

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 (thrushlecock) 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.

5	L[enten ys come] wiþ loue [to tounē] ¹ Wiþ blösme & wiþ briddes roun; Þe notes of þe hasel springeþ, Þe dewes derken ² in þe dale, Þe notes of þe niȝtingale; ³ Þis foules miri singeþ.	Lent (i.e. Spring) song nuts darken (see note) these; fowls; merry
10	¶ Ich herd a striif bitvixen to, Þat on of wele, þat oþer of wo, Bitven hem to yfere; Þat on herieþ wimen þat ben ⁴ hende, Þat oþer he wald fawe schende; ⁵ Þis strif ȝe mow yhere.	I; between; two one; weal (good) them; together praises; are courtly/noble would; a few; condemn strife/debate; ye; may; hear
15	¶ Þe niȝtingale haþ ynome To speke for wimen atte frome, Of schame he wald hem were; Þe þrustel cok he spekeþ ay, He seyrt bi niȝtes & bi day Þat þai ben fendes fere;	taken at the beginning would protect them thrushlecock (male thrush); ever says fiend's companion
20	¶ For þai bitraien eueri man Þat mest bileueþ hem on. Þei þai be milde of chere Þai ben fals & fikel to fond & wircheþ wo in eueri lond; It were better þat hye nere.	most believes in them though find (experience) work (do) they did not exist (<i>nere = ne were</i>)

¹ MS Digby 86 reads *Somer is comen with loue to tounē*. 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 tounē*, 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 niȝtingale* '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 shende* '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.

	Be Ni3tingale	
25	‘Schame it is to blame leuedi, For þai ben hende of curtaisi; Y rede þat þou lete. Nas neuer breche non so strong, No wiþ ri3t, no wiþ wrong,	ladies noble advise; desist there was (<i>nas = ne was</i>); breach neither...nor (<i>no...no</i>)
30	þat wimen no mi3t bete.	make better
¶	¶ Ysau3ten hem þat ben wroþe ⁶ & makeþ leue þat is loþe— Wiþ game men schuld hem grete. þis world were nou3t 3if wimen nere,	seek?; angry dear; what; hateful would be (<i>were</i>); were not (see l. 23)
35	Ymadeþ þai ben to mannes fere; Nis noþing half so swete.’	made; as man’s compaion there is (<i>nis = ne is</i>)
	[The Thrush]	
	‘I may wimen heri nou3t For þai ben fals & fikel of þou3t, So me is don to vnderstond, & take witnes of mani & fele	praise made many (<i>fele</i>) who; wealth
40	þat riche were of worldes wele & fre to senden hem sond.	messages
	¶ þei þai ben fair & bri3t in hewe, þai ben fals fikel vntrewe & worcheþ wo in ich lond. ⁷	though each
45	King Alisaunder menep him of hem; In þe world nis non so crafti men No non so riche of lond.’ ⁸	moans (see note 7) there is (<i>nis = ne is</i>)
	Be Ni3tingale	
50	‘Þrustelkok þou art wode Or þou canst to litel gode	mad understand

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 outtrewe, Ful yare Ich haue hem fonde. 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.
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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.	condemn type or object of love know as/so courteous
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, 60 & louelich in armes to wende. ⁹	indeed lovely or; mead lovely go
	þe Þrostel cok 'Niȝtingale þou hast wrong, As ich finde in mi song, For ich hold wiþ þe riȝt. Y take wittnisse of Wawain 65 þat Crist ȝaf miȝt & main & trewest was of kniȝt. ¹⁰	Gawain who; gave; strength
	¶ So wide so he hadde riden & gon Fals fond he neuer non, ¹¹ Bi day no bi niȝt. 70 Foule, for þi fals mouþe, þine sawes schal be wide couþe, Aliȝt whare þou aliȝt. ¹²	as wide as found sayings; widely; known wherever
	þe Niȝtingale 'Ichaue leue to aliȝt here In orchard & in erbere ¹³ Mine songes for to singe.	I have arbour

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.
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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.'

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 migghte* '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.

100	Herdi neuere bi no leuedi Bote hendinese and curteysi, And ioeye hy gunnen me bringe.’	I heard; of except; good breeding did
	[The Thrush] ‘Of muchele murthe hy telleth me, Fere, also I telle the,	great companion; as
105	Hy liuieth in longinge.’ ‘Fowel, thou sitest on hasel bou, Thou lastest hem, thou hauest wou, Thi word shal wide springe.’	blame; have; woe
110	‘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 (<i>not = ne wot</i>) hearken; saying (i.e. what I say) custom attack
115	Think on Costantines quene— Foul wel hire semede fow and grene— Hou sore hit gon hire rewe, Hoe fedde crupel in hire bour, And heledde him with couertour—	full; multi-coloured sorely; made her sorry she; cripple; bower (bedroom) healed; bedcovers
120	Loke war wimmen ben trewe!’ ¹⁴	where
	[The Nightingale] ‘Threstelkok, thou hauest wrong, Also I sugge one mi song, And that men witeth wide; Hy beth brighttore ounder shawe	as; say; in know grove (<i>Crenshaw</i> is ‘crane-grove’)
125	Then the day wenne hit dawe In longe someres tide.	than; when; dawns summertime
	Come thu heuere in here londe, Hy shulen don the in prisoun stronge, And ther thou shalt abide;	ever put
130	The lesinges that thou hauest maked Ther thou shalt hem forsake, And shome the shal bitide.’	lies shame
	[The Thrush] ‘Nighttingale, thou seist thine wille, Thou seist that wimmen shulen me spille—	destroy
135	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.

140	Think oupon Samsun the stronge, Hou muchel is wif him dude to wronge; Ich wot that hoe him solde. Hit is that worste hord of pris That Iesu makede in Parais In tresour for to holde.'	greatly; his know; she hoard of worth Paradise
[The Nightingale]		
145	Tho seide the Nighttingale, 'Fowel, wel redi is thi tale; Herkne to mi lore. Hit is flour that lasteth longe, And mest iherd in eueri londe,	then i.e. 'you're quick to talk'
150	And louelich under gore. In the worlde nis non so goed leche, So milde of thoute, so feir of speche, To hele monnes sore. Fowel, thou rewrest al mi thohut, Thou dost euele, ne geineth the nohut, Ne do thou so nammore!'	heard a wedge-shaped garment leech (the term for a medical doctor) man's hurts i.e. 'make my thoughts distressed'
[The Thrush]		
160	'Nightingale, thou art ounwis On hem to leggen so muchel pris; Thi mede shal ben lene. Among on houndret ne beth fiue, Nouthur of maidnes ne of wive, That holdeth hem al clene,	unwise lay; worth/value reward; lean pure/chaste
165	That hy ne werchethe wo in londe Other bringeth men to shonde— And that is wel iseene. And they we sitten therfore to striuen Bothe of maidnes and of wiue, Soth ne seist thou ene.'	work shame though; strive/debate truth; any
[The Nightingale]		
170	'O fowel, thi mouth the haueth ishend Thoru wam wel al this world iwend, Of a maide meke and milde; Of hire sprong that holi bern That boren wes in Bedlehem, And temeth al that is wilde.	shamed [the one] through whom; [was] changed child tames
175	Hoe ne weste of sunne ne of shame, Marie wes ire righte name— Crist hire ishilde! Fowel, for thi false sawe Forbeddi the this wode shawe.	neither...nor (<i>ne...ne</i>); knew; sin her protect saying I forbid

180	Thou fare into the filde!'	let you go
	[The Thrush]	
	'Nightingale, I wes woed,	mad
	Other I couthe to luitel goed	or; understood; too
	With the for to striue.	
	I sugre that Icham ouercome	say; I am
185	Thoru hire that bar that holi sone	her; bore
	That soffrede woundes fiue.	
	Hi swerie bi his holi name,	I swear
	Ne shal I neuere suggen shame	say
	Bi maidnes ne bi wiue.	of; nor
190	Hout of this londe willi te,	out; will I go
	Ne rechi neuere weder I fle—	care I; where; fly
	Awai Ich wille driue!'	go