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Antisemitism, and Species Division

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# THE FLYTING OF THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE: ANIMACY, ANTISEMITISM, AND SPECIES DIVISION

MICAH JAMES GOODRICH

Ich wot þat þu art unmilde  
Wiþ hom þat ne muȝe from þe schilde,  
& þu tukeſt wroþe & vuele  
Whar þu miȝt over ſmale-fuȝele.  
Vorþi þu art loþ al fuel kunne  
& alle ho þe driueþ honne,  
& þe biſchricheþ & bigredet,  
& wel narewe þe biledet;  
& ek forþe þe ſulue moſe  
Hire þonkes wolde þe totoſe!<sup>1</sup>

(I know that you are merciless  
to those who might be unable to shield themselves from you,  
and you cruelly and maliciously abuse  
small birds whenever you might.  
Therefore, you are hateful to all bird-kind;  
and they all drive you away,  
and they shriek and cry,  
and they very bitterly mistreat you;  
and even the tit-mouse  
herself would dismember you!)

THESE INJURIOUS WORDS, spoken by the Nightingale to the Owl early in their debate, frame the Owl as a predator of bird-kind, a group from which the Nightingale spends the length of the poem attempting to expel the Owl. Species division, or “speciesism,” operates through animacy and inanimacy in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and the boundaries of animacy and inanimacy are based on the partitions between animal/human, contamination/cleanliness, queer/straight, female/male, and external/internal group mechanics. While the animate is marked as a living entity, equipped with speech and the power to shape social interaction, the inanimate, conversely, is an entity considered or made to be insensate, marked as lifeless, speechless, and powerless. Mel Chen’s recent work on animacy and insults demonstrates how violent speech operates by de-animating the recipient.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *The Owl and the Nightingale* are from *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), here lines 61–70. Line numbers are hereafter cited parenthetically in text. Translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Since animacy is a grammatical and semantic feature that expresses the sentience of a noun, it is also a social function that denies the aliveness of persons, beings, and entities. Animacy gives language its “affective potency,” as Chen explains, and hateful and opprobrious speech is not *only* a tool of objectification, it is also—and perhaps more importantly—a device that seeks to re-animate something already considered to be non-animate, lifeless.<sup>3</sup> In *The Owl and the Nightingale* species are organized by “kinde,” the natural constitution or character of an entity, and divided by hateful speech.<sup>4</sup> Being “unkinde,” a word with the sense of both being unkind and being unlike one’s kind, separates species. In other words, a division of “kinde” is an effort to render inanimate—that is, unliving, non-sentient—and contaminate another entity at the level of speech and life.

As my opening epigraph makes clear, grammatical animacy can both reflect and construct the liveliness of the subject and objects in a sentence. Once the Nightingale explains that the Owl is hated by all bird-kind (“Vorþi þu art loþ al fuel kunne”), the grammatical position of the Owl shifts from subject to object—from “þu” to “þe”—and all bird-kind becomes the subject which enacts violence against the Owl’s body (“& þe bischricþ”). Through animacy, *The Owl and the Nightingale* stages an interspecies (avian) split between all bird-kind and all owl-kind. The segregation of the Owl from its larger species community is made possible by both the form of the debate poem as a *flyting* and medieval mechanisms of species division as racial division. As Myra J. Hird has written, “non-human animals have for some time been overburdened with the task of making sense of human social relations.”<sup>5</sup> While I am not suggesting that the invective in *The Owl and the Nightingale* and medieval *flytings* shares a transhistorical *telos* with modern oppressive regimes against people of colour, I do hope to show how medieval authors divided racial categories through interlocking discourses of species, animacy, and contamination to delineate boundaries of who was allowed to be animate, that is, who was allowed to be human.

In particular, since it was written and circulated in the late twelfth century, when anti-Jewish violence in England was legal,<sup>6</sup> *The Owl and the Nightingale*’s anti-Jewish discourse is crucial to include among contemporary antisemitic texts. Race, as Geraldine Heng writes, “is a structural relationship for the articulation and

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3 Chen, *Animacies*, 30. In other words, to call upon one’s animacy is to dredge an entity into liveliness, even when that entity may have been subject to inanimacy by the same force.

4 See “kinde, n.” in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

5 Myra J. Hird, “Animal Trans,” in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (London: Routledge, 2008), 227–47 at 227.

6 I will address some of these legal measures below. For an excellent overview of legal expressions of anti-Jewish violence see the second chapter of Geraldine Heng’s *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). As Heng writes, medieval England was a leader in legal persecution of Jewish people as it was the “first country in Europe to stigmatize Jews as coin clippers and criminals, the first to administer the Jewish badge, the first to produce state-sponsored efforts to convert Jews to Christianity, the first to invent the ritual murder libel, and of course the first to expel Jews from its national territory” (99–100n22).

management of human differences, rather than a substantive content”<sup>7</sup>; at the same time, as Adrienne Williams Boyarin reminds us, “the history of Christian thinking and invective against Jews, particularly those on the edge of the diaspora, works in combination with the English historical situation to produce certain [English] brands of anti-Semitic discourse.”<sup>8</sup> Both pertain. As I will show below, the symbolism of the owl-as-Jew is overtly present in the poem, and the scaffolded divisions between animal and human, non-Christian and Christian, filthy and clean, non-male and male, to name a few, are “speciated” splits that rely upon animacy to create such divisions. The unambiguous symbology of the owl-as-Jew marks the Owl in the poem as multiple species, all of which are targets of the Nightingale’s violence. While scholars have observed that the poem does not contain an “explicit Jewish connection” with the Owl,<sup>9</sup> I suggest that anti-Jewish themes in the poem were not only recognizable but central to the *flyting* in England as a genre of poetic (if not legally designated) hateful speech. Medieval species division could be not merely a confrontation between humanity and animality but also a process of deeply embedded racism that subordinated living beings through racial and sexual disparagement located in ideologies of contamination.

### Animacy and Medieval Species Division

Species are divided through assumptions about modes of living that are marked by race, gender, and sexuality, among other criteria. The concept of “speciesism,” first coined by Richard D. Ryder in 1970, was made popular by Peter Singer who established a comparison between animal cruelty and slavery.<sup>10</sup> Though Ryder and Singer both purport that “speciesism” works “by analogy with racism,”<sup>11</sup> Bénédicte Boisseron has aptly shown that this analogy uncomfortably collapses the violence against people of colour and animals into a comparable state. Boisseron writes that the goal of aligning violence against people of colour and animal cruelty is “precisely to bring attention to their mutual addressability and expose a system that compulsively conjures up blackness and animality together to measure the value

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<sup>7</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 19, also 27. At 23, Heng adds, “Not to use the term race would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently.”

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Warren, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2018), 143.

<sup>10</sup> Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), x.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon, 2001); cited in Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, 15. Boisseron notes that Singer “examines not only racism but also sexism in his theory of speciesism,” and that he “paved the way for vegan feminism and other types of study tackling discrimination, including homophobia, ableism, and ageism” (210n43).

of existence.”<sup>12</sup> While Boisseron’s project specifically focuses on black subjects and animality in modernity, the racialized animals in *The Owl and the Nightingale* are distant and embedded in a satirical fiction, a fiction that many scholars have used to ignore the violent and racist connotations of the poem. By ignoring the violent and racist implications of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, however, readers of the poem implicitly condone a violent literary history that has implications for real bodies.

Animacy works by hierarchizing sentience. Through gradience, animacy ranks humans at the top of the sentience scale; subordinate to humans are animals, plants, forces of nature such as wind, objects, abstractions, etc. Yet, as Chen shows, the scale of sentience is socially constructed and reflected through language,<sup>13</sup> and because of this the animacy hierarchy is subject to social conceptions of who counts as human, animal, or object. As a debate poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, written between 1160 and 1216,<sup>14</sup> participates in the medieval tradition of *flyting*, which engages the animacy hierarchy by explicitly dehumanizing or animalizing speech to debase an opponent.<sup>15</sup> Traditional *flytings* showcase insults between two human beings, typically male,<sup>16</sup> and the genre uses hateful speech in an interplay between racialities, animalities, and sexualities to demean the opposing party.<sup>17</sup> The word *flyting* is derived from the Old Norse verb *flytja*, which has various meanings—“carry,” “exchange,” “perform,” “recite,” “intercede,” “plead,” “disparage,” among others<sup>18</sup>—and, curiously, the verbal sense to flit or migrate, which conjures up a par-

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**12** Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, xx. In her first chapter, Boisseron gives a succinct overview of the “animal turn” in humanities and social sciences projects on race and racism. See Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (1988; repr., New York: Mirror, 1996); Gary L. Francione and Anna Charlton, *Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach* (Newark: Exemplar, 2015); Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Richard D. Ryder, “Speciesism Again: The Original Leaflet,” *Critical Society* 2 (2010): 1–2.

**13** Chen, *Animacies*, 2–4.

**14** On the dating of the poem see Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xiii–xvi.

**15** Carolynn van Dyke’s characterization of *The Owl and the Nightingale* as an “ornithological *flyting*,” together with Thomas Hahn’s suggestion that the poem has “conventions of *flyting*,” offers an entry point to discuss the poem’s mechanisms of sexual and racial disparagement, on which the *flyting* genre is built. See Carolynn van Dyke, “Names of the Beasts: Tracking the *Animot* in Medieval Texts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 1–51 at 31; and Thomas Hahn, “Early Middle English,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61–91 at 74. Ward Parks identifies *The Owl and the Nightingale* not specifically as a *flyting* but rather as an “ad hominem” attack in *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 167.

**16** By “traditional *flytings*” I am referring to the Old Norse and Middle Scots traditions of insult poetry, which I take up further below.

**17** This literary genre is often associated with the poetry of late medieval Scotland, such as *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* and *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart*, and with the Old Norse *sennur* tradition, such as *Lokasenna*, to which the later part of this essay will turn.

**18** *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, ed. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfusson (Oxford:

ticularly avian movement.<sup>19</sup> While *The Owl and the Nightingale* presents two female, avian disputants, a *flyting* between two animated birds, it uses the genre to show that injurious speech is a weapon that both deadens and animates the recipient.<sup>20</sup> In this mode, animality becomes analogical: animal analogy attempts to understand or threaten conditions of human difference. As Donna Beth Ellard writes, “analogy reveals itself as a critical tool that, in cleaving voice from body, generates certain communicative prohibitions between species.”<sup>21</sup> Analogies of difference in *flytings* draw on animal imagery, beast-like habits, or non-human performances of living. Iain MacLeod Higgins has argued that Chaucer, too, invokes *flyting* in Fragment I of the *Canterbury Tales* as a “tool to lay bare social and political problems.”<sup>22</sup> Higgins remarks that the *flyting* as a genre is a “highly formalized, verbally abusive, and uneasily comic poetic contest”; this uneasiness is marked by highly sexualized, racialized, and blatantly violent invective that seeks to destroy the opponent through defamation.<sup>23</sup> Through *flyting*, we can see how *The Owl and the Nightingale* stages interspecies conflict to reorder social relations.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* is the earliest Middle English bird debate, and while it shares many characteristics in form and content with *The Thrush and the Nightingale* (late thirteenth century), *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* (late fourteenth century), and William Dunbar’s *Merle and the Nightingale* (late fifteenth century), it is the only bird debate which features an owl.<sup>24</sup> As John W. Conlee writes, the majority of the bird-debates “focus on the value and nature of woman’s love and particularly

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Clarendon Press, 1957), 162; hereafter Cleasby-Vigfusson. Old English retained the verb *flitan* (to strike, contend) and the obsolete compound *flitcræft* (the art of disputing). See both entries in the digital edition of the Bosworth-Toller *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/>.

19 Priscilla Bawcutt has shown that, in the later Middle Ages, “the nouns *flyte* and *flyting* signified noisy quarrels and arguments, often taking place in public, and chiefly—or so, it was insinuated—carried on by women.” See Bawcutt, “The Art of Flyting,” *Scottish Literary Journal* 10, no. 2 (1983): 5–24 at 7. See also “flytja” in Cleasby-Vigfusson, 162.

20 Carissa Harris offers a reading of the pedagogical function of antifeminist satire in Middle Scots *flytings* in *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), especially chap. 2.

21 Donna Beth Ellard, “Communicating Between Species and Between Disciplines—Lessons from the Old English *Seafarer*,” *Exemplaria* 30, no. 4 (2008): 293–315 at 294.

22 Iain Macleod Higgins, “Tit for Tat: The *Canterbury Tales* and *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*,” *Exemplaria* 16, no. 1 (2004): 165–202 at 167.

23 Higgins, “Tit for Tat,” 173.

24 Richard Holland’s late fifteenth-century poem, *The Buke of the Howlat*, draws on many of the stereotypical characteristics of owls, but is not an interspecies debate. *The Buke of the Howlat*, however, does feature an owl who appeals to the pope (a peacock) to make his appearance more handsome. Many species of birds call a council to discuss the owl’s case, and the council agrees to the owl’s request. When each member of bird-kind gives up one feather to create new plumage for the owl, the owl becomes vain, whereupon Nature revokes his gift. See Richard Holland, *The Buke of the Howlat*, ed. Ralph Hanna, Scottish Text Society, 5th ser., 12 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014). On other Middle English debate poems, see John W. Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing: Colleagues, 1991).

on the question of woman's fidelity in love."<sup>25</sup> In terms of the content of Middle English bird-debates, then, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is again the exception; while there is some discussion of women's fidelity, the debate is centred around the two birds who verbally abuse each other. It is in this way that *The Owl and the Nightingale* shares more with a *flyting* than traditional bird-debate poetry. The contentiousness of the debate in *The Owl and the Nightingale* is outlined in the first twelve lines of the poem. An individual overhears the altercation between the Owl and the Nightingale in "one supe dizele hale" (a hidden valley) (2), and the poem recounts what the observer hears: the Owl and the Nightingale having a heated dispute in which they hurl the worst insults they can against the other: "An aīper aȝen oþer sval, / & let þat vole mod ut al; / & eīper seide of oþeres custe / Pat alre worste þat hi wuste" (And each one made the other swell, and let all filthy thoughts out; and each said of the other's character all the worst that they knew) (5–10). The essence of the debate can be reduced to these opening lines, which present the rift between the two birds in language that draws attention to the body. *Flytings* are meant to make the opponent "sval" (swell) (7) with anger. And while the debate is charmingly called a "plait," (controversy) (5), from the Old French "plait" (an argument, dispute, or presentation of suits), the bird-council is staged in a faraway locus with no one to listen except the birds themselves and the observer in the hidden corner.<sup>26</sup> John P. Brennan has even argued that the hidden corner from which the observer listens to the debate is a privy,<sup>27</sup> and the poet marks this council of uncleanness not just by scatological references, but also through contamination-anxiety marked by sexual slander and corporeal filth.

Locating the bird-debate in a hidden corner, evocative of a privy, situates the filthy and toxic tone between the disputants. The "plait" between the Owl and the Nightingale, overheard in a secret and private (privy) corner, is an evaluative contest, and the disputants judge the moral and physical cleanliness of the other. When the observer says that the disputants "let þat vole mod ut al" (let all filthy thoughts out) (8), this connotes letting out the filth of defecation but also the filth of the mind. The word *ful*, too, plays nicely with the status of the disputants as "foul" fowls in the poem. For instance, the Nightingale invokes this wordplay to draw attention to the Owl's medieval reputation as a dirty bird:

For eauereuch chil þe cleopeþ "fule"  
An euereuch man 'a wrecche hule'. (1315–16)

(For every child calls you "foul/fowl"  
And every man "a wretched owl.")

<sup>25</sup> Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry*, xxiii.

<sup>26</sup> See "plait (2)" in *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, ed. W. Rothwell, D. Trotter, et al., 2nd edn. (London: Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2005–), <https://www.anglo-norman.net>.

<sup>27</sup> John P. Brennan, "The Nightingale's Forum: A Privy Council?" *The Chaucer Review* 38, no. 4 (2004): 376–82.

Concerned not only with the species divide between nightingales and owls, the poem looks to dichotomies of cleanliness and filth, animacy and inanimacy, to show that *dehumanization* is not necessarily a function of making one *animal* but rather, making one *in-animal*, i.e., the animal without an animating presence. The first direct dialogue in the poem, indeed, is spoken by the Nightingale when she screams “unwiȝt” at the Owl (33). This term means non-creature—“un” + “wiȝt”<sup>28</sup>—and has particular purchase throughout the poem as the disputants use the term effectively to erase the other from the community of living creatures. This comparative contest between the two disputants rests not only on their attempts to expel the other from avian society but also to see which bird is more physically attractive. The Owl attempts to rouse the Nightingale out of its perch so the two birds can see who is of, “briȝter howe, of uairur blo” (brighter hue, of fairer colour) (152). Such provocations of colour difference are, as Chen makes clear, “imbricated with questions of legitimacy and the force of the law under which utterances are enacted.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the poem links birds of a fairer hue with an embodied legality; the bird of brighter hue and fairer colour is a permissible body in the formal apparatus of the debate.<sup>30</sup> The species of fairer colour is allowed to be animate.

As Carolyn van Dyke has suggested, the category of “animal” in medieval texts is a collapsing category that singularizes its referents.<sup>31</sup> What makes *The Owl and the Nightingale* so peculiar is that the two avian disputants are overtly aware of the differences between not just animal and human, but between animal species. For instance, when the Nightingale likens the Owl’s association with prognostication (which the Nightingale calls witchcraft, “wiecchecraftre” [1308]), with that of an ape learning, she explains that the imitation of intelligence does not make one wise:

On ape mai a boc bihalde,  
An leues wenden & eft folde,  
Ah he ne con þe bet þaruore  
Of clerkes lore top ne more. (1325–28)

(An ape may hold a book,  
And turn the leaves and shut it again,  
But he does not become better  
in scholarly knowledge because of it.)

By analogizing the Owl’s identity to that of an ape, the Nightingale not only separates the Owl from humankind (insinuating that she cannot possibly be trained in the art of prognostication), but also suggests that the Owl is no better than another animal, the ape, imitating a human. This re-hierarchizes the aspects of “kinde” to which the Owl is allowed to belong; she is not-avian, not-ape, and not-human because she is “unwiȝt.”

28 See “unwight, n.” in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

29 Chen, *Animacies*, 95.

30 As Heng aptly notes in *The Invention of Race*, 16, “Elite human beings ... have a hue, and it is white.”

31 van Dyke, “Names of the Beasts,” 1–5.

In the Middle Ages, the owl's mostly negative connotations were perpetuated in Christian bestiary and encyclopedic traditions, which interpreted the natural habits of some animals with sin. Owls were typically separated into four types in medieval bestiaries: the *nycticorax* (the night-raven), *noctua* (the night-owl), *bubo* (the common, dirty owl), and *ulula* (the screech-owl), and these classifications reflect how medieval thinkers organized living creatures not just across species but within them.<sup>32</sup> While owls were most often associated with filth, darkness, and sin, the *nycticorax* was an allegory of Christ. Used in Christian sermons and depicted in bestiaries, the night-raven's signification as Christ was based on its rejection of worldly things. The Aberdeen Bestiary, Aberdeen University Library, MS 24, produced around 1200 in England, remarks, for instance, "Mystice nicticorax Christum significat qui noctis tenebras amat, quia non vult mortem peccatoris sed ut convertatur et vivat" (In a mystic sense, the night-owl signifies Christ. Christ loves the darkness of night because he does not want sinners—who are represented by darkness—to die but to be converted and live).<sup>33</sup> The bestiary goes on:

Habitat nicticorax in rimis parietum quia Christus nasci voluit de populo Judeorum: Non sum inquit missus nisi ad oves que perierunt domus Israel. Sed Christus opprimitur a rimis, quia occiditur a Judeis

(The night-owl lives in the cracks in walls, as Christ wished to be born one of the Jewish people, saying: 'I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel' [Matt. 15:24]. But Christ is crushed in the cracks of the walls, because he is killed by the Jews.)<sup>34</sup>

As Jill Mann has articulated, the *nycticorax* here is presented as a *figura* of Christ, where the bird's love of darkness "signifies Christ's love of sinners."<sup>35</sup>

While the Owl in *The Owl and the Nightingale* is not classified by her disputant, the Nightingale, the Latin rubric in Jesus College MS Oxford 29—"Incipit altercatio inter filomenam et bubonem"<sup>36</sup>—identifies her as a *bubo*, a common, dirty owl.

<sup>32</sup> Hugh of Fouilloys's twelfth-century *Aviaryum*, a medieval book of birds, conveys a similar division but focuses only on the *nycticorax* and the *bubo*. The nightingale is absent from Fouilloys's *Aviaryum*. See *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloys's "Aviaryum"*, ed. and trans. Willene B. Clark (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Citations of this manuscript come from "Aberdeen Bestiary—MS 24," University of Aberdeen Library, Special Collections and Museums, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/>, here fol. 35v; hereafter "Aberdeen Bestiary." See Ezek. 18:32.

<sup>34</sup> Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 35v.

<sup>35</sup> Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 159. On Jews as sinners, see the first chapter of Steven F. Kruger's *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Jeremy Cohen's Introduction to *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) provides overview the construction of Jewish identity within a Christian salvific narrative.

<sup>36</sup> See the Introduction to *The Owl and the Nightingale: Facsimile of the Jesus and Cotton Manuscripts*, ed. N. R. Ker, Early English Text Society 251 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

Like the *nycticorax*, the *bubo* is associated with darkness, but unlike its Christ-like cousin, the *bubo*'s affiliation with the shadows is indicative of its presumed sinful nature. In its description of the *bubo*, the Aberdeen Bestiary cites Hrabanus Maurus, a ninth-century philosopher, who says, "Bubo inquit, in tenebris peccatorum deditos, et lucem iusticie fugientes significat" (The owl signifies those who have given themselves up to the darkness of sin and those who flee from the light of righteousness), and continues "Unde inter immunda animalia in Levitico deputatur. Unde per bubonem intelligere possumus quemlibet peccatorem" (As a result it is classed among the unclean creatures in Leviticus. Consequently, we can take the owl to mean any kind of sinner).<sup>37</sup> And here the case for reading *The Owl and the Nightingale* as participating in anti-Jewish polemics arises.

This bestiary association between darkness and sin mapped directly onto the medieval figure of the owl-as-Jew. In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the Nightingale asks the Owl why she acts the way that "unwiztis" behave:

Wi dostu þat unwiztis doþ?  
 Þu singist a niȝt & noȝt a dai:  
 & al þi song is 'wailawai!' (218–20)

(Why do you do what non-creatures do?  
 You sing at night and not in the day:  
 And all your song is "wailawai!")

The *un-creature* accusation here recalls the Nightingale's opening word to the Owl and aligns the Owl's non-creature status with her habits of living, participating in the precise species differentiation that the Nightingale takes issue with in the first place. The Nightingale refers to the Owl's treachery against bird-kind because she conceals herself during the daytime:

Þu flizst a niȝt & noȝt a dai:  
 Þarof ich wundri & wel mai—  
 Vor eurich þing þat schuniet riȝt,  
 Hit luueþ þuster & hatiet liȝt;  
 & eurich þing þat is lof misdeed,  
 Hit luueþ þuster to his dede. (227–32)

(You fly at night and not in the day:  
 Therefore, I wonder and well may—  
 For every creature that shuns justice,  
 It loves darkness and hates light;  
 And every creature that loves misdeed,  
 It loves to do so in the darkness.)

The Nightingale's use of the term "riȝt" to signal justice is held in contrast to her accusations of the Owl's crooked, horned appearance. The term "riȝt" denotes not simply what is morally or legally right but also that which is straight and not crooked.<sup>38</sup> While the Owl's habits of living define her as a certain *kind* of bird, the

<sup>37</sup> Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 50r–v. See Lev. 11:17.

<sup>38</sup> The Nightingale is persistent throughout the poem in identifying the Owl as crooked. I see this

Nightingale uses these habits to marginalize the Owl from the rest of the avian community. The Owl's "cunde," the natural constitution of a living creature,<sup>39</sup> is conflated with her behaviour; because owls are nocturnal, the Nightingale aligns all owl-kind with darkness and sin.

For a medieval Christian majority, both owls and Jews were associated with shunning the light—the daylight and Christ—and this signified a spiritual blindness.<sup>40</sup> As Edward Wheatly writes, the trope of the blindness of the Jews "shared the discursive space of anti-Semitic stereotypes with the representation of the Jews as the unruly other, bringers of disorder who were sinful in behavior."<sup>41</sup> The Owl's union with darkness is precisely what the Nightingale uses to discount her spiritual and moral conduct:

Pu hauest a niȝt wel briȝte sene;  
Bi daie þu art stareblind,  
Þat þu ne sichst ne bov ne rind.  
A dai þu art blind oþer bisne. (240–43)

(You have very bright sight at night:  
By day you are entirely blind,  
So that you cannot see bark nor branch.  
By day you are blind or dim-eyed.)

The Nightingale further spits that the Owl has intimate knowledge of the "þustre wai" (249), the dark way, and avoids paths that are well lit. Blindness distinguishes the Owl from the avian species in this debate: "So dop þat boþ of þine cunde: / Of liȝte nabbep hi none imunde" (Those of your kind behave that way: they do not care much about the light) (251–52). By distancing all owl-kind from the avian community, the Nightingale appeals to the same natural hierarchies within which she accuses the Owl of behaving. When the Nightingale addresses the Owl's habits as a function of her "kinde," she not only upholds natural order as an appropriate system of regulating creatures, but also suggests that the Owl is so untamed and wild that she is a different "kinde" than other birds. The Owl, too, distances herself from bird-kind when she responds that the hare is concealed during the day, but is still able to see.<sup>42</sup> The Owl rejects her own avian species and instead petitions a cross-species likeness with the order of lagomorphs.

Because this species and social reordering is contingent on stylized insult and abuse, *The Owl and the Nightingale* reveals a potent anti-Jewish polemic, grounded

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as a comment that seeks to disparage the Owl's physiognomy and sexuality. On straightness and crookedness see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

39 See "kinde, n." in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

40 See Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Semitic Iconography* (New York: Holt, 2014), chap. 2.

41 Edward Wheatly, "'Blind' Jews and Blind Christians: Metaphorics of Marginalization in Medieval Europe," *Exemplaria* 14, no. 2 (2002): 351–82 at 360.

42 Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, lines 373–74: "þe hare luteþ al dai, / Ac nopeles iso he mai" (The hare hides all day but nonetheless he can see).

in fear of contamination. Using the natural world as a template for social organization divides (in an attempt to naturalize) hierarchies of species. As Chen writes, “Animacy hierarchies in Western ontologies are about kind: they assert that *this group* is affiliated with *these properties* (for instance, the assertion that ‘animals lack language’).”<sup>43</sup> Medieval natural philosophy—expressed through bestiaries, encyclopedias, and scientific writing—was similarly grounded in classed categories of species and hierarchal differentiation. In Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s encyclopedic text *De proprietatibus rerum* (On the Property of Things), which circulated concurrently with *The Owl and the Nightingale*, information is organized in both hypotactic and paratactic ways. For instance, Bartholomaeus places some birds in the twelfth book, on flying creatures (“De avibus”) while other birds are duplicated in the eighteenth book, under animals.<sup>44</sup> As van Dyke writes, “contiguity trumps hierarchy” for Bartholomaeus, and this contiguity is shown through order and rank, not necessarily through species and family.<sup>45</sup> While medieval natural philosophy organized the world by order, encyclopedic and bestiary traditions were notorious for such categorization. Differentiating between and among species was commonplace in medieval natural philosophy and science, and bestiaries and encyclopedias could both distinguish and collapse human from and with animal, differentiating within species and kind. A *nightingale* is different from an *owl*, but even among owls there is hierarchy of good to evil: some owls represent Christ while others are associated with Jews. This unstable and mutating category was used to the advantage of those with anti-Jewish agendas.

### Animality, Antisemitism, and Toxicity

The association between Jews and animality takes many different forms in the Middle Ages. Of particular importance for owl-as-Jew symbology is the presence of horns and an association with filth. As Heng explains, medieval Jews were set apart by “biomarkers,” such as “horns, a male menstrual flux ..., an identifying stink (the infamous *foetor judaicus*), facial and somatic phenotypes (the *facies judaica*, ‘Jewish Face’), and charges of bestiality, blasphemy, diabolism, deicide, vampirism, and cannibalism.”<sup>46</sup> Antisemitic stereotypes that associated Jews with toxicity and contamination materialized in racist caricatures of Jews as suckling pigs, the *facies judaica* on owls and other “filthy” creatures, and manuscript illuminations of the ritual murder libel centred on a latrine.<sup>47</sup> Most notoriously on the continent, anti-

<sup>43</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> van Dyke offers thorough analysis of species ordering in bestiaries and encyclopedic texts in “Names of the Beasts.”

<sup>45</sup> van Dyke, “Names of the Beasts,” 16.

<sup>46</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 30; note also 116: according to Heng, Jews were seen as “a polluting and contaminating entity.”

<sup>47</sup> The famous illustration accompanying *The Child Slain by Jews* in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. a. 1, fol. 124v is discussed in Kathy Lavezzo, *The Accommodated Jew: English*

semitic literature and art of the *Judensau*, or “Jew’s sow,” portrayed Jews suckling, feeding, and having sex with pigs, animals deemed unclean and forbidden to eat under Jewish laws of *kashrut*.<sup>48</sup> Jody Enders has shown the resemblance of corporal punishment between pigs and Jews in late medieval France:<sup>49</sup> pigs condemned of homicide—specifically child-murder—were tried, convicted, and hanged while dressed in human clothing, and these trials were effective in naturalizing and superimposing violent “animal” behaviour onto Jews. In Christian exegesis, Jews were also identified with dogs, an image based on an interpretation of Matthew 15:26: “It is not good to take the bread of the children and to cast it to the dogs.” In Kenneth Stow’s words, the verse from Matthew 15:26 was “transmogrified into an image of Christian children hungering for the Eucharist, which ‘Jewish dogs’ incessantly plot to steal, consume, savage, or pollute.”<sup>50</sup> Animalizing imagery—dog, pig, goat, or owl—of Jewish people was marked by contamination and corporal punishment.

The owl’s difference from its own “kinde” could represent both Jews and “bad” Christians, according to Alexandra Cuffel.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is clear that the association between owls and Jews was so culturally embedded in medieval Christian society that the image was used as a pedagogical tool in art to mark the difference between Jew and Christian. Mariko Miyazaki’s work on misericord owls and owl imagery in Christian church settings argues that attempts to anthropomorphize the bird with anti-Jewish physiognomic features was so pervasive that the presence of an owl in medieval art and literature conjured up the image of Jewish people without needing an explicit referent.<sup>52</sup> Christian iconography, art, and illustration frequently blended racist, stereotyped characteristics of Jews with animal imagery, what Debra Higgs Strickland calls a disguised “demonic reference ... in the form of a symbol, such as

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*Antisemitism from Bede to Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), especially 13–14. See also Anthony P. Bale, “Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290,” in *The Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary, and Archaeological Perspectives* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 129–44.

**48** Literature and art of the *Judensau* was most common in Germany, decorating walls on churches, bridges, and towers. Images of the *Judensau* often merged with other animal imagery like the *Bock*, or billy-goat. See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 27 and 46–47. The antisemitic term *Judensau* continues to be used by Nazis in Germany to insult Jewish people: see Christine Coester, “How Pigs Rooted Their Way Into the German Language,” *Handelsblatt*, June 8, 2018: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/politics/germans-and-hogs-how-pigs-rooted-their-way-into-the-german-language/23582344.html>.

**49** Jody Enders, “Homicidal Pigs and the Antisemitic Imagination,” *Exemplaria* 14, no. 1 (2002): 201–38.

**50** Kenneth Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), xiv–xv. On the interpretation of Matt. 15:26, see 3–5.

**51** Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 227–34. Cuffel discusses that the owl was a marker of both Jews and “bad” Christians—in the sense that these Christians are “like Jews.” Medieval conceptions of the owl and its difference from the larger avian community would have been understood to represent, in some way, Jews and sinful Christians.

**52** Mariko Miyazaki, “Misericord Owls and Medieval Anti-Semitism,” in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, ed. Debra Hassig (New York: Garland, 1999), 23–49.

a goat or an owl.”<sup>53</sup> The portrait of the *bubo* in the Aberdeen bestiary likewise fuses animal and human together: “Infelix ergo dicitur, quia infelix est qui ea que prediximus operator” (The owl is known, therefore, as a miserable bird, just as the sinner, who behaves in the way we have described above, is a miserable man).<sup>54</sup> In this tradition, both the Jew and the owl are separated from the larger groups to which they belong, human and animal, and together make a single *infelix* creature.

Medieval Christian authors turned to natural philosophy, encyclopedic, and bestiary traditions as “evidence” for a social hierarchy that subordinated Jews. For the most part, owls were thought to be less distinguished than their avian colleagues, and some kinds of owls were worse than others. As Miyazaki notes, there are both horned and non-horned owls in nature, yet when a horned owl is depicted in bestiaries, misericord carvings, or other medieval media, the horns may be read as “either ornithologically descriptive or as an aspect of the bird’s anti-Jewish characterization, or possibly both, depending on context.”<sup>55</sup> Using owls to caricature Jewish people in medieval literature and art was contingent on depicting the owl’s body and face as deformed, ugly, and crooked. In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, uniting the Owl’s crooked appearance with her song, the Nightingale suggests that the Owl’s unnatural crookedness invalidates her speech:

þu bile is stif & sharp & hoked,  
 Riȝt so an owel þat is croked:  
 Þarmid þu clackes oft & longe—  
 & þat is on of þine songe!  
 Ac þu þretest to mine fleshe:  
 Mid þine cliures woldest me meshe. (79–84)

(Your bill is stiff and sharp and hooked,  
 Just as a flesh-hook is crooked:  
 Because of this you clatter often and for a long time—  
 And that is only one of your songs!  
 Yet you threaten my body:  
 With your claws you would crush me.

Cultural associations of the horned Jew with the horned owl were ubiquitous in medieval English manuscripts. The illustration in the Aberdeen Bestiary next to the “De bubone” entry on fol. 50r shows a horned owl with large glaring eyes and a hooked nose; one of the horns protrudes the border of the circle that encases the creature.<sup>56</sup> That the Owl is punningly aligned with a crooked “owel” further distinguishes her from avian species. An “owel” is an instrument of torture, a flesh-hook.<sup>57</sup> The word comes into Modern English through the term *awl*. In Middle English,

53 Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 137.

54 Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 50v.

55 Miyazaki, “Misericord Owls and Medieval Anti-Semitism,” 29.

56 Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 50r.

57 See “oul, n.” in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

“owl” was not only a near homophone for the word for owl (“hule”) but could also convey linguistically the calumny against the owl’s physiognomy. Insulting language explicitly draws on de-animation as it first objectifies its target and attempts to strip that target of animate life. An owl becomes an instrument of death. It is as animate as an inanimate tool. Importantly, that tool, a flesh-hook, also strips life away from living creatures.

The horned imagery cast onto Jewish people in the Middle Ages was not merely pictorial. In 1267, the Vienna Council introduced the decree that Jews must wear a *pileum cornutum*, “horned hat,” also known as the *Judenhut*.<sup>58</sup> As Strickland has demonstrated, the Christian caricature of Jewish physiognomy emphasized not just facial features (an enlarged, hooked nose, facial hair, large protruding eyes), but also through clothing.<sup>59</sup> The *Judenhut* was typically a bright orange Phrygian hat with a pointed tip, which, as Strickland writes, was “emphasized in both form and color in order to make it clear that this attribute was an imposed and pejorative device.”<sup>60</sup> The *pileum cornutum* was a sartorial extension of the 1227 Synod of Narbonne, which forced Jews to wear an oval badge in the centre of the chest on their garments, and also required that Jews wear a horn-shaped figure in the centre of the chest-badge.<sup>61</sup> Sara Lipton has shown that by the middle of the twelfth-century, the presence of a pointed hat and beard “had become familiar and consistent enough to serve as identifying marks of Jewishness.”<sup>62</sup>

In England and elsewhere, the association of the horned owl with Jews came out of a long antisemitic tradition that correlated horned physical attributes first with Moses and later the Devil. Ruth Melinkoff suggests that this false equivalence derives from an error made by Jerome in his translation of the Old Testament.<sup>63</sup> The Hebrew word in question, *qeren*, occurs in Exodus 34:29:

יהיה ברדת משה מהר סיני ושני לחת העדת ביד משה ברדתו מן ההר ומשה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו בדברו אתו

(And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of the testimony in Moses’ hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him.)<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Estella Antioaneta Ciobanu, *The Spectacle of the Body in Late Medieval England* (Iași: Lumen, 2012), 190–93. See also Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 44–46, and the first chapter of Lipton, *Dark Mirror*. In *The Invention of Race*, 15, Heng notes that some medieval authors “held that Jewish bodies also came with horns and a tail.”

<sup>59</sup> Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, 133–34. For an account of how such caricatures developed, see also Irvn M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, chap. 3, includes an iconographic history of the *Judenhut*.

<sup>61</sup> Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> Lipton, *Dark Mirror*, 57.

<sup>63</sup> Ruth Melinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 1–2.

<sup>64</sup> *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, Hebrew text, English trans. and comm. J. H. Hertz (London: Soncino, 1952), 368.

The Hebrew word *qeren* (קֶרֶן) can mean “horns” or “sunbeams.” As Melinkoff shows, Jerome’s translation of this passage interpreted the Hebrew *qeren* through the Latin *cornuta*, “horned,”<sup>65</sup> and illustrating Moses with horns was pervasive in medieval artistic representations and literature alike. The nearly 30,000-line thirteenth-century poem *Cursor mundi*, for instance, presents Moses with horns:

Quen moyses had broght þe lagh  
And his folk in þe face him sagh,  
Pam thught him hornd apon farr,  
And duted þam to cum him nerr.<sup>66</sup>

(When Moses had brought the law  
And his people looked him in the face,  
They thought he was horned from far away  
And were uncertain if they should go near him.)

*Cursor mundi*’s representation of the horned Moses figures him as a subject of fear, one that his community is uncertain to approach. The Middle English adjective and past participle *horned*, too, was used specifically of quadruped beasts, of owls, of Moses, of the devil, of women, and of the moon.<sup>67</sup> With the exception of the lunar reference, those described as *horned* merged in both property and kind; for instance, women described as *horned* were likened to “bestys.”<sup>68</sup>

Antisemitic cultural and textual production in medieval England overtly used animal imagery, specifically the owl, to crudely symbolize Jewish peoples. As Anthony Bale has suggested, antisemitic texts and images in medieval England are “manifestations of cultural power,” that is, a specifically Christian power that used Jewish people and culture to show what “medieval Christians were not, or did not want to be.”<sup>69</sup> The cultural expression of antisemitism was so pervasive in medieval

**65** *Biblia Sacra iuxta Latinam Vulgatam Versionem ad codicum fidem*, 259: “Cumque descenderet Moyses de monte Sinai, / tenebat duas tabulas testimonii, et / ignorabat quod cornuta esset facies sua / ex consortio sermonis Domini” (And when Moses came down from mount Sinai, he held two tables of the testimony, and he knew not that his face was horned from the conversation with the Lord) (Exodus 34:29). The extensive imagery of the horned Moses became an image that was cast on all Jews. As Trachtenberg writes in *The Devil and the Jews*, 44, “when we find ordinary Jews, medieval Jews in typical medieval garb, crowned with horns, we may reasonably suspect that something more lies behind this than faulty translation.”

**66** *Cursor Mundi (The Cursor of the World)*, ed. Richard Morris (London: Early English Text Society, 1874–1892), 1:21–22, lines 233–40.

**67** See the entry for “horned, adj. & ppl.” in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

**68** See John Lydgate’s *Reson and Sensuallyte*, ed. E. Sieper, EETS, e.s. 84, 89 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901–1903), where the section on women’s virtues describes the eighth virtue, Nobleness, in avian terms (at lines 6523–34). Lydgate explains that women of noble nature will embody Nobleness with “wynges” and in “flight” (6555–56), though a noble woman will detest horns: “They [women] dedely haten highe crestys / And to be hornyd lych as bestys” (6565–66). Through this avian metaphor, Lydgate divides noble birds from ignoble birds based on external characteristics of species difference.

**69** Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4–5.

England that it decorated churches, manuscript marginalia, lyrics, fables, and the cultural geography of cityscapes. This culture of antisemitism analogized Jewish bodies with sin and filth. Even in John of Arderne's fifteenth-century medical treatise on anal *fistulae*, the owl-as-Jew image stands in for an anal ulcer:

*Bubo* is an aposteme bredyng wipin þe lure in þe longaon wip grete hardnes but little akyng ... for it is hid al wipin þe lure; And þerfore it is callid bubo, for as bubo, i.e. an owle, is a best dwellyng in hideles so þis sikeness lurkeþ wipin þe lure in the bikynnyng, but after processe of tyme it vlcerate.<sup>70</sup>

(*Bubo* is a festering sore breeding within the hole of the rectum with great hardness but little aching ... for it is entirely hidden within the hole; And therefore it is called *bubo*, for the *bubo*, that is, an owl, is a beast dwelling in a secret place so this sickness lurks within the hole in the beginning but after some time it ulcerates.)

While Arderne's discussion of *bubo* does not explicitly name Jewish people, the presence of the *bubo*, especially in the context of anal filth, reveals "a mechanism of antisemitism," as Bale puts it, which is "unacknowledged (Jews are never mentioned) but powerfully graphic."<sup>71</sup> In fact, the manuscript, University of Glasgow MS Hunter 251, presents an illustration of an owl with the heading *bubo* on fol. 55r right next to this passage. The owl features the traditional antisemitic image of the owl with a dramatically hooked nose. Similarly, University of Glasgow MS Hunter 112 features an owl directly underneath a "clyster-pipe," (a medieval enema).<sup>72</sup> Because medieval Christianity regarded Jewish bodies as "animal-like, disgusting, contaminating," as Steven Kruger has pointed out, the boundaries of the body were coded in particularly racialized and sexualized ways.<sup>73</sup> Such images ask a medieval audience to automatically connect the anal ulcer with *bubo*, with owl, with Jew, and ultimately with filth.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> See J. Arderne, *Treatises of Fistula in Ano, Hæmorrhoids, and Clysters*, ed. D'A. Power, EETS, o.s. 139 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1910), 37; cited in Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 21. See also Peter Murray Jones, "Image, Word, and Medicine in the Middle Ages," in *Visualizing Medieval Medicine and Natural History 1200–1500*, ed. Jean A. Givens, Karen M. Reeds, Alain Touwaide (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1–24. On the term "clyster-pipe" see Juhani Norri, *Dictionary of Medical Vocabulary, 1375–1550: Body Parts, Sicknesses, Instruments, and Medicinal Preparations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Steven F. Kruger, "The Bodies of Jews in the Late Middle Ages," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 303. See also Kruger's *The Spectral Jew*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>74</sup> Susan Signe Morrison writes that "Jews were associated with filth from at least the twelfth century," but this association was not "an innovation of anti-Semitic rhetoric": see her *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 37.

## Species Contamination and Sexual Violence

Filth is central to the owl's portrait in medieval bestiaries. As the Aberdeen Bestiary says of the owl: "Avis feda esse dicitur, quia fimo eius locus in quo habitat commaculatur, quia peccator illos cum quibus habitat, exemplo perversi operis dehonestat" (It is said to be a filthy bird, because it fouls its nest with its droppings, as the sinner dishonours those with whom he lives, by the example of his evil ways).<sup>75</sup> Chen's suggestion that "animacy hierarchies"—that is, who or what is allowed to be *animate*—reorder species on racial and sexual axes is particularly useful when thinking about filth and toxicity. Both the Owl and the Nightingale make a central claim that the other is toxic, filthy, and therefore dangerous to the wider avian community. Chen shows that, through animacy, toxicity illustrates a schema between two bodies as proximate: "the first body, living or abstract, is under threat by the second; the second has the effect of poisoning, and altering, the first, causing a degree of damage, disability, or even death."<sup>76</sup> As John of Arderne's above-noted treatise demonstrates, the *bubo* could be both an anal ulcer *and* an owl; both ulcer and owl are inseparable because they symbolize the same threat of toxicity. Because an owl is a "best dwellyng in hideles" (a beast dwelling in a secret place), *bubo* becomes associated with a lurking "sikenes ... wiþin þe lure" (sickness within the hole). Holes, whether anuses, latrines, or hidden valleys (recall the "suþe diþele hale" in the opening lines of *The Owl and the Nightingale*), cast the owl, ulcer, and Jew as toxic threats.<sup>77</sup>

While the Nightingale's accusation of the Owl's filthy habits of living marks the Owl as different from other members of bird-kind, the Owl locates the Nightingale's filthiness in her cross-species contamination with humans:

Wane þu comest to manne hāze,  
 Par þornes boþ & ris idraze,  
 Bi hegge & bi þicke wode,  
 Par men goþ oft to hore node  
 Partu þu draʒst, þarto þu wunest. (585–89)

(When you come to human dwellings,  
 Where thorns and twigs tangle,  
 By the hedge and by the thick wood,  
 Where men go off to do their need,  
 That is where you are drawn, that is where you dwell.)

Many scholars have assumed that the Owl is here chiding the Nightingale for living near the privy, yet the Owl makes a distinction between the "picke wode" where men shit and the privy set within the wood and nettle. It is in this second location, at the "rumhuse" (592), where the Owl says to the Nightingale,

<sup>75</sup> Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 50v.

<sup>76</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 191.

<sup>77</sup> It is worth pointing out, too, that the lexical range of the Middle English word "lure" includes both a bird-trap and an anus. See entries for "lure, n." in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

Pu sittest & singst bihinde þe setle:  
 Þar me mai þe ilomest finde—  
 Þar men worpeþ hore bihinde. (594–96)

(You sit and you sing behind the seat:  
 That is where you are found most often—  
 Where men thrust out their behinds.)

It is near the “rumhuse” (the privy) that the Nightingale makes her home, and the Owl asks her what else she eats except the bugs that she “mizte finde, among þe uolde of harde rinde” (might find among the folds of hard bark) (601–02). The Owl targets the Nightingale, in other words, by sexually shaming her: not only does the Nightingale inhabit the privy; she is most often found where men thrust out their anuses. The Owl’s accusation is united by sexual innuendo and contamination. The uncleanness is legible by what takes place inside a privy but also by what takes place in a “dizele hale,” an area removed from public view, a latrine, an anus. We are to understand the accusation in both ways, and the final blow comes in the Owl’s query about what the Nightingale ingests: she eats from the crevices of “hard rinde,” perhaps “tough bark” but more likely in the crevices of the anus. The Owl slanders the Nightingale by associating her not only with non-normative sexual behaviour, but also by presenting her in a cross-species contamination; by associating with humans, the Nightingale does not act like her “cunde.”

Dehumanization or un-speciation operates through slander against one’s kin-group or origin, a hallmark of *flyting*. In the sixteenth-century *Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart*, for instance, references to “exotic” animals carry a racialized weight that works not merely to disparage the disputant but to dehumanize him. Chen suggests that, in conceptualizing animal hierarchy, “kinds are equated with propensities; but in the maintenance of kinds, the hierarchy simultaneously assigns kinds a generativity, mapping and marking reproductive and nonreproductive bodies.”<sup>78</sup> In Montgomery’s answer to Polwart, he thus maligns Polwart by attacking his birth:

Syne, fra the fathers side fynlie had fed it,  
 Mony monkes and marmasits come with the mother—  
 Blacke botche fall the breist and the bellie that bred it!  
 Ay offered they that vndoght fra ane to another:  
 Where that smatched hade sucked, so sair it was to shed it.  
 But beleife it begane to buckie the brother.  
 In the barke of ane bourtrie, whylloms they bed it.  
 All talking with ther tongues the ane to another,  
 With flirting and flyrring, ther fisnomie thej flipe;  
     Some, lookeand lyce, in the croune of it keikes;  
     Some choppis the keddis into ther cheekes;  
     Some in there oxtere hard it clekkes,  
     Like ane auld bagpype.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 127.

<sup>79</sup> This passage can be found in “The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart,” in *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie and Other Pieces from Laing MS. No. 447*, ed. George Stevenson (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society Publications, 1910), 167, lines 469–81. Translation from the Scots is my own.

(Then, since the father's side had finely fed it,  
 Many monkeys and marmosets came with the mother—  
 May black botch befall the breast and belly that bred it!  
 Always they offered up that good-for-nothing thing to each other  
 Where that monster had sucked, so sore it was to shed it.  
 But believe it began to suckle the brother.  
 In the bark of an elder-tree sometimes they fucked it.  
 All talking with their tongues from one to another,  
 With gibing and grimacing, they flipped their physiognomy;  
     Some, looking for lice, peeped in the crown of it;  
     Some cut the sheep-louse from their cheeks;  
     Some cruelly hatched in their armpits,  
     Like an old bagpipe.)

This dehumanization works by identifying Polwart's parents with "exotic" animals. Priscilla Bawcutt has noted that animal imagery in Scottish *flytings* was so potently "exotic" that authors often supplied their verbal abuse with animal-kind that was not "natural" to the Scottish or English landscapes.<sup>80</sup> We may ask, as Chen does, "when is human 'animal sex,' whether bestial, queer, or rapacious, racially intensified?"<sup>81</sup> It is significant that the "monkies and marmasits" came from the mother's side, which afflicted Polwart with the "blacke botch," a disease that the mother herself transmitted through her breast. The Scots term "botch" refers to some type of contagion or disease, and it is often accompanied by the adjective "black."<sup>82</sup> Curiously, in Middle English "bocche" is a pathological swelling or boil that could be glossed with the Latin *bubo*, the term of identification for an owl discussed earlier in John of Arderne's treatise on anal fistulae.<sup>83</sup> Yet it is clear in this passage that the "blacke botch" associated with Polwart's mother depicts not only animal contagion but imagined racial contagion as well.

Chen's discussion of queer toxicity focuses on the interlacing of race, sexuality, gender, and class in articulations of contamination, specifically lead poisoning.<sup>84</sup> In what Chen calls "queer licking," they outline media representations of a white, middle-class boy who licks his lead-laced Thomas the Tank Engine toy. Chen argues that the image of the white boy licking the train is bound up with social fears of racial and sexual contamination—if the white boy contracts lead poisoning from a queer lick, his hue will darken, his body will rot.<sup>85</sup> The act of licking, sucking, and the presence of "tongues" in the passage above similarly conveys contamination by oral transmission. When Montgomery suggests that the suckling of the mother's breast

<sup>80</sup> Bawcutt, "The Art of Flyting," 14.

<sup>81</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 122.

<sup>82</sup> See "boch(e)," in *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (Edinburgh: Scottish Language Dictionaries, 2004), available online at <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/boche>; hereafter *Dictionary of Scots*.

<sup>83</sup> See "botch" in Norri, *Dictionary of Medical Vocabulary in English*, and the entry "bocche n." in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

<sup>84</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, chap. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 184–88.

produces “monkies and marmasits,” he suggests that this “queer licking” alters the faces of Scotsmen by flipping their “fisnomie.” The final lines of the passage turn to a racialized caricature of enlarged heads, cheeks, and lips as “evidence” of contamination from suckling the breast of the diseased mother. Montgomerie’s racialized abuse of Polwart’s kin and origin underscores the anxiety of cross-species contamination. Both the racial and gendered language of Montgomerie’s invective suggests that the hereditary contamination in Polwart’s family (which stems from his mother, who is associated with “monkies and marmasits”) threatens the genealogy of Polwart’s family’s changing physiognomy.<sup>86</sup> The genre of the *flyting* shows us that the perceived threat of racial mixing must be announced, scorned, and finally, cleansed through hateful speech.

Similarly, the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* draws on language of toxicity to defile the family and kin-status of the disputants.<sup>87</sup> Contestation in a *flyting* is based on the social disparagement of the other contestant, which, in most instances, uses animals to convey racist ideologies. In the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*, the two disputants use animal, and specifically avian, language as a tool to debase each other. Terms such as “fule” (35), “aip” (36), “owll irregular” (36), “skaithbird” (37), “carioun” (139), “skytand skarth” (194), “oule” (236, 409), “gled” (237), “foule edder” (240), and “insensuate sow” (321), among many others, are used not merely as metrical filler but rather to speak to the perceived insentience of the other disputant. For instance, “fule” carries the same connotations as it does in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, comprising the meaning of fowl, foul, and fool, in addition to the emphatic “ful” (very). Likewise, the term “skytand skarth” may suggest a “befouled monster,” as James Conlee glosses it, but is more likely to mean a “befouled hermaphrodite.”<sup>88</sup> As Carissa Harris makes clear, Middle Scots *flytings* participate in an antifeminist, masculinist academic discourse that seeks to teach an opponent through obscene insult.<sup>89</sup> When used to insult, these terms accumulate meaning onto the body of the disputant; through Kennedy’s slurs, Dunbar is meant to be understood as all of these concepts in one body.

As in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the slurs used in the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* focus on scatological imagery and filth in order to provide evidence of the other disputant’s assumed non-human, animalistic, and dirty nature. Kennedy opens his portion of the *flyting* by shouting “Dirtin [filthy] Dunbar” (25), similar to the Nightingale’s opening insult of “unwizt” to the Owl, for Kennedy aligns the concept of *flyting* with Dunbar’s avian nature. He will make Dunbar “fleyit” (frightened) with his words:

<sup>86</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 37, notes that Blind Hary’s nationalistic work *The Wallace*, produced in the 1470s, “ferociously insists that *essential differences of blood* fundamentally separate English colonizers from native Scots resisters despite commonality of faith.”

<sup>87</sup> All references to *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* are taken from William Dunbar, *The Complete Works*, ed. James Conlee, TEAMS Middle English Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), hereafter cited parenthetically in text by line number.

<sup>88</sup> See “scarth” in the *Dictionary of Scots*.

<sup>89</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 74–84.

Fantastik fule, trest weill thow sal be fleyit.  
 Ignorant elf, aip, owll irregular,  
 Skaldit skaitbird and commoun skamelar,  
 Wanfukkit funling that Natour maid ane yrle. (35–38)

Fantastic fowl, trust well you shall be frightened.  
 Ignorant elf, ape, unnatural owl,  
 Dirty shit-bird and common parasite,  
 Miserably-fucked foundling that Nature made a dwarf.

Kennedy associates Dunbar's filth with avian imagery. His description of Dunbar as a "fantastik fule" is linked not only to Dunbar's filth but to his cowardice as well. When Kennedy explains that Dunbar will "be fleyit," he plays on the verb *fley*, "to frighten," a variant of the verb *fle*, "to put to flight through fear,"<sup>90</sup> but his depiction of Dunbar as a "fantastik fule" is predicated on his presumed cowardice and flight. Moreover, Kennedy's artillery fire of creatures—"elf, aip, owll irregular," followed by "skaldit skaitbird and common skamelar"—moves from the fantastically human to the toxic—that is, it provides an animacy hierarchy.

By associating Dunbar with an "elf," Kennedy places him in semi-human form that then turns toward the animal, a devolution into primate and then bird-kind. To call Dunbar an "owll irregular" suggests misshapeness, but, perhaps more insidiously, someone disobedient, lawless, or unqualified.<sup>91</sup> When Kennedy turns to "skaldit skaitbird and common skamelar," he fuses Dunbar's animal-avian qualities by returning to his filth. The Scots term *skaitbird* refers to the Arctic skua, a seabird thought to eat the excreta of other birds. The first element of the word, *skait*, is related to the Scots verb *skite*, "to shit,"<sup>92</sup> which derives from the Old Norse verb *skíta* bearing the same meaning.<sup>93</sup> That Dunbar here is likened to a "skaitbird," literally a "shit-bird," a bird that eats the excrement of other birds, not only figures him as a source of filth but also as a scavenger—at once a consumer of his own kind and (or perhaps therefore) not like his own kind at all. This is further highlighted in Kennedy's insult "common skamelar," which then defines Dunbar as a community parasite.<sup>94</sup> Kennedy's final attack on this unlawful, dirty, and parasitic creature in this passage—"Wanfukkit funling that Natour maid ane yrle" (miserably-fucked foundling that Nature made a dwarf)—recalls Montgomery's identification of Polwart as "wanshapen" (poorly made) and decries that no human being on earth could have created him. While Kennedy's insults against Dunbar have figuratively turned him from elf to parasite, this line provides reason for his degeneracy: Nature made him this way.

<sup>90</sup> See the entries for "fley" and "fle" in the *Dictionary of Scots*.

<sup>91</sup> See the entry for "irregular, adj. and n." in the *Dictionary of Scots*.

<sup>92</sup> See the entry for "scaitbird n." in the *Dictionary of the Scots*.

<sup>93</sup> See the entry for *skíta* in Cleasby-Vigfusson, 551. In *Sturlunga saga* III.253, the use of the verb *skíta* describes the fouling of bird-nests: "þeir fuglar er í sitt hreiðr skíta" (those that foul their own nest).

<sup>94</sup> See the entry for "skamelar, n." in the *Dictionary of Scots*.

*Flytings* also contain explicitly racialized language to describe animal features, behaviours, and non-humanness. The final two stanzas of Dunbar's attack describe Kennedy as a low-born person "lyk Mahoun" who must ready himself for obedience:

Loun lyk Mahoun, be boun me till obey,  
Theif, or in greif mischeif sall thee betyd.  
Cry grace, tykis-face, or I thee chece and fley,  
Oule, rare and yowle, I sall defowll thy pryd,  
Peilit gled, baith fed and bred of bichis syd  
And lyk ane tyk, purspyk, quhat man settis by thee!  
Forflittin, countbittin, beschittin, barkit hyd,  
Clym ledder, fyle tedder, foule edder, I defy thee! (233–40)

(Wretch like Mohammed, be ready to obey me,  
Thief, or in grief mischief shall befall you.  
Cry for grace, dog-face, or I will chase and scare you,  
Owl, roaring and yowling, I will defile your pride,  
Stripped of joy, both fed and bred of a bitch's side,  
And like a mongrel, purse-pick, what man sits by you!  
Severely scolded, cunt-bitten, shit-covered, tanned-hide,  
Gallows-climber, noose-defiler, foul adder, I defy you!)

Dunbar's threats centre around Kennedy's presumed animal obedience. Kennedy is identified as having a "tykis-face," the face of a "an ill-bred dog, a mongrel, or cur."<sup>95</sup> This condemnation of breed is racially intensified: Dunbar suggests here that Kennedy is cross-bred, and he addresses this cross-breeding once more when he says that Kennedy is "fed and bred of bichis syd." In his attempt to render Kennedy subhuman, Dunbar calls him an "oule" and says that he will be the one who defiles him (or at least his pride). This is, of course, extended in his triple insult that Kennedy is "forflittin, countbittin, bishcittin"—a triptych that suggests cowardice, sexual violence, and filth. While the insults begin with defamatory language, the stanza ends with imagined violence, "clym ledder" (gallows-climber).

In Kennedy's cacophonous final response, he extends a catalogue of traitorous figures to the Christian faith to Dunbar's character. In addition to calling him "Judas" (506, 524), "cankrit Caym" (513), and "Nero thy nevow" (529), Kennedy grounds his hate for Dunbar through racial attributions:

Conspiratour, cursit cocatrice, hell caa,  
Turk trumpour, traitour, tyran intemperate,  
Thou irefull attircop, Pilate *apostata*,  
Judas, Jow, juglour, Lollard laureate,  
Sarazene, Symonyte provit, pagane pronunciate,  
Machomete, manesuorne, bugrist abhominabile,  
Devoll, dampnit dog, sodomyte insatiable,  
With Gog and Magog grete glorificate. (521–28)

(Conspirator, cursed cockatrice, hellish jackdaw,  
Turkish deceiver, traitor, intemperate tyrant,  
You furious spider, Pilate apostate,

<sup>95</sup> See the entry for "tyk(e, n." in the *Dictionary of Scots*.

Judas, Jew, illusionist, Lollard laureate,  
 Saracen, verified Simonite, pronounced pagan,  
 Mohammed, perjurer, abominable bugger,  
 Devil, damned dog, insatiable sodomite,  
 Greatly glorified with Gog and Magog.)

Dunbar's treachery is linked here to Kennedy's description of a non-Christian, non-Western person, who takes the composite form of various religious, literary, historical, sexual, and animalized forms. Our understanding of Dunbar's traitorous qualities is informed by the racialized slander that identifies Dunbar as heretical, anti-Christian, and non-human. In fact, as Denis McKay writes, "in 1506, Sir Thomas Forsyth, chaplain, hired Cuthbert Simson, notary public, to protest that he had been called 'ane verray erratik and a Jow'."<sup>96</sup> In a long list of abuse, Dunbar also identifies Kennedy with "mauch mutton" (241), and he quickly moves to calling him a "her-retyk" and a "dirtin dok," a dirty arsehole (247–48). As Kruger has made clear of the associations between Jews, filth, and queerness, "religious difference—schism, 'heresy,' the 'infidelities' of Islam and Judaism—and (quasi-) racial or ethnic difference are often associated with sexual 'crimes': adultery, rape, promiscuity, incest, sodomy, bestiality."<sup>97</sup> In this way, animal-heretical-sodomitical-scatological language stacks to vituperate the opponent.

McKay suggests that identifications of "heretics" were particularly opprobrious in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scotland,<sup>98</sup> and Kennedy's racialized identifications of "Turk," "Jow," "Sarazene," "Machomete," "Devill," "apostata," and "Gog and Magog" explicitly mark Dunbar by his seeming apostasy of Christian faith. Montgomery also aligns the "false howlat" (273) with "Mahowne" when he exclaims, "Receiue this howlat off our hands, / In name of Mahowne" (428–29). Here we can see species division through the explicit overlap between animality and raciality employed by the speaker of the *flyting* in order to de-animate his opponent. The alignment of Mohammed in particular with animals shows that the animating force throughout these texts—*The Owl and the Nightingale* and the Scots *flytings*—is a Christian hegemony that divides species based on what is non-Christian. As Kruger notes, "The means for constructing sexual difference and those for defining religious, (quasi-)racial otherness are thus often parallel and intertwined."<sup>99</sup> These racialized identifications take on new form, and new violence, when paired alongside explicitly sexualized content: "intemperate," "bugrist abhominablile," "dampnit dog," and "sodomite insatiable."<sup>100</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Denis McKay, "Parish Life in Scotland, 1500–1560," in *Essays on the Scottish Reformation 1513–1625*, ed. David McRoberts (Glasgow: Burns, 1962), 85–115 at 113; and Bawcutt, "The Art of Flyting," 8.

<sup>97</sup> Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*, 89.

<sup>98</sup> McKay, "Parish Life in Scotland, 1500–1560," 113.

<sup>99</sup> Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*, 88.

<sup>100</sup> See also "sodomyt syphareit fra sanctis celestiall" (253 in the same poem). There is reason to extend the sexualized slur to the inclusion of "Lollard," as Carolyn Dinshaw has shown in

Animals symbolically bear the burden of human social problems. For medieval and modern audiences alike, the racialized, sexualized, and gendered dimensions of animals have been used to explain the habits and customs of marginalized bodies, which are presumed to be non-human or behave in ways antithetical to humanness. As David Clark reminds us, “it is one of the worst imaginable Norse insults to call a man a female animal”<sup>101</sup>; the antithesis of “male” and “human” is “female” and “animal.” In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, both birds are usually understood as female based on pronoun referents. In fact, the Middle English Dictionary entry for the pronoun *he* is often construed as *ho*, *heo*, and *hie* in Early Middle English, retains the semantic range of “it, she, he,” and can be “used of animals of male or unspecified sex.”<sup>102</sup> The pronoun *he* for grammatically feminine subjects is distinguishable from *he* for grammatically masculine subjects in Early Middle English only when we proscribe readings of gender onto texts wherein the orthographic range—*he*, *heo*, *ho*, *hie*, *hue*, *hy*, among other variants—encompasses male, female, and non-gendered usage. While the two disputants are coded as both female and animal, the ambiguity of species and gender within the poem is malleable. It is likely that the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale* frames the debate between two female animals precisely to call attention to the abusive language exchanged between them. That is, because they are female *and* animal, the birds are already templates for the slander they target at each other—but also for the slander that the poet writes onto their malleable bodies.

The tension between human and animal, animate and inanimate, as well as male and female, is overtly present in *flytings*. For Old Norse *flytings*, often called *senna*, the fuel that makes a *flyting* burn is *níð*, an insult of non-normative behaviour that is perceived to impact the honour of one’s kin, genealogy, and familial bonds. Sexually charged and maximally insulting, *níð* is perhaps the most damning slander in a verbal contest. The word *níð* carries the meaning of libel or insult, and has a particular legal weight as a lampoon.<sup>103</sup> In medieval Scandinavian law one can commit *níð* by accusing someone of *ergi* “perversion,” and one can be *níð*, as in the term *níðingr*, “a nothing, villain, traitor, coward,” a word of great legal consequence as it verbally verifies accusations of sexual difference, rendering the *níðingr* person socially outcast.<sup>104</sup>

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her chapter “It Takes One to Know One: Lollards, Sodomites, and Their Accusers,” in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 55–99.

**101** For more on this point, see David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52, and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), 16.

**102** See the entries for *he* (pron. 1) and *he* (pron. 2) in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

**103** See the entries for *níð* and *níðingr* in Cleasby-Vigfusson, 455 and 456.

**104** Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, University College London (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974), 4; and Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldson, “The *Níðingr* and the Wolf,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011): 171–96 at 171.

In his study of the *flyting* tradition in medieval Scandinavia, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen writes that “the purpose of *níð* is to terminate a period of peace or accentuate a breach of the peace and isolate an opponent from society by declaring that he is unworthy to be a member.”<sup>105</sup> Insult and offence coalesce in the term *níð*, an act “so heinous that it justifies the recipient in killing his taunter.”<sup>106</sup> Yet since accusations of *níð* also threaten the masculinity of the accused, violence is the socially prudent method of retribution: the victim of the accusation *should* use violence to fight back in order to reclaim his masculinity.<sup>107</sup> An act of *níð* then provokes a closed circuit of violence: once an individual is accused of socially proscribed non-normative sexual behaviour, the accused may use legal means to outlaw the slanderer or take up blood revenge to reset the allegation. The slanderer commits *níð* by saying foul things, but if the charge is deemed valid, the accused is considered to be *níðingr* and must prove he is not.

For all *níð* crimes in medieval Scandinavia—murder, housebreaking, stripping a dead man on the battlefield, defamation—blood-revenge or outlawry were the methods of punishment. These crimes were considered *níð* because they violated the honour of both the victim and the perpetrator. The Old Norwegian *Gulathing Law* (ca. 1150) warrants blood-revenge or outlawry in three specific situations of defamation.<sup>108</sup> The “Law of Personal Rights” of the *Gulathing* states:

Orð ero þau er fullrettis orð heita. þat er eitt ef maðr kveðr at karlmanne oðrom. at hann have barn boret. þat er annat. ef maðr kveðr hann væra sannsorðenn. þat er hit þriðia. ef hann iamnar hanom við meri. æða kallar hann grey. æða portkono. æða iamnar hanom við berende eitthvert. þa scal hann böta hanom fullum rette firi. þar ma han oc viga um. at utlogum þeim manne i gegn þeim orðom er nu hevi ec talt. ef hann skirskotar undir vatta.<sup>109</sup>

(These are the kinds of insulting remarks that call for full atonement. The first is when a man says of another man that he has given birth to a child. The second is when he says that the man has been used as a woman. The third is when he likens him to a mare or calls him a slut or a whore or likens him to any kind of female beast. For these remarks he shall pay the man a full atonement; but the man may also seek satisfaction in blood and outlawry for the sayings that I have now enumerated.)<sup>110</sup>

**105** Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 32.

**106** Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, 52.

**107** A challenge to battle may incorporate a *holmgang*, a traditional duel between two individuals of equal rank, while blood revenge suggests feud. See Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 32.

**108** *The Earliest Norwegian Laws: Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*, ed. Laurence Marcellus Larson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 26.

**109** *Gamle Norske Lover eldre enn 1263*, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, vol. 1 (Christiania, 1846), 57.

**110** *The Earliest Norwegian Laws*, 143, no. 196.

These three accusations of *níð* occur between male participants citing acts deemed socially “unnatural”: male reproduction, being *sannsorðenn*,<sup>111</sup> and likening a man to a female beast. Accusations of *níð* were “legally the strongest term of abuse,” and the perceived insult of *níð* points to the potential for defamation, not as sexually deviant per se, but rather through fear of reproductive origins that undermine the patriarchal value of a genealogical social order. In all three of these cases, the victim may bring the case to court and the perpetrator may pay the victim full atonement, or the victim may also seek satisfaction through blood.

Insults of *níð* cast between individuals are typically understood as a sabotage of masculinity while bolstering the dominance of the speaker dishing out the slander. Yet slanders of *níð* are not only—or even primarily—about masculinity, but rather about the “origin” of kin. As in the above passage, accusations of *níð* are coded in overtly reproductive language and demean an individual’s situation of birth; the question whether the insulted party is of a reputable “kind” rather than assume personal sexual depravity. The Old Norse eddic poem *Lokasenna*, (Loki’s *flyting*) provides an instance of banter where Loki accuses the gods of sexual perversity. Loki states to Freyja,

Pegi þú, Freyja,  
þú ert fordæða  
ok meini blandin mjök,  
síz þik at bræðr þínum  
stóðu blíð regin  
ok myndir þú þá, Freyja, frata.<sup>112</sup>

(Shut up, Freyja,  
you are a sorceress  
and of an extremely mixed indignity,  
since with your brother  
the friendly gods caught you,  
and then you farted, Freyja.)

**111** Medieval Scandinavia had a robust legal apparatus for managing *níð* related accusations. In the twelfth-century Icelandic laws known as *Grágás* (Grey Goose) there are three words associated with *níð* acts, all of which suggest socially deemed non-normative sexual activity: *ragr*, *stroðinn/sorðinn*—see *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (1852; repr. Odense: Universitetsforlag, 1974), 392. Geir T. Zöega’s *Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Mineola: Dover, 2004), glosses the verb *serða*, and its metathesized form *streða*, “to have sexual intercourse especially with a male.” The other term *ragr*, a metathesized form of *argr*, is more frequent in saga literature but also has a wider range of meaning: it suggests cowardice and effeminacy. According to Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 18, “the man who is *argr* is willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations.” In *Grágás*, to use the participle form of *stroðinn/sorðinn*, *serða/streða*, suggests that an individual has been the object of a presumed non-normative sexual act. The *Gulathing* law suggests that full compensation must be paid “if a man says of another that he is *sannsorðinn*” (*The Earliest Norwegian Laws*, 143, no. 196). The word *sannsorðinn* indicates the non-normative sexual act with the added intensifier *sann-*, which denotes proof of the act. That a *senna* is generally translated as a “quarrel,” but is still related to the Old Norse word *sann* (truth), aligns the *senna* genre and its close relative the *flyting* with this legal tradition.

**112** *Lokasenna*, in *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-Edda)*: *Fyrri Hluti*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri: Björnssonar, 1954), stanza 32. The translation is my own.

Loki accuses Freyja of sorcery because of her sexual perversity. The past participle *blandin* (mixed) is from the verb *blanda*, “to mix together” (from which we get the Modern English “blend”), but the verb has a secondary valence of mixing by way of intercourse, as in “mixing two fluids together.”<sup>113</sup> Loki’s accusation that Freyja is of “mixed indignity” not only assumes that she has a perverse origin but also that she continues the behaviour by committing incest with her brother. Although Freyja is mainly accused of lechery, her mixed status implies a contamination of fluids and bodily expulsions: once caught in the act, she “frata” (farted). Sørensen reads this passage as equivocating sorcery and sexual perversion. But what is particularly crucial here is not simply the scatological reference but especially its association with Freyja’s “meini blandin mjök” (extremely mixed indignity)<sup>114</sup>—Loki is linking Freyja’s toxicity with her origin, her kind. Similarly, in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, composed sometime between 1270 and 1290, Njál and his sons are called “taðskegglingar” (dung-beards) because they must cover their face in manure to grow facial hair.<sup>115</sup> In the saga, and medieval Icelandic society more broadly, the Njálssons lack of facial hair presumes effeminacy because they cannot grow beards. Like the Owl’s dismissal from the avian community in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the Njálssons are rejected from a cisnormative community of men because of a perceived incongruence of natural behaviour and embodiment. The accusation that they must smear *tað* (shit) on their faces is a comment not merely on their supposed effeminacy, but, more importantly, on their family or “species” classification—their questionable sexuality and gender expression—as dishonourable in a larger Icelandic society.

Using scatological references to defame an individual’s kin status extends to *The Owl and the Nightingale* similarly. The Nightingale frames one of her stories of the Owl with the proverb “Dahet habbe þat ilke best / Pat fuleþ his owe nest” (May the animal that fouls his own nest be cursed) (99–100). She underscores the Owl’s filth by kin-contamination when she relays that the Owl once crept into a falcon’s nest and laid her own “föle” (foul) egg among the falcon’s eggs (104). When the eggs hatched and the fledglings were eating together, the falcon noticed that the nest was “ifuled” (polluted) (110) on one side, covered in excrement. Furious, the falcon asked his fledglings who defiled them in their nest, at which point they immediately condemn their owl-brother:

**113** See the entry for “blanda” in Zöega, *Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 57, and in Cleasby-Vigfusson, 67.

**114** The phrase “meini blandin mjök” is common in Old Norse poetry and is always aligned with *níð* crimes. See Albert Morey Sturtevant, “A Study in the Old Norse Word *mein*,” *Publications of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study* 1, no. 5 (1914): 221–50.

**115** See kapituli (chapter) forty-four in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954): 111–15 at 113: “‘Það mun ek til finna, sem satt er,’ segir Hallgerður, ‘er hann ók eggí í skegg sér, at hann væri sem aðrir karlmenn, og kǫllum hann nú karl hinn skegglaus, en sonu hans taðskegglinga, og kveð þú um nǫkkuð, Sigmundur, ok lát oss njóta þess, er þú ert skáld.’” (“I will only bring forward what is true,” says Hallgerð, “he didn’t cart dung to his beard so that he may be like other men, let us call him ‘the beardless carl,’ but his sons we will call ‘dung-beardlings’; and now make up a poem about them, Sigmund, and let us get some benefit of you being a poet”). My thanks to Bob Hasenfratz for help with this passage.

Po quap þat on & quad þat oþer:  
 'Twis, hit was ure o3e broþer—  
 Þe 3ond þat haued þat grete heued.  
 Wai þat he nis þarof bireued.  
 Worp hit ut mid þe alre wurste  
 þat his necke him toberste!' (177–22)

(One spoke and then the other spoke:  
 "Indeed, it was our own brother—  
 The one over there that has that enormous head.  
 Pity if he is not deprived of it.  
 Throw it out with all the worst stuff  
 So that he breaks his neck!")

It is the family of affinity, the baby falcons, who condemn their owl-brother. The word "3ond" underlines the unlikeness of the baby owl, figuratively distancing the owlet from the kin-group (recall Chen's "*this group* is affiliated with *these properties*"<sup>116</sup>). Once the fledglings publicly accuse the owlet of fouling the nest, they change the owl's pronouns from "he" to "hit": throw "hit" out with all the worst stuff. By associating the owlet with the "wurstē," a superlative adjective meaning the most evil, wicked, reprehensible, or noxious, the fledglings liken the owlet to the waste that they condemn the owlet for creating in the first place.<sup>117</sup> According to the Nightingale, the falcon "nom þat fule brid" (seized that foul bird) and administered punishment in the same terms (124): "& warp hit of þan wilde bowe, / Þar pie & crowe hit todrowe" (And threw it off the wild bough, where the magpies and crows dismembered it) (125–26). In the first significant moment of violence in the poem, a dirty and different owlet is ejected and quartered by other birds.<sup>118</sup>

This type of interspecies group violence against the owl is commonplace in medieval bestiaries and other visual media of the bird. Miyazaki refers to this imagery as the "mobbing theme," where an owl is depicted central to and sometimes seemingly unaware of the attack of smaller birds.<sup>119</sup> The depiction of the mobbed owlet in *The Owl and the Nightingale* is a grotesque literary example of such interspecies violence. To return to the opening epigraph of this essay, the Nightingale, speaking for the entire community of birds, bemoans that the Owl preys on "smale fuzele" and claims that, because of her own predatory nature, the Owl is the target of violence:

Ich wot þat þu art unmilde  
 Wiþ hom þat ne muze from þe schilde,  
 & þu tukest wroþe & vuele  
 Whar þu miȝt over smale fuzele.

<sup>116</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 127.

<sup>117</sup> See the entry for "werst(e)," in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

<sup>118</sup> Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 99–100, suggests two analogues for this fable: Marie de France's *De l'ostur e del huan* and Nicolas Bozon's *Contes*. While both tell of a dirty owlet defecating in the nest of a hawk, however, neither ends with a violent death of the owlet.

<sup>119</sup> Miyazaki, "Misericord Owls and Medieval Anti-Semitism," 30–31. See also Warren's discussion of the mobbing theme in *Birds in Medieval English Poetry*, 136–37.

Vorþi þu art loþ al fuel kunne,  
 & alle ho þe driueþ honne,  
 & þe bischricheþ & bigredet,  
 & wel narwe þe biledet;  
 & ek forþe þe sulue mose  
 Hire þonkes wolde þe totose! (61–70)

(I know that you are merciless  
 to those who might be unable to shield themselves from you,  
 and you cruelly and maliciously abuse  
 small birds whenever you might.  
 Therefore, you are hateful to all bird-kind;  
 and they all drive you away,  
 and they shriek and cry,  
 and they very bitterly mistreat you;  
 and even the tit-mouse  
 herself would dismember you!)

The Owl's association with the torturing of "smale fuzele" can be read as an allusion to the antisemitic ritual murder libel which purported that Jewish men targeted, sometimes circumcised, and murdered young, virginal Christian boys.<sup>120</sup> According to the Nightingale, the Owl's threatening presence and acts of torture against small birds make her a target of violence by all bird-kind. When other birds drive the Owl out, furthermore, she is no longer avian—merely a "fule" creature. The Owl, too, shows awareness that she is a target of mob violence and hate. She explains to the Nightingale that she is true to her kind, "vor rihte cunde" (276), which is why she is hated by other birds. Their hate is registered through their speech, she says: the small birds speak with rants, "mid chaterne" (284), and with shit-talk, "mid schitworde" (286). Instead of employing the same abuse that the small birds use against her, however, the Owl chooses to exile herself from the avian community—"Forþi ich wende from hom wide" (For this reason I travel far from home) (288). As Michael J. Warren has suggested, the frequency with which the violent practices of species mobbing occur throughout the poem legitimizes it.<sup>121</sup> The mobbing image culminates at the end of the poem when the Nightingale assembles other birds of various species and sizes, "fuheles boþe grete & smale" (1660), to engage the Owl in warfare.

Yet it is not enough to conclude with the simple fact that bird-kind participates in violent mobbing in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, for the Nightingale sings not only of the avian community's hatred of the Owl but of human hatred as well:

Vor children, gromes, heme & hine,  
 Hi þencheþ alle of þire pine.  
 3if hi muze iso þe sitte,

<sup>120</sup> See Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, chap. 4; Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 81–96; Steven F. Kruger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?" in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Routledge, 1997), 21–41; and Lavezzo, *The Accommodated Jew*, chap. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Warren, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry*, 136.

Stones hi dop in hore slitte  
 An þe totorued & toheneþ,  
 An þine fule bon tosheneþ. (1115–20)

(For children, small boys, villagers and servants,  
 they all think of doing you harm.  
 If they can see you sitting,  
 they put stones into their pockets  
 and they pelt and injure you,  
 and shatter your *foul* bones.

In the Nightingale's continued description of the Owl's mutilation, she explains that humans hang the Owl on a stick and have her act as a scarecrow, watching over the fields. Here, the bodily violence to the Owl is not only performed between different species of bird-kind but also between human and animal species.<sup>122</sup> Warren writes that the image of mobbing in *The Owl and the Nightingale* is "a vindication of human hatred towards owls by locating this response as a 'natural' phenomenon in the nonhuman environment."<sup>123</sup> If the Owl's presence is meant to exemplify the body of a Jew, the description of human violence against the Owl also authenticates such racial violence through the appeal to nature.

Chen's formulation of the "animal that hides in animacy" is inseparable from "sex, race, class, and dirt."<sup>124</sup> In the texts discussed above, the species divide occurs through condemning and censuring birth origin, racial ambiguity, and potential contamination. While *flyting* maintained an elevated position as a comedic literary genre, it also acted as a place to publish and authenticate hateful language and imagery. In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, I have argued, the racial and sexual aggression of *flyting* is reproduced verbally. Both the Owl and the Nightingale foreground excremental discourse when insulting the other's "kind," and their rhetoric is a way to control and punish. Injurious speech paradoxically relies upon animacy to objectify and dehumanize its recipient. Animacy as a linguistic operation is bound within systems of race, animality, and sexuality. For medieval debate genres that are grounded in racial and sexual disparagement, the mechanics of hateful speech are organized through species division. The displacement of racial and sexual questions onto animals is motivated by obscuring the line between animate and inanimate. In this way, *The Owl and the Nightingale* and the wider *flyting* genre use the textual apparatus of language spoken through imagined animal-like bodies to render human recipients inanimate.

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**122** Recall Enders, "Homicidal Pigs and the Antisemitic Imagination," 203, on the corporal punishment of pigs dressed in human clothing and hanged, evocative of Jewish punishment: "why were the ordeals endured by pigs so terrifyingly reminiscent—and prescient—of those endured by Jews?"

**123** Warren, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry*, 137.

**124** Chen, *Animacies*, 11.

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**Abstract:** Despite its popularity among Early Middle English scholars and scholars of medieval debate literature, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is relatively inconspicuous in scholarship on medieval race and sexuality. When read alongside later medieval *flytings*, poetic exchanges of slander focused on the body and its proclivities, the injurious speech in *The Owl and the Nightingale* operates through racialized and sexualized species division. This article draws on animacy theory and medieval race theory to explore the symbol of the owl-as-Jew in the poem and demonstrates how sexual and racial insult against human beings is filtered through the bodies of animals.

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**Keywords:** *The Owl and the Nightingale*, medieval antisemitism, medieval race, animacy, contamination, species