

The Bestiary

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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 manuscripts for the Roxburghe Club, including, in 1928, *Bestiary: Being A Reproduction in Full of Ms. li 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 ¹

Montague Rhodes James

My discourse to-night I see is advertised as inaugural, but it will not have the usual characteristics of an inaugural address, which is commonly laid out on broad lines and sketches the aims and policy of some institution or study. You have not asked for that, nor do you need it, for you know quite well what you want: so I need only be inaugural in the sense that I deliver the first lecture of your session and preface it by saying that I am much honoured by the invitation to come here, and particularly glad to be under the presidency, and if necessary protection, of my Vice-Provost. In that feeling you all share, for some of his excellences are known to you; and that he has many more I can assure you from daily experience. His will be the credit should I succeed in interesting you: his the blame if I do not. His will be the duty—I had almost said the privilege—on this occasion of supplementing such information as I shall impart, and calling your attention to the grosser faults of misstatement and omission.

To pretend that I can set before you in an hour's lecture a neat little conspectus of the medieval view of what we call Natural History would be ridiculous. To introduce you to some of the current notions is possible.

Like all the rest of the sciences, Natural History, by which I mean really zoology and botany, was cultivated to a very considerable extent by the Greeks. Any modern scientist will tell you that Aristotle was, in this as in other provinces of knowledge, a most astonishingly gifted pioneer, a really faithful observer, wedded to the pursuit of truth. In his *History of Animals* and his many lesser tracts on their structure and life he laid foundations which have never needed to be uprooted. Had the world's history allowed of a succession of like-minded men to

¹ The Inaugural Address at the Annual Meeting of the Association, at Chester, delivered on 2 January 1931. It was illustrated by many lantern slides. [Digital edition note: the illustrations were not published in the original article.]

continue his work without interruption—but it is useless to speculate; we know as a fact that one convulsion after another—the rise and fall of empires, the decline of old races and the coming in of new ones—did time after time put back the clock. And it was so easy for the intellectual output of centuries to be blotted out in a single campaign that until the advent of the printed book there was no security that what a great mind had evolved in literature or science would be preserved for future generations. Aristotle, and Greek knowledge generally, accordingly, were submerged for many hundred years, and even when in the thirteenth century the wizard Michael Scot translated his *History of Animals* from Arabic into Latin, it can't be said to have found its public at all quickly or to have exercised a great influence.

Deprived of any trustworthy guidance, what did the medieval person, say in the twelfth century, make of the animal population of the world about him? For any truthful knowledge the ordinary man had to depend on his own eyes and on what he heard from the farmer and the huntsman. They could tell him about the denizens of the farm, and beasts and birds of chase. But if he was anything of a student, if he questioned his books about Nature—what were his books, and what had they to tell him? He may have had Pliny's *Natural History*—a vast compilation depending on books more than observation, yet capable of yielding a quantity of good information. But that was a rather rare book. He most probably had Solinus, a single volume of moderate compass which almost wholly depends on Pliny, but adds a little, and that little not very trustworthy. More certainly he had Isidore's *Origins*—an encyclopædia which uses Solinus and a great many other writers, but has no original observation.

But here we pause. It is important to remember that our student was almost sure to be a cleric, and very likely a monk. And a question which would inevitably occur to him would be this:—What bearing have these facts of Natural History on my religion?—or, more concretely: What can I learn from the habits of the lion or the hedgehog? And, once arrived at that point, our student is standing at the true point of view of the Medieval Natural Historian. It is quite a reasonable one. We recognise it still as reasonable to be interested in the universe because it is the work of God, and to draw conclusions from it about His nature, and we think that in proportion to our increased knowledge we get more from it. The old method, which forms part of my subject, was a more naive one. The reading world in those days would accept some perfectly unfounded statement

about an animal, and cry, What a lesson to all of us! without troubling to ask if it happened to be true.

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.

That is the starting-point of the old-fashioned observer of Nature. It took shape in a book called *Physiologus*, or the Naturalist, which was put together long before medieval times—perhaps in the fourth century—very likely in Egypt, in some community of monks. It consists of some forty chapters, each of which draws a valuable moral or religious lesson from the—almost always fabulous—habits or propensities of an animal. The book was written in Greek and was translated into Syriac and Ethiopic, and no doubt Coptic and Armenian. But we don't hear a great deal about it in the East. More important to us is the fact that it was also translated into Latin. And at some unknown time in the twelfth century and by some unknown person, whom I suspect of having been an Englishman, it was taken in hand and amplified by many additions and became what we call the Bestiary. Now the Bestiary has a very long literary history, which I am not going to trouble you with more than to say that it was rendered into almost every European language, including even Welsh, Irish, and Icelandic. We will stick to the Latin form of it which was current in England, especially in the twelfth century. I don't know that it would ever have attracted much attention—for it has no scientific or literary merits whatever—but for the fact that at an early stage it was furnished with pictures. It was as a picture book that it earned its popularity and took its place along with the three or four others which adorned the studies or church-stalls of persons of quality and prelates. For, parenthetically, many as are the specimens of twelfth and thirteenth century picture books we have, and great as is the variety of pictures we find in them, the finest ones are almost sure to be either Psalters (which develop or degenerate into Books of Hours) or illustrated copies of the Revelation, or Bestiaries. Very well, the Bestiary is a picture book, but for one person who has seen a manuscript Bestiary there are hundreds and thousands who may every day see subjects taken from it; especially in heraldry. When you see a griffin on a crest or supporting a coat of arms, or an antelope, or a pelican plucking its breast, or a phoenix on a Fire Insurance badge, or, most familiar of all, a unicorn, you are looking at something which but for the Bestiary would not have been there. Because it was something in the character or habits of these

creatures as described in the Bestiary which was the reason of their being put where they are and adopted as ensigns of noble families. I could multiply heraldic examples, but they are not the only ones. In your own cathedral here at Chester the carvings beneath the seats called misericords some of them illustrate subjects taken from this same source. Among the strange creatures carved round the arches of Norman doors the student of the Bestiary meets old friends, and so he does on many bench-ends, corbels, capitals of columns, etc., in this country, not to speak of what he may find in Italy or France. In short, medieval imagery was very much influenced by this curious book.²

So you see the Bestiary has its importance. And now I daresay you would like to hear a little more about what it says and about its pictures. I shall confine myself to the MS. copies of it which are of English origin (it is not long since I made an examination of every English copy I could hear of), only limiting myself to those that are in Latin and have pictures. Well, as I said, the Bestiary grew out of *Physiologus*, and the earliest copies of it were no more than a version of that rather short book, in which Beasts and Birds and Fish were talked about in no order. Then in the twelfth century somebody in England began combing out the book, putting Beasts, Birds and Fish into separate classes, and adding notices of a great many, most of which he took out of that encyclopædia of Isidore which I mentioned. He also copied a number of edifying extracts from St. Ambrose's work on the Six Days of Creation. So that in the end we have a compilation of over a hundred chapters; and, as time goes on, a student here and there makes additions from other books, and even recasts the whole work. I needn't trouble you with more details. I will only say that, there are somewhat over forty English copies with pictures known to me, ranging in date from the twelfth to the fifteenth century—but only one is as late as that. All the best belong to the twelfth and thirteenth.

Of course the Bestiary starts off with the Lion. It took over from *Physiologus* three statements about the Lion's habits, none of which have any foundation in fact. First, that when pursued he obliterates his track with his tail. Second, that he sleeps with his eyes open. Third, that his cubs are born dead, and are quickened on the third day by the father lion roaring over them.

² One English investigator, Mr. G. C. Druce, has specially distinguished himself by collecting English examples—Chester is laid under contribution—of Bestiary subjects in woodwork and stone. You will find articles of his profusely illustrated in various periodicals, notably the *Archæological Journal*, from about 1911.

These are severally interpreted by *Physiologus* of the Incarnation, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Christ. After that the Bestiary takes up the tale and states that the lion spares men if they prostrate themselves before him, that he is very much terrified by the crowing of a cock, especially a white cock, and that when indisposed he cures himself by eating a live monkey—with many other equally fabulous assertions, and some that are not fabulous.

Its next item is the Tiger, of whom the following habit is reported. That the tigress, on discovering that a hunter has carried off her cubs, pursues him with incredible swiftness. Prepared for this, the hunter casts down before her a ball of glass. In this she sees herself reflected in miniature, and, believing it to be the cub, pauses: discovering the trick, she resumes her pursuit: the hunter throws down another ball, and repeats the process until he has gained a place of safety, or the tigress is tired out. St. Ambrose seems to be responsible for this though he did not invent it. (It is one of the subjects to be found in your cathedral.)

Naturally I am not going through the whole book. I shall but take a subject here and there, being guided by the order of the text.

Here, for instance, is the Griffin, of which we read that it is a winged animal that lives in the mountains beyond the North and resembles the lion in body and the eagle in the head. It can carry off a horse. The Elephant follows, and of him much is said in a mixture of fact and fable. In a Cambridge manuscript you see him with his howdah and what the Book of Maccabees calls the Indian that rules him. In a little French picture you see two elephants at the pairing season taking refuge in the water and so eluding the dragon, which is their inveterate enemy. This is fable, but I would not have you think that we were completely ignorant of what the elephant was really like. In 1248 St. Louis of France made a present of a live one to Henry III of England, and Matthew Paris, our great historian of that time, made a couple of drawings of this elephant from life, and he was really a very capable and faithful artist.

Then I have the Crocodile—incredibly unlike. In the Cambridge MS. he is devouring a man. But the crocodile has troubles of his own, illustrated in a French picture. There is a beast called a Hydrus which enters his mouth when he is asleep and eats his way through him with fatal results.

Another Cambridge MS. gives me an illustration of the fidelity

of the Dog. In the upper scene the dog, whose master has been beheaded, starves himself to death beside the corpse; while below you see how, when King Lysimachus was burnt, his faithful dog leapt into the flames and perished with him. Only it was in fact the corpse of Lysimachus and the funeral pyre that were in question: the artist was unfamiliar with cremation.

Of reptiles I show you the Basilisk, from the latest of all my copies. Though the text does not say so, the artist evidently had in mind the story that he was hatched out of an egg laid by an old cook. His concentrated venom is such that he kills man, beast, or bird at sight, without contact. Some state that the best weapon against him was a looking-glass, since his reflection was fatal to himself. I cannot help thinking what a deal of pleasure some of us would lose if that were the universal rule. But others, and among them the Bestiary, held that the weasel could always get the better of him.

The adder stopping her ears is shown in the French MS. The figure on the right should by rights be an enchanter to whose spell the beast refuses to listen. It is, in fact, a man casting his money into the sea, because those who are immersed in the cares of this world are like the deaf adder, while he who resigns all earthly possession can listen to the heavenly voice. This is a perversion of the original picture.

Last of my Bestiary pictures is another admirable drawing from one of the Cambridge copies, representing the monstrous fish known as the *Aspidochelone*: so large and sluggish that it remains stationary for years with its back above water, until bushes grow on it and it is mistaken for an island. Mariners moor their ship to it and light a fire, and when it feels the heat it plunges to the sea bottom and takes ship and all with it. You meet this fish in the story of Sindbad the Sailor; you meet him also in the voyage of St. Brandan, where he has a proper name of his own, *Jasconius*. He encircles the whole world, and his object in life there is to put his tail into his mouth, but this he finds difficult of accomplishment, and earthquakes and storms result from his efforts. In the Bestiary he furnishes a valuable moral lesson, being compared to the Devil. Those who are ignorant of the Devil's wiles put confidence in him and bind themselves to him by their works, and with him are plunged into hell fire. This is one of the tales which the Bestiary has taken over from *Physiologus*, so it goes back a long way.

After going through the categories of beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish the Bestiary tails off into a disquisition upon trees, and

then into one upon the nature of man—both borrowed from Isidore. But these are comparatively dull.

I shall return to the Bestiary in order to hang on to it the second part of my lecture; but first I shall say a word about some other books which treated of Natural History on a more comprehensive scale. Late in the twelfth century Alexander Neckam of St. Albans wrote on the Nature of Things; in the first half of the thirteenth Vincent—commonly called Vincent of Beauvais—compiled the greatest of all medieval encyclopædias, in four bulky divisions, the *Speculum*, or Mirror of Morals, Doctrine, Nature, and History. And in the fourteenth Bartholomew the Englishman wrote of the Properties of Things, an enormous book which was known to the Elizabethans in the English version of one Stephen Batman; Batman upon Bartholomew is an authority often cited by commentators on Shakespeare. Some of these compilers indulge in stories about the sagacity of animals which remind us of the columns of the *Spectator* a generation ago, or even of the Points from Letters in *The Times* of the present day. I am tempted to cite two. Vincent in his Mirror of Nature tells of an animal called an enitra, which I suppose to be a marmot of some kind. It lives, says he, in pairs, in Germany. The pair construct a nest in a hillock with a store-place for food in the winter. The male is by nature parsimonious, the female greedy. On this account the male stops up the entrance to the larder, that his wife may not get at the food. She, however, full of guile, makes a secret entrance at the back of the mound and steals as much as she desires. The consequence is that at the end of winter the husband is reduced to skin and bone, while the wife positively shines with fatness. No moral lesson is drawn from this by Vincent; but surely some of us have observed in the circle of our acquaintance married couples to whom it might fitly be applied.

Alexander Neckam, again, has a story of the artfulness of the parrot. You may recollect that in his lamentation over Saul and Jonathan, David said, "Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew upon you," and what follows. There is in consequence no dew nor rain upon those hills, and parrots, which are susceptible to damp, breed there in large numbers. Now a knight in Britain had a parrot, a great favourite of the family, for many years, and this knight went on crusade, and, like the Amalekite, happening by chance upon Mount Gilboa, he saw there a parrot which strongly reminded him of his own—so much so that he said to it, "Our parrot, which is just like you, in his cage at home, sends

you greetings.” No sooner had he uttered these words than the strange parrot fell to the ground, to all appearance dead. The knight was a good deal surprised, and when he returned home, told his family the incident, in the presence of his own parrot, which listened attentively to the story, and when the climax was reached uttered a loud cry and fell over—again to all appearance lifeless. Great was the lamentation of the family: they took the bird out of the cage and laid it down in the open air on the chance of its recovery. To their horror and discomfiture the parrot instantly spread its wings and flew off, presumably to rejoin its companion on Mount Gilboa. The whole thing had been a put-up job, exactly how contrived it is not for me to guess. But no one, I am sure, who has observed the depths of guile that lurk in a parrot’s eye can refuse credence to this anecdote.

The hotch-potch of unscientific Natural History which fills these large tomes (and others which I have not time to mention) was destined to be replaced by better material as time went on. Even the men of the later Middle Ages could not put up with the Bestiary: as I have said, I only know of one copy as late as the fifteenth century. But the process of replacement and the evolution of modern views of nature were very gradual, and it is surprising to see to how late a date some of the old beliefs hang on. I intercalate here a picture or two from a book of the sixteenth century written by a very industrious naturalist, Aldrovandus (1522-1605), most of whose pictures are accurate enough. Yet he thought it not unreasonable to set these things before his readers. First we have three wonders of the deep: the sea pig with several supplementary eyes, the monk fish of—possibly—amiable nature, and the bishop fish certainly not. We then have two land-rarities—I hope, rarities. The first an eight-legged and crowned cockatrice or basilisk—cockatrice, you must know, is the same word as crocodile, though the medieval people did not so treat it. The second is a variety, I suppose, of the tortoise: it has twelve legs, at least four eyes and four ears, and must, one would think, have spent most of its time debating which way to go.

I think that perhaps the *Encyclopædia Britannica* is justified in saying that Aldrovandus was totally destitute of the critical faculty.

Then we switch back to the Bestiary, only to take a fresh start and survey a somewhat different province. Several copies of the Bestiary in one of its various forms begin with a section about the curious races of people who dwell in the remoter parts

of the earth. People were puzzled to account for their existence. One story was that they were the result of Adam's daughters disregarding their father's express warnings, and eating certain herbs which grew near their home at Damascus. That there were strange varieties of the human race very different from us in appearance was the constant belief. It is indeed the fact, though in this case truth is not quite as odd as fiction. The stock quotation from Othello, about anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders, is an adequate description of the gentry whom I have in mind. It is difficult to say where we encounter them first in the literature of Western Europe; but pre-Christian Greek writers such as Ctesias and Megasthenes, who described the East in the fourth century B.C., were not guiltless of reporting tales of them; and the romances of Alexander the Great's adventures of the second or third century A.D. made them as popular as did any other vehicle. Indeed, the true history of Alexander, his amazing inroads into regions previously unknown, excited the imagination of all the Greek world, and set it making up wonderful stories of what he must have seen; and its inventions lasted on, and spread over lands in the west and north of which even Alexander had not heard. Let me show you a few pictures from a thirteenth-century copy of one of the romances. There are four of them. The first two have to do with the savage nations of Gog and Magog who infested Central Asia. It was the great claim of Alexander upon the gratitude of posterity that he had shut up these people by building a wall and gate across the single narrow outlet of their country. They will only emerge in the last times. The first slide shows their unpleasant habits—cannibalism, and the eating of snakes and toads; in the second we see Alexander besieging their city. Next is a picture of three abnormal sorts of men—one nude and vegetarian, who would not attract so much attention now. The next living in flames; the third possessed of one large foot with which he shades himself from the sun. This last, who is called a Sciapous, is mentioned by Aristophanes in the *Birds*. I have seen him carved on a bench-end in an English church, and on the fronts of cathedrals abroad. I shall show him again. In my fourth and last Alexander slide you see the one-legged and one-eyed ambassador of a people like himself coming to Alexander, who I think granted terms to this nation.

But the Alexander-romances are not our only source for pictures of these races. You will find them on old maps of the world; the Hereford map, for instance, of about the year 1300.

Nay, they are to be seen in a thirteenth-century rose window in Lausanne cathedral; and recently it has fallen to me to investigate a book wholly devoted to them, which I call the *Marvels of the East*, and of which we have three pretty early copies, of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively; one in Anglo-Saxon, one in Anglo-Saxon and Latin, the third in Latin only. All three have pictures. The tract must be quite ancient. Most of it is taken out of a spurious letter, perhaps as old as the fourth century, supposed to be written by an explorer to the Emperor Hadrian. Of course it was no more written to the Emperor Hadrian than it was to me: it's a clumsy fiction, but valuable because it puts together a whole collection of travellers' tales. It is very inartistic in construction, consisting mainly of a series of paragraphs, saying: "Hard by these people there dwells another tribe fifteen feet high," or the like.

The pictures I take from this represent the following. A lady with a beard, clad in horse-hide. These people are huntresses, and employ tigers and leopards in place of dogs. A lady with boar's tusks, ox's tail, and camel's feet; these persons are twelve feet high and as white as marble. Alexander the Great, being unable to capture any of them, killed a large number. A man with long ears, wrapped about his arms. The people of this tribe are fifteen feet high and ten feet broad. At night they lie on one ear and cover themselves with the other. If they catch sight of a man, they spread out their ears and flee over the sand with incredible swiftness. The last of the four slides perhaps needs some elucidation. It shows a tribe who have animals' heads but human bodies. They speak many languages, and when they see a stranger they accost him in his own tongue and inquire after his parents and friends. When they have got hold of him they eat him; but thereafter take his head in their hands and lament over it, like the crocodile. Our picture shows the various moments—Salutation, Mastication, Lamentation. They remind me of a phenomenon described by the truthful Marco Polo, of voices heard by travellers in the great desert of Gobi or Shamo, exactly what Shakespeare calls "airy tongues that syllable men's names." If the traveller leaves the caravan and follows the sound, he is never seen again.

And now, that you may have these truths more firmly impressed upon you, I will show you in rapid succession a number of these varieties of mankind, taken from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493. Here we have the man with the large lower lip—hardly an exaggeration when you think of the African tribes

who distend their lips with rings of shell. The man with the dog's head. There was correspondence in the ninth century between German theologians as to whether this race had souls and could be saved. The decision ought to have been in their favour, for in the true original form of the story of St. Christopher we read that he was a dog-headed man; and there was another who was converted by St. Andrew.

The pygmy who has every spring to sally forth to protect his crops from the cranes who arrive hungry from their long flight from the north. These were known to Homer. The sciapous with his one umbrageous foot; the one-legged man who can run so swiftly that he captures a deer; the man who has ears so long that he can wrap himself up in them. You have seen him already. The man with his face in his chest. They are said to be eight feet high and eight feet broad, but I know nothing of their disposition. A somewhat later woodcut will do to end with. It is in the nature of an ensemble, or of the principal actors taking a call before the curtain. The dog-headed man, the face in the chest man, a new figure, of a two-headed child, the lady with one eye in her forehead, and the indispensable sciapous.

You have now seen enough perhaps of the typical imagery of the monstrous world to give you an idea of its nature. Needless to say, I have not exhausted it. Nor have I pretended to philosophise in the least degree about the attitude of the medieval mind towards nature. It can be plausibly compared to the attitude of the child's mind; but the medieval people were not children. The fact is, I think, that to them the accurate observation and investigation of nature had not begun to seem important in comparison with matters of conduct and religion, not to speak of war, law and art. When, in the light of Aristotle's writings, it did begin to seem worthy of attention, some few took it up seriously; and as the world widened on their view, and what we call the Renaissance supervened, their work took on the spirit we dignify with the name of scientific, and side by side with astronomy and mathematics and medicine, a truer Natural History began to be written.

MONTAGUE RHODES JAMES.