A Reader's Journey into the Musicality of The Owl and the Nightingale

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Ab uno disce omnes

On the cover:
Vassili Kandinsky
"Various circles"

CONTENTS ♦ SOMMAIRE

Literature ♦ Littérature

Cultural Studies ♦ Etudes culturelles

Linguistics♦ Linguistique

Translation studies ♦ Traductologie

Language Teaching ♦ Didactique des langues

A READER'S JOURNEY INTO THE MUSICALITY
OF *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*

John Hansen[*]

Abstract: The Owl and the Nightingale chronicles a witty debate between two birds concerning physical appearances, religion, and politics, to name a few. However, the debate form is not a new occurrence and has been implemented in various works since the time of Giovanni Boccaccio. This particular format usually ends in a stalemate, where the participants rarely reach a sound conclusion and the original problem continues to exist. This article examines how readers need not endlessly search for the meaning of the poem, but rather accept the poem as is, enjoying the musicality, stylistic, and creative features throughout. The true character of poetry is not to propel anyone to any final thesis, but to the enjoyment of the undecidability of a poem via the questioning of its materials and, to a certain degree, its subject matter.

Keywords: The Owl and the Nightingale, Middle English Debate Poetry, Animals, Talking Birds, Middle English, Musicality, Owl and Nightingale, Nicholas of Guildford.

Much of the scholarship on *The Owl and the Nightingale* covers a variety of approaches, from the significance of the debate form, the possibility of religious and political interpretations, down to the importance of the avian nature of the two protagonists. Most scholars appear to favor the latter, and believe the answer to the poem may stem from here. The motif of animals talking, debating, and ranting is a literary mode since remote antiquity and is not a new phenomenon. In chapter seventeen entitled "'*Aesopica*': The First Animal Fables" in *History Begins at Sumer*, Samuel Noah Kramer presents pre-Semitic wisdom literature, and more specifically the genre of the animal fable in Sumerian literature well over a millennium before Aesop -- or his medieval variant "Phaedrus" -- even came into existence.[1] These ancient Sumerian

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[1] Samuel Kramer, "'*Aesopica*': The First Animal Fables," in *History Begins at Sumer* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 127-135.

precursors encourage the modern reader to appreciate the esthetic conventionality of *a* and *any* dialogue. Non-realistic modes like the tall tale or the animal fable are indirect reminders that what we are reading is literature and not merely a series of alternating arguments. Among the troubadours of medieval Provence, the debate structure of *The Owl and the Nightingale* might be recognized as a "certamen" (Latin for "quarrel"[2]), and it was one way of pitting one poet against another, in some kind of confrontation of poetic arts.

The presentation and elaboration of contrasting points of view that do not build up to an unambiguous conclusion is attested in Giovanni Boccaccio's "Questioni d' Amore" (Questions of Love), a long series of narratives ending with the question to the reader: "who, do you think, loved the most?"[3] Undoubtedly, this was Geoffrey Chaucer's inspiration to write "The Franklin's Tale" that ends by asking, "who do you think was the most generous of the three protagonists of the tale?"[4] Why do writers -- Plato's Dialogues ought to be included among them -- choose this form? Typically, all these compositions end up in draws. So, is it possible the point of these texts is not the conclusion, or bottom line, but rather the process? That is to say, poetry as process therefore, rather than as a didactic product. Quite predictably, whole generations of scholars and their students have been trying to answer the question -- little thinking that the true character of poetry is not to propel anybody to any final thesis, but to the enjoyment of the undecidability of a poem via the questioning of its materials and, to a certain degree, its subject matter. Therefore, I intend to focus on the musicality of the poem, the rhythms, the tone of the nighttime setting -- in other words, of the duet, which at times becomes a duel, at times a diatribe.

According to A.C. Spearing, *artes poeticae* is one of three possible terms that is given to a work of literature during the Middle Ages, and invites the reader to be mindful of the writing process of poetry as a whole, which assists in the comprehension of why an author undertook to write a poem in a particular manner.[5] *Artes poeticae* is a type of lens a reader can view a literary work through that draws specific attention to the attributes of sound, lexis, and

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[2] H.W. Garrod, *The Profession of Poetry and Other Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 144-146.

[3] Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), "The Most Pleasant and Delectable Questions of Love", ed. Alexander King (New York: Illustrated Editions Company, 1931).

[4] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Franklin's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 189.

[5] A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1972), 51.

stylistic effects (e.g. repetition) that are typically embedded within a verse.**6** The significance of this approach is largely overlooked by scholars who spend countless hours striving to fathom what a poem from the Middle Ages was truly "about." Much of the intense analysis and interpretations that are done in order to arrive at a final conclusion of what the poem attempts to express may prove unproductive, to put it mildly. Rather, scholars should view *artes poeticae* as a means to view the poem as is, taking note of the apparent and subtle craftsmanship the author purposefully displays to provoke the reader into different responses of sentiment at various moments within the work, which may, consequently, bring about an understanding of medieval poetry and, perhaps all poetry.

　　The Owl and the Nightingale was written in the twelfth century most likely by Nicholas of Guildford. However, many critics refute this by citing the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the narrative voice and overgenerous praise found throughout the poem, leaving to believe that John of Guildford is the rightful author.**7** Regardless of whom the author may be, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is considered to be one of the finest English poems of its period. This poem is written in the standard iambic tetrameter rhythm (octosyllabic couplets) or eight syllables per line, and implements end-stopped lines. However, the poem, in its entirety, is not mechanically dependent upon them, nor does it obstruct the flow of how one would normally recite each successive line. From lines 1 to 214 of the poem, the narrator observes the nightingale begin a verbal assault on the owl and vice-versa. But once they both realize that the accusations they make about each other are not advancing the debate, they agree to seek higher counsel in order to have their grievances heard and ruled upon. Let us take a closer look at lines 55 through 76:

Þe niʒtingale ʒaf answare:
"Ʒif ich me loki wit þe bare,
& me schilde wit þe blete,
ne reche ich noʒt of þine þrete;
ʒif ich me holde in mine hegge,
ne recche ich neuer what þu segge.
Ich wot þat þu art unmilde
wiþ hom þat ne muʒe from [þ]e schilde;
& þu tukest wroþe & vuele,
whar þu miʒt, over smale fuʒele.

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6 Ibid. 55.

7 Kathryn Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 3-5.

Vorþi þu art loþ al fuel-kunne,
& alle ho þe driueþ honne,
& þe bischricheþ & bigredet,
& wel narewe þe biledet;
& ek forþe þe sulue mose,
hire þonkes, wolde þe totose.
þu art lodlich to biholde,
& þu art loþ in monie volde;
þi bodi is short, þi swore is smal,
grettere is þin heued þan þu al;
þin eȝene boþ col-blake & brode,
riȝt swo ho weren ipeint mid wode (lines 55-76).**8**

Here, an immediate sense of foreshadowing of violence may come to the reader's mind because the nightingale alludes to a religious connotation about a "hedge" or possibly God's protection from the Book of Job: "So Satan answered the Lord and said, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side?'"**9** Satan shows his disgust of the hedge and protection Job receives from God and is unable to cause any destruction to Job, his loved ones, or to any of his possessions. Similarly, a parallel can be made because the nightingale declares "& me schilde wit þe blete" (line 57), which means to protect herself against being exposed; thus, the nightingale is safe from the violent acts the owl attempts to carry out. However, the owl's aggressive comment found previously in lines 51 through 55 states, "Ȝif ich þe holde on mine uote, / (so hit bitide þat ich mote!) / & þu were vt of þine rise, / þu sholdest singe an oþer w[i]se!", and a reader may be lead to believe a physical battle of some kind will surely ensue, but this brief prelude to violence becomes anticlimactic and sets the tone for the remainder of the poem, where the two birds refute and rebut one another only with harsh and witty remarks.

The rest of the passage deals with surface issues such as behavioral concerns, popularity, exterior appearance, diet, and lavatory habits.**10** Listeners may be curious as to how they should view or react to both the owl and the nightingale; however, there is no clear justification for the quarrel. The qualities and characteristics that they debate about are natural to their own kind and are

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8 Eric Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 51.

9 Job 1:9-10 (The New King James Version).

10 Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 88.

beyond their control. Perhaps the author sets forth the satirical element of birds in relation to man in a discussion of unsubstantial topics to show the futility of their actions. The author reserves a special, melodic treatment with his poem in the description of such lighthearted subjects. Lines 69 (mose), 75 (brode), and 85 (frogge), have a rhythmical quality that is further heightened by the author's use of alliteration that is seen in the rest of the stanza: "& alle heo þe driueþ heonne" (line 66) and "heo broʒte his briddes mete" (line 107). Not only does alliteration bring variation to the poem, the poet repeats many of the words he uses in previous lines. For instance, line 51 states, "Ʒif ich þe holde on mine uote," while line 59 echoes a similar makeup of the sentence structure, "Ʒif ich me holde in mine hegge." There are other notable examples found throughout the poem that amplify the sound and syntax, which act as a call and response, much like the dialogue between the owl and nightingale. However, once the reader catches the rhythm and beat of each line, the reader almost expects a certain kind of rhyme scheme to appear. Therefore, the reader may feel as if the author occasionally forces an exaggeration of rhymes within the poem at times. Such examples are "an bidde þat hi moten iseche" (line 741) and "þan ilke song þat euer is eche" (line 742), and "mi song were ispild ech del:" (line 1027) and "for hom ne mai halter ne bridel" (line 1028). Yet, this issue, quite possibly, may be the only relatively minor defect one could find within such a literary creation.

Upon a uniform agreement to have Master Nicholas of Guildford settle their ongoing dispute, the owl and the nightingale are still unable to hold their tongues and begin to debate in a formality that closely mirrors a duet:

"Hule," ho sede, "seie me soþ,
wi dostu þat unwiʒtis doþ?
þu singist aniʒt & noʒt adai,
& al þi song is wailawai." 6
Þu miʒt mid þine songe afere
alle þat ihereþ þine ibere:
þu sch[ri]chest & ʒollest to þine fere,
þat hit is grislich to ihere:
hit þinche[þ] boþe wise & snepe
noʒt þat þu singe, ac þat þu wepe (lines 215-226).[11]
Þu seist þat ich me hude adai,
þarto ne segge ich nich ne nai:
& lust ich telle þe wareuore,
al wi hit is & wareuore.

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[11] Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 55.

Ich habbe bile stif & stronge,

& gode cliuers scharp & longe,

so hit bicumeþ to hauekes cunne;

hit is min hiȝte, hit is mi w[u]nne,

þat ich me draȝe to mine cunde,

ne mai [me] no man þareuore schende (lines 265-274).**12**

  The nightingale begins to portray the owl as a demonic creature that is only active and content during the nighttime setting. Much like the irony of two birds taking on the different qualities of mankind, satirical elements continue to be woven into each bird's dialogue. While the nightingale argues against the owl because of her association with night, a reader would quickly note that the nightingale itself is also a nocturnal creature that sings a song in darkness. The argument does not hold up for the nightingale and is comical because the premise is built on faulty logic and reasoning. The language here parallels this: "Hule," ho sede, "seie me soþ, / wi dostu þat unwiȝtis doþ? / þu singist aniȝt & noȝt adai, / & al þi song is wailawai," which allows the reader adequate time to consider the artistic nature of the poet's expressions rather than simply attempting to analyze who makes a better argument or who might be ahead in the debate. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the author would consider that his essay should be subjected to close literary analysis. That is, any careful reader of this literary work should conclude that it is quite whimsical in tone and rather colloquial in its expression. Additionally, one could argue, the audience is expected to notice the discrepancy and be amused by it -- much like a voter's fascination by politicians' ad hominem arguments which often backfire.

  A musical quality is seen in the owl's response and there is a conversational quality to the diction that mirrors a duet. Although some of the feet are unusual, such as "þarto ne segge ich nich ne nai:" (line 266) and "al wi hit is & wareuore" (line 268), and the lines within this passage are not quite equivalent in length, the nightingale's stanza prior to the owl's response is similar in these stylistic and metrical features. While both dialogues discuss and present different concerns, when read aloud, the nightingale's passage smoothly transitions into the owl's rebuttal with grace, with the reader, at times, unaware of who may be speaking if not for the narrator's comments. The repetitious use of the word "wareuore" shown in lines 267 and 268 illustrates the careful attention the poet has given to the importance of what the ear hears. Numerous examples are found in many of the verse groups, and perhaps, the author is calling for the reader to respond to these intentional repetitions and not merely

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12 Ibid., 57.

(or hastily) arrive at a foregone conclusion about what the debate is about. Similar to the author beckoning the reader to respond to the sounds embedded within the poem, the author cleverly inserts a prime example of this in the fourth and fifth stanzas. In line 40, the nightingale accuses the owl's song as "ȝoȝelinge," while the owl responds with "writelinge" in line 48. Here, two different onomatopoetic words are used–conveying two different kinds of vocal utterance–which further shows the author's awareness to the precise language of the poem.

As the dialogue continues, we find the owl taking the offensive for the first time rather than being in a defensive mode at the start of line 549. We also find the owl, much like the nightingale, attacking only physical characteristics that are out of their own control. According to Jan Ziolkowski, "even when the poem becomes more a debate and less an altercation, the owl feels impelled to punish the nightingale tit for tat for her earlier aspersions on the physical appearance and personal hygiene of the owl"[13] (577-596). The owl also presents her grievances in an aggressive and malicious approach as does the nightingale. At this point, the reader should remind themselves and recognize that both birds are in fact very similar, no matter how much they believe otherwise. After the owl makes her argument, we find the nightingale shaken and briefly at a loss for words:

Þe niȝtingale at þisse worde
was wel neȝ ut of rede iworþe,
an þoȝte ȝorne on hire mode
ȝif ho oȝt elles understode,
ȝif ho kuþe oȝt bute singe,
þat miȝte helpe to oþer þinge.
Herto ho moste andswere uinde,
oþer mid alle bon bihinde:
an hit is suþe strong to fiȝte
aȝen soþ & aȝen riȝte.
He mot gon to al mid ginne,
þan þe horte boþ on [w]inne:
an þe man mot on oþer segge,
he mot bihemmen & bilegge,
ȝif muþ wiþute mai biwro
þat me þe horte noȝt niso:

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[13] Jan Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 134.

an sone mai a word misreke
þar muþ shal aʒen horte speke;
an sone mai a word misstorte

þar muþ shal speken aʒen horte (lines 659-678).[14]

        This is the second occurrence where the reader can see one of the two
birds, in a sense, validate the others premise. Earlier in the poem at line 391, the
nightingale is shown as distraught and hard pressed to piece together a crafty
retort. Likewise, the nightingale is again seen in a daze and seems to admit that
what the owl previously states at the beginning of line 556 is true to an extent.
The meditation by the nightingale allows the reader to ponder what the response
may possibly entail, believing that the nightingale will refute each accusation
individually. It is amusing that the narrator devotes almost 40 lines to capture
the nightingale in deep contemplation over how to reply and formulate a sound
rebuttal. Some of the lines in this section are drawn out and could easily be
condensed into two or three sentences. Repetition is also seen in the last four
lines of 675 through 678, where the poet repeats similar word choices at the start
of each alternate verse. However, it appears that this is one of the more serious
sections in the poem because the reader is able to get a personal insight as to the
demeanor and thought process of the nightingale. One can readily see that the
nightingale struggles and the poet may have purposefully done this to evoke a
sentiment of compassion in the reader. Even so, the poet still constructs short
verse lines (e.g. equivalent of a present day nursery rhyme), which, if viewed
from a more modern approach, would usually signify that the particular work
will be of a humorous nature. Furthermore, this section utilizes the same jingle-
like quality that resonates in the rest of the poem through the alliteration and
end-rhymes. For instance, lines 113 to 122:
"Segget me, wo hauet þis ido?
Ov nas neuer icunde þarto:
hit was idon ov a loþ[e] [cu]ste.
Segge[þ] me ʒif ʒe hit wiste."
Þo quaþ þat on & quad þat oþer:
"Iwis it was ure oʒer broþer,
þe ʒond þat haue[þ] þat grete heued:
wai þat hi[t] nis þarof bireued!
Worp hit ut mid þe alre-[vu]rste

þat his necke him to-berste!" (lines 113-122)[15]

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[14] Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 68-69.

This brief passage is similar to a nursery rhyme and shows that the poet has an array of native rhetorical devices at his disposal. The reader also has a break from the legal or technical language of the debate that the author weaves in-and-out of in earlier verses. While this is the general impression we have today of short-line poetry, it would be beneficial to examine the medieval context of this. That is, how the written tradition has changed from Old English to Middle English.

In "Metrical Changes: From Old to Middle English," David Starr states that the practices of sentence structure and inflections were at an influential time when *The Owl and the Nightingale* was composed.[16] Old English poets depend on inflections to reveal the various sections of speech, while Middle English poets pay closer attention to the arrangement of words.[17] The transformation in linguistic construction between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1200 had a profound outcome on the metrical aspect of how a poem was written.[18] "As inflections are lost, the easiest and shortest forms generally remain intact, resulting in the loss of syllables, the obscuring of distinctions between many primarily and secondarily accented syllables, and the loss of a certain amount of potential variety in phrasing."[19] As a result, endings become reduced to a simplistic form, an array of strong verbs is lost, and most nouns become limited, which causes syllable shortening. Moreover, a poet cannot simply rearrange words to achieve a particular ornamental outcome. Rather, if the poet desires to modify a particular esthetic in a line, he must find an entirely new word to replace the original word with[20]: "[Due to] the leveled distinction between stress values, the iambic norm is required to provide a meaningful background for such an insertion."[21] However, many poets during this time period would find it difficult to maintain this form throughout an entire poem. Thus, a new norm, the rhymed couplet, came into existence. This allows an idea to be continued for more than one line, where it could progress to subsequent couplets. This is seen throughout

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[15] Ibid., 52-53.

[16] David Starr, "Metrical Changes: From Old to Middle English," *Modern Philology* 68, no. 1 (1970): 4.

[17] Ibid., 5.

[18] Ibid., 3.

[19] Ibid., 3.

[20] Ibid., 5.

[21] Ibid., 5.

The Owl and the Nightingale, where the author is able to contrast the length of sentences, with each deviation marked by end-stopped lines.

While an explanation of the iambic transformation from Old to Middle English appears to be more conclusive, a closer examination of why a poet would use short-lines within their work seems to be more speculative than definitive. Since many of the lines in *The Owl and the Nightingale* are relatively short, what effect would this have on the listener's ear? In *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, Derek Pearsall argues that many of the literary works written around the time of *The Owl and the Nightingale* were seldom read silently; rather, they were to be spoken with "emphatic delivery" in front of an audience.[22] Some poems during this period were even chanted or sung to the accompaniment of an instrument at times. As a result, one can only wonder about how certain sounds and sound clusters from the page must have come across: soothing, grating, numbing, surprising, snide and sarcastic? Perhaps an author's act of writing short-lined poetry is an attempt to show how the language, pace, and tone are synonymous with one another. Pearsall believes that the author of *The Owl and the Nightingale* primarily focuses on the form of rhetorical exercise and the liveliness of the traditional dialectic form, which places greater importance on the element of sound (or spoken word) within each line, rather than on the act of writing itself.[23] The utilization of short lines in this poem along with alliteration and rhyme allow the reader to hear a pleasant sound of music that does not upset the smooth flow of language used within the debate.[24] Therefore, short lines, if sung or chanted, can sound just as drawn out as any other work that implements longer lines.

Pearsall contends *The Owl and the Nightingale* was written during a transitional phase, where there was a noticeable decline in the use of classical verse. In regards to structural elements or form, the English poem closely mimics Latin, where an array of definable meters emerge – "the alliterative long line, occasionally with medial rhyme added, a four-stress couplet derived from French octosyllabic, a three-stress couplet and, more occasionally, septenary and 'common metre'"[25] When examining the differences that occur in Middle English texts in comparison to its preceding period, one can find a range of reoccurring changes such as: inflectional endings of vowels collectively

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[22] Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 96.

[23] Ibid., 88, 94.

[24] Ibid., 66-69, 91.

[25] Ibid., 79.

balanced, insightful alliteration, and the increase of French and Scandinavian words in daily vocabulary, which was a result of the Norman Conquest and "colonization of the Danelaw."[26] According to Fernand Mossé, the impact of a French tradition is highly evident, both in the vocabulary and creative ingenuity seen throughout the text.[27]

Pearsall maintains "the octosyllabic couplet is given a variety and richness which no other medieval poet, not even Chaucer, can match, with crisp rhymes tightening the structure and skewering the wandering mind as rhymes should."[28] The notion of versification needs to be further explored for the purposes of understanding how Chaucer, a writer who's texts set the basis for modern English, is indebted to texts from the early Middle English period and how he innovatively transitions from using eight to ten syllables in his own work. In matters of versification, Pearsall as well as Mossé are very careful not to give pat answers. However, it appears they both agree that the ten-syllable line is relatively close–if not a direct descendant of it–chronologically at least, to the Old English hemistichal (alliterative half-line) form. Reduction of the beat and of the number of syllables could be thought of being influenced from French poetic practice. Nevertheless, theirs must remain a hypothesis; changes in the direction of grammatical and lexical simplification–i.e., English becoming less of a Germanic language; and more like a Romance language–certainly affected the way it was being pronounced as well as written.

Often, scholars will instinctively examine many of Chaucer's English predecessors in order to explain the newness and richness of the poetic language he uses in his own work, yet, this research habitually leads them to no definite answers.[29] The complex rhetorical and syntactical features that Chaucer ingeniously attempts and creates are heavily indebted to the influence of French. Pearsall asserts that after Chaucer overused the short couplet format, such as in the comical text, *Sir Thopas*, he conceives the English pentameter: "the abruptness of the break with native rhythmical traditions, in which pentameters had only previously occurred as freaks or accidents, is a quite startling example of Chaucer's technical daring."[30] The pentameter with five metrical stresses in

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[26] Fernand Mossé, *A Handbook of Middle English*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1952), 1.

[27] Ibid., 157.

[28] Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, 94.

[29] Ibid., 199.

[30] Ibid., 201.

iambic measure allows Chaucer to freely pursue variations in poetic rhythm, and more importantly, creatively display the "rhetorical and syntactical stress against the basic metrical pattern."**31**

In the next 125 lines or so after we see the nightingale carefully planning her next move (line 659-706), the nightingale finally carries out her response against the owl at the start of line 707. Even though the owl previously lays out eight arguments against the nightingale, the nightingale cleverly chooses two that are most favorable for her to counter. Thus, the reader experiences the nightingale respond to the attacks on her singing (song) and how clever and witty she is in comparison to the owl's stature. The owl makes an astute argument and declares that the nightingale has merely mixed in the truth and false together, causing the words to run together and making it seem like all the words are in fact true. At this juncture, the reader should recognize the fallacy in the nightingale's argument and may notice that the two birds' exchange mirrors that of the entire work as a whole. That is, the idea of words being fashioned together or manipulated is something the author employs throughout. An example of this takes place between lines 955 through 960: "'[H]ule,'" heo seide "lust nu hider: / þu schalt falle, þe wei is slider. / Þu seist ich fleo bihinde bure: / hit is riht, þe bur is ure: / þar lauerd liggeþ & lauedi, / ich schal heom singe & sitte bi." Here, the argument is shown in a playful and lively manner, with the author using "þe wei is slider," or slippery-slope (a legal term), to describe the reasoning in the nightingale's argument, while still maintaining the rhyming couplet of "slider" with "hider." The author is able to elegantly intertwine serious matters with a language that is upbeat and pleasurable.

Towards the end of the poem, a reader may feel that the entire debate was of little value in terms of reaching a final resolution. Instead, both the owl and the nightingale should have put their differences aside until they were in Master Nicholas's presence for the sake of having to repeat their arguments a second time. It may have been an interesting twist with Master Nicholas moderating such a comical event, with the reader being able to see the comments he makes in regards to the reasoning behind the birds' complaints. In any case, the reader finally sees the owl and nightingale mutually agree, for a second time, on the intellectual capacity and wisdom that Master Nicholas possesses:

þar he demeþ manie riȝte dom,

an diht & writ mani wisdom,

an þurh his muþe & þurh his honde

hit is þe betere into Scotlonde (lines 1755-1758).**32**

The line of "an þurh his muþe & þurh his honde" is significant because it reflects that Master Nicholas's words and writings are of sound judgment. Thus, if he is a master of words, then he will be able to immediately see through faulty logic and reasoning and fairly judge the debate strictly on its merits, and not swayed by the emotions of the two birds. From this agreement stems several positive clauses that indicate a reinforcement of the idea to have Master Nicholas rule on their dispute. In line 1769, the owl says "þat is soð," and agrees with the wren about how valuable such a knowledgeable man like Master Nicholas is to society. The owl then remarks in line 1779 "Ah ute we þah to him fare" and the nightingale agrees that they both should visit Master Nicholas with "Do we" or agreed. The call and response here should be seen in a positive light and not as argumentative. However, a reader may question why the owl has the last word and abruptly decides who will recite the pleas in front of the judge. Unlike the rest of the poem, where each bird takes a turn to respond to the other's statements, the nightingale is silent and ends the duet, or echoing back of words and phrases, that has taken place throughout much of the poem.

While it is a mystery as to who exactly the intended audience of *The Owl and the Nightingale* is meant for, it may have been addressed to English commoners. On the other hand, the author may have simply wanted to demonstrate his ability to write and speak in the English dialect that was to become what we now call Middle English, and show the many stylistic features and uses one could do with the language; thus, the poem stands as a showcase for the possibilities of English. If so, then scholars should refrain from the tiresome process of trying to interpret what the poem is actually about and purely enjoy the poem as is, taking note of the wonderful rhythmical qualities, play on words, lightheartedness, and musicality the owl and nightingale engage in through the form of a beautiful duet.

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