INTRODUCTION

A narrator describes entering a remote valley in summer, where an owl and a nightingale are engaged in a bitter disagreement. It is a quarrel that continues for the better part of eighteen hundred lines of verse, in a style or genre sometimes described as "comic debate poetry," and although the poetry is indeed comic and even hilarious on occasions, the word "debate" lends a tone of intellectual politeness to what is at times a medieval slanging match. The fact that the birds are conversing in the language of humans is never explained or excused, and our unwitting acceptance of this situation from beginning to end can be taken as a confirmation of poetic achievement.

Of the many mysterious poems to have survived from the Middle Ages, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is one of the most mysterious of all. Despite expert investigation and analysis from many different angles, its date of composition is still a matter of speculation, with almost a hundred years separating the earlier and later possibilities. At lines 1091 and 1092 of the manuscript, the nightingale invokes the name of "King Henri," adding, "Jesus his soule do merci." The reference implies that the king is dead, but is this Henry II, who died in 1189, or Henry III, who wore the crown for fifty-six years until passing away in 1279? Two other monarchs occupied the throne during that period; the idea that the poem can't

be confidently assigned to a particular reign, let alone a year or even a decade, seems to darken its shadowy beginnings. "A twelfth- or thirteenth-century poem" is often how *The Owl and the Nightingale* is described.

Dating the poem's original composition would be easier if we knew who wrote it, but we don't. One candidate is a Master Nicholas of Guildford, a resident of Portesham in Dorset apparently, who is mentioned on two occasions in the poem as a man of sound judgment, someone who might objectively settle the dispute between the warring birds. Indeed, the flawlessness of his character is one of the few things the birds are able to agree on. However, if it seems to make sense that a named person within the poem is likely to be its author, it seems just as likely to me that the author could be deflecting attention away from his own identity, or even sending up a third party with sycophantic praise. In this translation, I have replaced Master Nicholas with the name of a poet who has a more reliable connection with the text. Further to the subject of authorship, I have referred to the narrator and the poet as "he" in this introduction, but only through a sense of informed speculation based on the literary norms and precedents of the era. And interestingly, both the owl and the nightingale of the poem are female.

If authorship were established, this might help throw light on the geographical origins of the poem (and vice versa), but on this topic, too, there is no consensus of opinion. The analysis of vocabulary, dialect words, and regional spellings in Middle English poems often helps to pinpoint, or at least narrow down, their place of composition. In the case of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, locations as far apart as Kent and

the West Midlands have been proposed, as well as Wessex—an area that would include most of Britain's southern coast and parts of the South West.

Uncertainty in regard to all those issues both reflects and reinforces hesitancy about the poem's ultimate meaning. Clearly the birds, with their personalities, habits, abilities, and physical characteristics, are representatives of particular ways of life and philosophical outlooks. This is especially true in relation to their Christian faith, and many critical commentaries focus on the extent to which the birds draw on biblical teaching to provide their themes and support their arguments. However, their individual claims to a religious and moral high ground are often undermined by contradictions in logic and descents into decidedly un-Christian rancor. The fact that their dispute remains unresolved at the end of the poem (despite the intervention of a wren, and with several other species of bird turning up to lend muscle or opinion) only adds to the ambiguity surrounding the author's intentions. That said, poetry of historical eras is always of more interest when it seems relevant and relatable to the contemporary reader, and on this front *The Owl and the Nightingale* does not disappoint. The dialogue between the birds resonates with issues that preoccupy latter-day society, including matters of identity, culture, the right to be heard, and class distinctions. The superior tones of the nightingale clash and contrast with the more pragmatic attitudes of the owl, the song of one trying to win out over the screech of the other. Questions of personal hygiene, toilet habits, parenting skills, dietary preferences, and sexual conduct also enter their bickering, alongside more elevated

disagreements on the themes of individuality, survival, community, and conscience, all traded in uncompromising, adversarial terms. If the poem was designed as an allegorical pastiche of humanity's predilection for vitriolic disagreement, then the two birds would not be out of place several centuries later, wrestling for "control of the narrative" in an internet chat-room or across social media platforms.

But if the poem's overall significance remains elusive, what is not in doubt is the quality of the writing or, more specifically, its poetics. To produce a work of nearly nine hundred rhyming couplets written in near-regular meter (iambic tetrameter) requires stamina and patience. It also insists on an exceptional level of creative ingenuity if the poem is to stay agile and alert from beginning to end. There is great inventiveness on display here, and the kind of authorial self-awareness and subtlety that distinguishes literature from mere information, and transforms the studied documentation of an idea into something we call art.

There are two surviving manuscripts, one held by the British Library (MS Cotton Caligula A.ix (C), ff. 233ra–246ra) and one held by Jesus College, Oxford (MS 29 (J), ff. 156ra–168vb), both thought to have been copied from a single original or "exemplar," now lost. Nuanced differences between the two versions are a matter of great importance and excitement to scholars of the poem; they are of less concern in this translation, though for the most part I have followed the British Library version.

I have described my working processes, and my reasons for taking on these old anonymous poems, and my interest

in medieval poetry generally, in introductions to other translations and in published lectures. But experience tells me that for the everyday reader, perhaps picking this book off the bookshelf out of idle curiosity (and thank you, if you have), one question comes to the fore. How can English be translated into English? I hope that question can be answered relatively quickly by quoting the first four lines of the original poem, which read as follows:

Ich was in one summer dale
In one suþe di3ele hale
Iherde ich holde grete tale
An hule and one ni3tingale

Middle English can be very crudely characterized as a form of English spoken and written in Britain from the arrival of William the Conqueror (1066) to the first printed editions of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1476). The Middle English alphabet included the two letters thorn (þ—similar in this instance to "th") and yogh (3—similar in this instance to "gh"), now obsolete. Knowing how to pronounce those letters allows a twenty-first-century reader to give voice to passages in the poem and develop a reasonable sense of what is being said. But line two is tricky because it contains words we no longer use and whose definitions are somewhat blurred, even to experts. The word hale (corner? place? location? hollow? glade?) isn't going to earn its keep in a contemporary rendition, so immediately a new rhyming couplet is called for, which will inevitably require changes to preceding words. Medieval sentence structure presents as archaic

to modern ears, so a certain amount of grammatical reshaping is also necessary. And some words, even if they have retained their inherent meaning over several hundred years, have often acquired new and sometimes unhelpful connotations, just as some modern words might feel anachronistic or out of place, no matter how accurate their definitions. Add to this the need to position words at particular locations in a line to conform to the prescribed rhythm of the poem, and something of the nature and scale of the task can be imagined.

It is interesting to speculate that seven or eight hundred years ago, all the uncertainties surrounding the poem as I have described them were probably not uncertainties at all, but very obvious facts. Except, that is, for the skill and verve of the author, who seems to have produced a work of unprecedented craft and virtuosic style in excess of the literary achievements of the period. Whatever audiences the poem reached, as readers or listeners they must have been mightily impressed by its theoretical inquiries and commanding use of language, and greatly entertained by its two main characters, whose verbal sniping and sparring has the authenticity of actual speech. If the poem is erudite and articulate, it is also idiomatic and at times vulgar, drawing on everyday experiences, deploying colloquial registers, and appealing to our common understanding of human behavior, albeit ventriloquized through the voices of two birds. The poem is almost a play, with an owl and a nightingale vying for the spotlight, and ultimately it is the theatrical and dramatic qualities of their monologues that I have attempted to capture and replicate in this translation.