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Allegorical Hares and Real Dragons:
Animals in Medieval Literature and Beyond

Tombs, Lions, Dogs

The little village of Sparsholt in the Vale of White Horse (Oxfordshire, formerly Berkshire) is not only home to the Star Inn, whose culinary fame attracts visitors from far and wide, but also to the Holy Rood Church. Its present structure dates back mostly to the late 13th and early 14th centuries and is, as such, nothing out of the ordinary among English parish churches. Its claim to (relative) fame among lovers of British art history rests upon three wooden effigies, one representing Sir Robert Achard (died 1353), the other two his wives, Joanna (died 1337) and Agnes (died 1356/8), respectively. Sir Robert's feet rest on a lion, those of Joanna on a lion's cub and those of Agnes on two dogs.¹ The latter are facing each other, as if they were playing (images 1-3).

Image 1: Wooden effigy of Sir Robert Achard at the Holy Rood Church, Sparsholt.

¹ Lady Joanna's animal is most likely a lion's cub or a lioness. Several scholars who saw a picture of the animal identified it as such, not least since we can see clearly the feline split of the upper lip running from the nose. Lady Agnes's two animals are either two dogs or another lion's cub and a dog. The latter can be unambiguously identified as a dog thanks to its pointed nose and its hanging ears, while the second may be a pug-nosed dog or the counterpart to Lady Joanna's lion's cub.

The leaflet informing visitors about the effigies makes much of the fact that ladies in the Middle Ages kept their lapdogs even in convents, and under 'Points of detail' we find the following text:

(2) The presence of lap dogs at the feet of the effigy of Lady Agnes need not surprise us, even though she was probably at her death the inmate of a nunnery. Most ladies of noble birth kept their pet dogs constantly with them; even in bed they served the purpose of foot-warmer. And a lady who entered a nunnery would not leave her dogs...
A letter from William of Wykeham to the Prioress of Romsey Abbey rebukes the nuns for bringing with them to church birds, rabbits, hounds and such like things […] with frequent hindrance to their own psalmody and that of their fellow-nuns, and to the grievous peril of their souls. (Leaflet, Holy Rood Church Sparsholt)

The unknown author's interpretation of the two dogs as a piece of early realism is inspired by the life-like representation of the two animals in the effigy. At the same time it unwittingly illustrates the modern bias for favouring the literal and real over the symbolic and allegorical. Of course, we cannot and should not ignore the realism of Agnes' dogs, yet we have to be aware that such an explanation tells only half the story and neglects completely the symbolic dimension of the effigy. A medieval viewer would also have noted the realism of the two dogs playing, yet s/he would, at the same time, have recognized the allegorical/symbolic meaning of the dog as a sign of fidelity. All the numerous dogs lying at the feet of (mostly) dead ladies are not so much a tribute to medieval women's fondness of pets, but part of the medieval (and later) language of symbols and signs. This does not exclude the possibility of a real and mundane model as the inspirational source for the allegorical/symbolic representation and that, in our case, the artist did indeed choose Lady Agnes' real pets to depict the canine representations of fidelity. Their primary raison d'être lies therefore in their symbolic value and if Lady Agnes had not owned any pet dogs, the artist would have provided her with a generic representative of the species. The animals found at the feet of the other two effigies support such an interpretation. Lady Joanna's effigy sports a quadruped that is most likely either a lion's cub or a lioness. The lion alludes to Christ and the resurrection, which is also the primary association (with secondary meanings of valour and nobility) evoked by the realistically depicted male lion at Sir Robert's feet. And no 20th- or 21st-century scholar would therefore argue that Sir Robert or Lady Joanna kept lions as pets.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that medieval audiences possessed the ability of 'double vision.' A huntsman would see his dogs primarily and most of the time as dependable and useful companions for hunting. Yet he would also be familiar with the dogs' symbolic and allegorical dimensions due to the sermons of the friars or his parish priest, so that if need be he could either switch 'registers' or, more likely, perceive the additional spiritual dimension of his canine hunting-companions. This way of thinking is to be found not only in medieval bestiaries, but also in many medieval works of an encyclopaedic nature. The authors of these texts usually first provide the 'scientific' or medical information on the animal (or plant or stone) under consideration and, in a second step, interpret the data allegorically. Thus a bestiary entry for 'dogs' contains the following allegorical interpretation of the medical efficiency of a dog's tongue:

2 The anonymous author of the leaflet could have pointed to Chaucer's Prioress and her lap dogs in the 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales to underpin his observation.
3 See, for example, the stories about faithful dogs in the relevant chapters of the bestiaries (e.g. White 1992, 62).
4 The Physiologus and the bestiaries (e.g. White 1992, 8f) report that baby lions are still-born and remain lifeless for three days until the father lion roars at them and they awake – which is interpreted allegorically as referring to Jesus' three days in the grave and his subsequent resurrection.
5 Lions were not native to Europe during the Middle Ages but known from literature, artistic depictions and royal menageries.
6 See Honegger (1996, 17-43) for an overview of the various medieval interpretative approaches.
The tongue of a dog cures a wound by licking it. This is because the wounds of sinners are cleansed, when they are laid bare in confession, by the penance imposed by the Priest. Also the tongue of a puppy cures the insides of men, because the inside secrets of the heart are often purified by the work and preaching of these learned men. (White 1992, 67)

The members of the clergy as the professional interpreters of the _liber naturae_ do not tire of reminding their audiences of the omnipresence of the spiritual element even in the most insignificant parts of creation. The famous anecdote about Saint Anselm and the hare may illustrate this attitude.

In the summer of AD 1097 Anselm left the court and rode with his retinue toward his manor at Hayes. When they encountered a hare on the road, the boys of his household chased it with their dogs and the frightened animal sought refuge between the legs of Anselm’s horse. His companions laughed at the terrified hare that did not dare to leave the relative safety of the horse’s legs. Yet Anselm was moved to tears and rebuked them for making fun of the unhappy beast with the following words:

You laugh, do you? But there is no laughing, no merry-making, for this unhappy beast. His enemies stand round about him, and in fear of his life he flees to us asking for help. So it is with the soul of man: when it leaves the body, its enemies – the evil spirits which have haunted it along all the crooked ways of vice while it was in the body – stand round without mercy, ready to seize it and hurry it off to everlasting death. Then indeed it looks round everywhere in great alarm, and with inexpressible desire longs for some helping and protecting hand to be held out to it, which might defend it. But the demons on the other hand laugh and rejoice exceedingly if they find that the soul is bereft of every support. (qtd. in Eadmer 1962, 89-90)

Note that Anselm’s defence of and sympathy for the hare is not primarily due to his love of all creatures, a trait found in many a saint, but is more specifically based on his allegorical interpretation of the situation. The hare becomes the demon-hunted human soul and the dogs the demons chasing it. The attentive reader may ask him- or

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7 This approach sees the created universe as a ‘book’ written by God and therefore accessible by means of the same interpretative strategies as the Bible.

8 The most prominent example is, of course, Saint Francis of Assisi. See also Alexander (2008).
herself why the dogs, the symbol of fidelity, are all of a sudden negatively connotated and come to represent demons. Again, we have an instance of medieval 'double' or even 'multiple' vision. Each element of the liber naturae, whether animals, plants or any other part of the created world, can have more than one meaning. Thus the lion can stand, on the one hand, for Christ ("the Lion of Juda") and the Resurrection but also, on the other, for the devil ("leo rugiens").\(^9\) It is the context that disambiguates the meaning, and thus the 'faithful dogs' become, in Eadmer's anecdote, terrifying Hounds of Hell.

### Allegory, Fiction, Facts

The lesson taught by Anselm is not one of empathy and commiseration with God's creatures, but a spiritual one. However, we must not imagine Anselm or any other member of the clergy walking around allegorizing everything all the time. It is, rather, a spontaneous and unexpected application of a technique usually reserved for a clerical context in a decidedly non-clerical situation – and this makes it so special. Furthermore, it shows that secular members of the society, too, were expected to be familiar with the application of allegorical exegesis to mundane situations. And therein lies one crucial difference between our modern secularized world and the Middle Ages. The dominant (western) worldview today distinguishes between a physical 'real' world and its creatures, and a spiritual, 'unreal' or fictional world. The boundaries between the two are clearly defined, and the 'non-real' is kept apart from the 'real.' A modern encyclopaedia, for example, strives for information based on empirically verifiable hard facts and would not include allegorical or fabulous elements, unless these entries are clearly marked as dealing with fabulous subjects. Medieval encyclopaedias, by contrast, have a decidedly catholic and all-embracing approach and aim at including basically all information available on a topic. Furthermore, the validity or value of a piece of information does not depend solely on its truthfulness in a 'real-world' context. Saint Augustine, discussing the (as we know, fabulous) tale about the pelican drawing blood by pecking her breast in order to re-animate her young ones with her life blood, doubts the veracity of the information. However, since it is habitually interpreted allegorically as symbolising Christ's sacrifice for fallen humanity, the tale has a spiritual truthfulness of its own. Saint Augustine, in his *Enmarationes in Psalmos*, writes:

> These birds [sc. pelicans] are said to slay their young with blows of their beaks, and for three days to mourn them when slain by themselves in the nest: after which they say the mother wounds herself deeply, and pours forth her blood over her young, bathed in which they recover life. This may be true, it may be false: yet if it be true, see how it agreeth with Him, who gave us life by His blood. It agreeth with Him in that the mother's flesh recalleth to life her young with her blood; it agreeth well. (Psalm CII, trans. Schaff, nd, 983)

This ready acceptance and functionalization of fictional (or 'untrue') elements within a spiritual context not only motivated people to retain and tolerate doubtful or even

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\(^9\) See the First Epistle of St. Peter the Apostle, 5:8: *sobrii estote vigilate quia adversarius vester diabolus tamquam leo rugiens circuit quae reperiet quem devoret. "Be sober and watchful because your enemy, the devil, goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (my translation).
fantastic information about well-known animals, but also made possible the survival of fictitious beasts such as unicorns or dragons. The latter are an interesting case in point and will serve as an example to illustrate the medieval view of fabulous beasts and their development.

Dragons, next to and often in combination with princesses and knights in shining armour, are generally seen as iconic, even constitutive, elements of the Middle Ages. This is not so much due to their quantitative appearance in secular medieval literature (see Honegger 2009, 132), as to the important role they play in some of the key texts of the Middle Ages as well as their prominence in the pictorial arts. The latter, i.e. the dragon’s popularity in the pictorial arts, is connected to its importance in both pre-Christian and Christian mythologies. The encyclopaedic tradition, by contrast, is rather disappointingly down-to-earth and, following Isidore’s lead, defines draco as “the biggest of serpents.” Thus, within the context of medieval culture, dragons fulfil three functions. In the encyclopaedic tradition, they are part and parcel of the exotic fauna found in far-away lands such as India and Ethiopia. In secular courtly or heroic literature, they provide the ultimate obstacle for the hero, and ‘dragon slayer’ is a prestigious and highly coveted epithet (see Honegger 2009, 134-38). And lastly, in the religious tradition, the dragon is often either associated with or seen as an incarnation of the devil. In the following paragraphs, we will take a closer look at these three traditions.

The medieval encyclopaedic tradition takes its cue mostly from Isidore of Seville’s (c. 560-636 AD) work. He discusses the dragon (draco) in his chapter on snakes, and most of the later encyclopaedists second Isidore’s categorization. For the English tradition we may take Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s De proprietas rerum (original 1235, English translation 1397) as the most representative text. Trevisa starts by characterising draco as a big serpent and describes in detail its enmity with the elephant. He mentions, among other things, features such as the dragon’s ability to fly, its dangerous tail, and its poisonous breath. The latter is seen as being responsible for the impression of dragons having a ‘fiery breath’ since the air coming from the dragon’s mouth passes by its tongue, which contains the poison in concentrated form and thus ignites the air. The author then quotes Solinus who reports that the natives of Ethiopia, when eating the meat of the dragon for medical purposes, are careful to avoid the tongue and the gall as the most poisonous parts. This detail is of special interest for students of literature since it explains why Tristan, after having killed the dragon and having cut out its tongue to prove his deed to the king, swoons immediately after sticking the trophy into his hose. Had he read his Solinus or Bar-

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10 There were, of course, authors such as Albertus Magnus and Frederic II who would object to and question the truthfulness of traditional lore if it went against their own observations. They did so, however, in texts not primarily concerned with the spiritual dimension of creation.

11 See “De serpentibus” (vol. II, bk. XII, V) in Isidore of Seville, Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX.

12 John Trevisa. On the Properties of Things. The chapter on the dragon (De dracone. Capitulum xxxviii) is found on pages 1184-86.

13 Cf. the Middle English Sir Tristrem: “To bote, / His tong hath he ton / And schorn of bi the rote. / In his hose next the hide / The tong oway he bar. / No yede he bot ten stride / His speche les he that. / Nedes he most abide / That he no may ferther far.” (Lupack 1994, 198, ll. 1483-91). “In addition its tongue has he taken and cut off at the base. In his stockings, right next to his skin, he carried it away. He didn’t go even ten paces when he lost the power of speech. Necessarily he must remain there and could not go any farther” (my translation).
tholomaeus Anglicus, or at least the translation by Trevisa, he would have known better and avoided any contact with the tongue. Bevis of Hampton, another dragon-slayer, seems better informed (or simply lucky) since he cuts out the tongue but then sticks it "onto his spear to carry." These two examples show that encyclopaedic dragon-lore constitutes the general frame of reference also for literary texts, which will be dealt with in the next section.

Prime examples of dragons in the secular literary tradition are Fafnir in the Old Norse Volsungasaga and related texts, or the nameless dragon in the second part of the Old English epic poem Beowulf. These 'epic worms' have often less impressive counterparts in (courtly) romances whose protagonists, such as Ywain, Gawain, Tristan, Eglamour of Artois, Torrent of Portyngale, Guy of Warwick, Wigalois, Wolfdietrich etc., all prove their valour by means of killing one or several dragons at some point or other during their chivalric career. Indeed, over time, the slaying of a dragon seems to have become an indispensable part of a knightly protagonist's career so that, for example, the Old Norse adaptor-translator of Chrétien de Troyes's Erec et Enide (c. 1170) felt justified to insert a dragon fight into his Erex saga (13th century) (see Blaisdell and Kalinke 1977, 22-23). This way the Old Norse Erec need not shun comparison with his dragon-slaying peers. Yet, while the dragon often proved to be the ultimate (and sometimes fatal) adversary, as in Beowulf, the literary topos of the dragon fight also developed into a literary cliché that poets gently made fun of. Thus the romance Sir Degaré presents a young and inexperienced Degaré who, during his very first venture away from home, encounters a dragon and beats it to pulp with nothing but his oaken staff – probably very much to the astonishment of the audience. Similarly, the author of the late 14th-century romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight spends exactly half a line describing Gawain's fight against dragons while travelling north. Furthermore, there are knights who overcome their scaly adversaries not so much by means of their bodily strength or their other chivalric qualities, but with the help of their Christian virtues and their faith in God. Bevis of Hampton is again a good example of such a saintly knight (see Four Romances). During his long-drawn fight against the dragon, Bevis repeatedly finds shelter and healing in a miraculous well which had been hallowed by a virgin who had bathed in it – obvious allegorical allusions to baptism and the salvational role of the Virgin Mary. The dragon does not dare approach the well and Bevis is able to recover from his wounds and gain new (spiritual and physical) strength. It is, in the end, his prayers, first to St

14 "And the gode knight Bevoun / The tonge karf of the dragoun; / Upon the tronsoun of is spere / The tonge stikede for to bere." (Four Romances of England 1999, 277, ll. 2887-90). "And the valiant knight Bevis cut out the tongue and stuck it onto his spear to carry" (my translation).

15 The Beowulfian pattern of a gradual increase in the opponents' dangerousness can also be found in Eglamour of Artois. The eponymous hero, in order to gain the hand of his beloved Christabelle, has to succeed in a series of three tasks of increasing difficulty: Firstly, he must hunt one of the harts guarded by a fierce giant and, as a consequence, he also has to overcome the giant; secondly, he must kill a boar and subsequently its enraged giant owner, while at last (and as the most difficult task) he has to fight against a dragon.

16 "Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als" (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 1967, 20, l. 720). "Sometimes he fought against dragons, and also against wolves" (my translation). The poet thus obviously contrasts the traditional chivalric deeds (such as fighting against dragons, trolls and giants) with the real test taking place later on in the privacy of Gawain's bedchamber in castle Hautdesert.
George (l. 2817) and later to God and the Virgin Mary, that put the dragon to flight (ll. 2867ff.), not his martial prowess. In Bevis, as later on in Spencer’s Red Crosse Knight, we have an instance of the chivalric tradition absorbing and incorporating elements from the religious tradition, whereas the religious tradition absorbs chivalric-heroic elements in form of the dragon-fighters St Michael and St George – which brings us to the third and final medieval tradition.

The religious tradition features the dragon prominently because the red dragon mentioned in the Apocalypse of John (Apocalypse 12) is unambiguously identified with the devil. Satan, as well as his lesser minions, frequently appear in the form of a dragon and thus constitute the favourite opponent of all aspirants to sainthood. Overthrowing the dragon, however, often happens by means of prayer and without the use of any weapons, as already mentioned above, and can be interpreted as symbolizing the defeat of the heathen or demonic (inner) opponents (see Riches 2003, 201; Leclercq-Marx 1994). The Vita H. S. Samsoni (9th/10th cent.), for example, reports how Saint Samson of Dol (c. AD 485 – c. 565) subdued a dragon and sent it away, never to trouble the people again:

[St Samson] bent his knees to the ground, praying with all his heart, begging God with all his faith who is victorious over everything. As the dragon fled to the extreme end of the cave, Samson raised his voice and said: “In the name of Christ the Son of God who is victorious over the enemy, I command you to come out at once.” And while all were standing around, watching, it came out forthwith, quite meek, and trembling all over and hanging its head to the ground. Then St Samson put his stole around its neck, and dragged it alongside him – the dragon’s track along the ground was smouldering and burning. […] Then he commanded it to cross a nearby river and never to harm any creature again. Without delay and while everybody was watching, that dragon headed for the wilderness across the river, and reappeared nowhere afterwards. (qtd. in Rauer 2000, 157)

Interestingly, the dragon here is seen primarily as a real animal and not a devil in dragon form, despite the fact that the allegorical and symbolic dimensions co-exist with and next to the literal one – and can be made explicit at any time. The bestiary entry on the dragon illustrates the allegorical potential of even a primarily ‘scientific’ description:

When this dragon has come out of its cave, it is often carried into the sky, and the air near it becomes ardent. It has a crest, a small mouth and a narrow gullet through which it draws breath or puts out its tongue. Moreover, its strength is not in its teeth but in its tail, and it inflicts injury by blows rather than by stinging. So it is harmless as regards poison. But they point out that poisons are not necessary to it for killing, since if it winds round anyone it kills him like that. Even the Elephant is not protected from it by the size of its body; for the dragon, lying in wait near the paths along which the elephants usually saunter, lassoes their legs in a knot with its tail and destroys them by suffocation.

17 The relevant passage runs, in translation, as follows: “To God he [Bevis] prayed and to Mary, His beloved mother; this heard the dragon that stood there and flew away as if it were mad. Bevis ran after it, without fail, and began to attack the dragon. […] Bevis then, with dolorous strokes, pierced the dragon’s heart.” (Cf. Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury 1999, 276f, ll. 2867-2884).
18 See, for example, St Margaret of Antioch in the Legenda Aurea (1260) or St George, who started out as a martyr but, since the 13th century, has been associated with the killing of a dragon.
They are bred in Ethiopia and India, in places where there is perpetual heat. The Devil, who is the most enormous of all reptiles, is like this dragon. He is often borne into the air from his den, and the air round him blazes, for the Devil in raising himself from the lower regions translates himself into an angel of light and misleads the foolish with false hopes of glory and worldly bliss. He is said to have a crest or crown because he is the King of Pride, and his strength is not in his teeth but in his tail because he beguiles those whom he draws to him by deceit, their strength being destroyed. He lies hidden round the paths on which they saunter, because their way to heaven is encumbered by the knots of their sins, and he strangles them to death. For if anybody is ensnared in the toils of crime he dies, and no doubt he goes to Hell. (White 1992, 166-7)

Although the second 'significatio' section of the entry gives a point-by-point allegorical interpretation of the characteristics mentioned in the preceding 'natura' section, we notice in the bestiaries a growing independence of the latter from the former. The 'natura' sections proliferate and grow in size and become more and more autonomous. The logical continuation of this development can be seen in encyclopaedias of the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The former, due to their truly encyclopaedic claim to comprehensiveness, often include the older allegorical interpretations. The latter, however, tend to focus increasingly on the 'scientific' information and omit the spiritual dimension. Conrad Gesner's Historia animalium (four volumes 1551-58, re-published 1565 as 'Thierbuch') and the eleven volumes of Ulisse Aldrovandi's Historia animalium (1599ff.) are prime examples of this development.

Image 5: BL MS Harley 4751, f. 58v, detail of a miniature of a dragon attacking an elephant.

19 Although bestiaries no longer label the different sections of an entry as 'natura' (giving the natural 'scientific' facts) and as 'significatio' (providing the allegorical-spiritual interpretation), as was the case in the Physiologus, they retain this basic dichotomy.
Survivals and Reinterpretations

The early modern encyclopaedic works by Gesner and Aldrovandi still contain many a fabulous beast, yet they constitute a 'point of no return' on a road that led, in the end, to the all-comprehensive system of categorization by Linnaeus. From then onwards it was only a question of time until even the last of the dragons and unicorns, bereft of the stabilizing framework of the allegorical interpretation, would disappear from their pages and their vacated places would be filled by more 'real' animals. These also took over many of the functions that the fabulous beasts had fulfilled in literature or popular mythology. Thus the dinosaurs in popular culture are in many ways the heirs to medieval dragons (see Honegger 2011). But those medieval animals and birds that seem to have disappeared entirely often live on in unexpected places too. The logo of the German fountain-pen brand 'Pelikan' (‘pelican’) features, not very surprisingly, a slightly stylised pelican bird with a young one.

The interpretation of the logo as given on the company homepage retains only a faint and garbled memory of the original 'pelican-in-her-piety' motif found already in late antiquity: "The Pelican brand logo puts in a nutshell an entire story. It tells of parental affection for its young one, of which it is known that it will one day take wing."

The pictorial pedigree of the modern logo, however, leads us straight back to the pelican of the Physiologus who opens her breast in order to revive her young ones with her lifeblood and about whom St. Augustine had already speculated.

Any medieval author worth his salt would have seized the chances offered by the allegorical potential of a fountain pen with a pelican logo. The 'pen' (< Lat. penna = feather) as pars pro toto for the pelican, the ink the equivalent of the pelican's lifeblood, and the young ones – the writer's ideas and thoughts brought to life by the flowing ink. Unfortunately, the medieval 'double vision' has been largely lost, and modern reactions to traditional animal lore, be it about pelicans or lap dogs, are often

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20 See, however, the '(in)famous' table of the animal kingdom in Carolus Linnaeus' first edition (1735) of his Regnum Animale. Draco is listed under 'Paradoxa,' a category that Linné created to accommodate all those creatures that defy classification and stand in opposition to his taxonomical endeavours.

characterised by incomprehension and more or less successful attempts to make (new) sense of ancient symbols no longer properly understood.

Works Cited


