The Thrush and the Nightingale

The *Thrush and the Nightingale* is a short debate poem similar in conception to the much longer and more accomplished twelfth-century *Owl and the Nightingale*. In the shorter poem the male thrush (thrustlecock) slanders women, who are defended by the apparently female nightingale. The poem survives in two manuscripts, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86 (written sometime between 1275 and 1300), and the Auchinleck manuscript, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 19.2.1, written c. 1330. The text below follows the version in the Auchinleck manuscript until it breaks off after line 74; from that point the text is taken from MS Digby 86. The two versions differ considerably in spelling and dialect, but also frequently in their choice of word and phrase. The notes below do not represent a complete representation of the differences; only the most significant are pointed out. The Auchinleck scribe marked stanzaic divisions with the ¶ mark, but I have added modern line breaks. I have also added modern punctuation. Words in brackets indicate reconstructed readings. In some cases, the Auchinleck scribe provided the names of the speakers, and, where they are left out, I have added them bracketed in Modern English.

Lenten ys come wiþ loue [to toune] Lent (i.e. Spring)
Wiþ blosme & wiþ briddes roun; song
Þe notes of þe hasel springeþ, nuts
Þe dewes derken2 in þe dale, darken
5 Þe notes of þe niȝtingale; (see note)
þis foules miri singeþ. these; fowls; merry
¶ Ich herd a striif bitvixen to, I; between; two
þat on of wele, þat oþer of wo, one; weal (good)
Bitven hem to yfere; them; together
10 Þat on herieþ wimen þat ben4 hende, praises; are courtly/noble
þat oþer he wald fawe schende; 5 would; a few; condemn
þis strif ey herere. strife/debate; ye; may; hear
¶ Þe niȝtingale haþ ynome taken
To speke for wimen atte frome, at the beginning
15 Of schame he wald hem were; would protect them
þe þrustel cok he spekeþ ay, thrustlecock (male thrush); ever
He seyt bi niȝtes & bi day says
þat þai ben fendes fere; fiend’s companion
¶ For þai bitraien eueri man
20 Þat mest bileuþ hem on. most believes in them
beþ þai be milde of chere though
þai ben fals & fikel to fond find (experience)
& wircheþ wo in eueri lond; work (do)
It were better þat hye nere. they did not exist (*nere = ne were*)

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1 MS Digby 86 reads *Somer is comen with loue to toune*. Since an ‘L’ is visible in the Auchinleck manuscript, it seems likely that the original reading was similar to *Lenten ys come with loue to toune*, the first line of a well known lyric in London, British Library MS Harley 2253.
2 Probably a mistake for *dankeþ* ‘to be moist’.
3 MS Digby 86 reads *For longing of the nightegale* ‘because of the longing of the nightingale’. The scribe most probably re-copied the first words of line 3.
4 MS Digby 86 reads *That on hereth wimmen, that hoe beth hende*, / *That other hem wole with mighte schende* ‘The one praises women, that they are noble, / The other will slander them with force’.
5 MS Digby 86 reads *wole with mighte schende*. The Auchinleck version, if it makes any sense, would have to be ironic understatement.
The Nightingale

25 'Schame it is to blame leuedi, 
For þai ben hende of curtai si; 
Y rede þat þou leti. 
Nas neuer breche non so strong, 
No wiþ riȝt, no wiþ wrong, 
bat wimen no miȝt bete.

¶ ¶ Ysauȝten hem þat ben wroþe makeþ leue þat is loþe— 
& makeþ leue þat is loþe— 
Wiþ game men schuld hem grete. 
þis warld were nouȝt ziȝf wimen nere, 
Ymaked þai ben to mannes fere; 
Nis noþing half so swete.' 

¶ ¶ Giȝten hem þat beth wrothe, /Bothe the heye and the low
`They make glade those who are angry, / Both the high and the low'. Brown (1932) emends wrothe to wrowe (same meaning) to fit the rhyme scheme.

¶ ¶ Hy beth feire and bright on hewe, 
For þai ben fals & fikel of þouȝt, 
So me is don to vnderstond, 
& take witnes of mani & fele 
þat riche were of worldes wele 
& fre to senden hem sond. 

¶ ¶ Pei þai ben fair & briȝt in hewe, 
þai ben fals fikel vntrewe 
& worcep wo in ich lond. 
King Alisaundre menþ him of hem; 
In þe world nes non so crafti men 
No non so riche of lond.'

[The Thrush]

'I may wimen heri nouȝt praise
For þai ben fals & fikel of þouȝt, 
So me is don to vnderstond, 
& take witnes of mani & fele 
þat riche were of worldes wele 
& fre to senden hem sond. 

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þai ben fals fikel vntrewe 
& worcep wo in ich lond. 
King Alisaundre menþ him of hem; 
In þe world nes non so crafti men 
No non so riche of lond.'

The Nightingale

50 Or þou canst to litel gode understand

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6 It is unclear what the scribe intended; he may have been confused about who hem referred to. MS Digby 86 reads Hy gladieth hem that beth wrothe, /Bothe the heye and the low ‘They make glade those who are angry, / Both the high and the low’. Brown (1932) emends wrothe to wrowe (same meaning) to fit the rhyme scheme.

7 In MS Digby 86 lines 40-50 read:

Hy beth feire and bright on hewe, 
Here thout is fals and ountrewe, 
Ful yare Ich haue hem fondi. 
Alisaundre the king meneth of hem; 
In the world nes non so crafti mon, 
I take witness of monie and fele 
That riche weren of worldes wele, 
Muche wes hem the shonde. 

They are fair and bright in colour, 
Their thought is false and unfaithful, 
Very long I have experienced them. 
Alexander the king complains of them; 
In the world there was none so clever a man, 
I take witness of many and numerous, 
Who were rich of the world’s wealth, 
Great was the humiliation to them.

8 In MS Digby 86 the Thrush goes on to cite the Fall of Adam as evidence for the duplicity of women. The beginning of the Nightingale’s reply in line 49 corresponds to line 72 in the Digby manuscript.
Wimen for to schende.
It is þe best drurie
& mest þai cun of curteisie,
Nis noþing also hende.

55 ¶ Her loue is swetter, ywis,
þan þe braunche of licoris;
Lofsum þai ben & hende.
Wele swetter is her breþ
þan ani milke oþer meþ,
& louelich in armes to wende. 9

60 ¶ So wide so he hadde riden & gon
Bi day no bi niȝt.
Fals fond he neuer non,11
Bi day no bi niȝt.
Foule, for þi fals mouþe,
Pine sawes schal be wide couþe,
Aliȝt whare þou aliȝt. 12

70 Foule, for þi fals mouþe,
Pine sawes schal be wide couþe,
Aliȝt whare þou aliȝt. 12

The reference may be to the story of Phyllis and Aristotle. After Aristotle had advised Alexander the Great to refrain from spending too much time with Phyllis, the king's wife, Phyllis seduced him as retribution. When Alexander caught him carrying Phyllis on his back, as if he were a horse, Aristotle said, 'If thus it happened to me, an old man most wise, that I was deceived by a woman, you can see that I taught you well, that it could happen to you, a young man.'

9 In MS Digby 86 the lines corresponding to lines 55-60 in the Auchinleck manuscript read:

The mest murthe that mon haueth here
Wenne hoe is maked to his fere
In armes for to wende.
Hit is shome to blame leuedi;
For hem thou shalt gon sori,
Of londe Ich wille the sende!

The greatest mirth that man has here
When she is made into his companion
To go into [his] arms.
It is a shame to blame ladies;
For them you shall be sorry (i.e. for their sake),
From the country I will send you.

10 MS Digby 86 reads and strengthe for to fightte.
11 MS Digby 86 reads trewe.
12 MS Digby 86 reads I rede the fle with migyte 'I advise you to fly with force (i.e. quickly)'.
13 The Auchinleck text ends after this word. The rest of the text is taken from MS Digby 86.
Herdi neuere bi no leuedi
Bote hendinese and curtesyi,
And ioye hy gunnen me bringe.’

I heard; of
except; good breeding
did

[The Thrush]
‘Of muchele murthe hy telleth me,
Fere, also I telle the,

Of great
companion; as

Hy liuieth in longinge.’
‘Fowel, thou sittest on hasel bou,
Thou lastest hem, thou hauest wou,
Thi word shal wide springe.’

Great
blame; have; woe

‘Hit springeth wide, wel Ich wot,
Thou tel hit him that hit not,
This sawes ne beth nout newe.
Fowel, herkne to mi sawe,
Ich wile the telle of here lawe;
Thou ne kepest nout hem, I knowe.

Know
knows not (not = ne wot)
hearken; saying (i.e. what I say)
custom
attack

Thenk on Costantines quene—
Foul wel hire semede fow and grene—
Hou sore hit gon hire rewe,
Hoe fedde crupel in hire bour,
And helede him with couertour—

Full; multi-coloured
sorely; made her sorry
she; cripple; bower (bedroom)
healed; bedcovers

Then the day wenne hit dawe
In longe someres tide.

Where
summertime

[The Nightingale]
‘Threstelkok, thou hauest wrong,
Also I sugge one mi song,
And that men witeth wide;
Hy beth brighttore ounder shawe (Crenshaw is ‘crane-grove’)

As; say; in
know

Then the day wenne hit dawe
In longe someres tide.

Come thu heuere in here londe,
Hy shulen don the in prisoun stronge,
And ther thou shalt abide;

Ever
put

The lesinges that thou hauest maked
Ther thou shalt hem forsake,
And shome the shal bitide.’

Lies
shame

[The Thrush]
‘Nightingale, thou seist thine wille,
Thou seist that wimmen shulen me spille—

Destroy

Datheit wo hit wolde!
In holi bok hit is ifounde,
Hy bringeth moni mon to grounde
That prude weren and bolde.

To hell with who would [have it so]
who; proud

14 The precise reference is unknown. The details supplied here seem to imply that the wife of the Roman Emperor Constantine (d. 337), who was partial to richly dyed clothing, took a cripple as her lover.
Thenk oupon Samsun the stronge,
140 Hou muchel is wif him dude to wronge; greatly; his
Ich wot that hoe him solde. know; she
Hit is that worste hord of pris hoard of worth
That Iesu makede in Parais Paradise
In tresour for to holde.'

[The Nightingale]
145 Tho seide the Nighttingale, then
‘Fowel, wel redi is thi tale; i.e. ‘you’re quick to talk’
Herkne to mi lore.
Hit is flour that lasteth longe, heard
And mest iherd in eueri londe, a wedge-shaped garment
150 And louelich under gore.
In the worlde nis non so goed leche, leech (the term for a medical doctor)
So milde of thoute, so feir of speche, man’s hurts
To hele monnes sore.
Fowel, thou rewest al mi thohut, i.e. ‘make my thoughts distressed’
155 Thou dost euele, ne geineth the nohut,
Ne do thou so nammore!’

[The Thrush]
‘Nightingale, thou art ounwis unwise
On hem to leggen so muchel pris; lay; worth/value
Thi mede shal ben lene. reward; lean
160 Among on houndret ne beth fiue, pure/chaste
Nouther of maidnes ne of wive,
That holdeth hem al clene,
That hy ne werchethe wo in londe work
Other bringeth men to shonde— shame
165 And that is wel iseene.
And they we sitten therfore to striuen though; strive/debate
Bothe of maidnes and of wiue, truth; any
Soth ne seist thou ene.’

[The Nightingale]
‘O fowel, thi mouth the haueth ishend shamed
Thorwam wel al this world iwend, [the one] through whom; [was] changed
Of a maide meke and milde;
Of hire sprong that holih bern child
That boren wesan Bedlehem, tames
And temeth al that is wilde.
170 Hoe ne weste of sunne ne of shame, neither…nor (ne…ne); knew; sin
Marie wes ire righte name— her
Crist hire ishilde! protect
Fowel, for thi false sawe saying
Forbeddi the this wode shawe. I forbid
Thou fare into the filde!’

[The Thrush]
‘Nightingale, I wes woed,
Other I couthe to luitel goed
With the for to striue.
I suge that Icham ouercome
That soffrede woundes fiue.

Hi swerie bi his holi name,
Ne shal I neuere suggen shame
Bi maidnes ne bi wiue.

Hout of this londe willi te,
Ne rechi neuere weder I fle—
Awa! Ich wille drie!’