Make We Merry More and Less
An Anthology of Medieval English Popular Literature

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Animal Tales

There is a long and extensive medieval tradition of animal tale, which has its roots in antiquity, and also looks forward to the modern world. It is a tradition in which learned, popular, and folk elements are intertwined. In it the animals have a variety of functions: they offer moral examples, practical instruction, and entertainment. The idea that man can learn from the animals is a venerable one; a very early English example is Bede’s story of the sparrow, offered as advice to a Northumbrian king: ‘It seems to me that the life of man on earth is like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall …’.¹ Later in the Middle Ages we find disapproving clerics recording popular superstitions concerning the possibility of learning the future from the behaviour of birds, as well as evidence in sophisticated writers like Chaucer, a knowledge that sometimes seems to come from observation. As in modern traditional societies, animals were not only ‘good to eat’ but also ‘good to think’.

Again, as in modern traditional societies, people were very close to animals. This is evident from many references in the works of literary authors. Chaucer remarks that the cock is the orloge [clock] of small villages (Parliament of Fowls, v. 350), and in the House of Fame (v. 1516) observes that there are as many writers of old tales ‘as ben on trees rokes nestes’. He gives names to common animals in and around the house: a sheep called Malle (Molly); dogs called Colle, Talbot, and

¹ See Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, trans. Sherley-Price, in Ch. 13 (pp. 129–30).
Gerland; horses Brok and Scot. He uses proverbial and colloquial locutions, 'stynken as a goot', etc, and refers to the behaviour of household animals: the hole 'there as the cat was wont to crepe' in the Miller's Tale (another household cat is swept from its resting-place by a visiting friar, III. 1775). There is even an allusion to 'pets' or proto-pets: the lap dogs that the Prioress fed (vv. 146–9). In Langland we find an allusion to a less attractive household creature, in the description of Covytise's tattered tabard (V 188 ff.), 'al totorne ... and ful of lys crepynge ... But if that [unless] a lous couthe have lopen [jumped] the bette, She sholde nought have walked on that welche [Welsh flannel], so it was thredbare ...'.

Household animals like the cat appear in carved misericords, and there is a ring with a figure of a cat devouring a mouse, with the legend 'gret wel Gibbe oure cat'. This closeness could lead to knowledge and to some acute observation, reflected in some manuscript illustrations, although usually mingled with popular lore (as in proverbs, see below). Similarly, some 'scientific' material and observation has become embedded in traditional lore, as for instance in the guileful and treacherous nature of the fox, so firmly established that it can be symbolic; Criseyde can address Pandarus (Tr. 3, v. 1565) as 'fox that ye ben'.

Medieval English proverbial lore is full of references to animals. Whiting’s collection of proverbs contains references to well over a hundred animals, birds, fish, and insects; some are exotic (chameleon, crocodile) but the majority are more local and familiar. And they include one or two which would have been more prominent in medieval town life than in modern, notably bears and apes. One proverb [Whiting B 102] alludes to bear-baiting, another [B 101] to the differing thoughts of the bear and its leader, which Chaucer uses in Tr. 4, vv. 1453–4: 'for thus men seyth, "That on thenketh the bere, But al another thenketh his leder."' Elsewhere, bears are traditionally black, fierce, and 'boistous'; and rough and slow. Captive apes were obviously a source of interest.

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2 Langland, Piers Plowman, ed. Schmidt, p. 48, and see editor's footnote for the extra line cited.

3 There is no online version of Whiting, but it is widely available in libraries and very easy to use. Therefore I am not listing every single proverb or proverb-like sentence that Gray cites, and I have simplified the references; he often gives not only the Whiting number but also the source used by Whiting.
and entertainment. Among the characteristics alluded to are their imitative behaviour (‘men sein commonly that the ape doth as he other seeth’ [Whiting A 136]), their grimacing and their foolishness. Ape seems sometimes almost synonymous with ‘fool’; see Chaucer’s ‘he made the person and the peple his apes’ (Tales, I, v. 706). People may be ‘drunken as an ape’ or ‘ape-drunk’.

The mixture of ‘scientific’ and ‘popular’ lore is an important element in the background of the very rich medieval literary tradition of animal tales, in which, in Britain, the achievements of Chaucer and Henryson are pre-eminent. Here we are in a wonderful fictional time when, as Chaucer says, ‘bestes and brides koude speke and synge’ (Tales, VII. v. 2881). Here beasts and birds engage in formal debate on matters significant to humans, or appear as actors in moral tales for their instruction and entertainment. The animal fable is a very ancient literary form, traceable back to the mysterious figure of Aesop and beyond, to the ‘wisdom literature’ of the ancient near East and the fables of the Old Testament. Animal fables, both Aesopic and non-Aesopic, lived on in the Middle Ages in versions in Latin and in the vernaculars. The ‘moralties’ which they engender are sometimes religious and high-minded, but not always. Sometimes the ‘morality’ seems rather to be advice on how to survive in a hostile world; and the fable, while not quite a ‘slave’ fable, often seems to be an expression of the views and attitudes of the lower classes of society. Here, cleverness, ingenuity, and cunning seem to be prized. An excellent (and extreme) example is to be found in the nefarious activities of Reynard the Fox, stories which moved through literary sources, but almost certainly against a background of popular storytelling, into a kind of beast epic, the French Roman de Renart. Reynard the Fox comes from a widespread folk interest in small animals who can by cleverness and cunning defeat the stronger and larger, but rather stupid, creatures; but he seems to have developed into a rather sinister and amoral comic Trickster figure, similar to Coyote in some North American Indian mythologies.

‘The overlapping of the human and animal worlds provides a powerful stimulus for the imagination’ says D. D. R. Owen in the Introduction to his translation of the Roman de Renart. It certainly does — and the creators of animal tales seem to have discovered (before literary theory)
the ‘elasticity of mind’ and the capacity to find ‘equivalences in the most disparate phenomena, and for substituting one for another which lies at the mysterious heart of metaphor’. 4

While it is clear that both popular and learned elements coexist in the developed tradition of the written medieval animal story, we must not forget that at the same time animal tales were being told by oral story tellers. For example, Thomas More, speaking as Anthony in the Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, recalls a ‘Mother Maud’ who used to tell the children stories as she sat by the fire. One of her ‘fond childish tales’ was the story of how ‘the Ass and the Wolf came on a time to confession to the Fox’. 5 And Wyatt’s ‘mothers maydes sang a song of the field mouse’. 6 There was probably a large body of such tales, which have vanished, almost without trace, but if we have lost the exact words that Mother Maud and other mothers’ maids used in telling their tales, we sometimes feel close to the presence of an oral teller in the fables in exemplary stories. A realisation of this has led me, rather boldly, not to illustrate the animal tale in the sophisticated form given to it by Chaucer or Henryson, but in Caxton’s version, where in spite of the apparent ‘literary’ background of his Aesop and Renard (the first translated from Macho’s version of Steinhovel, the second from a Dutch version), and in spite of his own occasional verbosity, there is a striking simplicity of narrative.

A. Man and Animal

Animals in histories, Cats and adages

Spectacular scenes involving animals are occasionally recorded in chronicles, sometimes associated with other ‘portents’. The Brut chronicle records (in the thirteenth century) ‘there fill so mich rayne in hay-tyme yhat it wasted and distroyed bothe corn and hey; and ther was suche a debate and fighting of sparows, by divers places in thes dayes, that men founden unnumerable multitudes of hem ded in feldes as they

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4 Cited in Gray, Robert Henryson, p. 57 in the chapter ‘Beasts and Wisdom (i)’.
6 Wyatt, Of the Mean and Sure Estate, in Poetical Works, ed. Clarke. The poem is available online (see Bibliography, below).
A. Man and Animal

wenten …’.

There was also a very severe pestilence, and a sickness called ‘the pockes’. A little later eagles fought ‘oppon the sonde of the Scottyssh see, that meny a man hyt sye the iii dayes togedir there were ii eges, of the which the tone come out of the southe. And the tother out of the north, and cruelly and strongly they foughten togider and warstled togider; and the suth egle ferst overcome the northe egle, and al torent and tare hym with his bille and his clowes, that he shold not reste ne take no brethe; and aftir, the suth egle flye home to his owne costs’. This was followed by a cosmic disturbance.

The Middle Ages had developed quite an impressive learned tradition of natural history, but it is very difficult to know how far this impinged upon popular lore. We give two possible examples: a passage on the fox from the Middle English *Physiologus*, and one on the cat from Trevisa’s fourteenth-century translation of the encyclopedia of Bartholomew the Englishman.

### i) The Fox

A wilde der⁰ is that is ful of fele⁰ wiles — creature many

Fox is hire to name for hire qwethsipe.⁰ her wickedness

Husebondes⁰ hire haten for hire harmdedes:⁰ householders harmful deeds

The coc and te capon she feccheth⁰ ofte in the tun,⁰ steals yard

And te gander and te gos, bi the necke and bi the nos.⁰ beak

Haleth is⁰ to hire hole — forthi⁰ man hire hatieth, drags them therefore

Hatien and huler⁰ bothe men and fules.⁰ drive off with shouts birds

Listneth nu⁰ a wunder that tis der doth for hunger — hear now

Goth o felde to a furgh⁰ and falleth tharinne, furrow

In eried⁰ lond er in erth-chine,⁰ for to bilirten⁰ ploughed crack deceive

fuyele.

Ne stereth she noght of the stede a god stund deies⁰ good while in the day

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⁰ In Brie ed, vol. 2 p. 316. The story continues (with the eagles) on p. 319.

ⁱ The *Physiologus* is in *Selections from Early Middle English*, ed. Hall (text in vol. 1, notes in vol. 2). See also *The Middle English Physiologus*, ed. Wirtjes, p. 11 (*Natura wulpis*). There is only one manuscript, dated around 1300; the Early Middle English is not easy to read (commentary and glossary may be consulted).
Oc dareth⁹, so she ded were, ne dragheth she non onde.⁹
The raven is swathe⁹ redi, weneth that she rotieth,⁹
And other fules hire fallen bi⁹ for to winnen fode.⁹
Derflike⁹ withuten dred⁹ he wenen that she ded beth,
He wullen⁹ on this foxes fel⁹ and she it wel feleth;⁹
Lightlike she lepeth up and letteth hem sone,⁹
Yelt hem here billing rathe⁹ with illing,⁹
Tetoggeth⁹ and tetireth⁹ hem mid hire teth sarpe,
Fret⁹ hire fulle and goth than ther⁹ she wille.

[It is followed by its Significacio: it is the devil, and the wicked man.]

ii) The Cat⁹

The catte … is a beste of uncerteyn here and colour. For som catte is whyte, som reed, and som blak, and som scowed and splenked [spotted and dappled] in the feet and the face and in the eeren, and is most yliche to the lepard. And hath a gret mouth and sawe teeth and scharpe, and longe tonge and pliaunt, thynne, and sotile. And lapeth therwith whanne he drynketh, as othere bestes doon that haven the nether lippe schorter than the over, for bycause of unevenesse of lippes suche bestes souken nought in drynkynge but lapeth and likketh, as Aristotil seith and Plinius also. And he is a ful leccherous beste in youthe, swyfte, plyaunt, and mery. And lepeth and reseth [pounces] on alle thing that is tofore him and is yladde by a strawe and pleyeth therwith. And is a wel hevy beste in eelde [old age] and ful slepy. And lith siliche [lies slyly] in awayte for mys and is ware where they ben more by smelle than by sight. And hunteth and reseth on hem in privye place. And whanne he taketh a mous he pleyeth therwith and eteth him after the pleye. And is as it were wylde and goth aboute in tyme of generacioun. Among cattes in tyme of love is hard fightynge for wyves, and oon craccheth [scratches] and rendeth the other grevousliche with bytyng.

⁹ In Batman uppon Bartholome his booke [1582], Bk. 18, Ch. 76, De Murilego.
and with claws. And he maketh a reweliche noyse and horrible whan oon profreth to fighte with another. And is a cruel beste whanne he is wilde and wonyeth in wodes and hunteth thanne smale wilde bestes, as conynges [rabbits] and hares. And falleth on his owne feet whanne he falleth out of highe place and is unnethe [scarcely] yhurte whanne he is ythrowe doun of an high place. His drytte [droppings] stynketh ful foule and therefore he hydeeth it under erthe and gadereth thereupon coverynge with feet and clawes. And whanne he hath a fayre skynne he is as it were prowde therof and goth faste aboute; and whanne his skynne is ybrende [burnt] he abydeth at home. And is ofte for his fayre skynne ytake of the skynnere and yslayne and yhulde [skinned].

### iii) Animals in Adages

We give a very small selection from a large mass of material (quotations and references are from Whiting). The long and complicated background to medieval animal lore produced traditional similitudes and common proverbial comparisons (a good many of which have survived), and a great range of traditional animal attributes and behaviour, and of human attitudes to them. Some animals seem to have become especially significant or almost symbolic: the lamb is gentle, chaste and humble, meek and mild (as is the dove, which has no gall). At the other extreme are hostile, dangerous or wicked animals like the serpent. There are foolish animals, like the ass (variously described as dull, ignorant, rude, slow), and animals which are traditionally mad or crazed, like the March hare. Some are unpleasant, like the stinking brock (badger), the ‘rammish’ goat, or the foul pig wallowing in its sty. Occasionally we can glimpse the hierarchies of the animal world: the cowardly kite may not fly with the royal eagle, whose eye pierces the sun. Some creatures are more ambiguous. In animal tales and fables the fox is the supreme example of wiliness and cunning, but one sometimes senses a barely-hidden admiration for its ingenuity. Can we perhaps catch a hint of this even in the fox proverbs, with their apparently ‘objective’ accounts of its behaviour: ‘the fox feigns dead

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10 Keywords in Whiting can easily be found, for example C for Cat.
11 See below in chapter 8, our footnote to Henryson on medicine identifies a reference to this belief.
till the birds come to his tongue’, ‘when the fox preaches keep well the geese’? The cat, in its nature an even more ambiguous creature, associated with the house but also with the world outside it, is found in many adages, but is not confined to them: ‘a cat falls on its feet’, ‘the cat would eat fish but would not wet its feet’, ‘see like a cat in the night’, ‘who shall find a cat true in keeping milk?’, and so on. We have already met two Chaucerian cats. Of a third (an example of its often noticed passionate hunting of its ‘contrary’ the mouse) it is said that even if given milk and exquisite food, ‘Lat hym seen a mous go by the wal, Anon he weyveth [refuses] milk and flesh and al … Swich appetite hath he to ete a mous’ (Tales, IX. 176–80). But for all its ambiguity, the cat could have a moral function.

The most obvious result of this proverbial animal lore was the development of a large number of proverbial similitudes of an almost formulaic kind: ‘busy as a bee’, black as any crow / raven’, ‘swift as the hind / doe / falcon / swallow’, ‘proud as a peacock’, grey as a goose’, etc., or expressions of the worthlessness of something: ‘not worth a bee / fly / flea / gnat / haddock / plucked hen’, and so on. Some seem clearly observed: ‘as tattered [shaggy] as a foal’ or ‘be cocksure’ [C 358], even if sometimes unexpected: ‘yt ys as clen as a byrdis ars’. And sometimes the proverbs give a miniature picture of animal behaviour ready-made for a poet or a moralist: ‘a cony covers her head and weens all is well’ [C 416], ‘the cuckoo sings only of himself’ [C 601], ‘where asses get lordships there is seldom good rule’ [A 230], ‘it is a foul bird that fouls its own nest’ [B 306], ‘the crow thinks her own young are white’ [C 568].

iii) Animal Proverbs

And summe other elder [children] whanne thei desiren and asken to be leid in bed to slepe, thei seie, ‘lete the cat wynke,’ or sum othere inpertynt resound [C 96]

Wele wotith [knows] the cat whos berde she likkith [C 108]

Grete fyssches are takyn in the net and slayn, smale fyssches scapen through the net into the watyr, and liven [F231; and the very common ‘the great fishes eat the small’, F 232]
Now find I weill this proverb trew ... ‘Ay rinnis the foxe als lang as he fute hais’ [F 592]
Gaillard he was as goldfinch in the shawe [G 319, Chaucer]^{12}
As wytles as a wylde goos [G 377]
Masid [crazed] as a Marche hare [H 113, H 110, H 116]
A man maie well bring a horse to the water, but he can not make him drinke without he will [H 541]
It is nought good a slepyng hound to wake [H 569, Chaucer]^{13}
Thai al fled from hym as schep from the wolfe [S 215]
One swallow maketh not somer [S 924]
He hath ... as many braynes as a wodcok [W 565]

B. Fables, and Stories of Reynard

Aesopic fables produced large and interesting literary tradition in the Middle Ages in both Latin and the vernacular. Caxton’s version (1483–4) is based on the French translation by Macho of Steinhowel’s extensive collection. Beside the various literary versions there was almost certainly a body of oral versions, known to the likes of ‘Mother Maud’. Caxton follows Macho fairly closely. Sometimes he tries to heighten his style, but many of his fables are simple and unsophisticated in form. It is in these, and in the many retellings of fables in moral tales, that we come probably as close as we can to the style of the oral taletellers. We begin with an Anglo-Norman example in Bozon (who quotes a couple of English proverbs), followed by examples from Caxton, and finally (nos xiii ff.), by examples in moral tales.

iv) Bozon: the Goshawk and the Owl^{14}

The owl asked the goshawk to bring up her son; the other agreed, and said that she should bring him and put him with her own nestlings. As soon as the little bird arrived among the others, the hawk told him to

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^{12} Tales, I. 4367, Perkyn ‘the reveller’ at the start of the Cook’s Tale.
^{13} Tr. 3. 764.
^{14} In the Contes Moralises, no. 17 (le Huan et le Ostur): Quod ignobiles, licet educati, gestus habent ignobiles. This means you can educate them as much as you like but you won’t change their nature.
behave like her young and learn their ways. When the goshawk flew off to seek their food, she returned to find her nest disgustingly soiled. ‘What is this,’ she said, ‘which I find contrary to good upbringing? Who has done this?’ ‘Your nursling,’ said her children. ‘Indeed!’ said she, ‘it is true what is said in English: “Stroke oule [owl] and schrape [scratch] oule, and evere is oule oule.”’

So it is with many people who are born of low lineage. Although they have risen high, often instructed and informed in religion or in the ways of the world or in noble positions, they always revert to their estate or to the ways to which they were born. For this reason it is said in English: ‘trendle the appel never so fer [no matter how far the apple rolls], he conyes [makes known] fro what tre he cam.’

Examples from Caxton

v) The Rat and the Frog

Now it be so that as the rat wente in pylgremage he came by a river, and demaunded helpe of a frogge for to passe and goo over the water. And thenne the frogge bound the rats foote to her foote, and thus swymed unto the myddes over the river. And as they were there the frogge stood stylle, to th’ende that the rat shold be drowned. And in the meane whyle came a kite upon them, and bothe bare them with hym. This fable made Esope for a symylytude whiche is prouffitable to many folks, for he that thynketh evylle ageynst good, the evylle whiche he thynketh shall ones [one day] falle upon hymself.

vi) The Eagle and the Fox

How the puyssaunt and myghty must doubte the feble Esope reherceth to us suche a fable. Ther was an egle whiche came theras yong foxes were, and took awey one of them and gaf hit to his yonge egles to fede them with. The fox wente after hym and praid hym to restore and

15 Whiting A 169.
16 In Caxton’s Fables. The first section is the ‘Fable Collection Romulus’: Rat and Frog (1.3), Eagle and Fox (1.13), Lion and Rat (1.18). Finally, the Cat and the Rat is in a later section, ‘Fables of Esope not found in the books of Romulus’, no. 8.
gyve hym ageyne his yonge foxe. And the egle sayd that he wold not, for he was over hym lord and maister. And thenne the foxe fulle of shrewdness and of malice beganne to put togider grete habondaunce of strawe round aboute the tree whereupon the egle and his yonge were in theyr nest, and kyndeled it with fyre. And whan the smoke and the flambe began to ryse upward, the egle ferdfulle and doubting the dethe of her lytyle egles restored ageyne the yonge foxe to his moder. This fable sheweth us how the mighty men oughte not to lette [harm] in ony thynge the smale folke, for the lytyll ryght ofte may lette and trouble the grete.

vii) The Lion and the Rat

The mighty and puysaunt must pardonne and forguye to the lytyll and feble, and ought to kepe hym fro al evyle, for ofyme the lytyll may wel gyve ayde and help to the grete — wherof Esope reherceth to us suche a fable of a lyon whiche slepte in a forest and the rats disported and playd aboute hym. It happed that the rat wente upon the lyon, wherfore the lyon awoke, and within his clawes or ongles he tooke the rat. And whanne the rat saw hym thus taken and hold sayd thus to the lyon, ‘My lord, pardonne me, for of my deth nought ye shalle wynne, for I supposed not to have done to yow ony harme ne displaysyre.’ Thenne thought the lyon in himself that no worship ne glorye it were to put it to dethe, wherfor he gaunted his pardone and lete hym goo within a lytell whyle. After this it happed so that the same lyon was take at a grete trappe. And as he sawe hym thus caught and taken, he beganne to crye and make sorowe. And thenne whan the rat herd hym crye he approached hym and demaunded of hym wherefore he cryed. And the lyon ansered to hym, ‘Seest thow not how I am take and bound with this gynne?’ Thenne sayd the ratte to hym, ‘My lorde, I wylle not be unkynde, but ever I shal remembre the grace whiche thou hast done to me, and yf I can I shall now helpe the.’ The ratte beganne thenne to byte the lace or cord, and so long he knawed it that the lace brake, and thus the lyon escaped. Therfore this fable techeth us how that a man myghty and puysaunt ought not to dispraise the lytyll, for somtyme he that can nobody hurte ne lette [hinder] may at a nede gyve help and ayde to the grete.
viii) The Cat and the Rat

He which is wyse, and hath ones hath ben begyled, ought not to truste more hym that hath begyled hym, as reherceth this fable of a catte whiche wente into a hows where as many rats were, the whiche he dyd ete one after other. And whanne the rats perceyved the grete fyersnes and crudelyte of the catte, held a coungeyle togyder where as they determined of one comyn wylle that they shold no more hold them ne come nor goo on the lowe floore. Wherfore one of them moost auncyent proffered and sayd to al the other suche words, ‘My bretheren and my frendes, ye knowe wel that we have a grete enemye, whiche is a grete persecutour over us alle, to whom we may not resyste, wherfore of nede we must hold our self upon the hyghe balkes [beams] to th’ende that he may not take us.’ Of the whiche proposycion or wordes the other rats were wel content and apayd, and bylevyd this counceylle. And whanne the kat knewe the counceylle of the rats, he hynge hymself by his two feet behind at a pynne of yron which was styked at a balke, feynynge hymself to be dede. And whanne one of the rats lokynge dounward sawe the katte, beganne to lawhe and sayd to the cat, ‘O my frend, yf I supposed that thow were dede, I shold goo doune, but wel I knowe the so fals and pervers that thow mayst wel have hanged thyself, feynynge to be dede — wherfore I shall not go doune.’ And therfore he that hath ben ones begyled by somme other ought to kepe hym wel fro the same.

Fox Tales

ix) Tybert the Cat is tempted by Reynard

... ‘O dere Reyner, lede me thyder for alle that I may doo for yow!’ ‘Ye, Tybert, saye ye me truth? Love ye wel myes?’ ‘Yf I love hem wel?’ said the catte, ‘I love myes better than ony thyng that men gyve me! Knowe ye not that myes savoure better than venison — ye, than flawnes or pasteyes? Wil ye wel doo, so lede me theder where the myes ben, and thenne shal ye wynne my love, ye, al had ye slayn my fader, moder, and alle my kun.’ Reynart sayd, ‘Ye moke and jape therwith!’ The catte saide, ‘So helpe me God, I doo not!’ ‘Tybert,’ said the fox, ‘wiste Y that verily, I wolde yet this nyght make that ye shuld be ful of myes.’ ‘Reynart!’ quod he, ‘Ful? That were many.’ ‘Tyberte, ye jape!’ ‘Reynart,’ quod

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he, ‘in trouth I doo not. Yf I hadde a fat mows, I wold not gyve it for a golden noble.’ ‘Late us goo thenne, Tybert,’ quod the foxe, ‘I wyl brynge yow to the place er I goo fro you’ …

[Unsurprisingly, disaster ensues, much to the gleeful delight of Reynard]

x) The Fox and the Wolf in the Well

An example of a Reynard narrative from the Early Middle English: The Vox and the Wolf

A hungry fox finds a building with hens in it, but is driven off by the cock. He sees a pit filled with water, with two buckets, one going up, the other down. Jumping into one he finds himself at the bottom, to his great distress …

... The fox wep and reuliche bigan.º
lamented piteously
Ther com a wolf gon,º after than,
came walking
Out of the depe wode blive,º
quickly
For he wes afingret swathe.º
really starving
Nothing he ne founde, in al the nighte,
Wermideº his honger aquencheº mightte. by which quench
He com to the putte,º thene fox iherde;º pit heard
He him kneu wel bi his rerde.º voice
For hit was his neighebore
And his gossip,º of children bore. friend
Adoun bi the putte he sat;
Quod the wulf, ‘Wat may ben thatº what can that be?
That ich in the putte ihere?º hear
Ertou Cristine other mi fere?º are you a Christian or my friend
Say me sothº — ne gabbeº thou me nout, truly deceive
Wo haveth the in the putte ibrouth?º brought you
The fox hine ikneu wel for his kun,º kinsman
And tho eroustº com wiitº to him; then first idea
For he thoute mid sommne ginne,º trick
Himself oupbringe,º thene wolf therinne.º
Quod the fox, ‘Woº is nou there?
Ich weneº hit is Sigrim that ich here.’
‘That is soth,’ the wolf sede.
‘Ac watº art thou, so God the rede?’º
‘A!’ quod the fox, ‘Ich wille the telle —
On alpi wordº ich lie nelle.
Ich am Reneuard,º thi friend;
And yif ich thine comeº hevede iwend,º
Ich hedde so ibedeº for the
That thou sholdest comen to me.’
‘Midº the?’ quod the wolf, ‘wartoº?
Wat shulde ich ine the putte do?’
Quod the fox, ‘Thou art ounwisº!
Her is the blisse of Paradiis —
Her ich mai evere wel fare,
Withouten pine, withouten kare.
Her is mete, here is drinke;
Her is blisse withouten swinke.º
Her nis hounger nevermo,
Ne non other kunnesº wo —
Of alle gode her is inou!’º
Midº thilke words the wolf lou.º
‘Art thou ded, so God the rede.
Otherº of the worldeº?’º the wolf sede.
Quod the wolf, ‘Wenne storve thouº?
And wat dest thouº there nou?
Ne beth noutº yet thre daies ago
That thou, and thi wif also,
And thine children, smale and grete,
Alle togedere mid me ete!’
‘That is soth,’º quod the fox,
Gode thonkº nou hit is thus
That I am to Criste wendº!
Not hitº non of mine frend;
I nolde, for al the worldes gode,
Ben ine the worlde, ther ich hem fond.
Wat shuld ich ine the worlde go
Ther nis bote kare and wo,
And livie in fulthe and in sunne?
Ac her beth joies fele cinne —
Her beth bothe shep and get.
The wolf haveth hounge swithe gret,
For he nedde yare i-ete;
And tho he herde spoken of mete,
He wolde bleteliche ben thare.
‘Al!’ quod the wolf, ‘gode ifere,
Moni gode mel thou havest me binome
Let me adoun to the kome,
And al ich wole the foryeve.
‘Ye!’ quod the fox, ‘Were thou ishrive,
And sunnen hevedest al forsake,
And to klene lif itake,
Ich wolde so bidde for the
That thou sholdest comen to me.’
‘To wom shuld ich,’ the wolf seide,
Be iknowe of mine misdeed?
Ther nis nothing alive
That me kouthe her nou shrive.
Thou havest ben ofte min ifere —
Woltu nou mi shrift ihere,
And al mi liif I shal the telle?’
‘Nay!’ quod the fox, ‘I nelle.
‘Neltou?’ quod the wolf, ‘thin ore!
Ich am afingret swathe sore —
Ich wot, tonight iche worthe ded.
Bote thou do me somne reed.
For Cristes love, be mi prest!’
The wolf bey adoun his brest
And gon to siken harde and stronge.
‘Woltou’, quod the fox, ‘shrift ounderfonge’ receive
Tel thi sunnen, sins one by one
That so that remains
‘Sone’, at once gladly quad the wolf, ‘wel ifaie’ wicked
Ich habbe ben qued al mi lif-daie;
Ich habbe widewene kors — widows’ curse
Therfore ich fare the wors.
A thousent shep ich habbe abiten slaughtered
And mo, yef hy weren written; they
Ac me ofthinketh sore, I regret it bitterly
Maister, shal I tellen more?
‘Ye!’ quod the fox, ‘al thou most sugge, tell
Other elleswer thou most abugge.’ or elsewhere pay for it
‘Gossip!’ quod the wolf, ‘foryef hit me, evil things about you
Ich habbe ofte seid qued bi the. I regret it bitterly
Men seide that thou on thine live
Miferdest mid mine wive.
Ich the aperseivede one stounde, saw you once
And in bedde togedere you founde:
Ich wes ofte you ful ney near
And in bedde togedere you sey.
Ich wende, also other doth,
That ich iseie were soth, what saw true
And therefore thou were me loth — hateful
Gode gossip, ne be thou nout wroth!’
‘Wolf!’ quod the fox him tho,
‘Al that ihou havest herbefore ido, before done
In thout, in speche, and in dede,
In euch otheres kunnes quede, every other kind of wickedness
Ich the foryeve at thisse neede.’ forgive necessity
‘Crist the forylde!’ the wolf seide,
‘Nou ich am in clene live,
Ne recche ich of childe ne of wive!
care
Ac sei me wat I shal do
And hou ich mai come the to.’
Tho quod the fox, ‘Ich wille the lere.’
Isiist thou a boket hongi ther?
Ther is a bruche of hevene blisse!
Lep therinne, mid iwisse,
And thou shalt comen to me sone.’
Quod the wolf, ‘That is light to done!’
He lep in — and way sumdel —
(That weste the fox ful wel)
The wolf gon sinke, the fox arise —
Tho gon the wolf sore agrise!
Tho he com amide the putte,
The wolf thene fox onward mette.
‘Gossip,’ quod the wolf, ‘wat nou?
Wat havest thou imunt? Weder wolt thou?’
‘Weder ich wille?’ the fox sede,
‘Ich wille oup, so God me rede!’
And nou go doun with thi meel —
Thi biyete worth wel small!
Ac ich am therof glad and blithe
That thou art nomen in clene live.
Thi soule-cnul ich wile do ringe.’
The wrecche binethe nothing ne find,
Bote cold water and hounger him bind.
To colde gistninge he wes ibede:
Froggen haveth his dou iknedel!

[The wolf’s tribulations are not yet over. When he is rescued by a friar, the other friars come and beat him severely.]
Foxes in Songs

xi) A Fox Carol

This carol, or the idea behind it, seems to survive in a modern folksong, The Fox and the Goose, though the exact route of its transmission remains uncertain.

‘Pax vobis,’ quod the fox. Peace be with you
‘For I am comyn to toowne.’

It fell ageyns the next nyght happened on
The fox yede to with all hys myghte, The fox yede to with all his might
Withouten cole or candelight, Without a candle or candelight,
Whan that he cam unto the toowne. Whan he cam unto the town.

Pax vobis …

When he cam all in the y[e]rde, right into
Soore te geys wer ill aferde; terrified
‘I shall macke some of yo[w] lerde better instructed
Or that I goo from the toowne. before

Pax vobis …

When he cam all in the croofte, croft, enclosed ground
There he stalkyd wundirfull soofte — frightened
‘For here have I be frayed full ofte
Whan that I have come to toowne.

Pax vobis …

He hente a goose all be the heye, eye
Faste the goos began to creye; cry out
Oowte yede men as they might heye went as fast as they could
And seyde, ‘Fals fox, ley it doowne!’

Pax vobis …

19 In The Oxford Book of Medieval Verse, no. 240.
'Nay,' he saide, 'soo mote I the,º may I thrive
Sche shall goo unto the wode with me;
Sche and I wntherº a tre. under
Emange the beryis browne.
Pax vobis …

'I have a wyf, and sche lyeth seke;
Many smale whelppis sche have to eke
Many bones they muste pike
Willº they ley adowne! while
Pax vobis …'

xii) The False Fox21

The fals fox came unto our croft,
And so our gese ful fast he sought.
  With how fox, how! with hey fox, hey!
  Come no more unto our howse to bere our gese aweye!

The fals fox came unto our styº pen
And toke our gese ther by and by.º one by one
  With how, fox …

The fals fox cam into our yerde,
And ther he made the gese aferde,º afraid
  With how, fox …

The fals fox came unto our gate,
And toke our gese ther wher they sate,
  With how, fox …

The fals fox came to our halle dore,

21 Ibid. no. 239.
And shrove our gese ther in the flore.
   With how, fox ...

The fals foxe came into our halle,
And assoiled our gese both grete and small.
   With how, fox ...

The fals fox came unto our cowpe,°
And ther he made our gese to stowpe,°
   With how, fox ...

He tok a gose fast by the nek,
And the goose tho began to quek.°
   With how, fox ...

The goodwife came out in her smok.
And at the fox she threw her rok.°
   With how, fox ...

The goodman came out with his flayle,
And smote the fox upon the tayle.
   With how, fox ...

He threw a gose upon his back,
And furth he went thoo with his pak.°
   With how, fox ...

The goodman swore yf that he myght,
He wolde hym slee or° it wer nyght.
   With how, fox ...

The fals fox went into his denne,
And ther he was full mery thenne.
   With how, fox ...
He came ayene yet the next weke,
And toke away both henne and cheke.\textsuperscript{9} \textit{chick}
  With how, fox ...

The goodman saide unto his wyfe,
‘This fals fox lyveth a mery lyfe.’
  With how, fox ...

The fals fox came upon a day,
And with our gese he made affray.\textsuperscript{9} \textit{disturbance}
  With how, fox ...

He tok a gose fast by the nek,
And made her to sey ‘wheccumquek!’
  With how, fox ...

‘I pray the, fox,’ seid the goose thoo,
‘Take of my feders\textsuperscript{9} but not of my to.’\textsuperscript{9} \textit{feathers} \textit{toe}
  With how, fox ...

C. Animals in Exempla or Moral Stories

\textbf{Aesopic tales and others; examples mainly from the} \textit{Alphabet of Tales}

\textbf{xiii) Adulators rewarded, Truth Tellers condemned}\textsuperscript{22}

Esopus tellis in his fables how ther was ii men, ane a trew man and a
noder a lyer. And thai come togedur into the region of apis [apes]. And
emang thaim was a chiefe ape, that satt in a hye sete that was ordand
for hym emang all the toder apis. And he askid thaim many questions;
emangis all other he said unto thaim, ‘\textit{Quis sum ego?} Who am I?’ And
this lyer ansswerd agayn and sayd, ‘Sur, thou erte ane emperour, and
thies abowte the er [these around you are] thi dukis and thine erlis and

\textsuperscript{22} Tale number XXXIII, \textit{Adulator}. 
thi barons.’ And onone as he had thus said, this ape commandid hym to hafe a grete reward. And than this trew man saw how this lyer was rewarded, and said privalie unto hym selfe, ‘Now, sen he this at [that] did bod [but] ma[k]e a lye hase had suche a grete reward, I mon hafe a grete reward for my suth saying.’ And than this ape askid this trew man and said, ‘Who am I?’ And he ansswerd ageyn and said, ‘Thow ert bod ane ape, and all thies other apis er like the.’ And onone as he had thus said, he commandid all the toder apis for to bite hym and skratt hym with ther tethe and ther naylis; and so thai did, to [until] he unnethis [scarcely] gatt away with his life. This tale is gude to tell agayn flaterers, and agayns thaim that wull here no thing bod at is to ther plesur.

xiv) The World’s Glory

Esopus in *Fabulis* tellis how ther was a hors that was arrayed with a brydyll of gold, and a gay saddyll, and he met ane ass that was ladyn; and this ass made hym no reverens, bod held evyn furth his way. So this prowde hors was wrothe therwith, and said, ‘Bod at I will not vex my selfe, els I sulde sla the with my hinder fete, becauce thou wolde not voyde the way, and giff me rowm to pass by the.’ And when this ass hard hym, sho made mekyll sorrow. So within a little while after, this hors, that was so gaylie cled, was wayke and lene, and had a sare gallid bakk; and the ass met hym undernethe a carte, ledand muke unto the felde — and the ass was fayr and fatt. And the ass said unto hym, ‘Whar is now thi gay aray at thou was so prowde of? Now blissid be God, thou ert e to the same occupacion at I use, and yit my bak is haler [more whole] than thyne. And therfor now thi gay gere helpis the nott.’

xv) Saint Jerome’s Lion and the Ass

On a day when Sant Jerom satt with his brethir, sodanlie ther come a haltand [limping] lion and went into the abbay. And onone as the brethir saw hym thai fled all, and Saynt Jerom rase and met [him] as he had bene a geste. And this lyon lifte up his sare fute and lete hym se it, and he callid his brethir and garte [made] one of thaim wash it, and layd salvis and

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23 Tale number CCCXLII, *Gloria mundi parum durat*.
24 Tale number CCCCXXXVIII, *Leo custodiebat asinum*. 
medcyns therto, made of herbys, and onone this lion was hale [restored] and was als meke as a hors. And Saynt Jerom chargid hym that he sulde evure day take charge of and kepe ane ass that broght hym and his brethir fewell [fuel] fro the wud, and he wolde everilk day at dew tyme hafe this ass of [from] the felde and bring it hame, and kepird hur surelie. So on a day as this ass was pasturand, this lyonliste wele slepe, and layde hym down and fell apoon a sad [deep] slepe; and ther come merchandes with camels be this ass away, and saw at no bodie was stirrand, and thai tuke this ass with thaim. And when thai war gone, this lyon wakend and myssyd his fellow, and soght here and ther romyand [wandering] and couthe not fynde hit. And when he saw he cuthe not fynd it, he wente home all hevylie unto the abbay, and stude at the yate oferrom [at a distance] and durste com no ner because he broght not hame the ass; and he durste not com in as he was wunt to do. And the monkis, when thai say [saw] hym at he come home and broght not the ass with hym as he was wunt to do, and thai trowed he had etyn hur, and herefor withdrew his meate fro hym at thai war wunte to giff hym and wold not giff hym it, bod bad hym go and ete the hynder-end of the ass as he had etyn the for-end. And than Saynt Jerom charged this lyon to do the ass offes, and to bring home wod [wood] on his bak daylie to the kychyn as it was wunt to do; and mekelie he did it as he was commandid and gruchid nothing therwith. So on a day as this lyon was walkand be his one [alone], he was war of thies merchandis com of ferrom [afar] with ther camels ladyn, and this lynonn ass at he kepid emang thaim. And with a grete romyng [sc. rounyng = roaring] he ran opon thaim, and all the men fled and war passand ferd, and all thies camels and this ass bothe with merchandis as thai war ladyn, he broght unto the abbay. And when Saynt Jerom saw, he comawndid his brethir to giff thies catell meate, and to abyde the will of God. And than this lyon come into the abbay as he was wunte to do, and wente to Saynt Jerom and syne [then] fro monk to monke, and fawnyd thaim and lowtid [bowed] unto the erth, evyn as he had askid thaim forgyfnes. And than the merchandis come and knew [acknowledged] ther fawte and askid Saynt Jerom forgyfnes; and he forgaff thaim when thai confessed how thai did, and lete thaim hafe all ther gudis agayn. And thai gaff the abbay to amendis a messur of oyle, and band thaim and ther successurs for evurmore yerelie to giff unto that abbay the same messur, and so thai do yerelie unto this day.
Silent Bribes: the Cow and the Ox

Som tyme ther was a ballay [bailiff] of a grete lordshup, that made a feste grete and costios unto the weddyng of a son of his. So ther was a tenand in the lordship, that had a grete cause ther in the cowrte to be determynd befor the Stewerd. And agayn this baillay son sulde be wed, he com unto the baillay and said, ‘Sur, I pray you stand for me befor the stewerd in the courte, at I may hafe right, and I sall giff yow a fatt cow to your son weddyng.’ And he tuke the cow and sayd that he suld. So this mans adversarie harde tell hereoff, and he come unto this baillay wyfe and gaff hur a fatt ox, and besoght hur at sho wold labur unto hur husband that he wold answer for hym agayns his adversarie in the courte. And sho tuke the cow and laburd unto hur husband, and he promysid hur at he suld fulfil hur entent. So bothe the parties come into the courte afor the stewerd, and put furth ther cawsis, and the baillay stude still and spak not a wurd for nowdur of thaim, unto so mekyll at he that gaff the ox was like to be castyn [defeated]. And the man that gaff hym the ox said unto the baillay, ‘Sur, whi spekis nott the ox?’ and the baillay ansswerd hym agayns and said, ‘For suthe! The ox may nott speke, for the cow is so fayr and so gude that sho will nott latt hym speke.’

Swallows

… somtyme ther was a husbandman, that had bygand [dwelling] in his howse everilk yere many swallows. So at tyme of the yere when thai wer bown [ready] att [to] goo, he tuke ane of the old swallows, and he wrate a bill with thir wurdis therin, ‘O Irund[o], ubi habitas in yeme?’ and he band it unto the fute therof, and lete hur goo, for he knew be experiens that sho wold come agayn the next yere. And so sho flow hur wais with other into the lande of Asie; and ther sho biggid in a howse all wynter. And so this gude man of the howse on a tyme beheld hur. And he tuke this burd, and lowsid the bill, and lukid whatt was therin; and he tuke it away, and wrate anoder, of thies wurdis, ‘In Asia, in domo Petri.’ And he knytt [fastened] it unto hur fute, and lete hur go. And sho come agayn

25 Tale number XCIX, Balliui frequenter munera recipiunt.
26 Tale number CCCLV, Hirundo singulis annis eadem loca repetit.
27 O swallow, where do you live in winter?
28 In Asia, in Peter’s house.
att sommer unto this husband howse, whar sho had bred befor; and he
tuke hur and lowsid this bill, and redd it. And he told the storie therof
unto many men, evyn as it had bene a miracle.

xviii) Malevolent Mice

… a riche man on a day satt at his meate. And sodanlie he was umlappid
with a grete flok of myce, and sodanly thai lefte all at was in the howse,
and purswed uppon hym. And men tuke hym and had hym unto a
ship on the water at he mot so [might thus] esskape the myce, and void
thaim fro hym. And thai lepid after hym into the watyr, and come to the
shupp and gnew [gnawed] it thurgh. And so he mott on no wyse kepe
hym fro thaim, unto so muche [until such time] att he was had to land
agayn; and ther the myce fell on hym and kyllid hym, and ete hym up
evere morsell unto the bare bonys.

xix) A Mouse and a Cat

A mowse on a tyme felle into a barell of newe ale, that spourgid [was
fermenting], and myght not come oute. The cate come beside, and
herde the mouse crie in the barme [froth], ‘Pepe! pepe!’ for she myght
not come oute. The cat seide, ‘Why cries thou?’ The mouse seide, ‘For
I may not come oute.’ The cat seide, ‘If I delyver the this tyme, thou
shalte come to me when I calle the.’ The mouse seide, ‘I graunte the, to
come when thou wilte.’ The cat seide, ‘Thou moste swere to me’, and
the mouse sware to kepe covenante. Then the catte with his fote drew
oute the mouse, and lete hym go. Afterward, the catte was hungry,
and come to the hole of the mouse, and called and bade hire come to
hym. The mouse was aferde, and saide, ‘I shall not come.’ The catte
saide, ‘Thou hast made an othe to me, for to come.’ The mouse saide,
‘Brother, I was dronkyne when I sware, and therfore I am not holdyn
to kepe myn othe.’

29 Tale number DXLV, Mures eciam homines aliquando inuadunt.
30 In Gesta Romanorum, tale XLV (fable of a cat and a mouse). Very well known, it also
appears among Spanish tales in Brewer’s Medieval Comic Tales.
xx) A Theft cannot be Hidden\textsuperscript{31}

... Som tyme ther was a man at [that] stale his neghbur shepe, and ete it; and this man that aght [owned] this shepe come unto saynt Patryk, and told hym how a shepe was stollen from hym, and he chargid oft sithis that who somevur had it sulde bryng it agayn, and no man wolde grawnte it. So on a haly day, when all the peple was in the kurk, saynt Patryk spirrid and commaundid, in the vertue of Jesu at this shepe sulde blete in his belie that had etyn itt, at all men might here. And so it did, and thus the thefe was known, and made amendis for his trispas. And all other that hard ever after was ferd to stele.

xxi) Animals Know that Theft is Sinful\textsuperscript{32}

... Som tyme ther was ane hermett that dwelt in wyldernes, and everilk day at meate tyme ther com unto his yate a sho-wulfe [she-wolf], and sho wulde never away or [before] he gaff hur somewhat at [to] eate. So on a day this hermett was with anoder bruther of his in occupacion, and come not home att meate-tyme of the day. And this wulfe come and fand hym not ther, and was war of a little bread in a wyndow, and sho brak in and tuke it, and eete it and went away. And when the hermett come home, he fand the crombis of the bread at the wyndow, and he demyd who had takyn it. And this wulfe knew hur deffaute, and wolde not com at this hermett a sennett [week] afterwerd. And when this hermet myssid this wulfe, at used to com daylie unto hym, he made his prayer unto God; and this wulfe com agayn upon the sennet day, bod sho stude of ferrom [far away], and durste not com nere hym. And sho layd hur down and held down hur head, as sho suld aske hym forgynes; and he tuke it for a confession, and bad hur com ner hym boldly, and he suld forgiff hur. And fro thensfurth evur after sho come at tyme of the day, and did hur ofifes as sho was wunt.

D. Some further Middle English Literary examples

These are not easy to find. One problem is that of all the types of Middle English popular literature, animal tales and poems are the result of

\textsuperscript{31} In Alphabet of Tales, number CCCXXXV, \textit{Furtum non potest celari}.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. number CCCXXXVI, \textit{Furtum commitendo eciam bruta se peccasse cognoscunt}. 
a very intimate interrelation between the ‘learned’ and the popular tradition. Birds make brief but significant appearances in lyrics. The high points, especially the elaborate bird debates, are to be found in poets like Chaucer, Henryson, and Holland. I have preferred examples which seem to come from the popular end of the spectrum (of which but few have survived), in contrast to the merry tales.

**xxii) Bird on Briar**

A love song, with music, apparently addressed to a bird, perhaps a confidant and the representative of Love.

Bryd on brere, brid, brid one brere,
Kynd is come of Love, love to crave
Blithful biryd, on me thu rewe,
Or greith, lef grei[th] thu me my grave.

[I]c am so blithe so bryhit brid on brere
Quan I se that hende in halle —
Yhe is quit of lime, loveli, trewe,
Yhe is fayr and flur of alle.

Mikte [i]c hire at wille haven,
Stedefast of love, loveli, trewe,
Of mi sorwe yhe may me saven,
Joye and blisse were me newe.

**xxiii) Foweles in the Frith**

Foweles in the frith, The fisses in the flod,
And I mon waxe wod;
For beste of bon and blod.

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In *The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse*, no. 64 (this well-known poem appears in numerous anthologies).

In *Medieval English Lyrics*, no. 4 (another well-known poem).
xxiv) I have Twelve Oxen

This poem seems close to folksong — perhaps a nursery rhyme

I have xii oxen that be fare and brown.
And they go agraysynge down by the town,
With hay, with howe, with hay!
Sawyste thow not myn oxen, thou litill prety boy?

I have xii oxen, and they be fayre and whight,
And they go agrasyng down by the dyke,
With hay, with howe, with hay!
Sawyste thou not myn oxen, thou lytyll prety boy?

I have xii oxen and they be fayre and blak,
And they go a grasyng down by the lak.
With hay, with howe, with hay!
Sawyste not thou myn oxen, thou lytyll prety boy?

I have xii oxen, and thei be fayre and rede,
And they go a grasyng down by the mede.
With hay, with howe, with hay!
Sawiste not thoy my oxen, thou litill prety boy?

Debates between animals, and especially between birds, were a favourite form of the sophisticated literary authors: like Chaucer’s Parliament of Foules; or Holland’s Buke of the Howlat, a Scottish poem in alliterative verse. One or two, however, seem possibly closer to the popular tradition. I give extracts from two thirteenth-century poems: firstly, from the Thrush and the Nightingale (in MS Digby 86), a somewhat stiff and uninspired debate on the nature of women.

35 In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, no. 250.
D. Some further Middle English Literary examples

xxv) The Thrush and the Nightingale

Somer is comen with love to toune,º the dwellings of men
With blostme, and with brides roune,º song of little birds
The noteº of hasel springeth,
The dewes darknethº in the dale; grow dark or misty
For longing of the nighttegale,
This fowelesº murieº singeth. these birds merrily

Hic herdeº a strifº bitweies two — I heard dispute
That onº of wele,º that other of wo,
Bitwene two ifere,º together
That on herethº wimmen that hoe beth praises
hende,º pleasant, kind
That other hem wole with mighte shende.º forcefully revile
That strif ye mowen ihereº … hear

[the Thrush speaks]
‘… I ne mayº wimen hereinº nout, cannot praise
For hy beth swikeleº and false of thohut.º treacherous mind
Also ich am ounderstonde.º am informed
Hy beth feire and bright on hewe,º complexion
Here thouº is fals, and ountreweº their thought untrue
Ful yareº ich have hem fonde’º … certainly found

The nightingale hoeº wes wroth:º she angry
‘Fowel, me thinkethº thou art me lothº it seems to me hateful
Swiche tales for to showe;
Among a thousent levediesº itoldeº enumerated
Ther nis nonº wickede I holde
Ther hy sitteth on rowe.

Hy beth of herteº meke and milde.
Hemself hy cunneº from shomeº shildeº are able shame guard

36 In English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century, ed. Brown, no. 52.
Withinne bowres wowe,
And swettoust thing in armes to wre
The mon that holdeth hem in gle.
Fowel, wi ne art thou hit icnowe?

‘Gentil fowel, seist thou hit me?
Ich habbe with hem in boure ibe,
I haved al mine wille.
Hy willeth for a luitel mede
Don a sunfoiul derne dede,
Here soule forto spille.

Foel, me thinketh thou art les,
They thou be milde and softe of pes,
Thou seyst thine wille.
I take witnesse of Adam,
That wes oure furste man,
That fonde hem wycke and ille.’

‘Threstelcok, thou art wod,
Other thou const to luitel goed,
This winmen for to shende.
Hit is the swetteste driwerie,
And mest hoe counnen of curteisie.
Nis nothing al so hende …’

[And so the argument continues, with the thrush citing further examples of the wickedness of women, and traditional examples of men (like Samson) brought down by them, until the Nightingale produces the Virgin Mary]
‘O fowel, thi mouth the haveth ishend!
Thoru wam wes al this world iwend?
Of a maide meke and milde,
Of hire sprong that holi bern
That boren wes in Bedlehem,
And temeth al that is wilde …’

[Whereupon the thrush admits defeat, apologetically says that she will no longer speak ill of women, and that she will fly away out of this land.]
D. Some further Middle English Literary examples

xxvi) From *The Owl and the Nightingale* [vv. 91–138]³⁷

The Nightingale Attacks the Owl

Our second debate is a much more lively affair, done with genuine wit and vivacity. The protagonists in their exchanges use exempla, fables, and proverbs, as well as rhetorical techniques of a less honourable kind. The poem’s editor says of the anonymous author that he was ‘a man of wide sympathies, a man who has seen something of the world and yet was not without the kind of learning valued among the religious.’³⁸ He seems to have been well read in the literature of his day, but he was also deeply responsive to the popular tradition, as we can see in the way he uses traditional and proverbial animal lore.

The poem’s protagonists are introduced at the beginning. The Nightingale, sitting on a bough, looks down on the old stump which is the dwelling-place of the owl. She has a very low opinion of the Owl’s singing: ‘Me luste bet [better] speten [spit] thane singe Of thine fule yogelinge [wailing, hooting]’. Later, in the evening, the Owl does sing, and remarks triumphantly ‘Hu thincthe [do you think] nu bi mine songe? Wenst thu that ic ne cunne singe, Thegh ich ne kunne of writelinge [warbling]’, and ends with a threat: if I held you in my foot you would sing ‘in other wise’. The Nightingale replies that she will remain secure in her cover because she knows that the Owl is hostile to small birds, and in consequence is hated by them all; and they try to drive the Owl away. The Owl is ugly, unclean, and unnatural. And the altercation gets off to a fine start with a mixture of comedy, satire, deep-seated incompatibility, and outright hostility …

... Thu art lodlichº and unclene, loathsome
Bi thine neste ich hit mene,
And ek bi thine fule brode:º foul brood
Thu fedest on hom a wel ful fode.³⁹

³⁷ *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. Stanley (extracts from this poem are added to chapter 7, below).
³⁸ p. 32.
³⁹ ‘When you feed them, you feed very foul offspring’ (Stanley’s note to line 94, p. 107).
[W]el wostu thatº hi doth tharinne:
you know what
Hi fuleth hit up to the chinne;
Hoº siteth thar soº hi bo bisne.º she as if be blind
Tharbi men segget a vorbisne:º proverbº
‘Dahet habbe that ilke bestº bad luck may that creature have
That fulethº his owe nest,’

That other yerº a faukun bredde;º
year falcon bred
His nest noght wel he ne bisedde.º did not watch over
Tharto thu steleº in oº dai,

And leidestº tharon thi fol ey.º placed foul egg
Thoº hit bicomº that he haghteº then happened hatched
And of his eyreº bridesº wraghte,º

Ho broghte his brides meteº food
Biholdº his nest, isey hi ete;º

He isey bi one halveº

His nest ifuled uthalve.º

The faukun was wroth wit his bride,º chicks
And lude yalº and sterne chidde Nº loudly screamed chided
‘Seggetº me, wo havet this ido?’
tell
Ouº nas never icundeº tharto.
to you natural
Hit was idon ou a loth custe.º

Segge[t] me, yif ye hit wiste!

Tho quath that on,º and quad that other,

‘Iwis, hit was ure ogheº brother.
our own
The yond,º that haved that grete heved;

Wai that he nis tharof bireved!º what a pity he is not deprived of it
Worp hit utº mid the alre wrste,º throw it out with the worst rubbish of all
That his necke him toberste!ºº that he breaks
The faucun ilefdeº his brideº left chicks
And nom that fule brid a midde,ºº in the middle
And warp hit of than wilde bowe,ºº branch
Thar pieº and crowe hit todrowe.ºº magpie tore to pieces
Herbi men seggetº a bispelº — say parable, tale
Thegh hit ne bo fuliche spelº —

though it is not a full narrative
D. Some further Middle English Literary examples

‘Also hit is bið than ungode
That is icumen of fule brode
And is meindº wit froº monne,
Ever he cuthº that he com thonne,
That he com of than adel eyeº
Thegh he a fro nest leieº
Thegh appel trendli fron thon troweº
Tharº he, and other midº growe,
Theghº he bo tharfrom bicumeº
He cuthº wel whoneneº he is icume.’

xxvii) The Hare’s Lament

It is rare to find any expression of sympathy, however brief, in Middle English animal tales, for hunted animals like the fox or the hare.

Bi a forrest as I gan fareº
Walkyng al myselven alone,
I hardº a morningº of an haare,
Rouffully schewº mad here moneº
‘Dereworthº God, how schal I leveº
And leyd my lyveº in lond?
Frouº dale to douneº I am idrevfeº —
I notº where I may syte or stond.

I may notherº rest nor slepe
By no wallayº that is so derneº
Nor no covertº may me kepeº
But ever I reneº fro herneº to herne.

Hontterisº wyll not heyre ther maseº
In hopeº of hunttyng for to wendº

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41 Whiting A 169.
42 In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, no. 178.
They cowpullyth° ther howndes more and lase,° couple large and small

And bryngyth theme to feldys° ende. field’s

Rochis° renyn on every syde hounds
In furrous that hoppe° me to fynd; hope
Honteris takythe ther hors and ryde,
And cast° the contray° to the wynd,° search country up wind
Anone as° they commyth me behynde, as soon as
I loke and syt ful style° and lo[w]e — still
The furst mane that me doth fynde
Anon° he cryit, ‘so howe! so hoowe! at once

‘Lo,’ he sayth, ‘where syttyt an haare —

‘Aryse upe, Watte,° and go forth blyve!’° Wat quickly
With sorroe and with mych care° great grief
I schape° away with my lyve,
escape

Att wyntter in the depe sno[w]e
Men wyl me seche for to trace,° track
And by my steyppes° I ame iknowe;° footprints recognised
And followyth me fro place to place.

And yf I to the toune° come or torne,° town turn
Be hit in worttes or in leyke,° whether for vegetables or leek(s)
Then wyl the wyffys° also yeorne° women as eagerly
Flec[h]e° me with here dogis heyke.° drive out also

And yf I syt and crope the koule,°
nibble the kale
And the wyfe be in the waye,° road
Anone schowe° wyll swere, ‘By cokes° soule!
she God’s
There is an haare in my haye!’° hedge

43 Wat is a country name for a hare, cf. Tod for fox (it is called Coward, or Couart, in the Reynard stories, and the German word ‘Hase’ means both hare and poltroon).
Anone sche wyle clepe forthº hure knaveº
And loke right we[l] werº I syte;
Behynd sche wyl with a stave
Ful wel porposº me to hette.º

‘Go forthe, Wat, witº Crystus curse,
And yf I leve,º thou schalt be take;º
I have an hare-pypeº in my purce,º
Hit schal be set al for thi s[a]ke!’

Then hath this wyffe .ii. dogges grete,
On me sche byddyt hemeº goe;
And as a schroweº sche wyll me thretº
And ever sche cryit, ‘Go, do[g]ge, gooe!’

But allway thisº most I goo,
By no banke I may abyde —
Lord God, that me is woo!
Many a hapeº hath me bytyde.º

There is no bestº in the wordº I weneº —
Hert, hynd, buke ne dowº —
That suffuris halfe so myche teneº
As doth the sylly Watº — go whereº he go.

Yeyfeº a genttyllmane wyl have any game,
And fynd me in formeº where I syte,
For dredº of lossynge of his nameº
I wotº wel he wyle not me hyte.º

For an acuris bredº he wyll me leve,º
Orº he wyll let his hondes renº
Of all the men that beth alive
I am most behold to genttlymen!
As sone as I can ren to the laye,\textsuperscript{9} open ground
Anon the greyhondys wyl me have;
My bowels beth ithrowe\textsuperscript{9} awaye, are thrown
And I ame bore home on a stavfe.\textsuperscript{9} stave

Als sone as I am come home, hook
I ame ihonge hye upon a pyne,\textsuperscript{9}
With leke-worttes\textsuperscript{9} I am eete\textsuperscript{9} anone, leeks eaten
And whelpes play with my skyne!