## THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE.

## THE PROLOGUE.

Our Hoste saw well that the brighte sun Th' arc of his artificial day had run The fourthe part, and half an houre more; And, though he were not deep expert in lore, He wist it was the eight-and-twenty day Of April, that is messenger to May; And saw well that the shadow of every tree Was in its length of the same quantity That was the body erect that caused it; And therefore by the shadow he took his wit\*, \*knowledge That Phoebus, which that shone so clear and bright, Degrees was five-and-forty clomb on height; And for that day, as in that latitude, It was ten of the clock, he gan conclude; And suddenly he plight\* his horse about.

"Lordings," quoth he, "I warn you all this rout\*, \*company The fourthe partie of this day is gone. Now for the love of God and of Saint John Lose no time, as farforth as ye may. Lordings, the time wasteth night and day, And steals from us, what privily sleeping, And what through negligence in our waking, As doth the stream, that turneth never again, Descending from the mountain to the plain. Well might Senec, and many a philosopher, Bewaile time more than gold in coffer. For loss of chattels may recover'd be, But loss of time shendeth\* us, quoth he.

\*destroys

It will not come again, withoute dread,\* No more than will Malkin's maidenhead, <2> When she hath lost it in her wantonness. Let us not moulde thus in idleness. "Sir Man of Law," quoth he, "so have ye bliss, Tell us a tale anon, as forword\* is. \*the bargain Ye be submitted through your free assent To stand in this case at my judgement. Acquit you now, and \*holdeyour behest\*; \*keep your promise\* Then have ye done your devoir\* at the least." \*duty "Hoste," quoth he, "de par dieux jeo asente; <3> To breake forword is not mine intent. Behest is debt, and I would hold it fain, All my behest; I can no better sayn. For such law as a man gives another wight, He should himselfe usen it by right. Thus will our text: but natheless certain I can right now no thrifty\* tale sayn, \*worthy But Chaucer (though he \*can but lewedly\* \*knows but imperfectly\* On metres and on rhyming craftily) Hath said them, in such English as he can, Of olde time, as knoweth many a man. And if he have not said them, leve\* brother, \*dear In one book, he hath said

them in another For he hath told of lovers up and down, More than Ovide made of mentioun In his Epistolae, that be full old. Why should I telle them, since they he told? In youth he made of Ceyx and Alcyon, <4> And since then he hath spoke of every one These noble wives, and these lovers eke. Whoso that will his large volume seek Called the Saintes' Legend of Cupid:<5> There may he see the large woundes wide Of Lucrece, and of Babylon Thisbe; The sword of Dido for the false Enee; The tree of Phillis for her Demophon; The plaint of Diane, and of Hermion, Of Ariadne, and Hypsipile; The barren isle standing in the sea; The drown'd Leander for his fair Hero; The teares of Helene, and eke the woe Of Briseis, and Laodamia; The cruelty of thee, Queen Medea, Thy little children hanging by the halse\*, \*neck For thy Jason, that was of love so false. Hypermnestra, Penelop', Alcest', Your wifehood he commendeth with the best. But certainly no worde writeth he Of \*thilke wick'\* example of Canace, \*that wicked\* That loved her own brother sinfully; (Of all such cursed stories I say, Fy), Or else of Tyrius Apollonius, How that the cursed king Antiochus Bereft his daughter of her maidenhead; That is so horrible a tale to read, When he her threw upon the pavement. And therefore he, \*of full avisement\*, \*deliberately, advisedly\* Would never write in none of his sermons Of such unkind\* abominations; \*unnatural Nor I will none rehearse, if that I may. But of my tale how shall I do this day? Me were loth to be liken'd doubteless To Muses, that men call Pierides<6> (Metamorphoseos <7> wot what I mean), But natheless I recke not a bean, Though I come after him with hawebake\*; \*lout <8> I speak in prose, and let him rhymes make." And with that word, he with a sober cheer Began his tale, and said as ye shall hear.

## Notes to the Prologue to The Man of Law's Tale

- 1. Plight: pulled; the word is an obsolete past tense from "pluck."
- 2. No more than will Malkin's maidenhead: a proverbial saying; which, however, had obtained fresh point from the Reeve's Tale, to which the host doubtless refers.
- 3. De par dieux jeo asente: "by God, I agree". It is characteristic that the somewhat pompous Sergeant of Law should couch his assent in the semi-barbarous French, then familiar in law procedure.
- 4. Ceyx and Alcyon: Chaucer treats of these in the introduction to the poem called "The Book of the Duchess." It relates to the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the poet's patron, and afterwards his connexion by marriage.
- 5. The Saintes Legend of Cupid: Now called "The Legend of Good Women". The names of eight ladies mentioned here are not in the "Legend" as it has come down to us; while those of two ladies in the "legend" -- Cleopatra and Philomela -- are her omitted.
- 6. Not the Muses, who had their surname from the place near Mount Olympus where the Thracians first worshipped them; but the nine daughters of Pierus, king of Macedonia, whom he called the nine Muses, and who, being conquered in a contest with the genuine sisterhood, were changed intobirds.
- 7. Metamorphoseos: Ovid's.
- 8. Hawebake: hawbuck, country lout; the common proverbial phrase, "to put a rogue above a gentleman," may throw light on the reading here, which is difficult.