

THE OWL IN FOLKLORE.*

The custom of taking omens from birds is common, well-nigh among all the people of the world,

Introduction. because in the whole of the animal creation, with which man comes into contact,

the birds stand first. They are seen everywhere and anywhere, of one species or another. The very Etymology of words for "omen" among different people testifies to the generality of the custom of taking omens from birds. For example, our English word "auspices" for good omens coming from *avis* a bird, testifies to the Old Roman belief of taking omen from birds. The Sanskrit word for omen is *Shakun* (शकुन) which also means a "bird." This Sanskrit word has given to the Parsees their Gujarati word *Sagan* સગન for omen. In the Avesta, though we do not find the word for omen derived from a word for bird, we find, that omens were taken from birds. For example, in the Yasht in praise of Haoma, (Yaena X. 11) we read, that the seeds of the good health-giving sacred plant of Haoma were spread over a number of mountains by auspicious birds (*spenta fradakhshsta méréga* lit. birds with good signs).¹ The modern Persian word for omen, *margwa* (مرغوا), also comes from Persian *margh* (Avesta *méréga*), i.e., bird. The Arabic word for omen is *tair* (طير) and it also means a bird. Thus, all these words for omen in different languages show that omens were taken from birds. For the custom of taking omens from birds in some of the countries of modern Europe, I will refer my readers to what I have said in my paper on "Superstitions common to Europe and India."² For the custom of taking omen from birds among the Parsees,

* This paper was read before the Anthropological Section of the tenth Indian Science Congress held at Lucknow in January 1923. (Journal Anthropological Society of Bombay. Vol. XII. No. 8, pp. 1014-1026.)

¹ The Vedic Soma was similarly brought down from heaven by the bird falcon.

² Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. II. No. 3, pp. 161-71. *Vide* my Anthropological Papers, pt. I, p. 27.

I will refer my readers to my paper on "Omens among the Parsees."¹

The reason, why, of all animals, man takes omens mostly from birds, is that they are the most migratory, migrating in thousands and tens of thousands at different seasons, from one country to another, hundreds of miles distant,² some marching at the rate of 200 miles per hour. So, their arrival, in one season or another, in one country or another, presages a change of season. The English proverb "One swallow does not make a summer," illustrates this view. Now, a change of season often gladdens the hearts of men, who are tired with the rigour or a kind of monotony of a season. Hence arose, the custom of taking omens from birds.

The object of this paper is to speak particularly about one bird, the owl, which is held to be inauspicious among many people, and to present some folklore about it.

In the Avesta, the owl, which is spoken of as *pesha* Pesr.

*The Owl in the
Avesta.*

(*Push* پش), is represented, as having feathers which serve as a kind of amulet.

If one rubs his body with the feathers, he is safe from the curses of his enemies. Both, its feather and its bone, protect the person holding them from enemies. They bring him help and respect from others. He is so well protected by keeping these feathers or bones on his body that no enemy can smite him. On the contrary, he becomes victorious and glorious (Behrâm Yasht. Yt. XIV 35-40). King Kavi Usa (Kai Kâus of the Shâh-nâmeh) and king Thraëtaona (Traïtana त्रेतन of the Hindus, Faridun of the Shâh-nâmeh) carried its feathers or bones over their bodies and were victorious. Faridun was victorious by these means over the snake-mouthed Azi-Dahâka or Zohâk. Here, we find,

¹ Ibid, Vol. I, No. 5, pp. 289-95. Vide my Anthropological Papers pt. I, pp. 4-5.

² Vide "The Migration of Birds," by Charles Dixon.

that this bird, instead of being considered as inauspicious, is held to be lucky.

There is another word in the Avesta, which the late Dastur Dr. Hoshang Jamasp took to be for owl. It is *Sijdareh* (Vendidad XIII, 2),¹ which he reads as *gizdreh*² and compares it with Sans. गृध्रम् Marathi गृध्र Gujarati ગ્રીધ Persian گدید He says : " In this place it is used for an owl. It is true that according to Natural History and Ornithology as developed in the present day, the owl is included in the species *Strix* or *Strigida*, but in the old times when the Avesta was translated into Pahlavi (250 or 300 B.C.), the owl was not probably classified as a distinct species and was included in the category of *gizdreh* गृध्र vulture or carnivorous bird, because it feeds upon flesh. There can, however be no doubt from the general description given in the texts that the animal alluded to is an owl."³

The Pahlavi rendering of it is⁴ *kûfik* P. کوف (*kûf*) which means "a large owl."⁵ A Persian lexicographer, quoted by Dastur Hoshang,⁶ renders this word (*kûf*) by بوم (*bûm*) which means an owl. The Persian lexicographer says that it is known for its inauspiciousness (be nuhûsat ma'aruf). The lexicographer quotes a poet, Ibn-Yamîn, as differentiating a literate from an illiterate, as the auspicious bird humâi (phoenix) from an owl. He says :⁷

شاذ بی هنر آنجا بجای اهل هنر : ندید هیچ تفاوت ز کوف تا به همای
i.e., he made an unintelligent person sit in the place of the intelligent and made no distinction between an owl and a phoenix.

¹ Vide his Vendidad, Vol. I (1907), p. 455.

² Ibid, Preface, p. VII.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 445, l. 12.

⁵ Steingass.

⁶ His Vendidad, Vol. I. p. VII, n. 1

⁷ Ibid.

The reason, why an owl is held by many people as inauspicious, presaging evil to the house or place where it is seen, is this: It generally seeks wilderness and out-of-the-way places for sitting and resting. When it comes to towns or cities, it generally seeks ruins and deserted places for its rest and abode. It very rarely comes to inhabited or frequented places. Hence, it is always associated with ruins, deserted places and wildernesses. That being the case, when it is seen on rare occasions in inhabited or frequented places, people associate with those places an idea of ruin or mishap in future. So, the bird is always looked at with dislike. Countess Cezaresco thus refers to the cause of the unpopularity of the bird: "Besides, the prejudice against reptiles, modern popular superstition has placed several animals under a ban, and especially the harmless bat and the useful barn-owl. Traditional reasons exist, no doubt, in every case; but stronger than these, are the associations of such creatures with the dark in which the sane man of a certain temperament becomes a partial lunatic; a prey to unreal terrors which the flap of a bat's wing or the screech of an owl is enough to work up to the point of frenzy."¹ This idea of superstitious dislike lurks, not only among the ignorant or the illiterate, but also among some educated people.²

The above fact, *viz.* the bird's fondness for solitary deserted ruined places as its seat or abode, seems to be the real cause of its being taken by mankind as inauspicious. The following Persian story, as given by Mirkhond, in his *Rauzat-ûs Safâ*, presents the old Persian folklore about the owl being held inauspicious from very remote times.

¹ "The place of Animals in Human thought" by Countess Cezaresco, p. 112.

² I remember well an instance of my boyhood, when I was a student of the Elphinstone High School, then located on the Picket Road, where the Government Middle School is now situated. The English Principal of the school saw one day an owl from his office-room sitting upon a part of the school building. He took up a tile from an adjoining roof, hastened to the spot where it sat, and drove it away.

Before the time of Kayômars, there was a kind of disorder in the affairs of the world, and sickness was much prevalent. So, several wise men met and resolved, that they should appoint one man as a ruler who can control all. After asking for divine help (istikhârat استخاره)¹ and deliberating (istishârat استشارة), they resolved to elect one of them as a ruler and their lot of selection fell upon one Kayomars (کیومرث افتاد) (قرعه اختیار بنام)² who being thus elected, took an oath (paêmân)³ of sovereignty. He had a son, Siâmak by name, who had retired into Mount Demâvand. One day, he started from his place to go to see his son Siâmak in his retirement. On his way thither, his eye fell upon 'an owl' (jaghd جغد) which shouted several times. Kayomars was affected by its voice and he said: "If thy news (i.e., news seemed to be conveyed by your voice), will be associated with good news (khair) and rejoicing (sarûr سرور), I wish that you will be acceptable for your intelligence (مقبوله طباع گردی). Otherwise you will always be persecuted and rejected. (مطرود و مہجور)."⁴ On going to his destination Kayomars found that his son was killed by a huge stone hurled over him by the Divs and Âfrits. Kayomars deposited the body of his son in a well (چاه), revealed to him by God on the mountain where Siâmak lived, and he kindled a great fire at the mouth of that well (بسرآن چاه آتشی بلند برافروخت). Thus, according

1 Mirkhond's Text of Rauzat-us-Safa. Munshi Naval Keshore's lithographed edition, Vol. I, p. 149, l. 9.

2 Ibid. This statement shows, that according to tradition, primitive people selected from among themselves a king and that selection was considered to be a kind of divine work, settled by a kind of lot. Cf. the selection of Virâf for a Divine Vision (*Vide* my Asiatic papers, pt. I, p. 1, *et. seq.*)

3 It seems that according to old Iranian tradition, a kind of oath was taken by the person selected as a King.

4 Naval Keshore's Ed. I, p. 149, l. 20.

to tradition, as given by Mirkhond, the owl has since then been condemned as an inauspicious bird.¹

The following story associated the owl with ruins. It is said, that at one time, a Persian King on seeing a pair of owls, asked his Mobad, i.e. his priestly minister, as to what the pair was talking. The Mobad said: "They wish and pray, that you, the reigning king, may live long, because they find in your reign many forsaken or deserted villages to wander or live in." It is said, that the king had, by his misrule, caused many a village to be deserted by the people. So, the owls had many deserted villages for their abode. They, therefore, prayed for a long life to such a bad king. This was a taunt, intended or

¹ Further on, in connection with the same story, Mirkhond describes how the cock has come to be considered as a good auspicious bird. He was informed by some, as to where the murderers of his son had hid themselves. He started to go there, and on the way, he happened to see a white cock (Kharus i-safid) followed by a hen (mâkiân). A serpent attacked the hen, and the cock, running after the serpent, defended his hen. Kayomars, pleased with the sight, went to the help of the cock, killed the serpent and threw some grains to the cock. The cock invited the hen by moving its beak to come and eat the grain, and he himself did not eat a single grain till the hen first ate one. Kayomars was pleased with the sight. He was going on an errand to kill the murderers of his son and all that he saw was a good omen for the result of his expedition. The fact, that he, through the instrumentality of the cock, killed the serpent, which was always an enemy of man, pleased him, as all that pointed to a good omen. He proceeded further, and killed the murderers of his son. Thenceforth, he declared his heirs to keep cocks and maintain them. Mirkhond adds: "It is said that no Demon can enter a house in which there is a cock; and, above all, should this bird come to the residence of a demon, and move his tongue to chaunt the praises of the glorious and exalted Creator, that instant the evil spirit takes to flight." (History of the early Kings of Persia, translated from the Original Persian of Mirkhond by David Shea 1832, pp. 56-57). People generally do not like cocks shouting at odd hours. Mirkhond thus explains the matter: "The reason why persons draw an evil omen from the unreasonable crowing of the cock, and at the same time put him to death, is this; that when Kayomars was seized with a fatal illness, at the time of the evening service, this bird crowed aloud; and immediately after, this orthodox monarch passed away to the world of eternity." (Ibid, p. 57.)

unintended, for the king by the Mobad, and, it is said, that the king took this to heart and began to manage his state affairs better, so that, in the end, there remained a few deserted places in his kingdom.¹

It is this idea, prevalent from olden times, of associating
 Firdousi on Owls. owls with ruins, that led Firdousi to say on the fall of Persia; "Pardeh-dâr mi-kunad bar kasr-i Kaisar ankabut Bumnaobat mizanad bar gunbad-Afrasiâb." *i.e.*, the spider is covering the palace of Cæsars with his webs and the owl is beating the naobat² on the castle dome of Afrasiâb.

It is said, that Sultân Mahmud also uttered these words of Firdousi when he first saw the palace of Constantinople.³

The unpopularity of the bird is illustrated by the epithet applied to it even by poets. For example, Its unpopularity displayed by the language used for owls. Shakespeare speaks of it as "Thou ominous and fearful owl of death" (1 Henry VI, IV, 2); "Boding screaeh owls (2 Henry VI, III, 2)."⁴ "Nothing but Songs of Death." Richard III, IV, 4 Obloquy is conferred upon the bird by other poets like Spencer, Shelly, etc., also⁵. There is a Gujarati proverb which says ધુપડનું મોત કળા માટે ⁶ *i.e.*, "The death of an owl (occurs) at a grave-yard." This proverb indicates that the bird always seeks a deserted place like a grave-yard and that its presence is associated with ruin and death. From

¹ "Place of Animals in Human Thought" by Countess Cezaresco.

² To strike the drum, etc., at the change of watches (naubat) was the usual custom of the courts of Eastern Kings.

³ J. B. A. S., Vol. V, No. 4, p. xciii.

⁴ *Vide* Davenport Adam's Concordance to the Plays of Shakespeare (1886), p. 310.

⁵ *Vide* "Distinguished Animals," by H. Perry Robinson, (1910). pp. 215-16.

⁶ *Vide* the કેહેવત માળા of Mr. J. M. Petit, edited by Mr. J. P. Mis'ri (1903), Vol. I, p. 221.

the fact that the owl is a nocturnal bird, generally moving about at night, and from the fact, that, during the day, it seeks sequestered deserted places, we have the English word "owl," used as a verb in the sense of "prying about, prowling, carrying on a contraband or unlawful trade."

There is a species of owls, known as Eagle-owls. It is believed in Tibet, that when they scream, people are certain, that there must be robbers in the neighbourhood.¹

Now, as to the question, why the bird has the natural characteristic of remaining lonely and of living in sequestered places, the following story of King Solomon seems to give the reason. All the birds, one day said to Solomon, that "the hated bird owl, dwells secluded in ruins and avoids habitations, nor does he repair to branched trees; and when we ask him the reason for this he says no more to us than *yâ hû yâ hû*. We entreat thee to ask him what is the meaning of this expression."

Solomon, that "the hated bird owl, dwells secluded in ruins and avoids habitations, nor does he repair to branched trees; and when we ask him the reason for this he says no more to us than *yâ hû yâ hû*. We entreat thee to ask him what is the meaning of this expression." Solomon, on asking the reason from the owl, was told: "He that regards the world as seduced and he that knows that he will be called to account for his actions is sorrowful; so I busied myself with the thought of the "One I fear and the One I dread, and I love no other friend but Him, (Hu) and there is none in my heart except Him (Hu). So, praise be to Him, of whom it is said, that there is none but Him." This story represents the owl to be, as it were a divine or god-worshipping bird. Like human ascetics, it was less of a worldling and more of the divine. This explains, why the ancient Greeks held it to be a wise bird.

¹ S. Hedin's Trans-Himalayas, Vol. II, p. 327. There is a belief about another bird that its shrieks informed people that there was a tiger in the neighbourhood.

It seems, that not only the mere sight of different birds, but their position and posture when seen affect the omens. That it was especially so, in Greece, we learn from Mr. Lawson's "Modern Greek Folklore." Therein,¹ under the heading of "Communion of God and man" (Chap. III), we have an interesting account of the Greek view about dreams, chance words, meetings on the road and auspices. It seems that in classical times, the owl symbolised wisdom. It was included in "the canon of ornithological divination."² The position and posture of birds at the time of the auguration are always important and it was more so in the case of the owls. "The 'brown-owl' perched upon the roof of a house and suggesting by its inert posture that it is waiting in true oriental fashion for an event expected within a few days, forbodes a death in the household ; but if it settle there for a few moments only, alert and vigilant, and then fly off elsewhere, it betokens merely the advent and sojourn there of some acquaintance. Another species of owl, our 'tawny owl', I believe, known properly as 'Charon's bird,' is, as the name suggests, a messenger of evil under all circumstances, whether it be heard hooting or be seen sitting in deathlike stillness or flitting past like a ghost in the gathering darkness."³

We saw in the above account of the position and posture of owls when omens were taken from them, that in classical Greece, it was held to be a Bird of Wisdom. It is so held in many countries. The idea of wisdom seems to have been associated with it from the fact of the solemnity of the way in which it sits. Mr. Robinson in the Chapter (XIII) on Owls in his book

¹ Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion. A study in Survivals, by John Cuthbert Lawson, (1910).

² Ibid, p. 309.

³ Ibid, pp. 311-12.

on "Distinguished Animals,"¹ thus speaks of the subject in a humorous way :

"As one sees them in their cages in the Zoological Gardens, the larger owls are persons of such extraordinary solemnity that one almost wonders whether one has not met them at the Club. Properly disposed in an armchair, the large owl, for instance, might, to the casual glance, pass well enough for an elderly member waiting for the Athæneum ; and it is no wonder that in the myths of so many countries the owl has been the bird of wisdom." In its state or posture of repose, it looks wise. But in its posture of wakefulness, it looks "frankly absurd." It is its voice not being "commensurate with the dignity of its appearance" that has made it unpopular. The voice sounds as plaintive.

Countess Cezaresco thus speaks of the cause why the bird was held to be the symbol of wisdom. "It is a most unfortunate thing for an animal if it be the innocent cause of a *frisson*, a feeling of uncanny dread. The little Italian owl, notwithstanding that it too comes out at dusk, has escaped prejudice. This was the owl of Pallas Athene and of an earlier cult. As in the case of the serpent, its wiles to fascinate its prey were the ground-work of its reputation for wisdom. Of this there cannot be, I think, any doubt, though the droll bobs and courtesies which excite an irresistible and fatal curiosity in small birds, have suggested in the mind of the modern man a thing so exceedingly far from wisdom as *civetteria*, which word is derived from *civetta*—"the owl of Minerva" as Italian class-books say. The descent from the goddess of wisdom to the coquette is the cruellest decadence of all."²

1 "Of Distinguished Animals" by H. Perry Robinson, 1910, p. 212.

2 "The place of Animals in Human thought" by the Countess Cezaresco, p. 112.

The sight of some luminous owls seems to have added to the view which made the bird a bird of wisdom. As to the luminosity of that species, the cause is not properly ascertained. Some say: "these birds acquired their luminosity by living in, perhaps, a rotten tree, phosphorescent with fungoid matter."¹ Some attribute it to its "dieting on rats killed, with phosphorus."² Some attribute the luminosity to a "fungoid growth . . . parasitic on the feathers of the owl."³ Owing to their luminous appearance these birds have created the belief about "Lantern Men, Lantern Birds," etc.⁴

The following Indian tale known as "The tale of the Owl as a King," which is one of the tales known as the Jâtaka tales,⁵ shows that the owl was taken as a "Bird of Wisdom," worthy to be considered as a ruler or king of birds. But it was rejected for its ugliness.

"Once upon a time, the people who lived in the first cycle of the world gathered together, and took The Owl as King. for their king a certain man, handsome, auspicious, commanding, altogether perfect. The quadrupeds also gathered, and chose for king the Lion; and the fish in the ocean chose them a fish called Ananda. Then all the birds in the Himalayas assembled upon a flat rock, crying :

"Among men there is a king, and among the beasts and the fish have one too ; but amongst us birds, king there is none. We should not live in anarchy ; we too should choose a king. Fix on some one fit to be set in the king's place !

¹ Ibid, p. 213.

² Ibid.

³ *Vide* the Contemporary Review of July 1908. The article on Luminous Owls and the Will of the Wisp " by Mr. Digby Pigott, p. 64.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jâtaka Tales, by H. F. Frances and E. J. Thomas (1916), p.213.

"They searched about for such a bird and choose the owl ; Here is the bird we like,' said they. And a bird made proclamation three times to all that there would be a vote taken on this matter. After patiently hearing this announcement, twice, on the third time on rose a Crow, and cried out.

' Stay now ! If that is what he looks like when he is being consecrated king, what will he look like when he is angry ? If he only looks at us in anger, we shall be scattered like sesame seeds thrown on a hot plate. I don't want to make this fellow king ! ' and enlarging upon this he uttered the first stanza :

The owl is king, you say, o'er all bird-kind :
With your permission, may I speak my mind ?

"The Birds repeated the second, granting him leave to speak
You have our leave, Sir, so it be good and right
For other birds are young, and wise, and bright.

"Thus permitted, he repeated the third :
I like not (with all deference be it said),
To have the owl anointed as our Head
Look at his face ! if this good humour be,
What will he do when he looks angrily ?

"Then he flew up into the air, cawing out ' I don't like it ! I don't like it ! ' The owl rose and pursued him. Thenceforward those two nursed enmity one towards another. And the birds chose a golden Mallard for their king, and dispersed."

In the great economy of nature, everything has its use.

The use of Owl
in the Economy of Nature. We see that illustrated even in the case of this bird, which has been hated and disliked by man from the time of Kayomars, the very first reigning monarch of Iran, passing through the classical time of Greece and Rome down to our own times, in all parts of the world. Mr. Robinson says : "The proof is overwhelming that the generality of owls confer incalculable

benefit on man by the destruction of rats and mice and voles as well as many species of insects which are 'noxious' from the human point of view."¹

Man generally creates his thoughts about others from what he sees of their characteristics. He associates his thought about a bird, an animal, or brother-man to its or his usual prominent characteristics, nature or work which strikes him most. Take for example the case of priests. Though they officiate on both occasions, joyful or sorrowful, they are more associated with sorrowful occasions like sickness or death because grief has often more marked effects upon one than joy. So, their appearance on some occasions, for example, early in the morning, is taken as an ill-omen by some among several people. While travelling in Europe I especially noticed this in Italy. Similar seems to be the case with the sight of owls. Their usefulness in the economy of Nature is lost sight of and another feature is taken into consideration in taking an omen from its sight.

¹ "Distinguished Animals," p. 221.