

*Authority, Identity, and 'the Idea of the Vernacular' in The Owl and the Nightingale*¹

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It is now accepted that the 'triumph of English' as a literary language in the fourteenth century was not a rapid process, much less an inevitable one, and recent scholarship has become increasingly ready to view the achievements of even our greatest vernacular champion in Chaucer as part of much larger developments. Contributors to the groundbreaking anthology *The Idea of the Vernacular*, for example, take this principle as the starting point for their bringing together of material composed by English writers between 1280 and 1520 which they see as exhibiting the earliest roots of a vernacular self-consciousness, and 'whose accounts of what it is to write in Middle English are not Chaucer-centered'.² This more contextual view of the progression of English towards its 'triumph' in the fourteenth century has made important ground in recent years, and yet, despite these new perspectives, our treatment of the narrative of a developing vernacular self-consciousness among early English writers is still characterised by what Treharne calls 'a persistent scholarly focus on named authors and identifiable movements'.³ Those vernacular texts produced during the murky years of the twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries occupy an uncertain place within this story of 'identifiable movements', tending to fall outside the purview of much scholarship concerned with the development of English vernacular writing. *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c.1200) is one such text.⁴ This poem has resisted easy definition because our knowledge of its immediate literary context is so patchy. Indeed, one could say that it has no immediate literary context to speak of, at least not in the English language of the period, making its appearance in the field of a vernacular writing at the turn of the thirteenth century seem like something of a lightning bolt

¹ In my choice of title I have been inspired by the highly influential volume *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280 – 1520*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and others (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999). Since its appearance fifteen years ago this has become the touchstone for any exploration of the various forms of vernacular self-consciousness encountered in English writing from the thirteenth century onwards.

² *The Idea of the Vernacular*, Introduction, xvi.

³ Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English 1020 -1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

⁴ All references are to Neil Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

from a clear sky. It has been variously described as 'miraculous',⁵ 'mysterious', and 'unaccountable',⁶ and it is perhaps because of these awkward qualities, as well as its anonymous authorship, that it is afforded but a single, brief nod in *The Idea of the Vernacular*.⁷ However I shall argue that *The Owl and the Nightingale* (henceforth O&N) can, in many ways, be viewed as one of the earliest examples we possess of an English poem which exhibits a true sense of its own identity and status as a vernacular production *vis-à-vis* the Latin tradition from which it sprang: in short, that this poem deserves a place at the beginning of any narrative treatment of the growth of an 'idea of the vernacular' amongst post-conquest English writers.

The student approaching O&N for the first time is presented with a daunting range of differing opinions regarding its date, authorship, provenance, and purpose. These questions, and particularly those concerned with unpicking the poem's possible allegorical significances, have tended to dominate critical approaches until now. Yet Holsinger recently drew attention to the 'overlooked nationalistic dimensions' of O&N, and to the important place it occupies in the literary history of an age where the English vernacular was increasingly exploring its purview in the areas of literature, law, liturgy, and many other public spheres.⁸ I should like to take Holsinger's comments as the starting point for a reading of O&N as an early expression of vernacular self-consciousness in which we see the emergence of a distinctively 'English' literary voice. However, one may well question the relevance of such a reading to a poem which mentions 'engelonde' only once in its 1794 lines of verse (O&N, 749), and which owes the entirety of its form and premise to the Latin tradition of debate poetry. If O&N is indeed an 'English' poem, it is not so in the same sense as other works produced around the same time, and for which critics have made the same claim. This is clear from its very appearance on the manuscript leaf: composed in the French octosyllables of polite literature, the poem is presented in short lines and double columns with punctuated line endings; in the J-version the text is furnished with a Latin *incipit*, with each line's initial letter set off from the others; the C-version is written in a professional gothic hand, one more usual for works of learned Latin tradition than for vernacular productions. In these visual respects, it has been remarked that O&N bears more resemblance to a European poem than to an English one, which were generally inscribed in continuous prose, and announces what Hahn called 'a vernacularity more continental than insular'.⁹ This extends beyond the poem's appearance on the page and to its substance as a piece of literature: if we are to view O&N as an 'English' work, we must appreciate that it does not share in the

⁵ W. P. Ker, *Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 134.

⁶ J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature* ed. by Douglas Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1.

⁷ Neil Watson, 'The Politics of Middle English Writing', in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 331–53 (332).

⁸ Bruce Holsinger, 'Vernacular Legality: The English Jurisdictions of *The Owl and the Nightingale*', in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. by Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 154–84 (156).

⁹ Thomas Hahn, 'Early Middle English', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999), 61–91 (33).

same English heritage as other early texts like the *Brut* or *Katherine Group*, which can be said to preserve at least some pre-conquest literary traditions, but originated in a *milieu* which drew its inspiration from distinctly continental impetuses. It is the Medieval Latin tradition of debate poetry, which had grown in popularity at the courts of the Carolingians during the ninth century, that stands as its immediate literary backdrop. 'And yet', says Hahn, 'this is an English poem'.¹⁰ Though in style and genre O&N can scarcely be argued to represent any genuine continuity between the literature of pre- and post-conquest England, we shall see that the poem expresses what we might call a form of reactionary Englishness, for it consciously defines itself against the Latinate tradition which gave it life. To appreciate these more nationalistic aspects of O&N, we must first explore something of the literary, social, and educational contexts of the Latin tradition from which the poem sprang.

The Medieval Latin debate poems undoubtedly trace their origins to the classroom: in their representation of a *conflictus* between two opposing parties, the attention they pay to the mechanics of scholarly argument, and their general insistence on resolution, they appear to have been designed in order to train beginning students in the arts of dialectic and debate. The late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a virtual domination of the traditional liberal arts by these disciplines, and by the thirteenth century the formal *conflictus* had become the staple of university education in Europe. Students were instructed through disputation, examined through disputation and, upon graduation, began their statutory two years of teaching by presiding over a forty-day flood of disputations.¹¹ Their study of dialectic was essentially based on the *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations* of Aristotle, which contained instruction on how to detect logical fallacies and construct arguments, exhibiting a strict, almost myopic attention to the *conduct* of debate. Little is said of the disputant's obligation to the truth, but only of the formal and rhetorical methods by which he might best his opponent. Within this educational culture of the *conflictus*, the vernacular languages initially had no place: all formal disputation was carried out in Latin, and in the context of their use as educational exercises it is little wonder why the Latin debate poems outnumber their more literary vernacular counterparts so vastly (the body-and-soul debate known as the *Visio Philiberti*, for example, survives in at least 136 different manuscripts). It is hard to believe that any educated person during this period could have been ignorant of them, and the poet of O&N certainly was not.¹² Time and again he exhibits his familiarity with many of the stock dichotomies of the Latin *conflictus*; the alignment of the two disputants with the seasons at O&N, 473-540, for example, draws on the same traditions as the Latin dialogues between Winter and Summer, and the general preoccupation of the contestants with determining who is the more useful to mankind also recalls similar preoccupations of the disputants in the famous Latin debate poem *Conflictus Ovis et*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹ Thomas Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 44-46.

¹² Cartledge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xxxi.

Lini.¹³

Over time, these Latin debates developed into more than simple schoolroom exercises and began to constitute their own distinct literary genre. Although clearly still the work of learned writers, it seems that some were intended to amuse as much as to instruct, and many can be said to represent the reaction from, or the parody of, the sober pursuits of the schoolroom.¹⁴ In many such debate poems, the egos of the disputants become more important than their beliefs and, in their light-hearted depiction of such bad debaters, these more subversive debate poems point to what was probably a reality of academic life then as it is now – that, in the context of an educational system dominated by the adversarial principles of the formal *conflictus*, the clash of scholarly personalities could often become more prominent than the clash of ideas.¹⁵ Hume's interpretation of O&N along these lines, and her view of the poem as a 'burlesque-satire upon human contentiousness' opened a new and fruitful phase of the poem's critical reception, much of which is relevant to our discussion here.¹⁶ Since Hume's proposal, scholarship has tended to move away from its original attempts to read the poem as an allegory and increasingly towards an approach which views O&N as 'a self-conscious commentary upon its own substance – that is, contentious discourse'.¹⁷ Scholarly attempts to allocate a 'winner' for the debate, in particular, have now fallen out of fashion. Indeed, the more one reads over the poem, the more one realizes that its argument really starts nowhere and ends nowhere:

An aiþer azen oþer sval,
& let þat vole mod ut al;
& eiþer seide of oþeres custe
þat alre worste þat hi wuste. (O&N, 7-10)

(And each of them swelled up against the other and vented all her malicious feelings, saying the very worst thing they could about their antagonist's character.)

From the outset, we are in no doubt that we are being presented with an *argumentum ad hominem* – or rather, *ad avem* – and that our disputants are less concerned with arguing any specific point than with attacking the other's 'custe' (character). The birds make nominal efforts to impose a structure upon their debate, but one gets the impression that this is done only so that they can better attack each other: the Nightingale may assert that they should proceed 'witute cheste & bute fizte' (without

¹³ Nicolas Jacobs, 'Conflictus Ovis et Lini: A Model for *The Owl and the Nightingale*?', *SELIM*, 4 (1994), 7-19 (11).

¹⁴ James H. Hanford, 'Classical Eclogue and Medieval Debate', *Romantic Review*, 2 (1911), 16-31 (20).

¹⁵ John W. Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991), xviii.

¹⁶ Kathryn Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale: The Poem and its Critics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 102.

¹⁷ Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xix.

bickering and quarrelling), with 'rizte segge' (decorum), and 'sckile' (skill) (O&N, 183-86), but neither party sticks to these rules for long. The birds show themselves to be spiteful, vindictive, and dishonest, frequently falling into what Atkins called 'passages of indiscriminate revilings'.¹⁸ This is clearly not an *ad hominem* attack arising from the heat of an otherwise civil debate, but an *ad hominem* attack which takes the formal *conflictus* as both its form and its excuse. The tit-for-tat nature of the birds' dispute is all part of its hilarity: having been accused of filthiness for allowing her chicks to defecate inside the nest at lines 91-138, the Owl flings the same accusation back at the Nightingale, pointing out that her own nest is built 'þar men worpeþ hore bihinde' (just where men stick out their behinds) (O&N, 596). She then accuses the Nightingale of eating 'fule wiztes' (filthy creatures) in the same manner as she herself was accused at lines 85-88. Their point-scoring exchange is not particularly edifying, but it is highly entertaining. Their pomposity, acrimoniousness, and illogic mark the birds out as fundamentally bad debaters; their dispute may range far and wide, touching on some of the greatest controversies of the day, but whether they are arguing about theology or adultery, their usefulness to man or the condition of their nests and scatological habits, we quickly notice that this is, as Hieatt said, a 'debate about nothing in particular which gets nowhere at a furious rate'.¹⁹

In many ways, the characters of the Owl and the Nightingale serve as realistic representations of the arbitrary and irrational ways in which people do actually argue and, to a large extent, their debate can be viewed as a light-hearted critique of the formal *conflictus* which was practised so obsessively in all aspects of medieval education, and in which a student's commitment to the 'truth' of any given debate was subsidiary to his ability to win an argument. O&N certainly seems to have been written by someone who had a particular concern with, and readiness to poke fun at, the arts of dialectic and debate as they were taught in medieval universities. This is conveyed by the narrator's comments on the Nightingale's thought process after her arguments have been successfully rebuffed by the Owl's speech at lines 549-658. Though she concedes to the soundness of the Owl's rhetorical defence and is now 'wel neȝ ut of rede' (almost completely at a loss what to say), she is obliged to press on with the dispute nonetheless:

Herto ho moste andswere uinde,
 Oþer mid alle bon bihinde;
 An hit is suþe strong to figte
 Aȝen soþ & aȝen rízt. (O&N, 665-68)

(She had to find an answer to this, or else be placed at a disadvantage in everything; and it's a pretty difficult thing

¹⁸ J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), liv.

¹⁹ Constance Hieatt, 'The Subject of the Mock-Debate Between the Owl and the Nightingale', *Studia Neophilologica*, 40 (1968), 155-60 (159).

to fight against what is truthful and correct.)

Cartlidge sees this, and the other frequent insights into the birds' thoughts as the argument develops, as a device used 'simply to demand attention for the poem by insisting on the delicacy of the situation and the rhetorical virtuosity with which the protagonists handle it'.²⁰ However I would argue that these allusions make perhaps the poem's fundamental point in their portrayal of the absurd, fixed adversity demanded by the process of the formal *conflictus* which often required its participants to argue 'aʒen soþ & aʒen riʒte' (against what is truthful and correct) in order to win an argument. This reading of O&N as a 'mock-debate' assumes an author with some experience of the university system of formal disputation and, in this context, I would suggest that the possibility of a student audience, perhaps even a student author, is not unthinkable. The deferral of judgement to the mysterious 'Maister Nichole of Guldeforde' certainly reflects the formal processes of the university *conflictus* where determination was reserved for the master alone, and whatever the relation of Nicholas to the poem (some have proposed him as its author), perhaps the most important point to draw from his appearance in the text is the obvious association it makes with university life by use of the title 'maister'. If we can indeed trace the origins of O&N to a university environment then, we must explain the strangest fact of its existence: that it is written in the English vernacular, and not in the institutional Latin of the classroom.

In attempting to discern the ultimate message of the poem's far-ranging debates, Stanley stated that if the poet 'had something fundamental to communicate on these subjects he would have written in Latin'.²¹ He takes the fact of its existence in the English vernacular as justification for viewing O&N as a fundamentally light-hearted and unserious piece. While I do not necessarily disagree with Stanley's assessment, I would suggest that although the poet may not have had any particularly serious points to make on the subjects which arise in his debate, there is the possibility that he did have something more 'fundamental' to say about the nature of debate itself. This was precisely something he could *not* say, at such length and with such cheek, in the Latin language of the institution he was currently engaged in laughing at. In many ways, the English vernacular was the essential vehicle for the O&N poet's parody of formal scholastic debate, the practice of which was synonymous with the Latin culture of the universities. This is not to say that Latin debate poems could not themselves contain satirical or burlesque elements. Jacobs, for example, points out that *Conflictus Ovis et Lini* shares something of our English poem's taste for 'gratuitous scatology', but O&N develops at such length and with such 'disconcerting enthusiasm' what is the subject of a veiled reference at lines 11-12 in the Latin piece as to make these elements stand out particularly strongly in our English poem.²² In contrast to the status of Latin and Anglo-Norman during this period, the use of the

²⁰ Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 64.

²¹ Gerald Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale* (London: Nelson, 1960), 25.

²² Jacobs, 'Conflictus Ovis et Lini', 15.

English vernacular seems often to have been marked by 'a certain crudity', and it was perhaps this aspect of the language which the poet of O&N found most suited to his purposes.²³ He parodies the ugliness and absurdity of the adversarial impulses lying behind the formal *conflictus* in a fluently colloquial, vernacular idiom which he uses to maintain an important linguistic distance from his satirical object. There are more elements of direct obscenity in O&N than in other Latin debates which we might call 'parodic', and which are generally more consciously learned and elaborately wordy in their humour.²⁴ By contrast, O&N's extended portrayal of the 'dirty side' of formal scholastic disputation – ending with the Owl's spiteful exclamation 'a tort ne zive ich for ow alle' (I don't give a turd for the lot of you) – is necessarily carried out in English. The use of the vernacular allows the poet of O&N to break the linguistic boundaries of the formal *conflictus* and laugh at it from the outside.

And yet, in his use of the English vernacular the poet of O&N achieves much more than simply to poke fun at the Latinate culture of formal debate which prevailed in medieval universities. As well as providing the perfect vehicle for his parody, the use of the English language also presented him with a perfect opportunity to experiment with the literary potentials of his native tongue *vis-à-vis* the Latin tradition. According to Evans, the growth of vernacular literatures in Europe during this period was often characterised by a readiness to demonstrate their ability 'to do anything Latin can do'.²⁵ I would argue that this impulse is certainly present in O&N. In a way, the very length of the dispute in O&N – far longer than in most Latin debate poems – conveys the poet's belief in the potential of English, for he takes obvious delight in showcasing it as a language of energetic debate in as many fields as possible. Holsinger has recently drawn attention to the way the poet partly revives, and partly invents, 'a heterogeneous and amalgamated legal lexicon' which he puts into the mouths of his disputants to show the technical capabilities of the vernacular as a medium for debate, and much has been said of aspects of the poem's use of Latinate rhetoric, particularly strong in passages such as lines 659-706.²⁶ As discussed above, the basic training in medieval schools was in the use of the language of dialectic, and the techniques learned there could be applied from Latin to the more difficult task of creating styles for writing in the vernacular. This is what Short referred to as 'the vernacularisation of learning' which was witnessed throughout Europe during the twelfth century, and I would argue that in many ways O&N can be seen as a part of this process.²⁷ However, what is perhaps more interesting than the ways in which O&N declares itself the 'English equal' to the Latin debate poem is the manner in which it asserts its *difference* from Latin tradition and, in doing so, defines itself as a piece of distinctly 'English' literature.

²³ Watson, 'The Politics of Middle English Writing', 332.

²⁴ Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xxxii.

²⁵ Ruth Evans, 'The Notion of Vernacular Theory', in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 314-31 (322).

²⁶ Holsinger, 'Vernacular Legality', 162.

²⁷ Ian Short, 'Patrons and Polyglots: French Literature in Twelfth-Century England', in *Anglo-Norman Studies 14: Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies, 1991*, ed. by Marjorie Chibnall (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992) 229-49 (231).

If the works of the Latin debate tradition are ‘consciously learned’, then in many ways O&N is consciously *unlearned*.²⁸ The poet's knowledge of the formal processes of debate, his legal, theological, and rhetorical wherewithal, and familiarity with the great academic questions of his day mark him out as an educated man, and yet this is all at odds with the seemingly uneducated mentality of his poem's protagonists. An integral element of the university *conflictus*, and of the debate poems concerned with portraying its processes, was the citing of a wide range of authorities in support of one's argument. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* – generally regarded as a close (if disappointing) English descendent to O&N – is the perfect example of a vernacular debate poem which closely follows the conventions of the Latin tradition in terms the citing of authority. Its disputants reference figures from classical, biblical, and literary sources, citing ‘Alisaundre þe king’, ‘Adam, oure furste man’, and ‘Saumsun þe stronge’ amongst others in support of their arguments.²⁹ Likewise the poet of the *Petit Plet*, a French debate which circulates alongside O&N in both manuscripts, has his disputants utilize proverbial material which they attribute to ‘Catun enseinne’, an archetypal figure of wisdom from the classical world.³⁰ Nowhere in O&N does either disputant make such explicit appeal to biblical, patristic, or classical authority, and this absence is indeed notable in an age which valued textual precedence so highly. The only authority which the birds cite is that of King Alfred, to whom were attributed the English collections of proverbial wisdom known as *The Proverbs of Alfred*. Though the *Proverbs* do not contain any particularly unique material, being drawn mainly from Old Testament sources and other collections such as Cato's *Distichs*, they can certainly be viewed as expressions of the ‘vernacularisation of learning’ which was seen during the twelfth century. This collection survives in four manuscripts, a relatively high number for the period, and their existence attests to a vigorous interest among contemporary English writers in translating classical and biblical wisdom into the vernacular. In doing so, they attributed that wisdom to the most learned and, more importantly, the most *English* figure they could find in their history: it is not Cato, Alexander, or Samson who imparts knowledge in the *Proverbs*, but King Alfred. Not only does Alfred function as a kind of ‘English Solomon’ in his capacity as a wise king, but also as an icon of national identity and vernacular learning.³¹ His reputation as a translator – indeed, as the leader of his own process of ‘vernacularisation’ in the ninth century – endured well beyond his lifetime, and would have been particularly obvious to university students. Patristic texts like the *Soliloquies* of Augustine and the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great formed an integral part of their study of dialectic and debate, and the lines of transmission of these works from classical to medieval dialogue are exceedingly clear, thanks in large part to the labours of King Alfred himself in translating them.³²

²⁸ Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xxxii.

²⁹ Conlee, *Middle English Debate Poetry*, 143.

³⁰ Brian S. Merrilees, ed., *Le Petit Plet*, ANTS 35 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 5.

³¹ Treharne, *Living Through Conquest*, 163.

³² Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry*, 101.

In his own capacity as a 'vernaculariser' then, it is little wonder that the poet of O&N chose King Alfred as the voice of authority for his poem. The first of the fourteen proverbs which the birds ascribe to him is particularly interesting when thinking about aspects of vernacular English identity in O&N:

A wis word, þe3 hit bo unclene,
Is fele manne a muþe imene,
For Alured king hit seide & wrot:
'He schunnet þat hine vul wot'. (O&N, 233-36)

(There's a wise saying that many people commonly repeat [even though it's indelicate], which is derived from the conversation and writings of King Alfred: whosoever's aware of their own foulness hides away.)

Cartlidge stated that 'it is not entirely clear why the Nightingale should think that the saying [...] is *unclene*'.³³ However, I suggest that we should read this allusion as an indication of O&N's consciousness of its own status as a vernacular production, and of the distinctiveness it asserts for itself by choosing to quote an English icon as its source of authority. Proverbial sayings in English may have been regarded as somewhat 'unclene' (indelicate), but in the context of O&N's vernacularisation of the Latin tradition of debate-poetry, we are told from the outset that the distinctly English authority of King Alfred will occupy a central place. There is perhaps even a certain nationalistic nostalgia evident in the Nightingale's reference at line 686 to the enduring influence of one of Alfred's sayings – 'an 3ut hit nis of horte islide' (one that has yet to slip from people's hearts). Although there is nothing intrinsically English about proverbial sayings in general, at times the poet even seems to use language suggestive of the pre-conquest tradition of Anglo-Saxon wisdom literature, telling 'euch mon' (every man) to place these sayings 'on horde' (in the hoard), using a phrase which harks back to that Old English concept of the 'wordhord' as the storehouse of orally-circulated wisdom (O&N, 1749).

In its strange lack of reference to any of the conventional authorities of Latin tradition, I believe Cartlidge hits the nail on the head in reminding us of the 'possibility that the poem's discourses were deliberately constructed precisely in order to seem as if they owed nothing directly to literary tradition'.³⁴ This is exactly the point, for in asserting its uniqueness, O&N asserts too a form of reactionary Englishness. The poem may be so thickly sown with proverbs and maxims that it can be viewed, in Hinckley's words, as a 'monument of gnomic literature', but it is important to note that whilst the language of this monument's inscription was English,

³³ Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xl.

much of its matter was drawn from Anglo-Norman and Latin sources.³⁵ And yet, these sources remain invisible in the text. Cartlidge argues that the poet's telling of the fable of the Owl and the Falcon, for example, follows the version of the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France so closely that it is hard to believe that he did not know her work, yet no indication of her influence is given.³⁶ Moreover, most of the sayings ascribed to Alfred cannot be verified in our surviving copies of the *Proverbs*, and it is probably the case that the poet was, in many instances, attempting to 'vernacularise' the wise sayings of Latin authors by simply attributing them to Alfred. The immediate source for the proverb at lines 945-50, for example, was probably the saying found in Cato's *Distichs* – 'impedit ira animum, ne possit cernere verum' (anger so clouds the mind that it cannot perceive the truth).³⁷ This consistent and pointed lack of reference to the non-English sources to which the poem is clearly indebted shows the relentless preoccupation of O&N with asserting its identity as a piece of *English* writing. Here we have the structure of the formal Latin *conflictus* stripped bare of all its otherwise Latinate features, with biblical, classical, and patristic authorities subordinated to, or transformed into, English ones.

It is for these reasons that we should view the poet of O&N as perhaps our earliest example of someone who truly appreciated what it meant to write in the vernacular. Compared to those other writers who composed in English at the turn of the thirteenth century, he seems truly unique. His decision to write in English was not purely practical in the same way as, say, the texts of the *Katherine Group*, which were designed for delivery to a mass audience simply unable to understand Latin. Neither was it in an attempt to perpetuate the remnants of an Old English literary tradition, as we see in the *Brut*. For the authors of these texts, the choice to write in the vernacular was far more natural than for the poet of O&N, who was working within the bounds of a fundamentally Latinate tradition. It is true that, to a large extent, English was the only language which could sustain his outrageous satire of that tradition, but his poem also stands as an early example of the methods by which an English poet could assert the potentials of his language as a sophisticated, creative medium alongside those of Anglo-Norman and Latin. In our lively poem of debate between Owl and Nightingale we witness the emergence of a fledgling English literary voice, heavily indebted to Latinate influence and yet eager to stand on its own two feet. It will take at least another century to reach its maturity, but we will ultimately hear its resonances in the work of Chaucer himself.

³⁵ Henry Hinckley, 'The Date, Author and Sources of *The Owl and the Nightingale*', *PMLA*, 44 (1929), 329-59 (343).

³⁶ Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, xxxiii.

³⁷ Arnold M. Duff, *Minor Latin Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 604.