Parliament of Fowls

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by
Richard Scott-Robinson
The Parliament of Fowls
Geoffrey Chaucer
written sometime around 1381

Prologue

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne · Th’assay so hard, so sharp the conquering · The dredful joy, that alwey slit so yerne — So short our lives, so hard the lessons, so difficult the tests, so sudden the final victory, so tenuous the hope of joy that so easily evaporates into fear — this is what I mean by Love. I am so in awe of Love and so bemused, when I think about Him, that I’m completely perplexed; for although I have no experience of Love — and can’t really understand what benefit people see in him, to be honest — I often read in books about his miracles and his cruel anger, and how he commands obedience. And so unspeakably severe are his punishments that I can only exclaim: ’God save such a lord!’ I have no other choice!

It is my habit, as I’ve said elsewhere, to read books often. I do this for sheer enjoyment and through a desire to learn. But why am I telling you all this? Well, not long ago, I came upon something written in an old book that made me read all day long and digest what I was reading with great eagerness; for out of old fields comes fresh new wheat, as they say, and out of old books comes all this new knowledge.

But let me get straight to the point. I enjoyed reading this old book so much that the day just flew by. The book was called Cicero’s Account of the Dream of Scipio. It had seven chapters, describing heaven, hell and the Earth, and the souls that inhabit these places, and I shall endeavour to quickly convey the gist of it to you now.

First of all this book describes how Scipio, when he was at Carthage, in North Africa, long before the birth of Christ, was entertained by Massinissa, and the great joy that the two of them had conversing with one another, and how, when the day came to a close and night fell, Scipio’s ancestor Scipio Africanus, who had defeated Hannibal and subdued Carthage for Rome half a century before, came to Scipio in a dream. The book describes how Africanus led Scipio into the stars and showed him Carthage from a great distance. He told him that any man, whether wise or ignorant, who is good-natured and likes to act for the good of everybody, will go to a joyful place that is ever-blissful. Scipio asked if people who are dead have a life, then, and a place to live somewhere else? Africanus answered: ’Yes, of course,’ and told Scipio that our lives on this Earth are like a sort of death, and that good people, after they die, go to heaven, and he showed him the galaxy of stars.

Scipio Africanus pointed out the tiny Earth – the place where we are now – and compared it to the vastness of the universe. He showed Scipio the nine heavenly spheres, and they listened to the music
that these spheres make, which is the source of all melody and harmony here on Earth, as Pythagoras demonstrated. Then Africanus urged Scipio, since the Earth was so small and so full of torment and unfairness, to take less account of it than he did. He told him that, after the passage of a certain number of years, every star comes round again to the position that it first occupied, and that nobody should pay any regard to the puny affairs of men.

Scipio urged Africanus to explain how best a human being could achieve this heavenly bliss. Africanus answered: 'Understand first of all that you are immortal, and be sure that you direct all your energy towards the common good, for then you will be certain of coming quickly to this lovely place which is full of bliss and beautiful souls. But criminals, murderers and rapists, when they die, will whirl around the Earth in pain for many eons, until their crimes are at last forgiven, and only then will they be allowed into this heavenly place – may you swiftly attain it! – with God's grace.

The day came to an end and darkness, which prevents all creatures from doing the things that they like to be doing, parted me from my book for lack of light, and I made ready to go to bed, my mind full of the things that I'd been reading about and in its usual turmoil, for I was dissatisfied with the things that I'd been taught and was desperately looking for something new.

At last, through sheer weariness, I fell asleep, and as I slept I dreamed that Scipio Africanus came to my bedside, just as he had to Scipio in the book. A weary hunter dreams of the chase, a judge of the courtroom, a carter of haulage, a rich man of gold, a knight of battle, a sick man is well again and a lover embraces his lady in his dreams, I guess, and I suppose that reading about him all day was why I saw him, but whatever the cause, he said to me: 'You have done so well by looking at my old, torn book – the one that Macrobius took such pains over – that I would like to reward you for this labour.'

Invocation

Venus, Oh sweet, blissful lady – who frightens anyone she chooses with her flaming firebrand and who sent me this dream! – be my help in this endeavour, since you are the most able to. I saw you in the sky, in the north-northwest, as I prepared to write this account, so give me the wit to describe my dream accurately, and make the rhymes good!

The Dream

Scipio Africanus took me up and brought me through some parkland to a gate in a wall of green stone. Over this gate was written, on each side, in large letters, some contrasting verse.

On the one side it said:

Through me men go into a blissful place that is balm to an aching heart and a cure for deadly wounds. Through me men go into the spring of grace where green and lusty May shall last forever. This is the way to everything good that can happen, so be happy, Oh reader, and forget all your troubles. I am open to you, so pass through me as quickly as you can!

On the other side it said:

Men go through me to the thrust of the spear, where disregard and danger are the order of the day, where the tree shall neither bear leaves nor fruit. You will follow the course of this stream to un-
certainty and mental anguish, like a fish in a dried-up pool. The only remedy is to renounce it.

This verse was written in black and gold, and I took the time to read it all, for the one side filled my heart with fear but the other emboldened it, the one side warmed me and the other made me shiver with fear. I was so perplexed that I couldn’t decide whether to enter or to flee, to save myself or to perish. Like a piece of iron set between two diamonds of equal hardness with no strength to move one way or the other – for any movement that the one allows, the other prevents – I had no idea whether to enter or to leave, until Africanus, my guide, took hold of me and shoved me through.

‘I can see plainly by your expression,’ he said, ‘that you misunderstand. Have no fear about entering this place, for this writing is not meant for you at all, it’s only for those who are Love’s servants. You’ve lost your taste for love – as much, I guess, as a sick man has for those extreme opposites of sweetness and bitterness. But nonetheless, although you are dull, what you cannot partake in you can at least observe. Many a weak man, after all, likes to watch the wrestling and is able to judge the abilities of the competitors as accurately as the next man. And if you have the skill to write it all down, I can show you things that are worthy to be written about.’

Then he took my hand in his, which gave me comfort, and lord! – what a wonderful sight I saw before me! Wherever I looked there were trees with leaves that will last forever – trees in full foliage, each with its appropriate leaves, as fresh and green as emeralds! – it was a joy to behold. The mighty oak for building, the flexible and utilitarian ash, the elm for coffins, the box tree for pipes and other musical instruments, the evergreen oak, the fir to make tall masts from, the cypress, the yew, the aspen, the peaceful olive and the drunken vine, the palm of victory and the divinatory laurel.

There was a garden beside a river with trees in it that were in full blossom, surrounded by meadows that will last forever, full of white, blue, yellow and red flowers. There were cold streams issuing from springs that were full of little fishes with red fins and silver scales, and on every bough there were birds in full song, some singing to attract a mate, in such harmony that it was like listening to the voices of angels! Rabbits were playing in the grass, and here and there were deer, stags and hinds, as well as squirrels and other small animals. The sound of melodious music from many stringed instruments filled the air, so beautifully that God, who made this world and is lord of all, has never heard better, I would imagine.

A very gentle breeze made a rustling sound in the green foliage, which harmonised beautifully with the birdsong. The temperature was so moderate and the air so pleasant, never too hot nor too cold, that herbs and spices of every sort were able to grow in abundance. No man ever grew sick or old in this place. There were a thousand times more joys than any man can possibly describe, and it was never night but always day.

Under a tree, beside a spring, I saw our lord Cupid making his arrows. At his feet, his bow lay ready and waiting as his daughter dipped the sharpened arrowheads into cold water to temper them, then skilfully arranged the arrows, some to kill and some to wound. I became aware of Pleasure, Elegance, Enthusiasm and Courtesy. I saw Machination, who has the ability to compel a man by force to do wrong – and she was disfigured, I have to say. Beneath an oak I saw Delight standing with Gentleness. I found myself looking at naked Beauty, Youth dancing and joking, Foolhardiness, Flattery and Desire, Artfulness, Promise and Reward, and three others whose names I shall not mention.

I saw a temple of brass, standing upon tall pillars of jasper. A multitude of women were dancing around this temple, some of them good-looking, some of them beautiful, but their skirts were dishevelled, for this was their function, to dance. Perched upon this temple were many hundreds of pairs of white
doves.

Outside the door of this temple sat Privacy with a curtain in her hand, and beside her, on a hill of sand, was Dame Patience, looking pale and demure. But all around them, inside and outside, were Anticipation and Cunning with their throng of followers, and within the temple, sighs as hot as flames were echoing everywhere, sighs born of desire that made every altar burn with a new intensity. I could clearly see that the cause of all this agitation was the bitter goddess Jealousy.

I went into this temple and saw the god Priapus standing in erect majesty, sceptre in hand, clothed as he was when that ass, braying at night, foiled his erotic intentions. People were busily finding ways to set garlands of fresh flowers on his head. In a quiet corner I found the proud and noble Venus and her gatekeeper Wealth making love together in the dark. But soon it was light again and then I saw this goddess reclining on a golden bed, waiting for the warm sun to sink into the west. Her golden hair was clasped with a gold band and she was wearing nothing to conceal her breasts—in fact, the clothing she wore was no thicker nor extensive than a handkerchief!

There were a thousand pleasant perfumes in this place. Bacchus, the god of wine, sat there, and Ceres, who relieves hunger, was there as well, and between them lay Venus, before whom, on bended knees, two young folk were kneeling, imploring her for help.

I let Venus lie there listening to the earnest requests of these young people and went to explore further. On the walls, in defiance of Diana the goddess of hunting and chastity, I came across the broken bows of many maidens who had wasted their youth in her service. On these walls were painted many of these maidens’ stories, a few of whom I shall mention, such as Callisto and Atalanta, and some others whose names now escape me. On another wall were depicted the stories of Serimamis, Candace, Hercules, Biblis, Queen Dido of Carthage, Pyramus and Thisbe, Tristan and Isolde, Elaine of Astolat, Paris of Troy, Achilles, Cleopatra of Egypt, Troilus, Scylla and also the mother of Romulus, describing the love they felt and the plight they had been in because of it when they died.

Back outside in the pleasant, sweet air, surrounded by green foliage, I walked alone, trying to dispel the tragedy of these stories, when I became aware of a queen. Just as the intense light of the summer sun surpasses that of the stars, so this goddess surpasses all other creatures in beauty. In an open space, high upon a hill covered in flowers, the noble goddess Nature was sitting. Her halls and chambers were the branches and boughs of trees, made according to her design and her measure, and there was not a single bird born of a mother that was not sitting attentively before her, to hear what she had to say and to receive its fortune, for this was Saint Valentine’s Day and every
bird was there to choose its mate.

Every sort of bird imaginable was present. They made such a noise and were so crowded together – on every tree, and land and sea, and on every lake – that there was scarcely room for me to stand anywhere at all. In form and appearance, Nature was exactly as described by Alain de Lille, in his Lamentation for Nature, with just the same features. She commanded every bird to occupy its appropriate place, the one it had taken each year on Saint Valentine’s Day in years gone by – that is to say, the birds of prey the highest locations and below them the small birds that eat worms and grubs and other things which I won’t mention, and the waterfowl in the bottom of the valley. The grassland was filled with birds that eat seeds, and they were so numerous that it was a wonder to behold.

The royal eagle was there, whose magnificent eyesight pierces the sun, and other fine hawks of a lesser kind, which learned men would be able to enumerate and describe: the tyrant goshawk, with his brown and grey feathers, who terrorises other birds with his greedy blood-lust, the gentle falcon, whose feet embrace the hands of kings, the bold sparrow hawk, enemy of quails, and the energetic merlin who likes to seek out larks. There were doves with their coy and hesitant eyes, the ravaging owl, the jealous swan who sings before he dies, the giant crane with his trumpeting voice, the thieving chuff and the talkative magpie, the audacious jay, the heron, foe to eels, the deceitful lapwing, the untrustworthy magpie, the friendly robin, the coward kite. The cockerel was there, that clock for small villages, the sparrow, offspring of Venus, the nightingale who summons the fresh new leaves, the swallow who likes to kill the bees that make our honey, turtledoves with their hearts so true, the peacock with his angelic feathers, the pheasant who so distains the crowing of the cock, the guarding goose, the outrageous cuckoo, the amusing parrot, the murderous drake, the stork, unwelcome to adulterers, the glutton cormorant, the wise raven, the anxious and mournful crow, the song-thrush and the migratory fieldfare, who arrives in winter. What more can I say? Every kind of feathered creature that exists in this world was there, assembled before the noble goddess Nature, and all of them anxiously, diligently, patiently and courteously seeking a partner, a lover or a concubine, with her blessing.

But let me get to the point. Nature held on her hand a female eagle, the fairest and most beautiful, the most gentle, best-natured and virtuous to be found amongst all her works, and so perfect that Nature often kissed her beak, such a delight she took in looking at her. This proxy here on Earth for the almighty lord, Nature, who balances hot and cold, heavy and light, wet and dry to form a unifying whole, began to speak in an easy voice:

‘Birds, listen carefully to me. I understand your urgency and I will progress as swiftly as I can. You are all well aware how, on Saint Valentine’s Day, by my command, you all come here to choose your mates, through the delightful urge that I have instilled in you, and then you quickly depart again. But we must not depart from tradition. So he who is the most worthy shall begin, and by this I mean the male eagle, who is the royal bird, as you all know, wise and worthy, discreet and as true as steel, whom I’ve fashioned in every way as I see fit – there’s no need for me to describe his shape to you, but he shall choose and speak first. And after him, you will all choose suitable mates in proper order, just as you like, according to how lucky and successful you are. But those of you for whom love has taken hold the most, may God send you the mate who will love you best in return.’

Then she called upon the male eagle and said: ‘My son, the choice is now yours. But I must remind you that these are the terms with which you must comply: that she must agree to your choice, for this is our way of doing things and has been for many years; and he who has his love returned in this way, let him truly celebrate his being in this blissful place.’

With his head bowed and with great humility, this royal eagle replied: ‘With all my desire and mind and heart I choose that beautiful female who is perched upon your hand, whom I shall serve and cherish forever, without question. I choose my sovereign lady, who is far superior to me. I’ll be hers always, whether she accepts me or leaves me to pine away and die, and I beseech her, through her grace and her mercy, as my sovereign lady, to accept me or to let me perish; for truly, my heart aches for her so
much that I cannot live without her.

‘And if I am found to be at all unfaithful, disobedient, negligent or boastful, or if I start to play around, I ask that this be my punishment: that all these birds shall tear me to pieces. Do this on the very day that I am found to be untrue or unworthy. And since no one loves her as much as I do, although she has never told me that she loves me, she ought to show mercy upon me and be mine, for I have no other claim upon her except to say that I will follow her to the ends of the Earth and never cease from serving her, however much pain it may cause me. So, my dear heart, take pity on me. Decide as you wish, this is all I have to say.’

In the same way that a fresh, red rose shows its petals to the sun, so this female eagle blushed when she heard all this. She gave no answer, neither a ‘yes’ nor a ‘no’, she was so taken aback, until Nature said: ‘Daughter, there’s nothing to be frightened of, I assure you.’

But then another male eagle, of a lower kind, spoke up.

‘I love her more than you do, by Saint John!’ he exclaimed suddenly. ‘At least, I love her no less than you do, I’m sure, and I’ve done so for much longer, and if length of time is to be taken into account, then she should love me more than she loves you and I should have my reward accordingly. And also, if she finds me to be unfaithful, disrespectful, indiscreet or jealous in any way, then you can hang me by the neck! May she take my life and have all my possessions if I fail to respect her honour or to serve her as well as I can, to the very best of my ability.’

Almost at once, a third eagle spoke up. ‘Sirs, there is no time for all this! Every bird is eager to be away with its mate, and none of us wants to hang around dawdling for a moment longer than necessary. But unless I speak, I feel that I will die for sorrow, for although I can claim no long service, it is just as possible for me to perish today through grief as it is for one who’s been languishing like this for twenty years. A man may serve as well or better and be of greater value over half a year than someone who has served for much longer. I dare say that I’m her most faithful man and that I get the most pleasure from seeing her happy. And to be brief, I will be hers until I die, and faithful in all that a heart may conceive.’

If I had the space to repeat to you everything that they said, from the morning until the sun began to set, you would agree when I tell you that in all my life, since the day that I was born, no gentler expressions of love can ever have been heard before. But the noise of all the birds, impatiently complaining about the delay, was deafening:

‘Have done with it! Let us be away!’ they all cried, so loudly that I thought the woods would splinter into pieces because of it. ‘Come off it! You’ll be the death of us! When will your cursed pleading come to an end? How can any judge make a judgement when there’s no real evidence to present?’

The goose, the cuckoo and the duck shouted: ‘kek kek, cuckoo, quack quack!’ so loudly that the noise went right through my ears.

‘None of this is worth a fly!’ cried the goose. ‘But I’ll suggest a remedy if you like – whether you like it or not! – on behalf of all water fowl.’

‘And I’ll give you one on behalf of all worm fowl as well,’ cried the foolish cuckoo. ‘I dare speak on behalf of us all, since we want to get away.’

‘Wait a little, if you don’t mind!’ exclaimed the turtle dove. ‘It’s possible to speak out of turn. I am a seed fowl, one of the most unworthy, I know, and not very intelligent, but it’s better to remain silent than to sound off about something you know nothing about, for if you do, the dung can stick to you.
Opinionated claptrap is often annoying.’

Nature, who had been aware of this disgruntled murmur for quite some time, decided that the moment had come for her to intervene. ‘Hold your tongues!’ she shouted. ‘I shall soon find a remedy, so you can all get away and escape from this noise. One of you from every kind must come forward and give a verdict.’

All the birds agreed to this. The birds of prey were the first to choose, and they elected the male falcon to speak on their behalf and to encapsulate all their thought. He turned to Nature, and she happily acknowledged him.

‘It is very difficult to prove categorically who loves this gentle female eagle the best, by logic alone,’ he conceded. ‘None of them can be proved to be overstating his feelings, and I cannot see how any rational argument will help to eliminate any of them, so it might seem, on the face of it, that they’ll have to fight it out between themselves.’

‘Whenever you wish!’ cried these three male eagles.

‘No, sirs! If you will allow me to finish, please,’ continued the male falcon. ‘That’s no way to decide the issue. If you’ll pardon me for saying so, but it’s my decision and you must comply with my verdict, so be quiet! I say, as fairly as I can judge, that the worthiest and longest-serving knight, the wealthiest and most highly ranked amongst you, would be best suited for her, if she were to agree to this. She can judge for herself, I’m sure, which of you I mean. I think it’s pretty obvious.’

Meanwhile, the water fowl had put their heads together and after a short discussion had come to the unanimous view that: ‘The goose, with her eloquent grace, who is so eager to speak on our behalf, should do so without further delay. And good luck to her!’ So the goose began to speak on behalf of all the water fowl. In a goose’s cackle she said:

‘Silence! Listen, everybody, and take heed of the argument I would like to bring to bear upon this matter. I am intelligent and I don’t like to be kept waiting. I would advise the eagle – and would do so if he was my own brother – that unless she loves him, let him look elsewhere.’

‘Is this the fine reasoning of a goose!’ exclaimed the sparrow hawk. ‘Let her go jump in a lake! It would have been better for you to have remained silent, you feathered fool, than to show us all what an idiot you are. It’s true when they say that ignoramuses cannot help but reveal their idiocy to the world.’

All the birds laughed at this. The seed fowl had chosen the turtle dove to speak for them and they instructed her to say what she pleased, and what she deemed to be the truth, and then they asked her what she intended to say. She replied that she would be very clear regarding this matter and they would find out soon enough.

‘God forbid that a lover should seek another!’ she then exclaimed, and blushed red for shame. ‘Even if his lady remains a stranger to him forevermore, let him love her and serve her nonetheless, until he dies. Truly, I cannot agree with the goose’s opinion at all. Even if she dies, he should remain faithful and loyal to her memory. I would take no other, if I was in his place, but remain true to her until I died.’

‘That’s a good joke!’ exclaimed the duck. ‘Stretch your love to this extent, without any reason? Where’s the sense in that? Who should care about something that can’t be cared for any more? I mean it
– quack!’ said the duck. ‘There are always plenty more fish in the river.’

‘Away with you, churl!’ exclaimed the noble hawk. ‘These sentiments come from the dunghill. Can’t you see the truth when its staring you in the face? You’re as blind as an owl in daylight. Your sort are so low and wretched that you’ve no idea what love is, even.’

The cuckoo spoke up and joined in the fray, on behalf of all the birds that eat worms. ‘If it would mean that I can have my mate in peace, you three can do what you like, for as long as you like. Let each of them live alone all their lives, that’s my advice, since they can’t decide. That’s all you’ll get from me’

‘Has this glutton filled his belly enough? Are we now safe?’ cried the merlin. ‘You murderer of the hedge sparrow on the same branch that nursed you into life! Live alone yourself, worm fiend! It would be no loss to be rid of your kind forever!’

‘Enough!’ cried Nature. ‘Peace, I command you! I have heard all your opinions, and I have to say that we seem to be no nearer to a decision now than we were at the beginning. So this is what we’ll do:

‘This female eagle will choose whom she pleases, whoever may be happy or angry about it, but whoever she chooses, he shall have her; for since it is impossible to determine who loves her the most, as the hawk has already pointed out, then I’ll do her this favour, that she shall have the mate upon whom her heart is set, and he shall have her. I, Nature, make this judgement, for we are running out of time, and I am beholden to nobody. But if you want my advice, regarding which of these three to choose, I would say that the reasonable choice would be the royal eagle, as the hawk has already explained, for he is the noblest and the most worthy amongst them, and I’m very proud of my work in his case. Is this any help to you?’

With a wavering and anxious voice the female eagle answered: ‘My rightful lady, goddess of Nature, the truth is that I’m yours to command, as is every other creature, and I must obey you for as long as breath remains in my body. So grant me one request, and then I will tell you what it is.’

‘I grant it,’ replied Nature.

‘Almighty queen, I ask for a respite until the end of the year, in order to decide. And afterwards, I ask to be able to choose as I wish. That’s all. I’ve decided that this is what I want, even if you kill me for it. I won’t serve Venus or Cupid yet, in no way will I do so.’

‘Well, since this is your decision,’ replied Nature, ‘then that’s that. It’s time for all these birds to fly away with their mates, without any further delay.’ And they responded – as you shall hear in a moment.

‘To you, falcons,’ Nature continued, ‘I say, serve, and be of good heart, all three of you. A year is not long to wait, if each of you do your utmost to perform your duties to the best of your ability; for God knows, she is rid of you for this year. Whatever she may decide later, you have your answer for now.

When this work was finished, Nature gave to every bird his mate, by mutual consent, and away they flew. Ah, lord! The joy and happiness was obvious to see. Each of them took the other in its wings and their necks entwined as they thanked the noble goddess Nature. But first, the songbirds were chosen, by tradition, to sing a roundel before the departure, in honour of Nature and to please her. The tune, I believe, was French, and the words were as I shall try to describe – the first verse went something like: ‘Qui bien aime a tard oublie.’ ‘Now welcome summer, with your warm sun, you’ve made the winter weather go away and driven away the long dark nights.’

Saint Valentine, high above, this is what the small birds sing, for your sake:

*Now welcome somer, with thy sonne soft*

*That hast this wintres weders over-shake*

They have good cause to be joyful, for each of them has his mate once again, and it is no wonder that
they sing as soon as they wake: ‘Now welcome summer, with your warm sun, you've made the winter weather go away and driven away the long dark nights.’

When this singing had finished, the noise of screeching and flapping, that birds make when they all fly away at once, woke me up.

I turned to other books, as I always do. And I hope that I'll read something one day that will give me another dream like this, and so I shall not stop from reading.