

DID WE BELIEVE IN DRAGONS?: THE PHYSIOLOGIC
TRADITION, WONDER AND ETHNICITY IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL BRITAIN AND IRELAND

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2022

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This dissertation identifies the presence within early medieval Britain and Ireland of a specific discourse around animality, which is labeled ‘the physiologic tradition’. Derived partially from the Late Antique *Physiologus*, a collection of religious animal lore, the physiologic tradition fundamentally combines various forms of ontological alterity — animality, wonder, and ethnicity being three key manifestations of that alterity — with instruction in correct spiritual and doctrinal beliefs. Examining a variety of early medieval texts in which physiologic animals are found, including the Old English *Phoenix*, the Irish Latin *Navigatio sancti brendani* (‘Voyage of St Brendan’), the Exeter Book riddles, and Gerald of Wales’ *Topographica Hibernica* (‘The History and Topography of Ireland’), this dissertation tracks how various Christian authors used these literary animals to explore questions of theology, ontology, and the natural world, as well as to dehumanize and harm ethnic and religious others.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Seth Hunter Koproski (any/all) is a teacher, writer, performer, researcher, and artist based as of this publication in Ithaca, New York. Born in the state of Connecticut, Seth pursued his undergraduate studies at the University of Connecticut, where he received his B.A. in English and a B.F.A. in Acting. He worked as an actor and puppeteer in New York City and throughout New England for several years before attending New York University for his M.A. and Cornell University for his Ph.D., both in English. He has spoken at numerous conferences; taught dozens of university courses at Cornell, Auburn Correctional Facility, and the State University of New York at Cortland on academic writing, theater, medieval and contemporary literature, the history of the English language, and pedagogy; and worked on hundreds of theatrical productions both professional and local.

This dissertation is dedicated to all of my teachers—both inside the classroom and out—but especially to Professors Bart Roccoberton and Hal Momma, who taught me both how to believe in my work and in myself.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my uncle, Robert J. Heller, who I believe would have read these pages with great pride and great joy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my entire family for their love and support, especially my Mom and Dad, my brother Jesse, my *cioci* Jill, and my cousin Jacquie. I need to next acknowledge the fantastic guidance and encouragement given to me by my committee: Professors Masha Raskolnikov, Andrew Galloway and, especially, my co-chairs Samantha Zacher and Thomas Dana Hill. I have been very blessed and privileged to have such great mentorship and trust in this rather fantastic project and I appreciate so deeply the belief my committee has placed in me.

I have also had a series of peer mentors who have inspired me and without whom I would never have even become a medievalist, nor felt at home in the departments I've been in, and for those reasons I need to thank Drs. Carla María Thomas, Angela Bennett, and Kaylin O'Dell.

Additionally, I've been blessed by a great number of other peers who deserve special thanks for reading through drafts, giving me feedback, providing much needed emotional or intellectual support, and a good deal else. I'd like to thank Noah Lloyd, Mint Damrongpiwat, Jennifer

Rabedeau, Sophia D'Ignazio, Seth Strickland, Jasmine Jay, Liza Flum, Krithika Vachali, Lisa Camp, my entire cohort in both the Literatures in English department and Medieval Studies program, and all of the participants who came to the various roundtable discussions of my work. I'd also like to thank Cornell's Medieval Studies Student Colloquium and the International Congress on Medieval Studies for hosting various versions of this work in progress, as well as the Cornell Institute for European Studies which generously funded my pre-dissertation research in the U.K. and Ireland.

There are many, many people who have been crucial in this nearly decade long process—from the first MA applications to editing my final dissertation draft—and it would be impossible to list them all. My brain has been far too filled with werewolves and phoenici to remember everyone who deserves to be mentioned and for that, I apologize. I would, however, like to thank Richard Pickering for his kindness, recommendation, and unwavering support; Amy Cohen for creating a community that has sustained me throughout this degree program; Monique Pipkin for sending me a long list of fantastic, real life animals;

Dr. Tamarah Kohanski for introducing me to medieval literature in the first place; and finally Hobbes Goodell, Jenaya Goldwag, and Jill Sopenoff for reasons that they already, many times over, know.

Thank you, as well, to any future reader of this dissertation. I hope you find it useful and I hope it brings you joy.

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We cannot fully know ourselves without first knowing the nature of all living creatures.

-St Ambrose, *The Hexameron* (6.2.3)¹

¹ Ambrose. *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, Catholic University of America Press, 1962.

INTRODUCTION BELIEF

The 793 entry of the *Canterbury Chronicle*, a historical account of early medieval England written by the early English themselves, states:

Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and there immediately followed a great famine, and after that in the same year on 8 January the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.¹

The question which spurred this dissertation is, in a sense, simple: did medieval people believe in fantastic animals like the dragon? Does this historical account, which gives little indication of fiction or whimsy, purport itself to be true and believed?

The answer is in one sense very straightforward: yes and no. Undoubtedly some medieval people believed in the existence of imaginary creatures, just as some people (fringe though they may be) believe dragons, the Loch Ness monster, and Bigfoot exist today. Undoubtedly some medieval people found the idea of the phoenix or the echinemon to be obvious hogwash, just as fantastic creatures like the elephant or the chameleon were obvious hogwash. Undoubtedly some people didn't think about the matter at all. And so asking, 'Did medieval people believe in dragons?' is asking an impossible question, as the category 'medieval people' and the idea of 'belief' are both so multifaceted that to flatten them would make them nonsensical. 'Medieval people,' of

¹ Swanton, Michael. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Phoenix Press, 2000. 55-57.

course, refers to countless individuals and cultures over a 1000 year span of history, and so this dissertation constrains that multifaceted multitude into the smaller multifaceted multitude, namely the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland roughly between 800-1200 CE. What I mean by 'believe in', however, requires a great deal more explanation, as does what I mean by 'dragons'.

In his 2002 novel *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman quotes G. K. Chesterton: "Fairy tales are more than true – not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten."² In an 2015 special edition of *postmedieval*, Cord J. Whitaker entitles his introduction "Race-ing the Dragon,"³ while Daniel Baker names his appeal to the transgressive potential of the fantasy genre "Why We Need Dragons."⁴ In all three instances, both popular and academic, the authors specifically use the 'dragon' as a metaphor, or perhaps a metonym, of 'the medieval,' of 'the fantastic,' or of 'our troubles.' 'Dragons,' as mythical beasts, seem to be eternally coupled to a set of symbolic meanings,

² He actually *mis*quotes Chesterton, whose words in *Tremendous Trifles* are: "Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon." For a full explanation, see Gaiman, Neil. 'Every Version of that Chesterton Quotation about Fairy Tales and Slaying Dragons', *Tumblr*, 31 October 2014, <https://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/101407141743/every-version-of-that-chesterton-quotation-about>.

³ Whitaker, Cord J. 'Race-ing the dragon: the Middle Ages, race, and trippin' into the future.' *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 6 (2015): 3-11.

⁴ Baker, Daniel. 'Why we need dragons: the progressive potential of fantasy.' *Journal of the fantastic in the arts* 23.3 (2012): 437-459.

all of which are separate from our actual reality. To the modern-day mind, reality and dragons are in a sense antithetical.⁵

As the early English *Chronicle* shows, however, this antithesis was *not* a given for medieval peoples. Their approach to what we consider today to be fantastic animals was entirely different, based on a different set of knowledges, of prejudices, and of experiences. The authorities which medieval people read and trusted in—say Pliny or Isidore—constructed their world in a way separate from our modern authorities—say Darwin or Mendel—and so to strike at the heart of this central question, we must tear away contemporary binary notions of ‘real’ and ‘not-real’. In his essay *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis reminds us that any early English poet believed various spirits existed in the upper atmosphere “because he had read about them in a book; just as we believe in the Solar System and in anthropologists’ accounts of early man.”⁶ Though the modern scientific apparatus is designed with verifiability in mind, the vast majority of people today do not have access to its process of knowledge creation and discovery. We still rely on a belief—belief in the

⁵ It is a great disappointment of mine that I, like Gaiman, Whitaker, and Baker, am using the ‘dragons’ of my title in a largely rhetorical sense. Though the medieval period was filled with dragons and their endless variety, I will not be addressing that particular strain of fantastic animality and instead focusing on the concept of fantastic animals in a larger sense— encapsulating not only the dragon, but also beasts such as the phoenix, the basilisk, and the werewolf, as well as the fantastic qualities placed upon real-world animals such as the lion, the whale, and even the goose. It is my hope that a second volume of this dissertation will one day be produced that is better equipped to fully approach the history of dragons themselves and on their own historic terms, but for the time being I, like my many predecessors, will use them as an attractive representation of fantastic and wondrous things. When I taught a course on medieval animal literature entitled ‘Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them’ I was accused by a student (who certainly did not read the course description) of a ‘clickbait course title’. I’m afraid my dissertation title may engender the same criticism, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take.

⁶ Lewis, C.S. *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge UP, 1964. 2-3.

scientific system—to inform our understanding and knowledge on how the world works, even at its most basic and fundamental levels. We accept the heliocentric model of the solar system and the nature of an atom not because the majority of us have seen conclusive proof of such with our eyes, but rather because it has been reported to us from authorities in which we have faith.

Therefore, to look at medieval belief with a strict, modern understanding of ‘reality’ is to hold people to an anachronistic, culturally-informed, and more or less pointless standard. We cannot take medieval people seriously if we hold them to our own standards of ‘truth’ and ‘real’. We must focus on, as Gaiman calls it, the ‘more than true’—the intention behind the text. We must focus not on ‘facts’ that we believe we know about the natural world, those slippery constructions of modern empiricist thinking, but rather on beliefs and the effects that those beliefs had on the real-world texts in front of us. In this dissertation, I would like to spend the majority of my time asking more productive questions than “Did people believe in fantastic animals?”— questions such as ‘*How* did people believe in fantastic animals?’ or ‘*Why* did people believe in fantastic animals?’ or ‘How was that belief constructed?’ But first, a more basic question to start with: what is *belief* itself?

Models and Structures of Belief

To start with, I will be examining belief as a structural component of society, one which is accepted, rejected, or modified by each ‘believer’ on an individual basis— from that starting point, we can establish a model of belief and consider how that model was expressed, how it changed, and how it was used. Models of belief do already exist, such as those considered by Steven Justice in his article, ‘Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?’, wherein he delves into, and subsequently rejects, a few popular models of belief which people impose upon the medieval era. He identifies a dual system, one that uses ‘didactic and perceptual accounts’ to explain tellings of the miraculous. The ‘didactic’ side, on the part of the clergy or other spiritual leaders, posits that the dissemination of miraculous literature ignores the irreality, instead focusing on its ‘higher truth’—i.e., the spiritual truths of the story are more important than the historical truths.⁷ The ‘perceptual account’, on the side of the believers, posits that those listening to the stories are more attuned to perceive the world in a supernatural way, and thus are perpetually primed to see and to believe in the miraculous. Alternatively, there are the ‘fraud and credulity’ narratives pushed by detractors of the medieval church, wherein the power-hungry clergy manipulate the credulous laity with what they know to be terrible lies. To Justice, both the ‘didactic and perceptual’ and ‘fraud and

⁷ This idea is related to the third point I make about the physiologic tradition and its preference for theological truth over zoological truth, yet to the *Physiologus*, these animal behaviors and qualities are not viewed or presented as ‘miracles’ in the same way, but rather through the lens of a proto-encyclopedic description. To the animals described, their natures are not fantastic or miraculous, just as the bombardier beetle is not viewed as miraculous for being able to spit acid and the *ophiocordyceps unilateralis* is not miraculous for its ability to control the brains of ants. Wondrous perhaps, but not miraculous in the way Justice describes.

credulity' models are two sides of the same coin, as in one account people tell the miracle stories for their own sake, i.e. "because they occupied a different thought world or because they were defectively credulous,"⁸ and in the other people tell miracle stories for the sake of something else, such as edification or personal gain. Taken to the extreme, Justice argues, these views of how medieval people believe paint them as either speaking "in a cynical and nearly sociopathic detachment" from the truth or "in a nearly delusional bondage to interests" other than their own. Either way, these temptingly 'realistic' models flatten the idea of belief from a thought process and an individual action of will into an agent of medieval coercion, a purely functional mode of institutional control.

Instead, belief must be considered on its own terms. As John Arnold states in the introduction to his *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, "we should not automatically read religious actions as signs of something else", that is, we should consider actual religious conviction as a possible motivating factor.⁹ This is not to say that belief doesn't exist outside the individual: Arnold's approach to the idea of belief is based partially on an idea of power, but not a linear, cynical one; rather, the type of power identified by Michel Foucault, a "subtle manipulation of language and cultural norms to limit the domain of what is possible or conceivable at a certain moment in time." This does not

⁸ Justice, Steven. 'Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?' *Representations* 103.1 (Summer 2008). 1-29. Quotation from 9.

⁹ Arnold, John H. *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, Hodder Arnold, 2005. 7. For people who are religious, this point is astoundingly obvious, but may still need to be re-stated in the secular, academic field.

need to be a conscious effort on the part of those in power, but rather we can consider how “the way in which [the elites] inevitably shape the concept of the world around them has powerful effects elsewhere.”¹⁰ Thus belief is to Arnold a societal structure, but one without an inherent end-goal in mind. Arnold’s model maintains a sharp division of power and agency, but removes the intrinsic motivation Justice describes in the didactic or fraudulent accounts of spreading miracle stories.

Taking his cue from anthropological theory, Arnold gives four maxims on studying belief.¹¹ Firstly, that belief “has an intrinsic relationship with social, economic, and political structures,” and that “religious patterns of meaning have a close relationship to social patterns of meaning”. This much is apparent when viewing belief as a social structure. His second and third points consider the importance of symbols: symbols must be considered in all aspects, including the “small and passing” daily actions and interactions of the laity; and symbols must be considered in terms of how they were received, not just expressed. The texts examined within this dissertation, as products largely of religious houses or the cultural elite, often do ignore the ‘small and passing’, concerning themselves with what they view as greater concerns, and accounts of their reception are for the most part few and far between. The nature of fantastic and imaginary creatures puts them intrinsically outside the purview

¹⁰ Arnold 11.

¹¹ Arnold 18-20.

of the everyday, and while lay belief and reception will be considered where it is appropriate, Arnold's focus on the laity is not mine.

Arnold's fourth point, and his most salient to this introduction, is that we must focus on *practice*, in two senses of the word. The first sense is of actuality vs. idealism- how closely did medieval people adhere to what their beliefs instructed them to do? And more importantly, the second sense is of performativity- belief is a series of practices, the repetition of which performs and reinforces itself. Arnold quotes Jean-Claude Schmitt on this point, "belief is a never-completed activity, one that is precarious, always questioned, and inseparable from recurrences of doubt". Belief, according to Justice, is a "discipline of a fidelity," a never-ending process of will, a "set of practices cultivated systematically with the goal of habituation."¹² Taking a more psychological approach and working from the doctrinal thoughts of Thomas Aquinas, Justice emphasizes the idea of choice, and its intrinsic relationship with doubt, it is "by definition distinct from knowledge and lacks its assurance," because the discipline of faith, as a virtue, can be defined as "undertaking and maintaining commitment to a series of putatively true propositions," propositions which to the mind are "alien, peremptory, and rebarbative" or "uncertain, difficult, inaccessible."¹³ The continual reaffirming, the 'undertaking and maintaining' of this system, can be seen in the eucharist, the design of which "insists that sight is misled about what is really there, and

¹² Justice, 'Did...' 14.

¹³ Justice, 'Did...' 11.

that it is not, *as* sight, corrigible.”¹⁴ Belief relies on the lack of knowledge, on doubt, it relies on the purposeful abandonment of what is thought possible, and it relies on a continual reaffirmation to exist. Arnold’s first three maxims deal with belief as it changes, as an entity that is structured by and with the society that embraces it, but this last one, coinciding with Justice’s more interior, personal model, asks us to examine the actual process of belief in the abstract- not just *what* people believe, but *how* people individually believe.

The existence of belief, then, necessitates the existence of doubt. If there were no doubts, there would be no faith, there would just be knowledge. Yet Christianity *requires* faith from its adherents—this much is evident by the oft-quoted John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* may not perish but may have eternal life”¹⁵ (emphasis mine). Belief is the single necessary component of salvation within Christianity, but in being so it also necessitates, perhaps counterintuitively, doubt which it can exist against. The various animals examined through this dissertation, alongside the doubts expressed about them, work in myriad ways toward the ultimate process of the reaffirmation and performance of belief.

This connection between belief and fantastic animality, however, is not a purely medieval mode of understanding. The analyses by Justice and Arnold

¹⁴ "Eucharistic Miracle and Eucharistic Doubt," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42 (2012):307-322. Quotation from 312.

¹⁵ All quotations from the Bible unless specified otherwise are from the *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with The Apocrypha*. 5th edition, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, 2018.

are helpful not only in considering what is ultimately a culture alienated from us by a thousand years of history, but also in considering our own contemporary uses of belief. If we, like Justice, reject flattened and untenable models of fraud and credulity and instead—perhaps wantonly—assume that medieval people were just as intelligent, critical, and curious about their natural world as we are, we must confront the fact that that means contemporary society and our contemporary notion of the natural world are built upon similar structures and concepts of belief.

The Fantastic, the Facts, and the Plausibly Impossible

The perceived divides that separate modern humanity from our medieval predecessors often do ignore the fact that the ways in which we perceive and interact with the world are not solely culturally informed. Earlier in this introduction I claimed that we must consider more than ‘facts’, but I did not do so to abandon all notions of empiricism or empirical ‘reality’: the contemporary scientific system, built upon empiricist thinking, has indeed been extremely successful in understanding and finding ways to utilize the natural world for human advancement. However, that ‘advancement’, as well as the accumulation and dissemination of human knowledge that has occurred in the intervening millennium, has not turned humanity into a separate specie from their medieval predecessors. The differences we perceive

between ourselves and medieval humans are based largely in our modern desires for self-definition: the medieval is to modern society a rhetorically useful time, place, and population against which we can define ourselves—often as rational, free-thinking, scientific, secular, or otherwise. When I claim we must abandon ‘facts’, I mean that we must resist the desire to immediately disavow medieval belief as unserious or nonsensical, *especially* when that belief is directly contradicted by modern scientific understanding.

Belief is not just a cultural concept. Human beings are hardwired in certain ways that allow for abstract thinking and ontological categorization—that is, how we form definitional boundaries between objects, beings, and ideas—and these abilities are crucial in our understanding of the relationship between belief and the natural world. In her 2017 article for *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schulz questions how it can be that humans have the ability to rank fantastic creatures and other impossible things in terms of believability. “Possibility and impossibility are binary,” Schulz writes, “and when we adjudge the yeti more probable than the leprechaun we aren’t reflecting facts about the world we live in; we aren’t reflecting the world we live in at all.”¹⁶ Schulz considers how artists provide a window into the craft of creating the impossible and the fantastic in a palatable way, but these investigations only cover the *how*, not the *why*—for that, Schulz turns to recent experiments in cognitive science and psychology, as I do now.

¹⁶ Schulz, Kathryn. ‘Fantastic Beasts and How to Rank Them’, *The New Yorker*, October 2017.

In one study by John McCoy and Tomer Ullman, participants were asked to rank the ‘effort’ perceived to be required of differing magical spells-¹⁷ unsurprisingly, a spell that lifted a frog a hundred feet in the air was considered more ‘difficult’ than one where the frog was lifted only one foot, even though in practical terms both actions are equally impossible (that is to say: they are impossible). Cognitive psychologists Andrew Shtulman and Caitlin Morgan have considered the “*plausibly impossible*” in human thinking, stating that the patterns of magical or fantastic logic in fiction “suggest that our notions of impossibility are graded rather than categorical.”¹⁸ What is considered ‘impossible’ in this vein is largely connected to ontology— as Michael H. Kelly and Frank C. Keil conclude in their analysis of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the Grimm fairy tales, “the transformational patterns... were partially determined by the nature of conceptual organization at some or all of the levels of ontology, animacy, and the more specific knowledge domain of animal.”¹⁹ Thus, ontological classifications are related to one another and the movement between ontological categories is constrained by the closeness of ontological classification- it is thought that a human is more likely to

¹⁷ Shtulman, Andrew, and Caitlin Morgan. “The explanatory structure of unexplainable events: Causal constraints on magical reasoning.” *Psychonomic bulletin & review* vol. 24,5 (2017): 1573-1585. doi: 10.3758/s13423-016-1206-3. PMID: 28176291. and McCoy, John, and Tomer Ullman. “Judgments of effort for magical violations of intuitive physics.” *PloS one* vol. 14,5 e0217513. 23 May. 2019, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0217513.

¹⁸ Shtulman and Morgan 1573-4.

¹⁹ Kelly, Michael H. and Frank C. Keil. ‘The More Things Change...: Metamorphoses and Conceptual Structure’, *Cognitive Science* 9 (1985). 403-416. Quotation from 415-6.

transform into a dog than a puddle of water, as 'human' and 'animal' are considered more closely related than 'human' and 'inanimate liquid'.

The 'graded' nature of our notions of impossibility lie partially in our *ontological commitments*, the "fundamental categories and conceptual structures that we use to organize our experiences",²⁰ and the breaking of these commitments is considered an *ontological violation*, that is, a violation of one of the "core properties" of a certain category of existence- in our mind, the category of 'frog' precludes levitation and so a levitating frog is an ontological violation.²¹ It has been shown that the amount of ontological violations has an effect on human memory: with one or two violations, an event is more memorable than if there are no violations or if there are many violations- Shtulman and Morgan give the example of a tree which never dies being more memorable than either a normal fruit-bearing tree or a tree that floats in the air, speaks, and never dies. This notion of memorability means that events which contain a sparing yet present amount of impossibility affect "how often and how reliably these ideas are passed from one person to another and one generation to another."²² Thus, a one-horned equine with an attraction to virginal women is more memorable and more likely to become a repeated tale than a fifty-horned equine that flies and shoots laser beams out of its eyes. On the inanimate side, it is impossible to forget that Jesus's first miracle was the

²⁰ Griffiths, Thomas L. 'Revealing ontological commitments by magic', *Cognition* 136 (2015), 43-48. Quotation from 43.

²¹ Shtulman and Morgan 1574.

²² Shtulman and Morgan 1574.

transformation of water into wine, an ontologically simple transformation, and that the Eucharist, a primary ritual of Christian belief, involves a slightly more ontologically complicated transformation of wine into blood.

In the end, human beings all consider a variety of factors when it comes to the 'believability' of fantastic creations, from how similar the creature seems biologically to known extant animals (unicorns and horses) to how terribly the creature is perceived to break our intuitive laws of physics (how big do a dragon's wings need to be in order for it to achieve flight?) to how much evidence or lack thereof there is for the existence of the creature (hence why faeries and Bigfoot, secretive forest-dwellers both, still have believers today). The ability to make judgment calls on nonexistent things is a crucial part of the mind and the human ability to imagine and fantasize is part of the reason we have achieved such intense innovation as a specie. Our ability to dream up skyscrapers, cures for disease, robotics, and more is tied to our ability to dream up dragons and faeries. "Patterns of evidence, a grasp of biology, theories of physics," Schulz writes, "as it turns out, we need all of these to account for our intuitions about supernatural beings"—our 'intuitions about supernatural beings' may not be "reflecting facts about the world we live in", as she claims at the beginning of the article, but they are reflecting facts about how the individual believer *views* and *constructs* the world we live in. Experience, knowledge, and relationship between the human and nature and between the human and the world all play into the believability of fantastic

animals, events, beings, places, and people. In psychological terms, understanding what people believe to be ontological violations, and how severe those violations are, illuminates the ontological commitments which those people hold to and how firmly they are held.

None of this is groundbreaking per se, as the idea that people's beliefs are indicative of their own understanding of the world is not a new one or particularly revelatory. But these recent studies and articles do throw into stark relief the fact that contemporary humans, just like their medieval predecessors, are capable of holding these two competing ideas in their heads at the same time: some things are *impossible*, they are violations of how we organize our experience of the world, but those things can still be evaluated and interrogated and anatomized as if they weren't. We intrinsically, as modern humans well aware of our own rich, internal intellectual lives, understand that this paradox is possible and do not often question it, despite its irrationality. If we didn't, how could fantasy as a genre even exist? Yet it is by not extending that same understanding to medieval people that we end up with what Justice calls the 'fraud and credulity' model- one wherein medieval people were not aware that their beliefs were just that, beliefs, and one wherein the lived experience of medieval people and their relationship to the natural world around them is flattened into superstitious, doctrine-led blindness. In his 2013 article, 'Aliens in the Classroom: Fantastical Creatures as Tools in Teaching Biology', Roland Allan L. Cruz details the various

pedagogical benefits his students received by attempting to classify fantastic animals described in online science fiction wikis.²³ By expressing their creativity and playing with the possibility of what an 'animal' is, Cruz's students were able to grow as biologists, they were able to practice the critical thinking skills necessary to contribute toward the creation of new knowledge. Just as Schulz's article demonstrated above, taking the fantastic seriously is not a unique feature to the medieval nor is it absent from modernity. Cruz's classroom activity demonstrates in an extremely tangible way how we as a society reap benefits from imagining wondrous animals, still.

Of course medieval people had an intuitive understanding of the laws of physics, as they interacted with the same laws that we do. Of course they understood on some level the nature of biology, as well. They had ontological commitments and they recognized when something presented to them was an ontological violation, yet that did not stop them, as it does not stop us today, from seriously engaging in thought and discussion about those paradoxes. The nature of the divine in Christian, medieval thought supersedes all ontology, of course, but that doesn't mean that there was not a considered and graded understanding of how possible or believable individual events that demonstrated that supersession, such as miracles or fantastic animals, were.

One of the words this dissertation turns and returns to is the 'fantastic', which I use as perhaps an antidote to the modern prejudices against medieval

²³ Cruz, Roland Allan L., 'Aliens in the Classroom: Fantastical Creatures as Tools in Teaching Biology', *The American Biology Teacher* 75.4 (2013). 257-261.

thinking. By 'fantastic animals', I mean the creatures that we as modern readers recognize to be unreal, never extant in physical reality. When we read of the phoenix today, we know for a 'fact' that the phoenix does not exist and, according to the laws of physics and biology we understand, such a creature could never have existed. In the many and various collections of medieval animal lore that have survived the intervening centuries, however, we often find creatures that we as modern readers find clearly fantastic, placed side by side with creatures that we recognize as undoubtedly real and physically extant. This practice is evident in proto-encyclopedias like Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and in moralizations based on the book of Genesis like the *Hexamera* of Sts Basil and Ambrose, but nowhere is the presence of the fantastic more conspicuous than in the primary text of this dissertation: a widely-read collection of Christian animal lore, originally written in Greek sometime in the 2nd-4th century C.E., called the *Physiologus*.

The Physiologus

The *Physiologus*, along with its bestiary descendants, was one of the most popular texts of the Middle Ages, being first translated into Latin in the fourth or fifth century and eventually finding its way to all corners of Europe and the Middle East. Extant translations include Ethiopian, Armenian, Arabic, Old High German, Icelandic, Provençal, and, in its earliest European vernacular

form, Old English.²⁴ At various times believed to be written by Solomon or Aristotle,²⁵ the *Physiologus* emerged from a Judeo-Christian mode of biblical exegesis and was used, in parts or whole, for sermons, poetry, natural histories, educational materials, and more. Starting in the late twelfth century the text came to be used more malleably- parts from Isidore of Seville and other authors were added to existing entries, new entries were concocted, elaborate illustrations became regular, and methods of classification (birds, beasts, serpents, etc) emerged, transforming the humble *Physiologus* into the full-on bestiary tradition of the later Middle Ages. "The influence of this work on the Middle Ages is incalculable," writes Guy R. Mermier, "being second only to the Bible in the number of versions in which it appeared."²⁶

In the *Physiologus*, each entry on each animal is written in a twofold way, immediately recognizable to any reader of medieval animal-lore- first, there is a description of the animal and its behaviors, and then there is an allegorical explanation on how the animal (or in some cases, the plant or mineral) illuminates, through a careful reading, some aspect of the Christian life. The ibis, like Satan, strikes at fish, or Christians, who live in the shallow water, and thus as Christians we must be deep in our knowledge and faith. This

²⁴ Curley, Michael J., trans. and introduction. *Physiologus*, University of Texas Press, 1979. cf. 'The Later History of *Physiologus*,' xxvi-xxxiii.

²⁵ 'Introduction' to Wirtjes, Hanneke, ed. *The Middle English Physiologus*, Oxford University Press, 1991. lxxii.

²⁶ Mermier, Guy R. 'The Phoenix: Its Nature and its Place in the Tradition of the *Physiologus*.' in *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages*, eds. Willene B. Clark and Meredith T. McMunn, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. 69-87. Quotation from 70.

decipherment is not always straightforward, nor is it always directly derived from zoological fact. Consider the nature of the eagle:

David says in Psalm 102, "Your youth will be renewed like the eagle's".²⁷ Physiologus says of the eagle that, when he grows old, his wings grow heavy and his eyes grow dim. What does he do then? He seeks out a fountain and then flies up into the atmosphere of the sun, and he burns away his wings and the dimness of his eyes, and descends into the fountain and bathes himself three times and is restored and made new again.

Therefore, you also, if you have the old clothing and the eyes of your heart have grown dim, seek out the spiritual fountain who is the Lord. "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water".²⁸ As you fly into the height of the sun of justice,²⁹ who is Christ as the Apostle says, he himself will burn off your old clothing which is the devil's. Therefore, those two elders in Daniel heard, "You have grown old in wicked days".³⁰ Be baptized in the everlasting fountain, putting off the old man and his actions and putting on the new, you who have been created after the likeness of God³¹ as the Apostle said. Therefore, David said, "Your youth will be renewed like the eagle's".³²

It is not sufficient for the eagle's keen-sightedness to be an allegory in and of itself, but an extra narrative element must be added: the inclusion of its burning eyes and aquatic rebirth allow the bird to serve as an allegory for viewing the truth of God and subsequent baptism. The *Physiologus* is filled with many other extant-yet-also-fantastic beasts, such as the beaver that gnaws off its own testicles when fleeing from hunters, the serpent that leaves its venom at home when drinking from the river, and the whale that tricks sailors by pretending to be an island. And all these animals are laid side-by-side within the same text as dragons, unicorns, phoenixes, and more

²⁷ Psalm 103:5. Quotation and biblical citations for this entry from Curley 12-13.

²⁸ Jeremiah 2:13.

²⁹ Malachi 4:2.

³⁰ Daniel 13:52.

³¹ Cf. Ephesians 4:24.

³² Psalm 103:5.

fantastic creatures. The *Physiologus* contains a uniquely constructed discourse, one which is copied throughout the early Middle Ages, and one for which, clearly bare, observed, zoological reality was not sufficient. The animal, on its way toward being a moral of Christian living, must pass through a stage of marvelousness, an expression of wonder which is equal to both biological fact and didactic interpretation.

Above, I mentioned the two-fold format recognizable to any medieval bestiary enthusiast, but I argue that this is actually a *threefold* format. The animal is not *just* the animal, but rather it is a conflation of both the animal and the *wonder*, that extra narrative element that defines and elevates the animal above quotidian existence. Thus, to be clear, for each animal entry of the *Physiologus* we can identify three important qualities: the beast, the wonder, and the moral. We find different combinations of these three in other formats: texts following Isidore's *Etymologiae* or travel-narratives such as the late antique *Wonders of the East* will contain the beast and the wonder, but no moral, while miracle stories contain the wonder and the moral without the necessity of a beast. Other types of genres use animals and morals, such as the fable, but the 'wonder' is subsumed in a fictional discourse: readers can accept the established Aesopian mode of a talking animals, which are as much zoomorphized humans as they are anthropomorphized beasts. But the *Physiologus* tradition presents in its purest form a set of interlocking modes which require all three aspects presented as ostensibly true: through its appeal

to authority (the Physiologus himself), its semi-naturalist tone, and its frequent exhortations to its reader, the text makes clear that it should be taken seriously by its audience and not dismissed as a created fable.

One of the problems in approaching this topic lies in the lack of certainty regarding the textual transmission of the *Physiologus* in early medieval Britain and Ireland. Evidence is not conclusive that an entire edition of the *Physiologus* existed, although parts were certainly known- Aldhelm used it in his riddles, the author of the *Liber Monstrorum* used it in his compendium of monsters, and the Exeter Book contains two complete entries and at least part of one more written in vernacular verse.³³ It is not necessary, however, to determine that early medieval writers had a copy of the work in front of them in order to prove that a *Physiologus*-style discourse surrounding animalkind existed. The approach certainly was utilized by various authors to various ends, and this dissertation is an exploration of these various ends in Britain and Ireland between the 8th and 12th centuries.

The Physiologic Tradition

This dissertation is concerned primarily with what I called the 'physiologic tradition', a discourse based around the *Physiologus's* style of writing fantastic animals that fundamentally connects ontological difference with spiritual

³³ Curley lxxiv-v.

instruction. I use the lowercase ‘physiologic’³⁴ as a nod to both the tradition’s roots as a ‘naturalist’ discourse (for ‘physiologus’ in Greek means ‘naturalist’) and as an acknowledgement that, although the *Physiologus* is undoubtedly the most important and widespread disseminator of the tradition, it can be certainly be found in other early texts such as the Sts Ambrose and Basil’s *Hexamera*, Clement I’s *Letter to the Corinthians*, and Gregory the Great’s *Moralia on Job*.

The physiologic tradition has several important beliefs and practices built into it. These identifying characteristics set it apart from other discussions of animals and animality, such as those discussing practical applications of livestock or those found in literary tropes, such as the Old English beasts of battle or the Middle English bird debates. The first chapter of this dissertation, ‘Phoenix’, will examine these aspects and attitudes in greater detail using that specific bird as an *exemplum*, but in short the physiologic tradition can be summarized within the following five structural traits, each of which I draw from and illuminate with examples from entries of the *Physiologus* itself.

1) Opacity. Animals were purposefully created by God as complicated symbols which learned teachers and holy men can interpret as lessons on being a good Christian and on scriptural history. This trait can be summed up

³⁴ For absolute clarity, the orthographic conventions used throughout this dissertation are as follows: when italicized, the *Physiologus* refers to the whole collection of entries; when not italicized, the Physiologus refers to the supposed author of that collection, also referred to within the collection itself; and finally in the lower-case physiologic, as in ‘the physiologic tradition’ refers to the discourse emerging from the *Physiologus* texts which I track throughout this dissertation.

in the word *opacity*, as the interpretation of these animals and their behaviors is almost never self-evident. More will be said on this in Chapter 3, but animals are, within the physiologic tradition, riddles that must be puzzled out, truths obscured by wondrous descriptions of behaviors and natures. This is both the most important point in the historical progression of the physiologic tradition and the most important point to the anonymous author of the *Physiologus*.

Despite the fact that very little can be said definitively about the organizational structure of the *Physiologus*, all three edited versions³⁵ do begin with the same animal, the lion, and the entries for the lion always begin with the same first nature. Translated from the Y version by Michael Curley, this reads,

*His first nature is that when he walks following a scent in the mountains, and the odor of a hunter reaches him, he covers his tracks with his tail wherever he has walked so that the hunter may not follow them and find his den and capture him. Thus also, our Savior, the spiritual lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, having been sent down by his coeternal Father, hid his intelligible tracks (that is, his divine nature) from the unbelieving Jews;*³⁶

This very first *Physiologus* entry paints Christ as a figure who purposefully covers up the truth for the sake of avoiding unbelievers. The phrase ‘intelligible’ here is a direct translation of *intelligibilis*, which Curley states is equivalent to the Neoplatonic technical term *το νοητον*, meaning ‘that which

³⁵ The 3 major edited versions are called the B-version, the Y-version, and the C-version, and they can be found in Carmody, Francis, ed. *Physiologus Latinus. Éditions préliminaires, versio B*. Librairie E. Droz, 1939.; Carmody, Francis, ed. “Physiologus Latinus, versio Y.” *The University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 12 (1941): 95-134.; and Gebert, B. 2010. *Der Satyr im Bad. Textsinn und Bildsinn in der Physiologus-Handschrift Cod. Bongarsianus 318 der Burgerbibliothek Bern. Mit einer Edition der Versio C des Physiologus latinus*, *MLatJb* 45.3, 353-403. For a fuller breakdown of the versions, see Gorla, Silva. ‘Some Remarks on the *Physiologus* Extracts Transmitted in the *Liber Glossarum*’, *Mnemosyne* 71 (2018), 145-149.

³⁶ Curley 3.

can be known by transcending sensible things,' similar to Christian *gnosis*.³⁷ The second nature of the lion is that he sleeps with his eyes open, as Christ 'slept' on the cross, "but his divine nature always keeps watch in the right hand of the Father."³⁸ Both these natures emphasize the necessity of extra sight, of transcending the normal sensible world with the help of divinity. This is the exact paradigm the *Physiologus* will follow in all of his entries—the animals are emblematic of a sensible world which hides the intelligible tracks of the divine. The implicit understanding is that believers, unlike the lion's persecutors, the Jews, can reveal these divine tracks, and so he does throughout the collection.

Important to note here, too, is the use of Jewish people as a stand-in for the more generalized idea of hostile non-believers. The *Physiologus*, written in a time when Christianity was still emerging from its position as an offshoot of Judaism into a full-fledged religious institution, consistently uses unbelieving Jews as a negative foil. The physiologic tradition, therefore, is one that is entrenched inextricably in antisemitism and presents a model that allows for the integration of ethnic and spiritual othering—a function expanded on later in this introduction and examined most fully in chapter four, 'Conquest', on Gerald of Wales's use of this form of opacity to craft anti-Irish propaganda.

³⁷ Curley 68.

³⁸ Curley 4.

2) Multiplicity. Animals have multiple meanings - although many of the individual allegorical explanations of the animals do have direct one-to-one correspondence between nature and spiritual meaning, they are often paired with multiple, seemingly contradictory natures. This is expounded upon within the *charadrius*³⁹ entry, where the *Physiologus* confronts the issue of the *charadrius* being unclean according to the law of Moses and thus unfit for imitation. He counters this objection with a quotation from John 3:14, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." That the gospels could compare Christ himself to a serpent, which is not only an unclean animal but in typical symbolism represents the devil and temptation, allows not only seemingly contradictory natures (good from the unclean, evil from the clean), but also multiple interpretations. "The creatures are twofold," states the *Physiologus*, "the praiseworthy and the blameworthy."⁴⁰ The B-version of the *Physiologus*⁴¹ adds to this, drawing in the lion and the eagle as unclean despite their dominance over other animals, "Because of their kingdoms they are likened to Christ, yet because of their greediness they are likened to the devil."⁴²

³⁹ The Vulgate refers to a *charadrius*, which is now generally thought of as a plover, a small bird. Modern translations of the same verses give 'heron.'

⁴⁰ Curley 8.

⁴¹ The various versions of the text are discussed below.

⁴² Curley 8-9. B-version Latin reads "secundum ergo regnum Christo assimilata sunt, secundum rapacitatem uero diabolo." Carmody, B-version 16.

The serpent itself is a great example of this multiplicity. Within the Y-version entry, the serpent is given four natures⁴³: (1) the serpent sheds its skin and becomes new, much like a Christian should throw off his old life; (2) when the serpent goes to drink water he leaves his poison in his pit, much like how Christians should leave their wicked earthly desires at home when attending church; (3) the serpent is afraid of naked men, because Adam was naked and pure without the trappings of the world before the Fall; and finally (4) the serpent protects its head and sacrifices its body when attacked, much like men should protect their faith at the expense of their body, even to the point of martyrdom.⁴⁴ The most despicable serpentine natures are given to separate sections on the viper, but even within this single entry the Physiologus acknowledges the snake's reputation for evil while also pairing it with many admirable and imitable traits. Thus animals are in themselves complex creatures, neither fully good nor evil, but full of potential meanings and lessons, and a good interpreter can learn from both the positive and the negative.

3) Theology. Theological didacticism takes precedence over zoological fact. 'Real-life' pelicans and lions don't kill their young, snakes can't remove their own venom, and so on, but these facts don't matter within the

⁴³ It claims to give three, but gives four- the last may have been an addition, as it does not appear in every manuscript. Additionally, there are two natures given to the viper, one immediately preceding the serpent entry and one much later within the weasel entry.

⁴⁴ Curley 16-9.

physiologic tradition because these fantastic actions illustrate important aspects of the Christian experience. The eagle, as previously mentioned, is a prime example of this. In her work *Animal Encounters* Susan Crane has explored this idea by specifically referenced the stag, which reportedly is an enemy to and consumer of serpents.⁴⁵ Speaking specifically of a later, medieval bestiary augmenting and expanding the *Physiologus* text, Crane pinpoints the stag as an example of an animal which the English would have encountered regularly, and could compare the text to their own experience, in which the herbivorous stags would not have eaten snakes. Yet the transmission of the physiologic tradition is *not* about biological accuracy, but rather as Crane writes, the naturalists “focus on the perceptual process: what has been *thought* about animals? What do they *mean* to us?” In this sense, all the animals of the *Physiologus* and of the physiologic tradition are fantastic, imaginary creatures—not just the unicorns and phoenixes—as their tether to reality is not nearly as important as their tether to symbolic meaning.

4) Zoology. The animals are, however, animals, and by that I mean living beings ontologically distinct from humans. As stated before, the animals of the *Physiologus* and of the physiologic tradition are not the animals of fables, though there are certainly some structural similarities between fables and *Physiologus* entries.⁴⁶ The beasts are reported to exist as nonhuman beings that

⁴⁵ Crane, Susan. *Animal Encounters*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 88-90.

⁴⁶ Cf. Crane on Marie de France’s fables and Kermode on the narrative of parables.

live in the world, and thus cannot be fully veiled by the identifier 'fictional'. This is accomplished often by the lack of clear narrative: the physiologic tradition is more concerned with general, repeated behaviors than single events or plotlines, and thus focus on animal natures and not anthropomorphized interactions or human concerns.

Occasionally, this line gets blurred in more exact and specific allegorical schemata as in the elephant entry, where exactly thirteen elephants are described crying out as one by one they fail in their attempts to save a fallen comrade. Elephants have no knees, and thus a hunter seeking to capture one will secretly shave down a tree, so that when an elephant leans on it to sleep it falls and the elephant, because of his poor anatomy, is unable to stand again. The thirteen elephants represent the Law and the chorus of prophets, who are despondent in their inadequacies until a tiny elephant, representing Christ in his humility, can lift up and save the elephant tricked by the hunter, representing mankind tricked by the devil. But even here, there is no human speech or communication, and the action, despite the length of its 'narrative', is described as a repeated nature of the beast.

5) Biblical reference. Whereas the four previous characteristics deal with the metaphoric structures behind the entries and their animals, this final trait focuses more on the text's deference to spiritual authority- the Physiologus himself, of course, but more importantly the Christian Bible. All *Physiologus*

entries are peppered with biblical references which are used in primarily two ways: if they come at the beginning of the entry, they bluntly mention the animal in some way (i.e. Psalm 102 in the entry for the eagle); or if they come toward the signification part, the quotation reinforces the didactic message (i.e. quotations from James, II Timothy, and Psalms in the entry on the siren and the ass-centaur). As in the case of the eagle, quoted above at length, it is not rare that the nature of the animal appears to be an almost-exegetical explanation of a biblical passage that is, on its surface, difficult to understand. Two of the shortest *Physiologus* entries, quoted in full, will help illustrate the most 'typical' uses of biblical quotation:

On the Swallow

Hezekiah the King said in the book of the prophet Isaiah, "Like a swallow I cry out, and like a dove I moan". And in Jeremiah it is said, "The turtle-dove and the swallow and the stork keep the time of their entry". Physiologus said of the swallow that it gives birth only once and never again.

And my Savior was conceived but once in the womb. He was carried once, crucified once, and once rose from the dead: "One God, one faith, one baptism."

On the Sun-lizard, that is, the Sun-eel

There is a beast called the sun-lizard, that is, the sun-eel. When this animal grows old, he is hampered by his two eyes. No long being able to perceive the sunlight, he goes blind. What does he do? Moved by his good nature, he finds a wall facing east, enters a crack in that wall, and gazes eastward. His eyes are opened by the eastern sun and made new again.

And you, O man, if you have the clothing of the old man, see that, when the eyes of your heart are clouded, you seek out the intelligible eastern sun who is Jesus Christ and whose name is "the east" in Jeremiah. As the Apostle says, "He is the sun of justice" He will open for you the intelligible eyes of your heart, and for you the old clothing will become new.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Curley 58; 66-7.

The swallow entry mimics the structure of the eagle entry previously discussed, giving the biblical background of the creature before presenting a unique behavior, presented as coming from the authoritative Physiologus, and subsequent interpretation.⁴⁸ The sun-lizard, saving its biblical justification for the moralization section, jumps straight from its naming of the beast into a longer and more detailed wondrous nature not derived from biblical precedent, but still supported with authoritative quotation.

The two entries have different objectives during their interpretation section, but both approaches are found often in the *Physiologus*: the didactic and the hortatory. The swallow is used as an illustration of a doctrinal concept, which is then reinforced by another scriptural quotation. The sun-lizard, however, is used as an *exemplum* of proper conduct which the reader is enjoined to practice, also reinforced through scriptural quotation. The important focus of both, however, is that the allegorical explanation serves as a rhetorical tool to express a correct belief. The ultimate goal—of the animal, the explanation, and the deference to authority both human and scriptural—is to instruct and engage the reader in the practice of belief.

Three Ontological Alterities

⁴⁸ As a side note, it is not rare for the mention of the animal to be from a mistranslation of the bible, as the ant-lion, the pelican, and the siren and ass-centaur demonstrate. Unicorns, as another example, although almost never appearing in modern-day translations of the bible, appear in the Vulgate six times, and so are treated as biblically-based creatures.

The five traits of the physiologic tradition are useful in identifying and deconstructing the physiologic tradition and will be referenced throughout this dissertation. I will most straightforwardly retread through those points in my first chapter, 'Phoenix', where I will examine in detail how the Old English poem *The Phoenix* exemplifies and uses the physiologic tradition within its verses. Aside from these five definitional traits, however, I would also like to introduce three crucial ideas, what I call 'ontological alterities' which underly the intention behind the physiologic tradition and its process of belief-making.

Ultimately, the physiologic tradition is about exploring ontological difference. Central to the existence (or inexistence) of these animals and the texts which conjure them are several types of alterity, differences which are fundamental to the central instructional purpose. The types of alterity that I draw attention to within this work I label as animality, wonder, and ethnicity: animality focusing on how humans differentiate themselves from the other living creatures of this planet; wonder focusing on how humans process and understand their own experiential and geographic differences; and ethnicity focusing on how cultural and ethnic signifiers are used as discriminatory tools within the physiologic tradition, first against the Jewish people and then against a variety of ethnic *others*. Each of these areas of difference require some consideration here as they will be continually referred back to throughout the dissertation. In order to understand how the physiologic tradition interacts and relies upon these alterities, we must understand their internal workings

and to how they contribute to the process of faith, both personal and institutional.

Animality. One of the most necessary parts of the physiologic tradition is its focus on animality and, despite the sometimes-inclusion of a single human being within the *Physiologus* collection (the prophet Amos, who is associated heavily with goats in the passage and may have originally been part of a longer entry), the tradition by and large is concerned with nonhuman beings. Humans are, of course, classified as animals in our modern Linnean system, but within this dissertation when I refer to ‘animals’ I am specifically referring to nonhuman animals- the animals against which humanity defines itself. In later chapters the questioning of this distinction will become more relevant, but for now it is important to state that the *Physiologus* beasts are not monsters or some form of transformed humans such as those described in the *Liber Monstrorum* or in Book XVI of Augustine’s *De Civitati Dei*. Although they ‘live’ within the same divinely-created system and are subservient to God in ways which parallel mankind’s subservience to God,⁴⁹ the animals of the *Physiologus* are indeed animals, neither anthropomorphized as in fables nor pure symbolic referents, as the lion, ox, and eagle are of the evangelists. They live in separate ecosystems, display fundamentally different cognitive processes, and possess distinctly non-human yet natural biologies.

⁴⁹ An idea discussed at length in the first chapter to Susan Crane’s *Animal Encounters*, discussed below.

Animal studies, as a genre of medieval literary critique, has exploded in recent years, thanks in no small part to the work of Susan Crane, Karl Steel, and many others. Crane, in the introduction to her *Animal Encounters*, reminds us that “the humanist traditions have tended to render nonhuman animals invisible to contemplation, unworthy of serious attention.”⁵⁰ Steel censures the humanist tradition even more strongly, defining the creation of the human-animal divide as a product of subjugation and violence—amid the various impossible definitions of ‘what is human’ and ‘what is animal,’ Steel finds the ‘single factor’ differentiating the two to be “the unilateral, legitimized domination of animals by humans.”⁵¹ He draws a difference between a more traditional, anthropocentric animal studies and the posthumanist critical animal theory, which rejects “the prejudice of ‘natural’ human ascendancy over other animals,”⁵² as well as a self-fashioning of ‘humanity’ which flattens the heterogeneous existence of animalkind in its devaluating mission.⁵³

For all intents and purposes, this dissertation is not concerned with the ‘actual’ animal, with what Jacques Derrida refers to as the “real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat,”⁵⁴ but rather with the construction of the animal

⁵⁰ Crane, Susan. *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 4.

⁵¹ Steel, Karl. *How to Make a Human*. The Ohio State University Press, 2011. 14

⁵² *ibid* 3.

⁵³ Steel’s monograph ends with an appeal for a corrective model of coexistence “that could be enacted with an awareness of our shared vulnerability, the shared significance of all our deaths, our shared and mobile being together, and even our shared deliciousness.” 244.

⁵⁴ Derrida, Jacques. ‘The Animal that I Therefore Am (More to Follow).’ trans. David Wells. *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (Winter 2002), 369-418. Quotation from 374.

beyond its 'real' existence. Undoubtedly this is part of the domination and violence which Steel refers to, as the fantastic aspects of the eagle efface whatever reality the eagle may inhabit, and the embellishments upon the supposedly-snake-eating stag are easily disprovable within an environment where English men and women would regularly encounter that specie. When Steel claims that animals are both "vulnerable and world-shaping,"⁵⁵ he refers to them as actors within a greater anti-anthropocentric historical system—my analysis focuses not on the agency of animals, but their usage within an anti-anthropocentric yet theocentric system. The tension between the 'real' animal encountered perhaps by a medieval reader, so valued by Steel, and the clearly 'fictional' animal presented through the physiologic tradition, is resolved by a supernatural higher purpose—one which is more than Justice's 'fraud and credulity' account or a set of religion-based blinders which hide empirical fact, but a purposeful embracing of animalkind as unknowability or mystery.

Crane has commented that "the bestiary's animals have a mixed ontological status: they may or may not exist in the world, but they certainly exist in cultural memory,"⁵⁶ denying the usefulness of the 'verifiable/legendary' binary and instead suggesting that we should "envision [the bestiary's] data on a single continuum, from the mundane to the amazing,

⁵⁵ Steel 244.

⁵⁶ Crane 88.

the obvious to the profound."⁵⁷ Pamela Gravestock echoes this sentiment in her aptly named article 'Did Imaginary Animals Exist?', in which she refutes the 'rationalist' explanations of dragons and bonnacons, concluding that "it is therefore more useful to hypothesize that medieval knowingly and effectively used fantastic creatures... and that they had discernable reasons for doing so."⁵⁸ The *Physiologus*, as a collection of not only animals, but also stones, plants, and at least one human, denies the categorical scheme of the later bestiaries to which Crane and Gravestock refer, as does the early Anglo-Latin *Liber monstrorum*, which sides Hercules and Hygelac with its otherwise bestial entries. 'Animal' is not as useful of a category, before the influence of Isidore and the classificatory project of the bestiary began, so much as perhaps 'wonder' is—wonder not as an emotion or thought process, but rather as a thing to be beheld. The animals of the *Physiologus* are not animals as Steel describes them and their animality is not the focus of their entries.

Undoubtedly the perceptions of *leo rex* within the first chapter of the *Physiologus* affected the way humans treated and interacted with real-world, historical lions, but the lions I am interested in are the ones so abstracted as to become fantastic. Like the dragon, the fantasy lion of the *Physiologus* and similar texts doesn't need a real-world referent to be useful. I still embrace a stated goal of animal studies theorists, that is to decenter the human—part of

⁵⁷ Crane 89.

⁵⁸ Gravestock, Pamela. 'Did Imaginary Animals Exist?' in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*. ed. Debra Hassig, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999. 119-140. Quotation from 131.

the creation of these animals certainly decenters the human—but instead of centering the nonhuman animal or creating an actor-agent network webbing together all creation ecosystemically, I, like the medieval authors themselves, wish to center Christian belief in these constructions.

Wonder. Much like animality, wonder is fundamentally concerned with alterity, but this alterity is one based on experiential, not biological, difference. This much is apparent from St Augustine, who in *De Civitate Dei* writes: “those who have not seen those powers demonstrated may perhaps not believe in them; or if they do believe they marvel at something beyond their experience. If they happen to become acquainted with the diamond, they are indeed for a time filled with amazement at something unfamiliar; but daily familiarity gradually blunts the edge of wonder”⁵⁹. The emphasis on experiential difference is repeated, a thousand years later, by John Mandeville as he describes a lamb born from a fruit. He does not consider this animal strange because, as an Englishman, he is familiar with the barnacle goose, which supposedly is born asexually from a floating log.⁶⁰ To the men of Caldilhe, however, who knew of no barnacle goose, the lamb “was marvelous indeed”⁶¹. To medieval thinkers, wonder was a relative reaction, one which was both culturally and personally shaped and therefore indicative of the culture or

⁵⁹ Augustine. *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, Penguin Books, 2003. Bk XVI, ch4, p.970.

⁶⁰ More on this in chapter three, ‘Riddles’.

⁶¹ Bale, Anthony, ed. and trans. *Sir John Mandeville, The Book of Marvels and Travels*. Oxford University Press, 2012. 104.

person experiencing it. The usefulness of wonder as a provocative literary tool is dependent, as well, on the audience's experiential lack, or else it becomes blunted by 'daily familiarity'.

From a more modern perspective, Caroline Walker Bynum describes medieval wonder as existing in three literary forms: a proto-scientific "impulse to collect and explore," one which drives learning;⁶² a religious experience related to miracles and the lives of holy men and women; and entertainment, found in histories and travel narratives which collect oddities and paradoxes.⁶³ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have picked up especially on this first version and its development from the twelfth to eighteenth century, and they, along with Bynum at first, label wonder as a reaction to the unknown, one which often elicits a desire to overcome ignorance, but ultimately is a personal and relative experience.⁶⁴ Wonder is based on the beholder's lack of knowledge, whether that be knowledge of science, of God, or of the world at large.

The use of wonder within the physiologic tradition, then, serves multiple purposes. The inclusion of fantastic behaviors and qualities, divorced from reality, convinces the medieval reader that he or she is ignorant or blind to many facts of the world, that they have an experiential lack; it entertains them in preparation for the coming allegorical lesson; and it, in itself, proves the

⁶² Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Wonder." *American Historical Review* 102, 1997. 1-26.

⁶³ Bynum 4-13.

⁶⁴ Daston, Lorraine and Katherine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750*, Zone Books, 1998.

glory and unknowability of God's creation, necessitating a trust and acceptance of ineffability and, moreover, inaccessibility. Texts like *Wonders of the East*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, *Mandeville*, even the *Navigatio sancti brendani*, other Irish *immrama*, and Gerald of Wales' *Topography of Ireland* all demonstrate that this experiential alterity is *also* a geographic alterity. The phoenix *cannot* live in Britain—where else the phoenix lives, either India, Ethiopia, or Arabia, doesn't truly matter aside from the need for spatial distance which translates into experiential difference. The elephant seems foreign in nature because it *is* foreign, even if it is real. And it is this innate ability for human beings to embrace experiential alterity that allows belief in the unreal to take root.

Spatial and geographic alterity, encountered within literary texts which allow for a mimetic or symbolic journey in lieu of actual travel, opens up imaginative and mental possibilities. Medieval geography, backed by stories of the sons of Noah and reinforced visually by the Isidorean T and O maps centered on Jerusalem, was a theologically inflected geography, and space was as much a part of God's will as any other part of creation. The miraculous and wondrous happenings of the *Navigatio* are possible because Brendan self-exiles himself into a fantastic geography past the edge of the known world, and so wonder—conceived as a product of both novelty and physical reality—becomes possible. The importance of this will be explored in the second chapter on 'Voyage', but understanding this will also become key

when looking at the English interpretation of the *Physiologus* found within the Exeter Book bird riddles in chapter three, where linguistic and symbolic alterity serve as substitutes for geographic distance.

Ethnicity. Ethnic alterity is not treated in the same way as animality and wonder within the physiologic tradition. It does not appear, at first glance, to be a prerequisite to the idea of wondrous animals, but a deeper reading of the *Physiologus* and its descendants shows a tendency, perhaps even a necessity, to identify groups of human beings as *other*, in addition to the animals and places expressed. Within the physiologic tradition as a whole, this othering is transferred to a variety of identities—within the Exeter Book riddles the Welsh are the *others*, in *The Topography of Ireland* the Irish, and so on and so forth—but within the *Physiologus*, the original target of this othering is explicitly stated to be Jewish people and the work as a whole is entrenched in antisemitic and/or anti-Judaic ideologies.

Starting with the lion entry, quoted above, the *Physiologus* marks Jewish people as quintessential non-believers, that is, people who refuse to believe in spite of the goodness of God and in spite of the evidence the natural world provides. The obfuscation of the lion's tracks in part demonstrates the necessity of *both* the old law and the new, and the Jewish people's connection to the Christian faith creates a multifaceted tension which is explored almost constantly throughout the collection.

The antelope's horns represent the two testaments, the roe on the mountain represents the heights of the wisdom of the Old Testament prophets, the stone the vulture sits upon is the Old Testament containing the hidden savior, and Jewish heroes are referenced and revered throughout, such as Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego being the predecessors of the salamander and the doves, who with their many colors represent many aspects of the faith, including the Law, the twelve prophets, and Old Testament protagonists Jonah, Elijah, and Elisha. The Wild Ass provides the most brutal example of the relationship between old and new, however, wherein the patriarchs of the Old Testament are figured as a father-ass breaking the genitals of its offspring, the New Testament, which preaches abstinence. Jews, however, are also owls who love the dark and not the light (though Jesus is also figured as an owl); the ant separates out the carnal Old Testament from the spiritual New Testament, in direct contrast to the carnal Jews who can't see beyond the worldly; the twelve prophets and the Law are shown to be ineffectual (though perhaps necessary) in the bizarre parable of the elephant, discussed above; Jews are the goats, living in sin, who Amos herds; the panther, who is clearly Jesus, suffers the sleep of 'Jewish illusions' for three days (whips, blows, injuries, reproaches, etc.); Jews are considered double-natured like the hermaphroditic hyena; and they are the Little Crow who killed Jesus and were thus abandoned.

The Jewish people are, throughout, a useful parallel or rhetorical strawman against which to prop up the holy life of a good Christian. This is unsurprising, perhaps, but the spiritual/carnal divide inherent in the New/Old Testament divide and between the Christian and the Jew serves a rhetorical purpose outside of antisemitism- it reinforces the 'hidden' nature of the allegorical meanings of these animals. The duality of the text is reinforced: material animals, spiritual meaning. The warning against being Jew-like implicit in these condemnations of Jewish belief are also warnings against reading items too 'carnally,' i.e. to take them literally. You must believe in the phoenix, says the Physiologus, but to attempt to track it down would be to embrace a Judaic worldview of skepticism and disbelief. The religious marker, and what would be seen in the Middle Ages as an ethnic or racial marker, exists to reinforce the community of believers, both in the sense of people who share a religion and people who accept and believe in the Physiologus's teachings.

The tying together of ethnicity and animality will be a theme revisited often throughout the dissertation: the Welsh within the oxen riddles, the *infantem ethiopen* of the *Navigatio*, and the Irish within Gerald of Wales' *Topographia*. Wonder, as well, has its place in these othering schema. Yet it begins, within the *Physiologus*, with the specific target of Jewish people, a group intrinsically tied within the Christian religion to a lack of belief and a failure of faith.

Isidore's Basilisk

While the physiologic tradition is best exemplified and historically transmitted through the text of the *Physiologus*, it does not exclusively belong to that collection. Echoes and hints of similar views on animality and the natural world exist in many patristic and medieval sources, even in unexpected places. One of the most well-respected and disseminated sources of animal lore and interpretation was Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, which embraces by and large a more recognizably encyclopedic approach to animal-kind.

The modern impulse for animal categorization, our Linnean system of *kingdom, phylum*, etc. all the way down to *genus* and *specie*, creates through evolutionary bonds a family tree which both connects all animals, including humans, and then also segments them into unique and discreet boxes. This impulse can be seen clearly within the bestiary tradition of the twelfth century onward, and it is opposite to the *Physiologus's* organizational strategy (or lack thereof), but its influence in the bestiary tradition originates in many ways with the *Etymologies*. The structure of the *Physiologus* as a complete work, no matter which manuscript, is haphazard- there are certain patterns and intentional designs, such as starting with the lion, the sometimes grouping of

stones, and the early-on run of connected bird-lore, but overall these organizational moments are few and far between. Descriptions of one animal rarely bleeds into another, and the chapters are in a sense moveable. In the Y-version, the four natures of the snake (*vipera* and *serpens*) are grouped, but then another section on the viper occurs twenty or so chapters later, connected to the weasel and existing underneath that heading. There are multiple entries split apart which talk of the same topic, such as the chapters on the Wild Ass or on the Adamant Stone. Even thematically, though the front end of the work largely deals with themes of resurrection, there is no discernable pattern or building of thought.

This disorganization is in stark contrast to Isidore's overarching project within the *Etymologiae*. Not only does the chapter, Chapter XII, *De Animalibus*, separate the animals from any stones or trees, but it further divides the animals into eight sections, on livestock, wild beasts, small animals, serpents, vermin, fish, birds, and small flying animals (meaning insects). Even within these subdivisions Isidore shows clear intentionality, as the string of lion, tiger, panther, and leopard within the 'beast' subchapter shows a conscious grouping of 'large cats'. Aside from the organizational project, Isidore also forgoes the *Physiologus'* approach on moralizing and explanations, instead preferring to present a 'just the facts' type reporting for the vast majority of its entries, similar to our more contemporary idea of what a zoological treatise should look like. There are several moments within Isidore's text where this

breaks down, however, as investigation into his descriptions of the hydra, the griffin, and the basilisk shows.⁶⁵

The entry on the hydra is a relative rarity in the *Etymologies*. Compared to, say, the *Liber monstrorum*, a collection of fantastic beings written not long after Isidore, the *Etymologies* does not often go out of its way to state and then point out falsehood. Whereas the *Liber monstrorum* continually calls its own entries *falubae* and *historia*, Isidore's work presents things straightforwardly, with little analytic commentary. The entry on the hydra (12.4.23), however, is an

⁶⁵ The original draft had this additional section on ants and ant-lions, which I have omitted for organizational/structural purposes.

The Ethiopian Ants and Ant-Lion. A different approach is taken up in Isidore's account of the ant-lion. The mythical ant-lion itself is a fascinating creature, born out of a misunderstanding of the Hebrew word *layish* in Job 4:11 by the translators of the Septuagint. Instead of merely referring to the 'lion,' as it does in the original, the Septuagint reads, "the ant lion perished for lack of food, / and lions' whelp abandoned one another."¹ The *Physiologus* believes this 'ant-lion' to be an unnatural hybrid, which due to its carnivorous father and face mixed with its herbivorous mother and body, cannot digest the food it eats and thus starves. To the Physiologus, this resonates with the Christian belief that one cannot be a servant of two masters, and thus to claim Christianity while being a sinner still results in spiritual starvation and death.

This creation is confused in two directions by patristic and early medieval writers. G. C. Druce suggests that the Biblical ant-lion referenced by the Septuagint translators comes about from a report in Herodotus of 'Ethiopian' or 'Indian ants,' which are dog-sized creatures who hoard gold- these are the same monstrous ants found in the two Old English versions of *Wonders of the East*. Isidore includes this account in his section on ants (12.3.9), immediately before discussing the ant-lion, but for the ant-lion he follows Gregory the Great's *Moralia on Job*, which describes a beast that preys on ants like a lion but is preyed on like an ant to other creatures (12.3.10). He suggests that it may be called the ant-lion for it is the lion of ants, but prefers the Gregorian answer. Gregory's account of the ant-lion, which mentions the insect hiding under the dust and trapping ants laden with corn, indeed appears to be what we now consider to be an actual antlion, an insect of the family *Myrmeleontidae*. Neither Isidore nor Gregory explicitly talk about the version of the ant-lion mentioned within the *Physiologus*.

Undoubtedly the Physiologus and Gregory both riff off the Septuagint's mistranslation, which possibly had neither of their versions of the ant-lion in mind. The closeness of the accounts of the Ethiopian ants and of the ant-lion in Isidore's account may imply that Isidore himself understood that these two traditions were possibly linked, and the wholesale rejection of the *Physiologus*-version, which claims a physically impossible sexual act must have occurred (the *Physiologus* ant-lion is the offspring of a male lion and female ant), shows a discerning eye, however imperfect. The lack of *any* description of the habits of the ant-lion within Isidore, including Gregory's overall accurate account, demonstrates uncertainty, which isn't apparent in the obviously-false hydra or the obviously-true griffin. Even the description of the Ethiopian ants is prefaced by "It is said," giving Isidore plausible deniability. True uncertainty, caused by conflicting accounts, goes unreported. Translation from the Septuagint into English comes from the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) version. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/28-iob-nets.pdf>. cf. G.C. Druce, "An Account of the Μυρμηκολέων or Ant-Lion," *The Antiquaries Journal* 3, vol 4 (1923): 347-364

exception, giving an explanation of the 'mythologization' of the serpent and explaining that the dragon with many heads "is only a story, for it happens that Hydra was a place that spewed out floods that devastated the neighboring city. If one outlet for the water were closed up in this Hydra, many others would burst forth." This stands in stark contrast to the entry on the griffin (12.2.17), which is indistinguishable in tone or evaluation from the elephant which precedes it or the chameleon which follows immediately after. Aside from the final two lines, "They are violently hostile to horses. They also tear humans apart when they see them," the entry does not seem concerned by the griffin's fantastic nature or even hybrid qualities- and hybridity *is* a source of anxiety for Isidore (see 12.1.58-59, where a discussion of humans breeding livestock together unnatural segues seamlessly into a section on monstrous human births, including human-beast hybrids). For a modern reader this stands out, even moreso than the entry on the unicorn, which is soon before the griffin (12.2.12-13), since at least 'unicorn' is given as an alternative name for 'rhinoceros,' which we accept as an extant beast. To a medieval reader, the griffin then is as real as the elephant and the chameleon, unlike the hydra which is clearly fictional. The strict binary of belief does not lie in the medieval imagination along the same axes which it does today.

Various animals of the *Etymologies* are given sparse additional commentary by Isidore, such as a quotation from Lucan in the section on the viper (12.4.10) or references to Cicero and Juvenal following the description of

the beaver's self-castration (12.2.21). Yet these most often are supporting illustrations of the behavior described, various appeals to authority as it were, and are unlike the biblical quotations which follow entries within the *Physiologus*, which often have absolutely nothing to do with the animal directly (see, for example, the quotation from Romans in the entry on the beaver: "Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, honor to whom honor is due."⁶⁶ Isidore eschews all such moralizations in his brief commentary, instead holding to his rather bare and unemotive descriptive style and etymological understanding, with few, though significant, exceptions.

In the entry on the basilisk (12.4.6-9), the so-called 'king of snakes' which kills humans and birds with just a single glance, Isidore claims that it can be matched by the lowly weasel, which will scare the basilisk, hunt it down, and then kill it. At this point Isidore takes the only *Physiologus*-like approach to describing animals within the chapter, claiming "Thus the Creator of nature sets forth nothing without a remedy." This is one of the only two explicit references to God throughout the entirety of the *De Animalibus* chapter, the other being a repudiation of augurs who claim to be able to divine via crow (12.7.44). Both references are brief, and neither can be considering sermonizing on par with the often lengthy diatribes found in the *Physiologus*, yet the inclusion of a moral indicates something special about these instances:

⁶⁶ Curley 52.

within the section on crows, it is obviously an attack on the idea of magic, but for the section on the basilisk I want to argue that this sidestep shows an acknowledgment of the basilisk's fantastic nature. Remembering the third trait of the physiologic tradition, theology, we see within the *Physiologus* fantastic behaviors and qualities are highlighted, sidelining realism to prioritize the allegorical meaning. Isidore's inclusion of an almost-allegory in this section belies the same impulse: the idea that God provides remedy to overpowerful evil is more important than the reality of a snake which kills with its eyes. Unlike the griffin, which according to all textual evidence appears to be simply true in Isidore's mind, the basilisk has a special status, perhaps derived from its 'king of serpents' title, directly paralleling the lion, 'king of beasts.' This stylistic choice is unlike Isidore's normal prose, but perhaps is too tempting to not indulge.

A parallel moment, however, also occurs within the *Physiologus*, where the belief in the fantastic is absolutely pushed, at least to the modern eye, to the limit. The phoenix is the first entirely fantastic animal within the Y version, an early version closely faithful to the first *redactio* of the Greek original and is a decently succinct description of the rite performed by the phoenix at the end of its life and its subsequent resurrection. This resurrection is perhaps the easiest of all allegorical mappings to construct and understand: the phoenix represents Jesus, who rose from the grave. Resurrection is a common theme

within the *Physiologus*, especially within its first few entries.⁶⁷ Yet the phoenix, of all of these, takes the spiritual imperative to believe in the resurrection of Christ one step further, telling its reader, “If this species of bird has the power to kill himself in such a manner as to raise himself up, how foolish are those men who grow angry at the words of the Savior, ‘I have the power to lay down my life, and I have the power to take it again.’”⁶⁸

The logic of this entry is clear: since you believe the phoenix can do this, you should believe Christ can do it, too. Nowhere else does the *Physiologus* author tie belief in the nature of an animal with belief in Christ so explicitly. Just like the basilisk entry within the *Etymologies*, this unique rhetorical strategy stands out, especially because it is so paired with a (to our modern eyes) clearly fantastic animal. Since we reasonably take the *Physiologus* author’s faith in Christ as true and absolute, we *must* believe that their faith in the phoenix is absolute as well. Otherwise, this moment is rhetorically dead and undercuts a cornerstone of the faith. The maxim-like “nothing without a remedy” moment of the *Etymologies* lifts the description of the basilisk into the realm of the ‘more-than-true,’ wherein spiritual truth is more important than zoological truth, but the phoenix moment of the *Physiologus* brings its elevated, spiritual discourse down to absolute reality.

⁶⁷ These include the lion and pelican, which both resurrect their young after three days, the charadrius which heals those on their deathbed, the eagle which bathes itself in its old age and is reborn, and the hoopoe, which nourish and care for their aging parents until the older birds are revitalized and made young again

⁶⁸ Curley 14.

It furthermore opens more and more questions: does this imply that the rest of the text is to be believed as fully accurate as well? Or does the *Physiologus* author simply believe that the phoenix exists, and we should still take its descriptions of dragons and weasels that birth through their ears with a grain of salt? Of course, it may be that this section was written by someone entirely different from the rest or that the allegorization is a later addition, but to the medieval reader presented with this text as a whole the belief in fantastic animals, that is all animals outside their range of experiences, becomes linked to the belief in God, and the miraculous works of Christ, and to the very core of faith. The *Physiologus*, and the physiologic tradition, is intrinsically enmeshed with what our modern eyes perceive as the very edge between belief and disbelief.

Chapter Summaries

This entry, and the certainty with which it apparently paints the existence of the phoenix, inspires the first chapter of this dissertation, 'Phoenix', which takes a practical, textual approach to many of the problems brought up within this introduction. In it, I walk step by step through the five traits of the physiologic tradition and how they are expressed in the Old English poem *The Phoenix*. The second chapter, 'Voyage', moves from the far east to the near west, into Ireland and the Atlantic Ocean to further explore the role of wonder

in God's created world. St Brendan, as the primary spiritual authority and captain of his vessel, demonstrates the necessity of correct interpretation within physiologic discourse. 'Riddles' after that brings the focus back to England, where the first trait of the physiologic tradition is literalized by Aldhelm and the anonymous riddler of the Exeter Book, provoking questions of both theology and nativism. The final full chapter, 'Conquest', examines the uses and abuses of the physiologic tradition for colonial ends by Gerald of Wales in his *Topographia Hibernica* and other works on Ireland and Wales. The conclusion, 'Dragons', once again approaches the titular beasts and provides some further development on the ideas of belief and modernity, briefly summarizing the previous chapters and discussing the nature of fantastic animals in contemporary discourse.

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CHAPTER ONE PHOENIX

Despite the abundance of *Physiologus* manuscripts throughout the broadly-conceived medieval period, there are precious few places we can definitively state its influence or existence in early medieval England. The most significant locus is within the Exeter Book collection, a miscellany of poetic writings compiled near the turn of the millennium and the single source of a large amount of the Old English poetry that survives to this day. Within the Exeter Book, there are three poems which are commonly referred to as ‘The Old English *Physiologus*’—*The Panther*, *The Whale*, and *The Partridge*, the last of which is extremely fragmentary and the subject of which is somewhat speculative—as well as a separate, lengthier piece entitled *The Phoenix*, which is the primary subject of this chapter. These three poems, or at least definitively the first two, are translations and expansions of the two *Physiologus* entries on the panther and whale (also referred to as the ‘Aspidoceleon’), and thus they follow the physiologic tradition exactly.

Before diving into *The Phoenix* proper, it is appropriate to consider these Old English poetic versions of the *Physiologus* in more detail. The first entry/poem focuses on the panther, a type of Christ that is a friend to all beasts and claims a coat of variegated colors; the second poem is about the whale, given in that text the name ‘Fastitocalon’, a type of the devil and a great

deceiver to both sailors and smaller fish.⁶⁹ The nature and interpretation of the bird-subject of the third poem are, as previously mentioned, lost. The beginning of *The Panther*, however, serves as an introduction for the entire mini-collection:

Monge sindon geond middan-geard
unrinu cynn, þe we æþelu ne magon
ryhte areccan ne rim witan;
þæs wide sind geond world innan
fugla ond deora fold-hrerendra
wornas wid-scope, swa wæter bibugeð
þisne beorhtan bosn, brim grymetende
sealt-yþa geswing.

[Many are the species, countless throughout the world, whose lineage we cannot reckon or numbers we cannot know; multitudes of birds and of beasts that stir on the earth are very widely established throughout this world as far as the water, the roaring sea, the surge of briny waves, encompasses this bright horizon.]⁷⁰

There are two important takeaways from this passage, which is an invention of the Old English author and does not appear in any version of the Latin *Physiologus*, including in its most probable source.⁷¹ Both takeaways deal with scope and scale. The first is the emphasis on zoological diversity: the first

⁶⁹ It perhaps goes without saying that whales are mammals and not fish according to modern taxonomic schema, but according to medieval authorities including Isidore's *Etymologies*, whales were considered fish much like bats were considered birds.

⁷⁰ *The Panther* 1-7a. Quotations from *The Panther* and *The Whale* are from Jones, Christopher, ed. and trans. *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume 1: Religious and Didactic*. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2012. 2-15.

⁷¹ Squires, Ann, ed. and introduction. *The Old English Physiologus*. Durham Medieval Texts, 1988. Cf. 19-22 for a discussion of sources, which are unclear thanks largely to the lack of *Physiologus* manuscripts in early medieval England. While the Y version seems the clearest source of the OE *Panther*, Squires suggests that *The Whale* is equally distinct from both the Y and B versions. Giovanni Orlandi, cited in Squire's footnotes (21, fn14), also argues that *The Panther* is based off of the Y version and that *The Whale* is based off of the B. Not enough remains of the third poem to make any strong claim of source material.

half-line of this entire poetic sequence is *Monge sindon*, 'There are many', and the repeated negatives in the next two lines, *unrimu* [countless], *ne maƷon... areccan* [we cannot reckon], *ne rim witan* [nor know the number], emphasize the limited nature of the human knowledge. Much like the homeland of the phoenix within *The Phoenix*, the multitude of animal species is beyond the scope of human experience or ability. This countlessness is mirrored by geographic distance, as the poet uses similar phrasing to emphasize twice the wideness of the animals' dispersion, *pæs wide sind... innan* [which are widely situated] and *wornas wid-scope* [widely-made multitudes], and to emphasize twice the totality of their placement in creation, *geond middan-geard* [throughout middle-earth] and *geond world* [throughout the world], and then goes so far as to poetically state that they exist as far as the oceans encompass the bright horizon, *swa wæter bibugeð | þisne beorhtan bosm*.

This superlative nature of animalkind ties neatly into a few key components of the physiologic tradition, namely the opacity of the natural world to human understanding and its subsequent capacity to inspire wonder. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, wonder is a product of both experience and geography, or rather the *lack* of experience and geography, and thus the intrinsic unknowability of the animal multitudes inspires reflection on human ignorance and the ultimate authority of God. This is further compounded by the natures and pairing of the panther and the whale. Both animals lure in lesser animals with sweet odors emanating from

their mouths, the panther for beneficent reasons and the whale for malicious ends. These two poems, as Jeremy DeAngelo has argued,⁷² form a purposeful diptych exploring the necessity of spiritual discernment- humans can equally be drawn in by the sweet truth of Christ as they can by the sweet deceptions of the devil, and without careful and deep knowledge the two would be indistinguishable.

Located several folia earlier in the collection, however, is the longer poem labeled *The Phoenix*, which largely appears to be a translation of the *Carmen de Ave Phoenix*, a Latin poem most often attributed to and most likely composed by the Roman Lactantius, who lived in the third and fourth centuries and was also known as an author of doctrinal philosophy. The Old English *Phoenix* is not a direct translation, then, of the *Physiologus* as *The Panther* and *The Whale* are, but the *Phoenix* essentially uses the *Carmen* as its 'animal' or 'nature' section and creates an extended *Physiologus* entry, utilizing the physiologic tradition to transform the phoenix into an allegory for a multitude of Christian elements and components of belief.

This chapter will focus on both the history of the phoenix mythos as it would have been received by the early English author of the Exeter Book poem and on how the components of the physiologic tradition outlined in the introduction can be used to break apart and identify the underlying structures of belief- including, most notably, an answer to the question 'Did medieval

⁷² DeAngelo, Jeremy. "Discretio Spirituum and The Whale." *Anglo-Saxon England* 42 (2013): 271-89.

people believe in the phoenix?’ The phoenix, as an endlessly multivalent symbol tied directly to concepts of destruction, exceptionalism, resurrection, animality, and eternity, was uniquely qualified to serve as the perfect vehicle for the Old English author of *The Phoenix* in their overarching mission to encourage the faithful and reify the foundational tenets of Christian belief.

The Phoenix’s Early Lives

The background of the phoenix mythos, and how it came into the hands of Christian authors, is helpful in establishing how the Old English poet viewed this creature. Through these very early accounts, we can see how the ideas of doubt, belief, riddling, and wonder were pre-baked into the very concept of the phoenix, well before it reached the exegetes or English shores.

The very first recorded mention of the bird comes from a riddle by Hesiod from the 8th century BCE,⁷³ though it may be traced to earlier Egyptian traditions of the *bn-w/Benu*⁷⁴ bird. R. van de Broek gives a translation of the Greek riddle:

The cawing crow lives for nine generations of young [or ‘old’] men, but the deer four times longer than the crow; the raven reaches the age of three deer, but the

⁷³ McMillan, Douglas J., ‘The Phoenix in the Western World from Herodotus to Shakespeare.’ *The D.H. Lawrence Review* 5, vol.3 (Fall 1972). 238-267.

⁷⁴ For fuller discussions of the connection between the benu and the phoenix, see van den Broek, R. *The Myth of the Phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, E.J. Brill, 1972. and, for a more recent recapitulation, Nigg, Joseph. *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast*, University of Chicago Press, 2016. Neither believe that the phoenix is a direct descendant of the benu, although there do appear to be certain connections.

*phoenix of nine ravens; we, however, the fair-haired Nymphs, daughters of Aegis-bearing Zeus, reach the age of ten phoenixes.*⁷⁵

The 'solution' to the riddle is simple in that the Nymphs live for $9 \times 4 \times 3 \times 9 \times 10$ generations of men, or 9,720 generations. Yet, depending on a number of variant translations around 'young' or 'old men' and how long a 'generation' is, van de Broek gives a large range of possible lifespans for the phoenix, at the low end being 972 years, and the high end 104,976 years.⁷⁶ Either way, the crucial takeaway at this early stage of development is that the notable aspect of the phoenix is neither of its two great later symbolic aspects, that of resurrection or of self-immolation, but rather purely of longevity. The phoenix is the longest-lived animal the riddler can think of, as only the demi-god Nymphs live longer.

The next major mention of the phoenix after Hesiod's riddle is from Herodotus in the 5th century BCE. Herodotus' account is notable not only by virtue of it being the earliest extensive account of the bird, but also because of that historian's utter lack of belief in the veracity of what he recounts. Within the first sentence of the description Herodotus clarifies that, "I myself have never seen, except in pictures" the phoenix.⁷⁷ The bird is described as "a great rarity" and Herodotus gives a physical description only with the disclaimer "if it is like the pictures". His account of the bird's behavior is bookended by

⁷⁵ van de Broek 80.

⁷⁶ van de Broek 85.

⁷⁷ All quotations from Herodotus are taken out of McMillan, Douglas, J. 'The Phoenix in the Western World from Herodotus to Shakespeare.' *The D.H. Lawrence Review* 5.3 (Fall 1972). 238-267. Cf. 240 for Herodotus material.

disavowals: “They tell a story of what the bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible... Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.”

Though the temple of the sun is mentioned twice and the bird is given red and yellow plumage, there is no explicit mention of fire at this point in the phoenix mythos, and Herodotus’s account focuses on myrrh and the treatment of the parent-bird’s body by the new phoenix.

According to van de Broek, from the first eight centuries BCE there are only nine mentions of the phoenix within the works of the Greeks and Romans, and eight of those mentions are found through quotations in the works of later authors.⁷⁸ Within the first century CE, however, we find 21 mentions of the bird, including detailed accounts from such famed authors as Ovid, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus. Solinus, Lactantius, and Claudian continued the tradition of the literary phoenix after the first century up until to the end of the Roman Empire, often expanding and revising the tale, inserting in key details we associate with the phoenix today. By the dawn of the medieval era, however, the phoenix had more or less shifted from its classical, mythological configuration and became an incredibly robust source of symbolism for the ever-expanding Christian community. This shift had its inception in the first century, with the pope Clement I’s *Letter to the Corinthians*, written in Greek, and was continued by a variety of Church Fathers as well as the *Physiologus*-author and Isidore of Seville.

⁷⁸ van de Broek 393-396.

The biblical foundations, however, of the phoenix's existence are just barely extant, and only in some translations. There are two verses which were thought of at various points to refer to the phoenix: Psalm 92:12 and Job 29:18.⁷⁹ The verse from Psalms was read within the Septuagint as "The righteous will flourish like the *phoinix*", where the Greek word *phoinix* can mean either 'phoenix' or 'palm tree.' This homonym is noted by several classical and medieval authors, who claim that either the bird is named for the long-lived plant or that the plant is named for the long-lived bird. Similarly, the verse from Job reads "I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the *hol*," where *hol* is the Hebrew word for 'sand'- the portion about 'dying in my nest,' along with mistranslation of *hol* as 'palm tree,' once again set up the interpretation of the word as 'phoenix'. Tertullian uses the Psalms verse and the Jewish authors of the *Midrash Rabbah* and *Babylonian Talmud* use the verse from Job as scriptural basis for their reading of and belief in the phoenix, but the large majority of Christian writers who take on the phoenix, including Clement, Isidore, the *Physiologus*-author, Ambrose, and more, do not establish any kind of the biblical basis, and instead use 'pagan' models of the bird as their exegetical fodder. R. van de Broek views the reliance on classical symbols as an expression "of their ability to preserve ancient conceptions deeply rooted in Classical culture, adapting them to their new experiences of faith and life"⁸⁰.

⁷⁹ Hill, John Spencer. 'The Phoenix.' *Religion and Literature* 16.2 (1984). 61-66. Hill includes a third verse from Job, though his argument for that particular verse is not convincing.

⁸⁰ van de Broek 13.

The Christian phoenix is the same as the classical phoenix, just once again reborn into a new life.

Pope Clement I's first century CE work, *Letter to the Corinthians*, is a watershed moment in the development of the phoenix legend, being the first recorded usage of the phoenix within a Christian context. Much like the *Physiologus*-author will in another century or so, Clement divides his writing on the bird into two sections on behavior and interpretation. Chapter 25 within the *Letter* gives an account like Herodotus, mentioning myrrh and the process by which the bird buries its predecessor, yet he does not mention, as the *Physiologus* will, any fire or self-immolation. Chapter 26 then asks, "Do we think it something great and marvellous, then, if the Creator of the universe shall bring about a resurrection of those who served Him in holiness, in the confidence of a good faith, considering that He demonstrates the greatness of His promise by means even of a bird?"⁸¹ The similarities to the *Physiologus*'s account, including its use of logic stemming from belief in the phoenix as a real bird, is noteworthy. Clement's letter was impactful, at least in Corinth, as Eusebius reports that it was read aloud publicly even a century after its writing⁸², and I see no reason to doubt that the *Physiologus* author was influenced by Clement's letter or a derivative thereof, especially in light of

⁸¹ All quotations from Clement of Rome, *The Letter of St Clement of Rome to the Corinthians*. trans. and introduction Francis X. Glimm, in *Apostolic Fathers*, Catholic University Press, 1947 (reprint 2008). 1-59. 26.1.

⁸² Glimm 5.

their shared structure, content, and language of composition.⁸³ The two differ, however, not only in their behavioral account, but also in their reading of the bird: Clement views the phoenix as proof that Christ can resurrect the faithful, the *Physiologus*-author views the phoenix as proof that Christ was indeed resurrected himself. These differences, although substantial, are not contradictory, and show two strains of thought which both end up in the Old English *Phoenix*.

⁸³ Suggestions that Clement was influenced by the *Physiologus* have been made, and are erroneous. See Scott, Alan. 'The Date of the *Physiologus*.' *Vigilae Christianae*, 52.4 (Nov 1998). 430-441.

Much fuller studies⁸⁴ have been done on the phoenix, especially those by Joseph Nigg and van de Broek, and the rich history of the phoenix, with its thematic and narrative changes across several millennia, is far too expansive to be treated appropriately here. This brief historical overview hopefully shows why, however, at the particular juncture of the early medieval period the phoenix was an ideal vehicle for an author wishing to embody the basics of belief. Authors like Clement, as well as the later Tertullian and Ambrose, attached great importance to the phoenix as a sign created by God more or less

⁸⁴ The most important late antique author of phoenix-lore for our purposes, of course, is Lactantius and his *Carmen*, but the works of Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and Ambrose are certainly worthy of consideration as well. In chapter 13 of his *De Resurrectione Carnis*, Tertullian implores his readers to “accept what is a very complete and unshakeable example” of the hope of resurrection, “seeing it is an animate creature, one subject to life and death.”¹ He is definite in his belief in the existence of the phoenix, an ‘unshakeable example,’ much like the *Physiologus*-author. *De Resurrectione Carnis* is notable for the rhetorical and poetic flourishes which Tertullian uses, as he ends the section on the phoenix with, “But shall men die once for all, while birds of Arabia are assured of their resurrection?”² Origen, in his *Contra Celsum*, takes a more measured approach to the myth while refuting Celsus’s claim of piety within animal kind, including within the elephant, stork, and phoenix. After relating what Celsus claims of the bird, Origen writes, “Now this story is indeed recorded, and, if it be true, it is possible that it may occur in consequence of some provision of nature,” ultimately concluding that the phoenix, if extant, shows mankind the diversity and harmony of nature in order to provoke admiration not of the creature, but of its creator. He then makes his skepticism known, and only seriously considers the phoenix with respect to its symbolic nature. Augustine’s mention of the phoenix is brief and skeptical as well, occurring in just one section of his *De anima et eius origine*. He decries another commentator for speaking so much of the phoenix, “after the fashion of young people,” and swiftly rebuts the phoenix as proof that souls have no sex, instead calling it a symbol of resurrection, “if, indeed, as is thought, he is born afresh after his death.” Ambrose, on the other hand, presents a straightforward picture of the bird without skepticism in his *Hexaemeron*, lifted largely from Clement, and tells his readers specifically, “We accept the fact that birds exist for the sake of man. The contrary is not true: that man exists for the sake of birds. We have here an example of the loving care, which the Author and Creator of the birds has for His own saints.” To Ambrose, too, the birds exist to help man recognize God, and not for its own sake. Further works that mention the phoenix credulously include those of Epiphanius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Jerusalem. Tertullian. *Tertullian’s Treatise on the Resurrection*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, S.P.C.K., 1960. 135. Origen quotation from *Contra Celsum* 4.98 and found in Nigg, ‘Transformations...’ 94, 98. Augustine, *De anima et eius origine* 4.33, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series I, Volume 5*, The Christian Literature Company, 1887. 699. Augustine’s skepticism here is not unlike his approach to wonders in general, cf. *City of God* Book 21, where he expresses reticence to believe in wonders, but believes in the anti-putrefactory properties of the peacock as he has apparently witnessed them with his own eyes. See also Ambrose. *Hexaemeron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, Catholic University of America Press, 1952. 219-220. McDonald, Sister Mary Francis. ‘Phoenix Redivivus’, *Phoenix* 14 (Winter 1960). 187-206. 202-203.

to help man believe that resurrection was possible (Tertullian calls the phoenix a “very complete and unshakeable example” of the hope of resurrection), while other Christian authors such as Origen and Augustine continued the skepticism of Herodotus, showing that belief in the phoenix was not entirely ‘unshakeable’ and was treated with doubt. Doubt is, after all, the necessary component of belief which stokes the need for habitual reaffirmation and performance. Writings on the phoenix were not just expressions of zoological knowledge, but were, in fact, expressions of belief.

On the part of the early medieval English, the phoenix myth was not, however, a particularly commonly told tale. The word *fenix* occurs in the Old English corpus a mere 42 times. Aside from one mention in *Marvels of the East* and two mentions by Ælfric in a homily and his *Grammar*, the word only occurs in *The Phoenix* of the Exeter Book and in two versions of the same, mid-to-late 11th century tract commonly labeled ‘The Phoenix Homily’⁸⁵. This homily, although not authored by Ælfric himself, is clearly imitative of his style⁸⁶, and appears to be a translation of a different, possibly prose version of Lactantius’s poem. The use of the phoenix solely within a late homiletic context (undoubtedly drawn from the church fathers) or in translations of late antique texts shows that there was not a particularly native Old English tradition regarding the bird, and that, especially at the time of the *Phoenix*’s

⁸⁵ *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, compiled by Antonette diPaolo Healey with John Price Wilkin and Xin Xiang. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project 2009).

⁸⁶ Blake, N.F., ed. *The Phoenix*, Manchester University Press, 1964. 94-6.

authorship, it would've been a fairly novel topic of composition for the early medieval English.⁸⁷

Lactantius's Carmen

As the *Phoenix* poem of the Exeter Book and the two prose Phoenix Homilies show, the primary literary influence on the phoenix mythos in early medieval England was Lactantius's *Carmen de ave phoenice*. Lactantius was born in North Africa in the second half of the third century to pagan parents, converted to Christianity, was invited by the future emperor Constantine to tutor his son, and then died in Gaul in 340.⁸⁸ His major works are large,

⁸⁷ Michael D.C. Drout has argued that the third of the Old English *Physiologus* poems in the Exeter Book, an extremely fragmentary piece that merely mentions a *fugel* with no other determining evidence, is in fact a phoenix as well, instead of the partridge which it is normally interpreted as. As aptly criticized by Valentine A. Pakis, Drout severely understates the manuscript evidence within the *Physiologus* tradition for the connected trio of panther-whale-partridge, which appear in that order across a number of manuscripts, including the earliest ones and ones most likely to be available to the Old English writers. Additionally, Drout's primary motivation in attesting the final poem to the phoenix over the partridge is to explore a number of thematic connections, such as the presence of odor (which is found in the original Latin) and the interpretive schema of the animals. In Drout's proposed version, the panther-whale-phoenix would represent God-devil-man, while the partridge is, within the *Physiologus* tradition, also a symbol for the devil and thus less of a tidy allegorical set. Yet, while such interpretive or thematic arguments may be, in the words of Drout himself, "learned and clever", they are purely speculative and extrapolate unnecessarily from the incomplete data. Matthew Spears, in his dissertation on animal subjectivity in early medieval England, gives a perfectly reasonable and perhaps stronger thematic reason for including the partridge over the phoenix (or Drout's backup suggestion, the charadrius), in which the partridge myth represents a choice for the believer: the partridge steals the eggs of other birds and, once those eggs hatch, the chicks recognize the partridge's deception and fly home to their kind, while the previous two poems represent either side of that choice. Frederick Biggs has similarly supported the partridge-identification through a thematic analysis emphasizing the eschatological nature of both the bird and the concluding section.⁵ Based on so little subjective evidence, it would be impossible to determine anything substantial or supported from this fragment about the phoenix tradition in Old English, and so Drout's argument will be, for these purposes, set aside. Drout, Michael D.C. "The Partridge" is a Phoenix: revising the Exeter Book *Physiologus*', *Neophilologus* 91 (2007), 487-503. In 488, fn 5. Drout uses the phrase "learned and clever" before dismissing a number of recent critics who engaged with the poems as if they are a unified threesome ending in the partridge. See also Pakis, Valentine A. 'A Note in Defense of "The Partridge"', *Neophilologus* 92 (2008), 729-734. Spears, Matthew E. *Identifying with the beast: animality, subjectivity, and society in Anglo-Saxon England*. 2017. Cornell University, PhD dissertation. Biggs, Frederick M. "The Eschatological Conclusion of the Old English *Physiologus*," *Medium Aevum* 58 (1989). 286-297.

⁸⁸ Blake 18.

doctrinal prose pieces such as *Divinae Institutiones* and *De Opificio Dei*, which at one point led to him being referred to as ‘the Christian Cicero’⁸⁹, but scholars of Old English generally know him from the *Carmen*. The *Carmen* is not an explicitly Christian text, and it could be argued that the poem was written before Lactantius’s conversion to Christianity⁹⁰ as there are many explicit pagan references to Greek and Roman deities.

There appears to be a divide amongst scholars as to whether or not the *Carmen* is at its core a Christian poem, with certain scholars focusing on the Old English *Phoenix* labeling the *Carmen* as a ‘pagan poem’ which the English author ‘Christianized’.⁹¹ Michael Roberts, however, writing on the Late Latin poetics of Lactantius’s work, notes that it is generally accepted that “some passages in the poem refer covertly to Christian doctrines; that is, while being fully intelligible only from a Christian perspective, they would not be perceptible as Christian elements to a non-Christian reader.”⁹² Marialuise Schuster, neé Walla, in her 1969 thesis on the *Carmen*, gives a detailed background on the debate up until her time, points to five verses (ll.25, 64, 93,

⁸⁹ White, Carolinne. *Early Christian Latin Poets*, Routledge, 2002. 27.

⁹⁰ Faraci, Dora. ‘Sources and Cultural Background: The Example of the Old English “Phoenix”’, *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 42.2 (2000), 225-239. Cf. 228.

⁹¹ See, for example, O’Donnell, Daniel Paul. ‘Fish and Fowl: Generic Expectations and the Relationship Between the Old English *Phoenix*-poem and Lactantius’s *De ave phoenice*’ in *Germanic Texts and Latin Models: Medieval Reconstructions*, eds. K.E. Olsen, A. Harbus, and T. Hofstra, Peters, 2001. 157-171. or Appleton, Helen. ‘The Insular Landscape of the Old English Poem *The Phoenix*.’ *Neophilologus* (2017) 101:585–602

⁹² Roberts, Michael. ‘Lactantius’s Phoenix and Late Latin Poetics’ in *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature*, eds. Jas’ Elsner and Jesús Hernández Lobato, Oxford University Press, 2017. 373-390. Quotation from 374.

164, 170) that only make sense from the perspective of Christian ethics⁹³, and ultimately writes that “muß festgehalten werden, daß das Gedicht zweifellos christlichen Charakter hat” [it must be stated that the poem undoubtedly has a Christian character].⁹⁴ The ‘deception’, so to speak, of presenting pagan deities first and foremost but secretly embodying Christian values (what Roberts calls its ‘crypto-Christianity’) can be explained by the persecutions of the early 4th century under Emperor Diocletian, which necessitated a level of secrecy.⁹⁵

By the time the poem reached England, Lactantius was known as a Christian author, and thus the *Carmen* would’ve been perceived as a Christian poem regardless of how cryptic its Christianity was. Gregory of Tours, writing in the 6th century, lists the phoenix as one of the seven wonders of the natural world created by God, and explicitly begins his description of the creature by stating it was written about by Lactantius⁹⁶, in no way referencing its or Lactantius’s ‘pagan’ character. The poem was undoubtedly changed by the Old English poet, expounded upon, made explicit, and purged of its references to pagan deities, but this was not a ‘Christianization’ of the poem, it was a translation and expansion. As Schuster points out in her commentary, the majority of pagan deities are referred to metonymically, and most others

⁹³ Walla, Marialuise. *Der Vogel Phoenix in der Antiken Literatur und der Dichtung des Laktanz*, Wien University, 1969.

⁹⁴ Walla 129.

⁹⁵ White 27; Roberts 374. Lactantius himself suggested in the *Divinae Institutiones* that Diocletian’s ascension was a herald of the apocalypse. See Digeser, Elizabeth DePalma. *Lactantius and Rome: The Making of a Christian Empire*, Cornell University Press, 1999. 149-150. CHECK.

⁹⁶ Lactantius. *The Minor Works*, trans. and intro. Sister Mary Francis McDonald, Catholic University of America Press, 1965. 210. “Tertium est quod de phoenice Lactantius refert.”

are simple classical allusions customary to Late Latin poetry.⁹⁷ The stand-out mythological reference is to Phoebus, the god of the sun, of whom the phoenix is some sort of devotee and whom Schuster considers to be an easy analogue to Christ, who is, after all, the 'Sun of Justice'.⁹⁸

Lactantius, however, is very intentional with the use of each of his allusions and deities, as their metonymic nature serves a distinct purpose in constructing the relationship between nature, man, and the divine. The constant embodiment of natural forces within deities or personifications serves to lend great agency to these forces, such as in line four where 'sol' is the subject of the verb 'fundit', assigning it the subjective, active position within the process of daybreak. There is an ambiguity in line eight where the 'solis nemus', the grove of the sun, is introduced, as grammatically the genitive may imply the sun's possession or ownership over this land. The rest of the poem quickly sets a precedent for using personification in its descriptions of the natural world: the heat of the sun is called "the fires of Phaethon" in line eleven, the floodwaters are "the waters of Deucalion" in line fourteen, 'Natura parens', translatable as Mother Nature, endows the phoenix with her possessions in line 34, and so on. Notably, lines 15 through 24 spend a good deal of time individually personifying numerous ills which are absent from the grove of the sun, such as *cupido*, "opum vesana" [mad for wealth],⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Walla 130.

⁹⁸ Malachi 4:2.

⁹⁹ Bracketed translations are taken from Carolinne White's English translation.

or *furor*, “ardens caedis amore” [burning with a desire to kill]. These ills include the terrors of nature, as well, such as the frost which does not “gelido terram rore... tegit” [cover the earth with its chilling dew] or the clouds which do not “super campos tendit sua vellera” [over the plains extend their fleeces]. Lactantius ends this invocation of the hardships of life with a description of a beautiful fountain in the center of the grove, one which has a name, ‘Vivum’, ‘Life’. These descriptions of the natural world, paired with the usage of Aurora (the dawn, l.34), Aeolus (keeper of the winds, l.73), Notus (the south wind, l.75), Flora (goddess of flowers, l.128), and Iris (the rainbow, l.133) in the rest of the poem, set up a clear pattern of viewing the natural world as a series of interacting agents, ones which moreover have identities, traits, and names.

The importance of this pattern lies in the phoenix herself, who, at the first light of day, “incipit illa sacri modulamina fundere cantus | et mira lucem voce ciere novam” [begins to pour out the melody of her sacred song | To summon the new day with a wondrous sound].¹⁰⁰ Within her role as a “sacerdos” [priestess] of Phoebus and his grove, the phoenix is imagined as fitting within this same ecosystem of personified natural forces as she is the one who summons the day, marks out its hours, is a guardian of the forest, and is the sole sharer of Phoebus’s secrets.¹⁰¹ Lactantius imagines the phoenix as both integral to creation and superior to it. He makes her into the namesake of the palm tree where she nests (l.70), as well as the land of Phoenicia (l.66),

¹⁰⁰ ll.45-6.

¹⁰¹ *Carmen* 55-58.

and her nest is adorned with spices and fragrances from all across the world. The process by which she dies shows her mastery of the elements as Aeolus holds back his winds so as not to disturb her, the immolation is sparked by heat from the sun, and upon rebirth she lives off of dew provided by heaven. Her neck and breast are marked by the bright colors of Flora, as are her wings by Iris, and she wears a radiant crown, echoing Phoebus's own. The adoration and submission of the forces of nature to the phoenix is, at the end of the poem, paralleled by the adoration of the animal and human worlds, as well, when she is flocked by both the Egyptians (l.151) and all other birds (l.155). These parallels emphasize the duality of the phoenix: she is both an animal and an agentive force of nature, she is owed allegiance by both the animal and human realms, and she is both a part of and above creation.

Even were it not for the most obvious connection, the resurrection, the phoenix's position as subordinate only to the sun god Phoebus (who is easily understood as the Christian God within this Lactantian 'crypto-Christianity') and as adored by and attended on by all creation sets the phoenix as a type of Christ and fulfills a crucial aspect of the physiologic tradition. Lactantius's phoenix emphasizes natural dualities and contradictions, using the animal to help bridge the paradox within a central belief to Christian doctrine: Christ's own dual nature as both divine and man. The pagan personification given to the natural world allows all of creation to literally praise the Lord and give

him glory¹⁰², while also expressing the dominance of the Christian symbol over those from classical mythology. It may also be important that the humans within the text are Egyptians, known in the book of Exodus as the oppressors of the Israelites who are ultimately brought to ruin by God's own mastery of natural forces, in the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea.¹⁰³ These layered, multifaceted hierarchical relationships would have all been present and apparent to any Christian medieval reader, and the early English poet of the Exeter Book *Phoenix* capitalized on this Christ-centered allegoric construction to push the physiologic tradition even further, while adjusting the language and tone from a Late Latin 'crypto-Christianity' to a more obvious, *Physiologus*-like, reading of the bird.

The connection between the *Physiologus* and the work of the *Phoenix*-poet has not been unnoticed by critics. The Old English translation has been called a 'generic shift' by Daniel Paul O'Donnell, and he concludes that the author "turned to the *Physiologus* to provide him with the most suitable generic model for his translation".¹⁰⁴ Thomas Honegger has given four strong reasons to consider it a *Physiologus* entry¹⁰⁵ and Dora Faraci concludes her article on the background of the *Phoenix* by stating that "although we are far from stating that the Old English *Phoenix* has to be equated to a *Physiologus* chapter,

¹⁰² This is a common trope within the scriptures, especially within Psalms, cf. Psalms 19, 96, 148 for examples.

¹⁰³ It is likely that the humans are Egyptians because of the connections to eastern lands inherent in the phoenix myth (sometimes also Arabia or even Ethiopia), but the biblical echo still exists.

¹⁰⁴ O'Donnell 171.

¹⁰⁵ Honegger, Thomas. *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry*, Francke Verlage Tübingen und Basel, 1996. 68.

we cannot deny that the author was influenced by it."¹⁰⁶ The connection becomes even stronger if we consider, as Sister Mary Francis McDonald suggests in her introduction to the *Carmen*, that Lactantius himself was familiar with the Greek *Physiologus*.¹⁰⁷

Structurally, there are immediate similarities between the Old English *Phoenix* and a typical *Physiologus* entry with its two-part structure of behavioral description and allegorical interpretation. Honegger has, in his *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry*, done extremely detailed analysis, exactly breaking down the parts of each into introduction, *natura*, and *significatio* sections, and this chapter does not seek to retread well-worn and well-done analyses.¹⁰⁸ Sufficed to say, though the *significatio* or moral section of the *Phoenix* is not as clean as the *Physiologus* usually dictates (Honegger argues that it "lacks a thorough systematic interpretation of many traits mentioned in the 'natura' part of the poem")¹⁰⁹, overall the paradigm is followed quite closely.

In the following pages I will do my own breakdown of the Old English *Phoenix*, going step by step through the five traits of the physiologic tradition as I have outlined in the introduction to this dissertation. While doing so, I

¹⁰⁶ Faraci 239.

¹⁰⁷ McDonald, Sister Mary Francis., 'Introduction', in Lactantius. *The Minor Works*, Catholic University of America Press, 1965. 208.

¹⁰⁸ Honegger 17-75. He also discusses the other Exeter Book Old English *Physiologus* poems and goes on to look at Middle English bestiary works as well.

¹⁰⁹ Honegger 69.

hope to illuminate more about the poem itself, especially regarding its relation to the belief structures and patterns of medieval Christianity.

1) *Opacity*

Animals were purposefully created by God as semi-opaque riddles which learned teachers and good men can puzzle out as lessons on being a good Christian and on scriptural history.

Aside from the church fathers and classical geographers, the only significant Latin mention of the phoenix I have been able to find in pre-Conquest England is a riddle by Symphosius who, although probably writing in Roman North Africa several centuries before England existed as such, was a major influence on riddlers like Aldhelm, Eusebius, and Tatwine.¹¹⁰ Symphosius's identity is unclear (and his name may be a pseudonym), but much like Lactantius's work, his riddles reference many pagan elements and it has been argued that there is a Christian undercurrent, a 'crypto-Christianity', to his works.¹¹¹ At the very least, as with the *Carmen*, Symphosius's riddle collection is well-positioned to be co-opted by Christian authors for Christian interpretations and ends, and it certainly was, being used in the Carolingian school curriculum, quoted by Pseudo-Bede, and found

¹¹⁰ These authors, and other medieval riddlers, are addressed in chapter three.

¹¹¹ Salvador-Bello, Mercedes. *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and the Medieval Enigmata*, West Virginia University Press, 2015. 117-141. Cf. Leary, T.J., *Symphosius, The Aenigmata: An Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. for a rundown of various theories put forth on whether his name is a pseudonym or not, and also claims that Christian influence should not be read into the work, "Thus the phoenix of *Aenig.* 29(31) should not be associated with the Christian idea of resurrection..." in footnote 36 on p.4. Leary's book was published very soon before Salvador-Bello's, so there is no explicit contradiction of her claims.

in some thirty codices across medieval Europe. The phoenix riddle of Symphosius, Riddle 31 in that collection, is short and elegant:

*Vita mihi mors est; morior si coepero nasci;
Sed prius est fatum leti quam lucis origo,
Sic solus Manes ipsos mihi dico parentes.*

[My life is death, for life and death are one,
Destruction first and then new light begun,
My parents are the Manes, I alone their son.]¹¹²

Compare these lines to the final lines of the *Carmen*:

*Mors illi Venus est, sola est in morte voluptas:
ut possit nasci, appetit ante mori.
Ipsa sibi sa sibi proles, suus est pater et suus heres,
nutrix ipsa sui, semper alumna sibi.
ipsa quidem, sed non [eadem est], eademque nec ipsa est
aeternam vitam mortis adepta bono.*

[Death for her is Venus; her sole pleasure is in death. In order that she may be born, she desires first to die. She is offspring to herself. She is her own father and also her heir. She is nurse of herself and ever a nurseling for herself. She is herself indeed, but still not the same, and neither is the same herself, for she has acquired life eternal by the good of death.]¹¹³

Neither the text of the *Carmen* nor the Old English *Phoenix's* parallel passage, quoted below, are explicitly riddles- both occur well into their respective poems after the lifespan of the phoenix has been explained in detail. Yet both contain riddling aspects that mirror the central question of Symphosius's Riddle 31. Riddle 31's primary seeming paradox is that of life and death, specifically that death appears to be both one with life, and that it

¹¹² Text and translation both from Hickman du Bois, Elizabeth, ed. and trans. *The Hundred Riddles of Symphosius*, The Elm Tree Press, 1912. 30-31. Leary 117 gives "Life is death to me; I die if I have begun to be born; but the fate of death comes before the beginning of life. In this way I alone declare the shades themselves are my parents."

¹¹³ Translation from McDonald 219-220.

precedes life, whereas we expect death to follow life. Lactantius precedes these lines from the *Carmen* stating the ambiguity of the phoenix's gender (and that that ambiguity is inconsequential, as God has granted the phoenix a sexless reproduction), creating a sexual relationship with death that emphasizes death's role in the birth process- essentially the same contradiction of the Symphosius riddle but with new flavoring. The ending proclamation about eternal life then contrasts this even more fully, and the lack of a specific noun subject (even the 'she' pronoun in that translation is McDonald's semi-arbitrary choice) both conform to a riddling mode of speech and generalize the possibility of eternal life to a broader group than this one bird. The back and forth contradictions throughout this passage, *suus est pater et suus heres*, | *nutrix ipsa sui, semper alumna sui*, further emphasize the un-literal or impossible nature of the subject. This is not to say that Lactantius wrote his section with Symphosius in mind, especially considering Lactantius possibly pre-dates Symphosius, but looking back on these and our very first mention of the phoenix in recorded history, Hesiod's riddle, reminds us that the phoenix is well fitted to a riddling existence. The uniqueness of the phoenix, as well as its complicated relationship with life and death, make it the perfect staging ground for symbolic and therefore linguistic ambiguity.

The comparable passage from the Exeter Book *Phoenix* reads as follows:

ende lifes; *þonne him weorþeð*
hine ad þeceð

þurh æledfyr. Hwæpre eft cymed
aweht wrætlice wundrum to life.
Forþon he drusende deað ne bisorgað,
sare swyltcwale, þe him synle wat
æfter ligbræce lifedniwe,
feorh æfter fylle, þonne fromlice
þurh briddes had gebreadad weorðeð
eft of ascan, edgeong weseð
under swegles hleo. Bið him self gehwæðer
sunu ond swæs fæder, ond synle eac
eft yrfeweard ealdre lafe.

[At that point the end of life arrives; with hot flame the pyre swallows it up. Even so, mysteriously revived, it returns to life in miraculous fashion. In perishing, it therefore does not fear death nor the grievous agony of its demise; it is constantly aware that, after the assault of flame, life will be renewed, vitality after its decease, when from out of the ashes it is vibrantly rejuvenated in the form of a bird, becomes young once more beneath the vault of heaven. That creature is both son and father to itself, and likewise ever the inheritor, in turn, of an ancient heirloom.]¹¹⁴

This section, like Lactantius's, shies largely away from explicit references to the phoenix itself- the sole mention here is *þurh briddes had* in line 372a, which is still not precisely a bird, but rather the *had* of a bird, *had* possibly meaning 'person', 'sex', 'condition', 'order',¹¹⁵ or, as Christopher Jones translates it above, 'form'. The contradictory elements which made it an effective riddle for Symphosius are intact, though adjusted- *feorh æfter fylle* marking the life and death contrast, *Bið him self gehwæðer | sunu ond swæs fæder* marking the reproductive contradiction building from Lactantius's more sexual description. The section also, following the *Carmen*, is the final part of the first

¹¹⁴ All textual quotations of the Old English *Phoenix* are from Jones, Christopher. *Old English Shorter Poems Vol. 1: Religious and Didactic*, Dumbarton Oaks, 2012. ll.364b-376. This passage is Jones' translation, with a minor emendation: Jones uses 'the bird' as the subject of ll. 366b-367, presumably for the sake of clarity, but this is not in the Old English text and thus I emended it to 'it'.

¹¹⁵ *DOE* entry on *had*. The most probable intended meaning is definition 4, 'order of beings or things / kind / race / family (mainly in poetry)'.

half of the *Phoenix*. After this, the *Carmen* is abandoned as a source in favor of an entirely original ‘allegory’ or explanatory section, what Honegger refers to as the *significatio* following the *natura* section of a typical *Physiologus* entry.¹¹⁶ It should come as no surprise that the most riddle-like passage of the piece would come right before the interpretation, as if to reinforce to the reader that the phoenix is indeed a wondrous creature—what several Exeter Book riddles refer to as a *wonderlice wiht*—and thus requires decipherment to be fully understood.

2) *Multiplicity*

Animals have multiple meanings - although many of the allegorical explanations of the animals do have direct one-to-one correspondence between allegory and nature, they are often paired with multiple, seemingly contradictory natures.

The Old English phoenix largely mirrors Lactantius’s phoenix as an allegory of Christ, though the allegorical schema of the poem as a whole is less tightly controlled than in Lactantius’s writing. Within the first section of the poem from line 85, when the phoenix is first introduced, until line 360, when the interpretive section begins, the phoenix is aligned with either God or Christ. Just as Christ is foremost amongst the race of men, the phoenix “ealdordom | onfehð foremihtig ofer fugla cynn”¹¹⁷ [foremost in might, receives dominion over the race of birds], and is called the *æþeling* [prince]¹¹⁸ when amongst birdkind. The death and resurrection of the phoenix has

¹¹⁶ Honegger 31.

¹¹⁷ *Phoenix* 158-159.

¹¹⁸ *Phoenix* 354.

obvious parallels to Christ's death and resurrection, parallels which while implicit in the *Carmen* are explained straightforwardly in the *Physiologus*.

Within the *Physiologus*, the phoenix revives after three days, and this has been acknowledged as a unique element within the phoenix tradition.¹¹⁹

Specifically, the *Physiologus*-author states that on the day after the phoenix's immolation, the priest of Heliopolis finds a worm; on the second day after "a tiny birdling"; and on the third a "huge eagle which takes flight".¹²⁰

Lactantius's phoenix gives no set amount of time that it takes for the resurrection to occur, though the phoenix does not leave its nest until "primaeva coepit florere iuventa" [she begins to grow strong in the first years of her youth]¹²¹. The Old English poet gives no timeline, either for the process of resurrection or the growth and departure of the bird, yet he does include the progression laid out by Lactantius, adjusting it to be more in line with the *Physiologus* version. Lactantius describes the resurrection as starting with something like a seed formed from the ashes of the previous phoenix, then moving to a milky-white worm which after a time sleeps and becomes egg-like.¹²² Within the egg, the phoenix develops akin to a chrysalis, and then it hatches and grows into a mature, adult bird.¹²³ The Old English poet adjusts this to start with the 'seed', which he describes as *æples gelicnes*¹²⁴ [in the

¹¹⁹ Curley 73, referencing van den Broek 214-216.

¹²⁰ Curley 13.

¹²¹ *Carmen* 115.

¹²² *Carmen* 99-104.

¹²³ *Carmen* 105-115.

¹²⁴ *Phoenix* 230.

likeness of an apple], from which grows a *wyrm wundrum fæger*¹²⁵ [a wondrously fair worm], which then grows into an *earnas brid | fæger fugeltimber*¹²⁶ [an eaglet, a graceful young bird], and later becomes like an *ealdum earne*¹²⁷ [mature eagle]. More can be said about the seed-apple, and is addressed below, but the parade of animal forms here (worm-eaglet-mature eagle) streamlines Lactantius's seed-worm-egg-chrysalis-eaglet-mature eagle version. The Old English poet also clearly demarcates each step of the resurrection at regular intervals, with *þonne* in line 230, another *þonne* at 234, and then *æfter þon* in line 238. This tighter construction makes the identification of the phoenix and its resurrection with Christ's resurrection after the cross more obvious, and echoes the *Physiologus*-specific three-day detail, though the poet does not use exact timeframes.

This direct, allegorical one-to-one correspondence of the phoenix with Christ, however, is immediately problematized by the very first sentence of the interpretative or *significatio* section of the poem: "Swa þæt ece lif eadigra gehwylc | æfter sarwræce sylf geceoseð"¹²⁸ [So, too, does each of the blessed choose eternal life after painful exile]. A few lines later, it is explicitly stated,

¹²⁵ *Phoenix* 232. This is a unique usage of the word *wyrm*, according to Michiko Ogura, who claims this is the only usage of the word in the Old English corpus with a positive connotation. More will be said in chapter four, but this could possibly be the result of an overly-faithful translation of the Latin *vermis* in the *Carmen* l. 102. See Ogura, Michiko. 'OE *wyrm*, *nædre*, and *draca*.' 117.

¹²⁶ *Phoenix* 235-236. According to the DOE, *fugeltimber* is a hapax legomenon which has been amended to an unattested **fugelumber* meaning 'the young of a bird'. If the second part of the compound is indeed *timber*, *fugeltimber* could be construed as 'the makings of a bird', implying (sensibly) that it is not yet fully a bird but in process of being one. The translation provided is from Christopher A. Jones' edition.

¹²⁷ *Phoenix* 238.

¹²⁸ *Phoenix* 381-382.

“þisses fugles gecynd fela gelices | bi þam gecornum Cristes þegnum”¹²⁹ [the nature of this bird bears a great likeness to Christ’s chosen servants], setting the phoenix up as an allegory for the good Christian. Immediately before this explanation is a recapitulation of the entire poem so far, lines 361 to 380 partially quoted above. This summary, while emphasizing the riddle-like nature of the phoenix, helps ‘re-start’ the allegorical schema of the piece, divorcing the poem from the interpretation of phoenix-as-Christ so that it can be reborn as an allegory of phoenix-as-Christian. This is not to say that the bird’s role as Christ is completely negated, as this restatement does call the bird father and son to itself, a theological point that would only apply to Christ and not to holy men. Nor is this *significatio* section the first time phoenix-as-Christian is preferred to phoenix-as-Christ, since line 242 states that the phoenix is *synnum asundrad*, separated from sins or, as Jones translates it, “liberated” from sins. As a sinless being, Christ would not have to be separated from sins and thus the phoenix’s separation more matches the perfection achieved by believers after judgment day. The poet could be using *synnum* metonymically for ‘the sinful world’, in which case Christ would be an appropriate allegorical interpretation, yet other usages of this phrase, such as those in *Elene*, *Andreas*, and *Guthlac A*, all refer to martyrs and holy men—not Christ.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ *Phoenix* 387-388.

¹³⁰ Cf. the DOE entry on *a-syndrian a-sundrian a-syndran*, definition I.A.4.a. The phrase appears in *Elene* l.1308; *Andreas* l.1241; and *Guthlac A* l.514.

There is a fluidity, then, between the interpretations of phoenix-as-Christian and phoenix-as-Christ, which continues throughout the remainder of the poem. Lines 451 through 465 describes *dryhtnes cempa*, a soldier of the Lord, building a nest (*nest wyrceð* in l.451) with his good deeds, while lines 596 to 598 explicitly state that believers will be clothed in light and live with the Lord forever, *swa se fugel fenix*, just like the phoenix bird. When the phoenix flies across the earth to be adored by the nations of the earth, however, the poet gives the Christ interpretation: “Swa fenix beacnað, | geong in geardum, godbearnas meahht”¹³¹ [So the phoenix signifies the might of God’s son, young in years], recovering the phoenix-as-Christ allegory from earlier in the poem. In addition to these two primary interpretations, the phoenix’s journey is also *gelicast* [very similar] to the fall of Adam and Eve¹³², and direct linguistic parallels are made between the phoenix burning and the world burning at the end of days.¹³³ Evidently, the author of the *Phoenix* did not view multiple interpretations of the same animal to be contradictory or impossible. Instead, the bird freely travels and is used as needed to represent various Christian beliefs, much like many of the entries from the *Physiologus*. Though the *Physiologus* entry on the phoenix solely connects the bird to Christ’s rebirth and not to the resurrection of holy men, the *Phoenix*-poet’s purposeful expansion and broadening of allegorical possibility fits within the greater

¹³¹ *Phoenix* 646-647.

¹³² *Phoenix* 424-427.

¹³³ *Phoenix* 500-503. More on this connection and these two interpretations below.

patterns and workings of the *Physiologus* and the physiologic tradition in general.

3) *Theology*

Theological lesson or meaning takes precedence over zoological fact

The primary consideration of texts written in the physiologic tradition is instruction in doctrinal truth. To this end, the aspects of the texts which we normally would associate with natural history, or any form of 'scientific' study such as zoology, botany, or anthropology, conform not to observation or real-world objective fact in every detail, but rather are tied to that doctrinal truth. This is not to say that the facts regarding the animal are entirely made up, but rather that adjustments and embellishments to the tales of its behavior are copacetic, if not encouraged, within the discourse, provided that those adjustments or embellishments serve the greater purpose of theological truth. It should not seem strange that medieval authors would conceive of nature in line with and dependent on theology, as nature after all is dependent on God for its creation and continued existence.

This hierarchy of God over nature exists within the Old English *Phoenix*. This is not a unique arrangement, however it is notable that the *Phoenix*-poet specifically comments on the bending of the natural order of the world by God. This occurs not at one moment, as in a single miracle, but rather is ongoing within the landscape surrounding the phoenix. The opening description of the land where the phoenix resides gives three instances of

God's intervention in preserving this particular space: the fruits of the place do not decay, but stand ever green *swa him god bibeod*¹³⁴ [as God has commanded them]; at the time of Noah's flood this land was set aside and protected *þurh est godes*¹³⁵ [through God's grace]; and *is þæt þeodnes gebod*¹³⁶ [it is the Lord's command] that streams irrigate the paradise twelve times a year. With the exception of the worldwide flooding, the actions of God here are as noteworthy in that they defy natural expectation. This is to say, this opening description prepares the reader by declaring that what seems unnatural, what seems like it should not be possible or extant, is in fact a work of God and should be understood as part of God's command. This ownership of nature and partiality is reinforced by the text referring to the sun as *godes condelle*¹³⁷ [God's candle] and a *torht tacen godes*¹³⁸ [glorious sign of God]; the phoenix (palm) tree in which the phoenix makes its nest is granted industriability and beauty by the *tir-mehtig cyning | meotud mon-cynnes*¹³⁹ [king glorious in power, creator of humankind]; the spices the phoenix uses to build its nest are created as the sweetest in the world by the *wuldor-cyning | fæder fymða gehwæs*¹⁴⁰ [king of glory, father of every beginning]; and so on and so forth. The duality of the phoenix bird itself, as being both part of nature and yet adored by and above nature, carries over from Lactantius's *Carmen* into the

¹³⁴ *Phoenix* 36.

¹³⁵ *Phoenix* 46.

¹³⁶ *Phoenix* 68.

¹³⁷ *Phoenix* 91. This is not an uncommon epithet for the sun, though.

¹³⁸ *Phoenix* 96.

¹³⁹ *Phoenix* 175-176.

¹⁴⁰ *Phoenix* 196-197.

English translation. The Old English poet, however, removed most of the personified forces of nature within Lactantius's network of natural agents, replacing invocations of pagan deities with a world ordered and sustained by God.

The phoenix, of course, is not a real being and therefore we cannot assign true 'zoological facts' to it. Even if we looked at the tradition of the phoenix as the 'facts' presented to the *Phoenix*-poet, the traditions which he inherited would have been mixed and contradictory at times. We can say with relative certainty that he would have encountered, of course, Lactantius's *Carmen*, the *Physiologus*, and Ambrose's *Hexameron*, from which parts of the allegorical section are drawn.¹⁴¹ Ambrose's phoenix, however, does not use fire while perishing and lives only to 500 years,¹⁴² while Lactantius's phoenix uses fire and lives a thousand years, and the *Physiologus* phoenix uses fire and yet lives only 500. One fairly consistent aspect of the phoenix legend throughout its history, though it does not appear in Ambrose, is the city of Heliopolis where the phoenix encounters a priest of the sun who worships him and assists in his death in some way. This city, although present in Lactantius,¹⁴³ is omitted by the Old English author. Thomas Hill has given an astute geographic reading of

¹⁴¹ Blake 31-32.

¹⁴² Ambrose. *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, Cain and Abel*. trans. John J. Savage, Catholic University of America Press 1961. 219-220. Bk 5, ch 23, secs. 79, 80.

¹⁴³ There is some confusion here, as l.121 of the *Carmen* states the phoenix travels *solis ad urbem* or *solis ad ortus* depending on the reading. Based on the surrounding details, it seems pretty clear that Lactantius intends Heliopolis or a cognate city, as he mentions the bird placing its parent-bird's remains on the altar and is worshipped by Egyptians- Egypt being a common origin of the phoenix due to its *benu* tradition.

both the *Carmen* and the *Phoenix*, noting that the *Phoenix*-author's cut of Egypt and Heliopolis creates a more compact itinerary of paradise-desert-Syria-paradise, 'Syria' or the *syrwarena lond* being a generic term for the Holy Land.¹⁴⁴ Not only does this route parallel similar Biblical journeys, but it also removes entirely the need for any human-created locations and places the phoenix solely in natural, God-created environments, even though this is contrary to the established tradition or thought on the phoenix at the time. Unsurprisingly, the phoenix is, to the Old English author, a malleable tool for conveying allegory and religious truth.

4) Zoology.

Animals are, however, animals, and not zoomorphized humans.

As an allegory for ostensibly human or human-like figures (holy men, Christ, God, Adam, etc.), the phoenix takes on a number of human-like behaviors. It is important, however, to note that the phoenix is always an animal, and the points within the piece where the phoenix mimics humanity most clearly are all undercut by the poet so that the phoenix does not cross the human/animal divide. There are three specific sections which mostly clearly involve this human-like behavior: the phoenix's dominion over birds; the building of its nest; and the funeral rite that follows its self-immolation.

¹⁴⁴ Hill, Thomas D. 'The 'syrwarena lond' and the Itinerary of the Phoenix: A Note on Typological Allusion in the Old English *Phoenix*', *Notes and Queries* 23, 482-484.

The first of these sections is partially quoted above, in the section on the Christ-like nature of the bird. Within this passage, roughly lines 158 through 170, the phoenix is joined in its flight by a crowd of birds, who accompany him when its death draws near to the land of the Syrians in a mock-royal procession. The phoenix is referred to in these lines as an *æþelne* [noble one], a *wesan þegn* [illustrious thane], and his flock of birds is referred to as the *corðra mæste* [greatest of retinues], all of which are typical descriptions of human leaders.¹⁴⁵ The moment is echoed in lines 335 through 355, when the birds throng around him again after his rebirth, and is allegorically elucidated in lines 591 through 594 when Christ is described as followed by *fuglas scyne* [shining birds], who are identified as the *gæstas gecorene* [chosen spirits], or the souls of faithful believers.

These human-like titles and hierarchies point toward a more obvious than normal anthropomorphization of the phoenix within this passage, but the process of ‘de-animalization’ inherent in the idea of anthropomorphism is stunted in a number of ways. For one, the hierarchization of animals, especially within a Christian context, is not unique to this work. Susan Crane has commented that, in early insular hagiographies, the many animals paying homage or showing obedience to human saints both act of their own accord (that is, not as divine “finger puppets”) and acknowledge moral and spiritual authority.¹⁴⁶ That is, especially when it comes to spiritual matters, the

¹⁴⁵ *Phoenix* 164, 165, 167.

¹⁴⁶ Crane 37-38.

hierarchies we associate today with human society were not seen as uniquely human in the early medieval period. The appellations given to certain animals, such as the lion, *leo rex omnium animalium et bestiarum*, according to at least one version of the *Physiologus*¹⁴⁷, or even the basilisk being Isidore's king of serpents¹⁴⁸, reinforce this idea. Additionally, this passage is preceded by a description of the destination which the phoenix seeks, *þær no men bugað | eard ond eþel*¹⁴⁹ [where no humans inhabit the land and country], pre-emptively emphasizing the animality of the event. Though the phoenix may resemble a human ruler, he is actively fleeing from human society, human social roles, and anthropomorphization. The bird-retainers, after all, are not actually able to follow the phoenix to his deathbed.

Upon reaching his destination, the phoenix then proceeds to build a nest, which the Old English author poetically calls a *hus*, a house, as often as he calls it a *nest*, or nest. Within lines 182 to 215, which describe the construction process, *hus* is used twice (ll.202, 212) and *nest* twice (ll.189, 215). Describing the immolation and its aftermath, *hus* and *nest* appear once each, in lines 217 and 227 respectively. The careful balance between *hus*, with its human connotations, and *nest*, with its birdlike connotations, is intentional, though the *Phoenix*-poet usurps the human-like aspects of *hus* through a dramatic chiasmus. The passage starts when the phoenix *on þam telgum timbran onginned*

¹⁴⁷ This specific phrase comes from Gebert's C-version, p.373, but it is by no means an uncommon title.

¹⁴⁸ *Etymologies* 12.4.6-9.

¹⁴⁹ *Phoenix* 157-158.

| *nest gearwian*¹⁵⁰ [begins to construct in those branches, to prepare a nest], which is expected and sets the literal scene, but the figurative scene follows soon after. In preparing his dwelling, the phoenix collects *wyrta wynsume* [pleasant spices], *æþel-stenca gehwone* [every noble fragrance], and *torhte frætwe* [splendid ornaments] to decorate, which resemble the trappings of material human wealth (though *wudubleda* [tree-blossoms] are also amongst these adornments).¹⁵¹ The first usage of the term *hus* is, as with the bird-retinue above, pre-empted by a statement of non-humanity: “þær se wilda fugel in þam westenne | ofer heanne beam hus getimbreð”¹⁵² [there the wild bird in that wilderness builds a house at the top of the tree]. Though the phrase *hus getimbreð* would imply human construction, the poet is exceedingly clear that this is a *wilda fugel* doing the construction, and that furthermore it takes place in the *westenne* at the top of a tree, that is to say, almost as far from human settlement as possible.

The *hus*-metaphor, however, is taken further as the bird dwells in *þam solere*,¹⁵³ which Jones translates as a ‘sunbathed spot’, though Bosworth-Toller gives the definition ‘a upper chamber, a soler’, derived from the Latin *solarium*. Soon after this, the poet uses *hus* once again, as indeed *weorðeð his | hus onhæted þurh hador swegl*¹⁵⁴ [his house becomes heated by the bright sun], but this language betrays a dramatic irony. Though the phoenix may have crafted

¹⁵⁰ *Phoenix* 188-189.

¹⁵¹ *Phoenix* 194-195; 200.

¹⁵² *Phoenix* 201-202.

¹⁵³ *Phoenix* 204.

¹⁵⁴ *Phoenix* 212.

himself, much like a human, a solarium within which to receive the sunshine, he does not do so for his own enjoyment or pleasure as a human would. The pleasantness of this entire passage, with such words as *wynsum*, *æþel*, and *swet* being used over and over again, is abruptly cut short:

Wyrta wearniað, willsele stymeð
swetum swæccum, þonne on swole byrneð
*þurh fyres feng fugel mid neste.*¹⁵⁵

[The herbs grow warm, the pleasant hall is scented with sweet fragrances, then, seized by fire the bird burns in flame with his nest.]

Even here, lines 213 and 214a toy with the idea of smoke but do not betray the violence that is to come, and *willsele* reinforces the ideas of the comforts of human building and living. The *Phoenix*-poet, however, makes clear that the *fugel* is burned in flame by fire *mid neste*, with its nest, this word having not been used since the beginning of the passage. The abruptness, both of the inferno and of the switch back into bird-terms, somewhat violently reminds the reader that this is indeed an animal, and though the temptation to impose anthropomorphization is present, it is ultimately incorrect. As if to reinforce this further, the poet calls the nest a *bæl*, a pyre, and *þonne brond þeceð | heoro-dreorges hus*¹⁵⁶ [then the flame covers the house of the disconsolate one].

The house is actually a pyre, not a human dwelling, and both are destroyed by

¹⁵⁵ *Phoenix* 213-215.

¹⁵⁶ *Phoenix* 216-217. *Heoro-dreorges* is an interesting word to use here, as the DOE gives in every other usage the definition “blood-stained, drenched in blood”, while this one instance is given a separate definition of ‘disconsolate’, presumably because of the parallel passage in Lactantius. Even if literal blood is not intended, the violence inherent in the term is clear.

the flames of the sun. Attempting to read the phoenix as one would a human being will only result in being burned.

The final passage which plays on this human-animal divide occurs in lines 267 through 287, as the newly born phoenix collects the bones and dust of his predecessor and buries them within its native land, as a human might for his or her own parents. As previously mentioned, however, this section is a modification of the *Carmen* and of many other accounts of the phoenix, where the phoenix's *eadig epel-lond*¹⁵⁷ [blessed homeland] is a substitution made by the Old English author for Heliopolis or its analogues. The transition from a 'city of the sun' to the bird's own native *ea-lond*¹⁵⁸ [island or perhaps isolated land] emphasizes once more the abandonment of human spaces for natural spaces beholden solely to God. Additionally, the *Phoenix*-poet goes to some lengths to emphasize the bird-like anatomy of the phoenix in this section, referencing its *clam* [claws, talons] and *feper-homa* [feather-covering, wings], and even when using the species-indistinct *fotum*, the phoenix *fotum ymbfehð* [grasps with its feet], an action impossible for human beings yet expected of birds.¹⁵⁹ These anatomic reminders transition seamlessly into a full-on blason of the phoenix in the following section, where the form of the bird is described in all its birdlike glory from crest to tail. Following Lactantius, the Old English

¹⁵⁷ *Phoenix* 279.

¹⁵⁸ *Phoenix* 287. Cf. Appleton, 'The Insular Landscape...' and the discussion on this word below.

¹⁵⁹ *Phoenix* 276-277, 280. The DOE gives *clam* as an attested spelling of *clawu* unique to *The Phoenix*, presumably as a contraction of *clawum*. *Clam* more regularly denotes a fetter or grasp.

poet lists the peacock as its closest accessible parallel, adding to earlier references of the bird's eagle-like appearance.¹⁶⁰

Ultimately, there can be no question as to the animality of the phoenix. Physically and behaviorally he is a bird, through and through, and this animality is given specifically in contrast to humanity. All three passages quoted above are mirrored within the second half of the poem, put in relation with human existence and experience. As mentioned before, the flock of *fugelcynn* are explained as the souls of the holy flocking around Christ. Lines 451-452 describes the *dryhtnes cempa*, solidier of the Lord, *nest wyrceð*, building a nest of his own good deeds, which conjures to mind once again the phoenix's own nest-/house-building process. And the burial of the burnt remains is an image brought up again and again through the poem in relation to the burning of the world at Judgment Day. On that day, the *faeger ond gefealic fugles tacen* [beautiful and delightful sign of the bird] will appear to the faithful as God collects their bones and bodies to raise them from the dead, effectively reversing their own burials.¹⁶¹ The gathering of the burnt bodies by the bird *on fotum*,¹⁶² refined by the fires of doomsday, represent for the believers the end of bodily harm and a renewal first modeled to them by the phoenix.

¹⁶⁰ *Phoenix* 312. Lactantius states that its appearance is in between a peacock and a quail (cf. *Carmen* 143-144), but this is reduced to just the peacock in the Old English.

¹⁶¹ *Phoenix* 508-514, quotation l.510.

¹⁶² *Phoenix* 578.

In each case, the bird sets an example to the human, and the human attempts to or hopes for an emulation of the bird. This is made more explicit by the phoenix's song, which cannot be matched by any instrument or the *hæleþa stefn | ænges on eorþan*¹⁶³ [voice of any man on earth], until Judgment Day when the holy souls of the righteous *song ahebbað | clæne ond gecorene, hergað cyninges þrym, | stefn æfter stefn, stigað to wuldre*¹⁶⁴ [they raise a song, the pure and chosen, they praise the might of the king, voice upon voice, they ascend to glory]. Donna Ellard has argued that *The Phoenix* represents an "interspecies alliance", using a phrase taken from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, where "all physical and behavioral contours have been unframed" and that the ecosystem of the phoenix is "an aerial space of environmental and spiritual interdependence"¹⁶⁵. This is untrue, however: the phoenix makes no alliance with man. The phoenix does not need, does not 'inter-depend' on man. While both serve under God, of course, within *The Phoenix* the phoenix is preferred to and holier than man, something for mankind to strive for, not to connect with. With its ability to represent a great many glorious things and its closeness to the natural world ordered and sustained by God, the animal in this case is *above* the human—and not despite its animality, but *because* of it.

5) *Biblical reference.*

¹⁶³ *Phoenix* 135-136.

¹⁶⁴ *Phoenix* 540-542.

¹⁶⁵ Ellard, Donna Beth. 'Going Interspecies, Going Interlingual, and Flying Away with *The Phoenix*', *Exemplaria* 23:3 (2011). 268-292. Quotations from 291, 292.

All *Physiologus* entries are peppered with biblical references which are used in primarily two ways: if they come at the beginning of the entry, they bluntly mention the animal in some way; or if they come toward the signification part, the quotation reinforces the didactic message.

The Phoenix contains a good amount of biblical references throughout, including the symbol of the seed drawn from 1 Corinthians 15:35-38 in line 242¹⁶⁶; the 'sun of righteousness', *seo soþfæste sunne*, in line 587 derives from Malachi 4:2¹⁶⁷; and the benediction of the blessed in lines 622 through 629 recalls similar language of praise in Isaiah 6:3.¹⁶⁸ These allusions are not explicitly mentioned, and they occur mostly in the second half of the poem when the Old English poet is not directly translating Lactantius's *Carmen*. These examples differ, therefore, from the biblical references within the Latin *Physiologus*, which generally cites the source of its wisdom. The entry for the phoenix, for example, begins with the invocation "Quoniam dixit saluator in euangelio" [The savior said in the gospel] and ends with "Bene ergo Physiologus dicit de phenice" [Physiologus, therefore, speaks well of the phoenix].¹⁶⁹ The deferences to authority exist as well in the Old English *Phoenix*, as the opening half-life is "Hæbbe ic gefrugnen..." [I have heard...], and the final section of the poem begins with "swa us gewritu secgað"¹⁷⁰ [As writings tell us...]. Dispersed throughout there are references to *witgan* [sages], *frod guma* [wise men], and *leorneras* [scholars],¹⁷¹ from whom the author

¹⁶⁶ Blake 72.

¹⁶⁷ Jones 383.

¹⁶⁸ Jones 383, this wording also appears in Revelations 4:8.

¹⁶⁹ Carmody Y-version 108-109. Curley 13-14.

¹⁷⁰ *Phoenix* 1, 655.

¹⁷¹ *Phoenix* 29, 570, 424.

derives the tales and interpretations of the phoenix. Although typical for the medieval period, the invocations of past writers, probably meaning at least Lactantius, the Physiologus, and Ambrose, matches with the typical *Physiologus* entry as well, which was supposedly a collection of information from the Physiologus written down secondhand.

The most similar moment to the *Physiologus* in terms of both deference to authority and biblical quotation, however, comes from lines 546-551:

Ne wene þæs ænig ælda cynnes
 þæt ic lygewordum leoð sonnige,
 write woðcræfte. Gehyrað witedom
 Iobes gieddinga. þurh gæstes blæd
 breostum onbryrded, beald reordade,
 wuldre geweorðad; he þæt word gecwæð:

[Let none of the race of men suspect that I am composing verses from lies, writing with poetic artifice. Listen to the prophecy of Job's verse. Encouraged in his heart by inspiration from the Spirit, the man who was honored with glory spoke forthrightly, declared this utterance:]¹⁷²

The defensiveness of the poet is a common trope amongst medieval writers discussing marvellous and miraculous things, but in this case the *ælda cynnes*, marked out for their disbelief, have a direct parallel within the phoenix *Physiologus* entry: the Jews. The opening of that entry begins with a quotation from Christ about his ability to resurrect, and Jews are specifically mentioned as being angered by these words and then as foolish, given the proof of the phoenix. Their role as quintessential nonbelievers, although not explicit within the *Phoenix*, still exists in the background of the text.

¹⁷² *Phoenix* 546-551, translation from Jones.

What follows this introduction in the Old English poem is a poetic paraphrase of Job 29:18, the infamous verse picked up by Tertullian as referring to the phoenix, though it in fact referred to (and was translated as in the Vulgate and most modern bibles) a palm tree. Given the earlier emphasis on the construction of the house/nest, this is an appropriate verse to quote: "I shall die in my nest, and as a palm tree shall multiply my days."¹⁷³ The paraphrase turns this short verse into an extended 17-line monologue, which should not be surprising given its appropriateness in its mistranslated form. Robert E. Bjork has written about the tradition of Job within early English literature, and although not an extensive tradition, the long-suffering man of God does appear in the writings of Ælfric, as well as *The Phoenix* and *Christ II*, both found in the Exeter Book.¹⁷⁴ Building off N.F. Blake's association of Job with the suffering Christian on Earth,¹⁷⁵ Bjork identifies Job as a type of Christ as well, emphasizing the multivalent interpretive possibilities and concluding that Job is, like the phoenix itself, a "dual symbol... that participates fully in and helps fulfil the kaleidoscopic technique that characterizes the poem."¹⁷⁶

This verse then, serves both purposes for which the Latin *Physiologus* uses biblical verse. It is the only verse in the bible to mention the phoenix, and so quoting it establishes the biblical basis of the phoenix's existence and worth as

¹⁷³ Quotation from Jones's footnotes, p.383.

¹⁷⁴ Bjork, Robert. 'The Symbolic Use of Job in Ælfric's Homily of Job, *Christ II*, and *The Phoenix*.' in *Latin Learning and English Lore*, vol 2, eds. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, Andy Orchard, University of Toronto Press 2005, 315-330.

¹⁷⁵ Blake 88-89.

¹⁷⁶ Bjork 327.

an interpretive object. This mirrors the usage of biblical quotation which foreground *Physiologus* entries, though the passage comes toward the end of the work as a whole. The typical usage for quotations appearing later in the entry is also present, as the expansion of the verse allows the poet to reinforce his own argument regarding the interpretation of the bird with a scriptural basis. Thus existence and didactic lesson are brought together within the words of Job, a person who embodies the differing allegorical meanings of the phoenix itself. This grand synthesis comes within the poem during a description of the refining fires of Judgment Day, and his 'song' mirrors the song of the saved believers mimicking the phoenix, and presents the image of a human worthy of emulation. Of course, that human is worthy of emulation specifically because he emulates the phoenix himself, and thus the circularity and symbolic layering of this passage continues ad infinitum.

Wonder and the Wonder

The third part of any *Physiologus* entry, aside from the animal and its moral, is the wonder, and the word *wonder* serves many purposes here. For one, *the wonder* is a thing, the object or behavior or fact which inspires *wonder*, the emotion. The wonder of an animal is what sets that animal apart from any other, it is what marks that animal as noteworthy, and it cannot be an everyday or 'normal' thing lest, returning to Augustine, "daily familiarity

gradually blunts the edge of wonder."¹⁷⁷ The phoenix in particular is full of wonders, and especially in medieval England it is above all unique. There is only one phoenix at a time, set apart from all other birds, animals, and beings. Even its sex is a marker of uniqueness, as *God ana wat* [only God knows]... *hu his gecynde bið | wifhades þe weres*¹⁷⁸ [what his nature is, female or male]. The Old English poet does not offer, as Lactantius does, the possibility that the bird is sexless, but rather implies that its bare, physical anatomy is something no human or mortal can understand. The bird is twice called *an-haga* or *an-hoga*, a word often translated as 'solitary one' but may also contain connotations of lone warriors and battle formations¹⁷⁹, the first time immediately after its introduction in line 85. In fact, the Old English poet constructs the entire opening of the *Phoenix*, mirroring Lactantius's approach, around the ideas of uniqueness and wonder.

As discussed in the introduction, there are two types of difference used in the production of wonder: experiential and geographic. The opening line of the poem, *Hæbbe ic gefrugnen þætte is feor heonan* [I have heard that there exists, far from here...], immediately expresses both of these. *Hæbbe ic gefrugnen* establishes not only the deference to authority discussed earlier, it also distances the author from the experience being described. The tale of the

¹⁷⁷ Augustine. *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, Penguin Books, 2003. Bk XVI, ch4, p.970.

¹⁷⁸ *The Phoenix* 356-357.

¹⁷⁹ *The Phoenix* 87, 346. *-haga* in compounds means 'hedge', and a *wighaga* was a battle-hedge of warriors. An *an-haga* is therefore one separated from this battle-hedge. Cf. Massey, Jeff and Karma DeGruy. 'Riddling Meaning from Old English *-haga* Compounds', *Studies in Philology* 112.1 (Winter 2015). 24-38. Their argument includes *anhaga* and *anhoga* being identified as different words, though the DOE lists them as variable spellings.

phoenix is removed from the reader in the single degree, of author to reader, and in a second degree, from the author's source to the author. The use of *feor heonan*, which is followed in the next line by *east-dælum on æpelast londa* [in the eastern part the noblest of lands], separates the phoenix far from the familiar geography of England's far-western position in the world. Lines 3-5 then emphasize the inaccessibility of this land, *Nis se foldan sceat | ofer middan-geard mongum gefere | folc-agendra* [That area of earth is inaccessible to many across the world who rule over peoples]¹⁸⁰, though whether it is inaccessible to all men or just the evildoers has been debated by critics.¹⁸¹ Regardless, its distance and solitariness are re-expressed in line nine, *Ænlic is þæt ig-lond* [Unique is that island/isolated land], which either identifies the phoenix's home as surrounded by water or as an isolated country. The DOE gives a possible interpretation of *ig-lond* and the later-used *ealond*, normally translated as 'island', as "distant land and their inhabitants" in a biblical context and suggests *The Phoenix* may be using this term, though the biblical references are generally of heathen spaces. In his translation Jones prefers the reading of all references to *ig-lond* as 'isolated land' without the water, though Helen Appleton provides a compelling reading of the phoenix's island home as a reflection of English insularity.¹⁸² The usage of *Ænlic* here additionally echoes

¹⁸⁰ Translation from Jones.

¹⁸¹ See Bammsberger, Alfred. 'The Old English *Phoenix*, Lines 3b-6', *Notes and Queries* 51.3 (September 2004), 223-225. for the interpretation that it is open to some humans. Bammsberger takes Blake as his primary foil, but E.K.C. Gorst disputes this in Gorst, E.K.C. 'Latin Sources of the Old English *Phoenix*', *Notes and Queries* 53.2 (June 2006), 136-142. Gorst claims Avitus's *De Origine* as a possible source of this passage and thus prefers Blake's rendition.

¹⁸² Cf. Appleton, 'The Insular Landscape...'

the future uses of *an-haga* and *an-hoga* which characterize the bird itself, as well as the later physical description of the bird which states *Se fugel is on hiwe | æghwæs ænlic*¹⁸³ [In appearance, the bird is unique in every way].

The topography of this earthly paradise is also described as alien and singular. As the *witgan* reveal in their writings, the radiant land of the phoenix is *twelfum herra, | folde fæðm-rimes... þonne ænig þara beorga þe her beorhte mid us | hea hlifiað under heofon-tunglum*¹⁸⁴ [a land twelve fathom-measures higher... than any of the majestic mountains which tower high under the stars of heaven here with us]. Aside from the superlative nature of the paradisaical land, the phrase *her... mid us* most clearly expresses a geographic-cum-experiential difference. The *beorga*, *beorhte* and *hea*, are magnificent in their own right, yet they are *her*, here, and they are *mid us*, with us, implying that the location of the phoenix's grove is *not* here, it is *not* with us. The poet does not just say that this land is higher than any place on Earth or in the world, but rather than any place within our possible realm of experience. Whether that *us* implies the English people, just the author and the reader, or all of mankind is inconsequential, as its primary purpose is to other the geography and topography of that distant land. This *mid us* appears also seven lines earlier, as the reader is told that within the land itself there are no mountains, no hills, no rocky cliffs standing high, *swa her mid us*¹⁸⁵ [as there are

¹⁸³ *Phoenix* 311-312.

¹⁸⁴ *The Phoenix* 28-29; 31-32.

¹⁸⁵ *The Phoenix* 24.

here with us]. Not only is the height of this land superlative when it emphasizes inaccessibility and majesty, but the lack of height is also superlative when it emphasizes lack of difficulty or barrenness, and in both cases it is a better place than we, denizens of a lower world, can ever hope to experience.

The lack of difficult terrain is part of a greater project within *The Phoenix* to isolate the bird and its homeland from human experience, specifically negative human experience. There are several sections within the poem which rely on a poetic list of negatives, such as in the opening section:

<i>Ne mæg þær</i>	<i>ren ne snaw,</i>
<i>ne forstes fnæst,</i>	<i>ne fyres blæst,</i>
<i>ne hægles hryre,</i>	<i>ne hrimes dryre,</i>
<i>ne sunnan hætu,</i>	<i>ne sincaldu,</i>
<i>ne wearm weder,</i>	<i>ne winterscur</i>
<i>wihte gewyrdan,</i>	<i>ac se wong seomað</i>
<i>eadig ond onsund.</i>	

[There neither rain nor snow, gust of cold nor blast of flame, torrent of hail nor fall of frost, heat of the sun nor lasting cold, warm weather nor winter shower does any harm at all; rather the plain endures, blessed and free from hurt.]¹⁸⁶

This list is repeated soon after, in a varied format from lines 57 through 63, where it is directly translating a similar passage in the *Carmen*, lines 21-24. The Old English author, however, found it fit to add these earlier in the description and then repeat them, almost in full, where Lactantius had placed them. These lists of meteorological experiential negatives are accompanied by a list of

¹⁸⁶ *The Phoenix* 14-20, translation from Jones.

physical and emotional ills, also absent within the land of the phoenix. The poet, translating and amplifying Lactantius, is not only emphasizing the goodness of the phoenix and the paradisaical qualities of its surroundings, but is also removing both from all possibility of human experience. The resonances with the garden of Eden allude to the fallen state of mankind and bring to mind the ailments of human existence caused by human folly, all of the negatives which are themselves negated in this neo-Eden. The phoenix is not human, and we as humans cannot be or know the phoenix, we can only wonder at what is outside our ken.

This introduction to the land ends with a statement that *No gebrocen weorþeð | holt on hiwe* [the appearance of the wood will not be destroyed] while *se halga stenc* [the holy fragrance] remains and that *þæt onwended ne bið | æfre to ealdre*¹⁸⁷ [that will never, ever change] until God destroys his creation at the end of the world. This is not the first time Judgment Day is brought to mind, as earlier in the passage the woods are described as fruitful always, and *ne him lig sceþeð | æfre to ealdre, ærþon edwenden | worulde geweorðe*¹⁸⁸ [fire will never, ever harm them until the end of the world happens]. Once again the poet is using negative statements to reinforce both the blessedness of this location and the fallen nature of the human lands,¹⁸⁹ except this time he ties these to the end of all days, the ultimate negation of human suffering. Once all

¹⁸⁷ *The Phoenix* 80-81; 82-83.

¹⁸⁸ *The Phoenix* 39-41.

¹⁸⁹ Both the absent horrors of human pain and suffering and the labor-less bounty of the plants within the phoenix's homeland directly address God's judgment on both women (painful childbirth) and men (toiling the land) in Genesis 3.

is consumed in fire, as the phoenix models for us in its self-immolation, the experiential difference will be removed and it is no coincidence that at this point, referencing Judgment Day, the phoenix is finally introduced. As the ultimate wonder of this piece, the phoenix not only embodies an experience which is beyond our experience, but also the hope for human attainment of that transcendence.

What It All Means

The invocations of Judgment Day continue throughout *The Phoenix*. Aside from the mentions quoted above, there is a passing reference to the end of the world in lines 180-181, and the lengthy description of Doomsday judgments from 490 to 545, referred to in 489 as *fyres cyrne* [the coming of fire], retroactively colors every mention of heat and flame with an apocalyptic flavor. Balancing all of this eschatology are references to Eden, the fall of man, and the creation of the world. The comparisons between the land of the phoenix and Eden are implicit until line 393, which begins an elegaic section on the follies of Adam and Eve. Notable here are the references to the serpent and the apple. Adam and Eve are deprived of their homeland *þurh nædran niþ*¹⁹⁰ [through the vexatiousness of the serpent], directly contrasting the salvation that can be attained through the phoenix. The two *æppel unrædum*

¹⁹⁰ *Phoenix* 413.

*ofer est godes | byrgdon forbodene*¹⁹¹ [tasted, ill-advisedly, the forbidden apple against God's kindness], and the distinct mention of *æppel* here mirrors the burnt ashes of the phoenix which appear *æples gelicnes*¹⁹² [in the likeness of an apple] earlier. In both cases the phoenix is a remedied version of the living, organic catalysts of mankind's downfall.

Thus the timeline of *The Phoenix* extends the full length of the biblical timeline and the image of the phoenix itself is woven with references to both the beginning of all things and the end of all things. These, along with the obvious references to salvation and the resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection of believers and holy men, encompass the full gamut of basic Christian beliefs. *The Phoenix* is not just one lesson on biblical history or doctrinal belief, but rather is a carefully textured mishmash of every essential tenet of the faith. The phoenix itself, as a creation of God untouched by sin, like our ancestors in Genesis were, and as the object of its own fiery destruction, like our descendents will be according to Revelations, is the perfect symbol for this complete dogma.

The Old English author even inserts his own devotional and poetic process within the phoenix myth, as after the bird's resurrection it flies across the world and *Ðonne wundrað weras ofer eorþan | wlite ond wæstma, ond gewritum cyþað, | mundum mearciað on marm-stane*¹⁹³ [Then people all over the earth

¹⁹¹ *Phoenix* 403-404.

¹⁹² *Phoenix* 230.

¹⁹³ *Phoenix* 331-333.

marvel at its growth and countenance, and they make known with writings, with their hands they inscribe in marble-stone]. This moment clearly models both what he, as an author, is doing in response to receiving this story and what we, as readers, should do as well. The Old English poet tells us that *Ʒeoda wƷitað, | wundraƷ wafiað*¹⁹⁴ [The nations gaze upon, they are amazed with wonder] at the sight of the phoenix, and in both of these passages the emphasis on *wundriað, wundraƷ, and wafiað*, bound together alliteratively, demonstrates that the phoenix is the wonder that the audience, as readers, Christians, and human beings, should wonder at.

It is the wondrous nature of the phoenix that grabs attention, that makes the story possible and worthy of being written down. It reinforces the reader's experiential lack, it entertains, and it mimics in itself the unknowability of God. And it is the animal nature of the phoenix that makes it a possible site for the myriad of interpretative possibilities. When viewing the bird, the people of the world can see both the majesty of God and Christ's resurrection while also seeing themselves in the bird, as it serves as a symbol for their own resurrection at the end of days. The ontological alterities of wonder and animality present the paradoxes which can bridge the divide between the beginning and the end, between mankind and the Godhead.

¹⁹⁴ *Phoenix* 341-342.

These paradoxes, part of our fallen world, will be resolved after Judgment Day. At the end of the poem the *Phoenix*-author gives another list of negations, echoing those at the beginning of the poem:

*Ne bið him on þam wicum wiht to sorge,
wroht ne weþel ne gewindagas,
hungor se hata ne se hearda þurst,
yrnþu ne ylðo.*

[In that place there will be nothing at all to cause them pain, neither hurt nor poverty nor days of struggle, neither burning hunger nor cruel thirst, neither misery nor old age.]¹⁹⁵

This time, however, these negations are *not* inaccessible. This is a description of the fate awaiting those that survive the refining fires. Human beings will attain the perfection embodied by the bird, and wonder will cease when *Hinn se æþela cyning | forgifeð goda gehwylc*¹⁹⁶ [The noble king will give to them every good thing] instead. As prophesied in 1 Corinthians 13, humans know now only in part, but at the end of days their knowledge will be complete, and the experiential lack which allows for wonder will no longer exist.

Did Medieval People Believe in the Phoenix?

Returning now to the central question of this dissertation, what can we say about whether the early English people believed in the phoenix? Without hesitation we can say that yes, in the case of the Exeter Book *Phoenix* poem, the

¹⁹⁵ *Phoenix* 611-614. Translation Jones's.

¹⁹⁶ *Phoenix* 614-615.

phoenix is a bird which the author believes in, and which the author believes people *should* believe in.

Another question, however, perhaps equally as compelling if not moreso, is whether the phoenix is, as Kantrowitz claims, “a real bird existing in the real world”¹⁹⁷. Reality is not, after all, a necessary component of belief, but it is of ‘scientific knowledge’, ‘natural history’, and other such anachronistic knowledge structures. Critical discussions, well-summarized in part by Honegger,¹⁹⁸ have discussed the ‘reality’ of the bird versus the ‘symbolism’ of the bird, with several compromises claiming it is both. Honegger himself lands on such a compromise, stating that the “main function” of the bird within the poem is “to illustrate divine truths”, although the phoenix is “obviously considered to be a real bird”¹⁹⁹. To these critics, it appears that belief in the phoenix was, to use Tertullian’s word, ‘unshakeable’. But can we honestly say, as O’Donnell claims, that to the Old English poet the phoenix was an “accepted fact of natural history”²⁰⁰?

Absolutely not.

From its earliest historical attestation up until the 10th century English, doubt is a crucial aspect of the phoenix’s existence. Hesiod’s riddle places the phoenix in between the real animals, the crow, the deer, and the raven, and the unreal or mythological Nymphs- it is unclear as to which side of reality the

¹⁹⁷ Kantrowitz, Joanne Spencer. ‘The Anglo-Saxon ‘Phoenix’ and Tradition’, *Philological Quarterly* 43:1-13 (1964). 1.

¹⁹⁸ Honegger 60-62.

¹⁹⁹ Honegger 74-75.

²⁰⁰ O’Donnell 164.

phoenix falls. This liminal existence is repeated through every mention, as the bird is treated either with suspicion or as a unique and special symbol, unlike any other animal or bird. Even within dogmatic and didactic texts, the phoenix is singled out as uniquely qualified to justify the more unbelievable and unbelieved parts of Christian doctrine. The bird's entry in the *Physiologus*, which uses it as proof that resurrection, and thus Christ's resurrection, is possible, conspicuously attempts to avoid doubt, yet in doing so it merely lays that doubt bare for all to see. If the phoenix were an unquestionably real bird, how could there be so many questions as to its reality? We can only conclude that it was not 'known', it was *believed* in.

The Old English *Phoenix* is a poem built upon belief, and thus upon doubt. The frequent invocations of a biblical timeline, including creation, salvation, and destruction, encapsulate the most critical parts of Christian belief. The phoenix, by being beyond human experience as both a special creation and as a non-human animal, emulates the mystery and unknowability of God and of the dual nature of Christ as man and God. The multivalent symbolism of the self-immolation as the passion of Christ, the destruction of the world, and the purifying fires also model the self-effacement necessary for humans to achieve holiness. Each new reading provides a new interpretation, a new angle with which to see the Christian belief structure. And the phoenix itself, as a singular, unique, and inaccessible creature, cannot be either proven nor disproven within the limited world of the early English, if not within the

limited world of the entirety of human knowledge. This is a crucial aspect which allows the phoenix to serve as such an effective vehicle for belief— an ever-present doubt which, like doubt of God or doubt of Christ, must constantly be guarded against. Belief in the phoenix essentially is a 'practice round' for belief in Christ, an exercise for training cerebral pathways built into its usage as a Christian symbol. If one can believe in the phoenix, one can believe in Christ. And, according to its *Physiologus* entry, if one believes in Christ, one *must* believe in the phoenix.

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CHAPTER TWO VOYAGE

This second chapter is a departure from all things English and instead focuses on the seafaring saints of early medieval Irish literature written in Latin. Though separated by spoken, vernacular languages and a short boat ride, the early medieval English and Irish were both cultures that flourished in Latin learning, Christian thought, and literary output. As a conscious rebellion against strict periodization and ethnic/linguistic divides, this dissertation seeks to find the connective threads between these neighboring cultures and consider broader contexts in which the physiologic tradition is found and communicated, including inter-cultural ones. Unsurprisingly, travel literature from both islands provides plenty of examples of interaction between the two cultures and between humanity and the animal world.

The *Navigatio sancti brendani* ('The Voyage of St Brendan'), broadly, will be the focus of this chapter, as its portrayals of distinct and varied animal encounters throughout the Northern Atlantic Ocean give strong insights into the nature of symbolic opacity and reliance on authoritative interpretation, corresponding to the first trait of the physiologic tradition outlined in the introduction. Like the introductory lines to the Old English *Physiologus* poems and the descriptions of the *The Phoenix* in the previous chapter, the *Navigatio* constructs and engages with a zoology and a geography beyond human

understanding. This is not surprising, however, given the ‘unreal’ space in which the majority of the *Navigatio*, which has been called “the most elaborate fiction in Latin from the early Middle Ages”,²⁰¹ occurs.

The Navigatio Sancti Brendani

The story begins in an Irish monastery, where the abbot and founder St Brendan hears from a traveling monk, one St Barrind, the tale of the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*, the Promised Land of the Saints, a paradise where a year feels like a fortnight and it is never night, for “lux enim illius est Christus” [the light of that place is Christ].²⁰² Brendan sets out with seventeen monks in a rickety hide-clad boat into the western ocean, toward the summer solstice, and begins his journey of seven years. Three of these fourteen monks are not invited by Brendan aboard, but rather beg for their places on his *currach*, which he begrudgingly accepts. Before the journey ends, all three are lost- one to a sudden though redeemed death; one to an earthly paradise; and the last to the very flames of Hell.

Along the way he encounters an island of gigantic sheep, an abbey where candles are lit by mystical flaming arrows, sea monsters who battle in the

²⁰¹ O'Loughlin, Thomas. "Distant Islands: The Topography of Holiness in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*." *The Medieval Mystical Tradition, Exeter Symposium VI*. Ed. Marion Glasscoe. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999. 1-19.

²⁰² “Lux enim illius est Christus.” *Navigatio* 80. Textual citations are from Carl Selmer’s definitive Latin edition. Selmer, Carl, ed. *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis: From Early Latin Manuscripts*. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame, 1959. Translations are largely based off of John J. O'Meara's translation of Selmer’s text, with emendations proposed by James Carney.

waves, a griffon, a pillar made of crystal that extends far into the sky, and even Judas Iscariot himself, amongst many other wonders. His seven years are cyclical, as he returns annually to specific islands at specific times, including the mystical Community of St Ailbe, the isle of sheep with its mysterious-yet-helpful steward, and of course our all-important whale, Jasconius. The cycle is finally broken and the fifteen Irishmen, having lost the latecomers, encounter Paul the Hermit, who directs them at last to their final destination. The lengthy voyage ends with a brief visit to the Promised Land, a discussion with a youth of that place, and then Brendan's final return home to his abbey at Clonfert, where he recounts his tale and dies.

The fantastic encounters found within St Brendan's tale set it apart from traditional saint's lives, and yet it is this blend of theological grounding and marvelous voyaging that make the legend so compelling. This blend, however, is not without problems. Based partially on Old Irish *immrama*, partially on traditional hagiography, and utilizing sources of inspiration from biblical apocrypha, native Irish religious tracts, accounts of desert fathers, and more,²⁰³ the *Navigatio* gives a fractured view into the world beyond our own, one which is fraught with contradictions, symbols, and paradox. One of these many sources, of course, is the *Physiologus*, which continued its relationship with the *Navigatio* beyond mere inspiration. Although the *Physiologus* predates

²⁰³ These include Athanasius's *Vita Antonii*, Rufinus's *Historia monachorum*, and St Jerome's *Vita pauli primi eremita*. For further discussion, see the 'Sources' section (21-22) in O'Meara, John J. and Jonathan M. Wooding. "The Latin Version." in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*. eds. W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, University of Exeter Press, 2002. 13-25.

the *Navigatio* by a good few centuries, Dora Faraci has argued that these two texts became so closely linked that the path of influence was reciprocated and later iterations of the *Physiologus*, especially the pictorial bestiary tradition emerging in the 12th century, used the *Navigatio* as a source of its details on the whale.²⁰⁴

It is no surprise that tales of the half-mythical physiologic beasts swam across the English Channel and Irish Sea with ease, finding homes both in learned English and Irish traditions. Its English name, 'Fastitocalon', actually appears to have come from an Irish bastardization of the Latin *Physiologus*'s 'aspidochelone'.²⁰⁵ DeAngelo's analysis of *The Whale*, mentioned in the previous chapter, directly compares Fastitocalon with the *Navigatio*'s own distinct cetacean, Jasconius, claiming that they "borrow from an established Christian tradition of whales and other sea creatures that operate as instruments of punishment or instruction to those who lose their ability to discern the proper path on account of their pride."²⁰⁶ In his analysis of the *Navigatio*, however, he problematizes the rather benign Jasconius to fit better with the undoubtedly evil Fastitocalon. The comparisons between the two beasts are indeed easy and numerous: both have unwary seafarers land upon their backs, both stories have those seafarers build fires, and both have the

²⁰⁴ Faraci, Dora. ' *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* and its relationship with *Physiologus*'. *Romanobarbarica* 11 (1991), pp. 149–73.

²⁰⁵ Squires 71-2, n.7b. She cites S. Bugge's 'Studien über das Beowulfepos', which proposes the possible reconstruction through Middle Irish of aspidocelone > *faspidocalon > *fascidocalon > *fascitocalon, the last of which was misread by the OE scribe as the 'Fastitocalon' we see in the Exeter Book, confusing the 'c' for a 't' which are quite similar in insular scripts.

²⁰⁶ DeAngelo 289.

whale suddenly shift to the chagrin of their inhabitants. DeAngelo, however, misreads Jasconius, claiming that “the creature dives,” which invites a stronger parallel to Fastitocalon, who “...semninga on sealtne wæg / mid þa noþe niþer gewiteþ”²⁰⁷ [suddenly, into the salty way, with recklessness departs below]. In fact, the *Navigatio* clearly states that “Porro illa insula ferebatur in oceanum. Potuit autem ignis ardens videri super duo miliaria” [Then the island was born out into the sea. Moreover, the burning fire was able to be seen more than two miles away].²⁰⁸ Jasconius does not dive, he simply moves away, remaining at the surface at all times. The connections with the older *Physiologus* tradition of the whale-as-island still exist, and the precarity of the situation is still forefront in both texts, but Jasconius’s character is more complicated than the straight allegory of the devil found in *The Whale*.

There is much more to say about these two beasts, and more will be said, yet treading bullet point by bullet point through an interpretive schema of Jasconius, as I have done for the phoenix in the previous chapter, is unnecessary and would be putting undue emphasis on Jasconius to the detriment of the rest of the *Navigatio*. As I will argue, the entire text is constructed around personified and embodied divine riddling, and the whale is but a single part of the many animal and non-animal wonders encountered in the many diverse yet largely discrete sections. The island-hopping, episodic nature of the text structurally mirrors the *Physiologus* in its separation and

²⁰⁷ *The Whale* 27-28.

²⁰⁸ *Navigatio* 21.

one-by-one treatment of wonders, though the *Navigatio* obviously connects them in an overarching narrative not present in the *Physiologus*. Jasconius, just like Fastitoclax and the Aspidochelone, is a single entry in a greater menagerie.

A Mystical Geography

In one particularly memorable episode of the *Navigatio*, Brendan and his monks wander into an area of the ocean with completely clear water, “mare clarum ita ut possent uidere quicquid subter erat” [so clear that they could see whatever was underneath them].²⁰⁹ What they see is horrifying: “diuersa genera bestiarum iacentes super arenam... pre multitudine tali uidebantur sicut ciuitas in girum, adplicantes capita ad posteriora iacendo” [different kinds of beasts lying on the sand below... so numerous that they looked like a city of circles as they lay, their heads touching their tails].²¹⁰ The monks are terrified, but Brendan marvels at their foolishness and asks them, “...cur timetis istas? Nonne Deus omnium bestiarum est Dominus noster Ihesus Christus, qui potest humiliare omnia animantia?” [Why are you afraid of those? Is not our Lord Jesus Christ God of all beasts, and can he not humble all living things?].²¹¹ The allegory for life here is obvious: Brendan and his men

²⁰⁹ *Navigatio* 56-7. O’Meara translates *bestiarum* as ‘fish’, but Selmer gives no alternative readings to suggest this. It is perhaps just for clarity.

²¹⁰ *Navigatio* 57.

²¹¹ *Navigatio* 57.

are living on the surface of an opaque world with monstrous, horrifying things just below the surface, beasts gathered in cities and circling humankind as prey. Only through faith in and devotion to God are people saved from these horrors. Humans don't acknowledge this because they cannot see the terrors which the clear sea would reveal and their ignorance shields them, not only from fear but also from a deeper understanding of the glory of God. Furthermore, it is only within this exceptional voyage that the opacity of the sea is dissipated, showing Brendan and his monks the clear, terrifying truth.

It is precisely that concept, of knowledge of the world's wonders leading to knowledge of spiritual truth, that permeates and drives forward the plot of the *Navigatio*. The entire text is essentially an extended meditation on the notion of wonder and the voyage is an ongoing process of discovery. This is not merely the discovery of new geography, but predominantly the discovery of new spiritual truths, making the voyage not just a physical journey, but largely a psychological one. On the final island, the Promised Land of the Saints, Brendan is told that the seven year long circular voyaging was imposed upon him by God in order that the monk may see *diversa sua secreta*, God's varied mysteries.²¹² The final act of Brendan before his death at the end of the text is to relate this story, and all its varied mysteries, to the people of his homeland, and the *Navigatio* of course is itself a relation of that story Brendan told. Thus, the journey of Brendan also becomes the journey of the *Navigatio's* reader- just

²¹² *Navigatio* 80.

as God showed these mysteries to Brendan, now the *Navigatio*-author (having received them ultimately from Brendan) is showing these mysteries to their audience. Brendan's wonder, and that of his traveling brethren, is designed to preempt or mirror the reader's wonder, their disbelief the reader's disbelief, and considering how inaccessible traveling past the edge of the world was to the majority of medieval peoples, the text of the *Navigatio* was designed as a stand-in or simulacrum of that journey for the untraveled layman. Wonder, however, is also a product of geographical and experiential difference, and the marginal positioning of Ireland gave the Irish a unique geographical perspective within the medieval Christian world.

The earliest extant manuscripts of the *Navigatio* come from the continent, copied by what was probably an Irish monk in exile in Lotharingia, in modern day France.²¹³ Two tenth century manuscripts of this early tale exist, now housed in London and Munich,²¹⁴ and the story itself found most of its life on the continent, being translated into many vernacular languages with over 120 manuscript versions surviving.²¹⁵ Clara Strijbosch, responsible for much of the recent scholarship and collations of scholarship on the Brendan legend, has posited that the *Navigatio* is derived from an earlier text, one which also led to the collection of texts known as the *Vita Brendani*, a more traditionally

²¹³ Strijbosch, Clara. "Searching for a Versatile Saint: Introduction." *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 7-16. Quotation from 2.

²¹⁴ Mackley, J. S. *The Legend of St. Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions*. Leiden: Brill, 2008. 14. Those manuscripts are Brit. Lib. Add. 36736 and Clim. 17740.

²¹⁵ Burgess, Glyn S. and W. R. J. Barron, eds. *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*. Exeter: U of Exeter, 2002. Quotation from 2.

hagiographic narrative that was often conflated with sections of the *Navigatio*.²¹⁶ Both purport to tell the story of the historical St Brendan of Clonfert, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries and was famed as one of the 'Twelve Apostles of Ireland,' establishing numerous monasteries and traveling extensively.²¹⁷ Brendan of Clonfert eventually became Brendan the Navigator due to stories of his journeys, which verifiably include visiting St Columba at Iona in modern day Scotland, but reportedly include Wales, the Orkneys, and Brittany, and legendarily include Newfoundland and even the Caribbean.²¹⁸

For at least the past century, scholars have attempted to 'decode' the text for its geographic reality,²¹⁹ pointing toward the similarities between the Island of the Sheep and the Faroe Islands or the descriptions of Hell and the smoky mountain with volcanic Iceland.²²⁰ John J. O'Meara, author of the preeminent English translation of the text, states that the monasticism of the piece "is a

²¹⁶ Strijbosch 1-3.

²¹⁷ O'Meara, 'Introduction' ix. Also Mackley, *The Legend...* 43-50. The 'Twelve Apostles of Ireland' moniker comes from a much later text, the *Dhá Aspal Déag na hÉireann*. For more information cf. Mac Mathuna, 'The Irish Life...' 148-9.

²¹⁸ Burgess, 'The Life and Legend...' 7-9. The verifiable account to Iona comes from another saint's life, the *Vita Columba*, written by St Columba's student, Adomnan.

²¹⁹ The most famous and most dramatic of these attempts came in 1976 when Tim Severin built a leather vessel and sailed it from Ireland to Newfoundland, using only the specifications for a boat laid out in the Brendan text, along with advanced navigation and communication equipment, resupplying stations along the way, and at one point a Faroese towboat. His effort, in order to prove that it was possible for Irish monks to have achieved this feat, is indicative of a greater interest in the geographic and historical 'reality' of Brendan's legend. For more on Severin, see O'Meara, John J. "In the Wake of the Saint: *The Brendan Voyage*, an Epic Crossing of the Atlantic by Leather Boat." *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000. 109-112.

²²⁰ For a more thorough look at the geographic comparisons, see Wooding, Jonathan M. "Monastic Voyaging and the *Navigatio*." *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000. 226-245. He, rightly, demolishes the notion that Brendan made it to any part of the 'New World.'

firm basis of reality in the story of Brendan's voyage,"²²¹ which echoes Cynthia Bourgeault's claim that the text "seems to lack fanciful elements and to be characterized by a solid realism," reminding us that the text is "about monks, by monks, and at least in its original manuscript context, for monks."²²² Meanwhile, allegorical interpretations abound, including those by Dorothy Ann Bray, Thomas O'Loughlin, and J. S. Mackley, whose book on the relation between the *Navigatio* and Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic is one of the fullest critical accounts of the tale in recent times.²²³ These allegorical or psychological interpretations pull away from any strict understanding of the historicity of the piece, focusing on the immaterial, internal, monastic mindscape instead of actual abbeys or real, traversable seas. Peter Christian Jacobsen has taken perhaps the most middle of the road view, remarking that with regards to "the style of the narrative... realistic descriptions of detail are mingled with fantastic events, the sources of which are hard to identify. It is a story filled with unexplained elements which remain open to the imagination."²²⁴

Even when it comes to clear geographic detail, critical disagreement persists. Jonathan M. Wooding, for example, claims that "the *Navigatio* is set in

²²¹ O'Meara, 'Introduction' xi.

²²² Bourgeault, Cynthia. "Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio*." *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 109-122. Quotation from 110-1.

²²³ Bray, Dorothy Ann. "Allegory in *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*." *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000. 175-86., O'Loughlin, Thomas.

"Distant Islands: The Topography of Holiness in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*." *The Medieval Mystical Tradition, Exeter Symposium VI*. Ed. Marion Glasscoe. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999. 1-19.

²²⁴ Jacobsen, Peter C. "The Island of the Birds in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*." *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 105-22.

an identifiable historical and geographical context"²²⁵ while Bertrand Westphal, in his book on space/place theory, directly contradicts this, claiming that "no attempt was made to account for the physical, *objective* world, but only for a world designed by God and recognized by men."²²⁶ Both Wooding and Westphal overlook details within these broad statements, specifically the existence within the text both of clearly historical and clearly fictional places, such as the Brendan's Seat in Ireland and the gigantic pillar made of crystal and silver.

Much as I do in the 'Phoenix' chapter, however, I would argue here that the geography of the *Navigatio* is to be believed in, not to be understood as a tangible, material ('real') place. Its existence, however, as a liminal space between the identifiable, material world and a purely theologically-inflected land of allegory, was mirrored by real-life geographic understanding at the time, as the geographic knowledge of Insular cultures throughout the Middle Ages clearly placed Ireland at the very edge of the world. Some of the earliest maps still extant, such as the Cotton and Hereford *mappae mundi*, follow Isidore of Seville's typical T and O pattern, with Jerusalem at its center, Rome quite close to that center, and the Atlantic islands at its farthest margins.²²⁷

Whereas modern maps typically use the mapmaker's home as a centerpoint,

²²⁵ Wooding 227.

²²⁶ Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Quotation from 58, emphasis Westphal's. It should be noted that Westphal is not a Brendan scholar, but he specifically conjures the tale several times over the course of his work.

²²⁷ Lavezzo, Kathy. *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2006. 1-21.

these maps, drawn up in the North Atlantic, reserve that position for the holiest and most spiritual of places and relegates its own existence much further away. The Hereford *mappa mundi* even decorates its borders with various monstrous heads, one of which is shown spewing flames more or less into western Scotland. In a very tangible sense these maps placed Ireland merely inches away from the hard border of the world, beyond which either nothing was known or nothing was cared about. Traveling west from Ireland, therefore, meant traveling not only away from civilization and religious centrality, but also from all things worldly and known. The *Navigatio* abandons traditional human geography, in all its capacities and limitations, and instead inhabits a world entirely ordered and sustained by God.

This is made evident from before the voyage even starts, as Barrind invokes Edenic language and features while describing the Promised Land of the Saints to Brendan, stating “Nihil herbe uidimus sine floribus et arborum sine fructu. Lapides enim ipsius preciosi generis sunt” [We saw no plants without flowers, nor trees without fruit. The stones of that land are of the precious kind.]²²⁸ Like the land of the phoenix within *The Phoenix*, this land is explicitly unknowable to human measurement, as he walks around the island for fifteen days but yet “could not find the end of it.” The only boundary they find is a river, which they are explicitly told is impassable. Nonspecific and mystically-inclined descriptions such as these continue throughout the text,

²²⁸ *Navigatio* 6.

from the description of Brendan setting off from Ireland *contra solsticiium estiuale*, into the summer solstice²²⁹, to the choice of the monks to hoist their sails to steer *quo uentus dirigisset*, where the wind directed,²³⁰ a practice which strangely enough has some historical basis in the often hyper-ascetic Irish monastic community.²³¹ Attempting to chart the voyage using modern-day understandings of Cartesian geometry is impossible, as directions are not given and even those which exist point in conflicting directions. The only concrete demarcations of measurement are measurements of time, which almost always follow either biblical numerology (7 years, 40 days, and so on)²³² or are known through monastic and religious practices (i.e., at the hour of nones, at vespers, for the month of Pentecost). Spatially, it is clear that Brendan sails westward from Ireland, but then he travels eastward to the Promised Land of the Saints after his seven year cycle.

This mystical geography serves the purpose of allowing a greater sense of wonder to pervade the text. The world of the *Navigatio* is one so deeply ordered and pervaded by the will of God that it essentially is beyond mere human understanding. In the phantasmagorical seascape of crystal pillars, fire-breathing sea monsters, and gargantuan sheep nothing is as it seems: Hell

²²⁹ *Navigatio* 12.

²³⁰ *Navigatio* 55.

²³¹ An 891 entry from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that three Irishmen appeared on English shores in a boat with no navigation equipment, "because they wished for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, they cared not where." See Whitelock, Dorothy. "The Interpretation of The Seafarer." *The Early Cultures of North-west Europe (H.M. Chadwick Memorial Studies)*. Ed. Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins. Cambridge: U, 1950. 260-72. Quotation from 271.

²³² Anderson, John D. 'The Navigatio Brendani: A Medieval Bestseller'. *The Classical Journal* 83.4 (Apr-May 1988), 315-322.

is a smithy, the whale Jasconius is thought an island, and the white birds whose wings ring like bells as they fly are secretly angels who fell with Satan 'through no fault of their own'. Understanding and knowledge, then, are the sources of power within this mystical environment, and they are also the ultimate goal of the venture. Readers are thrust into a world explicitly outside of human knowledge and experience for the expressed purpose of witnessing the 'varied mysteries', and while details of these mysteries are often explained to a certain extent, they remain largely, purposefully opaque. This chapter is an examination into how the author of the *Navigatio* uses that opacity, especially in how it relates to animal existence and symbolism, in order to model correct belief and, by extension, faith in established interpretive authorities.

Adventures in Animality

The voyage of St Brendan is rife with appearances of fantastic animals. Jonathan M. Wooding, in his article on 'Saint and Beast', has identified eight animals or groups of animals that appear and, in certain cases, reappear throughout the tale.²³³ These he gives as: (1) the dog which leads them to the uninhabited house, (2) the giant sheep, (3) Jasconius, (4) the flock of white

²³³ Wooding, Jonathan M. 'Saint and Beast in *Nauigatio S. Brendani abbatis*', in *À travers les îles celtiques: A dreuz an inizi keltiek Per insula scotticas*, eds. Bernard Merdrignac, Hervé Bihan, and Gildas Buron, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008. 287-296.

birds, (5) the sea beasts that spurt foam and fire, (6) the great bird that delivers fruit, (7) the griffon which battles the aforementioned bird, and (8) the schools of fish in the clear sea.²³⁴ These are the animals which Brendan directly encounters and interacts with, yet this list does not include the more oblique animal imagery and references, such as Barrind's Irish monks being compared to bees in their hive and being woken each morning by the crowing cock,²³⁵ the otter which feeds Paul the Hermit and the hermit's own description as birdlike,²³⁶ the references to the biblical whale that swallowed Jonah and to Leviathan,²³⁷ the distinct yet not unfamiliar references to Christ as *agnem immaculem*, the Spotless Lamb,²³⁸ or the curious detail of the bridle which the first latecoming monk stole from the uninhabited house²³⁹—a detail which can only be fully understood through its role in close literary analogues and which deserves a brief explanation. The closest parallel text to the *Navigatio* is the less overtly Christian and monastic *Voyage of Máel Dúin*,²⁴⁰ an Irish-language *immram* which contains a parallel latecoming voyager stealing from a deserted house inhabited by a magical cat— that latecomer steals a necklace, which

²³⁴ Wooding 2008 288-9.

²³⁵ *Navigatio* 4-5.

²³⁶ *Navigatio* 73-5.

²³⁷ *Navigatio* 45, 67..

²³⁸ *Navigatio* 42, 52.

²³⁹ *Navigatio* 15.

²⁴⁰ For more on this tale and genre, see Thrall, William Flint. 'Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the *Immrama*.' *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000. 15-21.; Dumville, David N. "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition." *Ériu* 27 (1976): 73-94.; and Oskamp, H.P.A. *The Voyage of Máel Dúin: A Study in Early Irish Voyage Literature Followed by an Edition of Immram curaig Máele Dúin from the Yellow Book of Levan in Trinity College, Dublin*. The Netherlands: Wolters-Noordhoff Publishing Groningen, 1970.

seems much more practical than a large, silver bridle.²⁴¹ Yet the nature of the bridle, as a piece of equipment used to control a horse, parallels the nature of the *Navigatio's* latecoming monk's demonic possession, as well as emphasizing the human-animal relationship and the subservience of animals to man.

Wooding's list, while certainly a 'greatest hits' collection of bestial encounters, doesn't paint the full picture of how deeply the *Navigatio's* author has interwoven animality into this text.

Additionally, one of the most celebratedly quirky details about St Brendan's tale is the nature of his vessel: a *currach*. The *currach*, similar to a coracle, was a simple boat associated with the Aran Islands and western Ireland before it was replaced by fully wooden vessels during the Viking Age.²⁴² Currachs were crafted from a wicker frame, as is explained in the *Navigatio*, and then covered with animal hides. Recent animal studies scholarship, especially that of Sarah Kay, has emphasized the role of animals in the creation of manuscripts and noted a wide variety of various puns, references, and thematic connections between the nature of manuscripts as animal skin in medieval texts.²⁴³ The *Navigatio* author describes the construction and build of the ship, stating that the monks covered the wooden frame "coriis bouinis atque rubricatis in roborina cortice. Et linierunt foris

²⁴¹ Mackley calls this theft "incomprehensible" (101) and Thrall suggests that this may be a mistranslation with the intended meaning 'necklace', but the Latin *frenum* does most often mean 'bridle'.

²⁴² "currach." *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*. eds. I.C.B. Dear and Peter Kemp. Oxford University Press, 2007.

²⁴³ See, for example, Kay, Sarah. *Animal Skins and the Reading of Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. 3-7.

omens iuncturas pellium ex butyro” [with ox-hides tanned with the bark of oak and smeared all the joints of the hides on the outside with fat].²⁴⁴ The connections between the currach and manuscripts are clear and must have been apparent to the medieval scribe: parchment is made with tanned oxhide while oak-galls, growths on the surface of oak trees around the egg of a gallfly, are also an integral part of medieval ink-making. The preparation of the vessel by the brothers matches the preparation of the manuscript by the scribe. In this sense, the currach of Brendan is a mirror of the manuscript page that Brendan lives in, and as the boat brings Brendan to the wonders, the manuscript brings Brendan, along with his wonders, to the medieval reader. As discussed above, the transmission of wonders (and therefore divine knowledge) is essentially the point of the *Navigatio*, and it is no surprise that that transmission is facilitated both literally and literarily by a vessel crafted from dead animals. So, too, do the still-living animals impart their lessons and wisdom throughout the tale.

The arrangement of these animals is also biblically motivated. As Wooding has argued, the ‘archipelago’ of three islands continually repeated over the seven years (the Island of the Sheep, Jasconius, and the Paradise of Birds) represents a triad of beast-fish-bird which “symbolically takes the travellers backward in time to the first days” of Genesis 1.²⁴⁵ Wooding, concerned solely with beasts, does not mention that, along with these three regularly scheduled

²⁴⁴ *Navigatio* 10-11.

²⁴⁵ Wooding 2008 290.

animal encounters, Brendan and his monks also regularly visit the Community of Ailbe, the monastic paradise where the brothers are magically fed and candles are lit by supernatural arrows of fire. The progression then follows beast-fish-bird-man, placing the holy monks of Ailbe amongst this mystical ecosystem. If we are to read more deeply into the creation-narrative interpretation of these events, we either get a straightforward progression reading the sheep as symbolic of the Christ the Lamb, then the fish, birds, and finally man; or we get the backwards progression suggested by Wooding, going from beast to fish and birds, and then ending with the Community of Ailbe as representative of God pre-creation. Either way, the array of animals harkens back to the prelapsarian world, a point emphasized by the lack of toil and strife amongst the sheep (hence their huge size) and the status of the birds as angels who fell with Satan before the world began.

Each of these animals, including the monks of Ailbe, explicitly require explanation. Brendan inquires of the sheep why they are so large, God reveals to Brendan in the night the nature of Jasconius,²⁴⁶ and there is a long question-and-answer period between St Brendan and the abbot of the Community of Ailbe in which Brendan is chastised for asking the wrong questions, much as Barrind was in the Promised Land of the Saints. All of these wonders presented to the monks are outside of their realm of experience, they are sufficient only to inspire curiosity, the “impulse to collect and

²⁴⁶ *Navigatio* 19 for sheep, 20 for Jasconius.

explore” discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum.²⁴⁷ This is most clear in the Paradise of the Birds episode, when the monks discover the relatively unremarkable “arbor mire latitudinis in girum, non minus altitudinis, cooperta avidibus candidissimus. In tantum cooperuerunt illam ut folia et rami eius vix viderentur” [tree of marvelous breadth around, and no less height, covered with the whitest birds. So greatly they covered that tree that its leaves and branches could scarcely be seen].²⁴⁸ Brendan experiences a strange crisis, one which seems unparalleled in the tale, as “cepit intra se cogitare et tractare quidnam esset aut que causa fuisset quod tanta multitudo avium potuisset esse in una collectione. Ac de hoc tantum sibi rat tedium ut effunderet lacrimas preuolutis genibus” [he began to think and wrestle within himself what it meant or what was the reason that such a great multitude of birds could be all collected together. He was so tormented about this that the tears poured out and flowed down upon his cheeks].²⁴⁹ He calls the lack of this knowledge the *angustiam cordis mei*, the “distress of my heart,”²⁵⁰ and implores God for an explanation of this mystery.

No emotional outbursts are shown when the monks are forced to travel in circles for seven years, especially considering that the same journey took

²⁴⁷ See Introduction.

²⁴⁸ *Navigatio* 22-23.

²⁴⁹ *Navigatio* 23.

²⁵⁰ *Navigatio* 23.

Barrind all of three days,²⁵¹ nor does Brendan seem to be in this kind of crisis when the griffon battles above him or demons crawl out of Hell. Neither danger nor damnation upset Brendan as much as his own ignorance. As Teresa Carp puts it, "it is a given in hagiography that saints are vouchsafed glimpses of the future and possess other miraculous forms of knowledge peculiar to their calling, such as instantaneous recognition of other saints," such as when Brendan encounters the abbot or Paul the Hermit.²⁵² Brendan's lack of recognition in this case allows the author of the *Navigatio* to open a dialogue concerning the nature of the birds and emphasizes the unknowability of the animal signs. Much as in the *Physiologus*, these animals are not obvious to interpretation, they are opaque. They are visual, tactile, and experiential riddles for Brendan and his men and an outside authority—either the bird herself, the steward on the Island of Sheep, the abbot at the Community of Ailbe, or in the case of Jasconius a direct vision from God himself—is necessary for correct interpretation.

The Edenic harmony implied by the size of the sheep and conjured by the secret of the birds also appears in the 'tamed' nature of several animals, including the dog who leads them to the uninhabited house, the otter who feeds Paul the Hermit, and, of course, Jasconius, whose serves as landmass,

²⁵¹ Barrind, the traveling monk whose story inspires Brendan to make his journey, says that he meets his son Mernoc after a three-day journey, and from there, he sailed for what seemed like an hour before seeing the Promised Land. More time may have passed without comment from Barrind, but it is obvious within the text that the voyage could be much shorter than the seven years it takes Brendan.

²⁵² Carp, Teresa. "The Three Late-Coming Monks." *Medievalia Et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 12 (1984): 127-42. Quotation from 128.

animal, and vehicle as needed. The multiple nature of Jasconius, both ontologically and symbolically, makes clear his direct indebtedness to the physiologic tradition.²⁵³ The aspidochelone's reputation as trap and temptor is the motivation behind Brendan's apparently non-sequitur mini-lesson upon meeting the whale a second time: "O fiolioli, uigilate et orate, ut non intretis in temptacionem. Considerate quomodo subiugat Deus inmanissimam bestiam subtus nos sine ullo impedimento" [My sons, watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation. Consider how God has subjected the most monstrous beast under us without any hindrance].²⁵⁴ This background knowledge of the whale's reputation, presumably from the *Physiologus* itself, is also what motivates the fear behind both the fleeing monks and Brendan's own reticence to leave the currach the very first night they spend on the island. It is not until Brendan's vision reveals to him, and he reveals to his followers, *which* version of the whale this island truly is do they find comfort, though it is still clearly an uneasy comfort.²⁵⁵

The Devouring vs. the Devoted

This uneasy comfort is part and parcel of most animal encounters within the *Navigatio*. As Isidore states in his *Etymology* entry on the weasel, "Thus the

²⁵³ See the second trait of the physiologic tradition outlined in the introduction, 'Multiplicity'.

²⁵⁴ *Navigatio* 42.

²⁵⁵ This is, however, confusing, as Brendan does not leave the boat when they first arrive because of his fear and then the next day tells his brothers that the truth of the island was revealed to him that night.

Creator of nature sets forth nothing without a remedy",²⁵⁶ and so it is here. For each monstrous beast the monks encounter, God provides a remedy: the griffon is countered by a gigantic bird, which provides fruit for the brothers' sustenance and proceeds to "abstulisset oculos griffe" [snatch out the eyes of the griffon] in an epic sky battle;²⁵⁷ the 'devouring beast' which spouts foam from its nostrils is countered by a fire-breathing beast, which rips the first beast into thirds as Brendan proclaims, "Videte, filioli, magnalia Redemptoris nostri. Videte obedienciam bestiarum creatori suo" [Look, my sons, at the great deed of our Savior! Look at the obedience of the beasts to their creator";²⁵⁸ and of course the aforementioned threats of Jasconius and the sea beasts of the clear sea are countered by Brendan himself and his great faith and knowledge.

This 'devouring beast' brings up another crucial aspect of the intersection between knowledge and animality in the *Navigatio*: consumption. The grand irony of the devouring beast is that, after being trisected, it floats to a nearby island where the monks soon find the carcass and make a meal of it. Brendan states with a little wordplay, "Ecce, que uoluit uos deuovrare. Ipsam deuorabilities" [Lo, see what wished to devour you. You will devour it!].²⁵⁹ Brendan warns his monks to take three months worth of provisions from the animal, as that night whatever remains will be eaten by different wild beasts.

²⁵⁶ See Introduction.

²⁵⁷ *Navigatio* 56.

²⁵⁸ *Navigatio* 46. There is no discussion in the text of why or how a water-dwelling animal would breathe fire.

²⁵⁹ *Navigatio* 46.

The monks then ask how they should live without water, and Brendan rhetorically counters, “Numquid difficilius est Deo uobis tribuere aquam quam uictum?” [Is it more difficult for God to give you water than food?].²⁶⁰ Not soon after, once the boat has been loaded with provisions, the text explicitly tells us that Brendan must collect plants and roots for himself, for he “nihil gustauit in qua spiritus uite esset de carne” [tasted nothing of flesh in which there was the spirit of life].²⁶¹ The consumption of spiritual knowledge supplants the very real consumption of worldly, material food, and the omission of the flesh of beasts from Brendan’s diet is one stepping stone toward perfect understanding—in a sense, it removes the symbolically opaque and confusing animals from the interpretive equation, bringing Brendan one step closer toward complete knowledge and holiness.

Nowhere is the connection between knowledge and consumption clearer than in the Promised Land of the Saints itself. Barrind, after being entreated to “refice animas nostras de diuersis miraculis, que uidisti in oceano” [refresh our souls with the diverse miracles which you saw in the ocean]²⁶², describes the monks of the Delightful Island where his son Mernóc works as a steward, as given nothing to eat “nisi poma et nuces atque radice et cetera genera herbarum” [except fruits, nuts, roots, and other sorts of greens].²⁶³ The Delightful Island here is a stepping stone, almost literally, between worldly

²⁶⁰ *Navigatio* 47.

²⁶¹ *Navigatio* 48.

²⁶² *Navigatio* 4.

²⁶³ *Navigatio* 5.

Ireland and the spiritual Promised Land, and the monk's vegetarianism (or more accurately, veganism), appears to be a similar stepping stone. In the actual Promised Land, after what feels like fifteen days, Barrind is told by the mysterious man that he had been on the island for an entire year without once needing to eat or drink— a spiritual paradise removes the human need for sustenance.

The other figure in the *Navigatio* who goes without food is Paul the Hermit, one of the final wonders Brendan encounters on his journey, and Paul's autobiographical account clearly demonstrates a progressive detachment from physical nutrition. Told by his abbot, none other than the venerable St Patrick, to set off in a directionless boat, much as Brendan did, Paul lands on his island and kicks his boat back out to sea. On this barren crag with no soil whatsoever, he is first fed by an otter who brings him fish and then subsists solely on water supernaturally drawn from a stone. As he summarizes, "Nonagenarius etenim sum in hac insula, tiginta annos in uictu piscium et sexaginta annos in pastu fontis ipsius; et quinquaginta annos fui in patria mea" [I have been ninety years on this island, living on fish for thirty years and on the food afforded by the fountain for sixty. And I lived for fifty years in my homeland.]²⁶⁴ Paul has been chosen to stay here until Judgment Day, and for his service he is recognized by Brendan as especially holy. Upon seeing the man, Brendan sorrows at his own inadequacies and explains that in Paul he sees "in angelico

²⁶⁴ *Navigatio* 76.

statu hominem," a man in an angelic state though still in human flesh.²⁶⁵

Paul's abandonment of all non-God-given sources of nutrition then is part of the ideal which Brendan aspires to, and the subservience of the otter is a stopgap measure to transition Paul from how he ate for the fifty years he spent in his native land to the abstinent sixty plus years he spends awaiting the end times, "sicut auis in ista petra" [like a bird on this rock].²⁶⁶ As a marker of his holiness, he can identify each of the seafaring monks by name, he knows the divine schedule which the currach follows, and he prophesies the end of Brendan's journey as rapidly approaching. Animalkind, in the form of otter and fish, help Paul achieve this holiness by reducing his consumption and increasing his dependence on God.

Knowledge-Giving Angels and Sinners

This emphasis on the reduction of consumption and the rejection of 'devouring', or forcible taking of nutrition both bodily and spiritual, results in a sympathetic portrayal of those wondrous beings, human and animal, that freely give of their knowledge. Paul the Hermit's role, narratively, is to increase anticipation ahead of Brendan finally reaching his much-sought-after destination by prophesying that the end is near. Not only does he show the Irish monks a model for a perfected, supernatural form of asceticism, but he

²⁶⁵ *Navigatio* 73.

²⁶⁶ *Navigatio* 73.

also passes along divine knowledge necessary for the continuation of the voyage. Aside from Paul and Barrind, who provides the inciting incident for the tale, Brendan also encounters a 'steward' on the Island of the Sheep, the youth in the Promised Land, the abbot of the Community of Ailbe, the fallen angels at the Paradise of Birds, and perhaps most strangely, Judas Iscariot himself. It is important to note that within this text knowledge is granted, never earned, a point which is driven home during Brendan's outburst regarding his own ignorance on the Paradise of Birds:

"Deus, cognitor incognitorum et reuelator absconditorum omnium; tu scis angustiam cordis mei. Deprecor tuam maiestatem ut mihi peccatori digneris per tuam magnam misericordiam reuelare tuum secretum, quod modo pre oculis meis video. Non de meritis meis aut dignitate sed de immensa clemencia tua presumo."

[God, who knows the unknown and reveals all that is secret, you know the distress of my heart. I implore your majesty to have pity and reveal to me, a sinner, through your great mercy your secret that I now look upon with my eyes. I rely not on what I deserve or my worth, but rather on your boundless pity.]²⁶⁷

Lack of knowledge is explicitly connected to sin here, so we may assume that a holier man would know more, but Brendan's refusal to rely on his own holiness and rather solely on the grace of God shows that the knowledge he has gathered and will gather through his adventure is strictly a spiritual gift. Not all knowledge is necessary or 'right' for Brendan to know at a certain time, and faith and the revelation of wonders go hand in hand.

The emphasis on knowledge-gathering is also evident through the text's treatment of 'undesirable' figures, that is, the fallen angels and Judas. The

²⁶⁷ *Navigatio* 23, translation O'Meara's.

angel-birds and Judas are connected with each other in their respite from punishment on Sundays and holy days, as well as their openness and freedom of information when it comes to Brendan's line of questioning. Upon approaching the condemned man on a rock enduring a lesser torment outside the gates of hell, Brendan asks him who he is, and he replies "Ego sum infelicissimus Judas atque negociator pessimus. Non pro merito habeo istum locum sed pro misericordia ineffabili Jesu Christi." [I am the most unhappy Judas and the most evil trader. I am not here in accordance with what I deserve, but because of the ineffable mercy of Jesus Christ.]²⁶⁸ In the words of Martin McNamara, Judas is an "arch-sinner," along the lines of Herod, Pilate, and Caiaphas, yet "the author [of the *Navigatio*] shows great sympathy" for him.²⁶⁹ Brendan treats him with great mercy, interceding on his behalf with God and warding off the demons that come to torture him for one more night, as well as ensuring that they do not take revenge on him for his night of freedom. This lax treatment seems strange and, according to McNamara, is without precedent in the medieval tradition.

Yet despite his reputation and his punishment, Judas is, much like the birds, being used as a tool of God, a wonder within the context of Brendan's voyage of spiritual discovery. Unlike the abbot of Saint Ailbe or the mysterious youth, Judas freely offers everything he knows to Brendan

²⁶⁸ *Navigatio* 66. The word 'trader' here seems strange, but it is not a typo for 'traitor.' Judas will later refer to his exchange of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver as "such an evil bargain."

²⁶⁹ McNamara 'Some Possible Connections...' 181.

immediately upon request. Mirroring the punished birds that sing God's praises, Judas derides his own sin in life, contributing to a sense of universal morality and divine understanding. His freedom with knowledge and his desire for repentance place him firmly within the same theological system that Brendan is familiar with, and once this is understood Brendan allows Judas a place alongside the holy men, creatures, and places he has already encountered as a revelation of God's mysteries. The tensions and frustrations that exist between Brendan and the monastic community, brought up again by the moment just before their encounter with Judas when the saint must tell his monks to, "Sinite contendere. Dirigite cursum navis" [Cease arguing. Steer the boat], does not come across here, alongside hell, next to the betrayer of Jesus Christ, and in the face of "infinita multitudo demonorum" [an infinite number of demons].²⁷⁰ The theological problem that Judas presents us with, according to McNamara, "was an ancient problem which continued down through the Middle Ages, namely the difficulty of reconciling eternal punishment with God's infinite mercy and goodness."²⁷¹ Yet neither this nor the purgatorial nature of the angel birds interests Brendan, who is satisfied with merely witnessing these glimpses of the spiritual realm. There is something inherently unexplained within the divine plan, perhaps unexplainable, but the saint is satisfied with the material and physical sight of the immaterial truths, rather than demanding a complete understanding.

²⁷⁰ *Navigatio* 65, 69.

²⁷¹ McNamara, 'Some Possible Connections...' 182

Certain commentators have lumped Judas together with the description of Hell as Brendan's touch with evil before he can achieve paradise, such as O'Loughlin's analysis previously discussed. This configuration emphasizes binary relationships throughout the last third of the text, starting with natural phenomena, the crystal pillar versus Hell, and progressing to human interaction, the encounter with Judas versus meeting Paul the Hermit.²⁷² The crystal pillar, descriptions of which "echo those of the temple of Ezekiel" and thus is "charged with positive Biblical symbolism,"²⁷³ can be imagined as an iceberg, while the smithy of Hell has been connected to volcanoes, blurring the distinctions between material and spiritual realms. Although this creates an appealing sense of chiasmus, holy-evil-evil-holy, with the abduction of the third supernumerary monk in the middle of it all, the Judas episode does not truly emphasize the evil of the situation, preferring instead to focus on the mercy of Christ and the reception of holy knowledge. The knowledge that Judas does provide earns this 'arch-sinner' some measure of salvation, at least a day's worth, which is enough to know that relation of knowledge and the acceptance of such is a matter of faith and in accordance with God's will.

The nature of the angel birds also presents theological problems that are swept under the rug by their knowledge-giving nature. When they were created by God, "Lucifer's fall and that of his followers brought about [their]

²⁷² This is the configuration explicitly explored by Mackley within his chapter, 'The Mirrors of Salvation' [175-233] but similar explorations can be found within O'Loughlin, 'Distant Islands' and Bray, 'Allegory in..'

²⁷³ Mackley, *The Legend...* 195.

destruction also," yet they "were not associated" with the fallen angels "through any sin of [theirs]." They exist in a type of angelic purgatory, wandering the world until judgment day except for on holy days, when they are allowed the bodies of birds. Jacobsen has shown that this intermediary place was "already disturbing to medieval readers," giving variant Latin versions of the text that show a theological wrangling with the implications of such spiritual beings.²⁷⁴ Brendan, however, is content with the given explanation, apparently the one he so emotionally sought from God, and tells his brothers, "Reficite corpora uestra, quia hodie anime nostre diuina refectione satiate sunt" [Refresh your bodies, for today our souls are satiated with divine refreshment.]²⁷⁵ Jacobsen argues that the birds are denied culpability within the inherent feudalistic structure of the heavenly ranks, where these angels must have been subordinate to some actually evil angel and merely followed orders. Yet these theological configurations are not apparent in the text, which leaves that particular mystery to the imagination of the reader. Despite their puzzling nature, the angel birds satisfy Brendan once he learns that they are indeed spiritual creatures created by God, as they sing hymns and relate to the monks once more the divine schedule of their voyage. It is the knowledge that they are indeed part of God's divine plan and a wonder purposefully shown to Brendan that allows him to be so comfortable with whatever nature they describe.

²⁷⁴ Jacobsen, 'The Island...' 103.

²⁷⁵ *Navigatio* 25.

Brendan's acceptance of both Judas and the fallen angels, and therefore the author's own acceptance of these theological possibilities, does not imply that belief in such were commonly accepted or acknowledged. Amongst others, Jacobsen quotes a 13th century verse invective written in the *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, which goes so far as to state of the *Navigatio*-author, "Hic fabellas addit plures non cessando fingere | Demones salvandos fore, laudes Deo solvere" [He adds a lot of stories and does not stop lying; that demons shall be saved, that they can praise God, which is quite contrary to the catholic faith].²⁷⁶ That a medieval commentator, albeit one several hundred years after the *Navigatio* was written, would "smell heresy in the invention of the... angels", in Jacobsen's words, emphasizes the riddling nature of these encounters. They are permitted to exist insofar as they convey teachings upon our hagio-protagonist, but their existence is in and of itself questionable and outside the boundaries of the strictly heterodox. Thus even basic spiritual truths such as damnation and salvation are irregular or suspect in the world of the *Navigatio*, and it is only through the instruction and interpretation of Brendan and other holy men or beings can the reader know what is correct belief and what isn't.

Authority and Conformity

²⁷⁶ Jacobsen 112. Translation Jacobsen's.

The centrality of the character of St Brendan is key to understanding the moral schemata of the *Navigatio* as, unlike other travel-narrative texts such as *Wonders of the East* which merely list their marvels, this particular voyage tale necessitates the presence of a singular spiritual authority to provide the proper interpretive lens. This is evident at the very onset of the voyage, when Brendan assembles his fourteen brothers, “conclisit se in uno oratorio cum illis” [shut himself up in one oratory with them],²⁷⁷ and tells them of his plans. At the end of his explanation he asks, “Quomodo uobis uidetur aut quod consilium mihi uultis dare?” [How does this seem to you, or what advice do you want to give to me?]²⁷⁸ Their response is telling in two distinct and complementary ways. For one, the content of the reply stresses the lack of their own will and desires as they obediently state “Abba, uoluntas tua ipsa est et nostra” [Abbot, your will is the same as ours] and rhetorically ask, “Nonne parentes nostros dimisimus, nonne hereditatem nostram despeximus et corpora nostra tradidimus in manus tuas?” [Have we not left our parents, have we not disregarded our inheritance and given our bodies into your hands?]²⁷⁹. Their expressions here emphasize the destruction of personal identity- they no longer have their own families, material wealth, bodies, or even will. All is subsumed to the direction of Brendan. The second important detail here is that their reply is not individualized either: they “quasi uno ore

²⁷⁷ *Navigatio* 9.

²⁷⁸ *Navigatio* 9.

²⁷⁹ *Navigatio* 9.

dicunt omnes” [all speak as if with one mouth].²⁸⁰ Not only are they all saying the ‘correct’ things here, but they further demonstrate their lack of individuality through their manner of speaking. It is no surprise that not one of these fourteen monks is named²⁸¹ and none of them are referenced in any particular or unique way. They are identity-less everymen (everymonks?) and, as often-times passive passengers on Brendan’s journey, they stand in for the audience in viewing and experiencing the marvels of the sea. Naturally the audience, just like the brothers, requires the guidance which Brendan provides.

Throughout the voyage, the primary purpose of the monks is to act wrongly so that they may be corrected by Brendan or another spiritual authority. This is made clear on Jasconius, when Brendan stays in the boat with the monks light a fire upon the unknown fish’s back, as well as when they cry out of fear above the clear sea full of serpents while Brendan sings praises to God. Many times these admonishments come about directly from the bodily needs of the monks- at the island of the uninhabited hall, the island of the Community of St Ailbe, and the island of the soporific well Brendan must stop them from “rapinem” [plundering], from doing “illicitam rem” [a forbidden thing], and from “supra modum utamini his aquis, ne grauius

²⁸⁰ *Navigatio* 9.

²⁸¹ It is worthwhile to also compare this fact across multiple *imrama*, as the *Imram Snédgusa ocus Maic Rialga* gives two separate traveler’s names and the *Imram Curaig Huí Corra* assigns each of the currach companions a trade or background they came from. Even the *Imram Mael Duin* and *Imram Brain* give more personality and key moments to their companions, unlike Brendan. It is also worthwhile to note that Paul the Hermit addresses them each by name, a point which emphasizes that it is the author himself who believes their identities to be entirely unnecessary for the reader to know.

uexentur corpora uestra" [consuming more of these waters than needed, lest they vex your bodies heavily].²⁸² In each of these cases there is no real indication that the monks should be wary of their water source, yet they must trust in Brendan all the same (or else they, in the case of the soporific well, face the consequence of a three-day long sleep). After investigating a claim by Brendan that a giant sea monster's carcass will be eaten overnight, the monks report back that he was correct and he replies with playful assonance, "Scio, filioli, quia uoluistis me probare si uerum dixissem annon" [I know, my sons, that you wanted to test me, to see if I spoke true or no].²⁸³ This is perhaps the only time there is any kind of 'threat' to or questioning of Brendan's authority by the monks, but strangely enough this testing is not coded negatively. Brendan continues by giving them a follow-up sign to watch out for, presumably thereby increasing their faith in him and in the truths he presents once that, too, comes to pass. Brendan's worth to the monks is dependent on his ability to understand the world around them and to interpret properly the symbolically or spiritually opaque, so it is only right that he should be tested, but that testing does have boundaries.

The most significant usurpation of Brendan's will by his fellow monks occurs immediately before he sets off on his voyage, when three monks approach the holy father and ask to accompany him, threatening that they will stay on the shore and die of starvation if he does not allow them. These

²⁸² *Navigatio* 13, 29, 38.

²⁸³ *Navigatio* 48.

latecoming monks, or as they are often called in scholarship ‘supernumerary monks’, are a trope that appears in several medieval Irish tales, most notably the *Imram Curaig Maile Duin*,²⁸⁴ but their appearance here is marked by a strange and foreboding prediction. Brendan claims that “Scio quomodo uos uenistis. Iste frater bonum opus operatus est. Nam Deus preparauit sibi aptissimum locum. Vobis autem preparabit teterrimum iudicium” [I know why you all have come. This brother has done something good, and so God has prepared a suitable place for him. But for you others he will prepare a hideous judgment]²⁸⁵. The first part of this prediction proves true, as one of the monks finds sudden death on the island of the uninhabited hall after committing theft and one is forcibly dragged from the ship into the very physical depths of hell, while the ‘good’ one remains on the Island of the Three Choirs where he is allowed to sing praises with the other monks of the island until Judgment Day. Taken together, this event and the ‘testing’ of Brendan with regard to the sea monster’s carcass show that the questioning of spiritual authority is only

²⁸⁴ In Mael Duin’s voyage, the three supernumeraries are foster-brothers of the titular protagonist who desire to assist him on his quest for revenge. Previously, Mael Duin was given a specific number of companions that he should take on his voyage by a local druid and so the addition of the supernumeraries in this tale is explicitly forbidden. Mael Duin’s acceptance of the brothers (otherwise they promise to drown) and therefore rejection of the druid’s advice is the reason he is forced out into the ocean on his exceedingly long voyage, as he cannot reach his destination until each of the foster-brothers finds their fate on various islands, much as do the supernumerary monks in the *Navigatio*. Mael Duin’s supernumeraries are essential to the main plot of his *imram*, unlike Brendan’s, and the diversionary voyage they cause allows Mael Duin’s character growth and therefore redemption at the end of the tale. It is curious that these foster-brothers are so essential to the structure of the *Imram Curaig Maile Duin* while the supernumerary monks feel unnecessary in the *Navigatio*- in my eyes, this suggests that the *Navigatio* has adapted this trope, if not from *Maile Duin* then from some similar text, though most scholars believe that *Maile Duin* came after and was influenced by the *Navigatio*, not the other way around. Cf. Teresa Carp’s article on the latecoming monks cited above.

²⁸⁵ *Navigatio* 11-12.

permissible with meritorious intentions. For those that desired more, the result is death and damnation.

The second part of Brendan's prediction, however, is curious in its inaccuracy. True, the monk carried off to hell certainly encounters a 'hideous judgment', but the first monk to perish is redeemed, with Brendan's help, and we are explicitly told that "anima fratris egressa est de corpore, suscepta ab angelis lucis uidentibus fratribus" [the soul of the brother left the body and was received by the angels of light, being seen by the brothers]²⁸⁶. This occurs on the very first island that Brendan and his fellow monks land on, the island of the uninhabited house, where it is discovered that that first supernumerary monk has both stolen a bridle from the home and been possessed by a demon for the past seven years. This demon, who takes physical and visible form both when he is 'playing' with the monk at night and when he is exorcised by Brendan before the monk's death, is described as 'Ethiopian', undoubtedly not a marker of national origin, but rather a marker of race, i.e. a black person.

As Isidore of Seville tells us in chapter XIV of the *Etymologies*, "Ethiopia is so called after the color of its inhabitants, who are scorched by the proximity of the sun (cf. *αἴθειν*, "burn"; *ὄψ*, gen. *ὀπός*, "face")."²⁸⁷ Writings by the church fathers directly conflated the idea of racial blackness with sinfulness and the trope of demons having the form of a *puer niger* [black boy] is found in a large

²⁸⁶ *Navigatio* 16.

²⁸⁷ *Etymologies* XIV.v.13, translation from Barney, p.293.

number of patristic texts.²⁸⁸ Amongst these is Augustine's *City of God*, in which he relates the tale of a Carthagian physician plagued in his dreams by *pueris nigris cirratis* [curly-haired black boys]²⁸⁹ before his baptism. Jerome goes even further in his *Tractates on the Psalms*, stating that "*People of the Ethiopians* means those who are black, being covered with the stain of sin. In the past we were Ethiopians, being made so by our sins and vices. How? Because sin had made us black."²⁹⁰ While a full account of how early medieval Irish authors thought about blackness and racial ideology is beyond the scope of this chapter, the usage of 'Ethiopian' points towards another aspect of the physiologic tradition outlined in the introduction: ethnicity. As the *Physiologus* uses Jewish people as its exempla of unbelievers and in doing so reaffirms Christian identity, so does the *Navigatio* use 'Ethiopian' as a foil for its white, Irish monastic brethren. The question of 'identity' is not often explicit within the *Navigatio*, but it is notable that not a single woman appears in the entire text,²⁹¹ nor is

²⁸⁸ Courtés, Jean Marie and William Granger Ryan. "The Theme of "Ethiopia" and "Ethiopians" in Patristic Literature." In *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume II: From the Early Christian Era to the "Age of Discovery", Part I: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood*, eds. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Courtés cites quotations from Augustine and Jerome (discussed here), as well as Origen, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great amongst others regarding the connection between sinfulness and blackness/Ethiopian identity. She does note that while actual Ethiopians were certainly affected and harmed by these negative perceptions, in many cases 'Ethiopian' was generally understood by the patristic writers to indicate skin color, not geographic origin- thus any black person from any region could be labeled 'Ethiopian'. See also Verkerk, Dorothy Hoogland. 'Black Servant, Black Demon: Color Ideology in the Ashburnham Pentateuch.' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (Winter 2001). 57-77.

²⁸⁹ Augustine. *City of God, Volume VII: Books 21-22*. trans. William M. Green. Loeb Classical Library 417. Harvard University Press, 1972. Quotation from XXII.8.

²⁹⁰ Quoted from Courtés, above. She gives the citation Jerome, *Tract. in Psal.* 86.4 (CCL 78.114).

²⁹¹ Though women certainly do appear and have significant roles in its closest literary analogues, such as the *Imram Curaig Maile Duin* and the *Imram Brain*.

there a single person who does not speak the same language as Brendan.²⁹² The emphasis, overall, is of homogeneity amongst not only the people in the currach, but also amongst almost every person and being encountered. This ocean, as I have previously mentioned, is a world completely pervaded and ordered by the will of God and in many ways is figured as a monastic paradise. The only significant differences between people encountered are the differences of spiritual status and of specie. The deliberate homogeneity of the characters then, emphasized by the appearance of this *infantem ethiopen*, brings to mind Cynthia Bourgeault's much-quoted reminder that the *Navigatio* is "about monks, *by* monks, and at least in its original manuscript context, for monks",²⁹³ and in doing so shows us exactly what kind of person the author supposed his monastic readership to be.

Conformity and the dissolution or nonexistence of individual identity affirm the necessity of spiritual authority. Brendan is in essence the only real, fully-formed person in the currach and so he is the only person worthy of being paid attention to. In the reader's position as passenger on the voyage, we are meant to subsume ourselves within the light-skinned, male, Irish brothers and assume the role of passive listener, deferential to the accepted spiritual authorities who will properly interpret the often confusing and

²⁹² Obviously there isn't much consideration for historical truth in the *Navigatio*, but it is especially strange from a modern point of view that there are no problems communicating between Judas and Brendan. I am unsure if the medieval Irish readers would've thought that Brendan and company would've been speaking in Irish (historically likely) or in Latin, but either way no mention of linguistic difficulty or difference is acknowledged.

²⁹³ Bourgeault 110-1.

marvelous natural world we encounter. Within the *Navigatio*, the interpretive capabilities of the 'masses', so to speak, are either nonexistent or exist solely to bolster and prove the superiority of those authorities.

The Taming of the Whale

It is worth repeating that the *Navigatio sancti brendani abbatis* is an elaborate text. It is dense in its unexplained phenomena and light in its explanations, chock full of differently-sourced and sometimes contradictory symbols and allegories. This dissertation chapter has necessarily tread through many, many different moments on the voyage, hopefully picking up on a few key threads throughout the text that highlight that symbolic density and explain how the author uses this density to impress upon their audience the difficulty of interpretation (especially when it comes to animalkind and the natural world) and the necessity of authoritative guidance. Rest assured, there is plenty more material within the *Navigatio* not covered here. I would like to conclude, however, with a return to where we began: Jasconius and his whale-brethren.

First off, it is difficult to even know exactly what kind of creature any given medieval author was imagining when they wrote about the whale, as throughout the middle ages whales had a taxonomic problem. The name of the whale in the *Physiologus* is the 'aspidochelone', which has variously been translated as 'asp-turtle' or 'shield-turtle', indicating perhaps a poisonous

turtle if the former or emphasizing the flatness of its back if the latter.²⁹⁴ Of course, whales are *not* turtles, but as we know today they are also not fish, and yet Isidore identifies the whales amongst *de piscibus*²⁹⁵ and gives several competing Latin terms- *bellua*, *ballena*, and *cetus*, the word used by the Vulgate to describe the giant fish which swallows Jonah.²⁹⁶ The line between ‘whale’, ‘large fish’, and ‘sea monster’ appeared to be quite malleable,²⁹⁷ and in English there is further terminological confusion. Though the modern term whale is a direct descendant of *hwæl*, there is some overlap found between *hwæl* and *horshwæl*, aka ‘horse-whales’ or walruses.²⁹⁸ The Dictionary of Old English mentions that *hwæl* can also be used for porpoises, dolphins, the Leviathan, a ‘monster’, or really any large marine mammal.

This linguistic and literary confusion can be partially chalked up to the long, inherited history of whale-lore. It is important to note that the storehouse

²⁹⁴ Squires 72, n.7b.

²⁹⁵ This is in no way a slight against Isidore. Before the construction of the Linnean system of classifying animals was solidified and animals became organized by evolutionary tree, different modes of grouping animals emerged. ‘Fish’ were defined by observable traits, their habitat, appearance, and behaviors, and so whales would certainly belong among them. More will be said on this in the next chapter’s discussion on bats and birds.

²⁹⁶ *Etymologies* XII.vi.7-8.

²⁹⁷ Barney notes in fn.17 to *Etym* XII.vi.7 on p.260 that *bellua* and *cetus* are ambiguous in this way.

²⁹⁸ This is especially prominent in the Ohthere interpolation in the Old English translation of Orosius’s *Historiarum adversum paganos*, where *hwælhuntran*, whale-hunters, seek out *hwælas* for their tusks and ivory. The entire account is a fascinating look at the economic side of whale-human interactions in the early middle ages, as well as an English parallel for Irish voyaging and exploration in the North Atlantic. In his journey Ohthere claims he “wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge, oþþe hwæðer ænig mon be norðan þæm lande” [wanted to find out how far north that land lay, or whether any men were to the north of that land] and then he finds a northerner who states that “on his agnum lande is se betsta hwælhuntað: þa beoð eahta and feowertiges elna lange, & þa mæstan fitiges elna lange; þara he sæde þæt he syxa sum ofsloge syxtig on twam dagum” [in his own land is the best whale-hunting: those are eight and forty ells long and the biggest are fifty ells long; of those he said that he, with five others, killed sixty in two days.] Lund, Niels, ed. *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred: The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan Together with the Description of Northern Europe from the “Old English Orosius”*. trans. C. E. Fell, William Sessions Limited, 1984. Quotations from 18, 20.

of learning afforded to medieval authors was largely based on received, classical knowledge from cultures surrounding the Mediterranean, which as an inland sea does not contain sea creatures of the same proportions as is found in the northern Atlantic Ocean.²⁹⁹ Juvenal, for example, briefly alludes to a *ballaena brittanica*, a 'British whale', as a very large sea creature in comparison to 'some puny dolphin',³⁰⁰ indicating that he recognized both that there were differences between whales around Great Britain and that they were of a much larger size. The works of classical geographers such as Pliny, Strabo, and Arrian also contain references to the whale's viciousness, size, and seemingly fantastic behaviors.³⁰¹ As Vicki Ellen Szabo puts it, "to the classical mind, whales embodied both fascinating and fearsome aspects of nature,"³⁰² and this naturally carried over into whale-lore's Christian inheritors. Take, for example, the *Hexameron* of St Ambrose, which states:

*We wish, now, to return to the Atlantic Ocean. What whales are found there, of huge bulk and measureless size! If they were to float on the surface of the sea, you would imagine that they were islands or extremely high mountains whose peaks reach to the sky! These animals are said to appear, not on the coast or on shore, but in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. To catch sight of them sailors are enticed to risk navigation within those regions. But these elemental mysteries are not likely to be faced without experiencing mortal terror!*³⁰³

²⁹⁹ Szabo, Vicki Ellen. *Monstrous Fishes and the Wine-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic*. Brill, 2008. See especially chapter two, 'Whales and Whaling from Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages', 31-65.

³⁰⁰ From Juvenal's Satire X, quoted in Szabo 2008 41, citing from Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, trans. P. Green, Penguin, 1967. X, xiv, 205.

³⁰¹ Arrian, in his *Indica*, also points out that surrounding oceans contain creatures greater in size than those in the Mediterranean. Szabo 2008 36.

³⁰² Szabo 2008 41.

³⁰³ Ambrose, St. *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*. trans. John J. Savage, Catholic University Press, 1961. v.32; 187.

Ambrose was writing some time after the *Physiologus* emerged as a central authority on religious animal symbolism, yet the emphasis on the Atlantic Ocean, the necessary pairing of experiencing the ‘elemental mystery’ of the whale with terror, and the comparison to ‘high mountains’ are all elaborations on the central lore. The classically received tradition naturally dovetailed with biblical accounts of the Leviathan in Job and the swallowing of Jonah in the book of Jonah, which was frequently thought of typologically as prefiguring Jesus’s own three-day tribulation.³⁰⁴

These carried over into the literature, art, and geography of the early medieval English and Irish, as well. The Franks Casket, famous whale-bone artifact of 8th century England, describes the whale (in runes!) as *gasric*, a word left undefined by the Dictionary of Old English but which Bosworth-Toller gives as meaning ‘an impetuous creature, a furious animal’, while the British Museum’s online catalogue gives the translation ‘king of ?terror’.³⁰⁵ Dicuil, an Irish geographer working in the Carolingian court, described whales larger than four acres wide which could destroy entire ships with the spray of their

³⁰⁴ See, for example, the Ordinary Gloss on Jonah, which states “Although Jonah, according to the interpretation, displays the figure of Christ himself, it is not necessary for us to strive to refer the whole sequence of the story to Christ by allegory, but only those things that are able to be understood clearly without the risk of interpretation.” McDermott, Ryan. "The Ordinary Gloss on Jonah." *PMLA* 128.2 (2013): 424-38. Quotation from 427.

³⁰⁵ British Museum Collection Database. “1867,0120.1” www.britishmuseum.org/collection, British Museum. Online. Accessed 19/02/2020.

blowholes.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, episodes from Ælfric's *Colloquy*³⁰⁷ and Adomnan's *Vita Columbae*³⁰⁸ both contain interactions with whales based around the incredible danger whales pose to sailors and fishermen.

Fear, then, seems to be the primary unifying factor between each account of the whale and this undercurrent of precariousness marks the whale as a unique creature within the medieval natural world. Szabo has pointed out that “the environment in which humans typically encounter cetaceans is the most foreign of all worlds,” gesturing towards the separate medium in which

³⁰⁶ Dicuil, *Liber de mensura orbis terrae*. ed. J. J. Tierney, Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1967. vii.25; 79. Dicuil is also quoting Solinus, a classical geographer, referencing whales from the Indian Ocean.

³⁰⁷ The *Colloquy* is a dialogue between a teacher and his students, who take on the guises of different tradesmen in typical Anglo-Saxon society. Within the exchange between the teacher and the ‘fisherman,’ the teacher asks him if he would like to capture a whale, to which he replies he wouldn’t. The teacher presses on, asking three separate times why not, though the fisherman talks of the great danger in such an enterprise. The instructor pointedly digs at the fisherman’s fears and references the economic gain, saying, *beah manige gefop hwælas, ond ætberstaþ frecnysse, ond micelne sceat þanon begytaþ* [Though many capture whales and avoid dangers, and they acquire a great price from that]. In Latin: “tamen multi capiunt cetos, et euadunt pericula, et magnum pretium inde adquirunt.” The teacher does not end his line of questioning until the fisherman admits it is *for modes mines nytenyssæ* [On account of the disgrace of my heart; less literally, on account of his timidity or cowardice] In Latin: “propter mentis meae ignauium.” Ælfric. *Colloquy*. trans. George Norman Garmonsway, Methuen, 1967. Quotations from 119-22. Note how the Latin uses *cetus* for the Old English *hwæl* throughout this text, possibly creating difficulty as to knowing whether an author is referring to a sea monster or the actual animal.

³⁰⁸ In one section, Columba warns two travelers of an “aliquo montruoso” [something monstrous] that will terrify the travelers if they take a certain path. The first traveler does not heed his warning, and “ecce cetus mirae et immensae magnitudinis, se instar montis eregens” [lo, a sea monster of enormous and marvelous size, emerging in the likeness of a mountain] appears. The second traveler, however, takes Columba’s admonition to heart, stating that “Ego et illa bilua sub dei potestate sumus,” [I and that beast are beneath the power of God] which not only reflects the humility which the *vita* is instructing its reader to practice, but also creates a clear parallel between the human and the whale condition. There is a fascinating parallel here between the two hagiographic accounts, as St Brendan comes to terms easily with Jasconius once he understands the nature of that beast, just as the second traveler in Columba’s story comes to terms with his whale. Despite initial fear and reticence, there is a mutuality in the human-whale dynamic that these texts allude to, one that clearly upsets the demonic allegory of the Exeter Book *Whale*. There are at least three major commonalities that these three texts contain, however: the blurred lines between land and animal, as even in Columba the whale is ‘emerging like a mountain’; the positioning of the animal in relation to God, whether antagonistically, positively, or simply in subservience; and finally, human fear. Adomnan. *Life of Columba*. Trans. Alan Orr Anderson. London: T. Nelson, 1961. 246.

whales and other sea-life move within.³⁰⁹ She mentions that “The aquatic environment was home to more bizarre creatures than nearly any other place on the earth... To the medieval mind, whales must have represented the otherness of the aquatic world.” At this point it is fair to mention the obvious, that humans are land animals and civilization grew up separate from the depths of the sea,³¹⁰ making the ecosystem that medieval travelers would encounter whales within one they were almost entirely unadapted to. Gary Schmidt has discussed the effect of this within the construction of Old English poetry, saying of the Exeter Book poem *The Seafarer*, “the reference to ‘hwæles eþel’ [home of the whale] suggests that the narrator is alien here in both a physical and a spiritual sense; the image contrasts sharply with the seafarer’s homelessness.”³¹¹ Various other phrases for the sea, including the common kenning *hronrad* or whale-road, point toward the inability of humans to take ownership of the sea in the same way as they did the land. The sea is poetically determined by its actual owners, the whales. Undoubtedly the sheer size of the animal was also a factor in this fear, uncertainty, and deference, as seen within the various characterizations that equated whales to islands or other landmasses.

³⁰⁹ Szabo, Vicki E. ““Bad to the Bone”? The Unnatural History of Monstrous Medieval Whales.” *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 8 (2005): Web. 25 Nov. 2014. §6.

³¹⁰ Isidore even acknowledges this explicitly within the *Etymologies* entry on fish, stating that “People gave names to livestock and beasts and flying animals before naming fish, because the former were seen and recognized before. Later, as the types of fish gradually came to be known, names were established based either on a similarity to land animals or on their particular appearance or behavior.” XII.vi.4, p260.

³¹¹ Schmidt 61.

Returning now to the most relevant animal/landmass to the *Navigatio*, Jasconius's name is notably a bilingual or macaronic formation, combining the Irish word *íasc*, meaning 'fish', and the common Latin cognomen ending *-onius*.³¹² This takes the impersonal, vernacular, generalized term and then personalizes and latinizes it into some form of literary subject, an agential character and location for Brendan to interact and relate with.³¹³ But as discussed above and earlier in the chapter, the whale is always-already an extremely complicated and multiple symbol. The encounter with Jasconius resonates with the ongoing *Navigatio* themes of subservience, the unknowability of the natural world, and the necessity of personal reliance on God, while also conjuring the rich history and understanding of whalekind marked by fear and otherness.

The dramatic tension built into the Jasconius scene is constructed on these ideas of fear and otherness. After being told by the mysterious and unexplained 'steward' that he would spend the night of Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday upon a nearby island, Brendan and his monks make their way there and disembark. The abbot, however, decides to stay upon the boat, "sciebat enim qualis erat illa insula, sed tamen noluit eis indicare, ne perterrerentur" [for he knew what kind of island that one was, but he did not want to tell the others, or else they'd be terrified].³¹⁴ After the brothers spend

³¹² Wooding, Jonathan M. 'Saint and Beast in *Navigatio S. Brenandi abbatis*', in *À travers les îles celtiques: A dreuz an inizi keltiek Per insula scotticas*, eds. Bernard Merdrignac, Hervé Bihan, and Gildas Buron, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008. 287-296.

³¹³ The implication being that Jasconius is not just *any* fish, he is Mr. Fish.

³¹⁴ *Navigatio* 20.

the night on the island in prayers and vigils, Jasconius makes himself known and they flee to the boat with Brendan, who claims that “Deus enim reuelauit mihi hac nocte per uisionem sacramentum huius rei” [God revealed to me this night through a vision the mystery of this thing].³¹⁵ There is, however, a temporal problem with this claim. The text clearly states that Brendan knew the nature of the island before the night passed, so why does he say God revealed to him the secrets during the night? Furthermore, the saint was told specifically “hac nocte eritis in illa insula quam uidetis prope” [you will spend this night on that island you see nearby], which he refuses to do.³¹⁶ The last problem with this passage is that, since Brendan knew the nature of the beast, why does he stay on the boat at all? He has no problem allowing the other brothers to disembark and shows something that looks very much like fear by staying off shore.

The next time the monks encounter Jasconius, however, Brendan freely disembarks with them and their Easter passes without incident.³¹⁷ The last time we see the fish-island, Jasconius actually carries Brendan and the monks all the way to the Island of the Birds on his back, with Brendan telling his men “Nolite formidare. Nihil enim mali erit uobis, sed adiutorium imminet itineris” [Do not be afraid, for no evil will come to you, but help for the journey is near at hand].³¹⁸ The progression here gives a clearer insight into the

³¹⁵ *Navigatio* 21.

³¹⁶ *Navigatio* 19.

³¹⁷ *Navigatio* 42.

³¹⁸ *Navigatio* 77.

problems encountered with the first incident. Brendan grows in confidence with each new year and each new knowledge-gaining encounter, becoming more and more reliant upon his faith in God to bring them where they are divinely scheduled to be. The temporal problem of 'knowing,' however, remains. Was the nature of Jasconius known to Brendan beforehand, or was it revealed to him in the night?

It is possible that Brendan only understood 'the kind of island it was' in general terms (an island of fear, danger, instability), and then during his vision the complete history of Jasconius was revealed. The 'secret of the affair', as Brendan puts it, is that "Insula non est, ubi fuimus, sed piscis, prior omnium natantium in oceano. Querit semper ut suam caudam simul iungat capiti, et non potest pre longitudine. Qui habit nomen Jasconius." [This is no island, where we were, but a fish—the foremost of all swimmers in the ocean. He is always trying to join his tail with his head, but he cannot on account of the length. He has the name Jasconius].³¹⁹ If the nighttime vision was what explained these details, then the lack of fear Brendan demonstrates come morning is a clear example of the power that knowledge has within the *Navigatio*, as well as the proper channels for that knowledge to be achieved: there is an opaque wonder, confusing and fearful and part of the natural

³¹⁹ *Navigatio* 21. This detail about the bringing his tail to his head is extremely reminiscent of the *ouroboros*, the Norse *Jörmungandr*, and other iterations of the world serpent myth, but I have not found or formulated a particular connection between these concepts (especially given the relative lateness of Norse texts detailing *Jörmungandr*) and Jasconius or the *Navigatio*. The *Navigatio* was, however, most probably written just at the outset of viking invasions of Ireland and Britain (Iona, Irish monastery and setting of the *Vitae Columbae*, was raided in 795) and so a historical connection may be possible.

world, but the spiritual authority through proper devotional practice learns of its nature directly from God himself and so eliminates that opacity and fear.

It is impossible to know, since unlike the episode with the *infantem ethiopem* earlier, the reader is not allowed to see the vision granted to the saint. Just like the brothers in the currach, we are left only with what Brendan tells us. We must be content with the glimpse of truth that we have been afforded.

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CHAPTER THREE RIDDLES

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed wonder as a product of geographic distance. In *The Phoenix*, this geographic distance was created through a mythic, Edenic setting in the far eastern corners of the known world. In the *Navigatio*, this geographic distance was achieved through legendary islands in the far western ocean, beyond the known world. This chapter will examine wonder not as a product of spatial or experiential distance, but rather as a product of a literary process wherein everyday, local objects, ideas, and animals become wondrous through oblique or opaque language—that is, in riddles. Remembering the words of St Augustine, that “daily familiarity gradually blunts the edge of wonder”,³²⁰ the riddle as a genre, and especially as a genre used in early medieval England, attempts to make a marvel of the quotidian, make strange what feels normal, and alienate the local, native, or unsurprising through metaphor, wordplay, and misdirection. In the words of Rafał Borysławski, the riddle seeks “to construct anew, to stimulate fresh perception, to defamiliarize in order to portray the world in a novel, breathtaking way.”³²¹

The focus of this chapter will lay in the Exeter Book riddles, a collection of 95 or so³²² poems split into several sections, taking up a significant part of the

³²⁰ Augustine. *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, Penguin Books, 2003. Bk XVI, ch4, p.970.

³²¹ Borysławski, Rafał. *The Old English Riddles and Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry*, Peter Lang, 2004. 22.

³²² The generally accepted number (put forth by Krapp and Dobbie) is 95, though Muir has 94 in his

back half of that codex. The first bundle of riddles, numbers 1-59, begin just three folia after the Old English *Physiologus* poems (just *Soul and Body II*, *Deor*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* come between them) and thus around 35 folia after *The Phoenix*. The riddles are often marked by imperative clauses like Riddle 3's *Saga hwæt ic hatte*, 'Say what I am called', or similar phrasing that enjoins the reader to guess the true nature of the speaker or riddle-subject. Similarly, many riddles begin with a sense of the mysterious, as in Riddle 18's *Ic eom wonderlicu wiht*, 'I am a wonderful creature', that set the audience up for the riddling game. The Exeter Book collection is the largest collection of riddles written in Old English, though the series has Latin predecessors in the early English Aldhelm, Tatwine, and Eusebius, as well as in the late fourth or early fifth century collection of Symphosius's *Aenigmata*.³²³ Unlike these collections, however, the Exeter riddles do not contain an answer key (whether by design or by misfortune it is unknown) and thus lay far more open-ended to scholarly interpretation than their predecessors.

Although nowadays riddles may be viewed as silly amusements, not worthy of contemplation much beyond figuring out their intended solution, the existence of these riddle collections demonstrates their enormous importance to the early English literati. Between the four collections already

edition and Williamson argues 91. Williamson's analysis is partially based on reading riddles 1-3 as the same poem, despite the clear manuscript demarcations which separate them, and I'm unclear whether his argument and subsequent shift in numbering does little more than confuse the entirety of riddle scholarship. I will be using Krapp and Dobbie's numbering for this paper.

³²³ Leary, T. J., *Symphosius, The Aenigmata: An Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 4.

mentioned and others, such as those by Boniface and the so-called Lorsch riddles,³²⁴ there are well over 300 surviving examples, making it the most prolific genre of poetry in pre-Conquest England³²⁵ in terms of sheer number of surviving examples. And poems they certainly were, often showing a great amount of poetic skill, beauty, and depth beyond what we might expect of a modern-day riddle. Aldhelm's 100 *Engimata*, the first English collection of riddles we have and which were modeled after the *Aenigmata* of Symphosius, were ostensibly written to illustrate the principles of poetic verse outlined in the treatises which first accompanied them.³²⁶ Boniface, Tatwine, and Eusebius all followed in Aldhelm's footsteps in constructing solidly crafted and metrically rigorous Latin lines. The Exeter Book's riddles, meanwhile, take on distinctly Old English verse forms, following precisely their poetic rules of alliteration and meter while selectively employing kennings, litotes, elegaic language, and all the other trappings of early English poetry found in its much longer, more 'serious' creations.

The Exeter Book is at its heart a religious miscellany and the existence of these riddle-poems amongst highly religious verses, such as *The Life of St Guthlac*, *The Passion of St Juliana*, *The Descent into Hell*, and of course the three

³²⁴ Though Continental, both collections are by early English expats. See Salvador-Bello, Mercedes. *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata*, West Virginia University Press, 2015. 17-24.

³²⁵ If we include prose riddles, such as those by Alcuin of York, the *Collectanea* of Pseudo-Bede, or the *Ioca monachorum*, this number rises substantially higher. There is also a riddling element to a good number of dialogues, an example of which famously is the Old English poem *Solomon and Saturn*.

³²⁶ Lapidge, Michael, trans. and introduction and James L. Rosier, trans. *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, D.S. Brewer, 2009. 10-11 and 61-63. The two metrical works are *De Metris* and *De Pedum Regulis*, and all three works are part of the immense *Epistola ad Acircium*.

Christ poems that begin the manuscript, should not be automatically taken as incongruous. As the example of Aldhelm, a bishop and largely theological writer,³²⁷ shows, riddles were considered worthwhile endeavours by holy men. Riddle-posing was also a biblically authorized activity for the medieval English as, in the book of Judges, Samson poses a riddle to the companions of his wedding feast and in doing so discovers their influence over his bride-to-be and her subsequent betrayal.³²⁸ His riddle, “the enigma par excellence of the Christian tradition”,³²⁹ is answered with ‘a swarm of bees inside the carcass of lion’, demonstrating that, while some riddles are unsolveable through mere guesswork, they still have the ability to divine real truth, even if they do so indirectly. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly to our purposes, Samson’s riddle demonstrates the centrality of animals in the Christian riddling tradition.

Riddles of ‘the Natural World’

This centrality of animals to the riddling genre fits within the emphasis the Exeter Book riddles place on non-human subjects and the vocalizations they give to animals, objects, and natural phenomena. With their focus on everyday

³²⁷ Lapidge and Rosier, see sections on ‘Aldhelm’s Life’ (5-9) for his ecclesiastical career and ‘The Writings of Aldhelm’ (10-18) for his theological writings.

³²⁸ See Murphy, Patrick J. *Unriddling the Exeter Book Riddles*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011., especially his chapter entitled ‘Riddle 17 as Samson’s Lion’ (153-173), in which he argues well that Riddle 17 derives from this biblical example and can be solved as *leo ond beo*, lion and bee. The story of Samson and his riddle is found in Judges 14.

³²⁹ Murphy 160.

life and 'low-brow' subject matter, often eschewing the lofty language or epic convention found in other Old English verse forms,³³⁰ the riddles often strike readers as more 'grounded', more 'down-to-earth', and more indicative of how the early English humans actually related to the extant, physical, non-human world around them.³³¹

Tied to this perception, the riddles have also recently received a significant boost of attention with the advent of ecocritical literary scholarship. Corinne Dale, for example, has argued that the poems as a whole "offer an alternative, ecocentric view of their subjects, one that considers the natural origins of manmade products and the individual integrity and personal plight of these useful human resources".³³² She goes on to identify "a programme of resistance to anthropocentrism... whereby the riddles challenge human-centered ways of depicting the created world".³³³ Dale's argument is in itself a resistance to the view of previous scholars that claim the non-human riddle subjects are largely defined by their utility to humanity,³³⁴ though her assessment of what is 'natural' can be further complicated by the possibility that 'eco-centrism' is, in a way, always still 'theo-centrism' within the medieval

³³⁰ For more discussion on this perception of unique diction in the riddles, see Wehlau, Ruth. "*The Riddle of Creation*": *Metaphor Structures in Old English Poetry*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1997. 93-4.

³³¹ See also Soper, Harriet. 'Reading the *Exeter Book* Riddles as Life-Writing', *The Review of English Studies* 68, Issue 287 (November 2017). 841-865. Soper argues that the riddles can be read as discourses on life progression, as early examples of life-writing and 'object biography'.

³³² Dale, Corinne. *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles*. D.S. Brewer: 2017. 1-2.

³³³ Dale 2.

³³⁴ She begins her book with a quotation, essentially that "All these riddles, whether the subject be animate or inanimate, have at least one common characteristic, their human interest... The riddler... constantly stresses [their subject's] uses to mankind." She cites Tupper, Frederick. *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Ginn, 1910.

mindframe. Ruth Wehlau reminds us that, to the early English writers, “the universe was not distant and alien, but rather a constant presence continually maintained through God’s active interest. Old English poetry represents the cosmos not as Nature, but as Creation, not as organism, but as artifice”.³³⁵ Dale agrees with Wehlau, pointing out the necessity of theology in understanding the medieval understanding of nature, but her work is still partially dependent on a division between nature and humanity, nature being ‘all that is external to humanity’, a definition she pulls from the pages of Jennifer Neville’s *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*.³³⁶ This definition may seem tautological, but it serves Dale’s purposes in conceiving of an ecocentric riddle collection.

Neville’s work also proposes that the early English concept of ‘the natural world’ did not exclude the supernatural, as it does today, which implies of course that there *was* a distinction between the supernatural and the non-supernatural (I hesitate here to say ‘the natural’). Neville’s own deconstruction of ‘the natural world’ leads, however, to the conclusion that there is no single, unifying cosmological scheme or worldview in early medieval England, and that “It is not really a self-sufficient, externally defined entity at all. It is instead a reflection of human constructions.”³³⁷ These human constructions include the religious, the learned, the folkloric, the lived

³³⁵ Wehlau 8.

³³⁶ Dale 8. She cites from Neville, Jennifer. *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 27, Cambridge University Press, 1999. 3.

³³⁷ Neville, *Representations* 16-7. Quotation from 16.

experience, and more, but they are not beholden to the natural/human divide that has emerged over the past few hundred years as a result of modern scientific theory and ecological understanding. They are not beholden strictly to the observable, quantifiable, empirically measured ecosystem that contemporary society so values and “with this focus on intangible concepts,” Neville argues, “it is unsurprising that the representation of ‘the natural world’ is not inevitably tied to physical reality.”³³⁸ It often *is* tied to physical ‘reality’, but not inevitably so. For the purposes of this dissertation, I find the nomenclature of ‘nature’ is beguiling and too caught up in contemporary concepts of that word—a word which, Neville rightly points out, does not even have a direct parallel in Old English—to be strictly useful. ‘Creation’, as an understanding of a theocentric ecology that incorporates far more than ‘physical reality’, is perhaps a better term, and it is borne out certainly in Aldhelm’s riddles. Enigma 4, solved as *Natura*, is a four line poem referencing the nature of things, whereas Riddle 100, solved as *Creatura*, is an 83-line, all-encompassing overview of the world that references the prefatory poem and rounds out the entire collection.³³⁹

An application of this idea would be to understand that the riddle-solutions themselves are not always ‘real-life’, extant things. Megan Cavell, for example, has pointed out that, while there is a current debate on

³³⁸ Nevill 16.

³³⁹ The prefatory poem begins *Arbiter*... ‘Judge’, while Riddle 100 begins *Conditor*... ‘Creator’ or as A.M. Juster translates, ‘The Maker’. Juster, A.M., trans. and ed. *Saint Aldhelm’s Riddles*, University of Toronto Press, 2016. 3-7 and 62-67.

whether the hedgehog or the porcupine is a better solution for Riddle 15, a better answer than either would be *igil*, the Old English word for both animals.³⁴⁰ Cavell hopes that her solution “reminds solvers that a solution in the language of the riddle is always preferable to one that draws on modern linguistic forms and categorizations”,³⁴¹ which also further reminds us that modern categorizations of the natural world are constructions of the modern mind, and not self-evident truths of nature. The answer is neither what modern scientists deem a ‘hedgehog’ nor what they deem a ‘porcupine’, but rather what the early English themselves deem a separate concept from both entirely. Language about nature necessarily classifies and categorizes nature, as it does about anything at all, and thus, as Wehlau puts it, “the concepts of language and metaphor, of human and divine creation, and of incarnation are all linked to each other... The Creation is a kind of book to be read, and a mystery to be deciphered. To study the Creation closely is thus a kind of reading akin to the working out of a riddle.”³⁴²

This mystery of creation, tied in with mysteries like that of the phoenix’s sex or the *diversa secreta* Brendan encounters, is ultimately why riddles are such fertile ground for looking at the physiologic tradition. Riddles teach their readers to marvel once more at the creation around them, even if that creation feels commonplace- to turn Augustine’s phrase, riddles *sharpen* the edge of

³⁴⁰ Cavell, Megan. ‘The *Igil* and Exeter Book *Riddle 15*’, *Notes and Queries* 64.2 (June 2017). 206-210.

³⁴¹ Cavell 206.

³⁴² Wehlau 10-11.

wonder, and this is demonstrated specifically in the Exeter Book riddle texts themselves. As Patricia Dailey has stated, “the aura of the wondrous or marvellous (‘wraetlic’ or ‘wunderlicu’) which explicitly accompanies the creatures or creaturely things described in a significant number of riddles (18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 31, 33, 36, 39, 40, 42, 44, 47, 50, 51, 55, 59, 60, 67, 68, 69, 70, 83, 84, 87, 88) is not meant to inhibit or stop the reader’s engagement”;³⁴³ instead, the wondrous nature of riddles is there to urge on the process of interpretation and the quest of understanding “the true and whole nature of things”, that is, what is only understood by God himself. This demonstrates the reader’s “inability to know an object fully, in the epistemological sense”³⁴⁴, much as texts like the *Navigatio* emphasize the readers’ lack of knowledge about creation while still encouraging them to seek truth and revel in wonder. Riddles, essentially, re-create creation, possibly reminding their readers of the role of God in the creation of their everyday lives.

The reshaping of ostensibly ‘real’ subjects, including ‘the natural world’, is a primary focus of the second half of this chapter. The first half, however, dives deeper into the structure and social functions of riddles, opening the pathway for a reading of several of the texts within the physiologic tradition while also further expanding and exploring how the physiologic tradition functions. As the chapter continues, it will become necessary to branch out

³⁴³ Dailey, Patricia. “Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness in Anglo-Saxon Literature.” In *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*. Edited by Clare A. Lees. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pages 451-72. Quotation from 469.

³⁴⁴ Dailey 469.

from the most obvious of the physiologic animal-riddles and consider what it means that these interpretations of animals are placed side-by-side with riddles which express anxieties about social, political, and ethnic others. The oxen riddles, so often connected with slavery and the 'dark-skinned' Welsh, *do* reflect a reality in early medieval England, one that uses the riddle's unique format to refigure the human/animal divide as more malleable when in contact with ethno-geographic distinctions. Thus, the physiologic tradition, a unique discourse which proscribes correct belief by utilizing and often blurring the distinctions between animality, wonder, and ethnicity, begins to be wielded and formed for nationalistic ends— a nationalism partially crafted from these very human constructions of 'the natural world'.

The Structure and Social Functions of Riddles

Riddles are an instructive part of the physiologic tradition in that they clearly mirror the works of God as explained by the Physiologus. The riddle can be broken down into two simple structural elements, the solution and the misdirection. A typical *Physiologus* entry, as the introduction to this dissertation argues, contains three structural elements: the animal, the wonder, and the moral. If we directly compare the two structures of riddle and entry, we find the 'solution' to be the moral or signification, with the animal and the wonder taking the place of the 'misdirection'. More granularly, we can

separate out the animal and wonder and call the animal the literal object of the riddle, which is elevated linguistically and poetically the same way wonder elevates the animal. An example will help clarify this— take Riddle 50, which begins:

*Wiga is on eorþan wundrum acenned
dryhtum to nytte, of dumbum twam
torht atyhted, þone on teon wigeð
feond his feonde.*

[A warrior is wondrously born on earth,
of profit to many, from two unspeaking ones,
created bright and then brought as a source of harm
by a foe to his foe.]³⁴⁵

The solution to this riddle is most commonly given as ‘fire’, although ‘anger’ is another viable option.³⁴⁶ If we take ‘fire’ for granted as the answer, we can parallel this riddle’s structure with the *Physiologus*’s structure: ‘the animal’ being the warrior mentioned in line one and ‘the wonder’ being the series of paradoxes and metaphoric language that complicate the idea of the warrior. A warrior is a straightforward concept to begin with, as a lion might be in the *Physiologus*, but the reader becomes lost as they hear the warrior is ‘wondrously born from two unspeaking ones’ (“Are the warrior’s parents deaf?” a reader might ask themselves) or that the warrior is ‘created bright’ (“Was the warrior born with luminescent skin?”) and ‘of profit to many’ (“Does he help many people out?”) while also being ‘brought as a source of harm’

³⁴⁵ All Old English texts within this chapter are from Muir, Bernard J., ed. *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501. Volume 1: Texts*, University of Exeter Press, 2000. All translations of Old English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

³⁴⁶ Marie Nelson argues that it is both, a position I agree with and will expand upon later.

between foes (“So he isn’t helpful, then?”). It is not until the solution, or ‘the moral’, is learned or figured out that the reader understands ‘the warrior’ is not a warrior, but actually ‘fire’. Fire is born from flint and iron, two unspeaking objects; it sparks to life in a bright flash; and while it helps many people survive the cold and cook food, it is also used as a weapon to burn and destroy between enemies. Creation within the riddles, such as fire, is hidden by images and wordplay. This directly parallels the spiritual truths which, within the physiologic tradition, are hidden by animals and their wondrous nature.

As we saw in the chapter one, the phoenix was always-already a riddle within Classical, Late Antique, and early English culture. The whale, as well, was a riddle to the unwary sailors that rest upon its back and the Old English *Physiologus* emphasizes the riddlic nature of sweet odors through its juxtaposition of good (the Panther’s breath) and bad (the Whale’s breath). These are in a large part dependent on experiential difference. If Brendan or the reader had known the true nature of the island, then the revelation of Jasconius’s whale-ness would not be effective; if the phoenix was a common backyard songbird, it could not stand for such a great many concepts and ideas.

Yet the riddles of the Exeter Book, like many other riddles, purposefully eschew the creation of wonder through experiential difference- that is, if the audience of a riddle has no experience of its subject the riddle becomes

meaningless and, to put it bluntly, not fun. If a riddle is posed with the solution of “my aunt Jill” or “a specific piece of bathroom graffiti at the local bar”, finding out the answer is nigh impossible unless it is given out by the riddle-poser themselves, in which case the ‘game’ of the riddle is foiled and its existence serves only the purpose of confounding and upsetting the riddle’s audience. Worse yet are entirely unsolvable riddles, regardless of frame of reference, such as Bilbo Baggins’ infamous ‘What have I got in my pocket?’, a riddle which, as Andrew Higl points out, in its unsolvable nature causes playful conflict to become serious and then precipitates the entire drama of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.³⁴⁷ Samson’s riddle in the book of Judges, even more obviously, provokes violent outrage (not to mention destroys a marriage) through its unsolvable nature; of course, the answer of “a swarm of bees in the carcass of a lion” is actually discovered, but the unveiling of the solution demonstrates that both riddle-poser and riddle-answerer had cheated at this game and leads to bad feelings and murder all around. Though we delight at riddles in their unsolved form in the same way we may delight at wonders we have never heard of before, we still must have experiential grounding to be satisfied with the transformation of that wonder into a solution. We must

³⁴⁷ Higl, Andrew. ‘Riddle Hero: Play and Poetry in the Exeter Book Riddles’, *American Journal of Play* 9.3 (Spring 2017), 374-394. 375.

know what 'fire' is, along with the details of its nature, in order to feel satisfaction upon reading Riddle 50.³⁴⁸

There are also clear social functions of the riddle form. Marie Nelson has outlined four of these: (1) "a structure for the competitive exercise of verbal skill"³⁴⁹, (2) they "sometimes provided their performers with opportunities to present themselves as warriors", (3) they responded to a "threatening aspect of the natural world"³⁵⁰, and finally (4) they "enabled [the Old English riddlers] to say some of the things they knew about themselves"³⁵¹ or, alternatively stated, they "expressed insights concerning the human power to destroy".³⁵² Nelson argues that it is this fourth social function that allows us to read Riddle 50 not only as solved by 'fire', but also by 'anger' simultaneously. "The 'Fire' creator", she claims, even as they "followed the general rules prescribed by the riddle game... may also have been making an astute observation about human aggression."³⁵³ Anger, like fire, can help a person stay alive, but if unchecked it can also destroy and consume.

³⁴⁸ I do, however, recognize the importance of riddles such as the 'One-Eyed Garlic Seller', a riddle that appears in Symphosius (*Enigma* 94) and the Exeter collection (Riddle 86). I think it is important to note that both of these occur very late in their respective collections- presumably, by the time they are reached the reader has become well acquainted with the typical riddle form and can handle a tongue-in-cheek joke by the author at their expense. At this point, it is the usurpation or perversion of the riddle form in which we get our pleasure.

³⁴⁹ Nelson, Marie. 'Four Social Functions of the Exeter Book Riddles,' *Neophilologus* 75 (1991), 445-450. Quotation from 445

³⁵⁰ Nelson 447.

³⁵¹ Nelson 450.

³⁵² Nelson 445. The more general statement concerning self-reflection is at the end of the article, but the more specific statement concerning destructive power is at the beginning- in her article she examines two riddles that embody the 'destructive power', but I don't believe that her point necessitates the existence of destruction as a key theme. I discuss this more at length below in my discussion of reading the riddles as physiologic entries.

³⁵³ Nelson 448.

Brian McFadden, meanwhile identifies the purpose of riddles as a clerical genre “to give the reader practice in interpretation of ambiguous texts”, while he also argues that “the riddles serve as a site for the expression of cultural anxiety; their depictions of otherness and ambiguity reflect English concern about the actual or potential threat posed by Viking incursions”, as well as the unrest borne in the wake of the Benedictine Reform.³⁵⁴ He argues that the ecclesiastical writers of the Exeter Book “used the riddles to defuse the unsettling effect of wonders by containing them in officially sanctioned interpretations,”³⁵⁵ pointing out that a large number of Exeter Book riddles (especially compared to their Latin predecessors) include imagery of weapons, armor, combat, exile, slavery, and tribute. Though he does not go so far as to say the riddles are direct commentary or allegory on the upheavals of the tenth century, the poems “still express anxiety about violence; these images depict dangerous beings” being contained by wordplay, much as the Vikings were just barely contained by political and military actions.³⁵⁶

As implied by McFadden’s original purpose, giving clerics practice at interpretation, riddles are also didactic. Borysławski mentions this purpose while outlining many other social functions, stating that they “show that things are not necessarily what they seem and that traditional classifications do not have to be the only taxonomy. Through this they teach intellectual or

³⁵⁴ McFadden, Brian. ‘Raiding, Reform, and Reaction: Wondrous Creatures in the Exeter Book Riddles’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 50.4 (Winter 2008). 329-351. Quotations from 329.

³⁵⁵ McFadden 333.

³⁵⁶ McFadden 340-341.

even religious humility; the divine is manifest in manifold and intricate ways."³⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the churchman Aldhelm himself claims a more straightforward didactic purpose for his *Enigmata*: these riddles ostensibly were written in order to illustrate the properties of hexametrical verse, which he had expounded upon in the two tracts that originally appeared on either side of that collection.³⁵⁸ Boryslawski, however, begins his analyses of riddles' social functions not with didacticism, but with the dual purposes of 'play' and of 'magic'- in a sense, each function described thereafter derives from these two ideas.³⁵⁹

The idea of 'play' matches with Nelson's first function, 'the competitive exercise of verbal skill', and it seems difficult to imagine the genre disconnected from some form of entertainment or enjoyment. Even the common literary trope of riddle contests with deadly consequences, from Oedipus's Sphinx to Bilbo's sparring with Gollum to Stephen King's sci-fi use of the genre in his *Dark Tower* series,³⁶⁰ relies on the initial notion of the riddle as a form of play, and the deadly consequences being a dramatic, horrific, or discomfiting perversion of this play. Higl has commented on the Exeter Book riddles specifically, arguing that the manuscript itself invites play at a wide variety of levels, most of which must be shut down by academics who "have

³⁵⁷ Boryslawski 25-6.

³⁵⁸ Lapidge, Michael, trans. and introduction and James L. Rosier, trans. *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, D.S. Brewer, 2009. 10-11 and 61-63. The two metrical works are *De Metris* and *De Pedum Regulis*, and all three works are part of the immense *Epistola ad Acircium*.

³⁵⁹ Boryslawski 17.

³⁶⁰ The protagonists of which, at one point in *Wizard and Glass*, must engage in a riddle contest to stump a highly intelligent, futuristic A.I., which will otherwise crash their train and kill them all.

disciplined the unruly text” in order to make it accessible to contemporary, non-specialist readers.³⁶¹ The layout of the manuscript page, with its relatively few marks of punctuation, capitalization, or enjambment; the lack of a specific demarcation or title that exclaims the riddles as riddles; and the collecting of the manuscript as a whole with texts like *The Phoenix* or the Old English *Physiologus*, riddles in and of themselves, are just a few aspects that invite the early English reader to constantly play, re-analyze, guess, and interact with the physical object of the text.³⁶² Following Nick Monfort, Higl identifies the riddle genre as one of the earliest examples of ‘interactive fiction’, comparing the Exeter Book riddles to modern video games where puzzles and situations are given without a single, clear solution: the reader, or player of the riddle so to speak, must “actively engage in the game, imaginatively participating in the meaning-making exercise”.³⁶³ In all of these social formulations outlined above, riddles are *reflexive*, they are self-aware literary creations that comment on themselves, their writers, and their audience while also asking the audience to agentially reflect upon themselves. They are demonstrative, didactic, and fun.

The broad sense of riddling, then, is one of mental turning. They are intended to spark thought and interpretation, whatever the outcome of that thought and interpretation may end up being, and this process of

³⁶¹ Higl 376.

³⁶² Higl 376-381.

³⁶³ Higl 392.

interpretation is iterative with each audience member, each performance, and even within the 'figuring out' process of a single guesser's brain. As the so-called sexual riddles demonstrate with their dual answers (one licentious, one innocuous),³⁶⁴ many riddles are even multiple in themselves, calling to mind several solutions in the same breath. It is no wonder that the riddles of the Exeter Book, with their lack of an answer key, have been solved in so many thousands of ways³⁶⁵ by so many hundreds of scholars. This chapter will focus on one particular outcome of that iterative and multiple interpretation, that is: reading the riddles as part of the physiologic tradition.

As discussed above, a fairly one-to-one correspondence can easily be drawn between the structure of a riddle and the structure of a *Physiologus* entry. The iterative turning continues on: if the solution to a riddle is an animal, and animals are themselves riddles, then more answers, more interpretations, and more significations are demanded of the reader. Many of the riddles discussed below have fairly agreed-upon solutions- Riddles 7-10 are almost always thought of as the swan, the nightingale, the cuckoo, and the barnacle goose, and it would be difficult to imagine a world in which these were not the actual 'intended solutions'. However, just as Nelson argues that the riddle-writer can intend 'fire' to be the solution of Riddle 50 while also

³⁶⁴ Mercedes Salvador-Bello identifies 14 such examples in the Exeter Book riddle collection. See Salvador-Bello, Mercedes. 'The sexual riddle type in Aldhelm's Enigmata, the Exeter Book, and early medieval Latin', *Philological Quarterly* 90.4 (Fall 2011). 357-85.

³⁶⁵ For a (rather outdated) list of proposed solutions to the riddles, see Fry, Donald K. "Exeter Book Riddle Solutions." *Old English Newsletter*, vol. 15, (1981), 22-33. Though it does not contain the most recent four decades of scholarship, it still lists hundreds of possible answers collected from over 135 sources.

making a commentary on the potentially destructive nature of ‘anger’, so too can these animals be more than just a single, ‘intended solution’. By reading these poems within the physiologic tradition, I intend to unpack another layer of possible solutions (one of the most-loved traditions of any riddle-scholar), as well as examine reflexively how these riddles connect with the way in which animals were interpreted by the early medieval English as a whole.

Early English Enigmas, Explained

As stated in earlier chapters, there are a very few moments within pre-Conquest England where we have direct proof that an English writer came into contact with the *Physiologus*. Michael Lapidge, in update of the work of J.D.A Ogilvy’s *Books Known to the English, 597-1066*³⁶⁶ lists two such places: the Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 448, which contains three Latin, prose entries on the lion, the unicorn, and the panther,³⁶⁷ and a reference

³⁶⁶ Lapidge, Michael. *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Oxford University Press, 2006. The *Physiologus*’s catalogue entry is on 341, it’s place in Æthelwold’s book list on 134-6. Ogilvy questions the possibility that the early English had access to an entire copy of the Latin *Physiologus*, but this is conjecture based on omission- the three animals in the Exeter Book, the three in CCC 448, and the few mentioned by Aldhelm appear to be purposeful choices based on thematic relevance, not happenstance. See also Squires, Ann, ed and introduction. *The Old English Physiologus*, Durham Medieval Texts, 1988. 19-20.

³⁶⁷ For more information on CCC 448, see Salvador-Bello, Mercedes and Mar Gutiérrez-Ortiz, ‘The Cambridge and Exeter Book *Physiologi*: Associative Imagery, Allegorical Circularity, and Isidorean Organization’, *Anglia* 136.4 (2018). 643-686. Salvador-Bello and Gutiérrez-Ortiz also include an edition of the Latin from CCC 448, as well as an English translation, and are notably the first to do so. Their arguments, however, that the two English *Physiologi* ‘clearly’ show the influence of Isidore’s organization structure and their identification of the phoenix as the third entry in the Exeter Book collection I find weakly supported. The allegorical schema they identify and attempt to impose upon the Exeter entries is based on too little data—any three points can form a triangle, after all—to usurp the clear manuscript evidence that would point toward the partridge. See my discussion of Drout’s similar claims in chapter one of this dissertation.

to a *Liber bestiarum* in a list of books donated by Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, to the Peterborough monastery.³⁶⁸ Three other points of contact are the Exeter Book, of course, with its translations discussed in chapter two; the *Liber monstrorum* with its references to the *autolops*, the siren, onocentaur, and others;³⁶⁹ and the *Enigmata* of Aldhelm in the 7th and early 8th centuries.

Though the connection between Aldhelm and the *Physiologus* has not been conclusively proven, this is partially because the sources that we know Aldhelm used, such as Isidore's *Etymologiae*, did in fact use the *Physiologus* themselves, and thus it is difficult to figure out if Aldhelm is pulling his physiologic information first- or second-hand.³⁷⁰ Mercedes Salvador-Bello has identified 13 of the *Enigmata* which overlap in subject matter with the *Physiologus*³⁷¹ out of 36 total animal riddles in the collection, in addition to several non-animal *Physiologus* entries, which is clearly suggestive considering the hundreds of non-physiologic possibilities Isidore presents. Through a very recent, careful analysis of these overlapping subject matters, especially the riddles on the lion and the weasel, Salvador-Bello has concluded that it is

³⁶⁸ This *Liber bestiarum*, 'book of beasts', may not actually refer to a copy *Physiologus* (as this manuscript does not survive), but it is certainly believable that it would.

³⁶⁹ Salvador-Bello, Mercedes. 'Evidence of Use of the *Physiologus* as a Source in Aldhelm's *Enigmata*', *The Review of English Studies* 8. The *Liber monstrorum* has also been often argued to be written by someone from the school of Aldhelm, perhaps a pupil of his.

³⁷⁰ Salvador-Bello, 'Evidence' 2. This work also contains a great deal of scholarship establishing more indirect connections between the *Physiologus* and early medieval England, including the presence of a Y version *Physiologus* in the same manuscript as the Bern riddles, which have been connected to Eusebius and Tatwine; a continental C Version with a colophon signed by a scribe that may be named Ecgberht and illustrations that suggest a connection with the Winchester style of decoration; and textual evidence that poetry written by Bishop Theodore was copying the *Physiologus* entry on the lion. 5-8.

³⁷¹ Nos. 15 (salamander), 18 (ant-lion), 35 (night-raven), 39 (lion), 42 (ostrich), 47 (swallow), 56 (beaver), 57 (eagle), 60 (unicorn), dove (64), 82 (weasel), 88 (snake) and 96 (elephant). Salvador-Bello, 'Evidence' 2.

“clear... that Aldhelm made use of the *Physiologus*, probably available to him in various versions, to complement factual information deriving from Isidore’s Book XII.”³⁷² In at least one more case, the case of the ant-lion, Aldhelm rejected the zoologically correct information found in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* and Gregory the Great’s *Moralia on Job* in favor of the *Physiologus*’s rather suspect claim that the ant-lion is the offspring of a male lion and a female ant.³⁷³

It is clear that Aldhelm and his 100 Latin *Enigmata* were known to the Exeter Book riddle-poet,³⁷⁴ as two of Aldhelm’s *enigmata* are translated directly into Old English within the collection.³⁷⁵ Other riddlers were undoubtedly also important to the Exeter Book riddles’ author(s), including Symphosius, Tatwine, and Eusebius, the first of whom bears particular importance.³⁷⁶ Perhaps the most obvious connection between these various collections is the sheer number- Aldhelm’s 100 riddles are based off Symphosius’s 100 riddles, and while Tatwine wrote just 40 riddles to follow in Aldhelm’s footsteps, his were combined in the manuscript tradition with Eusebius’s 60 riddles to form

³⁷² Salvador-Bello, ‘Evidence’ 24.

³⁷³ See information on ant-lions, see G.C. Druce, “An Account of the Μυρμηκολέων or Ant-Lion,” *The Antiquaries Journal* 3, vol 4 (1923): 347-364., as well as discussion in the Introduction to this dissertation. The riddle is #18 in Aldhelm’s collection.

³⁷⁴ Or riddle-poets, as the case may be. For the purposes of this study, I will be referring to a single poet, though I recognize that there may have been multiple, if not many authors. I do not believe that, were that the case, any larger part of my argument would necessarily fall apart.

³⁷⁵ Williamson, Craig, trans. and ed. *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 8.

³⁷⁶ According to Williamson, three of the Exeter Book riddles (45, 81, 82) “show the direct influence of Symphosius.” Williamson 8. T.J. Leary, however, gives a more expansive view of the Exeter Book riddler’s debt, as according to him, Riddle 16 elaborates on *Aenig.* 61; 37 develops *Aenig.* 73; 47 and 86 have their source from 16 and 86; 60 has similarities to 2; 65 and 85 probably from 40 and 12; and Riddle 91 is a probable analogue to *Aenig.* 4. Leary 32.

a third century of enigmatic poems.³⁷⁷ The Old English collection, coming in at just under a hundred, is probably indebted to this tradition, though whether it is ‘incomplete’ by design or happenstance is not known. Each collection, however, appears to blaze its own trail with regard to how it arranges the riddles within. Symphosius does tend to group his riddles by subject matter, whereas Aldhelm seems to eschew almost all organizational structure aside from at the very beginning and at the very end. Tatwine and Eusebius both have internal groupings to some extent, but then are obviously divided along authorial lines pretty strongly (24 out of Eusebius’s 60 riddles have animal subjects, for example, whereas the more philosophically inclined Tatwine crafts only one animal riddle, on the squirrel).³⁷⁸

Though Salvador-Bello has argued extensively for several structural elements to the Exeter Book riddle collection based around the organizational structure of Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, these claims are much more difficult to make and support in the vernacular collection as opposed to the Latinate ones, purely by virtue of the lack of an answer key. Any organizational structure based around the solutions to the riddles must, fundamentally, pretend to *know* the solutions to these riddles and for a large part of the Exeter Book

³⁷⁷ Williams, Mary Jane McDonald, ed. and trans. “The Riddles of Tatwine and Eusebius.” Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974. See 66-7 for her discussion of their grouping together—she is skeptical about the 100-riddle-collection tradition, suggesting that a compiler may have grouped Tatwine and Eusebius together, even possibly adding or removing excess, to fit the 100-riddle precedent of Symphosius and Aldhelm. Regardless, the pressure to have a collection of 100 riddles existed, even if it were not the original intent of these two authors.

³⁷⁸ See the appendices to Salvador-Bello’s *Isidorean Perceptions of Order* for convenient breakdowns of these Latin riddle collections and their ordering, but take her categorization schema with a grain of salt, especially within her section on the Exeter Book.

collection, this is untenable. Broad outlines or particular pairings may be gestured at, but these are not self-evidently coherent or marked and the overall organizational structure of the Old English riddles is one of almost chaotic miscellany, with two notable and obvious exceptions, the storm-riddles numbered 1-3 and the bird riddles numbered 7-10.

The status of the first three poems, all with the solution of ‘storm’ or some similar tempestuous natural phenomenon, has been hotly debated and, according to Craig Williamson, are all sections of the same poem, though there are slight indications in the manuscript that they should be distinct³⁷⁹ and each of the three sections does end with the typical *Saga*... invitation to the reader to guess.³⁸⁰ To Dieter Bitterli, however, these are clearly informed by Aldhelm’s first four riddles, solved as ‘earth’, ‘wind’, ‘cloud’, and ‘nature’.³⁸¹ This can be considered a parallel “Aldhelmian gesture” to the inclusion of an Old English translation of Aldhelm’s final enigma, ‘Creation’, which appears in the Exeter Book as Riddle 40. Though there is a distinct lack of organization in the center of Aldhelm’s work, the beginning and the ending of the whole clearly mark the collection as cosmological in nature. In the words of Michael Lapidge, “Aldhelm had the brilliant idea of casting his cosmology in the form of *enigmata* so that the reader would be led to consider the fabric of nature

³⁷⁹ Especially between Riddles 1 and 2, where the ‘h’ of Riddle 2’s first word ‘Hwilum’ is written larger and the typical poetic ending mark “:—” appears after Riddle 1’s final line, although there is no empty space between them. Riddle 3 starts on a new page from Riddle 2, but has no special demarcations.

³⁸⁰ “*Saga hwa mec þecce, | oþþe hu ic hatte, þe þa hlæst bere*” in Riddle 1 (ll.14b-15), “*Saga, þoncol mon, | hwa mec bregde...*” in Riddle 2 (ll.12b-13a) and the ending of Riddle 3 is given below. Quotations from Muir.

³⁸¹ Bitterli, Dieter. *Say What I Am Called*, University of Toronto Press, 2009. 36.

strand by strand (as it were) and so gain a fresh perception of the ‘hidden mysteries of things’”, a phrase which appears in the prefatory poem to the *Enigmata*, and thus “The brilliance of his innovation was immediately recognized by his contemporaries, and the form of his work was avidly imitated.”³⁸² Both Tatwine and Eusebius, as well, have cosmological concerns at the forefront of their collections,³⁸³ and so it would make sense that the Exeter Book riddle-poet would fall in step with this apparent tradition. The choice of ‘storm’ as cosmological introduction may not seem obvious until we consider the last few lines of Riddle 3:

*Saga hwæt ic hatte,
 oþþe hwa mec rære, þonne ic restan ne mot,
 oþþe hwa mec stæðe, þonne ic stille beom.*

[Say what I am called,
 or who raises me, when I cannot rest,
 or who stays me, when I am still.]³⁸⁴

Here the riddle-poet specifically offers up the possibility of multiple solutions. Not only do they ask, ‘What am I called?’, but they also ask, ‘Who is my master?’ or ‘Who controls me?’ Salvador-Bello translates these lines as “who lifts me up when I am not allowed to rest, or who holds me so that I am still”, emphasizing a nurturing relationship but still one of paternalism and control.³⁸⁵ With the understanding that these first three poems all represent

³⁸² Lapidge and Rosier 65-6.

³⁸³ Bitterli 36.

³⁸⁴ Riddle 3, ll.72b-74.

³⁸⁵ Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions* 296.

some uncontrollable natural occurrence,³⁸⁶ the clear answer to the second and third questions here is 'God'. When God raises a storm, it cannot rest, and when God stays the storm, it is still. From the get-go, the Exeter Book poems are inviting a secondary solution to their riddling- one that includes the Creator in its various representations of Creation. This follows the precedent set by Aldhelm in his *Enigmata* series.

The second obvious grouping of riddles within the Exeter Book does not have a clear precedent in Aldhelm, however, and it is this grouping that we will be spending a great deal of time on: the ornithological series of four birds in Riddles 7-10. Bitterli gives no particular analogues with this grouping as he does with the storm riddles, merely explaining it as "an attempt to follow a pattern that was established by the Latin riddle-makers"³⁸⁷. As it turns out, there are multiple places where the Exeter Book riddler could have picked up the concept of a run of bird-riddles: Symphosius, Eusebius, and, I will argue, the *Physiologus*.

The parallels with Eusebius's collection are perhaps most straightforward. As his collection of sixty riddles contains a good deal of animals and these animals are grouped by type, it is no surprise that his Riddles 56-60 are all, as Salvador-Bello puts it, 'Animals of Air'.³⁸⁸ They, in order, are given as the stork (*de ciconia*), the ostrich (*de strutione*), the night owl (*de noctua*), the parrot (*de*

³⁸⁶ Salvador-Bello also mentions they could be a seaquake, earthquake, sea storm, thunderstorm, and so on, all products of wind in medieval meteorological understanding. *Isidorean Perceptions* 292.

³⁸⁷ Bitterli 36.

³⁸⁸ Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions*, Appendix VI on 455-6.

psittaco), and the horned owl (*de bubone*). Eusebius largely followed descriptions found in the *Etymologiae*, so closely in fact that, according to Mary Jane Macdonald Williams, “the end result may justly be termed ‘versified Isidore’”³⁸⁹, though he was clearly also inspired by, if not modeling on Aldhelm’s collection. The connections between this bird-run and the Exeter Book are notable, in that both contain birds that are poor parents (the ostrich and the cuckoo), birds that fly above the water (the stork and the swan), birds known for their voices (the parrot and the nightingale), as well as birds known for existing at night (the two owls and, once again, the nightingale).

The connections with Symphosius, however, are a bit more convincing, though fairly obscured by manuscript history. In the typical arrangement of Symphosius’s material, Riddles 26-31 are given as *grus* (crane), *cornix* (crow), *vespertilio* (bat), *ericius* (hedgehog), *peduculus* (louse), and *phoenix* (phoenix).³⁹⁰ T.J. Leary, however, transposes Riddle 31, the phoenix, two spaces earlier by virtue of its status as a bird and the three birds that precede it, stating that the organizational principles “are very clear. In consequence the transmitted order of *Aenig.* 29-31 can be corrected.”³⁹¹ As it turns out, however, this modern transposition is entirely unnecessary given the transmission of the text in early medieval England. In the two manuscripts from England where we find Symphosius, Eusebius, and Tatwine all in one place (what Manuela Bergamin

³⁸⁹ Williams 60.

³⁹⁰ Leary 18. This is also the order given in Salvador-Bello’s Appendix III to *Isidorean Perceptions*, 457.

³⁹¹ Leary 15.

identifies as *g* and *h*),³⁹² the phoenix riddle has been transposed to its position as no. 29, rounding out more solidly the bird-run. With the transposition, the four bird-riddles of Symphosius map remarkably well onto the Exeter Book birds: the crane is a waterfowl, much like the swan; the bat and the nightingale both are nocturnal fliers with an etymological connection in that the first elements of the names (*vesper* in *vespertilio* and *niht* in *nihtegale*) mean 'night'; the crow and the cuckoo are both 'evil' birds; and finally the barnacle goose and the phoenix are fantastic in their birth and have associations with resurrection. Every bird in these three riddle bird-runs (Eusebius, Symphosius, and the Exeter Book) appears in Isidore's *de avis* section of his Book 12, with the notable exception of the barnacle goose, and none of them overlap in subject matter.³⁹³

The final analogue I would like to point to, however, is with the central text of this dissertation: the *Physiologus*. Much like the Exeter Book riddles, by and large there is no strong organizational structure to the *Physiologus* entries- a few pairings are possible, and the lion being the foremost animal seems obviously intentional. However, much like the Exeter Book riddles, the *Physiologus* does contain an obvious ornithological sequence: in both the Y and B versions, the first ten entries are rounded out by the charadrius, the pelican,

³⁹² Bergamin, Manuela, ed. *Aenigmata Symposii: La Fondazione dell'Enigmistica come Genere Poetico*. La Fondazione Ezio Franceschini, 2005. These are Cambridge University Library MS Gg.v.35 and British Museum Royal 12.C.xxiii. Fuller notes on these manuscripts can be found in Williams 82-96, though she refers to Bergamin's *h* as L. Both manuscripts are available freely digitized online through their respective archives.

³⁹³ Though there are overlapping riddle-subjects with Aldhelm, who has the nightingale (22), stork (33), and ostrich (42), as well as the *nycticorax*, another owl (35).

the owl, the eagle, the phoenix, and the hoopoe, much as the first ten riddles are rounded out by the swan, the nightingale, the cuckoo, and the barnacle goose. The ordering of the *Physiologus* is not inconsequential to the Exeter Book as a whole, as the common sequence of Panther-Whale-Partridge within the Y and B versions is the primary reason scholars have identified the third, heavily lacunated Old English *Physiologus* poem as the partridge in the first place. Like Eusebius and Symphosius, thematically resonant birds can be picked out between the two sequences (night-birds, water-birds, birds relating to parenting and birds related to resurrection), yet unlike the Latin riddle-writers, the positioning of these birds in relation to the rest of the collection matches with the *Physiologus*, whereas Eusebius's birds end his collection and Symphosius's are a bit further on (25-29).

I am not the first to comment on the connections between the riddles and the *Physiologus*. Jennifer Neville, for example, cites the physical closeness of the *Physiologus* poems and *The Phoenix* to the riddle collection³⁹⁴ within the manuscript, as well as the long tradition of reading the literal as allegorical in Old English literature, in order to set up her analysis of Riddle 9 on the cuckoo. She argues that instead of the typical question-solution dual way of looking at a riddle, there are four parts to be examined: the question, solution, a social commentary on fosterage, and a spiritual allegory. Neville's project is

³⁹⁴ Neville, Jennifer. 'Fostering the Cuckoo: Exeter Book Riddle 9', *Review of English Studies* 58, issue 236 (2007). 431-436. 440-441.

focused on the cuckoo riddle, but I extend her connections from beyond just that one particular bird into the entire series.

In terms of other sources, three of the Exeter Book riddle birds do appear in the *Etymologiae*—the swan (12.7.18),³⁹⁵ the nightingale (12.7.37),³⁹⁶ and the cuckoo (12.7.67),³⁹⁷ and they appear in the same order in both texts, although they are very far apart from each other in Isidore. This fits in with Salvador-Bello’s theory of an semi-Isidorean ordering of the riddles, and Bitterli as well argues for an ‘etymological principle’ to the bird riddles that follows Isidore’s lead in deconstructing the language of names.³⁹⁸ Yet, unlike Eusebius and his ‘versified Isidore’ enigmas (which are much closer to each other within the *de avis* section than the swan, nightingale, and cuckoo), the bird poems of the Exeter Book contain lore and elaborations on each of their subjects that do not appear in the *Etymologiae*, partially explained by the fact

³⁹⁵ “It is called ‘swan’ (*olor*) because it is ‘entirely’ white in its plumage; for no one mentions a black swan... The *cycnus*... is named for singing (*canere*) because it pours out a sweetness of song with its modulated voice. It is thought to sing sweetly because it has a long curved neck, and a voice forcing its way by a long and winding path necessarily renders varied modulations. 19. People say that in the Hyperborean regions, when musicians are singing to citharas, swans come flocking in large numbers, and sing with them quite harmoniously. *Olor* is the Latin name, for in Greek they are called κἄκνοβ. Sailors say that this bird makes a good omen for them, just as Aemilius (Macer) says (fr. 4): The swan is always the most fortunate bird in omens. Sailors prefer this one, because it does not immerse itself in the waves.” Translations of Isidore are all from Barney, Stephen.

³⁹⁶ “The nightingale (*lusciniā*) is a bird that took its name because it is accustomed to indicate by its song the onset of the rising sun, as if its name were *luciniā* (cf. *lux*, gen. *lucis*, “light, sun”). This same bird is also the *acredula*, concerning which Cicero says in his *Prognostics* (fr. 6): And the *acredula* performs her morning songs. “

³⁹⁷ “67. The cuckoo (*tucus*), which the Spaniards call *ciculus* (i.e. *cuculus*), is named from its particular call. These birds have a proper season for their return migration, at which time they are taken up on the shoulders of kites because of their brief and small spans of flight, lest their strength fail, fatigued by the long expanse of sky. Cicadas are born from their saliva.”

³⁹⁸ Bitterli, *Say What* 35-56. ‘The Etymological Principle’ is the name of his chapter on the swan and nightingale riddles.

that all four birds are native to Great Britain and thus would've been known through non-learned avenues to the Exeter Book riddler.³⁹⁹

The trope of the swan's wings making music in Riddle 7 is a rare one, yet it is found in the Exeter Book's own *Phoenix*, and though Isidore connects the swan with musicality, he does so only through the bird's call.⁴⁰⁰ The nightingale is identified in the *Etymologiae* as accompanying the rising sun, a detail absent within, if not entirely contradicted by, its riddle description.⁴⁰¹ Isidore's entry on the cuckoo, while making much of its migration, gives no negative connotation to the bird and makes no mention of its nature as a brood parasite,⁴⁰² which are both necessary components of understanding the riddle's solution.⁴⁰³ Finally, the Exeter Book appears to be the earliest extant writing on the miraculous barnacle goose at all, which became more popular

³⁹⁹ Bitterli, *Say What* 37-9.

⁴⁰⁰ Bitterli, *Say What* 40-42.

⁴⁰¹ Isidore's etymological derivation of *luscina*, nightingale, as coming from *lux*, light, seems to directly contradict the Old English *nihtegale*'s derivation from *niht*, night.

⁴⁰² Dieter Bitterli, however, using Jacques André's 1967 edition of the *Etymologiae*, cites an apparent ninth-century addition to the text, non-Isidorean in origin, that does mention this brood parasitism. I cannot say which version of the *Etymologiae* the Old English riddler would've had access to, but my point is primarily that the Old English riddler was not solely influenced by Isidore in their descriptions of these creatures, and that point is further emphasized by Bitterli's later point, in which he mentions that no authority mentions the cuckoo chick ousting the host's offspring from the nest, "a fact which was first described only in early modern times." The riddle-poet was undoubtedly working with a base of knowledge beyond the classical authorities and beyond Isidore. Bitterli, Dieter. 'Survival of the Dead Cuckoo', in Honegger, Thomas, ed., *Riddles, Knights, and Crossdressing Saints: Essays on Medieval English Language and Literature*, Peter Lang, 2004. 95-114, quotation from 104.

⁴⁰³ Isidore does, however, place the cuckoo immediately next to the hoopoe (the tenth and final entry of the *Physiologus* bird sequence), which he refers to as a 'loathesome bird' despite the *Physiologus*'s allegorical figuring of the hoopoe as good children who honor their mothers and fathers. I don't know if this means anything, but it is suggestive that the Isidore paints the cuckoo as neutral and the hoopoe bad, while *Physiologus* paints the hoopoe good and the Exeter Book riddler paints the cuckoo bad.

in later medieval bird-writing⁴⁰⁴ and thus appears to be part of a natively English tradition.

The Exeter Book riddler chose four birds which are not at all amongst the *Physiologus* animals, unlike Aldhelm who had no problem copying his *Physiologus* subjects, and I believe this to be intentional. I would like to view these birds, and their elaborations, as a deliberate echo of the bird-run found within the *Physiologus*, except with the regular, far-flung cast of characters being replaced with distinctly native, English species. In this sense, the choice of non-*Physiologus* animals in favor of native species brings the physiologic tradition out of far, distant lands, out of the sense of experiential and geographic distance, and into the local, experiential familiar. The genre of riddling uniquely serves the riddler's purpose, then, providing that sense of wonder that is necessary to the physiologic tradition while also commenting on and referencing distinctly English animals in the distinctly English language. This is merely a different form of what the Old English *Physiologus* and the Old English *Phoenix* accomplish as well- translation of a Latin paradigm into the vernacular. Yet the riddles translate more than vocabulary and grammar: they translate specie and genre, as well.

The Riddles Within Riddles: English Birdlore

⁴⁰⁴ The next historical mention of the barnacle goose is in the works of Gerald of Wales, discussed in the next chapter.

This act of translation between the Latin *Physiologus* and the Old English bird riddles can be read in a variety of ways, especially concerning notions of nativeness and Englishness, but before we broach that topic, I would like to spend some time actually reading the poems as constructions within the physiologic tradition and unpacking what the moral or signification of these animals could be. I will walk through each of them in the order presented in the manuscript, beginning with Riddle 7, the swan:

*Hrægl min swigað, þonne ic hrusan trede,
 oþþe þa wic buge, oþþe wado drefe.
 Hwílum mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht
 hyrste mine, ond þeos hea lyft,
 ond mec þonne wide wolcna strengu
 ofer folc byreð. Frætwe mine
 swogað hlude ond swinsiað,
 torhte singað, þonne ic getenge ne beom
 flode ond foldan, ferende gæst.*

[My garments are silent when I tread the earth,
 or when I stay at home, or stir up the sea.
 Sometimes they lift me over mankind's dwelling,
 my ornaments and this high air,
 and then the strength of clouds widely
 bears me over men. My adornments
 woosh loudly and make melody,
 sing splendidly, when I am not near
 the waters and the earth, a travelling spirit.]⁴⁰⁵

The repetition of the 'sw'-sound between *swigað*, *swogað*, and *swinsiað*, all of which represent sounds (or lack thereof) made by the riddle-subject, make obvious their sonic and linguistic connection to the solution, *swon*, and indeed

⁴⁰⁵ Old English text of the riddle comes from Muir 291-293. Translations into Modern English are my own.

this is the connection that forms the basis of Bitterli's 'etymological principle'.⁴⁰⁶ As astute riddle-readers, ever aware of the potential for misdirection, we should however push further into these words, and the primary focus for me within this poem is that last line, *flode ond foldan ferende gæst*. The word *gæst* has a large connotative and denotative berth- the Dictionary of Old English gives it as a variable spelling for two different words: *gyst*, meaning either visitor or stranger; and *gast*, meaning breath, wind, or inspiration and vitality, life, or spirit. Thus we can read *gæst* as either a guest, a gust, or a ghost. Though *gyst* shouldn't be discounted entirely, the last two possibilities seem more relevant. Within the context of the poem and the nature of a swan, *gæst* appears to work best as 'breath' or 'wind', a metaphoric reference to a bird emphasizing the characteristics of flight, sound, and air. Reading *gæst* as a life force, i.e. the metaphoric breath of life, also contributes to the overall image and this is how the word is used within the cuckoo riddle on the next folio. It also makes clear that the poet is speaking about a living thing- as the riddles which precede Riddle 7 are typically answered by the inanimate 'bell,' 'shield', and 'sun', this is a useful thing to know.

It is the last reading, that of understanding *gæst* as 'spirit' or 'ghost', which is most relevant to our reading here, however. Even when approaching the poem with the answer of 'a swan' in mind, parallels are easy to make between

⁴⁰⁶ Bitterli, *Say What* 35-56.

the description and the Holy Ghost at the beginning of creation, a spirit which travels the world over land, sea, and air. Consider, especially, the parallels between this final line and Genesis 1:2, “and the spirit of God moved over the waters,” or as Ælfric translates it into Old English in his *Hexateuch*, *Godes gast wæs geferod ofer wæteru*.⁴⁰⁷ *Geferod* is the past participle of *ferian*, the verb ‘to bear,’ while the riddle’s *ferende* is a present participle, either of *ferian* as well (making them different forms of the same word) or *feran*, a related verb meaning ‘to go’. *Gast* here is the same in both. The *DOE* states that this particular occurrence of *ferende* is a form of *feran* and means ‘wandering’; this, however, is a unique definition for this single usage and therefore somewhat suspect. The use of *ferende* as a form of *ferian* is a stronger reading in two ways: one, as the swan is indeed borne or *ferried* by the wind; and two, as an echo or parallel of God being borne above the waters of the earth, and as the Holy Spirit in general. We can imagine the Physiologus himself at this point stating, ‘As the swan is carried over the water, land, and human dwellings, so was the spirit of God carried throughout the earth before the world began’. If this is a deliberate echo of the second verse of the entire bible (and it seems unlikely that the learned riddle-poet would *not* have recognized the clear parallels), then the movement of past participle *wæs geferod* to present participle *ferende* represents a movement from the biblical past into the natural present.

⁴⁰⁷ Ælfric of Eynsham, trans. and ed. S.J. Crawford, *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric’s Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*, Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press, 1922. 81.

Moving on to Riddle 8, commonly solved as ‘the nightingale’:

*Ic þurh muþ sprece mongum reordum,
wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe
heafodwope, hlude cirne,
healde mine wisan, hleopre ne miþe,
eald æfensceop, eorlum bringe
blisse in burgum, þonne ic bugendre
stefne styrne; stille on wicum
sittað [h]nigende. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe swa scirenige sceawendwisan
hlude onhyrge, hæleþum bodige
wilcumena fela wope minre.*

[I speak through a mouth with many tongues,
I sing with artifice, I vary abundantly
my head-sound, loudly I wail.
I keep my ways, I don't conceal my voice.
An old evening-singer, I bring to noblemen
bliss in the cities, when I with bending
voice cry aloud. Still in their homes,
they sit bowing. Say what I am called,
I, who imitate loudly the dramatic song
of a performer. To mankind I preach
many welcome things with my speech.]

The overall image of this poem paints the nightingale as a performer, a bird of many voices entertaining the townsfolk proudly and happily. I'd like to focus, however, on a few distinct phrases: *sittað hnigende*, *hæleþa bodige*, and *wilcumena fela*.⁴⁰⁸ The DOE gives this usage of *hnigende* the meaning, “to bow down in reverence,” with every documented usage implying submission and obedience- a strange connotation to use about the audience of either an entertainer or a simple bird. *Hæleþa* of *hæleþa bodige* generally translates to ‘men,’ often with the implication that the men in question are worthy of

⁴⁰⁸ *Sittað hnigende* here is an edited reading, but one which I agree with.

praise, while *bodige* has several meanings that revolve around preaching, announcing, and prophesying. The *wilcumena fela* is sometimes translated as ‘greetings’, but can also be thought of as “many welcome or good things” as I translated here. The sum of these last two phrases, “I preach/prophesy to good men many welcome/good things”, figures the nightingale as a preacher, to whom the men of the town show reverence and listen well. Listening attentively to holy words and good teachings is a major concern of the *Physiologus* author, appearing in the entries on the weasel, the viper, the stag, the phoenix, and the serpent. Furthermore, this reading stresses the importance in the first place of listening to nature, as the figuring of a nightingale as preacher clearly demonstrates the basic lesson that the natural world, or Creation, is full of God’s teachings that also must be listened to. It is biblically precedented that the earth has a voice with which to praise God, as do the seas, mountains, trees, and all living creatures,⁴⁰⁹ and these could be the *mongum reordum*, ‘many tongues’ with which truth is spoken. Just as the voice of a nightingale ‘varies abundantly’, so do the metaphorical and allegorical layers of this riddle bend, twist, and interact to express the necessity of listening reverently to the words of God.

Riddle 9, breaking with 7 and 8 however, has no connection to sound, speech, or transmission of knowledge, though the knowledge of the cuckoo’s behavior and reputation as a brood parasite makes the basic solution very

⁴⁰⁹ See, for example, Job 12:7-9 (discussed below), Isaiah 55:12, or Psalms 69:34 and 96:11-12.

straightforward. Cuckoo mothers will lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, who unsuspectingly will incubate the cuckoo egg. Cuckoos tend to hatch earlier and are stronger than other bird species as a chick, and so the newly-hatched chick will either roll the remaining eggs or push the other newborn chicks out of the nest, ensuring it will be adequately fed by the still unrealizing mother.

*Mec on þissum dagum deadne ofgeafun
 fæder on modor; ne wæs me feorh þa gen,
 ealdor in innan. Þa mec an ongon,
 welhold mege, wedum þeccan,
 heold ond freopode, hleosceorpe wrah
 swa arlice swa hire agen bearn,
 oþþæt ic under sceate, swa min gesceapu wæron,
 ungesibbum wearð eacen gæste.
 Mec seo friþe mæg fedde siþþan,
 oþþæt ic aweox, widdor meahthe
 siþas asettan. Heo hæfde swæsra þy læs
 suna ond dohtra, þy heo swa dyde.*

[I, in these days, was given off as dead
 by father and mother, nor was there life in me yet,
 no spirit within. Then one began,
 a trustworthy kinswoman, to cover me with weeds.
 She held watch and made peace, wrapped me in a protective garment,
 as honorably as if I were her own child.
 Until I, beneath her bosom, just as my nature was,
 unsiblinglike, was endowed with breath.
 The peaceable kinswoman then fed me
 until I grew and could set out
 on a wider journey. She had less of her own
 sons and daughters because she did so.]

As mentioned before, Jennifer Neville has explored extensively the possible allegorical and *Physiologus*-style readings within this text. Her interpretation puts the cuckoo's mother as the devil, the victim mother-bird as

a human soul, and the cuckoo chick as sin implanted in the nest of our hearts.⁴¹⁰ The word *gæste* reappears from riddle 7, meaning ‘breath’ in the sense of ‘life-spirit’ or ‘proof of life’, and is endowed upon the maliciously placed chick instead of the mother-bird’s own children. The exact configuration between what represents what is not as important as the inherent spiritual lesson understood- to be wary of imposters, sin, and the devil’s stratagems. This lesson mirrors those discussed by Nelson regarding Riddle 50, on ‘fire’ or ‘anger’, serving as tacit reminder of the destruction which can be wrought if we are not cautious of who we let into our lives, homes, or souls. There is also an easy parallel within the *Physiologus* texts on the partridge, a bird which is said to steal the eggs of other birds. When the stolen chicks are old enough to fly on their own, they recognize that the partridge-mother is not one of their own kind and so fly away, just as Christians should recognize and flee from the devil.⁴¹¹ The details are similar enough to invite comparison, even if the arrangement of the metaphors is switched around, and if the third Old English *Physiologus* poem truly is the *Partridge*, then the connection between the two birds-masquerading-as-devils is even stronger.

The last bird-riddle of this ornithological sequence is number 10, the barnacle goose. The barnacle goose is a unique creature in that the lore surrounding it does not come from classical authors or medieval authorities.

⁴¹⁰ Neville, ‘Fostering’ 441-444.

⁴¹¹ For the full *Physiologus* entry, see Curley 46-7.

Despite being real-life, observable creatures to the early English, they apparently were believed to grow on the sides of floating logs, born sexlessly into the sea and then flying from the water once they became fully formed birds. This is partially because barnacle geese nested far north of temperate Europe along unobservable and untraversable cliff-faces, and their chicks were never seen by medieval Englishmen.⁴¹²

*Neb wæs min on nearwe, ond ic neþan wætre,
 flode underflowen, firgenstreamum
 swiþe besuncen, ond on sunde awox
 ufan yþum þeaht, anum getenge
 liþendum wuda lice mine.
 Hæfde feorh cwico, þa ic of fæðmum cwom
 brimes ond beames on blacum hrægle;
 sume wæron hwhite hyrste mine,
 þa mec lifgende lyft upp ahof,
 wind of wæge, siþþan wide bær
 ofer seolhbæþo. Saga hwæt ic hatte.*

[My nib was in a narrow place, and I beneath water,
 flowing under the flood, in mountainous streams
 so sunken. And in swimming I grew,
 covered above by the waves, my body
 pressed upon solitary, sailing wood.
 I then had living spirit, I came from the embrace
 of seas and trees in black garments—
 some were white, my adornments.
 Then the air lifted my living self up,
 wind from the wave, it bore me widely
 over the seal-bath. Say what I am called.]

This poem is the first account of the miraculous birth of the barnacle goose in recorded history- its next reference is a couple hundred years later in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica*. After Gerald, the barnacle then starts

⁴¹² Heron-Allen, Edward. *Barnacles in Nature and in Myth*, Oxford University Press, 1928. xiv-xv.

appearing in English bestiaries, sometimes as spoken of by the Physiologus himself,⁴¹³ and is even mentioned by John Mandeville as a homegrown English wonder.⁴¹⁴ It has been guessed that this miraculous conception was latched onto as a way to circumvent dietary restrictions during holy days (i.e. by virtue of its birth the goose is a fish, not a bird). This led to such scandal, in fact, that at the Fourth General Lateran Council in 1215, Pope Innocent III had to issue a papal bull specifically forbidding the eating of barnacle geese during Lent.⁴¹⁵ Unfortunately, as we have no other mention of the barnacle goose in Old English,⁴¹⁶ the actual Old English solution to this riddle is unknowable, though Bitterli gives the Latin possibilities of *bernaca*, *bernekke*, and *bernecta*.⁴¹⁷

This final bird riddle of this small section implicitly deals with one of the most important themes expressed in the *Physiologus*: resurrection. Specifically, this poem appears to reference the harrowing of hell, wherein Jesus spent three days in hell after his crucifixion before triumphantly breaking free and returning to earth alive once more, an extremely common literary and artistic motif in the Middle Ages. As a text using animals to model correct Christian belief, the *Physiologus* naturally uses Christ as a model for a large number of its animals. This includes the niluus, a legendary beast that births itself from the entrails of a crocodile, explicitly paralleling the manner in which “Christ

⁴¹³ Heron-Allen 13.

⁴¹⁴ See the Introduction for this account.

⁴¹⁵ Heron-Allen 16.

⁴¹⁶ The DOE does give a possible *byrnete* from a collection of Latin-Old English glosses.

⁴¹⁷ Bitterli, *Say What* 35. The solutions to riddles 7-9, in Old English, he gives as *swan* or *swon*, *nihtegale*, and *geac*.

descended into hell and, bursting its entrails, led away all who were devoured and detained there”, while also creating a precedent for the barnacle goose to be used in a similar way by the Exeter Book riddler.⁴¹⁸ Other animals that deal directly with Christ’s resurrection include the panther, friend to all beasts, who sleeps for three days before awakening and roaring out a pleasant fragrance; the sun-lizard, who regenerates its eyes by viewing the rising sun; and the lion who breathes life into its cubs after they have been dead for three days. The pelican, too, kills its children and then uses its blood to resurrect them and both the eagle and the hoopoe are also regenerated in their old age. In fact, of the six bird *Physiologus* entries that parallel these riddles, five of them deal with resurrection in some way.⁴¹⁹

In terms of the progression of the riddle itself, the first half of the poem focuses on the physical descriptions of being *neopan*, beneath, *under*, under, and *swiþe besuncen*, exceedingly sunken, a spatial relationship reminiscent of both hell in relation to earth and earth in relation to heaven. *Besuncen*, as well, can specifically refer to the descent into hell when used in the homiletic context.⁴²⁰ The descriptors of *nearwe*, narrow, *flode underflowen*, flowing under

⁴¹⁸ Curley 53-4, see also his commentary on 87-8. The niluus, also called the hydrus or enhydrus, and its battle with the crocodile, is paralleled to the echinemon’s battle with the dragon, and in both cases “the Christian author of *Physiologus* has very little difficulty turning these ancient myths into Christian resurrection legends.”

⁴¹⁹ Curley 3-4 (lion), 7-15 (bird sequence), 42-45 (panther), and 66-7 (sun lizard). The charadrius pulls the sickness of a dying person into itself, flies into the atmosphere, and then uses the sun to burn away and scatter that illness. The phoenix’s regeneration is obvious. The only exception is the owl, which is a twofold metaphor for (1) Christ, who loved those in the shadow of death and darkness and (2) the Jews who would not accept the light of Christ’s truth.

⁴²⁰ See the DOE entry on *be-sincan*, def. 1.a.i, which contains citations from Ælfric’s *Lives of the Saints* and an account of hell told by a devil in MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii, which is transcribed in Robinson, F.C., ‘The Devil’s Account of the Next World,’ *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73: 362-71.

the flood, and *ufan yþunn þeaht*, covered above with waves, inspire a sense of claustrophobia and torment. The cinching detail, however, in relating these first few lines to hell and, specifically, Christ's experience during the harrowing, is the detail of the barnacle goose being attached to the log: *anum getenge | liþendum wuda lice mine*- "my body pressed upon the solitary, sailing wood". Although Christ using the cross as a sailing vessel was not a common motif as far as I am aware, the details of the body being pressed upon a piece of wood are fairly straightforwardly Christological.

Halfway through the poem, however, the bird suddenly *hæfde feorh cwico*, had quick life, and ascends *lifgende*, living, into the air. As opposed to the claustrophobia of the first five lines, the six final lines are full of movement, vitality, and descriptions of openness- the air *upp ahof*, lifts upward the riddle-subject, who is then *wide bæc*, borne widely by the winds over the waves. This final section, reminiscent of the description of the swan and its connection to the spirit of God in Riddle 7, creates an appealing return to the beginning of the bird-run, circularly emphasizing their existence as a unit while reinforcing the allegorical view of the barnacle goose's miraculous birth as Christ's rebirth and ascension to heaven. The final half-line, "*Saga hwæt ic hatte*" [Say what I am called], is the first time the riddler has used this phrase within the ornithological sequence, making it a strong punctuation mark on the entire subsection, as if to finish with a flourish and a challenge, 'Say what all of us are called'.

Though there is undoubtedly more to say about each of these poems and their physiologic readings, I hope that I have made clear that, while undoubtedly we are meant to see a swan, a nightingale, a cuckoo, and a barnacle goose as the solutions, the riddle-poet is also inviting us to simultaneously see the spirit of God, a preacher, the devil, and Christ emerging from hell. These are the riddles within riddles, the mirrors of God's own work.

The Birds and the Beasts

Although they may be the most obviously physiologic in nature, these four bird riddles are certainly not the only animal-centered riddles in the Exeter Book. They aren't even the only riddles that are satisfactorily or often answered with birds. Their status at the head of the collection, however, does pre-emptively prime the audience to, provided that they follow the order written in the manuscript, read the animal riddles that follow in a similar vein. Most notably, Riddle 12, one of the oxen riddles, follows quickly on the heels on the ornithological sequence, yet its relationship to the physiologic tradition takes a decidedly different tone. In the following section I intend to view the oxen riddles as a collection of their own, but in doing so I make no claims to authorial intention. Unlike the bird-run, which is clearly intentionally placed and contains thematic and formal resonances, the oxen riddles are scattered

widely throughout the collection and are not nearly as critically agreed upon— though the intended solution of each of these riddles may be argued individually, there are certainly thematic resonances between at least Riddles 4, 12, 21, 38, 52, and 72. These resonance are ones of hard labor, bondage, servitude and slavery, animal use and abuse, and ethnic or racial othering, and they show that the riddle-writer or riddle-compiler had an enduring interest in these issues.

The well-ordered organization of the bird riddles versus the chaotic and far-flung nature of the oxen or beast of burden riddles in part can be understood by the very different literary roles birds and beasts took in medieval culture. Birds were particularly special animals in many ways, as Michael J. Warren puts it, “birds, like humans, achieve an elevated status separating them from other nonhuman creatures, and consequently this aligns them — conveniently, yet uncomfortably — with human privileges”.⁴²¹ Warren points out birds’ propensity for flight and voice (both birdsong and mimicry), as well as transformation in a literary context, as part of this special status.⁴²² The connection of birds and voice is particularly relevant in a medieval manuscript context, as the entire process of writing was done using bird feathers as quills.

⁴²¹ Warren, Michael J. *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations*, D.S. Brewer, 2018. 12.

⁴²² See Warren’s entire Introduction, 1-23, for a deeper discussion of these qualities.

Recent scholarship has been quick to point out the animality of parchment and the use of cattle and other livestock as the base material of medieval literature— Bruce Holsinger, for example, has stated that “Medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, millions of stains on animal parts” and that “To be a medievalist is to be hopelessly implicated in and to constantly witness the mass deaths of countless sheep, lambs, calves, and goats for the means of literary transmission.”⁴²³ It is worthwhile to note, simultaneously, that the ‘millions of stains’ are not just *on* animal parts, but are made *with* animal parts, as well. Warren does note this corollary, stating that “In the most material of senses, birds are responsible for constructing and obscuring knowledge, for creating the Riddles’ linguist play that promises and refuses a cognitive transformation toward clarity and understanding.”⁴²⁴ The process of writing, then, is a process of continually viewing the relationship between human, bird, and beast. This is nowhere more evident than in Riddle 26, the riddle which describes the physical process of book-making in its many parts and begins with the lines, “*Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede | woruldstrenga binom*” [Some enemy deprived me of life-force, took away my world-strength]. The final solution of this riddle, probably a bible or other holy book, promises

⁴²³ Holsinger, Bruce. “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal.” *PMLA*, vol. 124 (2009), pages 616-23. Quotations from 619. See also the discussion on Sarah Kay’s *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* of the previous chapter.

⁴²⁴ Warren 67.

to be advantageous to men in every conceivable way⁴²⁵, yet it begins with the recognition that it once was a living creature, a beast of burden that was deprived of life and strength by a *feonda*, an 'enemy'- that same enemy which at the end of the poem benefits from the beast's destruction. Along the way, riddle specifically mentions the process of writing as

*Fingras feoldan ond mec fugles wyn
geondsprengde speddropum, spyrede geneahhe
ofer brunne brerd. Beantelge swealg,
streames dæle, stop eft on mec,
siþade sweartlast.*

[Fingers folded and the fancy of a bird
sprinkled me with drops speedily, going often
across the brown border, imbibing tree dye,
a piece of the stream, stepped again on me,
leaving black tracks.]⁴²⁶

⁴²⁵ *Gif min bearn wera brucan willað,
hy beoð þy gesundran ond þy sigefæstran,
heortum þy hwætran ond þy hygebliþran,
ferþe þy frodran, habbaþ freonda þy ma,
swæsra ond gesibbra, soþra ond godra,
tilra ond getreowra, þa hyra tyr ond ead
estum ycað ond hy arstafum
lissum bilecgað ond hi lufan fæþmum
fæste clyppað. Frige hwæt ic hatte,
niþum to nytte. Nama min is mære,
hæleþum gifre ond halig sylf.*

[If the children of men choose to use me,
they will be sounder, surer of victory,
in heart they will be bolder and happier in thought;
the mind will be wiser, more friends they will have,
kinsmen, beloved ones, beneficent and true,
noble and faithful, whose favor will increase
their glory and riches; with grace they'll be covered
with kindness and they will clasp fast
to the embrace of love. Learn what I am called,
beneficial to men. My name is splendid,
useful to heroes and holy itself.] ll.18-28.

⁴²⁶ ll.7-11a. Note that l.8a is emended from *geond speddropum*.

Though the beast that becomes the parchment is killed by an enemy, the process of writing is done by *fugeles wyn*, the ‘joy of a bird’, who *stop eft on mec*, ‘stepped again on me’. The animal originally slaughtered is now just its own dead skin, being stepped upon by the bird-feather, which can be collected of course without the slaughter of the bird. There is a clear hierarchy between these two animals — with humanity above both — built into the process of medieval literary production.

For a more theological and exegetical bent to this relationship, consider Job 12:7, in the Vulgate rendered as “*Nimirum interroga jumenta, et docebunt te; et volatilia caeli, et indicabunt tibi. Loquere terrae, et respondebit tibi, et narrabunt pisces maris. Quis ignorat quod omnia haec manus Domini fecerit?*” [But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee: and the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee. Speak to the earth, and it shall answer thee: and the fishes of the sea shall tell. Who is ignorant that the hand of the Lord hath made all these things?]. In his *Moralia on Job*, Gregory the Great explains these verses to us as “What should we understand by beasts if not those of slow perception? What by birds of the air if not wise people who think high and heavenly thoughts?”⁴²⁷ The birds and the beasts alike are teachers to mankind, provided mankind asks them to teach, and though the book of Job makes no explicit distinction between them, Gregory takes the parallel structure of *jumenta* and *volatilia* as contrastive: the beasts are ‘of slow perception’ and the birds are wise, thinking

⁴²⁷ Gregory the Great, trans. Brian Kerns. *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job, Volume 3: Books 11-16*, Cistercian Publications, 2016. 8.

'high and heavenly thoughts', meaning that this is a truth (that is, the truth that they were created by God) known by literally everything regardless of their intellect. Even those who are unjust and do not live as they should, Gregory argues, cannot deny that God is the creator of all. He continues, however, "The text, however, can also be understood profitably according to the bare literal sense, because each creature considered in itself lends it own voice of witness, as it were, which is the very form that it has. We question beasts, birds, earth, or fish when we look at them, and they unanimously answer us that God created everything."⁴²⁸ The messaging is the same messaging that is foundational to the physiologic tradition: all parts of creation are testaments to God's power, will, and plan. Yet despite this universal leveling, Gregory's division of the beast and the birds in terms of intellect speaks directly to the division between the physiologically-inclined bird riddles and the laborious, ignoble oxen riddles.

Authority and Slavery

⁴²⁸ Gregory 9-10.

Of all the oxen riddles, Riddle 12 by far has received the lion's share of recent scholarly attention.⁴²⁹ Its peculiar blend of ethnic, racial, sexual, gendered, and classist othering has rightfully been given a great deal of thought by contemporary scholars, but as far as I know no academic has specifically read it in connection with the slew of bird riddles that appears almost immediately before it.

Though riddles may sometimes be a popular genre, found amongst 'the common folk' and representing more quotidian aspects of life, the riddles were undoubtedly highly crafted, poetically and thematically, often requiring a deal of specialist knowledge found only in books and theological teachings. Though the riddle invites any given audience member to 'Say what I am called', in a sense democratizing the interpretive process and giving space for a wider participatory process, they still do privilege the clever and the learned. Much as the *Navigatio* and the *Physiologus* use wonder and inexplicable strangeness to emphasize the necessity of proper authority for interpretation, so too do the riddles, in their purposeful obfuscation, reify a similar interpretive need— if the riddle stumps a reader, than that reader recognizes their own incapability and lack. When the riddles purposefully

⁴²⁹ Though more exist, this dissertation is primarily engaged with: Tanke, John. 'Wonfeax Wale: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book', in Harwood, Britton J. and Gillian R. Overing, eds., *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, Indiana University Press, 1994. 21-42.; Rulon-Miller, Nina. 'Sexual Humor and Fettered Desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12', in Wilcox, Jonathan ed., *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, D. S. Brewer, 2000. 99-126.; Neville, Jennifer. 'Speaking the Unspeakable: Appetite for Deconstruction in *Exeter Book Riddle 12*', *English Studies* 93.5 (2012). 519-528.; and Lumbley, Coral. 'The "dark Welsh": Color, race, and alterity in the matter of medieval Wales', *Literature Compass* 16.9-10 (2019). Dale, *The Natural World*, and Bitterli, *Say What* both also engage with the oxen riddles.

pull on the physiologic tradition, as I argue these four bird riddles do, then the riddling authority becomes a spiritual authority, as well.

Authority is always tied to hierarchy, unsurprisingly, and the hierarchies inherent in the oxen riddles are obvious. Following in the footsteps of many contemporary riddle-scholars, I would like to focus on Riddle 12 for my investigation:

*Fotum ic fere, foldan slite,
grene wongas, þenden ic gæst bere.
Gif me feorh losað, fæste binde
swearte Wealas, hwilum sellan men.
Hwilum ic deorum drincan selle
beorne of bosme, hwilum mec bryd triedeð
felawlonc fotum, hwilum feorran broht
wonfeax Wale wegeð ond þyð,
dol druncnennen deorcum nihtum,
wæteð in wætre, wyrmeð hwilum
fægre to fyre; me on fæðme sticaþ
hygegalan hond, hwyrfeð geneahhe,
swifeð me geond sweartne. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe ic lifgende lond reafige
ond æfter deaþe dryhtum þeowige.*

[I travel on foot, I slit the soil,
the green fields, as long as I bear spirit.
If I lose my life-force, I bind fast
the dark Welsh slaves, other times better men.
Sometimes I give drink to a dear man,
borne from my bosom, other times a stately bride
steps on me with her feet. Sometimes, brought from afar,
a dark-haired Welsh slave-woman lifts and presses,
the foolish drunken maid in the dark of night,
wets in water, sometimes warms
fairly by a fire; she sticks me in bosom
with skillful hand, turning often,
swivels me through blackness. Say what I am called,
I, who living rend the land
and after death serve noble men.]

The intended solution here is straightforwardly an ox, who breaks apart the earth when alive and then is transformed into leather for various uses, including as bindings on slaves, when dead.⁴³⁰ As one of the so-called ‘sexual riddles’, much has been made of the double-entendres that litter the second half of the poem. Nina Rulon-Miller has even gone so far as to provide two translations of the text in her work on the riddle, one ‘innocent’ and one ‘obscene’, showing the interpretive ambiguity built so deeply into this work,⁴³¹ commenting also that the poem is possibly “an anticipation of modern-day leather fetishism.”⁴³² Rulon-Miller builds off the earlier analysis of John Tanke, who identifies contempt in the riddler’s description of this slave-woman’s sexuality and gives four distinct yet intersecting reasons why she is so condemned: “her gender, her status as a servant, her ethnicity (if she is understood to be Welsh), and her sexual activity.”⁴³³ Tanke’s argument largely focuses on her gender and sexuality and so somewhat undercuts the markers of slavery and Welshness, the first by referencing her ‘status as a servant’ and the second by hedging with a parenthetical.

My translation above, obviously, does no such hedging. The existence of the Welsh in early medieval England as slaves of the English is

⁴³⁰ Unlike Riddle 26, which also is told from the perspective of a beast transformed after death, multiple uses of leather are given and the use of the ox before death is a critical part, as well, which is why this is solved ‘ox’ while 26 is solved by the object created, ‘bible’. The motif of ‘alive I break up the earth, dead I become bindings’ is a very common one, found in Eusebius, Aldhelm, and others, and reappears again in the Exeter Book Riddle 38.

⁴³¹ Rulon-Miller 125.

⁴³² Rulon-Miller 124.

⁴³³ Tanke 35.

well-documented and much-commented upon.⁴³⁴ The word *wealh* originally meant ‘foreigner’ but was quickly used by the early English after their invasion of Great Britain to indicate ‘a foreigner of British origin’⁴³⁵ and from there the term moved on to ‘British slave’ or even just ‘slave’. M.L. Faull tells us that “the majority of slaves in the earliest settlement period would presumably have been British in origin. It was therefore perhaps natural that the secondary meaning of ‘slave’ should arise as most slaves were *Wealas* even if the *Wealas* were by no means all slaves.”⁴³⁶ David A.E. Pelteret has analogized this semantic development to the same one that turned the ethnic marker ‘Slav’ into our contemporary English word ‘slave’.⁴³⁷ Though Faull spends a great deal of time attempting to parse the distinctions between when *wealh* was used with ethnic or with class intentions, her analysis is most salient when it focuses on law codes; in the literary context, however, both meanings would have been present and understood by the literate, privileged, English audience. As Tanke puts it, “*Wealh* is one of those enigmatic words whose

⁴³⁴ Pelteret, David A.E. *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century*, The Boydell Press, 1995. I especially pull upon his Introduction (1-40), his section on ‘The Indigenous Old English Terminology of Servitude and Freedom’ (41-45), and his section on ‘The Portrayal of Slaves in Various Genres of Anglo-Saxon Literature’ (50-67).

⁴³⁵ Pelteret 43. Pelteret also gives ‘a Celt’ as a possible translation, but I prefer not to use the unspecific and ahistorical terms ‘Celt’ or ‘Celtic’, as they tend to anachronistically elide the differences between various non-English cultures in early medieval Britain and Ireland. Welsh and Irish were distinct identities at this time and their linguistic genealogical connections were not known until the advent of historical linguistics roughly a thousand years later. See Sims-Patrick, ‘Celtomania and Celtoskepticism’.

⁴³⁶ Faull 34-5.

⁴³⁷ Pelteret 43.

usage dramatizes its meaning: it is a word from whose otherness there is no escape."⁴³⁸

The existence of slavery in early medieval England is not often commented upon in literary studies, but slavery was widespread and a constant concern to the early English. The slave trade was lively in pre-Conquest England, driven largely by wars between ethnic groups and kingdoms. Line 4b of Riddle 12, *hwilum sellan men*, 'sometimes better men', provides evidence that it was not just the Welsh who were enslaved, but also English who were captured in war—Pelteret comments that criminals were also enslaved, but they would most likely not be called *sellan*, better, were that the case here.⁴³⁹ Ælfric's *Colloquy*, famously, contains the only account in early English literature of the life of a slave from the viewpoint of a slave, and his final lines demonstrate the despair of such a position in life, "Oh! Oh! The work is hard. Yes, the work is hard, because I am not free."⁴⁴⁰ The slave of the *Colloquy* also directly works with oxen, supplying them with water and carrying their dung, a trait he shares in common with most of the Welsh slaves mentioned by the Exeter Book riddler. Of the five probable or definite references to Welsh slaves within the Exeter Book riddles, four of them occur in poems about oxen (the two references in Riddle 12 seen above, another explicit reference in Riddle 52, solved 'plow-team', and one more heavily implied reference in Riddle 72, also

⁴³⁸ Tanke 25.

⁴³⁹ Pelteret 52.

⁴⁴⁰ In Latin: *O! O! magnus labor. Etiam, magnus labor est, quia non sum liber.* Pelteret 65.

solved 'ox').⁴⁴¹ The connection between animality and slavery is clear and an overarching project of dehumanizing the Welsh through comparison to and association with beasts of burden can be recognized.

The English, however, were not the only slavers on the island. After the dawn of the Viking Age the Norse raiders frequently picked up whomever they could- Irish, Picts, Britons, or English, after the settlement of Scandinavians in Ireland, "no part of the British coastline was really safe from attacks by marauding Vikings."⁴⁴² Often carting their human cargo as far as Cordoba and Cairo, the seafaring Norse were able to profitably expand their slave trade with the explosive expansion of wealthy Islamic buyers in the eastern Mediterranean. The "cultural anxieties" that Brian McFadden finds expressed in the Exeter Book riddles, mentioned above,⁴⁴³ were very real, and the incursions of Norse raiders, the establishment of the Danelaw, and the growth of the slave trade all affected the English profoundly in how they viewed their own tenuous position in the North Atlantic. McFadden specifically focuses on violent and martial imagery, but I would argue that another element to this anxiety is ethnic. As the English were one-time conquerors themselves, the presence of a new series of invaders could conceivably cause them to flex their control over their predecessors in control of the island: the Britons, now called the Welsh. The insistence upon the

⁴⁴¹ Rulon-Miller 116-7.

⁴⁴² Pelteret 71.

⁴⁴³ In *The Structure and Social Functions of Riddles*, McFadden's article on 'Raiding, Reform, and Reaction: Wondrous Creatures in the Exeter Book Riddles' is discussed.

connections between Welshness, animality, and bondage or slavery buffets the English claim to superiority and rule over what was once the Welsh homeland.

There are also clear racial, as well as ethnic, biases in each of these Welsh/oxen riddles, all of which refer in some way to the darkness or blackness of the slaves' hair or skin—clear physiognomic markers of difference. As Coral Lumbley has argued, “each of these riddles hinge upon connections between epidermal darkness and servility, slavery, and/or animality.”⁴⁴⁴ The anti-black convention of associating darkness with servility is made clear through the Welsh's own works, in which they emphasize their own whiteness and fairness despite the English's colorization of them.⁴⁴⁵ This racialization occurs side by side with and exacerbates the dehumanizing project of associating the Welsh with beasts of burden, as the ultimate product of the slaughter of oxen in these riddles is leather, a product made from skin and darkened in the process. Rulon-Miller draws attention to the *cuir bouilli* process of crafting hardened leather, which she states the Welsh slavewoman “seems to be following almost to the letter” in ll.10-13a of the poem, and which leaves the leather with a further blackened hue.⁴⁴⁶ The process of darkening the skin of the animals is paralleled by the English's own attempts to racialize and bestialize the *wealas*.

⁴⁴⁴ Lumbley 4

⁴⁴⁵ See Lumbley 5-9, in which she discusses the works of Gerald of Wales and the Welsh *Peredur*, which she argues participate in a process of ‘self-whitening’.

⁴⁴⁶ Rulon-Miller 119-122

Jennifer Neville has also looked at Riddle 12, examining the series of oppositions presented throughout the poem with a Derridean mindframe. In addition to summarizing the ethnic stereotypes implicit in the term 'Welsh', which she gives as "dark, bad, low class, mindless, and lawless, as well as 'of Celtic origin'", she states that

*Juxtaposed to this image of 'the Welsh' is an image of 'the English', the privileged self that is defined in opposition to the denigrated 'other': the familiar, racist image of noble, fair English of both genders opposed to dark, enslaved Welsh of both genders. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that to see this 'self' we must add the unspoken terms 'fair' and 'English' to the text. I am not the first to do so. The important point to notice here, one again, is how natural and inevitable it seems to fill the silence in the text with these unstated, privileged oppositions.*⁴⁴⁷

I would argue, however, that the 'unspoken terms' Neville speaks about, especially 'English', *can* be found within the riddle-texts, just not in the oxen riddles themselves. The 'Englishness', instead, occurs just a few folia before Riddle 12: in the bird-riddles. As mentioned above, the ornithological sequence uses the physiologic tradition to craft its imagery, yet it does not use the birdlore found within the *Physiologus* itself, or any adjacent texts. Instead, the riddle-poet of the ornithological sequence creates a distinctly English *Physiologus*, one that translates the fantastic birds of the far east and replaces them with the well-known, native species of Great Britain while, of course, using the vernacular English language to do so. The transference of wonder based out of geographic difference to linguistic or metaphoric difference, in this movement from *Physiologus* to riddle, further emphasizes both the

⁴⁴⁷ Neville 'Speaking the Unspeakable' 522. For my feelings on the usage of the word Celtic in this manner, see fn. above.

importance of the English language and the importance of a localized geography. The hierarchies of writing discussed above, those of birds above beasts and quill above parchment, reinforce the ethnic hierarchies that the English so desired to preserve and were in greater and greater danger of losing as the Viking Age wore on.

It was not until 1102, after the Norman Conquest, did the Council of Westminster formally outlaw the slave trade in England, and they did so stating “That no one is henceforth to presume to carry on that shameful trading whereby heretofore men used in England to be sold like brute beasts.”⁴⁴⁸ At this point, the English-speakers have been supplanted as the ruling class and the pressure to diminish Welshness was no longer so immediate, and the recognition of the inhumanity of treating men ‘like brute beasts’ appears to be suddenly culturally possible.

Reflecting the Riddles

Before this chapter concludes, I would like to take a step backward and refocus on the *Physiologus* itself for a moment. In the text’s attempts to model correct belief, it takes Jewish people as the ultimate non-believers, the agentless foils that it manipulates however it desires to serve its didactic purpose as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. It is possible that

⁴⁴⁸ Pelteret 78, quoting the *Eadmeri Historia Novorum in Anglia*, trans. Bosanquet.

the writer or the writers of the *Physiologus* were concerned much more deeply with the question of religious truth than they were of any real ethnic conflict, yet the maligning of a real, living ethnic group for these purposes created a terrible precedent, a model which later texts like the Exeter Book riddles could follow. The substitution of the Welsh for the Jews is paradigmatically easy, as was the *infantem ethiopem* of the *Navigatio*, and so, we shall see, were the Irish for Gerald of Wales. The inherent danger of the using animals as allegorical models for real-life human beings is that their humanity is explicitly and necessarily stripped away—humanity is restored to the allegorized figure only when the author or the audience wishes for it.

There is a second reflexive property to the relationship between riddles and the physiologic tradition. As mentioned above, the satisfaction of the riddle comes from understanding the wonder as an opaque version of something within the audience's experience. In a *Physiologus*-like animal entry, there is also a satisfaction in understanding the wonder of the animal discussed. As these are Christian texts intended for Christian readers, most of the significations or morals expounded upon would be familiar to the audience (the rite of baptism in the case of the eagle, the danger of the devil's wiles in the case of the whale, the story of Jesus's resurrection in the case of the phoenix, and so on and so forth). Thus, though the wondrous behaviors of the animals are not explicitly riddles within physiologic texts (there is no straightforward "say what I am intended to mean" within them), the repeated

format of the *Physiologus* entries prepares the reader for a ‘solution’ to each wonder discussed- in reading each wondrous animal, the reader is expecting a solution as they would expect an answer to each entry in a collection of riddles. The teaching or moral, then, at the end of each entry delivers satisfaction to the reader much as the solution to a riddle does, emphasizing the satisfaction of a world created, ordered, and under the control of God. The delight of finding the riddle’s solution directly translates to the delight of finding the details of God’s plan. The fundamental thesis of the *Physiologus* and the physiologic tradition is that everything in Creation that seems complicated or unexplainable (or mysterious or wondrous) has a solution or a reason within Christian theology. It is the ultimate comfort of many religious beliefs— namely that the mysterious is legible and that the confusion of existence has meaning.

Of course, when ‘the legibility of existence’ as presented by a physiologic text includes the subjugation or denigration of particular groups of people, that oppression and prejudice become baked within religious belief, as well. The structures of belief can easily become the structures of colonization, racism, and other modes of oppression, provided they are, using the truthmaking that the interconnectedness of belief and ‘the natural world’ allows, carefully framed as built-in truths of God’s Creation.

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CHAPTER FOUR CONQUEST

The past two chapters have, in part, argued that the physiologic tradition is deeply enmeshed with a project of reifying spiritual authority. Works that use the physiologic tradition tend to do so in a way that emphasizes the unknowability of the world and then provides an authoritative interpretation to the reader. Yet despite being invested in hierarchies of knowledge between author and reader, these texts have not been the most straightforwardly didactic or polemic: the *Phoenix* and the *Navigatio* focus on narrative extensively, while the riddles are a linguistic game. Unlike the *Physiologus* itself, or St Clement's letter or the *Hexamera* or Isidore's encyclopedia, these texts do not take instruction or reference as their primary goal, nor do we even have names for their authors. This next chapter of the dissertation will break from that pattern and focus largely on the *Topographia Hibernica* (aka *The Topography of Ireland*) by Gerald of Wales, a 12th and 13th century Cambro-Norman churchman who did explicitly claim to be instructive, who did seek to grow his own spiritual authority, and who ultimately used the physiologic tradition to denigrate the newly colonized Irish people in complicated ways that combined animality, spirituality, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, language, and more in a vast web of oppressive belief structures.

This chapter will be an untangling of that web and an examination of how the physiologic tradition was used by Gerald to justify the conquest of the

Irish. To do so, I will be spending a good deal of time drawing comparisons between the *Topographia* and Gerald's other well-known tomes, the *Expugnatio Hibernica* (*The Conquest of Ireland*), the *Itinerarium Cambriae* (*The Journey through Wales*), and the *Descriptio Cambriae* (*The Description of Wales*).⁴⁴⁹ Gerald's self-positioning as part of the Norman invading force in Ireland is in direct contrast to his self-positioning when speaking about Wales, another land that had recently been conquered by the Normans. He speaks often and at length concerning not only the character of the 'peoples' of Ireland and Wales, but also the landscapes, saints, miracles, and especially animals of these regions and how they compare to what is 'normal' or 'expected'. From castle-building beavers to cursed were-people, the animality found within a given region reflects Gerald's own predispositions toward the religious and moral character of that region's people, whether in its positive qualities or negative.

In these passages dealing with animality, often accompanied by extensive personal judgments, Gerald pulls from and manipulates the texts of the physiologic tradition, binding that discourse's propensity toward racial and ethnic othering to his own proto-anthropological drive toward human evaluation and categorization. His status as a churchman allows him the spiritual authority to interpret God's creatures as he sees fit, or in more subtle ways to construct an image of ethnic animality- in the Welsh and Normans,

⁴⁴⁹ For the remainder of the chapter I will be referring to these four works as the *Topographia*, the *Expugnatio*, the *Itinerarium*, and the *Descriptio*. I use their Latin titles partially to follow the convention I set with the *Navigatio* in chapter two, but also so as not to imply that the *Expugnatio* is the central text of this chapter. All four texts deal directly with peoples and places that are in process of being conquered and so 'Conquest' is being used more generally.

this zoological identity is often considered favorably (compared to biblical models or placed within a comfortable colonial hierarchy), but for the Irish Gerald crafts a world of ontological horror and bestiality, reflecting a perversion, misinterpretation, or absence of good Christianity. As we've seen in the previous chapter, the Welsh have long had a history of being associated with lower social classes in English texts in general, possessing many of the same bestial associations that Gerald attributes to the Irish with the *Topographia*, so his discussions and rhetorical sidestepping around the similarities between the 'character' and treatment of the Welsh versus the Irish lay bare the hypocrisy of the oppressor's construction of the oppressed or colonized people. Given his heritage and background, Gerald cannot attack the Welsh with the same vehemence or in the same way that he does the Irish and he consciously fights against any public perception of similarity between the two. When literarily crafting Ireland Gerald takes on the perspective of the colonizer, wherein the native flora becomes rich and the people become fauna, yet when speaking from a colonized position about his "own native land"⁴⁵⁰ of Wales, Gerald does all he can to resist the same narratives he places on the Irish people and wildlife. To help navigate the relationship between colonizer and colonized, I have drawn largely on the work of Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, both of which provide modern models that, while not explicitly crafted

⁴⁵⁰ *Descriptio* 212. He uses similar phrasing repeatedly in the preface, including "my own country" twice (211, 213).

to examine medieval social structures, do provide strong parallels to the overarching pro-colonial and ethno-nationalist argument that Gerald makes.

I also intend to argue that Gerald's *Topographia* as a whole draws extensively from the physiologic tradition's belief elements. Just as the nature and wonder of the animal eventually always reflect back onto a religious, human lesson or human system of morality, so does the *Topographia* consistently use animals as a way to reflect upon moral hierarchy within humanity and to present a religious justification for the enforced hierarchization of humanity. The outcome is brutal: a use of the physiologic tradition specifically designed to denigrate and bestialize an entire populace in order to justify their conquest and enslavement. The racial and ethnic ideas presented in the background of the *Topographia* become explicitly clear in Gerald's later works, which present (for the most part) less fantastic events and people and in which Gerald clearly states his intended purpose as a historian intent on ethnic mythmaking. More so than these other histories, however, the *Topographia* artfully weaves together a narrative of animality, wonder, and ethnicity, embracing the *mirabilia* and *notabilia* of the wondrous 'West', while still unconcerned by notions of reliability or truth that emerge more forcefully in those later works.

Gerald, Prefaced

Gerald of Wales, aka Gerald de Barri, aka Giraldus Cambrensis, was a churchman of mixed Welsh and Norman heritage, related to Welsh royalty on his mother's side while his grandfather was constable of Pembroke Castle and his father was lord of Manorbier Castle, also in Norman-controlled Pembrokeshire.⁴⁵¹ His maternal uncle, David Fitzgerald, was the bishop of St David's in Wales, a position which Gerald fervently aspired to and yet never received. He lived 1146 to 1223 and is the author of a number of important texts composed in the late twelfth century, most notably the four tomes on Ireland and Wales previously mentioned, as well as a variety of other letters, poems, and papers, largely religious in nature. He made at least four visits to the island of Ireland from which sprung the *Topographia* and the *Expugnatio*, and these accounts are responsible for his reputation for being, as one critic puts it, "the prime apologist of the invasion of Ireland."⁴⁵² At this time both Wales and Ireland were only partially conquered by their Norman lords and the recent control gained in Ireland had been helped along extensively by Cambro-Normans, especially (as he reminds us often within the *Expugnatio*) those related to Gerald.⁴⁵³ Sycophantic to the Norman rulers despite or because of his own mixed ethnic background, Gerald describes the Irish people and their land in a way which provided and informed anti-Irish prejudice for centuries after his death—his approach, one of an observer,

⁴⁵¹ Faletra, *Wales*... 135-6.

⁴⁵² Lavezzo, Kathy. *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press: 2006. 53.

⁴⁵³ Cf. introduction to the *Expugnatio* by Scott and Martin.

almost of what we would call an anthropologist or ethnologist, worked to denigrate the Irish to the point where they seemingly deserved, if not entirely required, subjugation.

This 'anthropological' approach is most evident in two of his works, the *Topographia*, about the Irish, and the *Descriptio*, about the Welsh, though all four works are involved deeply with mythmaking and establishing ethnic hierarchies. His position within the *Topographia* as part of the colonizing power is clear and absolute, yet the *Descriptio* demonstrates a double-vision, a 'hybridity,' as Homi Bhabha might put it,⁴⁵⁴ alternating between the same colonial discourse found in the *Topographia* and his own awareness of the realities of Wales, compromised by his own 'Welshness,' which was itself a rather complicated notion given his mixed heritage and the partially conquered nature of Wales. To get a better understanding of Gerald's approach—both to the 'peoples' he claims to describe and to how he viewed his role as an author and historian—it is useful to dive into his own words, especially the prefaces he wrote to each of his pieces. As a remarkably self-aware (and almost neurotically self-conscious) writer, Gerald did take the time to state his purposes clearly.

Gerald begins his *Topographia* with a preface addressed to the English king, Henry II, which deserves to be quoted at length:

...coepi diligens scrutator eruere, quis terrae situs, quae natura, quae gentis origo, qui mores; quoties, a quibus, et qualiter subacta sit et expugnata; quae nova, quaeve

⁴⁵⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York, Routledge: 1994.

secreta, contra solitum sui cursum, in occiduis et extemis terrarum finibus natura reposit. Quos ultra fines nec terra subsistit, nec hominum vel ferarum habitatio est ulla: sed trans omnem horizontem in infinitum per investigabiles et occultas vias solus oceanus circumfertur et evagatur.

[...I began to examine everything [in Ireland] carefully: what was the position of the country, what was its nature, what was the origin of the race, what were its customs, how often, and by whom, and how, it was conquered and subjugated; what new things, and what secret things not in accordance with her usual course had nature hidden away in the farthest western lands? For beyond those limits there is no land, nor is there any habitation either of men or beast – but beyond the whole horizon only the ocean flows and is borne on in boundless space through its unsearchable and hidden ways.]⁴⁵⁵

Immediately apparent is Gerald's emphasis on geographic alterity and extremity. Kathy Lavezzo has commented extensively on the process by which England formed its own marginality into a marker of spiritual election, yet Gerald here reverses this distinction: the remoteness of Ireland is being set up here as a marker of barbarism and distance from cosmopolitan and spiritual centers.⁴⁵⁶ The positioning of the 'farthest western lands' allows Gerald in the next few lines to explicitly parallel the countries of the East, which are "propriis quibusdam et sibi innatis praeeminent et praezellunt ostentis" [remarkable and distinguished for certain marvels peculiar and native to themselves] with Ireland, emblematic of the "occidentales circumferentiae" [boundaries of the West] which "suis naturae miraculis illustrantur" [are shown to be remarkable by their own wonders of nature]. He explains that Nature, "seriis et veris fatigata" [tired of the true and serious] uses these

⁴⁵⁵ All quotations from the *Topographia Hibernica* are from Cambrensis, Giraldi. *Opera*. vol. 5, ed. James F. Dimock, Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867. Quotation from 20. Translations of the *Topography* are emended from Gerald of Wales. *The History and Topography of Ireland*. trans. John J. O'Meara. New York, Penguin Books: 1982.

⁴⁵⁶ Lavezzo 53-4.

utmost boundaries, both East and West, to store her “*vercundis et occultis*”,⁴⁵⁷ what John J. O’Meara translates as “secret and distant freaks.”⁴⁵⁸

These parallels to the medieval ‘Orient’ naturally open comparison to the work of Said, especially given the purposeful construction of Ireland as an ‘Occident’ of sorts, a localized ‘East’ full of wonders, neither “true” nor “serious”. Said’s work *Orientalism* largely focuses on the Western creation of the ‘Orient’, a mythic and over-broad amalgamation of Asian and other ‘Eastern’ cultures, a pure construct that is “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”.⁴⁵⁹ This distinction ultimately serves as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient”⁴⁶⁰—the ontological distinctions between ‘them’ and ‘us’, whether that is ‘East’ and “West’ or, as Gerald would have it, ‘Irish’ and ‘Normans/Cambro-Normans’, end up as justification for the conquest of ‘them’ by ‘us’. Orientalism is largely, also, a function of geography, and while mystical or imaginative geographies were a source of holiness for the Irish in the *Navigatio* and other Irish voyage texts, Gerald uses an ideologically-warped geography, comparable to the orientalist model, whereby the colonial mind can “intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away.”⁴⁶¹ That the Irish Sea is at many parts narrower than the

⁴⁵⁷ *Topographia* 20-21.

⁴⁵⁸ O’Meara 31.

⁴⁵⁹ Said 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Said 3.

⁴⁶¹ Said 55.

English Channel is no matter—Ireland is further from England *ontologically* than France, and so Gerald’s description of physical distance reflects his own ideas of cultural and moral distance.

The process of examination in the dedication also requires further scrutiny. Gerald’s desire to examine ‘everything’ in Ireland prompts an encyclopedic register, one that seeks to explain, classify, and therefore have mastery over all things Irish. He states soon after that he has put together this book, “collectis igitur et electis elegantioribus cunctis” [having, therefore, collected everything and chosen out the more elegant].⁴⁶² Gerald here is claiming an absolute position of authority: he claims to have seen and *collected*, or possessed, *everything* that Ireland has to offer and passed his judgment on which things need to be shared— which things are *elegantior*, more elegant. Said describes the rhetoric of the Orientalist discourse as “absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts.”⁴⁶³ Bhabha similarly places an emphasis on ‘fixity’ in the construction of otherness, that is, the “sign of cultural/historical/racial difference” which “connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.”⁴⁶⁴ The colonial discourse is one which seeks to ‘know’—which is different from understanding reality—it seeks to create a new set of knowledge which

⁴⁶² *Topography*, Dedication (p.31). Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶³ Said 72.

⁴⁶⁴ Bhabha 94.

validates and reinforces the colonizer's power over the colonized, and it does so by means of classification. The creation of 'facts,' the certainty of 'knowing,' and the process of 'discovering' the "position," the "nature," the "origin," and the "customs" of Ireland all lead, both grammatically and discursively, into "how often, and by whom, *and how* it was conquered and subjugated," emphasis mine. The proper conquest and subjugation of the Irish is a process which will require the anatomization of the character, the 'unchanging order,' of the Irish people, and Gerald of Wales here offers himself to the Norman king as chief anatomizer.

Bhabha's description of 'fixity,' the fact-producing process, discusses 'daemonic repetition,' in that it "vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something which must be anxiously repeated."⁴⁶⁵ This is further expanded in his discussion of the stereotype, which "requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes... the same old stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time."⁴⁶⁶ Leaping back to the introduction of this dissertation, the 'daemonic repetition' that Bhabha describes can be effectively mapped onto structures of belief examined by Steven Justice and John Arnold, the former of whom described belief as a "set

⁴⁶⁵ Bhabha 95.

⁴⁶⁶ Bhabha 110-1.

of practices cultivated systematically with the goal of habituation,"⁴⁶⁷ what is basically a never-ending process that requires continual reaffirmation to stave off doubt. Gerald, throughout all four of his books, but especially within the *Topographia*, works to cultivate a great deal of beliefs in his readers: belief in his own authority, for example, or belief in the existence of *mirabilia*, or belief in the holiness and authority of the Roman church. Yet his overarching project is to craft a story of ethnic exceptionalism, to drive an axe deep into the ontological border between the barbarous Irish and his own Cambro-Norman heritage in order to create and reaffirm belief in his own political, familial, and religious superiority.

Gerald is not shy in his purpose, either. In the *Descriptio Cambriae*, Gerald makes clear that the model historian he most admires is Gildas, 6th century author of the scathing *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*— it is not coincidental he most admires another British churchman passing judgment on his own people after an invasion. "Of all the British writers," Gerald claims, "he seems to me to be the only one worth copying", and this is because "He gives his own strong views on the decline and fall of his people, instead of just describing it. His history may not be all that polished, but at least it is true."⁴⁶⁸ To Gerald, a proper historian must 'give his own strong views' on the matters described— this is not, after all, the methodology of a contemporary historian and for Gerald the 'truth' of the matter is not a bare listing of the facts of what

⁴⁶⁷ Justice, 'Did...' 14.

⁴⁶⁸ *Descriptio* 214.

occurred, but rather the *judgment* placed on those facts. ‘Description’ and ‘polish’ are not necessary components to Gerald’s histories.

In the *Expugnatio* he defends himself against imagined attacks of untruthfulness, saying that “Nec indignetur inspector, nec in calumniam prorumpat lector delicatus, si ab historia tamquam ad fabulas converti videar. Non enim fabulosa sunt omnia que falsitatis imaginem tenent, sicut nec verisimilia cuncta statim pro verius suscipienda” [The examiner must not become indignant and the scrupulous reader must not rush to accuse me, if I seem to turn from history to myth. For everything which appears to be false is not necessarily mythical, just as everything which appears similar to truth cannot automatically be accepted as fact].⁴⁶⁹ Here Gerald is speaking specifically of prophecies he wishes to report on, but this is not the only place where Gerald works hard to defend marvels and blur the distinction between truth and fiction, others including his fervent defense of the *Topographia*’s marvelous happenings throughout the more stoic *Expugnatio* and his *Itinerarium* invocation of Augustine’s chapters on the wondrous in *City of God* after telling a story about a boy who gets swept away to a magical land of little men.⁴⁷⁰ Gerald also leans on the authority of Jerome, claiming twice that the saint stated, “Multa nimirum... in scripturis incredibilia reperies, et non verisimilia, que nihilominus tamen vera sunt” [you will find in the scriptures

⁴⁶⁹ *Expugnatio* 254-5. Translations from the *Expugnatio* are emended from those by Scott and Martin. Cambrensis, Giraldus. *Expugnatio Hibernica, The Conquest of Ireland*. ed. and trans. A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin. Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1978. 3-9.

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. *Expugnatio* 53, 69, 97, 171, 185, 187, 193, 195, 199, 251 for examples of references defending the *Topographia*. For the discussion of Augustine and the story, *Itinerarium* 133-6.

many things which are incredible, and not similar to truth, but which are nevertheless true], which grammatically and etymologically creates a parallel between *verisimilia*, what we expect to be true, and *vera sunt*, that which is true. Gerald continues the passage in both instances with his own words, “Nihil enim contra nature Dominum prevalet natura. Nec detestari debet sed admirari, sed venerari Creatoris opera quevis creatura” [For Nature has no power to act against the Lord of Nature. None of God’s creatures should reject the works of the Creator, but rather admire and stand in awe of them],⁴⁷¹ further emphasizing the dichotomy between *natura* and *nature Dominum*, that which seems natural to his readers and that which is in God’s nature. Gerald attributes this to Jerome once in the middle of the second book of the *Expugnatio* and once in the introduction to that whole volume. In the introduction version, Gerald follows the statement with several lengthy quotations from Augustine concerning belief, prodigies, and the nature of wonder. He follows Augustine with a repetition and amplification of his own *natura / nature Dominum* rhetoric, proclaiming

Videat itaque livor, nec inuideat, nature Dominum contra naturam pre oculis hominum multa sponte patrasse; quibus evidenter pateat et clarescat plus Deum posse quam hominem nosse, longeque trans omnem humanam intelligenciam divinam ineffabiliter extendi potenciam. Semper enim et vvasi ex industria seria sui negocia novis quibusdam natura depinget, ut sic manifest doceat et declaret quod, licet humanis utcumque ineniis usualia eiusdem opera valeant attendi potencialis tamen effectus nequeat comprehendendi.

⁴⁷¹ *Expugnatio* 6 and 194. In a footnote, Martin and Scott merely state that the Jerome quotation is “not identified”.

[So let envy cease to envy, and perceive that the Lord of Nature has himself, before the very eyes of men, brought many things to pass which run contrary to Nature, so that these may make it absolutely clear and ever more apparent that God has more power than man has knowledge of, and that the power of God stretches far beyond all human knowledge, further than we can say. For always, as if of set purpose, Nature tricks out her serious activities with some novel aspect, so that she may in this way clearly teach and show us that, although her routine activities can in some degree be understood by human minds, yet the effects of her power cannot be fully comprehended.]⁴⁷²

This reliance on wonder is familiarly didactic: Gerald says that the marvel, the ‘novel aspect’ that Nature tricks out her ‘serious activities’ with, exists so that Nature may ‘clearly teach and show’ humankind that it is incapable of full comprehension. This formulation is physiologic in its insistence that Nature obscures from humankind her deeper truth, the ‘serious activities’ that are ‘tricked out’, or rather obfuscated, made opaque and riddle-like in order to prove humanity’s ignorance and fallibility to itself. As I argued in chapter two, ‘Voyage’, an emphasis on ineffability is also an emphasis on the need for correct spiritual authority and, of course, as someone who had aspirations to the bishopric of St David (and aspirations to turn this into an archbishopric), Gerald views himself as that suitable authority. For both of the supposed Jerome quotations, Gerald is citing the saint in order to defend himself against attacks on the *Topographia*, doubling down on the fantastic claims he made about various Irish marvels and monstrosities by restating and attempting to chronologically and geographically situate them within the *Expugnatio*. His

⁴⁷² *Expugnatio* 6-9.

authority as a writer and historian is at this point tied to the believability of the fantastic claims he makes about the Irish, and he is aware of that.

Stringing these various snippets of commentary together, we see that Gerald believes it is his duty as a historian to report a judgmental truth, that he is aware his texts play with the boundary between truth and fiction, that people should not criticize him for reporting on marvels or what they view as fictive, and that marvels are proof that people are ignorant and need further guidance. The end summation of these quotations is that Gerald understands that he is trying to build history out of mythology, he is consciously attempting to rewrite the historical narratives to buffer his own claims of the right to colonization and the right to rule and he will defend his historical narrative regardless of its credibility or even reality— as his historian’s judgment is paramount. This extends to the very structure of the text he is writing when he tells the reader of the *Expugnatio* not to expect elegance or an ordered narrative, as “gerencia singula queque turbate proveniant, sicut et ipsa sunt tempora turbatissima” [the individual events described appear in a jumbled sequence, thus reflecting the very disturbed times in which we are living].⁴⁷³ Gerald attempts to make his written history parallel reality as closely as possible here, yet ‘history’ is still based upon the judgment of the historian, thus leading to an implicit hope that his judgment of history can one day, given enough reader support, become reality.

⁴⁷³ *Expugnatio* 134-5.

In ways Gerald's texts did have noticeable effects on reality—his military strategy suggestions, for example, were adopted by British colonizers in Ireland intermittently until the seventeenth century⁴⁷⁴ and his anti-Irish rhetoric was picked up by a great deal of Early Modern English writers⁴⁷⁵—but regardless of the historical outcome, it needs to be acknowledged that Gerald's intention in writing these texts is to cause real harm to real people. Said reminds us that the Orient is “not an airy European fantasy,” but rather “a created body of theory and practice in which... there has been a considerable material investment.”⁴⁷⁶ Gerald's crafted ethnic theorizations ran parallel and fed into the practice of Norman oppression and, despite the delights that many of his marvels, especially animal marvels, inspire, they always still must be considered as the anti-Irish and pro-Cambro-Norman propagandistic tools that they are. Just as with the phoenix in chapter one, the reality or existence of the matter discussed is immaterial. Gerald's prose, his approach to history, does not require that what he reports on is in any material sense true, especially when writing the *Topographia*: he will choose to believe in what he writes, regardless, and he will enjoin his reader to do the same.

Colonial Animality

⁴⁷⁴ See Martin and Scott's introduction to the *Expugnatio* xx-xxi.

⁴⁷⁵ McKibben, Sarah E. ‘In their “owne countre”’: Deriding and Defending the Early Modern Irish Nation after Gerald of Wales, *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies* 8 (2015), 39-70.

⁴⁷⁶ Said 6.

This chapter will return to the central topic of the *Topographia* and the physiologic tradition, but first it will be useful to spend some time looking at the animals that appear within Gerald's other works and how they function for comparison. First of all, it's important to note that, in each of the four texts discussed, Gerald takes on a slightly different perspective or vantage point. For the *Topographia*, he is an outside observer commenting on and describing an alien culture; for the *Expugnatio*, he is chronicling his immediate family members in their attempts to conquer a foreign land, some of which he was present for; in the *Itinerarium* he is more or less stringing together anecdotes about his own native country; and in the *Descriptio* he is providing a critical, evaluatory eye toward his own native people. The latter three, with their immediate connections to Gerald's own lived experiences and perhaps as a reaction to criticism of his first volume, do not contain nearly the same fanciful character as the *Topographia* (though the *Itinerarium* certainly has its fantastic moments), but animality still finds its place within each of these texts.

The *Expugnatio*, for example, has two repeated and central functions of animality within its chronicles: one, to associate the Irish and especially Diarmait Mac Murchada, the Cambro-Norman invaders' Irish ally, with beasts; and two, to demonstrate Norman mastery over animality, including animals that Gerald associates with the Irish people. Despite being on the same side of the conflict as Gerald, Diarmait is given monstrous and animalistic associations throughout the *Expugnatio* until his death, both subtle

and overt. In the less obvious approaches, Gerald places the words “Ciconias et hirundines observavimus” [We have watched the storks and swallows]⁴⁷⁷ into one of the speeches he constructs for Diarmait, associating him with animal augury, and he describes Diarmait’s fleeing allies at one point as *hirundineis*, swallow-like,⁴⁷⁸ which connects the Irish soldiers to faithlessness and cowardice through an animal metaphor. Gerald also claims that Diarmait hated the citizenry of Dublin because they had killed his father and buried him “damno dedecus annectentes, cum cane cives tumulaverant” [along with a dog, thus adding insult to injury],⁴⁷⁹ a historical detail which exists in no other source but Gerald.⁴⁸⁰ The fiercest moment comes, however, when after a successful battle Diarmait stands over the disembodied heads of his enemies, picks up the head of a man he particularly hated, and “crudeli morsu et valde inhumano nares et labra dente corrosit” [gnawed at the nose and cheeks—a cruel and most inhuman act].⁴⁸¹ Mac Murchada in part spearheaded the entire Cambro-Norman invasion of Ireland, but despite the Irishman’s central, catalytic role, Gerald still takes pains to connect him and his people with animality, as well as explicitly tell his audience that he commits ‘inhuman acts’, thus separating him further from humanity.

⁴⁷⁷ *Expugnatio* 54. The speeches Gerald writes for his characters are obvious constructs based on a Classical model of oratory- these soldiers would most likely have not spoken in such a Ciceronian fashion. See Martin and Scott’s endnote 50 *Expugnatio* (297).

⁴⁷⁸ *Expugnatio* 40.

⁴⁷⁹ *Expugnatio* 66.

⁴⁸⁰ See Martin and Scott’s endnotes 57 and 90 in the *Expugnatio* (298, 302).

⁴⁸¹ *Expugnatio* 36. In endnote 41 (296), Martin and Scott claim, “This incident and most of the comments on Diarmait by Giraldus represent a calculated effort to represent Diarmait and his followers and barbarians.”

Direct comparisons in the *Expugnatio* between humans and animals are never positive: the murderers of Thomas Beckett are “aulicis canibus, rabie plus quam canina furentibus” [dogs of the court, raging with a fury more than canine];⁴⁸² a dream the night before the parlay of Hugh de Lacy and Ua Ruairc allegorizes the treacherous Irish as swine⁴⁸³; and FitzAldelin, a Norman whom Gerald had a very particular distaste for, is described both as a *latens anguis in herba*, “a snake hidden in the grass” and, in a quote from Persius’s *Saturnalia*, is claimed to have a *astutam vulpem*, “cunning fox”, locked in his *vapido pectore* “rotten heart”.⁴⁸⁴ In contrast, Gerald presents those in positions of power as, rather than being animal-like, owning or having mastery over animals. He has several asides throughout the *Expugnatio* about falconry, specifically, including anecdotes about Robert de Barry’s prized sparrowhawk, King Henry II watching his Norwegian hawk get torn apart by local Welsh falcons, and King Henry’s love of hunting in general.⁴⁸⁵ Toward the end of the *Descriptio Cambriae*, Gerald aligns this formulation of human-animal domination more closely with his ethnic goals, stating that “Quorum temporibus gens haec in numero plurimum aduacta, armis etiam et equis a Normannis et Anglis, quos et curiam sequendo et obsides dando jam frequentaverant” [The Welsh have gradually learnt from the English and the Normans how to manage their weapons and to use horses in battle, for they have frequented the court and

⁴⁸² *Expugnatio* 72.

⁴⁸³ *Expugnatio* 112.

⁴⁸⁴ *Expugnatio* 173.

⁴⁸⁵ *Expugnatio* 38 for the sparrowhawk, 90 for King Henry’s raptor war, and 128 for Gerald’s exhortation that Henry devote himself more to religion over hunting.

been sent to England as hostages].⁴⁸⁶ Though the Welsh were formerly considered beneath the Normans, Gerald is claiming, they now have learned enough to “*cervicem erigentes, et terras occupantes, pristinum ferre jugum omnino respuerunt*” [raise their heads a little higher, recover their lands and cease to bear the yoke which once weighed so heavily upon them].⁴⁸⁷

‘Rejecting the yoke’ here is a particularly relevant metaphor, considering the association in the Old English riddles between the Welsh slaves and the oxen they tended explored in chapter three. Gerald’s underlying thesis here is that the Welsh have learned how to subjugate from their own subjugators and now that gives them the right to be viewed in human (horse-master), not animal (yoke-bound livestock), terms.

These kinds of animal metaphors are not necessarily parts of the physiologic tradition, as they exhibit nearly none of the traits listed in the introduction, but they are still important. The *Expugnatio* and *Descriptio* both present a more hierarchized and use-based formulation of the human-animal relationship than is found in the *Physiologus*, with its general emphasis on fantastic and wild creatures over livestock and tamed pets. Gerald’s animals are also largely associated with the military or with hunting and, while this is understandable given the matters Gerald is discussing, their engagement in warfare and venery runs parallel to human engagement in warfare and invasion, making the animals perfect metaphoric stand-ins for the

⁴⁸⁶ *Descriptio* II.7, 217.

⁴⁸⁷ *Descriptio* II.7, 217.

colonized/colonizer or master/subject relationship. Though not physiologic themselves, these types of colonialist and martial animal discourses were used by Gerald in conjunction with the physiologic tradition as he wrote his works, essentially crafting a moveable frame of reference, a series of easily-adjustable dividing lines between animal and human and between the mythic and the real, from which he could build his own definitions of Irishness, holiness, and humanity.

The Physiologus Hibernica

I have stated several times that Gerald's *Topographia* is indebted to the physiologic tradition without explicitly proving it to be so, and I intend to rectify that now. The clearest connection between the two works is Gerald's almost direct copying of the *Physiologus's* eagle entry, with its description of the eagle soaring into the sky, staring at the sun and burning off its wings in a process of rebirth, Gerald adding poetically that "item et per tot secula durat, ut renovatae juventutis beneficio cum ipsa videatur perennitate contendere" [it lives so long that it seems to contend with immortality itself in the renewal of its youth].⁴⁸⁸ This legend is unique to the *Physiologus* amongst the classical sources and the behavior of the animal seems partially crafted to explain the

⁴⁸⁸ *Topographia* I.13, 39 fn.1. Interesting to note that Gerald would go on to amplify his original version of this entry to great length, what Dimock calls a "long and wearisome chapter"- O'Meara's translation uses only the much shorter version found in the earliest versions of the *Topographia*. For the eagle *Physiologus* entry, see Curley 12-3.

bible verse quoted within its entry, Psalm 102, “Your youth will be renewed like the eagle’s”.⁴⁸⁹ Just as with the *Physiologus*, Gerald does provide a signification or moral for this wonder, though he does not follow his predecessor exactly. Gerald’s ‘nature’ section on the eagle omits the *Physiologus*’s descriptions of the fountain they supposedly bathe in and so he does not connect the eagle to baptism, but he instead describes the strange ritual of using the sun to self-immolate as an allegory for men seeking “ipsam divinae majestatis naturam, verumque solem justitiae” [the nature of divine majesty and the true sun of justice], as well as “in sacris scripturis... coelestium secretorum ardua et arcana scrutari nituntur” [those too who, trying to unravel in the sacred scriptures what is hard and secret in the celestial mysteries]. “Memores esse debemus” [We should be mindful], Gerald tells us in further explanation, “nec ingrati, quod in partem admissi sumus cognitionis, non in plenitudinem vel intelligentiae vel inquisitionis” [and not ungrateful, that we have been admitted to a part of knowledge and not to the fullness of intelligence and understanding].⁴⁹⁰ It is no great leap to imagine that Gerald here is thinking of himself, or at least of those in his position, as the holy men seeking divine truth in this eagle allegory. Unlike his later, more relatively spartan chronicles, Gerald here in the *Topographia* is taking the time to indulge in both the wonder and interpretation of the animals he includes and describes. He has no problem, however, adjusting the spiritual meaning

⁴⁸⁹ Curley 12. The entry also has clear echoes of the phoenix myth.

⁴⁹⁰ *Topographia* I.13, 39, fn.1.

behind the animal to fit his current ends, as in the case of the eagle here where he redirects the allegory to better praise those invested in the same types of knowledge production as him. In fact, he has no problem adjusting any part of the *Physiologus* entry from its origins, as no other creature treated by Gerald in his Book I appears to directly copy the *Physiologus*. Almost all, however, demonstrate clear signs of imitation of the style- that is, they are part of the physiologic tradition.

Looking a little more macroscopically, the central section of the first book of the *Topographia* is more or less structured like the *Physiologus*: a series of sketches, each one based around a particular animal, something remarkable about that animal, and then a moralization usually Christian in nature. Gerald does take his cue from Isidore in that he organizes the animals he discusses by type: first the fish, then the birds, and then the beasts of the land, ending on a discussion of poisonous reptiles. Before this physiologic section, Gerald discusses the actual topography of Ireland, with its landscape and waterways, and, after the animals, Gerald includes a few chapters on the East and the West's desirability over the East. In the first section, Gerald largely describes Ireland as a land of bounty, ripe for human use, such as the final topographic feature mentioned: "lacus... pulcherrimos, piscosos et grandes" [very beautiful lakes, full of fish and very large].⁴⁹¹ His Edenic picture of Ireland, almost virginal, which he describes as "gleba praepingui, uberique frugum

⁴⁹¹ *Topographia* I.8, 32.

proventu, felix terra et fecunda. Frugibus arva, pecore montes, nemorosa feris abundant” [fruitful and rich in its fertile soil and plentiful harvests. Crops abound in the fields, flocks on the mountains, and wild animals in the woods],⁴⁹² partially serves as a way to entice greater Norman and Welsh settlement there, but it also fits within the colonial animal paradigm previously discussed: Ireland is full of animals waiting to be hunted, beautiful lands ready to be plowed, and lakes ready to be fished, as soon as someone (i.e. his Norman superiors and Welsh family members) comes to the island who can properly master them all.

Despite this idyllic rendering, Gerald often refers to what is “missing” in Ireland, as in when he titles an early section “De marinis, et fluvialibus, et lacuum piscibus; eorum defectibus” [Sea, river, and lake fish and those that are missing],⁴⁹³ or two chapters later when he states that “quibusdam vero ab antiquo prorsus est destituta” [other types [of birds] have been altogether wanting even from the earliest times],⁴⁹⁴ or a few chapters later when he claims, “Defectum vero et aliarum quarundam patitur insula ferarum” [The island suffers the absence of certain wild beasts].⁴⁹⁵ This practice of comparative zoology comes from examining with a colonizer’s eye, using what is known (in this case, Wales and England) as a standard by which to judge what is not known (Ireland). It’s not that Ireland merely has a different

⁴⁹² *Topographia* I.5, 26.

⁴⁹³ *Topographia* I.9, 32.

⁴⁹⁴ *Topographia* I.11, 34.

⁴⁹⁵ *Topographia* I.26, 59.

ecology, it is that Ireland's ecology is *lacking* something, also implying that it somehow *requires* more. If they're not entirely absent, the animals are still wanting in some way, such as the boars who are "exigui, deformer, et fugitive: nec minus audacia et animositate, quam corporis compositione degeneres" [small, badly formed, and inclined to run away. They no less inferior in their want of boldness and courage than they are in their physical make-up],⁴⁹⁶ an example of Gerald crafting the same kind of hunter-prey relationship he uses in the *Expugnatio* with Welsh falcons and implying that the Irish too, like the boars they hunt, are less bold and courageous than other peoples. Gerald also goes on to claim, broadly, that "omnium animalium, ferarum, et avium corpora, hic quam alibi suo in genere minora reperies" [you will find the bodies of all animals, wild-beasts, and birds smaller in their species than anywhere else],⁴⁹⁷ rhetorically diminishing the Irish wildlife to literally the smallest in the world and expanding the sense of 'missing' from just 'animals Ireland doesn't have' to even the extant Irish fauna: *every* animal in Ireland is in some way still 'lacking'.

Though he does go on to clarify that "hominibus suam retinentibus majestatem" [men retain their full size],⁴⁹⁸ the diminishment of Irish fauna, especially Irish game, still reflects on the Irish themselves: if their opponents in the hunt are so small and weak, Gerald implies, then the Irish are thus

⁴⁹⁶ *Topographia* I.24, 57.

⁴⁹⁷ *Topographia* I.24, 57.

⁴⁹⁸ *Topographia* I.24, 57.

themselves weaker than foreign invaders who have lived fighting much stronger beasts. The implication is made explicit in the *Descriptio Cambriae*, where Gerald tells us that the Welsh are fierce in battle and claims that “Quod et mirandum, quia bestiae per totam propemodum insula faciem quasi mansuescunt, homines vero praedicti bestiales mansuescere nesciunt” [This is all the more surprising because the wild animals in the island are formed as if tamed, whereas the humans are not known to be tamed of their ferocity].⁴⁹⁹ The underlying assumption of the ‘surprise’ here is that people who are fierce live with fierce animals and Gerald feels the need to make this point—that the Welsh are an exception to this rule—in order to counter the exact same narrative he is presenting without rebuttal about the Irish in the *Topographia*. Gerald holds the belief that there is a connection between the character of a ‘people’ and the character of the animals around them. When presented in tandem with the physiologic tradition, as it is within the *Topographia*, this animality connection then extends to the spiritual character of a people, as well.

The *Topographia*’s structure of fish-birds-beasts-reptiles is a divergence from the *Physiologus*, but using a more categorical organizational strategies was common in physiologic texts by the end of the twelfth century, especially as Isidorean material was added into collections and the bestiary tradition began to bloom. Notable, however, is that this formulation mimics exactly the

⁴⁹⁹ *Descriptio* 1.8, 181-2.

biblical progression of animals created by God in Genesis 1: first came the fish and the birds, as they do in the *Topographia*, on the fifth day and then the livestock, land reptiles, and finally humankind all on the sixth.⁵⁰⁰ Though Gerald's topographic sections don't follow the cosmological patterning as exactly as the animals do, his discussion of the landscape and waterways immediately before the physiologic section is also reminiscent of the third day of creation, in which God separates the waters from the land and creates vegetation. Gerald is, in a sense, playing God here by literarily creating Ireland in front of his readers. So though a divergence, the structural shift from more-or-less unordered chaos to bring the animals in line with the Genesis myth makes Gerald's collection of animal chapters *more* physiologic in nature, not less—it elaborates upon a biblical precedent, it emphasizes the idea of nature as creation of God, and it lends spiritual authority by echoing the most well-known authoritative text in medieval Europe.

Yet, Gerald does not follow these fish, fowl, beasts, and creeping things with the same kind of description, the same physiologic inquiry, into the humans of Ireland until Book III. Instead, his description of the reptiles of Ireland makes an abrupt transition out of animal description and into political and colonial commentary. At first, Gerald states that “Caret serpentibus et colubris; caret bufonibus et ranis; caret tortuis et scorpionibus” [It has no serpents or snakes, toads or frogs, tortoises or scorpions. It has no dragons],

⁵⁰⁰ Genesis 1:20-31.

concluding that any reptile Ireland does have is “*prorsus innocuas*” [entirely harmless].⁵⁰¹ He makes sure not to attribute this to St Patrick as is commonly believed—he patronizingly calls that story “*figmento satis favorabili*” [a flattering enough conjecture]—but to state that it’s more likely Ireland was this way “*longe... ante omnia fidei fundamenta*” [long before the founding of the Faith].⁵⁰² Gerald then expands this miraculous quality, telling his readers that even poisons brought to the island become harmless and that the soil from Ireland can be brought elsewhere to drive poisonous reptiles off.⁵⁰³ This whole section once again paints Ireland with an Edenic brush and, as with the biblical Eden, a reptile symbolizes the downfall of Ireland’s human inhabitants. Gerald devotes an entire chapter to a single frog, found near Waterford, which is brought to King Duvenaldus of Ossory, whom Gerald claims to have stated, “*Pessimos in Hiberniam rumores vermis iste portavit*” [That reptile brings very bad news to Ireland].⁵⁰⁴ Gerald then explains that the “*prognostico vero, certissimum hoc signum esse dicebat adventus Anglorum, imminentisque conquisitionis et expugnationis gentis sua*” [he said that it was a sure sign of the coming of the English, and the imminent conquest and defeat of his people],⁵⁰⁵ making sure to put the tidings of what was to come in the mouth of an Irishman so that, in his version or telling of history, even the Irish themselves knew they were fated to be conquered.

⁵⁰¹ *Topographia* I.28, 62.

⁵⁰² *Topographia* I.28, 62.

⁵⁰³ *Topographia* I.29-31, 62-5.

⁵⁰⁴ *Topographia* I.32, 65-6.

⁵⁰⁵ *Topographia* I.32, 66.

This dark omen and discussion of poisons leads into a several-chapter comparison of Ireland's mild climate with the East's more dangerous one and concludes that Ireland is the preferable place to be— though in these sections he talks about “de variis insulae laudibus, terraeque naturis” [the good points of the island and the nature of the land], not the people.⁵⁰⁶ His reduction of Ireland to its positive qualities absent its human population is a stark divergence from the structure of Genesis 1 being followed previously as the creation of humankind has been completely replaced by an omission of humankind and a portent of Anglo-Norman invasion. The frequent invocations of the East show Gerald recognizes the nature of orientalist rhetoric and wishes to extend that same exoticism and appeal to the Irish West as part of his colonial mission. Irish humans *are* eventually included in a more categorical way by Gerald, but not until Book Three, and, instead of their expected place in the schedule of creation, the reader finds repetitive colonial rhetoric and the entirety of Book II, which describes what Gerald himself calls “quae contra naturae cursum edita digna stupore videntur” [those things which, appearing to be contrary to nature's course, are worthy of wonder].⁵⁰⁷ Gerald's plan of literarily re-creating Ireland replaces humankind with things ‘appearing to be contrary to nature's course’, framing the Irish humans as unnatural and setting the stage for Gerald's most grievous charge against the Irish: bestiality.

⁵⁰⁶ *Topographia* I.33, 66.

⁵⁰⁷ *Topographia* II.P, 74.

Beasts and Bestiality

The arc of Irish bestiality develops throughout almost the entire length of the *Topographia*. Ever aware of what other people say about his writings and their lack of belief in his words, Gerald does not frontload his most egregious accusations. Aside from mirroring the days of Creation, Gerald's descriptions of the non-human aspects throughout Book One are presented largely as the 'objective facts' of Ireland, so to speak, ones that anyone can corroborate for themselves. This observational approach should impart some sense of objectivity to Gerald's writing and he is able to maintain the appearance of such through most of the early chapters, though within the section on birds he does make the conscious shift into a more physiologic style. The descriptions of fish lack moralizations entirely and the first two sections on birds are focused on 'missing' birds and the tamed hunting falcons, both following the colonial model of animalkind discussed earlier. The eagle after them, however, is the first fully moralized animal and its position as the only animal mentioned by Gerald directly pulled from the *Physiologus* itself is no coincidence: I argue that this is an intentional move to signal his audience that he is taking his discourse into a new physiologic space, one which his medieval readers would have been familiar with. The familiarity of the eagle helps this transition, though it is worthwhile to note again that he changes the eagle's moralization to better complement his own spiritual labors.

After the eagle, Gerald continues to cement the usage of the physiologic tradition in his explanation of the crane's remarkable behavior and how "avis igitur istius exemplo vigilandum nobis est et excubandum" [we should follow the example of this bird by staying on guard and watchful].⁵⁰⁸ A brief description of the game fowls available (which are all abundant) ensues and then we are introduced to the barnacle goose—the same bird with the same miraculous nature that's widely believed to be the answer to the Exeter Book's Riddle 10.⁵⁰⁹ Despite its role there as a part of an English ecological identity, the barnacle goose is indeed native to both England and Ireland and so finds a place in Gerald's text, as well. He includes a hefty section on this fantastic creature and the implications of its existence, connecting the barnacle—in this text, at least—to an Irish ecological identity, presenting a bird "quas mirum in modum, contra naturam, natura producit" [which Nature, acting against her own nature, produces in a wondrous way],⁵¹⁰ that way being sexlessly grown on the side of floating logs. It is worthwhile to point out that Gerald here mentions that this nature is used as justification for the eating of barnacle geese during fasting times, "regarding them as not being flesh, since they were not born of flesh"—a stance which apparently caused enough issues that Pope Innocent III felt the need to issue a papal bull forbidding the eating of barnacle geese during Lent in 1215, within Gerald's own lifetime.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁸ *Topographia* I.14, 46.

⁵⁰⁹ Cf. my discussion of this riddle in chapter three, *Riddles*.

⁵¹⁰ *Topographia* I.15, 47.

⁵¹¹ Heron-Allen, Edward. *Barnacles in Nature and in Myth*, Oxford University Press, 1928. 16. Also see my section on the barnacle geese in chapter three.

Gerald, however, transitions immediately, with a flair of dramatics, into hortatory address: “Resipisce, infelix Judaeae, resipisce vel sero” [Pause, unhappy Jew! Pause, even if it be late].⁵¹² In the introduction to this dissertation I discussed at length the ways in which the *Physiologus* as a text targets Jews and uses them as quintessential nonbelievers, negative examples by which its audience can learn what not to do. Gerald is using ‘Jew’ here in the same way, drawing straight from the *Physiologus* and, curiously, its entry on the phoenix. The ensuing paragraph in the *Topographia* mirrors the second paragraph of the *Physiologus* phoenix, in that both are indicting people who don’t believe that the resurrection of Christ was possible and both are specifically identifying those non-believers as Jews. The phoenix entry opens by quoting the gospel of John and stating that “the Jews were angered by his words”, with the second half, the signification section, opening with the parallel, “If this species of bird has the power to kill himself in such a manner as to raise himself up, how foolish are those men who grow angry at the words of the Savior, ‘I have the power to lay down my life, and I have the power to take it again.’”⁵¹³ This is the same exact argument put forth by Gerald in his moralization of the barnacle goose, though he expands the rhetoric a bit and ends by invoking an obviously Augustinian-inspired defense of wondrous things.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² *Topographia* I.15, 48.

⁵¹³ Curley 14.

⁵¹⁴ Along with the fiery re-writing of the eagle legend, this appears to be bits of the phoenix *Physiologus* entry torn apart and inserted within descriptions of real, Irish animals.

Gerald's exclamation of 'Jew' here is clearly rhetorical—as in the *Physiologus*, he is not so much addressing actual Jewish people as he is warning that unbelievers are as 'bad' as Jews, using a religious and ethnic bogeyman to scare Christians away from disbelief. Those who doubt his description of the barnacle goose, Gerald is saying, are akin to the Jews who refused to recognize Jesus was resurrected, consciously introducing an explicitly ethnic discourse using the physiologic tradition as his guide. The invocation of Judaism here, or unbelievers, sets the stage for the ultimate ethnic argument that Gerald desires to make about the Irish and their mis-, dis-, or unbelief. The legend of the barnacle goose invited suspicion and mistrust⁵¹⁵ and, much like the fantastic nature of the phoenix seems to force the *Physiologus* to defend its existence, so does the barnacle goose inspire Gerald to pre-emptively invoke the necessity of faith in the seeming impossible after its description. Combined with his earlier comments that state the barnacle goose is a product of nature acting against her own laws, we can see the overall argument Gerald is using this bird to make: there are fantastic things in Ireland which readers may find difficult to believe, but to doubt their existence (and therefore his words/authority) is to be an unbeliever, a Jew. Gerald knows that what he is to report about the Irish is fantastic and will seem fantastic and so here, relatively early on in his overall piece, he is already

⁵¹⁵ We have record of incredulity: half a century after Gerald, Emperor Frederick II would write that he “doubt[s] the truth of this legend in the absence of corroborating evidence” in his *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*. Flores, Nona C. ‘The Mirror of Nature Distorted: The Medieval Artist’s Dilemma in Depicting Animals’, in Salisbury, Joyce E., ed. *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, Garland Publishing, Inc, 1993. 3-46. Quotation from 9.

starting to stoke the practice of belief in his audience, preparing them for his even more fantastic allegations still to come.

These first few chapters serve a purpose in constructing the physiologic pattern alongside the biblical organizational structure. From there, Gerald's readers develop an expectation of moralization from the animality discussed and, starting after the barnacle goose (or with the barnacle goose and its existence against nature), Gerald begins to use these moralizations or signification sections to attach a sinister, impure sense to the Irish wildlife. Ospreys, for example, are characterized as having a "biformis naturae" [twofold nature], a description which leads to the osprey being an allegory for the devil.⁵¹⁶ This is followed by a section which extends the osprey's duality into a greater zoological truth, as these are "aves aliis similimae, sed quasi adulterinae tamen et non verae... Verumtamen rerum quarumlibet tam similibus differentias, quam differentium similitudines, distinctius ab invicem mens non incauta discernit" [like birds, but are, so to speak, deceptively and not truly so... the careful observing mind will clearly grasp the differences that exist between similar things and similarities between different things].⁵¹⁷ The 'deceptive' nature of the Irish birds will later mirror the deceptive nature of the Irish people (Gerald goes on to claim in Book Three that "prae omni alia gente proditiōibus semper insistent" [above all other peoples they always

⁵¹⁶ *Topography* I.16, 49. The description of 'barnacles' also emphasizes their duality and mixed nature, ending with a moral invective in I.15.

⁵¹⁷ *Topographia* I.17, 50.

practise treachery]),⁵¹⁸ and the call for careful distinction will later mirror many of the distinctions Gerald makes between the Irish and his own people, the Welsh. These are all part and parcel of the physiologic tradition's insistence on correct spiritual authority leading to correct spiritual interpretation, as well, as the deceptive nature of the Irish birds also impresses upon the reader that they cannot trust even their own observations or understandings of the wildlife.

The next step in Gerald's program is a more explicit connection between the Irish and beasts, which occurs several times in Book II. Early on, Gerald gives the description of a marvelous large lake in Ulster, explaining that "fuit in terra illa, quam nun lacu obtinet, gens ab antiquis temporibus vitiosissima; et paecipue vitio coeundi cum bestiis, prae omni alio Hiberniae populo incorrigibiliter involuta" [there was in that land, in the region now covered by the lake, a people from ancient times very much given to vice and particularly addicted, above any other people in Ireland, to copulating with beasts].⁵¹⁹ A magical well was by accident uncovered and the region was flooded, killing all of the inhabitants. Gerald then states "tamquam terram, tam turpium contra naturam facinorum consciam, non tantum primis, sed et cunctis imposterum habittatoribus indignam auctor naturae judicasset" [It looked as if the author of nature had judged that a land which had known such filthy crimes against nature was unworthy not only of its first inhabitants but of any

⁵¹⁸ *Topographia* III.20, 165.

⁵¹⁹ *Topographia* II.9, 91.

others in the future].⁵²⁰ Here Gerald does explicitly mention the Irish as guilty of bestiality, but he does so largely in a historical sense (though ‘particularly addicted above any other people in Ireland’ certainly leaves room for lesser practices of bestiality throughout the land, if not implies it to be so). He is setting up a logical progression for his readers, though: the Irish of the past engaged heavily in bestiality, and everyone engaged in that kind of sin deserves to be wiped from their land—the next argumentative step is to move from the historical to the present and strengthen the present-day accusation of bestiality in order to emphasize the Irish people’s need for corrective control, politically and spiritually, in Gerald’s present day.

This transition begins most notably in a miracle story about a talking wolf about midway through Book II.⁵²¹ In response to the astounded onlookers’ queries, the shockingly articulate wolf gives “catholicum in omnibus responsum” [a Catholic answer in all things], and then describes his affliction as a result of a curse by the saint Natalis, wherein every seven years a man and a woman must go into exile and “formam enim humanam prorsus exuentes, induunt lupinam” [leave the human form and put on that of a wolf]. He begs the help of a priest as his female companion is about to die, and requires the viaticum—the priest is only convinced to do once the male wolf “pede quasi pro manu fungens, pellem totam a capite lupae tetrahens, usque ad umbilicum replicavit” [folding it back with his paw as if it were a hand, he

⁵²⁰ *Topographia* II.9, 92.

⁵²¹ *Topographia* II.19, 101-103. All ensuing quotations from this section.

pulled all the skin off the wolf from the head down to the navel], thus revealing the form of an old woman beneath. The beasts are, ultimately, treated according to their human nature as Christian souls, and this establishes a sense of pastoralism that foreshadows Gerald's calls for Irish subjugation on grounds that they need Christian leadership, having forsaken their proper faith and duties. This account immediately segues into a description of a woman with a long, full beard and a 'mane' that grew down her spine, "in modum pulli annui" [like a one-year-old foal].⁵²² Though Gerald assures us she was not a hermaphrodite, her beard borders both male and female sexes in a monstrous manner,⁵²³ and the mane pushes this monstrosity into the realm of animality, as well. The very next section describes a man, "si tamen eum hominem dici fas est" [if indeed it be right to call him a man], who was in all respects a man, except for his extremities, which "ungulas bovis expressas praeferebat" [bore the resemblance of an cow's hooves].⁵²⁴ This half-man, half-ox is eventually murdered by his kinsmen out of shame, and the section concludes with an account of a man having intercourse with a cow, which Gerald tells us (getting to the heart of the matter) is "vitio praecipue gens ista laborat" [a particular vice that those people practice].⁵²⁵ We are then

⁵²² *Topographia* II.20, 107.

⁵²³ Compare this description, for example, with the description of the monstrous tribe of women in the Old English *Wonders of the East*. Eileen Joy has discussed the fear of formless female bodies at length and their relation to monstrosity in Joy, Eileen. 'The Signs and Location of a Flight (or Return?) of Time: The Old English *Wonders of the East* and the Gujarat Massacre.' in *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*. ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. New York, Palgrave MacMillan: 2008. 209-30.

⁵²⁴ *Topographia* II.21, 108.

⁵²⁵ *Topographia* II.21, 109.

treated to another hybrid animal tale (a cow that is partly a stag), and two accounts of male animals, a goat and a lion, having sex with Irish women.⁵²⁶ Then Gerald resumes his discussion of the animal oddities of Ireland, including cocks that crow at the wrong time and wolves that whelp in the winter.

The progression from two-natured animals, to animals that are secretly people, to people that are half-animal, to men sleeping with animals, and (what is perhaps worse) animals sleeping with women, is a slow-build of ontological horror, each section a brick in the wall between the barbarous, bestial Irish and the civilized, dignified Cambro-Normans. When Gerald will later, talking of Irish nudity, ferocity in battle, and agricultural practices, state that “gens silvestris, gens inhospita; gen ex bestiis solum et bestialiter vivens; gens a primo pastoralis vitae vivendi modo non recedens” [a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living],⁵²⁷ it is no surprise.⁵²⁸ The parallel between the Irish and beasts at this point is complete, and a later account of the codification of bestiality into Irish kingship rituals that Gerald offers only belabors the point, although it does add a layer of governmental inability and amorality.⁵²⁹ Gerald’s insistence on declaring that “Gens igitur haec gens barbara, et vere barbara” [these people are therefore a

⁵²⁶ *Topographia* II.22-24.

⁵²⁷ *Topographia* III.10, 151.

⁵²⁸ *Topographia* III.93.

⁵²⁹ *Topographia* III.102.

barbarous people, and truly barbarous],⁵³⁰ “a communi terrarum orbe in his extremitatibus, tanquam in orbe quodam altero, sun tam remoti” [so far removed in these distant parts from the ordinary world of men, as if they were in another world altogether],⁵³¹ rhetorically reifies the ‘fixity’ described by Bhabha, the “continual and repetitive chain of... stereotypes.”⁵³² Gerald’s repetition of this key stereotype is the lynch-pin of his colonial argument, the racist stereotypical discourse which “in its colonial moment, inscribes a form of government... By ‘knowing’ the native population in these terms, discriminatory and authoritarian forms of political control are appropriate. The colonized population is then deemed to be both the cause and effect of the system, imprisoned in the circle of interpretation.”⁵³³ The Irish *must* be controlled because they act this way, not only because their moral degeneracy means they *deserve* to be subjugated, but by their very nature they *require* subjugation. Gerald builds into the system of knowledge regarding the Irish the very *necessity* of Norman control. His fervent and disturbing repetition of bestiality is emblematic of Said’s statement that, “Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind.”⁵³⁴

It is no surprise that Gerald, parallel to this ontological distinction built through bestiality, constructs an additional narrative of Irish misbelief. Book II, focused on various Irish miracles and miraculous happenings, allows Gerald

⁵³⁰ *Topographia* III.10, 153.

⁵³¹ *Topographia* III.93.

⁵³² Bhabha 110.

⁵³³ Bhabha 118-9.

⁵³⁴ Said 72.

to comment extensively on Irish faith, as well. Take for example, his description of ‘The wonderful nature of wells’ not far into Book II, where a well, if touched or looked at, will cause the whole province to be flooded with rain until a virgin priest holds a ritual “et aquae benedictae, lactique vaccae unius coloris aspersione... fontem reconciliaverit” [and appeases the well with a sprinkling of holy water and the milk of a cow of one color].⁵³⁵ Gerald takes the extra step of stating that it is “barbaro satis ritu et ratione carente” [certainly a barbarous rite, lacking rime or reason],⁵³⁶ though he does not explicitly state which part of the rite he finds barbarous: the magical well, the appeasing of the well, or, most likely in my opinion, the mixture of the holy water with the milk of the cow. Cows of various colors are prominent throughout native pre- and early Christian Irish literature—we need look no further than the *Táin Bo Cuailnge* and other *tana*—and so this is a useful symbol for Gerald to introduce an idea of spiritual hybridity: the Irish appease this magical well with a virgin priest using holy water, yes, but they also intermix that holy water with a animalistic symbol reminiscent of Irish paganism. Gerald does not literally say here that their faith is tainted, but he gives a very clear mental image of their holiness being clouded by a product of animality and then he harshly condemns the ‘barbarity’ of this rite, considering it irrational despite its apparent efficacy.

⁵³⁵ *Topographia* II.7, 89.

⁵³⁶ *Topographia* II.7, 89.

The next step in bestialization program is the progression of human monsters and human/animal hybrids previously discussed, which reinforces the concept of the Irish as a hybrid people: both human and animal, but also both Christian and pagan. The Irish have great capabilities, Gerald states clearly that “in his naturae, illud optimum” [in their nature, they are excellent],⁵³⁷ but their pagan, barbarous, and bestial nature does need to be stamped out. By midway Book III Gerald lays it out straightforwardly to his audience:

Cum autem a tempore Patricii, per tot annorum curricula, fides in insula fundata fuerit, et fere continue pullulaverit, mirum quod gens haec in fidei rudimentis hactenus manserit tam inculta.

Gens enim haec gen spurcissima, gens vitiis involutissima, gens omnium gentium in fidei rudimentis incultissima. Nondum enim decimas vel primitias solvunt; nondum matrimonia contrahunt; non incestus vitant; non ecclesiam Dei cum debita reverentia frequentant. Quinimmo, quod detestabile valde est, et non tantum fidei sed et cuilibet honestati valde contrarium, fratres, pluribus per Hiberniam locis, fratrum defunctorum uxores non dico ducunt, sed traducunt; immo verius seducunt, dum turpiter eas et tam incestuose cognoscunt; veteris in hoc testamenti non medullae sed cortici adhaerentes, veteresque libentius in vitiis quam virtutibus imitari volentes.

[Although since the time of Patrick, and through so many years, the Faith has been founded in the island and has almost continuously thrived, it is, nevertheless, remarkable that this people even still remains so uninstructed in its rudiments.

This is a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all peoples it is the least instructed in the rudiments of the Faith. They do not yet pay tithes or first fruits or contract marriages. They do not avoid incest. They do not attend God’s church with due reverence. Moreover, and this is surely a detestable thing, and contrary not only to the Faith but to any feeling of honour — men in many place in Ireland, I shall not say marry, but rather debauch, the wives of their dead brothers. They abuse them in having such evil and incestuous relations with them. In this (wishing to imitate the ancients more eagerly in

⁵³⁷ *Topographia* III, 10. 152

vice than in virtue) they follow the apparent teaching, and not the true doctrine, of the Old Testament.]⁵³⁸

Here Gerald cuts to the heart of the matter: the Irish are Christian in name only. They do not know the rudiments of the Faith (he repeats this immediately, reinforcing and practicing the belief in Irish inferiority), they are filthy, they commit impure sexual acts, they do not attend the Church with reverence, and, worst of all to Gerald, they view the Old Testament as the literal truth instead of understanding it through ‘the true doctrinal’ lens—that is to say, they read the scriptures like Jews. The implication is that the Irish view the Old Testament as their model, ignoring the New, just like the Jewish unbelievers so often used as rhetorical strawmen in the *Physiologus*. The full picture is complete now: Gerald wants us to believe that the Irish are animals, in culture and in faith, they are squandering their land and nature and they need guidance in morality, technology, culture, language, and, most of all, proper Faith. The physiologic tradition has been the perfect tool for Gerald’s mission of colonial dehumanization throughout the *Topographia*, tying animality, ethnicity, wonder, and religion together in a way that appeals to Gerald’s Augustinian sensibilities toward the marvelous and his colonial sensibilities toward Irish subjugation and control. This massive web of interweaving textual structures—biblical and physiologic patterning, the establishment of ethnic ecological identity, the insistence on bestiality and sexual sin, and so on—all aiming toward a singular colonial purpose, are

⁵³⁸ *Topographia* III.19, 164.

necessarily multitudinous in that they fulfill the colonial paranoia described by Said. Gerald must iteratively degrade the Irish in order to reify his own position and the position of those he supports or he believes will support him—those being, of course, positions of spiritual, cultural, and political power.

Irish-Welsh Contrasts

The *Descriptio Cambriae* provides a fascinating contrast to the paranoid epistemology found in Gerald's descriptions of the Irish. In a similar section to the *Topographia*, Book III, section 92 (the Irish "live like beasts"), Gerald describes the ferocity that the Welsh demonstrate in battle, for example. They are "audaciae et ferocitatis" [brave and ferocious], he claims, and while they often fight barefoot and barely clothed, this only adds to their agility and quick movements—it is not, as with the Irish, a nudity marked with barbarism.⁵³⁹ Furthermore, this is the point within the *Descriptio* where Gerald makes his point about the ferocity of the Welsh warriors being surprising considering the lack of ferocious Welsh beasts, quoted at length above—immediately after assigning the Welsh a 'bestial' trait, Gerald takes the time to

⁵³⁹ All quotations from *Descriptio Cambriae* and *Expugnatio Cambriae* are from Gerald of Wales. *Opera*. vol. 6, ed. James F. Dimock, Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867., translations are emended, yet based on Gerald of Wales. *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*. trans. and introduction by Lewis Thorpe. London, Penguin Books: 1978. *Descriptio* I.8, 181. *Ferocitatis* is not found in every manuscript, cf. footnotes to p.181.

distinguish them from literal beasts. Unlike the Irish, whose sexual proclivities and actions in battle align them with the less-than-human, the Welsh's actions in battle are explicitly stated to be more-than-beast. The next two sections follow up with discussions of the Welshman's frugality, parsimony, hospitality, and generosity,⁵⁴⁰ civilized traits which align with Said's description of Westerner's self-concept as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion."⁵⁴¹

Gerald, soon after, explicitly contrasts the Irish and Welsh, pausing his discussion to state, "Unde et duo notabilia hic reperies; quiz zelotypiae vitio sicut nulla magis quam Hybernica, sic nulla minus quam Kambrica gens laborat" [Here are two things worth remembering: the Irish are the most jealous people on earth, but the Welsh do not seem to know what jealousy is].⁵⁴² This appears to be a non-sequitur, coming in in the middle of a discussion of Welsh harp-playing, but it demonstrates Gerald's own anxieties about people drawing similarities between the two cultures. In a later section of the *Descriptio*, Gerald copies word for word his description of Irish harp-playing to describe Welsh harp-playing, and he had already explored the connection between the two musical natures in his *Topographia*.⁵⁴³ Harp-playing is the only case in which Gerald admits he finds diligence in the Irish, stating that they are more skilled any other people. This statement starts

⁵⁴⁰ *Descriptio* I.9-10.

⁵⁴¹ Said 49.

⁵⁴² *Descriptio* I.10, 183.

⁵⁴³ *Descriptio* I.12; cf. *Topographia* III.11.

the section which immediately follows his section on the nature, customs, and characteristics of the Irish, during which he at one point states “eos nimirum reddit incultos” [they are without a doubt reported to be uncultured].⁵⁴⁴ The contradiction between these two sections is immediately apparent to any modern reader, but Gerald apparently doesn’t consider it strange to fetishize a culture for its artistic skill while denigrating it for more or less everything else.⁵⁴⁵ In the *Descriptio*, the invocation of harp-playing is merely to commend the Welsh and requires no distinctions or denigrations to be made alongside it.

This is not the only section where Gerald makes pains to differentiate Ireland and, as he calls it in the dedication to the *Itinerarium*, “wild Wales.”⁵⁴⁶ Sections on agricultural practices, cleanliness, literary wit, and, most of all, piety dominate the first half of the *Descriptio*.⁵⁴⁷ Unlike the Irish, he claims, amongst the Welsh there has been found “nihil haereticum, nihil rectae fidei articulis contrarium” [nothing heretical or contrary to the articles of the true faith].⁵⁴⁸ In this final section of Book I, Gerald emphasizes the extremity of Welsh faith, as they more than any other people long to be confirmed by a bishop, extend offers of sanctuary, enjoy pilgrimages, venerate the relics of their saints, and in the case of their hermits and anchorites, lead more ascetic

⁵⁴⁴ *Topographia* III.10, 150.

⁵⁴⁵ Not knowing Irish, of course, Gerald didn’t have all that much of Irish culture available to him, but harp-playing would be. ‘Barbarous’, with its language-based indication of otherness, is a particularly on the nose word here considering Gerald finds himself able to commend the Irish when they are not speaking in a language he doesn’t understand.

⁵⁴⁶ *Itinerarium*, First Preface (p.68).

⁵⁴⁷ *Descriptio*, I.8; I.11; I.12; and I.18.

⁵⁴⁸ *Descriptio* 1.18, 202. A strange echo of this can be found in a letter by Irish saint Columbanus to the pope (*Epistola V*), wherein he uses the geographic extremity of Ireland as part of why there has never been found “a heretic, schismatic, or Judaizer” amongst the Irish.

and abstinent lives. That these last three are also key characteristics of Irish Christianity (and are mentioned in the *Topographia*) goes unacknowledged, and the declaration of Welsh piety segues into the second book, which promises “Illaudabilium” [the unlaudable things].⁵⁴⁹ “More historico” [In the custom of a historian], Gerald explains, he cannot neglect the aspects of Welsh culture which “virtutis et laudis lineam egredi videntur calamum vertamus” [seem less praiseworthy and transgress the path of virtue].⁵⁵⁰ Before he even begins his litany of faults, however, which include fickleness, incest, and cowardice, he couches these traits in a caveat that “corrumpi nimirum ex longo exilio et paupertate, pejoresque ad usus gentis huius natura perverti potuit” [the natural propensities of the Welsh may well have been corrupted and changed for the worse by their long exile and their lack of prosperity].⁵⁵¹ Thus from the very start Gerald blames exile and poverty as corruptors of Welsh ‘natural propensities’—unlike the Irish, who get no such justification for their ‘corrupted’ state.

In the *Itinerarium*, as well, Gerald constructs Welshness partially in contrast to Irishness, and that contrast can be clearly seen in how the *Itinerarium* and the *Topographia* treat animality. Both the *Expugnatio* and the *Descriptio* are rather bare in their descriptions of animals, but the *Itinerarium* gives some key moments in which Gerald utilizes a physiologic discourse and parallels

⁵⁴⁹ Or ‘The Less Good Parts’, as Book II is titled in Thorpe’s translation.

⁵⁵⁰ *Itinerarium* II.P, 205.

⁵⁵¹ *Itinerarium* II.P, 206.

discussions in the *Topographia*. As discussed above, the inclusion of hybridity and hybrid creatures are an important step in Gerald's progression toward the charge of bestiality against the Irish in the *Topographia*, but these hybrids find a different, more compassionate place within the *Itinerarium* and are not given as proof of Welsh perfidy. Consider the unnaturally large deer in the first chapter of the first book, who "despite her sex... was found to have horns with twelve tines and to be much heavier than a doe", with Gerald calling it "a very strange thing" and an "unnatural beast".⁵⁵² Though its mixed sex characteristics and size prompt the possibility of horror, Gerald stops any sense of the sinister from forming by killing the beast before even describing it "by an unfortunate accident". The hunter who shot the creature is immediately stricken with a stroke and "remained feeble-minded and impotent until the day of his death."⁵⁵³ Later in the *Itinerarium*, Gerald presents a progression of hybrids and marvels: first a countess that makes cheese from the milk of tame deer, then the existence of a deer-cow hybrid repeated from the *Topographia*, and then a litter of half-dog, half-monkey "prodigies of nature"⁵⁵⁴, ending with a woman who was born without hands and so has developed extremely dexterous feet. The monkey-dog hybrids, however, are reported to have been killed by a "country bumpkin" who was "revolted" by "their deformed and hybrid bodies." The bumpkin is then punished by his

⁵⁵² *Itinerarium* I. 78.

⁵⁵³ *Itinerarium* I. 78.

⁵⁵⁴ *Itinerarium* II. 199.

master, who was much annoyed at the murders, meaning that both here and in the hunter episode earlier, both perpetrators are punished for violence against marvels.

Looking at these two moments from the colonial-animal lens we've seen before, Gerald here is clearly calling for compassion from those in power toward things they don't understand, things they find marvelous, or things that are unnatural or incorrect through no fault of their own. At one point Gerald does describe a knight named Gilbert who goes through labor pains for three years before giving birth to a calf, but Gerald dismisses this as a portent or "more probably a punishment exacted for some unnatural act of vice" and then immediately follows it with a description of the Welsh saint Illtyd, whose mare gave birth to a horse-deer "which could run very fast".⁵⁵⁵ Here we see the same exact charge that Gerald levels against the Irish, except against a Welshman, and instead of the sin being named and daemonically repeated, bestiality is explicitly left unmentioned, it is properly and lengthily punished, and an example of holily-inflected marvelous hybridity is immediately provided as a counterpoint. Gerald's desire to share the marvels is infectious—"Another remarkable thing which I must tell you about..." leads to "In our lifetime another thing happened in this region..." which leads to "in the same region at the same time..." and then "it appears from ancient yet authentic records..."—⁵⁵⁶ but Gerald is also critically aware of when those

⁵⁵⁵ *Itinerarium* I.2. 88.

⁵⁵⁶ All from *Itinerarium* I.2 87-88.

marvels press on ontological boundaries and how his presentation of the wonders and wildlife of a region reflects upon the characteristics of the humans in that region. His project, throughout the *Cambriae* works especially, is to clearly delineate the distinctions between Welsh and Irish or, as he saw, it between Welsh and beast.

The contrasts carefully constructed between the *Topographia* and the *Descriptio*, however, were not acknowledged by Gerald's medieval contemporaries. William of Malmesbury characterized the Welsh as barbarians in his 1125 *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, while the *Gesta Stephani* claims that Wales breeds "men of an animal type."⁵⁵⁷ John Gillingham has argued that the Welsh, by the second half of the twelfth century (i.e. by the time Gerald of Wales is writing), were characterized by their 'untamed savagery,' a *barbara gens*. Chrétien de Troyes even writes at one point that the Welsh are "by nature more uncouth than the beasts in the fields,"⁵⁵⁸ and consistently the Welsh were grouped along with the Scots, the Danes, and yes, the Irish, as denizens of the barbarous fringes of Norman England.⁵⁵⁹ These bestial metaphors and stereotypes are undoubtedly the same ones within Gerald's *Topographia*, but they are defiantly absent and, indeed, worked against in the *Descriptio*.

Gerald's project in the *Descriptio* is much more complicated and double-sided

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Gillingham, John. *The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values*. Rochester, The Boydell Press: 2000. 17. Citation from the *Gesta Stephani* from Gillingham.

⁵⁵⁸ Chrétien quotation from Davis, R.R. *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093-1343*. New York, Oxford University Press: 2000. 121.

⁵⁵⁹ Gillingham 10; Davis 114. David tells us that a common formula calls those from Wales, Galloway, Scotland, and Ireland 'stubborn rude and most barbarous people.'

than his in the *Topographia*, as in the latter he can fully embrace his perspective as a member of the colonizing power, writing the narrative which provides justification for control. Within the *Descriptio*, however, he cannot fictionalize the Welsh people, either because he knows the truth of them so well, or he has Welsh sympathies, or both. Chapters 8 and 9 of Book II of the *Descriptio* give detailed methods for how the Normans may conquer Wales, but chapter 10 contains suggestions on how the Welsh could resist conquest, a move which imbues the Welsh with dignity and pride in their British origins as original rulers of the land. They would be unconquerable he says, “si... armatura Gallica Kambri plenius et communius uti consuerverint” [if the Welsh would only adopt the French way of arming themselves], that is, they have the natural propensity to be a supreme race of people, on-par if not greater than the Normans, they merely lack the technological and cultural advancement of their would-be-conquerors.⁵⁶⁰

Book I of the *Descriptio* begins with a linguistic correction, one based as far as we know in linguistic fact: “Kambria, quae adulterino vocabulo, usitatoque magis sed proprio minus, modernis diebus Wallia dicitur” [Cambria is called Wales nowadays, that having become its usual name, although it is a foreign word and not really correct].⁵⁶¹ This discussion comes up again later on, when Gerald scolds Geoffrey of Monmouth for his false etymology and gives us the true one:

⁵⁶⁰ *Description* II.10, 226.

⁵⁶¹ *Descriptio* I.1, 165. See also my discussion of the origin of the name ‘Wales’ in chapter three.

sed a barbarica potius nuncupatione nomen istud inolevit. Saxones enim, occupato regno Britannico, quoniam lingua sua extraneum omne Wallicum vocant, et gentes has sibi extraneas Walenses vocabant. Et inde, usque in hodiernum, barbara nuncupatione et homines Walenses, et terra Wallia vocitatur.

[It is derived from one of the barbarous words brought in by the Saxons when they seized the kingdom of Britain. In their language the Saxons apply the adjective 'wealh' to anything foreign, and, since the Welsh were certainly a people foreign to them, that is what the Saxons called them. To this day our country continues to be called Wales and our people Welsh, but these are barbarous terms.]⁵⁶²

Here Gerald attempts to pull back the colonial discourse which has characterized his own people, providing truth over the narrative constructed for his people by the dominant culture of which he cannot truly be a part. Though his *Topographia* and his denigration of the Irish succeeds spectacularly, when it comes to a defense of his own marginalized identity his words fall on deaf ears. Geoffrey of Monmouth characterized the Welsh people in his *Historia Regum Brittonum* as a once-proud people who have been felled by the divinely-sanctioned conquests, a *translatio imperii* which leads directly from the giants to Arthur to Hengest and Horsa to William the Conqueror⁵⁶³. In that text the last British king, Cadwaller, is told by an angel that "God did not want the Britons to rule in Britain any longer,"⁵⁶⁴ and the Britons are corrupted into the Welsh, into foreigners in their own land. Gerald consciously resists this narrative, finishing the arc of Welsh sovereignty in his work by claiming that the prophecies of Merlin foretell "exterorum tam natione pereunte quam

⁵⁶² *Descriptio* I.7, 179.

⁵⁶³ Cf. Faletra, *Wales...* Chapter 1: 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Matter of Britain' for a full discussion of the Galfridian version of Welshness. 19-54.

⁵⁶⁴ Quoted in Faletra 23.

nuncupatione, antiquo in insula tam nomine quam omine Britones exultabunt” [the foreign occupation of the island will come to an end and the foreigners themselves will be destroyed. The Welsh will then be called Britons once more and they will enjoy their ancient privileges].⁵⁶⁵ Gerald does not push this interpretation (to do so would be to challenge the authority of his Norman bosses), but he is clearly presenting a possible alternative to the common Anglo-Norman idea of Welshness at this time.

The Physiologus Cambriae

This alternative Welsh identity, one of piety and national pride, is also presented to his Anglo-Norman readers in the *Itinerarium* and *Descriptio* through the same physiologic lens that Gerald uses in the *Topographia*, but with either positive inflections or heavy biblical implications. An example of the latter is found in Gerald’s description within the *Itinerarium* of a man so cursed that “it seemed as if the entire local population of toads had made an agreement to go visit him”— even with the help of his fellow townspeople, who hide the man in a tree with all the lower branches cut off, the man is killed and eaten by the tree-crawling toads “leaving nothing but his skeleton”⁵⁶⁶. He tells us soon after that a different man was killed by rats in the same way “by the judgment of God, who is never unjust, even if it is

⁵⁶⁵ *Descriptio* II.7, 216.

⁵⁶⁶ *Itinerarium* 169-170.

sometimes hard to understand.”⁵⁶⁷ The “plague of toads”, as Gerald calls it, is highly reminiscent of the biblical ten plagues of Egypt within *Exodus* and his statement about the difficult-to-understand nature of God’s judgment shows that Gerald is conceiving of these animal plagues in the biblical sense: as righteous acts of judgment against individuals, even if the sins of those individuals are not named or known.⁵⁶⁸ This account is followed by the short tale of a man who follows instructions from a dream to find gold, only to be killed by a viper laying in wait there instead.⁵⁶⁹ Here we see animals used one after the other as symbols of God’s violent correction and of the dangers of incorrect interpretation, both emphasizing the need to follow correct spiritual authority. On top of this, however, Gerald is demonstrating to his readers that the Welsh people *do* follow the correct spiritual authorities and that they are *already* corrected. Unlike his argument about the Irish’s spiritual need for new authorities, Gerald’s picture of the Welsh in the *Itinerarium* demonstrates over and over that God already holds corrective sway over Wales, implying that further religious control from outside forces is not needed. His last comment on the viper-dream both puts the interpretive onus on the reader (or dreamer), “It seems to me that dreams are like rumours: you must use your common

⁵⁶⁷ *Itinerarium* 170.

⁵⁶⁸ Another moment to note on this point is a section almost immediately following in which a woman prevents her husband from crusading. That night she rolls over in her sleep and smothers her baby to death, also reminiscent of the final plague in *Exodus* destroying the firstborn sons. She is broken and he takes the Cross the next day. Diverging from the animal plagues, however, the woman’s sin is directly stated and she is the cause of her own downfall, but the *Exodus* echoes do connect these passages. *Itinerarium* 172.

⁵⁶⁹ *Itinerarium* 170.

sense, and then accept some but refuse to believe others,⁵⁷⁰ but the fatal and unforeseeable consequences of incorrect interpretation still linger after this man's apparent death and induce a sense of anxiety around reliance on one's own interpretive skill.

Gerald's most physiologic moments in the *Itinerarium* are similar in nature to the descriptions of wildlife found in the *Topographia*; they are, however, much more spread out amongst the text, often presented as asides or amusing anecdotes rather than organized or viewed with an encyclopedic, anatomizing, and colonizing eye. Halfway through Book One, for example, he discusses the nature of dogs in a rough quotation from St Ambrose's *Hexameron* and then, toward the end of Book One, he tells an amusing tale of an intelligent and vindictive weasel mother. In this aside, a man pretends to kill a weasel's babies and, seeking vengeance, the weasel spits venom into a jug of milk intended for the man's son; when the man returns her babies to her alive, however, she knocks over the jug to make sure the poisoned milk is not drunk by the human child after all. The weasel here is an example of intelligent animality and the overarching story demonstrates the internal emotional life of the weasel, humanizing her and treating her with compassion. Immediately afterward, Gerald assigns to the weasel a behavior of playing dead in order to foil an evil kite, which is the same story told in the

⁵⁷⁰ *Itinerarium* 170.

Physiologus fox entry but with the allegory reshuffled⁵⁷¹- unlike the fox, the weasel is the 'good' animal in this passage, a rehabilitation of the original metaphor seeking to present the Welsh animal as worthy of respect. These physiologic sections and the others like them are not long or central to the text, but they do show that Gerald is still thinking in a similar manner as he was in the *Topographia*, if in a diminished or less systematic, and therefore less anatomizing or colonizing, way. It is a little into Book Two, however, where Gerald addresses what was undoubtedly his own favorite animal: the beaver.

The beaver appears in three of the four Giraldian texts discussed and Michael Faletra has done excellent work outlining the drafting process of this section— from the first draft in early recensions of the *Topographia* to a much expanded version in the *Itinerarium* and then in full form in the *Descriptio*,⁵⁷² at which point Gerald's description of the beaver has ballooned to more text than is afforded any other nonhuman animal in any of his works. It may seem like a shock to contemporary readers for Gerald to include beavers in these works, both because he explicitly states that Ireland doesn't have beavers in the *Topographia* and because beavers became extinct in southern Great Britain soon

⁵⁷¹ The weasel story is fascinating, though aside from the point here. In it a man pretends to steal a weasel's babies and the weasel spits venom into a jug of milk intended for the man's son, seeking vengeance. When he brings back her babies, she knocks over the jug to make sure the poisoned milk is not drunk after all. The weasel here is a symbol of intelligent animality and the overarching story

⁵⁷² Faletra, Michael. 'Giraldian Beavers: Revision and the Making of Meaning in Gerald's Early Works', in *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, eds. Georgia Henley and A. Joseph McMullen, University of Wales Press, 2018. 111-126.

after he wrote about them.⁵⁷³ But beavers certainly did live on the river Teifi in Gerald's time and his ever-growing descriptions of these animals show a clear admiration and identification with the amphibious mammals. Faletra, in his article on Gerald's beaver-revision process, suggests that the "beaver material may actually serve as a metonymical insertion of the author in the text: the clever and busy beaver may well be Gerald himself."⁵⁷⁴ Faletra's overarching thought process is very similar to mine, and he comes to this conclusion by recognizing the strangeness of the beaver section within the *Topographia*: for one, it stylistically stands out as a more straightforward and less exoticizing or colonial section, and for two, it bears repeating that Gerald explicitly states beavers *have nothing to do with Ireland*. Gerald, according to Faletra's suggestion, parallels his own experience as a Welshman in Ireland with the passage on the Welsh animal in a catalogue of otherwise Irish fauna.

The beavers are presented almost exclusively in a positive light and are assigned human-like characteristics. Their dam-building is described in detail and with a sense of awe, with the dams being referred to as *castra*, literally 'forts'. Gerald tells us "They have no reason to fear any attack, except that of us human beings, and even we must bring our weapons shod with iron," directly elevating the beavers to just-below-human status and pointing out

⁵⁷³ The exact dating of the extinction is still up for debate amongst the zoological community, but Lee Raye convincingly argues that the most probable date of extinction is before 1300, all later references being largely derivative of Gerald. Bryony Coles argues in her book *Beavers in Britain's Past* that beavers were possibly extant on the island until the 18th century, but this is hypothetical and Raye shows this is not borne out in the historical record. Raye, Lee. 'The early extinction date of the beaver (Castor fiber) in Britain.' *Historical Biology* 27 (8), 2015. 1029-1041. 10.1080/08912963.2014.927871

⁵⁷⁴ Faletra 2018, 120.

that humanity can only have an advantage over these animals with their superior technology—this is the same point he makes about Welsh technological inferiority in the *Descriptio*, where the Welsh “have gradually learnt” from the Anglo-Normans “how to manage their weapons and to use horses in battle”⁵⁷⁵. Faletra mentions that Gerald “seems deliberately here to be emphasizing the ways in which the beavers resemble humans”⁵⁷⁶, and the Welshman’s insistence on the beaver’s scarcity in Europe, claiming they are a “remarkable peculiarity” of the Teifi, identifies them clearly as a marvelous part of the Welsh ecological identity. He furthermore makes sure to detail their system of societal divisions, in which one set of beavers gnaws down trees, another holds the woods tightly, and the third drag the members of the second group along the ground in order to transport the building material.⁵⁷⁷ This description appears in all three texts, but most notably it appears in the *Topographia* where the line “It is remarkable that in [beavers] there are to be found slaves which are prepared to accept a debasement of their natural habits and to suffer at the same time a certain wear and tear of the skin on their backs”⁵⁷⁸ has a particular relevance given both the unnecessary nature of the passage in that text and the clear colonial mission with which that text is engaged. Overall, however, Gerald desires to attach all of these attributes he views as positive—cleverness, industriousness, association with

⁵⁷⁵ *Descriptio* 267. See discussion of this passage above.

⁵⁷⁶ Faletra 2018 120. Faletra also discusses the use of *castra* here.

⁵⁷⁷ *Topographia* I.25-6, *Itinerarium* 174, *Descriptio* 227-8.

⁵⁷⁸ In all sections, translation Thorpe.

home-building and home-defense, use of technology, and hierarchical social divisions with an acquiescent and untroubling underclass—to the Welsh identity.

In the early *Topographia* version of the beaver section, however, Gerald somewhat blatantly ignores the authoritative, well-known lore on the beaver: its legendary behavior of self-castration when fleeing from hunters who seek its castoreum. This is the version of the beaver seen in the *Physiologus*, found there with a moralization on cutting out temptation and riffing on Matthew 5:29's extortion to pluck out one's eye if it causes one to sin, and the behavior derives from at least Pliny's *Historia naturalis*.⁵⁷⁹ Its omission within the *Topographia* is understandable when holding Gerald's self-identification in mind, as even a churchman would hesitate before identifying himself with a castrated animal. This part of the beaver legend does appear in the later *Itinerarium* version, but Gerald makes pains to point out that Welsh beavers do not engage in self-castration, only 'Eastern' beavers do this.⁵⁸⁰ Not only is this reference a further example of Gerald's orientalist mentality, but it also shows the same geographic distancing that made Brendan's islands and the phoenix's Edenic home more believable in those texts: the wondrous conflicts with the local and so Gerald must find a way to reconcile what he observes and reports as a natural historian with what he received, often spiritual, authorities say on the matter. His solution also divests the Welsh beavers of an

⁵⁷⁹ Faletra 2018, 124 (fn. 2). The reference is in *HN* viii.47 and possibly comes from Cicero and Aesop.

⁵⁸⁰ *Itinerarium* 176.

act which, while biblically sanctioned and emblematic of extreme devotion and faith, also critically challenges masculinity and virility. Gerald is once again making necessary adjustments to the physiologic source material in order to further his own goals of ethnic hierarchization and evaluation.

Gerald's section on beavers is notable as a piece of natural history. Faletra points out that many details included in these sections are innovative to Gerald, including the use of fallen logs as building material and the particular description of a beaver's tail⁵⁸¹ and even 21st century zoologists fall back on Gerald's descriptions as the last reliable, native mention of this beast before its local extinction.⁵⁸² This has led to a natural conclusion that Gerald did in fact spend a good deal of time observing beavers and recording his observations, but as Faletra states, "to read these and other passages solely in the light of a naturalistic mimesis is to foreclose other ways in which Gerald sought to allow historical and natural 'facts' to resonate meaningfully within his works."⁵⁸³ Gerald appears to be taking on a more objective viewpoint when considering the beaver, attempting to "sidestep traditional allegories or other 'authoritative' meanings" according to Faletra, and I agree with his assessment that the evolution of the beaver passages shows Gerald attempting to break free from the known hermeneutic tradition, but Faletra ends this point by stating that, as someone "who also seems to have been immersed in the

⁵⁸¹ Faletra 2018, 114-115.

⁵⁸² Cf. Raye 2015.

⁵⁸³ Faletra 2018, 116.

moralising *Physiologus* tradition, Gerald's rejection of stable, unitary meaning seems almost revolutionary."⁵⁸⁴ In the introduction to this book, my second point about the physiologic tradition was *multiplicity*: the physiologic tradition does not shutter animals into a single symbolic relationship, but rather invites the possibility of multiple interpretations and understanding. Gerald's wrangling with the multifaceted nature of the beaver is not a revolution from the *Physiologus* as Faletra claims, it is a natural progression, and considering the skill with which we've seen Gerald use the physiologic tradition earlier in this chapter, it is not a surprise either. The real revolutionary act Gerald wants to accomplish here is a rehabilitation of the Welsh image—a rehabilitation attempted through careful manipulation and control of the physiologic tradition, based most fundamentally in a spiritual, ecological, ethnic, and ontological division from the Irish.

The Men 'Who Really Count'

Gerald's physiologic allegories surrounding the Welsh did not gain much traction. His works on the Irish were far more popular and saw stronger revivals in later periods than than *Itinerarium* or *Descriptio*.⁵⁸⁵ Ultimately, this can be attributed to the power of the physiologic tradition as a colonial tool: when cataloging a colonized people and their ecological surroundings, the

⁵⁸⁴ Faletra 2018 122.

⁵⁸⁵ McKibben 40.

ingrained process of comparison between human and animal behavior will always benefit and boost the colonial powers doing that catalogic work. Regardless of the positive or negative nature of the metaphors implied, this iterative blurring of ontological boundaries serves the larger purpose of dehumanization and so Gerald's project of reforming Welshness was doomed before it began. Gerald mentioned several times he planned to write a *Topographia Brittanica* which never materialized, and understandably so: Gerald does not have the position from which he can anatomize the English or Norman peoples that control Great Britain. Between Geoffrey of Monmouth, William of Malmesbury, and plenty of other historians, the Anglo-Normans already had a strong hold on their own ethno-national narrative. Gerald's position, while effective in Ireland, is less effective in Wales and, literarily, nonexistent in the greater Anglo-Norman sphere.

It is the colonial necessity of hierarchization that foils Gerald before he even begins. In the first preface to the *Itinerarium*, addressing the archbishop of Canterbury, Gerald flatters his dedicatee by stating that he is "vir praecluis, vir insignis, vir virorum perpaucorum" [a much celebrated man, a distinguished man, one of that very small amount of men who really count as men].⁵⁸⁶ Gerald accepts that the nature of society is such that the vast majority of people 'don't count'. Even if this statement is just hyperbolic flattery, it shows that Gerald is willing to degrade and discount others when extoling those *he*

⁵⁸⁶ *Itinerarium* 1P, 8.

believes are important, playing into and reaffirming political—and therefore ethnic—hierarchies in order to achieve what he wants. Leo Carruthers tells us that “The otherness of British (Welsh) literature for the... Anglo-Normans is partly based on a material reality... and partly on a political construct, a certain attitude on the part of the more central and politically dominant groups toward what they saw as the ‘fringes.’”⁵⁸⁷ These fringes are clearly geographical, as the Welsh were pushed into the less hospitable western shore of Great Britain while the Cornish, Bretons, Irish, Scots, and Danes were found at various other marginal locations. They are also, however, political, as the Norman progression of acquiring each territory, an imperial expansion along the lines of a twelfth- and thirteenth-century sense of British manifest destiny, demonstrates.⁵⁸⁸ Gerald, by virtue of his Welsh birth, could never truly exist outside of the fringes of Anglo-Norman society despite his desires. In the *Expugnatio* he enthusiastically cries of the valor of the Cambro-Normans, building to a climactic, choral repetition of hard ‘g’s:

O genus! O gens! gemina natura a Troianis animositatem, a Gallis armorum usum originaliter trahens. O genus! O gens! tam generis numerositate quam et innata strenuitate semper suspect. O genus! O gens!

[What a breed, what a noble stock, its nature twofold, deriving its valour from the Trojans and its skill in the use of arms from the French. What a breed, what a noble stock, always under suspicion because of its numbers and its innate courage. What a breed, what a noble stock!]⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ Carruthers, Leo. “What makes Breton lays “Breton?”” *Études Épistémè* 25 (2014). 7.

⁵⁸⁸ For more on this idea, cf. Faletra, Michael A. *Wales and the medieval colonial Imagination: The Matters of Britain in the Twelfth Century*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan: 2014. 34-6.

⁵⁸⁹ *Expugnatio* 156.

Gerald is attempting to use that same 'daemonic repetition' described by Bhabha to bolster the nobility of his own Cambro-Norman heritage,⁵⁹⁰ but he can't help himself from pointing out the suspicion other people have of the Welsh or from connecting the Welsh to a universally-agreed-upon noble race (the Trojans) and to their current rulers (the French). This exclamatory moment, entitled by Gerald as *Generis Commendacio* or 'Praise of a/the Race', ends with a literal low note, claiming that the Cambro-Normans "ad regni cuiuslibet expugnacionem per se sufficeret" [would have been sufficient for the conquest of any kingdom], if only envy, "invidens illis strenuitatem semper" [ever prejudiced against their high strength], did not come "in alta livor ab alto descendisset" [from on high to drag them into the depths].⁵⁹¹ The envy which hinders the Cambro-Normans must be coming from the Anglo-Normans, as it comes from 'on high', but Gerald uses the same word, *altus*, to describe both his own people's low position and the colonizing power's high position, drawing a direct parallel between the peoples once again and attempting to upset the explicit hierarchization. He recognizes the colonial machine, he knows from his own experience as a Welsh person how the oppressor holds power, and he identifies that it is through unjust attitudes and emotions (the envy of the Anglo-Normans) that that power is maintained.

⁵⁹⁰ In the *Descriptio* he will go on to say that the principal sin of the Welsh is incest, but that is largely to preserve the nobility of their bloodlines. Even their sin is concerned with their ethnic strength.

⁵⁹¹ *Expugnatio* 156-7.

Ultimately, Gerald's dramatic, almost epic invocations of that *gens* and *genus* serve as desperate attempts to establish these Cambro-Normans as, indeed, 'people who really count', and in doing so they demonstrate the powerless position from which Gerald is truly speaking. His extolations of his own people defines the Welsh by outside perspectives, by their connections to more prestigious ethnic identities and the suspicions or prejudices with which outsiders view them. The bare, choral *O genus! O gens!* provides no adjectives, no possibility of self-definition, it is Gerald's simple, repeated cry entreating his own oppressors to grant him and his relations the grace he does not afford the Irish: to be recognized as real people, to be recognized as members of humanity.

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CONCLUSION DRAGONS

Were I to write a second volume of this dissertation, it would focus exclusively on dragons: the dragons of Germanic myth, the biblical and hagiographic dragons, the dragon's purpose in Galfridian national mythmaking, the dragon as site of gendered interaction, the *Beowulf* dragon, the dragon as contemporary symbol of the medieval, and so on and so forth. Unfortunately curiosity and ambition are long while time and funding are short, but rather than leaving my reader dragon-less at the end of a book entitled 'Did We Believe in Dragons?', I wish to include some discussion of this fascinating and multi-faceted beast. I return now to the quotation given at the beginning of this dissertation from *The Canterbury Chronicle*:

*Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and there immediately followed a great famine, and after that in the same year on 8 January the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.*⁵⁹²

Although the Christian writers of the early medieval period in Britain and Ireland had numerous religious authorities to base their belief of dragons on,

⁵⁹² Swanton, Michael. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Phoenix Press, 2000. 55-57.

such as Isidore,⁵⁹³ they also had plenty of biblical references to draw from. Contemporary bibles nowadays, whether by editorial choice or simply better translational practices, have greatly excised the fantastic beasts of earlier translations. In the New International Version, for example, there are no references to the unicorn, phoenix, or ant-lion (the latter two of which were clear mistranslations in earlier versions), and the word ‘dragon’ appears a meager 14 times, all within the book of Revelation describing John’s vision of the devil at the end of days.⁵⁹⁴ Compare this to the Latin Vulgate, where the word *draco* appears 42 times, popping up all throughout the Old Testament in largely poetical and figurative senses, from the dream of Mordechai in Esther 11 to Psalm 148’s call for sea dragons to praise the Lord to Job’s cry in Job 30:29, *Frater fui draconem, et socius struthionem* [I was brother to dragons, and companion of ostriches]. Many of these usages can be traced to mistakes of medieval translators, but the important part is that belief in dragons was not only biblically sanctioned, but biblically mandated, as the Physiologus says, “Holy Scriptures have said nothing concerning birds and animals without the

⁵⁹³ 12.4.4-5: The dragon (*draco*) is the largest of all the snakes, or of all the animals on earth. The Greeks call it *drakwn*, whence the term is borrowed into Latin so that we say *draco*. It is often drawn out of caves and soars aloft, and disturbs the air. It is crested, and has a small mouth and narrow pipes through which it draws breath and sticks out its tongue. It has its strength not in its teeth but in its tail, and it causes injury more by its lashing tail than with its jaws. 5. Also, it does not harm with poison; poison is not needed for this animal to kill, because it kills whatever it wraps itself around. Even the elephant with his huge body is not safe from the dragon, for it lurks around the paths along which the elephants are accustomed to walk, and wraps around their legs in coils and kills them by suffocating them. It is born in Ethiopia and India in the fiery intensity of perpetual heat.

⁵⁹⁴ Important to note, however, that the New Revised Standard Version contains the word ‘dragon’ a full 30 times— in some cases, this is due to canonical choices, but in many others the NIV renders the NRSV’s ‘dragon’ as simply ‘monster’.

purpose of our understanding".⁵⁹⁵ Though the dragon exists in these verses almost exclusively as a metaphoric or poetic construct, a medieval Christian could not conceivably claim that the dragon was not real without directly contradicting the literal truth of scripture.

Herein lies the problem with the *Canterbury Chronicle* text. As we've seen in the first two chapters, 'Phoenix' and 'Voyage', it is easy to create fantastic beasts within the 'real world' as long as they are placed in the far East or far West, past the experiential possibilities of the audience. However, these dragons are explicitly placed in Northern England- like the riddles of chapter three, they are local wonders but, like Gerald's marvels of chapter four, they exist in a borderland region abutting both known, English civilization and the wild land of ethnic others. Of course, we can jump into what Pamela Gravestock calls a 'rationalist' explanation for the presence of these dragons, and people have.⁵⁹⁶ Marilina Cesario has written a thorough and convincing article about the various astronomical and meteorological possibilities for what those fiery dragons might be, concluding that they are most likely a particularly low and red-toned appearance of the aurora borealis.⁵⁹⁷ Her work, however, is concerned heavily with what it was the early English observers *actually saw* in the sky, provided that this account of dragons is indeed a symbolic or metaphorical account of something that was actually seen. She

⁵⁹⁵ Curley 42.

⁵⁹⁶ See introduction for discussion of Gravestock and rationalism.

⁵⁹⁷ Cesario, Marilina. 'Fyrene dracon in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', in *Textiles, Text, Intertext*, eds. Maren Clegg Hyer and Jill Frederick, Boydell & Brewer, 2016. 153-170.

does not, however, engage with *why* the *Chronicle* would call such a display ‘*dracan*’. Cesario does note several places in other chronicle entries that refer to *fyrene leoman*, ‘fiery lights’, or *bærnende fir*, ‘burning fires’, to describe the aurorae and discusses *pluvia sanguinis*, ‘bloody rain’, as a Latin equivalent in use in England,⁵⁹⁸ demonstrating that other phrases were available to this chronicler. So the question remains an open if reframed question, regardless of rationalism: why did they choose a mythic, fire-breathing, winged serpent to obfuscate what was a known meteorological phenomenon?

I’d like to propose a new reading of *fyrene dracan*: as an embodiment of the fear of Norseness and its associated paganism. Though not structured as a physiologic entry, *The Canterbury Chronicle* directly arranges its animals as parallel to the ethnic others in a similar way to what we’ve seen throughout this dissertation and an understanding of the physiologic tradition helps us understand where these beasts might come from. Animality, and especially fantastic animality, has been connected with religious, racial, and ethnic identities since the very beginning of the physiologic tradition, and though the dragon does generally not possess an entry of its own, its reappearance throughout the *Physiologus* as a constant foe for righteous animalkind sets it up as the recurring bogeyman⁵⁹⁹ of the text. Dragons are mentioned five times within the *Physiologus*, in the entries on the Peridexion Tree, the Elephant, the

⁵⁹⁸ Cesario

⁵⁹⁹ Consider also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, where his second thesis is ‘The Monster Always Escapes’ - the dragon continually reappears, no matter how often defeated, being more of a representation of cultural anxieties than actual animals (whom human beings are actually capable of causing the extinction of).

Panther, the Echinemon, and the Stag. In all cases, the dragon is overcome by the animal (or plant) that the entry focuses on: the Peridexion tree wards away the dragon; burning the hair of an elephant provides protection from dragons; the echinemon covers himself in slime, inflating himself and standing against the dragon until he kills it; the stag spits water into the cracks of the earth to draw out the dragon, much as the Lord killed the devil with “heavenly waters of indescribable wisdom”.⁶⁰⁰ The panther, particularly important given its relatively long entry and direct parallels to Jesus, is “wisely said” to be “an enemy of the dragon in the water. Therefore, Holy Scriptures have said nothing concerning birds and animals without the purpose of our understanding”.⁶⁰¹ On theological grounds, the devil is used when the allegory requires an exterior, negative force that doesn’t face a decision process related to belief or doubt- otherwise nonbelievers are constructed as the target foe. The owl, for example, can serve as an allegorical symbol for nonbelieving Jews because the owl has a decision between dark and light and prefers the darkness. The hunters of the beaver allegory, on the other hand, symbolize the devil in that they represent an ever-present, nonsentient temptation toward sin.

In a text as concerned with multiplicity as the *Physiologus* is, however, the one-to-one correspondence of the multi-faceted monster named ‘the dragon’ to ‘the devil’ is unstable. The physiologic tradition encourages the continual

⁶⁰⁰ Curley 58.

⁶⁰¹ Curley 42.

pulling of meaning from animalkind, but the lack of an entry on the dragon shows that the text itself is resistant to pulling meaning from this specific animal. The *Physiologus* does not deny that dragons exist, it just does not want to afford them an opening for interpretation and contemplation. This perhaps-apotropaic omission is notable even over other animals, such as the ibis, which are similarly equated with just the devil yet are still afforded their own entry. The draconic lacuna seems to create a taboo around affording dragons space— in this case space on the manuscript page, but the overarching metaphor is easily transferrable to the historical reality of early medieval England. As an invading force, the Norse raiders were pagans who defiled holy places, such as the monastery of Lindisfarne in the 793 entry, and at the time of the writing of this entry (presumably after 890) they were beginning to make serious incursions on English territory. Dragons, like the Danes, could *not* be allowed to settle and call a place home, neither within the text nor within Northumbria. Indeed, dragons do not often have a place within England in early English literature—even the archetypal *Beowulf* dragon is quite clearly homed within modern-day Sweden.

As mentioned before, the *Chronicle* isn't written in the physiologic style or definitively within the physiologic tradition, but looking at these dragons through a physiologic lens allows us to understand better the religious, ethnic, cultural, and political signifiers that are at work here. Just as Gerald of Wales connects the Irish and their lack of faith to fantastic animality and a colonial

desire, so does the author of *The Canterbury Chronicle* connect the Norse and their lack of faith to fantastic animality and a threat of invasion. The reality of the flying animal is inconsequential to the greater idea here—it doesn't matter if the writer intends to impart literal, material dragons or figurative, portentous dragons or merely to poetically describe aurorae—that idea being that the imminent danger posed by these beasts is the same as that posed by the ethnically different, religiously different, culturally different *others* that are viewed as threatening the English borders.

The Physiologic World

In the introduction, I gave five traits of the physiologic tradition: opacity, multiplicity, theology, zoology and biblical reference. I also gave three subjects related to alterity in which the physiologic tradition is enmeshed: animality, wonder, and ethnicity. The past four chapters have been focused on various literary loci in which I have identified the physiologic tradition and the ways in which the physiologic tradition can help us better understand these texts and how these texts contributed to the shaping of medieval beliefs.

In the first chapter, 'Phoenix', I gave examples of how the Old English poem *The Phoenix* embodies the five traits of the physiologic tradition and argued that the phoenix, as an animal marked by its uniqueness and capacity for sparking wonder, was the perfect tool for expressing key aspects of

Christian belief. I also argued that belief in the existence of the phoenix was different from belief in the phoenix, and that our contemporary notion of empirical zoology hinders us from understanding the phoenix as medieval people would. My second chapter, 'Voyage', looked at Irish seafaring, uncovering how the *Navigatio sancti brendani* used the physiologic tradition in its construction of a mystical geography. The continual emphasis on knowledge and mystery within that text emphasizes the need for correct spiritual authority, embodied most often in the *Navigatio* with St Brendan. Both chapters examined the place of ecology within religious belief and tied the experience of wonder to devotion, using a theocentric view of the natural world, and especially animals, to communicate Christian theological teachings.

In the third chapter, 'Riddles', I brought us back to England and argued that the Exeter Book riddles used a physiologic discourse to construct a sense of ethnic or linguistic identity, with the bird riddles full of religious import and oxen riddles full of anti-Welsh racism. Christian animal riddling as a whole, with its literary obfuscation of the natural world often for didactic ends, engages in the same iterative process of belief-making as the physiologic tradition and so invites the same allegorical complexity and need for authoritative interpretation, as well. I continued my arguments connecting the physiologic tradition to colonial ends in my fourth chapter, 'Conquest', examining the dual vision of Gerald of Wales as colonizer and colonized,

caught between his role as anatomizer of the Irish and his own position as a member of a people also conquered by the Anglo-Normans. The *Topographia Hibernica*, especially, uses the physiologic tradition to make Gerald's colonial argument into one not only based on ethnicity and culture, but also religious belief as well. Within those pages, Gerald uses a construction of Irish belief to influence Anglo-Norman belief in the colonial potential of Ireland as well as, much less successfully, Cambro-Norman exceptionalism.

Now, just in these last few pages, I have examined a text, the *Chronicle*, which is in many ways entirely separate from the physiologic tradition, but one which can be understood better viewed through a physiologic lens. Simply stated and in summation, the physiologic tradition is a way of viewing animality, found throughout the early medieval period, that connects ontological difference to spiritual instruction. Sometimes this viewpoint is explicit and sometimes it is found through examining a text's underlying assumptions about the natural world. Either way, it begins from a familiar place, one which has not died off in the intervening centuries: a sense of wonder at the immense variety and splendor of animalkind.

Consider the following animal behaviors:

- When threatened, the horned lizard shoots blood from its eyes to ward off attackers, but it will only do so for dogs and not for other predators.⁶⁰²

⁶⁰² Hodges, W.L. Defensive blood squirting in *phrynosoma ditmarsii* and a high rate of human-induced blood squirting in *Phrynosoma asio*. *The Southwestern Naturalist* 49(2), 267-270, (1 June 2004).

- Clownfish live in groups led by the largest female. When she dies, the largest male of the group changes its sex to female and becomes the head of the group. There is an established order of succession throughout the remaining members as to who becomes the next male and subsequently the next female.⁶⁰³
- As a defense mechanism, Spanish ribbed newts will rotate their ribs outward to the point of piercing through their own flesh in order to more effectively envenomate their attackers.⁶⁰⁴
- The archerfish waits at the surface of the water and then precisely shoots a jet of water, knocking its prey down into the depths. It only ever takes one shot and it almost never misses.⁶⁰⁵
- The *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* fungus, though not an animal, is known for its ability to infect the minds of ants, causing them to become (and I quote scientific literature here) ‘zombie ants’ which fall from their arboreal homes, develop lockjaw, and die hanging in a perfect position for the fungus to spread further in a brutal form of mind-control parasitism.⁶⁰⁶

[https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1894/0038-4909\(2004\)049<0267:DBSIPD>2.0.CO;2](https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1894/0038-4909(2004)049<0267:DBSIPD>2.0.CO;2)

⁶⁰³ Buston Peter M. 2004. Territory inheritance in clownfish. *Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B*.271S252–S254
<http://doi.org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1098/rsbl.2003.0156>

⁶⁰⁴ Heiss, E., Natchev, N., Salaberger, D., et al. Hurt yourself to hurt your enemy: new insights on the function fo the bizarre antipredator mechanism in the salamandrid *Pleurodeles waltl*. *Journal of Zoology* 280 (2010), 156-162. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7998.2009.00631.x

⁶⁰⁵ Schuster, Stefan. Hunter in archerfish — an ecological perspective on a remarkable combination of skills. *Journal of Experimental Biology* 221 (2018). doi:10.1242/jeb.159723

⁶⁰⁶ Hughes, D.P., Andersen, S.B., Hywel-Jones, N.L. et al. Behavioral mechanisms and morphological symptoms of zombie ants dying from fungal infection. *BMC Ecol* 11, 13 (2011).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6785-11-13>

- The bombardier beetle wards off its attackers by creating an explosion of acid that it ejects from its abdomen.⁶⁰⁷
- Alaskan wood frogs can live frozen underground for up to 7 months, surviving temperatures of -18° Celsius (0° Fahrenheit) and producing their own natural anti-freeze, while Siberian salamanders, contrary to their fireproof *Physiologus* counterparts, regularly survive temperatures as low as -35° C (-31°F).⁶⁰⁸
- And, finally, Komodo dragons, the ‘real’ dragons of our world, undergo parthenogenesis. If separated from males for too long, a female komodo dragon can, without insemination, spontaneously give birth to an all-male brood that she or other females can then mate with to produce both male and viable female offspring.⁶⁰⁹

All of these are ‘real’ creatures in ‘the real world’ - animals that, if you were so inclined and had the ability, you could find and directly observe. Yet, they are also all fantastic. They are unique and extreme animals that inspire wonder in their deviation from what we expect is possible of animalkind.

⁶⁰⁷ Kojima, W., Yamamoto, R. Defense of bombardier beetles against avian predators. *Sci Nat* 107, 36 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00114-020-01692-z>

⁶⁰⁸ Don J. Larson, Luke Middle, Henry Vu, Wenhui Zhang, Anthony S. Serianni, John Duman, Brian M. Barnes; Wood frog adaptations to overwintering in Alaska: new limits to freezing tolerance. *J Exp Biol* 15 June 2014; 217 (12): 2193–2200. doi: <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1242/jeb.101931>

⁶⁰⁹ This is possible because reptiles such as the Komodo dragon have a ZZ/ZW chromosome system, where males are ZZ and females are ZW. The asexually generated brood consists of half males cloned from the female’s single Z chromosome and half unviable embryos with a WW chromosome. Watts, P., Buley, K., Sanderson, S. et al. Parthenogenesis in Komodo dragons. *Nature* 444, 1021–1022 (2006). <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1038/4441021a>.

Hyenas do not change their sex, as the *Physiologus* claims, but clownfish sure do. We have no record of sun-lizards burning out their eyes staring into the east at sunrise, but we do have record of lizards that eject blood from their eyes at canine predators. I don't make these connections to reinvigorate a rationalist argument attempting to prove that there was some basis in reality behind the *Physiologus's* fantastic elements, but rather to point out the inherent unknowability of truth, especially given the report of fantasy. If I did not append footnotes to the claims above and my readers were not familiar with these animals already, these claims would register as nearly as fantastic as those within the *Physiologus*.⁶¹⁰

These examples, too, are rife with symbolic possibility: the newt that hurts itself to save itself, the lizard weaponizing its bloody tears, the clownfish's hierarchy dominated by sex-change, the dragon giving virgin birth. I suspect that anyone who has read this dissertation so far could readily come up with several plausible-sounding Christian moralizations or significations for these bizarre behaviors. The medieval natural philosopher asking, 'Why did God give this animal this behavior?' or 'What purpose does this animal serve in God's creation?' has been replaced, however, with the modern evolutionary biologist asking, 'Why is this adaptation advantageous? What conditions existed to allow the development of such an organism?' Either way, the

⁶¹⁰ Also consider the effect that some of these animals, unknown to medieval authors, have had on the contemporary fantasy imagination: J.K. Rowling used the bombardier beetle as the model for her fantasy creature the blast-ended skrewt, while *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a fantasy television show, contains an episode with the thaw of overwintering wood frogs as a critical plot point. The *O. universalis* is well-known, too, in sci-fi and fantasy realms as a model of naturally-occurring horror.

questions revolve around the same search for a narrative, born out of perceived uniqueness, the same desire to unpack and understand the position of the animal within the natural world. The push for construction of knowledge and story-telling follows quickly on the heels of human wonder.

Whether spiritual or not and whether received from an authority or not, education and learning have always been and continue to be full of wonder, though we as medievalists often find ourselves at odds with non-specialists who believe in many wondrous and untrue things about our period. In Cesario's rationalist approach to the dragons of the *Canterbury Chronicle*, she refers to the dragons throughout her article almost exclusively as the *fyrene dracan*, written in the Old English, as if to erect a linguistic barrier between her contemporary scholarship and the notion of belief in dragonkind. In an article on the same phrase written by Rolf H. Bremmer Jr and László Sándor Chardonens, the authors call dragons "the least human of monsters,"⁶¹¹ spend two sentences talking about dragonkind, and then quickly sum up stating that they "are apparitions foreboding evil times, rather than creatures to be fought"⁶¹², effectively shooing the animal (and all notions of materiality) away. Obviously animal studies and fantasy were not at the top of these scholars' minds, as their work is focused on meteorology and prognostics, but when considering the question of medieval belief we must take seriously the

⁶¹¹ Quoting Andy Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies*.

⁶¹² Bremmer, Rolf and L. Sandor Chardonens. 'Old English Prognostics: Between the Moon and the Monstrous', in *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, ed. K.E. Olsen and L.A.]. R. Houwen (Louvain: Peeters, 2001),156.

text's insistence on dragons, flying in the sky and breathing fire. The *Physiologus*, though based in wonder and therefore automatically outside the realm of experience, does not present itself as fiction and neither does the *Chronicle*. We must take seriously the text's insistence on stating what we understand to be impossible. We must take seriously the text's insistence on *dragons*.

Well, Did We?

In the introduction to this dissertation, I addressed two critical parts of my titular question: what I meant by 'dragons' and what I meant by 'believe in'. In this concluding section, I'd like to address the remaining parts of my question: 'Did...?' and 'we'. 'We' can easily be understood as 'human beings', in this case specifically limited down to human beings in early medieval Britain and Ireland. Yet in another sense it can imply continuity between my audience, myself, and the authors and peoples written about in this dissertation. I by no means want to imply a genetic genealogy (it is not "Did our forebearers believe in dragons?"), nor do I even want to imply a linguistic or cultural one- I am not asking you, my reader, to imagine yourself as necessarily part of any tradition whatsoever. I am asking, however, that the cultural behemoth known as 'literary studies', or the discipline of 'English literature' as a whole, recognizes their own othering of the early medieval

period. It is easy to dismiss the 'dark ages' as a superstitious time of strict doctrinal oppression, wherein humans were somehow stunted in their intellect and indiscriminate in their beliefs. It is easy to imagine the 'fraud and credulity' model discussed in the introduction, one that fits our contemporary perceptions of facts and oppression while stroking our own modern, enlightened egos.

I hope that within this work I have shown that the structures of belief in early medieval England and Ireland were the product of creative, intelligent, and curious minds. Though undoubtedly they were caught up in and used to bolster structures of power, control, and violence (as they often still are today), these beliefs were built upon a backbone of inquisitive thinking and a deep desire to understand the natural, wondrous world that surrounded the early Christian thinkers. Their conclusions most often emphasized 'correct' Christian thinking, much to detriment of anyone who was not part of the dominant religious groups at the time, yet they were not mindless or uncritical repetitions of dogma. They were driven, in many respects, by the same motivations that drive today's scientists and researchers. Their weaknesses and failures are made so obvious to modern readers only by the passage of time and the shifting of cultural values, as undoubtedly our weaknesses and failures will be glaringly obvious to readers a millennium from now.

A careful reader of this dissertation may have noticed that within its pages I have not until this very sentence, except in citations, once used the term

‘Anglo-Saxon’. There are many people better versed in these issues than I that have discussed at length the damaging usage of this term in contemporary discourses outside (and inside) academia.⁶¹³ I join them in their disavowal of the term and I do so not only for the many reasons related to social justice and racist historicizing, but also for the simple fact that the term has long served as a way for those who do not study this time period to ignore this time period. ‘Old English’, the proper name for the language, and ‘early English’, which I have often used to refer to the society and people, both emphasize the continuity of the language and culture stretching from at the very least Bede’s nationalizing *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* to the present day. The ‘Anglo-Saxons’ were the same people as the ‘English’ who came after them, and though terminology was looser at that time (and they were certainly

⁶¹³ Maggie Williams has expressed a very similar sentiment to me in a footnote to her essay ‘Crosses, Croziers, and the Crucifixion: Twelfth-Century Crosses in Ireland’, which I would like to quote at length here: “I have avoided using the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in this essay because it is a contested term that has potentially harmful and racist associations. In recent years, archaeologists, art historians, literary scholars and linguists have reconsidered both the accuracy and usefulness of the term to describe the space and culture of England in the post-Roman/pre-Conquest period. While much of the existing terminology carries its own modern political baggage (e.g. ‘the British Isles’), this particular phrase is more insidious. Many young scholars of colour have rightly raised the alarm, and their bravery in speaking out comes at a moment when advancing technology has provided new data about the diversity of England in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. For too long, the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxon’ has been uncritically attached to a fictional ‘pure’ English past... For more information, see Mary Rambaran-Olm, ‘Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies]’, *Academia and White Supremacy* (<https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academiaand-white-supremacy>, accessed 20 December 2019); ‘Misnaming the Medieval: Rejecting Anglo-Saxon Studies’ (www.historyworkshop.org.uk/misnaming-the-medieval-rejectinganglo-saxon-studies/, accessed 20 December 2019); Adam Miyashiro, ‘Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies: A Response to ISAS Honolulu’ (www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/07/decolonizing-anglo-saxon-studies.html, accessed 20 December 2019); Susan Oosthuizen, *The Emergence of the English* (2019); and Catherine Karkov, ‘Post “Anglo-Saxon” Melancholia’ (<https://medium.com/@catherinekarkov/post-anglo-saxonmelancholia-ca73955717d3>, accessed 20 December 2019).” Williams, Maggie. ‘Crosses, Croziers, and the Crucifixion: Twelfth-Century Crosses in Ireland’, in *The Rood in Medieval Britain and Ireland, C. 800-C. 1500*, edited by Philippa Turner, and Jane Hawkes, Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated, 2020. 59.

sometimes referred to as 'Saxons'), they were still in all respects the early English people. 'Anglo-Saxon', aside from its problematic roots and appropriations in contemporary discourse, has assisted in the othering and distancing of this time period, flattening the humanity of the early English and sustaining myths of superstition, racial purity, and irrelevance.

This is all to say, the phrasing of 'Did we...?' is intended to draw attention to chronological continuity and reject the dehumanization of historical peoples. It is a principal ethic of both my research and pedagogy to resist dehumanization in all of its forms and to consider the perspectives of other humans as rational, or at least understandable, within their own worldview, regardless of how irrational or confusing I as a modern observer find their perspective to be. In a draft of his well-known essay, '*Beowulf* and the Critics', J.R.R. Tolkien took on the voice of the *Beowulf* author speaking to contemporary critics, stating, "You do not think much of trolls and dragons? Then our tastes differ, and living a thousand years later does not prove without further argument that your taste is superior. You are too sophisticated, and many of you have read too much too carelessly."⁶¹⁴ Tolkien removed this section in the final version of his work, perhaps because it does not fit the expected academic standard of tone and argumentation, but it demonstrates the passion and mentality behind his scholarship—one that seeks to, on a fundamental level, understand other human beings on their own terms

⁶¹⁴ Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf and the Critics*. Michael D. C. Drout, ed. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002. 144.

without the judgmental eye of modernity. He, as I do throughout this dissertation, tied this ethic directly to consideration of the fantastic, and specifically fantastic beings. Much like trolls and dragons, much like the phoenix and the barnacle goose and the werewolf and the talking birds and the whole bestiary crew were multitudinous symbols used by medieval people to contrast with and instruct humanity, regardless of zoological fact, so medieval people and 'The Middle Ages' as a whole are multitudinous symbols used today to define and instruct people in modernity, regardless of historical fact.

Of course, medieval people can no longer be harmed by modern prejudices, setting this apart from far more heinous forms of dehumanization that occur upon still-living humans and human bodies. Yet, contemporary society's practice of playing fast and loose ascribing often heinous traits, attitudes, and ideas to other human beings—who are not able to defend themselves but still were at one point real people worthy of respect and consideration—is problematic and contributes to problematic and harmful ways of thinking about other humans. 'Did we believe in dragons?' is not a question asking, 'Were humans really that stupid?', as I've seen some people interpret it; it's a question asking, 'How can we understand and more deeply appreciate the beliefs and perspectives of people other than ourselves?'

It feels appropriate to end this dissertation and answer its central question with a final point on one of the few dragons that can be actually touched and

therefore theoretically requires no belief: the Komodo dragon. For many years it has been thought that the Komodos cultivated hyper-pathogenic mouth flora by keeping bits of decaying flesh in their teeth and that they killed their prey by infecting them with highly septic bacteria through bite wounds, causing a larger prey beast to die within days even if it escaped from an initial attack.⁶¹⁵ Recent evidence has shown this to be false: the Komodo dragon's mouth flora is comparable to other carnivores and its native habitat originally had no large prey animals, meaning it had no reason to evolve such a mechanism in the first place. This revision is of course a regular and expected part of the scientific process, but the conception of Komodo dragons as fatally foul-mouthed has been called by researchers "an enchanting fairy-tale"⁶¹⁶ and "complete voodoo",⁶¹⁷ an attractively unique feature less quotidian than the truth (turns out the sepsis observed in prey animals was probably caused by local watering holes infected with fecal matter). The myth does persist to this day and many people, including myself until researching this conclusion, still believe in the legend of a bacteria-bomb bite. After all, that particular theory aligns with our conception of the Komodo's mythical namesake given that

⁶¹⁵ Wilcox, Christie. "Here Be Dragons: The Mythic Bite of the Komodo." *Discover Magazine*, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/here-be-dragons-the-mythic-bite-of-the-komodo>. 25 June 2013. She primarily draws her research from Goldstein E.J.C., Tyrrell K.L., Citron D.M., Cox C.R., Recchio I.M., Okimoto B., Bryja J. & Fry B.G. (2013). ANAEROBIC AND AEROBIC BACTERIOLOGY OF THE SALIVA AND GINGIVA FROM 16 CAPTIVE KOMODO DRAGONS (VARANUS KOMODOENSIS): NEW IMPLICATIONS FOR THE "BACTERIA AS VENOM" MODEL, *Journal of Zoo and Wildlife Medicine*, 44 (2) 262-272. DOI: 10.1638/2012-0022R.1

⁶¹⁶ Professor Brian Fry, venom researcher at the University of Queensland and co-author on paper cited above, quoted from Wilcox above.

⁶¹⁷ Also Fry, quoted in Zimmer, Carl. 'Chemical in Dragon's Glands Stir Venom Debate', *The New York Times*, 18 May 2009.

poison dripping from dragon fangs is found commonly throughout both medieval and contemporary fantasy literature.

This hyper-bacterial theory was disproven at about the same time researchers in zoos started discovering that Komodos were capable of parthenogenesis, over a decade ago. Yet, despite being a behavior analogous to a central miracle of Christian theology, the ‘virgin-birth’ angle has not caught on with the popular imagination of the Komodo dragon in the same way the ‘dirty-mouth’ theory did before. What Komodo dragons are known for may still yet change as the new research becomes more widely known, but the ‘dirty-mouth’ theory’s endurance is easy to explain given our collective cultural understanding of what a dragon is. The connection with disease and sepsis, the cleverness of waiting for the victim to die, the image of decaying flesh hanging from teeth— all of these feel properly draconic, they remind us of the mythological Nidhoggr or Tolkien’s Smaug, they align with what we somehow expect is ‘true’ for something that is unreal, something that definitionally cannot have ‘truth’. Even though we know our idea of the dragon is not ‘real’, that does not stop the dragon from affecting how we relate to the real world around us, including the real animals that we call dragons. Just as with the medieval authors discussed throughout this dissertation, belief still guides our contemporary relationship to the natural world, even if the tenor or methodology of those beliefs has changed. The advent of

modernity has not divested us of the desire to make animals into what we want them to be, regardless of accuracy or reality.

Finally, then, an answer to the question posed by the cover of this book, found within its very last page. Did we believe in dragons?

Yes, we did.

We still do.

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