

Somayeh Baeten

Birds, Birds, Birds:
A Comparative Study of Medieval Persian
and English Poetry, especially Attar's
Conference of Birds, The Owl and the
Nightingale, Chaucer's *The Parliament of*
Fowls and The Canterbury Tales



English and Beyond

herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger
und Monika Kirner-Ludwig

Band 11

Umschlagabbildung: Adrineh Zohrabi



Zugl.: Diss., München, Univ., 2019

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Das Werk ist urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Sämtliche, auch auszugsweise Verwertungen
bleiben vorbehalten.

Copyright © utzverlag GmbH · 2020

ISBN 978-3-8316-4860-3 (gebundenes Buch)

ISBN 978-3-8316-7579-1 (E-Book)

Printed in EU
utzverlag GmbH, München
089-277791-00 · www.utzverlag.de

هرگز نمیرد آنکه دلش زنده شد به عشق ثبت است بر جریده عالم دوام ما

He, whose heart has been revived by love will never die,
Our eternity has been written in the record of the universe (Hafez 2014, 46)

(Humbly dedicated to the memory of my mom)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1. General Background and Aim of the Study	1
1.2. Review of Comparative Research	4
2. Attar	5
2.1. Biography, Works and Ideology	5
2.2. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	7
3. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	9
3.1. Dating	9
3.2. Localization	10
4. Chaucer	11
4.1. Biography, Works and Ideology	11
4.2. <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	13
4.3. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	14
5. Major Sources	15
5.1. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	15
5.2. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	16
5.3. <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	17
5.4. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	17
5.5. Comparison	19
6. Contents and Structure	19
6.1. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	19
6.1.1. The Frame Tale	19
6.1.2. The Stories	22
6.2. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	28
6.3. <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	29
6.4. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	31
6.4.1. The Frame Tale	31
6.4.2. The Stories	32
6.5. Comparison	39
7. Genres	40
7.1. Animal Fable	40
7.2. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	41

7.2.1. The Frame Tale	41
7.2.2. The Stories.....	41
7.3. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	43
7.4. <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	44
7.5. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	44
7.5.1. The Frame Tale	44
7.5.2. The Stories.....	45
7.6. Comparison	52
8. Social Classes	53
8.1. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	53
8.2. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	54
8.3. <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	55
8.4. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	56
8.5. Comparison	57
9. Major Ideas and Motifs.....	58
9.1. Love.....	58
9.2. Religion	81
9.3. Allegory and Symbolism.....	88
9.4. Leader and Judge.....	92
9.5. Nature	98
10. Conclusion and General Comparison.....	102
11. Bibliography.....	104
11.1. Editions and Translations.....	104
11.2. Dictionaries	106
11.3. Studies and Handbooks	106
11.4. Uniform Resource Locators	106
12. Appendices	108
12.1. List of Tales.....	108
12.1.1. <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	108
12.1.2. <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	115
12.1.3. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	115
12.2. List of references to Quran in <i>The Conference of Birds</i>	116

Acknowledgements

This monograph was completed as my doctoral dissertation at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU) with many official and unofficial helps. After thanking God, it is my pleasure to acknowledge my profound gratitude to my doctoral father, Prof. Hans Sauer, for making it possible for me to study at LMU, his assistance and encouragement throughout the study accompanied with his useful guidance in reading drafts of every chapter of this project, a process that contributed greatly to my academic development. Furthermore, my gratitude goes to Prof. Sauer for including my dissertation in the publication series of 'English and beyond'. In addition, I would like to thank and admire my second supervisor, Prof. Helge Nowak, for his assistance and guidelines from the very beginning of the process. Afterwards, I find it my duty to express my appreciations and respect to Prof. Gaby Waxenberger as well as Prof. Ursula Lenker for their cooperation and support. I also thank the staff of Utz Verlag in München, for their assistance. Last but not least, my thanks go to my kind-hearted family, and my patient husband, Prof. Andre Baeten, whose daily support and compassion will never be forgotten.

Munich, December 2020

Somayeh Baeten

1. Introduction

1.1. General Background and Aim of the Study

Comparative studies in the field of literature play a vital role in connecting literatures of the world. There are literary works that have come into existence on their own in one society and gained their value and perfection through the help of other writers in another. Great writers benefit from masterpieces of other nations while keeping their own unique style of writing. One example is the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe, being inspired by the Persian poet Hafez, writes *West-Östlicher Divan (West-Eastern Divan)* in which he connects Orient and Occident as two inseparable worlds. For thousands of years, the East and the West have been exchanging literature, as in the case of body and mind. Travel and trade along the Silk Road brought ancient texts and mind practices deep into the West.

In the light of comparison through presenting the correspondences and unfolding the disparities of ideas of literary works, one may conclude that while authors follow their individual intentions, the ideas in literary works can be related. The present book compares one of the masterpieces of Persian literature, Attar's *The Conference of Birds*, with those of Middle English Poetry, especially *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Through comparing and identifying similar and dissimilar notions regarding the content and the thematic features of the works, the book covers the literary aspects of Persian and English masterpieces. As a result, the outcome of this research will shed light on previous studies and assist scholars to acquire guidelines for further comparative studies and future findings in both Persian and English literatures.

The Conference of the Birds is a poetic frame tale in Persian by Farid ud Din Attar of about 4,500 lines. Farid ud Din Attar was a scholar who lived in the 12th century (c.1145-c.1221). He travelled extensively, studying in monasteries and collecting the writings, stories and legends of spiritual leaders in the inner mystical dimension of Islam. *The Conference of the Birds* sets out what Attar learned throughout his journeys. The poem uses a journey by a group of thirty birds, led by a Hoopoe as an allegory of a Sufi Sheikh or master leading his pupils to enlightenment. Reaching the land of Simorgh, the self should be annihilated. The journey of the birds takes them through the seven valleys of the 1. Quest, 2. Love, 3. Understanding, 4. Independence and Detachment, 5. Unity, 6. Astonishment, and finally 7. Selflessness and Nothingness. As long as people are separated in the material world, good and evil will arise, but when they are drawn in the divine essence, then will be transcended by 'Love'.

When unity is achieved, one forgets everything and even oneself in the valley of astonishment and bewilderment. The Hoopoe declares that the last valley of deprivation is almost impossible to describe. In the immensity of the divine ocean the pattern of the present world and the future world dissolves. As one realises that the individual self does not really exist and what exists is nothing but the divine, as a drop becomes part of the great ocean forever in peace. Attar uses the analogy of moths seeking flame. From thousands of birds, only thirty reach the end of the journey. When the light of lights is manifested and they are at peace, they become aware that the Simorgh is actually themselves. They begin a new life in the Simorgh and contemplate the

inner world. By annihilating themselves, they do not renounce their self-pride, vanity, and self-love. Attar concluded the epilogue with the admonition that:

چند خواهد بحر جان در جوش بود جان فشاندن باید و خاموش بود

“if someone wishes to find the ocean of soul, then he should be dead to all his old life, and then keep silent” (4594). Besides being one of the most celebrated examples of Persian poetry, this book relies on a clever word play with the word ‘Simorgh’: ‘Si-Morgh’ means ‘thirty birds’ in Persian. The king whom the birds are searching for is a mysterious bird in Iranian mythology, also a symbol often found in Islamic mystic literature similar to the phoenix.

There are poems with some similarities to Attar’s poem in the medieval English literature. One medieval bird poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, also Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Canterbury Tales* are some of the examples.

The Owl and the Nightingale is a 12th century or 13th century Middle English poem detailing a debate between an owl and a nightingale about whether it is better to be mirthful or earnest, the earliest example in Middle English of a literary form known as debate poetry. The Nightingale defends her singing on the grounds that heaven is a place of song and happiness, while the owl maintains that much weeping for his many sins is man's best preparation for the future. But unlike most debate poetry, *The Owl and the Nightingale* offers no resolution, thus forcing the reader to interpret the highly ambiguous text for himself.

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400), ranks as one of the greatest narrative works of world literature. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories embedded in a frame tale written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer. The book, left incomplete when the author died, depicts a pilgrimage by some thirty people, similar to the number of Attar’s birds, riding to the shrine of the martyr, St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury on a spring day in April. On the way, they amuse themselves by telling stories.

The tales, mostly in verse (two are in prose), are told as part of a story-telling contest. The stories are interlinked with connecting pieces in which the characters talk to each other and occasionally quarrel, revealing much about them. The idea of a pilgrimage appears to have been an unprecedented, yet useful device to get such a diverse collection of people together for literary purposes. Introducing a competition among the tales and their tellers encourages the reader to compare the tales in all their variety and allows Chaucer to showcase the breadth of his skill in different genres and literary forms. No other work prior to Chaucer's is known to have set a collection of tales within the framework of pilgrims on a pilgrimage. He uses the tales and descriptions of the characters to paint an ironic and critical portrait of English society and particularly of the Church in the late Middle Ages.

Another medieval bird poem is also by Chaucer, *The Parliament of Fowls*. As for the birds, they are distinguished by rank (such as noble and royal, based largely on their feeding habits, with the seed-eating birds at the bottom), just as the medieval society was. Since birds of prey (goshawks, merlins, gerfalcons, and eagles) were used in falconry as hunting birds by the nobility, and certain species, including eagles and gerfalcons, were reserved for use by only the highest ranked individuals, it is not surprising that Chaucer would put the birds of prey in the

top rank of the birds. Ranking birds, while mirroring human social gradations among animals, was a recognisable literary trope, clearly meant as allegory.

It is not surprising that the tercel-falcon, another bird of prey used in falconry, is chosen as the judge. All the proceedings before Dame Nature are meant to mock the workings of the actual English Parliament, to some extent, which at this time was often engaged in a struggle between the commons and the aristocracy. The English term 'parliament', according to the Middle English Dictionary (MED) (1999), is based on a Latin root 'parlare' meaning 'talk'.

The present study compares *The Conference of Birds* and Middle English Poetry, especially *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, and tries to present the correspondences and unfold the disparities of ideas while revealing the individual intentions of works mentioned. Accordingly, the following questions are raised:

1. Which correspondences and disparities of forms and ideas can be found in works?
2. Which intentions does each individual literary work have?

By doing so, we will become aware of the notions regarding content and thematic features of the works. Having a look at Attar's *Conference of Birds* and the Middle English poems, we may come to understand the common features that these works share.

The quest for camping out, for instance, is presenting both *The Conference of Birds* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The Conference of Birds*, the notion of city is there, city as a centre that can be anywhere, but which kind? The reader remains in the realm of multiplicity and unity-multiplicity. In this city, the self should be annihilated. There exists only one being that can be many, and there are many that can be one. In the *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, there is a journey for pilgrims based on a geographical mapping. As the pilgrims travel, several locations along the way to Canterbury are mentioned. Chaucer's writing (mainly the frame tale) seems focused primarily on the stories told, and not on the pilgrimage itself.

In the City of God of *The Conference of Birds*, the natural law is postponed or subordinated to the Law of God. There is also a binary opposition referencing outside which is inside: *The Conference of Birds*, being allegorical, mystic and narrative, wants to establish a metaphysical being that is outside. Multiplicity should disappear into the transcendental being (unity), and therefore dissimilarities must vanish in individuals: the peacock should forget about his beauty and the parrot should forget about his mimicry. There is also a tendency to frame a society with one core in which multiplicity must disappear.

There exists a quest for love in the three works: *The Conference of Birds*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*. Although the nature of love with its interpretation, in a way, differs from one work to another, religion, on the other hand, plays a key role in both *Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of Birds*. In most of the works, debating and arguing, while having a judge to lead, is a common feature. Storytelling is also a common element which they share. Having birds as the characters, while each bird symbolises something different, is a noticeable similarity in *The Conference of Birds*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*.

In the present study, Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* (1987); the Modern English translation of *The Canterbury Tales* is by Wright (1986)¹, and *Parliament of Fowls* by Kline (2007)². The English translation of Attar's poem is mainly from Darbandi & Davis (1984) beside the prose translation of Stanley Nott (1971), a literal and complete French translation of Garcin De Tassyand into English, and the original Persian with the edition of both Shafiei Kadkani and Salmasi (2009, 2008). Finally, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is from Atkins (1922) and the Modern English Translation from MS Cotton Caligula³.

1.2. Review of Comparative Research

There are many books and articles that are devoted to criticism of Chaucer's and Attar's works. Some studies have been conducted on Persian Literature and Western literary works. For instance, Helmut Ritter in his book of *The Ocean of the Soul* (transl. by O'Kane, 2003) did a comprehensive survey and study of Attar's literary works and mystical doctrine, situating his poetry and prose within the wider context of the Persian Sufi tradition.

Apart from numerous mono-lingual comparative studies done so far for each of the four works of this study, some comparative studies have also been conducted on Persian Literature and Western literary works: Seied Mohamad Marandi and Nahid Ahmadian wrote a paper (2006) comparing Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* with Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Mohamadreza Nasresfahani and Mahboubeh Hematian also in a paper (2011) compared Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* with Attar's *Conference of Birds* in terms of their format and content; Maryam Khoshbakht, Moussa Ahmadian and Shahrukh Hekmat wrote an article entitled "A Comparative Study of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* & Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*" in 2013, in which the story direction, narrative techniques, characterization, and settings of both works are compared. Going through similarities of the two works, they concluded that Chaucer created realistic and objective events and characters, and his purpose was to present the political and social disruption of his age; Attar on the other hand, although he refers to social corruptions, views them as obstacles that prevent men to grow spiritually. Nezhat Nohi also compared *The Conference of the Birds* with Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* in her book, *Talking Birds* (2008). She sheds light on the notions like structure, argument, and symbols.

Regarding comparative studies of Attar's *The Conference of Birds* and those of Middle English poetry, especially *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Canterbury Tales*, there are unexplored areas on which the present study focuses, such as the narrator: what kind of narrator exists in the works; the time frame and the place(s): which kind of time is presented in the texts and how long do the action, pilgrimage and debate take;

¹ Also: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/ct-prolog-para.asp>
<http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/tr-index.htm>

² Retrieved from: <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/English/Fowls.php>

³ Retrieved from: <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/owl/owltrans.htm>

English and Beyond

herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger und Monika Kirner-Ludwig

- Band 12: Esaúl Ruiz Narbona: **Transitivising Mechanisms in Old English** · Preverbs versus the Deverbal Causative Formation
2020 · 404 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4872-6
- Band 11: Somayeh Baeten: **Birds, Birds, Birds: A Comparative Study of Medieval Persian and English Poetry, especially Attar's *Conference of Birds*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Canterbury Tales***
2020 · 132 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4860-3
- Band 10: Laura García Fernández: **Lemmatising Old English on a relational database** · Preterite-present, contracted, anomalous and strong VII verbs
2020 · 432 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4821-4
- Band 9: Felix Hausleitner: **Das altenglische *Læceboc* I und II** · Textausgabe, Übersetzung, Kommentar
2020 · 456 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4835-1
- Band 8: Hans Sauer, Elisabeth Kubaschewski (Hrsg.), Birgit Schwan (Mitwirkung): **Planting the Seeds of Knowledge: An Inventory of Old English Plant Names**
2018 · 444 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4743-9
- Band 7: Kaifan Yang: **The Concepts of Time in Anglo-Saxon England**
2020 · 218 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4685-2
- Band 6: Sophia Huber: **African American Vernacular English as a Literary Dialect** · A Linguistic Approach
2018 · 394 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4669-2
- Band 5: Stefanie Gerhards: **Die Murbacher Hymnen** · Edition nach der Handschrift Junius 25, Bodleian Library, Oxford
2018 · 220 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4682-1
- Band 4: Veronika Traidl: **Telling tales about Beowulf** · The poem and the films
2016 · 348 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4464-3
- Band 3: Maria Sutor: **Non-native Speech in English Literature**
2015 · 326 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4417-9
- Band 2: Kousuke Kaita: **Modal Auxiliaries from Late Old to Early Middle English** · With Special Reference to *agan*, *sculan*, and *motan*
2015 · 218 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4378-3
- Band 1: Anne Aschenbrenner: **Adjectives as nouns, mainly as attested in *Boethius* translations from Old to Modern English and in Modern German**
2014 · 366 Seiten · ISBN 978-3-8316-4365-3

Erhältlich im Buchhandel oder direkt beim Verlag:
utzverlag GmbH, München
089-277791-00 · info@utzverlag.de

Gesamtverzeichnis mit mehr als 3000 lieferbaren Titeln: www.utzverlag.de