GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE ASSEMBLY OF FOWLS

[In "The Assembly of Fowls" — which Chaucer's "Retractation" describes as "The Book of Saint Valentine's Day, or of the Parliament of Birds" — we are presented with a picture of the mediaeval "Court of Love" far closer to the reality than we find in Chaucer's poem which bears that express title. We have a regularly constituted conclave or tribunal, under a president whose decisions are final. A difficult question is proposed for the consideration and judgment of the Court — the disputants advancing and vindicating their claims in person. The attendants upon the Court, through specially chosen mouthpieces, deliver their opinions on the cause; and finally a decision is authoritatively pronounced by the president — which, as in many of the cases actually judged before the Courts of Love in France, places the reasonable and modest wish of a sensitive and chaste lady above all the eagerness of her lovers, all the incongruous counsels of representative courtiers. So far, therefore, as the poem reproduces the characteristic features of procedure in those romantic Middle Age halls of amatory justice, Chaucer's "Assembly of Fowls" is his real "Court of Love;" for although, in the castle and among the courtiers of Admetus and Alcestis, we have all the personages and machinery necessary for one of those erotic contentions, in the present poem we see the personages and the machinery actually at work, upon another scene and under other guises. The allegory which makes the contention arise out of the loves, and proceed in the assembly, of the feathered race, is quite in keeping with the fanciful yet nature-loving spirit of the poetry of Chaucer's time, in which the influence of the Troubadours was still largely present. It is quite in keeping, also, with the principles that regulated the Courts, the purpose of which was more to discuss and determine the proper conduct of love affairs, than to secure conviction or acquittal, sanction or reprobation, in particular cases — though the jurisdiction and the judgments of such assemblies often closely concerned individuals. Chaucer introduces us to his main theme through the vestibule of a fancied dream — a method which be repeatedly employs with great relish, as for instance in "The House of Fame." He has spent the whole day over Cicero's account of the Dream of Scipio (Africanus the Younger); and, having gone to bed, he dreams that Africanus the Elder appears to him — just as in the book he appeared to his namesake — and carries him into a beautiful park, in which is a fair garden by a river-side. Here the poet is led into a splendid temple, through a crowd of courtiers allegorically representing the various instruments, pleasures, emotions, and encouragements of Love; and in the temple Venus herself is found, sporting with her porter Richess. Returning into the garden, he sees the Goddess of Nature seated on a hill of flowers; and before her are assembled all the birds — for it is Saint Valentine's Day, when every fowl chooses her mate. Having with a graphic touch enumerated and described the principal birds, the poet sees that on her hand Nature bears a female eagle of surpassing loveliness and virtue,

for which three male eagles advance contending claims. The disputation lasts all day; and at evening the assembled birds, eager to be gone with their mates, clamour for a decision. The tercelet, the goose, the cuckoo, and the turtle — for birds of prey, water-fowl, worm-fowl, and seed-fowl respectively — pronounce their verdicts on the dispute, in speeches full of character and humour; but Nature refers the decision between the three claimants to the female eagle herself, who prays that she may have a year's respite. Nature grants the prayer, pronounces judgment accordingly, and dismisses the assembly; and after a chosen choir has sung a roundel in honour of the Goddess, all the birds fly away, and the poet awakes. It is probable that Chaucer derived the idea of the poem from a French source; Mr Bell gives the outline of a fabliau, of which three versions existed, and in which a contention between two ladies regarding the merits of their respective lovers, a knight and a clerk, is decided by Cupid in a Court composed of birds, which assume their sides according to their different natures. Whatever the source of the idea, its management, and the whole workmanship of the poem, especially in the more humorous passages, are essentially Chaucer's own.]

THE life so short, the craft so long to learn,
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering,
The dreadful joy, alway that *flits so yern;* *fleets so fast*
All this mean I by* Love, that my feeling *with reference to
Astoneth* with his wonderful working, *amazes
So sore, y-wis, that, when I on him think,
Naught wit I well whether I fleet* or sink, *float
For *all be* that I know not Love indeed, *albeit, although*
Nor wot how that he *quiteth folk their hire,* *rewards folk for
Yet happeth me full oft in books to read their service*
Of his miracles, and of his cruel ire;
There read I well, he will be lord and sire;
I dare not saye, that his strokes be sore;
But God save such a lord! I can no more.
Of usage, what for lust and what for lore,
On bookes read I oft, as I you told.
But wherefore speak I alle this? Not yore
Agone, it happed me for to behold
Upon a book written with letters old;
And thereupon, a certain thing to learn,
The longe day full fast I read and yern.* *eagerly
For out of the old fieldes, as men saith,
Cometh all this new corn, from year to year;
And out of olde bookes, in good faith,
Cometh all this new science that men lear.* *learn
But now to purpose as of this mattere:
To reade forth it gan me so delight,
That all the day me thought it but a lite.* *little while

This book, of which I make mention,
Entitled was right thus, as I shall tell;
"Tullius, of the Dream of Scipion:" <1>
Chapters seven it had, of heav'n, and hell,
And earth, and soules that therein do dwell;
Of which, as shortly as I can it treat,
Of his sentence I will you say the great.* *important part
First telleth it, when Scipio was come
To Africa, how he met Massinisse,
That him for joy in armes hath y-nome.* *taken <2>
Then telleth he their speech, and all the bliss
That was between them till the day gan miss.* *fail
And how his ancestor Africane so dear
Gan in his sleep that night to him appear.
Then telleth it, that from a starry place
How Africane hath him Carthage y-shew'd,
And warned him before of all his grace, <3>
And said him, what man, learned either lewd,* *ignorant
That loveth *common profit,* well y-thew'd, *the public advantage*
He should unto a blissful place wend,* *go
Where as the joy is without any end.
Then asked he,* if folk that here be dead *i.e. the younger Scipio
Have life, and dwelling, in another place?
And Africane said, "Yea, withoute dread;"* *doubt
And how our present worldly lives' space
Meant but a manner death, <4> what way we trace;
And rightful folk should go, after they die,
To Heav'n; and showed him the galaxy.
Then show'd he him the little earth that here is,
To regard the heaven's quantity; *by comparison with
And after show'd he him the nine spheres; <5>
And after that the melody heard he,
That cometh of those spheres thrice three,
That wells of music be and melody
In this world here, and cause of harmony.
Then said he him, since earthe was so lite,* *small
And full of torment and of *harde grace,* *evil fortune
That he should not him in this world delight.
Then told he him, in certain yeares' space,
That ev'ry star should come into his place,
Where it was first; and all should *out of mind,* *perish from memory*
That in this world is done of all mankind.
Then pray'd him Scipio, to tell him all
The way to come into that Heaven's bliss;

And he said: "First know thyself immortal,
And look aye busily that thou work and wiss* *guide affairs
To common profit, and thou shalt not miss
To come swiftly unto that place dear,
That full of bliss is, and of soules clear.* *noble <6>
"And breakers of the law, the sooth to sayn,
And likerous* folk, after that they be dead, *lecherous
Shall whirl about the world always in pain,
Till many a world be passed, *out of dread;* *without doubt*
And then, forgiven all their wicked deed,
They shalle come unto that blissful place,
To which to come God thee sende grace!"
The day gan failen, and the darke night,
That reaveth* beastes from their business, *taketh away
Berefte me my book for lack of light,
And to my bed I gan me for to dress,* *prepare
Full fill'd of thought and busy heaviness;
For both I hadde thing which that I n'old,* *would not
And eke I had not that thing that I wo'ld.
But, finally, my spirit at the last,
Forweary* of my labour all that day, *utterly wearied
Took rest, that made me to sleepe fast;
And in my sleep I mette,* as that I say, *dreamed
How Africane, right in the *self array* *same garb*
That Scipio him saw before that tide,* *time
Was come, and stood right at my bedde's side.
The weary hunter, sleeping in his bed,
To wood again his mind goeth anon;
The judge dreameth how his pleas be sped;
The carter dreameth how his cartes go'n;
The rich of gold, the knight fights with his fone;* *foes
The sicke mette he drinketh of the tun; <7>
The lover mette he hath his lady won.
I cannot say, if that the cause were,
For* I had read of Africane beforn, *because
That made me to mette that he stood there;
But thus said he; "Thou hast thee so well borne
In looking of mine old book all to-torn,
Of which Macrobius *raught not a lite,* *recked not a little*
That *somedeal of thy labour would I quite."* *I would reward you for some of your labour*
Cytherea, thou blissful Lady sweet!
That with thy firebrand dauntest *when thee lest,* *when you please*
That madest me this sweven* for to mette, *dream

Be thou my help in this, for thou may'st best!
As wisly* as I saw the north-north-west, <8> *surely
When I began my sweven for to write,
So give me might to rhyme it and endite.* *write down
This foresaid Africane me hent* anon, *took
And forth with him unto a gate brought
Right of a park, walled with greene stone;
And o'er the gate, with letters large y-wrought,
There were verses written, as me thought,
On either half, of full great difference,
Of which I shall you say the plain sentence.* *meaning
"Through me men go into the blissful place <9>
Of hearte's heal and deadly woundes' cure;
Through me men go unto the well of grace;
Where green and lusty May shall ever dure;
This is the way to all good adventure;
Be glad, thou reader, and thy sorrow off cast;
All open am I; pass in and speed thee fast."
"Through me men go," thus spake the other side,
"Unto the mortal strokes of the spear,
Of which disdain and danger is the guide;
There never tree shall fruit nor leaves bear;
This stream you leadeth to the sorrowful weir,
Where as the fish in prison is all dry; <10>
Th'eschewing is the only remedy."
These verses of gold and azure written were,
On which I gan astonish'd to behold;
For with that one increased all my fear,
And with that other gan my heart to bold;* *take courage
That one me het,* that other did me cold; *heated
No wit had I, for error,* for to choose *perplexity, confusion
To enter or fly, or me to save or lose.
Right as betwixten adamantes* two *magnets
Of even weight, a piece of iron set,
Ne hath no might to move to nor fro;
For what the one may hale,* the other let;** *attract **restrain
So far'd I, that *n'ist whether me was bet* *knew not whether it was
T' enter or leave, till Africane, my guide, better for me*
Me hent* and shov'd in at the gates wide. *caught
And said, "It standeth written in thy face,
Thine error,* though thou tell it not to me; *perplexity, confusion
But dread thou not to come into this place;
For this writing *is nothing meant by* thee, *does not refer to*
Nor by none, but* he Love's servant be; *unless

For thou of Love hast lost thy taste, I guess,
As sick man hath of sweet and bitterness.
"But natheless, although that thou be dull,
That thou canst not do, yet thou mayest see;
For many a man that may not stand a pull,
Yet likes it him at wrestling for to be,
And deeme* whether he doth bet,** or he; *judge **better
And, if thou haddest cunning* to endite, *skill
I shall thee showe matter *of to write."* *to write about*
With that my hand in his he took anon,
Of which I comfort caught,* and went in fast. *took
But, Lord! so I was glad and well-begone!* *fortunate
For *over all,* where I my eyen cast, *everywhere*
Were trees y-clad with leaves that ay shall last,
Each in his kind, with colour fresh and green
As emerald, that joy it was to see'n.
The builder oak; and eke the hardy ash;
The pillar elm, the coffer unto carrain;
The box, pipe tree; the holm, to whippe's lash
The sailing fir; the cypress death to plain;
The shooter yew; the aspe for shaftes plain;
Th'olive of peace, and eke the drunken vine;
The victor palm; the laurel, too, divine. <11>
A garden saw I, full of blossom'd boughes,
Upon a river, in a greene mead,
Where as sweetness evermore enow is,
With flowers white, blue, yellow, and red,
And colde welle* streames, nothing dead, *fountain
That swamme full of smalle fishes light,
With finnes red, and scales silver bright.
On ev'ry bough the birdes heard I sing,
With voice of angels in their harmony,
That busied them their birdes forth to bring;
The pretty conies* to their play gan hie; *rabbits **haste
And further all about I gan espy
The dreadful* roe, the buck, the hart, and hind, *timid
Squirrels, and beastes small, of gentle kind.* *nature
Of instruments of stringes in accord
Heard I so play a ravishing sweetness,
That God, that Maker is of all and Lord,
Ne hearde never better, as I guess:
Therewith a wind, unneth* it might be less, *scarcely
Made in the leaves green a noise soft,
Accordant* the fowles' song on loft.** *in keeping with **above

Th'air of the place so attemper* was, *mild
That ne'er was there grievance* of hot nor cold; *annoyance
There was eke ev'ry wholesome spice and grass,
Nor no man may there waxe sick nor old:
Yet* was there more joy a thousand fold *moreover
Than I can tell, or ever could or might;
There ever is clear day, and never night.
Under a tree, beside a well, I sey* *saw
Cupid our lord his arrows forge and file;* *polish
And at his feet his bow all ready lay;
And well his daughter temper'd, all the while,
The heades in the well; and with her wile* *cleverness
She couch'd* them after, as they shoulde serve *arranged in order
Some for to slay, and some to wound and kerve.* *carve, cut
Then was I ware of Pleasance anon right,
And of Array, and Lust, and Courtesy,
And of the Craft, that can and hath the might
To do* by force a wight to do folly; *make
Disfigured* was she, I will not lie; *disguised
And by himself, under an oak, I guess,
Saw I Delight, that stood with Gentleness.
Then saw I Beauty, with a nice attire,
And Youthe, full of game and jollity,
Foolhardiness, Flattery, and Desire,
Messagerie, and Meed, and other three; <12>
Their names shall not here be told for me:
And upon pillars great of jasper long
I saw a temple of brass y-founded strong.
And [all] about the temple danc'd alway
Women enough, of whiche some there were
Fair of themselves, and some of them were gay
In kirtles* all dishevell'd went they there; *tunics
That was their office* ever, from year to year; *duty, occupation
And on the temple saw I, white and fair,
Of doves sitting many a thousand pair. <13>
Before the temple door, full soberly,
Dame Peace sat, a curtain in her hand;
And her beside, wonder discreetely,
Dame Patience sitting there I fand,* *found
With face pale, upon a hill of sand;
And althernext, within and eke without,
Behest,* and Art, and of their folk a rout.** *Promise **crowd
Within the temple, of sighes hot as fire
I heard a swough,* that gan aboute ren,** *murmur **run

Which sighes were engender'd with desire,
That made every hearte for to bren* *burn
Of newe flame; and well espied I then,
That all the cause of sorrows that they dree* *endure
Came of the bitter goddess Jealousy.
The God Priapus <14> saw I, as I went
Within the temple, in sov'reign place stand,
In such array, as when the ass him shent* <15> *ruined
With cry by night, and with sceptre in hand:
Full busily men gan assay and fand* *endeavour
Upon his head to set, of sundry hue,
Garlandes full of freshe flowers new.
And in a privy corner, in disport,
Found I Venus and her porter Richess,
That was full noble and hautain* of her port; *haughty <16>
Dark was that place, but afterward lightness
I saw a little, unneth* it might be less; *scarcely
And on a bed of gold she lay to rest,
Till that the hote sun began to west.* *decline towards the wesr
Her gilded haires with a golden thread
Y-bounden were, untressed,* as she lay; *loose
And naked from the breast unto the head
Men might her see; and, soothly for to say,
The remnant cover'd, welle to my pay,* *satisfaction <17>
Right with a little kerchief of Valence;<18>
There was no thicker clothe of defence.
The place gave a thousand savours swoot;* *sweet
And Bacchus, god of wine, sat her beside;
And Ceres next, that *doth of hunger boot;*<19> *relieves hunger*
And, as I said, amiddes* lay Cypride, <20> *in the midst
To whom on knees the younge folke cried
To be their help: but thus I let her lie,
And farther in the temple gan espy,
<See note 21 for the stories of the lovers in the next two stanzas>
That, in despite of Diana the chaste,
Full many a bowe broke hung on the wall,
Of maidens, such as go their time to waste
In her service: and painted over all
Of many a story, of which I touche shall
A few, as of Calist', and Atalant',
And many a maid, of which the name I want.* *do not have
Semiramis, Canace, and Hercules,
Biblis, Dido, Thisbe and Pyramus,
Tristram, Isoude, Paris, and Achilles,

Helena, Cleopatra, Troilus,
Scylla, and eke the mother of Romulus;
All these were painted on the other side,
And all their love, and in what plight they died.
When I was come again into the place
That I of spake, that was so sweet and green,
Forth walk'd I then, myselfe to solace:
Then was I ware where there sat a queen,
That, as of light the summer Sunne sheen
Passeth the star, right so *over measure* *out of all proportion*
She fairer was than any creature.
And in a lawn, upon a hill of flowers,
Was set this noble goddess of Nature;
Of branches were her halles and her bowers
Y-wrought, after her craft and her measure;
Nor was there fowl that comes of engendrure
That there ne were prest,* in her presence, *ready <22>
To *take her doom,* and give her audience. *receive her decision*
For this was on Saint Valentine's Day,
When ev'ry fowl cometh to choose her make,* *mate
Of every kind that men thinken may;
And then so huge a noise gan they make,
That earth, and sea, and tree, and ev'ry lake,
So full was, that unnethes* there was space *scarcely
For me to stand, so full was all the place.
And right as Alain, in his Plaint of Kind, <23>
Deviseth* Nature of such array and face; *describeth
In such array men mighte her there find.
This noble Emperess, full of all grace,
Bade ev'ry fowle take her owen place,
As they were wont alway, from year to year,
On Saint Valentine's Day to stande there.
That is to say, the *fowles of ravine* *birds of prey*
Were highest set, and then the fowles smale,
That eaten as them Nature would incline;
As worme-fowl, of which I tell no tale;
But waterfowl sat lowest in the dale,
And fowls that live by seed sat on the green,
And that so many, that wonder was to see'n.
There mighte men the royal eagle find,
That with his sharpe look pierceth the Sun;
And other eagles of a lower kind,
Of which that *clerkes well devise con;* *which scholars well
There was the tyrant with his feathers dun can describe*

And green, I mean the goshawk, that doth pine* *cause pain
To birds, for his outrageous ravine.* *slaying, hunting
The gentle falcon, that with his feet distraineth* *grasps
The kinge's hand; <24> the hardy* sperhawk eke, *pert
The quaile's foe; the merlion <25> that paineth
Himself full oft the larke for to seek;
There was the dove, with her eyen meek;
The jealous swan, against* his death that singeth; *in anticipation of
The owl eke, that of death the bode* bringeth. *omen
The crane, the giant, with his trumpet soun';
The thief the chough; and eke the chatt'ring pie;
The scorning jay; <26> the eel's foe the heroun;
The false lapwing, full of treachery; <27>
The starling, that the counsel can betray;
The tame ruddock,* and the coward kite; *robin-redbreast
The cock, that horologe* is of *thorpes lite.* *clock *little villages*
The sparrow, Venus' son; <28> the nightingale,
That calleth forth the freshe leaves new; <29>
The swallow, murd'rer of the bees smale,
That honey make of flowers fresh of hue;
The wedded turtle, with his hearte true;
The peacock, with his angel feathers bright; <30>
The pheasant, scorner of the cock by night; <31>
The waker goose; <32> the cuckoo ever unkind; <33>
The popinjay,* full of delicacy; *parrot
The drake, destroyer of his owen kind; <34>
The stork, the wreaker* of adultery; <35> *avenger
The hot cormorant, full of gluttony; <36>
The raven and the crow, with voice of care; <37>
The throstle old;* and the frosty fieldfare.<38> *long-lived
What should I say? Of fowls of ev'ry kind
That in this world have feathers and stature,
Men mighten in that place assembled find,
Before that noble goddess of Nature;
And each of them did all his busy cure* *care, pains
Benignely to choose, or for to take,
By her accord,* his formel <39> or his make.** *consent **mate
But to the point. Nature held on her hand
A formel eagle, of shape the gentilest
That ever she among her workes fand,
The most benign, and eke the goodliest;
In her was ev'ry virtue at its rest,* *highest point
So farforth that Nature herself had bliss
To look on her, and oft her beak to kiss.

Nature, the vicar of th'Almighty Lord, —
That hot, cold, heavy, light, and moist, and dry,
Hath knit, by even number of accord, —
In easy voice began to speak, and say:
"Fowles, take heed of my sentence,"* I pray; *opinion, discourse
And for your ease, in furth'ring of your need,
As far as I may speak, I will me speed.
"Ye know well how, on Saint Valentine's Day,
By my statute, and through my governance,
Ye choose your mates, and after fly away
With them, as I you *pricke with pleasance;* *inspire with pleasure*
But natheless, as by rightful ordinance,
May I not let,* for all this world to win, *hinder
But he that most is worthy shall begin.
"The tercel eagle, as ye know full weel,* *well
The fowl royal, above you all in degree,
The wise and worthy, secret, true as steel,
The which I formed have, as ye may see,
In ev'ry part, as it best liketh me, —
It needeth not his shape you to devise,* — *describe
He shall first choose, and speaken *in his guise.* *in his own way*
"And, after him, by order shall ye choose,
After your kind, evereach as you liketh;
And as your hap* is, shall ye win or lose; *fortune
But which of you that love most entriketh,* *entangles <40>
God send him her that sorest for him siketh."* *sigheth
And therewithal the tercel gan she call,
And said, "My son, the choice is to thee fall.
"But natheless, in this condition
Must be the choice of ev'reach that is here,
That she agree to his election,
Whoso he be, that shoulde be her fere;* *companion
This is our usage ay, from year to year;
And whoso may at this time have this grace,
In blissful time he came into this place." *in a happy hour*
With head inclin'd, and with full humble cheer,* *demeanour
This royal tercel spake, and tarried not:
"Unto my sov'reign lady, and not my fere,* *companion
I chose and choose, with will, and heart, and thought,
The formel on your hand, so well y-wrought,
Whose I am all, and ever will her serve,
Do what her list, to do me live or sterve.* *die
"Beseeching her of mercy and of grace,
As she that is my lady sovereign,

Or let me die here present in this place,
For certes long may I not live in pain;
For in my heart is carven ev'ry vein: *every vein in my heart is
Having regard only unto my truth, wounded with love*
My deare heart, have on my woe some ruth.* *pity
"And if that I be found to her untrue,
Disobeisant,* or wilful negligent, *disobedient
Avaunter,* or *in process* love a new, *braggart *in the course
I pray to you, this be my judgement, of time*
That with these fowles I be all to-rent,* *torn to pieces
That ilke* day that she me ever find *same
To her untrue, or in my guilt unkind.
"And since none loveth her so well as I,
Although she never of love me behet,* *promised
Then ought she to be mine, through her mercy;
For *other bond can I none on her knit;* *I can bind her no other way*
For weal or for woe, never shall I let* *cease, fail
To serve her, how far so that she wend;* *go
Say what you list, my tale is at an end."
Right as the freshe redde rose new
Against the summer Sunne colour'd is,
Right so, for shame, all waxen gan the hue
Of this formel, when she had heard all this;
Neither she answer'd well, nor said amiss, *she answered nothing,
So sore abashed was she, till Nature either well or ill*
Said, "Daughter, dread you not, I you assure."* *confirm, support
Another tercel eagle spake anon,
Of lower kind, and said that should not be;
"I love her better than ye do, by Saint John!
Or at the least I love her as well as ye,
And longer have her serv'd in my degree;
And if she should have lov'd for long loving,
To me alone had been the guerdoning.* *reward
"I dare eke say, if she me finde false,
Unkind, janglere,* rebel in any wise, *boastful
Or jealous, *do me hange by the halse;* *hang me by the neck*
And but* I beare me in her service *unless
As well ay as my wit can me suffice,
From point to point, her honour for to save,
Take she my life and all the good I have."
A thirde tercel eagle answer'd tho:* *then
"Now, Sirs, ye see the little leisure here;
For ev'ry fowl cries out to be ago
Forth with his mate, or with his lady dear;

And eke Nature herselfe will not hear,
For tarrying her, not half that I would say;
And but* I speak, I must for sorrow dey.** *unless **die
Of long service avaunt* I me no thing, *boast
But as possible is me to die to-day,
For woe, as he that hath been languishing
This twenty winter; and well happen may
A man may serve better, and *more to pay,* *with more satisfaction*
In half a year, although it were no more.
Than some man doth that served hath *full yore.* *for a long time*
"I say not this by me for that I can
Do no service that may my lady please;
But I dare say, I am her truest man,* *liegeman, servant
As to my doom, and fainest would her please; *in my judgement
At shorte words, until that death me seize, *in one word*
I will be hers, whether I wake or wink.
And true in all that hearte may bethink."
Of all my life, since that day I was born,
So gentle plea, in love or other thing, *such noble pleading*
Ye hearde never no man me beforn;
Whoso that hadde leisure and cunning* *skill
For to rehearse their cheer and their speaking:
And from the morrow gan these speeches last,
Till downward went the Sunne wonder fast.
The noise of fowles for to be deliver'd* *set free to depart
So loude rang, "Have done and let us wend,"* *go
That well ween'd I the wood had all to-shiver'd:* *been shaken to
"Come off!" they cried; "alas! ye will us shend!* pieces* *ruin
When will your cursed pleading have an end?
How should a judge either party believe,
For yea or nay, withouten any preve?"* *proof
The goose, the duck, and the cuckoo also,
So cried "keke, keke," "cuckoo," "queke queke," high,
That through mine ears the noise wente tho.* *then
The goose said then, "All this n'is worth a fly!
But I can shape hereof a remedy;
And I will say my verdict, fair and swith,* *speedily
For water-fowl, whoso be wroth or blith."* *glad
"And I for worm-fowl," said the fool cuckow;
For I will, of mine own authority,
For common speed,* take on me the charge now; *advantage
For to deliver us is great charity."
"Ye may abide a while yet, pardie,"* *by God
Quoth then the turtle; "if it be your will

A wight may speak, it were as good be still.
"I am a seed-fowl, one th'unworthiest,
That know I well, and the least of cunning;
But better is, that a wight's tongue rest,
Than *entremette him of* such doing *meddle with* <41>
Of which he neither rede* can nor sing; *counsel
And who it doth, full foul himself accloyeth,* *embarrasseth
For office uncommanded oft annoyeth."
Nature, which that alway had an ear
To murmur of the lewedness behind,
With facond* voice said, "Hold your tongues there, *eloquent, fluent
And I shall soon, I hope, a counsel find,
You to deliver, and from this noise unbind;
I charge of ev'ry flock* ye shall one call, *class of fowl
To say the verdict of you fowles all."
The tercelet* said then in this mannere; *male hawk
"Full hard it were to prove it by reason,
Who loveth best this gentle formel here;
For ev'reach hath such replication,* *reply
That by skilles* may none be brought adown; *arguments
I cannot see that arguments avail;
Then seemeth it that there must be battaile."
"All ready!" quoth those eagle tercels tho;* *then
"Nay, Sirs!" quoth he; "if that I durst it say,
Ye do me wrong, my tale is not y-do,* *done
For, Sirs, — and *take it not agrief,* I pray, — *be not offended*
It may not be as ye would, in this way:
Ours is the voice that have the charge in hand,
And *to the judges' doom ye muste stand.* *ye must abide by the judges' decision*
"And therefore 'Peace!' I say; as to my wit,
Me woulde think, how that the worthiest
Of knighthood, and had longest used it,
Most of estate, of blood the gentilest,
Were fitting most for her, *if that her lest;* *if she pleased*
And, of these three she knows herself, I trow,* *am sure
Which that he be; for it is light* to know." *easy
The water-fowles have their heades laid
Together, and *of short advisement,* *after brief deliberation*
When evereach his verdict had y-said
They saide soothly all by one assent,
How that "The goose with the *facond gent,* *refined eloquence*
That so desired to pronounce our need,* business
Shall tell our tale;" and prayed God her speed.

And for those water-fowles then began
The goose to speak. and in her cackeling
She saide, "Peace, now! take keep* ev'ry man, *heed
And hearken what reason I shall forth bring;
My wit is sharp, I love no tarrying;
I say I rede him, though he were my brother,
But* she will love him, let him love another!" *unless
"Lo! here a perfect reason of a goose!"
Quoth the sperhawke. "Never may she the!* *thrive
Lo such a thing 'tis t'have a tongue loose!
Now, pardie: fool, yet were it bet* for thee *better
Have held thy peace, than show'd thy nicety;* *foolishness
It lies not in his wit, nor in his will,
But sooth is said, a fool cannot be still."
The laughter rose of gentle fowles all;
And right anon the seed-fowls chosen had
The turtle true, and gan her to them call,
And prayed her to say the *soothe sad* *serious truth*
Of this mattere, and asked what she rad;* *counselled
And she answer'd, that plainly her intent
She woulde show, and soothly what she meant.
"Nay! God forbid a lover shoulde change!"
The turtle said, and wax'd for shame all red:
"Though that his lady evermore be strange,* *disdainful
Yet let him serve her ay, till he be dead;
For, sooth, I praise not the goose's rede* *counsel
For, though she died, I would none other make;* *mate
I will be hers till that the death me take."
"Well bourded!" quoth the ducke, "by my hat! *a pretty joke!*
That men should loven alway causeless,
Who can a reason find, or wit, in that?
Danceth he merry, that is mirtheless?
Who shoulde *reck of that is reckeless?* *care for one who has
Yea! queke yet," quoth the duck, "full well and fair! no care for him*
There be more starres, God wot, than a pair!" <42>
"Now fy, churl!" quoth the gentle tercelet,
"Out of the dunghill came that word aright;
Thou canst not see which thing is well beset;
Thou far'st by love, as owles do by light,—
The day them blinds, full well they see by night;
Thy kind is of so low a wretchedness,
That what love is, thou caust not see nor guess."
Then gan the cuckoo put him forth in press,* *in the crowd
For fowl that eateth worm, and said belive:* *quickly

"So I," quoth he, "may have my mate in peace,
I recke not how longe that they strive.
Let each of them be solain* all their life; *single <43>
This is my rede,* since they may not accord; *counsel
This shorte lesson needeth not record."
"Yea, have the glutton fill'd enough his paunch,
Then are we well!" saide the emerlon;* *merlin
"Thou murd'rer of the heggsugg,* on the branch *hedge-sparrow
That brought thee forth, thou most rueful glutton, <44>
Live thou solain, worme's corruption!
For no force is to lack of thy nature; *the loss of a bird of your
Go! lewed be thou, while the world may dare!" depraved nature is no
matter of regret.*
"Now peace," quoth Nature, "I commande here;
For I have heard all your opinion,
And in effect yet be we ne'er the nere.* *nearer
But, finally, this is my conclusion, —
That she herself shall have her election
Of whom her list, whoso be *wroth or blith;* *angry or glad*
Him that she chooseth, he shall her have as swith.* *quickly
"For since it may not here discussed be
Who loves her best, as said the tercelet,
Then will I do this favour t' her, that she
Shall have right him on whom her heart is set,
And he her, that his heart hath on her knit:
This judge I, Nature, for* I may not lie *because
To none estate; I *have none other eye.* *can see the matter in
no other light*
"But as for counsel for to choose a make,
If I were Reason, [certes] then would I
Counsaile you the royal tercel take,
As saith the tercelet full skilfully,* *reasonably
As for the gentilest, and most worthy,
Which I have wrought so well to my pleasance,
That to you it ought be *a suffisance."* *to your satisfaction*
With dreadful* voice the formel her answer'd: *frightened
"My rightful lady, goddess of Nature,
Sooth is, that I am ever under your yerd,* *rod, or government
As is every other creature,
And must be yours, while that my life may dure;
And therefore grante me my firste boon,* *favour
And mine intent you will I say right soon."
"I grant it you," said she; and right anon
This formel eagle spake in this degree:* *manner

"Almighty queen, until this year be done
I aske respite to advise me;
And after that to have my choice all free;
This is all and some that I would speak and say;
Ye get no more, although ye *do me dey.* *slay me*
"I will not serve Venus, nor Cupide,
For sooth as yet, by no manner [of] way."
"Now since it may none other ways betide,"* *happen
Quoth Dame Nature, "there is no more to say;
Then would I that these fowles were away,
Each with his mate, for longer tarrying here."
And said them thus, as ye shall after hear.
"To you speak I, ye tercels," quoth Nature;
"Be of good heart, and serve her alle three;
A year is not so longe to endure;
And each of you *pain him* in his degree *strive*
For to do well, for, God wot, quit is she
From you this year, what after so befall;
This *entremess is dressed* for you all." *dish is prepared*
And when this work y-brought was to an end,
To ev'ry fowle Nature gave his make,
By *even accord,* and on their way they wend: *fair agreement*
And, Lord! the bliss and joye that they make!
For each of them gan other in his wings take,
And with their neckes each gan other wind,* *enfold, caress
Thanking alway the noble goddess of Kind.
But first were chosen fowles for to sing,—
As year by year was alway their usance,* — *custom
To sing a roundel at their departing,
To do to Nature honour and pleasance;
The note, I trowe, maked was in France;
The wordes were such as ye may here find
The nexte verse, as I have now in mind:
Qui bien aime, tard oublie. <45>
"Now welcome summer, with thy sunnes soft,
That hast these winter weathers overshake * *dispersed, overcome
Saint Valentine, thou art full high on loft,
Which driv'st away the longe nightes blake;* *black
Thus singe smalle fowles for thy sake:
Well have they cause for to gladden* oft, *be glad, make mirth
Since each of them recover'd hath his make;* *mate
Full blissful may they sing when they awake."
And with the shouting, when their song was do,* *done
That the fowls maden at their flight away,

I woke, and other bookes took me to,
To read upon; and yet I read alway.
I hope, y-wis, to reade so some day,
That I shall meete something for to fare
The bet;* and thus to read I will not spare. *better
Explicit.* *the end

Notes to The Assembly of Fowls

1. "The Dream of Scipio" — "Somnium Scipionis" — occupies most of the sixth book of Cicero's "Republic;" which, indeed, as it has come down to us, is otherwise imperfect. Scipio Africanus Minor is represented as relating a dream which he had when, in B.C. 149, he went to Africa as military tribune to the fourth legion. He had talked long and earnestly of his adoptive grandfather with Massinissa, King of Numidia, the intimate friend of the great Scipio; and at night his illustrious ancestor appeared to him in a vision, foretold the overthrow of Carthage and all his other triumphs, exhorted him to virtue and patriotism by the assurance of rewards in the next world, and discoursed to him concerning the future state and the immortality of the soul. Macrobius, about AD. 500, wrote a Commentary upon the "Somnium Scipionis," which was a favourite book in the Middle Ages. See note 17 to The Nun's Priest's Tale.

2. Y-nome: taken; past participle of "nime," from Anglo-Saxon, "niman," to take.

3. His grace: the favour which the gods would show him, in delivering Carthage into his hands.

4. "Vestra vero, quae dicitur, vita mors est." ("Truly, as is said, your life is a death")

5. The nine spheres are God, or the highest heaven, constraining and containing all the others; the Earth, around which the planets and the highest heaven revolve; and the seven planets: the revolution of all producing the "music of the spheres."

6. Clear: illustrious, noble; Latin, "clarus."

7. The sicke mette he drinketh of the tun: The sick man dreams that he drinks wine, as one in health.

8. The significance of the poet's looking to the NNW is not plain; his window may have faced that way.

9. The idea of the twin gates, leading to the Paradise and the Hell of lovers, may have been taken from the description of the gates of dreams in the Odyssey and the Aeneid; but the iteration of "Through me men go" far more directly suggests the legend on Dante's gate of Hell:—

Per me si va nella citta dolente,
Per me si va nell' eterno dolore;
Per me si va tra la perduta gente.
("Through me is the way to the city of sorrow,
Through me is the way to eternal suffering;
Through me is the way of the lost people")

The famous line, "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi che entrate" — "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" — is evidently paraphrased in Chaucer's words "Th'eschewing is the only remedy;" that is, the sole hope consists in the avoidance of that dismal gate.

10. A powerful though homely description of torment; the sufferers being represented

as fish enclosed in a weir from which all the water has been withdrawn.
11. Compare with this catalogue raisonne of trees the ampler list given by Spenser in "The Faerie Queen," book i. canto i. In several instances, as in "the builder oak" and "the sailing pine," the later poet has exactly copied the words of the earlier. The builder oak: In the Middle Ages the oak was as distinctively the building timber on land, as it subsequently became for the sea. The pillar elm: Spenser explains this in paraphrasing it into "the vineprop elm" — because it was planted as a pillar or prop to the vine; it is called "the coffer unto carrain," or "carrion," because coffins for the dead were made from it. The box, pipe tree: the box tree was used for making pipes or horns. Holm: the holly, used for whip-handles. The sailing fir: Because ships' masts and spars were made of its wood. The cypress death to plain: in Spenser's imitation, "the cypress funeral." The shooter yew: yew wood was used for bows. The aspe for shaftes plain: of the aspen, or black poplar, arrows were made. The laurel divine: So called, either because it was Apollo's tree — Horace says that Pindar is "laurea donandus Apollinari" ("to be given Apollo's laurel") — or because the honour which it signified, when placed on the head of a poet or conqueror, lifted a man as it were into the rank of the gods.
12. If Chaucer had any special trio of courtiers in his mind when he excluded so many names, we may suppose them to be Charms, Sorcery, and Leasings who, in The Knight's Tale, come after Bawdry and Riches — to whom Messagerie (the carrying of messages) and Meed (reward, bribe) may correspond.
13. The dove was the bird sacred to Venus; hence Ovid enumerates the peacock of Juno, Jove's armour bearing bird, "Cythereiadasque columbas" ("And the Cythereian doves") — "Metamorphoses. xv. 386
14. Priapus: fitly endowed with a place in the Temple of Love, as being the embodiment of the principle of fertility in flocks and the fruits of the earth. See note 23 to the Merchant's Tale.
15. Ovid, in the "Fasti" (i. 433), describes the confusion of Priapus when, in the night following a feast of sylvan and Bacchic deities, the braying of the ass of Silenus wakened the company to detect the god in a furtive amatory expedition.
16. Hautain: haughty, lofty; French, "hautain."
17. Well to my pay: Well to my satisfaction; from French, "payer," to pay, satisfy; the same word often occurs, in the phrases "well apaid," and "evil apaid."
18. Valentia, in Spain, was famed for the fabrication of fine and transparent stuffs.
19. The obvious reference is to the proverbial "Sine Cerere et Libero friget Venus," ("Love is frozen without freedom and food") quoted in Terence, "Eunuchus," act iv. scene v.
20. Cypride: Venus; called "Cypria," or "Cypris," from the island of Cyprus, in which her worship was especially celebrated.
21. Callisto, daughter of Lycaon, was seduced by Jupiter, turned into a bear by Diana, and placed afterwards, with her son, as the Great Bear among the stars. Atalanta challenged Hippomenes, a Boetian youth, to a race in which the prize was her hand in marriage — the penalty of failure, death by her hand. Venus gave Hippomenes three golden apples, and he won by dropping them one at a time because Atalanta stopped

to pick them up. Semiramis was Queen of Ninus, the mythical founder of Babylon; Ovid mentions her, along with Lais, as a type of voluptuousness, in his "Amores," 1.5, 11. Canace, daughter of Aeolus, is named in the prologue to The Man of Law's Tale as one of the ladies whose "cursed stories" Chaucer refrained from writing. She loved her brother Macareus, and was slain by her father. Hercules was conquered by his love for Omphale, and spun wool for her in a woman's dress, while she wore his lion's skin. Biblis vainly pursued her brother Caunus with her love, till she was changed to a fountain; Ovid, "Metamorphoses." lib. ix. Thisbe and Pyramus: the Babylonian lovers, whose death, through the error of Pyramus in fancying that a lion had slain his mistress, forms the theme of the interlude in the "Midsummer Night's Dream." Sir Tristram was one of the most famous among the knights of King Arthur, and La Belle Isoude was his mistress. Their story is mixed up with the Arthurian romance; but it was also the subject of separate treatment, being among the most popular of the Middle Age legends. Achilles is reckoned among Love's conquests, because, according to some traditions, he loved Polyxena, the daughter of Priam, who was promised to him if he consented to join the Trojans; and, going without arms into Apollo's temple at Thymbra, he was there slain by Paris. Scylla: Love-stories are told of two maidens of this name; one the daughter of Nisus, King of Megara, who, falling in love with Minos when he besieged the city, slew her father by pulling out the golden hair which grew on the top of his head, and on which which his life and kingdom depended. Minos won the city, but rejected her love in horror. The other Scylla, from whom the rock opposite Charybdis was named, was a beautiful maiden, beloved by the sea-god Glaucus, but changed into a monster through the jealousy and enchantments of Circe. The mother of Romulus: Silvia, daughter and only living child of Numitor, whom her uncle Amulius made a vestal virgin, to preclude the possibility that his brother's descendants could wrest from him the kingdom of Alba Longa. But the maiden was violated by Mars as she went to bring water from a fountain; she bore Romulus and Remus; and she was drowned in the Anio, while the cradle with the children was carried down the stream in safety to the Palatine Hill, where the she-wolf adopted them.

22. Prest: ready; French, "pret."

23. Alanus de Insulis, a Sicilian poet and orator of the twelfth century, who wrote a book "De Planctu Naturae" — "The Complaint of Nature."

24. The falcon was borne on the hand by the highest personages, not merely in actual sport, but to be caressed and petted, even on occasions of ceremony, Hence also it is called the "gentle" falcon — as if its high birth and breeding gave it a right to august society.

25. The merlion: elsewhere in the same poem called "emerlon;" French, "emerillon;" the merlin, a small hawk carried by ladies.

26. The scorning jay: scorning humbler birds, out of pride of his fine plumage.

27. The false lapwing: full of stratagems and pretences to divert approaching danger from the nest where her young ones are.

28. The sparrow, Venus' son: Because sacred to Venus.

29. Coming with the spring, the nightingale is charmingly said to call forth the new

leaves.
30. Many-coloured wings, like those of peacocks, were often given to angels in paintings of the Middle Ages; and in accordance with this fashion Spenser represents the Angel that guarded Sir Guyon ("Faerie Queen," book ii. canto vii.) as having wings "decked with diverse plumes, like painted jay's."
31. The pheasant, scorner of the cock by night: The meaning of this passage is not very plain; it has been supposed, however, to refer to the frequent breeding of pheasants at night with domestic poultry in the farmyard — thus scorning the sway of the cock, its rightful monarch.
32. The waker goose: Chaucer evidently alludes to the passage in Ovid describing the crow of Apollo, which rivalled the spotless doves, "Nec servataris vigili Capitolia voce cederet anseribus" — "nor would it yield (in whiteness) to the geese destined with wakeful or vigilant voice to save the Capitol" ("Metam.," ii. 538) when about to be surprised by the Gauls in a night attack.
33. The cuckoo ever unkind: the significance of this epithet is amply explained by the poem of "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale."
34. The drake, destroyer: of the ducklings — which, if not prevented, he will kill wholesale.
35. The stork is conspicuous for faithfulness to all family obligations, devotion to its young, and care of its parent birds in their old age. Mr Bell quotes from Bishop Stanley's "History of Birds" a little story which peculiarly justifies the special character Chaucer has given: — "A French surgeon, at Smyrna, wishing to procure a stork, and finding great difficulty, on account of the extreme veneration in which they are held by the Turks, stole all the eggs out of a nest, and replaced them with those of a hen: in process of time the young chickens came forth, much to the astonishment of Mr and Mrs Stork. In a short time Mr S. went off, and was not seen for two or three days, when he returned with an immense crowd of his companions, who all assembled in the place, and formed a circle, taking no notice of the numerous spectators whom so unusual an occurrence had collected. Mrs Stork was brought forward into the midst of the circle, and, after some consultation, the whole flock fell upon her and tore her to pieces; after which they immediately dispersed, and the nest was entirely abandoned."
36. The cormorant feeds upon fish, so voraciously, that when the stomach is crammed it will often have the gullet and bill likewise full, awaiting the digestion of the rest.
37. So called from the evil omens supposed to be afforded by their harsh cries.
38. The fieldfare visits this country only in hard wintry weather.
39. "Formel," strictly or originally applied to the female of the eagle and hawk, is here used generally of the female of all birds; "tercel" is the corresponding word applied to the male.
40. Entriketh: entangles, ensnares; french, "intriguer," to perplex; hence "intricate."
41. Entremette him of: meddle with; French, ' entremettre," to interfere.
42. The duck exhorts the contending lovers to be of light heart and sing, for abundance of other ladies were at their command.
43. Solain: single, alone; the same word originally as "sullen."
44. The cuckoo is distinguished by its habit of laying its eggs in the nests of other and

smaller birds, such as the hedge-sparrow ("heggsugg"); and its young, when hatched, throw the eggs or nestlings of the true parent bird out of the nest, thus engrossing the mother's entire care. The crime on which the emerlon comments so sharply, is explained by the migratory habits of the cuckoo, which prevent its bringing up its own young; and nature has provided facilities for the crime, by furnishing the young bird with a peculiarly strong and broad back, indented by a hollow in which the sparrow's egg is lifted till it is thrown out of the nest.

45. "Who well loves, late forgets;" the refrain of the roundel inculcates the duty of constancy, which has been imposed on the three tercels by the decision of the Court.