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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE FLOWER AND THE LEAF

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

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

WHEN that Phoebus his car of gold so high
Had whirled up the starry sky aloft,
And in the Bull <1> enter'd certainly;
When showers sweet of rain descended soft,
Causing the grounde, fele* times and oft, *many
Up for to give many a wholesome air,
And every plain was y-clothed fair
With newe green, and maketh smalle flow'rs
To springe here and there in field and mead;
So very good and wholesome be the show'rs,
That they renewe what was old and dead
In winter time; and out of ev'ry seed
Springeth the herbe, so that ev'ry wight
Of thilke* season waxeth glad and light. *this
And I, so glad of thilke season sweet,
Was *happed thus* upon a certain night, *thus circumstanced*
As I lay in my bed, sleep full unmeet* *unfit, uncompliant
Was unto me; but why that I not might
Rest, I not wist; for there n'as* earthly wight, *was not
As I suppose, had more hearte's ease
Than I, for I n'had* sickness nor disease.** *had not **distress
Wherefore I marvel greatly of myself,
That I so long withoute sleepe lay;
And up I rose three houres after twelf,
About the springing of the [gladsome] day;
And on I put my gear* and mine array, *garments

And to a pleasant grove I gan to pass,
Long ere the brighte sun uprisen was;
In which were oakes great, straight as a line,
Under the which the grass, so fresh of hue,
Was newly sprung; and an eight foot or nine
Every tree well from his fellow grew,
With branches broad, laden with leaves new,
That sprangen out against the sunne sheen;
Some very red;<2> and some a glad light green;
Which, as me thought, was right a pleasant sight.
And eke the birdes' songes for to hear
Would have rejoiced any earthly wight;
And I, that could not yet, in no mannere,
Heare the nightingale of* all the year,<3> *during
Full busy hearkened with heart and ear,
If I her voice perceive could anywhere.
And at the last a path of little brede* *breadth
I found, that greatly had not used be;
For it forgrowen* was with grass and weed, *overgrown
That well unneth* a wight mighte see: *scarcely
Thought I, "This path some whither goes, pardie!"* *of a surety
And so I follow'd [it], till it me brought
To a right pleasant arbour, well y-wrought,
That benched was, and [all] with turfes new
Freshly y-turf'd, <4> whereof the greene grass,
So small, so thick, so short, so fresh of hue,
That most like to green wool, I wot, it was;
The hedge also, that *yeden in compass,* *went all around <5>*
And closed in all the greene herbere,* *arbour
With sycamore was set and eglatere,* *eglantine, sweet-briar
Wreathed *in fere* so well and cunningly, *together*
That ev'ry branch and leaf grew *by measure,* *regularly*
Plain as a board, of *a height by and by:* *the same height side
I saw never a thing, I you ensure, by side*
So well y-done; for he that took the cure* *pains, care
To maken it, I trow did all his pain
To make it pass all those that men have seen.
And shapen was this arbour, roof and all,
As is a pretty parlour; and also
The hedge as thick was as a castle wall,
That whoso list without to stand or go,
Though he would all day pryen to and fro,
He should not see if there were any wight
Within or no; but one within well might

Perceive all those that wente there without
Into the field, that was on ev'ry side
Cover'd with corn and grass; that out of doubt,
Though one would seeken all the worlde wide,
So rich a fielde could not be espied
Upon no coast, *as of the quantity;* *for its abundance
For of all goode thing there was plenty. or fertility*
And I, that all this pleasant sight [did] see,
Thought suddenly I felt so sweet an air
Of the eglentere, that certainly
There is no heart, I deem, in such despair,
Nor yet with thoughtes froward and contrair
So overlaid, but it should soon have boot,* *remedy, relief*
If it had ones felt this *savour swoot.* *sweet smell*
And as I stood, and cast aside mine eye,
I was ware of the fairest medlar tree
That ever yet in all my life I seye,* *saw
As full of blossoms as it mighte be;
Therein a goldfinch leaping prettily
From bough to bough; and as him list he eat
Here and there of the buds and flowers sweet.
And to the arbour side was adjoining
This fairest tree, of which I have you told;
And at the last the bird began to sing
(When he had eaten what he eate wo'ld)
So passing sweetly, that by many fold
It was more pleasant than I could devise;* *tell, describe
And, when his song was ended in this wise,
The nightingale with so merry a note
Answered him, that all the woode rung,
So suddenly, that, *as it were a sote,* *like a fool <6>*
I stood astound'; so was I with the song
Thorough ravished, that, *till late and long,* *for a long time*
I wist not in what place I was, nor where;
Again, me thought, she sung e'en by mine ear.
Wherefore I waited about busily
On ev'ry side, if that I might her see;
And at the last I gan full well espy
Where she sat in a fresh green laurel tree,
On the further side, even right by me,
That gave so passing a delicious smell,
According to the eglantere full well. *blending with*
Whereof I had so inly great pleasure,
That, as me thought, I surely ravish'd was

Into Paradise, where [as] my desire
Was for to be, and no farther to pass,
As for that day; and on the sweete grass
I sat me down; for, *as for mine intent,* *to my mind*
The birde's song was more *convenient,* *appropriate to my humour*
And more pleasant to me, by many fold,
Than meat, or drink, or any other thing;
Thereto the arbour was so fresh and cold,
The wholesome savours eke so comforting,
That, as I deemed, since the beginning
Of the world was [there] never seen *ere than* *before then*
So pleasant a ground of none earthly man.
And as I sat, the birdes heark'ning thus,
Me thought that I heard voices suddenly,
The most sweetest and most delicious
That ever any wight, I *trow truely,* *verily believe*
Heard in their life; for the harmony
And sweet accord was in so good musike,
That the voices to angels' most were like.
At the last, out of a grove even by,
That was right goodly, and pleasant to sight,
I saw where there came, singing lustily,
A world of ladies; but to tell aright
Their greate beauty, lies not in my might,
Nor their array; nevertheless I shall
Tell you a part, though I speak not of all.
In surcoats* white, of velvet well fitting, *upper robes
They were clad, and the seames each one,
As it were a mannere [of] garnishing,
Was set with emeraldes, one and one,
By and by; but many a riche stone *in a row*
Was set upon the purfles,* out of doubt, *embroidered edges
Of collars, sleeves, and traines round about;
As greate pearles, round and orient,* *brilliant
And diamondes fine, and rubies red,
And many another stone, of which I went* *cannot recall
The names now; and ev'reach on her head
[Had] a rich fret* of gold, which, without dread,** *band **doubt
Was full of stately* riche stones set; *valuable, noble
And ev'ry lady had a chapelet
Upon her head of branches fresh and green, <7>
So well y-wrought, and so marvellously,
That it was a right noble sight to see'n;
Some of laurel, and some full pleasantly

Had chapelets of woodbine; and sadly,* *sedately
Some of agnus castus <8> wearen also
Chapelets fresh; but there were many of tho'* *those
That danced and eke sung full soberly;
And all they went *in manner of compass;* *in a circle*
But one there went, in mid the company,
Sole by herself; but all follow'd the pace
That she kept, whose heavenly figur'd face
So pleasant was, and her well shap'd person,
That in beauty she pass'd them ev'ry one.
And more richly beseen, by many fold,
She was also in ev'ry manner thing:
Upon her head, full pleasant to behold,
A crown of golde, rich for any king;
A branch of agnus castus eke bearing
In her hand, and to my sight truely
She Lady was of all that company.
And she began a roundell <9> lustily,
That "Suse le foyle, devers moi," men call,
"Siene et mon joly coeur est endormy;" <10>
And then the company answered all,
With voices sweet entuned, and so small,* *fine
That me thought it the sweetest melody
That ever I heard in my life, soothly.* *truly
And thus they came, dancing and singing,
Into the middest of the mead each one,
Before the arbour where I was sitting;
And, God wot, me thought I was well-begone,* *fortunate
For then I might advise* them one by one, *consider
Who fairest was, who best could dance or sing,
Or who most womanly was in all thing.
They had not danced but a *little throw,* *short time*
When that I hearde far off, suddenly,
So great a noise of thund'ring trumpets blow,
As though it should departed* have the sky; *rent, divide
And after that, within a while, I sigh,* *saw
From the same grove, where the ladies came out,
Of men of armes coming such a rout,* *company
As* all the men on earth had been assembled *as if
Unto that place, well horsed for the nonce* *occasion
Stirring so fast, that all the earthe trembled
But for to speak of riches, and of stones,
And men and horse, I trow the large ones* *i.e. jewels
Of Prester John, <11> nor all his treasury,

Might not unneth* have bought the tenth party** *hardly **part
Of their array: whoso list heare more,
I shall rehearse so as I can a lite.* *little
Out of the grove, that I spake of before,
I saw come first, all in their cloakes white,
A company, that wore, for their delight,
Chapelets fresh of oake cerrial, <12>
Newly y-sprung; and trumpets* were they all. *trumpeters
On ev'ry trump hanging a broad bannere
Of fine tartarium <13> was, full richly beat;* *embroidered with gold
Every trumpet his lord's armes bare;
About their necks, with greate pearles set,
[Were] collars broad; for cost they would not let,* *be hindered by
As it would seem, for their scutcheons each one
Were set about with many a precious stone.
Their horses' harness was all white also.
And after them next, in one company,
Came kinges at armes and no mo',
In cloakes of white cloth with gold richly;
Chaplets of green upon their heads on high;
The crownes that they on their scutcheons bare
Were set with pearl, and ruby, and sapphire,
And eke great diamondes many one:
But all their horse harness, and other gear,
Was in a suit according, ev'ry one,
As ye have heard the foresaid trumpets were;
And, by seeming, they *were nothing to lear,* *had nothing to learn*
And their guiding they did all mannerly.* *perfectly
And after them came a great company
Of heraldes and pursuivantes eke,
Arrayed in clothes of white velvet;
And, hardily,* they were no thing to seek, assuredly
How they on them shoulde the harness set:
And ev'ry man had on a chapelet;
Scutcheones and eke harness, indeed,
They had *in suit of* them that 'fore them yede.* *corresponding with*
*went
Next after them in came, in armour bright,
All save their heades, seemly knightes nine,
And ev'ry clasp and nail, as to my sight,
Of their harness was of red golde fine;
With cloth of gold, and furred with ermine,
Were the trappures* of their steedes strong, *trappings
Both wide and large, that to the grounde hung.

And ev'ry boss of bridle and paytrel* *horse's breastplate
That they had on, was worth, as I would ween,
A thousand pound; and on their heades, well
Dressed, were crownes of the laurel green,
The beste made that ever I had seen;
And ev'ry knight had after him riding
Three henchemen* upon him awaiting. *pages
Of which ev'ry [first], on a short truncheon,* *staff
His lorde's helmet bare, so richly dight,* *adorned
That the worst of them was worthy the ranson* *ransom
Of any king; the second a shielde bright
Bare at his back; the thirde bare upright
A mighty spear, full sharp y-ground and keen;
And ev'ry childe* ware of leaves green *page
A freshe chaplet on his haires bright;
And cloakes white of fine velvet they ware
Their steedes trapped and arrayed right,
Without difference, as their lordes' were;
And after them, on many a fresh courser,
There came of armed knightes such a rout,* *company, crowd
That they bespread the large field about.
And all they waren, after their degrees,
Chapelets newe made of laurel green,
Some of the oak, and some of other trees;
Some in their handes bare boughes sheen,* *bright
Some of laurel, and some of oakes keen,
Some of hawthorn, and some of the woodbind,
And many more which I had not in mind.
And so they came, their horses fresh stirring
With bloody soundes of their trumpets loud;
There saw I many an *uncouth disguising* *strange manoeuvring*
In the array of these knightes proud;
And at the last, as evenly as they could,
They took their place in middest of the mead,
And ev'ry knight turned his horse's head
To his fellow, and lightly laid a spear
Into the rest; and so the jousts began
On ev'ry part aboute, here and there;
Some brake his spear, some threw down horse and man;
About the field astray the steedes ran;
And, to behold their rule and governance,* *conduct
I you ensure, it was a great pleasuance.
And so the joustes last'* an hour and more; *lasted
But those that crowned were in laurel green

Wonne the prize; their dintes* were so sore, *strokes
That there was none against them might sustene:
And the jousting was alle left off clean,
And from their horse the nine alight' anon,
And so did all the remnant ev'ry one.
And forth they went together, twain and twain,
That to behold it was a worthy sight,
Toward the ladies on the greene plain,
That sang and danced as I said now right;
The ladies, as soon as they goodly might,
They brake off both the song and eke the dance,
And went to meet them with full glad semblance.* *air, aspect
And ev'ry lady took, full womanly,
By th'hand a knight, and so forth right they yede* *went
Unto a fair laurel that stood fast by,
With leaves lade the boughs of greate brede;* *breadth
And, to my doom,* there never was, indeed, *judgment
Man that had seene half so fair a tree;
For underneath it there might well have be* *been
A hundred persons, *at their own pleasance,* *in perfect comfort*
Shadowed from the heat of Phoebus bright,
So that they shoulde have felt no grievance* *annoyance
Of rain nor haile that them hurte might.
The savour eke rejoice would any wight
That had been sick or melancholious,
It was so very good and virtuous.* *full of healing virtues
And with great rev'rence they inclined low
Unto the tree so sweet and fair of hue;* *appearance
And after that, within a *little throw,* *short time*
They all began to sing and dance of new,
Some song of love, some *plaining of untrue,* *complaint of
Environing* the tree that stood upright; unfaithfulness*
And ever went a lady and a knight. *going round
And at the last I cast mine eye aside,
And was ware of a lusty company
That came roaming out of the fielde wide;
[And] hand in hand a knight and a lady;
The ladies all in surcoats, that richly
Purfiled* were with many a riche stone; *trimmed at the borders
And ev'ry knight of green ware mantles on,
Embroider'd well, so as the surcoats were;
And ev'reach had a chaplet on her head
(Which did right well upon the shining hair),
Maked of goodly flowers, white and red.

The knightes eke, that they in hande led,
In suit of them ware chaplets ev'ry one,
And them before went minstrels many one,
As harpes, pipes, lutes, and psaltry,
All [clad] in green; and, on their heades bare,
Of divers flowers, made full craftily
All in a suit, goodly chaplets they ware;
And so dancing into the mead they fare.
In mid the which they found a tuft that was
All overspread with flowers in compass* *around, in a circle
Whereunto they inclined ev'ry one,
With great reverence, and that full humbly
And at the last there then began anon
A lady for to sing right womanly,
A bargaret, <14> in praising the daisy.
For, as me thought, among her notes sweet,
She saide: "Si douce est la margarete."<15>
Then alle they answered her in fere* *together
So passingly well, and so pleasantly,
That it was a [most] blissful noise to hear.
But, I n'ot* how, it happen'd suddenly *know not
As about noon the sun so fervently
Wax'd hote, that the pretty tender flow'rs
Had lost the beauty of their fresh colours,
Forshrunk* with heat; the ladies eke to-brent,** *shrivelled **very burnt
That they knew not where they might them bestow;
The knightes swelt,* for lack of shade nigh shent** *fainted **destroyed
And after that, within a little throw,
The wind began so sturdily to blow,
That down went all the flowers ev'ry one,
So that in all the mead there left not one;
Save such as succour'd were among the leaves
From ev'ry storm that mighte them assail,
Growing under the hedges and thick greves;* *groves, boughs
And after that there came a storm of hail
And rain in fere,* so that withoute fail *together
The ladies nor the knights had not one thread
Dry on them, so dropping was [all] their weed.* *clothing
And when the storm was passed clean away,
Those in the white, that stood under the tree,
They felt no thing of all the great affray
That they in green without *had in y-be:* *had been in*
To them they went for ruth, and for pity,
Them to comfort after their great disease;* *trouble

So fain* they were the helpless for to ease. *glad, eager
Then I was ware how one of them in green
Had on a crowne, rich and well sitting;* *becoming
Wherefore I deemed well she was a queen,
And those in green on her were awaiting.* *in attendance
The ladies then in white that were coming
Toward them, and the knightes eke *in fere,* *together*
Began to comfort them, and make them cheer.
The queen in white, that was of great beauty,
Took by the hand the queen that was in green,
And saide: "Sister, I have great pity
Of your annoy, and of your troublous teen,* *injury, grief
Wherein you and your company have been
So long, alas! and if that it you please
To go with me, I shall you do the ease,
"In all the pleasure that I can or may;"
Whereof the other, humbly as she might,
Thanked her; for in right evil array
She was, with storm and heat, I you behight;* *assure
Arid ev'ry lady then anon aright,
That were in white, one of them took in green
By the hand; which when that the knights had seen,
In like mannere each of them took a knight
Y-clad in green, and forth with them they fare
Unto a hedge, where that they anon right,
To make their joustes,<16> they would not spare
Boughes to hewe down, and eke trees square,
Wherewith they made them stately fires great,
To dry their clothes, that were wringing wet.
And after that, of herbes that there grew,
They made, for blisters of the sun's burning,
Ointmentes very good, wholesome, and new,
Wherewith they went the sick fast anointing;
And after that they went about gath'ring
Pleasant salades, which they made them eat,
For to refresh their great unkindly heat.
The Lady of the Leaf then gan to pray
Her of the Flower (for so, to my seeming,
They should be called, as by their array),
To sup with her; and eke, for anything,
That she should with her all her people bring;
And she again in right goodly mannere
Thanked her fast of her most friendly cheer;
Saying plainely, that she would obey,

With all her heart, all her commandement:
And then anon, without longer delay,
The Lady of the Leaf hath one y-sent
To bring a palfrey, *after her intent,* *according to her wish*
Arrayed well in fair harness of gold;
For nothing lack'd, that *to him longe sho'ld.* *should belong to him*
And, after that, to all her company
She made to purvey* horse and ev'rything *provide
That they needed; and then full lustily,
Ev'n by the arbour where I was sitting,
They passed all, so merrily singing,
That it would have comforted any wight.
But then I saw a passing wondrous sight;
For then the nightingale, that all the day
Had in the laurel sat, and did her might
The whole service to sing longing to May,
All suddenly began to take her flight;
And to the Lady of the Leaf forthright
She flew, and set her on her hand softly;
Which was a thing I marvell'd at greatly.
The goldfinch eke, that from the medlar tree
Was fled for heat into the bushes cold,
Unto the Lady of the Flower gan flee,
And on her hand he set him as he wo'ld,
And pleasantly his winges gan to fold;
And for to sing they *pain'd them* both, as sore *made great exertions*
As they had done *of all* the day before. *during
And so these ladies rode forth *a great pace,* *rapidly*
And all the rout of knightes eke in fere;
And I, that had seen all this *wonder case,* *wondrous incident*
Thought that I would assay in some mannere
To know fully the truth of this mattere,
And what they were that rode so pleasantly;
And when they were the arbour passed by,
I *dress'd me forth,* and happ'd to meet anon *issued forth*
A right fair lady, I do you ensure;* *assure
And she came riding by herself alone,
All in white; [then] with semblance full demure
I her saluted, and bade good adventure* *fortune
Might her befall, as I could most humbly;
And she answer'd: "My daughter, gramercy!"* *great thanks <17>
"Madame," quoth I, "if that I durst enquere
Of you, I would fain, of that company,
Wit what they be that pass'd by this herbere?

And she again answered right friendly:
"My faire daughter, all that pass'd hereby
In white clothing, be servants ev'ry one
Unto the Leaf; and I myself am one.
"See ye not her that crowned is," quoth she
"[Clad] all in white?" — "Madame," then quoth I, "yes:"
"That is Dian', goddess of chastity;
And for because that she a maiden is,
In her hande the branch she beareth this,
That agnus castus <8> men call properly;
And all the ladies in her company,
"Which ye see of that herbe chaplets wear,
Be such as have kept alway maidenhead:
And all they that of laurel chaplets bear,
Be such as hardy* were in manly deed, — *courageous
Victorious name which never may be dead!
And all they were so *worthy of their hand* *valiant in fight*
In their time, that no one might them withstand,
"And those that weare chaplets on their head
Of fresh woodbind, be such as never were
To love untrue in word, in thought, nor deed,
But ay steadfast; nor for pleasance, nor fear,
Though that they should their heartes all to-tear,* *rend in pieces*
Would never flit,* but ever were steadfast, *change
Till that their lives there asunder brast." *till they died*
"Now fair Madame," quoth I, "yet would I pray
Your ladyship, if that it mighte be,
That I might knowe, by some manner way
(Since that it hath liked your beauty,
The truth of these ladies for to tell me),
What that these knightes be in rich armour,
And what those be in green and wear the flow'r?
"And why that some did rev'rence to that tree,
And some unto the plot of flowers fair?"
"With right good will, my daughter fair," quoth she,
"Since your desire is good and debonair;* *gentle, courteous
The nine crowned be *very exemplair* *the true examples*
Of all honour longing to chivalry;
And those certain be call'd The Nine Worthy, <18>
"Which ye may see now riding all before,
That in their time did many a noble deed,
And for their worthiness full oft have bore
The crown of laurel leaves upon their head,
As ye may in your olde bookes read;

And how that he that was a conquerour
Had by laurel alway his most honour.
"And those that beare boughes in their hand
Of the precious laurel so notable,
Be such as were, I will ye understand,
Most noble Knightes of the Rounde Table,<19>
And eke the Douceperes honourable; <20>
Whiche they bear in sign of victory,
As witness of their deedes mightily.
"Eke there be knightes old <21> of the Garter,
That in their time did right worthily;
And the honour they did to the laurer* *laurel <22>
Is for* by it they have their laud wholly, *because
Their triumph eke, and martial glory;
Which unto them is more perfect richess
Than any wight imagine can, or guess.
"For one leaf given of that noble tree
To any wight that hath done worthily,
An'* it be done so as it ought to be, *if
Is more honour than any thing earthly;
Witness of Rome, that founder was truly
Of alle knighthood and deeds marvellous;
Record I take of Titus Livius." <23>
And as for her that crowned is in green,
It is Flora, of these flowers goddess;
And all that here on her awaiting be'n,
It are such folk that loved idleness,
And not delighted in no business,
But for to hunt and hawk, and play in meads,
And many other such-like idle deeds.
"And for the great delight and the pleasance
They have to the flow'r, and so rev'rently
They unto it do such obeisance
As ye may see." "Now, fair Madame,"quoth I,
"If I durst ask, what is the cause, and why,
That knightes have the ensign* of honour *insignia
Rather by the leaf than by the flow'r?"
"Soothly, daughter," quoth she, "this is the troth:
For knights should ever be persevering,
To seek honour, without feintise* or sloth, *dissimulation
From well to better in all manner thing:
In sign of which, with leaves aye lasting
They be rewarded after their degree,
Whose lusty green may not appaired* be, *impaired, decayed

"But ay keeping their beauty fresh and green;
For there is no storm that may them deface,
Nor hail nor snow, nor wind nor frostes keen;
Wherefore they have this property and grace:
And for the flow'r, within a little space,
Wolle* be lost, so simple of nature *will
They be, that they no grievance* may endure; *injury, hardship
"And ev'ry storm will blow them soon away,
Nor they laste not but for a season;
That is the cause, the very truth to say,
That they may not, by no way of reason,
Be put to no such occupation."
"Madame," quoth I, "with all my whole service
I thank you now, in my most humble wise;
"For now I am ascertain'd thoroughly
Of ev'ry thing that I desir'd to know."
"I am right glad that I have said, soothly,
Aught to your pleasure, if ye will me trow,"* *believe
Quoth she again; "but to whom do ye owe
Your service? and which wolle* ye honour, *will
Tell me, I pray, this year, the Leaf or the Flow'r?"
"Madame," quoth I, "though I be least worthy,
Unto the Leaf I owe mine observance:"
"That is," quoth she, "right well done, certainly;
And I pray God, to honour you advance,
And keep you from the wicked remembrance
Of Malebouche,* and all his cruelty; *Slander <24>
And all that good and well-condition'd be.
"For here may I no longer now abide;
I must follow the greate company,
That ye may see yonder before you ride."
And forthwith, as I coulde, most humbly
I took my leave of her, and she gan hie* *haste
After them as fast as she ever might;
And I drew homeward, for it was nigh night,
And put all that I had seen in writing,
Under support of them that list it read. <25>
O little book! thou art so uncunning,* *unskilful
How dar'st thou put thyself in press, <26> for dread?
It is wonder that thou waxest not red!
Since that thou know'st full lite* who shall behold *little
Thy rude language, full *boistously unfold.* *unfolded in homely and unpolished fashion*
Explicit.* *The End

Notes to the Flower and the Leaf

1. The Bull: the sign of Taurus, which the sun enters in May.
2. The young oak leaves are red or ashen coloured.
3. Chaucer here again refers to the superstition, noticed in "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale," that it was of good omen to hear the nightingale before the cuckoo upon the advent of both with spring.
4. The arbour was furnished with seats, which had been newly covered with turf.
5. "Yede" or "yead," is the old form of go.
6. Sote: fool — French "sot."
7. See note 59 to The Court of Love
8. Agnus castus: the chaste-tree; a kind of willow.
9. Roundell: French, "rondeau;" a song that comes round again to the verse with which it opened, or that is taken up in turn by each of the singers.
10. In modern French form, "Sous la feuille, devers moi, son et mon joli coeur est endormi" — "Under the foliage, towards me, his and my jolly heart is gone to sleep."
11. Prester John: The half-mythical Eastern potentate, who is now supposed to have been, not a Christian monarch of Abyssinia, but the head of the Indian empire before Zenghis Khan's conquest.
12. Oak cerrial: of the species of oak which Pliny, in his "Natural History," calls "cerrus."
13. Tartarium: Cloth of Tars, or of Tortona.
14. Bargaret: bergerette, or pastoral song.
15. "Si douce est la margarete.": "So sweet is the daisy" ("la marguerite").
16. To make their joustes: the meaning is not very obvious; but in The Knight's Tale "jousts and array" are in some editions made part of the adornment of the Temple of Venus; and as the word "jousts" would there carry the general meaning of "preparations" to entertain or please a lover, in the present case it may have a similar force.
17. Gramercy: "grand merci," French; great thanks.
18. The Nine Worthies, who at our day survive in the Seven Champions of Christendom. The Worthies were favourite subjects for representation at popular festivals or in masquerades.
19. The famous Knights of King Arthur, who, being all esteemed equal in valour and noble qualities, sat at a round table, so that none should seem to have precedence over the rest.
20. The twelve peers of Charlemagne (les douze pairs), chief among whom were Roland and Oliver.
21. Chaucer speaks as if, at least for the purposes of his poetry, he believed that Edward III. did not establish a new, but only revived an old, chivalric institution, when be founded the Order of the Garter.
22. Laurer: laurel-tree; French, "laurier."
23. The meaning is: "Witness the practice of Rome, that was the founder of all knighthood and marvellous deeds; and I refer for corroboration to Titus Livius" — who, in several passages, has mentioned the laurel crown as the highest military honour.

For instance, in 1. vii. c. 13, Sextus Tullius, remonstrating for the army against the inaction in which it is kept, tells the Dictator Sulpicius, "Duce te vincere cupimus; tibi lauream insignem deferre; tecum triumphantes urbem inire." ("Commander, we want you to conquer; to bring you the laurel insignia; to enter the city with you in triumph")

24. Malebouche: Slander, personified under the title of Evil-mouth — Italian, "Malbocca;" French, "Malebouche."

25. Under support of them that list it read: the phrase means — trusting to the goodwill of my reader.

26. In press: into a crowd, into the press of competitors for favour; not, it need hardly be said, "into the press" in the modern sense — printing was not invented for a century after this was written.