

The Assembly of Ladies

anon

fifteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Pearsall, Derek (Ed), 1990. *The Floure and the Leafe, The Assembly of Ladies, The Isle of Ladies*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS. Medieval Institute Publications. The Middle English text is from British Library MS Addit 34360.

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The Assembly of Ladies

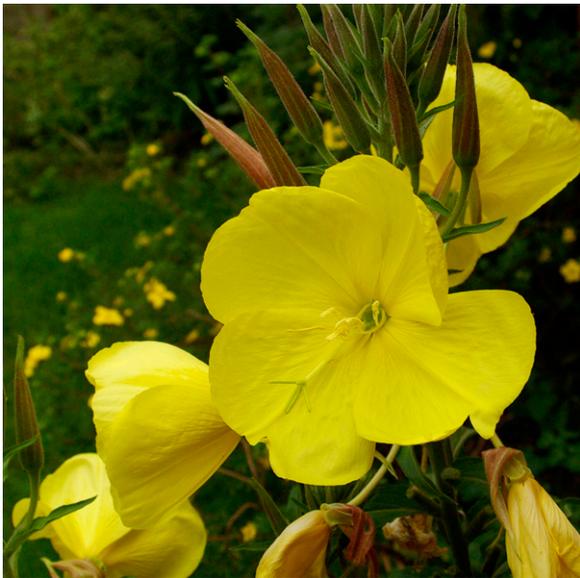
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fifteenth century

In Septembre at fallyng of the leef · the fressh season was al to-gydre done · and of the corn was gadred in the sheef · in a garden, about tweyne after none · there were ladyes walkyng – One September, when the summer had ended, all the corn had been gathered in and the leaves had begun to fall – in the afternoon as I remember – there were ladies walking within a garden, as they were well accustomed to be doing, four of them I think, and I the fifth and the least of them I’m sure. Four gentlewomen were there also, strolling along the perpendicular paths of this garden. Some of us walked alone, occupied with our own thoughts, others were in pairs, some in conversation – yet in truth we were not alone, for there were many knights and squires in this garden as well and one of them came up to me and asked me what I was doing.

‘I’m going to take a leisurely stroll around this maze, since I have some free time,’ I replied.

He asked me again who I was looking for, and why I seemed so apprehensive.

‘Thereby hangs a tale,’ I replied, evasively.



‘Tell me,’ he said. ‘I want to know. Tell me quickly.’

‘Wait, then,’ I said. ‘You are too keen. It is no light matter. But since you seem so eager to know, I’ll do my best to tell you. But I must start at the beginning:

‘One afternoon, my friends and I agreed that, once we had discharged all our duties for the day, we would go into the maze. When we were inside, we each followed our own path. Some thought they were about to reach the outside again, only to be suddenly led deeper

into the maze. Others came to a halt and tried to get their bearings by looking around, and to tell the truth, some got left far behind and then suddenly reappeared right next to us again! One or two of us became so bewildered that we chose turnings at random, getting quite breathless and impatient. Some of us even began climbing over the curbs and hedges.

‘But as we each followed our own route through the maze, I got myself a little advantage. I was so tired that I had to rest, although my journey had been successful because I quickly came to a narrow path that led to a delightful little garden, shaded by trees, with many wooden seats thereabouts. It seemed to be a perfect place, safe and enclosed, with a circular stone wall all around and there were steps descending in the middle of this garden and there was a water wheel turning and above its revolving hub a pot of marjoram. There were daisies growing everywhere, in full view – it was a beautiful sight – forget-me-nots and other flowers as well, pansies also, God knows, they were everywhere! The ground was paved with smooth flagstones, each slab a different colour and so well joined that you would have thought that there was no join at all unless you knew the contrary to be true. Amongst and beneath these stones ran streams of water like liquid silver that seemed to spring from the ground.

I spent a little while alone in this garden, enjoying the beauty of the place, knowing that my friends were on their way and all I had to do was to wait for them, so I rested, reminiscing, enjoying my own company and recalling things, often with a sigh. Soon I began to fall asleep.

As I slept, I dreamed that I was approached by a gentlewoman of noble appearance. She was not tall but she was wearing fine, blue clothes and had a serious expression on her face. There was nobody accompanying her. Her gown was finely embroidered with her own flower, the flower called forget-me-not, and on the hem, her motto, *Very loyally*, was clear to see. I asked her her name and she replied, Perseverance. Thus emboldened, I asked her where she lived and she courteously replied: ‘I live, and have for a long while, with a lady.’

‘Which lady is this?’

‘One of great nobility, I assure you,’ she replied.

‘What is her name?’

‘Loyalty

‘What is your function, or your rank?’

‘Unworthy though I am, I am the usher in her private rooms. Can you see, I carry the appropriate rod of office.’

She told me that she had been commanded to summon me and all eight of my friends to an audience, immediately, or at least within the next seven days, and she had been

The Assembly of Ladies is found in three other early manuscripts, all dating to the late-fifteenth century, and carries on a tradition that can be seen in Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women and The House of Fame, as well as Lydgate’s Temple of Glass – that of a place encountered in a dream where feminine authority holds sway and where the wrongs done to women are acknowledged or can be remedied. There is something of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland about the scurrying palace officials in this story, who inhabit a setting that seems similar to the island paradise in the poem The Isle of Ladies, surrounded by its walls of glass and which men are discouraged from visiting. The Otherworldly nature of these places owes something to the mysterious islands of women in Irish myth and legend that lie far across the sea, a parallel reinforced in the Isle of Ladies by the presence of apples of immortality, but medieval voyagers usually encounter them in a dream.

instructed to make it clear that there could be no excuses and no delay. ‘And there is another thing that I must tell you,’ she said, ‘although it nearly slipped my mind, but it’s important. You and your friends must come wearing blue, and have your mottos sewn onto your sleeves. And don’t be bashful or embarrassed, like many who find themselves standing before a high authority, but make your petition and your request as clearly as you can and she will gladly listen to you. There is no crime nor distress nor injustice which you may have suffered that, with her help, you will not quickly receive a remedy for.’

‘I am very happy to hear you say this,’ I said. ‘But none of us knows the way. How will we find her?’

‘You will find her. One of my companions will come to guide you. Her name is Diligence. She is well-known and held in great affection, I can say this with certainty. Her companionship will be a great pleasure to you and she will happily show you the way and do as much as she can for you, to the best of her ability. This is all I have to say. Farewell.’

‘Wait!’ I cried. ‘You cannot leave so quickly.’

‘Why?’ she asked. ‘I have far to go, to speak to your friends and to many others as well. I’ve already told you that there is little time.’



‘But even so, tell me this,’ I said. ‘Should we bring any men along with us?’

‘No, not one,’ she answered.

‘Not one? Goodness gracious! What have they done?’

‘I know well enough, but I won’t elaborate. I have no authority to explain. You must take my word for it.’

‘Then tell me this. Where exactly does this lady live?’

‘Truly, if one searched an entire kingdom, one could not find a fairer place. It is built superbly, its towers are high, with vanes and banners fluttering in the breeze. All the rooms are equally fine, with bay windows and fine halls and galleries for dancing and other amusements, so much so that I can say for certain that if you were taken there now, you would think that you had arrived in Paradise.’

‘What is this place called?’ I said. ‘Tell me this.’

‘It is called Good Looking,’ she replied.

‘Are you sure? I’m certain you’re right. I believe you. But tell me this – what should I do when I arrive, and whom should I seek out?’

‘You should look for a gentlewoman, the keeper of the gate. Her name is Self-control and it would be well for you to make her acquaintance. She will advise you how best to proceed and how to come quickly into this lady’s presence. I advise you to listen to her carefully. But it is time that I took my leave, for in all honesty, I have a lot to do.’

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘Thank you for answering all my questions. You have given me the courage to do exactly as you advise.’

She went away and I was left alone; but not for very long because I soon saw a lady approaching and immediately began to wonder whether she was the guide I had just been told about. I asked her her name, and in a very feminine voice she replied:

‘I am a simple creature sent from the court, and my name is Diligence. I came as soon as I could, as soon as I had permission to. And now that I am here, how can I serve you? I am yours to command.’

I thanked her and asked her to approach, so that I could have a good look at her. Her gown was blue and adorned with her own personal emblem and with her motto, which was *To the best of my ability*, which pleased me, for it seemed that what I had just been told was the truth.

‘If we set off immediately, it would do us no harm,’ she said eagerly.

‘How far away is it?’

‘Pretty much a day’s journey, so it’s best if we set off at once. I imagine your companions are already on their way, and I would hate for us to be the last to arrive.’

So we set off, as the sun arose, and made easy progress until we had travelled so far that we began to see the palace in the distance.’

‘Let’s rest for a little while,’ I said, ‘and say an Our Father for Saint Julien, as devoutly as we can.’

‘By all means. We’ll be much the better for it.’

So we stopped and made our prayer. And when evening was approaching, we came to a wall, like one that surrounds a sanctuary for the sick and disabled. Here I found a gentlewoman of my acquaintance who had brought my clothes with her.

‘I’m amazed that you know about this place, and that you knew how to find me and what to bring,’ I said.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said. ‘I learned that Perseverance had sent a message to you all, and what



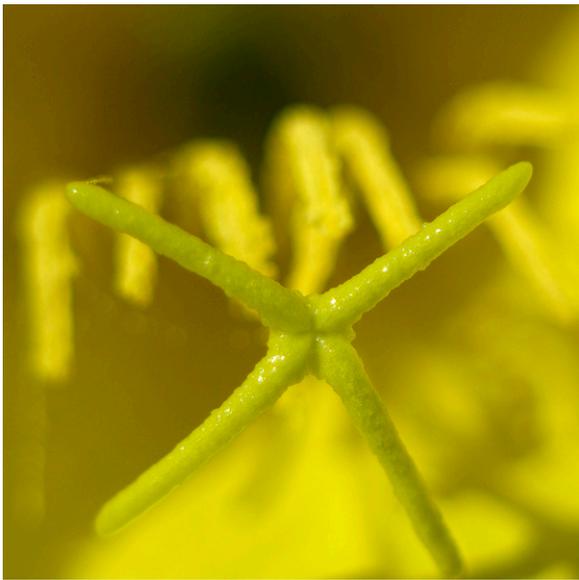
you would need.'

'For my love, then, I ask you, since you've gone to all this trouble, please help me to dress. I'm eager to make as good an impression as I can.'

'What need is there for you to ask?' she chastised. 'Let's get you changed as quickly as we can, and you'll see how well it can be done.'

'Do you think that my friends and companions might already have gone on ahead.'

'I guarantee that they have not. We would see them if they had,' she replied. 'But nevertheless, I advise you to get a move on. There'll be no harm done if you're the first to arrive.'



So I got into my clothes and asked her how I looked.

'You look lovely,' she said. 'You would be presentable at any court.' And as we chatted away, Diligence reappeared and, seeing me all in blue, said: 'Sister, your new clothes suit you very well.'

She led the way and by chance we came upon a young woman, a lady in authority it seemed. 'What is your name?' I asked.

'Discretion,' she replied.

'Where do you live?'

'I'm a palace official and I'm in charge of purchasing.'

'Fair love,' said I, 'who amongst all your peers is the lady in charge of accommodation?'

'Her name is Acquaintance, a very gracious lady.'

'How many guests have arrived?'

'Not many, of any rank, high or low. You are the first to arrive, in fact, as far as I know.'

We chatted for a little while more until we came to the entrance gate, and then the young lady departed. Diligence knocked loudly on the door.

'Who is it?' called Self-control from inside.

'Fair sister, here's one,' answered Diligence.

'Who is one?' asked Self-control, with a laugh.

'Me, of course. Diligence.'

Self-control opened the gate and in we went. ‘You are welcome,’ she said. ‘Is there nobody else?’

‘No,’ replied Diligence. ‘Only me and this woman.’

‘Well,’ she said, turning to me, ‘then go to my chamber and rest there for a while. I’m sure your friends will be here soon.’

I thanked her, and she led me silently to her chamber. Diligence reappeared only to say that she had to leave.

‘By all means,’ I said. ‘Do whatever you need to do, and thank you for all that you have done. May God reward you for it, and may Jesus be your guide, I can say no more.’

‘Where have all your friends got to?’ asked Self-control.

‘I’m sure they’re coming,’ I replied. ‘And we’ll be able to see them from this window when they do. I’ll stand here and keep a lookout. I’m sure they won’t be long.’

As I stood waiting for them to arrive, I had a good look at her clothes. She was wearing a blue gown, very fashionable and trimmed very finely in grey fur. On her sleeve was embroidered in white letters – as my pen shall now bear witness – the words *I believe what I see*. She noticed me looking and came over. ‘What is your motto?’ she asked.

‘I haven’t got one, I’m afraid,’ I replied. ‘All I was told was that I had to arrive wearing blue, and I’m satisfied that I’ve done all that was asked of me. But tell me this, please – who is the steward here? What is her name?’

‘Her name is Generosity and she is a very honourable lady, as you will see when you meet her. Her assistant, who will welcome you all in due course, is Good Cheer, the marshal of the hall. But while you are waiting, you should be thinking of your own affairs. Have you brought your petition?’

‘Yes, of course, or else I would have been remiss. But is there anybody I should give it to?’

‘Yes, to the chamberlain.’

‘The chamberlain? Are you sure?’

‘Of course. And if you will take my advice, be very polite to her and show some humility, but don’t be afraid of her.’

‘Then I shall do as you say. What is her name?’



'Her name is Remembrance. And don't forget the palace secretary, for she is able to accomplish a lot. Therefore I advise you, when you meet her, to explain everything about your petition to her. She is a very kind and sympathetic lady.'

'Please tell me her name.'

'It is Caution.'

'That's a good name for her, I imagine,' I said. 'She must have to see every bill and petition that's ever presented. But come here! I can see all my friends arriving. Here they are!'

'Really?'

'Yes, really! I'm not joking. See how they're all coming in pairs?'

'You're right,' she said. 'They all look very splendid, I must say.'

'They are all very kind and loving, and if they come to see you, my love, please be a good friend to them.'

'They will not miss out on my friendship, I assure you, at least as far as presenting their petitions goes.'

'May God cause that to be true, but tell me this: How will we know which is the chamberlain?'

'You will know her by her motto.'

'Which is?'

'*To my utmost.*'

As we stood together, she and I, my friends arrived at the gate. Delightedly, I went to greet them and welcomed each one of them individually. Then Self-control caught up with me and greeted them as well. 'May I offer you, all of you, my fair sisters, a heartfelt welcome to this land,' she said. 'I advise you to take a little rest in my chamber, if this is acceptable to you. When you are there, I shall go and call Perseverance, because you all know her, and she will be able to explain everything.'

We all agreed to do as she suggested. All my friends dressed themselves appropriately, so that people would not think us short of resources or ill-prepared, and we all made bets as to who most deserved to be thought the finest-looking and the most attractive amongst us. Shortly, Self-control arrived with Perseverance. She welcomed us courteously.

'You will not have long to wait,' she said. 'I will go to speak with Acquaintance, who will sort out your accommodation, then I will go to Remembrance, the chamberlain, to put your cases to her. Then I shall return.'

When she had gone, we saw people arriving beyond the wall, so many that we could not count them. They were all gentlewomen and ladies, clothed in blue and bearing mottos

and embroidered emblems, but it was impossible to read or study any of them properly, there was such a crowd.

Perseverance reappeared and came straight over to me. 'We have known each other for a long time,' she said, 'and so I require less courage to ask you what your friends are wearing as their mottos. Tell me in confidence and I promise to be discrete.'

We are nine of us in all, five ladies and four gentlewomen, bound by friendship. When each states her petition, then you will know her motto. But as for me, I really haven't got one. I've told Self-control this already. My clothes are blue, what more is required?'

'I will go back again, then, and find out what you have to do.'

'If you would do so, you would be doing us all a very great favour. The quicker we can get these preliminaries over with, the sooner we can be seen. There is always a cost to delay, and prolonged proceedings are very wearisome.'

She departed, and returned very quickly. 'You must come to see the chamberlain,' she said.

'We are ready to follow, wherever you wish to take us,' I said. 'We have no great way with words though, I have to tell you, and I beg you not to allow our petitions to be harmed on this account.'



We followed Perseverance and came upon a massive crowd that looked as though it would take a lot of squeezing and shoving to get through. 'Wait here,' she said. 'I'll try to find a better way around.'

She went on ahead, clearing a way so that we could get past, and when she had done so, she beckoned to us to come over. Then we followed her straight to where the chamberlain was standing. Perseverance left us and went off to pursue her other duties.

We greeted the chamberlain as the occasion demanded, imploring her with great humility that she listen to our petitions with goodwill, as a kind lady and like a mistress to us.

'You are welcome,' she assured us, in reply. 'I'm ready to do everything that I can for you.'

We followed her to the chamber door. 'Sisters,' she said, 'come in.'

We found ourselves standing upon a paved, stone floor, the best that you can imagine, and as we looked at the walls and into the corners, we saw that everything was made of crystal and engraved with images depicting many stories of ladies who had been harmed and deceived by men: the story of Phyllis, who, through pity, died piteously for the love of Demophon; the story of Thisbe, who killed herself beneath a tree; Cleopatra who died

for the love of Mark Anthony. On an opposite wall was depicted the end of Mehusine, who was deceived while she was in a bath. Anelada was there, who had much to complain of against Arcite – all these stories were engraved upon these walls, and many more that I could tell you about, but it would take far too long to do so. And because the walls shone so brightly, they were shaded with fine gauze to protect the eyes, to lessen the glare and to make these stories easier to read.

Further into the chamber we came upon a chair, draped in rich apparel and placed upon a stack of five platforms, leading like steps up to it. It was made of chalcedony, very intricately formed, with four golden knobs set with sapphires, the finest that you can imagine. I was able to examine it very closely, and you know what? I bet if you searched diligently from here to India, you wouldn't find another one like it! A canopy of magnificent cloth was hanging above, embroidered with strange patterns and designs, with a motto, in huge, prominent letters, that said *Ever to endure*.

As we stood, a door opened and a fine-looking woman approached, bearing a mace. I thought she looked very splendid. She did not shout or rush her words, but said authoritatively and very politely: 'Stand away, my lady is coming.'



At once, I saw Perseverance in the doorway. She held up the drape that covered this entrance, and then I saw the great lady herself coming through and out into the chamber. Behind her emerged a fine-looking company of ladies, but how many I could not tell you. I was given no opportunity to ask them their names – I could state only my petition – except that the lady who was the chancellor was called Temperance, which I know because in pursuit of our petition we were to have dealings with her more and more.

But of the great lady herself, to describe her beauty is beyond my capability. Never in all my life had I ever seen a woman possess such quality and such confidence. She seemed to lack for nothing, I assure you, nothing that belongs to the good and the fair. Let me describe to you her gown: it was made of cloth-of-gold, blue in colour and cut and shaped exquisitely in the style of a herald's coat with the sleeves hanging down. The collar and the vents were matching, with embroidered hems which – just as some borders are decorated with ermine, so these were studded with large pearls and the gaps between the pearls sparkled with diamonds. The sleeves and all the embroidered hems were decorated like this. Around her neck was clasped a neck-ring adorned with rubies set in white enamel shaped like flowers, and on her head she wore a circlet of rubies. I speak the truth when I say that, to young or old or, indeed, to a person of any age, it was a world to look upon her face.

As she approached the chair and sat, we knelt and presented our petitions to her, and

you know what? She humbly received them, one by one. And when this was done, the lady's attendants came up, knelt before her themselves, and then they all rose again.

When she was comfortably seated in her chair, she called the chamberlain to her. This lady responded quickly, although she did not know the reason for the summons.

'Move everybody in the crowd back against the wall to create a little more space,' the lady instructed. 'Do it quickly, and then take these petitions to the palace secretary.'

The chamberlain did as she had been asked. The palace secretary was presented with the petitions, not only ours but many others as well. Then this great lady sensibly called her chamberlain to her once more and said: 'Go and ask the palace secretary to come here and read these petitions, so that we can all hear what they say and weigh them carefully in our minds and I can be guided by your good advice. See that this is done.'

When she had received her instructions, the chamberlain cried out to the palace secretary: 'Present your petitions! My lady wishes it.'

'Madam,' replied the secretary. 'I shall.'

'She requires you to read them all in her presence.'

'With great pleasure. I am ready to do whatever she commands.'

An instruction was given that the petitions of those who had been the first to arrive should be read before the others. Perseverance explained: 'It is reasonable that they should be dealt with first.' So the palace secretary laid out all our petitions on a tapestry and read them out, one after the other.

The first was from a lady with the motto *Without ever giving cause*, and she wrote in her petition about broken promises, agreements that she had made in good faith and kept for her part, and for which she now sought remedy. The second had the motto *Constancy*, and her complaint was that although she had been rewarded for her service, it was far less than she felt she deserved, and had no other recourse but to present this petition.

As for another two, one of them had the motto *I can never rise*, and to tell you the truth, the crime against her was grievous. I shall try to tell you about it, as much as I can remember, for in her own way, she complained that she could never be sure of her comfort or happiness and could find no stability in these things at all. For her it was an endless round of anxiety and uncertainty and it was a remedy for this insecurity that she sought.

Her companion presented the following complaint: that however insistent or angry she got, the person whom she loved the most she could not see when she most wanted to; and she was angry about revealing her motto, which was *Entirely yours*. And she made a great request, with heart and will and all that might be done, that she who had the power to redress it might soon find an answer to her problem, and she went over the details of her complaint again, beseeching her that a solution might soon be found.

In a similar way, the four gentlewomen in our group put their petitions, and to be more explicit, one of them had *It needs no words* as her motto, and she explained the cause of her complaint more fully. She said – and God knows, very piteously too – that she was disposed not to take misfortune with any great anguish. Pain and joy were all one to her, she said; she often didn't receive thanks or any reward for what she did, didn't expect any and so wasn't disappointed when none arrived. She awaited no bliss and set no store by it, and implored this lady to provide her with a better hope, as all her life she had been steadfast and true and always would be.

Her friend's petition was read next, and I will tell you what it said. *I trust in God* was her motto, and she told us that certainly, her trust had been misplaced, which surprised her a lot, and that faith is sometimes taken advantage of – but enough of this. More's the pity that it's tolerated so much. There was much more she might have complained about as well, but she thought it too much trouble to write it all down. And therefore, she continued to put her trust in God and in her, as her motto states, beseeching that this lady show her the favour of her grace.

The third revealed her grievance and, Yee! What do you think? It was a pitiable thing to hear, for I perceived that she was very unhappy, you could see this in the way she carried herself, and no wonder, because the cause of her distress lay very deep. And yet she was loth to put it into writing. But need will find a way, every time. *Rest assured* was her motto, and her tale was short. She loved a man, but it was to no avail because his love lay elsewhere. All she asked was that she might be given some comfort to ease her pain and to make her life more bearable.

The fourth seemed very self-assured, in the way she moved and in her demeanour, and very confident, as far as I could tell. *Well advised* was her motto, which suited her well. She asked this lady, very sincerely, above all things, if she would grant her good self-control.

'You have presented these petitions to me,' said this great lady, 'but I haven't heard from you yet,' she said, looking at me.

'It may be that you shall.'

'Now then, while I am here.'

'If you wish. But I can say, in all honesty, that it is a very sad case, and I'm sure you will agree when you have heard my petition.'

'Then tell it to me, my dear, by Saint James!'

'Wait a moment. I'm not ready yet. But you must already know, since you are aware of everything that takes place.'

But then I began. I would welcome even death to put an end to my sorrow and pain. What more could I desire, do you think? If you knew all that had led up to it, you would agree for certain. And to tell you the truth, without the help of She who has everything

in her care, I don't think I would be able to carry on at all. My fidelity has been beyond reproach – to tell the truth, I could not have done more. I have suffered everything with patience and kept it all to myself, beseeching her, through her goodness, that she might reward me by giving me the justice that I deserve.'

When these petitions had all been read, this great lady sought the advice of all her ladies and came to the conclusion that there was no need to answer them all individually, so she commanded us to approach her and to hear a reply that would be to the benefit of every one of us. And what happened then, do you think? Well, she spoke in this way:

'We have heard all of your petitions, and some of them are very touching and very sad. And therefore I wish to say this to you all: that very shortly a parliament is to be held in the palace here, and in all this matter in which you find grievance, there you will find a remedy that will relieve you of every concern that you have voiced here. You shall be advised of its date in due course, so that you will have time to travel here. Diligence will bring you news of it in writing.'

We humbly thanked her, each of us by common assent, and submitted ourselves to her service, for we considered that our journey had been very worthwhile indeed. We held each other by the sleeve and prepared to curtsy and take our leave, when suddenly I became aware of a splash of water on my face and I woke up.

'Where am I?' I thought, and heard the water wheel. 'The palace has gone!' I looked around at the garden in bewilderment.

And so I went and wrote this little book, which states plainly what I saw, for it should not be forgotten.

'Your dream was truly a marvellous one,' he said when I had finished, 'and worthy to be remembered. And although I've been standing here for quite a long while now, listening to you, I haven't minded at all. It's been a real pleasure. But tell me, what have you called this book. I'd like to know.'

'You shall. With great pleasure I can tell you that it's called *The Assembly of Ladies*. What do you think?'

'Good, by God!'

'Now go, farewell, for I can hear all my friends calling me, and I must go with them.'

Read well my dream, for now my tale is done.