

The Owl and the Nightingale: Both Sinners^{*}

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Shin, Woong-Jae. “*The Owl and the Nightingale: Both Sinners.*” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 44.2 (2018): 63-73. The critics have varied in their judgments on the two birds's merits in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Some decided in favor of the flippant Nightingale. Others leaned toward the grave Owl. Still others maintained the balance between the two. However, this paper's interpretation of the poem is to condemn both birds as sinners in terms of Christianity. First of all, the Nightingale's song of carnal love leads people to lust and lechery, often causing them to commit adultery. She also commits the sin of judging or finding faults with others. On the other hand, the Owl's nocturnal habit, cursing the light and loving darkness, was condemned as evil in the medieval period. To predict misfortune, she also practices either astrology or sorcery which was considered impious and prohibited in the Bible. Moreover, she justifies adultery and prefers revenge to forgiveness. In addition, the two birds are both malicious, foul-mouthed, and extremely proud. The poem thus condemns the two birds alike so as to caution the reader against their numerous sins. (Kwangwoon University)

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I

The matter of judgment on the two birds' merits in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, an anonymous medieval poem, has long troubled critics. Some decided in favor of

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the flippancy of the Nightingale. J. W. H. Atkins observed that "the Nightingale is represented on the whole as the better-tempered of the two combatants; she is the more attractive personality, she shows more self-restraint than the Owl, and she indulges to a lesser extent in vile personalities and abuse" (*The Owl and the Nightingale* viii-ix). Others like A. C. Spearing leaned toward the grave Owl: "At the beginning of *The Owl and the Nightingale* it is the Nightingale, with its associations with summer and young love, that seems the most attractive of the two birds, but gradually we come to see that the poet is on the side of the moralizing Owl" (66). Still others refused to judge, maintaining the balance between the two birds: Suzanne M. Kincaid, for example, believed both to be part of the divine plan which orders and harmonizes the world (130).

While the critics vary in their judgments, they agree with one another in one point: that both birds deny the possibility of any common ground because, to use Jay Schleusener's words, "they maintain diametrically opposing positions" (185). However, the critics have overlooked one important point the two birds have in common--the fact that both of them are sinners alike according to Christian principles and traditions. Hence this paper's interpretation of the poem is neither to prefer one bird to the other nor to reconcile the two, but to condemn both birds as sinners.

II

Throughout the poem, the Nightingale constantly boasts of her song. She claims that her single achievement--singing skill--is better than the many which the Owl claims to possess, for it brings the world joy and furthermore heaven's bliss. Comparing her song to summer and its delight, the Nightingale eulogizes herself:

But I bring with me joy and glee,

For men are cheered because of me,
Rejoice the moment I appear,
Are glad before I'm even near.

.....
The rose as well, with tint of red,
From out the briar-bush shows her head,
And then she asks if I will sing,
For love of her, some pleasant thing. (433-46)

However, it soon turns out that the Nightingale's song of joy is mostly about "love," specifically "carnal love" associated with the sensual pleasures of the world. The Owl is quick to point out that her opponent's song is full of wantonness:

Wild animals will not stay still,
But ramp and mount and mate at will.
The fiery stallions in the stud
Rage for mares with all their blood.
And you with all these wantons throng,
For lust's the subject of your song. (493-98)

The Owl then makes fun of the Nightingale's hoarse voice during the mating season: when she has glutted her lust, the Nightingale loses her voice in her shame (489-508). The Owl thus constantly associates the Nightingale's song with the ephemeral joy of carnal love and sets it against the everlasting joy of heaven:

There's no delight that I can name
Which will survive if kept the same
Except the Kingdom of God above,
Unchanging in its endless love. (355-58)

When the Owl has just finished her charge, the author delays the Nightingale's reply for forty lines while digressing on her plight. In her heart the Nightingale

admits that her opponent has told the truth. However, she does not yield but decides to use trickery in order to defend herself:

And certainly it's hard to fight
 Against the truth, against the right.
 When the heart is cornered, man
 Must use whatever guile he can. (667-70)

Now it is clear that the Nightingale's answer is going to be an argument of expedience since it must "fight against the truth, against the right." It will be an argument which by necessity must proceed by deceit and the trimming of words. Hence she claims that her song, which she has admitted herself is of carnal love, aids man in his quest for heaven--an absolute nonsense:

Priests, monks and canons, all devout,
 Will leave their beds at dead of night
 To sing the bliss of heaven's light,

 I help them all as best I may
 By singing with them night and day.
 They're happier because of me
 And chant and sing more readily. (730-38)

The Nightingale thus tries to identify the sensual pleasures represented by her song with "the bliss of heaven's light," although it is a common Christian doctrine that both are opposed to each other. The Owl is quick to attack the Nightingale's sophistry as well as her blasphemy: "Your style in all is fake and foul. / You colour every single word / To sound like truth, you lying bird!" (838-40).

The Owl continues to accuse the Nightingale of leading men to lust and lechery: "You lure to fleshly lust and wrong / All those who listen to your song" (894-95). She reminds the Nightingale of how she was doomed to be "torn in bits" (1060)

when she led a wife to commit adultery. The Nightingale rebuts the accusation, insisting that all she did was to cheer up the wife out of pity for her. She even blames the accident on the wife's husband who tyrannized over her out of jealousy. Atkins, who interprets the Nightingale's song as representative of the medieval courtly-love poetry, sides with her on this matter, arguing that the wife's distressful situation aroused the sympathy of the poet (*English Literary Criticism* 145). However, the prohibition of adultery has been a fundamental Christian doctrine since it was stipulated in the Ten Commandments. It is not likely that the author, who most critics assume wrote this poem as a plea for preferment in his ecclesiastical career (Hume 5), would have been lenient toward this capital sin. Later in the poem, the Nightingale herself advocates legitimate love, denouncing wives' adultery fervently (1338-47). Therefore, it is quite natural that in the poem the Nightingale is punished to death for abetting adultery, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). As the debate continues, the Nightingale still flatters herself, this time claiming that her song can afford both solace and instruction to lovesick maidens:

I teach these youngsters with my song
That love like that does not last long.
It merely brushes with its wing,
Then goes, just like the song I sing.
Such girls discover it soon departs,
And calm returns to aching hearts. (1449-54)

Now, perhaps in her hasty attempt to show off her usefulness to maidens, the Nightingale reverses her earlier claim that her song is a reminder of heavenly joy, for now she declares openly that her song is short-lived and analogous to carnal love—"A brief excitement, like a breath / That quickly lives and has its death" (1460-61).

The Owl also discredits the Nightingale for not singing in the North. The Owl asks why, if she pretends to teach man to sing of eternal happiness, she does not

travel to the northern countries where religious songs are utterly lacking (904-19). The Nightingale replies that in such lands the people are so barbarous that her songs will be wasted; therefore, she would rather stay in more favored lands (994-1029). It is obvious that the Nightingale's favoritism is against the Christian doctrine that one should "go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). When the Nightingale insists that "he is mad who sows his seed / Where grass and blossom cannot speed" (1040-41), she seems to employ the Christ's teaching: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town" (Matt. 10:14). However, the Scripture implies that such a decision should be made only after one has made every effort to Christianize such a place, while the Nightingale, concerned for her own comfort, refuses to enter there from the beginning.

One of the fundamental Christian doctrines is not to judge others because we too will be judged in the same way we judge others. Christ reproached the faultfinders: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3) The Nightingale exactly commits this sin of judging or finding faults with others by constantly censuring the Owl on her appearance, habitation, and food. And then she is also censured on almost the same grounds. At the opening of their debate, she curses the Owl calling her a loathsome monster (71-80), but her own appearance is also ridiculed as being "filthy, dark and small" (577). She finds fault with the Owl's nesting habit, telling the tale of the hawk who, in ignorance, reared an owl in her nest, but had to cast it out because of its filthy habits (101-25). However, the Nightingale's choice of her nesting site by "the privy house" (592) is quite unsanitary too. She also censures the Owl's food--frogs, snails, and mice (85-8)--but her own food--"spiders and revolting flies" (600)--seems no better than the Owl's. The Owl, afterward, sums up the consequences of the Nightingale's sin of judging others:

Now most clearly you can see

That you have spoken foolishly,
For things you say to give me shame
Rebound on you with all the blame.
Whatever happens, in every round
Your own throw fells you to the ground. (1280-85)

III

To condemn the Nightingale as a sinner does not mean to judge the Owl, her opponent, either as the winner of the debate or as a pious Christian. The Owl is another sinner on grounds of Christian traditions and doctrines. First of all, the Nightingale charges that the Owl is evil because she is blind by day, keen of sight at night, and loves darkness:

You fly by night and not by day.
I wonder why, and well I may,
For every thing that shuns the right
Loves the dark and hates the light,
And every thing inclined to sin
Prefers the dark for working in. (227-32)

Her attack on the Owl's nocturnal habit is soundly based on the medieval Christian tradition. For example, Kathryn Hugarir quotes from St. Cyril's *Speculum Sapientiae* written in the thirteenth century: "The owl began to complain and curse the light. Whereupon the light replies, 'The other birds rejoice in the light but you disappear lest you perish; at night when all of creation sleeps you watch that you may kill'" (31). Hugarir then notes that the Nightingale's association of evil with darkness and good with light suggests John 3:19-20: "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does

evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (51). The twelfth-century *Bestiary* also describes the owl as a light-shunning bird, and as such symbolic of the Jews who rejected Christ, the light of the world (White 133). The Owl's rebuttal that she hides by day and finds night the best time to carry out her warlike expeditions (385-90) seems to only aggravate her situation by revealing her aggressive, fierce nature.

The Nightingale's next charge is that the Owl is the bearer of evil tidings who is always announcing some misfortune. Therefore, men are angry with her and fear and ill-treat her (1144-71). She gives some details of the kinds of misfortune predicted by the Owl, and concludes by invoking God's anger upon her: "May . . . God as well, split you with wrath!" (1173-74). The Owl admits her power to foretell the future but insists that it can be of good use in the service of men by warning them of impending disasters (1250-53). This argument on the Owl's foreknowledge, as A. C. Cawley points out, has a close connection with astrology:

. . . several parallels are to be found between the disasters listed by the Nightingale and by the Owl and the misfortunes attributed to Mars and Saturn as planetary gods in Chaucer's poem "The Knight's Tale" . . . Further, there are parallels to be found between the disasters predicted, according to the astrologers Corumphiza, William of Chester and Pharamelia, by the planetary conjunction of the year 1186, in which the evil influence of Mars and Saturn was considered dominant. (164)

Astrology, however, had been condemned by St. Augustine and by all the theologians who followed his lead in later centuries as an impious form of divination. Consequently, it virtually disappeared from the social and intellectual life of western Europe for eight centuries (Wedel 107). Therefore, if it were true that the source of the Owl's foreknowledge is astrology, she is to be condemned as a practitioner of impious science. If it is granted that astrology was "christianized" and its practice was allowed to some extent during the medieval period (Cawley 162), the Nightingale's remark that the Owl is ignorant of astrology (1320-21) makes

plausible the Nightingale's claim that in order to get foreknowledge the Owl uses sorcery or witchcraft (1300). Practicing divination or sorcery, prohibited in the Bible (Lev. 19:26), was condemned as an abominable crime. Moreover, it has been a folk tradition in Europe that an owl's cry, far from the Owl's claim of its service to mankind, bodes ill for those who hear it. As Huginir points out, a number of biblical Scriptures bear witness to the Owl's reputation as "a bird of solitude and lamentation, unclean, and a prophet of evil": Lev. 11:16, Deut. 14:15-17, Isa. 34:11-15, Job 30:29, Jer. 50:39, etc. (19). It is unlikely that the author would have defied this long-standing Christian tradition by favoring the Owl's foreknowledge--the source of which is either astrology or sorcery--as a means of serving humanity, especially if he had written this poem for his ecclesiastical preferment. The fact that in the poem the Owl is punished to death for foretelling future events (1605-12) also suggests that the author meant to condemn the Owl as an evil prophet.

Although she claims that she is against adultery, the Owl accepts wives' adultery in case their husbands are unworthy or abuse them:

And often when she's saintliest
He slams her teeth in with his fist:
A man is bound to make her loose
To whom he offers such abuse.
Ill-treated by such constant spite,
She'll sometime take her own delight;
And if she cuckolds him, God knows,
It's not her fault the case arose. (1535-42)

Her justification of adultery--which is a parallel to the Nightingale's sympathy for the jealous knight's wife--is indisputably against Christianity as already discussed. Furthermore, behind her justification of the abused wives' adultery lurks another sin--the revengeful thought that, if their husbands mistreat them, they can also

mistreat such unworthy husbands. This attitude is similar to that of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' which Christ replaced with the new doctrine of submission and forgiveness: "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:38).

IV

The two birds' sins, besides those that have been discussed so far, are almost innumerable. They hate, curse, and threaten each other. They are full of malice and even ready to murder each other only if they have the chance. Their constant use of harsh words in attacking each other is equivalent to the wicked man's mouth in the Scriptures: "his mouth is full of curses and lies and threats" (Ps. 10:6-7); "the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). Above all, both birds are extremely proud of themselves, although the Nightingale once hypocritically proclaims that pride is a greater sin than lust (1412-15). Indeed, the whole debate springs from their sin of pride. In her attempt to show her superiority, each bird is constantly boasting of herself and disparaging her opponent.

Eric G. Stanley remarks that the central question of *The Owl and the Nightingale* is "which is the better of the two birds" (22). However, we should not attempt to determine that one bird is better than the other when both are equally sinful. It is even worse to consider that each of the two sinners constitutes a part of God's plan that harmonizes the world. The poem condemns both sinners alike and urges one to guard against their evil ways. This is the religious and moral lesson that the medieval author of the poem sought to deliver to his contemporary readers.

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