4

Birds of a Feather: Magpies in the Bayeux Tapestry?

Carol Neuman de Vegvar

The Bayeux Tapestry is alive with birds; in her 2005 article, “Squawk Talk: Commentary by Birds in the Bayeux Tapestry”, Gale R. Owen-Crocker counts 217 of them.[1] The roles these birds play are richly varied: not only as hunting hawks and ornamental finials in the main register, but far more numerously in the borders, as actors in fables, and as what Owen-Crocker considers decorative pairs and singletons, which she sees also as sometimes commenting by pose and expression on the narrative action of the main register. Some of these birds are recognizable species: doves, peacocks, roosters, hawks or eagles, storks, cranes or herons; other less convincing identifications have included an ostrich, an owl, and paired phoenixes.[2] Many of these species carry one or more widely applied symbolic associations in medieval art.

Among the birds in the border, there is a consistent tendency, regardless of physical type, to show the wings in a contrasting color and often to delineate the pinfeathers as alternating colors, creating a pattern of stripes. The colors used for the birds reflect the palette of the Tapestry as a whole, including dark green, red, gold, and black: naturalistic color is not intended. In part, the use of unnaturally bright colors for the birds and the contrasting color for the wings is probably intended to help make the bird and its pose visually legible. If the Tapestry was made for display in a large space such as a hall or church, as has been widely suggested, the color differences would certainly have enhanced visual legibility at a distance. However, the contrasting wing color of some of the birds in the Tapestry’s borders may have an additional dimension of symbolic content. Of the birds of northwestern Europe,

1 Gale R. Owen-Crocker, “Squawk Talk: Commentary by Birds in the Bayeux Tapestry?” *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005): 240.

2 *Ibid.*, 244–52.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

the most widespread example of a bird with a starkly contrasting wing is the magpie, with a highly striking white shoulder patch and stomach displayed against a black body. Given the non-naturalistic colors of the Tapestry's avian population, an accurate observation of color and its placement is not to be hoped for. But other elements of magpie appearance and behavior may be present here, thereby identifying these birds for their symbolic potential. Magpies are also visually notable for what Gordon D'Arcy, in the *Pocket Guide to the Birds of Ireland*, has aptly called their "ridiculously long tails" and for their strutting walk with the tail lifted off the ground, both of which were seen by medieval commentators as references to pride and excessive show.[3] They are also famous for their loud and frequent calls, or chatter. Many of the birds in the borders of the Bayeux Tapestry, regardless of species, seem to be vocalizing, which Owen-Crocker has seen as commentary on the human characters and actions in the central register, so an open beak is not in itself an identifier for a magpie.[4] But it seems possible that in the zoologically inexact world of the Tapestry's margins, a bicolor bird with an unusually long tail, with neither a peacock's crest nor the long neck of a goose, but which is shown with a swaggering or preening pose and sometimes with an open beak, may be read as a magpie.[5]

The probability that at least some of the birds in the Tapestry's borders are intended to be read as magpies is enhanced because, like doves, peacocks, and other species-specific birds and animals in the Tapestry's borders, magpies carried a range of strong behavioral and symbolic associations in medieval Europe. In the artistic context of the Tapestry, where quite a lot of the border animals have been read as providing commentary on the main narrative as much by their identification as by their actions, an absence of magpies would perhaps be more surprising than their presence. The magpie's associations were evolving in the time of the Tapestry's production in directions that may have enabled it to serve as a potent signifier for the Tapestry's makers and viewers. They may have been intended to serve by their presence and placement as an indictment of the words and actions of Harold that are seen ultimately to lead to his downfall: pride, false speech, and possibly also the very acquisition of the crown of England. Further, they may support the unfolding narrative of the Tapestry as feathered harbingers of the disaster to come.

Where are the possible magpies in the Bayeux Tapestry? Two preen their feathers above the last group of horsemen in Harold's entourage as they ride towards Bosham: they are located directly above the words "Harold dux Anglorum" and one of the riders points upward at them.[6] Two more preen above Harold and another man as

3 G. D'Arcy, *Pocket Guide to the Birds of Ireland* (Belfast: Appletree, 1986), 63.

4 Owen-Crocker, "Squawk Talk", 252–53.

5 W. Brunsdon Yapp, "A New Look at English Bestiaries", *Medium Ævum* 54 (1985): 3. Yapp notes that the long tail is used as an identifying marker for magpies in otherwise inexact imagery in some medieval bestiaries.

6 David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pl. 2.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

they carry their hounds and a hawk on board ship *en route* to France (Figure 4.1).[7] A large one is placed above the words "hic Harold", and another above the figure of Harold himself as he rescues two men from the sand; both spread their wings and look downward in amazement, mouths agape.[8] Above the fortress of Rennes, two seem to be singing their praises of the victory, while another in the lower border seems to look up with admiration.[9] At the burial of Edward, two below Westminster Abbey appear to be terrified by a roaring lion.[10] Two try to hide behind scene dividers in the lower margin when Harold is offered the crown.[11] Nearby, two more look up in amazement at a crowd of men acclaiming the enthroned Harold and at the appearance of the comet; they effectively link these two otherwise separated scenes.[12] A pair sits on the roof of Harold's throne room as he is advised of the appearance of Halley's Comet (Figure 4.2).[13] Two lift a wing and vocalize as though delivering news above the arrival of the ship that carries word of Harold's coronation to William.[14] Four squawk in alarm at the loading of arms and armor onto William's ships; they are flanked by lions in both borders (Figure 4.3).[15] Four more flap and vocalize above and below William as he receives word of Harold's approach.[16] Three more call out loudly above and below the enthroned William at Hastings: these and others in the later parts of the Tapestry have dark greenish-black bodies and lighter, in some cases partially white, wings, and thus bear a closer resemblance to magpies than do their more fancifully colored predecessors.[17] Another similar pair flex their wings and cry out as if to give warning to William's cavalry as they begin to charge into battle.[18] Additional pairs of birds in a variety of colors appear in both borders as events devolve towards the Battle of Hastings, the birds flexing their wings and visibly crying out, although many have short tails or long, goose-like necks and are not readable as magpies. As the battle commences, the zoological parade of the lower border gives way to fallen men and horses, archers, and scavengers stripping the dead, leaving only the upper border to the avian chorus, along with the continuing range of other Tapestry border animals, both zoological and mythological. But the green/black and white birds reappear only in the scene of Harold's death: one looking down at the scene at its beginning, and then a pair crying out above

7 *Ibid.*, pl. 4.
8 *Ibid.*, pls 19–20.
9 *Ibid.*, pl. 22.
10 *Ibid.*, pl. 29.
11 *Ibid.*, pl. 31.
12 *Ibid.*, pl. 32.
13 *Ibid.*, pls 32–33.
14 *Ibid.*, pl. 34.
15 *Ibid.*, pl. 38.
16 *Ibid.*, pl. 50.
17 *Ibid.*, pl. 48.
18 *Ibid.*, pls 58–59.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.1 Bayeux Tapestry, 11th c.: Harold and his companions embark for Normandy.

the words “interfectus est” (Figure 4.4).[19] In all, it seems that the birds most likely to be identified as magpies in the Bayeux Tapestry are most commonly found in close proximity to scenes where Harold appears or where his actions are discussed.

Within the probable period and broad geographic zone of production of the Bayeux Tapestry, magpies were certainly a highly visible component of the natural environment. In prehistoric France, magpie bones were part of an Early Aurignacian (*c.* 30,400 BC) deposit at Abri Castanet (Vallon des Roches, Dordogne).[20] In Britain, magpie bones have been found in Late Glacial cave deposits (*c.* 11,000–8000 BC) at Soldier’s Hole in Cheddar Gorge, Somerset, and in Late Devensian strata in Pin Hole Cave and Robin Hood’s Cave at Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire.[21] Later deposits

19 *Ibid.*, pls 71–72.

20 J. Bouchud, “Étude des Rongeurs et des Oiseaux del’abri Castanet”, *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique de France* 49 (1952): 267–71.

21 C. J. O. Harrison, “Pleistocene and Prehistoric Birds of South-West Britain”, *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* 18, no. 1 (1987): 90; Harrison, “Bird Bones from Soldier’s Hole, Cheddar, Somerset”, *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* 18, no. 2 (1988): 260, table 1, and 262; D. D. Gilbertson and R. D. S. Jenkinson with

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.2 Bayeux Tapestry, 11th c.: King Harold II being told of the appearance of Halley's Comet.

of magpie bones have also been found in archaeological contexts of Roman date at Wroxeter and Lincoln, as well as among post-Roman deposits at the shrines at Uley, Gloucestershire, and at the Fishergate site in Anglo-Saxon York, although the archaeological finds of magpie bones from the Roman period to the post-medieval era are relatively rare, strongly outnumbered in the osteological evidence by ravens, jackdaws, rooks, and crows, and far fewer than their current numbers in the British Isles might lead one to expect.[22] For the Anglo-Saxon context, they also appear in 1059 in a bill of fare from Waltham Abbey that lists magpies among other wild birds,

D. Bramwell, "The Birds of Britain: When Did They Arrive?" in *In the Shadow of Extinction: A Quaternary Archaeology and Palaeoecology of the Lake, Fissures and Smaller Caves at Creswell Crags SSSI*, ed. D. D. Gilbertson and R. D. S. Jenkinson (Sheffield: J. R. Collis, 1984), 89–99.

22 Derek W. Yalden, "Place-Name and Archaeological Evidence on the Recent History of Birds in Britain", *Acta Zoologica Cracoviensia* 45 (2002): 423. On modern populations, see T. R. Birkhead, *The Magpies: The Ecology and Behavior of Black-billed and Yellow-billed Magpies*, Poyser Monographs 49 (London: Poyser, 1991), 123–38.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.3 Bayeux Tapestry, 11th c.: Loading of the ships.

so they were occasionally on the Anglo-Saxon menu.[23] Thus they were certainly a visible part of the natural world in France and England in the period of the Tapestry, although not as common as they are today. In the Tapestry, they seem to be present more for symbolic purposes than as accurate mimesis of the natural world, which is a low priority in general for all the Tapestry's animals.

To understand the potential symbolic roles of magpies in medieval art, it is useful to start by considering their reputation among classical authors, who remark on their loud and thoughtless imitation of the human voice. The primary classical Latin texts on the magpie are in the work of Ovid and Pliny the Elder. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* relates the transformation of the nine arrogant, tuneless, and foolish daughters of Pieros of Thespos into magpies for their hubristic attempt to compete with the Muses: the poet notes the birds' skill at imitating human voices to the point of misleading listeners, "magpies now, the slanderers of the woods; [e]ven now, as

23 Peter Bircham, *A History of Ornithology* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), 8. This practice is also echoed in the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Account Rolls of Durham (18). However, magpies have rarely been a part of the human diet; Birkhead, *Magpies*, 217, notes possible exceptions in modern Portugal and the Aran Islands. Annette Garnier, "Thèmes et variations sur la pie dans le monde médiéval", *Le Moyen Age: Revue d'historie et de philologie* 97, no. 1 (1991): 51–52, and Peter Tate, *Flights of Fancy: Birds in Myth, Legend and Superstition* (New York: Random House, 2007), 81, both note uses of the magpie in folk medicine.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.4 Bayeux Tapestry, 11th c.: Here King Harold II is killed.

birds, their former eloquence remains, their raucous garrulity, and their monstrous capacity for chatter".[24] Pliny speaks more extensively about the species:

> A certain kind of magpie is less celebrated because it does not come from a distance, but it talks more articulately. These birds get fond of uttering particular words, and not only learn them but love them, and secretly ponder them with careful reflexion, not concealing their engrossment. It is an established fact that if the difficulty of a word beats them this causes their death, and that their memory fails them unless they hear the same word repeatedly, and when they are at a loss for a word they cheer up wonderfully if in the meantime they hear it spoken. Their shape is unusual, if not beautiful; this bird has enough distinction in its power of imitating the human voice.[25]

Other classical authors remark on the magpie's ability to imitate the human voice, but with widely varying value judgments: Persius calls them poetesses, Petronius sees them as slanderous gossips, and both Martial and Plutarch comment on their

24 Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* 5.676–78, trans. Anthony S. Kline (The Ovid Collection, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, 2000). http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph5.htm/ [accessed 6 January 2013]. Ovid's choice of the number nine for the magpies has an element of accurate observation of nature: T. R. Birkhead has noted that the maximum number of eggs in a magpie clutch is nine, which is also the average number of birds at a "ceremonial gathering" or territorial dispute of magpies ("Studies of West Palearctic Birds: 189. Magpie", *British Birds* 82, no. 12 (1989): 590 and 594 (as cited in Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 47–48)).

25 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 3.10.59, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 353 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 369; see Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 48.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

capacity for learning and imitating new sounds.[26] This mixed review continues in the *Etymologiae* (12.7.46) of Isidore of Seville:

> The magpie (*pica*), as if the word were "poetic" (*poetica*), because they pronounce words with a distinct articulation, like a human. Perching on the branches of trees, they sound out in unmannerly garrulity, and although they are unable to unfold their tongues in meaningful speech, still they imitate the sound of the human voice. Concerning which someone has said, appropriately (Martial, *Epigrams* 14.76): "I, a chattering magpie, salute you as master with a clear voice – if you did not see me, you would deny that I am a bird."[27]

Hrabanus Maurus (*De universo* 3.6, "De avibus") and Hugh of Fouilloy (*De bestiis et aliis rebus* 3.32) follow Isidore in perpetuating the generally positive viewpoint of the classical commentators.[28] This positive view of magpies in the Roman world is reflected in the practice of keeping them as pets, typically housed in a cage near the door of the home to greet and announce the arrival of guests, as noted by both Petronius (*Satiricon* 37.7) and Martial (*Epigrams* 7.87.6 and 14.76).[29] For the subsequent negative shift in the reputation of magpies in the medieval period, the literature does not provide a direct and obvious trail, but the distribution of the motif in a broad variety of twelfth-century sources and their wide variations on several core themes, as well as in the frequent and emphatic reiteration and elaboration of these motifs in later medieval texts, suggest strongly that this transformation was in progress by the date of the Bayeux Tapestry.

As the logical starting point for medieval animal iconography, the *Physiologus*, in both the Greek and Latin versions, does not include the magpie in its roster of moralized animals.[30] The magpie begins to appear only in the twelfth-century expansions of the Bestiary into what Florence McCulloch classified as the "Transitional group" and the "Second Family" by the addition of more chapters, including one on the magpie; most of these addenda are based on Isidore.[31] However, by the high medieval period, other western European authors had begun to consider

26 *Ibid.*, 49–50.

27 Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 267.

28 Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 51.

29 *Ibid.*, 49; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 275–76.

30 Trans. Arnaud Zucker, *Physiologos: Le bestiaire des bestiares* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2004); Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 34–38. See also Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 51, who reads *pica* (magpie) for *picus* (woodpecker) in the phrase "Picus est *poikilos*" in the text *Sancti Patris Nostri Epiphanii, Episcopi Constantiae Cypri, Ad physiologum*, ed. Gonzalo Ponce de Léon (Antwerp, 1588), 102–103.

31 McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 33–38; W. Brunsdon Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts* (New York: Schocken, 1981), 57. The bestiary text, however, did not necessarily transpose Isidore verbatim; see below.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

the magpie as a morally ambiguous if not outright evil creature.[32] Where and when this transformation of the magpie's reputation begins is opaque, but within a century after the usually accepted date of the Bayeux Tapestry, it is articulated widely and consistently enough that it cannot be a very recent development. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), in her *Physica* (VI:33), sees the magpie as malicious, proud, and insolent, a creature more earthbound and demonic than aerial and angelic because of its black and white plumage, physical warmth, and preference for hopping over flying.[33] Similarly, Alexander Neckham (1157–1217), in *De naturis rerum* 69, sees the bird as a portmanteau of vices: he reads its chatter as boastfulness and its long tail, held aloft, as a sign of pride, vanity, and insolence, reflecting in its constant motion a restless spirit separated from the divine.[34] Neckham considers the bird's only virtue to be its loud territoriality in fending off intruders and thieves, much as the Capitoline geese had given warning of the Gallic incursion. Many subsequent medieval writers, starting with Conon de Béthune (*c.* 1150–1220), build on Neckham's negative viewpoint by drawing the magpie's moral ambiguity, chatter, and constant mobility into a misogynistic discourse on the moral weakness, intellectual vacuity, and general social perniciousness of women.[35] Perhaps the best-known reference to a magpie in medieval literature is at the beginning of Wolfram von Eschenbach's early-thirteenth-century epic, *Parzifal*, where the magpie with its black and white feathers is put forward as a metaphor for the struggle of good and evil in the souls of men of courage.[36]

European folklore also condemned magpies as evil birds: elaborations on biblical narratives had it that the magpies refused to enter the ark but instead remained on the roof cackling during the Flood, and that they refused to mourn at the Crucifixion and so were put under a curse.[37] The origins of these and other condemnatory folktales

32 Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 51.
33 *Ibid.*, 51–52.
34 *Ibid.*, 52–55.
35 *Ibid.*, 55–57.
36 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzifal*, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Random House, 1961), 3.
37 Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 264–65; Jack Tresidder, ed., *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature* (London: Duncan Baird, 2004), 299; and Tate, *Flights of Fancy*, 76–81, provide overviews of various aspects of magpie folklore but without text references or dates. References to the magpie's meaning in late medieval and Renaissance Europe is also found in the art historical literature: Gertrud Roth-Bojadzhiev, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Vögel in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei* (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1985); Wilhelm Fraenger, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1983), 221 and 260; D[irk] Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch: His Picture-Writing Deciphered*, trans. M. A. Bax-Botha (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1979), 295–96; Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1980), 155–56 and 269–70; and Anne Simonson, "Pieter Bruegel's Magpie on the Gallows", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 67, no. 2 (1998): 71–92.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

concerning magpies are not closely datable; unlike the earliest literary sources they cannot be traced to an era close to the Tapestry's production. However, these stories about magpies demonstrate a hostile view of magpies at an entirely different social level in the pre-modern world, whether such fables were stimulated by the texts of medieval writers, served as their sources, or evolved separately.

During the magpie's high medieval change of ascribed character, references to its thievery as well as its prophetic potential begin to appear in bestiaries in the twelfth century, although these associations remain relatively rare in medieval written sources.[38] The literary motif of magpie thievery is a medieval development: for classical writers including Ovid, Pliny, and Cicero, the bandit amongst the *Corvidae* was the jackdaw.[39] The magpie as thief and prophet may have become enshrined in texts due to a misreading of Isidore of Seville, whose chapter on the woodpecker (*picus*) immediately follows that on the magpie (*pica*). Isidore's text reads:

> The woodpecker (*picus*) took its name from Picus, the son of Saturn, because he would use this bird in augury. People say this bird has a certain supernatural quality because of this sign: a nail, or anything else, pounded into whatever tree the woodpecker has nested in, cannot stay there long, but immediately falls out, where the bird has settled. This is the Martius woodpecker (*picus*), for the magpie (*pica*) is another bird.[40]

In the text of the Second Family bestiaries, in circulation by the twelfth century, this text is transformed:

> The woodpecker (*picus*) takes its name from Picus, son of Saturn, because he used <the bird> in auguries. Now, they say that this bird <the magpie> has a certain prophetic quality, evidenced in the fact that on whatever tree it nests a key or anything else attached cannot long remain in place without disappearing quickly to the place where <the magpie> sits.[41]

It is not clear whether the association of the magpie with both thievery and prophecy in texts originates with this rephrasing of Isidore's text or in lost earlier sources, but it seems more likely that interpretation of the actual bird's behavior over time may have led to the twelfth-century reinterpretation of Isidore's text indicting the magpie

38 Karl Brunner, "diz vliegende bîspel – Elsterngeschrei", *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 211 (2004): 204 and n. 2; see also Gerd Dicke and Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und des frühen Neuzeit*, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften 60 (Munich: W. Fink, 1987), where the only fable involving the magpie as thief (no. 90, p. 94) is from a sixteenth-century source. The magpie's modern notoriety for theft owes much to Gioachino Rossini's 1817 opera, *La Gazza Ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*).

39 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.466–68, trans. Kline, http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph7.htm/ [accessed 6 January 2013]; Pliny, *Natural History* 3.10.41, trans. Rackham, 341–42; and Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 76, in *In Catilinam* 1–4; *Pro Murena; Pro Sulla; Pro Flacco*, trans. C. Macdonald, Loeb Classical Library 324 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 524–25.

40 Isidore, *Etymologies* 12.7.47, ed. Barney et al., 267.

41 Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 181.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

as thief. If so, the magpie may already have been known as a thief in the world of the Bayeux Tapestry, which dates within a century before the emergence of the Second Family bestiary text. The identification of magpies as thieves and hoarders of shiny objects is also widespread in compendia of European folklore, although recent ornithologists have observed that these allegations are not founded in fact, and are probably based on the birds' hoarding of food in scattered caches.[42] In medieval literary texts other than the bestiaries, the motif of the thieving magpie is applied with less consistency, although in a scattershot way that suggests that a long history of observation and misapprehension of avian behavior is an underlying constant. In his twelfth-century *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, Gautier de Coinci associates the magpie with covetous monks bartering salvation for worldly wealth because its coloration matches the habits of some of the orders.[43] Specific identification of the magpie as a thief grows stronger by the fourteenth century, when Nicholas Bozon, in *De la femme et de la pye*, refers to women's dissimulations as analogous to the magpie's thievery.[44] The association was not universal: for Chaucer, in his *Parliament of Fowls*, the chough is the thief, and the magpie merely "janglynge" or noisy.[45]

One final motif associated with magpies is prognostication, preserved in the modern counting rhyme, "One for sorrow, two for joy … "[46] The idea that magpies foretell the future by their presence or number may be related to their reputation in medieval literature for speaking the truth at any cost, which completely inverts the classical association of magpies with meaningless or false chatter. The identification

42 Birkhead, *Magpies*, 113 and 116–122; Birkhead, "Studies of West Palearctic Birds", 587–88.

43 Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 58.

44 *Ibid.*, 68.

45 Francis Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. Evelyn Antal and John Harthan (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 375; Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parliament of Fowls", line 345, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 390. In the *Canterbury Tales* (5.643–50, *Riverside Chaucer*, 177), the Squire describes the magpies painted on Canacee's mews to chide at the other "false" birds painted there: whether the magpie is to be seen as another false bird, since it too is painted, or as a guardian against the falsehood of others, remains unclear. See also Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 134–35.

46 Tate, *Flights of Fancy*, 76–79. Five variants of the counting rhyme are included in the *Roud Folk Song Index* as no. 20096 (Steve Roud, *The Roud Folk Song Index*, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, http://www.vwml.org/search/search-roud-indexes?qtext=20096&ts=1410636626472&collectionfilter=RoudFS;RoudBS# [accessed 13 September 2014]). The counting rhyme can be traced only to the late eighteenth century: see Iona Opie and Moira Tatum, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 235–36. It is known in England, Scotland, and Ireland, although it varies regionally: see John T. Page, "Crow v. Magpie", *Notes and Queries*, 7th series, 3 (5 March 1887):188; see continuing correspondence in the same volume by "Paddy from Cork" (9 April), 298; and by Frank Nankwell, Robert F. Gardiner, and Page (21 May), 414–15. I thank Michael Ryan for an introduction to the magpie counting rhyme, which is not widely known in the United States.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

of magpies as speakers of otherwise concealed verities may have its origins with their role in the classical sources as door guards and gossip mongers, which reemerges in medieval texts and has a long life in that context. In his *Policraticus* of 1159, John of Salisbury advises that a chattering magpie may advise caution in the reception of strangers.[47] In *The Seven Sages*, a cycle of Eastern fables translated from Greek into Latin in the twelfth century and into French in 1210, a pet magpie reveals a wife's adultery. In the *Bonum universale de apibus* of Thomas of Cantimpré, a magpie serving as guardian of a hospice frequently visited by a holy man is secretly killed and eaten by a servant; when the holy man next visits the site, the magpie responds to the saint's salutation from inside the culprit's abdomen, a miracle alleged to have occurred in 1231.[48] In the *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry*, begun in the fourteenth century but only completed and translated into English and German in the fifteenth, a talking magpie reveals that a man's wife has eaten an eel that he had been saving for a feast, for which betrayal the wife plucks all the feathers from the top of the bird's head.[49] The motif of magpies revealing hidden truths, sometimes with dire consequences, may share its origins with the tradition behind the counting rhyme. The surviving medieval texts both in the bestiaries and in the literary sources which describe the magpie's capacity for revealing hidden truths postdate the Bayeux Tapestry, although again in some cases by less than a century, and the folkloric beliefs behind them may have arisen earlier.[50] Paralleling the tradition of the magpie as oracle is an additional folkloric strand seeing magpies as birds of ill omen, particularly when perched on a roof; this motif can be traced in surviving texts only as early as 1507, but it is very tempting to see an earlier reference to this belief in the bicolor birds perched on the roof of Harold's throne room in the Bayeux Tapestry.[51]

Magpies also appear in medieval art in both mosaics and manuscripts. In the apse mosaic of the Crucifixion in San Clemente, Rome (*c.* 1128), two magpies perch in the vinescroll on either side of the arms of the cross.[52] Their placement may suggest the role of the two thieves crucified on either side of Christ, but the magpies may equally be understood as part of the birdlife throughout the vine as it expands to fill

47 Opie and Tatum, *Dictionary*, 235; *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers; Being a Translation of the First, Second, and Third Books and Selections from the Seventh and Eighth Books of the* Policraticus *of John of Salisbury*, trans. Joseph B. Pike (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938), 48.

48 Garnier, "Thèmes et variations", 61.

49 Rebecca Barnhouse, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 88: "Of her that ete the Eele & plumed her pie"; Klaus Weimann, ed., *Middle English Animal Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1975), 17–18.

50 Roth-Bojadzhiev, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Vögel in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei*, 22.

51 Opie and Tatum, *Dictionary*, 235–36.

52 *Ibid.*, 3 and abb. [illustration] 4.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

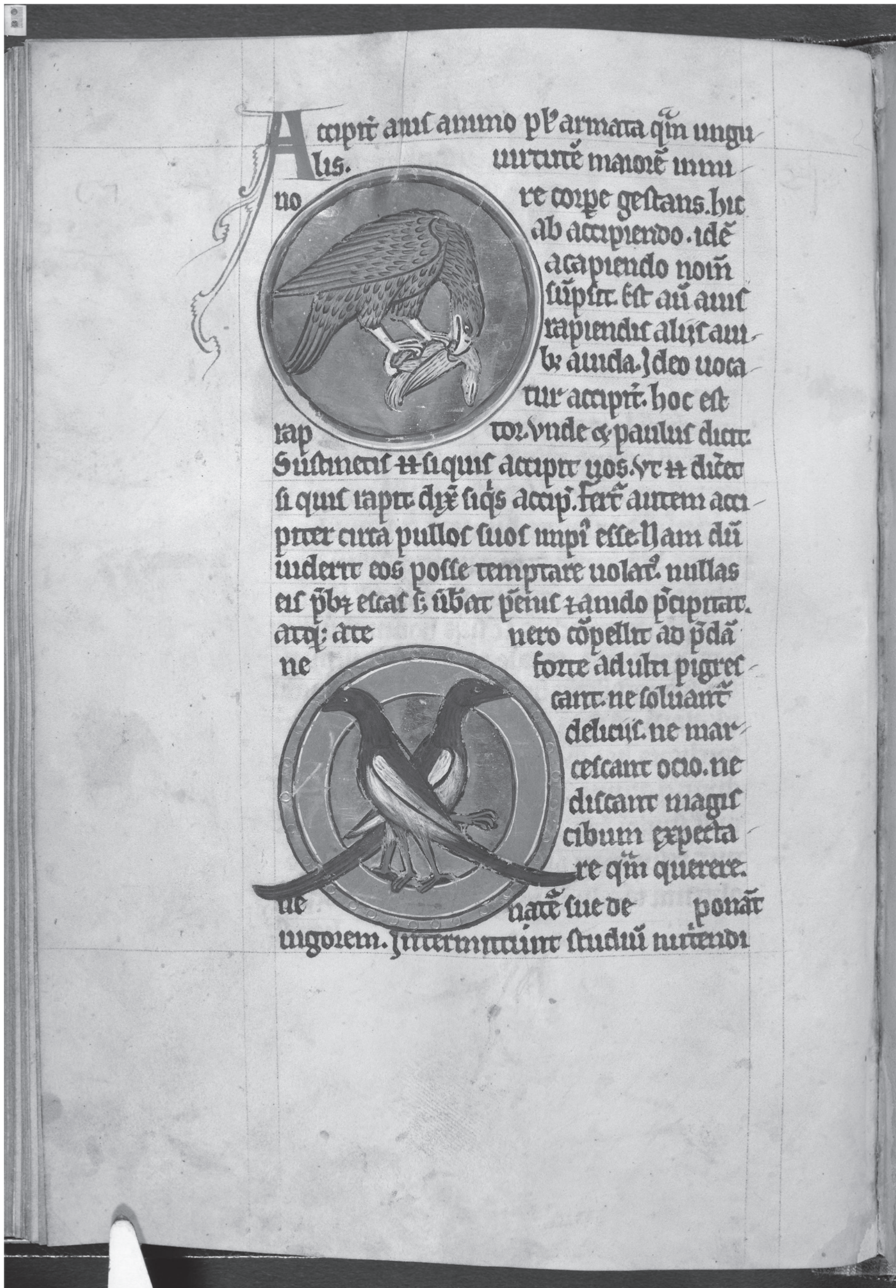

Figure 4.5 London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C. xix, fol. 42v detail: magpies. 12th c., Northern or Central England.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4.6: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1511 (Ashmole Bestiary), fol. 48r: an archer shoots at magpies sitting in a tree. *c.*1200.

Published online by Cambridge University Press

the half-dome of the apse, identifying Christ as the True Vine.[53] In a mosaic of Noah placing the birds in the ark, installed about 1215–18 among the Genesis mosaics in the narthex of St Mark's Basilica in Venice, a pair of magpies patiently queue up with the other birds; on the other side of the same vault, at the release of the animals from the ark, a magpie stands with several other birds flexing its wings on the ark's roof.[54] Neither image shows knowledge of the later Christian legend of the magpie's unwillingness to join the other animals in the ark. Some of the Transitional and Second Family bestiaries include illuminations of magpies, as for example an early thirteenth-century Transitional bestiary from northern or central England, now in the British Library (MS Royal 12 C. xix, fol. 42v; Figure 4.5). Brunsdon Yapp has also identified them in a series of images of "Adam Naming the Animals" in four of the Transitional and Second Family (Subfamily IIB) bestiaries.[55] In the late-twelfth-century Ashmole Bestiary (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1511, fol. 48r) and other examples in the Aberdeen-Ashmole group in the Second Family of bestiaries, an archer shoots at a group of four magpies sitting in a tree (Figure 4.6).[56]

Francis Klingender noted that this scene echoes the scene on the eighth- or ninth-century St Andrew Auckland Cross, in which an archer shoots at a bird and two quadrupeds in a vinescroll; similar archers shooting into inhabited vines also occur on Peak District sculpture from Bakewell, Bradbourne, and Sheffield.[57] Another possible early example is found on the Ruthwell Cross (Dumfries), where an archer below the transom of the crosshead shoots upward and to the viewer's right, while a bird widely identified as an eagle perches in the upper arm of the cross: these two elements have been interpreted both together and separately, and as either religious or secular in content.[58] The similarity between the Bestiary scene and the St Andrew

53 In the Crucifixion panel of Jörg Ratgeb's 1519 Herrenberg Altarpiece (Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie), a magpie perches on the transom of the cross of the damned thief; by this time the association of magpies and theft had become common lore (Roth-Bojadzhiev, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Vögel in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei*, 53 and 74–75, abb. 92 and detail, taf. 113–14). Roth-Bojadzhiev also provides several examples of Northern and Italian Renaissance paintings in which magpies appear as evil omens in scenes of Christ's infancy (58–64) and miracles (68) and in images of martyr saints (84–86), as well as in the representation of one of the Seven Ages of Man for women (91).

54 Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 257 and pls 159–60.

55 Yapp, "A New Look at English Bestiaries", 8–10 and 18–19.

56 Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 392 and pl. 223; McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 36.

57 Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 392; Rosemary Cramp, *County Durham and Northumberland*, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1984), 1.38 and 40; 2, pl. 5.14. Cramp gives a ninth-century date for the cross, while Judith Calvert dates it to the eighth century ("The Iconography of the St. Andrew Auckland Cross", *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984): 543–55).

58 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "The Archer in the Ruthwell Cross", *Art Bulletin* 42 (1960): 57–59; Meyer Schapiro, "The Bowman and the Bird on the Ruthwell Cross", *Art Bulletin* 45 (1963):

Published online by Cambridge University Press

Auckland Cross relief may suggest that the motif of magpie hunting is considerably older than the twelfth century. However, while the bird in the St Andrew Auckland Cross has a long magpie-like tail, it also has the short curved beak of a raptor or a parrot. Although the St Andrew Auckland Cross was probably originally painted, as current consensus argues for the Anglo-Saxon stone crosses in general, not a trace of pigment remains here to allow species identification by coloration. Further, the symbolic content of a scene may vary substantially in different contexts and over time, so even if some of the hunted birds on the Anglo-Saxon crosses were identifiable as magpies, the meaning of the scene would not necessarily remain monolithic and unaltered from the eighth to the twelfth century.[59]

In the centuries after the Aberdeen-Ashmole bestiaries, additional naturalistically depicted and easily identifiable magpies appear in illumination. In fourteenth-century Apocalypse and Apocalypse commentary manuscripts they appear as a reference to those shut out of the heavenly Jerusalem (Apocalypse 22:15; London, British Library, Additional MS 35166, fol. 29), among the birds summoned by the angel to consume the flesh of men and horses (Apocalypse 17:21; London, British Library, Add. MS 17333, fol. 36), and amid the "unclean and hateful" birds of fallen Babylon (Apocalypse 18:2; London, British Library, MS Royal 19 B. xv, fol. 37v).[60] However, in the same period they also appear among a range of other birds in scenes of the creation of the birds and animals, as in the early-fourteenth-century Holkham Bible

351–55; Barbara Raw, "The Archer, the Eagle and the Lamb", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 391–94; Robert T. Farrell, "The Archer and Associated Figures on the Ruthwell Cross – A Reconsideration", in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in Honour of the 1300th Anniversary of the Birth of Bede, Given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974*, ed. Robert T. Farrell, BAR International Series 46 (London: BAR, 1978), 96–117; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the* Dream of the Rood *Tradition* (London: British Library, 2005), 141–43, 282, 285; Jane Hawkes, "Gregory the Great and Angelic Meditation: The Anglo-Saxon Crosses of the Derbyshire Peaks", in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Jane Roberts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 444.

59 The scene is appropriated in the Trinity College Apocalypse (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.16.2, fol. 30v) to illustrate an episode in the life of St John, where the two men shooting at the birds represent a band of forest-dwelling outlaws (Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 402 and pl. 235).

60 Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 402–409 and 534, no. 20, pls 237–38. Klingender links the later scenes of the angel's summons, with more varied birds and fewer carrion eaters, to the type of St Francis preaching to the birds, under the influence in England of Roger of Wendover's *vita* of the saint. But see also Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts*, 104–105, pl. 13B (*The Fall of Babylon*, in the Apocalypse Commentary of Berengaudus, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.16.2, fol. 20v; English, mid-thirteenth century); and 106–107, pl. 14 (*The Angel Summons the Birds*, in the Apocalypse Commentary of Alexander of Bremen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Mm.v.31, fol. 140; ?Saxon or English, thirteenth century). Yapp argues that the range of birdlife in these scenes is too early for the Francis scene to be influential (106).

Published online by Cambridge University Press

(London, British Library, Additional MS 47682, fol. 2v).[61] The ambiguity of the magpie's role in these Gothic manuscripts parallels the bird's moral ambiguity in texts of the same and earlier periods, an idea that seems to have been developing already in the age of the Bayeux Tapestry.

If some of the strategically placed birds in the borders of the Bayeux Tapestry are to be read as magpies, they are at the early end of a long progression of references to the species in surviving medieval texts and art, a sequence in which this particular species carries a range of symbolic associations based in part on interpretation of their natural behaviors. Their roles in the Tapestry most probably reflect the same range of observations. That they join in the "squawk talk" is not at all surprising, as from Roman times on, and in reality, magpies were and are famously vocal. That they might imitate what they hear or comment intelligently on what they observe would not be an unfamiliar plot stratagem to medieval narrators; thus these aspects of the bird's character would confirm Owen-Crocker's reading of the birds in the Tapestry in general as reacting to situations unfolding in the central strand of human events. But there appears to be more to the placement of the possible magpies in the Tapestry's borders: they seem to be stalking Harold, turning up at significant moments when his decisions and actions, in person or *in absentia*, move the narrative forward. If these birds can be seen as emblematic of Harold's character, the associations of magpies may be seen to enumerate Harold's faults. Certainly their thoughtless chatter, as earlier described by Isidore, would suggest that at least one speech act by Harold, his oath to William, was similarly undertaken and then repudiated with, at best, a lack of thoughtful foresight. If some of the negative attributes that magpies accrued steadily during the high medieval period had already taken root in the era of the Tapestry, then the parallels with Harold may extend further and could include an allusion to the magpie's pride or insolence. If the Tapestry is interpreted as critical of Harold's actions and choices that lead ultimately to his defeat at Hastings, the strutting, preening, and noisy chatter of magpies could be understood as emblematic of Harold's arrogance and self-aggrandizement: in risking so much by indulging his desire to hunt by travelling to France, in playing the public hero by saving two men at once from the sands near Mont Saint-Michel, by accepting the crown of England rather than presenting it to William. At the latter scene the birds attempt to hide; perhaps this is a reference to false modesty on Harold's part, as he does not reach to take the proffered crown but stands observing it with his chin lowered and his hand at his hip, as though fulfilling a requirement of etiquette by momentarily hesitating to accept it. As references to the sin of *vanitas*, the association of Harold with magpies would enlarge upon the distinction of moral standing that the Tapestry may make elsewhere between Harold and William.[62] If the association of magpies with theft

61 Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, 412–13, pl. 43.

62 Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Dining with Distinction: Drinking Vessels and Difference in the Bayeux Tapestry Feast Scenes", in *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Approaches: Proceedings of a*

Published online by Cambridge University Press

was already well-known at the date of the Bayeux Tapestry, their presence could also allude to Harold's dishonest acquisition of that quintessentially shiny object, the crown. If they may be read as emblematic of Harold's character, magpies in the Tapestry's border are also contrasted with and sometimes frightened by lions, an old symbol of true kingship with reference to Edward as more worthy predecessor at the scene of the latter's funeral, and to William as rightful contender at the loading of armor aboard the Norman fleet. Finally, the presence of magpies in the Tapestry as a whole may provide a suggestion of the ill omen with which they were commonly linked in later texts and in folklore, perhaps especially so when perching on the roof of Harold's throne room in association with the scene of the appearance of the comet, an unhappy harbinger of Harold's ultimate fate.[63] Whether, as has been variously suggested, the Tapestry was made either as a Norman statement of righteous victory, or as an Anglo-Saxon commentary on a tragic but avoidable disaster, there could be few Greek choruses better suited to accompany the drama of Harold's vainglorious journey toward defeat than the chatter of magpies.

Conference at the British Museum, ed. Michael J. Lewis, Gale R. Owen-Crocker, and Dan Terkla (Oxford: Oxbow, 2011), 116–19.

63 Owen-Crocker, "Squawk Talk", 253, refers to the birds above Harold's throne in terms of the broader tradition of augury.

Published online by Cambridge University Press