

# Song and harmony in *The Owl and the Nightingale*

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## SONG AND HARMONY IN *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*

Cet article propose une lecture du poème moyen-anglais *The Owl and the Nightingale* à la lumière des théories musicales de Boèce: car le chant (donc, la musique), ses effets sur l'homme, la place de certaines créatures dans l'univers, sont au cœur du débat opposant les deux oiseaux. Il paraît ainsi légitime de considérer le poème comme une réflexion sur les apparences, et la nécessité de la différence dans l'harmonie divine. Le poète donne de multiples indications de l'inanité de la querelle qu'il rapporte: et le hibou et le rossignol font partie intégrante de la Création. Ce qu'ils prennent pour des discordances ne sont en fait que les différentes voix, prises isolément, d'une suprême harmonie.

The theme of song is at the heart of the Middle English debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*. It is the main cause for contention between the two birds, and the poet explicitly states that song is the principal issue of the debate:

*& hure & hure of othere[s] songe  
Hi holde plaiding suthes stronge.*<sup>1</sup>

The exact significance of the theme of song in the poem has however caused some debate among the critics. For some, we are in the presence of an allegory, representing for example different schools of poetry or preaching. But these theories often do considerable violence to the poem. For others, the apparent impossibility of fitting all the elements in *The Owl and the Nightingale* into any single overall theme has led to the conclusion that the poem is a burlesque, the components of which have no special function beyond their comic effects<sup>2</sup>. To consider that the poet merely wanted to ridicule a human foible through the absurd "law-suit" of two birds does indeed solve many a problem; the seemingly random accusations the birds throw at each other may then be disregarded as mere entertainment material. However, this approach ultimately results in an impoverishment of the

poem, in that it masks the poet's art in using trivia (or what is generally considered as such) to shape his poem, and to introduce "serious" themes such as adultery, extra-marital love, religion and death. This note will therefore investigate the general strategy of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and following the guideline of song, will attempt to establish that the purpose of the poem is exegesis rather than derision.

The theme of song occurs on three different levels in the poem: *physical* song, that is, sounds emitted by a body; *functional* song, that is, music as a means of producing in the hearer a given reaction; and song as *harmony*, through different yet complementary voices.

At a superficial glance, physical song is what the birds' debate is about. The poem opens with the Nightingale singing, with an especial stress on the variety and harmony of her song, which is compared to the music of a harp or a pipe. Her initial attack on the Owl is also founded on song: the Owl makes such a horrid noise, says the Nightingale, that it completely puts her off singing. The poet stresses that the music we are dealing with here is a bodily function — the beautiful sounds produced by the Nightingale are explicitly "ishote... of throte" (lines 21-24); the Nightingale herself links her song with such physical organs as her heart and tongue (line 37). In Boethian terminology, this is *musica instrumentalis*; and inasmuch as the birds wish to establish that the sound produced by their opponent's body is foul, so do they focus their attacks on other "dirty" bodily functions: the music is dismissed on the grounds of the unworthiness of the instrument. Scatological references thus appear before the debate has formally started even, with the tale of the falcon and the owl-chick; and the Nightingale's singing is repeatedly linked with the "rumhuse" — the latrines. On the same level, the oral act of song leads to the theme of eating, both birds accusing each other of disgusting food habits, and more generally of having a repulsive physical appearance.

As noted by Kathryn Hume and others, these elements are the main source of comedy within the poem; they are decidedly avian, and create a distance between the reader and the actual debate. But they are not trivial for all that; each aspect of the bodily existence of the birds introduces more meaningful themes, the complexity of which the protagonists cannot grasp (the contrast between what is said and who says it is indeed quite comical). The serious nature of the debate is hinted at by the poet from the

very beginning: before song is even mentioned, we are told that the two birds said the worst they could about the “*custe*” of the other one — in other words, their *nature* — and song is presented as just one aspect (though an important one) of this “*custe*”. What the birds are debating is their intrinsic goodness or badness, and just as bodily functions are used by the Owl and the Nightingale to assess the virtues of their song, so is their song used to assess a higher level of being.

Such a mental process is founded on the theories of music current in the Middle Ages, propounded by St Augustine of Hippo and more especially Boethius, who was a recognized authority on the subject, and whose influence on the poem may also be detected in the Owl’s discussion of God’s foreknowledge and human free-will<sup>3</sup>. According to Boethius, music may be classified under three headings: *musica instrumentalis* (which includes the human voice, and therefore song); *musica humana*, which may roughly be said to be the proportioning of the different members of the body, the blending of the soul with the body, and the joining within the soul of the rational and the irrational (under this heading would come physical appearance and “*custe*”); and last, *musica mundana*, which governs the binding of the elements, the variation of the seasons and the motion of the spheres. This “*music*” is maintained through mutual love, *concordia*, which may be paraphrased as harmony<sup>4</sup>. The debate between the Owl and the Nightingale therefore ultimately raises the question of difference within the harmony of the world.

The whole poem hinges in fact on the obvious differences between the two birds. The Nightingale is spurred on to her vicious attack of the unsuspecting Owl by the contrast between herself and her fellow-bird, and the feeling that so different a creature cannot possibly partake of the same nature as herself. Her calling the Owl “*unwi3t*”, literally “*non-creature*”, implies that she feels that the Owl has no place in the divine harmony, that she was not created by God but partakes of some evil principle. The Owl thus has to defend the very essence of her being — her “*custe*”, to quote the poet — and being a mere bird, her attempt to justify her place within the world music (*musica mundana*) will also consist in casting doubts on the “*custe*” of her opponent.

Within this fight for recognition in the divine order, song has an emblematic function, not only because of its obvious aesthetic connections with *concordia*, but because of its moral dimension,

in a Boethian outlook. For Boethius, and with him the whole of the Middle Ages, credited music with the power of working changes in morals: good, true and divine music was thought to be able to cure the illnesses of both body and soul, through restoring man's "harmony". On the other hand, "bad" music was thought to encourage men to sin. The birds' debate about the effects of their song on men, linked with the more general theme of service to mankind, is thus of direct relevance to their problem. When D.C. Peterson states that the issues of "cuse" and song are *subordinate* to the theme of service<sup>5</sup>, he is reversing the order of importance: the service theme is on the contrary instrumental in determining the value of the song, though the avian nature of the protagonists prevents their keeping this consistently in mind during the debate. Man is the only available reference point, for only he has a soul.

The arguments of the two birds on this level may be paraphrased as "You induce man to sin, I encourage him in the ways of God". The emphasis is put on the more noticeable of human sins, fornication, which shares with the theme of song a basic ambiguity. It partakes on the one hand of bodily function — copulation and excretion are mentioned as it were in the same breath in the poem, with the explicit proximity of the "bure" to the "rumhuse". On the other hand, it may be seen as proceeding from the greatest of Christian virtues, love, the very foundation of the *concordia* of the universe. And it is significant that the birds' discussion should focus more especially on harmony or discord within the married couple, and that the ideal implicitly recognized by both the Owl and the Nightingale is that of the wife longing for her absent husband (lines 1583 sqq.). Such was the symbolic image of the soul longing after God's realm, the advent of perfect harmony within a perfect creation. It is thus quite clear that we are dealing throughout with discords within the concord of Creation: in other words, with sin, which separates the Creator from his creature just as adultery separates the spouses in a marriage.

On the level of the birds, this discussion can only be futile. They are but instruments — the pipe-like Nightingale or the horn-like Owl are in no way responsible for the sounds they produce. But the principle of the discussion is serious. The poet is offering us a reflexion on the value of appearances — one given action may have contradictory effects — and the difficulty of distinguishing good from evil. Which, of the Owl or the Nightingale, is

the good bird? Which is the evil one? In truth, the debate shows quite clearly that the “custe” of both birds is the same, despite their superficial differences; most of the charges occur a number of times, applied to *both* birds. Appearance is deceptive: birds and men hate the Owl because of her appearance, and give her an ignominious death, yet she is a useful bird, and like them is a creature of God. The Christ-like overtones in the passage describing the death of the Owl are most revealing: the life and death of Christ are not attractive in human terms, but they are an essential part in the plan of the Creator, and the Redemption of Mankind is divine harmony.

How then are we supposed to judge, at the end of the poem? The answer, I think, is contained in the way Nicholas of Guildford, the perfect judge, is presented by the birds:

*He wot insi3t in eche songe,  
 Wo singet wel, wo singet wronge;  
 & he can schede vrom the ri3te  
 That wo3e, that thuster from the li3te.*<sup>6</sup>

This description of Nicholas’ abilities is generally understood as dithyrambic praise of his qualities as a human judge, which may or may not have been intended to help a certain Nicholas of Guildford to obtain preferment. However, this stress on his insight into good and evil, his capacity of recognizing the “custe” of things over and beyond appearances, goes far beyond what is expected of human justice. Nicholas, we are further told, was once subject to sin:

*Vor the3 he were wile breme  
 & lof him were ni3tingale  
 & other wi3te gente & smale,  
 Ich wot he is nu suthes acoled;*

...

*Ne lust him nu to none unrede:  
 Ne him ne lust na more pleie,  
 He wile gon a ri3te weie.*<sup>7</sup>

Nicholas has been a sinner, but he has overcome his sin: he has acquired true knowledge of good and evil, and has amended his life accordingly — or, more correctly, having amended his life, he has acquired insight into the true nature of things. His very name is emblematic of this state of affairs: he is Nicholas of Guldeford,



which is certainly the name of the modern town of Guildford, but which may be understood literally as *gulde ford*, the ford of guilt — *gulde* being an ambiguous term<sup>8</sup>. Nicholas is a man who has crossed the river of guilt; after indulging in discord with the divine order of things (through lechery, the implications are), he has overcome the weight of sin, and reached the other side, that of Redemption. In such an outlook, the reference at the end of the poem to the corrupt bishops who ignore such a worthy man may be seen as an indication of Nicholas' purity, living *in* the world, but not *of* the world, following in that respect the teachings of Christ. He is the symbol of the Christian ideal, a sinner repented and redeemed, hated by the world (represented by unworthy prelates) because of his faith, and whose immediate experience of the music of God makes him turn away from the discords of the devil.

One may even go one step further. Nicholas' ability to distinguish the true nature of things beyond all appearances exceeds what can be expected of any human being. The description of Nicholas implies that he is in total harmony with the Creator and the created universe: the "insist in eche song" is impossible without a total deliverance from sin, for sin is discord, and therefore hinders an accurate perception of the different voices in the divine *concordia*. Nicholas would appear to have attained the state to which all Christian souls aspire. The question of preference would be futile for such a man: he has already obtained the ultimate prize.

*The Owl and the Nightingale*, which is generally read as a poem on discord and contentiousness, thus seems to me to be a lesson on the nature of harmony and love. Harmony implies different voices; love also implies difference, in that it is directed towards someone else. The two birds are different: yet they partake of the same world harmony, their music is complementary; their true place may only be assessed in love, by someone partaking of the perfect knowledge and wisdom of God Himself. The birds will not find their judge on this earth: if indeed the poem was written for a man called Nicholas, one suspects he was living in Christ — but no longer in the flesh<sup>9</sup>.

Françoise LE SAUX

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Owl and the Nightingale* (quoted from the edition of E.G. Stanley, Manchester/New York, 1972), lines 11-12. "And especially concerning the song of the other one did they hold very fierce pleas". For practical reasons, I have transcribed eths by th.

<sup>2</sup> For a convenient survey of the criticism on the poem, see Kathryn Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale. The Poem and its Critics*, Toronto & Buffalo, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> See Constance Hieatt, "The Subject of the Mock-Debate Between the Owl and the Nightingale", *Studia Neophilologica* 40 (1968), p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> On Boethius' theory of music, see David S. Chamberlain, "Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius", *Speculum* (1970), pp. 80-97 and Henry Chadwick, *Boethius. The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, Oxford, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> See Peterson, "The Owl and the Nightingale and Christian Dialectics", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Lines 195-199. "He has deep understanding of every type of song, who sings well, who sings wrong, and he can distinguish right from wrong, darkness from light".

<sup>7</sup> Lines 202-205 and 212-214. "For though at one time he was wild, and he liked nightingales and other delicate little creatures, I know that he has now greatly cooled down [...]. He no longer takes pleasure in evil things: he no longer delights in frivolity, he will go the right way".

<sup>8</sup> See Kurath and Kuhn's *Middle English Dictionary*, under *gilt*.

<sup>9</sup> If one accepts that the poem was perhaps a tribute to the saintly life of someone who really existed, his only dwelling-place, in Porteshom (lines 1751 sqq.), could be understood as referring to his grave. However, I think it more probable that Nicholas is an emblematic figure, symbolizing the ideal Christian.

F. L. S.



