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Here begins the debate between the nightingale and the owl.

I was in a valley in summer
In a very secluded spot.
I heard an owl and a nightingale
Conduct a great disputation

line

5 Argued stiff and stark and strong,
At times soft, at times loud,
And each puffed against the other
And let out all that resentment,
And spoke of the other's habits

line

10 In the worst ways they could imagine,
And, most of all, about the other's song
They pressed very fierce arguments.

Nightingale The nightingale began to speak
From inside a grove of beech trees,

line

15 Sitting on a lovely bough
Thickly adorned with blossoms,
In a dense, thick hedge,
Mixed with reeds and green sedge.
The branch made her all the more happy,

line

20 So she sang a range of tunes:
It seemed as if the melody was

A harp's or pipe's instead of hers;

It seemed as if it emerged from

A harp or pipe instead of a throat!

Owl Nearby stood an old stump
line

26 Where the owl sang her hours

Amid ivy growing all around.

It was the owl's dwelling place.

Nightingale The nightingale saw her,
line

30 Examined and surveyed her,

And felt disdain for that owl,

For she's considered ugly and foul.

fol. 156rb "Evildoer," she said, "fly away!

I'm worse off for the sight of you.

line

35 Indeed, because of your awful face

I too often abandon my own song;

My heart jumps and my speech fails

When you press close to me.

I'd much prefer to spit than sing

line

40 Your wretched yowling."

Owl The owl held off till evening —

She mightn't desist any longer,

For her heart was so swollen

She could barely breathe —

line

45 And she finally sputtered a speech:

“What do you think now of my song?

Do you assume I’m unable to sing

Because I’m unable to warble?

You always cause me harm

line

50 And both insult and shame me.

If I could just grab you by my foot —

Just let it happen that I could! —

And if only you were off your branch,

You’d sing another tune!”

Nightingale The nightingale answered:

line

56 “So long as I’m alert in open country

And shield myself from exposure,

I could care less about your threats;

So long as I stay in my hedge,

line

60 I don’t ever care what you say.

I know full well you’re ungentle

Toward those unprotected from you,

And that you inflict violence and abuse

Wherever you can against small birds.

fol. 156va That’s why all birdfolk hate you,

line

66 And why they drive you away,

And screech and squawk about you,
And tightly throng around you.
And also that's why even the titmouse

line

70 Is determined to tear you to pieces!
You're hideous to look at,
And you're loathly in many ways:
Your body's short; your neck's small;
Your head's bigger than the rest of you;

line

75 Your eyes are coal-black and as big
As if they were painted with woad —
You stare as if you plan to bite
Whatever you can strike with talons!
Your beak's stiff and sharp and curved

line

80 Just like a crooked fleshhook —
You clack with it incessantly,
And that is one of your songs!
And you threaten my very flesh —
With your claws you'd mash me!

line

85 A frog'd be more natural for you,
As it squats under a millwheel;
Snails, mice, and other vermin
Are more natural and proper for you.
You roost by day and fly by night,

line

90 Which shows how evil you are.

You're loathsome and unclean —

Here I'm referring to your nest

And your filthy brood as well:

You raise them with dirty habits!

line

95 You know what they do in there —

They soil it right up to the chin!

They sit there as if they're blind.

There's a proverb about that:

fol. 156vb 'Shame on that creature

line

100 Who soils its own nest.'

One year a falcon was breeding;

She failed to guard her nest carefully.

You crept in there one day

And laid your filthy egg in it.

line

105 When the time came for hatching

And chicks emerged from their eggs,

She brought her chicks food,

Watched the nest, saw them eat.

She noticed that, to one side,

line

110 Her nest was soiled at the far edge.

The falcon was angry with her chicks,

Yelled loud, and sternly chided:

‘Tell me who’s done this!

You never used to do this!

line

115 A filthy habit’s been done to you!

Tell me what you know about it!’

Then said one, and said another:

‘Truly, it was our own brother —

The one there with the big head —

line

120 It’s a pity no one’s cut it off!

Throw him out immediately

So that his neck will break!’

The falcon believed her chicks

And took that ugly chick by the middle,

line

125 And threw it off that leafy branch,

And magpies and crows tore it apart.

There’s a fable told about this,

Though not a full-length story:

‘So will it go for the villain

line

130 Who comes from a rotten family

And mixes with worthy men.

He always shows where he came from —

fol. 157ra That he emerged from a rotten egg —

Even if he might lie in a worthy nest.

line

135 Even if an apple might roll from the tree
 Where it grew up amid others,
 In spite of being quite far from it,
 It displays where it came from.””

 The nightingale spoke these words,

line

140 And after that long speech
 She sang as loud and high-toned
 As a resonant harp being strummed.

Owl The owl listened to this,
 And kept her eyes lowered,

line

145 And sat puffed up, swollen with rage,
 As if she'd swallowed a frog,
 Because she knew and recognized
 That she sang at her with mockery,
 Yet nonetheless she answered:

line

150 “Why don't you fly out into the open,
 And show which of us two is
 Of brighter hue, of fairer color?”

Nightingale “No! You have sharp claws!
 I'd rather not be clawed by you!

line

155 You've got really strong talons;
 You use them like tongs to grip with.

You expect — as your kind does —
To trick me with flattery.
I won't do what you tell me to do;

line

160 I'm well aware that you lie to me.
Shame on you for your bad advice!
Your deception is exposed!
Protect your evil from the light,
And hide that wickedness with good.

line

165 When you try to practice your villainy,
Be certain it's not obvious,
fol. 157rb For evil brings shame and hatred
Only if it's open and observed.
You won't win with your bad tricks,

line

170 For I'm alert and can dodge.
It doesn't help to be too pushy:
I can fight better with cleverness
Than you can with all your strength.
I have, in width and also in length,

line

175 A good castle on my branch.
'He fights well who flees well,' say the wise,
But let's cease this quarreling,
For such words are worthless,
And let's take a sensible course,

line

180 With polite speech and civil concord.

Even if we're not in agreement,

We'll do better with polite speech,

With no quarreling or fighting,

Pleading truthfully and correctly,

line

185 And let each of us say what she likes

With good oral arguments and with skill."

Owl Then the owl said: "Who will decide for us?

Who understands and will judge us fairly?"

Nightingale "I know who," said the nightingale,

line

190 "There's no need to debate that:

Master Nicholas of Guildford.

He's wise and careful with words;

He's extremely prudent of speech,

And he loaths every vice.

line

195 He possesses insight into every song —

Who sings well, who sings wrong —

And he can distinguish truth

From falsehood, darkness from light."

Owl The owl reflected awhile,

line

200 And eventually uttered this statement:

fol. 157va "I fully agree to his judging us,

For even though he was once impetuous
And beloved to him were nightingales
And other creatures delicate and small,

line

205 I know that he's now cooled down.
He's not so beguiled by you
That he, for an old affection held for you,
Would denigrate me and favor you.
You'll never charm him so much

line

210 That he'd judge falsely in your favor.
He's now mature and steady of purpose;
He now has no desire for indiscretion;
He's no longer inclined to frivolity;
He will take the right path."

Nightingale The nightingale was fully prepared —

line

216 She possessed lore from everywhere.
"Owl," she said, "tell me truly,
Why do you do what evil ones do?
You sing by night and not by day,

line

220 And your whole song's 'wailaway'!
By your song you're bound to frighten
Everyone who hears your racket.
You screech and yell at your mate
In a manner grisly to hear.

line

225 It seems to both wisemen and fools
 That you don't sing but only weep!
 You fly by night and not by day —
 I wonder about that, and really have to,
 For anything that shuns goodness

line

230 Loves darkness and hates light;
 And anything that loves sin
 Loves darkness for its actions.
 There's a wise proverb, though it's filthy,
 Spoken by a lot of people,

fol. 157vb For King Alfred said and wrote it:

line

236 'He who's fouled himself stays away.'
 I know that's what you do as well,
 For you always fly by night.
 And something else occurs to me:

line

240 You have sharp eyesight by night;
 By day you're so utterly blind
 That you can't see a linden bough;
 By day you're blind and sightless!
 There's a proverb about that:

line

245 'So does it fare for the villain
 Who's up to no good

And so full of evil malice
That no one can escape him;
He understands the dark path

line

250 And avoids the well-lit one.’
So it is with those of your ilk —
They care nothing at all for light.”

Owl The owl listened a long while
And grew extremely angry.

line

255 She said: “You’re called ‘nightingale,’
But a better name is ‘gabblegale’
Because you talk too much!
Give your tongue a rest!
You think this day’s all your own!

line

260 Now let me have my turn!
Be still now and let me talk!
I’ll get my revenge on you!
Listen to how I defend myself
By true facts with no fiction.

line

265 You say I conceal myself by day —
That fact I don’t deny —
And listen while I explain
Why it is and for what cause:

fol. 157vb I have a stiff and strong beak,

line

270 And good talons, sharp and long,
 As are proper for the hawk family.
 It's my great joy and pleasure
 To take after my own species.
 No one can blame me for it —

line

275 In my case, it's obvious
 That I'm fierce by my very nature.
 That's why I'm hated by small birds
 Who flit by ground and in thickets;
 They scream and squawk at me,

line

280 And gather in flocks around me.
 I'd much rather remain at rest
 And sit quietly in my nest,
 For I'd never be any the better
 Were I, by scolding and haranguing,

line

285 To insult them with bad words,
 As herdsmen do, or with obscenities.
 I don't want to quarrel with the rogues,
 So I give them a wide berth.
 It's the opinion of a wise man,

line

290 And so it's often said,
 That 'one shouldn't quarrel with fools

Nor yawn with an oven.'

I have heard how at one time

Alfred said in his proverbs:

line

295 'Take care not to be where

There's wrangling and arguing;

Let fools quarrel, and go your way!'

And I am wise and do just that.

And Alfred said elsewhere, in additon,

line

300 A saying that's spread far and wide:

'He who mingles with someone filthy

Never walks away from him clean.'

fol. 158rb Do you think the hawk is any the worse

If a crow might caw at him by the marsh

line

305 And swoop at him, screaming,

As if she means to attack him?

The hawk follows a sensible plan;

He flies on his way and lets her squawk.

What's more, you accuse me of something else,

line

310 Saying that I cannot sing,

That my entire song's a lament,

A dreary thing to listen to.

That is not true! I sing evenly

With full voice and loud sound.

line

315 You think every song is dreary
 If it's not just like your own piping.
 My sound is bold and not weak,
It's like a gigantic horn,
 And yours is like a tweet

line

320 Made from a puny, half-grown reed.
 I sing better than you do —
 You chitter like an Irish priest!
 In evening I sing at a proper time,
 And later when it's bedtime,

line

325 And a third time at midnight,
 And so I regulate my song.
 When I see coming from afar
 The rays of dawn or the morning star,
 I do good with my throat

line

330 And alert people, to their benefit.
 But you sing all night long
 From evening until dawn,
 And your song always lasts
 As long as the night,

line

335 And always your wretched throat crows
 Without ceasing, night and day.

fol. 158va With your piping you fill with noise

Those human ears dwelling near you,

And make your song so grotesque

line

340 That they attach no value to it.

Every pleasure can last so long

That it comes to be disliked,

For harp, pipe, and birdsong

Grow tedious if they persist too long.

line

345 However merry a song may be,

It shall be thought unmerry

If it lasts longer than desired.

Thus may you ruin your song.

For truly did Alfred say,

line

350 And it can be read in books:

‘Everything can lose its goodness

By lack of measure and excess.’

You can be gluttoned with delicacies,

And overindulgence causes nausea,

line

355 And every enjoyment can diminish

If people pursue it constantly,

Except for one, that is: God’s kingdom,

Always pleasurable, always constant.

Even if you partake of that basket,

line

360 It's always full to overflowing!

Wondrous is God's kingdom,

Always abundant, always constant.

What's more, you give me further insult —

That I am handicapped in eyesight —

line

365 And say, because I fly by night,

That I cannot see by daylight.

You lie! In my case, it's obvious

I have a keen sense of sight,

For there's no darkness so dim

line

370 That it makes me see less.

You think I'm unable to see

fol. 158vb Because I don't fly by day.

The hare lies low all day,

But he can see nonetheless;

line

375 If hounds run toward him,

He skirts away at top speed,

And swerves down narrow paths,

And keeps his tricks ready,

And hops and leaps swiftly,

line

380 And seeks paths to the woods.

As for both eyes, he'd not be able

To do this if he couldn't see well!
I can see just as well as a hare
Even though I stay hidden all day —

line

385 Wherever brave men go to war,
 And travel both far and wide,
 And overrun many countries,
 And do good service at night,
 I follow those brave men

line

390 And fly by night in their company.”

Nightingale In her mind the nightingale
 Pondered all this and focused on
 What she might say next,
 Because she couldn't rebut

line

395 What the owl had said to her,
 For she'd spoken both truly and wisely;
 And she regretted that she had
 Let the argument progress so far,
 And feared that her response

line

400 Wouldn't be effectively argued.
 But nevertheless she spoke boldly,
 For he is wise who confidently
 Bears a brave face before his foe
 Instead of giving up out of fear,

line

405 For one who'd be belligerent if you run
 Will run away if you hold firm —

fol. 159ra When he sees you're not afraid,
 He'll change from boar to gelded pig!
 Therefore, even though the nightingale

line

410 Was frightened, she spoke confidently.
 "Owl," she said, "why be like this?
 You sing in winter 'woe-la-woe.'
 You sing just like a hen in the snow —
 All she can sing about is misery!

line

415 In winter you sing angrily and mournfully,
 And in summer you're mute!
 With your wicked spitefulness,
 You refuse to be joyful with us,
 For you're virtually burning with anger!

line

420 When our mirth arrives in the land,
 You act like a mean-spirited guy:
 Every pleasurable thing bothers him;
 Grouching and scowling suit him;
 If he sees people being joyful,

line

425 He'd prefer to see instead
 Tears in every person's eyes.

He'd not care at all if herds
Were mixed up by head and by hair.
You behave just like that, for your part,

line

430 Because when snow lies deep and wide
And every creature's miserable,
You sing evening to morning.
But I bring abundant joy with me;
Everyone's glad on my account

line

435 And rejoices when I arrive,
And looks forward to my coming.
The flowers start to grow and bloom
Both on trees and also in meadows.
The lily with her fair complexion

line

440 Welcomes me, as you know,
Bidding with her lovely face
fol. 159rb That I fly to her.
The rose, too, with her complexion,
Opening on the thorny stem,

line

445 Requests that I sing
A joyous song for her love.
And so I do, all night and day —
The more I sing, the more I can! —
And amuse them with my singing,

line

450 But not for an excessively long time.

When I see that people are happy,

I don't want them to feel too satisfied —

When what I came for is all done,

I return and do what's sensible;

line

455 When men are intent on sheaves,

And green leaves start to fade,

I travel home and take my leave.

I don't care at all for winter's misery!

When I see harsh weather coming,

line

460 I return home to my own country

And receive both love and gratitude

For having come and performed here.

When my errand is completed,

Should I stay on? No! For what?

line

465 He is neither clever nor wise

Who overstays where he's not needed."

Owl The owl listened and stored up

This argument, word for word,

And then considered how she might

line

470 Best find a defensible answer,

For whoever's afraid of debating tricks

Must remain mentally alert.

“You ask me,” said the owl,

“Why I sing and call out in winter.

line

475 It’s the habit of good men,

And has been since the world began,

fol. 159va That each good man greet his friend

And entertain him for a time

In his house at his table

line

480 With pleasant talk and pleasant words,

And most of all at Christmastime,

When rich and poor, high and low,

Sing dancing songs night and day.

I help them out as much as I can!

line

485 And also I have different purpose

Beyond having fun or singing —

For this I have a good response,

All ready and waiting!

Because summertime is beautiful,

line

490 Causing a man’s thoughts to stray

So that he cares nothing about chastity,

His intent is wholly on lechery,

For no animal hesitates long,

But every one mounts the other.

line

495 The very stallions in the stable
 Go wild and crazy for the mares,
 And you yourself are among them
 Because your song's all about lechery,
 And, pressing toward how you'll breed,

line

500 You become quite bold and aggressive.
 As soon as you have copulated,
 You can no longer utter a word
 But chirp instead like a titmouse,
 Coughing in a hoarse voice,

line

505 Singing worse than a hedge sparrow
 Flitting near the ground among the stubble.
 When your passion is depleted,
 Then is your voice depleted too.
 In summer churls become mad fools

line

510 And get all twisted and perverse —
fol. 159vb It's not out of love, though,
 But out of a churl's mad frenzy,
 For as soon as he's done the deed,
 All his passion collapses;

line

515 Once he's stung under a skirt,
 His love lasts no longer.

Your tendency is just like that:
Just as soon as you sit hatching,
You lose all your melodies.

line

520 You act just like that on your bough:
When you've finished your game,
Your voice is immediately ruined!
Yet when nights grow long
And bring frosts stark and cold,

line

525 Only then may it be seen
Where are the bold, where the fearless;
In tough times, it shall be discovered
Who goes forward, who lags behind.
It shall be seen in time of need,

line

530 When dutiful service is called for,
That then I'm bold and entertain and sing,
And rejoice to give my performance.
Winter doesn't faze me at all
For I'm not a puny weakling!

line

535 Moreover, I comfort many creatures
Who've got no strength of their own;
They're anxious and quite miserable,
And search desperately for warmth.
I sing often especially for them

line

540 So as to reduce some of their stress.

How about it? Are you beaten?

Are you overcome by truth?"

Nightingale "No! No!" said the nightingale,

"You'll have to hear another side!

fol. 160ra This debate still hasn't been judged,

line

546 So be quiet and now listen to me!

I will, with only a single argument,

Cause your speech to mean nothing!"

Owl "That's not fair!" the owl said.

line

550 "You've argued as you've liked,

And I've given you an answer!

But before we go to our judgment,

I intend to argue against you

Just as you've argued against me,

line

555 And you may answer me if you can.

Tell me now, you wretched creature,

Do you have in you any use

Besides possessing a shrill voice?

You are good for nothing

line

560 Other than your chattering,

For you are little and weak,

And your coat's not long at all.
What good do you do among men?
No more than does a paltry wren!

line

565 No other good comes out of you
Than making noise as if you're mad,
And once your piping fades away,
You've got no other skills.
Alfred, who was wise, said

line

570 (Well he might, for it's true):
'Solely for singing is no one
Loved or valued for very long,
For that's a worthless person
Who can do nothing but sing.'

line

575 You're only a worthless creature;
You're nothing but chattering;
You're dark and dull in color,
And look like a little, sooty yarnball.

fol. 160rb You're not pretty; you're not strong;

line

580 You're not broad; you're not tall;
You've missed out on good looks,
And small is your goodness.
Another thing I impute about you:
You're neither pretty nor clean

line

585 When you visit men's enclosed yards,
 Where thorns exist and branches entwine
 Amid hedges and thick weeds,
 Where people go to relieve themselves.
 You head off toward it, you dwell there,

line

590 And you avoid other clean spots.
 When I fly after mice by night,
 I might find you at the privy
 Among weeds, among nettles.
 You sit and sing behind the seat!

line

595 There, most often, they'll find you
 Where people thrust out their bums.
 What's more, you blame me for my diet,
 And say I eat disgusting creatures,
 But what do you eat — don't deny it! —

line

600 Other than spiders and filthy flies
 And worms — whatever you can find
 In the crevices of rough bark?
 What's more, I can do useful service,
 For I can guard men's dwellings,

line

605 And my service is very useful
 Because I help with men's food:

I can catch mice in a barn
And also in a church in the dark,
For it pleases me to cleanse

line

610 Christ's house of filthy mice —
Evil creatures won't ever
Enter there, if I can catch them!

fol. 160va And if, for my amusement, I choose
To reject other types of dwellings,

line

615 I have large trees in the woods
With thick boughs, not bare at all,
But overgrown with green ivy
That always stays leafy,
And never loses its color

line

620 When it snows or freezes.
In there I find good shelter —
Warm in winter, cool in summer.
While my house stays bright and green,
Yours is nowhere to be seen.

line

625 What's more, you accuse me of other things:
You slander my chicks
By saying their nest is not clean;
That it's shared among many creatures,
For a horse in a stable and an ox in a stall

line

630 Just do their business wherever it drops;
 And little children in cradles —
 Both churls and also nobles —
 Do all that in their infancy.
 They abandon that when they're older.

line

635 How can a baby help it?
 If it dirties, it's by necessity.
 There's a proverb of great antiquity:
 'Need makes the old woman trot.'
 And still, I have another answer:

line

640 Would you like to visit my nest
 And see how it's laid out?
 If you're wise, you might learn:
 My nest's hollow and roomy in the middle,
 Making it as soft as possible for my chicks;

line

645 It's latticed all around,
 Far outside the nest itself.
 This is where they go for their needs,
fol. 160vb But I forbid them from what you claim.
 We pay attention to human bowers,

line

650 And we construct ours accordingly.
 Humans have, among other conveniences,

A privy at the far end of their bedchambers
Because they prefer not to wander far,
And my chicks do the same thing.

line

655 Sit still now, chattering girl!
You've never been tied up more tight —
To this, you'll never find an answer.
Hang up your axe! Now be done!"

Nightingale Upon hearing this, the nightingale

line

660 Was just about out of ideas
And quickly pondered whether
There was something else she knew —
Anything beyond singing —
That might help in some way.

line

665 She needed to find a response for this,
Or else be completely behind,
And it's hard to fight
Against truth and right.
One must turn to deception

line

670 When the heart's in trouble,
And one must talk another way —
He must embroider and embellish —
If the outward mouth is to conceal
What can't be seen in the heart.

line

675 An argument may suddenly go astray
 When mouth speaks against heart;
 An argument may suddenly go wrong
 When mouth speaks against heart.
 But nonetheless, even in spite of this,

line

680 Here's some advice, whoever wants it:
 Never is a mind so keen
 As when the plan is in doubt;

fol. 161ra Mental acuity first arrives
 When it's the most frightened.

line

685 For Alfred said in an old proverb
 That even now isn't forgotten:
 'When disaster's the highest,
 Then remedy's the nearest.'
 The mind waxes in its troubles

line

690 And for its troubles is the greater.
 Thus is one never defenseless
 Unless his heart is witless.
 Should he lose his wits,
 His trick-bag's slit right open —

line

695 If he can't hang onto his wits,
 He'll find no trick in its folds!

For the very wise Alfred said,
Who always spoke truly:
‘When disaster’s the highest,

line

700 Then remedy’s the nearest.’

 The nightingale had applied
All her thought to arrive at a plan;
Among hardships, among challenges,
She pondered hard to come up with a plan,

line

705 And had found a good answer

 Among all her hard positions.
 “Owl, you ask me,” she said,
 “Whether I know how to do anything
 Besides sing in summertime

line

710 And bring happiness far and wide.

 Why do you ask about my skills?
 My one skill is better than all yours!
 One song from my mouth is better
 Than all that your kin’s able to do!

line

715 And, listen, I’ll tell you why:

 Do you know why mankind was born?
 It was for the bliss of heaven’s realm,

fol. 161rb Where always are song and mirth together.

 Every person aspires to go there,

line

720 Who knows anything about good.
 That's why people sing in Holy Church,
 And clerks compose songs:
 So that people remember, by the song,
 Where they'll go and stay a long time;

line

725 So that they don't forget the joy,
 But think about it and obtain it,
 And grasp from church-singing
 How joyful is the bliss of heaven!
 Clerks, monks, and canons

line

730 From good religious communities
 Arise at midnight
 And sing about heaven's light,
 And priests in the land sing
 When the light of day dawns;

line

735 And I help them however I can!
 I sing with them night and day,
 And all of them, because of me, are happier
 And more eager to sing the song.
 I give people a beneficial taste

line

740 So that they'll rejoice in spirit,
 And encourage them to pursue

The true song that lasts forever.
Now may you, owl, sit and decay!
About this there's no idle chatter —

line

745 I'd let you go for judgment
Before the Pope of Rome himself!
But hold on a bit, nevertheless —
You shall face another blast:
You shall not, for all of England,

line

750 Prevail against me in this point.
Why criticize me for my weakness,
My littleness and my shortness,
And allege that I'm not strong
fol. 161va Because I'm not large or tall?

line

755 You never know what you're saying,
But just allege lies about me,
For I'm skilled and I'm shrewd,
And that's why I'm so assertive!
I'm smart and know many a song,

line

760 And I don't depend on other strengths,
For what Alfred said is true:
'Strength cannot beat wisdom.'
Often a bit of shrewdness succeeds
Where great strength would fail.

line

765 With a bit of strength, by trickery
Castles and towns can be won;
By shrewdness, walls can be felled,
And brave knights thrown off horses.
Violent strength is worth little,

line

770 But wisdom never loses its value.
You can see by every example
That wisdom has no equal:
A horse is stronger than a man,
But because it has no intellect,

line

775 It carries on its back heavy loads,
And pulls by neck large plow reins,
And suffers both stick and spur,
And stands tethered at the mill door,
And does what men order it to do;

line

780 And because it has no wisdom,
Its strength cannot protect it
From having to submit to a little child.
Man sees to it, by strength and wisdom,
That no other thing is his equal.

line

785 Even if all strengths were combined,
Human wisdom would still be more,

Because the human with his skillfulness
fol. 161vb Dominates all earthly creatures.

Likewise, with my single song, I do
line

790 More good than you do all year long.

For my skill, people love me;
For your strength, people shun you.
Do you thus tell me I am worse
Because I have just one skill?

line

795 If two men start to wrestle,
And each presses the other hard,
And one knows lots of throws
And can conceal his tactics well,
While the other knows a single throw

line

800 That's effective against everybody,
And with that one brings down
One opponent after another with speed,
Why should he care about a better throw
When that one's so effective for him?

line

805 You claim you can do many services,
But I am entirely your opposite.
Combine all your skills together,
And yet is my one skill truly better.
Often, when hounds chase foxes,

line

810 The cat survives on his own quite well,
Even though he knows just one trick.
The fox knows nothing that's equally good,
Even though he knows so many tricks
That he thinks he'll escape each hound.

line

815 For he knows paths straight and crooked,
And he can hang from a branch
So that the hound loses his track
And turns back to the moorland.
The fox can creep along the hedge,

line

820 And turn off from his earlier route,
And shortly afterwards come back to it;
fol. 162ra Then the hound is thrown off the scent,
Not knowing from the mingled scents
Whether he should go forward or back.

line

825 If the fox exhausts all these ruses,
In the end he creeps into a hole.
But nonetheless, despite all his tricks,
He's not able to plan so well —
Even though he's clever and swift —

line

830 That he doesn't lose his red fur coat.
The cat knows only a single trick,

By highland or by marshland:
He simply knows how to climb well —
Therefore he wears his grey fur coat!

line

835 Just so do I proclaim of myself:
Better is my one skill than your twelve.”

Owl “Hold on! Hold on!” the owl said,
“Your whole approach is dishonest.
You manipulate all your words

line

840 So that it seems what you’re saying is true!
All your words are smoothed over,
And made so plausible and charming
That everyone who hears them
Thinks you’re telling the truth!

line

845 Hold on! Hold on! You’ll be rebutted!
Now it’ll be made obvious
That you’ve lied enormously
When your lying is exposed!
You claim that you sing to humans

line

850 And teach them they’re headed hence
Up toward the song that lasts forever.
But what’s most remarkable is
That you dare to lie so openly.
Do you expect to bring them so easily

line

855 To God's realm, all singing?

fol. 162rb No! No! They'll certainly find out

That they must copiously weep

And pray for release from their sins

Before they can ever arrive there.

line

860 So I advise folks to take heed

And weep more than sing,

In hope of reaching the King of heaven.

Because no one is without sin,

He must therefore, before going from here,

line

865 Repent with tears and weeping,

Making sour what was once sweet for him.

I help them do that, God knows!

I don't sing to them to set a snare

Because my song's all about longing

line

870 Mingled somewhat with mourning,

So that a man, by me, may realize

That he must bewail his bad deeds;

I pummel him with my song

So that he'll bewail his guilt.

line

875 If you must go on disputing this point,

Then I weep better than you sing!

If right goes ahead and wrong behind,
My weeping is better than your song.
Even if some folks are utterly good,

line

880 And utterly pure in their hearts,
They long to leave here nonetheless;
They're miserable that they're here,
For despite being saved themselves,
They see nothing here but sorrow.

line

885 They weep bitterly for other people,
And on their behalf pray for Christ's mercy.
I help people of both kinds;
My mouth offers two types of remedy:
I aid the good man in his longing,

fol. 162va For when he longs, I sing to him;

line

891 And I help the sinful man as well,
For I show him where misery lies.
What's more, I counter you another way,
Because when you sit on your branch,

line

895 You entice into fleshly desire those folk
Who desire to hear your songs.
You entirely forfeit heaven's bliss,
For, regarding it, you don't give voice;
You sing only of lechery,

line

900 For there's no holiness in you!
 No one's reminded by your piping
 Of a priest singing in church.
 What's more, I pose another point for you
 To see if you can explain it away:

line

905 Why won't you sing in other lands,
 Where there's so much more need?
 You never sing in Ireland,
 Nor do you visit Scotland.
 Why don't you travel to Norway,

line

910 And sing to men of Galloway?
 The people there know little
 About any song under the sun.
 Why won't you sing to priests there
 And teach them by your warbling

line

915 And show them by your voice
 How angels sing in heaven?
 You behave like a lazy spring
 That wells up beside a swift stream,
 And lets the slope dry out,

line

920 Flowing uselessly down it.
 But I travel north and south;

In every land I'm well known:

East and west, south and north.

fol. 162vb I do my job very well,

line

925 And warn people with my cries,

So that your beguiling song not mislead them.

I guide people with my song

So that they won't sin too long;

I advise them that they ought to quit

line

930 So that they not deceive themselves,

For it's better that they weep here

Than have devils' company somewhere else."

Nightingale The nightingale was furious

And also quite a bit embarrassed

line

935 Because the owl had criticized her

For the place she sat and sang in:

Behind the bedchamber, among the weeds,

Where people go to relieve themselves;

And she sat and thought for a time,

line

940 And knew well upon reflection

That wrath deprives a man of his wits,

For as King Alfred said:

"The hateful seldom end well,

And the wrathful seldom plead well" —

line

945 Because wrath stirs up the heart's blood
 Causing it to flow like a wild flood
 And overwhelm the heart,
 Until it has nothing but passion,
 And so loses all its insight,

line

950 And can't see what's true or right.
 The nightingale considered this,
 And allowed her anger to subside;
 She might better speak calmly
 Than spew wrathful words.

line

955 "Owl," she said, "now listen to this:
 You're going to fall; your way's slippery.
 You say I fly behind the bower;

fol. 163ra It's true, the bower is ours.
 Wherever lord and lady lie,

line

960 I'll sing to them and perch nearby.
 Do you think that wise men abandon
 The right road just because of dirty mud?
 Or that the sun shines any the later
 Just because it's dirty in your nest?

line

965 Should I, just because of a board's hole,
 Abandon my rightful place

And not sing alongside the bed
Where a lord sleeps with his lady?
It is my duty, it is my lawful rule,

line

970 To which I draw myself to the utmost.
Just because you boast of your own song —
That you're able to yell angry and tough —
And argue that you advise mankind
To weep for their sins,

line

975 Should everyone wail and screech
As if they're miserable?
If they were to yell the way you do,
They might frighten their priest.
A person should be still and not screech;

line

980 He must weep for his misdeeds.
But wherever Christ is praised
Is where they cry out and sing loudly;
Church song at the proper time
Is neither too loud nor too long.

line

985 You yell and wail, and I sing;
Your song is lament, and mine celebration.
May you forever yell and weep
Until your life is over,
And may you yell so loud

line

990 That both your eyes burst out!

Which is the better of two states:

fol. 163rb To be happy or to be angry?

May it forever be so, in our case,

That you are sad and I am happy.

line

995 What's more, you ask why I don't travel

To another country and sing there.

No! What would I do among those

Who've never known happiness?

That country isn't good or pleasant,

line

1000 But instead it's wilderness and wasteland,

Crags and rocky hills reaching to the skies.

Snow and hail are what they're used to;

That country is hideous and foul!

The people are savage and miserable;

line

1005 They don't live in peace or harmony.

They don't care how they live:

They eat raw fish and meat,

Ripping it apart like wolves.

They drink milk and whey with it —

line

1010 They don't know what else to do —

They don't have either wine or beer,

But live just like wild animals,
Going about clad in rough pelts,
As if they've come out of hell.

line

1015 If any good man visited them
 (As someone from Rome once did)
 To teach them to behave properly
 And abandon their vices,
 He'd be better off staying put,

line

1020 For his time would be wasted!
 He'd do better to teach a bear
 How to hold shield and spear
 Than persuade that savage nation
 That they'd want to hear me sing.

line

1025 What use would I be with my song?
fol. 163va No matter how long I sang to them,
 My song would be entirely wasted:
 Neither halter nor bridle could
 Draw them from their savage ways,

line

1030 Nor could a man with steel or iron.
 But where a country is pleasant and good,
 And the people have gentle ways,
 I put my throat to good use among them,
 For I may give them good service,

line

1035 And bring them welcome tidings,
 Because I sing songs of the church.
 It was said in an old proverb,
 And the same saying still holds true,
 That ‘A man must harrow and sow

line

1040 Where he expects to reap some good,
 For deluded is he who sows his seed
 Where grass or leaf never grows.’”

Owl The owl was angry, ready to fight;
 When she heard this, her eyes bulged:

line

1045 “You say that you watch over people’s bowers,
 Where there are leaves and lovely flowers,
 Where two lovers in one bed
 Lie in embrace, well protected.
 I know where you once sang

line

1050 Beside a bower and wished to urge
 The lady into an illicit love affair,
 And sang both low and high,
 And taught her to do something shameful
 And improper with her body.

line

1055 The lord soon discovered that;
 Lime, snares, and all sorts of things

He set and laid out in order to catch you.

Soon you came to the window:

You were caught in a snare —

fol. 163vb Your legs paid the price for it!

line

1061 Your only judgment and sentence

Was to be torn apart by wild horses!

See if you can ever again misadvise

Whoever you please, wife or maiden —

line

1065 Your song will only succeed so far

Until you end up fluttering in a snare!”

Nightingale Upon hearing this, the nightingale,

If she’d been a man, would have attacked

With a sword and spear-point,

line

1070 But since she couldn’t do anything better,

She fought with her clever tongue.

“He fights well who speaks well,” says the song.

She took counsel of her tongue.

“He fights well who speaks well,” said Alfred.

line

1075 “What? Do you say this to insult me?

The lord got into trouble for this.

He was so jealous of his wife

That, for his life, he couldn’t

Tolerate any man speaking to her

line

1080 Without his heart breaking.
 He locked her in a chamber
 That kept her tight and secure.
 I felt sympathy and compassion for her,
 And pitied her unhappiness,

line

1085 And entertained her with my song
 As much as I could, early and late.
 For that, the knight was angry at me;
 He hated me with sheer malice.
 He inflicted on me his own shame,

line

1090 But it returned to him with trouble.
 King Henry learned about that.
 (Jesus have mercy on his soul!)
 He banished the knight

fol. 164ra Who'd done such a crime

line

1095 In the realm of so good a king,
 Who, for sheer malice and foul envy,
 Had planned the little bird's capture
 And condemned it to death.
 It was an honor to all my species!

line

1100 As a result, the knight forfeited his riches,
 And paid for me a hundred-pound fine,

And my chicks stayed safe and sound,
And had bliss and joy afterwards,
And were pleased, as well they might be,

line

1105 Because I was so well avenged.
Ever since, I've dared speak all the more
Because it concluded in this way.
I've been the happier ever since!
Now I can sing wherever I like,

line

1110 And no one dares annoy me again.
But you wretch, you miserable soul,
You've got no idea how to find
A hollow trunk where you might hide,
So that no one can pilch your hide,

line

1115 For children, servants, peasants, farmhands,
They all want to make you suffer.
If they happen to see you sit,
They fill their pockets with stones,
And violently pelt and injure you,

line

1120 And break your filthy bones to pieces.
Once you've been struck or shot,
Then for the first time you're put to good use,
For they hang you on a stick,
And you, with your stinking paunch

line

1125 And with your ugly neck,
 Guard people's corn from animals.
 Your life and blood are good for nothing,
fol. 164rb But you make a fine scarecrow
 Wherever seeds are sown.

line

1130 No sparrow, goldfinch, rook, or crow
 Ever dares to venture close
 If your carcass hangs at the boundary.
 Wherever trees blossom each year,
 And young seeds sprout and grow,

line

1135 No bird will dare to get at them
 If you're hung over them.
 Your life's always hateful and evil;
 You're worthless unless you're dead!
 Know now, for certain,

line

1140 That your looks are fearsome
 During the time you're alive,
 For when you've been hung up, slain,
 They're still terrified of you,
 The birds that formerly squawked at you.

line

1145 People justifiably feel hostile toward you
 Because you sing about what they hate;

All that you sing, early or late,
Dwells incessantly on human calamity.
Whenever you screech at night,

line

1150 People are utterly terrified of you.
You sing where someone will die.
Always you foretell some disaster:
You sing during loss of property,
Or the ruin of some friend;

line

1155 Or you foretell a house's burning,
Or an advancing army, or a thievish plot;
Or you foretell a plague among cattle,
Or that the populace will be harmed,
Or that a wife will lose her husband;

line

1160 Or you foretell quarrels and conflicts.
Always you sing of people's suffering!

fol. 164va Because of you, they're sad and wretched.

You don't ever sing at any time
Unless it's about some bad luck.

line

1165 That's the reason why people shun you,
And violently pelt and clobber you
With stick and stone, turf and clod,
So that you cannot escape anywhere.
Cursed be always the town crier

line

1170 Who announces evil secrets
 And always brings bad news
 That speaks of calamitous things!
 May he gain the wrath of God Almighty
 And all who wear linen cloth!”

Owl The owl did not pause for long

line

1176 But gave a bold and vigorous answer.
 “What?” she said. “Are you ordained,
 Or do you curse unordained?
 I think you’re performing a priest’s job.

line

1180 I didn’t know you were a priest;
 I didn’t know you could sing mass —
 You know plenty about excommunicating!
 On account of your ancient grudge,
 You’ve cursed me once again!

line

1185 But there’s an easy retort for that:
 ‘Pull harder!’ said the carter.
 Why criticize me for my insight,
 My intelligence, and my power?
 For I am clever, certainly,

line

1190 And know all that is here to come:
 I know of famine, of invasion;

I know if people will live long;
I know if a wife will lose her mate;
I know where there'll be war and ruin;

line

1195 I know who will be hanged,
Or else suffer horrible death;
If men have joined in battle,
I know which side will be beaten;

fol. 164vb I know if disease will infect cattle,

line

1200 And if animals will lie dead;
I know if trees will blossom;
I know if grain will grow;
I know if houses will burn;
I know if men will walk or ride;

line

1205 I know if the sea will drown ships;
I know if smiths will badly rivet.
And I know much more:
I know a good deal of book-learning,
And I also know about the gospel

line

1210 More than I'm willing to tell you,
For I frequently go to the church
And learn a great deal of wisdom.
I know all about prophecy,
And about many other things.

line

1215 If anyone should suffer a hue and cry,
 I know all about it before it happens.
 Often, because of my deep insight,
 I sit vexed and sorrowful in heart;
 Whenever I see that something bad

line

1220 Is about to happen, I call out loudly.
 I advise people to be vigilant
 And to have good plans ready,
 For Alfred uttered a wise saying
 (Everyone should memorize it):

line

1225 ‘If you see beforehand that it’s coming,
 Its strength is virtually robbed from it.’
 So heavy blows are lessened
 If one anticipates them with alertness,
 And an arrow will go astray

line

1230 If you see how it flies from the string,
 For you might be able to duck and run
 When you see it coming toward you.
 If someone falls into disgrace,
 Why should he blame his shame on me?

line

1235 Even if I see his harm in advance,
fol. 165ra It doesn’t therefore come from me.

Even if you see some blind man
Incapable of taking a straight path
Heading roundabout toward a ditch,

line

1240 And falling in and getting muddy,
Do you think, even if I saw it all,
It happened any sooner because of me?
That's how it is with my insight:
When I sit upon my branch,

line

1245 I know and see very clearly
That someone will come to harm sometime.
Should he, knowing nothing about it,
Blame me because I do know about it?
Should he blame me for his distress

line

1250 Because I am wiser than he is?
Whenever I see that some calamity
Draws toward humans, I call out plenty
And warn them enough to protect themselves
Because serious harm is headed toward them;

line

1255 But even if I call out, loud or quiet,
It all happens according to God's will.
Why do men wish to complain about me
If I trouble them with what's true?
Even if I warned them for an entire year,

line

1260 The harm's not therefore any closer to them.

But I sing to them because I want

Them to understand clearly

That some misfortune is at hand.

When I direct my hooting at them,

line

1265 No person has any assurance

That he may not expect or fear

That some misfortune is nigh to him,

Even though he himself might not see it.

That's why Alfred said very aptly

line

1270 (And his word was gospel)

That 'the better off each man is,

The more ought he plan ahead.'

fol. 165rb No one should trust in wealth

Too much, however much he has.

line

1275 Nothing's so hot it doesn't grow cold,

Nor so white it doesn't grow dirty,

Nor so beloved it doesn't grow odious,

Nor so pleasant it doesn't grow irksome;

But everything that's not everlasting

line

1280 Must pass away with all this world's joy.

Now may you readily understand

That you always talk foolishly,
Because all you've said to insult me
Always rebounds to harm yourself.

line

1285 However it goes, with every bout
You fall down by your own swing!
Everything you say to revile me
Goes to my credit in the end.
Unless you go about it better,

line

1290 You won't win anything but shame.”
Nightingale The nightingale sat and sighed,
And was anxious with good reason,
For the owl had so well spoken
And so well laid out her case

line

1295 That she was anxious and unsure
About what she'd say to her next,
But nonetheless she gathered her thoughts.
“What?” she said. “Owl, are you crazy?
You boast of your wondrous wisdom;

line

1300 You don't know how it comes to you
Unless it be by witchcraft.
Of that, you wretch, you'll need exoneration
If you want to remain among humans,
Or else you'll have to flee the country

line

1305 Because all who have knowledge of that
 Were long ago, by priest's edict,
 Put under curse, as you are still —
 Never have you given up witchcraft!
 I explained this to you just a bit ago,

line

1310 When you mockingly asked me
fol. 165va Whether I'm ordained as a priest,
 But cursing is so widespread
 That even with no priests in the land
 You'd still be a miserable wretch,

line

1315 For every child calls you 'filthy,'
 And every man 'a wretched owl.'
 I have heard, and it's true,
 That one must be learned in astrology
 To understand what might happen,

line

1320 Just as you say is customary with you.
 What do you know, wretch, about stars
 Apart from gazing at them in the distance,
 Just as do many animals and humans
 Who know nothing about such things?

line

1325 A monkey can look at a book,
 Turn over the leaves, and shut it again,

But by no means does it thus make him
Knowledgeable of clerks' lore, not at all.
Even if, likewise, you see the stars,

line

1330 You are none the wiser for it.
And still, you foul thing, you chide me
And upbraid me very sternly
For singing close to people's houses
And teaching wives to commit adultery.

line

1335 You lie for sure, you filthy thing!
By my doing, wedlock's never been wrecked,
But it's true that I sing and call out
Where there are ladies and lovely girls,
And it's true that I sing about love,

line

1340 Because in marriage a good wife
Does better to love her own husband
Instead of another, her lover.
And a girl may choose love
So as not to lose her honor,

line

1345 And love with a virtuous love
The man who will be her lord.
I teach and instruct such love;

fol. 165vb My entire song is about it.

Even if a wife has a tender heart —

line

1350 For women are soft by nature —
 So that she, by the teaching of some fool
 Who earnestly begs and deeply sighs,
 Goes astray and errs for a time,
 Must I be held responsible for that?

line

1355 If women love ill-advisedly,
 Do you blame me for their misdeeds?
 If a woman considers a secret love,
 I cannot withhold my songs.
 A woman may play under bedsheets

line

1360 Whether her intentions are good or ill;
 And she may make use of my song
 Whether her intentions are right or wrong,
 For there's nothing so good in the world
 That it might not perform some evil

line

1365 If someone wants to turn it awry.
 For gold and silver are good,
 Yet nonetheless by them you might
 Purchase adultery and crime.
 Weapons are good for keeping peace,

line

1370 Yet, despite that, men are killed by them
 In violation of all countries' laws

Whenever thieves bear them in hand.
It is just like this with my song:
Even though it's good, one can misuse it

line

1375 And apply it to folly
 And other wicked actions.
 But, wretch, is it love you blame?
 No matter what, every love is proper
 Between a man and a woman;

line

1380 But if it's forcibly diverted, then
 It is wicked and corrupt!
 May anyone perverting nature this way
 Have the Holy Cross's wrath!
 It's a wonder she doesn't go insane,

fol. 166ra And perhaps she does, for she's crazy

line

1386 To start hatching outside the nest!
 A woman is frail of flesh,
 And fleshly desires are hard to suppress;
 It's no wonder if she carries on,

line

1390 For fleshly desires make her slip.
 She might not be entirely lost
 Who finds the flesh a stumbling-block,
 For many a woman has misbehaved
 And risen up from the mire.

line

1395 Not all sins are exactly alike,
 For they consist of two types:
 Some arise from the flesh's desire,
 And some from the spirit's inclination.
 While the flesh draws men to drunkenness,

line

1400 And to pomposity and to lechery,
 The spirit sins through malice and envy,
 And later by pleasure in men's disgrace,
 And hungers for more and more,
 And cares little for pity and mercy,

line

1405 And rises high through arrogant pride,
 And then lords it over lesser folk.
 Tell me truly, if you know:
 Which does worse, flesh or spirit?
 You might say, if you like,

line

1410 That the flesh is less culpable:
 Many a man is chaste in his flesh
 Who in his spirit is the Devil's friend.
 No one ought to call out a woman
 And upbraid her for fleshly desires,

line

1415 Such that she'd be blamed for lechery
 By someone sinning worse in pride.

Still, when I sing, if I were to urge
A wife or a maiden toward love,
I would choose the maiden.

line

1420 If you can grasp it correctly,
 Listen now, I'll tell you why

fol. 166rb From beginning to end:

 If a maiden falls in love secretly,
 She stumbles and falls by way of nature,

line

1425 For although she may play for awhile,
 She's not gone far off the path;
 She can free herself from her guilt
 In a proper way, with a church-bond,
 And afterwards have as her mate

line

1430 Her lover without being blamed,
 And go by daylight to him whom
 She'd crept to earlier in the dark of night.
 That child doesn't know what such a thing is;
 Her young blood leads her astray,

line

1435 And some besotted man draws her into it
 By every means in his power.
 He comes and goes and persists,
 And he sits close to her,
 And beseeches often and long.

line

1440 What may the child do if she should err?

She never knew what it was!

For that reason, she set out to try it,

And find out the nature of the sport

That makes a wild man tame.

line

1445 Out of pity, I cannot refrain —

When I see the drawn expression

That love brings to a young girl —

From singing to them about joy.

By my song I teach them

line

1450 That such love doesn't last long,

For my song lasts but a little while,

And love does nothing but alight

On such children and soon depart,

And its hot breath tapers down.

line

1455 I sing with them for a moment;

I start high and end low,

And let my songs taper down

A little while, fading altogether.

fol. 166va The maiden understands when I finish

line

1460 That love is just like my songs,

For it's nothing but a little breath,

That soon comes and soon goes.
The child learns it from me,
And turns from folly to good sense,

line

1465 And sees clearly from my singing
That foolish love doesn't last long.
But I very much want you to know this:
I hate a wife's extramarital excess,
And a wife may take note of me

line

1470 That I do not sing when I'm breeding.
A wife ought to shun a fool's speech,
Even if her marriage binds too severely.
It seems to me shocking and awful
That any man might go so far

line

1475 As to propose in his heart
To do it to another man's wife,
For it leads to one of two things,
And no one can imagine a third:
Either her lord's a very worthy man,

line

1480 Or else he's inadequate and worthless.
If he's an honorable, worthy man,
No sensible man will want to do
Him shame, least of all through his wife,
Because he'd be afraid of injury,

line

1485 Lest he lose what hangs there,
 Causing him to never again desire that way.
 And even if he's not afraid of this,
 It is wrong and very stupid
 To do wrong to a good man,

line

1490 And seduce his wife away from him.
 If her lord is inadequate,
 And has little to offer in bed and at table,
 How could there be any love
 When a churl's belly lies on top of her?

line

1495 How could there be any love
fol. 166vb Where such a man gropes her thigh?
 By this, you may well understand
 By one path lies harm, by the other disgrace,
 When stealing into another man's bed,

line

1500 Because, if her husband's a worthy man,
 You can expect to come to grief
 When you're lying by her side,
 And if her lord's a wretch,
 What pleasure might you gain from it?

line

1505 If you think about who sleeps with her,
 You must buy pleasure with disgust!

I don't know how any worthy man
Would want to pursue her after that;
If he thinks about by whom she lies,

line

1510 His love may suddenly go away.”

Owl The owl was pleased by this speech.

She thought that the nightingale,
Even though she'd spoken well at first,
Had made an error at the end,

line

1515 And she said, “Now I've found out

That maidens are of interest to you:
You take their side and defend them,
And you praise them excessively.
But ladies turn toward me

line

1520 And direct their laments to me,
For it happens over and over
That a wife and husband are at odds,
And on that account guilty deeds occur:
The husband screws another woman,

line

1525 And spends on her all that he has,
And woos her when he has no right to,
And keeps his proper wife at home,
The walls bare, the house empty,
Poorly dressed and badly fed,

line

1530 And leaves her without food and clothing.

When he comes back home to his wife,

She doesn't dare utter a word.

fol. 167ra He complains and shouts like a madman,

And brings home no other goods.

line

1535 Everything she does he dislikes,

Everything she says irritates him,

And often when she does nothing wrong,

She gets a fist in the teeth.

There's no man who won't lead

line

1540 His wife astray by such means;

She may so often be mistreated

That she'll take care of her own needs.

Ah, God knows, she can't help it

If she makes him a cuckold!

line

1545 For it happens over and over

That his wife is gentle and soft,

Of fair complexion and well dressed,

So it's all the more wrong

That he spends his love on one

line

1550 Who's not worth even one of her hairs!

And there are plenty of men like this,

Who cannot treat a wife properly:

No man's allowed to talk to her;

He thinks she'll suddenly break

line

1555 Wedlock if she should look at

Or speak politely to a man.

He keeps her under key and lock.

Consequently, wedlock's often broken

Because she's brought to that point where

line

1560 She does what she'd never thought of before.

A curse on anyone who grumbles a lot

When such wives take their revenge!

The ladies complain about it to me

And upset me painfully;

line

1565 My heart comes close to breaking

When I see their suffering.

I weep bitterly with them,

And pray for Christ's mercy on them —

That he quickly rescue the lady

fol. 167rb And send her a better bedmate.

line

1571 And I'll tell you another thing,

For which, to save your skin,

You won't find an answer —

All your disputing will die off!

line

1575 Many merchants and many knights
 Love and treat their wives properly,
 And so do many peasants.
 The good wife does so in return,
 And serves him in bed and at table

line

1580 With loving acts and loving words,
 And eagerly discovers how she might
 Do whatever is profitable to him.
 Into the country her lord
 Travels out on their behalf,

line

1585 And the good wife is unhappy
 About her lord's distressing departure,
 And sits and sighs, in deep longing,
 And sorely anxious in her heart,
 Entirely for her lord's sake.

line

1590 She's sad by day, awake by night,
 And the wait seems very long to her,
 And every step seems like a mile.
 When others are asleep around her,
 I alone listen there from outside,

line

1595 And know about her deep sorrow,
 And sing at night for her good;

And my good song, for her sake,
I change somewhat into a lament.
Of her misery, I bear it somewhat,

line

1600 For which I'm very welcome to her.
I help her as much as I might
Because she follows the right path.
But you've so sorely insulted me
That my heart's nearly paralyzed,

line

1605 And I can barely speak!
Even so, I will carry on.

fol. 167va You say that I am hated by humans,
And everyone is angry at me,
Threatening me with stones and sticks,

line

1610 And violently hitting and beating me,
And once they've killed me,
They hang me on their hedge
Where I scare away magpies and crows
From what's sown there.

line

1615 Even if this is true, I do them good,
And for their sake I shed my blood.
I do them good by my death.
On this point, you're in difficulty,
For when you lie dead and shrivel up,

line

1620 Your death isn't anything to anyone.
 I can't even guess what use you might have,
 For you're merely a miserable creature!
 But yet when my life's passed out of me,
 I'm still able to do good service.

line

1625 They can, upon a small stake,
 Set me in the thick of the forest,
 So they can lure toward them
 Little birds and make a catch,
 So they can obtain through me

line

1630 Fine roast meat for their meals.
 But you never do any good for men,
 Alive or dead, nor afford any help.
 I don't know why you raise your brood:
 Alive or dead, it does no good."

Nightingale The nightingale heard this

line

1636 And hopped upon a flowering bough,
 And sat higher than she did before.
 "Owl," she said, "be careful now!

fol. 167vb I won't argue any more with you,

line

1640 For here you fail in your reasoning.
 You boast that people hate you,

And every creature's angry with you;
And with yelling and screeching,
You acknowledge you're vile.

line

1645 You say that boys catch you
 And hang you high on a pole,
 And violently pluck and shake you,
 And some make a scarecrow out of you.
 It seems like you're losing the game —

line

1650 You boast of your own humiliation!
 It seems like you're handing me victory —
 You boast of your own shame!"
 After she'd said these words,
 She perched within a lovely spot,

line

1655 And then readied her voice
 And sang so clear and so bright
 That it was heard far and wide.
 In response, there immediately came to her
 Thrushes, throstles, and woodpeckers,

line

1660 And birds both large and small,
 For they believed that she had
 Vanquished the owl, for which they chirped
 And sang all sorts of melodies,
 So that there was bliss among the boughs,

line

1665 Just as when people cry shame upon the one
 Who plays at dice and loses the game.

Owl This owl, when she heard this,
 Said, “Have you mobilized an army?
 And, wretch, do you plan to fight me?

line

1670 No! No! You don’t have the power!
fol. 168ra What are they shouting, those who come here?
 It appears you’re leading an army against me;
 You’ll learn before you fly from here
 How much is the strength of my kind,

line

1675 For those who have hooked beaks
 And talons sharp and very curved
 Are all of my kindred,
 And would come if I call them!
 Even the cock, who can fight very well,

line

1680 Could legitimately take my side,
 For both of us have clear voices
 And sit under the stars at night.
 If I raise a hue and cry against you,
 I’ll command such a strong army

line

1685 That your pride will collapse —
 I don’t give a turd for the lot of you!

Before it's all dark, there won't be
A wretched feather left on any of you!
But it was our agreement

line

1690 When we came here
 That we'd uphold the terms
 As would give us a fair judgment.
 Will you now break the contract?
 I guess you think judgment's too risky,

line

1695 For you don't dare face a judgment,
 Wretch, wanting now to fight and argue.
 What's more, I'd advise all of you,
 Before I raise a hue and cry against you,
 That you back off from our quarrel

line

1700 And speedily start to fly away,
 For, by the talons I bear,
 If you should battle my army,
 You'll sing a very different tune
 And curse all fighting,

line

1705 Because not one of you is so brave
 As to dare face my visible presence.”
 The owl spoke very forcefully;
 Even though she hadn't as quickly
 Fetched her own army,

fol. 168rb She nonetheless wanted to respond
line

1711 To the nightingale with such words,
 Because many a man with his spear-point
 And his shield has little strength,
 But, nevertheless, on a battlefield,

line

1715 By boasting words and brave countenance,
 Makes his enemy sweat for cowardice.

Wren The wren, because she could sing,
 Arrived there in the morning
 To support the nightingale.

line

1720 Even though she had a small voice,
 She had a good, resonant throat,
 And a song that many find delightful.
 The wren was considered very wise,
 For though she'd not been bred in the woods,

line

1725 She'd been educated among humans,
 And brought her wisdom from there.
 She could speak wherever she liked,
 Even if she were in the king's presence.
 "Listen!" she said. "Allow me to speak!

line

1730 What? Do you wish to break this peace
 And do such a dishonor to the king?

He's not yet dead or crippled.
You two will suffer harm and disgrace
If you breach the peace in his country.

line

1735 Let it be, and call a truce,
 And go directly to your judgment,
 And let the judgment break this dispute
 As was previously agreed to.”

Nightingale “I agree,” said the nightingale,

line

1740 “But, wren, not because of your speech,
 But because of my respect for the law;
 I wouldn't want injustice
 To defeat me in the end.
 I'm not afraid of any judgment.

line

1745 I have sworn, it's true,
 That wise Master Nicholas
 Shall judge between us,
 And I still hope that he will.

fol. 168va But where might we find him?”

Wren The wren sat in a linden tree.

line

1751 “What?” she said. “Don't you know his home?
 He lives at Portesham,
 In a village in Dorset,
 Near the sea on an inlet.

line

1755 There he delivers many sound judgments,
 And composes and writes much that's wise,
 And by his words and his actions,
 Things are better as far as Scotland.
 It's not hard to find him;

line

1760 He's got only one place of residence.
 That's to the bishops' great shame
 And to all who've heard of
 His name and achievements.
 Why won't they decide among themselves

line

1765 To have him often among them
 To instruct them in his wisdom,
 And give him revenues from many places
 So he can often be among them?"

Owl "Indeed," said the owl, "that's true.

line

1770 These wealthy men are terribly wrong
 To neglect such a good man
 Who's capable of so many things,
 When they distribute revenues so unjustly
 And give him so little consideration.

line

1775 To their own families, they're more gentle
 And give revenues to little children!

Thus do their own wits judge them to be wrong

In how Master Nicholas continues to wait.

But let's nonetheless visit him,

line

1780 For that's where our judgment's at hand."

Nightingale "Let's go," said the nightingale,

"But who will read our pleadings,

And speak before our judge?"

Owl "On that matter, I'll please you well,"

line

1785 Said the owl, "for, from beginning to end,

fol. 168vb I can repeat it word for word;

And if you ever think I go astray,

You can object and make me stop."

With these words, off they went,

line

1790 With neither host nor army,

Till they arrived in Portesham.

But of how they sped in their judgment

I can tell you nothing more —

There's nothing more of this story!

The end.