

Book Reviews

Along the way there is much interesting, and certainly deeply felt, material and comment, but, as history, the book is marred by its uncritical application of modernization theory, by its over-simple ascription to each time period of consensus about aging, in place of the messily competing discourses which were closer to reality, indeed by a general tendency to smooth out the complexities of the past to a greater degree than can be justified even by the attempt to cover a lot of time in a short space.

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WILMA GEORGE and BRUNSDON YAPP, *The naming of the beasts: natural history in the medieval bestiary*, London, Duckworth, 1991, pp. xiv, 231, illus., £42.00 (0-7156-2238-2).

This book, whose publication sadly the authors did not live to see, comprehensively studies the depiction of aerial, terrestrial and marine creatures in illuminated English bestiaries or medieval books of beast lore. The authors felt that such works served as textbooks of natural history for monastic students. Deriving ultimately from the second-century Greek *Physiologus*, or Naturalist, these bestiaries show a great and often fanciful variety in the artists' depictions of the animals and the ways in which they are treated by the manuscripts' compilers.

Though the authors claim that nothing systematic has been written on the bestiary before, perhaps an overstatement, the book does offer the first detailed examination of how these creatures were described in about forty English manuscripts. Why continental bestiaries are not considered is unclear. The discussion of the manuscripts follows, in the main, M. R. James's classification into families and sub-families, and the codices consulted range in date from c. 1120 to 1450.

While the book contains a great deal of information, and has, for its price, a large number of illustrations, some in colour, the exact audience for which it is intended is a bit uncertain. The Introduction has an extremely detailed treatment of the development of the various bestiary families and their relation to the ancient *Physiologus*, which would chiefly interest specialists. The bibliography, however, is very brief, and should certainly be supplemented by the extensive one in Willene B. Clarke and Meradith T. McMunn, *Beasts and birds of the Middle Ages: the bestiary and its legacy* (University of Pennsylvania, 1989) with which the authors were apparently unacquainted.

Both, moreover, but especially Yapp, seem concerned to show that the illustrators of the bestiaries were much more accurate observers of animals, particularly birds, than has been hitherto noticed—"many . . . of their pictures are not only correct but highly original" (p. 28)—and to give the exact species for every drawing of a creature in the manuscripts studied. This often involves a considerable amount of natural history and, taken as a collection of characteristics of the animal world that was known in the Middle Ages, the book will be very useful for many sorts of readers. Various interesting problems of taxonomy are treated, and the point is quite rightly made that the bestiary compilers were clear on differences between mammals and birds but had difficulties classifying creatures such as the bee and the bat, placed with birds because they fly. This sort of material will be of considerable value to the historian of science.

It has long been known that many scenes in religious art such as painted glass, misericord carving, roof boss sculpture, and manuscript illumination, drew on the lore of bestiaries, but the authors caution that such indebtedness can sometimes be overstressed and M. D. Anderson, F. Bond and G. L. Remnant, who have pioneered the study of such a relationship are criticized in this regard.

The structure of the book proper—as the title suggests—begins with scenes of God or Adam naming the animals, and then follows a breakdown into the various families showing the animals described and depicted in the texts of the English bestiaries. Various headings and sub-headings—"Beasts with Claws (large)"—somewhat clog the flow and the entry on the unicorn is typical of the rather flat-footed prose:

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Unicornis has featured widely as a mythical animal and has given rise to many fantasies. There has been much speculation about its identity, but the oryx must be the favourite . . . In Africa and Arabia there are several species of oryx. The Arabian oryx is about the size of the ibex, has big feet for walking on sand and long slender annulated horns. The horns are soft in the young oryx and often get damaged or deformed during growth. The result can be the reduction of one horn to a curly insignificant stump. Thus the oryx becomes the unicorn. (p. 87.)

While some mention is made of its mythology, the wonder of the unicorn and the richness of the traditions associated with it, for example that it was a symbol of Christ hunted from heaven by the angel Gabriel, is lost among the details about the way the creature is depicted by the artists of the different families of bestiaries. At other points the discussions are heavily literal and chiefly paraphrases and translations of the bestiary entries about the animal:

Bos according to the texts, is an amicable beast, the friend of its companion under the yoke. If the companion is absent, *Bos* moos. It can predict the weather: if rain is coming, it knows that it is wise to stay in the shed, but if it can sense an improvement it sticks its head out of the shed to show that it is ready to emerge. And, as the text says, *Bos* has a heavy dewlap. (p.104.)

Elsewhere, however, novel information is provided, such as about the camel, apparently brought to England during the Middle Ages—indeed, one was kept at King's Langley in 1290. But birds—Yapp's obvious passion—dominate the whole book, and show his careful observation and wide reading. This wealth of detail about real birds: "the brood patch, a highly vascular area of the breast free of feathers developed by most species of birds during incubation" (p. 175), is not matched with regard to those mythical ones like the phoenix, whose entry seems a bit thin.

Other weaknesses of this kind are evident in the authors' ignorance of the midrash and its importance for the conception of the serpent as originally upright and having arms and legs and of such creatures which derive from midrashic explanations of scripture, like the draconopede.

There is a detailed index of Latin names of creatures as well as a general index. In the main, the book is carefully presented and free from error. Though readers with a literary interest in the bestiary may be disappointed, most users will appreciate the many illustrations and the careful matching of the actual animal to its bestiary description or depiction.

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IAN DOWBIGGIN, *Inheriting madness: professionalization and psychiatric knowledge in nineteenth-century France*, *Medicine and Society* 4, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1991, pp. x, 217, \$34.95 (0-52006937-4).

France in the second half of the nineteenth century has provided a rich setting for historians discussing the interrelations of medicine, social policy, popular culture, the arts, and political life generally. No one could mistake the concern in all these areas, especially after the events of 1870–71, with degeneration, the representation in individual inheritance of everything that appeared wrong in society. Ian Dowbiggin's interesting and readable book extends the historical literature in a very specific way, to argue that the professionalising interest of alienists was the primary reason for these doctors' enthusiasm for degeneration theory. He does not ignore other factors but they are kept subsidiary to the main thesis: "Hereditarianism was primarily a defensive ideology that enabled alienists to mitigate the perennial embarrassment and sociopolitical difficulties stemming from the impasse in which asylum psychiatry found itself at midcentury" (p. 160). The professionalisation argument is then worked out in terms of the detail of the published literature addressing both alienists and their publics, though this