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Debate in Medieval English and Middle-Scots Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis aims to examine forms of debate literature in the medieval and Early Modern periods. In doing so, I aim to determine how these forms functioned within the societies which produced them. From the many surviving examples of debate poetry written in Middle English, it is clear that the genre enjoyed a period of widespread popularity in the Middle Ages. In order to understand how the form medieval debate poetry related to its audiences, the origins of the genre must first be examined. The first chapter of this study will consider the origins of debate poetry in the teaching of scholastic disputation in early European universities. The foundation of the universities and their teaching of disputation appear to have had a major influence on the number of debate poems being produced during the period. In this section I will discuss the texts used in the teaching of debate, and how teaching was administered. In the second chapter, I will consider the points raised in the opening chapter in relation to two specific debate poems; the anonymously written *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*. With reference to these two poems, I will discuss the origins and literary traditions that influenced them, in relation to their possible social functions. I will also question the irresolution that the two poems end on, and how this form of the unresolved debate is essential in understanding how they were received among their original audiences. By focussing on these aspects of my chosen poems, I aim to determine how they functioned in relation to the expectations of their original audiences. The final chapter will consider flyting as a distinct, popular form of debate literature. In this chapter, I intend to discuss how different forms of flyting, such as those found in Middle-Scots and Early Modern drama, while are not entirely independent of debate poetry, can be viewed as their own specific style.

Debate in Medieval English and Middle-Scots Poetry

<u>Contents</u>

Preface

During the medieval and Renaissance periods, debate literature was a highly popular form of entertainment. The popularity of the genre is clearly evident through the vast amount of examples which survive from medieval and Early Modern sources, and the variety of styles in which it appears. Before we, as modern readers, can fully understand how this form of entertainment functioned within its original societies, we must first consider its origins and influences. Through examination of Middle English debate poems, it seems clear that the form was heavily influenced by the teaching of disputation in early universities. While many scholars acknowledge this connection, few actually discuss how these lessons appear in the poems themselves. This thesis aims to examine in what ways medieval teaching of debate can be found within the poems, and discuss their influence on later flytings. In doing so, we can begin to understand more clearly how this form of literature functioned within its original societies.

The first chapter of this study examines the ancient texts used in the medieval teaching of debate. The recovery of Aristotle and the New Logic at this time had a massive impact on the university curriculum. The *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations* in particular played a huge part in the teaching of scholastic disputation, becoming prescribed reading in most major European universities. Their significance is highlighted through the writing of John of Salisbury, a twelfth-century scholar, whose *Metalogicon* provides an invaluable insight into the teaching of logic in the Middle Ages. The structure of teaching and students' progression through this course of learning was heavily influenced by the emphasis placed on debate skills. In order for students to progress, they often had to participate in a debate in front of an audience of fellow students and university faculty.

Such performances of debates became popular forms of entertainment, with the audience often participating in different ways. Through the performative nature of the scholastic debates, and their enjoyment as a form of public entertainment, we can begin to see how they influenced the literature of the time.

The second chapter examines the conventions of medieval debate poetry in relation to the teaching of scholastic disputation. With reference to two particular poems, *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the chapter will highlight the ways in which the form of debate poetry was influenced by the teaching of disputations in the universities. Through the content and structure of their opponents' arguments, these poems clearly demonstrate knowledge of Aristotle and the New Logic. In *The Owl and the Nightingale* we are presented with two birds who debate a number of issues, such as the quality of their song and their appearance. After an initial exchange of threats, the debate is then proposed as a civilised alternative. Through the debate that follows, we are presented with a number of features reminiscent of the scholastic disputations, such as the roles adopted by the birds, and the appointment of a judge. The debate is occasionally interrupted by outbursts of violence, as the scholastic debates sometimes were. The irresolution of the poem is also interesting, considering its form as a debate. Its failure to offer a solution tells us much about the poem's social functions, and how its original audiences would have interacted with it.

The debate of *Wynnere and Wastoure* also ends unresolved. While *The Owl and the Nightingale* was intentionally written without a resolution, *Wynnere and Wastoure* remains unfinished due to pages of the manuscript being lost. From what survives of the poem, it seems reasonable to assume that not much of it is missing. What is left, however, is a very balanced judgement from the king. In the second chapter I shall discuss what the irresolution of these poems could tell us about their social functions. The debate of

Wynnere and Wastoure is also presented as a civilised alternative to a physical confrontation, with the allegorical figures of Winner and Waster personified as knights. From the structure and content of their debate, knowledge of Aristotle is again evident. Through the examination of these two poems, and their connections to the teaching of debate, I intend to determine how they functioned in relation to their original societies.

The final chapter of this study will examine flyting as a form of debate literature. This form can be found in poems as early as *Beowulf*, although its tone is somewhat different to that of its medieval and Early Modern descendants. The form of flyting was particularly popular in Middle-Scots, and was often performed as courtly entertainment. In these flytings the audiences were encouraged to judge the winner themselves, and there is much evidence which points towards their performance in public. The performative nature of flytings led to their inclusion in drama, becoming particularly popular in the plays of Shakespeare. In the final chapter I will argue that while the content of the flytings were somewhat different to the medieval debate poems, their social intentions were very similar. As well as their similar functions to the debate poems, a connection between the flytings and the scholastic debate is also evident. Through examining the teaching of scholastic disputation, the social functions of the debate poems and the flytings becomes clear.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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For their words of encouragement I am thankful to my parents, family, and my partner Stephen. I also owe thanks to my fellow student, Kavan Stafford, for his company over the past year. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my close friends and colleagues, and thank them for enduring my recent inability to discuss anything other than this thesis.

1. Scholastic Disputation in the Middle Ages

In order to fully understand the form of medieval and Early Modern debate literatures, and how they functioned within their societies, we must first examine the genre's origins in the scholastic disputations of early universities. The aim of this chapter is to provide a historical background to the classical texts that influenced the debate traditions taught in the medieval universities of Europe, in order to show how they influenced the popular literature of the time. To do so, I shall examine the transmission and teaching of the instructional texts used in universities (particularly those of Aristotle), the structure and performance of the scholastic debate, and discuss the wider historical context that the literary genre of debate poetry was placed.

While it is widely acknowledged that the popularity of debate poetry was influenced by the teaching of scholastic disputation, few studies actually consider how these lessons appear in the poems themselves. By using this chapter to examine the teaching, structure and performance of debate in the universities, the full extent of their influence will become clear in the following chapters.

In the *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, Ebbesen discusses the ancient logic of '*auctores,*' such as Aristotle, as being the main source of medieval scholastic knowledge.[1] This influence is also discussed by Courtenay, who asserts that in the arts faculties of medieval universities, logic was 'by far the most important' subject taught.[2] As he explains, the texts used in the teaching of logic were separated into two categories: the Old Logic, which he describes as being 'known before the twelfth century,'

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[1] Sten Ebbesen, 'Ancient scholastic logic as the source of medieval scholastic logic' in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* ed. by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 101-127 (p. 101)
[2] William J. Courtenay, *Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.32

and the New Logic, 'which was recovered by the mid-twelfth century.'[3] The works of Aristotle were particularly influential in the teaching of logic, with his *Categories*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations* being just a few of the essential works cited by Courtenay. Novikoff has also made particular reference to the New Logic and its influence in the universities, stating that it had a 'profound impact on the development of scholastic disputation, lending authority and guidance to the practice most characteristic of the medieval schoolroom.'[4]

If this statement by Novikoff is indeed true, it is important to understand how it came to be. In *The Medieval Culture of Disputation*, Novikoff gives a detailed account of the transmission of Aristotle's ancient texts into European culture, which he describes as being made available in Latin through 'three clearly distinguishable waves of translation.'[5] It is the second of these waves of translations that is relevant to this particular study. This wave commenced at the beginning of the twelfth century and, as stated by Novikoff, 'catalysed the scholastic practice of disputation.'[6] This growing interest in Aristotle and logic was inspired by the select few works on logic already available in Latin during this period, including Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, the philosopher's introduction to logic. This resulted in the renewed interest in Boethius' translations of many other of Aristotle's works on logic, including the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*, both of which had a huge impact on the university curriculum. This impact is clear from the amount of surviving manuscripts, translations, and evidence on how they were received and used within the context of university learning, which will be considered later in this chapter.

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[3] Ibid
[4] Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice and Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 106
[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid, p.107

It is evident that Latin translations of the works of Aristotle were being taught in European universities by at least the beginning of the thirteenth century. In 1210 Peter of Corbeil, the archbishop of Sens, banned the teaching of Aristotle in the University of Paris. The recorded condemnation of Aristotle's works state that: 'Neither the books of Aristotle on natural philosophy nor their commentaries are to be read at Paris in public or secret, and this we forbid under penalty of excommunication.'[7] Lecturers on Aristotle were condemned as heretics, as his works were considered 'a threat to the Christian faith.'[8] This ban was in place for over two decades, after which it seems to have been disregarded. The fast-growing interest in these texts after this period, however, is best highlighted through the increased number of surviving manuscripts. Dod states: 'Up to about the middle of the thirteenth century the surviving material with which to document Aristotle's progress is somewhat meagre; after that it becomes a flood.'[9]

From this point on, the number of surviving manuscripts, glosses by their readers, and commentaries greatly increases. By 1255, the faculty of Arts at the University of Paris had specified the teaching of most of Aristotle's major works. A similar situation appears to have been in place at Oxford, where 'documentation about commentaries and lectures became abundant as early as the 1240s.'[10] The glosses of the prescribed texts provide valuable evidence of how students received and interacted with the source materials. Through these we can gain insight into 'the level of understanding reached by ordinary students' and the 'contents of lecture courses.'[11]

Before we consider the methods of teaching the works of Aristotle in relation to scholastic debate, however, we must consider the contents of his most influential texts in

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[7] Lynn Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), pp. 26-27
[8] Bernard G. Dod, 'Aristoteles latinus' in *CHLMP,* pp. 45-79 (p. 71)
[9] Ibid, p. 69
[10] Ibid, p. 73
[11] Ibid, p. 74

this area: the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*. Reed describes the *Topics* as giving 'instruction in the invention of argument,' and the text opens with Aristotle declaring his intentions.[12] He states that:

> Our treatise proposes to find a line of inquiry whereby we shall be able to reason from reputable opinions about any subject presented to us, and also shall answer ourselves, when putting forward an argument, avoid saying anything contrary to it.[13]

Divided into eight books, what follows is Aristotle's rules for 'the practical side of a dialectical disputatio,' instructing readers how to successfully construct and present an argument.[14] Aristotle spends some time defining the terminology of disputations and their processes in Book I, and identifies three participants involved in the act of debate: a questioner, an answerer, and an audience or judge.

In Book VIII Aristotle discusses the disputation as a whole, considering the points of these three positions. He offers advice for the questioner on the 'arrangement and method in putting questions,' stating that the first step is to 'select the ground from which he should make his attack.'[15] He continues, advising the reader that the second and third steps of the questioner should be to 'frame them [the attacks] one by one to himself' then 'proceed actually to put them to the other party.'[16] Here, Aristotle provides step-by-step instructions to the questioner of a disputation, emphasising the importance of preparing one's arguments before commencing the debate and attacking the answerer's thesis. Aristotle discusses this idea further in his *Sophistical Refutations,* a much shorter work

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[12] Thomas L. Reed, Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 45

[13] *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 167

[14] Mikko Yrjönsuuri, 'Aristotle's Topics and Medieval Obligational Disputation,' *Synthese*, Vol. 96, No. 1, 'Studies in Early Fourteenth-Century Philosophy' (Jul., 1993), pp. 59-82 (p. 60)

[15] *The Complete Works of Aristotle…* p. 261

[16] Ibid

which is often viewed as an appendix to the *Topics*. In Chapter 12 of this text, he states that

'A rule specifically appropriate for showing up a falsity is the sophistic rule that one

should draw the answerer on to the kind of statements against which one is well supplied

with arguments.'[17] Again, preparation is seen to be essential for a successful questioner, so

that they may lure the answerer into making statements that they can confidently refute.

Emphasising the necessity for preparation of the questioner, Aristotle then goes on

in Book VIII of the *Topics* to define 'what is the business of a good answer.'[18] He

contrasts the goals of a good questioner and a good answerer, stating that a good questioner

should aim to:

> make the answerer utter the most implausible of the necessary consequences of his
> thesis; while that of the answerer is to make it appear that it is not he who is
> responsible for the impossibility or paradox, but only his theses; for one may, no
> doubt, distinguish between the mistake of taking up a wrong thesis to start with,
> and that of not maintaining it properly.[19]

According to Aristotle, it is the aim of the questioner to find flaws in the answerer's

arguments, so that his thesis may sound impossible to the audience of the debate.

He discusses the aims of both the questioner and the answerer also in the

Sophistical Refutations. In Chapter 3 he states that the participants of a disputation have

five aims: 'refutation, falsity, paradox, solecism, and… to reduce the opponent in the

discussion to babbling… or it is to produce the appearance of each of these things without

the reality.'[20] He gives a brief explanation of these terms as 'plainly to refute the other

party, or… to show that he is saying something false, or… to lead him into a paradox, or…

to make him repeat himself.'[21] In Aristotle's opinion, it is not imperative that the

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[17] Ibid, p. 293
[18] Ibid, p. 268
[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid, p. 279
[21] Ibid

questioner truly achieves any of these five aims, but they would still be considered successful should they merely appear to do so. This view seems to highlight the importance of the role that the audience or judge plays in the disputation. As long as the questioner appears to be getting the better of the answerer, it would be viewed as a successful attack on his thesis.

In Chapter 5 of Book VIII of the *Topics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between disputations of teaching and disputations of competition. He states that 'in a competition the business of a good questioner is to appear by all means to produce an effect upon the other, while that of the answerer is to appear unaffected by him.'[22] He contrasts this to disputations 'held in the spirit not of a competition but of an examination and inquiry.'[23] Aristotle claims here to be the first to define clear rules for non-contentious disputations, and conveys the idea that the goal of this form of disputation is not to beat your opponent, but to arrive at the truth of the matter up for debate. This idea is discussed by Mikko Yrjönsuuri, who comments that: 'Even if the goals of the questioner and the answerer are… practically opposed in the truth-seeking disputation described by Aristotle, they are both working for a joint external good.'[24] The participants in this form of disputation then are seen to be working together, rather than against each other, despite the inherently contentious nature of the disputation.

In Chapter 18 of Book I of the *Topics*, Aristotle emphasises the importance of clarity in avoiding the pitfalls of fallacies. He states that both the questioner and the answerer should be clear in their intended meanings:

> For as long as it is not clear in how many ways a term is used, it is possible that the answerer and the questioner are not directing their minds at the same thing; whereas where once it has been made clear how many uses there are, and also upon

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[22] Ibid, p. 268
[23] Ibid
[24] Yrjönsuuri, 'Aristotle's Topics and Medieval Obligational Disputation,' p. 61

which of them the former directs his mind when he makes his assertion, the questioner would then look ridiculous if he failed to address his argument to this.[25]

He goes on to state that following this advice helps both the questioner and the answerer 'to avoid being misled and to mislead by fallacies.'[26] Aristotle addresses at length how to deal with fallacies in the *Sophistical Refutations*. Here he defines sophistical refutations as 'what appear to be refutations but are really fallacies instead,'[27] with sophistry concerning the deliberate misleading of your opponent in a debate. In this work Aristotle provides the reader with all the knowledge he would need to expose his arguments as fallacies. The exposing of sophistry and fallacies works in conjunction with Aristotle's main concern of a debate, which is the arrival at the truth.

Now that the contents of Aristotle's most influential works on the subject of disputations have been examined, we can better understand how they were taught in the context of the medieval university. One of the most valuable insights into the university teaching in Europe during the Middle Ages is John of Salisbury's 1159 work, the *Metalogicon*. In this treatise, the Greek title of which literally translates as 'about the arts of verbal reasoning,' the medieval scholar provides an extensive and in-depth view of logic and the texts used in its teaching.[28] As stated by Novikoff, John of Salisbury shows in this work that he is 'especially attuned to the increasingly popular method of classroom disputations and provides an unparalleled testimony to the unfolding effects that these new works of Aristotle were exerting on current methods of teaching….'[29] We shall now consider how Aristotle's influence manifests in the *Metalogicon*, and consider its representation of the teaching of scholastic disputations.

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[25] *The Complete Works of Aristotle…* p. 180
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid, p. 278
[28] Rita Copeland and Ireke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Art and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 484
[29] Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation…*, p. 110

The treatise was written in response to the 'Cornifician' criticisms towards teaching of the trivium of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic in the universities. In the text, John makes frequent reference to 'Cornificius,' which is the name he has given to a particular group of scholars who were against this branch of learning. According to Copeland and Sluiter,

> "Cornificius" is a personification of an opinion shared by many that traditional attention to the trivium as an organic whole is obsolete and should give way to a more streamlined academic training for professional success in fields such as civic and church administration.[30]

Throughout the course of the *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury gives a passionate account in the defence of such education that the Cornificians were so against.

In Book I, Chapter 7 of the *Metalogicon*, John attacks the Cornifician's belief that the 'Rules of eloquence are superfluous, and the possession or lack of eloquence is dependent on nature.'[31] According to John, eloquence is of the utmost importance. He states: 'I am at a loss to see how anything could be more generally useful: more helpful in acquiring wealth, more reliable for winning favour, more suited for gaining fame, than is eloquence.'[32] John's appreciation of eloquence here seems undoubtedly close to Aristotle's emphasis on clarity in the *Topics*. John defines an eloquent person as one who 'can with facility and adequacy verbally express his mental perceptions,' which agrees with Aristotle's many statements of the subject of clarity in relation to the art of disputation.[33] In particular, Aristotle makes reference to clarity as being essential in avoiding fallacies and ensuring that the questioner and answerer of a disputation understand each other correctly.

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[30] Ibid
[31] *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury*, ed. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkley: University of California Press, 1955) p. 26
[32] Ibid
[33] Ibid

John also discusses logic in Aristotelian terms, again providing an invaluable insight into how the works of the ancient philosopher were interpreted and utilised in the Middle Ages. In the first chapter of Book VII of the *Metalogicon*, John defines logic as being 'in its narrower sense… the science of argumentative reasoning' and should be 'exercised in inquiry into the truth.'[34] This idea is again clearly influenced by Aristotle's thinking in the *Topics*, where he discusses in Book VIII, Chapter 5, his rules for non-competitive disputations. Here Aristotle provides an outline on how to proceed with disputations where the only desired outcome of each participant should be that of the truth, and not that of victory. By removing the competitive elements from the act of disputation, the debate then becomes solely about whether the truth of the matter at hand can be agreed upon, and not about which participant wins.

We can further see the extent of Aristotle's impact on education and debate through John's chapters in the *Metalogicon* which specifically discuss the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*. Book III of the *Metalogicon* focuses specifically on the *Topics*, of which John states:

> …it surprises me that this book of Aristotle was neglected by our fathers for so long that it had completely, or almost entirely, fallen into disuse. At length, however, in our own day, through the insistent researches of diligent geniuses, it has, as it were, been raised from the dead, or aroused from sleep, so that it may summon back to their senses those who have been wondering, and make plain the way of truth to those who have been seeking it.[35]

Here we can see direct evidence of the second wave of Aristotelian translations as discussed by Novikoff, and the growing interest in New Logic. John recognises that a knowledge and interest in Aristotle's work had previously existed before this point, expressing his surprise that scholars had not realised the importance of this text until

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[34] Ibid, p. 74
[35] Ibid, p. 172

recently. Here he makes reference to the first wave of translations of Aristotle's texts. According to Novikoff, this initial wave can be attributed to Boethius and his Latin translations, which 'in the sixth century opened the door for early Medieval knowledge and interest in ancient logic and philosophy.'[36] The *Metalogicon* allows us to see the high regard in which Aristotle's works were held during this period, while also giving us an insight into the stages of transmissions of these ancient texts into medieval learning.

John continues to praise the excellence of Aristotle's *Topics*, stating that the eighth book of this particular text 'contributes more to the science of argumentative reasoning than practically all the works on dialectic that our modern predecessors were accustomed to teach in the schools,' and that everything 'in the work, both rules and examples, can be usefully applied, not only to logic, but also to practically all branches of learning.'[37] The *Metalogicon* also discusses the essential value of the *Sophistical Refutations*. In Book IV, John states his opinion that he 'would be reluctant to say that any other study could be more beneficial for the young.'[38] He discusses the importance of young scholars understanding sophistry, which he defines as the logic 'which makes a pretext of being dialectical and demonstrative [logic] with a flourish of hollow imitation, and strives more to acquire the [external] semblance than the [true] virtue of wisdom.'[39] He emphasises that this should be of particular interest to young scholars as it allows them to appear wise without them having to 'obtain true wisdom in all matters.'[40] Like Aristotle, John discusses the importance of understanding sophistry in relation to disputations. He states that, without this knowledge, one 'can neither avoid falsehood, nor unmask one who is lying…

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[36] Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation…,* p. 106
[37] Ibid, pp. 171-172
[38] Ibid, p. 236
[39] Ibid
[40] Ibid, p. 237

You may see those who know nothing about sophistry when they find themselves deceived by fallacious reasoning.'[41]

John is therefore clearly of the opinion that the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations* are essential reading for any student who wishes to succeed in the art of disputation, and it would appear that he was not the only scholar to think so. As has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, by 1255 (after a very brief ban on the teaching of Aristotle in place at the University of Paris) most of his major works were prescribed in university teaching throughout Europe. It would seem, then, that John's *Metalogicon* was written during a time of changing attitudes towards what should, or should not, be taught in the curriculum of medieval universities. The Cornificians discussed by John represent a movement against the teaching of grammar, logic and dialectic, but in the *Metalogicon* we see a passionate defence of such education. The fact that the teaching of Aristotle and the New Logic had become standard in universities less than one hundred years after the *Metalogicon* was written reflects that John's opinion appears to have been the prevailing one, while the Cornificians seem to have been outnumbered.

Now that we have examined a first-hand account of how Aristotle's works on disputation were received in the context of medieval learning, we can now consider how these were disseminated within the classroom environment. The study of Aristotle and logic remained prevalent into the 1300s, with Courtenay stating that the 'context of the arts curriculum in the fourteenth century centred on the study of Aristotle,' with the rules and teaching of scholastic debate being heavily influenced by his work.[42] As stated by Novikoff, however, the 'practice of disputation… concerns not just the texts relative to the

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[41] Ibid

[42] Courtenay, *Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England,* p. 31

arts curriculum, but how teaching was conducted.'[43] In *University Teaching in Medieval Europe*, Maierù discusses the structure of debate as taught in the classrooms of medieval universities. Of the methods of teaching, he states that in the universities 'two basic forms of teaching were considered: the lecture and the disputation.'[44] The lectures, according to Maierù, would consist of examining commentaries of textbooks, which was intended to 'impart doctrine,' and to train 'the student to develop his individual abilities.'[45] The disputation was then thought 'to be most suited for developing and invigorating the student's intellect and encouraging the acquisition of the discipline's habit.'[46] In other words, the lecture provided the students with the knowledge required to understand the form of debate, while the disputation allowed them to put this knowledge into practice.

As students progressed through their years of study, they were taught in stages the different elements which make up a debate. This progression is discussed by Courtenay who highlights how debates were taught in the universities, and how students advanced through this course of learning. He states that, while learning, 'the arts student was expected to attend the weekly disputation of his master (*disputatio solemnis*) and the weekly review sessions (*repetitions*), usually under a bachelor.'[47] The term 'bachelor' was used to describe the more advanced students, as younger students did not usually participate in debate until their third year of study.

As the student progressed through the ranks of academia, they learned to engage with the many different roles of a debate. Courtenay also outlines the progression of a student in the following summary: 'At first he participated as opponent (*opponens*) and attacked the chosen thesis by raising objections. He then advanced to the principal role

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[43] Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation...,* p. 66
[44] Alfonso Maireù, *University Training in Medieval Europe*, ed. and trans. by D. N. Pryds (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 117
[45] Ibid
[46] Ibid, p. 127
[47] Courtenay, *Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England,* p.33

(*respondens*) in which he answered objections.'[48] The determination of the debate was then decided either by a presiding master or an advanced bachelor. Through Courtenay's summary we can see in practice the three roles which were discussed by Aristotle in the *Topics*: the *opponens* (or questioner), the *respondens* (or answerer), and a judge to decide the outcome. Kenny and Pinborg describe the process of examination for new bachelors. These formal disputations were often carried out over the course of two days, with the topics up for disputation being revealed by the master well beforehand. The first day would consist of a chosen bachelor defending the master's thesis, in response to the questions posed by the audience, with the master at hand to help if required. On the second day, the master would offer a summary of both sides of the argument and provide his 'own overall solution (*determinatio*) to the question in dispute.'[49] If a student successfully progressed to their fifth year of study, they would usually be expected to lecture on one of the texts taught in the arts faculty, and would also then be able to determine. Progressing to this stage is what made a student a bachelor.

The final stage was the advancement from bachelor to master. After seven years of study, it was then possible to be recommended to become a master of arts. Courtenay discusses the process as it was at Oxford. This consisted of a disputation followed by a ceremony in which the master received 'the symbols of office (the book and the cap), and gave a brief lecture… and determined two disputed questions.'[50] If this was done successfully, once a student had graduated, they were then 'obliged to begin their statutory two years of teaching by riding out as presiding master a forty-day flood of disputations.'[51]

Participation in these debates served many purposes. For undergraduates it allowed them to gain valuable experience in the art of disputation, and allowed them to 'shape and

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[48] Ibid, p. 53
[49] Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinbord, 'Medieval philosophical literature' in *CHLMP*, pp. 11-42 (p. 22)
[50] Ibid, p. 35
[51] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution*, p. 46

extend their dialectical skills,' while for the more advanced bachelors it formed an 'essential part of the training necessary for their qualification as a master.'[52] It is extremely important to understand how disputations were taught in the university environment. Through the roles of the debate's participants we can see the influence of Aristotle and the New Logic, and by examining their structure and methods of teaching, it becomes evident that the theatrical aspect of the disputation is essential in understanding how they functioned within the medieval culture of scholastic debate.

Now that the structure and methods of teaching has been examined, we can turn to the theatrical elements of debate. Novikoff discusses two different kinds of disputation which took place in the university environment. There was the ordinary disputations, which 'focused on specific topics announced beforehand and which was held for the benefit of students and faculty only,' and the *disputatio de quodlibet*, where the 'initiative for the subjects debated lay with the audience, and the disputing masters never knew beforehand what questions would be asked.'[53] The *quodlibet* style of debate, popular at the University of Paris, was held much less frequently. These debates were held only during Advent and Lent, and were open not only to students and masters of logic, but to all pupils and staff of the university.

The popularity of the *quodlibet* debate evidently lay in its interactive and performative nature. The spectacle of the *quodlibet* is discussed by Enders in the article 'The Theatre of Scholastic Erudition.' She discusses the *quodlibet* at the University of Paris, highlighting the grand scale of the performance in the statement:

> Students and teachers, civil and religious authorities all flocked to the streets
> surrounding the Sorbonne as other university activities ground to a halt to allow

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[52] Alan B. Cobban, *The English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge to c. 1500* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988) p. 168

[53] Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation...,* p. 143

them to witness and participate in this academic rite of passage for students of theology.[54]

Enders, drawing comparisons between the debate and medieval drama, explains that the appeal of the *quodlibet* lay in its offering of a 'ritual spectacle'.[55] Characteristic elements of the *quodlibet* debate included the use of 'theatrical space, costume, gesture, conflict and audience participation,' all of which were typical aspects of medieval theatre.[56] In particular, the element of audience participation, which 'recalls the performance circumstances of medieval drama, which also tended to efface distinctions between actor and audience, spectacle and daily life, ritual and representation.'[57]

The theatrical elements of the scholastic debate, then, are essential in understanding how they functioned within their societies. Not only were they an integral part of university education, but they were also viewed almost as a form of entertainment for students and faculty. Novikoff provides us with an example of this in his discussion of Simon of Tournai, a master in Paris in the latter half of the twelfth century. Novikoff states the fact that Simon's disputation were written and recorded serves as evidence for his status in the sphere of scholastic debate. As well as this, Novikoff also provides evidence of a first-hand account of Simon's debates. English chronicler Matthew Paris wrote in his *Chronica majora* that 'even the largest lecture hall… could scarcely contain the crowd of students who flocked to hear Simon.'[58] From this description we can imagine an almost tournament-like atmosphere, with masses of spectators gathering to witness the outcome of the debate. Evidence such as this, which highlights the wide-reaching popularity of the scholastic debate is therefore extremely important. As the form came to be enjoyed as a

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[54] Jody Enders, 'The Theatre of Scholastic Erudition,' *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 341-363 (p. 341)
[55] Ibid
[56] Ibid
[57] Ibid, p. 344
[58] Ibid

kind of entertainment, it then makes perfect sense that it would begin to make its way in to, and begin to influence, the popular literature of the time. The second chapter of this study will focus on a selection of medieval debate poems, and what has been examined so far in this initial chapter is essential for understanding how these poems functioned within the context of medieval societies.

As has already been discussed in relation to the works of Aristotle, the object of a scholastic disputation was to discover the truth of the topic up for debate. This supposedly shared goal, however, seems to have often been disrupted by the very public nature of the debate. Enders has examined how these public performances seem to have affected the outcome of the debates. Due to the inherently oppositional nature of the disputation, intensified by an active audience, Enders states a belief that the 'struggle for truth became a nascent plot, a spectacular tournament of words, a quest for applause.'[59] Therefore, the participants of the debate became less concerned about the truth, and more interested in winning.

It seems that the oral traditions of the medieval university are in part responsible for fuelling the contentious behaviour of its students. Ong states that this competitive nature was 'encouraged and abetted by the dialectical approach.'[60] This structure is, in Ong's opinion, intrinsically linked to the medieval notions of masculinity, an idea which is also discussed by Karras. In the Middle Ages, university learning was only accessible to males, who, upon their arrival, were 'initiated into an alternative masculine subculture based on ideas of rationality and moderation.'[61] University life is presented as an alternative to that of knighthood, but with certain parallels drawn between them: 'violence was the mode of masculine expression within knighthood, while in the university men fought with verbal

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[59] Enders, 'The Theatre of Scholastic Erudition,' p. 344
[60] Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (London, Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 126
[61] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 1

weapons.'[62] The metaphor of scholastic debate as a form of physical combat is one that is frequently used. Karras states that the 'academic structure of attack and defence provided a forum for the demonstration of masculinity,' which naturally lends itself to comparisons with physical combat.[63] We can also see this metaphor being used in John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*. Speaking of Aristotle, John likens him and his works to a military officer arming his men for battle. He refers to him as 'the drill-master of those who profess to be logicians,' who has, in his writings, 'stacked in the arena arms for the use of his students.'[64] Aristotle is portrayed as a commander, providing his soldiers with the weapons necessary to fight.

Karras states that the medieval university 'had adopted the notion of masculinity as violent dominance of other men, but the violence was metaphorical, using words as weapons.'[65] While this may have true in the most part, there is evidence that, on occasions, the violence did become physical. There are surviving records providing evidence of the punishment that befell those who behaved in what could be considered an aggressive manner. In a treatise on lecturing in the liberal arts in the University of Paris from 1355, we are given details on the correct procedures of the masters. The treatise informs us that should anyone attending lectures

> …oppose the execution of this our statute by clamour, hissing, noise, throwing stones by themselves or by their servants and accomplices, or in any other way, we deprive and cut off from our society for a year, and for each relapse we increase the penalty double and quadruple….[66]

That such a statute had to exist reveals that there was in fact a problem with violent conduct in the lecture halls. This evidence is extremely important in understanding how the

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[62] Ibid, p. 21
[63] Ibid, p. 91
[64] *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury,* p. 189
[65] Karras, *From Boys to Men…,* p. 91
[66] Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages,* p. 237

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debates functioned within the university context, as it highlights ways in which the audience interacted with the methods of teaching, and the high tensions that could form in the disputations.

    The aim of this initial chapter was to provide a background to the teaching of scholastic disputation in the medieval universities. As we have seen, a heavy emphasis was placed on the learning of debate. Examining the content and structure of this education is essential in fully understanding in what ways it influenced the popular literature of the time. The high regard in which the texts of Aristotle were held is clear through the writings of John of Salisbury, and the prescription of their teaching in medieval education. By examining the content of the *Topics* and the *Sophisctical Refutations*, and the performance of the debates, we can see how they influenced the structure of teaching. We can also see how students were expected to progress through their learning by engaging with the different roles in a disputation. This is essential in understanding the influence of education on the popular form of debate poetry, as we shall see in the following chapter. The commonly used metaphor of disputation as a form of combat is also a feature which often appears in the poems. By examining these aspects of scholastic disputation in the medieval universities, we can understand more fully the form of debate literature and how it functioned within its society, as shall be discussed in the remainder of this study.

2. Middle English Debate Poetry

The opening chapter of this thesis aimed to examine the content and structure of the teaching of scholastic disputation in medieval universities. By understanding what was taught and how teaching was administered, we can clearly see how these lessons appear in the debate poems, which in turn can reveal the extent of university learning's influence on the popular literature of the period. This chapter will examine the conventions of Middle English debate poetry, focusing on two particular poems; the anonymously written *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*. By illustrating the influence of scholastic disputations on these two poems, I shall argue that in order to understand how these poems functioned within their societies, we must first understand their origins in the debates of the medieval universities.

With such emphasis being placed on debate skills in formal education, it would make perfect sense that they would begin to work their way into the literature of the period. According to Reed, this connection heavily influenced how audiences received and interacted with the popular form of debate poetry. He states that 'the shared educational and social experience of debate poetry's authors and audience informed their expectations for and appreciation of the literary genre.'[67] Through their education, the literate audience of the debate poems would have been familiar with the conventions they shared with the formal debates taught in universities. By realising this connection we, as modern readers, can 'begin to understand more fully the roles these works played in the society that produced them.'[68]

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[67] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. 42
[68] Ibid

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The popularity of the debate poem is reflected in its many varying forms, through which a shared set of conventions can be seen to emerge. These conventions are discussed by Conlee, who states that they 'suggest that debate poetry had come to be accepted… as a discrete literary genre.'[69] Conlee identifies four main categories into which the participants of the poems can be separated. These are; 'personified abstractions,' 'inanimate objects,' 'living things,' and 'rival aspects of a single entity.'[70] He also identifies modern critics' distinction between what they term 'horizontal' and 'vertical' debates. In horizontal debates the 'disputants are of equal status,' for example as in the bird debates such as *The Owl and the Nightingale*. In vertical debates the participants come from different categories, for example, if a living thing were to debate a personified abstraction.[71] Conlee also identifies several popular themes of debate poetry, such as love, religion, and different occupations. By examining the shared conventions, along with the differences, of surviving medieval debate poems, we can begin to see the themes that appealed to the authors and readers of this form of poetry, as it evolved from its scholastic descendants into its own literary form.

Another typical convention of the debate poems is that of the narrator. Of this development in the form of debate poetry, Conlee states that among 'the important earlier innovations was the introduction of a first-person narrator, who served as the auditor and reporter of the debate that he had overheard.'[72] This feature of debate poetry can be found from the earliest examples of the form, and was 'accompanied by a tendency to elaborate the framing material used to surround the debate component of the poem.'[73] The use of the first-person narrator invites the reader to share in a spectator's view of the debate,

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[69] John W. Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991), p. xv
[70] Ibid
[71] Ibid
[72] Ibid, p. xiv
[73] Ibid

providing them with essential information on the setting and performance, as well as an account of the dialogue.

The structure of many medieval debate poems also seems to reflect that of the scholastic disputation. Murphy discusses the teaching of *disputatio*, drawing attention to their structure. He states that although they may occasionally deviate from this format, they generally adhere to the following structure: 'the statement of a question, then the offering of a proposition in reply to the question, followed by objections to the proposition. Finally, a determination... of the correct or approved answer would be presented.'[74] While comparing this to the format of many of the debate poems, we can see an undeniable connection between the two, again highlighting the influence that the teaching of debate had on the literary culture of the medieval period.

Through the course of this chapter, I will discuss the conventions of medieval debate poetry in relation to their scholastic influences in order to determine how this would have affected the expectations of their original audiences.

The Owl and the Nightingale

The Owl and the Nightingale is the earliest example of the debate poem written in Middle English, and dates from the twelfth or thirteenth century.[75] In the poem the birds debate a number of issues, including whose song is more pleasing, their usefulness to man, and human issues such as adultery. Throughout the debate of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, insults and threats are exchanged as each bird attempts to best its competitor.[76]

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[74] James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (London: University of California Press, 1974), p. 102
[75] For a discussion on the dating of *O&N*, see Neil Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2003), p. xv
[76] Going forward *The Owl and the Nightingale* shall be abbreviated to *O&N*

The form of the bird debate was frequently used in the medieval period, becoming common in both the vernacular and in French courtly poetry. The diverse range of birds indigenous to the countries came to be associated with specific traditions and allegories. Of *O&N*, Reed states that 'any interpretation that does not respect their specific avian identities should be mistrusted.' Both owls and nightingales came to be associated with opposing ideas in relation to their natural attributes and the traditional lore surrounding them.[77] Hume agrees that the fact that the protagonists are birds is essential to the nature of the poem, and that understanding why birds are used could 'help us see how the poem functions.'[78]

Of Conlee's categories of debate poems, *O&N* would fall into that of a 'horizontal' debate between 'living things,' and both of the debate's participants are put in contrast with each other from the very beginning. The narrator of *O&N* introduces the debating birds in a manner very similar to that of the framing of a dream vision. Cannon comments that the opening of the poem 'satisfies all the generic conditions of a dream vision,' were it not for the fact that the narrator had not fallen asleep at any point.[79] Set in a 'sumere dale, / In one suþe diȝele hale,' (ll. 1-2) he stumbles across the Owl and the Nightingale, and proceeds to report to the reader the argument he has overheard.[80] Putting the two birds in contrast with each other, the narrator describes the Nightingale as sitting: 'In one hurne of breche; / & sat up one vaire boȝe, / Þar were abute blosome inoȝe' (ll. 14-16). The Nightingale upon the blossom covered branch seemingly symbolises this bird's traditional association with the heralding of spring. This is a stark contrast to the Owl, who is 'stod on old stoc þarbiside,' (l. 25) surrounded by ivy, which although evergreen, is traditionally

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[77] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. 220
[78] Kathryn Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale: The Poem and its Critics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 15
[79] Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 113
[80] All quotations are taken from *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2003)

associated with winter. This opening contrast sets up the antagonism between the two

opponents, who, after the Nightingale's initial insults, begin to hurl abuse at each other

based on their appearance and song.

Further contrasts between the two birds are made apparent through the course of

the debate. Hume discusses the literary traditions which depict owls as birds of 'ill omen',

but also ones which have 'a reputation for great wisdom,' through their association with

the goddess Athene.[81] The nightingale too is a bird with opposing traditional associations.

For example, it is described as being thought of as an 'inspirer of romantic love or sexual

desire,' whilst on other occasions they are portrayed as a 'singer in praise of divine love, as

in Lydgate's *A Song on the Nightingale*.'[82] By choosing two birds with dualistic literary

identities, the author of *O&N* provides each of the opponents with material to attack the

other bird with, while simultaneously providing them with traditional associations to

defend themselves.

The owl's reputation as a bad omen comes from them 'being nocturnal… from

their mournful sounding hoots, and from the hatred other birds display by mobbing'

them.[83] Each of these traits is then used by the Nightingale as ammunition against the Owl,

with the mobbing by smaller birds carrying religious connotations. This image is often

used in religious allegory as 'the public derision endured by a sinner who acknowledges

his sins.'[84] Hume also states that this, along with their reputation as 'unclean' birds, have

led owls to be likened to the 'spiritually unclean,' and were often likened to Jews.[85] As a

result, the 'little birds who attack during daylight become then good Christians chastising

the sinner,' a motif Hume states is found in the medieval *Bestiary*.[86]

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[81] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p.17
[82] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry…* p. xxiii
[83] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 15-16
[84] Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 48
[85] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 19
[86] Ibid

The Owl, however, seems to pride herself on being a highly religious figure. She is described as singing her 'tide,' (l.26) which seems to refer to the canonical hours, and she later states that the times of her singing are the 'riȝte time,' (l. 323) likening her song to the 'divine offices sung in monastic houses during the night.'[87] Here she does not state that she is a monk, but she does imply close connection to them. The Owl, somewhat blasphemously, also seems to see herself as a Christ-like figure. She states in reference to her usefulness to man even after death, that: 'Þah hit beo soþ, ich do heom god / An for heom ich chadde mi blod. / Ich do heom god mid mine deaþe' (ll. 1615-1617). By stating that her blood is shed to help mankind, despite her helpful intentions, she seems to be equating herself to Christ. She uses this argument to further her cause, stating that in both life and death she has use to men, while the Nightingale has no use whether dead or alive.

The Nightingale has counter arguments to each of the claims made against her by the Owl. When the Owl claims that she is an incessant chatterbox, the Nightingale states that men and women rejoice to hear her sing. When the Owl claims that her song entices young women to have affairs, she states that this is false, and that the Owl has misconstrued the connection between her song and love into something impure. The debate goes back and forth in this manner between the two disputants, and when we examine the poems structure closely, the influence of the scholastic debate tradition is evident.

The contents of the debate have been discussed and analysed in great detail by many critics, for example, Hume and Cartlidge. There is much to be said about the different allegorical, religious, and literary interpretations of the poem, but as this study is more concerned with the form of the debate rather than its contents, this thesis will turn now to the features of the poem which relate to its form as a debate.

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[87] Ibid, p. 56

The language used in *O&N* is characteristic of that used in scholastic and legal debate, particularly in the opening section. The use of words such as 'tale,' (l. 3) 'plait,' (l. 5) 'plaiding,' (l. 12) and 'speche' (l. 13) all carry legal connotations, which some critics have used to argue that the poem was intended for 'a legal milieu.'[88] This may not necessarily have been the case, however, with Cartlidge arguing that 'none of these terms is so exclusively legal in sense that it could only have been understood or employed by trained lawyers,' and that 'the adversarial format of a debate-poem naturally invites the use of a terminology of litigation.'[89] This style of language is used throughout the course of the poem. Although not necessarily intended solely for those of the legal profession, it perhaps does imply that it was written for an audience with some understanding of the debate form. It certainly seems to imply that the author does have an in-depth knowledge of debate terminology.

The poem almost falls into the genre of flyting, rather than that of debate. It begins 'not like a serious intellectual debate, but like a quarrel between two children,' with the Nightingale relentlessly insulting the Owl who in turn replies with violent threats.[90] Flyting is described by Parks as 'an openly bellicose exchange of insults and boasts between warriors,' that are 'usually charged with military overtones and frequently preface some kind of trial at arms.'[91] The Owl does threaten the smaller bird with violence in lines 51-54, stating: 'Ȝif ich þe holde on mine uote - / So hit betide þat ich mote! - / & þu wete vt of þine rise, Þu sholdest singe anoþer wise!' The Nightingale, knowing that she could not win in a physical fight against the Owl, suggests that their 'flyting and fighting give way to

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[88] Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale...* p. 44
[89] Ibid
[90] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale...* p. 17
[91] Ward Parks, 'Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres,' *Poetics Today* (1986), Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 439-458 (p. 440-441)

disputation and determination,' and they agree that Nicholas of Guildford should be the judge of their dispute.[92] This then allows the debate proper to begin in line 217.

Through close examination of the poem's structure and the speeches of its participants, the influences of scholastic disputation and the teaching of Aristotle become clear. As stated by Novikoff:

> While discussions of this debate poem have often been confined to the world of Middle English literary history, the content and framework of this particular debate merit serious consideration in the context of scholastic disputation and the formalization of the university curriculum.[93]

I shall now discuss *O&N* and its relation to university learning in the Middle Ages. Before the debate properly commences, we see the discussion between the two birds as they set the terms of the debate. The Nightingale is first to suggest that they should end their quarrelling and violent threats, and instead agree upon conditions for a civil debate. She addresses the Owl, stating :

> Ac lete we awei þos cheste,
> Vor suiche worde boþ unwreste,
> & fo we on mid riȝte dome,
> Mid faire worde & mid ysome.
> Þeȝ we ne bo at one acorde,
> We muȝe bet mid fayre worde,
> Witute cheste & bute fiȝte,
> Plaidi mid foȝe & mid rigȝte;
> & mai hure eiþer wat hi wile,
> Mid riȝte segge & mid sckile (ll. 177-186).

The Nightingale here expresses her thoughts that it would be much more productive for the two of them if they were to embark upon a proper debate, using 'faire worde' rather than merely insulting each other. As Novikoff states, this structure 'undertaken by the two birds

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[92] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry...,* p. 232
[93] Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation...,* p. 124

resonates with the procedures of debate exposed in Aristotle's New Logic and the institutionalization of scholastic learning,' allowing us to see the influence of university learning on the popular form of debate poetry.[94]

Before the two can begin their debate, however, a judge must be chosen. The Nightingale suggests that 'Maister Nichole of Guldeforde' (l. 191) preside over the debate, an idea which the Owl agrees to. The fact that Nicholas of Guildford is mentioned as having the title of 'Maister' is highly significant and heavily implies that he has had a university education. It is particularly relevant since, as discussed in the previous chapter, the title of 'master' was given to those who had received advanced training in the art of disputation. The two birds agree that Master Nicholas would be a suitable candidate to judge their debate, referring to his wisdom and discerning nature: 'He is wis an war of worde. / He is of dome suþe gleu / & him is loþ eurich unþeu' (ll. 192-194). Now that the terms of the debate and its judgement have been settled on, the debate can properly begin.

The Nightingale begins the debate entreating the Owl to be truthful, asking her why she only sings at night and not during the day. Here, much like the scholastic disputations discussed in the first chapter, the Nightingale introduces the main concern as being that of truth. Again, as in many scholastic debates, the object of truth becomes obscured by the contentiousness between the two participants. From the Nightingale's opening question, we can also see how the two birds fall into the roles of a debate as defined by Aristotle: the questioner and the answerer. The Nightingale initially takes on the role of the questioner, while the Owl defends herself from the Nightingale's claims, in turn attacking the smaller bird's reasoning for such accusations. This structure of attack and defence is followed throughout the poem, allowing us to see how the lessons of Aristotle appear within the debate.

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[94] Ibid

The Nightingale's opening statement (ll. 217-253) includes the claims that both the hour and sound of the Owl's singing is unnatural, and asserts that she is blinded by daylight, revealing her dark nature. In response, the Owl claims that she can refute each of these claims, defending herself 'Mid riȝte soþe' (l. 264). She proceeds to do so, providing evidence as to why the Nightingale's accusations are false. The Owl argues so eloquently that we are informed the Nightingale had trouble thinking of how to reply, as she had spoken 'boþe riȝt an red' (l. 396). The narrator gives the reader an insight into the thinking process of the Nightingale, telling us that while she was concerned about how she would respond, she tells herself that confidence is essential: 'Ac noþeles he spac boldeliche, / Vor he is wis þat hardeliche / Wiþ is uo berþ grete ilete, / Þat he vor areȝþe hit ne forlete…' (ll. 401-404). The Nightingale is of the opinion that as long as one appears confident your opponent is more likely to back down, whereas if you appear weak they will attack even stronger. According to Reed, the Nightingale's following speech is 'so confident and… effective that, were we not made privy to her momentary distress, we could never appreciate its singular inspiration and brilliance.'[95]

While the Nightingale appears to be able to remain calm when faced with a difficult response, the Owl seems to find this more problematic. After the Nightingale's initial questions, the Owl is undoubtedly flustered, snapping agitatedly at the Nightingale, ordering her to 'Bo nu stille & let me speke!' (l. 261). This emotional response from the Owl, and the Nightingale's calm demeanour, seems to reflect one of Aristotle's lessons from the *Topics*. As we have already seen in the first chapter of this study, Aristotle states that in a competitive debate, which *O&N* certainly turns out to be, the 'business of the questioner is to appear by all means to produce an effect upon the other, while that of the

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[95] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry…,* p. 224

answerer is to appear unaffected by him…'[96] Although the Owl seems to successfully refute the Nightingale's claims against her character, she is also allowing the smaller bird to get the better of her emotionally. In this respect, then, the Nightingale seems to be displaying superior skills in the art of debate.

From line 549, the positions of the two birds change, with the Owl becoming the questioner, and the Nightingale the answerer. This change is signalled in the Owl's statement:

> Þu hauest bicloped also þu bede,
> An ich þe habbe iȝiue ansuare.
> Ac ar we to unker dome fare,
> Ich wille speke toward þe
> Also þu speke toward me –
> An þu me ansuare ȝif þu miȝt! (ll. 550-555).

The Owl proceeds to question the Nightingale on her usefulness to man, stating that her only talent is that of her song, proving useless in every other respect. Once the Owl finishes her attack, the Nightingale again temporarily seems speechless, as she struggles to think of a suitable response. She realises that she is in a dangerous position, acknowledging the Owl's words as 'soþ' and 'riȝte' (l. 668). We are again, however, given an insight into the Nightingale's thought process as she prepares to defend herself. The narrator praises the Nightingale's technical abilities in disputation, stating that: 'Þe Niȝtingale al hire hoȝe / Mid rede hadde wel bitoȝe. / Among þe harde, among þe toȝte, / Ful wel mid rede hire biþoȝe; / An hadde andsuere gode ifunde, / Among al hire harde strunde' (ll. 720-706). While it is clear that the Nightingale struggles at certain points of the debate, she does not allow the Owl's words to have any visible effect on her, which is precisely Aristotle's advice as written in the *Topics*.

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[96] *The Complete Works of Aristotle…* p. 268

From the Nightingale's technical abilities in debate, it would seem reasonable to assume that the poet did have some knowledge of the teaching of disputations in the medieval universities. Cartlidge states that the Nightingale's thoughts in this passage 'naturally recalls the classical view of rhetoric as the science of persuasion – an intellectual and technical exercise.'[97] He does, however, disagree with the level of influence Aristotle can be said to have on the poem. He speaks against Murphy and Catalini's assertions that these lines are directly influenced by the *Topics*, stating that the passage 'hardly demonstrates any immediate indebtedness to Aristotle.'[98] Although this may be true in that there is no definite reference to the works of Aristotle, it is clearly evident that the author was at least familiar with the *Topics* and its teachings in relation to debate.

Throughout the course of the poem, the Nightingale displays the characteristics of a good debater as described by Aristotle. She allows her anger to subside before making a response on several occasions (ll. 951-954 and ll. 939-954), and does not allow herself to appear as though the Owl is having an effect on her. That is not to say, however, that the Owl does not display her own skills in debate. On more than one occasion the Owl is said to be speaking the truth (l. 396 and l. 668), and her defence against the Nightingale's attacks is described as 'starke & stronge' (l. 1176). While the Nightingale internally struggles to find replies, the Owl seems to have no such problem. We are told that 'Þe Hule ne abot noȝt swiþ long,' finding replies to the Nightingale almost instantly.

As well as her apparent truthfulness and quick-thinking, we are also told of the Owl's skills in preparing and executing her arguments. As we have already seen, more than once, the Nightingale appears to panic and worries about how to respond to the Owl's claims. While the Owl also carefully considers how to best respond to her opponent, it

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[97] Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p.64
[98] Ibid

seems to be in a less panicked manner than the Nightingale. We are told of the Owl's

methodical approach towards considering how to reply to the Nightingale:

> Þos Hule luste & leide an hord
> Al þis mot, word after word;
> An after þoȝte hu he miȝte
> Ansvere uinde best mid riȝte,
> Vor he mot hine ful wel biþenche
> Þat is aferd of plaites wrenche (ll. 467-472).

When compared to the Nightingale's internal worrying, the Owl comes across as much

better prepared for their debate.

  The Owl's abilities are again reflected in her speech as she defends herself against

the Nightingale. In answering the question as to why she only sings during the winter, the

Owl states that: 'Ich habbe herto god ansuare, / Anon iredi & al ȝare…' (ll. 487-488). She

already has a good answer at hand in defence of this attack, which seems to mirror advice

offered by Aristotle in the *Sophistical Refutations*. As we have seen, Aristotle states that a

'rule specifically appropriate for showing up a falsity is the sophistic rule that one should

draw the answerer on to the kind of statements against which one is well supplied with

arguments.'[99] While in this section it is the Nightingale's job as questioner to be leading

the Owl into making statements against which she is prepared to argue, the Owl

successfully stops her from doing so. The Owl has all of her answers ready, waiting to

refute the Nightingale's attacks, enabling her to avoid the traps of the questioner.

  The Owl also recognises the Nightingale's attempted use of sophistry. In the

Sophistical Refutations, Aristotle defines 'sophistical refutations' as 'what appear to be

refutations but are really fallacies instead.'[100] In other words, they occur when one

participant of a debate attempts to refute the other's argument using a fallacy as though it

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[99] *The Complete Works of Aristotle…* p. 293
[100] Ibid, p. 278

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were a truth. We see the Owl call out the Nightingale's use of this technique when she

accuses her opponent:

Þu gest al to mid swikelede.
Alle thine wordes þu bileist,
Þat hit þincþ soþ, al þat þu seist.
Alle þine wordes boþ isliked
An so bisemed an bikliked,
Þat alle þo þat hi auoþ
Hi weneþ þat þu segge soþ! (ll. 838-844)

The Owl's recognition of such a tactic shows definite skill in the art of disputation, and

again highlights that the poet was very likely familiar with the teaching of Aristotle and

debate in the universities of the period. While this section shows knowledge of the skills

and techniques used in debate, it displays them without any direct references to the

technical terms used in their teaching. It has been suggested that as the two birds here

manage to carry out their argument without using these technical terms, we can understand

much about the poet and his intended audiences. According to Cartlidge, 'even if the poet

himself might well have been conscious of the terms of dialectic or rhetoric, he was

nevertheless addressing a general audience, rather than one with specialist knowledge of

these disciplines.'[101] The question of the poem's intended audience and how it relates to its

functions within society shall be discussed further, later in this chapter.

The debate is eventually called to a halt by the Wren, who intervenes when the

looming threat of physical violence almost becomes a reality. In the scholastic debates of

the medieval universities the judge of a debate would also act as a mediator, presiding over

the debate to ensure of the participant's proper conduct. Since, however, the debate is

being held in the absence of its judge, the Wren steps in as mediator, reminding the birds

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[101] Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 68

of their agreement. According to Cannon the role of the Wren is to 'sit athwart neither bird but alongside each of them, mediating not so much by keeping disputation from growing too heated… but by eliminating the possibility of confrontation.'[102] This goes against Stanley's assertion that the Wren 'is of the Nightingale's party,' due to their association as songbirds.[103] While the poem does state that the Wren came to 'helpe þar Niȝtegale,' (l. 1719) this seems to be due to the Owl's elevated threats. Angered by the noisy support for the Nightingale by the smaller birds, the Owl accuses the Nightingale of gathering an army against her, and threatens to do the same, the outcome of which would be much more disastrous for the smaller birds than the Owl. The Wren therefore seems to step in at precisely the right moment, ensuring that both birds keep to their original agreement.

Now that the influence of Aristotle and the teaching of debate on the structure and arguments of *O&N* have been examined, I will now look at in what other ways this influence can be seen in the poem. Much like the disputations of medieval universities, the debate of *O&N* is often marred by outbursts of violence. As seen in the previous chapter, debates were occasionally disrupted by students displaying violent or threatening behaviour, such as making excessive noise and throwing stones. This is a problem we can also see manifest in the poem, with both birds making either violent threats out loud or internally. We are told, for example, that in response to the Owl's accusation that the Nightingale's song entices young women to commit adultery, the songbird becomes so angry that she would have physically attacked the Owl if she could: 'Þu Niȝtingale at þisse worde / Mid sworde an mid speres orde, / Ȝif ho men were, wolde fiȝte; / Ac þo ho bet do ne miȝte / Ho uaȝt mid hire wise tung' (ll. 1067-1071). Here we see the Nightingale's desire for violence, to injure the Owl in revenge for her accusations. As she is unable to do so, however, she decides to fight using words rather than weapons.

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[102] Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature,* p. 136
[103] Quoted in Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 93

Through lines 1067-1071 we see the use of the common metaphor of debate as a form of combat. Rather than engaging in a physical fight, the Nightingale 'uaȝt mid hire wise tunge.' This decision is followed with a proverb by King Alfred: 'Wel fiȝt þat wel specþ' (l. 1074). This reflects the belief that one can defeat one's opponent through speech rather than violence, portraying debate as a civilised alternative to physical confrontation. The frequent reference to the proverbs of Alfred is used by both birds to justify and lend authority to their arguments, a technique that, according to Matlock, was common in the legal disputations of the medieval courts of law. Matlock states that although 'most of the sayings attributed to Alfred are not included in the Middle English collection of the *Proverbs of Alfred*, the king had a reputation as a wise authority, which may have attracted such attribution,' and states that the proverbs 'replace the authorities characteristically cited in legal disputation.'[104] The threat of violence is always close to the surface in *O&N*. The use of elements characteristic of formal debates, such as the proverbs, the Wren as mediator, and a verbal agreement at the disputation's commencement, all contribute to keeping this violence in check. As Matlock states; the poem 'avoids violence by appealing to legal devices and formal arbitration.'[105]

The violence expressed in the poem could also be considered to be part of its humour, and could help modern readers understand how it functioned within its society. Conlee states that in the tradition of medieval debate poetry, humour often came 'from the rowdy, rancorous conduct of the disputing parties, or… from the choice of creatures who are placed in opposition to one another.'[106] In the case of *O&N*, these two sources of humour seem to be intrinsically linked to each other. The fact that the poet chose birds rather than humans as his protagonists 'clearly signals the fictitiousness of the action,'

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[104] Wendy A. Matlock, 'Law and Violence in *The Owl and the Nightingale*,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2010), Vol. 109, No. 4, pp. 446-467 (p.453)
[105] Ibid, p. 447
[106] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry…* p. xviii

allowing an effect of comic-distancing.[107] This effect is discussed by Hume who states that the use of birds allows the poet to release 'the plot of all seriousness, simply because we cannot really believe the animals.'[108] The tension created between these birds as they bicker over frivolous matters such as their appearance, song, and toilet habits is quite ridiculous, and using the birds to dispute human issues such as adultery 'allows the poet to work as a compromise between the farcical and the serious.'[109]

While the comic-distancing effect created by the birds is undoubtedly one of the main purposes of having non-human protagonists, there are certainly other reasons. Hume states that it offers 'opportunities for satire on and parody of human institutions.'[110] The poem would have had a very different tone had the two birds been two men threatening each other with violence, or two women discussing under what circumstances it was acceptable to commit adultery. The humour created by the avian protagonists, used in the debate form associated with scholastic learning, is therefore essential in understanding how the audience would have received the poem: as a light-hearted take on the debate form, rather than a completely serious intellectual disputation.

With the birds seemingly equally matched arguments, there appears to be no clear winner by the time they set off to recount their debate to Nicholas of Guildford at the end of the poem. Hume states that as 'any quarrel becomes a fight for supremacy, the outcome of the debate is its natural focus. Everything… is determined by the conclusion.'[111] The poem's lack of resolution can then be considered somewhat problematic, and perhaps crucial in understanding how the form of the poem would have related to its function within society. Conlee stated that early Latin debate poems were often written without a

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[107] Thomas Honegger, *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry* (Tubingen: Francke Verlag, 1996), p. 29
[108] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 25
[109] Ibid, p. 29
[110] Ibid, p. 25
[111] Ibid, p. 38

resolution, and were 'little more than school exercises,' the point of which was mostly like to help teach 'beginning students in dialectic to determine the truth on their own.'[112] The irresolution of debate poems was a common feature of the form in the Middle Ages, found in several well-known examples, such as Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and, and as shall be examined later, *Wynnere and Wastoure*.

The unresolved debate of the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, is different in that its irresolution is offered as a solution. The formel refuses to choose any of the three tercels as a mate following the debate of the birds in the garden. In relation to Chaucer's poem, Brewer discusses the nature of medieval court culture, stating that when 'members of these courtly societies were at leisure their entertainments were largely conversations, stories, poems, and music….'[113] He makes particular reference to these activities as represented in Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*, a poem in which a group of young courtly people 'assemble in a beautiful garden to amuse themselves with "questions of love."'[114] According to Brewer, poetry was a 'natural part of such entertainments' could have been intended to be a part of a conversation such as that found in Boccaccio's poem.[115]

From this depiction of medieval audiences interacting with poetry as a form of entertainment, and the tradition of Latin debate poems written without a resolution, it seems reasonable to assume that *O&N* was written with a similar idea in mind. The language and structure of the poem undoubtedly reflects that of the scholastic disputations of the medieval universities, which could appeal to the educated audience of the court. The humorous use of the avian protagonists and the almost slapstick threats of violence ensure that the poem is not taken too seriously, suggesting the irresolution was meant to inspire its own light hearted debate among its readers. The suggestion of its readers being actively

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[112] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. xix
[113] D. S. Brewer, *The Parlement of Foulys* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), p. 3
[114] Ibid, p.4
[115] Ibid

involved in the debate also mirrors the spectators of the scholastic disputations. As previously discussed, there was evidently a theatrical element involved in the performance of academic debates in the medieval universities. Audiences gathered to watch them take place, and were sometimes permitted to participate by posing questions to the debaters. The irresolution of *O&N* then seems to tell us much about how its intended audience may have interacted with the poem, its ending inspiring the audience to debate the outcome for themselves.

Not much is known for certain about the poem's medieval readers, with it surviving in only two manuscripts. By looking at these manuscripts, however, and the other texts contained within them, we may be able to tell something more about the poem's intended audience. Both manuscripts, MS Cotton Caligula A. iv and Jesus College Oxford, MS 29 (II), contain another debate poem called the *Petit Plet*. This poem concerns an old man trying to convince a young man of the 'inevitability of sorrow… and the urgency of preparing for death.'[116] Unlike *O&N*, however, this poem concludes with a resolution, declaring the young man as the winner. The religious lyrics found in both manuscripts also contain themes similar to those discussed in *O&N*, for example the 'inexhaustibility of God's love and the urgency of repentance.'[117] There are also examples of texts concerning pre-marital affairs and 'woman's woes in marriage.'[118] From examining the texts that exist alongside *O&N*, we can build an idea of the interests and concerns of the audience it was intended for. With another long debate poem found in the same manuscripts, along with shorter texts with similar themes, it would seem that these were forms which appealed to the compilers and literate audience of such texts.

The influence of the teaching of Aristotle and debate can be seen clearly through the language and structure of *O&N*. Through their speech and internal thinking, they

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[116] Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. xxxi
[117] Ibid, p. xxxviii
[118] Ibid

display debate skills as taught in medieval universities, revealing the poet's knowledge and appreciation of the form. As with the educated disputations of the universities, the poem's debate is occasionally interrupted by violent outbursts. The fact that the protagonists are birds rather than humans, however, creates an effect of comic-distancing which allows the reader to find humour within the debate. The irresolution of the poem is characteristic of Latin debate poems written without resolutions as exercises designed for teaching students to arrive at the truth of a debate by themselves. The irresolution of *O&N* also seems to be similar to that of the *Parliament of Fowls*, a courtly poem of love. These styles of poems were often at the centre of leisurely entertainment among members of the court, which tells us much about how the poem may have functioned within its society. The fact that *O&N* exists in manuscripts containing similar poems also tells us as modern readers the forms and themes of poetry that appealed to medieval audiences. Through these aspects of the poem, we can more fully understand the teaching of debate in medieval universities and its wide-ranging influence on the literature of the time. Only through understanding this connection can we fully understand the poems, and how they functioned within their societies.

Wynnere and Wastoure

From examining *O&N*, the earliest surviving example of debate poetry written in English, the influence of university teaching and the works of Aristotle are evident through the structure and content of the opponents' arguments. By looking at the later poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, we can see the versatility of the form of debate poetry in terms of content, opponents and resolution.[119] This section will examine these aspects of *W&W* in

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[119] Going forward *Wynnere and Wastoure* shall be abbreviated to *W&W*

relation to the teaching of scholastic disputation, the conventions of medieval debate poetry, and in comparison to *O&N*. In doing so, I aim to examine further the influence of medieval learning on the literature of the period.

The only surviving copy of *W&W* exists in British Library Additional MS 31042, which is described as a 'miscellany of religious histories, verse romances, poems by John Lydgate, carols and other devotional or ethical poems…'[120] The manuscript was compiled by Robert Thorton, a wealthy Yorkshire man, and dates from sometime between 1420 and Thorton's death in approximately 1486.[121] While the dating of the poem itself has been the topic of some debate, most of the poem's scholars seem to agree that it was written around 1352. Sir Israel Gollancz in his study of the poem describes it as a 'pamphlet of the day,' with its primary concern being to 'set forth the outstanding problems of Edward III's reign.'[122]

The narrator of the poem, while solitarily wandering through the countryside, falls asleep by a stream and dreams of a debate between the two allegorical figures of Winner and Waster. Of Conlee's categories of debate poems, *W&W* would belong to that of a 'horizontal' debate between 'personified abstractions,' allowing the narrator to give a voice to the symbolic characters of Winner and Waster.[123] Thus, the poem displays a number of conventions commonly found in medieval poetry; the dream vision, the debate form, and allegory, providing the modern-day reader with an insight into the social politics of the time.

The dream vision element of *W&W* relates strongly to its form as a debate poem. The first 30 lines of the poem serve as an introduction. In these lines the narrator makes

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[120] Warren Ginsberg, *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), p. 1
[121] Stephanie Trigg, *Wynnere and Wastoure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. xiii
[122] Sir Israel Gollancz, *A Good Short Debate Between Winner and Waster* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Ltd, 1974), p. ix
[123] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. xv

reference to 'selcouthes' (l. 3), the legend of Britain's foundation by Brutus, and prophesies made by Solomon.[124] In his twelfth-century work *History of the Kings of Britain,* Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that Britain was founded by Brutus after the fall of Troy. Reference to this legend can be found in several medieval alliterative poems, most notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The prophecies attributed to Solomon, with his medieval reputation 'not only as a sage but magician and prophet,' also evoke feelings of marvel and wonder.[125] References to these medieval legends and historical figures associated with magic introduce the audience to the idea of mysticism. Allusions to such figures could be intended to open the audience's minds to be accepting of the lessons of the debate, and the narrator's experience of the dream vision.

After introducing the poem, the narrator begins to tell the reader of the events leading up to his dream. This includes a conventional description of a lone narrator wandering and his experiences with nature. As he wanders, he gives a detailed description of his surroundings; the shining sun, the noise from the stream, the flowers in the meadow, and the array of birds singing in their trees (ll. 31-44). Such descriptions are used frequently in medieval dream poems, such as that found in *Piers Plowman*, *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, and several of Chaucer's dream poems. Bestul discusses the poet's use of the *locus amoenus* convention in relation to other common genres in medieval poetry, citing its use at the 'beginning of amatory visions' and 'religious allegories.'[126] The use of this convention in *W&W* would have been familiar to its medieval audience and was most likely a 'neutral convention, so widely used that it aroused no special anticipations of a

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[124] All quotations are taken from *Wynnere and Wastour*, ed. Stephanie Trigg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

[125] Ginsberg, *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, p. 31

[126] Thomas H. Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 67

particular kind of poem.'[127] By included such a well-known and common feature of dream poetry, however, the poet does perhaps seem to be alluding to the purpose of his work.

Understanding dream interpretation in the Middle Ages may help modern readers realise the poet's intentions. Macrobius, for example, was considered a great authority on dreams in the Middle Ages. He differentiates between 'significant and meaningless' dreams, believing that significant dreams had the potential to 'be the special vehicle for the revelation of truth.'[128] The meaningful dream was 'often ambiguous' and required 'interpretation and analysis to get at the kernel of truth it embodied.'[129] With dreams being so closely associated with the discovery of truth, the dream vision form of poetry is then an extremely fitting partner to the debate genre.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, Aristotle states in the *Topics* a belief that the goal of a non-contentious disputation should be to arrive at the truth of the matter being debated.[130] This idea is also discussed by John of Salisbury, who states in the *Metalogicon* that logic, or the 'science of argumentative reasoning,' should be 'exercised in inquiry into the truth.'[131] With debate in the medieval universities being taught as a way to arrive at truth, and dreams being considered as a channel for the revelation of truth, the two forms highly complement each other. Bestul states that the form of the dream vision was 'used to give framework to works of religious or moral instruction.'[132] Since *W&W* is a poem concerning 'social abuses and defects of the spirit,' the combination of the two forms and their associations with truth is a highly fitting way to arrive at a conclusion.[133]

The use of the first-person narrator is another conventional feature of medieval dream poems and debate poetry. In a similar situation to the narrator of *O&N*, the narrator

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[127] Ibid
[128] Ibid, p.28
[129] Ibid, p. 28-29
[130] *The Complete Works of Aristotle...* p. 268
[131] *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury...* p. 74
[132] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure...* p. 25
[133] Ginsberg, *Wynnere and Wastoure...* p. 4

of *W&W* describes himself as stumbling across the field in which the armies of Winner and Waster are preparing for battle. The narrator tells us that: 'Me thoghte I was in the werlde, I ne wiste in whate ende, / One a loueliche lande þat was ylike grene, / Þat laye loken by a lawe the lengthe of a myle' (ll. 47-49). We can see a similarity here to the 'sumere dale, / In one suþe diȝele hale' (ll. 1-2) described by the *O&N* narrator. In both cases, the narrators portray themselves as happening upon the disputes completely by accident. Such accidental discovery of debates is discussed by Speirs who states that it is common for the narrator of a dream vision to represent 'himself as having luckily, or perhaps magically, been favoured to witness this performance while in a dream or trance.'[134] In relation to *W&W*, Speirs states that this conventional portrayal is used to help to achieve the 'suspension of disbelief' on behalf of the reader, so that the '"space" within which the imagined events happen is distinctly marked off from the audiences' every-day environment.'[135] Because of the narrator's prologue, the description of the dream setting and the introduction to the debate make up 220 of the poem's 503 lines, it is extremely important that we consider its connection to the actual debate.

As previously discussed, the reference at the poem's beginning to medieval legends and magic could have been intended to open the reader's mind to the events of the dream. As well as this, by setting the poem in a space that is completely separated from reality, the reader is invited to view the world of the debate as having its own logic and rules. As a result, the reader may be more receptive to the lessons of the debate. It would seem, then, that the use of the first-person narrator and the hints towards magic are undoubtedly linked to its form as a debate.

Much like the beginning of *O&N*, the debate of *W&W* is often closer to the form of flyting rather than a civilised debate. As previously discussed, flyting, 'as it appears in

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[134] John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 268
[135] Ibid

early traditional heroic narrative, designates an exchange of insults and boasts between two heroes in some public setting, such as the mead-hall or battle-field.'[136] This tradition has clearly influenced the action of *W&W*, with each of the allegorical figures preparing for battle against the other. The poet provides us with a detailed description of the two armies:

> In aythere holte was ane here in hawberkes full brighte,
> Harde hattes appon hedes and helmys with crestys;
> Brayden owte thaire baners, bown for to mete,
> Schowen owte of the schawes, in schiltrons þay felle,
> And bot the lengthe of a launde thies lordes bytwene. (ll. 50-54)

Following these lines, after a lengthy description of the king and his company, the poet dedicates 53 lines to cataloguing further details of the two armies. This description is somewhat imbalanced, however, with Winner's army receiving 50 lines of description, while Waster receives only 4 lines.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, the metaphor of debate as a form of combat was frequently used in the Middle Ages. The lengthy and detailed description of Winner and Waster's armies immediately bring this metaphor to mind, and is extremely fitting to the disputants use of flyting. In lines 197-201 the king's messenger demands that all soldiers put down their arms and stand before the king:

> Forthi I bid ȝow bothe that thaym hedir broghte
> That ȝe wend with me, are any wrake falle,
> To oure comely kyng that this kythe owethe;
> And fro he wiete wittirly where þe wronge ristyth,
> Thare nowthir wye be wrothe to wirche als he d[em]eth.

In the lines that follow, both Winner and Waster step forward, described by the narrator as 'Knyghtis full comly' (l. 203). Through this description we see a continuation of the theme

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[136] Parks, 'Flyting, Sounding, Debate…', p. 441

of debate as combat. The poem thus suggests that words have just as much power as their weapons. The debate of *W&W* is suggested as a civilised alternative to battle, with the king's messenger declaring at one point that 'I holde hym bot a fole þat fightis whils flyttinge may helpe' (l. 154). The king, naturally, will be the figure of authority to judge the debate, and the two knights exchange their weapons for words. As Karras states, 'Like knightly prowess, disputation was a way for a man to prove himself in relation to other men,' making the personification of Winner and Waster as knights highly appropriate. [137]

Although the contestants agree to exchange weapons for words, their exchange nonetheless maintains some of the less refined aspects of battle. Throughout their dispute the two participants frequently resort to petty insults and are eager to resolve their differences through violence. Waster, for example, implores the king to 'Late vs swythe with oure swerdes swyngen togedirs' (l. 320). Despite the personal nature of the disputants' attacks on each other, the influence of scholastic debate and Aristotle is still apparent.

The influence of Aristotle can be seen throughout the poem, but before we consider the content and structure of the debate, we must first consider its historical context. Scholars' dating of the poem places it as being composed around the year 1352, and identify the king presiding over the debate as Edward III. The king of *W&W* is referenced to as wearing a 'grete gartare of ynde' (l. 94) and Edward III's Chief of Justice, William de Shareshull, is mentioned by name, which would indeed point to the king's identity as being Edward III.

Most of the poem's scholars agree that the king presented in the poem is intended to be Edward III, and that the poem itself is a 'sharp, twofold attack upon Edward III for the extravagance of his living, and for his wars, and for the means by which he obtained

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[137] Karras, *From Boys to Men...* p. 92

money for both.'[138] Reed discusses the possibility that the poem was meant as a 'timely warning against the kinds of counterproductive policies that… did leave England embroiled in a lengthy and unwinnable war, massive foreign debt, and ever increasing antagonism between Crown and Parliament.'[139] From an examination of Edward's reign, it does seem that he did display tendencies similar to that of both Winner and Waster. Gollancz refers to Edward as 'Waster *par excellence*,' citing his love of 'pomp and magnificence,' while much of the country lived in poverty.[140] Gollancz, however, also considers in which ways Edward could be thought of as 'Winner *par excellence*,' referencing his Free Trade Policy of 1351 as an example.[141] If we consider *W&W* as a 'pamphlet of the day,' in connection with the problems of Edward III's reign, it becomes easier to understand the characters of Winner and Waster, and the meaning of their conflict with each other.[142]

The first recorded use of the word 'wynnere' in English is found in *W&W* and had a different meaning than its present-day use. Its use in this poem refers to 'someone who gains wealth, by labour, trade, or other means,' which is a direct contrast to 'waster's' traditional connotations with 'extravagance and dissipation.'[143] Through the examination of the associations of these two characters, and the substance of their arguments, the influence of Aristotle and debate becomes apparent.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, the works of Aristotle and the New Logic were recovered in Western Europe in the mid-twelfth century, and became a source of knowledge in university teaching. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is one such text, which seems to be closely linked to the themes present in *W&W*. Bestul briefly discusses the

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[138] Dorothy Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 50
[139] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution*, p. 269
[140] Gollancz*, A Good Short Debate Between Winner and Waster,* p. x
[141] Ibid
[142] Ibid, p. ix
[143] Bella Millet, Notes to *Winner and Waster*, 09 September 2014, www.southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/winner/winnn.htm [accessed 25.07.16]

personifications of Winner and Waster in the poem in relation to Aristotle's analysis of the

vices of prodigality and avarice, though not in great detail. In Book IV, Chapter 1 of the

Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle defines the prodigal man as one 'who has a single evil, that

is wasting his substance; since a prodigal is one who is being ruined by his own fault, and

the wasting of substance is thought to be a sort of ruining of oneself.'[144] Aristotle goes on

to define avarice (translated by Ross as 'meanness') as consisting of two things:

'deficiency in giving and excess in taking.'[145] These are definitions that can certainly be

applied to the personifications of Winner and Waster as presented in the poem.

Aristotle elaborates his description of the prodigal, stating that they

> become apt to take because they wish to spend and cannot do this easily; for their
> possessions soon run short. Thus they are forced to provide means from other
> sources. At the same time, because they care nothing for honour, they take
> recklessly and from any source; for they have an appetite for giving and they do not
> mind how or what source.[146]

This fits with Winner's accusations against Waster. Winner says of his opponent that

'There es no wele in this werlde to wasschen thyn hands /That ne es gyffen and grounden

are þou it getyn have' (ll. 268-269), meaning that he gives away his wealth before he has

even earned it. In perhaps the most damning of accusations against Waster, Winner

declares that:

> And thou wolle to the tauerne, byfore þe tonne-hede,
> Iche beryne redy with a bolle to blerren thyn eghne,
> Hete the whatte thou haue schalte and whatt thyn hert lykes,
> Wyfe, wedowe or wenche þat wonnes there aboute.
> Then es there bott "fille in" and "feche forthe," florence to schewe,
> "Wee hee," and "worthe vp," wordes ynewe.
> Bot when this wele es awaye, the wyne moste be payede fore;

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[144] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* trans. by W. D. Ross,
www.classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.4.iv.html [accessed 02.08.16]
[145] Ibid
[146] Ibid

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Than lympis ȝowe weddis to laye or youre londe selle,
For siche wikked werkes wery the oure lorde! (ll. 277-285)

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Waster is evidently guilty of prodigality, having to sell his land to fund his excessive and extravagant habits. While this summary of Waster's behaviour aligns with Aristotle's definition of prodigality, so too does Winner's match with the definition of avarice. Winner boasts of his ability to acquire wealth, stating that 'Witt wiendes me with, and wysses me faire, / Aye when gadir my gudes than glades myn hert' (ll. 226-227). This is much to the disliking of Waster, however, who implores his opponent: 'Let be thy cramynge of thi kystes, for Cristis lufe of heuen! / Late the peple and the pore hafe parte of thi siluere' (ll 255-256).

By his showing a familiarity with Aristotle and the New Logic, it seems reasonable to believe the poet had received a university education. With the Aristotelian ideas of prodigality and avarice being so closely linked to the poem's form as a debate, we once again see a connection between the teaching of medieval universities and the literature of the time. This connection becomes even more apparent in *W&W* as we examine the structure of the two opponents' arguments.

While it can be said that *O&N* shows two characters who both display the technical skills of a good debater, the same cannot be said for *W&W*. Instead, each opponent presents the qualities of a poor debater as described by Aristotle. A prime example of this is cited by Bestul.[147] In reference to Winner's accusation that he is a 'felle false thefe' (l. 228), among other things, Waster does not make any apparent attempt to defend himself or his actions. Neither does he attempt to refute his opponent's claims. Rather, Waster responds with the question: 'What scholde worthe of that wele if no waste come?' (l. 253). Replying to an opponent with a statement that does not answer their attack would fall

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[147] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure...* p. 76

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under Aristotle's category of a sophistical refutation; arguments that 'appear to be refutations but are really fallacies instead.'[148] In terms of an educated debate, responding to an attack with your own accusation is not a refutation at all, but a sign of faulty logic and fallacious reasoning. Both opponents are guilty of avoiding giving direct answers to their opponents' accusations. Instead they reply with their own accusation or repeat a previously made point.

Throughout the debate, both Winner and Waster fall into the trap of repeating themselves, a trait that Aristotle specifically advises against. In his *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle states that it should be the aim of competitors in debate to 'reduce the opponent in the discussion to babbling,' or in other words, 'to constrain him to repeat himself a number of times.'[149] Both Winner and Waster repeat themselves several times over the course of the debate. Winner, for example, more than once refers to Waster as a thief. As we have already seen, Winner refers to his opponent as a 'felle false thefe' in line 282. He then makes a similar accusation in line 242, stating that he is a 'wikkede weryed thefe.' Winner also refers more than once to Waster's reckless spending and his pride. In lines 230-231 Winner states that: 'Alle þat I wynn thurgh witt he wastes thurgh pryde; / I gedir, I glene, and he lattys goo sone.' Similarly, in lines 265-267, he states: 'With thi sturte and thi stryffe thou stroyeste vp my gudes / In [waytt]inge and in wakynge in wynttres nyghttis, / In owttrage, in vnthrifte, in angarte pryde.' Waster is just as guilty of repetition, stating several times that Winner in fact relies on him to exist. As well as his aforementioned question of 'What scholde worthe of that wele if no waste come?,' (l. 253) Waster repeats a similar idea in lines 390-391. He states: 'Whoso wele schal wyn, a wast*our* `mo[st]e´ he fynde / For if it g*re*ues one gome, it gladdes anoþ*er*.' Neither Winner nor Waster seem to deliberately cause this effect of repetition upon the other, or seem to notice that they are

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[148] *The Complete Works of Aristotle…* p. 278
[149] Ibid, p. 279

doing so. Through their failure to notice this and use it against their opponent, we can again see a lack of debate skills on both of their parts.

The debate and personification of Winner and Waster are the main sources of the poem's satire, and the poor debate skills of the two opponents would only add to any humour intended. Bestul argues that the audience would have found humour in the poem's take in the debate form, stating 'an important part of the satire in the debate depends upon seeing it as a discourse which exemplifies numerous fallacies of argument, the specific types of which would be known to an educated audience through Cicero and Aristotle.' [150] Through the poem's form as a debate and its close connections with the university teaching of disputation, it appears as though it was intended to be enjoyed by a well-educated audience. Jacobs disputes this assertion, stating that he is 'not so convinced of the intellectual credentials of the poet or of his audience as to be able to assume that an Aristotelian demonstration of fraudulent logic was intended or would have been understood.' [151] It would certainly be difficult to prove without a doubt that the audience of the poem would have had knowledge of Aristotle's work. It does seem, however, from the structure of Winner and Waster's arguments that the poet almost certainly did. I would then be inclined to agree with Bestul's belief that at least some of the poem's audience would have recognised the humorous take on scholastic debate. For the poet to make such apparent allusions to Aristotle, it would make sense that it would be in hope that it would be appreciated by those reading or listening to it.

The poem itself contains evidence which suggests that it was intended to be listened to, and was not only for reading. In Chapter 1 of this study, the performative nature of the scholastic debate was discussed, a feature which seems to have been carried into its literary counterpart. Speirs states a belief that debate poems were 'in their very

[150] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure…* p. 77
[151] Nicholas Jacobs, 'The Typology of Debate and the Interpretation of *Wynnere and Wastoure*,' *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 26 (1985), pp. 481-500 (p. 494)

nature oral poetry,' which tells much about how their original audiences may have interacted with them.[152] Of *W&W*, Speirs notes its 'unmistakable resemblance to a species of drama,' with the narrator's extensive and vivid descriptions of setting and costume, and his reproduction of the dialogue.[153] The narrator portrays himself as being a mere reporter of the dramatic events of the poem, but we are reminded of his presence as he calls to fill up his wine cup at the end of each fit (ll. 216-217 and ll. 366-367). This call to drink suggests that the poem was intended for social occasions, reminiscent of the drinking rites which were 'retained by the medieval guilds of northern Europe.'[154] According to Speirs, the narrator's interaction with his audience also distinguishes it as a social poem, being distinctly different from the 'art' poems such as *Pearl*, which is very private in its nature.[155] The social and performative nature of *W&W* is clearly influenced by its form as a debate. As in the scholastic disputations of the medieval universities, it is apparent that the debate of *W&W* was intended to be observed by an audience, which in turn implies much about how it was received by its original audience.

Although the poem's subject matter concerning the problems of Edward III's reign may make it appear as though it carries serious intentions, its structure and characterisation would suggest otherwise. Reed states that the narrator's participation in drinking the wine offered by the king signals a 'retreat from the seriousness of the poem's opening.'[156] As the 'threatening possibility of civil butchery is… reduced to the amusing reality of spirit-stung eyes,' the audience is invited to enjoy the poem as a humorous look at the social politics of the day.[157] The poet provides a description of the two armies in which we are told that the Pope, friars, lawyers and merchants stand on the side of Winner, while

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[152] Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry…* p. 266
[153] Ibid, p. 268
[154] Ibid, p. 276
[155] Ibid
[156] Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution*, p. 275
[157] Ibid

military men and the landed gentry take the side of Waster. Through this description we are offered a 'nearly complete panorama of medieval society,' and a humorous look at the associations within medieval culture.[158] Lawyers, for example, are depicted as trusted friends responsible for upholding the country's laws, with line 152 describing them as 'ledis of this londe þat schold oure lawes yeme.' This would appear to be intended as highly ironic, due to the fact they are armed and prepared for battle. Bestul also notes the 'venality and treachery of lawyers was a traditional topic of medieval satire.'[159] The religious figures present on the battle field are also discussed in the same humorous and satirical tone. The banners of the Pope are described as depicting 'thre bulles of ble white' (l. 144), referring to the pronouncements known as bulls through which the Pope's 'power and demands for money were conveyed.'[160] The banners of the Carmelites is described as showing a boar's head, alluding to the 'proverbially gluttonous' reputation of the order.[161] These references to the follies of supposedly respectable organisations, alongside the petty insults and accusations exchanged by Winner and Waster, hardly imply that the poem was intended to be taken seriously. As stated by James, the poet deals with 'serious preoccupations and intentions but chiefly with humorous eyes and expectations.'[162]

As discussed in relation to *O&N*, the 'natural focus' of a debate is its solution.[163] While the solution of *O&N* is intentionally deferred as the birds set off to recount their debate to be judged by Nicholas of Guildford, the debate of *W&W* ends unexpectedly in the middle of the king's judgement, as the manuscript pages containing the poem's conclusion have been lost. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that not much of the poem is missing due to the short length of the debate itself. From what remains of the

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[158] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure…* p. 4
[159] Ibid, p. 71
[160] Ginsberg, *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages,* p. 35
[161] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure…* p. 72
[162] Jerry D. James, 'The Undercutting of Conventions in *Wynnere and Wastoure*,' *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 25 (1964), pp. 243-258 (p. 245)
[163] Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale…* p. 38

king's judgement, it appears he is 'represented as looking benignantly upon both antagonists.'[164] Indeed, we are told before the commencement of the debate by Winner and Waster 'Wele knowe we the kyng, he clothes vs bothe / And hase vs fostered and fedde this fyve and twenty wyntere' (ll. 205-204). In his final speech, the king does not seem to be leaning in favour towards either participant, but instead seems to judge them equally. He sends the two off on their separate ways and other than this no action is taken against either of them. This could be seen as a wise move, as it was the 'duty of a monarch to strive to keep both factors in balance.'[165]

Most of the poem's scholars agree that elements of both Winner and Waster are essential to a successful economy, as should be the king's concern. I would be inclined to agree with Reed, however, who discusses the king's balanced judgement and irresolution of the debate in terms of its recreational intent. As the debate of *O&N* is left unresolved so that its audience may debate who the winner is among themselves, a similar approach seems to have been taken with the king's even judgement in *W&W*. The poem's irresolution defies the audience's expectations of a conclusive ending, leaving it open for discussion. The unresolved ending of the debate fits especially well with its form as a dream vision, with dreams being 'often considered an equivocal method of expression requiring interpretation and analysis…'[166] With the king's balanced judgement and the interpretation required to decipher the characters of Winner and Waster, it seems clear that the poem was intended to be a topic of discussion among its audience, to be debated over at their leisure. Thus, the irresolution of the debate tells us much about how it may have been utilised as source of entertainment by its original audience.

Through the examination of *W&W*, we can see further evidence of the conventions medieval debate poetry often adhered to, and how they relate to the form of the debate. The

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[164] Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry…* p. 287
[165] Bestul, *Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure…* p. 79
[166] Ibid, p. 29

use of the dream vision allows the poet to give a voice to the personified abstractions of Winner and Waster, while the first-person narrator serves as a reporter of the overheard debate. As in *O&N*, the debate of *W&W* is proposed as a civilised alternative to physical combat, although the two opponents of *W&W* frequently slip into the more violent and personal attacks typical of flyting. Through the structure and content of their arguments it becomes clear that Winner and Waster do not possess the high quality of debate skills as displayed by the Owl and the Nightingale. Instead, they make the very mistakes that Aristotle advises against, adding humour to the already satirical work. The king's apparent reluctance to choose a victor suggests the same kind of recreational irresolution presented in *O&N*, allowing the audience to debate the deserved winner among themselves. The hint towards the possible social functions of the poem is supported by the narrator's call to drink, which brings to mind the drinking rites of the medieval guilds. This allusion to the performative nature of the poem recalls the public nature of the debate in medieval universities, and their interactive performances in front of an audience. Through these features of the poem, the influence of Aristotle and the medieval teaching of debate become clear. This influence is essential in understanding the popular form of the medieval debate poem, and how the poems functioned in relation to their original audiences.

3. Flyting as Debate Literature

The first two chapters of this study have discussed the teaching of scholastic debate and its influence on the literature of the medieval period. This final chapter will examine the genre of flyting, a form which Conlee has described as representing a 'curious off-shoot from the mainstream of medieval debate tradition.'[167] This chapter will also discuss flyting's dramatic counterparts as seen in plays of the Early Modern period, focusing on those of Shakespeare. Through the examination of poetic and dramatic flyting, this chapter aims to discuss further the tradition of debate literature and how it functioned within its original societies.

Before discussing the functions of flyting in the medieval and Early Modern periods, it is important to clarify how it differed from its predecessors. Found frequently in the Germanic poems of earlier centuries, the form of flyting is one which existed long before those that became popular in the Middle Ages. In these earlier poems there exists numerous examples of heroic flyting, but here I shall focus on the famous flyting between Beowulf and Unferþ. *Beowulf* is the earliest surviving long poem written in Old English. While exact dating of the poem has never been determined, its only remaining manuscript has been dated approximately to the year 1010. The poem itself is thought to have been composed sometime in the first half of the ninth century. The heroic flyting of poems such as *Beowulf* share many characteristics with the flytings of medieval courts and Early Modern drama, such as their set-up and use of insults, which I shall examine later in this chapter. Their functions and intended effects on their audiences, however, are very different.

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[167] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. xviii

To understand the various functions of the different styles of flyting, we must first differentiate between serious and ludic flyting. As previously mentioned, Parks states that flyting:

> …as it appears in early traditional heroic narrative, designates an exchange of insults and boasts between two heroes in some public setting, such as the mead-hall or the battle-field. Exchanges of this kind are usually charged with military overtones and frequently preface some kind of trial of arms…[168]

This description is the basis of his definition of serious (or heroic) flyting, which he compares with the 'more playful' ludic flyting.[169] According to Parks, ludic flyting 'does not seem to bring with it any martial entailments, nor do the contestants in these exchanges seem to intend their statements as literally true.'[170] This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Heroic flyting is also discussed in detail by Carol J. Clover, who identifies commonly shared features of Germanic flytings, such as similarities in setting, contenders, dramatic situation, structure, content, and outcome.[171]

The flyting between Beowulf and Unferþ is of the heroic style. In *Beowulf*, the flyting takes place upon Beowulf's arrival at Heorot, the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar, where he proposes to help 'cleanse' (l. 432) them of the monster Grendel.[172] It is here that Unferþ steps in, criticising Beowulf for his swimming-match again Breca. Unferþ states that despite Beowulf's claims of victory, he actually lost the 'sorry contest' (l. 512), and expresses his doubts that Beowulf is capable of defeating Grendel (ll. 515-528). Unferþ's accusations and Beowulf's replies to them are conducted in a manner which highlights

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[168] Parks, 'Flyting, Sounding, Debate…', p. 441
[169] Ibid
[170] Ibid
[171] Carol J. Clover, 'The Germanic Context of The Unferþ episode,' *Speculum*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (July 1980) pp. 444-468
[172] All quotations are taken from *Beowulf*, ed. Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001)

some of the main features of heroic flyting. First of all, the flyting takes place as Beowulf arrives at Heorot, following his earlier adventures. According to Clover, in heroic flyting where the participants do not know each other, 'a travelling hero entering an unfamiliar territory' is a common occurrence.[173] She goes on to state that the 'exposure of newcomers to mockeries and challenges… is so common a feature in literature that we may wonder whether it does not reflect actual Germanic etiquette.'[174]

The public setting of the court is also a common feature of heroic flyting, as is the manner of Beowulf's reply to Unferþ. Clover states that the 'structure of the flyting is conditioned by the terms of debate and has a standard sequence a Claim, Defence, and Counterclaim.'[175] This pattern is clearly evident in this exchange. Unferþ claims that Beowulf did not in fact win the swimming-match, since Breca's strength is 'the greater' (l. 518); thus he accuses Beowulf of being both a loser and a liar. Beowulf immediately defends his claims of victory, stating that not only did he win the contest, but displayed more strength than his opponent: '… But the truth is as I've said: / *I* had more sea-strength, outstaying Breca's, / and endured underwater a much worse stuggle' (ll. 532-534). He then goes on to provide a detailed account of his battle with sea monsters. In the final step of his reply, Beowulf poses his counterclaim to Unferþ: '… Never has Breca, / nor you Unferþ either, in open battle-play / formed such a deed of daring with your shining-swords – small as my action was' (ll. 583-586). In comparing Beowulf's actions to those of his opponents', the poet displays yet another common feature of heroic flyting. Clover states that in the structure of heroic flyting 'the use of the opponent's name in direct address, and the emphatic pronoun contrasts (I / you),' are frequently used.[176] This creates a sense of 'otherness,' emphasising the differences between the two participants of the flyting. This

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[173] Clover, 'The Germanic Context of The Unferþ episode,' p. 450
[174] Ibid
[175] Ibid, p. 452
[176] Ibid, p. 453

feature is also apparent in the later flytings of the medieval and Renaissance periods. In his statement, Beowulf elevates the greatness of his own actions by comparing them to the feebleness of his opponents'.

The comparison made by Beowulf between his own heroic achievements and those of Unferþ highlights the central concerns of heroic flytings: honour and bravery. In his edition of *Beowulf*, Alexander discusses Beowulf's preoccupation with gaining fame and glory that will live on after his death. Alexander states:

> When he is at the mercy of Grendel's mother, or the dragon, Beowulf thinks of his glory; he is *mærtha gemyndig*, "mindful of glorious deeds." This is the primary theme of heroic poetry: the prowess, strength and courage of a single man, undismayed and undefeated in the face of all adversaries and in all adventures. As he surpasses other men, his moment of excelling… is rewarded by fame, the ultimate of human achievement in the heroic age.[177]

Unferþ's challenge to his heroic deeds and questioning of his honour is something Beowulf simply cannot stand for, and he feels the need to defend himself before returning the accusation to his attacker. This structure of argument highlights yet another difference between serious and ludic flyting: 'When the contest statement – particularly an insult is intended seriously…, the adversary or butt frequently feels obligated to defend himself by denying it; when the statement is intended to be fictional or ludic, denial is superfluous.'[178]

In order to understand how serious and ludic flyting functioned within their societies it is important to highlight their differences. While the examples of the two forms discussed in this chapter share many characteristics, their content and subject matter is extremely different. That honour and glory is the dominant theme of heroic flyting implies much about how it would have been received among its original audiences. Alexander

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[177] Alexander, p. xxii
[178] Parks, 'Flyting, Sounding, Debate…', p. 447

states that *Beowulf* was 'surely composed for a court audience.'[179] It is 'concerned with leaders and their conduct,' and, for its earliest audiences, 'was a good story about their ancestors.'[180] *Beowulf* presents an idealistic portrayal of the bravery and valour of the audiences' ancestors, where the flyting arises from a disrespectful opponent. That in this case Beowulf's opponent is from a different country could imply the audience was meant to take this slander personally, and would have delighted in seeing Unferþ proven wrong. The subject of the poem is serious, as is its flyting. Although there is much more to be said about the heroic flytings of the earlier poems, my aim here was to highlight their common features as presented in *Beowulf*. In doing so, we as modern readers can understand much about how the flyting may have been received among its original society. Through this understanding, it becomes clear that the intended effects on its audiences are extremely different to those of the ludic flytings of later periods. The social functions of the later flytings seem to have a closer connection to the debate culture examined in the previous chapters.

In the previously mentioned statement by Conlee, it is particularly the Middle-Scots flytings which demonstrate a close connection to the debate poems of the medieval period. In this section I will argue that while the Scottish flytings involve the exchange of insults as in the heroic flytings, their social functions are indeed much closer to the debate poems. While the heroic flyting of poems such as Beowulf exist as part of a wider story, the later ludic flytings written in Middle-Scots exist as stand-alone debates. Where the heroic flytings address issues such as honour and bravery, the ludic flyting of Middle-Scots revolves around petty insults on personal appearance, social status, and poetical skill.

The most famous instance of flyting in Middle-Scots is that between William Dunbar and Walter Kennedy, in the court of James IV. Such exchanges of insults do not,

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[179] Alexander, p. xv
[180] Ibid

however, seem to have been an activity confined solely to the court. Parkinson describes

flyting as being a frequent occurrence in the everyday life of medieval Scotland, often

causing tension among its people. The problems caused by flyting were so severe in certain

parts of the country that it came to be banned in public places. Parkinson references a

record of Aberdeen in 1405 which stated:

> It has been enacted that whoever verbally abuses the provost, bailiffs; or any other
> officer of the king, shall for the first offense kiss the ducking-stool, and be pelted
> with eggs, filth, dung and the like, and for the third offense shall be banished from
> the burgh for a year and a day.[181]

Public flytings of this sort, according to Parkinson, emphasise the importance of context.

He states that: 'In the street, flyting does not seem to have been considered a game,' and he

compares it to the highly stylised form of flyting as courtly entertainment.[182] In

Parkinson's own words, his 1983 study is most likely the first real attempt to consider *The

Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* as a 'comic masterpiece.'[183]

The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* was composed in the late fifteenth or early

sixteenth century. It was 'one of the first vernacular works printed in Scotland,' in

approximately the year 1508, and its popularity is implied by the continued production of

manuscript copies into the seventeenth century.[184] It seems significant that Dunbar is often

recorded as having the title 'maister,' which, as previously discussed, is a common title

given to those with a university education. Bawcutt discusses the relevance of this title,

stating that Dunbar is 'believed to be the William Dunbar who studied at St Andrews,

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[181] David John Parkinson, *Flyting and Abuse in Scots Verse* (PhD, Toronto, 1983)
[182] Ibid, p. 4
[183] Ibid, p. 2
[184] Pricilla Bawcutt, 'The Art of Flyting,' *Scottish Literary Journal*, Vol 10, No. 2 (December 1983), pp. 5-24 (p. 6)

"determining" in 1477 and becoming a "licentiate," or master, in 1479.' [185] The university education of debate poets could be highly significant in understanding the influences upon their poetry. As discussed in relation to *O&N*, Nicholas's title of 'Maister' is highly significant, and was perhaps intended to imply his university education and ability to determine. While the debating participants of poems such as *O&N* and *W&W* aim at resolving a dispute, the aim of flyting as displayed by Dunbar and Kennedy, is simply to outdo the insults of your opponent.

Using reasoned evidence, each participant in a debate would normally refute the claims of his or her opponent(s). As previously stated, in ludic flyting a refutation to an opponent's attack is somewhat unnecessary, as the statements are not intended to be taken as truth. This is one of the main differences between flyting and the previously examined debate poems where the participants of the poems argue over the truth of their opposing beliefs. Replies to opponent's attacks in flyting, rather than a refutation, often involve a progression of more and more elaborate insults, usually building on a statement already made by your opponent. This pattern can be seen in *The Flyting Dunbar and Kennedy*. Parkinson states that Kennedy is particularly prone to this, arguing that he 'comes to rely on simply overdoing those topics of abuse which Dunbar had already used.' [186] This is particularly evident in their exchanges concerning their social status. On several occasions throughout the flyting, Dunbar makes reference to his opponent as being a 'baird,' which at the time was a 'pejorative term for an idle entertainer, usually of a scurrilous kind.' [187] He uses this attack at least six times, the first instance appearing in line 49: 'lersche brybour baird, wyle beggar….' [188] This insult is the basis of many of Dunbar's attacks on Kennedy,

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[185] Pricilla Bawcutt, *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998), p. 1
[186] Parkinson, *Flyting and Abuse in Scots Verse,* p. 195
[187] Bawcutt, 'The Art of Flyting,' p. 19
[188] All quotations are taken from *The Poems of William Dunbar,* ed. Pricilla Bawcutt (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998), pp. 200-218

which Kennedy then mirrors in his own. He elaborates Dunbar's claims and turns them against him, with detailed descriptions of him as a vagrant. This insult from Kennedy appears four times throughout the flyting, including the charge that:

> Fra Etrike Forest furthward to Drumfrese
> Thou beggit wyth a pardon in all kirkis
> Collapis, cruddis, mele, grotis, grisis and geis,
> And onder nycht quhile stall thou staggis and stirkis.
> Because that Scotland of thy begging irkis,
> Thou scapis in France to be a knycht of the felde.
> Thou has thy clamschellis and thy burdon kelde.
> Wnhonest wayis all wolroun, that thou wirkis. (ll. 425-432)

Through this pattern of mirroring and elaborating previously made insults, we can see the aim of outdoing and one-upping your opponent in terms of the creativeness of your attacks.

As well as attempting to outdo a rival, *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* also displays a feature which has already been discussed in relation to the earlier flytings. By drawing distinct comparisons between themselves, both Dunbar and Kennedy successfully create a sense of the 'otherness' of the opponent, such as that which can be seen in *Beowulf*. In doing so, the two poets concentrate on each other's heritage. Dunbar portrays Kennedy as a 'raw, provincial, poverty-stricken, country bumpkin,' while Kennedy describes Dunbar as a 'cosmopolitan and rootless outsider.'[189] Dunbar's attacks on Kennedy's heritage are intrinsically linked to his attack on his skills as a poet. Dunbar tells Kennedy: 'Thy trechour tung hes tane ane Heland strynd, / Ane Lawland ers wald mak a bettir noyis' (ll. 55-56). Since these poets would have often performed their works before the court (as shall be discussed later), the implication of Dunbar's words is that a Lowland ass is capable of making a more pleasant sound than Kennedy can in his poetry. Scatological humour such as this can be found frequently throughout the poem. Likewise,

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[189] Bawcutt, 'The Art of Flyting,' p. 18

Kennedy criticises Dunbar's Lowland origins, claiming that the English connections of Dunbar's ancestors makes him a traitor of his king and Scotland. Kennedy states that the Dunbar family 'stanis of tressone as the bruntsone stinkis.' Kennedy utilises Dunbar's depiction of him as a provincial Highlander to draw a stark comparison between himself and the traitorous Lowlander.

Dunbar and Kennedy's flyting consists of over 500 lines in which the two poets verbally assault each other with increasingly creative insults. Through the course of the flyting they attack each other's heritage, appearance, and poetical skills. As in the previously examined works, the language of their dispute often becomes somewhat violent. In one of Dunbar's verses, he ends a flood of insults with the threat: 'I sall quell the!' (l. 248). Similarly, Kennedy ends the verse following Dunbar's threat with his own promise of violence: 'Put I nocht sylence to the schiphird knaif? / And thou of new begynis to ryme and raif. / Thou salbe maid blait, bleir eit bestiall.' (ll. 254-256). In a similar manner to the scholastic debates of the universities, and the medieval debate poems, the language of the flyting often slips into violent threats. Despite the intensity of these threats, however, it seems clear they were not intended to be taken seriously.

All evidence points towards the flyting as being a public spectacle, a performance to be enjoyed by members of the court. According to Higgins, the poem's 'pleasure-giving capacity is re-emphasized in the Bannatyne Manuscript.'[190] In this copy of the flyting, it is introduced as 'The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie. / Heir efter followis iocund and mirrie.'[191] This opening statement highlights the poem's playful intentions. The possibility that it was enjoyed as an interactive game is suggested at several points throughout the poem. For example, the audience are encouraged to judge for themselves the winner of the debate. After the opening short exchange between the two poets, we are then invited to

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[190] Iain Macleod Higgins, 'Tit for Tat: The Canterbury Tales and "The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy,"' *Exemplaria*, Vol. 16, No.1 (2004), pp. 165-202 (p. 177)
[191] *The Poems of William Dunbar,* p. 200

'Iuge in the nixt quha gat the war.'[192] The poem also ends with the invitation to 'Iuge ȝe now heir quha gat the war.'[193] The audience, or readers, evidently played an important part in the poem's resolution, being invited to judge the winner for themselves.

Courtly performances of the flyting are also evident through the opponents addressing the king himself, James IV. Kennedy, for example, in connection to his assertion that Dunbar is a traitor, begs the king: 'Hye souuerane lorde, lat newir this synfull sot / Do schame fra hame vnto your nacion' (ll. 481-482). As well as this plea, the king is referred to on two other occasions; when Dunbar refers to him as 'our lordis chief' (l. 77) and again by Kennedy, who states that 'I am the kingis blude, his trew speciall clerk, / That newir yit ymaginit hym offense, / Constant in myn allegeance, word and werk' (ll. 417-419). In these lines Kennedy again emphasises the idea of Dunbar as an outsider. Throughout the rest of this verse Kennedy refers to the king as 'his excellence' (l.420) and 'his magnificence' (l. 421). Such a blatant attempt at flattery could suggest that the king was in fact present for the performance of the flyting, and Kennedy perhaps hoped that such language would persuade the king to rule in favour of him as the winner.

King James IV clearly had an interest in the form of flyting, and even offered his own advice on their composition. According to him: 'As in Flyting and Inuectiues, your wordis to be cuttit short, and hurland ouer heuch.'[194] Bawcutt makes particular reference to this statement by James, stating that he is referring to the grammar of the words. For example: '*I's* for *I shall*, and *neir* for *neuer*.'[195] From examining the language in *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*, this advice seems to have been taken on board. James

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[192] Ibid, p. 201
[193] Ibid, p. 218
[194] Bawcutt, 'The Art of Flyting,' p. 14
[195] Ibid

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recommends using 'contracted forms, so as to sound rapid, informal and colloquial,' which again implies the light-hearted tone of the exchange.[196]

From this brief discussion of *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*, it seems clear that despite the harsh and elaborate exchange of insults, and the often violent language, it was in fact intended as a jovial form of entertainment. Flynn and Mitchell have written a fascinating article using the similarities between Scottish flytings and modern day battle rap to discuss the possible social functions of flyting. In their study they suggest that in a similar fashion to modern rappers, the poets of the flytings 'were actually amicable rivals competing for increased court status and wealth.'[197] As stated by Parkinson, the work is 'essentially courtly,' with much of the focus being on 'the highest judge, the monarch, whose presence is implied or alluded to at various points in the text.'[198] With the king being the natural choice as judge, we see the flyting mirror the debate poems' convention of appointing someone, usually a figure of authority, to decide the outcome of the debate.

Examples of flyting in the Scottish court can also be found during the reigns of later kings. After the death of James IV his seventeen-month-old son, James V, became king. Once being declared an adult ruler by his mother in 1524, James V fell under the control of his mother's husband, the Earl of Angus. After several years of uncertain rule the young king was freed from Angus in 1528, and in the following years, his confidence as a leader grew. During this time Edington states there was 'a return to grand spectacle complemented by the revival of the artistic and literary activity of the court.'[199] This statement is fittingly supported by Sir David Lindsay's *Answer to the Kingis Flyting*. While the king's own flyting has not survived, Lindsay's reply most likely conveys the

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[196] Ibid

[197] Caitlin Flynn and Christy Mitchell, '"It may be verifyit that thy wit is thin": Interpreting Older Scots Flyting through Hip Hop Aesthetics,' *Oral Tradition*, Vol, 29, No. 1 (March 2014), http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/article/576693 [accessed 13.08.16]

[198] Parkinson, *Flyting and Abuse in Scots Verse,* p. 199

[199] Carol Edington, *Court and Culture in Renaissance Scotland: Sir David Lindsay of the Mount* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1965), p. 92

'bawdy' tone and style in which James's was written.[200] Lindsay's flyting also reflects the work as a written piece, stating in the opening line: 'your ragement I haue read.'[201] He also makes references to James's 'prunyeand pen' (6) and his 'wennemous wryting' (21).'[202] That the poem was also performed is evident, however, through Lindsay's advice to the king: 'To heir… with greit Pacience.'[203]

Polwarth and Montgomerie's flyting in the court of James VI is another prominent example of the form, which conveys a performative nature. We are given a clue to its performance in a later sonnet by Montgomerie, who recounts the king's reaction to the flyting. Montgomerie states that his 'Highness laughed som tym for to look / Hou I chaist Polwarth from the chimney [nook],' with the chimney nook being considered a place of honour, close to the king.[204] That the flyting seems to have been performed is essential in understanding how it would have functioned within its society.

Through the public performance, in front of an audience who were encouraged to take part in the judgement of the dispute, we can see an undeniable connection to the debates of the medieval universities. The theatrical elements of the university disputations have been discussed in the first chapter of this study, with the *quodlibet* style of debate attracting an audience far beyond the masters and students of theology. As previously discussed, Enders has stated that the 'ritual spectacle' of the *quodlibet* debate, with its 'theatrical space, costume, gesture, conflict and audience participation' was its main appeal with audiences.[205] The attraction to such a performance is mirrored in the public spectacle of the flytings. As Parkinson states, due to 'the recurrence of flyting in its various literary contexts, it wold seem that the Scots audience found equal pleasure in the rumbustiousness

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[200] Ibid
[201] Ibid
[202] Ibid
[203] Ibid
[204] Quoted in Sally Mapstone 'Invective as Poetic: the Cultural Contexts of Polwarth and Montgomerie's Flyting,' *Scottish Literary Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 18-40 (p. 20)
[205] Enders, 'The Theatre of Scholastic Erudition,' p. 341

of the abusive conflict and the disciplines technique with which it was rendered.'[206] While taking place within the university context, it is clear that the scholastic debates were also considered as a form of public entertainment.

Although outside the broad scope of this thesis, it seems at least arguable that the flyting tradition underpins certain usages in later literary works, notably in Shakespeare's plays. Galway has written on Shakespeare's use of flytings in his plays as a 'comic device,' and counts thirteen major flytings as well as many minor ones throughout his works.[207] The flyting that takes place between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* would fall under the category of 'lord-and-lady' flytings identified by Galway.[208] Of this kind of flyting, Galway states that they 'are almost invariably part of the dramatic fare wherever Shakespeare's lords and ladies meet in playful mood, and they therefore constitute possibly the bulk of the flytings in his comedies.'[209] Galway also states, however, that this form of flyting is 'too elusive for detailed analysis,' and fails to go into any great detail about their possible functions.[210]

Act 1.1 of *Much Ado* may be analysed as an illustration. The main story concerns Claudio and Hero, in a plot that represents a traditional story of courtship. This relationship is placed in direct contrast with the second plotline: the 'merry war' between Hero's older cousin Beatrice and the soldier Benedick.[211]

Upon a messenger's arrival bearing news that the prince Don Pedro is on his way to Messina with a group of his soldiers, Beatrice inquires whether 'Signior Mountanto' is among them.[212] The word 'Mountanto' seems to be derived from the fencing term, which

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[206] Parkinson, *Flyting and Abuse in Scots Verse,* p.198
[207] Margaret Galway, 'Flyting in Shakespeare's Comedies,' *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 10 No. 4 (October, 1935), pp. 183-191 (p. 183)
[208] Ibid, p. 184
[209] Ibid
[210] Ibid
[211] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The RSC Shakespeare: Complete Works* (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2007), pp. 255-304 (p. 259)
[212] Ibid, p. 258

is 'suggestive of the verbal duelling Benedick engages in with Beatrice.'[213] In this opening scene we are given a brief taste of the verbal back-and-forth between the two characters. Beatrice initiates the flyting, interrupting Benedick with the statement: 'I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.'[214] Benedick turns this attack back on Beatrice, calling her a 'rare parrot-teacher,' thus reducing her speech to worthless chatter.[215] This insult is delivered in a similar vein to Dunbar's criticisms of Kennedy: his words are nothing but an awful noise. Beatrice's speech, and its adverse effect on men, is often commented on in the play – in Act 2.1 her uncle warns her: 'thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue.'[216] This initial exchange between the two gives the audience a brief insight into the nature of their relationship, while presenting it as an alternative to that of Claudio and Hero's courtship. The 'merry war' of words between Beatrice and Benedick is a constant reminder of the play's comic nature. Brief as it is, this opening interaction is a perfect example of how Shakespeare used flytings within his comedies.

Beatrice and Benedick represent one kind of Shakespearean flyting; another is represented by the exchange in *Troilus and Cressida* between Ajax and his ill-mannered slave, Thersites. Flytings between masters and their slaves are found frequently throughout Shakespeare's works. Of the flytings identified by Galway, a minimum of six of these fit the paradigm of master versus slave. The gulf between these two roles naturally implies opposition, with humour arising from both participants acknowledging their social differences. Thersites, for example, acknowledges Ajax's superiority as a lord, and includes it in several of his insults. He calls him a 'mongrel beef-witted lord,' a 'sodden-

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[213] Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, Notes to *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The RSC Shakespeare: Complete Works* (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2007), pp. 255-304 (p. 258)
[214] Shakespeare, *Much Ado…*, p. 260
[215] Ibid
[216] Ibid, p. 265

witted lord' and 'scurvy lord.'[217] Similarly, Ajax uses Thersites inferior position against

him, calling him a 'Dog' and a 'whoreson cur.'[218] In a similar fashion to *The Flyting of*

Dunbar and Kennedy, social status is frequently used in the Shakespearian insults. A

difference, though, is that Ajax does physically beat Thersites at several points. The

violence of this scene is much closer to the slapstick style associated with comedies, and

the frequency at which these outbursts occur suggests that this kind of violence was

expected by Early Modern audiences.

More work on this topic, going beyond Galway's discussion, is likely to be fruitful,

but while I have aimed to argue that the flytings in Shakespeare suggest a continued

appreciation of the genre amongst audiences and a development of the form, detailed

analysis of such examples are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The purpose of this final chapter was to discuss flyting as a 'curious off-shoot from

the mainstream of medieval debate tradition.'[219] In doing so I have aimed to highlight

flyting's similarities with the debates performed in the medieval universities, and its

likeness to the popular genre of the medieval debate poem. The performative nature and

audience participation, of the Middle-Scots flytings in particular, are highly reminiscent of

the performing of scholastic debates. That the Middle-Scots flytings were often performed

in court before the king, who was naturally the judge of the debate, recalls the Middle

English debate poems' convention of appointing an authority figure to decide the debate's

outcome. As in both the scholastic disputations and the debate poems, the language of the

flytings occasionally turned violent. While the heroic flytings of earlier poems were often

included as a precursor of battle, the ludic flytings of the medieval period seemed to be

purely for entertainment, with the violent threats not intended to be taken seriously. The

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[217] William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, in *The RSC Shakespeare: Complete Works* (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2007), pp. 1456-1535 (p. 1478-1479)
[218] Ibid
[219] Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry...* p. xviii

light-hearted nature of the later flytings would imply that their social functions were then much closer to those of the debate poems, intended to be enjoyed and discussed by a social group. The dramatic flytings of Shakespeare's plays seems to represent a development in the form, with little attention being given to the outcome of the disputes. Instead they seem to have been included purely for the audience to enjoy in the moment, with the hurling of insults and slapstick violence. Although Conlee's description of flytings can be viewed as entirely accurate, they can also be appreciated as their own distinct form.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have aimed to highlight the ways in which the teaching of debate in medieval universities influenced the literature of the time. In order to fully understand how debate literature of the medieval and Early Modern periods functioned within their societies, it is essential that we understand their influences.

Through examination of the medieval curriculum, we can see the heavy emphasis placed on the teaching of debate in the universities. The recovery of Aristotle and the New Logic at the beginning of the twelfth century had a huge impact on the teaching of disputation. The growing interest in the works of Aristotle, particularly the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*, is made clear through John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*. Through this work, we can see the high regard in which these texts were held, and the role they played in university teaching. Students progressed through their learning by engaging with the different roles of debate, and performing in front of a crowd. Due to the performative nature of the scholastic debates, and their appeal with audiences in the university, we can begin to understand how they came to influence the literature of the time.

By examining the Middle English debate poems, the influence of scholastic disputation becomes clear. In *O&N*, the influences of Aristotle and the teaching of debate are evident through the structure and language of the opponents' argument. The poet's appreciation of the form of debate is obvious through the skills displayed by the Owl and the Nightingale. As the disputations of the universities were occasionally disturbed by violent outbursts, so too is the debate of *O&N*. The adversarial nature of the debates, heightened by the presence of an audience, made violence a real possibility in the universities. In the poems, however, violence is usually avoided by the debate being suggested as a civilised alternative. The irresolution that the poem ends on is a feature

found in several Middle English debate poems, which also hints at how it would have been received by its original audiences. It seems the poem's open ending was intended to have a similar function to that of earlier Latin debate poems, written without resolutions so that students could debate them among themselves. In a similar fashion to the irresolution of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, the poem seems to have been intended as a form of leisurely entertainment. In understanding the poem's influences, we can more fully appreciate how it would have been received by its original audiences.

We can continue to see similar influences from the teaching of disputation through the later poem, *W&W*. The personification of the allegorical figures of Winner and Waster as knights perfectly highlights the confrontational nature of the dispute. While the debate does not actually break out in violence, the two opponents frequently make violent threats. Through close examination of Winner and Waster's arguments, however, is it clear that they do not possess the same quality of debate skills as displayed by the Owl and the Nightingale. Instead the poet humorously provides us with two figures who display all the qualities of a poor debater as described by Aristotle. From the references to the works of Aristotle it seems the poet was most likely writing for an educated audience, who would have appreciated and understood the debate form. The king's evenly balanced judgement implies that, as with *O&N*, the audience would have been encouraged to debate the outcome for themselves. Understanding the poems' influences of the scholastic disputations therefore helps us realise their social functions.

We can see the wide-ranging influence the teaching of disputation had on the literature of the medieval and Early Modern periods by examining flyting as a form of debate literature. While the contents of the flytings were extremely different to that of the debate poems, their social functions were very similar. The performative nature of flyting is crucial in understanding how they would have been received within their original

societies. Much like the scholastic debates of the universities, flytings came to be enjoyed as a very public form of entertainment. The audiences of the Middle-Scots flytings in particular were evidently encouraged to judge the outcome of the contest themselves. There is also much surviving evidence which points towards their performances at court, in front of the king who would act as a judge. The back-and-forth insults of the flytings were often violent, although it seems clear that, in the ludic flytings of the medieval period, these threats were not intended to be taken seriously. As previously mentioned, Flynn and Mitchell discuss the social functions of the Scots flytings in relation to modern rap battles. In this study they suggest that the flytings, like the rap battles, functioned as 'constructive, positive venues for artistic expression and experimentation,' with the poets sharing a mutual respect for each other.[220] The dramatic flytings of Early Modern theatre seems to suggest a continued appreciation of the form.

From the volume of surviving examples from the medieval and Early Modern periods, it is clear that debate literature was a highly popular form of entertainment. In order to fully understand how they functioned within their original societies, it is essential to consider their influences. Throughout this thesis I have aimed to highlight how the teaching of disputation in the medieval universities heavily influenced the production of debate literature. By understanding this influence, the social functions of the literature becomes clear. As the scholastic debates came to be enjoyed as a form of public entertainment, so too did these forms of debate literature. The main functions of both the Middle English debate poems and the flytings were social. They were intended to be enjoyed by an active audience, and aimed to inspire discussion and debate among those who came into contact with them.

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[220] Flynn and Mitchell, '"It may be verifyit that thy wit is thin"…'

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