

THE FLOWER AND THE LEAF

["The Flower and the Leaf" is pre-eminently one of those poems by which Chaucer may be triumphantly defended against the charge of licentious coarseness, that, founded upon his faithful representation of the manners, customs, and daily life and speech of his own time, in "The Canterbury Tales," are sweepingly advanced against his works at large. In an allegory -- rendered perhaps somewhat cumbrous by the detail of chivalric ceremonial, and the heraldic minuteness, which entered so liberally into poetry, as into the daily life of the classes for whom poetry was then written -- Chaucer beautifully enforces the lasting advantages of purity, valour, and faithful love, and the fleeting and disappointing character of mere idle pleasure, of sloth and listless retirement from the battle of life. In the "season sweet" of spring, which the great singer of Middle Age England loved so well, a gentle woman is supposed to seek sleep in vain, to rise "about the springing of the gladsome day," and, by an unfrequented path in a pleasant grove, to arrive at an arbour. Beside the arbour stands a medlar-tree, in which a Goldfinch sings passing sweetly; and the Nightingale answers from a green laurel tree, with so merry and ravishing a note, that the lady resolves to proceed no farther, but sit down on the grass to listen. Suddenly the sound of many voices singing surprises her; and she sees "a world of ladies" emerge from a grove, clad in white, and wearing garlands of laurel, of agnus castus, and woodbind. One, who wears a crown and bears a branch of agnus castus in her hand, begins a roundel, in honour of the Leaf, which all the others take up, dancing and singing in the meadow before the arbour. Soon, to the sound of thundering trumps, and attended by a splendid and warlike retinue, enter nine knights, in white, crowned like the ladies; and after they have jousted an hour and more, they alight and advance to the ladies. Each dame takes a knight by the hand; and all incline reverently to the laurel tree, which they encompass, singing of love, and dancing. Soon, preceded by a band of minstrels, out of the open field comes a lusty company of knights and ladies in green, crowned with chaplets of flowers; and they do reverence to a tuft of flowers in the middle of the meadow, while one of their number sings a bergerette in praise of the daisy. But now it is high noon; the sun waxes fervently hot; the flowers lose their beauty, and wither with the heat; the ladies in green are scorched, the knights faint for lack of shade. Then a strong wind beats down all the flowers, save such as are protected by the leaves of hedges and groves; and a mighty storm of rain and hail drenches the ladies and knights, shelterless in the now flowerless meadow. The storm overpast, the company in white, whom the laurel-tree has safely shielded from heat and storm, advance to the relief of the others; and when their

clothes have been dried, and their wounds from sun and storm healed, all go together to sup with the Queen in white -- on whose hand, as they pass by the arbour, the Nightingale perches, while the Goldfinch flies to the Lady of the Flower. The pageant gone, the gentlewoman quits the arbour, and meets a lady in white, who, at her request, unfolds the hidden meaning of all that she has seen; "which," says Speght quaintly, "is this: They which honour the Flower, a thing fading with every blast, are such as look after beauty and worldly pleasure. But they that honour the Leaf, which abideth with the root, notwithstanding the frosts and winter storms, are they which follow Virtue and during qualities, without regard of worldly respects." Mr Bell, in his edition, has properly noticed that there is no explanation of the emblematical import of the medlar-tree, the goldfinch, and the nightingale. "But," he says, "as the fruit of the medlar, to use Chaucer's own expression (see Prologue to the Reeve's Tale), is rotten before it is ripe, it may be the emblem of sensual pleasure, which palls before it confers real enjoyment. The goldfinch is remarkable for the beauty of its plumage, the sprightliness of its movements, and its gay, tinkling song, and may be supposed to represent the showy and unsubstantial character of frivolous pleasures. The nightingale's sober outward appearance and impassioned song denote greater depth of feeling." The poem throughout is marked by the purest and loftiest moral tone; and it amply deserved Dryden's special recommendation, "both for the invention and the moral." It is given without abridgement.] (Transcriber's note: Modern scholars believe that Chaucer was not the author of this poem)

WHEN that Phoebus his car of gold so high Had whirled up the starry sky aloft, And in the Bull <1> enter'd certainly; When showers sweet of rain descended soft, Causing the grounde, fele* times and oft,
 *many Up for to give many a wholesome air, And every plain was y-clothed fair

With newe green, and maketh smalle flow'rs To springe here and there in field and mead; So very good and wholesome be the show'rs, That they renewe what was old and dead In winter time; and out of ev'ry seed Springeth the herbe, so that ev'ry wight Of thilke* season waxeth glad and light.
 *this

And I, so glad of thilke season sweet, Was *happed thus* upon a certain night,
 thus circumstanced As I lay in my bed, sleep full unmeet*
 *unfit, uncompliant Was unto me; but why that I not might Rest, I not wist;
 for there n'as* earthly wight, *was not As I suppose, had more
 hearte's ease Than I, for I n'had* sickness nor disease.** *had not
 **distress

Wherefore I marvel greatly of myself, That I so long withoute sleepe lay; And
up I rose three houres after twelf, About the springing of the [gladsome] day;
And on I put my gear* and mine array, *garments And to a
pleasant grove I gan to pass, Long ere the brighte sun uprisen was;

In which were oakes great, straight as a line, Under the which the grass, so
fresh of hue, Was newly sprung; and an eight foot or nine Every tree well
from his fellow grew, With branches broad, laden with leaves new, That
sprangen out against the sunne sheen; Some very red;<2> and some a glad
light green;

Which, as me thought, was right a pleasant sight. And eke the birdes'
songes for to hear Would have rejoiced any earthly wight; And I, that could
not yet, in no mannere, Heare the nightingale of* all the year,<3>
*during Full busy hearkened with heart and ear, If I her voice perceve could
anywhere.

And at the last a path of little brede* *breadth I found, that
greatly had not used be; For it forgrowen* was with grass and weed,
overgrown That well unneth a wight mighte see: *scarcely
Thought I, "This path some whither goes, pardie!"* *of a surety And so
I follow'd [it], till it me brought To a right pleasant arbour, well y-wrought,

That benched was, and [all] with turfes new Freshly y-turf'd, <4> whereof
the greene grass, So small, so thick, so short, so fresh of hue, That most like
to green wool, I wot, it was; The hedge also, that *yeden in compass,*
went all around <5> And closed in all the greene herbere,*
arbour With sycamore was set and eglatere, *eglantine, sweet-briar

Wreathed *in fere* so well and cunningly, *together* That ev'ry
branch and leaf grew *by measure,* *regularly* Plain as a board, of
a height by and by: *the same height side I saw never a thing, I you
ensure, by side* So well y-done; for he that took the cure*
*pains, care To maken it, I trow did all his pain To make it pass all those
that men have seen.

And shapen was this arbour, roof and all, As is a pretty parlour; and also
The hedge as thick was as a castle wall, That whoso list without to stand or
go, Though he would all day pryen to and fro, He should not see if there
were any wight Within or no; but one within well might

Perceive all those that wente there without Into the field, that was on ev'ry

none earthly man.

And as I sat, the birdes heark'ning thus, Me thought that I heard voices suddenly, The most sweetest and most delicious That ever any wight, I *trow truely,*
verily believe Heard in their life; for the harmony And sweet accord was in so good musike, That the voices to angels' most were like.

At the last, out of a grove even by, That was right goodly, and pleasant to sight, I saw where there came, singing lustily, A world of ladies; but to tell aright Their greate beauty, lies not in my might, Nor their array; nevertheless I shall Tell you a part, though I speak not of all.

In surcoats* white, of velvet well fitting, *upper robes They were clad, and the seames each one, As it were a mannere [of] garnishing, Was set with emeraldes, one and one, *By and by;* but many a riche stone *in a row* Was set upon the purples,* out of doubt, *embroidered edges Of collars, sleeves, and traines round about;

As greate pearles, round and orient,* *brilliant And diamondes fine, and rubies red, And many another stone, of which I went* *cannot recall The names now; and ev'reach on her head [Had] a rich fret* of gold, which, without dread,** *band **doubt Was full of stately* riche stones set; *valuable, noble And ev'ry lady had a chapelet

Upon her head of branches fresh and green, <7> So well y-wrought, and so marvellously, That it was a right noble sight to see'n; Some of laurel, and some full pleasantly Had chapelets of woodbine; and sadly,* *sedately Some of agnus castus <8> wearen also Chapelets fresh; but there were many of tho'* *those

That danced and eke sung full soberly; And all they went *in manner of compass;* *in a circle* But one there went, in mid the company, Sole by herself; but all follow'd the pace That she kept, whose heavenly figur'd face So pleasant was, and her well shap'd person, That in beauty she pass'd them ev'ry one.

And more richly beseen, by many fold, She was also in ev'ry manner thing: Upon her head, full pleasant to behold, A crown of golde, rich for any king; A branch of agnus castus eke bearing In her hand, and to my sight truely She Lady was of all that company.

And she began a roundell <9> lustily, That "Suse le foyle, devers moi," men

gear, Was in a suit according, ev'ry one, As ye have heard the foresaid trumpets were; And, by seeming, they *were nothing to lear,* *had nothing to learn* And their guiding they did all mannerly.*
*perfectly And after them came a great company

Of heraldes and pursuivantes eke, Arrayed in clothes of white velvet; And, hardily,* they were no thing to seek, assuredly How they on them shoulde the harness set: And ev'ry man had on a chapelet; Scutcheones and eke harness, indeed, They had *in suit of* them that 'fore them yede.* *corresponding with*
went Next after them in came, in armour bright, All save their heades, seemly knightes nine, And ev'ry clasp and nail, as to my sight, Of their harness was of red golde fine; With cloth of gold, and furred with ermine, Were the trappures of their steedes strong, *trappings Both wide and large, that to the grounde hung.

And ev'ry boss of bridle and paytre* *horse's breastplate That they had on, was worth, as I would ween, A thousand pound; and on their heades, well Dressed, were crownes of the laurel green, The beste made that ever I had seen; And ev'ry knight had after him riding Three henchemen* upon him awaiting. *pages

Of which ev'ry [first], on a short truncheon,* *staff His lorde's helmet bare, so richly dight,* *adorned That the worst of them was worthy the ranson* *ransom Of any king; the second a shielde bright Bare at his back; the thirde bare upright A mighty spear, full sharp y-ground and keen; And ev'ry childe* ware of leaves green
*page

A freshe chaplet on his haires bright; And cloakes white of fine velvet they ware Their steedes trapped and arrayed right, Without difference, as their lordes' were; And after them, on many a fresh courser, There came of armed knightes such a rout,* *company, crowd That they bespread the large field about.

And all they waren, after their degrees, Chapelets newe made of laurel green, Some of the oak, and some of other trees; Some in their handes bare boughes sheen,* *bright Some of laurel, and some of oakes keen, Some of hawthorn, and some of the woodbind, And many more which I had not in mind.

And so they came, their horses fresh stirring With bloody soundes of their trumpets loud; There saw I many an *uncouth disguising* *strange

manoeuvring* In the array of these knightes proud; And at the last, as
evenly as they could, They took their place in middest of the mead, And ev'ry
knight turned his horse's head

To his fellow, and lightly laid a spear Into the rest; and so the jousts began
On ev'ry part aboute, here and there; Some brake his spear, some threw
down horse and man; About the field astray the steedes ran; And, to behold
their rule and governance,* *conduct I you ensure, it was a
great pleasuance.

And so the joustes last'* an hour and more; *lasted But those
that crowned were in laurel green Wonne the prize; their dintes* were so
sore, *strokes That there was none against them might sustene:
And the jousting was alle left off clean, And from their horse the nine alight'
anon, And so did all the remnant ev'ry one.

And forth they went together, twain and twain, That to behold it was a
worthy sight, Toward the ladies on the greene plain, That sang and danced
as I said now right; The ladies, as soon as they goodly might, They brake off
both the song and eke the dance, And went to meet them with full glad
semblance.* *air, aspect

And ev'ry lady took, full womanly, By th'hand a knight, and so forth right
they yede* *went Unto a fair laurel that stood fast by, With leaves
lade the boughs of greate brede;* *breadth And, to my doom,*
there never was, indeed, *judgment Man that had seene half so
fair a tree; For underneath it there might well have be* *been

A hundred persons, *at their own pleasance,* *in perfect comfort*
Shadowed from the heat of Phoebus bright, So that they shoulde have felt
no grievance* *annoyance Of rain nor haile that them hurte
might. The savour eke rejoice would any wight That had been sick or
melancholious, It was so very good and virtuous.* *full of healing
virtues

And with great rev'rence they inclined low Unto the tree so sweet and fair of
hue;* *appearance And after that, within a *little throw,*
short time They all began to sing and dance of new, Some song of love,
some *plaining of untrue,* *complaint of Environing* the tree that
stood upright; unfaithfulness* And ever went a lady and a knight.
*going round

And at the last I cast mine eye aside, And was ware of a lusty company That

came roaming out of the felde wide; [And] hand in hand a knight and a lady; The ladies all in surcoats, that richly Purfiled* were with many a riche stone; *trimmed at the borders And ev'ry knight of green ware mantles on,

Embroider'd well, so as the surcoats were; And ev'reach had a chaplet on her head (Which did right well upon the shining hair), Maked of goodly flowers, white and red. The knightes eke, that they in hande led, In suit of them ware chaplets ev'ry one, And them before went minstrels many one,

As harpes, pipes, lutes, and psaltry, All [clad] in green; and, on their heades bare, Of divers flowers, made full craftily All in a suit, goodly chaplets they ware; And so dancing into the mead they fare. In mid the which they found a tuft that was All overspread with flowers in compass* *around, in a circle

Whereunto they inclined ev'ry one, With great reverence, and that full humbly And at the last there then began anon A lady for to sing right womanly, A bargaret, <14> in praising the daisy. For, as me thought, among her notes sweet, She saide: "Si douce est la margarete." <15>

Then alle they answered her in fere* *together So passingly well, and so pleasantly, That it was a [most] blissful noise to hear. But, I n'ot* how, ithappen'd suddenly *know not As about noon the sun so fervently Wax'd hote, that the pretty tender flow'rs Had lost the beauty of their fresh colours,

Forshrunk* with heat; the ladies eke to-brent,** *shrivelled **very burnt That they knew not where they might them bestow; The knightes swelt,* for lack of shade nigh shent** *fainted **destroyed And after that, within a little throw, The wind began so sturdily to blow, That down went all the flowers ev'ry one, So that in all the mead there left not one;

Save such as succour'd were among the leaves From ev'ry storm that mighte them assail, Growing under the hedges and thick greves;* *groves, boughs And after that there came a storm of hail And rain in fere,* so that withoute fail *together The ladies nor the knights had not one thread Dry on them, so dropping was [all] their weed.* *clothing

And when the storm was passed clean away, Those in the white, that stood under the tree, They felt no thing of all the great affray That they in green without *had in y-be:* *had been in* To them they went for ruth, and for pity, Them to comfort after their great disease;*

trouble So fain they were the helpless for to ease. *glad, eager

Then I was ware how one of them in green Had on a crowne, rich and well
sitting;* *becoming Wherefore I deemed well she was a queen,
And those in green on her were awaiting.* *in attendance The
ladies then in white that were coming Toward them, and the knightes eke
in fere, *together* Began to comfort them, and make them
cheer.

The queen in white, that was of great beauty, Took by the hand the queen
that was in green, And saide: "Sister, I have great pity Of your annoy, and of
your troublous teen,* *injury, grief Wherein you and your company
have been So long, alas! and if that it you please To go with me, I shall you
do the ease,

"In all the pleasure that I can or may;" Whereof the other, humbly as she
might, Thanked her; for in right evil array She was, with storm and heat, I
you behight;* *assure Arid ev'ry lady then anon aright, That
were in white, one of them took in green By the hand; which when that the
knights had seen,

In like mannere each of them took a knight Y-clad in green, and forth with
them they fare Unto a hedge, where that they anon right, To make their
joustes, <16> they would not spare Boughes to hewe down, and eke trees
square, Wherewith they made them stately fires great, To dry their clothes,
that were wringing wet.

And after that, of herbes that there grew, They made, for blisters of the sun's
burning, Ointmentes very good, wholesome, and new, Wherewith they went
the sick fast anointing; And after that they went about gath'ring Pleasant
salades, which they made them eat, For to refresh their great unkindly heat.

The Lady of the Leaf then gan to pray Her of the Flower (for so, to my
seeming, They should be called, as by their array), To sup with her; and eke,
for anything, That she should with her all her people bring; And she again in
right goodly mannere Thanked her fast of her most friendly cheer;

Saying plainely, that she would obey, With all her heart, all her
commandement: And then anon, without longer delay, The Lady of the Leaf
hath one y-sent To bring a palfrey, *after her intent,* *according to her
wish* Arrayed well in fair harness of gold; For nothing lack'd, that *to him
longe sho'ld.* *should belong to him*

never may be dead! And all they were so *worthy of their hand*
valiant in fight In their time, that no one might them withstand,

"And those that weare chaplets on their head Of fresh woodbind, be such as
never were To love untrue in word, in thought, nor deed, But ay steadfast;
nor for pleasance, nor fear, Though that they should their heartes all to-
tear,* *rend in pieces* Would never flit,* but ever were steadfast,
*change *Till that their lives there asunder brast.*" *till they died*

"Now fair Madame," quoth I, "yet would I pray Your ladyship, if that it
mighte be, That I might knowe, by some manner way (Since that it hath
liked your beauty, The truth of these ladies for to tell me), What that these
knightes be in rich armour, And what those be in green and wear the flow'r?

"And why that some did rev'rence to that tree, And some unto the plot of
flowers fair?" "With right good will, my daughter fair," quoth she, "Since your
desire is good and debonair;* *gentle, courteous The nine crowned
be *very exemplair* *the true examples* Of all honour longing to
chivalry; And those certain be call'd The Nine Worthy, <18>

"Which ye may see now riding all before, That in their time did many a noble
deed, And for their worthiness full oft have bore The crown of laurel leaves
upon their head, As ye may in your olde bookes read; And how that he that
was a conquerour Had by laurel always his most honour.

"And those that beare boughes in their hand Of the precious laurel so
notable, Be such as were, I will ye understand, Most noble Knightes of the
Rounde Table,<19> And eke the Douceperes honourable; <20> Whiche they
bear in sign of victory, As witness of their deedes mightily.

"Eke there be knightes old <21> of the Garter, That in their time did right
worthily; And the honour they did to the laurer* *laurel <22>
Is for* by it they have their laud wholly, *because Their
triumph eke, and martial glory; Which unto them is more perfect richness
Than any wight imagine can, or guess.

"For one leaf given of that noble tree To any wight that hath done worthily,
An!* it be done so as it ought to be, *if Is more honour
than any thing earthly; Witness of Rome, that founder was truly Of alle
kighthood and deeds marvellous; Record I take of Titus Livius." <23>

And as for her that crowned is in green, It is Flora, of these flowers goddess;
And all that here on her awaiting be'n, It are such folk that loved idleness,

And put all that I had seen in writing, Under support of them that list it
read. <25> O little book! thou art so uncunning,* *unskilful
How dar'st thou put thyself in press, <26> for dread? It is wonder that thou
waxest not red! Since that thou know'st full lite* who shall behold
*little Thy rude language, full *boistously unfold.* *unfolded in homely
and unpolished fashion*

Explicit.*

*The End