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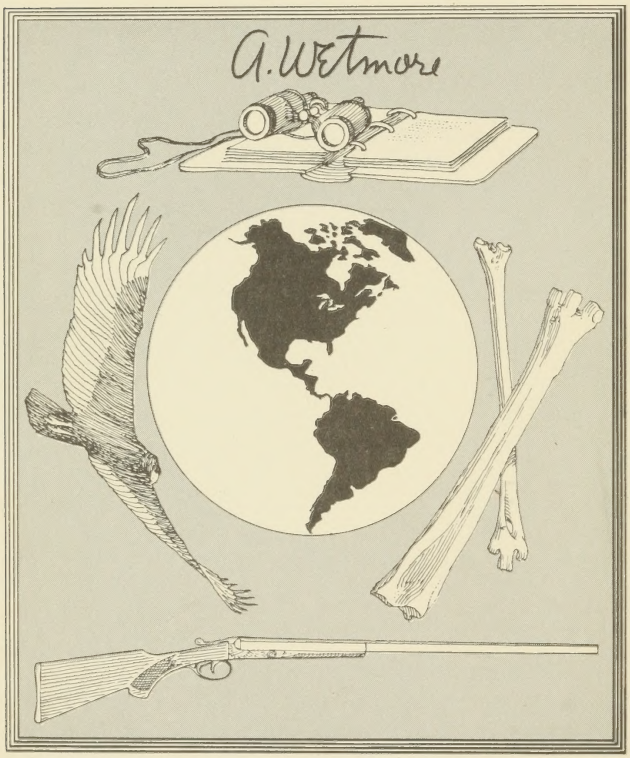

Alexander Wetmore

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THE BIRDS OF SHAKESPEARE

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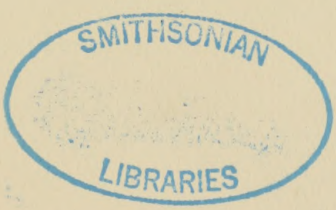
THE BIRDS OF SHAKESPEARE

BY

SIR ARCHIBALD GEIKIE, O.M.

K.C.B., D.C.L., F.R.S.



GLASGOW

JAMES MACLEHOSE AND SONS

PUBLISHERS TO THE UNIVERSITY

1916

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Preface

The attentive reader of Shakespeare's Poems and Plays can hardly fail to notice the remarkable frequency of the Poet's allusions to Birds, not merely as a great choir of songsters, enlivening the woods and fields with their varied music, but as individual creatures, each endowed with its own special characters. Shakespeare has drawn an assemblage of bird-portraits to which, for extent and variety, no equal is to be found in any other great English poet. Making ample use of what he had himself observed about Birds in their native haunts, and combining this personal knowledge with what he could obtain from literature and from popular fancy or superstition, he has employed the material thus gathered to illustrate, in many an apt simile

and striking metaphor, his vivid presentation of the great drama of human life. If we compare him in this respect with either the poets who preceded or those who have followed him we learn that he stands apart from them all.

The present little volume was written as a Presidential Address to the Haslemere Natural History Society, and was read to the members on March 9th of the present year. The approach of the Shakespeare Tercentenary having brought the poet and his writings more closely to the mind, it appeared to me not inappropriate that a company of naturalists should be asked to consider how one branch of the subjects in which they are more specially interested had been treated by the greatest poet of all time. The Address was nearly finished when I came, for the first time, upon the excellent and exhaustive *Ornithology of Shakespeare*, by Mr. James Harting, published in 1871. I would gladly have

availed myself of this volume had I known of it sooner, but I gleaned from it a few quotations which in my search through the Poems and Plays I had missed. My object, however, was somewhat different from that author's. Approaching the subject from the literary rather than the scientific side, I desired to show that Shakespeare's delight in birds and bird-music was not less keen than that of Chaucer and the earlier poets, and at the same time to point out how detailed was his acquaintance with birds, and how wide the range of similitudes which he drew from them to the great enrichment of our literature. I have ventured also to illustrate the change of poetic mood since his time in regard to Nature by citing three poems on Birds by three of the great poets of last century.

The *Cambridge Shakespeare* of W. Aldis Wright is the text from which my citations are made. I have to thank Messrs.

Gurney and Jackson for their courtesy in supplying some clichés taken from the illustrations in the useful *Manual of British Birds* by my friend the late Mr. Howard Saunders, in which the text-figures are so faithful and at the same time artistic.

In all humility I desire to lay this little Tercentenary offering at the shrine of the "Sweet Swan of Avon."

SHEPHERDS' DOWN,
HASLEMERE, *1st August*, 1916.

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The Birds of Shakespeare

FROM the infancy of mankind no tribe of living creatures has awakened more sympathy in the human heart than the Birds of the Air. Their pairing, their nesting, their sedulous care of their young, their arrival in spring and disappearance in autumn, the endless variety of their notes, and the manifold diversity of their habits and dispositions, often so suggestive of analogies with those of human nature, have arrested the attention of even the most unobservant men. This wide range of attraction, appealing so directly to the poetic instincts of humanity, has called forth hearty recognition in the literature of every age and of every tongue. In our own literature this recognition has been

more especially ample. Chaucer, the illustrious Father of English Poetry, struck the keynote of that passionate love of Nature which has been maintained among us with ever-growing devotion. "Nature, the vicar of the Almighty Lord," to use his own expression, filled his soul with a deep, reverential and joyous delight in the endless beauty and charm of the outer world. This pleasure included an ardent appreciation of bird-life, which finds vent continually in simple but enthusiastic language all through his writings. Chaucer was undoubtedly a bookish man, much attached to his favourite authors and to meditation upon them. Yet, as he himself confesses, there were times when the open country, with all its varied sights and sounds, and especially with its exuberant life in plants and animals, had for him even greater attraction. He tells that

> On bokes for to rede I me delyte,
> And to hem yeve I feyth and ful credence,

And in myn herte have hem in reverence
So hertely, that there is game noon,
That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,
But hit be other upon the haly-day,
Or elles in the Ioly tyme of May
Whan that I here the smale foules singe
And that the floures gynne for to springe—
Farwel my studie, as lasting that sesoun ![1]

In his vivid descriptions of scenes in spring and summer, the carols of the birds are always a prominent feature. Thus, at the very beginning of his *Canterbury Tales*, the mere thought of April, with its sweet showers and tender leafage "in every holt and heath," recalls to him how the

Smale foules maken melodye
That slepen al the night with open yë.[2]

His poem on *The Parlement of Foules* represents the various birds of the air

[1] *Legende of Goode Women*, Prologue, 30.
Again he declares:

As for myn entent
The birdes song was more convient
And more pleasaunt to me by many fold
Than mete or drink or any other thing.
Flower and Leaf, 118.

[2] Prologue, 9.

coming in a crowded throng from all quarters to choose their mates. As he enumerates our familiar birds he couples with their names epithets that express the popular estimation of them. The scene is laid in a garden where

> On every bough the briddes herde I singe
> With voys of aungel in hir armonye.[1]

Again, in his quaint and humorous verses on the *Cuckow and the Nightingale*, the poet transports us into the very heart of the woods to hear a discourse between these two harbingers of summer. For the nightingale he had a fondness which is lovingly expressed in the *Flower and the Leaf*, where we find the picture of a woodland of oaks whose new leaves

> Sprongen out ayein the sonne shene,
> Some very rede, and some a glad light grene;
> Which, as me thought, was right a plesaunt sight,
> And eek the briddes songes for to here
> Would have rejoised any erthly wight;

[1] *Parlement of Foules*, 190.

And I, that couth not yet, in no manere,
Here the Nightingale of al the yeare,
Ful busily herkned with herte and ere,
If I her voice perceive coud any-where.[1]

This simple delight in the voices of the birds, so prominent in the poems of the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, was maintained among his successors in English poetry. By Elizabethan times, however, it had become enlarged and enriched by the growth of a more observant and contemplative habit. The spontaneous and irresistible joy of the human soul in the varied beauty of Nature, and not least in the bird-music of the fields and woods, is as marked in Shakespeare's works as it was in those of Chaucer ; but it is now combined with more thought and reflection. The appreciation of life in all its divers forms has grown closer, more sympathetic and more intimately linked with human experience.

[1] *The Flower and the Leaf*, 34. Even if this poem be held not to have come from the pen of Chaucer, it shows that he was not alone at an early time in his enthusiasm for birds and their song.

Shakespeare had the good fortune to be born in one of the pleasantest and most varied districts of England, in the midst of fields and gardens, as well as wide tracts of woodland and heath, among sturdy farmer-folk, and simple peasantry. The face of open Nature lay spread out around him, and his earliest poems bear witness to the range and acuteness of his faculty of observation amid the fields and forests, the beasts and birds of his home. The extent and accuracy of his acquaintance with law have been claimed as proof that he had passed through some legal training. There is sounder evidence that his remarkable familiarity with objects of natural history could not have been derived at second-hand from books, but was acquired from his own personal observation. His youthful surroundings in Warwickshire furnished him with ample opportunity of acquiring and cultivating this knowledge. Nor should it be forgotten that the London in

which he spent the active years of his middle life, was a comparatively small town. Open country lay within a short walking distance from any part of it. Heaths and woodlands, with all their riches of animal life, extended almost up to its outskirts. So that even in the height of his busy theatrical career the dramatist could easily, at any interval of leisure, renew his acquaintance with the face of Nature which he dearly loved.

An attentive study of Shakespeare's dramas supplies probable indications of some of his early observations among natural history objects. When, for instance, he makes Benedick assert that Claudio had committed

> the flat transgression of a school-boy, who, being overjoyed with finding a bird's nest, shows it his companion, and he steals it,[1]

he probably could remember incidents of that kind among the boys at the grammar

[1] *Much Ado about Nothing*, II. i. 197.

school of Stratford. At all events, that he himself had known the excitements of bird-nesting may be fairly inferred from the following passage:

> Unreasonable creatures feed their young;
> And though man's face be fearful to their eyes,
> Yet, in protection of their tender ones,
> Who hath not seen them, even with those wings
> Which sometime they have used with fearful flight,
> Make war with him that climb'd unto their nest,
> Offering their own lives in their young's defence?[1]

As a concomitant of his love of outdoor life it was natural and almost inevitable that the future dramatist should become a sportsman. There does not appear to be any good reason to question the truth of the tradition that in his youth he joined his Stratford companions in poaching Sir Thomas Lucy's deer in Charlecote Park. When he wrote the following lines we can well imagine that he had some of his own escapades in mind:

> What, hast not thou full often struck a doe,
> And borne her cleanly by the keeper's nose?[2]

[1] 3 *Henry VI.* II. ii. 26. [2] *Titus Andronicus*, II. i. 93.

Both the Poems and the Plays show him to have been well-versed in all the arts then in vogue for the capture of birds dead or alive—the use of bird-lime for the smaller kinds, the fixing of springes and gins, the spreading of nets, the employment of decoys in the shape of caged birds or of painted fruit and flowers, as well as the ordinary weapons for shooting—birding-pieces, bows and arrows, and cross-bows and bolts. More especially does he appear to have mastered the whole craft of falconry, then so much in vogue; for his writings are full of the vocabulary of its technical terms. The frequency and detail of the poet's allusions to the various methods of bird-capture suggest the experience of one who speaks from personal practice. He is fond of introducing these allusions in illustration of the plots and wiles of man with regard to his fellow-men. So many of these methods of capture have gone out of fashion that

the modern reader is apt to be surprised at the constant recurrence of references to them in Shakespeare's writings, and to forget how much more they would appeal to the imagination in the days of Elizabeth than they can do now. A few illustrations may be quoted here. Thus Lady Macduff, musing on the future of her little son, but all unsuspicious of the fate immediately impending on him, tells him

> Poor bird ! thou'ldst never fear the net, nor lime,
> The pitfall, nor the gin.[1]

Again, the Duke of Suffolk, having to inform the Queen of King Henry VI. regarding the steps which he has taken about the Duchess of Gloucester, conveys his news in the language of the bird-catcher :

> Madam, myself have limed a bush for her,
> And placed a quire of such enticing birds,
> That she will light to listen to the lays,
> And never mount to trouble you again.[2]

[1] *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 34. [2] 2 *Henry VI.* I. iii. 86.

Similes from Bird-Capture

The King in *Hamlet*, torn with compunction for his crime, exclaims

> O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
> O limed soul, that struggling to be free
> Art more engaged.[1]

The supposed experience of a bird that has once been nearly caught is transferred by the poet to the human heart. King Henry VI. laments his fate in this wise:

> The bird that hath been limed in a bush,
> With trembling wings misdoubteth every bush;
> And I, the hapless male to one sweet bird,
> Have now the fatal object in my eye
> Where my poor young was limed, was caught and kill'd.[2]

On the other hand, the innocent assurance of a blameless soul is likened to that of a bird that has never known the treacherous arts of the fowler.

> For unstain'd thoughts do seldom dream on evil;
> Birds never limed no secret bushes fear.[3]

We find reference to "poor birds deceived with painted grapes," and to "poor

[1] *Hamlet*, III. iii. 67. [2] 3 *Henry VI.* v. vi. 13.
[3] *Lucrece*, 87.

birds that helpless berries saw."[1] There is a graphic force in the exclamation

Look how a bird lies tangl'd in a net,[2]

and in the simile applied to Lucrece,

Like a new-kill'd bird she trembling lies.[3]

But it is from the sport of falconry that Shakespeare draws most frequently his allusions to bird-capture. Some of these I shall quote in connection with his references to hawks and hawking. The poet does not confine his similes to birds in the wild state, but draws them also with effect from birds in confinement, as where he represents King Henry VI. thanking the Lieutenant of the Tower for courtesy shown to him during his imprisonment :

I'll well requite thy kindness,
For that it made my imprisonment a pleasure ;
Ay, such a pleasure as incaged birds
Conceive, when after many moody thoughts,
At last, by notes of household harmony,
They quite forget their loss of liberty.[4]

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 601, 604. [2] *Ib.* 67.
[3] *Lucrece*, 457. [4] 3 *Henry VI.* iv. vi. 10.

His feeling for Nature

It will be remembered, also, how touchingly the same comparison appears in the scene wherein Cordelia and Lear are led off the stage guarded. When she asks her father, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" Lear impatiently answers,

No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;
When thou dost ask me the blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, . . .
And take upon's the mystery of things.[1]

Shakespeare's feeling for Nature and love of outdoor life are nowhere more fully and admirably expressed than in his delightful Play of *As You Like It*. Pervaded by the very breath of the country and the charms of rural life and sylvan peace, the chief scenes of this drama are laid in a landscape that was doubtless based on recollections of his youthful home, and he appropriately

[1] *King Lear*, v. iii. 8.

named it after his own "Forest of Arden" in Warwickshire. He transports us to a green woodland, interspersed with copses of hawthorns and brambles, revealing grassy glades among venerable trees, where flocks of sheep and goats are pasturing, while here and there we catch sight of a quiet herd of deer. We meet, too, with shepherds and foresters, and come upon a cottage near the rank osiers by a murmuring stream. Now and then our attention is drawn to some specially picturesque feature in the timber of the forest, such as "an oak whose antique root peeps out upon the brook that brawls along the wood."[1] Or we are halted

> Under an oak, whose boughs were moss'd with age,
> And high top bald with dry antiquity.[2]

And there are smooth-stemmed beech-trees, on the massive trunks of which a love-sick swain may carve the name of his beloved.

[1] II. i. 31. [2] IV. iii. 103.

His picture of English Landscape

Into this essentially English scenery the poet introduces a fence of olive-trees around the sheep-cote, likewise "a green and gilded snake," together with a "hungry lioness" that lies crouching on the ground, ready to spring upon a man when he awakes from sleep. But these productions of other climes were, from the dramatist's point of view, no more out of place in his forest, than was the presence of a banished duke with his company of lords and attendants. He had created an ideal landscape out of his own Forest of Arden, and he might clothe it with such vegetation and people it with such beings as he thought that the claims of his art allowed.

Among the first sounds that greet our ears after we enter this land of enchantment are those of an invitation to hear the bird-music :

> Under the greenwood tree
> Who loves to lie with me,

And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.[1]

And in nearly the last strains that reach us before the drama closes, the carol of the birds comes in again :

In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding :
Sweet lovers love the spring.[2]

It will be remembered that the contemplation of the woodland peace and happiness of the Forest of Arden inspired the poet with one of the most pregnant passages to be found in his works. Though the quotation has become rather hackneyed from constant use, it deserves to be treasured in the heart of everyone to whom the study of Nature is dear :

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.[3]

[1] II. v. 1. [2] v. iii. 17. [3] II. i. 15.

His Sympathy with Life

In this pastoral drama, and throughout his Poems and Plays, Shakespeare manifests the keen pleasure with which the face of Nature filled his soul. The beauty and fragrancy of flowers and woods, the movements and music of birds were a joy to him. But he combined with this enjoyment a feeling of pity for the frailty and suffering of living things. A recent and most able writer on Shakespeare has stated as his opinion that "the wild creatures of the fields and woods, because they have never run the risk of familiarity with man, are outside the circle of Shakespeare's sympathetic observation." I venture to think that a more mistaken judgement could hardly have been pronounced. Shakespeare was not a man of science, but he obviously had some of the best qualities of a naturalist—quickness and accuracy of eye and sympathy with life, not of man only, but of every creature that lives and feels. This sympathy shows itself in his

allusions to birds, but is displayed also in his references to animals both higher and lower in the scale of being, which "have never run the risk of familiarity with man." In the remarkable Play which we have just been considering it is conspicuously prominent. The banished Duke in the Forest of Arden asks his companions if they will go with him to kill some venison, but before their answer comes, he immediately adds, on reflection :

> And yet it irks me the poor dappled fools,
> Being native burghers of this desert city,
> Should in their own confines with forked heads
> Have their round haunches gored.[1]

This commiseration is expressed much more forcibly by one of his "co-mates and brothers in exile," the melancholy Jaques, who had been overheard, as he lay under an oak near the brook, lamenting the fate of a wounded stag that had come to languish at the same spot. As he watched the creature

[1] II. i. 22.

weeping into the needless stream ;
'Poor deer,' quoth he, 'thou makest a testament
As worldlings do, giving thy sum of more
To that which had too much ;' then, being there alone,
Left and abandon'd of his velvet friends ;
''Tis right,' quoth he ; 'thus misery doth part
The flux of company :' anon, a careless herd,
Full of the pasture, jumps along by him
And never stays to greet him ; 'Ay,' quoth Jaques,
'Sweep on, you fat and greasy citizens ;
'Tis just the fashion : wherefore do you look
Upon that poor and broken bankrupt there ?'
Thus most invectively he pierceth through
The body of the country, city, court,
Yea, and of this our life ; swearing that we
Are mere usurpers, tyrants and what's worse,
To fright the animals and to kill them up
In their assign'd and native dwelling-place.[1]

More detailed and even more full of commiseration is the poet's vivid description of the hunting of "the purblind hare."

[1] II. i. 46. The dramatist may perhaps have been thinking of this scene when he afterwards put into Hamlet's mouth a reiteration of the same view of the indifference of the crowd :

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play,
For some must watch, while some must sleep :
Thus runs the world away.
Hamlet, III. ii. 265.

Mark the poor wretch, to overshoot his troubles,
How he outruns the wind, and with what care
He cranks and crosses with a thousand doubles.[1]

When he has for a little succeeded in throwing the hounds off the scent,

Poor Wat, far off upon a hill,
Stands on his hinder legs, with listening ear,
To hearken if his foes pursue him still:
Anon their loud alarums he doth hear,
Then shalt thou see the dew-bedabbled wretch
Turn, and return, indenting with the way;
Each envious brier his weary legs doth scratch,
Each shadow makes him stop, each murmur stay.[2]

The poet's feeling of pity descends even to small and fragile forms of living things, to which most people are indifferent or even hostile. Perhaps he may sometimes have credited these feeble creatures with greater sensitiveness to pain than a modern naturalist would allow, as where Isabella in *Measure for Measure* tells her brother that

The poor beetle, that we tread upon,
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies.[3]

Shakespeare elsewhere alludes to our

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 680. [2] *Ib.* 697. [3] III. i. 80.

prevalent insensibility towards the insect world, from our youth upward.

> As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods ;
> They kill us for their sport.[1]

In maturer life men will do "a thousand dreadful things as willingly as one would kill a fly."[2] But the poet's pity extended even to the fly. In a spirited picture of a superb charger he tells how the animal proudly "stamps and bites the poor flies in his fume."[3] The most detailed and remarkable expression of this commiseration in the whole of Shakespeare's works, however, is to be found in the unpleasing tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*, which, though printed among his dramas, is doubtless mainly the work of another writer. Yet it contains passages of great power and beauty which are not unworthy of Shakespeare and probably came from his pen. Among these passages I would include the

[1] *King Lear*, iv. i. 37. [2] *Titus Andronicus*, v. i. 141.
[3] *Venus and Adonis*, 316.

singular scene in which Titus is sitting at table with his brother Marcus, who strikes the dish with his knife, whereupon the following dialogue ensues :

Titus. What dost thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?
Marc. At that that I have kill'd, my lord—a fly.
Tit. Out on thee, murderer! thou kill'st my heart;
A deed of death done on the innocent
Becomes not Titus' brother : get thee gone;
I see thou art not for my company.
Marc. Alas! my lord, I have but kill'd a fly.
Tit. 'But'! How if that fly had a father and mother?
How would he hang his slender gilded wings
And buzz lamenting doings in the air!
Poor harmless fly!
That, with his pretty buzzing melody
Came here to make us merry! and thou hast kill'd him.
Marc. Pardon me, sir; it was a black ill-favour'd fly
Like to the Empress' Moor; therefore I kill'd him.
Tit. O, O, O.
Then pardon me for reprehending thee,
For thou hast done a charitable deed.
. . . . . .
I think we are not brought so low,
But that between us we can kill a fly
That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor.[1]

[1] *Titus Andronicus*, III. ii. 52.

"*The poor harmless Fly*"

The mind of Titus, broken down by a succession of crushing calamities, had by this time become unhinged, and the extravagance of his language is doubtless designed to show this derangement, though it may perhaps also express the poet's own underlying pity with even "the poor harmless fly." Modern science, however, has recently discovered that the house-fly is far from harmless, and that its ruthless extirpation from human habitations, as a dangerous carrier of disease, should be regarded as really what Titus called "a charitable deed."

Not less effectively than his forerunner Chaucer, does Shakespeare enliven his pictures of day and night and of the seasons of the year by introducing the voices of the birds. He loves the

> summer bird
> Which ever in the haunch of winter sings
> The lifting up of day.[1]

[1] 2 *Henry IV.* IV. iv. 91.

He tells how "The birds chant melody on every bush,"[1] and recounts where

> As it fell upon a day
> In the merry month of May,
> Sitting in a pleasant shade
> Which a grove of myrtles made,
> Beasts did leap and birds did sing,
> Trees did grow and plants did spring;
> Everything did banish moan.[2]

He leads us where we may

> See the shepherds feed their flocks
> By shallow rivers, by whose falls
> Melodious birds sing madrigals.[3]

The movement of spring and the renewal of the activity of the birds are well pictured in the song at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
> And merry larks are ploughmen's clocks,
> When turtles tread, and rooks, and daws,
> And maidens bleach their summer smocks.

The sadness and silence of the woods in autumn when the birds are dumb, are recorded in these musical lines:

[1] *Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 12.
[2] *Passionate Pilgrim*, xxi. [3] *Ibid.* xx.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.[1]

Again, in a song from which I have just quoted, a graphic picture of winter shows the changed aspect of the birds at that season :

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw.[2]

Or we are presented with a storm in which we see

A flight of fowl
Scattered by winds and high tempestuous gusts.[3]

In many passages, to some of which I shall presently allude, the poet heightens the gloom of night by allusion to the nocturnal birds which screech or moan in the dark, or he lightens its eeriness with the pensive melody of the nightingale.

[1] *Sonnet*, lxxiii. [2] *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 908.
[3] *Titus Andronicus*, v. iii. 68.

Shakespeare was keenly alive to the strong contrasts so continually placed in juxtaposition by Nature—what he calls

Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh-sounding,
Ear's deep-sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding.[1]

He recognised contrasts of this kind both in the animate and the inanimate creation, and not least where the birds are involved:

Unruly blasts wait on the tender spring;
Unwholesome weeds take root with precious flowers;
The adder hisses where the sweet birds sing,
What virtue breeds iniquity devours.[2]

He makes the Bishop of Ely account for the reformation of the Prince of Wales by calling attention to the association in Nature of what is baneful with what is profitable.

The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
Neighbour'd by fruit of baser quality:
And so the Prince obscured his contemplation
Under the veil of wildness; which, no doubt,
Grew like the summer grass, fastest by night,
Unseen, yet crescive in his faculty.[2]

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 431. [2] *Lucrece*, 869.
[3] *Henry V.* I. i. 60.

Contrasts in Nature

The co-existence of pleasure and pain, of joy and sorrow, met the poet even among the tender creatures in whose songs he delighted. He saw that the grief or suffering of one single songster in no perceptible degree quieted the carolling of the rest of the choir.

> All thy fellow-birds do sing,
> Careless of thy sorrowing:
> Even so, poor bird, like thee,
> None alive will pity me.[1]

He realised, as many another poet has also found, that there are times in which the joyous songs of birds may even sound harshly to human ears when the heart is bowed down with affliction. Thus he wrote of Lucrece:

> The little birds that tune their morning's joy
> Make her moans mad with their sweet melody:
> For mirth doth search the bottom of annoy.
> . . . . . .
> 'You mocking birds,' quoth she, 'your tunes entomb
> Within your hollow-swelling feather'd breasts,
> And in my hearing be you mute and dumb:
> My restless discord loves no stops nor rests;
> A woeful hostess brooks not merry guests.[2]

[1] *Passionate Pilgrim*, xxi. [2] *Lucrece*, 1107-1125.

The Birds of Shakespeare

While Shakespeare, like his poetical predecessors and contemporaries, regarded the whole tribe of birds as a great vocal assemblage, a delightful section of animated Nature, that gives life and charm to the countryside, his Poems and Plays stand apart for the remarkable extent to which he singles out individual birds by name, often with such detailed reference to their habits as to show that he well knew them in their native haunts. The birds thus distinguished by him amount to some fifty in number, as given in the following list :

Eagle	Loon	Crow
Falcon	Owl	Rook
Kestrel	Cuckoo	Chough
Sparrowhawk	Woodcock	Jackdaw
Buzzard	Pheasant	Magpie
Kite	Partridge	Jay
Osprey	Snipe	Starling
Vulture	Quail	Domestic Cock
Parrot	Lapwing	Goose
Ostrich	Wild Duck	Turkey-cock
Cormorant	Dabchick	Swan
Pelican	Raven	Peacock

Birds mentioned by Him

Dove and Pigeon	Wagtail	Hedge-Sparrow
Turtle-dove	Bunting	House-Sparrow
Lark	Redbreast	Swallow
Blackbird	Finch	House-Martin
Thrush	Halcyon or King-fisher.	Nightingale
Wren		

Of a few of them he makes only a single mention, but most of them are more frequently cited, in some cases, indeed, as often as forty or fifty times. Recognising in these creatures traits that remind him of the feelings and actions of mankind, he makes varied and effective use of them as symbols and illustrations with which to enrich his vivid picture of the great drama of human life. The naturalist, interested in noting the attitude of the greatest poet of all time towards living creatures, feels no surprise that Shakespeare's knowledge of natural history is sometimes inaccurate, or that he should have taken on trust some of the fabulous legends in that subject, which were current in his day. The scientific study

of Nature had not yet been seriously undertaken.

I propose to enumerate here the birds individually selected by Shakespeare for special comment, and to cite a few passages from his works in illustration of the various ways in which he makes use of each of them. It will be convenient to take them in groups.

We may begin with BIRDS OF PREY, following the precedent set by Chaucer, who in his long list tells that "the fowles of ravine were hyest sette." The EAGLE is cited some forty times. The two birds of this kind native to Britain, the Golden Eagle, and the White-tailed or Sea-eagle, now so restricted in number, were doubtless more abundant in his day. He may have occasionally seen examples of each of them on the wing, though his allusions hardly suggest any personal familiarity with the birds. Recognising the lofty rank of the eagle and its acknowledged

dignity above the other birds of prey, he makes the birds themselves, in the arrangements for the obsequies of the Phoenix and Turtle, admit this supremacy.

> From this session interdict
> Every fowl of tyrant wing,
> Save the eagle, feather'd King.[1]

The powerful vision which from time immemorial has been ascribed to the eagle[2] is often referred to by the poet, who makes one of his personages even claim that kings of men have eyes like the king of birds. As Richard II. stood on the battlements of Flint Castle the Duke of York pointing to him, exclaimed,

> Yet looks he like a king; behold! his eye,
> As bright as is the eagle's, lightens forth
> Controlling majesty.[3]

The future King Edward IV. was taunted by his brother Richard thus:

[1] *Phoenix and Turtle*, 9.

[2] Chaucer places at the head of his large company of feathered creatures "the royal egle that with his sharpe look perceth the Sonne," *Parlement of Foules*, 330.

[3] *Richard II.* III. iii. 68.

> Nay, if thou be that princely eagle's bird,
> Show thy descent by gazing 'gainst the sun.[1]

With delightful hyperbole, Biron, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, discovers a power of vision beyond that of an eagle, when he is persuading himself and his friends to abjure their foolish vow "to fast, to study, and to see no woman." Enlarging on the potency of "love first learned in a lady's eyes" he declares that it

> Gives to every power a double power,
> Above their functions and their offices.
> It adds a precious seeing to the eye:
> A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind;
> A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,
> When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd.[2]

Again, in the same Play, the comparison becomes even more grotesquely exaggerated, for the same lover in praising his lady-love demands to know

> What peremptory eagle-sighted eye
> Dares look upon the heaven of her brow,
> That is not blinded by her majesty?[3]

[1] 3 *Henry VI.* II. i. 91. [2] IV. iii. 327. [3] IV. iii. 222.

THE EAGLE

The Eagle

The eagle was credited not only with a wonderful strength of vision, but also with a remarkable length of life. This belief is alluded to by the churlish philosopher who demands of Timon

> Will these moss'd trees,
> That have outlived the eagle, page thy heels,
> And skip where thou point'st out?[1]

Shakespeare, when he likens the orders of human society to the various grades among the birds, compares the leaders to eagles, and the commonalty to birds of a less reputable kind. The haughty Coriolanus stigmatises the Roman plebs as a rabble that

> Will in time
> Break ope the locks o' the Senate, and bring in
> The crows to peck the eagles.[2]

Pandarus, not less contemptuous of the populace of Troy, affirms that "the eagles are gone," and that there are left only "crows and daws, crows and daws."[3] The

[1] *Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 222.

[2] *Coriolanus*, III. i. 136. [3] *Troilus and Cressida*, I. ii. 235.

same kind of similitude is applied to the political condition of England. The future Richard III. asserts :

I cannot tell : the world is grown so bad
That wrens make prey where eagles dare not perch.[1]

And Hastings in the same Play remarks

More pity that the eagle should be mew'd
While kites and buzzards prey at liberty.[2]

Among Shakespeare's political allusions in which the eagle appears there is one of some interest as a reminiscence of a far-off unhappy time in our history when the southern half of the island could be likened to the king of birds, while the northern portion was compared to a destructive kind of vermin.

Once the eagle, England, being in prey,
To her unguarded nest the weasel Scot
Comes sneaking, and so sucks her princely eggs,
Playing the mouse, in absence of the cat,
To tear and havoc more than she can eat.[3]

The contemplation of the various mis-

[1] *Richard III.* i. iii. 70. [2] *Ib.* i. i. 132.
[3] *Henry V.* i. ii. 169.

fortunes that may befall even the king of birds leads to the reflection :

> Often, to our comfort, shall we find
> The sharded beetle in a safer hold
> Than is the full-wing'd eagle.[1]

The last line of this quotation recalls another passage in which, as if the writer had watched the bird on the wing, the majestic sweep of its flight is pictured :

> The course I hold
> Flies an eagle flight, bold and forth on,
> Leaving no tract behind.[2]

The eagle has been credited with a nobility of nature in keeping with his regal rank :

> The eagle suffers little birds to sing,
> And is not careful what they mean thereby,
> Knowing that with the shadow of his wings
> He can at pleasure stint their melody.[3]

Shakespeare may have seen an eagle in confinement, for his description of its manner of feeding seems as if drawn from actual observation :

[1] *Cymbeline*, III. iii. 19. [2] *Timon of Athens*, I. i. 51.
[3] *Titus Andronicus*, IV. iv. 83.

> Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
> Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,
> Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
> Till either gorge be stuff'd or prey be gone.[1]

Whether in captivity or in stuffed specimens, the dramatist had evidently set eyes on the bird close at hand, so as to be able to put so whimsical a comparison into Falstaff's mouth :

> My own knee! When I was about thy years, Hal, I was not an eagle's talon in the waist; I could have crept into any alderman's thumb-ring.[2]

Shakespeare's acquaintance with the family of HAWKS was manifestly of the most intimate kind. These birds were common natives of the country, and in great request for the sport of falconry. His writings prove him to have had a detailed knowledge of the terminology of this sport, and he was probably himself a keen falconer in his early years, if not throughout his life. His Plays are full of

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 55. [2] 1 *Henry IV.* II. iv. 320.

the technical language of hawking, which he employs by way of similitude in matters of a wholly different nature. As an example of this habit no better illustration can be given than Petruchio's description of the method he meant to employ to tame his ill-tempered wife. In the approved lingo of the practical falconer he remarks to himself:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
My falcon now is sharp and passing empty;
And till she stoop she must not be full-gorged,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come and know her keeper's call,
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites
That bate and beat and will not be obedient.
She eat no meat to-day, nor none shall eat;
Last night she slept not, nor to-night she shall not;
As with the meat, some undeserved fault
I'll find about the making of the bed;
And here I'll fling the pillow, there the bolster,
This way the coverlet, another way the sheets:
Ay, and amid this hurly I intend
That all is done in reverend care of her.[1]

[1] *Taming of the Shrew*, IV. i. 172.

The extent to which falconry and its language had taken hold of the society of Elizabeth's time is well illustrated in the scene in Capulet's garden where Romeo and Juliet make their declaration of mutual attachment. She has twice retired, but again returns to the window for one last word. He has slowly and reluctantly crept back into the darkness, but a voice from above recalls him :

> Hist ! Romeo, hist ! O, for a falconer's voice
> To lure this tassel-gentle back again !
> Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud.[1]

The actual array of hawking is brought before us in the gay scene in the second part of *King Henry VI.* where the King and Queen, with their company and falconers halloing, appear on the stage after a morning's sport.

> *Queen.* Believe me, lords, for flying at the brook,
> I saw not better sport these seven years' day :
> Yet, by your leave, the wind was very high ;
> And, ten to one, old Joan had not gone out.

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, II. ii. 158. The tassel-gentle or tercel-gentle was the male gos-hawk, much used in falconry.

King. But what a point, my lord, your falcon made,
And what a pitch she flew above the rest!
To see how God in all His creatures works!
Yea, man and birds are fain of climbing high.

Suffolk. No marvel, an it like your majesty,
My lord Protector's hawks do tower so well;
They know their master loves to be aloft,
And bears his thoughts above his falcon's pitch.

Gloucester. My lord, 'tis but a base ignoble mind
That mounts no higher than a bird can soar.

Cardinal. . . . . Believe me, cousin Gloucester,
Had not your man put up the fowl so suddenly
We had had more sport.[1]

Under the general designation of HAWKS most of our larger birds of prey were employed for purposes of sport, and it is mainly with reference to this use of them that they are mentioned by Shakespeare. FALCON, the name most frequently used by him, may include several distinct species.[2]

[1] 2 *Henry VI.* II. i. 1-46.

[2] Chaucer alludes to

The gentil faucon, that with his feet distreyneth
The Kinges hond. *Parliament*, 337.

He evidently admired their flight. He speaks of

> A falcon towering in her pride of place.[1]

Again, he makes Bolingbroke boast that he would fight Mowbray

> As confident as is the falcon's flight
> Against a bird.[2]

He notes how

> A falcon towering in the skies,
> Coucheth the fowl below with his wings' shade,
> Whose crooked beak threats if he mount he dies.[3]

The falcon generally employed in hawking was the female Peregrine, which was held to be more adapted for the purposes of sport than the male. The KESTREL is referred to by Shakespeare, under the local name of *Staniel* in the scene in *Twelfth Night*, where Malvolio, gulled by Maria, picks up and begins to guess at the meaning of the clever letter, Sir Toby and Fabian watching in concealment :

[1] *Macbeth*, II. iv. 12. [2] *Richard II.* I. iii. 61.
[3] *Lucrece*, 506.

THE PEREGRINE FALCON

Malvolio. 'M. O. A. I. doth sway my life.' Nay but first, let me see, let me see, let me see.

Fabian. With what dish o' poison has she dressed him!

Sir Toby. And with what wing the staniel checks at it![1]

The SPARROW-HAWK (*Musket*) is only once alluded to in the Plays, and then as a kind of pet name applied by Mrs. Ford to little Robin, the page:

How now, my eyas-musket! what news with you?[2]

[1] II. v. 102.

[2] *Merry Wives of Windsor*, III. iii. 18. Musket or Musquet-hawk was an old name for the cock Sparrow-hawk, and 'eyas' meant a fledgling.

Before passing from the subject of hawks and hawking, I should state that the sport is not yet wholly extinct in this country, and that we have at least two extant memorials of the time when it was a favourite pastime here. There is still among our King's Court officials a Hereditary Grand Falconer, the office being held in the family of the Duke of St. Albans. In old times, and for many generations, the royal stud of hawks was kept at Charing Cross in buildings that were known as The Mews. In the reign of Henry VIII. these mews were turned into stables for horses, but the time-honoured name still clung to them. It became customary to call by this name lanes flanked with stables, and this practice has continued down to our own day. When we speak of "mews," however, it is always horses and never hawks that come into our minds.

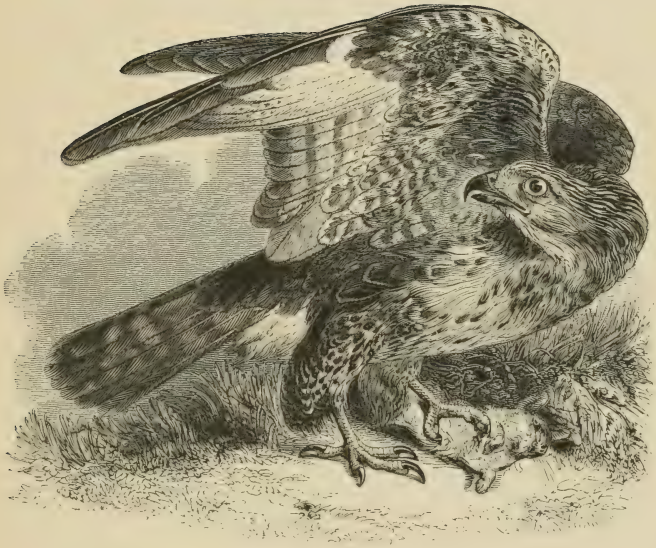
The BUZZARD is mentioned several times by Shakespeare, and always in a more or less depreciatory sense. It is a large handsome bird, but compared with the falcon is slow and heavy in flight. So in the encounter of wits between Petruchio and Katharine, he in his characteristic falconer's language asks her :

O slow-winged turtle, shall a buzzard take thee ?[1]

In a passage already cited the buzzards are coupled with the disreputable kites. Professor Newton remarks that "in the old days of falconry, buzzards were regarded with infinite scorn, and hence in common English to call a man a 'buzzard' is to denounce him as stupid."[2]

In the time of Elizabeth the KITE (or *Puttock*), now one of the rarest of our birds, was quite common in this country. It was particularly abundant in London, where it fed on the garbage of the streets,

[1] *Taming of the Shrew*, II. i. 206.
[2] *Dictionary of Birds*, p. 67.



THE COMMON BUZZARD

and even of the Thames, and where, together with the raven, it was protected by law as a useful scavenger without pay. The frequency of Shakespeare's allusions to this bird is good evidence of how familiar it must then have been. It is always referred to in some disparaging way. The "hungry kite" did not scruple to carry off any living creature it could overcome even from the very farm-yard. When Warwick mentions to the Queen his suspicions of foul play in Duke Humphrey's death, he tells her :

> Who finds the partridge in the puttock's nest
> But may imagine how the bird was dead,
> Although the kite soar with unbloodied beak?
> Even so suspicious is this tragedy.[1]

In an earlier part of the same Play York asks :

> Were't not all one, an empty eagle were set
> To guard the chicken from a hungry kite,
> As place Duke Humphrey for the King's protector?

[1] 2 *Henry VI.* III. ii. 191. Chaucer refers to "the coward Kyte."

to which the Queen replies :—"So the poor chicken should be sure of death."[1] In *Winter's Tale*, when Antigonus is sent on his task to carry the child to some distant desolate spot, he takes it up, saying :

> Come on, poor babe :
> Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens
> To be thy nurses ! Wolves and bears, they say,
> Casting their savageness aside, have done
> Like offices of pity.[2]

But it was more especially as feeders on carrion or on weakly animals that the kites were held in disrepute. Cassius, before the battle of Philippi, recognises the forerunners of carnage in the foul birds that hovered above him :

> Ravens, crows and kites
> Fly o'er our heads and downward look on us,
> As we were sickly prey : their shadows seem
> A canopy most fatal, under which
> Our army lies, ready to give up the ghost.[3]

[1] III. i. 248. [2] II. iii. 184.

[3] *Julius Caesar*, v. i. 84.

At the battle of St. Albans York declares that

> The deadly-handed Clifford slew my steed ;
> But match to match I have encounter'd him,
> And made a prey for carrion kites and crows
> Even of the bonny beast he loved so well.[1]

The thievish propensities of the kite when building its nest led it to plunder all sorts of garments that might be bleaching on the hedge,—pieces of rag, old hats, and bits of paper. This habit is sympathetically referred to by Autolycus, who was himself, as he confesses, another "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles."—"My traffic is sheets ; when the kite builds, look to lesser linen."[2] The very name of kite became an epithet of contempt and hatred. When Goneril announced to her father in peremptory terms that he must "disquantity his train," poor old Lear's indignation was in response hurled at her in these words, "Detested kite."[3]

[1] 2 *Henry VI.* v. ii. 9. [2] *Winter's Tale*, iv. iii. 23.
[3] *Lear* i. iv. 262.

The OSPREY, now almost extirpated as a native of these islands, was probably not uncommon in the time of Elizabeth. It is once mentioned by Shakespeare. Aufidius, the General of the Volscians, alluding to the regard of the Roman people for the banished Coriolanus, reluctantly confesses :

> I think he'll be to Rome
> As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it
> By sovereignty of nature.[1]

It would almost seem that the poet had himself watched the bird plunge into some clear lake or pond in southern England, and, with unerring stroke, seize in its talons the unsuspecting fish which its keen eyes had detected from aloft.

The VULTURE, not infrequently mentioned by Shakespeare, is not a British bird, though at rare intervals it has appeared as a migrant in this country. The poet most likely never saw one, his allusions to it being obviously based on its reputation for

[1] *Coriolanus*, IV. vii. 33.

THE KITE

voracity, and partly also on the legend of Prometheus and the eagle. In one passage a speaker asserts "there cannot be that vulture in you to devour so many."[1] The expressions "vulture thought" and "vulture folly" are used in the Poems.[2] A favourite observation of the braggart Pistol was "let vultures vile seize on his lungs." Sir William Lucy speaks of "the vulture of sedition that feeds in the bosom of great commanders."[3] "The gnawing vulture of the mind" is referred to in *Titus Andronicus*. But the most touching allusion in which this bird is used is that where King Lear, wounded to the quick by Goneril's unkindness, exclaims to her sister, as he raises his hand to his heart,

> O Regan, she hath tied
> Sharp-tooth'd unkindness like a vulture here.[4]

Reference may be made to two other exotic birds mentioned by Shakespeare—

[1] *Macbeth*, IV. iii. 73.
[2] *Venus and Adonis*, 551; *Lucrece*, 556.
[3] 1 *Henry VI.* IV. iii. 47.
[4] *Lear*, II. iv. 132.

the Parrot and the Ostrich. As one result of the many voyages of discovery in his day, both in the Old and the New World, the PARROT had become a familiar bird in England. Its loud and harsh clamour, its docility, its clever imitation of human speech, but at the best, the paucity of its vocabulary, are duly noted by our dramatist. In one scene we are told how Falstaff was pleased to have "his poll clawed like a parrot,"[1] in another, a lady declares that in her jealousy she will be "more clamorous than a parrot against rain."[2] Again we hear of

> Some that will evermore peep through their eyes
> And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper;[3]

also of an indiscreet officer who in his tipsy fits would "speak parrot, and squabble, swagger, swear and discourse fustian with his own shadow."[4] Nor must we forget the drawer at the Boar's Head Tavern in

[1] 2 *Henry IV.* II. iv. 249. [2] *As You Like It,* IV. i. 134.
[3] *Merchant of Venice,* I. i 52. [4] *Othello,* II. iii. 270.

The Cormorant

Eastcheap who had only two words of reply to any call, and of whom the merry Prince remarked, with a sly hit at the fair sex: "That ever this fellow should have fewer words than a parrot, and yet the son of a woman!"[1] The parrot was also known by the name of popinjay, a word sometimes applied to a foppish dandy. It is used in this sense by Hotspur with reference to

> A certain lord, neat and trimly dress'd
> Fresh as a bridegroom; and his chin new-reap'd
> Show'd like a stubble-land at harvest-home.
> . . . . . .
> I then, all smarting with my wounds being cold,
> To be so pester'd with a popinjay,
> Answer'd neglectingly I know not what.[2]

The same word was used of the stuffed bird or other mark set up to be shot at in a competition of marksmanship. This kind of sport in archery continues to be kept up in Scotland, or was only recently abandoned. It has been described by

[1] 1 *Henry IV.* II. iv. 95. [2] 1 *Henry IV.* I. iii. 33-52.

Scott in *Old Mortality*. I have myself attended the summer festival of the "Papingo" at Kilwinning where it is said to have been held ever since 1488. The stuffed bird is there suspended from the end of a pole fastened on the steeple at a height of 100 feet from the ground.

The OSTRICH or ESTRIDGE was doubtless an unfamiliar bird in England in the reign of Elizabeth, though its feathers were in repute. When Hotspur asked after "the nimble-footed, madcap Prince of Wales" and his comrades, he was told by Sir Richard Vernon that they were

> All furnished, all in arms;
> All plumed, like estridges that with the wind
> Baited like eagles having lately bathed,
> Glittering in golden coats, like images.[1]

Among the marvels told of this bird, it had the credit of digesting iron for the sake of its health. This reputation is alluded to in Jack Cade's defiance in Iden's

[1] 1 *Henry IV.* IV. i. 97.

garden, when he vowed to the honest owner that

> I'll make thee eat iron like an ostrich, and swallow my sword like a great pin, ere thou and I part.[1]

Three large water-birds, the Cormorant, Pelican and Loon are disparagingly noticed by Shakespeare. The CORMORANT, so well-known along all our rocky shores, was described by Chaucer as "full of glotonye," and by the dramatist as the symbol of a rapacious voracity. Thus, vanity is described as an "insatiate cormorant"; we are told of "cormorant devouring Time," of the "cormorant belly" and of

> Wounds, friends, and what else dear that is consumed
> In hot digestion of this cormorant war.[2]

The PELICAN is alluded to in the Shakespearian drama in connection with a popular fable that this bird nourishes

[1] 2 *Henry VI.* IV. x. 27.

[2] *Richard II.* II. i. 38. *Love's Labour's Lost*, I. i. 4. *Coriolanus*, I. i. 119. *Troilus and Cressida*, II. ii. 6.

its young with its own blood. Laertes in *Hamlet* affirms that to his father's friends

> Thus wide I'll ope my arms,
> And, like the kind life-rendering pelican,
> Repast them with my blood.[1]

When Lear, in the storm on the open heath, sees the disguised Edgar at the entrance of the hovel, he will not be persuaded that the poor man could have been so beggared save by his unkind daughters, and he asks Kent

> Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
> Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
> Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
> Those pelican daughters.[2]

The word "Loon" or "Lown" is employed by the poet to denote a rogue or low fellow. A messenger of evil tidings is called by Macbeth a "cream-faced loon."[3] In the play of *Pericles* we hear of a company that would include "both lord and lown";[4] and in *Othello* Iago

[1] *Hamlet*, IV. v. 142. [2] *Lear*, III. iv. 71.
[3] *Macbeth*, V. iii. 11. [4] IV. vi. 17.

sings part of a north-country ballad in which the same word occurs :

> King Stephen was a worthy peer,
> His breeches cost him but a crown ;
> He held them sixpence all too dear,
> With that he called the tailor lown.[1]

The name of Loon or Loom is a popular appellation which includes three distinct families of water-birds, all remarkable for their clumsy gait on land. Whether this name was applied to them after it had first been in use as an uncomplimentary epithet for a man, or was originally their own common designation which came eventually to aquire a human application, remains in doubt. More probably the bird was first owner, and the word may belong to the group of bird-names like goose, snipe, kite, hawk and others which have become disparaging epithets for human subjects. In Lincolnshire the word is in use as the common name of the Great Crested Grebe. Though now

[1] II. iii. 82.

obsolete in conversational English as an epithet for a rogue it is still in common use in Scotland in that sense.[1]

The OWL plays a large part in Shakespeare's references to bird-life. He does not discriminate between the different members of the large family probably included under this name, though he distinguishes some of their respective cries. He heightens the feeling of the eeriness of night by introducing the remarkable sound of the owl's voice, and most effectively when some deed of villany is on foot, or as one of the signs popularly supposed to portend coming disaster. He includes the owl also in that fairy world which he has made so real. It will be enough to cite a few examples of these different usages in his works.

[1] Thus in the song of the "Ewie wi' the crooked horn" the knave that did the mischief is thus maledicted:

O had I but the loon that did it,
I hae sworn as well as said it,
Though the parson should forbid it
I wad gie his neck a thraw.

The Owl

Traces are said still to linger in Gloucestershire of a legend that had become long ago attached to the owl, and which was known to the great dramatist. He makes use of it in the scene where Ophelia appears distraught from her father's death. In her incoherent talk she exclaims "they say the owl was a baker's daughter."[1] The tradition ran that our Lord one day entered a baker's shop and asked for bread, which was grudgingly and sparingly given by the baker's daughter who was thereupon turned by Christ into an owl. There has long been a popular feeling that something specially uncanny and mysterious hangs about this bird.

In the Poems night is pictured in these words :

> Look, the world's comforter, with weary gait,
> His day's hot task hath ended in the west ;
> The owl, night's herald, shrieks, 'tis very late ;
> The sheep are gone to fold, birds to their nest.[2]

[1] *Hamlet*, IV. v. 40. [2] *Venus and Adonis*, 529.

The time chosen by Bolingbroke for the incantation scene in Gloucester's garden was

Deep night, dark night, the silent of the night,
The time when screech-owls cry, and ban-dogs howl,
And spirits walk, and ghosts break up their graves.[1]

In a view of winter the owl is made to play its part :

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipp'd and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.[2]

The poet has noted "the night owl's lazy flight,"[3] and the predatory habits of the "mousing owl."[4] He has increased the glamour of the night-scenes in the tragedy of Macbeth by the introduction of this bird. When Lady Macbeth, alone and on the alert for the perpetration of the

[1] 2 *Henry VI.* I. iv. 16. [2] *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 899.
[3] 3 *Henry VI.* II. i. 130. [4] *Macbeth*, II. iv. 13.

THE BARN-OWL

murder, hears a sound, she exclaims in anxious suspense :

> Hark !—Peace !
> It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman
> Which gives the stern'st good-night.[1]

Her husband, too, after he has done the deed, emerges to her with the eager question " Didst thou not hear a noise ? " ; to which she replies, " I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry." Next morning before the fatal news had become known it was reported that, through the midst of a storm,

> The obscure bird
> Clamour'd the livelong night.[2]

The appearance of the owl by day was unusual enough to be considered an evil omen. Among the portents that preceded the assassination of Julius Caesar it was reported that

> The bird of night did sit,
> Even at noon-day, upon the market-place
> Hooting and shrieking.[3]

[1] *Macbeth*, II. ii. 2-4. [2] *Ibid.* II. iii. 57.
[3] *Julius Caesar*, I. iii. 26.

When Richard II. realises the machinations of his enemies, and is asked to come down to the base-court to meet Bolingbroke, he exclaims

In the base-court? Come down? Down, court! Down, king!
For night-owls shriek where mounting larks should sing.[1]

The hooting or screeching of the owl was often looked upon as a foreboding of death. Among the nocturnal sounds recounted by fairy Puck, he tells that

Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.[2]

Even at a babe's nativity the sound of this bird's note might be taken as a bad omen. King Henry VI. tells Gloucester:

The owl shriek'd at thy birth—an evil sign:
The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time.[3]

[1] *Richard II.* III. iii. 182.

[2] *Midsummer Night's Dream*, v. i. 364. Chaucer refers to "The oule that of dethe the bode bringeth." *Parlement*, 343.

[3] 3 *Henry VI.* v. vi. 44.

The Cuckoo

The Owl

Among its mysterious relationships, the owl was believed to be connected with some of the machinations of witchcraft. It will be remembered that the miscellaneous ingredients which went to the making of the hell-broth of Macbeth's "midnight hags" included "a lizard's leg and howlet's wing."[1]

Shakespeare's introduction of the owl into his fairy-land was a dexterous artistic stroke, for it connected a well-known but somewhat mysterious bird with his world of sprites, and gave to that world a further touch of realism. Alike in the *Tempest* and the *Merry Wives* this conjunction may be seen. The "dainty Ariel," Prospero's "tricksy spirit," sings:

> Where the bee sucks, there suck I,
> In a cowslip's bell I lie;
> There I couch when owls do cry.[2]

Titania, the Queen of the fairies, when she

[1] *Macbeth*, IV. i. 17. [2] *Tempest*, V. i. 88.

disperses her train on their several quests, bids

> Some keep back
> The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wonders
> At our quaint spirits.[1]

The popular association of owls with supernatural beings is again noted in the *Comedy of Errors*, where poor Dromio of Syracuse, utterly bamboozled by the confusion of Dromios and Antonios, exclaims:

> This is the fairy-land: O land of spites!
> We talk with goblins, owls and sprites;
> If we obey them not, this will ensue,
> They'll suck our breath, or pinch us black and blue.[2]

The CUCKOO receives nearly as much notice from Shakespeare as the Owl. In the bright song at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* both birds appear as symbolical, the one of spring, the other of winter.

> When daisies pied and violets blue,
> And lady-smocks all silver-white,

[1] *Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. ii. 5. [2] II. ii. 188.

And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight:
The cuckoo then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he
Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo.[1]

In Bottom's song in *Midsummer Night's Dream* the bird is styled "the plain-song cuckoo gray," as if its music were as dull as the colour of its coat. When Portia comes back from her memorable trip to Venice and re-enters her home, Lorenzo, who is eagerly expecting her return, says to Jessica:

That is the voice,
Or I am much deceived, of Portia.

Whereupon Portia, overhearing him, remarks to Nerissa:

He knows me, as the blind man knows the cuckoo,
By the bad voice.[2]

As summer advances, the cuckoo's note, having grown familiar, no longer attracts the notice of the country-folk, as it did when the bird first appeared in April. King

[1] v. ii. 881. [2] *Merchant of Venice*, v. i. 110.

Henry IV. avails himself of this common observation when he lectures his son on his misdoings, and compares the Prince's career to that of "the skipping king" of the previous reign, who lost the respect of the people, and

> Was but as the cuckoo is in June,
> Heard not regarded.[1]

The habit of this bird to lay its egg in another's nest is naturally made much of in the Plays. We are told that "the cuckoo builds not for himself,"[2] and the poet puts questions which still await an answer:

> Why should the worm intrude the maiden bud?
> Or hateful cuckoos hatch in sparrows' nests?[3]

The very name of the bird could be used as a term of reproach, as where Falstaff, in retort to the repeated gibes of the Prince of Wales, calls him, "Ye cuckoo."[4]

[1] 1 *Henry IV.* III. ii. 75.
[2] *Antony and Cleopatra*, II. vi. 28. [3] *Lucrece*, 848.
[4] 1 *Henry IV.* II. iv. 343.

The Quail

As might be anticipated, the birds which are treated as game take their place in the Shakespearian dramas, as well as the birds of prey that hunted them. The WOODCOCK, for example, is referred to by name nine times, generally in connection with the gin or springe with which in those days it was taken, and in reference to some trick or contrivance by which somebody is caught or deceived. When, for instance, the Duke of York, seized by Queen Margaret and her lords, struggles to free himself from their hands, he is taunted by two of the lords, who both make use of the language of sport. Clifford tells him :

> Ay, ay, so strives the woodcock with the gin ;

to which Northumberland, with equal sarcasm, adds :

> So doth the cony struggle in the net.[1]

Ophelia, when cross-questioned by her

[1] 3 *Henry VI.* I. iv. 61.

father as to the attentions paid to her by Hamlet, answers how the Prince

> Hath given countenance to his speech
> With almost all the holy vows of heaven ;

whereupon Polonius abruptly breaks in with the unfeeling comment :

> Ay, springes to catch woodcocks ; I do know.[1]

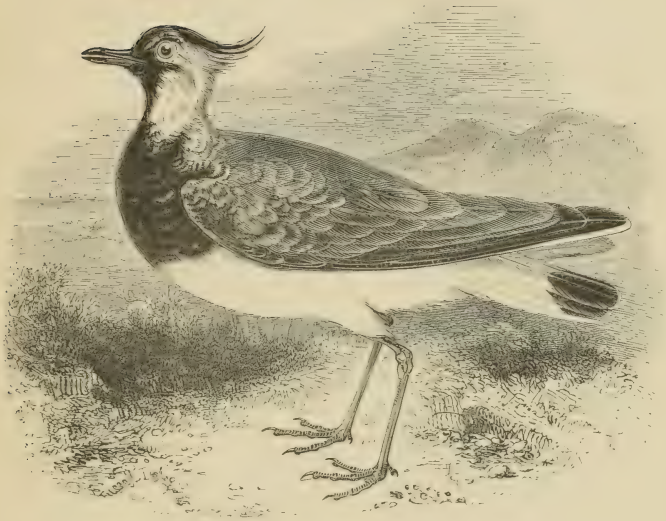
Again, in the tricking of Malvolio, as the steward picks up the letter, Fabian, from the lurking-place where Sir Toby and he are watching every movement, exclaims

> Now is the woodcock near the gin.[2]

The PHEASANT is only once mentioned by Shakespeare, and in a ludicrous way. When the Shepherd and the Clown in *The Winter's Tale* are accosted by Autolycus on their errand to the king, the following conversation ensues :

> *Aut.* I command thee to open thy affair.
> *Shep.* My business, sir, is to the king.
> *Aut.* What advocate hast thou to him ?

[1] *Hamlet*, I. iii. 115. [2] *Twelfth Night*, II. v. 77.



THE LAPWING

Shep. I know not, an't like you.
Clown [*aside*] Advocate's the court-word for a pheasant: say you have none—
Shep. None, sir; I have no pheasant, cock nor hen.
Aut. How blessed are we that are not simple men!
Yet nature might have made me as these are;
Therefore I will not disdain.[1]

We find the PARTRIDGE referred to twice in the dramas, once as part of the game in a puttock's nest, in the passage already cited, and the second time in the encounter of wit between Beatrice and Benedick at the masked ball when she, pretending not to recognise him, heaps all manner of ridicule upon him, ending with the taunt that if he should hear what she has been saying about him,

> He'll but break a comparison or two on me; which peradventure not marked or not laughed at, strikes him into melancholy; and there's a partridge wing saved, for the fool will eat no supper that night.[2]

[1] *Winter's Tale*, IV. iv. 727.
[2] *Much Ado about Nothing*, II. i. 128.

The SNIPE is only once mentioned and the name is used as a contemptuous epithet. Iago, as he soliloquises after an interview with the "gulled gentleman" Rodrigo, affirms

> I mine own gain'd knowledge should profane
> If I would time expend with such a snipe,
> But for my sport and profit.[1]

The QUAIL is likewise referred to in two of the Plays dealing with Greek and Roman history. Antony, comparing his chances in life with Octavius Caesar's, confesses to himself

> The very dice obey him: if we draw lots he speeds;
> His cocks do win the battle still of mine;
> His quails ever beat mine, inhoop'd, at odds.[2]

Thersites speaks thus slightingly of a great warrior:

[1] *Othello*, I. iii. 379. In Shakespeare's time the bird was also called snite, under which form it is referred to by his contemporary poet, Drayton, who speaks of

> The witless woodcock and his neighbour snite.

The use of the word "snipe" as a disparaging epithet for an individual is not yet extinct in the north.

[2] *Antony and Cleopatra*, II. iii. 34.

> Here's Agamemnon, an honest fellow enough, and one that loves quails; but he has not so much brain as ear-wax.[1]

In both these quotations the reference seems to be to a practice of training quails to fight after the manner of cock-fighting.

The allusions to the LAPWING indicate that the dramatist was acquainted with some of the characteristics of the bird. The tactics of the male bird to entice a passer-by away from his nest are expressed in the line

> Far from her nest the lapwing cries away.[2]

When the plot is laid to get Beatrice to accept Benedick as her lover, and the plotters see her "couched in the woodbine coverture," Hero urges:

> Now begin;
> For look where Beatrice, like a lapwing, runs
> Close by the ground, to hear our conference.[3]

[1] *Troilus and Cressida*, v. i. 48.

[2] *Comedy of Errors*, iv. ii. 27. It was this instinct of deception that Chaucer had in mind when he wrote of "the false lapwing ful of trecherye." *Parlement*, 347.

[3] *Much Ado about Nothing*, iii. i. 23.

Lucio, the Euphuist, in *Measure for Measure*, confesses

> 'Tis my familiar sin,
> With maids to seem the lapwing, and to jest,
> Tongue far from heart.[1]

The WILD DUCK OR MALLARD is taken by Shakespeare as a symbol of cowardice and uxoriousness. Falstaff, after robbing the travellers on the highway, without the help of the two chief members of the gang, declares,

> An the Prince and Poins be not two arrant cowards, there's no equity stirring: there's no more valour in that Poins than in a wild duck.[2]

In the description of the flight of Cleopatra from the battle of Actium, the conduct of her Roman lover is thus given:

> The noble ruin of her magic, Antony,
> Claps on his sea-wing, and like a doting mallard,
> Leaving the fight in height, flies after her.[3]

The DABCHICK, DIVE-DAPPER OR LITTLE GREBE is portrayed in a dainty little vig-

[1] *Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 31. [2] 1 *Henry IV.* II. ii. 95.
[3] *Antony and Cleopatra*, III. x. 19.

nette in the *Venus and Adonis*, which brings the bird before our eyes, as it may be seen on many a stream or lake in this country and even on artificial waters, such as those of St. James's Park. The passage represents Venus vowing to her unresponsive mortal "by her fair immortal hand":

> Upon this promise did he raise his chin
> Like a dive-dapper peering through a wave
> Who, being look'd on, ducks as quickly in.[1]

The birds of the CROW family are well represented in Shakespeare's works. Chief among them comes the RAVEN, to which frequent and effective allusion is made. The remarkably dark hue of the bird, including even his bill and his feet, has made his name proverbial as a type of the deepest blackness in Nature. In one of the Sonnets it is said that

> In the old age black was not counted fair,
> Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
> But now is black beauty's successive heir:
> . . . . . .
> Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black.[2]

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 85. [2] *Sonnets*, CXXVII.

With pardonable exaggeration, Juliet, as she stood alone in the orchard awaiting her lover, gave vent thus to her longing:

Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.[1]

The blackness of this bird in contrast to the pure whiteness of a dove, supplies an image to Lysander, mistakenly bewitched by the mischievous Puck:

Not Hermia but Helena I love:
Who will not change a raven for a dove?[2]

The Raven has long had the evil reputation of not only killing the smaller wild animals but, in common with the crows and kites, of watching for and attacking those of larger size that look enfeebled by disease or accident. Thus we read that

Vast confusion waits,
As doth a raven on a sick-fallen beast,
The imminent decay of wrested pomp.[3]

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, III. ii. 17.
[2] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, II. ii. 113.
[3] *King John*, IV. iii. 152.

With less justice, the bird has also been credited with savageness of disposition—a character which Shakespeare has sometimes attributed to persons who may outwardly seem to be gentle and kindly. These are said to have "a raven's heart within a dove."[1] Juliet expands the simile—

> Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!
> Dove-feather'd raven! wolvish-ravening lamb!
> Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st.[2]

Yet there was a belief that the Raven can show a wholly different nature:

> Some say that ravens foster forlorn children,
> The whilst their own birds famish in their nests.[3]

The Raven comes into one of the Scriptural allusions in the Plays where the faithful old Adam, pressing upon Orlando the thrifty savings of his lifetime, consoles himself with the prayer

> He that doth the ravens feed,
> Yea, providently caters for the sparrow,
> Be comfort to my age![4]

[1] *Twelfth Night*, v. i. 125. [2] *Romeo and Juliet*, III. ii. 75.
[3] *Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 153. [4] *As You Like It*, II. iii. 43.

But the most frequent reference made by Shakespeare to this bird has regard to its supposed boding power. It is called the "fatal raven." A messenger of ill news is said to "sing a raven's note." When Othello has the first suspicions craftily suggested to him by Iago, he exclaims

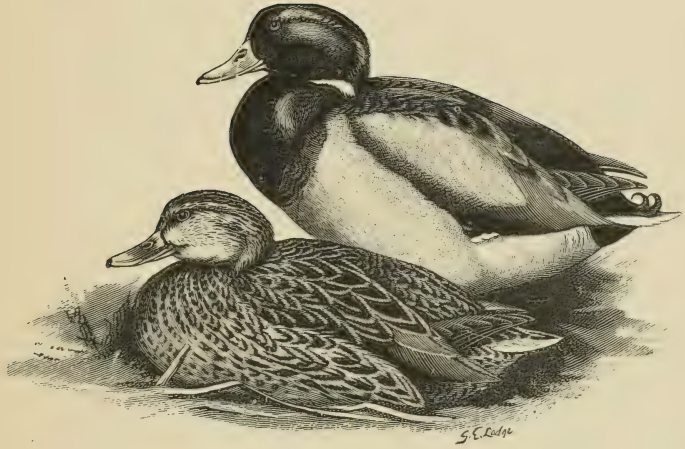
> O, it comes o'er my memory,
> As doth the raven o'er the infected house,
> Boding to all.[1]

Again, when the king is approaching the Castle at Inverness, we hear from Lady Macbeth the ominous words :

> The raven himself is hoarse
> That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
> Under my battlements.[2]

Under the general name of CROWS Shakespeare seems to group the Carrion Crow, the Hooded Crow and the Rook, though the last-named is plainly distin-

[1] *Othello*, IV. i. 20. [2] *Macbeth*, I. v. 35.



THE MALLARD

guished in the description of evening when Macbeth tells his wife

> Light thickens, and the crow
> Makes wing to the rooky wood.[1]

Like the Raven, the Crows are often contrasted with something pure and white. Thus, in a striking simile, we learn that

> The ornament of beauty is suspect,
> A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air.[2]

The simile is sometimes reversed, as where Romeo, on seeing Juliet for the first time, exclaims :

> Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear !
> So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
> As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.[3]

Although it is usually with the dove that the contrast is drawn, another bird is sometimes chosen :

> The crow may bathe his coal-black wings in mire,
> And unperceiv'd fly with the filth away ;

[1] *Macbeth*, III. ii. 50. [2] *Sonnet*, lxx.
[3] *Romeo and Juliet*, I. v. 45.

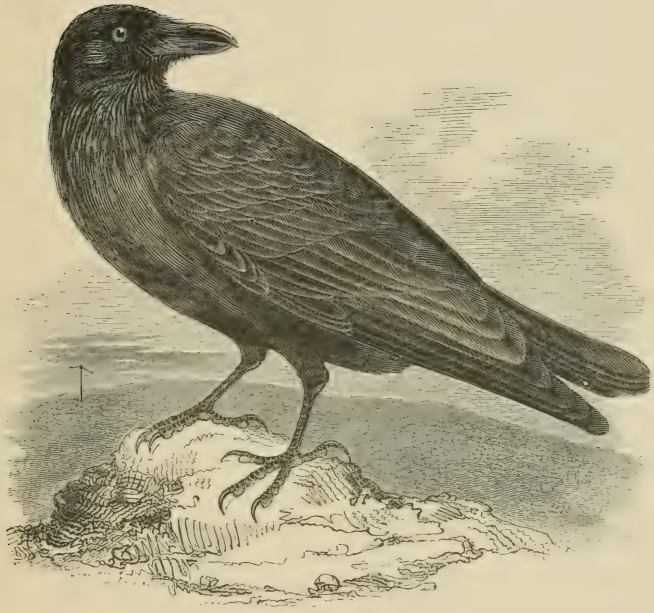
But if the like the snow-white swan desire,
The stain upon his silver down will stay.[1]

Again, when Benvolio presses Romeo to come with him to Capulet's feast, where he will see his Rosaline among the admired beauties of Verona, he challenges him, "with unattainted eye," to

Compare her face with some that I shall show
And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.[2]

In Shakespeare's day the CHOUGH must have been a much commoner bird in our islands than it is now. At present it is not known to breed on the south coast of England further east than the cliffs of Dorset. Three hundred years ago, however, it seems to have been abundant about the chalk headlands of Kent. That it was a familiar English bird may be inferred from various passages in our poet's writings. The most striking scene depicted by him, wherein this bird plays a conspicuous part, is his picture of Dover

[1] *Lucrece*, 1009. [2] *Romeo and Juliet*, I. ii. 86.



The Raven

cliffs, drawn so vividly, as from an actual visit to the place :

> How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low !
> The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles : half way down
> Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade !
> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head :
> The fishermen that walk upon the beach
> Appear like mice ; and yond tall anchoring bark
> Diminish'd to her cock ; her cock, a buoy
> Almost too small for sight : the murmuring surge,
> That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,
> Cannot be heard so high.[1]

It is interesting to notice that while birds are here taken as a help to the eye in estimating the height of the precipice as seen from the summit, a bird is again used as a guide to gauge the height as seen from below :

> Look up a-height ; the shrill-gorged lark so far
> Cannot be seen or heard.[2]

The habits of the chough were not unknown to the poet, since he chose the bird as a symbol for a certain courtier of

[1] *King Lear*, iv. vi. 11. [2] *Ibid.* 58.

whom it was said that "it was a vice to know him":

> 'Tis a chough, but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt.[1]

The chough's continuous and unmusical chatter is more than once contemptuously invoked to describe the talk of some men. When Antonio in *The Tempest* tempts Sebastian to assassinate the honest old Counsellor Gonzalo, he speaks of

> Lords that can prate
> As amply and unnecessarily
> As this Gonzalo; I myself could make
> A chough of as deep chat.[2]

In a passage in *All's Well that Ends Well* where the ambush party are concocting some sort of gibberish to deceive the vainglorious Parolles, they agree to talk "Choughs' language, gabble enough and good enough."[3] When Puck recounts to

[1] *Hamlet*, v. ii. 85.

[2] *Tempest*, II. i. 254. Chaucer's epithet for the Chough was "the theef."

[3] *All's Well that Ends Well*, IV. i. 19.

Oberon what happened to the rustics when Bottom reappeared among them wearing the ass's head, he gives an excellent description of the effect of the discharge of a fowling-piece at a bird-haunted cliff:

> When they him spy,
> As russet-pated choughs, many in sort,
> Rising and cawing at the gun's report,
> Sever themselves and madly sweep the sky:
> So, at his sight, away his fellows fly.[1]

The Chough together with the other members of the Crow family was thought to have a supernatural prophetic gift, and a faculty of revealing hidden deeds. Macbeth's evil conscience was troubled with the thought that

[1] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, III. ii. 19. The chough, by association with man, may become a companionable creature. At Ardkinglas, Loch Fyne, Lady Noble has kept for some years a couple of choughs, brought from Ireland, which are at liberty to fly about the woods and hills, but come back to the mansion house for food and attend their mistress or her guests along the pathways. They even come into the house and perch on the hand of any one who has the courage to invite them.

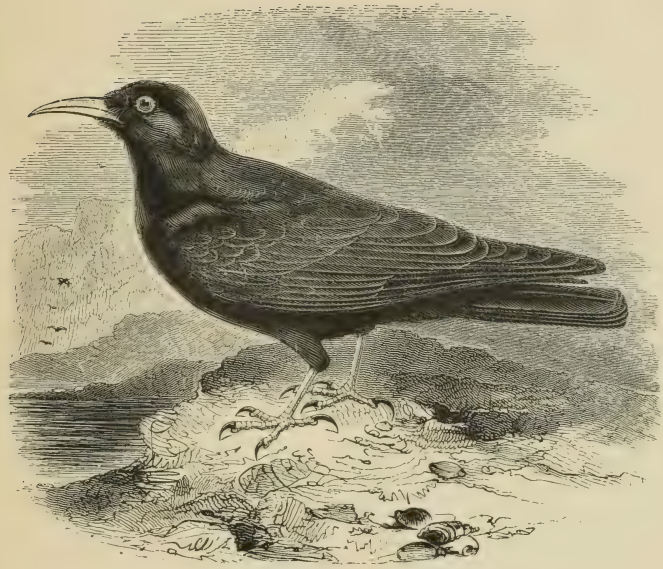
Stones have been known to move and trees to speak ;
Augures and understood relations have
By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood.[1]

The STARLING is mentioned only once by Shakespeare, in a passage which shows that in his time this bird, which has so remarkable a power of imitation, was taught to say some words. The fiery Hotspur declares that although the King had forbidden him to speak of Mortimer he would find his Majesty

When he lies asleep,
And in his ear I'll holla 'Mortimer!'
Nay,
I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak
Nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it him,
To keep his anger still in motion.[2]

The JACKDAW appears occasionally in the dramas as obviously a familiar bird, but no outstanding characters are assigned to it, except that it was common and looked upon as somewhat stupid. Reference has

[1] *Macbeth*, III. iv. 123. [2] 1 *Henry IV.* I. iii. 221.



THE CHOUGH

already been made to the comparison of the lower orders of society to "crows and daws." When, in the Temple Garden, the Earl of Warwick was asked to decide a legal point between the supporters of the White Rose and those of the Red Rose, he replied, that if the question had been one of hawks, sword-blades, horses or merry-eyed girls,

> I have perhaps some shallow spirit of judgement ;
> But in these nice sharp quillets of the law,
> Good faith, I am no wiser than a daw.[1]

The MAGPIE or Maggot-pie has already been alluded to. Macbeth associates it with choughs and rooks as a prophet or discoverer of evil. It is named by King Henry VI. among the boding portents that attended the birth of his murderer Gloucester :

> Dogs howl'd, and hideous tempest shook down trees ;
> The raven rook'd her on the chimney's top,
> And chattering pies in dismal discords sung.[2]

[1] 1 *Henry VI.* II. iv. 16.

[2] 3 *Henry VI.* v. vi. 46. Chaucer's epithet for this bird was "the jangling pye."

The JAY is referred to five times by Shakespeare. In the enchanted isle Caliban offers to guide the drunken Trinculo and Sebastian to some of the dainties of the place :

> I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts :
> Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
> To snare the nimble marmoset.[1]

The name of the bird is used as an uncomplimentary epithet for some women, as where Mrs. Ford, in reference to Falstaff's addresses, declares "we'll teach him to know turtles from jays,"[2] and where Imogen affirmed, "Some jay of Italy hath betrayed him."[3] But perhaps the most interesting appearance of the bird in the Plays occurs in the scene of the *Taming of the Shrew*, where after the tailor has been sent about his business, taking with him the cap and gown which had been ordered for Katharine, and with which she

[1] *Tempest*, II. ii. 158. [2] *Merry Wives*, III. iii. 34.
[3] *Cymbeline*, III. iv. 47.

THE STARLING

was well pleased, her husband addresses her thus :

> Well, come, my Kate ; we will unto your father's
> Even in these honest mean habiliments :
> Our purses shall be proud, our garments poor ;
> For 'tis the mind that makes the body rich ;
> And as the sun breaks through the darkest clouds,
> So honour peereth in the meanest habit.
> What is the jay more precious than the lark
> Because his feathers are more beautiful ?
> Or is the adder better than the eel,
> Because his painted skin contents the eye ? [1]

The various BIRDS OF THE FARM-YARD have received due attention from the great dramatist. Chief among them, the COCK is frequently cited, especially as a recognised chronometer of the morning hours, for in Elizabethan days this mode of indicating time had not gone out of popular use. We all remember the unhappy experience of the carrier in the inn at Rochester "since the first cock." [2]

[1] *Taming of the Shrew*, IV. iii. 165.

[2] 1 *Henry IV.* II. i. 15. Chaucer's reference to the bird is "The cok, that orloge is of thorpes lyte." *Parlement*, 350.

We also recall how Capulet, bustling among his household, gave them a three-fold indication of the time :

> Come, stir, stir, stir ! the second cock hath crow'd,
> The curfew-bell hath rung, 'tis three o'clock.[1]

Shakespeare brings the cock's shrill clarion even into his fairyland, for Ariel's song breaks off at this signal :

> Hark, hark ! I hear
> The strain of strutting chanticleer
> Cry, Cock-a-diddle-dow.[2]

But the most detailed and impressive reference to this familiar bird occurs in the memorable scene on the platform before the Castle of Elsinore. The ghost had just appeared to Hamlet's friends and

> Was about to speak when the cock crew.
> And then it started like a guilty thing
> Upon a fearful summons. I have heard,
> The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
> Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
> Awake the god of day, and at his warning,
> Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, IV. iv. 3. [2] *Tempest*, I. ii. 384.

The Cock and Goose

The extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine: and of the truth herein
This present object made probation:
It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm;
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.[1]

The GOOSE, so frequently alluded to in the Plays, usually appears there as the recognised symbol of human stupidity and cowardice. How far this character, if really deserved by the bird, is the result of domestication and association with man for many centuries, is a question for ornithological psychologists. There can be no doubt that the wild-goose does not deserve the reputation attributed to his degenerate kinsman in the farm-yard. Shakespeare was aware how active and vigilant that bird was among the fens

[1] *Hamlet*, I. i. 147-164.

which it haunted. He refers to the sudden uprise and flight of

> The wild geese that the creeping fowler eye,[1]

and to the autumnal movement of these fowl to the larger waters, a fact known even to Lear's fool, who remarks :

> The winter's not gone yet if the wild geese fly that way.[2]

The rapidity with which these birds disappear when they take wing was likewise familiar knowledge. The melancholy Jaques claims that if a man whom he censures does not deserve reproof,

> Why then my taxing, like a wild goose, flies,
> Unclaim'd of any man.[3]

The difficulty of circumventing the bird is conveyed in the proverbial expression "a wild-goose chase," which was well known in the time of Elizabeth. Mercutio retorts to Romeo :

[1] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, III. ii. 20.
[2] *King Lear*, II. iv. 45.
[3] *As You Like It*, II. vii. 86.

> Nay, if thy wits run the wild-goose chase, I have done; for thou hast more of the wild-goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five.[1]

The SWAN, perhaps in Shakespeare's day more abundant in this country than it is now, was then regarded as a "Bird Royal" which nobody could keep without a licence from the Crown, and provision for making a certain mark on the bird's bill to denote its ownership. Our Sovereigns still maintain the Royal Swans on the Thames, and the young birds are regularly taken up in summer to receive the mark. To this bird full recognition has been paid by our dramatist. He places it before us in its usual watery domain, where its nest serves as a symbol of Britain set in the midst of the sea, "like a swan's nest in a great pool."[2] He lets us see

> The swan her downy cygnets save,
> Keeping them prisoner underneath her wings.[3]

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, II. iv. 69. [2] *Cymbeline*, III. iv. 138.
[3] 1 *Henry VI.* v. iii. 56.

We watch the bird's ungainly gait on land and are told that

> All the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> Although she lave them hourly in the flood.[1]

The perfect stillness of the surface of a sheet of water is marked by

> The swan's down-feather,
> That stands upon the swell at full of tide
> And neither way inclines.[2]

Again, we watch

> A swan
> With bootless labour swim against the tide
> And spend her strength with overmatching waves.[3]

The time-honoured legend that the "death-divining swan" utters a musical note or wail at the time of dying is repeatedly alluded to by the poet, and sometimes as if it were a reality. Lucrece, at her approaching death, like a

> Pale swan in her watery nest,
> Begins the sad dirge of her certain ending.[4]

[1] *Titus Andronicus*, IV. ii. 101.

[2] *Antony and Cleopatra*, III. ii. 48. [3] 3 *Henry VI.* I. iv. 19.

[4] *Lucrece*, 1611. Chaucer had already chronicled "the

Prince Henry, son of King John, when told that his dying father had been singing, muses thus :

> 'Tis strange that death should sing :
> I am the cygnet to this pale faint swan
> Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death.[1]

In the scene wherein Othello discovers the double-dyed villainy of Iago, a touching incident is the wandering language of the faithful dying Emilia, whose mind goes back to her beloved mistress :

> What did thy song bode, lady ?
> Hark, canst thou hear me ? I will play the swan,
> And die in music. [*Singing*] Willow, willow, willow.[2]

More cheerful is the use of the legend by Portia when Bassanio stands before the caskets, and she, deeply interested in the result, commands

> Let music sound while he doth make his choice ;
> Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
> Fading in music.[3]

jalous swan, ayens his deth that singeth." *Parlement of Foules*, 342.

[1] *King John*, v. vii. 20. [2] *Othello*, v. ii. 249.

[3] *Merchant of Venice*, III. ii. 43.

The TURKEY-COCK, introduced into Europe from the New World in the early part of the sixteenth century, had become quite naturalised in the farm-yards of England by the time of Elizabeth. It is several times alluded to by Shakespeare, sometimes as a symbol of conceited ostentation, and also as an article of food. When in *King Henry V.* Gower sees Pistol approaching, he exclaims to Fluellen "Here he comes, swelling like a turkey-cock," to which the Welshman, who had resolved to make the braggart eat the leek, replies, "'Tis no matter for his swellings nor his turkey-cocks."[1] Not less appropriately is the comparison used of Malvolio, who, as Maria said, had been "yonder i' the sun practising behaviour to his own shadow this half hour." As the three concealed onlookers watch him strutting down the walk, talking to himself, they can

[1] v. i. 14.

THE MAGPIE

scarcely restrain themselves. Fabian entreats silence :

> O, peace ! Contemplation makes a rare turkey-cock of him : how he jets under his advanced plumes.[1]

It will be remembered that among the produce on its way to London in the carts of the two carriers at the Rochester inn there was a pannier of live turkeys.[2]

The PEACOCK is alluded to several times in the Plays as the accepted personification of pride. Joan of Arc is represented as counselling the Princes :

> Let frantic Talbot triumph for a while
> And like a peacock sweep along his tail ;
> We'll pull his plumes and take away his train.[3]

Thersites says of Ajax that he "goes up and down the field asking for himself ; he stalks up and down like a peacock—a stride and a stand."[4] When King Henry V.

[1] *Twelfth Night*, II. v. 28. [2] 1 *Henry IV.* II. i. 25.

[3] 1 *Henry VI.* III. iii. 5. Chaucer refers to

> The pecock, with his aungels fethres brighte.

[4] *Troilus and Cressida*, III. iii. 244.

mingles incognito among his soldiers in France, one of them tells him :

> That's a perilous shot out of an elder-gun, that a poor and a private displeasure can do against a monarch ! you may as well go about to turn the sun to ice with fanning in his face with a peacock's feather.[1]

"'Fly pride,' says the peacock," is a pithy proverb put into the mouth of Dromio of Syracuse.[2]

The DOVE and the PIGEON are often mentioned in Shakespeare's writings, without any essential distinction being drawn between them. Thus, we read in one passage that "Venus yokes her silver doves,"[3] while in another place the birds appear as "Venus' pigeons."[4] Again, in a less poetical sphere, they are even interchanged as articles of food. On the one hand we find Justice Shallow ordering "some pigeons" and any other "pretty

[1] *King Henry V.* IV. i. 195. [2] *Comedy of Errors*, IV. iii. 74.
[3] *Venus and Adonis*, 1190. [4] *Merchant of Venice*, II. vi. 5.

THE JAY

little tiny kickshaws" for the entertainment of Falstaff,[1] and on the other hand, we note that old Gobbo, when he wanted Bassanio to take his son into service, presents to that gentleman "a dish of doves."[2]

The Dove is typically pure white, and stands as the recognised emblem of gentleness, purity and innocence. Yet in direst emergencies this timid bird may show fight in defence of its young. We are told that

> The smallest worm will turn being trodden on,
> And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood.[3]

It was believed that when "frighted out of fear" the dove would peck the ostrich,[4] and it had probably been actually observed in hawking experience, that as

> Cowards fight when they can fly no further
> So doves do peck the falcon's piercing talons.[5]

The TURTLE-DOVE, long the accepted symbol of conjugal affection and loving

[1] 2 *Henry IV.* v. i. 25. [2] *Merchant of Venice*, II. ii. 123.
[3] 3 *Henry VI.* II. ii. 17.
[4] *Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xiii. 196.
[5] 3 *Henry VI.* I. iv. 40.

tenderness, has an honoured place in Shakespeare's pages.[1] We there read of "a pair of loving turtle-doves that could not live asunder day or night."[2] Florizel takes Perdita's hand in *Winter's Tale*, with the significant assertion :

> So turtles pair
> That never mean to part.[3]

And at the end of the same Play, the widowed Paulina, when all around her has at last ended happily, desires to retire into solitude :

> I, an old turtle,
> Will wing me to some wither'd bough and there
> My mate, that's never to be found again,
> Lament till I am lost.

The Pigeon is not only presented as an article of food ; but is sometimes slightingly alluded to, with reflections on its mode of feeding and its timidity.

[1] Chaucer's phrase is :

The wedded turtel, with hir herte trewe. *Parlement*, 355.

It was the moaning croon of the bird from the high elms that dwelt in Virgil's memory.

[2] 1 *Henry VI.* II. ii. 30. [3] IV. iv. 154.

Of the "honey-tongued Boyet" it was remarked

> This fellow pecks up wit as pigeons pease
> And utters it again when God doth please.[1]

And Hamlet, reflecting on his slowness to avenge his father's murder, reproaches himself as "pigeon-liver'd and lacking gall."[2]

I have reserved for the last section of this Essay the smaller birds, including the songsters, as these are noticed in Shakespeare's Poems and Dramas. A number of them are grouped together by Bottom in the ditty, singing which he wakes the sleeping Fairy Queen:

> The ousel-cock so black of hue,
> With orange-tawny bill,
> The throstle with his note so true,
> The wren with little quill;
>
> The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
> The plain-song cuckoo gray,
> Whose note full many a man doth mark
> And dares not answer nay.[3]

[1] *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 315. [2] *Hamlet*, II. ii. 572.
[3] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, III. i. 114.

Of the birds recounted in this song, Shakespeare's favourite, if we may judge from the frequency and appreciation with which he mentions it, was the LARK. He makes this bird a rival to Chanticleer in the honour of setting the day agoing. He calls it "the morning lark," "the herald of the morn," specially associated with the brightness and glory of dawn.

> Lo, here the gentle lark, weary of rest,
> From his moist cabinet mounts up on high,
> And wakes the morning, from whose silver breast
> The sun ariseth in his majesty.[1]

Again

> The busy day,
> Waked by the lark, hath roused the ribald crows.[2]

The blithe sound of the bird's carol is commemorated in the line

> The merry larks are ploughmen's clocks.

How joyfully does this feeling find expression in the exquisite song in *Cymbeline* :

[1] *Venus and Adonis*, 853.

[2] *Troilus and Cressida*, IV. ii. 8.

THE TURTLE-DOVE

The Lark

Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,
And Phoebus 'gins arise,
His steeds to water at those springs
On chaliced flowers that lies;
And winking Mary-buds begin
To ope their golden eyes;
With every thing that pretty is,
My lady sweet arise:
Arise, arise![1]

The bird-melodies of night and morning were never more delicately commingled than in the garden scene where Juliet, from her window above, would fain persuade her lingering lover that it was not yet near day:

Jul. Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day:
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear;
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate-tree:
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.
Rom. It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale; look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain-tops:
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.
Jul. Yond light is not day-light, I know it, I:
It is some meteor that the sun exhales,

[1] II. iii. 19.

To be to thee this night a torch-bearer,
And light thee on thy way to Mantua:
Therefore stay yet; thou needst not to be gone.
Rom. Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death;
I am content, so thou wilt have it so.
I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,
'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow.
Nor that is not the lark, whose notes do beat
The vaulty heaven so high above our heads:
How is't my soul? let's talk: it is not day.
Jul. It is, it is: hie hence, be gone, away!
It is the lark that sings so out of tune.

. . . . . .

Some say the lark and loathed toad change eyes;
O, now I would they had changed voices too![1]

The BLACKBIRD or OUZEL, depicted in Bottom's song as "so black of hue, with orange-tawny bill," though one of our most melodious songsters, receives no commendation from Shakespeare. It is only once again mentioned by him, when its name is used with a rather uncomplimentary meaning. When Justice Shallow enquires of his brother magistrate regarding his god-daughter, Silence replies, "Alas, a

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, III. v. 1-32.

THE SONG-THRUSH

black ousel, cousin Shallow."[1] It is a pity that the old and distinctive name ouzel for this bird has become obsolete, though it may still be heard in use in Scotland. On the other side of the Tweed, also, where so many linguistic relics of the old alliance with France still remain, the blackbird is likewise known by its French name of merle, while the common name of the thrush is *mavis*, likewise from the French *mauvis*.

The THRUSH or THROSTLE, another of our most musical warblers, is cited thrice by Shakespeare without any further comment on his voice than the compliment in Bottom's song—"with his note so true." The bird comes into one of Autolycus' songs :

> The lark, that tirra-lyra chants,
> With heigh ! with heigh ! the thrush and the jay,
> Are summer songs for me and my aunts,
> While we lie tumbling in the hay.[2]

[1] 2 *Henry IV.* III. ii. 7. I have heard in East Lothian a remarkably dark-complexioned child called "a blacket ouzel."

[2] *Winter's Tale*, IV. iii. 9.

Our great dramatist refers to the WREN no fewer than nine times in his different Plays. Its small size is noticed, and the bird is credited with an amount of courage disproportionate to its stature. When Macduff flees to England his wife bitterly complains that he should have left her and his children without his protection :

> He loves us not ;
> He wants the natural touch ; for the poor wren,
> The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
> Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.[1]

When Imogen, recovering in the cave, hardly knows where she is, she muses with herself and prays :

> I tremble still with fear : but if there be
> Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity
> As a wren's eye, fear'd gods, a part of it ![2]

Shakespeare hardly does justice to the notes of the wren, which are louder, sweeter and more varied than might have been looked for in so tiny a bird. Portia thought that if the nightingale sang by

[1] *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 8. [2] *Cymbeline*, IV. ii. 304.

day it would be thought no better than the wren.[1] And, in another passage, words of consolation "from a hollow breast" are likened to "the chirping of a wren."[2]

The WAGTAIL is alluded to once by the poet, when its name is used in contempt by Kent towards Goneril's steward:

> Thou zed! thou unnecessary letter! I will tread this unbolted villain into mortar. Spare my gray beard?—you wagtail![3]

There is one reference by Shakespeare to the BUNTING, probably the common corn-bunting or bunting-lark, which is not unlike the lark, and further resembles that bird in nesting on the ground. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, the old lord Lafeu, when assured by Bertram that he had mistaken the character of Parolles, remarks; "Then my dial goes not true; I took this lark for a bunting."[4]

[1] *Merchant of Venice*, v. i. 104. [2] 2 *Henry VI.* III. ii. 42.
[3] *King Lear*, II. ii. 59. [4] II. v. 5.

The REDBREAST or RUDDOCK is most fully referred to in *Cymbeline*. Arviragus enters, bearing in his arms Imogen, seemingly dead, and as he lays the body down he thus addresses it:

> With fairest flowers,
> Whilst summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele,
> I'll sweeten thy sad grave: thou shalt not lack
> The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose, nor
> The azured harebell, like thy veins; no, nor
> The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander
> Out-sweetened not thy breath: the ruddock would
> With charitable bill,—O bill, sore shaming
> Those rich-left heirs that let their fathers lie
> Without a monument!—bring thee all this;
> Yea, and furr'd moss besides, when flowers are none,
> To winter-ground thy corse.[1]

The list of signs whereby Speed knows that his master Valentine is in love begins thus: "first, you have learned, like Sir Proteus, to wreathe your arms, like a male-content; to relish a love-song, like a robin-redbreast; to walk alone, like one that had the pestilence."[2] When Hotspur

[1] *Cymbeline*, IV. ii. 219. Chaucer speaks of "the tame ruddock."

[2] *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II. i. 16.

presses his wife to sing and she twice refuses, his only remark is, "'Tis the next way to turn tailor, or be redbreast-teacher."[1]

The only allusion to the HEDGE-SPARROW occurs in *King Lear*. When Goneril has gone some way in her recrimination of her father, the Fool, who had just before called the old king "a shealed peascod," breaks into the conversation with these lines:

> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
> That it had it head bit off by it young.[2]

The FINCH, included in Bottom's song, is not elsewhere mentioned by the poet, though the epithet "finch-egg," as a term of reproach, is hurled by Thersites at Patroclus.[3] Of the various English finches we may suppose that the bird intended was the common chaffinch.

The familiar HOUSE-SPARROW, though often mentioned by Shakespeare, receives

[1] 1 *Henry IV.* III. i. 260. [2] *King Lear*, I. iv. 214.
[3] *Troilus and Cressida*, v. i. 34.

little commendation from him. He twice connects it with evidence of the care of Providence, in obvious allusion to passages in Holy Writ. Hamlet observes that "there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."[1] Reference has already been made to the trust expressed by Orlando's faithful old Adam in Him "that providently caters for the sparrow."[2] The bird comes also into the presentation of classical deities in *The Tempest*, where Iris tells how Venus'

> Waspish-headed son has broke his arrows,
> Swears he will shoot no more, but play with sparrows
> And be a boy right out.[3]

Thersites, who had been soundly thrashed by Ajax, takes his own method of revenge by declaring

> I have bobbed his brain more than he has beat my bones; I will buy nine sparrows for a penny, and his pia mater is not worth the ninth part of a sparrow.[4]

[1] *Hamlet*, v. ii. 212.
[2] *As You Like It*, ii. iii. 44.
[3] *Tempest*, iv. i. 99.
[4] *Troilus and Cressida*, ii. i. 67.

The Swallow

The SWALLOW is cited in the Plays for the swiftness of its flight, and for its annual migration.[1] When Richmond gives the order to march for Bosworth Field, he adds,

> True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings;
> Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.[2]

The rapidity with which this bird can pursue its course, even close to the ground, had not escaped the poet's notice. Titus, in praise of his stud, affirms

> I have horse will follow where the game
> Makes way, and run like swallows o'er the plain.[3]

When Falstaff was rebuked for his dilatory journey to the field of battle, he justified himself thus:

> I never knew yet but rebuke and check was the reward of valour. Do you think me a swallow, an arrow, or a bullet? Have I, in my

[1] Chaucer regarded this bird from another point of view:—

> The swalow, mordrer of the flyës smale
> That maken hony of floures fresshe of hewe.
>
> *Parlement*, 353.

[2] *Richard III.* v. ii. 23. [3] *Titus Andronicus*, II. ii. 23.

poor and old motion, the expedition of thought? I have speeded hither with the very extremest inch of possibility.[1]

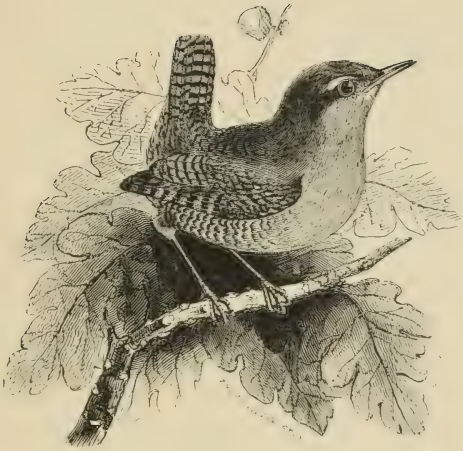
The arrival of the swallow with spring is charmingly brought before us in this little picture of vernal flowers :

Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty ; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath ; pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength, a malady
Most incident to maids ; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial ; lilies of all kinds.[2]

The regular disappearance of the bird on the approach of autumn is taken as a symbol of human constancy. Timon of Athens is assured by his associates :— "The swallow follows not summer more willing than we your lordship."[3]

For the HOUSE-MARTIN or MARTLET Shakespeare seems to have had a special

[1] 2 *Henry IV.* iv. iii. 31. [2] *Winter's Tale*, iv. iv. 118.
[3] *Timon of Athens*, iii. vi. 29.



THE WREN

regard. He had noted the courageous way in which the bird places its nest, and the social instinct which leads it to build in companies where it can find convenient settlements. In one passage we are told :

> The martlet
> Builds in the weather on the outward wall,
> Even in the force and road of casualty.[1]

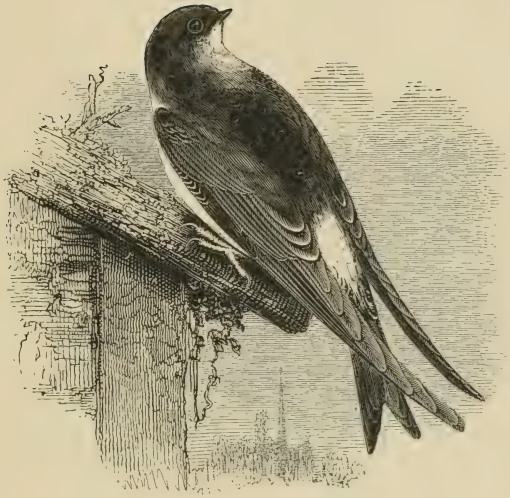
When King Duncan arrives at the Castle of Inverness, and is delighted with the situation of the building and the pleasantness of the air, Banquo calls his attention to the numerous nests of the house-martin as evidence of the salubrity of the climate :

> This guest of summer,
> The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
> By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
> Smells wooingly here : no jutty, frieze,
> Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
> Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle :
> Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed
> The air is delicate.[2]

I have reserved for the last place in the list of Shakespeare's birds his references

[1] *Merchant of Venice*, II. ix. 28. [2] *Macbeth*, I. vi. 3.

to the NIGHTINGALE. These are numerous and may be divided into two groups. In one of them the style is somewhat artificial in tone, reflecting not the poet's own experience of the bird, but the legendary interpretation of its song that had been handed down from remote antiquity. In the other group, the nightingale takes its natural place as one of our familiar English songsters. There was a Greek myth that Philomela, the daughter of an Attic King, after being cruelly treated by her brother Tereus, was compassionately changed by the gods into a nightingale, and that thereafter she spent her life among woods lamenting in mournful notes the fate that had befallen her. Her name came to be given to the bird. Shakespeare, following this legend, introduces the bird as Philomel into his separate Poems and into the lyrics included in his dramas. In the ordinary dialogue of the Plays, however, dropping



THE HOUSE-MARTIN

the Greek name and legend, he uses the common English appellation of the bird, and, like ancient and modern poets, speaks of the bird as feminine, although it is the male alone that sings.

Along with the ancient myth about Philomela he intertwined another and probably much more recent, but equally unfounded belief that the nightingale, when it sings, leans against a thorn that pierces its breast. This combination of ignorant fancies is most fully expressed in the following passage :

> Every thing did banish moan,
> Save the nightingale alone :
> She, poor bird, as all forlorn,
> Lean'd her breast up-till a thorn,
> And there sung the dolefull'st ditty,
> That to hear it was great pity :
> 'Fie, fie, fie,' now would she cry ;
> 'Tereu, tereu !' by and by ;
> That to hear her so complain,
> Scarce I could from tears refrain ;
> For her griefs, so lively shown,
> Made me think upon my own.[1]

[1] *Passionate Pilgrim*, xxi.

The same artificial note of sadness runs through the other allusions to Philomel. In *Lucrece* we read :

> By this, lamenting Philomel had ended
> The well-tuned warble of her nightly sorrow.[1]

Again in the *Sonnets* :

> As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
> And stops her pipe in growth of riper days :
> Not that the summer is less pleasant now
> Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,
> But that wild music burthens every bough,
> And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.[2]

The poet has brought Philomel into his fairy-land, and has for the moment left out any reference to the alleged mournfulness of her music :

> Philomel, with melody
> Sing in our sweet lullaby ;
> Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby :
> Never harm,
> Nor spell, nor charm,
> Come our lovely lady nigh ;
> So, good night, with lullaby.[3]

[1] *Lucrece*, 1079. [2] *Sonnet*, cii.
[3] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, II. ii. 13.

The Nightingale

In the Plays it is pleasant to find the bird with its English name and in natural surroundings. When Valentine, one of the Two Gentlemen of Verona, was banished from Milan and from the lady of his love, he pictured to himself among the woes that lay in front of him :

> Except I be by Silvia in the night
> There is no music in the nightingale.

And when afterwards, through stress of circumstances, he found himself compelled to become the captain of a band of outlaws, he found consolation in this wise :

> How use doth breed a habit in a man !
> This shadowy desert, unfrequented woods,
> I better brook than flourishing peopled towns :
> Here can I sit alone, unseen of any,
> And to the nightingale's complaining notes
> Tune my distresses and record my woes.[1]

It will be recollected that among the tantalising tricks played off by the lord

[1] *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, III. i. 178, v. iv. 1.

and his servants upon Christopher Sly, he was asked

> Wilt thou have music? Hark! Apollo plays
> And twenty caged nightingales do sing.[1]

Nor can we forget the magnanimous offer of Bottom when he wanted to play the part of the lion, and the danger of his frightening the duchess and the ladies was pointed out to him :

> But I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.[2]

The romance of the nightingale's song was never more thoroughly discarded than by Portia when she returned from her memorable trip to Venice and found a light and music in her hall. She remarked to Nerissa that by night music sounds much sweeter than by day, and received in reply the explanation that "Silence bestows that virtue on it, madam." Portia, however,

[1] *Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, Scene ii. 33.

[2] *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, I. ii. 72.

THE NIGHTINGALE

with her ingenuity of a barrister, insisted in a passage already referred to :

> The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark,
> When neither is attended ; and I think
> The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
> When every goose is cackling, would be thought
> No better a musician than the wren.[1]

The lapse of two centuries from the time of Chaucer witnessed a change in the mood of English poetry in regard to its treatment of birds. The simple and unaffected joy in the voices of the grove, so conspicuous in the poems of the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, had not become less, but it had been accompanied by the growth of a more observant and contemplative spirit. While bird-music was as much appreciated as ever, a much wider field of interest in the feathered tribes had been entered upon. Greater familiarity with bird-life had been attained, and much more was known about the habits of birds.

[1] *Merchant of Venice*, v. i. 102.

Of this knowledge use was made by way of simile and illustration in regard to human life. How often and how vividly, for instance, does Shakespeare, by means of an analogy from the world of birds, portray the depth of man's feelings,—his joy, his sorrow and his suffering!

The law of evolution, which has been so supreme in the history of organised life on the globe, does not leave the human mind outside of its influence. If there was proof of progress in poetic insight between the days of Chaucer and those of Shakespeare, we may expect to find on examination that other two centuries did not pass without leaving some evidence of change in the tone of our poetry. To test this inference, some typical examples may be taken from the poetry of the nineteenth century where it deals with birds, for comparison with the quotations which have been cited from our great dramatist. The subject is obviously far

too wide to be fully entered upon here; but it may be briefly illustrated by selecting three well-known poems by three of the most illustrious of the English poets of the nineteenth century—the "Ode to the Cuckoo" of Wordsworth, the "Ode to the Nightingale" of Keats, and the "Ode to the Skylark" of Shelley.

Coming anew to these poems from a prolonged perusal of Shakespeare, we are first struck by the fact that although so distinct from each other in thought as well as in music, they are akin in being not mere references to the birds, but actual addresses to particular members of the feathered tribes. In each case the ode is no cold description, but a monologue, glowing with appreciation and love, and spoken as it were directly to the subject itself. The birds are recognised as, like ourselves, "travellers between life and death." Instead of being regarded as "unreasonable," that is, devoid

of any reasoning faculty, and gifted only with what is called "instinct," they are felt to be linked with us by the possession of many qualities that are closely akin to some of the purest virtues of humanity. And they are acknowledged to be fellow-creatures, partners with us in the great mystery of life. They are communed with as if man's longings could be made known to them, and as if they in turn might be brought to feel the reality and depth of his affectionate interest in them, or even perhaps be induced to reveal to him the secret of their careless happiness. The poets in their mystic rapture idealise these songsters until they almost seem to cease to be corporeal beings. Thus Wordsworth:

> O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
> Or but a wandering voice?
> . . . . .
> Even yet thou art to me
> No bird, but an invisible thing,
> A voice, a mystery.

Shelley's ethereal melody becomes even more ecstatic in his address to the Skylark :

> Hail to thee, blithe spirit—
> Bird thou never wert—
> . . . . .
> Teach us, sprite or bird,
> What sweet thoughts are thine.

To the modern poet the voices of the birds seem to express more directly and simply than any other kind of music the pure *joie de vivre.* Shelley wrote of his Skylark :

> Sound of vernal showers
> On the twinkling grass,
> Rain-awakened flowers,—
> All that ever was,
> Joyous and clear and fresh,—thy music doth surpass.
> . . . . . .
> Yet, if we could scorn
> Hate and pride and fear,
> If we were things born
> Not to shed a tear,
> I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Keats recognised the same joyous feeling in his Nightingale :

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thy happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

Each poet seeks to interpret for himself the meaning of the song of the bird and the sources of its inspiration. To Wordsworth the Cuckoo seems to be

Babbling to the vale
Of sunshine and of flowers.

To Keats the Nightingale was singing of "summer." Shelley asks the Skylark :

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain ?
What fields, or waves, or mountains ?
What shapes of sky or plain ?
What love of thine own kind ? What ignorance of pain ?

Again, to the poet's ear the bird-music awakens memories of the past. To Wordsworth the notes of the Cuckoo brought "a tale of visionary hours" in his boyhood when, in his endeavour to set eyes upon the bird, he would

Often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou were still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

To Keats the vista unfolded of the past reached far beyond his own time:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown;
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

The modern poet finds in the varied notes of the birds not the bodings and portents, superstitiously associated in the olden time with such cries as those of the raven and the owl, but high and solemn thoughts of death and the hereafter. Shelley wrote of his Skylark:

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

And Keats found his heart attuned by the voice of the Nightingale to the contemplation of his own dissolution :

> Darkling I listen ; and for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath ;
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy !
> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem become a sod.

What the future course of English Poetry will be in this same domain cannot be confidently predicted. Already, after the lapse of another century since the three poems appeared which we have been considering, a certain change in the poetic mood with regard to living Nature can be more or less distinctly perceived. With such a splendid past to contemplate, we may be well assured that our Poetry will continue to be radiant with sympathy for all living things. The birds will not

fail to retain their "pride of place" in the affections of each generation of poets, and their voices, in the future as in the past, will abide with man as the source of some of the purest pleasure that can solace his heart.

A Friendly Chough

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