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Introduction ix

The Owl and the Nightingale 1

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The Owl
and
the Nightingale

Ich was in one sumere dale,
in one suþe diþele hale,
iherde ich holde grete tale
an hule and one niztingale.
Þat plait was stif & starc & strong,
sum wile softe & lud among;
an aiþer aþen oþer sval,
& let þat [vue]le mod ut al.
& eiþer seide of oþeres custe
þat alre-worste þat hi wuste:
& hure & hure of oþere[s] songe
hi holde plaiding suþe stronge.

10

Þe niztingale bigon þe speche,
in one hurne of one breche,
& sat up one vaire boþe,
—þar were abute blosme inoþe,—
in ore waste þicke hegge
imeind mid spire & grene segge.
Ho was þe gladur uor þe rise,
& song auele cunne wise:
[b]et þuþte þe dreim þat he were
of harpe & pipe þan he nere:
bet þuþte þat he were ishote
of harpe & pipe þan of þrote.

20

[Ð]o stod on old stoc þar biside,
þar þo vle song hire tide,
& was mid iui al bigrowe;
hit was þare hule earding-stowe.

One summer's day I overheard
a mighty war of words disturb
a peaceful & secluded dale;
between an Owl & Nightingale
barbed comments flew, now soft, now loud,
but always heartfelt, wounding, proud.
The birds, both swollen up with anger,
hurled abuse at one another,
taking turns to slate & curse
what in the other bird was worst, 10
with insults being especially strong
when rubbishing the other's song.

The Nightingale took up proceedings
from the corner of a clearing,
perching on a handsome bough
with blossoms hanging down & round,
beside a densely knotted hedge
entwined with reeds & bright green sedge.
She gloried in that branch; it formed
a kind of stage, & she performed 20
the music of her repertoire
as if she played a pipe or harp,
as if each bright, melodious note
were not the product of a throat.

There was, nearby, a tree-stump where
the Owl intoned her hourly prayers,
an ancient ivy-covered bole
the Owl had claimed as her abode.

[D]e niztingale hi iseʒ,
& hi bihold & ouerseʒ, 30
& þuzte wel [vu]l of þare hule,
for me hi halt lodlich & fule.
“Vnwizt,” ho sede, “awei þu flo!
me is þe w[u]rs þat ich þe so.
Iwis for þine [vu]le lete,
wel [oft ich] mine song forlete;
min horte atfliþ & falt mi tonge,
wonne þu art [to me] iþrunge.
Me luste bet speten þane singe
of þine fule ʒoʒelinge.” 40

Pos hule abod fort hit was eve,
ho ne miʒte no leng bileue,
vor hire horte was so gret
þat wel neʒ hire fnast atschet,
& warp a word þar-after longe;
“Hu þincþe nu bi mine songe?
We[n]st þu þat ich ne cunne singe,
þeʒ ich ne cunne of writelinge?
Ilome þu dest me grame,
& seist me [boþe tone] & schame. 50
ʒif ich þe holde on mine uote,
(so hit bitide þat ich mote!)
& þu were vt of þine rise,
þu sholdest singe an oþer w[i]se.”

De niztingale ʒaf answare:
“ʒif ich me loki wit þe bare,

The Nightingale clapped eyes on her
& shot the Owl a filthy glare, 30
disgusted by that horrid creature's
loathsome, nauseating features.
“Freak, why don't you disappear?
It sickens me to see you here.
Your ugly presence guarantees
to throw my fluting out of key.
In fact whenever you turn up
my jaw locks & my heart won't pump.
As for your tuneless yodeling
it makes me want to spit, not sing.” 40

The Owl was silent until dusk,
by which time she was on the cusp
of rage, her lungs about to burst
through holding back her angry words,
her heart about to pop. She yowled,
“How does my music strike you now?
You tell yourself that I can't sing
but I'm not one for twittering.
You ridicule me & you mock,
snipe from the cover of the copse, 50
but if you flew that branch of yours
I'd make you welcome in my claws
(bring on that day before too long!)
& then you'd sing a different song!”

At which the Nightingale remarked,
“As long as I'm alert & sharp

& me schilde wit þe blete,
ne reche ich noȝt of þine þrete;
ȝif ich me holde in mine hegge,
ne recche ich neuer what þu segge. 60

Ich wot þat þu art unmilde
wiþ hom þat ne muȝe from [þ]e schilde;
& þu tukest wroþe & vuele,
whar þu miȝt, over smale fuȝele.
Vorþi þu art loþ al fuel-kunne,
& alle ho þe driueþ honne,
& þe bischricheþ & bigredet,
& wel narewe þe biledet;
& ek forþe þe sulue mose,
hire þonkes, wolde þe totose. 70

þu art lodlich to biholde,
& þu art loþ in monie volde;
þi bodi is short, þi swore is smal,
grettere is þin heued þan þu al;
þin eȝene boþ col-blake & brode,
riȝt swo ho weren ipeint mid wode;
þu starest so þu wille abiten
al þat þu mi[ȝ]t mid cliure smiten:
þi bile is stif & scharp & hoked,
riȝt so an owel þat is croked; 80

þar-mid þu clackes[t] oft & longe,
& þat is on of þine songe.
Ac þu þretest to mine fleshe,
mid þine cliures woldest me meshe.
þe were icundur to one frogge
snailes, mus, & fule wiȝte,

in open ground or on the wing
your menace has a hollow ring.
As long as I keep to the hedge
your words are simply worthless threats. 60
I've seen the ruthless way you rip
those birds who can't escape your grip,
& how you like to sink your pincers
into little larks & finches.
That's why feathered creatures hate you,
drive you from their patch, berate you
with their screams & cries, & why
they rise & mob you when you fly,
& why the tiniest of tits
would gladly tear you bit from bit. 70
You really are a gruesome sight
in ways too many to describe:
your neck's too thin, your trunk's too small,
your head is bigger than . . . your all!
Your coal-black eyes are weirdly broad
& look like they've been daubed with woad,
& glare as if you'd like to feast
on anyone within your reach.
Your bill is sharp & bent & hard—
a flesh-hook with a buckled barb— 80
that issues—loud & all day long—
some caterwaul you call a song.
You threaten me, & say your feet
will catch & mulch me into meat;
a frog, though, underneath the mill-wheel,
surely makes a truer Owl meal?

boþ þine cunde & þine rihte.
Ðu sittest adai & fliz[s]t anizt,
þu cuþest þat þu art on vnwiht. 90
Ðu art lodlich & unclene,
bi þine neste ich hit mene,
& ek bi þine fule brode,
þu fedest on hom a wel ful fode.
Vel wostu þat hi doþ þarinne,
hi fuleþ hit up to þe chinne:
ho sitteþ þar so hi bo bisne.
Ðarbi men segget a uorbisne:
'Dahet habbe þat ilke best
þat fuleþ his owe nest.' 100
Ðat oþer zer a faukun bredde;
his nest noht wel he ne bihedde:
þarto þu stele in o dai,
& leidest þaron þi fole ey.
Ðo hit bicom þat he hazte,
& of his eyre briddes wrahte;
ho brohte his briddes mete,
bihold his nest, iseþ hi ete:
he iseþ bi one halue
his nest ifuled uthalue. 110
Ðe faukun was wroþ wit his bridde,
& lude ʒal & sterne chidde:
'Segget me, wo hauet þis ido?
Ov nas neuer icunde þarto:
hit was idon ov a loþ[e] [cu]ste.
Segge[þ] me ʒif ʒe hit wiste.'

Snail & mouse & squelchy slug
are more your right & proper grub.
You roost by day & fly by night
which proves that something isn't right. 90
You are repellent & impure,
you & those filthy chicks of yours,
that brood of dirty-looking pests
you're raising in a filthy nest.
They soil the den they're living in
until their droppings reach their chins
then stand about as if they're blind,
which brings this truism to mind:
'Accursed be the wretched beast
that makes its toilet where it feeds.' 100
One year a falcon left her brood
& in her absence from the wood
you slipped into the clutch to lay
your ugly-looking egg one day,
& after several weeks had passed
& several of her chicks had hatched
she brought her young ones meat to eat
but noticed as the fledglings ate
that one half of the nest was neat,
the other in a squalid state. 110
The bird was livid with her young,
who felt the rough edge of her tongue.
'Explain who made this shameful mess.
No child of mine would foul the nest.
You're victims of a sneaky trick,
so tell me who committed it.'

Po quap þat on & quad þat oþer:

‘Twis it was ure ozer broþer,

þe zond þat haue[þ] þat grete heued:

wai þat hi[t] nis þarof bireued!

120

Worp hit ut mid þe alre-[vu]rste

þat his necke him to-berste!’

Þe faucun ilefde his bridde,

& nom þat fule brid amidde,

& warp hit of þan wilde bowe,

þar pie & crowe hit todrowe.

Herbi men segget a bispel,

þez hit ne bo fuliche spel;

al so hit is bi þan un gode

þat is icumen of fule brode,

130

& is meind wit fro monne,

euer he cuþ þat he com þonne,

þat he com of þan adel-eye,

þez he a fro nest[e] leie.

þez appel trendli fro[m] þon trowe,

þar he & oþer mid growe,

þez he bo þar-from bicume,

he cuþ wel whonene he is icume.”

Þos word azaf þe niȝtingale,

& after þare longe tale

140

he song so lude & so scharpe,

riȝt so me grulde schille harpe.

Þos hule luste þiderward,

& hold hire eze noþerwa[r]d,

& sat tosvolle & ibolwe,

The chicks, first one & then another,
all sang out, ‘It was our brother,
him whose head sits like a boulder,
shame it’s still perched on his shoulders. 120

Fling his foulness to the deck
& where he lands he’ll break his neck.’
The falcon’s chicks would not tell fibs;
she plucked the stray bird from their midst
& threw it to the forest floor
where crows & magpies gouged & tore.
This fable, though it isn’t proof,
delivers an essential truth:
expect no good of any trace
from him born to a lowly race. 130

He might mix with a better class
but can’t escape his commonness,
& even in a decent nest
a rotten egg’s a rotten egg.
An apple might roll far & wide
& leave its family tree behind,
but at its core it still betrays
its starting place & early days.”

Then after hectoring so long
the Nightingale broke out in song, 140
her tune as vibrant & as sharp
as music streaming from a harp.
The Owl took in the songbird’s sound,
her eyes fixed firmly on the ground,
& sat there ready to explode,

also ho hadde one frogge isuolze:
for ho wel wiste & was iwar
þat ho song hire a-bisemar.
& nopeles ho ʒa[f] andsuare,
“Whi neltu flon into þe bare, 150
& sewi [w]are unker bo
of brizter howe, of uairur blo?”
“No, þu hauest wel scharpe clawe,
ne kepich nozt þat þu me clawe.
þu hauest cliuers suþe stronge,
þu tuengst þar-mid so doþ a tonge.
Þu þoztest, so doþ þine ilike,
mid faire worde me biswike.
Ich nolde don þat þu me raddest,
ich wiste wel þat þu me misraddest. 160
Schamie þe for þin unrede!
Vnwrozen is þi svikelhede!
Schild þine svikeldom vram þe lizte,
& hud þat woze amon[g] þe rizte.
Þane þu wilt þin unrizt spene,
loke þat hit ne bo isene:
vor svikedom haue[þ] schome & hete,
ʒif hit is ope & underzete.
Ne speddestu nozt mid þine unwrenche,
for ich am war & can wel blenche. 170
Ne helpþ nozt þat þu bo to [þ]riste:
ich wolde vizte bet mid liste
þan þu mid al þine strengþe.
Ich habbe, on brede & eck on lengþe,
castel god on mine rise:

like someone choking on a toad.
She knew full well the other bird
was baiting her with wounding words,
but answered her, “Why don’t you show
yourself out here & then we’ll know 150
who wears the fairer face, & who
is finest feathered—me or you.”
“No thanks, your talons bite like nails.
I’d rather not become impaled
on sets of claws so hard & strong
they grip their prey like iron tongs.
You mean to snare me with untruth;
that’s Owl behavior through & through,
& I’ll be paying your advice
no heed because it’s laced with lies. 160
Admit the shame of who you are,
your crooked traits are now laid bare
& so are those deceits you cloak
when spending time with decent folk.
And if you deal in dirty business
check it’s done without a witness;
treachery becomes disgrace
when played out in a public place.
Though knowing how to duck & weave
protects me from your evil schemes; 170
you thrash about, all boast & brawn,
but I do better with my brain
than you with all your thuggish strength,
& on this branch—its breadth & length—
I have my castle. ‘He who flies

‘Wel fiȝt þat wel fiȝt,’ seiþ þe wise.
Ac lete we awei þos cheste,
vor suiche wordes boþ unw[re]ste;
& fo we on mid riȝte dome,
mid faire worde & mid ysome. 180
Þeȝ we ne bo at one acorde,
we m[a]ȝe bet mid fayre worde,
witute cheste, & bute fiȝte,
plaidi mid foȝe & mid riȝte:
& mai hure eiþer wat h[e] wile
mid riȝte segge & mid sckile.”

Þo quaþ þe hule “[W]u schal us seme,
þat kunne & wille riȝt us deme?”
“Ich wot wel” quaþ þe niȝtingale,
“Ne þaref þarof bo no tale. 190
Maister Nichole of Guldeforde,
he is wis an war of worde:
he is of dome suþe gleu,
& him is loþ eurich unþeu.
He wot insiȝt in eche songe,
wo singet wel, wo singet wronge:
& he can schede vrom þe riȝte
þat woȝe, þat þuster from þe liȝte.”

Þo hule one wile hi biþoȝte,
& after þan þis word upbroȝte: 200
“Ich granti wel þat he us deme,
vor þeȝ he were wile breme,
& lof him were niȝtingale,

shall win the fight.’ So say the wise.
Enough, though, of this bickering,
such barneys are belittling.
Let’s start afresh, & this time act
with greater courtesy & tact.
We don’t see eye to eye, that’s plain,
but both would make a stronger claim
without hostility or spite.
Let’s state with dignity & pride
our points, positions & beliefs
in measured tones & reasoned speech.”

180

The Owl replied, “A magistrate
is needed to adjudicate.”
“That’s easy,” said the rossignol,
“his name stands ready on my tongue.
The person who should arbitrate
is Master Simon Armitage.
He’s skilled with words & worldly wise
& frowns on every form of vice.
In terms of tunes, his ear can tell
who makes a din & who sings well.
He thrives at telling wrong from right
& knows the darkness from the light.”

190

The Owl considered what she’d heard,
then after pondering declared,
“Agreed, he’ll tell the honest truth,
though he was reckless in his youth
& spooned a Nightingale or two

200

& oþer wizte gente & smale,
ich wot he is nu suþe acoled.
Nis he vor þe nozt afoled,
þat he, for þine olde luue,
me adun legge & þe buue:
ne schaltu neure so him queme,
þat he for þe fals dom deme. 210
He is him ripe & fast-rede,
ne lust him nu to none unrede:
nu him ne lust na more pleie,
he wile gon a rihte weie.”

Þe niztingale was al zare,
ho hadde ilorned wel aiware:
“Hule,” ho sede, “seie me soþ,
wi dostu þat unwiztis doþ?
þu singist anizt & nozt adai,
& al þi song is wailawai. 220
Þu miht mid þine songe afere
alle þat ihereþ þine ibere:
þu sch[ri]chest & zollest to þine fere,
þat hit is grislich to ihere:
hit þinche[þ] boþe wise & snepe
nozt þat þu singe, ac þat þu wepe.
Þu flizst anizt & nozt adai:
þarof ich w[u]ndri & wel mai.
vor eurich þing þat schuniet riht,
hit luueþ þuster & hatiet lizt: 230
& eurich þing þat is lof misdede,
hit luueþ þuster to his dede.

& other passerines like you.
And yet he has cooled down a lot
& doesn't lust for you of late
& wouldn't, through some lingering love,
set me below & you above.
His sense of justice won't be harmed
by your submissions to his heart. 210
Mature & of a balanced mind,
all indiscretions left behind,
ignoring every vulgar cause
he steers a straight & proper course."

Schooled in the art of rhetoric
the Nightingale's response was quick.
"So tell me, Owl, why is it true
you do as evil creatures do?
The one nocturnal dirge you sing
is woeful & self-pitying 220
& those unlucky souls who hear
are terror-struck with morbid fear.
The squawks you aim toward your mate
disturb the ears they penetrate.
Both dolt & genius have found
your singing makes a weeping sound.
You sleep by day & fly by night,
which worries me, & well it might;
all things preferring wrong to right
adore the dark & hate the light, 230
& every sinful creature needs
the night-time to obscure its deeds.

A wis word, þez hit bo unclene,
is fele manne a-muþe imene,
for Alured King hit seide & wrot:
'He schunet þat hine [vu]ll wot.'
Ich wene þat þu dost also,
vor þu flizst niztes euer mo.
An oþer þing me is a-wene,
þu hauest anizt wel brizte sene; 240
bi daie þu art stare-blind,
þat þu ne sichst ne bov ne strind.
Adai þu art blind oþer bisne,
þarbi men segget a uorbisne:
'Rizt so hit farþ bi þan ungode
þat nozt ne suþ to none gode,
& is so ful of vuele wrenche
þat him ne mai no man atprenche,
& can wel þane þu[st]re wai,
& þane brizte lat awai.' 250
So doþ þat boþ of þine cunde,
of lizte nabbep hi none imunde."

Pos hule luste suþe longe,
& was oftoneð suþe stronge:
ho quap "þu [h]atrest niztingale,
þu niztest bet hoten galegale,
vor þu hauest to monie tale.
Lat þine tunge habbe spale!
þu wenest þat þes dai bo þin oze:
lat me nu habbe mine þroze: 260
bo nu stille & lat me speke,

A proverb, vulgar but of note,
(a phrase King Alfred said & wrote)
repeated frequently: ‘He slinks
away who knows his own bad stink.’
That summarizes perfectly
your fly-by-night activities.
And something else occurs to me:
in total blackness you can see
but once the dawn dispels the dark
you struggle telling branch from bark!
And of those beings, who by day
are sightless, this is what they say:
they’re ne’er-do-wells & vagabonds
whose shady dealings know no bounds,
whose sneaky schemes & escapades
no decent person can escape,
they tread a shadowed path & shun
the lanes & ways lit by the sun,
& you’re the very same, the type
who lives her life avoiding light.”

240

250

She listened for what felt an age,
the Owl, then flew into a rage.
“You’re called a Nightingale,” she spat,
“but blabbermouth’s more accurate.
Your monologues are all-consuming,
rest your tongue & stop assuming
that you’ve won the day & own
the argument. Give me my turn
& keep your trap shut while I speak

260

ich wille bon of þe awreke.
& lust hu ich con me bitelle,
mid riȝte soþe, witute spelle.
Pu seist þat ich me hude adai,
þarto ne segge ich nich ne nai:
& lust ich telle þe wareuore,
al wi hit is & wareuore.
Ich habbe bile stif & stronge,
& gode cliuers scharp & longe, 270
so hit bicumeþ to hauekes cunne;
hit is min hizte, hit is mi w[u]nne,
þat ich me draȝe to mine cunde,
ne mai [me] no man þareuore schende:
on me hit is wel isene,
vor riȝte cunde ich am so kene.
Vorþi ich am loþ smale foȝle
þat floþ bi grunde an bi þuuele:
hi me bichermet & bigredeþ,
& hore flockes to [m]e ledeþ. 280
Me is lof to habbe reste
& sitte stille in mine neste:
vor nere ich neuer no þe betere,
[ʒ]lif ich mid chauling & mid chatere
hom schende & mid fule worde,
so herdes doþ oþer mid schit-worde.
Ne lust me wit þe screwen chide;
forþi ich wende from hom wide.
Hit is a wise monne dome,
& hi hit segget wel ilome, 290
þat me ne chide wit þe gidie,

& listen closely while I seek
a rational & sincere revenge
without recourse to verbiage.
You say by day I hibernate,
a fact I won't repudiate,
but hear me while I clarify
the wherefore & the reasons why.
My beak is powerful & strong,
my claws are sharp & very long, 270
& rightfully I share these traits
with others of the owlsh trade.
No man can criticize my pride
in feeling kinship with my tribe.
Look at my features & you'll find
ferocity personified,
so all the tiny birds abhor me,
flitting through the understory,
slighting me with squeaks & squawks
& flying at me in their flocks 280
when all I want to do is rest
in peaceful silence on my nest.
I'll fare no better if I shriek
& curse my enemies, or speak
the kind of oaths & foul abuse
& filthy talk that shepherds use.
Instead of wasting words with knaves
I'd rather look the other way.
The wise have noted more than once
that he who argues with a dunce 290
might just as well compare his jaw

ne wit þan ofne me ne zonie.

At sume siþe herde [I] telle
hu Alured sede on his spelle:

‘Loke þat þu ne bo þare
þar chauling boþ & cheste zare:
lat sottes chide & uorþ þu go.’
& ich am wis & do also.

& zet Alured seide an oþer side
a word þat is isprunge wide:

300

‘Þat wit þe fule haueþ imene,
ne cumeþ he neuer from him cleine.’
Wenestu þat haueck bo þe worse
þoz crowe bigrede him bi þe mershe,
& goþ to him mid hore chirme
riht so hi wille wit him schirme?
Þe hauec folzeþ gode rede,
& flizt his wei & lat him grede.”

“Zet þu me seist of oþer þinge,
& telst þat ich ne can nozt singe,
ac al mi rorde is woning,
& to ihire grislich þing.

310

Þat nis nozt soþ, ich singe efne,
mid fulle dreame & lude stefne.
Þu wenist þat ech song bo grislich,
þat þine pipinge nis ilich.

Mi stefne is [bold] & nozt unorne,
ho is ilich one grete horne,
& þin is ilich one pipe,
of one smale wode unripe.

320

Ich singe bet þan þu dest:

against an oven's yawning door.

And now a saying comes to mind,
a proverb that King Alfred coined:

'Be careful not to waste your life
where strife & quarreling are rife;
keep well away from fractious fools.'

A wise Owl, I obey those rules.

A further point that Alfred makes
is quoted far & wide. It states:

300

'Those mixing with a filthy kind
shall never leave the dirt behind.'

Therefore, a hawk is none the worse
if crows along the marsh rehearse
their jeers & jibes, then swoop & squawk
as if they mean to fell the hawk.

The hawk, though, follows sound advice:
he lets them shriek, then off he flies.

And there's a further charge you bring,
the accusation I can't sing,

310

& that my song is one long moan,
a painful, monotonal drone.

It isn't so. My voice, being true,
emits a rich, melodious tune.

You twitter, so for you a song
that doesn't cheep & chirp is wrong.

My call is deep & bold & proud
& booms out with a horn-like sound,
while yours pipes like a tinny reed
sliced from a thin unripened weed.

320

My song is best, yours pleases least,

þu chaterest so doþ on Irish prost.

Ich singe an eue a riȝte time,

& soþþe won hit is bed-time,

þe þridde siþe a[t] middel-niȝte:

& so ich mine song adiȝte

wone ich iso arise vorre

oþer dai-rim oþer dai-sterre.

Ich do god mid mine þrote,

& warni men to hore note.

330

Ac þu singest alle longe niȝt,

from eue fort hit is dai-liȝt,

& eure seist þin o song

so longe so þe niȝt is long:

& eure croweþ þi wrecche crei,

þat he ne swikeþ niȝt ne dai.

Mid þine pipinge þu adunest

þas monnes earen þar þu wunest,

& makest þine song so unw[u]rþ

þa[t] me ne telþ of þar noȝ[t] w[u]rþ.

340

Eurich murȝþe mai so longe ileste

þat ho shal liki wel unwreste:

vor harpe, & pipe, & fuȝeles [song]

mislikeþ, ȝif hit is to long.

Ne bo þe song neuer so murie,

þat he ne shal þinche wel unmurie

ȝef he ilesteþ ouer unwille:

so þu miȝt þine song aspille.

Vor hit is soþ, Alured hit seide,

& me hit mai ine boke rede:

350

‘Eurich þing mai losen his godhede

you witter like an Irish priest!
I sing at dusk—the proper hour—
& then at bedtime sing once more,
then sing again when midnight chimes;
my songs are governed by those times.
I see the distant dawn draw near
& watch the morning star appear
then from my throat a note is shaped
that summons workers to their trade. 330
But you sing all & every night
from sunset through to morning light,
the whole night long you sing a song
that prattles on & on & on,
an exhibitionist display
that chirps away throughout the day
& causes trauma in the ears
of anybody living near,
a song so cheap it has no worth
for people anywhere on earth. 340
For as a rule, a thing that pleases
rankles if it never ceases;
harps & pipes & songs of birds
eventually disturb the nerves,
just as the cheeriest of scores
seems not so cheery any more
if endlessly performed. Your song
is likewise wastefully prolonged.
A noble stance that Alfred took
(it's written down in many books): 350
'When overdone, true virtue fades.

mid unmeþe & mid ouerdede.⁷
Mid este þu þe miȝt ouerquatie,
& ouerfulle makeþ wlatie:
an eurich mureȝþe mai agon
ȝif me hit halt eure forþ in on,
bute one, þat is Godes riche,
þat eure is svete & eure iliche:
þeȝ þu nime eure o[f] þan lepe,
hit is eure ful bi hepe.
Wunder hit is of Godes riche,
þat eure spenþ & euer is iliche.

360

ȝut þu me seist an oþer shome,
þat ich a[m] on mine ezen lome,
an seist, for þat ich flo bi niȝte,
þat ich ne mai iso bi liȝte.
Þu liest! on me hit is isene
þat ich habbe gode sene:
vor nis non so dim þusternesse
þat ich euer iso þe lasse.
Þu wenest þat ich ne miȝte iso,
vor ich bi daie noȝt ne flo.
Þe hare luteþ al dai,
ac nopeles iso he mai.
ȝif hundes urneþ to him-ward,
[h]e gengþ wel suiþe awai-ward,
& hokeþ paþes sviþe narewe,
& haueþ mid him his blenches ȝarewe,
& hupþ & star[t] suþe coue,
an secheþ paþes to þe groue:

370

380

With overkill, real value wanes.

Indulgence, surplus & excess
do not equate to more, but less,
& what goes on relentlessly
infuriates eventually.’

The only everlasting good
is found within the realm of God:
its basket constantly provides
yet stays replenished to all sides.

360

God’s wondrous empire knows no end,
forever giving, never spent.

“A further slander: you have dared
to say my vision is impaired,
assuming that I fly by night
because I’m blinded by the light.
But clearly you are telling lies;
I know that I have perfect eyes
since there’s no dim or darkened state
my piercing gaze can’t penetrate.

370

I have defective sight, you say,
because I never fly by day,
but skulking through those hours, the hare
is master of the watchful stare.

Flushed from his form by hunting hounds
at breakneck pace away he bounds
down steep & curved & narrow tracks,
all twists & turns & clever tricks,
until with leaps & darts he speeds
toward the cover of the trees.

380

ne sholde he uor boþe his eze
so don, zif he þe bet niseze.
Ich mai ison so wel so on hare,
þez ich bi daie sitte an dare.
Par azte men [boþ] in worre,
an fareþ boþe ner an forre,
an oueruareþ fele [þ]ode,
an doþ bi nizte gode node,
ich folzi þan azte manne,
an flo bi nizte in hore banne.”

390

Þe niztingale in hire þozte
athold al þis, & longe þozte
wat ho þarafter mihte segge:
vor ho ne mihte nozt alegge
þat þe hule hadde hire ised,
vor he spac boþe rizt an red.
An hire ofþuzte þat ho hadde
þe speche so for uorþ iladde,
an was oferd þat hire answare
ne w[u]rþe nozt arizt ifare.
Ac noþeles he spac boldeliche,
vor he is wis þat hardeliche
wiþ is uo berþ grete ilete,
þat he uor arezþe hit ne forlete:
vor suich worþ bold zif þu [flizst],
þat w[u]le flo zif þu [n]isvicst;
zif he isip þat þu nart arez,
he wile of [bore] w[u]rchen barez.

400

Coordination of that kind
is not accomplished by the blind!
I hide away by day but share
outstanding eyesight with the hare.
When fearless soldiers march to war,
advancing on all fronts, the corps
engaging evil foreign powers
& fighting through the darkest hours,
I keep them company, my flight
a flag above them in the night.”

390

Left to her thoughts, the Nightingale
then mulled things over for a while,
not confident she could deny
the soundness of the Owl’s reply,
because with that robust defense
the Owl had spoken truth & sense.
Perhaps her judgment had been wrong
to let the rumpus last this long,
& now it was her turn to speak
her logic might sound false or weak.
But she was bold & held her nerve,
& wisely, spoke with guts & verve,
& looked her foe straight in the face.
The timid voice will lose the case;
a rival prospers if he sees
you run—stand firm though & he flees,
or met by fortitude he’ll flip
from fierce wild boar to gelded pig.

400

& forþi, þez þe niztingale
were aferd, ho spac bolde tale. 410

“[H]ule” ho seide “wi dostu so?
þu singest a-winter wolawo!
þu singest so doþ hen a-snowe,
al þat ho singeþ hit is for wowe.
A-wintere þu singest wroþe & zomere,
an eure þu art dumb a-sumere.
Hit is for þine fule niþe
þat þu ne miȝt mid us bo bliþe,
vor þu forbernest wel nez for onde
wane ure blisse cumeþ to londe. 420

þu farest so doþ þe ille,
evrich blisse him is unwill:
grucching & luring him boþ rade,
ȝif he isoþ þat men boþ glade.
He wolde þat he iseȝe
teres in evrich monnes eȝe:
ne rozte he þez flockes were
imeind bi toppes & bi here.
Al so þu dost on þire side:
vor wanne snov liþ þicke & wide, 430
an alle wiȝtes habbeþ sorȝe,
þu singest from eue fort a-morȝe.
Ac ich alle blisse mid me bringe:
ech wiȝt is glad for mine þinge,
& blisseþ hit wanne ich cume,
& hiȝteþ aȝen mine kume.
Þe blostme ginneþ springe & sprede,