The Legend of Good Women

Geoffrey Chaucer

written sometime around 1386

Prologue of IX Good Women

I’ve heard it said a thousand times that there’s joy in heaven and pain in hell, and I’ve no doubt that that’s right, although there’s nobody who lives in this country who’s ever been to either of these places. A man has no knowledge of heaven or hell except by what he’s been told about them, or what he’s read. There’s no direct way of proving their existence. But men should believe more than just what they can see with their own eyes. People shouldn’t believe everything to be a falsehood that happened too long ago for them to have witnessed it at first hand. God knows, a thing is no less true if some may not have seen it. Bernard the monk didn’t see everything, by God!

So we must turn to the books that we have, which deal with things that happened a long time ago, and we should give credence to what they say, being guided by our own judgement. We should believe these old, respected tales of kings and kingdoms, holiness, victories in battle, love and hate and sundry other things that I won’t speak about here, for if old books were all destroyed, the key to the past would be lost. We should respect and believe these old books, since there is no other way of knowing the truth.

For myself, although there are many men who are more intelligent than I am, I delight in reading books. I hold them in great reverence, and I read them with such enthusiasm and trust that there’s scarcely any distraction that will tear me away from them, unless it’s a holiday or the jolly month of May when I can hear the little birds singing and see the flowers bursting forth. Then farewell my studies!

Now, it happens that of all the flowers in the meadow, the ones that I love the best are those red and white ones that men call daisies here in London. I have such great affection for these flowers, when, as I said, the may blossom is out, that there’s no dawn that lights my bed which doesn’t see me already up and walking in the meadow, in order to see them spreading their petals against the rising sun. And when the sun gets low again in the sky, I see this flower closing its petals again until the next morning, so afraid it is of the night. The daisy is the most wonderful of all the flowers, filled with virtue and honour, always beautiful and fresh-looking, and I love it!

Daisy! I’d praise you more if I could do it properly, but woe is me, I’m not equal to it. Those before me have reaped all the poetic corn and carried it away and here I am, searching here and there, happy to find just a single ear of any goodly word that may have been left behind. But if I’m reduced to repeating what people have already written, I hope they’ll not be too angry with me, since it’s said in the furtherance and in the honour of those who serve either the flower or the leaf; but rest assured that it’s
not my intention to argue for either the flower against the leaf or for the leaf against the flower, any more than I would for the ear of corn against the sheaf. As far as I’m concerned, neither is dearer nor less deserving than the other. I’ve yet to make any particular affiliation. In fact, I’ve no idea who serves the leaf and who the flower. It doesn’t concern me. This work comes from another barrel entirely; its about old stories that existed long before all this flower and leaf business. I’m saying that old books should be given the trust and reverence that they deserve and that men should believe these works of authority, since there is no other way to the truth. So my intention is to declare the naked text, in English, of many a story and many a legend that ancient authors have written about. You must make up your own mind about them. Believe them if you wish!

When the month of May had almost passed and I’d spent all day wandering amongst the daisies in the summer meadow that I told you about – and the evening was getting late and the flowers had already closed their petals because the night was approaching, which, as I’ve already said, they’re very frightened of – I sped swiftly back to my house and in a little garden that I have, which had some new benches in it made from freshly-cut turves, I asked my servants to make me up a couch so that I could enjoy the first warm evening of summer, and I asked them to strewn flowers upon this bed.

When I was lying on one of these grassy mounds, strewn with flowers and with my eyes closed like a corpse, I fell asleep within an hour or two and dreamed that I was back in the meadow looking at the daisies, just as I’d been doing all day. It was a beautiful meadow, dotted with lovely flowers, everywhere. Compared to resin, or sage or pine – well, there was just no comparison, the perfume was incomparable. They were like no flowers I’ve ever seen. The Earth had shaken off the poverty of Winter, which had made him naked and grieved him so harshly with his icy sword, and found relief from all that cold in the warm sun that had clothed him anew, in green. The little birds were happy that it was spring – at least, those who had escaped from the huntsman’s net, after he’d imitated them and confused them with his deceitful voice and killed all their offspring. They thought it did them good to put their tongues out to him and to get their own back. This was their song: ‘We defy you, bird-catcher!’

Some of them sang of love from the branches, and it was a joy to hear them doing so. They sang in praise of their mate, and of the new, blissful summer. They sang: ‘Blessed be Saint Valentine, for on his day I chose you to be mine, and I have no regrets, my sweetheart.’ Their beaks touched, in acknowledgement of the humble respect and affection they felt for each other, and then they performed other observances that are pleasing to love and to nature. I strained my ears listening to all this birdsong, because in my dream I imagined that I could understand what they were saying.

At last I heard a lark singing: ‘I can see the mighty God of Love! Lo! Here he comes! I can see his wings spreading.’

I gazed over towards the other side of the meadow and saw him as well. He led a queen by the hand and she was clothed in a garment of royal green with a golden circlet upon her hair and upon this a white
crown with a lot of flowers, and it looked for all the world as though, just as a daisy is crowned with white petals, so also was she. Her crown was made from a single pearl, a beautiful pearl from the east, and the white crown above the green of her garment made her look like a daisy. The golden ornament on her hair only added to the effect.

This mighty God of Love was clothed in silk with green boughs embroidered on it, and he wore a garland of rose leaves on his head, studded with little lily buds, but I can’t describe his face because it shone so brightly that it dazzled my eyes and I couldn’t look at him, even though he was over two hundred yards away.

But as he came nearer I could see that he was holding two flaming darts, as red as burning coals. Then he began to spread his wings like an angel, and although men say that he’s blind, I disagree, for he turned his gaze sternly in my direction.

My heart froze.

He held the noble queen by the hand. She was clothed in green and crowned in white, and so womanly, so humble, so graceful and benign that if men searched through the entire world they wouldn’t find another creature half as beautiful. Her name was Alcestis, and I pray God keep her safe! For without the comfort of her presence, I would have been dead for certain, for fear of Love’s words, and of his mood, which I’ll describe to you in a moment.

Following behind this God of Love, within the meadow, I saw nineteen ladies walking sedately in royal clothes. And behind them, such a crowd of ladies that since the time that God made Adam out of earth, I don’t think there’s any possibility at all that the ladies who’ve been on this Earth since then could number a third or a quarter of these, and they were all faithful in love, every one of them.

But whether this is surprising to you or not, as soon as they caught sight of this flower which I call the daisy, they all stopped at once and knelt down before it, and then danced a leisurely carol in a circle around this flower, singing the following song:

**Ballad**

Hide your golden tresses, Absolon; lay aside your meekness, Esther; conceal your friendliness, Jonathan; Penelope and Marcia, wife of Cato the Younger, make no attempt to flaunt your wifely virtues; and hide your beauty, Isolde and Elaine, for Alcestis is here, who puts you all in the shade.

Hide your beautiful body, Lavinia, and you, Lucretia of Rome and Polyxena of Troy, who paid such a high price for love; Cleopatra, with all your passion, hide your faithfulness and your renown; and you as well, Thisbe, who suffered so much pain for love, because Alcestis is here, who puts you all in the shade.

Hero, Dido, Laudomia, all of you; Phyllis, you took your life for your Demophon, Canace, betrayed by a baby’s cry; Hypsipyle, jilted by Jason, make no boast of your loyalty, not even a sound, nor Hypermnestra, nor Ariadne, not even a complaint, for Alcestis is here, who puts you all in the shade.
When this ballad had finished, they set themselves down upon the sweet, green grass, and sat neatly in a circle. First sat the God of Love, then this queen with the white crown, dressed in green, then all the others, one by one, as their rank allowed, with every courtesy, and you could have passed the time walking a horse for a furlong or more before a single word was spoken. I crept to the foot of a grassy slope and leant against a branch, keeping as still as a stone, hoping to find out what was going on. Suddenly, the God of Love turned his gaze in my direction once again.

‘Who’s that over there?’ he asked.

‘Sir, it’s me,’ I said in reply when I heard him speak, and I approached and greeted him.

‘What are you doing here? What’s made you so brave as to come into my presence? It would be better for a worm to come into my sight than you.’

‘Why is that, sir, if it pleases you?’

‘Because you’re no use to me at all. My servants are all wise and honourable, but you’re my mortal enemy and attack me constantly and slander all my old servants and hinder them with your translations, and try to prevent folk from serving me devoutly and hold it foolishness to trust in me. You can’t deny it. You’ve translated the *Romance of the Rose* in its entirety, which is a heresy against my law, and you make wise folk withdraw from me and use your intelligence, and the cool light of reason, to show that only a complete fool would give too much thought and energy to Love and Passion. So it’s clear to me that you’re in an early stage of dementia, like those old fools whose spirits are failing and who blame others for their own shortcomings.

‘Haven’t you translated into English that book about how Cressida betrayed Troilus, showing how women have transgressed? Why haven’t you said good things about women, as well as bad? Is it that you just couldn’t think of anything to say? Couldn’t you find any suitable tales in your old books about women who’ve been faithful and good? God knows, you own sixty books yourself, old and new, full of wonderful stories that the Romans and Greeks set down, describing the lives of various women, and a hundred of them good to every one that’s bad. God knows this, and every clergyman as well, who examines these texts.

‘What has Catullus said, Livy or Claudian? How does Saint Jerome contrast with Jovinian? Jerome tells stories of chaste maidens, faithful wives and steadfast widows who remained so all their lives; and not just a few either but a hundred of them. It’s pitiful to read about the sorrow that they endured for their fidelity. They were so true to their love and so loyal that, rather than take another, they preferred to die in various ways, as the stories relate. Some were burnt, others had their throats cut and some were drowned, for they wouldn’t be unfaithful. They all preserved their virginity, or their marriage vows, or their widowhood. And these things were kept not for holiness but for true virtue and purity, and so that men wouldn’t think less of them; yet they were heathen, all of them, and so fearful of shame and dishonour.
These ancient women were so concerned to preserve their good name that I’m sure you couldn’t find in this entire world a single man who’s capable of being as loyal and as faithful as the least of them. What do we find in the epistles of Ovid concerning the deeds of faithful wives? What does Vincent say, in his Storial Mirour? There are a world of authors, Christian and heathen, who touch upon this subject, there’s no need for us to spend all day discussing it! So I have to ask, what’s wrong with you? What ails you, to want to record all the dry straw and stubble of stories and leave out the wheat? By my mother, Saint Venus, although you’ve rejected my law, as many old fools have done over the years, you’ll come to regret it, you’ll see!

Then Alcestis spoke, the worthiest queen. ‘God, through your courtesy, you must wait to see if he can reply to these points that you’ve made. A god should not appear as angry as you seem to be, but through his deity he should be coolheaded and balanced, and therefore merciful and just. It is not right that a god should vent his anger before hearing what the other has to say. You cannot believe every complaint that you hear to be the gospel truth; the God of Love hears many false tales. For in your court there is many a flatterer, and many a subtle, tale-bearing accuser who bangs his drum in your ears out of some personal hatred or some jealous imagining, or just to have your attention. Jealousy – may God bring it to grief! – brings a great deal of dirty linen into the court, for the laundress is present at Caesar’s house night and day, as Dante says. No one can escape her. This man may be wrongly accused, so by rights you should give him the benefit of the doubt.

‘Also, because he’s a little lacking in intelligence, he might have translated something with no ill intention but simply because the book was there. Perhaps he wrote Troilus and Cressida and the Romance of the Rose in all innocence, without knowing what he was translating. Or maybe he was told to make these two books by someone, and dared not refuse. For he’s written many a book before this. Surely it isn’t so grievous a sin to recall what old writers have said – it’s not as though he’s written purposely against love out of malice, using his own words.

‘A just lord should keep all this in mind and not be like those tyrants of Lombardy, who rule by lawlessness and tyranny. A king or a lord, by his nature, should not practice cruelty like a tax gatherer, who delights in doing harm, but should assume, unless forced otherwise, that a man is his liege man. He has a duty to show fairness and justice to his people and should hear their excuses and their complaints and petitions promptly and with equanimity. This is what the philosopher says: that a king is there to maintain justice among his people, this is his role. For this reason, a king is duty-bound and sworn – and has been for the last hundred years at least – to keep his lords in the estate and in the honour to which they are entitled. He should hold them dear – for they are half-gods in this world of ours – and indeed, both rich and poor should be held dear, although their rank is not the same, and he should have compassion for poor folk. Think upon the gentle nature of the lion, who swats away an annoying fly that bites him with a lazy swish of his tail, for through his nobility he has no desire to kill that fly, as a villain or some other beast might.

‘Nobility and courage should impel you to pause for thought, weigh an argument and give due attention to what’s appropriate. Sir, it’s no sign of superiority to condemn a man out of hand, without hearing what he has to say. That’s a despicable thing. And if it so happens that a man cannot justify himself, but asks for mercy with a sorrowful heart and comes before you in his bare shirt and begs for clemency, then it behaves a god to consider his own honour, and his own failings. For since no death is involved
in this case, it should be easier for you to show mercy. Calm your anger and be more approachable! The man has done his best, and promoted your law in his books. While he was young he was one of yours, although I can’t say for sure that he’s not a renegade now. But I’m certain of this: that with his writings he’s made unlettered folk delight in serving you, by praising your name. He made the book called *The House of Fame* and also *The Death of Blanche the Duchess* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, and all the love in *Arcite and Palamon of Thebes* [later the Knight’s Tale from the *Canterbury Tales*], although it’s not well-known; and many a hymn for your holy days, that we call roundels, rhymes and ballads; and besides all this, he’s translated the *Consolation of Philosophy* into English prose, and the *Wretched Engendering of Mankind*, that a man may find in the writings of Pope Innocent, and also the life of Saint Cecelia [later the Second Nun’s Tale from the *Canterbury Tales*], and he also did, a long time ago, Origen’s *De Maria Magdalena*. He ought now to have less grief, since he’s been so busy.

‘As you are a god, and also a king, I, your Alcestis, once queen of Thrace, ask you, through your grace, not to harm this man for as long as he lives; and in return, he’ll swear to you that he won’t transgress any more but will do as you say and write about women who were faithful all their lives, both as maidens and in wedlock, and will advance you as much as he maligned you in the ‘Rose’ and in *Troilus and Cressida.*

‘Madam,’ replied the God of Love. ‘I’ve known you to be charitable and faithful for so long now that never, since the world was very young, have I found anyone to be better than you. Therefore, since it’ll do no harm to my standing, I concede, nay, I insist, that your advice shall be followed. I give him over to you. Do with him as you wish. Forgive him if you like. Do it now. For whoever gives a gift, or does a favour, if you do it at once you’ll receive the greatest thanks for it. So decide now what you want him to do.’

He turned to me. ‘Now go and thank my lady,’ he said.

I arose, set myself down upon one knee and said: ‘Madam, the God above yield to you, that you’ve made the God of Love quell his anger against me! And give me the grace to live enough years that I may come to know truly what you are – you who have helped me so very much, and advanced me. But I truly believe that I’m not guilty. I haven’t committed any offence against love. An honest man, for certain, shouldn’t be hanged with a thief, and in the same way, a true lover shouldn’t be offended when I speak badly of unfaithful lovers. Rather, they should agree with me and support me when I write of Cressida, or the Rose. Whatever my author meant, it’s always been my intention to promote faithfulness in love, to encourage it and to warn against unfaithfulness and vice by such examples. God knows, this was my intention.’

‘Stop all this pleading,’ she replied. ‘Love does not engage in a debate over right and wrong, take this from me! You have your forgiveness, so be satisfied. But now I’ll give you the penance you must do for your offence; I’ll spell it out for you. You shall, year by year, for as long as you live, spend most of the rest of your life writing a glorious *Legend of Good Women*, telling of both maidens and married women who were faithful lovers all their lives, and of the unfaithful men who betrayed them and spent all their lives seeing how many women they could jump into bed with; for in your world that’s now considered a game. And although it pleases you not to be a lover yourself, speak well of love. This is the penance that I give you.

‘And to the God of Love, I ask that he might instruct his servants to give you all the help that they can,
to advance you and reward you for your efforts. Now go. This penance is very light.’

The God of Love smiled and said: ‘Have you any idea whether she is a virgin or a married woman, a queen or a countess who has given you such a tiny penance, when you deserve to suffer so much more?’

‘No, sir, God help me, I only know that she is good.’

‘That is certainly true!’ said Love. ‘Pity comes easily to a kind heart, as you can see, and she can’t hide that. You must admit this much, if you’re honest with yourself. But have you not, lying within your chest, a book that tells of the great goodness of queen Alcestis, who was turned into a daisy? She chose to die instead of her husband and to go to hell in his place. Hercules rescued her, by God, and brought her out of hell again and into Bliss.’

‘Yes I have that book. I remember now. And is this good Alcestis, the daisy and my heart’s ease? Her kindness, both during her life and after it, has magnified her standing, and now I can well appreciate the goodness in this woman. She’s certainly rewarded me well for the affection that I hold for her flower, the daisy. No wonder that Jove placed her among the stars because of her virtue, as Agathon tells us. Her white crown bears witness to it; and also, she has many other virtues that are represented by the small flowers in her crown. The Phrygian goddess Cibella caused the daisy to be crowned with white in her honour, and Mars gave some red to the flower in the place of rubies to set amongst the white ...’ – whereupon this queen blushed a little through modesty, to be spoken of so highly, in her presence.

‘It was a grievous negligence on your part,’ said Love, ‘to write of the faithlessness of women, since you’re aware of their goodness at first hand, as well as from old books. So forget the straw in future and write about the wheat! Why couldn’t you have written about Alcestis and left Cressida lying asleep on her couch? You know that Alcestis possesses a litany of virtues, for she taught the highest love and the most perfect way to be a wife and all the constraints that a wife must observe. Your tiny brain must have been asleep! But now I instruct you – for your life depends on it – to include a tale of Alcestis in your Legend of Good Women when you have written about all the others. Now goodbye. Farewell. This is all the penance you have. You shall begin with Cleopatra, and then so on and so forth, and in this way you’ll win my love.’

With this, I woke up, and at once, I began work on my Legend.

Cleopatra

After the death of king Ptolemy, who ruled over the whole of Egypt, Cleopatra his queen reigned there, until a senator named Mark Antony was sent from Rome to subdue kingdoms and to bring the whole world under Roman control. But when his wealth and power had been reduced, Mark Antony became a rebel to the city of Rome; he left his wife, the sister of Octavian, without warning and went seeking another wife, which further alienated him from Rome and from his brother-in-law Octavian, the future Augustus Caesar. Mark Antony was a fine soldier and his death was a tragedy. But love’s passion had so seized him, such was now his love for Cleopatra, that he cared for nothing else. He was so caught in love’s net that the only thing
he set any value on at all was to serve and love Cleopatra, although he had no idea that he would die in defence of her, and of her rightful claims.

Cleopatra loved Mark Antony very much in return; she loved him for his prowess and for his chivalry, and certainly, unless books lie, because he was, through his nobility, his strength and discretion, as worthy as any man alive. She was as fair as a rose in May, and, to come quickly to the point, she became his wife and had him to herself.

To describe the wedding and the feast, when I have taken on the task of telling so many stories, would take far too long and might draw attention away from the things I really want to say. Men can overload a ship or a barge. So therefore I will skip forward to the conclusion of this tale, and let the rest slip away.

Octavian was mad with rage and gathered a fleet, intending to sail to meet Mark Antony, his ships full of Roman soldiers who were as cruel as lions and bent on his destruction. They set sail, and I'll leave them for a moment out at sea.

Mark Antony is aware of what is happening, and has resolved to meet them in battle if he can. After consulting with advisors, he and Cleopatra and a great army of Egyptians set sail at once. At last, both fleets catch sight of one another. The trumpets blow, more sail is put on and great shouts ring out as they try to engage with each other before the morning ends. Great engines let off their missiles with a grisly sound, showering stones from on high. Out fly the grappling irons and the hooks! Men swing pol-axes at each other, hide behind masts, dash out again and knock men overboard, lunge with the points of spears, tear sailcloth with hooks that are as sharp as scythes, fortify themselves with a swig of wine as they pour lime and peas with great enthusiasm onto the runners of the hatches to seize them up, and spend the whole day fighting.

At last, because everything must come to an end, Mark Antony was defeated. He tried to escape as best he could, with as much of the Egyptian navy as remained afloat. Cleopatra fled with her purple sails, and no wonder, the missiles her ship had received had been as thick as hail. When Mark Antony saw this: 'Alas! The day that I was born!' he cried. 'My reputation is lost!' He went out of his mind with despair and stabbed himself through the heart.

Cleopatra, who could expect no mercy from Octavian, fled back to Egypt. But listen, you men who speak of devotion. You make promises that you have no intention of keeping when you swear to die through love. See how a woman keeps her promises!

This woeful Cleopatra lamented so piteously that no tongue can describe it. In the morning she did not rest but instructed her finest workmen to make a shrine containing all the rubies and precious stones that could be found in Egypt, and to fill it full of spices to embalm a corpse. And then she fetched Mark Antony’s body and closed it within the shrine. Then she had a pit dug next to the tomb and had all the poisonous snakes that could be found put into this grave, and then she said: ‘Now, my love, I made a covenant with myself that whatever happened to you – I mean you, Mark Antony – would be my fate as well, as far as it lay within my power to bring this about. My sorrowful heart has been yours so absolutely that, from that blissful hour that I swore to be yours, never in my waking hours, day or night, have you ever been out of my thoughts. And this covenant I shall fulfil. I shall show you that there was never a more faithful queen.’

With this, she went naked into the snake pit, and there she chose to take her final rest. The adders bit her and she received her death with pleasure, for the love of Mark Antony.

That’s really what happened, it’s not a tale. And before I find in my books a man as faithful as this, one who would so willingly take his own life through love, I imagine my head will long have ached with the effort, may God forbid that!
Thisbe of Babylon

In Babylon once – a city that queen Semiramis had great ditches dug all around and high walls built from kiln-fired bricks – it happened that there dwelt two lords of great renown who lived so close to one another, within a district of lawns and trees, that only a stone wall separated their properties – as is often the case in great cities. One of them had a son, one of the fittest and most handsome youths in all the land, and the other had a daughter, who was the most beautiful girl in that part of the world. They came to know of one another only from the talk of neighbourhood women, however; for in that country to this day, without doubt, young girls are kept locked away through jealousy, for fear that they might otherwise do something to dishonour their families.

This young man was called Pyramus, and the girl's name was Thisbe. Ovid tells us that from these reports of each other, as they grew older, they fell in love. Certainly, as far as age went, they could have been married, had their fathers allowed it. But both of them burned with such love for one another that their friends could not quench it. Sometimes they would meet secretly and tell each other how they felt. If you bury a hot coal, the heat only increases and in the same way, forbid a love and it burns ten times hotter.

The wall which separated the two dwellings had a split in it, from top to bottom. The crack had been there since the wall had first been built, but it was so narrow you could hardly see a mite through it. But what exists that love is unable to find? You two lovers, if I'm honest, were the first to discover this crack. With a sigh as soft as gossamer, they let their words pass through this tiny space and gave voice to the feelings of sorrow and love for one another that were burning in their hearts. They did this whenever they could. On one side of the wall stood he, and on the other side stood she, bathing in the sound of each other's voices – at least, after having given their wardens the slip. Every day they would threaten this wall, wishing that they could smash it down. They would say: 'Alas! Wicked wall! You prevent us from doing anything! Why won't you split in half, or fall into two pieces! Or at least, for a moment, forget your envy and let us hold and kiss one another. Then we would be cured of our unhappiness. And yet, we owe you something at least for letting our words pass through your lime and your stone. We are thankful to you for that.'

When they had said this, they would kiss the cold stone and say goodbye to one another, and leave.

Usually, they did this in the evening, or very early in the morning when nobody was about. Things went on like this for a long time, until one day, when the sun had begun to clear the horizon and the dew was disappearing from the grass, Pyramus came to the wall as normal. Shortly afterwards, Thisbe arrived, and they promised each other that that very night, they would deceive their wardens and run away together. They would escape from the city. And because the fields were so wide and expansive, they set a time and a place to meet, which was at the tomb of king Ninus, beside a tree; for old pagans who worshipped idols in those days used to be buried out in the open. Close to this tomb was a spring. And to get to the point as quickly as I can, they took only a short time to agree to this, but the sun seemed to take an interminable eon as it moved slowly across the sky afterwards, towards its setting place beneath the sea.

Thisbe loved Pyramus so very much, and so wanted to be with him, that when she saw her opportunity, she stole away in the darkness with her face concealed. For the sake of love and fidelity, she was
prepared to abandon all her friends. Alas, that a woman should trust a man so much before she knows what he's like!

Thisbe went as quickly as she could to the tree, emboldened by love, and sat beside the spring. But alas! A wild lioness appeared from out of some woodland, its mouth bloody from a recent kill, and made straight for the spring to have a drink. When Thisbe saw it approaching, she stood up with her heart racing and ran into a nearby cave, for the moonlight was enough to see by. As she ran, the veil which had been covering her face fell to the ground, and she left it there without stopping to pick it up. She was thankful just to have escaped, as she sat as silently as she could in the cave.

When this lioness had drunk all that she wanted to, she paced around the spring, found the veil and began to bite at it with her wet and bloody mouth before leaving it where it lay. Then she went back into the woodland and disappeared from sight.

At last, Pyramus arrived. But he's late! He's stayed too long at home! The moon shone down, and it was easy to see the veil lying on the ground. As he approached the spring, being careful to look where he was going, Pyramus first saw the footprints of a lioness in the sand and suddenly fearful, he went pale and his hair began to stand on end as he came upon the torn veil on the ground.

‘Alas! Why was I born?’ he cried. ‘This night will see the death of us both! How can I ask Thisbe for mercy when I’m the one who has killed her? My darling, I’ve led you to your death. Alas, I asked a woman to go out at night to a dangerous and unprotected location, and I’m late! I should have been here to meet you. But whichever lion is here in this woodland, he can tear at my flesh as well – or whatever animal it is – it can gnaw at my own heart!’

With this, Pyramus picked up the veil, kissed it, wept tears upon it and said: ‘Veil, alas, there is no other way, except for you to feel my blood upon you as well as Thisbe’s!’ And with this, he stabbed himself to the heart. The blood burst out like the water from a fractured pipe.

Thisbe, who had seen nothing of this, sat in the cave thinking to herself: ‘If my Pyramus comes along now and cannot find me, he may think that I haven’t shown up and he’ll curse me for being unfaithful.’ So she crept out of the cave, thinking of him and looking for any sign that he might be there, telling herself: ‘I’ll explain to him how frightened I was, and how the lioness appeared, and everything else.’

But soon she came upon Pyramus, covered in blood and beating his heels on the ground. She backed away, her heart crashing like the waves on a shore. She became as pale as boxwood, gathered her courage and confirmed to herself that it was, indeed, Pyramus lying there. Who can describe the dreadful emptiness that Thisbe felt then, how she tore her hair, beat herself with her fists, fainted and lay upon the ground for dead, how she wept for his dreadful wound and covered herself in his blood as she cried and moaned and wailed, and kissed the dead body. Alas! She kissed his cold mouth. ‘Who has done this?’ she cried. ‘Who has been so bold as to slay my love? Oh speak, my Pyramus! It is your Thisbe who speaks to you.’ She lifted the head of this woeful man, who still had a little life left in him, and hearing the name ‘Thisbe’, he opened his eyes as much as a man can when he is on the point of death, and closed them again, and gave up the ghost.

Thisbe got up from the ground, saw her own veil, the empty sheath and the bloody sword that Pyramus had used on himself and cried: ‘My sorrowful hand is equal to the work I now ask of it, for love shall give me the courage and the strength to make my wound large enough, I’m sure! I will follow you in death. I’ll be a cause and a companion also, since nothing except death could ever have separated the two of us, and you shall no more depart from me now than from death itself, for I shall follow you! And you wretched, jealous fathers of ours, we who were once your children ask you – and please, let there be no more jealousy on your part – that we may lie in a single grave, since love has brought us to this piteous end. May God send better fortune to every true lover and let no gentle lady ever put herself into such danger again. And God forbid, but a woman can be as faithful and loving as a man, as I shall now show.’
With this, she took the sword that was still warm and wet with Pyramus's blood, and stabbed herself to the heart with it.

So Thisbe and Pyramus are dead. I find only a handful of faithful men in all my books, but Pyramus is one of them, so I’ve spoken of him here because it’s a pleasant surprise to us men to find a man who can be as faithful and kind in love. But here you can see that, however deep a man’s courage may be, a woman’s can always match it where love is concerned.

Dido, Queen of Carthage

I shall, if I can, follow behind your light, Oh Virgil – may glory and honour be attached to your name! – and recall the story of how Aeneas rejected Dido. I shall use your Aenead as my guide. I’ll describe how Troy was brought to destruction by Greek subterfuge, through a deception, a horse offered to Minerva, through which many a Trojan had to die. The ghost of Hector appeared. There was a raging conflagration that couldn’t be controlled, it engulfed the main citadel of that city and the country was brought to its knees. King Priam was dead.

The goddess Venus instructed Aeneas to flee, so he took his son Ascanius in his right hand and escaped the slaughter, carrying his father Anchises on his back. Along the way he lost his wife, Creusa. He was in great sorrow until he met up with some of his friends, and when they had all gathered together, he chose his moment and set sail upon the sea towards Italy, as his destiny decreed.

It’s not my intention to speak of his adventures while he was on the sea, for it’s not relevant. As I said, it’s the story of he and Dido that I want to tell. He sailed so long in the salt sea that he arrived in Libya, with only seven ships left, overjoyed to have made it safely to land, so battered was he from a recent storm. When he found a harbour, he took a trusted friend, a knight called Achates, and went with him to spy out the surrounding countryside. They went off alone, leaving the ships lying at anchor, and walked for a long while across rough ground until they came upon a huntress. She held a bow in her hand, and some arrows, and wore a short dress that came only to her knees. But she was the most beautiful creature that nature had ever created, and she greeted Aeneas and Achates and asked them:

‘Have you, by chance, seen any of my sisters with arrows in her case and an animal killed and wrapped up; a wild boar, perhaps, or some other game that we’ve been hunting in this forest?’

‘We haven’t,’ replied Aeneas. ‘But from your beauty, I guess that you cannot be an earthly woman. Are you Apollo’s sister, Diana? If you are a goddess, then have mercy on our tribulations and our sorrow.’

‘I’m no goddess, I must tell you,’ she said. ‘It’s the custom here for young ladies to hunt in these forests with bows and arrows. This is the kingdom of Libya, where Queen Dido rules.’

Then she told Aeneas the story of how Dido had come to Libya, which I won’t put into verse here, because there’s no need, it would waste time unnecessarily. It was the goddess Venus who was speaking to Aeneas, his own mother. She told him to make his way to Carthage. Then she vanished. I could follow Virgil word for word, but it would take too long to do so. Suffice it to say that this noble queen,
whose name was Dido, had been the wife of Sitheo and she was as beautiful as the shining sun. She founded the city of Carthage and reigned there with such great honour that she was called the flower of all queens, for her gentility, her beauty and generosity—so much so that it was a lucky man indeed who set eyes upon her! She was so well-regarded that kings and lords were vying for her favour, and all the world had been set alight by her beauty.

When Aeneas arrived at the city, Dido was worshipping at its principal temple, so he made his way there and entered it as unobtrusively as he could. And I cannot say whether it truly happened exactly in this way, but Virgil says that his mother Venus made him invisible, he's quite clear about this. And when Aeneas and Achates were searching through this temple, they came upon a wall with a fresco on it depicting how Troy had been destroyed, and the entire land of Ilium along with it.

‘Alas!’ cried Aeneas when he saw this. ‘Our shame is spread so widely across the entire world that it’s even painted on a wall here! We, who were once so prosperous, are now reduced to being a byword for ruin and disaster!’ and he began to weep, so softly that it was pitiful to see.

This young lady, the queen of this city, stood in the temple in her royal clothes and with her royal attendants. She was so rich and magnificent, so refreshingly young and energetic and had such bright, gleaming eyes that if that god who made the heavens and the earth wished to take a lover, whom could he possibly choose above this sweet lady? For beauty and goodness, feminine virtue and honesty, no woman could possibly be more attractive to him. Fortune, who governs this world, had created such a rare thing that it had never been seen before.

But Aeneas’s friends and comrades, whom he thinks have been lost at sea in the storm, have come ashore not far from here, and some of his highest noblemen by chance have already arrived in the city, in that same temple even, intent upon speaking to the queen and asking for her hospitality, such is her fame and reputation.

When these shipwrecked noblemen had explained their distress to her, described the tempest they had experienced and the hardship they had endured, Aeneas suddenly appeared before the queen and introduced himself. His men were overjoyed to see him! They could see that their lord was alive, and the queen saw the honour and respect that they showed to him. She had often heard of Aeneas and felt great pity and sorrow that such a man should be disinherited in this way, and so reduced in status. She saw that he was like a knight: strong and resourceful, refined and articulate, handsome and well-proportioned, for Aeneas had inherited his good looks from Venus, more than any other man, I guess, and he truly looked a lord.

And because he was a stranger, she felt even more attracted to him; for, by God’s salvation, some people find new things entrancing simply because of their very newness. She felt pity for his predicament, and along with this pity grew love, and she was determined to help him. She told him how very sorry she was that he had fallen into such peril, and how sorry she was for everything else that had happened to him, and in her friendly way she said: ‘Are you not the son of Venus and Anchises? I’ll give you all the honour and reward that I can, in good faith, and I’ll rescue your ships and your men.’

She spoke many a friendly word to him and commanded her messengers to go at once, that same day, to seek out his ships and to repair and provision them. She had many a bull and goat sent to his ships for slaughter, and wine, and then she made haste to her palace with Aeneas alongside her. But what need is there for you to hear about the feast that she gave? Aeneas had never enjoyed himself so much! There were all manner of rare dishes to sample, music, singing and entertainment, and many amorous glances to enjoy as well.

From the gates of hell, Aeneas has suddenly been delivered into heaven. It is just like the old days in Troy.

After dinner, Aeneas was led to lavishly furnished dancing-chambers filled with tapestries and rich
hangings, couches and ornate decorations. When he had sat and tasted the spices and drunk all the wine, he was led by the queen to his chambers, to relax with all his men, and to rest.

There is no horse with reins nor warhorse for jousting, no large riding pony, no bridle and no saddle, no article of jewellery speckled with precious gemstones nor heavy sackful of gold, no ruby that shines by night, no proud falcon for catching herons nor swift hound for chasing wild boar, no greyhound to chase deer, no cup of gold and not one of those newly-minted coins that can be found in Libya that Dido does not send to Aeneas. All his personal bills are settled as well. This is what this noble queen does for her guests, like a lady whose generosity is limitless.

Aeneas also, in all honesty, has sent Achates down to his ship to fetch his son and all the treasure that he can lay his hands on, sceptres, clothes, broaches, rings – some to wear and some to present to Dido, the lady who has given him all these wonderful gifts – and Aeneas has told Achates to instruct his son how he should present these things to the queen.

Achates returned. Aeneas was very happy to see his young son Ascanius; although our author tells us that Cupid, who is the god of love, at the behest of his mother, high in the heavens, had taken on the likeness of Ascanius in order to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas. But as for that scripture, be that as it may, I find it hard to believe. This at least is true, however: that Dido made such a fuss of the child that it was a wonder to see, as she thanked him many times for the presents that his father had sent to her.

The queen is full of happiness and joy, surrounded by all these handsome Trojans. She asks Aeneas to tell her everything that happened in Troy before he left, and they spend long hours together, conversing and enjoying one another’s company, until such a fire begins to ignite in foolish Dido’s heart, and she now has such a desire to go to bed with her new guest, that she has gone quite pale and looks quite ill because of it.

So now to business, to the fruit of this story and the reason I’ve been telling it. Thus I begin: one night, when the moon had risen and spread her light over the city, this noble queen retired to her chamber and to her bed. Later she woke, and began to sigh and to agonise with herself. She tossed and turned in bed, as do many lovers – so I’ve heard – and at last she confided with her sister Anne.

‘My dear sister, what can it have been that so frightened me out of my dream? This Trojan guest is so much in my thoughts, he is so handsome and so attractive and so powerful that my life lies in his hands, along with all my love. You haven’t heard him tell the story of his adventures? Certainly, Anne, if you were to advise it, I would gladly marry him. This is how I feel. He has the power to let me live or die.’

Her sister Ann spoke frankly to her. But what she said was such a sermon that it would take far too long to repeat it here, and in the end, it had no effect anyway. Love will run its course, and no one can stop it from doing so.

The sun arose over the sea and this young, energetic and amorous queen gave instructions to all her court to prepare the nets and the broad, sharp spears. Queen Dido wished to go hunting. Everybody prepared their horses, the hounds were brought to the court, all her young knights paraded about on their swiftest hunting steeds and there were a large number of women there as well. The queen rode out on a paper-white palfrey and, sitting on a red, embroidered saddle embossed with gold stripes and wearing gold and many glittering jewels, she looked as fair as the dawn that brings relief to the restless sleeper.

On a lively and animated horse, which was so responsive that men might turn him with the pull of a tiny thread of a rein, Aeneas sat looking for all the world like Phoebus the sun god. The bridle and the frothy golden bit were firmly under his control, so let me allow this noble queen to ride to the hunt with this Trojan alongside her.
Soon a herd of deer is located, with a: ‘Hey! Spur on! Unleash! Unleash! Why won’t a lion or a bear appear for us to kill’ these young folk cry, as they pick off the deer at will.

With all this going on, the sky began to darken and thunder began to rumble and then lightning flashed and the clouds cracked with a terrible noise. Down came the rain, hail and sleet with such terrifying flashes that it distressed this noble queen, and all her followers, so much so that they were glad to flee quickly towards some shelter. In order to save herself from this storm, Queen Dido found a little cave and Aeneas went in with her. I don’t know if anybody else was with them. Virgil doesn’t say. But here their love blossomed. This was the first morning of her happiness, and the true beginning of her death. Aeneas knelt and told her how much he loved her and swore that he would be faithful, come what may, and would never seek another woman – just as every false lover lays it on with a trowel and lies deceitfully. But Dido took pity on him and took him as her husband, and vowed to be his wife forevermore, for as long as they both lived. And after this, when the storm had passed, they emerged from the cave with great mirth and happiness and went home.

Tongues quickly began to wag. People soon learned that the queen and Aeneas had gone into a cave alone together. Imaginations began to run wild. King Yarbus came to hear of it; he who had loved Dido all his life and had wooed her and wanted to marry her. He made such sorrow and felt such anguish that it’s pitiful to hear of it. But as far as love is concerned, this happens all the time – one man laughs at another’s sorrow. Aeneas laughs; he’s happier and wealthier now than he ever was in Troy.

Oh foolish womankind, full of innocence, pity, faithfulness and conscience, why do you trust men so? Why so much pity for feigned sorrow, when you have so many old stories to guide you? Can’t you see how you’re all deceived? Can you show me a single example of a man who hasn’t left his sweetheart, or been unkind, or done her some mischief or robbed her and boasted of his deed? You can see it all around you, as clearly as you can read about it. Take heed now of this great gentleman, this Trojan, who is so well able to please her, who pretends to be so faithful and obedient, so kind and so discreet, and performs all his duties of obedience so well and waits on her at feasts and at dances and when she goes to the temple and then home again, and does not eat until he’s seen her and carries around his badges of office for her sake and I don’t know what; and he composes love songs, he jousts, he performs deeds of arms, sends her letters, tokens, broaches and rings. Where shortly before he was in peril of his life, hungry and at the mercy of the raging sea, exiled and destitute, a refugee from his own country and pursued by storms, Dido has given him her body and her realm, when she might otherwise have married a king and been the queen of another country as well as her own, and lived in joy enough. What more can I say? Now listen how he serves his lady!

Aeneas, who has so fervently sworn to be faithful, soon tires of the situation. His ardour has cooled. His ships are readied and he prepares to make a run for it at night. Dido suspects that something is wrong, for Aeneas is very restless in bed. She asks him what is the matter?

‘My darling, whom I love beyond all else, I dreamed that my father’s ghost visited me, and Mercury came with a message as well. It was about the conquest of Italy which it is my destiny to achieve and how I must soon set sail for Latium. It’s nearly breaking my heart!’ Then false tears trickled down his deceitful face, as he held her in his arms.

‘Is this true?’ she asked. ‘Will you go? Have you not promised to marry me? Alas! What sort of a woman does this make me? I’m a gentlewoman and a queen. Will you disgrace your own lover by fleeing from her? What shall I do? Alas that I was born!’

And to get quickly to the point, this noble queen Dido prayed at holy shrines, did sacrifice, knelt and wept so much that it’s pitiful to relate; she pleaded with Aeneas and offered to be his servant, his humblest minion, fell at his feet, fainted, and then, dishevelled with her golden hair in a tangle, cried: ‘Mercy! Let me sail with you. My noblemen will destroy me if you leave me liked this. Only marry me, as you have promised, then I give you permission to kill me with your sword the very same evening! For then I shall die as your wife. But I’m carrying your child. Give my child his life! Mercy, lord! Have
But it was to no avail. One night, as she lay sleeping, Aeneas left her lying there and stole away to where his men were already waiting on the ship, and like the despicable traitor that he was, he sailed for the broad country of Italy. In this way, he left Dido in sorrow and pain and in Italy he married a woman named Lavinia.

Aeneas left some clothing behind, and his sword, right at the head of the bed, so keen was he to creep away swiftly and silently to where his ships were lying. When she woke, foolish Dido kissed this clothing many times and said: 'While it pleases Jupiter, Oh cloth, take my soul and unravel me from this agony. My life has run its course.'

Alas! No help came from Jupiter. She fainted twenty times. And then she went to pour out her grief to her sister Anne – which I cannot put into verse because it would be too painful to have to translate it all. She instructed her nurse and her sister to go to fetch fire and some other things, for she wanted to perform a sacrifice. And when she saw her opportunity, she leapt into the sacrificial flames and drove the point of Aeneas's sword into her heart. But as Ovid describes, before doing this she wrote a letter that begins: 'Just as the white swan sings before dying, so I make my complaint here. Not that I cherish any hope of getting you back, for I know that that's impossible. The gods will have their way. But since my reputation has been lost through you, I may as well lose a word or two as well, or a letter, although it will do me no good I know, for the wind that has blown away your ships has blown away all the hope that I have …'.

Those of you who want to read this letter in its entirety, read Ovid and you'll find it there.

**Hypsipyle and Medea**

Jason, you father of all faithless lovers! – you sly devourer and destroyer of gentle and tender women who were lured and enticed by your stately appearance, your false promises, your honeyed words and gentle manner, feigned consent and false tears. Where others deceived one, you deceived two!

Oh, you swore many times how you would die for love, when all the time you felt nothing but a warm throb in your loins, which you called love. If I live, your name will be thrust into English so hard that you'll be known for the villain and the liar that you were. Get this, Jason – your horn will be blown!

It is a great sorrow and also pitiful that false lovers get so much out of it while true lovers get so little. Unfaithful lovers receive far more delight than those who pay a heavy price for their love. A fox will enjoy eating a hen for nothing, just as much as the good man who has looked after the bird and fed it for months and cared for it. The chickens belong to him, but the deceitful fox gets his portion at night, for free.

**Hypsipyle**

In Thessaly, as Guido tells us, there was once a king called Pelias who had a brother called Aeson; for when Aeson became so crippled with age that he could scarcely walk, he let his brother rule in his place and made him lord and king. Jason was Aeson's son, and in his youth, there was no lustier,
chivalrous, more generous nor more celebrated knight than he, in the entire country. After his father's death, Jason behaved with such honour that he had no enemies at all, only good friends and loyal companions. This provoked jealousy in King Pelias's heart. He feared that Jason might become so popular and so well-respected amongst the nobility that they might soon wish to elevate him to the throne, as his father's rightful heir. So he pondered at night how best he might destroy Jason, without bringing any slander down upon his own head. And at last he decided to send Jason to some far country where he would be likely to meet his death. This was his plan, although he outwardly pretended to show great love and affection for his nephew, in case his lords should become suspicious.

It came about, as is well-known, that fame became attached to a story that goes as follows: that in a land far to the east, beyond Troy, on an island called Colchis, there was a ram with a golden fleece that shone so brightly that nowhere in the whole world was there one like it. It was guarded by a dragon, and by many other marvellous things as well, including two copper bulls that spat fire. It was also said that whoever wanted to win this fleece must fight with these bulls, and with this dragon. King Aeērites was the lord of this isle.

King Pelias had heard of this and conceived the following plan: he would encourage his nephew to set sail for this land and present himself there.

‘Nephew,’ he said. ‘If you were fortunate enough to win this famous treasure and bring it back to me here, it would bring me so much honour, and indeed pleasure, that I would be bound to reward you very highly for it. I will pay for the whole expedition and choose the right people to go along with you. What do you say? Are you brave enough to take this on?’

Jason was young and courageous, and agreed at once to make the voyage. Argus prepared the ship, and along with Jason's crew went the strong Hercules and many others as well; if you want to know the names of everyone who went, you'll have to read the Argonauticon, for it's a long story. Philotetes raised the sail when the wind was favourable and they sailed away from Thessaly.

They travelled as far as the isle of Lemnos – this isn’t mentioned by Guido but it is by Ovid, in his Epistles – where the queen of that island was the young and beautiful Hypsipyle, the daughter of King Thoas. She was taking a leisurely walk along the cliffs beside the sea when she saw Jason's ship arrive. Out of generosity, she sent men down at once to see whether it was a ship that had been blown off course by a storm and whether she could do anything to help; for it was her custom to help those in need, through her courtesy and her generosity of spirit.

The messenger scrambled down the rocks and found Jason and Hercules rowing to the shore, to fetch water and to take the air. It was a lovely morning and the messenger soon caught up with them. He greeted them very courteously and delivered his message, asking if their ship was in any way damaged, or if they were in trouble of any sort, or if they had need for provisions, or a pilot, perhaps, to guide them away from rocks. Anything they wanted was theirs for the asking, by order of the queen.

‘May I thank my lady heartily,’ replied Jason, softly and correctly. ‘It is very kind, but we are in no need of anything at present. It is just that we are tired and have come ashore to rest our legs and to wait for a more favourable wind.’

By now, the lady's walk had taken her, and all her entourage, to the beach where Jason and Hercules were standing talking with her messenger. They saw the queen approaching and greeted her at once. She observed them and noted, by their manner and by their clothes, by their language and their demeanour, that they must be noblemen of great distinction. She led them to her castle, these strange foreigners, and asked them to tell her of their time in the salt sea and to describe how they had fared, and she honoured them greatly.

At last, after a day or two, she came to understand, from the rest of the crew, that it was the renowned Jason and the famous Hercules she was entertaining, and that they were on their way to adventure in
Colchis. She honoured them even more because of this, and looked after them even more attentively. Their worthiness was plain to see. She spoke particularly with Hercules, with whom she was very honest, advising him to be sober, wise and faithful, and to be careful what he said and what he did in regard to love, and not to indulge his fantasies. And Hercules so praised Jason in return that he raised him to the very sun itself, claiming that no man under the heavens was half as faithful in love as he was. He was wise and strong, discrete and very rich, he said. On these many counts there was no one to equal him. As far as energy and generosity went, Jason surpassed anybody who had ever lived, he was such a great nobleman, and as likely as not, destined to rule over Thessaly in due course. His only failing was that he was very shy when it came to women. He would rather kill himself than be seen with a lady. 'I'd give anything to see the day that he marries a suitably royal wife somewhere, and she'd certainly lead a pleasant life, with such a lusty husband in her bed!' Hercules told her.

Jason and Hercules had concocted all this garbage the night before. And they cunningly agreed to go to the palace on an innocent pretext in order for Jason to flirt with Hypsipyle in person.

Jason pretends to be as coy as a maid, glancing at the queen and then remaining silent. But he has already given fine gifts to her councillors and her officials, and I wish I had the leisure and the time to describe in verse exactly how duplicitously he wooed her. But if you can see any deceitful lovers in this house, then I'll just say that he did exactly what they do, very subtly and with equal cunning. You'll get no more from me. You can read all about it in the original if you want. But the outcome of it all was that Jason and Hypsipyle were married. He took everything he wanted of her property, fathered two children upon her, then raised his sail and said farewell. She never saw him again.

She sent him a letter, which is too long to describe in detail here, reproaching him for his unfaithfulness and begging him to show some pity on her. And of his children, she said that they were like him in every way, except that they did not tell lies. And she prayed to God that before long, the woman who had taken her place in Jason's life might find him to be equally unfaithful and kill her children by him, and the same with all his other women.

Hypsipyle remained faithful to her husband all her life and never took another man. She died in sorrow, through unrequited love.

**Medea**

Jason, a dragon where love was concerned, finally arrived in Colchis. And just as matter always passes from one form into another, or like a well whose bucket can never find the water, so Jason can find no peace. To seek out gentlewomen and to satisfy his lusts upon them is the sum total of his desire. Jason went into the town which was the principal city of Colchis and told King Aeërtes the reason for his visit. He explained that he wanted permission to try to seize the golden fleece. The king granted his request, and honoured Jason so greatly that he made his daughter Medea sit next to him at the meal table and in the hall. She was the most sensible and beautiful young lady you could ever wish to meet. Jason was a handsome man, like a lord, he was as noble as a lion and had a fine reputation, he spoke well and knew how to flirt and be intimate with a woman, without the help of any book of love. And by her unspeakably bad luck, Medea began to fall in love with him.

'Jason' she said. 'From all that I can see, you're putting yourself into great danger by attempting this feat. Any man who desires this thing will be lucky to escape with his life, without my help. And it is my wish to help you. I don't want to see you die but to return again, fit and well, to your land of Thessaly.'

'My righteous lady,' replied Jason. 'The great honour you do me by showing concern over my welfare I shall not deserve to my life's end. May God thank you for it. I am your man, and I humbly ask for your help, although I'll not let any possibility of death get in the way of my quest.'

Medea then explained to Jason the dangers of this enterprise, point by point, describing what he would
have to contend with and the perils that he would have to face, which only she could save him from. And, to get quickly to the point, they both agreed to arrange a time, very soon, for him to come to her chamber at night and there to make his oath, upon the gods, that whatever might befall, he would become a true and faithful husband to her, as surely as she had saved him from death. And this they did: they met together one night, he made his oath, and they went to bed together.

The next morning, he raced off to capture the golden fleece, for Medea had told him all that he needed to know; she saved his life and brought him great fame, through her power as an enchantress.

Now Jason has the fleece and he’s on his way home, with Medea and a load of treasure! Her father has no idea that she’s sailing to Thessaly with Jason, which will later bring her to such harm, for he will abandon her like a traitor, leave her with two young children and marry a third wife, the daughter of King Creon – Alas! He’s the greatest villain as far as love is concerned.

This is the reward that Medea received for her love and her fidelity, her help and assistance, and her kindness. She loved Jason better than she loved herself, I think, and left her father and all her inheritance for him. This was Jason’s achievement, who in his days was the most dishonest lover on Earth. Therefore, she wrote in her letter, when she first reproached him for his unfaithfulness: ‘Why did I find your fair hair more attractive than a regard for my own reputation? Why did I fall for your youth, your beauty and the infinite graciousness of your words. Oh! if you had died in your endeavour, a great deal of unfaithfulness and dishonesty would have perished along with you.’

Ovid has very skilfully presented the substance of her letter in verse, but it would take too long for me to recall it now.

Lucretia of Rome

Now I must touch upon the exile of the kings of Rome, because of their horrible deeds. In particular, king Tarquinius, who was the last of this line, as Ovid and Livy relate. But not because of these hateful acts, however, but to praise and to keep in memory that faithful wife Lucretia who, for her loyalty and her refusal to be cowed, received praise not only from these pagan authors but from the man known in our hagiographies as the great Saint Augustine, who had huge compassion for this woman who died in Rome. How Lucretia died I shall shortly describe, but only briefly.

When the city of Ardea was under siege by the Romans, who were very powerful and strong, the siege lasted for such a long time with no outcome in sight that the Roman soldiers found themselves with quite a lot of spare time on their hands. Fooling around one day, the young Sextus Tarquinius, the king’s son, began to joke – for he was prone to this sort of thing – ‘It’s an idle life we have! We’ve no more work to do than our wives! And speaking of wives, let every man praise his own as he thinks best. Let’s while away the time a little in this way.’

A knight whose name was Collatinus spoke up: ‘No, it’s pointless to rely on the truthfulness of a husband’s account. You have to see these things for yourself. I have a wife whom I swear is held in the highest regard, so let’s go back to Rome tonight and I’ll show you that I speak the truth.’
‘That’s fine with me,’ replied Tarquinius.

They arrived in Rome that evening and quickly went to Collatinus’s house where the two of them got off their horses. Collatinus knew his house well enough and they stole in unseen. There was no porter at the gate. They stood before the door to his wife’s chamber where this noble wife sat beside her bed with her hair unclasped, for she was expecting no visitors. She was spinning soft wool, our book tells us, to keep herself from idleness, and giving instructions to her servants; and then she asked them: ‘Do you have any news? What are people saying about the siege? How is it going? I wish to God the walls would fall down soon. My husband has been away for so long that it frightens and hurts me as much as any sword going through my heart, when I think of that siege. I pray that God will save my lord.’ Then she started to weep, put her spindle away and let her head fall meekly, in keeping with her true nature. Her honest tears embellished her wifely chastity and only added to her dignity, for both her face and her heart were shown to be in true accord.

With this, her husband Collatinus, before she was aware of him, came rushing in and cried: ‘Dry your tears, darling, I’m here!’

She rose to her feet, suddenly happy and smiling, and kissed him, as wives do.

Sextus Tarquinius, son of king Tarquinius the Proud, looked carefully at her beauty and her demeanour, her yellow hair, her figure, her deportment, her complexion, her way of using words, and he could see that everything about her was genuine. His heart ignited with a desire for her and became so inflamed that he lost all his judgement, for he knew that she would not consent to what he desired. The more he reflected upon the impossibility of what he wanted, the more it tormented him, and soon he was overtaken by blind lust.

Next morning, when the birds began to sing, he went quietly to the siege and walked in sober mood by himself, thinking of her continually. ‘This was how her hair fell,’ he thought to himself, ‘this was her complexion, this is how she sat, this was how she spoke, and spun wool, this was her mood, this her beauty, this her gesture.’

It’s taken a firm hold on him. Just as the sea, after a tempest, preserves the fierce waves in a heavy swell for a day or two after the storm has passed, although she wasn’t there with him, the pleasure of her beauty was still there with him. But no, pleasure is the wrong word – fixation, a despicable yearning. ‘Whether she wishes me to or not, I shall have her,’ he decided. ‘Fortune favours the brave. However it might turn out, so be it.’

He buckled on his sword and prepared to return to Rome. Once in that city, he made his way alone to the house of Collatinus.

The day came to an end and the sun had already set when he found a secluded alleyway and crept along like a thief, while everybody slept in their beds. No one had any suspicions of treason. And whether through an open window or by some other way, I don’t know, but he made it into the house and entered Lucretia’s chamber, with his sword drawn. She woke to the feeling of something pressing on her bed. ‘Which of my dogs is this, you weigh so much?’ she said.

‘I am Tarquinius, the king’s son,’ he replied. ‘If you cry out, or make any noise at all or wake anything, by that god who made mankind, I shall run this sword through your heart.’ Then he grabbed her by the throat and put the sharp point of his sword against her breast. She didn’t say a word, she wasn’t able to. What can she say? Her thoughts are in turmoil.

Just as when a wolf finds a lamb away from its mother, who does the creature have to turn to or cry out to? Shall she fight off a powerful knight? Men are well aware that women are not strong. Is she to scream? How shall she defend herself against a man who has her by the throat with the point of his sword against her heart, forbidding her to make a sound?
She asked for mercy as forcefully as she dared.

‘If you don’t let me do this thing,’ replied this cruel man, ‘may wise Jupiter save my soul but I’ll kill a stable boy, put him in your bed and swear that I found him lying there with you; then you’ll be put to death with disgrace and dishonour, for I won’t let anyone else have you.’

These Roman wives were so keen to preserve their good reputation and their honour at this time, and so frightened of disgrace, that under threat of losing her good name and in fear for her life, she soon lost both. She lay in a faint and looked so pale and lifeless that men could have cut off one of her arms, or her head even, and she wouldn’t have felt it, she was so completely numb.

Tarquinius, as a king’s heir, you should, by virtue of your upbringing, behave as a lord and a knight. Why have you so slandered chivalry? Why have you forced yourself upon this lady? Alas! This is the act of a villain! But let me get on with this story.

When he had gone, dreadful things began to happen. This lady sent for all her friends, father, mother, husband, altogether, and all dishevelled, her hair uncombed, wearing clothes that women wore when going to bury a friend, she sat in the hall looking distraught. Her friends asked her what was wrong and who was dead. She sat weeping, she couldn’t speak a word to them and wouldn’t look into their faces. But at last she told them of Tarquinius, of her pitiful ordeal and this horrible act. It’s impossible to describe the sorrow that they all felt. If their hearts had been made of stone they would still have pitied her, she was so loyal and so faithful. She said that what had happened should bring no disgrace upon her husband, she would not allow this to happen. And they all replied that they forgave her for it, it wasn’t her fault, she’d had no power to prevent it, and they produced many examples to support this. But it was to no avail.

‘Be that as it may, but as to forgiveness, I deserve none,’ she said, and she took a knife and killed herself with it.

As she fell, she cast a glance at her clothes, for she was anxious not to leave her feet or anything else uncovered as she lay dying, she was so modest.

Soon, the whole of Rome learnt of this and had pity for her. Brutus swore by her chaste blood that king Tarquinius should be banished, his son and all his family. He called an assembly and told everyone what had taken place, and openly allowed her coffin to be carried through Rome so that everybody would know the horrible thing that had happened. There were no more kings of Rome from that day on.

Lucretia was held to be a saint and her day was celebrated in their calendar. This was the way that Lucretia, that noble wife, met her end, as Livy tells us. I’ve told her story because her love was true. She wouldn’t succumb to the novelty of a new lover, her love was constant and her heart dutiful, which is true for the majority of these women I’m describing. Wherever they cast their affections, there it stayed. As Christ himself said, as wide as the land of Israel is, he could find no greater faith than in a woman, in all that land; and this is no lie. And as for men, look at the tyranny that happens every day! Judge for yourself.

Ariadne

That judge in hell, Minos, once king of Crete, now it’s your turn, you’re next! And not for your sake alone do I tell this story, but to recall again to memory the
unfaithfulness of Theseus, for whose duplicity the gods of heaven were angry.

Theseus, they avenged themselves upon you for your sin, so go red for shame! I shall begin your story.

Minos, who was the mighty king of Crete, with its hundred magnificent cities, sent his son Androgeus to Athens to be educated, but it happened that he was killed right there in the city, out of envy. Minos came to wreak vengeance for his son's death and laid siege to Megara, but it had strong walls and the king of that city, king Nisus, was so accomplished in warfare that he cared little for Minos and his army, and the city held out.

One day, as the daughter of king Nisus stood on the wall watching the siege, it so happened that as she was looking at a skirmish down below, she fell head over heels in love with Minos. He was so handsome, so fine-looking and so athletic that she made herself very ill thinking about him afterwards. And to cut a long story short, she allowed king Minos to take the city and to do as he wished with it, to grant mercy or to kill as he saw fit. Minos abused her generosity and left her in sorrow and despair, and neither did the gods show her any pity either; but that's another story.

King Minos won Athens along with Megara and some other cities as well, and the outcome of it all was that he subdued the people so grievously that they agreed to give him, year by year, their own children to be taken and killed; for king Minos had a monster, a wicked creature that was so cruel that when a man was brought into its presence, it would eat him. There was no possible defence against it. Every third year the people of Athens would cast lots and whoever's name came up, rich or poor, he was compelled to give his son as a gift to king Minos, who would save the child or let his beast devour him, just as it wished. Minos had done this out of spite, to make the people of Athens pay for his son's death and to be his slaves, for as long as he lived.

King Minos sailed home, having brought Athens to its knees, and many years later it fell upon king Aegaeas to deliver his own son Theseus to be eaten by the monster, in compliance with this wicked custom, for there was no way out of it.

So this woeful young knight is led away to the court of king Minos and thrown into a prison with his legs in irons, until such time as the terror starts. Well may you weep, Oh sorrowful Theseus! A king's son and condemned like this! You'd think that if anyone saved you from this ordeal you'd be deeply indebted to them. If any woman were to help you now, you ought to be her servant forever and pledge to her your utmost fidelity, if she chooses you to be her lover.

Well, the tower into whose deep dungeon Theseus was now incarcerated was abutted by a newer building occupied by king Minos's two daughters. They lived in two large chambers above the main street of the city in great comfort and happiness. And I don't know how it happened, but as Theseus was complaining of his predicament one night, Ariadne and her sister Phaedra heard all that he said, as they stood on the wall looking at the bright moon. They had no desire to go to bed early, and his words stirred them with pity; to be a king's son in such a dark and dismal place waiting to be eaten alive! They were filled with compassion.

'Ariadne, dear sister,' said Ariadne. 'Can you hear this sorrowful lord's son, how he laments and complains that he's in such a dreadful place for no just reason? How pitiful to hear him cry out. If you agree, I'd like to help him in some way.'

'I would as well,' replied her sister. 'I feel as sorry for him as you do. I've never felt this way for a man before. Why don't we send for the jailor, in secret, and ask him to bring this prisoner along with him? If he can overcome the monster, he'll have kept his side of the bargain and can go home again. So let's try to discover whether, if he had a weapon with him, he'd be prepared to fight with this fiend and save himself. The Minotaur will be in a place that's not dark and there'll be plenty of room to wield an axe or a sword or a club or a knife. So, by my reckoning, he should be able to save himself when he's in the Labyrinth, if he's man enough to do so.'
‘We can make him balls of wax and tallow, so that when the Minotaur opens its mouth, he can throw them down the creature’s throat, satisfying its hunger and sticking all its teeth together! Then as soon as he sees the beast choking, he can leap on it and kill it, before it gets too close to him.

‘The jailor could hide this weapon somewhere in the Labyrinth beforehand. And because the place is so crooked and jagged with twists and turns – for it’s rather like a maze inside – I’ve another idea: if Theseus plays out a ball of yarn as he goes through the rooms and passages, he’ll be able to follow this back and return the same way that he came. And when he’s overcome this beast, he can flee away from all this danger and take the jailor with him, and offer him all sorts of honour and advancement in his own country, since he’s a lord’s son. That’s my advice, if he’s brave enough to act on it.’

But why should I make a sermon of this? The jailor was summoned and came, bringing Theseus along with him, and when they’d both agreed to what was proposed, Theseus went down upon one knee before Ariadne and said: ‘My lady, my saviour, I, a sorrowful man condemned to death, will not abandon you while breath remains in my body. When this adventure is over, I’ll serve you in any capacity that you choose, as an unknown wretch until my heart stops beating if you like. I’ll give up my inheritance and my homeland and be your page, if you promise that you’ll allow me the grace just to have my food and drink. I’ll work hard for this sustenance too, as it pleases you, and behave so that king Minos won’t know – since he hasn’t set eyes on me yet, in fact nobody has – so no one will know that it’s me. I’ll be so discrete and disguise myself so well that nobody in the world will recognise me, if only I may have my life and be able to be with you – you who have given me this opportunity. And I’ll send this worthy man here, who is at the moment your jailor, to my father, and as a reward he shall be made one of the most honoured men in my country.

‘But as I am a king’s son and a knight, I dare say that if it came about that all three of you were in my country, and I was there with you, then you’d see how generous I can be! And if I offer myself to be your lowly page here and don’t keep my word, I pray to Mars that I may suffer a shameful death, and may death and poverty come to all my friends as well, and may my spirit walk at night and wander to and fro, and may I be called a traitor, and suffer the fate of traitors. And if I ever claim to be anything other than a lowly servant, unless you confer such advancement upon me yourself, may I die a shameful death. Have mercy upon me. That’s all I can say.’

Theseus was a young and handsome knight, only twenty-three years old, and anyone watching this display would have wept for pity.

‘A king’s son and a knight to be my lowly servant?’ questioned Ariadne. ‘That would bring shame upon all women and may God forbid it! But may God send you the grace and the courage to defend yourself and kill this creature, then return safely to where we can find you, my sister and I, so that I don’t regret saving you. In fact, it would be better if I was your wife, since you are as noble as I am and have a realm nearby. That would be far better than to allow you to die, or to let you work as a page, which would be a waste, given your upbringing, although what is there that a man will not do when his back is against the wall? Let my sister marry your son Hippolytus in the fullness of time, since she will have to come with us, if I go, or die with me if I don’t. This is what must happen. Swear it, upon everything that can be sworn upon.’

‘I swear it!’ said Theseus. ‘Or else may I be torn to shreds by the Minotaur tomorrow. I pledge to you my heart’s blood, and if you like, if I had a knife or a spear, I’d produce some right now and swear this, for then I know that you’d believe me. To be honest with you, I’ve been in love with you for a long time, from a distance, in my own country, although you haven’t been aware of it. I’ve longed to see you more than any other woman in the world.’

Ariadne smiled at his sincerity, at his romantic words and at his unwavering courage and said quietly to her sister: ‘Now we’ll be duchesses, you and I, and connected to the Athenian royal family, and likely to be queens in due course, having saved a king’s son from death; for it’s always a woman’s place to rescue a gentleman, as far as her strength will allow, if his cause is just. So we cannot be blamed for it, and our
names will never be blackened because of it.'

So, to cut a long story short, Theseus departed and everything went as planned. His weapon, his club, was concealed inside the Labyrinth by the jailor, very close to the entrance. Theseus was lead to his death. He made his way towards the Minotaur, and following Ariadne's instructions, he killed the beast and was able to retrace his steps because of the thread that he had trailed behind him. He returned unseen to where the jailor had organised a boat for them all; he stowed his wife's treasure on board and took his wife, and her sister and also the jailor, all three of them, and they sailed away secretly by night.

They sailed to a country where Theseus had a friend who could help them. Here they feasted, and danced and sang. Ariadne held Theseus in her arms, having saved him from certain death. Theseus found another ship, a large Athenian vessel with a crew, took his leave and they sailed for home. And on an island in the stormy sea, where nothing lived except for wild beasts, and a great many of them at that, he landed the ship for half a day in order to rest his legs, so he said. His mariners were happy to obey these orders and to get quickly to the point, when his wife Ariadne was asleep, because her sister Phaedra was prettier than she was, Theseus took Phaedra by the hand, led her to the ship and like a traitor, sailed away with her while Ariadne lay sleeping.

Theseus sailed swiftly back to Athens – may the wind drive him towards twenty devils! – where he found his father drowned in the sea. But I don't wish to say any more about him. May poison destroy these unfaithful lovers! I shall return to Ariadne, who is still sleeping. She is tired, and when she eventually wakes, her heart will be filled with such sorrow that alas! – my own heart aches with pity for her.

At first light Ariadne awoke, reached out for Theseus and, finding herself all alone, tore her hair, ran barefoot to the beach and cried: 'Theseus, my sweetheart! Where are you? Why am I alone at the mercy of these wild animals?' Only the hollow rocks gave her an answer. She could see nobody, although the moon was bright. She quickly climbed a high promontory and from there she saw his ship sailing away. Her heart froze.

‘These wild animals are less cruel than you are,’ she whispered.

‘Oh, turn round, for pity, Theseus, you’ve made a mistake!’ she cried. ‘You haven’t got everybody on board!’ She put a piece of her clothing on a pole and waved it about so that he could not fail to see it and remember that he’d left her behind, and turn around again and find her on the beach …

But all in vain. He kept his course. Was this not a sin, to deceive her so?

She fell down in a faint upon a stone, got up and kissed the footprints that Theseus had made on the sand, and then she spoke to her bed: ‘Oh bed, you have received two and you require two, not one. Where has the greater part of you gone? Alas! What shall become of me? Even if a boat or a ship should visit this island, I dare not go home to my country. I can’t think what to do!’

What more can I say? Her grief was so protracted that it would be a weighty thing indeed to have to describe it in full. Ovid has put it all into verse, but I shall make an end of it here. The gods helped her, out of pity. And in the sign of Taurus you may see the gems from her garland shining clearly. I’ll say no more about it. But that’s how Theseus deceived Ariadne, may the devil give him his just reward for it.
Philomela

Giver of the ideal forms, you who made this beautiful world and held it in your thought eternally before making it, why did you create, to the disgrace of all mankind – or, albeit that it was not your doing to create such a thing for that end, having no control over its destiny, why at least did you suffer to be born – that rogue Tereus? He was so dishonest in love that the very mention of his name corrupts the earth up to the first heavenly sphere, even now. For myself, I can say that his deeds are so despicable that, when I read his hateful story, my eyes secrete a foul discharge. So enduring is the poison of long ago that it infects all who read this story.

Tereus was the king of Thrace and he was related to Mars, the cruel god of war who stands holding a blood-stained spear. He married the daughter of King Pandion, whose name was Procne, the flower of her country – although Juno refused to attend the marriage feast and so did Hymen, who is the god of weddings! But the three Furies were there, and an owl was heard outside the palace every night, a harbinger of doom and mischance.

The marriage festivities lasted for a fortnight or a little less, with singing and dancing. But to get to the point quickly, for I dislike this story, they had been married for five years when Procne became very eager to see her sister again. Unsure how her husband might react to this request, she began to ask, for God’s love, if she could go to see her sister, or else she could come to stay with them – she hinted. He could invite her to come and visit, if he liked. She kept broaching the subject, with humility and with humour, and at last his ships were readied and he sailed to Greece, to his father-in-law, and asked him to promise that, for a month or two, Philomela might have a glimpse of her sister Procne: ‘And then she will return to you,’ he said. ‘She and I will take ship together, and I’ll look after her with every care.’

Old Pandion began to weep, reluctant at first to let his daughter go, for he loved her above everything else in this world. But at last he relented, for she cried as much as he did, holding him in her arms as she begged him to let her go to see her sister.

When Tereus saw how beautiful Philomela was, how well-dressed and demure and wealthy, his inflamed heart reached out to her and he vowed to possess her, come what may. He added his own voice to the entreaties to King Pandion, and at last King Pandion said: ‘Now, son, you are so dear to me that I give to you my young daughter, who holds the keys to my heart. Greet Procne, your wife, for me, and give her leave to have some time to herself so that she may come to see me at least once before I die.’

King Pandion put on a magnificent feast for his son-in-law and his entourage, entertained the greatest down to the least, gave Tereus some marvellous gifts and escorted him ceremoniously down the main street of Athens to the harbour. Then he returned, oblivious to what Tereus was planning.

The oars pulled the vessel along with speed and it soon arrived back in Thrace. Tereus led the girl up into a forest to a cave and invited her to rest in this dark cavern. She became suspicious. ‘Where is my sister?’ she asked, and began to cry. She went pale and started to shake with fear, like a lamb being chased by a wolf, or a dove being attacked by an eagle, escaping from its claws but knowing with certainty that another attack will not be long in coming. She sat, terrified.

But she has no choice. He has taken her by force, and now deprives her of her virginity, against her will, through his strength. Lo! Here is the act of a man, and no mistake!
‘Sister!’ she cried. ‘Father dear! Help me, God in heaven!’

No help came. And yet Tereus did her even more harm, for fear that she would speak out about what had taken place; he took his sword and cut out her tongue, cast her into a prison and kept her there with no hope of release, using her whenever he wanted to, so that she could never escape from him.

Oh Philomela, your heart is in agony. May God send what you pray for and provide a way to avenge this deed!

I shall come quickly to the conclusion of this story.

Tereus goes back to his wife and takes her into his arms, weeping and swearing that he has found her sister lying dead. This foolish Procne is so hysterical that her heart nearly breaks in two! But I shall leave Procne in floods of tears and return quickly to her sister.

Philomela had learned in her youth how to stitch and embroider, and make a tapestry in a frame, as women have since time immemorial, and, to cut a long story short, she had enough food, drink and clothing and could read and write well enough, although she was not allowed a pen, but she could weave letters to and fro so that before the year was out, she’d woven a cloth that had written upon it how she was brought from Athens in a ship and taken to a cave, depicting everything that Tereus had done to her. She fashioned this tapestry well and made it explain exactly how she’d been treated, for the love she bore to her sister. She gave a ring to a boy and made him understand by signs and gestures that he should go to the queen and give this cloth to her.

The boy made his way to the queen, gave her the cloth and told her everything he knew about the condition of the lady who had given it to him. When Procne looked at it, she spoke not a word. She was beyond anger. She made out that she was going to go on a pilgrimage to the temple of Bacchus, and it didn’t take her long to discover her dumb sister sitting weeping in the castle.

Alas! The sorrow and distress that Procne shows to her poor mute sister, as they hold each other in their arms. I shall leave them here with their tears and their sorrow, for the rest does not concern us, it’s not relevant. It is enough to know that Philomela was treated like this, undeservedly, by this cruel man. You may beware of men, if you like! For although he may not do the same as Tereus, or murder you – unless he’s really evil – you can’t rely on a man’s honesty, and I would say the same of my own brother.

**Phyllis**

If you want proof beyond all doubt that a wicked tree bears wicked fruit, you can find the evidence all around you, if you look. But for the moment I will speak of dishonest Demophon. I’ve never heard of a more faithless lover, unless you count his father, Theseus. God save us from people like this! – that’s what women will say when they hear this story. So here it is:

The siege of Troy is ended. Demophon is sailing towards Athens and his splendid palace with his ships and barges full of soldiers and veterans of that protracted war, many of whom are wounded or sick.

The rain fell and a gale blew so strongly that it tore all the sails to pieces. Demophon would have given the world to be ashore. The night was dark, his rudder was smashed and his ship so damaged that it was already beyond the repair of any carpenter. The tempest seemed to be pursuing him. Waves crashed and the angry sea glowed in the darkness as brightly as
any torch and tossed him up and down until Neptune, the god of the sea, took pity on him, and also Thetis, Chorus and Triton, and contrived to land him on a shore where Phyllis was queen; Phyllis, the daughter of Ligurgus and more beautiful than a flower against a clear, blue sky.

Demophon scarcely made it to shore alive, he was so weak and weary. All his people were hungry and in a dreadful state and they quickly advised him to seek the help of queen Phyllis, to see if some advantage might accrue from it; but he was sick and almost at the point of death himself. He could barely speak or draw breath even, as he lay resting in Rodopeya. But when he was able to walk again, he went to the royal court to ask for help. He was known there, and respected, for he was a duke in Athens, his father was the renowned Theseus, who had been the greatest of his generation in that region. Demophon was like his father to look at, he had the same build and the same duplicity when it came to love; inherited in the same way that Reynard the fox knows all the tricks instinctively without having to be taught them first – they just come naturally to him, in the same way that a drake takes to the water if you carry it to the edge of a river, even though it may never have seen so much as a puddle of water before.

Phyllis greeted Demophon and looked approvingly at him – but since I’m obliged to speak of those who have had their love rejected, and to get quickly to the point of this story, I shall move swiftly on. You’ve all heard how Theseus betrayed Ariadne after she saved him from death. Well, in a nutshell, Demophon did exactly the same as his father. He took everything he could from Phyllis, now that he was well and strong and rested again. He did what he liked with her, and he liked it very much! If I wanted to, I could tell you all about it. He promised to marry her, told her that he would sail back to his own country and make preparations for their wedding. It would be to her honour and to his, and he promised to return for her within a month. They gave him their trust. He had his ships prepared, said farewell and set sail at the first opportunity.

Phyllis never saw him again.

She was so distraught when he failed to show, and she realised that she’d been betrayed – alas! – that, as the stories tell us, she wanted to take her own life. But first she wrote him a letter, begging him to come back and relieve her of the pain she felt, and I’ll relate a word or two of it in a moment, but I don’t wish to expend any more effort telling his story, nor waste a penful of ink on Demophon any more than I have to. He was just like his father, may the devil set both their souls on fire! But I’ll write a few words about the letter that Phyllis wrote to him.

‘Your hostess,’ wrote Phyllis, ‘Oh Demophon, your Phyllis, of Rodopeya, who is so distraught, must complain to you that you’ve broken your promise over the length of time that you would be away. Your anchor, when you cast off in our haven, you vowed we would see again before the moon had completed a full cycle. But four times now the moon has hidden her face since the day you left, and four times she has lit the world again, and there has been no sign at all of your ship. If you count the days, as true lovers should, and as I have, you will see that I am not being premature in my complaint.’

I cannot tell you all that she wrote, it would be too much. Her letter was very long. But here and there I have put into verse those parts that deserve to be recorded because they’re especially poignant.

‘I know why you haven’t returned,’ she wrote. ‘I gave my love to you too freely. Of those gods whom you have so obviously renounced, if their vengeance falls upon you as a result of this, I hope you won’t be able to bear the pain either.

‘I was too trusting of your weasel words and your false tears. How could you weep so convincingly without any true emotion? Can tears like that be feigned? If you wish to look back on this, you will realise that deceiving a foolish maiden will bring you no great glory. I pray to God, and do so often, that this will be seen as your greatest accomplishment and your highest achievement. When your forebears and descendants are depicted, and men can see their worthiness, then I ask God that you will be there amongst them and people passing by will be able to say “Lo! There’s the man whose finest distinction was to have betrayed his true love.”’
‘They should be able to read that you were like your father in this, for he beguiled Ariadne with the same skill and with the same subtlety that you’ve beguiled me. In this regard, although it does you no credit, you are truly your father’s heir. But since you have sinfully deceived me, you shall see my body, very shortly, floating in the harbour at Athens, unburied and without a tomb, although you yourself are harder than any marble.’

When this letter was sent, and she knew how deceitful he was and how fickle in love, through despair and because of the great sorrow she felt, she killed herself, alas! Even today such things can be seen going on all around us. Women, beware of your subtle foe and as far as love goes, trust no man but me!

Hypermnestra

In Greece, once, there were two brothers. One of them had fathered a great many children, as is often the case with deceitful husbands and philanders, and his name was Danao. He loved one of his sons above all the others, a boy named Lino. The other brother was called Egiste; he was also a deceitful lover and had fathered many daughters.

Egiste had a daughter named Hypermnestra by his rightful wife; she was his youngest and she’d been born with all the advantages of wealth and virtue, under a very auspicious horoscope. Hypermnestra seemed destined to tower above all her peers as much as the ears of corn do the rest of the sheaf. The Fates had decreed that she should have the virtues of wisdom, responsibility, a ready disposition to pity and a loyalty that was as tough as steel – and this certainly turned out to be the case! Although Venus gave her great beauty, Hypermnestra was so influenced by Jupiter that she found her greatest delight in honesty, a good conscience, a dread of shame and a desire to maintain her reputation in marriage. Mars, the red planet, had been so feeble at the time of her birth that Venus had quelled all his anger. His cruelty and his poison had been rendered harmless – so much so that Hypermnestra could not handle a knife in anger, even if her life depended on it; although as time went on, Saturn began to influence her destiny for the worse, so that in the end she died in prison, as I shall explain shortly.

Danao and Egistes, although they were brothers, conceived the desire that Lino and Hypermnestra should marry, for marriage between first cousins was not considered unlawful in those days. They fixed a date and it soon arrived.

The feast is procured and Lino has married his uncle’s daughter! The torches burn, the meat is about to be slaughtered, the incense in the fire fills the air with a pungent sweetness, flowers and leaves are torn from the ground and made into garlands and the air is filled with music, and particularly love songs extolling marriage, as was usual at that time. At last, in the palace of Egistes, the day has come to a close. The friends and guests have taken their leave and made their way to their own homes. The night has arrived and it is time for the bride to be taken to the marriage bed.

Egistes went quickly to his room and quietly arranged for his daughter to be summoned. When all the guests had left, he smiled at his daughter and said:

‘My daughter, my heart’s treasure! Since the day I was born, nothing has come to be so dear to my heart as you, my dear Hypermnestra. Listen to your father, and be guided always by wisdom. I love you so much that nothing in the world is half so dear to me as you, and I would not lead you into any harm for all the good that lies beneath the cold moon. But what I’m trying to tell you is – well, let me explain. It hurts me to say this, but unless you do as I say, you will die. To be brutally clear, you will not be able to escape from the palace, or avoid death, for if you do not do as I say, I will have you killed. That’s how it will be, I’m afraid.’
Hypermnestra stared at the ground and shook like an aspen leaf. She began to look like death and her face became the colour of ashes.

‘My lord and father, whatever you want, God knows I shall do it to the best of my ability, if it doesn’t offend me.’

‘You will do what I say, whether it offends you or not,’ her father replied bluntly. He produced a knife, as sharp as a razor. ‘Hide this where it won’t be seen,’ he said. ‘When your husband is in bed and asleep, I want you to cut his throat with it. I have seen in my dreams that my nephew is going to bring about my death, although how this will happen I have no idea, but I must be sure. If you refuse, I’ll be very angry with you, by the god whom I have sworn by.’

By now, Hypermnestra was nearly beside herself with terror. In order to escape from her father with her life, she agreed. She had no other choice. He father picked up a flask and said: ‘Give him a draft of this, or two or three if you like, when he goes to bed, and he will sleep for a long time, the opiates and narcotics are so strong. Now go to him, before he becomes suspicious.’

Hypermnestra left her father and, with the serious expression typical of a young woman on her wedding night, she was carried to the bedroom with much joy, mirth and singing. And to get quickly to the point, Lino and she soon found themselves in bed together, and the room empty apart from themselves. By now it was long into the night and Lino shortly fell asleep. Hypermnestra began to cry.

She got out of bed, shaking like a branch in a gale. The city of Argos was silent. She became as cold as frost with pity, and fainted three times for the fear of death that was upon her. She picked herself up and staggered here and there, peering at her hands. ‘Alas! Are these hands shortly to be covered in blood?’ she asked. ‘I am a maiden, and by my very nature, by my physique and by my temperament, these hands are not made to wield a knife or to kill anybody. What the devil should I have to do with a knife! But do I want my own throat to be cut? Then I will bleed to death, alas! I must find a way out of this, before one of us dies.

‘Since I am Lino’s wife and have promised my loyalty to him, it’s better for me to die in honesty than to live in shame. Whatever may come of it, I’ll wake him up and warn him, so he can steal out of the city before daybreak, by way of a nearby sluice.’

She wept tenderly upon his face, took him in her arms and gently shook him until he awoke. And when she had told him all that had happened, he leapt out of the window and escaped. Lino was very fit and a good runner and he got far ahead of his wife as she tried to keep up with him. This poor woman is so breathless, alas!

Hypermnestra was so helpless that her father was soon able to have her seized. Lino! Have you no humanity? Why did you not remember to take your wife with you? When she saw that she’d been left far behind and she had no way of catching him up, she collapsed to the ground and lay there until they caught her and put her in prison. And the conclusion of all this is …