



Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*
as a Valentine Fable
The Subversive Poetics of Feminine Desire

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haucer's initiation of St. Valentine's Day as a celebration for love-birds of all species began a remarkable tradition of wide social and cultural impact still blooming today in florists' and Hallmark shops around the world. Smitten medieval Courts eagerly implemented Chaucer's literary suggestions, instituting programs to further the already well-known practice and policy of courtly love. By the time of his death, these practices were becoming institutionalized not only in England but in France and elsewhere as well. As Derek S. Brewer points out,

A whole elaborate institution, the *Cour Amoreuse* was founded in the French Court in honour of women; its chief aim was the presentation of love poems to ladies in a kind of competition, with a prize for the best poem. The *Cour Amoreuse* first met in Paris on St. Valentine's Day 1400. In theory there were over six hundred members... mostly great lords of the realm... under the King's patronage. It was ruled by a "Prince of Love", who was a professional poet.... On St. Valentine's Day 1400, after mass, the chief ministers... met in "joyous recreation and conversation about love." Love-poems were presented before ladies, who judged them, and awarded a golden crown and chaplet for the best poem.¹

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This and other institutions in France and England—the rival orders of the Flower and the Leaf, for example—testify to the abiding interest in *fine amour* in poetry and courtly society. However, these institutions supposedly honoring women failed to endorse feminine desire. Rather, the idealizing and therefore distancing of women perpetuates their social objectification and isolation under the guise of praise. Treating women as actual persons with desire was rare indeed. Poems written especially for St. Valentine’s Day, such as Chaucer’s *Complaint of Mars*, the anonymous *Complaynt d’Amours*, Oton de Grandson’s *Le Songe Sainte Valentin*, John Gower’s 34th and 35th of the *Cinkante Balades* and John Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupide*, reflect the actual social situation and attitudes endorsing this courtly construct: idealization but not acceptance of actual women.

But do all these poems in fact actually “endorse the courtly construct”? Or might Chaucer offer a strikingly revolutionary alternative in honestly presenting, and even encouraging, a strong species of feminine desire within his typically traditional context? I would suggest that Chaucer is deconstructing the hierarchical courtly convention by subversive decoding, re-inscribing feminine desire within the tradition, and thereby reappropriating feminine power. He defies convention. No doubt most Cupid poems were written for the late fourteenth-century, primarily English, Valentine’s Day festivals of games in which men and women chose their love partners for the next year. Allegorized lovers,

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often represented as birds, sang of eternal and unrequited love in these complaint ballads. The poetic love-vision, often encompassing a *demande d'amour*, rehearsed the love-sick poet's dream of a May garden hosting a love debate. The discourse often asked practical amatory questions: who is the best lover? Who suffers most, she with a dead or an unfaithful lover? Who is the best mistress, a maid, wife, or widow? Who is preferable, a loyal but indiscrete lover or a discrete but possibly unfaithful one? This is the convention.

Chaucer's primary Valentine poem, the *Parlement of Fowles*, breaks certain literary *fine amour* conventions by being philosophical rather than witty. No doubt on the surface its debate form investigates the nature of "worthinesse": who merits love and why? What is "*fine amour*"? These serious questions Chaucer answers from a marginalized social rather than conventional aristocratic position. Furthermore, he gives unexpected and non-traditional responses authorizing female desire and multiclassed power. If honorable love demands eternal dedication even in rejection, is the rejected suitor who truly loves eternally faithful despite that rejection? The question is explored, interestingly, by the lower, unprivileged birds; as Brewer points out:

The essence of *fine amor* was its disinterested loyalty; all the suitors have vowed eternal faithfulness as part of their claim of love. What is to happen to those who are unsuccessful? Are they to remain faithful, with the absolute certainty of no

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reward? Here is the question at the heart of the debate. (Brewer, 12)

This deeper type of theoretical and abstract philosophical *demande* rather than a practical or individualized dilemma marks Chaucer's ruminations. Simultaneously this philosophical poet is politically engaged, exploring both amatory and historically based questions of hierarchy, power, and gender.

Furthermore, while the typical *demande d'amour* offers equally qualified suitors and a difficult intellectual crux to be unscrambled, not philosophical or moral dilemmas but a rational *demande* or question, Chaucer posits a single logically and obviously "right" choice. He offers no true dilemma. His probing, then, is actually about the essence of reality and justice, not who is a better mate! Why thus play with conventions? For Chaucer, it is not sufficient to posit that for the likely historical occasion of his writing, Anne of Bohemia and Richard II's marriage—and Larry Benson has no doubt rightly reclaimed the three lost suitors and bride²—one suitor is head and wings above the others. But this simple allegory, appropriate vehicle though it may be, is too thin; Chaucer has another agenda. Statements of Chaucer's purpose by J.A.W. Bennett to offer "a variant of the common literary *topos*: the instability and duality of love"³ and by Dubs and Malarkey to find "the attainment of true poetic fusion of form and content... fleeting and obtained at great pains"⁴ ignore his involvement with history. Chaucer's *persona* reads not a

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romance, but Macrobius, “a transition to the posture of historian/redactor... Scipio’s towering vision of the place of earth and human endeavor in the total scheme of things”⁵ as Dubs and Malarkey note. Clearly this *Parlement*, so politically and culturally suggestive, so redolent with traditional and historic markers, begs for a New Historicist interpretation with a feminist slant. Just as Chaucer has used and moderated conventions and historic fact for his ends, so has he used, countered, challenged, even subverted the traditional, static, hegemonic establishment, privileging a pluralistic, sometimes marginalized perspective—a feminist and even a lesser-classed avian perspective. We may never completely unearth the vexed and often-explored folk custom of how one, or several, Saint Valentines came to be associated with amatory mating,⁶ or why blustery British Februaries came to represent hot passionate exchanges. But the real question is what Chaucer did with this historic context of Valentines, Februaries, and powerless, sexless women. Jack B. Oruch describes some of that historic contextual lore:

Chaucer and his contemporaries were of the belief enunciated by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, in his *De arte venandi cum avibus* (thirteenth century), that “birds generally nest in the springtime”: This season has as a rule, an even temperature, which induces an abundance of blood and sperm, and an excess of these two humors arouses a desire in both

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sexes to indulge in coitus, resulting in racial reproduction.⁷

Further, Charles Muscatine notes Brewer's citation of John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's thirteenth-century *De Proprietatibus rerum* 12.1:

Among alle bestis that ben in ordre of generacioun,
briddes and foules [fowlen] most honest[ee] of
kynde. For by ordre of kynde males seche femalis
with bisynesse and loueth hem whanne thy beth
ifounden... and briddes and foules gendrynge
kepith couenable tyme, for in springinge tyme
whanne the generacioun cometh inne, briddes crien
and singen. Males drawn to companye of females
and preyen iche othir of loue and wowith by beκες
and voys.⁸

Within his narrative of interiority and alterity, self and other, individual good and "common profit," Chaucer affirms, questions, or challenges these cultural assumptions about bird and human biology, physiology, gender, and sexual desire. He thus examines the agency of the subject caught within the agency of the historic tradition, the matrix of his narrative construct.

Besides the obvious literal purpose—writing an occasional piece to celebrate Anne of Bohemia and Richard II's courtship—how did Chaucer use this politically laden vehicle to structure and further politicize his narrative? Several obvious possibilities

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hover above the Parliament, and a few more flutter along the edges. Much of the dominant ideology on which patriarchal convention rests is subtly probed: namely, the wholesale cultural adoption of *courtoisie*, of graciously granting the female certain limited control over her amatory and sexual sphere—not choice of mate, mind you, but *where* her favors will be bestowed. Historically, this might well be seen as a token effort to redress the political imbalance of power in which the female is deprived of actual or material power. Her power most blatantly lies in her ability to move the particular male now suing for her affection. He has given her this power by acknowledging his reaction to her in his oral and written wooing words. A verse from Guilhelm IX's "Mout jauzens" suggests her influence:

Per son joy pot malautz sanar,
E per sa ira sas morir
E savis hom enfolezir
E belhs hom sa beutat mudar
E-l plus cortes vilaneiar
E-l totz vilas encortezir.

Through her joy a sick man can become well,
And through her anger a healthy man die
And a wise man become foolish
And a handsome man lose his beauty
And the most refined become boorish
And the most boorish become refined.

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She passively learns of *his* desire, claiming that her charms have placed him in this vulnerable position, and that she has the power to “cure” him of his desire. But her desire is ignored.

This insignificant, non-threatening realm of amatory involvement is easily relegated to her, as her domain of influence, on condition that she not penetrate beyond it into the masculine realm of real, military and political authority, or of sexual desire. The patriarchal tradition demands containment. The kind of power courtly love entails is nebulous, temporary, limited, inconstant, and of doubtful value. This historic concession did not cede more authority to women in any tangible sphere, or allow greater choice of husband. In effect, women were bought off by convincing rhetoric adulating *fine amour* and the feminine although their material and intellectual condition remained subservient. They still had no real, but only illusory power.

Perceiving this political power manipulation in society, Chaucer has subversively empowered the feminine: he does it with the non-offensive subtlety and grace for which he is known. Despite his tact, he nevertheless privileges the female beyond her accepted realm of amatory attraction by mapping and endorsing a pattern of feminine desire. One way is by exploring the marginalization of female desire in actual history through allegorically depicting its converse: Anne’s brother, the Holy Roman Emperor Wenzel, patriarchal emblem par excellence, is privileged in both power and desire. Political machinations and power plays control

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the players. History shows his influence determined the marriage. Larry Benson describes the marriage-seeking emissaries of 1380, concluding “Wenzel could choose whom he wished of the three [Richard, Charles VI, or Friedrich of Meissen]. When he finally agreed that Richard should have Anne, he did not even have to offer a dowry.”⁹ What does Anne of Bohemia have to say about it? Or, in fact, Richard? Benson points to the marriage treaty explicitly privileging common profit over personal choice:

The practice of righteous rulers and the custom of just princes have always been to place the common good of their subjects before any private advantage (*privatis commodis*) whatsoever, and by this means to strengthen the commonwealth (*rem publicam munire*).... The treaty goes on to the proposed alliance between England and the Empire and then to the marriage itself, emphasizing that Anne has all the freedom of choice that Nature allows the formel (“de eius spontanea voluntate”) and depicting Richard, busily concerned with the good of the commonwealth (“inter gloriosas republicae curas”), likewise freely agreeing to the marriage.¹⁰

But the differences are obvious: it is incumbent upon Anne to accept for public benefit; and once her brother Wenzel has chosen, she has the power of negation only. The formel, of course, uses that power of negation, altogether rejecting all three choices for the moment.

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Interestingly, the medieval documents quoted above theoretically acknowledge and affirm female desire or at least complicity in mating, sexual desire and its symbolic correlate: power. But in point of fact, such power is denied in the actual political and sexual situation.

Chaucer thus has two possible models, from written literary texts and from political praxis long in effect across Europe. His poem ignores the latter: Wenzel's patriarchal injunction behind Anne's marriage. Grounded in the courtly domain which by its nature accords women an ostensibly but not actually privileged status, he places the formel, a powerful agent, at the narratological core. Within the Chaucerian fiction, a Valentine garden of discoursing birds, political concerns of a male imperial register do not exist. The female is simply accorded power. She is ultimately in control of *whom*, and in fact, with Court permission, *when* she will choose a mate. Chaucer has subverted the actual facts of the marriage of Richard and Anne (clearly the outcome was not within Anne's power to determine) by creating a reality in which her courtly surrogate, one actively aggressive formel, does indeed implement her own desire. Unlike Emily in the heavily patriarchal *Knight's Tale*, deprived of even the choice of negation, the right to reject *both* Palamon and Arcite, the formel is assumed to have will, acceptance and negation, and the right to exercise it. Thus he subverts the actual political role of women by creating a female who is privileged—given rights—not marginalized. Her decision is not contingent upon power relationships

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outside her desire or a patriarchal order which must be maintained for political containment. Chaucer actively subverts Emperor Wenzel's male historical appropriation of power in the real world behind his parliamentary allegory in awarding precisely that power of conjugal choice, power and desire, to the formel, surrogate of the historically marginalized Anne. If woman's voice has effectively been marginalized, suppressed, or ventriloquized within history, in his poem Chaucer reverses this power relationship and the gender assumptions behind it by giving the formel the only voice that counts.¹¹

A second way Chaucer subverts the marginalized role of women is through the authority of Cytherea (or Venus) and Natura, goddesses notably useful to those encountering them. The poet first calls upon a powerful Cytherea, the "blysful lady swete / That with thy fyrbrond dauntest whom the lest" (113–14); as the source of his dream, she has the ability to help him recount it, he acknowledges: "Be thow myn helpe in this, for thow mayest best!" (116). The allegorical figures of the garden, alternately male and female, have no particular power advantage before the choosing game begins, although the proudly noble Venus, standing apart in dignity, receives two young lovers on bended knee begging her help. But, as Brewer suggests,

though Cupid is surrounded by in the main pleasant qualities, and may be taken as representing fashionable love affairs, some of his qualities are

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evil and treacherous; through Cupid we are led to the miseries and calamities of the temple, with its gross phallic image of Priapus, and the titillating picture of the all-but-naked Venus.¹²

Venus as Playmate-of-the-Month plays to male desire. Male sexuality is not seen as terribly appealing. The noble goddess Dame Natura, however, is seen as refreshing after the temple, what Brewer calls “a hot-house of illicit sensuality.”¹³ Nature is accorded more privilege and power than her gender generally warrants; her desire, albeit non-sexual, is privileged. Atop a flowering hill, this queen presides over all the fowles who “take hire dom and yeve hire audyence” (308). Although critics disagree as to the precise degree of potency she displays,¹⁴ Natura indubitably rules. Her will dominates. As John P. McCall claims, “Despite the press of the crowd and the huge noise, every bird finds his proper place and all grow quiet as Nature outlines ‘In esy voyc,’ the customary procedures”:¹⁵ “This noble emperesse, ful of grace, / Bad every foul to take his owne place” (319–20). When Nature commands them to heed her sentence, by her “ryghtful ordenaunce” they begin the choosing game according to station. The rules are traditional and patriarchal: males choose, and females assent or reject. When the chatty birds become disorderly, Nature

With facound voys seyde, “Hold youre tonges there!
And I shal sone, I hope, a conseyl fynde

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Yow to delyvere, and fro this noyse unbynde:
I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle
To seyn the verdit for yow foules alle.” (521–25)

Her voice is firm, definitive, and unwavering, and business is conducted in what McCall calls “the stable governance of that patient Goddess, Nature.”¹⁶ Although the birds are somewhat disruptive, willingly she grants them free speech while controlling their chattering, a mark of her authority. Finally she exercises her prerogative to judge, and in doing so, defies the traditional patriarchal code. The male will not have his choice of mate. Rather Nature transfers that autonomy from the masculine to the feminine domain:

But fynally, this is my conclusioun,
That she hireself shal han hir eleccioun
Of whom hire lest; ...
Thanne wol I don hire this favour, that she
Shal han right hym on whom hire herte is set,
And he hire that his herte hath on hire knet:
Thus juge I, Nature, for I may not lye.
(620–23; 626–29)

Thus, a female in authority valorizes another female in a double reversal of power for the donor and the receiver; both are given power normally relegated to males in the patriarchal system of amatory relations. Deferring to Nature’s sovereign position, the formel acknowledges her own and all other creatures’

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subservience, but boldly seeks to maintain her freedom of choice for a year. Desire plays a three-fold role: in the fact of the choice, in the time of its inauguration, and in its inevitably sexual fabric. Granting her wish, Nature again controls the suitors by ordering them to wait patiently and faithfully for that year. The formel eagle holds the cards.

She is accorded power in other instances as well. During the trial, Nature fondles the formel eagle, of highest station and most prestige. This linking of the two most significant females in the text enhances the status of both by mutual association. Furthermore, the royal tercel addresses the formel as “my soverayn lady, and not my fere [equal]” (416), fulfilling the conventional code of authority. The servant-lover is abjectly beholden to his courtly lady as his promises of everlasting devotion, pleas for “routhe,” and humility before her confirm. Here, of course, we have no assurance that his protestations are any more sincere than the typical idealizing / distancing of the woman in the courtly love paradigm. This is the traditional *fine amour* power usually accorded the female. Equally submissive are the two lower orders of tercel offering length of service and sincere devotion. The protocol of power relationships is here fulfilled. Males, with the power to choose or not choose the formel, pretend to relegate power to the chosen female by abjectly bowing before her; she supposedly has power over them by virtue of their infatuated devotion, but not the power to choose her mate from all possible mates. At most she has the

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right of rejection. But her power persists only as long as he remains enamored of her, as Canacee's lovesick little bird attests in the *Squire's Tale*. Not until the conclusion does Chaucer truly defy convention and accord power in another domain—not just amatory—beyond the expected and to the unexpected—to the marginalized female.

Surprisingly neglected in criticism of such a love poem as this is the topoi of eroticism and feminine desire. Chaucer's third method of privileging feminine desire is through the poetics of deferral or postponement. No doubt Chaucer has taken the humorous rather than salacious road in his Canterbury narratives where he admittedly posits feminine desire—probably as often as masculine desire. His fabliaux *femme fatales*, for example, might humorously climb into a washtub or a tree to satisfy desire. But the *Parlement* can hardly be said to treat love humorously. Here the female is taken seriously as a sexual animal; her own desires are presumed and respected. Initially the female eagle representing the feminine is given veto-power over her suitors, but that control reaches a crescendo when three vie for her hand. They actively, passionately, and publicly woo her, albeit in words rather than deeds. Her abashed blushing confirms and enhances the erotic poetic dimension; that Venus fails to understand her modest reticence suggests that Venus's erotic tendencies are of a different order: yes, more “natural” and unself-conscious, but also less subtle, more blatant than the shy but nonetheless responsive formel.

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Chaucer accords Venus her brand of sexuality too, as a foil to the formel and in her own right. Perhaps the formel's embarrassment at the public display of male desire, and her own barely repressed but undeniable reaction impels her to postpone her "marriage." She is overcome—by their impulses and her own uncontrollable reaction.

Certainly the blatantly erotic allegorized iconography of Venus' temple prepares for the dramatic words, in effect, speech acts in the sexual choice *debate*. The profession of the suitors' love is an action and a commitment, for a year if not forever. It is, in itself, both literally and symbolically, an erotic act, and in the wooing of her, an acknowledgment of the formel's desire. Specific erotic behavior follows from this profession. The traditional patriarchal social norm denies the female that profession of desire. Chaucer gives it back.

The means by which Chaucer empowers this formel through valorizing her desire is complicated. Initially, she gains authority by her ability to attract three males and thereby earns the prerogative to postpone: she plays her own game, a highly erotic deferral gesture which increases manifoldly the sexual content, tenor, and outcome of the debate. She keeps the passion of not one, but three lovers hotly burning for a year. No doubt the tripartite verbal and gestural foreplay will continue throughout the year, intensifying immediately before her choice of mate. Her wish—ironically, to postpone rather than commit to any physical desire, thus

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heightening the eroticism for all involved—is honored, respected, fulfilled. The seemingly shy, blushing formel defies the expected amatory behavior, working against the customary ritual to heighten and prolong the inconclusive and therefore smoldering sexuality; this signifies her power, sexual and otherwise. As usual, sex and power are inextricable. Furthermore, the narrator acceptingly reports Venus' brand of open sensuality alongside the formel's tantalizingly subtle, and thus powerfully controlling sexuality within this ritualized, stylized frame. That is his erotic game.

The function of Chaucer's erotic interplay is to redistribute power in the narrator's textual field. Medieval historic and literary realities play deceptive games, feigning allegiance to feminine power through courtly *fine amour* without conceding actual control; the patriarchy, fawning over idealized and etherealized women, deny real power in a tangible world where it counts. Their allegiance is a sham. Chaucer has created an alternative in which the feminine is empowered. A feminized narrator has reinscribed history or at least one literary reality, by changing the poetics of eroticism: he transfers real power of choice, in this case entailing sexual desire, not the illusory influence of *fine amour*, to the feminine, albeit still within the conscribed amatory domain.

Chaucer uses and sometimes undermines other historic givens in his *Parlement*, namely social privilege. Beginning with the aphorism from Hippocrates, patriarchal wisdom initially contextualizes the poem

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within the traditional conventional mode, the ground from which he will then deviate. The first dream sequence is an idealized but hegemonic construct apart from reality. From his grandfather Africanus, Scipio learns of Carthage and the virtue of the powerful beneficently governing the powerless for “common profyt” in order to achieve celestial bliss. Here deviators from law and convention will forever lose salvation. Scipio’s dream and its *contemptus mundi* message represent dogmatic establishment policy which Chaucer rejects in favor of his own more personal dream construct.

The harsh didactic tone of the first dream is replaced by a softer, more humane reality as Africanus visits the poet. Here a green-stoned garden gate on a warm, lusty May replaces the cold, sterile, objective cosmological locus of Scipio’s dream. The message of the first is threatening and uncompromising, filled with injunctions to labor diligently and thus merit the afterlife since the world is “dissevable and ful of hard grace” (65); the comfort of the second suggests no such distrust or resistance, no compulsion to move to another more amenable locus. The planetary dwellers’ world “Nis but a maner deth” looking toward the next world. The earthly world of the poet, a “welle of grace,” is sensuously green and fertile, a “blysfyl place / Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure”(127–28). Its salvific properties starkly contrast the ominous, inhuman uncontrollable environment of the cosmos. The garden gate’s invitation of “pleyn sentence” (126) to “al good

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aventure” personally addressed to “thow redere” (132) has no parallel in the non-verbal world of singing heavenly bodies, incomprehensible to human ears. Its physical and moral dangers are replaced by emotional dangers in Chaucer’s garden: disdain, emotional distance, sorrow of love’s rejection. The historic vantage-point of the celestial dream-voyage is patriarchal and military. As David Aers observes,

The text of the dream, the dream, and the celestial instruction all come from Roman politicians and patriots for whom service of the earthly city and empire comprised the highest vocation of man.... Chaucer invites speculation concerning the relationship between self-righteous nationalistic war and ‘commune profyt’.... Such speculations would be relevant in his own society locked in the long, destructive war with France and, as the 1381 uprising made especially plain, composed of social groups whose interests were often antagonistic—whatever might be claimed in the dominant ideology which presented society as an organic body with hierarchical estates whose ends were mutual benefit and harmony.¹⁷

Scipio’s harshly masculine, male-dominated dream-world which Aers describes is contrasted to the narrator’s softer feminine, female-dominated edenic garden, and translation to the second dream generated from the first is a relief. The traumatic experience of

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the cosmological trip has wearied the poet, plunging him into his own dream, a fit transition and appropriate psychological motive for a peaceful substitute. The ambience of his dream world is much more ambiguous, making him hot and cold, fearful and emboldened, witless and powerless to leave. This personally compelling, but marginalized reality Chaucer would privilege as the reader is invited to rehumanize official authority. The Church and Innocent III as hegemonic codes offer less validity and viability than Ovid and open acceptance of Valentinian amour. Pleasure is not to be marginalized in the face of privileged order within his narratological schema.

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. discusses other subversive or non-conventional elements, claiming in his *Parlement* Chaucer realized that “traditional and authoritative materials fail to cohere”¹⁸; thus he believes Chaucer advocated self-conscious self-limitation for the social good. Individualized pleasure, even of a hord of birds and a formel eagle, is not marginalized, but rather acknowledged and privileged, and its converse is also concretized: if the “disruptive force of individual personality,” of avian personal choice, precludes social harmony, how are we to read the disruptive social, if non-human babble concluding the tale? Why is the question of choice raised if any personal choice not made for the common profit is disruptive? David Aers likewise does not find Chaucer advocating self-conscious self-limitation. Chaucer rails against what Aers calls “the dogmatic objectivity of authoritative discourses,”¹⁹

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the world view of homogeneous universality rather than plurality. Regardless of the social class from which each bird is hatched, love itself seems to transform and ennoble. Despite the adulation accorded the eagle species, as McCall suggests, “because she has no special concern for social status, Nature begins by siding with the practical judgment of the goose.”²⁰ If disharmony temporarily intrudes, it is simply a part of the multiplicity of voices which Chaucer heard and respected. As McCall observes, “Perhaps it takes a ‘president’ or goddess, like Nature, or even a department chairman, to understand that all the terrible racket can actually be part of an earthly melody. But it is.”²¹ No social class is privileged in the *mêlée*.

Through the doors of his dream vision, traditional allegorical figures—Youth, Beauty, Nature, Cupid, Venus—à la *Roman de la Rose*, etherealize and idealize. From this allegorical world emerge charmingly loquacious, sensuously inclined, doubly allegoricalized birds absorbed in the same issue as Canacee’s Falcon in the “Squire’s Tale” and Geoffrey’s Eagle in “The House of Fame”: the merits of lovers. Unlike the Nun’s Priest’s Pertelote and Chauntecleer who for all their supposed dignity never approach courtliness or discuss love, the *Parlement’s* avians, Canacee’s Falcon, and Geoffrey’s Eagle represent refined sensibility and genteel aristocratic emotions in a unique type of aristocratic bestiary. They also subversively defy hegemonic convention by their deviance from ritualized expectations and power manifestations.

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In this time of social upheaval suggested above, the actual revolutionary situation marked by the Peasant's Revolt validates and informs Chaucer's political concerns. What, then, in contemporary life was his source and exemplar for women's desire which he raised to such a perfect climax of erotic deferral? Arlene W. Saxonhouse notes that in the early middle ages, Augustine's view of sexuality, which must be transcended, and *femina* (defined by her body) which must be controlled, is negative.²² Vern L. Bullough comments that "Sex in the early Christian church was usually equated with women... who were looked upon as the source of all male difficulties."²³ Nevertheless, eventually feminine power began to emerge: "Woman's new assertiveness, or at least her prominence, created tensions between the progressive and reactionary elements in early Christianity... only relieved by the reassertion of the traditional masculine view of the position of women."²⁴ Women take on even greater import with the power of three great French noblewomen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie of Champagne, and Blanche of Castile. Mary Beard notes that:

As Eleanor began her active public life when she was fifteen on her marriage with Louis VII in 1137, and as her granddaughter Blanche of Castile, wife of Louis VIII... mother of Saint Louis was actively wielding her imperious scepter in France till the time of her death in 1252, the era of their

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regal influence extended over a century of demiurgic history in France and England.²⁵

The new-found power of the Queens of Love, as well as cultural changes accepting feminine authority, undoubtedly extending to the realm of sexuality, must have affected Chaucer more than a hundred years later. Their open endorsement of the sexual is itself miraculous. Eleanor S. Riemer finds a softening when Italy's commercial revival in the late middle ages first gave increased legal and economic rights to middle- and upper-class women; but soon male retrenchment in the form of dowry laws curtailed women's power.²⁶ Marion A. Kaplan claims,

In early modern France and England... the need to save for the dowry resulted in later marriages among artisans and peasants... [as] young women had to wait for their [parents'] deaths... or had to work until they themselves accumulated enough money or goods. Both alternatives seem to have raised the average age of marriage.²⁷

And the age of sexual fulfillment. Yet feminine desire, possibly stronger with age, was no doubt a potent and influential social force. Perhaps the emotional zeal and passion that fired fourteenth-century mystics endorsed eroticism in its more usual form of feminine desire as well as its extended manifestation of mysticism.

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Ultimately, with proper respect for station, each bird in “his owne place” in Nature’s field, is hierarchically aligned: “the foules of ravyne / Weere hyest set” (320, 323–24); the small worm-eating birds followed; seed-eating fowls sat next on the green; “water-foul sat lowest in the dale.” But they do not remain in that orderly procession of upper-class decorum and refinement of speech. They say what they think. When and how they choose. And without denying Nature her prerogative to rule, they are allowed the freedom of speech—the song they have not waited to be given. This is Chaucer’s politicized, socially disruptive statement.

But power properly belongs to the Valentine queen, the formel eagle, double symbol of Anne of Bohemia and all her gender. The suitors’ wooing dialogue replete with courteous phrases “of merci and of grace” to “my lady sovereyne,” offers high-born gentility, and pledges of long service and deep devotion. Equally vocal, and thereby empowered, however noisy, are the less aristocratic birds vying for their beloveds. But their empowerment wanes in the heat of passion engendered by the formel’s sexual power. Through it, she potently controls both masculine and feminine desire, privileging her own erotic waiting game.

The *Parlement* is a fine concatenation of successes. As Larry Benson notes,

no other Valentine Poem made so happy a use of the idea... of enlivening the dreariest of winter months with an occasion redolent of spring... [by]

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an association of love with Saint Valentine's Day...
as *The Parliament of Fowls*, and none approaches it
in richness of texture and complexity of theme.²⁸

The realm of sexual as well as gender politics must be seen as part of the power machinations by which Chaucer upset the Valentine appellation of his too staid patriarchal world. His subversive privileging of feminine desire, both substantial and erotic in its foreplaying deferral, is an effectively subtle means of countering an all-too-patriarchal stronghold on courtly *fine amour*.

Notes

1. Derek S. Brewer, ed., *The Parlement of Foulys* (New York and London: Barnes and Noble and Nelson, 1960), p. 4.
2. Larry D. Benson, "The Occasion of the *Parliament of Fowls*" in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), pp. 123–144. Benson re-examines the historic foundation for the avian allegory, dismissing previous objections to the Anne-Richard hypothesis and reasserting its legitimacy.
3. J.A.W. Bennett, *The Parlement of Foules: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) p. 26.

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4. Kathleen E. Dubs and Stoddard Malarkey, "The Frame of Chaucer's *Parlement*," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978), p. 18.
5. Dubs and Malarkey, p. 21.
6. Jack B. Oruch perhaps does the most convincing job. In "St. Valentine, Chaucer, and Spring in February," *Speculum* 56 (1981), pp. 534–65, Oruch systematically surveys the most significant candidates of thirty possible Valentines from the fourth to sixteenth centuries and their potential amatory associations. He accounts for a February date by noting that the Shepherd's Calendar c. 1503 defines "Primetime," the Spring of the year, as February, March, and April.
7. Oruch, p. 553.
8. Charles Muscatine, Explanatory Notes to *Parlement of Fowles*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) p. 999, n. 310. All quotations are from this edition.
9. Benson, p. 137.
10. Benson, pp.131–32.
11. Ironically, this occasional poem is to honor the new couple! Yet there is no reason to think Chaucer would subvert the historical marriage, only Anne's lack of control over it.
12. Brewer, p. 20.
13. Brewer, p. 20.
14. John P. McCall, "The Harmony of Chaucer's *Parlement*," *Chaucer Review* 1 (1970), pp. 22–31, sees Nature as powerful and in control.
15. Mc Call, "Harmony," p. 24.

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16. McCall, p. 23.
17. David Aers, "The *Parliament of Fowles*: Authority, the Knower and the Known," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981), pp. 1–17.
18. H.M. Leicester, Jr. "The Harmony of Chaucer's *Parlement*: A Dissonant Voice," *Chaucer Review* 9 (1974), p. 21.
19. Aers, p. 5
20. McCall, p. 25.
21. McCall, p. 29.
22. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985); see especially "St. Augustine: Women in the City of God," pp. 135–40.
23. Vern L. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 98.
24. Bullough, pp, 101.
25. Mary R. Beard. *Woman as Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 214–15.
26. Eleanor S. Riemer, "Women, Dowries, and Capital Investment in Thirteenth-Century Siena" in *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History* ed. Marion A. Kaplan (USA: Haworth Press, 1985), pp. 59–79.
27. Marion A. Kaplan, "Introduction," *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History* (USA: Haworth Press, 1985), p. 6.
28. *Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 383.

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