The Parliament of Fowls

The life so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th’assay so sharp, so hard the conqueringe,
The dreadful joye alway that slit so yerne,
Al this mene I by Love, that my feelinge
Astonieth with his wonderful werkinge
So sore, ywis, that whan I on him thinke,
Nat woot I wel wher that I flete or sinke.
For al be that I knowe nat Love in deede,
Ne woot how that he quiteth folk hir hire,
Yit happeth me ful ofte in booke rede
Of his miracles and his cruel ire;
That rede I wel, he wold be lord and sire:
I dar nat sayn—his strokes been so sore—
But “God save swich a lord!”—I saye namore.

Of usage, what for lust and what for lore,
On booke rede I ofte, as I you tolde;
But wherfore that I speke al this: nat yore
Agoon it happe me for to biholde
Upon a book, was write with lettres olde;
And therupon, a certain thing to lerne,
The longe day ful faste I rede and yerne.

For out of olde feeldes, as men saith,
Cometh al this newe corn from yeer to yere;
And out of olde bookes, in good faith,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere.

But now to purpos as of this matere:
To rede forth so gan me to delite
That al that day me thoughte but a lite.

This book of which I make of mencioun
Entitled was al thus, as I shal telle:
“Tullius of the Dreem of Scipioun.”
Chapitres sevene it hadde, of hevene and helle

1. The Parliament of Fowls is one of Chaucer’s loveliest but most elusive poems. The form is that of a dream vision, in which the narrator is usually someone in search of love who dreams that he wakes into a May morning during which he has some kind of love experience. The narrator of the Parliament seems to be in search of love, but he is apparently disqualified in advance from ever attaining it. His poetic valentine is written, therefore, from the point of view of one who is a stranger to the very thing that a valentine is supposed to celebrate. Though hardly an enthusiastic tourist, he is granted a visit to a highly erotic temple of love, and then—with somewhat more enthusiasm—watches the process of the birds choosing their mates under the supervision of the goddess Nature. This incident promises to afford a more constructive idea of love than the stasis of the vision of the temple; but the fact is that the choosing of mates is held up most of the day by the argument of three male eagles asserting their right to obtain the same female. Only in the very last lines of the poem do the birds receive their mates, and the three eagles get none. The frustration which seems a part of the dreamer’s nature and which makes itself felt in the lovely paralysis of the temple infects in a different way the lively business of the birds’ parliament. Love remains a mystery to the frustrated narrator, but a mystery with its own manifold frustrations.

2. Slides, slips away.
3. Is astonished.
4. I.e., anything but.
5. I.e., little while.
6. I.e., (Macrobius’s edition of) Marcus Tullius Cicero on the dream of Scipio; Macrobius’s commentary on Cicero’s work was the great source of medieval dream lore.
And erthe, and soules that therinne dwelle;  
Of which as shortly as I can it trete,  
Of his sentence I wol you sayn the grete:  

First telleth it when Scipion was come  
In Affrike, how he meeteth Masinisse,  
That him for joye in armes hath ynome:  
Thanne telleth he hir speeche, and of the blisse  
That was bitwixe hem til that day gan misse;  
And how his auncestre Africann, so dere  
Gan in his sleep that night to him appere.

Thanne telleth it that from a sterry place  
How Africann hath him Cartage shewed,  
And warned him biforn of al his grace,  
And saide what man, lered other lewed,  
That loved commune profit, wel ythewed,  
He sholde into a blisful place wende,  
Ther as joye is that last withouten ende.

Thanne axed he if folk that now been dede  
Han lif and dwelling in another place;  
And Africann saide, “Ye, withouten drede,  
And that our present worldes lives space  
Nis but a manere deeth, what way we trace.1  
And rightful folk shul goon after they die  
To hevene”; and shewed him the Galaxye.

Thanne shewed he him the litel erthe that here is,  
At regard of the hevenes quantitee;  
And after shewed he him the nine speres;  
And after that the melodye herde he  
That cometh of thilke speres thries three,  
That welle is of musik and melodye  
In this world here, and cause of armonye.

Thanne bad he him, sin erthe was so lite,  
And deceivable, and ful of harde grace,  
That he ne sholde him in the world delite.  
Thanne tolde he him in certain yeres space  
That every sterre sholde come into his place,  
Ther it was first, and al sholde out of minde  
That in this world is doon of al mankinde.

Thanne prayed him Scipion to telle him al  
The way to come into that hevene blisse;  
And he saide, “Know thyself first immortal,  
And looke ay bisily thou werke and wisse  
To commune profit, and thou shalt nat misse

8. Come to an end.  
9. Scipio Africanus Major, the famous antagonist of Hannibal.

1. Is nothing but a kind of death, whatever path we follow.  
2. In comparison to.  
3. Those same.
To comen swiftly to this place dere,
That ful of blisse is, and of soules clere.

But brekeres of the lawe, sooth to sayne,
And likerous⁵ folk, after that they been dede⁶
lecherous / dead

Thanne shal they comen into this blisful place,
To which to comen, God sende thee his grace.”

The day gan folwen and the derke night,
That reveth⁷ beestes from hir bisinessse,⁸
anxiety

Birafte me my book for lak of light,
And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,⁹
prepare

Fulfild of thought and bisy⁹ hevinesse:
filled / anxious

For bothe I hadde thing which that I nolde,⁶
And eek I nadde⁷ that thing that I wolde.

But finally my spirit at the laste,
Forwery⁸ of my labour al the day,

And in my sleep I mette,⁹ as that I lay,
dreamed

How Affrican, right in the same array
That Scipion him saw bifore that tide,⁹
time

Was come, and stood right at my beddes side.

The very hunter, sleeping in his bed,
To wode⁹ ayain his minde gooth anoon;
wood

The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;
Fights / foes

The riche, of gold; the knight fight⁹ with his foon;

The sike met⁹ he drinketh of the tonne;

The lover met he hath his lady wonne.

Can I nat sayn if that the cause were
For I hadde red of Affrican biforn,

That made me to mete⁹ that he stood there:
dream

But thus saide he: “Thou hast thee so wel born⁹
behaved

In looking of myn olde book totorn,⁹
tattered

Of which Macrobe⁴ roughte⁹ nat a lite,⁹
cared / little

That somdeel⁹ of thy labour wolde I quite.”⁹

Cytherea,⁷ thou blisful lady sweete,
Venus

That with thy firbrand daunttest whom thee lest,²

And madest me this swevene⁶ for to mete,
dream

Be thou myn help in this, for thou maist best;
surely

As wisly⁶ as I sawgh thee north-north-west

When I bigan my swevene for to write,
give

So yif⁶ me might to ryme and eek t’endite.

4. I.e., until.
5. Takes away.
6. Didn’t want.
7. Didn’t have.
8. Tired out.
9. Tun, i.e., vessel of medicinal liquid.
1. See note to line 31, above.
This forsaide Affrican me hente\textsuperscript{o} anoon,  
And forth with him unto a gate broughte,  
Right of a park walled with greene stoon,  
And over the gates with lettres large ywroughte  
Ther were vers ywriten, as me thoughte,  
On either side, of ful greet difference,  
Of which I shal now sayn the plein\textsuperscript{o} sentence:\textsuperscript{o}  

“Thurgh me men goon into that blissful place  
Of hertes hele\textsuperscript{o} and deedly\textsuperscript{o} wounds cure;  
Thurgh me men goon unto the welle\textsuperscript{o} of grace,  
Ther greene and lusty May shal evere endure:  
This is the way to al good aventure;  
Be glad, thou redere,\textsuperscript{3} and thy sorwe of-caste;\textsuperscript{3}  
Al open am I: passe in, and speed thee faste.”

And forth with him unto a gate broughte,  
Right of a park walled with greene stoon,  
And over the gates with lettres large ywroughte  
Ther were vers ywriten, as me thoughte,  
On either side, of ful greet difference,  
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Ther greene and lusty May shal evere endure:  
This is the way to al good aventure;  
Be glad, thou redere,\textsuperscript{3} and thy sorwe of-caste;\textsuperscript{3}  
Al open am I: passe in, and speed thee faste.”

Thurgh me men goon,” thanne spak that other side,  
“Unto the mortal strokes of the spere  
Of which Desdain and Daunger\textsuperscript{o} is the gide,  
That nevere yit shal fruit ne leves bere;  
This streem you ledeth to the sorweful were\textsuperscript{o}  
Ther as the fissh in prison is al drye:  
Th’eschewing\textsuperscript{o} is only the remedyé.”

Thise vers\textsuperscript{o} of gold and blak ywriten were,  
Of whiche I gan astonied\textsuperscript{4} to biholde,  
Forwhy\textsuperscript{2} that oon encreassed ay my fere,  
And with that other gan myn herte bolde.\textsuperscript{4}  
That oon me hette,\textsuperscript{o} that other dide me colde:\textsuperscript{5}  
No wit\textsuperscript{o} hadde I, for errour,\textsuperscript{o} for to chese\textsuperscript{o}  
To entre or fleen, or me to save or lese.?  
Right as bitwixen adamantes\textsuperscript{o} two  
Of evene might, a pece of iren set  
Ne hath no might to meve\textsuperscript{o} to ne fro—  
For what that oon may hale,\textsuperscript{o} that other let\textsuperscript{o}—  
Ferde\textsuperscript{2} I, that niste\textsuperscript{6} whether me was bet\textsuperscript{o}  
To entre or leve, til Affrican my gide  
Me hente,\textsuperscript{o} and shoof\textsuperscript{o} in at the gates wide,  
And saide, “It stant\textsuperscript{o} writen in thy face  
Thyn errour, though thou telle it nat to me;  
But dreed thee nat to come into this place,  
For this writing nis no thing ment by thee.  
Ne by noon but\textsuperscript{o} he Loves servant be;  
For thou of love hast lost thy tast, I gesse,  
As sik man hath of sweete and bitternesse.  

But nathelees, although that thou be dul,  
Yit that thou canst nat do, yit maist thou see;  

3. Cast off.  
4. Become bold.  
5. Caused me to cool.  
6. I.e., power to come to a decision.  
7. Bring to ruin.  
For many a man that may nat stonde a pul, 9
It liketh him at wrestling for to be,
And deemen o yit wher he do bet or he.  judge / whether
And ther, if thou haddest conning for t’endite,
I shal thee shewe materre for to write.”

With that myn hand he took in his anoon,
Of which I confort caughte, and that as faste;
But Lord, so I was glad and wel bigoon, 1
For overal wher that I mine yen caste
Were trees clad with leves that ay shal laste,
Eech in his kinde, of colour fressh and greene
As emeraude, that joye was to seene.

The bildere oook, and eek the hardy assh;
The pilere elm, the cofre unto caraine;
The boxtree pipere; holm to whippes lassh;
The sailing firre; the cypres, deeth o to plaine; 2
The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes plaine;
The olive of pees; and eek the dronke vine;
The victour palm; the lauer to divine.

A gardin saw I ful of blosmy boughes
Upon a river in a greene mede, 3
Ther as the swetnesse everemore ynough is,
With flowres white, blewe, and yelowe, and rede,
And colde welle-stremes no thing dede, 4
That swimmen ful of smale fisshes lighte,
With finnes rede, and scales silver-brighte.

On every bough the briddes o herde I singe 5
With vois of angel in hir armonye;
Some bisied hem hir briddes forth to bringe.
The litel conies o to hir play gonne hie; 6
And ferther al aboute I gan espye
The dredful o ro, the buk, the hert, the hinde,
Squireles, and beestes smale of gentil kinde.

Of instruments of stringes in accord
Herde I so playe a ravisshing swetnesse
That God, that Makere is of al and Lord,
Ne herde nevere bettre, as I gesse.
Therwith a wind, unnethe it mighte be lesse, 7
Made in the leves greene a noise softe
Accordant to the briddes song alofte.

The air of that place so attempre was
That nevere was grevance of hoot o ne cold;
the holm for whips; the fir for masts; the cypress, associated with death; the yew for bows; the aspen for arrow-shafts; the olive, associated with peace; the vine with drunkenness; the palm with victory; and the laurel, used in augury.

3. I.e., stagnant
4. In tune with.

9. I.e., engage in wrestling.
1. Joyous.
2. The trees in this stanza are characterized by their traditional functions, real or symbolic: the oak for building; the asp wherever hardwood is required; the elm used both for posts and coffins; the boxtree from which musical pipes are made;
Ther weex° eek every hoolsom spice and gras: grew
No man may there waxe sik ne old.
Yit was ther joye more than a thousandfold
Than man can telle; ne nevere wolde it nighte,°
But ay cler day to any mannes sighte.

Under a tree biside a welle° I sey° spring / saw
Cupide oure lord his arwes forge and file;
And at his feet his bowe al redy lay,
And Wil his doughter tempered al this while
The hevedes° in the welle, and with hir wile° skill
She couched hem after they sholde serve,°
Some for to slee,° and some to wounde and kerve.° slay / cut

Tho was I war of Plesance anoonright,
And of Array, and Lust,° and Curteisye, desire
And of the Craft that can and hath the might
To doon° by force a wight to doon° folye: cause
Disfigurat was she, I nil nat lie.
And by hemself under an oon, I gesse, Saw I Delit that stood by Gentilesse.

I saw Beautee withouten any attir,
And Youthe ful of game and jolitee,
Foolhardinesse, and Flaterye, and Desir,
Messagerye, and Meede, and other three— eight
Hir names shal nat here be told for° me; by
And upon pileres grete of jaspe longe
I saw a temple of bras yfounded stronge.

Aboute that temple daunceden alway
Wommen ynowe,° of whiche some ther were enough
Faire of hemself, and some of hem were gay;
In kirteles al dischevele° wente they there:
That was hir office° alway, yeer by yere. duty
And on the temple of douves° white and faire
doves
Saw I sittinge many an hundred paire.

Bifore the temple-dore ful sobrly
curtain
Dame Pees sat with a curtin° in hir hond,
And by hir side, wonder discreetly,
Dame Pacience sitting ther I found,°
With face pale, upon an hil of sond;° found sand
And aldernexti withinne and eek withoute

Biheeste and Art, and of hir folk a route.°

and a number of others.
1. Next of all.
2. Promise and Subtlety, and of their people a number.
Within the temple of sikes\(^9\) hote as fir
I herde a swough\(^3\) that gan aboute renne,\(^9\)
Whiche sikes were engendred with desir,
That maden every auter\(^9\) for to brenne\(^9\)
Of newe flaumbe;\(^2\) and wel espied I thenne
That al the cause of sorwes that they drie\(^9\)
Cometh of the bittre goddesse Jalousye.

The god Priapus\(^4\) saw I, as I wente,
Within the temple in soverain place stonde,
In swich array as whan the asse him shente\(^5\)
With cry by night, and with his sceptre in honde;
Ful bisily men gonne assaye and fonde\(^6\)
Upon his heed\(^9\) to sette, of sondry hewe,
Gerlandes ful of flowres fresshe and newe.

And in a privee corner in disport
Foond\(^9\) I Venus and hir porter Richesse,
That was ful noble and hautain\(^9\) of hir port;
Derk was the place, but afterward lightnesse
I saw a lite\(^9\)—unnethe\(^9\) it mighte be lesse;
And on a bed of gold she lay to reste,
Til that the hote sonne gan to weste.\(^7\)

Hire gilte heres with a golden threed\(^9\)
Ybounden were, untressed\(^9\) as she lay;
And naked from the brest up to the heed
Men mighte hire seen; and soothly for to say,
The remenant was wel covered to my pay\(^9\)
Right with a subtil coverchief of Valence:
Ther nas no thikker cloth of no defence.\(^8\)

The place yaf a thousand savours soote,\(^9\)
And Bacus,\(^9\) god of win, sat hire biside,
And Ceres next that dooth of hunger boote,\(^9\)
And as I saide, amiddes lay Cypride,\(^9\)
To whom on knees two yonge folk ther cride
To been hir\(^9\) help; but thus I leet hire lie,
And ferther in the temple I gan espye,

That, in despit of Diane the chaste,\(^1\)
Ful many a bowe ybroke heeng\(^9\) on the wal,
Of maidenes swiche as gonne\(^5\) hir times waste
In hir service; and painted overal
Ful many a storye, of which I touche shal

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3. Murmuring sound.
4. A fertility god depicted with a large sexual organ; see line 256, below.
5. Abashed: Priapus’s assault on the chastity of a certain nymph was frustrated when she was awakened by the cry of an ass.
6. Endeavor and strive.
7. Go west.
8. I.e., there was no thicker cloth (than the thin kerchief made in Valence) to defend her from sight.
9. Allays hunger: Ceres was the goddess of vegetation.
1. Diana was goddess of chastity.
A fewe, as of Caliste and Atalante,²
And many a maide of which the name I wante.⁰

Semiramis, Candace, and Ercules,⁰
Biblis, Dido, Thisbe, and Pyramus,
Tristam, Isoude,⁰ Paris, and Achilles,
Elaine,³ Cleopatre, and Troilus,
Sylla,⁰ and eek the moder⁴ of Romulus:
Alle thise were painted on that other side,
And al hir love, and in what plit⁰ they they dye.

When I was come ayain unto the place
That I of spak, that was so soote⁰ and greene,
Forth welk⁰ I tho⁰ myselven to solace;
Tho was I war⁰ wher that ther sat a queene,
That as of light the someres sonne sheene⁰
Passeth⁰ the sterre,⁰ right so over⁰ mesure
She fairer was than any creature.

And in a launde⁰ upon an hil of flowres
Was set this noble goddesse Nature;
Of braunches were hir halles and hir bowres,
Ywrought after hir cast⁰ and hir mesure;⁰
Ne was ther fowl that cometh of engendrure⁰
That they ne were alle prest⁰ in hir presence
To take hir doom,⁰ and yive hire audience.

For this was on Saint Valentines day,
Whan every brid⁰ cometh ther to chese⁰ his make;⁰
Of evry kinde that men thinke may;
And that so huge a noise gan they make,
That erthe and air and tree and every lake
So ful was that unnethe⁰ was ther space
For me to stonde, so ful was al the place.

And right as Alain⁵ in the “Plainte of Kinde”
Deviseth⁰ Nature in array and face,
In swich array men mighte hire there finde.
This noble emperesse,⁰ ful of grace,
Bad every fowl to take his owene place,
As they were wont alway, from yeer to yere,
Saint Valentines Day, to stonden there.

That is to sayn, the fowles of ravine⁰
Were hyest set, and thanne the fowles smale
That eten as hem Nature wolde encline.
As worm, or thing of which I telle no tale;
And waterfowl sat lowest in the dale;

2. Callisto, Atalanta, and the others named in the following stanza were famous lovers.
3. Helen of Troy.
4. Mother, i.e., Rhea Sylvia.
5. Alanus de Insulis, whose medieval Latin poem the Complaint of Nature personifies Nature much as Chaucer does.
But fowl that liveth by seed sat on the greene,  
And that so fele\textsuperscript{\textdegree} that wonder was to seene.  

\texttt{330} Ther mighte men the royal egle finde,  
That with his sharpe look perceth\textsuperscript{\textdegree} the sonne;  
And othere egles of a lower kinde  
Of whiche that clerkes wel devise\textsuperscript{\textdegree} conne;  
Ther was the tyrant with his fetheres donne\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
And greye—I mene the goshawk—that dooth pine\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
To briddes for his outrageous ravine.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  

The gentil faucon that with his feet distrainteth\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The kinges hand; the hardy sperhawk\textsuperscript{\textdegree} eke,  
The quails fo; the merlion\textsuperscript{\textdegree} of the paineth\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
Himself ful ofte the larke for to seeke;  
Ther was the douve\textsuperscript{\textdegree} with hir \texty\textsuperscript{meeke};  
The jalous swan, ayains\textsuperscript{\textdegree} his deeth that singeth;  
The owle eek that of deeth the bode\textsuperscript{\textdegree} bringeth;  

The crane, geant\textsuperscript{\textdegree} with his trompes\textsuperscript{\textdegree} soun;  
The thief, the chough\textsuperscript{\textdegree} and eek the jangling\textsuperscript{\textdegree} pie;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The scorning jay; the eelles fo, heroun;  
The false lapwing, ful of trecherye;  
The starling that the conseil\textsuperscript{\textdegree} can biwrye;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The tame rodok,\textsuperscript{\textdegree} and the coward kite;  

The cok, that orlogge\textsuperscript{\textdegree} is of thropes lite;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The sparwe,\textsuperscript{\textdegree} Venus sone; the nightingale,  
That clepeth\textsuperscript{\textdegree} forth the greene leves newe;  
The swalme,\textsuperscript{\textdegree} mortherere\textsuperscript{\textdegree} of the fowles smale\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
That maken hony of flowres fresshe of hewe;  
The wedded turtel,\textsuperscript{\textdegree} with hir herte trewe;  
The pecok, with his angeles clothes brighte;  
The fesant, scornere of the cok by nighte;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  

The wakere\textsuperscript{\textdegree} goos; the cokkou evere unkinde;  
The popinjay ful of delicasey;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The drake, stroyere\textsuperscript{\textdegree} of his owene kinde;  
The stork, the wrekere of avouterye;\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  
The hote\textsuperscript{\textdegree} cornerant of glotonye;  
The raven wis; the crowe with vois of care;  
The throstel\textsuperscript{\textdegree} old; the frosty feeldefare.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}  

6. Takes hold on; falcons, being royal birds, are  
often pictured perched on the hands of kings. The  
qualities and behavior assigned to this and the  
other birds in these four stanzas are evidently tra-  
ditional, but in some cases the appropriateness of  
the assignment is obscure.  
7. At the coming of.  
8. A kind of crow.  
9. Ruddock, European robin.  
1. Little villages.  
2. I.e., bees.  
3. The pheasant scorns the rooster perhaps  
because the pheasant is supposed to be capable of  
mating with domestic hens.  
4. Wakener: geese are reputed to have awakened  
Rome against a stealthy barbarian attack. The  
cuckoo is unkind—unnatural—because it deposits  
its eggs in the nests of other birds.  
5. Destroyer: drakes sometimes kill their young.  
6. Avenger of adultery: storks were supposed to  
kill their adulterous mates.  
7. Hot: the ravenous cormorant is thought of as  
burning from its own glutony.  
8. Fieldfare, another kind of thrush.
What sholde I sayn? Of fowles every kinde
That in this world hath fetheres and stature, standing
Men mighten in that place assembled finde,
Before the noble goddesse Nature;
And everich of hem dide his bisy cure
Benignely to chese or for to take,
By hir accord, his formel or his make.

But to the point: Nature heeld on hir hond
A formel egle, of shap the gentileste
That evere she among hir werkes foond,

The most benigne and the goodlieste:
In hire was every vertu at his reste,
So ferforth that Nature hirself hadde blisse
To looke on hire, and ofte hir beek to kisse.

Nature, vicarye of the Almighty Lord
That hoot, cold, hevy, light, and moist and drye
Hath knit with evene nombres of accord,
In esy vois gan for to speke and saye,
"Fowles, take heede of my sentence, I praye;
And for youre ese, in forthering of youre neede,
As faste as I may speke, I wol you speede.

Ye knowe wel how, Saint Valentines Day,
By my statut and thurgh my governaunce,
Ye come for to chese—and flee youre way—
Youre makes as I prike you with plesaunce.

But nathelees, my rightful ordinaunce
May I nat breke, for al this world to winne,
That he that most is worthy shal biginne.

The tercelet egle, as that ye knowe ful weel,
The fowl royal aboven every degree,
The wise and worthy, secree, trewe as steel,
Which I have formed, as ye may wel see,
In every part as it best liketh me—
It needeth nat his shap you to devise—
He shal first chese and spoken in his gise.

And after him by ordre shul ye chese,
After youre kinde, everich as you liketh,
And as your hap is shul ye winne or lose—
But which of you that love most entriketh,
God sende him hire that sorest for him siketh."

And therwithal the tercel gan she calle,
And saide, “My sone, the chois is to you falle.

1. Female eagle or hawk.
2. i.e., at home.
3. To such an extent.
4. Prick, inspire.
5. Male eagle.
But natheles, in this condicioun
Moot\(^6\) be the chois of everich that is here:
That she agree to his eleccioun,
What so he be that sholde be hir fere.\(^6\)
This is oure usage alway, from yeer to yere:
And who so may at this time have his grace,
In blisful time he cam into this place.\(^6\)

With heed enclined and with humble cheere
This royal tercel spak and taried nought:
“Unto my soverein lady, and nat my fere,
I chese, and chese with wil and herte and thought,
The formel on your hand, so wel ywrought,
Whos I am al, and evere wil hire serve,
Do what hire list to do\(^6\) me live or sterve;\(^6\)

Biseeking hire of mercy and of grace,
As she that is my lady sovereine—
Or lat me die present in this place:
For certes, longe I may nat live in paine,
For in myn herte is corven\(^6\) every veine;
And having reward\(^6\) only to my trouthe,
My dere herte, have of my wo som routhe.\(^6\)

And if that I to hire be founde untrewe,
Disobeisant,\(^6\) or wilful neglectful,
Avauntour,\(^6\) or in proces\(^6\) love a newe,
I praye to you, this by my juggement:
That with thise fowles be I al torent\(^6\)
That ilke\(^6\) day that evere she me finde
To hire untrewe, or in my gilt\(^6\) unkinde.

And sin\(^6\) that hire loveth noon so wel as I—
Al be that she me nevere of love bihette\(^6\)—
Thanne oughte she be myn thurgh hir mercy,
For other bond can I noon on hire knette;\(^6\)
Ne nevere for no wo ne shal I lette\(^6\)
To serven hire, how fer\(^6\) so that she wende;
Saye what you list: my tale is at an ende.”

Right as the fresshe, rede rose newe
Ayain\(^7\) the somer sonne coloured is,
Right so for shame al waxen\(^6\) gan the hewe
Of this formel, whan she herde al this.
She neither answerde wel, ne saiende amis,
So sore abasshed was she, til that Nature
Saide, “Doughter, drede you nought, I you assure.”

Another tercel egle spak anoon,
Of lower kinde, and saiende, “That shal nat be!
I love hire bet\(^6\) than ye doon, by saint John,

Or at the leeste I love as wel as ye,
And longere have served hire in my degree:
And if she sholde have loved for long loving,
To me ful longe hadde be the guerdoning.

I dar eek sayn, if she me finde fals,
Unkinde, or janglere, or rebel in any wise,
Or jalous, do me hangen by the hals;
And but I bere me in hir servise
As wel as that my wit can me suffise,
From point to point, hir honour for to save,
Take ye my lif, and al the good I have."

The thridde tercel egle answerde tho:
"Now, sires, ye seen the litel leiser here,
For every fowl crieth out to been ago
Forth with his make, or with his lady dere;
And eek Nature hirself ne wol nat heere,
For tarying here, nat half that I wolde saye;
And but I spoke, I moot for sorwe deye:
Of long service avaunte I me no thing—
But as possible is me to die today
For wo, as he that hath been languisshing
This twenty yeer; and as wel happen may
A man may serven bet, and more to pay
In half a yeer, although it were no more,
Than som man dooth that hath served ful yore.

I saye nat this by me, for I ne can
Doon no service that may my lady plese;
But I dar sayn I am hir trewest man,
As to my doom, and fainest wolde hire ese;
At shorte wordes, til that deeth me sese,
I wil been hires, whether I wake or winke,
And trewe in al that herte may bithinke."

Of al my lif, sin that day I was born,
So gentil plee in love or other thing
Ne herde nevere no man me biforn,
Who that hadde leiser and conning
For to reherce hir cheere and hir speking:
And from the morwe gan this speeche laste,
Til downward drow the sonne wonder faste.

The noise of fowles for to been delivered
So loude roong: "Have doon, and lat us wende!"
That wel wende I the wode hadde al tosilvered.

8. I.e., long ago.
9. Have me hanged by the neck.
1. To greater pleasure.
2. Most gladly.
3. Fallen to pieces.
“Come of!” they criden, “allas, ye wole us shende.”

Whan shal youre cursed pleting have an ende?
How sholde a juge either partye leve,
For ye or nay, withouten other preve?

The goos, the cokkou, and the doke also
So cride, “Kek kek, cokkou, quek quek,” hye
That thurgh mine eres the noise wente tho.

The goos saide, “Al this nis nat worth a flye!
But I can shape herof a remedye:
And I wol saye my verdit faire and swithe:
For waterfowl, who so be wroth or blithe.”

“And I for wormfowl,” quod the fool cokkou.
“For commune speed, take on me the charge now:
For to delivere us is greet charitee.”

“I am a seedfowl, oon the unworthieste,
That woot I wel, and litel of conninge;
But bet is that a wightes tonge reste better
Than entremetten him of swich doinge
Of which he neither rede can ne singe.
And who so dooth, ful foule himself accloyeth:
For office uncommitted ofte anoyeth.”

Nature, which that alway hadde an ere
To murmur of the lewednesse bihinde,
With facound vois saide, “Holde youre tonges there,
And I shal soone, I hope, a conseil finde
You to delivere, and from this noise unbinde;
I jugge of every folk men shul oon calle
To sayn the verdit for you fowles alle.”

Assented was to this conclusioun
The briddes alle; and fowles of ravine
Han chosen first, by plain eleccioun,
The tercelet of the faucon to diffine
Al hir sentence, as hem liste to termine;
And to Nature him gonne to presente,
And she accepteth him with glad entente.

The tercelet saide thanne, “In this manere
Ful hard were it to preve by resoun

4. A person may speak who had better have remained quiet (?).
5. I.e., one of.
7. Interfere in.
8. I.e., to the complaining of the unsophisticated birds in the distance.
Who loveth best this gentil formel here,
For everich hath swich replicacioun,\(^2\)
That noon by skiles\(^6\) may been brought adown.
I can nat see that arguments availe:
Thanne seemeth it ther moste\(^5\) be bataile."

"Al redy," quod thise egles tercels tho.\(^\circ\)
"Nay, sires," quod he, "if that I dorste it saye,
Ye doon me wrong, my tale is nat ydo.
For sires, ne taketh nat agrief,\(^9\) I praye,
It may nat goon as ye wolde in this waye:
Oure\(^9\) is the vois that han the charge\(^9\) on honde,
And to the juges doom\(^9\) ye moten\(^9\) stonde.
And therfore, pees; I saye, as to my wit,
Me wolde thinke\(^3\) how that the worthieste
Of knighthood, and lengest hath used it,\(^4\)
Most\(^6\) of estaat, of blood the gentileste,
Were sittingest\(^5\) for hire, if that hire leste;
And of thse three she woot hirself, I trowe,
Which that he be, for hire is light\(^6\) to knowe."
The waterfowles han hir hedes laid
Togidre; and of a short avisement,\(^\circ\)
Whan everich hadde his large golee\(^9\) said,
They saiden soothly, alle by oon assent,
How that the goos, with hir facounde gent,\(^7\)
"That so desireth to pronounce oure neede
Shal telle oure tale," and prayed God hire speede.

As for thse waterfowles tho bigan
The goos to speke, and in hir cakelinga
She saide, "Pees, now take keep,\(^9\) every man,
And herkneth which\(^6\) a reson I shal bringe:
My wit is sharp, I love no taryinge.
I saye, I rede\(^9\) him, though he were my brother,
But\(^9\) she wil love him, lat him take another."

"Lo, here a parfit\(^6\) resoun of a goos,"
Quod the sperhawk. "Nevere mote\(^6\) she thee!\(^o\)
Lo, swich it is to have a tonge loos!
Now pardee, fool, now were it bet\(^9\) for thee
Han holde thy pees than shewe thy nicetee.\(^9\)
It lith\(^9\) nat in his might ne in his wille,
But sooth is said, a fool can nat be stille."
The laughtre aroos of gentil fowles alle,
And right anoon the seedfowl chosen hadde
The parliament of owls

8. Would want: the turtle-dove, a female, is apparently quoting a sentimental bit of verse appropriate for a male.
1. I.e., in good condition.
2. I.e., to be recorded.
3. The hedge-sparrow has reared (brought forth) the cuckoo because the egg from which the cuckoo was hatched was placed in the hedge-sparrow's nest.
4. I.e., for it doesn't matter if your line dies out.
“Now pees,” quod Nature, “I comande heer,
For I have herd al youre opinioun,
And in effect yit be we nevere the neer."  

But finally, this is my conclusioun:
That she hirself shal han the eleccioun
Of whom hire list; and who be wroth or blithe,
Him that she cheseth° he shal hire have as swithe.  

For sin° it may nat here discussed be
Who loveth hire best, as saith the tercelet,
Thanne wol I doon hire this favour, that she
Shal have right him on whom hir herte is set,
And he hire that his herte hath on hire knet.°
Thus jugge I, Nature, for I may nat lie:
To noon estaat have I noon other yë.°

But as for conseil° for to chese a make,
If I were Reson, certes thanne wolde I
Conseile you the royal tercel take—
As saide the tercelet ful skilfully—
As for the gentileste and most worthy,
Which I have wrought so wel to my plesaunce
That to you oughte it been a suffisaunce.”°

With dredful vois the formel tho° answerde,
“Myn rightful lady, goddesse of Nature,
Sooth is that I am evere under youre yerde,°
As is another lives° creature,
And moot° been youre° whil that my lif may dure;°
And therfore, graunteth me my first boone.°
And myn entente you wol I sayn wel soone.”°

“I graunte it you,” quod she. And right anoon
This formel egle spak in this degree:
“Almighty queene, unto° this yeer be goon,
I axe° respit for to avise me,°
And after that to have my chois al free:
This al and som that I wol speke and saye:
Yet gete namore although ye do me deye.°

I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide
Forsoothe, as yit, by no manere waye.”°
“Now, sin° it may noon otherwise bitide,”°
Quod tho Nature, “here is namore to saye.
Thanne wolde I that thise fowles were awaye,
Eech with his make,° for tarying lenger here,”°
And saide hem thus, as ye shul after heere.

5. At once.
6. I.e., I take no other consideration into account.
7. I.e., that it ought to be enough for you.
8. I.e., any other living.
9. Think it over.
10. Put me to death.
"To you speke I, you tercelets," quod Nature.

660 “Beeth of good herte, and serveth alle three:
A yeer is nat so longe to endure,
And eech of you paine him² in his degree
For to do wel; for God woot, quit² is she
Fro you this yeer, what after so bifalle:

665 This entremes⁰ is dressed⁰ for you alle.”

And whan this werk al brought was to an ende,
To every fowl Nature yaf his make
By eve ne accord, and on hir way they wende.
But Lord, the blisse and joye that they make,
For eech gan other in his winges take,
And with hir nekkes eech gan other winde,
Thanking alway the noble queen of Kinde.⁰

670 But first were chosen fowles for to singe—
As yeer by yere was alway the usaunce⁰
to singe a roundel at hir departinge,
To doon to Nature honour and plesaunce.
The note,⁰ I trowe, ymaked was in Fraunce;
The wordes were swiche as ye may here finde
The nexte vers, as I now have in minde.

680 “Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast thise wintres wedres⁰ overshake,⁰
And driven away the large nightes blake.
Saint Valentin, that art ful heigh on loft,
Thus singen smale fowles for thy sake:

685 Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast thise wintres wedres overshake,
And driven away the large nightes blake.

Wel han they cause for to gladen ofte,
Sith⁰ eech of hem recovered hath his make;

690 Ful blisful mowe⁰ they singe whan they wake:
Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast thise wintres wedres overshake,
And driven away the large nightes blake.”

And with the shouting, whan the song was do,
That fowles maden at hir flight away,
I wook, and othere bookes took me to

695 To rede upon; and yit I rede alway,
In hope, ywis⁰ to rede so somday,
That I shal mete⁰ something for to fare
The bet;⁰ and thus to rede I nil nat spare.

ca. 1380