

The Form of *The Owl and The Nightingale* — In the Light of Medieval Debate —

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It has been agreed that the type of literature to which *The Owl and Nightingale* belongs is called the debate, which was especially characteristic of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Like anything else, this particular type of literature has its predecessors from which it is derived and elaborated according to the need and temperament of succeeding authors. This paper, therefore, traces a few predecessors of the debate type in order to place this Middle English poem historically and examines how it was composed within this context.

The earliest clear examples of the debate type in medieval literature are to be found in a little group of poems belonging to the general period of the Carolingian Renaissance. Among the literary works of this period are two Latin poems, the *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* and *De Rosae Liliique Certamine*.¹

¹ J. W. Atkins, ed., tr., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Cambridge University Press, (1922), p. xlvii.

E. G. Stanley, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London (1960), p. 26.

J. H. Hanford, "Classical Eclogue and Medieval Debate," *The Romanic Review*, II (1911), 19.

Let us examine the outline of the *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* as an example of the Latin group in the hope of making its essential form more evident. The poem opens with an introductory narrative. The shepherds have come down from the hills with their flocks to sing the praises of the cuckoo. Spring begins "in threefold verse," praising the most welcome of the birds and bidding him come soon. Winter answers scoldingly, with reproaches for the cuckoo as the bringer of hunger, labor, and strife, as the disturber of land and sea with his harsh note. At length, the quarrel becomes more personal, Spring turning against Winter and upbraiding him for idleness, and the latter boasting of his wealth and comfort. At last Winter is put to shame. Palaemon, the judge, and the whole throng of shepherds clamor their assent to the words of Spring and hail the cuckoo with one accord. This outline readily reminds us of Latin works such as Virgil's *Seventh Eclogue*.²

This Latin eclogue opens with the Meliboeus's introductory narrative, passes quickly to the song contest between the two shepherds, Corydon and Thyrsis, and ends with Meliboeus's words, in which he judges the contest: "so much I can recall. Thyrsis put up a fight, but all in vain. He lost; and from that day it has been Corydon, Corydon every time with us."³

The Virgilian eclogue has been constantly studied for centuries. Its theme can be interpreted in various ways. However, as far as its literary framework is concerned, it is the debate type. At the same time Virgil might have wanted to describe the real shepherds with whom he had had contact: they enjoyed arguing merely for the sake of argument during the long days

² Hanford, 23.

³ Virgil, *The Pastoral Poems* (The Eclogues), tr. E. V. Eieu, Penguin, (1949), p. 61.

they spent with their flocks, for shepherding is usually a boring business.

According to Hanford, there are no clear examples of the debate in the dreary period of Latin literature up to the beginning of the Carolingian times. From the middle of the eleventh century, however, occasional poems of the debate type are to be found, and in the latter half of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, there comes an influx of Latin debates of every description, the majority of which are written in the so-called goliardic stanza. From this time on, the stream of debate writing follows without interruption.⁴

How do we account for the fact that the debate type of literature which is as old as Virgil, or probably even older, was so popular throughout Western Europe from the period of the Carolingian Renaissance to the end of the Middle Ages? There are a variety of causes. The clue to the answer to this question lies in the activities of Abelard (A.D.1079–1142), a logician, who gave to medieval thought a new direction and a new method. He set out on a search for truth in the midst of the conflict of authoritative doctrines current at the time. He held that an attitude of doubt should precede all scientific search for truth, since doubt led to inquiry, and inquiry, to truth. In other words, he introduced the study of dialectics to twelfth-century scholars.⁵ It is hardly necessary to explain the subsequent developments of the study in this field as far as its debate form is concerned. Thus the debate first flourished in the study of dialectics.

At the same time, many of the debates were a means of satire. They

⁴Hanford, 137.

⁵Atkins, pp. xlviiii–xlix.

C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the 12th Century*, New York, (1927), pp. 351–55.

represent a reaction from the sober philosophical pursuits for truth and are the works of monks and pedagogues. The dramatic element, the exchange of repartee, the contrast in characters, the humiliation of one disputant or the other, all of which are easily made effective by means of the debate form, gave opportunity for a lively and vivid presentation of practically any subject.⁶ Before long this debate type became one of the most popular of literary forms. By the end of the twelfth century it had rapidly developed and had become one of the most characteristic types in the literature of the period.

Alongside the Latin debate type, vernacular types had also developed. Hanford, for example, contrasts two vernacular debates between the rose and the violet, one in Italian, the other in French, with the Latin debate.⁷

The Owl and Nightingale obviously belongs to the group of these vernacular medieval debates. The first thirty-two lines vividly and fully describe "the haunt remote of a certain valley"⁸ (line 2) in which an Owl and a Nightingale are holding a heated argument. To be specific, the Nightingale is perched in a thick hedge with reeds and sedge entangled, safe from her opponent's claw, while the Owl occupies an old tree-stump, which is all overgrown with ivy and is her dwelling-place. Then the real argument begins in the form of dialogue between the two birds, when the Nightingale provokes the argument by saying insultingly, "Monster, fly away! I am the worse for seeing you. Your ugliness spoils my song. My heart sinks, my tongue fails me, when you thrust yourself upon me. I'd rather spit than sing on hearing that gurgling noise of yours" (33-40).

⁶ Hanford, 137-38.

⁷ Hanford, 141.

⁸ The translation is Atkins'.

After each speech, some of which are considerably long, the poet comes in and describes them, how they feel, how they look, what they think about themselves, and so on. His descriptions, which are both subjective, as if he were the Owl or the Nightingale, and objective, as he takes the role of an eyewitness, run in such a way that the reader can get a clear picture of the whole situation in which they are debating. The detailed arguments of the birds go on and on, each boasting of her accomplishments and her usefulness to mankind.

The wren finally intervenes and says that they should stop their argument and make peace. In the end at the suggestion of the wren the birds set out to lay their case before a judge, Nicholas of Guildford. When the Nightingale asks, "Who is to present our statement, and speak before this judge of ours?" (1782–83), and Owl replies that "on that point, I can set your mind at ease; for I can repeat every word from beginning to end; and if I seem to go wrong, protest and put me up" (1784–88). Then they set forth for their judge. However, the poet disclaims knowledge of the result.

In contrast with this English poem, Virgil's *Seventh Eclogue*, one of the prototypes of the debate form, begins with Meliboeus's opening description of the setting to which two shepherds, Corydon and Thyris, drive their flocks. Meliboeus, urged by Daphnis, becomes the judge of the singing match between the two shepherds. Corydon leads off the singing debates, which go on without interruption. In contrast to the speeches of different length of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, each of these speeches is composed exactly of four lines. After much such regular alternation, the debate comes to an end with the verdict of the appointed judge, Meliboeus, as has been stated above.

Roughly speaking, then, the form and the conduct of the debate, as illustrated in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *The Conflictus Veris et Hiemis*

and Virgil's *Seventh Eclogue*, can be summarized as follows: they consist of (1) an introduction which forms a description of the scene and circumstances of the argument, (2) a heated discussion with a certain amount of dramatic event, and (3) a brief judgment pronounced by an appointed judge, though the judgment is not always given, as, for example, in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, among others. Therefore, we can say that the framework of the English poem is almost the same as that of those Latin debate poems.

More needs to be said of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. It is of importance to note, for example, that both birds quote *The Proverbs of Alfred*, the homespun sayings, which enjoyed a popularity in thirteenth-century England, comparable to the sayings of *Poor Richard* in colonial America.⁹ The Latin debate poems, on the other hand, have abundant references to classical authority which are not to be found in the vernacular works. Another important characteristic of this English poem is that it contains references to the formal procedure of the debate, which follows very closely a thirteenth-century law-suit. The choice of words, as often pointed out, is one indication of this. The fact that the two birds bring forward witnesses on their own behalf, and that they do this by quoting certain proverbs of Alfred in support of their statements, is another indication of it.¹⁰

A few words should be devoted to the allegorical aspect of the poem. A number of interpretations have been suggested, such as "the Owl stands for the solemn way of life, and the Nightingale for the joyous way of life,"¹¹ "the contest is between the older didactic and religious poetry and the newer lyric.... The owl, representing the former, claims to sing to men for their

⁹ A. C. Baugh, ed., *A Literary History of England*, New York, (1948), p. 152.

¹⁰ Atkins, pp. lii-iii.

¹¹ Stanley, p. 22.

good and to warn them of the coming judgment. She sees in the song of the nightingale only frivolity and an incitement to wantonness—— a criticism frequently levelled at secular literature during the Middle Ages. The nightingale, as the representative and defender of the new lyric poetry, jeers at the mournfulness of the owl, which only arouses dislike and suspicion, and proclaims that the mission of poetry is to express beauty and to give pleasure."¹²

However, once we start allegorizing, it is really difficult to stop. I am of the opinion that in spite of a great number of possibilities of finding a hidden meaning, the poem should be taken as a story told for its own sake. The following quotation expresses exactly how I feel about this particular poem:

The poet had his eye sharply on the subject and the subject was just an exhibit of two talkative birds hopping from branch to branch, enjoying themselves because they liked to argue. If anything is plain it is that he sympathizes with both sides, exposes the virtues and weakness of both, the gravity and folly of both, and in the happiest manner keeps the balances even. He offers no "solution." Why should he? How could anyone? Let Master Nicholas judge, Master Nicholas who may after all be as much a fiction as the two birds.¹³

Indeed, this approach to the poem does much to make it clear why the reader does not become bored with the poem despite its length. Because of

¹² E. M. Wilson, *Early Middle English Literature*, 3rd ed., London, (1968), p. 161.

¹³ P. Baum, "Foreword," *The Owl and the Nightingale*, tr. G. Eggers, Duke University Press, (1955), pp. xiii-iv.

the poem's length, the poet was able to elaborate a variety of items, great and small, which the birds leisurely, happily, often angrily, and yet humorously argue. What is more, the poem is enriched with its naturalness and freshness evoked by the numerous references to contemporary life and scenes, with "the frankness with which the birds bring their accusation against each other, and the liveliness and skill with which they meet each charge."¹⁴ The birds are extraordinarily human in their emotion and reasoning, but they remain birds from beginning to end. I think the poet made a happy choice of making these two birds female. It is quite plausible that women who have leisure time are most likely to enjoy the kind of argument which the Owl and the Nightingale have. This feminine delight in bantering argumentation may contribute to our final impression or supposition of this English poem as characterized by apparent friendliness, intimacy, and sociability. These are unique features of this English vernacular poem, features which are absent in the Latin debate poems.

Therefore, we can say with confidence that although *The Owl and the Nightingale* certainly owes its literary framework to the simpler Virgilian eclogue and medieval Latin debate poems, it is remarkably different from them and is a great literary achievement in its own right.

¹⁴ Baugh, p. 157.