

The Oxford History of English Literature

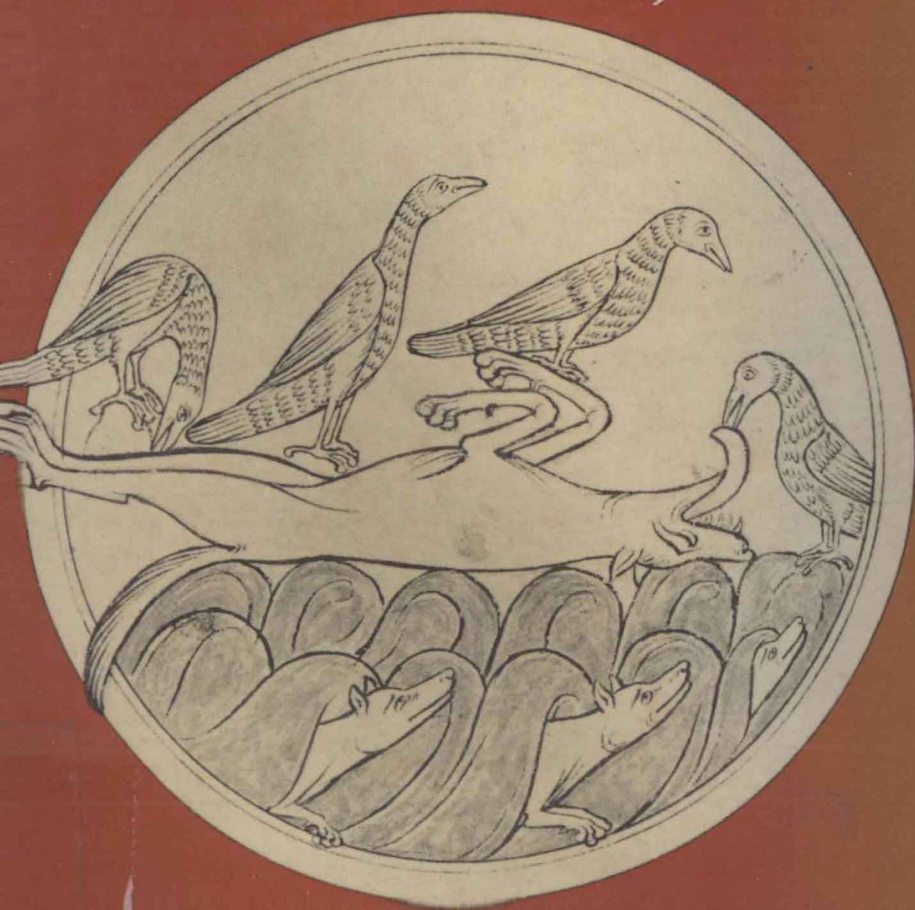
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MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

J. A. W. BENNETT

Edited and completed by
DOUGLAS GRAY



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Abbreviations

<i>Aen.</i>	<i>Aeneid</i>
AN	Anglo-Norman
<i>Archiv</i>	<i>Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen</i>
AV	Authorized Version
B	G. L. Brook (ed.), <i>The Harley Lyrics</i> (3rd edn., Manchester, 1964)
BRUC	A. B. Emden, <i>A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500</i> (Cambridge, 1963)
BRUO	A. B. Emden, <i>A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500</i> , 3 vols. (Oxford, 1957-9)
CA	<i>Confessio Amantis</i>
CBXIII	Carleton Brown (ed.), <i>English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century</i> (Oxford, 1932)
CBXIV	Carleton Brown (ed.), <i>Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century</i> (revised G. V. Smithers, Oxford, 1952)
CT	<i>Canterbury Tales</i>
ESS	<i>Essays and Studies by members of the English Association</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society (ES: Extra Series, SS: Supplementary Series)
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
EMEVP	J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers (edd.), <i>Early Middle English Verse and Prose</i> (2nd edn., Oxford, 1968)
HF	<i>House of Fame</i>
HP	R. H. Robbins (ed.), <i>Historical Poems of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries</i> (New York, 1959)
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>KnT</i>	<i>Knight's Tale</i>
LGW	<i>Legend of Good Women</i>
LSE	<i>Leeds Studies in English</i>
MÆ	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
M&H	<i>Medievalia et Humanistica</i>
ME	Middle English
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>Met.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

MWME	J. B. Severs and A. E. Hartung (edd.), <i>Manual of the Writings in Middle English</i> (New Haven, 1967-)
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
NS	New Series
OE	Old English
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OF	Old French
ON	Old Norse
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PF	<i>Parlement of Foules</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
RS	Rolls Series
SATF	Société des Anciens Textes Français
Sisam	K. Sisam (ed.), <i>Fourteenth-Century Verse and Prose</i> (Oxford, 1921)
SL	R. H. Robbins (ed.), <i>Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries</i> (Oxford, 1952; 2nd edn. 1955)
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
SRL	D. Gray (ed.), <i>A Selection of Religious Lyrics</i> (Oxford, 1975)
STS	Scottish Text Society
TC	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>
TLS	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
Tr. RHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
W	E. Wilson (ed.), <i>A Descriptive Index of the English Lyrics in John of Grimestone's Preaching Book</i> (<i>Medium Ævum</i> Monographs, NS ii, Oxford, 1973)

Note on the Treatment of Texts

In the Middle English quotations i/j and u/v have been standardized according to modern usage; the letters þ, ð, ȝ have been transliterated into their modern equivalents; and one or two other spellings which might puzzle modern readers (such as silent *h* in forms like *hic* for *ic*, 'I') have been changed.

Preface

WHEN Jack Bennett died early in 1981 he left unfinished the Middle English volume of the Oxford History of English Literature, on which he had been working for many years. The period just before his death had been one of intense activity, during which sections and segments both large and small had been dispatched from Cambridge to the Oxford University Press, which had managed to find a typist who could decipher his notoriously idiosyncratic handwriting. When the surviving pieces were assembled it became clear that although they did not represent a complete book, they could be made into one with some effort and ingenuity. I was much honoured to be asked to undertake this task. I am grateful to Mr Edmund Bennett and to Professor Peter Heyworth, Jack Bennett's literary executor, for collecting the material and making it available. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Professor Norman Davis for giving unsparingly of his time and for his constant encouragement, advice, and criticism.

It would be proper to give some indication of the nature and extent of my editorial work. It is difficult to do so in detail, since I have often had to expand draft manuscript notes, and to add link passages and matter whenever I thought it necessary (although I did not feel obliged to add a few words on *every* romance or piece of prose that he had left unmentioned). Of the longer additions, the sections on *Wynnyere and Wastoure*, 'Robert of Gloucester', *Purity*, *The Peterborough Chronicle*, and the later sermons are mine, as is the whole of Chapter 8 and the Bibliography. (It was never intended that this book should contain chapters on Chaucer or the medieval drama; these will find their place in a new volume on the following period.) I have also had to do much trimming and revising, but I have tried to leave Jack Bennett's opinions (and his prejudices) untouched. I am responsible for the ordering of the chapters, and for the ordering of the material within each chapter. This has been a heavy responsibility, and sometimes as I struggled with the fragments I feared that that venerable white-haired figure might appear in a dream and begin to upbraid me with Holy Church's words, 'thow doted daffe, dulle arne thi wittes . . .'. Sadly, this book can never be the one to which he would have given his final approval. (Indeed, those of us familiar with his patterns of work know that for him the process of revision continued up to, and often beyond, the proof stage.) I can only hope that it does not differ too much from

PREFACE

what he would have wished it to be. I am certain, however, that it shows in a remarkable way the immense range of his reading and scholarship, his characteristic humanity and piety, and the elegance of his thought and style. On behalf of those of us who benefited so much from his erudition and his example, I should like to dedicate the volume to the memory of this most humane of medievalists, in accordance with that Langlandian injunction which he quoted in dedicating his *Piers Plowman* to his own mentor, P. S. Arden: *Redde quod debes*.

D.G.

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1

Pastoral and Comedy

The Owl and the Nightingale; The Fox and the Wolf; The Land of Cokaygne; Dame Sirith; De Clerico et Puella; The Man in the Moon

As the story of Anglo-Saxon literature opens with a masterpiece—‘The Dream of the Rood’—that found no parallel in three hundred years, so, when in the late twelfth century English has its renaissance, the first poet to be heard spoke in assured tones and showed a delicate humour, a rich humanity, and a sensitivity to nature that amounted to genius, and that will hardly be met with again before Marvell’s time. The *Altercacio inter Filomelam et Bubonem*—the name given in the two extant manuscripts to the poem now called *The Owl and the Nightingale*—has been called miraculous by those who sense the change in English feeling that it displays when set alongside *Beowulf* or *Maldon*, *The Seafarer* or the *Riddles*—or even the Latin pastoral in which Alcuin laments the departure of the cuckoo, anticipating Arnold’s ‘too quick despairer, wherefore wilt thou go’; or the *Ecloga Theoduli*, in which the contestants challenge each other, prizes are promised, and a judge appointed: that title suggests a connection with Virgil’s third eclogue, which Servius had called an *altercacio*. But ‘miraculous’ is merely a loose synonym for ‘mysterious’, ‘unaccountable’: a confession that we know nothing of the cultural conditions and little of the literary context out of which it grew. There is a springtime freshness about it, a *verve*, a sense of sheer fun.

There survive, to be sure, numerous earlier fragments of verse, pious, gnomic, or hortatory, in the old alliterative measure, even if debased or modified. They will merit attention later as links between the older literary culture and the school of verse that arose in the West Country about the same time that this bird-debate was being written. But the lively dialogue, poetic wit, the easy rhythms of its 830 octosyllabic couplets; the suppleness in sophisticated self-portraiture, with its humorous hyperbole—all these qualities link the author with the contemporary clerkly humanism of Walter Map and John of Salisbury. The disputants represent him as ‘ripe and fastrede’—a man of

mature wisdom who 'wot insight in eche songe'—is a shrewd judge of verse; and they give him a clerkly title: *Master* Nicholas. He is, then, a university man, the first of a long line of English clerks who had acquired from Abelard's example a relish for 'disputeison' (as distinct from the 'flytings' of an earlier age). *Piers Plowman* will proceed along much the same lines; and the 'Pleasant Conceited Comedie' called *Love's Labour's Lost* (which ends in a medieval *contentio* between Owl and Cuckoo) begins with an academic debate. Future lines of English literary development—as well as the English poet's foible for self-portraiture—are already to be discerned in this light-hearted poem that moves easily from the life of a country parish to the life of castle and manor, and naturalizes, seemingly at a stroke, the French octosyllabic couplet that was to remain popular till Gower's time, and after. The debate between the two birds may be read as expressing the conflict between traditional native mores and the French culture that was represented by a new poetic and that gave a new sweetness to love.

The Provençal *tençon*, or *tenso*, was a debate (sometimes scurrilous) between two speakers (sometimes fictive, sometimes actual *jongleurs*) on questions of love or politics or the virtues of a mistress; it might be entirely in couplets of identical form or in alternating strophes of attack and riposte, and would often conclude with a *tornada* or envoi voicing (as the English poem does) an appeal for judgement to a person (often a woman) of rank. In the late twelfth century it was perhaps the most fashionable form of court poetry.

The English poet's achievement consists in adapting some of the features of a *tenso*, fusing them with elements of quite different origin, and giving the disputants far more flexible roles than those they play in troubadour verse: an achievement in many ways similar to that of the masterpiece that will later mark the high point of the English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is really a tribute to the poet's powers that various critics have seen the debate between the birds as symbolizing so many different antagonisms: gaiety vs. gravity, worldly pleasure vs. spiritual asceticism, courtly love-poetry vs. didactic verse, conservative North vs. receptive South, or even, and more narrowly, the struggle between the simple type of music of the earlier Gregorian kind and the later type of highly varied secular music full of trills and runs, such as was used by the troubadours and was finding its way into the churches—the very kind that the Nightingale, for obvious reasons, wishes to justify. This last debate lasted into the time of Wyclif, who (or one of whose followers) disparages 'fleshly knocking and tattering' in good round terms, and still continues. If none of these

antitheses fit the poem exactly, it is because the two contesting birds are much more than mouthpieces.

Certainly, the Owl is presented from the outset as almost literally sticking to the Old. Her dwelling-place (*earding-stowe*: an Anglo-Saxon term, by then archaic) (28) is an 'old stock', overgrown with ivy; and she never stirs from it; whereas the Nightingale, as her nature is, flies from bough to bough and her migratory habits mean that she can be represented as far-travelled: like a *clericus vagans* 'ho had ilorned wel aiware' (she* had gained her knowledge everywhere) (216). Yet such contrasts are never pressed to the point of conflict: ultimately each recognizes that there is some cogency in the other's argument; just as the Norman builders had come to make use of English craftsmen and churchmen, and English artists to assimilate some Norman patterns.

The setting of the debate neatly symbolizes the cultural situation. It is 'In one hurne of one breche' (14), a corner (OE *hyrne*) of a clearing: *breche* being a new toponym called for as the Normans began to break up and break into the ancient weald or woodland whilst, at the same time, creating the new royal forests (a French term for a French conception) that reached their greatest extent in the reign of the second Henry, whose death is noted in the poem.† It is in just such a sunlit clearing that nightingales (like primroses) are still to be found. Blossom hangs on the bough (16), so we must read *sumere* ('Ich was in one sumere dale') (1) as meaning spring. The poetry of southern England was constantly to evoke this season when, as both Chaucer and Langland noted, the sun is still 'soft' (mild) and the nightingale sings with full-throated ease. This first appearance of the nightingale in English verse thus betokens the taming and peopling of places formerly waste and wild. The Ovidian tradition that made Philomena's song one of sorrow (as in *Confessio Amantis*) had as yet made no impact. Milton's first sonnet will not only evoke just such a Maytime setting but plead with the nightingale to 'timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate / Foretell my hopeless doom, in some grove nigh'. Conformity to ornithological truth is no warrant for poetic felicity. Yet without it the poem would lose half its charm. If the nightingale goes on and on, it is because in early summer (beginning at dusk) it does sing all night long till the other birds gather for the dawn chorus:

An sungen alsua vale wise
An blisse was among the rise (1663-4)

* Both birds are referred to by feminine pronouns.

† The extent of the change is indicated in W. G. Hoskins's chapter 'The English Landscape', in *Medieval England*, ed. A. L. Poole (Oxford, 1958), i. 1-36.

'singing joyfully in the branches in their different notes'. The owl's untidy nest, its mobbing by other birds, its mousing in churches, its intermittent hooting, penetrating like a great horn (318)—all these betray direct observation as does the owl's dismissive description of its rival as 'a lutel soti clowe' (a little sooty ball) (578) who as soon as it has 'trode' (generated) pipes

also as doth a mose¹
Mid chokeringe mid stevne hose² (503-4)

¹ titmouse

² with squeaking, with hoarse voice

and who dare not venture as far as Scotland or Ireland (907-8). The troubadours had cared nothing for such observations, and were content with bestiary sentiments. They pay only lip-service to Nature, whilst the Saxon poetry had told only of birds of the battlefield or the cuckoo that announces summer with foreboding. The Middle English poem has room for thrush and throstle, wren and 'wudewale' (?oriole) (1659). It abounds in glimpses of the English scene: teams of horses drawing loads of wheat or waiting at the mill door (775-8); pairs of wrestlers (795)—wrestling was the most popular sport of the time; a fox slinking along the hedge and so killing the scent (819 ff.)—a scene that will recur in every period of our poetry down to Masefield's *Reynard*; a carter shouting 'pull over' ('Drah to the') (1186).

The chief art of the poem lies in the adaptation of such patterns of behaviour to the critical, topical, and satirical points of debate, in providing them with a human dimension. Thus the reproach that the Nightingale does not sing in heathen lands (905 ff.) but wastes its music is answered by an allusion to an event of 1176: if a real missionary sent from Rome could do nothing with those devils, how could I? The *Reynard* story as taken over from the Latin *Ysengrimus* about the same time (see pp. 13-14 below) makes similar topical allusions, but not so deftly.

The poem concludes with an assembly of birds great and small that, like Chaucer's two hundred years later, evinces a sense of the rich plenitude of Nature.* Nature, *kind*, meaning 'the natural order of things' makes its first entrance into English thought. Not yet hypostasized as in *The Parlement of Foules*, it is the measure by which the disputants judge everything, and are willing to be judged. Thus the Owl claims that in using her sharp bill and long claws she is obeying

* Both owl and nightingale figure in Chaucer's assembly (*PF* 342, 351-2), taking roles similar to those they have here, just as Chaucer takes the poet's role of a silent auditor to the birds' colloquy. The simile in *Troilus and Criseyde* iii. 1233 recalls the opening lines of *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

natural law: 'Vor rihte cunde ich am so kene' (276), whilst the Nightingale condemns unlawful love with the malediction:

Wroth wurthe heom the holi rode
The rihte ikunde swo forbredeth! (1382-3)

'May the wrath of the Holy Rood fall on those who so transgress the law of nature'—the kind thus invoked being concerned primarily with procreation.*

Constantly the author exploits the incongruity of birds talking as humans, if he strains it when alluding to adultery (1497 ff.) and in the later discussion of human mores (1515-602) when the Owl passes beyond the immediate topic of debate and even beyond the conventions of fable; though the situation, in which the birds are forgetting their disagreement in a side issue, remains not unhumorous—the Nightingale momentarily posing as a moralist and even something of a theologian, the Owl as a broad-minded man, or woman, of the world. We can perhaps detect here some pressure from the dominant social and literary concerns of the time: the emergence of 'amour courtois' or, to use the native phrase, 'derne lue'. In so far as such love is unlawful neither disputant will defend it. On the one hand, the Nightingale avers that

Yef maide luveth dernliche¹
Heo stumpeth & falth icundeliche² (1423-4)

¹ loves secretly

² naturally stumbles and falls

'it's only natural that young blood should sometimes outrun discretion'; but marriage can make all right (1427-8). On the other hand Owl argues that if a husband spends all his wealth on a woman not his wife (1527), she is hardly to blame if she forgets her vows. Whatever we make of this morality, it is clearly not one that puts a premium on passion. Rather, it suggests a characteristically English blend of moral principle tempered with pity. So Chaucer (or his poetic *persona*) would wish to have excused Criseide 'for routhe', if that had been morally permissible, and Gower would see that secret love always brings unease.†

* The phrase 'against kind' is first found in *The Peterborough Chronicle* in the entry for the year 1102. *The Owl and the Nightingale* provides examples of the older forms *ikunde* and *cun* (OE *gecynde* and *cynn*) which gradually disappear.

† The bird-debate on the weakness of women was to become a popular genre, of which an Anglo-Norman specimen is preserved in the Bozon MS (SATF xxxii) and a later English example is *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, CB XIII No. 52. The nightingale again takes the side of the weaker sex and again displays its *courtois* vocabulary: the lady described is compact of 'hendinesse and courtesye' (such synonyms help to naturalize French terms). She is the physician who can heal a lover's wound, but also the victim of

The world of 'amour courtois' is the world of Marie de France. And from Marie's *lai* of *Laustic* (or a variant thereof), the poet takes the tale of a suitor who assumes the shape of a nightingale to reach his mistress (1050 ff.). Retelling it against her opponent, the Owl asserts

Thu naddest non other dom ne laghe*
Bute mid wilde horse were todraghe¹ (1061-2)

¹ *torn apart*

The incongruity consists not in the punishment itself—Nequam reports that a knight actually had a nightingale torn apart in this way—but in the Owl positing that it had really befallen her antagonist. Yet it must not be pressed: each bird is arguing as representative of its kind. And this is the very point at which the poet indicates that he is aware of the limitations of bird-fable:

The nightingale at thisse worde
Mid sworde an mid speres orde¹
Yif ho mon were², wolde fighte. (1067-9)

¹ *point* ² *if she had been a man*

For the most part the assimilation of natural attributes to human behaviour (especially to human pettiness and pique) is deft and unobtrusive. We are told at once that the Nightingale is concealed in a thick hedge ('in *shadiest* covert hid', says Milton) and it relishes its security:

Yif ich me holde in mine hegge
Ne recche¹ ich never what thu segge² (59-60)

¹ *care* ² *say*

When the Owl would put herself on a level with the hawk (271-308), or even with the raven and eagle (389-90), the poet is capitalizing at once on the bird's self-importance and on the pretentiousness of owl-like men.

The debate conducted with such brio savours as much of the court as of the schools. Not surprisingly, since the development of legal procedures had been a marked feature of the reign of Henry II. *Plait* (legal suit) is the term used to describe it at the beginning (l. 5) and the end (1737); and *tale* (3, 544) may be an English calque on this French *Wikke-tonge* (to use the Chaucerian equivalent to the *Malebouche* of the *Roman de la Rose*): the Thrush is accused of unduly blaming such ladies (107). The tone throughout is light and gay; the poem is as much an exercise in verse-rhetoric as a serious *disputacio*.

* Editors have not noticed the technical sense of 'to have the law', used likewise as regards (Guenevere's) adultery in Malory (*Works*, ed. Vinaver (2nd edn., Oxford, 1967), 1175; cf. also 374).

term; it certainly did duty for French *conte* (= the plaintiff's statement) in later times.* When the nightingale says her 'bare word' (547) can invalidate charges, she is using the plaintiff's right of *nude parole*; and when the Owl protests that she need not answer, she is within her rights as defendant. Less obvious, if more pervasive, is the influence of the new vogue for rhetoric, discernible in the way in which each bird, driven to present dubious arguments, pursues the recognized rhetorical device of *prosecutio cum proverbiis*, bolstering her case with gnomic lore, some drawn from old alliterative stock and ascribed to Alfred, even if with no greater warrant than Marie de France had for citing him as source for her Anglo-Norman fables.

The initial give and take is deceptively simple, holding no hint of later complexities. The Nightingale's complaint is wholly personal: she is upset because the Owl stops her from singing. Pejoratives (notably epithets and nouns in *un*—*ungode*, *unmilde*, *unorne*) are bandied about and the Owl repeatedly asks for open combat. Only after some 200 lines of this does argument begin in due form, with the Owl straining to upgrade herself socially and temporarily raising the tone of the dispute with pious allusions to a heaven where there is no satiety of song (335–62). The Nightingale has to take a new line, of moral censure: Owl is envious—and envy is a capital sin—of Nightingale's role as a harbinger of joy. Owl is thus forced to underline her religious role: if she sings only in winter, that is the time of Christmas; Nightingale's song belongs to the season of pride and wanton passion that does not last. The debate has become a *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis*, and Owl is moving over to the attack, with dismissive references to Nightingale's small size, and drab colour, and uncleanly habits. Her self-praise approaches smugness and is again given a pious colour:

Vor me is lof to Cristes huse
To clansi hit with fule muse (609–10)

'the Church is dear to me and I like nothing better than to cleanse it of defiling mice'. Nightingale now resorts to the device of concession, covering weakness in argument by a display of apophthegms: *bihemen* and *bilegge*, 'to trim and to glose over', are the terms the poet applies to the device, and the former is *hapax legomenon*. True, she knows only one song, but it is better than all the Owl's put together. True, she is small and weak, but cleverness is better than brute force. She too can be pious; by helping man to sing devoutly on earth, she

* F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (revised edn., Cambridge, 1968), ii. 605 and n. 2.