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# Allegorical Theology of Medieval Bestiaries

Medieval bestiaries are a fascinating genre of literature, offering us a glimpse into the lives of the people from the Middle Ages. While serving to educate broadly, bestiaries contributed to the variety of visual vocabulary in the medieval environment of artistic symbolism that can be interpreted according to their employments. To the medieval mind, the animal kingdom provides an understanding of God, and through comprehension of his divine work, one could better understand the human condition. These compendiums of known, exotic, and sometimes mythological animals offered insights into the behaviors of animals and their connection to the role of the larger medieval Christendom. By exploring how allegorical encoding became imbued in the animals depicted in these books, both real and mythological, we will be able to distinguish characteristics of the visual vocabulary of medieval theology to understand the deeper spiritual meaning they express.

To better comprehend the service bestiaries performed in the Middle Ages, it is important to note their predecessor, *Physiologus.* Between the second and fourth century an Alexandrine author summarizes and moralizes the knowledge and beliefs pertaining to less than fifty of Earth's animals, to include reptiles, birds and mythological beasts. This book was translated into Latin as early as the fourth century, but certainly by the early sixth century. From this point on, *Physiologus* was translated and copied into many other languages, though many copies are almost verbatim to the original, though some translating authors expanded or omitted content of

their choosing. Even these slightly varied versions of *Physiologus* uphold a lasting standard of order that nearly all future bestiaries will follow until about the twelfth century England.

*Physiologus* starts with the creation story of Genisis, at God's behest Adam gives names to the animals God has created, the first being the Lion (Figure 1). "The bestiary text notes their strength and power, and perhaps also in recognition of the great, furry manes that crown their heads, the lion was therein designated as the King of Beast. These qualities likely explain why they are commonly found as noble guards for church entrances, such as those from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries on the south and main entrances of the Cathedral of Modena (Figure 2)." (Morrison, 179) The elaborate lore detailed in the bestiary for lions gave them a wide variety of meanings based on their context and placements. The most common associations of the King of Beast (Lion) representing The King of Man (Christ) were usually depicted in the following iconography; (1) while chased by hunters, the lion erases it's tracks with its tail to distract its pursuers- a metaphor for the Incarnation of Christ. (2) When the lion sleeps, its eyes remain open and alert- a representation of Christ's divinity veiled in the grave while his human nature slept. (3.) After three days, the lion is able to revive the cubs born dead through either a breath or roar. - a powerful metaphor for the Resurrection (Figure 3). In this way the parables associating Christ to the lion are clear and would have been understood even by lay audiences in any of these varying contexts. Lion allegorical stories such as these grew over time, and "by the end of the fourteenth century, the cycle illustrating the lion was expanded to encompass a dozen more scenes; the lion seeking an ape to eat was a particular favorite. (Met,8)

Unlike many works such as the Bible or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that contain events in certain sequence, bestiary's subjects are extremely flexible, and it is rare that any copies would be exactly alike. In Ron Baxter's book, *Bestiaries and Their Users in the Middle Ages* the

author has identified two methods to aid in the comprehension of (1) Reading the Story and (2) Reading of Images used in many of the *Physiologus* versions (and thus all later bestiaries), these could be applied either singly or in combination. The first explains the four ways in which illustrated moralizations are often depicted in manuscripts, "The first is to show Christ as teacher the second is to show Christ's Passion, and third makes use of the typological parallels drawn in the text, and the lasts shows the practical or instructional operation of the textual lessons."(Baxter, 63) For example, in the illustrations of the Brussels *Physiologus (f.141r)* (Figure 4) the upper register shows the antelope trapped by its horns in a tree and cannot escape the hunter's spear. Below Christ is shown teaching, with a book in his right hand and the left extended toward a receptive listener. This illustration is a very literal interpretation for viewers to see the connection to the antelope and Christ's teachings. The lesson illustrated from this image of the antelope is for men of God to avoid the Devil's work, or else be trapped.

Methodology used in the reading of the illustration is explained by Baxter as "in the narrative corpus that make up the *Physiologus* text, the animals are no more than actors taking on roles in order to drive home an ideological message. What is more, different animals can take the same role, playing Christ, the Devil, or the Jews, in different chapters of the corpus." (Baxter, 72) The issue then becomes analyzing the parts played by the animal, human, and spiritual characters of the story. For this methodology Baxter has employed a model developed from A.J. Greimas' critique of Russian folktales. This model is "based on the notion of actants, who differ from acteurs, or the characters of the story, in that they are general categories underlaying all narratives, and are not defined by their individual qualities, but by the narrative they perform." (Baxter, 75) Thus, acteurs are numerous, whereas the number of actants in Greimas's model are six, seen below (Table 1).

Table 1.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sender | → | Object | → | Receiver |
| | | ↑ | | |
| Helper | → | Subject | → | Opponent |

Developed to explore the narratives of love or quest in folktales, there is a surprising correlation to the allegory of bestiaries. As an example, the folktale subject, a male hero seeks an object (usually a princess) supplied by a sender or donor (usually her father). “In this case, the actants, ‘subject’ and ‘receiver’ are conflated. The subject may receive help or hinderance from other characters or agencies.” (Baxter, 75) Within tales such as these, the acteurs constantly change their actantial roles. Perhaps the quest is for a magical sword, or the sender is actually the opponent. It is the change in these narratives that are functioning as a product of ideology in bestiaries. The particulars are flexible and thus offer a wide range of underlying narratives.

For example, the *Physiologus* text would model Christian ideology as:

Subject: Individual Christian
Object: Christ
Sender: God, the Father
Receiver: Mankind
Helper: Saints
Opponent: The Devil

When this method is applied to bestiary images a clear story line appears once the “characters” are established. Let us apply these actant assignments to the Lion cleverly covering its tracks from the hunters referenced above.

Literal Level:
Sender: Mountain
Object: Lion
Receiver: Hunters

Moralization Level:
Sender: Father
Object: Christ
Receiver: Mankind *(note the receiver is always mankind)

It is noticeable that at the literal level, the actants could be a wide range of animals as prey and predator. At the actantial moralization level, we see the Devil acts as the predator for all of mankind. In narratives in which Christ is the prey, mankind is asked to identify with Christ as a man of God, usually narrated by a story of the Devil luring a man of God (humanity)into a trap. This involves the bait as the object used to lure humanity just as the Devil attracts the faithless with the bait of a sin, such as fornications. Schemes such as these offer not only a good vs evil, but a helper vs an opponent mechanism used to express the spirit vs the flesh. The spirit vs the flesh takes on the respective roles of helper and opponent used to employ the teachings of "knowing if you live according to the flesh you die; if, however, with the spirit you slay the works of the flesh and live" (Baxter, 81)

At the root of all bestiaries, there is an actor who aids or opposes humanity by expressing lessons of spirit or flesh. In this way iconic stories and images of the bestiary were easily identifiable to those in the Middle Ages, even when the animals appeared in other artistic contexts such as the three pairs of lions across the trumeau of the south portal of the Church of Saint-Pierre at Moissac, in France. (Figure 5) "Anyone who knew the bestiary would have remembered upon seeing them that, after birth, lion cubs remained with their eyes closed until the father lion let out

a great roar on the third day, instilling them with the breath of life....as God resurrected Christ the third day after the Crucifixion." (Morrison, 179)

Bestiary's popularity grew, hitting its golden age for two hundred years at ca. 1100-1300 and became the most widely produced books of the Middle Ages. Many bestiary authors compiled from several sources, with notable contributions from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and Isidore of Serville's *Etymologies,* both works proved most useful to later compilers of bestiaries. It is important to note, if *Physiologus* was the predecessor to bestiaries, *Etymologies* was the successor. "Unlike the earlier *Physiologus,* Isidore did not include any moralizations or allegory in his beast stories. The compilers of the later bestiaries quoted Isidore extensively and added the allegory Isidore left out. For example, in the Aberdeen Bestiary (f. 37v) we find: "In his book of Etymologies, Isidore says that the raven picks out the eyes in corpses first, as the Devil destroys the capacity for judgement in carnal men and proceeds to extract the brain through the eye. The raven extracts the brain through the eye, as the Devil, when it has destroyed our capacity for judgement, destroys our mental faculties." In fact, Isidore supplied only the basic "facts" about the raven; the allegory was from other sources." (http://bestiary.ca)

Another helpful form of bestiary was a complied "handbook" to aid a preacher in sermon composition, as described in John Friedman's Peacocks and Preachers, *Liber de moralitatibus* was compiled about c. 1290 by a Franciscan, Marcus of Orvieto. Invited by Benedict Cardinal Deacon of St. Nicholas to compose such a book, Marcus states plaining that his purpose is to provide a "reference work of sorts, a gathering together of facts and quotations on various moral and doctrinal points which could then be easily worked into a sermon." (Clark & McMunn, 189) Due to the nature of purpose, *Liber de moralitatibus* has a hexameral format with forms of signposting that allows the preacher to find the excerpts he needed quickly. As this is more

encyclopedia in nature, a preacher would be less likely to read this work for pleasure but more as an application of information. An important illustration of how bestiary moralizations were utilized in the Middle Ages.

*These b*estiary images, "whether or not representations of animals in the arts of the Middle Ages followed their strict bestiary illustrations, the behaviors of the animals in the bestiary were so well known that people would have attributed those characteristics to the animals any time they were depicted. Because of this flexibility, the animals from the book are commonly seen alongside other non-bestiary-known and fantastic creatures in both sacred and secular arts. This flexibility also allowed for seemingly limitless creative possibilities and filled medieval visual culture with a variety of forms." (Morrison, 183) One such example of this is Flander's tapestry, Millefleurs with animals. This tapestry became popular in the late Middle Ages, well passed the golden age of bestiary manuscripts. However, this example shows the lasting foundation of allegorical associations established in the Middle Ages. In this tapestry animals are depicted as a part of a larger decorative pattern among an array of flowers and foliage. Spread throughout this works are common animals such as rabbits and birds as well as exotic animals like a leopard and a lion that flank a unicorn. To the untrained eye this work would be admired for it's fine weaving craftsmanship. But to the everyday medieval person, the unicorn would be instantly associated with the Virgin Mary through bestiary stories of the unicorn hunt, which details how only a maiden (virgin) can draw out the extremely wild unicorn to allow the beast to lay its head upon her lap, thus making the unicorn vulnerable to attack. So too would the lion be associated with Christ, the King of Man, this paired with the three clumps of rosebushes forming a triangle around the pair, allude to the Trinity (God the Father, Son and

Holy Ghost). To further the symbolic meaning of the centered holy section, the barking hound and the falcon in the corner sections refer to evil forces or the Devil.

The values and beliefs of medieval society were reinforced by beasts, both real and mythological, which served the significant role of shaping the medieval mind towards nature and religion. From the illuminated manuscripts read in churches or privately in Books of Hours, to tapestries adorning castles, and architectural sculptures guarding sacred sites. The visual vocabulary of bestiary allegory permeated medieval life and served as a communication of complex concepts to a people who were largely illiterate.

Figure 1. *Physiologus,* Version C. Reims, second quarter of the ninth century.

Figure 2. Royal gate portal with lions, Catherdral of Modena, early thirteenth century, marble.

Figure 3. Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 764, folio 2v.

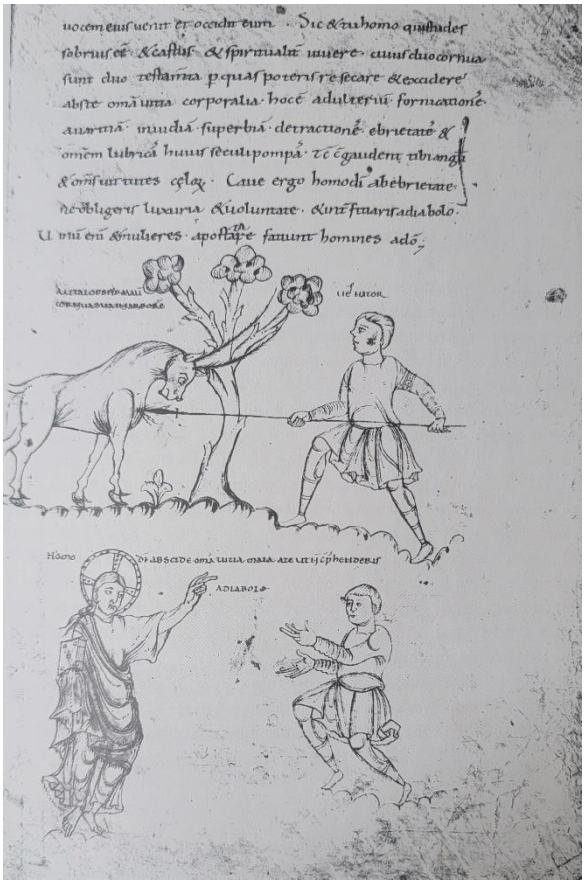

Figure 4. Brussels, Bib. Roy. 10066-77, f.141.r autalops miniature.

Figure 5. *Lions and Jeremiah* Trumeau of south porch, Saint Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30.

Figure 6. *Millefleurs* Tapestry with Flowers and Animals, about 1530-45, Belgian, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

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