THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN
OR, THE LEGENDARY OF CUPID'S SAINTS*

Prologue

A thousand times have I heard people tell
That there is joy in heaven and grief in hell,
And I agree that that may well be so;
But all the same, there's something else I know:
There's no one living in this land, I say,
Who's been to hell or heaven and come away,
Or knows a thing except that he could quote
From something someone said, or even wrote!
No man can prove it by an actual test.
Yet God forbid! Men may the truth attest
Of many things without the proof of eye.
For people shouldn't think a thing a lie
Because no person saw it long ago.
A thing is just as real, and not less so,
Although it can't be seen by every man.
Some things, by God! escaped Saint Bernard's scan!*

And so it is to books, in which we find

Those ancient things remaining in the mind,
And to their teaching in an antique style,
That we must give belief, and to the guile
With which they tell their well-attested stories
Of holiness, and realms, and triumph's glories,
Of love, of hate, of other subjects too,
Which at the moment I shan't list for you.
If ancient books were lost or ceased to be,
Then lost would be the key of memory.
So we should trust to what the old books say:
To prove the truth, there is no other way.
And as for me, although my wit is small,
I find that books most happily enthral;
That I so reverence them in my heart,
So trust their truth, so pleasure in their art,
That there is scarce a single joy I know
That can persuade me from my books to go,
Except, perhaps, upon a holy day,
Or else in the ecstatic time of May,
When all the little birds begin to sing,
And flowers start to blossom and to spring.
Farewell my study while the spring days last!
Now as for spring, my liking is so cast
That, of all the meadow flowers in sight,

I most adore those flowers red and white
Which men call daisies in the region round.
To them I'm so affectionately bound,
As I declared before, in time of May,
That when I lie in bed there dawns no day
But has me up and walking on the lawn
To see these flowers spread towards the dawn
When sunrise brings the light with brilliant sheen,
The livelong day thus walking on the green.
And when the sun goes down towards the west,
It draws its petals in and shuts in rest
Until the morrow brings the morning light,
So greatly frightened is it of the night.
This daisy, of all lovely blooms the flower,
Replete with virtue, honour's pretty dower,
And constant in its beauty and its hue,
Alike in winter as in summer new,
Its praises, if I could, I would distil;
But sad to say, it is beyond my skill!
For men before my time, I can be sworn,
Have reaped the fields and carried off the corn;
And I come after, gleaning here and there,
And am delighted if I find an ear,
A graceful word that they have left behind.

And if I chance to echo in my mind
What they sang freshly in authentic song,
I trust they will not think I've done them wrong,
Since what I write is done to praise the power
Of those who erstwhile served the leaf or flower.*
For be assured, I do not undertake
To attack the flower for the green leaf's sake,
Nor yet to set the flower against the leaf:
As if I'd set the corn against the sheaf!
I give sole love, or am averse, to neither;
I'm not specifically attached to either.
Who serves the flower or leaf I do not know.
That's not the purpose of my present throe,
Which is concerned with quite another span:
That of old tales, before such strife began.
The reason that I advocate belief
In ancient books and reverence them in chief
Is this: men should believe authorities
Since in all other tests no firm proof lies.
I mean, before I leave you for elsewhere,
The naked text in English to declare
Of tales or exploits ancient authors told.
Believe them if you will: they're very old!

The 'F' text, in which Chaucer at first appears to favour the Flower against the Leaf, has this lovely passage instead of ll.69 – 80 above:

… Since what I write is honour to the power
Of love, and in true service of the flower
Whom I shall serve while I have wit or might.
She is the brightness and the perfect light
That in this dark world shows, and steers my course.
The heart within my sad breast with such force
Respects and loves you that of my true wit
You are the mistress: I guide none of it.
My words and deeds are so in your command
That, as a harp obeys the player's hand,
And sings according to its fingering,
So from my heart-strings you can always bring
What voice you please, to laugh or to complain.
Be ever my guide and Lady Sovereign!
To you as to my earthly god I cry
Both in this poem and when my woes I sigh.

*

When it was towards the very end of May,
And I had wandered all a summer's day
That verdant meadow that I told you of
The new-sprung daisies to admire with love,
And when the sun had sunk from south to west,

And shut up was the flower, and gone to rest
At gloom of night, at which she felt such dread.
Then homeward to my house I quickly sped;
And in a little arbour I possess,
New-benched with fresh-cut turves for tidiness,
I had my servants dress my couch for night;
To celebrate the summer's fresh delight,
I bade them scatter flowers on my bed.
When I had covered up my eyes and head,
I fell asleep within an hour or two.
I dreamed that I was on that lawn anew
And that I wandered in the selfsame way
To see the daisy as you've heard me say.
And all that lawn, it seemed to me, was fair,
With pretty flowers embroidered everywhere.
One speaks of gum's, or herb's, or tree's fine scent:
To no comparison would I consent.
Its perfume outdid other scents by far;*
In beauty it surpassed all flowers that are.
The earth had quite forgotten winter's dread,
Which stripped him naked, leaving him for dead,
And with his icy sword struck him with grief.
To that the temperate sun now brought relief
And freshly clothed the earth in green again.

The little birds, in early summer's vein,
At least those who'd survived the noose and net,
Sang out defiance of him who'd so beset
Them all in winter, killing off their brood,
The cruel fowler, for it did them good
To sing of him, and in their song revile
The filthy churl who with his cunning guile
And avarice had tricked them wickedly.
This was their song: 'The fowler we defy!'
And on the branches some birds sang out clear
Their love songs, which were pure delight to hear,
Each one in praise and honour of a mate,
And blissful summer's start to celebrate*
Upon the branches fluttering aloft
In their delight among the blossoms soft.
They trilled out, 'Blessed be Saint Valentine!*
For on his day I choose you to be mine,
Which I shall not repent, my own heart's sweet!'
With that their beaks came gently in to meet,
Conveying honour and humble salutations,
And after that they had such celebrations
As are appropriate to love and nature,
And are performed indeed by every creature.
To hear their singing I was most intent

Because I dreamed I knew just what they meant.

Presently a lark sang out above.

‘I see,’ she sang, ‘the mighty God of Love.

Look where he comes! I see his wings outspread.’

And then I looked along the flowery mead

And watched him pacing, leading forth a queen

Attired in royal array, and all in green.

And on her hair she wore a golden net,

On top of which a crown of white was set

With many flowers. It’s true what I write down:

For all the world, as daisies have a crown

Made up of many small white petals bright,

So she too had a crown of flowery white.

Of one piece only was this crown of white,

A single eastern pearl unflawed and bright,

Which made the white crown up above the green

Exactly like a daisy in its sheen,

Considering the golden net above.

The garments of this mighty God of Love

Were silk, adorned all over with green boughs;

He had a rose-leaf garland on his brows,

Which held a host of lily-flowers in place.

I could not see the expression on his face

Because his countenance shone out so bright

Its gleaming brilliance amazed the sight;
A furlong off, he dazzled still my eye.
But in his hands at length I did espy
Two fiery darts, like coals both glowing red,
And angel-like his glowing wings he spread.
The God of Love is blind, or so men say,
But I thought he could see well every way,
Because he fixed on me the sternest look,
Which when I saw, my heart turned cold and shook.
And by the hand he held that noble queen,
Who wore a crown of white and robes of green,
And was so womanly, benign and meek
That though you travelled all this world to seek,
Not half her beauty would you ever find
In any creature of a natural kind.
And she was called Alcestis,* bright and fair;
I pray God may she prosper everywhere!
For if she'd not been present with her balm,
Then doubtless I'd have died in sheer alarm,
Helpless before his words and fierce look,
As I shall tell you later in my book.
Behind the God of Love, upon that green,
Some ladies I observed, in all nineteen,*
Walking in royal robes with gentle tread,

And such a host of womankind they led,
I could not think that there had ever been
A third or fourth of those who now were seen
In all this wide created world since God
Constructed Adam from the earthly sod.
And every one of them was true in love.
Whatever wonder this was token of,
The very moment that there came in sight
That flower I call the daisy fair and bright,
They suddenly all stopped instinctively
And went down on their knees most purposefully.
And then they all danced gently in a ring
Around this flower. I watched them dance and sing
In manner of a carole, and I heard
Their ballad and shall tell you every word:

Hide, Absalom, thy tresses gold and clear,*
And Esther, lay thy gentle meekness down,
And Jonathan, conceal thy friendly cheer;
Penelope, and Marcia, Cato's own,
Make of your wifehood no comparison;
Isolde, Helen, hide your beauties' light:
Alcestis here bedims your lustre bright.

Thy lovely body, let it not appear,

Lavinia; thou, Lucrece of Roman town;
Polyxena, who bought thy love so dear;
Thou, Cleopatra, nobly passionate one;
Hide all your faithful loves and your renown;
And Thisbe, whom love brought such pain and fright:
Alcestis here bedims your lustre bright.

Hero and Dido, Laodamia dear,
And Phyllis, hanging for thy Demophon,
Thou Canacee, whose woes in thee appear;
Hypsipyle, betrayed by Aeson's son,
Boast not your faith in love, make no proud moan;
Ariadne, Hypermnestra, bear your plight:
Alcestis here bedims your lustre bright.

The singing of this ballad being done,
By order in a circle every one
Of all those ladies gentle and serene
Sat down upon the grass so soft and green.
First sat the God of Love, and next, this queen
Attired in crown of white and robes of green,
Then in due order others by degree
Of noble rank were seated courteously;
And not a word was spoken in that place

Within the radius of a furlong's space.
Upon a grassy slope close by I waited
To learn what these fine people contemplated,
As still as any stone, until at last
The God of Love his eyes upon me cast
And then demanded, 'Who's that over there?'
Which when I heard, I gave him answer fair,
Saying, 'My lord, it's I,' and going near,
Saluted him. 'What are you doing here,'
He asked, 'so bold and in my presence now?
For it were better a worm should come, I vow,
Before my eyes than you, I'd have you know.'
'If you please, my lord,' said I, 'why so?'
'Because,' said he, 'you're quite incapable.
My servants are all wise and honourable,
But you're among my deadly enemies,
And lie about my former devotees,
Misrepresenting them in your translation,
And stopping folk from making dedication
Of service to me. While to trust to me,
You can't deny, you say is lunacy.
To put it plainly, everybody knows
That by translating *The Romance of the Rose*,
Which is all heresy* against my law,

You've made wise people from my rule withdraw.
Your mind and reason, being somewhat cool,
Reckon a person is a perfect fool
Who loves intensely with a burning fire.
By that I see you're doddering in desire
Like ancient fools with failing spirits, who blame
The rest and don't know what is wrong with them.
Have you not put in English too the book
Of Troilus, whom Cressida forsook,
Thus demonstrating women's perfidy?
But all the same, this question answer me:
Why won't you write of women's uprightness
Now that you've written of their wickedness?
Was there no good material in your mind?
In all your books could you not somewhere find
A tale of women who were good and true?
By God, yes, sixty volumes old and new
Do you possess, all full of stories great
That Roman poets, and Greek as well, relate
Of various women, what sorts of life they had;
And ever a hundred good against one bad.
This God knows well, and so do scholars too
Who seek such histories, and find them true.
What say Valerius,* Livy,* Claudian?

What says Jerome against Jovinian?*
How pure were virgins and how true were wives,
How constant too were widows all their lives,
Jerome recounts, and not of just a few –
More like a hundred, that would be my view.
It's pitiful and makes the spirit sore
To read the woes which for their faith they bore,
For to their loves they were so wholly true
That rather than take on a lover new
They chose to die in various horrid ways,
And ended as each separate story says.
For some were burnt, some had their windpipes slit,
Some drowned because no sin would they commit;
But every one retained her maidenhead,
Or widow's vow, or troth with which she wed.
They did it not for love of holiness,
But love of purity and righteousness,
Lest men should mark them with a vicious blot;
Yet all of them were heathens, all the lot,
Who were so fearful of incurring shame.
These bygone women so preserved their name
That in this world I think you will not find
A single man who'd be as true and kind
As lowliest woman at that early date.

What does Ovid's famed *Epistle** state
Of faithful wives and all their doings, pray?
Or in *History's Mirror*, Vincent of Beauvais?*
All authors, Christians and pagans too,
The wide world over, write of such for you.
It doesn't need all day to put you right.
But yet what's wrong with you, that when you write,
You give the chaff of stories, not the corn?
By sainted Venus, from whom I was born,
Although you have renounced my law and creed,
As other old fools often have, take heed!
You shall repent, as shall be widely seen!'
At once up spoke Alcestis, noblest queen,
Saying, 'God, the dues you owe to courtesy
Require you to attend to his reply
On all these points that you have put to him.
A god should not appear so cross and grim,
But should be stable in his deity,
With justice and true magnanimity.
His anger rightfully he cannot wreak
Until he's heard the other party speak.
Not all is true that you have heard complained;
The God of Love hears many a tale that's feigned.
For in your court is many a flatterer,

And many a strange accusing tattler,
Who in your ears will drum some ugly thing,
Born of hate or jealous imagining,
Just to enjoy with you some dalliance.
Envy – I pray God deal her all ill-chance! –
Is laundress in the royal court, I say,
For she will never leave, by night or day,
The house of Caesar. Dante made it plain:
Whoever leaves, the laundress will remain.
Perhaps this man has wrongly been accused,
So that in justice he should be excused.
Or else, my lord, the man is so precise
He makes translations with no thought of vice,
Just versifying what in books is there,
Of subject matter hardly being aware.
And so *The Rose* and *Cressida* he wrote
In innocence, of harm not taking note.
Or he was forced that pair of books to choose
By somebody, and did not dare refuse;
For he has written many books ere this.
He has not done as grievously amiss
In rendering new what ancient poets penned,
As if with malice and with foul intent
He'd written poems himself in Love's despite.

That's how a lord should think who cares for right,
And not be like the Lords of Lombardy,*
Who rule by wilful fit and tyranny.
For one who's naturally a lord or king
Should not be cruel and given to bullying
As is the excise-man, who does what harm he can;
But knowing his duty, he should treat the man
As liegeman, since he owes that loyalty
To all his people, and benignity,
And should attend to all their pleas with care,
Complaints, petitions, every law affair
When it's put up, for judgement in due course.
For this rule, Aristotle* is the source:
It is the duty of a king to make
And keep good law for every liegeman's sake.
Good kings have sworn to that their deepest vow
For many hundred winters up till now;
Sworn too to keep their aristocracy,
As it is right and wise that they should be
Enhanced and honoured, given favours dear,
For they are half-gods in this world down here.
For rich and poor alike this law is meant,
Although their state of life is different.
For poor folk everyone should feel compassion;

See how the lion behaves in gentle fashion!
For when a fly annoys or stings him, he
Wafts it away with tail quite easily;
His noble sentiments are set so high
He won't avenge himself upon a fly
As would a cur or beast of low-born taint.*
A lordly spirit ought to show restraint
And weigh up each event in equity
With due regard for noble dignity.
For Sire, it shows no prowess in a lord
To damn a man who's not allowed a word
In his defence. That is a foul abuse;
And even if he offers no excuse,
But pleads for mercy with a grieving heart,
And begs you. kneeling to you in his shirt,
To give your judgement as you deem it fit.
A god should briefly then consider it,
Weighing his honour and the person's crime.
And since there is no cause for death this time,
You shouldn't find it hard to show some grace:
Dismiss your rage and show a kindly face.
The man has served you with his poet's skill;
Your love-laws he has helped you to fulfil.
When he was young he propped up your estate;

I don't know if he's now a runagate.
But I know well, the things that he can write
Persuade unlearned folk to take delight
In serving you and honouring your name.
He wrote the book that's called *The House of Fame*,
The book of Blanche the Duchess' death no less,
The Parliament of Birds too, as I guess,
Arcite and Palamon of Thebes's love,*
A story very few have knowledge of,
And many hymns to you for holy days
As well, called ballads, roundels, virelays.*
Of other products of industriousness,
He has in prose translated Boethius,
The Miserable Engendering of Mankind,
Which in Pope Innocent the Third you find,
And Saint Cecilia's life with all its woe;
And he translated, long long years ago,
Origen's homily on the Magdalen.*
He now deserves less punishment and pain,
Because he's written so many a lovely thing.
Now, as you are a god and mighty king,
I, your Alcestis, sometime Queen of Thrace,
Ask on this man's behalf that in pure grace
You'll never do him harm in any way;

And he shall swear to you without delay
Never to be at fault as you describe;
And he shall write, as you should now prescribe,
Of women who loved truly all their lives,
What kind you will, of virgins, widows, wives,
To advance your cause, not smirch it, as in those
Stories he wrote of Cressida and the Rose.'
The God of Love made answer straight away:
'My Lady, it is many and many a day
Since first I found you charitable and true,
So clearly so that since the world was new
I never found a better one than you.
And so to keep my state with honour due,
I will not, cannot, frown on your request.
He's yours, to do with him as you think best.
You may forgive, without a moment's pause,
For if you make a gift, or bless his cause,
And do it quickly, you'll be thanked the more.
Give judgement then what he must do therefore.
Go thank my Lady now!' he said to me.
I rose, then settled down upon my knee
And humbly said, 'My Lady, God above
Repay you, since you've made the God of Love
Remove his anger from me and forgive!

Now grant with grace that I may so long live
As to be sure what person you may be,
Who helped me thus and put such trust in me.
Yet truly I believe that in this case
I have no guilt, and did Love no disgrace,
Because an honest man, I firmly plead,
Takes no part in a robber's wicked deed.
And no true lover ought to give me blame
Because I speak a faithless lover's shame.
They rather ought to give me their support
Because of Cressida I wrote the thought
My author had, as also of *The Rose*.
It was my wish completely, as God knows,
To further faith in love and cherish it,
And warn against betrayal and deceit
With my examples; that was what I meant.'*
And she replied, 'Stop all that argument,
For Love won't have such plea and counter-plea
Of right and wrong; take that at once from me!
You've won your favour; closely hold thereto.
Now I will say what penance you must do
For your misdeed. Attend my judgement here:
During your lifetime, you shall year by year
Spend most part of your time in writing stories

Extolling all the legendary glories
Of virtuous women – virgins, honest wives –
Who kept their faith in loving all their lives;
And tell of traitors who were false to them
And made of all their lives a stratagem
To see how many women they could shame:
For in your world that's counted as a game.
Though love is not the thing on which you're bent,*
Speak well of it: that is your punishment.
And to the God of Love I shall so pray
That he shall charge his men in every way
To help you on, your labour to repay.
Your penance is but light; now go your way!'
The God of Love then smiled at that and said,
'Can you tell me, is she wife or maid,
Or queen or countess? Of what rank is she
Who gave you penance of such small degree,
When you deserved more painfully to smart?
But pity quickly flows in gentle heart.
You can see that; she makes known who she is.'
And I replied, 'No, lord. May I have bliss,
But all I know of her is that she's good.'
'That story's true all right, and by my hood,'
Said Love, 'If you've a notion to be wise,

You'd better know it well, that's my advice.
Do you not have the book, in your big chest,
Of Queen Alcestis, full of virtues blest,
Who changed into a daisy, the day's eye,*
Who took her husband's place and chose to die,
And so instead of him to go to hell;
Whom Hercules brought out from there to dwell
On earth again, by God, and live in bliss?'
And I replied to him and answered, 'Yes,
I recognize her now. And is this sshe,
The daisy Alcestis, heart's felicity?
I deeply feel the goodness of this wife,
Who after death, as well as in her life,
Redoubled her renown with her largess.
She well repays the love that I profess
For her own flower. Small wonder that high Jove
Should set her as a star in heaven above
For all her virtues, as writes Agathon.*
Her white crown proves the fact to everyone;
For just as many virtues does she own
As there are little flowers in her crown.
In honour of her, to keep her memory,
The daisy flower was made by Cybele,*
As men may see, with white crown on her head,

To which Mars gave, by God, a touch of red
Instead of rubies, set amongst the white.'
At this, the Queen in shyness blushed a mite
At being praised so highly to her face.
Said Love then, 'Negligence has brought disgrace
On you for writing of inconstancy
In women, since you know their purity
By proof, as well as truth in old tales borne.
Ignore the chaff and celebrate the corn.
Tell Alcestis' story, I suggest;
Leave Cressida alone to sleep and rest.
For of Alcestis should your writing be;
Perfection's calendar, you know, is she.
She taught what perfect love should always do,
And chiefly what in wifely love is due,
With all the limits that a wife should keep.
Till now your tiny wit was fast asleep.
But now I order you, upon your life,
To write the legend of this perfect wife,
First writing others of a lesser brand;
And now farewell! For that's my last command.
At Cleopatra you should now begin,
And go from there; that way my love you'll win.'
With that, I awoke from sleep to shining day,

And started on my Legend straight away.

I
The Legend of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, Martyr

After the death of Ptolemy the King,*
Who had all Egypt in his governing,
His consort Cleopatra reigned as queen
Until it chanced, as history has seen,
That out of Rome a senator was sent
To conquer kingdoms and win settlement
Of honour for Rome, it being their practice then
To win the fealty of all earthly men,
And truth to tell, Mark Antony was his name.
It happened Fortune owed him grievous shame
So that he fell from high prosperity,
A rebel to the Roman polity.
And worse dishonour, Caesar's sister fair
He falsely abandoned, she being unaware,
And wanted at all costs another wife;
Thus he with Rome and Caesar fell to strife.
Yet all the same in truth this senator
Was valiant and a noble warrior
Whose death was a most dolorous event.
The love that filled him was so vehement,

He was so trapped in snares, in passion hurled,
By love for Cleopatra that the world
He valued not at all. Indeed it seemed
The only thing his moral sense esteemed
Was serving Cleopatra with his love.
Regardless of his life, in war he strove
To make defence of her and of her rights.
This noble queen adored this best of knights
For his deserving and his chivalry;
And certainly, unless the histories lie,
He was in person and in worthiness,
Discretion, courage and illustriousness,
Of noble living men the nonpareil;
And she was lovely as a rose in May.
And since things said are best in shortest measure,
She married him and had him at her pleasure.
For me, whose undertaking is to tell
So many stories and to tell them well,
Reporting of the wedding and the feast
Would take too long; when I should most, not least,
Report affairs of great effect and charge;
For men may overload a ship or barge.
So straight to the effect I now shall skip,

And all the minor things I shall let slip.
Octavian,* being furious at this deed,
Amassed an army which he meant to lead
To Antony's destruction utterly.
With Romans lion-cruel and hardy, he
Took ship, and thus I leave them as they sail.
Antony, aware, determined not to fail
To meet the Romans, could he find a way,
Made plans, and then he and his wife one day,
Delaying no longer, massed their mighty host,
Took ship with them and sailed along the coast,
And there the two fleets met.* With trumpet blasts
The shouts and firing starts, while each side casts
To get the sun behind its own attack.
The missile flies with fearful din and crack;
The fleets together grind in fierce clash
And down come balls of stone in crushing crash.
In goes the grapnel with its clutching crooks,
And, raking ropes and sheets, go shearing-hooks.
A fellow fetches blows with battle-axe
At one who round the mast flees the attacks,
Then out again, and heaves him overboard.
One stabs with spear, and one with point of sword;
One tears the sail with hooks as if with scythe.

One brings a cup and bids his mates be blithe,
Pours peas to make the hatches slippery,
Takes quicklime too to blind the enemy;
And thus the dragged-out day of fight they spend,
Till at the last, as all things have their end,
Mark Antony takes flight, a beaten man,
And all his forces flee as best they can.
The Queen flies too with all her purple sail
Before the blows, which beat as thick as hail;
No wonder! It was far too much to bear.
When Antony saw that misfortune there,
‘Alas the day that I was born!’ he said,
‘From this day forth my honour’s lost and dead!’
Despair unhinged his mind upon that word,
And through his noble heart he thrust his sword
Before he’d gone a footstep from the place.
His wife, who could not win from Caesar grace,
To Egypt fled in terror and distress.
Now listen, men who speak of tenderness,
Fellows who falsely promise, swearing blind
They’ll die if their beloved proves unkind,
Just hear what sort of truth woman can show!
This wretched Cleopatra felt such woe
No tongue on earth could tell her mighty sorrow.

She did not pause, but swiftly on the morrow
Told subtle craftsmen to erect a shrine
With all the rubies and the jewels fine
In Egypt of which they could find supplies,
And filled the shrine with various kinds of spice
Which to embalm the body would combine,
Then fetched the corpse and shut it in the shrine.
And next the shrine she had dug out a grave,
And all the serpents that she chanced to have
She had put in that grave, and then she said,
'Now Love, whom my lamenting heart obeyed
So utterly that from that blissful time
I freely swore to keep your rule sublime –
Or Antony's, I mean, my noble knight –
I'd never waking, morning, noon or night
Allow you from my feeling, thinking heart,
For weal or woe, or song or dance, to part!
I swore then to myself that, weal or woe,
Exactly as you did, then I would so,
As fully as my powers could sustain,
Provided that my wifehood got no stain –
Yes, whether it would bring me life or death –
A covenant which, while I can draw breath,
I shall fulfil: and it shall well be seen,

There never was to love a truer queen.'
Full-hearted thus, she leapt into the pit*
Naked among the snakes that dwelt in it,
Desiring there to have her burial.
The serpents came to sting her one and all,
And she received her death with joyful cheer
For love of Antony, to her so dear.
I tell the truth, this is no yarn or fable.
Until I find a man so true and stable,
Who will for love his death so freely take,
I pray to God our heads may never ache! AMEN

II
The Legend of Babylonian Thisbe: Martyr

Once upon a time in Babylon
Where Queen Semiramis* had had the town
Surrounded with a moat and walled about –
High walls with splendid well-baked tiles, no doubt –
There were residing in the noble town
Two princely lords of excellent renown,
Who lived so near each other on a green
That nothing but a stone wall lay between,
Of city boundaries the usual one.
And truth to tell, the one lord had a son,

In all that land one of the manliest.
The other had a daughter, loveliest
Of all those eastward dwelling in the place.
The name of each grew in the other's grace
Through gossips from the neighbourhood about,
For in that foreign land, without a doubt,
Virgins were strictly kept with jealousy
Lest they committed some loose levity.
The youthful bachelor's name was Pyramus,
The girl's was Thisbe, Ovid tells it thus.
Their reputations by report so throve
That as they grew in age they grew in love.
And truly, since their ages tallied quite,
Marriage between them would have been just right,
But that neither father would assent;
Yet both so burned with passion violent,
No friend of theirs could mitigate its force.
And secretly their true love took its course
And both of them expressed their strong desire.
'Cover the coal, and hotter grows the fire.'
And 'Ten times madder is forbidden love.'
A crack from top to base foundation clove
The wall which stood between these lovers two:
It had been so of old since it was new.

So narrow was this fissure in the wall,
So tiny, it could scarce be seen at all.
But is there anything Love can't espy?
These two young lovers – and I do not lie –
Were first to find that narrow little cleft.
And with a sound as soft as any shrift,
Their words of love were whispered through the wall,
And as they stood there, they went over all
Their sad lament of love, and all their woe,
Whenever it was safe to whisper so.
Upon the one side of the wall stood he,
And on the other side stood fair Thisbe,
Each there the other's sweet words to receive.
And in this way their guardian they'd deceive,
And every day that ancient wall they'd threaten,
And wish to God that it could be down beaten.
Thus would they speak, 'Alas, you wicked wall!
Your spiteful envy robs us of our all.
Why don't you cleave apart or break in two?
Or at the least, if that won't pleasure you,
You might just once allow us two to meet,
Just once to have the bliss of kissing sweet.
We'd then be cured of all our fatal woe.

But yet it is to you that we both owe
A debt because you suffer all the time
Our words to travel through your stone and lime;
And so we should be satisfied with you.'
And when their useless words were spoken through,
They'd kiss that cold unyielding wall of stone
And take their leave, and then they would be gone.
And this was chiefly in the eventide
Or early morning, lest it be espied.
They did the same a long time, till at length,
One day when Phoebus* brightly shone in strength –
Aurora* with her kindling morning gleams
Had dried the wet grass soaked in dewy streams –
Beside the crack as they were wont to do,
First Pyramus arrived, then Thisbe too,
And pledged their word with utmost faith that they
Would both of them that evening steal away,
Deceiving all their guardians as they went,
And leave the city, after which they meant,
The country fields being spacious, broad and wide,
At an appointed time to meet outside
At one fixed place, which they agreed should be
At Ninus'* kingly tomb beneath a tree –
For those who worshipped idols, so I've heard,

The pagans, used in fields to be interred –
And by this mausoleum was a well.
The covenant between them – and I tell
The story briefly – was compacted fast.
So long the sunshine seemed to them to last,
The sun would never set beneath the ocean.
This Thisbe loved with such intense emotion,
And longed so much her Pyramus to see
That, when she saw that it was time to flee,
She stole away at night-time from her place
Disguised, a wimple covering her face.
To keep her promise she forsook her friends;
And it is pitiful that woman tends,
Alas! when she is under true love's spell,
To trust a man before she knows him well.
So to the tree she went at speedy pace,
Love making her determined in this case,
And then sat down and waited by the well.
Alas! A lioness most fierce and fell
Came from the wood at speed without delay,
Maw dripping blood from slaughtering her prey,
To drink from the well beside which Thisbe sat.
As soon as Thisbe was aware of that –
The moonlight made her see it fully clear –

She leapt up, heart benumbed with dread and fear,
And dashed into a cave in utter fright,
Dropping her wimple in her headlong flight
Regardless, being with terror so hard struck,
And glad that she'd escaped with so much luck.
She cowered in the darkness, very still,
And when the lioness had drunk her fill,
About the well she stalked and prowled around,
And straight away the maiden's wimple found,
And ripped and tore it in her bloody maw.
That done, she did not linger any more,
But to the forest once more took her way,
At last came Pyramus with some delay,
For all too long at home, alas! stayed he.

The moon was shining; he could clearly see,
And on the path, as he was striding fast,
His searching look was always downward cast.
So looking down, there in the sand he saw
The spaced-out imprints of a lion's paw;
And suddenly he shuddered and grew pale.
His hair on end, he followed on the trail
And, finding there the wimple, ripped and torn,
He cried, 'Alas the day that I was born!
This single night shall both we lovers die!
Ask mercy of my Thisbe, how can I,
When I'm the one who slaughtered you, alas?
Through my request your death has come to pass.
Alas! To bid a woman go by night
Where dreadful dangers lurk to do her spite!
And I so slow I was not here – what shame! –
At least a furlong's length before you came.
Whatever lion prowls this wood, at least
My body he must tear! Whatever beast
Roams savage here must gnaw my heart, say I!'
He seized the wimple with a dreadful cry,
And kept on kissing it, and wept full sore,
Saying, 'Wimple, alas! I long for nothing more

Except that you should feel the blood of me
As you have felt the bleeding of Thisbe!'
Which said, right through his heart he thrust his sword.
Out of the wound the blood in wide streams poured,
Like water when a conduit-pipe has burst.
Now Thisbe, knowing not of this at first,
But sitting terror-stricken, reasoned thus:
'If it should chance that my own Pyramus
Came here to seek me, and then did not find,
He'd think me faithless to him, even unkind.'
So she emerged at once to seek him out,
With heart and eyesight casting all about.
'I'll tell him how I feared the lioness,'
She thought, 'And everything I did, no less.'
And finally her loved one there she found,
Hammering with his heels upon the ground,
All bloody, which made her swiftly backwards start.
Like waves at sea then heaved her beating heart
And, pale as box-tree leaves, she came to see
And recognize her lover instantly,
Her Pyramus, her own heart's truest dear.
Who could describe the desperate deadly cheer
Of Thisbe then, and how she tore her hair,
And gave herself to torment and despair?

Ah, how she swooned and lay upon the ground,
And how she wept with tears that filled his wound!
How mingled she his blood with her complaint
By using it to daub herself, like paint!
How she embraced the dying corpse, alas!
This woeful Thisbe, come to such a pass!
And how she kissed his frosty mouth so cold!
'Who has done this? And who has been so bold
And killed my love? O speak, my Pyramus!
I am your Thisbe, calling on you thus.'
And thereupon she lifted up his head.
This wretched man, who was not fully dead,
On hearing her the name of Thisbe cry,
Raised up to her his heavy, deathly eye,
Then let it fall, and yielded up the ghost.
Without a cry or moan Thisbe arose;
She saw her wimple, saw his empty sheath:
Saw too his sword, the sword which gave him death;
And then spoke thus: 'My grieving hand,' said she,
'Is strong enough to do the deed for me.
For love will give me strength and ruthlessness
To make a wound that's deep enough, I guess.
I'll follow you in death, and I shall be
Both cause and fellow of your death,' said she.

‘Though only death could part us utterly,
You shall not even so escape from me,
For as you can’t leave death, then I’ll come too,
And in your death I shall companion you.
And now, you wretched jealous fathers two,
We who were once your children beg of you
That we, when you put further envy by,
May in a single grave together lie,
Since love has brought us to this piteous end.
May the just God to all true lovers send,
If they are faithful, more prosperity
Than ever came to Pyramus and me!
And may no lady thoughtlessly be sent
As I was to endure such accident.
Yet God forbid but that a woman can
Be just as true in loving as a man:
And as for me, I’ll blazon it abroad.’
So saying, she at once took up his sword
Still hot with her love’s heart-blood, as I say,
And thrust it through her own heart straight away.
And thus are Pyramus and Thisbe gone.
Men true in love I find but few or none
In all my books, except this Pyramus.
And that is why I’ve spoken of him thus.

For it is gratifying to us men to find
A man whose love is faithful, true and kind.
But here you see, great lover though he be,
A woman can dare and do as well as he.

III
The Legend of Dido, Queen of Carthage, Martyr

Glory and honour, Virgil the Mantuan,
Be to your name! I shall as best I can
Follow your lamp which lit up ere I came
Aeneas forswearing Dido, and their fame,
And take from Ovid and the *Aeneid*
The gist and great effects of what they did.
When Sinon with his wily Greek construction*
Caused Troy to fall and end in great destruction
By offering to Minerva* in pretence
A horse, and many Trojans perished hence;
When there'd appeared the ghost of Hector bold,
And fire so fierce it could not be controlled
Had burned down all of Troy it could devour,
Including Ilium, its chiefest tower;
And all that land was ravaged and brought low,
With Priam its king cut down and lost in woe;
Aeneas then was charged to flee the land

By Venus, so he grasped in his right hand
His son Ascanius,* and with him too,
Upon his back, his ancient father who
Was called Anchises; so he fled away,
But lost his wife Creusa by the way.
Much sorrow in his grieving mind had he
Till he could find and lead his company.
But at the last, when he had found his men,
He marshalled them in readiness, and then
He led them swiftly on towards the sea,
And all of them set sail for Italy,
The land where he'd fulfil his destiny.
Concerning his adventures on the sea,
To tell them here would be of no avail,
Since they don't fit the purpose of my tale.
But I shall stick, as I have now begun,
To his and Dido's story till it's done.
So long he sailed upon the salty sea
That finally to Libya's coast came he
With only seven ships in his command;
And glad was he to hurry to the land,
Being shaken by the tempest, I declare.
He took possession of the harbour there,
And having with him in his knightly troop

Achates,* him he picked from all the group
To be his partner and spy out the land.
He took no other warriors from his band.
So lord and henchman left their ships to ride
At anchor and went forth without a guide.
They walked a long time in that desert bare,
And then at length they met a huntress there.
A bow in hand and arrows too had she;
Her skirt was short, cut close above the knee.
And yet she truly was the fairest creature
That ever had been made in mortal nature.
She, Lord Aeneas and Achates meeting,
Addressed them both as follows in her greeting:
'Have you, while ranging wide across the land,
Seen any of my sisters close at hand
With skirts tucked up and bow and arrow-case,
With boar or other quarry of the chase
That they have slaughtered in this forest wide?'
'No, truly, Lady,' then Aeneas replied,
'But with such beauty, so it seems to me,
An earthly woman you could never be;
For you are Phoebus' sister, so I guess,
And if in very truth you're a goddess,
Have mercy on our travail and our woe.'

She said, ‘No goddess I, I’d have you know;
For girls go walking forth in this fair land
Like this, with bow and arrows in the hand.
You’re now in Libya’s kingdom, the demesne
Of Dido, who is lady here and Queen.’
She briefly told him all the circumstance
Of Dido’s coming and her governance,
Concerning which I do not wish to rhyme.
It’s pointless: it would be a waste of time.
The point is simply this: it was no other
Who spoke to him but Venus, his own mother.
She bade him go to Carthage that same day,
And having told him, vanished clean away.
I’d copy Virgil word for word in style
Except that it would take too long a while.
This noble queen called Dido, formerly
Sichaeus’* wife, whose beauty all might see
Was brighter than the beauty of the sun,
The founding of noble Carthage had begun.
Her rule there was so lofty and so good
That she was judged the flower of queenlihood
For noble grace, largess and elegance:
Happy the man who looked upon her once!
By kings and lords she was so much desired

That all the world was by her beauty fired:
She stood most high in everybody's grace.
Now when Aeneas had come into the place,
With unobtrusive stealth he made his way
Towards the town's chief temple where, I say,
Queen Dido was devotedly at prayer.
When he had entered that huge temple there,
I cannot say if it be possible,
But Venus made him quite invisible –
I do not lie: it says it in the book.
When in this temple there they came to look,
Aeneas and Achates studied all
And found depicted there upon a wall
The ruin of Troy and all the land beside.
'Alas that I was born!' Aeneas sighed,
'Throughout the whole wide world they know our shame,
Which lurid paintings everywhere proclaim.
We who once lived in high prosperity
Are now dishonoured, and to such degree
That to prolong my life I do not care!'
Upon which word he burst out weeping there
As pitifully as ever could be seen.
That ardent lady, Carthage city's Queen,

Stood in the temple in her royal gear.
So sumptuous and so fair did she appear,
So young, so vital, eyes a-glint with mirth,
That should our God, creator of heaven and earth,
Desire a love, for beauty and worthiness
And womanliness and truth and seemliness,
Whom should he choose but that sweet lady bright?
For him no woman else could be so right.
Fortune, who keeps the world in governance,
Now suddenly brought in a lucky chance.
No luckier chance was ever so designed,
For all the company Aeneas had left behind,
Which in the tempest he had counted lost,
Had landed near the city on the coast.
Amongst the greatest of his lords were some
Who by good luck had to the city come,
And to that very temple, there to speak
To Dido, and her gracious succour seek,
So justly famous was her kind largess.
And when they'd told the tale of their distress,
The tempest and the woes through which they'd been,
Aeneas came and stood before the Queen
And openly made known that it was he.
Who then rejoiced but all his company

Who'd found their lord and governor once more?
The honour that they did him, Dido saw,
And having often heard Aeneas' fame,
She felt her heart with pity and grief a-flame
That ever such a noble man as he
Should be cut off from rule so cruelly.
She looked, and saw that he was like a knight,
A well-endowed and stalwart man of might,
The very pattern of nobility.
He framed his lofty utterance graciously,
Expressing well the splendour of his face,
His strength of bone, his muscles' shapely grace.
For, being Venus' son, he was so fair
No man could look one half as fine, I swear;
He seemed to be a lord of sovereign kind.
And since he was a stranger, she inclined
Still more to like him, such was God's behest:
For some, what's new is often loved the best.
Her heart was struck with pity for his woe,
And with that pity, love came too; and so
Her sweet compassion and her graciousness
Worked to refresh him in his dire distress.
She said how desolate in truth she was
For all his dangers past and heavy loss,

Addressing him with words of friendly cheer
And speaking kindly, as you now may hear:
'Are you not Venus and Anchises' son?
In truth, all courtesies that may be done,
All help and honour I can give, you'll have.
Your ships and all your company I'll save.'
And many a gentle word she gave him then,
And sent out messengers from her own men
To find his ships, beginning that same day,
And victual them in full without delay.
First sending to the ships full many a beast,
With wine in barrels to make up the feast,
Straight to her royal palace did she stride,
Keeping Aeneas always at her side.
Their banquet there, what need have I to tell?
He never was delighted half as well.
Such dainties were there and such luxury,
Such playing instruments, such songs of glee,
And many a loving look and quaint device.
Indeed Aeneas had come to Paradise
Out of the gulf of hell, and thus in joy
Looked back on his estate and life in Troy.
Aeneas was led, the banquet being done,
To ballrooms full of hangings nobly spun,

With sumptuous couches, brilliant ornament,
Where he and Dido settled in content
With wine and spices shared in sweet delight,
Until they led him to his room at night
With all his band, to take his rest at ease;
And all could do whatever most might please.
No well-caparisoned and bridled charger,
No easy-ridden palfrey small or larger,
No stallion snorting for the tournament,
No jewel with inlaid stones as ornament,
No loaded sacks of gold heavy and bright,
No crimson ruby shining out by night,
No noble heron-hunting falcon found,
No boarhound, stag- or deer- or other hound,
No golden cup filled with florins new-chased,
That in the land of Libya could be traced,
But Dido had it to Aeneas sent;
And all was paid whatever he had spent.
And so her guests called this queen honourable
And in her largess unsurpassable.
Aeneas sent Achates, on his side,
Aboard his ship, it cannot be denied,
To fetch his son, and many sumptuous things,
Clothes, sceptres, brooches, also many rings,

Some for himself to wear and some for her
Who'd made him gifts of noble character,
And tell his son to make the presentation
By taking to the Queen his own donation.
Achates soon came back, and full of joy
Aeneas was to see once more his boy,
His little son, the Prince Ascanius.
But yet our author makes it known to us
That Cupid, he who is the God of Love,
Being asked to by his mother high above,
Assumed the likeness of the little child
So that the noble Queen might be beguiled
And love Aeneas: be that as it may,
I do not care what those old writings say.
The truth is that the Queen made mighty fuss,
A wonder to hear, of young Ascanius,
And for the presents that his father sent
She thanked him often with warm compliment.
Thus was the Queen delighting in full joy
With all those lively new-met folk from Troy.
She soon requested bold Aeneas to tell
His knightly deeds and what at Troy befell,
And all day long that pair most eagerly

Delighted in their talk and revelry,
From which activities grew such a fire
That Dido in the bliss of her desire
To dally with Aeneas, her new-come guest,
Lost all her colour and health in her unrest.
Now to the result, the consequence of all
When I have told the tale, as tell I shall.
I start like this: it happened one fine night
Just as the moon was throwing out its light,
This noble queen into her bedroom went,
And sighed and gave herself to languishment,
Sleepless and starting, tossing to and fro
As lovers do – at least I've heard it's so.
Eventually she told her sister Anne
And with heartfelt lamentings thus began:
'Dear sister, tell me what that thing might be
That terrifies me in my dreams?' asked she.
'This Trojan newcomer so fills my mind,
Because he seems so shapely and refined,
And therefore like to prove a manly knight,
Achieving what is virtuous and right,
That in his hands lies all my love and life.
Have you not heard him tell his woes and strife?
Now truly, Anne, provided you agree,

Married to him I simply long to be.
This is reality, I can't deny:
He has the power to make me live or die.'
Her sister Anne, advising for the best,
Declared that she by no means acquiesced;
And thereon followed such a long debate,
Until I ended it you couldn't wait.
But in the end Anne's point could not be gained:
Love must love on; it cannot be restrained.
The dayspring being risen from the sea,
This amorous queen enjoined her men to see
To hunting nets and spears both broad and keen.
A-hunting then would go this fresh young queen,
So sharp was her delightful languishment;
And so to horse her lively people went.
Into the courtyards all the hounds were brought,
And on their horses swift as any thought
Her youthful knights were waiting everywhere,
And crowds of ladies watched their menfolk there.
Upon a stalwart palfrey, paper-white,
Its saddle red, embroidered with delight,
With heavy bars of gold embossed, behold
Queen Dido sitting, draped in jewels and gold,
As lovely as the sweetly shining morrow

That rescues sufferers from nights of sorrow.
Upon a charger mettlesome as fire –
You'd ride and turn him with a bit of wire –
Aeneas sat, like Phoebus I should say,
His garments shone in such a brilliant way.
The foamy bridle with the bit of gold
He managed well, and thus his mount controlled.
And so I leave this noble queen to ride
Out hunting with the Trojan at her side.
Right soon a herd of stags came into view
And then, 'Hey, on! Spur faster! View halloo!
Why won't a lion or a bear appear,
That I might face and have him with this spear?'
So cried the young men, moving in to kill
The wild beasts, and take them at their will.
Amidst all this heaven made a rumbling noise;
The thunder roared with terrifying voice;
Down came the rain with sleet and hail, so fast,
With heaven-fire too, the hunt-folk were aghast.
The noble queen and all her company,
Each and every one, were glad to flee.
Queen Dido, from the storm intent to save
Herself, escaped into a little cave,
And this Aeneas also went with her.

What others went with them I am not sure;
Our author does not mention anyone.
And here the mighty passion was begun
Between these two; yes, here was the first morrow
Of all their bliss, and start of all their sorrow.
For here it was. Aeneas knelt down low,
Unlocked his heart and told her all his woe,
So swearing that to her he would be true,
Come weal or woe, nor leave for someone new,
Pleading as faithless lovers always feign,
That luckless Dido pitied all his pain,
Took him for husband and became his wife
For evermore, as long as they had life.
And after that, the tempest being spent,
The two emerged in joy and homewards went.
At once foul Rumour rose and made it known
That Dido and Aeneas had gone alone
Into the cave. What people thought, they averred,
And when the King, whose name was Iarbas,* heard,
Seeing that he had loved her all his life
And wooed her so that she would be his wife,
He grieved so sadly, with such wretched cheer,
That truly it was pitiful to hear.
But in Love's wars it always happens so

That one man's laughter brings another's woe.
Aeneas now laughs, possessing much more joy
And fortune than he ever did in Troy.
O luckless women full of innocence,
Pity and truth and sweet benevolence,
What makes you trust men's declarations so?
Why waste your pity on their seeming woe
When such examples are before your eyes
Of men forsworn, of lovers telling lies?
Where saw you one who never was unkind,
Nor left his love, nor harmed her, nor maligned
Nor plundered her, nor bragged about his deed?
You see such things, and also you may read.
Be warned now by this well-bred warrior,
This Trojan with such skill in pleasing her,
Who puts on faith and deep humility,
Is so refined, observes such secrecy,
Performs love's duties with obedience,
And squires her at the feast and in the dance,
At temple-going, and home again at night,
And fasts until his lady comes in sight,
And bears I know not what devices on
His shield to honour her; composes songs,
And jousts; with arms in fight does many things,

Sends letters to her, tokens, presents, rings;
Just listen how he serves his Lady dear!
When he was starving, so that death was near
From hunger or from peril on the sea,
From homeland fled a hapless refugee,
And all his men by tempest overwhelmed,
She made him gift of body and of realm
At his command, although she might have been
Of other lands, not only Carthage, Queen,
And lived in ample joy; what would you more?
Aeneas, who such fervent promise swore,
Soon tires of playing the devoted lover;
His earnest passion very soon blows over.
He secretly prepares his ships for flight
And plans to steal away in them by night.
Queen Dido had a slight suspicion of this,
Perceiving well that something was amiss.
So lying in his bed with sighs at night,
She asked him straight: ‘Is anything not right,
My own heart’s darling, whom I love the most?’
‘Truly,’ he said, ‘tonight my father’s ghost
As I was sleeping caused me torment sore,
And also Mercury* a message bore
That I am bound to conquer Italy:

To sail at once there is my destiny.
And that is why my heart is burst, it seems!'
Therewith his artful tears poured down in streams
As he embraced her strongly. 'Is that true?'
She cried, 'In faith is that what you will do?
Have you not truly sworn to marry me?
What sort of woman would you make of me?
I am of rank, a queen of noble life:
You will not thus so foully leave your wife?
What shall I do? Alas that I was born!'
In brief this noble Dido, thus forlorn,
Says prayers at shrines and offers sacrifice,
And piteous to tell, she kneels and cries,
She conjures him and swears that she will be
His slave, his servant of the lowest degree;
She falls before his feet and, fainting there
Dishevelled, with her bright and golden hair,
'Have mercy! Let me go with you!' she cried.
'These nobles at the court close at my side
Will kill me otherwise because of you.
But if you take me as your wife most true,
As you have sworn to, then I give you leave
To kill me with your sword this very eve!
For then I shall at least die as your wife.

I am with child, so give my child his life!
Have pity in your mind, have mercy, Lord!'
No gain at all her pleading did afford,
Because one night he left her sleeping sound
And stole away. His company he found
And sailed away from Carthage treacherously
Towards the spacious land of Italy.
So leaving Dido to her wretched life,
He there acquired Lavinia as his wife.
When he from sleeping Dido stole at night,
He left a robe, besides his sword so bright,
At her bedhead, so hasty then was he
To join his men and steal away to sea.
That robe, when hapless Dido came to wake,
She kept on kissing for its owner's sake
And said, 'Sweet robe, if Jupiter permit,
Now take my soul, let me of pain be quit!
My course of fortune I have now fulfilled.'
Alas! Divine support not being willed,
She fell to fainting twenty times or more.
Her lamentations then she came to pour
Upon her sister Anne – and I shan't write
Of that, I feel such pity for her plight –
And told her sister and her nurse to go

And fetch her fire and other things, that so,
She said, she'd sacrifice: that was her aim.
Then, judging when the moment for it came,
She with his sword leaped right into the fire,
And with it pierced her heart upon that pyre.
Before she stabbed herself, or death occurred,
My author says she had a final word.
She wrote it in a letter which began:
'In just the same way as the snow-white swan
When faced with death begins to sing a song,
So I complain to you about my wrong.
Not that I think to win you back again,
For well I know that that is all in vain,
Seeing that the gods are enemies to me.
But since my name is lost through you.' wrote she,
'I well may loose on you a word by letter,
Although my doing so makes me no better;
For that same wind that blew your ship away
Also blew away your faith, I say.'
You want to read that letter's every word? –
To Ovid, where it is, please be referred.

IV

The Legends of Hypsipyle and Medea, Martyrs

Duke Jason, primal source of treachery
In lovers, you who ate up guilefully
To their confusion ladies noble and pure!
You captured gentlewomen with the lure
Of your high state and noble elegance,
With speeches stuffed with charm and eloquence,
And with your counterfeited constancy,
Your deference and false humility,
And with pretended pain and suffering too.
Others were false to one, but you tricked two!
0, frequently you swore that you would die
Of love, when all the harm that made you sigh
Was evil lust, and that was love, you said!
My life on it, in English shall be read
Your name, and all your cunning guile be known!
Have at you, Jason! At you the horn is blown!*
Though grief and woe it bring, yet true it is
That love, when man is faithless, works like this:
False lovers have much better loving cheer
Than those who ache with love and buy it dear,
Or in the wars get many bloody knocks.
As tender capon feeds the crafty fox,
And is by him abominably betrayed,
So too betrayed's the poultryman who paid,

Who to the bird had every claim and right;
But yet the false fox takes his share at night.
The truth of that in Jason's case is clear:
I cite Hypsipyle and Queen Medea.

THE LEGEND OF HYPSIPYLE

In Thessaly, so Guido* writes, there was
Long since a king whose name was Pelias
Whose brother Aeson, being at last so old
That he could hardly walk, so we are told,
Gave up to Pelias all the governing
And rule, and called his brother lord and king.
This Aeson had a son called Jason who
Became the greatest knight that country knew
During his lifetime, famed for courtliness,
Largess and strength, vigour and cheerfulness.
His father being dead, so famed was he
That no one wished to be his enemy;
They praised him rather, kept his company,
Which drew from Pelias mighty jealousy.
He fearfully imagined Jason might
Be elevated to such splendid height
By all the love the region's lords had shown
That he himself might well be overthrown;

So nightly all his wits he then employed
To scheme how Jason might be quite destroyed
Without himself receiving any blame.
After much thought, the right solution came:
Send Jason to some far-off country where
He'd meet his fate, and get destruction there!
This being decided, he made overture
To Jason with much love and friendship pure
For fear that his intentions should be spied.
It so fell out, since fame spreads far and wide,
That tidings came, or that there was report,
That on an isle called Colchis,* so men thought,
Beyond Troy city, eastward in the sea,
There was a ram which, everyone could see,
Possessed a fleece of gold which shone so bright
That nowhere was there such another sight;
But yet a dragon always guarded it.
And there were other marvels, I submit –
Two mighty bulls entirely made of brass
Who spat out fire: besides, much else there was.
And this is what is said concerning these:
Whoever wished to win that Golden Fleece,
Before he could possess it, first must fight
Against both bulls and dragon for that right.

Aeëtes was the monarch of the isle.

So Pelias pondered thus his course of guile:
He'd spur his nephew Jason, so he thought,
To sail to Colchis to achieve that sport.
'Dear nephew, if it could arise,' said he,
'That you would win the high celebrity
Of getting that famed treasure in your hand
And bringing it back with you to my land,
It would both honour me and give me pleasure.
I should be bound to quit in fullest measure
All your pains, and all your costs I'd pay.
So choose who shall go with you on your way,
And let us see now: will you dare this quest?'

Jason was young and strong and full of zest
And undertook the task without delay.
The ships, by Argus* built, got under way,
And Jason took the mighty Hercules
And other hand-picked men upon the seas.
But if you ask who else was with him gone,
Go read it in the *Argonauticon*,*
The list of men there's on a bigger scale!
So Philoctetes* hauled aloft the sail,
The wind being right for them, and fair and free
It blew them from the land of Thessaly.

Long Jason sailed upon the salty sea
Until on Lemnos island landed he –
All this is not in Guido, if you please,
But Ovid wrote it in *Heroides* –
And of this island Queen Hypsipyle*
Was mistress: young and bright and fair was she,
The daughter of old Thoas, former king.
Hypsipyle, who was a-pleasuring
And roaming on the cliffs beside the sea,
Happened beneath a hillock there to see
Where Jason's ships were coming in to land.
Kind-heartedly she sent a sweet demand
To ask if any stranger blown ashore
By tempest in the night she might restore
To comfort, since it was her custom so
To succour every voyager and show
Her bounteous kindness and her courtesy.
Her messenger went straight down to the sea
And there found Jason, who with Hercules
Had landed in a cock-boat at his ease,
That they might have a change and take the air,
The morning weather being mild and fair.
Advancing thus to meet those mighty lords,
The envoy greeted them with gracious words

And gave her message, asking if they'd had
Much damage or experience that was bad,
Or needed pilot or re-victualling.
If they had needs, she'd get them everything;
The Queen insisted that it should be so.
Jason replied with humble speech and low,
'I give my lady thanks most heartily
For her great kindness, but in honesty
We have no needs at present. We are tired;
To relax a bit on land's what we desired
Until the wind is right for us again.'
This lady, near the cliff with all her train
Disporting happily along the strand,
Saw Jason and this other noble stand
Explaining, as I said, why they were there.
When Hercules and Jason were aware
It was the Queen, with such a lady meeting,
At once they gave her fair and gentle greeting.
She took good heed, and well did she assess
Their splendid manner, speech and style of dress,
And knew that they were men of high degree.
So to her citadel in company
Did she escort those strangers courteously,
And ask what hardships and adversity

The two had suffered on the salty sea;
So that, within one day, or two, or three,
She knew from people in his ships who came
That they were Jason, man of well-known fame,
And mightier yet, most famous Hercules,
For Colchis bound, to seek the Golden Fleece,
Which made her honour both men all the more,
And dally with them longer than before.
For truly they were most distinguished folk.
Mainly it was with Hercules she spoke;
She bared her heart to him because he seemed
Discreet, wise, truthful, serious, well-esteemed
And able to converse in balanced fashion
Without vile speculation or false passion.
This Jason was by Hercules so praised
That right up to the sun's height he was raised,
So that no man was ever truer in love
Beneath the dome of heaven high above;
He was a wise man, trusty, rich and bold.
In these three things none beat him, be it told:
In vigour and free giving he surpassed
All living men; the dead too he outclassed.
And third, so great and noble a man was he,
He might become the King of Thessaly.

He had no fault but that he took great fright
At love; to speak of it ashamed him quite.
He'd rather murder and be killed for it
Than be described as 'lover', he'd admit.
'If mighty God would grant it, I would give
My flesh and blood, provided I might live,
To see him certain somewhen of a wife
For his estate; for what a happy life
She'd lead with this attractive, noble knight!'
And all this thing was plotted in the night
Between this Jason and this Hercules,
Who both thought up the fraud, the crafty wheeze,
To foist themselves upon an innocent!
To fool this queen was their agreed intent.
And Jason was as bashful as a maid,
Looked pitiful, to speak was quite afraid,
But yet gave freely to her counsellors
Expensive gifts, and to her officers.
Would God but grant me leisured ease and time
To detail all his wooings in my rhyme!
If in this house false lover here there be,
Then Jason there did just the same as he,
With tricks and every sort of artful deed.

You'll get no more from me, but you may read
The original, where everything is said.
The end was this, that Jason came to wed
This queen, took what he liked without discretion
Of her belongings for his own possession,
Fathered two children on her quickly, then
Set sail and never saw the queen again.
She sent a letter to him, never doubt,
Too long for me to write, or read it out,
Reproving him for lack of faith and truth,
And begging him to pity her forsooth.
She said this of her children, I declare:
That like their father were the little pair
In everything except their lack of guile.
She prayed to God that in a little while,
The next time that he won a lady's heart,
She too would find he falsely did depart,
And after that would both their babies kill,
Like any others who let him have his will.
But she was true to Jason all her life,
Remaining ever taintless as his wife.
Her heart from then on knew no happiness:
She died for love of him in wretchedness.

To Colchis then this noble Jason came,
That dragon, that devourer of Love's flame.
As matter always yearns for form, and then
May pass from form to form, and on again,
Or as a well that's bottomless heaves ever,
False Jason quested on, and peace found never,
For longing through his lustful appetite
To have fine women was his whole delight,
The single joy he knew that pleased him well.
Then Jason went forth to the citadel
In olden times called Jaconites and
The capital of Colchis' famous land;
And there he told Aeëtes, who was King
Of Colchis, why he'd come adventuring,
And begged permission for his questing bold:
If possible, to win the Fleece of Gold.
The King agreed at once to his request.
And dealt with him as with an honoured guest,
So much so that his daughter and his heir,
Medea, a girl so sapient and fair
That no man ever saw a lovelier,
He made ask Jason to sit close to her

At meals and entertainments in the hall.
Now Jason was good-looking after all,
Was lordly too and of illustrious name,
With bearing like a lion of royal fame,
Was fluent of speech and debonair of look,
And knew concerning Love without the book,
Its art and craft, and all its duties too;
And since from Fortune harm to her was due,
She fell in love and doted on the man.
‘Jason,’ she said, ‘to judge as best I can
This enterprise which you are keen about,
You’ve put yourself in peril, I’ve no doubt.
Whoever would this mighty quest achieve
Could hardly come from it, so I believe,
Alive unless I help him with my skill.
In spite of which,’ said she, ‘it is my will
To advance your cause, so that you shall not die,
But go safe home again to Thessaly.’
‘Good lady, that you might,’ was Jason’s word,
‘By death or woe of mine enjoy reward,
Yet honour me and wish my cause to serve,
Is much much more than I can well deserve
By strength or deed, while life remains my lot.
May God give thanks to you, which I cannot!

I am your man, and humbly I beseech
That you will give me help. So no more speech!
But yet, I swear, I do not flinch from death.'
Medea then spoke to him with urgent breath
To tell him of the dangers of his plight,
One after another, in his coming fight.
She said that no one in that dreadful strife
But she herself could guarantee his life.
So briefly and directly, here's the point:
Between the two was made agreement joint
That Jason would espouse her, sworn true knight,
And at the due hour go to her at night,
And in her chamber there would swear his oath
Upon the goddess, never, like or loath,
By night or day to break his marriage faith,
But stay her man while he had life and breath;
And she in turn would stop him being killed.
Thereon that night their tryst they both fulfilled.
He swore his oath and took her off to bed,
And in the morning up he gladly sped,
Because she'd taught him how he should not fail
To win the Fleece, and in the fight prevail.
She saved his life and won him honour too,

The reputation to a conqueror due,
Because she laid her strong enchantment on.
So Jason has the Fleece and home is gone,
Taking Medea and loads of treasure too
To Thessaly. Her father never knew
She'd gone off with Duke Jason whom she loved,
But who to her an evil-doer proved.
For soon he falsely left her, grief to tell,
Leaving her with their two small babes as well.
He tricked her like the traitor that he was,
The chief of Love's betrayers. Soon, alas,
To yet a third wife he was quickly tied;
The daughter of King Creon was his bride.
So that was all the love and the reward
Medea had from Jason, her false lord,
For her true faith and for her kindliness.
She loved him better than herself, I guess;
For him she left her father and her nation.
Of Jason, we may state his reputation:
In all his days there never could be found
So false a lover walking on the ground.
And therefore in her letter this wrote she,
Upbraiding him for all his treachery:
'Why was I pleased to watch your yellow hair

More than the limit of my honour fair?
Why did I love you, beautiful and young
And infinitely eloquent of tongue?
O had you fallen in your battle dread,
With you much treachery would now be dead!’
In Ovid’s verse her letter’s set out right;
Just now, it’s far too long for me to write.*

V

The Legend of Roman Lucrece, Martyr

I write now how the Kings of Rome were sent
For evil-doing into banishment,
And tell of Tarquin,* last of them in date,
Whose deeds Ovid and Livy both relate.
Yet not for that cause do I tell this story,
But to memorialize and praise in glory
That perfect wife, that best in faith, Lucrece,
Whose wifely virtues and great constancies
Not only pagans sing with commendation,
But he who in our Legend's* appellation
Is known as great Augustine felt much pity
For this Lucrece who died in Rome's fair city.
My tale of how it happened will be short,
For major details only I'll report.

Now when the Romans, resolute and strong,
Had stayed besieging Ardea* so long
Without accomplishing the aim they sought,
That they became half idle, so they thought,
In joking chatter Tarquin, being young
And free and irresponsible of tongue,
Remarked that there they led a lazy life,

With no man doing more fighting than his wife.
‘So it is best we make our wives well known,
And each man in his fashion praise his own;
For talking thus will do our spirits good.’
At once a knight called Collatine upstood
And spoke as follows: ‘Sir, there is no need
To credit words when we can trust the deed.
I have a wife,’ he said, ‘and I am sure
That everyone who’s met her knows she’s pure.
Let’s go tonight to Rome,* and we shall see.’
And Tarquin answered, ‘Yes, that pleases me.’
The pair arrived in Rome and made their way
To Collatine’s abode without delay,
And there dismounted. Well the husband knew
The plan of his estate and ways in too,
So secretly they made an entry straight,
There being no porter watching at the gate,
And sought the noble lady’s chamber door.
There by her bedside, hair unbound, they saw
Her sitting, not a thought of harm in mind,
Weaving soft wool, the book says, thus inclined
To keep herself from sloth and indolence.
She urged her maids to work with diligence
And asked them, ‘What’s the news? What do men say

About the siege? What is expected, pray?
O, would to God the walls would tumble down!
For far too long my husband's out of town,
In dread of which my spirits burn and smart
As if a sword had pierced my very heart
When thinking of the siege or of the place.
May God preserve my husband with his grace!'
And thereupon she wept in tender grieving,
Taking no more notice of her weaving,
And lowered her sad eyes submissively –
A beautifully becoming sight to see.
Her tears as well, virtuous to a degree,
Greatly adorned her wifely chastity;
Her expression and her heart were in one mode,
In harmony with what they did and showed.
And as she spoke, before she was aware,
Her husband Collatine came straight in there
And said, 'Don't be afraid, for I am here!'
And she arose at once with joyful cheer
And kissed him, as good wives are wont to do.

The King's son, Tarquin, arrogant through and through,
Struck by her beauty and her lovely face,
Her golden hair, her mien, her body's grace,

Her sweet look, and the way that she lamented,
(Her loveliness was not by art augmented)*
Conceived for her as violent a desire
As if his heart were suddenly on fire.
So mad he was, his reason was undone,
Yet well he knew that she would not be won;
Which plunged him all the deeper in despair
The more he wanted her and thought her fair.
He lusted for her with blind coveting.
Next morning, when the birds began to sing,
He stole back to the siege in secrecy
And paced about alone abstractedly.
Her image ever fresh within his mind.
'Thus was her look, and thus her hair was twined;
Thus sat she, talked and spun, thus looked her face,
Thus lovely was she, such her moving grace.'
With these ideas his heart was freshly taken.
And as the sea, by tempest tossed and shaken,
After the stormy gale has ceased to blow
Still heaves with waves another day or two,
Just so, although her body was not there,
Its pleasing qualities most truly were.
It did not only please, but roused in spite
Malicious lust, immoral in delight.

‘Will she, nill she, I’ll get her into bed:
Luck helps the bold man every time,’ he said.
‘Whatever happens, that is what I’ll do.’
He girded on his sword and off he flew,
Riding to Rome without the least delay.
Then all alone he went his secret way
Directly to the house of Collatine.
The light had gone, the sun had ceased to shine;
And stealing furtively from nook to nook
Tarquin through the night stalked like a crook,
When everybody had retired to bed,
And thought of treason entered no one’s head.
By window or some other entry place,
With sword in hand, this Tarquin came apace
To where Lucrece the true wife lay at rest.
And as she woke, she felt her bed being pressed.
‘What beast,’ she cried, ‘weighs down so hard on me?’
‘I am the King’s son, Tarquin,’ answered he,
‘And if you cry, or any sound let fall,
Or if there wakes up anyone at all,
I swear by God, who made us one and all,
I’ll thrust this sword right through your heart, I shall.’
Which said, he seized her by the throat and pressed
The sharp point of his sword against her breast.

She had no strength to speak; her tongue was dumb;
What could she say, her mind and sense being numb?
Just like a lamb found by a wolf alone,
To whom could she appeal or make her moan?
What! Should she battle with a sturdy knight?
Men know a woman has no strength to fight.
What! Should she scream? How could she wrench apart
His throttle-grip, his sword being at her heart?
She begs for mercy, pleading all she can.
'You won't get that,' replies the cruel man.
'As sure as Jupiter my soul shall save,
I shall go out and kill your stable-knave,
And put him in your bed, and loudly cry
I found you in that foul adultery.
And so you will be dead, and also lose
Your honour. You have nothing else to choose.'
Now Roman wives so cherished their fair name
In olden days, so shrank at thought of shame,
That what with dread of slander and fear of death,
She lost at once her senses and her breath
And fell into a swoon so deep and dead
You could have chopped her arm off, or her head,
And she feel nothing, neither foul nor fair.
Now Tarquin, you a king's son, royal heir,

Who should by lineage and sense of right
Act as a lord and as a faithful knight,
Why have you scorned the code of chivalry?
Why have you done this lady villainy?
Alas! In you this was a shameful deed!
But to the purpose. In the book I read,
When he had done his wickedness and gone,
This lady called together everyone,
Friends, father, mother, husband, one and all,
And pitiful to behold sat in the hall,
Her lovely bright hair all dishevelled, attired
As women's mourning custom then required
When friends were taken to the burial-ground.
They asked her what had caused her woe profound,
And why she sat in tears, and who was dead.
In utter shame, no single word she said,
Nor dared she raise her eyes to them. At last
She spoke of Tarquin and of what had passed,
The event so pitiful and horrible.
To tell that grief would be impossible,
That pain in which her friends and she were thrown.
Had all those people's hearts been made of stone
They would have pitied her with tenderness,
Her heart being full of truth and wifeliness.

She said that through her guilt and through her blame
Her husband should not gain an evil name;
She would not let that happen, come what may.
And they all swore in truest faith that they
Forgave her, which they knew the proper course,
Since she was guiltless, being compelled by force;
And many an example then they named,
But all to no avail, for she exclaimed,
'Forgiveness may be given as you say,
But I shall not accept it any way.'
And secretly she then drew out a knife
And, stabbing with it, robbed herself of life.
And as she fell she cast a heedful eye
On how her skirts fell and were seen to lie:
Yes, in her falling she took special care
Her feet or other parts should not show bare,
Her love of shamefast honour was so great.
The whole of Rome felt pity for her fate,
And Brutus* took an oath by her chaste blood
That Tarquin should be banished thence for good
With all his kin; then called the populace
And openly informed them of the case,
And openly exposed her on her bier
All round the town, that men might see and hear

The horrid facts of her dishonouring.
Nor has there ever been in Rome a king
Since then: they made of her a saint whose day*
Was kept each year in a most hallowed way
By custom. Thus the records of Lucrece,
That noble wife, as Livy tells them, cease.
I tell her tale because she was so true
That in her love she would not change for new,
And she'd a constant heart, demure and kind,
That in such women men can always find.
Where once they set their heart, it always stays.
For I assure you, Christ himself well says.
That wide as is the Land of Israel,
He never found great faith maintained so well
As in a woman:* this is not a lie.
And as for men, observe what tyranny
They always practise; test them as we must,
The truest of them is too weak to trust.

VI
The Legend of Ariadne of Athens

Now judge infernal, Cretan king,*
It is your turn, so come into the ring!
I do not tell the tale for your sole sake,

But more to keep the memory awake
Of Theseus's immense bad faith in love,
For which the gods who rule in heaven above
Were furious and wreaked vengeance for your sin.
Beware, for shame! Your tale I now begin.
Minos, who was the mighty King of Crete,
And ruled a hundred cities strong and great,
To Athens sent to school Androgeus,*
His son, to whom – alas! – it happened thus:
That he was killed learning philosophy
For no more reason at all than jealousy.
So mighty Minos, he of whom I speak,
Dire vengeance for his son's death came to wreak.
Megara* he besieged both hard and long,
But yet the walls were so extremely strong
And Nisus, King there, was so bold and brave,
That little cause for fear the onset gave.
Nisus felt scorn for Minos and his forces
Until one day it chanced by Fortune's courses
That Nisus' daughter,* standing on the wall,
Observed the siege in progress, saw it all.
It happened during skirmishing that she
Fell deep in love with Minos suddenly,
And was so smitten with his chivalry

And beauty that she thought that she must die.
To cut the story short, she made him win
The siege by letting all his forces in,
So that he had the city at his will,
And all the people there, to save or kill.
But foul reward he gave her kindliness,
Letting her drown in sorrow and distress
Until the god took pity on her state –
A tale too long for me now to relate.
Besides Alcathoë, King Minos won
Athens and other cities many a one.
The effect was, Minos rigorously
Oppressed the Athenians, who annually
Were forced to yield to him their offspring dear
For sacrifice, as you shall shortly hear.
This Minos had a monstrous wicked beast*
So cruel that he'd make an instant feast
Of any human being brought to him;
There was no good defence, he was so grim.
When every third year came, as sure as sure,
By casting lots it fell to rich and poor
To take their sons, as chance might then dictate,
And give them to King Minos, when their fate
Would be to be preserved alive or killed,

Or eaten by the monster, as he willed.
And this did Minos do in deadly spite;
To avenge his son was his entire delight,
And to enslave the Athenians in this way
From year to year until his dying day.
Thus home he sailed, the city being won.
This wicked custom went on being run
Until Aegeus,* the Athenian king,
Was forced to give his son as offering,
Young Theseus, when the lottery was run,
To be devoured, for mercy was there none.
And so this sad young knight was sent away
Into King Minos' court without delay,
And chained and in a dungeon thrown until
He should be eaten at the monster's will.
Well may you weep, O wretched Theseus,
And you a king's son, to be fated thus!
It seems to me you would be much in debt
To one who saved you from that deadly threat!
And if a woman were to help you now,
You ought to serve her with a faithful vow
And year by year to love her constantly!
But let me now resume my history.
The gloomy cell where Theseus had been thrown

Was at the bottom of a tower deep down,
Adjacent to a privy in the wall
Which both of Minos' daughters used, for all
Their dwelling quarters with their chambers great
Were over them and faced the major street;
And there they lived in happiness and grace.
I don't know how, but still it was the case,
As Theseus at night was sorrowing,
That Ariadne, daughter of the King,
And her sister Phaedra listened to all
His grieving as they stood upon the wall,
Gazing upwards at the brilliant moon
Because they hated going to bed too soon;
And they took pity on his heavy woe.
A king's son to be shut in prison so
And be devoured! It seemed to them a shame.
Then Ariadne spoke her sister's name;
'Phaedra,' she whispered, 'darling sister dear,
This royal scion's grieving – can't you hear
How sadly he laments his lofty race,
Being so cast down in such a wretched place,
And guiltless? It is pitiful to me!
And so, upon my oath, if you agree,
He shall be saved, whatever else we do.'

Phaedra replied, ‘Yes, truly I grieve too,
As much as ever I did for any man;
And my advice, to help as best I can,
Is that we make his guard immediately
Come up and speak with us most secretly,
And bring with him that miserable knight.
For if he beats the monster in a fight,
The prize must be that he can then go free.
So let us test his spirit’s bravery
And find out whether he would boldly dare
To save his life if given a sword to bear
For self-defence, and with the beast contend.
For in that dungeon where he must descend,
You know the monster’s lair is in a place
That is not dark, and has sufficient space
To wield an axe or sword or staff or knife,
So that I think he well may save his life.
If he’s a proper man, he should do so.
And we shall also make him balls of tow
And wax, so when the monster’s maw gapes wide,
Theseus can aim and throw them deep inside,
To slake his hunger and gum up his teeth.
And when he chokes and cannot get his breath,
Theseus shall leap on him with mighty blows

And strike him dead before they grapple close.
The warder shall beforehand without fail
In secret hide the weapon in the gaol.
And since the labyrinth has twists and bends
And artful passageways and strange dead ends,
Just like a maze, most craftily designed –
This is the right solution to my mind –
Then he must trail a clew of twine behind
When going in, and coming out thus find
The way he came by following the thread.
And when he's struck the dreadful monster dead,
He then can flee and leave the fearful place,
And take the gaoler too, whom he can raise
To some position in his land at home,
Since of such a noble line he's come.
If he dare do it, that's what I advise.'
Why spin it out, or longer sermonize?
The gaoler comes, and Theseus with him too,
And all agree the things they have to do.
Then down goes knightly Theseus on his knee:
'Most noble lady of my life,' says he,
'I, wretched castaway condemned to death,
Declare that while I shall have life or breath,
After this exploit I'll not go away,

But faithful in your service ever stay,
And as a low-born person undistinguished
Be true to you until my life's extinguished.
I shall forsake my native heritage
And in your court be, as I said, a page,
If you will let it fall within your grace
So far as to allow it in this place
That I may have my food and drink, no more.
And for that sustenance I'll work therefore
As you instruct me, so that nobody –
Not Minos, who has not set eyes on me,
Nor any other – shall be aware of me,
I shall conduct myself so carefully.
I'll smirch myself and be so humbly low
That who I am no one alive could know,
To take my life; and thus I'll strive to be
With you, who did me such a charity.
This most deserving man, your gaoler now,
I'll send home to my father, who, I vow,
Shall so reward him that he soon shall be
In Greece among the men of high degree.
For if I may assert it, lady bright,
I am a king's son and, besides, a knight,
And if it were God's pleasure that all three

Of you might in my native country be,
And I with you to keep you company,
Whether I'm lying you would quickly see.
If I don't serve you humbly in this place,
I pray to Mars to do me such a grace
That shameful death may fall on me, and death
And want afflict my friends in that same breath,
And that my spirit after death may go
And wander nightly, walking to and fro,
And may I ever bear a traitor's name,
For which my ghost shall walk, to do me shame!
And if I ever claim a higher estate
Without your offering a thing so great,
As I have said, then may I die in shame!
Your mercy, Lady! Nothing else I claim.'
A gracious knight was Theseus to behold,
And young, being only twenty-three years old.
Yes, anyone who'd seen his face would weep
In pity for the oath he'd sworn to keep;
So that's why Ariadne gave him cheer
About his pledge, in answer kind and clear:
'A king's son and a noble knight,' said she,
'To be my slave in such a low degree!
May God forbid it, for all women's shame,

And stop me ever making such a claim!
But may he send you grace of heart and skill
In self-defence, and power your foe to kill,
And grant it to me afterwards to find
That I grieve not for having saved your life!
Yet it were better I should be your wife,
Since you are quite as nobly born as I,
And have a realm conveniently close by,
Than that I should allow you, innocent,
To die or be a slave in languishment.
There's no dynastic gain in that, it's clear,
But what's the thing man will not do in fear?
And as my sister, if I leave this place,
Must also go, as truly is the case,
Since she as well as I would suffer death
If both of us stayed here, now plight your faith
To wed her to your son when home you go.
This matter can be well concluded so;
Promise it now, by all that may be sworn.'
'I swear, my lady. If I fail, then torn,'
He said, 'by the Minotaur tomorrow may I be!
Take from my heart some blood for surety
If you desire; had I some knife or spear,
I'd let it out, and thereon I could swear,

For then I know you'd credit what I say.
By Mars, the chief of gods to whom I pray.
If I might live and haply not succumb
When tomorrow's battle time shall come,
I never would depart from here before
You've seen fulfilled the solemn oath I swore.
For now, if it's the truth that I should say,
I've been in love with you for many a day
Back home in Greece, and longed to see you near,
(Although of that you'd simply no idea)
Preferring you to all things else alive.
I swear upon my faith, as I may thrive,
For seven years I've served you faithfully.
Now I have you, and also you have me,
My dearest heart, Duchess of Athens now!'
The lady smiled at his most heartfelt vow
And at his constancy and noble cheer,
And to her sister said as you shall hear
With gentle speech: 'Now sister mine,' said she,
'Both you and I are duchesses, and we
In Athens' royal line shall be secure,
And soon be queens thereafter, I am sure.
We've saved from death a prince of kingly name –
And noble women by custom always aim

To save a noble man if they've the force,
And he has right, and runs an honest course.
For this I think no man should give us blame
Or fix upon us any evil name.'
To make the matter I am telling brief,
This Theseus of the ladies took his leave,
And every detail was performed in deed
As in their compact you have heard me read.
His sword, his clew, his things, as I have said,
Were in the building by the gaoler laid,
Close to the lair where lived the Minotaur,
Where Theseus would go in, beside the door.
So to his death this Theseus was sent,
And forth in to the Minotaur he went,
And worked the plan that Ariadne taught,
And beat and killed the monster when they fought,
And following the clew came out again
In secret when the Minotaur was slain,
And through the gaoler procured a barge,
And loaded Ariadne's treasure large,
And took wife, sister, gaoler, all three,
On board, and softly stole away to sea,
Sailing under cover of the night,
And safely in Aegina* did alight,

Where Theseus had a good friend, as it chanced.
And there they feasted, there they sang and danced,
And he had Ariadne in his arms
Who'd saved him from the monster and death's harms.
He soon acquired another ship again
And with a host of fellow-countrymen
He took his leave; and homeward then sailed he.
But on an isle* amid the fierce sea,
Where living man or being dwelled there none
But savage creatures many and many a one,
He put his ship ashore for a brief stay,
And paused and idled there for half a day,
Saying he had to have a rest on land.
His mariners complied with his command
And – briefly then my story to expound –
While Ariadne lay in sleep profound,
Thinking her sister lovelier than she,
He took her by the hand and treacherously
Led her on board the ship, and stole away,
Leaving Ariadne where she lay,
And happily towards Athens set his sails –
May he be blown by twenty devils' gales! –
And found his father had been drowned at sea.

By God! You'll hear no more of him from me!
These faithless lovers, poison be their bane!
To Ariadne let me turn again,
Still fast asleep, worn out with weariness.
Her heart will wake in misery, I guess.
Alas! For you in pity beats my heart!
She woke up in the dawn light with a start
And groping round, found nothing in the bed.
'Alas that ever I was born!' she said,
'I am betrayed!' And then she tore her hair
And ran down to the beach, her feet all bare,
Exclaiming, 'Theseus, my sweetheart true,
Where are you, that I cannot be with you?
Alone among wild beasts I'm left to die.'
The hollow rocks with echoes made reply.
She saw no man, and still there shone the moon.
Then high upon a rock she climbed up soon
And saw his vessel sailing out at sea.
Her heart went cold, and thus aloud said she:
'Kinder than you are creatures of the wild!'
Did he not sin, to leave her so beguiled?
She cried out, 'O turn back, for pity and sin.
Your vessel has not all its company in!'
She tied her head-scarf to a pole up high

In hope perhaps that it would catch his eye,
And tell him she had been abandoned and
Make him return and find her on the strand.
But all for nothing; on his way he'd gone,
And she fell down and swooned upon a stone.
Then up she rose and kissed with loving care
His footprints where they lay before her there,
And spoke these words directly to their bed:
'Thou bed which hast received a pair,' she said,
'Thou shalt reply for two, and not for one!
Alas! Where has the greater partner gone?
What shall become – alas! – of wretched me?
For though a ship may put in from the sea,
I dare not go back home for very dread.
No good expedient comes into my head.'
Shall I tell on her further lamentation?
It would produce a tedious narration.
In her *Epistle* Ovid gives it all,
But tell it briefly to the end I shall.
The gods delivered her in sympathy,
And in the sign of Taurus* men may see
The jewels of her coronet shining bright.
And here's the last of this that I shall write:
May the devil soon requite a fickle lover

Who cheats a true betrothed and throws her over!

VII
The Legend of Philomela

Creator of all forms, who well designed
And made fair earth, and had it in your mind
Eternally, before your work began!
How could you so create, in shame of man,
Or, if it was not your engendering,
Permit such consequence? To do a thing
Like letting that foul Tereus be born,
Who was so false in love and so forsworn,
The uttering of whose name invites decay
From Earth below to Primum Mobile!*
And as for me, so ghastly was his deed
That every time his grisly tale I read
My eyes go dim and suffer ugly pains.
The poison of so long ago remains,
Infecting everyone who would behold
The words of Tereus' tale, of which I told.
He was the Lord of Thrace, and Mars's kin,
That cruel god with bloody javelin;
And he had married in abundant cheer
The King Pandion's* lovely daughter dear

Called Procne, fairest flower in all of Thrace.
Their wedding, Juno* was not pleased to grace,
Nor Hymen,* god of marriage, but instead,
With all their killing torches burning red,
The Furies Three* were at the celebration.
All night upon the beams the Owl* kept station,
The prophet of despair and of mischance.
The revels, full of happy song and dance,
Went on a fortnight, or a little less,
But all the details I must now compress
Because I am so weary of the man.
Five years his marriage with this Procne ran
Until one day she longed, it so appears,
To see the sister she'd not seen for years;
She longed so much, she knew not what to say.
Then to her husband did she keenly pray,
For love of God, that she might go and see
Her sister and return immediately,
Or let her sister come and visit her,
And he send word to her by messenger.
Day after day her humble prayer she pressed
With wifely speech and humour of the best.
This Tereus equipped his ships for sea,
And into Grecian waters forth sailed he,

And not long after of his father-in-law
He begged that he would let, for a month or more,
His sister-in-law, Philomela,* come
To Procne his wife and visit her at home –
'And she will soon rejoin you, I aver.
Myself I'll take her and return with her,
And guard her like my life's heart-blood, no less.'
Pandion, this old king, in tenderness
Of heart began at once to weep and grieve
That he should give his Philomela leave:
Nothing in all this world did he love so.
But finally she got his leave to go,
For Philomela, salt tears on her face,
In trying hard to win her father's grace
To see again the sister she adored,
Embraced him. Such a sight did she afford
When doing that, so lovely did she seem
To Tereus, so youthfully a-gleam,
While in her dress she was the nonpareil,
And yet in beauty twice as rich as well,
He fixed his fiery heart on her and meant
To have her soon, however matters went.
And so in craft he kneeled as well, and prayed
Till at the last Pandion sighed and said,

‘Now son-in-law, who are to me so dear,
I trust to you my younger daughter here,
Who bears the key to all my heart and life.
Commend me to my daughter and your wife,
And may she spend her time in pleasure high:
But let her see me once before I die.’
And truly then he made a sumptuous feast
For Tereus and his men, the best and least
Attending him; and gave him presents fair,
And led him down the chiefest thoroughfare
Of Athens, and then brought him to the sea,
And turned back home. He thought no villainy.
The oarsmen drew the vessel forward fast,
And safe in Thrace they all arrived at last,
And up into a forest then they sped,
And her into a secret cave he led,
And in that cavern dark he made request
That, would she or not, she there must take a rest.
She shuddered in her heart and then spoke thus:
‘Where is my sister, brother Tereus?’
And thereupon she wept most feelingly
And, pale with fear, she quaked most piteously
Exactly like the lamb the wolf has bitten,
Or like the dove the eagle once has smitten,

Who somehow wriggles from the claws' grim hold,
Yet lies confounded and in terror cold
Lest she be seized again; yes, so sat she.
But it was clear no other fate could be.
By force the traitor did the shameful deed
And took away from her her maidenhead
Against her will with violent assault.
Lo! Here's a man's deed, typical man's fault.
'Sister!' she screamed, and cried in accents clear,
'Help me, God in heaven!' and 'Father dear!'
To no avail; and then this thieving traitor
Did her damage infinitely greater
For fear lest she should cry abroad his shame
And do him harm by slandering his name.
He cut her tongue out with his sword and then
He shut her in a castle far from men,
And locked her in a secret prison there
For use and pleasure when he wished, I swear,
To keep her from escaping evermore.
O luckless Philomel, with heart so sore!
May God avenge you and fulfil your prayer!
And now it's time I ended this affair.
Tereus then returned to his own place

And, giving to his wife a close embrace,
He wept most piteously and shook his head,
And swore that he had found her sister dead;
Which gave this hapless Procne such deep woe,
Her heart with grieving almost broke in two.
Now, Procne thus I leave in tearful gloom
So that her sister's tale I may resume.
This noble lady had been taught, in truth,
To sew and to embroider in her youth,
And to weave tapestry upon a frame,
As once was woman's custom and her fame.
Of food and drink she was allowed her fill,
And had whatever clothes might please her will.
Now she could read, compose and also spell,
But writing with a pen she did not well.*
Yet she could weave the letters to and fro,
So by the time a year had passed in woe
She'd woven in coarse wool a pictured note
How she'd been brought from Athens in a boat,
How she'd been taken to the cave alone,
And everything that Tereus had done.
She wove it well, and wrote the story above
How she'd been served for showing her sister love.

And to a servant then she gave a ring,
And begged him* with her signs to go and bring
To Procne what she'd woven on the cloth.
By signs she swore to him with many an oath
That she'd reward him then as best she could.
Off to the Queen then sped this servant good,
And showed it her, and all its story told.
When Procne came the tapestry to behold,
She said no word in sorrow or in rage,
But feigned at once to go on pilgrimage
To Bacchus' temple; and not far from there
Found her dumb sister sitting in despair
And weeping in the castle, all alone.
Alas! the pitiful lament, the moan
That Procne made of Philomela's harms!
Each sister took the other in her arms,
And thus I leave them in their sorrow dwelling.
As for the rest, no burden is the telling.
That's all there is.* For that's how she was served,
Who from this cruel man no harm deserved,
Nor did him wrong of which she was aware.
So, if you please, of man you should beware,
For though he would not wish, for very shame,
To do as Tereus did, and lose his name,

Nor serve you as a murderer or knave,
He won't for long in faithful style behave –
I'll say it now, although he were my brother –
Unless as lover he can't get another!

VIII
The Legend of Phyllis

By proof as well as by authority,
A wicked fruit comes from a wicked tree:
That's what you find, by my analysis.
The reason I now mention it is this:
To tell the tale of faithless Demophon.*
So fickle in love I heard of only one,
And that one was his father Theseus.
'From such, may God in mercy succour us!'
Yes, that's how women ought to pray who know.
Now straight into my story I must go.
With Troy destroyed and ruined utterly,
Demophon came sailing on the sea
Towards Athens, to his palace high and large,
And with him many a ship and many a barge
Full of his troops, of whom too many a one
Were badly wounded, sick or woebegone,
As at the Siege of Troy they long had lain.

Behind him came a gale and storm of rain
Much fiercer than his rigging could withstand:
He'd give the universe to be on land,
The storm so chased him to and fro with force!
So dark it was, he could not set a course.
The rudder, smashed by waves, all useless hung,
And leaks below the water-line were sprung;
No carpenter could put such damage right.
Like burning torch the sea boiled up at night
Like mad, and heaved the ship now up, now down,
Till Neptune* out of pity ceased to frown,
With Thetis,* Chorus and with Triton,* all
Of whom then caused him on a coast to fall,
Where Phyllis was the mistress and the queen,
Lycurgus'* daughter, of more lovely mien
Than is the flower beside the brilliant sun.
Scarce had Demophon his landing won,
Exhausted, weak and feeble, with his crew
Worn out with weariness and famished too,
Than all became aware that he might die.
His sage advisers told him he should try
To seek some help and succour from the Queen,
Discovering thus what favour he might win,
What profit he could manage in that land

All chance of woe and hardship to withstand.
For he was ill and at the point of death,
And he could hardly speak or draw his breath.
And so he stayed in Rhodope* to rest.
When he could walk, it seemed by far the best
To go to court and there seek royal aid,
For he was known; to him respect was paid
Because of Athens Duke and Lord was he
Like Theseus, his father, previously,
Who in his time commanded mighty fame,
And in that region had the greatest name.
And he was like his sire in face and stature,
And also false in love: it came by nature,
Like Reynard the Fox's father's handing on
Of his own craft and nature to his son
Without instruction, as a duck can swim
When carried new-born to the water's brim.
This honourable Phyllis liked his face
And manner, and warmly greeted him with grace.
But since I'm altogether surfeited
With writing out what faithless lovers did,
I'll tell the legend at a spanking pace,
Which to perform, God send me ample grace!
And this is how I'll tell it in a tick:

You've heard the tale of Theseus' nasty trick
In falsely leaving Ariadne fair,
Whose pity saved him in the monster's lair?
Well, briefly, just the same was Demophon,
Going the same way, falsely treading on
The same path that his father Theseus trod.
To Phyllis thus he swore by every god
To marry her, and pledged fidelity.
He did his best to filch her property
When he was well and by his resting eased,
And did with Phyllis wholly what he pleased;
And if I pleased, then I could well proceed
To chart his to's and fro's and every deed.
He had to sail back home, is what he said,
To furnish all the things required to wed
Her as her state required, and his as well.
That done, straightforwardly he bade farewell,
Swearing he'd not delay in this concern,
But would for sure within a month return.
In Rhodope he took the dues of rank
And like a lord received obeisance frank
As if he were at home, fitted his fleet,
And to his own land beat a fast retreat.
To Phyllis, however, he never came again,

And that she bore with agony and pain.
Alas! As all the old accounts record,
She killed herself by strangling with a cord
When she perceived that Demophon was false.
But first she wrote, and sent him urgent calls
To come to her and rid her of her woe,
Of which I shall report a word or two.
I shall not sweat for him, or so I think,
Nor pen on him one dip-full of my ink,
For he was false in love as was his sire.
And may the Devil set both their souls on fire!
But of poor Phyllis's letter I shall write
A word or two, though short the account and slight:
'I am hostess to you, O Demophon,
Your Phyllis, who is now so woebegone,
Of Rhodope, and must to you complain
About the terms agreed between us twain,
To which in spite of oaths you don't adhere.
You dropped your anchor in our harbour here,
And promised us that you'd return as soon
As, or before, there'd passed a monthly moon.
But four times more the moon has hid her face
Since that day you departed from this place,

And also four times lit the world with light.
And yet, if I observe the truth aright,
The ocean stream of Thrace has still not brought
Your ship from Athens; come here it does not.
And if you count that period as you should,
As I or any faithful lover would,
You'll see I don't complain before it's due.'
But I don't give her whole epistle to you
In order, which would make hard work for me,
For it was long, and penned expansively.
But here and there I've versified her plea
When what she wrote seemed quite well said to me.
She wrote to him, 'Your sails don't come again:
To look for faith in what you said is vain.
And I know why you do not come,' wrote she.
'With loving favours I was much too free.
As for the gods by whom you falsely swore,
If their vengeance falls on you therefore,
You won't be strong enough to bear the pain.
I placed too much reliance, I complain,
On your high rank and on your pleasing tongue,
And on your tears, from eyes so slyly wrung.
How could you weep so falsely?' she complained.

‘And could such tears as those be really feigned?
Now truly, if you think the matter through,
It ought to bring but little fame to you
To have deceived like this a simple maid!
I pray to God, and I have often prayed,
That this may be your greatest glory due,
And highest honour that shall fall to you.
And when your ancient ancestors are painted,
And men are with their noble deeds acquainted,
I pray to God that you are painted too,
And people may observe there as they view,
“Look, here’s the man who with his flattery
Betrayed a maid and did her villainy,
Although her love was true in thought and deed!”
But truly, of one fact they’re bound to read:
That you are like your father in your shame,
For he tricked Ariadne just the same,
With just such craft and just such subtlety
As you yourself have just deluded me.
And in that matter, which is far from fair,
You truly follow him and are his heir.
But since you’ve hoodwinked me so sinfully,
My body you are shortly going to see
Float into Athens harbour on the wave,

Without a proper burial or grave,
Although you are much harder than a stone.'
The letter was sent off and, left alone,
She felt how fickle and how false he was,
And in despair she hanged herself, alas!
Such store she set on him, and felt such woe.
Beware, you women, of your subtle foe,
Since still today such bad men you may see;
And trust in love no other man but me.

IX
The Legend of Hypermnestra

In Greece there were two brothers long ago,
And one was called Danaus, you should know,
Who with his body sired a host of sons –
False lovers often are such clever ones! –
Among which progeny there was a son
He loved much more than any other one.
And when this son was born, Danaus thus
Proposing, named the infant Lynceus.
Aegyptus was the other brother's name;*
Promiscuous he, as if it were a game.
And he sired many daughters in his life,
But one, whom he begat upon his wife,

A cherished daughter whom he chose to call
Hypermnestra, youngest of them all,
By chance of stars at her nativity
Gained every good and lovely quality,
As if the gods had ruled when she was born
That of the sheaf this girl should be the corn.
The Fates, those beings we call Destiny,
So crafted her that she was bound to be
Kind and serious, true as steel and wise –
All of them good women's qualities.
Though Venus gave great loveliness to her,
She was compounded under Jupiter
And so had conscience, loyalty, dread of shame,
And the desire to guard her virtue's fame.
All these she thought meant happiness for her.
Red Mars was at that special time of year
So feeble that his malice had declined;
The rise of Venus cramped his cruel mind
So that, with her and many another star
Pressuring him, his bile was less by far.
So Hypermnestra could not wield a knife
In anger, no, though she should lose her life.
But from the turning heavens, all the same
To her from Saturn two bad aspects came,

Which caused her afterwards to die in gaol,
Concerning which I'll later tell the tale.
Danaus and Aegyptus then agreed –
Though they were brothers of the selfsame seed,
For then it was not wrong to marry thus –
To bring together in marriage Lynceus
And Hypermnestra, their two offspring dear,
And chose the day to which they would adhere,
And all was settled, as I understand.
The time was near, the arrangements well in hand.
This Lynceus took in marriage his father's brother's
Daughter, and they so became each other's.
The torches flamed, the lamps were burning bright,
The sacrifices all prepared aright;
Sweet from the fire the incense smell did shoot;
The flower and leaf were torn up by the root
To make the garlands and the lofty crowns.
And minstrelsy filled all the place with sounds
Of amorous songs devised for wedding days
According to that period's simple ways.
Aegyptus' palace was the place for this,
Where he did what he liked, for it was his.
And so they revelled till day's end was come,
And then the guests took leave and trooped off

home;
And night being come, the bride was bound for bed.
Aegyptus to his chamber quickly sped,
And secretly he bade his daughter call.
The palace being emptied of them all,
He gazed upon his daughter with good cheer,
And said to her as you shall quickly hear:
'Dear daughter mine, and treasure of my heart,
Since first I had a shirt at my life's start,
That day the Fatal Sisters* shaped my doom,
So near my heart has nothing ever come
As you, my Hypermnestra, daughter dear.
Ponder what I, your father, tell you here,
And what my greater wisdom bids you, do,
For, daughter, first of all, I love you so
That all the world's not half so dear to me.
I'd not advise you to your misery
For all the gain beneath the cold bright moon.
What I intend I'll tell you now, not soon,
With urgent affirmation, in this way:
Unless you do exactly as I say
You shall be dead, by him who made us all!
You shan't escape outside my palace wall
Alive, to put it briefly, understand,

Unless you agree to do what I command!
And that is final: you must take it so.'
This Hypermnestra cast her eyes down low
And shuddered like a leaf of aspen green,
Her colour dead, and ashen-grey her mien,
Saying, 'Lord and father, all your will,
If I can, God knows, I shall fulfil,
Provided I am brought to no disgrace.'
He rapped back. 'No proviso in this case!'
And swiftly drew a dagger razor-keen.
'Hide this, and be quite sure it isn't seen:
And when your husband is in bed with you.
While he is sleeping, cut his throat in two.
For in my dreams a warning came to me
Which said my nephew would my killer be;
Which one I know not, so I'll be secure.
If you refuse, we two shall quarrel, for sure.
As I have said, and sworn by God before.'
Poor Hypermnestra, out of mind therefore,
Got his permission to depart the place
And not be harmed. That was his only grace.
Producing next a little phial, he
Then said, 'A draught of this, or two or three,
Given him when he wishes to retire,

Will make him sleep as long as you desire,
The opium and narcotics are so strong.
Now go, in case he thinks you stay too long.'
Out came the bride, and with a serious face,
Which virgins wear at such a time and place,
To her chamber went with revel and with song.
And briefly, lest my tale be thought too long,
This Lynceus and she were brought to bed,
And all the revellers from the chamber sped.
The night wore on and soon he fell asleep.
Most tenderly she then began to weep;
She rose up from her bed, with horror quaking,
Just like a branch the strong west wind is shaking,
While all of Argos was in silence lost.
And now she grew as cold as any frost;
For in her heart pity was labouring so,
And dread of death was causing her such woe,
She fell down thrice in misery and despair,
Yet rose again and staggered here and there,
And stared at her two hands with fixity.
'Alas! Shall these be bloodstained?' sorrowed she,
'A virgin and by nature disinclined
Both by my wedding robes and state of mind,
And by my hands, not meant to bear a knife,

I cannot, will not, rob a man of life.
What the devil have I with this knife to do?
Or shall I let my throat be cut in two?
Then I shall bleed, alas! and die in shame!
But this thing must be settled all the same,
And either he or I must lose our life.
And out of doubt,' she said, 'since I'm his wife
And faithful, it is better far for me
To die in honour and wifely chastity
Than live a traitor in undying shame.
Be as it may, in earnest or in game,
He shall awake, arise and flee away
Through this gutter, before the break of day.'
She wept most tenderly upon his face
And in her arms she held him in embrace,
And shook and woke him with a motion soft.
He leaped down from a window up aloft
When warned by her and succoured from disaster.
This Lynceus was light-footed, no man faster,
And from his wife he ran at furious speed.
The luckless woman was so weak indeed,
And helpless too, that she had not gone far
Before her cruel father seized her. Ah!
Lynceus, alas! Why are you so unkind?

Why didn’t you especially keep in mind
The need to take her with you safe and sound?
For when she saw that he had gone, and found
She could not catch him up, nor go his pace,
Nor follow him, she sat down in that place
Until they caught and threw her chained in gaol,
And here is the conclusion of the tale.*

380 '… hot and cold, and moist and dry': a conventional reference to the four temperaments or humours, based on combinations of the four supposed elements in medieval physiology.

393 Tercel: the male of any kind of hawk.

583 The turtle-dove: traditionally the advocate of fidelity in love, and clearly a different bird from the 'meek-eyed dove' of l.341 which was especially associated with Venus.

THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

Title: The work is referred to in the Man of Law's introduction to his tale as 'the Seintes Legende of Cupid' ('The Legendary of Cupid's Saints'), which describes the poem more appropriately than the title in common use, and incidentally makes a usefully ironic connection between Christianity and the religion of Love.

16 Saint Bernard: Abbot of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, famed for his wisdom. The proverbial saying that even he didn't know everything seems to have been common.

70–80 The Flower and the Leaf were rival sets of allegorical values which figure in the amusements of contemporary adepts of courtly love. Those who declare themselves for the Flower bloom briefly and beautifully in love, while those who support the Leaf naturally represent more stable and sober virtues. In the allegorical poem of the early fifteenth century called *The Flower and the Leaf*, formerly thought to be by Chaucer, followers of the Flower indulge in delights, while followers of the Leaf are brave and

chaste. The latter comfort the former after a storm has drenched them.

111 The attribution of perfume to the scentless daisy was a commonplace of courtly literature.

130 The two lines following l.130 are added from the 'F' text, ll.143–4.

131 Saint Valentine: see note to 'The Parliament of Birds', l.309.

179 Here, and again at ll.317 and 422, the poet names the queen of the god of love, and yet at l.505, in answer to the god's question, he behaves as if he did not know she was Alcestis until told. Since the 'mistake' is common to both versions of the Prologue, I prefer to think that the character of the poet in the poem must be seen as deferring, very politely and in some trepidation, to the monarch of the occasion. His ensuing compliment evidently goes down very well with Alcestis (l.523).

186 It has been suggested that Chaucer intended there to have been nineteen 'Cupid's saints'.

203–23 The lovers and beauties here invoked include eight of the ten heroines of 'The Legend of Good Women', Medea and Philomela being excluded. Notes on the other characters follow: Absalom: King David's son, beautiful and golden-haired, but treacherous. For his story, see 2 Samuel, 13–18.

Esther: see note to 'The Book of the Duchess', l.987.

Jonathan: son of King Saul and close friend of David. See 1 Samuel, 18–20.

Penelope: see note to 'The Book of the Duchess', l.1081.

Marcia: wife of the Younger Cato (95–46 BC), who gave her to his friend. On the death of the latter she returned to her former husband.

Helen: a special representative of beauty because she became the ostensible cause of the Trojan War when Paris abducted her from her husband, Menelaus.

Isolde: see note to 'The House of Fame', l.1796.

Alcestis: eponymous heroine of Euripides' play. When Death came for her husband Admetus she offered herself instead. Hercules brought her out of Hades and reunited her with Admetus.

Lavinia: see note to 'The Book of the Duchess', ll.328–31.

Polyxena: see note to 'The Book of the Duchess', l.1070.

Hero: a priestess of Aphrodite and lover of Leander, who nightly swam the Hellespont to visit her. When he was drowned in a storm she threw herself into the sea.

Canacee (the double 'e' aids correct pronunciation and scansion): daughter of Aeolus and mother of several children by Neptune. She was killed by her father because she fell in love with her brother.

256 'Heresy': see Introduction, p.154.

280 Livy: the Roman historian Titus Livius (59 BC-I 7 AD), probably cited here because he wrote on the story of Lucrece (Lucretia). Valerius: a Roman author?

281 Jerome: St Jerome (*c*. 347-*c*. 420), main author of the Vulgate, wrote *Adversus Jovinianum* 'to refute the contention (among others) of a monk called Jovinian that "a virgin is no better as such than a wife in the sight of God" ' (Robert P. Miller, ed., *Chaucer Sources and Backgrounds*, p.415; a generous selection from the Jerome work appears in the book).

305 Ovid's *Epistle* is his *Epistolae Heroidum (Heroides)*, in which there are twenty-one letters, some of which Chaucer used in writing 'The Legend of Good Women'.

307 Vincent of Beauvais: a thirteenth-century Dominican

and author of *Speculum Historiale* (The Mirror of History).

354 Lords of Lombardy: no precise reference is traced; possibly the political turbulence of the region had already become proverbial.

365 Aristotle: not mentioned in Chaucer's text, which has 'the philosophre'. But his advice to kings in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was also cited by Chaucer's fellow-poet Gower, and in any case, Aristotle was *the* philosopher for the Middle Ages.

382 'The compassion of lions, on the contrary, is clear from innumerable examples – for they spare the prostrate; they allow such captives as they come across to go back to their own country; they prey on men rather than women, and they do not kill children except when they are very hungry' (twelfth-century Latin bestiary translated by T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts*. Jonathan Cape, 1954, p.9).

408 Arcite and Palamon and their love for Emily are the subject of the first of *The Canterbury Tales*, 'The Knight's Tale'.

411 Roundel: see 'The Parliament of Birds' (ll.680–92) for an example.

Virelay: a thirteenth-century French dance-song, usually of three stanzas. Each stanza is preceded by the two-line refrain, and then follows the four-line stanza, the last two lines of which use the music of the refrain. Then the second singing of the refrain ends the stanza.

414–18 If this is a true account of Chaucer's subject matter, then his work based on Innocent III 's commentary on Boethius and on Origen's homily has not survived. Origen (*c*. 185-*c*. 253), a defender of Christianity and especially the upholder of mystical interpretation of

the Bible, was a controversial but important figure in the early Church. When young he made himself a eunuch 'for the kingdom of heaven's sake' (see Matthew 9.12).

The Life of Saint Cecilia is presumably 'The Second Nun's Tale'.

464 A standard defence, in all times up to but not including our own, of those accused of writing immoral material is that it is done to warn against evil.

480 Another of Chaucer's frequent protests (or laments?) that he himself is not engaged in the kind of passionate action of which he writes.

500 The turning of Alcestis into a daisy seems to be a Chaucerian invention (Robinson). 'Day's eye' is the correct etymology for 'daisy'.

514 Agathon (*c.* 447–400 BC): a poet and friend of Plato and Euripides. Probably mentioned here because in Plato's *Symposium*, which was known as 'Agathon's Feast', the story of Alcestis is told.

519 Cybele (*Gr.* Rhea): earth goddess and mother of both Jove and Neptune.

580 Ptolemy: the thirteenth Egyptian king of that name, whom Cleopatra murdered so that she might reign alone. This is F. N. Robinson's numbering, following 'F' text of the Prologue.

624 Octavian (63 BC –14 AD): Octavius Ceasar the conqueror of Antony and Cleopatra.

634–49 This short passage on the sea-fight off Actium has stimulated a flow of scholarly ink. Every detail of the manner of fighting has been confirmed from contemporary accounts of medieval naval battles, including the practice of spreading some slippery

substance on the decks (peas? pease? pitch?) to frustrate foemen's foothold.

696 It was a comparatively common medieval barbarism to put an offender in a snake-pit.

707 Semiramis: see note to 'The Parliament of Birds', l.288.

773 Phoebus: the epithet ('bright' or 'pure') applied to Apollo as the sun god.

774 Aurora (*Gr*. Eos): goddess of the redness of dawn, who announces the coming of the sun and accompanies him throughout the day.

785 Ninus: king, and co-founder, with Semiramis, of Nineveh.

930 Most of the characters mentioned in this second Chaucerian account of the fall of Troy and its consequences figure in 'The House of Fame' (see notes to II.151–380).

932 Minerva (Gr. Athena): goddess of power and wisdom.

942 Ascanius: Aeneas's son.

964 Achates: faithful friend of Aeneas.

1005 Sichaeus: Dido's rich uncle, to whom she had been married. He was killed by Dido's brother Pygmalion, an event which touched off Dido's emigration and the founding of Carthage. Historically, the fall of Troy (*c*. 1184 BC) and the founding of Carthage (*c*. 853 BC) are more than three hundred years apart. It is owing to Virgil and his insertion of the Aeneas episode into the life of Dido that we think of the two events as closely successive.

1245 Iarbas: historically, but not in Virgil, a neighbouring king whose attempt to force Dido into marriage with him caused her to immolate herself.

1297 Mercury: the Roman god of commerce who inherited the characteristics of Hermes, the Greek god used as herald and messenger by the gods.

1383 Possibly, suggests Robinson (p.963), Chaucer echoes a passage in Dante's *Inferno* (XIX.5), where 'the public crying of the misdeeds of condemned criminals' is mentioned. Chaucer clearly gives notice, by blowing a horn, of raising the hue and cry against Jason.

1396 Guido: see 'The House of Fame', note to l.1469.

1425 Colchis: not in fact an island but a region near the Caucasus.

1453 Argus: the grandson of Aeëtes. Jason had rescued him after a shipwreck.

1457 *Argonauticon*: the *Argonautica*, an unfinished heroic poem in eight books by Valerius Flaccus, a first-century poet; known to the Middle Ages chiefly through Dares Phrygius.

1459 Philoctetes: most famous of Greek archers, and friend and armour-bearer to Hercules. Hero of a tragedy by Sophocles.

1466 Hypsipyle: became Queen of Lemnos (the island, incidentally, upon which Philoctetes was marooned by the Greeks besieging Troy, because the stench from his wound lowered their morale) when the women of the island killed all the men except her father, whom she hid, for consorting with Thracian slave women. In Valerius Flaccus the messenger is of course a woman, but Chaucer has a male messenger (l.1486), an error I have corrected.

1679 In this account of Jason and Medea, the latter's sorcery is referred to only obliquely, and her tremendous revenge on Jason – murdering her two children by him, and poisoning his next wife – is not mentioned at

all. It figures in Chaucer only as the prophecy of the abandoned Hypsipyle (1574 *ante*).

1682 Tarquin: Sextus Tarquinius, the ravisher of Lucretia, was the son of Tarquinius Superbus (so named on account of his great cruelty). The rape of Lucrece was the last straw for the oppressed Roman people, who banished the entire family, and with it the kingship, in 510 BC.

1689 'Our Legend' is probably *The Golden Legend* (a thirteenth-century collection of largely unhistorical saints' lives). St Augustine comments on the story in *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God) 1.19 (Robinson, p.964).

1695 Ardea: the city of the Rutulians.

1710 Collatine lived in Collatia, not Rome. In the full story, the Roman officers first went to Rome, where they found the women of the Tarquin family feasting, and afterwards to Collatia.

1749 A centuries-old commonplace in masculine praise of women.

1862 Brutus: Lucius Brutus, the tribune who assumed leadership of the Roman people rebelling against the Tarquins.

1870 Lucrece's Day was 24 February – the date, as it happens, on which first I drafted this note.

1882 The Syrophoenician Woman (Matthew 15.28).

1886 Minos, the King of Crete, was, like his brother Rhadamanthus, the son of Jove and Europa; both after death became judges in the underworld.

1896 Androgeus was not killed out of envy of his prowess at phil-osophy, but because he beat his fellow-contestants in the games of the Panathenaea.

1902 Megara: a city twenty-six miles from Athens. Its citadel, Alcathoë (l.1922), was named after its founder Alcathous).

1908 For the daughter of Nisus, Scylla, see note to l.292 of 'The Parliament of Birds'. In the myth on which Chaucer draws, she killed her father by plucking from his beard the purple hair on which his life depended. So the city fell; but Minos, horrified by her undaughterly action, drowned her.

1928 The 'monstrous wicked beast' was the Minotaur, offspring of Pasiphae, Minos's queen, by a bull.

1944 Aegeus: King of Athens and father of Theseus. The latter sailed to Crete with black sails. On his triumphant return he forgot to hoist white sails, the agreed signal of his success, and Aegeus, thinking he was dead, threw himself into the sea (hence the *Aegean* Sea).

2155 The island of Aegina is near Athens, in the Saronic Gulf.

2163 To maroon Ariadne on Naxos, Theseus would have had to sail many miles east and south before turning back to Athens. See any map of the eastern Mediterranean.

2223 Taurus: Bacchus took pity on Ariadne, made love to her, and threw her up to heaven as a star in the constellation Hercules.

2237 Primum Mobile: in Chaucer 'the first heaven', i.e. the outermost in the Ptolemaic system.

2247 Pandion: King of Athens.

2249 Juno (Gr. Hera): senior goddess in the classical pantheon, protectress of women and especially of marriage.

2250 Hymen: originally a marriage song, but later

personalized into a handsome youthful god bearing a marriage torch.

2252 The Furies: goddesses of Vengeance who hunted down criminals. Only in later poetry (e.g. that of Ovid) are they limited to three, and named.

2253 Owl: in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (VI. 552–3) we have:

> And on the house did rucke [i.e. huddle]
> A cursed Owle the messenger of yll successe and lucke.

2274 Philomela (= lover of song): poetic name for the nightingale (see Introduction, p. 158).

2357 An interesting detail of medieval ladies' education. Presumably, writing was the work of employed clerics, while weaving was an appropriate activity for gentlewomen.

2367 Another messenger who was traditionally – and more appropriately – female, Chaucer makes male.

2384 The subsequent revenge of the sisters, in killing Tereus's child and serving him cooked to his father, is not germane to Chaucer's tale!

2398 Demophon: son of Theseus and Phaedra.

2421 Neptune (*Gr.* Poseidon): the god hostile to the Greeks, whose ships returning to Greece from Troy he pursued with storms.

2422 Thetis was a sea-goddess and mother to Achilles. Triton was a half-human, half-fish son of Neptune. Sometimes Tritons are mentioned in the plural. No good explanation of 'Chorus' here exists.

2425 Lycurgus: according to Boccaccio, the King of Thrace.

2438 Rhodope: a mountainous region of Thrace.

2570 Danaus and Aegyptus were twins. Danaus had fifty

daughters, and Aegyptus fifty sons who proposed to their cousins. Danaus's daughters were instructed by their father, who feared his nephews, to kill their husbands in the bridal bed. All didexcept Hypermnestra, whose husband Lynceus later killed Danaus. In Chaucer, Aegyptus (after whom Egypt is named) was father to the daughters.

2630 The Fatal Sisters: the three Parcae, or Fates – 'Clotho (who held the distaff), Lachesis (who spun the thread of life), and A tropos (who cut it off when life was ended)' (Rev. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*).

2723 No satisfactory explanation exists for the failure to round off this tale.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Love Visions

THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

THE HOUSE OF FAME

THE PARLIAMENT OF BIRDS

THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
BRIAN STONE

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