



# Birds in Medieval English Poetry

METAPHORS, REALITIES,  
TRANSFORMATIONS

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MICHAEL J. WARREN



BIRDS IN MEDIEVAL  
ENGLISH POETRY

# Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages

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Dr Michael D.J. Bintley, School of Humanities, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU

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Metaphors, Realities,  
Transformations

Michael J. Warren

D. S. BREWER

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASPR	G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, eds, <i>The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</i> , 6 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931–1953)
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
Bosworth-Toller	J. Bosworth, <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collection of the Late Joseph Bosworth</i> , ed. by T. Northcote Toller (1888–98; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1954), and T. Northcote Toller, <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collection of the Late Joseph Bosworth, Supplement</i> (1921; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955)
BWP	Stanley Cramp, gen. ed., <i>Birds of the Western Palearctic</i> , 9 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977–94)
CR	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
EETS OS	Early English Text Society, Original Series
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>Etym.</i>	Isidore of Seville, <i>The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville</i> , ed. by Stephen A. Barney and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
HA	Aristotle, <i>The History of Animals</i> , in <i>The Complete Works of Aristotle</i> , ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 1

## Abbreviations

HN	Pliny, <i>Natural History</i> , ed. by H. Rackham, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938–62)
Lat.	Latin
MÆ	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
ME	Middle English
MED	Hans Kurath and Robert E. Lewis, eds, <i>Middle English Dictionary</i> (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999)
MLat.	Medieval Latin
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
OE	Old English
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>Riverside Chaucer</i>	Larry D. Benson, general ed., <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> , 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
SAC	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
Trevisa	Bartholomaeus Anglicus, <i>On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De proprietatibus rerum</i> , ed. by M. C. Seymour and others, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1
Wright-Wülcker	Thomas Wright and Richard Paul Wülcker, <i>Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies</i> , 2 vols (London: Trübner and Co., 1884), vol. 1

The following abbreviations from *Riverside Chaucer* (p. 779) are also used: 'Chaucer's Words Unto Adam' (*Adam*); *Book of the Duchess* (*BD*); *Boece* (*Bo*); *House of Fame* (*HF*); *Manciple's Tale* (*MancT*); 'Complaint of Mars' (*Mars*); *Merchant's Tale* (*MerT*); *Nun's Priest's Tale* (*NPT*); *Squire's Tale* (*SqT*); *Troilus and Criseyde* (*Tr*).



## Introduction

IF THE VOCABULARY of medieval English is anything to go by, birds were a conspicuous and abundant presence in the lives of medieval people. In Old English alone, one might talk of a *fughel-dæg* 'bird-day'; of being a *fugel-bana* 'bird-killer' gone *fugelung* 'fowling' with a *fugel-net* 'bird-net' somewhere *fugel-wylle* 'abounding in birds'; or of a *fugel-hælsere* 'bird-diviner' observing *fugel-cynn* 'bird-kind'; or perhaps of *feðer-cræt* 'feather-embroidering' or a *feðer-bed*.<sup>1</sup> Raucously and richly vocal, feathered and flying, birds impressed and enriched, sustained and enabled the bodily and cognitive experiences of daily living. As much as their mammalian fellows, birds were participants in rural and urban living in a time, as one historian goes so far as to say, in which 'animals and humans shared space, food, famines, work, and weather conditions more intensely' than any other historical age except human prehistory.<sup>2</sup> As the Old English terms above suggest, birds were often of practical interest. The most proximate, everyday species were domestic poultry: chickens were an important and protected resource, enjoyed by almost every social stratum, and geese, a more labour-intensive poultry species, not only provided meat and eggs, but their feathers, plucked from living or dead birds, were a crucial resource for arrows and quills.<sup>3</sup> Tamed birds of prey were highly prized among the nobility,

<sup>1</sup> See Bosworth-Toller, s.v. (n.) *fugel* through to (n.) *fuhlas*, and MED, s.v. (n.) *brid*, senses 1–2, 3a and 5, (n.) *briddere*, and (n.) *foul*, senses 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Pascua, 'From Forest to Farm and Town: Domestic Animals from ca. 1000 to ca. 1450', in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, ed. by Brigitte Resl (Oxford and New York, NY: Berg, 2007), pp. 81–102 (81).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the importance of poultry in the later Middle Ages, including their roles in large-scale economic and social processes, see Philip Slavin, 'Chicken Husbandry in Late-Medieval Eastern England: c. 1250–1400', *Anthropozoologica*, 44:2 (2009), 35–56, and 'Goose Management and Reading in Late Medieval Eastern England, c. 1250–1400', *Agricultural History Review*, 58:1 (2010), 1–29.

nurtured and flown by falconers who knew intimately the birds' idiosyncratic habits and moulting patterns. All these birds could occupy less prosaic roles, too. Raptors had powerful semiotic value as emblems on escutcheons, or through the projection of 'shared' courtly values in literary realms, and even the humble chicken could, in cockerel form, function as a symbol of Christian light and hope, or the hen feature as an encrypted marvel in an Old English riddle, or a reminder of God's divine wisdom in bestiary sources.<sup>4</sup>

Recent interest in human-nonhuman relations has emphasised this eclecticism of animal meaning in pre-modern living, but particularly nonhuman physicality, reminding us that these creatures existed within a network of relations and interactions with human subjects who were well acquainted with the origins and husbandries of those natural sources that provided foods and technologies. Observations like these risk over-speculation, but they do remind us that the nonhuman in most, if not all, medieval human lives was evident and palpable. As Susan Crane states in one of the most recent and significant literary studies on this subject, 'medieval writers ... had no animal experience, however physically immediate, that they did not apprehend cognitively as it unfolded. Conversely, there is no thinking ... that can entirely forget the living creature'.<sup>5</sup> In the main, traditional or popular perceptions of the nonhuman in medieval experiences have emphasised the two extremes of non-human significance – creatures exist to serve a subjugated purpose as food or worker, or live an abstracted existence in the realm of instructive allegory which little heeds actual birds and animals. It was possible, though, for nonhuman subjects to occupy positions variously and contrarily along a spectrum of representation and

<sup>4</sup> The best example of medieval falconry knowledge is Frederick II's *De arte venandi cum avibus*, which reveals an intimate understanding of birds' habits; see Frederick II, *The Art of Falconry*, ed. and trans. by Casey A. Wood and F. Marjorie Fyfe (Boston, MA: Charles T. Branford, 1955). For the bestiary cockerel and hen, see *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS 764*, trans. by Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), pp. 172–3 and 174–5, respectively. For the hen riddle, see Exeter Book Riddle 13 (and 42) in ASPR, vol. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.

significance, which could, and did, include and attend closely to interactions with creatures that were literal, physical and haptic, without being simply utilitarian.

Such thinking is typical of the wide and overlapping range of interdisciplinary approaches currently making their mark, which aim not only to emphasise the inherent value of the nonhuman, but to explore with greater sensitivity and clarity the multiplex ways in which the natural world was perceived, experienced and depicted.<sup>6</sup> Literary studies seek nonhuman material traces in textual representations, teasing out the potential revelations of non-human presence and relation in the layers of linguistic detail. More specifically, medievalists are confronted with the task of seeking how writers represent the nonhuman within orthodox frameworks that typically point out a desirable categorical difference between human and animal, and remind us that – to take one iteration of a popular concept – ‘from animals people may learn what behaviour should be imitated, what avoided, what may wisely be borrowed from them, and what should rightly be avoided’.<sup>7</sup> I engage here with the breadth of these ecologies to attempt a full exploration of how and why birds mattered in a range of poetic texts from across the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The flourishing of such studies in recent years has made the aims and principles of ecocriticism and animals studies familiar, so I refrain from more than a cursory summary in this introduction. For further discussion, see Crane, *Animal Encounters*, pp. 4–5; Karl Steel, *How To Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2011), pp. 4–23; and Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 4–10.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Damien, *De bono religiosi status et variorum animantium tropologia*, 2, cited in and trans. by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 304–5.

<sup>8</sup> Like all scholars in these fields, I am faced with terms which do not adequately represent the heterogeneity of the natural world. ‘Animal’, e.g., for medieval and modern writers, both distinguishes and integrates other creatures from and with the human category. Likewise, ‘nonhuman’ risks an unintended assumption that all that is not human holds inferior status. For the sake of clarity and ease, however, I use ‘nonhuman’ consistently throughout this study. For further discussion of this semantic difficulty, see Steel, *How To Make a Human*, pp. 19–20.

It is surely no surprise that domestic birds, most immediately present and relevant to human experiences, feature prominently in cultural representations. At the other end of the scale are the fantastical species belonging to the *Physiologus* and bestiary traditions: the phoenix, for example, or the alerion, caladrius, cinnamologus, hercinia or griffin. Birds of all sorts abound in medieval literature and art, treated and envisaged richly and widely, at times familiar co-inhabitants, at others exotic and improbable. The birds at the heart of this study, however, are those whose flights largely occur beyond the domesticated space of household, farmstead and myth, beyond clipped wings, lures or cages.<sup>9</sup> In the chapters that follow, I am largely preoccupied with the wild, native British species that were recognisable and nameable in real-world engagements, and which feature as one of the most ubiquitous nonhuman groups to appear in the various poetic traditions of the Middle Ages. Historians of ornithology have tended to overlook possible pre-modern contributions, side-lining medieval interests in, and understandings of, birds as under-developed or neglected in an age that had yet to discover the rigours of empiricism that came with the early modern era; there was at best an 'indifference' to birds in a 'retrograde' age 'not orientated towards facts'.<sup>10</sup> Modern scholars, following on from the apparent priorities of medieval writers, concern

<sup>9</sup> By and large, interest in birds per se has focused on tamed or fictional birds. See, e.g., Susan Crane, 'For the Birds', *SAC*, 29 (2007), 23–41; Donna Beth Ellard, 'Going Interspecies, Going Interlingual, and Flying Away with the *Phoenix*', *Exemplaria*, 23:3 (2011), 268–92; and Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 121–41. One precursor to my study is chapter two in Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 34–55. See also Heide Estes, who does comment on how several of the Exeter Book Riddles describe birds to reflect 'the varied qualities of birds and the close observations humans have made of them'; Heide Estes, *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes: Ecotheory and the Environmental Imagination* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 135.

<sup>10</sup> The first two citations here are from J. H. Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology* (London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1921), p. 14; the last is from H. R. Hays, *Birds, Beasts and Men* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1973), p. 38. Popular expressions of this sentiment reveal the same assumptions: 'people knew little about birds, and cared even less'; Stephen Moss, *A Bird in the Bush: A Social History of Birdwatching* (London: Aurum, 2004), p. 29.



themselves 'not, of course, with birds as they are in nature but as they exist in the mind', as moralised symbols of Christian virtues and vices, as correlatives to lyric emotions.<sup>11</sup> This book contends that the sources available to us insist on a more complex history, in which the multitude of native birds observable in England's habitats registered meaningfully in human experiences. Critical responses hint at these possibilities when they acknowledge 'correct observations' and the 'purely avian detail' of nearly all the poems I address, but have yet to fully explore the implications of such details.<sup>12</sup> I propose that those sensibilities capable of responding to one harsh winter's 'destruction of birds' alongside the 'mortality of men, disease among animals, both wild and domestic', of describing a migratory finch irruption, or depicting both common and lesser-seen species in manuscript margins (as demonstrated on the cover of this book), hint at diverse, interpenetrating orientations towards the natural world in which natural and cultural histories overlap, reciprocate and interweave.<sup>13</sup> There is, in short, evidence for a medieval ornithology that deserves fuller, more serious attention. Moreover, this ornithology can affect our understanding of how birds function in fictional and cultural contexts. This premise is at the heart of this book: in the case of the texts I explore, spanning the tenth to the fourteenth century, real contacts with birds contribute richly to the poems' avian interests, and recommend the diversity of ways in which birds could appeal to medieval thought.

<sup>11</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee University Press, 1978), p. viii.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Barrett Hinckley, 'Science and Folklore in *The Owl and the Nightingale*', *Modern Language Association*, 47:2 (1932), 303–14 (p. 314), and Kathryn Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale: The Poem and Its Critics* (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Buffalo Press, 1975), p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> For the avian mortality in 1111, see *The Chronicle of John of Worcester, Volume III: The Annals from 1067–1140*, ed. and trans. by P. McGurk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 127; for Matthew Paris's famous description and image of a crossbill irruption in 1251, see Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in Chronica Majora* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 297; for an impressive range of naturalistically depicted British species in illuminations, see Janet Backhouse, *Medieval Birds in the Sherborne Missal* (London: British Library, 2001), and Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 2-1954.

Avian quiddities hold a strong sway, too, in modern philosophical enquiries into the nonhuman, and suggest a useful comparison to medieval interests as an indication of the transhistorical fascination with birds. The anthropologist Andrew Whitehouse has pinpointed birdsong in the current age – or rather a lack of birdsong – not only as foregrounding ‘anxieties that stem from the ambiguities implicit in the Anthropocene’s formulation of human relations with other species’, but as a precise and important example to which human cultures respond in their participations with the ‘lines, knots and texture of the meshwork’ of living forms and worlds.<sup>14</sup> Whitehouse’s words echo those of two co-authors that have become household names in animal studies disciplines; for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, birds embody specific, illuminating examples of the intimate and fundamental connections across and between all things (what they term ‘refrains’).<sup>15</sup> In their anthropological and philosophical speculations about the refrain’s functions (‘amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic’) the bird comes first in their list of instances: ‘Bird song: the bird sings to mark its territory’.<sup>16</sup> Throughout their discussion they return to birds to illustrate their meaning, not through metaphor, but with real living birds: the stagemaker’s courtship displays, the chaffinch’s non-mimicking song, the wren’s territorial behaviours. Perhaps most familiar of all are Claude Lévi-Strauss’s remarks on birds’ totemic roles in human cultural structures. On the subject of assigning proper names to nonhumans, he ponders, ‘why should it ... particularly be birds that profit from this liberal attitude?’<sup>17</sup> He postulates elsewhere:

Birds ... can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason that they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Whitehouse, ‘Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World’, *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015), 53–71 (pp. 53 [abstract] and 60).

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 363.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. by George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 204. Originally *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962), p. 270.

are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like freedom; they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulate language.

Consequently, everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society: is it not after all literally parallel to it on another level?<sup>18</sup>

None of these modern paradigms, I think, would have been incomprehensible to medieval thinkers. Lévi-Strauss's assertions, particularly, resound with the sorts of parallels between avian and human orders that are prevalent in medieval literary forms such as the dream vision, in which birds' peculiar unlike-likeness makes them suitable metaphors because they can be assimilated and distanced at once. Birds are distinctly unhuman, well removed anatomically from humankind, and yet there is an enduring inclination to identify bird society as 'homologous to that in which we live'.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, medieval paradigms involving the nonhuman operate as they do for Lévi-Strauss – 'by *means* of a creature, and not the creature itself'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this comparison draws attention to the fact that certain forms of medieval literature often require us to read overtly 'by means', particularly when it comes to that much favoured mode, the allegory. The medieval penchant for allegory and exegesis, for thinking of one thing in terms of another, presents a central problem for scholars attempting to write about real birds and animals in texts that require us to read non-literally. It is, as Onno Oerlemans recognises, 'the mode that best reflects the deep conflict in how we have thought about the relationship between humans and animals'.<sup>21</sup> In conventional terms, allegory makes it 'inconsequential to determine whether the fabulous stories connected with the animals are true,

<sup>18</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 149 (italics mine).

<sup>21</sup> Onno Oerlemans, 'The Animal in Allegory: From Chaucer to Gray', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20:2 (2013), 296–317 (p. 300).

but ... essential to discover and determine the religious significance they confirm'.<sup>22</sup> Augustine's words echo clearly in the bestiary materials, those chief medieval texts for allegorical animals. Birds are one of the best represented nonhuman classes of all in allegory, particularly as the stock figures in late medieval dream visions and debate poems in which those avian characteristics that Lévi-Strauss lists are specifically employed to establish bird-human parallels.<sup>23</sup>

Like other scholars who have recently begun to tackle the philosophical and textual difficulties inherent in these treatments, though, I aim to show how these acts of figuration are sometimes more complicated than has previously been acknowledged. The avian aspects that Lévi-Strauss marks as 'so different' are, for him, central to what makes birds such potent metaphors for human societies; because they are separated from us so distinctively in various ways, we can more objectively identify the parallels that birds offer (unlike mammals, presumably, which, because of their closer species proximity, are less obviously 'literally parallel to ... [us] on another level'). Although the differences that put birds at a remove do suggest 'something like freedom', they are ultimately part of reinforcing similarities – the associations that work by 'means' of a nonhuman creature transfigured into totemic concept. Medieval discourses involving birds embrace this same paradox, but other approaches are also evident which engage literal qualities in further ways, and can encourage less orthodox interpretations. How might we respond, for example, to the well-known seabirds in *The Wanderer*? Like *The Seafarer*, this poem is often assumed to be allegorical to some degree, with a journey that ought to be read in figurative terms. Like the wanderer's journey itself, though, literal and metaphorical elements involving birds are not so easily

<sup>22</sup> 'Psalm 102', in *Saint Augustine: Exposition of Psalms*, trans. by A. Cleveland Coxe, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, 8, ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 497.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., besides the debate poems addressed in this book, *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Clerk and the Nightingale*, *Clanvowe's Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, and *Dunbar's Merle and the Nightingale*. All poems available in John Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry* (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1991). See also William Langland's extended treatment of birds' nest building as a model for human endeavour in *Piers Plowman* (Passus XI.344–61).

distinguishable. The seabirds do seem to function in some sort of metaphorical relation to the wanderer himself, conveying something of his misery and desolation. But they are also undeniably physical birds which the wanderer momentarily confuses with his hallucinogenic visions of lost kinsmen. These birds do not respond, they are not allocated the faculty of human speech or idealised. They simply attend to themselves, *baþian brimfluglas, brædan feþra* 'seabirds bathing, spreading feathers'.<sup>24</sup>

*The Wanderer's* seabirds are a more unusual occurrence. Many birds in medieval poems are not depicted in clearly realistic terms at all, but stylised at the other end of the spectrum in full-blown formal allegory. In the fourteenth-century 'Bird with Four Feathers', for instance, the speaker happens upon a lone bird with no flight feathers. In the first place, she only ever had 'Fedres fowre' (41), two on each wing, which explicitly signify youth, beauty, strength and riches (45–6).<sup>25</sup> Here we have a talking, Christian bird, who cites biblical exempla with all the skill of a pulpit preacher – precisely the sort of characteristic representation that leads us to believe that, 'as far as nature itself goes', the anonymous writer of this poem 'does not seem to draw his inspiration from the fields'.<sup>26</sup> But a more sensitive analysis might also query why birds' voices are so often paralleled with human speech in medieval poems, or how the bird apparently has privileged access to some mystic divinity evident in '*Parce*' (12), a word and concept that is 'bale and bote of gostly sore' (236), upon which the narrator 'thought me wele' (235). The Latin refrain in the poem (*Parce michi, Domine*) is beyond any real bird's knowledge or capabilities, but it is also unfamiliar to the human narrator, which suggests some correlation between

<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all OE quotations are from ASPR. Translations of OE are my own.

<sup>25</sup> Text from Susanna Greer Fein, ed., *Moral Love Songs and Laments*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998). Cf. the use of a bird–woman pairing in 'A Bird in Bishopswood'; Ruth Kennedy, "'A Bird in Bishopswood": Some Newly-Discovered Lines of Alliterative Verse from the Late Fourteenth Century', in *Medieval Literature and Antiquities: Studies in Honour of Basil Cottle*, ed. by Myra Stokes and T. L. Burton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 71–87.

<sup>26</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 15.

esoteric Latin and inscrutable birdsong, both of which may provide access to desirable, otherworldly knowledges. Moreover, both these poems might encourage us to think more carefully about how 'briddes wise' specifically (to adopt Chaucer's phrase) are relevant, even in forms like allegory.<sup>27</sup> How are the concerns of a forlorn, wave-bound traveller shared with, and expressed by, preening seabirds? How do the translation interests between Latin and vernacular English implied in the 'Bird with Four Feathers' raise queries about possible translations between other 'languages' too, and how might poets engage with these possibilities?

In the readings I offer in this book, medieval poets embrace the sophisticated potential of such moments so that metaphors and realities fuse and collide when observed avian behaviours or utterances enhance and undercut literary figurative procedures. Three chapters, in fact, address birds in poems – *The Seafarer*, *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *The Parliament of Fowls* – whose textual histories are characterised by long-standing debates about their allegorical statuses, and in the last of these the avian 'community which is independent of our own' is so pointedly different that allegory falters because those differences struggle to sustain the illusion of similarity. *The Parliament of Fowls* will concern me most directly and fully with the difficulties of allegory, but all the poems in some way confront metaphorical representation. Moments of distancing do not simply put assimilation in relief, as they do for Lévi-Strauss (who clearly understands that birds 'literally' exist, but for whom this is not an obstacle or complication to metaphor). Instead, the poems contemplate, exploit and interrogate the tricky differences or incompatibilities revealed by the presence of real birds or real avian attributes. The interaction between like and unlike, in other words, pays serious attention to the 'creature itself', not just the 'means', generating responses and understandings that are variously profound, comic, affective and unsettling. Alterity is directed towards nuanced purposes that complicate various forms of transfiguration: from mysterious to intelligible, indistinct to classified, and in

<sup>27</sup> *Mars* (23). Cf. *Tr* (II.921). All quotations from Chaucer's works are from *Riverside Chaucer*. Translations of all ME, where provided, are my own.

Gower's 'Tale of Tereus' the tangled relations between distance and proximity are highlighted in further ways still when correlation is pushed beyond metaphor into fully reified bird-human bodies.

In their own ways, the poets represented in this study are sensitive to the same remarkable avian intelligences and skills that have fascinated modern researchers and thinkers. Comparisons with modern theorising, moreover, help to clarify why the bird, as category or species, might be especially appealing. In one respect, the arguments presented in this book function as a general contribution to recent interests in ecological themes and complexities in medieval culture. The chapters can be thought of as explorations of the nonhuman animal in English poetic texts which happen to focus on birds. More crucially, however, I contend that birds' suitability to the complex and sometimes contradictory procedures of figurative imagining presents unique interests and crystallises focuses on specific medieval concerns. Birds provoke the same reactions in medieval thinkers and writers that move modern philosophers to exclaim: 'How different are these two kinds of bipeds, birds and humans, whose bodies and evolutions are so remote from each other! The more intriguing then some of the feats of intelligence and ingenuity performed by birds; of all the mammals only humans are capable of anything remotely like them.'<sup>28</sup>

Like Alphonso Lingis, medieval writers pondering the bird must have been struck by birds' bipedality. Even if they do not philosophise explicitly on this shared avian-human physical characteristic, it would have been evident to some, in the later Middle Ages at least, through contact with Aristotle's texts.<sup>29</sup> Birds' two-footedness would have surely resonated with the commonplace medieval image of bipedal heaven-facing man and quadrupedal earth-facing

<sup>28</sup> Alphonso Lingis, 'Understanding Avian Intelligence', in *Knowing Animals*, ed. by Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2007), pp. 43–56 (43).

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., *Progression of Animals*, I.704b5. See Aristotle, *The Progression of Animals*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 1. All references to Aristotle are to this edition.



beast (often invoked to defend human, rational superiority).<sup>30</sup> Birds, in this way, set themselves apart from mankind's anatomically closest relatives. There is a sense in which birds, like humans, achieve an elevated status separating them from other nonhuman creatures, and consequently this aligns them – conveniently, but also uncomfortably – with human privileges. Medieval encyclopaedic discussions of birds certainly recognised the literal manner in which birds were elevated; they are 'of þe eire', the 'foules of heuene' who physically occupy a space that even mankind is denied in his earthly time.<sup>31</sup> Birds, of course, were classed as *animalia*, but their unique aerial skills also emancipated them from the lowly beasts, earned them 'special mencion ... in þe texte of þe bible ouþir in þe glose'.<sup>32</sup> Their strange mobility and corporeality that seems incorporeal in flight must surely have registered with the conventional hierarchy in which humans are poised midway between animals and angels, as recalled in artistic representations in which angels are typically depicted with birds' wings, or in the traditional bird-soul metaphor. It is not difficult to recognise how birds presented themselves as illuminating, curious parallels when, as David Wallace puts it, the 'perilous art' of aligning 'bawdy bodies and stargazing intelligences' was an unavoidable predicament of the human condition.<sup>33</sup> Birds model this art, crossing the boundaries that limit terrestrial existence and troubling those that are necessary, at other times, to maintaining self-perceptions of human sovereignty.

*Fugel-cynn* or *bridde*s, then, were outliers in medieval conceptions: on the one hand, base and subject to human dominion like any other creature; on the other, aligned (ostensibly at least) with human abilities and privileges. In Trevisa's translation of 'the standard medieval encyclopaedia' – Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De*

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiae* (in Chaucer's *Bo*, V.v.16–9) and *Etym.*, XI.i.5.

<sup>31</sup> Trevisa, XII.i (p. 596).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* In some depictions of Noah's ark, the birds are assigned a space between humans and the other animals, seemingly as an indication of their elevated nonhuman status. See, e.g., Paris, BnF, MS français 938, f. 86r.

<sup>33</sup> David Wallace, *Geoffrey Chaucer: A New Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 35.

*proprietatibus rerum* – birds' troublesome kind is suggested from the start.<sup>34</sup> Bartholomaeus places birds according to their environment (air, weather, wind) in book twelve, which is entirely devoted to birds, but also in book eighteen, under animals and in book nineteen, under colours. These category models show an Aristotelian influence, but they also reflect the boundless essences of birds, which are at once animals, but equally pertain to other, very unanimal-like qualities. The range of 'condiciouns and propirtees' by which we may know birds (again deriving from Aristotle) also hints at the vexing challenge of defining birdness: according to substance and complexion, habitat, by feet or bill shape, by manner of hunting and eating.<sup>35</sup>

Birds not only defy categories, but in doing so they display transformative abilities that at once distinguish them, and provide them with the means of persistent escape from these laboursome human efforts to classify. There is an in-betweenness apparent in their very substance 'þat beþ bytwene þe tweye elementis þat beþ most heuy and most lizt'.<sup>36</sup> These are creatures who 'haueþ lasse of wordlich heuynesse and more of liztnesse of eire þan bestis', who do not share the same regrettable earthliness as humans because they 'beþ deschargid of weizte of fleische and fleþ most hize', and 'in here composicioun and makynge eire and water haþ most maistrie'.<sup>37</sup> This definition according to difference from other creatures is repeated: as Bartholomaeus concludes his opening summary, 'it nedip onliche to knowe þat among opir kynde of beestis generalliche foules ben more pure and lizt and noble of substaunce and swift of meuyng and scharp of sizt'.<sup>38</sup> As will be evident in some of the chapters to come, birds, in flight and in bodily matter, exist and move between substances and territories, embodying the core sense of movement and change at the etymological root of Old English

<sup>34</sup> A. S. G. Edwards, 'Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum* and Medieval English Literature', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 222 (1985), 121–8 (p. 121) [italics original].

<sup>35</sup> Trevisa, XII.i (p. 596).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 596–7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 601–2.

*cynd* and Middle English *nature* (Lat. *natura*).<sup>39</sup> Bartholomaeus's gull ('þat hatte *larus*'), for instance, 'woneþ somtyme in watris and somtyme in londe ... boþe in ryuere and in londes and now swymmeþ as a fische and now fleep as a bridde'.<sup>40</sup> *Larus*'s curious shape-shifting recalls certain metamorphosing birds that we will encounter below – in the Old English riddles, for instance, or the Ovidian transformations that occur in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.

Like other encyclopaedic treatments of the natural world, Bartholomaeus borrows from the hugely influential authority of Isidore of Seville, whose etymologically-centred claims about birds proliferate right across the Middle Ages. Bartholomaeus's comments on the curious misfit properties of birds strongly echo a general aspect of the class that Isidore identifies and which is consistently repeated, often verbatim, by his imitators. In an observation that anticipates something of Jacques Derrida's consternation at the term 'animal' which masks the prolific 'heterogeneous multiplicity of the living', Isidore notes that 'There is a single word for birds, but various kinds, for just as they differ among themselves in appearance, so do they differ also in the diversity of their natures'.<sup>41</sup> Of all the world's *unrimu cynn* 'countless species' (*The Panther*, 2a), birds are the most prolific and various. No other group of animals in Isidore is characterised in this way: animals (*De animalibus*) are apparently much easier to subdivide (livestock [*pecus*], beasts of burden [*iumenta*]).<sup>42</sup> The prolific diversity of birds creates and perpetuates the avian enigma. Birds' diversity is a central theme throughout Bartholomaeus's description. Like Isidore, who begins his chapters on birds by outlining specific examples of avian difference, Bartholomaeus's vocabulary is peppered with 'somme ... and somme' (Lat. *alia*): birds have 'dyuers complexioun ... dyuers

<sup>39</sup> Both terms derive from Proto-Indo-European *gen*, meaning 'to beget', and thus convey the senses of development or process. See Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words: A Discursive Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), s.v. *gn*, *gen*.

<sup>40</sup> Trevisa, XII.xxiv (p. 633).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 31, and *Etym.*, XII.vii.1, respectively.

<sup>42</sup> *Etym.*, XII.i.1–8.

manere of place', 'dyuers maner of doynge', 'dyuers disposicioun of membres'.<sup>43</sup>

Among all this diversity there are two avian abilities that are especially prominent. Perhaps most alluring is the enduring medieval belief (in scholastic milieux, anyway) that birds' flight – with its associated accoutrements and contiguities: feathers, wings, air – engages these creatures in transformative evasions that literally leave no traces by which we might purchase more tangible, evidential understandings of avian being. For Isidore, the very name for these creatures in Latin reveals their defining characteristic: 'They are called birds (*avis*) because they do not have set paths (*via*), but travel by means of pathless (*avia*) ways'.<sup>44</sup> It is not simply flight, but a secretive flight known only to birds themselves. Bartholomaeus elaborates: birds are 'as it were "without way" ... for here wayes in þe eyre be not distinguyd in certayne', and 'anone aftir þe flizt þe eire closip itself and leueþ noo signe neipir tokene of here passage'.<sup>45</sup> It is quite impossible (because birds fly and can disappear without 'signe neipir tokene') for mankind 'to penetrate all the wildernesses of India and Ethiopia and Scythia, so as to know the kinds of birds and their differentiating characteristics'.<sup>46</sup>

Isidore's interest in the multiplicity and great variation of birds also addresses that other familiar aspect of birds' brilliance, the voice. It is, after all, birds' songs and calls that give many species their names (some non-bird creatures also have well-known onomatopoeic calls, of course [sheep, cow, dog], but birds are especially marked in so frequently being named after these utterances). As with their appearances and natures, so birds' vocal abilities are marvellously diverse: 'Many bird names are evidently constructed from the sound of their calls, such as the crane (*grus*), the crow (*corvus*), the swan (*cygnus*), the peacock (*pavo*), the kite (*milvus*), the screech owl (*ulula*), the cuckoo (*cuculus*), the jackdaw (*graculus*), et

<sup>43</sup> Trevisa, XII.i (pp. 598, 599, and 601). 'Dyuers' does describe other nonhuman creatures (see book eighteen), but nowhere near as frequently as it does birds.

<sup>44</sup> *Etym.*, XII.vii.3. Cf. Hrabanus Maurus, *De rerum naturis*, VIII.vi, and Alexander Neckam, *De naturis rerum*, I.xxiii.

<sup>45</sup> Trevisa, XII.i (p. 596).

<sup>46</sup> *Etym.*, XII.i.2.

cetera. The variety of their calls taught people what they might be called.<sup>47</sup> From an etymological perspective, many birds' voices produce another form of in-betweenness; their onomatopoeic titles preserve the distinctive sounds of their own vocal utterances, making their names both the product of contrived, assigned human signifiers, and of their own natural voices. Onomatopoeic bird names circumnavigate onomastic procedures to some extent because the sounds that are ultimately fixed in approximating human signs do at least derive from the creature itself in the first place; their names are less wholly or obviously the product of human-created and -assigned terms that announce or clarify the cultural uses or suggestions of nonhuman creatures. When Isidore claims that 'Cranes (*grus*) took their name from their particular call, for they whoop with such a sound', the semantic deconstruction that attends his typical analysis of other non-onomatopoeic terms is less complete because the name signifies naturally as well as artificially.<sup>48</sup> Unlike *sorex* (shrew), for instance ('named because it gnaws and cuts things off like a saw [*serra*']), *grus* cannot be assigned specific linguistic meaning; its value exists only in its culturally specific approximation of the actual bird call.<sup>49</sup> *Grus* itself remains indeterminable, the inscrutable property of the bird.

This instability and curiosity of avian vocals in the linguistic context was clearly of interest to medieval writers. Birdsong generally is a stock motif in dream visions and romances, often because their voices can be usefully paralleled with human speech. As a measure of their relevance to medieval grammars, the variety and skill of birds' songs and calls is often engaged and celebrated in school texts. Birds occupy much space in the popular Latin animal-sound word lists (*voces animantium* 'the voices of animate things'), for instance, and are given their own platform in one versified list of this sort devoted almost entirely to birds' calls.<sup>50</sup> In the same context, the

<sup>47</sup> *Etym.*, XII.vii.9.

<sup>48</sup> *Etym.*, XII.vii.14. For natural and artificial categories of voice, see Trevisa, XIX, vol. 2, p. 131.

<sup>49</sup> *Etym.*, XII.iii.2.

<sup>50</sup> 'De cantibus avium' is recorded in three continental MSS from the late Anglo-Saxon period (earliest tenth century). See Franciscus Buecheler and Alexander

legacy of Philomela and the famous vocal abilities of the nightingale appear in poems about the diversity and virtuosity of this non-pareil species.<sup>51</sup> More disconcertingly, though, avian voices raised serious queries relating to the definition of voice (*vox*) in some grammatical discourses, precisely because birds are not human, but appear, at least, to have all the 'acoustic means recalling articulate [human] language', particularly those species that are capable of mimicry.<sup>52</sup> For some theologians and grammarians this situation called for necessary, unequivocal differentiation: bird sound is arguably discrete in a linguistic or musical sense, but it needed to be assigned inarticulate status for the sake of the privileged human voice. Difference under these circumstances served as a device for more clearly perceiving, and confirming, metaphorical congruence; birds' voices only *seem* like human voices, but do not actually have the same rational, divinely-gifted properties. For others, however, like the poets represented in the chapters to follow, differences are established in more intricate ways which can still expose the artificiality of metaphorical parallels, but not in ways that dispense with the avian components or reduce them to insignificance. Strange vocal correlations between birds and humans could be fertile grounds for comic exploitation and philosophical engagement that explore, rather than fix, the boundaries between species.

I identify flight and voice as especially important here because their prominence in medieval discourses involving birds means that they feature, separately or together, as elements of the effects achieved in all the poems I will address. The voice, particularly, is confronted as a distinctive avian facet that encourages fascinated comparison between birds and humans. It appears to greater and lesser degrees in four of my chapters to establish both humorous and poignant interspecies affinities, prompting the sorts of

Riese, eds, *Anthologia Latina: sive poesis latinae supplementum*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Leipzig: B. G. Teubneri, 1894), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 218–19.

<sup>51</sup> See 'De filomela' (with its persistent refrain 'Vox, filomela' [1]), surviving in eight MSS, and the same-titled 'De filomela', extant in seven MSS. For the texts and details of MSS, see Buecheler and Riese, *Anthologia Latina*, pp. 130–1 and 246–50, respectively.

<sup>52</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, p. 204.