GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE CUCKOO AND THE NIGHTINGALE

[THE noble vindication of true love, as an exalting, purifying, and honour-conferring power, which Chaucer has made in "The Court of Love," is repeated in "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale." At the same time, the close of the poem leads up to "The Assembly of Fowls;" for, on the appeal of the Nightingale, the dispute between her and the Cuckoo, on the merits and blessings of love, is referred to a parliament of birds, to be held on the morrow after Saint Valentine's Day. True, the assembly of the feathered tribes described by Chaucer, though held on Saint Valentine's Day, and engaged in the discussion of a controversy regarding love, is not occupied with the particular cause which in the present poem the Nightingale appeals to the parliament. But "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" none the less serves as a link between the two poems; indicating as it does the nature of those controversies, in matters subject to the supreme control of the King and Queen of Love, which in the subsequent poem we find the courtiers, under the guise of birds, debating in full conclave and under legal forms. Exceedingly simple in conception, and written in a metre full of musical irregularity and forcible freedom, "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" yields in vividness, delicacy, and grace to none of Chaucer's minor poems. We are told that the poet, on the third night of May, is sleepless, and rises early in the morning, to try if he may hear the Nightingale sing. Wandering by a brook-side, he sits down on the flowery lawn, and ere long, lulled by the sweet melody of many birds and the well-according music of the stream, he falls into a kind of doze — "not all asleep, nor fully waking." Then (an evil omen) he hears the Cuckoo sing before the Nightingale; but soon he hears the Nightingale request the Cuckoo to remove far away, and leave the place to birds that can sing. The Cuckoo enters into a defence of her song, which becomes a railing accusation against Love and a recital of the miseries which Love's servants endure; the Nightingale vindicates Love in a lofty and tender strain, but is at last overcome with sorrow by the bitter words of the Cuckoo, and calls on the God of Love for help. On this the poet starts up, and, snatching a stone from the brook, throws it at the Cuckoo, who flies away full fast. The grateful Nightingale promises that, for this service, she will be her champion's singer all that May; she warns him against believing the Cuckoo, the foe of Love; and then, having sung him one of her new songs, she flies away to all the other birds that are in that dale, assembles them, and demands that they should do her right upon the Cuckoo. By one assent it is agreed that a parliament shall be held, "the morrow after Saint Valentine's Day," under a maple before the window of Queen Philippa at Woodstock, when judgment shall be passed upon the Cuckoo; then the Nightingale flies into a hawthorn, and sings a lay of love so loud that the poet awakes. The five-line stanza, of which the first, second, and fifth lines agree in one rhyme, the third and fourth in another, is peculiar to this poem; and while the prevailing measure is the decasyllabic line used in the "Canterbury Tales," many of the lines have one or

two syllables less. The poem is given here without abridgement.] (Transcriber's note: Modern scholars believe that Chaucer was not the author of this poem)

THE God of Love, ah! benedicite,
How mighty and how great a lord is he! <1>
For he can make of lowe heartes high,
And of high low, and like for to die,
And harde heartes he can make free.
He can make, within a little stound,* *moment
Of sicke folke whole, and fresh, and sound,
And of the whole he can make sick;
He can bind, and unbinden eke,
What he will have bounden or unbound.
To tell his might my wit may not suffice;
For he can make of wise folk full nice,* — *foolish
For he may do all that he will devise, —
And lither* folke to destroye vice, *idle, vicious
And proude heartes he can make agrise.* *tremble
Shortly, all that ever he will he may;
Against him dare no wight say nay;
For he can glad and grieve *whom him liketh.* *whom he pleases*
And who that he will, he laugheth or siketh,* *sigheth
And most his might he sheddeth ever in May.
For every true gentle hearte free,
That with him is, or thinketh for to be,
Against May now shall have some stirring,* *impulse
Either to joy, or else to some mourning,
In no season so much, as thinketh me.
For when that they may hear the birdes sing,
And see the flowers and the leaves spring,
That bringeth into hearte's remembrance
A manner ease, *medled with grievance,* *mingled with sorrow*
And lusty thoughtes full of great longing.
And of that longing cometh heaviness,
And thereof groweth greate sickeness,
And <2> for the lack of that that they desire:
And thus in May be heartes set on fire,
So that they brennen* forth in great distress. *burn
I speake this of feeling truely;
If I be old and unlusty,
Yet I have felt the sickness thorough May
Both hot and cold, an access ev'ry day, *every day a hot and a
How sore, y-wis, there wot no wight but I. cold fit*
I am so shaken with the fevers white,
Of all this May sleep I but lite;* *little

And also it is not like* unto me *pleasing
That any hearte shoulde sleepy be,
In whom that Love his fiery dart will smite,
But as I lay this other night waking,
I thought how lovers had a tokening,* *significance
And among them it was a common tale,
That it were good to hear the nightingale
Rather than the lewd cuckoo sing.
And then I thought, anon* it was day, *whenever
I would go somewhere to assay
If that I might a nightingale hear;
For yet had I none heard of all that year,
And it was then the thirde night of May.
And anon as I the day espied,
No longer would I in my bed abide;
But to a wood that was fast by,
I went forth alone boldely,
And held the way down by a brooke's side,
Till I came to a laund* of white and green, *lawn
So fair a one had I never in been;
The ground was green, *y-powder'd with daisy,* *strewn with daisies*
The flowers and the *greves like high,* *bushes of the same height*
All green and white; was nothing elles seen.
There sat I down among the faire flow'rs,
And saw the birdes trip out of their bow'rs,
There as they rested them alle the night;
They were so joyful of the daye's light,
They began of May for to do honours.
They coud* that service all by rote; *knew
There was many a lovely note!
Some sange loud as they had plain'd,
And some in other manner voice feign'd,
And some all out with the full throat.
They proined* them, and made them right gay, *preened their feathers
And danc'd and leapt upon the spray;
And evermore two and two in fere,* *together
Right so as they had chosen them to-year* *this year
In Feverere* upon Saint Valentine's Day. *February
And the river that I sat upon,* *beside
It made such a noise as it ran,
Accordant* with the birde's harmony, *keeping time with
Me thought it was the beste melody
That might be heard of any man.
And for delight, I wote never how,

I fell in such a slumber and a swow, — *swoon
Not all asleep, nor fully waking, —
And in that swow me thought I hearde sing
The sorry bird, the lewd cuckow;
And that was on a tree right faste by.
But who was then *evil apaid* but I? *dissatisfied
"Now God," quoth I, "that died on the crois,* *cross
Give sorrow on thee, and on thy lewed voice!
Full little joy have I now of thy cry."
And as I with the cuckoo thus gan chide,
I heard, in the next bush beside,
A nightingale so lustily sing,
That her clear voice she made ring
Through all the greenwood wide.
"Ah, good Nightingale," quoth I then,
"A little hast thou been too long hen;* *hence, absent
For here hath been the lewd cuckow,
And sung songs rather* than hast thou: *sooner
I pray to God that evil fire her bren!"* *burn
But now I will you tell a wondrous thing:
As long as I lay in that swooning,
Me thought I wist what the birds meant,
And what they said, and what was their intent
And of their speech I hadde good knowing.
There heard I the nightingale say:
"Now, good Cuckoo, go somewhere away,
And let us that can singe dwelle here;
For ev'ry wight escheweth* thee to hear, *shuns
Thy songes be so elenge,* in good fay."** *strange **faith
"What," quoth she, "what may thee all now
It thinketh me, I sing as well as thou,
For my song is both true and plain,
Although I cannot crakel* so in vain, *sing tremulously
As thou dost in thy throat, I wot ne'er how.
"And ev'ry wight may understande me,
But, Nightingale, so may they not do thee,
For thou hast many a nice quaint* cry; *foolish
I have thee heard say, 'ocy, ocy;' <3>
How might I know what that should be?"
"Ah fool," quoth she, "wost thou not what it is?
When that I say, 'ocy, ocy,' y-wis,
Then mean I that I woulde wonder fain
That all they were shamefully slain, *die
That meanen aught againe love amiss.

"And also I would that all those were dead,
That thinke not in love their life to lead,
For who so will the god of Love not serve,
I dare well say he is worthy to sterve,* *die
And for that skill,* 'ocy, ocy,' I grede."** *reason **cry
"Ey!" quoth the cuckoo, "this is a quaint* law, *strange
That every wight shall love or be to-draw!* *torn to pieces
But I forsake alle such company;
For mine intent is not for to die,
Nor ever, while I live, *on Love's yoke to draw.* *to put on love's yoke*
"For lovers be the folk that be alive,
That most disease have, and most unthrive,* *misfortune
And most endure sorrow, woe, and care,
And leaste feelen of welfare:
What needeth it against the truth to strive?"
"What?" quoth she, "thou art all out of thy mind!
How mightest thou in thy churlishness find
To speak of Love's servants in this wise?
For in this world is none so good service
To ev'ry wight that gentle is of kind;
"For thereof truly cometh all gladness,
All honour and all gentleness,
Worship, ease, and all hearte's lust,* *pleasure
Perfect joy, and full assured trust,
Jollity, pleasance, and freshness,
"Lowlihead, largess, and courtesy,
Seemelihead, and true company,
Dread of shame for to do amiss;
For he that truly Love's servant is,
Were lother* to be shamed than to die. *more reluctant
"And that this is sooth that I say,
In that belief I will live and dey;
And, Cuckoo, so I rede* that thou, do y-wis." *counsel
"Then," quoth he, "let me never have bliss,
If ever I to that counsail obey!
"Nightingale, thou speakest wondrous fair,
But, for all that, is the sooth contrair;
For love is in young folk but rage,
And in old folk a great dotage;
Who most it useth, moste shall enpair.* *suffer harm
"For thereof come disease and heaviness,
Sorrow and care, and many a great sickness,
Despite, debate, anger, envy,

Depraving,* shame, untrust, and jealousy, *loss of fame or character
Pride, mischief, povert', and woodness.* *madness
"Loving is an office of despair,
And one thing is therein that is not fair;
For who that gets of love a little bliss,
*But if he be away therewith, y-wis,
He may full soon of age have his hair.* *see note <5>*
"And, Nightingale, therefore hold thee nigh;
For, 'lieve me well, for all thy quainte cry,
If thou be far or longe from thy make,* *mate
Thou shalt be as other that be forsake,
And then thou shalt hoten* as do I." *be called
"Fie," quoth she, "on thy name and on thee!
The god of Love let thee never the!* *thrive
For thou art worse a thousand fold than wood,* *mad
For many one is full worthy and full good,
That had been naught, ne hadde Love y-be.
"For evermore Love his servants amendeth,
And from all evile taches* them defendeth, *blemishes
And maketh them to burn right in a fire,
In truth and in worshipful* desire, *honourable
And, when him liketh, joy enough them sendeth."
"Thou Nightingale," he said, "be still!
For Love hath no reason but his will;
For ofttime untrue folk he easeth,
And true folk so bitterly displeaseth,
That for default of grace* he lets them spill."** *favour **be ruined
Then took I of the nightingale keep,
How she cast a sigh out of her deep,
And said, "Alas, that ever I was bore!
I can for teen* not say one worde more;" *vexation, grief
And right with that word she burst out to weep.
"Alas!" quoth she, "my hearte will to-break
To heare thus this lewd bird speak
Of Love, and of his worshipful service.
Now, God of Love, thou help me in some wise,
That I may on this cuckoo be awreak!"* *revenged
Methought then I start up anon,
And to the brook I ran and got a stone,
And at the cuckoo heartly cast;
And for dread he flew away full fast,
And glad was I when he was gone.
And evermore the cuckoo, as he flay,* *flew
He saide, "Farewell, farewell, popinjay,"

As though he had scorned, thought me;
But ay I hunted him from the tree,
Until he was far out of sight away.
And then came the nightingale to me,
And said, "Friend, forsooth I thank thee
That thou hast lik'd me to rescow;* *rescue
And one avow to Love make I now,
That all this May I will thy singer be."
I thanked her, and was right *well apaid:* *satisfied
"Yea," quoth she, "and be thou not dismay'd,
Though thou have heard the cuckoo *erst than* me; <6> *before
For, if I live, it shall amended be
The next May, if I be not afraid.
"And one thing I will rede* thee also,
Believe thou not the cuckoo, the love's foe,
For all that he hath said is strong leasing."* *falsehood
"Nay," quoth I, "thereto shall nothing me bring
For love, and it hath done me much woe."
"Yea? Use," quoth she, "this medicine,
Every day this May ere thou dine:
Go look upon the fresh daisy,
And, though thou be for woe in point to die,
That shall full greatly less thee of thy pine.* *sorrow
"And look alway that thou be good and true,
And I will sing one of my songes new
For love of thee, as loud as I may cry:"
And then she began this song full high:
"I shrew* all them that be of love untrue." *curse
And when she had sung it to the end,
"Now farewell," quoth she, "for I must wend,* *go
And, God of Love, that can right well and may,
As much joy sende thee this day,
As any lover yet he ever send!"
Thus took the nightingale her leave of me.
I pray to God alway with her be,
And joy of love he send her evermore,
And shield us from the cuckoo and his lore;
For there is not so false a bird as he.
Forth she flew, the gentle nightingale,
To all the birdes that were in that dale,
And got them all into a place in fere,* *together
And besought them that they would hear
Her disease,* and thus began her tale. *distress, grievance
"Ye witte* well, it is not for to hide, *know

How the cuckoo and I fast have chide,* *quarrelled
Ever since that it was daylight;
I pray you all that ye do me right
On that foul false unkind bride."* *bird
Then spake one bird for all, by one assent:
"This matter asketh good advisement;
For we be fewe birdes here in fere,
And sooth it is, the cuckoo is not here,
And therefore we will have a parlement.
"And thereat shall the eagle be our lord,
And other peers that been *of record,* *of established authority*
And the cuckoo shall be *after sent;* *summoned
There shall be given the judgment,
Or else we shall finally *make accord.* *be reconciled*
"And this shall be, withoute nay,* *contradiction
The morrow after Saint Valentine's Day,
Under a maple that is fair and green,
Before the chamber window of the Queen, <7>
At Woodstock upon the green lay."* *lawn
She thanked them, and then her leave took,
And into a hawthorn by that brook,
And there she sat and sang upon that tree,
"Term of life love hath withhold me;" *love hath me in her
So loude, that I with that song awoke. service all my life*
Explicit.* *The End
The Author to His Book.
O LEWD book! with thy foul rudeness,
Since thou hast neither beauty nor eloquence,
Who hath thee caus'd or giv'n the hardiness
For to appear in my lady's presence?
I am full sicker* thou know'st her benevolence, *certain
Full agreeable to all her abying,* *merit
For of all good she is the best living.
Alas! that thou ne haddest worthiness,
To show to her some pleasant sentence,
Since that she hath, thorough her gentleness,
Accepted thee servant to her dign reverence!
O! me repenteth that I n'had science,
And leisure als', t'make thee more flourishing,
For of all good she is the best living.
Beseech her meekly with all lowliness,
Though I be ferre* from her in absence, *far
To think on my truth to her and steadfastness,
And to abridge of my sorrows the violence,

Which caused is whereof knoweth your sapience;* *wisdom
She like among to notify me her liking,
For of all good she is the best living.
Explicit.
L'Envoy; To the Author's Lady.
Aurore of gladness, day of lustiness,
Lucern* at night with heav'nly influence *lamp
Illumin'd, root of beauty and goodness,
Suspires* which I effund** in silence! *sighs **pour forth
Of grace I beseech, allege* let your writing *declare
Now of all good, since ye be best living.
Explicit.
Notes to the Cuckoo and the Nightingale
1. These two lines occur also in The Knight's Tale; they commence the speech of Theseus on the love follies of Palamon and Arcite, whom the Duke has just found fighting in the forest.
2. A stronger reading is "all."
3. "Ocy, ocy," is supposed to come from the Latin "occidere," to kill; or rather the old French, "occire," "occis," denoting the doom which the nightingale imprecates or supplicates on all who do offence to Love.
4. Grede: cry; Italian, "grido."
5."But if he be away therewith, y-wis, He may full soon of age have his hair": Unless he be always fortunate in love pursuits, he may full soon have gray hair, through his anxieties.
6. It was of evil omen to hear the cuckoo before the nightingale or any other bird.
7. The Queen: Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III.