

THE CUCKOO AND THE NIGHTINGALE.

[THE noble vindication of true love, as an exalting, purifying, and honour-conferring power, which Chaucer has made in "The Court of Love," is repeated in "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale." At the same time, the close of the poem leads up to "The Assembly of Fowls;" for, on the appeal of the Nightingale, the dispute between her and the Cuckoo, on the merits and blessings of love, is referred to a parliament of birds, to be held on the morrow after Saint Valentine's Day. True, the assembly of the feathered tribes described by Chaucer, though held on Saint Valentine's Day, and engaged in the discussion of a controversy regarding love, is not occupied with the particular cause which in the present poem the Nightingale appeals to the parliament. But "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" none the less serves as a link between the two poems; indicating as it does the nature of those controversies, in matters subject to the supreme control of the King and Queen of Love, which in the subsequent poem we find the courtiers, under the guise of birds, debating in full conclave and under legal forms. Exceedingly simple in conception, and written in a metre full of musical irregularity and forcible freedom, "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" yields in vividness, delicacy, and grace to none of Chaucer's minor poems. We are told that the poet, on the third night of May, is sleepless, and rises early in the morning, to try if he may hear the Nightingale sing. Wandering by a brook-side, he sits down on the flowery lawn, and ere long, lulled by the sweet melody of many birds and the well-according music of the stream, he falls into a kind of doze -- "not all asleep, nor fully waking." Then (an evil omen) he hears the Cuckoo sing before the Nightingale; but soon he hears the Nightingale request the Cuckoo to remove far away, and leave the place to birds that can sing. The Cuckoo enters into a defence of her song, which becomes a railing accusation against Love and a recital of the miseries which Love's servants endure; the Nightingale vindicates Love in a lofty and tender strain, but is at last overcome with sorrow by the bitter words of the Cuckoo, and calls on the God of Love for help. On this the poet starts up, and, snatching a stone from the brook, throws it at the Cuckoo, who flies away full fast. The grateful Nightingale promises that, for this service, she will be her champion's singer all that May; she warns him against believing the Cuckoo, the foe of Love; and then, having sung him one of her new songs, she flies away to all the other birds that are in that dale, assembles them, and demands that they should do her right upon the Cuckoo. By one assent it is agreed that a parliament shall be held, "the morrow after Saint Valentine's Day," under a maple before the window of Queen Philippa at Woodstock, when judgment shall be passed upon the Cuckoo; then the

I am so shaken with the fevers white, Of all this May sleep I but lite;*
little And also it is not like unto me *pleasing That any
hearte shoulde sleepy be, In whom that Love his fiery dart will smite,

But as I lay this other night waking, I thought how lovers had a tokening,*
*significance And among them it was a common tale, That it were good to
hear the nightingale Rather than the lewd cuckoo sing.

And then I thought, anon* it was day, *whenever I would go
somewhere to assay If that I might a nightingale hear; For yet had I none
heard of all that year, And it was then the thirde night of May.

And anon as I the day espied, No longer would I in my bed abide; But to a
wood that was fast by, I went forth alone boldely, And held the way down by
a brooke's side,

Till I came to a laund* of white and green, *lawn So fair a one
had I never in been; The ground was green, *y-powder'd with daisy,*
strewn with daisies The flowers and the *greves like high,* *bushes of
the same height* All green and white; was nothing elles seen.

There sat I down among the faire flow'rs, And saw the birdes trip out of their
bow'rs, There as they rested them alle the night; They were so joyful of the
daye's light, They began of May for to do honours.

They could* that service all by rote; *knew There was
many a lovely note! Some sange loud as they had plain'd, And some in other
manner voice feign'd, And some all out with the full throat.

They proined* them, and made them right gay, *preened their feathers
And danc'd and leapt upon the spray; And evermore two and two in fere,*
together Right so as they had chosen them to-year *this year
In Feverere* upon Saint Valentine's Day. *February

And the river that I sat upon,* *beside It made such a
noise as it ran, Accordant* with the birde's harmony, *keeping
time with Me thought it was the beste melody That might be heard of any
man.

And for delight, I wote never how, I fell in such a slumber and a swow, --
*swoon Not all asleep, nor fully waking, -- And in that swow me thought I
hearde sing The sorry bird, the lewd cuckow;

And that was on a tree right faste by. But who was then *evil apaid* but I?
dissatisfied "Now God," quoth I, "that died on the crois, *cross
Give sorrow on thee, and on thy lewed voice! Full little joy have I now of thy
cry."

And as I with the cuckoo thus gan chide, I heard, in the next bush beside, A
nightingale so lustily sing, That her clear voice she made ring Through all
the greenwood wide.

"Ah, good Nightingale," quoth I then, "A little hast thou been too long hen;*
hence, absent For here hath been the lewd cuckow, And sung songs rather
than hast thou: *sooner I pray to God that evil fire her
bren!*" *burn

But now I will you tell a wondrous thing: As long as I lay in that swooning,
Me thought I wist what the birds meant, And what they said, and what was
their intent And of their speech I hadde good knowing.

There heard I the nightingale say: "Now, good Cuckoo, go somewhere away,
And let us that can singe dwelle here; For ev'ry wight escheweth* thee to
hear, *shuns Thy songes be so elenge,* in good fay."**
*strange **faith

"What," quoth she, "what may thee all now It thinketh me, I sing as well as
thou, For my song is both true and plain, Although I cannot crakel* so in
vain, *sing tremulously As thou dost in thy throat, I wot ne'er
how.

"And ev'ry wight may understande me, But, Nightingale, so may they not do
thee, For thou hast many a nice quaint* cry; *foolish I have
thee heard say, 'ocy, ocy;' <3> How might I know what that should be?"

"Ah fool," quoth she, "wost thou not what it is? When that I say, 'ocy, ocy,' y-
wis, Then mean I that I woulde wonder fain That all they were shamefully
slain, *die That meanen aught againe love amiss.

"And also I would that all those were dead, That thinke not in love their life
to lead, For who so will the god of Love not serve, I dare well say he is
worthy to sterve,* *die And for that skill,* 'ocy, ocy,' I
grede."** *reason **cry

"Ey!" quoth the cuckoo, "this is a quaint* law, *strange That every

wight shall love or be to-draw!* *torn to pieces But I forsake alle
such company; For mine intent is not for to die, Nor ever, while I live, *on
Love's yoke to draw.* *to put on love's
yoke* "For lovers be the folk that be alive, That most disease have, and most
unthrive,* *misfortune And most endure sorrow, woe, and care,
And leaste feelen of welfare: What needeth it against the truth to strive?"

"What?" quoth she, "thou art all out of thy mind! How mightest thou in thy
churlishness find To speak of Love's servants in this wise? For in this world
is none so good service To ev'ry wight that gentle is of kind;

"For thereof truly cometh all gladness, All honour and all gentleness,
Worship, ease, and all heartes lust,* *pleasure Perfect joy,
and full assured trust, Jollity, pleasance, and freshness,

"Lowlihead, largess, and courtesy, Seemelihead, and true company, Dread of
shame for to do amiss; For he that truly Love's servant is, Were lother* to be
shamed than to die. *more reluctant

"And that this is sooth that I say, In that belief I will live and dey; And,
Cuckoo, so I rede* that thou, do y-wis." *counsel "Then," quoth
he, "let me never have bliss, If ever I to that counsail obey!

"Nightingale, thou speakest wondrous fair, But, for all that, is the sooth
contrair; For love is in young folk but rage, And in old folk a great dotage;
Who most it useth, moste shall enpair.* *suffer harm

"For thereof come disease and heaviness, Sorrow and care, and many a
great sickness, Despite, debate, anger, envy, Depraving,* shame, untrust,
and jealousy, *loss of fame or character Pride, mischief, povert', and
woodness.* *madness

"Loving is an office of despair, And one thing is therein that is not fair; For
who that gets of love a little bliss, *But if he be away therewith, y-wis, He
may full soon of age have his hair.* *see note <5>*

"And, Nightingale, therefore hold thee nigh; For, 'lieve me well, for all thy
quainte cry, If thou be far or longe from thy make,* *mate
Thou shalt be as other that be forsake, And then thou shalt hoten* as do I."
*be called

"Fie," quoth she, "on thy name and on thee! The god of Love let thee never
the!* *thrive For thou art worse a thousand fold than

"Yea? Use," quoth she, "this medicine, Every day this May ere thou dine: Go
look upon the fresh daisy, And, though thou be for woe in point to die, That
shall full greatly less thee of thy pine.* *sorrow

"And look alway that thou be good and true, And I will sing one of my songes
new For love of thee, as loud as I may cry:" And then she began this song
full high: "I shrew* all them that be of love untrue." *curse

And when she had sung it to the end, "Now farewell," quoth she, "for I must
wend,* *go And, God of Love, that can right well and may, As
much joy sende thee this day, As any lover yet he ever send!"

Thus took the nightingale her leave of me. I pray to God alway with her be,
And joy of love he send her evermore, And shield us from the cuckoo and his
lore; For there is not so false a bird as he.

Forth she flew, the gentle nightingale, To all the birdes that were in that
dale, And got them all into a place in fere,* *together And
besought them that they would hear Her disease,* and thus began her tale.
*distress, grievance

"Ye witte* well, it is not for to hide, *know How the cuckoo
and I fast have chide,* *quarrelled Ever since that it was
daylight; I pray you all that ye do me right On that foul false unkind bride."*
*bird

Then spake one bird for all, by one assent: "This matter asketh good
advisement; For we be fewe birdes here in fere, And sooth it is, the cuckoo is
not here, And therefore we will have a parlement.

"And thereat shall the eagle be our lord, And other peers that been *of
record,* *of established authority* And the cuckoo shall be *after sent; *
*summoned There shall be given the judgment, Or else we shall finally
make accord. *be reconciled*

"And this shall be, withoute nay,* *contradiction The morrow
after Saint Valentine's Day, Under a maple that is fair and green, Before the
chamber window of the Queen, <7> At Woodstock upon the green lay."*
*lawn

She thanked them, and then her leave took, And into a hawthorn by that
brook, And there she sat and sang upon that tree, *'"Term of life love hath

withhold me;"* *love hath me in her So loude, that I with that song
awoke. service all my life*

Explicit.*

*The End