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Contentious Birds

*The Owl and the Nightingale* and Other Poems In A Singular Middle English Verse Tradition

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Abstract

This thesis considers the use of birds in medieval English poetry as reflections of humans and human society. I look especially at some of the ways in which medieval animals are used to comment satirically on the frailties and foibles of the human animal, man. Birds and beasts configured as humans present particular problems of identity and alterity that lend themselves well to the composition of recreational verse, and the fact that they are both so similar to humans and so different is particularly conducive to their use as vehicles of parody and satire. Also considered here are some of the early works in which animals are studied both as themselves and in comparison with humans, especially the texts of such classic natural historians as Aristotle and Pliny. I also glance, if only briefly, at the second-century Physiologus, which incorporates the work of Pliny and his followers together with biblical texts and Christianized moralizations. This seminal work, in the form of its direct descendants the medieval bestiaries, is a major source for writers of animal narrative in the Middle Ages.

My study is organized in two parts. Part One contains the material outlined above together with some discussion on different kinds of satire — in particular, the satire of incongruity, so important in the context of animal impersonation of humans. It also considers the use of birds in various comic-satiric genres, especially in recreational texts such as the clerk and knight débats, liturgical parodies and, above all, the peculiarly English genre of bird debate. The vernacular literary tradition represented in the eight bird poems in this section — ranging from the thirteenth to the early sixteenth century, some dialogic, some not — virtually constitutes a minor genre in which even a major poet like Chaucer was happy to work.

Part Two contains four chapters devoted to a close reading and textual analysis of a single poem, The Owl and the Nightingale, probably the earliest and certainly the best of all the Middle English two-party bird debates. (My title — Contentious Birds — is derived from the descriptive title of thirteenth century poems in this particular debate tradition: The Thrush and the Nightingale, for example, appears in MS Digby 86 under the heading, "Ci commence la cantent parente le Mauius & la russinole"). A spirited
dispute of nearly eighteen hundred lines, *The Owl and the Nightingale* dates from the late twelfth or thirteenth century, and is remarkable above all for its freshness and originality, and its sheer, delightful ease of writing.

A final chapter looks at conclusions in the debates and other poems in this study, at the question of the disputants' usefulness to man, particularly in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and at the fluctuating nature of the boundaries that separate human from animal. Principal concerns in my thesis are the nature and the variety of the literary relationships constructed in the Middle Ages around these dividing lines between humans and birds or beasts (in this case, birds), and the ways in which these precarious lines of demarcation can be put, especially, to recreational literary use.
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Introduction

Albertus Magnus says that man possesses a "divine intellect by which he is sometimes so far uplifted above the mundane world that the matter of the universe is compelled to bend to his ideas." He also recognizes that this remarkable creature is, at the same time, an animal, albeit the "most perfect of all animals." Recognition of the connections, the fundamental relationship between animal and human does not, of course, start with Albertus; it stretches back through the centuries and crosses all frontiers, both symbolic and real. Since the recital of the first tales linking bird or beast with man, animals have served as reflective images of human beings, as anthropomorphic mirrors of the people around and with whom they lived, and with whose lives their own existences have always been closely bound. From earliest days we humans have thought of animals in personal relation to ourselves, in much the same way as we anthropomorphize most of the world. Even in so little conscious a context as the linguistic figures we use in every-day speech, anthropomorphic attitudes are constantly evident: the sun, we say, blesses us, storm clouds threaten us, stains are stubborn, keys are obstinate, cars refuse to start. We use the same kind of automatic, self-reflexive expressions about the natures and actions of animals, so much closer to us than stars, storms or inanimate objects. Birds and beasts are so easily thought of as, almost literally, some kind of extension of ourselves.

From early times animals have often been regarded as men in disguise, just as in many societies humans were frequently thought to be enclosed in animal shapes, sometimes as the result of spite, or jealousy, sometimes as revenge, sometimes in compassion for misfortune. Beliefs in metamorphosis, man-beast transformations, were familiar in both antique and Hellenic worlds; the ancients also believed in metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls between animals and humans. In both Egypt and Greece, the gods changed humans into birds or beasts or themselves

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1 Albertus Magnus, Man and the Beasts, 65, 59.
2 The theme of metamorphosis, human changed into bird or beast, is familiar in Greek myth and legend; see P. M. C. Forbes Irving, Metamorphosis in Greek Myths. The concept also underlies the medieval notion of the "wild man." The theme of humans who either possess the attributes of animals or are brought up by animals (or both) is not uncommon in medieval romance.
assumed animal shapes at will. Some divinities — for example, in Egypt — were thought to be doubly incarnated in the shapes of both human and beast. The integration of animals into a wide, anthropomorphic universe, however, went much further than this. In many very early societies, animals were not only thought of as existing in close relation with humans, they were also important in wider realms, in the worlds of religion and magic. Certain animals were closely involved with religious cults, with gods, or evil spirits — or with heavenly bodies; in Babylonia, for example, they were often associated with the stars. The motif of the lion morning-star devouring the night as represented by the antelope is common on Babylonian seals.

As different patterns of thought began to develop in the Hellenic and Roman worlds, these magico-religious beliefs were to lose most of their original force. Nevertheless, animals retained important symbolic roles within the context of storytelling, as reflective — and often disturbing — images of the human animal. The use of beasts and birds as metaphors for men and women is a direct issue of the imposition of human structures and institutions, human patterns of thought and behaviour upon the other, the animal world. In most medieval animal narrative — the broad area of this thesis — perceptions of virtually every item of animal conduct are predicated upon imagined analogies with human life. For evidence that this is a time-sanctified way of thinking, we need only consult the work of early writers.

Pliny, for example, in the Historia animalis, consistently interprets the animal world in terms of the human, attributing human affective and moral sentiments to such diverse creatures as the horse, the stork and the lion; he is followed by writers such as Aelian and Solinus, both early natural historians well-known in the Middle Ages. Both Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch likewise make use of animal allegory and symbolism to explain unseen phenomena, including invisible things belonging to a higher world. Thus, as we will see in the second chapter in this study, Philo compares the worldly lover of pleasure to a serpent in close and considered detail, while Plutarch associates the nictating eyelids of the crocodile with an image of the divine — like the highest God it sees without being seen to do so.

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3 See Jack Lindsay, Origins of Astrology, 14, 15, and 24-25.
4 Philo Judaeus, in Philo, Book I, 125; Plutarch, De Iside et Osiride, 237. Plutarch also repeats the story of the weasel, a creature that was sometimes thought to conceive by the ear and give birth by the mouth; he interprets the ancient legend allegorically as a “portrayal of the creation of speech.”
The allegorical or metaphorical representation of humans and human institutions is not and never has been confined to animal figures alone, but it is a role that they are peculiarly well suited to play. Animals presented as metaphors for humans bring an extra dimension with them, a particular kind of doubleness; there is a close relationship on more than one level with the human referent that a bloodless personification cannot match. Unlike the personified abstraction that can have no real substance, that is but a figure of the identity imputed to it, the animals pressed into literary service as, for instance, vehicles of satire or parody, are doubly embodied in the texts. Birds and beasts are present in animal narrative both as human surrogates and as themselves, creatures with dual existences, part-human hybrids that nevertheless possess separate, animal realities of their own. Like humans, they already have flesh and blood bodies, emotions, personalities — and, in some cases, even histories closely entwined with our own. Ellen Douglass Leyburn, writing on the use of animals in allegorical satire, observes that, “brute creation seems sometimes to exist as a satire on mankind. All that the allegorist needs to do is to point the parallel.”

Apart from the innate resemblances between humans and animals upon which most animal narrative depends, medieval vernacular beast poets also make full use of their birds’ and beasts’ literary antecedents, delving into myth and legend, Bible and bestiary. These symbolic relationships are constantly evident in the bird poems with which I am mostly concerned. At the same time, we should note how some of the medieval poets are increasingly inclined to derive their descriptions of animals from empirical observation rather than cleave too rigidly to the symbolism of the moralized bestiaries; in this they are probably following the lead of some contemporary writers on natural history. The thirteenth-century natural historian Bartolomaeus Anglicus is one of these authors, as is Albertus Magnus. Albertus, for example, provides in De animalibus a number of descriptions of birds and beasts based on what he, or another eyewitness has observed. Although he does not eschew some

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5 Tales of relationships between animals and humans date back to very early times. See, for example, the numerous accounts in ancient mythologies of metamorphosis from human into animal (and sometimes back again, especially in stories of changes of man into werewolf), and also the many medieval tales of children stolen from their parents and reared by beasts.

6 Ellen Douglass Leyburn, Satiric Allegory: Mirror of Man, 57.
fanciful accounts from the bestiaries and other authorities, he does not hesitate to add to them the results of his own observations.

The methods Albertus uses are shown at their most practical in his description of the structure of the elephant’s knees; this is completely at odds with the usual bestiary account. The Physiologus, followed by a considerable number of bestiaries, states that the elephant has no knee joints and is thus unable to lie down; it must therefore sleep standing up, leaning against a tree. If a hunter wishes to capture an elephant, he has but to cut halfway through the tree where the animal likes to rest — and wait. When the beast arrives and leans against the tree, both tree and elephant fall to the ground. Albertus, however, gives little credence to this improbable tale. He provides a very different, very commonsensical account of the anatomy of these equivocal elephant underpinnings.

Their legs are massive and uniform in diameter from top to bottom, much like the columns of a building. Though each foot is divided into multiple digits, nature has conjoined the toes to give added strength for weight-bearing. For the same reason, they are believed to have no flexible joints above their knees; more likely, these joints are stiff rather than freely movable, but to the superficial observer appear to have no fulcrum points of flexure. In actuality, if the elephant had no such flexibility, it would be unable to walk with a coordinated gait.

This factual and reasoned account bears no resemblance at all to the unreal, moralized elephant of the Physiologus and the bestiaries. Whether Albertus has examined an elephant himself or is relying on an eyewitness account we cannot know. He probably could have seen one; there were elephants in the menagerie belonging to Emperor Frederick II, with whose family Albertus had connections, and also in other, especially royal collections. Henry III, for example, was presented with an African elephant in 1255 that lived in a special elephant house in the Tower of London until 1258. Matthew Paris has left some drawings of it.

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7 Debra Hassig, in Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology, notes that of the twenty-eight English bestiaries she examined for her book, no fewer than twelve repeat this tale.
8 Physiologus, 29-32. A charming moralization is added. Not the largest of elephants, not even twelve elephants can raise the fallen beast. But, suddenly a tiny elephant appears who puts his trunk under the stricken creature and lifts him up. The largest elephant and his wife represent Adam and Eve; the twelve elephants, the chorus of prophets; the tiny animal is “the holy intelligible elephant,” that is, the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he is greater than all the rest, he was made small in comparison to them. “For he humbled himself and became obedient unto death” (Phil. 2.8), in order to raise up man.
10 See Hassig, 141 and 250, note 77.
Other examples of Albertus's empirical investigative methods may be seen in a lengthy section on falcons and other birds of prey, in which he documents different species' anatomical structure, coloration, characteristic behaviour, breeding, training, health care and so on, all in careful detail. He also lists seventeen falcon species in terms of their nobility: ten are unequivocally noble, three of lesser quality, three of mixed parentage and one of mixed breed. Of the superior falcons, the noblest is the saker, a regal bird, with talons "more brutal than an eagle." In descending order of nobility, come the gerfalcon, mountain falcon and peregrine, the humpbacked falcon and black, white and red falcons, the falcon with azure feet and the merlin. We note that Richard Holland pays similar close attention to descending orders of raptor nobility when he describes the arrival of the birds of prey in *The Buke of the Howlat*, in lines 313-31 and 635-46 (see Chapter 4 below). Holland's gerfalcons, for example, are dukes in the eagle-emperor's army, but the little merlins, least of the noble falcons in Albertus's list, are mere knights.

It should be noted that the birds in most of the poems in this study, including *The Buke of the Howlat*, show the influence of these new, more empirical ways of thinking about animals. Newly recognized behavioural contrasts between different kinds of both bird and beast — together with differences in physique, habits and habitat — give special scope for different kinds of (often satiric) analogy-making, in which species-specific observed facts are frequently combined with symbolic stereotypes. There are obvious divergences between the symbolic meanings which birds, for example, are given in the bestiaries and the more realistic, knowledge-based observations on those birds with which writers would have had some personal familiarity; both aspects may be merged in medieval bird portraiture. We see this practice illustrated as early as the twelfth- or thirteenth-century in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, in which the Nightingale's traditional bestiary references to the Owl as a light-fearing, day-shunning prophet of evil are mixed with sharp observations on her raucous voice, her deplorable shortcomings in chick-rearing and disgusting eating habits. Nevertheless, the fact that a new realism begins to appear in these texts does not mean that the bestiaries are forgotten or put aside. They are not; they are powerfully present in the poems I consider here.

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12 Although Albertus acknowledges debts to Frederick II's *De arte de venandi cum avibus*, the greater part of the factual observations recorded in *De animalibus* appear to be his own. See Robin S. Ogins, "Albertus Magnus on Falcons and Hawks," in *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays*, 1980, 441-62.
Whether drawn from bestiary or real life, then, all the animal characters in the texts examined in this study are modelled analogically on examples taken from a parallel world of humans, and on human ways of looking at this world; all tell us something about our species and ourselves. The revealing of ourselves to ourselves has been, indeed, a major function of animal writing throughout the centuries, from Aesop to Horace to the Physiologus and the bestiaries, and to the writers of both Latin and vernacular medieval beast literature. We read our own thoughts and feelings into the inhabitants of the animal world, seeing our own natures shown in tales of the pride of the lion, the vanity of the peacock, the cunning of the fox; these human-like qualities are incorporated into narrative form, in fable or beast epic, bestiary or bird debate. When Umberto Eco says that for every virtue and for every sin there is an example drawn from bestiaries, he adds, simply, that, "animals exemplify the human world." In this study, I attempt to identify some of the different poetic modes and diverse contexts in which medieval birds and beasts appear. Although animals used as human surrogates by Middle English poets are by no means restricted to recreational texts, it is especially their role in this literature of laughter that I consider here; the mode of writing in the poems I examine is mostly humorous. In a broad sense, then, it is the role of animals as satiric representatives of humans in vernacular recreational poetry that constitutes my field of enquiry. I have noted above that the creatures we meet in this study are already living metaphors for us, their human cousins, and I argue here that it is precisely the closeness of their natural resemblances to humans that gives plausibility to the comic-satiric works in which they figure.

The world of medieval vernacular animal literature is a vast conglomeration of transgeneric allegory, analogy and metaphor, and I consider only a small part of it here. I have limited this study to birds only, partly in order to draw some strict parameters, but also because birds have a special place in medieval vernacular poetry. As decorative and melodious "ornaments of the air," birds regularly adorn spring openings in medieval lyrical poetry:

13 Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose, 79.
Springtime singing is not birds’ only function in medieval poetry, however. They play spirited speaking roles in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century knight and clerk debates and perform in bird masses and other liturgical parodies; they also figure in other comic-satiric poems on courtly, political and religious life. Above all, birds, much more than other non-human creatures, occupy an especially important place in Middle English debate poetry — dialogic verse, in that case, is necessarily an area of particular interest to me. The fowls of the air, of course, appear in other kinds of medieval texts, notably fables, and also in those monitory poems in which animals are used as figures of mortal sins. But these are specialized fields I do not enter here.

I have chosen birds to illustrate my general argument — especially birds in verbal conflict — partly because bird voices seemingly raised in screaming argument are one of the first and most vivid perceptions we have of these air-borne inhabitants of our world. There are a number of reasons why birds, perhaps even more than four-footed creatures, are peculiarly suited to being cast in human roles, but a principal one is that, like us, birds notably use their voices to communicate — an action that, Albertus Magnus says, is a “manifestation of the levity of their spirits.” Some birds seem even to possess the power of human speech, a quality the animal poets exploit to the full. Chaucer, for example, makes richly comic distinctions between the kinds of language his birds use in The Parliament of Fowls. He distinguishes between the elaborately polite, elevated diction of his courtly tercel eagles, and the honest simplicity of the language attributed to lesser birds such as the sparrowhawk and the turtledove — he even takes his comparison down to the coarse sentiments expressed and vulgar noises made by the goose, the cuckoo and the duck, rude birds that cry “‘Kek kek! Kokkok! Quek quek!’ hye” (499) until the narrator’s ears ring with the sound. In a similar way, when the distraught female falcon in The Squire’s Tale tells Canacee her pathetic tale of betrayal, of how her false falcon lover, “this tigre, ful of doublenesse” has deceived her, her language, like that of Chaucer’s tercels, is elevated in style. She also uses graceful imagery of classical origin, comparing her faithless

14 “When þe Nyhtegale Synges,” in The Harley Lyrics, 63.
15 Albertus Magnus, Man and the Beasts, 190.
lover's defection with, for instance, Paris leaving the nymph Oénone for Helen, and Jason's desertion of Medea. The tercel eagles and the unhappy falcon with their high-flown language are all exaggeratedly parodic figures, straight from a human world of courtly romance.

Not only birds' apparent gift of language link the avian and human worlds together; there are also parallels between social organization in the two societies. Claude Lévi-Strauss has pointed out in how many ways our worlds appear to be parallel, theirs in one dimension, ours in another:

They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own, but precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live: birds love freedom; they build themselves homes in which they lead a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulated language.¹⁶

All these points are relevant to the discussion here; so is his comment that birds "can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason that they are so different."

The association of birds with human social classes and religious and other kinds of human establishment are themes of particular interest to medieval writers. They are illustrated in poems in which birds figure as courtiers and lawyers, as kings and clowns, as lovers and divine choristers and even as semi-religious figures, for example, the intermittently pious birds in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Nor is political life neglected in bird poetry. Both *The Book of the Howlat* and Skelton's *Speke Parott* have complex, if elliptical, political sub-texts, while birds are king, lords and "common people" in the fifteenth-century *The Parliament of Birds*. The grievances and injustices the "comyn" birds discuss in this last poem vis à vis the tyrannical hawk-magnate must have sounded very familiar to audiences in that turbulent era.

* * *

This study is divided into two, largely separate parts. In the first chapter in Part One, I look at some of the background to and theory of the use of animals as reflections of

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 204.
human life and society. In particular, I consider animal narrative as a source of delight as well as instruction, and the use of beasts and birds in the literature of recreation as illustrative of a robust medieval penchant for laughter. I look, especially, at the nature of the satire of incongruity and at its close affinities with comic animal narrative; at some of the genres in which birds and beasts are pressed into service as satiric or parodic vehicles; and at the development of the use of animals as human metaphors in terms of increasingly subtle characterization and individualization. In the second chapter, I consider some of the ancient roots of the anthropomorphism supporting comic and satiric beast writing, especially the close identification of beasts with humans as illustrated in such early natural historians as Pliny and Aelian.

In the third and fourth chapters I begin to look, at first in a general way, at the range and genre of the vernacular bird poems that, from the late twelfth century on, begin increasingly to use birds to represent humans. Although most of the poems in this study are in Middle English, we nevertheless cannot ignore the European forms of bird-poetry that early crossed the Channel and took root on the other side, and I glance at some twelfth- and thirteenth-century clerk and knight debates in French and Anglo-Norman, and at a French bird-mass, as well. In the clerk and knight debates, birds are cast as the nobles in the court of the god of love who adjudicate upon the relative claims of clerics and knights as lovers; lively parodies, these poems satirize both the tenets of courtly love and the rivalries between the first and second estates. As natural musicians, birds are obviously also particularly suited to the form of comic parody in which their singing abilities are used to travesty different parts of the liturgy; there are a number of liturgical parodies in which their voices are lifted in both speech and song. Two important examples of this minor mode briefly examined here are the fourteenth-century La Messe des Oisius, a bird-mass set in the court of Venus, and the late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century The Court of Love, in which the birds sing a version of the Matins and Lauds of the Blessed Virgin — except that their voices are addressed not to Mary herself, but to the god of love.

In these chapters, I also consider a number of Middle English bird poems in some detail. There are eight of these in this first part of my study. Three are anonymous, and five by known authors; together they span something close to two and a half centuries and illustrate some of the themes most familiar in medieval bird verse. It
becomes clear that birds figure variously in a wide range of literary genres (as Jan Ziolkowski observes of animals more largely), but it is also clear that the typifying character of bird talk gives such formal consistency to the line of dialogic poems in which birds appear that we can observe the formation and development of a specific genre, the bird debate.17 Five of the eight texts I study in Part I take the form of dialogic poems, either two-party or multi-character; of these five, four discuss various aspects of human love. The fifth debate in this dialogic section, The Parliament of Birds, eschews love, and concentrates on politics and the dangers of inordinate pride. Particularly, I take notice of the ways in which the traditions, the symbolic histories, the avian natures their bird principals bring with them can be seen to affect both the course of the individual poems and their outcomes.

As we will see in the third chapter, the most important themes we find in bird poetry are love and the organization of human society, including human courtly and political worlds. Birds and love are inextricably bound together in medieval verse, together with their song and the concept of their possession of human speech. It is the advent of spring with its implications for love-making and breeding that inspires birds to lift their voices in many medieval poems; examples are the “smale foweles” in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, the little songbirds which, too excited to sleep a wink all night, “maken melodye” in an April morning.18 Love is the sole subject in the four debates in this chapter. Pairs of birds meet to discuss its various aspects in the anonymous thirteenth-century The Thrush and the Nightingale, in Clanvowe’s fourteenth-century The Cuckoo and the Nightingale and Dunbar’s The Merle and the Nightingale, and a large number of bird characters exchange individual views on the subject in the late fifteenth-century The Birds’ Praise of Love.

In the fourth chapter I analyse four bird poems only one of which is a debate, the political The Parliament of Birds. The others are Richard Holland’s The Buke of the Howlat, William Dunbar’s A Ballat of the Abbot of Tungland and John Skelton’s Speke Parott; together they cover a chronological period from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth century. None of these last three poems is dialogic, yet in a sense all derive much of their force from a common ancestry that includes the earlier debate poems.

18 See The Riverside Chaucer, The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, lines 9-10, 23.
The eponymous anti-hero in the *Howlat* and, particularly, the parrot in *Speke Parrott* are both eloquent talking birds (those in Dunbar's *Abbot of Tungland* are, unusually, almost silent) and, just as earlier debating birds take some of their character from symbolic representations in medieval bestiaries, so the creatures in these poems have, we might say, a greater right to judgement and speech because the debates' use of bird talk has delivered a specific form of poetic composition to the written literary tradition. All three of these non-dialogic poems are remarkable and highly individual works that deal with known, historical human characters and events — except that virtually all the roles in them are played by birds.

My principal aim in the first part of my thesis has been to look at the field of bird poetry very generally, at the conspicuous roles that birds play in vernacular verse, and also at some of the different ways in which poets make use of their birds as comic or satiric vehicles. In *The Book of the Howlat*, for example, birds perform all the functions of a well-ordered ecclesiastical community. Holland casts a peacock as pope, and all the functionaries belonging to a clerical society are birds, from pheasant-patriarchs and swan-bishops to a raven as rural dean. When birds from the first and second estates meet in conclave, an eagle-emperor and raptor bird-officers represent the second, military estate. Both spiritual and temporal lords are waited on and entertained by lesser bird-persons, cooks and servants, musicians and jesters; songbirds of all kinds perform as minstrels, and a Celtic rook-bard delivers an almost unintelligible tirade in the Scottish tradition of the comic Gaelic-speaking Highlander. A particular feature of this poem is the rich variety of the fowls that take part in its assemblies.

* * *

Part II of this study takes a very different form. It devotes four chapters to a close reading and textual analysis of a single poem, from an earlier period of English letters than those discussed above. This is the anonymous bird debate *The Owl and the Nightingale*, an animated argument between two birds that continues over nearly eighteen hundred lines. Traditionally accepted as the earliest of the Middle English bird debates (although it may have been preceded by *The Thrush and the Nightingale*), *The Owl and the Nightingale* is also by far the longest and most thematically complex, its lively discussions ranging over a wide spectrum of both avian and human issues. The date of the poem's composition is uncertain, but a general consensus has usually
dated it to a period extending from the last years of the twelfth century to some time in the early thirteenth, probably somewhere between the death of Henry II in 1189 and the accession of Henry III in 1216. Recently, however, Neil Cartlidge, in a new edition of the poem, has suggested that it may have been written at a much later date. He goes so far as to suggest that there may be a "serious possibility that the poem was composed after the death of Henry III in 1272."\(^{19}\)

The exceptional importance of this remarkable poem stems to a great extent from its rarity, its composition in English without any obvious vernacular predecessor, and its appearance at such an early date, at a time when Latin, not English, might have been expected in a poem of such ambition and sophistication. At the same time, the poem's undeniable originality is matched by its range of interests and quality. *The Owl and the Nightingale* is a dispute that operates on the same formal lines as the other two-party bird debate poems, that is, on alternating exchanges of argument. Like the other debates it concentrates on individual themes (although there are several of these they are treated in sequence), but proves incomparably more complex in both format and thematic dimensions. In its lengthy treatment of human love, for example — a discussion that extends over nearly three hundred lines — in terms of understanding, of subtlety of analysis, of freshness and originality the poem far outstrips all the other bird love-debates, with the exception of Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls*.

The polythematic *The Owl and the Nightingale* achieves a degree of virtuosity and easy grace indeed not seen again until Chaucer — and, like Chaucer's work, its very excellence seems to invite the most serious, profoundly engaged reading. Like the other poems discussed here, it borrows its inspiration from human life. Its comedy is based on the absurd concept of two ordinary birds, each ensconced in its habitat of hedgerow and tree stump, appearing as opponents in an imaginary court of law, in which they debate both avian questions and human issues, themes such as xenophobia, prophecy, predestination, religion, and human love and marriage. *The Owl and the Nightingale* is a parodied mock-legal trial that relies heavily on logical argument, but is conducted by creatures officially denied the possession of reason. In this incongruity, it has connections with the genre of the recreational beast poem, yet nowhere do we feel that the poem is properly explained by that problematic relation.

\(^{19}\) See Neil Cartlidge, Introduction to *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xv.
For that reason alone, *The Owl and the Nightingale* demands discussion that acknowledges an arguable generic context, but which also honours the poem’s singularity. In many respects, both in terms of quality and status, even Chaucer’s bird poems cannot match this early debate.

Chaucer, of course, does have some of the very best birds in English literature. Though I do not specifically address any of his bird poems here, they are everywhere in my text as examples, illustrations, yardsticks. I have not included *The Parliament of Fowls* among the debates considered here, partly because so much has already been written about the poem, but also because I use it constantly as a standard of reference and of comparison. That is to say, Chaucer’s birds, especially his parliamentary fowls, haunt my text in many respects, even if they do not figure in any extended discussion of the poems from which they come. *The Parliament of Fowls*, for example, in which all the fowl “that cometh of engendrure” meet on St Valentine’s Day to discuss love and mating, is not only the first but certainly the greatest of all animal parliamentary poems, providing a standard for the use of non-human creatures as satirical analogues for a particular kind of human society. Without it, it is difficult to imagine how some of the later bird debate poems could have come into being in the form that they take. The process of man-bird hybridization is more discreetly achieved here than in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, but Chaucer establishes in the *Parliament* an equally comic degree of human, class-based differentiation between his birds.

Chaucer has so many memorable birds. In addition to the argumentative creatures in *The Parliament of Fowls*, the peerless Chauntecleer in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and the unhappy crow in *The Manciple’s Tale*, there are, for instance, the lovesick nightingale and the eagle in Criseyde’s dream in *Troilus and Criseyde*,

20 the courtly falcons in *The Squire’s Tale* and the loquacious eagle “with his grymme pawes stronge” who seizes the dreamer in *The House of Fame* (541) and discourses on the nature of all things as he carries him aloft. Although many of Chaucer’s fowl are noble birds, fitting graciously into the courtly society of which he so often writes, he has bird villains as well, the worst of these being the falcon deceiver in *The Squire’s Tale*, a shocking bird-cad, traitor to his noble caste. Neither does the poet deny individual identity to lesser birds. In the human social divisions that characterize *The Parliament of Fowls*, the non-

noble fowl are separated into well-bred seed-eaters, worm-eaters such as the rude cuckoo, and noisy, vulgar waterbirds like the quacking duck.

The medieval satirist, using bird or beast to comment on its superior on the ladder of being, is fully aware of the comic possibilities inherent in replacing real-life animals by convincing beast-human hybrids, figures that are neither wholly animal nor human. Such a writer achieves his comic effects by deliberately blurring the boundaries that divide fictional hybrid from human; only the thinnest of lines is allowed to separate animal signifier from human signified. A legal debate takes place in *The Owl and the Nightingale* between an Owl-logician and Nightingale-rhetorician, and the eponymous hero in *Speke Parott* is simultaneously a pretty bird in a cage and the implacable accuser of Skelton’s favourite enemy, Cardinal Wolsey. In *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Chaucer draws Chauntecleer as a hen-pecked rooster as well as a Latin-speaking husband interested in medieval dream theory, and the male falcon in *The Squire’s Tale* is both courtly lover on his knees in seemingly devout humility, and a consummate deceiver: “Ne koude man, by twenty thousand part/Countrefete the sophymes of his art/Ne were worthy unbokelen his galoche/Ther doublenesse or feyning sholde approche” (553-56). Such fictional creations as the rhetorically sophisticated Chauntecleer and bossy Dame Pertelote seem at times almost human — can we think of Pertelote as a Wife of Bath in feathers? Like the man-animal hybrids in the manuscript margins neither one thing nor the other, Chaucer’s inventively satirical birds effectively break the compositional moulds that normally separate one order of creation from another. In the same way as Henryson’s preaching swallow, urbanized town mouse and sanctimonious wolf, the Chaucerian fowls all have recognizably human dimensions added to their animal personae, satirically elaborated along the lines of estate, habitat and social custom.

This man-animal parallelism, these both natural and symbolic resemblances between human and bird or beast, form a principal interest in this study. I look at the ways in which animal-human characteristics are conflated, and how the double identities that result function. Especially, I have sought to analyse the methods bird poets employ

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21 For these characterizations of the birds in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, see Douglas L. Peterson, “The Owl and the Nightingale and Christian Dialectic.”

22 See *The Squire’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 175.
to confer a fictional near-human status on their avian characters at the same time as maintaining their natural "birdiness," their undisputed continuing existence as birds; this is always a complicated exercise. The construction of a convincingly double bird-human persona can be achieved only by precise and plausible mingling of the characteristics of these two so different genera. Only by means of adroit management of this literary balancing act, the successful investment of the avian personae with plausibly dual natures and attributes, can poets sustain the sense of near believability essential to the maintenance of successful animal satire.

In the process of maintaining this plausibility, delicate balances must be struck. It is important for the writer who uses his animals to satirize humans that the boundary dividing bird or beast from human should never become too fixed, stay always fluid, uncertain, ambiguous. The question remains, nevertheless: how should we read the deliberate blurrings of boundaries in the works in which birds and beasts are used as metaphors for humans? What do the identifications of animals with human characters and institutions bring to the beast-human interface in works of literature? And do they change the ways in which we understand the animal and human worlds? As well as the undoubted correspondences that exist between animal and human, yawning chasms of difference yet remain. In spite of their recognized resemblances to humans, even the tamest of animals must at different times and in different ways have seemed dangerous as well as familiar creatures, inhabiting another, different, and imperfectly understood part of an otherwise human world.

Dorothy Yamamoto cites Julia Kristeva, who raises the question of this impalpable boundary between human and beast. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva says, "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where men stray on the territories of animal." 23 Yamamoto notes how suggestive the word "fragile" is here.24 She observes that "the boundary between humans and animals is in one sense a site of play, richly productive of cultural enterprises, but it is also a danger area, a place where human identity — construed as difference from animal kind — may slip from one's grasp." The question of both the fragility and danger involved in combining

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human-animal identity is a problem that writers of animal narrative must learn to recognize and control.

Hans Robert Jauss approaches this question of human-animal combined identity from a different point of view. He discusses the significant changes that come about when the human characters in a particular genre (he cites the courtly epic as his example) are replaced by animals: the genre changes, assumes different values and dimensions, is no longer the same. Elsewhere, he points out that the beast epic, as an "antiheroic contrafactor" of the courtly epic, "also brings to the fore a closed and ahistorical world of types and characters which has still not been sufficiently appreciated as an influential pattern for human self-interpretation." Finally, the bird debate, it seems to me, operates in a similar way since, even as it contributes to the larger tradition of debate, by virtue of its peculiar advantages in characterization, it opens up different potentialities as a "pattern of human self-interpretation," and thereby reconstitutes the larger, parent tradition in notable ways.

Of particular interest to me in this study are the different kinds of mixed avian and human individuality that beasts and birds so often possess in medieval fictions, and the disconcerting as well as comic uses to which this ambiguously anthropomorphic status may be put. Strange things happen at the ill-defined, fluctuating interface between man and bird or beast. Conflations of animals and humans mean that questions of identity and alterity continually arise; different kinds of connections and divisions both join and separate human and animal. Often in folklore animal and human bodies combine to create hybrid forms, creatures such as centaurs and sirens and the fearful manticore — all owe their strange identity, the essence of their being, partly to human ancestry, partly to animal. At least these creatures of double physical form can be identified as hybrids: the degree of their humanness or animality is shown in their shapes.

 Stranger, and more disturbing, if only because less visible, are the creatures that look like humans but are born of unions between humans and non-humans. There are medieval tales in which marriages take place between humans and other beings; for

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example, the tale of Melusine, who is a woman and wife on six days in the week but a serpent on Saturdays, and Walter Map's similar story of an eleventh-century Norman baron, Henno-with-the-teeth, whose beautiful wife (a "brilliant pestilence") turns out to be a dragon in disguise.  

Intermarriage between humans and these part-other beings is a not uncommon theme in medieval fiction, their unions often cemented by a practical bargain. The mortal husband (for example, Sir Launfal) is blessed with riches and worldly success in return for silence and non-interference in his supernatural wife's other, mysterious existence. The condition violated, both success and demon-bride disappear.

These rather disconcerting myths take on a different shape in the mundus inversus, a symbolic parallel universe in existence since at least classical times. This is the world of symbolic inversion in which humans and animals not only meet and merge identities but exchange roles, typically by the (human) master assuming the role and the duties of the (animal) servant. Originally a literary form, the inverted world becomes pictorial in the Middle Ages, familiar in the fantastic pictures in the margins of medieval manuscripts. Man-animal hybrids provide one kind of inverted fantasy in the manuscript margins, but the larger part of the pictorial art of the mundus inversus illustrates hierarchical relationships of various kinds. These fall into a number of specific categories, but it is those involving human and animal, or animal and animal that are especially relevant here. David Kunzle notes the extent to which animals are used to satirize human social and political institutions and power relationships; for example, in the kind of illustration in which the ox drives the peasants harnessed to the plough, the donkey rides the man, and the huntsman is cooked on a spit turned by a hare, while being basted by a goose. Other similarly revenge-based, role-reversal cartoons show geese capturing the fox, mice hanging the cat from the gallows, and hunted animals first sitting in judgement on their persecutors, and then roasting the huntsman and hanging his dogs.

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27 For Melusine, see The Romans of Partenay, or of Lusignen. See also Walter Map, De Nigis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles, Dist. 4, Chapter 9, 344-49.
28 For Sir Launfal, see Donald B. Sands, Middle English Verse Romances, 210-32.
29 For pictures in the margins see Lilian M. C. Randall, Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts; also, Michael Camille, Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art. Figures from the mundus inversus, are also discussed in The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society.
Other role-reversal pictures in the margins find their inspiration in the satire of incongruity rather than in revenge. Prime examples are the marginalia that show animals absurdly involved in various human activities, for instance, the satirical anti-clerical drawings that show a mitred pig preaching, or a fox conferring a blessing on the faithful. There are many literary parallels to these pictures, especially in texts that rely most heavily on incongruous behaviour for their satirical substance. An example in this study is the macabre scene in Dunbar’s *A Ballat of the Abbot of Tungland* where battalions of militant birds strike down a presumptuous human who, dressed in feathers, is attempting to fly. The satire of symbolic inversion is always present at some level, however reduced, in texts in which animals incongruously take on the aspect and functions of men, figuring in role-reversal situations predicated on human individuals, kinds of society or institutions from the human world. Comedy springs from these absurd assumptions; whether the animal mimics courtier, lover, or political or religious figure, the effect is so inappropriate as to induce laughter. At the same time, there is danger here, an unstated, underlying, even ideological theme, something, perhaps, like the predictions of the wheel of fortune: he who rides high should beware, he may yet be laid low.

In spite of the fact that we know that the role-reversal birds and beasts in animal narrative are there specifically to point out truths about mankind, they are, nevertheless, accorded something resembling a human-like subjectivity, so that we are enabled — often to some considerable extent — to feel with them and for them in their human masquerades. In a profounder sense, however, we remain detached. We do not forget that these bird-man or bird-woman hybrids and analogues are but fictions and that, while they may resemble people, and even stand in for specific types of men and women, humans they are not. Farmyard fowls do not speak Latin and discuss medieval philosophy; eagles and falcons are not soldiers nor part of an elaborately courtly society; owls and nightingales cannot be members of religious communities; parrots are neither politicians nor philosophers. The texts in which the reverse is suggested as true constitute excellent tools for the analysis of human nature and human institutions, but their poets’ intentions are aimed at satire, not sympathy.

The continuity between human and animal necessary for the success of this satire depends on the permeability, the difficulty of defining the fragile lines that separate
man from beast. There are always complex and difficult aspects to the dual nature of the animal-human relationship, and the problems inherent in the literary melding of human and beast are multiplied when attempts are made to conflate their two so different worlds. How these difficulties are overcome, how well they are resolved in any given text, must depend upon how the poet handles them — but also, and crucially, on the individual nature of the given, non-human creature. Close attention must be paid to each animal’s own, particular, individual characteristics, so different, so widely divergent from those of both man and other beasts. Henryson writes:

Thocht brutall beistis be irrationall,
That is to say wantand discretiour,
Yit ilk ane in thair kynd naturall
Hes mony divers inclination:
The bair busteous, the wolff, the wylde lyoun,
The fox feinyeit, craftie and cawtelows,
The dog to bark on nicht and keip the hows.

Sa different thay ar in properteis,
Unknowin to man, and sa infinite,
In kynd havand sa fell diversiteis,
My cunning is excludit for to dyte. (397-407)31

In thus commenting on the incalculable diversity in the world of birds and beasts, the poet emphasizes the mystery the animal world is, always has been and remains for us. He also reinstates that line between the animal and the human orders of creation that the poems in this study transgress. Whatever else these texts do, they perhaps refer us to another line dividing humankind from other orders, suggesting a different, more ennobling potential for the human race.

In the ninth century, John Scotus Eriugena considers this question of man’s duality, his own double nature and also the visible and invisible qualities that both unite and separate man and other animals. In his philosophy, the “general life of the world,” that is, of every kind of organic creation, is separated into the rational and irrational; this division applies both to men and angels and to all other living things. Eriugena subdivides these separate classes yet further. His first class comprises angels and men, the second, animals and plants, and each of these four groups possesses specific qualities. The angels are pure intelligences, humans, rational beings, animals have sentience, plants, life. There is, however, Eriugena says, an important sense in which

the human role exceeds that of every other form of life. Man subsumes within himself the qualities of all four of the above groups, "understanding like an angel, reasoning like a man, sensing like an animal and living like a plant."  

In the philosopher's view, man is produced from the earth as a single species among the other animals; there are things he shares with them and they with him. At the same time, he is incomparably far above all other animals, for man and man alone has been made in God's image and likeness. From these things, then, we understand that "man is in all the animals and they are in him" — but that man is above them all. Eriugena tells us that "whoever examines carefully the remarkable and altogether ineffable creation of nature itself will clearly find that the same man is a species in the genus of animals and yet subsists above every species of animal."

Hence one can correctly speak of him both affirmatively and negatively by saying: "Man is an animal; man is not an animal." When one considers in him body, nutritive life, sense, memory of sensibles and all irrational appetite, such as madness or greed, he is altogether an animal; for all of these he has in common with other animals. But in the higher part of himself, where he consists of reason, intellect, the inner sense with all its rational motions called virtues and with the memory of things eternal and divine, he is not an animal in any respect.

The difference is that man is made in the image of God.

When Eriugena says that it is "correctly stated of man, 'He is an animal; he is not an animal'," the philosopher adds, "We can confirm this point from the authority of divine Scripture, for the Apostle says: 'An animal-like (animalis) person does not perceive the things which are God's.'" That clarifies the double-edged distinction that operates in all the bird debates in varying degrees, even if they do not seem to be so much burdened with the obligations such radical oppositions appear to place upon humanity. So far as the doubleness, the continuity and double nature of man and animal are concerned, however, this is a final and conclusive distinction that would have been intelligible to each and everyone of the writers I consider in this thesis, even as it is cancelled for the moment in the interests of the audience's somewhat transgeneric pleasure.

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32 John Scotus Eriugena, Periphyseon On the Division of Nature, 204. In Eriugena's philosophy even plants, "in manifesting a power of life" are regarded as "ensouled bodies," 204.
33 Eriugena, 220.
34 Eriugena, 220.