

Article

Aesthetics of Evil in Middle Ages: Beasts as Symbol of the Devil

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Abstract: Since the very origin of art, human beings have faced the challenge of the representation of Evil. Within the medieval Christian context, we may find many beings which have attempted to convey the power of the devil. Demonic beings, terrifying beasts, fallen angels or even Satan himself can be frequently found and appear in many forms. They can be seen in chapitols, stained glass windows, codices . . . Our aim is to evaluate different creatures, animals and monstrous hybrids, which represent the efficient presence of the devil. We base our evaluation on some bestiaries, natural history books and encyclopedias from the XII and the XIII century, like the *Bestiaire* from Philippe de Thaon, Pierre de Beauvais, Guillaume le Clerc, or the so-called Cambridge Bestiary as well as the one from Oxford, the *Livres dou Tresor* from Brunetto Latini, the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, *L'image du Monde* from Gossuin, the *Bestiario moralizzato di Gubbio*, and of course, the *Physiologus*. Natural beings acquire a supernatural dimension in bestiaries and in natural history books. We will present the reader with a satanic bestiary, a short selection of these evil-related beings. In this, we will distinguish between those beasts representing evil through their ability to deceive and those which are able to generate not only fear, but also death.



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1. Introduction

In *Libellus in modum Symboli*, written by bishop Pastor for the Council of Toledo in 447 (de Aldama 1934; Cardelle de Hartmann 1994), the Evil governing hell is described as a hideous being, black, gigantic, fetid, horned and crowned, with donkey ears and deadly claws, endowed with a large phallus and, above all, with a frightening, brilliant look, which at the same time attracts with the force of a magnet and annihilates like lightning (Muchembled 2000, pp. 27–28). This characterization seeks to yield a visual representation of a being which is spiritual in nature. This task is complex because it seeks to simultaneously portray many facets of the devil: A being which seduces and deceives, one which is harmful, violent and even lethal. All in all, we shall not forget that every creature, angels included—and Satan is an angel—cannot be considered as independent from the almighty action of God.

For this reason, in the same year 447, the Pope Leo the Great addresses a letter, dated 21 July and known as *Quam laudabiliter*, to bishop Toribio de Astorga, in which he deals directly with the issue of the Nature of the Devil:

‘The sixth note states that they claim that the devil was never good and that his nature is not the work of God. Rather they claim that he emanated from chaos and darkness, having in fact no author of his being but being himself the principle and the substance of all evil. The true faith on the other hand, the Catholic faith, professes that the substance of all creatures, both spiritual and corporeal, is good, and that evil is not a nature, since God, the Creator of the universe, made only what was good. This is why the devil himself would be

good if he had remained in the state in which he had been created. Unfortunately, since he abused his natural excellence and did not remain in the truth (Jn 8, 44), he was not transformed (without doubt) into a contrary substance, but he separated himself from the supreme good to which he ought to have adhered just as they themselves who make such assertions run headlong from truth into falsehood, and accuse nature of their own spontaneous delinquencies, and are condemned for their voluntary perversity: though of course this evil is in them, but is itself not a substance but a penalty inflicted on substance' (Denzinger and Hünemann 2017, DS 286).

These characterizations will be employed as models for the works of art which will be used for the education of the illiterate individuals in the Middle Ages. Comparisons between the devil and other beasts arise frequently in this context. Animals and monsters become symbols and illustrate issues such as pain and death, or struggle between good and evil. The natural-scientific description, the philosophical speculation, the doctrinal interpretation (theological in nature) and the artistic expression (George and Yapp 1991) are venues that allow to deepen the understanding on these fundamental matters in life and, specially, those related to the mystery of evil.

'Evil is directly experienced and directly intuited' (Russell 1988, p. 1) and also, one may add: Within medieval bestiaries, this power becomes transparent through the behaviour of animals. Through the animal kingdom, we can obtain not only a detailed description about the beasts which inhabit the natural world but also information on the supernatural meanings that they may acquire (Delort 1984). In the end, we may find a whole universe of images within these codices. To disentangle their full meaning, we need to combine a philosophical and theological stance.

Bestiaries are composed of different hermeneutic codes which are mapped to different sensitive levels, that is, from the level describing mere anatomy we may turn to the one dealing with ethical-philosophical consideration; and further turn to the one on moral perspectives which are later complemented with the theological ones (Voisenet 2020, pp. 321–25). In all these cases, the fields of word and those of image are intertwined (Kay 2017). In the end, XII–XIII century bestiaries, books on natural history and encyclopedias allow us to access a world where both the creative power of goodness and evil are present: The excellence of divine creation and the subtlety of diabolic action play a role.

Our aim here is to show how this presence of evil becomes visible through animals and monstrous hybrids. To do that, we provide a brief characterization of the bestiary in medieval art whilst highlighting its ability to portray the natural reality and to suggest the supernatural at the same time. Finally, we devote the last two sections to present what we may refer to as the 'satanic bestiary', composed of six creatures. Firstly, we discuss three beasts which stand out by their ability to seduce and deceive. We show the subtle camouflages of the chameleon, the proficient imitations of the mantichore and the seductive skills of sirens. Second, we deal with three other beasts which are rather characterized by their ability to induce terror and cause death. We will see the skillful and venomous asp, the powerful ferocity of the dragon and the lethal gaze of the basilisk. For this research we use a few essential texts: the *Bestiaire* from Philippe de Thaon, Pierre de Beauvais, Guillaume le Clerc, or the so-called Bestiary from Cambridge as well as the one from Oxford, the *Livres du Tresor* from Brunetto Latini, the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, *L'image du Monde* from Gossuin, the *Bestiario moralizzato di Gubbio*, without forgetting the *Physiologus*.

Throughout this analysis we may acquire a more precise understanding of how Evil is interpreted by means of beasts in the context of the Christian Middle Ages. On top of that, how the images of Evil end up becoming archetypes which later serve as intellectual yet also plastic inspiration by generating new forms of artistic expression through chapitols, stained glass windows, sculptures, decorative objects . . . In this way, the natural world opens to a scatological horizon where the human being seeks to grasp the meaning of the present—and the eternal—life.

2. The Reality of Art and the Art of Reality

Medieval bestiaries ‘are collections of animal descriptions and lore, both real and fantastic, which are interpreted as spiritual or moral lessons’ (Clark and McMunn 2016, p. 1). These books of beasts are a work of art (Morrison and Grollemond 2019; Muratova 1984). In them, not only do we encounter a careful design or a set of rich materials. We may also find a careful calligraphy with decorated capital letters and delicate, full of intelligence miniatures which are masterly accomplished (Camille 1992). Ultimately, medieval bestiaries are authentic works of art which fulfill, from an intellectual perspective, the definition of art given by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 57 a. 4: ‘ars est recta ratio factibilium’ (Sancti Thomae Aquinatis (ST) 1891, t. 6 367). Bestiaries are not a product of fantastic imagination but rather one from right reason. The objective is to do that which shall be done. For the medieval mindset, a work of art should be a representation of reality. Both, in the conception of art of Thomas as well as in the *raison d’être* of the bestiary, there is a compromise with knowledge, a sort of gnoseological and aesthetic realism presumption which responds to a clear objective: to give a reason for being what it is. It so happens that the bestiary is a practical example of ‘mimesis’: It tries to reflect reality not only as it appears but also insofar it signifies. The bestiary, as is so with medieval art, is ‘imitatio’ not ‘creatio’, this is, its ultimate commitment is to be a loyal witness of reality. Note that the latter is nothing but a real ontological challenge.

Bestiaries and books of natural history are born from observation, from experience, from the contrast between the diverse sources or testimonies contained in its ‘auctoritates’: the ‘Physiologus’ (Carlill 1924; Cruley 1979; Zambon 1993; Zucker 2004), Plinio el Viejo, Isidoro de Sevilla. Reality rests on top of imagination. This entails a fundamental condition: given that the bestiary and art are imitation of reality, they cannot represent that which is not real. Thus, the later commitment with reality ends up being normative: Not only does art—and thus the bestiary—have the possibility of presenting what is, but rather it must do so.

In this way, art becomes an instrument that helps philosophers in delimitating ontological matters, moralists in reckoning the limits of action, knowledge theorists in amplifying the depth of their analysis and naturalists in registering their observations to objectivize their own experience. The bestiary as a work of art becomes a very powerful means of representation. It becomes an instrument that can generate images of animal’s reality in which it is possible to detect not only their physical virtuality but also their ‘meta-physical’ and ‘symbolic’ one.

Following Aristotle, reality is an achieved development of virtuality, something like the metaphysical flow which goes from potency to act. Nevertheless, in other conceptions—as in the platonic one—what is real ideal is confronted to what is virtual: Ideal is that which really is while what is virtual is that which, even if it appears to, actually lacks ‘real’ existence. This said, the difference between both is not in their effective ability nor it is in their existential condition, but rather in the ‘how’ of such existence. The aesthetic inquiry on art can shed light upon some fundamental aspects of this binomial. It will help us realize that beasts inhabiting the medieval codices are as alive now as they were when figuring in the capitals of the columns in the cloisters of monasteries. Regarding this, Bernardo de Clairvaux in his *Apologia ad Guillelmum* abad de Saint-Tierry en 1125 regretted:

‘Ceterum in claustris, coram legentibus fratribus, quid facit illa ridicula monstruositas, mira quaedam deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas? Quid ibi immundae simiae? Quid Feri leones? Quid monstruosi centauri? Quid semi-homines? Quid maculosae tigrides? Quid milites pugnantes? Quid venatores tubicinantes? Videas sub uno capite multa corpora, et rursus in uno corpore capita multa. Cernitur hinc in quadrupede cauda serpentis, illinc in pisce caput quadrupedis, Ibi bestia praefert equum, capram trahens retro dimidiam; hic cornutum animal equum gestat posterius. Tam multa denique, tamque mira diversarum formarum apparet ubique varietas, ut magis legere libeat in mar-

moribus, quam in codicibus, totumque diem occupare singula ista mirando, quam in lege Dei meditando. Proh Deo! si non pudet ineptiarum, cur vel non piget expensarum?’ (Bernardo de Claraval 1983, § 29, p. 292)¹.

By definition, medieval art implies metaphysical aspirations and normative elements (De Bruyne 1959). Its commitment with reality is undeniable yet the reality which it attempts to represent is so complex and vast that the limits between what is and what is not, between what we believe and what we know, between what we are and what we wish to be, are often blurred (Cronin 1941). Medieval *ars* is much more than a set of norms which ought to be followed to produce something that can be called art. It is perfect reckoning of that which shall be done; a commitment with the realization of that which is ideal. This ideal is not always identified with what is real. For this reason, medieval art frees itself from being chained to that which is (Piñero Moral 2000). No writer, until Cennino Cennini, recognizes the artist the possibility of creating cose non vedute . . . (Cennini 1899). Up until the renaissance, the artist was binded to reproducing reality. However, a simple visual tour of hundreds of capitals, facades, frescoes, stained-glass windows, miniature manuscripts is enough to verify that the creators anticipated Cennini’s decree, opening in each stone, in each wall and in each scroll the door to fantasy.

If there is a special locus for imaginary beings, then that may be the Middle Ages (Lum 1952; Kappler 1980; Mode 1973). As special as the Greek mythology yet within a Christian perspective. Leucrotes, dragons, hydras, myrmico-lions, griffins and phoenixes appear before our eyes (Hubaux and Leroy 1939; van den Broek 1972), beings with a great symbolic force and whose existence is unquestionable. Why so? Because with the same resolution with which our current astrophysics talk about black holes, the scientific medieval literature, from Homer to Alberto Magnus, is filled with explanations, though not assumptions, about these beings. This is done with a thoroughness which is only found in natural history treatises.

The medieval bestiary is a compendium on animal nature in which physical, metaphysical, anthropological, moral, religious and aesthetical aspects are intermingled (Durand 1973; Ciccurese, Maria Pia 2002–2007). A bestiary (Hassig 1995) is not a fantastic inventory nor it is a mere literary creation; it is rather a collections of essays on animals and it may serve as a paradigm for the comprehension of human life and also to distinguish the place of man in the world. Observation, experience, interpretation, beliefs, didactical interests as well as symbolic perspectives come together in a bestiary. For this reason, a bestiary may be understood as a revision of the human condition in light of the animal condition (Klingender 1971). It is a pictoric text which seeks to comprehend human nature through animal nature. Yet it is not based in a simple ethological transposition but in the conscious analysis and synthesis which departs from non-human elvels and later arrives to the construction of what is proper to the human condition. Physics and metaphysics, natural and supernatural perspectives are articulated in a bestiary. Thus, many bestiaries begin by showing the very act of creation: the genesis. In this genetical origin, we attend to a sequence of animal appearances, the creation of the human being and ultimately attend to the moment where Adam names the animals (Muratova 1977). The latter may be considered as the milestone marking the end of the metaphysical process of creation.

One key aspect of the bestiary is its amphibious condition, its presentation of life is twofold: word and image, literality and iconicity. It achieves sufficient virtuality only when these both come together. The reality of fantastic beings is accomplished in the intersection: words, alone, do not overcome the fact of configuring a more or less acceptable story; analogously, images, by themselves, do not overcome the fact of being more than just ‘phantásmata’. It is the convergence where they acquire an unquestionable realism: the existence of the unicorn (McCulloch 1962) or of the siren (Faral 1954) or the sawfish (Druce 1919a) does not lend itself to questioning. Nobody questions it because everybody has seen their image and they have read or heard about where they live, which are their habits, how they behave: Whether a creature is fierce, gentle, or terrible; they know which parts of their body have curative power and that its speed is without a match or that its chant

is so sweet that it has seduced hundreds of sailors, dragging them into the depths of the abyss. Therefore, nobody doubts that the bestiary collects the models of the natural and supernatural animals, of the good and disgraced, the creatures of God and the beasts of evil. But then, what if evil is a beast in itself? What are we referring to when we talk about a 'beast'?

Isidore of Seville, a benchmark when it comes to the vocabulary in the Middle Ages, argues that:

'Bestiarium vocabulum proprie convenit leonibus, pardis, tigribus, lupis et vulpibus canibusque et simiis ac ceteris, quae vel ore vel unguibus saeviunt, exceptis serpentibus. Bestiae dictae a vi, qua saerio suo ferantur. Sunt enim liberae eorum voluntates, et huc atque illuc vagantur et quo animus duxerit, eo feruntur' (Isidoro de Sevilla 1994, vol. II XII 2 1 68)².

The identity of the beast is marked by violence and cruelty and its nature denotes savage and brutal attitudes. These beasts induce panic just by appearing, as images, in our imagination. Its artistical representation does not correspond to a mere aesthetical taste of the times, as if it were an accidental or a temporal fashion, but rather it defines a vision of the world and with that, the place that humanity takes in it. Whatsoever, medieval art broadcasts, beneath veils of stone, glass or stories, our own view of things, events, divinity, beauty or sin and it further builds a way to access, interpret and value the world (Costarelli Brandi 2017). Art, so understood, is a necessary element in the configuration of human condition in terms of experience, knowledge, and beliefs.

It is within this context where the action of God and that of the devil provide one of the most profound lectures of reality. Illustrations of the incarnation of the Spirit of Evil are probably as numerous as those of the Spirit of Good. In this line, let us not forget that many animals keep a complicated ambivalence which often leads to confusion and mistakes. Indeed, there may sometimes be a subtle line separating the bestiary of God and that of the devil: In the limit, the same animal can be a symbol of Christ as one of the devil (Réau 2002, p. 98).

Those attempting to establish an inventory of these beings of evil have formulated different typologies distinguishing between real and fantastic animals with further subdivisions into hybrid beings lacking human elements and semihuman monsters. Other typologies, linking diabolic representation and vices also exist. Other authors have adopted a general division of the bestiary into telluric, aquatic, aerial, igneous and hybrid beings. Each of these typologies offers a relevant point of view of ontological, moral and philosophical criteria. We consider each of these points of view as fundamental and also believe that our own presentation adds its own value.

Among the animals that may figure in the index on any satanic bestiary we may highlight the following: The whale (Coulter 1926; Runeberg 1902), the goat, the chameleon, the crocodile (Druce 1919b; Malaxecheverría 1981), the hedgehog, the cat, the wild boar, the lion, the leopard, the he-goat, the monkey, the bear, the dog (Menache 1997), the frog, the mouse, the toad, the snake, the turtle, as well as asps, basilisks, dragons, griffons, leucrotes, chimeras, unicorns (Einhorn 1976), satyrs, centaurs, sphinxes, sirens, manticores, cynocephalos, to which should be added the donkey, the bat, the owl, the raven, the scorpion, the aptalops, the ostrich, the pig, the squirrel, the sparrow, the hawk, the hyena, the ibis, the lobster, the wolf, the peacock, the panther, the mole, the hurray, the fox . . .

In any case, beneath all these representations, the devil acts under two premises: fear and pleasure. We base our selection criteria on this perspective and provide an inevitably summarized satanic bestiary: We present creatures specially motivated towards generating fear and particularly linked with sensuality and deceit.

We find that the best way to deal with these creatures of evil is to depart from the texts included in the bestiaries, natural history books and encyclopedias. In this way, its evocative ability and its expressive and symbolic power may remain alive. In the next sections we show a brief selection which shall allow us to concisely yet comprehensively oversee a small satanic bestiary.

3. The Beasts of Pleasures and Deceit: Chameleon, Manticore and Siren

3.1. The Chameleon

The chameleon is not usually a distinguished figure—to the point of sometimes not even appearing—in the bestiaries. Perhaps for this reason, it deserves to be included in our short satanic bestiary. Two basic features of the chameleon are, to begin with, the fact that it feeds from air and second, its incredible ability for metamorphosis. It is this last quality, above all, the one that has linked it so closely with evil: The chameleon changes its skin color to protect itself from danger and to gain survival advantage; much in the same way, the Devil transforms itself and it trick, deceives, and devours men. In what follows, we will closely examine the features of the chameleon.

The Bestiary of Oxford highlights:

‘The chameleon is not all one color, but is multicoloured, like the pard. It is able to vary the colours of its body very easily, whereas the bodies of other animals cannot readily be changed in this way. The chameleon-pard is so called because while it is like the pard in having White spots, its neck is like that of a horse, its feet like those of a camel, but its head is like that of a camel. It is native of Ethiopia’ (Barber 1993, pp. 67–68).

A Catalan bestiary (Martín 2012) states:

‘L’altre creatura és calamió, lo qual jamés no’s posa sinó en l’ayre [. . .]. Per lo calamió, qui viu solament de l’air, podem entendre una manera de sàvies gents que ha en lo món, qí, com nexen, jamés de tota lur vida no posen lur enteniment en les riqueses temporals, ans posen tot lur enteniment en les altes coses, e en allò viuen e s’adeliten tots temps per voluntat que han de ésser ab lo dolç Pare qui és en lo gloriós paradís’ (Panunzio 1963, I 83–86)³.

Yet the most detailed information can be found in *Li Livres dou Tresor*:

‘Camelion est un veste ki naist en Ayse, et si en i a grant plenté. Et sa face est samblable a lizarde, mais ses jambes sont droites et longues, et les ongles fieres et aguës, et coue grant et voutice, et vet autresi lentement comme tortue, et sa pel est dure comme de cocodril; et ses oils fiers et durement encavés dedens la teste, et ne les muet pas ça et la, por ce ne voit il en travers, ains regarde tot droit devant soi. Et san ature est de fiere merveille, car il ne manguë n ene boit chose del monde, ains vit solement de l’air k’il atouche a aucune chose, prent sa color et devient d’autretel taint, se ce n’est rouge ou blanc, car ce sont .ii. coulours k’il ne peut faindre. Et sachiés que son cors est sans char et sans sanc, se ce n’est ou cuero u il en a .i. petit. En yvier maint repost, et en esté vient et un oiseaus l’ocist ki a non corax; mais s’il manguë de lui il le covient a morir, se fueille de lorier ne l’en delivre’ (Latini 1998, I: 185 162)⁴.

The death of the chameleon by the claws of the raven brings two demonic symbols together as one. In these lines, do notice one remark from Brunetto: The raven dies if he eats the chameleon. Inspired by this we may regard two opposite symbols here: the eatable fruit from evil and the Eucharist. Eating the body of the chameleon (i.e., of the devil) implies death while eating the body of Christ, at least for the ones believing so, yields life. Another fact brings together the imagery of the beast with the Bible’s texts: The raven, having eaten the chameleon, can still be saved by an antidote. This antidote is far from a complicated potion or product: It is simply the leaf of a laurel.

One may realize that the appearances of these animal symbols in various biblical scenes carries multiple paradoxes. For instance, take the raven, which liberated by Noe from the Arc to see if the water level has sufficiently gone down, never returns. It prefers to stay and eat the carrion of the dead bodies of the people drowned by the Deluge. In contrast, when the dove is sent, it comes back and it brings a green olive branch in its beak. The final symbol of the Deluge is precisely that branch brought by the dove. The antidote to heal the raven is a branch, green too yet from a laurel; symbol of victory and image of life which conquers death.

3.2. The Manticore

The inclusion of the manticore in our satanic bestiary is almost a prerequisite. This beast is mentioned by the Greek writer Ctesias in his book *Indica* (Ctesias of Cnidus 2011) and also Pliny the Elder in *Natural History* (8: 30)⁵. The word ‘mantichora’ is connected with the Persian word ‘mard-khora’ which means ‘man-eater’ (Collins 1913, chp. XI). The manticore is a hybrid being which can simultaneously be the image of the devil and the image of Jeremiah the prophet—when he was thrown into a dunghill. At the same time, it illustrates the malevolent nature of the Devil in three ways: his voracity, his seduction skills and his fabulating abilities. In a sense, the manticore shares a fair deal of qualities with satyrs, basilisks, and even centaurs (Collins 1940, p. 242). This beast is quite strange physically: it has a human face, the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion. It is a complete engine of destruction, endowed with intelligence, strength, and venom. Its natural habit is within the deep underground as if the animal itself wanted to let us know that it lives just in the gates of Hell. In what follows, three texts will illustrate its greediness for human flesh, its art of seduction and its ability to deceive the human soul, respectively.

The Bestiary from Oxford claims:

‘in India there is a beast called the manticore. It has a triple row of teeth, the face of a man, and grey eyes; it is blood-red in colour and has a lion’s body, a pointed tail with a sting like that of a scorpion, and a hissing voice. It delights in eating human flesh. Its feet are very powerful and it can jump so well that neither the largest of ditches nor the broadest of obstacles can keep it in’ (Barber 1993, pp. 63–64).

Gossuin, in *L’image du Monde*, says about it that it has goat eyes and the body of a lion, the tail of a scorpion and the voice of a snake. It also adds that, through its sweet chant, it attracts people and then devours them (Gauthier 1913, p. 113). The *Bestiario moralizzato di Gubbio* also describes it:

‘Una fera manticora kiamata
pare d’omo et de bestia concept,
però k’a ciascheduno è semegliata
e carne humana desia e afecta.
Ane una boce bella e consonata
nella quale ki l’ode se delecta:
a lo nemico pare semeliata
ke, variando, nell’anima decepta.
Semiglia ad omo per dimostramento,
ké, volendo la gente a sé trare,
fasse parere angelo de luce,
a bestia k’è in reo delectamento:
fa ki li crede tanto delectare,
k’a la dannatione lo conduce.
(Carrega and Navone 1983, XXIV 83)⁶.

3.3. The Siren

The siren is the beast which best combines sensuality and deceit, voluptuousness and treason. In the *Odyssey* (Homer 1919, Book XII vv. 37–56 and 153–200), Homer describes to us her high-pitched chant: enchanting, sonorous and very sweet. The sirens from the *Odyssey* reveal their irresistible powers with this chant that bedazzles sea men. Ulysses himself, following Circe’s warnings, saves his fellow crew members by plugging their ears with a mass of soft wax, and asking them to tie his hands and feet to the mast.

Even if literary tradition is well-known nowadays, many of the classical authors which discussed sirens were not known in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, one may find some exceptions to this: Ovid, for example, states in the *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 2004, V, pp. 512–62) that sirens have the most beautiful voice in the world. Apollodorus also discusses at some point about a siren which played the lyre, another one that sang and some other that played the flute (Apollodorus 1989, Epitome VII, sct. 18–19). In the end, all these authors discussing sirens agree in that the consequences of their songs were malicious for the sailormen (Salvador Miguel 1998, pp. 91–92).

Even if sirens account for all of the power of the Devil, the highest seductive charm, and all the beauty one may dream of, there is still no doubt regarding their realism. These are for sure fantastic beings, fantastically real, if one wishes, a hybrid between physical reality and metaphysical fiction, humanity and animality, a mix between reality and desire. Yet, what do they look like? (Rowland 1974).

Homer's story remarks the sirens' powers and abilities but does not provide a physical description of them. Still, one may conclude from the poet's verses that we are talking about beings of the sea, which live in an island, and that are considered sorcerers. This absence on physical facts prompted speculation in the old—Greek and Roman—world, as people tried to qualify the nature, the essence, and the formal configuration of sirens. After all, one thing appears clear: In every design, the siren is always a hybrid being whose torso is human but becomes a bird, a fish . . . from the waistline down.

As one may expect then, sirens enjoy a quite varied typology. The hybridization of human and animal can take multiple distinguishable forms. The first classical type is that of woman-bird, used already in Egyptian art to symbolize the soul separated from the body. This is also collected by Virgilio (2008) and Sevio's verses, both read during the Middle Ages. This type remains put in the encyclopedia of Isidorus and in one of the versions of the *Bestiaire* from Beauvais (Pierre de Beauvais 1992), as well as in the Oxford *Bestiary*.

A second hybrid type is the one presented in both, the Greek and the Latin versions of the *Physiologus*. In this case, the upper body is clearly human—which does not mean that it is female—and the lower body has a volatile semblance.

A third typology, present already in the *el Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, shows a design including womanly body with a fish tail for the first time:

'sirens are sea maidens, who seduce sailors with their splendid figure and the sweetness of their song. From their head to their navel, they have female bodies, and are identical with the human race; but they have the scaly tails of fish, with which they always move in the depths of the sea' (Haupt 1863, pp. 42–43).

This configuration is the one that will be popularized from the second quarter of the XII century and on. French bestiaries such as Gervaise's, and even in the text of Bartolomaeus Angelicus confirm this. Following Philippe de Thaon's text we may read:

'Siren lives in the sea, it sings at the approach of a storm,
and weeps in fine weather; such is its nature;
and it has the make of a woman down to the waist,
and the feet of a falcon, and the tail of a fish.

When it will divert itself, then it sings loud and clear
if then the steersman who navigates the sea hears it,
he forgets his ship, and immediately falls asleep;
remember that this has a meaning.

The sirens are riches of the world;
the sea shows this world, the ship the people who are in it;
and the soul is the steersman, and the ship the body which ought to swim;
know that many times the rich who are in the world make
the soul sin in the body, that ship and steersman

the soul hinders from sleeping, and furthermore from perishing.

Riches of the world effect great wonders,
they talk, and fly, take by the feet, and drown;
for this we paint the sirens with falcon's feet'

(Philippe de Thaon 2018, vv. 1361–94).

A fourth variant shows a woman-bird and a woman-fish, intermingled, and produces a woman-fish-bird result. This last typology is the one that Thomas of Cantimpré alludes in *De natura rerum*, where he describes the siren as a being which is half woman and half hawk but which also has *in fine vero corporis scamosum piscium caudas*, that is, an authentic (real) fish tail (Faral 1954) with scales.

Further, there is a fifth typology which is collected in the Armenian version of the *Physiologus* where we may encounter a siren resembling a woman up until the breasts and something like a mixture reminiscent of the bird, donkey, or bull in the rest of the body:

'Isaïe a dit: «Que les sirènes fassent leur demeure, que les démons bondissent; que les porcs-épics mettent bas». Le moraliste enseigne que les sirènes sont crueles; qu'elles habitent la mer, que les accents de leurs voix sont mélodieux; et que les voyageurs en sont épris au point de se précipiter dans la mer, où ils se perdent. Le corps de ces enchanteresses est celui d'une femme, jusqu'aux mamelles; le reste tient de l'oiseau, ou de l'âne, ou du taureau. De même (tels sont, etc.) ceux qui ont deux manières d'agir sont inconstants (*sic*). Il est de gens qui fréquentent les églises sans s'éloigner du péché. Ils ont l'apparence de la vérité (*droiture?*), mais sont bien loin de ce qu'ils semblent être. Lorsqu'ils entrent dans l'église, ils ont l'air de chanteuses; puis, mêlés à la foule (*dans la ville?*), ils ressemblent à des brutes. Ces sortes de gens tiennent du dragon et de la sirène; ils ont le pouvoir séducteur des hérésiarques, qui entraînent le cœur des innocents (*imprévoyants*) et des faibles. Isaïe dit: «Les paroles dangereuses gâtent la douce (*faible?*) nature (*perdunt incautos*)»' (Cahier 1874, pp. 126–27).

We may find a sixth variation in *De Bestiis* and in the *Bestiary* from Oxford where the siren is described as a white and winged serpent:

'In Arabia there are white serpents with wings, called sirens, wich run faster than horses, and are also said to fly. Thei poison is such yhat the victim is dead before he feels the pain of their bite' (Barber 1993, p. 192).

The same characterization is also present in Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*:

'Mais selonc la verité, les seraines furent .iii. meretrix ki dechevoient toz les trespasans et les metoient en povreté. Et dist l'estoire k'eles avoient eles et ongles, por senefiance de l'amor ki vole et fiert; et conversoient en euue, por ce que luxure fu faite de moustor' (Latini 1998, I: 136 132)⁷.

In its *Speculum naturale*, Vincent de Beauvais presents us with a seventh type according to which the siren consists of a human figure up until the belly button and then it has a fish tail and bird feet or claws. The Catalan bestiaries provide us with other images: a siren that is half fish and half female, and another which is half horse and half female. From these varied set of typologies we may conclude three things: these aquatic beings are of a hybrid nature, they are irrefutably real, and they are connected with the malicious and tortuous action. It is possible to owe this aspectual variety to an intention to give a natural, close, or credible form to a universe of beliefs, fears, and concerns. This formal diversity of the siren is not derived from direct observation. We may claim that it results from an attempt to explain some phenomena which remain mysterious and which require material arguments by means of an appearance which, even if strange, is not impossible. What is the shape of temptation, dread, vaines, sexual desire, deception, seduction, falsehood, pleasure, lust, evil ... ? All these things have a form and are shaped, among others, as a siren.

Bestiary authors provide word and shape for the multiple facets of the human condition: Richard de Fournival presents us the sirens as an image of he who dies from love;

Pierre de Beauvais ([Mermier 1966](#)) compares them with those who, bedazzled with richness and worldly pleasures, ends up eaten up by the devil. The Cambridge Bestiary presents them as the image of those who give in to the seductions of pretention or pleasure.

‘the Sirenae (Sirens), so Physiologus says, are deadly creatures who are made like huma beings from the head to the navel, while their lower parts down to the feet are winged. They give forth musical songs in a melodious manner, wich songs are very lovely, and thus they charm the ears of sailormen and allure them to themselves. They entice the hearing of these poor chaps by a wonderful sweetness of rhythm, and put them to sleep. At last, when they see that the sailors are deeply slumbering, they pounce upon them and tear them to bits. That’s the way in wich ignorant and incautious human beings get tricked by pretty voices, when they are charmed by indelicacies, ostentations and pleasures, or when they become licentious with comedies, tragedies and various ditties. They lose their whole mental vigour, as if in a deep sleep, and suddenly the reaving pounce of the Enemy is upon them’ ([White 1960](#), pp. 134–35).

The Oxfor Bestiary portrays sirens as the reflection of the man who lives only for the sake of pompousity and voluptuosity and thus ends up corrupted ([Barber 1993](#), pp. 150–51). Similarly, Guillaume le Clerc, in its bestiary, sees lust and worldly pleasures in them, and identifies them as symbol of the demonic action upon manhood ([Guillaume le Clerc 1970](#), vv. 995–1054, pp. 224–26).

The ending is simple, yet it puts things into perspective. He who believes in the beauty of evil and follows the Enemy, knows what lies ahead: eternal damnation. It then participates in the ultimate show of deceit and lies in which one may contemplate the very image of a really mounstruous being. As it has also become clear, the nature of this being and its plastic representation constitutes one of the most suggesting topics in Christian medieval aesthetics.

4. The Beasts of Terror and Death: Asp, Dragon and Basilisk

4.1. The Asp

The serpent is one of the cultural symbols which best represents the Devil since old times. The story of the diabolic temptation in the first book of the Bible inevitably and almost automatically comes to mind ([Besseyre 2004](#)). In that occasion, the serpent did not kill the human being yet it brings about its moral death and by doing so it inaugurates the history of sin. There is one very special type of serpent, not only because of the lethal power of its venom but mainly because of its cleverness. Its tricks are already acknowledged in the Psalms: ‘The wicked have been corrupt since birth; liars from the womb, they have gone astray. Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a serpent stopping its ears, so as not to hear the voice of the charmer or the enchanter with cunning spells’ (58:4–6). Let us evaluate the serpent’s deception game:

‘Aspis est quoddam genus serpentis obturantis aures suas ne incantatores audiat

Aspis is a serpent which signifies people;
it is cunning and sly, and aware of evil;
when it perceives people who make enchantment,
who want to enchant, take, and ensnare it,
it will stop very well the ears it has,
it will press one against the earth, in the other it will stuff
its tail firmly, that it hears nothing of it.

This signifies a great thing, I will not omit to tell it you.

Aspis hic pingitur, et quomodo obturat aures.

In this manner do the rich people of the world;
one ear they have on the earth to obtain riches,

the other sin stops up, by which they are ensnared:
 by the tail of the serpent is understood the sins of people.
 The rich man will have what he sees, be it with wrong or with right;
 after he shall have taken it, he will not do any alms,
 nor has he any compunction to do people injury,
 if they will not owe and do his pleasure;
 yet they will see a day when the caitiffs shall wail,
 at the Day of Judgment; then the wretches will wail
 who will go into hell, which they have deserved.
 This is the signification of the aspis without doubt.

Yas Grece, venenum dicitur Latine.

As in Greek is venom, from whence the name aspis is derived;
 it has a strong venom, by which it draws people to death.
 There are several vipers, which are serpents in the world;
 they have divers natures, and divers ways of stinging,
 for they will sometimes sting, and the persons will die immediately,
 and sometimes they will swell, and then after a long time will die;
 sometimes they will dry up and die by burning;
 sometimes they will take the blood of those whom they shall sting;
 as was the case with Cleopatra, who was wise in the arts,
 she was called queen of the country of Egypt;
 she did this wonder, she put them to her teats,
 and they milked her so hard that they sucked out the blood;
 the queen died of it; so the discourse finishes
 (Philippe de Thaon 2018, vv. 1615–80).

The Bestiary of Cambridge remarks once again on the malaise derived from not paying attention to the Word of God:

‘such indeed are the men of this world, who press down one ear to worldly desires, and truly by stuffing up the other one they do not hear the voice of the Lord saying ‘He who will not renounce everything which he possesses cannot be my disciple or servant’. Apart from men, asps are the only other creatures which do such a thing, namely, refuse to listen. Men make their own eyes blind, so that they do not see heaven, nor do they call to mind the works of the Lord’ (White 1960, p. 174).

This rejection reveals pride and greed: The insurgency of the fallen angel, the contempt regarding the good of the unholy. Based on the classical sources of the bestiary, Pierre de Beauvais explains the difference between those choosing to nurture themselves with the balm of Grace and those who, to avoid struggling against the devil, choose the nourishment of sin:

‘Physiologus says that if an enchanter comes to the asp’s hole where it lives, and charms it with songs to make it come out of its hole, the asp presses its head on the ground and plugs the other with its tale so as not to hear the enchanter’s voice. Such are the rich men who turn one ear to the earthly desires and who plug the other with their sins. However the asp plugs only its ears, while the rich men also cover their eyes with their earthly thoughts and desires so that they have neither ears with which they can hear nor eyes with which they can see Heaven, and thus they do not turn their thoughts toward God who gives everything, goodness and justice. But those who do not want to hear him now

will no doubt hear him on the Day of Judgment when he will say: ‘You cursed, go away from me into the eternal fire prepared in hell for the devil and its angels’ (Matt. 25: 41)’ (Pierre de Beauvais 1992, pp. 153–54).

The connection between the beasts of evil and escathology is quite immediate. It may sometimes appear as if the victory of these beasts in this world is unavoidable: they blind, they mute, they deafen the heart of man. Even so, they are still subdued to divine judgement. Their punishment is crystalline: eternal fire, Hell. For this reason, the ultimate destiny of any creature in the satanic bestiary is Hell: Every beast of evil ends up being a beast of Hell.

I presume that, following Brunetto Latini’s *Li Livres dou Tresor*, we may map the diverse means of killing employed by the asp to the different types of capital sin—lust, gluttony, greed, anger, pride, envy, laziness.

‘Aspis est une maniere de venimeus serpes ki ocist home de ses dens [wrath]. Ja soit ce, k’il sont de plusours manieres; et chacuns a une proprieté de mal faire; car celi ki est apelés aspis fait morir de soif l’ome que ele mort [greed]; et l’autre ki a non prialis le fait tant dormir k’il muert [sloth]; et l’autre ki est apelés emorois li fait fondre tot son sanc jusc’a sa mort [lust]; eli ki a non preste vait tozjours boucheoverte, et quant il estraint nuli a ses dens, il enfle tant k’il devie, et maintenant porrist si malement que c’est diaublie [gluttony]. Et sachiés que aspis porte la très luisant et la precieuse pierre [envy] que l’on clame carboncle; et quant li enchanteour ki li veut oster la pierre dist ses paroles, et maintenant ke la fiere veste s’en aperchoit, fiche l’une de ses oreilles dedens la terre et l’autre clot de sa coue, en tel maniere k’ele devient sourde et non oïans des paroles conjurans [pride] (Latini 1998, I: 138 133)⁸.

Within one beast, we encounter the complete intersection of all the capital sins. This beast thus synthesizes all the constituents of a type of behaviour that is lethal for human beings. The asp comprehends all the possible courses of action that can be taken to attack the integrity of the human body and its soul. In other words, it comprehends all the possible ways with which to subdue the most beloved creature of God.

4.2. The Dragon

The dragon is a very characteristic type of serpent. It is a winged being, especially fearsome. Perhaps because of its size, or because of the overall appearance, it reveals that it is a very ferocious creature. It expels fire from its mouth, and its tail possesses a formidable capacity for destruction. Its Greek etymology, *derkomai*, presents it as a beast with a penetrating gaze. It is common to find many heroes fighting with dragons to death in the Greek mythology: Cadmus kills the guardian of the source in Thebes; Perseus frees Andromeda from a terrible-looking monster about to devour her; Hercules destroys the one who guarded the garden of the Hesperides; even Apollo pierces a huge Python, making light triumph over darkness, order over chaos...

In Christian tradition, the dragon is the devil, the enemy. As the *Book of Revelation* (12: 9) reminds us: Satan, ‘the ancient serpent’. There are also heroes battling the dragon-shaped beast in this tradition: Saint Theodore, Saint Demetrius, Saint George. Among the many saints which are iconographically accompanied by the dragon we may include Saint Lupo, Saint Romano, Saint Clemente, Saint Armelio, Saint Mangoldo, Saint Beato . . . The dragon’s physiognomy is also much varied: It may have one or two heads, the body covered with scales, wings similar to those of a bat yet of greater dimensions, it exhales fire through its mouth and its breath is poison. It is widely accepted that he lives in remote, hidden places, caverns, swamps, from which it only comes out to kill its victims. Let us follow the description from the Cambridge Bestiary:

‘the Dragon is the biggest of all serpents, in fact of all living things on earth. The Greeks call it ‘draconta’ and hence it has been turned into Latin under the name ‘draco’. 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 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. 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 by the toils of crime he dies, and no doubt he goes to Hell' (White 1960, pp. 165–67).

This said, the action of the Evil does not just involve generating fear, it is not limited to frightening as, just like the lethal basilisk does, it has many ways to get into the inner guts of the human being and terminate his life.

4.3. The Basilisk

The basilisk is considered as the *rex serpentium* and it is crowned by a dented crest. It has a strange origin which also conditions its maleficent nature. The basilisk is born from a rooster's egg incubated by a toad. This results in a hybrid being which is a mixture of reptile and bird. Therefore, it has the head, chest and feet of a rooster, and the body and the tail of a snake.

The most significant thing of this monster is its lethal power. Many bestiaries recognize its deadly gaze and breath. The only possible way with which the human being can circumvent death when confronted with it, is if it uses a glass as an intermediary between itself and the creature. This sheet of glass suggests the need to establish a barrier of purity to protect oneself against the power of evil. The king of serpents is a direct image of Satan. Let us see how it has been dealt with in different bestiaries.

'The basilisk's name Greek (*regulus*) means little king, because he is the king of creeping things. Those who see him flee, because his scent will kill them. And he will kill a man simply by looking at him. No bird that sees him can fly past unharmed: it will be consumed at a distance by his fiery breath and then swallowed. But he can be conquered by the weasel, and for that reason men put weasels in the holes where basilisks live. If the basilisk sees the weasel he flees, but the weasel pursues him and kills him. For the Creator of all things has made nothing for which there is not an antidote. The basilisk is a half-a-foot long, with white spots. He lives in dry places, like the scorpion; if he comes to water he poisons it so that those who drink get hydrophobia and are struck with panic. The hissing snake is the same as the *regulus*, killing by his hissing before he bites or scorches. But the basilisk signifies the devil, who openly kills the heedless sinner with his venom; he himself is conquered, like all other harmful creatures, by the soldier of Christ who puts all his hope in the Lord, whose power overcomes and tramples underfoot all hostile forces. Of this too the prophet says in the Psalms: 'Thou shalt tread upon the asp and basilisk; the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample underfoot' (91: 13). This represents divine power, which holds sway over so many savage creatures. All these names are aptly bestowed on the devil. He is an asp when he strikes secretly; a basilisk when he

spreads his poison abroad; a lion when he pursues the innocent; a dragon when in his evil greed he swallows the heedless. But, truly, at the glorious coming of our Lord, all creatures will lie subject at His feet. He alone was strong enough to subdue these fierce creatures, who is coeternal and consubstantial with the Father in His divinity. If we trace these things in preaching of the holy fathers, so that we are not led astray by any depraved heretics or madmen, every one of these sayings in true' (Barber 1993, pp. 184–85).

This beast has many demonic features: It is full of venom and thus it glows as if with a proper and attractive light which induces one to come closer. It likes arid places and it poisons whoever it touches. It is also very cunning, but the man who notices the basilisk first does not die—note how the careful human being can free himself from falling into the temptations of Evil. The contrast between the basilisk and the Devil is as precise as the one sentencing the equality between Christ and the Father, coeternal, consubstantial: One God, one Lord, caring for its creatures since the creation until the end of time.

Pierre de Beauvais discusses the lethal power of this creature and describes how he who falls under its claws sees himself thrown into hell's cisterns. We know that this beast is born from a rooster's egg and according to the de Beauvais, the egg is born exactly when the rooster reaches the age of seven. In feeling that egg, the rooster remains in awe of itself and experiences the greatest anguish that an animal can suffer. It is then that it looks for a warm place, in a dunghill or stable, and it scratches it until it digs a hole in which to lay the egg. The toad perceives the venom carried in the rooster's belly and it ends up incubating the egg. The resulting animal is endowed with a rooster's head, neck and chest yet it resembles a snake from the chest downward. It spews its poison through its eyes. Every place it passes through, loses its value: No grass or anything else will ever grow there again. If it touches a tree, this loses its strength and will never bear fruit again, it perishes and dries up forever. However, the basilisk is a very beautiful animal. It has quite an alluring color, as if suggesting that there are many things that are attractive, yet bad. This animal is a clear representation of the Devil. It represents he who hid in paradise and deceived Eva and Adam into eating the prohibited fruit. The fact that this is the reason behind their expulsion is common knowledge and it is also so the fact that given their action, all of their descendants were subsequently poisoned for four thousand years (Pierre de Beauvais 1851, pp. 213–15). Because of this, it comes as no surprise that the Devil may be referred to as the ruler of this world (Jn 12: 31).

Li Livres dou Tresor collect the rebel attitude, the false purity, the crown of a lying and ambitious king, among many other details:

'sa grandor est de mi pié, et a blanches taches, et creste comme cok. Et vet droit contremont la moitié devant, et l'autre moitié comme autres serpens. Et tot soit il si fiers, les belotes l'ocient, c'est une veste plus longhe que soris, et est blanche el ventre. Et sachiés que Alixandres les trova, et fist faire grandes ampoles de voirre ou homes entroient dedens ki veoient les basiliques, mais il ne veoient ceaus, ki les ocioient des saietes; et par itel engin en fu delivrés il et son ost' (Latini 1998, I: 140 134)⁹.

On top of this, in S. Panunzio's version of the Bestiaris, we are presented with a basilisk which is very powerful and, given that no other animal is willing to confront it, it compared to Satan himself:

'Lo besalis és pocha bèstia, e tant de verí, que solament ab la vista aucien les hòmens. E aquests són reys de les serps; e no és bèstia al món qui's vulla combater ab ells. E per tot là hon passen, per lo gran verí que han, sequen los arbres e erbas. E aquests muden tots anys la pell, axí con fa la serp, e puys renovella' (Panunzio 1963, II 118)¹⁰.

5. Conclusions

We have shown how the presence of evil in the world can be perceived by means of the animal kingdom. We have attempted to fulfill a series of objectives. On the one hand, we showed some of the typical characteristics of demonic action. On another, considering the beasts which inhabit medieval manuscripts, we show these characteristics. In doing this, we considered both, the physical qualities of the animals as well as their behaviour.

Thanks to our analysis we may claim that there exists some degree of continuity followed by the elements representing evil. These elements may even be considered as if constant thus leading to a sort of universalization of the representations of evil. One of these elements regards the horns. Both in the basilisk and in the dragon, they express power and reflect a systematic predisposition towards evil. The horns in demons and the devil are a signal of their evil spirit and of their deviant spiritual nature.

As the mantichore and some types of sirens convey, the claws are another essential element. Note that dragons and basilisks share these too. Maleficent beings are endowed with them as a signal showing that they destroy that which they touch. Some other hybrid beings also have claws in their extremities, thus creating a sense of violence. Icon-wise, it is highly likely that claws come from harpies but in terms of christian aesthetics, the devil's claws are the antithesis of the arms of God.

As horns and claws, the face of demons is also a bestial, animal attribute. Big, almost exorbitant, and enigmatic eyes as the ones of the chameleon. Hard features, bitter expressions, large ears, half-open jaws as if ready to swallow whatever moves. Also, scavenger-like beaks, strong enough to smash any carrion. The look is usually tenacious, unhesitant, at the same time mocking and intimidating. Sooner or later, the most exotic and ferocious animals have lent their faces to the devil.

Among the contents of medieval art, a significant gesture also stands out: one may usually find the devil sticking its tongue out as to mock its victims. We have already seen this for the case of the dragon. All in all, this is an image of repugnance and mockery. It transmits a sense of scandal which is very close to that generated by a desecration. With the same impunity of the executioners which laughed at the disfigured sight of the Nazarene, the devil mocks us with his tongue out from the top of the chapitols. In front of the sober and serene countenance of Christ or of the apostles, even of kings and nobles, demons grimacingly try to gain our attention, to seize our gaze and thus penetrate our interior.

To the latter we may add the characteristics that define the devilish body. As we have already seen for the case of the mantichore, the devil's body is usually very hairy and hirsute. It intentionally resembles a wild animal. In Christian art, hair is related to what is brutal and is a symbol of the presence of evil. Hair flames on the head of the devil and thus resembles fire. This messy and flaming hair is yet another image of its rebel nature and its evilness. Finally on this note, realize that the flaming mane is to the devil as the tonsure is to the monk.

Moreover, the Devil is usually endowed with a tail. We have indeed seen its power in the bestiary: the lethal strength of a dragons' tail, the slippery tail in sirens or snakes. Specially for the latter, we have seen the case of the asp which is an unequivocal symbol of the nature of evil.

On many occasions, demons also have wings. This brings us back to their angelical origins and it is an expression of their preternatural powers. Wings elevate them into spirits which move freely and without bounds around earth. Although, given that they are spirits of darkness and not from the heavens, they may adopt weird forms as is the case in many serpents or the one of the dragon.

Along this itinerary we have shown that evil can be perceived at plain daylight, in our daily world and its routines, not only in the dark grottos of far away mountains or in forgotten and hidden caves. The enigmatic and effective action of the Devil can be seen in the same scenario as the loving presence of God, creator of all, visible and invisible. God and Satan share the scene.

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Notes

- ¹ ‘Again, in the cloisters, what is the meaning of those ridiculous monsters, of that deformed beauty, that beautiful deformity, before the very eyes of the brethren when reading? What are disgusting monkeys there for [or satyrs?], or ferocious lions, or monstrous centaurs, or spotted tigers, or fighting soldiers, or huntsmen sounding the bugle? You may see there one head with many bodies, or one body with numerous heads. Here is a quadruped with a serpent’s tail; there is’ a fish with a beast’s head; there a creature, in front a horse, behind a goat; another has horns at one end, and a horse’s tail at the other. In fact, such an endless variety of forms appears everywhere, that it is more pleasant to read in the stonework than in books, and to spend the day in admiring these oddities than in meditating on the law of God. Good God! If we are not ashamed of these absurdities, why do we not grieve at the cost of them?’
- ² ‘The term ‘beast,’ properly speaking, includes lions, panthers, tigers, wolves, foxes, dogs, apes, and other animals that attack either with their mouth or their claws, excepting serpents. They are called beasts (*bestia*) from the force (*vis*) with which they attack. They are termed wild (*ferus*) because they enjoy a natural freedom and are driven (*ferre*) by their own desires—for their wills are free and they wander here and there, and wherever their spirit leads, there they go’ (Isidore of Seville 2006, XII 2 1 251).
- ³ ‘The other creature is chameleon and it never settles anywhere but in the air. As per the chameleon, who lives solely from air, we may understand a careful class of people in the world who never, in their whole life since they are born, settle their understanding in the world’s things but rather in others, and they do not live nor find permanent delight in something other than that, given their will to remain close to the sweetest Father who in glorious paradise abides’.
- ⁴ ‘The chameleon is an animal which is born in Asia, and there is an abundance of them there. Its face is like a lizard’s but its legs are long and straight, and its claws are fierce and sharp, and its tail is long and curved. Its gait is as slow as a turtle’s and its hide is as hard as a crocodile’s. Its eyes are fierce, and set back in its head, and it does not move them, and for this reason it cannot see to the side; it looks straight ahead. Its behavior is simply astonishing, for it does not eat or drink anything; rather it lives off of air alone which it breathes in. Its color is such that it takes on the color of each thing it touches, and it takes on any other color except red or white, for these are colors it cannot reproduce. You should know that its body is without flesh and without blood, except in the heart, where there is a little. A bird named corax can kill it, but if it eats it, it inevitably dies, unless a laurel leaf saves it from death’ (Latini 1993, I: 185 134–35).
- ⁵ ‘Ctesias writes that in the same country [Ethiopia] is born the creature that he calls the *mantichora* [fabulous] which has a triple row of teeth meeting like the teeth of a comb, the face and ears of a human being, grey eyes, a blood-red colour, a lion’s body, inflicting stings with its tail in the manner of a scorpion, with a voice like the sound of a panpipe blended with a trumpet, of great speed, with a special appetite for human flesh’ (Pliny the Elder 1954).
- ⁶ ‘A beast called mantichore, / conceived of man and animal, / but resembling each of both, / and greedily desiring human flesh. / His voice is beautiful and harmonious, / and he who hears it, in it delights: / he is akin, of course, to the Enemy, / who, pretending, deceives the soul. / It resembles man by its deception, / Who, wanting to attract people to himself, / Becomes an angel of light, / And the beast that lives in delight: / So much does it make those who believe it enjoy / That it leads to damnation’.
- ⁷ ‘But in truth, the sirens were three prostitutes who tricked all passers-by and brought them to ruin. The story goes that they had wings and nails to signify love, which strikes and flies; and they remain in the water because lust was made of moisture’ (Latini 1993, I: 136 107).
- ⁸ ‘The asp is a kind of very poisonous serpent which kills a man with its teeth [wrath]. They are of several types and each one has a way of causing injury for the serpent called an asp causes a man to die of thirst [greed] when it has bitten him; another, called prialis (hypnalis) causes a man to sleep so much that he dies [sloth]; another, called emorois (haemorrhoids), makes him lose all his blood until he dies [lust], and the one named priest (praester) always has its mouth open, and when it sinks its teeth into someone, it swells up until it dies, and then it begins to rot so horribly that no man can bear it [gluttony]. You should know that the asp carries in its head the very shiny and precious stone [envy] called a carbuncle, and when the magician who wants to remove the stone says his words, as soon as the fierce creature realizes it, it puts one of its ears into the ground and covers up the other with its tail, and in this manner it becomes deaf and does not hear the words of the conjurations [pride]’ (Latini 1993, I: 138 108–9).
- ⁹ ‘It is six feet long, and has white spots, and a comb like a rooster, and its front half rises up above the ground while the bottom stays down like a snake. However ferocious they might be, they are killed by weasels, an animal longer than a mouse, red on its back and white on its belly. You should know that Alexander found a great quantity of them between two mountains when he went there with his men, and many of them died because of the basilisk who were looking at them. Neither Alexander nor his men could detect why his men were dying in such a way, but then he had a great glass container made. When the men were inside they could see the basilisk, but the basilisks could not see the men enclosed in the glass; and Alexander had them all killed with arrows. Through this stratagem, his army was saved from them’ (Latini 1993, I: 140 109).

- ¹⁰ ‘The basilisk is a small animal, but so venomous that it kills men with its eyes alone. These are the kings of snakes; and there is no beast in the world that will stand up to them. Wherever they go, because of the great poison they have, they dry up trees and grasses. And every year they shed their skin, as the snake does, and afterward they renew it’.

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