

Chapter One

Introduction

The targeted text of this thesis is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* (*The Parliament of Fowls*) (1382). It was written more than 620 years ago. As we know, an old text can give the modern readers new insights and stimulate new interpretations. When the ancient work is examined closer with a new scope, one will find that there is still more to be discovered. As Chaucer says in the proem of *The Parliament of Fowls*:

For out of olde feldys, as men seyth,
Cometh al this new corne fro yere to yere,
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al thys new science that men lere. (22-5)

(For as in ancient fields they say it's true / That new corn strongly grows
from year to year, / So truly out of ancient volumes too / New knowledge
comes that learned men can hear.)

The purpose of the thesis is to elaborate three perspectives on nature in the poem. Although it is an earlier work, it can be viewed as a milestone of Chaucer's writings. Through this 700-line-long poem, we can still find out the crucial points to understand Chaucer's significance and position in the history of English Literature. Therefore, taking into account the importance of Chaucer's poetry, the writer of the present thesis has decided to disregard the difficulty that the Middle English posits and to begin with the three perspectives of nature in this dream vision poem.

Judging from the subject matters and techniques, Chaucer's writings have binary dimensions: the conventional and the innovational. He was born and lived in the second half of the 14th century, which is the late Middle Ages, but he was influenced by the new currents of thought from the Continent, especially France and Italy. His works have mixed characteristics of the old and the new eras. Generally speaking, most of mediaeval literary works were written for religious and political purposes. Hence, the content of mediaeval literature contains the Scriptures, saints' lives, sermons and homilies. The themes cover virtue and sin, salvation and damnation. If the works are not didactic, they would relate to warfare, kingship, and knighthood. Nevertheless, Chaucer cares more about the secular part of the society. His writings reveal more dimensions of people's life in the late Middle Ages.

The genre he used most is allegorical dream vision poetry. It is quite prevalent in religious writings. Dream is an appropriate form to convey mystic revelations. We can find many examples of this popular genre before Chaucer's time.¹ Chaucer composed several dream vision poems and gave this ancient genre a new life. Instead of writing for religious and political purposes, he imitated the French poem, *Le Roman de la Rose*², and turned the content of dream vision poetry from the sacred to the secular. Chaucer's four dream vision poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Legend of Good Women*, are related to the nature of love. The transition of poetic themes stands for a landmark to his writing

¹ See Appendix I: Dream Vision Texts in the Ancient and Mediaeval Times.

² The Romance of the Rose: Modeled on Ovid's Art of Love, it survives in more than 300 manuscripts. Its first 4,058 lines were written c. 1230 by Guillaume de Lorris; they form a charming dream allegory drawing on traditions of courtly love. About 1280 Jean de Meun wrote the rest of the more than 21,000 lines, incorporating a vast mass of encyclopaedic information and opinions on many contemporary topics, which secured the poem's fame. It was translated by Geoffrey Chaucer and was one of the most important literary influences on his writings.

achievements.

The Parliament of Fowls is preserved in fourteen manuscripts, and many more have been lost. Compared with his previous works *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, this poem is far more widely known. Although many literary works in the Middle Ages are anonymous, the authorship of this poem is certain. Chaucer himself mentioned this poem twice in his later works. The first time is in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*: “And the Parlement of Foulis, as I gesse” (407), and the second time in the “Retractation” to *The Canterbury Tales*: “The book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes” (1085). We can be sure that Chaucer really wrote this poem.

However, many scholars have debated on the exact date of the composition of this poem. This poem is usually dated 1382 from its connection with King Richard II's³ marriage. During this period of time, Chaucer was busy composing a poem in honour of the arranged marriage between Richard II and the foreign princess Anne of Bohemia. This was a very big deal indeed, and Chaucer was looking for just the right saint to honour on the third of May, the day on which Richard II signed the papers of engagement to his new bride. His search ended when he learned that a Saint Valentine of Genoa had an honorary feast on this day. He might hear of the saint during his diplomatic mission in Genoa, Italy in 1372-3, almost ten years earlier.

The poem was written in the seven-line iambic pentameter form, so-called rhyme royal. Surprisingly it has strong dramatic effects, for all the necessary

³ Richard II: The grandson of Edward III, he inherited the throne during his boyhood, and his uncle John of Gaunt and other nobles dominated the government. The king was crowned in 1377.

ingredients of stage were present in the text: formal expressions of sentiment, brisk dialogue, and even a chorus. It contains a mixture of comedy and serious speculation about the puzzling nature of love.

In the Proem, the narrator tells us that after reading Cicero's⁴ "The Dream of Scipio,"⁵ he goes to bed and dreams about Scipio's⁶ father, Africanus⁷, who leads him to a gate and pushes him into an enclosed garden of great natural beauty. He encounters the God of Love⁸ and many allegorical personages until he eventually enters the grand brass temple. He sees several Roman deities inside the temple – Priapus, Venus, Bacchus, Ceres, and many broken bows hung on the wall to scorn Diana. He also observes many paintings of legendary and historical martyred lovers on the walls, which depict the stories how they suffered and died for love.⁹

Outside again, he perceives the Goddess Nature presiding over the annual parliament of four-classed birds when they assemble on Saint Valentine's Day to choose their own mates for the coming year. The congregation is supervised by Nature, who has with her a young Formel (female eagle) of rare beauty. No sooner has Nature invited the birds to begin their selection of mates than a keen rivalry develops between the three male eagles, each of whom has a courtly speech to claim the female eagle for his lover.

⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC): His extant works include 58 orations and more than 900 letters, as well as many poems, philosophical and political treatises, and books of rhetoric. He is remembered as the greatest Roman orator and the innovator of what became known as Ciceronian rhetoric, which remained the foremost rhetorical model for many centuries.

⁵ "The Dream of Scipio" or "Scipio's Dream" is in the Chapter Six of *De re publica* (On the Republic).

⁶ Scipio Africanus the Younger (184-129 BC): Roman general credited with the final subjugation of Carthage.

⁷ Scipio Africanus the Elder (236-183 BC): Roman general in the Second Punic War.

⁸ Greek Mythology: Eros; Roman Mythology: Cupid or Amor.

⁹ See Appendix II: The Martyred Lovers.

This courtly rivalry is the subject of a sarcastic debate among the other birds, each of whom has his own opinion of how things should proceed. The Goddess Nature then opens the discussion on the resolution of this rivalry, and the four classes of birds designate their representatives to express various attitudes toward love, courtly or earthly. Thus, birds of middle rank, the Duck, the Goose, and the Cuckoo, are impatient and consider that discussion of love is waste of time. Their vulgar ideas of love irritate the Turtle-Dove, a bird of lower rank, whose purpose of life is fidelity of love. Birds of higher rank, the Sparrowhawk, the Falcon, and the Merlin, mock the middle-classed birds and think that they can never understand what love really is, for they are of low birth and ignorant.

Finally, the Goddess Nature closes the noisy dispute and invites the female eagle to speak for herself and make a choice among the three suitors. Because she does not want to be the slave of love now, she asks for a year to think things over. The Goddess Nature grants her indecision and tells the three male eagles to wait patiently until the next Saint Valentine's Day. Afterwards, each bird chooses his own mate. Before their departure, they sing a roundel to cheer and honour the Goddess Nature. The roundel is made in France. The loud singing and flying of the birds awake the dreamer from his sleep. He says he should continue reading in order to find something to improve his life.

Many scholars have studied this poem, and their research contain many different approaches and show different points of view. The following is a brief survey of the previous studies. By reading the summary of their research results, we can get a general attitude to the poem and get some crucial ideas of the directions of

Chaucerian studies:

Bennett in *The "Parlement of Foules": An Interpretation* reads this poem as a unified exploration of Christian love, infused with Neoplatonic thought and imagery and inspired by the poetic tradition of Cicero, Macrobius, Alain de Lille, Jean de Meun, and Dante. He demonstrates the tight verbal structure and the allusiveness of the poem, identifying the poetic and philosophical traditions of its central themes and images, and explicating the importance of love to Chaucer's representations of social and cosmological order. Love, in its tradition, is the natural binding force of the universe, even though man can only know this imperfectly (217).

Benson in "The Occasion of the *Parliament of Fowls*" reinspects the evidence for the occasion and the date of this poem and argues that it was written for the 1380 negotiations of marriage between Richard II and Anne of Bohemia. The political nature of the poem's Scipio section and its central concern with love and selection of a mate conform the occasion. New proof suggests both that three suitors vied for Anne's hand, like the poem's three eagles, and that the internal astrological reference to Venus was possible in 1380 (123-44).

Braddy in *Chaucer's "Parlement of Foules" in Relation to Contemporary Events* interprets this poem from a historical point of view, establishing the date of the poem as 1377 by internal astrological reference, and considering the poem as a result of Chaucer's involvement in the negotiations for the marriage of Richard II and Princess Marie of France. He summarizes the contemporary political relations between England and France. The conflict among the classes of birds reflects the actions of the Good and Bad Parliaments of 1376 and 1377, and the early dating

suggests Chaucer wrote this poem before *The House of Fame* which reflects relatively less Italian influence (120).

Brewer in "Introduction" of *Geoffrey Chaucer: "The Parlement of Foulys"* introduces the major concerns necessary to a full understanding of this poem: its occasion, literary convention, sources and background, rhetoric, language, meter, manuscripts, and themes. Particularly helpful are the discussions of rhetoric and mythology, and the thematic analysis of the poem as a delicate investigation of love and a structure "of opposites balanced if not entirely reconciled" (1-64).

Bronson in "In Appreciation of Chaucer's '*Parliament of Foules*'" has an early recognition of the structural and verbal irony of this poem, identifying the tensions between conventions of love visions and Chaucer's use of them in the poem. He assesses the function of Africanus, the depiction of Venus, and the impossible astrology of the narrator's invocation to the goddess. He regards the birds as "types of humanity" and the satirical focus of the poem as the "unreality of courtly love" (30).

Cawley in "Chaucer's Valentine: *The Parlement of Foules*" compares and contrasts the framing dream of Scipio and the dreamer's vision of the garden in order to demonstrate the poem's coherent expression of different kinds of love (125-39).

Cowgill in "*The Parlement of Foules* and the Body Politic" explores the political allegory of this poem, discussing the dominant opposition between common profit and social discord, the traditional value of Scipio as a wise temporal ruler, and the literary convention of representing the state as a garden. He thinks that a breakdown in natural law produces social discord (315-35).

Eldredge in "Poetry and Philosophy in the *Parlement of Foules*" uses the

language of philosophy to explore the relation between Venus and Nature in this poem, regarding Venus as a nominalistic representation of personal desire and Nature as a more overall realistic depiction of concern for the common profit. He does not argue that this poem is a philosophical study, but that the philosophy of universals underlies the patterns of thought and imagery in Chaucer's poem (441-59).

Jordan in *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* describes this poem structurally, identifying its "discontinuity and acentricity" of form, and denying that it has an organic unity. Following mediaeval rather than modern principles, the poem consists of "sharply articulated," various, and "loosely integrated" parts, which other critics have wrongly attempted to reconcile into unity (373-85).

Kearney in "*The Parliament of Fowls: The Narrator, the 'Certyn Thyng', and the 'Commune Profyt'*" articulates the "dynamic continuity of Love" in this poem, reading the poem's apparent tensions as evidence of the narrator's limited perception. Framed by the philosophy of Scipio, Nature's resolution to the love debate suggests that the plenitude of love is part of God's order (55-71).

Lumiansky in "*Chaucer's Parlement of Foules: A Philosophical Interpretation*" interprets the poem as a unified expression of Chaucer's unsuccessful search for a way of reconciling true and false happiness. The poem fulfills the poet's immediate need for a love poem for St. Valentine's Day and embodies his unfulfilled desire to justify love poetry and religious truth (81-9).

McCall in "*The Harmony of Chaucer's Parliament*" explains how the various types of discord in this poem resolve into a "dynamic harmony" once we recognize that final reconciliation is heavenly, not earthly. The discord of the birds, the duality

of the garden, and the diversity of the catalogues harmonize in the manner of Scipio's vision of the nine spheres (22-31).

McDonald in "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*" shows how the theme of common profit and the figure of tolerant Nature bridge the opposing views of the classes of birds in this poem. The realistic and idealistic attitudes of the birds are anticipated early in the poem by other contrastive pairs: the two versions of inscriptions on the gate, Priapus and Venus, etc. (444-57).

Olson in "*The Parlement of Foules: Aristotle's Politics and the Foundations of Human Society*" reads this poem as "a very great civic poem" which in its structure and images reflects the 14th-century English Parliament. "Common profit" and Christian charity are synonymous in the poem (53-69).

Pelen in "Form and Meaning of the Old French Love Vision: The Fableau dou Dieu d' Amors and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*" defines the characteristic structure, imagery, and themes of Old French (the 9th to 15th century) love visions, and applies these generic features to *The Parliament of Fowls*. Chaucer follows the tripartite structure of the tradition (visionary setting, questing love debate, and Court of Love) and its humorous, ironic preference for spiritual rather than earthly love (277-305).

Quilligan in "Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Deallegorization of Language" contrasts the literary modes of this poem and its sources, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose* and Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Natura*, demonstrating how Chaucer's oral, dramatic presentation differs from their overt "textuality," and how his mimesis differs from their allegories (163-83).

Rothschild in "*The Parliament of Fowls: Chaucer's Mirror up to Nature?*"

explores the numerological significance and astrological allegory of this poem, dating the poem by these means in 1384. He reads the poem as a celebration of the Neoplatonic world view, ordered and governed by Divine Love, a hierarchy from the cosmic to the secular in which the birds represent various classes of creatures (164-84).

Smith's impressionistic reading of this poem in "Mirth and Marriage in the *Parlement of Foules*" emphasizes its energy and humour. He suggests that the discontinuities of the poem reflect the nature of dreams and the nature of love (15-22).

Von Kreisler in "The Locus Amoenus and Eschatological Love in the *Parliament of Fowls*" identifies the "reminiscence of popular eschatological literature" in the description of the enclosed garden in this poem, associating it with the tradition of "pleasant place" (Latin: *locus amoenus*), and suggesting that it colours the "allegorical conception of love" in the poem (16-22).

Nevertheless, they do not mention Chaucer's view of nature and the natural history in the Middle Ages. The objective of this thesis is to analyze the three perspectives of nature in *The Parliament of Fowls*. By definition, "perspective" means the way that objects appear smaller when they are further away and the way parallel lines appear to meet each other at a point in the distance. On the level of thought, on the level of thought, means a particular way of considering something. In other words, it means a point of view. The perspective of nature is the way how human beings perceive the natural world. Human beings, as members of the whole nature, observe the environment and try to understand the world. Ancient people did not rely on science entirely; they used their cognition and imagination to form their knowledge of

the world. It is mixed with mythology, folklore, legend, and classical academics. In literature, the writers create a world, which is full of nature deities, imaginative animals and plants in the fantastic space and time. This is a humanistic way to recognize the world whose centre is man, not an abstract and remote God.

In this poem, the persona perceives and enjoys nature. He senses the existence of himself and nature. Through his senses, he projects a model of the world by setting nature deities, plants and animals in the methodized nature. It is rather a comparatively rare phenomenon in mediaeval literature. Even though the persona of mediaeval literature is surrounded by nature, the writers are never or seldom aware of this fact. The writers and readers of mediaeval literature seemed to neglect the pleasure from nature.

The thesis is divided into five parts. Chapter One is the introduction. Chapter Two discusses the structure of time and space. It will convey the concept of time and the design of the garden in the dream vision. Chapter Three discusses Flora and Fauna in the garden. Chaucer settles many kinds of plants and animals in the garden according to his knowledge from many sources. The plants and animals have symbolic meanings. The data shows us the cognition of nature people in the Middle Ages had. Chapter Four analyzes the Roman deities outside and inside the brass temple. There are seven gods and goddesses of fertility in the background of the dream vision. All of them share the attributes of love and sex. They are divinized drives of life and the origin of the nature. Chapter Five is the conclusion. The whole thesis would be concluded as a combination of “love of nature” and “nature of love”.