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Satirising Courtly Love in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls*

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"whan this werk al brought was to an ende,

to every foul Nature yaf his make"

(Chaucer 667-8)

In ‘Satire and Irony as Means of Communication’, Jean Weisgerber argues that satire is not only a device specific to text but a form of communication that is inextricably linked to society. Published in the 1380s, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls* is a work of social function, examining issues such as medieval love in Richard II’s court, and feudal class systems. The poem operates as ‘a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn’, as Chaucer directs his satirical attention to the rigidity of fin’amor as well as the elaborate and ostentatious conventions of the nobility (‘Satire’). Through satire’s potential to challenge and destabilise, Chaucer encourages the reader to maintain a pluralistic outlook, demonstrating that love transcends the concept of fin’amor, and that hierarchy is only one model of class relations. This essay will examine how *The Parliament of Fowls* is predicated on the deployment of delicate and complex satire.

Chaucer satirises the exalted and refined world of aristocratic love prescribed by the code fin’amor. In his article ‘The Nature of Love’, Irving Singer identifies a series of five conventions defining this code, each of which Chaucer parodies in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Firstly, Singer stresses how certain medieval genres present fin’amor as ‘an ideal worth striving for’, championing love as a pursuit of transcendental attainment (23). Despite this, from the start, *Fowls*’ narrator does not venture towards the garden of love voluntarily but is thrust inside, as ‘Affrycan, my gide, me hente and shof in at the gates wides’ (Chaucer 153-4). If the reader is to interpret the locus amoenus as a manifestation of love itself, then this love is not something that the narrator strives towards but rather accidentally and farcically stumbles into. Moreover, the temple of Venus – another representation of love – would normally serve as a magnificent and regal symbol of fin’amor, its elevated position creating the impression that it is emerging from the heavens. However, its fragile structure ‘upon a hil of song’ renders it unstable and liable to fall: the temple, and, by extension, love,

becomes not an ideal to reach towards but one that is likely to collapse on itself (242-3). Singer further reiterates fin'amor's emphasis of glorification and distinguishment by claiming that this 'love ennobles both the lover and the beloved' (23). This ideal is complicated by the writing on the gates leading towards the garden of love. The warning – 'this streme yow ledeth to the sorweful were / there as the fish in prysoun is al drye' – recalls the inscription on the gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* announcing 'lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate' (abandon all hope, you who enter) (Chaucer 138-9; Stump 181). By depicting this body of water as a prison-like enclosure for the fish, Chaucer curates a world that deliberately perverts the noble values of fin'amor, a perversion supported by the oxymoronic image of the stream as 'al drye'. This is consolidated by the portrayal of Venus with 'here gilte heres' lying 'on a bed of gold' whilst 'that hote sonne gan to weste'. Although this is ostensibly a fusion of three incandescent images, it also recalls the warning inscribed on the garden gates also written in 'gold and blak' (Chaucer 265-7, 141). By evoking the image of gates leading to a Dantean underworld, Chaucer subtly denounces the locus amoenus and suggests that the love it represents leads to despondence.

Singer also construes fin'amor in physical terms, although his interpretation of it as 'love in an intense, passionate relationship' is undermined by Chaucer's presentation of 'the air of that place', which 'so attempre was that nevere was grevaunce of hot ne cold' (Singer 23; Chaucer 204-5). The garden of love is characterised here by moderation and temperance, a contrast to the intensity and fervour of courtly love emphasised by Singer, as Chaucer introduces a sense of bathos in his satirical deflation of fin'amor. This is furthered by Singer's observation of fin'amor as a relationship where 'sexual love cannot be reduced to mere libidinal impulse', as Chaucer satirises this inclination of courtly love to shy away from the bodily and the sensual (23). By depicting Venus in an overtly sexualised position in the

temple, ‘naked from the brest unto the hed’ where ‘men myghte hire sen’, her deliberately provocative stance parodically suggests that lustful attraction is an ideal that should be worshipped (Chaucer 269-70). The handmaidens dancing beside Venus in this temple are described as ‘al dishevele’, similar to Eve in *Paradise Lost* whose ‘adorned golden tresses wore dishevelled’ (Chaucer 235, Milton 4.306). As this adjective carries reminiscent notions of fallen women, Chaucer exploits these parallel associations to connect the women’s slovenly and unkept appearance, once so majestic and regal, with a disgraced form of romantic relations. This form of debasement is also evidenced in Chaucer’s decision to make the actors in his parliament birds rather than humans, ridiculing the primal and animalistic instincts of its members who ostensibly worship fin’amor. While the birds’ negotiations are seemingly centered around marital arrangements, the narrator’s declaration that every creature arrived ‘to take, by hire acord, his formel or his make’ acknowledges the distinction between a wife and a sexual partner (Chaucer 370-1). Here, Chaucer elucidates the bodily and sexual undertone that characterises both the parliamentary debate and courtly love, satirising the unrealistic aloofness epitomised by fin’amor.

Singer most crucially interprets fin’amor as a love ‘that establishes a holy oneness between man and woman’ (23). Such emphasis on unity is destabilised once again at the entrance to the garden of love, as the narrator explains ‘no wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese / to entre or flen, or me to save or lese’ (Chaucer 146-7). This moment of comic indecision, where the narrator is torn between two paths, is crucial to the following parliament scene because it introduces the possibility of free will. By challenging the need for homogeneity and singularity, Chaucer foreshadows the opportunity for individual choice rather than compulsion or coercion. The inscription on these gates also introduces inherent paradoxes in the garden rather than a coherent vision of the locus amoenus by stating that ‘grene and lusty

May shal evere endure' but simultaneously suggesting that 'ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere' (Chaucer 130, 137). This promise of abundance and lushness is challenged by the image of barrenness and infertility exemplified in the same garden; Chaucer satirises the unity exemplified in fin'amor by producing an incongruent and pluralistic depiction of the garden of love.

Chaucer's disruption of this 'sense of oneness' extends beyond his description of the garden to the parliamentary debate amongst the birds. The royal eagle's pledge to the female eagle that he will 'do what hire lest, to do me lyve or sterve' recalls Sir Launcelot's vow to Gwenyver that 'ye have ben ever my speciall good lady, and I at all tymes your poure knyght', as both position themselves as subservient lovers at the mercy of their ladies (Chaucer 419-20, Malory, 'The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon' 676) . The adoption of conventional roles exemplified in fin'amor is consolidated by the decorous nature of the rhyme royal form with its seven-line stanzas, iambic pentameter, and ABABBCC rhyme scheme. The intricacies and sophistications of this form reflect the equally embellished linguistic style of the nobility and the distinctive culture of courtly love. This is an idea corroborated by James Dean, who asserts that 'the rhyme scheme reinforces the sense of exultation' and 'holds the idea of elation in our minds', as its originating source, the Italian Ottava Rima, is ultimately associated with high culture. Despite being exclusively accessible to a higher-class audience, throughout the deliberation between the eagles, Larry M. Sklute argues that 'Chaucer never leads his readers to any conclusion about which claim is more just or important' but rather 'directs our attention to the fact of pluralistic opinion' (126). For instance, the regularity and rigidity of the rhyme scheme at the end of the poem creates the impression of denouement despite the debate proving anti-climactic and unresolved. By maintaining the form even when courtly conventions of love appear to deteriorate, Chaucer

satirises the notion of fin'amor as an exclusive definition of love and suggests that even when this form of love deteriorates, others still remain viable. Even during their attempt to win the female eagle, the royal eagle's claim that 'non loveth hire so wel as I' and the second eagle's justification that he 'lenger have served hire in my degre' demonstrates how intensity is not the only criterion for love in the parliament but that constancy and fidelity can be equally valuable measures (Chaucer 435, 453). In this way, Chaucer champions a fluid and flexible vision where fin'amor is not the only possible type of love and the inconclusive parliamentary debate becomes, through Chaucer's satire, a form of resolution in itself.

Alongside his focus on fin'amor, Chaucer incorporates a diverse range of social classes in the parliament but ultimately directs his satirical attention onto the folly and vices of the nobility. The various social crowds in the parliament are represented by different groups of birds; Edith Rickert postulates that 'the fowls of the ravine are the nobility, the water fowls the great merchants, and the worm fowls the citizenry or the working classes' (61). Robert B. Burlin argues, in a conceivably reductive argument, that 'serious reservations about aristocratic love are expressed not in the parliament scene but in the structure of the poem as a whole' (91). Although Burlin dismisses the importance of content and subject matter in favour of form, he likewise appreciates how the rhyme scheme proves more elucidatory about Chaucer's attitude to love rather than his indeterminate resolution. Instead, it is perhaps negligence that Burlin is guilty of, as he overlooks the importance of Chaucer's language and symbolism as a tool in his satire. The third eagle attempts to emulate the courtly idioms and clichés of the royal eagle, claiming that 'longe may nat lyve in payne' just as the first eagle proclaims 'and but I speke, I mot for sorwe deye' (Chaucer 424; 469). This recurring motif of love as a cause of death in the eagles' declarations of love, where the 'speche laste tyl dounward went the sonne faste', appears increasingly repetitive and

prolonged (Chaucer 489-90). Here, Chaucer does not accuse the water and worm fowls of their impatience but rather the eagles, and by extension the nobility, of being tedious and self-absorbed in their own affairs. To this end, both the water fowl and the cuckoo strive for a conclusion to the unrelenting debate, respectively advising 'but she wol love hym, lat him love another' and 'lat ech be hem be soleyn al here lyve / this is my red'. The use of unambiguous language, with the repeated use of the imperative verb 'lat' and explicit utterances such as 'this is my red', reflects how the water fowl and the cuckoo – the classes inferior to the nobility according to Rickert – avoid complicated affairs of the heart in favour of a simple resolution. Here, Chaucer satirises the nobility in their refusal to acknowledge the rationality of the merchants or citizenry and insistence on continuing the debate.

Equally, Chaucer manipulates structure for the purpose of satire and sustains the use of iambic pentameter in the resolution of the poem. This uninterrupted sequence of unstressed and stressed syllables mirrors the rhythms of a heartbeat and generates a sense of emotional contentment in the framework of the poem. This sense of fulfilment is corroborated by how the water and worm fowls are able to return home to their existing partners, for 'whan this werk al brought was to an ende, / to every foul Nature yaf his make', and it is only the courtiers that are forced to wait another year (Chaucer 667-8). Through the meter, Chaucer satirises the aristocracy's overly embellished attempts to find love as the cause of their very failure. This elaborate debate arising between the birds in competition for the fowl reflects Richard II's marriage negotiations with Princess Anne of Bohemia, as he, like the royal eagle, faced the two competing suitors Prince William of Bavaria and Prince Friedrich of Meissen. This interpretation of *The Parliament of Fowls* as a performance piece situated in reality is echoed by Weisgerber's claim that the satirist's 'victims are real' and that he 'regards them as people involved in a concrete situation at the time he is writing' (159). The reader is able to

associate Chaucer's critique of the noble eagles with the convoluted and ritualised nature of Richard II's own betrothal, as his satire against the aristocracy appears more recognisable and even legitimate because it fits into an existing framework of events at the time. This importance of satire as being founded in reality is complicated by the parliament which is composed of birds and not humans. However, by producing a greater sense of distance between the players in the parliament and what they represent, Chaucer is not required to abide by certain codes of conduct or loyalties in his presentation and his characters become easier to critique, as he uses animals to facilitate his exposure of human folly. This is further demonstrated through Chaucer's status as a detached and uninvolved narrator: he retains a position of observation during the parliamentary debate and only intervenes with neutral remarks such as 'so ful was that unethe was there space for me to stonde' (314-5). While Chaucer was a courtier, he was not noble in the same way as the aristocrats, having been born into a noble family (Jones). The scarcity of the narrator's presence indicates how Chaucer seeks to distance himself from his own social class and role in the court, for it is this space and scope that allows him to satirise the nobility more effectively.

Fundamentally, Chaucer's satire is based on real life issues and events, as he directs his satirical focus on social matters such as medieval courtly love and hierarchical class systems. By subverting the respective codes of fin'amor, he maintains an expansive outlook and suggests that courtly conventions of love are no longer the only viable form of relationships. His critique of the elaborate and decorous nature of aristocratic lifestyle, particularly in the context of Richard II's marital negotiations, emerges from his creation of a diverse parliament, where each social group champions different values and strengths. It becomes increasingly evident in *The Parliament of Fowls* that Chaucer thrives on plurality and multiplicity, both in implying the possibility of alternative models of love and in

producing a varied set of competing suitors alongside an even broader set of opinions regarding their courtship. Crucially, Chaucer enjoys the comedic possibilities that stem from this open-endedness, as his satire endeavours to counter the limitations of singularity and homogeneity.

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