40

THE MEDIEVAL BESTIARY

"Beasts are those who rage
about with tooth and claw."

- T.H. White, The Book of Beasts

Johanna Freedman
Integrated Arts 1A
1 - 3 - 66

The Whale (Asp-Turtle)

Now will I spur again my wit, and use
Poetic skill to weave words into song,
Telling of one among the race of fish,
The great asp-turtle. Men who sail the sea
Often unwillingly encounter him,
Dread preyer on mankind. His name we know,
The ocean swimmer, Fastitocalon.
(Sailors think he is an island, rest on his back,
He lowers, and drowns them all.)
Such is the way
Of demons, devils' wiles; to hide their power,
And stealthily inveigle heedless men,
Inciting them against all worthy deeds,
And luring them to seek for help and comfort
From unsuspect foes, until at last
They choose a dwelling with the faithless one.
Then, when the fiend, by crafty malice stirred,
From where hell's torments bind him fast, perceives
That men are firmly set in his domain,
With treachery unspeakable he hastes
To snare and to destroy the lives of those,
Both proud and lowly, who in sin perform
His will on earth. Donning the mystic helm
Of darkness, with his prey he speeds to hell,
The place devoid of good - all misty gloom,
Where broods a sullen lake, black, bottomless,
Just as the monster, Fastitocalon,
Destroys seafarers, overwhelming men
And staunch-built ships. [1]

- author unknown, translated by
James Hall Pitman
12th century

The red-haired monkey dances on the stairs
because the jungle is uncivilized
breeding all things since Noah's ark in pairs
or worse than what the solemn three surmised.
Only the evil waste must be ignored
since stairways make the clutching tail a curl
to tease the tailless who wish they could afford
a wand they would with equal pleasure twirl.
The red-haired monkey is the only one;
but should the stair depopulate the tree,
the curl (by then a fad feared overdone)
might seize the branches monkeys, stairwise, flee.
The stair or tail is not important here
but where no other monkey will appear. [2]

- Francis J. Mathues, Bestiary
1953

The Medieval Bestiary

What is a bestiary? At first, it appears to be only a crude attempt to classify the beasts of the earth, "... a sort of naturalist's scrapbook."[3] The descriptions of the animals and the traits ascribed to them are in general inaccurate and often fantastical. The writers of the bestiaries tended to emphasize artistic feelings rather than natural observation.[4] There seems to be little value in these "scientific" creations.

However, if only for its varied and colorful history, the bestiary deserves a second glance. It is a direct descendent of the slim, moralizing pamphlet known as the physiologus or "The Naturalist," written from the second to fifth centuries in Alexandria, Egypt. Its original author remains unknown and attempts to identify him range from Solomon and Aristotle to Basil and Ambrose.[5] Possibly because the various sexual references throughout the physiologus can be given profane significance,[6] the physiologus was declared to be the work of heretics during the beginning of the sixth century.

The curiosity of people as to the meaning of the world could not be so easily quelled. The twelfth century saw the arrival of the bestiary, similar in form to the physiologus, but more ornate, larger, and containing considerably less moralization. Although today we may term the bestiary an example of credulity and naive moralizing, its popularity was such that it was translated into Ethiopic, Armenian, Syrian, Latin, Arabic, Georgian, Anglo-Saxon, Old High German, Middle High German, Icelandic, English, French, Provencal, Italian, and Spanish.[7] Hand-made copies were found in Iceland as late as 1724. It was an instant success in its own time. It appealed to the people because it satisfied their curiosity about strange beasts. It also assured them