To the Editor:

In a paper published in this Journal I discussed the perceptions of bystanders around deathbeds (Alvarado, 2006). In this note I would like to summarize a few 17th-century reports of apparitions of birds seen around deathbeds by individuals other than the dying persons. I present this material for its historical interest, and not to argue for the actual occurrence of the phenomena.

The cases in question took place in England among members of a single family. They were published anonymously in a pamphlet that appeared in 1641 (Anonymous, 1641). The first case concerned John Oxenham, a young man of about 22 years of age who lived in the county of Devon. He was said to be of good character and “much addicted to pious and religious exercises...” (p. 5; the pages in the pamphlet were not numbered, but I numbered them starting with the first page of text). The young man fell sick and died on September 5, 1635. According to the anonymous author, two days before Oxenham died “there appeared the likenesse of a bird with a white breast, hovering over him...” (p. 6). Two men, Robert Woodley and Humphrey King, said to be “honest and substantial men” (p. 6), witnessed the appearances of the bird and gave their testimony to the minister of the parish.

Another bird was observed when Thomazine, wife of the recently deceased John Oxenham, died on September 7, 1635. It was said that she wanted to die and that she was “of a blameless and unspotted life” (p. 7), loving, affable and charitable to the poor. Before she died the “likenesse of such a Bird hovered over her ... as appears by the testimony of two women who were present, by name Elizabeth Froft, and Joan Tooker...” (p. 8). They were questioned by the above mentioned minister.

Soon after, Rebeccah, sister of Thomazine, who was about 8 years of age, died on September 9, 1635. Before she died “about eleven of
Clocke of the night appeared the Bird in the same likeneffe and hovered over her ....” (pp. 9–10). Two women, Elizabeth Avery and Mary Stephens, witnessed the presence of the bird.

On September 15, 1635, the daughter of the deceased John Oxenham and his wife, also named Thomazine, fell sick and died. She was described as a little child in the cradle. The same witnesses as before (Avery and Stephens) attested to the presence of the bird over the little girl.

It is also said that the “faid Bird appeared to Grace, the Grandmother of the faid John, over her death-bed, which faid Grace was a vertuous woman ....” (pp. 10–11). This death took place prior to the others, in 1618.

The anonymous author further wrote that there were four other members of the family who fell sick and recovered “and yet did never fee or perceive any fuch apparition ....” (p. 11).

The rest of the pamphlet was devoted to defending the reality of the apparitions. It implied that they were spiritual beings sent by God. Referring to apparitions in general, the author wrote that “God hath fuch instruments of mercy or juftice, let the righteous take courage and comfort in all conditions ....” (p. 20).

Typical of many other accounts of apparitions during the 17th century, the first-hand testimony of the witnesses was not presented. Instead the pamphlet included very brief summaries of the events in question. In addition, there are other details missing from the account. The author of the pamphlet did not explain why this family had so many deaths in so short a time span, nor the cause of each death. One may speculate that epidemic disease, known to be prevalent in 17th-century England, may have been the cause of death. Furthermore, there are no details about the birds. Were they all the same type of bird? Did the witnesses see the bird coming from outside the room, or leaving the room through a window, or did it just appear or vanish? Presumably the bird was seen collectively, but this is not clear from the accounts. We do not even know how long was the bird seen hovering over the deathbeds.

Similar to other 17th-century publications (for example, More, 1653), this one was concerned to a great extent to show the existence of a spiritual world. Thus the sermonizing character of such accounts is brought to mind, as well as the possibility that some of them may have been written to convert and not to document actual phenomena. Of course, they may have fulfilled both functions.
References


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