

Michael J. Warren. 2018. *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations*. Nature and the Environment in the Middle Ages. Cambridge: Brewer, ix + 259 pp., 6 illustr., £ 60.00.

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When I accepted the task to review Michael J. Warren's study *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations*, I was expecting to tread on (mostly) familiar ground and to re-visit some 'old friends'. This expectation was met only partially, which made the reading and reviewing of Warren's book both irritating and interesting. Let me start with the irritation, which was caused by his frequent use of what one may call 'academic jargon'. Sentences like the following are quite typical for Warren's style:

Their [i.e. the birds'] unique capabilities summon parallels, but their mysteries also position metaphorical relation at the point of disintegration more keenly than perhaps any other nonhuman creature, where a space is re-opened (or remains open) to iterate ultimate and uncategorised difference, all the while refusing to provide alternative indications for safe classification. (18)

He has a point here, but I would have been grateful if he had taken the trouble to express it in a language less riddled with terms that make the reader search for the exact meaning of the sentence. Such language may show (off) the author's familiarity with the rhetoric of the prevalent discourse in some schools of animal studies, but at the end of the day the additional complexity and difficulty does not contribute anything to the understanding of the poems themselves. Not surprisingly, the main arguments proposed by Warren, once the reader has digested the content, do not differ much from the more simply and clearly expressed analyses of earlier scholars, though he places and interprets them within a new context. And this is what makes Warren's book interesting and worth reading. Studies like Jill Mann's magisterial *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (2009) or my *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry* (1996) take a more catholic view on animal literature and try to cover a wide range of texts and animals. They put birds next to fish, foxes and chicken next to donkeys and wolves. Not so Warren. He consciously selects the birds as the one group of animals to constitute the sole subject of his study. The reason for this limitation can be found in the close parallels between the realm of birds and human society: both birds and humans are 'two-legged', they show a great variety within a

certain unity, and they have a clear hierarchical structure. Furthermore, the singing of the birds is often interpreted as a means of communication equivalent or at least similar to human language. All these characteristics put birds and humans on the one side, and the four-footed beasts that face downwards on the other. Warren's primary interest lies in exploring the relationship and interaction within this birds-and-humans group, and in order to do so, he chooses suitably representative texts. The selection of poems thus follows an implicit logic and is determined by the theoretical framework of the study.

One, if not *the* central point of Warren's analysis is his discussion of the (conflicted) dual nature and function of birds, which are, in most of the poems analysed, both symbolical and allegorical, yet at the same time also very real. Warren, in order to make his point, cleverly puts the focus on those instances where metaphors and realities fuse, collide, and clash. Yet while birds constitute a distinct category, they, as Warren argues, also defy clear categorisation since different members of the group inhabit the different elements: air, water, earth, and, in the case of the phoenix, even fire. While this is undoubtedly true for birds, it also applies, for example, to dragons. As pointed out, Warren purposely puts the focus on birds and excludes other animals from his discussion, yet a brief comparison with other animals would have made clear whether we have unique avian features or not.

Within the theoretical framework outlined above, Warren dedicates each chapter to one particular poem or text-type and discusses the texts in view of their peculiarities. Thus, the first chapter focusses on the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, where the seabirds' status as 'native foreigners' makes them apt representations of the Christian on earth. However, already these Anglo-Saxon birds show an oscillation between the metaphorical dimension, where they symbolise the human soul, and avian realism. Warren's analysis must be credited for carefully exploring this dichotomy and highlighting an aspect largely neglected by earlier scholarship. The same is true for his chapter on the Old English riddles of the *Exeter Book*. Riddles, by definition, are partially metaphorical and exploit the vacillation of their subjects between the different levels of meaning. Birds, in such a context, demonstrate how to elude the act of grasping their identity and are thus prime contributors to this essential function of the riddle.

The (early) Middle English bird-debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*, which was composed ca. 1200, provides the chronological bridge towards the later Middle English poems. In spite of its relatively early date, *The Owl and the Nightingale* shows astonishing sophistication and complexity and has been the subject of numerous studies. Warren, in his discussion of the bird-debate, analyses in detail the tension between the symbolic-cultural dimension of the birds and their natural-literal qualities. He is not the first to do so – nor was I back in 1996. There is a general agreement among scholars on the existence of these

competing and sometimes clashing levels. The interpretation of what this means, however, has been and still is debated. While I, for example, have stressed the resulting literary comedy, Warren discerns more serious implications and sees the owl “bound up with some alarming social realities” (144).

The final two poems dealt with, namely Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* and Gower’s “Tale of Tereus” in his *Confessio Amantis*, bring us into the second half of the 14th century. No study of medieval English literature can ignore Chaucer’s contribution. Warren, somewhat to my astonishment, mentions *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* merely in passing and concentrates his efforts on the earlier *The Parliament of Fowls*. I stress this because *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is a prime example of a highly sophisticated text exploiting the various metaphorical and allegorical dimensions of the animal protagonists, which are then opposed to instances of avian realism with great effect (see Honegger 1996: 197–227) – and which would have provided an excellent example supporting Warren’s claim that birds defy categorisation. Warren’s discussion of *The Parliament of Fowls*, then, focusses on the disruptive intrusion of nonhuman features in the parliamentary debate. More specifically, he interprets the avian voices, with the goose, cuckoo, and duck going “Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!” (l. 499) respectively, as a breakdown in translation that “rais[es] queries about categories of species and voice” (149). The study comes full circle with the analysis of the “Tale of Tereus” in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. As in *The Seafarer*, here we have again a transformation – this time, however, from human to bird.

Warren’s claim that “there has been little or no attention to how detailed study of these birds can contribute richly to established or new interpretations of these poems” (23) is at least partially justified. His approach is theory-driven and though his close readings show an intimate knowledge of the primary texts and present a plethora of relevant and often new points, it is not the texts themselves that are central, but the theoretical considerations concerning the relationship between humans and birds/animals. All in all, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry* is a valiant attempt at focussing exclusively on the birds and their special role within the medieval discourse on animals and recommended reading for all interested in matters animal.

Works Cited

- Honegger, Thomas. 1996. *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry*. Tübingen: Francke.
- Mann, Jill. 2009. *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.