The Allegorical Interpretation of the Owl and the Nightingale

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THE ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION
OF
THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE

BY
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CHAPTER I

Introductory: The Poem

Although The Owl and the Nightingale was rediscovered in the eighteenth century, it was not until 1838 that this poem, "one of the finest achievements in English medieval literature,"\(^1\) appeared in a modern edition. Since that date six critical editions have been published, four of them in our own century.\(^2\) This persistent tribute to the poem has been echoed in the various histories of English literature. But, asks G.G. Coulton in a review of Professor Atkins' edition,

> will these judgements hold their ground fifty years hence, or do they still smack of the enthusiasm of a comparatively new discovery? We would suggest a simple test; Professor Atkins says, coming to details: 'The arguments are marshalled in effective fashion, and the reader need never be in doubt as to where the main issue lies.' But is this praise consistent with the fact, so embarrassing to the generality of students, that no two editors have yet agreed as to what exactly either Owl or Nightingale is driving at?\(^3\)

Mr. Coulton's difficulty is twofold: what exactly are the Owl and the Nightingale driving at, that is, what is the allegorical interpretation of the poem; and does the diversity of opinion in regard to the allegorical interpretation materially lessen the value of the poem as literature? This thesis is concerned with the first question. But, in passing, it also answers the second question; and the an-
swer is 'no.' For the poem, though a debate, is basically a fable and as such can be enjoyed for itself. Atkins anticipated the objection when he called attention to one of the many excellencies of the poet:

All the while he has been telling an interesting story, a story which, like *Gulliver's Travels*, can be read for itself.\(^4\)

The first question raised by Mr. Coulton's objection, the problem of the allegorical interpretation of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, has never been fully treated. A few authors have set forth their own views at some length; the majority have been satisfied with the mere statement of their interpretations. No one has tried to evaluate the respective merits of the proposed interpretations. After an introductory chapter on the poem itself, this thesis classifies the interpretations already proposed and sets them forth in separate chapters. Each interpretation is first considered as it is stated by its author, then further evidence, both from the events of the time and from the poem itself, is adduced. The results of this study are embodied in the concluding chapter. The present chapter is a summary of the numerous studies on the form, date, and authorship of the poem. But before proceeding further a synopsis of the poem may prove helpful.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* is a medieval English poem,
a debate between the two birds over the respective merits of their characters and, especially, their song.

& eiper seide of òperes custe
pat alre-worste pat hi wuste:
& hure & hure of òperes songe. (9-11)

Hidden in a valley, the poet hears an Owl and a Nightingale disputing with vigor. The Nightingale from her blossomy perch bids the Owl, who is seated on an old tree-stump overgrown with ivy, to take her ugly presence and her harsh song elsewhere. With difficulty the Owl restrains herself till evening falls; then she declares that had she the Nightingale in her claws the latter should sing another song. The Nightingale answers disdainfully that all the other birds scorn such a foul bird as the Owl. Furious, the Owl challenges her opponent to a trial by combat but the Nightingale proposes that they hold a more proper trial in which words shall be the weapons. They decide upon Master Nicholas of Guildford as judge.

The Nightingale opens the debate, chiding the Owl as a creature of the night, a bird that loves the dark, and hence is evil. After the Owl's successful retort, she accuses the latter of singing only of woe. But the Owl explains the nature of her song and turns the argument on her opponent's head, charging that she incites lovers to lust. The Nightingale answers that her song rather incites hearers to
seek the bliss of heaven. This the Owl will not allow, urging that repentance not song is the way to heaven. But the Nightingale says that life is more than a lament. The Owl returns to the attack with the charge, "You entice to lasciviousness, one of your kind was torn to pieces for such." Angrily, the Nightingale exclaims that the assailant received his just due. When the Owl seizing her advantage taunts the Nightingale, the latter turns upon her tormentor with the accusation of witchcraft. Earnestly the Owl defends herself, adding that even though her life is taken she still remains useful; for dead she makes a good scarecrow. At this the Nightingale exults. "You confess -- you boast of your shame!" So loud are her cries that the other birds gather around and mock the Owl. When the beleaguered bird threatens to summon all the hook-billed and sharp-clawed clan to her defence she is reminded of the pledge to submit their case to the judge for his decision. So off they fly to Nicholas at Portisham in Dorset.

Ah hu heo spedde of heore dome,  
ne can ich eu namore telle. (1792-3)

As this brief synopsis shows the poem is a debate, a form defined by Professor Atkins as

a spirited contest in verse between two or more disputants each of whom claimed supremacy for the views he held. 5

All students of the poem agree that there can be little di-
rect influence from the somewhat similar forms, the Provençal partimen, tenson, and feigned tenson and the North French tenson, jeu parti, and feigned tenson. If there is any direct influence it is to be sought in narrative poems imitative of the Latin duel. No such poem, that is, one containing all the characteristics of The Owl and the Nightingale, is now extant. Recourse therefore must be had to the Latin debate or duel itself.

The Latin debate or contention (altercatio, certamen, conflictus) is traceable to the Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth and ninth centuries whence it harks back through the Bucolics of Virgil to the Idylls of Theocritus. This Latin tradition began with Alcuin (c.735-804) under whom it took the form of a literary exercise in the schools. Two compositions of this early time have come down to us. The Conflictus veris et hiemis, of uncertain authorship, dates from the eighth century. The other, De rosae liliique certamine, is the work of Sedulius Scotus who flourished in Lorraine during the following century.

In the twelfth and early thirteenth century, the date of The Owl and the Nightingale, the medieval debate reached the height of its popularity. The source of this popularity is to be sought in the temper of the time. One aspect of this temper is summed up in the character and work of Abelard (1079-1142). He was seized with the importance of
dialectics in the search for truth; for by means of this science wits were sharpened and thus rendered more fit for the detection of truth from falsity. Abelard himself prepared the matter on which these sharpened wits were to be exercised. In his famous Sic et Non the various opinions on philosophical and theological questions were presented but no solutions. These were to be the outcome of the discussion of the conflicting opinions. Pedagogical principles such as these together with the taste for argument and formal discussion characteristic of the open intellectual life of the period account for the vogue of the debate. From an exercise in composition it became, through the infusion of dialectics, a popular literary form both in Latin and in the vernaculars.

The themes of these debates were varied. Besides the familiar debates between the Soul and the Body, between Summer and Winter, Water and Wine, there were many of particularly contemporary interest. The Goliardic note is struck in the satirical Dialogus inter aquam et vinum, monastic differences are echoed in another Goliardic composition, De Clarevallensibus et Cluniacensibus, while in De Presbytero et Logico and De Mauro et Zoilo questions confronting the clerics are debated. Love is the theme of the famous De Phillide et Flora which had many later versions.

Although these debates followed a common general pattern
they differed among themselves, the differences between the Latin and the vernacular types especially being very clearly marked. It is to the vernacular group that *The Owl and the Nightingale* belongs, as well by its form as by its language. The framework follows the general pattern common to both. There is a brief introduction wherein the scene is described and the circumstances of the dispute exposed. A spirited discussion follows, enlivened with dramatic incident and, finally, there is an appointed judge. But it is in the details that the vernacular and the Latin debate differ; here *The Owl and the Nightingale* definitely ranges itself alongside the vernacular type. For there is a notable absence of classical phrase and allusion and in its stead we find the proverbs of Alfred. There is a marked increase too in the elements which tend to animate the dialogue, namely, the narrative and dramatic details, while the whole atmosphere is colored with references to contemporary life. Finally, there are two features which set it apart not only from the Latin debate but from the vernacular as well. In the first place the protagonists of the poem are birds; the poem is an animal fable. Secondly, the formal procedure of the debate follows the terminology and procedure of a contemporary law-suit. On the first of these features J. E. Wells remarks:

Though in Provencal, Latin, and French up to 1250, never more than one of the two contestants is bird or beast,
in the Owl not only the principals but all the actors and many of the persons in the illustrations and by­cidents, are lower animals. All this reminds us of the popularity of stories and of descriptions of char­acteristics and properties of animals of the period -- of fables, bestiaries, and works on natural history. The Owl is the predecessor of a long line of animal con­ tests.7

And elsewhere in the same volume he states that

Mall and Joseph Jacobs have shown that England was the home of the medieval fable.8

The skillful blending of the debate and the fable evidences the genius of the poet. In grafting the English fable to the continental debate he shows, even more than by his use of the English language, that his talent is English, that his matter and his manner are his own. For this reason the in­debtedness of The Owl and the Nightingale to the fable will be treated more at length in a later chapter wherein the personal interpretation of the poem is considered.

The second outstanding feature of the poem has reference to the conduct of the debate. Gadow, in 1907, was the first to point out that the debate follows the terminology and procedure of a contemporary law-suit. But it was left for Atkins, and after him Miss Huganir, to develop this char­acteristic.9 The technical word 'plait' (plea; 5, 1737) is used of the debate. In line 140 the plaintiff, the Nightingale, states the charge ('tale') but as her 'bare word' (547) is not sufficient she invokes the Proverbs of
Alfred as an authority (236, 294, etc.). The Owl, as defendant, replies to the charge, stating her willingness to defend her cause by arms (150-3). When this is refused she sets forth her defense (255-390, 473-542), citing the Proverbs for support (291, 301, 351, etc.). Here the case should end. But as at that point the defendant could claim the right of exceptio -- show cause why the action should proceed no farther -- the Owl turns on the plaintiff and as­sails her character (556-668, 837-932). The Nightingale makes her defense in the replication (707-836, 955-1042). Thereupon the case degenerates into attack and rebuttal.

Each of the contestants is ever on the alert to detect the other in some technical error in pleading. This also serves to keep them on their guard against the familiar tricks of legal debate (472). The Owl attempts one of these tricks (933), that of angering the opponent and caus­ing him to forget himself, but the Nightingale realizes the pitfall in time (943-4). Later, the Owl again seeks to stop the process by asserting that the charge put forward by the plaintiff is not a bona fide one, but the outcome of malice (1183). But in the end the Nightingale convicts the Owl of a stultiloquium (1640), asserting that the latter has lost her case by boasting of her own disgrace (1650). This contention is endorsed by her supporters and the debate ends with the flight to Nicholas for his decision.
Characteristics such as these we have just been considering indicate that The Owl and the Nightingale is no mere translation of a foreign original. A consideration of the versification of the poem strengthens this conclusion for, though the poet borrowed the octosyllabic couplet from the French, he made it thoroughly English by substituting the law of accent for that of syllabification and introducing alliteration and other characteristics of English poetry. Moreover the subject of the poem, though an old one, is perfectly in touch with the England of its day. To verify this, we must now turn to a consideration of the date of the poem, especially as this is one of the most highly disputed of the questions connected with it.

Consideration of the Cotton manuscript, the earlier of the two manuscripts in which the poem is found, has led scholars to agree on two points: the manuscript belongs to the first half of the thirteenth century and is a copy of a copy of the original poem. Therefore the original dates from the opening decades of the thirteenth century or the closing decades of the twelfth. Orthography favors a date after 1200. The comparative absence of French words and the fidelity shown to the Old English inflectional system points to a date before 1200. Scholars and critics, consequently, have differed greatly in the date they assign to the composition of the poem.10 While they commonly agree
that the reference to Henry in lines 1091-2 is to Henry II of England, *they* are at odds as to whether that reference indicates that the king is dead or not. Mr. Hinckley and Miss Huganir are loud in their protestations: the lines do not mean that the king is dead; consequently, and for other reasons as well, they place the date of the poem before, though not much before, 1189, the year of the king's death. The other camp, Wells, Atkins, and scholars generally, believe that the phrase 'Jesu his soule do merci' refers only to dead persons and accordingly they place the date of composition after 1189.

Relative to the remaining internal evidence nothing conclusive is to be found. Persons before and after 1200 have been discovered and identified with Nicholas of Guildford. The Papal embassy (1015 ff.) has been connected with the mission of Cardinal Vivian in 1176-7 and with the presence of Archbishop Eystein of Norway in England during the years 1180-3. The contention that the reference demands an adjacent date of composition has been as stoutly denied as it has been asserted by Mr. Hinckley and Miss Huganir. The sources provide no clue in the solution of this impasse for they allow of an early or a late date. Perhaps the short Anglo-Norman *Chronicle* which precedes *The Owl and the Nightingale* in the Cotton manuscript is of some help as it ends abruptly at the year 1216 which would seem to indicate that
that manuscript was written soon after that date.

Two conclusions stem from these considerations. The date of the poem, in all probability, is the reign of King John, 1199-1217. And the tone of the poem and the life of the poet reflect the preceding reigns of Henry II and Richard Coeur-de-lion. If the date of the poem is even earlier this second conclusion is the more true.

The century reflected in the poem therefore is the twelfth. What is the character of that century? The first thing to be noted is that although France was the center and inspiration of the life of that century, especially the intellectual and artistic life, England and France to all intents and purposes were one. William the Conqueror was Duke of Normandy before his conquest of England. Though his eldest son, Robert, succeeded to the dukedom and William Rufus inherited England the union once made was not so easily dissolved. A younger brother, Henry I (1100-1135), obtained the throne of England and by imprisoning his elder brother, Robert, likewise acquired Normandy. This kinship with France was increased by the marriage of Mathilda, the daughter of Henry I, to Geoffrey of Anjou. Their son not only succeeded to the estates of Anjou and Maine besides the throne of England and the dukedoms of Normandy and Brittany but, by his marriage (1152) to Eleanor, the heiress to Aquitaine, managed to add that rich fief to the crown.
With Eleanor came the train of Provencal Poets which had gathered about her and her father at Bordeaux. Henry II was already famous as a patron of literature and the period of his reign, 1154-89, was a glorious one for learning in England. J.E.Wells quotes the results of Jacob's researches, establishing by actual count that two-thirds of the French writers of the period 1154-1206 were Englishmen or men closely connected with the English court. This intimate union of England and France lasted until 1204 when King John lost Normandy and most of his possessions above the Loire to Philip Augustus of France.

Another characteristic of the age is the extent to which religion pervaded the life of all. The Cluniac reforms of the eleventh century were carried to new heights by the work of Clairvaux under St. Bernard (1091-1153). Nearly all western Europe was Catholic, a fact which made for unity. Within the ranks of the clergy, whence came many of the learned of the age, this cosmopolitanism was especially evident. Each country had many foreigners prominent among its clerics, secular and regular. The Crusades too helped to unite the people in a common cause. During this century the first three of the Crusades occurred (1096-9, 1147-9, 1189-92).

In the preceding century Gregory VII had won a notable victory over Henry IV of Germany in the matter of lay inves-
titute. But Canossa (1077) did not settle the question. It was only with the Concordat of Worms, 1122, that a solution was reached; in this the Pope emerged victorious. The conflict between Empire and Papacy came to the fore again under Frederick Barbarossa (1154) and again the result was a papal victory, the Peace of Constance (1183). But the height of the political power of the pope occurred during the reign of Innocent III (1198-1216). All Europe felt his influence and King John handed England over to him to receive it back as a papal fief. But previous to John this struggle was felt in England. The conflict of Church and State was personified in Henry II and Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and ended as a victory for the Church although it cost the life of the Archbishop. Henry's strength occasioned the struggle for he was a strong king and, in general, a good one. During his reign great financial and judicial reforms were set on foot and the nobles, who had asserted their independence by building fortifications and levying armies, were brought into line again. Amid all this activity Henry found time to foster learning; and the learning of the age deserved his patronage. For side by side with the enormous religious and political activity went an interest in things intellectual. Haskins thus summarizes the wide range of this activity of the mind:

The epoch of the Crusades, of the rise of towns, and of the earliest bureaucratic states of the West, it saw the
culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic; the emergence of the vernacular literatures; the revival of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Roman law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities. The twelfth century left its signature on higher education, on the scholastic philosophy, on European systems of law, on architecture and sculpture, on the liturgical drama, on Latin and vernacular poetry.

To take up these contributions in detail would be impossible here. In later chapters these points will receive further development in so far as they have especial significance through their connection with some interpretation of the poem. But before we proceed to a consideration of these interpretations there remains one more topic to be treated.

Who wrote The Owl and the Nightingale?

There are only two names connected with the writing of the poem, Nicholas of Guildford and John of Guildford. The possibility that another wrote it has received scant attention. At first the tendency was to deem it impossible that Nicholas of Guildford was the author as his virtues are so clearly enumerated in the poem. But recent opinion has veered in the other direction, especially as the case for John of Guildford is so slight and unsatisfactory.

The only evidence connecting John with The Owl and the Nightingale is to be found in four verses which a seventeenth century owner claims to have discovered on a part of a broken leaf of the manuscript which contains the poem.
These verses read:

Mays ter Johan eu gretep of Guldeuorde po.
And sendeþ eu to seggen þat synge nul he no.
Ac on þisse wise he wille endy his song.
God louerd of Heuene, beo vs alle among.
Amen.

The case for John is not much stronger than this evidence. As he was of the same town as Nicholas he may have written the poem on behalf of the latter; for there can be no doubt that the immediate object of the poem was the winning of recognition for Nicholas. But the above verses, although stating definitely that at least one poem in the manuscript was written by John, does not connect him with The Owl and the Nightingale. The broken leaf on which these verses were first penned could not occur before folio 253 and The Owl comes to an end some 12 folios before. Moreover, The Owl can hardly be called a 'song' while there are numerous short poems answering to that description in the 31 folios wherein the broken leaf might have occurred.

Self-praise is the only deterring factor in the attribution of The Owl and the Nightingale to Nicholas of Guildford. But there is no question of indulging in personal vanity here. It is the plain statement of fact for the attainment of a definite material end much like a present-day application for a position in which one states his qualifications. There was no need to say that he had written the poem. It was sufficient to say that he, Nicholas of Guild-
ford, although worthy of preferment, had been passed over. But he would not boast of his abilities; rather here was an illustration of his talent and the king and his ministers or whoever could secure his preferment might judge for themselves. "Absolute certainty as to authorship is out of the question: but Nicholas of Guildford must at least be said to hold the field." Various attempts have been made to identify Nicholas more precisely but, although interesting, so far they have not been convincing.

In all this controversy over the authorship of *The Owl* and the *Nightingale* it is necessary to hold fast to the just remark of J.E. Wells:

The name of the author matters little at all: it is the man, his character, his mind and thought, his attitude towards life and art, that are really important.

For the man stands revealed in his poem. Although of considerable learning, as the literary forms of the poem and the materials embodied therein evidence, he was an original artist and an observer of nature. He made his materials his own and welded seemingly diverse forms into a highly artistic whole, ordering all to the end he had in view. His acquaintance with judicial procedure is no less noteworthy than his love of nature and of men. Even though much of the animal lore found in the poem may have come from books (although this is disputed), he is not only responsible for
the selection of the materials but for their transmutation into himself; he delighted in them, heightened them with his own interest. In addition he inserted details which could only have come from personal observation. His broad human sympathies are as obvious as his love of the lower forms of life. Shrewd and observant he tempered his knowledge of human nature with humor and all his references to human persons bear witness to the balance he thus achieved. J.E. Wells, whose wide and scholarly knowledge of medieval literature is illustrated, among other things, by his _Manual of Writings in Middle English_ and whose thorough knowledge of _The Owl and the Nightingale_ in particular is manifest in his edition of the poem, thus summarizes the genius of the poem's author:

Independence of mind and attitude; sympathy with the lower forms of life and sympathy with man; alertness to suggestion, and capacity and readiness to utilize and adapt to the purpose in view; reverence for the deeper truths of existence; realization of the seriousness of human life, of its duties and of its glorious opportunities; and, with all this, appreciation of the humor that runs through all mortal affairs high and low; these qualities, which with his artistic genius, his dramatic imagination, his true ear, and his accurate insight and judgment and taste in the elements of poetic effect, make the author of _The Owl and the Nightingale_ the greatest poet of his age in England -- these qualities in combination are generally accepted as notable distinctive characteristics of purely English literature since the actual amalgamation of the French and the English in Great Britain.16

Mr. Wells elsewhere explains what he means by "the greatest poet of his age":
he produced a composition that seems the earliest, and from many points of view the best, original long poem of a wholly imaginative character written in English before the time of Chaucer. 17

If the poet and Nicholas of Guildford were one and the same man we have additional information of him from the poem itself (191-214, 1745-78). He was a cleric whose merits had been neglected by the proper authorities. Although somewhat wild in his youth and given to the writing of poetry of love, age has sobered him and he has now taken up his abode at Portisham where he renders sound judgments and writes wisely.

Further significant information betraying the interests and preferences of the author is to be found in the interpretation of the poem. Under the form of a fable recounting a debate between an Owl and a Nightingale the poet has written an allegory. The debate form shows that it is a conflict that is allegorized with the birds and their arguments embodying the two sides. No one has denied that a conflict lurks here but many and varied have been the interpretations of that conflict. These may be grouped under three large heads according to the spirit in which they would express the conflict: religious, secular, and personal. In so far as the themes are found in the religious life (between asceticism and mysticism) or the clerical life (between the regular and the secular priests) or the Christ-
ian life (between two attitudes toward this life) they belong to the first classification. Here too belongs the conflict between the Old English religious poetry and the new love poetry of France, but because of its importance this interpretation will be discussed in a separate chapter. Under the second classification, that of secular conflict, fall the conflicts found in the natural order whether they be an attitude of life, as gravity versus gaiety, or the persons embracing or associated with that attitude, as the thinker versus the poet, age versus youth. Finally, there is the personal conflict, the struggle within the author of conflicting attitudes toward life, of conflicting interests and desires. Each of these interpretations will be considered in its turn in the chapters which follow. In the main the conclusions flowing from these considerations are reserved for the last chapter.
Footnotes to Chapter I


2. The 1838 publication was edited by J. Stevenson for the Roxburghe Club. The six subsequent editions are:
   1907. W. Gadow, Das Mittelenglische Streitgedichte Eule und Nachtigal (Berlin, 1907).


5. Ibid., p. xlvi.


10. For a tabulation of the dates suggested by the various writers see Kathryn Huganir, op. cit., pp. 63-4.


13. The case for and against John of Guildford as the author of the poem will be found excellently summarized in J.W.H. Atkins, op. cit., pp. xxxix-xli.


16. ibid., p. lii.

17. ibid., p. xxxvii.
CHAPTER II

The Religious Interpretation.

The critics -- Coulton, Legouis, Courthope, Brother Leo, Schofield -- who interpret the allegory of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in terms of religious conflict agree in viewing the Owl as a monk. Accordingly as they consider the Nightingale to be a mystic, a member of the secular clergy, or a lay-person they envisage the conflict in the monastic, the clerical, or the Christian life. Consequently we shall first develop the identification of Owl and monk as it is expounded by Mr. Coulton and then proceed to a study of the three-fold conflict.

Ostensibly contributing a note to line 1174, Mr. G.G. Coulton seized the opportunity to gather some of the lines which seem to indicate that the Owl typifies the monk.\(^1\) In the passage with which Mr. Coulton opens his article the Nightingale, highly angered, concludes an impassioned speech with the curse:

\[
\text{God Almi} \text{\textit{\"iti wur\"be him wrop}, an \text{\textit{\"at weriep linnene clo\"p}}} \quad (1173-4)
\]

The usual meaning of linen cloth in medieval England, Mr. Coulton asserts, was underclothing and as such was not worn by, or at least not characteristic of, the monk and the poor folk; it denotes, in his opinion, the upper and middle classes,
all socially respectable people with the exception of the monk. Therefore the Nightingale invokes on the Owl 'the malison of all decent unmonastic folk.' The absence of underclothing, he admits, is only passively consistent with the monk's characteristics and habits. But Mr. Coulton finds other and more explicit affirmations of the identity of Owl and monk. The Owl boasts (323-8) that he sings at the proper times, at sunset, bed-time, midnight, and sunrise; respectively, the canonical offices of Vespers, Compline, Matins, and Lauds. He restricts himself to these as they are the 'hours' sung at night. Since the secular clergy recited their 'hours' by day this passage definitely ranges the Owl along-side the monk, concludes Mr. Coulton.

Nor does he find further evidence of the identification lacking. In a number of passages the Nightingale accuses the Owl of being prone to tears, an accusation that the Owl retorts with the assertion that the kingdom of heaven is better won by weeping than by singing. "Is not this," asks Mr. Coulton, "one of the many medieval echoes of that sentence of Jerome's, so dear to St. Bernard, 'Monachus non docentis sed plagentis habet officium'? cf. Ancren Riwle." Then too the Nightingale's allegation that her opponent 'ever speaks of evil things' (1151, 1172) prompts Mr. Coulton to remark that the monk in medieval society sometimes passed for a creature of ill omen. And in lines 25-28, 89,
281-282 he finds the life of the cloister satirically described. These lines portray the Owl's haunt as an old tree-stump overgrown with ivy and her activity as sitting by and bestirring herself only by night. Other lines, of which line 220 is characteristic,

& al PLICATE song is wailawai,

pillory for him the monotonous psalmody of the monk. Still others (226, 425-6, 485-92, 378, 895-914, 971-990) reveal a melancholy and ascetic view of life, a statement Mr. Coulton intends in a derogatory signification although the passages merely embody a true sense of values, a subordination of the temporal to the eternal. Some of Mr. Coulton's contentions are quite plausible, but they bear evident signs of his well-known antipathy to medieval Catholicism. But he adduces yet two more bits of evidence. The Owl's observation that all joy is fleeting save that which is found in the kingdom of God reflects the religious contemplation of the monk (355-60); while in several passages (535-40, 603-4, 609-10) he understands a reference to the works of charity connected with monastic life. The Owl in the last of these quotations describes her protection of and care for the dwellings of God and men. But lines 535-540 are the most significant. The Owl recounts how she comforts the weak, the anxious, the miserable, and those who long for warmth. She lessens their pain by her song and her consoling words. The lack of care for ornithological truth here illustrated
indicates the existence of some preconceived theme; for the owl of natural history is far from the religious altruist of the poet.

Though what has been said is true, concludes Mr. Coulton, the whole of this side of the debate cannot be worked into a complete and consistent picture of monastic life—but consistency is not the medieval poet's strong point. And perhaps the poem is a translation, or possibly the poet is not an original observer of nature. Because, as Mr. Coulton admits, the poem does not bear out his interpretation, he attributes lack of artistry to the poet.

Many of the details which Mr. Coulton would brand as inconsistencies are characteristics of the Owl, features which would indicate that the bird is a bird and not a man, that the allegory is to be found in a conflict of attitudes and not of men. For the description of the Owl (73-80) has nothing in common with monks; nor have its methods of fighting. The Owl (41) waited for night before she spoke while the monk could have answered by day. Again, the Owl (89) is active only by night when, presumably, she performs her works of charity; but the monk does his good deeds by day. The monk does not sing only at night as the Owl does (219). Finally, the fables told by the Nightingale have an application to the Owl as a bird but not to the Owl as a monk.
There is much in the history of the times, however, which would lead one to suspect that one of the protagonists was a monk. Perhaps the identification of owl and monk was almost proverbial as the following passage from the De Similitudinibus of St. Anselm (1033-1109) would seem to indicate:

Sicut bubo, dum in caverna cum pullis suis est, laetatur et suo modo bene sibi est, dum vero inte, corvos et corniculas seu alias aves, incursatur ad dilaniatur et omnino sibi male est: utpote quem hic rostro male percutit, ille alis in eum irruit, alter vero unguibus discindit, ita et mihi. Quando enim cum monachis, meis scilicet filiis, conversari queo, mihi bene est et grata haec singularis vitae meae consolatio.3

More generally, the enormous monastic activity of the time together with the conflicts which inevitably would follow in the wake of such activity provides a fit and likely subject for discussion. More than one hundred new monasteries were founded during Stephen's reign (1135-54) in England alone and a like number were founded during the reign of Henry II (1154-89), his successor. Some of these new foundations devoted themselves primarily to the salvation of their neighbor; others chiefly to their own sanctification. Some stressed the ascetical way of life, pressing on toward heaven through the mortification of the body. Others sought to unite themselves to God by means of love and prayer. There were those among the secular clergy who looked with envy on the privileges and with scorn on the pretensions of the regulars. At times, too, the more na-
tional-minded of the laity saw in this vast body directly under the rule of the pope a foreign enemy. The relation of each of these conflicts—those, namely, in the monastic life, in the clerical life, and in the Christian life—to the poem under consideration must now be determined.

A

In the Monastic Life

Although Emile Legouis places the conflict of the poem between careless youth and the wisdom of old age, he also suggests a religious interpretation:

Both are pious, but while the nightingale hymns a rapturous piety, thinking to win heaven with songs, the owl insists on the need for gravity, self-examination and good works.5

This interpretation is valid enough when it is one aspect of conflicting attitudes toward life. But when it is proposed as the whole allegory of the poem, establishing it as a conflict between asceticism and mysticism, it is notably deficient.

The evidence for the Owl as the exponent of asceticism is quite conclusive. Some of this evidence has been cited in the first part of this chapter. In one speech in particular the Owl sets forth her principles (860-932). For those longing for heaven, she says, weeping is better than
singing since they must first with many tears ask forgiveness for their sins. No man is free from sin. Consequently her song is partly of yearning and partly of lament and its healing power is two-fold: the good are encouraged in their longing for heaven and sinners are urged not to continue in their sin,

for betere is pat heo wepen here,
    pan elles hwar beon deoulene fere. (931-2)

On the contrary the Nightingale argues that man was born for the joy of heaven where there is song and mirth eternal (716-8). Monks and canons and parish priests compose and sing

pat man ipenche bi pe songe
    wider he shal, & par bon longe:
pat he be mur3pe ne uor3ete,
ac parof penche & bi3ete,
an hime 3eme of chirche steuene,
    hu murie is pe bliss of houene. (723-8)

She helps them all she can (735-6), singing with them night and day;

For ic of chirche-songe singe. (1036)

Elsewhere she says:

& sop hit is of luue ich singe. (1339)

She hopes to win heaven by her song and as her song is of love she represents, according to M. Legouis' interpretation, 'rapturous piety' as opposed to the 'gravity, self-examination, and good works' of the Owl. With this view agrees the tradition according to which the Nightingale is
the 'songstress of the divine praises.' Atkins traces this tradition back to the Carolingian era,

when the nightingale was praised, not for her love-song, but for her skill in chanting the glory of God. Thus Alcuin in his De Luscinia (11.15-20) writes:

Felix o nimium, Dominum nocteque dieque
Qui studio tali semper in ore canit!

..........................
Hoc natura dedit, naturae et conditor almus,
Quem tu laudasti vocibus assiduis.

And this tradition is preserved by Neckam where he writes in connection with the nightingale: 'Quid quod noctes tota ducit insoranes, dum delicioso garritui pervigil indulget? Nonne jam vitam claustrialium praec oculis cor-dis constituuis, noctes cum diebus in laudem divinam expedentium.'

Professor Atkins finds this tradition perpetuated in the Fables of Odo of Cheriton (1200-1250),

where it is explained that 'Philomela significat religiosos super duros ramos, id est, austeritates religionis habitantes et Deum in choris nocturnis laudantes.'

That the Nightingale in the present poem has not followed in this tradition is quite clear. She explicitly distinguishes her song from that of the monks and canons and parish priests (729-36). She helps them:

Ich warni men to hore gode,
pat hi bon blipe on hore mode,
an bidde pat hi moten iseche
pan ilke song pat euer is eche. (739-42)

This is as far as she goes. She bids them to be cheerful and prays that they might attain to the song that is eternal. This is the 'chirche-song' that she sings (1036). More rightly does she herself say that it is of love she sings
And in the lines that follow she makes it clear that this love is the love between man and woman. Consequently the Nightingale can not stand as the exponent of mysticism in the monastic life and that interpretation of the poem is untenable which seeks to explain the allegory in terms of a conflict between asceticism and mysticism in the monastic life.

In the Clerical Life

Mr. W. J. Courthope suggests the two parties in the debate are the strict monastic party and the more latitudinarian among the clergy.

It is plain that he [the author] was in orders, and, to judge from the two passages cited above [707-23, 847-72], which summarize the spirit of the argument on either side, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the dispute was meant to represent the opposite opinions of the strict monastic party, on the one side, and of the more latitudinarian among the secular, and even the regular, clergy, on the other.

There is even less support for this view than there is for the preceding.

The evidence for the alignment of the Owl with the monastic party has been given in the preceding portions of this chapter. According to Mr. Courthope, the ascetic ideals there noted are to be emphasized. But the focal point
for the conflict in this new sense is to be sought in lines 323-328 where the Owl claims that she sings at the proper times, implying that the Nightingale does not. Hence the latter represents the parish priests since (as the Nightingale notes in lines 729-734) they said their 'hours' in the day-time. In reality the point of the passage is that the Owl sings at the proper times, that is, her song is in praise of God, whereas her opponent sings all the night, thus cheapening her song (331, 339-40). Moreover, the Nightingale sings all night when, by her own admission, the parish priests are not singing; and she herself asserts that she only helps them (735-6). When she is attacked for pronouncing an excommunication although she is not a priest (1177 ff., a passage which Courthope mistranslates; see Atkins, op. cit., p. lvii n.) she does not take the obvious means of refutation (obvious, that is, if she is a priest) of declaring her priesthood. For these reasons, this second interpretation, which necessarily considers the Nightingale as the representative of the secular clergy, must be rejected.

Some support comes to this theory, however, from the contemporary testimony of John of Salisbury who complains of the monks' spiritual pride in these terms:

They are proud of their pale faces and sighing is with them a fine art; at any moment they are prepared to shed a flood of tears. They walk about with downcast heads and half-closed eyes. They move at a snail's pace muttering prayers the while. They cultivate a ragged and
First, however, we must note that John of Salisbury, as we learn both from the title of the chapter from which the quotation is taken and from the chapter itself, is speaking only of some monks, hypocritical ones. Hence when we find many of his complaints echoed in our poem by the Nightingale we do not at once jump to the conclusion that here is verification of the regular-secular conflict. As we have seen the Nightingale does call her adversary a creature of woe, given to weeping. Frequently, too, the Nightingale speaks of the other's filthy habits (e.g. 91 ff.). Finally, she may be said to accuse the Owl, at least by inference, of spiritual pride. Anxious because of the clever arguments of the Owl, she says that if any sin is to be imputed to her (the Nightingale) it is only a sin of the flesh which is admittedly less evil than the sin of pride (1395 ff.). But these characteristics, so easily susceptible of other interpretation, are not sufficiently strong to establish a view that has been rejected on the testimony of the poem itself.

C

In the Christian Life

In the religious interpretation of the poem, as already
noted, the Owl typifies the monk. The Nightingale is therefore a monk, a cleric, or a lay-person. The first section of this chapter has shown that she is not a monk and the second that she is not a secular priest. She may represent a cleric, one of the wandering scholars of the Goliardic type so prevalent at the time, or she may have been a lay-person. One thing is, however, obvious. Her attitude toward life is different from the Owl's; it is contrary to the ascetic ideal of the Owl, although it does not contradict the latter. It is this conflict of attitudes that Brother Leo finds in the poem:

In this clever and spirited collection of verses monk and minstrel engage in friendly though animated debate on the merits of their respective attitudes toward life. The Owl is the spokesman of the monk and upholds the worth and dignity of the ascetic standard of conduct; the nightingale symbolizes the minstrel and pleads for the recognition of beauty and of song. The birds of controversy are evenly matched, and together present an impartial statement of the theory of beauty and the theory of goodness.10

Mr. W. H. Schofield draws support for this contrast of attitudes from the poet's contemporary, Giraldus Cambrensis. The latter, in his Topography of Ireland, after contrasting the nature of hawks and falcons, moralises:

May we not compare to the first class of birds those who, indulging in sumptuous banquets, equipages, and clothing, and the various other allurements of the flesh, are so won by their charms that they study only earthly things and give themselves up to them; and as they do not soar on high to gain the prize by resolute and persevering efforts, their conversation is on earth and not
in heaven. Those, again, may be compared to the other class of birds who, rejecting altogether a delicate diet and all the other delights of the flesh, choose rather, by divine inspiration, to suffer hardships and privations. And, since all virtue soars high, struggling upwards with all their efforts, their aim and object is that recompense and reward for their labours above which the violent take by storm.  

The attitudes assumed by the Owl and the Nightingale present a similar contrast. Hence Schofield concludes:

the former opposes permanent to transient pleasures, unselfish to lustful inclination, the earnest life to one of indulgent ease, religious duty to worldly joy.  

These are the opposing characteristics that have been noted in the preceding sections of this chapter. They may be briefly recapitulated here. The Owl's concern is with the kingdom of heaven and the means by which one may attain to it (860-932). While the Nightingale prays that men may come to life eternal she endeavors to make men cheerful here below (739-42). It is of love, of the transient pleasures of this world, that she sings (1339 ff.). Works of charity occupy the Owl, particularly when the snow is on the ground and the need is greatest (523-40). But the Nightingale sings in summer and, the Owl charges, her song is all of wantonness (489-98). Finally, because she is devoted to the things that are above, the Owl's life is earnest and given to the performance of religious duties while, on the contrary, the Nightingale enjoys a life of ease, reveling in love and the pleasures of this world.
Turning again to the poem we note that the Owl is endowed with great knowledge (1189-1212) and because of it she is disturbed at the troubles of men and warns them of their danger (1217-22). Here advice is valuable as she, removed from the center of trouble, can view it more clearly (1244-6). This seems to indicate that the Owl is a monk, dwelling apart from the world of affairs. But, as has been observed in the introduction to this chapter, there is much that militates against such an identification. Everything, however, is in accord with viewing the Owl as an attitude of mind, a concern for the things that are above.

Something of this larger view of things seems to be demanded by certain prominent features of the time which appear to have their echo in the poem. The most important of these is the conflict of Church and State. Reference has been made in the previous chapter to the struggles between the Empire and the Papacy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These found their reflection in the England of the same period. After an initial impetus under Rufus (1087-1100), the conflict was revived during the reigns of Henry I, Stephen, and Henry II, and came to a climax with the death of St. Thomas of Canterbury in 1170. It was resumed in the time of John (1199-1216), thus covering the whole period mirrored in The Owl and the Nightingale.
Naturally enough the Owl with her concern for the things that belong to God might be taken to represent the Church party. The Nightingale, since her eye is more on the affairs of the world, would gravitate toward the State faction. Of course, if the Owl were a monk, the identification would be the more noticeable as the monks were not only the upholders of the rights of God and His Church but were especially close to the Pope. In general they were free from the jurisdiction of the local bishop and, as clerics, they were not liable to the civil power. Thus they were directly under the Pope and popular opinion would tend to associate them with foreign powers. Atkins finds this verified in the concluding lines of the poem though his discovery does not entail considering the Owl as a monk. It is sufficient to regard her as the exponent of the otherworldly view. Toward the end of the poem the Nightingale claims the victory and sings so loudly that the other birds come and congratulate her. The Owl asks if she has summoned her army and threatens to do likewise. But first she reminds her opponent that they had agreed to submit their discussion to Nicholas and abide by his decision. To this the Nightingale acquiesces and they fly off to Porkisham without their followers.

Mid þisse worde forþ hi ferden, al bute here & bute uerde. (1789-90)

Elsewhere (1668, 1672) the Owl refers to the army of her ad-
versary as 'uerde' and (1702) her own as 'here.' The poet (1709) uses 'here' in speaking of the forces of the Owl.

Whereupon Atkins remarks:

And this fact is not without its significance: for while the O.E. distinction between here (Danish army) and fierd (English levies) is here maintained, the side on which the poet's sympathies lay is also implied. The Owl and her forces were clearly to him the enemies of national culture. 13

Professor Atkins' conclusion, however, outruns his evidence. It may be inferred that the Owl and her forces were the enemy of the national culture; or at least that they were of foreign origin. But it is a matter of dispute whether or not the poet's sympathies lay with the national culture. Atkins assumes that the Nightingale has the victory. But throughout the poem the Owl has the better of the argument while the Nightingale merely claims the victory on a technicality. This point will recur at the conclusion of our treatment of Professor Atkins' interpretation of The Owl and the Nightingale. To that interpretation we now turn.
Footnotes to Chapter II


2. Ibid., p. 70.


7. Ibid., p. 63n.

Dunbar's *Merle and the Nightingale*, of a somewhat later date, attests the persistency of this tradition. In that poem the merle (blackbird) sings in praise of love whereas the theme of the nightingale is that 'all love is lost save upon God alone.'

And still later we find Isaac Walton lyricising:

'But the nightingale, another of my airy creatures, breathes such sweet loud music out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think miracles are not ceased. He that at midnight, when the very laborer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, 'Lord, what music hast thou provided for the saints in heaven, when thou affordest bad men such music on earth!'


In his tamen omnibus fideles inveniuntur, et reprobì, nec ob id religionis aut professionis veritas deformatur... Inde est quod facie pallorem estentant, profunda ab usu trahunt suspiria, artificiosis et obsequentibus lacrymis subito inundantur, obstipo capite,
liminibus interclusis, coma brevi, capite fere raso, 
voce demissa, labiis ab oratione mobilibus, incessu 
tranquillo, et quasi gressu quadam proportione com-
posito, pannosi, obsiti, sordes vestium, et affecta-
tam vindicant vilitatem, ut eo facilius ascendant, quo 
se studiosius videntur in locum novissimum dejecisse, 
et qui sponte sua decrescunt, crescere compellantur 
inviti.

10. Brother Leo, English Literature (Boston: Ginn and Com-

11. W.H.Schofield, English Literature from the Norman Con-

12. idem.

CHAPTER III

Religious Poetry Versus Love Poetry

Professor Atkins claims that the interpretation of *The Owl and the Nightingale* as the clash of two attitudes toward life is too general. It is not in the opposing ways the monk and minstrel view life that he would place the allegorical significance of the poem, but rather in one particular activity of the two, namely, their songs. Because this interpretation still maintains the religious-secular contrast it belongs in the preceding chapter. But because of the fullness of treatment (no one has developed his interpretation with such a wealth of detail) it deserves separate consideration.

"*The Owl and the Nightingale* is the herald of the love-theme in England."¹ This is the thesis which Professor Atkins stated in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* in 1907 and developed in his edition of the poem fifteen years later. Two German scholars², Brandl and Gadow, anticipated this interpretation; Harvey³ and Professor Osgood⁴ are among the recent writers who have accepted it. Professor Atkins' own exposition is summarized in the following pages. It is to be noted, however, that all the evidence summarized in this chapter is Professor Atkins'; with some of that evidence, in particular that alleged from his-
tory, the present writer is not always in agreement.

According to Professor Atkins, in order to view his interpretation in the proper light, it is first necessary to envisage the age in which the poem was written. The intellectual atmosphere of the twelfth century; he explains, was mainly cleric. For a century before and after the power of the Pope was at its height; and in the universities theology was the main study and dominated all learning. In England the influence of the Church is visible in the strong personalities of Lanfranc and Anselm and Thomas à Becket, the spirit of devotion is illustrated by the religious revival under Henry I and the coming of the friars a little later. Throughout Europe, he continues, a groping for political freedom marked the renascence of this century, nations breaking away from the Empire and citizens securing recognition of their rights. An intellectual counterpart of this revolt brought forth the secular litterateurs and laic architects of France. In England it manifested itself in a tendency to reject religious themes and to revert to what was elemental (sic) in man. The Poema Morale and the Ormulum are characteristic of the religious poetry against which the new spirit strove. Fancy, in the shape of legend, was the substitution proposed; in this vein the Arthurian romance, as the Brut of Layamon, won the hearts of many. The passion of love was the other theme challenging
the traditional religious inspiration.

This spirit of revolt was further reinforced by the general assertion of another side of elemental man, viz.: that connected with the passion of love. France, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, had been swept by a wave of popular love-poetry which brought in its wake the music of the troubadours. Germany, in the twelfth century, produced the minnesingers. The contemporary poets of Italy were also love-poets, and, at a slightly later date, Portugal, too, possessed many of the kind. This general inspiration, originating in France, and passing over the frontiers on the lips of the troubadours..., was destined to touch English soil soon after 1200. Though it failed for some time to secularize English poetry, it imparted a note of passion to much of the religious work; and, further, in The Owl and the Nightingale religious traditions were boldly confronted with the new-born ideas, and the case for love was established beyond all dispute.6

Therefore, according to Atkins, The Owl and the Nightingale is not just a general conflict between religious traditions and new-born ideas; it is "the challenging of religious poetry of the old tradition by the secular love poetry of the new."7

Under Henry II (1154-89), he continues, England and France were to all intents and purposes one. Representatives from all nations were at his court and his envoys encircled the globe. Scholars and troubadours thronged the English court. The love-poetry of these troubadours fostered a new devotion to women and established the doctrine of courtly love. This ideal of love animated the Provencal lyrics and was the theme of the great achievement of the twelfth century, the romances. Benoit de Sainte-More and
Chretien de Troyes told the immortal loves of Cressida, Guinevere, and Iseult. From the East came the tales of the love of Floris and Blaunchflur, of Aucassin and Nicolette. These stories were refashioned according to the contemporary ideals and their right to pre-eminence in the poetry of the time recognized.

In The Owl and the Nightingale, whose ultimate intention, according to Professor Atkins, "seems to have been to suggest to English readers a new type of poetry," the religious didactic poetry characteristic of the Middle Ages and the new poetry with its love-motif which originated in the century 1150-1250 were brought face to face.

If, however, we have nothing in England to correspond to the Minnesingers of Germany or the Troubadours of Italy and Spain, there is at least The Owl and the Nightingale to show that the new movement in France did not pass altogether unnoticed, and that England too played a part in the new European concert.

... And although its utterance may be but an echo from abroad, it is yet the English voice in that widespread chorus which anticipated the coming of Dante and of Petrarch, and of all who were to find their inspiration in the theme of love.

Allegory, continues Atkins, came naturally to twelfth century minds. The Owl and the Nightingale is an allegory with birds as actors; thus the poet gave human interest to an abstract question. For the setting of his allegory he took a simple story: the two birds meet at night-fall in their natural haunts, quarrel over the respective merits of
their songs until one claims the victory, whereupon they both fly off. It is a delightful fable -- "all the while he has been telling an interesting story, a story which, like *Gulliver's Travels*, can be read for itself"\(^{10}\) -- and a suitable fable too:

> with a meaning plain to all: for who could fail to see in the quarrel about the bird-songs a discussion relating to the songs of men? \(^{11}\)

It is an allegory plain, (so Mr. Atkins says), to the simplest of souls. To a mind well versed in the contemporary fable it is obvious; to one without such knowledge the poem presents ample evidence: the antithesis is established in the beginning and developed by claims and counter-claims, charges and counter-charges. The interpretation intended by the poet is neither too far-fetched nor too obvious, "though at the same time sufficiently veiled to give the reader the delight of discovery."\(^{12}\) It is this balance between story and figurative sense which indicates the artistry of the poem. The story does not obscure the allegory, nor is the allegory allowed to stifle the story. Rather, running throughout the story, the allegory brings it into intimate connection with life.

That the dispute is primarily concerned with the singing of the two birds is shown in the choice of the birds themselves, the explicit statement of the poet, and the ar-
guments of the plaintiff and the defendant. Hence the key to the allegory, says Mr. Atkins, is to be found in the contrast of the two songs. A hint as to the nature of the contrast is given in the birds chosen; the owl with her fabled wisdom and the nightingale who from ancient times was associated with the passion of love. Moreover Mr. Hinckley has pointed out that the antithesis between the owl and the nightingale was apparently proverbial. He quotes the Low German proverb, *Wat dem eenen sin Uhl is dem andern sin Nachtigall* and cites from Walter Map's *Epistle of Valerius* to Rufinus:

Loqui prohibeo et tacere non possum. Grues odi et vocem ulule, bubonem et aves ceteras que lutose hiemis gravitatem luctuose preululant: et tu subsannas venturi vaticinia dispendii, vera, si perseveras. Ideo loqui prohibeo, veritatis augur, non voluntatis. Lusciniam amo et merulam que leticiam aure lenis concentu placido preloquuntur, et potissimum philomenam, que optate tempus jocunditatis tota deliciarum plenitudine annulat, nec fallor.

The Owl explicitly claims wisdom and foreknowledge for herself (1189 ff.); the Nightingale in the very next speech asserts that she is the minstrel of love (1339 ff.).

Each bird, says the poet at the outset, assailed the other's character but especially ('& hure & hure') the other's song:

& eiper seide of operes custe
pat alre-worste pat hi wuste:
& hure & hure of operes sone
hi holde plaiding supe stronge. (9-12)
And in her opening words where, according to legal custom, the case was usually stated in the plainest terms, the plaintiff (Nightingale) exclaims against her opponent's song (35-40). Again, when she begins her formal plea it is with an indictment of the Owl's singing (217 ff., 411 ff.). The defendant, on the other hand, makes an arraignment of the Nightingale's song the main line of her defence. Then, too, it is significant, declares Mr. Atkins, that the Nightingale is the plaintiff:

she is out to remedy an abuse, to right a wrong, and to claim for love-poetry its release from the heavy hand of tradition.14

The progress of the debate, he continues, also reveals the nature of the allegory. Through her songs the Owl urges men to repent and find pardon for their sins, she inspires good men with longing for the kingdom of heaven and fills the wicked with terror at the evils to come (869-92). The Nightingale gladly confesses that her songs bring delight ('skentinge', 986),

& so up hit is of luue ich singe. (1339)

Therefore Professor Atkins concludes that the contrast is between two types of poets and poetry. The Owl is the religious poet and her song religious poetry.

As for her views on life, they are of the narrow ascetic kind: life to her is at best a bad business, and he lives best who sheds most tears. Hence her pride in the dismal nature of her songs, which are a perpetual remin-
der of the terrors to come, and aim at inducing men to leave their evil ways.15

The Nightingale's accusations, that the Owl only terrorizes and depresses by her lugubrious singing (220 ff.) and chants ever in times of woe (412 ff.), refer, says Atkins, to the medieval religious poetry which, based on the patristic tradition, sought by thunderings and threats to bring men to God. The Owl admits the religious character of her song when she speaks of its didactic purpose (535 ff.) and her knowledge of symbolic meanings (1213-4). She reveals her medieval ascetic temper in the charge she brings against the Nightingale for her use of wanton themes (899), protesting

Ich wisse men mid mine songe, pat hi ne sunegi nowiht longe. (927-8)

Atkins also finds references in the poem to the clerical condition of the prototype of the Owl. The passages (e.g. 61 ff., 91 ff.) which describe the tyrannical behavior of the Owl and her uncleanly ways are (to him) obvious allusions to clerical abuses of the time. Her preference for a life of retirement (227 ff.), her well-ordered singing at the regular hours (323 ff.), her special chants at Christmas (481-4), and her care for the fabric of the Church (609 ff.) indicate a member of the regular clergy.

The Nightingale, on the contrary, is the secular love-poet.
The cause she pleads is that of sweetness and light; the songs she sings are of love and the joy of life. Her mission is simply to spread happiness around.16

Her songs are reserved for cultured circles (1031 ff.). The claim she makes to the possession of a finer technique (759 ff.) is admitted by the Owl (48) and her defence of love (1378 ff.) finds a parallel in contemporary love-poets. Finally, she sets herself apart from the clergy when she does not contradict the Owl's charge that she is 'al unhoded' (1178), that not being ordained she has not the priestly prerogative of excommunication. (See note on p.56)

Having compared his interpretation with the material of the poem, Atkins passes to the consideration of some possible objections. One such objection lurks in the Nightingale's assertion,

\[ \text{vor ich of chirche-songe singe.} \] \hspace{1cm} (1036)

Is she as didactic as the Owl? But the difficulty vanishes, he says, when the boast is seen in its context. In the lines which precede (716 ff.) the contention is made that since all earthly songs are a preparation for heavenly harmonies her singing is not without its religious value. Another seemingly didactic passage (1347-1450), in the first line of which she teaches the virtue of fidelity and in the last the transitoriness of earthly passion, has, according to Mr. Atkins, a merely tactical purpose, "a passado in a bout of dialectics." To meet her opponent more success-
fully she uses an argument drawn from the teaching of Latin Christianity which praised the Nightingale as the songstress of the glories of the Creator.

The Nightingale has her own reply to some of the charges levelled against her. Besides meeting the charge of inducing wantonness by her music with the explanation that as everything may be turned to evil uses, so may her song, though it be chaste, be abused and connected by others with evil things (1373-4), she ventures a criticism of the contemporary love themes. According to the artificial convention of the mal mariée (1077-82, 1523 ff.) marriage was a hateful form of slavery and the husband an odious tyrant, ill-treating his wife, clothing her badly, and often beating and imprisoning her. Love was seldom celebrated except in opposition to marriage; the love which preceded or accompanied marriage was generally excluded. The courtly lyrics idealized married women alone, singing of their exploits with lovers while songs in honor of young unmarried girls were comparatively rare. For in the Courts of Love it was decreed that a man could love only a married lady and that love in marriage was impossible. Against themes such as these the Nightingale inveighed. She pleaded for poetry more in keeping with morality. Her sympathy lay with the loves of young maids (1419) while she had only condemnation for the sins of wives (1468). Even if her marriage was un-
happy the wife should ignore the allurement of fools (1471). Setting herself against the doctrine of the Courts of Love, the Nightingale argued that a virtuous wife might taste of love and yet be faithful to her marriage vows, loving her own husband more than any philanderer (1340-1). She offers these criticisms as a defence of her love songs, as an answer to the main contention of the Owl (a contention emphasized by the nightingale episode, 1049-1104) that the love songs of her antagonist often led to grave abuse and disaster.

To which side of the conflict between the traditional religious poetry and the new love-poetry does the poet lean? Reading between the lines Professor Atkins hazards the statement:

although the balance is fairly held between the two disputants it is the nightingale who in the end seems to get the better of the argument.17

As we have seen, he finds it significant that the nightingale was chosen as the plaintiff. Equally significant, he believes, is the representation on the whole of the nightingale as the better tempered of the combatants, having the more attractive personality, showing more restraint and indulging to a lesser extent in vile personalities and abuse. Finally, the Nightingale is made to triumph in the end. Indirectly, therefore, the poet has given his verdict:
he has declared against the monopoly of religious themes in literature, and has called attention to the claims of the new love-poetry for recognition.\textsuperscript{19}

On the basis of the distinction between here (Danish army and the army of the Owl) and uerde (fierd, the English levies and the supporters of the Nightingale) Atkins ventures further, concluding to the side on which the poet's sympathies lay:

The Owl and her forces were clearly to him the enemies of national culture.\textsuperscript{20}

As noted at the end of the preceding chapter this does not prove where the sympathies of the poet were at all. Either Atkins argues: the Owl has lost the debate; but the Owl is the enemy of the national culture (as witness the foreign support on her side); therefore, the poet's sympathies lie with the national culture. Or: the Owl is the enemy of national culture; but the poet is in favor of national culture; therefore the Owl has lost the debate. In the first case, it can be stated that it is not proven that the Owl lost the debate. For the decision rests with Nicholas of Guildford; the Nightingale's claim of victory on a technicality is merely a way of ending the debate. Nicholas, as a just judge, will, we are sure, declare that one victor who has the weightier arguments. The arguments of the poem all end in the Owl's favor as the Nightingale's procedure and the poet's comments (e.g., 391-410) indicate.
If anything is evident in the poem it is the balance and reasonableness of the poet. Consequently, his sympathies would lay with the side having the weightier arguments, demonstrably the Owl's. For this reason all the authors, other than Atkins, who write of this matter agree that if anyone has the better of the debate it is the Owl. 21

In the other case it is gratuitously assumed that the poet favors national culture. If by national culture is meant the Nightingale as love-poet, then the poet's sympathies would be on the side of the Owl. For though the love-poet might answer to the description of culture, she certainly cannot be called national by an Englishman as she was purely continental. It is the Owl -- the traditional religious poetry -- that is national. Hence the argument of Professor Atkins proves nothing. This conclusion, however, applies strictly to the question of the attitude of the poet, although it does seem that Atkins' interpretation of the poem demands that the Nightingale be victorious. Moreover, he is in error in his assertion that the ultimate purpose of the poem is to introduce a new type of poetry. Besides the fact that love-poetry was already in England (since the advent of Henry II, at least), though perhaps not in English, the obvious ultimate purpose of the poet was the winning of recognition and preferment for Nicholas. And, as we shall see in the next two chapters, Atkins neglects
many things in the poem in order to place the contrast of the birds' songs in greater relief. But a more proper evaluation of this interpretation, which sees in the poem "the challenging of the religious poetry of the old tradition by the secular love-poetry of the new,"22 will be attempted in the concluding chapter.
Footnotes to Chapter III


2. On Brandl, see W. Horn's review of Atkins' edition of the poem in the Anglia Beiblatt, XXXVI (1925), p. 164: "Diese Auffassung beruht sich nahe mit der, die Brandl, Pauls Grundr. II (1893), 622 so ausgesprochen hat: ,Die Eule vertritt die alte heimische Sangwise ... Die Nachtigall dagegen ist ein leichter Wandervogel mit frohem, zierlichem Gesang, ein Troubadour.'" On Gadow, see Brier's review of his dissertation in Englische Studien, XLII (1910), pp. 408-421, especially p. 410, the pertinent paragraph of which is quoted in our last chapter.


5. Professor Atkins' exposition of his theory is to be found in the C.H.E.L., pp. 246-8, 266 and in his edition of the poem, pp. xviii, lv-lxi (in particular), lxxvii-lxxi, lxxviii-lxxvii, lxxxii, lxxxi.


10. ibid., p. lxxxi.

11. ibid., p. lxxvii.

12. idem.


15. ibid., p. lxxix.
16. idem.

17. ibid., p. lviii. Cf. also the C.H.E.L., p. 266.

18. ibid., p. lxx.

19. ibid., p. 151n.

20. idem.


J.E. Wells, The Owl and the Nightingale, p. xliv.

H.B. Hinckley, op. cit., p. 73.


Note to page 49:
A simple priest never had the power of excommunication such as it exists in the Church today. For certain offenses he could exclude the offender from the sacraments (the so-called minor excommunication). In more serious cases he could declare the offender liable to the excommunication (greater) which would actually be pronounced by the bishop.
Thus far the interpretations under consideration have understood the conflict in The Owl and the Nightingale as basically religious. According to the commentators whose views have been set forth, it is either a dispute within the monastic life between two ways of attaining heaven, or in the clerical life between two ways of serving God, or in the Christian or every-day life between two attitudes, one seeking the things that are above, the other those which are of the earth. This last has been particularized by Atkins as a debate between the traditional religious poetry and the contemporaneous love-poetry.

There is another class of interpreters who would consider the conflict as 'secular.' Though the poem is didactic, "it is not ecclesiastical, or merely religious." These commentators view the poem as popular rather than religious and, as such, their interpretation differs from that treated above. There is, however, much in common between the two views since they both interpret the dispute rather abstractly and especially since they are concerned with a Christian society in which the 'popular' frame of mind was, fundamentally, religious. There was an at least implicit recognition of the great fact that this life did not embrace
the whole of reality, that its pleasures and pains were or-
dered to a fuller life hereafter.

According to the 'secular' interpretation the subject of The Owl and the Nightingale is

the old problem that arises in life from the apparently irreconcilable elements duty and pleasure, seriousness and joyousness.2

The poet made the old problem live because he let it grow out of himself and because he was in touch with the England of the day. Although the various writers express themselves somewhat differently, the interpretation is fundamentally one and the same. It is a conflict between youth and age and the various qualities and attitudes of mind usually associated with each. "The Nightingale, with his voice 'of harpe and pipe,' stands for careless youth, the Owl, with his mournful cry, for the wisdom of old age;"3 "one represents the gay side of life, the other the sterner side of law and morals;"4 pleasure versus sobriety;5 gravity and gaiety, crabbed age and youth;6 Philosophy versus Art or the strong though not silent Thinker as against the Poet;7 or, again, tradition and the contemporary mind.8 But the contrast is not absolute. The Owl would be thought musical and the Nightingale is anxious not to be taken for a mere worldling. To Ten Brink

It is the old conflict between beauty, brilliancy, youth,
cheerfulness, and a serious, gloomy, sullen old age, between pleasure and asceticism... It embraces life and nature, with warm and liberal sympathy. The aesthetic side of his view is represented by the nightingale, the moral by the owl; yet the nightingale, too, would promote ethical or religious aims and within this very field does her view of life serve to supplement and correct the reverse phase.  

This is also the opinion of Professor Wells. To him the poem is more than a conflict between the serious and the gay view of life. Although the poet leans toward the side of the Owl, he realizes the need of complementing the serious attitude toward life with the qualities of the Nightingale.

The whole poem is for the sake of man and sane living.  

It is this view, explained in the introduction to his edition of The Owl and the Nightingale (1907) and reiterated in his opus magnum, A Manual of the Writings in Middle English (1926), which is summarized here.

The Owl and the Nightingale is in the Southern dialect. The South of England was the one section that was neither conquered nor settled by the invaders from the countries to the north during the early centuries of the Christian era. Consequently it proved a stronghold of the English life, language, and character. On the other hand, it was the first to receive the faith at the hands of the missionaries from Rome, a faith which it preserved, and which in turn molded the life and thought of its possessors. At the same
time, because of its proximity to France, southern England was most strongly influenced by the Norman Conquest. It is not surprising, therefore, that under the stimulus of this new influence a large body of prose and verse should appear in the south much before the north had a like offering. Nor is it surprising that this literature should be religious in character and English in language. In the twelfth century, for example, it could boast of the Poema Morale and the Pater Noster, and in the next few years the Ancren Riwle, numerous lives and lyrics, and the Brut of Layamon.

With the exception of this last, two themes, explains Mr. Wells, formed the subject-matter of these compositions. The first theme extolled virginity and consecration to God and gave a realistic portrayal to Death and Hell. The second presented the lessons learned from human experience which would be helpful in the every-day life of others. These lessons often assumed the form of popular proverbs; or again they were expressions of regret at men's failure to observe the principles of right living or were statements of the sins found amongst men together with the penalty to be exacted for them. A desire to help men live to their best advantage here and hereafter animated all this work. The means for the proper conduct of life were those proposed by the Church: and among these the most prominent were:
virginity*, the denial both of the desires of the flesh and the lure of material possessions.

Asceticism, in short, is the general method at the base of the efforts of practically all the writers toward a solution of the task of right living.13

In the Proverbs of Alfred and The Owl and the Nightingale this world and the life of man in it received wider recognition. Their worth was urged not only for their ultimate end but for their own sakes.

Based as it is on practical experience and common-sense, The Owl and the Nightingale is 'popular' rather than religious. Life is precious for its own sake; this is the teaching of the poem. And the teaching of the poem is its interpretation.

The debate arises from personalities: There is no proposing of a debatable question. The nightingale opens the contest by abusing the owl. At dusk the owl replies, and the debate follows.14

The contestants are so real that "to us the debate is because the birds are what they are."15

The nightingale stood to him, as to his contemporaries, for the melody, the sweetness, the grace, the beautiful in life -- for the aesthetic, that which ministered to, and existed for, pleasure and joy. Her use was in this,

* The Church, while extolling virginity, has always recognized the sacredness of marriage. Matrimony, it should always be remembered, was, and is, one of the seven sacraments.
to attract to the delight of living for its own sake, to the utilization of all the gifts for enjoyment and for the expression of joy, that creatures were endowed with. 16

But there was always the danger that she would attract to a life of pleasure alone wherein the stern realities of life would be ignored.

It was in the owl that the poet found embodied the serious view of life. 17

She was abused because she was different. Man (1111, 1165, 1315, 1607) and bird (275 ff., etc.) beset her path and beat her to death. They called her foul (32, 85, 625) and blind (239, 363), charges prompted by malice and envy, not truth. Thus they ignored her true value. Her days and nights were spent in meditation, meditation productive of much good, for others as well as for herself. Her apparent withdrawal enabled her to see into the principles of things (1187 ff.); there she learned how to advise others for their own good (887, 1219 ff.); there she saw where comfort and consolation were needed. Her charity was great (535-40); she was no respecter of persons (905-30). Above all, she called men's attention to the important things (860 ff.). In short, her usefulness was unlimited; even in death she protected the fields of her murderers (1121, 1615 ff.). In her eyes the Nightingale was a chatterbox of no practical use to the world (322, 559-60, 655). "It
was to the Owl that the poet leaned mainly; but not without realizing her deficiencies. A life of usefulness was not enough. She needed some of the qualities of the Nightingale, especially her joy in living for its own sake.

Wostu to wan man was ibore?
To pare blisse of houene-riche,
Par euer is song & mur3pe iliche. (716-8)

This is the teaching of the poem and its interpretation. "The whole poem is for the sake of man and sane living."19

The poet's treatment of the clergy and the laity bears out this idea. Although the poet looks upon the monks and canons and parish-priests as from without (cf. 729 ff.), he speaks of them with respect. His ideal of the priest is high but he does not hesitate to criticize. There is a hint (1179) that ecclesiastics are sometimes too ready with their curses. And in view of his calling attention to the rude state of the people of Ireland, etc. (907 ff.) who would not listen to the mission sent from Rome (1016), his allusion to the idle chattering of the Irish priests indicates perhaps that he attributes the degradation of the people to some extent to the poor condition of their clergy. He explicitly decries such abuses as the bestowal of benefices on children and the incompetent merely because of influence while there are suitable persons at hand (1761-78). His criticisms are plain statements of fact; there are no sneers or curses in his charges.
The poet's sympathetic view of human life is evident in all the details of his work, whether it be the joy of the hearth (475 ff.), the thrill that comes with success in sports (795), or pity for the victim of gambling. A feeling of commiseration for those in distress betrays the sympathetic man. There is the blind man who, feeling his way along the path, plunges into the ditch before the poet can warn him (1237-40). And when the snow is on the ground the poet's heart goes out to all the poor as they huddle together in search of warmth (523 ff.). But he knows the meaning of suffering (884-6, 927-32) and is not cast down by it.

In spite of all, men are happy, and life is a blessing; that is the atmosphere of the poem.20

Noteworthy, too, is the poet's attitude toward the love of man and woman:

Bo wuch ho bo, vich luue is fele bitweone wepmon & wimmane. (1378-9)

It is a gift of God, useful to mankind, and productive of happiness in the individual. Accepting life as it is man can find happiness in love. But this is true only of lawful love; those who abuse it are accursed (1380-86). Yet he would remind those who are ever eager to upbraid the victim of the desires of the flesh that pride is a greater sin (1413-6). The adulterer is a fool who does not realize the folly, even from a natural viewpoint, of his act (1473-
1510). Then, too, there is the errant husband and the jealous husband. The one bestows his love on another and has only abuse for his wife. She attempts to placate him but is unsuccessful and finally has her revenge (1523-50). The other, led by his jealousy, so restrains his wife that he drives her to that which he would prevent (1551-62, 1049-54, 1075-90). Such untoward happenings do not turn the poet against love;

For nis a-worlde þing so god, 
bat ne mai do sum ungod, 
þif me hit wule turne amis. (1363-5)

Many a knight and merchant, he says (1575-1602), and many a husbandman too, loves and cherishes his wife. Then the wife responds in kind and when her husband is away in the interests of them both she longs for him and anxiously await his return. The Owl vainly tries to comfort her during these wakeful nights. Only when her loved one is once again in her arms is her heart at rest.

Live, the poet teaches. Live, and enjoy all that God has given. Be moderate. Love God.21

Such, concludes Mr. Wells, is the answer of the poet to the old problem that arises in life from the conflicting elements of duty and pleasure, seriousness and joyousness. In his presentation of the problem the poet has given the solution in as far as it could be given --

there is good in all that is used rightly.22
Footnotes to Chapter IV


2. ibid., p. xlix.


11. ibid., pp. xli-xlvii in particular.


14. ibid., p. liv.

15. ibid., xl.

16. ibid., p. xli.

17. idem.

18. ibid., p. xlii.

19. ibid., p. xliv.

20. ibid., p. xlv.

21. ibid., p. xlvi.

CHAPTER V

The Personal Interpretation

Up to this point the two birds in *The Owl and the Nightingale* have been considered as the antagonists of either a religious or a secular conflict. Another theory has been advanced which emphasizes the personal characteristics of the poem. This view does not cancel out the interpretations already set forth but rather completes and reconciles them. The commentators who hold these interpretations do not deny the personal element in the poem; but they do not discuss it as sufficiently as it seems to deserve. Hence the difference between the interpretation to be considered in this chapter and those previously noted is mainly a matter of emphasis. Because the personal element has been neglected, it is here treated at greater length than the conflict itself; moreover, the nature of the conflict has been developed already, especially in the sections devoted to a contrast of attitudes either in the Christian life or in the secular life.

For want of a better phrase, the theory now under consideration may be called the 'personal interpretation,' not because it essentially differs from preceding interpretations but because, unlike them, it emphasizes the elements of the poem personal to the author. The struggle of the conflicting attitudes takes place within his own breast. Mr. Scho-
field, the sole proposer of this interpretation, thus ex-
presses himself:

It seems to contain a modern, personal note, revealing an inner struggle of the author with his conflicting tendencies, aesthetic and moral, which has ended in a just appreciation of each, a compromise without prejudice, yielding a character puritan in essence but humanized by cultivation. There were no doubt many other young Englishmen in the early thirteenth century to whom the brilliancy of the French-mannered court appealed strongly, but who were brought to recognize that the sturdiness of their English nature was the soundest basis of personal and patriotic development; many who took sides with the national Parliament against the cosmopolitan Church; who felt it wise to promote the native to the neglect of the foreign speech.

What is it that leads us to suspect that the struggle heretofore considered as outside the poet occurred in his own life? The first clue is found in the purpose of the poem and especially in the means by which he achieved that purpose. That is, the poet took an old story with its traditional contrast of two views of life and in retelling it unconsciously revealed himself. This, then, is the procedure to be followed in the present chapter: the purpose of the poem, the means by which that end was achieved, and the revelation of the poet's character.

The poem was written to bring Master Nicholas to the attention of those who could secure his preferment. His qualities for such preferment are clearly stated. He is a wise and prudent judge, a firm opponent of vice of every kind, and, although in his youth he was somewhat given to
frivolous pursuits, he is now a sober and reliable man (192-214). His writings evidence his wisdom; his judgements attest the same (1755-8). Livings have been bestowed indiscriminately, even to little children, but he still suffers neglect;

Pat is bischopen muchel schame,
an alle þan þat of his nome
habbeþ ihert, & of his deede.
Hwi nullþ hi nimen heom to rede,
þat he were mid heom ilome
for teche heom of his wisdome,
an þive him rente auale stude,
þat he miȝte heom ilome be mide? (1761-8)

To bring his (or his friend's) claim before the proper authorities the poet chose to submit a literary work;

This might be one formally dedicated by permission, or directly addressed in the hope of aid to the desired patron, or one addressing a desired patron by incidental laudatory reference. It is characteristic especially of the latter, that the plea for aid is based upon representations of poverty or neglect quite undeserved in the light of the writer's more or less unabashed recital of his aspirations, merits, or achievements.2

As this was a practice long in use the examples are numerous, especially of those works formally dedicated. It is hard to come upon works addressed to a patron by means of laudatory references in vernacular literature but they are plentiful in Latin clerical verse.3 The learned author of The Owl and the Nightingale would no doubt know many such examples.

We do not know to whom the author addressed his plea. Perhaps there was a formal dedication to one person who was in a position to help him; we have not the original copy and so
can never know. If it were written before 1189, it was very likely addressed to Henry II. There is much in the poem itself to suggest such an hypothesis. One thing, however, is certain: his own name and address is safely secured within the poem and whoever could might help him.

When the poet decided to submit a literary work as a plea for preferment, he first cast about him for a subject. He found his material in an old fable. That is why the debate form, although the element in the poem most frequently considered, is nevertheless not the most important feature. The Owl and the Nightingale is a fable cast in the form of a debate. It is from the fable that the birds have been taken and most of the matter as well. And it is because of the fable that the poem can be read for itself, independently of the allegory. Moreover, as we have seen, England was the home of the medieval fable. Hence it would appear that the fable came to the author before the debate form.

No source in the debate literature of the medieval centuries has been found for the poem we are considering. In no debate, Latin or vernacular, before the middle of the thirteenth century, is more than one of the contestants bird or beast. Therefore,

it seems safe to assume that the fable was directly responsible for the poet's clever idea, in conjunction with their traditional use as emblems in rhetorical and poetical similitudes.
Among others, Professor Atkins has indicated the tradition responsible for the poet's conception of the Owl as the bird of filthy habits, who avoided light, and was a prophet of evil; and of the Nightingale as the herald of spring, the minstrel of love, and the songstress of the divine praises. This last characteristic was discussed in the first section of Chapter II; in the introduction to the same chapter the identification of the Owl with the monk was considered. But our concern now is not so much with the tradition of the birds viewed separately as with the tradition which places them in opposition.

In a previous chapter (III) we noted the evidence adduced by Mr. Hinckley to show that the antithesis of the two birds was proverbial. Miss Huganir quotes a more significant passage from a standard work of the Middle Ages, the *Originum seu Etymologiarum Libri XX* of Isidore of Seville:

Luscinia avis inde nomen sumpsit, quia cantu suo significare solet diei surgentis exortum, quasi lucinia. Eadem et acredula, de qua Cicero in Prognothicis (frag. 6)

Et matutinos exercet acredula cantus.
Ulula avis Λυκό τοῦ δίολυκείν id est a planctu et luctu, nominata; cum enim clamat aut fletum imitatur aut gemitum. Unde et apud augures si lamentetur tristiam, tacens ostendere fertur prosperitatem. Bubo a sono vocis compositum nomen habet, avis feralis, onusta quidem plumis, sed gravi semper detenta pigritia; in sepulchris die noctuque versatur, et semper commorans in cavernis. De qua Ovidius (Met. 5.549)

Foedaque fit volucris venturi nuntia luctus,
ignavus bubo dirum mortalibus omen.

Denique apud augures laum portendere fertur: nam cum in urbe visa fuerit solitudinem significare dicunt. Noctua dicitur pro eo quod nocte .circumvolat et per diem non
possit videre; nam exorto splendore solis, visus illius hebetatur. Hanc autem insula Cretensis non habet; et si veniat aliunde statim moritur. Noctua autem non est bubo; nam bubo maior est. Nycticorax ipsa est noctua, quia noctem amat. Est enim avis lucifuga, et solem videre non patitur. Strix nocturna avis, habens nomen de sono vocis; quando enim clamat stridet. De qua Lucanus (6.689):

Quod trepidus bubo, quod strix nocturna queruntur. Hae aves vulgo anima dicitur, ab amano parvulos; unde et lac praebere fertur nascentibus.8

In the Elegia de Philomela, ascribed to Albus Ovidius Juventinus, after some praise of the nightingale, the voice of the owl is taken up in comparison:

Bubulat horrendum ferali carmine bubo
Humano generi tristia fata ferens.
Strix nocturna sonans, et vespertilio stridunt
Noctua lucifuga cucubat in tenebris.9

In two collections of fables dating from the thirteenth century and pointing, as all fable literature does, to an earlier tradition, vivid contrasts of the singing of the crow and the nightingale are found. In Cyril's De corvo et philomela the crow assails the nightingale for the vanity of her song, while in Nicholas' De philomela et corvo inter ceteras aves the crow comes upon the nightingale when the latter is singing "et incoepit turpiter crocitare, philomela autem obmutit non valens tam turpiter audire cantare eum." This parallels the Nightingale's opening charge:

Me luste bet speten pane singe
of pine fule ȝ03elinge. (39-40)

Such a contrast in the matter of song shows too that it is merely natural to set the nightingale over against the owl
on that basis and that an interpretation which, like Atkins', is founded entirely on this contrast is tenuous indeed. Other fables in these two collections are concerned with the owl and contain characteristics we find in *The Owl and the Nightingale*.10

From these medieval citations ranging from Isidore of Seville in the seventh century to the fables of Cyril and Nicholas in the thirteenth and merely indicative of much more evidence along the same line, two facts emerge: that there was a persistent tradition attributing certain characteristics to the owl and to the nightingale and that these two birds were contrasted on the basis of their song sometimes with other birds but more often with each other. This two-fold tradition the poet found ready at hand when he began to compose the work which should secure recognition either for himself or for his friend. This he took for his material.

Although he borrowed extensively from books or from a literary tradition, the poet made his borrowings his own, thereby giving an intimate revelation of himself. For, as Wells notes,

The marked personal element at these places, the vividness, the aptness, the appropriateness, and the caring, in these passages, indicate that the poet saw and felt first, and then merely perhaps utilized a 'popular' figure for helping expression.11
His attitude toward life, his personal viewpoint, animates the general structure which he received from others and his own experience fills in the details. Consequently, whatever the poem contains reveals the poet. This explains how, amidst such varied materials, we constantly encounter a shrewd and humorous personality. There can be no mistaking that

from first to last this personality dominates the work, making it the expression of an individual soul, with its own peculiar utterance and its own outlook upon life... Rich in fancy, in humanity, and in the wisdom drawn from life, the poem is, in short, an intimate revelation of the poet himself.12

This revelation of the poet's self is evident in the form and in the content of the poem. He chose to cast his material in the form of a debate either because such was the natural bent of his mind or to give evidence of his own talents or those of his friend. Though both come to much the same thing, it is perhaps the latter and conscious reason which directed the choice of the form. For the careful progress of the debate, as noted in the introductory chapter, indicates the skill of the author and constitutes an effective plea, in the way of a qualification, for the desired preferment.

But it is in the content, in the meaning of the poem, that the author most reveals himself. The Nightingale's claim to a victory at the end gives no clue as to whom the
judgement is to go. It is only a way of ending the debate. The decision is up to the judge. The antagonists' arguments, not merely the final technicality, are to be presented to him and he is to judge of them. Since these arguments do not tend to establish the supremacy of either the Owl or the Nightingale but rather reveal an attitude toward life which includes the best each bird has to offer, it is the teaching of the poem, its lesson, that is important. Wells, in his interpretation, has stated the nature of that teaching, of that attitude toward life. Briefly,

The whole poem is for the sake of man and sane living. This is the poet's conclusion. Taking his material from the fable he set it forth in the form of a debate, as his habits of mind or his purpose or both, dictated. For, as Wells rightly notes (and it will be well to quote his remarks again),

As we read, we have no thought that the birds are speaking for the sake of the debate; to us the debate is because the birds are what they are.... we almost feel that he began to write because of the birds and not because of an ulterior purpose.

That is why the poem appeals irrespective of its allegorical associations. The criticism each bird has to offer in regard to the other's habits and song, especially in so far as these are related to men, and the replies these criticisms evoke give us the poet's attitude toward life. It is
the criticism of life such as is found in every creative work, regardless of its purpose or form. "As hunters find their game by the trace, so is a man's genius descried by his works," so Burton expresses it.

As Atkins frankly admits,

when placed in its true perspective, [the poem] presents new lights and shades, countless overtones and undertones, that could have existed for neither the poet nor his original readers.15

One note or other -- either the plea for the new love-poetry or the criticism of monastic life, for example -- might have struck contemporaries of the poet as a reflection of their life but not the note, that is, the one point in particular which different commentators think the author wished to allegorize. Various conjectures proposed by them have been considered above. But the fable is not restricted to any one of these interpretations. It is too highly developed for that. To present an allegory such as these commentators wish more precision in the placing of the conflict is necessary. For example, if the point in question is poetry, not song and character but song alone should be emphasized. Each side would then have only one dominant trait with one of the contestants upholding the better side in various aspects of that trait and not sharing its advantage with the other. For each to share in the good of the other is to arrive at a conclusion for which neither contestant stands but, as is
the case here, belongs rather to the considered philosophy of the author. Atkins tries to establish such an absolute antithesis when he claims that "for the frailties of others she (the Owl) has no sympathy." But the poem refutes him. To cite only one instance -- an essential one since in it the Owl is on the side of Love -- the Owl's sympathies are with married women who are often driven by the inhuman treatment of their husbands to do that which they would not (1519 ff., 1561 ff.). Moreover, the well-developed theme of love found in the poem which is adduced by Atkins as proof that the conflict is one between the old religious poetry and the new love poetry is thought by Miss Huganir (and with some reason) to be the result of the work of Gilbert of Sempringham and of conventual scandals which led to a discussion of woman in general in relation to love and marriage.

The issue it would seem is a broader one. Therefore Mr. Wells again aptly remarks:

As is true of all that is general and universal, the matter and presentation could then or now be appropriated perhaps to many single local or contemporary conditions, but not definitely to one alone, or not to the local or the contemporary alone.

The issue is between two attitudes toward life; not as a theme set up by the poet and outside his own experience but as an animating force re-creating with the intensity of genius
an old fable. Thus he did not take up a religious or a secular topic for discussion but, with his eye on the attainment of recognition and a benefice, he looked into his heart and wrote. In the light of this view, the confession of the frailties of his youth assumes added significance:

\[\text{vor þeȝ he were wile breme} \\
\& lof him were niȝtingale, \\
\& ofer wîȝte gentȝ & smale, \\
ich wot he is nu suþe acoled. \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \]
\[\text{he is him ripe & fast-rede,} \\
\text{ne lust him nu to none unrede;} \\
\text{nu him ne lust na more pleie,} \\
\text{he wile gon a riȝte weie. (202-5, 211-4)}\]

The poet admits that his sympathies once lay with the Nightingale and what she represents but that was in the days of his youth. Now his is the fabled wisdom of the Owl. Here then is place for the various interpretations. Fitted thus into the general structure of the 'personal interpretation' they are not cancelled out but are reconciled; here they receive their completion. Once the poet had been addicted to the gay love poetry but the song of the Owl, with its emphasis on the eternal verities, came with age and experience. Youth and age are contrasted; delight in the pleasures of this world has given way to a realization that one's true happiness is not to be sought here below. The teaching of the poem as explained by Mr. Wells in the preceding chapter is the embodiment of the conflicts experienced by the poet. But the poem is more than an allegory of the age-old contest of youth and age, pleasure and asceticism. It
is a fable and a fable has a moral. The moral of this fable is:

there is good in all that is used rightly. 19

Even though the Nightingale is not allowed the victory, her claims in so far as they agree with this moral, which is pointed by life itself, are admitted. The Owl exercises no harsh tyrannical rule. Playing one against the other, the poet has expressed himself and attained recognition, though perhaps not the recognition he sought.

It is, after all, as the expression of a unique personality, that the poem appeals finally to modern readers: for in it we have the authentic utterance of one who lived under the early Plantagenets, and whose ambitions and fancies, whose thoughts and moods are therein set down for all to read. 20

This is Professor Atkins' final word.
Footnotes to Chapter V


4. See Kathryn Huganir, op. cit., pp. 177-82.

5. On the indebtedness of The Owl and the Nightingale to the fable see Kathryn Huganir, op. cit., pp. 15-58.

6. ibid., p. 16.


9. ibid., p. 22.

10. ibid., pp. 27-45.


14. ibid., p. lxxix.


16. ibid., p. lxxix.


CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

The various interpretations of *The Owl and the Nightingale* as set forth in the last four chapters are apparently exhaustive. Any other interpretation of the dispute between the two birds would seem to fall under one of the classifications enumerated. The comparative value of these suggestions has been indicated with varying degrees of detail in the study thus far. It now remains to gather these deductions into one final conclusion the evidence for which lies in the preceding chapters.

The first two suggestions -- that the dispute represents a conflict in the monastic or in the clerical life -- have been rejected since the Nightingale is neither monk nor priest. Moreover, it is not accurate to identify the Owl as a monk; she more truly stands for the other-worldly point of view, the Nightingale presenting a contrast by embodying rather the ideals of this world. This is the contrast established by the third type of religious interpretation: a concern for the things that are above versus the attitude that is more concerned with the enjoyment of worldly things. This is really the thought embodied under the title 'secular interpretation'; for in view of the religious character of the times the conflict established by that interpretation
could not be so purely natural. The infusion of the higher motives, the raising of the consideration to the supernatural plane, would place the 'secular' interpretation in the same category as the 'religious.' If the exponents of the secular interpretation would admit this explanation, as it appears Mr. Wells does, their view can be said to be consonant with the poem; otherwise not.

Professor Atkins' contribution must be treated differently. What he claims as the virtue of his interpretation is really its fault. This is that it excessively particularizes the conflict. As we have noted with Mr. Wells, the conflict may be applied to various contemporary discussions but it must not be restricted to any particular one. Atkins mistakes the ultimate purpose of the poem. For him the poet wrote to advance the claims of the love-poets. As the poem itself makes very clear he wrote to secure recognition and preferment for Nicholas. Even supposing that the poet wanted to plead for love-poetry, we must admit that he defeated his own purpose in making such a strong case for the opposite side. Atkins realized the weakness of his position, but in trying to strengthen it he fell into several further errors. First of all, he declared that the victory was the Nightingale's. We have seen that the Nightingale's claim to a victory was merely a way of ending the debate, that the decision was to be rendered by Nicholas, a just and
wise judge, on the arguments advanced by the litigants, and that the arguments, as poet and Nightingale admit, are in favor of the Owl. Then, too, Atkins errs in striving to identify the Owl with foreign forces when as the representative of the traditional religious poetry she would be more national than the Nightingale, the standard-bearer of continental love-poetry. Finally, in stressing the contrast on the basis of song, Atkins overemphasizes this trait. For centuries the fables had contrasted the birds in matters of song and had intended no such interpretation. Given the birds, an important, though not the only, contrast would naturally be in their songs. But the poem stresses contrasts in character, habit, etc.; Atkins neglects these contrasts. Finally, the debate is not so much between two sides one of which is to win (i.e. love poetry) as between two different attitudes which are to coalesce into a true view of life. Each is to play its part but only in so far as it is in accord with divine and natural law. Consequently, although there is much in favor of Atkins' interpretation, to set it up as the explanation of the whole poem is to outrun the evidence. Years ago the German scholar Gadow proposed a view such as this, and what Breier said of him and his interpretation we may conclude of Atkins and his interpretation:

Gadow versucht, die absicht des gedichtes klarzustellen. Möglicher ist, dass die Eule als vertreter der in den kreisen des niederen klerus gepflegten englischen, die Nachtigall als vertreter der feineren anglofranz. dich-

That interpretation appears to be most acceptable which is consonant with the stated purpose of the poem and which avoids the inconsistencies noted above. To obtain preference, either for himself or for his friend, the poet decided to submit a literary work. The material with which he began was taken from the fable literature for which England was famous. He selected in particular two birds, traditionally at enmity, an Owl and a Nightingale, and pictured them as disputing over the relative merits of their song, both in itself and in regard to mankind, and the good points and bad of each other's characters. This is the story which we can read for itself, which makes the poem interesting, intensely so, even to those who do not in the least bother about its meaning. But the poet, either because such was the natural cast of his mind or, better, because it promoted the purpose he had in writing, chose to conduct the discussion along the lines of a debate, conforming the structure to the procedure current in contemporary law-suits. This intensified the meaning which ran beneath the fable, emphasizing the contrast between two attitudes toward life. In the pro and con of the debate he portrayed the conflict in every man's life between the desires of a loftier nature and the demands of a
lower, between reason and inclination, and thus unconsciously obtained universal interest in his poem. These conflicts naturally assumed his own characteristics as they were viewed through his eyes and experienced in his own person. Hence they acquired the charming personal appeal which strikes every reader of the poem. Perhaps, as a passage previously quoted (202-14) leads us to suspect, he felt in his own person the strife between religious and love poetry which, at least to us looking back, characterized his times. If so, this too is embodied in his poem. In short, the poem seems to demand a personal interpretation. Thus regarded it reveals the poet's philosophy. Rather than allow one of his disputants to win the debate, the poet gives us his mature view of life:

there is good in all that is used rightly.2

In conclusion, then, we may sum up the results of this study in the words of Professor Osgood, understanding them in the sense just indicated:

The general question is an old one -- youth vs. age, pleasure vs. sobriety, and the like. In particular, however, it may present the respective claims of the traditional secular love-poetry of the Provencal type and the equally traditional religious poetry of the times. But it has clearly another purpose -- to recommend the neglected talents of the worthy Nicholas to recognition by church dignitaries.3
Footnotes to Chapter VI

3. C.G. Osgood, op. cit., p. 60.
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The thesis, "The Allegorical Interpretation of The Owl and the Nightingale", written by Alphonse Homer Mattlin, S.J., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Rev. Burke O'Neill, S.J. May 1, 1939