INTRODUCTION

The Parliament of Foules

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Overview

Of the early works in this volume, Chaucer's *Parliament of Foules* is the most wide-ranging in its sources and interests and the most accomplished in its prosody. The *Book of the Duchess* offers a more consistent tone, the *House of Fame* more biting social commentary, and *Anelida and Arcite* more touching introspection. But the *Parliament*'s confidence and brio carry the reader along a fast-paced journey through source citations, heavenly and earthly scenes, interpretive puzzles, and differing visions of how to live and love. Several of Chaucer's later works redeploy the *Parliament*'s awkward and limited narrator, its incorporation of varied source texts, and its rhyme royal stanza.

Sources, Verse Form, and Date of Composition

The Parliament of Foules gives no clear indication for when it was composed. Taking into account its sources, contents, and versification, scholars concur its most likely date of composition falls between the late 1370s and mid 1380s. The *Parliament*'s place in Chaucer's multilingual reading history sustains this date range. His source texts for the *Parliament* include Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, Guillaume de Lorris's *Romance of the Rose*, and contemporary French poets including Machaut—all sources for Chaucer's poetry from his *Book of the Duchess* onward. In addition, the *Parliament* takes cues from Dante's *Inferno*, a source for *The House of Fame* as well; and the *Parliament* draws more broadly on Boccaccio's *Teseide* than does *Anelida and Arcite*. Dating the *Parliament* in relation to Chaucer's reading history places it between between the late 1370s and mid 1380s—that is, between the composition of *Anelida and Arcite* and the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Chaucer began to draw on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Some scholars have attempted to narrow this date range through the *Parliament*'s reference to the position of the evening star Venus (117-18), which could fit with certain years between 1374 and 1382, or through parallels between the eagle suitors and negotiations between 1377 and 1382

for Anne of Bohemia's marriage to King Richard II. Alternatively, the *Parliament* could have been occasioned by a London court celebration of Valentine's Day, as indicated by the poem's setting on that day (309-10). Further indicating live performance, the poem concludes with the singing of a roundel, a French lyric form. A first line from such a lyric is recorded in some manuscripts, perhaps as a performance cue. Other manuscripts record a few lines from a different lyric, from which W.W. Skeat constructed the roundel that appears in this Garnier edition.

The final indication for a date of composition is the most visible for first-time readers of Chaucer's works: the *Parliament* holds an important place in the evolution of Chaucer's versification. The early works in this volume trace a shift from eight-syllable couplets, imitated from French verse, in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, to the more flexible ten-syllable line that characterized his later works. The *Parliament*'s ten-syllable line also appears in *Anelida and Arcite*, but *Anelida* deploys stanzas of seven and nine lines that probably predate Chaucer's settling on the seven-line stanza (ababbcc) for the *Parliament*. Chaucer continues to use this seven-line stanza, now known as the rhyme royal stanza, in several of his later works.

Summary

In structure, the *Parliament* has three sections, intriguingly disjointed even as they also signal that they are related to one another. The poem opens with a sober first-person narration of reading and reflection about love and the soul's salvation. In a second section, the narrator's reading and reflecting produces a dream in which he visits an earthly paradise where the Temple of Venus offers images of romantic love's pleasures and pains. Moving beyond this temple ground and into a longer third section of the poem, the still dreaming narrator visits an outdoor parliament headed by the goddess Nature, where birds choose their mates on Valentine's Day. The most evident connection among the poem's three parts is the narrator, a consistently bedazzled witness to the books and dreamscapes that open before him. His mode of apprehension is receptive rather than judicious, and emotional rather than analytical.

Not a lover himself, the narrator initially reads voraciously to learn more about the awesome power of the God of Love: here he refers to the medieval ideal of heterosexual courtship, the "craft of fyn lovyng" (the craft or art of refined loving) as Chaucer calls it in his *Legend of Good Women* (F 544). In refined courtly love, noble men win the hearts of noble women by serving

them humbly, courageously, and faithfully. The *Parliament* begins with the narrator asserting his voracious interest in books about this refined loving, but he next reports reading not the *Roman de la Rose* or a similar work on noble courtship; instead, he reads an authoritative treatise on dreams—Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*. In Scipio's revelatory dream, his deceased grandfather Africanus lifts him into the heavens and shows Scipio the earth far below, so small in relation to the nine spheres of the heavens. Africanus enjoins his grandson not to delight in the little earth, a place of deception and troubles. Instead he must focus on his immortal soul and win eternal life by advancing "commune profit" (77), the general good of his community.

Chaucer's narrator declares himself unsatisfied by Scipio's authoritative text. Falling asleep in this searching state of mind, the narrator has a dream of his own, but he is uncertain whether this dream is revelatory or merely the product of his own preoccupations. Africanus appears in this dream and says he is rewarding the narrator's reading by taking him to a walled park enclosing all the joys and sorrows of love. Frozen in astonishment, the narrator must be shoved through the park's gates by his guide Africanus, who points out that he risks nothing, since he is no lover but only a spectator to love. The narrator wanders through the park's perfect natural environment where a single springtime day never ends, until he comes upon the Temple of Venus. There he finds allegorical personifications for aspects of noble courtship such as Beauty, Courtesy, Wealth, and Desire—but also negative aspects of courtship such as Deception, Bribery, Flattery, and painted murals depicting love's suffering victims throughout history.

Continuing to wander through the park, the narrator arrives at the *Parliament*'s third setting, the leafy outdoor court of Dame Nature, who is presiding over numberless birds as they choose their mates on Valentine's Day. The birds' behaviors align them with human social groups, while retaining closely and amusingly observed avian characteristics as well. Three noble eagles contend for the love of a female eagle who sits on Nature's hand. In keeping with the attenuated courtship that the romantic ideal requires, the eagles' pleas are so lengthy that the sun sinks toward the west and the lesser birds grow impatient. At Nature's command, each group at the parliament puts forward a representative—falcon, duck, goose, turtledove—to propose a resolution for the three eagle suitors' claims, with each resolution differing from the others. When all have made their differing cases, Nature resolves the debate by asking the female eagle to do the choosing. Rather than choosing one of her three suitors, she asks for a year's delay. At last all the other birds are free to choose their mates, with great joy, and the day's parliament closes with a chosen chorus

of birds singing a roundel, a French lyric form often set to music. Once the roundel has been performed, the noise of all the departing birds awakens the narrator, who closes the poem with his hope to learn more by continuing to read and dream.

Critical history and Interpretations

(a) Chaucer before 1950

No commentary on Chaucer's authorship of the *Parliament of Foules* precedes the twentieth century. Until the publication in 1894 of W.W. Skeat's edition of Chaucer manuscripts, the *Parliament* was thought to be not by Chaucer but by an unknown contemporary. The *Parliament* came slowly into the Chaucerian canon during the twentieth century, the era of modernism in the arts. Modernism brought into visibility a core feature of Chaucer's artfulness that had been less appreciated in earlier times. John Dryden, for example, complained in 1700 that Chaucer lacked creativity; instead of inventing original narratives he "built on the inventions of other men." In contrast, modernism in the arts exalted experimenting with source texts and found originality in artistic citations. As James Joyce reimagined the Odyssey in his *Ulysses*, and T.S. Eliot drew myriad classical, biblical, and medieval citations into *The Waste Land*, it became more visible to Chaucer's readers that he similarly fragments, reshapes, and resituates his sources in new compositions with new aesthetic and thematic aspirations.

(b) Midcentury Chaucer: Artistry, Coherence, and High Ideals

By the middle of the twentieth century, with deeper academic study, Chaucer's mastery of Middle English prosody, literary form, and voicing came to light. Deep and sustained attention to Chaucer's creative strategies is the essential lasting legacy of midcentury scholarship. With regard to content, Chaucer's virtues for midcentury readers centered on his works' coherence and internal harmony. Diverse source materials come under his artistic control; he develops a unifying theme from each of his works' disparate topics and sources. Moreover, for midcentury readers, Chaucer's unifying themes demonstrate his adherence to medieval ideals of political, social, and religious order and Christian faith.

If we read the *Parliament* in these midcentury terms, the poem coordinates the varied kinds of love that bind the universe together. These kinds of love begin with the poem's opening lines on romantic love—so powerful that it can be personified in a God of Love, based on the classical Cupid. Love next leaps upward, in the narrator's dream, to the Creator's nine heavenly spheres. As well as evoking divine love through their harmonious "melodye . . . that cometh of thilke speres thryes thre" (60-61), the heavens offer eternal life to those humans who "lovede commune profyt" (47) while living on earth. This love of civic harmony is at one extreme of human potential for love, and at the other is the variety of sensual loves in the walled park of the narrator's dream. Here the breeze and birdsong make a perfect natural music recalling the music of the spheres (197-200), and Nature's parliament validates both noble courtship and the easier sensual loving of lesser folk. Aspiration to perfect love, if not its achievement, conjoins the Parliament's several scenes, from the narrator's opening awe at the God of Love's power, through the evocation of divine love and civic harmony in the dream of Scipio, onward through the walled park in the narrator's dream, to the closing roundel thanking "Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte" (683). If we foreground these elements, the poem as a whole endorses heavenly and earthly love as the source of order in all Creation.

This ordered creation is hierarchical at every point. The heavenly perspective of the nine spheres reveals how little is the earth, compared to the heavens; life on earth "nis but a maner deth" (54) that the most virtuous souls will escape forever. In a different, secular hierarchy, the craft of refined loving is exclusive and elite. Alongside its own hierarchy of great and failed lovers in Venus's temple, refined loving is beyond the understanding of ordinary humans—that is, the ordinary birds at Nature's parliament. The three "royal" and "noble" eagles argue eloquently that their unbreakable faith and their years of humble service deserve love from the female eagle, but the birds of lower standing are uncomprehending: why care about her if she doesn't care, asks the duck; go find different lovers, the goose recommends; all three of you could just stay single, says the cuckoo. The lesser birds' insouciant practicality expresses their lesser species status, below the noble eagles. As these avian species map onto human social hierarchies, the *Parliament* expresses the medieval conviction that human social differences are as innate as species differences.

In summary, for midcentury Chaucerians, the *Parliament*'s merit lay in how fully Chaucer expressed and endorsed central ideals of his time: God's unfolding creation coordinates eternal and earthly hierarchies, holding them together with differing manifestations of divine love.

(c) Late 20th Century: Questioning Cultural Ideals

Critical approaches in the late 20th century, most notably political analysis and gender theory, led to appreciating Chaucer's *Parliament* in new ways. To be sure, his works continued to be recognized as evocations of medieval cultural ideals, but now they also won praise for taking a questioning or even subversive stance toward those norms. Across earlier centuries, Chaucer had won praise for his irony, manifested in his warm tolerance of human foibles, his generosity of spirit, and his appreciation for differing points of view. In the later 20th century, attention shifted from the breadth of vision that irony accomplishes—its seeing from more than one position—to weighing whether Chaucer's staging of differences sometimes calls cultural ideals into question.

For these late 20th century readers, earlier praise for the *Parliament* as a vision of universal harmony discounts the poem's substantial internal tensions and disharmonies. The opening passage on romantic love has no stated or implied relationship to Scipio's dream on deserving immortality through concern for the common good. The narrator complains as he finishes reading Scipio's dream that he feels "fulfyld of thought and busy hevynesse; / For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde, / And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde" (89-91). The narrator's own dream is without an authoritative guide, and its two parts are in several ways disjointed. The walled park appears to be a perfect timeless paradise, but soon proves to encompass suffering lovers, allegorical vices, and fleeting time. The high ideal of refined courtship appeared universal at the poem's outset, but it proves to be an elite privilege at Nature's parliament, a conspicuous consumption of time and effort that not all lovers can afford. The birds at Nature's parliament disagree about how to love, and their disagreements remain unresolved. The three eagles' suit for the female eagle is not settled. The waking dreamer offers no closing insights, instead resolving to continue his search for better understanding.

Politically and socially oriented critics accounted for the *Parliament*'s internal tensions in two ways. For some, Chaucer is expressing a pluralist vision, moving beyond ironic detachment to a more engaged position that societies continually debate and undermine their contending ideals. Others argued that the *Parliament*'s inconclusiveness expresses its resistance to specific religious and aristocratic values. The message of Scipio's dream, to surpass earthly miseries and focus on attaining heaven, drops out of sight as the narrator's dream stays earthbound: is this a rejection of

Neoplatonic transcendence? Dame Nature, introduced as a divine principle emanating from God, loses control of her noisy assemblage, becoming a participant in her species' quarrels rather than an emissary of divine order. In the court of Nature, the three eagles speak eloquently and feel deeply about their noble courtship, but they take up the entire day with their professions of love, insensitive to the desires of lesser birds. The vivid colloquial voices of goose, duck, and turtledove hold their own against the eagles' self-important and long-winded professions of worthiness. In these ways, the unfolding design of the *Parliament* destabilizes the social hierarchy and sidelines Christian focus on the hereafter.

The emergence of gender and sexuality studies in the later 20th century extended the questioning of cultural norms to the *Parliament*'s depictions of elite courtship—the craft of refined loving. This secular ideal holds the narrator awestruck at the beginning of the poem, but at Venus's temple, several unappealing strategies of specifically male courtship—flattery, bribery, deception—appear alongside the virtues. In the male eagles' lengthy professions of merit, the craft of refined loving is a more masculine than feminine endeavor. Nature opens the parliament asserting her immutable rule that female creatures must always have their choice of suitors (407-11), but she bypasses her rule by instead inviting the assembled birds to choose which suitor should win the female eagle. This lapse in procedure subordinates female desire to public perceptions; only when the birds' vigorous debate fails to produce a clear solution does Nature turn back to her earlier principle that the female eagle may choose for herself. Even the female eagle's answer, when she finally can give it, enlarges the masculine space for self-expression and self-improvement by another year. In these ways, the *Parliament* gradually shifts from exalting elite courtship to depicting its moral limitations and its focus on masculine rather than feminine self-articulation.

(d) 21st Century: Affects and Environments

Midcentury and late century readers illuminated many facets of the *Parliament*, including its responses to authoritative sources, religious teachings, social hierarchy, gender roles, and political organization. One blind spot for these earlier contextualizations was the history of emotional expression. Affect studies point out that sensations and emotions gain meaning and articulation, as affects, in historically specific contexts. For reading medieval literature, we need

an archaeology of affects in order to understand specific professions of faith, declarations of love, or funeral laments. An example from the *Parliament* could be the female eagle's blush (442-48), indicating her sensations—the text suggests modesty, embarrasment, or fear—on hearing her suitors' professions of love. Her feelings take shape in her response that "I axe respit for to avise me. . . . I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide, / Forsothe as yit" (648-53). A gender theorist might see in this articulation a woman constrained by the rules of refined courtship, unable to refuse or accept because her crucial role is to prolong the time for masculine striving and self-realization. An affect theorist might counter that she is structuring her modesty, embarrasment, or fear into an affective stance of watchful reticence, a stance that grounds her identity in chaste behavior and asserts her authority over her suitors' fates.

This blushing eagle illustrates another blind spot for earlier readings of the *Parliament*. Until recently, the poem's focus was taken to be entirely on humankind. An eagle who blushes is an impossibility in nature, but for earlier readers, the eagle's blush, the duck who swears by his hat (589), and many further confusions of species traits are merely comic glimpses across the allegorical divide between avian signifier and human signified; these glimpses do not question the difference between avian and human protagonists. For environmental and animal theory, the birds' mixed status is not simply amusing but also exploratory and interrogative. In the *Parliament*'s third section, the poem has turned away from Scipio's transcendent experience and Venus's clearly allegorical temple to an earthbound world of living things. The narrator's transition from Venus to Nature (298-301) privileges the latter by comparing a star's light (Venus, the evening star) to the summer sun (Nature, the queen of creation). The bird parliament's species-commingling narrative enmeshes humankind in a world of creatures, through various strategies including the half-mapping of avian onto human identities, the birds' species-conflating insults, and the quacks and cackles that punctuate their English. These strategies produce interspecies transmorphisms and simultaneities that run counter to the human exceptionalism of Scipio's dream: when bodies are indeterminate (what's wearing that hat?) and when a goose cackles "Peace," we are invited to imagine a world in which human being is continuous with other earthly being. Chaucer's ontological adventurousness foreshadows environmental theories that strive to reconceive the living world without resorting to the traditional dichotomy between the human and nonhuman.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Over the past hundred years, readers have shifted from admiring how the *Parliament* exemplifies the normative ideals of its age toward admiring how the *Parliament* tests and critiques those ideals. In this double artistic project, Chaucer meets the highest standard for creative arts: to know deeply but also to question, to see clearly but also to imagine. In the poem's final stanza, the narrator expresses Chaucer's dual purpose in the homonymous verb *meten*, meaning both "to meet" and "to dream": the narrator hopes "to rede so som day / That I shal *mete* som thyng for to fare / The bet" (697-99). Does the narrator turn back to books hoping "to meet" something meaningful in his reading, or does he turn to books hoping "to dream" something meaningful, as he did after reading Macrobius? The homonymous *meten* encompasses Chaucer's commitment to his books, but also to imagining beyond their limits.

Further Readings

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