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## *The Parlement of Foules: Aristotle's Politics and the Foundations of Human Society*

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*The Parlement of Foules:*  
Aristotle's *Politics* and the  
Foundations of Human Society

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**R**ECENT studies in *The Parlement of Foules* have made it fairly clear that the two fabulous places in the poem, Venus' hothouse and Nature's hill, are representations of contrasting systems of value or ways of loving. The primary emphasis of the criticism has been on the work as a "question d'amour" poem in which the debate concerns how human beings should conduct the amorous life or how love may be redirected toward the God of Nature and his glorious creation.<sup>1</sup> Without wishing to denigrate such interpretations, I want to urge an alternative view—one which sees the discussion of love between men and women primarily as vehicle for a discussion of the nature of the social and social love in general. Within this perspective, I would suggest that the inclusion of a "Parlement" is not fictional decoration, but a representation of that vehicle through which late medieval man found it most possible to develop his sense of sociability and conviviality.

I

The sources for my argument about Chaucer's *Parlement* are primarily late medieval neo-Aristotelian treatises on the nature of the political and social. As late medieval courts in northern Europe became somewhat more centralized, thinkers in those courts began to look at the nature of political conduct less from the perspective of single, personal loyalty between men located in a divinely arranged hierarchy—less from the

<sup>1</sup> J. A. W. Bennett, *The Parlement of Foules: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); D. W. Robertson and Bernard F. Huppé, *Fruyt and Chaf* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 101-48; D. S. Brewer, ed., *The Parlement of Foulys* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960).

perspective which makes the central political action of the disloyal follower Guenelon's remark to Charlemagne "I do not love you at all"—and more from the perspective of how groups of people acting in essentially corporate bodies work out problems of loyalty, goals, conflict of interest, and organization.<sup>2</sup> It should be recalled that a Christian frame allowed for no appeal to that selfishness or self-interest as the motor of society posited by Adam Smith, and the new thought had to deal with the question of how human beings in society, in corporate bodies, are able to love one another *through* the institutional forms of a more complex society.<sup>3</sup>

In the evolution of a tradition of thought which dealt with such questions, Aristotle's *Politics* was particularly helpful in that Aristotle provided a picture of how corporate institutions could support civic charity. The concept of the existence in the civic world of equivalents of cupidity and charity was conventional; natural law theory held that the civic equivalent of cupidity was the quest for "private profit," or what Chaucer calls "singular profit," and of charity was the quest for "the common profit."<sup>4</sup> The quest for the common profit, insofar as it was a natural instinct of man, could be seen as enlightened self-interest, but nature itself, in the case of the beasts and redeemed men, was seen as full

<sup>2</sup> Compare, for example, the picture of social relations in Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961) with that in May McKissack's *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). McKissack's remark that "when Edington became Chancellor in 1356 he found himself at the head of an elaborately organized bureaucracy" (p. 213) could be made about numerous fourteenth-century English figures.

<sup>3</sup> Initially the economic contracts which made Smith's description possible, based on self-interest and usury, had to be concealed under the language of "chevisaunces" (achievements) and terms of friendship as in *The Shipman's Tale*.

<sup>4</sup> For common profit and charity as analogues, see Nicolai Rubenstein, "Political Ideas in Sieneese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Publico," *JWCI*, 21 (1958), 185-86; cf. John Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Venice: D. Nicolinum, 1586), I, 155; St. Bonaventura, "Commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard," I, 33; II, 35; Henri de Gauschi, *Li Livres du Gouvernement des Rois*, ed. S. P. Molenaer (New York: MacMillan, 1899), p. 25. An anonymous fourteenth-century commentator on Boethius says "ffor Governours shulde be as the sonne: or the more in vertuous brichtness; more to comune profit than to singular . . ." Anon. comment on Boece, *West MS.* 2684, fol. 212. For Chaucer's use of singular profit, see *HF*, I, 310. For definitions of "singular profit" and related concepts current in Chaucer's time, see Bromyard, II, 304v; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, V, 21, and for a summary statement, Ewart Lewis, *Medieval Political Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 1954), I, 210; cf. Rhoda H. Selvin, "Shades of Love in the Parlement of Foules," *SN*, 37 (1966), 146-60.

of grace; and the human nature of redeemed men told them to serve the commonwealth as an expression of love.

The usefulness of Aristotle's *Politics* was that it provided a picture of how people can identify "the common profit." For Aristotle, what makes man human is his capacity for speech—for speaking together to identify species' interest. Thus, while bees and birds and other collective creatures find out what they should do corporately by listening to instinct, men find out what they should do by talking together in assemblies until they recognize what the common interest is.<sup>5</sup> It is not much of a step from this view of man to the medieval institution of *parlement*—of speaking together. It is not the purpose of this article to determine which came first, the practicing colloquia for determining institutional direction called "parlements" or the idea of such colloquia derived from Aristotle's thought. What is important is that, in Northern Europe and particularly in England, Neo-Aristotelian Christian thought having to do with the functions of civic speaking or thinking together and the institution of formal "Parlements" converged. The institution of speaking together was an important part of life on rural estates, in guilds, universities, and the central royal administrations. The importance of the tradition of thought which I am investigating to Northern European courts, particularly to the English and French courts, has not, so far as I know, been discussed. Walter Burley, Sir Simon Burley's father, edited Aristotle's *Politics* for Richard du Bury; Simon Burley, in turn, had Henry of Gauschi's translation of Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*, a Christianization of the *Politics*, in his library, and Simon was Richard II's tutor. Sir John Trevisa translated the whole of Giles into English prose and Thomas Hoccleve translated part of it mingled with other works into poetry while paying tribute to Chaucer in his *Regement of Princes*. Aristotle's *Politics* was translated into French for Charles V of France with commentary by Nicolas Oresme, and Giles appears prominently in Charles V's grand library.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, so far as I can discover, no other book about the conduct of political offices appears so often in

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2; III, 1; IV, 14.

<sup>6</sup> For Walter Burley's edition of Aristotle's *Politics*, see S. Harrison Thomson, "Walter Burley's Commentary of the *Politics* of Aristotle," *Melanges Auguste Pelzer* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1947), pp. 557–78. For Simon Burley's library including Henri de Gauschi, see Maud Clarke, *Fourteenth Century Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), pp. 120–21; Henri's version of Giles of Rome is *Li Livres du Gouvernement des Rois* cited *supra*, n. 4. Trevisa's translation of Giles is found in MS. Digby

Northern European libraries of men of affairs. It is not surprising that when Sir John Fortescue, Thomas Chaucer's lawyer, writes his *De Natura Legis Naturae*, he uses primarily St. Thomas' and Giles' arguments about the nature of the political and social, and when he praises the laws of England as opposed to France, he emphasizes the consultative parliamentary nature of British monarchy.<sup>7</sup>

Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* is, I think, a picture of how people discover civic charity through institutions for "speaking together"; it is drawn to explore Aristotle's and Giles' thought, and the implications of those institutions for deliberation which existed in Chaucer's own time. The work opens, as do many of Chaucer's dream visions, with the poet reading the text for the dream. The piece of literature which inspires the revelation appropriate to Chaucer's day, which is also interpretive of the text read, is the passage from Macrobius where Scipio Africanus explains to Scipio the Younger the duties of citizenship, a text drawn out of Cicero's *Republic*—Cicero's version of Plato's *Republic*. It is important that Chaucer reads about republican senatorial Rome rather than imperial Rome; his guide to civic conduct is the Scipio who served the Roman republic, and not the Virgil, creator of the imperial myth, who is Dante's mentor.<sup>8</sup> The vision which Scipio offers defines civic charity as 'following the common profit' and living in harmony with the music of the spheres; it also marks for Scipio the Younger the Carthage which he must destroy and the Dido passion which he must avoid. However, it says almost nothing about how the common profit is to be found. This is the place of the dream.

In the dream, Chaucer passes through the gate which is split between the products of the quest for singular profit and the fruits of collective

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233 (hereafter Trevisa). For Hoccleve, see "Regement of Princes" in Hoccleve's *Works*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, ES 72 (London, 1897). I cite Nicolas Oresme's translation of and commentary on Aristotle's politics, *Li Livres de Politiques de Aristote* in the 1489-93 edition, which does not indicate place or publisher.

<sup>7</sup> Sir John Fortescue, *De Natura Legis Naturae*, ed. Lord Claremont (London: privately printed, 1864), dated 1461-62; for Fortescue and Thomas Chaucer, see Martin B. Ruud, *Thomas Chaucer* (Minneapolis: Research Pub. of Univ. of Minnesota, 1926), p. 60. The contrast between regal or authoritarian and consultative or parliamentary government drawn in the *De Natura* is extended and applied to the French and English systems in the later (1468-71) *De Laudibus Legum Angliae* (cf. *infra*, n. 24).

<sup>8</sup> For the medieval Scipio, see Aldo Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio, and the "Africa": The Birth of Humanism's Dream* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); cf. Bruce Kent Cowgill,

enterprise. He visits the temple of Venus and "Riches", which both embodies the values of the quest for private profit and sets the basic choice against the background of 'myth'. For Chaucer, rejecting Venus's house is rejecting Paris's choice and following better choices such as those of Hercules or Scipio, who went after the lives of action and contemplation (contemplation in that he dreams, and action in that he dreams of the active life).<sup>9</sup>

"The Parlement of Foules and the Body Politic," *JEGP*, 74 (1975), pp. 316–19, *et passim*. Cowgill's comments on the garden of the *Parlement* as the purified active life, the paradigmatic temporal society, support my interpretation, and his arguments on natural law parallel mine partly because we worked together in the late 60's and the early 70's. The essential research for this essay was done in 1962–63 under a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. I disagree with some of Cowgill's harsher judgements on the 'squabbles' of the birds, and his sense that the bird song ends in cacophony (*PF*, 693–95). The *Parlement* ends in the kind of harmony which the state and "nature" can give, which is not the same as what grace offers in the full overriding of lust and pride.

Fortescue emphasizes how much Rome declined when it went from a senatorial assembly system to an imperial autocratic system (*De Natura*, I, 16). It is not clear how Chaucer felt about Richard II's imperial ambitions or the increasingly unilateral character of his later reign, but his choice of Scipio Africanus as guide, and his placing of 'himself' in the dream in a role analogous to that of the Scipio the Younger of the *De Re Publica* may suggest a slant on the imperial dream which is also perhaps reflected in his condemnation of Nimrod (*Form Age*, 58), the archetype of regal or authoritarian rule, his urging Richard II to cherish his people and hate extortion, Nimrod's talent (*Sted*, 23), and his emphasis on Henry IV's achieving kingship by "free eleccion" as well as by conquest (*Purse*, 22 ff.). Two of Chaucer's noble leaders, Hector and Theseus, are careful to consult parliament in crucial state matters; and Chaucer reserves the imperial title for Nature herself in the *Parlement* (319) without suggesting that any of the tersed eagles are also imperial. The royal eagle is clearly under Nature.

I do not know how much weight to put on such evidence. Chaucer was obviously a faithful servant of the Richardian anti-warhawk party in the 1380's, and Thomas Chaucer quickly became an important force in the Lancastrian administration.

<sup>9</sup> Boccaccio interprets his own House of Venus [*Teseida, della Nozze d' Emilia*, ed. Roncaglia (Bari: Laterza, 1941), p. 417], as the concupiscent rather than the irascible appetite, but the element of choice in Chaucer's dream draws it closer to Scipio's choice between the voluptuous, active, and contemplative, conventionally mythographized as the choice of Paris between Venus, Juno, and Minerva, a choice which appears in late fourteenth-century dream-vision in the *Eschecs Amoureux*, B.N. 9197, fol. ciiiixxvii<sup>r</sup>-ciiiixxviii<sup>r</sup>. The anonymous fifteenth-century commentary on the *Eschecs Amoureux* has been edited by Joan Jones, Diss. Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1968. The voluptuous life is unnatural in that it does not follow the rule of reason or the search for the common good: "Il convient que l'homme en ses concupiscences et en tous ses desires ensieue le Rieule de Raison ou il *desnature* (italics mine);" *Eschecs* gloss, B.N. 9197, fol. ciiiixxviii<sup>v</sup>. Venus' loci are sometimes used to describe political situations as in the Burgundian satire on the putative adultery of Louis of Orleans and Isabella of France, which is located

When Chaucer comes into the 'Parlement', he apparently has no guide. Scipio has disappeared, and no one is announced as a replacement, such as the Statius or Beatrice of Dante's *Comedy*. But the guide is here, I think, and she is Nature, that figure who can reveal the meaning and institutional form necessary to the quest for the common profit in the same way that Beatrice can reveal the theological meaning of history, of Hell and Purgatory, and pull together the meaning of the fragments of imperial and papal life which Dante has viewed in Hell and in the lower Purgatory. Nature is described as the vicar of God, and acts as an ordainer of statutes in this context. Whereas Nature is commonly described as the vicar of God in the tradition of Alanus' *De Planctu Naturae* and the *Romance of the Rose*, she is, I think, here the vicar of God *in a civic sense*; exactly the sense which makes the king the vicar of God in the language of medieval ruler-praise (or "ruler-worship" as Kantorowicz puts it). The king is the vicar of God in the sense that he translates natural law into positive law even as Nature translates eternal law into natural. The standard language makes the medieval ruler "the vicar of God" but this is a shorthand for the more extensive hierarchical relationship which is implicit in *The Parlement of Foules*: God/eternal law; Nature/natural law; King/positive law; people. This set of hierarchical relationships meant that a medieval king held his kingship in trust, and was a king to the degree that he interpreted natural law into positive law, enforcing "the idea of the species" through his legal ministrations and preventing Venus or "selfish impulse" from destroying man's basically social nature, his commonweal.

By looking at man's species nature (and also his fallen nature), a king was thought able to discern what natural law told him: i.e., that man is a weak individual; that he is a collective species, requiring sustenance from special goods of the earth, and lengthy periods for the birth and rearing of children; that he is granted free will and the power of speech to solve problems, and, after the fall, possessed of a social nature which required defined social duties and roles if men were to serve one another

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in the realm of Venus with the perilous fountain of Narcissus nearby; "Le Pastorelet," *Chroniques relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique sous la domination des Ducs de Bourgogne*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Bruxelles: Commission Royale d'Histoire, 1873), pp. 601, 606. A frequent complaint against younger courtiers in the 1380's and 90's was that they were followers of Venus rather than of more active military or statesmanlike pursuits.

in a continually constructive way.<sup>10</sup> If one were to write up the ‘rules’ of natural law as conceptualized by the ordinary late medieval thinker, they might read something like this:

- (1) Man, by nature, has a right to meet in social assemblies and deliberate over—speak together about—the common good of the group assembled.
- (2) Since the human species comes into the world as a “poor forked creature” and remains relatively helpless for many years, natural law requires something like a permanent relationship between the male and female of the species; since men are granted “freedom of will,” marriage and other important contracts in life should be with the free assent of the parties.
- (3) Since man is a creature who sustains himself from the soil, he needs soil to sustain himself—before the fall, common property, and after it private property held in trust from the emperor and God for the common good. (Richard II was found to be a tyrant for violating the precept in the case of John of Gaunt’s estates.)
- (4) Finally, since men after the fall are not given spontaneously to serving the collective good or interest of society, natural law requires the development of “roles”—like the divisions of a beehive—whereby the various sorts of service that men can give to each other are defined.<sup>11</sup>

This rule of nature is the foundation for late medieval estate theory. What Dame Nature does in calling the *Parlement* is to ask the creatures to behave as if they were somewhat stylized human beings whose species role demands what Nature’s law demands: concern for the common

<sup>10</sup> For “Nature” as what translates eternal law or “divine providence” into natural law, see Philippe de Mézières, cited in Dora Bell, *Étude sur le Songe du Vieux Pelerin de Philippe de Mézières* (Geneva: Droz, 1955), pp. 189–90; Alain Chartier, *Les Oeuvres de Maître Alain Chartier*, ed. Andre du Chesne Tourangeau (Paris: P. Le-Mur, 1617), p. 403. For Latin distinctions among eternal, natural, and positive (or enacted) laws, St. Thomas, *Summa*, I, ii, 91, 4; Trevisa, 150<sup>r</sup>–63<sup>v</sup>; Pierre d’Ailly, “Questio Eiusdem in Suis Vesperis,” *Fasciculum Rerum Expetendarum et Fugiendarum*, ed. Ortuin Gratius (London: R. Chiswell, 1690), II, 519; Fortescue, *Natura*, I, 5 and 43. In calling Nature “the vicar of the almighty Lord,” Chaucer echoes both the *Romance of the Rose* and the language of civic ceremony, which makes the king who serves the common profit a *Rex Typus Christus* mediating between natural law and positive law; Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 89, 134–35, *et passim*; actually, in medieval political theory, the king is more accurately *vicar naturae*. The King who uses his corporate body for private profit (“singular profit”) is a tyrant by medieval definitions, one worthy of deposition (cf. Giles of Rome, *De Regimine Principum*, I, iii, 3).

<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, I, ii, 94, 2, says that natural law includes the species and individual interest in the preservation of its own being, sexual intercourse, engendering



profit, speaking together to realize what it is, permanent marriage and respect for freedom of choice, a conception of the collective and the individual in property and rights which does not jeopardize the group character, and a clear system of statutes which defines what men are to do for each other.

Dame Nature not only orders the *Parlement* according to natural laws as applied to the human sphere; she gives it a kind of symmetry reflective of the most orderly medieval conceptions of bird life in the natural spheres, and further orders that order. If one compares early medieval books cataloguing nature's creatures (such as *Physiologus*) with late medieval books, such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, one instantly recognizes that the perception of the creatures has changed sharply. In the *Physiologus*, no effort is made to classify; in Bartholomaeus, everything is classification, classification by anatomy, by surface physical characteristics, by habitat, by feeding characteristics, by social nature. And this obsession with classification (which stands at the head of the long tradition leading up to the Linnaeus) is the reflection of the growth of discipline in the art of reasoning and, to some extent, of induction fostered by the university studies in logic and science; it reflects an interest in taxonomy and detail which is essential in late

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and education of offspring, the inclination to seek the species' good according to natural reason including living in society, shunning ignorance, avoiding offense etc; cf. Gratian, *Decretum*, I, i, 7. The ancient commonplaces from which medieval natural law theory develops are *Romans*, II, 12-14, Cicero, *De Re Publica*, II, 43-44; III, 22; and Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, XXXI, 58; *De Civitate Dei*, XV, 16; XIX, 21; *De Libero Arbitrio*, I, 5, 13, 31; VI, 15. The later history of natural law theory is well described in H. H. Chroust, "The Philosophy of Law from St. Augustine to St. Thomas," *New Scholasticism*, 20 (1946), pp. 61-62, developments which include the notion that natural law implies the golden rule, obedience to superiors, and a species of charity, ideas also reflected in Chaucer's *The Former Age* and *The Parson's Tale* (X, i, 755-74). The elaboration of the natural law or "kindly" functions of speaking together come after the revival of Aristotle in St. Thomas and Dante and in Oresme, sig. aiiii', and Giles (Trevisa, fol. 63' and Henri de Gauschi, pp. 10, 145-48). The other clichés listed in the section are found in Augustine, Isidore, Ivo of Chartres, Giles of Rome, Roger Waltham, Gratian, Eustache Deschamps, "Le Songe De Vergier," Oresme, Trevisa, Jacobus' "Omne Bonum" and other sources too numerous to list. The notion that the estates or statuses are needed after the fall to define that character of man's service to man is set forth in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* ("gilt disserveth thraldom but nat nature;" *ParT*, X, 755); Fortescue, *Natura*, I, 16 and in Robert W. Carlyle and H. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory* (London: Blackwood, 1903-06), II, 108, *et passim*.

medieval science and natural observation.<sup>12</sup> The scheme which Chaucer presents is a schematization of the scheme of that professional schememaker, Bartholomaeus Anglicus.<sup>13</sup> Instead of simply accepting Bartholomaeus' division of the birds (by habitat, by feeding habits, and by flocking habit), Chaucer puts the three divisions together. The categories go together as follows:

- A. Habitat: mountains, field, forest, water.
- B. Feeding habits: ravine, seed, worm, water plants.
- C. Flocking habit: solitary, pairs, individual, flocks.
- D. Speaker: eagle, turtle, cuckoo, duck, and goose.

The first three categorizations of creatures are clearly reflective of categories in Bartholomaeus; they are conflated to make a kind of stylized "Byzantium" of birdlife. The fourth category, the category of bird-class

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lynn Thorndike, "Bartholomew of England," *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia, 1923), II, 401–35; cf. 528–42; Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Latrobe: Archabbey Press, 1951), *passim*. English philosophy after Ockham, including Strode, was much concerned to refine the concepts of classification, species, and genus.

<sup>13</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus presents the classes of birds by habitat, feeding habit, and flocking habit without conflating the classification schemes as Chaucer does; *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's translation of "Bartholomaeus Anglicus' De Proprietatibus Rerum"*, ed. M. C. Seymour, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, 596–602 [hereafter Seymour]. Vincent of Beauvais' categories, including only feeding habit, not habitat or flocking habit, are not as close to Chaucer's as those of Bartholomaeus *pace* Brewer (pp. 114–15). Bartholomaeus is the main source of the common allegorical dictionaries which make the bird-classes into social estates.

Allegorized versions of Bartholomaeus' encyclopedia, which make the bird classes into statuses of society, include the New York Academy of Medicine Manuscript of Bartholomaeus (Ricci, II, 1312; fol. 92<sup>v</sup>–93<sup>r</sup>), Pierre Bersuire, *Opera Omnia* (Cologne: Antonium & Arnoldum Hieratos, 1631) II, 166–68; John of St. Geminiano, *Summa de Exemplis* (Basel: Froben and Petri), IV, lxxvii; and Bromyard, *Summa*, II, 109. These generally associate birds of prey with violent men and nobles; seed birds with preachers, prelates, or "religious"; water birds with worldly men involved in the active life; and woodland birds with seekers of luxury. The iconographic tradition is sufficiently inconsistent to require Chaucer's device of bird speakers who have clearer traditions to define the reference to conventional social statuses. The clearest reference to the estates as such and bird categories is found in Henri du Ferrieres' *Livre du Modus et Ratio* (1379):

Si mist en livre des ois[i]aux de iii manieres et de iii estas aussi comme des gens de quoi les uns sont apeles clers, les autres nobles, les autres gens de labour; les oisiaux sont apeles les uns ois[i]aux de proie, les autres ois[i]aux marins, les autres ois[i]aux champestres et ches iii manieres dois[i]aux seivent en diverses manieres quer les oisiaus de proie seivent des autres oisiaus et les oisiaus champestres seivent des fruis de la terre. . . . Et tieulz oisiaus de proie sont lesgle, le faucon, le anier, le esequere, le hobe, et pluseurs autres aux quieux sont atribues les clers du temps present les quieux volent haut. . . . Autres oisiaux ia quant ils veulent

speakers, is a reflection of the habit of the British Parliament in Commons of having speakers after 1376.<sup>14</sup> It has been commonly argued that the debate which Dame Nature conducts has to do with the royal marriage; I am unable to find anything in the debate which anyone could trace to actual debates over the marriage of Richard to Anne of Bohemia or to Isabella of France. It would have been impolitic or foolish for Chaucer to have given political advice about a royal marriage through a dream-vision, ambiguous and subject to variant situational interpretations as it is. Indeed, when Philippe de Mézières gives advice to the identical court through dream-visions such as the *Epistre au Roi Richart II*, he specifies very clearly what he means and who he is talking about lest he be misunderstood. Rather, Chaucer's debate about love is a debate about how the estates should behave toward one another in all matters of life-concern, symbolized here by that first matter of life-concern, "Who shall I marry when I grow up?" The conventional four-estate schemes identified the estates as lords spiritual, lords temporal, commoners, and merchants. Other schemes identified lawyers or curial officials as the fourth estate.<sup>15</sup> While either of these interpretations may be satisfactory for the understanding of Chaucer's scheme, I am inclined to believe that in the context of the *Parlement*, lawyers or curial officials more likely constitute the fourth estate.

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prendre leur proie que la chachent et prennent de randon sans voler haut et la prennant par tost voler. Et tieux oisiaux sont lostour, lespriner, lesmerillon, le gerfaut et mant dautres; iceulz sont attribues aux nobles. . . . Autres ois[i]aus sont qui seuiuent des fruis de la terre comme coulomps, corneilles, oisiaux champestres et oisiaux marins qui tous seuiuent des fruis de la terre. Et yceulz ois[i]aux sont attribues aus gens de labour qui du labour terrien viennent de quoi les clers et les nobles sont soustenus." Henri of Ferrieres, *Livre du Modus et Ratio*, B.N. Fr. 12, 399, fol. 102<sup>r</sup>-02<sup>v</sup> (1379).

<sup>14</sup> May McKissack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 388.

<sup>15</sup> Brewer (p. 35) notes that the only class division known to medieval theory was the three estate division into "Knights, clergy and ploughmen," but that statement is far from accurate; for late medieval men changed the plowman class into the more general laborers class as the number of rural laboring roles proliferated, and, as urban groups grew, a fourth estate, composed either generally of "merchants" (i.e., urban traders) or of "lawyers" or "curial and judicial officers" reflecting the expanded royal bureaucracy, was often introduced into the schemes of statuses. For lawyers or the king's judicial and curial officers as the fourth estate, see William Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891) II, 207-08; *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), IV, 230; Bromyard, *Summa*, II, 466<sup>v</sup>; Philippe de Mézières, *Songe de Vieil Pelerin* MS. B.N. Fr. 22, 542, fol. 124<sup>r</sup>-24<sup>v</sup>; *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, III, 100, 579. McKissack observes that separate kinds of summons to Parliament

The fowls of ravine are interested in fighting to solve problems, and their symbolism is insistently martial, what one would expect of lords temporal or knights.<sup>16</sup> The speaker for the field foules is a turtle, which is a conventional symbol for the clergy or the contemplative<sup>17</sup>; the contemplative is married eternally to Christ, and can afford to urge endless unrequited fidelity in this world on the knights. The water fowl are pretty clearly common; the duck speaks for the commoners in Lydgate's, *The Horse, the Sheep and the Goose*.<sup>18</sup> And the cuckoo or worm fowl seems to be a spokesman for selfish curial officials.<sup>19</sup>

went to these four classes in the late fourteenth century (pp. 184–89), and reference appears to them in other parliamentary documents, e.g., J. E. A. Jolliffe, *The Constitutional History of Medieval England* (London: A. and C. Black, 1954), pp. 434–35. Merchants are described as the fourth estate in the writings of Brinton, Bromyard, Philippe de Mézières and numerous other late fourteenth-century writers, but they appear to be less appropriate as the fourth estate in the context of this "parlement".

<sup>16</sup> Most recent critics have accepted the fowls of ravine-eagles groups as representing lords temporal (e.g., Bennett, p. 169) on the basis of internal evidence in the poem, but this general iconology is confirmed in Deschamps, Lydgate, John of St. Geminiano, Bromyard, John of Sheppey, *Fleta*, Oton de Graunson, and in the conventional fourteenth-century treatises on heraldry such as Bishop John Trevoir's, written for Anne of Bohemia, in *Medieval Heraldry*, ed. Evan John Jones (Cardiff: William Lewis, 1943), p. 119, a much neglected source of late medieval iconology.

<sup>17</sup> For the turtle as clergy or contemplatives, see Alexander Neckham, *De Naturis Rerum* (London: Rolls series, 1858), p. 108; Johannes de Sancto Geminiano, IV, 56; Philippe de Thau, "The Bestiary," *Popular Treatises on Science Written During the Middle Ages* (London: Historical Society of Science, 1841), p. 119; *Guillaume le Clerc, Das Thierbuc des Normanischen Dicter Guillaume le Clerc*, ed. Robert Reinsch (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1892), p. 340. The turtle of the *Song of Songs* whom January imitates when he calls May into his enclosed garden to be faithful to him, as he understands faith, was conventionally allegorized as the church or the faithful religious from the twelfth century through Luther. A fourteenth-century sermon on the three estates compares the turtle to "men of holy chirche" who are married to Christ, and to "holi Chirche" from the time of their taking on the "yok of chastitee." A. I. Doyle, "A Treatise of the Three Estates," *Dominican Studies*, 3 (1950), pp. 357–58.

<sup>18</sup> The common medieval-Renaissance symbolism of the goose is as a symbol for simpletonism, a symbolism easy enough for a court poet to extend to the less lettered commons. The "goose-duck" class has commonly been associated with commons or a part of commons by modern critics (Bennett, p. 170; Brewer, p. 35; Robinson, p. 795) and explicitly in Lydgate's "The Horse, the Goose and the Sheep," *Minor Poems*, ed. H. N. MacCracken (London: Kegan Paul, 1911), II, 548–49; for additional documentation from Chaucer and the period, cf. David Lampe, "Lydgate's Laughter: Horse, Goose and Sheep as Social Satire," *Annuaire Medievale*, 15 (1975), 154.

<sup>19</sup> The cuckoo is commonly associated with greed, destruction of innocence, and feathering its own interests by laying its egg in other nests and pushing out the young of its host, a charge very like the common complaint that curial officials and advisors to the king usurped too much power and used the power to their own advantage. For the best

The advice which each class gives about the conduct of love constitutes what wisdom the "class" (as opposed to Nature) has with respect to how civic affairs are to be conducted. The knights know that fighting solves problems and blood counts; the turtle knows that eternal values are to be kept eternal; the duck knows that for commoners the need to increase and multiply is more important than any particular values attached to curial protocol; and the cuckoo is concerned that the business get done. Each of these expressions is the expression of how, at one time or another, the class or "estate" was called upon to solve social problems. Knights fought wars to "solve problems"; they fought before the High Court of Chivalry to achieve justice. Clergy enforced their vows on one another to the same effect. Bureaucrats pursued efficiency in their jobs; and commoners such as the men of 1381 kept insisting that they could get their jobs as commoners done were it not for the interference of the gentry. But none of these bits of advice is necessarily appropriate to creating a love which must be freely willed or to the solution of social problems by a political vehicle which has to mediate the struggles of all classes of society.

Nature allows the Parlement to speak only what each class's concept of the social is; then she imposes her conception, that is, restraint for a year at the very top of society so that the rest of society, which can achieve its goals simply through a coming together under "nature" for a St. Valentine's "speaking together," can "marry". The song of love at the end, which reflects the feast at the conclusion of the annual Parlement, is surely one of the finest hymns to civic charity in existence:

"Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,  
That hast this wintres wedres overshake,  
And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!

"Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte,  
Thus syngen smale foules for thy sake:

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characterizations of the cuckoo in the natural histories as a greedy usurper, see Neckham, *De Naturis Rerum*, p. 118; Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, II, 564; Jean de Condé, *Dits et Contes de Baudouin de Condé et son fils Jean de Condé*, ed. August Scheler (Brussels: Devoux, 1866-67), III, 59; Roger of Waltham, *Compendium Morale*, Bodleian MS. Fairfax IV, fol. 138-39, makes the cuckoo, an ingrate who grows up in someone else's nest and destroys him, into "aliqua perversi et viles persone" who mix themselves in the good and noble society of magnates and later destroy them, or the familiars of the great who later show themselves to be "filii et sequaces Neronis."

Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,  
That hast this wintres wedres overshake.

"Wel han they cause for to gladen ofte,  
Sith ech of hem recovered hath hys make,  
Ful blissful mowe they synge when they wake:  
Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,  
That hast this wintres wedres overshake,  
And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!"

(PF, 680–95)

Thus it is that Venus, or the search for private profit, is overcome through a speaking leading into song, through self-abnegation on the part of the great, and through the application of nature's general reason rather than the strategies of any particular status to the solution of a total society's problem.

## II

The *Parlement* has been seen as a reflection of the British parliament.<sup>20</sup> It certainly is a schematized version of that, but it is also a paradigm, in the classic sense of that word, for any speaking together among the estates in which the sense of the social—in which civic charity—is discovered, whether that speaking be in convocation, guild, city, university, or rural estate. Love is the business of every speaking together, and it should end in song as regards the *convivium* of our work together here.

It is possible to see *The Canterbury Tales* as another *Parlement*. But here the ending of the feast is different, because the poem opens on a wider horizon. Again, Nature begins the speaking together, and the speaking together of men and women is set against the speaking together of the April birds. The estates are present; the journey is a journey to the shrine of a saint who represents estate order in England because of his assertion of the authority of canon law in the face of Henry II's claims.<sup>21</sup> But whereas the *Parlement* is concerned only with how a "speaking together" and sacrifice on the part of the most noble in society can establish a form of civic charity under the laws of nature, *The Canterbury Tales* are

<sup>20</sup> Cf. W. Pieper, "Das Parliament in der m.e. literatur," *Herrig's Archiv*, 146 (1923), 187–212, which should be supplemented by the works referring to estate conceptions of parliament cited *supra*, n. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, I or II, pp. 140–43.

concerned with this *and* with the transformation of the heart, of pride into love, which it is a function of penance to perform. Under the Bradshaw shift the first segment of *The Canterbury Tales* deals with the relation of lords temporal and peasants. It begins with an epic and ends with a prose tale of counsel for lords temporal, *The Tale of Melibee*. The second sequence begins with the false start of *The Monk's Tale* (a tragedy which leads to no penance, and ends as the knight objects to the sleepiness and heaviness of heart which it induces). It goes on to the Nun's Priest's "mock epic", which picks up the theme of civic charity developed in *The Knight's Tale's* conclusion. By mocking the epic temptation of pride for clergy and court, it prepares the way for the Parson's prose conclusion which deals with pride in all its manifestations. Between the tale of the Knight and the *Melibee*, many wayward bearers and would-be bearers of the temporal sword speak, and many who bear the marks of wayward bearing; between the Nun's Priest and the Parson, many would-be clerics who know of other ways and other "sectes" from that of St. Thomas speak of wandering by the way (the Wife of Bath for instance).<sup>22</sup>

At the end, the Parson says he will knit up all the *feast* of tales with his penitential sermon. The "speaking together" of *The Canterbury Tales*, like a medieval parliament or the *Parlement* itself, is a "feast" knit up. But whereas the feast knit up of *The Parlement of Foules* is a feast of civic man seeking civic charity in the *convivium* of Nature and Nature's law, the feast of *The Canterbury Tales* ends in the Jerusalem which is above, which is an "infused charity", given to the human heart by an author beyond Nature. Chaucer in *The Parlement of Foules* recognized not only what was central in Aristotelian medieval *parlement* tradition—the importance of "speaking together" to civic love—but also elevated the consultative institution which Fortescue fifty years later was also to recognize as central to British governance—the parlement—as the most *natural* institution in the world.<sup>23</sup> That Chaucer did this is a tribute, not only to his percipience and to the profundity of his political understanding, but also to his courage, for he lived in an age torn between warhawk lords and

<sup>22</sup> The Wife of Bath is the cleric of the voluptuous life, preached a sermon in its mode, and is addressed as a scholastic, teacher of clergy, and founder of a sect. Her church is like January's Song of Song's garden.

<sup>23</sup> Fortescue, *De Natura*, I, 16, *et passim* for the view that consultative government is natural, and not simply a concession to evil as Nimrodic or royal government is.

a would-be imperial king, when men willing to listen to the give and take of the *parlement* so as to come to a picture of the common good (such as Shakespeare's John of Gaunt in his old age, or his Duke of York, or Chaucer's immediate circle) were all too few and too powerless. It would perhaps be useful to read Chaucer's *Parlement* not only as a beautifully crafted picture of the ways of love but as a political treatise as sophisticated and elegant in its way as Dante's *De Monarchia* and the political sections of the *Commedia*, and a good deal more useful. For whereas Dante looks for civic health to the centralization of power in the imperial see, and hopes for salvation for Italy from the single imperial figure, Chaucer writes as one of the first of a series of British political thinkers who recognize that in matters social and political the speaking together of many groups to discover what is right and natural for them to do has important functions that no civic savior-king, no matter how charismatic, can fulfill. Sir John Fortescue was to put the matter more succinctly some years later in another book praising the strength of British institutions, his *De Laudibus Legis Angliae*; after describing how authoritarian or royal monarchies like that in France began with a subjugation such as that which Nimrod compelled of the beast-men under him, after rehearsing how subjugation, long endured and valued for the protections it may bring, was eventually sanctioned by the people, Fortescue describes a wholly different kind of rule—political rule—which is based not on subjugation but on community of interest, which began with Brutus' band as it fled from Troy, and which is now established and organized through parliament:

. . . a people wishing to erect itself into a kingdom or any other body politic must always set up one man for the government of all that body, who, by analogy with a kingdom, is, from "regendo", usually called a king. As in this way the physical body grows out of the embryo, regulated by one head, so the kingdom issues from the people, and exists as a body mystical, governed by one man as head. And just as in the body natural, as Aristotle said, the heart is the source of life, having in itself the blood which it transmits to all the members thereof, whereby they are quickened and live, so in the body politic the will of the people is the source of life, having in it the blood, namely, political forethought for the interest of the people, which it transmits to the head and all the members of the body, by which the body is maintained and quickened. . . . And just as the head of the body physical is unable to change its nerves, or to deny its



members proper strength and due nourishment of blood, so a king who is head of the body politic is unable to change the laws of that body, or to deprive that same people of their own substance uninvited or against their wills. . . . Sometimes, also, by the negligence of such princes and the inertia of their counsellors, [the] statutes [of countries governed regally] are made so ill-advisedly that they deserve the name of corruptions rather than of laws. But the statutes of England cannot so arise, since they are made not only by the prince's will, but also by the assent of the whole realm, so they cannot be injurious to the people nor fail to secure their advantage. Furthermore, it must be supposed that they are necessarily replete with prudence and wisdom, since they are promulgated by the prudence not of one counsellor nor of a hundred only, but of more than three hundred chosen men—of such a number as once the Senate of the Romans was ruled by—as those who know the form of the summons, the order, and the procedure of parliament can more clearly describe.<sup>24</sup>

From Giles of Rome, Fortescue knew the mystical body of society to be in many ways like a colloquium of birds, meeting, mating, and carrying ahead the functions required to maintain the species, but with this difference, that it has the gift of speech to discover community right reason:

Also swalwes maken here nestes at the beste thei 3 (though) they seie nevere other swalwes make nestes. . . . But a woman cannot helpe her self in traveile of childe but she be tau3 t atte the fulle by mydwifes. Thanne for man is not inclined at the fulle by kynde to do thewe werkes and dedes kynde 3eveth speche to mankynde so that by speche men mowe teche eche other and lerne of eche other and for that may not be but men lyve and dwelle ifere it is kyndelich to man to lyve with other and to be a companiable beist.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Sir John Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*, ed. S. B. Chrimes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1942), pp. 31, 33, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Trevisa, fol. 63<sup>v</sup>. Aside from Fortescue, one early political-regal commentator who may be usefully read in connection with *The Parlement of Foules* is John Rastell, who edited the *Parlement* in the 1520's. E. J. Devereux suggests the edition may have a connection with *Four Elements* and "with the recurrent theme of natural law in Rastell's legal prefaces and theological writings." See "John Rastell's Text of the Parliament of Foules," *Moreana*, 23–28 (1970), p. 116. As a matter of fact Rastell's conception of nature, natural law, human society, and "Sensuall Appetite," set forth in *Four Elements* (c. 1520) and in his *Exposition of the Termes of the Lawes of Englande* (1527), is identical with Chaucer's as explained in this article. Like Fortescue, Rastell was, first of all, a lawyer.

I like to think that Chaucer understood the kind of tradition of thought represented by Giles, and that he to some degree anticipated what Fortescue wrote about in laying the foundations for a philosophic analysis of British political institutions. Chaucer made the *Parlement* a parliament of birds because the fundamental social relationships beyond the political community, created through speaking, posited by Aristotle and his successors, are those of dominance and sexuality (*Politics*, I, i, 5–7). Dominance is represented by the hierarchy of the birds, sexuality by the presence of males and females choosing mates and establishing families. And birds in the order of nature are most “kyndelic”, most natural and comely, in their mating and familial life:

Among alle bestis þat ben in ordre of generacioun, briddes and foules [folwen] most honest[ee] of kynde. For by ordre of kynde males seche femalis wiþ bisynesse and loueþ hem whanne þey beþ ifounden and fiȝtiþ and puttiþ him to perile for ham and beþ ioyned to ham onliche, as it were by couenaut and loue weddyng, and norischiþ and fedet onliche briddes þat þey getyn. And so kyndeliche þey demeþ and knowiþ bytwene sext and sext, male and female. . . . And briddes and foules gendrynge kepith couenable tyme, for in springinge tyme whanne þe generacioun comeþ inne, briddes crien and singen. Males drawn to companie of females and preyen iche opir of loue and wowiþ by bekes and voys, and makeþ nestis and leggiþ eyren and bryngiþ forþ briddes. And whanne þe briddes beþ igendrid þey fedith and noirischith ham and bringiþ hem vp. But whanne þe offyce of generacioun is fulendid, þanne þey sesen of songe and departen atwynne and comeþ nouȝt togedres forto tyme of generacioun come aȝeyne.<sup>26</sup>

*The Parlement of Foules* is a very great civic poem, concerned not only with British institutions but also with the foundations of human community in its recognition of the weakness of our physical nature, which makes the interdependency of corporate groups necessary, and of the speech unique to our nature, which makes sacrifice meaningful and corporate action fruitful.

<sup>26</sup> Seymour, I, 597–98; cf. St. Augustine, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia Carnis*, I, iv. Bird symbolism seems to have been used in actual marriage garments, as in the red vestment powdered with birds in which the Lady Joan, Countess of Kent, was married, listed in the 1384 inventory of the Royal Chapel at Windsor. See Maurice F. Bond, *The Inventories of St. George's Chapel: Windsor Castle* (Windsor: printed for the dean and canons of St. George's Chapel, 1947), p. 41.