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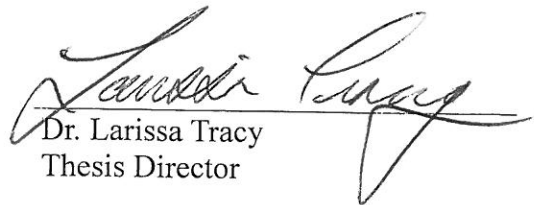
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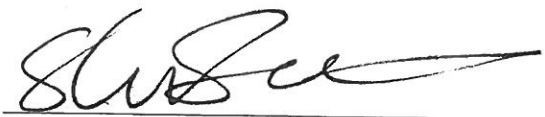
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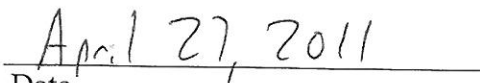
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Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1342-1400), widely considered to be the most influential of the medieval English poets, revolutionized the rhetoric of the Middle Ages with his new and fresh writing style, particularly in the realm of debate poetry. His discoveries do not exist in a vacuum, however, and his works are often based on past authors. Chaucer reclaims the genre of medieval debate poetry and ultimately rejects the interloping French style that had taken hold since the end of the Old English period. After becoming frustrated with a number of unfinished shorter works, Chaucer wrote his most enigmatic poem, apart from the jumbled *House of Fame*. The bird-debate allegorical dream vision of the *Parlement of Fowls*¹ (c.1382) is categorized in long and meaningless terms like that just described since it seems to fit into all categories at once, and none at all, depending on where the narrator and audience finds himself in the poem. The poem is seen by many, including the preeminent Chaucerian scholar Charles Muscatine, as an early failure of Chaucer's before he was able to form his sources into a coherent model (116). However, the poem is not a failure; Chaucer does not use these mainly Continental French sources ineptly, but rejects them in favor of a burgeoning English vernacular and sense of rhetorical separation from the other kingdoms of Europe.

While the ideas of a unified country or nation are often considered modern anachronisms applied to the Middle Ages, there is a definitive sense of a united England by the early thirteenth century. True to his name, Normandy was lost by King John “Lackland” of England in 1204, and only forty years later, under the reign of Henry III, it

1 Hereafter *Parlement*.

became illegal to own land in both England and France (Malone and Baugh 111). The increasing isolation of England into its own northerly borders helps to establish an “Englishness” in literature and culture that is distinct from the French, beginning one hundred years before Chaucer was born. A bit after the reign of King John, the thirteenth century monk and cartographer Matthew Paris (c.1200-1259) further established England and France as separate nations on his detailed maps. Not only did Paris set these two kingdoms apart geographically, but he also became what Geraldine Heng calls “the great nationalist historian” of England in the high Middle Ages (Heng 151). Paris was particularly concerned with non-natives coming to England in order to take powerful positions in both the Church and in the secular courts (Tracy 263). This bias led him, along with his contemporaries after the loss of continental English holdings, to “take on an insular identity distinct from that of their ancestors” (Speed 140). This separate identity manifested itself not only on the maps that Paris made, but also in the literature of the period. So while the terms “Englishness” and “Frenchness” may seem tenuous to a modern audience looking at the medieval world, these terms are in fact realities from the late twelfth onwards. These changes that occur in the high and late Middle Ages necessitate an historiographic approach to these works, and a focus on the materials available to Chaucer and his contemporaries, particularly ancient rhetorical texts. For instance, the only major surviving ancient rhetorical texts in the Middle Ages were Cicero's *De Inventione*, parts of Quintillian's *Institutio Oratoria*, and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Some other texts were available, but just not in England in the fourteenth century. This historicist method of reading these ancients in coupled with the historical political situation in Europe in the late Middle Ages helps to further the

view that Chaucer, in the *Parlement*, as Paris does a hundred years before in his maps and writings, soundly rejects the culture of his neighbors to the south, creating a new English vernacular, a new rhetoric, and a new form of the debate poem.

The *Parlement* begins with a short proem that introduces the narrator as a bit of a bookworm who has some untold problem that he believes he can find the answer to in his scholarly pursuits. He speaks of an enigmatic “craft” that is so “long to lerne,” (PF 1) but never reveals what this is. He asserts that he is looking for love, but later on in the poem he reveals that this is not true. The Chaucerian narrator then explains that he is reading a translation of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*,² or “Dream of Scipioun” that has been passed down to him through an analysis that the fifth century pagan scholar Macrobius wrote in his *Commentatio*. In this dream, the Roman general Scipio is visited by his father, Affrican, who shows him a heaven-like realm where good men go after their deaths. Then, in a scene reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, Affrican shows the dreaming Scipio a host of lecherous souls that are whirling around the earth “alwey in peyne” (PF 80). After reading the pagan text and gleaning its message of the moral good of “commune profyt,” the narrator finds himself “berafte. . .of light,” as the sun sets, at which time he readies himself for bed and falls asleep (PF 87). The *Parlement* is not the only medieval poem to use the *Somnium* at its beginning to introduce a dream; it is also used in the French *Roman de la Rose* as an introduction invoking Macrobius to give credibility to that dream vision. Chaucer uses the dream for a similar purpose, but in opposition to the French poem, ultimately rejecting what had become the quintessential medieval French dream vision poem.

2 Hereafter *Somnium*.

Soon after falling asleep, just as the carter dreams of how his carts fare, and the judge dreams of how his pleas go, the narrator also dreams of what weighs heavily on his mind—but only briefly. Scipio's father Affrican appears to the narrator and tells him that because of his committed reading of his story he will reward him with an informative vision. The two walk together until they come to the gate of the Garden of Love where the narrator is met by two signs, one, covered in letters of gold, promising bliss to those who enter, and the other, of black letters, dooms those who enter to a fate worse than death. There may be two signs giving warning of what is beyond the gate, but there is only one gate which denotes the Garden of Love as a “paradoxical unity, undifferentiated and ambiguous” (Flyer 35). A lover will experience both of these emotions at some point along the path to his ultimate goal—but the signs are so ambiguous that the dreamer does not understand their meaning.

The confusion of the signs leaves the narrator so baffled that he cannot even move; it is as if he is stuck between “adamauntes two” (*PF* 148). His ancient guide, Affrican, pushes him into the garden, asserting that the sign is meaningless for him since he is no lover. This is the first indication in the poem that the “craft so long to lerne” spoken of in the beginning of the poem is most likely not love since Affrican notes the narrator has of love “lost thy tast, as I gesse”—his guide then disappears, not to reappear. (*PF* 160). Fortunately for the narrator, he does not enter a hellish, barren land as the black sign indicates, but rather a paradisiacal garden where trees flourish, brooks babble, and Cupid sits by a well, carving his arrows with which to shoot prospective lovers. He sees a slew of personifications, most of which are good, and none of which are necessarily bad. Among these are, “Beute,” “Youthe,” “Foolhardynesse,” “Flaterye,” and “Desyr” (*PF*

226-27). The personages of Danger and Disdain are nowhere to be seen as the black sign reads at the entrance to the garden, which gives further evidence for the lack of love in the dreamer's life since he cannot see the downsides to lustful love and only the pleasurable, thinly veiled exterior of this kind of love.

A Temple of Brass then comes into view. This temple is often thought to resemble the Temple of Venus in Boccaccio's *Teseida*. In Chaucer's poem, this is where lustful love is portrayed in an unrestrained manner. The god Priapus gallivants around waving his large phallus about while men try to crown his "hed" with "freshe floures." Priapus is portrayed here as the ruler of this temple and has a scepter in his hand. The Temple of Brass, or Temple of Venus, as it is more commonly known, demotes Venus to the status of a minor character sitting quietly in a corner, waiting for the sun to set, where the narrator takes some pleasure in seeing the mostly-naked goddess. The dreamer then begins to walk out from the temple, but soon notices that there is a wall inscribed with the names of chaste lovers (who he notes have wasted their lives) on one side, and doomed lovers on the other. He takes little notice of this and enters the third and final part of his journey—The Park of Nature.

In the Park of Nature, the narrator reveals that the dream is in fact occurring on Valentine's Day. As Victoria Rothschild notes in her article, "*The Parliament of Fowls: Chaucer's Mirror Up to Nature*," the first time Valentine's Day is mentioned is in the forty-fifth stanza of the poem, corresponding with a February 14 date, which would make the holiday forty-five days into the year (167). This poem is the first time that the holiday is associated with romantic love (Benson 383). The park has as its setting the blissful time of spring and a personified Nature appears as being in control over all of her realm.

Nature is described as being the same in appearance and temperament as the Nature found in the French Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, a late-twelfth century Latin poem in which Nature delivers a long diatribe on the lustful nature of man. The narrator soon finds that there are birds of every kind around him and goes on to list them and their traditional roles in nature in detail. For instance, the owl is described as foreboding death, and the nightingale is described as ushering in the spring. The dreamer soon discovers that the birds have gathered to choose their mates.

A female eagle is brought before the gathering of birds and three male eagles attempt to gain her hand in marriage. A royal tercel, who is set above the other two eagles in class, argues that he will love her the longest, the second tercel argues that he has already served her longer, and the third tercel argues that he will love better in a shorter amount of time than the both of them. The debate leads to a stalemate and the birds of lower status become impatient with the long pleading of the eagles and begin to complain. A terclet, or young falcon, is asked for advice and he says that there should be a battle between the three tercel. The royal tercel backs down from the fight, citing his royal heritage as too lofty to descend to a physical battle. After humorous and ridiculous advice from the birds of lower status, Nature decides to leave the decision of which eagle is most worthy of her love to the formel, giving her power over the fates of the three and herself. The formel decides to delay her decision for another year, and in closing, all of the birds sing a roundel "imaked in Fraunce," and they fly away peacefully (*PF* 667). The narrator, at the end of the song, awakens, decides he has learned nothing, and resolves that he will continue reading books so that he can learn some vague knowledge.

The inconclusive nature of the poem is common among English debate poetry.

The unwillingness to give an answer or judgment at a debate and letting the audience come to their own conclusions, or in this case to come to its own knowledge, is characteristic of Chaucer. F.H. Whitman notes that this is because “the start of learning [. . .] lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation” (236). Chaucer begins the poem by reading a book, the *Somnium Scipionis*, and ends with a promise to read more books. But Whitman's assertion is strange here since the Chaucerian narrator, while he does meditate on the book he has read, has not gained any knowledge. Chaucer, therefore, refuses to be clear about the knowledge that is inherent in the *Parlement* and conceals the true meaning of the poem. Among these other goals, Chaucer rejects French poetic tradition in this poem, pointing out the flaws in older French texts. He traveled extensively on the Continent, and while he uses French as a stepping-stone in his earlier poetry, there is an eye-opening moment when he writes the *Parlement* that allows him to break free from the constraints of his French contemporaries and forbears. He reinforces his rejection through his rhetorical devices, and especially through his use of classical texts and texts that were written early in his own English vernacular. This new rhetoric is realized in the form of ambiguity in the text that allows the audience to come to its own conclusions by injecting a translation of a Neoplatonic text while being coy as to what knowledge it contains. The *Somnium* is surrounded by thinly veiled Christian morals in the *Parlement*, but the narrator makes no decisions on which type of love is best. Chaucer's French contemporaries were not so subtle and clearly make decisions for their audiences, detracting from their universal, and oftentimes moral, nature.

Chapter One: The Rhetoric of Rejection

The *Parlement* and the Rhetoric of Translation

Great attention has been paid to the various sections of the *Parlement of Fowls* that are considered to be either translations of earlier works or sources for the poem. Chaucer used a number of works to craft this relatively short poem, and some critics are inclined to brush off what is being transmuted into English as simply source material. The vernacular that Chaucer uses is not simply a tool for translation, but also a method of recreating these materials, and as a consequence, rejecting the French style of debate poetry and claiming it for a new English literature.

Ideas about medieval translation are largely derived from Roman theories, but there are some important developments that took place over the centuries, particularly in the shift from rhetoric as a function of speech to the written word. Rita Copeland, in her book *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, explores the progress of rhetoric from Latin translations of Greek texts by the ancient Romans up to the late-medieval period. Instead of rhetoric describing the structure of speech or writing, which is how most modern critics think of the term, it was instead mainly just a function of speech to the Greeks and Romans; and because of this rhetoric's impact on audience was also equally as important (Copeland 14). Rhetoric had incurred a perceived blow to its prestige in the late Roman era as grammarians "appropriated parts of the discipline of the *rhetores*," (Vickers 221) allowing rhetoric to be regarded as part of the written word and not just as oratory. This reappropriation of rhetoric by the grammarians trickles down to Chaucer by the late-fourteenth century, and many of the traditional functions of rhetoric are subsumed into literature since the oratory that ancient rhetoric was meant to inform is

no longer important. In an age when learning moved from the open forums of cities to the scriptoriums of monasteries, the learning of oratory is no longer imperative to become a productive citizen, and rhetoric transforms into a theoretical, written art form (Vickers 227). Despite the decline of rhetoric as it was known in antiquity, Chaucer lived in an era when ancient source materials were undeniably important to include in a work to gain credibility; his only method of incorporating these materials into a new structure was by imparting his own interpretation upon them. Speaking to this, Copeland writes, “In the translations of Chaucer and Gower, hermeneutical practice becomes the point of departure for rhetorical invention” (184). Instead of strictly imitating those who came before them, the poets of the late Middle Ages were forced to interpret ancient writer's texts for a Christian audience. The modern term “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek *heuresis* (Conley 317), which in turn became Latin *inventio* and describes not only the creation of new material but also the interpretive strategy used by the writer. Chaucer chooses not to refashion his classical sources in the *Parlement* in conventional ways, which might dictate a retelling or amplification of the dream of Scipio, but he instead changes the events surrounding these sources in the text as his “point of departure”—this is his hermeneutical strategy. The translator holds all of the cards when interpreting a particular text; for example, the *Somnium Scipionis*, the last book of Cicero's *De Re Publica* was only known in the Middle Ages through an analysis that Macrobius wrote in his *Commentatio* in the fifth century (Spearing 2). This early medieval translator and philosopher influenced the whole of the medieval period, especially in the realm of dream theory, with his commentary on and interpretation of Cicero. Chaucer would have known that this text was just a commentary and that the original author was Cicero, but he would

not have had access to the primary document. Like Macrobius's preservation of the *Somnium*, Chaucer makes ancient texts (and contemporary ones for that matter) accessible to his time period by writing in the vernacular and preserving the texts for late-fourteenth century England. In being the first to translate a particular text into English, Chaucer imparts his own hermeneutic analysis on these ancient commentaries and treatises, often rejecting his own contemporaries' translations of the same writings, allowing him to form a new debate genre through his analysis.

The first hint of translation in the *Parlement* comes in the very first line: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne." There has been much debate as to what this line means and which "craft" the narrator of the poem is referring to. Katherine Dubbs and Stoddard Malarkey have noted that the line is nearly a direct translation of a line from Horace's *Ars Rhetorica*, which distinctly connects Chaucer and the Roman ancients from the very beginning of the poem (18). The line in the *Rhetorica* reads: "Ars longa, vita brevis" [Art is long, life is short]. In their analysis of this line, Dubbs and Malarkey draw the astute conclusion that Chaucer does not necessarily question love in the opening lines, as it may seem at first glance, but is more troubled by his poetical craft:

What Chaucer is asking here is not a philosophical question, "How am I going to write about human love and place it in the great scheme of things?" It is, instead, a more practical problem. "How am I going to shape all these materials I have at hand into a poem about Love at all?" (18-19)

Their hypothesis is understandable here, but what they do not address is not only the question of how will Chaucer combine all of his source materials into a love poem, but the larger issue of how Chaucer will interpret them for an English audience. These first few lines of the poem reveal a frustration and an anxiety about translating and using his sources, and also with the act of making of poetry and its long learning curve. Where Chaucer seems most comfortable is not when he uses the long tradition at his disposal, but when he creates new material, as seen in the parliament section of the poem.

A proem that comprises the first thirty-five lines of the *Parlement* comes before the short translation of the summary of the *Somnium* and includes a highly rhetorical stanza that tries to justify the inclusion of this dream vision by Cicero. The narrator speaks of “new science” coming from “old bokes,” just as “newe corn” comes from “olde feldes” (PF 22-25). The stanza is rhetorical in that it uses the strategy of antithesis to describe the differences, but more subtly the synthesis, of the ancient and more modern texts by injecting an analogy of agricultural significance in conjunction with that of an analogy of academic significance. These lines are intentionally ambiguous, as is much of the *Parlement*, but these lines are even more confusing in their relation to the subsequent translation of the *Somnium*. David Aers in his article, “*The Parliament of Fowls: Authority, Knower, and the Known*,” addresses the implications of choosing Scipio’s dream as a catalyst to the narrator’s own dream vision, and the use of Affrican as a guide. Aers argues that Chaucer uses Cicero’s work in the beginning of the poem because the *Somnium* takes a cyclical view of nature that is acceptable to a pagan worldview and knowledge more generally, but rejects a Christian view of knowledge (6). He goes on to argue: “[The *Somnium*’s] instruction includes the Neoplatonic-Stoic doctrine of the great

cycles of being, antithetical to the Judaeo-Christian version of a unique and linear history created and concluded by God, and it includes the doctrine of universal salvation after an automatically granted purgatorial period, anathematized early in the history of Christian theology” (Aers 6). In essence, a Christian medieval view of the universe and history supports a linear progression from Creation, to Christ’s death, to Armageddon (Aers 5). Conversely, the pagan views put forth in the poem fit nicely within Christian Neoplatonic rhetoric on “commune profyt” and its inclusion of references to heaven, hell, and purgatory (Aers 7). This is not to say that the writings of ancient rhetoricians and philosophers were rejected by the Church, on the contrary, scriptural exegesis often found a use for ancient writers as critics, but this does not necessarily mean that everything the pagan writers wrote is absolutely compatible with Christian doctrine. Chaucer injects the cyclical nature of knowledge in using the “olde bokes” of the pagan “auctores” who he believes are the only true poets in order to highlight the ever-changing events of the poem, particularly in the realm of nature, where seasons change and planets circle overhead. Just as the new corn comes from old fields and the agricultural process is begun anew each year (Aers 2), so too is knowledge constantly renewed from time to time. Indeed, Chaucer respects the pagan writers to such a degree, that very rarely does he refer to himself as a poet, but rather as a “makere” (Olson 274). The English word “poetry” is derived from the Greek *poein* meaning “to make” and it was not unusual for a medieval poet to be called a “maker.” What is unusual, however, is that the word “poet” is not used often or at all to describe certain writers who worked primarily with verse, even when Chaucer refers to himself. Chaucer did not know Greek, and therefore would

not know the root of the word. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the relatively late

Troilus (c.1385) as he writes:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
 So sende myght to make in som comedye!
 But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
 But subgit be to alle poesy;e;
 And kis the steppes where thow seest pace
 Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (*T&C* 1786-92)

This very clear rhetorical deference to Cicero, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius exhibits a great respect for the ancients, and with this comes a great anxiety in translation that stands in sharp contrast to his dealing with his contemporary sources, which he is not afraid to alter. Chaucer desires that his best complete work be subjugated to the “poesy” of the ancient authors and he very specifically calls himself a “makere.” Because of his respect for the ancients, Chaucer exhibits a definitive sense of trepidation in translation that he has not yet overcome at the time he writes the *Parlement*. Counter-intuitively, anxiety is not always a negative force when imitating available sources. Anxiety can surprisingly be a healthy thing since it forces the writer to consider that he is possibly, or maybe even hopefully, displacing the original work with his translation (Copeland 30). The Romans had to grapple with this anxiety in their own translations, and Chaucer knew this from the writings of those he lists at the end of the *Troilus*. His anxiety is heightened

because if his ancient Roman mentors struggled with this issue, then he knows he will certainly struggle with it as well.

Chaucer's trepidation is evident elsewhere in his early works and the *Somnium* is certainly not the only evidence of apprehension in translation. In the prologue of *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer asserts that the English language is just as suitable for teaching the use of this complicated astronomical instrument as any other: "Englissh as well sufficith to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek; and to Arabiens in Arabik, and to the Jewes in Ebrew, and to Latyn folk in Latyn; whiche Latyn folk had hem first out of othere diverse langages, and written hem in her owne tounge" (29-35). Interestingly, Chaucer makes no mention of French, or Italian for that matter, in these lines as an acceptable language to translate materials into. Andrew Cole writes that these lines closely mirror Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* as he quotes the Church father as saying, "The thing itself is neither Greek nor Latin," referring to the ideas imbedded in a work rather than the language in which it is written (1132). More simply, universal truths become apparent in any language, and just as Augustine had to justify his new Neoplatonic truths to the early-Christian world, Chaucer has to do the same in late-fourteenth century England. Chaucer's hermeneutical practice is very similar to that of Augustine's own methods in that he is rhetorically, in this passage of the *Astrolabe*, appealing to the rational mind, or *logos*, of his audience in what is very likely the first writing on translation theory in medieval Europe (Cole 1131). The "vernacular" of the less prestigious Latin and the insecurity in translating from the Greek in antiquity passes down to the Middle Ages through Augustine, but the Church father has a basis for his own justifications of ultimate meaning as being more important than the language itself.

Quintillian's rhetorical treatise *Institutio Oratoria*, which was partially preserved during the Middle Ages (Vickers 215), notes that translations often “fail absolutely to attain the force of style and invention possessed by the original, but as a rule degenerate into something worse” (10.2.16). This bias was certainly pervasive in the minds of Augustine and Chaucer as they wrote their own imitations and translations from more prestigious languages. The French did not have such problems with justifying the use of their own language because it was spoken by their royalty and by default a more “sophisticated” vernacular than the English of Chaucer's day. Conversely, English was not spoken exclusively in the court of Richard II. These same principles of translation hold true in *Boece* as Chaucer decides not to include the prologue of the Frenchman Jean de Meun in his translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy* since, again, he did not consider many contemporary poets as “poetes” either, but rather “makeres” because they were not as revered as the ancient writers. Glending Olson writes that in the medieval world, the division between these two categories of writers are differentiated as follows: “Poetry is classical lore, ‘making’ the creation of verses which may incorporate poetry in one way or another” (278). The dream of Scipio certainly qualifies as classical lore, but it is how Chaucer interprets the Roman general's vision in his text that allows him to interpret this source for an English audience.

Chaucer's qualification of his translation of the *Astrolabe* and exclusion of Jean in *Boece* shows a man wary of the efficacy of using all vernacular languages, not just his own—even the more illustrious French vernacular. He is constantly ready to justify his choice of the English vernacular as a method of teaching his own countrymen in *Boece* and his son “lytel” Lowys in the *Astrolabe*. Just as it is possible that *Boece* was not

simply a translation made for Chaucer's own use since it was widely disseminated, the same can be assumed of his translation of the *Somnium* (Benson 396). Chaucer is clear that he is going to tell the reader a summary of the "Drem of Scipioun" before he begins to actually do it. He writes that he "Of his sentence I wol yow seyn the greete," which can either mean, as Whitman believes, "the moral truth which he finds there," or it could have another meaning which is simply that he will relate the larger part of the story. Larry D. Benson notes that either of these definitions can apply and glosses "greete" as meaning either "the chief part," or "substance" (1254). Chaucer succeeds in giving both the greater part of the *Somnium* as well as the lesson to be learned. By giving both of these aspects of the Ciceronian dream vision, he is also either implicitly or explicitly using the Macrobian principle that poetry must "please the ear" or "encourage the reader to do good works" (Whitman 231). These two principles are not mutually exclusive in Chaucer's world, as they were for Macrobius, and the translation of the *Somnium* is pleasant to the ear through its format in verse, and the moral of common profit and eschewing licentiousness is inevitably reinforced. The inclusion of these several ancient rhetorical methods and the fact that Chaucer summarizes the entirety of the *Somnium* in his poem suggests that he did not want to change the text. The synthesis of the pleasurable and moralistic leads the dreamer to draw clearer conclusions about love from the short summary of the *Somnium* than from the entirety of the Chaucerian dreamer's vision.

The ancients grappled with a similar problem of translation just as Chaucer did in his day. Even though the Romans militarily conquered the Greeks in antiquity, "the Romans acknowledge Greek as the more illustrious language, and translation from Greek into Latin can be described as a vertical movement from greater to lesser prestige"

(Copeland 11). The parallel struggle of the English to displace the French and the Latins to overcome the Greeks manifests itself in Chaucer's English, and becomes evident as not only as a literary, but also a military enterprise. Horace, whom Chaucer certainly read, says in his *Ars Poetica* "Our own poets have left no style untried, nor has least honor been earned when they have dared to leave the footsteps of the Greeks [. . .] Nor would Latium be more supreme in valour and glory of arms than in letters, were it not for her poets" (Copeland 29). The exclusion of the French in the *Astrolabe* and the early problems with altering the *Somnium* in his translation of the *Roman* further highlights the rivalry between the two northern European countries. The two countries, which were at war in the mid-fourteenth century onward, are certainly at odds not only militarily, but in a literary sense as well. Chaucer's apparent anxiety and doubt in his own abilities and the efficacy of his vernacular language can at least partly be attributed to the rhetorical device known as *dubitatio* as it is known in Latin, or *aporia* in Greek³. This term can be defined as the doubt of the narrator as it presents itself in internal dialogue, and "*dubitatio* tends to divide or double back on itself as a thought develops" (Dupriez 145). This doubt is often feigned, but can also be quite real. The device has a long history of use throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages before Chaucer, but it is not nearly as well portrayed elsewhere as it is through the struggles of the narrator in the *Parlement*. Cicero discusses this rhetorical strategy at length in his *De Officiis*, which became important to the early medieval church fathers and rhetoricians when they wrote about earthly duties as well as spiritual in a Neoplatonic context. To the ancients, *dubitatio* is not necessarily a positive use of rhetoric, and Cicero notes that doubt may belie some sort of

3 I use the Latin *dubitatio* since the Greek would not have been familiar to Chaucer.

wrongdoing; he writes, “Righteousness shines with a brilliance of its own, but doubt is a sign that we are thinking of a possible wrong” (*De Officiis* I.ix.). Conversely, in the early thirteenth century, Chaucer’s fellow Englishman Geoffrey of Vinsauf (c.1200) recognizes the strategy as one of his many ornaments of style, and one that can be used for scriptural exegesis or in praise of God. In his best-known work, *Poetria Nova* (1210), he gives the following example: “Oh, Jesus, so good, what shall I call you? If I call you holy or holiness itself, or fountain of holiness, or add still more, you are greater yet” (1180-82). The correct formulation of words fails the speaker just as Chaucer’s dreamer does not know “wel wher that I flete or synke” as he delivers the proem (*PF* 7). The dreamer of the *Parlement* realizes that he is no lover and has only experience from books, and this quasi-“real-life” experience of love he is receiving at the hands of Affrican is troubling to him. This becomes evident again when the narrator does not know why he sees Affrican at his bedside and can only speculate as to why he has appeared, and again perhaps most notably at the black gate to the entrance to the Garden of Love. He is not a very optimistic figure, and even unto the end of the poem, he is still doubtful in his abilities as he simply hopes to “fare / The bet,” revealing himself to be unsure of his capabilities as a scholar, even in the future (*PF* 698-99).

The *dubitatio* that exists in the *Parlement* is nothing new even for Chaucer, however, and has its roots in the Englishman’s earlier works. Chaucer’s first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess* was an instant success, but his next work, the confusedly rambling *House of Fame* was an unfinished failure. As Chaucer was writing this jumbled dream vision, he was in a decidedly experimental stage of his career when he also wrote the unfinished *Anelida and Arcite* (late 1370s), which would eventually be transformed

into the successful *Knight's Tale* soon after. After this fruitless period, Chaucer was finally prepared to write the *Parlement*, but while he was willing to alter his classical sources in the earlier works, he is hesitant to do so in this dream vision as a result of his recent failures. For instance, in *The House of Fame* (c.1379), Chaucer puts on display his large collection of classical knowledge, but in trying to adapt these sources to fit into such a small space of only two thousand lines, he ultimately fails by including too many classical references without a suitable background. He tries something similar and again fall short in the later *Legend of Good Women* (after 1382), when he attempts to abbreviate the lives of several women taken from classical texts. The doubt that the dreamer exudes is therefore not simply a construct by Chaucer to give more ambiguity to an already ambiguous poem, but it is a real problem of doubt that he faces in the years leading up to the writing of his latest dream vision. Though this use of doubt and anxiety is often used to convey a false sense of humility, as with Vinsauf, Chaucer's recent failures exhibit anxiety through his use of the ancients, but a certainty that he is ready to use them in a coherent manner in the *Parlement*.

The inclusion of any part of the translation of Cicero's work is astonishing, especially in light of Chaucer's poetic French predecessors. It seems then that Charles Muscatine, when he insultingly says that Chaucer was using "materials that were too fancy and too Italian for his present use," (116) is incorrect—Chaucer is simply putting these "fancy" materials to use for the first time in English literature. When Muscatine mentions Italian texts, he is referring to the wrong Italians. Chaucer is undeniably influenced by the writings of the contemporary Boccaccio, but even more so by the older Italians—the Romans. The text of the *Somnium* is not too complicated for his present use;

on the contrary, through his inclusion of Cicero's dream vision, Chaucer injects a revered source into his poem to give himself credibility and to show that he can finally use classical sources adeptly. The French, on the other hand, often rejected the ancients in the mid-thirteenth century due to a disdain for "rhetorical virtuosity expressive of general truths" towards that of the more familiar and personal (Zink and Briand-Walker 613). France at this time underwent a shift from using Roman texts as authoritative and moral exempla applied to romances to that of personal experience. Chaucer's French predecessor Guillaume de Lorris uses the *Somnium* to give himself credibility in the *Roman de la Rose*⁴ (1230-1275), but does not give it nearly the weight that the *Parlement* does. Chaucer's translation of this French poem in the late 1360s actually reinforces his problems with reinterpreting or changing the ancients, unlike the ease with which the French were doing so, and his increasing comfort in rejecting the French over the course of his career. Contempt for the alteration of the *Somnium* becomes apparent in light of the fickle French attitude toward ancient texts.

Chaucer translated several thousand lines of the *Roman*, also a dream vision, from French into English. The *Roman* is often considered the paragon of French medieval love poetry. In the poem, written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun over the course of seventy years in the thirteenth century, a young lover, aptly named Amans, finds himself in Love's garden where he is promptly shot with an arrow by Cupid. The lover then sees a rose that he cannot obtain, but is instantly infatuated with. After a series of speeches by various personifications, chief among them Reason, Amans decides to steal a kiss from the rose. After he does this, a personification of Jealousy steals the flower and builds a

4 Hereafter *Roman*.

castle to keep it from the lover. Cupid and his various vassals then move to lay siege to Jealousy's castle and finally take it, through artifice, allowing Amans to pluck the rose from its prison, thus fulfilling his desires.

Like the *Parlement*, the very first lines of the *Roman* explain the significance of Macrobius's contribution to the dream of "kyng Cipioun" (*Romaunt* 10). The *Somnium* undoubtedly serves a very different purpose in the *Roman* than it does in the *Parlement* and A.C. Spearing argues that Guillaume de Lorris is simply using it to "claim that dreams sometimes foretell the future" and that the dream of the *Roman* is similar to that of the *Somnium* in that they are both this type of dream—what Macrobius calls a "visio" (25). In his translation to the beginning of the English *Romaunt of the Rose*, Chaucer translates the same number of lines from the French nearly verbatim:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Many men sayn that in swevynges | Maintes gens dient que en songes |
| Ther nys but fables and lesynges; | N'a se fables non et mençonges; |
| But men may some swevenes sen | Mais l'en puet tiex songes songier |
| Whiche hardely false ne ben, | Qui ne sunt mie mençongier; |
| But afterward ben apparaunt. | Ains sunt après bien apparant. |
| This may I drawe to warraunt | Si en puis bien trere à garant |
| An authour that hight Macrobes, | Ung acteur qui ot non Macrobes, |
| That halt nat dremes false ne lees, | Qui ne tint pas songes à lobes; |
| But undoth us the avysioun | Ainçois escrist la vision |
| That whilom mette kyng Cipioun.(1-10) | Qui avint au roi Cipion ⁵ . (<i>Roman</i> 1-10) |

5 "Many men say that there is nothing in dreams but fables and lies, but one may have dreams that are not deceitful, whose import becomes quite clear afterward. We may take as witness an author named Macrobius, who did not take dreams as trifles, for he wrote of the dream that came to King Scipio"

While the *Parlement* shows some slight anxiety about translating the ancients, this direct translation into octosyllabic couplets is admittedly not very imaginative; however, Chaucer has an excuse. At the time that he is translating the *Roman*, he has essentially just begun his poetic career, but he would inevitably reject this French use of the *Somnium* that he was so eager to use in his translation of the *Roman*. Roman theories of translation, which would have been most available to Chaucer, emphasize the “transference substitution, and ultimately displacement of the source,” which created some anxiety even in the revered Latins (Copeland 30). The act of translation, then, according to Horace’s *Ars Poetica* should be different from its source material in such a way that the original is no longer relevant (Copeland 30). The translation from the French has been dated to before 1370, long before Chaucer began any of his major works, which may help to explain why it remains essentially unchanged (Benson xxix). Chaucer rejects this introduction of the French *Roman* in the *Parlement* through the type of dream vision used, and he uses the Italian of Boccaccio to refute the French in order to reinterpret his Continental sources.

The opening assertion that the French poem is a “visio” or dream that will foretell the future (Spearing 25), and the use of the *Somnium* cues the reader into the visionary aspects of the poem before it even begins. The *Parlement*, according to Mabrobius’s writings on dream visions, would be considered by a scholarly medieval audience to have a bit of each of the other two types of “significant” dream to the early medieval philosopher: The “somnium” or “engigmatic dream,” and the “oraculum,” a type of

(Dhalberg 31).

dream where an authority figure appears to guide and give advice to the dreamer (Spearing 10). The use of the *Somnium* in the prologue to the *Parlement* is indeed enigmatic in relation to the rest, and even the Chaucerian narrator does not necessarily see the use of reading the story of Scipio. As he is about to lie down in bed, he says, in the best example of *dubitatio* in the poem, “For bothe I hadde thing which that I nolde, / And ek I ne hadde that thing I wolde” (PF 90-1). The ambiguity and doubt in these lines from the *Parlement* is mirrored in the above opening lines of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, but are used in a more naïve manner in the latter. In the excerpt, the *Roman* and *Romaunt* both say that many men are quick to brush off dreams as simply “fables and lesynges,” but they quickly note that this is an incorrect view, giving the ultimate knowledge on the issue to that “authour hight Macrobes” (*Romaunt* 2, 9). It is as if there is an argument between those who do not believe in the efficacy of dreams and those who do. In the first two lines, the French are quick to set aside those who do not believe in the predictive power of dreams in order to push their own agenda, which is to establish an authoritative credibility for foreknowledge in the poem. The acceptance of foreknowledge does not fit with a Christian worldview, as Chaucer notes in his later translation of *Boece* where divine prescience is the only method of telling the future, which is important despite the fact that these are secular authors.

Chaucer, though he is a secular poet, does not necessarily compromise his religious beliefs or those of Church doctrine in including the *Somnium* because he remains unsure of how it can help him, even if he leaves it unchanged as he finishes reading Macrobius’s commentary. At the beginning of his work he does not assert that it will predict the future of the poem or of lovers. While Macrobius is certainly an

important commentator to Chaucer, and especially in this early translation, he is not nearly as influential as the original author of the dream of Scipio whom he will later directly invoke in the *Parlement*—Cicero. When he portrays the gods, and especially Priapus, in a lowly manner in the Temple of Brass, he will exhibit a rejection of even the principles of Macrobius that he seems to hold so dear in the translation of the *Roman*. The French ultimately turn towards a more individualistic, humanistic literature and away from universal tropes in the thirteenth century while the English, partly through Chaucer's writings, maintain the ideas of common profit and communal importance advocated in the *Somnium*. While the French begin to disparage all of the ancients, Chaucer, who is very often thought to follow the lead of his French contemporaries, instead reveres the ancient Romans to such a degree that he cannot alter Cicero's work. It is almost as if the French do not recognize Cicero as the true author of the *Somnium*, and Guillaume and Jean do not list him as such in the *Roman*. Chaucer, and by extension his French source, is not saying that all dreams are necessarily predictions of the future, but simply says that "men may some swevenes sen" that contain foreknowledge (*Romaunt* 3). Despite the fact that not all dreams are "visio"s, it becomes obvious that the *Roman* is definitively intended to be one. This again becomes apparent in Chaucer's translation in the lines that soon follow these first ten: "Many wightes / That dremen in her slep a-nyghtes / Ful many thynges covertly/ That fallen after al openly" (*Romaunt* 17-20). The French have set up the poem from the beginning to claim that the events about to be related in the *Roman* are a possibility for any lover, and if a lover heeds Macrobius and tries to search his dreams for evidence of foreknowledge, he will be able to avert disaster in loving. Though the dreamer may experience the pains of love that appear in the dream

vision, these feelings may soon come to fruition “al openly” rather than remaining “covertly” in his dreams. In opposition to the French interpretation of the *Somnium*, Larry Skulte, in his article “The Inconclusive Form of *The Parliament of Fowls*,” notes that the narrator of the *Parlement* admits after reading the *Somnium* that the dream of Scipio is not imparting any knowledge of love to him, and he cannot apply the tenants described therein to amorous relationships (122). Unlike the *Roman*, the *Parlement* does not provide all of the answers to the issue of precognition, nor does it attempt to. This is not to say that all of the tenants of the dream vision are useless, but instead that the supposedly incorruptible knowledge of dreams that Macrobius advocates is not necessarily flawless. The narrator soon finds that in the wider world of his vision, the *Somnium* really only serves as a catalyst for Affrican to come into his dream and guide him to the gates of the Garden of Love, where he shoves the frightened narrator in and then promptly disappears.

The most significant change in the opening passage of the *Parlement* from that of the *Roman* is that the *Somnium*, while it is extremely important to the poem overall, has no predictive powers in Chaucer’s work. Cicero’s dream vision is included in the *Roman* as a sort of warning to lovers that anyone who lives lustfully will inevitably end up like those lecherous lovers in the *Somnium* who are “brekers of the lawe,” and who will “whirle aboute th’erthe alwey in peyne, / Tyl many a world be passed” (PF 80-81). The punishment that awaits “likerous folk,” is spelled out very clearly, but this does not come to fruition in this Valentine’s Day poem—it would be much later in the *Troilus* when the true destructive powers of love would be displayed in their totality. The *Parlement* begins ambiguously, but not altogether as seriously as the predicted “double sorwe” that appears

at the opening of the *Troilus* (*T&C* 1). It is inappropriate to warn of the destructive powers of lust at the beginning of a poem that celebrates romantic love. As the *Parlement* progresses into the dream world, the lack of forewarning that the *Somnium* imparts upon the narrator becomes increasingly noticeable. As Affrican leads the narrator to the two signs above the entrance to the Garden of Love, it seems that a true sense of forewarning has been achieved. One sign is wholesome and inviting to those passing into the realm of Cupid, but the other is daunting. Part of the black sign reads, “Thorgh me men gon [. . .] / Unto the mortal strokes of the spere / Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde” (*PF* 134-6). Writing on these very lines, Skulte astutely notes that the Garden of Love does not lead to a dangerous place, but he says that rather, “The path in fact leads to a temple of brass about which are dancing women and before which are regaled the pleasing and familiar personifications of courtly allegory: ‘Pleasaunce,’ ‘Curteysie,’ ‘Gentilesse,’ as well as some less familiar but no less pleasant figures like ‘Dame Pees,’ and ‘Dame Pacience’” (124). This Temple of Brass, with women dancing about it in an orbit, is faintly reminiscent of the *Somnium*’s sinners, but the women are not forever in pain awaiting some sort of salvation as are the lecherous folk of Cicero’s dream vision. Traditional French use of the *Somnium* as a source of foreknowledge is increasingly set aside as the poem progresses towards the Temple of Brass.

This temple, as many critics have noted, has a strong correlation with the Temple of Venus in the *Teseida* of Boccaccio. Some hesitate to call Chaucer’s temple that of Venus because the goddess of love has such a minor role in the *Parlement*; instead some have resorted to giving ownership of the temple to Priapus since his role is so pronounced. Emerson Brown in his article “Priapus and the *Parliament of Fowls*”

supports this theory and writes the following about the high status of the lowly god: “He [Chaucer] increases the suggestion of sovereignty by adding the scepter, a common detail in the iconographic tradition of Priapus but one lacking in [. . .] Boccaccio” (260). A minor, lecherous god that should be shunned by a Christian audience is given sovereignty when it comes to love as the dreamer sees it so far as the poem has progressed, and Chaucer even pokes fun at him. By adding a humorous scene which includes Priapus being exposed by a braying ass before he rapes the Naiads, and picturing the men at the temple as trying to crown him with flowers, Chaucer rejects even Macrobian principles. Macrobius, in his discourse on dream fables writes that gods should not be portrayed as adulterous or humorously in poetry since these are “matters base and unworthy of deities” (Olsson 20). Priapus is pictured with sexually frustrated men attempting to crown his head with flowers; this scene is a further hint of an inversion of Boccaccio’s *Teseida* in the poem (*PF* 258-59). In the *Teseida*, the walls are adorned with flowers, and this is absent in the *Parlement* (Brown 262). The agency of Venus is taken away, since it is at first assumed that this is her temple, and invests this agency instead in Priapus. Venus is no moral goddess, but she is at least somewhat restrained, as she appears in a “prive corner in disport,” thus giving the duties of lustful love to an extremely licentious lower god (*PF* 260). This power will never shift back to Venus, and Chaucer makes clear this when he says that she is waiting until “the hote sonne gan to weste,” but since she inhabits a land that “nevere wolde it nyghte / But ay cler day,” she will forever be at rest (*PF* 209-10). The debasement of deities, and the relinquishing of power to a depraved god shows that the Macrobius who Chaucer seemed to revere so dearly in the *Romaunt* and the beginning of the *Parlement* slowly loses credibility in the poem. He des not lose

nearly as much credibility as the French and Italian writers, however, but the depiction of the depravity of the gods reveals that even Macrobius is not a revered enough source to be considered a “poete,” but the subject of his *Commentatio*, Cicero, is.

The mixture of the humorous and the serious has its roots in Chaucer's use of Ovid and the tenants that are used throughout the Roman poet's works. Ovid and Chaucer are often taken much less seriously than their respective poetic contemporaries of Virgil and Dante, even in their own day (Fyler 2). Each poet has a vast corpus of literature at their disposal, Ovid's of course being less, but both use their respective traditions to reject the old and create new ones. Ovid's rhetorical prerogative is to mix genres and in order to create new ones out of the old (Fyler 3). For instance, as John Fyler argues in his book *Ovid and Chaucer*, “In a classical universe, mixed genres mean chaos, not simply the abuse of conventional properties,” but this chaos is appealing to Ovid (3). Ovid is a sort of ancient iconoclast when it comes to adhering to the epic form and believed that poetic convention is established by humans and not inherently present in literature; he therefore mixed elegy with the traditional epic form (Fyler 3). Similarly, Chaucer rejects parts of Neoplatonic philosophy by including supposedly virtuous pagans, Scipio and Affrican, but he essentially imparts no moral at all by the end of the poem, and the dreamer and audience nearly forget even the dream of Scipio. No Christian principle is conveyed in a Neoplatonic context, not even in the Temple of Brass where the lovers are unaware of their doom until it happens, leaving no room for foreknowledge, and giving no advice on how to avoid the fate of too-passionate lovers. Venus, Priapus, Nature, and even the royal tercel at the parliament of Nature are reduced from “heroic figures to the status of amorous exemplars,” by Chaucer, just as Ovid does to the same gods mentioned in the

Parlement (Fyler 8). This, along with the inclusion of the complete *Somnium* at the beginning, makes a clear case for a classical Roman rather than a Continental French influence on Chaucer's *Parlement*. Chaucer's first dream vision, *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1370), was written long before Chaucer's parliament of birds, and the Roman works of Ovid would have weighed heavily on his mind. His inclusion of the story of Seys and Alcione in the *Duchess* is Chaucer's first use of Ovid in any of his works. In this story borrowed from the *Metamorphoses*, king Seys is lost at sea while on a military campaign and his wife, Alcione, wants to discover what has happened to him. Juno, queen of the gods, allows Seys to appear to Alcione in a dream, where he tells her where his body has drifted, granting her wish. The supposedly unbreakable bonds of marriage to even virtuous pagans are reinforced through the story. Chaucer does leave the Ovid's story unfinished, and the couple do not turn into birds as they do in the *Metamorphoses*. He does not include the transformation since, just as the wife of the Man in Black, Seys is dead, and death is final—there is no hope for him to see his lady again. Chaucer is willing to change his classical sources early on to suit his purposes and to push his interpretation of the text upon the reader, but this quickly changes by the time he writes the *Parlement* where he is much more subtle. Chaucer therefore takes a page out of Ovid's book, so to speak, by merging genres to create a new, mixed one in the *Parlement*. He merges the ancient moral text in the *Somnium*, the allegorical dream vision, and the Italian courtly poem, and later in the Park of Nature, the quintessentially English bird debate poem of *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

The Temple of Brass further becomes a fulcrum of the events in the *Parlement* as it appears at the center of the poem, and it helps to conclude the influence of the *Somnium*

before the narrator seems to enter a completely different world in the Park of Nature. The temple scene is much like that of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, but there are some important differences that enable Chaucer's use of this Italian text to further reject the methods the French use in including Cicero in the *Roman*. In Boccaccio's story, the main goal of the Temple of Venus scene is to gain an audience with the goddess, who promptly delivers a speech on the nature of love. On the way to doing so, images of doomed lovers are displayed on the walls of the temple (Hewitt 24). This is a direct inversion of the manner in which the temple is portrayed in Chaucer's poem. Chaucer, after seeing Venus resting "in a prive corner in disport," passes by her unseen to a wall where chaste lovers are painted on one side whom the narrator notes have wasted their lives in service to Diana, and on the other are lovers who have been doomed because of their passions. Chaucer writes only a quick description of these doomed classical lovers after naming each in turn⁶: "All these were peynted on that other side, / And al here love, and in what plyt they dyde (*PF* 293-94). This directly contrasts with the chaste lovers that appear on the other side of the wall that are noted by the narrator as being "maydenes swiche as gone here tymes waste" (*PF* 283). Even though those who died through their hot passions do not have foreknowledge of what will happen to them, the chaste lovers are equally subject to the same conundrum. In fact, the dreamer deals with the chaste lovers much more harshly by saying that they have wasted their time, unlike the doomed lovers who seem as if they are almost pitied by the narrator. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer depicts the benefits of lustful desire and its humorous aspects, including the attempted crowning of Priapus, and the pleasure that the narrator takes in seeing a partially naked Venus, before the

6 Chaucer lists as his doomed lovers Semiramis, Candace, Hercules, Biblis, Dido, Thisbe, Pirus, Tristan, Isaude, Paris, Achilles, Eleyne, Cleopatra, Troilus, Silla, and the "moder of Romulus" Iliia.

consequences of such behavior are revealed. Boccaccio informs the audience immediately upon the beginning of his temple scene that the consequences of love very often lead to death or destruction, even if his characters will not heed the warning. This may seem a small change from one text to another, but the difference from the Italian *Teseida* has a large impact on how Chaucer treats the French tradition in that he uses the *Somnium* to oppose the predictive powers of Cicero's dream vision that is used in the *Roman*.

The forewarning that the *Roman* includes in its beginning as it inserts the *Somnium* is a sort of exhortation to believe what is to follow and is a forewarning of what will happen to all lovers, much like the walls of Boccaccio's temple. There is no such confidence found in Chaucer, as seen in his assertion that he does not have that which he had wished for before he lies down to bed (*PF* 90-1). Chaucer takes the only known French use of the *Somnium* in his day, in the *Roman*, and inverts it to mean something completely opposite its context in that poem to serve the purposes of the *Parlement*. By the time the narrator comes through the other side of the Temple of Brass, he is injected into the new world of the Park of Nature where all that he has learned up until that point is no longer valid. The park represents married love as presided over by Nature. No lesson has been learned at the time he enters this paradisiacal part of the poem, and he is in reality only going from one paradise to another, because he is not affected in an adverse way by the licentiousness of the Garden of Cupid or the Temple of Brass since he is not a lover in the first place.

The *dubitatio* present in Chaucer's translation of the *Somnium* is more apparent than ever in light of this analysis. He is willing to forge Cicero's work to his own

purposes, but he still does not alter the story that it contains, and in the end reserves judgment by essentially imparting no moral at all of his own. Chaucer faithfully preserves the ideas of “commune profyt,” the immortal nature of souls—even pagan ones—and the punishment of evildoers (*PF* 75). The *Roman* includes none of these moralizing aspects of the *Somnium*, but just mentions it in what may even be considered a heretical superstition of prediction of the future. Chaucer is not safe from criticism here either since he includes the moralizing aspects of the dream to the detriment to his own religious beliefs and possibly to the criticism of his own Christian contemporaries. Aers points out that salvation in Scipio's dream comes from loyalty to the state and not reverence to God, and that common profit can be dangerous to the Church because it takes the need for the unifying force of the congregation out of the equation (6). Chaucer is unwilling to change the ancient text out of respect for Cicero (and his commentator Macrobius) and through the inversion of the temple scene that can be found in the Boccaccio, he uses the Italian to reject the French.

Aers' assertion that Chaucer compromises his religious beliefs by including Scipio's dream is debatable. Conversely, the anti-Christian powers of prediction included in the *Roman* are not. A further rejection of the *Roman* is confirmed by the several tenets of the early-Christian philosopher Boethius (c.480-524) that are unavoidable when considering issues of foreknowledge and free will in this early poem of Chaucer's. Completed sometime after 1382, and therefore after the *Parlement*, Chaucer's translation of *Boece*, as his name is anglicized, became one of the seminal works of philosophy in English in the Middle Ages. Though he wrote his translation after the bird debate poem, Boethius's work, the *Consolation of Philosophy* (c.524) was well known to Chaucer at

this time. The *Consolation of Philosophy* is also considered by many to be the end point for classical antiquity, exhibiting Chaucer's use of all of the classical sources at his disposal, even unto the very latest (Walsh xii). In the allegory, Boethius, who is incarcerated in a Roman prison, comments on the fickle nature of fortune and speaks with a personified Philosophy about his troubles. The fifth and last book of the treatise is most important to Chaucer's *Parlement* and sheds some light on why the Englishman writes in the manner he does about forewarning and free will.

Despite the later date of his translation, Chaucer undoubtedly uses Boethius in the *Parlement*, often lifting direct quotations from the Roman author. For example, when he describes Nature's role as God's vicar, he notes that she embodies the elements of "hot, cold, hevye, light, moyste, and dreye" (PF 373), which directly translates part of Song IX of Book III in the *Consolation*. More relevant to the predictive powers of the ancient *Somnium* and the eschewing of them by Chaucer in order to reject its French use elsewhere, Chaucer utilizes the final chapter of the *Consolation*. In a particularly significant few lines, Chaucer's translation of Boethius reads:

The moevynge of the resoun of mankynde ne may nat moeven to (that is to seyn, applien or joignen to) the simplicite of the devyne prescience; the whiche symplite of the devyne prescience, yif that men myghte thinken it in any manere (that is to seyn, that yif men myghten thinken and comprehenden the thinges as God seeth hem), thanne ne scholde ther duelle outrely no doute. (*Boece* V.4.10-19)

Boethius is essentially saying that man cannot have the foreknowledge that God possesses, and cannot even form a conception of it. This follows from the third chapter of Book V where Philosophy tells Boethius that if there is no free will then God is unjust for punishing those who do wicked deeds since they have no control over their actions (*Boece* V.3.151-60). The free will that the dreamer of the *Parlement* has in choosing his own path and not being able to see what exactly will occur before it does, as in the *Roman* and in the *Teseida*, allows him to decide freely, but this philosophy has darker overreaching connotations for love. If there is free choice available to the lover that enters the Temple of Brass and Garden of love, there is also a penalty for choosing such a sinful path. The dreamer, as Affrican asserts, is in no danger of the harm that love can cause, but even though the narrator sees the world from an objective view that a lover might not have, he still does not see the dangers until after he views the pleasure enjoyed by the licentious in the more sensual sections of the dream. The lover that chooses to live by the law of Venus has no way to know what specific fate awaits him, but he should use his reasoning abilities to consciously exercise his free will and restrain himself. The analysis of Boethius on foreknowledge and free will is accepted as Church doctrine, but the arrogant Guillaume de Lorris flouts it in the *Roman* as he purports to know the end result of love through his use of the *Somnium*.

By inverting the temple scene of the *Teseida* and reappropriating the use of the *Somnim* from the *Roman*, Chaucer reveals the true nature of love, which is never known to the lover no matter how perceptive he may be, even in a vision. Amans does not know what he wants when he enters the high-walled garden at the beginning of the *Roman*, but he soon finds an object of his desire in the rose. He even receives his reward at the end of

the more than 22,000 line French poem, but the Chaucerian narrator receives nothing, just as he expects to receive nothing as he finishes reading Macrobius's commentary. The *Parlement* begins very differently than the *Roman*, with a dreamer who is decidedly not a lover, as Affrican notes (*PF 160*). The Chaucerian narrator wants to gain knowledge, but he does not know what kind of knowledge will be beneficial to him, and at the end of his journey, as he takes himself to other books, he still does not know (*PF 695*). Chaucer treats the very serious material of the *Roman* and the *Teseida* in a humorous way, but in keeping the powers of prediction out of his dream vision, he still maintains a serious authorial voice. The story found in the *Somnium* is no laughing matter, and the extensive list of the doomed lovers on the wall of the Temple of Brass inspire pity in medieval and modern audiences alike, though they are quickly forgotten.

Though, like Ovid, Chaucer fuses the serious and the comical into the *Parlement* in innovative ways, there is some precedence in English for doing so. The Middle English debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* is often considered a source for the debate of birds that occurs at the end of Chaucer's *Parlement*. The continuation of the English bird debate genre from the high to the late Middle Ages further exhibits a break with the French literature that is contemporary to these two English texts. With an historical backing of this genre that supports it as inherently English, a further sense of "Englishness" is established through the *Parlement*.

Chapter Two: The *Parlement* and The Owl and the Nightingale

2.1 Rejection of the French Through an English Discourse on Love

Critical debate over the last one hundred years has argued in favor of many influences over Chaucer that prompted him to write this allegorical dream vision, but one that has received little attention is that of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The early-Middle English poem has a disputed composition date anywhere between the late-twelfth century and the late-thirteenth century, but a generally accepted date is around 1275, and only two manuscripts survive⁷. The *Parlement's* connection to this bird debate poem reveals a powerful reaction against the rhetoric of French secular and ecclesiastical romance, and contempt for contemporary law proceedings taking place in the same language.

The Owl and the Nightingale begins with a narrator at the edge of a field in a valley where he suddenly, to his great wonder, comes upon an owl and a nightingale in hot debate. As the two female birds “sval”⁸ against each other, the owl takes a religious stance that favors marriage, while the nightingale prefers a courtly, and (as the owl often notes) lascivious sort of romance (*O&N* 7). The two birds agree that they cannot decide which is better through their debate alone and resolve to choose a judge, the mysterious Nicholas of Guildford, who never appears in the poem. The debate continues until a new day has dawned, at which time a contingent of small birds appears to proclaim the nightingale the winner, making the owl feel threatened physically by their presence—the debate nearly breaks out into a battle at this moment. A flurry of legalese ensues and all agree that Nicholas must decide the argument. The two fly away on peaceful terms to

7 Only the “C” and “J” texts survive. I use the “C” text for my quotations as it is the earliest of the two, and is therefore considered to be closest to the original.

8 A full translation of *The Owl and Nightingale* is included in Appendix A.

find this man and the poem ends finished but inconclusively.

An assertion of the supremacy of married love over lustful love in the Middle Ages is not surprising. The poem was most likely written by a Dominican friar and had circulated among this monastic order for about a hundred years before Chaucer was writing (Fletcher 2). The likely religious authorship certainly influences the moralistic content, but the fact that courtly romance is included in the poem at all is surprising in a poem written by a monk. Alan Fletcher says of this phenomenon that the building of the Dominican priory at Guildford, where he believes the poem to have been written, was a royal enterprise financed and maintained by the widow of Henry III, Eleanor (7).

Speaking to this, he says:

Given this sustained royal attachment, it might be expected that court culture would find easy accommodation among the Guildford Dominicans, especially when the general fact is also borne in mind that by the second half of the thirteenth century the Dominican presence at court was already pervasive.

(Fletcher 7)

This is not a cloistered monk that has no knowledge of the outside world; he was probably very knowledgeable of worldly affairs and was concerned enough to write a poem relaying both sides of this debate in a fairly objective manner, despite the small interjections that suggests he favors the owl.

The importance of this early poem cannot be understated, especially in reference to its influence on Chaucer, and *The Owl and the Nightingale* is by no means the only

bird debate poem to come out of the Middle Ages. Poems such as *The Thrush and the Nightingale* and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* are contemporary with these two poets, but they are of dubious authorship and dating. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* is contemporary with *The Owl and the Nightingale*, but is believed to be an imitation of the latter (Conlee 237); the same is true of *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* and Chaucer's *Parlement* (Conlee 249). In light of this, it seems that *The Owl and the Nightingale* is the earliest bird debate poem in the English language.

Some of the similarities between the *Parlement* and *The Owl and the Nightingale* are obvious: the basic form of the debate, its heated argument that nearly comes to blows, and the inconclusive ending. On a deeper level, however, the problems of sex versus chastity and courtly love versus married love become most important. At the debate of birds in Chaucer's work, the narrator sees three male eagles of higher "kynde" vying for the preference of the formel, each telling of their better qualities and how well they have served the female eagle. In the earlier poem, two female birds are fighting for the preferment of Nicholas, even though he is not present at the debate. The owl and nightingale are not vying for the love of their judge, but they still debate which kind of human love and lover is best. The birds do not speak of bird-love, and only give examples of men that are either living in marriage or in lust. Bird and human lore are kept separately in the poem so that there can be no confusion when it comes to the exempla shared by the two. In fact, when the two criticize each other outside of the service that they perform for humans, they only mention the bird-like qualities of the other that each one finds offensive. For instance, in her first criticism of the owl, the nightingale says, "Pu art lodlich & unclene / bi pine neste ich hit mene" (*O&N* 91-2). The nightingale is

not personifying the owl by portraying her with having a home with human trappings, but keeps the owl within the realm of the bird world. This separates the birds from what could be otherwise seen as a purely allegorical poem, and indeed without these qualifications, the poem could very easily be seen as an allegory of human and not bird-life, with the birds being surrogates for humans. The same is true of the *Parlement*—the tercel is just a bird, but this does not stop them from having parallels to humanity. Spearing notes that when the birds exhibit their “irreducible birdlikeness” they cannot be taken seriously as authority figures, therefore heightening the humor of the poem (98); this is just as true for *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The actual debate of birds, which is a fairly small part of Chaucer's overall dream vision, does obviously have allegory inherent in it, as do all dream visions, but the allegory highlights a disparity between the love of courtly and lower classes rather than differences between particular historical figurations. Despite this, critics will try to find real-life parallels to the tercel while ignoring the rest of the poem.

In his article “The Sources of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles*,” William Farnham chronicles the history of the criticism of the *Parliament* that favors it as an “historical allegory” (492). Some analysts of the text have seen John of Gaunt as representative of the royal tercel and his wife Blanche as the formel (Farnham 492). This is not necessarily true, however, since there are two other tercel to account for. Perhaps the most widely accepted human figurations for the royal tercel, two other debating tercel, and the formel are Richard II, Charles VI of France, and Frederick of Mesina⁸, respectively (Farnham 493). This notion of applying political significance to this assembly of birds was roundly

⁸ Even Larry D. Benson's ubiquitous *Riverside Chaucer* notes this as a possibility in his short introduction to the *Parlement*.

rejected⁹ even by the time Farnham had written his essay in the first few years of the twentieth century. The bird-debate section of the poem holds a significance of its own apart from these contrived historical constraints. Historical figurations are oftentimes even applied to the owl and the nightingale of the earlier poem as well; specifically, the owl is often tied to specific clergymen of the period.

The search for historical allegory in these poems can be more distracting than informative. Russell Peck makes the case that since the personal political connections to these debate poems have only cropped up in the last half of the nineteenth century, that “centuries of readers have admired the *Parlement of Foules* without knowledge of any specific courtly situation behind the squabbles of the birds who, even if they do not wittily equate with specific individuals, surely seem to embody recognizable social types” (290). Here Peck correlates the debate of birds with social class, which is perfectly correct, but he is remiss when he rejects the courtly connections of the birds. While he may have had some nobles in mind as he wrote the *Parlement*, it is more likely that Chaucer was instead allegorizing a courtly and parliamentary situation in fourteenth century England. The tercels are themselves not specific royalty, but represent the courtly situation in England at the time that Chaucer was writing his poem. In order to make the *Parlement* more universal in its meaning, Chaucer does not see the need to include particular people, as many of the French poems do. More specifically, the birds depict the general concept of *demandes d'amour* that is ever-present in both French and English medieval poetry, debate or otherwise—a concept that Chaucer will make English for his purposes, and one that is also present to a less obvious degree, but still important, in *The*

9 Farnham himself rejects the historical view, saying that a composition date of later than 1381 does not correlate with this theory because Richard II had already married Anne of Bohemia (493).

Owl and the Nightingale.

It is of course ironic that a French term is often used to describe what has become apparent in Chaucer's English poetry, particularly in light of his rejection of the traditional tenets of the conventions of *demandes d'amour*. This term can be defined in the following manner: "The question [of] which lover, or which kind of love, a person should prefer" (Brewer 325). In the *Parlement*, both the lover and the kind of love one should prefer are addressed by Chaucer—the different kinds of love in the other settings of the poem outside of the debate, and different kinds of lovers in the bird-debate itself. Similarly, *The Owl and the Nightingale* addresses the issue of the *demande* just as thoroughly as Chaucer but without the presence of specific lovers, enhancing its status as a source for the *Parlement* and exhibiting a continuum of the English bird-debate genre. By addressing the *demande* in such a way that moderates the two extremes of unrestrained lustful love and celibacy, the two poems create a sensible choice of love that is not always present in the contemporary French poetry of similar genres.

When *demandes d'amours* is present, the characters that are debating typically comprise two separate professional groups: the *clerc* (cleric), and the *chevalier* (knight), that seem to have equal footing at the beginning of the argument, at least socially (Brewer 325). In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the owl is thought to represent the former, and the nightingale the latter. The poem begins with the owl sitting on a stump where she "song hire tide," which represents the canonical hours of prayer (Burrow and Turville-Petre 86). Later on in the poem, the nightingale, portrayed in the owl's reproaching speech to her, points out that she is only good for leading a lord and lady into lustful adultery by singing to them when they have sex (*O&N* 1511-30). The nightingale is unquestionably

associated with courtly love again as she is ridiculed by the owl who relates what has become known as the “nightingale episode” (Atkins lxii). This episode, which has its roots in Marie de France's *Laustic* (c.1180), is very much remade from the French version in that the Middle English poem rejects the *lai* of Marie by pointing out the folly and deceit of the lustful nightingale and in the treatment of the love triangle that exists between lord, lady, and lover.

In Marie's *lai*, the nightingale is a symbol of the “pure” courtly love that exists between a married lady and a neighboring lord who is a bachelor. A wall separates them, but the lady goes up to a high tower to see her lover every evening; her husband becomes suspicious and questions her. She tells him that she is simply going to hear the nightingale sing, her husband subsequently kills the bird, effectively ending her excuses to go to the tower at night and the relationship between the two courtly lovers. In Marie's version, this is a sad and pitiful tale of lost love, but in the Middle English poem, the story becomes a point of reproach for the owl to use against the nightingale. In *Laustic*, the lady was “closely guarded / when her husband was in the country” (49-50), the nightingale confirms this part of the story after the owl's accusations saying, “He hire bileck in one bure” (*O&N* 1081). The jealousy of the husband stays the same throughout both texts, but in Marie, there is no moralizing clerical figure to point out the sinful ways of the bachelor and lady. Marie does not feel the need to reproach this courtly love, because she does not see it as unjustifiable in light of the circumstances. The poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale* disagrees, however, and believes that the nightingale “lerdest hi to don shome” (1154). This could simply be the voice of the owl and not the author, but as the narrator interjects to give analysis of the two birds' thoughts, it becomes apparent

that the unknown poet has taken sides with the owl, and therefore the side of the Church. From the very beginning of the debate genre in England, there is already a rejection of earlier French modes of writing about courtly love in this translation of the nightingale episode.

This introduces an antithesis when it comes to moralizing certain parts of courtly and clerical culture between medieval French and English literature. The principle of antithesis, or *comparatio* as it is known in Latin, is an ancient rhetorical term that survived into the Middle Ages. From its roots, antithesis was used by Plato to disparage rhetoric (Vickers 112), but after Geoffrey of Vinsauf wrote his *Poetria Nova*, it came to be used beyond simply one of his ornaments of style (*Poetria* 64). Rather than antithesis being simply “where contraries are opposed and distinguished,” (Vickers 492) within a few lines of poetry or even a single work as it was known to Geoffrey and the ancients, during the Middle Ages, entire bodies of literature were at odds with one another and the various ways in which each interpreted similar material. This is where the opposing moral values of French and English literature find each other in the high and late-Middle Ages—each setting the other up to write in antithetically about the other, even long before Chaucer himself was writing. Even though Marie was born in France and wrote in Anglo-Norman, she lived in England, and possibly in the court of Henry II when she wrote her *lais* (Hanning and Ferrante 1-2). Despite her later impact on *The Owl and the Nightingale* through the nightingale episode, Marie's influence is only seen through the self-same defensive bird, who arguably loses the argument to the clerkly owl. Marie was writing about 100 years before the supposed composition date of *The Owl and Nightingale*, in the late twelfth century, a time in England when French was even more ubiquitous than it

was in Chaucer's day. This makes a cultural case for a difference between those texts that pre-dated Chaucer, as there was a shift from an Anglo-Norman woman writing in England praising lustful love to a poet that moralizes between an owl and a nightingale on sex and marriage using the same source material.

The context of these two earlier poems gives some insight into how the *Parlement* addresses the antithesis between courtly and married love. The narrator sees the formel eagle at the debate, and describes her in an irreproachable manner; he says, "In hire was everi vertu at his reste" (390). The dreamer makes it apparent that this will not be an argument in favor of lustful, lecherous love, since a creature that supposedly possesses every virtue is most likely not going to exhibit wantonness. Just as Marie defends the actions of the two lovers in *Laustic* and gives no opposing side to the story, so too does Chaucer only give a married view of life in the debate of the *Parlement*. He does this quite subtly by representing the trials of courtly love framed against a backdrop of marriage. There are no lustful desires that are being played out by the tercel, as one might find in a French work of the same genre, and in the end, no love is consummated. Rather the formel chooses not to take a mate and instead decides to uphold her chastity for at least another year, saying, "I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide / Forsothe as yit, by no manere weye" (*PF* 652-53). Through the preservation of her chastity and rejection of the god and goddess of love, the formel does not represent lustful desires like the nightingale does in both *Laustic* and *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The formel does not allow herself to accept a courtly or married sort of love that Nature would like to see her acquiesce to in order to continue the species. She is immune to the pressures of marriage and the squabbles of the lower birds, but she will also not take a courtly lover for her own

pleasure. The tercels are ordered by Nature to “beth of good herte, and serveth alle thre” the female eagle until the next Valentine's Day meeting, which they agree to and they do not force themselves on the formel and so abide by Nature's governance and the female eagle's decision (*PF* 660).

Though not explicitly present in the formel, sexual desires are definitely apparent, at least implicitly, in the higher and lower bird's complaints, but there is a subtle departure in the wording—the difference between a “lovere” and a “make.” Chaucer, as well as his English source, only uses the word “make” in reference to married love. *The Owl and the Nightingale* uses the word “make” three times in its nearly eighteen hundred lines, and each time it refers to married life. On the other hand, the word “lover,” and its many variations, comes to stand only for licentious love. Such a stark contrast between the two kinds of love are not present in the French sources of these poems, and these two words allow each author to express his contempt for lecherous lovers and his preference for married mates which is absent from Marie's *Laustic*. The moralizing between these two types of love is not confined only to the tercels, however, and even the birds of lower status are not lecherous per se, as they are stereotypically labeled to be. It is tempting to place the tercels as the most worthy lovers at the debate, but the lowly turtledove, for example, says that the eagles should take the following as their mantra of love: “For though she be deyede, I wolde none other make; / I wol ben hires, til that the deth me take” (587-8). While the argument of the turtledove is noble in its loyalty to only one mate, the other lowly birds often seem urged by sexual pleasures and the desire to get on with their breeding, and the argument can be made that the parliament is really just a staging ground for an orgy. The turtledove is the only bird of lower status that truly gives

a serious response to the quandary in which the parliament finds itself concerning who is the better lover. The other lower birds, including the “goos,” the “doke,” and the “merlioun” all give responses that are outrageous and disrespectful, but none give foul or explicit sexually charged arguments in favor of ending the debate early so they can choose their mates. Even in the humorous interplay of words that the birds exchange at the debate, the same moralizing factor that is begun in *The Owl and the Nightingale* becomes apparent in the *Parlement*. The restraint of sexual humor at the gathering of birds lends a moral quality to the poem that is missing in Marie's *lai*, but this does not mean that sexual desires are completely absent from the English poems, nor need they be.

Directly before she discusses at length the differences between the sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit, the nightingale says, “An maide mai luue cheose / þat hire wurþschipe ne forloeoese” (*O&N* 1343-4). The word “luue” in this context should be read as “lover” and not simply as “love.” The nightingale is essentially saying that the maid may be able to avoid the shame of a lustful relationship if she takes a lover instead of a mate. However, these two lines prepare the nightingale to begin a moralizing speech that points out the learning-curve for maidens and the various ways in which they may often sin on their way to becoming good wives. The nightingale's story is revealing here since she believes women to be of “softe blod” when she is a female herself, particularly when there is no indication that either of the birds at this debate has a spouse (*O&N* 1350). Either the poet is attempting to distance humans and fowls once again, or to increase the humorous effect of the birds' speech. Whatever the case, this is a particularly serious section of the poem and the nightingale's frivolity is offset by the owl's seriousness. As the poet writes about this hypothetical maid again he says that that she can become

transformed through the doctrine of the church to fashion her lover into her husband. The nightingale's speech reads, "Heo mai hire guld atwende / a rihte weie þur[h] chirchebende, / an mai eft habbe to make / hire leofman withute sake" (*O&N* 1427-30). The difference between lover and mate could not be spelled out more plainly: To take a "leofman" or male lover is to go against the "rihte weie" of the church, and to take a mate, or husband, is to conform to it. The two other instances of the word in the poem occur at lines 1159 and 1193 when the nightingale and owl are speaking about the owl's ability to foretell when a "wif" will lose her "make"—again referencing married love. While the nightingale speaks of being helpful to youthful and wanton maids, the owl retorts, in a much more serious manner, that a wife may often "hauveþ the fust in hire teþ" (*O&N* 1538). In the medieval bird-world a virtuous woman must either be married or chaste, but as the above line reveals, husbands were not free from criticism either. Even though there is certainly a positive reinforcement of marriage overall in the poem, there is an acknowledgment of the perils and shortcomings of some marital relationships. Though the only good woman is a married woman as far as the owl is concerned, the best relationship comes about from the exercise of free will in choosing a mate.

Speaking to the exercise of free will in romantic relationships in the *Parlement*, Chaucer also situates the words "make" and "lovere" at a great distance from one another. "Make" appears nine times in the *Parlement*, and it is only used at the debate of birds and nowhere else in the poem. The meaning of the word is used in the same terms here as it is in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The narrator, when he sees Nature for the first time, says, "For this was on Seynt Valentynes Day, / Whan every foul cometh there

to chese his make”¹⁰ (308-10). The key word in this particular passage is not “make” but “chese,” which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, “To take by preference out of all that are available; to select; to take as that which one prefers, or in accordance with one's free will and preference.”¹¹ There is no male choosing a female and visa versa; the two parties are able to choose their spouses at will, according to who is most suitable to them. It appears that the “his” being referred to in line 310 is a masculine pronoun and that the narrator is only conferring the gift of choice to the male birds, but this is not so. Throughout Middle English literature in the Middle Ages, “his” is often used as a third person plural pronoun (OED). This rhetorical construction, coupled with the fact that of all the birds present, only the gender of the tercel and formel are given, and not those of the lower birds, exhibits equanimity between those choosing mates, despite their gender. This free choice of a partner conflicts with the sections of the poem outside of the debate when lovers are spoken of as not having any control over their romantic lives. The ability of the birds of lower “kynde” to choose their mates freely, and the absence of control by a single gender creates a separation between the higher and lower species of birds present at the debate—the lower birds have more freedom than their superiors. Unlike the control exerted by the husband in the French *Laustic*, Chaucer’s English audience would have been uncomfortable with the taking by force or locking away of a virtuous lady by a jealous husband or lover, and he does not arbitrarily include this notion of free choice. In the last half of the fourteenth century, due to plague, it is likely that much of Chaucer’s

10 The other uses of “make” as a noun occur in the following lines of the *Parlement*: 371, 466, 587, 605, 631, 657, 667, and 688. “Lovere” only occurs twice, in the above discussed line 105, and again in line 582.

11 Hasenfratz and Jambeck have identified the OE equivalent as “ceosan” which is similarly defined as to “elect, or select” (505).

audience were women. Through the destruction of the Black Death in the middle of the century, the population had been reduced to so much that nearly forty percent of females became heiresses to the estates of their fathers since so few male heirs remained alive (Payling 414). The increasing importance of women in England not only as a means of producing offspring, but also as an economic force to be reckoned with liberates women to be able to choose their own husbands. Despite similar effects of the plague in France, women were not given the same freedoms. For example, if a woman living in France in the last half of the fourteenth century was to elope with her lover, she and her male companion were subject to criminal rather than civil lawsuits as the daughter was thought of as property that had been stolen (Donahue 316). Despite the threat of criminal litigation, it is believed that there were many more of these illegal relationships occurring in France than in England (Donahue 316). Conversely, in England the penalties were much less harsh and, as Charles Donahue argues, "There does not seem to be any place in England in which the criminal mode of enforcement was so dominant" as it is in France (316). In light of the new post-plague cultural situation in England, Chaucer sets up a balance in the spousal relationships of the *Parlement* in order to point out the inequalities between courtly lovers in France, where the theme was so common in its literature and reality.

Contrary to the marital relationships that are discussed at the meeting of the birds, and to the free will inherent in their ability to "chese," the word "lovere" again becomes relevant. When the narrator is relating his reasons as to why he is dreaming of the *Somnium Scipionis*, he states that men dream of what lies heavily on their minds. The hunter's mind goes back to the woods, the judge dreams of his cases, the drover dreams

of his carts, and the lover dreams of having “wonne” his lady (*PF* 99-105). In having to win a lady, there is not necessarily free choice being exercised on the part of the woman. This line implies that the lover, who in this case is male, has chosen a lady, but she has not chosen him—at least not yet. He must convince her that he is a suitable lover, which is indicative of a courtly love relationship, and harkens back to *demandes d'amours*. The definitive male presence in this line that is representative of the courtly lover is used very often in Chaucer's works. Most of the times that Chaucer indicates that a lover must be won, it is usually a courtly, and therefore lustful kind of love, as in the *Troilus*. In the *Troilus*, Chaucer explicitly writes in his retraction his hesitance to write about a lady being “won” and the implications of spending too much energy in the pursuit of a woman who may not requite a lover's persistence. In this final part of his long epic poem, he writes that “yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she” beware the love that “up groweth with youre age” in order to more clearly focus on Christ (*T&C* 1835-41). Troilus and Criseyde's destructive relationship would have been a familiar sight to the worldly Chaucer who was intimate with the courts of the kings of many kingdoms of Europe. The later *Troilus* stands as a sharp contrast to the *Parlement* in that there is no manipulation or treachery being practiced by the male lovers. At a time when love is viewed as similar to warfare, Chaucer adds his own moderating English factor to its pursuit and shows that love can exist without violence and forceful dominance.

Even though the three tercels attempt to win the love of the formel, they do not want to beguile her into taking them on as a lover, on the contrary, they want to take her as a mate. This may seem to conflict with the notion of “winning” a love as being courtly, but Chaucer makes the idea new in this context. He presents a moderate middle-way of

love between the two extremes of unhappy married love only for procreation and the lustful urges of purely courtly love that are seen elsewhere in his writings. The Man in Black and “Whit” of the *Book of the Duchess* provide an early example of a relationship similar to this. The courtly love that the Man in Black exhibits for his lover leads to a happy marriage, the kind that may happen between one of the tercelles and the formel. The black knight is snubbed by what is originally only his object of desire, but he continues to do chivalrous services for her until he is finally accepted as a courtly lover. His labors are requited and the two live a happily married life until the lady dies and in the dream the Chaucerian dreamer tries to console the knight, unsuccessfully. When there is no mention of marriage, however, the outcome is much different, as in the *Troilus* where there is only a hidden love based upon the lecherous desires imparted by Cupid that ends badly for all involved, with the exception of perhaps Diomedes. Therefore, the kind of love discussed in the *Parlement* has an historical linguistic backing in earlier Middle English bird-debate poetry that it is not a lustful, orgy kind of love, but rather a pure, marital sort of love. It may have its roots in a courtly love romance, but in a successful relationship, the outcome almost always turns from courtly to marital.

Chaucer, like the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, recognizes the problems of only accepting one or the other of these types of love and attempts to be reasonable about love and sexual desires. *The Owl and the Nightingale* further rejects the originally French “nightingale episode” by using language similar to that of the make-lovere disconnect found in the English. *Laustic*, having been written by a secular poet, does not have to include religious themes, as does the poet of the Middle English poem. Marie is not as constrained to include a moral in her story and she does not. Each time the bachelor and

the lady are mentioned, they are specifically termed “amants” or “lovers” (Marie 74). Since the lady in question is married, there is no hope of a married life with the bachelor that shares a property line with her husband's household. The lady feels no remorse for participating in an extra-marital relationship, despite the fact that her husband discovers her infidelity. Chaucer, also a secular poet, pokes some fun at adultery later on in his career, and especially with his use of the *fabliaux*, but the *Parlement* is one of his earlier writings and he has not yet made the jump from restrained poet to full-fledged humorous cuckoldry that is present in *The Canterbury Tales*. But at the moment he is writing the *Parlement*, Chaucer does not include material that is too risqué out of an English prudishness that prompts him to balance these two modes of love, which makes Chaucer seem especially moderate in light of his French contemporary Guillaume de Machaut.

Though not stated explicitly as a source in the *Parlement*, the French debate poem *The Judgment of the King of Bohemia* (1342)¹² by Machaut (c.1300-1377) is also said to have heavily influenced Chaucer's own debate poems (Davis 391). This connection is most often made in reference to *The Book of the Duchess* (Davis 392), but the *Parlement* rejects Machaut's poem equally as well. While both English debate poems appear to mirror the French poem, upon closer inspection *Bohemia* is not so very much like the *Parlement*, particularly when dealing with courtly love. Chaucer's middle-of-the-road stance on courtly versus married love is not present in Machaut's poem—Machaut makes a very clear conclusion as to which is more preferable, again widening the rhetorical divide between English and French debate poetry.

The poem begins with a narrator who sees a lady and a knight arguing about who

12 Hereafter *Bohemia*.

has endured the greater pains of love. As he views the debate from afar, he hears that the lady's husband has died and that the knight's courtly lover has left him for another man. Each lover tries to prove that they are the more miserable in the loss of their beloved. The narrator transforms from passive observer into active participant when he reveals himself to these two disputants and suggests that they all three go to the King of Bohemia to get his decision on the matter. When they arrive at the court, the personified courtly personages of Reason, Youth, and Loyalty weigh in on the decision and the lady's cause is rejected in favor of the knight who is languishing in unrequited love. The fact that a decision is made between these two types of love is not present in the English debate poems, which end inconclusively, and again the courtly, lustful, mixed love is given preferment over the pure.

Despite the presence of personifications, this is not a dream vision; the narrator is never seen going to sleep and there is no invocation or request for a dream to help him gain knowledge. There has even been some argument, according to Constance Hieatt, on whether or not Machaut really included dream visions in any of his works (97). The lack of a dream affects the outcome of the debate because there is no veiled opinion; what is occurring in the poem is supposed to have really happened to the narrator. Hieatt notes that Machaut certainly does not use the dream vision form with any regularity, but nearly all of Chaucer's short poems include this form (98). The lack of the dream makes it seem more likely that Machaut really does favor the knight's plea over that of the loyal and grieving wife. He can make no excuses for his narrative by saying that it took place in a dream and that he has no control over it—he even implicates his royal patron in the whole affair. Jean de Louxembourg, the King of Bohemia that is described in the poem,

has been called an “extravagant and unstable figure” (Altmann and Palmer 11) that probably would not have been bothered by the kind of love that he is said to favor in this poem.

The difference in the preference of love by Jean in *Bohemia* obviously stands in stark contrast to that of the English poems, but the choice of judge that Machaut uses directly opposes the choice of judge in the *Parlement* and *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Machaut, as a clergyman, was intimate with the secular courts of Jean de Luxembourg (Altmann and Palmer 11). While Machaut chooses a monarch as his judge, and in reality he must do so to patronize his king, Chaucer and the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale* do not include such powerful secular judges. The *Parlement* gives the power of judgment to a force that reigns over all of the Earth and is the “vicaire of the almyghty Lord”—a very detached and uninterested Nature—and the earlier poem gives it to a lowly clergyman (*PF* 379). The choice of Nicholas of Guildford as judge in *The Owl and the Nightingale* exhibits the moderate rhetorical leanings that even the English clergy had on the subject of courtly love. Angela Carson, in her article “Rhetorical Structure in *The Owl and the Nightingale*,” argues that both of the debating birds in that poem represent “mutually opposed worldviews” that “coalesce into a closely-worked argument in Nicholas's favor” (93). This goal is accomplished through a variety of rhetorical devices: the first, according to Carson, showing off his knowledge of classical and legal texts (94); and the second being his progression from passionate to reasonable. Carson discusses the former at length, but the latter is more relevant to a study of courtly love and exhibits Nicholas as representative of aspects of the owl and the nightingale themselves. After the two debating birds have agreed to have Nicholas as their judge, the owl says:

Ich granti wel þat he us deme,
 vor þeʒ he were wile breme,
 ond lof him were niʒtingale,
 ond oþer wiʒte gente & smale,
 ich wot he is nu suþe acoled. (*O&N* 201-5)

It seems that the entire natural world knows of Nicholas and his progression from a passionate young man that was kind towards small and gentle creatures to a transcendent wisdom. Just as the debate has taken a stance that allows making mistakes in youth, a realization of former folly is necessary to become “suþe gleu” (*O&N* 193). Despite the recognition of his wisdom here and a sort of validation for the necessity of his youthful silliness, there is still a very strong rejection of courtly love as a fleeting desire—this is not so in Machaut. The “extravagant and unstable” Jean de Luxembourg described by Barton Palmer does not fit this description. Machaut was the personal secretary of the King of Bohemia throughout much of his life, until Jean’s hot passions got the better of him and he died at the Battle of Crecy against the English in 1346 (Fallows 288). The French poet, like the anonymous clerical poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, was closely tied to royalty, but Machaut was at a much closer distance to a monarch. Despite probably being housed in a royal benefice, the author of the early-Middle English poem had no qualms about criticizing anyone, including his own Church. In praising the virtues of Nicholas, the wren, in the closing lines of the poem points out that he has only one house, much to the shame of bishops everywhere (*O&N* 1761). The poet is unafraid to

point out the corruption that is present in all forms of authority, whereas Machaut is unable to even to point out the extravagances of the court of his king. The Frenchman is essentially unable to think for himself when patronizing the secular courts and gives preference to a kind of love that conflicts with Church doctrine. On this, David Fallows writes that Machaut “enjoyed the patronage and even friendship with many of the titled heads of Europe, among them Jean, Duke of Berry, Amadeus VI, Bonne of Luxembourg, King Charles the Bad of Navarre, and Charles of Normandy” (288). In having his liege lord appear in favor of lustful courtly love, Machaut does not restrain his language to seem ambiguous as to which type of love the king may secretly prefer, as in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. In the English poem there is, as has been stated, a movement by Nicholas of Guildford from a passionate youth to a wise manhood, but there is no maturation in the King of Bohemia. Jean de Luxembourg's passionate experience in loving is described by the narrator in the poem as he says, “Of love, / He knows all the assaults, the skirmishes, / The joys, the pains, the sorrowing and moaning / Better than Ovid himself” (*Bohemia* 1324-27). This passage decides the judgment of the debate before the lady, knight, and narrator even arrive at the court. Jean is what Chaucer and *The Owl and Nightingale* poet would call a “lover.” No wife of the king is mentioned, and indeed there are no other real, tangible people in his court, only personifications of several virtues. Even personified Reason, who so resoundingly rejects courtly love in Machaut's own French in the *Roman de la Rose*, accepts the cause of the knight over the lady. From the very first, Machaut's lady does not stand a chance as she enters the court. As she and the knight enter, the king describes the two to the court as, “This knight who is noble and well mannered / And also this lady with the blond hair” (*Bohemia* 1626-7).

This is a far cry from the deference the formel receives when she is said to have “everi vertu” in the *Parlement* or when the two disputants of *The Owl and the Nightingale* are given their respective talents as birds. The lady is an afterthought as soon as she enters the throne-room of the king—she is only considered objectively by the color of her hair—and this continues on into the debate of who has lost the most in love. The only personified figure that takes up the lady's argument is Youth, and only for an instant right before the personage is written off as naïve and inexperienced. Youth herself eventually reverses her decision, therefore delivering a unanimous judgment by the court in favor of the lustful, unrequited love of the knight, and a rejection of married and pure love.

To say that moralizing over marriage and licentiousness is only a trait of English poems would be remiss, and there are certainly French poems that address this issue from a pro-marriage stance, taking discourse on love to another extreme. The best example of this is what Chaucer himself calls “the Pleynt of Kynde” by Alain de Lille (*PF* 316). One of the few sources that Chaucer directly says he uses in the *Parlement*, the *De Planctu Naturae* (c.1200), as it is known in Latin, is a strange work for Chaucer to reference, especially in using it to describe his personification of Nature. Alain's poem stands in extreme opposition to the two English poems, which advocate moderation in allowing Nature to govern sexual relationships coupled with some restraint on the part of the individual. To the author of *The Owl and the Nightingale* and to Chaucer, there is a balance that must be created, because if each man and woman were chaste, then there would be no procreation, and as Affrican points out in the *Parlement*, a man who does not love is akin to a sick man that has no taste for “swete or bytternesse” (*PF* 161). According to Affrican, a man that has neither a marital nor a courtly lover is not able to

perpetuate the species and is therefore useless as far as Nature is concerned, since Nature is so often concerned with the augmentation of her kingdom.

As Chaucer first sees Nature personified in the *Parlement*, he gives her the following description: “And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde, / Devyseth Nature of aray and face, / In swich aray men mygthe hire there fynde” (316-18). Chaucer makes a strange comparison here since his Nature is in very few ways like the Nature that is seen in Alain's *Plantcu*. This is particularly true because the “aray and face” of Alain's personification has its own allegorical significance and does more than just to describe how she is dressed and what her face looks like. When Nature first appears to Alain in his dream vision, she emerges from the heavens wearing a robe that has pictured on it the many aspects of the natural world: animals, plants, planets, birds, and sea-life. Eventually Alain notices that bits of the robe that have been torn off, which is later revealed to represent the movement of men away from marriage. Jack Oruch argues that this scene represents a very different kind of unheroic Nature that differs from that of the *Parlement*, and one that has many failings. He argues that the shortcomings of Nature become apparent when Alain sees the torn robe, and he also notes that, “She compares herself to Theology (though she says she exceeds her office to do so): ‘I barely see the things that are visible, she comprehends in their reflection things incomprehensible. I by my intellect hardly compass trifles, she in her comprehension compasses immensities. I, almost like a beast, walk the earth, she serves in secret heaven’” (Oruch 29). Whereas the Nature of Chaucer's dream vision does not explicitly have any flaws pointed out by the narrator, and indeed seems to uphold the institution of marriage quite well (as seen in the “make-lovere” disconnect), Alain is quite bitter about Nature's involvement. Neither does

Chaucer's Nature "exceed her office," as Oruch points out that Alain's does. Chaucer's dreamer says very simply that she is the "vicaire" of God, but that she also "prike"(s) the birds with "plesaunce" (*PF* 379, 389), therefore, her only role is to ensure the procreation of the species in a morally acceptable manner that is absent from the French texts. There is no explicit mention of humans in the *Parlement*, but Alain's poem is completely obsessed with pointing out the vices of men, and only supports fornication for procreation, and even then only in certain circumstances. Such limitations restrict the freedom of men and women to choose a mate for love, and only leave that kind of love that benefits the continuation of the species—a stoic and barren view of the world not present in either Chaucer or *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

Unlike the French poem, it is through the genre of the bird debate and the lack of humans in the English debate poems that does not allow Nature to go off on a diatribe denouncing men as lustful as Alain's personification does so vehemently. Nature has only to deal with birds representative of men in different social classes in the *Parlement*, and because Chaucer's personification is so detached, she is not willing to relegate the lower birds to the "donghil" (*PF* 596) as quickly as the *tercelet*. Through her detached attitude, Nature is allowing "a pluralistic vision of reality" (Skulte 125) that is not present in the French sources to the poem. She gives no preference to one class of birds over another. In the *Planctu*, no lower classes or creatures are physically present, only godly personifications and the overly-prudish narrator give their opinions on what attributes the perfect love should include. Alain represents an extreme view completely opposite that of his French counterparts of Marie de France and Guillaume de Machaut. Such extreme views are never realistic which is something that Chaucer and his English predecessors

understood well. The ultimate goal of rhetoric is to, as Horace says, “delight or entertain the reader, / Or say what is both amusing and really worth using” (*Ars Poetica* 91). Chaucer's ever-present source of Cicero expresses similar views in *De Oratore* through the use of the principles of *docere, delectare, and movere*, but unlike Horace's more easily accessible texts, the *Oratore* was not rediscovered until the early-fifteenth century in Italy, making it unavailable to Chaucer (Murphy 123). What was available to him, however, was another of Cicero's treatises, *De Inventione*. In his treatise, Cicero, like Horace, encourages the speaker, or in this case writer, to both “bring the mind of the hearer into a suitable state” so that he is “well disposed towards the speaker” and to make certain that the hearer is “attentive and willing to receive information” (I.XV). These principles mirror Horace's and would have been at the fore of the mind of Chaucer, especially as he was writing the *Parlement* where Cicero and commentaries on him become so important as sources. In light of classical assertions that poetry must be both pleasing and informative, this leads to the issue of how the English and the French would fulfill these two requirements. French and English sensibilities would not have been the same and what informs the interpretation of the literature of one language often does not apply to another. This is no less true than in the interpretation of courtly versus married love in the text from these two kingdoms. On this very issue, Copeland writes that differences in language and style “call attention to their own status as vernacular productions and thus underscore the fact of cultural and historical difference that vernacularity exposes” (180). The movement away from writing in the hegemonic Latin and the major movement in the late Middle Ages in England, even outside of Chaucer, to write in the English vernacular imparts a new interpretive and ethical system on the

existing documents as Chaucer does with his source in the *Planctu*. Both the English and French poets follow these ancient Latin rules, but the French are more ready to be informative without the ambiguity included in Chaucer's poem, which does not allow an audience to decide which kind of love is better for themselves. The inconclusive nature of the English poems allow the reader to come to his or her own conclusion on the nature of love, while still pushing them in a certain direction. In the case of these two English poems, the direction is one of moderation and experimentation. The French models of sexuality in all three of the poems addressed here advocate a severe adherence to one type of love or another, something that is absent in the English of the same genre.

Chaucer's interpretive strategy and method of invention in this case is the ambiguity in sexuality that he imparts upon the text. As explained in Chapter One, the main hermeneutical and inventive strategy of Chaucer is to control the events surrounding the *Somnium* but not to impart much of his own analysis on this dream vision so that he does not detract from Cicero's (via Macrobius) meaning. This indecision extends past the use of the *Somnium* and Chaucer is not willing to give a particular view on courtly or married love, and he gives each equal weight and time in the poem. The Chaucerian narrator embodies the naiveté that consumed Nicholas of Guildford when he was a young man, but he never seems to distance himself from it. The dreamer is no passionate lover, but neither has he moved on to a more mature wisdom of the world and the divine, as Nicholas has done. His passivity as he walks through the dream world is consistent with traditional dream poetry, which tends to include a distracted or detached narrator, but Chaucer is also following medieval poetic and rhetorical rules when he writes in this deliberately ambiguous and inconclusive manner. Chaucer was perhaps

taking a page out of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's book; Geoffrey writes:

Let the poet's hand not be swift to take up the pen, nor his tongue be impatient to speak; trust neither hand nor tongue to the guidance of fortune. To ensure greater success for the work, let the discriminating mind, as a prelude to action, defer the operation of hand and tongue, and ponder long on the subject matter. (*Poetria Nova* 49-54)

Geoffrey is speaking on *inventio* here and specifically on the preparations that a poet must make when he begins to compose a work, and *inventio* in this context means to compose rather than to just simply come up with new ideas (Copeland 2). Geoffrey seems to distrust the passions and composing what one feels in spontaneity, but instead advocates restraint and contemplation—something the narrator of the *Parlement* and Chaucer take to heart. The audience only hears the narrator's thoughts at four points in the poem: as he introduces the subject, as he turns from reading the *Somnium* to the dream, as he turns from the Temple of Brass to the Park of Nature, and briefly as he wakes up (Skulte 120). Even during these small interludes, the narrator never offers his own interpretations, and leaves many issues unresolved, the most important of which is whether he truly understands what is happening in the dream vision. Because he is not a lover, and therefore distrusts the impatience of hot passions in favor of a bookish knowledge as Geoffrey does, the dreamer remains unaffected by the world he finds himself in, leaving the audience questioning whether they should trust what the narrator tells them as true, false, or a misinterpretation. Kurt Olsson has noted in his article

“Poetic Invention in Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules*” that the dreamer’s interpretation of his world is really secondary to the issues of ambiguity and that Affrican “supplies the ‘mater of to wryte’ and the images then recorded by the dreamer, but obviously judged and shaped by the poet, constitute the invention” (23). Olsson further argues, “If [Chaucer’s] wish to learn a thing is fictitiously personal, his discovery is impersonal” (23). Of course Chaucer shapes and judges the materials seen by the dreamer, but Chaucer is afraid of imparting too much of his own analysis on the opening dream of Scipio and the later sections dealing with the various styles of love. Chaucer begins with the pagan dream vision to set up an exposition on love in the Middle Ages, and in doing so rejects the all-or-nothing mentality of the French poets. The impersonal and indecisive narrator allows a universal view of the poem to be accepted by any who many have differing views on love, making the narrator a sort of Everyman character, “ready to take the impress of anybody’s seal,” just as the *Somnium* is relevant to the universal audience of the ancient and medieval (*De Amore* 204). Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s contemplative factor that he advocates helps Chaucer to create a character that is not indifferent, but is noncommittal to one side or another to maintain his scholarly approach. The French rejection of the ancients during their humanistic thirteenth century period did not allow such a universal aspect to be achieved in their literature but advocated one side clearly over another.

Despite having differing views on courtly love, each poet has to work within his own culture and courtly circles. Machaut, Marie, and Alain wrote about what they knew best, which were courtly circles and the Church, respectively. Chaucer and the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale* are no different in that they were both familiar with the law

system of the day and included it in their debates. To date, very little research has taken a look at the English law system as it existed in the late-thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century in relation to these two poems together. In exploring this, some surprising similarities are revealed that further reject the interloping French literature.

2.2 Middle English Literature and the Law

Nowhere is rhetoric more distilled and more carefully practiced than the courtroom, a fact no different in medieval England than it is today. A dramatic change occurred in the legal system of England in 1362 that mandated that English, and not French, be the “compulsory language of oral communication in all royal and seigniorial courts in the land” (Ormrod 750). W.M. Ormrod, in his article “The Use of English: Language, Law, and Political Culture in 14th Century England,” notes that this new law, termed the Statutes of Pleading, opened the door for pleading in English in royal courts which had previously been required to be in French (765). Before this statute was enacted, pleading to a court had to be nearly always done by a professional lawyer that was trained at the centralized schools for lawyers in London, which would eventually become the Inns of Court where Chaucer is thought to have studied for some time (Ormrod 765). The Statutes allowed provincial lawyers to take control of the legal system and decentralized the power of law and pleading (Ormrod 765). This forward-looking piece of legislation was certainly influential on the spoken English language as a whole, but *The Owl and the Nightingale* was applying its tenants long before it was passed.

When the Statues were passed, there were three types of French being spoken in England: Northern French, Anglo-Norman, and “law French” that was only used in the

royal courts (Ormrod 764). The poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, since he was close to secular courts and probably a friar of a royal benefice, would most likely have spoken at least two, if not all of these styles of French. This possibility, along with the fact that there are some French legal terms in the text of the poem give the theory credibility that the anonymous poet was likely acquainted with legal procedure of the late fourteenth century (Potkay 368). This poet's work, along with Chaucer's *Parlement* are together going further than their respective governments by rejecting French law procedure not simply in their contradictory rhetoric, but by their inclusion of English law procedure as well.

The presence of French legal terms in both of these poems may seem to be strange evidence for a case advocating a rejection of French influence in medieval English debate poetry. The fact of the matter is that some French legal terms were preserved in order to avoid ambiguities in translation between the French and English in the courts even after the passing of the Statutes (Ormrod 768). Despite its historical distance from the Statutes of Pleading, *The Owl and the Nightingale* uses a similar pleading structure to that outlined in the legislation. For instance, the most common French legal term that appears is "plait" or "ple," meaning "lawsuit," "plea," or simply "complaint" (Witt 285). Michael Witt notes, however, that there are an overwhelmingly large number of Old English legal terms that survive in the poem including, but not limited to, the following: "Speche," meaning "plea"; "dom," or "fals dom," meaning "judgment" or "improper judgment," respectively; "bicleped" or "making of a charge"; and "pes" meaning the keeping of peace in general or specifically the "king's peace" (285). All of these terms also appear in

Chaucer's *Parlement*, and other Old English words¹³ do appear in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Together, these words establish the legal proofs that were available to a citizen in late-medieval England, and lend a cultural heritage to the legal system that becomes apparent in the literature hundreds of years after Old English had ceased to be spoken.

The relatively few French legal terms in each of these poems is significant because during Chaucer's day, French terms were so interspersed within the language of law that there was still some exclusivity to being a lawyer in a kingdom where English was quickly becoming the dominant language (Ormrod 773). It is a different story, however, for the time period in which *The Owl and the Nightingale* was written. The fact that an English vernacular poem was being composed in the context of a courtroom drama in Anglo-Norman England is astonishing. The poem could possibly have been written as early as 1189 (Atkins xxxiv) and as late as 1275 (Fletcher 1). The earlier the date, the more astonishing the phenomenon, as the Statutes were not passed for nearly one hundred years after the latest date accepted for the authorship of the poem. Property and contract law were still conducted partly in French under the Statutes, but criminal law still mainly used the above Old English words even in Anglo-Norman England, at the time the earlier poem was written. There are so many Old English words included in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and this helps to make the case that the poem is some sort of criminal proceeding. In using words that imply a criminal trial inherently in using Old English legal terms, the author of *The Owl and the Nightingale* dismisses "law French"

13 Witt also mentions several other terms that are OE legal terms, but I have noted are not shared by the *Parlement* and the *O&N*. They are: "Forbonne," or "standing for trial"; "niþe"; or "malice"; "skere," to "exculpate oneself"; "rem" to "raise a hue-and-cry"; "at bedde and borde," a part of the marriage vow, and finally "bare worde," or "unsupported charges" (285).

long before even the passing of the Statues, and in doing so ultimately rejects the use of the French in the rhetorical model and language of the debate.

Both the owl and the nightingale believe that each has committed crimes against not only other bird-fowl, but also against mankind and God. The nightingale even goes so far as to accuse the owl of witchcraft: “For alle þeo þat þerof cuþe, / Heo uere ifurn of prestes muþe / amanest: swuch þu art ȝette” (*O&N* 1305-7). Conversely, the nightingale is repeatedly admonished for her role in leading maidens and wives astray from virtuous sexual mores. There were three ways to try such criminal cases in the thirteenth century: Trial by combat, “proof by oath with oath-helpers,” and oath by a witness to the crime committed (Hollond 2-3). Each of these is imbedded in both the *Parlement* and *The Owl and the Nightingale* in one way or another, and the legal terms the poems share become relevant in speaking to these three court proofs. When these legal terms do occur in the *Parlement* they are included at the debate in the Park of Nature where the tercel is attempting to argue their case for the formel. While Chaucer is writing in the late-fourteenth century, he still employs thirteenth century law proceedings. This is perhaps seen most evidently in the trial by combat that nearly breaks out spontaneously at the debate. The tercel falcon, becoming frustrated with the proceedings and unable to decide who the formel should choose says to the gathering, “I can not se that arguments awayle: / Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle” (*PF* 38-9). At this assertion by the young tercel, a flurry of legal terms ensues. The royal tercel quickly backs down from the fight and cites several legal difficulties in going to judgment so quickly. Here is shared a legal term with *The Owl and the Nightingale*, that of “bicloped” which is not used directly in the *Parlement* but is used in the same sense with the use of different words. After backing

down from the trial by combat, the royal tercel says that they must bring their charges against each other with their “voys” and abide by the “dom” of the judge, Nature (*PF* 545-5). This is mirrored nearly directly in *The Owl and the Nightingale* as the latter rudely interrupts the argument of the former and decides to bring the matter to judgment herself (545-48). The owl refutes her, saying, “Þat nere nouht rȝht. . . / þu hauest bicloped al so þu bede” (*O&N* 549-50). The nightingale has “bicloped,” or delivered her charge as she has wished, the owl has refuted her charge and is now making her own case against the nightingale in order to make her seem the more criminal.

The two disputants follow English law procedure as it was in the thirteenth century as they make their “tale,” which is closely tied to that of the “speche,” a synonym that occurs several times in both texts (Hollon 2). “Tale” is a term referred to in the *Parlement* as well when the royal tercel finishes his pleading for the formel; he says, “My tale is at an ende” (*PF* 441). H.A. Hollon notes that after a “tale,” it was then the defendant’s turn to officially “deny,” by means of “mak[ing] good his denial by an appropriate mode of proof,” the manner of which is decided by the courts (3). The owl and nightingale do not argue in a courtroom (though it is later revealed that the small birds have been listening for at least some time, secretively), but they still follow the order of the delivery of the “tale” followed by the denial delivered by the defendant, which is then followed by a rebuttal. The nightingale attempts to break this code, and when she does she is admonished by her fowl adversary.

The owl and nightingale twice threaten trial by combat to one another, as is done once at Chaucer’s parliament, once at the beginning of the debate, and again at the end when all of the smaller birds come to the defense of the nightingale. The gathering

together of a host of witnesses to protect a defendant is what Hollon terms as “witnesses to an oath given” (3). The nightingale has given her side of the story, which has supposedly been overheard by her small allies, and they come to her defense. The owl, feeling threatened physically, not verbally, launches a verbal attack that guarantees death for all of those present if they do not stint their squawking—essentially, the two take turns threatening each other at the beginning and end of the poem. At the beginning of the poem, the owl says, “Whi neltu flon into þe bare, / ond sewi ware unker bo / of briȝter howe, of unairur blo?” (*O&N* 150-52). Though not a formal challenge for trial by combat that is stated outright, the owl tries to lure the nightingale out of her thick protective hedge by flattering her. The nightingale is not so easily tricked, however, and she realizes that the owl has sharp claws and she does not want to see them put to use on her (*O&N* 154-55). The nightingale then takes her turn to not threaten the owl outright, but to make her feel uncomfortable who had felt so superior in strength all along. Once the small birds assemble, the owl says, “Havestu [. . .] ibanned ferde? / An wultu, wreche, wið me fiȝte?” (*O&N* 1668-69). The owl reacts by saying that she will gather together her own band of witnesses, but witnesses that have not heard the debate, so they will essentially be testifying to the quality of her character, a type of legal proof termed “proof by oath with oath helpers” (Hollon 3). The wording in the poem is more violent than it would have been in an actual courtroom, where the rhetoric would have been more tactful and restrained, but the analogies to the law hold true. The most important factor here is that the birds do not fight in either poem, and there is a peaceful resolution of differences that may have been rare, particularly at the time *The Owl and the Nightingale* was written. The same peaceful resolution may have encouraged Chaucer to exclude an outright trial

by combat in his poem.

One reason for the birds' lack of violence is that, by the end of the poem, neither of them is really the defendant or the plaintiff. The argument has been taken so far, even the nightingale wishes she had never brought charges against the owl in the first place. The narrator notes the nightingale as thinking, "Hire ofþuʒte þat ho hadde / þe speche so for uorþ hadde / an was oferd þat hire answare / ne wurþe noʒt aright ifare" (*O&N* 397-400). This lack of true courtroom procedure has led some to believe that the poet was familiar with, but not an expert in, the legal terms of the late-twelfth or thirteenth century (Witt 286). Another reason that the birds may not fight in either poem is that the method of evidence of combat was essentially nonexistent by the middle of the thirteenth century. By this time, under the reign of Henry III, there was a shift from many kinds of divinely ordained evidence (ordeal, compurgation, and trial by combat) to the more reasonable method of verbal dispute (Ormrod 283-84). The absence of a true defendant and plaintiff is mirrored in the *Parlement*. The three birds are not necessarily on trial for some wrong done; indeed, they attempt to show themselves as better than one another, but this simple argument is masked by a mock-criminal trial. It is not necessary to equate the bird debate with a trial, but with all of the legal terms included and the attempted trial by combat, it is difficult to not see similarities.

The peaceful resolution in both of these English poems conflicts with the French legal system in the Middle Ages in a number of ways. The most striking difference is that the last legal trial by combat was performed in France in 1387, as recorded by Jean Froissart in his *Chronicles* (c.1390), a fairly late date considering it was out of vogue in England nearly a hundred years before (Johnes 387). The violence displayed by the

French is not only restricted to their court system, however, and this belligerence again shows itself in their literature. One of the best examples of this is another medieval allegory, the French *Roman de la Rose*, which Chaucer knew well, and even partially translated, but in keeping with the law of his own country, rejects its tenants of violence in the name of love.

The *Roman*, written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun in the early and then again in the late-thirteenth century respectively, is essentially a direct contemporary text to that of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The French text, however, is much more violent in its language and allows the lover to literally take up arms against the one who has wronged him—Jealousy. The rose, which represents the beloved, is kidnapped and Amans will do anything to get it back—even resorting to warfare. The movement of medieval love poetry into violence is a common trope seen throughout this genre. Peck notes that very often in French literature, and especially in the *Roman*, when it comes to politics and love, “hot sighs turn to weapons of destruction” (300). With this assertion, Peck specifically describes the love that is engendered by Priapus in all of his forms, even outside of Chaucer’s work. Peck is highlighting what happens when love is locked away, kept from sight, and erotic desires are suppressed as they are in the Temple of Brass in the *Parlement* (300). This pushing to the margins of erotic love only leads to violent behavior in the shadows as seen in the rape of the Naiads by Priapus at the temple and the taking of the castle of Jealousy by Amans through nefarious means. The tercels of the *Parlement* act in a much more civilized manner, allowing their debate to decide the outcome of the *demande d’amours*. In an England where aristocrats have often turned “love’s capers into political enterprises” in the form of broken treaties, political

marriages, and questionable genealogical claims (Peck 301), Chaucer chooses to include a fairly restrained aristocrat in his poem. *The Owl and the Nightingale* chooses to exclude royalty from the equation altogether as its poet seems to distrust clerical authority that tries to assert secular dominance. Even the royal tercel of the *Parlement* is willing to give up his secular authority in order to let the formel decide the outcome of the debate, and even when it is not in his favor, all three disputants fly away without incident, creating an exemplum for the aristocrats of England to follow in their own lives of love.

In addition to the sense of a criminal trial taking place and the various legal proofs imbedded in the Middle English texts other Old English legal terms are used. After the royal tercel's withdrawal from trial by battle, he uses yet another term that is connected with natural law and royal law. Since he is the set the highest of the three debating birds, he exercises his control and calls for "pes" not only in recognition of his "high estaat," but also for the judgment, or "dom" of Nature (*PF* 547). Judgment is deferred to Nature in these lines to keep the peace at the parliament. "Pes" here is much more than simply the peace of the parliament but also can refer to what is in *The Owl and the Nightingale* referred to also as "pes" or of more use to this discussion contextually, "griþbruche" or the breaking of the king's peace (Atkins 147). Atkins notes that the word, after 1066, is used as a general term to describe a "normal and general safeguard of public order" rather than the particular safeguard it had been for a select group of people in the Anglo-Saxon period (147).

As soon as the owl has given her speech on her willingness to gather her kin and fight with all of the gathered smaller birds, the wren, who is often associated with royalty (Atkins 146), intervenes and admonishes the two birds, "Hunke shal itide harm an

shonde, / ʒef ʒe doʃ griʃbruche on his londe” (*O&N* 1733-34). “Griʃbruche” literally means to “break the peace” and “griʃ” by itself means simply the king’s peace. The most literal form of the law of the king in the early-Middle English poem is echoed in the natural law that is inherent in the *Parlement* and the deference that must be given to Nature. There is no earthly king to whom the birds at Chaucer’s parliament give respect, but when the royal tercel calls for peace because of his high status, he is afforded it. The same holds true of the wren in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Though the wren is an adversary of the owl, just as the royal tercel is of the two lower terrels, she is still given respect by the owl, who listens without interrupting, and ultimately decides to abide by her advice to honor her contract with the nightingale and go to their judgment before Nicholas of Guildford.

There is yet another kind of law at issue in these two texts that is more theoretical and theological than the harsh realities of courtroom procedure—the law of Nature. This law is debated by church fathers and philosophers throughout the Middle Ages, but there is never a consensus on how it can be applied to humans. With so much overt natural imagery in each of these poems, the manner in which Nature exerts her control and how the characters of the poems react to her dictates becomes unavoidable. *The Owl and the Nightingale* and the *Parlement* treat the law of Nature, and specifically the control that Nature exerts over her realm, very differently than Alain de Lille in his *De Planctu Naturae*. The differences in how Nature rules and how natural law is applied from the English texts to that of the French reveals a further rejection of the principles in Alain’s treatise.

From the beginning of the medieval period, many churchmen took up the topic of how divine law and human law—the king’s law—interacts with the law of Nature. On this, the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and his *Summa Theologica* (1265-74) are perhaps most relevant to Chaucer’s writings and lifetime. Though it is not known if Chaucer read Aquinas directly, the influence of this thirteenth century churchman on discourse dealing with law in all its forms is ubiquitous at the time, especially in Dante, who most certainly had a formative influence on Chaucer. In the *Summa*, Aquinas defines natural law as follows: “The light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil” (91.2). This is differentiated from human law, which must follow natural in order to be wholesome, and divine law, which forms the basis of the other two and cannot err in any way (*Summa* 91.4). Even before Aquinas wrote his most famous work, the idea of reasonable thought, which is peculiar only to humans, and the tying of natural reason to the conscience (“what is good and what is evil”) are common ground in discussions of natural law (Kreeft 504). While Chaucer may not have known Aquinas’s works directly, he certainly did read the *Decretum* (1139-1150) written by the mid-twelfth century canon lawyer Gratian (Weever 159), and he takes a “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” stance on natural law (Boswell 314). What is not a consensus in the Middle Ages, however, and is especially relevant to a discussion of these texts, is whether man can learn about the law of nature and gain reasoning skills by observing the various aspects of the natural realm and particularly animal behavior. This is a resounding “no” in the world of Alain de Lille, but is less certain in the early Middle English *Owl and the Nightingale*. Chaucer, through his use of the bird allegory, seems to think that it is possible to learn from the birds-as-humans in the *Parlement*. The medieval precedent of

being able to learn from animals is established by eleventh century scholar Peter Damian as he writes, “God, established all earthly things for the use of humans, so he took care to enlighten man through the individual natures and instinctive behavior he bestowed on lower animals: from animals people may learn what behavior should be imitated, what avoided” (Boswell 304-5). This is not to say that animals have the same powers of reason as humans, but that when observed in a natural state, animals can impart wisdom on humans on how to live correctly or, conversely, exhibit unacceptable behavior.

The two birds of *The Owl and the Nightingale* rarely agree on anything in the 1800 line poem, but one thing they do not dispute is the supremacy of the law of Nature. In its only mention of this law, the poem reads, “Wroþ wurþe heom þe holi rode / þe *rihte ikunde* swo forbreideþ!¹⁴” (O&N 1382-83). There is a synthesis of the divine and natural in these lines between the holy rood and the law of Nature that demonstrates that the three different types of law outlined by Aquinas are inseparable. Monica Potkay, in her article “Natural Law in *The Owl and the Nightingale*,” argues that despite the two birds’ agreement on this topic, they cannot ultimately decide on which kind of natural law is correct for their particular species of bird, much less which is best for mankind (369). They do decide, however, that it is in their best interest to not physically fight over their argument. The two birds, like the tercelts of the *Parlement*, do eschew fighting over sexual matters though this is something that, according to Barbara Hanawalt, is perhaps not entirely common to an English gathering of birds. She writes, “In a society where litigants were accustomed to defend their own interests to the point of homicide, where little popular support was given to law enforcement and life was generally rough and

14 My emphasis.

short in duration, a prevalence of violence is, perhaps, normal” (310). Hanawalt's thoughts are reminiscent of a section of *The Owl and the Nightingale* when the nightingale describes why she does not go to sing to men in the distant, far northern lands:

Pat lond is grislich & unuele,
 þe men boþ wilde & unisele,
 hi nabbeþ noþer griþ ne sibbe:
 hi ne reccheþ hu hi libbe.
 Hi eteþ fihs an flehs unsode,
 suich wulues hit hadde tobrode:
 hi drinkeþ milc & wei þarto. (1003-9)

The nightingale describes what she believes to be the most primal and depraved natural state of men that are devoid of reason. She will not even consider going to the north to sing to these barbarians in “Irelonde,” “Scotlonde,” “Noreweie,” and “Galeweie” (*O&N* 907-10). These northern men do not live according to the natural law of Aquinas and Gratian, and indeed there seems to be an outright rejection of it by them. Just as Peter Damian believes that adherence to natural law can be achieved through observing nature, the opposite is true here. These northern men have observed the lower nature of wolves and have decided to live accordingly. Aquinas directly speaks of the abandonment of natural law in the *Summa*, and he notes that the rational connotations associated with natural law can become abolished through the practice of “vicious customs and corrupt

habits” (94.6). Unlike these men, the owl and the nightingale decide not to fight in a country where customs and habits might dictate that they should, according to Hanawalt. To the north, a deviant form of the law of man has replaced an allegedly reasonable natural law. The law of man need not always be deviant, however, and Aquinas asserts that if human law follows natural, then it is permissible, as seen in the law of the wren, or king figure, in *The Owl and the Nightingale* (*Summa* 95.2). Conversely, Aquinas says that “if in any point it (human law) deflects from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of law” (*Summa* 95.2). Without natural law, human law cannot exist, and since there is no reasonable human law in these cold lands, it would seem that Nature has failed in her duties, but this is not so. The two disputing birds agree that the law of these northerly men is perverse, and is one that appears to be an inversion of natural law but it is in reality an inversion of human law. These men have no “griþ ne sibbe” and this lack of truce and peace is ultimately a lack of justice, on which Augustine, in his *De Libero Arbitrio* (387-89) notes, “That which is not just seems to be no law at all” (I.5), and in this case a lack in the rule of Nature. The owl and nightingale favor a more rational behavior—that described by Augustine and Aquinas—as the nightingale argues in favor of courtly love, the law of the courts; as she disputes the owl in courtroom-like procedure; and ultimately in the keeping of “griþ”—the king’s peace, a reflection of human law. The requirement of the presence of justice in human law mandated by Augustine supports rational behavior that leads to the fulfillment of a beneficial natural law through these several rules to which the two argumentative birds adhere. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, while it does not specifically include a personage of Nature, has inherent in the speech of all of the birds a rejection of the fickle Nature found in the

Planctu.

Nature and the law she upholds in Chaucer's *Parlement* is very near to that of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. While there is not a direct personification of the goddess in the earlier poem, her law is often invoked indirectly. The Nature of Chaucer's making is far more detached and distant than the goddess found in the *Planctu*, and in just this small detail, he rejects the Nature of the French text. Chaucer's Nature, through her apparent indifference, also allows the audience to come to their own conclusions concerning the debate, unlike the overbearing Nature of the "Pleynt of Kynde." "Pleynt" is itself a legal term, and in this instance describes the plea or charge that Nature is making against man's lustfulness. While Nature tells the narrator of the Frenchman's dream vision that she wants man to only have sexual intercourse for procreation, this is a questionable charge, because Nature admits that she has been far too preoccupied with the other aspects of the natural world to busy herself with mankind's continuation. The narrator, at the beginning of *De Planctu Naturae*, describes Venus as "the monster of sensual love" that "makes men women; when with her magic art she unmans men" (*Planctu* 1). Later on in the poem, Nature herself admits that she has had to outsource the task of the continuation of mankind to Venus, but once the goddess of love goes astray into unrestrained sexuality, man is corrupted soon after. Nature complains, "Venus stung by these fatal passions, began as a concubine, defiling the chastity of her marriage-bed in the polluting sin of adultery," (*Planctu* 56) indicating that she has lost all control over the lesser goddess. Nature then reveals that she is troubled by the change in the character of Venus, but ultimately, the fault is her own for not being responsible for this aspect of her God-given tasks on Earth and upholding a natural law that is acceptable to her divine ruler. While the

Nature of Alain's *Planctu*, like Chaucer's Nature in the *Parlement*, is the "vice-regent of God the creator," Alain's personification does not do much to enforce divine law (*Planctu* 25). Oruch, concerning this very limitation writes that Nature exceeds her office in comparing herself to Theology in a quite narcissistic manner (29). Nature, while she does give a degree of deference to a personified Theology, does not act so humbly for the rest of the poem as she admonishes men for their slights against God and herself. She admits that she is no expert on divine law or theology; however, she is advocating her own natural law over that of the divine. Alain openly states that she is the vicar of God, as does Chaucer's dreamer, but she does not enforce the dictates of her creator to maintain control over the natural world.

Nowhere does the Nature of the *Parlement* complain so openly about her shortcomings; in fact, she is the only calmly authoritative and stable figure in the poem. Nature has had no reason to outsource the continuation of mankind and does not bemoan the sexual desires of men—she even supports these desires in the appropriate context. Since the poem is ultimately an allegory to represent human behavior, and these birds have come to the parliament because they have been "prik[d]" with "pleasaunce," then it becomes apparent that Chaucer's Nature has fulfilled her duties, unlike Alain's. The law of Nature upholds human law in the *Parlement* through the reinforcement of class structure and the keeping of the peace that the royal tercel sanctions as he somewhat cowardly backs down from a trial by combat. Alain's personification has opened a Pandora's box of sexual sins by giving up the duties of procreation to Venus. She essentially lives by her own law, which is ultimately against the law of God and man in that she has given up her responsibilities to the erotic goddess Venus. Furthermore, Venus

is relegated to a fairly unimportant position in the Temple of Brass in Chaucer's poem, which highlights the fact that Nature has much more control in that poem, and she enforces her law without interrupting the parliamentary proceedings to complain about the loss of control of her realm. The *Parlement* does descend into humorous chaos as the birds argue, but the goddess never fully loses control, and through this control she allows the reason that is supposedly inherent in all men, or birds representative of men, to reign. The problem with the law of Nature in the *Planctu* is the lack of her own control, not the intrusion of a deviant form of human law as it is in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Even though Alain is writing before Aquinas wrote the *Summa*, he still has a long tradition of commentary on natural law at his disposal and should know that convention dictates that the law of nature is inherent in all creatures and manifests itself as rational behavior in mankind. Alain allows Nature to disparage herself to such a degree that it seems as if there is no rational law of nature to be had in his world. The personified goddess has only failed to enforce her law in the distant cold lands in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and in this instance a lack of virtuous human law is to blame, where in the *Planctu*, Nature has abandoned all of mankind. Even when Nature appears to lose control of the debate in Chaucer's poem, she quickly wrestles it back with the utterance of a few words. Once again, the English poets find a moderate middle way of analyzing not only the effects of different kinds of love, but different types of law as it is defined by the Church fathers.

The rhetorical devices of English law in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries affect the way law is treated in both the *Parlement* and *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Chaucer rejects the Nature of the *Planctu* by portraying her as detached and distant in the *Parlement*. By choosing to portray her in this manner, he is choosing a much different

image from the “Kynde” of Alain that he says he gets his image of Nature from (*PF* 316-17). Indeed, Chaucer may be poking a bit of fun at Alain for taking himself so seriously. Alain’s Nature is a violent woman that seems bent on revenge, so an idea that would seem more natural to the English seems oddly more at home in a French text. The peaceful resolution of differences within the framework of the law is simply not seen in those French texts that pre-dated Chaucer’s writing of the *Parlement*, in either Alain, or the *Roman*.

Conclusion

The *Parlement of Fouls* sets the stage for the rest of Chaucer's writings. As the most highly organized of his early poems, it allows him to understand how to synthesize different kinds of love, ancient and contemporary texts, and commentary on class and the law. The moderate rhetorical leanings toward love put forth by Chaucer is the same moderation that would eventually influence his versions of the *fabliaux* that appear in the *Canterbury Tales*. Even though violence is present in the Chaucerian versions of the *fabliaux*, it is downplayed in the *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale* just as it is in the *Parlement*. No lines are crossed in the later *Tales* that would injure a character to such a degree that he or she will take a long time to recover or never recover at all. Speaking to this, Larissa Tracy notes that the *fabliaux* written by French authors “challenge notions of vengeance and justice in the accepted social order and subvert even the expectations of the genre itself by presenting realistic violence in graphic terms that cannot be reconciled with a humorous milieu” (6). The three tercels of the *Parlement* do not descend into petty and grisly fighting, instead they fly away, perhaps not as allies, but at least reconciled to

the peaceful resolution of the formel's decision.

The acceptance of this peace, and essentially a law of mankind that does not submit completely to the unrestrained law of Nature, speaks to a specifically English sensibility that allows the island nation to become the first kingdom in Europe to establish a parliamentary system. The resolution of differences through speech helps transform England from a proto-nation in the early thirteenth century to a powerful force in Europe at the end of the fourteenth. This is due in part to the acceptance of a common enemy in the political realm. France was not only a literary rival to England in Chaucer's *Day*, but also a rival in warfare. The Hundred Year's War began in 1337, just a few short years before the English poet's birth, and he was most certainly a soldier in that same war in 1359 (Benson xvii). While the young Chaucer had perhaps translated some French poems in what have become known as the "Ch." manuscripts, he ultimately seemed to decide that the French style of writing was not appropriate for an English audience and decided to begin a new poetic tradition in the late Middle English period. With texts like *The Owl and the Nightingale* to give him a bit of a push in the right direction, and a vast knowledge of ancient authorities, Chaucer was able to write a poem unlike any written since the end of the Old English period.

Though he often credits the French with providing source materials, Chaucer does this in an underhanded manner. He may credit these Continental poets, but he constantly attempts to remake their materials for an English audience and in doing so reject the French tenets therein. Instead, Chaucer places a greater importance on the ancients like Macrobius, Cicero, Boethius, and Ovid. In giving his fellow Englishmen translations and summaries of ancient texts, Chaucer educates them. While this began in the earliest of his

dream visions in *The Book of the Duchess*, and was attempted unsuccessfully in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer did not do this correctly until the *Parlement*. Even in his later work, *The Legend of Good Women*, which gives tragic accounts of classical women who have died in the service of love, he is unable to truly teach his countrymen—the poem remains unfinished and the summaries of the women's lives are far too short. Even though the *Parlement* is not long itself, it does not exclude anything from the *Somnium*, nor does it exclude the humorous mixture of genres that can be found in Ovid's writings, for this poem truly is a mixture of many of the popular genres circulating in the late Middle Ages. The bird-debate, dream vision, classical allegoresis, and Neoplatonic moral text are all present in this astonishingly organized poem of only seven hundred lines. No French poem from the period encompasses so many genres into one work—not even the often celebrated and inordinately long *Roman de la Rose*.

The *Parlement* also influenced other English writers of the Middle Ages and beyond. John Clanvowe, a devoted student of Chaucer, wrote *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, another bird-debate poem, and even in the twentieth century, J.R.R. Tolkien uses aspects of the dream vision and debate section of the *Parlement* at his Council of Elrond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Therefore, while *The Owl and the Nightingale* has a great impact on Chaucer, he preserves the tradition of the classical debate dream vision in England for future generations to stand as an example of the correct way to settle differences. As John Lydgate so aptly notes in his *Fall of Princes*, Chaucer truly is the “loadsterre off our language,” and particularly language that advocates a harmonious England.

Appendix I

The Owl and the Nightingale "C" Text in Modern English

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 It was in a valley in summer, In a very secluded nook, I heard holding a great debate An owl and a nightingale.</p> <p>5 Their plea was stiff and stark and strong, Sometimes soft and sometimes loud, And either against the other it swelled, And they let their violent minds all out, And each said of the other's character, 10 That of all she was the worst, And especially of the other's song. They held their dispute very strongly. The nightingale began her speech In one corner of the clearing, 15 And sat upon a fair bough, there were about it many blossoms, In an impenetrable thick hedge Mixed with grass and green sedge. She was the happy to be on the branch, 20 And sang in many various ways;</p> | <p>The music seemed rather to come From harp and flute than it were not. Better it seemed that it were fashioned Of harp and pipe than of throat.</p> <p>25 There stood an old stump there beside, There where the owl sang her hours, And was with ivy all overgrown: It was that owl's dwelling-place. The nightingale herself saw 30 And she glanced and looked over her, And thought very foul of that owl, For men held her to be loathly and foul, "Monster," she said, "Fly you away! I am the worse that I see you, 35 Indeed for your foul face, Well often is my song abandoned; My heart flies off and my tongue falters When you are forced upon me. I prefer better to spit than sing 40 Of your foul yowling."</p> |
|---|---|

This owl abode until it was night,
 She could no longer hold back,
 For her heart was so great
 That her breath nearly stopped
45 And uttered a long speech thereafter:
 “What do you think about my song now?
 Do you think that I have no singing skill,
 Because I have no knowledge of
 thrilling?
 Always you burden me with blame,
50 and speak to me with mock and
 shame,
 If I held you in my claws,
 so may it happen that I might!
 And you were put out of your high
 place,
 You would sing otherwise.”
55 The nightingale gave answer:
 “If I can safely hide myself,
 And shield myself against the cold,
 I will not take heed of your threat;
 If I keep myself in my hedge

60 Nor take heed of whatever you say.
 I know you are intemperate
 With those that might not shield
 themselves from you;
 And you take angrily and violently
 Where you might, small fowls.
65 You are held as loathly to all bird-
 kind,
 And they all drive you hence,
 And screech at and cry out at you
 And attack you until you leave,
 And also the small mouse
70 Would gladly tear you apart if it
 could.
 You are loathly to behold,
 And you are loath in many ways;
 Your body is short, your neck small,
 Your head is bigger than all of you;
75 Your eyes are both coal-black and
 broad
 As if they were painted with woad;
 You stare as if you will bite

All that you might with your claws kill:

Your beak is stiff and sharp and hooked,

80 Just as an awl that is crooked;

Therewith you clack often and long

And this is part of your song,

But you threaten to my flesh,

With your claws would me mash.

85 A frog would be more suitable to you

for food

That sits at a mill beneath the wheel:

Snails, mice, and foul creatures,

Are both your kind and your right.

You sit by day and fly at night,

90 You know that you are unnatural,

You are loathly and unclean,

Your nest is what I mean,

And also by your foul brood,

You feed it on truly foul food.

95 You know well what they do

therein¹⁵

They make it foul up to the chin,

They sit there as if they are blind

¹⁵ Therein the nest

Thereby men say an adage:

‘Misfortune attends that kind best

100 That fouls his own nest.’

In another year a falcon did breed;

He did not attend to his nest:

Therefore you stole in one day,

And laid your foul eggs.

105 So it became that they hatched

And out of his eyrie the birds hatched;

He brought his birds meat,

Watched his nest, saw them eat:

He saw that one half

110 Of his nest was foul on the outside.

The falcon was angry with his birds,

And loudly and sternly chided:

‘Say to me, who has done this?’

This has never been natural to us:

115 It was done by one of a loathly

character.

Say to me if you know.’

Then spoke one and then the other:

‘I think it was our other brother,

the one that has the great head,
120 Alas that he is not bereaved of it!
 Throw it out among the refuse
 So that his neck will break!¹
 The falcon believed his birds,
 And caught that fowl bird in the middle,
125 And threw it off the wild bough
 There crow and magpie drew it down.
 Hereby men say a parable
 Though it be not a complete story;
 It is through that evil one
130 That comes from a fowl family,
 And understanding is stirred from men,
 He ever makes known where he comes
 from,
 That he comes of that addle-egg
 Though he lives in a noble nest,
135 Though the apple falls from the tree,
 There it may grow with others
 Though it has come from elsewhere,
 He knows well from where it comes.”
 The nightingale replied with these words

140 And after that long tale
 She sang so loud and so sharp,
 As if she has twanged a shrill harp.
 This owl listened thither ward,
 And held her eye downward,
145 And sat swollen and swollen with
 rage
 As if she has swallowed a frog:
 For she knew well and was aware
 That her song¹⁶ was in mockery.
 And nonetheless she gave answer:
150 “Why will you not fly into the open,
 And show which of the two of us both
 Is of brighter hue, of fairer color?”
 “¹⁷No, you have sharper claws,
 And I do not wish that you claw me.
155 You have truly strong talons,
 You bite as does a pair of tongs.
 You thought, as do others of your kind,
 To deceive me with fair words,
 I would not allow that you advise me,

¹⁶ The nightingale’s song

¹⁷ The nightingale’s response is not introduced here

160 I know well that you mis-advise me.

Shame on you for your false advice!

Revealed is your deceit!

Shield your deceit from the bright view,

And hide that wrong among the right.

165 When you will spend your wrong,

Look that it not be seen,

For deceit has shame and hate

If it is open and understood

You will not succeed with your spiteful

tricks,

170 For I am aware and can well escape.

It will not help that you are too bold:

I would fight better with cunning,

Than you with all your strength.

I have, in breadth and length,

175 A good castle on my branch:

‘He fights well who flies well,’ say the

wise.

But let us refrain from this dispute

For such words are futile;

And let us continue on with right

judgment,

180 With fair words and with

reconciliation.

Though we are not of one accord,

We may better with fair words,

Without dispute, and without fight,

Plead with decency and with right:

185 And may each say what she will

Say correctly and with skill.”

Then said the owl: “Who will arbitrate

us,

That can and will judge us correctly?”

“I know well,” said the nightingale,

190 “There need not be any dispute.

Master Nicholas of Guildford,

He is wise and learned of words;

He is truly wise of judgment

And he is loath of every bad habit.

195 He has knowledge of every song,

Who sings well, who sings wrong:

And he can distinguish from the right

That wrong, the dark from the light.”

The owl for a while did ponder,
200 And afterward then these words
 spoke:
 “I grant that he will judge us well,
 For though he was passionate for awhile,
 And his love was for the nightingale,
 And other creatures gentle and small,
205 I know he is now truly cooled¹⁸
 Nor is he for you going to be fooled,
 That he, for your old love,
 Place me lower and you above:
 Nor will you ever so please him,
210 That he gives a false judgment for
 your sake.
 He is himself mature and steadfast,
 He does not lust now after any folly
 Now he lusts no more to play,
 He will go in a right way.”
215 The nightingale was all ready,
 She had learned well in all things:
 “Owl,” she said, “Tell me truthfully,
 Why do you that which monsters do?”

¹⁸ His passion has cooled

You sing at night and not at day,
220 And all your song is wailing.
 You might with your song terrify
 All that hears your noise:
 You shriek and yowl to your terror¹⁹
 That it is grisly to hear:
225 It seems both to the wise and foolish
 That you do not sing but that you weep.
 You fly at night and not at day:
 Thereof I wonder and well may wonder,
 For everything that shuns the right,
230 It loves dark and hates light:
 And everything that loves mis-deed,
 It loves darkness to do his deeds,
 This is a wise word, but unrefined
 Commonly spoken by many men,
235 For King Alfred said and wrote:
 ‘He shuns what he knows to be foul.’
 I know that you do also,
 For you always fly by night.
 Another thing is known by me,

¹⁹ Increasing the terror of the owl to other small creatures, not the owl being terrified

240 You have at night better sight,
 By day you are blind,
 That you cannot see either bough or
 stream,
 During the day you are utterly blind,
 Therefore men say a parable:
245 'It so rightly fares concerning those
 who are evil
 Who sees nothing to any good purpose,
 And is so full of evil tricks,
 That he no man may deceive,
 And knows the dark ways well,
250 And the light avoids.'
 So do all of your kind do this,
 Of light they have no consideration."
 This owl listened very long,
 And was vexed very strong(ly):
255 She said, "You are called
 nightingale,
 You might better be called chatterbox,
 For you have too much to tell.
 Let your tongue rest awhile!

You think that the day is your own:
260 Let me now have my turn:
 Be now still and let me speak,
 And I will revenge myself on you,
 And listen how I will with my defense,
 Might truly say right, without a long
 story.
265 You say that I hide myself during
 the day
 To this I say no and nay
 And listen while I tell you why,
 All why it is and wherefore.
 I have a beak stiff and strong,
270 And good claws sharp and long,
 So it is fitting for the hawks to know,
 It is my joy, it is my pleasure,
 That I obey the laws of my kind,
 Nor may no man therefore revile me:
275 It is very visible in me,
 From my very nature, that I am so keen.
 Furthermore, I am loathly of small fowls
 That fly by the ground and by the

thickets:
 They scream and twitter at me,
280 And filthy flocks mob me
 My love is to have rest
 And sit still in my nest:
 For I am none the better,
 If I with chiding and with chatter
285 Curse them with foul words,
 As shepherds do to each other with foul
 words,
 I do not wish to chide evil people;
 Therefore I travel wide of them.
 It is a wise man's judgment,
290 And he says it very often,
 That I do not chide the foolish against
 Not gaping at an oven.
 I heard tell at one time
 How Alfred said in his speech:
295 'Look that you not be present
 There ready to both scold and dispute,
 Let fools be chided and then you go
 forth.'

I am wise and do this myself.
 And yet Alfred said again
300 A passage that is widely known:
 'He that has to do with what is foul,
 Never comes away clean.'
 Do you suppose that the hawk is the
 worse
 When the crow cries out at him by the
 marsh,
305 And go to him with rasping claw
 As if he will against him fight?
 The hawk follows good advice,
 And flies his way and lets him screech.
 20 "Yet you say of me another thing,
310 And say that I cannot sing,
 But all my voice is sad,
 And a grisly thing to hear.
 That is not true, I sing smoothly,
 With full melody and loud voice.
315 You think that every song is foul,
 That is not like your piping.

20 Stanza break here, the owl continues her argument.

My voice is bold and not feeble,
 It is like a great horn,
 And yours is like one pipe,
320 Of a small unripe wood.
 I sing better than you do:
 You chatter as does an Irish priest.
 21 I sing in the evening at the right time
 And until when it is bedtime,
325 The third time at midnight:
 And so I compose my song
 When I see arising from afar
 Either daybreak or morning star,
 I do good with my throat,
330 And give warnings to men
 But you sing all night long,
 From evening until it is daylight
 And ever sing your own song
 So long as the night is long:
335 And your wretched throat is always
 crowing
 That you do not cease night or day

With your piping you make a din,
 That men who dwell near to you,
 And makes your song so unworthy
340 That one reckons nothing of it.
 Every joy can only last so long
 That she shall well please none
 For harp and pipe and fowl's song
 Will not like that it is too long.
345 Be the song ever so merry,
 It will seem quite unpleasant
 If it lasts beyond the proper time:
 So you might your song spoil.
 For it is true, Alfred said it,
350 And I may read it in a book:
 'Everything may lose its goodness
 With excess and with over-doing.'
 With pleasure you might cram yourself
 with excess,
 And by being over-full make yourself
 disgusting:
355 And every joy may go away
 Unless it is halted will every go on

21 What follows is a description of canonical prayer hours.

Except one, that is God's kingdom,
 That is ever sweet and ever alike:
 Though you catch ever of that basket²²
360 It is ever full to overflowing.
 It is a wonder of God's kingdom,
 That ever it spends and ever is
 unchanging.
 Though you say another shameful thing
 to me,
 That I am weak in my eyes,
365 And say that I fly by night because
 of this,
 That I may not see by light,
 You lie! In me it is seen
 That I have good sight,
 For the darkness is never so dim
370 That I ever see the less.
 You think I might not see,
 Because I will not fly by day.
 The hare lies all day,
 But nonetheless he may see.

375 If hounds run towards him,
 He goes well far away,
 And follows very narrow paths,
 And has wit and his tricks ready,
 And hops and starts very quickly
380 And seeks paths to the grove:
 He would not but for his two eyes
 Do this, if he could not see well.
 I may see so well as the hare,
 Though by day I sit in my nest,
385 Therefore valiant men are at war,
 And go about near and far,
 And overrun many peoples,
 And do by night good deeds,
 Then I follow these valiant men,
390 And fly by right the natural
 summons."
 The nightingale in her thought
 Took heed of all this, and thought long
 What she thereafter might say:
 For she might not refute
395 What the owl had said to her,

22 The "basket" or abundance of the kingdom of God is always full.

For she spoke both right and wisely.
 And she was displeased that she had
 Carried the speech so far
 And was terrified that her answer
400 Would not be worthy and not go
 right.
 But nonetheless she spoke boldly,
 For he is wise that strongly
 With his foe bears great face,
 that he fear cowardice, and be aware of it
405 For such²³ will become worthy and
 bold if you do flee
 But your foe will fly if you do not fail;
 If he sees that you are not a coward,
 He will of a boar make a castrated pig,
 And so, though the nightingale
410 Was afraid, she spoke a bold tale,
 “Owl,” she said, “Why do you so?
 You sing of woe at winter!
 You sing as does a hen at snow
 all that she sings it is for woe.
415 At winter you sing angrily and

23 The foe.

sadly,
 And ever you are dumb in summer.
 It is for your foul envy
 that you might not be joyful with us,
 for you are consumed well nigh by
 malice;
420 When bliss comes to our land
 You fare as does the evil one:
 Every joy is unpleasing to him,
 He is quick to both grumble and lowre,
 If he sees that men are glad.
425 He would rather that he see
 Tears in every man's eye,
 Nor does he care though the groups of
 people were
 Mingled by their heads and hair²⁴.
 You do all of this as well:
430 For when the snow lies thick and
 wide,
 And all creatures are in sorrow,
 You sing from evening until the

24 This is a literal translation, but Atkins translates this as “Pulling one another by the hair.”

morning,
 And I bring with me all joy:
 Each creature is glad for my sake,
435 And blesses the time when I come,
 And rejoices again at my coming.
 The blossoms begin to spring and
 spread,
 Both in the tree and on the mead.
 The lily with her fair beauty
440 Welcomes me, as you do know,
 And bids me with her fair color
 So that I will fly to her.
 The rose also with her ruddy color,
 That comes out of the woody thorn,
445 Bids me that I should sing
 For her love, one pleasant thing,
 And I do so through the night and the
 day
 The more I sing, the more I may²⁵,
 and amuse them²⁶ with my song,
450 But nonetheless not overlong,

When I see that men are glad,
 I do not wish that they be overly sated:
 When that is done for which I have
 come,
 I leave again, and do so wisely.
455 When man is anxious of his harvest,
 And reddish-brown comes on green
 leaves,
 I go home and take leave;
 Nor do I care of winter's plunder.
 When I see that hard weather is coming,
460 I go home to my native country,
 And have both love and thanks
 That I here came and hither toiled.
 When my business is done,
 Should I remain? Nay, why?
460 For he is neither clever nor wise
 That long abides where is is not needed."
 This owl listened, and stored up
 All of the debate, word after word,
 And thought after this how she might

find

25 The more the nightingale sings, the more she is able to sing.

26 "Them" being the flowers.

470 The best way to answer correctly:

For he must consider his speech
That is afraid of the tricks of pleading.
“You asked me,” the owl said,
“Why I sing and cry out at winter.

475 It is the custom of a good man,
And was from the beginning of the
world,
That each good man cherish his friend,
And have bliss with him sometimes
In his house at his table,

480 With fair speech and fair words.
Especially at Christmas,
When rich and poor, more and less²⁷,
Sing parts of songs night and day,
I help them as I may.

485 And I think of other things,
Other than to play or sing.
I have here a good answer
At once prompt and all ready:

For summertime is all too arrogant
490 And causes men's minds to go

27 Or “high and low.”

astray:

For he cares not of cleanliness,
All his thoughts are of lustfulness:
For no animal will wait long,
Before every one is riding upon the
other²⁸.

495 The male horses in the herd
Are both wild and mad for mares,
And you are among them,
For your song is all of lustfulness,
And just before you will breed,

500 You are very passionate and very
spirited.
Soon after you have mated,
You may not speak a word for a long
time,

But pipe as does a mouse,
With chucking, with harsh voice.

505 Yet you sing worse than the hedge-
sparrow,
That flies along the ground among the
stumps:

28 A reference to mating.

When your lust is gone,
 Then is your song gone also.
 In summer, peasants go mad
510 And convulse and corrupt
 themselves
 It is nonetheless not for love,
 But it is the peasants' mad impulse,
 For when he has done his deed,
 His rashness is all fallow²⁹,
515 He has thrust beneath the gown,
 His love will last no longer.
 It is just the same when it comes to your
 mood:
 As soon as you sit a-brooding³⁰
 You lose all your melody.
520 You fare the same on your branch:
 When you have done your pleasure,
 Your voice goes at once to shame.
 But when long nights come,
 and bring frosts stark and strong,
525 Then it is seen for the first time

29 "Lessened" also an acceptable word choice here.

30 "A-brooding"=mating

Cautious are the quick, cautious are the
 keen.
 At that difficult time one can find
 Who goes forth, who lies behind.
 One may see at that time of need
530 Which one will command hard
 tasks;
 Then I am active and play and sing,
 And I rejoice with my song of delight,
 Of winter I take no reckoning,
 For I am not a languishing wretch.
535 And also I comfort many creatures
 That have no strength of their own
 That are anxious and fallen into misery,
 And seek eagerly to be warm;
 Often I sing for them the more
540 To lessen some of their pain.
 What do you think? Are you yet caught?
 Are you overcome with truth?"
 "No, no!" said the nightingale,
 "You will hear another tale:
545 Not yet is this argument brought to

judgment.

But be very still, and listen now to me

I will with one mere word

make your speech become worthless.”

“That is not right,” the owl said,

550 “You have made your charge as you

so wished,

And I have given answer.

But before we go to our judgment,

I will speak concerning you

Just as you spoke concerning me

555 And you answer me if you are able.

Tell me now, you wretched creature,

Is there in you any other note

but that you have a shrill throat?

You are not good for any other thing,

560 But that you can do chattering

For you are little and weak,

And you armor is not sufficient.

What good do you do among men?

No more than does a wretched wren.

565 From you comes no other good,

But that you cry out as if you are mad:

And when your piping is done,

You do not have any other skills.

Alfred said, that was wise:

570 And well might he say it, for it is

true,

'No man is for a mere song

Dear or worthy very long

For it is a useless man

That can do naught but sing.'

575 You are nothing but a useless thing:

You do nothing but chatter.

You are dark and of foul hue,

And seem a sooty little ball.

You are not fair, nor are you strong,

580 You are not thick, nor are you long:

You have utterly escape from beauty,

And your goodness is very little.

Another thing of you I will say,

You are not fair nor are you clean.

585 When you come to the homestead of

men,

That their nest is not clean.
 It is common in many other beasts
 For a horse in stable and an ox in stall
630 To let that fall where it may³³
 And little children in the cradle,
 Both peasants and also nobles,
 Do all that in their youth
 That they forsake in their maturity.
635 What! Can that youngster prevent
 it?
 If it acts wrongly, it may be from
 necessity:
 A proverb of old has come down
 'That need makes the old wife run.'
 And yet I have another answer:
640 Will you go to my nest
 And see how it is built?
 If you are wise you might learn:
 My nest is hollow and spacious in the
 middle,
 So it is comfortable for my birds.
645 It is woven all around,

33 "That"=excrement.

From far outside the nest:
 There they go to their need,
 But what you say I forbid them to do.
 We take them from man's bowers³⁴,
650 And after that we make ours.
 Men have, among other things near-at-
 hand,
 A latrine at the end of their bower,
 So that they do not have to go far,
 And my birds do the same.
655 Now sit still chatterer!
 Never were you bound so fast,
 Now you will never find an answer.
 Hang up your ax! You may now go!"
 The nightingale at these words
660 Was nearly out of worthy counsel,
 And thought eagerly in her mind
 If she knew how to do anything else,
 If she could only but sing,
 And if she might help in other things.
665 Now she must find an answer,
 Or else be all left behind,

34 Take the idea for the construction of the nest.

And it is truly hard to fight
 Against truth and against right.
 He must go with all cunning,
670 When the heart is troubled:
 And then the man must speak cunningly,
 He must manipulate and disguise,
 If the outward mouth may conceal
 What may not be seen in the heart:
675 And a word may soon go astray
 Where the mouth will speak against the
 heart,
 But nonetheless still strive against that.
680 This is counsel to whomever will
 take it
 For never is wit so keen
 As when his counsel is in doubt.
 Then his cunning becomes apparent
 When his mind is most in dread:
685 For Alfred said in an old proverb,
 And yet it has not slipped from men's
 hearts:
 "When trouble is at its highest,

Then is the remedy nearest";
 For wit increases among his woe
690 And for his woe it is the more.
 So man should never lack counsel
 Unless his heart is witless,
 And if he forsake wit,
 Then is the source of wisdom stolen
 away;
695 If he cannot hold onto his wit,
 He will not find counsel in any place.
 For Alfred said, that is well-known,
 he ever spoke with a true mouth:
 "When trouble is at its highest,
700 The remedy is nearest."
 All of the nightingale's thought,
 She had well employed with counsel;
 Among the hard and tight circumstance,
 She thought well with wisdom,
705 And had found a good answer,
 Among the hard situation.
 "Owl, you ask me," she said,
 "If I can do any other deed

but sing in summertime,
710 And bring bliss far and wide.
 Why do you ask of my crafts?
 Better are mine than all yours,
 better is one song from my mouth
 than all your kin ever knew:
715 And listen, I will tell you why.
 Do you know why man was born?
 To the bliss of the kingdom of heaven,
 Where there is ever singing and mirth
 alike:
 There every man goes
720 That has anything of good in him.
 Therefore men sing in holy church,
 And clerks begin to make songs,
 And men think about the songs,
 And whither they will go, and be forever
725 that he does not forget mirth³⁵,
 But need only think of it and obtain it,
 And by taking heed of the church's
 teaching
 know how merry is the bliss of heaven.

35 They will not "forget mirth" in heaven.

Clerks, monks, and canons,
730 Where there are those good religious
 communities,
 Rise up at midnight,
 And sing of heaven's light:
 And priests sing throughout the country,
 When the light of day begins.
735 And I help them how I may,
 I sing with them night and day,
 and they are all the happier for me,
 And are more ready to sing the song.
 I warn men to do good,
740 So they might be joyful in their
 minds,
 And bid that they might seek
 That same song that is ever everlasting.
 Now you might, owl, sit and wither
 away
 Among these words is no chattering:
745 I allow that we go to judgment
 Before the very Pope of Rome.
 But abide yet, regardless,

Man, with strength and with wit,
 has nothing else as his equal.
785 Even if all strength were to come
 together as one,
 Man's wit would still be greater
 For man, with his skill,
 Overcomes all earthly creatures.
 I do the same with only one of my songs
790 Better than you do all the year long:
 Men love me for my skill,
 Men shun you for your strength.
 Tell me why I am the worse
 That I know but one skill?
795 If two men go to wrestling,
 And firmly press each other,
 And the one can trick in many ways
 And can conceal his tricks well,
 and the other has but one trick,
800 And this allows him to beat each
 man⁴⁰,
 And with that one he lays to the ground
 One after the other in a short amount of

time,
 Why need he care of more tricks
 When the one is so effective for him?
805 You say that you can do many duties
 And that I am unlike you in this:
 If you put all your skills together,
 Yet is my one the better of them.
 Often when the hounds chase the fox,
810 The cat truly lives in safety,
 Though he knows but one trick.
 The fox is not so good that he can,
 Though he knows many tricks,
 Expect to deceive each hound.
815 For he knows the straight and
 crooked paths,
 And he can hang by the bough,
 And so lose the hounds because of this,
 And turn away again to the roots.
 The fox can creep by the hedge
820 And go a different way
 And come again to the same place:
 Then is the hound's smell undone:

40 With his one trick.

The hounds will not, because of the
scent,
Know whether to go forward or back.
825 If they miss the fox because of his
wandering course,
He creeps to his hole at the end⁴¹:
But nonetheless even with all his tricks
He can not so think,
Though he is cunning and swift,
830 That he will not lose his red fur.
The cat knows no trick save one,
Whether by hill or by fen,
He can climb very well,
He protects his gray fur there well.
835 So I say of myself,
better is my one than twelve of yours.”
“Stop! Stop!” the owl said,
“You behave far too treacherously;
You disguise all your words
840 So that all you say seems truthful,
All of your words are made sleek⁴²,

And made plausible and more pleasing,
That all people receive from you,
They suppose you speak the truth.
845 Stop! Stop! I will answer you.
Now it will become very clear
That you have told many lies,
When your falsehood is undone.
You say that you sing to mankind,
850 And teach him what he may find
hence⁴³
When he goes up to the everlasting song:
But it is the greatest marvel of all,
That you dare to lie so openly.
Do you think you bring them so easily
855 To God's kingdom by singing?
No! No! They should better learn
That they might with long lamentation
Ask forgiveness for their sins,
Before he will be able to go there.
860 I advise that men be ready
To weep more than to sing

41 End of the chase.

42 A particularly hard line to translate. I use

Atkin's suggestion here (72).

43 In the afterlife.

In order to find the kingdom of heaven:
 For no man is without sin.
 Therefore he may, before he goes hence,
865 With tears and with weeping make
 amends,
 So that which was before sweet is now
 bitter to him.
 I help with this, God knows it!
 I do not sing any foolishness to him,
 For all my song is of longing,
870 And I mix this with lamentation,
 That man, because of me, does think
 That he groans of his own misdeeds:
 I belabor him with my song,
 So that he groans for his guilt.
875 If you are planning to dispute me,
 I weep better than you sing,
 If right does forward and wrong
 backwards,
 Better is my weeping than your song.
 Though some men are good throughout,
880 And clean throughout in their spirits,

They long for heaven nonetheless.
 Those who are here, woe to them for
 that⁴⁴,
 For though their souls are saved,
 They know nothing here but sorrow.
885 They weep grievously for other
 men,
 And bid Christ's mercy for them,
 I help men on either side.
 My mouth has two kinds of salves:
 I help the good with their longings,
890 For when he longs, I sing to him,
 And I also help the sinful,
 For I teach him what woe is.
 Yet I will answer you in another way,
 For when you sit on your branch,
895 You lead men to the lust of the flesh,
 If they will listen to your songs.
 All because of you they lose the mirth of
 heaven,
 For you never do any teaching:
 Lustfulness is all you sing of,

44 Atkin's suggestion (75).

940 And knew well in her thought
That wrath takes away man's wise
counsel.

For King Alfred said thus:

“Seldom does it end well for the hateful
And seldom do the angry argue well.”

945 For wrath stirs up the heart's blood
So that it flows as does a wild flood,
And all of the heart overruns

Until nothing but fury remains,
And so she loses all of her light

950 So that she knew neither truth nor
right.

The nightingale understood this,
and let her anger overrun:

He might speak better in a good mood
Than have to deal with wrathful words.

955 “Owl,” she said, “Listen here now:
You will fall, the way is slippery.

You say I fly behind the houses:

It is true, that dwelling is ours

Where the lord and lady lie,

960 I will sit and sing by them.

Do you think that wise men abandon

The right street for a foul muddy one?

Do you think the sun no longer shines
though it is foul in your nest?

965 Should I, for a hollow log⁴⁵,

Leave the place where I belong,

So that I may not sing by the bed,

Where the lord has his love in bed?

It is my right, it is my custom,

970 That I go to the highest⁴⁶,

But yet you boast of your song,

And say that you can yell angrily and
strong,

And say you teach mankind,

So that they weep of their sins.

975 If each man should lament and cry
out,

45 A particularly difficult two words to define, “hole brede” could mean “hollow log” or “broad hole,” I accept Atkin's suggestion (81).

46 The “highest” here could refer to either the laws and customs, or the highest classes. When two lovers are mentioned, they are always termed “lord” and “lady,” signs of nobility.

As if he were wretched,
 If he were to yell as you do,
 He might terrify his soul.
 Man should be still and not cry out;
980 But he may weep for his misdeeds:
 But where Christ is praised,
 There men will yell and sing loudly.
 Nor is it too loud or too long,
 When the hymn is sang at the right time.
985 You yell and complain, and I sing:
 Your voice is lamenting, and mine is
 delight.
 You might ever yell and weep so much
 That you might leave your life!
 And you might yell so loudly,
990 That both of your eyes pop out!
 What is better of these two things:
 That men be merry or grim?
 So it will always be in our time
 That you are sad and I am blithe.
995 Yet you ask why I do not go
 Into other lands and sing there?

No! What should I do among them,
 Where bliss never comes?
 That land is not good, nor is it bountiful,
1000 But it is all wilderness and
 desolate:
 Rocks and crags reach to heaven,
 Snow and hail is common to them.
 That land is horrible and evil,
 The men are wild and wicked,
1005 They have neither truce nor peace,
 They do not care how they live.
 They eat fish and flesh uncooked,
 like wolves they tear it apart:
 They also drink milk and whey,
1010 They do not know how to do
 anything else:
 They have neither wine nor beer,
 But live as does a wild animal:
 They go about covered with hairy skins,
 As if they came out of hell.
1015 If any good man should go to
 them,

As did some from Rome,
 To teach them good habits,
 and to refrain from vices,
 He would be better to stay home,
1020 For he would waste all his time:
 He might better teach a bear
 To carry both shield and spear,
 If you brought me to that wild folk,
 Than they would heed my singing⁴⁷.
1025 What would I do there with my
 song?
 I could not sing to them for any amount
 of time,
 So that every bit of my song is not
 wasted:
 A halter or a bridle may not
 Bring them from their mad ways,
1030 Nor a man with steel or iron.
 But where the land is both beautiful and
 good,
 And men have a mild spirit,

I render service to them with my throat,
 For I may do good service with it:
1035 And bring him tidings of love,
 For I sing hymns.
 It was said in an old law,
 And the wise saying continues to be the
 same,
 If a man will plow and sow,
1040 There is going to be a good
 harvest,
 For he is mad that sows his seed
 Where grass never springs nor flowers.”
 The owl was angry, ready to argue,
 With these words her eyes moved
 rapidly:
1045 “You say you guard men's
 dwellings,
 Where there are leaves and fair flowers,
 Where two lovers are in one bed,
 Lying clasped and well guarded.
 Once you sang, I know well where it

47 The sense here is that it would be easier to train a bear to carry weapons than to get these “wild folk” to listen to the nightingale's song.

was⁴⁸,

1050 Near a dwelling, and taught

The lady of an evil love,

And sang both high and low,

And taught them to do shame

And wrong to their bodies.

1055 The lord, who soon finds out,

Limes and snares and everything he has

Is set and laid out to catch you.

You come soon to that tomb,

You were caught in one snare,

1060 It was all around your shins:

You had no other judgment or law,

But were torn apart by wild horses.

If you try to give evil advice

To a wife or a maid,

1065 Your song may be effective for so

long

That you will tremble in a trap.”

The nightingale at these words,

with a sword and a spear's point

Would fight, if she were a man:

1070 But since she might not do this,

She fought with her wise tongue.

“He fights well who speaks well,” says

the song.

She took counsel of her tongue,

“He fights well who speaks well,” Alfred

said.

1075 “What? Do you say this for my

shame?

The lord was the one harmed here.

He was so jealous of his wife,

That he might not for his life,

Bear to see her speak with another man,

1080 If his heart were not to break.

He locked her in a dwelling,

That was both strong and certain:

I had pity on her continually,

And was sorry for her wretchedness,

1085 And amused her with my song,

All that I might, be it short or long.

Then the knight was angry with me,

48 This is the beginning of the “Nightingale Episode” that is the basis of Marie de France's *Laustic*.

Because of true envy I was loath to him:
 He placed his own shame on me,
1090 But he turned it all to anger.
 King Henry⁴⁹ came to understand this:
 Jesus have mercy on his soul!
 He let that knight be outlawed,
 That had done so many wrongs,
1095 In so good a king's land;
 For true wickedness and foul hate
 Let that little bird be caught,
 And condemned him by life and limb.
 It was an honor to all my kind;
1100 The knight after this lost his joy,
 And gave for me one hundred pounds
 And now my birds sat safe,
 And had true bliss and joy,
 And were blithe, as they should be.
1105 Since I was so well avenged,
 Ever after I dared to speak more boldly:
 For since I was avenged this once,
 I am the happier always.

Now I may sing where I will,
1110 And no man may again annoy me.
 But you, wretched being! You wretched
 ghost!
 You cannot find, nor do you know,
 A hollow stump where you might hide
 yourself,
 Where one may not pinch your hide.
1115 For children, boys, masters, and
 servants,
 They always think of doing you pain
 If they may see you perching.
 They put stones in their pockets
 And pelt you with turf and strike you
 down,
1120 And break your foul bones to
 pieces.
 If you are thrown down or otherwise
 shot,
 Then you might be of service for the first
 time.
 For men hang you on a rod,

49 This is believed to be Henry II of England
 (Atkins 82).

And you, with your foul baggy form,
1125 And with your terrible neck,
 Protect men's corn from all creatures.
 There is nothing else in your life or your
 blood
 Except that you are a truly good
 scarecrow.
 Where the seeds are newly sown,
1130 Neither hedge-sparrow, goldfinch,
 rook, nor crow
 Do not dare to ever come hence,
 If your body is in that place.
 When trees bloom at the appointed time,
 And young seeds spring and grow,
1135 No fowl would dare to take them,
 If you are hanging nearby.
 Your life is ever bad and vile,
 You may as well be dead.
 Now you might truly see
1140 That your appearance is ghastly
 While you are living,
 For when you hang slain,

Yet they are afraid of you
 The fowls that once cried out at you.
1145 Men are right to be wroth with you,
 For you always sing of your pain:
 All that you sing, sooner or later,
 It is always of men's misfortunes:
 When you have cried out at night,
1150 Men become very afraid of you.
 You sing when some man will be dead:
 You always predict some evil.
 You sing just before loss of property,
 Or some friend's ruin:
1155 Or you bode of a burning house,
 Or armies of men, or pursuit of thieves;
 Or you bode pestilence of cattle,
 Or that farmers will become afflicted,
 Or that the wife will lose her mate,
1160 Or you bode strife and quarrels.
 You always sing of man's harm,
 Because of you they are wretched and
 miserable.
 You never sing at all

Unless it is for some misfortune.

1165 And this is why men shun you,

And pelt you and beat you

With stones, and rocks, and turf and
clods,

So that you may not escape to any place.

May the herald in town be cursed

1170 That always bodes bad news,

And always brings evil tidings,

And always speaks of evil things!

May God almighty be wroth with him,

And all that wear linen cloth⁵⁰.”

1175 The owl did not abide very long

and gave a stern and strong answer:

“What?” she said, “Are you ordained?

Or do you curse when you are not a
priest?

Because you are doing priestly duties.

1180 I did not know you were ever a

priest,

I did not know you can sing mass:

You know how to excommunicate well

enough, though.

But it is because of your wickedness

That you curse me yet again:

1185 And this is easily answered;

'Move on,' says the carter.

Why do you reproach me for my insight,

And my wisdom and my strength?

For I am wise indeed,

1190 I know of hunger, of invasions:

I know if men will live long,

I know if a wife will lose her mate:

I know where there will be envy and
revenge

1195 I know who will be hanged,

And who else will receive foul death.

If men have taken to battle,

I know which will be overcome:

I know if pestilence will come on cattle,

1200 And if animals will lie dead;

I know if the trees will bloom

I know if the crops will grow:

⁵⁰ Atkins associates linen cloth with the clergy (98).

I know if houses will burn,
 I know if men will run or ride⁵¹,
1205 I know if the sea will drown ships,
 I know if snow will badly bind the land.
 And yet I know much more:
 I know the lore of many books,
 And I also know of the gospel
1210 More than I would tell you:
 For I often go to church,
 and learn much wisdom:
 I know of all the symbolism⁵²
 And of many other things.
1215 If any man will abide my outcry,
 He will know things before they happen.
 Often, because of my great wit,
 I sit sad and wroth
 For when I see that some wretchedness
1220 Is near men, I cry out profusely:
 I bid that men be aware,
 And have good counsel ready.
 For Alfred said a wise word,

Each man should lay it in his hoard:
1225 'If you see trouble before it
 comes⁵³,
 It's strength is very nearly diminished.'
 And mighty blows will be diminished,
 If men take heed and are wary,
 An arrow will fly wide of you
1230 If you see how it flies from the
 string;
 And then you may truly escape and flee,
 If you see the arrow coming towards
 you.
 If any man has fallen into disgrace,
 Why should he reproach me for his
 grief?
1235 Just because I see his harm
 beforehand
 Does not mean it comes about because
 of me.
 Though you see some blind man,
 That cannot go in the right direction

51 Atkin's suggestion (102).

52 In the gospels.

53 I use Atkin's translation in this line as it is a difficult passage (104).

And his path leads to a ditch,
1240 And he falls, and therefore
 becomes soiled,
 Do you think, because I see all,
 That it happens the sooner because of
 me?
 This always happens because of my
 wisdom:
 When I sit on my bough,
1245 I know and see very clearly
 That some man will come to harm soon.
 Should he, who knows nothing of it,
 Blame me for what I know?
 Should he blame me for his misfortune,
1250 Because I am wiser than he?
 When I see some wretchedness
 Is near men, I cry out sufficiently,
 And bid them so that they protect
 themselves,
 For harsh harm is coming toward them.
1255 But though I cry out loud and low,
 It all comes about through God's will.

Why will men complain of me,
 Though I trouble them with truth?
 Though I may warn them all the year,
1260 It does not always mean that harm
 is near at hand:
 But I sing to them because I wish
 That they should understand well
 That some unhappiness is close at hand
 When I send my hooting to them.
1265 No man has any certainty
 That he may not know and dread
 That some misfortune is near to him,
 Though he cannot see it.
 For Alfred said very well,
1270 And his word was as good as
 gospel,
 That 'Every man, the higher his station,
 should ever the more carefully look at
 himself.'
 'No man should trust to his wealth
 Too much, though he have much.'
1275 There is nothing so hot that it does

not cool,
 Nor nothing so white that it does not
 soil,
 Nor nothing so loved that it does not
 become hateful,
 Nor nothing so happy that it does not
 become angry:
 But everything that is not eternal,
1280 Will pass away, and all this world's
 bliss.
 Now you may truly know
 That you always speak foolishly:
 For all that you say to my shame,
 It turns ever to your own harm.
1285 And so it goes, at each bout
 You fall by your own tricks;
 All that you say to reproach me,
 It is to my honor in the end.
 Unless you will give a better argument,
1290 You will win nothing but shame."
 The nightingale sat and sighed,
 And was anxious, and full well should

be,
 Because of how the owl had spoken,
 And how she carried her speech.
1295 She was anxious and made ready
 What she would say to her thereafter:
 But nonetheless she searched for
 understanding.
 "What?" she said, "Owl, are you mad?
 You boast of a strange wisdom,
1300 You do not know where it comes
 from,
 Unless it is from witchcraft.
 Therefore you, wretch, must purify
 yourself
 If you will be among men:
 Otherwise you must flee from the land.
1305 For all those that know of
 witchcraft
 They were long ago from a priest's
 mouth
 Cursed: As you are still.
 You never stopped your witchcraft.

I said to you a little before,
1310 And you asked if I was
 In a mocking way, an ordained priest.
 But the cursing of you is so common
 Though no priest be close by,
 That you are still a wretch nevertheless:
1315 For every child calls you foul,
 And every man calls you a wretched
 owl.
 I have heard, and it is true,
 A man might know star-lore well,
 That knows of what things are to come,
1320 As you say is your custom.
 What do you know, wretched thing, of
 stars,
 Other than you behold them from afar?
 Many animals and men behold them too,
 but they know naught of such things.
1325 An ape may behold a book,
 And turn its leaves and close it again:
 But he does not know any better
 The lore of the clerks, not one bit.

Though you also see the stars,
1330 You are never more wise.
 And yet you, foul thing, chide me,
 And very cruelly reproach me,
 That I sing by man's house,
 And teach a wife to break with her
 spouse.
1335 You certainly lie, you foul thing!
 Marriage was never put to shame
 through me.
 But it is true that I sing and cry out
 Where ladies and fair maidens are;
 And it is true that I sing of love:
1340 For a good wife may, in her
 marriage,
 Love her husband better
 Than any other lover;
 A maid may choose a lover,
 So that her honor is not lost,
1345 And love him with righteous love,
 The she will be of a higher status.
 Such love I teach and instruct,

And flesh's lust is hard to crush:
 It is not a wonder that the lust remains.
1390 For flesh's lust makes them err,
 Nor are they all completely forlorn
 That fall at the stumbling-block of the
 flesh:
 For many women have done wrong
 That have arisen out of the slough.
1395 Nor are all sins the same,
 For they are of two kinds:
 Some arise out of lust of the flesh,
 And some are of the spiritual kind.
 Where flesh leads men to drunkenness,
1400 And to sloth and lust
 The spirit does wrong through envy and
 malice,
 And sees with mirth another man's
 shame,
 And gapes in happiness at him all the
 more,
 And he reck's little of mercy and grace,
1405 And rises higher because of pride,

And despises that which is lower than
 he.
 Tell me truly, if you know it,
 Which does the worst, flesh or spirit?
 You may sing, if you will,
1410 That the sins of the flesh are less:
 Many a man is clean of flesh,
 That in his mind is a companion of the
 devil.
 No man should admonish a woman,
 And upbraid her for the lust of the flesh:
1415 He may reproach for lust
 That sins worse in pride.
 Yet if I should bring love
 To a wife or a maid, when I sing,
 I would prefer to defend the maid,
1420 If you can understand it:
 Listen now, I will tell you why,
 From the top to the bottom.
 If a maid loves secretly,
 She stumbles and falls naturally in this:
1425 For though she plays awhile,

She is not too far led astray;
 She may escape her sins
 The right way, through church-rites,
 And afterward have as a mate
1430 Her lover, without question,
 And go to him in the light of day
 Who she before had to steal to by dark of
 night.
 A young girl does not know about such
 things:
 Her young blood leads her amiss,
1435 And some foolish man draws her to
 this folly
 By every means available to him.
 He comes and goes, and commands and
 asks favors
 And pays court to her and often neglects
 her,
 And woos her often and long.
1440 What may she do but go astray?
 She did not ever know love before
 And so she thought to try it,

And learn the truth about that game of
 love
 That makes the wild tame.
1445 I may not for pity refrain,
 When I see the drawn expression
 That love brings to the young girl,
 From singing to her of mirth.
 I teach them by my song
1450 That such love does not last long:
 For my song only lasts a little while,
 And love does nothing but laze about
 On these girls, and soon goes,
 And the hot breath becomes less⁵⁴.
1455 I sing with them for awhile,
 Beginning high and ending low,
 And let my songs fall from the branches
 And in a little while I stop.
 That maid knows, when I cease,
1460 That love is like my song,
 For it is naught but a little passion
 That soon comes and soon goes.
 That girl understands this because of me

54 The hot breath of passion.

And her folly turns to wisdom,

1465 And I see well, because of my
song,

That foolish love does not last long.

But I would like you to know that

Loathly to me are the excesses of wives:

And if a wife take heed of me, she will
see

1470 I do not sing when I breed.

And a wife should ignore the teaching of
fools,

Though her marriage-bonds are weak.

It seems a violent and severe wonder to
me

How any man may

1475 Drive his heart

To take another man's wife:

As for the other man, he may do two
things,

No man may do a third;

Either the lord is very valiant,

1480 Or otherwise feeble, and is

worthless.

If he is a worthy and valiant man,

No man, that has wisdom,

Will do him shame, especially of his
wife:

For he may fear harm from the husband,

1485 And fear that he will lose what
hangs there⁵⁵,

Which will afterward leave him without
any longings⁵⁶.

And if he is not afraid,

It is wrong and great folly

To wrong a good man,

1490 And entice his wife from his bed.

If her lord is worthless

And feeble at bed and table,

How might there be any love

When a churl's body lay beside her?

1495 How may there be any love,

Where such a man gropes her thigh?

So, you might understand well

⁵⁵ He may fear that he will lose his penis.

⁵⁶ "Longings"=Sexual urges.

That one is a pity, the other a shame
 To steal another man's bed.
1500 For if her lord is a valiant man,
 You might expect it to turn out badly,
 When you lie by her side.
 And if the lord is a wretch,
 What pleasure might you obtain?
1505 If you think who she usually lays
 upon,
 You buy your pleasure with disgust.
 I don't know how any good man could
 Seek for her if her husband is a wretch.
 If he thinks about whom he lays by,
1510 All his love may go away.”
 The owl was glad for such a charge:
 She thought that the nightingale,
 Though she spoke well at the beginning,
 Had gone wrong at the end:
1515 And said, “Now have I found
 That maidens are in your care:
 You stay near them, and protect them,
 And you praise them too much.

The ladies⁵⁷ turn to me,
1520 They send their complaints to me.
 For it happens frequently and often,
 That man and wife are at odds
 And therefore that man is guilty
 That is happy to assail women,
1525 And spends all he has on them,
 And follows where he has no right to
 follow,
 And has his true spouse at home,
 With barren walls and an empty house,
 His spouse is thinly clad and barely fed,
1530 And he leaves her without meat
 and clothing.
 When he comes home again to his wife,
 He dares not to speak a word to her:
 He chides and cries out as if mad,
 And he does not bring home anything
 good.
1535 All that she does is displeasing to
 him,
 All that she says is wrong to him;

57 Married women.

And often, when she does nothing
 wrong,
 She has the fist in her teeth.
 There is no man that cannot bring
1540 His wife to wrong by such things:
 A man may abuse her so often,
 That she will do her own pleasures.
 Lo, God knows it! She cannot help
 herself,
 Even if she makes him a cuckold.
1545 For it happens frequently and
 often,
 That his wife is tender and gentle,
 Of fair countenance and well-formed:
 Therefore it is the worse
 That he spend his love on her
1550 That is not worth one hair on her
 head.
 And such men are so numerous,
 That a wife cannot hold to the right way.
 Nor may any man speak to her:
 He thinks she will soon break

1555 Her wedding vows if she looks
 Or speaks fair words to another man.
 He locks her up with key and lock:
 Because of this the marriage vows are
 broken.
 For if she is brought to this,
1560 She does those things which before
 she had not thought to do.
 Misfortune be to him who speaks too
 much,
 If such wives decide to avenge
 themselves!
 Of these things do the ladies complain to
 me,
 And trouble me sorely:
1565 My heart may nearly break,
 When I hear their complaint.
 I weep with them grievously,
 And ask Christ's mercy for them,
 That he soon rescue the lady
1570 And send her a better bed-mate.
 And I will tell you another thing,

And you will not, even for your own
 skin,
 Find any answer:
 All your disputing will cease.
1575 Many a merchant and many a
 knight
 Loves and keeps his wife well,
 As does many a bondsman:
 So that the wife does good,
 And serves him at bed and at table
1580 With fair deeds and fair words
 And tries eagerly, however she may,
 To do that which is pleasing to him.
 The lord into other people's lands
 Goes out to meet the needs of them both,
1585 And then is that good wife
 unhappy
 Because of her lord's anxious journeys,
 And she sits and sighs, overcome with
 longing,
 And she is distressed and her heart is
 vexed:

All for her lord's sake
1590 She worries during the day and
 stays awake at night:
 And the time seems long to her,
 And every step she thinks a mile.
 When others sleep around her,
 I alone listen outside,
1595 And know of her troubled mind,
 And sing out at night to make her happy:
 And my good song, because of her
 troubles,
 I turn a little towards sadness.
 I bear some of her sorrow
1600 And thus she welcomes me:
 I help her how I can,
 For she goes on the right path.
 But you have enraged me very much,
 So that my heart is nearly crushed,
1605 So that I may hardly speak:
 And yet I will go further.
 You say that I am loathly to men,
 And every man is angry with me,

And threatens me with stones and sticks,

1610 And they break and beat me
severely,

And when they have slain me,

They hang me on their hedges,

Where I scare away magpies and crows

From where the seeds are sown.

1615 Though this is true, I do men good,

And for them I shed my blood:

I do them good with my death,

This is difficult for you to do.

For though you lie dead and shriveled,

1620 Your death is not useful for any
purpose:

I do not know what good you are,

For you are nothing but a wretched

creature.

But though my life is shot out of me,

I may still do a good service:

1625 I may be set up on a small stick

And set in the thick woods,

And I may entice to men

Little birds so they may capture them.

And so, because of me, man receives

1630 Very good roasted meat to add to
his food.

But you are never good to men

Neither alive nor dead, in any place:

I do not know why you breed your
brood,

When it does no good in life or death.”

1635 The nightingale heard this,

And hopped upon a blossoming branch,

And she sat higher than she did before:

“Owl,” she said, “Now be aware,

I will not plead with you anymore,

1640 For here your usual skill fails:

You yell that you are loathly to men,

And every creature is angry with you;

And with yelling and with clamor

You lament that you are accursed.

1645 You say that boys capture you,

And hang you high on a rod,

And pluck and shake you to pieces,

And some make a scarecrow of you.

I think that you lose this game,

1650 For you boast of your own shame,

You are giving up to me, I think,

Because you boast of your own

disgrace.”

When she had spoken these words,

She sat in a fair place,

1655 And thereafter prepared her voice

And sang so shrill and so clear,

That men heard it both far and near.

Therefore immediately came to her

Thrush and throstle and woodpecker,

1660 And birds both large and small:

For they thought that she had

Overcome the owl, and they cried out

And sang in many different ways,

And there was bliss along the branch.

1665 Just as men weep for the shame of

the man

That gambles and loses the game.

The owl, when she heard this,

“Have you,” she said, “Summoned an
army?

And will you, wretch, fight with me?

1670 No! No! You do not have enough
strength!

What are they saying that have come to
this place?

I think you are leading an army against
me.

You will learn, before you fly from here,

How strong my kind are:

1675 For those that have hooked bills

And sharp and crooked claws,

They all belong to my kindred,

And would come if I asked.

The very cock, that can fight well,

1680 He might hold to the right with me,

For we both have clear voices,

And sit under the sky by night.

If I raise a battle-cry against you,

I will lead so strong an army,

1685 That your pride will fall,

I do not give a turd for you all!
 Nor will, before it is fully evening,
 One wretched feather be left on any of
 you.
 But it was our agreement
1690 When we came here,
 That we should hold
 To what correct judgment would give us.
 Will you now break the agreement?
 I believe you think that judgment is too
 hard for you,
1695 Since you do not want to wait for
 the judgment,
 You will now, wretch, fight and chide
 me.
 Yet I will advise you all,
 Before I raise my battle-cry against you,
 That you let your fighting be,
1700 And start to quickly fly away.
 For, by the claws that I have,
 If you wait here for my allies
 You will sing very differently,

And curse all fighting:
1705 For not one of you is so bold,
 That you will dare look on my face.”
 The owl spoke very boldly,
 For though she would not truly so
 quickly
 Go in search of an army,
1710 She would still give an answer
 To the nightingale with violent words.
 For though a man with a spear
 Has little strength, he, with his shield,
 But if he is in a field,
1715 Though bold words and with his
 countenance,
 Makes his foe sweat for cowardice.
 The wren, because of her singing skill,
 Came there in the morning
 To help the nightingale:
1720 For although she had a small voice,
 She had a good and shrill throat,
 And sang to the pleasure of many men.
 The wren was considered very wise,

For though she was not bred in the
 woods,
1725 She was brought up among
 mankind,
 And she brought her wisdom hence:
 She could speak wherever she wanted,
 Even before the king if she must.
 “Listen,” she said, “Let me speak.
1730 What? Will you break this peace,
 And do such shame to the king?
 He is not yet dead or crippled.
 Both of you will come to harm and
 shame,
 If you break the peace on his land.
1735 Let the matter lie, and be
 reconciled,
 And go immediately to our judgment
 And let judgment decide this debate,
 As was earlier spoken.”
 “I am very willing,” said the nightingale,
1740 “But wren, not for your tale,
 But I do so for my own lawfulness.

I do not want wickedness
 To overcome me at the end:
 I am not afraid of any judgment.
1745 I have promised, it is true,
 That Master Nicholas, who is wise,
 Should decide between us,
 And I still expect that he will.
 But where might we find him?”
1750 The wren sat in her tree;
 “What? Do you not know,” she said, “his
 home?
 He dwells at Portisham,
 At a town in Dorset,
 In an outlet by the sea,
1755 There he decides many judgments
 correctly,
 And composes and writes many wise
 things,
 And because of his mouth and because
 of his hand,
 Things are the better, even into Scotland.
 To seek him is an easy thing,

1760 He does not have but one dwelling.

That is much to the shame of the

bishops,

And all who of his name

Have heard, and of his deeds.

Why will they not take counsel of

themselves,

1765 Since he is with them so often,

To teach them of his wisdom,

And give him homes in many places,

So that he may more often be with

them?"

"Certainly," said the owl, "That is true:

1770 These rich men act truly wrong

If they leave that good man alone

That knows of so many things,

And give annuities away

indiscriminately⁵⁸,

And give little respect to him.

1775 With their kin they are kind,

And give annuities to little children:

So their wit he deems stupidity,

Master Nicholas must ever endure this.

But let us now go to him,

1780 For there our judgment is all

ready."

"We will do so," the nightingale said:

"But who will read our speech,

And speak before our judge?"

"I will please you very much in this

respect,"

1785 Said the owl, "All of it, to the end

of the point,

I can tell, word-for-word:

And if you think I misspeak,

You may stand against me and restrain

my speech."

With these words they went forth,

1790 All except the armies of the two,

Until they came to Portisham.

But how they fared of their judgment,

I cannot tell you any more:

There is no more of this story.

⁵⁸ This line is referring to "these rich men," not Nicholas.

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