The Owl and the Nightingale

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And I must comment also upon Father McNabb's attempt to enlist the late G. C. Macaulay on his side. Mr Macaulay came to consult me about Father McNabb's prefatory letter of March 18, 1915, in which he sketched the outlines of his theory; and we agreed that, though there was no evidence of the 'certainty' there claimed, the suggestion was interesting enough to lay before the public. We met fairly frequently in those days: once or twice he recurred to the subject, but with no hint of change in his benevolent scepticism; he frankly confessed himself untrained to follow the historical arguments. If he had lived to read Miss Allen's article, my own conviction is that he would, at least, have applauded it as the best working theory yet presented.

G. G. COULTON.

CAMBRIDGE.

'THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE.'

It will be best to start with a passage which I feel sure has been misinterpreted; since this, if I am right, may decide the vexed question of the poet's didactic purpose. The Nightingale is reviling the Owl for being such a doleful prophet and counsellor; and he proceeds (l. 1169):

Dahet euer suich budel in tune
 þat euer bodeþ un-wreste rune,
 an euer bringeþ yuele tipinge,
 an þat euer speç of vuele þinge!
 God Almiȝti wrþe him wroþ,
 an al þat werieþ linnene clop.

What is the point of this *linen cloth*? Gadow gives us no note here; Wells tells us in two words that the reference is to 'the clergy.' But the usual meaning of *linen cloth* in medieval English, as in French, is that of *underclothing*¹. In default of evidence to the contrary—and I think none such has yet been offered—this specification of linen cloth cannot be referred to the outer garments of the clergy (who appeared in linen only for a few hours in the day) in preference to the large class who were

¹ See *N.E.D.* s.v. *linen* and Godefroy s.v. *linge*, who, after citing many instances, adds 'on remarquera que dans plusieurs des exemples cités, *drap linge* et *robe linge* désignent la chemise.' It is possible that Wells's interpretation is based upon what may look at first sight like a parallel passage (*Havelok*, l. 429), where the author invokes upon the villain the malison 'of patriark and of pope, and of priest with locken cope.' But this *locken cope* was not a linen vestment; it was the *cappa clausa* which Canon Law commanded the priest to wear on all but the most private occasions, and which answered in certain ways to the modern cassock. See e.g. Lyndwood, *Provinciale*, lib. III, tit. 1, and T. A. Lacey in *Trans. St Paul's Eccles. Soc.*, vol. IV (1900), p. 128, where the *cappa clausa* is well described, though some of the writer's earlier inferences must be read with caution. Linen did not distinguish the priest; deacon, sub-deacon or acolyte wore linen vestments in church whenever the priest wore them; the acolyte (parish clerk) was perhaps more often seen in linen than the priest himself.

distinguished from the rest of mankind by the linen shirt. For such a class did exist. The peasant and the poor man were generally shirtless by necessity; many others were shirtless for religion's sake. When Langland describes himself as 'wolleward and wete-shoed' (B. 18. 1 : cf. *Ancren Riwele*, ed. Morton, p. 418) he speaks either as a beggar or as an ecclesiastical penitent. The monk, the anchorite, and the stricter of the Canons Regular, wore no shirt, but a sort of woollen jersey instead; Innocent III expressly commanded this (*Decret. Greg.* lib. III, tit. xxxv, c. 6) and it was repeated equally solemnly by Gregory IX in 1236; 'utuntur camisiis lineis' is a frequent gravamen of Odo Rigaldi, the famous 13th century visitor. If, then, *linen cloth* is used in *O. and N.* in its commonest sense, the phrase roughly divides society into two classes: (1) the monk and his congeners, with the struggling poor, and (2) the rest of the upper and middle-class population. 'All that weareth linen cloth' would connote all socially respectable people, except the professional puritan. The Nightingale invokes upon the Owl the malison of all decent unmonastic folk.

This passage, perhaps, is in itself only passively consistent with the monk's habits and characteristics; but we can support our interpretation by other passages which seem to supply active evidence in the same direction. The allusion to night-services fits the monk alone among all classes of society; ll. 323—8 definitely specify the four services of Vespers, Compline, Matins and Prime. There is no allusion, it is true, to the three day-services; but for this there is an obvious reason: the owl does not sing by day, and the poet was bound not to break too glaringly with the facts of natural history. But these omitted day-services are not in any sense distinctive of monasticism; the really significant allusion is that to the night-services; if we are to suppose that the author had any other reason than that of the owl's literal habits for omitting the day-services, whatever deductions we may draw from their omission would tell less heavily against the monks than against the rest of the clergy, few of whom said their Hours at night-time.

Again, ll. 860—1, the Owl pleads that the kingdom of heaven is better won by weeping than by singing, and boasts his own frequent tears (876). Is not this one of the many medieval echoes of that sentence of Jerome's, so dear to St Bernard: 'Monachus non docentis sed plan-gentis habet officium'?—cf. *Ancren Riwele*, p. 109. And this Owl's boast corresponds to the Nightingale's reproach, that his opponent loves to remind folk of death (1151) and to bring evil tidings (1172). The monk, in medieval society, sometimes passed for a creature of evil omen; it

was unlucky to meet him, as it was unlucky to see a raven. The other allusions which seem consonant with this interpretation must here be indicated more briefly: cloister-life may be satirically described in ll. 25—8, 89, 281—2; the monotonous psalmody, 220 and *passim*; melancholy and ascetic view of life, 226, 425—6, 485—92, 878, 895—914, 971—990; religious contemplation, 355—60; charity and good works, 535—40, 603—4, 609—10. Moreover, some of these seem very far-fetched, to suit some preconceived theme, without much care for ornithological truth. The author must have known, for instance, that the owl of natural history is very far from the religious altruist whom he depicts, e.g. in ll. 535—40.

We cannot, it is true, work the whole of this side of the debate into a thoroughly complete and consistent picture of monastic life; but consistency was not the medieval poet's strong point. Moreover, we must deal with the possibility that this poem is, after all, a translation from some Latin or French original; it may be worth noting that the line from which this discussion has started (1174) goes very naturally into French—'E cil ke portent linge drap.' Many of the inequalities in this poem would at once be explained if it turned out to be a not very masterly *rifacimento* of some earlier poem, far more consistent in its theme. Among other things, this would account at once for the noticeable superiority of ll. 433—67 to the rest of the poem.

For I must confess my dissent from the praise bestowed upon this author as an original observer of nature. I can see nothing in it which might not be mere *cliché* taken from people who knew little of birds and beasts at first-hand. The nestling owl fouling the hawk's nest is a scene far less likely to have ever happened, than to have been invented by the same people who invented the chivalrous nobility of lions and eagles, and the plastic power of the she-bear's tongue. The instances singled out by Mr Wells (p. xxxix) seem either desperately commonplace or actually incorrect; the hawk is not baited by 'carrion crows' (which are solitary birds), but by rooks, swallows, and even sparrows; moreover, it does not in real life 'sail from its lofty perch in lordly contempt of its base revilers,' but cuts a very undignified figure and often shows manifest fear. The poem is remarkable for its superiority of structure and metre at so early a date; but is it wise to credit the poet with virtues which will not bear close examination?

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