

from *The Owl and the Nightingale* (late 12th century)

The Owl and the Nightingale is a long poem touching on three topics: questions of religion, questions of fortune (with particular reference to astrological portents), and questions of love and marriage. In the debate between the two on this third topic the Owl represents herself as the defender of traditional marriage and attempts to characterize the Nightingale as a source of the sort of romantic love through which young maidens are ruined. In the discussion it becomes clear, however, that the distinctions between the two points of view are not always clear-cut.

The Owl was now angry, ready for battle, and after this speech she rolled her eyes. "You say that you guard the dwellings of men where there are leaves and beautiful flowers, and where two lovers lie in bed, well protected in each other's arms. Once you sang—I know well where—near to a dwelling. You told the lady of unlawful love and, with song high and low, taught her to abandon herself to a shameful and evil passion. Her lord, soon seeing how things were, set bird-lime and snares and many other things in order to capture you. You soon came to the window, and you were caught in a trap.¹ Your legs paid the price: the doom decreed was none other than that you should be torn asunder by wild horses. Try again, then, if you can, to seduce either wife or maiden; your singing, indeed, may prove so successful that you shall flutter helplessly in a snare!" ...

[The Nightingale says:] "... You vile creature, you hide and reproach me viciously for singing near the dwellings of men and teaching wives to break their vows. You lie for certain, you loathsome creature! I have never harmed marriage. Yet I sing and declaim where there are ladies and fair maidens, and it is also true that I sing of love. For a virtuous wife can, in her married state, love her own husband far better than any philanderer, and a maiden can take a lover without loss of honor, loving with true affection the man to whom she grants her favor. Such love as this I teach and commend; this is the

sense of all my utterances. But if a woman is weak of will—for women are soft-hearted by nature—so that through the wiles of a fool, who eagerly entreats her with many a sad sigh, she happens to go astray and do wrong on occasion, should I in that case be held to blame? If women love in foolish ways, am I to be scolded for their misdeeds? Even if a woman is bent on a secret love, I cannot nevertheless refrain from singing. A woman may frolic as she will, either honestly or viciously, and as a result of my song, she may do as she will, either well or badly. For there is nothing in the wide world so good that it may not do evil if turned to wrong uses. Gold and silver, for instance, are always valuable, yet one can use them to pay for adultery and other such crimes. Weapons, again, are useful in keeping the peace, yet men are unlawfully killed with them in lands where they are used by thieves. And so it is with my singing: though it be chaste, it can still be abused and connected with foolish and evil deeds. But must you, wretched creature, speak evil of love? All love between man and woman, of whatever kind it may be, is pure unless it be stolen; in that case it is impure and also corrupt. May the wrath of the Holy Cross descend upon those who thus transgress the laws of nature! It is strange that they do not go mad—yet indeed they do, for they are mad who go to brood without a nest. Women's flesh is weak, and since carnal lust is hard to crush, it is no wonder that it persists. But even if fleshly lusts make women stray, not all those who trip at the stumbling-block of the flesh are completely lost. For many a woman who has gone wrong rises again out of the mire.

"Nor are all sins quite the same; they are, indeed, of two different kinds. One is the fruit of carnal lust: the other, of the spiritual nature. For whereas the flesh leads men to drunkenness, to sloth and also to wantonness, the spirit goes wrong through malice and anger, and through the joy felt at another's shame. It also longs for more and more, having little regard for mercy and grace: and, ascending on high through haughtiness, it proudly disdains what is below. Tell me truly, if you can, which is worse, the flesh or the spirit? You may answer, if you like, that the flesh is the less evil, for many a man is pure of body, who in his heart is of a devilish nature. No man should therefore loudly condemn a woman, rebuking

¹ *You soon came ... caught in a trap* This story is told in a slightly different form in Marie de France's "Laüstic," below, as well as in other medieval texts.

her for the lusts of the flesh; he may blame her for wantonness while he indulges in the greater sin of pride.

"Yet if through my singing I cause a wife or maiden to fall in love, I would take the side of the maiden—if you can grasp my meaning correctly. Listen now and I'll tell you why, the whole reason from beginning to end. If a maiden loves secretly, she stumbles and falls according to nature, for though she may frolic for a time, she has not gone very far astray. She can escape lawfully from her sin through the rites of the church, and afterwards have her lover as husband, free from all blame, and in the full light of day go to the man whom before she had received under cover of darkness. A young maiden knows nothing about such things; her young blood leads her astray, and some foolish fellow entices her to evil with all the tricks at his command. He comes and goes, he commands and entreats, he pays her attention, then neglects her, and sighs after her often and persistently. How can the girl help but go wrong? She never knew what things were, and so she thought she would experiment, and learn for certain of the sport that tames high spirits. And when I see the drawn expression which love gives to the young maid, I cannot refrain, out of sheer pity, from singing to her some song of cheer. Thus do I teach them by my singing, that love of this kind does not last long. For my song is short-lived, and love merely alights upon such girls; it soon passes, and the hot passion quickly subsides. I sing with them for a while; I begin high and end low, and after a time I cease completely. The maiden knows, when I have finished, that love is just like my singing, for it is but a brief excitement that soon comes and soon goes. The girl understands things through me, and her naivety is turned to wisdom. She sees clearly from my song that unbridled love does not last long.

"But I want you to know that I find hateful the lapses of wives. And if a married woman will take note of me, she will see that I do not sing in the breeding season. Though marriage bonds may seem harsh, a wife should ignore the teaching of fools. And to me it appears most astounding, how a man could find it in his heart to wrong another's wife. For it means one of two alternatives; there can be no other possibility. Either, on the one hand, the husband is worthy; or else he is feeble and of no account. If he is honored and courageous, no

man who is wise will wish to shame him, especially through his wife, for he will fear the good man's anger and the loss of his thing that dangles down there. And even if he is not afraid of that, yet it is wicked and extremely stupid to injure a worthy in this way and lure his partner away from him. If, on the other hand, the husband is a failure, feeble in bed and at the table, how could there be any love when such a churl's body lies on top of her? How can there be any sort of love, when such a man is pawing her thigh? From this you can see clearly that in one case there is sorrow, in the other, disgrace, as a result of stealing another man's wife. For if her husband is a brave man, you can look out for trouble when lying by her side, and if the husband be good for nothing, what pleasure can be derived from the deed? If you remember who lies with her, you will pay for her favors with loathing. I do not know how any man with self-respect can make advances to her after that. If he thinks about whom he's lying beside, all his love will immediately vanish."

The Owl was glad to hear these words, for she thought that the Nightingale, though she had argued well to begin with, had in the end come to grief. And so she exclaimed, "Now I can see that maidens are your special interest; you take their side, defending them and praising them beyond all reason. The married women turn to me: to me they make their complaints. For it very often happens that a husband and wife are at odds, and so the man goes astray and takes delight in loose living, spending all the money he has on another woman, making love to one without claim on him, and leaving his lawful wife at home with bare walls and an empty house, leaving her, too, thinly clad and poorly fed, without food and without clothing. And when he comes home to his wife again, she dare not utter a single word: he storms and shouts like a madman—and this is all the kindness he brings. All that she does merely annoys him, all that she says is utterly wrong, and often when she does nothing amiss, her reward is his fist in her teeth. There is no man living who cannot send his wife astray by such treatment. Such a one may be so often maltreated that on occasion she may consult her own pleasure. God knows she cannot help it even if she makes a cuckold of him. For it happens, time and again that the wife is tender and gentle, fair of face and of

good figure, and this only makes it the more unjust that he should shower his love on one who is not worth a hair of her head. And there are plenty of men who do not know how to treat their wives properly. No man can speak to her, for he thinks that she is at any moment about to betray him if she so much as looks at a man or speaks sweetly to him. And so he puts her under lock and key, with the result that marriage ties are often broken, for if she is brought to such a pass, she does what before she never thought of. A curse on anyone who talks too much, if such wives proceed to avenge themselves.

“Wives complain to me concerning this matter, and they grieve me sadly. My heart, indeed, almost breaks

when I see their great distress. I weep bitter tears with them, and pray that Christ shall have mercy on them, so that he may quickly help the wife, and send her a better husband. And moreover I can tell you this, that you shall find no answer to what I have said, even to save your skin; all your talking shall now be futile. Many a merchant and many a knight loves and cherishes his wife properly, and so does many a peasant. And then the good wife behaves accordingly, rendering him service at bed and at table, with gentle deeds and kindly words, anxiously striving how to please him.” ...