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BLOSSOM IN THE BREACH: SOME COMMENTS ON THE LANGUAGE OF SPRING IN *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*

By Elizabeth Williams

When we read the opening lines of *The Owl and the Nightingale* it is difficult to avoid the impression of being drawn into some disarmingly familiar territory. We know this summer valley, this nightingale singing on a blossoming bough: we have been here before in a score of poems, not all of them medieval. The pleasurable nature of the experience is, moreover, confirmed later in the poem, when the Nightingale herself finds a chance to play to the gallery on the same theme and takes full advantage of it (ll.433-46).

Material like this, particularly as the opening to a poem, seems almost too traditional to need annotation. The notes to E.G. Stanley's edition,¹ however, refer us to H.E. Sandison's classic monograph, *The "Chanson d'Aventure" in Middle English*,² as a reminder of one kind of poem which frequently begins in this way; and at the later lyrical outburst by the Nightingale J.W.H. Atkins³ quotes from a troubadour poem, the Latin debate of *Flora and Phyllis* and two of the Harley Lyrics. The range of these references draws attention to some (though not all) of the different kinds of composition that employ this spring material - debate, love-song and the semi-narrative *chanson d'aventure* - but it should not be overlooked that, of the parallels cited, all are either in languages other than English or are later than *O & N*. Our sense of familiarity is, in fact, largely an effect of hindsight: the English poet is indeed drawing on a tradition but it is not one that can yet be said to have established itself in the English language⁴ at this date. Even if *O & N* were composed as late as the 1260's, which seems to be about its upper limit (though a date towards the end of the twelfth century remains a possibility),⁵ then it still stands almost alone in English with regard to its genre and style, antedating any other debate,⁶ most major lyrics including those of MS Harley 2253,⁷ and the earliest extant example of *chanson d'aventure*.⁸ The conventions employed must then have reached the poet in some other language, presumably Latin or French, and we may well have in *O & N* one of the first appearances in Middle English of what is only later to become the familiar *reverdie*.

It may therefore be worthwhile to speculate a little on some of the forms in which the tradition may have been known to the English poet, and in the light of these to look more closely at his own use of it. Like all good conventions a *reverdie* gains usefulness by being used: seldom appearing for its own sake it generally serves as a prelude to something else, and through its frequent occurrence in particular contexts tends to arouse certain expectations in the

reader which the poet can rely on, to confirm or confound as he will. A fresh look at one or two of the contexts available in the first half of the thirteenth century may therefore provide some reminders about the literary background of *O & N*, which otherwise stands so much on its own, as well as drawing attention to the particular character of this pioneering example of *reverdie* in English.

By the period of *O & N* the principal context of *reverdie*, associating the fresh growth of spring with human love, has been established in Latin quite long enough to be usable in more than one way. The immediate impression of a "spring opening" is generally happy, but a contrastive function for the device is often found in poems that go on to describe a situation of pain or frustration. The spring idyll is therefore readily available as a counterbalance to something in quite different mood. Less immediately obvious is the further possibility that the *reverdie* itself may vary in tone, or in the selection of the elements that make up the description: spring, like love, can be viewed through spectacles of more than one colour.

The *locus classicus* for *reverdie* remains, however, the love-lyric, and one of its more familiar manifestations in this period is the French *pastourelle*, with its first-person narrator wandering romantically through a spring landscape and encountering a pretty girl. Poems of this kind can hardly have been unknown to the poet of *O & N* but they were presumably continental ones: *pastourelles* and *chansons dramatiques*⁹ are known in France from the later twelfth century¹⁰ but none is extant in English until the fourteenth, and an English provenance does not seem to have been suggested for any of the French examples.¹¹ We shall return to these, but it may be best to start by examining the *reverdie* tradition as it appears in the genre to which *O & N* strictly belongs, namely the debate, whose early appearance in England is not in doubt.

A spring-opening, however brief, is not unknown in Latin debates, particularly (and not surprisingly) in those which deal with vernal subjects, such as the Carolingian *Rose and Lily* of Sedulius Scottus,¹² or the later *Flora and Phyllis*,¹³ cited by Atkins. This latter belongs to the twelfth century, when debates were enjoying a vigorous revival, and is therefore closer to the time and (perhaps) the literary interests of the English poet. In it the opening description finds a later echo in the account of Love's paradise where the two debating maidens go for their verdict. They too are the subject of some elaborate description, and the poem is one of the earliest examples of a debate on the subject of whether a clerk or a knight makes the better lover, a topic which gives rise to a whole group of debate poems in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, chiefly in French.

These French clerk/knight debates may perhaps be seen as providing a kind of thematic link between the love-lyric, where the association of the vernal landscape with love and pretty girls is already established, and *O & N*, where the *reverdie* precedes a debate on subjects by no means unconnected with love though not restricted to them. The French poems also have features which suggest that they may have stood in a particularly close relationship to the

English one. The maidens, for instance, do their own debating, but they also have birds to fight as their champions, one of which is nearly always a nightingale (though the other is never an owl). Apart from some coincidence of subject-matter, however, there is also evidence that clerk/knight debates enjoyed at least some kind of a vogue in England in the thirteenth century, and therefore have a more objective claim to having formed part of the Owl-poet's own literary milieu. Of the texts published by Charles Oulmont,¹⁴ who studied the group as a whole, two are in Anglo-Norman, and one of these, *Le Geste de Blancheflour e de Florence*,¹⁵ which also exists in continental French versions, ends with the tantalizing and well-known stanza which implies that there was once actually a version in English:

Banastre en englois le fist,
E Brykhulle cest escrit
En francois translata. (427-9)¹⁶

(Banastre made it in English, and Brykhulle translated this writing into French.)¹⁷

The obvious interpretation of this is to assume a lost English poem as the direct source of the Anglo-Norman one. Professor Legge (p.335) suggests that it may alternatively point to a common original, perhaps in Latin, for both poems, but whatever the precise truth may be the lines are at least evidence for the existence of another debate poem not merely in England but in English in the thirteenth century,¹⁸ which helps to supply at least a partial context for *O & N*, which otherwise seems so unparalleled as a quality product in this genre and language at this date.

O & N opens, as has been noted, with a first-person reference that at least suggests the conventional opening of a *chanson d'aventure*. In *Blancheflour e Florence* the likeness is even closer:

L'autre hier m'en aloi jwant,
De mes amors rejoïssaunt,
Delez une prairie. . . (1-3)

(The other day I went out, amusing myself, delighting in my loves, beside a meadow . . .)

But this artlessness gives way at once to a spring description of exceptional elaboration, with set-piece lists of musical instruments, jewels, trees and birds to produce an ostentatious display of delights beneath which can still just be seen the classic *locus amoenus* with its requisite "charms of landscape", here used as a series of pegs on which the poet can parade the resources of his vocabulary. This technique could hardly be more different from the modest allusions in *O & N*, but it is nonetheless a logical, if extreme, development of a general tendency in these poems to present the landscape as an aspect of the courtly and aristocratic life-style, nature tamed for the delight of knights and ladies. The poem, however, stands apart from other clerk/knight debates in not featuring a nightingale, the maidens' champions being a lark (for Blancheflour and the cause of

clerks) and a popinjay (for Florence and knights). Uniquely also the knight is adjudged the superior lover, one of the objections to the love of clerks being that a connection *sans esposailles* (173) is shameful, an interesting suggestion of a preference for a respectable rather than a purely romantic connection, though it is also clear that the low social status of clerks weighs quite as heavily with Florence as their regrettable celibacy.

The "courtly" concerns of the poem go only so far. Comment has been made on the blunt language used by the maidens in their argument. Florence, for instance, remarks that a clerk eats like a pig (185), which *Blancheflour* counters by drawing attention to the disagreeable duty of treating wounded knights with hot dung poultices (224-31). The actual language is not all that bad: the point is not so much that the maidens are swearing as that they are naming villainous objects, but nonetheless this is one of the features which led Oulmont to judge the Anglo-Norman clerk/knight debates as more "réalistes" than the French ones, ascribing the difference to the demands of "le tempérament anglais" (p.79). He also points out that in *Blancheflour e Florence* the maidens' bird-champions fight for them in natural bird-fashion, with beak and claws and feathers flying.¹⁹ Whether or not we call this "realistic", parallels are suggested with the threats of violence made by both birds in *O & N*, as well as with the "shitwords" they use to each other.

There is of course no particular reason to assume specific influence here on the English poem. Indeed, if anything the Anglo-Norman piece is the later of the two,²⁰ but the dung poultices at least are mentioned also in the other Anglo-Norman clerk/knight debate, *Melior et Ydoine*,²¹ and according to Kathryn Hume (p.37) "unlaundered language" is characteristic of debates on other subjects too. What is useful here, on the most general level, is the Anglo-Norman provenance, supplying a useful indicator of what was possible in debate poetry in thirteenth-century England. And even though the presentation of the spring environment in *Blancheflour e Florence* is elaborate to the point of pretentiousness the conduct of the dispute undoubtedly reveals a concern with the practicalities of life, adding a robust undercurrent to the brilliance of the setting and the surface elegance of the two females who use it to squabble in. The contrastive function of the *reverdie* is thus particularly marked, with the crudities kept apart from the landscape which remains exceptionally courtly and unsullied.

Not all Anglo-Norman debates are on the clerk/knight question and not all present the spring setting with this degree of elaboration, even though the idyllic flavour is retained. Another poem which may stand quite close to *O & N* is Chardry's *Le Petit Plet*, a debate between Youth and Age which is dated by its most recent editor "in the later years of the twelfth century or the early years of the thirteenth",²² and may well therefore be exactly contemporary with the English poem. Indeed, the relationship between the two may be even closer, since of the three known manuscripts of *Le Petit Plet* two also contain *O & N*.²³ Again, we cannot assume that the Owl-poet knew the Anglo-Norman poem but, even more than with *Blancheflour e Florence*, it seems not unreasonable to see them as products of the same milieu.

The opening lines of *Le Petit Plet* seem at once far closer in tone to the English poem, an effect not wholly to be ascribed to the fact that they are both in octosyllables, a much more usual metre for French debates than the stanzas of *Blancheflour e Florence*. The whole introduction of subject and contestants is similar in directness, and even perhaps in phraseology:

Beau duz seignurs, por vus dedure
 Vus cunterai un esveisure
 De un veillard e de un enfant
 Ki se entredalierent tant
 De juvente e de veillesce,
 De jolifté e de peresce,
 Chescun mustra sa grevance,
 Sa eise u sa mesestance:
 Si fu le estrif mult delitius
 Del veillart e del jofne tus. (1-10)

(Fair sweet sirs, to divert you I will relate an amusing tale about an old man and a boy who argued a great deal about youth and age, frivolity and indolence. Each aired his grievances, his comfort and his trouble: the conflict of the old man and the young lad was most enjoyable.)

There is no spring introduction here, and no "As I rode out" formula, but as the poet's interest concentrates on the young man we find him in fact setting out in very much the manner of the hero of a *chanson d'aventure*, supplying a kind of second start²⁴ for the poem as the setting is established:

Un vaslet, ki mult esteit pensif
 E de divers pensers sutif,
 S'esbaneout par aventure
 Por joie aver e enveisure . . . (21-4)

(A young man, who was very thoughtful and subtle in various ideas, was seeking diversion by chance to find delight and pleasure . . .)

In due course he reaches the predictable location:

Mes por tolir mauveis penser
 Se mist tut sul en un verger . . . (45-6)
 . . .
 Par le verger e sa e la
 Icest vaslet itant ala
 Ke il choisi une funtaine
 Dunt l'ewe esteit e clere e seine.
 La surse esteit e nette e bele
 Ke rouleout cele gravele,
 Si fu la noise duce e sutive,
 Si resemblout ben chose vive.
 Trestut entur fu l'erbe drue
 Estencelee de flur menue,

E si esteint li arbre haut,
 Ke ja si grant ne fust le chaut
 Ke nul en fust gueres grevee,
 Ja si chaut ne fust l'estee.
 Les oiseals de meinte manere
 Se acosteient a la rivere;
 Por le verdur e por la flur
 Mult chantoient a grant duçur. (55-72)

(But to be rid of worrying thought he went all alone into an orchard . . . Through the orchard on this side and that this youth went walking until he noticed a fountain whose water was clean and wholesome. The spring was pure and fair as it tumbled the pebbles, and the noise was sweet and subtle: it seemed just like a living thing. All around the grass was flourishing, dotted with little flowers, and the trees were so high that, however great was the heat, no one was at all oppressed by it, no matter how hot the summer was. Birds of many kinds gathered by the river; they sang for the greenness and the flowers, abundantly and with great sweetness.)

Unlike the elaborate setting of *Blancheflour e Florence* this description does not actually open the poem, but it undoubtedly starts it on its way, and with passages like this available in debate poems it begins to seem as if what is sometimes regarded as the characteristic opening to a *chanson d'aventure* is far from peculiar to it. As we have seen, the evidence for the existence of *chanson d'aventure* in England at this time is in fact very meagre, though this does not mean that the Owl-poet did not know French examples: literary historians²⁵ seem to treat debate and lyric as close relations, so perhaps to know one was to stand a good chance of knowing the other.²⁶ At all events, as far as the actual form of the opening goes, we hardly need to assume direct knowledge of pastoral lyrics to account for the presence in *O & N* of a *reverdie* associated with a first-person narrator and acting as prelude to an overheard dialogue or complaint: the poet could have found this also in debate. Where the special legacy of *pastourelle* may perhaps be distinguished is in the subtler area of the expectations aroused by the form: in particular, in *chanson d'aventure* there is a far greater certainty that a romantic encounter will follow, a certainty that can in due course come to be played on.

It was suggested above (pp.164-5) that the clerk/knight debates might be seen as forming a thematic link between an older lyric tradition and *O & N*: if an actual process of development is involved, the conventions of *pastourelle* already established in French, including a strong dialogue element as well as a spring opening, could easily merge with the more learned traditions of Latin debate, where the spring opening is also not unknown, to produce a fully-fledged contention, sometimes retaining the pastoral connection with matters of love and marriage, as the clerk/knight poems do, sometimes making use of the wider range of subjects found in the debate genre proper, as in *O & N*. Even the romantic expectations of *pastourelle* could

thus be carried over into debates. To see just how close the openings of the two kinds of poem are we can make use of Dr Sandison's summary of the features that usually mark the start of a *chanson d'aventure*:

The manner in which the French poet ushers himself upon the scene is traditional. As a rule he mentions the day, usually *l'autrier* or *l'autre jour* ["the other day"], and the hour, regularly near dawn; he names or suggests the season (almost always *le douz tens nouvel* ["the sweet fresh season"]), often investing it with much grace . . . He appears alone, riding, or . . . walking, by a wood or along a meadow-side, *lons de gent* ["far from people"]; he is *pensis chief enclin* ["pensive, head bowed"] or . . . *dedusant, juant* ["amusing himself"] . . . When he chances to catch a glimpse of a fair shepherdess or a *dame* ["lady"] who sits *tote soule* ["all alone"] under a tree, or to hear a bit of her song . . . he must pause . . . to observe and perhaps to describe the woman's beauty . . .²⁷

In this the parallels with the Anglo-Norman debates considered above are marked, and the association of the spring setting with love and maidens explicit. The essential linking feature is the leisurely and pensive young wanderer: without him we might simply have the classic *locus amoenus*, but with him the anticipations of a romantic encounter become far stronger. The two clerk/knight debates might be said actually to fulfil these: the first-person narrator appears, however vestigially, as the solitary wanderer, and overhears not one but two maidens discussing love. On the purely structural level the distinction between debate and *chanson d'aventure* here seems very fine.

With *Le Petit Plet* we have moved a little further from the pastoral lyric but the connection is still discernible. The wanderer is now no longer the narrator but one of the contestants, though his pensive association with the spring landscape remains suggestive, and his winning position at the end keeps the sympathies of the debate at least on the side of youth. Any romantic expectations engendered by the opening, however, are given a different turn, the old man articulating a position in pregnant contrast with the normal subject-matter of *chanson d'aventure*. But if the topics for discussion here extend well beyond those of youth, love and marriage these are by no means ignored, though they receive a still further twist when even the young man's views are found to be not wholly romantic: Professor Legge has drawn attention to his anti-feminist outburst (at 1.1212 ff.) "which accords not too well with the rest of his argument" (p.198). Once again, then, we have a non-idyllic undercurrent, but it is of a different character from the waspish and even vulgar aggressiveness of Florence and Blancheflour. It is more bookish, wider-ranging, more serious, but it is still confined to the dialogue: the setting may not be associated so explicitly with the courtly life-style, but it still retains its spring perfection, untouched by any of the contrasting issues, whether the old man's or the youth's.

Against the background of poems like these we find that the

setting in *O & N* is much less fully described, but such as it is it centres first on the poet, the elusive but essential *ich* of the opening lines:

Ich was in one sumere dale;
In one suþe diþele hale . . . (1-2)

Thinking for the moment in terms of the evocative machinery of *chanson d'aventure* we find in this brief compass the proper season and the seclusion, as well as the poet, who is shortly to hear not a maiden but a nightingale singing:

Ho was þe gladur uor þe rise,
& song a uele cunne wise.
Bet þuþte þe dreim þat he were
Of harpe & pipe þan he nere . . . (19-22)

We have already seen that birds feature strongly in clerk/knight debates. Birdsong also enhances the setting of *chanson d'aventure*,²⁸ and Dr Sandison even cites an example where a nightingale, rather than a maiden, utters the complaint.²⁹ The coincidence of poet, spring, secluded spot and even overheard nightingale can therefore be paralleled in both genres, so, as far as the actual items chosen for inclusion are concerned, the Owl-poet could have found the model for his opening in either. If, however, there is any question of his seeking to exploit, or invert, the expectation of a romantic encounter, it must have been *chanson d'aventure* that established that expectation.

There is one other point at which the style of the *reverdie* in a *chanson d'aventure* may be a little different from that found in the Anglo-Norman debates, particularly *Blancheflour e Florence*: what we have identified as a "prosaic undercurrent" is not so strongly marked in *chanson d'aventure*, partly because the spring setting is not presented to the same extent as an aspect of courtly life, and the social status of the encountered maiden is usually lower: as Dr Sandison indicates, she is just as likely to be a shepherdess as a *dame*. From such speakers blunt comments do not come with the same shock if they complain, as they sometimes do, of the infidelities of men, or the more general shortcomings of their husbands. A decidedly forthright tone is, for instance, heard in the earliest *chanson d'aventure* extant in English, where the *litel mai* roundly consigns her faithless lover to the worms: "The clot him clingge!"³⁰ This sort of thing does not jar with the scenery in the same way as Blancheflour's notorious dung-poultices, which are deliberately and gratuitously squalid. As always, however, no matter what the *dramatis personae* may say, the setting itself remains fresh and unpolluted, containing only the prettiest appurtenances of spring, trees, birds and blossoms: a place to idle rather than to toil in.

Now, on the face of it, the opening couplet of *O & N* seems very close to the formula of *chanson d'aventure*. Of the other debates examined *Blancheflour e Florence* is the only one that is equally close, but the unassuming start there leads into a scene of al fresco elegance far removed from the usual pastoral lyric. The artless

charm of the picture in *Le Petit Plet*, however, shows that an unpretentious approach is possible in debate also, and with that close, contemporary parallel before us we have no reason not to expect a similar sketch of rural prettiness from the Owl-poet, whichever tradition he is following. When he turns his attention to the Nightingale this expectation seems to be fulfilled, as he surrounds her with appropriate trimmings:

De Nijtingale bigon þe speche
 In one hurne of one breche,
 & sat up one vaire boþe -
 Þar were abute blosme inoþe! -
 In ore uaste þicke hegge
 Imeind mid spire & grene segge.
 Ho was þe gladur uor þe rise,
 & song a uele cunne wise. (13-20)

. . .
 Þo stod an old stoc þarbisode,
 Þar þo Vle song hire tide,
 & was mid iui al bigrowe.
 Hit was þare Hule eardingstowe. (25-8)

A closer look at this passage, however, suggests that the setting is neither as conventional nor as homogeneous as it looks. For the first time here we have an indication that the unromantic alternatives, usually confined to the dialogue in both debate and *chanson d'aventure*, are here also a part of the landscape.

As the poet slips into the background to become the unobtrusive reporter of the ensuing debate, the prettiness of the Nightingale's setting, far from being a merely appropriate *mise-en-scène*, is also seen to have a thematic function, for the opposition of her blossoming twig and the Owl's *old stoc* is the base-line from which the two sides of the debate take off. This contrast goes much deeper than the simple antithesis of moods found in *chanson d'aventure*, where the beauty of spring adds point or poignancy to the lament of the maiden. *O & N* is actually structured around the split between the two sides of a debate, one of which, the Nightingale's, arises directly out of the romantic values of the traditional spring landscape. But the Owl is also a part of the landscape, and her ivied stump is not just an isolated blot on an otherwise artistic setting. Gothic decay had no charms for the real Middle Ages: the rural scene here carries its own counterblast to the escapism of idyllic charm. Twig and stump are the poles of the argument.

The symbolism of the birds' respective perches is a familiar point of critical comment;³¹ what may, however, be worth exploring further is the way the opposed values are intrinsic in the rest of the description also. The whole landscape is, in fact, not as close as it may seem to the traditional one, but a more specific, perhaps even a parodic, variation on it. In order to establish this we need a standard against which to judge. The usual features of the classic *locus amoenus* have been conveniently summarized by Curtius:

It is . . . a beautiful, shaded natural site. Its minimum ingredients comprise a tree (or several trees), a meadow, and a spring or brook. Birdsong and flowers may be added. The most elaborate examples also add a breeze.³²

Our simpler medieval examples, such as that in *Le Petit Plet*, may be seen to be in this tradition. The Owl-poet, however, though ostensibly dealing in boughs, blossoms and birdsong, is actually giving us a rather different picture. It is not just that there is no running stream, or that the site is a valley rather than a meadow or orchard. The blossom is very specifically located neither on the grass, nor on the ubiquitous *spray* of later poets, but on a hedge which is most particularly described: it is thick, partly because of its own natural growth, and partly because of the *spire & grene segge* growing up independently inside it. This is a long way from the standard *locus amoenus*: plants may be precisely named in such a description - indeed, *Blancheflour e Florence* includes an elaborate list of trees - but these are mere mundane reeds. This *dizele hale* does not bear the marks of a place tamed by the hand of man for man's (and woman's) delight: the hand of man may indeed have been at work in it, but more for use than pleasure.

The much-annotated word *breche* (14) is our best clue to the real nature of the spot. C.T. Onions' very full explanation³³ of the term marks it out as the kind of place that, far from being a pleasure, lies at the very edge of terrain man is reclaiming from the wild, "primarily a 'breach' made in a forest, that is, a clearing on one of its edges" (p.107).

Several things are notable here. First, the rarity of the word: this is the only example of a generic use recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (s.v. *brech(e)*, sense 6). All the other examples, the majority of which are thirteenth-century, are in place- and personal names (two of them, incidentally, compounded with *hurne*). Secondly, its particularity: far from belonging among the common descriptive terms of the *locus amoenus* it has a very specific use in local topography,³⁴ in quite a different league from *boje* and *blosme*. Thirdly, it is very much an agricultural term: this is not a garden but a bit of marginal land which man is painstakingly breaking up for cultivation, a clearance activity of which the Owl's *stoc* perhaps provides further evidence. Both birds therefore occupy sites which, while relating them on the one hand to the purely literary landscapes of romantic poetry, also place them in a more prosaic world of rural toil, poised, moreover, on the very boundary between the wild and the tame.

It is possible, though not as certain, that the *sumere dale* of the opening line is another place of this kind. Perhaps even more heavily annotated than *breche*, *sumere*'s problems are complicated by the fact that we may be meant to read it as a form of *sum*.³⁵ A "summer" reading would on the whole seem preferable, both contextually and syntactically, but if so it antedates the earliest recorded instance in OED of the Old English noun *sumer* used attributively. The earliest such use cited (in *Dame Sirith*) may not

be very much later than *O & N*, but the previous history of the word records it in largely pragmatic contexts, describing something in use, or available, only in summer. Old English noun compounds recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* and its various supplements³⁶ include *sumer-hæte* (and *-hat*), *sumer-lida*, *sumer-boc* (and *-rædingboc*) and *sumer-selde* (and *-hus*). To these we might add, from the rare examples OED records from c.1300, *summer('s)day*.³⁷ The weight of the evidence would therefore indicate that a *sumere dale* would be not merely a poetic "valley in summer" but an agricultural "valley used for summer grazing", as Dickins and Wilson show.³⁸

In *breche*, then, we seem to have an example of the poet, in his own voice and not that of one of his characters, electing to include in his setting an actual feature that is not especially poetic or romantic. *Sumere* has more claim to being a conventional reference to the appropriate season, but in association with *dale* it too may be seen as a term denoting agricultural function rather than evoking poetic atmosphere. The *vair* *boȝe*, *blosme* and *rise* surrounding the Nightingale are more usual features of the *locus amoenus*, and indeed, if we include the bird's song we have three of Curtius' desiderata, but we can hardly call the actual words conventional at this date, since we have so little in English to judge them by. "Bough" and "blossom" will undoubtedly become common later in similar descriptive contexts, sometimes alliterating together.³⁹ A "rise" will also become a very familiar place for finding flowers, especially the alliterating "rose",⁴⁰ but it is perhaps worth noting that this word also continued to be available in agricultural contexts as a term for prosaic twigs and brushwood.⁴¹

Blossoms, boughs and singing birds, then, while being perfectly acceptable features of the poetic landscape, are not here presented with quite the usual accompaniments. Against this background the hedge too acquires new significance. When the *chanson d'aventure* catches on in English the wanderer will be found riding *by grene wode*,⁴² and his maiden *under a bogh*,⁴³ which implies something more substantial than a hedge. The Nightingale's hedge, moreover, as we have seen, is not merely closely-observed but closely-woven and therefore efficient. Again it is a useful agricultural barrier rather than the artfully planted shade-trees round the grassy plot designed purely for dalliance. The Nightingale may have chosen to sing among blossom for aesthetic reasons but she does not hesitate to draw attention to its protective function as well, referring to her twig as a *castel gode* (175) and observing,

"3if ich me holde in mine hegge,
Ne reche ich neuer what þu segge." (59-60)

The usual literary context for hedges in early Middle English cannot really be established on the basis of Old English, as the *locus amoenus* occurs too infrequently there for just comparison,⁴⁴ but dictionary entries for both "hedge" (OE *hecg*) and "hay" (OE *hege*) produce a majority of references in such sources as charters and glosses to hedges as boundaries and defences, again isolating the practical function of a hedge as something that divides one man's property from another's, or marks the point where man's sphere of

influence stops altogether and nature takes over. The *spire* & *segge* growing up inside this particular hedge, moreover, carry a strong suggestion of water, perhaps another indication of the marginal nature of the land, as being awkwardly marshy. Is it, perhaps, also one more variant on the *locus amoenus* convention, an uncongenial transformation of the running brook? It is interesting, however, that the weeds are named at all: according to the dictionaries the only previous example of *spire*, "reeds", is in the OE *Leechdoms*, and the only subsequent examples recorded in this sense up to 1500 are in Bible translations. *Segge*, though apparently less rare, has a broadly similar range, in predominantly non-literary texts even after descriptions of the *locus amoenus* have become common. Clearly neither plant is in the common literary vocabulary, a far cry indeed from the ubiquitous rose and lily.

Rose and lily are not mentioned either in *Svmer is Icumen in*,⁴⁵ one of the very few secular lyrics which may come within the date-range allowed for *O & N*, albeit the very end of it. As it is also comparable in provenance⁴⁶ it is perhaps not without interest that this poem reveals an attitude to nature not unlike that outlined above. In the first stanza the purely botanical aspects of spring are generalised in the lines,

Groweþ sed and bloweþ med
And springþ þe wde nu. (3-4)

The second stanza, however, evokes something much more like the practical husbandry suggested by the *breche* and *hegge* of *O & N*: the actual presence of man is even less explicit than it is in the debate, but the lamb and calf are very much man's concern. As Edmund Reiss puts it, the poet's "visions and interests seem to be those of the farmer who looks around his plot of ground and knows that the health of nature contributes to his own well-being".⁴⁷

As for "Bulluc sterteþ, bucke uerteþ" (8), a slight doubt may hang over what precisely the buck may be doing⁴⁸ but the presence of the female animals makes it quite clear why both bullock and buck are feeling skittish. The line is in fact an excellent analogue to the Owl's later comment on spring fever:

Vor none dor no leng nabideþ,
Ac eurich upon oþer rideþ.
The sulue stottes ine þe stode
Boþ boþe wilde & merewode;
& þu sulf art þaramong,
For of golnesse is al þi song. (493-8)

The lyric however is notably free of moral comment on the situation. The opening of *O & N* also seems free of it, explicit comment like the above arising only later, but the initial spring description which is, on the surface, so artless, is not in fact quite devoid of premonitory hints. Just as Blanche flour makes the most of the squalid side of sick-nursing so the Owl takes care to strip the specious romantic allure from the poetic landscape, labeling courtship junkettings as mere *golnesse*. This severe view of

for contrast he shows it to be itself two-sided, the *spire* and *segge* growing up through the *rise*, allowing his two contestants to exploit each in turn, the romantic surface and the sweaty underside.

Like Nicholas of Guildford he can allow a warm response to the *wizte gente & smale* (204) in his summer valley, but he can also work the ground in a purely practical way for man's benefit so that *Hit is þe betere into Scotlonde* (1758). Like the wren, who can persuade the jangling birds to seek arbitration on the very verge of an armed confrontation, this secluded spot combines the advantages of wild origins and man-made discipline (1724-6). Implicit in it is the central concept of usefulness, that single stable criterion of judgement which provides almost the only fixed point around which the birds finally agree to argue, the standard they can both accept.

Several critics in the last few years have stressed the element of parody and burlesque in *O & N*.⁵² A fair bit of ruthless undercutting is clearly intrinsic to the debate genre, but the process needs to be described with care, since undercutting does not necessarily lead to total collapse. It is, for instance, a little misleading for John Gardner to claim that the beauty of the Nightingale's song is devalued by the *breche* of its setting:⁵³ the opening of the poem in fact maintains the two views of nature, the romantic and the agricultural, in precise balance and neither is toppled; it could as fairly be argued that the mundane *breche* is redeemed by its singer. As is usual in debate, it is left to the speakers to attempt the real toppling, which they do, the Owl grossly over-emphasising man's animal side, the Nightingale his sentimental.

This attempt to explore the tradition of the *reverdie* in thirteenth-century England in order to elucidate some of the reverberations of the opening of *O & N* may be thought to be approaching the position of Atkins, who identified the Nightingale firmly as the advocate of the new lyric traditions of France, and the whole poem as a literary comment. It is not the purpose of this article to put forward this or any other complete interpretation of *O & N*: literary associations, however, are undoubtedly exploited, and we may perhaps conclude with one final suggestion.

We have already seen how *chanson d'aventure* almost invariably leads up to an encounter with a pretty girl. It is not unknown for debate to do the same, or for the girl to be described, perhaps at some length. Researches into medieval rhetorical arts have now made us very familiar with the technique of describing a beautiful woman by means of the "descending catalogue".⁵⁴ Are our romantic expectations therefore meant to be given their first real knock when, instead of the usual pink and white damsel, we are presented with a nightingale's-eye-view of an owl?

Di bodi is short, þi swore is smal,
 Grettere is þin heued þan þu al;
 Þin eþene boþ colblake, & brode
 Riþt svvo ho weren ipeint mid wode.
 Þu starest so þu wille abiten
 Al þat þu mist mid cliure smiten.
 Þi bile is stif & scharp & hoked

Rigt so an ovvel þat is croked.
 Þarmid þu clackes oft & longe,
 & þat is on of þine songe.
 Ac þu þretest to mine fleshe,
 Mid þine cliures woldest me meshe. (73-84)

The catalogue, it is true, is not complete, and does not wholly stick to the descending order, but then it did not always do so, and the sequence of head/eye/beak is maintained. Significantly the claws are anticipated, sinisterly out of place in association with the beak, before recurring where they should be at the end.⁵⁵ This is indeed a portrait that concludes, as Geoffrey de Vinsauf recommends, *ad unguem*.⁵⁶ It might also be said to have begun with an inversion of the reference to Nature which occurs at the start of Geoffrey's specimen description: the Nightingale's first, and recurring, epithet for the Owl is *unwiht* (33, 90, 218), expressing her conviction that she is addressing something wholly unnatural.

Parody is strongly suggested by some of the detail. As usual English parallels tend to be late, but the short body and neck are humorously out of key with the slender shapeliness of the ladies in two of the standard fourteenth-century portraits, the fair maid of Ribblesdale⁵⁷ and Chaucer's Blanche.⁵⁸ The Owl's eyes have a special significance, for a lady's eyes should indeed be large, but not staring. The Ribblesdale lady has eyes *grete ant gray ynoh* (16) but the picture of Blanche perhaps defines the acceptable limits more clearly:

Hyt was hir owne pure loking
 That the goddesse, dame Nature,
 Had mad hem opene by mesure,
 And close; for, were she never so glad,
 Hyr lokynge was not foly sprad,
 Ne wildely, thogh that she playde. (870-5)

Two fifteenth-century lyrics cited by Kevin S. Kiernan⁵⁹ in connection with "descending catalogues" are even further from *O & N* in time, but as they are overt parodies of something which has by then become an outworn convention they sum up even better the parodic possibilities in our Owl. A mock epistle from a lady to her lover defines him as a paragon *euyñ as an Oule / ys best and most fauoryd of ony odyr foule!*⁶⁰ In his reply to this the lover employs the same sort of comparison with mundane objects that the Nightingale goes in for in *Rigt so an ovvel*⁶¹ *þat is croked* (*O & N*, 80), while unlovingly

Rememberyng your grete hede and your forhed round,
 Wyth Staryng eyen, visage large & huge,
 And eyþer of youre pappys like a water-bowge. (19-21)⁶²

By this date it looks almost as if the owl has become the type of ugliness for both sexes, but this should not be taken to support the idea of any real "undercutting" of romantic convention in *O & N*. Literary parody there may be, but this does not alter the fact that

what is being described in *O & N* actually is an owl, seen through the eyes of one of its natural victims, and in a genre where overstatement is part of the attacking technique. The integrity of the original image of beauty is what gives this ruthless variant its impact.

Chaucer has come in for a good deal of praise for the way his portrait of Chauntecleer applies this old *descriptio* formula to a bird, even *ad unguem*.⁶³ Chaucer is, however, quite big enough to concede the credit for having been the first to think of it to one of his few predecessors who come anywhere near him in wit and learning.

NOTES

- 1 *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. E.G. Stanley (London, 1960). All quotations are from this edition. For brevity the poem is referred to throughout this article as *O & N*.
- 2 Bryn Mawr College Monographs, 12 (Bryn Mawr, Penn., 1913).
- 3 *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. J.W.H. Atkins (Cambridge, 1922).
- 4 This is not to deny that "spring openings" may also be found in Old English poetry: H.B. Hinckley pointed out the parallel with *Judgement Day II* ("The Date, Author, and Sources of the 'Owl and the Nightingale'", *PMLA* 44 (1929) p.356, note 85) but this does not imply a continuity of tradition from Old to Middle English.
- 5 For a summary of the dating problems see Kathryn Hume, "*The Owl and the Nightingale*": *the Poem and its Critics* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1975) Chapter 1. On the date of the Jesus MS see Betty Hill, "Oxford, Jesus College MS. 29: Addenda on . . . 'The Owl and the Nightingale'", *Notes and Queries* 220 (1975) p.105; and on the date of the Cotton MS see "*The Owl and the Nightingale*" reproduced in facsimile . . . , ed. N.R. Ker, *EETS*, 251 (London, 1963) pp.ix, xvi. Both MSS must be at least two removes from the author's original (see Stanley, p.5).
- 6 The next is *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, dated to the last quarter of the thirteenth century. A convenient edition is that in *Early Middle English Texts*, ed. Bruce Dickins and R.M. Wilson (London, 1951) pp.71-6.
- 7 Some items in this fourteenth-century MS must have been composed in the thirteenth century but this cannot be proved for the lyrics cited here. Quotations are taken from *The Harley Lyrics*, ed. G.L. Brook (3rd ed., Manchester, 1964), the poems being referred to by number.
- 8 *Nou Sprinkes the Sprai*, printed in *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1932) pp.119-20.
- 9 The term *chanson d'aventure* was of course first used by E.K. Chambers of the English examples ("Some Aspects of Mediæval Lyric", in *Early English Lyrics*, ed. E.K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick (London, 1907; reprinted 1966) p.266). For the French ones a distinction is observed between the *chanson dramatique*, in which the poet overhears something but does not take part in the action, and the *pastourelle*, in which he does. See also Sandison, *The "Chanson d'Aventure" in Middle English*, p.9ff.. (See note 2, above.)
- 10 See, for instance, Alfred Jeanroy, *Les Origines de la Poésie Lyrique en France au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1925) esp. Chapter 1.
- 11 See Jeanroy, and M. Dominica Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and its Background* (Oxford, 1963), esp. Chapter 13. Professor Legge comments, "Pastorals are rare in Anglo-Norman" (p.349).
- 12 *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, ed. L. Traube, III, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (Berlin, 1896) pp.230-1. See also Atkins, p.li, for references to many other Latin debates which open in this way.
- 13 The most convenient edition is probably that in *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, ed. F.J.E. Raby (Oxford, 1959) pp.312-16.

- ¹⁴ *Les Débats du Clerc et du Chevalier dans la Littérature Poétique du Moyen-Age* (Paris, 1911). This book contains texts or summaries of most of the clerk/knight debates in French and Latin.
- ¹⁵ It is convenient to retain the two names in this order in referring to the Anglo-Norman poem to emphasise the distinction from the continental French versions of *Florence et Blanche fleur*. All these texts are of course distinct from the later romance of *Floire et Blancheflor*, with its Middle English translation, *Floris and Blanchefleur*, though J.C. Russell confuses them in his *Dictionary of Writers of Thirteenth Century England, Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research. Special Supplement 3* (London, 1936) p.183.
- ¹⁶ Quotations are from the text printed by Oulmont, pp.167-83. For attempts to identify the persons named see Legge, pp.334-5; Russell, *Dictionary*, s.v. Brykhulle, William Banastre, and "Some Thirteenth-Century Anglo-Norman Writers", *Modern Philology* 28 (1931) p.259.
- ¹⁷ Translations throughout are mine but I have not struggled to avoid coincidence of wording at some points with translations given by Professor Legge. I am grateful to Dr L.R. Muir for help with the French and Anglo-Norman texts.
- ¹⁸ Paul Meyer places *Blanchefleur e Florence* at the end of the reign of Henry III, which is about the latest limit for *O & N*. (See "Notice du MS. 25970 de la Bibliothèque Phillipps", *Romania* 37 (1908) p.223.) It is also perhaps worth recalling here that the library catalogue of Titchfield Abbey records the existence of not merely a copy of a work described as "De conflictu inter philomenam et bubonem in anglicis", which cannot be either of our surviving MSS of *O & N*, but also another, "Altercationes inter bubonem et philomenam", which was probably in French. See R.M. Wilson, "The Medieval Library of Titchfield Abbey", *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 5 (1938-43) pp.155, 159, 274; and "More Lost Literature. II", *Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages* 6 (1937) pp.31-2.
- ¹⁹ Oulmont, p.15. In the other Anglo-Norman clerk/knight debate, *Melior et Ydoine*, they joust like knights. For the text see Oulmont, pp.183-96.
- ²⁰ See above, note 18.
- ²¹ L.201. See above, note 19.
- ²² *Le Petit Plet*, ed. Brian S. Merrilees, *Anglo-Norman Texts 20* (Oxford, 1970) p.xxxiii. All quotations are from this edition.
- ²³ For MSS of *Le Petit Plet* see Merrilees, pp.xi ff.; for those of *O & N* see above, note 5.
- ²⁴ *Melior et Ydoine* contains a similar "second start", in *chanson d'aventure* style, after an introduction of a dozen lines.
- ²⁵ See for instance Jeanroy, especially Chapters 1 and 2; and Legge, Chapter 13.
- ²⁶ The complete *pastourelle* opening formula is also found in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Donnei des Amants*: see Legge, pp.128-30.

- 27 The "Chanson d'Aventure" in *Middle English*, pp.5-8.
- 28 Sandison, p.6, note 11.
- 29 P.8, note 21. The reference is to *Romances et Pastourelles Françaises*, ed. K. Bartsch (Leipzig, 1870; reprinted 1967) pp.22-3, no.27.
- 30 L.8. See above, note 8.
- 31 See, for instance, H. Hässler, "The Owl and the Nightingale" und die literarischen Bestrebungen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts (Frankfurt, n.d.) pp.94-7.
- 32 E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask (London, 1953) p.195.
- 33 "Breche in 'The Owl and the Nightingale'", in *A Grammatical Miscellany offered to Otto Jespersen*, ed. N. Bøgholm (Copenhagen and London, 1930) pp.105-8.
- 34 For more recent local use see *The English Dialect Dictionary*, ed. J. Wright, 6 vols. (London, 1898) (EDD), s.v. *breach*.
- 35 See Stanley's note to 1.1 for a summary of the problems.
- 36 J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary . . .* (Oxford, 1898; reprinted 1976); *Supplement with . . . Addenda* by A. Campbell (London, 1921, reprinted 1973).
- 37 In addition to the material in the dictionaries, the entry under *sumor* in A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (Cambridge, 1956) II, confirms this practical application of the word.
- 38 *Early Middle English Texts*, ed. Bruce Dickins and R.M. Wilson (London, 1951) p.183: their examples *summer-wall* and *summer-side* are dated by OED 1676 and 1440 respectively. See also the note on this line in the edition of the poem by J.H.G. Grattan and G.F.H. Sykes, *EETS*, 119 (London, 1935).
- 39 e.g. Harley Lyric 12, 1.4; *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A.J. Bliss (London, 1954) 1.61 (Auchinleck MS).
- 40 e.g. Harley Lyric 3, 1.11; 5, 1.32.
- 41 See OED s.v. *rice*¹; EDD s.v. *rise*.
- 42 e.g. Harley Lyric 27, 1.2.
- 43 e.g. *Nou Sprinkes the Sprai*, 1.14. See above, note 8.
- 44 As well as the opening to *Judgment Day II* in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. E.V.K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* 6 (New York and London, 1942) pp.58-67 there is also the passage in *The Seafarer*, ed. I.L. Gordon (London, 1960) ll.48-9.
- 45 Printed in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers (2nd ed., Oxford, 1968) p.110.

- 46 The MS of this lyric was produced at Reading Abbey, not very far from Guildford, a town not unconnected with the genesis of *O & N*. The date of the poem still seems to be controversial: see the references in Bennett & Smithers, pp.317-18.
- 47 *The Art of the Middle English Lyric* (Athens, Georgia, 1972) p.10.
- 48 The traditional translation of *uertep* is of course "farts" but Theodore Silverstein has pointed out, not without regret, that the buck may be just cavorting (*Medieval English Lyrics* (London, 1971) p.37).
- 49 See especially the thirteenth-century example summarized by Stanley pp.167-8 and quoted by Hässler pp.23-4 (see above, note 31). Both refer for the full text to H. Walther, *Das lateinische Streitgedicht des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1920) which I have not seen.
- 50 "Listening to the Nightingale", *Comparative Literature* 22 (1970) p.56.
- 51 G.G. Coulton must have been a member of it. One of the rare dissenting voices in the general chorus of praise for this poem he found this passage its only real success. ("The Owl and the Nightingale", *Modern Language Review* 17 (1922) p.71.)
- 52 See especially Hume, Chapter 7 (see above, note 5) and the further references given there.
- 53 "'The Owl and the Nightingale': a Burlesque", *Papers on Language and Literature* 2 (1966) p.11.
- 54 See especially D.S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature . . .", *Modern Language Review* 50 (1955) pp.257-69; Benjamin S. Harrison, "Medieval Rhetoric in the 'Book of the Duchesse'", *PMLA* 49 (1934) pp.428-42; Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at *Alisoun*", *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975-6) pp.1-16.
- 55 Kiernan (p.8 ff.) comments on this technique of dwelling on items out of order in other catalogues.
- 56 J.J. Murphy reminds us that this phrase was not originally meant to be taken literally: see his *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Berkeley and London, 1971) p.55. Nonetheless some medieval writers did so take it, see e.g. the portrait of Helen of Troy in Guido de Columnis, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. N.E. Griffin, *The Mediaeval Academy of America*, Publication No.26 (Cambridge, Mass., 1936) p.73. Elsewhere Murphy has used the handling of rhetoric in the poem as evidence for its date, commenting: "The poem is a true product of the enlightened environment of discourse of the twelfth century. It is not in the spirit of the thirteenth." (*Medieval Eloquence. Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1978) p.230.)
- 57 Harley Lyric 7.
- 58 In "The Book of the Duchess". See *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed., London, 1957) esp. p.274 ff..
- 59 See above, note 54.

- ⁶⁰ Printed in *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. R.H. Robbins (2nd ed., Oxford, 1955) pp.219-20 (ll.6-7).
- ⁶¹ So far as I am aware no one has suggested the possibility of word-play here.
- ⁶² Printed in Robbins (see above, note 60) pp.220-2.
- ⁶³ See, e.g., Kiernan p.11 (see above, note 54); and *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, ed. Nevill Coghill and Christopher Tolkien (London, 1959) p.46.