

Chapter Three

Flora and Fauna:

The Symbols of Nature in the Garden

By definition, nature means all the animals, plants, rocks in the world and all the feature forces and processes that happen or exist independently of people, such as the climate, the water, mountains, reproduction, and growth. The theme of this chapter is focused on the plants and animals as symbols of nature in the garden of *The Parliament of Fowls*. The objective of this chapter is to understand how Chaucer describes plants and animals in the poem according to his knowledge of nature from different kinds of sources in the Middle Ages.

Plants and animals are the basic elements to form a garden. The garden is the imitation of the perfection of God's creation. God created plants and animals and put them in the Garden of Eden. In this chapter, the focus is on the relationship between mankind and nature (plants and animals.) Two particular words are used here: flora and fauna. In Biology, flora means all the plants of a particular place or from a particular time in history. It comes from the name of the Roman goddess of flowers, gardens, and love (Zimmerman 107). Fauna means all the animals that live wild in a particular area. It is the female counterpart of Faunus, Roman patron god of woodland, herds, and crops. He was identified with the Greek Pan (106). Both of the two Roman deities have the property of life and fertility.

I. The Flora of the Garden

A. Flowers and Blossoms

Popularly, flower applies especially when part or all of the reproductive structure is distinctive in colour and form. Flowers present a multitude of combinations of colour, size, and form. The petals are usually colourful and showy, and some have pleasing odours. Flowers have been symbols of beauty, and flower-giving is still among the most popular of social niceties.

When the narrator enters the park, the beautiful scenery of the garden draws his eyes immediately:

A gardyn sawe I, ful of blossomed bowis,

Upon a ryver, in a grene mede (183-4)

(A garden full of blossoming boughs I saw / Besides a river in verdant mead)

Chaucer mentions blossoms and flowers in the garden. By definition, flowers are the genital part of a plant, which is often brightly coloured and with odours. Blossoms are flowers, but generally speaking, blossoms are small flowers on a tree. Chaucer uses the two different words in order to arrange flowers on the meadow and in the trees.

A meadow is a field with grass and often wild flowers in it. The river offers sufficient water to the land, so that the meadow flourishes with colourful flowers:

Ther as swetnes ever mo ynow is,

With floures white, blew, yelow and rede (185-6)

(Where lives abundant sweetness evermore, / With flowers white and blue, yellow and red [. . .])

The significance would be adapted according to the colour of the flowers. For

example, yellow-coloured flowers represent a reinforcement of the basic sun symbolism. Red flowers emphasize the relationship with animal life, blood, and passion. The blue flower is a legendary symbol of the impossible, and is probably an allusion to the “mystic Centre” as represented by the Holy Grail. The white flowers represent purity and the immaculate heart. The colours red, yellow, and blue, known as primary colours, can be combined in varying proportions to produce all other colours. Thus, Chaucer employs flowers of every colour in this passage.

Different flowers usually have separate meanings, but, as it so often happens, flower-symbolism is broadly characterized by two essentially different considerations: the flower in its essence, and the flower in its shape. By its very nature it is symbolic of transitoriness, of spring and of beauty. The Greeks and Romans, at all their feasts, always wore crowns of flowers. Because of visionary and olfactory pleasure, people use flowers to decorate their lives. Although flower is a symbol of beauty, we have to remember that flower is the generative organ of a plant. The flower has to be attractive in order to absorb the attention of the insects. The insects come to visit the flowers, and they help the plants to propagate by spreading anther. Therefore, flower can be regarded as the symbol of fertility. In order to honour Priapus, people set upon his head with garlands of fresh flowers of various colours:

Ful besely men gunne assay and fonde,
 Upon his hede to sette, of sundry hewe,
 Garlondes ful of fresshe floures newe. (257-9)

(And men were trying with exertion great / To put upon his head fresh
 flowers new / In garlands bright of variegated hue.)

The garland has been a part of religious ritual from ancient times. The religious significance of garlands was evident in the Middle Ages when they were hung on religious statues. Because the flowers are the sexual organs of plants to produce seeds, they are the adequate gifts to Priapus.

B. Herbs and Spices

Grasses are the most economically important of all flowering plants because of their nutritious grains and soil-forming function, and they are the most widespread and most numerous of plants. Grasses provide food for grazing animals and shelter for wildlife. Some species are grown as garden ornamentals, cultivated as turf for lawns and recreational areas.

Some particular herbs grown on the meadow are of medicinal properties. Human beings have a long history of using the plants to heal illness or improve health. In the garden,

Ther wex eke every holsome spice and gras.

No man may there waxe seke ne olde. (206-7)

(There also thrived all wholesome spice and grass; / And there no man became diseased or old;)

People keep young and healthy by taking the herbs and spices as the natural medicine. However, in real life, no man can stay healthy and keep young forever. People suffer from aging, sickness, and death, but in the garden of the poem, people enjoy good health and longevity. Dream vision is the compensation of people's discontents and expectations. Because of sickness, aging, and death, human life is miserable. People

long for everlasting life; thus, the wholesome herbs grow in the paradisiacal place.

C. Trees

Trees are important in the garden of the poem. Human beings have been taking the advantage of trees for a long time. Trees provide many valuable products, especially wood. Wood is used for building, furniture, tool, ship, coffin, and ornament. Wood is also a major source for fuel. Trees supply edible fruits and nuts.

If we trace the origin of trees back to the beginning of the world, they were created on the third day of God's Creation:

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." (Genesis 1:11-2)

When the narrator comes into the park, he sees trees with lush leaves:

For, overall where I myn eyen caste,
Weren trees claad with levys that ay shal laste,
Eche in his kynde, with coloure fressh and grene
As emeraude, that joye was to sene. (172-5)

(For everywhere I looked, my eyes were cast / On trees whose foliage would for ever last, / Each kind as fresh and green as emerald / In its own way, a pleasure to behold.)

Cupid and the allegorical personages of love stay in the shade of the trees and do their regular work. Besides, the birds and the small gentle beasts live, play, and breed in the woods. Human beings and other creatures rely on trees for many purposes.

Chaucer writes thirteen kinds of trees in the poem. The list is like a guide of the mediaeval knowledge and usage of trees. In this category, Chaucer does not view the trees like a modern botanist. He does not use scientific methods to note the appearances of trees in the botanical classification. Instead, he uses a practical and conventional way to describe the trees. They are noted according to their functions and symbolical meanings. The list has been seen as the focus of the poet's delight in his own erudition, and argues that the trees themselves seem to have been created with art in mind.

In line 176, "the bilder ook" (the builder's oak tree), the oak tree is a detail added by Chaucer, who may have associated it with nobility. As a symbol of strength, the oak has been revered for both historical and mythological associations. It was the favourite of Zeus or Jupiter (Cirlot 328). The narrator sees the tree again afterwards:

And by hem self, under an oke, I gesse,
 Saugh I Delyte, that stoode with Gentillesse. (223-4)
 (And by himself beneath an oak I spied / Delight, who had Good
 Breeding by his side.)

The tree represents delight and gentleness. In addition, in *The Book of the Duchess*, it is the tree which the young knight in black is leaning against when the narrator finds him:

I was war of a man in blak,
 That sete and had [y]turned his bak
 To an ooke, an huge tree. (445-7)
 (I suddenly saw a man in black / Reclining seated with his back / Against

an oak, a giant tree.)

Oaks are cultivated for ornament and are prized as the major source of hardwood lumber. The wood is durable, tough, and attractively grained; it is especially valued in construction. Chaucer says it can be used for building. In the same line, “and eek the hardy asshe” (and the hardy ash), the ash tree is used for hardwood timber. The ash wood is strong and durable. Chaucer thinks it can live through the winter without protection from the weather.

In line 177, “the piler elm, the cofre unto careyne” (the elm for stakes and coffins for the dead), elm trees have a limited use as hardwood for timber. Its fragrant wood is used for cabinet making, especially for posts. Chaucer adds that it can also be made into coffins for the dead bodies.

In line 178, “the boxtree piper” (box for pipe-making), the box tree is a small evergreen tree with small shiny leaves. The boxwood is close-grained, strong, and hard, and polishes well; it is valued for making musical instruments. Chaucer says it can be made into pipes. In the same line, “holm to whippes lasshe” (holly for whips to lash), the holly is a small evergreen tree with shiny sharp leaves and small round red fruit. The holly wood is white, hard, close grained, and polishes easily. Chaucer says it can be made into whip handles.

In line 179, “the sayling firr” (the fir for masts), the fir is a tall evergreen tree that grows in cold countries and has needle-like leaves. The fir wood is usually light and soft. It is good to be used in ship-making. Chaucer says it can be made into ship masts. In the same line, “the cipres, deth to pleyne” (for grief the cypress dread), the cypress is a kind of conifer which produce fruit in the form of cones. It has since early

times been symbolic of mourning and immortality. It used to be planted beside graveyards. Chaucer says it is used for mourning the dead.

In line 180, “the sheter ew” (the yew for bows), of sombre appearance, with dark green leaves, the yew since the ancient times has been associated with death and funeral ceremonies. Besides, the yew is employed in making longbows. Bows are weapons and related to death as well. We can associate this tree with Cupid’s bow at his feet (213) and the broken bows hung on the wall in the temple (282). In the same line, “the asp for shaftes pleyne” (poplar for shafts smooth-made), the aspen wood is very soft and flexible, so it is used for making shafts. We can associate the tree with the making of arrows of Cupid and his daughter (211-7).

In line 181, “the olyve of pees” (the peaceful olive), according to the Greek mythology, the olive was Athena’s gift to mankind (Cotterell 146). The olive branch has been the symbol of peace since pre-Christian times. It can be seen very early in the Hebrew civilization. In the *Old Testament*:

When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. (Genesis 8:11)

A dove bearing an olive branch has been seen as a symbol of peace in fine arts. We can associate the olive tree with the white doves in lines 237 and 341. In the same line, “and eek the drunken vyne” (and the drinker’s vine), the vines are grown to harvest grapes, which can be made into wine. The art of grape growing was said in the Greek mythology to have been introduced by Dionysus to ancient Greece (Cotterell 154). We can associate the grape vine with Bacchus in line 275. Throughout the classical

history, the grape has been a symbol in art and literature of revelry and joy. Wine is the beverage of intoxication and prosperity.

In line 182, “the victor palm” (the victor’s palm), the palm tree grows in warm countries and has a tall trunk with a mass of long pointed leaves at the top. In Greek mythology, Nike (also Nice), the goddess of victory, carries a palm branch (Zimmerman 175). In Roman times, the gladiators were professional combatants engaging in fights to death as sport. The victor would earn palm branches or money. In the *New Testament*, the crowd welcomes Jesus with palm branches as he rides into Jerusalem:

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of
Israel!” (John 12:13)

The palm tree is used in the celebration of triumph. In the same line, “the laurer to devyne” (the laurel, augury’s sign), the laurel of the classical literature is native to the Mediterranean. It also symbolizes victory. Moreover, it was sacred to Apollo (Cirlot 328). His oracle was established in Delphi. He gave prophecy to individuals and the states there (Zimmerman 26). The laurel tree was linked with him because of a sad love story. According to the legend, Apollo fell deeply in love with Daphne, but she showed indifference to him. When Apollo pursued her, she prayed to her father, a river god, to save her. Then, she was transformed into a laurel tree. Apollo, distraught by what had happened, made the laurel branches as a garland and wore it on his head. Therefore, the laurel tree is associated with his own prophecy ability (Cotterell 144).

Actually, Chaucer does not create the tree list. It is a conventional technique of

poetry, so-called epic category. Chaucer's list is the immediate source of this catalogue of trees. The literary convention has its roots in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

Here, tall Chaonian oaks their branches spread, / While weeping poplars
there erect their head. [. . .] Here, brittle hazels, lawrels here advance, /
And there tough ash to form the heroe's lance; / Here silver firs with
knotless trunks ascend, / There, scarlet oaks beneath their acorns bend.
[. . .] There, tamarisk, and box for ever green. [. . .] Vines yonder rise,
and elms with vines entwin'd [. . .] Then easy-bending palms, the victor's
prize [. . .] (10.90-105)

The epic category never disappears in English Literature. More than two centuries later, Edmund Spenser also wrote a list of trees in *The Faerie Queene*. Coincidentally, most of the trees in Spenser's list correspond to those in Chaucer's list (8):

The vine-prop Elme [. . .] The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all, /
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funerall. / The Laurell, meed of
mightie Conquerours [. . .] the Firre that weepeth still, [. . .] The Eugh
obedient to the benders will [. . .] the Ash for nothing ill, / The fruitfull
Oliue [. . .] The caruer Holme, [. . .] (1.1.70-81)

Spenser's epithets, for the most part referable to each tree's natural characteristics or uses, include scriptural and classical associations. The knowledge of trees becomes conventional in literature.

II. The Fauna of the Garden

A. Insects

Chaucer intends to make the garden of *The Parliament of Fowls* into a small ideal model of the real nature. He tries to select plants and animals as representatives of nature and settle them in the garden. However, there is a strange circumstance: he seldom mentions insects in this poem. He neglects the existence of insects, but he sees fish, birds, beasts, and plants in the garden. He only refers to an insect once when he describes the characteristics of fowls in the bird list. He assumes that the dietary preference is the criterion to classify birds. Among the diet category, worm-eating birds are in the second level of bird hierarchy. In this way, the swallow belongs to this class:

The swallow, morthrer of the foules smale

That maken hony of floures, fressh of hewe; (353-4)

(The swallow, murderer of the creatures small / Whose honey comes from flowers fresh of hue;)

As we know, swallows are beneficial birds, for they eat pests in the field and in the forest. However, Chaucer uses a down-side attitude to describe the swallow. He calls this bird “the murderer.” The bees make honey from flowers. Chaucer supposes that bees are beneficial insects. For this reason, swallows, in his opinion, are killers. This is the only time when Chaucer makes mention of insects in this poem.

B. Fish

Fish lives in water. Most species have paired fins and skin covered with scales.

When the narrator comes to the gate of the garden, he sees the black inscription on the gate:

This streme yow ledeth unto the sorwful were

Ther as the fyssh in prison is al drye. (138-9)

(This stream will lead you to the joyless weir / Where fish are caught up,
trapped and left to dry:)

A weir is an enclosure set in a river for catching or keeping fish. Fish swims into the artificial trap and can not escape from it. The destiny for the jailed fish is death. This is a very miserable situation.

When the narrator enters the garden, he sees that the garden is upon a river. Water is a very important and necessary element to maintain a garden. Naturally where there is a cool fast-flowing spring, there is fish living in:

And colde well stremes, no thing dede

That swymmyn ful of smale fishes lyght,

With fynnes rede and scales sylver bryght. (187-9)

(And cool spring-water streams, by no means dead, / But swimming with
little fishes darting light / With fins of red and scales of silver bright.)

Chaucer depicts the appearance of fish in a simple way: with red fins and silver scales. Since fish is not the main character in the poem, the description is brief and ordinary. For another reason, compared with the other living creatures, people were not familiar with fish in the Middle Ages.

In addition, the narrator mentions a specific kind of fish in the bird category. In the third class, the water-fowls eat fish as their food. The heron belongs to this class:

[. . .] the eles foo, heroine, (346)

([. . .] the heron, to every eel a foe;)

Chaucer takes a sympathetic attitude to see the food chain of living creatures. He thinks the swallow is the murderer of bees, and the heron is the foe of eels. Murderer and foe are negative words. Chaucer alludes the cruelty of food chain in nature, but it is the realistic situation of the world.

C. Beasts

In the woods of the garden, the narrator sees several gentle furry beasts:

The lytel conyes to her pley gunnen hye;

And further, al aboute, y gan espye

The dredful roo, the buk, the hert and hynde,

Squerel, and bestis smale of gentil kynde. (193-6)

(The little rabbits in their games in glee / Ran fast; and all around me I
could see / The timid roe, the buck, the hart, and hind, / Squirrels and
creatures small of gentle kind.)

The little rabbits, kinds of deer, squirrels, and other small gentle beasts are associated with erotic and procreative activity. They are related to the theme of mate-choosing in *The Parliament of Fowls*. The regularity and abundance of the forest, in a pre-Romantic culture, symbolize perfection. In *The Book of the Duchess*, he describes the same animals in a similar form:

And many an hert and many an hinde

Was both before me and bihinde.

Of founes, soures, bukkes, does

Was ful the wode, and many roes,

And many squirelles that sete

Ful hye upon the trees, and ete,

And in hir maner made festes. (427-33)

(And many a hart and many a hind / Were there before me and behind. /

Of fawns, bucks young and old, and does, / And many squirrels too that

sat / Aloft upon the trees and ate, / Making their special kinds of feasts.)

The rabbit has strong procreative ability and propagates rapidly. It is regarded as a symbol of fertility. The hunting of the deer, particularly the hart was traditionally linked to erotic pursuit. In Middle English, hart was spelled as “hert,” which resembles “herte” (heart.) We can find the metaphor of deer and lovers in the Cantic of Canticles (Song of Solomon):

My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our

wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the

lattice. (2:9)

And,

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among

the lilies. (4:5)

All of the small furry beasts here are herbivores, animals adapted to subsist solely on plant tissues. Consequently, Chaucer’s garden is not a real natural wilderness. It is an artificial model, which is a place for people to enjoy. Those carnivore beasts have to be absent in the garden, or they would be dangerous and

harmful to human beings. Only those meek animals can be selected to live freely in the garden.

C. Birds

A covering of feathers distinguishes birds from all other animals. Birds are found almost worldwide in diverse habitats. Their dietary preferences also differentiate widely. Human beings have had close relationships with birds: using wild and domesticated birds' meat and their eggs for food, hunting wild birds (or using birds for hunting) for sports, and using feathers for decoration.

This poem is entitled *The Parliament of Fowls*. Surely, the birds are the most important characters in the text. This poem is regarded as an important record of the natural history in the Middle Ages. We can still identify all of the 36 kinds of birds in the poem today. Surely, Chaucer's knowledge of birds is quite different from the modern Biology, but the record can help us understand the relationships between mankind and birds and the way how people recognized birds in the Middle Ages.

A rich variety of sources may have influenced Chaucer's representations of 36 kinds of birds in *The Parliament of Fowls*. This gathering of birds can be seen in ancient literatures. In Aesop's *Fables*, a beauty contest was held and all the birds went to be judged by Zeus (329). A well-known source for an assembly of birds is the striking biblical description of the "call of the birds" in St. John of Patmos's Apocalypse:

And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of

God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.” (Revelation 19:17-8)

In Persian literature, there is a book which was also entitled *The Conference of the Birds*. It was written by Farid Ud-Din Attar. The idea of bird’s assembling before Goddess Nature could have come from reading the description of birds on the goddess’ s mantle in Alain of Lille’ s *De planctu naturae*, which is a source also for some specific features of birds’ appearance and behaviour in Chaucer’ s poem. When the narrator encounters Goddess Nature, he is struck by the dazzling appearance of her robes:

A garment, woven from silky wool and covered with many colours, was as the virgin's robe of state. Its appearance perpetually changed with many a different colour and manifold hue. [. . .] Moreover, spun exceedingly fine so as to escape the scrutiny of the eye it was so delicate of substance that you would think it and the air of the same nature. On it, as a picture fancied to sight, was being held a parliament of the living creation. (11)

What follows is the description of a vast array of birds, both real and mythical. The hawk, kite, falcon, heron, ostrich, swan, phoenix, and many others birds make their appearances, going about their natural business, generally somewhat less metaphorically than did the eagle, but often with hints of anthropomorphism. There

are more possible sources of Chaucer's bird category. Mediaeval encyclopaedias¹ also provide parallels and models for classification that may have been drawn upon in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Besides, the Old French² romances often give birds courtly or angelic voices in the background of a garden, such as in *Le Roman de la Rose*.

The form of *The Parliament of Fowls* is the familiar mediaeval one of the love debate, incorporating the *demande d'amour* (the question of love.) The idea of birds' debate may come from an earlier English poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*. It is a long poem of debate, long probably written between 1186 and 1216 by an unknown author. The narrator overhears a quarrel between a serious owl and a happy nightingale at a summer night. The debate follows the rules of the scholastic disputations, as they were held in the law schools and universities in the Middle Ages. The two birds use every device of medieval rhetoric to prove that they are of the highest use to mankind. During the debate they touch upon nearly every topic of contemporary interests. It is believed that this debate poem has great influence on *The Parliament of Fowls*, which contains terms of parliamentary language and an organized articulation about two opinions of love between the four classes of birds.

The personalised accounts of avian behaviours in the mediaeval bestiaries may provide points of reference for the birds in *The Parliament of Fowls* on some occasions. The bestiary consists of a collection of stories in verse or prose, often with illustrations, each based on a description of certain qualities of an animal. The bestiary presumed to describe the animals of the world and to show what human traits

¹ Caxton's *Mirroure of the World*, Isidore of Sevilla's *Etymologiae*, Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, Raban Maur's *De universo*, and Alexander Neckham's *De naturis rerum*.

² Old French is a term sometimes used to refer to the langue d'oïl, the continuum of varieties of Romance language during the period roughly from 1000 to 1300 A.D.

they severally exemplify. The stories are allegorical and didactic, used for moral and religious instruction and admonition. Many traditional attributes of the birds in Chaucer's category derive from the mediaeval bestiaries.

In addition, the influence of popular belief and practical observation should not be underrated. For example, falconry in lines 337-8 was prevalent in mediaeval daily life. Another possibly neglected source is the visual culture of the period. Birds are frequently depicted in mediaeval manuscripts. For instance, the *Sherborne Missal*³, one of the greatest of English medieval manuscripts, contains a wealth of marginal illustrations of wild birds, painted with great skill and accuracy. All of the images can be clearly identified as 40 species. Although many are imaginary birds and fantasies, the manuscript offers an unparalleled insight into a fascinating aspect of England's natural history in the Middle Ages.

According to Chaucer, the birds are divided into four classes according to their dietary preference:

That ys to sey, the fowles of ravyne
 Were hyest sette, and than the foules smale
 That eten as hem Nature wolde enclyne –
 As worm or thyng of which I tel no tale.
 And water foule sate lowest in the dale,
 But foule that lyveth by seede sate on the grene,
 And that so fele that wonder was to sene. (323-9)

(That is to say, the birds of prey were set / In highest place, and next

³ See Janet Backhouse, *Medieval Birds in the Sherborne Missal* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001).

came those more small, / Like birds who followed Nature' s laws and ate /
 Such things as worms whose names I do not call; / And lowest in the
 glade sat water-fowl. / But on the green sat birds that live on seed, / So
 many, it was strange to see indeed.)

The fourfold classification of the birds as birds of prey, worm-fowl, water-fowl, and seed-fowl can be found in ancient Greek biological studies; for example, Aristotle's *The History of Animals*. Chaucer could have derived it from mediaeval encyclopaedias. However, Chaucer's classification of birds is not correct because birds can eat a variety of food and their life styles are more complicated than the four types. In modern Biology, the ornithologists classify birds by their appearances.

On the possible correspondence with social classes of Chaucer's time, it includes four classes of citizens represented in the Parliament in the 14th-century England. Chaucer's parliament of birds has more social and realistic meanings. The parliament of birds reflects the situation of social conflicts between the four classes in the English society. They are nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, and commons.

The following is a detailed analysis of the list of birds. The list contains 36 kinds of birds. Chaucer collects many materials from different sources at his time. This is a bird index in Mediaeval English literature. It shows the various images of birds in the eyes of human beings in the Middle Ages:

There might men the royal egle fynde
 That with his sharpe looke perceth the sonne,
 And other egles of a lower kynde
 Of which that clerkes wel devysen konne.

There was the tiraunte with his fethres donne

And grey – I mene the goshauke that doth pyne

To briddes for his outrageouse ravyne; (330-336)

(There might a man the royal eagle find, / Who with his fierce sharp look
pierces the sun, / And other eagles of a lesser kind, / About whom writers'
tales are deftly spun. / There was the tyrant with his feathers dun / And
grey, I mean the goshawk, fell in deed / To birds with his outrageous ire
and greed.)

As we know, this poem was composed to celebrate the engagement of Richard II of England and Anne of Bohemia. The queen was the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV. The royal emblem of the Holy Roman Empire is a double-headed eagle. Moreover, the various mythical and legendary traditions identify the eagle as royal, and the association of birds of prey in general is linked with royalty and lordship. Descriptions and illustrations of the eagle in the mediaeval bestiaries show it flying up to the sun to revive its youth or eyesight. The goshawk was often used for duck-hunting. Therefore, the goshawk is noted for its fierce attack and greed.

The gentil faucoune that with his fete distreyneth

The kynges honed, the hardy sperhauke eke,

The quayles fo; the merlyon that peyneth

Hym self ful ofte the larke for to seke.

The jalousie swanne ayens his deth that syngeth;

The owle, eke, that of dethe the bode bryngeth; (337-344)

(The gentle falcon, who clutches in his claws / The hand of kings; the

sturdy sparrowhawk too, / Foe of the quail; the merlin who explores /
 Ways all the time the small lark to pursue; / There was the meek-eyed
 dove full in my view; / The angry swan, of his coming death the singer; /
 The owl as well, of death the omen-bringer;)

The falcon is a bird with pointed wings and a long tail which can be trained to hunt other birds and small animals. Hawking is an entertainment and sport to people in the Middle Ages. Earlier in Chaucer's time, we can also find an interesting story about falconry⁴ in *The Decameron*⁵ (Boccaccio 102-3). The sparrowhawk eats quails, and the merlin preys on larks. The dove is a bird of mildness and is associated with Venus:

And on the temple, of doves whyte and faire
 Saw I sittinge many a hunderede paire. (237-8)
 (And on the temple, doves most white and fair / I saw there perching,
 many a hundred pair.)

The dove also represents the Holy Spirit in the gospel:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. (Matthew 3:16)

In legends, swans were supposed to sing once, before dying. In "the Legend of Dido"

⁴ Fifth Day, Ninth Story: Federigo degli Alberighi loves and is not loved in return: he wastes his substance by lavishness until naught is left but a single falcon, which, his lady being come to see him at his house, he gives her to eat: she, knowing his case, changes her mind, takes him to husband and makes him rich.

⁵ *The Decameron* (1348-53): Giovanni Boccaccio's great secular classic, a collection of 100 witty and occasionally licentious tales set against the sombre background of the Black Death. The tales treat a wide variety of characters and events and brilliantly reveal humanity. The courtly themes of medieval literature began to give way to the voice and mores of early modern society.

of *The Legend of Good Women*,

‘Ryght so,’ quod she, ‘As that the white swan

Ayens his deth begynnyth for to singe, (1355-6)

(‘In just the same way as the snow-white swan / When faced with death
begins to sing a song,)

The owl is a bird with a flat face, large eyes, and strong curved nails, which hunts small mammals at night. Chaucer later refers to the belief that owls cannot see well by day:

Thou farest be love as owles doon by light:

The day hem blent; ful well they see by nyght. (599-600)

(Your’ re struck by love as owls are by the light: / They’ re blinded by the
day, and see by night.)

In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the owl is also mocked by the nightingale (239-52).

The owl is a bird of darkness and death. This is an idea that is given a moral application in the bestiaries.

The crane, the geante, with his trompes sounne,

The thefe, the choghe, and eke the janglynge pye;

The scornynge jay, the eles foo, heroune,

The fals lapwyngge, ful of trecherye;

The stare that the counseylle kan bewrye,

The atme ruddok and the coward kyte,

The cok that orlogge ys of thropes lyte; (344-50)

(The crane, that giant, his cry a trumpet’s blow; / The chough, that thief;

the magpie with his chatter; / The mocking jay; the heron, to every eel a
 foe; / The treacherous lapwing, prone to falsely flatter; / The starling,
 who betrays all secret matter; / The robin tame; the kite, that cowardly
 bird; / The cock that clock in little hamlets heard;)

The crane is a tall bird with long thin legs and a long neck. Its voice is loud. Magpies are birds with black and white feathers and a long tail. They are attracted to small shiny objects which they carry away to their nests. The jay is a noisy, brightly coloured bird, which likes to fight. The lapwing is associated with a version of the Philomela story in which the rapist Tereus, was turned into a lapwing. The kite is described as “coward and fereful among grete brides” (I, 634, 31) by Bartholomaeus, and its inferiority to the falcon is stressed because its size is smaller than the other eagles.

The sparrow, Venus sone; the nyghtyngale

That clepeth forth the grene leves newe,

The swallow, morthrer of the foules smale

That maken hony of floures, fressh of hewe;

The wedded turtle with hir herte trewe,

The pecok with his aungels fethers bryght,

The fesaunt, scorner of the cok by nyght; (351-357)

(The sparrow, Venus' son; the nightingale, / Whose singing summons
 forth the green leaves new; / The swallow, murderer of the creatures
 small / Whose honey comes from flowers fresh of hue; / The married
 turtle with her heart so true; / The peacock with his plumage angel-bright;

/ The pheasant, scorner of the cock by night;)

The sparrow is a small grey-brown bird which is especially common in towns. The association of the sparrow with Venus and libido is very common in literature. The nightingale is a small brown European bird. The male nightingale is known especially for the beautiful song, which is usually heard during the night. It features as the herald of spring in a number of middle English poems. For example, in a middle English lyric “Fairest between Lincoln and Lindsey” in the later 13th century to earlier 14th century (Davies 62):

When the nightegale singes,

The wodes waxen grene:

Lef and gras and blosme springes,

In Averil, I wene; (1-4) (Ms. Harley 2253)⁶

(When the nightingale sings, / And the woods wax green: / I expect, the leaves and the blades of grass, / And blossoms to spring up, in April
[. . .])

The turtle-dove’s identification with fidelity can be found in lines 577 and 582-8. The turtle-dove is a small pale brown bird which makes a soft pleasant sound and likes to flock in pairs. The peacock has very long tail feathers which it can spread out to show bright colours and eye-like patterns. In *De planctu naturae*, Alanus refers to the wild pheasant which cuckold the domestic cock.

The waker goos, the cuckow ever unkunde,

⁶ Ms. Harley 2253: The Harley Lyrics is the name of a collection of poems in a manuscript of the early 14th century at the British Library. It is so famous, because it is the earliest preserved collection of lyrics comprising more than half of the secular lyrics from before the 15th century.

The papiay, ful of delycacye;

The drake, stroyer of his owne kynde,

The storke, wreker of avouterye,

The hooete cormoraunte of glotonye;

The ravenes and the crows with her voys of care,

The throstel olde, the frosty feldefare. (358-65)

(The watchful goose; the cuckoo ever unkind; / The parrot, always full of lechery; / The drake, destroyer of his own true kind; / The stork, avenger of adultery; / The fiery cormorant, full of gluttony; / The raven wise; the crow with voice of care; / The long-lived thrush; the frosty fieldfare.)

The raucous vigilance of the goose is noted in classical literature⁷, but Chaucer later associates the goose with stupidity (568-74). The bird can mean fool in the 14th and 15th-century usage. The cuckoo puts its eggs in other birds' nests. The new-born cuckoo will push out the other eggs in the nest. The occupation and murder would be regarded as unnatural. This selfish behaviour is referred to again in lines 612-3. Chaucer associates the cuckoo with folly (505). Neckam describes the wantonness of the parrot, which is said to “adopt the poses of a lover” on seeing its own reflection in a mirror (Phillips and Havely 272). The description of the male duck “destroying its own species” probably refers to the phenomenon known as “mallard rape,” which means attacks by males on females at the end of the mating season. It is believed that the male stork would kill an unfaithful mate. The cormorant eats fish by swallowing. It is associated with greed and rapacity. Ravens and crows are black birds which have

⁷ The sacred geese on the Capitol were believed to have saved Rome from invaders by cackling.

raucous voice and eat dead bodies. They are believed to bring bad omens. The last two birds in the list are the grey-brown (hence old) thrush and the pale, winter-resident (hence frosty) fieldfare.

Although the plants and animals are important in daily life, they were nearly neglected in mediaeval literature. The plants and animals were minor characters in mediaeval literary works. They only appeared as the background of human activities. Nature was regarded as transient and must pass away someday. Only the God's Kingdom is worth of expectation. However, they became more important when the Humanism revived in the 14th century. People redefined the values of secular life and paid more attention to the interaction between man and nature. Plants and animals had personalities like mankind. They become symbols of nature and reveal different messages to human beings to show the truth of the world.