THE BESTIARY

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Introduction to the Digital Edition

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Author: Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936) was born in Kent, where his father was curate. James studied at Eton, and then moved on to King's College, Cambridge. He became an assistant in Classical archaeology at Fitzwilliam museum and later lectured in divinity. He rose up the academic ladder at Kings College to Provost and then Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University between 1913 and 1915. His academic areas of interest were apocryphal Biblical literature and mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. He edited several books on medieval manuscriptes for the Roxburghe Club, including, in 1928, *Bestiary: Being A Reproduction in Full of Ms. Ii 4. 26 in the University Library, Cambridge*, in which he set out for the first time the classification system of "families" of medieval bestiaries, a modified and extended version of which is still in use. His output of learned books was prodigious, and the ghost stories for which he is now chiefly known formed only a tiny part of his busy life.

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THE BESTIARY

By M.R. JAMES, O.M., Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A.
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A popular picture book in the days of my youth was somebody's *Anecdotes of Animals*, of which I do not remember much more than that it was illustrated with woodcuts, perhaps by Birket Foster, and that it besought us to note what valuable lessons for the conduct of life we might receive from imitating the fidelity of the Dog or the intrepidity of the Titmouse, and, doubtless, by shunning the voracity of the Pig.

Such a picture-book our medieval ancestors also possessed, and it was called the Bestiary. But, of course, the Bestiary was not a neatly-printed book in English, bound in purple cloth and illustrated with woodcuts. It was current in manuscript only; it was (usually) written in Latin and its pictures were either in gold and colours or in outline; or else it had no pictures at all—but with the unillustrated copies I am not concerned. The Bestiary is essentially a book of *Anecdotes of Animals*: but the anecdotes are of two kinds. One kind drew valuable lessons from the habits of the creature, the other only described it. The first kind of anecdote was taken from a much older book than the Bestiary, a book written in Greek either in Syria or Egypt as early as the third century and called *Physiologus*. This book again went back a long way: it took its statements largely (as have been recently shown) from a Greek writer called Bolos, and upon these statements it grafted its moral and religious lessons. Broadly speaking, I believe none of the statements are true, but the morals drawn from them are doubtless unexceptionable.

Now *Physiologus* was translated out of Greek into several Eastern languages—Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian and Coptic—and also into Latin, and some of the Greek and Latin copies had pictures. Early in the twelfth century, or perhaps even in the eleventh, someone (in England, as I believe), had the bright idea of enlarging *Physiologus*: he took over its text and its pictures, and added to them more pictures and more descriptions, which latter he borrowed principally from three writers who were greatly thought of in his time. These were, first and foremost, Isidore of Seville (d. 636) who wrote an Encyclopaedia in twenty books embracing all manner of topics, and included in it two books on Natural History. Next, an earlier writer, Julius Solinus, who compiled (largely out of Pliny's Natural History) a book on Remarkable Things and Places—treating of History, Geography, and Natural History. Lastly, St. Ambrose, whose book on the Six Days of Creation contained a number of edifying stories about beasts, birds, and fishes.

The Bestiary, thus constituted, had a very considerable vogue. The whole book, or selections from it, was turned into Latin verse, French prose and verse, German, Provençal, Welsh, Icelandic [13] and, for what I know, Irish, as well as other western languages. The Latin text was taken hold of by successive editors and rearranged and amplified. But, not to make the longest possible story of it, its time of greatest success was in the twelfth century, and its attractiveness at that time lay in the fact that it was a popular picture-book—popular, that is, among such as could afford to pay for a picture-book of any kind. I think that most of those who owned an illustrated Bestiary were connected with the Church. That is certain in the case of half a dozen fine copies, and probable for more. Consequently it was preserved in places where a number of people would see it, and again consequently many could take ideas from it which they used in the decoration of churches and other buildings. Many a carving which you may see on the arches of Norman doors, or the capitals of pillars, or on the folding seats of stalls in churches (called misericords, *not* misereres) or on the ends of benches, owes its existence to the Bestiary, whether it be a mermaid or a centaur or an elephant with a castle on his back, or a tiger chasing a huntsman. Hence, too, came a great deal of the imagery of heraldry, dragons, giraffes, unicorns, antelopes, wyverns (the same word as vipers, by the way), eagles, pelicans, phoenixes, and even hedgehogs. Each of these creatures has some prowess or virtue which fitted it to be the cognisance of a warlike house, or a noble clan. So the Bestiary be said to be still with us, in a manner of speaking.

But all this time hardly anything has been said as to what the Bestiary contains. Some samples of this must be given, chosen rather at random, but with an eye upon the general arrangement of the work, which is of this sort. A well-appointed one of the standard type treats first of all of Wild Beasts—Lion, Tiger, Griffin, Panther, etc., then of Tame—Horse, Cow, Sheep, Dog, and so on; then of Birds, beginning with Eagle and ending perhaps with Bee; then of Reptiles, and Fishes, and Trees and Man, the last two sections being unimportant because they never have any pictures.

In all the earlier sections a number of chapters are taken from *Physiologus*, as I said. All these have morals attached to them; and I have already remarked that no one of *Physiologus*' statements is true. The matter that is taken out of Isidore and the others has no moral, usually; and since many of the creatures described were common objects of the country, what is said of them is not always incorrect, and is therefore, I fear, the least interesting part of the book. Nearly all that can be called sensational comes from *Physiologus*. Still, the Bestiary has some notable

figures of its own. One is the Manticora, a scarlet beast with a human head, and a snake for a tail. It is incredibly ferocious and swift, with a voice like a trumpet. This creature has a long history: a Greek writer, Ctesias, of the fourth century before Christ, is responsible for it. He says he saw one at the Persian court; but even his contemporaries did not accept this statement. He calls it the Martichoras, and it has been shown that he was trying to reproduce the Persian word for man-eater, and that what he described in such literally glowing colours was no other than the tiger.

[14] Then there is the Eale or Yale: its peculiarity is that it can move its horns at will and point one or both backwards or forwards. The late Sir Arthur Shipley devoted much attention to the Yale and showed that it was the habit of some African tribes so to treat the horns of their cattle that one horn was made to point backwards; and travellers, less observant than they might have been, assumed that the horns were movable, The Yale figures not seldom in heraldry, notably as a supporter of the arms of Lady Margaret, Henry VII's mother. It may be seen, horned and also hornless, as a spotted beast, on the bosses and pinnacles of St. George's Chapel. The Antelope, which is one of our Founder's badges, has serrated horns, and *Physiologus* tells us that when it is sporting among the tamarisks which fringe the Euphrates, its horns become inextricably entangled in the branches and it falls an easy prey to the hunter. Such an Antelope crouches at the Founder's feet in the image of him which surmounts the lectern at King's College.

As we are among the Wild Beasts of heraldry it is inevitable that we should mention the Unicorn, which can only be captured when it is resting its head in the lap of a fair maiden, and is therefore a type of chastity: and the Panther whose breath is so sweet that it attracts all beasts except the Dragon, which knows full well what will be the end of following the Panther, and hides itself in the ground. The Griffin, too, there is which guards the gold miner of Northern India (perhaps), and is so strong that it can carry off a horse. Less startling is the Parandrus, whose characteristic, besides speed and ferocity, is that its upper and lower rows of teeth are each in one piece. One hopes it is not often a prey to toothache.

Of Tame Beasts nothing, I think, need be said. The largest chapters are those on the Horse and the Dog, the former not indulging in any play of fancy, the latter diversified by anecdotes of the Dog detecting his master's murder and the like.

Birds are headed by the Eagle. When the Eagle is old his upper mandible curves down over the lower so that he cannot open his beak; and a film grows over his eyes. To remedy this he flies upward towards the sun, and then plunges

head downward upon a rock. The sun burns the film from his eyes, and the rock breaks off the overgrown part of his beak. Then he bathes himself in a certain fountain he knows of, and thus renews his youth.

We are familiar with the picture of the Pelican "in her piety" wounding her breast and letting the blood flow over her young. But we are not always aware of the reason of this, which is that the Pelican, losing patience with the importunity of her young, kills them all, and consequently has to revive them with her blood.

The Charadrius—is it a curlew or a plover?—gives infallible prognostics of a sick man's recovery or death. Brought into his room, it will either look steadfastly upon him or turn away its head. The significance of this can be readily guessed.

[15] Among birds we read of the tree called Peridexion or Perindens. The Dragon lies in wait near it for the doves which perch in it. As long as they are within range of its shadow they are safe, even on the ground; but only on that condition. In most of the books the picture of the tree, dragon, and birds makes a beautiful decorative composition.

A few insects are mixed up with birds—the Ant and the Bee; and under the heading of Ant a remarkable phenomenon is to be found. "The Ant-lion," we read in the Greek of Job, "perisheth for lack of food.'' And very naturally, says *Physiologus*; for, being the offspring of an Ant and a Lion, it finds that what suits the Lion in the way of diet does not agree with the Ant, and *vice versa*. At this rate it can rarely attain maturity, but like the Bread-and-Butter-fly, "always dies." It is only fair to say that the Bestiary does not accept this, but is aware of what an Ant-lion really is.

Among reptiles a great many venomous snakes are briefly described—at second-hand—but the pictures of them show very little that is unexpected, except in the case of the Amphisbaena, which has a head at each end. We do, however, see the Adder stopping one ear with its tail and laying the other on the ground to avoid hearing the voice of the charmer, and the ordinary snake squeezing itself through a narrow crack in a tower to scrape off its old skin.

Of fishes the most remarkable is undoubtedly the Aspidochelone, which pretends to be an island. This usually furnishes the best of the pictures, with the sailors mooring their ship to the imagined land, and lighting a fire, which, of course, rouses the fish and makes it dive to the sea bottom, taking ship and all with it.

Such are some of the more famous images and assertions of the Bestiary. It leaves altogether on one side another branch of Natural History, namely, the description of the monstrous or abnormal varieties of humankind. This omission was remedied, I ought to say, in some of the rather later copies of the book,

which insert a chapter about them—lifted, as usual, from Isidore. These strange races were a favourite theme with the ancients, among whom there were plenty of Gullivers. Lucian's *True History* is but a parody of books he had read, purporting to be accounts of real travels.

A Roman dilettante, Aulus Gellius, tells how he bought a whole parcel of shabby old copies of such books on a stall at Brindisi, and got them very cheap. He tells us, too, something of what he read in them and did not believe. The matter is of the usual kind: men with one eye in their foreheads, or eyes in their chests, one-legged men who run very fast, others with feet turned backwards who run equally fast, others with dogs' heads, others who live only on the smell of flowers; of others in the land of Albania, which *may* mean Scotland, who grow grey as children and can see by night. Other people tell of the men with one enormous foot that serves them as an umbrella, of those with a lower lip large enough to cover their face, or with ears so capacious that they can wrap [16] themselves up in them at night. Very commonly, in fact, the mere exaggeration of some part of the body makes the marvel, and it has been pointed out that the distension of lips and ears is practised by some tribes, and the drawing of eyes on the forehead or breast is not unknown; also that there are such things as cannibals and pygmies. Exaggeration of things actually seen there may be, as when we are told of dog-headed men, who must be baboons; but for the one-legged nation and that which has no mouth, and several others, it is useless to search. And after all, what a dull world it would have been if nobody had ever invented any stories!

At least some of these tribes proved useful to the artist world. You may often find them portrayed in the same places as subjects from the Bestiary. In the Bestiary itself some copies give whole pages of pictures to them, and another set of medieval books which both describe and figure them are the *Romances of Alexander the Great*, who was, of course, bound to encounter many strange beings in his Eastern campaigns, and who is credited with having very properly written a long letter to his tutor (Aristotle) telling of all that he had seen. And who, we may reasonably ask, in writing to his tutor would desert the paths of truth? Still, the assertions are very remarkable, and it is open to us to believe that the original letter of Alexander (if any) may have differed in some respects from that which we have.

One of the tracts about the fabulous people was read in England at a quite early date. The finest copy of three which I know, was, I am persuaded, written for a king of England before the Conquest; it is in the British Museum. A second,

rather older and also in the Museum, forms part of the most famous of all Anglo-Saxon books—that which has preserved for us the poem of Beowulf.

Enough, perhaps, has now been said to give a very general idea of the character of this little department of literature. No one can say that it has any scientific value, but it has exercised quite a strong influence on men's imaginations, and from the pictorial and artistic point of view its effects have been long-lived and far-reaching.