The Owl and the Nightingale

This is the beginning of a poem about a debate between an *ule* (vle, hule) 'owl' and a *nyhtegale* 'nightingale' about their relative merits.

It was composed after 1189 and probably before 1216. The text is from the J manuscript, Jesus College, Oxford, MS 29, written in the second half of the thirteenth century.

Textual note: I have made occasional changes to the text: All these changes involve the adoption of a reading from the C manuscript of the poem, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A IX, also from the second half of the thirteenth century. Such changes are underlined.

As you read, keep in mind the following observations about spelling, pronunciation and forms:

1. y is often used to represent i: e.g. *playd* for *plait* 'plea' line 5, and *eyþer* for *eiþer* 'either', line 7.
2. The graphs *u* and *v* are often used interchangeably.
3. The indefinite article, which derives from OE *an* 'one', is frequently inflected: e.g. *one*, line 1, *ore* line 17 and *on* line 25. Translate all occurrences as 'a' or 'an'.
4. The poem originated in the Southeast, where initial [f] was voiced to [v]: e.g. *vaire*, line 15, *vaste* line 17, and *vor* line 19. The mental substitution of an [f] for [v] will make these forms much more transparent to you.
5. You will often find the OE paradigms of the personal pronouns useful.

After you have done the translation, go through the text and identify as many of the OE to ME spelling and pronunciation changes as you can, and also note those words which still preserve the OE spellings (e.g. the *h* in *nyhtegale* instead of *gh*) and/or pronunciations that have not yet changed.

ICH was in one sumere dale
In one swiþe dyele hale
Iherde ich holde grete tale
An vle and one nyhtegale.
5: þat playd wes stif & stark & strong
Sum hwile softe & lud among;
And eyþer ayeyn oþer swal,
And let þat uyele mod Þat al.
And eyþer seyde of oþres custe
10: þat alre Þort þat hi ywuste:
& hure & hure of oþres songe
Hi holde playding swiþe stronge.
þe Nihtegale bigon þe speche
In one hurne of one breche,
15: & sat vp one vayre bowe,
bar were abute blossoms ynowe,
In ore vaste ðikke hegge
Imeynd myd spire & grene segge.
He wes ðe gladder vor ðe ryse,
20: & song a veole cunne wyse:
Bet þuhte ðe drem þat he were
Of harpe & pipe ðan he nere:
Bet þuhte þat heo were ishote
Of harpe & pipe ðan of þrote,
25: þo stod on old stok þar byside,
þar þe vle song hire tyde,
And wes myd ivi al bigrowe:
Hit wes þare vle erdingstowe.
þe Nihtegale hi iseyh,
30: & hi bi[hold] and ouerseyh,
& þuhte wel ful of þare vle,
For me hi halt lodlich & fule.

there; round about; blossoms; enough
secure; hedge
mixed with reeds; sedge
she; branch
in many kinds of ways
rather; seemed; music
were not
she, it; sent out
throat
then; stump
where; her hours (i.e. chanted prayers)
with; overgrown
the owl's dwelling place
her; saw
gazed at and looked her over
it seemed very foul of the owl
because one holds her as hateful and foul