doings of a criminal;
 And no true lover should think me to blame
 When I expose a fickle one to shame.
 In fact, I think they should be laudatory
 Because I wrote or told of *Cressid's* story
 And of the *Rose*; whatever the source meant,

I know this much—that it was my intent
 To show that truth in love is to be prized,
 While vice and falseness ought to be despised,
 By such examples; that was what I meant."

And she replied, "Forgo your argument.
 The right and wrong of love can never be
 Disputed; and you should learn that from me!
 You have the mercy I obtained for you.
 Now I shall say what penance you must do
 For your trespass; now listen carefully:
 You shall, throughout your life, unflaggingly,
 Devote the largest portion of your time
 To the composing of a glorious rhyme,
 A legend of good women, maids and wives,
 Those who were true in loving all their lives;
 And also tell of men who, false and sly,
 Do nothing else for all their lives but try
 To see how many women they can shame.
 For in your world that now is thought a game.
 And though you may choose not to love, firsthand,
 Speak well of love; this penance I demand.
 And for your sake the God of Love I'll ask
 To have his servants help you in your task
 And give your labors suitable reward.
 Now go your way—this penance is not hard.
 The book, when it is done, give to the queen
 On my behalf, at Eltham or at Sheen."²⁶

Not in G.

The God of Love smiled slightly then, and said,
 "Do you know whether this is wife or maid,
 What rank she is, what honor she is due,
 Who has such minor penance given you,
 Who have deserved so bitterly to smart?
 Pity runs swiftly, though, in gentle heart;
 That you may see; she makes known what she is."
 "No, as I may be saved," I said to this,
 "I do not know more than that she is good."
 "There you have said a true thing, by my hood,"

(47)

(49)

Said Love, "and you may be assured of it,
If only you will stop and think a bit.
Do you not have a book, shut in your chest,
That tells the goodness of the queen Alceste,
She who became a daisy at the end?
She chose to die, her husband to defend
From death, and from hell, where she took his place;
Hercules rescued her, and, by God's grace,
He brought her out of hell to joy again."

"Yes," I said—I had found my answer then,
"I know her now. Is this the good Alceste,
The daisy, and the source of my heart's rest?
Now do I feel the goodness of this wife,
Who has, after her death and in her life,
Both fame and other virtues twice as rare.
She has rewarded fully all the care
I've lavished on the daisy, as her flower.
That Jove has stellified her through his power,
As *Agathon*²⁷ narrates, is only right.
The emblem of it is her crown of white.
As many virtues make up her renown
As there are tiny flowers in her crown.
For, to immortalize her here on earth,
Cybele made this flower of great worth,
Which wears its own white crown, as all men know.
And Mars gave it a crown of red also,
Instead of rubies, set among the white."

Modesty made her face a little bright
With blushes, when she heard this compliment.
Then Love said, "It was very negligent
Of you not to remember her that time
You wrote 'Hide, Absolon, thy hair' in rhyme;
Her name in it you surely should have set
Because you are so greatly in her debt,
And know so well the good example she
Can set for women who would lovers be.
Of noble love she taught the excellence,

Especially of wifely innocence,
And all the boundaries a wife should keep.
Your meager wits must then have been asleep.
But now I order you, upon your life,
That in your legend you include this wife
With other ladies in your brief narrations.
Farewell; I make no other stipulations.
Before I go, one more thing I should tell—
No faithful lover ever enters hell. *x Not in G*

These ladies you see sitting in a row
Appear in your *balade*, as you should know,
And in your books also you can them find.
While writing you should have them too in mind,
At least those of whom you have heard before.
For here are sitting twenty thousand more
Of whom you have not heard, good women all,
And true in love, whatever should befall.
Write about those among them you think best;
I must go home (the sun is sinking west)
To Paradise with all this retinue.
And to the daisy give the honor due.
I wish for Cleopatra to begin
The list; go on from there, my love to win.
Let's see what man could such a lover be
That he would suffer pains as sharp as she. *Not in G*

I know you cannot put all into rhyme
That lovers did and suffered in that time;
It would be over-long to read and hear,
And it suffices for my purpose here
That only the main incidents be told
From those accounts written by authors old.
He who tells many tales must have the sense
To keep them short, or lose his audience."
And with that word, up from my sleep I rose,
And this—my Legend—started to compose.