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DEBATING BIRDS UPEND THE HIERARCHY OF NATURE IN
THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS

An Essay Submitted to the
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By
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2021

As their titles indicate, the anonymous medieval poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* and Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *The Parliament of Fowls* revolve around birds. However, since birds are illiterate, the poems had to have been relevant to medieval human society, or at least to their human authors. The talking bird characters in each medieval poem help reveal nature's relationship with humanity. But the birds are not alone in this task because a multifaceted nature functions as setting, character, and influencer within these poems. The owl and the nightingale debate from their tree and hedge, respectively, while the bird parliament meets in the narrator's dream garden. Chaucer uses a Nature character to convene, supervise, and judge the birds who have gathered to find their mates. Meanwhile, the owl and the nightingale argue for the value of their natural characteristics, which range from their appearances to their songs. I will explore these different facets of nature as setting, character, and influencer across these two poems to establish the relationship between the bird characters and nature.

Critics have rarely compared *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *The Parliament of Fowls* at length, and, admittedly, there is no proof that Chaucer read or knew of the earlier poem. Furthermore, each poet echoes a different literary tradition to manifest nature in the poems. Chaucer's Nature character is a descendent of the classical Goddess Natura tradition. The owl and the nightingale present the same avian characteristics that appear in the medieval bestiary tradition. But the birds in both poems, from the owl and nightingale to Chaucer's eagles, ultimately rely on human elements to provide value for their claims and to win their contests, regardless of nature. Kathryn Hume's well-regarded interpretation of *The Owl and the Nightingale* as a burlesque satire of human contentiousness confirms that humanity's role in that poem cannot be ignored (103–04). Meanwhile, ecocritical scholars in the twenty-first century purposefully reject the use of an anthropocentric lens, where nature is seen and valued only when

it benefits humans, to inform their literary interpretations (Rudd 5–6). Between ecocritical and humanist interpretations, I will examine the relations and rank between nature, talking birds, and humanity in these poems. The birds are the primary contenders in *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, but their deliberations incorporate nature and humanity. When the birds in each poem ultimately privilege human emotion or human opinion to win their contests, they elevate humanity above nature, and invert the hierarchy in which nature traditionally ranks above all of creation.

These two poems may be centuries apart and from different genres, but they have similar characters and content. *The Owl and the Nightingale* is a debate poem by genre that has been traditionally dated from between 1189 and 1216 CE (Cartlidge 230). Chaucer's poem from over a century later, between 1380 and 1382 CE, is not classified as a debate poem, even though a debate occurs among his bird parliament (Benson xxix; Mann 149). Instead, *The Parliament of Fowls* is commonly classified as a dream vision poem (Marti 181). Luckily, the dream vision genre allows for the appearance of other literary genres within it. Kevin Marti defines the dream vision genre as "a metagenre that subsumes and interrelates many other literary genres" (178). Therefore, Chaucer's dream vision poem can include a debate. The bird debate in each poem is overheard by what is assumed to be a human narrator. Ironically, the theme of human nature is not perpetuated in either poem by these human narrators, but by the birds. The owl and the nightingale are critical of each other's natural behaviors, but as their debate progresses, each bird argues for her own value based on her usefulness to humans and how humans perceive her. Meanwhile, the male eagles are the first birds to try to impress the female eagle in Chaucer's parliament with their proclamations of courtly love. When the female eagle cannot choose between her three suitors and their identical presentations of love, the other birds attempt to

advise her, despite their lack of knowledge about love, and a debate ensues. In both poems, the bird characters and their traits comprise most of the debates' content, while Nature and the narrators observe. Despite the centuries between these two poems, the birds' debates serve as the culminating event in each poem.

1. Literary Traditions of Nature: Goddess Natura and Medieval Bestiaries

Chaucer's Nature character is a descendent of the classical Goddess Natura. George Economou identifies concurrent traditions surrounding the Goddess Natura: the "philosophical and encyclopedic" tradition and the "mythological and religious" tradition (37–38). My focus is exclusively on the latter tradition because it most commonly manifests as a personified Nature character in poetry (Economou 38). Ernst Curtius traces Goddess Natura's appearances in poetry from Ovid to Claudian. In the fourth century, "She stands between Zeus and the gods, governs marriage and generation, and through her complaint can intervene in the course of history" (Curtius 106). However, with Rome's Christianization she becomes a "defeated pagan deit[y]," who is relegated to sustaining the men that God creates (Curtius 107). With changes in the prevailing religion, Natura's rank in the hierarchy of the gods, or God, subsequently shifts. Yet, Lady Philosophy describes a powerful Nature to Boethius in his sixth-century philosophical work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*:

How mighty Nature holds the reins of things,
And how she frames her laws in providence
Which keep in motions fixed the globe immense;
How all things singly she doth bind and curb
With such a bond that nothing can disturb. (50)

Chaucer needs this powerful Nature in his garden to ensure that all of the birds mate and continue their species. According to Economou, this passage demonstrates how “Boethius keeps the poetic and philosophical [Nature] separate” (39–40). Lady Philosophy consistently presents the philosophical Natura in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, except for in this passage, Economou says (39–40). Chaucer was surely familiar with Boethius’s forms of Nature because he translated *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Economou 37). However, Chaucer has only one Nature, and she appropriately ranks below God as “the vicaire of the almyghty Lord” (Chaucer, line 379).¹ She is, however, above the bird parliament. Nature is similarly subordinate to God in Alan of Lille’s twelfth-century poetry (Curtius 119). When Chaucer specifies that his Nature character is physically modeled after Alan’s, he is acknowledging his character’s place in the Goddess Natura tradition (lines 316–18). Chaucer is also appropriately ranking her by Christian standards under God and above His creation.

In addition to the Goddess Natura tradition, *The Parliament of Fowls* participates in the beast literature tradition, along with *The Owl and the Nightingale*. As the name implies, animals take center stage as the characters in this type of fiction, which was popular at the end of the twelfth century in England (Ziolkowski 2; Mann 149). Joyce E. Salisbury correlates this popularity with changes in medieval humans’ relationships with animals (81–82). Animals were not believed to have the capacity to feel like humans in the early Middle Ages; early Christians distinguished humans above other animals because of God’s gift of the “virtue of human reason” (Salisbury 2). Salisbury hypothesizes that twelfth-century beast literature shows this “early Christian paradigm of separation between humans and animals breaking down” (7). The beast

¹ Quotations from *The Parliament of Fowls* are from Larry Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Modern translations are my own.

literature tradition spans genres to include beast fables, the bestiary, and Renard the Fox tales (Ziolkowski 1–2). Jill Mann adds beast epic; animal debate; animals appearing in lyrics, romances, and sermons; aetiological [origin] tales; and narratives with anthropomorphized animal characters to this list of genres (1). The presence of the birds in *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *The Parliament of Fowls* guarantees that these poems qualify as beast literature, but they fall under different genres. Mann classifies *The Owl and the Nightingale* as an animal debate, while Chaucer’s writing is comprised of individual animal tales (1). The dream vision framework in *The Parliament of Fowls* can accommodate this subgenre. Furthermore, the debates in both poems show interconnectedness between the bird characters and humans, to support Salisbury’s claims that the separation between species diminishes in the later Middle Ages. Mann attempts to determine “in what way individual literary structures imply different ways for the animal to be made significant for the human” (1). But a debate between birds occurs in both of these poems, and conventional genre classifications cannot fully account for this content. While Mann studies structure, a comparison of these two poems from different genres must focus on their debates.

The Owl and the Nightingale is an animal debate poem that echoes another beast literature genre, the medieval bestiary. Latin bestiaries from the Middle Ages are illustrated encyclopedia-like collections describing real and fantastical animals (Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 1). It is important to note that the animals’ descriptions in bestiaries are not meant to be considered accounts of natural history (Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 6). Instead, each of the bestiary’s entries presents moral lessons that are religious in nature (Hassig, “Introduction” xiii). Bestiaries therefore come to serve as an “important medieval contribution to didactic religious literature,” and provide source material for sermons (Hassig, “Introduction” xi;

Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 3). The majority of bestiary texts were produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries across Europe, but the surviving texts are dated from the thirteenth century (Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 3–4; Baxter 165–66). Medieval bestiaries were produced in the same period in which *The Owl and the Nightingale* is traditionally dated. The overlap between the medieval bestiary and the poem occurs in earnest when the owl and the nightingale present the same characteristics that appear in their bestiary entries as natural behaviors for them.

Medieval bestiaries have classical roots in the Greek *Physiologus* (Mann 23). Each chapter of this second-century CE text describes an animal or rock and then a corresponding Christian moral (Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 2; Baxter 33). The *Physiologus* heavily relies on Old and New Testament references (Baxter 33). As medieval bestiaries evolved from the classical *Physiologus*, the structure and character remained, but the tone and emphasis became didactic because of additions from St. Ambrose and Isidore’s writings (Clark and McMunn, “Introduction” 2–3). In addition to their religious nature, medieval bestiaries are unique among beast literature genres because they unite “two existing realities, the animal and the human, into meaningful relation” (Mann 31). The owl and the nightingale also argue for meaningful relationships between themselves and humans, from which each bird derives her superiority. *The Owl and the Nightingale* performs the reverse of bestiaries in that bestiaries include descriptions of animals by humans, and these two birds are animals describing humans.

Medieval bestiaries exhibit how medieval humans perceived certain animals, and owls had a negative reputation, while nightingales enjoyed a positive reputation. The owl is negatively associated with “sinners in general and with the Jews in particular” in its various entries (Miyazaki 27). The *nycticorax* (night raven), which appears in the *Physiologus*, is often

considered to be an owl, and later bestiaries refer to owls under entries for *noctua*, *bubo*, and *ulula* (Miyazaki 27). The nocturnal habits of the *nycticorax* and *noctua* are compared with followers of Judaism because, according to Christians, Jews reject the light of Jesus Christ (Miyazaki 27). But owls can also represent any human sinner, regardless of religion; this generalization appears in Hugh of Fouilloy's *Aviarium*, a bird-only text that was "often excerpted or incorporated in its entirety into the bestiaries" (Miyazaki 27; Mann 24–25). While the bestiary entries for *nycticorax* and *noctua* focus on the owl's nocturnal nature, the *bubo* owl is portrayed as sinful because of "its abominable foulness and idleness" (Miyazaki 27–28). Even too many feathers on a *bubo* could be equated "to an excess of flesh" and to the sin of the flesh, lust (Syme 170). Furthermore, the owl is known as a filthy animal who lives in its own excrement, and this filth correlates to spiritual unhappiness (Syme 172). Other birds therefore mob owls during the day because they recognize the owl's sinful nature (Miyazaki 28). Finally, the *ulula*'s ominous cry is not only a warning of impending doom, but its screeches "symbolize the wailing of the sinner in hell" (Miyazaki 28). It is not revealed which type of owl is debating in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, but this lack of classification does not matter because the nightingale uses all these characteristics to try and prove her superiority. An understanding of the various owl entries in the medieval bestiary enhances the readers' understanding of the nightingale's argument. The nightingale is criticizing natural characteristics that the owl cannot change, but the overlapping content with the bestiaries' entries implies that the owl character in the poem is unholy.

While the bestiary tradition presents a thorough critique of the owl, the nightingale has a wider and more flattering literary reputation because of her defining feature, her song. The nightingale is generally positively associated with her song, despite the owl's criticism of it in the poem (Heck and Cordonnier 384). The nightingale defends her singular talent to the owl by

citing a different beast literature genre: Marie de France's fable in which a cat utilizes his singular trick of climbing to escape being killed by hounds, while the fox's many tricks fail to protect him from the hounds (Mann 180). Her song might be her only distinguishing feature, but this nightingale says it is valuable, and medieval poets seem to agree with her. Even though the nightingale is absent from early Latin medieval bestiaries and the *Aviarium*, she does appear frequently in medieval poetry (Pfeffer 89–90; Mann 156). When bestiaries do include the nightingale, they portray her as “a sign of maternal devotion, calmly rest[ing] in a nest raised above the ground into the sky, nourishing its young with its voice, its singing” (Syme 165). This presentation agrees with St. Ambrose's observation that the nightingale sings while sitting on her eggs (Pfeffer 90). However, the song of the nightingale “is remarkable only during its mating season in the spring” (Pfeffer 93). Yet, having a short mating season from April to June, and therefore a limited time to sing, does not negatively affect the nightingale's reputation (Pfeffer 88). Instead, it contributes to her reputation: “Despite the differences [across the world] in species and geography, all authors recognize the nightingale for its song, and all associate the bird with spring” (Pfeffer 88). This generalization confirms that the birds' reputations were prevalent in medieval society “from a multitude of sources, some textual, some visual, some word of mouth,” and not exclusive just to the bestiary tradition (Hassig, “Introduction” xi). Therefore, it should not be assumed that *The Owl and the Nightingale* poet strictly relied on the bestiary tradition to craft his birds. But the bestiary entries reinforce the debate's contents; these birds' medieval reputations were prevalent, or at least familiar to the poet. *The Owl and the Nightingale* poet continues the tradition of recognizing the nightingale for her natural song and literary association with love, but also forces her to defend it. Mann logically claims that *The Owl and the Nightingale* uniquely joins two bird species “whose literary genealogies had for the

most part run on quite separate lines” (150). These different genealogies heighten the juxtaposition of the sinful owl and the melodic nightingale debating in the poem.

2. Introducing the Hierarchy of Nature

The Parliament of Fowls and *The Owl and the Nightingale* are worthy of comparison not only because they both contain debates, but also for their different manifestations of nature, which can be organized into a hierarchy. Chaucer’s Nature character rules over the parliament at one end of this hierarchy. She is initially described by the narrator as “queene,” “noble goddesse,” and “emperesse,” in accordance with her Goddess Natura ancestry (Chaucer, lines 298, 303, 319). Before Nature addresses the birds for the first time, the narrator refers to her as God’s “vicaire” and then mentions her role in maintaining balance between “hot, cold, hevye, lyght, moyst, and dreye” (379–80). Nature has a clear place below God and above nature, or at least above temperature and humidity, before the parliament begins. Again, this placement is appropriate given the evolution of the Goddess Natura tradition under Christianity. The owl and the nightingale perch on the other end of the hierarchy from Nature. Without a formal Nature character in their poem, the owl and the nightingale present their own natural characteristics. The birds cannot and do not want to deviate from these natural characteristics; instead, they defend them over the course of their debate, like the nightingale with her song. However, as the parliament and debate proceed in each poem, their mutual focus on humanity becomes clear. Indeed, these poems could not fully present the hierarchy of nature without the human element. Humans can be positioned in the middle of the hierarchy with God and Nature above them, whereas animals are subordinate to humans, in accordance with the Genesis creation story. By including the Goddess Natura character in *The Parliament of Fowls* and echoing bestiaries in *The*

Owl and the Nightingale, these poems primarily rely on opposite ends of the hierarchy of nature to concentrate on humanity.

3. Nature as Setting in *The Owl and the Nightingale*

The inanimate, natural setting in each poem should coexist with the birds in the lowest tier of the hierarchy of nature. The narrator of *The Owl and the Nightingale* simultaneously introduces the birds and their roosts in the first 28 lines of the poem. The narrator uncovers the birds “in a summer-valley, in a / really out-of-the-way retreat,” as translated by Neil Cartlidge (*The Owl and the Nightingale*, lines 1–2).² Furthermore, each bird has her own habitat within this retreat. The nightingale sits within a dense hedge among flowers and reeds, adjacent to a field (13–20). Wealthy medieval families kept songbirds, including nightingales, in cages to enjoy their songs (Heck and Cordonnier 384). The nightingale in the poem has procured a cage from nature. Meanwhile, the owl lives in an old tree stump covered in ivory (lines 25–28). These descriptions of the hedge and tree by the narrator are strikingly intertwined with references to the birds’ songs. Protected by her hedge, the nightingale sings like a “harpe & pipe” (22). And the owl performs “hire tide,” which Cartlidge translates as “her hours,” from the tree (26). These differing roosts enable each bird to perform her song, as perceived by the narrator. The two birds will also conduct their debate from these respective posts. This brief interpretation by the narrator binds the birds with their secluded natural setting.

The owl and the nightingale also use setting details to evaluate each other during their debate. The nightingale includes the seasons when she says, “A wintere þu singest wrope &

² Both Middle and Modern English translations from *The Owl and the Nightingale* are from Neil Cartlidge, ed. and trans., *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation* (Liverpool UP, 2001).

zomere: / An eure þu art dumb a sumere,” which Cartlidge translates as, “In winter you sing grimly and / dolefully, but in the summer you’re / completely dumb” (415–16). The nightingale, on the other hand, claims that she “bring[s] joy / entirely when I arrive” in the spring, as Cartlidge translates (433–36). Her proof is the newly bloomed lily and rose welcoming her (434–50). She has a reciprocal relationship with these flowers; she provides them happiness with her singing and their blooming response confirms her excellence. The nightingale’s song has been immortalized in medieval poetry by her human listeners, but this nightingale extends the effects of her song to inanimate, albeit living, objects. While the nightingale capitalizes on her song, the owl presents a unique perspective on the nightingale’s home, as translated by Cartlidge:

When you come to mankind’s
dwellings, it’s next to the hedges and
the thick weeds, where the thorns and
twigs are tangled together, just where
people go to do their business, that
you hang about and where you make
your home. You avoid other places
where it’s clean. (585–90)

The owl’s filthy reputation, which is included in medieval bestiaries, is being extended to the nightingale. This imagery is certainly less attractive than the flowering hedge that the narrator initially described the nightingale as occupying. The owl then describes her own home as “warm in winter and cool in summer. / When my house stands green and / bright, there’s nothing of yours visi- / ble,” as translated by Cartlidge (621–24). This description of a temperate home pleasantly enhances the narrator’s short account of the owl’s tree stump. It is visually appealing

with its ivy cover, unlike the nightingale's unsavory home. Each bird argues for the value in her song or home based on their shared surroundings. Singing and nesting may be instinctive behaviors for real birds, but this owl and nightingale use them as a basis of comparison. Furthermore, singing and nesting are natural behaviors that cannot be changed. Just as the narrator made their perches significant to the birds' initial descriptions, the birds themselves also incorporate their silent setting, especially plants, into their debate.

4. Nature as Setting in *The Parliament of Fowls*

Meanwhile, Chaucer's narrator also provides a description of setting in his dream in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Once Chaucer's human narrator falls asleep and meets his dream guide, he is "unto a gate broughte, / Ryght of a park walled with grene ston," and he must choose which side of this gate to enter (121–22). One side of the gate says it hides a paradise where "grene and lusty May shal evere endure," while the other side is much less pleasant, where "nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere" (130, 137). After his dream guide helps him choose the former gate, the narrator presents the contents of the garden in a series of lists, starting with its trees. Gillian Rudd cites this tree-filled stanza in her ecocritical study to argue that "for Chaucer trees are primarily a resource, whether literally as timber or in literary terms, as the raw material for rhetorical display" (67). Furthermore, according to Rudd, the wide variety of trees cited by the narrator could not grow together in real life (68). However, this poem is a dream vision; it does not purport to be real. Rudd argues that "the trees are denied actuality even as their physical presence is invoked: it simply does not occur to Chaucer to celebrate the trees as splendid living entities in themselves" (68). Rudd's dissatisfaction with these trees arises because their value is dependent on human opinion, as embodied by the narrator's description of them. But this list of trees is Chaucer's first attempt to present the "grene and lusty May" that the gate promised (line

130). The narrator goes on to briefly describe a river, flowers, fish, and even the air temperature in the garden (184, 186, 188, 204). Meanwhile, Lisa J. Kiser succinctly interprets the dream in this poem as a dramatization of the narrator's desire and inability to write his own poem (43, 46). Kiser therefore claims that the trees "seem to have been created with art in mind, for each is either described as the raw material for some future craftsman's project or assigned a conventional symbolic meaning such as might be useful to a poet or a painter" (47–48). Despite Rudd's disapproval, both she and Kiser agree that the tree stanza itemizes a human resource, whether Chaucer's or his narrator's. The narrator in *The Owl and the Nightingale* identifies the hedge and the tree, but never associates them with himself. They are left to the birds, thereby broadening the lower level of the hierarchy of nature to include animate and inanimate living things. The levels within the hierarchy of nature are trespassed much more quickly in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Trees are included as part of the setting in the garden, but these trees are significant for the human narrator, rather than for the birds.

As Chaucer's narrator continues his journey through the garden, the theme of unfulfillment first presented among the trees will reappear among the subsequent list of mythical figures, and finally, among the bird parliament. Rudd finds the trees detrimentally lacking authenticity, while Kiser indicates that they have not yet reached their full potential. These critics reveal the problem of unfulfillment in the trees' descriptions. With the inanimate setting established, the narrator continues to wander, and he finds mythical figures from Cupid to Venus loitering in the garden (lines 211–94). He lists off each character he sees, and sometimes provides a short description. They seem to blend into the landscape, starting with Cupid "[u]nder a tre, besyde a welle" (211). He passes Plesaunce, Delyt, and Desyr, among other characters, and enters a temple (218, 224, 227). Except for the unnamed women dancing in front of the temple,

these characters are defined by inaction (232–36). At least the trees have potential; Cupid’s bow lies at his feet (213). Inside the temple, the narrator finds Venus “in a prive corner in disport” and “on a bed of gold she lay to reste” (260, 265). The goddess of Love is lounging. This character list overall includes many figures who are commonly associated with love. Kiser claims that this lack of “proper amatory action” by the figures corresponds to the narrator’s unfulfilled desire to be a poet (50). Narrator aside, these figures continue the theme of unfulfillment first presented by the trees, but it has evolved into sexual unfulfillment. The figures therefore foreshadow the trouble that the female eagle will encounter during the parliament. If the gods of love do not love in this paradise, what chance do the birds have of finding love? Without their amatory actions, the mythical figures are cast as part of the garden setting. This part of the poem is the first time that the highest, divine tier of the hierarchy of nature is equated with the natural world of the lowest tier.

5. Nature as Character in *The Parliament of Fowls*

After the narrator leaves the temple, he encounters Nature, and his description of her finally shows a character with agency over her surroundings, in accordance with the hierarchy of nature. She is the culmination of the tree-filled landscape and the mythical figures that the narrator encounters before her. Furthermore, the earlier presentation of the mythical figures makes Nature’s appearance seem credible. The narrator reports:

And in a launde, upon an hil of floures,
Was set this noble goddesse Nature.
Of braunches were here halles and here boures
Iwrought after here cast and here mesure;
Ne there nas foul that cometh of engendrure

That they ne were prest in here presence

To take hire dom and yeve hire audyence. (lines 302–08)

Nature controls both her animate and inanimate surroundings. Venus has her temple and Nature has her glade, but the previously described mythical figures lack the engagement with the garden that the narrator describes here of Nature. This relationship between Nature and the garden is especially appropriate because she is Nature in nature. This description parallels how *The Owl and the Nightingale*'s narrator finds the owl and the nightingale inside the tree and hedge, respectively. Despite this description, Rudd maintains that this garden is ruled by human concerns (69). A human poet has walled it up and stocked it with an unrealistic combination of trees and figures (Rudd 69). Nature's commanding introduction will be diluted when the birds introduce love, which is a human concern, in the parliament. But before the birds speak, Nature's introduction has righted the hierarchy of nature. She rules over the plants and the birds of the lowest tier, and she has captivated the human narrator.

When Nature finally speaks to address the bird assembly, she also places herself above their ranks and explains her influence over them. Nature first directs each bird "to take his owne place, / As they were woned alwey fro yer to yeere, / Seynt Valentynes day, to stonden there" (lines 320–22). This parliament is a ritual. Unlike the owl and the nightingale, the bird parliament does not need to be associated with the other natural structures in the garden because they have Nature herself. The birds settle in groups according to their own avian hierarchy, ranging from the birds of prey to worm-eating birds to water-dwelling birds, and finally to the seed-eating birds (323–29). Then, the narrator presents his third and final descriptive list of the different species of birds from within these groups (330–71). After they have taken their places, Nature provides more context for the gathering:

Ye knowe wel how, Seynt Valentynes day,
By my statut and thorgh my governaunce,
Ye come for to cheese – and fle youre wey –
Youre makes, as I prike yow with plesaunce;
But natheles, my ryghtful ordenaunce
May I nat lete for al this world to wynne,
That he that most is worthi shal begynne. (386–92)

Rudd briefly mentions that a common ecocritical concern is “whether nature (or Nature) is seen in hierarchical terms or as made up of a vast array of different things each equally worthy” (5). This entire parliament is defined by hierarchy from how the birds are physically arranged to the order in which they can choose their mates. And Nature leads them from the top of the larger hierarchy of nature. Nature decrees that the most worthy bird is the eagle, and the other birds will be able to choose their mates after him (lines 393–406). However, each female bird must also agree to the match (407–10). Nature may have gathered the birds together and instilled them with the need to mate, but the choice and acceptance of their mate is delegated to each individual bird.

6. The Appearance of Love and the Resulting Debate in *The Parliament of Fowls*

Nature’s order falters when three male eagles vie to be chosen as the loving mate of the one female eagle. The first royal male eagle explains how his heart has chosen the female eagle, and he will die if she does not reciprocate his love (416–41). This proclamation causes the female eagle to turn red, and she is unable to speak (442–48). Then another male eagle “[o]f lower kynde” says he loves her just as much, if not more, than the first eagle, and that he has loved her longer (449–62). Finally, a third eagle claims that he will be her truest love, whether asleep or awake, until his death (463–90). The female eagle must therefore choose between

eerily similar arguments of love. The eagles alter the hierarchy of nature with their presentations of love; they have interjected feelings from the middle, human tier into their lowest tier of nature. The eagles' pleas of love also equalize them among the birds of prey. The two eagles of lower standing are made seemingly interchangeable with the first noble eagle. Salisbury explains, "In medieval society, it was noble to be a predator" (102). This characterization helps explain Chaucer's choice of the eagle, a predator, as the worthiest bird. But these eagles also allow Chaucer to immediately introduce the human concern of love into a parliament that has been strictly natural, with Nature ruling over nature. Eagles are a bird species not commonly associated with love in literature. Instead, songbirds, such as the nightingale, appear in medieval courtly literature in relation to love (Heck and Cordonnier 384). The whole of the hierarchy of nature is disturbed by the eagles acting like humans.

Chaucer's male eagles are not only unique among literary eagles in their feelings, but the female eagle is also uniquely characterized. The female eagle is mentioned by the narrator before Nature speaks to the parliament because she is sitting on Nature's hand. The female eagle is described, "of shap the gentilleste / That evere she among hire werkes fond, / The moste benygne and the goodlieste" (lines 373–75). "She" refers to Nature, so the female eagle's description here is Nature's impression of her. These descriptors could also be applied to a human character. In medieval beast literature, the eagle is positively portrayed as "the king of birds, due to its strength," while it is simultaneously feared as a hunter "capable of carrying off livestock and even infants" (Heck and Cordonnier 140). Medieval bestiary entries focus on the eagle's impressive physical qualities, including its vision, flight, and beak (Heck and Cordonnier 141). The beak of Chaucer's female eagle is described only as receiving kisses from Nature (lines 377–78). Medieval literature presents Chaucer with a bird at the top of the hierarchy of birds, a

ranking that he agrees with when Nature allows the eagles to mate first. Otherwise, Chaucer largely rejects this characterization of eagles as powerful predators; instead, his eagles are courtly lovers. Unfortunately, the female eagle's choice between indistinguishable claims of love overwhelms her natural urge to mate. The male eagles have inserted a human element between Nature's governance and their mating ritual. Two hierarchies are therefore impacted by the male eagles' love and the female eagle's indecision. Within the hierarchy of nature, the distinction between the lowest tier of nature, or at least the avian subset of it, and the middle human tier has become distorted. The male eagles' equalizing claims of courtly love also devalue the ruling birds of prey in the avian hierarchy and stupefy the female eagle.

The other groups of birds from the avian hierarchy interrupt the eagles, and Nature agrees that a representative from each group may advise them (491–525). It has become the responsibility of the other birds to try to rectify the hierarchy of nature, along with Nature. The debate ensues when each representative presents a different interpretation of love. The falcon first suggests a “batayle” to determine the winning suitor because the three male eagles' proclamations of love cannot be measured or compared (533–39). The goose then endorses the theory that “there are plenty more fish in the sea,” which the spearhawk interrupts to mock (562–74). The turtledove endorses everlasting love, even if one of the pair dies, and the duck interrupts to criticize that reasoning (582–93). The goose says he agrees with the duck (594–95). The falcon chimes in to say that the goose does not know what love is (596–602). The cuckoo expresses his desire to mate and says the birds who cannot choose should remain single, instead of wasting everyone's time (605–09). The merlin then condemns the cuckoo's murderous nature and says it might be better if he is forced to remain single (610–16). The debate transitions from opinions about love to criticism of the other bird species. These representatives' versions of love

are as varied as the species present. But this meager advice confirms that love is not natural among birds. Nature stops the debate after the merlin. She explains, “For sith it may not here discussed be / Who loveth hire best, as seyde the tercelet” (624–25). While Nature does not agree to the falcon’s suggested battle, she agrees with his sentiment that each eagle’s claim of possessing the greatest love is unmeasurable to determine a winner.

Nature is left as judge after she ends the debate, but she ultimately delegates the choice of winning mate to the female eagle. Nature decrees that the female eagle “[s]hal han right hym on whom hire herte is set, / And he hire that his herte hath on hire knet” (627–28). Apparently, desire is natural, or at least something that Nature can inspire within the birds, unlike love. Nature trusts the female eagle to make the final decision about her suitor, under her influence. But before the female eagle issues her decision, Nature advises her. She says that if she were Reason, instead of Nature, she would counsel the female to choose the first eagle because he is the best match (631–37). Nature’s choice of a winner from among the eagles and her support of the falcon’s advice from the debate confirms her capacity as judge at the top of the hierarchies, or at least her belief in occupying this top position. When the female eagle finally speaks, she acknowledges Nature’s supremacy before asking for a year hiatus before she has to choose her mate (638–51). Apparently, neither the debate nor Nature has convinced her heart to love. This ask by the female eagle concerningly undermines the very power that Nature has repeatedly claimed to have over the birds. However, Nature seems unconcerned and agrees to the year, stating, “I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide” (652). Nature ranks herself above those gods that lounge on the other side of the garden, but Nature’s commanding statements and authority have been undermined by the eagle’s choice, or lack thereof. The other birds are also unperturbed because they are now able to choose their mates, and they sing a roundel before flying away in

their pairs (666–94). *The Parliament of Fowls* ends when the narrator awakens from his dream and returns to his reading (695–96). The narrator, Nature, and the birds continue to act normally, even though the eagles' love has upended the hierarchical relationship between their species and Nature. Nature's righting of the hierarchy of nature at the beginning of the parliament is proven to be an allusion within the greater allusion of the garden. This dream garden is not natural, from the trees that benefit humans to the inactive mythical figures and finally to the parliament, where Nature fails to inspire all of the birds to mate. Instead, it is a beautiful place of unfulfillment, where not even the top of the hierarchy of nature, Nature herself, can be totally successful.

7. The Influence of Nature in *The Owl and the Nightingale*

Having explored the hierarchy of nature as exhibited in *The Parliament of Fowls*, we can now examine the manifestations of nature and humanity in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. This poem overall has significantly fewer characters than Chaucer's, with just the human narrator and title characters primarily attending the debate. The narrator's introduction in *The Owl and the Nightingale* summarizes the debate poem as centering on the birds' character and songs (7–12). The owl and the nightingale's noticeably different songs provide a natural point of contrast between them; this characteristic is similarly recognized in each bird's bestiary entries. But the characters of the owl and the nightingale are harder to evaluate. Their characters should be primarily guided by the natural instincts to survive and procreate, or at least a real bird's character would be. How can the owl and the nightingale be differentiated when they are both birds who possess the same instincts? These two fictional birds measure their character by human opinion. For example, following the narrator's introduction, but before the nightingale speaks for the first time to begin the debate, the nightingale thinks about how the owl is referred to as "lodlich & fule," "hateful and filthy," by people (32). This introduction of the owl

resembles the tone of the owl's bestiary entries. It is this combination of natural behaviors and human opinion presented by the birds that completes and complicates the hierarchy of nature within the poem.

It is important to remember that the material in bestiaries is believed to have been widely available in medieval society, and so the echoing of it in *The Owl and the Nightingale* could reflect the medieval mindset about certain animals more than prove any widespread prominence of the bestiary tradition (Hassig, "Introduction" xi). My reliance on the bestiary entries is twofold. These manuscripts have preserved medieval ideas about exactly the two birds that appear in this poem, and the contents of the bestiary entries parallel the judgements made by the owl and nightingale in the poem. Regarding the bestiary tradition, Christian Heck and Rémy Cordonnier explain, "Since the world was made for man and in his image, knowing about animals was one way of coming to know man" (81). The inverse occurs in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The birds use man's knowledge about them to know themselves and to argue for their own value. While the bestiary is not a natural history account, it includes natural characteristics, such as bird songs. These same characteristics are presented as the birds' authentic natures in the poem.

The Owl and the Nightingale includes nature in the poem by demonstrating how nature has control over the birds in the form of their natural behaviors. The nightingale speaks first to complain that the owl's presence negatively affects her ability to sing (lines 33–40). This complaint supports the narrator's claim that this debate is about the birds' songs. The owl responds and fantasizes about catching the nightingale in her claws, "then you'd sing a different / tune," but the nightingale is safe within her hedge (51–54). This threat of violence is a natural response from a predatory bird. The nightingale retorts with a detailed critique of the owl: the

owl is mobbed by other birds because she is a bully, she is unattractive in appearance, unnatural as a nocturnal bird, and dirty when she allows her babies to defecate in their nest (55–126).

These characteristics also appear in the owl's medieval bestiary entries. While these are unholy characteristics in the bestiary, they are framed in this poem as one bird objecting to the other's nature. Again, the owl responds to the nightingale with the threat of violence (150–52). Then the nightingale proposes a formal debate in order to “plead our cases in / decent language with propriety and / decorum,” as translated by Cartlidge, and the owl agrees (180–87). This discussion of the terms of their debate is the first time that the owl responds without the threat of violence. They have agreed to debate verbally, instead of physically settling their differences with violence.

8. The Appearance of Humanity and the Formal Debate in *The Owl and the Nightingale*

Each bird will continue to argue for her own natural behaviors. The nightingale starts their formal debate by reiterating the owl's nocturnal habits, including singing (215–52). The owl now responds to each of the nightingale's earlier claims against her in lines 253 to 390. She says she cannot deny her fierce nature, which other birds hate her for. She also has the chance to defend her song, which she says serves as an alarm clock “warning people to go about their / duties” in the morning, as translated by Cartlidge (326–30). The owl criticizes the nightingale's defining characteristic, her springtime song. She says that the nightingale cheapens her song by singing so frequently. Finally, the owl says that she has no problems seeing, and she can accompany men's armies because of her ability to see at night. These two bird species have fundamental and natural differences in their appearances, lifestyles, and songs. As their debate continues, the birds will continually reframe these same characteristics in different contexts.

In addition to the discussion of their natures, the owl and the nightingale invite humanity into their debate. When establishing the terms of the debate, the nightingale suggests “Maister Nichole of Guldeforde” as their judge (191). The owl accepts, but only after she verbally evaluates Nicholas, who used to be a bit wild (199–214). The owl ultimately decides that she does not feel that he will discriminate against her now in his maturity (199–214). A human seems an appropriate choice of judge for this debate between different bird species. The owl and the nightingale need a non-avian judge to determine the winner, just as Chaucer’s parliament had Nature as their judge. Since this poem lacks a dream context and mythical figures, a human judge is also a realistic choice for a realistic poem, talking birds aside. However, Master Nicholas is not physically present at all in the poem. Yet, both birds might be keeping him in mind because they continually support their statements by citing human maxims and proverbs, which they often attribute to King Alfred. These sayings use human wisdom to justify their arguments. The owl and the nightingale easily represent the lowest natural tier in the hierarchy of nature, but they choose to involve the middle tier of humanity in their debate about characteristics given to them by the top tier of nature.

The owl positively associates herself, including her diet and song, with human religion. When the nightingale explains her association with spring and the owl’s association with winter, the owl replies she would rather be associated with Christmas than with the lecherous activities that occur in the spring (473–92). Furthermore, she is present for people in their “time of need” in the winter (529–40). This mention of Christmas is just one example of how the owl draws correlations between herself and religion. She explains how she catches mice in churches and has learned from the services (603–12). She also manages to critique the nightingale’s appearance, home, and diet to conclude that she is useless (559–602). The nightingale responds that her

heavenly singing reminds human listeners about the kingdom of God (716–42). The owl retorts that the kingdom of heaven can only be reached through repentance, and her mournful song is therefore more appropriate to prepare her human listeners for heaven (854–900). The owl’s use of religion positively in her defense is ironic because she is an unholy bird in medieval bestiaries. The nightingale explains that the owl must hide from people, who will throw stones at the owl because her song predicts disaster (1111–29). The nightingale accuses the owl of gaining her foresight through witchcraft, which is certainly not an accepted medieval religion (1299–1301). And once the owl is dead, her body is used as a scarecrow. The owl will only confirm her wisdom of events to come and maintains that her knowledge of misfortune does not cause it (1213–54). What happens to humans is God’s responsibility and will; she is only the messenger (1255–56). Mariko Miyazaki claims, “*The Owl and the Nightingale* describes a dispute between the two birds in order to underscore the dichotomy between the monastic and secular life” (26). Critics may equate the owl with piousness, but she is clearly still an owl who is hunting mice and singing in the winter. She is a bird who uses human religion to assess and add value to the traits given to her by nature.

Unsurprisingly, the nightingale relies on her singular feature of her song to explain her influence over human love. The nightingale says that she likes to grace lovers with her presence. The owl retorts that she knows of an instance when the nightingale tried to lead a married woman astray, and her husband therefore laid a trap for the nightingale (lines 1043–66). The nightingale clarifies that the knight mistreated his wife, and when King Henry found out, he banished the knight and celebrated the nightingale for taking pity on the mistreated wife (1075–1104). The nightingale then expounds upon the role of her singing in marriage. She admits that she sings about love to women in lines 1337 to 1510. But, like the owl with her bad news, the

nightingale says she should not be held responsible for the effects if women listen to her song and then “love ill-advisedly” (1353–56). If the nightingale had the choice of listener, though, she prefers to sing to the maiden, rather than to a married woman. A young girl can learn that love is temporary from the nightingale’s short song. Since the nightingale does not sing and breed simultaneously, she also sets an example for the wife. The owl is then eager to claim her own usefulness to lovers and says that her song is meant for the wives unloved by their husbands (1518–23). One of Rudd’s ecocritical concerns includes “how far humans are regarded part of the world, how far set apart from it” (5). These birds certainly regard humans as part of their ecosystem. While Chaucer’s eagles claim to love like humans, the owl and the nightingale derive their value from helping humans in love or spirituality.

The debate ends when the owl responds to the earlier scarecrow accusation, and the nightingale focuses in on the humans’ perception of the owl’s death. She says that her body is helpful after death, while the nightingale’s death is useless to humans (lines 1607–34). The nightingale then claims victory in the debate because the owl is “boasting about your own dishonour,” as translated by Cartlidge, and admitting that humans hate her and want her dead (1635–52). The nightingale then sings to celebrate her victory and attracts other birds (1653–64). The owl accuses the nightingale of raising an army, and she responds with the threat of raising her own forces (1668–88). They momentarily revert to their natural tendencies of singing and violence. But the owl also reminds the nightingale of their agreement, and the wren agrees (1689–1738). The owl and the nightingale then fly off to repeat their debate to Nicholas (1781–91). The narrator reveals that they arrive at Nicholas’s, but he does not know the final decision of the debate (1791–94).

The owl and the nightingale never specify the winning terms when they establish the other terms of their formal debate, and their chosen human judge is not present to determine the winner or end the debate. This open-endedness has surely contributed to the wide variety of interpretations of this poem by critics. Meanwhile, Nature makes the goal of Chaucer's bird parliament explicit and offers her judgement, even though the female eagle does not ultimately agree. The owl and the nightingale each argue for a positive reputation for herself. Furthermore, they each provide examples of how their natural characteristics help the humans that they encounter gain love and religion. The deciding factor in the debate becomes the humans' perception of the birds. The owl and the nightingale can explain how she is helpful, but do humans feel the same way? Without Nicholas being present, the nightingale adopts human opinion to end the debate. Her opinion is the same hatefulness towards the owl that she was thinking about at the beginning of the poem. If medieval bestiaries can be believed, the medieval human's mindset condemns the owl, and the nightingale echoes this sentiment. The nightingale can claim that she has the better reciprocal relationship with humans, but her natural characteristics are not fundamentally different from the owl's. Therefore, the true winner from between the two birds needs to be decided by a non-avian judge. When the nightingale relies on her impression of the middle tier of the hierarchy of nature to claim her win, her self-proclaimed victory feels unnatural. Her privileging of human opinion completes the inversion of the hierarchy of nature in the poem. Human attitudes are ultimately privileged more in this debate than the natural avian characteristics instilled by nature.

9. Conclusion

The Owl and the Nightingale and *The Parliament of Fowls* each include all of the necessary elements for the hierarchy of nature: a governing Nature presence, human concerns,

and birds in a wooded setting. The contents of these poems are illuminated with the consideration of the Goddess Natura and medieval Latin bestiary traditions. Debra Hassig claims that “medieval bestiaries cannot be separated from their cultural milieu because they in fact played a significant role in its creation” (“Introduction” xvi). It is the same for these poems. Nature is initially presented as a ruling force in each poem. She convenes and judges Chaucer’s parliament, and she has instilled the owl and the nightingale with their characteristics and behaviors. But her rule is challenged when the birds privilege human emotions and opinions among themselves to win their contests. After all, the powerful pagan Goddess Natura character had been made extinct centuries before Chaucer populates his garden. Meanwhile, the medieval bestiary tradition condemns the owl and praises the nightingale’s song. The eagles, owl, and nightingale therefore straddle the medieval mindset of their poets and nature from the lowest tier of the hierarchy of nature. Heck and Cordonnier summarize that animals “served as both companions and mirrors held up to humanity” in medieval bestiaries (13). The birds in these poems are species that would have been familiar to medieval readers, but they also serve as mirrors by expressing human emotion and opinion to those same readers. When the birds embrace this duality in each poem, they upend Nature’s privileged position at the top of the hierarchy. Unfortunately, when the birds in *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *The Parliament of Fowls* embrace human opinion and human emotion, respectively, they do not succeed in their contests. The outcomes, or lack thereof, in these two poems signify that it is unnatural for the birds to privilege humanity over nature.

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