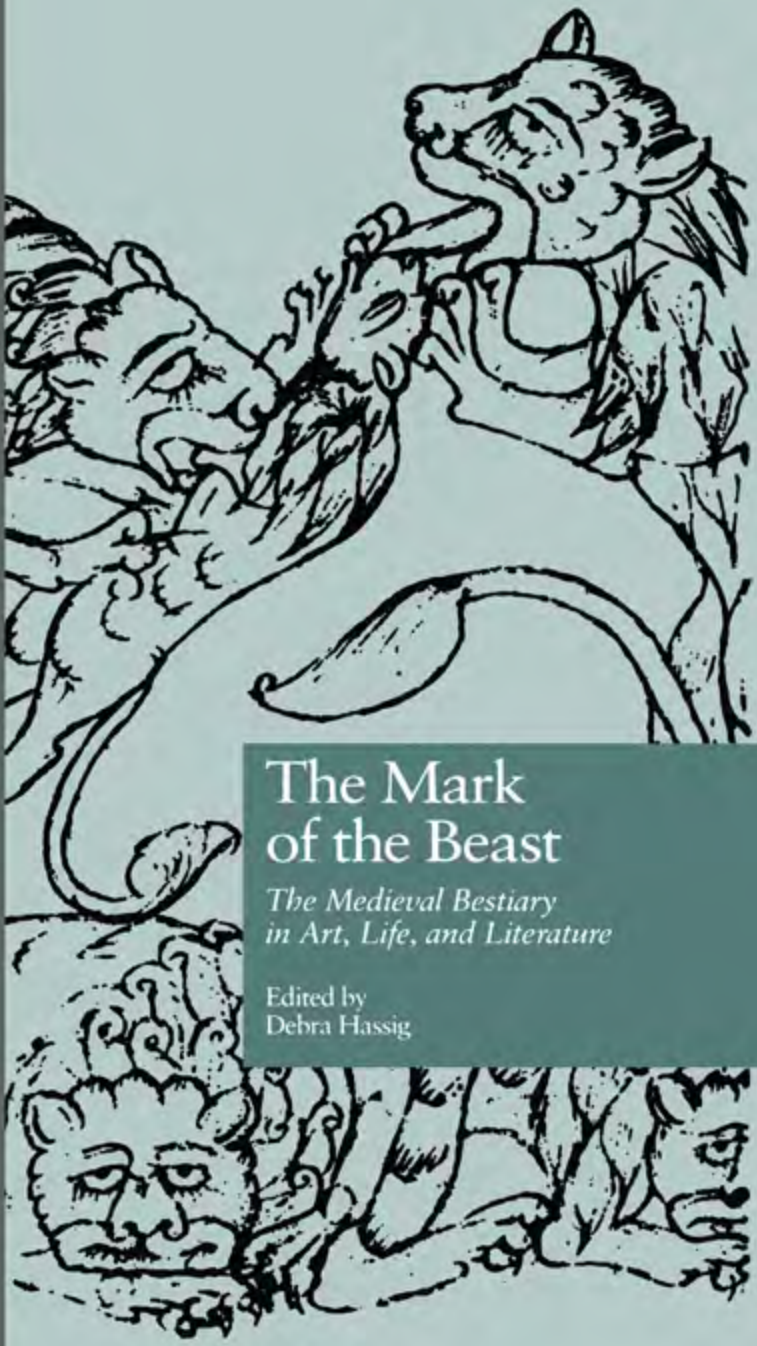

The Mark of the Beast

The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature

Edited by
Debra Hassig

The Mark of the Beast

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Cover illustration depicts *Lions*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 247, f. 139v.

for Jane Rosenthal
scholar, teacher, friend

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Contents

Acknowledgments

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years to better understand and to take immense pleasure in the study of medieval art.

Introduction

Animals were a ubiquitous presence in medieval life. The wild ones were hunted and feared, while the domestic ones lived side by side with their human owners, often performing various agricultural, transportation, and courtly tasks. Animals provided food, clothing, and companionship, and certain individuals won lasting fame for their loyalty and devotion to heroes and saints,[1] so is it really surprising that imaginative thinking about animals became a medieval preoccupation? With a gradually accumulated and rich store of symbolic associations, animals were excellent, figurative vehicles for religious allegory, political satire, and moral instruction. The medieval bestiary was the culmination and apogee of allegorical functions for animals, assembling stories and pictures of beasts and birds for purposes of moral instruction and courtly entertainment. It is indisputable that the bestiaries were an important medieval contribution to didactic religious literature. But far from comprising an isolated, specialist's genre available only to the religious and literate elite, bestiaries also addressed concerns central to virtually all walks of Christian life. That is, familiarity with the bestiary stories did not necessarily require direct access to the bestiary manuscripts, as the stories were available from a multitude of sources, some textual, some visual, some word of mouth.[2]

The present collection of essays rides the tide of accelerated academic interest in the medieval bestiary witnessed during the last couple of decades. The result of this interest has been a number of published studies that have greatly advanced our interpretations of this complex genre as well as deepened our understanding of the significance of animals during the Middle Ages. These include books and articles on the bestiaries per se,[3] translations into English of key

texts relevant to bestiary studies,[4] major investigations of the literary and historical significance of animals in the Middle Ages,[5] and a number of interdisciplinary anthologies that address medieval animals and their social and symbolic significance.[6] Art historical treatment of this material has been greatly aided by the publication, often in color, of collections of bestiary imagery,[7] including complete facsimiles and editions of bestiary manuscripts.[8]

One explanation for the increased attention to bestiaries during recent years is the double recognition of the necessity for interdisciplinary approaches to problems in medieval studies, and of the inherently interdisciplinary content of the bestiaries themselves. In addition, the influence of the bestiaries was not contained between their covered boards but rather extended to many other genres either dedicated to elucidating the wonders of nature or to exploiting the symbolic potential of animals in such varied outlets as biblical commentaries, nature treatises, encyclopedias, romances, epic, *exempla*, and fables. Even a cursory survey of this literature reveals certain commonalities and borrowings, which are almost always grounded in or related to the Early Christian *Physiologus* and the later medieval bestiaries. Hence, the bestiaries are the logical starting point for understanding animal allegory and imagery found in many other contexts.

The goal of the present collection of essays is not to hand down truths on the ultimate significance of the bestiaries or to argue for one consistent symbolic meaning for a given animal or to suggest but a single function for these books. Rather, the individual studies all expose accumulated layers of meaning developed in the bestiary stories and attached to the animals themselves and seek therefore to make visible their numerous ambiguities and contradictions as compelling testimony to the flexibility and power of the genre. In addition, it is clear that the bestiaries exerted a strong influence in other spheres, in that animal imagery in other types of manuscripts (such as psalters and Books of Hours) and in other artistic forms (such as monumental sculpture and romance) carries with it associations drawn from the bestiaries that informed and enriched its meaning in the new contexts. It is also apparent that not only their texts and iconography but also the way the bestiaries were read and perceived owed much to Classical tradition and interpretations of animals, both real and imaginary.

Emphasis in all of these essays is on art historical and literary analysis. Equal consideration is paid to texts and images with an eye

toward connecting specific artistic and literary features of the bestiaries with broader issues in medieval art, life, and literature. Still, given their varying topical concerns, I have grouped the essays into four distinct categories.

SOCIAL REALITIES

In the first section, I have included a pair of studies focused on single bestiary entries that address particularly important contemporary social and political issues. In Margaret Haist's study of the lion, that issue is no less than the legitimacy of the English monarchy. Taking as her point of departure a passage in Genesis quoted in the Bern Physiologus lion entry, she traces changing ideas about the importance of bloodline and qualities appropriate to a king as revealed in the later bestiary images and commentaries on the lion. These ideas helped legitimize the king's position in England by emphasizing rights to the throne through heredity and by suggesting that secular power was an earthly manifestation of heavenly authority. By the early thirteenth century, visual messages pertaining to kingship were incorporated into the seemingly conventional bestiary illustrations of the lion, and these changes paralleled ideas about kingship available in contemporary political tracts. Within this analytical framework, the bestiary leopard entry is also relevant as a vehicle for the condemnation of particular English kings.

The second essay that addresses a specific social concern is Mariko Miyazaki's study of the owl as a symbolic locus for medieval anti-semitism. Discussion centers on sculpted owl bosses and misericords in Norwich Cathedral and their relationship to the various owls pictured and described in the bestiaries, as a means of demonstrating how the bestiaries contributed to anti-Jewish sentiment in a city that experienced an especially intense division between Christians and Jews. The relationship between the owl and the ape as co-representatives of sin and evil is also examined in order to highlight the flexibility of the owl as a symbol, subject to multiple interpretations appropriate to both monastic and secular audiences.

MORAL LESSONS

In a very practical sense, moral lessons were the *raison d'être* of the bestiaries and hence at least the indirect subject of all of the essays in this collection. However, those comprising the second section are

distinguishable from the others in that they examine directly particular moral or religious problems that blurred the lines between social mores and theological preoccupations. Carmen Brown has analyzed several different bestiary entries for their didactic potential in communicating the dangers of the two deadly sins of pride and lust. Bestiary entries related to these two sins are exceptionally numerous, so much so that certain animals were eventually invested with emblematic value as signs of specific sins, which they carried to a variety of artistic settings. Lion and goat imagery is especially revealing in this regard, transmitting a clear warning at once religious and social, in contexts both within and outside the bestiary proper.

The sin of lust is also the subject of my own essay on sex in the bestiaries. I am primarily interested in charting changing theological views of sex as revealed in a number of bestiary entries concerned with this theme, including the siren, beaver, and fire rocks. I try to show how bestiary characterizations of sex are consistently negative and generally condemn women as the impetus behind sexual misconduct. I trace a shift in emphasis over time by contrasting the ways in which the theme of sex functions as a theological guidepost in the Latin prose bestiaries with its later function in the *Bestiaire d'amour*. Written by Richard of Fournival, the latter is essentially a love-plea that skillfully reworks the meanings and imagery of the traditional bestiaries from the service of theological moralization to that of private seduction.

The most intensely theologically focused of the essays in this section is the study of the phoenix by Valerie Jones. The precise nature of the resurrection, whether physical or spiritual, was a matter of ongoing dispute throughout the Middle Ages. This essay links phoenix imagery in the bestiaries to contemporary beliefs concerning the resurrection at the end of time. In medieval literature and exegesis, the ancient myth of the phoenix's self-immolation and subsequent revival was adopted as a metaphor for Christ's self-sacrifice and resurrection, a metaphor transferred to and further developed in the bestiary phoenix entries. The essay explores how the phoenix images functioned as pictorial allusions to Christ and to Christian ideas of sacrifice and salvation, providing insight into views on the resurrection predominant at the time of their production as well as into more general beliefs regarding the ultimate fate of humankind.

CLASSICAL INHERITANCES

That the medieval bestiaries were dependent upon and informed by a rich accumulation of Classical lore and animal iconography is by now a commonplace, but the two essays included in this section explore this idea in especially detailed and insightful ways. Pamela Gravestock tackles the important, often-asked but little-answered question of whether or not medieval readers believed in the existence of imaginary bestiary creatures such as the unicorn, griffin, and bonnacon. Not surprisingly, the answer to the question is an involved one. The essay first examines the different approaches taken by modern scholars in the study of fantastic animals and then critiques those that seek one-to-one matchups between imaginary creatures and "real" animals as a continuation of the Classical tradition of rationalism. Among the issues examined are whether or not inclusion of certain animals in the bestiaries is tantamount to simple cases of "mistaken identity," to what extent their inclusion constitutes a continuation of Classical beliefs and ideas and whether or not imaginary animals may have served a didactic function in the bestiaries comparable to that of the "real" and recognizable beasts.

J. Holli Wheatcroft's essay on Classical influences in the bestiaries is an iconographical study but one that is fully integrated with ancient ideological influences that were incorporated into new Christian contexts, which distinguishes this study from previous ones that have provided important insights into the artistic origins of medieval animal imagery. The analyses of the bestiary snake and phoenix show how visual evidence of earlier religious practices were adopted and modified to serve the newer demands of emerging Christian doctrine. The analysis concentrates on correspondences between the significance of the snake and the phoenix in ancient Rome and on concomitant connections between the Roman cult of the dead and emerging Christian beliefs surrounding death and salvation. The essay deals directly with the bestiary's syncretic nature and the function of the *Physiologus* as a pathway from Roman religion to medieval Christian practice, an aspect of the genre that is often overlooked.

READING BEASTS

The last two essays in the collection provide lively and in-depth text and image analyses of two very important illuminated manuscripts. The first of these, by Alison Syme, is a study of Bodley 764, one of the

most celebrated of the thirteenth-century English bestiaries. Using the tools and methods of psychoanalysis, references to specific taboos connected with death, sex, and decay are shown to play a large role in the formal structuring of the illuminations as well as to motivate the content of the text. Interestingly, however, these taboos are consistently "hidden"—cloaked in the guise of spiritual instruction—yet concern with avoiding them provides a bridge between biblical commandments, medieval exegesis, the bestiaries, and the work of modern theorists, including Freud and Derrida.

Finally, Michelle Bolduc calls attention to the compelling associations between the bestiary and late medieval romance despite their disparate pictorial and textual traditions. To this end, her essay examines the influence of bestiaries on an important thirteenth-century French romance, *Le Roman de Silence*. Included among the fourteen narrative images that illustrate the only extant manuscript copy of this work are three portraits of hybrid creatures. Providing a marked contrast with the dynamic, narrative imagery devoted to the romance's protagonists, the hybrid images make both direct references to—and indirect invocations of—the bestiary tradition, which reciprocally enriches and multiplies the levels of meaning in the romance.

I would only add that all of these essays aim to celebrate the medieval bestiary as an amazingly complex, well-loved, and versatile genre in its own right as well as to contribute to the process of removing it from intellectual and scholarly isolation as a charming but insignificant collection of animal stories. Together, the essays clearly demonstrate how bestiaries both address and further develop some of the most important concerns of the Middle Ages, bearing on such central institutions as the Church, the monarchy, and everyday social relations. In this sense, all of the authors assembled here have a common goal, which is to demonstrate that medieval bestiaries cannot be separated from their cultural milieu because they in fact played a significant role in its creation.

NOTES

1. Among the latter must be counted Alexander the Great's brave horse, Bucephalus; the loyal and avenging dog of King Garamantes; and the compassionate sea otters who dried the feet of St. Cuthbert.

2. See Willene B. Clark, "Twelfth and Thirteenth-Century Latin Sermons and the Latin Bestiary," *Compar(a)ison* 1 (1996), 5-19.

3. Xenia Muratova, *The Medieval Bestiary* (Moscow, 1984); *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and Its Legacy*, ed. Willene B. Clark and Meradith T. McMunn (Philadelphia, 1989); Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London, 1991); Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge, 1995). Comprehensive bibliography on bestiaries, including journal literature, may be found in Clark and McMunn (1989). For the earlier literature, see the bibliography in Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill, 1962).

4. These include Richard of Fournival, *Master Richard's Bestiary of Love and Response*, trans. Jeanette Beer (Berkeley, 1986); Albert the Great, *Man and the Beasts: De animalibus (Books 22-26)*, trans. James J. Scanlan (Binghamton, 1987); Hugh of Fouilloy, *The Medieval Book of Birds*, ed. and trans. Willene B. Clark (Binghamton, 1992); *A Medieval Book of Beasts: Pierre de Beauvais' Bestiary*, trans. Guy Mermier (Lewiston, 1992); *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764*, trans. Richard Barber (Woodbridge, 1993).

5. Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1100* (Philadelphia, 1993); Joyce Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1994). While not focused on the medieval period, interesting anthropological insights into animal-human relations are revealed in *What Is an Animal?*, ed. Tim Ingold (London, 1994).

6. Besides Clark and McMunn 1989, the most recent of these include *The Medieval World of Nature*, ed. Joyce Salisbury (New York, 1993); *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York, 1996); and *Animals and the Symbolic in Mediaeval Art and Literature*, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen (Groningen, 1997).

7. Ann Payne, *Medieval Beasts* (New York, 1990); Janetta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1992).

8. *Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat der Handschrift Ms. Ashmole 1511-Bestiarium* (Graz, 1982), with translation and commentary by Franz Unterkircher, *Bestiarium: Die Texte der Handschrift Ms. Ashmole 1511 der Bodleian Library Oxford in lateinischer und deutscher Sprache* (Graz, 1986); Muratova (color facsimile of the St. Petersburg Bestiary); *Deidis of Armorie: A Heraldic Treatise and Bestiary*, 2 vols., ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen (Edinburgh, 1994). Barber 1993, while not a facsimile publication, provides an English translation and all of the images (in color) of Bodley 764.

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Abbreviations

Bible quotations given in the *Notes* sections of essays follow the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate. In excerpts transcribed from manuscripts, abbreviations have been expanded and capitalization and punctuation have been added, but spellings have not been normalized nor has grammar been corrected.

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Figure A. Pardus. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 764, f. 9v.
Photo: The Bodleian Library.

Figure B. Siren and centaur. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig XV/3, f. 78. Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California.

Figure C. Peacock. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 764, f. 84v.
Photo: The Bodleian Library.

Figure D. Goat. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 764, f. 36v.
Photo: The Bodleian Library.