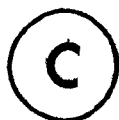


CHAUCER AND THE MEDIEVAL CONVENTIONS
OF BIRD IMAGERY

PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF REQUIREMENTS FOR DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



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ABSTRACT

E.R. Curtius' European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages demonstrated the extent to which medieval literature may be fruitfully examined in terms of the classical and Scriptural topoi which flourished in the poetry of the Middle Ages. His study, however, argued the continuity of these topoi so emphatically that he tended to slight the innovative treatment of the familiar models. A close reading of medieval poetry reveals that bird imagery exercised continuing interest for the poets. I have attempted to categorize this imagery into broad conventions—the bird as intellectual sign, the bird fable, and the convention of birds-and-love. After demonstrating the continuity of these formulas, I have examined Chaucer's handling of the conventions particularly in the House of Fame, the Parlement of Foules and the "Nun's Priest's Tale". An awareness of Chaucer's adaptation of conventional bird imagery provides a fresh perspective on both his "art" and his poems.

ABSTRACTLes représentations médiévales de l'imagerie des oiseaux
chez Chaucer

Le livre de E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, a démontré à quel point il peut être profitable d'examiner la littérature médiévale en fonction des topoi classiques et religieux, si abondants dans la poésie de cette époque. Son étude, cependant, insistait tellement sur les liens entre les topoi classiques et ceux du moyen âge qu'elle négligait le fait que ces derniers traitent souvent les thèmes familiers d'une façon originale. Une lecture de la poésie médiévale révèle que l'imagerie des oiseaux a suscité un intérêt continu chez les poètes. J'ai tenté de classifier cette imagerie selon des thèmes généraux—l'oiseau comme signe intellectuel, l'oiseau-fable, l'oiseau comme symbole d'amour. Après avoir démontré la continuité de ces thèmes, j'ai examiné la manière particulière dont Chaucer les a traités, surtout dans les ouvrages suivants: House of Fame, Parlement of Foules et "Nun's Priest's Tale". La connaissance de la façon dont Chaucer a exploité et modifié l'imagerie conventionnelle des oiseaux permet de voir sous un nouvel angle aussi bien son "art" que ses poèmes.

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INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Everett, in "Chaucer's Love Visions, With Particular Reference to the Parlement of Foules", offers a perceptive description of the use of convention in medieval poetry:

... to the medieval poet, the art of poetry was not the creation of something new, but the much humbler one of the selection, arrangement, and representation of what was known and familiar. At its best this resulted in new combinations and revealed new relations, but it meant that even the good poem was likely to be familiar in all of its parts, and that it would be valued for this and would appeal as much by its likeness to what was known as by its difference from it.¹

That this aesthetic would be abused by inferior poets should not prevent us from recognizing that it would also offer a focus, a framework, and a touchstone of excellence that enabled the best poets to create an impressive literature. Despite the general acceptance of "tradition" as a valued element in literary art, we still tend to employ the terms "convention" and "conventional" as though they described the common-place. This is clearly an unfortunate attitude when applied to medieval poetry. Innovation and originality were obviously prized because one can recognize that Chaucer was highly regarded in his own day; novelty for novelty's sake, equally obviously, was considered simply "lewed" or uneducated. Divorced from its historical context, the extensive use of convention is defensible; within the medieval

intellectual and aesthetic setting, it is expected and commendable.

As a medieval student, Chaucer would have been taught to write poetry in school and, of course, the models used were classical and Scriptural. The pedagogy was imitation, not inspiration. E.R. Curtius notes:

A great many medieval authors wrote poetry because one had to be able to do so in order to prove oneself a clericus and litteratus; in order to turn out compliments, epitaphs, petitions, dedications, and thus gain favor with the powerful or correspond with equals; as also for the sake of vile Mammon. The writing of poetry can be taught and learned; it is schoolwork and a school subject.²

This was true for average and great writers. Poetry might be inspired but, first and foremost, it was a craft with definite rules, techniques, traditions, themes, and forms - conventions - which could be ignored only at the poet's peril. One subject which generated a series of important conventions was "birds". Medieval poetry is filled with bird characters and avian imagery. And if bird imagery is prominent in medieval literature generally, it is pervasive in Chaucer's poems. All of Chaucer's major poems use bird imagery at least incidentally and most use it as an important image pattern, as an intellectual sign, or to describe bird characters. For the most part, the poet's bird imagery can be categorized into three broad conventions of imagery which had their origins in classical and Scriptural literature: the bird as intellectual sign, the bird fable, and the convention

of birds-and-love. Chaucer would use these conventions in much the same way that he used the "locus amoenus" and the "Fortuna" topoi: they would orient the audience, set the tone, and limit and define the area of expectation. By employing conventions which had originated and been developed in earlier literature, Chaucer could avail himself of a wealth of allusion because the use of the convention or the conventional style brings with it many of the overtones of its former associations. Convention led the audience into a new poetic creation yet reminded it of the tradition of literature within which the poet was working; it gently prepared the audience for new relations, allusions, combinations, and intellectual and emotional surprises within well-established patterns of response. The innovative would only be understood and recognized as truly valuable were it found in the context of established convention.

This essay proposes to study Chaucer's use of the medieval conventions of bird imagery. It will attempt to demonstrate that the poet draws on traditional patterns of imagery and uses them in unfamiliar contexts, views them from distinctive perspectives, and adds seemingly incongruous elements to reveal new dimensions within familiar boundaries. The methodology adopted involves examining Chaucer's poetry against a background of earlier and contemporary uses of the various conventions of bird imagery. It has not been possible, or necessary, to provide a definitive provenance for each

convention; major themes relating to birds have been identified in the classics, the Bible, and in patristic writings, and then followed as they appear and are modified in seminal works of literature up to the fourteenth century. An awareness of the traditional uses of the conventions and an understanding of how Chaucer adapts these patterns to original poetic designs should provide a fresh perspective on the poet's incidental use of bird imagery, but it is more particularly suited to an examination of the House of Fame, the Parlement of Foules, and the "Nun's Priest's Tale"; here, especially, we watch Chaucer pour new wine into old wineskins to create the successful combination of aging, body, and freshness.

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NOTES

¹ D. Everett in Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. P.M. Kean. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 107.

² E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. W.R. Trask. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 468.

CHAPTER I

Background : Classical and Christian

The late medieval attitude toward "natura" involved a complex of philosophical theories inherited from the classical world synthesized with the Christianity of the New Testament.¹ The earliest patristic fathers, who were themselves directly influenced by Platonism and neo-Platonism,² were interested in "natura" as the distorted reflection of a higher unfallen world. Study of the natural world was recommended as a means of understanding Scripture, discovering the harmony of all creation through an understanding of the hierarchical relationship between and within species, and explaining the divine plan of salvation through the elements of nature which function as signs provided by God.³ With the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, renewed interest in Plato's Timaeus and the arrival of Aristotelian tracts via Arabic translations and commentaries provided added impetus and new direction to the study of nature. Winthrop Wetherbee, in his introduction to Bernard Silvestris' Cosmographia, claims:

Nature, the protagonist of the cosmic drama, is in many respects a discovery of the twelfth century. Those scholars with whom we associate the intellectual renaissance of the period seemed to themselves to be asserting new and important truths in claiming that the universe was an object of study worth considering for its own sake.⁴

The re-discovery of these classical philosophers added

significant depth to the recognition of nature's value in its own right, but it did not reverse the earlier interest in nature as a system of signs and models designed to instruct man of Christian values and truths. Empiricism was granted fuller recognition and freedom than it possessed in the first Christian centuries; however, one still finds influential philosophers who object to the questioning of nature's laws on the basis that it is a heresy which attempts to raise reason above faith,⁵ and even William of Conches, one of the most emphatic empiricists of the age, maintains that all phenomena of the natural world have a symbolic value for our instruction.⁶ Interest in nature for its own sake was reflected in twelfth century art and philosophy, and eventually Natura herself was introduced into the writing of such representative twelfth century renaissance poet-philosophers as Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille; here, reconciliation and synthesis of classical thought, New Testament Christianity, and patristic philosophy was the norm.⁷

Classical Philosophical Backgrounds

Plato's influence is pervasive in the Middle Ages despite the fact that only about half of Timaeus was known, translated, and commented upon; the medieval reader did, however, have the benefit of excerpted and paraphrased Platonic dialogues in the writings of Cicero, Boethius, Augustine, Plotinus,

Macrobius, Calcidius, and many others. On the other hand, Aristotle had very little influence⁸ until the twelfth and thirteenth century when men such as Adelard of Bath, Michael Scot, and Gerald Morley travelled to Islamic Spanish intellectual centres, translated Aristotle, and transmitted the result to the Latin west. By the end of the Middle Ages, the theories of Plato and Aristotle rivalled one another, and each philosopher seemed to support a distinct attitude to nature and to the general, sublunary world.

In Timaeus, Plato conceives of the universe as a living being with soul and intelligence:⁹

. . . god's purpose was to use as his model the highest and most completely perfect of intelligible things, and so he created a single visible living being containing within itself all living beings of the same natural order.¹⁰

The universe is perfect, self-sufficient, and it is created in terms of musical harmony, but the elements contained within it only partially share the ideal "form" imparted by the Demiurge. The ideal, eternal "forms" are transcendent and only in imperfect transmission do they reach the corporeal world which we inhabit. It follows, then, that the philosopher should not study the phenomenological world but, rather, should strive toward an understanding of the ideal, immutable truths or "forms". The Demiurge, in fact, created lesser gods for the express purpose of generating sublunary life; as the Demiurge is only capable of creating the immortal and divine, the minor gods must create the world of generation,

decay, and general mutability. The Demiurge insisted on a creation based on "plenitude". Accordingly, there came into being three orders of mortal life - birds, land animals, and water animals - to complete the perfect sublunary world.

The human land animal is, in fact, the only one of these creations discussed in any detail in the half of Timaeus accessible to the medieval scholar. Man's soul acquired the vegetative, sensitive, and rationalistic qualities, and it is so created that its ultimate home is one of the stars; the actions of each individual man on earth determines whether his soul will finally return to its home after the death of the body or whether it will be reincarnated in the body of a beast suitable to his particular kind of wrong doing. Birds, for example, are the souls of "empty headed men, who were interested in the heavens but were silly enough to think that visible evidence is all the foundation astronomy needs".¹¹ Land animals came from men who had no interest in philosophy and never considered the nature of the heavens, while the water beasts, because they were so hopelessly filled with error, live in the depth of the water as a punishment for the depth of their stupidity.¹² No beast is considered to be of much interest in itself for two important reasons: the beasts are part of the corporeal, mutable world which must be transcended, and their souls are, in fact, inhabiting their bodies as punishment for errant behaviour.

Aristotle's influence came as a balancing influence on

Platonic thought. His keen empirical interest tended to temper the rationalistic attitude inspired by Platonic theories. Aristotle, too, made a strong distinction between the translunary and sublunary worlds, but because he posited a primum mobile which animates the universe through its near-perfect attempt to love and to model itself on the Creator, and because all subsequent movement is based on this initial action, the imperfect corporeal world is worthy of investigation.¹³ "Form" also lost some of its transcendent qualities in Aristotle's writing; instead of "forms" being separate, translunary entities with which the "particulars" of this world obscurely participate, Aristotle thought of the eternal ideas and "forms" as imbedded in the particulars as a potential waiting to be actualized. This modification tended to break down the otherworldliness of Platonic dualism and allowed for an interest in particulars by and for themselves.

Aristotle also rejected Plato's theory of the transmigration of imperfect souls into appropriate animal bodies. This omission had a great deal of significance for it allowed animals to be viewed as creatures for their own sake, rather than as the souls of punished human beings. Indeed Aristotle, himself, demonstrated this interest in the natural world as he wrote extensively on biology and zoology.

Plato's corporeal world, then, is something to be transcended as it is an imperfect manifestation of the ideal "forms" and has evil as a given necessity in that non-human

life is a trial or punishment for negative behaviour; Aristotle, on the other hand, regards the sublunary sphere as worthy of close observation because it is striving - albeit imperfectly - for good, and it is animated by a mutation of the love which moves the primum mobile. By the late Middle Ages, these opposing attitudes rivalled each other for pre-eminence, but they never supplanted one another; they provided "auctoritas", however, for very different ways of regarding animals and birds.

The Neo-Platonic Influence

As the ancient Greek texts were not available to the Christian west, and due to language deficiencies not accessible if available, the Middle Ages depended heavily on the translations and commentaries of Calcidius' (fl. 325 A.D.) treatise on roughly the first half of Plato's Timaeus and Macrobius' (ca. 354-430 A.D.) Commentary on the Dream of Scipio for a basis on which to continue the neo-Platonic tradition.¹⁴ Both Calcidius and Macrobius are generally regarded today as compilers rather than original thinkers or researchers, and it would appear that although they give the impression of having read both Plato and Aristotle extensively, it is likely that they are indebted mainly to Cicero, Plotinus, Porphyry, Origen, and Nunnius for their sources. The two works are certainly quite different in terms of complexity of analysis, disposition of the author, and length, but it is

the shared neo-Platonism in both commentaries which so influenced the medieval conception of nature and the world of beasts.

Fundamental to the theories of neo-Platonism is the distinction between the sphere of eternal, rational forms or "Ideas" which seem to co-exist with God or the Demiurge, and the world of temporal, sensory, material objects which are merely a dim reflection of the celestial archetypes. Between the heavenly forms and the temporal and degenerate matter lies a "matrix" or mother of all "becoming" who, lying below God and the World Soul, generates the sensory world which exists in a sphere of mutability and multiplicity. This "matrix" is identified by Calcidius as "Natura" who acts as the intermediary between the divine "Ideas" and the material world.¹⁵ The "World Soul", or Nous, or sometimes Providence, is explained by Plato and Macrobius as that which emanates from God and creates the perfect order, harmony, and music of the spheres,¹⁶ and then animates all creatures despite the fact that as it moves from the celestial "Being" to the sub-lunary "Becoming", it loses some of its power.¹⁷ In fact, matter is perceived as a negative element as it seems to be stubbornly moving against the eternal "forms" transmitted by the World Soul.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it remains that the order that exists in the life of the good and reasonable man is a fragmented image of the order that exists in the visible cosmos.¹⁹ Therefore, the influential theory that the

composition, order, and purpose of the microcosm, or lesser world, mirrors the composition, order and purpose of the macrocosm becomes a basic facet of medieval thought, and it is understood that the universe is capable of explaining man, and man the universe.²⁰ Macrobius takes this line of reasoning a step further and relates the order of created life to the Golden Chain which, in the Iliad, Zeus hangs down from the heavens to the earth:

. . . , since Mind emanates from the Supreme God and Soul from Mind, and Mind, indeed, forms and suffuses all below with life, and since this is the one splendor lighting up everything and visible in all, like a countenance reflected in many mirrors arranged in a row, and since all follow on in continuous succession, degenerating step by step in their downward course, the close observer will find that from the Supreme God even to the bottommost dregs of the universe there is one tie, binding at every link and never broken.²¹

This idea finds its fullest expression in the Middle Ages in the Great Chain of Being which details the hierarchies of life in a decreasing order of classes of existence from the Godhead, through the immortal angels, the mortal but rational world of man, the irrational but sensitive animals, the insensitive but vital vegetative world, and the insensitive sphere of the inanimate mineral world.

Most important for our study, however, is the neo-Platonic theory of the transmigration of souls which explains that after death the soul of man is rewarded or punished for his life in the material world. Macrobius argues that souls originate in the celestial sphere (the Milky Way) and:

... the soul, in the very cognizance of its high estate, assumes those virtues by which it is raised aloft after leaving the body and returns to the place of its origin; in fact, a soul that is permeated with the pure and subtle stuff of the virtues does not become defiled or burdened with the impurities of the body. . . . But when a soul allows the habits of its body to enslave it and to change the man somehow to a beast, it dreads leaving the body, Such a soul does not readily leave the body at death, . . . but it either hovers about its corpse or it goes to seek lodging in a new body, in beast as well as man, and chooses the beast best suited to the sort of conduct it willfully adopted in the man.²²

The beast is denigrated, then, for two very important reasons: the "forming" power of the World Soul or Nous has lost its strength as it moves toward the lower forms of life, hence, they share less of the ideal "form"; the natural world of beasts includes former human beings who have abandoned the pure and the virtuous qualities which they derived from the celestial eternal world of "Ideas". Macrobius states that reason distinguishes man from the animals²³ so man has, by his abuse of reason, lost the capacity for rational thought, and it follows that there is evolution by degeneration. Nature exists within God's plan as a generating and mediating force but her animal subjects are not glorified; rather, they reflect a state of existence closely connected with man's fall from his high estate. The soul's temporary habitation in the physical body is a trial and its true home is in the heavens, so, if man abandons reason, the soul:

... prefers to endure anything in order to avoid the sky which it forsook through negligence, deceit, or rather betrayal. But the rulers of commonwealths and other wise men, by keeping in mind their origin, really live in the sky though they still cling to mortal bodies, and consequently have no difficulty, after leaving their bodies, in laying claim to the celestial seats which, one might say, they never left.²⁴

The skies have become idealized and the soul rising from the body into the heavens suggests the bird rising from the earth into the skies. Birds, although still part of the natural world which has lost a major share of its divine inheritance, have yet maintained a close link with the celestial seat and seem, in fact, to mediate between the divine and the earthly.

Cicero's "The Dream of Scipio" places a great deal of emphasis on the fact that man's understanding of the universe, fate, and divine harmony is severely limited by his earthly perspective and that only the view from the celestial spheres will allow true vision:

As I looked out from this spot [in the heavens], everything appeared splendid and wonderful. Some stars were visible which we never see from this region, and all were of a magnitude far greater than we had imagined. Of these the smallest was the one farthest from the sky and nearest the earth, which shone forth with borrowed light. And, indeed, the starry spheres easily surpassed the earth in size. From here the earth appeared so small that I was ashamed of our empire which, is, so to speak, but a point on its surface.²⁵

This higher contemplative perspective had a great deal of influence and currency in the literature and philosophy of the Middle Ages, and because the bird in flight can reasonably

be assumed to have this lofty view, it would suggest that the bird has, perhaps, an approximation of the divine perspective on earthly aspirations.²⁶

These neo-Platonic hypotheses of evolution by degeneration, the sky as the true home of the soul, the heavens as the vantage point for a fuller understanding of the physical and moral truth of the universe, are frequently mirrored in various degrees of literalness in the philosophy and poetry of the Middle Ages and, as such, are important to an understanding of major aspects of the conventions of bird imagery.

The Christian Attitude Toward the Status of Beasts

The patristic fathers were remarkably well-read in the philosophical classics and very familiar with the cosmological theories of Plato, Cicero, Plotinus, Porphyry, and to a lesser extent, Aristotle.²⁷ For the most part, these classical theories were made to agree with the cosmology of the Old and New Testament. The patristic writers were quick to identify Plato's Demiurge with the Old Testament God;²⁸ the Platonic archetypal and eternal world of "forms", celestial music, and harmony was recognized as the perfect, timeless heaven of God, and the sublunary world sphere was accepted as a dim and transitory reflection of the celestial; the Great Chain of Being was developed into a divinely inspired hierarchy of creation, and pseudo-Dionysus the

Areopagite, in his Celestial Hierarchies, elaborated this theory into an extremely influential metaphysical principle; and the parallel worlds of the microcosm and the macrocosm presented an image and moral lesson to provide man with a theory of the metaphysical, moral, and physical harmony and unity of the universe. It was when the medieval Christian regarded the sublunary world as described in the neo-Platonic theory of the genesis of the universe that he began to find some serious problems which are pertinent to this study.

E.P. Evans, in his Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture, points to an important aspect of original sin:

According to the biblical story the fall of man involved the alteration and corruption of the whole creation, including all forms of animal and vegetable life, and extending even to the soil itself, which thenceforth showed a perverse prolificacy in bringing forth thorns and brambles and every species of noxious weed. These lower organisms were also embraced in the Christian scheme of redemption, and are represented as looking forward with painful longing to its completion, and their consequent release from the degrading penalties of human transgression.²⁹

It is true that many patristic fathers, under the influence of Biblical, Platonic, and apocryphal sources, did see negative repercussions throughout the physical world as a result of "original sin".³⁰ One of the most extreme writers in this tradition was the third century Christian, Origen, who made a supreme effort to reconcile Platonism with Christianity. Origen claimed that in the beginning God had created all life on an equal spiritual and rational basis and

that the "fall" involved each creature's free choice as to how they should use their gifts.³¹ The subsequent inequalities of created beings in terms of rationality, sensitivity, spirituality, and vitality are thus directly related to conduct, and it, therefore, follows that the natural world of animal, vegetable, and inanimate creation is labouring under a heavy burden of guilt. Augustine, however, recognizing the Platonic theory of the transmigration of souls and perhaps noting the Manichaeian possibilities involved in this very negative concept of the created world, bluntly rejects Origen's theory:

They also claim that souls, though not parts but merely creatures of God, have sinned by withdrawing from the Creator and, according to the gravity of their sins, have been imprisoned in bodies ranging, by degrees, from heaven down to earth, and that such souls and bodies constitute the cosmos. . . . Origen has been rightly reprov'd for holding and expressing such views in his work, which he calls . . . Of Origins.³²

God is the perfect Artist with perfect knowledge of His creation and although "original sin" corrupted the nature of man, Augustine argues that all life is not sinful:

If no one had sinned, this beautiful world could have been filled with created natures that are good. Even now, with sin in the world, it does not follow that all things are sinful. The great majority of those in heaven preserve the integrity of their nature; and not even the sinfulness of a will refusing to preserve the order of its nature can lessen the beauty of God's total order, designed, as it is, according to the laws of His justice.³³

Augustine expressly rejects the idea that the inequalities of created beings are the result of sin and explains the hierarchy with the theory of "plenitude" :

What... is true is that there is a hierarchy of created realities, from earthly to heavenly, from visible to invisible, some being better than others, and that the very reason for their inequality is to make possible an existence for them all.³⁴

Each creature receives from God an existence fitting for him³⁵ and taken together the various species and ranks form a positive hierarchy with a kind of internal harmony:

... in the case of beasts, trees and other mutable and mortal creatures which lack not merely an intellect but even sensation or life itself, it would be ridiculous to condemn in them the defects which destroy their corruptible nature. For if it was by the will of the Creator that they received that measure of being whereby their comings and goings and fleeting existences should contribute to that special, if lowly, loveliness of our earthly seasons which chimes with the harmony of the universe. For, there was never any need for the things of the earth either to rival those of heaven or to remain uncreated merely because the latter are better.³⁶

Augustine is not, however, attempting to idealize the animal world; rather, he is trying to offset the tendency to describe the lower orders of creation in terms of voluntary or involuntary sinfulness. He recognizes that man was created midway between angel and beast:

But, should he offend his Lord and God by a proud and disobedient use of his free will, then, subject to death and a slave to his appetites, he would have to live like a beast and be destined to eternal punishment after death.³⁷

When a soul falls from grace it begins to live with the same standards as the beast, but it does not, as Origen, Plato, Macrobius, and Calcidius suggest, become a beast literally. And Boethius, in The Consolation of Philosophy, provides additional authority for the use of beasts as metaphors when he concurs with Augustine that the man who abandons his rational strivings for virtue should be described in terms of an animal:

"... wicked men cease to be what they were; but the appearance of their human bodies, which they keep, shows that they once were men. To give oneself to evil, therefore, is to lose one's human nature...."

"You will say that the man who is driven by avarice to seize what belongs to others is like a wolf; the restless angry man who spends his life in quarrels you will compare to a dog. The treacherous conspirator who steals by fraud may be likened to a fox; the man who is ruled by intemperate anger is thought to have the soul of a lion. The fearful and timid man who trembles without reason is like a deer; the lazy stupid fellow is like an ass. The volatile, inconstant man who continually changes direction is like a bird; the man who is sunk in foul lust is trapped in the pleasures of a filthy sow. In this way, anyone who abandons virtue ceases to be a man, since he cannot share in the divine nature, and instead becomes a beast."³⁸

Reinforcing this distinction between man and beast, Boethius refers to the argument — which ultimately becomes a medieval commonplace — that the beast faces the ground while man lifts up his head to the heavens:

The human race alone lifts its head to heaven and stands erect, despising the earth. Man's figure teaches, unless folly has bound you to the earth, that you who look upward with your head

held high should also raise your soul to sublime things, lest while your body is raised above the earth, your mind should sink to the ground under its burden.³⁹

Animals possess the first and second of the three-fold powers of the soul - the nutritive and sense perceiving powers - but Hugh of St. Victor points to the element which separates man from beast:

The third power of the soul appropriates the prior nutritional and sense perceiving powers, using them, so to speak, as its domestics and servants. It is rooted entirely in the reason, and it exercises itself either in the most unfaltering grasp of things present, or in the understanding of things absent, or in the investigation of things unknown. This power belongs to humankind alone. ⁴⁰

When man abandons his third power of the soul, he relegates himself to the realm of the animals.

But there is another tradition within medieval thought which offers a positive perspective on animals and birds. In Jeremias, God laments that, "The kite in the air hath known her time : the turtle and the swallow and the stork have observed the time of their coming : but my people have not known the judgment of the Lord."⁴¹ St. Ambrose, writing in the fourth century, develops this theme and emphasizes the ways in which animals are superior to humans:

[God] . . . by reason of divine dispensation infuses His orders in the senses of all created things, . . . [and] without the use of words, allows mute animals to follow the directions of natural instinct. His instruction reaches even to the smallest creatures; it is not limited to

the largest. Fishes follow a divine law, whereas men contravene it. Fishes duly comply with the celestial mandates, but men make void the precepts of God. . . . Because a fish is mute and deprived of reason is it, therefore, an object of contempt in your eyes? What is more rational that this migration of fish. . . ?

Solomon in his wisdom declared this to be a great mystery, this knowledge of the time to go and the time to return, the time for performance and the time for change. Fish are not deceived in this knowledge because they follow an instinct of nature, the true teacher of loyal devotion and not the deliberations of reason and rhetorical argumentation.⁴²

More to our purposes, however, are Ambrose's statements about birds:

These birds have a natural social and military organization whereas with us this service is compulsory and servile. . . . Hence there are no deserters, because the loyalty is a natural one. . . .

What is nobler than . . . [the birds' social organization] wherein toil and preferment is open to all, where power is not the privilege of the few, but is distributed in voluntary fashion equally among all.⁴³

Birds are bound by a natural code of laws prescribed by natural grace,⁴⁴ and they possess an ideal state:⁴⁵

From the beginning men began in this manner to establish a political system based on nature, with the birds as models. Thus there was equal participation in both labour and office. Each individual in his turn learned to set up a division of responsibilities, to take his share in doing service and in supervising it. Thus no one was devoid of office and no one was without his allotment of work.⁴⁶

Ambrose articulates an important aspect of the medieval

attitude to nature and birds. Man has chosen the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and has turned his back on the knowledge derived from instinct and divine instructions. Birds in one tradition are deprived of the "rational soul"; however, from this more positive intellectual perspective, birds, by virtue of natural grace, possess perhaps an even higher instinctive knowledge derived solely from God. In this latter tradition, it is instinct, not the "rational soul" which leads to social and political harmony and common profit; human society looks to nature and to the birds for instruction.

Ambrose did not, however, limit himself to regarding bird life as a model for man or as an illustration of the potential for folly within rational faculties. Nature, here represented by birds, becomes a mediator between the divine and human; God communicates with mankind through man's study of the natural habits of birds:

What do those people say who usually ridicule our mysteries when they hear that a virgin gave birth to a child — people who consider that parturition is impossible to one who never had any relations with a man? Is that to be thought impossible for the Mother of God which is admitted to be possible in the case of vultures? A bird gives birth without contact with a male. No one has cast any doubt on that. . . . Do not our observations show that the Lord has provided many precedents in the realm of nature by which to prove the glory of His own Incarnation and assert its veracity?⁴⁷

And Ambrose's most famous student, St. Augustine, draws on

this not entirely original attitude towards birds and animals and offers "auctoritas" and insight into this more profoundly mystical sense of beast imagery:

. . . if the divine goodness is identical with divine holiness, then it is rational and intelligent rather than rash and presumptuous to pursue the hypothesis that each of God's creatures speaks to us in a kind of mystical code in order to stimulate our curiosity and to intimate an image of the Trinity. . .⁴⁸

Augustine's On Christian Doctrine elaborates this attitude into a technique of interpretation of signs and while its purpose is to elucidate Scripture, it offers a theory of the origin and function of signs and figurative language generally.

Augustine first asserts that a sign is of no intrinsic value but rather is a, "thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses."⁴⁹ He distinguishes between the natural and the conventional sign:

Those are natural which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. . . .

Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. . . . We propose to consider and discuss this class of signs in so far as men are concerned with it, for even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them.⁵⁰

The latter is obviously the most important to Augustine, and he subdivides the conventional sign into the literal and the figurative:

They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted; thus we say "bos" [ox], when we mean an animal of a herd because all men using the Latin language call it by that name just as we do. Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is normally designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture,⁵¹

The diversity of meaning of a single figurative sign should not, according to Augustine, create any difficulty. The fact that an animal is used in Scripture in several instances with totally diverse figurative senses is not a contradiction but, rather, a suggestion of the profundity of the text.⁵² The literal sense of the sign is very important but one must not ignore the spiritual sense:

Nor can anything more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the thing which distinguishes us from beasts, which is the understanding, is subjected to the flesh in the pursuit of the letter. . . . There is a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit of taking signs for things, so that one is not able to raise the eye of the mind above things that are corporeal and created to drink in eternal light.⁵³

The interpretation of a figurative sign is a devotional not a scientific study, and the certain test of an interpretation is whether the lesson leads to a building of charity:⁵⁴

. . . if he is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place towards which the road itself leads.⁵⁵

It follows then that even the pagan classics are open to this technique of interpretation of signs:

Even some truths concerning the worship of the one God are discovered among them. These are, as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere infused,⁵⁶

God uses figurative signs and obscurity "to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless,"⁵⁷ for "no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure."⁵⁸

Augustine's attitude toward the allegorical potential of the Scriptures is extended to the whole of God's creation,⁵⁹ and as pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor points out: "The entire sense-perceptible world is like a book written by the finger of God."⁶⁰ Alan of Lille, whose De planctu Naturae and Anticlaudianus were, along with Bernard Silvestris' Cosmographia, the most elaborate poetic demonstrations of the twelfth century fascination with the role of Natura in the universe, is even more explicit in his allegorical attitude toward nature: "Every creature in the world is, for us, like

a book and a picture and a mirror as well."⁶¹

Both Augustine and Alan of Lille, although separated by approximately nine centuries, essentially agree with the approach taken toward the animal world as it was expressed in the Physiologus. Variouslly dated from between the second and the fourth century A.D.,⁶² the Physiologus exerted enormous influence throughout the Middle Ages and was quoted and read by preachers, church scholars, laymen, and artists as a source of spiritual truth gained through a devotional study of nature.⁶³ In this very popular Latin poem fabulous and actual beasts such as the phoenix, hart, unicorn, eagle, and whale are described in a totally unscientific fashion and then are convincingly allegorized to demonstrate the mystic sentence of each creature which reveals the truth of the dogma of the Christian Church. Augustine's writings frequently reflect this allegorical approach to the beast when, for example, he discusses the pelican who supposedly kills her young, mourns three days, and wounds herself deeply in order to revivify her young with her blood.⁶⁴ Beyond this, when explaining the allegorical significance of the eagle breaking its beak on the rock, Augustine points out that it is inconsequential for us to determine whether the fabulous stories connected with the animals are true or not, but it is essential to discover and determine the religious significance they confirm.⁶⁵ Augustine accordingly calls for encyclopedias⁶⁶ - which include descriptions of beasts,

numbers, celestial phenomena, plant life, and minerals - which will provide essential information for understanding the Scriptures. Responding to this need, Christian scholars such as Isidore of Seville, Bede, and Hrabanus Maurus look for direction from the highly developed classical encyclopedic tradition which included Pliny's Natural History and the Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium of Solinus.⁶⁷ Pliny's encyclopedia was an extremely influential work even beyond the Middle Ages, and its scope, plan, and curious mixture of seeming first-hand information and reported fabulous creatures made it a much quoted authority. For the most part, Pliny avoids moralization of his animal observations, and Isidore, in turn, generally avoids allegorical interpretation of natural phenomena. Hrabanus Maurus, however, in his De Universo, bases his encyclopedia on Isidore's Etymologies and then provides extensive moral and allegorical commentary very much within the Physiologus stream. Beyond this, encyclopedias of a more restricted scope began to develop, and these texts were more like individual chapters copied and expanded into bestiaries, lapidaries,⁶⁸ and herbals. The bestiaries particularly flourished and while originally they were essentially excerpts from the Physiologus, later editions included numerous chapters from Pliny, Isidore, and Hrabanus Maurus; the sequence moved into a more logical order; and in the twelfth and thirteenth century the illustrations were so prolific that the bestiary became one of the leading picture

books of the later Middle Ages.⁶⁹ So despite the objections of spiritual leaders such as Bernard of Clairvaux, who felt that the spiritual value of animal imagery was being obscured by its secular appeal,⁷⁰ animal symbolism from the Physiologus tradition more and more entered into the daily life of medieval man through sermons, poetry, bestiaries, encyclopedias, and ecclesiastical art.

The continuing interest in the status and significance of beasts and the conflicting points of view it engendered from the earliest Christian times are responsible for much of the intellectual richness, irony, and ambiguity in the medieval conventions of bird imagery. The topoi of birds representing debased human nature, and avian society as a model for, or parallel to, human society leads to the bird fable convention. The human/bird double perspective in this convention offers the audience the opportunity to witness beasts acting as humans and to therefore ridicule the behaviour of humans who have abused their rational faculties. On the other hand, the audience is also tempted to laugh at the birds who, acting as supposedly rational human beings, fall into intellectual and physical traps because they are not acting on instincts derived from natural grace. The recognition of the birds' higher perspective on earthly affairs, the belief that they reveal the mysteries of Christianity as "through a glass darkly", and that they mediate between the divine and the human leads to the convention of birds as intellectual

signs. This convention provides a contemplative dimension to bird imagery, and it gradually moves from primarily Christian semiology to a broader philosophical language of signs. The final image pattern, the convention of birds-and-love, is a more complex web of traditions which derives its intellectual and emotional power from all of the above themes. As the poet usually develops some aspect of the contrast between human and bird society, or the contrast between the birds' earthly and aerial activities, this convention encompasses moods and themes as diverse as frustration and celebration, alienation and reconciliation, and eros and caritas. As we shall see, each of these conventions had a literary heritage which extended back at least to the classics and the Bible.

Bird and Beast Imagery in Classical Literature:

Animal and bird stories are prevalent in all cultures. It is probable that the beasts in these stories were originally furred and winged gods or totem figures who later retained their sub-human form when they lost their divine associations.⁷¹ Egypt and India, for example, possessed an extensive collection of beast fables and myths, and both cultures demonstrated a tendency to recognize certain animals as manifestations of deities or as deities themselves. Eventually the tales became moral fables and achieved their

greatest western flowering in the repertoire of Aesop. Here we find beasts in their sub-human form acting with all the rationality, or lack of rationality, of human beings. This indeed seems to be the basis of much of the charm of these stories. We recognize that the fox will not rationalize the frustration of out-of-reach fruit into "sour grapes" nor will the pigeons entrust their safety to a predatory kite, but we do know that given the right circumstances humans will do exactly this. Aesop is able to point out the quirks of supposedly rational behaviour in a safe, entertaining, and distanced way, and the fable form also affords him the opportunity to drive home points because we recognize that in a certain sense the sub-human protagonists would normally be superior to us: human foolishness is all the more apparent in contrast to natural animal instinct.

Actually, The Fables of Aesop seems to have been a general title for a continually expanding collection of allegorical animal fables written probably by Persian, Greek, Roman, and Indian authors and this collection - especially that produced by Demetrius of Phaleron (ca. 300 B.C.) - made a very significant contribution to the literature of classical civilization. That the "fables" were not reserved for school children is amply demonstrated by the fact that, according to Plato, Socrates versified some of Aesop's fables while he was waiting for trial in prison,⁷² and that both Aristotle and Pliny cite Aesop as one of their sources of natural

history.⁷³ Official Christian sanction was readily forthcoming for Augustine speaks approvingly of Aesop's fables in Contra Mendacium,⁷⁴ and Basil, in one of his letters, writes positively of Aesop and compares himself to the lamb unjustly accused by the wolf.⁷⁵

Given the popularity and effectiveness of Aesop's Fables, it is not surprising that Aristophanes could use similar techniques to great effect in several of his comedies. The Birds, for example, is a much more complex artistic creation than any of the "Fables" but it does depend very much for its effect on the fable's human/bird double perspective.

The Birds portrays two foolish Athenians enthusiastically setting out to search for an avian utopia where litigation, imperialism, and war will be abolished. The two men expect to find this utopia among the birds because they admire the birds' powers of flight, their rustic simplicity and uncomplicated life, and their seeming higher perspective on earthly activities - essentially, however, they admire the birds' ability to fly over the problems of humanity and to escape the tragedy of human existence.⁷⁶ When they found the new utopia of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, the two Athenians end up substituting world conquest and defeat of the gods for war, anarchy for litigation, birds as the new winged gods, and themselves as the new dictators. The birds are, of course, articulate which, as in all animal fables, closes much of the gap between human and avian spheres, and the instincts which

normally ensure the success of the birds is mitigated by the extent of human reason Aristophanes portrays the birds as possessing. Dressed actors perform as birds and Aristophanes plays up the incongruity of these feathered characters and then introduces Tereus and Philemon - humans transformed into birds - to reinforce the interplay of human and bird characteristics. Finally then, The Birds, very subtly combines satire, mythology, animal fable, naturalistic details, and humour into a drama which clearly transcends its immediate satirical subject.

An extension of the concept of the humanized bird is found in the idea of metamorphosis which plays such a prominent part in classical mythology. Ovid's Metamorphoses, offers a compendium of classical mythology centred around the motif of transformation from human into bird, fish, animal, stone, wood, and water. Often the transformation involved is a fitting one - when, for example, Lycaon who is acting very much like a wolf is finally metamorphized into one - but occasionally the rationale of other transformations escapes us now as our knowledge of the cults of heroes and gods is incomplete. Ovid does, however, show us on several occasions the gradual transformation of man into beast and makes the important point that the line which separates human from beast is a very blurred one. Beyond this, Ovid also subscribes to the Platonic and Pythagorean theory of the transmigration of souls:

All things change, but nothing dies: the spirit wanders hither and thither, taking possession of what limbs it pleases, passing from beasts into human bodies, or again our human spirit passes into beasts, but never at any time does it perish.⁷⁷

Lucius Apuleius' The Golden Ass, written in Latin in the second century A.D., affords an even better example of the metamorphosis motif and the human/beast double perspective. Apuleius' "novel"⁷⁸ describes the supposed adventures of the author whose inordinate curiosity about the black magical arts leads him into experimental witchcraft and an accidental transformation into an ass which retains intellect and human consciousness. After more than adequate warning about the dangers of magic and the witch Merope's ability to transform humans into beasts appropriate to their human behaviour, Lucius conspires with a slave girl and attempts to transform himself into a bird - specifically an owl. It is significant that Lucius chooses this specific bird because the owl was considered both a symbol of ill-omen and the bird of Minerva, goddess of wisdom. Carelessness, however, leads to transformation into an ass and as the goddess Isis is later to say:

. . . because thou didst turn to servile pleasures, by a little folly of thy youthfulness, thou hast had a sinister reward of thy unprosperous curiosity.⁷⁹

It is clear that Isis considered Lucius' metamorphosis appropriate to his behaviour; the only way he can redeem himself is to go through an initiation of sorts which will

force him to examine his behaviour against that of an animal. Ironically, however, Lucius, as an ass, is far more capable of understanding, kindness, and heroism than the majority of the people he encounters during his travels. He assists in the rescue of a captured maiden, foils robbery attempts, and he is capable of forgiving some of the humans who torment him. His most telling adventure, however, is when he is placed in an arena and expected to rape a convicted murderess; the ass is revolted by the bestiality perpetrated by the humans, and he escapes to find the goddess Isis who transforms him back into human form and then initiates him into her cult. Lucius has investigated the sub-human aspect of life (which, in many ways, describes his earlier lust, cruelty, and foolish curiosity), but, recognizing his bestial side, he gradually rises above his situation until he is truly human again. In many ways, however, the common run of humanity has been shown to be even more bestial than the animals, so Apuleius raises the initiated hero above the general run of mankind and makes him a priest of Isis.

Classical literature was clearly not without examples of highly developed beast fiction which exploited the human/beast double perspective, but we may also read some of this fiction interpreting the beasts as symbols of deities and divine mysteries. Many early cultures, particularly that of the Egyptians, used beasts as symbols of their gods, the gods' earthly manifestations, or as symbols of the initiates

of a mystery cult. It is likely that at an earlier time the beasts were themselves deities but most of the art which survives suggests that the falcon represented Horus and that the ibis represented Thoth. The whole Egyptian pantheon seems to have had animal representation. The classical Greeks and Romans had similar associations and horses were sacred to Hades, swine to Demeter, and doves and swans to Aphrodite. Possibly connected with this idea was the heraldic use of beast imagery which offered Athens her owl, Argos her wolf, Boetia her bull, and the Roman legions their standards of wolf, bear, lion, and eagle.⁸⁰

The Golden Ass is, again, the most convenient example of this semiological technique as it is generally acknowledged that the beasts referred to in the novel are signs of sacred figures. As already mentioned, Lucius wishes to be transformed into the owl which would suggest that he desires the wisdom of Athene or, her Roman counterpart Minerva, but is instead metamorphized into the ass which is noted for its foolishness. Near the end of the novel when Isis decides it is time to redeem Lucius, we recognize that the work is truly centred around the mysteries of the Isis cult; it is then apparent that the ass is a particularly appropriate figure for the protagonist because Isis states that she is utterly opposed to the beast:

An ass [is a] beast I have long time abhorred
and despised.⁸¹

The ass is the sacred animal and earthly manifestation of Set and, therefore, the sworn enemy of Isis, her brother/consort Osiris, and her son, Horus. Lucius' metamorphosis appears to have been an initiation on at least two levels. In terms of the theory of the transmigration of souls, Lucius has become an animal associated with stupidity because he was filled with the wrong kind of curiosity and passion. In terms of the beast as a symbol of the god or one of his initiates, Lucius unwittingly becomes a follower of Set because he acts in ways abhorrent to Isis. When he is finally returned to human form, his experience of living out his follies has purified and improved him as a human being.⁸²

Apuleius' The Golden Ass had considerable influence in the Middle Ages as it was known and discussed by intellectuals such as Lactantius, Augustine, Jerome, Ausonius, Martianus Capella, Fulgentius, Macrobius, and Cassiodorus, but it was only in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries that copies of the novel had wide currency.⁸³ As an animal tale with moral and religious dimensions and as an animal fable which describes the world and human relationships from the point of view of beast and human simultaneously, The Golden Ass figured prominently in the development of the medieval conventions of beast imagery.

The connection of birds with spring and human love involves a very complex web of traditions. That birds were closely associated with spring for the classical Greeks and Romans

can be seen in pastoral poetry from Theocritus and Meleager, to Ovid and Horace, as well as in the Swallow Song sung by classical Greek children for the advent of spring.⁸⁴ We also know that doves and swans were associated with Venus and Aphrodite. Furthermore, it is clear that classical celebrations of spring characteristically linked the renewal of nature with renewal in the human sphere. Still, classical bird imagery is not particularly associated with joyful love.⁸⁵ The Roman and Greek poets characteristically perceive sadness in the songs of their favourite birds and this, to a certain extent, reflects the belief in the transmigration of souls. According to Ernest Martin, the myth of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus, who are finally turned into respectively nightingale, swallow, and hoopoe, effectively tempered what might have been a tendency to connect birds and fulfilling human love in Roman poetry.⁸⁶ One sees in a Horatian spring ode,⁸⁷ for example, what appears to be a traditional spring song replete with spring, love, and birds except that the bird which appears reminds the poet of the Procne-Philomela tragedy and the poem ends with a meditation on death and the carpe diem theme. On the other hand, Ovid and Virgil allude to the connection of birds, spring, and joyful love. Propertius refers positively to Venus and her doves, and Catullus explicitly compares doves and happy lovers.⁸⁸ Clearly the association of birds with the transmigration of souls tended to undermine the birds, spring, and love formula; nevertheless,

one also suspects that generally, the classical poets rejected the perhaps too facile pattern of simultaneous renewal in the vegetative, avian, and human spheres, and used the Tereus-Philomela myth to suggest the tragic underside of the popular association of birds, love, and spring. The late classical Pervigilium Veneris, for example, appears to have been written for the officially sanctioned spring festival, the trinoctium of Venus,⁸⁹ yet much of its power derives from the fact that it advances the theme of birds and joyful human love only to finally reject it: the poem develops a great deal of the potential of the convention of birds and love by relating it to both the joys and frustrations of human love.

Pervigilium Veneris begins by combining birds, mating, spring, and love in a natural scene of fertility and universal harmony:

Tomorrow he will love who has never loved;
 tomorrow he who has loved will love again.
 Spring is new, the spring of birdsong; in the spring our
 earth was born.
 In the spring hearts come together; in the spring the birds
 all mate.⁹⁰

The sense of renewal and harmony in the natural scene is reinforced and related to the supernatural sphere when the poet introduces the pagan deities:

Tomorrow's the day when Father Heaven held his marriage:
 He made the whole year out of his springtime showers,
 Falling as husband Rain to the lap of his lovely wife,
 Mixing seeds to nourish all in her broad body.
 Then the Sea from its foamy ball, from Saturn's floating blood,
 In the middle of sky-blue legions and squads of two legged
 horses
 Made Venus shivering wet from the shower-sprayed foam.⁹¹

Venus, the "creatress who governs all"⁹² ensures that vegetative and animal life mate and that the birds continue their singing. The emphasis then falls on the human sphere with Venus and her winged son, Cupid, leading Aeneas to Lavinia⁹³ and the Romans to the Sabines.⁹⁴ Mankind, gods, and nature are joined in a celebration of sexuality, fertility, and love - until suddenly the poet notices the sound of the swallow:

The wife of Tereus is singing in the shade of a poplar tree.
 You'd think she sang love's measures with her melodious
 voice;
 You'd never think she mourned a sister wronged by her
 husband's rape.⁹⁵

With the intrusion of this tragic story of rape, incest, mutilation, and cannibalism the idyllic atmosphere is broken. The poet who has been, until this point, a part of this world of love, beauty, and harmony now recognizes that he is unhappy and outside of the natural scene:

She is singing. I am silent. When will my spring ever come?
 When will I be like the swallow, with my days of silence
 done?⁹⁶

This remarkable poem, which begins as a tribute to Venus and

ends as a confession of romantic agony,⁹⁷ integrates all the essential elements in the convention of birds-and-love: birds and bird-song, spring and locus amoenus, love in the natural, human, and divine spheres, and finally a human observer who is portrayed as alienated from the world of nature and renewal.

Bird and Animal Imagery in the Bible:

The Bible is a rich storehouse of bird and animal imagery which was derived, for the most part, from the same sources as the animal lore in the Aesopian fables.⁹⁸ Here we find a bird fable,⁹⁹ birds used as symbols of divinity, image patterns associating birds, spring, and love, and animal characters who were influential in establishing the beast/human double perspective of the bird fable.

The fable of the eagles and the vine (Ezekiel 17) is a political and religious bird allegory. It illustrates the capture of the vine (the Jews) by two eagles (Egypt and Babylon) and God's final rescue of the vine. God promises to "net" the eagle and plant the vine in Israel so that it will provide a haven for mankind: "On the high mountains of Israel will I plant it: and it shall shoot forth into branches and shall bear fruit, and it shall become a great cedar. And all birds shall dwell under it, and every fowl shall make its nest under the shadow of the branches thereof."¹⁰⁰ This

fable would clearly offer strong authority for the convention; however, the characters are described rather than dramatized and one suspects that humanized beast characters would have even greater influence on the medieval bird fable.

The serpent in the Garden of Eden is a prominent example of the speaking and thinking beast and, unless one examines it in terms of the complex mythological heritage of the serpent in world mythology, one is tempted to regard it mainly as a creature which abuses faculties of reason and speech. That there was a strong Christian and Hebraic tradition to consider that Satan or one of his fallen angels was transformed into the serpent (Apoc. 12:7-9) would accentuate the idea that through misuse of rational faculties Satan had fallen to the lowest form of animal life. But perhaps a less complex example of the talking animal is recounted in Numbers 22 when Balaam is tested by God. Balaam is given the choice of doing the will of God or his own self-interested will and he chooses the latter. Riding his ass along the road, Balaam is unable to recognize that the angel of the Lord is blocking his way; the ass, however, sees the truth and he refuses to carry his master further. The ass is beaten but he then turns and rebukes his master in a human voice and Balaam admits his error. This story reflects one aspect of the human/beast double perspective: man possesses the rational faculty but his awareness is still inferior to the animal which is capable of recognizing truth through

different but natural faculties.

The beast/human metamorphosis can be seen in the description of Daniel's struggles with Nabuchodonosor. The king of Babylon did not recognize that Daniel's God was supreme and Nabuchodonosor was therefore:

. . . driven away from among men and did eat grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven: till his hairs grew like the feathers of eagles and his nails like bird's claws.¹⁰¹

The king will not use his reason so he is reduced to a composite sub-human state of neither bird nor animal but rather monster. As a beast he keeps his eyes to the ground — as he did when king — and it is only later when Nabuchodonosor repents that he returns to his former human situation:

I . . . lifted up my eyes to heaven, and my sense was restored to me. And I blessed the most High. . . .¹⁰²

There is also, of course, an extensive tradition in the New Testament of using birds and animals as symbols of divinity or of the divine in man. The lamb is often used as a symbol of Jesus¹⁰³ because of its use in the Passover ritual,¹⁰⁴ its natural habits, and mystical references in Apocalypse.¹⁰⁵ The dove is often employed as a symbol or earthly manifestation of the Holy Spirit,¹⁰⁶ and the bird generally is used on many occasions as a symbol of the soul.¹⁰⁷ The dove as a symbol for the Holy Spirit is appropriate as it draws on the story of Noah's flood and the dove

which brings back the olive branch signifying that God's wrath is receding,¹⁰⁸ and the ritual which requires the sacrifice of a dove for purification after the birth of a child.¹⁰⁹ The use of the bird as a symbol of the soul is pervasive in world religion,¹¹⁰ and one sees it in Egyptian¹¹¹ and in classical mythology.¹¹² In Psalms, bird imagery relates to freedom, mobility, and purity and the bird's ability to transcend the earthly suggests the intangible divine spark which animates the corporeal. As such, it represents escape from the mundane concerns of human existence (Psalms 55:6), but it also reminds us that the soul can lose its freedom and become ensnared by temporal life (Psalm 124:7).

In the Bible, the poetry which connects birds, spring and human love is reserved almost exclusively for the Canticle of Canticles. Although it was interpreted by both Christian and Hebraic commentators as an allegory of the love between God or Jesus and the soul or the Church, the poem is literally concerned with sexual love between King Solomon and a Shulamite maiden. The bridegroom twice and the bride once compare their lovers' eyes to those of a dove,¹¹³ and the male repeatedly refers to his lover as a dove.¹¹⁴ There is also an invocation to spring which explicitly associates the arrival of the spring season, the return of the birds and their songs, and the arousal of human love:

Behold, my beloved speaketh to me: Arise, make haste,
my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come.

For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone.

The flowers have appeared in our land : the time of
pruning is come: the voice of the turtle is heard in our land:

The fig tree hath put forth her green figs : the vines
in flower yield their sweet smell. Arise, my love, my
beautiful one, and come.¹¹⁵

What Pervigilium Veneris did for the birds and love convention in the classical tradition, Canticle of Canticles had already achieved in the Scriptural tradition. However, while the Old Testament lyric does have a slight reference to love's frustrations at one point,¹¹⁶ it is overwhelmingly a celebration of the simultaneous renewal of the natural, the human, and the spiritual spheres. The participants in the poetic dialogue are not alienated from the natural scene of renewal and fertility; rather, they are part of nature: they are doves, lillies, roes, and their features are described in terms of sheep, pomegranates, and the honey comb. Then, of course, the erotic level of the poem was subsumed by Christian exegesis, and the joy and fulfillment in the natural and human sphere is seen to represent the spiritual love of Christ and His Church. Just as medieval poets used garden imagery to evoke a complex pattern of charity and cupidity,¹¹⁷ so also could they refer to the birds and love formula to suggest both a spiritual love which binds the human with the natural sphere as well as an erotic love which tends to point up the disparity between "natural" and human relations.

It will be useful at this point to summarize the pre-medieval ancestry of these conventions. The fable convention had wide currency through the classical Aesopian fables and the Biblical bird fable. As well, the prominent use of the beast/human double perspective in characters such as Lucius in The Golden Ass, Balaam's ass, or the serpent in Eden would suggest the important ironic element of the speaking, thinking beast. Pervigilium Veneris and Canticle of Canticles offered strong support for the convention of birds-and-love. Both poems clearly develop the pattern of spring, birds, and love, but the former stresses the alienation felt by the human observer and the latter emphasizes the extent to which the renewal of nature reflects the emotions of the lovers; significantly the poem of alienation and frustration concerns erotic human love, and the one which integrates the human and the natural is interpreted by the Middle Ages to be concerned with spiritual love. Finally, for the convention of birds as intellectual signs we have found many examples of birds representing deities, initiates, and souls; however, we have not encountered the use of birds as signs as described by Augustine or as illustrated by Physiologus. There is no doubt that the pre-medieval identification of certain birds with deities had in its origin an awareness of the bird's natural habits and markings which made it an appropriate symbol for the god or goddess.¹¹⁸ Once the identification has been made, however, there appears to be little concern to

offer an explicit rationale for the use of the symbol. On the other hand, in the medieval use of birds as signs, the rationale for the identification is of foremost concern.

The eagle, for example, suggests both Jesus and the evangelist John but, perhaps as a result of the injunctions against bird and animal worship,¹¹⁹ the focus is on how the bird and its supposed natural habits reflect, embody, and explain Christian mysteries. When Chaucer employs birds as signs, he develops the cognitive sign one step further; his birds suggest and embody broad philosophical concepts which extend beyond the strictly Christian or theological.

NOTES

¹ See George D. Economou, The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), Chapter one and passim.

² M.-D. Chenu, Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century, trans. J. Taylor and L. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). See chapter two, "The Platonism of the Twelfth Century" passim.

³ Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Inc., 1958). See Book II, chap. 16. See also Augustine, The City of God, Books VIII-XVI, trans. G. Walsh and G. Monahan. Fathers of the Church (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), XI, 24.

⁴ Bernard Silvestris, Cosmographia, trans. W. Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 6.

⁵ Chenu, pp. 10-11.

⁶ Chenu, p. 129.

⁷ Cosmographia, pp. 3, 56-7. See also G. Economou, The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature, chap. III passim.

⁸ Macrobius, for example, argues extensively against Aristotle, and one receives the distinct impression that Aristotle is little more than a straw man to demolish with Platonic arguments. See, for example, Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, trans. W. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), Bk. II, chaps. 14-16, pp. 227-43.

⁹ Plato, Timaeus, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 54.

10 Timaeus, pp.42-3.

11 Timaeus, p. 121. This illustration of Plato's theory of reincarnation appears near the end of Timaeus; hence, it would not have been available during the Middle Ages. It is, however, very much in line with the classical theories of the transmigration of the soul which were well known to medieval scholars. Plato also associated "wings" with the journey to the celestial regions; see Phaedrus 246:E.

12 Timaeus, p. 121.

13 This was more a change of emphasis than a change of theory as Plato allows that it is harmony which moves the earth. This change of emphasis was, however, very important in the development of the empirical study of nature.

14 For a discussion of the influence of Macrobius and Calcidius, see W.H. Stahl's introduction (pp. 39-48) to Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, and J.C.M. Van Winden, Calcidius on Matter; His Doctrine and Sources: A Chapter in the History of Platonism (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959), pp. 1-5.

15 See G. Economou, pp. 21-2, and Van Winden, pp. 191-2.

16 Macrobius, p. 185, 194. Macrobius also believed that the soul was derived from musical concords.

17 Macrobius, p. 123, 126; and Van Winden on Calcidius, p. 33.

18 Matter is judged an inferior substance for the divine artisan in Timaeus, and Calcidius describes "silva" or matter as evil in chapters CXIX-CXXXVI. See I. Wrobel, ed. Platonis Timaeus Interprete Chalcidio Cum Eius Commentario (Frankfurt am Main: Universanderter Nachdruck, 1963).

19 Macrobius, p. 224; Calcidius, CCLXVIII-CCLXIX; Plato, Timaeus, p. 42.

20 Calcidius, ed. Wrobel, CCXCVII; Van Winden, p. 114; Macrobius, p. 224.

21 Macrobius, p. 145

22 Macrobius, pp. 124-5.

23 Macrobius, p. 144.

24 Macrobius, p. 125.

25 Cicero, "The Dream of Scipio" in W.H. Stahl, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, p. 72.

26 The birds' close link with the skies and celestial vision is, at least, partially responsible for the tradition that the future can be foretold by the flight patterns and cries of birds. See, for example, Macrobius, p. 168.

27 See Chenu, pp. 48-89.

28 Augustine, for one, however, sternly pointed out that it was wrong to believe that the mortal world was created by God's first creations. See The City of God XII, 27, pp. 294-5.

29 E.P. Evans, Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture (London: W. Heinemann, 1896), pp. 29-30. On the other hand, Arcite, in Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" (I, 11, 1315-1321), seems to understand that as the animal simply follows his fleshly desires and has no afterlife or punishment, he does not share in the Christian plan of redemption. See Beryl Rowland, Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 20

- 30 Many medieval intellectuals mention this extended "fall". One might particularly note Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, Bk. III, pr. 10; St. Basil, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine each describe the rose as being without thorn before the Fall. See Basil, Hexameron, V, 6; Ambrose, Hexameron, III, xi, 48; Augustine, De Genesi Contra Manichaeos, I, xiii. Alexander Neckham, in De Natura rerum et de laudibus divinae sapientiae, ed. and trans. T. Wright (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, Green, 1863), pp. 201-2 points out that the 'ape had a tail before the Fall.
- 31 Of Origins. Cited in A.O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea (1936; Rpt., New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 75.
- 32 Augustine, City of God, XI, 23, p. 222.
- 33 City of God, XI, 23, p. 222.
- 34 City of God, XI, 22, p. 220.
- 35 City of God, XII, 4, p. 251.
- 36 City of God, XII, 4, pp. 250-1.
- 37 City of God, XII, 22, p. 288.
- 38 Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. R. Green (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Inc., 1962), Bk. IV, prose iii, pp. 82-3. It is, of course, this kind of interpretation of human nature which leads to the elaborate allegories we find attached to classical stories and myths in works such as Ovide Moralisé, Fulgentius' Mythologies, and The Exposition of the Contents of Virgil, and Commentaries on Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men in The Odyssey. This mutation of the soul wherein a man might be depicted in terms of animal characteristics leads to the philosophical and satirical use of "monsters" to suggest particular types of degeneracy.

- 39 Boethius, Bk. V, poem v, p. 114.
- 40 Hugh of St. Victor, Didascalicon, trans. J. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), Bk. I, chap. 3, p. 49.
- 41 Jeremias 8:7. All Bible quotations are from the Douai-Rheims translation.
- 42 St. Ambrose, "Hexameron", Bk. V, chap. 10, pp. 184-5, in Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel, trans. J.J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961).
- 43 Ambrose, Hexameron, Bk. V, chap. 15, pp. 200-1.
- 44 Ambrose, Bk. V, chap. 16, p. 205.
- 45 Ambrose, Bk. V, chap. 15, p. 201.
- 46 Ambrose, Bk. V, chap. 15, p. 201. Ambrose is here using Virgil's Georgics as his source. Virgil's praise for the social organization of the bees (Georgics IV, 149-196) was well known in the Middle Ages, and it is worth noting that medieval encyclopedists considered the bee a bird. Aelian's third century encyclopedia of animal lore, On the Characteristics of Animals, frequently refers to the "intelligence" and social harmony of the natural world. See particularly Aelian's prologue to Book I.
- 47 Ambrose, Bk. V, chap. 20, p. 212.
- 48 Augustine, City of God, Bk. XI, chap. 24, p. 225.
- 49 Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, II, 1, p. 34.

- 50 On Christian Doctrine, II, 1 and 2, pp. 34-5.
- 51 On Christian Doctrine, II, 10, p. 43.
- 52 On Christian Doctrine, III, 18-28, pp. 95-102. See also Augustine's Ennarrationes in Psalms, CXXVI.
- 53 On Christian Doctrine, III, 5, p. 84.
- 54 On Christian Doctrine, I, 36, pp. 30-31.
- 55 On Christian Doctrine, I, 36, p. 31.
- 56 On Christian Doctrine, II, 40, p. 75. Augustine's influence provided sanction for allegorical readings of many classical authors. For a study of the survival of the classics in the Middle Ages, see J. Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods, trans B. Sessions (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).
- 57 On Christian Doctrine, II, 6, p. 37.
- 58 On Christian Doctrine, II, 6, p. 38.
- 59 The Bible itself provided authority for this point of view. "Ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee: and the fowls of the air, and they shall teach thee." Job 12: 7.
- 60 De Tribus diebus III, in J.P. Migne, Patrologiae, cursus completus: series latina, 221 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1844-82), CLXXVI, 814B, hereafter referred to as P.L. The translation is taken from Chenu, Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century, p. 117. Until recently, this tract was considered to be the seventh book of Hugh of St. Victor's Didascalicon.

61 Rhythmus alter (P.L. CCX, 579A). The translation is taken from Chenu, p. 117.

62 E. Mâle, The Gothic Image, trans. D. Nussey from 3rd French ed. (1913; Rpt., New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 33, suggests a date of the second century while F. Klingender, Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 92 suggests the fourth century.

63 See Mâle, p. 33. The Physiologus was apparently condemned as heretical in 469 A.D., but this did not seem to impede its diffusion. Evans, in Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture, points out that, "Perhaps no book, except the Bible, has ever been so widely diffused among so many people and for so many centuries as the Physiologus." p. 62.

64 Enarrationes in Psalms, Psalm 102, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series (New York: Scribner's, 1908), VII, p. 497.

65 Enarrationes, Psalm 102, VII, p. 497.

66 On Christian Doctrine, II, 16 and 29, pp. 50, 65.

67 An excellent summary of the classical and medieval encyclopedic tradition is included in Rudolf Wittkower's "Marvels of the East", Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute, vol. 5 (1942), 159-197.

68 Evans, in Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture, describes Marbodius' De Lapidibus as an allegorical interpretation of minerals which reflects the same concerns as the Physiologus. See p. 38.

69 For a full discussion of the bestiary, and a scholarly edition of one of the most famous twelfth century bestiaries, see M.R. James, The Peterborough Psalter and Bestiary (London: Roxburghe Club, 1921). A more accessible version of this bestiary is available in T.H. White, ed., The Bestiary (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1960).

70 P.L., CLXXXII, chap. ix, 914-916. Bernard of Clairvaux, with his very heightened sense of the symbolic potential of images, was almost certainly objecting to the prevalence of flora and fauna and monstrosities as nature for nature's sake, for satire, and for general aesthetic appeal. This concern was not particularly unique for the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 had already expressed concern about the fact that medieval artists were enjoying too much individual expression in ecclesiastical art.

71 One is able to see aspects of this tendency in all early folklore and mythology. Paul Radin's The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (1956; Rpt., New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1972).

72 Plato, The Last Days of Socrates, "Phaedo", trans. Hugh Tredennick, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 102-3. 59E-61B.

73 William M. Carroll, Animal Conventions in English Renaissance Non-Religious Prose (1550-1600), (New York: Bookman Associates, 1954), p. 23.

74 P.L., XL, 538.

75 "Letters of St. Basil", Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. P. Schaff. First Series (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1908), IV, p. 229.

76 Greek tragedy often refers to the tragic protagonist's desire to fly from his doom. See William Arrowsmith's introduction to his translation of The Birds (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 8. This escape symbolism can be seen, for example, in Euripides' Hyppolitus, l. 732.

77 Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. Mary Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), XV, p. 339. Later on the soul is described by Pythagorus as "winged", XV, p. 346.

78 P.G. Walsh, in The Roman Novel: The Satyricon of Petronius and the Metamorphoses of Apuleius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), refers to The Golden Ass as a novel. Walsh's book is probably the finest literary criticism available on The Golden Ass.

79^a Apuleius, The Golden Ass, trans. William Adlington (1566), ed. Harry C. Schnurr (New York: Collier Books, 1962), chap. 47, p. 270.

80 See Carroll, Animal Conventions in English Renaissance Non-Religious Prose (1550-1600), p. 31. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Totemism, trans. R. Needham (Paris, 1962; Rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), argues generally against this kind of interpretation of animal imagery but he does not persuade me that the adoption of sacred animal images is almost always for the sake of distinguishing categories.

81 The Golden Ass, chap. 47, p. 264.

82 It is interesting that in the Odyssey when Circe returns Odysseus' men to human form, they are described as younger, fairer, and taller than before their transformation. See Odyssey, chap. X.

83 E.H. Haight, Apuleius and his Influence (New York: Longmans Green, 1927), chap. 4. See also Walsh, pp. 228-231.

84 Henry R. Fairclough, Love of Nature Among the Greeks and Romans (New York: Cooper Square Publishing, 1963), p. 54.

85 See, for example, Homer's Odyssey, 19:524 for the tragic associations of the nightingale and Calypso's garden birds and their funereal suggestions (5: 40-80). Pliny (Natural History, x.xliii) points out that the nightingale often died at the end of his song. James J. Wilhelm in The Cruellest Month: Spring, Nature and Love in Classical and Medieval Lyrics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) offers a good synopsis of the "tragic" bird imagery in classical poetry. See

particularly pp. 39-43. Even in early Celtic and Old English poetry bird imagery is introduced on a note of melancholy as the bird was characteristically associated with the soul and consequently, death. See P.L. Henry's discussion of The Seafarer in The Early English and Celtic Lyric (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), pp. 133-151.

86 Ernest W. Martin, The Birds of the Latin Poets (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1914), p. 2.

87 "Iam veris comites", IV, 12, in The Complete Works of Horace, ed. C.J. Kraemer Jr., (New York: Random House, 1936), pp. 294-5.

88 For example, Ovid, Fasti, IV, l. 99; Virgil, Georgics II, ll. 319-42; Propertius, Elegies Bk. III, 3, 31-2; Catullus 68, "Quod mihi fortuna casuque oppressus acerbo", ll. 125-8.

89 See Harold Isbell, trans. The Last Poets of Imperial Rome (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 37.

90 "Vigil of Venus" in Medieval Song: An Anthology of Hymns and Lyrics, trans. and ed. James J. Wilhelm, pp. 21-4 (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1971), ll. 1-3. I am indebted to Wilhelm's discussion of this poem in The Cruellest Month, pp. 19-29.

91 ll. 9-15.

92 l. 17.

93 ll. 68-9.

94 ll. 71-2

95 ll. 85-7.

96 11. 88-9.

97 Wilhelm, The Cruellest Month, p. 38, argues that the "whole poem is tinged with dimly perceptible strains of discord; but these strains are not consciously expressed until the poet hears the fateful cry of the swallow".

98 William M. Carroll, Animal Conventions in English Renaissance Non-Religious Prose (1550-1600), p. 28.

99 There are also two "tree fables", Judges 9:8-15 and IV Kings 14:9.

100 Ezechiel 17:23.

101 Daniel 4:30.

102 Daniel 4:31.

103 John I:29.

104 Exodus 12:3-11.

105 Apocalypse 5:6; 13:8; 12:11; 22:1.

106 John I:32. In Psalm 90:3-4 God is described in terms of a bird.

107 eg. Psalm XI:1.

108 Genesis 8: 8-12.

109 Luke 2: 22-4.

110 See Josphe Campbell, The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 334.

111 Klingender, p. 182.

112 Ovid, Metamorphoses, Bk. XV, p. 346.

113 Canticle of Canticles 1:14; 4:1; 5:12.

114 Canticles 5:2; 2:14; 6:8.

115 Canticles 2: 10-13.

116 Canticles 5: 6-8.

117 See D.W. Robertson Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens," Speculum, 26 (1951), 24-49; and Paul Piehler, The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), pp. 98-105.

118 See, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss' explanation for the presence of the raven in "trickster" myths. "The Structural Study of Myth" in Myth: A Symposium, ed. T. Sebeok (1955; Rpt., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 81-106.

119 eg. Romans 1:23-25.

CHAPTER II

Chaucer and the Convention of Birds as
Intellectual Signs

The Convention of Birds as Intellectual Signs:

St. Paul provided "auctoritas" for the semiological convention when he wrote, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."¹ In the writings of the patristic fathers the whole of creation was invested with mystical significance as it was described and studied as a series of signs which allowed human minds to perceive divine truths. The bird, as one of the signs in this series, offered insight into the mysteries of Christianity and was, therefore, a mediator between the perfect world of God and the imperfect world of mankind. The bird already had a very distinguished reputation for carrying divine messages to human ears; however, the semiological convention provided a new sense in which the bird could reveal spiritual truth to mankind.

Physiologus, apparently antedating Ambrose and Augustine, had an immense influence on the whole of the Middle Ages.² Reaching back to the pseudo-observations of Pliny and adding moralizations and allegorizations to the description of birds, animals, insects, reptiles, gems, and trees, it provided a framework and perspective which allowed all of nature to reflect as "through a glass darkly" a dimension of instruction.

and insight for the alert Christian. Nature was not divorced from the important facts of thought, theology, and spirit; it was potentially an integrative area of study which could mirror eternal truths. In many ways, the semiological technique employed in the Physiologus was an intellectual and rhetorical short-hand for the author and his audience. And clearly this was not an esoteric convention. Significantly, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, Augustine, Hrabanus Maurus, Isidore, and pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor - to name only a few - used both the substance and the techniques of Physiologus with far-reaching and influential results. This is not an unexpected influence because the semiological technique of the Physiologus combines a sense of the exotic; sound Christian doctrine; interesting if somewhat arbitrary Scriptural authority for its interpretation; "similitudo between the material element and the spiritual reality",³ a sense of harmony and purpose in all creation; and authority for some rhetorically important metaphorical images.

It is significant that of the fifty avian, reptilian, animal, vegetative, and lapidary items chosen for their semiological import, fifteen are birds.⁴ Listed are interpretations for the caladrius, pelican, owl, eagle, phoenix, hoopoe, ibis, partridge, vulture, ostrich, crow, turtle-dove, swallow, dove, and heron. These entries were picked up by encyclopedists such as Isidore of Seville, Hrabanus Maurus, and pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor, and were finally incorporated

into the larger encyclopedias of Bartholomew Anglicus, Thomas of Cantimpré, and Vincent de Beauvais. Often they were also lifted out of the encyclopedias again to form enlarged and elaborately illustrated bestiaries. As a result of the extensive popularity of these compendiums, bird and animal imagery remained an accepted staple of didactic art. Outside of their pervasive use as symbols of the virtues and vices,⁵ and as subjects of moral fables, birds and animals entered into the very influential handbooks written to help preachers construct their sermons. Emile Mâle points out how important Honorius of Autun's twelfth century Speculum ecclesiae was to medieval ecclesiastical art in that Honorius quoted extensively from the bestiary and, therefore, provided inspiration for the cathedral artists.⁶ Mâle, however, overstates his case when he insists that bestiary imagery in Church art is derived almost exclusively from Honorius' sermons. Francis Klingender cites numerous examples of bestiary-inspired art where the source could not possibly be traced to Honorius, and he very convincingly shows how important both the Physiologus itself and the bestiaries were to the medieval artists.⁷ Particularly interesting is Klingender's discussion of a twelfth century mosaic pavement in the Cathedral of Otranto where bestiary animals, monsters, fabulous beasts, fauna, and scenes from the Old and New Testament present an "imago mundi" similar to that expounded in Maurus' De universo.⁸ This Biblia pauperum

suggests a resumé of twelfth century thought in which religious, secular, and pagan motifs are juxtaposed and combined in a truly encyclopedic fashion.

The popularity and influence of the Physiologus-inspired bestiaries is beyond question; simply the number of surviving manuscripts attests the demand for these moralized compendiums. In fact, the Physiologus and its descendents are themselves an important genre of literature in the Middle Ages.

Each item presented in the Physiologus is treated in a loosely standard format. It characteristically begins with a Scriptural reference, as, for example:

David says in Psalm 102, "Your youth will be renewed like the eagle's" [Ps. 103:5].⁹

The text then attempts to explain the meaning of the "natural" reference:

Physiologus says of the eagle that, when he grows old, his wings grow heavy, and his eyes grow dim. What does he do then? He seeks out a fountain and then flies up into the atmosphere of the sun, and he burns away his wings and the dimness of his eyes, and descends into the fountain and bathes himself three times and is restored and made new again.¹⁰

Finally, after establishing the validity and significance of the Scriptural reference, the moral is spelled out to the reader:

Therefore, you also, if you have the old clothing and the eyes of your heart have grown dim, seek out the spiritual fountain who is the Lord. "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water" [Jer. 2:13]. As you fly into

the height of the sun of justice [Mal. 4:2], who is Christ as the Apostle says, he himself will burn off your old clothing which is the devil's. Therefore, those two elders in Daniel heard, "You have grown old in wicked days" [Dan. 13:52]. Be baptized in the everlasting fountain, putting off the old man and his actions and putting on the new, you who have been created after the likeness of God [cf. Eph. 4:24] as the Apostle said.¹¹

This allegory and the natural references rallied to support it would certainly be familiar to all levels of medieval society: the vividly illuminated bestiary manuscripts would be prepared for wealthy patrons; as amplificatory material for sermons, bestiary was demonstrably important;¹² it is likely that the bestiary was employed in grammatical and rhetorical training;¹³ and the illustrations were popular enough to permeate cathedral art. These conditions, along with the Physiologus' meditative nature and its ability to explain Scriptural references, ensured a continuity of the tradition into the Renaissance. When poets such as Dante and Chaucer worked with this convention, their imagery expressed a polysemous intellectual and Christian dimension which would be familiar, yet challenging, to their educated audiences.

One finds an extremely effective early medieval use of the semiological convention in the influential and familiar "First Hymn" of Prudentius' Cathemerinon.¹⁴ "The Hymn at Cockcrow" compares the dawn and the cock which announces it to the dawning of Christianity and the "call" of Jesus. Like the spring reverdie which, as we shall see later,¹⁵ is

transformed into the Easter hymn so this aubade moves beyond the temporal sense of morning to an eternal spiritual and emotional awakening:

The bird that announces the day
tells us that daylight is coming;
Christ wakens our sleeping spirits
and like the cock calls us to life.

.

The shrill voices of the birds perched
just before dawn beneath the roof
are a figure prepared for us
of that Judge who will soon call us.

.

The demons who roam in the night
are struck with fear when the cock crows;
their happiness soon disappears
and they look for a place to hide.¹⁶

Sleep becomes the spiritual equivalent of paganism, ignorance, evil, sloth, and death, and the cock's cries waken mankind to Christianity, virtuous action, and eternal life; the combined voices of the dawn birds suggest the call of God to banish the darkness with the new light of the imminent apocalypse. The observable incongruity of linking Jesus with the barnyard fowl is ignored in favour of the literary tradition of the Gospels:

What this bird means to us is seen
in our Saviour's telling Peter
that before the cock crowed, Peter
would have denied the Lord three times.

Sin is done before the herald
of daybreak announces the dawn
that enlightens all of mankind
and swiftly brings an end to sin.

For that reason he who denied
three times shed tears for the evil
that his lips spewed while his mind was
without guilt and his heart was true.

After that he kept a close watch
on his tongue lest it slip again.
When the cock crowed he became just
and from that day he never sinned.

For reasons such as these we know
that it was at this same moment,
when the cock was crowing loudly,
that Christ returned to us from Hell.¹⁷

Prudentius does not simply use the cock as a symbol of Jesus
or Peter; the use of the bird sign becomes an opportunity
to explore the connection between the lowly cock and Jesus,
and to explain the heralding of the Christian enlightenment.
The cock was not included in Physiologus, so Prudentius
follows the Physiologus formula and provides both an
explanation and a Scriptural justification for the metaphor.
An indication of Prudentius' success and influence can be
observed when one examines the moralitas provided for the
cock in the twelfth century bestiary edited and translated
by T.H. White:

At his singing the frightened sailor lays
aside his cares and the tempest often moderates,
waking up from last night's storm. At his
crowing the devoted mind rises to prayer and the
priest begins again to read his office. By
testifying devotedly after the cockcrow Peter
washed away the sin of the Church, which he had
incurred by denying Christ before it crowed.
It is by this song that hope returns to the sick,
trouble is turned to advantage, the pain of wounds
is relieved, the burning of fever is lessened,
faith is restored to the fallen, Christ turns his
face to the wavering or reforms the erring,

wandering of mind departs and negation is
driven out.¹⁸

The Old English The Phoenix employs the semiological convention and offers an expanded version of the phoenix legend using Lactantius' De Ave Phoenice and Physiologus. Whereas Prudentius' "Hymn at Cockcrow" elevates dawn beyond the temporal, The Phoenix raises landscape onto a spiritual plane. The whole of the first section of the poem — a free adaptation and expansion of Lactantius' fourth century work — develops a description of an Earthly Paradise set high above the mountains and, although seasons still prevail, there is only perpetual harmony, fertility, and peace. The poet is obviously as interested in the ideal landscape as he is in the detailed description of the phoenix itself:

There is no foe in the land, nor weeping, nor
woe, nor sign of grief, nor old age, nor sorrow,
nor cruel death, nor loss of life, nor the coming
of a hateful thing, nor sin, nor strife, nor sad
grief, nor the struggle of poverty, nor lack of
wealth, nor sorrow, nor sleep, nor heavy illness,
nor wintry storm, nor change of weather fierce
under the heavens; nor does hard frost with chill
icicles beat upon anyone.¹⁹

Moving beyond Lactantius, then, the poet looks to Physiologus with its Christian explanation of the legendary bird and he fuses the concepts of the Earthly Paradise and the Christ symbol. He reports that after one thousand years of faithfully serving God, the phoenix travels to an eastern land where he manifests himself to the bird kingdom and then flies off to a Syrian desert to prepare for his renewal. After

building his own funeral pyre, he cremates himself to be reborn among the ashes as an apple, a worm, and finally the new phoenix. When he fully regains his shape and plumage, he again manifests himself to the races of birds and returns to the Earthly Paradise. However, contrary to the Physiologus, the poet does not make a clear separation between the description of the bird and the Christian signification; the whole poem is infused with Christian thought as well as Christian semiology so that the reader is aware throughout of the application. The phoenix is simultaneously an image of the Christian who, although he has been forced to leave Eden, will again return to a divine state through the purification of the fires of the apocalypse, and Jesus, who leaves Heaven to manifest Himself to His people, accepts death, and finally is resurrected and returns to His original home. Like the Physiologus, the Old English poem discovers evidence for a complex of metaphysical truths in nature and elaborates the whole myth into a meditation which justifies and explains the Earthly Paradise through Christian bird imagery. Reinforcing this fusion of redeemed landscape and Redeemer, the poet describes the phoenix as part of nature but nature purified of all artistic defects. Without fail, the phoenix notes the hours of the day²⁰ and, "it is not sluggish nor slothful, dull nor torpid as some birds who wing their way slowly through the air, but it is speedy and swift and very alert, fair and winsome, and gloriously marked."²¹

Its song, in fact, becomes the celestial music described by Macrobius:²²

The harmony of that song is sweeter and fairer than all music, and more pleasant than any melody. Neither trumpets, nor horns, nor the sound of the harp, nor the voice of any man on earth, nor the peal of the organ, nor the sweetness of song, nor the swan's plumage, nor any of the delights which God hath devised to gladden men in this dreary world can equal that outpouring.²³

The bird finally is described almost totally in terms of precious metals, and the phoenix, the Earthly Paradise, and sun are "jewels" and works of art created by the Divine Artist:

The sign of the sun is renewed for him, when the light of the sky, brightest of jewels, the best of noble stars, shines up from the east over the sea. The bird is ever fair of hue, bright with varied shades in front round the breast; green is its head behind, wondrously mingled, blended with purple. Then the tail is beautifully divided, part brown, part crimson, part artfully speckled with white spots. The wings are white at the tip and the neck green, downward and upward; and the beak gleams like glass or a jewel; bright are its jaws, within and without. Strong is the quality of its eye and in hue like a stone, a bright gem, when by the craft of smiths it is set in a golden vessel. About its neck like the round of the sun is the brightest of rings woven of feathers.²⁴

The phoenix is in the realm of nature but it is nature perfected and redeemed. The bird, therefore, becomes a "speculum" of the central mystery of the Christian church: the divine is incarnated in the sublunary world, but the divine remains immaculate, and reflects the paradox of the human-divine, mortal-immortal Saviour of the Christian Church.

A less complex but perhaps more pervasive use of the semiological convention can be seen in the use of the bird as a symbol of the soul. As pointed out earlier,²⁵ there was precedent and authority for this identification in both the Scriptures and the classics, yet one suspects that it is an idea so pervasive in mythology that one need not account for it by diffusionist theories; the bird seems to mediate between earth and heaven so it is generally assumed to carry the "divine spark". Perhaps the most influential statement of this tradition comes in the iconography and literature surrounding St. Francis' "Sermon to the Birds". Although one finds accounts of birds greeting, listening to, and being blessed by saints prior to the twelfth century - it appears to have been a fairly extensive Celtic tradition²⁶ - St. Francis' extensive association with birds generally offered not only a deep sense of the supernatural qualities of birds but also a justification for viewing birds anthropomorphically. In the Fioretti - slightly different accounts also exist²⁷ - St. Francis is described as addressing a multitude of birds as "little sisters" and he reminds them of God's generosity. He warns them of ingratitude and then, when he blesses them, they fly away - in some versions to divide into four groups to form a cross. The wide popularity of the legend and the illustrations of the scene contributed a mystical sense of affinity with the birds and because the scene accords neatly with the description of the angel inviting the birds to the

apocalyptic "great supper of God" (Apocalypse 19:17), it strengthened the saint's reputation as an angel and the birds' association with souls and the redeemed in Paradise.²⁸

However, while there is authority in Apocalypse for regarding birds as the redeemed souls, the birds can also represent souls which are damned:

And after these things, I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power: and the earth was enlightened with his glory.

And he cried out with a strong voice, saying: Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen; and is become the habitation of devils and the hold of every unclean spirit and the hold of every unclean and hateful bird.²⁹

Obviously there are certain souls which will be caught and "caged"³⁰—the word is used in the King James translation— but these seem to be the ones who forget or lose their ability to fly at spiritual heights:

For among my people are found wicked men that lie in wait as fowlers, setting snares and traps to catch men.

As a net is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit:³¹

B.G. Koonce, in an article entitled "Satan the Fowler"³² and later in Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in The House of Fame,³³ develops this idea and relates it to Satan, the hunter, ensnaring bird souls. He shows that in Deguillville's Pilgrimage of the Life of Man Satan tempts souls to fall from their high estate with the bait of earthly goods:

"With nettys, I haue eke my repayre
ffor bryddes that ffleen eke in the hayre,
ffor to make hem ffalle adown
ffrom ther contemplacyoun . . ."34

Significantly, St. Jerome contrasts those birds who according to their nature fly above the earth and those who remain close to the earth and are caught in the lime of sin,³⁵ and in Ecclesiasticus the symbolism is explicitly related to one species of low-flying bird:

. . . as the partridge is brought into the cage, and as the roe into the snare; so also is the heart of the proud, and as a spy that looketh on the fall of his neighbour.³⁶

Koonce points out that the partridge is "conventionally related to cupidity, a fact explained partly by his libidinous traits and partly by his small wings and consequent inability to soar to any great height."³⁷ Alan of Lille and the fourteenth century Pierre Bersuire both mention the partridge as the bird most easily snared by the hunter and both explain this by reference to the bird's inability to free itself from the earthly sphere.³⁸ Clearly, part of the reason for the fascination with birds in general derived from man's awareness of the potential freedom from earthly concerns that wings afford: the height achieved by the high-flying birds offered a metaphorical image of the freedom achieved by the contemplative, spiritual life; the plight of the partridge mirrored the situation of those unwilling or unable to abandon cupidity.

One could list many examples of semiological bird images in medieval literature,³⁹ but the peak of the convention was really achieved by Dante in The Divine Comedy. It is here that Chaucer probably recognized the tremendous potential of the convention, and one suspects that he knew he would be hard pressed to duplicate the Florentine's achievement.

Dante's use of semiological imagery reaches beyond the Physiologus tradition and accepts birds as embodying classical and Christian allusion as well as scientific and philosophical ideas. The eagle which appears periodically in The Divine Comedy carries with it a profound and complex iconographical significance. It appears first in "Purgatory"

IX :

I dreamt I saw an eagle in mid*air,
Plumed all in gold, hovering on wings outspread,
As though to make his swoop he poised him there.

Meseemed me in the place whence Ganymede,
Up to the 'high gods' halls was snatched one day,
Leaving his comrades all discomfited.

I thought: Perhaps this eagle strikes his prey
Always just here; his proud feet would think shame
Elsewhere to seize and carry it away.

Then, in my dream, he wheeled awhile and came
Down like the lightning, terrible and fast,
And caught me up into the sphere of flame,

Where he and I burned in one furnace-blast;
The visionary fire so seared me through,
It broke my sleep perforce, and the dream passed.⁴⁰

Considering the traditional iconography of the eagle, one would suspect that St. John of the Apocalypse is invoked,

but when Dante awakens he learns that St. Lucia has carried him to the gates of Purgatory. Later, the significance of the eagle's connection with "the sphere of flame" is made explicit, and we find that we have returned to the semiology of the Physiologus:

When Beatrice, intent upon the sun,
Turned leftward, and so stood and gazed before;
No eagle e'er so fixed his eyes thereon.⁴¹

Dante has been so spiritually uplifted by his love for Beatrice that he too is given the eagle's faculty for gazing on the sun:

And, as the second ray doth evermore
Strike from the first and dart back up again,
Just as the peregrine will stoop and soar,
So through my eyes her gesture, pouring in
On my mind's eye, shaped mine; I stared wide-eyed
On the sun's face, beyond the wont of men.⁴²

However, Dante's eagle is much more than this: it is Aquila, the constellation and the north wind, but more importantly it is the heraldic emblem of the Roman empire both in its negative and positive senses. At the end of "Purgatory", the Chariot of the Church, which is drawn by the Gryphon and tied to the "tree" of the cross, is attacked by the eagle:

. . . I beheld the bird of Jove
Swoop on the tree, rending the bark and scattering
All the new foliage and the flowers thereof;

With all his might he struck a blow so shattering
That the car staggered like a storm-tossed ship
Starboard and larboard rolled by billows' battering.⁴³

Next, a fox fruitlessly attempts to ravage the chariot, and then the eagle returns:

. . . once again, down on the chariot's waist,
 From the same place I saw the eagle dart
 And leave it plumed with plumes from his own breast;
 And in the accents of a grieving heart
 A voice from heaven cried: "O my little keel,
 How laden with calamity thou art !" 44

This masque which portrays the history of the Christian Church is derived from the parable of the eagles and the vine in Ezechiel XVII, but Dante transforms the eagles of Babylon and Egypt and the vine of Israel into the Roman Empire's first evil, then well-intentioned, assaults on the Church: the persecutions by the heathen emperors and the well-intentioned but ill-advised munificence of Constantine. Finally, however, the eagle is redeemed in the "Paradise" when in the realm of Jupiter the souls of the "just rulers" form themselves into the words "Love justice, ye that judge the earth,"⁴⁵ and finally into the shape of the eagle:

So flew aloft a thousand lights, meseemed,
 Moved by the Sun that kindles them, to less
 Or greater height mounting in order schemed.

When each had found its place in quietness,
 There I beheld an eagle's neck and crest
 Limned out in fire by all these brightnesses; 46

The image has gone full circle, and the Church has been reunited with the true Empire but, in the process, it has drawn on Old and New Testament semiology, astronomical theories, the Physiologus symbolism, classical images, and

heraldic emblems. It is difficult to imagine any poet who would not be awed by Dante's achievement; however, when Chaucer adopts this bird image in the House of Fame, he retains much of Dante's allusiveness yet makes it uniquely his own.

It will be useful to summarize briefly our discussion of the semiological convention of bird imagery:

- a. As it was generally accepted that cognition could be mediated through signs and that God could be known through His creation, birds in general and species of birds in particular could be seen as icons which offered insight into the mysteries of the creation and the Creator.
- b. The Physiologus with its allegorical interpretation of the natural habits of animals and birds gave wide currency to the semiological convention and seems to have encouraged patristic writers and medieval preachers and artists not only to employ the imagery but to enlarge its store.
- c. Pre-Christian topics such as the dawn-song or aubade, the divine harmony of celestial music, and the description of the Earthly Paradise are brought into line with Christian thought through the merging of semiological Christian imagery with the classical themes. One sees this particularly in Prudentius' "Hymn at Cockcrow" and in the 8th century Old English The Phoenix.
- d. The older, Biblical and classical tradition of viewing

the bird as a symbol of the soul is current throughout the medieval period, but it becomes particularly influential in the legends and iconography surrounding St. Francis. Beyond this, a distinction is made between those birds who fly high above earthly affairs and those who, because of their inability or unwillingness to escape the worldly sphere, are easily snared by secular concerns or the devil.

e. Finally, in the early fourteenth century, Dante's The Divine Comedy brings the semiological convention of bird imagery to its peak: in this poem, the eagle is used as an important image which combines, the Christian, the classical, the Physiologus, the political, and the scientific. Although the semiological convention is found quite extensively in late medieval poetry, Dante's use of birds as intellectual signs stands as the exemplar against which others should be compared.

Chaucer and the Convention of Birds as Intellectual Signs:

Chaucer's use of the semiological convention has merited a great deal of examination in the influential studies of scholars such as D.W. Robertson Jr., B.G. Koonce, and Beryl Rowland.⁴⁷ There is, one expects, no need to persuade the reader that there are important and complex symbolic dimensions to Chaucer's birds. And this symbolic dimension should not be thought of as primarily or exclusively theological;

Chaucer's bird images are signs of philosophical ideas, and while they often have a specific Christian application, they suggest, like Dante's, broad metaphysical, epistemological, and scientific questions. Unlike Dante, however, Chaucer infuses an ironic dimension into his bird symbolism, perhaps the logical extension of the contemplative vision, the "bird's-eye view" which seems so much a part of the medieval fascination with the bird. As writers as far apart as Lucan, Macrobius, Boethius, Dante, and Boccaccio⁴⁸ have recognized, the affairs of men when viewed from a higher vantage point, seem petty and, perhaps, even comical:

So with my vision I went traversing
The seven planets till this globe I saw,
Whereat I smiled, it seemed so poor a thing.

Highly I rate that judgement that doth low
Esteem the world; him do I deem upright
Whose thoughts are fixed on things of greater awe.⁴⁹

As a result, Chaucer's use of birds as cognitive signs is, at times, disarming. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the comedy in the bird images does not reduce the profundity of the ideas they embody; rather, the humour reflects the higher, panoramic perspective which allows the poet to integrate the contemporary and historical, the classical and Biblical, and the theological, scientific, and philosophical. Before examining the very complex instances of Chaucer's use of birds as intellectual signs, however, it will be useful to glance briefly at one example of the semiological bird image which tends to operate on a simpler

level.

In the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer uses semiological bird imagery to suggest an irreplaceable human lover:

Trewly she was, to myn yē,
The soleyne fenix of Arabye;
For ther livyth never but oon.⁵⁰
Ne swich as she ne knowe I noon.
(B.D., ll. 981-4)

At first glance one would see this allusion as an aspect of the bestiaires d'amour tradition where birds and beasts of the bestiary are employed in secular fin amour and "dalliance".⁵¹ However, like the Pearl-poet who uses the image to describe his pearl beyond price (ll. 429-32) and Gower who describes his absent mistress as a phoenix (Balade xxxv), Chaucer, it seems clear, intends to suggest a spiritual significance which would accord with the traditional Christian semiology. The Black Knight's worship (l. 1098) of Nature's perfect creation (ll. 908-913) suggests the logical extreme of fin amour which, at least while Blanche was alive, led the knight to spiritual regeneration. While it would be superficial to place Blanche in the same symbolic role as Beatrice, certainly the fin amour tradition suggests the ennobling of the lover through his contact with his idealized lady. This is not, however, a characteristic use of bird imagery for Chaucer; even though he is demonstrably aware of the ennobling effects of love, Chaucer seems acutely sensitive to the ambiguities and problems involved in idealized devotion to sexual earthly love.

The Parlement of Foules would appear to be the most obvious place to find a traditional treatment of the semio-logical convention of bird imagery. The poem begins by emphasizing spiritual love at the expense of the interests of "likerous folk", so when Chaucer details an extensive list of the participants in the debate, one anticipates that the Christian significance of the birds will provide an ideal through which the concept of love will be focussed. However, when we actually examine the list we find little to relate to the spiritual meditations of the Physiologus:

There myghte men the royal egle fynde,
That with his sharpe lok perseth the sonne,
And othere egles of a lowere kynde,
Of whiche that clerkes wel devyse conne.
Ther was the tiraunt with his fetheres donne
And grey, I mene the goshawk, that doth pyne
To bryddes for his outrageous ravyne.

The gentyl faucoun, that with his feet distrayneth
The kynges hand; the hardy sperhawk eke,
The quayles foo; the merlioun, that payneth
Hymself ful ofte the larke for to seke;
There was the douve with hire yēn meke;
The jelous swan, ayens his deth that syngeth;
The ouleek, that of deth the bode bryngeth;

The crane, the geaunt, with his trompes soun;
The thef, the chough; and ek the janglyng pye;
The skornynge jay; the eles foo, heroun;
The false lapwyng, ful of trecherye;
The stare, that the conseyll can bewrye;
The tame ruddock, and the coward kyte;
The kok, that orlage is of thorpes lyte;

The sparwe, Venus sone; the nyghtyngale,
That clepeth forth the grene leves newe;
The swalwe, northerere of the foules smale
That maken hony of floures freshe of hewe;
The wedded turtill, with hire herte trewe;
The pekok, with his aungels fetheres bryghte;
The fesaunt, skornere of the cok by nyghte;

The waker goos; the cukkow ever unkynde;
 The popynjay, ful of delicasye;
 The drake, stroyere of his owene kynde;
 The stork, the wrekere of avouterye;
 The hote cormeraunt of glotenye;
 The raven wys; the crowe with vois of care;
 The throstil old; the frosty feldefare.

(P.F., ll. 330-64)

I have included this long quotation for two reasons; in the first place, one should notice that this catalogue provides a contextual background for the poem through a characterization for each species of bird, and we note that in almost every case the details are from tradition and bestiary;⁵² in the second place, the catalogue is designed to suggest the plenitude of the gathering and more importantly, the potential lack of harmony which will gradually replace the ordered assembly which we view at the beginning. Despite Nature's four-tiered hierarchical plan, chaos breaks out both within and between the ranks, and this is to be expected after we have been acquainted with the characteristics of the species; we move from birds often associated with Jesus, to birds beneficial to man, birds who attack and kill other birds, birds which illustrate human virtues, birds which expose human sin, unnatural birds, and birds which embody human sins. The catalogue immediately points up the unlikelihood of a harmonious "parlement" where "commune profit" will be readily achieved. The birds associated with divine love in the Physiologus and the bestiaries - for example, the eagle, the peacock, and the dove - are not used to provide

a spiritual focus for the poem; rather, the catalogue suggests the plenitude of nature. Examining the poem in terms of the semiological convention, we would expect that the eagles, so closely identified with Jesus, rebirth, and spiritual heights would be the exemplars of ideal spiritual love, but, ironically, it is the eagles who initiate the frustrating contest for singular profit. The eagles are obviously depicted as the highest and most noble of the birds but neither the Physiologus nor the bestiaries offer any insight into their individual motives: the real problem of the aristocratic birds in this poem is their excessive self-concern - and this selfishness is heightened by their lack of concern for the formel's feelings and eventually reflected in her lack of interest in the suitors themselves. Even the turtle-dove, which in the Physiologus and bestiaries is variously interpreted as the ascetic, the preacher, and the Holy Spirit, does not provide an answer to the love question. His idealistic statement, which suits his legendary monogamy, initially attracts our sympathy but, as the poem develops, we recognize that his thesis hardly satisfies Nature's command to "engendrure":

"Nay, God forbede a lovere shulde chaunge!"
 The turtle seyde, and wex for shame al red,
 "Though that his lady everemore be straunge,
 Yit lat hym serve hire ever, til he be ded.
 Forsothe, I preyse nat the goeses red,
 For, though she deyede, I wolde non other make;
 I wol ben hires, til that the deth me take."

(P.F. 11. 582-8)

The turtle-dove, in fact, unwittingly exposes the futility, sterility, and frustrations involved in the fin amour debate. Of course, the duck, goose, and cuckoo come off even worse, and it is interesting that none of these birds figure prominently in the Physiologus or the bestiaries. Both the cuckoo and the goose are mentioned in passing, and the duck has his own entry in the twelfth century bestiary edited by T.H. White,⁵³ but none of them are moralized for good or bad.⁵⁴ Chaucer, in fact, has already prepared us for the cuckoo and the duck:

. . . the cukkow every unkynde;

. . . .

The drake, stroyere of his owene kynde; .

(P.F. 11. 358, 360)

The poet's reference to the goose as, "The waker goos" (358) would hardly prepare us for the boorish - in this context - advice, "But she wol love hym, lat hym love another!", so it is necessary to follow it up with "Lo, here a parfit resoun of a goos !" (11. 567, 568)⁵⁵ For the most part, then, Chaucer does not expect us to refer to the Physiologus Christian tradition. The poem does not require a knowledge of the Christian symbolism attached to these birds - although, of course, this symbolism does provide an ironic frame or context which heightens the awareness of the incongruity of their behaviour - because the poem works in terms of the bird characteristics which are either spelled out in the catalogue or identified through the context. The catalogue of birds

is, therefore, more than a rhetorical embellishment: it makes concrete the plenitude of Nature's parliament; it anticipates the chaos of the debate by identifying the less than harmonious interests of the birds, and it offers an index to the characteristics of the speakers in the ensuing drama.

It is, however, tempting to view the parliament of birds as suggesting the assembly of birds addressed by the angel in Apocalypse 19:17. This would provide a context for the birds as redeemed souls who understand the true nature of love and, as suggested earlier, this ideal image had wide currency not only through the Scriptures but also through saint legends and particularly visual representation of St. Francis preaching to the birds. Chaucer's eagles, however, finally end up suggesting the negative image of the bird as soul and are closer to the "unclean and hateful birds" of Babylon the Great.⁵⁶ Through their self-seeking they have turned the potential harmony of heaven into the sterile chaos of hell.

However, beyond the use of specific bird semiology, it appears that the whole of the Parlement of Foules is, itself, an intellectual image. David Chamberlain, in a thought-provoking and subtle article,⁵⁷ demonstrates that the concept of divine celestial music pervades the poem, and that not only the musical references in the poem reinforce the theme but that the poem, itself, is constructed according to medieval

ideas of ~~divine~~ harmony.

Chaucer's summary of "The Dream of Scipio" refers pointedly to the concept of divine music:

And after shewede he hym the nyne speres,
 And after that the melodye herde he
 That cometh of thilke speres thryes thre,
 That welle is of musik and melodye
 In this world here, and cause of armonye.
 (P.F. 11. 59-63)

This celestial music of the spheres is ideally reflected on earth but it is obviously not a primary element in the parliament of birds. The "armonye" of the spheres should, nevertheless, govern the discordant voices in the debate as the "accorde" in human relationships is a reflection of celestial harmony. Chamberlain convincingly argues that Chaucer constructs his poem according to medieval principles of music — drawn for the most part from Boethius' De musica — which were thought to mirror the harmony of the celestial spheres. Briefly, the poem is constructed in seven line stanzas to reflect the seven tones of the celestial spheres, the seven kinds of music, and the knitting together of the four elements of the body and the three faculties of the soul for the perfection of man. The rhyme scheme of ABABBC again suggests the accord of body and soul but, in addition, the rhyme, "embodies the three principal consonances of instrumental music, the perfect fourth or diatessaron (4:3), the perfect fifth or diapent (3:2), and the octave or diapason (2:1), which were also the principal consonances among the

spheres. In Chaucer's stanza, the relation of quatrain to tercet is diatessaron (4:3); the relation of rimes within the tercet (bcc) is diapason (2:1); and the relation of b's to a's and of b's to c's in the whole stanza (ababbcc) is diapente (3:2). The only other relationship that can be found in the stanza is equality or unisonus (1:1) appearing in the a:b relation in the quatrain (2:2), and the a:c relation in the whole stanza (2:2), and it was considered the best of all consonances by Augustine."⁵⁸ The metre also reflects the emphasis on ideal numbers as the lines of basically ten syllables each multiplied by the seven lines norms each stanza at seventy which would reflect the knitting together of the Empyrian tenth sphere with the ideal number of man which is seven. Finally, Chamberlain argues that the poem should have seven hundred lines instead of six hundred and ninety-nine to reflect that the poem itself is, like Affrycan, leading to the outermost tenth sphere of perfect accord. In order to find the additional line, he suggests that the roundel at the end is incomplete and that the three line refrain:

"Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast this wintres wedres overshake,
And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!",
(P.F. 11. 680-682)

should be repeated in full three times. In this way the poem would have an ideal number of stanzas (similar to Dante's one hundred cantos in The Divine Comedy) and seven hundred

lines. Considering that Macrobius in Commentary on the Dream of Scipio suggests that learned men who imitate the seven celestial tones in their songs have "gained for themselves a return to the sky",⁵⁹ it seems likely that Chaucer has followed Macrobius' advice.

Chamberlain's conclusion that Chaucer is using the structure and theme of the Parlement of Foules to point the way to the Empyrean heavenly sphere is, I think, correct. One might perhaps suggest, however, that the poet intentionally dropped one line of the roundel in order to suggest that neither the participants of the parliament, nor the poet/dreamer have achieved the heavenly perspective: four eagles could not reach the "accord" of relationships that would reflect celestial harmony, and the confused dreamer at the end of the poem has hardly had the same infusion of insight and joy as has Dante at the end of The Divine Comedy. Chaucer is searching for his accord with the divine principles of harmony, but he symbolically and literally denies that he has achieved it. The poet wishes to soar like the birds "for a return to the skies", but he uses his bird poem as an intellectual image of his failure at the same time that he demonstrates that he is familiar with the route.

Chaucer's golden eagle in the House of Fame has occasioned a good deal of discussion but this interest has, in fact, often tended to overshadow the rest of what is a relatively neglected poem. In this chapter, I will examine the eagle as an intellectual image; in a later chapter I will attempt to show how this feathered guide fits into the larger context of an introduction to a bird-debate.

Probably the most complete treatment of the eagle as an iconographical image is found in B.G. Koonce's Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame.⁶⁰ Koonce's thesis is that the poem is modelled on Dante's The Divine Comedy and that the three parts lead the dreamer through a hell, purgatory, and heaven of worldly fame. The concept of "fame" espoused in the interpretation is drawn from Boethius' The Consolation of Philosophy where the concern is for the contrast between earthly and heavenly fame and consequently the two kinds of love caritas and cupiditas. Koonce's explanation of the poem depends very heavily on the use of patristic commentaries and, while my interpretation of the poem differs considerably, a number of his insights have added considerably to my understanding of the poem. For the most part, however, it appears that at least when dealing with the eagle Koonce places unnecessary emphasis on quotations from the Church fathers; the description and moralization of the eagle in the Physiologus and bestiary was a much more readily available source for the same information.

More importantly, however, Koonce's explanation of the eagle is unnecessarily narrow; Chaucer's high-flying guide is indebted to Dante in more ways than one, and "myn egle" becomes a semiological image which incorporates scientific principles, contemplative perspective, Christian iconography, and a very un-Dantesque broad humour.

Chaucer's eagle, like Dante's at the end of "Purgatory", arrives when the dreamer is in a state of despair, and he carries the poet to a higher state of knowledge. The dreamer in the House of Fame has witnessed not only a concrete image of the sterility and futility of the erotic love affair, but he is also in a quandary over the "trouthe" in the traditional story of Dido and Aeneas. Reluctantly admitting that he knows that Aeneas deserts Dido for a higher purpose,⁶¹ he is, nevertheless, moved by the interpretation which views Aeneas as a treacherous, faithless lover.⁶² The poet is confronted with conflicting "auctoritas" and one of the most important functions of the eagle-guide is to provide a bird's-eye view of the relativity of the "truth" of human affairs.

Most obviously, the eagle is a palpable extension of Boethius' "A thought may flee so hye, / Wyth fetheres of Philosophie, / To passen everych element;".⁶³ The eagle, noted for its high flight, its ability to look directly at the sun, and its capacity to renew itself, becomes an admirable guide to heavenly perspective and an example of Chaucer's tendency to move from abstract to concrete metaphors. It is

significant, also, that Chaucer does not depend on his audience's familiarity with The Consolation of Philosophy but, rather, includes the pertinent line in his poem. The poet, however, does expect his listeners to have a knowledge of the account of the eagle in the Physiologus and/or bestiary and this, as is clear from our earlier study of the currency of these texts, would not be an excessive expectation. If one refers to the Physiologus description of the eagle quoted at the beginning of this chapter,⁶⁴ one finds that we already have the ideas of the heavenly flight, the acute eyesight and contemplative perspective, the ability to gaze unflinchingly at the sun, and the sense of immortality through baptism. Implicit is the suggestion that the eagle is an image of Christ, a messenger of God,⁶⁵ and a symbol of divine grace. The two familiar motifs missing are: (1) the breaking of the overgrown beak on the rock of the Church which suggests humility and again renewal of the eagle's youth,⁶⁶ and (2) the identification of the eagle with the evangelist St. John. The former does not seem to be particularly pertinent,⁶⁷ and as for the latter, it is highly unlikely that any medieval audience would have missed the extensive use of the iconographical symbol of St. John as it appeared regularly in manuscript art, sermons, architectural sculpture, and even the eagle lectern used for Church Gospel readings.⁶⁸ But beyond the Christian significance of the bird imagery, the classical context of the poem and the pagan references

to Ganymede, Ykarus, Daun Scipio, and Pheton move the bird into a more universal sphere. Christian iconography, folklore, and pagan motifs seem to merge easily in the image of the eagle, and one suspects that this has something to do with the fact that the poem is not devoted exclusively to Christian themes but themes, more broadly, philosophical. Supporting this hypothesis is the pervading humour of the treatment of an eagle who, as we shall see later, is described as garrulous, pedantic, and likely more bird than angel in terms of bodily functions.

Chaucer's eagle is primarily a guide to a higher perspective on love, truth, and fame, and while the Christian iconographical traditions support this interpretation, I doubt that Chaucer would wish to suggest a strong identification of the eagle with St. John, Christ, or an angel; while the bird is an ironic version of Dante's Virgil, Chaucer's eagle remains unmistakably a bird and not a very reverentially depicted bird at that. He is an image of philosophy appropriated from Lady Philosophy's speech and, as such, is susceptible of a lighter treatment than would a purely Christian sign.

However, if the reader recalls Dante's eagle in "Paradise", he remembers a polymorphous and polysemous sign which has impressed audiences from its conception to the present. Although Chaucer's eagle does not, as far as I can tell, have heraldic significance or a body made up of worthy rulers, it

does have another level of signification — and one that is closely allied to philosophy in the Middle Ages. Probably working from allusions in Dante,⁶⁹ the eagle in the House of Fame is Aquilo, the North Wind,⁷⁰ and Aquila the constellation. It should be remembered that the dream is supposed to take place on December 10th⁷¹ and that the eagle dwells with and is the messenger of Jupiter. John Leyerle's convincing argument is best quoted to explain Chaucer's allusion:

. . . in December, as the sun moves through its annual path in the ecliptic, it approaches close to Aquila, the constellation of the eagle. . . .

The astronomical situation on 10 December yields more information. The sun, then is in the sign of Sagittarius which is the night domicile of Jupiter, the most benevolent of the planets, whose influence would be especially strong after dark when Chaucer had his dream. The reason why he chose the tenth can be inferred from a point made in A Treatise on the Astrolabe; in section I of Part II Chaucer notes that the sun at mid-day on 13 December was in the first degree of the next sign, Capricorn, which it had entered on 12 December; occasionally the sun even reached the winter solstice a bit earlier during the last hours of 11 December. Capricorn is the domicile of the malevolent Saturn whose evil influence is to be avoided. A dream on the night of 11 - 12 December might thus take place as the sun was moving out of the beneficial house of Sagittarius and into the less favourable one of Capricorn. Sagittarius was, among other things, the house of dreams, tidings and travels so that a dream about tidings that involved travels would naturally be dated, if dated at all, when the sun was in that sign. Consequently Chaucer took the night of 10 - 11 December, the last one when the sun would certainly still be in Sagittarius; . . . , the sun [would be] approaching the eagle as it leaves Sagittarius and so would be closest as it left the sign. In brief, the night of 10 - 11 December is taken because the sun is then closest to the eagle but still in the sign of Sagittarius, the night domicile of the benevolent Jupiter.⁷²

Chaucer has therefore commenced with Dante's description of the golden eagle, he has retained the classical allusions to Ganymede and expanded them to include Icarus, Daedalus, Alexander, and Scipio, he has modified the Christian symbolism but kept to the Physiologus signification, he has largely extended the astronomical and astrological level of the image, and most importantly he has added a level of comic humour which is wholly missing from The Divine Comedy. Furthermore, Chaucer has also transformed the context of the image so that while Dante's journey leads to Paradise, "Geffrey's" journey ends when he is confronted with a bird-debate of "love-tydynges". The semiological convention has gradually included elements from the fable convention and finally the poem moves toward bird-like debaters who will tell stories of love.

A close reading of the House of Fame demonstrates that the bird imagery does not end with the description of the eagle. Fame is associated with "pies",⁷³ the poets in her temple are as plentiful as "rokes nestes",⁷⁴ petitioners are compared to bees,⁷⁵ storytellers are in a cage,⁷⁶ and the goddess Fame, herself, is described as a monstrous creation with as many eyes as feathers on a bird⁷⁷ and feet with partridge wings.⁷⁸ Although it is generally presumed that Chaucer has mistranslated Virgil's "pernicibus alis",⁷⁹ we might feel that this modification was deliberate⁸⁰ as Fame's general treatment in the poem suggests the low-flying partridge which is too concerned with the earthly to fly to

the spiritual life which is represented by the eagle. In a later chapter, the House of Rumour will be examined in more detail but it is worth noting at this point that the storytellers who appear caught in the "hous of twygges" seem to reflect the situation of the fallen birds of Apocalypse 18 who live in Babylon the Great.⁸¹ Their concern with the affairs of the world snares them to Fame's sphere of influence. It is a mistake, however, to take this image too seriously: the dreamer states that he is concerned with love-tidings, not fame, and he can see that Eolus' clarions blow out "Laude" and "Sklaundre" without any regard for truth. The whole of the House of Fame questions the reliability of "auctoritas" as not only the contemporary but also the classical storytellers are subject to the caprice of Fame. The poet's journey has not discouraged him from his quest for stories of love; rather, it has opened up a whole new range of possibilities because his higher bird's-eye perspective has made him aware that there is no essential difference between the "truth" of the classics and the "truth" of his contemporaries' stories. Significantly, as the poem ends the dreamer, rather than avoiding these suspect "tydynges", actively seeks them out:

. . . I alther-fastest wente-
 Aboute, and dide al myn entente
 Me for to pleyen and for to lere,
 And eke a tydyngge for to here, . (H.F. 11. 2131-2134).

Faced with the recognition that poetic truth is relative, the

dreamer regards this fact not a limitation on his craft but rather an opportunity to expand his range of poetic materials. When seen in this light, contemporary stories of "love-tydynges" such as are found in The Canterbury Tales and were likely projected for the House of Fame have as much legitimacy as those stories which the poet finds in the classics. As the eagle points out at the beginning of Book II :

. . . thou hast no tydynges
 Of Loves folk yf they be glade,
 Ne of noght elles that God made;
 And noght oonly fro fer contree
 That ther no tydyng cometh to thee,
 But of thy verray neyghebores,
 That duellen almost at thy dores,
 Thou herist neyther that ne this;
 For when thy labour doon al ys,
 And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
 In stede of reste and newe thynges,
 Thou goost hom to thy hous anon;
 And, also domb as any stoon,
 Thou sittest at another book
 Tyl fully daswed ys thy look,
 And lyvest thus as an heremyte.,
 (H.F. ll. 644-659)

Chaucer employs perhaps even more complex semiological bird imagery in the "Nun's Priest's Tale"; here the allusions work on two levels as the traditional iconographical significance of the birds suggests a universal Christian application as well as a specific reference which relates to the Nun's Priest himself and his relations with the other pilgrims. Although the latter allusion is dependent on the semiological convention, its effect finally belongs to the fable convention so it will be discussed in the following

chapter.

A first reading of the tale impresses the reader with its satirical elements. Although it can easily stand on its own as a delightful mock-heroic tragicomedy which ridicules and chides some of the most important intellectual, artistic, and social preoccupations of the late Middle Ages, few would disagree that this approach severely limits Chaucer's larger design. One can see that while the Priest has successfully told us "swich thyng as may oure hertes glade" (Prologue of N.P.T. l. 2811), that there is great depth to his version of this normally rather simple fable:

. . . . ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.

Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
(N.P.T. ll. 3438-3440 and l. 3443)

It must be remembered that in Christian thought the irrational world of the animals can be seen as representative of the human condition after man's Fall in Eden.⁸² In the "Nun's Priest's Tale", we have neither the spiritual aubade of Prudentius' cock nor the redeemed landscape and celestial music of the Old English The Phoenix. Mankind has fallen from divine grace and instinctive understanding, and the present state of human corruption can be seen as a strutting and philosophizing amidst the dust and dung of a barnyard which, to its inhabitants, is incongruously viewed as a medieval manor. Beyond this, the animal imagery is also

employed according to the semiological convention with its signs derived from the Bible, bestiaries, encyclopedias, patristic fathers, and iconography. The Nun's Priest, a practising preacher, would have abundant experience in using animal imagery as a way of providing striking and interesting exempla, concrete physical characters and situations, and physical natural symbols of spiritual truth.

The Christian level of the poem is most apparent when the reader recognizes that he is confronted with a bird fable so integrally connected with themes of temptation, faulty female advice, and the question of free-will and determinism:

My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,
That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe,
To walken in the yerd upon that morwe
That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde.
Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broughte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.

(N.P.T. ll. 3252-9)

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" reflects a world which has fallen from its original place in the divine scheme: the fallen paradise is symbolized by the poor barnyard of the old widow. As a consequence of Chaucer's extensive development of parallels between details in this fable and significant events in human history, we recognize that our perspective on the beasts is an approximation of God's perspective on mankind. Because man fell from his high estate, ". . . God did will that human progeny should begin life much as animals do, seeing that their first parents had been lowered to the level

of beasts . . .",⁸³ and we are left with characters such as Chauntecleer, Pertelote, and Daun Russell to re-enact their tragicomic barnyard episode as a contemporary counterpart to the original Fall in Eden. The bird fable convention here provides a higher perspective on human experience as it serves somewhat the same function as the celestial flight in the talons of the eagle.

A universal sense of history is suggested by the extensive classical and Scriptural allusions; the stage is carefully set with references to Genesis — "In principio" (N.P.T. l. 3163) — the adventure is dated just after "the month in which the world bigan,/ That highte March, whan God first maked man," (N.P.T. ll. 3187-8); the temptation is phrased as "Lat se, konne ye youre fader countrefete?" (N.P.T. l. 3321); and Chauntecleer's fall or near fall, is, like Adam's, a fall through pride and uxoriousness. In both cases the temptation is to forget instinctive obedience and supernatural warning — in Adam's case he was created to instinctively follow the good⁸⁴ and he was warned by God of the evil of disobedience, and in Chauntecleer's situation, he instinctively knows to run from the fox⁸⁵ and has been supernaturally warned by his dream — but they ignore or forget instinct and caution when the tempter appeals to the original sin of pride. Just as the forbidden knowledge of the tree of knowledge of good and evil leads man to his degradation, so the incongruous erudition paraded so ostentatiously in the

"Nun's Priest's Tale" is shown to be a vacuous display of affectation which actually interferes with the proper knowledge derived through instinct. The contrast between Pertelote's seemingly intelligent but potentially deadly advice,⁸⁶ and Chauntecleer's strong argument based on a lengthy list of authorities, is not judged in terms of the merits of each presentation; the lengthy debate finally is decided when the cock admits, "I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor,/ For they been venymous, I woot it weel;" (N.P.T. ll. 3154-5). Chauntecleer's "fall" has only a superficial connection with rational thought; it is Chauntecleer's lust for Pertelote that so invigorates him that he finally states:

I am so ful of joy and of solas,
That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.
(N.P.T. ll. 3170-1)

Chauntecleer is the servant of Venus (N.P.T. ll. 3342-3) and his lust, specified as "Moore for delit than world to multiplie," (N.P.T. l. 3345) is, on the human level, one of the results of the original Fall.⁸⁷ However, in this reenactment of the original sin in Eden, it is not really Pertelote's advice⁸⁸ which convinces Chauntecleer to "fall" and "fley down fro the beem" (N.P.T. l. 3172); it is, rather, his attraction to his wife,⁸⁹ his corn (N.P.T. l. 3175) and his own glory which leads to his foolhardiness. "Mulier est hominis confusio" (N.P.T. l. 3164) is a familiar medieval sentiment and one directly linked to "original sin", but Chauntecleer's perhaps ignorant mistranslation into "Womman

is mannes joye and al his blis" (N.P.T. 1. 3166) suggests a failing of knowledge and an ironic contradiction of the sentiment, since he is his owrr "confusio". Chauntecleer's most important weakness is best revealed in a comparison derived from the bestiaries:

. . . Chauntecleer so free
 Soong murier than the mermayde in the see;
 For Phisiologus seith sikerly
 How that they syngen wel and myrily.
 (N.P.T. 11. 3269-72)

The description of the mermaid or siren⁹⁰ in the Physiologus adds considerable depth and subtlety to Chauntecleer's characterization:

. . . the sirens . . . are deadly animals living in the sea which cry out with odd voices, for the half of them down to the navel bears the figure of a man, while the other half is that of a bird. They sing a most pleasing song so that through the sweetness of the voice they charm the hearing of men sailing far away and draw them to themselves. By the great sweetness of their extended song they charm the ears and senses of the sailors and put them to sleep. When they see the men lulled by most heavy sleep, they attack them and tear them to pieces.⁹¹

The bestiary - also referred to as "Physiologus" as a generic description - takes a further moralizing attitude to this monster:

That's the way in which ignorant and incautious human beings get tricked by pretty voices, when they are charmed by indelicacies, ostentations and pleasures, . . . They lose their whole mental vigour, as if in a deep sleep, and suddenly the reaving pounce of the Enemy is upon them.⁹²

To reinforce the "Mulier est hominis confusio" theme, the Priest could have referred to Pertelote as a mermaid but instead he attributes these qualities to Chauntecleer himself. The cock is his own temptation and "confusio" which will lead him to peril. It is his own "pretty voice" - his fascination with debate, rhetoric, and "his voys . . . murier than the murie orgon" (N.P.T. l. 2851) - as well as his licentiousness that lead him to momentarily lose his mental vigour, close his eyes (as if in sleep),⁹³ and enable the enemy to pounce upon him. Similarly, Chauntecleer is a monster in much the same way as is the mermaid: the cock is a cock but the bird/human double perspective suggests a monstrous merging of distinct species. Just as Adam and Eve try to become gods, so Chauntecleer and Pertelote are aspiring to the human level: in both cases there is a distortion of the divine hierarchical plan.⁹⁴ Finally, when our bird-Adam does fall, the traditional and very popular description of the barnyard chase suggests the moral chaos following the Fall of Man:

They yolliden as feendes doon in helle;

It seemed as that hevene sholde falle.

(N.P.T. ll. 3389 and 3401)

Reinforcing the image of confusion is an allusion to a contemporary "fall" from grace which adds new significance to this chaos:⁹⁵

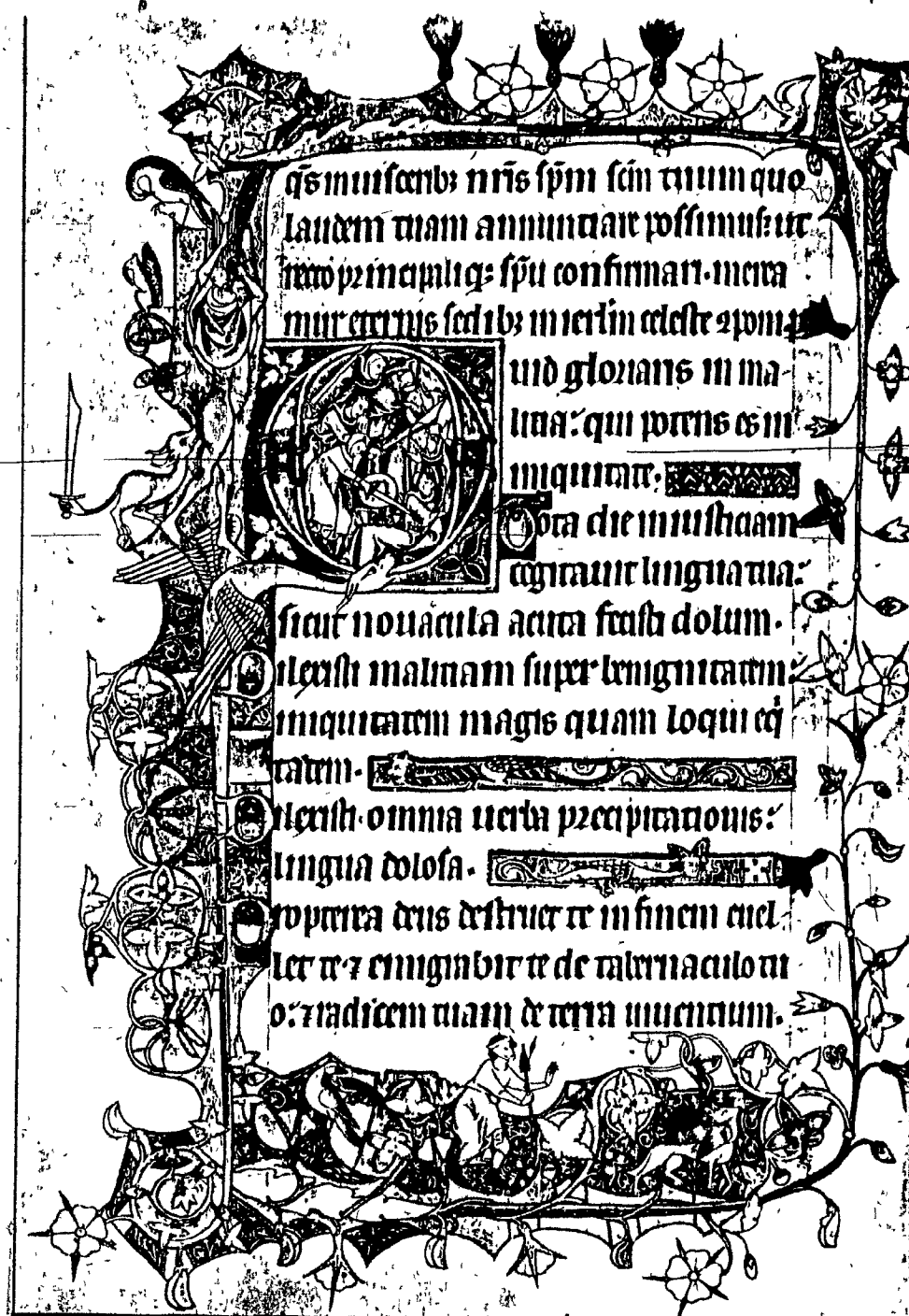


FIGURE ONE. Ormsby Psalter. Reproduced in D.W. Robertson, Jr.,
A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962.)
 plate 78.

. . . Jakke Strawe and his meynne
 Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
 Whan that they wolden any Flemmyng kille,.
 (N.P.T. ll. 3394-6)

The Peasant Revolt which concerned so many of Chaucer's class was certainly viewed as an attack on the divine "Chain of Being" that held medieval society together.⁹⁶ The pride of Chauntecleer, the attempted usurping of man's place by Pertelote and Eve, the temptation by the fox and serpent, and Chauntecleer's and Adam's attempt to aspire to the heights of their fathers — all provide the elements for a synthesizing exemplum of timeless and universal pride and fall.

There can be little doubt concerning Daun Russell's role in the allegory:

His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,
 And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris
 With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;
 His snowte smal, with glowynge eyen tweye.
 (N.P.T. ll. 2902-5)

The fox is a barnyard representative of the tempting serpent or devil who admits that "I were worse than a feend,/ If I to yow wolde harm or vileynye!" (N.P.T. ll. 3286-7), and he tempts Chauntecleer with the words, "konne ye youre fader countrefete?" (N.P.T. l. 3321). If these diabolical associations are not convincing enough, we need only turn to the Physiologus where the fox's craftiness and deceit is described and then moralized:

The fox is an entirely deceitful animal who plays tricks. If he is hungry and finds nothing to eat, he seeks out a rubbish pit where there is red earth

and rolls in it so that he appears bloodied all over; he then throws himself down and rolls over as though dead. Then, throwing himself on his back, he stares upwards, draws in his breath, and thoroughly bloats himself up. Now the birds, thinking the fox dead, descend upon him to devour him. But he stretches out and seizes them, and the birds themselves die a miserable death.

The fox is a figure of the devil. To those who live according to the flesh he pretends to be dead.⁹⁷

Cosmic significance is added to the fox's entrance into the barnyard world when it is suggested that the whole episode is "By heigh ymaginacioun forncast," (N.P.T. l. 3217) and Bradwardine and Boethius are invoked. The question of whether God's foreknowledge of Original Sin removed free will from Adam and Eve aroused considerable interest for the medieval philosopher,⁹⁸ and a new dimension is added to the free will and determinism theme when the action is transported into the second Eden context of the "Nun's Priest's Tale".

In this poem, the argument is phrased in terms of a barnyard squabble, and we recognize that just as God's gifts of nature and grace to Adam should have kept him free from temptation so Chauntecleer's supernatural prophetic dream and natural instinct should have kept him out of the mouth of the fox.

Beyond this, though, we must also recognize that a fox attacking a cock is a normal part of the post-lapsarian natural cycle⁹⁹ and Adam and Eve's fall is ultimately an integral part of God's divine plan.¹⁰⁰ The paralleling of the two events — as absurd as the comparison initially appears — finally provides an important sense of perspective on both.

incidents. Our higher "bird's eye" perspective on Chauntecleer and Pertelote, we expect, parallels God's higher perspective on mankind.

But on another level, Chaucer presents this temptation again, this time, in terms of the second Adam, Christ. While this level of the tale is not developed to the same extent as the Eden parallel, it should be discussed briefly because of the allusions to the fox as the "newe Scariot", (N.P.T. l. 3227), the cock's near tragedy on Friday, the temptation "konne ye youre fader countrifete?" (N.P.T. l. 3321), the New Testament connection of Jesus, Peter and the cock, Prudentius's influential "Hymn at Cockcrow", and iconographical and bestiary evidence which links the cock with Christ.

As pointed out earlier in this chapter¹⁰¹ both "The Hymn at Cockcrow" and the bestiary give wholly positive descriptions of the cock and conclude with moralizations identifying Christ with the cock. To ascertain that this figura was still current in the fourteenth century one need only examine one of the most famous paintings in the Trés Riches Heures de Jean, Duc de Berry. This illumination (Figure two, p. 106) illustrates the text:

Again the devil took him up into a very high
mountain and shewed him all the kingdoms of the
world and the glory of them,
And said to him: All these will I give thee,
if falling down thou wilt adore me. 102

This scene, the third temptation of the second Adam, Christ, is dominated by the Duc de Berry's chateau and in the background

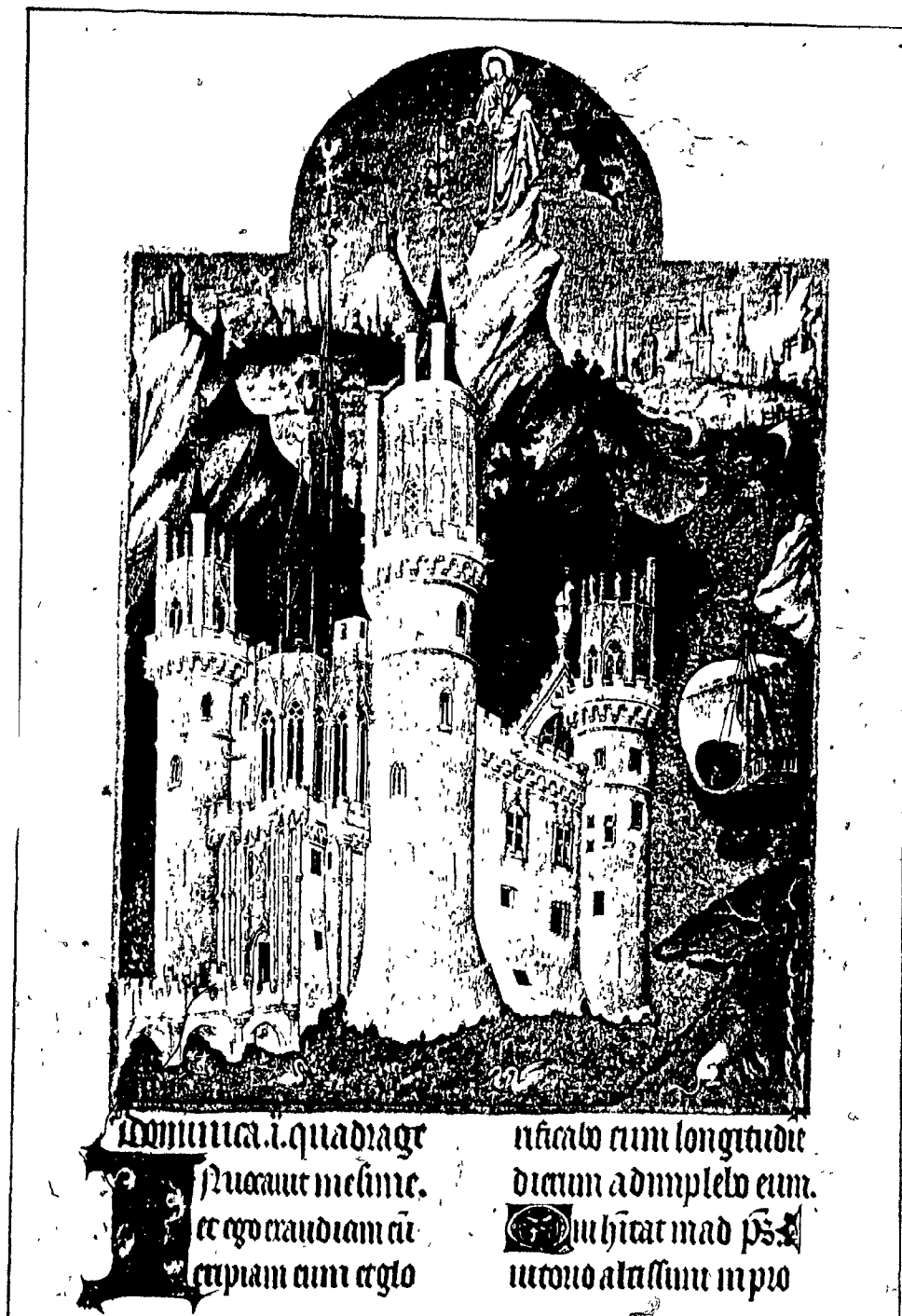


FIGURE TWO "The Temptation of Christ". Très Riches Heures de Jean Duc de Berry. Reproduced in Jean Longnon, ed. The Très Riches Heures de Jean, Duke of Berry, trans. V. Benedict, (New York: Geo. Braziller, 1969) plate 121.

we see a golden robed Jesus standing on a steep mountain while a black, horned, and web-winged devil hovers by his side. In the foreground on a tall tower of the chateau stands a weathercock also in gold, which, because of medieval perspective, seems beside and at the same level as Jesus. The cock, in this instance, seems directly related to the temptation visually; moreover, symbolically he is connected to Peter's temptation (Matt. 26:69-75), and Jesus as the herald of dawn, new life, and perhaps even a redeemed earthly paradise.

Another temptation of Christ which might be pertinent to the imagery in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is the description of Jesus taunted while on the cross:

. . . thou that destroyest the temple of God and
in three days dost rebuild it: save thy own self.
If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. 103

Again the temptation is seen as a descent from above — this time from the cross rather than the mountain — and if we recall our tale of the cock and the fox, we recall that Chauntecleer's peril is directly connected with his decision to "fley down fro the beem" (N.P.T. l. 3172). Like Christ's, Chauntecleer's tragedy occurs on a Friday, and although each encounters near-death, both stories end according to the Knight's medieval definition of comedy:

As when a man hath been in povre estaat,
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
And there abideth in prosperitee.
(Prologue of N.P.T. ll. 2775-7)

Jesus descends to hell to free the souls of the ancients and

triumphantly ascends to sit at the right-hand side of God, whereas Chauntecleer falls into what might be considered the traditional hell mouth and then, outwitting the fox, escapes, "And heigh upon a tree he fleigh anon." (N.P.T. l. 3417). Figure three (p. 109) from The Hours of Catherine of Cleves quite accurately illustrates two dimensions of Chauntecleer's plight: a bestial hell-mouth dominates the page and, in the lower border, a fowler limes branches in order to snare birds for his cages. Chauntecleer's worldly appetites and his inability to fly at higher altitudes have placed him in both physical and spiritual danger.

The semiological convention of bird imagery — like allegory in a more general sense — allows the artist to suggest the universal behind the particular; the eternal within the temporal; the serious underneath the humorous; and the sacred within the profane. When considered in careful analysis, the Priest's tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote provides a profound insight into the nature of art in the Middle Ages. The Host asks that the Priest:

Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade
(Prologue of N.P.T. l. 2811)

and the Priest replies:

"But I be myrie, ywis I wol be blamed."
(Prologue of N.P.T. l. 2817)

The tale is a very fine piece of entertainment for the pilgrims but one which may make "oure hertes glade" with

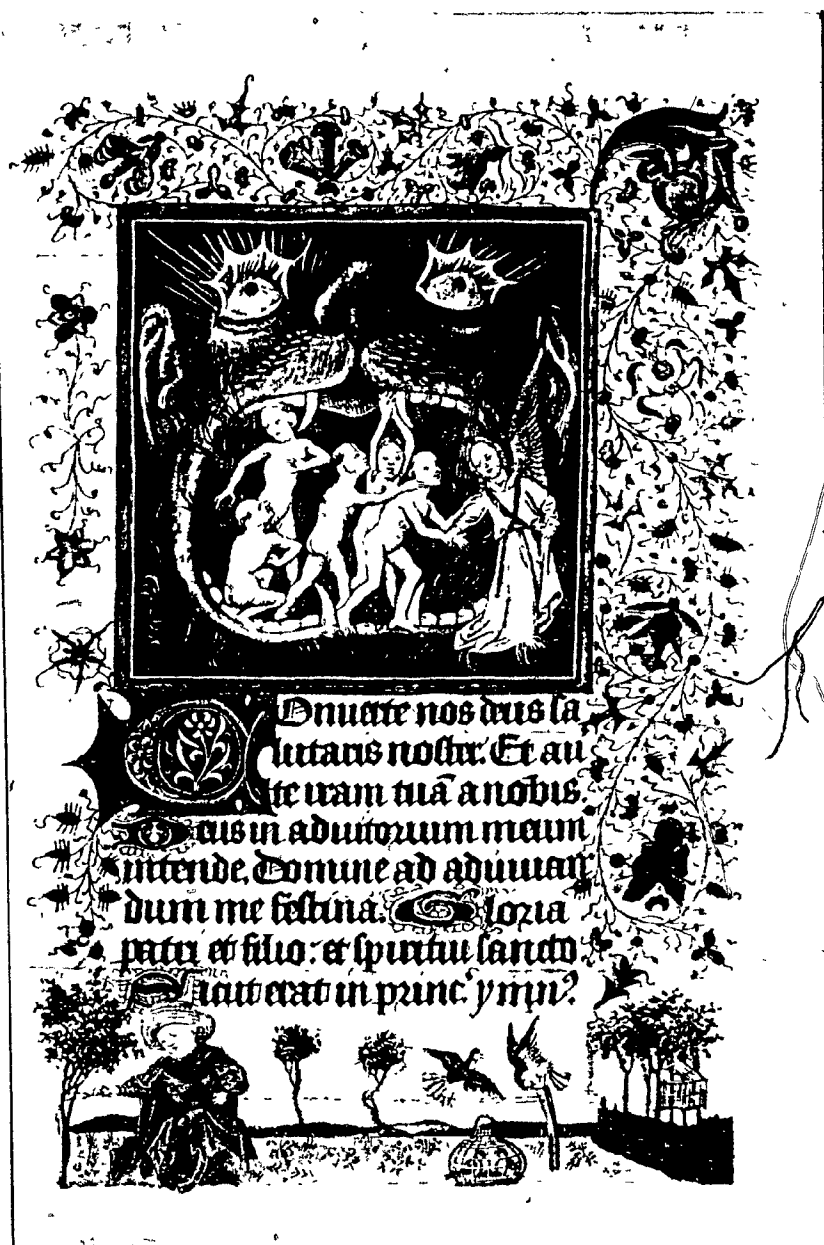


FIGURE THREE. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves. Monday Hours of the Dead -Compline. "The Release of Souls from the Mouth of Hell". Notice the scene in the lower border where bird imagery is used to illustrate the capture of souls.

Reproduced in The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, ed. John Plummer (New York: Geo. Braziller, 1964) plate 48.

dimensions which move beyond the purely entertaining. The narrator's admonition which concludes his tale reinforces the reading of the poem provided in this paper:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
 Taketh the moralite, goode men.
 For seint Paul seith that all that writen is,
 to oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaff be stille.
 (N.P.T. ll. 3438-43)

The convention of birds as intellectual signs allowed its audience to see the "light" of Christian universals through "dark" but concretely realized particular birds figures. The semiological bird images in the House of Fame, the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the Parlement of Foules also aspire beyond the particulars of time, place, and person; moreover, they point beyond the specifically Christian truths of earlier usage. In addition, Chaucer, like his bird image, rises above his immediate setting with the help of the "wings of philosophy" and achieves a celestial perspective that encompasses, in its all-embracing view, events, ideas, and characters from the Old Testament, New Testament, classics, mythology, and contemporary chronicles. The bird imagery mediates between the divine and human because the audience's perspective on the bird characters is, in effect, an approximation of God's perspective on mankind; thus, Chaucer establishes a synthesis of what, from our earthly perspective, would seem antithetical and incongruous elements.

NOTES

- ¹ Romans 1:20.
- ² See Chapter One, p. 27, n. 63.
- ³ C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (1936; Rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 46.
- ⁴ Michael J. Curley's translation of Physiologus (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) will be used throughout when referring to this work.
- ⁵ See M.W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), pp. 245-249, and A. Katzenellenbogen, Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art from Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century, trans. A. Crick (New York: Norton, 1964), passim.
- ⁶ The Gothic Image, trans. D. Nussey (1913; Rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 39-46.
- ⁷ Francis Klingender, Animals in Art and Thought to the Late Middle Ages, p. 342.
- ⁸ Klingender, p. 282.
- ⁹ Physiologus, chap. 8, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Physiologus, chap. 8, p. 12.
- ¹¹ Physiologus, p. 13.

12 See, for example, Gesta Romanorum, CLXXXI, and the sermons of Honorius, in Speculum ecclesiae.

13 W.J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), p. 198, and R.W. Bond, The Complete Works of John Lyly, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), vol. I, pp. 131-134.

14 "Cathemerinon: A Hymn at Cockcrow" in The Last Poets of Imperial Rome, trans. H. Isbell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 153-156.

15 "Chaucer and the Birds-and-Love Convention" pp. 194-5.

16 "A Hymn at Cockcrow" ll. 1-4; 13-16; 37-40.

17 "A Hymn at Cockcrow" ll. 49-69.

18 T.H. White, The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1960), p. 151.

19 Anglo-Saxon Poetry, trans. R.K. Gordon (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1954), p. 240.

20 Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 242.

21 Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 245.

22 See Chapter I, p. 12.

23 Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 242.

24 Anglo-Saxon Poetry, pp. 244-245.

25 See Chapter I, pp. 40-4 passim.

26 See E.A. Armstrong, St. Francis: Nature Mystic, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 42-48.

27 E.A. Armstrong, pp. 56-60, discusses a similar version in Celano's Vita Prima.

28 Perhaps also influential was Attar's The Conference of the Birds, which, although it was of eleventh century Arabic origin, appears to have had considerable currency in Europe in the fourteenth century. In this rather profound poem, the birds—clearly symbols of the souls—are led by the hoopoe in search of the bird god, the Simurgh or phoenix. After much questing and backsliding, the birds finally reach the palace of the Simurgh only to find that the divinity resides within themselves.

29 Apocalypse 18:1-2.

30 See figure three, p. 109 (chap. 2) for iconographical tradition of paralleling snared birds with souls caught in hell.

31 Jeremias 5:26-27.

32 "Satan the Fowler", Medieval Studies, XXI (1959), pp. 176-184.

33 Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 246-253.

34 Quoted in Koonce's "Satan as Fowler, p. 181.

35 P.L., 25, col. 1,065.

36 Ecclesiasticus 11:32.

37 "Satan the Fowler", p. 182. I am indebted generally to Koonce for the information on the symbolism attached to the partridge. The bestiary account of the partridge emphasizes perverted sexual appetite and duplicity so the bird is likened to the devil. Although there is no mention of the inability to fly to great height, this seems implicit because the commentary emphasizes that "when the call of Christ is heard, the wise ones, growing their spiritual plumage, fly away and put their trust in Jesus." T.H. White, p. 136.

38 Alan of Lille, De planctu Naturae, P.L., CCXVI, 436, and Pierre Bersuire Opera, IV, 355 (Petrus Berchorius) Opera (Colonise Agrippinae, 1730, 1731). "Satan the Fowler", p. 182.

39 eg., Pearl, ll. 429-432, Richard Redeless, passus III, ll. 37-85, and Confessio Amantis III, ll. 2600-2629.

40 Purgatory IX, ll. 19-33, Dorothy L. Sayers, trans. The Divine Comedy, "Purgatory" (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955).

41 "Paradise", I, ll. 46-48.

42 "Paradise", I, ll. 49-54.

43 "Purgatory", XXXII, ll. 112-117.

44 "Purgatory", XXXII, ll. 124-129.

45 The first sentence of The Book of Wisdom.

46 "Paradise", XVIII, ll. 103-108.

47 All three of these authors have been quite prolific, but I would particularly note, Robertson's A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Rowland's Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 1971); and Koonce's Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame.

48 Lucan's Pharsalia, IX, 1 ff; Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, I, 4; Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, II, pr. VII; Dante, The Divine Comedy, "Paradise", XXII, ll. 133-138; Boccaccio, Teseida, xi, 2.

49 "Paradise", XXII, ll. 133-138.

50 All quotations from Chaucer's poetry are taken from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957).

51 The semiological convention was also capable of less lofty but still culturally interesting applications. The chief significance of the bestiaires d'amour for our purposes was their concern to enlarge the scope of the semiological convention beyond the strictly spiritual. Richard De Fournival's Le Bestiaire D'Amour, ed. C. Hippeau (1852-7; Rpt. Genève Slatkine Reprints, 1969) is probably the best known of the genre and a short summary of a few of its images will indicate its technique and tone. The poet compares himself to the unicorn who is rendered powerless by his virginal mistress (pp. 23-4), and he requests that she, like the pelican, give him life by opening her breast (pp. 30-1) or, like the eagle, break her pride as the eagle breaks his beak so as to allow him to enter her fortress (pp. 44-5). The poet's mistress is not convinced.

52 This, of course, accords with Beryl Rowland's thesis that Chaucer's use of animal imagery is based almost completely on literary rather than natural observation. Blind Beasts, passim.

53 White, The Book of Beasts, cuckoo, p. 104., goose, p. 152, and duck, p. 151.

54 This is particularly surprising in terms of the cuckoo's infamy. Outside of the bestiary, there are, of course, moralizations of these birds. See Rowland, Birds with Human Souls (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1978), entries under cuckoo, duck, and goose.

55 cf. Pandarus' advice to Troilus in Troilus and Criseyde, III, l. 584.

56 Apocalypse 18:1-2.

57 "The Music of the Spheres and the Parlement of Foules". Chaucer Review 5 (1970), pp. 32-56.

58 Chamberlain, pp. 49-50.

59 quoted by Chamberlain, p. 48.

60 B.G. Koonce, Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), especially pp. 129-136 and 143-177.

61 House of Fame, ll. 427-432. Virgil's account makes it clear that Aeneas must leave Dido so that he can found Italy. It is, significantly, the first lines of Virgil's Aeneid which the dreamer sees on the brass plate.

62 House of Fame, ll. 293-8. This version of the story comes from Ovid's Heroides, vii (Dido to Aeneas).

63 House of Fame, ll. 973-5. The original line in The Consolation of Philosophy is only slightly different. See Boece, Bk. IV, pr. 1, ll. 65-70.

64 See pp. 63-4.

65 Chaucer, himself, makes the eagle the messenger of a seemingly Christianized Jupiter.

66 This was a familiar motif. Augustine mentions it in Ennarationes in Psalms, Psalm 102, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, VII, p. 497.

67 It is significant, though, that the eagle sits on a "stoon" and swears by St. Peter. House of Fame, ll. 1990-2000.

68 Rowland, Birds With Human Souls, p. 55, points out that in Chaucer's age "Aquila" was already a term used to refer to the lecturn.

69 See "Purgatory", XXXII, l. 99, and "Paradise", XVIII.

70 The eagle's association with wind will be discussed in the following chapter.

71 Koonce's explanation of the December 10 dating based on Ezek. 40:1-2 and Ezek. 24:1-2 (Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame, pp. 57-72) is forcefully refuted by Leyerle. See note No. 3, p. 261 "Chaucer's Windy Eagle" University of Toronto Quarterly, XL (1971), pp. 247-263.

72 Leyerle, p. 249.

73 House of Fame, l. 703.

74 House of Fame, l. 1516

75 House of Fame, l. 1522.

76 House of Fame, ll. 1935-19.

- 77 House of Fame, l. 1382.
- 78 House of Fame, ll. 1391-2. One could possibly see the goddess as a peacock with her bright colouring and numerous "eyes". In such a case, Chaucer might be alluding to the tradition that the peacock is shy about the fact that her feet do not match the beauty of the rest of her body. See White, The Bestiary, p. 149, n. 4.
- 79 Aeneid, IV, 180.
- 80 Chaucer does translate the phrase correctly in Troilus and Criseyde IV, l. 661 as "with preste wynges". Koonce tentatively makes this point in Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame, p. 212, n. 76.
- 81 Koonce examines this image in detail (Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame, pp. 251-2), but asks us to take the allusion as a reference to Satan's snared souls. To a certain extent this is reasonable; it does not, however, help us to understand the dreamer's renewed interest in their "love-tydynges".
- 82 See Chapter I, pp. 19-21, and Chapter II, p. 97-8.
- 83 Augustine, The City of God, XIII, 3, p. 302.
- 84 The City of God, XIV, 6, p. 358.
- 85 See Pliny the Elder, Natural History x, xxiv.
- 86 See C.E. Kauffman, "Dame Pertelote's Parlous Parle", Chaucer Review 4 (1970), 41-8.
- 87 The City of God, XIV, 10, p. 374

- 88 Dahlberg, in "Chaucer's Cock and Fox" (Journal of English and Germanic Philology 53, (1954), pp. 277-90) points out that "if we assume an old French derivation of Pertelote's name, it may mean 'loss of a portion in a heritage' or 'loss of birthright.'" p. 286.
- 89 Augustine explains that Adam accepted Eve's advice because, "... Adam refused to be separated from his partner even in a union of sin. . . ." The City of God, XIV, 11, p. 378.
- 90 Chaucer, like most medieval writers, seems to have used the two words interchangeably. See his translation of The Romance of the Rose, ll. 682-4.
- 91 Physiologus, p. 23.
- 92 T.H. White, The Book of Beasts, pp. 134-5.
- 93 The closing of the eyes motif would seem to have suggested to Chaucer an ironic contrast to the serpent's temptation of Eve in Eden: For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil. Genesis 3:5.
- 94 See the following chapter for a discussion of the concept of the "monster" and the "monstrous" in the bird fable convention.
- 95 Chaucer's technique here is an interesting variation on the more traditional use of animal and bird imagery in medieval painting. Figure One (p. 102) is an illuminated manuscript from the Ormsby Psalter depicting the treacherous murder of priests by Doeg and his Edomite followers (I Samuel 22:9). Beside the illumination is a grotesque suggesting the unnaturalness of the murder. In the lower margin, the artist depicts a woman chasing a fox which is carrying off her cock. The barnyard scene reinforces and parallels the raid on the temple. Chaucer turns this convention upside down and has the momentous political event serve as reinforcement to the actually insignificant situation of his cock and hen.

- 96 See, for example, John Gower's Vox clamantis I, discussed in the following chapter.
- 97 Physiologus, p. 27. The early Latin analogue to the "Nun's Priest's Tale", "Gallus et Vulpes", adds a 'moralitas' which identifies the fox as Satan. The patristic fathers frequently equate the fox with the devil. For numerous examples, see Mortimer Donovan, "The Moralite of the Nun's Priest's Sermon", Journal of English and Germanic Philology 52 (1953)⁴⁸, pp. 498-508 and p. 501.
- 98 See, for example, The City of God, XII, 23; XIV, 11, 26, 27.
- 99 The repercussions of Original Sin in the natural world is discussed on pp. 17-21(Chap.I).
- 100 Augustine discusses the "Fortunate Fall" in The City of God, XIII, 3, pp. 301-2.
- 101 See pp. 64-7 (Chap.II)
- 102 Matthew 4:8-9.
- 103 Matthew 27:40.

CHAPTER III

Chaucer and the Convention of Bird Fables

The Bird Fable:

The attitude which we have seen demonstrated towards nature in the early Middle Ages is paralleled in the Christian response to fiction and fable. While this medieval aesthetic is of paramount importance in any study of Chaucer's poetry, the influence of D.W. Robertson, Jr.'s studies¹ has been so pervasive that it seems unnecessary to do more than summarize some of his findings.

Interest in birds for their own sake and study of the fiction for the sake of the story itself suggested the kind of confusion of proper priorities which initially encouraged St. Augustine and St. Jerome to turn away from the Scriptures because these writings were not as "eloquent" as the classical writings which both had studied as young men. The question which troubled the early Church was: Does the fiction teach; does it delight; or, does it both teach and delight? Gradually it was conceded that the best literature—Scriptural and classical—did both, but it was clearly a problem that many of the fabulists, such as Ovid, Petronius, Menander, Plautus, Aesop, Terence, Virgil, and Apuleius referred frequently and approvingly to the Greek and Roman pantheon. Many of these classical writers could not be salvaged, but Ovid and Virgil were soon redeemed by the exegetes,² and Aesop never seems to

have been out of favour.³ In order to employ the fable or fiction in the cause of ecclesiastical work, it was only necessary to make the morality clear and at least as weighty as the fiction itself; in fact, more than half the problem was solved from the beginning because of the use of the "fiction" in the Bible: Jesus' parables and the fables of the trees invited to leadership in Judges 9:8-15 were linked by St. Augustine to the fables of Aesop,⁴ and God, Himself, gives the fable of the eagles and the vines to the prophet in Ezekiel XVII, so although there were those who begrudged the fabulist his legitimacy, the weight of authority was distinctly on his side. Macrobius, in fact, relates the enigma of fables to the enigma of nature and legitimizes the Physiologus tradition and fiction when he explains that philosophers use fables because "they realize that a frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of men by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives".⁵ Finally, for Chaucer's age, Boccaccio, following Petrarch, sums up the defense by pointing out that much of the Bible is based on various degrees of fiction: those who refuse to allow the poet his license, must also explain the total fiction of the conference of trees (Judges 9:8-15), the fiction and truth in the visions in the Old Testament, and the parables used by Jesus in the New Testament.⁶

These arguments ensured continuity of the bird fable convention throughout the Middle Ages, and by the fourteenth century, Chaucer would have inherited a fully legitimized and highly developed literary tradition. In this chapter, we shall examine the satirical implications of birds described in terms of humans, and humans described in terms of birds—the ironic perspective of the bird/human double context. More particularly, we will investigate Chaucer's use of (1) the double-edged satire which results from the philosophical positions which variably view birds as superior (Ambrose) and inferior (Boethius) to the human; (2) the concept of the "monster" wherein the characters are simultaneously bird and man; (3) bird imagery and heraldry in political and social satire; (4) the humour and comic distancing derived from the incongruity of human characters depicted as birds; (5) the depersonalizing and generalizing effect of employing bird protagonists.

Although, as we have already seen, birds had been used as signs of philosophical truths throughout the Middle Ages, it is in the twelfth century that the bird and animal fable achieves its greatest popularity. One suspects that this is at least partly due to an increased interest in the observation of birds and animals for their own sake. With the recovery of the Arabic scientific tracts and translations brought back to northern Europe by scholars such as Adelard of Bath, Michael Scot, Daniel of Morley, and Robert of Chester, the twelfth

century found strong support for a renewed interest in nature. The animal does not lose his semiological value as a dim reflection of divine truths, but he does gain a dignity, beauty, and truth of his own. Much of the credit for this enlarged sense of animal imagery was due to Aristotle's biological tracts which promoted an empirical study of nature.⁷ In scientific tracts, we see evidence of this change in Adelard's Quaestiones naturales where close observation of nature is encouraged;⁸ the philosopher, William of Conches, criticizes those who wish to remain ignorant of nature's laws;⁹ interest in the bestiaries is heightened and many new and more elaborate copies are made; vernacular translations of Aesop's fables are developed; and poetic allegories such as Alan of Lille's De planctu Naturae and Anticlaudianus and Bernard Silvestris' Cosmographia offer striking prominence to the Goddess Natura. Klingender notes that within the visual arts—especially the animal and bird illustrations in the bestiary manuscripts—one finds that the rigidity of much of the Romanesque animal designs begins, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to move to a striking naturalism.¹⁰ One sees this naturalism in Friedrich II of Sicily's thirteenth century De arte venandi cum avibus with its nine hundred and fifteen coloured drawings of birds,¹¹ but one also sees it in the depiction of birds in the margins of numerous medieval manuscripts. Perhaps many of these representations are symbols of souls for, as we have seen, the bird was often associated with the transcendent spirit in

man; however, the extent to which birds enter the margins of secular and ecclesiastical manuscripts, the spring lyric, and the saint legends suggests a real celebration of birds for their own sake. One must be careful not to overstate or to simplify this change of attitude as it is quite obvious that there was a good deal of fascination with bird and animal imagery prior to the twelfth century,¹² and that one of the most "scientific" of the twelfth century philosophers, William of Conches, resolutely maintained that "the most trivial and useless realities of nature possess a symbolic value which made them both beautiful and good."¹³ Nevertheless, the renewed and revitalized late medieval interest in the close observation of birds and animals clearly contributes to the awareness of the parallels between animal and human behaviour and social structures, and this, in turn, provides a general acquaintance with bird lore to which fable and fiction writers can appeal for their audiences' amusement and edification.

The philosophical concept of the parallel hierarchies of creation is certainly the intellectual basis for the bird fable;¹⁴ close observation reveals that birds, like humans, build homes, sing, walk on two legs, appear to dance, have distinctive and often colourful markings, and engage in elaborate courtship rituals. The classical idea of the Great Chain of Being offered solid philosophical support for the encyclopedic tradition of Pliny, Solinus, Isidore, Neckham, Thomas of Cantimpré, Albertus Magnus, Vincent de Beauvais, and

Bartholomew Anglicus which detailed characteristics of animals and birds and often paralleled these observations with notes on human behaviour. Neckham's De naturis rerum, for example, de-emphasizes moralization of animal traits, but in ten chapters on the levels of nobility in the bird kingdom, points out the parallels between the animal hierarchy and feudal society.¹⁵ Bartholomew Anglicus' De proprietatibus rerum and Vincent de Beauvais' Speculum naturale—both of which include material from Aristotle's History of Animals—also adopt the logic of the Neoplatonist Great Chain of Being and describe the correspondence between bird and animal species and various levels of society.¹⁶ This paralleling of bird and human hierarchies, the heraldic beast imagery which identified late medieval aristocratic families, the enlarged audience of the Aesopian fables because of vernacular translations, the authority of patristic fathers such as Boethius who discusses human degeneracy in terms of animal characteristics, all contributed to the popularity and profundity of the satirical beast fables which commented on and criticized the various levels of medieval society.

The bird and animal fable drew its imagery from the encyclopedias, the patristic writers, the Aesopian fables, and the bestiaries, and, as was pointed out earlier, its authority from the Bible and the classics.¹⁷ Clearly, it was a popular form of protest literature for clerics, the land-owning class, and writers closely attached to the court; presumably, it also

provided the lower class an opportunity to attack the whole feudal framework, but in the absence of any existing "popular" animal fables,¹⁸ we can only suspect that there existed a strong oral tradition of satirical beast fables and that it likely contributed to the Reynard and Isengrim cycles and the beast parables and exempla employed in the sermons of the "popular" preachers.

The most prevalent attitude to birds in the beast fable was negative; following up on the philosophical attitudes expressed by Macrobius and Boethius, birds, as a sub-group of the beast world, were seen to reflect the base qualities of mankind, and in John Wyclif's Tractatus civili dominio, John Gower's Mirour de l'omme, and the Ancrene Riwe birds and animals are depicted as personifications of the vices.¹⁹ In Truth : Balade de Bon Conseyl Chaucer would seem to favour this attitude as he repeats the familiar formula which relates the beast's downward turned eyes to base interests:

Her is non hoom, her nis but wildernesse:
 Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!
 Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;
 Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede;²⁰
 (ll. 17-20)

There is, however, another factor at work when we move from beasts in general to birds in particular. In our earlier examination of philosophical attitudes towards birds, we found that although birds were often denigrated as beasts they were also respected for their ability to fly and to approach the realm of the heavens—hence move away from the base world.

This idea seems implicit in Boethius' description of the philosophical mind in terms of "fetheres of Philophye",²¹ and in Macrobius' idealized skies and the celestial perspective.²² The Physiologus, however, most clearly reflects this positive attitude when, for example, the eagle is associated with Christ because it can look and fly directly toward the sun rather than stare at the earth. As we have seen in the last chapter,²³ this feature is then extended so that certain species of birds are viewed positively because they fly at a great height and others, notably the partridge, are regarded negatively because they are only able to leave the ground for short periods of time and for low flights. One can see, therefore, that within the philosophical tradition there was a strong rationale for exempting the bird from the general rule that beasts keep their eyes to the base world.

On a more general level, we also saw that St. Ambrose—working with an idea in Virgil's Georgics²⁴—depicted the birds as possessing a special kind of reason and a co-operative social organization which made them a model for mankind. This tradition can be found in the fourteenth century in Piers

Plowman:

Briddes I biheld that in buskes made nestes
 Hadde nevere wye wit to werche the leeste.
 I hadde wonder at whom and wher the pye
 Lerne to legge the stikkes in which she leyeth and bredeth.
 Ther nys wrighte, as I wene, sholde werche hir neste to paye;
 If any mason made a molde therto, much wonder it were.²⁵

The narrator goes further, however, and sees that the whole beast world follows reason:

Reson I seigh soothly sewen alle beestes
In etynge, in drynkynge and in engendrynge of kind. . . . 26

He wonders, in fact:

That Reson rewarded and ruled alle beestes
Save man and his make: . . . 27

What is being expressed here is, in many ways, the obverse side of the Boethian tradition of associating beasts with sin and irrationality. It is not truly a denial of man's superiority over the animal but, rather, a recognition that birds and beasts are capable of productive, reasonable, and co-operative behaviour which does not always come naturally to humans. The currency of these philosophical attitudes allows for a double-edged satire in the beast fable: man is intellectually degraded when portrayed as a beast; a frustrating irony is also suggested by the fact that actual beasts would never find themselves in the fable's human dilemma. In the Parlement of Foules, for example, human society is seen as a chaotic, chattering crowd of birds unable to mate without resorting to invective and threats; if one approaches the same scene remembering that actually "Reson . . . sewen alle beestes/ In etynge, in drynkynge and in engendrynge of kynde", human society appears even more ridiculous because it is incapable of successfully accomplishing even the basic activities of survival.

A similar situation can be observed when birds are used in political allegory. Alexander Neckham describes falcons and hawks as the feudal aristocrats of the bird kingdom and frequently stresses the nobility of their behaviour;²⁸ and the bestiary describes bees—considered birds in the medieval era—as possessing an ideal society:

They arrange their own king for themselves. They create a popular state, and, although they are placed under a king, they are free. For the king does not merely hold the privilege of giving judgment, but he also excites a feeling of allegiance, both because the bees love him on the ground that he was appointed by themselves and also because they honour him for being at the head of so great a swarm. Moreover, the king does not become their leader by lot, for in casting lots there is an element of chance rather than good judgment, and often by the irrational misfortune of luck somebody who is worse gets preferred to better men.²⁹

Yet despite this influential recognition that some birds actually possess an ideal political structure, the main thrust of the bird fable criticizes man's political and social institutions by referring to them in terms of avian parallels. John Bromyard, for example, describes the pettiness and corruption of fourteenth century Parliament using the Latin word "cavea"—which means both "a place of assembly" and "a bird cage"—and then likens the prelates and counsellors to birds in captivity:

It is the same way with these men in this case as it is with birds who sing freely in the forest according to their natural inclinations, but in a "bird cage" sing and speak just as they hear others speak there, English or French. So it is with these counsellors who also learn the language of the country, even down to specific phrases; therefore they are not birds of heaven but of hell. . . .

[The counsellor] if he had not been in that "bird cage" would have sung another note. But in the hell of the lord that clever bird learned to speak just as he heard others speak.³⁰

One can see from the above quotation that the bird fable or more exactly, the bird/human double perspective, was an effective rhetorical technique in political writing; by relating humans to birds Bromyard suggests the "unreasonable" nature of their activity for the counsellors are not interested in truth or honour any more than birds are capable of reason or understanding. And John Wyclif reports a less subtle bird fable which was used to describe the historical conditions of the Parliament of 1371:

Once upon a time there was a meeting of many birds; among them was an owl. But the owl had lost her feathers, and made as though she suffered much from the frost. So she begged the other birds, with a trembling voice, to give her some of their feathers. They sympathized with her, and every bird gave the owl a feather til she was overladen with strange feathers in unlovely fashion. Scarcely was this done when a hawk came in sight in quest of a prey. Then the birds, to escape from the attacks of the hawk, demanded their feathers back again from the owl, and on her refusal each of them took back his own feather by force, and so escaped from the danger, while the owl remained more miserably unfledged than before. Even so, when a war breaks out we must take from the endowed clergy a portion of their temporal possessions, as property which belongs to us and the kingdom in common, and so wisely defend the country with property which exists among us in superfluity.³¹

An additional dimension to the bird fable developed with the use of birds and animals derived from the distinctive heraldic badges worn by the nobility.³² Political events, one

would initially suspect, could be less dangerously analyzed and criticized by describing the intrigues of the swan, the bear, the heron, the colt, the peacock, and the geese, rather than the duke of Gloucester; the earl of Warwick; Henry, duke of Lancaster; the earl of Arundel, and so on.³³ That political caution was not a major concern of the bird fable, however, can be deduced from the fact that these fables were completely transparent to their medieval readers. In fact, when John Gower wrote The Tripartite Chronicle³⁴ which again describes the political vicissitudes of the swan, the horse, the bear, the fox, and the swallow, he presents a running commentary to sort out the identity of the characters for us. It is well that he does, for on occasions the imagery is not consistent and the fox is a symbol of the good duke of Gloucester because of the fox tail tied to his lance, and at other times the sly King Richard. It is unlikely, therefore, that bird imagery was used primarily to veil political satire; if safety was the author's concern, he would usually post or circulate his manuscript anonymously.³⁵ Gower's purpose was to capitalize on the popularity of the beast fable, make his characters more vivid and, to a certain extent, exercise the wits of his audience. Again, "Richard the Redeless" (attributed to William Langland by Skeat) sets the harts (Richard's retainers wore the White Hart badge) against the swan, bear, horse, and eagle (Gloucester, Warwick, Arundel, Bolingbroke) and makes the identity of the nobles explicit; clearly, he is writing

political satire and he does not wish to limit his audience to those equipped for learned explication. The poem, like Gower's The Tripartite Chronicle, is a more vivid and stimulating piece of literature because of the heraldic beast imagery, and it would definitely be more forceful than a straight-forward account of England's political problems. Richard the Redeless, however, adds another dimension to the fable by incorporating elements from the semiological convention. Employing the bestiary tradition that the hart seeks out an adder to suck its venom and thus renew himself, the author points out that it is, therefore, unnatural for the hart to attack a swan or a horse.³⁶ Beyond this, the bestiary account of the partridge leaving the hatching of its eggs to another but returning later to claim its offspring, is applied to the political situation.³⁷ It is interesting to note that the author feels secure that his audience will recognize his allusion to the bestiary; he is not certain, however, that "Hicke Heuyheed" will understand the political application, so he spells out his meaning. The political point is of primary importance, and to reinforce it the author draws on a text which, as we have already seen, had immense authority and currency in secular and religious spheres.

Another aspect of medieval bird imagery which is pertinent to both the fable and the semiological convention is the concept of the "monstrous". In this connection, I would define "monstrous" as a merging of normally distinct human and beast

characteristics in a particular creature. Walls and ceilings of medieval cathedrals, margins of manuscripts, lines of poems, and pages of the Liber monstrorum are filled with strange creatures which have somehow stepped outside of the familiar God-created categories and species to become monsters who combine either human and animal, or hybrid animal features. Some of these can be accounted for by the medieval fascination with the logical extension of the theory of God's plenitude; others can be seen as signs of divinity as when Dante uses the Gryphon as a symbol of Christ in "Purgatory"³⁸ or when the Evangelists are depicted as humanized eagle, ox, and lion. The remaining "hybrids", however, appear to be linked to a philosophical concept of the monster which has its roots in Ovid's and Boethius' literal and metaphorical metamorphoses. Arnulf of Orleans, for example, explains that Ovid's intention was to depict not only mutation of the body but also mutation of the soul,³⁹ and Guillaume de Conches, commenting on Boethius' description of humans behaving like animals,⁴⁰ states that the most miraculous metamorphosis is when man degrades himself to the moral level of the beasts.⁴¹ Scriptural and classical precedents strengthened the medieval aesthetic interest in the "monstrous" and it became a viable didactic technique in the representational and literary arts of the Middle Ages.⁴² I would contend that this philosophical use of the monstrous generally underlies the beast/human fable in the Middle Ages; Gower's Vox clamantis, however, is the most obvious yet

effective use of the monstrous so perhaps it is best to examine this poem in some detail.

Vox clamantis employs bird and animal imagery to satirize contemporary political and social events where there would be little need to disguise the characters. Written shortly after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, this nightmare vision reflects Gower's situation as a wealthy landowner and his very real concern for the stability of the whole feudal system. Instead of describing the various levels of society in terms of the hierarchies within the animal kingdom—as was the encyclopedic tradition—Gower borrows from the philosophical and rhetorical convention of the monstrous: he characterizes the rebellious peasants at one point as hybrid creatures, such as asses with horns in the middle of their foreheads and tails like that of a lion, who are led by their chief, Wat Tyler, the lowly jay. At another point Gower depicts the peasants as monsters wholly within the bird kingdom:

Their leaders were a cock and a gander. Those which used to stay at home and tread on dung dared to assume the eagle's prerogatives for themselves. The cock seized the falcon's beak and talons for itself, and the gander wanted to touch the heavens with its wings. . . .

Suddenly I saw the colours of the cock and the goose changed, and a new shape enveloped them. New plumage with the blackness of a raven transformed the cock, and the gander was instantly turned into a kite. It was not so much that they assumed the plumage of others for themselves, but rather that they adopted like ways of behaviour. Going astray changed those which were once contented with very little, and which used to feed naturally off of grain at the barns. For in order to eat more, they demanded the fat carcasses of human bodies for

themselves, and these alone pleased them. Once so gentle, these creatures which suffered anyone to call them and used to watch for the hands which gave out their food, tried to snatch their plunder by force, more savage and rapacious than falcons.⁴³

Within the context of the medieval hierarchical Chain of Being, the rebels have violated God's ordained nature; the categories, symmetries, and the order of the universe which are so precious to this society are threatened aesthetically, intellectually, and socially. The rebels' violation of these principles of order is reflected in their physical make-up so that their species is indefinite, wholly outside of the ordained categories and structures, and, therefore, monstrous. Their physical state also mirrors the psychological state of their souls wherein various antagonistic passions co-exist in a single consciousness. This irrational psychological state violates the natural order of the universe and the hierarchical Chain of Being is turned upside down as the lion is overcome by the jay, and the owls join the other Birds in common cause.

However, there is a satire of a far gentler kind which seems more dependent on folk tradition, and where entertainment and humour predominate over the didactic. The History of Reynard the Fox⁴⁴ was an immensely popular beast tale and, while the didactic element is still present, the author rarely draws attention to "moralitas". This fox is closely related to the near universal "trickster" animal who, as raven, hare, fox, or serpent, figures as a kind of culture hero in so much

folk-lore and myth. Reynard is variously cruel, sly, deceitful, irreligious, and clever, but our reaction to him is rarely total condemnation; the humour of the situations, the audacity of the fox, the anti-clerical jibes, and our amazement at Reynard's ability to talk himself out of impossible situations, make him an uncomfortably attractive hero. The animal world of The History of Reynard the Fox reflects the feudal society where the lion is king, the wolf is a favoured minister, the fox lives in his castle, and the cock is a threatened vassal who petitions the king for protection; nevertheless, each animal in the tale retains his individuality and behaves according to his animal nature. The tales which make up this collection demonstrate a joy and fascination with the animal world for its own sake as naturalistic details constantly remind us that we are dealing with beasts and consequently distract us from the allegory, and, interestingly, the human characters who occasionally enter the stories come off as rather ridiculous foils. And considering the anti-clericalism in the Reynard cycles, it is surprising that scenes from this tradition figure so prominently in ecclesiastical art. The fox is often found depicted, as he is in several of the tales, as the false friar, the unrepentant penitent, the despoiler of Chauntecleer's barnyard harem, the fox on trial before the animal court, and as a general symbol of fraud and deceit.⁴⁵ For the most part these illustrations have a didactic purpose, but one suspects that the Reynard illustrations could also be

expected to appeal to some of the less religious concerns of the artists and parishioners.

The History of Reynard the Fox, however, is important for our purpose primarily for the extremely effective way in which animals manage to maintain their animal natures at the same time they are participating in the life of a medieval feudal world. There is no question that we are dealing with a fox, a cock, and a hen in the Reynard and Chauntecleer branch of the cycle; however, Chauntecleer's pride, his favouritism for Pinte because she lays the biggest eggs, his intellectual pretension; Pinte's wifely concern, her aristocratic pretension, her beauty; and Sir Reynard's deceitful eloquence, political power, and clever ruses all point to human characteristics. As each of the characters becomes more anthropomorphic, we are confronted with details of bird and animal life which jolt us back to the world of the barnyard. In the best of these versions of the tale, there is a very careful and deliberate attempt to make the audience aware of a bird/human, human/bird double perspective in the narrative. The characters walk a tightrope between the human and animal worlds, and the artist very deliberately allows them to periodically take their falls not only for broad humour but also for comic distancing and to provide a double context for proper intellectual perspective. The comic distancing and double context are very important because in the Reynard stories we are dealing with a life and death struggle, a bigamist protagonist, an incestuous

relationship, and a system of justice which seems to be based not on right and wrong but on trickery, deceit, and power. If the characters were human, there could be no humour in the story—only a frightening image of Godless chaos. In the long run, however, we are reminded that the birds and the fox are morally and physically negligible. As fascinating as the individualized portraits of the characters are, they are, for the most part, de-humanized, our feelings about specific characters do not complicate the issues, and the issues themselves do not become very serious. There are moral lessons to be learned in the Reynard stories but they do not often deal with justice; usually the moral lesson is one which cautions prudence in dealing with a deceptive social and political environment.

By the fourteenth century the bird fable convention had been developed to an intellectual and aesthetic peak. Chaucer inherited a convention which emphasized the didactic, developed the incongruity and humour resulting from a mixture of animal and human characteristics, enriched the satirical presentation of contemporary events, explored intellectual dimensions, and provided sheer fun and entertainment. What raises him above the other artists working within this convention was his technical mastery of his art, his expansion of the perimeters of the convention to allow merging with other conventions of bird imagery, and his use of fable elements in such a way as to allow bird imagery to function within a tale at the same time that he

uses it to relate to characters within the larger dramatic unity of a work such as The Canterbury Tales.

Chaucer and the Bird Fable:

Chaucer frequently uses incidental bird imagery to describe human character and activity. In Troilus and Criseyde, for example, Troilus is referred to "as proud a pekok" (I, l. 210), his love is seen to have as much chance of succeeding as eagles and doves mating (III, ll. 1493-6), and he is described as caught by Love who "bigan his fetheres so to lyme," (I, l. 353). Even though the source of this imagery can be traced to the distillation of philosophical and popular lore in the bestiary and the vocabulary of falconry and hunting, the modern reader has little difficulty understanding the references. Sometimes, however, this apparent simplicity can be deceptive. The description of the Summoner in the "General Prologue", for example, uses proverbial and cant bird images which when used singly are simple enough, but when taken cumulatively suggest something of the "monster" which we know him to be. He is "lecherous as a sparwe" (l. 626), his knowledge of Latin is likened to "how that a jay/ Kan clepen 'Watte' . . ." (ll. 642-3), and it is pointed out that, "Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle" (l. 652). Of course, the initial impact of this description suggests the bestial nature of the Summoner, but the audience's mental picture of this composite of normally distinct species

intimates a creature which violates nature's laws. His "compeer", the Pardoner, boasts that when he preaches:

Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.
(Prol. Pard.T., ll. 395-7)

Beryl Rowland points out that this image is appropriate in several ways.⁴⁶ The Pardoner distends his neck in a manner characteristic of doves when they "pout" and his voice, like the dove's, is both "smal" yet far-reaching. Beyond this, we recognize that the Pardoner is comparing himself to the bird which in the bestiary symbolizes the Good Preacher who is "far from provocative songs and from the fashions of the times."⁴⁷ Chaucer's Pardoner with his interest in fashion (Gen. Prol. l. 682) and erotic song (Gen. Prol. l. 672) is clearly the anti-thesis of the traditional semiological image of the dove. Alison's song, in "The Miller's Tale", is described using an image which is similar to that employed by the Pardoner:

. . . hir song, . . . was as loude and yerne
As any swalwe sittynge on a berne.
(Mill. T., ll. 3257-8)

One recognizes the appropriateness of a barnyard simile for this remarkable young woman who is described as a composite of animal and bird characteristics, but it takes a greater familiarity with bird lore to note that the swallow's actual song is almost imperceptible unless in excitement or alarm it voices its high pitched "tswee". This shrill cry, although not very appropriate for the usual image of the lover as a bird, somehow

() suits our barnyard version of the courtly heroine. In the cases of the Pardoner's self-promoting use of the dove image and the initial impact of Alison as a gentle swallow, we see Chaucer working with traditional bird imagery to present the favourable appearance of his characters, but on closer scrutiny we recognize that the same images serve to reveal the characters' less positive inner realities. Obviously, we must be prepared for Chaucer's multi-levelled allusiveness which draws on both tradition and natural observation.

The Squire's use of bird imagery in his tale is not entirely successful; this is not to say, however, that Chaucer's use of bird imagery is either unsuccessful or uninspired. In this poem Chaucer uses the bird fable convention to reveal the Squire's artistic weaknesses.

Initially one is impressed by the Squire's description of the betrayed falcon. This aristocratic bird—whose complaints remind the reader of Dido's similar expressions in the House of Fame—is deftly characterized, and the description of her plight, which would arouse deep sympathy were she not a bird, is very dramatically developed. When we are first introduced to this bird it appears as though she is standing in a pool of blood which has fallen from her self-inflicted wounds:

Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously,
 With bothe hir wynges, til the rede blood
 Ran endelong the tree, ther-as she stood.
 And evere in oon she cryde alwey and shrighete,
 And with hir beek hirselven so she prighete,
 That ther nys tygre, ne noon so crueel beest,
 That dwelleth outhur in wode or in forest,

That nolde han wept, if that he wepe koude,
For sorwe of hire, she shrighthe alwey so loude.

(Sq. T., ll. 414-22)

So human and so believable is she that one is constantly tempted at this point to forget that, in fact, we are dealing only with a bird. In this quotation, the Squire helps us to keep our perspective with references to 'beaks' and 'wings', but as the story progresses he tends to forget the bird/human double perspective and moves dangerously close to allowing the bird to forget that she is a bird. This could deaden much of the effect of the bird tale, and it is a tendency which one sees frequently in the twelfth and thirteenth century bird debates which will be examined in the following chapter. To achieve the full potential of the bird/human double perspective, the artist must maintain a middle course between bird and human; this does not suggest that the description or speech should be suitable for either, but rather that the poem should move lightly and usually incongruously from side to side pointing up the "humanity" of the bird, and the avian aspects of the human.

The falcon's speech—there is no pretense of dialogue — begins with a very effective description of her background:

"Ther I was bred— allas, that ilke day ! —
And fostred in a roche of marbul gray
So tendrely that no thyng eyled me,
I nyste nat what was adversitee,
Til I koude flee ful hye under the sky."

(Sq. T., ll. 499-503)

The security and protection afforded the falcon would be

appropriate for the most aristocratic courtly maiden but instead of a human dwelling she lived in a marbled home of rock — ostensibly the avian equivalent to the aristocratic castle. She takes her role of aristocratic lady very seriously, however, and she progressively loses track of the fact that she and her lover are birds. The two of them go through all the usual fin amour preliminaries and she reports that her tercil "fil on his knees" (l. 544) as he begged for her favour, that she "took hym by the hond" (l. 596), and she swears by the appropriately eagle-depicted "Seint John" (l. 596). To top off this perhaps too human speech, the Squire has the falcon make Scriptural allusion in a doubly ironic sense when she describes Jason as "Ne were worthy unbokelen [her tercelet's] galoche" (l. 555). For one hundred and fifteen lines⁴⁸ there is nothing to remind the audience that the speaker is anything less than a courtly mistress; finally, she even uses the comically inappropriate metaphor of a caged bird to illustrate the foolishness of her lover:

Men loven of propre kynde newefangelnesse,
 As briddes doon that men in cages fede.
 For though thou nyght and day take of hem hede,
 And strawe hir cage faire and soft as silk,
 And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk,
 Yet right anon as that his dore is uppe,
 He with his feet wol spurne adoun his cuppe,
 And to the wode he wole, and wormes ete;
 So newefangel been they of hire mete,
 And loven novelries of propre kynde;
 (Sq. T., ll. 610-19)

Chaucer has made very clever use of the bird/human double perspective in this poem; to complement the characterization of

the Squire as an over-ambitious and inexperienced storyteller, he depicts the young man as periodically forgetting that the falcon is a bird. Chaucer uses the bird fable convention to reveal something about his characters, but here it is the subtlety of what the convention reveals, and how it is used to reveal it, that marks Chaucer as master of the convention and his art. It is the narrator's ineptness rather than insights into the human/bird characters in the tale which is revealed in this use of the convention. When the Franklin breaks in to praise the Squire's wit and eloquence, Chaucer has already suggested that the young man's apprenticeship has not been fully served.

The extensive and very successful use of the bird/human double perspective in the House of Fame has been noted by all of its critics. The eagle is constantly singled out as one of Chaucer's finest bird creations. It has not been noted, however, how much bird imagery generally is involved in the poem. As pointed out in the last chapter the poets in the Palace of Fame are said to be as plentiful as rooks' nests in trees (l. 1516) and their noise is likened to the sound of bees (ll. 1522-3). Fame herself, who in Troilus and Criseyde is described as a winged bird (Bk.IV, ll. 659-62), is here more subtly depicted with just suggestions of her avian background; she is described as having as many eyes as there are feathers on a fowl (ll. 1381-2), she has partridge wings on her feet (ll. 1391-2), and magpies to keep her informed of the

latest gossip (l. 703). Beyond this, the House of Rumour is an oblong bird cage or bird house which contains "gygges" (l. 1942) or lures designed to attract birds to the fowlers' nets.⁴⁹ The contemporary story-tellers inside the cage are likened to birds with their "chirkynges" (l. 1943). The whole of the third book is subtly interlaced with a pervading suggestion that the story-tellers are being likened to birds of the love-debate convention and that Fame herself with her partridge wings is likened to a bird which is noted for its inability to fly to spiritual heights and is limited to the base perspective of the animal. Combined, this imagery suggests that this story-telling extravaganza is going to have the negligible moral and intellectual import of the arguments of the ~~birds in~~ the birds-and-love debate topos. It is unlikely that birds were connected with debate primarily because of their expertise in matters of love; rather, debaters like to argue and it takes little observation of nature to recognize that birds, of all beasts, seem the most interested in communication. In Troilus and Criseyde, for example, Troilus, angered at Pandarus' argument that he should take another mistress and thus forget Criseyde, cries:

"O, where hastow ben hid so longe in muwe,
That kanst so wel and formaly argue?"

(Tr. and Cr. IV, ll. 4969-7)

The image is appropriate because Pandarus' advice is essentially that of the goose in the Parlement of Foules, but beyond this, the suggestion is that birds are well known to argue —

even if they do not have anything worthwhile to contribute. The tales which I believe were meant to be told in the House of Fame would not have been uplifting, contemplative, spiritual stories; the stories told by the "birds" in Rumour's cage would be directed at Fame who, with her partridge wings, would be incapable of understanding the contemplative perspective that Geoffrey has been introduced to through his flight with the eagle.

The third book of the House of Fame, therefore, focusses mainly on human characters and personifications which are subtly described in terms of birds-and-love debates, and this imagery tends to undermine the importance of the proposed "love-tydynge"; the second book concentrates on a bird who is distinctly human, and this time the imagery suggests the superiority of the bird's perspective on truth. Both the positive and negative aspects of avian nature, therefore, are incorporated into the poem.

This is not to suggest, however, that the eagle is exclusively a sign of contemplative vision. Much of the uniqueness of this bird derives from the contrast between the narrator's initial impression of the golden eagle:

Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore,
 But that hit semed moche more
 Then I had any egle seyn.
 But this as sooth as deth, certeyn,
 Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte
 That never sawe men such a syghte,
 But yf the heven had ywonne
 Al newe of gold another sonne;

(H.F., ll. 499-506)

and the actual encounter:

. . . he to me spak
In mannes vois, and seyde, "Awak !
And be not agast so, for shame !"
(H.F., ll. 555-7)

One is tempted, in fact, to find the golden eagle, like the peregrine falcon in the "Squire's Tale", a little too human.

Nevertheless, the two birds are in entirely different situations. The eagle is so fully developed that he cannot be contained in any classification; he is simultaneously bird and human and, beyond this, he is an idea which is turned into a metaphor before our eyes. Although the eagle continually speaks as though he were a pedantic schoolmaster, the reader is not allowed to forget that this is truly a bird — the situation does not allow it. The poet hangs precariously from the talons of the eagle and as they soar higher and higher the allusions to Phaeton and Icarus remind the reader of the poet's danger. Beyond this, after one particularly lengthy speech wherein one suspects that the eagle himself has lost track of the fact that he is a bird, he boasts that despite his superior knowledge, he can educate the ignorant poet:

"A ha !" quod he, "lo, so I can
Lewedly to a lewed man
Speke, and shewe hym swyche skiles
That he may shake hem be the biles
So palpable they shulden be.
(H.F., ll. 865-9)

Two aspects of this speech remind the reader of the bird/human perspective: the blatantly conceited eagle asserts his

superiority over the human poet in a manner which begs us to forget that he is a bird, but then his reference to "biles" brings us back to his avian nature. The eagle is also very much a bird in his prolixity; one aspect of the humour in the "dialogue" between the bird and Geoffrey is the fact that for every word of the poet there are probably fifty for the eagle. The "teacher" pontificates and then asks the "student" for a response, but the only response given is a curt "wel" or "yis" and then the eagle breaks into another burst of eloquence. The pomposity of the bird is evident both to the poet and the reader, and one suspects that were it not for the passenger's perilous situation he would respond more sarcastically to his pedantic carrier. The bird's excitement is accurately captured in his speech, and after he has reminded the poet of the "kyndely enclynynge" of "any thing that hevy be, / As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte,"⁵⁰ Geoffrey would not want to further distract the eagle's attention.

When one turns to the bestiary tradition of bird lore one finds another reason for the poet's reticence. As was noted in the discussion of Dante's use of the eagle in The Divine Comedy,⁵¹ the eagle was noted for its acute eyesight and its ability to gaze directly at the sun. Furthermore, when the eagle tests and educates its offspring, it carries it up towards the sun in its talons, and if the young eagle turns from the sun beam it is dropped because it is deemed unworthy of being an eagle. This tradition must certainly be in the

poet's mind when his eagle guide suggests that he learn about the stars by looking directly at them rather than reading about them in books. Geoffrey demurs:

"No fors," quod y, "hyt is no nede.
I leve as wel, so God me spede,
Hem that write of this matere,
As though I knew her places here;
And eke they shynen here so bryghte,
Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte,
To loke on hem."

(H.F., ll. 1011-7)

The poet acknowledges his limitations rather than take a chance that the eagle might forget itself and let him drop if he turns from the starlight.

For anyone familiar with the traditional guided tour of the celestial regions, Chaucer's version borders on the bathetic. The poet not only acknowledges his unworthiness, it is confirmed by his guide. The journey is a meditative flight of the philosophical mind, but Chaucer never allows us to forget the comic aspects of an actual naturalistically described flight in the talons of an eagle. John Leyerle, for example, argues convincingly that the eagle's dissertation on sound is an elaborate joke on flatulence.⁵² He points out that the poet's physical position in relation to the eagle, the definition of sound as "eyr ybroken" (l. 765), and the description of Eolus' distribution of the sound of bad fame from a "tuel" (l. 1649) that issues a noisome smoke "Blak, bloo, grenyssh, swartish red" (l. 1647), that "stank as the pit of helle" (l. 1654), suggests that this is another instance of Chaucer's

humorous treatment of the subject of farting. The eagle states,

"Soun ys nought but eyr ybroken,
And every speche that ys spoken,
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
In his substaunce ys but air;
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke.

(H. F. ll. 765-70)

Considering the poet's riding position relative to the eagle, one might understand why the bird sums up his disputation with, "Take yt in earnest or in game" (l. 822).

Yet despite Chaucer's light treatment of the eagle it is important to remember that the eagle has a serious function in the poem. He is the "fetheres of Philosophye" (l. 974) which offers not only insight into the nature of sound, but also a contemplative perspective on earthly life. The poet is offered a familiar celestial view of the world which reveals "That al the world, as to myn yē,/ No more semed than a prikke" (ll. 906-7), and it is this perspective which enables the poet to regard the "truth" of the classics in the same light as the "truth" of contemporary English "love-tydynges". The humorous treatment of the theme undercuts the traditional solemnity accorded the celestial flight, but it does not deny its seriousness. The bird is recognized as an intermediary between earth and heaven, man and God, human and divine knowledge and, as such, is an entirely suitable guide to remedy the poet's "daswed" look. Thus Chaucer succeeds in employing the bird fable convention to new effect in the House of Fame by

reconciling the tensions between the poet's initial expectations of his traditional bird-guide, and the humorous way in which the more naturalistic treatment of the bird is at variance with this, and by finally permitting the total experience to fall once again within the tradition of the bird as spiritual guide.

Now, turning to the Parlement of Foules, we shall examine Chaucer's characterization in terms of the bird/human double perspective and, in addition, consider the persistent efforts of critics to interpret the poem as an occasional piece to commemorate the marriage of Isabel and Richard, the marriage negotiations of Richard and Marie of France, or John of Gaunt's attempts to arrange a marriage for his daughter. What initially occupies our attention is Chaucer's very effective characterization of the birds; it is only with historical hindsight that the arguments for contemporary allegory become feasible.

When the narrator is unceremoniously shoved through the gate into the garden of love he notices three groups of birds: in the garden of perpetual springtime, which seems outside of the sphere of influence of Daunger and Disdayn, he finds birds "With voys of aungel in here armonye" (l. 191); in the section of the garden associated with erotic courtly love, the birds are limited to "dowves white and fayre" (l. 237) which are sitting on the temple of brass; and, finally, when he returns to the garden of perpetual spring he meets the birds which are so distinctively characterized in terms of "foules of ravyne", and

"worm, sed, and water foules". When one compares the debate in the Parlement of Foules with those in the twelfth century demande d'amours such as De Venus la Deese d'Amour or Le Jugement d'Amours,⁵³ one is struck by the energy and spontaneity of Chaucer's debaters. The Parlement of Foules contains drama enacted by colourful and highly individualized characters, and the debate itself is not conducted with set pieces of scholarly argument but with rapid and lively dialogue. While the birds of Li Fablel dou Dieu d'Amours make reference to the lower classes when discussing who is eligible to become a courtly lover, in actual fact it is an abstract issue for there is no bird present to speak for the peasants.⁵⁴ The Parlement of Foules gives all social levels of the birds an opportunity to speak. Employing the same type of hierarchical configuration suggested by Alexander Neckham and Vincent de Beauvais, Chaucer assembles a parliament — significantly one perhaps more representative than the actual fourteenth century parliaments Chaucer attended — where the rules of parliamentary procedure are followed; each estate is "seated" according to its degree, a representative is elected (or in one case, he boldly volunteers) to speak for his class, and all must defer to the authority figure of Nature who, despite all the squabbling, is still definitely in charge. When we are confronted with the extensive catalogue of birds, we recognize the unlikelihood of a harmonious parliament where common profit will be readily achieved;⁵⁵ if anyone can draw harmony from this "meynee",

however, it would be "Nature, the vicaire of the almyghty Lord,/ That hot, cold, hevy, lyght, moyst, and dreye/ Hath knyht by evene noumbres of acord" (ll. 379-81).

The most striking aspect of Chaucer's use of the bird/human double perspective in the Parlement of Foules is the very highly developed state of drama created by the diction and tone of the various birds. For the most part, it is species and class that are characterized in the speeches, yet even amongst the three eagle suitors, one sees subtle individuality. The first eagle is the highest of the aristocratic birds as he is clearly favoured by Nature and, the spokesman for the aristocratic class, the falcon. He is wholly within the tradition of courtly love: he speaks eloquently, "With hed enclyned and with ful humble cheere" (l. 414); he addresses the formel not as a mate but as "my soverayn lady, and not my fere" (l. 416); he begs for her "merci" and "grace" and suggests that if it is refused "let me deye present in this place" (l. 423); but finally he bases his appeal on the fact that ". . . syn that non loveth hire so wel as I,/ Al be she nevere of love me behette,/ Thanne oughte she be myn thourgh hire mercy,/ For other bond can I non on hire knette" (ll. 435-438). The second suitor, explicitly identified as of "lower kynde" (l. 449), is clearly less interested in decorum than the first eagle, "That shal nat be!/ I love hire bet than ye don, by seint John,/ Or at the leste I love hire as wel as ye,/ And lenger have served hire in my degre" (ll. 450-3). One might excuse his agitation

because he is, after all, the second to offer his love plea, but his over-confidence contrasts distinctly with the courtly humility of the first eagle. The third eagle, after acknowledging the impatience of the other birds and suggesting that he will be brief in his plea, seems to speak on until nightfall. Despite his commonsense and perhaps even cynical attitude towards the second eagle's "long servyse", he appears humble, ". . . I ne can/ Don no servyse that may my lady plese;" (477-8); he, too, threatens to die if he is unsuccessful; but most importantly, he is, like the other aristocrats, an eloquent speaker. John Gardner summarizes the three arguments presented for the formel's love: "(1) That the lady should consent out of mercy, (2) that she should consent because she owes it to her lover, and (3) that she should consent out of self-interest - in other words, the arguments descend from selfless to selfish."⁵⁶ The eagles are united by a belief in courtly love and by their common estate, but there is clearly little room for "commune profit" in their venture. However, when the other birds join in the discussion, the subtle distinctions between the aristocrats seem negligible in the face of the differences with the "commons" birds. What began as a contest of subtle love-pleas quickly loses focus and decorum until a far-ranging, disorderly argument about "mating" is in full progress. Individualized birds become less prominent and "classes" come into the foreground.

If during the eagles' speeches the audience is beginning

to forget that the debaters are birds, we are quickly returned to the avian context when "The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also/ So cryede, 'Kek kek ! Kokkow ! quek quek !' . . ."

(ll. 498-9). The goose, with particular appropriateness, despairs of the proceedings with the words, "Al this nys not worth a flye !" (l. 501) and the duck incongruously states, "Wel bourded," quod the doke, "by myn hat!" (l. 589). Chaucer is satirizing the various estates which were probably correctly identified by Edith Rickert as nobility (foules of ravyne), citizenry (worm foules), country gentry (seed fowl) and merchants (water fowl),⁵⁷ but he never forgets to keep his eye clearly on the birds. Parliamentary procedure and legal diction are omnipresent so an overall allusion to the British parliament is pervasive; however, the diction, logic, sentiments, and general style of each of the speakers distinctly develops individualized human/bird personalities. The terselet falcon, like the eagle suitors, is aristocratic and idealistic but the confusion of the assembly is beginning to try even his patience:

"And therfore pes! I seye, as to my wit,
 Me wolde thynke how that the worthieste
 Of knyghthod, and lengest had used it,
 Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste,
 Were sittynge for hire, if that hir leste;"

(P.F., ll. 547-551)

The goose, on the other hand, is the spokesman for the water fowl and she is practical to a fault;

. . . in hire kakelynge
 She seyde, "Pes! now tak kep every man,
 And herkeneth which a resoun I shal forth brynge!

My wit is sharp, I love no taryinge;
 I seye I rede hym, though he were my brother,
 But she wol love hym, lat hym love another!"
 (P.F., ll. 562-7)

The sperhawk refutes the counsel of the goose as readily as Troilus discards Pandarus' similar advice, but one gradually notices that the aristocrats are beginning to speak in the manner of the lower classes. The sperhawk responds, "Lo, here a parfit resoun of a goos!" (l. 568), and later on, the tercellet exclaims "Now fy, cherl!" . . . / "Out of the donghil cam that word ful right!" (ll. 596-7). Finally, even Nature adapts to the colloquial and direct diction of the common birds and, in exasperation, interjects, "Now pes," quod Nature, "I commaunde heer!" (l. 617). The sentiments and principles of the participants are clearly divided, but gradually one notices that, in the heat of debate, style of speech has generally fallen to the lowest common denominator. Ironically, it is the turtle-dove - the representative of the country gentry - which maintains both the aristocratic sentiments and style:

"Nay, God forbede a love re shulde chaunge!"

"Though that his lady everemore be straunge,
 Yit lat hym serve hire ever, til he be ded.
 Forsothe, I preyse nat the goeses red,
 For, though she deyede, I wolde non other make;
 I wol ben hires, til that the deth me take."
 (P.F., l. 582 and ll. 584-8)

However, for all the idealism contained in the turtle-dove's words,⁵⁸ he makes little impact on the assembly and he is mocked by the duck who cynically points out that "There been mo

sterres, God wot, than a payre!" (l. 595). Finally, to remind the audience of the gradual degradation of the purpose of the "parlement", the spokesman for "commune spede", the cuckoo, makes it clear where his true interests lie:

"So I", quod he, "may have my make in pes,
I reche nat how longe that ye stryve.
Lat ech of hem be soleyne al here lyve!"
(P.F., ll. 605-7)

It is clear that there will be little agreement in this assembly. The birds which have been placed in the garden of perpetual springtime should offer mankind an example of natural instinct succeeding where human reason often fails. As we have seen earlier in St. Ambrose's Hexameron and in Piers Plowman, birds were often seen as possessing a natural reason which ensured a harmonious society and "engendrynge of kind".⁵⁹ Here, however, the human refinements of courtly love which have been depicted in the adjacent garden influence and overpower instinct; "Disdayn" and "Daunger" rather than "Reasoun" and "Conseyle" prevail. The lower classes of birds are treated condescendingly; nevertheless, it is significant that despite their ignorance of the refinements of love, "Wel han they cause for to gladen ofte,/ Sith ech of hem recovered hath hys make,/ Ful blissful mowe they syngé when they wake:" (ll. 687-9). It seems clear that the audience is not expected to identify with the base attitudes of the duck, goose, and cuckoo; it seems equally clear that there is danger in becoming overly committed to the subtleties of the cult of fin amour.

(.) Chaucer's audience, one must expect, would readily identify with the aristocratic birds and their dilemma; by the end of the poem, however, it is likely that the listeners would be acutely aware that their sympathy with the refinements and subtleties of love tends to frustrate not only "commune profit" but also the most basic necessities of human survival.

While satire of the various classes is obviously one of the elements of the poem, it seems quite certain that this is not the primary theme. The satire is too all-encompassing and it seems aimed at humanity in general rather than at particular classes. Although the ostensible protagonists of the poem are birds, we recognize that birds actually would not find themselves in the dilemma depicted here; birds only in so far as they are described as sharing human characteristics find themselves in this frustrating situation. Rather than satirizing specific classes, Chaucer presents the various estates in order to suggest the conflicting attitudes towards love. Significantly, we are again presented with a favourite Chaucerian situation: a group of highly individualized characters with opposing points of view are set against one another and their impatience is only barely kept in check by a beleaguered authority figure. Taking the overall effect of the scene then — a chaotic meeting with subtle and not so subtle criticism aimed seemingly everywhere — it is difficult to imagine that Chaucer is referring to Richard II or John of Gaunt in the poem. The persistence of critics who have

interpreted the Parlement of Foules as an occasional poem, however, is significant in itself, so it is important to examine one of these interpretations in some detail.

Of the various interpretations so far set forth, it seems that Haldeen Braddy's is the most persuasive.⁶⁰ Braddy argues that as Chaucer was, on several occasions, a member of a delegation formed to negotiate marriage treaties for Richard II, the Parlement of Foules is likely an occasional poem describing and gently satirizing the stalled and frustrated negotiations for marriage to Marie of France. The subsequent "Good Parliament" of 1376 where Edward III, Dame Alice Perrers, John of Gaunt, and many of their highly placed political allies were criticized and, in some cases, condemned by the commons would form a prototype for the chaotic and self-seeking bird debate. Braddy points out that as Chaucer was an interested party in these events, the Parlement of Foules would have been a stimulating vehicle for a veiled commentary on these contemporary events.

There are several problems involved in this kind of interpretation, however. In the first place it should be stated that there is no necessity for a topical interpretation as the poem is more than satisfactory as a philosophical work of art. The political satires of Gower and Langland depend on the contemporary allusions to make the poem meaningful and they are, therefore, in a different category. However, it is true that if topical allusion could be convincingly argued,

there is no denying that it would add further to our appreciation of Chaucer's artistry. In the Book of the Duchess, for example, Chaucer combines the topical and the philosophical, and the synthesis is, for the most part, successful. Here, however, there is no doubt that Chaucer was alluding to Lancaster and Blanche. This reference to contemporary characters and events would accord with the technique used in the occasional poems we examined earlier in the chapter. Richard the Redeless, Vox clamantis, and The Tripartite Chronicle also obviously refer to human protagonists and even so the poet explicitly reminds his audience of the contemporary allusions. If Chaucer were alluding to Richard, Gaunt, Marie of France, and some unidentified others in this poem, why would he not add details so we could make the necessary connections? One possible reason might be that there is a very noticeable lack of decorum surrounding even the noble birds, and that indeed the noble birds are not altogether praiseworthy. It is unlikely that Richard or Gaunt would approve of their possible portraits in this poem. Beyond this, however, there is a more convincing argument: the topical interpretation of the poem ignores many of the delicate shadings and philosophical considerations which have made the Parlement of Foules such an intellectually stimulating piece of literature. If Richard is the first suitor, one should probably forget all the criticism the poem seems to direct towards the suitors who appear to have little regard for "commune profit".

It seems likely, therefore, that Chaucer had no intention of writing an occasional piece. Topical allusions were almost always explicit in medieval satire and there is nothing in the poem which would point to this kind of reference. Beyond this, Braddy's topical interpretation would undercut some of the delicate ironies which raise the poem to a philosophical level. While it is clear that the nobility would not normally object were they depicted as eagles, the speeches of these birds and the context wherein they are placed would hardly be a compliment to Richard or Gaunt.⁶¹ On the other hand, it is possible that the parliamentary discussion and situation indirectly alludes to Chaucer's perception of the Good Parliament of 1376, but pushing the allusion too far seems counter-productive. Chaucer attended Parliament as a knight on several occasions and was familiar with the wrangling of the estates; he was equally familiar with the joys and frustrations of marriage negotiations - in one case the negotiations broke down, in another the bride-to-be died, and finally the negotiations for Anne of Bohemia were successful and led to a very happy marriage. In a very general way, the Parlement of Foules would be a topical poem: marriage negotiations, like the ones current in fourteenth century England, were frustrating. For Chaucer, however, the love debate would be quite distant from his concerns for aristocratic match-making. Length of service, intensity of passion, promises of "trouthe" would not be deciding factors in medieval aristocratic

() marriages; the real concerns would be affairs of state, dowry, treaties, and inheritance. In other words, if Chaucer were truly alluding to the marriage negotiations which he participated in, this whole courtly "demande d'amour" would be an ironic commentary on the pragmatic political and economic considerations of royal marriage.

It would seem, then, that we profit most from viewing the Parlement of Foules as a work employing the bird fable convention in its broadest context, rather than specifically relating it to occasional or limited topical issues. In this respect, the highly developed individuality of the bird characters, the tension between their specifically human and avian characteristics, the poem's intellectual focus on the question of "love", and the overall irony of the treatment of the "classes" creates a work which expands and then rises above the traditional usage of the literary convention. In turning to the "Nun's Priest's Tale", we see another aspect of Chaucer's mastery over the bird fable convention: his usage of the bird/human double perspective to illuminate and unify a multiplicity of topics and points of view.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, bird imagery in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" varies from the obvious to the subtle. In the first instance, transferring the protagonists from the human to the bird level serves to protect the narrator from the anger of those listeners he is satirizing. The Priest is, after all, an ecclesiastic under the domination

() of a female superior, and throughout the tale he cautiously reminds his listeners that, "My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,/ That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe," and, "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;" (ll. 3252-3 and l. 3265). Furthermore, by using birds as characters the author opens the possibility of personal allusions from outside the tale itself when human characters are described in terms of incidental bird imagery. When, in the "Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale," the Priest narrator is described as having the eyes of a bird, a large breast, and long neck (ll. 3456-7) we can be expected to connect this character in some way with the bird characters of the tale. Beyond this, however, by depicting the pretensions and foibles of the pilgrims in terms of barnyard birds strutting around their hen coop, their affectations are mocked and shown to be ridiculous. This double context of the bird and human is not, however, a haphazardly employed technique; we tend to expect a loose mixture of animal and human traits in animal fables and tales but in actual fact an artistic, subtle use of the technique is relatively rare. To be successful, the author must keep his audience conscious simultaneously of both the human and animal features of his main characters, and the reader/listener is constantly forced to accept the action in terms of a shifting focus which views Chauntecleer as a proud and erudite chevalier looking "as it were a grym leoun," (N.P:T., l. 3179) but hen-pecked by his wife with the words "Have ye no mannes

herte, and han a berd?" (N.P.T., l. 2920). This mixture of animal, bird, and human features is a subtle extension of the techniques which we find in the monsters of The Tripartite Chronicles, The Divine Comedy, and in the margins of medieval manuscripts. While, for the most part, Chaucer does not employ the technique with the same sense of moral indignation that we expect was felt by his contemporaries, it would be a mistake to ignore the moral and intellectual implications of the technique he is employing. Certainly humour is one of his main concerns, but much of that humour is derived from the incongruity of a bird, a human, or an animal attempting to raise, lower, or shift itself from its proper place in the hierarchy of creation. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale", Chauntecleer is a comic character in that he seems to not only aspire to the human level but also beyond the level of his human caretakers; a more profound level of the story, however, charts the dangers of excessive pride generally so his outrageous pretensions reflect the hazards of intellectual, moral, and social hubris.

The setting for the fable is an animal world where normally the irrational predominates. It is the shock of seeing the hierarchy of creation set on end — the erudition, rhetoric, colour, intellectual ability, classical heritage and articulateness of the barnyard inhabitants is carefully juxtaposed with the human protagonists who, in this tale, are by and large nameless, without a sense of history, non-intellectual,

colourless, and inarticulate - that provides both the comic perspective and the incongruity of the situation. This disproportion is a highly important theme in the poem; the poet uses high rhetoric to adorn a low subject, and while pretending to take the light seriously, he takes the serious lightly. Consequently, despite the rhetoric, classical allusions, intellectual debate, quoted authorities, and appeals to destiny, we are constantly reminded that we are viewing an insignificant event which normally merits only passing attention.

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" can obviously stand on its own and apart from the other Canterbury Tales. Chaucer has not provided us with a portrait of the Nun's Priest, some elements in the transitional links have been questioned,⁶² and we are not even certain where the tale fits into the work as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Chaucer did intend each tale as a dramatic monologue within a larger dramatic framework, and it would be a mistake to regard the "Nun's Priest's Tale" as an exception. Much of the force of his fable is directed towards his fellow pilgrims and their tales, and it is important to discuss briefly some of the Priest's satirical victims in order to illustrate the use of bird imagery in this tale.

The Nun's Priest's tale is presented directly after the Monk's dreary catalogue of woes. The Monk's appearance and bearing suggest anything but austerity, celibacy, and temperance: the "General Prologue" describes him as a wealthy, independent, and worldly individual with a definite sensuousness

about him that is suggested by his love knot, his love of venerie and his "prikyng and . . . huntynge for the hare" (l. 191). The Host, interpreting the Monk's outward appearance, approaches the cleric with levity and first calls him by the name of the lustful monk of the "Shipman's Tale,"⁶³ and then adds a more explicit suggestion of the Monk's "lust" :

I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
 That first thee broughte unto religioun.
 Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
 Haddestow as greet a leeve, as thou hast myght,
 To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,
 Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature.
 (Prologue to the Monk's Tale, ll. 1943-8)

Perhaps it is the levity of these remarks plus the earlier depiction of the lustful monk in the "Shipman's Tale" which prompts the Monk to his lengthy and, for most audiences, monotonous list of tragedies illustrating an almost mechanical sense of "fortuna" and "necessitee". Seemingly drawn from a grab-bag of exempla designed for use within sermons, the Monk's tale would be appropriate for a cleric who has abandoned worldly ambition, and one suspects that this monk is attempting to counter suspicions based on his aristocratic and worldly appearance. Instead of "quyting" his detractors, he offers a catalogue of condensed histories illustrating the medieval sense of tragedy:

The harme of hem that stode in heigh degree,
 And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
 To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.
 (Monk's Tale, ll. 1992-4)

The Host and Knight finally intervene after seventeen such histories because the company is becoming depressed and probably bored. Unlike the pilgrim Chaucer, the Monk will not try another tale so the Nun's Priest is asked to offer, "swych thyng as may oure hertes glade" (Prologue to N.P.T., l. 2811).

The Priest seems to have been intrigued by the Host's "tredefowel" reference and describes a cock who is clearly a match for our worldly monk,⁶⁴ or one of his tragic victims -- except for the fact that Chauntecleer is still only a cock:

In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.

.

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whitter than the lylle flour,
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour.
 This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce
 Sevene hennes for to doon al his pleasaunce,
 Whiche were his sustres and his paramours,
 (N.P.T., l. 2850 and ll. 2859-67)

Just as the Monk is a monk yet is not what he is supposed to be, Chauntecleer is a cock who is presented as a human but one who mates with his sisters: each is depicted as an incongruous mixture of appearance and reality. Furthermore, Chauntecleer is fully as proud and prosperous as any of the Monk's tragic protagonists: he is so obviously at the top of Fortuna's wheel that he seems to invite disaster. But the whole question of destiny, fortune, premonition, and free choice is put into a comic perspective by the Priest:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed !
 Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes !
 Allas, his wyf ne roughete nat of dremes !
 (N.P.T., ll. 3338-40)

Instead of a protagonist such as the Monk's King Cresus whose premonitory dream — correctly interpreted by a woman — fore-shadows the King's broken neck as he hangs from a tree, we substitute a regal cock whose near tragedy occurs under many of the same circumstances. In this latter case, however, the transfer to the animal world moves the whole concept of personal tragedy into a higher and larger realm. Just as the cock attacked by the fox can be readily seen as a normal part of post-lapsus nature, so tragedy from a heavenly perspective is, according to Boethius, a positive part of God's plan:

Only to divine power are evil things good,
 when it uses them so as to draw good effects
 from them. All things are part of a certain
 order, so that when something moves away
 from its assigned place, it falls into a
 new order of things. Nothing in the realm
 of Providence is left to chance.⁶⁵

Because of the transfer of the action to a barnyard setting, the audience is given an approximation of the insight of a heavenly perspective. Our Priest insists that he does not wish to discuss dream prophecy or enter the debate between Augustine, Bradwardine, and Boethius on the nature of free-will and determinism, but he only defers after an extended debate on dreams and a lengthy summary of free-will and determinism arguments which serve to point up the limited perspective presented in "The Monk's Tale". By drawing high tragedy

dream prophecy, Fortuna, free-will, and tragic protagonists to the level of a barnyard dispute between the relative merits of recourse to "auctoritas" or laxatives, the Priest very effectively "quytes" the Monk. Furthermore, the Priest emphasizes the human/bird double perspective by pointing out that Chauntecleer is obviously neglecting his God-given instinct as he tries to approach the realm of human rationality. The cock instinctively knows to crow at the appropriate times of the day, yet he seems to base his schedule on precise astrological measurements:

By nature he knew ech ascencioun
Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;
For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,
Thanne crew he, that it myghte nat been amended.
(N.P.T., ll. 2855-8)

In the same way, the cock instinctively knows to flee from the fox but, because of his human-like pride, he ignores his natural knowledge to succumb to the fox's temptation. By free choice Chauntecleer aspires beyond his bird nature and much of the emphasis on determinism and "destinee" is thereby undercut.

In discussing the Priest's tale in relation to the Prioress, it is well to remember the peculiar situation of "this sweete preeste, this goodly man sir John" (Prol. of N.P.T., l. 2820). Although a man of obvious intellectual ability in a position of responsibility as the Prioress' spiritual counsellor and confessor, the Priest is chafing under the rule of his ecclesiastical superior.⁶⁶ The Priest,

almost a misogynist through his profession,⁶⁷ would have his worst prejudices confirmed through his contact with the Prioress; but beyond this, to retain his humility and subservience despite his scorn, would be particularly demoralizing. The Prioress' portrait in the "General Prologue" reveals a woman who, with probably the best intentions in the world, is doing her best to synthesize the style of the nunnery and the chivalric romance:

. . . she was of greet desport,
And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
And to ben holden digne of reverence.

. . . .
Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,
Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first writé a crowned A,
And after Amor vincit omnia.

(Gen. Prol., ll. 137-41 and ll. 151-62)

Clearly this is a woman who would not be out of place in a courtly romance; and when "sir John" suggests that his beast fable is as true as "the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence" (N.P.T., ll. 3212-3), we understand that the Priest is ridiculing the Prioress' credibility as well as her courtly reading matter. More pointed criticism is presented when the Priest modifies his likely

sources⁶⁸ and transforms the prosperous farmer - Constans de Noys in the Reynard cycle - into the idealized figure of the temperate widow. The description of the Prioress in the "General Prologue" offers an interesting account of the Nun's diet:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:
 She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
 Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
 Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
 That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
 Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
 That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.

Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.
 (Gen. Prol., ll. 127-36 and 146-7)

The widow, who provides the human context of the tale, and her yard, which offers a microcosm for our barnyard aristocratic characters, together present a striking contrast to the Prioress and her environment.⁶⁹ In the same way that the Parson and the Plowman provide a kind of ethical norm for the Canterbury pilgrims, the widow presents an idealized exemplum within the tale:

This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
 Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf,
 In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,
 For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
 By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
 She foond herself and eek hir doghtren two.
 Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
 Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
 Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle.
 In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.

(N.P.T., ll. 2825-33)

The widow's diet offers a very explicit contrast to that of the Prioress:

Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
 No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
 Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
 Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
 Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
 And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
 The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
 N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
 No wyn ne dranke she, neither whit ne reed;
 Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak,-
 Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
 Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an ey or tweye;
 For she was, as it were, a maner deye.
 (N.P.T., ll. 2834-46)

Within this miniature agricultural world of a "yeerd . . . enclosed al aboute/ With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute," (N.P.T., ll. 2847-8), the Prioress has been transformed into Pertelote, the regal lady who is first among the hens. Again the bird imagery pricks the bubble of the victim's affectations of courtly style, and the incongruity of the human/bird double perspective points up the incongruity of the Nun casting herself as a secular courtly heroine. Beyond this, Pertelote's tendency to "hen-peck", belittle, and advise, her husband likely suggests that, from the Priest's point of view, the Prioress has usurped the male's proper role in the natural world of creation.⁷⁰ Pertelote's medical advice, which was originally approved by the critics, has lately been shown to be faulty in several respects - the most important being that the cumulative effect of all her medicines would have provided a more certain death for Chauntecleer than

Daun Russell himself.⁷¹

It would seem, then, that at this point, whether the Priest originally intended to identify Chauntecleer with himself or not, he is led by his story and its parallels to his own situation to a certain degree of self-criticism and wishful thinking. It is likely that at least some members of the audience had suspicions about the relationship between the Priest and the Prioress for, according to Eileen Power, it was generally accepted by the laity that a priest stationed in an abbey had sexual relations with the nuns.⁷² Obviously, the Host interprets the story this way:

. . . , if thou were seculer,
 Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
 For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
 Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,
 Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.
 See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
 So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest !
 He loketh as a sperhawk with his yen;
 Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen
 With brasile, ne with greyn of Portyngale.

(Epilogue to N.P.T., ll. 3450-9)

One suspects that because the Priest knows that the Prioress regards the world through a prism of courtly romance, "sir John" has transformed their relationship into one which is the logical extension of the Prioress' world view. One might expect as well that, on one level, the Priest perhaps enjoys picturing himself with his seven "süstres and his paramours" (N.P.T., l. 2867),⁷³ providing for them, singing his morning duet "My lief is faren in londe" as an "aube" or matins, and

keeping his favourite, the presumptuous and aggressive Prioress, in her proper place. In fact, the patristic fathers were very clear in their identification of the cock as a sign for the priest. Mortimer Donovan and C.H. Dahlberg both argue for an allegorical interpretation of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and between them they list a large number of patristic references to the cock as a symbol of the priest.⁷⁴ As this material has been so well researched already, we will limit ourselves to the influential words of Hugh of St. Victor:

Gallus qui superpositus [on the church tower] praedicatores repraesentat. Gallus enim, noctis profundae pervigil, horas ejus dividit cantu, dormientes excitat, diem appropinquantem praecinit; sed prius seipsum verberare alarum ad cantandum excitat.⁷⁵

Accepting this interpretation of the cock on one level of the bird fable, it is consistent to view the widow through the extensive tradition provided by the patristic fathers who employ the "poor widow" as an allegorical sign for the Church:

... omnis Ecclesia una vidua est, deserta in hoc saeculo.⁷⁶

The courtly manor of Chauntecleer and Pertelote is ostensibly the Abbey wherein the affected behaviour and worldly activities of the Prioress are found; but, the larger sphere of the Church symbolized by the widow and her farm suggests that just as the incongruity of a rich hen-coop within a humble farm is both ridiculous and a distortion of values, so also is the rich and sophisticated Abbey within the ecclesiastical

world an inversion of the divinely ordained hierarchy of being.

Finally, however, one would not suggest that the tale should be seen as confession of illicit sexual activity. There is no evidence in The Canterbury Tales to suggest that the Priest is actually indulging in sexual license with any of the nuns. We recognize, for example, that a Chauntecleer-like priest would be an unlikely candidate for a third-rate mount, "a jade . . . bothe foul and lene" (Prologue to N.P.T., ll. 2812 and 2813), and it seems quite certain that the Priest would not be so intent on satirizing the Prioress' courtly aspirations if he too were partaking of the worldly life. Nevertheless, Chauntecleer does become at least a half-hearted alter-ego for the Priest, and it provides him with the opportunity to refashion artistically his humble and modest world, and to correct both what he considers a distortion in the heavenly ordained natural order of male/female relationships, and the God-inspired hierarchy of Church and Abbey.

One is tempted, however, to speculate whether the Priest's enthusiastic use of rhetoric, satire, and pointed digression will soon place him in the same vulnerable position that Chauntecleer found himself because of his obsession with his own voice and his crowing. We know that the pilgrims are very sensitive to the fact that their tales and conversation can leave them open to reprisal, and the Manciple's tale of the crow is clearly related to this problem. The Manciple makes the mistake of openly insulting the Cook and incurring

his anger. The Host reminds the dishonest steward that the Cook may retaliate if he is so minded so the Manciple mollifies the Cook with another draught of wine and when he tells his tale he shows that he has learned his lesson. He tells the story of the crow which is blackened and loses its song when it tells Phebus that his wife has committed adultery. The moral of the tale is,

"My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe
Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe.
Whereso thou come, amonges hye or lowe,
Kepe wel they tonge, and thenk upon the crowe."
(Manc.T. ll. 359-362)

One suspects that the Nun's Priest, like the Manciple, should heed his own "moralite".

There is, however, another probable dimension to the moral of the Priest's bird fable and it is one which returns us to the dramatic context of The Canterbury Tales and the Priest's reaction to the other pilgrims in the company. We might look again at the semiological interpretation of the tale advanced by M.J. Donovan.⁷⁷ The fox is seen as a heretic (see figures four and five) and devil who has entered the Church which is symbolically represented by the barnyard of the poor widow. The cock is representative of the priest or alert Christian who, in this case, has been blinded by flattery, weakened by vanity and negligence of duty, but is finally saved by a return of true knowledge and moral conscience. Donovan, however, makes no attempt to show how this "moralitee" might fit into the larger context of The Canterbury

FIGURE FOUR.
Carved figures in
Abington Manor,
Northampton.

Reproduced in
Kenneth Varty,
Reynard the Fox:

A Study of the Fox
in Medieval
English Art

(Leicester:
Leicester Univ.
Press, 1967) pl.82.





FIGURE FIVE. The wood carving of a pew-end in Brent Knoll Church, Somerset. Reproduced in K. Varty, Reynard the Fox, p1. 128

Tales, so one is left wondering how the semiological bird imagery relates to the tales of the other pilgrims. I would suggest that although we cannot be certain of the exact order of the tales,⁷⁸ we can relate the "Nun's Priest's Tale" to the "Pardoner's Tale" and argue that the Priest's allegory of Christian, Church, and heretic constitutes either a foreshadowing or a commentary on the Pardoner's money-raising ploy. It will be recalled that the Pardoner, himself described as an interesting mixture of monstrous animal, bird, and human imagery, recounts a very professional sermon which displays his impressive oratorical skills. One would expect that this heretic is making a considerable impression on his audience until he, like Daun Russell, opens his mouth once too often as he tries to bilk the Host and the other pilgrims. With his eyes fully open to the evil of this monster, the Host responds furiously:

"Nay, nay !" quod he, "thanne have I Cristes curs !
 Lat be," quod he, "it shal nat be, so theeche !
 Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
 And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
 Though it were with thy fundement depeint !,
 (Pard.T., ll. 946-50)

and the Pardoner learns belatedly to keep his mouth shut:

This Pardoner answerde nat a word;
 So wrooth he was, no worde ne wolde he seye.
 (Pard.T., ll. 956-7)

If the Pardoner tells his story before that of the Nun's Priest, then I would suggest that the Priest is offering a satirical analysis of the Pardoner's humiliation; if the

Pardoner's tale is after that of the Priest, then it would appear that the Pardoner has taken the chaff and forsaken the "fruyt" of the "Nun's Priest's Tale".

We see, then, in our study of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" an amazing variety of obvious and subtle usages of the bird fable convention. The Nun's Priest employs bird images so that his criticism remains anonymous and yet the imagery functions as a distinct element of his tale, in and of itself. However, through using these images he is enabled to comment on his fellow pilgrims: the Monk and his tale, the Pardoner and his tale, and the Prioress in terms of her contrast to the widow and similarities to Pertelote. The impact of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" lies not only in the originality of the use of the convention, but in the artistic economy which this device allows. By this we mean not only the quantity of topics discussed in a brief tale, but also their meshing one with another, and especially the meshing of the bird fable convention as a whole with the semiological convention discussed in the previous chapter. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale", it is the unifying aspect of the bird imagery which carries the hallmark of Chaucer's brilliance.

In summary then, Chaucer seems particularly interested in developing a complex and subtle bird/human double perspective which on one level satirizes humans for their inability to rise above petty worldly concerns, and on another level suggests the intellectual concept of the "monstrous" - a

mixing of divinely ordained species which reflects an incongruous confusion of priorities and purposes. In the Parlement of Foules, the birds which should normally mate without difficulty are frustrated to the extent that they are influenced by human values, and in the "Nun's Priest's Tale", the cock is in mortal danger when he allows his natural instinct to be usurped by his attempts to assume human stature. Bird imagery in the House of Fame is slightly more complicated as the characters here are sometimes elevated and sometimes debased when they are given wings: the human beings in the House of Rumour are depicted as birds as they chatter about their "love-tydynges", yet the eagle is given a contemplative super-human perspective because of his ability to fly high above the earth.

The human/bird double perspective, nevertheless, also suggests a hybrid sense of the monstrous. In Troilus and Criseyde, Pandarus warns against the technique which Chaucer and his contemporaries use to such advantage:

"Ne jompre ek no discordant thyng yfeere,
As thus, to usen termes of phisik
In loves termes; hold of thi matere
The forme alwey, and do that it be lik;
For if a peyntour wolde peynte a pyk
With asses feet, and hede it as an ape,
It cordeth naught, so nere it but a jape."
(Tr. and Cr. II, ll. 1037-43)

As we have seen, Chaucer employs an explicit sense of the "monster" when, for example, he compares Chauntecleer to the siren, when he depicts the Miller in terms of a sow and a fox,

and when he surrounds the Summoner with imagery derived from various species of birds. Beyond this, however, the discordant effect of maintaining a precarious balance between the human and the avian features of a protagonist forces the audience to question the moral, social, and intellectual interests and priorities of the hybrid character. In the Parlement of Foules, for example, the spirit of "commune profit" is temporarily undermined by the incongruous juxtaposition of the anticipated natural, harmonious bird mating and the actual, chaotic fin amour love debate; in the "Nun's Priest's Tale", the human pretensions of Chauntecleer and Pertelote lead to both a potential barnyard tragedy as well as a contemporary re-creation of the Fall in Eden when Adam and Eve aspired to become like the gods.

On a more familiar level of the fable, Chaucer seems to avoid specific political allusions in favour of a more generalized and depersonalized satire of political and social situations. The long-range effect of the Parlement of Foules is philosophical but that, of course, does not exclude political dimensions; to interpret the poem in terms of current political figures, however, runs the danger of blurring exactly those subtle philosophical dimensions and distinctions which raise the poem above its immediate time and place. On the other hand, personal topical allusion in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is quite a different matter; here the frame of reference is the microcosmic world of The Canterbury Tales

and the fable's application to various pilgrims does not undercut the philosophical dimensions of the story but rather contributes a dramatic unity and verisimilitude to the work as a whole.

Chaucer does not significantly alter the bird fable convention; as was demonstrated earlier, he had inherited a convention which was fully legitimized, and which easily combined the functions of teaching and entertaining. What Chaucer does accomplish is the full exploitation of the convention's major elements, and an expansion of the parameters of the convention which allows for a maximum of artistic economy, the unification of a multiplicity of what initially appear as disparate elements, and the merging of this convention with other traditions of bird imagery.

NOTES

¹ His most complete statement on the medieval aesthetic is found in A Preface to Chaucer, passim.

² See, for example, Ovid Moralisee and L.K. Born, "Ovid and Allegory", Speculum, ix (1934), 364. St. Augustine used Virgil throughout his own writings and consequently legitimized the classical author for the Middle Ages. See Robertson, Preface, pp. 337-8.

³ See Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude Towards Fables", Journal of English and Germanic Philology 59 (1960) 403-16, p. 408.

⁴ In Contra mendacium, I.13. 28, Augustine defends Horace's fable of the mice and in I.2.6, he denies that Aesop's fables are "lies".

⁵ Macrobius, pp. 86-7.

⁶ C.G. Osgood, trans. Boccaccio on Poetry. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1956), pp. 49-50.

⁷ To simplify a very complex philosophical difference, one might suggest that Aristotle rejects the dualism of Plato's philosophy of Immortal Forms and, rather, sees the evidence for these Forms as something within each sensible object.

⁸ Klingender, pp. 346-50.

⁹ M.- D. Chenu, p.14.

¹⁰ Klingender, pp. 390-402.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Michael Scot was an influential translator and scholar in Friedrich's court and that Friedrich possessed a Latin translation of Aristotle's History of Animals.

12 It takes only a cursory look through Helen Waddell's Medieval Latin Lyrics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1952) to recognize the fascination with animal imagery evident in the poems of the fourth century Ausianus (e.g., "On Newblown Roses" pp. 37-9) and Alcuin (e.g., "The Strife Between Winter and Spring", pp. 93-7). The Old English Guthlac A describes the ascetic saint in the company of animals and birds who have come to bless him much as they were to later congregate around St. Francis.

13 M.-D. Chenu, p. 129. Professor Chenu is paraphrasing William of Conches.

14 Folk-lore and mythology are important, as well, of course. One recognizes many folk-lore elements in the medieval beast fable, and there can be little doubt that the very positive reception of the animal protagonists was to some extent due to the popularity of animal motifs in Celtic, continental, and even oriental folktales. However, it is very uncertain whether the birds in these stories are gods, representatives of gods, or categorizing and structuring elements. As the thesis is concerned with conscious conventional features of the bird fable, it seems appropriate to minimize mythological and folk-lore motifs.

15 Klingender, pp. 351-9.

16 Klingender. This was a very popular theme and one also finds it in The Boke of St. Albans and Albertus Magnus' De animalibus.

17 See chap.1, "Background: Classical and Christian", pp. 30-4, 41-3.

18 One might possibly except "Song of Our Time" in T. Wright, Political Songs and Poems (London: Rolls Series, 1859) and the "belling of the cat" episode in Piers Plowman "B" text, Prologue 11.146-204.

19 Tractatus civili dominio, iii, 15-16; Mirour de l'omme i, 13 ff, ii, 841 ff; Ancrene Riwe trans. M.B. Salu (London: Burns & Oates, 1955), pp. 86-94. Beryl Rowland lists and describes many examples of beasts used as symbols of vices. See Blind Beasts, pp. 18-19.

20 Cited by Rowland, Blind Beasts, p. 28.

21 See chapter II, pp. 89-90.

22 See chapter I, pp. 14-6.

23 Chapter II, pp. 63-4.

24 Georgics, Bk.IV.

25 William Langland, Piers the Plowman and Richard the Redeless, ed. Rev. W.W. Skeat (London: Oxford University Press, 1886), Passus xi, ll. 344-9.

26 William Langland, Passus xi, ll. 334-5.

27 William Langland, Passus xi, ll. 368-9.

28 See Klingender, pp. 351-9.

29 T.H. White, The Bestiary, p. 154.

30 Cited in McCall and Rudisill, "The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 58 (1959) 276-88, pp. 279-80. Thomas Brinton (a contemporary of Chaucer and Bromyard) describes parliament in terms of an assembly of rats and mice. See McCall and Rudisill, p. 281.

³¹ H.B. Workman, John Wyclif (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926) I, p. 210.

³² Heraldry developed in England and Europe in the twelfth century, and unlike earlier symbols such as the Roman eagle or the Athenian owl, heraldic insignia designated individual families. As such, it is an important field of study for those interested in personal allusion in the Middle Ages.

³³ "On King Richard's Ministers", Political Songs and Poems. vol. I, pp. 363-6.

³⁴ Eric W. Stockton, The Major Latin Works of John Gower. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962) pp. 289-326.

³⁵ See R.M. Wilson, The Lost Literature of Medieval England. (2nd ed. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1970), pp. 187-208 passim.

³⁶ Rev. W.W. Skeat, ed. Piers the Plowman and Richard the Redeless, vol. I, pp. 615-6, passus III, ll. 13-32.

³⁷ Rev. W.W. Skeat, pp. 616-7, passus III, ll. 37-85.

³⁸ "Purgatory", XXIX, ll. 108-14.

³⁹ Cited by Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, p. 154. For the concept of the philosophical "monster", I am generally indebted to Robertson.

⁴⁰ See chap. I, p. 20-1.

⁴¹ Cited by Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, p. 154.

⁴² Curtius briefly discusses this topic as "The World Upside-down" (European Literature, pp. 94-8.)

43 Eric W. Stockton, trans. The Major Latin Works of John Gower, pp. 61-2.

44 The History of Reynard the Fox, trans. William Caxton, ed. N.F. Blake. Early English Text Society, no. 263 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970). Caxton's version of the Reynard stories does not include all the existing stories, but it is a very representative sampling.

45 See E.P. Evans, Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Art, pp. 185-213, passim for additional examples. See also Kenneth Varty's Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art, (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1967) passim.

46 I am indebted to Beryl Rowland's Blind Beasts for the analysis of the similes attached to the Pardoner and Alisoun. See pp. 23-4.

47 T.H. White, The Bestiary, p. 144.

48 Sq. T. 11. 505-620.

49 See Koonce, The Tradition of Fame, p. 252, n. 139.

50 H.F. 1. 734 and 11. 738-9.

51 "Chaucer and the Convention of Birds as Intellectual Signs", pp. 73-5.

52 "Chaucer's Windy Eagle", p. 255.

53 These poems are discussed in "Chaucer and the Convention of Birds-and-Love", pp. 205-9.

54 "Chaucer and the Convention of Birds-and-Love", p. 207.

55 Both the catalogues of trees and birds suggest the dualistic or binary nature of the structure and theme of the poem as there are harmful and valuable elements in each list. This parallels the negative description of erotic love and the positive account of spiritual love which are both contained in one garden of love.

56 The Life and Times of Chaucer (New York: Random House, 1978) pp. 217-8.

57 "A New Interpretation of the Parlement of Foules," Modern Philology 18 (1920), p. 5.

58 It is interesting that the turtle-dove as a representative of the country gentry is, like the Franklyn in The Canterbury Tales, possibly even more "refined" than the aristocrats.

59 Chap. I, pp. 21-3, and Chap. III, pp. 128-9.

60 Haldeen Braddy, Chaucer's Parlement of Foules in its Relation to Contemporary Events. (New York: Octagon Books, 1969). More recently, John Gardner re-introduces Braddy's theory as a partial explanation for the Parlement of Foules. (The Life and Times of Chaucer, pp. 218-220.)

61 John of Gaunt seems to have been particularly sensitive to satire. In 1377 when lampoons concerning Gaunt were posted around London, the unknown authors were excommunicated by the Bishop of Bangor. See R.M. Wilson, The Lost Literature of Medieval England, p. 196.

62 There is some question as to whether Chaucer intended to cancel the "Epilogue" to the "Nun's Priest's Tale" as these lines are not included in all the manuscripts and they partly restate attributes earlier ascribed to the Monk. The critics, however, are divided on this issue, and the epilogue fits in extremely well with the tale so I accept the lines as intentional repetition.

63 "Prologue to the Monk's Tale", l. 1929.

64 There is a great deal of animal imagery associated with the Monk generally. He is very fond of hunting the hare, he is dressed in fur, "He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen/ That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men," (Gen. Prol. ll. 177-8),

and "A fat swan loved he best of any roost" (Gen. Prol. l. 206). The cumulative effect of all these references links the Monk to the fox as well.

65 The Consolation of Philosophy, Bk. IV, pr.vi, p. 96.

66 R.M. Lumiansky in Of Sondry Folk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955) pp. 105-112, provides an interesting summary of divergent critical opinion on the relationship between the Nun's Priest and the Prioress. For a closer look at a possible prototype for the Prioress, see Eileen Power, Medieval People (London: Methuen, 1924) pp. 73-95.

67 The Priest, no less than the Clerk of Oxenford, would note the Wife of Bath's comments on the ecclesiastical attitude towards women. See Wife of Bath's "Prologue", ll. 688-710.

68 The best study of sources for the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is R.A. Pratt, "Three Old French Sources for the Nun's Priest's Tale". Speculum, 47 (1972), 422-444 and 646-668.

69 St. Augustine idealizes widowhood as an exemplum of man who has awakened to the vanity of worldly life and abandons the life of the passions to devote himself to God. See, for example, Ennarrationes in Psalms, CXXXI, 23; and Of Holy Virginity in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 3, pp. 441-454. See also J.B. Friedman's article, "The Nun's Priest's Tale: The Preacher and the Mermaid's Song", Chaucer Review 7 (1973), 250-66. Friedman points out (p. 256) two typical exempla of widowhood in the sermon compendium of Nicholas Bozon.

70 On another level, this ill-advised wifely advice would be a reply to the Wife of Bath and to Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee".

71 C.E. Kauffman, "Dame Pertelote's Parlous Parle", Chaucer Review 4 (1970), 41-8.

72 Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) pp. 144-5.

73 In the fourteenth century "sustrè" was already used to refer to a nun. See O.E.D. entry under "sister", No.3.

74 Donovan argues that the cock symbolizes the priest or the alert Christian and the fox is the devil or a heretic. "The Moralite of the Nun's Priest's Sermon", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 52 (1953), pp. 498-508. Dahlberg also espouses a "patristic" interpretation but sees in the figure of Daun Russell a symbol of a Franciscan friar who tempts the secular priest, Chauntecleer. "Chaucer's Cock and Fox", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 53 (1954), pp. 277-90.

75 "The cock placed on the church tower represents the preachers. The cock, for instance, is ever watchful through the deep night, apports the hours with his song, wakes the sleeping, sings to the approach of day, but before waking others it must beat itself on the sides to wake itself to crow." (My translation)

76 Augustine, Ennarrationes in Psalms, CXXXI, 23. "The whole Church is a widow deserted in this generation." (My translation) See also Bede, P.L. XCII, 379; Glossa Ordinaria, P.L. CXIII, 261; St. Ambrose, P.L. XVI, 3; Isidore, P.L. LXXXIII, 128; Alcuin, P.L. C, 636. For these references I am indebted to Dahlberg and Donovan. Dahlberg takes the symbolism of the Church further and parallels the widow's "yeerd . . . , enclosed al aboute/ With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute," (N.P.T., ll. 2847-8) with The Song of Songs (IV, 12) where the bridegroom (Christ) calls the bride (The Church) "Hortus conclusus . . . fons signatus." The "drye dych" further emphasizes the deserted nature of the Church in that it contains no living water. "Chaucer's Cock and Fox", p. 286.

77 "The Moralite of the Nun's Priest's Sermon", above p.175, and note 74, p.192.

78 See W.W. Lawrence, Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), pp. 90-118 for a summary of critical opinion on the order of the tales.

CHAPTER IV

Chaucer and the Convention of Birds-And-Love

The Convention of Birds-And-Love:

To attempt to provide a provenance for the convention associating birds, human love, and spring before it appears in Pervigilium Veneris and Canticle of Canticles is truly tempting; for the most part, however, unless one sets up an anthropological study of a particular closed society and its relation to birds, one finds oneself talking of the obvious: in spring birds return to more northern countries to mate, birds sing to establish their territories and to attract a mate, seed is sown in the fields, humans feel warmer, more mobile, and rejuvenated - numerous anthropological classics spring to mind. For our purposes I think it is enough to say that birds are related to human love primarily because: (1) they are closely related to spring, being one of the earliest forms of weather prognostication; (2) they are very visible and audible in their mating habits; (3) man characteristically wishes to align his most strongly instinctual drives to nature; (4) the bird's ability to fly suggests a freedom of movement and a spontaneity which to many might suggest the boundless nature of love.¹ In this chapter we will try to recognize and isolate frequent themes, forms, and ideas in the birds-and-love imagery of medieval poetry and then examine Chaucer's poetry in the light of this protean

convention.

As pointed out earlier, the convention of birds-and-love that the medieval poet inherited from the classical world generally emphasized the tragic side of human love.

Pervigilium Veneris, particularly, is not a celebration of love and spring, it is a lament. The Canticle of Canticles, on the other hand, must have been a potent force relating birds, spring, and joyful human love - even acknowledging the primary interpretation of the poem as a love-song between Christ and His Church. The early Christian writers, however, did have reason to ignore this straight-forward birds-and-love topos: pagan celebrations of Mithra, Isis, Magna Mater, and many others were still practised in Europe, and the early medieval poet would be cautious of a convention which glorified spring, sexuality, and birds closely identified with pagan goddesses. Consequently Christian authors played down the erotic aspects of the theme and most adapted it to their own religious context.

In the early Christian centuries we find that the bird is generally removed from the spring setting and it becomes an iconographical symbol of divine mystery. As we observed earlier, St. Augustine and St. Ambrose offer strong authority for this semiological convention. In a parallel fashion, the spring song is replaced by the Easter hymn,² and instead of rejuvenation of the earth, we find rejuvenation of the spirit. As a result, there is little evidence of the birds and erotic

love convention in early medieval poetry. An interesting variation on the convention is found, however, in Paulinus of Nola's (ca. 353-431) "Ver avibus voces aperit, mea lingua suum ver" which recognizes the power of the spring, birds, and love convention and adapts it to a Christian orientation:

Spring opens the voices of birds -
 My tongue calls St. Felix' Day its spring,
 For in this light even the winter is flowering
 For joying people. Let there be black chill
 Around wintry frost, the year hardened in whiteness;
 But still the light within kindles happy joy
 Which creates this spring inside me,
 Sadness is gone, exiled from the heart;
 The winter of the soul is over.³

The festival day of St. Felix is January 14, but the empirical reality of snow, frost, and ice count for nothing against the spiritual springtime of the warmth of divine love. Instead of the sympathetic relationship between the seasons and man where spring renews or evokes love in man, Paulinus reverses the convention and melts the ice and snow of winter with spiritual love. The narrator of Pervigilium Veneris is drawn spiritually and physically into an actual spring scene complete with mating birds only to find himself alienated from love and more frustrated than ever; but, for Paulinus the absence of actual spring bird-song is of no real concern for the birds are present in the description, if not in fact, and the poet is fully integrated into the spiritual spring:

Just as the gentle swallow acknowledges friendly days
 And the white bird darts on black wings
 And the turtledove, kin to the kindly pigeon,
 With finches makes bushes resound with spring song -

Each darting mute now among the rasping hedges,
 But soon with spring come back, they will all be glad,
 With songs as varied as the colour of their wings —. ⁴

Furthermore, there is no need for actual bird-song when the spiritual spring of St. Felix' Day turns Paulinus himself into a singing bird:

Now happy spring is reborn for me with the earth rejoicing;
 Now I must loosen my mouth in song, intoning my prayers,
 Blossoming in fresh new strains, O God, fill my heart!
 My Christ, satisfy this thirst for a heavenly spring! ⁵

What seems clear from a reading of this poem is that the association of birds, spring, and love still had a great deal of vitality — and how could it not considering the fact that the pagan religions which emphasized the themes of fertility were still practised. Paulinus, however, moves from the external to the internal world and from sexual to spiritual fertility. It is not surprising, therefore, that the spring song is replaced by the Easter song because for the Christian the resurrection of Christ becomes the all-important call for humanity's spiritual renewal.

It is really only in the Carolingian period that we again begin to see the convention of birds-and-love tentatively move back into a secular sphere. Wilhelm, in fact, states that the "Carolingian poets reintroduced the nature lyric to western literature."⁶ Alcuin, for example, wrote several poems which avail themselves of the birds-and-love convention although their final intent is complicated by the fact that

the scholar apparently made a practice of referring to his students using the names of birds.⁷ Thus, although these poems recognize and develop the convention of birds-and-love, the cuckoo and the nightingale are less birds than wayward students.⁸ On the other hand, Alcuin's "Dialogue Between Spring and Winter" seems less likely to be about his students than the others; and while the poem does not explicitly relate the arrival of the cuckoo with human sexual renewal, the bird is definitely associated with fertility, warmth, and love:

I want my cuckoo to come with the happy blossoms;
Let him drive away cold, this long-time friend of the Sun;
Phoebus adores the cuckoo when the days are long and serene.

.
Let the cuckoo come with flowers in his beak, ministering
honey;
Let him build up his mansions and sail on a halcyon sea,
Engendering offspring and brightening happy fields.

.
No, let the cuckoo come, sweet friend of the shepherds,
And let the gladdening seeds burst forth on our hills;
Let the cattle have pasture, let peace reign over the
meadows
And branches green lift parasols for the weary;
Let the goats come to barnyard with udders swelling with
milk,
And the birds salute the Sun with their varying songs.
For all these reasons, come now, my cuckoo, come!
You are now my sweet love, a most welcome guest for all.⁹

However, even the poems addressed to his students attest to the continuing vitality of the convention of birds-and-love for it is not obvious from the poems that he is actually lamenting the loss of a novice. Alcuin is adapting an already

established convention to his own personal needs.

It is, however, in The Cambridge Songs manuscript, a collection made in the eleventh century but containing poems composed in the tenth, that we find three poems which point to the different orientations of the convention of birds-and-love in the later Middle Ages. The first one, "Vestiunt silve tenera ramorum", is truly in the Christian tradition which uses the bird as a sign to explain the metaphysics of the Church:

The woods are dressing their branches
With tender spray, weighted with fruit buds.
High overhead the pigeons are crooning
Tunes for us all.

The turtle-dove's groaning; the thrush sings lushly;
The age-old cry of the blackbird twangs again;
The sparrow's not quiet, but high under the elm leaf
Strikes with a chuckle.

.

But none of these creatures is like the bee,
Who embodies the ideal of chastity —
Only Mary, who carried Christ in her womb
Untouched by man.¹⁰

As we have already seen, this use of the bird as an iconographical symbol of divine mystery was prevalent throughout medieval literature, but here it draws much of its energy from the fact that the semiological image is incorporated into a traditional birds-and-love context. Another poem in the collection, "Iam, dulcis amica, venito" — ostensibly a dialogue between a man and a woman — is heavily indebted to *Canticle of Canticles*, but the religious imagery is

humourously applied to a secular situation. The male speaker's enthusiasm is not even slightly lessened by the appearance of Philomela as he here attempts to seduce his mistress with talk of spring, birds, and love.

Girl:

I walked alone through forest spaces,
Delighting in those hidden places;
How often I fled the vulgar classes,
Trying to avoid the common masses.

Man:

Snow and ice are no more to be seen.
Flowers and grass are growing green.
Philomela high takes her part;
Love burns in the cavern of my heart.

O dearest one, please don't delay !
Be eager — yes, love me right away !
Without you I just can't fend;
We must carry our love to the end. 11

The poem's adaptation of the Canticale of Canticles does presage the movement from the allegorical to the literal, and from the spiritual to the erotic, that the birds-and-love convention is to take in the succeeding centuries. And then, with "Levis exsurgit Zephrus" we find we have come full circle back to the Pervigilium Veneris tradition. The poet laments that while spring has awakened joy and love in the natural world and that birds are singing, somehow, he has been left in a spiritual winter:

Now Zephyr's rising lightly
While Sun comes on more brightly;
Now Earth is opening up her lap
And everything's aflow with sap.

Scarlet Spring comes walking out
 With gaudy clothes wrapped about,
 Sprinkling land with many flowers,
 Hanging fronds on woodland bowers.

Four-footed beasts prepare their lairs
 While nests are formed for those in air;
 On every branch among the wood
 The fowls are singing: joy is good.

But what my ears explain to me
 And what my eyes force me to see —
 Alas ! — in the midst of this happiness
 Fill me instead with sorrowfulness.

For here I'm sitting all alone,
 Considering life, as white as stone,
 And the minute that I lift my head
 Every sound and sight is fled.

You at least, for the sake of the Spring,
 Go out and walk, considering
 The fronds and flowers and the grain —
 This soul of mine is sick with pain.¹²

To summarize then, one can recognize that by the eleventh century there were several influential permutations within the convention of birds-and-love. In the early Christian centuries we find that the spring setting for this convention is transformed into Easter and instead of seasonal renewal, suggesting fluctuations of joy and despair, youth and old age, gain and loss, we find a movement beyond temporality and into sacred time in a perpetual Eden or Golden Age. We have chosen Paulinus of Nola as a representative figure of the Christian lyricists not because he is truly typical, but because he extends the ecclesiastical tradition to its logical limit: springtime becomes a state of mind sustained by a knowledge of the new order ushered in by Christ. In the

eight and ninth centuries a much more straightforward use of the convention is employed by Alcuin. Here we find a clear, sympathetic relationship between the renewal of the natural world, the sound of bird song, and the revival of love in the human sphere. Finally, in the Cambridge Songs of the tenth and eleventh century are heard the two notes which are so often sounded in the troubadour use of bird imagery: erotic love replaces spiritual love and the poet, like the narrator of Pervigilium Veneris, begins to recognize that he is alienated from the simple joys he observes in nature.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as we move from Latin to vernacular treatments of the convention, we recognize a very clear emphasis on erotic fin amour, alienation, and dialectic, and a movement from birds as important background features to major protagonists, arbiters, and guides.

The twelfth century troubadour poet Bernart de Ventadorn, for example, runs the gamut of modifications on the convention of birds-and-love. One first finds the anticipated correlation of microcosm and macrocosm in "Can l'erba fresch e-lh folha par":

When the new grass and the leaves come forth
and the flower burgeons on the branch,
and the nightingale lifts its high
pure voice and begins its song,
I have joy in it, and joy in the flower,
and joy in myself, and in my lady most of all;
on every side I am enclosed and girded with joy,
and a joy that overwhelms all other joys.¹³

This poem commences with a boundless joy which is anticipated

by a natural scene complete with birds and bird-song; the remainder of the poem, however, reveals the tortures of the poet's unconfessed love, his fear for his mistress' reputation, his detachment from the normal sphere of activity, and his inability to meet with his lady. The final stanza reflects the fact that the poet has made a startling shift from the expanses of the natural scene into the enclosed garden of fin amour :

A lady deserves blame
when she makes her lover wait too long,
for endless talk of love
is a great vexation, and seems like a trick,
because one can love, and pretend to everyone else,
and nobly lie when there are no witnesses.
Sweet lady, if only you would deign to love me,
no one will ever catch me when I lie.¹⁴

Therefore, in an attempt to break down this barrier between nature and court, Bernart composes a secular version of Paulinus of Nola's "Ver avibus voces aperit, mea lingua suum ver" :

My heart is so full of joy
it changes every nature.
The winter that comes to me
is white red yellow flowers;
my good luck grows
with the wind and the rain,
and so my song mounts up, rises,
and my worth increases.
I have such love in my heart,
such joy, such sweetness,
the ice I see is a flower,
the snow, green things that grow.¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite his bold attempt to impose the microcosm on the macrocosm, in fact the mistress is absent, the

desire unfulfilled, and the lover is again reduced to abject misery:

I get good hope from her;
 but that does me little good,
 because she holds me like this, poised
 like a ship on the wave.
 I don't know where to take cover
 from the sad thoughts that pull me down.
 The whole night long I toss and turn
 on the edge of the bed.
 I bear more pain from love
 than Tristan the lover
 who suffered many sorrows
 for Isolt the blonde.¹⁶

His only chance would be to emulate the mobility and freedom of the bird, so when the bird is finally introduced, it does not signal the return of spring but rather it becomes a symbol of the poet's futile attempt to enable his body to follow his spirit:

Ah God ! couldn't I be a swallow
 and fly through the air
 and come in the depths of the night
 into her dwelling there.¹⁷

So again, despite the invocation of spring or the quasi-spring, the poet returns to an awareness of his inability to take part in the renewal of life and love that is seemingly so simple in the natural sphere. Furthermore, it is this theme which animates Bernart's most famous poem, "Can vei la lauzeta mover" :

When I see the lark moving
 its wings in joy against the light,
 rising up into forgetfulness, letting go, and falling
 for the sweetness that comes to its heart,

alas, what envy then comes over me
 of everyone I see rejoicing,
 it makes me wonder that my heart,
 right then, does not melt with desire.¹⁸

Paulinus of Nola is anticipating a different type of love,
 and when he calls on God he, himself, becomes the spring
 bird; Bernart's fin amour, on the other hand, places him in
 the position of the narrator of Pervigilium Veneris who
 remains envying the situation of the birds.

The central problem addressed in the late medieval form
 of the convention of birds-and-love lies in the ambiguous
 nature of passionate, erotic love itself. The poets of the
 Middle Ages who wrote of erotic courtly love are perpetually
 in the hell of unrequited love, secret unspoken love, lack
 of love, dying love, contested love, or cruel inconstant
 love. Unfortunately, suffering appears to be the meat of
 passionate, erotic love; we find elements of it in Cantic
 of Canticles, (despite its happy conclusion), it is the
 primary theme of Pervigilium Veneris, and it appears in almost
 all of the love poetry of all ages. At its most cynical
 level, this idea might be summed up by Ovid's:

Her who follows I flee; her who runs off I pursue.¹⁹

Wilhelm's perceptive comments on the theme of unfulfilled
 love seem significant in this regard:

. . . marriage (absolute fulfillment) is death
 to lyric poetry, is the end of romantic love,
 whether the lover be Ovid or Sappho or Bernart de
 Ventadorn. In a sense, the finest lyric poetry
 begins with some unattainability on the part of

the object, with a tension between what is wanted and what is not had. Socrates was keenly aware of this paradox when he defined Love in the Symposium as lack, not fulfillment.²⁰

But perhaps this is too extreme an attitude to take to human romantic love. It may be that it is enough to say that in the late medieval use of the convention of birds-and-love, the most striking theme results from the juxtaposition of the uncomplicated fruitful mating in the natural world with the difficulties and lack of fulfillment in the human sphere. Beyond that we find two essentially philosophical themes: the mating and singing of birds correlates successfully with the human sphere when the subject of spiritual love is introduced; the mating of birds and the burgeoning spring provide a tantalizing contrast to the wasteland of suffering for the passionate love of courtly lovers. As we move from lyrics to bird-debates it is the second theme which receives major emphasis.

In the bird-debate poems such as Le Jugement D'Amours, Li Fablel dou Dieu d'Amours, La Geste Blanchflour et Florence, and De Venus La Deese d'Amor one notices primarily the degree to which the birds have been drawn more fully into the action of the poem: the birds no longer form a spring backdrop nor do they only suggest the facility with which nature mates and procreates; now there is a court of love wherein birds act as lovers, judges, guardians, and guides.²¹ This is not a transformation which only occurs in the debates; in Provencal and Old French poetry generally one finds birds

as messengers of lovers,²² guardians who warn illicit lovers that morning has come,²³ advisors on the rules of love,²⁴ and symbols of the lovers themselves.²⁵ Later, in The Decameron, the expression "listening to the nightingale" becomes a euphemism for sexual intercourse.²⁶ One could expect this sort of identification as a normal extension of themes connecting birds and love generally, but its use must have been immensely encouraged by the symbolism of the winged god Eros or Cupid, or Venus with her emblematic swan or doves. The idea of a winged deity of love is an ancient one and can be traced back at least to the point at which the early Greeks considered him a "winged Spite like Old Age or Plague in the sense that uncontrolled sexual passion could be disturbing to ordered society."²⁷ By the fourth century B.C., however, this daimon had been sentimentalized into a beautiful but mischievous young boy who was the son of Aphrodite, and just as the winged freedom might suggest disruption, it also suggested that love is a phenomenon of the spirit which could arrive without warning and disappear just as quickly, a spirit which recognizes no physical, social, or national boundaries, a spirit which can even mediate between the human and the divine. In the medieval bird-debates this winged god of love is very much at home with his avian attendants.

Le Jugement D'Amours²⁸ is a twelfth century Old French poem which describes the quest of Blanchflor and Florance

to discover whether clerks or knights are the best lovers. They journey to the palace of the God of Love guided by two birds, and, when they arrive, the God of Love, who is depicted as a feudal king, assembles his bird-barons to decide the case. After they fail to reach an agreement, the nightingale and the parrot decide to try the case by combat. Their comic battle ends in a victory for the clerk, and then the birds sing a funeral dirge for the broken hearted Florance whose lover is a knight. Another version of this poem was written in England but again in Old French, La Geste Blancheflour et Florence,²⁹ and although we again find a God of Love assembling his bird-barons to debate and fight, this time the knight's side wins.

In the thirteenth century, Li Fablel dou Dieu d'Amours³⁰ and De Venus La Deese d'Amor³¹ further develop the bird-debate but they are more ambitious and attempt to use it to a greater extent as an element within a larger story. Li Fablel dou Dieu d'Amours introduces the dream vision into the context of the bird assembly, and the narrator witnesses a council of birds presided over by a nightingale who complains of the degeneration of love. The bird-barons argue whether it is possible for one of low birth to love as worthily as a knight or a clerk, and the assembly is dismissed when the birds decide that if a man loves and is loved in return he is as wise as a clerk and as brave as a knight. The narrator, whose lady is absent, is forlorn when he

awakens but soon falls into another dream wherein he is temporarily re-united with his lover, then deserted, then through the God of Love re-united with her again - but then finally awakens only to find it all a dream. De Venus la Deese d'Amor is a variation on the above and, despite a hiatus in the text, it integrates the bird-debate more successfully into the larger context of the poem. The lover falls asleep thinking of his unrequited passion for Florie and dreams that he enters a paradise filled with the singing of birds. A nightingale presides over the assembly of birds, sings of the joy and pain of love, and offers a definition of true love. At this point the dreamer speaks up to agree with the nightingale but succeeds only in driving the birds away. After a hiatus in the text, the lover continues to mourn his poor fortune with Florie and the birds return accompanied by Venus. Venus agrees with the narrator that Florie is a paragon of virtue and beauty, and she decides to lead him to the God of Love who commissions the nightingale to write up a charter wherein Florie is ordered to return his love or face dire consequences. Florie, quite surprisingly considering the usual ending of these poems, submits.

What is significant about this stage in the development of the convention is that the birds have become so closely connected with human love: they are not simply symbols of spring and renewal, and they have moved beyond the roles of guides or messengers; birds are now experts capable of

deciding abstract issues, arguing the expertise of lovers, and philosophizing about the nature of love. Seen initially in the convention as a symbol of natural, instinctual, unsophisticated, and unencumbered mating, the birds have been adopted by later poets to reveal the intricacies of the complicated fin amour, and for the most part, the birds end up in conflict with one another over issues which have no relation to their actual situation. The audience recognizes that there is no true equivalent to knights and clerks in the bird kingdom, and the question of lovers of low birth (which is not depicted dramatically but, rather, abstractly) is hardly applicable except in a metaphorical sense. Consequently, if the birds become closely associated with courtly love and questions of social degree, the theme of the alienation of the human observer, which had been so prominent in earlier uses of the convention, is markedly de-emphasized.

The late twelfth century Owl and the Nightingale represents a very large advance beyond the scope of its near contemporaries in the bird-debate tradition. The two birds are debating the merits of various types of love but it appears to this reader that unlike the birds of the knight/clerk debates, neither of these debaters has a clearly definable nor a definitive point of view on love: it is tempting, at points, to identify the owl with Christianity and spiritual love, and the nightingale with erotic love and the troubadours (or various similar configurations) but

invariably doubt slips in when one bird's statement would appear to belong to the opposing party. Much careful analysis has been paid to the various interpretations of this poem,³² and I do not intend to enter the debate in this short reference, but it seems that the reason there is so much difficulty in assigning solid, logical positions to the protagonists rests on two aspects of the poem which have not been given adequate attention. In the first place, the poem is meant to be confusing, as it is, after all, an advertisement for one Nicolas Guildford who specializes in sorting out and judging extremely complicated issues. If the reader could explain and decide the issues posed by the birds, there would be little need for this brilliant arbiter. More important, however, is the fact that here the poet seems truly interested in the bird-lore of his time and he, therefore, allows the birds to argue from their natural situations. This can be seen, for example, when the poet allows both birds to criticize each other's position on the basis of their natural, and ironically unchangeable, habits: both birds are unattractive; the nightingale's song is beautiful but it refuses to sing in the northern missionary fields; the owl styles itself a Christ-figure but admits that it is hated by other birds and mankind, and it continually threatens violence in order to win the debate; and the owl fouls its own nest while the nightingale lives by the privy. This emphasis on the bird rather than on the idea is quite

remarkable for the time, and we see little of it in bird-debates until Chaucer's Parlement of Foules as attitudes even in the later Middle Ages were still opposed to raising natural history over philosophical ideas. And finally, another modification to the bird-debate can be noted in this fine and humorous poem in that instead of birds or the god of love judging attitudes to human love, at the end of the poem, a human will arbitrate that which the birds are unable to decide.

The last pre-Chaucerian addition to the convention of birds-and-love which will be examined here, the introduction of St. Valentine, does not appear until the late fourteenth century. While it is possible that Graunson and Gower's Valentine "bird-poems" were written after those of Chaucer, I have chosen to discuss them briefly for there is no certain evidence for dating, and clearly, the ideas of both of these men would be of much interest to Chaucer. In Graunson's Complainte de sainte Valentine, set on February 14, the poet contrasts his gloom with the simple joy of nature. Like the Black Knight in the Book of the Duchess, the narrator's mistress has died and he cannot love another. St. Valentine, himself, appears accompanied by the God of Love and they, despite the poet's protests, present him with a new mistress. The poet immediately falls in love but promises to continue his prayers for his first love. It is Graunson's Le songe sainte Valentine, however, which is considered most important

in relationship to the Parlement of Foules. On St. Valentine's Day, the poet finally falls asleep to dream that he has entered a garden to find a diamond and a ruby he had lost. There he witnesses an assembly of birds presided over by a formel eagle and her mate. The birds all successfully choose mates with the exception of a falcon who tells the poet that he has already chosen a mate but one which is infinitely above and beyond all possibility of attainment. Although the narrator, in Chaucerian fashion, disclaims any knowledge of love - Graunson was known, of course, as the poet-lover par excellence - the falcon seems to represent the poet himself. The narrator then wakens and philosophically meditates on the seeming ease with which birds mate and the difficulties encountered by humans. He acknowledges that the reason of mankind can produce a more noble kind of love but then realizes that reason also produces much sorrow and misery.

Gower's Valentine poems - Nos. 34 and 35 of Cinkante Balades - are less ambitious enterprises. No. 34 has the lover, on St. Valentine's Day, announcing his joy and declaring his love for his mistress. He wishes that he and his lady could be transformed into birds like Cicx and Alcyone so that they could have the totally free and uncomplicated love that is traditionally ascribed to the birds. No. 35 is an abrupt about-turn for now the lady has rebuffed the lover. Again he contrasts his love with that of the birds and wishes that human wooing were as simple and automatic. The narrator's

lady is like a phoenix, who does not need a mate, so he will remain alone.

The innovations in these poems are of significance to the convention of birds-and-love. Graunson had adopted the idea that the human lover can be effectively allegorized as a bird; he has introduced St. Valentine - a thoroughly respectable Christian saint - as a colleague of the God of Love and one who will intervene in the cause of erotic love; the theme resulting from the contrast between the instinctual mating of the birds and the complex courtship in the human erotic sphere has been re-introduced, and he has presented the bird/human lover who, in courtly love fashion, has so effectively chosen excellence that he cannot hope to succeed. Gower's contribution is slighter - although one can be fairly certain that he was not as interested in the St. Valentine's Day vogue - and he reinforces the sense of alienation felt by human lovers in the face of birds mating, and includes Physiologus information in the allegory.

A review of some of the most important topoi surrounding the medieval convention of birds-and-love should be valuable here as the examination of Chaucer's use of the convention will necessarily involve a rather complicated web of references.

(i) As a rule, when bird mating is compared to erotic human love, the human observer feels alienated from the natural setting and experiences his lack of love even more

deeply. Human love and courtship are described ambivalently while bird mating is depicted as simple and successful. As we saw earlier in Ambrose's Hexameron and in Langland's Piers Plowman, bird society is often recognized as superior to and, in fact, a model for human society: avian society is described as held together by instinctive co-operation, loyalty, and affection, and, in this tradition, birds become natural symbols of supernatural spiritual love.

(ii) Consequently, when bird mating is compared to Christian or spiritual love, the human observer feels integrated into nature and the universe. Beyond this, the spiritual springtime of the soul can defeat the external reality of the winter, so the traditional antagonism between the seasons is no longer valid. Graunson's introduction of a Christian saint into the erotic love-debate offers an interesting example of cross-fertilization between (i) and (ii) because the narrator re-discovers love.

(iii) While the birds themselves are not always taken very seriously (the human/bird double perspective and the fact that often they are arguing the tenets of fin amour militates against this), the natural setting is not treated humourously as it suggests important aspects of fertility and plenitude. In fact, the idyllic natural setting is usually contrasted with the inner chaotic world of the human participant.

(iv) Birds can be a symbolic backdrop for spring, or they

can become lovers, advocates, judges, advisors; and guides. They are worthy experts on love because flight offers them a higher perspective, their anatomy is similar to that of the God of Love, and they are integrally connected with the arrival of spring. Obviously, however, the more the birds are associated with the trappings of fin amour, the less their situation suggests a tantalizingly happy contrast to the despair of the narrator.

(v) The birds are capable of intricate displays of dialectic and they are aware of the rules of debate; however, they rarely settle a resolution, and they often threaten violence during the course of their arguments. Generally, one does not expect speeches of a profound intellectual nature from the bird-debaters.

(vi) The birds are usually described as feudal barons and the experts on love are invariably nightingales, eagles, and falcons, but other than that there is little reference to social degree. When there is, it is spoken of abstractly and not depicted dramatically.

(vii) The human observer is invariably a participant in some way in the poem as his fate is bound up with the judgment. There is almost always a verdict pronounced by the birds, the God of Love, or the observer - although in several cases it is a technical victory (e.g., The Owl and the Nightingale) or an arbitrary one (e.g., The Cuckoo and the Nightingale where the narrator throws a rock and the cuckoo is frightened away).

Chaucer and the Convention of Birds-and-Love:

There could hardly be a better introduction to a discussion of Chaucer's use of the convention of birds-and-love than the first eighteen lines of the "General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales:

Whan that' Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
 (Gen. Prol. ll. 1-18)

As many critics have noted before, we have here a linking of the physical and the spiritual, the natural and supernatural, and eros and caritas. The lines form a concrete representation of Theseus' "faire cheyne of love"³³: the interaction of the personified months and western wind causes an agricultural fertility which is linked to the heavens by "the yonge sonne . . . in the Ram" which prompts animal fecundity as the birds sing and prepare to mate and, at the same time, signals the liturgical season for man's spiritual quest for the Christian saint who can heal the "seeke". This

description of the Chain of Being suggests a continuum of love moving from fertility in the vegetative, through eros in the animal, to caritas in the human. As love passes from garden and bird to man, fertility and eros are not necessarily abandoned in the pursuit of spiritual love; each level of life should partake of love at its own appropriate level but, because love is the spiritual binding force of life, ideally fertility, eros, and caritas are indivisible even though a difference of importance is accorded each. In this introduction to The Canterbury Tales then, the renewal in nature and the mating of birds does not alienate man from the universe as it does in Pervigilium Veneris; rather, like Paulinus' spring song, the human observer is fully integrated into the universe because the garden's fertility and the birds' mating are paralleled by man's spiritual love.

Chaucer's use of the convention of birds-and-love is primarily philosophical and, of course, we expect this from an artist whose poetry is so often concerned with metaphysical, epistemological, scientific, and moral questions. Almost all of Chaucer's poetry comprehends a spiritual dimension which he seems to have found very satisfying for his artistic purposes. While the poet's persona invariably styles himself an artist writing about love but frustrated by his own lack of personal involvement, his poetry is infused with a Boethian contemplative perspective - which Chaucer in his translation of Boece refers to as "fetheris in thi thought"³⁴ -

which provides a philosophical backdrop to his stories of erotic love. It would be narrow-sighted, however, to suggest that the poet is unsympathetic to erotic love: there are too many successful and joyful "swyvyns", numerous playful erotic puns, happy fin amour marriages, and discussions of the ennobling effects of love to suggest that Chaucer seriously disapproved of the erotic. Moreover, it is unlikely that the poet could or would have drawn us so deeply into his poetic fictions had he not empathized with his "lovers". It is, however, an inescapable fact that he characteristically depicts erotic love against a philosophical and spiritual background. It does not seem that Chaucer is asking his audience to make a choice between the two.

The synthesis of these seemingly antithetical themes might simply be a recognition of moderation and priorities; the danger is that the courtly lover will, as he is sometimes advised, subjugate all other values to that of his erotic, earthly love. This theme will be treated more fully in the later discussion of the Parlement of Foules but, for the time being, we might briefly examine the scene in the "Merchant's Tale" where old Januarie - a man who has definitely lost a proper perspective on the relative importance of erotic love - serenades his young, adulterous May with erotic bird imagery:

"Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free !
 The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
 The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
 Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn !
 How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn !

The garden is enclosed al aboute;
 Com forth, my white spouse !
 (Merch.T., ll. 2138-44)

We are tempted to compare Chaucer's lines with those of the Cambridge poem "Iam, dulcis amica, venito"³⁵ where the narrator also makes erotic overtures to his mistress in a parody of the birds and garden imagery of the Canticle of Canticles. But Chaucer is doing much more than his eleventh century colleague; he has incorporated into his poem a religious allegory of the Garden of Eden, the bridegroom and the Shulamite maiden in their bower, and the contemporary debased variation on the theme. The adultrous love is consummated in Januarie's pear tree, but the religious imagery employed in the description requires that we judge the act quite harshly. Januarie misuses bird imagery from the most important spiritual love poem for the Middle Ages. As we have already seen, the Canticle of Canticles uses bird imagery to celebrate the simultaneous renewal of the natural and the human through spiritual love; when Januarie adopts the spiritual bird imagery but relates it to a purely erotic level he is left, whether he knows it or not, as unfulfilled and alienated as the narrator of Pervigilium Veneris. Beyond this, the religious backdrop of the fabliau serves, among other things, to direct the audience's attention away from a purely secular level and to reinforce our recognition that Januarie's comical, erotic enthusiasm reflects a misunderstanding of the appropriate object of human devotion.

A less explicitly religious, but no less complex, use of the convention of birds-and-love is found in Troilus and Criseyde. Here the bird imagery is subtly interwoven into the entire fabric of the poem to suggest the tragic and perhaps even sordid aspects of the love affair. The love shared by Troilus and Criseyde is unmistakably erotic and although there are strong suggestions of its ennobling effects, it is difficult to regard the two lovers as working their way toward an idealized spiritual love. Troilus and Criseyde celebrate a religion of love, but it is a love which is subject to time, human frailty, and fortune. To suggest the themes of duplicity, impermanence, aggression, role reversal, and even incest, Chaucer uses bird imagery derived from mythology and medieval falconry.

The most significant way that Chaucer undercuts the theme of the religion of erotic love is his introduction of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus into the poem. Briefly, the myth, as described by Ovid in Metamorphoses, relates that Procne was changed into the swallow for taking vengeance on her husband Tereus who had raped her sister Philomela. Subsequently Tereus was transformed into the hoopoe and Philomela into the nightingale. As we have already seen, this myth was very influential in cooling the erotic ardour in the classical spring lyric, yet Chaucer introduces Procne in the middle of a conventional birds-and-love spring morning. Suggesting the traditional frustrated lover, Pandarus lies

in his bed and is roused by the singing of the swallow:

The swalowe Proigne, with a sorowful lay,
 Whan morwen com, gan make hire waymentynge,
 Whi she forshapen was; and ever lay
 Pandare abedde, half in a slomberynge,
 Til she so neigh hym made hire cheterynge
 How Tereus gan forth hire suster take,
 That with the noyse of hire he gan awake,
 (Tr. and Cr., II, ll. 64-70)

Instead of the lover's despair becoming more acute when seen in relation to nature, here Pandarus' frustration is reflected in the natural sphere. Nevertheless the tragic tones of the song are lost on Pandarus as he enthusiastically rushes off to arrange the illicit liaison between Troilus and his niece. Later the mythological motif is again introduced, but this time the narrator does not make its significance explicit. Criseyde has just been informed of Troilus' love and as she prepares for bed, she thinks about her potential love affair:

A nyghtyngale, upon a cedir grene,
 Under the chambre wal ther as she ley,
 Ful loude song ayein the moone shene,
 Peraunter, in his briddes wise, a lay
 Of love, that made hire herte fressh and gay.
 That herkned she so longe in good entente,
 Til at the laste the dede slep hire hente.
 (Tr. and Cr., II, ll. 918-24)

Taken at face value, the image is beautiful and gentle, and it suggests all that is natural, spontaneous and noble in the convention of birds-and-love. Actually, however, although Criseyde is clearly unaware of the allusion, the nightingale or Philomela's "lay of love" is part of the pattern of

tragedy. The violence of the bird image immediately following the description of the nightingale offers a less ambiguous impression of the aggressive, self-seeking erotic love in the poem:

And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette
 How that an egle, fethered whit as bon,
 Under hire brest his longe clawes sette,
 And out hire herte he rente, and that anon,
 And dide his herte into hire brest to gon,
 Of which she nought agroos, ne nothyng smerte;
 And forth he fleigh, with herte lefte for herte.
 (Tr. and Cr., II, ll. 925-931)

The juxtaposition of these two bird images suggests an ambivalent attitude to erotic love, but in both cases the overtones of rape and violence are present. Furthermore, the Procne, Philomela, Tereus allusion suggests another dimension: a ménage à trois with an added incest motif. In this regard it is well to remember that there are three major lovers in the poem: Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus. Pandarus' active involvement in Troilus and Criseyde's relationship seems more motivated by vicarious sexuality than faithful friendship; he is much too quick to cajole Troilus through the "courtship" and when he actually undresses Troilus and throws him into bed (Bk. III, ll. 1090-9) his enthusiasm seems boundless. More striking is his intimacy with his niece: he thrusts a love letter in her bosom (Bk. II, l. 1155), he repeatedly pokes her, (Bk. III, l. 116), and while kissing and playing with her in her bed, he asks her how she has enjoyed her tryst with Troilus. (Bk. III, ll. 1562-75). Finally,

when Troilus and Criseyde lie in bed together for the first time, Pandarus sits in the same room "to looke upon an old romaunce" (Bk. III, l. 980). One would not want to dismiss the humour in this treatment of Pandarus' prurient tactics and motives, yet when seen in relation to the incest motif in the mythological allusion the "threesome" appears rather sordid. Furthermore, another mythological bird image from Metamorphoses is introduced to suggest Criseyde's faithlessness. When Troilus and Pandarus watch for Criseyde's return from the Greek camp, the lark ". . . Nysus daughter song with fressh entente," (Bk.V, l. 1110) : Nisus' daughter Scylla was metamorphized into a lark for betraying her father because she loved his enemy. Like Pandarus when he hears Procne, and like Criseyde when she hears Philomela, Troilus does not understand the significance of Scylla's song.

Then to reinforce this depiction of sordid erotic love, Chaucer describes the love affair in terms of the hunt of love, specifically using falconry and fowler imagery. The theme revolving around the pun on venerie was popularized for the Middle Ages by Ovid's The Art of Love;³⁶ here the narrator describes the hunt for love as one of masculine chase and feminine flight. The topos was familiar in medieval literary and visual art so it is not surprising that Chaucer would introduce it into Troilus and Criseyde. Chaucer does not, however, adopt it as a straight-forward pattern of imagery with positive connotations. The suffering caused by

unrequited love, for example, is likened to vultures tearing at one's stomach (Bk.I, ll. 785-788). Love is a fowler who "lymes" Troilus' feathers (Bk.I, l. 353),³⁷ and later Troilus twice refers to himself as caught in a snare (Bk.I, l. 507; V, l. 748). Criseyde, on the other hand, is identified with nets which have trapped Troilus (Bk.III, ll. 1355 and 1733), and more significantly, in other contexts, she is likened to a hawk which refuses to remain in the mew (Bk.III, l. 1784; IV, l. 1310). Furthermore, the narrator at one point even compares Troilus' relationship with Pandarus to "the sely larke . . ./ . . . that the sperhawk hath . . . in his foot." (Bk.III, ll. 1191-2). Although Troilus is described as a falconer in the poem (Bk.III, l. 1779; V, l. 65), one perceives gradually that Chaucer has reversed the traditional sexual roles and that Criseyde is the aggressive bird of "ravyne" and Troilus the prey.³⁸ Troilus' passivity and timidity makes him both a pawn and a victim in his relationships with Pandarus and Criseyde. It is no wonder that when Troilus achieves the "bird's eye" transcendent perspective ". . . he lough right at the wo/ Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;" (Bk.V, ll. 1821-2).

The use of the convention of birds-and-love in the "Squire's Tale", on the other hand, reveals less about the characters of the tale than about the intellectual interests of the Squire himself. Chaucer's use of bird imagery is characteristically so complex and philosophical that one does

not expect such a straight-forward correlation of birds, spring, and erotic love. While it is possible that had the tale been completed it would have developed a more profound use of the convention, it seems more likely that the relative absence of intellectual depth in the completed portion suggests why the Squire was discouraged from completing his tale.

The poem describes a spring landscape complete with the usual bird imagery:

Ful lusty was the weder and benigne,
For which the foweles, agayn the sonne sheene,
What for the sesoun and the yonge grene,
Ful loude songen hire affecciouns.

(Sq.T. ll. 52-55)

Cambyuskan, the king of Sarray, is approached by a mysterious knight who offers him a brass horse capable of amazing speeds and heights and a sword of supernatural strength. The king's daughter, Canacee, is given a mirror which will expose deceitfulness and a ring which allows its wearer to speak and understand the language of birds.³⁹ It is the latter gift which is prominent in the tale as we have it, and it performs the task normally handled in the bird-debates by the dream vision. Normally the human observer can understand the birds because sleep allows supernatural intervention or signals the demise of normal intellect. In this case there is no need for Canacee to sleep before she can hear a peregrine falcon, whose complaint is well within the bird dream-vision tradition:

Ther sat a faucon over hire heed ful hye,
 That with a pitous voys so gan to crye
 That all the wode resounded of hire cry.
 Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously
 With bothe hir wynges, til the rede blood
 Ran endelong the tree ther-as she stood.
 (Sq.T. ll. 411-416)

As pointed out earlier, the use of birds as actual lovers was common and so also was the tendency to describe them as participating in fin amour. The Squire leaves no doubt that a courtly love affair is what is involved: the need for secrecy (l. 530-1), obeisance (l. 562) long service - even to death (ll. 523-7), humility (l. 544), and the worship of the mistress (l. 571) are all stressed by the falcon and fulfilled by the tercelet until finally the deceitful male falls in love with a kite and deserts his mistress. Essentially this is as far as the story goes, but before the Franklin "courteously" cuts the story short, the Squire has announced that the falcon will win back her tercelet through the efforts of Canacee's brother.

Critics' arguments that the poem is tiresome seem exaggerated; however, there is no doubt that were the story to continue at the same rate - there is a great deal of rhetorical ornamentation and not much plot development - and to utilize all the plot elements which have been introduced, the poem would have been a very long one indeed.⁴⁰ It is therefore likely that Chaucer did not intend to finish the poem. Judging by the use of bird imagery, one can recognize that except for the use of the human/bird double perspective

which we have examined in the last chapter, the poet is employing bird imagery in an uncharacteristically one-dimensional way. At the point that the poem breaks off, there is no indication that the Squire intends to use his bird characters as intellectual signs, to develop their higher perspective on human experience, or to suggest a dimension of spiritual love which would provide a more profound framework for the birds-and-love imagery. This adds evidence to the theory we have already advanced that Chaucer is gently satirizing the young and inexperienced but ambitious storyteller.

The earlier chapters of this study held up the "Nun's Priest's Tale" as the most subtle and complex example of Chaucer's use of the bird as intellectual sign and the bird fable conventions. The convention of birds-and-love is an equally important element in the poem as it tends to develop and link some of the most important themes suggested by the other two conventions.

Early in the poem an important juxtaposition is developed which suggests the contrast between erotic and spiritual love that is so pervasive in Chaucer's poetry. On the one hand, we have the "povre wydwe" living on the poor farm where Chauntecleer and Pertelote hold court. Her style of life is seemingly as idealized as that of Chaucer's Plowman:

This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf,
In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,

For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
 By housbondrie of swich as God hir sente.
 She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
 Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
 Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
 Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
 In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
 Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
 No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
 Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
 Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
 Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
 And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
 The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
 N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
 No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
 Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak, -
 Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
 Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an ey or tweye;
 For she was, as it were, a maner deye.

(N.P.T. 11. 2824-2846)

As a startling contrast to this patient and simple woman are
 the low-flying Chauntecleer and Pertelote whose life-style
 has not been affected by a contemplative perspective on
 earthly pleasures. These two remarkable birds had been
 gradually developing their personalities and their love-
 affair since the thirteenth century Reynard cycle, but it is
 Chaucer who carries them fully into the world of fin amour,
 aristocratic court-yard, and fourteenth century intellectual
 circles:

. . . she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.
 In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.
 His voys was murier than the murie orgon
 On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
 Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge
 Than is a klokke or an abbey orlogge.
 By nature he knew ech ascencioun
 Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;
 For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,
 Thanne crew he, that it myghte nat been amended.

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whitter than the lylve flour,
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour.
 This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce
 Sevene hennes for to doon al his pleasaunce,
 Whiche were his sustres and his paramours,
 And wonder lyk to hym, as of colours;
 Of whiche the faireste hewed on hir throte
 Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote.
 Curteys she was, discreet and debonaire,
 And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire,
 Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold,
 That trewely she hath the herte in hoold
 Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith;
 (N.P.T. 11. 2849-2875)

The incongruity of the two worlds is immediately apparent and becomes more so when Chauntecleer next sings an erotic aubade to Pertelote. The two birds are clearly courtly lovers excepting, of course, the fact that Chauntecleer, in a twist provided by realism, does not limit himself to his paramour, nor does he worry about the rules of consanguinity.⁴¹ At this point, we have the first of a number of reversals within the convention of birds-and-love. Usually a courtly lover is confronted by the simplicity of the birds' social organization; here, the human representatives in the story are clearly superior to the aristocratic bird/lovers. Next we find that the traditional locus amoenus is replaced by a humble barnyard. A dream-vision is not required here because our narrator solves the problem of speaking birds by stating that in the days when his story took place, birds could talk - "as I have understonde" - but we are, nevertheless offered a

(dream even though it is very unlike those normally associated with the convention of birds-and-love. This dream is a premonition of the fox which will later try to eat Chauntecleer. We also have the requisite spring landscape complete with bird song, but the cock's description of the scene suggests that he has adopted the traditional role of the human observer of the natural scene:

Herkneth thise blisful briddes how they synge,
And se the fresshe floures how they sprynge;
(N.P.T. 11. 3201-2)

The sense of renewal of life in this spring setting, however, ironically leads Chauntecleer to a very close brush with death. Next, we move to the conventional bird-debate, but instead of it being concerned with love, the two argue "authoritatively" about the nature of dreams generally and Chauntecleer's dream particularly. Using exemplums, auctoritas, medical information, insults, and flattery, the two birds have the pretense of a learned debate. Pertelote's practical, down-to-earth advice is, "taak som laxatyf" (1. 2943). Chauntecleer, a cock of learning and imagination, is shocked by the lack of vision of his mistress and argues at length that dreams are premonitory - but the bottom line of his argument undercuts the sincerity of his intellectual position:

() . . . I seye forthermoor,
That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor,
For they been venymous, I woot it weel;
I hem diffye, I love hem never a deel !
(N.P.T. 11. 3153-6)

Nevertheless, to ensure that he wins the argument, Chauntecleer abandons the role of learned doctor and again becomes the worshipping courtly lover who will flatter and perhaps purposely mistranslate authorities to smooth the ruffled feathers of his companion. Although he is satisfied that the dream was premonitory, he nevertheless succumbs to the temptation to leave his perch to eat and "fether[e] Pertelote twenty tyme" (l. 3177), so he is caught by the fox and then released, at least partly, through the efforts of the widow and her companions. With all the excitement of the chase, it is difficult to know how serious Chaucer is when he alludes to the parallel between Adam and Eve and Chauntecleer and Pertelote, or when he poses the question as to whether Chauntecleer had free will if God had foreknowledge; certainly the humour would not be lost on the audience but neither would the philosophical dimension go unnoticed. These reversals and disproportionate allusions reflect the confused and disordered priorities of our bird protagonists.

Examined only through the scope of the convention of birds-and-love, this poem is fascinating in that it incorporates most of the primary elements of the convention - dream vision, courtly lovers, spring landscape with singing birds, alienated human observers, a bird-debate - but all slightly twisted in content or context. Some of these modifications, to be sure, were already a part of the Chauntecleer and Pertelote story when Chaucer first read it, but when the poet

exaggerates, and extends these incongruities we can recognize that he is deliberately wrenching the convention from its familiar bearings. In so doing, he provides pre-eminent entertainment for his audience; he suggests the confused priorities inherent in pride, false learning, and excessive erotic love; he allows his Nun's Priest to make subtle allusions to the Prioress and other Canterbury pilgrims; and he permanently enlarges the frame of the convention of birds-and-love.

Next we turn to a poem which depends on the convention of birds-and-love for both its themes and its structure. Although the House of Fame is usually classified as an early and/or minor work, it is a poem which still has critics arguing about its main theme. Is it a poem parodying⁴² or emulating⁴³ Dante?; a poem reflecting Chaucer's scepticism about the possibility of knowing "truth"?;⁴⁴ a poem examining the nature of love?;⁴⁵ a poem for the Order of Pegasas and the Christmas Revels at the Inner Court?;⁴⁶ a botched poem?;⁴⁷ a poem of fame, fortune, and love?;⁴⁸ or a prologue introducing a series of tales?⁴⁹ In this chapter I intend to approach the poem through the focus of the convention of birds-and-love; the House of Fame employs many of the conventional elements which we have studied in the first half of this chapter, and perhaps an examination in terms of the birds-and-love topoi can shed some new light on the purpose and theme of the poem.

The difficulties encountered in understanding the House of Fame are, at least in part, attributable to the fact that the poem is unfinished. I do not find that there is much evidence that the poem is almost finished. If this were the case, why did not Chaucer complete the last few lines? It seems more likely to me that he is on the verge of introducing the heart of the poem; the fact that on many occasions "love-tydynges" are promised, that a whole crew of characters which we would expect to be great storytellers are introduced, that while these characters are not fully individualized, they are certainly given more sense of presence than Fame's petitioners, and that a character who "seemed for to be/ A man of gret authorite" (ll. 2157-8) is on the verge of taking authority in the chaotic whirling house, all suggest that we are to be treated to tales of love. It seems, likely to me, therefore, that the House of Fame was intended as a frame for a series of tales such as those of The Canterbury Tales or The Legend of Good Women. While a hypothesis such as this cannot be proven beyond all doubt, I shall try to demonstrate how the poem's bird imagery supports this thesis, and I shall attempt to answer the objections which have been raised against this theory.

Although the ostensible subject of the poem is a quest for "love-tydynges",⁵⁰ the theme seems to involve something larger which encompasses more than stories of love. The poem, as we have it, is concerned with truth but more particularly

the truth in the poetic process. It, therefore, involves the question of the subjectivity of the artist/observer and artist/reporter - his limited perspective, his reliance on authorities, his personal sympathies, and the vicissitudes of fortune. A theme such as this, which makes the storyteller a participant in his own story, would be most appropriate for a poet who consistently enlists his persona as a character in his poetry and who makes his pilgrim storytellers into dramatic characters in The Canterbury Tales. In this second case, the poet is "twice removed" from objectivity for the persona ironically excuses himself from responsibility for the pilgrims' tales:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
 That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,
 Thogh that I pleylnly speke in this mateere,
 To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
 Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
 For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
 Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
 (Gen. Prol. ll. 725-736)

This, briefly, is my orientation toward the poem. In the paragraphs which follow I shall attempt to show how this theme is developed through the use of the convention of birds-and-love.

The poem utilizes the machinery of the dream vision, but the events do not take place in the spring nor is there a

spring landscape with singing birds. This initially seems a troublesome detail, but when one examines the nature of the love described in the poem, the winter setting is appropriate. The narrator prefaces his dream with conflicting explanations of the causes and significance of dreams but finds it impossible to choose one authority over the other so he decides to simply recount:

So wonderful a drem as I
The tenth day now of Decembre,
The which, as I kan now remembre,
I wol yow tellen everydel.

(H.F. 11. 62-5)

The dreamer describes a temple of Venus which is made of glass . and situated in the middle of a desert:

Then sawgh I but a large feld,
As fer as that I myghte see,
Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
Or bush or grass, or eryd lond;
For al the feld nas but of sond.

.

Ne no maner creature
That ys yformed be Nature
Ne sawgh I, me to rede or wisse.

(H.F. 11. 482-5 and 489-91)

Chaucer leaves no doubt that this is a temple dedicated to erotic love as the paintings on the walls depict a naked Venus with her doves, a brown-faced Vulcan, and a blind Cupid. We see the relevance of the wasteland setting and the December dating when the narrator next describes the love affair which is celebrated in the temple. On a brass plate the first lines of Virgil's Aeneid are written and then the

narrator finds paintings relating to the various adventures of Aeneas' voyage. The poet focusses, however, on one episode — Aeneas leaving Dido — and he moves from Virgil's account to that of Ovid's Heroides,⁵¹ to allow Dido the full opportunity to complain of Aeneas's and mankind's inconstancy, her loss of good reputation, and Fame's wickedness. It is significant that Chaucer allows this part of the story to emphasize the baseness of Aeneas' behaviour because it is quite clear in Virgil that the hero must, for the sake of his sacred mission, leave Dido behind.⁵² Later on he acknowledges this fact, but he does so with a noticeable lack of emphasis and conviction:

But to excusen Eneas
 Fullyche of al his grete trespas
 The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,
 Bade hym goo into Itayle,
 And leve Auffrikes regioun,
 And Dido and hir faire toun.
 (H.F. ll. 427-433)

In the second section of the poem, his guide warns:

. . . , that thou hast no tydynges
 Of Loves folk yf they be glade,
 Ne of nought elles that God made;
 And not oonly fro fer contree
 That ther no tydyng cometh to thee,
 But of thy verray neyghbores,
 That duellen almost at thy dores,
 Thou herist neyther that ne this;
 For whan thy labour doon al ys,
 And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
 In stede of reste and newe thynges
 Thou goost hom to thy hous anon;
 And, also domb as any stoon,
 Thou sittest at another book
 Tyl fully daswed ys thy look,
 And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
 Although thyn abstynence ys lyte.
 (H.F. ll. 644-660)

The poet is accused of studying and reading at the expense of the real life which surrounds him for, like most medieval poets, Chaucer has been taught to value the literary experience as that which has solidity, truth, and authority; the day-to-day details of life are transitory, subjective, and of little value. But the poet has already demonstrated in the temple of Venus that he is fully capable of allowing his own subjectivity and limited perspective to transform his classical sources, and he has even earlier set up a "sic et non" with "authoritative" definitions of dreams. Later on he will discover that even:

. . . Omer made lyes,
 Feynyng in hys poetries,
 And was to Grekes favorable;
 (H.F. 11. 1477-9)

"Auctoritas" is finally not the touchstone of truth the poet had anticipated: as the narrator learns more about the nature of subjectivity and perspective in artistic creation, he is freed from some of the constraints of tradition and convention and is enabled to modify his sources and develop character, situation, and setting using both natural observation and convention.

For the time being, however, the narrator wishes to escape from this erotic love "wasteland" of his sources; soon, with the help of the eagle, he will transcend the conventional dream/vision:

"O Crist!" thoughte I, "that art in blysse,
 Fro fantome and illusion
 Me save !" and with devocion
 Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.

(H.F. ll. 492-5)

Jupiter's eagle, which arrives to rescue the narrator, is an endearingly verbose and pedantic comic figure who incorporates the philosophical perspective of Boethius or Macrobius, with the comic style of Tereus in Aristophanes' The Birds. The eagle snatches poor "Geffrey" up in his talons, assures him of his safety, and flies to a tremendous height:

. . . half so high as this
 Nas Alixandre Macedo;
 Ne the kyng, Daun Scipio,
 That saw in drem, at poynt devys,
 Hell and erthe and paradys;

(H.F. ll. 914-8)

The frightened poet is given a philosophical perspective of the world in his actualized contemplative flight, and then he is briefed on the theory of sound, wherein sound, like all other created things, "Hath his propre mansyon/ To which hit seketh to repaire" (ll. 754-5). All sound and speech is "eyr ybroken" and as when a pebble disturbs the surface of water, circular waves of ever-increasing size move out farther and farther until they reach their proper place which is the Palace of Fame.⁵³ The poet has been literally forced to acknowledge the kind of "bird's eye view" perspective on earthly life described by Boethius and Macrobius and is now to be taken to the House of Fame where he will be likewise confronted by the relativity of earthly "truth" and

"objectivity".

The Palace of Fame is built on ice and the names of the famous are written variously on the north and south side of this base : if the name is written on the south side, the sun will melt away the engraving; if written on the north, it shall be preserved. The pinnacles of the beryl castle are peopled, "Of al maner of mynstralles/ And gestiours, that tellen tales/ Both of wepinge and of game," (ll. 1197-9), and the halls are filled with petitioners for Fame's totally arbitrary favours. When the narrator is asked if he has come to petition for fame, he answers:

"I cam not hyder, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, by my hed !
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde.
I wot myself best how y stonde;
For what I drye or what I thynke,
I wil myselven al hit drynke,
Certeyne, for the more part,
As fer forthe as I kan myn art."

(H.F. ll. 1874-1882)

But while Chaucer's own quest for fame is probably a subsidiary issue, the larger theme involves the whole question of the perceived or received knowledge that a poet uses in his art. Chaucer, at the beginning of the House of Fame, is, himself, like the Goddess Fame when he chooses details from authoritative sources and decides to elaborate and emphasize the inconstant lover theme and consequently censure Aeneas. Now, in horror, he watches essentially the same mechanism at work. But it is taken one step further when he is next

guided to the revolving House of Rumour which he twice likens to a cage and describes as being full of "chirkynges" and "gygges" (ll. 1942-3). This bird cage or bird house is composed of twigs and has holes on the top and thousands of entrances, but it is revolving so violently that the eagle, who ambiguously states "therfore y duelle,"⁵⁴ must help him enter. Once inside, it appears to the poet that the cage is no longer moving. This seems to suggest the psychological equivalent of the flight above the earth: from a proper perspective both the world and the House of Rumour appear mutable and contingent; on earth or in the bird cage of rumour one becomes snared and involved, and all seems normal. The cage of rumour contains, significantly, contemporary sound which is waiting to fly off through the roof to go to be judged by Fame, and each of these sounds takes on the physical image of the person who made it. Particularly interesting is the list of characters present:

And, Lord, this hous in alle tymes,
 Was ful of shipmen and pilgrimes,
 With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
 Entremedled with tydynges,
 And eek allone be hemselfe.
 O, many a thousand tymes twelve
 I saugh I eke of these pardoners,
 Currours, and eke messagers,
 With boystes crammed ful of lyes
 As ever vessel was with lyes.

(H.F. ll. 2121-2130)

Appropriately, this list centres on medieval characters one could most expect to tell strange stories - and it is difficult not to think of the Canterbury storytellers - but what

is perhaps more significant is the fact that the narrator takes a quite different attitude towards the bird house and its inhabitants than he had taken to Fame's petitioners. In Fame's Palace, the narrator felt detached from his surroundings; now, he is immediately drawn to these contemporary characters who instead of coming out of "olde bokes" are derived from daily observation. His enthusiasm is demonstrated in his request to his guide that he be given more time in the House of Rumour:

. . . "Y prey the
That thou a while abide me,
For Goddis love, and lete me seen
What wondres in this place been;
For yit, paraunter, y may lere
Som good thereon, or sumwhat here
That leef me were, or that y wente."
(H.F. 11. 1993-1999)

His reaction to the storytellers clearly demonstrates his desire to hear:

. . . I alther-fastest wente
Aboute, and dide al myn entente
Me for to pleyen and for to lere,
And eke a tydynge for to here,
That I had herd of som contre
That shal not now be told for me -
For hit no nede is, redely;
Folk kan synge hit bet than I;
(H.F. 11. 2131-8)

The reference to "som contre" is problematical. Koonce argues that it would be a reference to Jerusalem or Heaven;⁵⁵ however, there seems no real evidence to point to an answer to this dilemma. A more fruitful approach might be to note that the poet has introduced a detail which will have to be

explained later - and I suspect that the explanation will take more than a few lines - and states that others can, and likely will, tell it better. There seems a strong likelihood that the ones who "kan synge hit bet than I" are the characters particularized in the next lines:

I herde a gret noyse withalle
 In a corner of the halle,
 Ther men of love-tydynges tolde,
 And I gan thiderward beholde;
 (H.F. ll. 2141-4)

I would suggest that these men are our storytellers and that the "chirkynges" in the bird cage will be the "love-tydynges" referred to earlier in the poem. This assembly of "birds"; however, is as chaotic as the one in the Parlement of Foules:

. . . I saugh rennyng every wight,
 As faste as that they hadden myght;
 And everych cried, "What thing is that?"
 And somme sayde, "I not never what."
 And whan they were alle on an hepe,
 Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
 And clamben up on other faste,
 And up the nose and yēn kaste,
 And troden faste on others heles,
 And stampen, as men doon aftir eles.
 Atte laste y saugh a man,
 Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;
 But he semed for to be
 A man of gret auctorite. . . .
 (H.F. ll. 2145-2158)

Somehow this figure which the narrator explicitly states he does not recognize seems prepared to bring some order to those characters who are telling "love-tydynges". The suggestion of Koonce that the figure is Christ,⁵⁶ of Ruggiers that he is Boethius,⁵⁷ or of others that he is John of Gaunt

or Richard II⁵⁸ seem to miss the mark because of the impropriety and incongruity of these characters appearing in a bedlam bird cage, the statement that the poet does not recognize the "man of grete ~~authorite~~", and the fact that the House of Rumour is reserved for contemporary tidings. A more likely candidate would be a "man of grete authorite" much like Harry Bailey who with several notable exceptions brings order to the, at times, unruly Canterbury pilgrims. At this point the bird imagery in the poem converges to focus on the convention of birds-and-love: the bird-guide eagle to a debate on love; the poets in the Palace of Fame who are described in terms of birds (ll. 1516 and 1522-3); Fame with her avian attributes (ll. 1381-2; 1391-2; and l. 703); the bird cage of rumour with its bird-lure "gygges" (l. 1942), its bird sound "chirkynges" (l. 1943), and its "winged wondres" (l. 2118) which fly out the doors - all lead to a conventional bird-debate which has been adapted to a very unconventional situation. Chaucer has created the frame for a collection of stories around the idea of the bird-debate: in the same way that the birds in Le Jugement D'Amours, De Venus La Deese d'Amor, The Owl and the Nightingale and the Parlement of Foules debate and argue and fight over questions of love, so also will the House of Rumour's "birds" debate "love" with their "love-tydynges". It seems clear that these "love-tydynges" "al mot out, other late or rathe" (l. 2139), and if we missed the love debate in the House of Fame,

fortunately it turned up later in the love and marriage debate in The Canterbury Tales.

Obviously there are several objections to this theory. At the beginning of Book III Chaucer refers to "This lytel laste bok" (l. 1093), and it could be reasonably argued that if Book III continued for much longer, it would not be "lytel", and that if more books were to be added, it would not be "laste". In the first instance, it is helpful to remember that Chaucer describes Troilus and Criseyde as a "lytel boke"⁵⁹ when it would definitely exceed our normal standard of "little". As for "laste", it is likely that the poet uses the word in the sense of "latest" - in which sense he and his contemporaries demonstrably used the word.⁶⁰ Another objection would be that for a prologue, The House of Fame is disproportionately long. This is undoubtedly true, but one feels uncomfortable criticizing as too long a work of art which is thoughtful, provocative, humorous, and aesthetically pleasing. Chaucer makes explicit in this poem ideas and themes which are implicit in "The General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales and whether one prefers implicit to explicit one must recognize that explicit exposition usually requires more lines, more words. As for the more general objection that the poem lacks unity, there is no question that the parts of the poem are fully integrated into the whole: the quest for "tydinges/ of Loves folk" does not conflict with the theme of the vicissitudes of fame because the

emphasis is placed on "tidings" as much as on "love", and what we are dealing with in much of the poem is the subjectivity of "tidings" generally. The convention of birds-and-love reinforces this theme and adds unifying force to the poem. In Book I, "tydynges/ of Loves folk" are explicitly described, however, there are none of the conventional birds present, the season is winter, and the setting is a wasteland. When a bird does arrive on the scene, it is not to celebrate erotic love but rather to take the poet away from the Temple of Venus. This eagle is described and conceived as a humorous character but that should not discourage us from regarding him as the "fetheris in thi thought"⁶¹ which guides to a contemplative perspective on life. The bird is a symbol of the love espoused in Macrobius and Boethius because he offers a proper perspective on earthly experience and because of his humour and explanations of natural science. The contemplative vision understands the workings of the universe, and humour, not solemnity, is derived from a recognition that humanity is so snared to the chaotic earthly perspective that it cannot appreciate the relativity of human experience and the higher purpose of an ordered universe.⁶² We have, then, an emissary of spiritual love, rather than the conventional bird-guide who leads the narrator to the bird-debate on erotic love. In Book III, the whole description of Fame and her palace is linked to "love-tydynges" not as much by subject matter as in terms of the veracity or subjectivity involved

in the creation of stories of love. The narrator witnesses Fame dealing with reputation in much the same way that he, himself, did when describing the Aeneas and Dido episode. But next "Geffrey" is led to the bird-debate and instead of birds debating like men, we have men in a bird cage or bird house "chirkyng" their "love-tydynges". The stories which will be told under the auspices of a Natura or a Harry Bailey type of authority figure will be "tydynges/ of Loves folk" and they will be furiously fighting for survival just like the contending theories of love in the conventional bird-debates. The convention of birds-and-love directs us to birds debating on earthly love, but also provides us with a philosophical backdrop - a bird's eye view contemplative perspective - as an intellectual context for the debate.

The House of Fame and the Parlement of Foules are both concerned with "love-tydynges" but whereas the former emphasizes "tydynges", the latter investigates "love". The Parlement of Foules clearly follows in the tradition of the bird-debate, and all of the conventional machinery is present: a narrator searching for love; a visionary dream; a guide to the garden of love; an assembly of birds presided over by an authority figure; and a debate which centres on the nature of love. It is, however, the exceptional use which Chaucer makes of the conventional elements which lifts this poem to the philosophical and humorous dimensions for which it is so admired.

The Parlement of Foules features a framing technique which is similar to the one employed less successfully in the Book of the Duchess. In the latter poem, the narrator's reading offers an attitude towards excessive grieving expressed by the dead Seys to his wife Alcyone:

. . . "My swete wyf,
Awake ! let be your sorwful lyf !
For in your sorwe there lyth no red.
For, certes, swete, I nam but ded;"
(B.D. 11. 201-4)

In the narrator's dream, he encounters a knight dressed in black who is obviously in mourning, and who has lost all interest in living. After listening to the knight describe his loss in terms of the wheel of fortune and a game of chess, the narrator manipulates the mourner to actually state that his wife is dead and to recognize the futility of further excessive grief. As the poem unquestionably concerns John of Gaunt's feelings at the death of Blanche, one sees that Chaucer is placing the courtly love near-suicidal grief at the death of a loved one in some kind of larger perspective through the framing story. In the Parlement of Foules, the framing story is from Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" as reported in Macrobius' commentary. At first glance, this might not appear to be an innovation as the narrator of The Romance of the Rose begins by reading the same book. Guillaume de Lorris, however, merely mentions the text and uses it as "auctoritas" for his dream. Chaucer moves beyond this

conventional opening by expanding the description of Scipio's dream, and undermining the traditional trappings of the bird-debate. Affrycan gives Scipio a bird's eye view of the universe and warns him:

... "Know thyself first immortal,
And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse
To commune profit, and thow shalt not mysse
To comen swiftly to that place deere
That ful of blysse is and of soules cleere.

"But brekers of the lawe, soth to seyne,
And likerous folk, after that they ben dede,
Shul whirle aboute th'erthe alwey in peyne.,

(P.F. 11. 73-80)

Although earthly erotic love is ostensibly the focal point of the poem, when Chaucer introduces the bird-debate by paraphrasing Affrycan's summary:

Than bad he hym, syn erthe was so lyte,
And ful of torment and of harde grace,
That he ne shulde hym in the world delyte.,

(P.F. 11. 64-6)

he is calling into question the basis of three centuries of bird love-debates. And this sense of disjunction is acknowledged in the narrator's statement that "I hadde thyng which that I nolde,/ And ek I nadde that thyng that I wolde" (11. 90-1), and reflected in the contentio structure of the lines at the beginning of the poem.

The narrator is, like his counterparts in Li Fabel dou Dieu d'Amours and De Venus La Deese d'Amor, searching for love. Characteristically, however, the narrator of the bird-debate is seeking an actual mistress, his plight is serious, and his

success is somehow dependent on the bird-debate. The narrator of the Parlement of Foules, on the other hand, admits:

. . . that I knowe nat Love in dede,
Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
(P.F. ll. 8-9)

Nevertheless, he reads his books in hope of "a certeyn thing to lerne" (l. 20). Chaucer's narrator is a "voyeur" of love, and he styles himself not only without a mistress but also only really interested in love in the abstract. From the beginning, he is seen in a slightly pathetic light - as, for example, when he hesitates before the ambiguous inscription on the gate and must be shoved through by Affrycan - yet his reading has led him to a "certain" immutable type of love which, while it might not be the type of love he expected, does seem the kind of earthly love which has most validity in the poem.

The earthly love featured in the poem is epitomized by the dual inscription on the gate to the garden of love:

"Thorgh me men gon into that blysfyl place
Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure;
Thorgh me men gon unto the welle of grace,
There grene and lusty May shal evere endure.
This is the way to al good aventure.
Be glade, thow redere, and thy sorwe of-caste;
Al open am I - passe in, and sped thee faste !"

"Thorgh me men gon," than spak that other side,
"Unto the mortal strokes of the spere
Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde,
Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne layes bere.
This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were
There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;
Th'eschewing is only the remedye !"

(P.F. ll. 127-140)

It is significant that these two types of love seem so distinct yet so inseparable. The same type of incongruity is reflected by Chaucer's decision to replace the traditional guide to the garden of love - a bird, Venus, the God of Love - with a discourteous advocate of spiritual love who has the contemplative bird's eye perspective if not the wings and the beak. This ambivalent description of love can be viewed on one side as a kind of spiritual, omnipresent springtime much like that espoused in Paulinus of Nola's "Ver avibus voces aperit, mea lingua suum ver". "Grene and lusty May shal evere endure", "that blysfyl place" (echoing Affrycan's earlier description of heaven),⁶³ "the welle of grace", and "hertes hele", all suggest a spiritual state of love but one, significantly, which can exist independent of seasonal change in the earthly garden of love. Furthermore, when the section of the garden reflecting this love is described, it is portrayed in terms of plenitude, health, utility, and harmony. Here birds "synge,/ With voys of aungel in here armonye;" (ll. 190-1) and the music is equal to that in heaven:

Of instruments of strenges in acord
 Herde I so pleye a ravyshyng swetnesse,
 That God, that makere is of al and lord,
 Ne herde nevere beter, as I gesse.
 Therwith a wynd, unnethe it myghte be lesse,
 Made in the leves grene a noyse softe
 Acordaunt to the foules song alofte.
 (P.F. ll. 197-203)

This is an Eden-like setting and while there is no initial reference to erotic love, there is, significantly, much

emphasis on fertility, plenitude, and "commune profyt". On the other hand, the other inscription is studded with the trappings of erotic fin amour - Disdayn, Daunger, sterility, and sorrow - and when this side of the garden is described, it is depicted as almost a frozen tableau filled with personifications from The Romance of the Rose, mythological figures connected with erotic love, and an atmosphere of shame and frustration. Here again the birds are beautiful and plentiful,⁶⁴ but their song is not described in terms of angels and heaven, as they now belong to the tradition which produced the troubadour poetry of Bernart de Ventadorn.

When we are introduced to Nature - "the vicaire of the almyghty Lord" (l. 379) - she is found, not surprisingly, in the part of the garden, "that was so sote and grene" (l. 296):

And in a launde, upon an hil of floures,
Was set this noble goddessse Nature.
Of braunches, were here halles and here boures
Iwrought after here cast and here mesure;
Ne there nas foul that cometh of engendrure
That they ne were prest in here presence,
To take hire dom and yeve hire audyence.
(P.F. ll. 302-8)

It is important to note that Nature is very much a part of this Edenic section of the garden; this is no other-worldly type of love but is, rather, integrally connected with fertility, beauty, "engendrure", and common profit. However, the harmony which is emphasized when every bird takes "his owne place" (l. 320) is shattered when the exaggerated ideals of erotic fin amour enter through the love demands of the

eagles. The birds, who with their ability to fly, have the potential to view the world from Affrycan's vantage point but instead fall into the error of "synguler profit".⁶⁵ All three suitors have varying degrees of selfishness in common, and their demands are based respectively on (1) faithfulness to the mistress whatever happens; (2) length of service; and (3) intensity of passion. Nature and the tercelet offer the advice most reasonable to harmony and plenitude - mating between equals - but their candidate seems to have already disqualified himself with the confusion of hierarchical principles implicit in his opening statement, "Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,/ I chese, . . ." (ll. 416-7).⁶⁶ Exaggerated emphasis on sexual passion and the trappings of courtly love have replaced the principles of plenitude, rationality, and hierarchy so even the much sought after formel eagle asks for a respite because "I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide" (l. 652). And who can blame her considering the context which the poem has set up: she has before her two natural settings, one which is dominated by fertility, plenitude, and harmony, and the other governed by Venus but peopled by Daunger and Disdayn and pervaded by the atmosphere of sterility and frustration. The assembly of birds should and does take place in the pre-lapsus Edenic setting but somehow the fin amour elements of the convention of birds-and-love have encroached on "commune profit" territory. Two traditions of birds-and-love imagery are set up in

contradiction to one another when normally one is employed to govern the poem: birds are either seen as instinctual and unencumbered by human mating problems or they are experts and arbiters of fin amour - here we have both traditions working within the same bird assembly.

The poet, like the narrator of Pervigilium Veneris, is alienated from the love which he is aware is going on all around him. Instead of the traditional bird, Venus, or Cupid for a guide, he is given a spiritual mentor who shows him a kind of earthly eternal springtime of love which, like Paulinus of Nola's springtime, admits all the joyful elements of Scipio's vision but discards the contemptus mundi penumbra. One might then expect that, like de Ventadorn, Gower, and Graunson, the narrator would be treated to a view of the uncomplicated harmonious love of birds which would form a contrast to his present situation. Instead he is confronted with the fact that many of the birds have taken up the subtleties of fin amour and "synguler profit" and end up frustrated. The harmonious assembly breaks into "flytyngs" between idealism and practicality, and aristocratic and plebian tastes which are dramatically displayed to an extent unseen in previous bird-debates. The context, moreover, provides an even greater disagreement because we have been presented with an earthly ideal of plenitude, hierarchy, and harmony, and a formel who intends to keep to that ideal. The only recourse for the narrator if he is to have "that blysfyl

place/ Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure" (ll. 127-8) is to forsake the exaggerated sexual passion and self-seeking of "likerous folk" and accept the principles of reason, hierarchy, and fertility as the basis for mating - exactly those principles valued so highly in medieval marriage contracts.⁶⁷ And it is here that St. Valentine becomes important in the poem. How this Christian saint came to be associated with lovers is lost in a murky past.⁶⁸ The same might be said for February 14 as the day on which all birds mate. Whatever the origin of the connection - and Chaucer and Graunson make the first recorded references to it - St. Valentine is seen as a Christian saint who intercedes on behalf of human lovers and who presides over the mating of birds on his feast day. It is significant, however, that a saint is so closely associated with the mating of birds and humans because, as we have seen earlier, in the secular convention of birds-and-love, bird mating is usually divorced from human love as a result of the seeming disparity between the simplicity of one and the complexity of the other. On the other hand, in the Christian tradition where one would expect St. Valentine to be found, birds and love are prominent but there is no mating and the love described is spiritual. The secular tradition emphasizes temporality, alienation, and eros; the Christian tradition, perpetual springtime, unity, and spiritual love. It would appear to be one or the other. But the Parlement of Foules does not ask us to choose between spiritual and erotic love;

if it did, the parliament would break up before the vast majority of the birds had successfully chosen their mates, and there would be no roundel to return us to the harmony of nature and the celebration of St. Valentine. In this poem, St. Valentine becomes an intermediary between the secular and Christian traditions of erotic and spiritual love — just as he, as a saint, is an intermediary between man and God, earth and heaven. And it is significant that Graunson's use of St. Valentine in Complainte de sainte Valentine⁶⁹ is similar. After the narrator's mistress has died, he is prepared to forego erotic love, but St. Valentine intervenes and presents him with a new mistress. Chaucer appears to be working with the same idea of mediating between two seemingly contradictory ideals, but he takes it much further. The state suggested by "grene and lusty May shal evere endure" is one normally reserved for spiritual love, but the poet fills it with an earthly assembly of mating birds who are, for the most part, successfully combining eros with "commune profyt". Under the auspices of St. Valentine and Nature, both mediators between heaven and earth, a synthesis of two traditions within the convention of birds-and-love has occurred so that a sense of community, eros, and a perpetual feeling of rejuvenation combine in the mating process — as long as one maintains the higher perspective which sees the folly of exaggerated exaltation of sexual passion and "synguler profit".⁷⁰ The Parlement of Foules, finally, is not a poem of sexual

frustration, but rather a celebration of mating based on the principles of reason, hierarchy, plenitude, and common profit. Although the narrator/observer does not seem to recognize it, he should feel integrated into this natural scene. The birds, who should themselves mediate between earth and sky and who should possess, according to Ambrosé, an instinctive sense of community, do finally live up to their potential and become natural symbols of supernatural spiritual love.

Chaucer's contribution to the convention of birds-and-love is impressive. He inherited a form which had seen a fairly steady development since the classics and by working within the familiar framework of this convention he could effectively prepare his audience for striking variations on familiar themes. He contributed humour, irony, natural observation, a heightened sense of drama, a concern for philosophical issues, and most importantly, an enlarged sense of love. The transmutations of the elements within the convention were not introduced merely to be shocking, innovative, or amusing; the changes reflect and suggest new ways of thinking, feeling, and seeing. Chaucer's use of birds-and-love topoi such as the spring setting, locus amoenus, dream vision, and the bird-debate on the nature of love is very unconventional. Generally, he alters the significance of the topos by inverting it or by moving it from its traditional context. In the House of Fame, for example, we have a dream-vision but the conventional spring season is replaced by a winter season to suggest the

sterility of the love depicted in the temple of glass. The "Nun's Priest's Tale" adopts the conventional locus amoenus for its setting but our bird protagonists are depicted in a humble barnyard rather than an enclosed garden: this adaptation reflects Chaucer's perversion of traditional intellectual and moral priorities. A more dramatic alteration of the convention of birds-and-love can be seen in the House of Fame when Chaucer dramatically extends the idea of the bird-debate so that it becomes a conceptual framework for a collection of love stories and, at the same time, it reinforces the theme of the unreliability of "tydynges" by identifying the prospective storytellers with birds in a cage. On the other hand, the Parlement of Foules appears to use the birds-and-love topoi in a more traditional way — except that Chaucer informs the whole poem with a sense of spiritual love right from the beginning. Nevertheless, eros is not depicted as a negative, animal activity. Chaucer obviously finds erotic love ennobling and gratifying but only when the passion does not mask self-interest and usurp higher principles. The poet characteristically places erotic love against a philosophical backdrop of spiritual love which seems inextricably tied to a contemplative bird's eye perspective on the universe. Whether it be a flight in the talons of an eagle, a synopsis of Scipio's dream, a startling allusion to Scripture, or a pilgrimage to Canterbury incorporated into a reverdie, the contemplative dimension gives a hierarchical

context to humanity's secular concerns in general and its erotic preoccupation in particular. While it is not uncommon to find the contemplative perspective in medieval literature, it is rarely combined with the convention of birds-and-love unless the contrast is intended to undermine the interest in erotic relationships, youth, and earthly joy. That Chaucer does not make the contrast too unbalanced is part of his greatness: his concern for his protagonists, his understanding of their aspirations, his gentle irony rather than satire, his insight into the subtlety of human interaction, set him apart from the majority of his artistic contemporaries. Finally, in the Parlement of Foules even the contrast of earthly and contemplative fades into the background: a synthesis between the values of the erotic and spiritual is found when St. Valentine and Nature encourage mating for "commune profit" through the principles of reason, hierarchy, and plenitude.

NOTES

¹ Psychoanalysis, of course, also argues that birds are phallic-shaped and that "flying" is symbolic of sexual intercourse.

² See James J. Wilhelm, The Cruellest Month: Spring, Nature and Love in Classical and Medieval Lyrics, pp. 76-7.

³ ll. 1-9. Medieval Song: An Anthology of Hymns and Lyrics, trans. James J. Wilhelm (New York: E.P. Dutton Co., 1971), p. 28.

⁴ ll. 11-17.

⁵ ll. 20-24.

⁶ The Cruellest Month, p. 139

⁷ See E.S. Duckett, Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 153-4.

⁸ See Helen Waddell, Medieval Latin Lyrics (1933; Rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1952), "Written for His Lost Nightingale" (pp. 98-9), and "Lament For The Cuckoo" (pp. 88-9).

⁹ ll. 6-8, 18-20, 36-43. Wilhelm, Medieval Song, pp. 61-3. See Waddell, pp. 92-7, for Latin original. There is some question as to whether Alcuin wrote this poem. See Waddell, Medieval Latin Lyrics, p. 317.

¹⁰ Medieval Songs, ll. 1-8, 21-4, pp. 68-9. See Waddell, Medieval Latin Lyrics, pp. 168-9, for Latin original. Bees were considered birds in medieval encyclopedias. See T.H. White, The Bestiary, pp. 153-9, and Chaucer's Parlement of Foules, ll. 353-4.

11 Medieval Songs, pp. 69-70, ll. 29-40. See Waddell, Medieval Latin Lyrics, pp. 156-9, for Latin original.

12 Medieval Songs, p. 71. See Waddell, pp. 168-9, for Latin original.

13 Frederick Goldin, ed. and trans., Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères: An Anthology and a History (New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 136-41, ll. 1-8. This useful text provides original and translation on facing pages.

14 ll. 49-56.

15 Goldin. "Tant ai mo cor ple de joya" pp. 129-134, ll. 1-12.

16 ll. 37-48.

17 ll. 49-52.

18 pp. 144-49, ll. 1-8.

19 Amores 2. 19. 36, in The Loves, The Art of Beauty, The Remedies for Love and The Art of Love, trans. R. Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1957), p. 66.

20 James J. Wilhelm, The Cruellest Month, p. 34.

21 Later, in Jean de Condé's La Messe des Oisiaus et li Plais des Chanonesses et des Grises Nonains, one even finds a light-hearted depiction of a religious service sung by birds in honour of Venus. A company of canonessees attend this court of love to lodge a complaint against the grey nuns who have stolen their lovers.

22 e.g., Peire D'Alvernhe, "Rossinhol, el seu repaire", Goldin, p. 162.

23 See J.M. Teffler, "The Evolution of a Medieval Theme", Durham Univ. Journal, 45 (1952), p. 26.

24 De Venus la Deese d'Amour.

25 Marie de France, Lai de Laüstic, and Lai de Yonec.

26 Boccaccio, The Decameron, Fifth Day and Fourth Story. The expression was likely current earlier. Piehler, Visionary Landscape, notes its use in Chrétien's Cliges, see pp. 100-1.

27 Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), vol. I, p. 58.

28 Charles Oulmont, Les Débats du Clerc et du Chevalier (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1911), pp. 124-42.

29 Oulmont, pp. 167-83.

30 Oulmont, pp. 197-216.

31 Oulmont, pp. 217-22.

32 Kathryn Hume, The Owl and the Nightingale: The Poem and Its Critics (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), provides an excellent summary of the various interpretations of this complex poem.

33 The "Knight's Tale", l. 2988.

34 Boece, Bk. IV, pr. i, l. 66.

35 See above, pp. 198-9.

36 Bk. I, ll. 41-9 and passim. The association of "fowling" or bird hunting with love is quite ancient. In Love Poems of Ancient Egypt, trans. Ezra Pound and Noel Stock (New York: New Directions, 1962), "Pleasant Songs to the Sweetheart Who Meets You in the Fields" uses fowling imagery quite extensively to describe the sensation of falling in love.

37 It is interesting to compare this image of the fowler with the more famous one in "The Prologue" to The Legend of Good Women (Text F, ll. 130-9). In the latter poem, the fowler is clearly placed in opposition to the birds who are joyfully preparing for love and mating.

38 Later Criseyde is netted and caught, but it is the masculine and aggressive Diomedes who is the fisherman who "leyde out hook and lyne." (Bk. V, l. 777).

39 This motif, which, in the interests of brevity, was not discussed in the earlier survey of the birds and love convention is a popular detail of folklore. By breaking down the communication barrier between birds and man it allows for more intense interaction between nature and civilization. Usually a bird or animal is required to help a human protagonist in his quest, and this implies that human intellect is insufficient to understand life fully. We have seen that the bird is often chosen because it is part of nature but also because it sees from a higher perspective. The motif appears in Celtic folklore and in the Volsunga Saga where Sigurd eats the heart of Fafnir, the worm, and learns the language of the birds. It also survives in the Grimm's Household Stories tale "The White Snake". For a full account, see J.G. Frazer, "The Language of Animals", in Garnered Sheaves (London: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 93-127 and 431-81. It appears that the Squire was only using the motif as a substitute for the dream vision; were he not, the poem might have been potentially as profound as the Parlement of Foules.

40 See, for example, the analogues in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago:1941; Rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 357-76. For the Squire's use of rhetoric, see R.S. Haller, "Chaucer's 'Squire's Tale' and the Uses of Rhetoric", Modern Philology 62 (1965), pp. 285-95, and D. Pearsall, "The Squire as Storyteller", University of Toronto Quarterly 34 (1965), pp. 82-92.

41 It is difficult to believe that Chaucer was not familiar with the use of the word "cok" as euphemism for "penis". "Pilcok" was used as a cant word for "penis" earlier and only slightly after Chaucer, the poem "I have a gentil cok" seems quite clearly to refer to the penis.

42 John Gardner, The Life and Times of Chaucer (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 257.

43 B.G. Koonce, Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame; Symbolism in The House of Fame, passim.

44 S. Delany, Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972) passim.

45 W.O. Sypherd, Studies in Chaucer's House of Fame, Chaucer Society, 2nd ser., no. 39 (1908; Rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1965) passim.

46 R.J. Shoenck, "A Legal Reading of Chaucer's House of Fame", University of Toronto Quarterly 23 (1953), pp. 185-92.

47 R. Preston, Chaucer (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 39.

48 P.G. Ruggiers, "The Unity of Chaucer's House of Fame", Studies in Philology 50 (1953), pp. 16-29.

49 J.M. Manly, Kittredge Anniversary Papers (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1913), p. 73 ff.

50 See, for example: ll. 615-650; ll. 651-677; ll. 2141-2144; and the whole Dido and Aeneas story.

51 Heroides, VII, "Dido to Aeneas".

52 Chaucer employs nearly two hundred lines to describe the Dido and Aeneas episode and thirty-one lines to describe the last eight books of the Aeneid.

53 The oral/aural nature of medieval reading and readings would make this passage on the nature of sound more relevant to poetry of the Middle Ages than to contemporary poetry.

54 l. 2001. The eagle is stating that he lives to bring the poet to the house, but perhaps he also suggests that appropriately, he lives in a bird house.

55 Koonce, pp. 270-71.

56 Koonce, pp. 270-73.

57 P. Ruggiers, "The Unity of Chaucer's House of Fame", p. 28.

58 See Robinson, p. 788, for critics who have identified the "man of great authority" with some of Chaucer's contemporaries.

59 Troilus and Criseyde, V, l. 1786.

60 Middle English Dictionary, H. Kurath and S. Kuhn eds., (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1952—). Entry under "laste", p. 676, vol. V.

61 Boece, Bk. IV, l. 66.

62 John of Salisbury's comments on the comedy of secular, earthly life is applicable here. See Policraticus, Bk. III, chap. viii.

63 l. 48; l. 72; l. 77; and l. 83.

64 And on the temple, of dowves white and fayre⁴
Saw I syttyng many an hundred peyre. ll. 237-8.

65 This is Dido's expression to describe Aeneas' unfaithful behaviour. House of Fame, l. 310.

66 It is significant that six lines before, Nature, herself, has used the word "feere" (l. 410) in her directions for the mating. The first eagle, thus, expressly rejects an important principle in the mating process.

67 Fin amour is, of course, not necessarily extra-marital. There are many examples of successful courtly marriages in Chaucer's poetry, but one might particularly note the "Franklin's Tale", the "Knight's Tale", and the Book of the Duchess. Alceste, in "The Prologue" to The Legend of Good Women, explicitly relates "fyn lovyng" to marriage. F. ll. 544-5.

68 There is nothing in the biography of either martyr named Valentine to account for his association with lovers. An interesting possibility is that the idea that birds mated on February 14 and that it was a day for choosing lovers originated with a popular tradition going back to pagan rituals, and that the saint was merely added on because the festival corresponded with his saint day and he legitimized the occasion. The Roman Lupercalia, which involved fertility and

purification rituals, was celebrated on February 15 and it is quite possible that ~~these~~ rituals were perpetuated and extended in folk tradition before they were picked up by courtly circles.

69 See pp. 211-2.

70 In the Complaint of Mars, a bird sings Mars' lament about his unsuccessful liaison with Venus. Despite the fact that the song is sung on St. Valentine's Day, the affair, which is described as degrading, motivated primarily by sexuality, inconstant, and adulterous, is a disaster.

CONCLUSION

We began this thesis by suggesting that Chaucer's use of bird imagery is conventional yet highly individualistic. This study has attempted to demonstrate the vitality and currency of the conventions up to the late fourteenth century and to discuss Chaucer's poetry against the backdrop of these conventions so as to determine in what ways the poet modified established patterns of imagery in order to create unique poems within traditional frameworks. Careful examination of most of Chaucer's "bird poems" reveals a struggle and tension between idea and convention: one soon learns to recognize the familiar structure of the topos, but one must also be sensitive to the originality of its treatment. Chaucer characteristically invests established form with new or fresh content, and in particular, he extends the conventions of bird imagery to express philosophical and spiritual truths by developing in the conventions the elements of perspective, point of view, and finally analogy. It will be appropriate to conclude by reviewing some of the more important themes connected to bird imagery and by demonstrating how Chaucer's modifications reflect significant intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic developments.

The most distinctive feature of Chaucer's bird imagery is his emphasis on the celestial perspective. In its traditional medieval contemptus mundi context,¹ this topos

elaborates the insignificance of earthly aspiration, but in Chaucer's poetry it favours a more tolerant and generous understanding of mankind's involvement in the temporal. For Chaucer, this celestial perspective may involve a "bird's eye" view from a physical height or it may be a metaphorical flight of the spirit, a meditation, a flight "wyth fetheres of Philosophye"; in either case, the transcendent height offers a hierarchical context to secular concerns, an insight into the contingent nature of earthly truth, and an understanding of the seeming paradox of time, free-will, and Providence. As such this celestial perspective could be reasonably linked to the divine perspective described by Lady Philosophy:

. . . "if we may aptly compare God's present vision with man's, He sees all things in his eternal present as you see some things in your temporal present. . . . His judgment is not confused; with a single intuition of his mind He knows all things that are to come, whether necessarily or not." 2

The human observer is too close or too involved to recognize the true significance of his earthly experience; Chaucer, in fact, illustrates this phenomenon in the House of Fame when the poet enters the whirling cage of Rumour and discovers that, once inside, all seems normal. The higher, contemplative perspective, on the other hand, is best demonstrated with the poet's flight on the "fetheres of Philosophye", the eagle. In the first book of the House of Fame, the poet is confronted with contradictory "truths" of authoritative

writers, and it is only when he is rescued by the philosophical perspective and the celestial vantage point represented by the eagle that he understands the relativity of literary auctorite. In a similar fashion, Chaucer's summary of "The Dream of Scipio" at the beginning of the Parlement of Foules encourages the audience to view the question of love from a perspective which is, ironically, even higher than that of the avian protagonists of the poem. Beyond this, however, Chaucer offers his audience an approximation of the celestial perspective without the necessity of a physical journey to the eighth sphere. Rather than depending on an eagle carrier or a description of "the lytel erthe that here is", he creates a parallel situation to the higher perspective in his use of the bird fable. The use of the bird/human double perspective keeps the audience aware of the "hybrid" nature of the protagonists and raises questions about the moral, social, and intellectual priorities of the characters. Furthermore, the distancing effect which results from the use of the bird fable convention approximates a view from a level which offers a clearer sense of perspective: the human vantage point on pretentious cocks and hens strutting around their courtly barnyard or on aristocratic and plebian birds arguing the nature of love can be regarded as an approximation of the divine perspective on mankind's vanities. One might feel that if our reaction to Chauntecleer and Pertelote's situation is one of charitable humour, so also is God's

reaction to human aspirations and follies.

The linking of "charitable humour" to the celestial perspective was not, however, a common medieval theme; traditionally, it is the cynical humour of the contemptus mundi which we encounter. This scorn for earthly human aspirations is most familiar from its appearance in Troilus and Criseyde where Troilus is enlightened from the eighth sphere:

. . . ther he saugh, with ful avysement,
The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye
With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie.

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.

(Tr. and Cr. Bk.V, ll. 1811-25)

As we have seen, Troilus's "lough" has an extensive pedigree in medieval literature,³ but it is not a characteristic sense of humour for Chaucer. In the House of Fame, the Parlement of Foules, the "Squire's Tale", and the "Nun's Priest's Tale", the humour is ironic and gentle rather than scornful. For that matter, with the possible exception of the last few stanzas of the poem, Troilus and Criseyde itself is infused with an irony which reflects understanding and acceptance rather than contempt for the characters and their aspirations.

The good-will of the author as he regards his characters seems pervasive in Chaucer's poetry; there are times when his philosophical stance gives way to contempt for characters and earthly ambitions, but generally the higher "bird's eye" perspective of the artist/creator suggests an understanding of the larger purpose of the universe, the relativity of human experience, and an acceptance of human frailty. It is significant in this regard that Affrycan and "myn egle" — both associated with the higher perspective — are described as humorous rather than as austere characters. It is appropriate that the French poet Eustache Deschamps referred to Chaucer himself as, "O lofty eagle!"⁴ : it suggests the artistic breadth of vision and the resulting charitable perspective that Chaucer integrated into his poetry:

The ramifications of the introduction of the contemplative perspective into the poems is most clearly seen in the treatment of the theme of love. As we have seen there was a long tradition of poets, ranging from Paulinus of Nola, Prudentius, and the author of the Old English The Phoenix, who adapted secular conventions of bird imagery to Christian themes: the reverdie with its celebration of birds, eros, and fertility is transformed into a hymn to eternal spiritual springtime; the alba or aubade with the bird warning the lovers of impending danger becomes the call of Christ to wake mankind for the dawning of a new spiritual era; and the locus amoenus is spiritualized into a recovered Eden with the

presence of the immortal and self-sacrificing phoenix. These adaptations are important for an understanding of Chaucer's poetry because of his tendency to examine love from the transcendent perspective and to juxtapose spiritual and erotic love. From the classical period to beyond the Middle Ages poetry linking singing birds and erotic human love ends on a note of frustration. As we have seen, one of the reasons for this was the pervasive influence of the myth of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus. The introduction of Procne and the nightingale, the emphasis on erotic love, the suggestions of incestuous motives, and the theme of betrayal clearly demonstrate Chaucer's symbolic intentions in Troilus and Criseyde. In a more obvious way the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and Book I of the House of Fame depict the purely secular aspects of the convention of birds-and-love: in the former, we have an earthly cock in a temporal spring setting, singing an erotic aubade in a very earthly locus amoenus; in the latter, we have a poem of birds and love but instead of reverdie and a fertile earthly paradise, we have a winter season and a sterile desert.

Another element which thwarted the erotic love theme was the human observer's discovery of his alienation from nature; birds appear to mate effortlessly while the human lover is frustrated by the complex motivations of both himself and his mistress. The audience of the Parlement of Foules would likely anticipate this treatment of the theme; the convention

would suggest that the narrator who is a self-confessed failure as a lover will experience his lack of love even more deeply when he views the mating scene. On the contrary, the poem demonstrates the temporary alienation of the birds themselves from nature. Chaucer carefully installs his bird parliament in a spiritualized locus amoenus of perpetual reverdie where even the singing of the birds is likened to the music of the celestial spheres. Ironically, however, the birds have become side-tracked by the near-by garden of fin amour, so rather than providing a model of "commune profit" they offer an object lesson on the dangers and frustrations of excessive emphasis on eros. Finally, an atmosphere of permanence, fertility, and integration is achieved, but the birds, who should themselves be capable of mediating between earth and heaven, on this occasion, need St. Valentine and God's vicar, Nature, to effect the synthesis of earthly and celestial love - medieval marriage based on a fusion of eros and "commune profit".

Birds were also integrally connected with the transcendent and spiritual perspective as a result of the semiological convention popularized by the Physiologus and the bestiaries. In the hands of artists such as Dante and Chaucer this convention moved from a primarily Christian orientation to one which could accommodate the philosophical and the classical. Birds could be used as signs and paradigms of mystical truth, but they were also integrative symbols which could suggest

the sacred within the profane, the universal behind the particular, and the serious beneath the comic. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale", for example, Chaucer moves beyond the bird fable to add another dimension which links Chauntecleer to Prudentius' sacred rooster and to the priests and preachers referred to by the patristic fathers and the bestiaries. The semiological element moves in two directions in this poem: it elevates and universalizes the subject matter to the level of Christian allegory but, at the same time, lowers and particularizes the characters and actions to the level of a commentary on the Canterbury pilgrims. On the other hand, the semiological bird imagery in the House of Fame is clearly of a more philosophical nature. In The Divine Comedy, Dante used the semiological bird imagery to suggest philosophical, political, classical, Christian, and scientific signification; in the House of Fame, Chaucer employs the eagle as an image of philosophy itself, a sign for Aquila - the constellation and the wind, - a pedantic schoolmaster, a very palpable eagle, a figure which represents the humour inherent in the meditative flight, and an image which integrates celestial flights from both the classics and Scriptures.

Chaucer also seems to have tentatively accepted the tradition that avian society is held together by instinctive co-operation, loyalty, and affection. In the Parlement of Foules, the poet uses bird-mating to suggest a synthesis of eros and caritas: here the birds are natural symbols of

supernatural spiritual love. More often, however, Chaucer employs birds metaphorically to suggest the less than human aspects of some of his characters. The topos probably originated with the classical idea of the transmigration of souls, but Boethius' influential modification which made birds and animals metaphors for base behaviour obviously appealed to the medieval artist. Chaucer adopts but also adapts this convention so that in portraits such as those of the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Miller the mixture of animal and bird imagery suggests the bestial side of the character but at the same time, intimates the sense of the "monstrous" which results from a confusion of the priorities appropriate to each normally distinct form of life.

Related to this metaphorical use of the bird is the tradition which regards the bird as an intermediary between earth and heaven and subsequently a symbol of the soul: the bird which flies at the highest level is a soul associated with rationality and spirituality, while the bird which is unwilling or unable to rise above the earth is one easily snared by intellectual and spiritual sloth. In Troilus and Criseyde, this tradition leads to a fairly extensive pattern of bird images. Chaucer refers to the soul as a bird (Bk. IV, l. 305) and then uses falconry and fowler imagery to suggest the danger of being snared in an erotic and adulterous affair. In the Parlement of Foules, Chaucer asks the audience to decide if the eagles suggest the redeemed or the damned souls

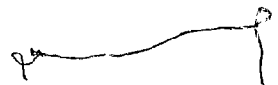
of Apocalypse 19:17 or 18:2; certainly the high-flying eagles reflect the elevated sentiments of fin amour but they are decidedly lacking in any understanding of "commune profit". There is less ambiguity surrounding Chauntecleer and Pertelote for despite their elevated manners and distinguished ancestry, they are low-flying birds and their aspirations are ignoble. In the House of Fame, the symbolism is three-pronged: the eagle is depicted as a distinctly humanized bird but because it is noted for its high flight, its ability to gaze at the sun, and its periodic renewal of its youth, the character is elevated; Fame, on the other hand, is denigrated because of the partridge wings on her feet; and the human storytellers who are described as birds in a cage are disparaged because they have been snared by a perhaps excessive concern for Fame.

Nevertheless, this still does not account for the enormous number of birds and bird images in Chaucer's poetry. The poet obviously enjoys pointing out the human in the bird and the bird in the human and, although the allegorical level of the birds is invariably pre-eminent, one recognizes his delight in the birds' sheer abandon to the arts of amplificatio. Chaucer rarely describes the markings, the habitat, or even the colours of birds; however, he does put a great deal of energy into developing the personality of his birds through distinctive dialogue appropriate to the various species. All of his birds are garrulous: they lecture, argue,

insult, lament, sing, chatter, and generally make a great deal of noise, yet they are individualized through their tone, diction, and rhetorical figures. Furthermore, when the poet wishes to suggest that human characters are speaking untruthfully, senselessly, or pretentiously, he describes them in terms of birds. This point clarifies Chaucer's use of bird imagery in the description of the storytellers at the end of the House of Fame; the poem is concerned with the relativity of truth in art; appropriately, the narrators of the "love-tydynges" are described as the traditionally garrulous, contentious, and bombastic birds of the love-debate.

Finally then, we can conclude that Chaucer is eminently familiar with the conventions of bird imagery, but that he approaches a convention not as a restriction or even a model but rather as an opportunity to explore intensively in an area with already established boundaries. Working within well-established patterns of imagery, Chaucer juxtaposes seemingly contradictory themes and achieves a fresh synthesis; he introduces a perspective normally associated with contemptus mundi but transforms it into a generous and accepting attitude; he draws on traditional elements and then dramatically modifies the context; and he adopts a semiology traditionally associated with theology and broadens it to incorporate the philosophical at the same time that he narrows it to make it function as satirical allegory. The audience's familiarity with the conventions frees Chaucer to evoke a

(traditional context and then introduce discordant intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic elements which strain the framework of the convention as he reveals new relations, new directions, new perspectives.



NOTES

¹ e.g., Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, Bk. II, pr. 7 and Bk. III, pr. 8.

² Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy, Bk. V, pr. 6, p. 117.

³ See chap. II, p. 78.

⁴ "Ballad addressed to Geoffrey Chaucer", Eustache Deschamps, l. 5, in Derek Brewer, ed. Chaucer: The Critical Heritage. 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) vol. I, pp. 40-1.

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