

## **THE PROLOGUE TO THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN.**

[SOME difference of opinion exists as to the date at which Chaucer wrote "The Legend of Good Women." Those who would fix that date at a period not long before the poet's death -- who would place the poem, indeed, among his closing labours -- support their opinion by the fact that the Prologue recites most of Chaucer's principal works, and glances, besides, at a long array of other productions, too many to be fully catalogued. But, on the other hand, it is objected that the "Legend" makes no mention of "The Canterbury Tales" as such; while two of those Tales -- the Knight's and the Second Nun's -- are enumerated by the titles which they bore as separate compositions, before they were incorporated in the great collection: "The Love of Palamon and Arcite," and "The Life of Saint Cecile" (see note 1 to the Second Nun's tale). Tyrwhitt seems perfectly justified in placing the composition of the poem immediately before that of Chaucer's magnum opus, and after the marriage of Richard II to his first queen, Anne of Bohemia. That event took place in 1382; and since it is to Anne that the poet refers when he makes Alcestis bid him give his poem to the queen "at Eltham or at Sheen," the "Legend" could not have been written earlier. The old editions tell us that "several ladies in the Court took offence at Chaucer's large speeches against the untruth of women; therefore the queen enjoin'd him to compile this book in the commendation of sundry maidens and wives, who show'd themselves faithful to faithless men. This seems to have been written after *The Flower and the Leaf*." Evidently it was, for distinct references to that poem are to be found in the Prologue; but more interesting is the indication which it furnishes, that "*Troilus and Cressida*" was the work, not of the poet's youth, but of his maturer age. We could hardly expect the queen -- whether of Love or of England -- to demand seriously from Chaucer a retractation of sentiments which he had expressed a full generation before, and for which he had made atonement by the splendid praises of true love sung in "*The Court of Love*," "*The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*," and other poems of youth and middle life. But "*Troilus and Cressida*" is coupled with "*The Romance of the Rose*," as one of the poems which had given offence to the servants and the God of Love; therefore we may suppose it to have more prominently engaged courtly notice at a later period of the poet's life, than even its undoubted popularity could explain. At whatever date, or in whatever circumstances, undertaken, "The Legend of Good Women" is a fragment. There are several signs that it was designed to contain the stories of twenty-five ladies, although the number of the good women is in the poem itself set down at nineteen; but nine legends only were actually composed, or have come down to us. They are, those of Cleopatra Queen of Egypt (126 lines),



eyes in our town; To them have I so great affectioun, As I said erst, when  
 comen is the May, That in my bed there dawneth me no day That I n'am\*  
 up, and walking in the mead, \*am not To see this flow'r  
 against the sunne spread, When it upriseth early by the morrow; That  
 blissful sight softeneth all my sorrow, So glad am I, when that I have  
 presence Of it, to do it alle reverence, As she that is of alle flowers flow'r,  
 Fulfilled of all virtue and honour, And ever alike fair, and fresh of hue; As  
 well in winter, as in summer new, This love I ever, and shall until I die; All\*  
 swear I not, of this I will not lie, \*although There loved no  
 wight hotter in his life. And when that it is eve, I runne blife,\*  
 \*quickly, eagerly As soon as ever the sun begins to west,\* \*decline  
 westward To see this flow'r, how it will go to rest, For fear of night, so hateth  
 she darkness! Her cheer\* is plainly spread in the brightness  
 \*countenance Of the sunne, for there it will unclose. Alas! that I had  
 English, rhyme or prose, Sufficient this flow'r to praise aright! But help me,  
 ye that have \*cunning or might;\* \*skill or power\* Ye lovers, that can  
 make of sentiment, In this case ought ye to be diligent To further me  
 somewhat in my labour, Whether ye be with the Leaf or the Flow'r; <3> For  
 well I wot, that ye have herebefore Of making ropen,\* and led away the corn;  
 <4> \*reaped And I come after, gleaning here and there, And am  
 full glad if I may find an ear Of any goodly word that you have left. And  
 though it hap me to rehearsen eft\* \*again What ye have in  
 your freshe songes said, Forbear me, and be not \*evil apaid,\*  
 \*displeased\* Since that ye see I do it in th'honour Of love, and eke in service  
 of the flow'r Whom that I serve as I have wit or might. <5> She is the  
 clearness, and the very\* light, \*true That in this darke world  
 me winds\* and leads; \*turns, guides The heart within my sorrowful  
 breast you dreads, And loves so sore, that ye be, verily, The mistress of my  
 wit, and nothing I. My word, my works, are knit so in your bond, That, as a  
 harp obeyeth to the hand, That makes it sound after his fingering, Right so  
 may ye out of my hearte bring Such voice, right as you list, to laugh or  
 plain;\* \*complain, mourn Be ye my guide, and lady sovereign. As to mine  
 earthly god, to you I call, Both in this work, and in my sorrows all.

But wherefore that I spake to give credence To old stories, and do them  
 reverence, And that men muste more things believe Than they may see at  
 eye, or elles preve,\* \*prove That shall I say, when that I see  
 my time; I may not all at ones speak in rhyme. My busy ghost,\* that  
 thirsteth always new \*spirit To see this flow'r so young, so  
 fresh of hue, Constrained me with so greedy desire, That in my heart I feele  
 yet the fire, That made me to rise ere it were day, -- And this was now the  
 first morrow of May, -- With dreadful heart, and glad devotion, For to be at  
 the resurrection Of this flower, when that it should unclose Against the sun,

that rose as red as rose, That in the breast was of the beast\* that day  
 \*the sign of the Bull That Agenore's daughter led away. <6> And down on  
 knees anon right I me set, And as I could this freshe flow'r I gret,\*  
 \*greeted Kneeling alway, till it unclosed was, Upon the smalle, softe, sweete  
 grass, That was with flowers sweet embroider'd all, Of such sweetness and  
 such odour \*o'er all,\*                      \*everywhere\* That, for to speak of gum, or  
 herb, or tree, Comparison may none y-maked be; For it surmounteth plainly  
 all odours, And for rich beauty the most gay of flow'rs. Forgotten had the  
 earth his poor estate Of winter, that him naked made and mate,\*  
 \*dejected, lifeless And with his sword of cold so sore grieved; Now hath  
 th'attemper\* sun all that releaved\*\*      \*temperate \*\*furnished That naked  
 was, and clad it new again.                      anew with leaves The smalle fowles,  
 of the season fain,\*                      \*glad That of the panter\* and the net  
 be scap'd,                      \*draw-net Upon the fowler, that them made  
 awhap'd\*                      \*terrified, confounded In winter, and destroyed had their  
 brood, In his despite them thought it did them good To sing of him, and in  
 their song despise The foule churl, that, for his covetise,\*  
 \*greed Had them betrayed with his sophistry\*                      \*deceptions  
 This was their song: "The fowler we defy, And all his craft:" and some sunge  
 clear Layes of love, that joy it was to hear, In worshipping\* and praising of  
 their make;\*\*                      \*honouring \*\*mate And for the blissful newe summer's  
 sake, Upon the branches full of blossoms soft, In their delight they turned  
 them full oft, And sunge, "Blessed be Saint Valentine! <7> For on his day I  
 chose you to be mine, Withoute repenting, my hearte sweet." And  
 therewithal their heals began to meet, Yielding honour, and humble  
 obeisances, To love, and did their other observances That longen unto Love  
 and to Nature; Construe that as you list, I \*do no cure.\*                      \*care  
 nothing\* And those that hadde \*done unkindeness,\*                      \*committed  
 offence As doth the tidife, <8> for newfangleness,                      against natural laws\*  
 Besoughte mercy for their trespassing And humbly sange their repenting,  
 And swore upon the blossoms to be true; So that their mates would upon  
 them rue,\*                      \*take pity And at the laste made their accord.\*  
 \*reconciliation All\* found they Danger\*\* for a time a lord,                      \*although  
 \*\*disdain Yet Pity, through her stronge gentle might, Forgave, and made  
 mercy pass aright Through Innocence, and ruled Courtesy. But I ne call not  
 innocence folly Nor false pity, for virtue is the mean, As Ethic <9> saith, in  
 such manner I mean. And thus these fowles, void of all malice, Accorded  
 unto Love, and lefte vice Of hate, and sangen all of one accord, "Welcome,  
 Summer, our governor and lord!" And Zephyrus and Flora gentilly Gave to  
 the flowers, soft and tenderly, Their sweete breath, and made them for to  
 spread, As god and goddess of the flow'ry mead; In which me thought I  
 mighte, day by day, Dwellen alway, the jolly month of May, Withoute sleep,  
 withoute meat or drink. Adown full softly I began to sink, And, leaning on

mine elbow and my side The longe day I shope\* to abide,  
 \*resolved, prepared For nothing elles, and I shall not lie But for to look upon  
 the daisy; That men by reason well it calle may The Daye's-eye, or else the  
 Eye of Day, The empress and the flow'r of flowers all I pray to God that faire  
 may she fall! And all that love flowers, for her sake: But, nathelasse, \*ween  
 not that I make\*                    \*do not fancy that I In praising of the Flow'r against  
 the Leaf,                    write this poem\* No more than of the corn against the  
 sheaf; For as to me is lever none nor lother, I n'am withholden yet with  
 neither n'other. <10> \*Nor I n'ot\* who serves Leaf, nor who the Flow'r;  
 \*nor do I know\* Well \*brooke they\* their service or labour!                    \*may they  
 profit by\* For this thing is all of another tun, <11> Of old story, ere such  
 thing was begun.

When that the sun out of the south gan west, And that this flow'r gan close,  
 and go to rest, For darkness of the night, the which she dread;\*  
 \*dreaded Home to my house full swiftly I me sped, To go to rest, and early  
 for to rise, To see this flower spread, as I devise.\*                    \*describe  
 And in a little arbour that I have, That benched was of turfes fresh y-grave,\*  
 <12>                    \*cut out I bade men shoulde me my couche make; For  
 dainty\* of the newe summer's sake,                    \*pleasure I bade them  
 strowe flowers on my bed. When I was laid, and had mine eyen hid, I fell  
 asleep; within an hour or two, Me mette\* how I lay in the meadow tho,\*\*  
 \*dreamed \*\*then To see this flow'r that I love so and dread. And from afar  
 came walking in the mead The God of Love, and in his hand a queen; And  
 she was clad in royal habit green; A fret\* of gold she hadde next her hair,  
 \*band And upon that a white corown she bare, With flowrons\* small, and, as  
 I shall not lie,                    \*floreys <13> For all the world right as a daisy Y-  
 crowned is, with white leaves lite,\*                    \*small So were the  
 flowrons of her crowne white. For of one pearle, fine, oriential, Her white  
 crowne was y-maked all, For which the white crown above the green Made  
 her like a daisy for to see'n,\*                    \*look upon Consider'd eke her  
 fret of gold above. Y-clothed was this mighty God of Love In silk embroider'd,  
 full of greene greves,\*                    \*boughs In which there was a fret of red  
 rose leaves, The freshest since the world was first begun. His gilt hair was y-  
 crowned with a sun, Instead of gold, for\* heaviness and weight;  
 \*to avoid Therewith me thought his face shone so bright, That well unnethes  
 might I him behold; And in his hand me thought I saw him hold Two fiery  
 dartes, as the gledes\* red;                    \*glowing coals And angel-like his  
 winges saw I spread. And \*all be\* that men say that blind is he,  
 \*although\* Algate\* me thoughte that he might well see;                    \*at all  
 events For sternly upon me he gan behold, So that his looking \*did my  
 hearte cold.\*                    \*made my heart And by the hand he held this noble  
 queen,                    grow cold\* Crowned with white, and clothed all in green,



enviroun\*            \*all around in a ring\* They sette them full softly adown.  
 First sat the God of Love, and since\* his queen,            \*afterwards With the  
 white corowne, clad in green; And sithen\* all the remnant by and by,  
 \*then As they were of estate, full courteously; And not a word was spoken in  
 the place, The mountance\* of a furlong way of space.            \*extent  
 <18>

I, kneeling by this flow'r, in good intent Abode, to knowe what this people  
 meant, As still as any stone, till, at the last, The God of Love on me his eyen  
 cast, And said, "Who kneeleth there?" and I answer'd Unto his asking, when  
 that I it heard, And said, "It am I," and came to him near, And salued\* him.  
 Quoth he, "What dost thou here,            \*saluted So nigh mine owen  
 flow'r, so boldely? It were better worthy, truely, A worm to nighe\* near my  
 flow'r than thou."            \*approach, draw nigh "And why, Sir," quoth I, "an' it  
 liketh you?" "For thou," quoth he, "art thereto nothing able, It is my relic,\*  
 dign\*\* and delectable,            \*emblem <19> \*\*worthy And thou my foe, and  
 all my folk warrayest,\*            \*molestest, censurest And of mine olde servants  
 thou missayest, And hind'rest them, with thy translation, And lettest\* folk  
 from their devotion            \*preventest To serve me, and holdest it  
 folly To serve Love; thou may'st it not deny; For in plain text, withoute need  
 of glose,\*            \*comment, gloss Thu hast translated the Romance of the  
 Rose, That is a heresy against my law, And maketh wise folk from me  
 withdraw; And of Cresside thou hast said as thee list, That maketh men to  
 women less to trust, That be as true as e'er was any steel. Of thine answer  
 \*advise thee right weel;\*            \*consider right well\* For though that thou  
 \*renied hast my lay,\*            \*abjured my law As other wretches have done  
 many a day,            or religion\* By Sainte Venus, that my mother is, If  
 that thou live, thou shalt repente this, So cruelly, that it shall well be seen."

Then spake this Lady, clothed all in green, And saide, "God, right of your  
 courtesy, Ye mighte hearken if he can reply Against all this, that ye have \*to  
 him meved;\*            \*advanced against him\* A godde shoulde not be thus  
 aggrieved, But of his deity he shall be stable, And thereto gracious and  
 merciabile.\*            \*merciful And if ye n'ere\* a god, that knoweth  
 all,            \*were not Then might it be, as I you telle shall, This man to  
 you may falsely be accused, Whereas by right him ought to be excused; For  
 in your court is many a losengeour,\*            \*deceiver <20> And many a  
 \*quaint toteler accusour,\*            \*strange prating accuser <21>\* That labour\* in  
 your eares many a soun',            \*drum Right after their  
 imaginatioun, To have your dalliance,\* and for envy;            \*pleasant  
 conversation, These be the causes, and I shall not lie,  
 company Envy is lavender\* of the Court alway,            \*laundress  
 For she departeth neither night nor day <22> Out of the house of Caesar,

thus saith Dant'; Whoso that go'th, algate\* she shall not want.                   \*at all  
 events And eke, parauntre,\* for this man is nice,\*\*    \*peradventure  
 \*\*foolish He mighte do it guessing\* no malice;\*thinking For  
 he useth thinges for to make;\*                                 \*compose poetry Him \*recketh  
 naught of \* what mattere he take;         \*cares nothing for\* Or he was bidden  
 \*make thilke tway\*                                 \*compose those two\* Of\* some person, and  
 durst it not withsay;\*                                 \*by \*\*refuse, deny Or him repenteth utterly of  
 this. He hath not done so grievously amiss, To translate what olde clerkes  
 write, As though that he of malice would endite,\*                                 \*write down  
 \*Despite of\* Love, and had himself it wrought.                                 \*contempt for\* This  
 should a righteous lord have in his thought, And not be like tyrants of  
 Lombardy, That have no regard but at tyranny. For he that king or lord is  
 naturel, Him oughte not be tyrant or cruel, <23> As is a farmer, <24> to do  
 the harm he can; He muste think, it is his liegeman, And is his treasure,  
 and his gold in coffer; This is the sentence\* of the philosopher:  
 \*opinion, sentiment A king to keep his lieges in justice, Withoute doubte  
 that is his office. All\* will he keep his lords in their degree, --  
 \*although As it is right and skilful\* that they be,                                 \*reasonable  
 Enhanced and honoured, and most dear, For they be halfe\* in this world  
 here, --                                 \*demigods Yet must he do both right to poor and rich,  
 All be that their estate be not y-lich;\*                                 \*alike And have of  
 poore folk compassion. For lo! the gentle kind of the lion; For when a fly  
 offendeth him, or biteth, He with his tail away the flye smiteth, All easily; for  
 of his gentry\*                                 \*nobleness Him deigneth not to wreak  
 him on a fly, As doth a cur, or else another beast. \*In noble corage ought to  
 be arrest,\*                                 \*in a noble nature ought And weighen ev'rything by equity,  
 to be self-restraint\* And ever have regard to his degree. For, Sir, it is no  
 mastery for a lord To damn\* a man, without answer of word;  
 \*condemn And for a lord, that is \*full foul to use.\*    \*most infamous  
 practice\* And it be so he\* may him not excuse,                                 \*the offender  
 But asketh mercy with a dreadful\* heart,                                 \*fearing, timid And  
 proffereth him, right in his bare shirt, To be right at your owen judgement,  
 Then ought a god, by short advisement,\*                                 \*deliberation Consider  
 his own honour, and his trespass; For since no pow'r of death lies in this  
 case, You ought to be the lighter merciable; Lette\* your ire, and be  
 somewhat tractable!                                 \*restrain This man hath served you of his  
 cunning,\*                                 \*ability, skill And further'd well your law in his making.\*  
 \*composing poetry Albeit that he cannot well endite, Yet hath he made  
 lewed\* folk delight                                 \*ignorant To serve you, in praising of  
 your name. He made the book that hight the House of Fame, And eke the  
 Death of Blanche the Duchess, And the Parliament of Fowles, as I guess,  
 And all the Love of Palamon and Arcite, <25> Of Thebes, though the story is  
 known lite;\*                                 \*little And many a hymne for your holydays, That



highte ballads, roundels, virelays. And, for to speak of other holiness, He hath in prose translated Boece, <26> And made the Life also of Saint Cecile; He made also, gone is a greate while, Origenes upon the Magdalene. <27> Him oughte now to have the lesse pain;\* \*penalty He hath made many a lay, and many a thing. Now as ye be a god, and eke a king, I your Alcestis, <28> whilom queen of Thrace, I aske you this man, right of your grace, That ye him never hurt in all his life; And he shall swere to you, and that blife,\* \*quickly He shall no more aguilty\* in this wise, \*offend But shall maken, as ye will him devise, Of women true in loving all their life, Whereso ye will, of maiden or of wife, And further you as much as he missaid Or\* in the Rose, or elles in Cresseide." \*either

The God of Love answered her anon: "Madame," quoth he, "it is so long agone That I you knew, so charitable and true, That never yet, since that the world was new, To me ne found I better none than ye; If that I woulde save my degree, I may nor will not warne\* your request; \*refuse All lies in you, do with him as you lest. I all forgive withoute longer space;\* \*delay For he who gives a gift, or doth a grace, Do it betimes, his thank is well the more; <29> And deeme\* ye what he shall do therefor. \*adjudge Go thanke now my Lady here," quoth he. I rose, and down I set me on my knee, And saide thus; "Madame, the God above Foryielde\* you that ye the God of Love \*reward Have made me his wrathe to forgive; And grace\* so longe for to live, \*give me grace That I may knowe soothly what ye be, That have me help'd, and put in this degree! But truly I ween'd, as in this case, Naught t' have aguilt,\* nor done to Love trespass;\*\* \*offended For why? a true man, withoute dread, \*\*offence Hath not \*to parte with\* a thieve's deed. \*any share in\* Nor a true lover oughte me to blame, Though that I spoke a false lover some shame. They oughte rather with me for to hold, For that I of Cressida wrote or told, Or of the Rose, \*what so mine author meant;\* \*made a true translation\* Algate, God wot, it was mine intent \*by all ways To further truth in love, and it cherice,\* \*cherish And to beware from falseness and from vice, By such example; this was my meaning."

And she answer'd; "Let be thine arguing, For Love will not counterpleaded be <30> In right nor wrong, and learne that of me; Thou hast thy grace, and hold thee right thereto. Now will I say what penance thou shalt do For thy trespass;\* and understand it here: \*offence Thou shalt, while that thou livest, year by year, The moste partie of thy time spend In making of a glorious Legend Of Goode Women, maidenens and wives, That were true in loving all their lives; And tell of false men that them betray, That all their life do naught but assay How many women they may do a shame; For in

your world that is now \*held a game.\*      \*considered a sport\* And though  
 thou like not a lover be, <31> Speak well of love; this penance give I thee.  
 And to the God of Love I shall so pray, That he shall charge his servants, by  
 any way, To further thee, and well thy labour quite:\*      \*requite Go  
 now thy way, thy penance is but lite. And, when this book ye make, give it  
 the queen On my behalf, at Eltham, or at Sheen."

The God of Love gan smile, and then he said: "Know'st thou," quoth he,  
 "whether this be wife or maid, Or queen, or countess, or of what degree,  
 That hath so little penance given thee, That hath deserved sorely for to  
 smart? But pity runneth soon in gentle\* heart; <32>      \*nobly born  
 That may'st thou see, she kitheth\* what she is.      \*showeth And I  
 answer'd: "Nay, Sir, so have I bliss, No more but that I see well she is good."  
 "That is a true tale, by my hood," Quoth Love; "and that thou knowest well,  
 pardie! If it be so that thou advise\* thee.      \*bethink Hast  
 thou not in a book, li'th\* in thy chest,      \*(that) lies The greate  
 goodness of the queen Alceste, That turned was into a daisy She that for her  
 husbände chose to die, And eke to go to hell rather than he; And Hercules  
 rescued her, pardie! And brought her out of hell again to bliss?" And I  
 answer'd again, and saide; "Yes, Now know I her; and is this good Alceste,  
 The daisy, and mine own hearte's rest? Now feel I well the goodness of this  
 wife, That both after her death, and in her life, Her greate bounty\* doubleth  
 her renown.      \*virtue Well hath she quit\* me mine affectioun  
 \*recompensed That I have to her flow'r the daisy; No wonder is though Jove  
 her stellify, <33> As telleth Agathon, <34> for her goodness; Her white  
 crowne bears of it witness; For all so many virtues hadde she As smalle  
 flowrons in her crowne be. In remembrance of her, and in honour, Cybele  
 made the daisy, and the flow'r, Y-crowned all with white, as men may see,  
 And Mars gave her a crowne red, pardie! Instead of rubies set among the  
 white."

Therewith this queen wax'd red for shame a lite When she was praised so in  
 her presence. Then saide Love: "A full great negligence Was it to thee, that  
 ilke\* time thou made      \*that same 'Hide Absolon thy tresses,' in  
 ballade, That thou forgot her in thy song to set, Since that thou art so  
 greatly in her debt, And knowest well that calendar\* is she  
 \*guide, example To any woman that will lover be: For she taught all the craft  
 of true loving, And namely\* of wifehood the living,  
 \*especially And all the boundes that she ought to keep: Thy little wit was  
 thilke\* time asleep.      \*that But now I charge thee, upon thy  
 life, That in thy Legend thou make\* of this wife,      \*poetise, compose  
 When thou hast other small y-made before; And fare now well, I charge thee  
 no more. But ere I go, thus much I will thee tell, -- Never shall no true lover

come in hell. These other ladies, sitting here a-row, Be in my ballad, if thou canst them know, And in thy bookes all thou shalt them find; Have them in thy Legend now all in mind; I mean of them that be in thy knowing. For here be twenty thousand more sitting Than that thou knowest, goode women all, And true of love, for aught that may befall; Make the metres of them as thee lest; I must go home, -- the sunne draweth west, -- To Paradise, with all this company: And serve alway the freshe daisy. At Cleopatra I will that thou begin, And so forth, and my love so shalt thou win; For let see now what man, that lover be, Will do so strong a pain for love as she. I wot well that thou may'st not all it rhyme, That suche lovers didden in their time; It were too long to readen and to hear; Suffice me thou make in this mannere, That thou rehearse of all their life the great,\*                    \*substance After\*these old authors list for to treat;                    \*according as For whoso shall so many a story tell, Say shortly, or he shall too longe dwell."

And with that word my bookes gan I take, And right thus on my Legend gan I make.

Thus endeth the Prologue.