

The Nightingale

The Owl and the Nightingale (ca. 1210)

a debate poem by an unknown author in Middle English. The narrator overhears a quarrel between a serious owl and a gay nightingale.



Owl and nightingale
(Illustrations from "De arte venandi cum avibus" Codex Ms. Pal. Lat. 1071, ca. 1260)

f233r1

Ich was in one sumere dale,
in one suthe diyhele hale,
iherde ich holde grete tale
an hule and one niyhtingale.

5

That plait was stif & starc & strong,
sum wile softe & lud among;
an aither ayhen other sval,
& let that [vue]le mod ut al.

& either seide of otheres custe
10

that alre-worste that hi wuste:
& hure & hure of othere[s] songe
hi holde plaiding suthe stronge.

It happened in the summery heart
Of a secret vale's most hidden part,
I heard an Owl and Nightingale
Disputing on a mighty scale;

5

Most keen and strenuous the debate,
Now gentle, now in furious spate.
And each against the other swelled,
Each her spleen and ire expelled,
Saying the worst of every feature

10

That she could mock in the other creature;
Contention was especially strong
When each abused the other's song.

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|------------|--------------------|
| strenuous | eifrig |
| spate | Flut |
| spleen | Rage, Zorn |
| ire | Wut |
| contention | Auseinandersetzung |

The Nightingale

Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare (1564-1616), English playwright

Capulet's orchard.

Enter Romeo and Juliet aloft, at the Window.

Jul. Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

Rom. It was the lark, the herald of the morn;
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder East.
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

(III, v)

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|-------------|--|
| lark | Lerche |
| pomegranate | Granatapfel (It represents fertility and blood, life and death) |
| Herald | Herald, Vorbote |
| streaks | Streifen |
| to lace | durchsetzen |
| severing | teilend, tremend |
| jocund | fröhlich, heiter |

The nightingale with its beautiful night song is the **bird of love**, for as long as it sings dark night shelters secret lovers from the eyes of those who would part them. In romantic stories and poetry there is often an association between love and death. The nightingale's link with lovers and the night makes it a perfect symbol of those who would die for love.

The Nightingale



Poets, bards, singers, and their works are occasionally referred to as “nightingales”. This bird represents the desire to sing, write, or speak beautifully. Eating its heart was once considered an aid to the acquisition of such skills.

Classical mythology offers a story to explain why this bird seems to cry “Itys! Itys!” Aedon, jealous of her sister-in-law’s many children, attempts to kill them, but accidentally ends up killing her own child, Itys. This being her only child, Aedon was overwhelmed with remorse and convinced Zeus to change her into a nightingale.

In medieval times, it was thought that this bird sang all night long with its breast pressed against a thorn to keep itself awake because of its fear of snakes.