

Belligerent Mothers and the Power of Feminine Speech in *The Owl and the Nightingale*

Wendy A. Matlock

THE MIDDLE ENGLISH poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* famously records the dispute between a hostile Nightingale and a bellicose Owl. “Þat oþer 3er a faukun bredde,” begins one of the Nightingale’s accounts of the Owl’s offensive character. She continues: “His nest noȝt wel he ne bihedde: / Þarto þu stele in o dai, / & leidest þaron þi fole ey” (Some years ago, a falcon was breeding, and she didn’t take good care of her nest. You crept in there one day, and laid in there your own nasty egg).¹ This anecdote references two reproductive bodies—falcon and owl—and is related by a bird who, it turns out, has produced young herself. At the level of the avian dispute, the Nightingale relates it to characterize herself as an arbiter of maternal mores and to vilify her opponent. The Nightingale expresses outrage at the Owl’s negligent maternity: her illicit fostering abdicates responsibility for her own offspring and, further, takes advantage of a distracted mother, disrupting familial and species bonds. Structurally, the narrative concerns storytelling itself and acknowledges the fertility of intertextuality. The Nightingale sneaks this nasty-egg narrative, borrowed from Marie de France’s Anglo-Norman fables, into an extended disputation, the scholastic tool designed to transform received ideas into

1. *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation*, edited by Neil Cartlidge (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), lines 101–4. All subsequent quotations of text and translation come from this edition; line numbers are given in parentheses within the text.

understanding.² With this act, the poem makes English art by combining scholastic practice and popular poetry, Latin and vernacular sources, and male and female authority. It elides such seeming oppositions to produce a work celebrated for its virtuosity. Two of the poem's modern editors effusively rhapsodize: Neil Cartlidge explicitly calls it a "virtuoso performance," and J. W. H. Atkins enthuses that it is "a marvel of literary art before our medieval art was born."³ Theoretically, *The Owl and the Nightingale* illustrates feminist and environmentalist ideas about the nature of the individual, reproductive politics, and information technology. Coincidences between reproduction and communication, reason and survival, and individual and species structure the thirteenth-century poem. These overlapping categories are similar to those feminist and science studies scholar Donna Haraway observes in evolutionary theory. In postmodern terms, Haraway points out that "reproductive politics and communications technologies" are "both aspects of strategic reasoning in relation to survival, and they are both emblematic of the breakdown of the hermetically sealed individual."⁴

The poem associates natural, corporeal, and feminine in ways that trigger modern essentialist responses and postmodern reactions to them, but, crucially, it reveals, even revels in, how constructed those associations are. In fact, *The Owl and the Nightingale* only works because it assembles the birds' opposition from their similarities: they are singers and impassioned debaters united by their mutual antagonism; both exhibit vast stores of technical and popular learning; both are female; both are mothers; and *both are birds*. This poem, which seems to rely on binaries, in fact questions and disrupts them, unearthing how matter and meaning are always in the process of becoming. The poem conflates

2. Cartlidge includes three analogues as appendix D in his edition of the poem and notes, "There are a number of different versions of this fable, but *The Owl and the Nightingale* most closely resembles the one by Marie de France." *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 99.

3. Neil Cartlidge, "Medieval Debate-Poetry and *The Owl and the Nightingale*," in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 237-57, at 252, and J. W. H. Atkins, introduction, *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), lxxxii.

4. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 375.

the birds as individuals and as representatives of their respective species, productively merging the particular and the universal, inviting readings of their multiplicity as generators of discourse that (re)produces their identity and of offspring that assure the survival of their species.⁵ Moreover, the titular birds are simultaneously avian and human, forging their identities from the antagonisms and anecdotes they exchange. Indeed, sustained treatments of the disputants as connatural, that is, as dissolving “distinctions between the human and the animal,” appear in Jill Mann’s *From Aesop to Reynard* and Carolyn Van Dyke’s “Touched by an Owl?”⁶ Van Dyke, for example, concludes that the Owl “is not simply a bird with a human voice; she is a subjectivity that knows itself to be of two species. . . . She channels the feelings of a particular woman.”⁷ Part of what marks them as particular women is their maternity. The birds’ maternity is more than incidental to their character and antagonism; it foregrounds feminine concerns as productive by using these specific voices to domesticate scholastic authority in the evolving Middle English vernacular. Their digressions on bodies and scatology, on childbearing and childrearing, become fertilizer that expands maternal authority into public, intellectual discourse. In addition to calling forth their own communicative powers, both characters aggressively recount narratives best known from the work of Marie de France, a voice feminist scholars have successfully restored to the canon, to condemn her foe. In this light, *The Owl and the Nightingale* encourages feminist labor when it recounts a woman’s writing without acknowledging her authorship and material feminist analysis when it puts such an artful dispute in the voices of vividly embodied avian mothers where the only named human is a man,

5. My thinking stems from Haraway’s readings in *Primate Visions*, which she uses to revise “Persistent western narratives about difference,” and “reproduction,” and “survival” (377). The poem’s tendency toward integration can also be seen in efforts classify the birds’ precisely. For example, Cartlidge observes that the Owl possesses characteristics of the two most common owl species in Britain, the barn owl and the tawny owl, and concludes that she “should perhaps be seen as an imaginative conflation of the two.” *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 46, 14n28.

6. Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168; Carolyn Van Dyke, “Touched by an Owl? An Essay in Vernacular Ethology.” *Postmedieval* 7.2 (2014): 1–24.

7. Van Dyke. “Touched by an Owl?,” 20–21.

the famous “Maitster Nichole,” and the narrator remains intriguingly androgynous. Christopher Cannon may discount the poem’s “feminism” but he rightly concludes that it invites feminist analysis.⁸

Avian Self-Fashioning: Bodies of and in the Environment

The characters’ connaturality unveils the interdependence of art and environment. In verse, as in reality, humans, animals, and plants exist in a “contact zone.”⁹ Life, human or otherwise, cannot be separated from “the environment.” Beginning with a presumably human but unsexed narrator observing the poem’s action while on a rural retreat, *The Owl and the Nightingale* quickly situates the titular birds in two very specific vegetative habitats.¹⁰ The Nightingale perches on a flowering branch surrounded by a “vaste þicke hegge, / Imeind mid spire & grene segge” (17-18; dense and impenetrable hedge, intermingled with reeds and green sedge-grass). In contrast, the Owl resides on an old, ivy-covered tree-stump. Much critical ink has been shed interpreting the cultural significance of these two birds placed in their apparently natural biotopes. On the one hand, the poem records observable truths: owls do

8. He writes, “*The Owl and the Nightingale* is not a feminist poem, but the truths it finds latent in certain structures of belief are exactly those which feminism will later embrace.” Christopher Cannon, “*The Owl and the Nightingale* and the Meaning of Life,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, no. 2 (2004): 251-78, at 271, doi:10.1215/10829636-34-2-251. My thinking on the importance of materiality and discourse, nature and culture in feminist theory has been greatly influenced by the collection *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

9. Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” in Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms*, 237-64, at 238.

10. Cartlidge suggests that the poem’s conventional vernal opening recalls the *chansons d’aventure*. These Old French poems typically feature male narrators, but the character of the narrator in *The Owl and the Nightingale* remains elusive. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 44, 1-2n. Most scholars refer to the narrator with masculine pronouns, but two do speculate that the author at least was a woman. See Alexandra Barratt, “Flying in the Face of Tradition: A New View of *The Owl and the Nightingale*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1987): 471-85, and J. Eadie, “The Authorship of *The Owl and the Nightingale*: A Reappraisal,” *English Studies* 67 (1986): 471-77.

nest in hollow trees and nightingales prefer the edges of forests.¹¹ On the other hand, the natural world proves thorny with inscribed meanings. Nightingales are symbolically associated with spring and love, hence our songbird's blossomy sanctuary; owls with winter and death, as the evergreen ivy and dead trunk showcase.¹² These associations establish the birds' characters in ways that correspond to their subsequent dialogue, and meaning is transferred across sites. For example, the Nightingale later celebrates her association with springtime flowers and rebirth, crowing: "Ech wizt is glad for mine þinge, / & blisseþ hit wanne ich cume, / & hi3teþ a3en mine kume. / Þe blostme ginneþ springe & sprede" (434-37; Every creature is glad because of me. They rejoice about it when I turn up and they look forward to my coming. The blossoms are then sprouting and growing). Similarly, the Owl defends her winter singing as suitable to Christmas festivities but also as a solace to humans enduring the miseries of cold weather (473-540). The plants give/gain meaning from the animals; the animals give/gain meaning from the human; the human gives/gains meaning from the animals. Different agential possibilities exist in these entanglements even as they form boundaries distinguishing flora from fauna, animal from human, ornithological from mythological. Human, animal, and plant all prove dynamic, meaningful agents. The avian characters illustrate what Karen Barad calls "posthumanist performativity," whereby knowledge and being are always "mutually implicated."¹³ In their conversation, the birds reveal how, in Barad's words, "We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because 'we' are *of* the world."

At stake in recognizing this agential "intra-activity" is not only a construction of the natural but also of the unnatural.¹⁴ Indeed, the birds'

11. Thomas L. Reed, Jr. praises, "The disputants describe each other with the precision of Audubons." *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 220.

12. Kathryn Hume offers a useful overview of symbolic interpretations, particularly intellectual and political allegories in *The Owl and the Nightingale: The Poem and Its Critics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

13. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," in Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms*, 120-54, at 147.

14. The term is Barad's. See "Posthumanist Performativity," especially pages 142-44.

dispute begins when the Nightingale calls the Owl “vnwiȝt” (33). The first word of dialogue in a poem that consists almost entirely of dialogue, “vnwiȝt” merits close attention. It adds the negative prefix “un-” to the Old English “wiht,” the word for “a creature or being.”¹⁵ To be unwiht is to be not “a living creature,” not “an animate being.” What does it mean then, when the Nightingale addresses the Owl as “vnwiȝt”? In its negative form, the term appears three times in the poem. Otherwise, it is rare, attested to primarily in the thirteenth century. The *MED* defines the noun with its negative prefix as “an evil spirit, a fiend; specif., the devil” or as “a foul or monstrous creature.” The poem also provides the *MED*’s only example of the word as an adjective, meaning, “grotesque, frightful.” Is the Nightingale accusing her antagonist of being non-living (i.e., dead), of being non-human (i.e., animal), of being non-natural (i.e., monstrous)? This question is not easily answered, exacerbating the poem’s destabilization of binary meanings. One bird calling another “vnwiȝt” divides them into things made and things unmade, creatures natural and unnatural, even as it imagines animals with human powers of speech, anthropomorphizing nonhuman characters by giving them eloquence and powerful emotions. The accusation provokes rage: the Owl, after all, waits to respond until evening, even though her heart nearly bursts with her violent reply, a promise to hurt the Nightingale if she would only come out from her protective branches.

Intriguingly, the evidence the Nightingale offers to support her accusation that the Owl is unnatural relates particularly to the bird of prey’s body and her misuse of its reproductive capabilities. Though their disagreement extends to many different topics, the songbird is *initially* put off by her foe’s body, her appearance, diet, and childrearing practices. She complains, “Me is þe wurs þat ich þe so! / Iwis, for þine vule lete / Wel oft ich mine song forlete” (34-36; Just looking at you is bad for me. In fact I’m frequently put off my singing because of your ugly countenance). The details she singles out in the Owl’s appearance are the very characteristics that distinguish owls from other birds: her small body and enormous head (“Grettere is þin heued þan þu al” [74]); her “eȝen boþ col-blake & brode,” where “brode” can mean both wide

15. This is definition 1a for “Wight (n.)” in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

and far apart, an accurate description of the features that enable owls' binocular vision (75); and her hard, sharp, hooked bill (79). Similarly, she stigmatizes the Owl's fondness for frogs, snails, and mice (85–87). Owls do eat invertebrates and small birds and mammals, so the Nightingale's disgust may stem from her own anxiety about becoming owl food. That possibility elaborates the intra-activity of all these different species, giving agency to small birds like the Nightingale, as well as the frogs, snails, mice, and other birds that feed owls (and also some humans).¹⁶ Similarly, the Owl attacks the Nightingale's body and diet. She describes the little bird's unattractive body: “Þu art dim an of fule howe / An þinchest a lutel soti clowe” (577–78; You're a dim and dirty colour; and you look just like a little, sooty ball). She also stresses that the Nightingale's diet is as unappealing to the Owl as the Owl's is to the Nightingale:

3et þu atuittest me mine mete,
 An seist þat ich fule wi3tes ete!
 Ac wat etestu, þat þu ne li3e,
 Bute attercoppe & fule uli3e
 An wormes, 3if þu mi3te finde
 Among þe uolde of harde rinde?
 (597–602)

And yet you twit me for what I eat, accusing me of eating filthy creatures! But in truth what do you eat, apart from spiders, nasty flies, and worms, as long as you can find them in the crevices of the tough bark?

The birds' criticisms highlight the active qualities of agency, showing it to be less an attribute than an ongoing activity.¹⁷ The conversation reveals their sustained interaction with the natural world—they perch

16. Van Dyke maintains that “questions about the species—indeed, the biological kingdom—to which they belong” has “shaped scholarly response” to the poem. See “Names of the Beasts: Tracking the *Animot* in Medieval Texts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 1–51, at 21–22, doi:10.1353/sac.2012.0006.

17. I am drawing on Alaimo's discussion of material agency in “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms,” especially on page 248.

on branches, seek food in tree bark—and with the animals that inhabit it, especially insects and small mammals they consume for nourishment. These points of contact become the vehicles through which both bodies and meanings emerge. Because bird bodies provide fodder for this debate, material becomes indistinguishable from meaning, prey indistinguishable from predator, and the environment indistinguishable from art.

The poem constructs the avian characters and their knowledge through their disputational performance, and femininity forms the core of that process. The poem unambiguously sexes the birds as female. This unequivocal femininity, however, does not reduce gender to a mere reflection of social or even biological constructs, just as their characters are never entirely human nor entirely avian. The birds' feminine identities radiate out from diverse, unstable fields, including grammar, culture, biology, and poetry. Alexandra Barratt explains that *The Owl and the Nightingale* consistently preserves grammatical gender (usually absent in Middle English) and that in Old English owl is feminine and nightingale varies between masculine and feminine.¹⁸ Additionally, Barratt lists the birds' preoccupations with topics associated with women, from childrearing to housekeeping to women's suffering in love. These linguistic constructions of femininity pair with the corporeal ones that so exercise our Owl and Nightingale, their noisy, messy, reproductive bird bodies. These bodies correspond to femininity, language, and animals, but the poem resists denigrating these oft condemned poles in traditional Western dichotomies. Instead, *The Owl and the Nightingale* depicts garrulous, eloquent, wrathful, sympathetic, illogical, logical birds that insist on and resist such closure. All of these constructions of femininity accumulate in the avian disputants, revealing that gendered identities don't simply reflect nature or culture but continually, actively, perform both.

¹⁸ Barratt, "Flying in the Face of Tradition," 477.

Reproductive Performance

Reproduction proves essential to the birds' performances as women and as debaters, because their maternity enables and constrains the knowledge that they cite and that their dispute produces. Returning to my opening example, the Nightingale's adaptation of the fable of the hawk and the owl singles out the Owl's maternity as a sign of her reproductive potential and her pedagogical responsibility by characterizing her adversary as an aggressive and prolific reproductive body. The analogue by Marie de France describes the rapine birds as neighbors and friends, not as housebreaker and victim, and the short narrative concentrates on how the Owl's offspring are recognized when they soil the nest like owls even though they have been raised by more refined birds of prey to assert a conservative moral about the dominance of nature over nurture. Thus, in Marie de France's fable, the hawk shouts, "I can hatch [the owls] out of the egg and keep them warm and brood over them, but I can't change their nature. Cursed be such fledglings!" (de l'oeuf les poi jeo bein geter / e par chalur e par cover, / mais niënt fors de lur nature. / Maldite seit tels nurreture!).¹⁹ The hostile Nightingale in the Middle English dispute wishes to besmirch her opponent with even more than the filth produced by her poorly potty-trained owlets. The songbird's fable vilifies her opponent's maternal dysfunction. It is not the fact of maternity that bothers her here—later she admits that she herself has borne offspring and never sings when she is breeding (1470); rather, she is upset by the Owl's maternal failings. In her story, the Owl transgresses the boundaries of the falcon's home, engages in deceitful fecundity, and abdicates responsibility for her offspring. In modern terminology, the Nightingale figures her opponent as a gender-bending deadbeat dad, and the accusation produces two opposing responses. On the one hand, the Nightingale is inspired to sing: "He song so lude & so scharpe, / Ri3t so me grulde schille harpe" (141-42; she sang so loudly and so penetratingly that it was as if ringing harps were being played). On the other hand, the Owl is reduced to an insubstantial threat of violence—her

19. Edition and translation from Mary Lou Martin, *The Fables of Marie de France: An English Translation* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1984), 206-9, lines 29-32.

immediate reply merely taunts her aggressor to come out and see who is fairer. The two reactions highlight what Mary Beth Rose identifies as the “potentially contradictory truths” about maternal authority in Western culture: first, it acknowledges the need for maternal authority, because the Owl is both fertile and inspirational to the Nightingale’s beautiful singing; and, second, it reveals the difficulty of connecting that authority to public power, because the Owl abdicates responsibility for her offspring and initially fails to respond to the attack.²⁰ Both truths signal the difficulty of connecting reproductive and cultural power, but the entire poem celebrates the immense potential of maternal power given that the exchange is merely the opening salvo in a wide-ranging and erudite debate. The two birds have not even decided to seek arbitration yet when the Nightingale issues this sally.

Once they agree that Nicholas of Guildford will be a suitable judge, the Owl asserts her rigor and success as a teacher, an important detail in this poem that turns scholastic dispute to vernacular interests. She responds directly to the Nightingale’s attack on her maternity, assuring us that her nest is cozy and that she teaches her young to take care of their business far from it:

Mi nest is holȝ & rum amidde.
So hit is softest mine bridde,
Hit is broiden al abute.
Vrom þe neste uor wiþute,
Þarto hi god to hore node:
Ac þat þu menest ich hom forbode.
(643–48)

My nest is hollow and spacious in the middle. It’s interwoven all around so that it’s as soft as possible for my chicks. Far beyond the nest, that’s where they go to do their business: but what you accuse them of is something I don’t permit them.

20. Mary Beth Rose, *Plotting Motherhood in Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern Literature* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 4.

Just as the poem equates embodiment with knowledge, so it maintains that mothers must provide early instruction on how to control bodies. The poem builds on the two birds' maternal authority, invoking their experiences as mothers and nest builders and also their learning as rhetoricians and Christians.

The Power of Mothers' Speech

The poem finds rich inspiration in women's words, focusing on dialogue exclusively between female speakers, including the Wren, who breaks in at line 1717. Further, the birds ventriloquize the work of Marie de France at key moments. The Anglo-Norman poet appears in discussions of both the Owl's and the Nightingale's maternity, providing narrative authority for the birds' condemnation of each other's maternal deficiencies. Specifically, the birds accuse one another of abandoning their offspring via narratives drawn from Marie de France. Whereas the Nightingale references the moralizing *Fables*, the Owl summarizes one of the *Lais*, *Laiüstic*, the story of an illicit and ill-fated love affair that culminates in a nightingale's death and orphans her chicks. Both birds, then, justify their childrearing practices in clever intertextual responses to the important female poet, founding a gendered literary tradition that redefines maternal duties to empower feminine speech. Compared to the birds' frequent and unreliable references to King Alfred, the allusions to Marie appear to be the real abandoned eggs.²¹ Never marked as quotations or borrowings, they are fully integrated into the birds' voices, sneakily establishing female intertextual authority only for those already familiar with the tradition. These displaced eggs become innocent offspring of an unknown source raised in a new nest, implicitly inviting questions about their mother and their appropriation into a new language and context.

As we have seen, the Owl directly refutes the Nightingale's accusation that she leaves her chicks for other mothers to rear. The Nightingale, in contrast, agrees with her antagonist's story but reinterprets its meaning by recounting a sequel to *Laiüstic* in which King Henry banishes

21. Cartlidge notes, "The authority of King Alfred is invoked on thirteen occasions, but the poet is clearly not referring to any of the works that are generally ascribed to Alfred." *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Introduction, xxxix.

and fines the man who murdered his wife's beloved songbird. She brags that the husband lost his happiness, and, even more delightfully for the Nightingale, her species gained honor and she herself became a more assured singer. She celebrates, "Euer eft ich dar þe bet speke" (1106; Ever afterwards I could speak more confidently) and brags, "Nu ich mai singe war ich wulle" (1109; Now I can sing just where I like). Her female voice, she insists, is limited only by her own desires. Thus, the Owl's narrative provokes the Nightingale to document her right to speak. She elides individual and species and, at the same time, justifies her voice independent from family, lineage, or blood relationships. The Nightingale's elision invites further reflection on the conflation of bodies, knowledge, and survival. She identifies as, not with, the dead bird in the narrative, turning life and death into permeable categories. Further, the death of the individual allows for the survival of the species, and the Nightingale insists that her orphaned chicks thrived despite her absence because of the king's fair and efficient justice. After her violent murder, her young remain "isunde," physically safe, and "bliþe," psychologically happy (1102 and 1104). In fact, the Nightingale goes so far as to insist that the entire sordid episode "was wurþsipe al mine kunne" (1099; was an honour to my whole family). Her death secured protection for her young and renown for her species. The line between individual reproduction and species survival is blurred as the Nightingale zealously asserts the power of her voice. The stolen eggs transcend voice, gender, literary traditions, and languages.

Women's speech is not celebrated unquestionably in the poem, however. Cannon notes that the birds' shrill voices and bickering tongues correspond to female stereotypes developed in learned medieval misogynous writings like the *Ad Herennium*.²² Further, as often as they authorize their voices in their discourse, the birds' debate depends on male authority. Indeed, their faith in the discernment of male authority figures permeates the poem, from the explicit references to King Alfred, to the Nightingale's faith in royal justice, to their mutual acclaim for Nicholas of Guildford. Whether as sources of proverbial wisdom or as reliable arbiters, male figures undergird the entire debate. For the Nightingale,

22. Cannon, "The Owl and the Nightingale," 259–60.

King Henry's condemnation of the jealous husband absolves her of any wrong-doing, secures her chicks' futures, and assures the worthiness of her species. Her confidence in authoritative judgment mirrors the dueling birds' celebration of Nicholas of Guildford. Early in the debate, when the Owl's threat of violence jeopardizes the discourse, the Nightingale recommends they seek out legitimate judgment. She suggests:

Ac lete we awei þos cheste,
Vor suiche words boþ unwreste,
& fo we on mid ri3te dome,
Mid faire worde & mid ysome.
Þe3 we ne bo at one acorde,
We mu3e bet mid fayre worde.
(177-82)

But let's leave off this quarrelling, for this kind of language is worthless. We should adopt some proper procedure, using fair and peaceable words. Even though we don't agree with each other, we can better plead our cases in decent language with propriety and decorum.

Her effort to keep the disagreement verbal repeats the phrase "fayre worde" twice as a pointed contrast to and censure of words that are "unwreste," worthless. This desire for productive discourse promises to unite their embodied, maternal experiences with their wordy, scholastic sparring, as we see when the Nightingale explains that proper oversight will allow the two disputants to speak their minds eloquently: "& mai hure eijer wat hi wile, / Mid ri3te segge & mid skile" (185-86; Then each of us can rightfully and reasonably say whatever we might wish). The Owl agrees to her foe's advice only after the songbird suggests a male arbiter, Nicholas of Guildford (191). His restrained language as much as his discerning mind recommends him to the Nightingale, and she says, "He is wis an war of worde" (192; He's wise and careful with his words). The Owl agrees but for different reasons, praising his conduct, not his words, as the source of his wisdom; she remarks that although he was once wild, he has now cooled and will "gon a ri3te weie" (214;

take the proper course). The encomium for Nicholas comes from both birds, suggesting the value of both well-chosen words and experience in developing a sound intellect. Further, their consensus about his wisdom allows them to continue their conversation even in his absence. Nicholas's absent male authority, thus, licenses the female authority articulated in the poem.

Few readers have found the birds right or reasonable, but they are prolix. The wide-ranging debate never reaches judgment, marking dispute itself as the essential moment in knowledge creation. Famously inconclusive, the poem concludes when the Owl promises that, when they reach Master Nicholas, "for al ende of orde / Telle ich con word after worde" (1785–86; I can recite every word from beginning to end) and concedes that the Nightingale can interrupt her "3ef þe þinçþ þat ich misrempe" (1787; if you think that I go astray). The promise of unending disputation resonates, according to Alex J. Novikoff, "with the procedures of debate exposed in Aristotle's *New Logic* and the institutionalization of scholastic learning."²³ The birds promise more words, but the poem ends when the narrator insists there are none (1793–94). Cannon finds in that contrast the premise that "the *whole* of their debate" matters, since dialectic allows "keenly held positions" to be "reviewed, revised, and transformed."²⁴ Altogether the poem encodes disputation as information technology, a means of producing truth and preserving knowledge. As such, the efflorescence of female voices within a promise of male authority corresponds with Caroline Walker Bynum's description

23. Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 124. Many others have studied the poem's relationship to scholastic discourse, including James J. Murphy, who claims that "no satisfactory understanding of the poem is possible until we comprehend the author's early medieval understanding of the relation between grammar, rhetoric and dialectic as being simply different points on a continuum of discourse." "Rhetoric and Dialectic in *The Owl and the Nightingale*," in *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 198–230, at 200. See also Tamara A. Goeglein, "The Problem of Monsters and Universals in 'The Owl and the Nightingale' and John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 94, no. 2 (1995): 190–206.

24. Cannon, "The Owl and the Nightingale," 271.

of maternal imagery in late medieval religious writing, whereby for male authors, “*mothering* meant not only nurturing but also an affectivity that was needed to complement authority.”²⁵ The birds’ songs, denaturalized as human speech, naturalize debate as a maternal force predicated on authoritative but absent judgment.²⁶ That force transcends sexual difference to produce intellectual truths. The birds in all their messy maternity become vehicles for the search for truth, not mere rhetorical ornamentation. In *Primate Visions*, Donna Haraway asks, “In what specific places, out of which social and intellectual histories, and with what tools is nature constructed as an object of erotic and intellectual desire?”²⁷ Responding to Haraway’s question from the perspective of the Middle Ages glimpsed through *The Owl and the Nightingale* reveals fertile opportunities to ground our feminist and ecocritical work in historical texts. As nature and culture are mythic poles, so are present and past. We see that by encoding the birds as mothers, as orators, and as representatives of both nonhuman agents and personified humans, the poem complicates our understanding of the role nature plays in human desire for understanding.

Kansas State University

25. Caroline Walker Bynum. “. . . And Women His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 151–79 at 158.

26. For Edmund Reiss, the poem, like Abelard’s *Sic et non*, offers real contradiction and asks readers to resolve it: “the reader must aim at arriving at the most complete and adequate answer possible, and this will, of course, be one that recognizes and takes into account all aspects of the debate and the debaters.” See “Conflict and Its Resolution in Medieval Dialogues,” *Arts Libéraux et Philosophie au Moyen Âge* (Montréal: Institut D’Études Médiévales, 1969), 863–72, at 871.

27. Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 1.