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Raising a stink in The 'Owl and the nightingale': A new reading at line 115

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The homilist at this point adds a specific example of a clandestine sin that is not in his source: *þær swutelað ælc cild hwa hit formyrð-rode* ('There every child will reveal who murdered it'). Bosworth–Toller has examples of *formyrþrian* that refer both to the termination of pregnancy and infanticide, as *cild* can mean both 'foetus' and 'child'. As the homilist is suggesting that the resurrected child will accuse its murderer at Doomsday, it is more likely that infanticide and not abortion is described here.

Naturally infanticide would not be of major relevance to Bede's clerical audience, but it is significant that this clandestine sin and no other is singled out for attention in the homily. There are signs that this crime was considered more serious in the tenth and eleventh centuries than in earlier Anglo-Saxon times. There is mention, for example, in Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* of the *bearnmyrðran* ('infanticide', 'child-murderer'),[4] although it occurs in a list of many other crimes that reflect the moral decay of the age and is not singled out as specifically evil or prevalent. Abandonment and exposure of newborn children were common acts and generally treated by church and state as a less serious crime than murder.[5] It was generally believed that the Germanic tribes frequently abandoned their children,[6] and not only illegitimate and malformed ones, but noble children like Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, were exposed to the elements and, if lucky, fostered by lay strangers or the church. It is likely, however, that this habit was growing in England as a result of the influence of the Scandinavian settlers. There is ample evidence in Norse literature of such habits; John Boswell quotes many examples from the *Islendingabók*

and sagas in which the exposure of children was one of the few traditions not changed by Christianity, and there is critical debate about whether *barna útburð* refers to abandonment or is a euphemism for infanticide.[7] St Olaf directly condemned this habit (*bera út børn*) at the beginning of the eleventh century, although he permitted it for deformed children, if baptized.[8]

This addition in the homily, then, provides a glimpse into the everyday life of the parish and the priest's immediate concerns. The homilist must have been sufficiently worried by the numbers of abortions or infanticides to make it the only addition to his source. These were sins difficult to detect, but nothing could be a more powerful and shocking deterrent than the thought of the child reappearing as accuser at Doomsday.

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[7] Boswell, 285–9; see also Juha Pentikäinen, *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition* (Helsinki, 1968).
[8] Boswell, 292.

RAISING A STINK IN *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*: A NEW READING AT LINE 115*

THE two manuscripts which preserve the only surviving texts of *The Owl and the Nightingale* (British Library, Cotton Caligula A.ix, hereafter C),[1] and Oxford, Jesus College MS 29, part 2, hereafter J) are closely related. They share seven texts in English and three in French.[2] Correct readings in J corresponding

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[1] In the present paper the siglum C refers to the second part of the Cotton manuscript, from fos 195ʳ-261ᵛ, and not to the first part which contains Laȝamon's *Brut* in a different hand.
[2] The shared texts, in the order in which they appear in C, are *Josaphaz*, the *Set Dormanz*, the *Petit Plet*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Long Life* or *Death's Wither-Clench*, *An Orison to Our Lady*, *Doomsday*, *The Latemest Day*, *The Ten Abuses*, the *Lutel Soth Sermun*. The two manuscripts may also have shared *Will and Wit* which survives in C. It is likely to have been in J also and is probably missing because of a lost bifolium.

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tongue spoke in malice or all the evil that the hand of man performed, deeds in this earth, in dark caves.'
[4] Dorothy Bethurum (ed.), *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford, 1957), 273.
[5] See John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York, 1988), 184–227. He mentions the major influence of the canonical decree of 906, compiled by Regino of Prüm. It lists the penalties for infanticide and abandonment or enslavement of children and urges priests to announce publicly that mothers who have illegitimate children should not kill them but leave them at the church door and thus avoid murder and parricide (222–3). The alternative was to donate a child to the church as an oblate.
[6] See P. D. King, *Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1972), 238–40.

to textual errors in C, and vice versa, indicate that neither can have been copied directly from the other. A large number of shared errors has led to the conclusion that the texts represent copies with a common ancestor, X.[3] It is clear, however, that the two scribes employed very different copying strategies.

Breier was the first to observe that the C text of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, although in a single hand, contains two kinds of language.[4] This shift from one usage to another suggests that X's text of *The Owl and the Nightingale* was in two different hands, or at least was itself in two distinct types of language (X1 and X2), which the C scribe faithfully transmitted. The C scribe reveals himself therefore as a literatim copyist by habit or training.[5] The J scribe's text, by contrast, shows little sign of linguistic variation, all the Middle English texts that he copies being in much the same language. The J scribe may be taken to be a translator by habit: a scribe who converts the language of his exemplars, of whatever kind it might be, into his own usage.[6] The habit of literatim copying

naturally also implies textual conservatism. The habit of translation often (though not always) goes with greater freedom in textual adaptation and editing. Editorial freedom is certainly characteristic of the J scribe, as has been acknowledged by all editors of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Atkins observes: 'while the C text . . . supplies the better version, the J text is the result of a freer handling of the original, and thus contains modifications which detract very considerably from its value as a copy of the original text'.[7] Grattan and Sykes point out that 'the editorial activity of the scribe of J (or of a precursor) is manifest on almost every page'.[8] Wells's assessment is more dismissive: 'the scribe [J], while a clear writer, was careless in copying';[9] while Hall considers that 'the scribe of J was more independent [than that of C]' but also refers to the J scribe's 'drastic revision' of his text of *The Poema Morale* and observes that his 'version of the Owl and the Nightingale has suffered, though not to the same extent'.[10]

The contrast between the copying strategies of the scribes of C and J, and the implications of the two policies, are summarized by E. G. Stanley:

Composite Texts in Middle English', *Speculum*, lxiii (1988), 83–100, repr. ibid., pp. 150–69 (152); Michael Benskin and Margaret Laing, 'Translations and *Mischsprachen* in Middle English Manuscripts', in *So meny people longages and tonges: philological essays in Scots and mediaeval English presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh, 1981), 55–106 (56), repeated in the General Introduction to *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, ed. Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, I, 16, § 3.1.3; Jeremy J. Smith, 'Tradition and Innovation in South-West-Midland Middle English', in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge, 1991), 53–65 (54).

[7] Atkins, op. cit., p. xxvii. Neil Cartlidge has pointed out to me (personal communication) that here Atkins is referring to the little words of emphasis, present in C and absent from J. It is impossible to be sure that they are omitted by J rather than added by C. For further discussion on this matter see the forthcoming edition of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, in preparation by Neil Cartlidge for Exeter University Press. Cartlidge also draws attention to an adaptation by the scribe of J not cited by Atkins; on lines 1526–7, J's *noht* and *riche*, where C correctly has *no riht* and *riȝte*, makes a travesty of the Owl's meaning.

[8] J. H. G. Grattan and G. F. H. Sykes (eds.), *The Owl and the Nightingale*, EETS e.s. 119 (1935), p. xvi.

[9] J. E. Wells (ed.), *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Boston, Mass. and London, 1907), p. xiii.

[10] J. Hall, *Selections from Early Middle English: 1130–1250*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1920), II, 553 and 293.

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[3] Both C and J are certainly descended from X, but there is evidence from a third surviving version of *Le Petit Plet* of a copy intermediary between X and J, for that text at least. See Brian S. Merilees (ed.), *Le Petit Plet*, Anglo-Norman Text Society 20 (1970), pp. xvi–xvii. The two versions of *The Owl and the Nightingale* provide no evidence for the existence of any copy between X and J, and it may well be that for this text X was the proximate exemplar for both surviving copies. For simplicity's sake, that will be assumed here. For a useful summary of the evidence, with references, see Neil Cartlidge, 'The Date of *The Owl and the Nightingale*', *Medium Ævum*, lxv (1996), 230–47 (233–4, and notes).

[4] The first language type (C1) runs from lines 1–900 and 961–1174; the second type (C2) runs from lines 901–960 and 1175–1794 (end). See W. Breier, *'Eule und Nachtigall': eine Untersuchung der Überlieferung und der Sprache, der örtlichen und der zeitlichen Entstehung des me. Gedichts*, Studien zur englischen Philologie, xxxix (Halle, 1910), 49–51; and cf. J. W. H. Atkins (ed.), *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Cambridge, 1922; repr. New York, 1971), pp. xxix–xxxi, where lines 901 and 1175–1183 are assigned (I think wrongly) to C1.

[5] For a study of orthographic variation and vestigial traces of the language(s) of X in C's texts, as a result of the scribe's copying practice, see Neil Cartlidge, 'Orthographical Variation in the Middle English Lyrics of BL MS Cotton Caligula A.ix', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, xcviii (1997), 253–9.

[6] For the background to the distinction between scribal copying practices, see Angus McIntosh, 'Word Geography in the Lexicography of Middle English', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, ccxi (1973), 55–66, repr. in *Middle English Dialectology: essays on some principles and problems*, ed. Margaret Laing (Aberdeen, 1989), 86–97 (92); Margaret Laing, 'Dialectal Analysis and Linguistically

... the scribe of C seems the more conservative and faithful. . . . The scribe of J is more thoughtful; but in scribes thinking may be as dangerous as not thinking. A scribe copying mechanically (like the C scribe) will often blunder, but he will also often copy what cannot have made sense to him, so that the original sense may be recovered. A thoughtful scribe (like the J scribe), wishing to write sense, will regularise and modernise, and at times even 'emend' what he thinks is nonsense in his exemplar, thus perhaps weakening the sense of the original which he failed to understand, and often wiping out, beyond hope of recovery, such traces of the original good sense as may have existed still in his exemplar.[11]

The corollary to this observation is that where the C and J texts substantively differ, the C text, however garbled, is likely to be closer to what was in X, and by implication closer to the original. When the two texts differ and J's reading is accepted as 'better' our suspicions should be aroused.[12] One such place is at lines 115–16 of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Here the C text reads:

> Hit pas idon ov aloþ wiste
> Segge me ʒif ʒe hit þiste

The Jesus text has:

> Hit wes i don eu a loþe custe
> Seggeþ me if ye hit wiste.

These two lines form part of the nightingale's criticism of the owl and her kind as being dirty and foul by nature. She invokes the fable of the hawk (or falcon) and the owl which relates (in the nightingale's version) how an owl secretly laid an egg in the falcon's nest. When the eggs

hatched the falcon fed all the nestlings. But she noticed that the nest had been fouled while she was away and became very angry with the nestlings and shouted at them, 'Tell me who has done this to you. It was never in your nature to do it.' (Then follow the two lines quoted above, also spoken by the falcon.) The baby falcons replied that it was their brother with the big head who did it. The story ends badly for the baby owl who was then thrown out of the nest by the falcon, broke his neck and was torn to pieces by magpies and crows.

Editors have been unanimous in emending C's *wiste* in line 115 to J's *custe*, some also add the dative ending *-e* to *loþ*. J's version might be translated: 'It was done to you in a loathsome manner. Tell me if you saw it.'[13] The assumption has been that here J preserves the text of X more accurately than C does. The fact that *custe:wiste* is not an exact rhyme is explained either by postulating that the original had *custe:wuste*,[14] or by accepting that the poet tolerated rhymes on [i] and [u].[15] The C scribe's 'error' is usually accounted for by assuming that his eye fell on *wiste* in the line below.[16] Only Grattan and Sykes suggest that C's *wi* was miscopied from a badly made *ecu.*[17] It is hard to imagine what sort of orthographical botch of *ecu* could have been read as *wi*, but Grattan and Sykes's edition has the unusual merit of distinguishing scribal *w* from wynn. The C scribe uses *w* for the first *wiste* and *þ* for the second. They do not say so, but perhaps the reason why Grattan and Sykes do not subscribe to the eye-slipping theory is that since X must have had either *w* or *þ* in line 116, it is surprising that the C scribe did not notice his mistake when he came to writing his second version with a different littera.

With our knowledge of the differing copying practices of the scribes of J and C, is it possible to read C's text without emendation in a way that makes sense? I think the answer is yes. All three types of language preserved in *The Owl*

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[11] E. G. Stanley (ed.), *The Owl and the Nightingale* (London and Edinburgh, 1960; re-issued Manchester, 1972; repr. 1981), 6.

[12] This is not to deny that the C scribe sometimes made mistakes where the J scribe read correctly. I am talking about places (as Stanley's observation also implies) where the text of X was difficult or unclear. In these cases the J scribe will seek to 'improve' the text so that it makes sense. Literatim copyists, such as the C scribe, also want their text to make sense. As long as they themselves understand it, they will feel no necessity to change it. But even if a literatim copyist does *not* understand what is in his exemplar, he is more likely, rather than emending it, to replicate exactly what he (thinks) he sees in front of him rather as we might trace as closely as we can an illegible name or address in the hope that the postman may be able to make sense of it even if we cannot.

[13] This seems a more natural translation than 'Tell me if you knew (anything about) it'. See *OED wite* v² sense 3.

[14] Wells, op. cit., 155 and compare lines 9–10 which do rhyme *custe:wuste*, and lines 1397–8 *luste:custe.*

[15] Atkins, op. cit., 12, note to line 116 where he cites for comparison *wite:utschute* (lines 1467–8) and *ofligge:bugge* (lines 1505–6).

[16] Atkins, op. cit., 12, note to line 115.

[17] Grattan and Sykes, op. cit., 4, note to line 115.

and the Nightingale – J, C1, and C2 – display evidence of the voicing of initial [f] in words of native origin.[18] In common with the usage of many scribes writing early Middle English, the language of the C text, especially that of C1, also occasionally shows orthographic equivalence of the symbols *w*, *v*, *u*, and *p*, which may be used interchangeably for [w], [v], and [u].[19]

[18] It is usually assumed that South and South-West Midland dialects of this period had voicing of the initial fricatives [s] and perhaps also [θ] as well as [f]. The voicing is only apparent in the C and J scribes' usages, however, in the variation of *u*- and *v*- spellings with *f*- spellings in e.g. *vaire*, *vayre* 'fair', *viʒte*, *uaʒt* 'fight', 'fought', *uolde*, *volde* 'fold', *uor*, *vor* 'for', *urom*, *vrom* 'from'. For voicing of initial fricatives in Middle English see: W. H. Bennett, 'The Southern English Development of Germanic Initial [f s þ]', *Language*, xxxi (1935), 367–71, repr. in R. Lass (ed.), *Approaches to English Historical Linguistics* (New York, 1969), 349–68; H. Kurath, 'The Loss of Long Consonants and the Rise of Voiced Fricatives in Middle English', *Language*, xxxii (1956), 435–45, repr. Lass, op. cit., 142–53; J. Sledd, 'Some Questions of English Phonology', *Language*, xxxiv (1958), 252–8; M. L. Samuels, 'Kent and the Low Countries: Some Linguistic Evidence', in A. J. Aitken *et al.* (eds.), *Edinburgh Studies in English and Scots* (London, 1971), 3–19; J. Fisiak, 'The Voicing of Initial Fricatives in Middle English', *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, xvii (1984), 3–16, repr. in W. Viereck (ed.), *Focus on: England and Wales, Varieties of English around the World*, 4 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1985), 5–28; P. Poussa, 'A Note on the Voicing of Initial Fricatives' in R. Eaton *et al.* (eds.), *Papers from the 4th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics* (Amsterdam, 1985), 235–52; G. Kristensson, 'On Voicing of Initial Fricatives in Middle English', *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, xix (1986), 3–10, and 'Voicing of Initial Fricatives Revisited', in A. R. Rumble and A. D. Mills (eds.), *Names, Places and People: An Onomastic Miscellany in Memory of John McNeal Dodgson* (Stamford, 1997), 186–94; H. Voitl, 'The History of Voicing of Initial Fricatives in Southern England: a Case of Conflict between Regional and Social Dialect', in J. Fisiak (ed.), *Historical Dialectology: Regional and Social* (Berlin, 1988), 565–600; K. Dietz, 'Die südaltenglische Sonorisierung Anlautender Spiranten', *Anglia*, cviii (1990), 292–313; R. Lass, 'Old English Fricative Voicing Unvisited', *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* xxxv–xxxvii (1991–3), 3–45; Hans F. Neilsen, 'On the Origin and Spread of Initial Voiced Fricatives and the Phonemic Split of Fricatives in English and Dutch', in Margaret Laing and Keith Williamson (eds.), *Speaking in our Tongues: Medieval Dialectology and Related Disciplines* (Cambridge, 1994), 19–30.

[19] C's text, which has usual wynn, occasional *w*, for [w], has *u* for [w] in e.g.: *andsuare* 'answer' 149, *uel* 'well' 537, *uise* 'wise' 961, *uere* 'were' 1306, *ueneð* 1554; and *v* for [w] in e.g.: *sval* 'swelled' 7; *vel* 'well' 95, *svikelhede*, *svikeldom*, *svikedom* 'treachery' 162, 163, 167. For more examples and the contrast in usage between C1 and C2 see John Scahill, 'A Neglected Sound-Change in Early Middle English', *English Studies*, lxxviii (1997), 1–7, at p. 2 and fn. 4. Scahill has amassed some useful information on spellings in C and J, but the data in no way support his hypothesis for a sound-change

The litteral substitution which is important for the reading in question is *w* or *p* for [v] from Old English initial 'f'.

The C scribe has *w* for [v] (from earlier 'f') four times in the word 'foul' from OE *fūl*: *wole* 8; *wl* 31, 236; *wle* 35.[20] It is evident that, at these points in the running text, spellings with initial *w* appeared in X because J, who 'translates' to the form *ful* at lines 31 and 236, also has *wle* at line 35 and at line 8 reads the word in X as a form of 'evil' and writes *vuele*.[21] C has *p* for [v] from Old English 'f' at line 17 in the word *paste*: *In ore paste picke hegge*. In spite of J's evidence, where

involving the fricativization of [w] to [v] after 's' and 't'. *su-/sv-* and *tu-/tv-* are orthographically and systematically quite unexceptionable spellings for [sw] and [tw] in Middle English. The origin of the use of *u*, *uu*, *v*, *vv*, and *w* as equivalents of the Old English rune-derived wynn comes from Anglo-Latin orthographical practice not, as so often asserted, from French (or even Anglo-Norman) influence, as shown by Michael Benskin, 'The Letters ⟨þ⟩ and ⟨y⟩ in Later Middle English, and Some Related Matters', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vii (1982), 13–20 (19–20), cf. also Richard Coates, 'On an Early Date for Old English *i*-mutation', in *Linguistic and Stylistic Studies in Medieval English*, ed. A. Crépin, Publications de l'association des médiévistes anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur 10 (Amiens, 1984), 25–37 (32 and 35, fn. 4). That *w* and *p* may in their turn be used in [u] and [v] contexts is a logical extension of the practice in such writing systems. Writing systems which include the possibility that two symbols may be written for one sound, e.g. *uu/vv* for [w], often include the corollary that one symbol may be written for two, e.g. *w* or *p* for [wu] or [wi] (or *y* for [ði]). For further discussion and some fascinating examples of the orthographical phenomenon that two letters may be written for one and vice versa (which may also extend to triplets) see Michael Benskin, 'On the Ignorance of Anglo-Norman Scribes', forthcoming. See also Margaret Laing, 'A Fourteenth-century Sermon on the Number Seven in Merton College, Oxford, MS 248', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, xcviii (1997), 99–134 (esp. p. 103 and fns 22 and 23) and 'Confusion *wrs* Confounded: Litteral Substitution Sets in Early Middle English Writing Systems', forthcoming.

[20] C's other spellings for 'foul' are *fule* 20x, *ful* 3x, *fulne* once, and *fole* once (line 104). Here the spellings imply [fuː] or perhaps [vuː] with the historical spelling lagging behind the phonetic reality. The *w*-spellings presumably imply [vuː].

[21] Given the form *fole* (which also appears for 'foul' once in each of C's texts *Death's Wither-Clench* and *The Latemest Day*) and the implausibility of *wole* with medial 'o' as a spelling for 'evil' even if *w* were read as *vv* representing [uv], C's *wole* is here taken to represent 'foul'. The C scribe's spellings for 'evil' in *The Owl and the Nightingale* are *uvele* 4x, *uuele* 2x, *uuel* once, and *Vuel* once. There are no examples of the word in any of the other texts in his hand. The scribe of X may here, however, have intended the word 'evil'. A form such as *vvele* with a rounded *o*-like first *e* could possibly have misled the C scribe into reading it as a form for 'foul'.

the scribe again converts (in accordance with his own system) what must have been a spelling with *p/w* in X to *vaste*, meaning 'dense, impenetrable' from OE *fæst*, most editors of *The Owl and the Nightingale* assume C's reading implies a different word. They suppose it to be from OFr *wast* meaning 'solitary, deserted', but for the most part prefer 'J's reading'. Only Hall correctly takes C's reading simply as a variant spelling for the adjective *vaste* < *fæst*.[22] Both C and J have one other clear example of *w* for [v]: C *iwrne*, J *iwurne* line 637, which is from the Old English adverb *gefyrn*, 'formerly, long ago' and comes in the phrase *of olde iw(u)rne* 'from the olden days'.[23]

We can assume therefore that the text of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in X had occasional instances of *w/p* for [v]. Judging from their infrequent occurrence, such spellings are unlikely to have formed part of the spontaneous usage of either the C scribe or the J scribe.[24] The use of *w/p* for [v] was, however, quite widespread in other orthographies in the South-West Midlands at this date.[25] The spellings in X were, as we have seen, adopted by the scribe of C, who was either familiar with the usage, and saw no reason to change it or, if not, simply played safe in his instincts towards literatim copying. The scribe of J must have had some familiarity with the usage since he three times accurately converts the *w/p*-spellings to his own preferred *f-* or *v*-spellings.

[22] Breier assumes it is from the adverb *faste*, qualifying *picke*: 'very thick'.

[23] Note that these spellings, which are not mentioned by Scahill (op. cit., fn. 19 above) underline the equivalence of *w* and *u/v* as orthographic realizations of both [v] and [w].

[24] Whatever may have been the linguistic provenance of the original poem, it is evident that the languages of the surviving copies belong in the South-West Midlands. The language of J has been provisionally placed in East Herefordshire, that of C1 probably belongs in South Worcestershire, and C2 somewhat further north and west.

[25] For some easily accessible examples see the poems in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 86 (*Facsimile of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86*, with an introduction by Judith Tschann and M. B. Parkes, EETS, s.s. 16 (1996) and editions cited there and in Margaret Laing, *Catalogue of Sources for a Linguistic Atlas of Early Medieval English* (Cambridge, 1993), 129–30, and the poems written by scribe A in Cambridge, Trinity College B.14.39 (323) and, to a lesser extent, those written by scribe D (K. Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im englischen Hochmittelalter: Untersuchung und Edition der Handschrift B.14.39 des Trinity College in Cambridge* (München, 1973); the scribes correspond respectively to Reichl's scribes D and E).

The occasions where he fails to convert the text may indicate unusual lapses by the scribe into literatim copying mode, or simply that he accepted the forms as part of his passive repertoire of possible spellings.

It follows then that C's *wiste* in line 115 may be read as a variant spelling for [vist] from earlier **fist*. There is a Middle English word *fīst* which fits the context of the poem admirably and has a fine Germanic and Indo-European pedigree. It means 'a fart' or 'a stink': see *MED* under *fīst* n. (2) and cf. the entries under *fīsten* v., *fīsting* ger., *fīs(e* n. and *fesilen* v; also *OED* under *Fist* (feist), *sb.*[2], first sense and cf. the entries under *Fist*, v.[2], *Fise*, sb. first sense, *Foist*, v.[3] and *Fizzle*, sb. and v. To give the meaning of ME *fīst* simply as 'fart' is not, however, quite accurate. It was a different word from *fert* or *fart* which denoted 'a noisy breaking of wind'. *Fist* rather meant 'a quiet, low sounding or silent windy escape backwards'.[26] This distinction is preserved in Modern German *Furz* and *furzen* 'fart' as against *Fist* and *fisten* which are 'leise' – quiet or gentle. The two words continue separate IE roots (**perd-* and **pezd-*) first distinguished by Holger Pedersen and fully discussed by Bernhard Forssman[27] who links *fist* with Gr πέζισ 'puff-ball' and traces the word back via PGmc **fistiz* to PIE **pezd-i-*. He summarizes (p. 56) the surviving Germanic evidence as follows:

OIcel *físa* (str. vb) 'fisten' ('to fart quietly or silently');

OE *fīsting* f. 'das Fisten' ('the act of quiet or silent farting') (quantity of the first *i* not determinable); ME and PE *fīst* 'Fist' ('a quiet or silent fart') (*i* long or short);

MHG *vist*, *vīst*, *veist* m. 'Fist'; *vīsten* (str. or wk vb) *visten*, *veisten* (wk vb) 'fisten'; *vīsen* (str. vb?) 'fisten';

[26] Though some later citations in *OED* indicate that it later became synonymous with 'fart'.

[27] Holger Pedersen, 'Die Nasalpräsentia und der slavische Akzent', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* (1905 [1902–3]), 10-421 at pp. 418–419 where Pederson engagingly writes: 'Ein von mir gehörtes irisches Sprichwort, das den *bruim (braim*) [loud fart] als ehrlich, den *tufōg* [quiet fart] als einen Verräter bezeichnet, ist vielleicht für die Weltlitteratur verloren gegangen, da ich es nicht aufgezeichnet habe.' Bernhard Forssman, 'Altgriechisch πέζισ und deutsch Fist', *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft*, xxix (1972), 47–70. I am grateful to Patrick V. Stiles for drawing my attention to these articles.

MLG *vist* m. 'Fist'; *visten* (wk vb) 'fisten' (quantity of the *i* not determinable, PLG in some cases *ī*);

MDu *veest*, *vijst* n. 'Fist'; *veesten*, *vijsten* (wk vb) 'fisten'.

The C text's *wiste* (for [vist] from OE *fist) must have a short vowel to rhyme with *piste*, the 2nd pers. pl. pret. of *witen*.[28] The evidence that such a word, both in substantival and verbal variants, was current (if not, understandably, frequently used in writing) in England in the mid to late thirteenth century is reasonably strong. OE *fistung* (from which are deduced the existence of an Old English verb *fistan and perhaps also a noun *fist) appears in two Latin–Old English glossaries of the tenth–eleventh centuries. The first, written on the margins of fos 3–4 of Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum 47 (Salle, iii 68) and fos 2ᵛ–21ᵛ of London, British Library, Additional 32246,[29] has *fesiculatio* ∼ *fisting*, coming suggestively between *pedatio* ∼ *feorting* and *sibilatio* ∼ *hwistling*.[30] The second, London, British Library, Harley 3376[31] also has *fesiculatio.fisting*. Bosworth–Toller suggests that *fesiculatio* should be read as *fistulatio*, presumably meaning 'blowing' from *fistula*, 'a pipe'. Oliphant (p. 181, n.) conjectures more plausibly

that 'behind it may lie vesicule "bladder full of air"'.

The next citations of the word are from much later, the earliest being from the *Promptorium Parvulorum*. This is an English–Latin dictionary, compiled from a number of earlier and contemporary Latin Nominalia supposedly by Galfridus Grammaticus. It survives in six different manuscripts (not all complete) one of which, the Winchester MS, says that Galfridus was a friar of King's Lynn, Norfolk and that the work was compiled in 1440.[32] *Promptorium Parvulorum* records (Way, I, 163): 'FYYST, stynk. *Lirida*. FYISTYN. *Cacco, lirido*. FYYSTYNGE. *Liridacio*.'[33] These entries are supported by a slightly later, shorter English–Latin dictionary *Catholicon Anglicum* of the last quarter of the fifteenth century. This cites 'a Fiste; *lirida*'.[34] Somewhat later English–French dictionaries confirm the continued use of the English word. John Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement de la langue francoye* of 1530 has 'Fyest with the arse, *uesse*', and 'I fyest, I stynke. *Je vesse*. Beware nowe thou fysthe nat, for thou shalte smell sower than.'[35] Randle Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* of 1611 cites '*Vesse*. A fyste. *Vesseur*. A fyster, a stinking fellow. *Vessir*. To fyste, to let a fyste'.[36] There is no reason to suppose that the word *fist* was not current in the language between its citations in glossaries of the eleventh and of the fifteenth centuries.

When we return to the couplet in the C text of the *Owl and the Nightingale*, it becomes clear that we now have a reading which entirely fits the subject matter and mood of the poem and moreover accounts for the lack of dative 'e'

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[28] In fact Old English words in -*ist* greatly outnumber those in -*īst*: e.g. *cist* (cf. *kist*), *gist* 'yeast', *list*, *mist*, *pistol*, *pistel*, *twist*, *hwistlian*, *wist* 'substance'; *wrist* against e.g. *līste* and *ōrīste*. In spite of -*st* not supposedly being a shortening environment, both of these words had Middle English variants with short *i* (*The Owl and the Nightingale* rhymes *priste* with *liste* (<OE *līst*) at lines 171–2 and 757–8), as do the French borrowings *giste* 'joist' and *triste* 'tryst, shooting station'. Even the word 'Christ' seems sometimes to have short *i* in Middle English: see the rhymes *wangeliste/cristelhiwiste* from Arundel 248 in Carleton Brown (ed.), *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1932), no. 45 lines 33–5.

[29] See N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), no. 2.

[30] See L. Kindschi, 'The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus 32 and British Museum MS Additional 32,246', unpublished doctoral dissertation (Stanford, 1955). A combination of this glossary and another Latin-Old English glossary from the same manuscripts (wrongly labelled Ælfric's Glossary) is printed by T. Wright and R. P. Wülcker, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (London, 1884), 104–91 (162.43), from a transcript made for Junius (Bodleian Library, Junius 71).

[31] See Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 240. Edited: R. T. Oliphant, *The Harley Latin Old English Glossary* (The Hague and Paris, 1966), F252; also printed Wright-Wülcker, 192–247 (237.28).

[32] *Promptorium Parvulorum* was edited from London, BL Harley 221 by A. Way, 3 vols, Camden Society 25, 54, 89 (1843, 1851, 1865) and from the Winchester MS by A. L. Mayhew, EETS, e.s. 102 (1908). See also the facsimile of Pynson's 1499 edition, Scolar Press Facsimile, 108 (1968).

[33] The Winchester MS agrees with the Harley MS but has *lurida*, *luridacio* and Mayhew (162 and 181) prints the Latin nominal declensions and genders and the verbal conjugations. It is not clear whether these also appear in the Harley MS or whether they have been omitted by Way. Cf. the related *fise* cited from a Latin-English nominale printed by Wright-Wülcker (679): *Hec lirida*, a fyse.

[34] See Sidney J. H. Herrtage, *Catholicon Anglicum*, Camden Society, n.s. 30 (1882), 132 and fn. 4.

[35] See Scolar Press Facsimiles, 190 (1969).

[36] See Scolar Press Facsimiles, 82 (1968).

ending in *loþ*. We know that the baby owl has fouled the falcon's nest and that the falcon is angry with the nestlings. *Hit pas idon ov alop wiste* may now be read, with comic litotes, 'A disgusting fart was done to you' or perhaps 'a foul stink was done to you'.[37]

But I think we may be able to do even better than this. The context requires that the nest be fouled with something rather more than a smell, however unpleasant. It is apparent that ME *fist* can, and usually does, mean a quiet emission of air from the back end. But I think it is possible that it could sometimes imply the quiet emission of something more than air. Here one has, so to speak, to tread delicately. And this, of course, is also the problem with the sources: the word is only rarely used and when it and its cognates appear in texts other than dictionaries, the company they keep certainly gives an idea of their meaning, but often simply implies general terms of abuse. The J scribe himself may have emended line 115 because he did not know the word *fist* and sought, as usual, to make sense of the text. But it is perhaps more likely that a scribe who has been labelled 'the moralizing reviser'[38] edited out a blatant vulgarism in favour of a blander but less uncomfortable reading.

To establish a further possible sense for ME *fist* and *fisten* we must look more closely at the definitions given in *Promptorium Parvulorum*.

[37] The pleonastic construction, here dictated by the exigencies of metre and rhyme, is not uncommon in Middle English. For a similar example, with 'it' as grammatical object emphasizing a following quotation, see *The Owl and The Nightingale* lines 942–3: 'For hit seide þe king alfred / Sele endeð þel þe loþe.' For other Middle English examples with 'it' accompanying the subject, see *MED hit* pron., sense 6 (a), especially *Peterb. Chron.* an. 656: 'Ðancod wurð hit þon hæge Ælmihti God, þis wurðscipe þet her is gedon'; *Cursor* 873: 'Bot now it es þis appell etten'; *KAlex.* 4147: 'Jt shal be wel dere abouȝth, þe tol þat was in Grece souȝth'. Cf. also *OED it* pron. sense 4 (c) and for further examples. F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*, I (Leiden, 1970), 48–9, §62–f. The closest parallel that I can find to the syntax pleonastic *hit* + verb phrase + indirect object + subject phrase in apposition to *hit*, all in a passive construction, is in *The 'Gest Hystoriale' of the Destruction of Troy*, ed. G. A. Panton and D. Donaldson, EETS, o.s. 39 (1869), 102, line 3137: '*Hit is knowen to you kendly þe cause of our iourney.*' Cf. also *The Romance of Emaré*, ed. E. Rickert, EETS, e.s. 99 (1908), 2, lines 55–6: '*The chyld, þat was fayr* and *gent, To a lady was hyt sente*'.

[38] By Arngart in the context of J's text of *The Proverbs of Alfred*. See O. Arngart, *The Proverbs of Alfred*, II (Lund, 1955), 135.

For the noun *fyyst*, the compiler unusually gives an English equivalent, 'stynk' before citing Latin *lurida* (or its variant *lirida*), a first declension feminine noun. The entries under 'luridus ~a' and 'luridatio' in *The Dictionary of Latin from British Sources*,[39] refer us back to *Promptorium Parvulorum, Catholicon Anglicum* and the Nominale in Wright-Wülcker with the familiar definitions, 'breaking wind', 'foul smell', 'stink', and 'fart'. The *Promptorium Parvulorum* entry for the verb is, however, far more suggestive: 'FYISTYN. *Cacco, lirido*'. *Cacco*, the first definition given, is Latin 'caco, cacare' and means 'to defecate', and by transferred usage also 'to defile'. The Middle English verb *cakken* with the same meaning may also refer to fouling one's breeches (see *MED cakken* v.). The *Promptorium Parvulorum* entry for *cakken* is here of great interest: 'CAKKYN, or fyystyn. Caco' (Way, I, 58). *Fyystyn* is given as the equivalent of *cakkyn* and also defined by 'caco' 'to defecate or defile'. It is worth recording that the noun 'stink' given in *Promptorium Parvulorum* as equivalent to *fyyst* can in Middle English mean not only a bad smell, but also the source of the smell. See *MED stink* n. sense 1. (a) '. . . also, that which emits an offensive odor: dung, muck, foul water, etc.'. The verb 'lurido, ~are' does not seem to have been recorded as such in classical Latin, but Lewis and Short has an entry, which presumably corresponds to the past participle of the first conjugation verb: 'lūridātus, ~a ~um adj. [luridus] besmeared, defiled' with a reference to Tertullianus Marc. bk. 4, ch. 8. The usage here turns out to be figurative: 'Qui retro luridati delinquentiae maculis et nigrati ignorantiae tenebris' but it is clearly referring to something more substantial than wind.[40] The only citation in Lewis and Short of the verb 'caco' quotes from Phaedrus 4.17, 25: 'Canes odorem mixtum cum merdis cacant'. The mixture of bad smell and excrement and the notion of fouling or besmearing seem to indicate that ME *fist* and *fisten* probably, like *cakken*, could carry the additional implication of involuntary

[39] Ed. D. R. Howlett *et al.* Fascicle 5 I-J-K-L (Oxford, 1997).

[40] Cf. also the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* under 'lurdus' a quotation from Felix of Crowland's *Life of St Guthlac*: 'lurido [gl.: i.e. contaminato vel sordido] vultu.'

or loose defecation. Modern English seems not to have a word to describe the resultant, specifically loose, object[41] though it is obvious that such an offering is precisely what is habitually produced by birds.

This theory gains further support from comparison with another version of the fable of the hawk and the owl: that told by Marie de France (no. 79). The fable is summarized by Stanley.[42] The tale is slightly different from that in C and J. In this version, the hawk and the owl agreed to share the nest and to hatch out their eggs and bring up their chicks together. When the hawk challenged the nestlings for fouling the nest they replied that it was her own fault and gave the reason. Here Stanley, treading delicately, says: 'The next two lines are corrupt, and have not been solved satisfactorily.' Then the hawk acknowledged that owls are just like that and although she can hatch them out she cannot change their nature. It is true that at this point in the text there are a number of different readings in the surviving manuscripts of the Marie de France fables. The oldest manuscript, York Minster XVI, K. 12 (Y), and the manuscript considered the best, British Library, Harley 978 (A), together with the other two manuscripts most closely related (the four together forming the α group)[43] and also Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 1593 (N) read:

[41] Not at least in general use, though I am told by an anonymous but reliable informant that the playground usage is 'a wet fart'. Diarrhoea and all its various slang synonyms (trots, runs, squits, skitters, etc.) describe the condition rather than the object produced. There is another word in Middle English (also now obsolete except in veterinary use): *lask* derived from Latin *laxare* via ONFr *lasquer*. See Cotgrave, op. cit.: 'Foire: f. Squirt, thinne dung; a laske. Foirer: To squirt, to shite thinne, as in a laske; also to besquirt, or beray with squirting'. See also *OED Lask* v. which quotes from Thomas Dekker, *The Owles Almanack* (1618), 43: 'Then will they untrusse a hoope and laske like a squirt'. By the late fifteenth century two further French loans were current, specifically used in falconry: (*a*) 'mute' from OF *muetir*, meaning (of a hawk) 'to void excrement' and the associated noun meaning 'faeces or excrement of a hawk' (see *MED mūten* v. *mūte* n. (2)); and (*b*) 'slice' from OF *esclicier*, meaning to spurt, or (of a hawk) to mute or defecate with projectile force (see *MED sclīsen* v.). I am grateful to Roger Lass for information about muting and the projectile nature of raptors' and owls' faecal emissions.

[42] *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 159. For summaries of other versions of the owl (buzzard) and falcon (hawk) fables, see Atkins, op. cit., 196–9.

[43] For a reconstruction of the stemma of the surviving manuscripts see R. Warnke, *Marie de France: Die Fabeln*, Bibliotheca Normannica 6 (1898), p. xliii.

Cil li respundirent aprés
qu'il nes en deit mie blasmer,
lui meïsmes deit enculper:
kar lur deriere unt eü frere
pur ceo est dreiz qu'en sun ni paire

This may be translated: 'They then replied that she ought not to blame them but should blame herself [problem line] and it is natural that it would appear in her nest'. The problem line makes no sense at all as it stands and there is obviously some textual corruption. The presence of the word *frere* 'brother' could possibly be the vestige of a now irrecoverable sentence in which the nestlings tried to blame their brothers – presumably the baby owls. Variant readings in some of the surviving manuscripts make this idea explicit,[44] and the Latin version of the fable by Romulus has 'Nobis hoc iniuste imputatur, cum frater noster ille cum magno capite solus hoc fecerit' which would seem to support it.[45] But the version of the fable in *The Owl and the Nightingale* has the reference to the nestlings' big headed brother two lines later:

Ipis hit pas ure oȝer broþer
þe ȝond þat haued þat grete heued

and something else is required at the earlier point in its text. One of the manuscripts of Marie de France's fables, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 19152 (S) reads 'quant lor derriere ont eu foire' – 'when their backsides had diarrhoea'.[46] Most editors (including Warnke) agree that S preserves the correct reading in 'foire' and, though accepting A or Y as a base text, make no difficulty about emending 'frere' accordingly. The emendation certainly makes much better grammatical and contextual sense. It seems that the author of *The Owl and the Nightingale* knew both French and Latin traditions and has here combined them.

We are left only with the minor problem of how to render the line for a more or less squeamish modern readership. As both *fist* in the required sense and *lask* are no longer current, I would venture 'A disgusting squirt [or squit] was done to you'. But others with a

[44] *Die Fabeln*, ed. Warnke, 265: 'H kar ort derriere ont lor fals frere, V kar chauoient fait lor frere, I kar ce ot fait faire leur frere.' Other variants are along the lines of: it was their nature to do it (faire).

[45] Ed. L. Hervieux, *Les fabulistes latins*, 2nd edn, 5 vols (Paris, 1893–9), II, 641. I am grateful to Neil Cartlidge for tracking down this reference for me.

[46] Cf. also BN fr. 14971 (R): 'que li huan ont en fere.'

wider vocabulary or who are more willing to plunge deeper into the *cloaca maxima* of modern slang may have better suggestions.

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FURTHER BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON ROBERT MANNYNG OF BRUNNE

MATTHEW SULLIVAN in his article in *Notes and Queries* (September 1994)[1] has claimed incorrectly, that references to Robert Mannyng of Brunne may be found in a number of public records. A closer examination of these records would indicate that these sources refer to more than one individual of the same name. Until recently the only known details regarding Robert Mannyng are those that can be gleaned from his two poems namely, *Handlyng Synne* and the *Story of England*.

His name appears in the Prologue to *Handlyng Synne*. After a passage describing the author's intentions, is found (lines 57–62):

> To alle crystyn men vndir sunne,
> And to gode men of Brunne,
> And speciali, alle be name,
> þe felaushepe of Symprynghame,
> Roberd of Brunne gretesþ ʒow
> In al godenesse þat may to þrow.

Here he introduces himself as Robert of Brunne and that the poem is addressed to 'all the good men of Bourne' and the fellowship of Sempringham.

In lines 63–76 he tells us that he lived at Sempringham Priory for fifteen years in the time of Prior John of Camelton, who was dead at the time of writing the prologue of *Handlyng Synne*, and also of Prior John of Clinton. It has been argued by Stephen A. Sullivan[2] that the prologue could not have been started before 1317 and may have been written as late as 1330. Hence Robert's fifteen-year stay at Sempringham must have been during this period. At no time does he say that he was a canon of the order, all he tells us is that he lived at the Priory.

In his prologue to *The Story of England*

(lines 139–44) Robert Mannyng gives us a further detail about his life. Here he tells us that he resided at Sixhills Priory in the time of Edward III where he wrote the whole story, that is, sometime after 1327. At the end of *The Story of England* he tells us that he completed the work in 1338. From this it must be assumed that he lived at Sixhills from some time after 1327 up until 1338. In lines 139–44 he mentions a Robert de Malton who may have been Prior of Sixhills at the time that Robert was resident there. The list of the Priors of Sixhills are very scanty especially during this period. So far I have not been able to confirm whether Robert de Malton was a Prior of Sixhills.

Bishop Oliver Suttons Register[3] records that a Robert de Brunne was ordained Sub-Deacon, Deacon, and Priest between 1294 and 1295. These entries describe him as the son of Thomas de Brunne of Lincoln. The ordinations were supported by the Cistercian Abbey of Revesby in Lincolnshire since none of the ordinations were beneficed.

It had been laid down by the Council of Chalcedon[4] that no Bishop was to ordain anyone unless he were prepared to keep him at his own expense, the ordinand has visible means of support, or a title by which he could be maintained until he found employment. Such a title could be provided in one of three ways:

1. Membership of a religious order.
2. Presentation to a living as a Rector.
3. The possession of private means.

The ordinations tell us that the ordinations were to the title of Revesby Abbey. Taking each of the categories above, there is no evidence to suggest that he was a member of the Gilbertine Order. An examination of the Institution lists in the Bishops of Lincoln Registers for the appropriate period show no evidence of an institution to a parish within the Lincoln Diocese. As regards him having private means there is no evidence to suggest he had private means or not.

I have stated that there is no evidence that he was a member of the Gilbertine Order, that is, a canon. The Master of the Gilbertine

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[1] M. Sullivan, 'Biographical Notes on Robert Mannyng of Brunne and Peter Idley, the Adaptor of Robert Mannyng's Handlyng Synne', *N&Q*, ccxxxix (1994), 302–4.

[2] S. A. Sullivan, 'Handlyng Synne in its Tradition', Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge (1978), 13.

[3] *The Rolls and Registers of Bishop Oliver Sutton 1280–1299*, Lincoln Record Society, lxix, 60, 63, 71.

[4] F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, *Councils and Synods Part I 1205–1265* (Oxford, 1964), 123.