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A Dream as a Guide for the Dreamer in *Parliament of Fowls* by Geoffrey Chaucer

Using the dream vision was a method even before the Middle Ages, employed by the likes of Cicero to embolden the journey of the epic hero. In *The Parliament of Fowls* by Geoffrey Chaucer, the utilization of the dream vision—a tool for allegory in many love poems—expands further with the integration of the beast fable. Chaucer chooses to assimilate an earlier dream vision into *Parliament* to add depth to his own dream vision. The dream vision from Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* gives Chaucer elements to transform and two key elements to adopt as his own dream vision. The harmony of the nine planets and commune profit ideal from the “Dream of Scipio” become the foci for Chaucer in his narrator's dream vision and the narrator's search for tangible evidence of love.

The narrator's journey into his dream vision begins with self-aware melancholy for his nescience of love as an emotion. The narrator only possesses knowledge of love through the portal of literature. The joys and the pains of love are foreign to his personal emotions; he expresses Love as a personified stranger:

For al be that I knowe nat Love in ded,  
Ne wot how he quiteth folk here hyre,  
Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede  
Of his myrakles and his crewel yre. (8-11)

The book that the narrator chooses as his reading is peculiar in its content as a cure for his dilemma. The book, Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* or “Dream of Scipio,” does not identify and deal with the narrator's benightedness with Love. The book instead, or at least the portion that

we are given by the narrator, discusses Scipio's own dream vision with his grandfather as guide. Scipio's dream vision will serve as parallel for Chaucer as he uses elements of it to foil his own love themes.

Scipio's guide in his dream vision, Africanus, also becomes the narrator's guide in his own dream vision. Scipio's dream vision produces ideas of commune profit and harmony of the heavens produced by the "speres thryes thre" (61). The concept of "commune profit" is stressed by Africanus twice as the public good that Scipio should love as a means to attain heavenly bliss, "And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse / To commune profit, and thow shalt not mysse / To comen swiftly to that place deere" (74-76). The dream vision of the narrator splices the harmony of the nine spheres in the "Dream of Scipio" into two. The dream vision of the narrator utilizes the "dredful joye" of love in the birds of the locus amoenus of his dream vision to emphasize the harmony and disharmony created by the joy and anguish of love (3). A harmonious chorus of anonymous birds greets the narrator, but with the positive aspect of love come the negative accoutrements as well. This duality is emphasized when he enters the garden through the paradoxical gate of gold and black. As opposed to the chorus of birds in harmony that greet the narrator when he first enters into the locus amoenus, the parliament of fowls is representative of the negative trappings of love. With their discordant melodies and bickering for an antithesis to the common good, the parliament of fowls are not headed for what Africanus professed to be the greater good. Instead, they cause the disharmony he said would happen as a result in the "Dream of Scipio". The commune profit and harmony are interrelated in both dream visions; the "Dream of Scipio" does not place as much emphasis on the correlation between the two as does Chaucer in his dream vision.

A gate, gold on one side and black on the opposite, has a paradox inscribed upon it as the prime indication of love as two faced in the dream vision of the narrator and the first metaphor that Chaucer employs to show the inconsistency of love. Africanus forces the narrator into the locus amoenus before he can decide what the paradox of love entails. The conflict of love that the narrator has not experienced has him at a dilemma whether or not to cross. The two sides of the gate conflict the opposing sides in the narrator and are a precursor to the events within the garden: “For with that oon encresede ay my fere / And with that other gan myn herte bolde; / That oone me hette, that other dide me colde” (143-145). The narrator’s insecurities and inexperience lend themselves to the indecision and Africanus settles the matter for him. The garden is the enlarged gate, a larger metaphor of what the gate represents.

In this locus amoenus Chaucer bisects the garden in twain; the anonymous chorus of harmonious birds and beautiful images that surround them that exist in commune profit, and their opposite, the disharmonious parliament of fowls—birds that bicker in an absence of commune profit. The initial flock of birds the narrator encounters are nameless and their setting is scenic, “On every bow the bryddes herde I synge, / With voys of aungel in here armonye; / Some besyede hem here bryddes forth to brynge” (190-192). The nameless birds are employed as a contrariety for the later parliament of fowls that are at odds with each other. At this point in the narrator’s trek through the garden there has not been a couple stricken with love, thus Cupid is still readying his artillery and has not yet assailed any victims: “Under a tre, besyde a welle, I say / Cupide, oure lord, his arwes forge and file; / And at his fet his bowe al redy lay” (211-213). Cupid is ready and able to strike, but love has not yet incapacitated the birds that are in harmony in the scenic landscape maintaining their commune profit.

The introduction of Cupid into the dream vision and the narrator's progression past Venus lead him to the parliament of fowls with intensifying elements of love being importuned slowly by Chaucer. The parliament of fowls have their appropriate monikers and the narrator disappears into the scenery. The scene of the fowls choosing their mates is the setting for love's tyranny to begin. Nature deems it a simple process for the fowls to choose their own mates as a celebration of Saint Valentine's Day, but with multiple tercels at the hand of one formel, the wicked arrows of Cupid have done their job and the ugly side of love has reared its head on the congress of birds. The commune profit is in danger with the inability of the three tercels to decide upon the proper suitor for their unified choice. An chorus of anti-melody arises from the birds that must await a decision on the disputed formel, "The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also / So cryede, 'Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!' hye, / That thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho" (498-500). The commune profit of the remaining fowls awaiting their own loves is sacrificed for the turmoil of the one group of three tercels and one formel. Love is endangering the good of all, and the "fol kokkow" can see, "For I wol of myn owene autorite / For commune spede, take on the charge now, / For to delyvere us is gret charite" (505,506-508). Love and the common good of parliament never come into one good congress. The narrator's quest for deeper understanding of love is not fulfilled, and the answer is not given for the dilemma of the three tercels and the single formel. The only answer that the narrator is given by his dream vision is a greater dilemma: with love comes two emotions, pain and joy.

Chaucer's narrator comes to an understanding as an outsider looking in on the melee that is his own dream vision, that with love comes the responsibility of common good in congress with harmony. The story of Scipio sparks Chaucer's transformation so that the story's conclusion is that love is not objectively scientific but harmony and common good. The narrator could have

understood love from the appearance of the entrance to the locus amoenus and ended the journey with the study of the duplicitous gate, but Chaucer instead chose to extend his journey to further emphasize the double-edged blade that is love. Chaucer utilized the harmony aspect of Cicero's heavens in *Somnium Scipionis* and transformed it into a twofold approach to love, both the positive and negative attributes that do exist and contribute to the societal goods or ills as the outcomes.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Parliament of Fowls*. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.  
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