

The Parliament of Fowls

Geoffrey Chaucer



The life so brief, the art so long in the learning, the attempt so hard, the conquest so sharp, the fearful joy that ever slips away so quickly--by all this I mean love, which so sorely astounds my feeling with its wondrous operation, that when I think upon it I scarce know whether I wake or sleep. For albeit I know not love myself; nor how he pays people their wage, yet I have very often chanced to read in books of his miracles and his cruel anger there, surely, I read he will ever be lord and sovereign, and his strokes will be so heavy I dare say nothing but, "God save such a lord!" I can say no more. 14

Somewhat for pleasure and somewhat for learning I am in the habit of reading books, as I have told you. But why speak I of all this? Not long ago I chanced to look at a book, written in antique letters, and there I read very diligently and eagerly through the long day, to learn a certain thing. For, as men say, out of old fields comes all this new corn from year to year; and, in good faith, out of old books comes all this new knowledge that men learn. But now to my theme in this matter: it so delighted me to read on, that the whole day seemed to me rather short. This book of which I speak was entitled Tully¹ on the Dream of Scipio. It had seven chapters, on heaven and hell and earth, and the souls that live in those places; about which I will tell you the substance of Tully's opinion, as briefly as I can. 35

First the book tells how, when Scipio had come to Africa, he met Masinissa², who clasped him in his arms for joy. Then it tells their conversation and all the joy that was between them until the day began to end; and then how Scipio's beloved ancestor Africanus appeared to him that night in his sleep. Then it tells how Africanus showed him Carthage from a starry place, and disclosed to him all his good

¹ Tully. Roman orator, Cicero (Marcus Tullius, 106-43 B.C.), whose *Dream of Scipio*, the conclusion of his *Republic*, was preserved with a long commentary by Macrobius. The narrator is relating the Macrobius version.

fortune to come, and said to him that any man, learned or unlettered, who loves the common profit and is virtuous shall go to a blessed place where is joy without end. Then Scipio asked whether people that die here have life and dwelling elsewhere; and Africanus said, "Yes, without doubt," and added that our space of life in the present world, whatever way we follow, is just a kind of death, and righteous people, after they die, shall go to heaven. 56

And he showed him the Milky Way, and the earth here, so little in comparison with the hugeness of the heavens; and after that he showed him the nine spheres. And then he heard the melody that proceeds from those nine spheres, which is the fount of music and melody in this world, and the cause of harmony. Then Africanus instructed him not to take delight in this world, since earth is so little and so full of torment and ill favor. Then he told him how in a certain term of years every star should come into its own place, where it first was; and all that has been done by all mankind in this world shall pass out of memory. 70

Then he asked Africanus to tell him fully the way to come into that heavenly happiness; and he said, "First know yourself to be immortal; and always see that you labor diligently and teach for the common profit, and you shall not fail to come speedily to that dear place that is full of joy and of bright souls. But breakers of the law, in truth, and lecherous folk, after they die, shall ever be whirled about the earth in torment, until many an age be passed; and then, all their wicked deeds forgiven, they shall come to that blessed region, to which may God send you His grace to come." 84

The day began to end, and dark night, which withdraws beasts from their activity, bereft me of my book for the lack of light; and I set forth to my bed, full of brooding and anxious heaviness. For I both had that which I wished not and what I wished that I had not. But at last, wearied with all the day's labor, my spirit took rest and heavily slept; and as I lay in my sleep, I dreamed how Africanus, in the very same guise in which Scipio saw him that time before, had come and stood at the very side of my bed. When the weary hunter sleeps, quickly his mind returns to the wood; the judge dreams how his cases fare, and the

In the dream the Roman general Scipio the Younger meets his grandfather, Scipio the Elder (Africanus) in a dream in which the younger is shown all the universe.

² Masinissa. King of Numidia (Libya).

carter how his carts go; the rich dream of gold, the knight fights his foes; the sick man dreams he drinks of the wine cask, the lover that he has his lady. I cannot say whether my reading of Africanus was the cause that I dreamed that he stood there; but thus he spoke, "You have done so well to look upon my old tattered book, of which Macrobius thought not a little³, that I would requite you somewhat for your labor." 112

Cytherea⁴, you sweet, blessed lady, who with your fire-brand subdues whomsoever you wish, and sends me this dream, be my helper in this, for you are best able! As surely as I saw you in the north-northwest⁵ when I began to write my dream, so surely do you give me power to rhyme it and compose it! 119

This aforesaid Africanus took me from there and brought me out with him to a gate of a park walled with mossy stone; and over the gate on either side, carved in large letters, were verses of very diverse senses, of which I shall tell you the full meaning: 126

"Through me men go into that blessed place
Where hearts find health and deadly wounds find cure,
Through me men go unto the fount of Grace,
Where green and lusty May shall ever endure.
I lead men to blithe peace and joy secure.
Reader, be glad; throw off your sorrows past.
Open am I; press in and make haste fast." 133

On the other side it said:

"Through me men go where all mischance betides,
Where is the mortal striking of the spear,
To which Disdain and Coldness are the guides,
Where trees no fruit or leaf shall ever bear.
This stream shall lead you to the sorrowful weir
Where fish in baleful prison lie all dry.
To shun it is the only remedy." 140

These inscriptions were written, the one in gold, the other in black, and I beheld them for a long while, for at the one my heart grew hardy, and the other ever increased my fear; the first warmed me, the other chilled me. For fear of error my wit could not make its choice, to enter or to flee, to lose myself or save myself. Just as a piece of iron set between two load-stones of equal force⁶ has no power to move one way

³ Of which Macrobius thought not a little. Understatement: Macrobius, who preserved the text and wrote a long commentary on it, wrote in the last sentence of the commentary, "there is nothing more perfect than this work" (R).

⁴ Cytherea. Venus, the goddess of love.

⁵ North-north-west. The reference is unclear, but perhaps

or the other--for as much as one draws the other hinders. So it fared with me, who knew not which would be better, to enter or not, until Africanus my guide caught and pushed me in at the wide gates, saying, "Your doubt stands written on your face, though you tell it not to me. But fear not to come in, for this writing is not meant for you or for any, unless he would be Love's servant. For in love, I believe, you have lost your sense of taste, even as a sick man loses his taste of sweet and bitter. Nevertheless, dull though you may be, you can still look upon that which you cannot do; for many a man who cannot complete a bout is nevertheless pleased to be at a wrestling match, and judges whether one or another does better. And if you have skill to set it down, I will show you something to write about." 168

With that he took my hand in his, from which I took comfort and quickly went in. But Lord, how glad and at ease I was! For everywhere I cast my eyes were trees clad, each according to its kind, with everlasting leaves in fresh color and green as emerald, a joy to behold: the builder oak, eke the hardy ash, the elm the pillar and the coffin for corpses, the boxwood for horns, the holly for whip-handles, the fir to bear sails, the cypress to mourn death, the yew the bowman, the aspen for smooth shafts, the olive of peace, the drunken vine, the victor palm, and the laurel for divination. 182

By a river in a green meadow, where there is at all points so much sweetness, I saw a garden, full of blossomy boughs, with white, blue, yellow and red flowers; and cold fountain-streams, not at all dead⁷, full of small shining fish with red fins and silver-bright scales. On every bough I heard the birds sing with the voice of angels in their melody. Some busied themselves to lead forth their young. The little bunnies hastened to play. Further on I noticed all about the timid roe, the buck, harts and hinds and squirrels and small beasts of gentle nature. I heard stringed instruments playing harmonies of such ravishing sweetness that God, Maker and Lord of all, never heard better, I believe. At the same time a wind, scarce could it have been gentler, made in the green leaves a soft noise which accorded with the song of the birds above. The air of that place was so

means that he seeks inspiration in an unorthodox way. Cf. *Hamlet*: "I am but mad north-northwest. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.396-97).

⁶ Two load-stones. Chaucer names these "adamantes," hard magnetic stones. The narrator is the image of indecision.

⁷ Not at all dead. I.e., teeming with life.

mild that never was there discomfort for heat or cold. Every wholesome spice and herb grew there, and no person could age or sicken. There was a thousand times more joy than man can tell. And it would never be night there, but ever bright day in every man's eye. 210

I saw Cupid our lord forging and filing his arrows under a tree beside a spring, and his bow lay ready at his feet. And meanwhile his daughter well tempered the arrow-heads in the spring, and by her cunning she piled them after as they should serve, some to slay, some to wound and pierce. Just then I was aware of Pleasure and of Fair Array and Courtesy and Joy and of Deception who has wit and power to cause a being to do folly--she was disguised, I deny it not. And under an oak, I believe, I saw Delight, standing apart with Gentle Breeding. I saw Beauty without any raiment; and Youth, full of sportiveness and jollity, Foolhardiness, Flattery, Desire, Message-sending and Bribery; and three others--their names shall not be told by me. 229

And upon great high pillars of jasper I saw a temple of brass strongly stand. About the temple many women were dancing ceaselessly, of whom some were beautiful themselves and some gay in dress; only in their kirtles they went, with hair unbound--that was forever their business, year by year. And on the temple I saw many hundred pairs of doves sitting, white and beautiful. Before the temple-door sat Lady Peace full gravely, holding back the curtain, and beside her Lady Patience, with pale face and wondrous discretion, sitting upon a mound of sand. Next to her were Promise and Cunning and a crowd of their followers within the temple and without. 245

Inside I heard a gust of sighs blowing about, hot as

fire, engendered of longing, which caused every altar to blaze ever anew. And well I saw then that all the cause of sorrows that lovers endure is through the bitter goddess Jealousy. As I walked about within the temple I saw the god Priapus⁸ standing in sovereign station, his scepter in hand, and in such attire as when the ass confounded him to confusion with its outcry by night. People were busily setting upon his head garlands full of fresh, new flowers of various colors. 259

In a private corner I found Venus, who was noble and stately in her bearing, sporting with her porter Riches. The place was dark, but in time I saw a little light--it could scarcely have been less. Venus reposed upon a golden bed until the hot sun should seek the west. Her golden hair was bound with a golden thread, but all untressed as she lay. And one could see her naked from the breast to the head; the remnant, in truth, was well covered to my pleasure with a filmy kerchief of Valence; there was no thicker cloth that could also be transparent. The place gave forth a thousand sweet odors. Bacchus, god of wine, sat beside her, and next was Ceres⁹, who saves all from hunger, and, as I said, the Cyprian woman lay in the midst; on their knees two young people were crying to her to be their helper. 279

But thus I left her lying, and further in the temple I saw how, in scorn of Diana¹⁰ the chaste, there hung on the wall many a broken bow of such maidens as had first wasted their time in her service. And everywhere was painted many stories, of which I shall touch on a few, such as Callisto and Atalanta¹¹ and many maidens whose name I do not know. There was also Semiramis¹², Candace¹³, Hercules¹⁴, Byblis¹⁵, Dido¹⁶, Thisbe and Pyramus¹⁷, Tristram and

⁸ Priapus. Phrygian god of fertility and gardens, son of Aphrodite by Dionysus or Hermes. He is said to have argued with an ass over the relative size of their genitalia. Naked, they compared themselves, only to find that the ass' "sceptre" was larger.

⁹ Ceres (Demeter). Goddess of grain, who gives the remedy for hunger.

¹⁰ Diana. Goddess of the Moon, the hunt, and chastity. He sees many boughs offered to Diana by women in hopes that they might remain virgins. But they have wasted their time in her service.

¹¹ Calyxte and Athalante. Callisto, favorite hunting companion of Artemis (Diana), duped and ravaged by Zeus, who disguised himself as Artemis, then transformed into a bear by Zeus (to hide her from his wife, Hera), Hera (out of jealousy), or Artemis (for breaking her vow of chastity). Atalanta, another virgin huntress, whose father, wanting only

sons, left her in the forest where she was raised by bears and hunters.

¹² Semiramis. Assyrian queen who built Babylon and conquered Persia and Egypt. Known for beauty, valor, and lust.

¹³ Candace. Queen of India who loved Alexander the Great.

¹⁴ Hercules. Great Greek hero, son of Zeus and Alcmena, accidentally killed by his wife Deianeira.

¹⁵ Biblis. Fell in love with her twin brother Caunus, but when she tells him, he departs, horrified. She went mad and searched for him, but is eventually transformed into a spring.

¹⁶ Dido. Queen of Carthage, lover of Aeneas (Trojan hero, later pre-founder of Rome), who killed herself when she saw him depart.

¹⁷ Thisbe, and Piramus. Star-crossed lovers who plan to meet at night at the tomb of King Ninus. Pyramus, discovering her blood-stained cloak in the mouth of a lioness (from

Isolt¹⁸, Paris¹⁹, Achilles²⁰, Helen²¹, Cleopatra²², Troilus²³, and Scylla²⁴, and the mother of Romulus²⁵ as well--all were portrayed on the other wall, and their love and by what plight they died. 294

When I had returned to the sweet and green garden that I spoke of, I walked forth to comfort myself. Then I noticed how there sat a queen who was exceeding in fairness over every other creature, as the brilliant summer sun passes the stars in brightness. This noble goddess Nature was set upon a flowery hill in a verdant glade. All her halls and bowers were wrought of branches according to the art and measure of Nature. 305

And there was not any bird that is created through procreation that was not ready in her presence to hear her and receive her judgment. For this was Saint Valentine's day²⁶, when every bird of every kind that men can imagine comes to this place to choose his mate. And they made an exceedingly great noise; and earth and sea and the trees and all the lakes were so full that there was scarcely room for me to stand, so full was the entire place. And just as Alan, in *The Complaint of Nature*²⁷, describes Nature in her features and attire, so might men find her in reality. 318

This noble empress, full of grace, bade every bird take his station, as they were accustomed to stand always on Saint Valentine's day from year to year. That is to say, the birds of prey were set highest, and then the little birds who eat, as nature inclines them, worms or other things of which I speak not; but water-fowls sat the lowest in the dale; and birds that live on seed sat upon the grass, so many that it was a marvel to see. 329

whom Thisbe has safely fled) kills himself because he believes that she has been eaten by the lioness; she kills herself for loss of him.

¹⁸ Tristram, Isolde. Famous lovers in the Arthurian tradition. Isolde, though married to king Mark, loves Tristram, who is Mark's most able and dedicated knight.

¹⁹ Paris. Trojan son of Priam; his abduction of Helen from her husband, the Greek King Menelaus, was the immediate cause of the Trojan War.

²⁰ Achilles. Brooding Greek hero, invulnerable except for his heel (by which his mother held him when she dipped him into the River Styx), who slew the Trojan champion Hector and dragged his body around the city. He died for the love of Polyxena.

²¹ Helen. See note on Paris above.

²² Cleopatra. Famous Egyptian queen, who died for the love of the Roman leader Antony.

²³ Troilus. Trojan son of Priam, brother to Hector and Paris,

There one could find the royal eagle, that pierces the sun with his sharp glance; and other eagles of lower race, of which clerks can tell. There was that tyrant with dun gray feathers, I mean the goshawk, that harasses other birds with his fierce ravening. There was the noble falcon, that with his feet grasps the king's hand; also the bold sparrow-hawk, foe of quails; the merlin, that often greedily pursues the lark. The dove was there, with her meek eyes; the jealous swan, that sings at his death; and the owl also, that forebodes death; the giant crane, with his trumpet voice; thieving chough; the prating magpie; the scornful jay; the heron, foe to eels; the false lapwing, full of trickery; the starling, that can betray secrets; the tame redbreast; the coward kite; the cock, timekeeper of little thorp; the sparrow, son of Venus; the nightingale, which calls forth the fresh new leaves; the swallow, murderer of the little bees which make honey from the fresh-hued flowers; the wedded turtle-dove, with her faithful heart; the peacock, with his shining angel-feathers; the pheasant, that scorns the cock by night; the vigilant goose; the cuckoo, ever unnatural; the popinjay, full of wantonness; the drake, destroyer of his own kind; the stork, that avenges adultery; the greedy, gluttonous cormorant; the wise raven and the crow, with voice of ill-boding; the ancient thrush and the wintry fieldfare. 364

What more shall I say? One might find assembled in that place before the noble goddess Nature birds of every sort in this world that have feathers and stature. And each by her consent worked diligently to choose or take graciously his lady or his mate. 371

But to the point: Nature held on her hand a formel²⁸

whose love affair with Criseyde is the topic for Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

²⁴ Scylla. Daughter of Nisus, king of Megara. For love, she helped Minos to defeat her own father, but Minos quickly leaves her.

²⁵ The mother of Romulus. Rhea Silvia or Ilia, a priestess of Diana who was raped in the forest by Mars. She bore the twins Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome.

²⁶ Saint Valentine's day. The first reference of this holiday in the English language.

²⁷ Alan, in *The Complaint of Nature*. Alain of Lille's work, which is a dramatized remedy for humankind's straying from the laws of Nature, inspires the remainder of this work, especially the following description of the allegorical figure of Nature. In both Chaucer and Alain the birds seem to arise from her gown.

²⁸ Formel. Female eagle.

eagle, the noblest in shape that she ever found among her works, the gentlest and goodliest; in her every noble trait so had its seat that Nature herself rejoiced to look upon her and to kiss her beak many times. Nature, vicar of the Almighty Lord, who has knit in harmony hot, cold, heavy, light, moist, and dry in exact proportions, began to speak in a gentle voice: "Birds, take heed of what I say; and for your welfare and to further your needs I will hasten as fast as I can speak. You well know how on Saint Valentine's day, by my statute and through my ordinance, you come to choose your mates, as I prick you with sweet pain, and then fly on your way. But I may not, to win this entire world, depart from my just order, that he who is most worthy shall begin. 392

"The tercel²⁹ eagle, the royal bird above you in degree, as you well know, the wise and worthy one, trusty, true as steel, which you may see I have formed in every part as pleased me best--there is no need to describe his shape to you--he shall choose first and speak as he will. And after him you shall choose in order, according to your nature, each as pleases you; and, as your chance is, you shall lose or win. But whichever of you love ensnares most, to him may God send her who sighs for him most sorely." 404

And at this she called the tercel and said, "My son, the choice is fallen to you. Nevertheless under this condition must be the choice of each one here, that his chosen mate will agree to his choice, whatsoever he be who would have her. From year to year this is always our custom. And whoever at this time can win grace has come here in blissful time!" 413

The royal tercel, with bowed head and humble appearance, delayed not and spoke: "As my sovereign lady, not as my spouse, I choose--and choose with will and heart and mind--the formel of so noble shape upon your hand. I am hers wholly and will serve her always. Let her do as she wishes, to let me live or die; I beseech her for mercy and grace, as my sovereign lady, or else let me die here presently. For surely I cannot live long in torment, for in my heart every vein is cut. Having regard only to my faithfulness, dear heart, have some pity upon my woe. And if I am found untrue to her, disobedient or willfully negligent, a boaster, or in time love elsewhere, I pray you this will be my doom: that I will be torn to pieces by these birds, upon that day when she should ever know me untrue to her or in my guilt unkind. And since no other loves her as well as

I, though she never promised me love, she ought to be mine by her mercy; for I can fasten no other bond on her. Never for any woe shall I cease to serve her, however far she may roam. Say what you will, my words are done." 441

Even as the fresh red rose newly blown blushes in the summer sun, so grew the color of this woman when she heard all this; she answered no word good or bad, so sorely was she abashed; until Nature said, "Daughter, fear not, be of good courage." 448

Then spoke another tercel of a lower order: "That shall not be. I love her better than you, by Saint John, or at least I love her as well, and have served her longer, according to my station. If she should love for long being to me alone should be the reward; and I also dare to say, if she should find me false, unkind, a prater, or a rebel in any way, or jealous, let me be hanged by the neck. And unless I bear myself in her service as well as my wit allows me, to protect her honor in every point, let her take my life and all the wealth I have." 462

Then a third tercel eagle said, "Now, sirs, you see how little time we have here, for every bird clamors to be off with his mate or lady dear, and Nature herself as well, because of the delay, will not hear half of what I would speak. Yet unless I speak I must die of sorrow. I boast not at all of long service; but it is as likely that I shall die of woe today as he who has been languishing these twenty winters. And it may well happen that a man may serve better in half a year, even if it were no longer, than another man who has served many years. I do not say this about myself, for I can do no service to my lady's pleasure; but I dare say that I am her truest man, I believe, and would be most glad to please her. In short, until death may seize me I will be hers, whether I wake or sleep, and true in all that heart can think." 483

In all my life since the day I was born never have I heard any man so noble make a plea in love or any other thing--even if a man had time and wit to rehearse their expression and their words. And this discourse lasted from the morning until the sun drew downward so rapidly. The clamor released by the birds rung so loud--"Make an end of this and let us go!"--that I well thought the forest would be splintered. They cried, "Make haste! Alas, you will ruin us! When shall your cursed pleading come to an end? How should a judge believe either side for yea

²⁹ Tercel. A male eagle.

or nay, without any proof?" 497

The goose, cuckoo and duck so loudly cried, "Kek, kek!", "Cuckoo!", "Quack, quack!" that the noise reverberated in my ears. The goose said, "All this is not worth a fly! But from this I can devise a remedy, and I will speak my verdict fair and soon, on behalf of the waterfowl. Let who will smile or frown." 504

"And I for the worm-eating fowl," said the foolish cuckoo; "of my own authority, for the common welfare, I will take the responsibility now, for it would be great charity to release us." 508

"By God, you may wait a while yet," said the turtle-dove. "If you are he to choose who shall speak, it would be as well for him to be silent. I am among the birds that eat seed, one of the most unworthy, and of little wit--that I know well. But a creature's tongue would be better quiet than meddling with such doings about which he knows neither rhyme nor reason. And whosoever does so, overburdens himself in foul fashion, for often one not entrusted to a duty commits offence." 518

Nature, who had always an ear to the murmuring of folly at the back, said with ready tongue, "Hold your peace there! And straightway, I hope, I shall find a counsel to let you go and release you from this noise. My judgment is that you shall choose one from each bird-folk to give the verdict for you all." 525

The birds all assented to this conclusion. And first the birds of prey by full election chose the tercel-falcon to define all their judgment, and decide as he wished. And they presented him to Nature and she accepted him gladly. The falcon then spoke in this fashion: "It would be hard to determine by reason which best loves this gentle woman; for each has such ready answers that none may be defeated by reasons. I cannot see of what avail are arguments; so it seems there must be battle." 539

"All ready!" then cried these tercel-eagles. 540

"Nay, sirs," said he, "if I dare say it, you do me wrong, my tale is not done. For, sirs, take it not amiss, I pray, it cannot go thus as you desire. Ours is the voice that has the charge over this, and you must stand by the judges' decision. Peace, therefore! I say that it would seem in my mind that the worthiest in knighthood, who has longest followed it, the highest in degree and of gentlest blood, would be most fitting for her, if she wish it. And of these three she knows

which he is, I believe, for that is easily seen." 553

The waterfowl put their heads together, and after short considering, when each had spoken his tedious gabble, they said truly, by one assent, how "the goose, with her gentle eloquence, who so desires to speak for us, shall say our say," and prayed God would help her. Then the goose began to speak for these waterfowl, and said in her cackling, "Peace! Now every man take heed and hearken what argument I shall put forth. My wits are sharp, I love no delay; I counsel him, I say, even if he were my brother, leave him if she will not love him." 567

"Lo here," said the sparrow-hawk, "a perfect argument for a goose--bad luck to her! Lo, thus it is to have a wagging tongue! Now, fool, it would be better for you to have held your peace than have shown your folly, by God! But to do thus rests not in her wit or will; for it is truly said, 'a fool cannot be silent.'" 574

Laughter arose from all the birds of noble kind; and straightway the seed-eating fowl chose the faithful turtle-dove, and called her to them, and prayed her to speak the sober truth about this matter, and asked her counsel. And she answered that she would fully show her mind. "Nay, God forbid a lover should change!" said the turtle-dove, and grew all red with shame. "Though his lady may be cold for evermore, let him serve her ever until he die. In truth I praise not the goose's counsel, for even if my lady died I would have no other mate, I would be hers until death take me." 588

"By my hat, well jested!" said the duck. "That men should love forever, without cause! Who can find reason or wit there? Does one who is mirthless dance merrily? Who should care for him who is carefree? Yea, quack!" said the duck loud and long, "God knows there are more stars than a pair." 595

"Now fie, churl!" said the noble falcon. "That thought came straight from the dunghill. You can not see when a thing is proper. You fare with love as owls with light; the day blinds them, but they see very well in darkness. Your nature is so low and wretched that you can not see or guess what love is." 602

Then the cuckoo thrust himself forward in behalf of the worm-eating birds, and said quickly, "So that I may have my mate in peace, I care not how long you contend. Let each be single all his life; that is my

counsel, since they cannot agree. This is my instruction, and there an end!"

"Yea," said the merlin, "as this glutton has well filled his paunch, this should suffice for us all! You murderer of the hedge-sparrow on the branch, the one who brought you up, you ruthless glutton! May you live unmated, you mangler of worms! It matters nothing to you, though your tribe may perish. Go, be a stupid fool, as long as the world lasts!" 616

"Peace now, I command here," said Nature, "For I have heard the opinions of all, and yet we are no nearer to our goal. But this is my final decision, that she herself shall have the choice of whom she wishes. Whosoever may be pleased or not, he whom she chooses shall have her straightway. For since it cannot here be debated who loves her best, as the falcon said, then will I grant her this favor, that she shall have him alone on whom her heart is set, and he her that has fixed his heart on her. This judgment I, Nature, make; and I cannot speak falsely, nor look with partial eye on any rank. But if it is reasonable to counsel you in choosing a mate, then surely I would counsel you to take the royal tercel, as the falcon said right wisely; for he is noblest and most worthy whom I created so well for my own pleasure; that ought to suffice you." 637

The formel answered with timid voice, "Goddess of nature, my righteous lady, true it is that I am ever under your rod, just as every other creature is, and I must be yours as long as my life may last. Therefore, grant me my first request, and straightway I will speak to you my mind." 644

"I grant it to you," said Nature; and this female eagle spoke immediately in this way: "Almighty queen, until this year comes to an end I ask respite, to take counsel with myself; and after that to have my choice free. This is all that I would say. I can say no more, even if you were to slay me. In truth, as yet I will in no manner serve Venus or Cupid" 653

"Now since it can happen no other way," Nature said then, "there is no more to be said here. Then I wish these birds to go their way each with his mate, so that they tarry here no longer." And she spoke to them

thus as you shall hear. "To you I speak, you tercel," said Nature. "Be of good heart, and continue in service, all three; a year is not so long to wait. And let each of you strive according to his degree to do well. For, God knows, she is departed from you this year; and whatsoever may happen afterwards, this interval is appointed to you all." 665

And when this work was all brought to an end, Nature gave every bird his mate by just accord, and they went their way. Ah, Lord! The bliss and joy that they made! For each of them took the other in his wings, and wound their necks about each other, ever thanking the noble goddess of nature. But first were chosen birds to sing, as was always their custom year by year to sing a roundel³⁰ at their departure, to honor Nature and give her pleasure. The tune, I believe, was made in France. The words were such as you may here find in these verses, as I remember them. 678

Qui bien aime a tard oublie³¹.

"Welcome, summer, with sunshine soft,
The winter's tempest you will break,
And drive away the long nights black! 682

Saint Valentine, throned aloft,
Thus little birds sing for your sake:
Welcome, summer, with sunshine soft,
The winter's tempest you will shake! 686

Good cause have they to glad them oft,
His own true-love each bird will take;
Blithe may they sing when they awake,
Welcome, summer, with sunshine soft,
The winter's tempest you will break,
And drive away the long nights black!" 692

And with the shouting that the birds raised, as they flew away when their song was done, I awoke; and I took up other books to read, and still I read always. In truth I hope so to read that some day I shall meet with something of which I shall fare the better. And so I will not cease to read. 699

*Explicit tractatus de Congregacione Volucrum die sancti Valentini tentum, secundum Galfridum Chaucers. Deo gracias.*³².

³⁰ Roundel. (Or Rondeau.) Form of short poetry, usually ten to thirteen lines, in which the opening phrase or line is repeated as a refrain in the second and third stanzas.

³¹ *Qui bien aime a tard oublie*. Who loves well forgets slowly. This line is included in some of the manuscripts of

PF. It seems to be a consolation to the three suitors, and it may also indicate the source of the roundel or tune.

³² *Expixit . . .gracias*. Here ends the work of the Parliament of Fowls held on the day of Saint Valentine, according to Geoffrey Chaucer. Thanks be to God.

Geoffrey Chaucer - The Parliament of Fowls

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Manuscript. The Parliament of Fowls. View images from this item (7). Information. Description. Ever wondered where the tradition of sending cards to your beloved on Valentine's Day comes from? You might imagine that there is something in the story of St Valentine that makes the day a special day for lovers. The idea that Valentine's Day is a day for lovers is thought to originate with Geoffrey Chaucer's Parliament of Fowls, a poem written in the late 14th century. It describes a group of birds which gather together in the early spring "on ~seynt valentynes day" to choose their mates for the year. It seems that the poem sparked a tradition. In 1477, Margery Brews, a Norfolk woman, wrote a letter to her cousin John Paston, calling him "my right well beloved Valentine".