

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Legend of Good Women

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Prologue

A thousand times have I heard men tell
That there is joy in Heaven and pain in Hell,
And I do agree that it is so;
But nonetheless I well know also
That there is none dwelling in this country
That to Heaven or Hell has made journey,
Nor in any other way has knowledge of them,
Except as he's heard told or found it written,
For by experience none may doubts relieve.
But God forbid that men should believe
No more than man can see with his eye!
Men should not deem everything a lie
They cannot see themselves, or else do;
For, God knows, a thing is no less true,
Though everyone may not that thing see.
Bernard the monk saw not all, indeed!

Then must we to the books that we find,
By which ancient things are kept in mind,
And to the doctrines of the old and wise
Give credence, in every subtle guise,
Which tell us the old well-proven stories
Of holiness, of kingdoms, victories,
Of love, of hate, of other sundry things,
Which I must spend no time rehearsing.
And if the old books were flown away,
Of remembrance would be lost the way.
We should then truly honour and believe
Those books, when all else may deceive.

And as for me, though my learning's slight,
In books for to read is my delight,
And to them I give faith and full credence,
And in my heart hold them in reverence
So heartily that pleasure is there none
That from my books would see me gone,

Unless quite seldom, on a holiday,
Save, certainly, when the month of May
Is come, and I hear the birds all sing,
And the flowers all begin to spring,
Farewell my book and my devotion!

And then am I in such condition
That, of all the flowers in the mead,
Love I most the white and red I see,
Such as men call daisies in our town.
For them I have so great an affection,
As I have said, at the start of May,
That in my bed there dawns no day
When I'm not up and walking in the mead
To see this flower to the sun freed,
When it rises early on the morrow;
That blissful sight softens all my sorrow,
So glad am I when I am in its presence
To show it all and every reverence,
As she that is the flower of all flowers,
Whom every virtue and honour dowers,
And ever alike fair and fresh of hue,
And I love it, and ever the love renew,
And ever shall until my heart shall die;
Though I swear not, and this I tell's no lie,
No creature loved hotter in his life.

And when it is eve, I swiftly hie,
As soon as ever sun sinks in the west
To see this flower, how she does sink to rest
For fear of night, she so hates the darkness.
Her face is wholly open to the brightness
Of the sun, for there it does unclose.
Alas, that I lack English rhyme or prose,
Sufficiently to praise this flower aright!
But help me, you of knowledge and of might,
You lovers, who can write of sentiment;
In this cause ought you to be diligent
To further me somewhat in my labour,

Whether your party is the leaf or flower.
For I well know, you oft before have borne
Poetry's crop away, and stored the corn,
And I come after, gleaning here and here,
And am full glad if I can find an ear
Of any goodly word that you have left.
And though it may be I rehearse, bereft,
What you in your fresh songs did plead,
Be patient with me, and be not displeased,
Since you see I do it all in honour
Of love, and in the service of the flower
Whom I serve with all my wit and might.
She is the brightest and the one true light
That through this dark world my way has lead:
'The heart within my sad breast owns to dread,
Of you, and loves so sore, that you, I sigh,
Are truly mistress of my wit not I.
My word, my work, so knit you understand
That, as a harp's obedient to the hand
That makes it sound after its fingering,
Right so do you out of my heart bring
Such voice as you wish, to laugh or plain.
Be you my guide and lady sovereign;
As to my earthly god, to you I call
Both in this work and in my sorrows all.'

But why I spoke was, to give credence
To old stories, and show them reverence,
And say that men must more things believe
Than they may prove, or with their eyes see –
That shall I speak of when I see my time;
I can't say everything at once in rhyme.
My restless spirit that ever thirsts anew
To see this flower so young, so fresh of hue,
Constrained me with so fiery a desire,
That in my heart I yet do feel the fire,
Which made me rise before it was day –
And this was now the first morn of May –

With fearful heart and glad devotion,
So as to be at the resurrection
Of that flower when it should uncloseth
Against the sun, that rose as red as rose,
That in the breast was of the Bull that day
Whom Agenor's daughter led away.
And down on my knees I fell to meet,
And as I might, this fresh flower greet;
Kneeling always till unclosed it was
Upon the small, soft, sweet grass
That with sweet flowers was embroidered all,
Of such sweetness and fragrance overall
That in respect of gum, or herb, or tree,
Comparison shall not be made by me,
For it surpasses plainly all odours,
And in its rich beauty all flowers.
The Earth had forgot its poor condition
Of winter, that left it naked, beaten,
And with its sword of cold so sore grieved;
Now the temperate sun had all relieved
That naked was, and clad it new again.
The small birds, free of wintry pain,
Who did the hunter and the net evade,
Of the fowler, who attack had made
In winter and had destroyed their brood,
Thought, to spite him, it did them good
To sing, and in their song of him despise
The foul churl who had in greedy wise
Betrayed them all with his sophistry.
This was their song – 'The fowler defy we,
And all his craft!' And some sang loud and clear
Lays of love, that joy it was to hear,
In worship and praise of their mates there,
And in new blissful summer's honour,
Upon the branches full of blossom soft,
In their delight, they turned about full oft,
And sang: 'Blessed be Saint Valentine,

For on his day I choose you to be mine,
Without regret, oh my heart sweet!
And therewithal their beaks did meet,
Bestowing honour, humble obedience
To love, and all other due observance
That belongs to love and to nature;
Construe that as you wish, I do not care.

And those that had committed unkindness –
As some birds do, from faithlessness –
Besought mercy for their trespass,
And humbly sang repentance at the last,
And swore on the blossom to be true,
So their mates would pity them too,
And in the end make peace and accord.
Though they found Pride for a time their lord,
Yet Pity, through his strong noble might,
Forgave, and made Mercy temper Right,
Through innocence, and so reigned Courtesy.
But I don't equate innocence to folly,
Nor false pity, for virtue is the mean,
As *Ethics* says, such the manner I mean.
And thus these birds, free of all malice,
Agreed to love, rejecting the vice
Of hatred, and sang of one accord,
'Welcome, summer, our governor and lord!'

And Zephyrus and Flora gently
Gave to the flowers, soft and tenderly,
Sweet breath, opening their leaves indeed,
As god and goddess of the flowery mead;
In which I thought I might, day by day,
Ever dwell, in the jolly month of May,
Without sleep, without meat or drink.
Down full softly I began to sink;
And leaning on my elbow and my side,
There the long day planned I to abide,
For no reason else, no lie you see,
Than there to look upon the daisy,

That for good reason men do name
The 'day's-eye' or else the 'eye of day,'
The Empress, and flower of flowers all.
I pray to God good may her befall,
And all that love flowers, for her sake!
Yet nonetheless think not that I make,
In praising the flower above the leaf,
More than is the corn above the sheaf,
For one's no worse or better than the other;
I am no partisan now of either.
Nor know I who serves the leaf or flower;
May they enjoy their service and labour,
For this is all drink from another tun,
From an old story, ere such was begun.
When the sun sank towards the west,
And this flower closed and drooped to rest
Through the darkness of night, which is dread,
Home to my house full swiftly I sped,
To take my rest, and early then to rise,
To see this flower open, as I devise.
And in a small garden I have made,
That benched was with turf freshly laid,
I bade men swiftly my couch to make;
For honour and the new summer's sake,
I bade them strew flowers on my bed.
When I'd closed my eyes, laid down my head,
I fell asleep within an hour or so;
I dreamed how I lay in the meadow,
This flower, I love and dread to see.
And from afar came walking in the mead
The god of Love and on his arm a queen,
And she was clad in royal habit green.
A net of gold she wore upon her hair,
And on that a white crown did she bear
With small flowers, no lies hear from me,
For all the world, just as a daisy
Is crowned with white petals light,

So were the flowers of her crown white;
For of one fine pearl oriental,
Her white crown was fashioned all,
So that the white crown above the green
Made her like a daisy in that scene,
Considering also her gold net above.

And clothed was the mighty god of Love
In silk, embroidered full of green sheaves,
Twined with a design of red rose-leaves,
The freshest since the world was first begun.
His golden hair was crowned with a sun,
Instead of gold, to make the burden light;
And his face therewith shone so bright
That scarcely could I the god behold,
And in his hands I thought he did hold
Two fiery darts glowing like embers red,
And angel-like his wings I saw spread.
And although men say that blind is he,
Nonetheless I thought that he could see,
For sternly his gaze on me he did hold
So that his look made my heart turn cold.
And by the hand he took this noble queen,
Crowned with white and clothed all in green,
So womanly, so gracious, and so meek,
That through this world, though men might seek
Half her beauty, it should no man find
In any creature formed after our kind.
And therefore I write, as it comes to me,
This song in praise of the noble lady.

Ballade

Hide, Absolom, your gold tresses clear,
Esther, lay you your meekness all a-down;
Hide, Jonathan, all your friendly manner;
Penelope, Cato's Marcia, be one,
Make of your wifehood no comparison;
Hide you Iseult, Helen, your beauty's bane,
My lady comes, that all these may disdain.

Your fair body; let it not appear,
Lavinia; nor Lucretia the Roman,
Polyxena, who paid for love so dear,
Nor Cleopatra, with all your passion,
Hide you your truth in love, your reputation;
And you Thisbe, who had of love such pain;
My lady comes, that all these may disdain.

Hero, Dido, Laodamia here,
And Phyllis, hanging for your Demophon,
And Canace, whose face alone brings cheer,
Hypsipyle betrayed so by Jason,
Make of your truth no boast nor oration;
Nor Hypermnestra, nor Ariadne, twain;
My lady comes, that all these may disdain.

This ballade may well be sung, you see,
As I have said before, to my lady free,
For certainly all those would not suffice
To equal my lady in any wise.
For as the sun will the fire make thin,
So surpasses all my lady sovereign,
Who is so good, so fair, so debonair;
I pray God all that befalls her is fair!
Had I known not the comfort of her presence,
I'd have been dead, without defence,

Of Love's words and look, from very fear;
As, in time, hereafter you shall hear.

Behind this god of Love, upon the green,
I saw advancing ladies nineteen
In royal habit, at full easy pace;
And after them of women such a race,
That since God made Adam out of earth,
A third of them, from mankind, or a fourth,
I thought it beyond possibility,
In this wide world could created be,
And true in love the women were each one.

Now was this a wonder or was it none,
That right anon as soon as they did espy
This flower that I call the day's eye,
Suddenly they halted all as one,
And knelt, as it were upon occasion,
And sang with one voice, 'Hail and honour
To truth of womanhood and this flower
That symbolizes all our honour thus!
Her white crown bears witness to us!'

And at that word, in a circle round,
They seated themselves full softly down.
First sat the god of Love, and then the queen
With the white crown, clad all in green;
And then all the rest, by their degree,
According to their rank, full courteously;
And not a word was spoken in the place
For the time it takes a furlong to pace.

I, kneeling by this flower, with good intent
Waited to know what all this meant,
As still as any stone, till at the last,
The god of Love on me his eye did cast
And said, 'Who kneels here?' and I answered
As he did request, when I him heard
And said: 'Sire, it is I,' and came near,
Saluting him. Quoth he, 'Why are you here
So near my own flower, and so boldly?

It would be more fitting, truly,
For a worm to approach my flower than you.’
‘And why so, Sire,’ quoth I, ‘so please you?’
‘Because,’ quoth he, ‘you are unsuitable.
She’s precious to me, worthy and delightful,
And you’re my foe, and my folk make war on,
And slander my old servants every one
And harm them with your translation
And hinder folk in their devotion
To me, and you claim that it is folly
To serve Love. You cannot deny it,
For in plain text, without the need of notes,
You translated the *Romance of the Rose*,
Which is a heresy against my law
And makes wise folk from me withdraw.
And Cressida you wilfully discussed,
Making men in women lose their trust,
Who have been true as ever any steel.
Frame me your answer carefully indeed;
For, though you have renounced my law, I say,
As other wretches have done many a day,
By Saint Venus, who my mother is,
If you live, you shall repent all this
So bitterly, it shall be clearly seen!’
Then spoke the lady clothed all in green
Saying: ‘By God, now, out of courtesy,
You must listen, if answer yet has he
To all this of which you him accuse.
A god should not resentfully abuse,
But of his deity he should be careful
And thereto gracious and merciful.
And were you not a god that knows all,
Then it might be I could tell you more:
He may have been falsely accused,
Such that by rights he should be excused,
For in your court is many a flatterer,
And many a cunning tattling slanderer,

Who many a sound in your ear will drum
Arising solely from imagination
To claim your intimacy, and from envy;
These are the reasons, no lies you'll see.
Envy is washer of dirty linen always,
For she is never missing night or day
From the house of Caesar, so says Dante,
Whoever is absent it will not be she.
And then perhaps, since this man is foolish,
He may have done the thing without malice,
And, accustomed his written works to make,
He cares not what matter for them he take;
Or he was bade to make those poems two
By some person, and felt bound so to do,
And perhaps he repents utterly of this.
He has not gone so grievously amiss
In translating what old clerk's have writ,
As if he'd maliciously invented it,
In scorn of Love, and himself it wrought.
This a just lord should have in his thought,
And not be like the tyrants of Lombardy,
That have their riches all by tyranny.
For king or lord whose right is natural,
Should not play the tyrant or be cruel:
Like a tax collector, do what harm he can.
He must consider this is his liege man
And his own treasure, and his gold in coffer.
This is the judgement of the Philosopher:
A king to rule his liegemen with justice;
Without doubt that his true office.
Though he'll defend his lords high degree,
As it is right and reasonable they be
Enhanced and honoured and most dear –
For they are demigods in this world here –
Yet he must do right to both poor and rich,
Although their state is not alike as such,
And show to poor folk his compassion,

For see the noble nature of the lion:
If a fly should offend him or bite,
He with his tail away the fly will smite
Quite gently, for being noble, ay,
He will not deign to move against a fly
As does a mongrel dog or other creature.
Noble spirits should restrain their nature,
And weigh everything with equity,
And ever have regard for high degree.
For, sire, it is no triumph for a lord
To condemn a man without a word,
And, for a lord, not the path to use.
And if so be the man has no excuse,
Yet asks for mercy with a fearful spirit,
And offers up himself, just in his shirt,
To submit himself to your sole judgement,
Then a god ought with swift discernment
To think of his own honour, and the crime.
For since it's no mortal matter, at this time
You ought to be more kind and merciful;
Lay aside your wrath, and be reasonable.
The man has served according to his learning,
And furthered well your law in his writing.
Though he can poorly perhaps indite,
Yet has he made unlearned folk delight
In serving you, by praising your name.
He made the book that's called the House of Fame,
And the Death too of Blanche the Duchess,
And the Parliament of Fowls as I guess
And all the love of Palamon and Arcites
Of Thebes, although the tale is heard less,
And many a hymn for your holidays,
Known as ballades, roundels, virelays;
And, to speak of other holiness, he has
Translated into prose Boethius,
And wrote a life too of Saint Cecilia;
And long ago, translated another,

Origen upon Mary Magdalen;
He ought now to suffer less pain;
He has made many a lay, many a thing.

Now as you are a god and a king,
I, your Alceste, once the queen of Thrace,
I ask for this man now, of your grace,
That throughout his life you harm him not,
And he will swear to you, swift as thought,
And further you as much as he misled there,
In both the *Rose* and in *Cressida*.'

The god of Love answered her thus anon,
'Madame,' quoth he, 'lengths of time now gone
Have shown you to be charitable and true,
So that never since the world was new
Has any seemed better than you to me.
If now I'd honour my high degree,
I cannot nor will not scorn your plea;
All lies with you: do with him as you please.
I forgive everything without demur;
For he who gives a gift or does a favour
In timely fashion wins thanks all the more;
So you decide what he must do, therefore.
Go, thank now my lady here,' quoth he.

I rose, then, down I fell upon my knee,
And said thus: 'Madame, may the god above
Reward you now, since you the god of Love
Have made his wrath towards me forgive,
And given me, with grace, so long to live
That I may learn truly who you might be
Who gift me this honour, and help me,
But truly I did not think, in this case,
I was wrong and against love did trespass.
Since a true man should not share, indeed,
In the blame attached to a thief's deed;
Nor should I earn a true lover's blame
Because I spoke a false lover's shame.
They ought my cause rather to uphold

In that of Cressida I wrote and told,
And the Rose. Whatever the author meant,
It was, God knows, despite it, my intent
To further truth in love, and such cherish;
And to warn men of falseness and of vice
By such examples, that was all my meaning.

And she answered: 'Cease your arguing,
For Love will in no way contradicted be
Whether right or wrong, learn that from me!
You have your favour, hold you then thereto.
And I shall say what penance you must do
For your trespass. Understand me here:
As long as you live, throughout the year,
You shall the greater part of your time spend
In composing of tales of glorious legend,
Of those good women, maidens and wives,
Who were true and loving all their lives,
While telling of false men who did betray,
Them, and in their lives did make assay
Of how many women they might shame,
For in your world such is thought a game.
And though no lover you yet choose to be,
Speak well of love; this penance do for me.
And to the god of Love I shall then pray
That he charge all his servants, in every way
To further you and your labour requite.
Go now your ways, the penance is but slight.
And when the book's done, give it to the queen,
On my behalf, at Eltham or at Sheen.'

The god of Love did smile, and then he said:
'Know you,' quoth he, 'if she be wife or maid,
Queen, or countess, or other degree
She who such slight penance serves on thee,
Who deserved to feel a greater smart?
But pity flows swifter in noble heart;
As you may see. She knows what she is.'
And I said: 'Nay, sire, as I may have bliss,

No more than that I see she is right good.’
 ‘That is true indeed, by my own selfhood,’
 Quoth Love, ‘you have knowledge, I see,
 If that is what you think, but now tell me,
 Have you not read in a book, in your chest,
 Of the great goodness of queen Alceste,
 Who became the daisy, the *day’s eye*;
 She that for her husband chose to die,
 And thus to go to Hell rather than he,
 She who was rescued then by Hercules,
 Who brought her out of Hell again to bliss?’
 And I answered again, and said: ‘Yes,
 Now I know her! And is this good Alceste,
 The day’s-eye, and my own heart’s true rest?
 Now I feel the goodness of this fair wife,
 Who both after her death and in her life
 Doubled by her bounty her reputation.
 Well she repays me for the great affection
 I show towards her flower, the day’s-eye.
 It is no wonder Jove did her stellify,
 As Agatho tells us, for her goodness.
 Her white crown to that bears witness,
 For as many virtues as had she
 As many small flowers in her crown be.
 In remembrance of her and in honour,
 Cybele made the daisy, and the flower
 She crowned all with white, as men may see,
 And Mars tipped it with red, indeed,
 Instead of rubies, set amongst the white.’
 At this the queen with modesty blushed bright
 With being praised so in her presence.
 Then said Love, ‘Great negligence I see
 In you, that at the time you created
 ‘Hide, Absolom, your tresses,’ as a ballade,
 You forgot her in your song to set,
 Since you are so greatly in her debt,
 And well know what a paragon is she

To any woman who will lover be,
For she taught the art of noble loving,
And of wifehood the proper meaning,
And the bounds that we should keep;
Your little wit was at that time asleep.
But now I charge you upon your life,
That in the legend you tell of this wife,
When you have writ of lesser ones before,
And now fare you well, I'll ask no more.

But ere I go, this much I will you tell,
No true lover shall come unto Hell.
These other ladies sitting in a row
Are in your ballade, as you may know,
And in your books all of them you'll find.
In your writings, keep them all in mind,
I mean those who are in your knowing.
For here are twenty thousand more sitting
Than you recognise, good women all
And true in love whatever might befall;
Make verses on them all as you think best.
I must away, the sun draws to the west,
To Paradise, with all this company,
And evermore serving the fresh daisy.

With Cleopatra, I'd have you begin,
And so forth, and my love shall you so win,
For where's the man in love, whoever he be,
Who'd suffer as much pain for love as she.
I know you cannot tell it all in rhyme,
All that such lovers did in their time;
It would take too long to read and hear.
It suffices me though if, in this manner,
Their lives you write the greater part of,
Following what the old authors treat of.
For whosoever many a story tells,
Must speak briefly, or too long he dwells.'
And with those words my books I did take
And right thus the legend did I make.

The Legend of Cleopatra

Here begins the Legend of Cleopatra, Martyr, Queen of Egypt.

After the death of Ptolemy the king,
Who of all Egypt had the governing,
There reigned his queen, Cleopatra;
Until it occurred, some brief time after,
That out of Rome was sent a senator
To conquer kingdoms and win honour
For the town of Rome, as was their custom,
And make all the world obedient to them,
And, truth to tell, Antonius was his name.
So it befell, Fortune brought him shame:
When he fell in with prosperity,
Rebel unto the town of Rome was he.
And with all this the sister of Caesar,
He left her falsely ere she was aware
And would take himself another wife,
So that he made with Rome and Caesar strife.

Nonetheless in truth this same senator
Was a full worthy noble warrior,
And from his death arose great damage,
Yet love had brought the man to such a rage
And he so tightly bound in the snare
All for the love of Cleopatra there,
That all the world he deemed of no value.
It seemed to him nothing less was due
To Cleopatra than to love and serve.
He cared not if he died in war for her,
In defence of her, and of her right.

The noble queen too so loved this knight,
For his merit and his chivalry.
And unless the books lie, certainly,
He was in person, and in nobleness
And in discretion and in hardiness,
As worthy as any man that lives today.

And she was fair as is the rose in May.
And since to write most briefly is the best,
She wedded him, and had him as she wished.

The wedding and the feast to devise,
For me, who undertake this enterprise,
And who so many stories must now make,
Would be too long indeed, lest I mistake
And fail in things of more weight and charge,
For men may overload a ship or barge;
And therefore to the main point I will skip,
And all the rest of it I shall let slip.

Octavian, enraged by this deed,
A host against Antony chose to lead
All utterly aimed at his destruction,
Of stout Romans, each cruel as a lion;
To ship they went, and so I'll let them sail.

Antonius was aware, and would not fail
To meet with these Romans if he may;
He took counsel, and upon a day,
His wife and he and all his host forth went
To ship anon, all swift was their intent;
And on the sea they there chanced to meet –
High sounds the trumpet – and to shout, and beat
To arms, attacking with the sun.
With grisly sound out booms the mighty gun,
And fiercely they hurtle down at once,
And from the tops they fling great stones.
In goes the grapnel, so filled with crooks;
Among the ropes run the shearing-hooks.
In with the poleaxe presses he and he;
Behind the mast one begins to flee,
And out again, is driven overboard;
One with his own spear himself has gored;
One rends the sail with hooks like a scythe;
One brings a cup, and bids them all be blithe;
One pours dry peas, so on the deck all slither;
With pots of quicklime they clash together;

And thus the long day in fight they spend
Till, at the last, as everything has end,
Antony is beaten and put to flight,
And all his folk flee, as best they might.
The queen flees too, with all her purple sail;
From the blows that fell as thick as hail,
It was no wonder she could not endure.
When Antony saw the misadventure,
'Alas,' quoth he, 'the day that I was born!
My honour this day is lost and gone.'
And, in despair, from his wits did depart,
And stabbed himself at once through the heart,
Before he sailed further from that place.
His wife, who could from Caesar win no grace,
To Egypt fled in fear and in distress.
But hearken all you who speak of kindness,
You men, who falsely swear many an oath
That you will die if your love shows wrath,
Here may you see in women such truth.
The woeful Cleopatra felt such ruth
That there is no tongue that may it tell.
But in the morn, she would not be still,
Until her clever craftsmen built a shrine
With all the rubies and the gemstones fine
Out of all Egypt that they could espy,
And filled the shrine all full with spice,
And had the body embalmed, and fetched up
The corpse into the shrine, which she shut.
And next the shrine she had dug a grave,
And all the serpents she could, displayed
And put them in that grave, and then she said:
'Now, love, whom my sorrowful heart obeyed
So utterly that from that blissful hour
In which to be all freely yours I swore –
I mean you, Antonius, my knight –
Never, waking, in the day or night,
Were you out of my heart's remembrance

For weal or woe, for carol or for dance;
And with myself this covenant I made so,
That, such as you suffered, weal or woe,
Insofar as in my power it lay,
Irreproachable my wifehood, always,
The same would I suffer, life or death.
And that covenant while lasts my breath
I will fulfil, it will be clearly seen,
Was never to her lover a truer queen.’
And with those words, with firm heart, naked,
Among the serpents into the pit she leapt,
And there she chose to make her ending.
Anon the vipers her began to sting,
And she her death received, with good cheer,
For love of Antony, to her so dear –
And this is history, it is no fable.
Now, where to find a man as reliable,
Who will for love his death so freely take,
I pray God may never our heads so ache!
Amen.

Here ends the legend of Cleopatra, martyr.

The Legend of Thisbe

Here begins the Legend of Thisbe of Babylon, Martyr.

Once in Babylon occurred all this,
That town which queen Semiramis
Had ditched all about, and walls did make
Full high, of bricks they did hard-bake.
There were dwelling in this noble town
Two lords, who were of great renown,
And lived so nigh each other, on a green,
That there was but a stone wall between,
As often in great towns is the custom.
And truth to tell, one man had a son,
In all that land one of the liveliest.
The other had a daughter, she the fairest,
That eastward in the world was then dwelling.
The name of each to the other did bring
Women who were neighbours thereabout.
For in that country still, without a doubt,
Maidens were kept guarded jealously
And narrowly, in case they did some folly.

The young man was named Pyramus,
Thisbe was the maid, Ovid says thus;
And in gossip they went hand in glove,
So that as they grew so did their love;
And truly, by reason of their age,
Might have been joined as one in marriage
Except their fathers would not give assent,
And so alike in love was their intent
That none of all their friends could yet,
Prevent it, but oft secretly they met
By cunning, and spoke of their desire;
For veil the coals yet hotter is the fire,
Forbid a love, and it is ten times greater.

The wall which was between them there
Was split apart, from the top right down,

From the moment it first graced the town,
Yet this cleft so narrow was and slight,
It could not be seen in broad daylight.
But what is there love cannot espy?
These two lovers, for I tell no lie,
First finding this little narrow cleft,
With voices low like one who does confess,
Sent their words through the cleft apace,
And told, as they stood there in that place,
All their tale of love and all their woe
Whenever they both dared to do so.

Upon the one side of the wall stood he,
And on the other side there stood Thisbe,
The sweet voice of each other to receive,
And thus their guardians would they deceive.
And every day this wall they would threaten
And wish to God that it were down-beaten,
Thus would they say: 'Alas, you wicked wall,
Through envy you hinder us in all!
Why won't you break or fall all in two?
Or at the least, if you cannot, if you
Would but the once only let us meet,
Or once only exchange kisses sweet,
Then we'd recover from our cares cold.
Yet nonetheless we obligation hold,
Inasmuch as you suffer us to moan
Our words through all your lime and stone.
And so with you we should be pleased.'

And when these words of theirs had ceased
They would kiss the cold wall of stone
And take their leave, and forth would go,
And this was gladly in the eventide,
Or wondrous earl, lest men them espied;
A length of time they spent in this manner
Till on a day when Phoebus rose full clear –
Aurora with the streams of her heat
Had dried the dew from the grasses sweet –

Unto this cleft, where they were wont to be,
Came Pyramus, and after him Thisbe
And made a promise, by their faith I say,
That very night they would steal away
Beguiling their guardians every one,
And forth from the city would be gone;
And as the fields were so broad and wide,
To meet at a sure place and time beside,
And they set their meeting place to be
At King Ninus' grave beneath a tree,
Since pagans who idols' favours curried,
Were then usually in meadows buried,
And fast by this grave there was a well.
And briefly this tale for to tell,
The covenant was made wondrous swiftly,
And the time the sun spent seemed lengthy
Before beneath the ocean it sank down.

This Thisbe had such great affection
And such desire Pyramus to see
That, when she saw her moment, she
At night stole away full secretly
With her face all veiled subtly;
For all her friends, to keep her vow –
She had forsaken. Alas, what pity now,
That ever a woman should be so true
As trust in a man she thought she knew!
And to the tree swiftly she went apace,
For love made her fearless in this place,
And by the well she sat her down to rest.
Alas, then came a wild lioness
Out of the wood, without delay,
Blood-stained from some beast it did slay,
To drink at the well there as she sat;
And so when Thisbe realised that
She rose up with a full fearful heart,
And to a cave, with frightened foot, did dart,
For by the moon she saw it well withal.

And as she ran her veil she let fall
But took no heed, so terrified was she,
And glad it had been possible to flee;
And thus she sat in darkness wondrous still.
When the lioness had drunk her fill,
Around the well she began to wind,
And suddenly the veil did she find,
And with her blood-stained mouth it rent.
When this was done, away she went
And took to the woods to reach her lair.
And at the last Pyramus came there,
But all too long at home had stayed he.
The moon shone, men could clearly see;
And on the way as he travelled fast
His eyes on the ground a-down he cast,
And in the sand that he was gazing on
He saw the broad footprints of a lion,
And in his heart he shuddered so,
And grew pale, and fearful, his hair rose,
And coming near he found the veil all torn.
'Alas,' quoth he, 'that ever I was born!
This one night two lovers' deaths will see!
How shall I ask forgiveness of Thisbe
When I am he who has slain her, alas!
My bidding has slain her, here it was.
Alas, to bid a woman go by night
Into a place where peril might alight,
And I so late! Alas, if I had been simply
At this place before her more promptly!
Now whatever lion is in this forest,
My body must he rend, or my breast
Some wild beast, and gnaw at my heart!
And with those words to the veil did dart,
And kissed it oft and wept on it full sore,
And said, 'Veil, alas I can do no more,
Than let you feel as well the blood of me,
As you have felt the bleeding of Thisbe!'

And with these words he smote him to the heart.
The blood from the wound did sudden start
As water when the conduit broken is.

Now Thisbe, who knew naught of this,
Sitting alone in terror, she thought thus,
'If it so befall that my Pyramus
Comes hither and he cannot me find,
He may think me false, and unkind.'
And out she comes, and after him she spies
Both with her heart, and with her eyes,
And thought, 'I'll tell my fear indeed,
Of the lioness, and my every deed.'
And at the last her love then she found
Beating his heels against the ground,
All blood-stained, and backwards she did start,
And like the waves began to throb her heart,
And pale as boxwood she, and at a throw
She realised, and did fully see and know,
That is was Pyramus, her heart's dear.
Who could write how deathly did appear
Thisbe now, and how her hair she rent,
And how began herself to torment
And how she lay and swooned on the ground,
And how she wept tears to drown his wound,
How mingled his blood with her plaint,
And with his blood herself began to paint,
How embraced the corpse so, alas!
How woeful this wretched Thisbe was!
How she kissed his frosty mouth so cold!
'Who has done this: who has been so bold
To slay my dear? O speak, my Pyramus!
It is your Thisbe, who calls you thus.'
And therewithal she lifted up his head.

The woeful man it seems was not yet dead,
When he heard Thisbe her own name cry,
On her he cast his heavy deathly eye
And sank again, and yielded up the ghost.

Thisbe rose, without a sound almost,
And saw her veil and his empty sheath,
And then his sword, that made his life cease;
Then spoke she thus: 'My woeful hand,' quoth she,
'Is strong enough for such a deed I see,
For love will give me both strength and boldness,
To make a wound large enough, I guess.
I will follow you, and I shall be
Companion yet cause of death,' quoth she.
'And though nothing but death only
Could separate you from me truly,
You shall no more part now from me,
Than from death itself, I go with thee.
And now you jealous fathers of ours,
We that once were children of yours,
We pray you, that without more envy,
In one grave together we might be,
Since love has brought us to this piteous end.
And may a just God every lover send,
Who loves truly, more prosperity
Than ever had Pyramus and Thisbe,
And let no gentlewoman venture more
To enter into such an adventure.
But God forbid that a woman can
Be less true in love than any man,
And, for my part, I'll show it here!
And his sword she grasped without fear
That with her love's blood was yet bright,
And to the heart she herself did smite.

And so Thisbe and Pyramus are done.
Of true men I find but few or none,
In all my books, save this Pyramus,
And therefore have I spoken of him thus,
For it is a delight to men to find
A man who can in love be true and kind.
Here you may see, whatever man may be,
Woman will dare to do as much as he.

Here ends the Legend of Thisbe.

The Legend of Dido

Here begins the Legend of Dido the Martyr, Queen of Carthage

Glory and honour, Virgil the Mantuan,
Be to your name, and I shall if I can
Follow your lantern as you go before,
And tell how Aeneas Dido did abjure.
From your *Aeneid*, and Ovid, will I take
The tenor and the great events re-make.

When Troy was brought to destruction
By Greek craft, and chiefly by Sinon,
Lying about the horse pledged to Minerva,
Through which many a Trojan must suffer,
And Hector had after his death appeared,
And fire so wild, uncontrollable reared
Above the noble tower of Ilium,
That of the city was the keep and dungeon,
And all the country was so low down-brought,
And Priam the king slain, reduced to naught,
And Aeneas was charged by Venus
To flee away, he took Ascanius,
Who was his son, in his right hand and fled;
And on his back he bore and with him led
His old father named Anchises,
And by the way his wife Creusa loses.
And much sorrow had he in his mind
Ere that he could his comrades find.
But at the last when he had found them,
He made ready and at a certain time,
He hied him to the sea full swiftly,
And sailed forth with all his company
Towards Italy, as fate would have it be.
But of his adventures on the sea
It is not my purpose to speak of here,
For it accords not with my matter.

But, as I said, of him and of Dido
 Shall be my tale, till I have all told.
 Long time he sailed on the salt sea
 Till he reached Lybia with difficulty
 With ships seven and no more navy,
 And glad to make his landing speedily
 He was with the tempest then so shaken;
 And when the haven he had overtaken
 He had a knight who was called Achates,
 And chose him of all his company
 To go with him for the country to espy;
 He took with him no more of them, say I.
 But forth they went, and let the ships ride,
 He and his comrade, without a guide.
 Long time he walked in this wilderness
 Till at the last he met with a huntress.
 A bow in hand and arrows had she,
 Her clothes were cut away to the knee,
 And she was the very fairest creature
 That ever yet was formed by Nature,
 And Aeneas and Achates greeted she,
 And thus she spoke to them when they did meet:
 'Saw you,' quoth she, 'as you wandered wide,
 Any of my sisters, yourselves beside,
 With any wild boars or other beasts
 They were hunting through the trees,
 Their skirts tucked up, with arrows, go past?'
 'Nay, in truth, lady,' quoth Aeneas,
 'But, by your beauty, it seems to me,
 You can never a mortal woman be,
 But Phoebus's sister you are, I guess.
 And, if so be you are a goddess,
 Have pity on our labour and our woe.'
 'I am no goddess,' quoth she, 'truly, though;
 But maidens in this country here do wander
 With arrows and with bow, in this manner.
 This is the Libyan kingdom that you see,

Of which Dido mistress is and queen,
And told him briefly on what occasion
And why Dido had come to that region,
Of which I choose now no more to rhyme;
There is no need, and it would lose much time.
For here's the sum of all, it was Venus,
His own mother, that spoke with him thus,
And on Carthage she bade him light,
And vanished anon out of his sight.
I'd follow Virgil, word for word, here,
But it would last too long a while, I fear.

This noble queen who was named Dido,
Who was Sichaeus' wife long ago,
And fairer was than is the bright sun,
The noble town of Carthage had begun,
In which she reigned in such great honour
That she was held of all queens the flower
Of nobleness, free-handedness, and beauty,
Fortunate him who might her once see;
By kings and by lords so desired
That her beauty all the world had fired,
She stood so well in every man's grace.

When Aeneas had come unto that place,
Unto the chief temple of that region,
Where Dido was making her devotion,
All secretly his way did he pursue.
When he had entered the great temple too –
I cannot say if it was possible,
Yet Venus had made him invisible,
So says the book, with surety –
And when both Aeneas and Achates
Had gone through the temple, seen it all,
They found there painted on a wall
How Troy and all the land destroyed was.
'Alas that I was born!' quoth Aeneas,
'Through the world our shame is spread so wide,
That now it is painted too on every side.

We who were in prosperity
Are now disgraced, and in such degree
I no longer care my life to keep!
And with these words he began to weep
So tenderly a pity it was to see.
The queen of the city, that fresh lady,
Stood in the temple in her royal estate,
So richly and so fair now, I may state,
So young, so lively, and with looks so gay,
That if that God whom heaven and earth made
Could love someone for beauty and goodness
For womanhood, constancy, seemliness,
Whom should he love but this lady sweet?
There was no woman but her so complete.

Fortune, that holds this world in governance,
Suddenly produced a fresh occurrence,
And so strange a happening never was,
For all the company of Aeneas,
Whom he had believed lost at sea,
Arrived not far from that city,
So that of his greatest lords, now some
By chance had to the city come,
Unto that same temple for to seek
The queen, and her succour to beseech,
Of such renown, there, was her goodness.
And when they had told all their distress
And of the storm, how hard their case was
Unto the queen appeared Aeneas
And openly made known that it was he.
Who had joy then if not his company
Who had found their lord and governor?

The queen saw they did him such honour,
And had often heard of Aeneas so,
And in her heart she had pity and woe
That ever such a noble man as he
Should be disinherited to such degree,
And saw the man: that he seemed a knight

And capable in person, and of might
And like to be a very nobleman,
And he his words well arrange can,
And has a noble visage also,
And is well-formed in flesh and bone.
For from Venus he had such fineness
That no man was half so fine, I guess,
And a perfect lord he seemed to be.
And as he was a stranger, so did she
Like him the better as, God succour me,
To some folk often a new thing is sweet.
Anon her heart took pity on his woe,
And with that pity love came in also,
And thus with her pity and her kindness
He could not but be eased of his distress.
She said that indeed she was sorry
That he had seen such peril, misery,
And with her friendly speech in this manner
She spoke to him, and said what you shall hear:
‘Are you not Venus’ son and Anchises’?
In good faith, all the worship and increase
That I may grant to you, you shall have.
Your ships and your company I’ll save,
And many a gentle word she spoke so,
And ordered her messengers to go
That same day, and seek without fail
His ships, and provision them to sail.
Full many a beast she to the ships sent,
And with wine did she them present;
And to her royal palace then she sped,
And Aeneas away with her she led.
What need is there the feast to describe?
He was never more at ease in his life.
Full was the feast of dainties and richness,
Of instruments, of song, and of gladness,
And many an amorous glance and device.
Aeneas then is come to Paradise

Out of the mouth of hell, and thus in joy
Recalls all his prosperity at Troy.
To dancing chambers full of merriment,
Of rich benches, and of ornament,
Aeneas is led after the meal.
And there he sat down with the queen,
Till spices all removed, the wine gone,
Unto his chamber was he led anon
To take his ease and for to have his rest
With all his folk, to do what pleased them best.

There was no courser, well-bridled, none,
Nor steed for the jousting good to run,
No fine palfrey that does swiftly go,
No jewellery adorned with rich stones,
No sacks full of gold of large weight,
Nor any ruby that shone by night,
No noble falcon fit for heronry,
No hound to hunt the hart, wild-boar, deer,
No cup of gold with florins newly shot,
That in the land of Libya may be got,
That Dido has not to Aeneas sent,
And all is paid for that he has spent.
Such a welcome does her guests befall,
From one whose kindness passes all.

Aeneas also, to tell you truly,
Sent unto his ship by Achates,
To call for his son and for rich things,
Sceptre, clothes, brooches, and rings,
Some to wear and some he might present
To her who all these noble things had sent,
And bade his son, that he should also make
A gift of them and to the queen them take.

Returned is Achates thus again,
And Aeneas full blissful is, I say,
To see his young son Ascanius.
But nevertheless our author tells us
That Cupid, he who is the god of love,

Through his mother's prayer, high above,
Had the likeness of the child put on
To make the queen enamoured of the man,
This Aeneas; and yet as to that text
Be as it may. I take of it no care.
But true it is she gave a welcome there
To the child, that a wonder 'tis to hear;
And for the present that his father sent
She thanked him full oft with true intent.

Thus is the queen delighted, full of joy
At all these spirited new folk from Troy.
And of the deeds has she enquired
Of Aeneas, and by the tale been fired,
Of Troy; and those two the long day
Made it their aim to talk and play,
From which began to breed such a fire
That guileless Dido has such a desire
With Aeneas, her new guest, to deal,
That she has lost her hue, and sick does feel.
Now to the outcome, now to the fruit of all,
And why I tell what did, and will, befall.

Thus I begin; it fell upon a night
When that the moon had lifted up her light,
The noble queen unto her rest went.
She sighed full sore, herself did torment;
She tossed and turned there, in her bed,
As these lovers will, so I've heard said.
And at the last unto her sister Anne
She made complaint, and thus she began:
'Now, dear sister mine, what can it be
That disturbs me in my dream?' quoth she.
'This same Trojan is so in my thought
Because it seems to me he's so well wrought,
And also seems so likely as a man,
And withal does all the good he can,
That all my love and life lies in his care.
Heard you him tell of his adventures there?

Now Anne, if you do so advise me,
To him would I gladly married be;
This is the crux; for in him does it lie,
Whether indeed now, I shall live or die.'

Her sister Anne, as one who sought her good,
Said what she thought, and her wish withstood.
But hereof there was such a long discussion
It would take too long for me to pen a version;
But in the end the wedding day must stand;
Love will have love, for halt it no one can.

The dawn up-rises out of the sea;
The amorous queen charges her company
To prepare the nets, and spears broad and keen;
A-hunting goes this fresh lively queen,
So spurs her on this new happy woe.
To horse do all her vigorous folk go;
Unto the court the hounds were brought,
And upon coursers swift as any thought,
Her young knights hovered all about,
And of her women too a huge rout.
Upon a sturdy palfrey, paper-white,
With saddle red, embroidered to delight,
With golden bars embossed, at a height,
Sat Dido, all in gold, with gems alight,
And she is fair, as is the bright morrow
That heals sick folk of night's sorrow.
Upon a courser, leaping like the fire –
A man might guide him with a thread of wire –
Sat Aeneas, like Phoebus to describe;
So was he fresh arrayed in charming wise.
The foaming bridle with the bit of gold
Just as he wishes he does there control,
And forth this noble queen I leave to ride,
Out hunting with this Trojan by her side.

The herd of harts is found right anon,
With 'Hey! Let go! Let go! Spur now! Ride on!
Let the lion come now, the bear appear,

That I might once meet him with this spear!
Thus cry the young folk, and to the kill
Drive the wild harts, take them at their will.

Amidst all this to rumble began heaven,
The thunder roared with violence even;
Down came the rain, with hail and sleet so fast,
And heaven's fire, that they were all aghast
The noble queen and all her company,
That each of them was glad away to flee.
And shortly from the tempest her to save,
She fled onwards to a little cave,
And with her went Aeneas also –
If any more went too I do not know,
The author makes of that no mention –
And here began the deep affection
Between the two; this was the first morrow
Of their joy, and start of all their sorrow
For there did Aeneas kneel so
As to tell her all his heart, and all his woe,
And swore so deeply to her to be true,
For weal or woe, and change not for new,
And as a false lover so well did plain,
That guileless Dido pitied his pain,
And took him for husband, became his wife
For evermore, while they should both have life.
And after this, when the storm was spent,
With the same joy as at first, home they went.

Malicious rumour rose and that anon,
Of how Aeneas with the queen had gone
Into the cave; men thought as they chose;
And when neighbouring King Iarbas knows,
Being one who has loved her all his life,
Who had wooed her to have her as his wife,
Such sorrow he made and such grief there,
It was sadness and a pity for to hear.
But as in love it often happens so,
That one shall laugh at another's woe;

Now Aeneas laughs and is in joy
 And richer than he ever was at Troy.
 O guileless women, full of innocence,
 Full of pity, truth, and of conscience,
 What is it makes you trust in men so?
 Have you pity still on their feigned woe,
 With these ancient warnings gone before?
 See you not how they were all forsworn?
 Where see you one who has not left his dear,
 Or been unkind, or made her shed a tear,
 Or robbed her, and boasted of his deed?
 You know it all as well as you can read;
 Take heed now of this great gentleman,
 Who pleases her so well, this same Trojan,
 Who feigns to be so true, her will obeying,
 So noble and discreet in all his doing,
 And so readily makes his obeisance,
 And waits on her at feast and at dance,
 And when she goes to temple and home again,
 And fasts until he has his lady seen,
 And carries on his shield for her sake,
 I know not what; and songs would make,
 Joust, do deeds of arms, and many things,
 Send her letters, tokens, brooches, rings –
 Now hearken how he shall his lady serve!
 Whereas he was in peril undeserved
 And starving through disaster out at sea,
 And desolate had fled from his country,
 And all his folk before the tempest driven,
 She has her body and her kingdom given
 Into his hand, when she might have been
 Of other lands than Carthage their queen,
 And lived in bounteous joy, what would you more?
 This Aeneas, who that deep oath swore,
 Is weary of the game within a throw;
 His ardent zeal away does blow.
 And secretly his ships he readies quite,

And shapes a plan to steal away at night.
 Dido had some suspicion of all this,
 And thought that something seemed amiss,
 For in his bed he lay at night and sighed;
 She asked him at once, what he did hide,
 'My dear heart, whom I love the most?'
 'Indeed,' quoth he, this night my father's ghost
 Has in my sleep so sorely me tormented,
 And Mercury too a message presented,
 Of necessity it is my destiny
 Soon to sail and conquer Italy,
 And so I think to break shall my heart!
 Therewith his false tears out they start,
 And he takes her in his arms two.
 'Is this, in truth,' quoth she, 'what you will do?
 Have you not sworn me your wife to make,
 Alas, what sort of woman do you take
 Me for, a noblewoman and a queen;
 You will not from your wife thus vilely flee?
 Alas, that I was born! What shall I do?'
 To tell it briefly, noble queen Dido
 Seeks the shrines and does sacrifice;
 Pity it is to see her kneel and cry,
 Imploring him and offering to be
 His slave, his servant in the least degree;
 She falls before his feet and swoons there
 Dishevelled all her bright golden hair,
 And cries: 'Have mercy! Let me with you bide!
 The lords who live here at my side
 Will destroy me simply for your sake.
 And if you will me as your wife take
 As you have sworn, then I give you leave,
 To slay me with your sword this very eve,
 For then I would yet die as your wife.
 I am with child, grant my child its life.
 Mercy, lord, have pity in your thought!
 But all this things avails her right naught,

For, one night, asleep he let her lie,
 And to his company away did fly,
 And as a traitor he set out to sea
 Towards the large country of Italy.
 And thus has he left Dido to suffer;
 And wedded there the lady Lavinia.
 A cloth he left and his sword standing,
 When he left Dido as she was sleeping,
 Right at her bed's head, so did he flee
 When he did steal away to his navy,
 Which cloth when guileless Dido did awake
 She kissed full often for his sake;
 And said: 'Sweet cloth while Jupiter so wished,
 Take now my soul, ease me of my unrest!
 Of destiny I have fulfilled the course.'
 And thus, alas, without more recourse,
 Twenty times she swooned and could not stand.
 And when that she unto her sister Anne
 Had complained, of which I cannot write –
 Too great a pity I feel to thus indite –
 She bade her nurse and her sister go
 To fetch fire and other things also,
 And said that she would make sacrifice.
 And when her opportunity she spied,
 Upon the fire of sacrifice, apart,
 She stabbed his sword into her heart.
 Yet as my author says, right thus she said,
 Ere she was hurt, before yet she was dead,
 In a letter that she wrote, that thus began:
 'Right so,' quoth she, 'as the white swan
 Against its death will begin to sing,
 Right so to you I make my complaining.
 Not that I hope to win you back again,
 For well I know that all that is in vain,
 Since the gods are all opposed to me.
 But since my honour's wasted,' quoth she,
 'I may as well waste on you this letter,

Though for it I'll not be the better,
For the wind that blew your ship away,
Has blown your loyalty the same way.'
And who of this letter would himself remind
Read Ovid, and in him he shall it find.

Here ends the Legend of Dido the Martyr, Queen of Carthage.

The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea

Here begins the Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea, Martyrs

INTRODUCTION

You source of false lovers, Lord Jason!
You sly devourer and confusion
Of gentle women, tender creatures,
You claimed them, using, as your lures
For ladies, your royal appearance,
And your words' flattering presence,
And your false truth, and your manner,
Your submissiveness, humble demeanor,
And your counterfeited pain and woe.
Where others lied once, you did twice so!
O, often you swore that dead you'd be
For love when you felt no malady
Save that foul desire which you call love.
If I live, your name abroad I'll move
In English so your sect may be known.
Have at thee, Jason! Now the horn is blown!
But surely both pity it is and woe
That love for false lovers works so,
For they receive better love and cheer
Than he that has bought his love full dear,
And had in battle many bloody shocks,
For as tender a capon eats the fox
Though he's false and has the fowl betrayed
As does the man who for the fowl has paid.
Though he the capon can claim by right,
The false fox will take his part at night.
In Jason this pattern's clearly seen
With Hypsipyle and Medea the queen.

HYPsipyle

In Thessaly, as one Guido tells us,
There was a king named Peleus
Who had a brother, who was called Aeson,
And when he was in old age far gone,
He handed Peleus the governing
Of all his realm and made him lord and king.
Of which Aeson, Jason begotten was,
Such that in his time that country has
Nowhere a knight so famed for nobleness,
For generosity, strength, lustiness.
After his father's death he bore him so
That there was none wished to be his foe
But paid him honour, sought his company,
Which in Peleus aroused great envy,
Imagining that Jason thus might be
Enhanced to such a high degree
By love of the lords of that region
That his reign might be overthrown.
And in his mind at night plotted he
How Jason might best destroyed be
Without slander harming his position,
And at the last he came to the decision
To send him off to some far country
Where this Jason might destroyed be,
This was his plan, though he made Jason
A great play of love and of affection
For fear lest his lords the plot espied.
It so befell, for fame spread it wide,
There was rumour everywhere, that is,
That in an isle that was called Colchis
Beyond Troy, eastward in the sea,
There was a ram that men might see
That had a fleece of gold that shone so bright
That nowhere was there such another sight;
But it was always guarded by a dragon,

And many other marvels hedged it round,
And two bulls that were made of brass,
That spat fire, and much else there was.
But this was still the tale told, at least,
That whosoever would win the fleece,
He must, ere ever it win he might,
With the bulls and the dragon fight;
And King Aetes lord was of that isle.

Peleus thought of yet another wile,
That his nephew Jason he'd exhort
To sail to that land, there to disport,
And said: 'Nephew, if it yet should be
That this great prize is your destiny,
And this famous treasure you should win
And bear it to my kingdom here within,
It would bring delight to me and honour;
I'd be bound to repay your labour,
And all the cost on myself would take;
So choose what folk you might wish to take.
Let's see if you dare undertake this voyage?'
Jason was young, and full of courage,
And undertook this same enterprise.

Argus at once did a ship devise;
With Jason went the mighty Hercules
And many another in his company.
But whoever would know who was there,
Let him go read *Argonautica*,
For that will yield a list long enough.
Philoctetes the sail soon hauled up,
When the wind was fair: then swiftly
He sailed from that country Thessaly.
Long time he sailed on the salt sea,
Till at Lemnos isle arrived he –
Though this is not told by Guido,
Yet Ovid in *Heroides* says so –
And of this isle a lady was the queen,
The fair young Hypsipyle, I mean,

Daughter of Thoas the former king.
Hypsipyle had gone in her roaming
Wandering on the cliffs by the sea,
Under a bank suddenly spied she
Jason's ship nearby, close to shore.
From kindness, she sent a messenger,
To witness if any stranger might
By tempest be hither blown by night,
And to aid him, as was her custom,
To delight and further every man,
Through true bounty and courtesy.

The messenger, descending hurriedly,
Found Jason and Hercules also
Who in a small boat to land did go,
To refresh themselves and take the air.
The morning was temperate and fair,
On his way the messenger did meet,
Full courteously, these lords whom he did greet,
And gave his message, asking them anon
If they were distressed or woebegone,
And had need of pilot or provisions,
For they should lack nothing in reason,
As that was utterly the queen's will.

Jason answered meekly standing still,
'I thank my lady,' quoth he, 'heartily
For all her goodness; yet we need truly
Nothing for now, though we are weary,
But come to take our ease from the sea
Till the wind improves, then we'll away.'

The lady wandered by the cliff in play,
With her company, along the strand,
And found the two where they did stand,
Speaking of this thing, as I have told,

Hercules and Jason did behold
The queen, and gave her fair greeting
Straightaway, at their first meeting,
And she took heed, and knew by their manner,

By their array, words, and demeanor,
That they were gentlemen of high degree.
And to the castle with her she does lead
These unknown folk and does them great honour,
And asks them of their travail and labour
And how they'd suffered on the salt sea;
So that within a day or two or three,
She knew from the folk in his navy
That they were Jason, famous is he,
And Hercules, who as renowned is,
Who sought adventure both at Colchis;
And did them honour greater than before,
And had dealings with them more and more,
For they were worthy folk, certainly.
And especially spoke most with Hercules;
To him her heart she bared, that he must be
Steadfast, wise, and true, in words discreet,
Without pretending to the affection
Of love, or any false imagination.

Hercules so greatly Jason praised
That to the sun he him up-raised,
Saying that half so true a man in love
Lived not beneath the roof of heaven above,
That he was wise, brave, trustworthy and rich –
In those qualities no man could him match.
In generosity and vigour surpassed
All those living, or those of the past;
And a great gentleman indeed was he
And likely to be king of Thessaly.
He had no failing, except that he feared
To love, and was ashamed to speak a word.
He would rather harm himself and die
Than that a lover men in him should spy:
'God willing, I would surely give
My flesh and blood, if that I might live,
If only somewhere he might find a wife
Of his degree: for such a joyful life

She would lead with this lusty knight!’
And all this had been planned in the night
Between Jason and this Hercules.
A wicked lie it was, devised by these,
In order to seduce an innocent.
To dupe her they both gave their assent.
And Jason is as coy as a maid,
He looks woeful, but naught has said,
Yet freely gives to her counsellors
Great gifts, and to all her officers.
Would God I had the leisure and the time
Step by step his wooing for to rhyme.
But if, among you all, false lover be,
Just as he himself does, well, so did he,
With feigning, and with every crafty deed.
No more of me here, but you may read
The original that tells the tale, alas.
The sum is this: that Jason wedded was
Unto the queen and took, as I relate,
Whatever he wished of her estate,
And he begat two children upon her,
Then hoisted sail sail, and left forever.

A letter she sent to him, 'tis certain,
Which is too long to set down here again,
That reproved him for his great untruth,
And begged him to have some pity too.
And of his children two, she said this:
They were alike in every way there is
To Jason, save they lacked his guile,
And prayed God, before a long while,
That she who had his heart stolen so
Might find him untrue to her also,
And that she would both her children kill,
And all those who let him do his will.
And true to Jason was she all her life,
And ever chaste as befits a wife;
Nor never had she joy in her heart,
But died for his love of sorrow's smart.

MEDEA

To Colchis has come the Lord Jason,
Who is of love devourer and dragon.
As matter has desire for form always
And from form to form may make its way,
Or like a well whose depths we cannot see,
Right so can false Jason find no peace,
For his desire, due to appetite,
To take with noble women his delight;
This is his joy, and his felicity.

Jason has wandered forth to the city
That once was called Jaconitis,
Which was the chief town of all Colchis,
And has told the reason for his coming,
To Aeetes, who was that country's king,
Requesting that he might make assay
To win the fleece of gold if he may,
Which the king assents to readily,
And does him honour as is customary,
So much so, his daughter and heir,
Medea, who was so wise and fair,
That fairer never men's eyes did see,
He caused to keep Jason company
At dinner, and sit by him in the hall.

Now Jason was a handsome man withal,
And lordly, and he was widely known,
And in his looks was regal as a lion,
And gracious of his speech, and friendly,
And knew love's arts and craft completely
Without a book: with every fine observance.
And as Fortune owed her foul mischance,
She grew all enamoured of this man.

'Jason,' quoth she, 'for aught I see or can
Know of this thing that you are about,

The outcome of it all is much in doubt.
For he who would this task achieve,
May well not escape, so I believe,
And die, unless he has help from me.
And surely it is my will,' quoth she,
'To aid you so that death you might flee,
And return home safe to Thessaly.'
'My true lady,' Jason quoth then also,
'Your showing for my death or my woe
Such regard, and doing me this honour,
I know neither my strength nor labour
Could deserve to my dying day;
God show you the thanks I cannot say.
Your man am I, and humbly do beseech
That you'll help me now, without more speech;
And, though I die, myself I shall not spare.'
Then this Medea to him did declare
Point by point, the dangers that he faced,
In battle what problems would be placed
Before him, such that there was no creature,
Save only she, might yet his life assure.
And briefly to the point now to go,
They agreed fully between them so,
That Jason wed her as her true knight,
And set a time to come to her at night,
To her chamber, and there swear an oath
Upon the gods, that he was nothing loath,
And never to betray her, night or day,
And be her husband while so live he may,
Since she from death would save him there.
And to this end at night they met together,
He swore his oath, and went with her to bed.
And on the morrow swiftly onward sped,
For she had taught him how he could not fail
To win the fleece, and through the battle sail,
And end the battle thereby as the victor,
And gain renown there as a conqueror,

Through the craft of her enchantment.
Thus Jason took the fleece, and home he went
With Medea, and the treasure he had won,
But unknown to her father is she gone
To Thessaly with Jason her dear one,
Who afterwards brought her misfortune.
For as a traitor from her he did go,
And left her with two young children so,
And falsely he betrayed her, alas!
And ever in love the worst traitor was,
And wedded yet a third wife anon,
Who was the daughter of King Creon.

This is the reward for love, the burden
That Medea received from Jason
Both for her truth and for her kindness,
Who loved him better than herself, I guess,
And left her father and her heritage.
And of Jason this the lasting message
That in his day there was nowhere found
So false a lover going on the ground
And therefore in her letter thus she said
When she his falseness first displayed:
'Why did I love your yellow hair to see,
More than the constraints of chastity,
Why did I love your youth, and your fairness,
And of your tongue the endless graciousness?
Oh, had you lost, and not won victory,
Full many an untruth would have died with thee!'
Well does Ovid her letter in verse indite,
Which would be now too long for me to write.

Here ends the Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea, Martyrs.

The Legend of Lucretia

Here begins the Legend of Lucretia of Rome, Martyr

Now must I sing the exiling of kings
Of Rome, for their horrible doings,
And of the last king Tarquinius,
As Ovid tells, and Titus Livius,
But not for that reason give I this story,
Rather to praise, and grave in memory,
The faithful wife, the ever-true Lucretia,
Who for her wifhood and loyalty there
Not only did the pagans her commend
But he, who is called in saintly legend
The great Augustine, felt great compassion
For her that died, Lucretia the Roman;
And in what manner I'll but briefly state,
And of these things touch only on the great.

When once Ardea was besieged about
By the Romans who were fierce and stout,
Full long was the siege, yet little was wrought,
So they were all half-idle, as they thought;
And, in play, Tarquinius the younger
Began to jest, his tongue being lighter,
Saying that 'it was an idle life;
A man was no more use there than his wife;
And let us speak of wives: that is best;
Let every man praise his own with zest;
And with our speech let us ease our hearts.'

A knight called Collatinus made a start
And said thus: 'Nay, sire, there is no need,
To trust in the word alone, but in the deed,
I have a wife,' quoth he, 'who, here below,
Is held as good, by all who do her know;
Let us to Rome tonight, and we shall see.'

Tarquinius answered: 'That pleases me.'
To Rome they went, that very night

To Collatinus' house: there did alight
Tarquinius and also Collatinus.
The husband knew it well of course,
And secretly inside they were gone;
Now, at the gate, keeper was there none,
And by the chamber-door they did abide.
The noble wife was seated at her bedside
Hair down, danger nowhere in her thought.
And soft wool, our book says, she wrought
To keep herself from sloth and idleness,
And bade her servants see to their business,
And asked them: 'What news have you for me?
Do they say how things go, at the siege?
I wish to God the walls were broken down;
My husband is so long away from town
That the dread of it makes me smart;
Like a sword it stings my very heart
When I think of the siege or that place;
God save my lord, I pray Him for His grace!'
And therewithal full tenderly she wept,
And on her work her thought no longer kept,
But meekly she let her gaze down fall,
And that visage suited her withal.
And her tears too, full of purity
Embellished her wifely chastity;
Her countenance of her heart is worthy,
For they in deed and gesture both agree.
And with that her husband Collatinus,
Ere she was aware, had entered thus,
Saying: 'Fear you not, for I am here!'
And she at once arose full of cheer
And kissed him as is a wife's wont.
Tarquinius, the proud king's son,
Had observed her beauty and still further
Her yellow hair, her shape, and her manner,
Her hue, the words in which she complained,
And that her beauty by no craft was feigned;

And felt for this lady such desire
That in his heart he burned as any fire
So madly, that his reason was forgot.
For, he thought, she could not be got.
And the more that he felt in despair
The more he coveted, and thought her fair,
His blind lust turned all to coveting.

At morrow, when the birds began to sing,
Unto the siege he came all discreetly,
And by himself he walked right soberly,
Remembering her image always new:
'Thus lay her hair, and thus fresh was her hue;
Thus sat she, spoke, thus span; this her manner,
Thus was she fair, and this was her demeanor.'
All this conceit to heart he had taken,
And as the sea is by the tempest shaken,
So that after when the storm does go,
Yet still the water heaves to and fro,
Right so, even though her form was absent
The pleasure in her form was present.
Yet not pleasure rather but the delight
Of an unlawful passion fed by spite –
'For, despite herself, she'll my lover be;
Luck favours the bold man ever,' quoth he;
'Whatever the end for me, it shall be so;'
And he girt on his sword and off did go
Riding forth till he had come to Rome,
And had made his way thus all alone,
There to Collatinus' house outright.
Down was the sun, and day had lost its light,
And in he went, and quietly did walk
And through the night stealthily did stalk
When everyone to their rest was brought,
And none of them on treason cast a thought,
By window sped, or other way within.
With drawn sword he swiftly entered in
Where she did lie, the noble wife Lucretia.

And as she woke, she felt the bed quiver.
 'What beast is this,' quoth she, 'that weighs thus?'
 'It is the king's son, Tarquinius,'
 Quoth he, 'and if you cry, or noise should make,
 Of if any creature you should wake,
 By the same God that created men alive,
 This sword through your heart I shall drive.'
 And her throat he seized, for his part,
 And set the sharp point against her heart.
 No word she spoke, she'd no strength so to do.
 What could she say? Her mind was confused.
 As when a wolf finds a lamb alone,
 To whom shall she complain or make moan?
 What, shall she fight with a powerful knight?
 Men know well that women have no might.
 What, shall she cry, or how shall she start
 To seek escape, a sharp sword at her heart?
 She asks for grace and begs as best she can.
 'You'll find it not,' quoth he, that cruel man,
 'As surely as Jupiter my soul shall save,
 For I shall in the stable slay your knave,
 And lay him in your bed, crying loudly
 That I caught you so in adultery;
 And thus you shall die, and also lose
 Your reputation, naught else may you choose.'
 The Roman wives so loved their good name
 In those days, and dreaded so the shame
 That, what with fear of slander, and dread of death,
 She lost at once both consciousness and breath,
 And in a swoon she lay, and seemed so dead
 Men might have smitten of her arm or head;
 She felt nothing, neither foul nor fair.
 Tarquinius who are the king's heir
 And should, by lineage and by right,
 Act as a lord does, and a true knight,
 Why have you outraged chivalry?
 Why have you done this lady a villainy?

Alas, this was indeed a villain's deed!
But to my point now: in the tale I read,
When he was gone and evil her befallen,
The lady sent for friends one and all then,
Father, mother, husband, all together;
And all dishevelled with unbound hair,
Clothed in the way women go
To the burying of a friend also,
She sat in the hall a sorrowful sight.
Her friends asked what trouble might
Be on her, who was dead? She, weeping,
For shame could not a word to air bring,
Nor their faces dared she to behold.
But of Tarquinius at last she told,
Her pitiful case, and this thing horrible.
The woe to tell of were impossible,
As she and all her friends made moan.
Even if folk's hearts had been of stone,
It might have made them her trouble rue,
Her heart was so wifely and so true.
She said that to her guilt and blame
Her husband should not owe a foul name,
She would not suffer that in any way.
And they all answered by their faith
They forgave her all, for that was right;
Guilt was not hers: she'd lacked the might,
And told her of examples, many a one.
But all for naught; for thus she spoke anon:
'Be that as it may, as regards forgiving;
I'll not forgive myself for anything.'
Then secretly she brought forth a knife,
And therewith bereft herself of life.
And as she fell she looked down indeed,
And of her clothes yet she took heed;
For in her falling she yet had care
Lest her feet or any part lay bare,
So well did she love purity and truth.

For her all the town of Rome felt ruth,
And Brutus by her chaste blood he swore
That Tarquin should be banished evermore
And all his kin; the people he did call
And openly the tale he told them all
And had her carried openly on a bier
Through all the town, that men might see and hear
The terrible result of that oppression.
Nor ever was there king in Rome's town
From that day; and she was thought of there
As a saint, and her saint's day held dear,
By their law. And ended thus Lucretia,
The noble wife, as Livy does make clear.
I tell it because in love she was so true,
Nor of her own will did she change for new.
And for the constant heart, true and kind,
That men may ever in such women find;
Where they set their heart, there does it dwell.
For Christ himself tells, as I know well,
That in Israel, throughout all that land,
So great a faith could no man command,
As is in woman, and this is no deceit.
And as for men, see what tyranny
They commit; test them as you must,
The truest is too brittle for your trust.

Here ends the Legend of Lucretia of Rome, Martyr.

The Legend of Ariadne

Here begins the Legend of Ariadne of Athens.

Judge Infernal, Minos, of Crete king,
Now your turn comes, you come into the ring.
Not for your sake alone I write this story
But to recall again to memory
Theseus' great faithlessness in love,
At which the gods of high heaven above
Were angry and took vengeance on your sin.
Blush red for shame! Now I your life begin.

Minos, who was the mighty king of Crete,
And ruled a hundred cities strong and great,
Sent to school his son Androgeus,
To Athens; and so it happened thus
That he was slain, learning philosophy
In that same city, and solely through envy.

The great Minos, of whom I speak,
Sailed there, revenge for this to wreak;
He besieged Alcatheo hard and long,
Yet nonetheless the walls were so strong,
And Nisus, who was king of that city,
So valiant that little fear showed he.
Of Minos and his host he took no care
Till on a day befell this adventure there,
That Nisus' daughter stood upon the wall
And of the siege viewed the manner all;
It so happened that in the skirmishing
She lost her heart to Minos the king
For his beauty and his chivalry, say I,
So deeply she thought that she would die.
And briefly to tell this tale apace
She helped Minos to reduce the place
So that the city lay all at his will
To save whom he wished or else to kill.
But wickedly he repaid her kindness

And let her drown, in sorrow and distress,
Except that the gods on her took pity,
Though the tale is too long now for me.

King Minos conquered Athens also,
And Alcothoe and other towns so;
With this result, that Minos has driven
The people of Athens so, he must be given,
From year to year, their own children dear
To be slain, as later you shall hear.

Minos kept a monster, a wicked beast,
That was so cruel it swiftly made a feast
Of any man brought into its presence
Without delay, against it no defence.
And every third year thus, without fail,
They cast lots, and so goes the tale,
Rich or poor, they must their son take,
And of their child a present make
To Minos, for him to save or kill,
Or let his beast devour him at its will.
And all this Minos did out of spite;
To avenge his son was his delight
And keep the men of Athens in thrall
While he should live, and oppress them all;
And home he sailed when the town was won.
The wicked custom its course long had run
When the king of Athens Egeus
Must send his own son, Theseus,
Since him the lot had fallen upon
To be devoured, exception was there none.
And forth is led this woeful young knight
Unto the Court of Minos outright,
And in a prison fettered fast is he
Until the time that he should eaten be.

Well may you weep, O woeful Theseus,
You are a king's son, condemned thus.
I think a deep gratitude you would hold
For anyone who saved you from care's cold!

And if now any woman should help you,
You ought to be her servant too,
And her true lover, from year to year.
But now to return to my purpose here.

The tower in which Theseus they did throw
Down in the bottom, dark, and wondrous low,
Was joined by the wall to a privy
That belonged to two daughters, I read,
Of King Minos, who in their chambers sweet
Dwelt above, facing the main street,
In great mirth, and joy, and happiness
I know not how, it happened nonetheless,
That as Theseus complained by night,
The king's daughters, Ariadne bright,
And her sister Phaedra, heard it all,
All his complaint as they stood on the wall
And looked there upon the bright moon.
They had not wished to go to bed so soon,
And for his woe now they felt compassion.
That a king's son should be in such a prison
And be devoured, they thought a great pity.

Then Ariadne spoke to her sister free,
'Phaedra,' she said, 'beloved sister dear,
This woeful lord's son can you not hear,
How piteously he laments his kin
And the lowly state which he is in
All guiltless? Surely I feel ruth!
And if you will agree, by my truth,
He shall be helped, whatever we can do!'

Phaedra answered: 'I am as sorry, too,
For him as ever I was for any man;
And to help him as best as we can
I say we call the jailor secretly
To come and speak with us right swiftly,
And bring the woeful man when he comes.
For if he this monster overcomes,
He would be free; there is no other way.

Let us test him deeply, and let him say
Whether, if a weapon he should have,
He would dare his life protect and save,
Fight with the fiend, and himself defend.
For in the prison which he must descend,
You well know the beast has a place
That is not dark, and has room and space
To wield an axe or sword or stave or knife,
So that, I think, he well might save his life;
If he should prove a man, he shall do so.
And we shall make balls of hemp also
And wax, that when its jaws gape, then fast
Into the beast's throat he shall them cast
To quell its hunger and so foil its teeth;
And right anon when this Theseus sees
The beast choking, he can on him leap
To slay him, before they further meet.
The weapon shall the jailor ere that tide
Secretly within the prison hide;
And as the house is crinkled to and fro
And has such complex ways to go –
For it is shaped as a maze is wrought –
I've a remedy for that in my thought,
That with a clew of twine the way he's gone
The same way he may return anon,
Following ever the thread till out he'll come.
And when he the beast has overcome,
Then out of this dread away he may flee,
And the jailor too with him may lead,
And at home advance him in his country
Since so great a lord's son is he.
This is my counsel if such he dare take.'
Why should I longer story of this make?
The jailor came and with him Theseus.
And when the thing had been settled thus,
Down fell Theseus on bended knee:
'The rightful lady of my life,' quoth he,

'I, sorrowful man, condemned to death,
I'll not, while I still have life and breath,
Part from you after this adventure,
But in your service thus will I linger,
And, as a wretch unknown, I'll serve you
For evermore until my days are through.
I will forsake at home my heritage
And, as I said, be at your court a page
If you vouchsafe me that in this place
You'll grant that I receive such grace
As to have naught but my food and drink;
And, for my sustenance, work, as I think,
So that neither Minos nor another might –
Since he's not seen me with his own sight –
Recognise in me the man you save;
So cannily and so well I'll behave,
And so disguise myself, act so humbly
That in this world no man shall know me,
So save my life, exist in the presence
Of you who show me all this excellence.
And to my father shall I send further
This worthy man who is my jailor
And reward him so that he shall be
One of the noblest men in my country.
And, dare I say it, my lady bright,
I am both a king's son and a knight.
I God will it so, if it might be
That you were in my country, all three,
And I with you to bear you company,
That I tell no lie thereof, you'd see.
And if I offer in a humble manner,
To be your page, and serve you right here,
If I do not serve as humbly in this place,
I pray to Mars that he give me such grace
That shameful death here on me might fall
And death and poverty on my friends all;
And that my spirit by night might go

After my death and walk to and fro;
That I may of traitor possess the name
And my spirit walk to do me shame.
And if I ever claim higher degree
Unless you vouchsafe to grant it me,
As I have said, a shameful death I'll die!
And mercy, lady! Nothing more say I.'

A handsome knight was Theseus to see
And young, only twenty years and three;
But whoso had seen his countenance
Would have wept for pity of his penance;
And for which, Ariadne, in this manner,
Answered his offer and his demeanor:
'A king's son and a knight also,' quoth she,
'To be my servant and in such low degree,
God forbid, would shame us women all,
May He never let such fate on me fall!
But send you grace of heart and skill also
To guard yourself and bravely slay your foe,
And let it be hereafter that I may find
You to me and my sister here so kind
That I repent not the saving of your life.
Yet it were better that I were your wife
Since you are as nobly born as I
And have a kingdom, fast nearby,
Than I should let you suffer underserved
Or that I let you as a page me serve.
It is not an offer that befits your kindred;
But what is there man will not do for dread?
And as for my sister, since that it is so
That she must go with me if I go,
Or else suffer death as well as me,
Unto your son, as truly too, must she
Be wedded to your son at your homecoming.
This is the final end of all this thing.
Swear to it here on all that may be sworn.'
'Yes, lady mine,' quoth he, 'or else torn

May I be by the Minotaur tomorrow!
And my heart's blood may you borrow
If you so will; if I had knife or spear
I would let it out, and thereon swear,
For then more readily you will believe.
By Mars, who is supreme in my belief,
If I might live on thus, and not fail
Tomorrow in the battle to prevail,
I would never from this place flee
Till you the very proof should see.
For now, if the truth I'd dare to say,
I have loved you full many a day
Though you knew it not, in my country,
And desired above all you to see
Of any earthly living creature.
Upon my truth I swear, and you assure,
These seven years I have your servant been.
Now I have you, and also you have me,
My dear heart, of Athens the duchess!'

The lady smiled at his steadfastness
And at his honest words and demeanor,
And to her sister spoke in this manner
All softly: 'Now, sister mine,' quoth she,
'Now we are duchesses, both you and me,
And pledged to the royalty of Athens,
And both hereafter likely to be queens,
And have saved from death a king's son,
As it is ever a noblewoman's wont,
To save a noble man if she might
In honest cause especially his just right.
I think therefore no one should us blame
For this, nor burden us with evil name.'

And briefly of this matter for to make,
Theseus of her his leave did take,
And every point was performed in deed
Of the covenant, of which herein you read.
His weapon, his clew, the things I said

Were by the jailor in the house there laid,
Where the Minotaur had his dwelling
Right fast by the door, on his entering.
And Theseus was led unto his death,
And forth unto the Minotaur's dark breath,
And by the counsel of this Ariadne
He overcame the beast, his bane was he,
And out, by means of the clew, again
He came secretly when the beast was slain;
And with the jailor's help he filled a boat
With his wife's treasure, setting it afloat,
And took his wife and noble sister free
And the jailor too, and with all three
He stole away out of the land by night
And to the isle of Aegina he took flight
Where he had a friend in his knowing.
There they feast, there they dance and sing,
And in his arms he has Ariadne
Who led him from the beast to safety,
And gets himself a new boat before long,
And of his countrymen a large throng,
And takes his leave, and homeward sails he.
And by an island in the wild sea
Where there dwelt of creatures none
Save wild beasts and that full many a one,
His boat against the rocks he laid,
And in that isle half a day delayed
And said that on the shore he must rest;
His mariners had done just as he wished.
And to tell this story but in brief
When his wife Ariadne was asleep,
Because her sister fairer was than she
He took her by the hand, and forth went he
To ship, and as a traitor stole away
While Ariadne there sleeping lay,
And towards his country he sailed so –
Twenty devils way may the wind him blow! –

And found his father drowned in the sea.
I wish to speak no more of him, indeed.
These false lovers poison be their bane!
But I turn to Ariadne once again
Who in her weariness deep Sleep did take.
Full sorrowfully her heart may awake.
Alas, for her my heart now feels pity!
Right in the dawning awake did she
And groped in the bed, and found him not.
'Alas!' quoth she, 'that ever I was wrought!
I am betrayed!' And her hair then she rent
And to the shore barefoot fast she went
And cried: 'Theseus, my heart's sweet!
Where are you, with you I may not meet,
Who might thus by beasts have been slain?'
The hollow rocks answered her again.
No man saw she, yet bright was the moon.
And high upon a rock she clambered soon
And saw his boat a-sailing in the sea.
Cold grew her heart and right thus said she:
'Meeker than you I find are the beasts wild!
Did he not sin who her had thus beguiled?
She cried: 'O turn back in your sin for pity!
Your boat lacks one in its company!'
Her kerchief on a pole then hoisted she
So that by chance the head-cloth he might see
And remember he had left her there behind
And return, and on the shore her might find;
But all for naught; his way he has gone.
And down she fell swooning on a stone
Then up she rose, and kissed with sad care
The print of his feet where he'd passed there,
And to her bed right thus she spoke too:
'Oh bed,' quoth she, 'who have received us two,
You should answer for two, not just for one!
Where away has your greater part now gone?
Alas, what shall I, a wretched girl, become?

For, even if some boat, some ship may come,
I dare not sail home to my land, for fear;
I can advise me no course of action here.'

What shall I say more of her complaining?
It was so long, it would be a heavy thing.
In his *Heroides* Ovid tells us all;
But briefly I'll say what did befall.
The gods came to her aid, out of pity,
And when the sun's in Taurus men see
The stones of her crown shining clear.
I'll speak no more of the matter here,
So false lover may his true love beguile:
And may the devil requite him in a while!

Here ends the Legend of Ariadne of Athens

The Legend of Philomela

Here begins the Legend of Philomela

Deus dator formarum: God the giver of form.

You giver of forms, who have wrought
The fair world, and borne it in your thought
Eternally, ere you your work began,
Why did you conceive that shameful man,
Or – if there was no intent in your doing,
To create, to that end, such a thing –
Why did you suffer Tereus to be born,
Who was in love so false and forsworn,
That all from this world to highest heaven
Is corrupted, when folk speak his name even?
And, for myself, so grisly was his deed
That when I his foul story read,
My eyes grow foul and sore also;
Yet so lasts the venom of long ago
That it infects him who would behold
The story of Tereus, of whom I've told.

Of Thrace was he lord and kin to Mars,
The cruel god that stands with bloody arms;
And wedded had he with blissful cheer
King Pandion's fair daughter dear
Named Procne, and the flower of her country,
Though Juno did not wish that feast to see,
Nor Hymeneus who god of weddings is;
But at the feast appears, as witnesses,
The Furies three with all their deadly brands.
The owl at night among the roof-beams stands,
Who prophet is of woe and of mischance.
This revel full of song and full of dance
Lasts for a fortnight or a little less.
But I'll not from the story now digress,
For I am wearied by the tale I tell,

Five years his wife and he together dwell
Till one day she does so sorely long
To see her sister she's not seen for long,
That, from desire, she can hardly speak.
From her husband a favour she did seek
Praying, for God's love, she might be gone
To see her sister, and come back anon,
Or else, if she could not towards her wend,
She prayed that he would for her sister send.
And this was day by day her only prayer
All humbleness of wifehood in word and air.

Then Tereus made ready his ships there
And unto Greece himself forth did fare
To his father-in-law, and did him pray
To vouchsafe that for a two-month, say,
Philomela, his wife's sister, might
Of Procne his wife, just once, have sight –
'And she shall come to you again right so.
Myself with her will both come and go,
And as my heart's life I will her keep.'

Old Pandion the king began to weep
From tenderness of heart now to see
His daughter go, and to give her leave;
In all this world he loved none other so.
But at the last she has leave to go,
For Philomela with salt tears does beseech
Her father, and the grace from him does seek
To see her sister, whom she longs for so,
And embraces him in her arms also.
And then so young and fair was she
That, when Tereus saw her beauty
And that in her dress she had no match
And yet in beauty was she twice as rich,
He fixed his burning heart upon her so
That he would have her, whether yes or no,
And in his cunning knelt and so prayed
That at the last Pandion this speech made:

‘Now son,’ quoth he, ‘who are to me so dear,
I trust to you my young daughter here
Who bears the key to all my heart’s life.
Go: greet well my daughter and your wife
And give her leave sometime here to hie
That she may see me once more ere I die.
And truly he prepared him a rich feast,
And for his folk, the most unto the least,
That came with him; and of his gifts was free
And led him by the main street to the sea,
Through Athens, and to the shore him brought,
And turned for home; no evil in his thought
The oars drove the vessel onward fast
And in Thrace they arrived at last,
And up into a forest he her led,
And to a cave secretly they sped;
And in this dark cave, whether she wished
Or she wished it not, he bade her rest;
At which with trembling heart, she said thus,
‘Where is my sister, brother Tereus?’
And withal she wept so tenderly,
And quaked for fear, pale and piteously
Just as a lamb that by a wolf is bitten,
Or like a dove that’s by an eagle smitten
And has escaped thereafter from its claws
And yet is terrified, and stunned the more,
Lest it be seized again, so there sat she.
And yet this was to be her destiny.
By force, has he, this traitor, done the deed,
And bereft her of her virginity,
Against her will, by strength and by his might.
Lo, here’s a manly deed, done as if by right!
She cried: ‘Sister!’ then loud as she could,
And ‘Father dear!’ and ‘Help me, God above!’
None come to her aid; yet this false thief
Has done this lady still a greater mischief,
For fear lest she should cry openly

His shame, and declare his villainy,
He has cut out her tongue, and he
Has shut her in a castle, there to be
Held evermore in prison secretly,
And keeps her for his use and property,
Such that she might nevermore depart.
O guileless Philomela, woe is your heart;
God avenge you, and send you His boon!
Now it is time I made an end, right soon.

Tereus, returned, his wife has faced,
And in his arms has his wife embraced,
And piteously he wept and shook his head
And swore to her he found her sister dead;
At which the guileless Procne felt such woe
Her heart near broke in two with it so;
And thus in tears I leave Procne to dwell,
And of her sister briefly will you tell.

This woeful lady had learned in her youth
How to work fabrics and embroider, sooth
To say, and, on a frame, weave a tapestry
As women, long ago, did skilfully.
And, truth to tell, she still had her fill
Of food and drink and clothing, by his will,
And could read too and well enough indite,
And though she had no pen with which to write,
Letters could she weave there to and fro,
So that by the time a year had passed or so,
On a large woollen cloth she had woven
How she was borne there by boat from Athens,
And how to a cave she had been brought;
And all the thing that Tereus had wrought,
She wove it skilfully and wrote above
How she was served by her sister's love;
And to a boy a ring she gave anon
And begged him by signs to be gone
Unto the queen, and bear her that cloth,
And by signs swore him many an oath

That she would give him whatever she might.
The lad soon at the palace did alight,
Gave the queen that cloth, and his tale told.
And when Procne did the thing behold,
She spoke no word for sorrow and for rage,
But feigned that she would go on pilgrimage
To Bacchus' temple; and in a while she found
Her mute sister seated on the ground,
Weeping in the castle all alone.
Alas, the weeping, the complaint and moan
That Procne made for her mute sister's harm!
Each of them takes the other in her arms,
And thus I'll let them in their sorrow dwell.
The rest is no great matter now to tell,
For this is all and sum: thus was she served
Who, innocent, had never harm deserved
From this cruel man, and that she knew.
Woman beware of man, I say to you.
For though he might not for very shame
Do as Tereus did, and lose his name,
Nor serve you as a murderer does his victim,
Faithful but a short while shall you have him –
This will I say although it were my brother –
Unless, so be it, that he may have no other.

Here ends the Legend of Philomela.

The Legend of Phyllis

Here begins the Legend of Phyllis

By proof as well as by authority,
Wicked fruit does come from wicked tree,
And that you may find, if you so allow.
But to that end I'll speak this tale for now:
To tell you of false Demophon.
One falser in love I heard of never none,
Unless it were his father Theseus.
'God, of his grace, from such men keep us!'
Thus may those women pray who may hear.
Now to the substance of this matter here.
Destroyed is of Troy all the city;
This Demophon comes, sailing on the sea,
Towards Athens, to his palace large;
With him come many a ship and many a barge
Full of his folk, of which full many a one
Is wounded sore, and sick, and woebegone.
And they have at the siege long there lain.
Behind him blows a wind and then a rain
That drives so hard, his sail might not stand;
He'd like, more than all the world, to land,
The tempest so pursues him to and fro.
So dark it was, he could nowhere go;
And with a wave broken was his rudder.
His ship damaged now in such a manner
The carpenter could not the harm amend.
The sea at night like a torch it burned
Madly, and tossed them up and down
Till Neptune his compassion found,
Thetis, Thaumias, Triton, and them all,
Allowing him thus to make his landfall
In a place where Phyllis was the queen,
Licurgus' daughter, fairer to be seen
Than is the flower in the bright sun.

Barely has Demophon to the land won,
Weak, and weary, and his folk wasted
By weariness and hunger debilitated;
And almost to death he himself driven.
His wise folk council have him given
To seek help and succour from the queen,
And see what his fortune there should be,
And benefit therein from circumstance
To keep him from woe and from mischance,
For sick is he and almost unto death;
He can scarcely speak or draw his breath,
And waits near Rhodope, so he may rest.
When he could walk he thought it best
To go to the court and seek for succour.
Men knew him well and did him honour,
For of Athens duke and lord was he
As Theseus his father used to be,
Who in his time was of great renown,
No man so great in city there and town,
And like his father too in face and stature
And false of love; for it was in his nature.
As Reynard the fox does, so the fox's son
By nature will adopt his father's custom
Without experience, as a drake will swim,
Raised in captivity, when brought to the brim.
This honourable Phyllis gives him cheer,
Liking well his bearing and his demeanor.
But as I'm sated with writing here before
Of all those who were in love forsworn,
And wish to hasten on with my legend –
Which to perform God the grace me send –
Therefore I pass on briefly in this wise.
You have heard what Theseus did devise
In his betrayal of fair Ariadne
Who kept him from his bane, out of pity.
Well, in short, so does this Demophon
The same way, the same path he's gone

As did his false father Theseus.
For unto Phyllis has he sworn thus,
To wed her, and her his troth plight,
Yet stolen from her all the goods he might,
Once he is whole and sound and has his rest;
And does with Phyllis what he thinks best;
And I could, if it pleased me so
Tell of all his doings to and fro.

He said that to his country he must sail,
Their wedding to prepare there without fail,
As fitting to her honour and his also.
And openly he took his leave to go
And swore to her he would not there sojourn,
But in a month he would again return.
While yet in Thrace he issued his orders
Like a true lord, and he had homage there,
Well and familiarly, and his ships prepared
Then home he went: the shortest way he fared;
But unto Phyllis yet returned he not.
And she had such sore suffering in her thought,
Alas, that as the stories then record
She brought about her own death with a cord
When she knew Demophon had her betrayed.

Yet to him first she wrote and deeply prayed
That he would come and deliver her from pain,
As I shall tell you in a word or twain.
I like not on him to labour or to think,
Nor spend on him a pennyworth of ink,
For false in love he was, just like his sire.
The devil set their souls both in the fire!
But of Phyllis' letter I will write
A word or two, although it be but slight.

'Your hostess,' quoth she, 'O Demophon,
Your Phyllis, who is so woebegone,
Of Rhodope, of you must now complain,
Regarding the time set between us twain,
Which you have not kept to as you said.

Your anchor in our harbour that you laid,
Gave hope that you would come without doubt
Before the moon had gone but once about.
Yet four times the moon has hid her face
Since the day you vanished from this place,
And four times has lit the world again.
But for all that, nothing can explain
Why the Thracian Stream has not brought
Your ship from Athens; yet comes it not.
And if the term that we set you would
Reckon, as I or any true lover should,
I complain not, God knows, before my day.'

But all her letter, point by point, I may
Not write: it would be too heavy a charge,
Her letter was long enough, she spoke large;
But here and there in rhyme I have it made,
Where I think it well what she has said –

She said: 'Your sails will not come again,
Nor in your words have I faith that's certain,
And I know why you come not,' quoth she:
'Because of my love I was to you so free.
If the vengeance of the gods you forswore
Falls upon your head now therefore,
You'll not own the strength to bear that pain.
I trusted too much, as I must now complain,
In your lineage and in your fair tongue,
And in your tears so falsely wrung.
How could you weep so cunningly?' quoth she;
'May such tears be feigned so readily?
Now if you would search your memory
It should prove to you but little glory
A guileless maid to have so betrayed!
To God,' quoth she, 'I pray, and oft have prayed,
That it may be the greatest shame of all
The most renown that ever shall you befall!
And when your old ancestors depicted be,
In whom men would great worthiness see,

Then, I pray God, they picture you also,
That folk may learn from that as they go,
'Lo, this is he that with his flattery
Has betrayed and done her villainy
Who was his true love in thought and deed!'
But truly, of one point yet they may read,
That you were like your father in this,
For he beguiled Ariadne with a kiss
With such an art and with such subtlety
As you yourself have beguiled me.
And in that point, that's far from fair,
You follow him for certain, and are his heir.
But since thus sinfully you me beguile,
My body you will see, in a little while,
Right in the harbour of Athens floating
Without a sepulchre or a burying,
Though you are harder than is any stone.'

And when this letter was sealed and was gone,
Knowing how fickle and how false he was,
She in despair destroyed herself, alas!
Such sorrow had she for trusting so.
Beware, you women, of your subtle foe,
Since to this day examples you may see;
And trust, in love, no other man but me.

Here ends the Legend of Phyllis.

The Legend of Hypermnestra

Here begins the Legend of Hypermnestra

In Greece there once were brethren two,
Of which the one was named Danaus, who
Had many a son born of his body too
As such false lovers often chance to do.
Among all his sons there was one
The he loved the best of everyone.
And when this child was born, Danaus
Gave him a name, and called him Lynceus.
The other brother was named Aegyptus, who
Was ever in love as false as he did choose,
And many a daughter he begat in his life;
Of whom he begat upon his rightful wife
A daughter dear, and he did her call
Hypermnestra, youngest of them all;
The which child at her nativity
To all good qualities born was she,
Since it pleased the gods ere she was born
That of the sheaf she should be the corn;
The Fates, those whom we call Destiny,
Had shaped her so that she would be
Compassionate, calm, wise and true as steel.
And this woman it suited well, I feel,
For though Venus granted her great beauty,
With Jupiter compounded so was she
That conscience, truth, and fear of shame,
And of wifhood to keep the good name,
This she thought, was true felicity here.
And red Mars was at that time of year
So feeble that small malice did he have;
Repressed had Venus his cruel craft.
What with Venus and the other oppression
Of the Houses, Mars' dark venom is so gone,
That Hypermnestra cannot handle a knife

In malice, though she stand to lose her life.
But nonetheless as the heavens did turn
Towards the bad, aspects had she of Saturn
That had destined her to die in prison,
As I shall afterwards make mention.

As to Danaus, and Aegyptus also,
Although they were brothers, even so –
Since at that time so did every lineage –
It pleased them both to join in marriage
Hypermnestra and that Lynceus,
And planned a certain day for it thus,
And it was all agreed, utterly, say I:
The arrangements wrought, the time fast by.
And thus Lynceus has of his father's brother
The daughter wedded, and each has the other.

The torches burn and the lamps are bright,
The sacrifices ready as is right;
The incense from the fire smokes, the fruit,
The flower, the leaf are rent up by the root
To make high crowns, garlands and wreaths;
Full is the place with the sound of minstrelsy,
With sounds of amorous songs of marriage
As at that time were in widespread usage.
And this was in the palace of Aegyptus,
Who was lord as he wished in his house.
And thus the day they pass till its end;
The friends take leave and home they wend
The night is come, the bride shall go to bed;
Aegyptus to his chamber fast him sped,
And secretly he did his daughter call.
When the house was empty of them all,
He looked on his daughter with glad cheer,
And spoke to her as you shall shortly hear:
'My own daughter, treasure of my heart,
Since that day when at the very start
My fate was shaped, by the Sisters woven,
So near my heart never has any come,

As you, my Hypermnestra, daughter dear!
Take heed what I your father tell you here,
And follow after the wiser evermore.
First of all then, daughter, I love you so
That all the world's not half so dear to me;
Nor would I cause you any mischief
For all the wealth under the cold moon.
What I intend can be said right soon
With one condition, and in this wise,
That unless you do as I shall devise
You shall die, by Him that has all wrought!
To state it briefly, you shall escape not
Out of my palace, but must die indeed,
Unless you do consent to pay me heed;
Take this last conclusion for your own.'

Hypermnestra cast her eyes full down,
And trembled like a leaf of aspen green;
Her hue waxed deathly, and like ash did seem,
She said: 'Lord and father, all your will
If 'tis in my power, God knows, I'll fulfil,
So long as it brings me not to confusion.'

'I will,' quoth he, 'make no exception,'
And out he whipped a knife, razor-keen.
'Hide this,' quoth he, 'so it be not seen;
And when your husband to his bed does go,
While he is sleeping slit his throat also.
For in my dreams it is foretold me
One of my nephews my bane shall be,
But which I know not, and I would be sure.
If you say no, we two shall be at war,
As I have said already here, and sworn.'

Hypermnestra near lost her wits, heart-torn,
Yet to pass unharmed from that place,
She must agree; he'd grant no other grace.
And therewithal a flask he took and he
Said: 'Hereof a draught, or two or three
Give him to drink when he goes to rest,

And he shall sleep as soundly as is best,
The narcotics and the opiates are so strong;
Now go, lest you appear with me too long.'

Out came the bride, with sober demeanor
As in maidens is often the manner,
And to chamber is brought with revel and song,
And briefly, lest this tale appear too long,
Lynceus and she are soon brought to bed,
And everyone out at the door is sped.

The night is spent, and he falls asleep,
Full tenderly she begins to weep;
She rises up, and fearfully she quakes
As does the branch that Zephyrus shakes,
And hushed was all in Argos that city.
As cold as any frost now feels she,
For by the heart pity grips her so,
And dread of death causes her much woe,
That thrice she falls so overcome with fear.
She rises up and staggers there and here,
And on her hands intently looks she.
'Alas, and shall my hands bloody be?
I am a maiden, as I am by nature,
And by my form, and by my vesture,
My hands are not made to grasp a knife,
Nor to take from any man his life.
With knives what the devil have I to do?
Yet, shall my throat then be slit in two?
Then will I bleed, alas, and deathwards wend!
And yet this thing indeed must have an end:
Either he or I must surely lose our life.
Now,' quoth she, 'since I am his wife,
And pledged to loyalty 'tis best for me
To die myself in wifely honesty
Than be a traitor and live on in shame.
Be it as it may, dire earnest or in game,
He shall awake and rise and go his way
Out by the window ere that it be day' –

And she weeps tenderly upon his face,
And him in her arms she does embrace,
And shakes him then, and wakes him soft.
And he leaps from the window high aloft
When she has warned him for his good.

This Lynceus was swift and light of foot,
And from his wife he ran away full fast.
The guileless woman is so weak, alas,
And so helpless, that before she went
Far, her cruel father gained his intent.
Alas, Lynceus, why now so untrue?
Why was there never a thought in you
To take and lead her forth secretly?
For when she saw that gone away was he,
And that she could in no way swiftly go
And follow him, she sat lingering so,
That she was caught and fettered in prison.
The tale is told to this conclusion...

Chaucer left the Legend of Hypermnestra unfinished.

End of the Legend of Good Women

Note: I am aware that the last word of the refrain in the balade 'Hide, Absolom...' does not translate as disdain. Chaucer's disteyne, means to discolour or bedim. However I did not wish to destroy the perfect music of the line, and she certainly has a right to disdain the other beauties. Like the reader I remain dissatisfied with this solution.