

The Parliament of Fowls

by Geoffrey Chaucer

The life so short, the craft so long to learn,
The assay so hard, so sharp the conquering,
The fearful joy that slips away in turn,
All this mean I by Love, that my feeling
Astonishes with its wondrous working
So fiercely that when I on love do think
I know not well whether I float or sink.

For although I know not Love indeed
Nor know how he pays his folk their hire,
Yet full oft it happens in books I read
Of his miracles and his cruel ire.
There I read he will be lord and sire;
I dare only say, his strokes being sore,
'God save such a lord!' I'll say no more.

By habit, both for pleasure and for lore,
In books I often read, as I have told.
But why do I speak thus? A time before,
Not long ago, I happened to behold
A certain book written in letters old;
And thereupon, a certain thing to learn,
The long day did its pages swiftly turn.

For out of old fields, as men say,
Comes all this new corn from year to year;
And out of old books, in good faith,
Comes all this new science that men hear.
But now to the purpose of this matter –
To read on did grant me such delight,
That the day seemed brief till it was night.

This book of which I make mention, lo,
Entitled was, as I shall quickly tell,
'Cicero, on the dream of Scipio';
Seven Chapters it had on heaven and hell
And earth and the souls that therein dwell:
As briefly as I can treat of its art,
I'll tell you, of its meaning, the main part.

First it tells how when Scipio came
To Africa, he met Massinissa,
Who in his arms embraced the same.
Then it tells of their speeches, all the bliss there
That lay between them till the shadows gather,
And how at night his grandfather, so dear,
Scipio the Elder, did appear.

Then it tells how, from a starry place,
His grandfather had him Carthage shown,
And told him in advance of all his grace
And taught him how a man, learned or rude,
Who loves the common good and virtue too
Shall unto a blissful place yet wend,
There where joy is that lasts without an end.

Then he asked if folk that have died here
Have life and dwelling in another place;
And his grandfather said, 'Have no fear,'
And that our present world's brief space
Is but a kind of death, whose path we trace,
And virtuous folk after they die shall go
To heaven; and the galaxy did him show.

Then showed him how small our Earth appears
Compared to the heavens' quantity;
And then he showed him the nine spheres,
And after that the melody heard he
That comes from those spheres thrice three,
The source of music and of melody
In this world here, and cause of harmony.

Then he told him, since Earth is so slight,
And full of torment and so little grace,
That he should never in this world delight.
And then he said, that in a certain space
Of time, return the stars would to their place
Where they had been at first, and out of mind
Pass all things in this world done by mankind.

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Then Scipio prayed he would tell him all
The way to come into that heavenly bliss;
And he said: 'Know yourself first immortal,
Be sure to work busily, wisely in this
World for the common good, you'll not miss
The path that leads swift to that place dear,
That full of bliss is, and of souls clear.

But breakers of the law, he did explain,
And lecherous folk, after they are dead,
Shall whirl about the Earth ever in pain
Till many an age be past, and then indeed
Forgiven for their every wicked deed,
Then shall they come unto that blissful place,
To come to which may God send you his grace!

The day began to fail, and the dark night
That relieves all creatures of their business
Bereft me of my book for lack of light,
And to my bed I began me to address
Filled full of thought and anxious heaviness,
For I yet had the thing that I wished not,
And the thing that I wished I had not got.

Yet finally my spirit at the last
Full weary of my labour all the day
Took its rest, sent me to sleep so fast
That in my sleep I dreamed there as I lay
How that Elder in selfsame array
Whom Scipio saw, who long ago had died,
Came and stood there right at my bedside.

The weary hunter sleeping in his bed
To the woods again his mind will go;
The judge he dreams how his pleas are sped;
The carter dreams of drawing carts below;
The rich, of gold; the knight fights with his foe;
The sick person dreams he drinks a tun;
The lover dreams he has his lady won.