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Morgan Dickson

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Nightingales in Medieval Text and Sound: Liminality and Evasion

Le chant du rossignol dans les textes médiévaux : liminalité et évasion

Morgan Dickson

1 Nightingales appear more frequently than other birds in medieval literary texts (Pfeffer 89), yet this textual abundance contrasts with the bird's scarcity in its natural setting: the nightingale is a migratory creature who is only present and vocal for a brief season in certain areas (Cramp 627-631). An unprepossessing small, brown creature, the nightingale's interest for authors is closely linked to its voice, which takes on an importance that is inversely proportional to the creature's diminutive size and unremarkable plumage. Two recent books have looked at the importance of birds in medieval texts, emphasising both the centrality of birds' vocal capacities and the place of birds as music-makers in an anthropocentric model. Michael Warren looks at how the voices of birds had to be carefully distinguished from human speech in order to differentiate the two: "birds' voices only *seem* like human voices, but do not actually have the same rational, divinely-gifted properties" (Warren 17).[1] While the voice—human and avian—is related to the spirit, rising aloft into the air, birds also have a privileged position in the heavens, literally rising over the heads of Earth-bound humanity——as for example the dove, who came to represent the Holy Spirit (Marchesin 50-51). The voices of birds were thus cast as both like and unlike human speech, somehow in between human and bestial, and while they may *seem* similar to human voices, they could not be accepted as the same. Yet the voice of the nightingale came to represent human longing in a variety of aspects; longing so intense that it crosses the boundaries of sacred and secular, allowing the small creature to carry a surprising amount of symbolic weight.[2] Furthermore, if it has been problematic for human theorists to accept that birds' voices produce speech, the classification of their song as music has been equally problematic, and for similar reasons: only human beings were held to possess the rational capacities necessary for the production of music. In *Sung Birds*, Elizabeth Eva Leach presents Augustine's argument that "[d]espite its song sounding most sweet [...] the nightingale does not understand the liberal art of

music" (Leach 1-2). Only those who have been taught the rules of music—thus, certain humans who have received a very specific education—can produce music, and however beautiful it may be, the nightingale's song was thus not, strictly speaking, considered to be "music". And yet, the fact that the song is not music in no way keeps human listeners from appreciating it; the song of the nightingale is very much present in medieval texts where it is linked to many aspects of human experience. These links pass from the spiritual through the staunchly earthly, even leading to moral danger since the frequent link between the nightingale and sexual love places the song of the bird, if not the diminutive bird itself, in a highly ambiguous moral space.

2 The nightingale, as other birds, appears betwixt and between; with voice, but without speech, with song, but without music, with physical presence and yet also with the ability to disappear into thin air—or at least fly away—and evade the human beholder even in the very moment of song. This liminality, the ability to be *between* here *and* there, *between* present *and* absent, defines the varied textual appearances of the nightingale in medieval examples and perhaps influences the different attributions and symbolism ascribed to the bird. Victor Turner has discussed liminality in a temporal sense; following Arnold van Gennep, Turner characterizes the liminal in-between as a *period* rather than *space* (Turner 93-95). My reading of the nightingales in medieval texts is related to liminal space rather than temporality, by which I simply mean the space just beyond, just outside human reach: the nightingale rests in the thickets that separate space carved out for humanity from the wilderness, and for the brief period that they sing, they remain hidden, obscured and untouchable; in a space that is both here and not here. I see this as liminal rather than marginal because the presence of the nightingale leads *to* something beyond reach, beyond the boundaries of the attainable: a lover, a longing, a divine presence. However, this distinction has its limitations; the boundary or border is also a liminal space leading onto another, and thus if the margin serves to frame human experience, as margins have increasingly been defined as doing,[3] the nightingale—liminal or kinetically marginal—can also be seen to provide a link to something, opening out onto something beyond the self. Heard but not seen, the nightingale represents an intangible presence; a longing that can be either terribly earthly, in the guise of sexual desire, or soaringly spiritual, as when the nightingale represents the soul, rising aloft.[4] Unlike other birds, the nightingale sings both during the day, and at night-time, which has perhaps suggested its appropriateness to human listeners as a symbol for hidden or secretive erotic encounters (Cramp 632).[5] The Old English word *nihtegale* literally means *night-singer*,[6] pointing to the importance of the bird's nocturnal song in relation to human perception of the animal. This importance is attested by the appearance of the bird in an early English riddle; while the word *nightingale* does not appear in or alongside Riddle 8 of the Exeter Riddle Book, since this group of Old English riddles does not contain the answers to the puzzles it sets, the answer attributed by modern scholars to Riddle 8 is most frequently "nightingale" (Salvador Bello 55). In the course of the riddle, a cognate term, *æfensceop*, or "evening-singer", seems to have been coined specifically to provide an alternative formulation of the *nihte-gale* compound.[7] This association with the night-time and darkness may explain the association with lovers and love-longing, as well as the fact that it is not very easy to see images of nightingales in medieval manuscripts. This visual absence can be explained both because the nightingale is not very recognizable, even for a seasoned birdwatcher (Cramp 627;

Yapp 64-65), and because the significance of the creature for a human subject is more predominantly aural than visual.

3 A striking example of the dual nature of the nightingale—clearly not human, though possessed of a voice, yet not entirely bestial, as a biped—[8] is found in Ovid's metamorphosis story of Philomela, or Philomena, as the name appears in certain medieval texts (Williams 11-13). A version of the story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* circulated in the twelfth century in an Old French text called *Philomena*, attributed by some to Chrétien de Troyes.[9] This text has not survived on its own, and is found incorporated into the early fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé*.[10] Ovid's narrative of transformation after betrayal, rape and mutilation gives a sombre aspect to the image of the nightingale, and the text of the *Philomena* emphasizes the elements of betrayal and revenge. The important effect of metamorphosis in this story—aside from the immediate necessity of saving Philomena and Progne (Procne in Ovid's version) from the vengeful wrath of Tereus—is the restoration of Philomena's voice, ripped from her by her torturer.[11] This restoration is taken to an extreme in the *Philomena*, in which human meaning is projected onto the nightingale's song:

Que quant il vient au prin d'esté,
Que tout l'iver avons passé,
Pour les mauvés qu'ele tant het,
Chante au plus doucement qu'el set
Par le boschaige : oci ! oci ![12]

4 The violence of Philomena's narrative is inscribed in her very voice; the trace of the bird's former humanity remains in the form of the anthropocentrically-ascribed call to murderous vengeance. Medieval stories of metamorphosis have received recent attention, and these stories of werewolves or snake-women express a certain discomfort with, if not fear of the boundaries of the human.[13] Once again, we are in the in-between; the werewolf moves from human to beast, or half-beast and back again, as does Melusine, confusing the boundaries of what defines the human. Apart from the Philomena story, medieval nightingales do not transform, yet they do move betwixt and between other boundaries, complicating classification since they appear on both sides of the spiritual/secular divide. They are also highly unstable geographically, moving with the seasons, yet what connects all these representations of nightingales is the importance of their voice, which is of course precisely what *can* reach across spatial boundaries, reaching the ears of those at a distance and communicating without immediate physical presence.

5 Not all nightingales carry the sombre burden of the Philomena story; the nightingales that appear in Middle English lyrics arrive as the harbingers of spring, evoking reverdie or cyclical greening along with the associated elements of the return from the death of winter to the life of springtime. The very presence of the nightingale suggests the atmosphere of rising erotic desire and burgeoning life associated with springtime:

When þe nyhtegale singes þe wodes waxen grene;
lef ant gras ant blosme springes in Aueryl, y wene,
ant loue is to myn herte gon wiþ one spere so kene,
nyht ant day my blod hit drynkes; myn herte deþ me tene.[14]

6 In the opening lines of this thirteenth-century Middle English lyric, the poet evokes strong sensory elements: the song of the nightingale and the visual images of the greening of spring contrast with the physical and perhaps visual image of the speaker's heart being pierced with a spear. While this spear is a metaphorical reference to the

suffering caused by love, the visual image conjured in the mind of many hearers could well be the omnipresent medieval image of the Passion, in which a tangible spear pierces the physical side of Christ.[15] While this may initially seem far-fetched, the lyrics in the celebrated London, British Library MS Harley 2253, in which this poem is found, contain both secular and religious themes, and love songs to the Lord nestle amongst pleas for a secular lover's mercy. In other words, "the borderline between secular and religious poetry is porous and fuzzy" (Reichl 203). It is fitting, then, that the nightingale is conjoined in this text to a fleeting image that is both joyous and painful at the same time. The harbinger of spring, the nightingale is also linked to a love-longing so strong that pierces the heart of the listener. Within earshot, but just out of sight, the nightingale, like the fulfilment of love itself, perches just beyond reach. The creature's inherent association with spring is attested by the active role given the nightingale in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*: amidst a long list of birds found in the garden with Dame Nature, we find "the nyghtyngale, / That clepeth forth the grene leves newe"; ("the nightingale that calls forth the fresh, green leaves", lines 351-352).[16] The nightingale, like springtime, brings the much longed-for regeneration of the seasons and of love, yet the very fleetingness of its presence emphasizes the unattainable joy it represents. In order to examine this tenuous presence, I would like to look at different examples of nightingales found in a variety of texts that all link the creature's presence to song and liminal space.

Naughtier Nightingales: Marie de France's *Laüstic*

7 Marie de France's *lai*, *Laüstic* clearly links the nightingale to music: Marie states that her *lais* were written to be accompanied to music, but the music has not survived.[17] In this relation to music, the form of the *lai* resembles many lyrics, such as the Middle English lyric discussed earlier, since both are, effectively, songs that have been preserved without music.[18] The connection between the nightingale and the *lai*, as a musical form, is crystalized by Geoffrey Chaucer in the epic love tragedy, *Troilus and Criseyde*. This text, as Lesley Kordecki points out, "is not otherwise concerned with animals" (Kordecki 1), yet the nightingale figures and sings in Chaucer's description of Criseyde's inability to sleep on account of her love-longing for Troilus:

> A nyghtyngale, upon a cedre grene,
> Under the chamber wal ther as she ley,
> Ful loude song ayein the moone shene,
> Paraunter in his briddes wise a lay
> Of love, that made hir herte fressh and gay. (book 2, lines 918-922)

8 The bird is placed in the visually recognizable foliage, whose greenness points here more to exoticism than to seasonality since the cedar is an evergreen that was not introduced to Britain until the seventeenth century (Sell and Murrell 83), yet whose frequent appearances in the Old Testament link it closely with the Eastern setting evoked here. Here the bird sings a lay, the very form of love song in which its own story is recorded in Marie's *Laüstic*, suggesting a link between the form and the content, as well as the context of the nightingale as a representative of, and at the same time bringer of balm to a human sufferer of love-longing.[19]

9 Marie tells us that the title of her *lai*, *Laüstic*, is the Breton word for nightingale. Marie also gives the name in French and English at the opening of a story that resembles an

adulterous version of the story of Pyramis and Thisbe: two knights live in adjoining houses near Saint-Malo in Brittany. One is married, and the other, who is a generous, noble, tournament-going model of a knight, falls in love with his neighbour’s wife. She, hearing about all her neighbour’s attributes, and on account of his physical proximity, falls in love with him as well. While the lovers cannot meet physically, since the lady is too closely guarded while her lover is in the neighbourhood, they can speak to one another through the windows of their adjoining houses. The houses are even close enough for the lovers to throw objects to one another through the windows. While their pleasure is limited, they are at least able to assuage their love-longing by talking both day and night. Their love lasts into the spring, when flowers bloom and birds sing and those who are that way inclined are likely to give way to their feelings (lines 57-64). The lady makes such extensive use of her night-time visits to the window that her husband becomes suspicious and asks her why she keeps getting up in the middle of the night. The lady replies with a highly coded image:

“Sire”, la dame li respunt,
“Il nen ad joie en cest mund
Ki nen ot le laüstic chanter.
Pur ceo me vois ici ester.
Tant ducement le oï la nuit
Que mut me semble grant deduit;
Tant me delit[e] et tant le voil
Que jeo ne puis dormir de l’oil.”[20]

10 Here the very image of the nightingale, about whom the audience has heard nothing before this moment, becomes a rather elaborate euphemism.[21] “Hearing the nightingale sing” combines several of the elements that we have been discussing in relation to nightingales, music and the imposition of human meaning or expectation on a creature: the night-time setting is the right time for listening to a nocturnal bird at the window; the sleeplessness of the lady is brought on by her lovesickness and her longing for the lover who is just out of reach, like the nightingale itself in its nearby thicket or tree: both are close enough to hear, but not close enough to touch. Marie is careful to specify the season, and the transitory nature of springtime adds to the fleeting quality of the precarious relation and reflects the nightingale’s fugitive nature and habits: a migratory bird with extreme sensitivity to change, the nightingale only appears for a very brief period in certain well-defined and limited areas.[22] The very *absence* of the nightingale is carefully noted by Gerald of Wales in the *Topographica Hibernica*, a catalogue of the flora and fauna—some decidedly marvelous—of Ireland.[23] This scarcity may well make it an appropriate representative of love relations; the furtive uncertainty of the nightingale’s appearance may echo the blissfully painful pangs of human love-longing. Like the spring, the lovers’ arrangements cannot last: the jealous husband deploys all his followers to coat the entire garden in bird-lime and to set traps everywhere.[24] When they have caught a nightingale, they take it to their master, who confronts his wife, claiming that it will no longer disturb her sleep. When the lady asks her husband for the bird, he throws it at her, but not before breaking its neck with his own hands, and the broken body of the bird leaves a stain of blood just above the lady’s breast. The lady takes the small body and leaves the room, lamenting that her excuse to go to the window has been destroyed. She wraps the mangled body in a richly embroidered silk cloth and sends it to her lover via a servant who recounts the story. Sylvia Huot suggests a link between this brutal act and the story that appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

> *Laüstic* too is a tale of violence and erotic passion in which the nightingale plays a central role as the victim of male aggression, silenced forever, whose story can be told only through the medium of a tapestry. [...] Marie adapts her Ovidian sources, however, in such a way that the action is consistently diverted onto the nightingale. It is the bird, not the lovers, that dies, sheds its blood, and is entombed. It is the bird, not the lovers, that is snared by a jealous husband. It is even the bird, and not a child, whose dead body is flung about. Thus the nightingale, in addition to being an emblem of the Breton tradition, also becomes a repository for Latin mythological associations, which adhere to it in a sort of layering process. (Huot 271)

Here the tiny, dead creature is carrying an enormous amount of weight, evoking both the Classical tradition of Ovid and the oral tradition of love-song and reverdie or greening.[25]

11 Upon receiving the shrouded body of the nightingale, the knight has a casket built for it (lines 145-156). Whatever the moral ambiguity of initiating an amorous relation with one's neighbour's wife, and with reciprocating the advances of one's husband's friend, the imagery in this *lai* remains extremely powerful: the visual evocation of the seasonal greening that marks the evolution of the relationship and the setting are most propitious for amatory sentiments; moreover, the aural presence of the nightingale is strong, even though neither we, nor the characters within the narrative see or hear of it before it is captured and killed. Yet the very mention of the nightingale's song evokes longing and desire. The death of the nightingale marks a return to the strikingly visual with the body enveloped in richly embroidered silk and enclosed in a gem-incrusted secular reliquary.[26] One of the elements that the violently repressive jealous husband gets badly wrong in this narrative is that like in the case of human martyrs, physical death does not mark the end of the victim's significance, but on the contrary, death is indeed only a beginning: the importance and significance of the martyred victim becomes far stronger than that enjoyed during the lifetime of the sacrificed being. Put another way, "the husband is not victorious over the lovers, for the love is intact, even though its physical manifestation may be broken, for the lovers remain united in the preserved body of the slain bird" (McCash 1995, 391). Far more is said about the nightingale after its death than the fleeting reference to it during its lifetime. In a surprising reversal, death brings a physicality to the bird that remained elusive while it was alive: whilst it was a voice only in life, it becomes a physical presence in death, and its evasiveness is stopped only in the moment of non-being, of death, when the voice is snuffed and replaced by the physicality of the corpse. The elaborate casing in which the tiny cadaver is wrapped serves to keep the nightingale hidden, a fitting cover for a bird who served to keep the lovers' relation hidden during its life, even while symbolizing that very relation through the lady's claim that earthly joy is found in hearing the nightingale sing.

Vociferous Nightingales: Middle English Lyric and Debate

12 Nightingales' voices appear in the somewhat unexpected context of debate poems; unexpected because here they are made to speak in their own defence rather than sing. This lending of human language to birds—or imposition—appears frequently in the popular form of the debate poem.[27] The debate-lyric "The Thrush and the Nightingale"

(Brown 1932, 101-107) is relatively unconvincing—all the arguments are on the side of the male thrush who attacks women on a number of misogynistic fronts, especially deploring a female lack of chastity—which he knows all about for having personally tested it himself and found it wanting. Yet the debate ends abruptly when the female nightingale, who has vaguely defended women by praising their gentleness and delicacy, pulls out her only specific example of female goodness: that of the Virgin Mary, the mere mention of whom brushes away the thrush's examples of Alexander, Adam, Gawain and Samson, all of whom he had claimed were betrayed or deceived by women. The nightingale places herself under the wing of Mary, as it were, and manages thus to defend all women from the misogynistic claims of her opponent. This potentially surprising association for a bird who frequently introduces erotic encounters or erotic longing in Middle English lyrics as well as earlier texts points to the nightingale's ability to cross secular and spiritual divides, and thus evade being exclusively attached to either.[28]

13 This need for the nightingale to find protection—more commonly physical than spiritual or metaphoric—is discussed by a nightingale herself in the Middle English poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Essentially an extended mud-slinging match between two talking birds, the poem has been categorized as a debate poem, but it really is so in superficial form only; that is, two creatures have a discussion, but the term "debate" suggests something far more formal and structured than what we find here (Cartlidge xvi-xxxvii). This is a festival of insults, a one-upbirdship of nastiness. In reply to the Owl's expressed wish to get hold of the Nightingale with her claws, the Nightingale explains why she is rarely found outside thickets and trees:

> ȝif ich me holde in mine hegge,
> Ne recche ich neuer what þu segge.
> Ich wot þat þu art unmilde
> Wiþ hom þat ne muȝe from þe schilde,
> & þu tukest wroþe & vuele
> Whar þu miȝt over smale fuȝele.[29]

14 By claiming that she is safe as long as she stays hidden, the Nightingale emphasizes that her preferred place is out of sight and out of reach, as seen in earlier texts. Generically, *The Owl and the Nightingale* has caused discomfort, since while it takes the form of a debate, the rules of debate are not clearly followed, and more problematically, there is no clear winner, unlike in the lyric-debate "The Thrush and the Nightingale". As Neil Cartlidge suggests, the joke is ultimately on the audience "for having been prepared to commit ourselves for so long to the serious consideration of a dispute that is essentially ludicrous" (Cartlidge xxii). Yet what is present, among the insults and allegations that the contestants fling at one another, are descriptions of the songs of the birds. The poem opens in a beautiful clearing in the spring, as is familiar from the lyrics and the *lai* discussed previously. The speakers here are both gendered female, unlike in the lyric-debate between the thrush and the nightingale. One of the recurring themes in this debate is the anthropocentric argument that the birds both claim superiority to one another through their usefulness to human beings. The nightingale's song is described in terms of human music: it is related to harp music: "He song so lude & so scharpe, / Riȝt so me grulde schille harpe".[30] In the course of their discussion, the birds are ready to argue about absolutely everything, including the fact that even though they both sing at night — even if the Nightingale has a few well-chosen words to say about the nature and sound of the Owl's "song", which she terms *fule ȝoȝelinge* (l. 40:

"awful howling") — the way in which they do so is different, and of course, according to each, better than the night-singing of the other. The Owl compares her own regular usefulness to the Nightingale's sporadic disorganization, claiming that the nightingale sings all night long, to the extent that she can be faulted for it (lines 323-336). In addition to criticizing the Nightingale's excessive night-time singing, the Owl also manages to fault the Nightingale for the *shortness* of the season in which she sings, since she only sings in the spring, till she has mated, then once she is sitting on her eggs, we don't hear another peep out of her. As frequently in the text, it is hard to know why this is a fault — singing to attract a mate is simply what nightingales do—but the Owl suggests in a grumpy way that she is left to do all the hard work as usual, singing along to keep humans merry through the long, cold nights of winter while others flit off (lines 531-540).[31] While the image of the nightingale sitting faithfully on her eggs calls images found in the medieval Bestiary tradition to mind, in which nightingales are usually shown sitting on or near nests, it is worth noting that the Owl's claim is totally untrue from an ornithological perspective: only the male nightingale sings outside of texts (in real nature [Brown and Grice 476]). Perhaps it is fitting that a creature that suggests heterosexual encounters in the lyrics and in the *Laüstic* should itself be an embodiment of both male and female behaviour, as if the sexually differentiated tasks of singing and nesting were distilled into a single unified being who comes to represent both the courtship and the consummation of the relation through song and nest. Moreover, when the elusive nightingale, whose mere evocation suggests love-longing, is seen, it is never seen in a pair: manuscript images in Bestiaries or the Fables of Marie de France show single birds, whether in trees, thickets or on nests, and the texts that mention nightingales also mention single figures.[32] Nightingales are not seen or mentioned in couples, as are some literary birds of prey,[33] nor in flocks, rendering it a particularly apt symbol of problematic relations, such as that seen in the Ovidian tradition, or in instances of unconsummated love-longing, as seen in *lai* and the lyrics. This absence of any discussion of nightingale coupledom also reflects the anthropocentric viewpoint of these texts: if the nightingale is interesting to humans for its song, and the song ceases once the nightingale finds a mate, then the human listener is not interested in the silent (because busily brooding) nightingale couple.

15 Nightingales are visually unremarkable small, brown birds that become remarkable to most human audiences when they sing. A recurrent figure, the nightingale's significance lies in its sound and the forms of many of the literary texts in which the nightingale appears are related to music: lyric and *lai* are musical forms in which a bird known for its musicality figures. While we hear about their singing, we do not hear them sing in these texts, even though their singing is evoked or described.[34] Thus, the nightingale's relation to sound is a central element of the understanding of the creature for medieval observers and authors. The sound of the nightingale becomes an evocation of love and desire in secular texts, and the difficulty of both seeing and hearing the creature—because it hides, because it is only present in specific areas during brief periods of the year—adds to its appropriateness in representing the unattainable in human love-longing. The presence of the nightingale, however peripheral, ephemeral or elusive it may be, suggests love, or at least physical desire, and evokes a tradition in which a variety of texts and traditions are embodied in an evasive creature who is, when represented in its own plumage, as physically unremarkable as it is aurally resonant.

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NOTES

1. My thanks are due to Michael Warren for his kind generosity in sending me several chapters of his book when it first appeared and was not yet available in French libraries. I would also like to thank Anna Russakoff and the anonymous readers of this article for their careful reading and constructive suggestions.

2. As has been examined by a number of modern scholars: Gellinek-Schellekens, *The Voice of the Nightingale*; Pfeffer, "Spring, Love, Birdsong"; Shippey, "Listening to the Nightingale"; Williams, *Interpreting Nightingales.*

3. For an excellent discussion of the recent history of the study of the margin, see Smith, "Margin".

4. As in the Bestiary tradition and other spiritual texts such as the *Rossignos*, a thirteenth-century poem about the life of Christ; see Clark, *The Medieval Book of Beasts*; Hesketh, *Rossignos.*

5. A recording of the nightingale's song can be heard here: https://www.bl.uk/the-language-of-birds/articles/the-top-10-british-birdsongs. Last accessed 21 December 2019.

6. *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*; see the entries for *niht*: http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/023718 and *galan*: http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/046897, last accessed 21 December 2019. See also Whitman, "The Birds of Old English Literature", 158-159.

7. The significance of this term is discussed in the context of Riddle 8 in Stanton, "Mimicry", 38. Stanton emphasises the performative nature of the birds in Old English riddles. See also https://theriddleages.wordpress.com/2013/06/14/commentary-for-riddle-8/, last accessed 21 December 2019.

8. Warren discusses how being bipeds creates a bond between bird-kind and humankind, to the exclusion of quadruped mammals: *Birds in Medieval English Poetry*, 11-12.

9. Baumgartner, *Pyrame et Thisbé, Narcisse, Philomena.* The story of Procne and Philomela appears in book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

10. This textual behemoth contains a Christian reinterpretation of many of the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The *Philomena* story is found in book 6, lines 2217-3684: de Boer, « *Ovide moralisé* », vol. 2, 337-366. A new edition of the *Ovide moralisé* is currently in preparation; at time of writing only the first book (of fifteen) has appeared in 2 volumes: Baker, *Ovide moralisé*.

11. It is problematic that Philomena never does regain her voice in Chaucer's version of the story; he tires of telling the narrative before the metamorphosis, or even the act of female vengeance that provokes it: Chaucer, book VII of *The Legend of Good Women* (ed. Benson).

12. "When spring returns—when we have left winter behind us—on account of evildoers whom she hates so much, she sings as sweetly as she can in the woods: 'Kill! Kill!'", *Philomena,* lines 1462-1467. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. The nightingale's refrain of "oci, oci" is frequent in troubadour poetry as well, as discussed by Leach, 90-92. See also the nightingale in John Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide* (ed. Symons), whose song is also transcribed as 'Ocy, Ocy', ll. 124-130.

13. See the studies by Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* and Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity* as well as Cohen, "Inventing with Animals". An image of the moment of Philomena's metamorphosis can be seen in the manuscript of the *Ovide moralisé* held in Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 5069, fol. 91r: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525031179. The picture of Philomena and Progne appears in the middle column. Last accessed 21 December 2019.

14. "When the nightingale sings and the woods become green, leaf and grass and blossom spring in April, I know, and love enters into my heart with such a sharp stab — it drinks my blood night and day; my heart causes me pain." Lines 1-4 of number 25 in Brook, *The Harley Lyrics*, 63.

15. It has been suggested that the growing emphasis on personal devotion in the later Middle Ages increased focus on the bodily suffering of Christ and even led to the appearance of images of Christ's side wound on their own. These images of the decontextualized wound would allow for a more immediate, personal response: see Olson, "Penetrating the Void". For a striking example of the depiction of the wound of Christ, see the Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg, fol. 331r; New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1969 (69.86): https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471883. Last accessed 21 December 2019.

16. All references to Chaucer are from Benson's edition.

17. Marie writes that her *lai*, *Guigemar*, was composed to be accompanied by the harp and rote (*Guigemar*, lines 883-886); and that *Chevrefoil* was also set to music by Tristan himself, who composed it on the harp (lines 107-113): Waters, *The Lais of Marie de France*. For a discussion of the question of the identity of Marie, see Waters, 9-13.

18. The manuscript of London, British Library Harley 978, which contains both the collected *Lais* of Marie as well as her *Fables*—one of which is about a nightingale—does contain examples of musical notation (fols. 2-15), but the music is not a setting of Marie's texts.

19. A sensitive discussion of this scene, as well as larger issues of gender, subjectivity and human-animal relations is found in the introduction to Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*: "Avian Subjectivity, Genre, and Feminism", 1-23. The importance of the nightingale as a symbol of song and love is also mentioned in Gellinek-Schellekens, *The Voice of the Nightingale*, 17-18.

20. "My lord", the lady answered him, "there is no joy in this world like hearing the nightingale sing. That is why you see me here. I hear it so sweetly at night that it gives me great pleasure; it delights me so much and I so desire it that I cannot close my eyes to sleep". Lines 83-90.

21. Leach, *Sung Birds*, 93, suggests a connection to the more obviously ribald version of this in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, 5.4.

22. The drastic decline of breeding pairs of nightingales in modern Britain is thought to be due to "changes in the quality or quantity of their breeding habitat", Brown and Grice, *Birds in England*, 478; on territory, see Cramp, *Handbook of the Birds of Europe*, 627-631.

23. Gerald remarks that there are no nightingales in Ireland, which would seem to be true to this day: Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, chapter 17, 47.

24. The outrageously excessive violence of the husband's reaction has been much discussed: see Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, 78.

25. A connection between *Laüstic* and *Philomena* is also suggested by McCash "Philomena's Window"; and by Quéruel, "Silence et mort du rossignol".

26. On the semi-religious nature of the "reliquary of love", see Tudor, "The Religious Symbolism of the 'Reliquary of Love'". The importance of reliquaries as "performative objects" is discussed in Changanti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary*; see especially the Introduction, 1-18, and chapter 1, "The Poetics of Enshrinement", 19-45.

27. A number of debate poems in French and English present a nightingale as one of the speakers: see, in addition to the texts discussed in this section, *Le Jugement d'amour* (ed. Delbouille); the Anglo-Norman *Blauncheflour e Florence* (ed. Oulmont); Clanvowe, *Boke of Cupide* (ed. Symons); *The Clerk and the Nightingale* (ed. Robbins, nos. 179 and 180).

28. The use of secular love imagery for religious texts exists in other lyrics: see, for example, Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIc*, nos. 34-36.

29. "as long as I stay in my hedge, I don't care about what you say. I know you're merciless to those who can't get away from you and you're a cruel and malicious bully whenever you can get little birds into your power." Lines 59-64; text and translations Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

30. "she sang so loudly and so penetratingly that it was as if ringing harps were being played." Lines 141-42, text and translation Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

31. This problematic definition of the birds in relation of their usefulness to humans is discussed in Warren, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry*, chapter 3, "A Bird's Worth", 113-159; on the notion of "natural law", see Brzezinski Potkay, "Natural Law".

32. A fine Bestiary nightingale can be found in Aberdeen, University of Aberdeen MS 24 fol. 52v, ca. 1200: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f52v. A luxury version of Marie de France's Fables, in which a nightingale faces a larger, threatening hawk, is found in the third column of Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 3142, fol. 266v, late thirteenth century: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55003999w. Both accessed 21 December 2019.

33. One of the most elaborately described, and thoroughly studied love relations between a pair of falcons occurs in Chaucer's Squire's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales*. The birds' relation, as well as the relation of the former to Canacee, is discussed in Crane, "For the Birds". Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* also centers on the eagles' choice of mate.

34. Leach, *Sung Birds*, discusses a *virelai* in which the music of the human singer resembles the birdsong of the nightingale, 122.

ABSTRACTS

Nightingales appear frequently in medieval texts, yet their appearances are fleeting and elusive as they remain just beyond human reach. The presence of the nightingale is marked by its voice, and the creature's interest for human audiences is linked to its brief, seasonal song. This paper examines the nightingale's paradoxical presence through sound, which contrasts with the physical distance that allows the creature to remain just beyond the contours of human reach. The liminal space accorded to the nightingale, a space just beyond that occupied by the human listener, allows the nightingale to represent longing and desire in a variety of texts written in French and English in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Le rossignol apparaît très souvent dans les récits du Moyen Âge, même si cette présence est éphémère, puisque intangible. Le rossignol est connu par sa voix, et l'intérêt de cette créature aux yeux de l'être humain réside dans son chant qui ne dure que l'espace d'une saison. Ce chant témoigne de la présence paradoxale du rossignol, liée à la distance physique qui le maintient au-delà de l'espace que s'est approprié l'être humain. La liminalité du rossignol, toujours situé à la marge de l'espace occupé par l'auditoire humain, fait de cette créature une figure du désir dans des textes du XII^e et du XIII^e siècle en français et en anglais.

INDEX

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AUTHORS

MORGAN DICKSON

Morgan Dickson is Senior Lecturer at the University of Picardy in Amiens. Her research is primarily concerned with Anglo-Norman romance, material culture and gender studies.