

Notes to The Assembly of Fowls

1. "The Dream of Scipio" -- "Somnium Scipionis" -- occupies most of the sixth book of Cicero's "Republic;" which, indeed, as it has come down to us, is otherwise imperfect. Scipio Africanus Minor is represented as relating a dream which he had when, in B.C. 149, he went to Africa as military tribune to the fourth legion. He had talked long and earnestly of his adoptive grandfather with Massinissa, King of Numidia, the intimate friend of the great Scipio; and at night his illustrious ancestor appeared to him in a vision, foretold the overthrow of Carthage and all his other triumphs, exhorted him to virtue and patriotism by the assurance of rewards in the next world, and discoursed to him concerning the future state and the immortality of the soul. Macrobius, about AD. 500, wrote a Commentary upon the "Somnium Scipionis," which was a favourite book in the Middle Ages. See note 17 to The Nun's Priest's Tale.

2. Y-nome: taken; past participle of "nime," from Anglo-Saxon, "niman," to take.

3. His grace: the favour which the gods would show him, in delivering Carthage into his hands.

4. "Vestra vero, quae dicitur, vita mors est." ("Truly, as is said, your life is a death")

5. The nine spheres are God, or the highest heaven, constraining and containing all the others; the Earth, around which the planets and the highest heaven revolve; and the seven planets: the revolution of all producing the "music of the spheres."

6. Clear: illustrious, noble; Latin, "clarus."

7. The sicke mette he drinketh of the tun: The sick man dreams that he drinks wine, as one in health.

8. The significance of the poet's looking to the NNW is not plain; his window may have faced that way.

9. The idea of the twin gates, leading to the Paradise and the Hell of lovers, may have been taken from the description of the gates of dreams in the Odyssey and the Aeneid; but the iteration of "Through me men go" far more

directly suggests the legend on Dante's gate of Hell:--

Per me si va nella citta dolente, Per me si va nell' eterno dolore; Per me si va tra la perduta gente.

("Through me is the way to the city of sorrow, Through me is the way to eternal suffering; Through me is the way of the lost people")

The famous line, "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi che entrate" -- "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" -- is evidently paraphrased in Chaucer's words "Th'eschewing is the only remedy;" that is, the sole hope consists in the avoidance of that dismal gate.

10. A powerful though homely description of torment; the sufferers being represented as fish enclosed in a weir from which all the water has been withdrawn.

11. Compare with this catalogue raisonne of trees the ampler list given by Spenser in "The Faerie Queen," book i. canto i. In several instances, as in "the builder oak" and "the sailing pine," the later poet has exactly copied the words of the earlier. The builder oak: In the Middle Ages the oak was as distinctively the building timber on land, as it subsequently became for the sea. The pillar elm: Spenser explains this in paraphrasing it into "the vineprop elm" -- because it was planted as a pillar or prop to the vine; it is called "the coffer unto carrain," or "carrion," because coffins for the dead were made from it. The box, pipe tree: the box tree was used for making pipes or horns. Holm: the holly, used for whip-handles. The sailing fir: Because ships' masts and spars were made of its wood. The cypress death to plain: in Spenser's imitation, "the cypress funeral." The shooter yew: yew wood was used for bows. The aspe for shaftes plain: of the aspen, or black poplar, arrows were made. The laurel divine: So called, either because it was Apollo's tree -- Horace says that Pindar is "laurea donandus Apollinari" ("to be given Apollo's laurel") -- or because the honour which it signified, when placed on the head of a poet or conqueror, lifted a man as it were into the rank of the gods.

12. If Chaucer had any special trio of courtiers in his mind when he excluded so many names, we may suppose them to be Charms, Sorcery, and Leasings who, in The Knight's Tale, come after Bawdry and Riches -- to whom Messagerie (the carrying of messages) and Meed (reward, bribe) may correspond.

13. The dove was the bird sacred to Venus; hence Ovid enumerates the

peacock of Juno, Jove's armour bearing bird, "Cythereiadasque columbas" ("And the Cythereian doves") -- "Metamorphoses. xv. 386

14. Priapus: fitly endowed with a place in the Temple of Love, as being the embodiment of the principle of fertility in flocks and the fruits of the earth. See note 23 to the Merchant's Tale.

15. Ovid, in the "Fasti" (i. 433), describes the confusion of Priapus when, in the night following a feast of sylvan and Bacchic deities, the braying of the ass of Silenus wakened the company to detect the god in a furtive amatory expedition.

16. Hautain: haughty, lofty; French, "hautain."

17. Well to my pay: Well to my satisfaction; from French, "payer," to pay, satisfy; the same word often occurs, in the phrases "well apaid," and "evil apaid."

18. Valentia, in Spain, was famed for the fabrication of fine and transparent stuffs.

19. The obvious reference is to the proverbial "Sine Cerere et Libero friget Venus," ("Love is frozen without freedom and food") quoted in Terence, "Eunuchus," act iv. scene v.

20. Cypride: Venus; called "Cypria," or "Cypris," from the island of Cyprus, in which her worship was especially celebrated.

21. Callisto, daughter of Lycaon, was seduced by Jupiter, turned into a bear by Diana, and placed afterwards, with her son, as the Great Bear among the stars. Atalanta challenged Hippomenes, a Boetian youth, to a race in which the prize was her hand in marriage -- the penalty of failure, death by her hand. Venus gave Hippomenes three golden apples, and he won by dropping them one at a time because Atalanta stopped to pick them up. Semiramis was Queen of Ninus, the mythical founder of Babylon; Ovid mentions her, along with Lais, as a type of voluptuousness, in his "Amores," 1.5, 11. Canace, daughter of Aeolus, is named in the prologue to The Man of Law's Tale as one of the ladies whose "cursed stories" Chaucer refrained from writing. She loved her brother Macareus, and was slain by her father. Hercules was conquered by his love for Omphale, and spun wool for her in a woman's dress, while she wore his lion's skin. Biblis vainly pursued her brother Caunus with her love, till she was changed to a fountain; Ovid, "Metamorphoses." lib. ix. Thisbe and Pyramus: the Babylonian lovers, whose

death, through the error of Pyramus in fancying that a lion had slain his mistress, forms the theme of the interlude in the "Midsummer Night's Dream." Sir Tristram was one of the most famous among the knights of King Arthur, and La Belle Isoude was his mistress. Their story is mixed up with the Arthurian romance; but it was also the subject of separate treatment, being among the most popular of the Middle Age legends. Achilles is reckoned among Love's conquests, because, according to some traditions, he loved Polyxena, the daughter of Priam, who was promised to him if he consented to join the Trojans; and, going without arms into Apollo's temple at Thymbra, he was there slain by Paris. Scylla: Love-stories are told of two maidens of this name; one the daughter of Nisus, King of Megara, who, falling in love with Minos when he besieged the city, slew her father by pulling out the golden hair which grew on the top of his head, and on which his life and kingdom depended. Minos won the city, but rejected her love in horror. The other Scylla, from whom the rock opposite Charybdis was named, was a beautiful maiden, beloved by the sea-god Glaucus, but changed into a monster through the jealousy and enchantments of Circe. The mother of Romulus: Silvia, daughter and only living child of Numitor, whom her uncle Amulius made a vestal virgin, to preclude the possibility that his brother's descendants could wrest from him the kingdom of Alba Longa. But the maiden was violated by Mars as she went to bring water from a fountain; she bore Romulus and Remus; and she was drowned in the Anio, while the cradle with the children was carried down the stream in safety to the Palatine Hill, where the she-wolf adopted them.

22. Prest: ready; French, "pret."

23. Alanus de Insulis, a Sicilian poet and orator of the twelfth century, who wrote a book "De Planctu Naturae" -- "The Complaint of Nature."

24. The falcon was borne on the hand by the highest personages, not merely in actual sport, but to be caressed and petted, even on occasions of ceremony, Hence also it is called the "gentle" falcon -- as if its high birth and breeding gave it a right to august society.

25. The merlion: elsewhere in the same poem called "emerlon;" French, "emerillon;" the merlin, a small hawk carried by ladies.

26. The scorning jay: scorning humbler birds, out of pride of his fine plumage.

27. The false lapwing: full of stratagems and pretences to divert approaching danger from the nest where her young ones are.

28. The sparrow, Venus' son: Because sacred to Venus.

29. Coming with the spring, the nightingale is charmingly said to call forth the newleaves.

30. Many-coloured wings, like those of peacocks, were often given to angels in paintings of the Middle Ages; and in accordance with this fashion Spenser represents the Angel that guarded Sir Guyon ("Faerie Queen," book ii. canto vii.) as having wings "decked with diverse plumes, like painted jay's."

31. The pheasant, scorner of the cock by night: The meaning of this passage is not very plain; it has been supposed, however, to refer to the frequent breeding of pheasants at night with domestic poultry in the farmyard -- thus scorning the sway of the cock, its rightful monarch.

32. The waker goose: Chaucer evidently alludes to the passage in Ovid describing the crow of Apollo, which rivalled the spotless doves, "Nec servataris vigili Capitolia voce cederet anseribus" -- "nor would it yield (in whiteness) to the geese destined with wakeful or vigilant voice to save the Capitol" ("Metam.," ii. 538) when about to be surprised by the Gauls in a night attack.

33. The cuckoo ever unkind: the significance of this epithet is amply explained by the poem of "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale."

34. The drake, destroyer: of the ducklings -- which, if not prevented, he will kill wholesale.

35. The stork is conspicuous for faithfulness to all family obligations, devotion to its young, and care of its parent birds in their old age. Mr Bell quotes from Bishop Stanley's "History of Birds" a little story which peculiarly justifies the special character Chaucer has given: -- "A French surgeon, at Smyrna, wishing to procure a stork, and finding great difficulty, on account of the extreme veneration in which they are held by the Turks, stole all the eggs out of a nest, and replaced them with those of a hen: in process of time the young chickens came forth, much to the astonishment of Mr and Mrs Stork. In a short time Mr S. went off, and was not seen for two or three days, when he returned with an immense crowd of his companions, who all assembled in the place, and formed a circle, taking no notice of the numerous spectators whom so unusual an occurrence had collected. Mrs Stork was brought forward into the midst of the circle, and, after some consultation, the whole flock fell upon her and tore her to pieces; after

which they immediately dispersed, and the nest was entirely abandoned."

36. The cormorant feeds upon fish, so voraciously, that when the stomach is crammed it will often have the gullet and bill likewise full, awaiting the digestion of the rest.

37. So called from the evil omens supposed to be afforded by their harsh cries.

38. The fieldfare visits this country only in hard wintry weather.

39. "Formel," strictly or originally applied to the female of the eagle and hawk, is here used generally of the female of all birds; "tercel" is the corresponding word applied to the male.

40. Entriketh: entangles, ensnares; french, "intriguer," to perplex; hence "intricate."

41. Entremette him of: meddle with; French, 'entremettre,' to interfere.

42. The duck exhorts the contending lovers to be of light heart and sing, for abundance of other ladies were at their command.

43. Solain: single, alone; the same word originally as "sullen."

44. The cuckoo is distinguished by its habit of laying its eggs in the nests of other and smaller birds, such as the hedge-sparrow ("heggugg"); and its young, when hatched, throw the eggs or nestlings of the true parent bird out of the nest, thus engrossing the mother's entire care. The crime on which the emeron comments so sharply, is explained by the migratory habits of the cuckoo, which prevent its bringing up its own young; and nature has provided facilities for the crime, by furnishing the young bird with a peculiarly strong and broad back, indented by a hollow in which the sparrow's egg is lifted till it is thrown out of the nest.

45. "Who well loves, late forgets;" the refrain of the roundel inculcates the duty of constancy, which has been imposed on the three tercel by the decision of the Court.