

## C The owl and the nightingale

The Owl and the Nightingale, one of the earliest long comic poems to be written in Middle English, describes an imagined debate between two nocturnal birds. It is an anonymous work, dated to 1189-1216.

The nightingale began the argument in the corner of a clearing, and perched on a beautiful branch – there was plenty of blossom around it – in an impenetrable thick hedge, with reeds and green sedge growing through it. She was all the happier because of the branch, and sang in many different ways; the music sounded as if it came from a harp or a pipe rather than from a living throat. Nearby there stood an old stump<sup>1</sup> where the owl sang her Hours, and which was all overgrown with ivy; this was where the owl lived. The nightingale looked at her, and scrutinised her and despised her, and everything about the owl seemed unpleasant to her, since she is regarded as ugly and dirty.

“You nasty creature!”, she said, “fly away! The sight of you makes me sick. Certainly I often have to stop singing because of your ugly face. My heart fails me, and so does my speech, when you thrust<sup>2</sup> yourself on me. I’d rather spit than sing about your wretched howling.”

The owl waited until it was evening; she couldn’t hold back any longer, because she was so angry that she could hardly breathe, and finally she spoke:

“How does my song seem to you now? Do you think that I can’t sing just because I can’t twitter? You often insult me and say things to upset and embarrass me. If I held you in my talons<sup>3</sup> – if only I could! – and you were off your branch, you’d sing a very different tune!”

The nightingale answered, “As long as I keep out of the open, and protect myself against being exposed, I’m not bothered about your threats; as long as I stay put in my hedge, I don’t care at all what you say. I know that you’re ruthless towards those who can’t protect themselves from you, and that where you can you bully small birds cruelly and harshly. [...]”

The owl listened to this, and kept her eyes lowered, and sat puffed up and swollen with rage, as if she had swallowed a frog, because she was fully aware that the nightingale was singing to humiliate her. And nevertheless she answered:

“Why don’t you fly into the open and show which of us two is brighter in colouring and prettier to look at?”

“No! you have very sharp claws; I don’t fancy being clawed by you. You have very strong talons; you grip with them like a pair of tongs. You were planning – that’s what your sort do – to trick me with flattery. I wouldn’t do what you suggested to me; I knew very well that you were trying to mislead me. You ought to be ashamed of your bad advice! Your deviousness<sup>4</sup> has been exposed; hide your dishonesty from the light, and conceal that wickedness<sup>5</sup> under good behaviour! When you want to practise your villainy, see that it’s not obvious; because dishonesty brings down contempt and hatred if it is open and recognised. You didn’t succeed with your cunning plans, because I’m cautious and can easily dodge<sup>6</sup>. It’s no use your pushing too hard; I would fight better with cunning than you with all your strength. I have a good castle, both in breadth and length, in my branch; the wise man says,

‘He who fights and runs away,  
Lives to fight another day.’

But let’s stop this quarrelling, because speeches like this aren’t getting us anywhere; and let’s begin with reasonable procedure, and courteous and diplomatic language. Even if we don’t agree, we can plead better politely, without quarrelling and fighting, properly and correctly; and indeed each of us can say what she wants to fairly and reasonably.”

1. stump: the part of a tree left after the trunk was cut – 2. thrust: attack (here) – 3. talons: claws  
4. deviousness: dishonesty – 5. wickedness: badness – 6. dodge: avoid

1 Read the introduction. List the words used to describe the owl and the nightingale. Analyse how the narrator describes the two birds.

2 Read the text from “you nasty” to “harshly” (l. 9-20). Comment on the tone and the words used by both the nightingale and the owl to address each other.

3 Explain how it impacts the reader’s view of the two characters.

4 Read the end of the text (l. 21 to the end). Describe the strategies used by the owl and the nightingale to end the argument.

5 You are an animal witnessing the argument. Imagine who is going to win this debate and why.

**A**

Now Mr Price, you told the sheriff during his investigation that there was a skinny<sup>1</sup> passenger on the bus who could've been a tall woman disguised as a man. Is that correct? Please describe this passenger."

"Yeah, that's right. A young white man. Reckon he was 'bout five ten, and his pants just hung on him like sheets on a fence post. He wore a big bulky cap, blue. Kept his head down, didn't look at anybody."

"And now that you've seen Miss Clark, do you believe it's possible that the skinny man on the bus was Miss Clark in disguise? Could her long hair have been hidden in that bulky<sup>2</sup> cap?"

"Yeah, I do."

Eric asked the judge to request that Kya stand up, and she did so with Tom Milton by her side.

"You can sit back down, Miss Clark," Eric said, and then to the witness, "Would you say that the young man on the bus was the same height and stature as Miss Clark?"

"I'd say 'bout exactly the same," Mr. Price said.

"So all things considered, would you say that it's likely that the skinny man on the 11:50 P.M. bus traveling from Greenville to Barkley Cove on the night of October 29 of last year was in fact the defendant Miss Clark?"

"Yeah, I'd say that's very possible."

"Thank you, Mr Price. No further questions. Your witness."

Tom stood in front of the witness stand and, after five minutes of questioning Mr. Price, he summed up. "What you've told us is this: one, there was no woman who looked like the defendant on the bus from Greenville to Barkley Cove on the night of October 29, 1969; two, there was a tall, thin man on the bus, but at the time, even though you saw his face very close, you didn't think of him as a woman in disguise; three, this idea of disguise only came to you when the sheriff suggested it."

Tom continued before the witness could respond. "Mr. Price, tell us how you're sure the thin man was on the 11:50 P.M. bus of October 29? Did you take notes, write it down? Maybe it was the night before or the night after. Are you one hundred percent sure it was October 29?"

"Well, I see what you're getting at. And, when the sheriff was jogging my memory, it seemed like that man was on that bus, but now, I reckon I can't be one hundred percent sure."

"Also, Mr. Price, wasn't the bus very late that night? In fact, it was twenty-five minutes late and didn't arrive in Barkley Cove until 1:40 in the morning. Is that correct?"

"Yeah." Mr. Price looked at Eric. "I'm just trying to help out here, do the right thing."

Tom reassured him. "You've been a great help, Mr. Price. Thank you very much. No further questions."

*Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens, 2018 ■

1 List the facts put forward by the witness and comment on how he expresses himself.

2 Compare the facts with their interpretations by the lawyer. Explain the lawyer's strategy.

3 Imagine the effect of this analysis on the jury.

4 Comment on the ending of the testimony. What was the lawyer's objective?

5 **GROUP WORK.** Make a list of possible counter arguments following this testimony. Write and act the defence lawyer's plea.

## Nouns

trial  
bar  
barrister  
caveat: warning

## Adjectives

law-abiding  
null and void: cancelled  
persuasive  
assertive

## Verbs

acquit  
release on bail  
testify  
assemble a case  
sue

## Expressions

innocent until proven guilty  
take/swear an oath: make a promise  
a breach of promise  
bona fide: in good faith  
contempt of court:  
disruption of court

1. skinny: very slim - 2. bulky: large



The art of debate involves mastering skills of obvious intrinsic value: the confidence to speak in public, and make sense; the construction of a logical argument; the ability to read an audience's reactions; and, perhaps most importantly, the willingness<sup>1</sup> to hear others' arguments, and to respond to them. For Rosa Thomas, one of Team England's members, being brought face to face with the reality of other debaters' lives was particularly memorable: "It makes you more aware of your national assumptions," she says. "For example, that there is a national health service<sup>2</sup>. But you can't rely on this with an international audience. Also, you are aware that when talking about other countries, there will be individuals from those places in the audience." [...]

If a perception of this kind of competitive debating as old-fashioned and the preserve of public schools and university societies goes unchallenged, then we lose a great deal. Robert Sharpe of the worldwide writers' association English PEN sees charges of elitism as a shame, because "the skills one learns through a good debate are crucial for modern life. Political events continue to remind us of the importance of persuasive arguments and good oratory that appeal not only to our rational side, but our emotional side too." He also thinks the ability to see the other side is particularly important. "The essence of free speech is that we allow people with whom we disagree to speak. Wrongheaded<sup>3</sup> views will be aired. But free speech means no one gets the last word. We can – and indeed, we should – use our own right to free speech to challenge expression we think is unpleasant or wrong. To do this we need to be equipped to argue in public. Debating competitions are a fantastic way to teach this important skill to young people." [...]

The discussion of the possible limits and limitations of free speech recurs on an almost constant basis across social media, and perhaps nowhere so starkly as on Twitter, where those disagreeing with one another rail at<sup>4</sup> anyone who will listen – and indeed, anyone who won't. Twitter's problem is its encouragement of the individual's "broadcast mode", where the superficial appearance of a conversation is, in fact, two or more people simply stating and restating their views with ever-intensifying fury. Nothing real is at stake<sup>5</sup>: the exchange can be abandoned at any point. Hacked off<sup>6</sup> with someone? Block them. Too shy to block? Mute (the word is telling).

But the powerful thing Twitter has going for it is that there is no barrier to entry if you have access to the internet. [...]

I asked Sam Leith, author of *You Talkin' to Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*, what he thought. [...] "Nowadays, the main audience for a debate won't be the people in earshot: the exchange is intended to be, as it were, overheard by hundreds of thousands of people on television and social media. So, of course, people don't make three-hour-long, perfectly turned speeches intended to be taken in whole: they semaphore emotion, repeat key words, pepper it with catchphrases and soundbites. And that's what works."

"Why debating still matters," *The Guardian*, Aug. 8, 2016 ■

1. willingness: desire - 2. national health service: British social security  
3. wrongheaded: wrong, mistaken - 4. rail at: criticise - 5. at stake: at risk - 6. hacked off: annoyed

- 1 Read the first two paragraphs and explain in your own words what are the essential qualities to be a good debater according to the journalist.
- 2 Give a definition of "free speech" as mentioned in this article.
- 3 Comment on Twitter as a debating platform, with its advantages and drawbacks.



- 4 Find elements which characterise modern forms of debating.
- 5 **PAIR WORK.** Debate online about the importance of free speech, using Sam Leith's advice. Student A believes Twitter is a good platform. Student B believes the opposite.

#### Nouns

counter-argument  
resolution  
rebuttal  
fallacy = untruth  
plurality

#### Adjectives

equivocal  
confrontational  
extemporaneous:  
improvised

#### Verbs

affirm  
claim  
refute  
retaliate

#### Expressions

more style than  
substance  
agree to disagree  
cushion the blow: make  
one's disappointment  
less painful  
common ground