

“THE GODS HAVE TAKEN THOUGHT FOR THEM”: SYNCRETIC ANIMAL
SYMBOLISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN MAGIC

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ABSTRACT

“The Gods Have Taken Thought for Them”: Syncretic Animal Symbolism in Medieval European Magic

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This thesis investigates syncretic animal symbolism within medieval European occult systems. The major question that this work seeks to answer is: what does the ubiquity and importance of magical animals and animal magic reveal about overarching medieval perceptions of the world? In response, I utilize the emerging subfield of Animal History as a theoretical framework to draw attention to an understudied yet highly relevant aspect of occult theory and practice. This work argues that medieval Europeans lived in a fundamentally “enchanted” world compared to our modern age, where the permeable boundaries between physical and spiritual planes imbued nature and its creatures with intrinsic power. In addition, with the increasingly pervasive influence of Christianity, animals took on supplementary and often negative symbolic dimensions within evolving magical systems, yet retained their sense of power within a new syncretic context. By surveying classical occult inheritance, the pervasive influence of Christian doctrine, the use of animals in medical magic, and their rich symbolic potential within medieval literature, this interdisciplinary work highlights the multifaceted medley of Christian and pagan elements that became intertwined in daily life despite seeming doctrinal opposition. Although further scholarly research has yet to be done, analyzing understandings of a world filled with intrinsic occult power offers a valuable and revealing contrast to an age of increasingly sharpened boundaries between animals, human beings, the cosmic realm, and nature.

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INTRODUCTION

The *Epistula Vulteris*, or *Letter of the Vulture*, is a curious medical treatise from the time of Charlemagne, believed to have been written somewhere in the Loire Valley around 800 C.E.¹ “To the province of Babylonia Alexandria, greetings from the King of Rome,” it reads, “the human race does not know how much virtue the vulture has in it and how much it contributes to healing.”² As the remainder of the text reveals, the bird’s uses are truly manifold and often verge on the miraculous; see, for instance, the first four remedies from a fifteen-part list:

(1) The bones from its head (wrapped) in deerskin will cure every pain and migraine (of the head). (2) Its brain you mix with the best of oil and put in the nose, and it will expel all ailments of the head. (3) Wrap the eyes in wolf skin and hang around the neck and it will drive away pain from the eye. (4) If you put its tongue in the right shoe and walk with it (thus) all your enemies will adore you.³

To contemporary readers, such remedies may seem bizarre and superstitious; after all, their spell-like workings, noxious mixtures, and use of charms and amulets fall closer to the realm of magic than scientific medicine. For medieval Europeans, however, receiving a semi-magical prescription for a vulture’s tongue or eye would have been a normal and entirely reasonable occurrence. This is because, as historian Richard Kieckhefer argues, medieval people saw magic as “essentially rational,” “believing, first of all, that it actually worked...and, secondly that its workings were governed by principles that could

¹ “Here Begins the Letter of the Vulture,” in “An Unpublished Treatise on Medicine and Magic from the Age of Charlemagne,” by Loren C. Mackinney, *Speculum* 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1943): 494.

² *Ibid.*, 495.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* 99,

be coherently articulated.”⁴ In addition, prior to advanced knowledge of chemistry and access to artificially created compounds, medieval Europeans drew heavily from nature’s pharmacopeia, utilizing a variety of animal, vegetable, and mineral ingredients to heal the body, mind, and soul. The focus of this investigation, however, is not the rationale behind such remedies or all of their intrinsic parts, but the use of animal ingredients, or put more simply, *why the vulture?*

This work will investigate the role of syncretic animal symbolism within medieval European magic in order to reveal deeply entwined connections between humankind, animals, the natural world, and the occult. As countless forms of primary and secondary source materials reveal, animals were everywhere in physical and imaginative landscapes, from magical texts and literature to artwork and archeological remains. The major question that this project poses is: what does the ubiquity and importance of animals in magical systems tell us about the medieval worldview? In answer, I will argue that medieval Europeans lived in a fundamentally “enchanted” world compared to our modern age, where the permeable boundaries between physical and spiritual planes imbued nature and its creatures with intrinsic power. I will also argue that with the increasingly pervasive influence of Christianity, animals took on supplementary and often negative symbolic dimensions within evolving magical systems, yet retained their sense of power within a new syncretic context.

In order to explore this topic to its fullest extent, my investigation is divided into four main parts. The first section will outline basic components of medieval magic and the power of the natural world, including inherited classical beliefs, the central concept of

⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (June 1994): 814.

a macrocosmic-microcosmic universe, and the dichotomy between learned and “common” magical traditions. The second chapter examines the connections between animals and magic in medieval Christian thought, from Biblical foundations to animalistic portrayals of the Devil and other heavily modified vestiges of classical paganism. Together, these sections serve to outline the theoretical foundations and basic operative principles of medieval magic, as well as highlighting the meaning, power, and the highly significant yet often-overlooked function of animals in various occult workings. The next two chapters provide concrete examples of animal magic and magical animals within medieval thought and practice to reveal their multifaceted practical and symbolic dimensions. The third section surveys the middle ground between medicine and magic, in which myriad animal species played a central role. These practices include the widespread use of animal parts in charms, amulets, and potions, influential treatises such as the leechbook of Bald, and specific applications of Galenic cosmology reflecting the perceived effect of supernatural influence on health. The fourth and final section analyzes syncretic animal symbolism within medieval literature, with a specific focus on both mundane and mythical beasts in magical treatises, the beast fable, hagiography, and romance. Together, these seemingly disparate aspects of medieval occult tradition reveal highly nuanced symbolic meanings ascribed to human beings, animals, and nature that transected boundaries between species as well as magic and religion.

Although no exclusive works on animal symbolism in medieval magic currently exist, many scholars have examined the general features of these occult systems in great depth. Richard Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages* is a prime example, providing an astoundingly comprehensive yet highly detailed overview of occult theory and practice

within medieval Europe. Kieckhefer defines medieval magic as a “crossing point” where “religion converges with science, popular beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and conventions of fiction meet with the realities of daily life.”⁵ He also identifies two major forms of medieval occult practice: demonic magic, which “invokes evil spirits and rests upon a network of religious beliefs and practices,” and natural magic, which “exploits occult powers within nature and is essentially a branch of medieval science.”⁶ Although Kieckhefer only briefly mentions animals (in the context of medical magic) within this work, these two notions are essential for understanding the importance and ubiquity of animals in a wide variety of arcane arts. This is because, as fundamentally natural beings imbued with inherent mystical power, these creatures often crossed the threshold between natural and demonic magic. In addition, the palpable presence of wild and domestic animals in medieval daily life bisected the boundaries between religion and science, learned and popular culture, and fiction and reality in both practical and theoretical ways.

Another influential work on magic in the Middle Ages is Catherine Rider’s *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*. Like Richard Kieckhefer, Rider pays particular attention to the role and place of magic in everyday existence, arguing that medieval Europeans from a wide range of social groups tried to influence the world around them in a myriad of ways.⁷ She also emphasizes the motivations and rationale behind what modern readers would classify as superstitious practices. As Rider states, medieval people lived in a fundamentally “uncertain” world, where life was often short and

⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-2.

⁶ Ibid., 1-2.

⁷ Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 9.

threatened by famine, disease, war, and other terrifying hazards.⁸ Thus, magic offered an opportunity to secure personal protection and “make sense” of varied life circumstances, particularly in the midst of tragedy and insecurity.⁹ Although her discussion of animals in magic is also relatively brief, Rider does mention how ease of access allowed medieval Europeans to fashion spells and charms from animal materials, such as those depicted in the *Letter of the Vulture*.¹⁰ Sophie Page’s *Magic in the Cloister* adds another, more complex dimension to discussions of medieval magic by examining illicit occult interests among the clergy. By studying a surprising number of magic texts found in a Benedictine abbey, this book highlights the intersections between medieval Christianity and the occult, which were fairly common despite doctrinal opposition. According to Page, the main purpose of this examination is to “elucidate the internal rationality...of these magic texts, to examine the orthodoxy of magical approaches to the medieval universe, and to show how it was possible for a group of monks to integrate magical studies with their orthodox worldview.”¹¹ These intersections between the occult and religious orthodoxy also lead Page to place a heavy emphasis on natural magic, which “pervaded” medieval literature and religious culture.¹² As such, her work provides a detailed discussion of animal symbolism within medieval Christian magic, including Biblical foundations, the role of animal parts in medicine, and the delicate, mystical balance between humankind and nature.¹³

⁸ Rider, 9.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹¹ Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2013), 1.

¹² Ibid., 32.

¹³ Ibid., 42.

A significantly smaller yet steadily growing number of scholars have begun studying the general role and place of animals in medieval Europe. The vast majority of such works fall into the emerging subfield of Animal History, which strives to “document the lives of historical animals as an intrinsically valuable history through which we can better understand nonhumans and ourselves.”¹⁴ Beginning with pioneering works such as Ann Norton Greene’s *Horses at Work*, Malcolmson and Mastoris’s *The English Pig*, Virginia Anderson’s *Creatures of Empire*, and Keith Thomas’s *Man and the Natural World*, Animal History places non-human beings as central, active agents in historical change to emphasize the fundamental role of nature in shaping human experiences and existence.¹⁵ Most significantly, as illustrated in Robert Darnton’s examination of the Great Cat Massacre in eighteenth-century Paris, Animal History offers contemporary readers a uniquely intimate form of insight into cultural norms that may seem alien or irreconcilable today.¹⁶ Animal History is also characterized by its interdisciplinary focus, combining fields such as biology, environmental science, philosophy, and literature with animal husbandry and traditional historical analysis.¹⁷ As a whole, Animal History offers scholars a unique revelatory framework for multifaceted societal inquiry while providing a fresh perspective on extensively-analyzed events and themes. Because both wild and domestic creatures have played an essential role in daily life for innumerable peoples, periods, and regions, it is no surprise that they acquired highly nuanced practical and symbolic meanings, leaving hoofprints on the land and on human consciousness.

¹⁴ Susan Nance, ed., *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 78.

¹⁷ Nance, 8.

As Animal History scholar Erica Fudge highlights in her survey of the field, an increasing number of scholars have transcended the usual boundaries of early modern history to explore human-animal relations in the medieval world. Two pioneering examples of such works are Nona Flores's *Animals in the Middle Ages* and Joyce Salisbury's *The Medieval World of Nature*.¹⁸ Flores's edited collection examines a wide variety of beasts from the humble yet "truculent" toad to fantastical creatures such as gargoyles and werewolves. As such, this collection focuses on the symbolic meanings of non-human species to demonstrate how animal images were utilized in medieval art and literature to reflect overarching social values and man's place within the cosmos.¹⁹ *The Medieval World of Nature* expands on this analysis to examine the role of animals both in human society and in the natural world, drawing heavily on literary sources to reveal deeply held theoretical conceptions.²⁰ Other more recent works further extend these arguments and observations. For instance, Susan Crane's *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* seeks to "redirect attention from the animal trope's noisy human tenor back to its obscure furry vehicle" by moving beyond metaphoric and symbolic figuration.²¹ In order to achieve this aim, Crane analyzes specific instances of cross-species "encounters" in fantastical and mundane contexts to emphasize the "living animal" and its impact on human consciousness.²² As a literary scholar, Crane draws heavily on source material such as early medieval Irish poetry, Chaucer's *Canterbury*

¹⁸ Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁹ Nona C. Flores, ed., *Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xi.

²⁰ Joyce Salisbury, ed., *The Medieval World of Nature* (New York: Garland, 1993), 1-2.

²¹ Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

Tales, and illustrated bestiaries, making creative use of Animal History's interdisciplinary framework to enhance readers' understanding of medieval human-animal bonds.

By putting these separate scholarly trajectories in conversation with one another, I will expand upon the frequently alluded to yet only partially developed discussions of animal symbolism within medieval magic. Although many works on medieval Europe include discussions of the occult, few scholars have analyzed the significance and symbolic meaning of animals within this realm, and no current works focus exclusively on this topic. In addition to addressing silences and omissions in a generally understudied field, this topic is historically relevant for its potential to reveal a fundamental part of what makes us human – which is the overarching goal of all animal historians. It also highlights the stark contrast between medieval perceptions of animals, which were highly spiritual and heavily symbolic, to modern interpretations, which are comparatively sterilized by sharper scientific cross-species divides. This work will retain the interdisciplinary character that defines Animal History, drawing on literature, art history, animal husbandry, and theology as well as traditional historical analysis to examine the myriad, complex dimensions of nonhuman beings. Most importantly, it follows closely in the footsteps of Susan Crane's *Animal Encounters* in an attempt to emphasize the “living” animal and its complex connections to mankind.

2
MAGICAL SYSTEMS, CLASSICAL INHERITANCE, AND THE POWER OF
NATURE

In order to comprehend an age so different from our own, it is essential for historians to grapple with foundational and overarching socio-cultural contexts. Whether focusing on political, social, economic, religious, or any other aspect of the past, no analysis of such subjects is complete without sufficiently reflecting on broader societal matrices. In her essay “Father God and Mother Earth” in *The Medieval World of Nature*, Karen Jolly defines this concept as a “worldview,” or “the way a culture, or an individual, perceives its relationship to the divine or supernatural, the physical realm, and other people.”²³ This understanding of a worldview is particularly relevant to our investigation into animal symbolism, as medieval animals straddled a myriad of planes – both physical and spiritual, mystical and mundane – whose blending may seem foreign and mysterious to contemporary readers. This chapter will explore the foundations of medieval magical systems, analyze distinct features in their theory and practice, and reveal their profound yet often underemphasized impact on perceptions of the natural world. As such, this chapter argues that classically-inherited yet distinctly medieval forms of magic imbued all forms of life with intrinsic power, which directly influenced how people understood and interacted with their surrounding world.

To understand the medieval worldview, particularly in regards to magic, we must first take a theoretical jump forward to the early twentieth-century writings of the German sociologist Max Weber. Much of Weber’s work focuses on the concept of

²³ Karen Jolly, “Father God and Mother Earth: Nature Mysticism in the Anglo-Saxon World,” in Salisbury, *Medieval World of Nature*, 224.

modernity, which he characterized as the post-Enlightenment division of human knowledge into several distinct categories, including science (associated with reason), morality (linked to justice), and art (allied with beauty).²⁴ Although the incredibly complex analysis of modernity itself is well beyond the scope of this specific project, what is essential for our purposes is a quote from his 1917 lecture “Science as a Vocation,” which states that “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world.”²⁵ Originally coined by the German poet and philosopher Freidrich Schiller, Weber utilized the notion of “disenchantment” as a framework for explaining political, social, and economic shifts from pagan superstition to rational intellectualism.²⁶ In his analysis of Weber’s writings, Richard Jenkins describes “disenchantment” as “a historical process in which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious; defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable, and manipulable by humans.” He also underscores two distinct aspects of this phenomenon which are simultaneously interlinked: secularization and the decline of magic, and the “increasing scale, scope, and power of the formal means-ends rationalities” in science, law, and politics.²⁷

The first prong of secularization is particularly relevant to this work – specifically for its prelude rather than its “modern” impact. In addition to her generalized definition of a worldview, Karen Jolly also provides a compelling analysis of its medieval variation. Thus, at the center of our perception of the Middle Ages lies a question: why does

²⁴ Simon Gunn, “Modernity,” in *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2006), 110.

²⁵ Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16.

²⁶ Richard Jenkins, “Disenchantment, Enchantment, and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium,” *Max Weber Studies* 1 (2000): 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

medieval Europe appear “mystical” to us? The answer, Jolly argues, lies in recognizing the medieval worldview as a “complex mixture of different traditions, which are better served by using the plural, *worldviews*.”²⁸ Although its use has changed over time to encompass a broader range, the concept of the mystic denotes perceptions of the world influenced by some sort of contact with an “Other” in the spiritual dimension.²⁹ It is precisely this steadfast belief in spiritual contact, particularly when combined with the plurality of *worldviews*, that grants medieval Europe its unique categorization as mystical, which is often erroneously misconstrued as superstitious – the practice of assigning spiritual significance to circumstantial events or chance, which has a negative connotation associated with ignorance. Thus, when Weber described the “disenchantment of the world,” he sought to separate the progressive, utilitarian, and rational modern age from the “backwards” Middle Ages, when magical and religious forces permeated virtually every aspect of society.³⁰ In other words, medieval Europe mainly appears mystical to us today due to the lack of rigid separation between the natural and the supernatural that characterizes modernity.³¹ In following this line of reasoning, I will categorize the medieval worldview as fundamentally “enchanted.” However, rather than portraying this characteristic in a negative light as Weber did, I intend to reclaim the notion of such spiritual permeation as a positive and entirely rational conception.

Our investigation into the “enchanted” world of medieval Europe begins with a relatively simple question: what is magic? As with the vast majority of concepts in medieval intellectual tradition, the origins of this term stem from classical antiquity. The

²⁸ Jolly, 230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 226, 230.

³⁰ Cascardi, 16.

³¹ Jolly, 230.

term “magic” was first used in fifth-century Greece to describe the activities of the magi – Zoroastrian priests from Persia, some of whom may have migrated to the Mediterranean. In describing these individuals’ activities, Greeks and Romans’ understandings were generally broad and “imprecise.” According to their sources, Persian magi engaged in a wide variety of practices – including astrology, healing ceremonies, and the general pursuit of occult knowledge – which became defined as “arts of the magi,” “the magical arts,” or a more simplified version: “magic.”³² Here we must pause for another essential definition: the occult. Derived from the Latin word *occultus*, which means “hidden,” the term referred to any sort of natural phenomenon that human beings could not yet comprehend. Within this definition, there are two important points to note: the occult does not refer to something irrational or unnatural, but rather entirely organic and within the logical order of the world, and that human understanding of such “hidden” phenomena could be eventually attained – indeed, this was the ultimate goal of magical practitioners. It is also relevant to emphasize that from its earliest definition, magic was an “imprecise” activity, partly due to its dealings with mysterious forces, as well as the often-secretive nature of its practitioners.³³ Additionally, classical magic carried a dark and emotional connotation, due to both the foreign nature of the magi and the potentially sinister forces that their works invoked, which also carried over into medieval occult systems.³⁴

Despite the secretive, selective nature of its original participants and the generally fearsome status of the arcane arts, magic became increasingly widespread in both intellectual thought and practice in ancient Greece and Rome. Contemporary scholars

³² Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

have shed light on this trend by examining three main categories of source material: literature, archeology, and the writings of ancient intellectuals. In the literary realm, magic seemed to retain its fearsome and darkly emotional status. For example, in *The Odyssey* and other epics, magic was used to create an “atmosphere of manipulation, isolation, mystery, and fear.”³⁵ One of the key tropes within these works is the ghastly and malevolent witch, such as Erictho from Lucan’s *Civil War*, who is described as “haggard and loathly with age,” with an “awful countenance, overcast with hellish pallor and weighed down by uncombed locks.” More terrifying still, Erictho lives in deserted tombs and preys upon the living, whom she buries alive before “eagerly [venting] her rage on all the limbs, thrusting her fingers into the eyes, scooping out gleefully the stiffened eyeballs, and gnawing the yellow nails on the withered hand.”³⁶ Although she assumes a far more agreeable appearance as a “nymph with lovely braids” in order to entice her victims, the witch Circe from *The Odyssey* is no less wicked, transforming lost travellers into servile wild beasts – including Odysseus’s crew, who she turns into pigs – through the use of “magic drugs.”³⁷ As these examples show, classical literary works generally preserved the formative characterization of magic as evil, dangerous, forbidden, and utilizing organic elements for nefarious purposes. Thus, in addition to the trope of the fearsome female witch, classical literary magic focused heavily on death, destruction, potions, curses, and bodily/spiritual transformations, most notably between the living and the dead and human beings and beasts.

³⁵ Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15.

³⁶ Flint, 16.

³⁷ Robert Fagles, trans., *The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 237.

Archeological finds echo this sinister characterization. For instance, a lead tablet from first to fourth-century Roman Britain reads, “I curse Tretua Maria and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together...thus may she be unable to speak what things are concealed.”³⁸ As this example illustrates, ancient curse tablets commonly wished ill-health, misfortune, death, or damnation on the writer’s enemies, and were frequently pierced with holes in order to increase their destructive effect.³⁹ Other finds such as Greco-Egyptian amulets and magical papyri suggest that even love or attachment magic carried a similar tone, such as a first-century papyri that reads, “I adjure you, demon of the dead...cause Sarapion to pine and melt away out of passion for Dioskoros...inflamm his heart, cause it to melt, and suck out his blood out of love, passion, and pain over me.”⁴⁰ Although demon invocation is a highly complex topic warranting its own analysis in a later chapter, this passage contains many similar elements to the Roman curse tablet, namely a specific target, severely spiteful intentions, and violent personal destruction stemming from the victim’s innards. As with classical literature, these archaeological remains characterize magic as a fearsome practice that twists elements of nature and the human body into grotesquely violent subversions that induce horrific physical and spiritual suffering.

Due to their highly suspect and potentially dangerous nature, ancient intellectuals often did not admit to practicing the arcane arts themselves; however, their writings often contain extensive information on occult theory and practice. For example, Pliny the

³⁸ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 19; “Research Collection Online: Curse,” The British Museum, last modified 2017, accessed May 22, 2018, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1362950&partId=1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 20.

Elder's *Natural History* provides a fascinating overview of "the magic arts." According to Pliny, there are many different types of magic, including those involving air, water, and the stars, man-made appliances such as lamps, basins, and hatchets, as well as complex practices such as prophecy and communication with the dead.⁴¹ Magic is also intimately associated with medicine, as occult practitioners believed that ritualistic applications of natural ingredients could directly aid in healing. For example, ashes from a mad dog's head were prescribed as a remedy for toothache, dirt from a wheel-rut was said to soothe a shrew-mouse bite, and patients could alleviate "catarrhs oppressive to the head" (sinus infections) by kissing a mule's nostrils.⁴² Pliny also states that magic became closely associated with religion and astrology, which when combined with its ubiquitous medical application "enthralled" men's minds and held great sway in a variety of regions.⁴³ Despite acknowledging this impressive influence, however, Pliny's account ultimately denounces magic, calling such practices "detestable," "frivolous," and "false and chimaerical [illusions]."⁴⁴ One particularly entertaining passage cites the magicians' admiration for the mole – a creature cursed by nature to live deep within the ground, doomed by gloom and blindness in a state not far from death – as a sure sign of this frivolity.⁴⁵ Thus, Pliny's attitude reflects the aforementioned classical characterization of magic as ineffective, dangerous, and darkly emotional; however, as other ancient authors demonstrate, this is a decidedly one-sided and incomplete analysis.

Because magic carried a forbidden connotation within classical intellectualism, many writers often took great pains to detail occult practices in a purely descriptive and

⁴¹ Pliny The Elder, *The Natural History* 30.1, 30.5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30.8, 30.7, 30.11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.7

often dismissive manner. This methodology most often took the form of framing occult treatises as a pursuit of natural philosophy, which sought to reveal the hidden yet rational workings of the natural world. In following this logic, Pliny admits that despite his strong denunciation, magic “still bears some shadow of truth upon it,” particularly for those who study “the arts of secret poisoning” rather than ritualistic or divinatory applications.⁴⁶ Similarly, Seneca’s scientific writings found validity in certain forms of divination, such as reading the flights of birds, planetary movements, and the occurrence of meteors, thunder, and lightning as potential portents of future events. Thus, for these ancient intellectuals, occult powers and signs in nature were *not* inherently magical, and activities practiced by the magi were “a parody of such things.”⁴⁷ This distinction would continue to be crucial for medieval European understandings of occult theory and practice, in which the lines between magic, natural philosophy, and religion became increasingly blurred and convoluted. In addition, by focusing primarily on magicians and emphasizing “high” or ritualistic rather than “low” or common magic, these texts ignored the magical practices permeating daily life in the ancient world, from curse tablets and love spells to sacrificial entrail-reading and healing amulets. Nevertheless, these proto-scientific texts provided material that later writers would indeed classify as magic, and thus had a profound impact in shaping medieval views of the occult.⁴⁸

Out of the three aforementioned sources – literature, archeology, and the writings of ancient intellectuals – this third category presents the most revealing and contextually explicit information regarding classical magic, and was also the most influential in shaping inherited medieval magic. In order to properly apply these writings to their

⁴⁶ Pliny, 30.7.

⁴⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

fundamentally distinct worldview, medieval Europeans spent considerable effort shaping occult practices to fit within their own intellectual and religious contexts. As I have argued in a previous work on the rationality of medieval medicine, this process often involved reconfiguring classical pagan magic to fit within established frameworks of monotheistic spirituality.⁴⁹ This restructuring hinges in large part on the distinct yet easily blurred boundaries between magic and religion – two terms that must be properly defined before expanding our analysis of medieval reconfigurations. According to magic and witchcraft scholar Brian Levack, religion is defined as the invocation of and supplication to a divine spirit or God, while magic entails the human *manipulation* of natural and supernatural forces to achieve a certain end.⁵⁰ As Richard Kieckhefer argues, however, these definitions originate from sixteenth-century religious debate and late nineteenth-century anthropology, and as such are insufficient for understanding medieval magic. Kieckhefer thus proposes an alternate definition that “focuses on the intended *force of action* rather than the type of power invoked.”⁵¹ This distinction, in turn, leads to two separate categories of medieval occult practice: natural magic, a “branch of science...that dealt with ‘occult powers’ (or hidden virtues) within nature,” and demonic magic, a “perversion of religion...that turned away from God and towards demons for their help in human affairs.”⁵² In other words, medieval Europeans perceived a distinct difference between practitioners studying and perhaps prescribing certain herbs and animal ingredients in order to utilize their magical healing properties, and practitioners who summoned demons to teach them secrets of the natural world. My investigation into

⁴⁹ Solange Kiehlbauch, “Wisdom of the Cosmos: The Rationality of Magic in Medieval Medicine,” (senior project, California Polytechnic State University, 2016), 5.

⁵⁰ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

⁵¹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9.

animal symbolism within medieval magic adopts Kieckhefer's distinction between natural and demonic magic in order to highlight these theoretical boundaries and their different resulting applications and perceptions; however, I will also incorporate Levack's assertion that magic and religion occur on a "continuum" of supernatural power.⁵³ Together, these two methodological frameworks provide a suitable foundation for examining animal symbolism within medieval magic – an aspect that few if any scholars have sufficiently touched upon. In addition, the interdisciplinary framework of Animal History and my emphasis on religious syncretism provides a uniquely detailed glimpse into how medieval Europeans viewed mystical forces within nature and its creatures.

After analyzing the classical origins, definitions, and contextual meanings surrounding medieval magic, we must also examine its major theoretical principles and operative functions. Two specific elements are particularly relevant in this regard: magical astrology and the doctrine of sympathies. Like many aspects of medieval magic, these principles primarily stem from classical source material. For instance, Ptolemy's *Configurations of Sun, Moon, and Stars* states that:

Some power from the aether's eternal nature spreads over the whole region around the earth and permeates it, making it everywhere subject to change for the following reason: of the primary elements beneath the moon, fire and air are surrounded and altered by motions of the aether, and these elements in turn

⁵³ Levack, 5.

surround everything else – earth, water, and the animals and plants that are in them.⁵⁴

By this logic, the cosmic potency of the heavens directly influences all life on earth, imbuing plants, animals, minerals, and human beings with a poignant source of power. An excerpt from the medieval magical text *Picatrix* echoes this concept in a discussion of the “effects and powers” of each planet. For instance, according to this text Saturn has particular influence on the human right ear and spleen, black stones, specific animals (black camels, pigs, monkeys, dogs and cats), those in professions of law and learning, and certain natural features (black mountains, dark streams, deeply dug wells).⁵⁵ This theory of astrological influence would bleed into virtually every aspect of medieval life, as the heavens were held to influence a variety of elements including the balance of fortune, disease and treatment, personality and temperament, and, most importantly, the generalized workings of the natural world.

Rather than the influence of outside, cosmic forces, the doctrine of sympathies operated by internal correspondences in which certain natural substances could affect something with similar features. For instance, liver-shaped leaves could promote the health of the liver, or as in *The Letter of the Vulture*, bones from the head could cure a migraine, and medicine from its eyes could soothe eye pain.⁵⁶ The reverse of this principle is antipathy, which holds that dissimilar substances fundamentally repel each other. This is what governs Pliny’s mention of using dirt from a wheel-rut to heal a

⁵⁴ “Configurations of Sun, Moon and Stars: Ptolemy, Treatise in Four Books,” in *The Book of Magic, From Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Brian Copenhaver (New York: Penguin, 2016), 141.

⁵⁵ “The Various Kinds of Magic. Hugh of St. Victor: *Didacalion* (late 1120s),” in *The Occult in Medieval Europe: A Documentary History*, ed. and trans. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 71.

⁵⁶ Mackinney, 494.

shrew-mouse bite, as the mouse itself would not cross such a mark, and thus neither would the wound.⁵⁷ Both astrology and the doctrine of sympathies occupied a sort of gray area in classical and medieval magical theory, falling somewhere in between proto-scientific natural philosophy and magic. However, the hidden or occult nature of their specific workings meant that such practices often strayed more heavily into the latter field, where they attained a heightened sense of mystical quality and function.

Now that we have laid out the foundational principles and major features of medieval magic, we must also explore who practiced magic and their motivations for doing so. In contemporary understandings of the occult in past and present, magic is generally regarded as a specialized activity practiced by highly skilled, spiritually powerful, or otherwise exceptional individuals; in other words, it is not a readily accessible or particularly widespread practice.⁵⁸ As we have seen in our discussion of the Persian magi, this exclusivity frequently aroused public suspicion, which in turn led to generally negative interpretations of the arcane arts. However, when looking at medieval source material, this stereotype becomes difficult to maintain. Rather than a specific group of learned and easily identifiable magicians, a wide variety of medieval people engaged in magical activities. These included diviners, clergy members, medical practitioners, and even ordinary men and women without any sort of special training.⁵⁹ Part of this variety stemmed from distinct skill levels and specializations within these groups. For instance, monks with access to classical texts could delve into complex occult theory, folk healers and midwives often prescribed charms and herbal remedies, and physicians consulted astrological charts for procedures such as bloodletting. There is

⁵⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

also evidence of overlap in the types of magic used by this wide range of practitioners – a phenomenon that Kieckhefer calls the “common tradition of medieval magic”⁶⁰ This term does not imply the universality of specific types of magic in medieval society, nor that these types remained unchanged over time; rather, magic in medieval Europe was widely distributed among the general populace, and often passed within and between various social spheres. In seeking to understand why so many medieval Europeans practiced some semblance of magic, we must return to the concept of the worldview (or worldviews). As previously mentioned in the introduction, medieval Europeans lived in a fundamentally “uncertain” world, which was under constant threat from a variety of hazards. Thus, as Catherine Rider argues, medieval people “from all parts of society...tried to influence the world around them in a variety of ways.” Their reasons are easy to understand: they wanted their children to survive, their business ventures to succeed, their crops to keep producing, their livestock to stay healthy, and many other concerns that still resonate today.⁶¹ Furthermore, because magic was believed to be rational (meaning, as previously stated, that it actually worked, and its workings were governed by coherent principles), it is no surprise that medieval Europeans from all walks of life placed faith in its power to influence their lives. While religion also offered solace and the possibility of divine intervention to deliver one from hardship, magic, by its definition, utilized manipulation of natural and supernatural forces to give a broader semblance of control over earthly affairs. It is no wonder, then, that occult practice permeated various social groups, professions, and specific aspects of medieval society,

⁶⁰ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 56.

⁶¹ Rider, 9.

where it subsequently took on syncretic characteristics to maintain acceptability as well as harness maximum supernatural power.

In addition to providing some semblance of control over hardship and misfortune, magic also fundamentally shaped how medieval Europeans viewed their surrounding world. As with the theoretical foundations of magic itself, much of these views stemmed from classical Greece and Rome. Perhaps the most important influence was the Neo-Platonic school of thought, founded by Plotinus, which emphasized “the idea of the supernatural and transcending the material, transitory world for the eternal,” as well as a the concept of a “World Soul” responsible for the “workings of divine providence and holding all in order.”⁶² This principle is evident in a passage from *Life of Apollonius*, which states that: “all things must be enchained; and the sympathy and correspondence obtained by any one closely knit organism must exist, first and most intensely, in the All.”⁶³ This belief also led to the characterization of nature as “the primal mage and sorcerer” in classical antiquity, as cosmic power was believed to influence and infiltrate plants, animals, and minerals, as well as the human body and worldly affairs.⁶⁴ This idea, which will be explored in greater depth in the chapter on medico-magic, constituted a major foundational principle within medieval occult practice. Another key aspect of this belief was the medieval emphasis on allegory and symbolic meaning. In her introduction to *The Medieval World of Nature*, Joyce Salisbury defines this perception of nature as multi-layered and complex, in large part because medieval Europeans “moved

⁶² Corinne J. Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 35.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ From a treatise on astrology written around 337 C.E., quoted in Copenhaver, 156.

comfortably from the pragmatic to the allegoric and back again.”⁶⁵ Thus, by this logic, to the medieval mind the natural landscape served as “a means of exploring the truths hidden within the created world,” which most often carried religious meanings, as we will see in the next chapter.⁶⁶ In addition and most importantly for the purposes of our investigation, it also significantly influenced medieval perceptions of and relationships with animals.

One of the best ways to assess the medieval view of nature is to analyze primary source material. A prime example is a twelfth-century “field ceremony” for healing the land from supernatural harm or witchcraft. This ceremony contains directions for several ritualistic acts that build upon each other in a complex magico-religious rite. For instance, the first ritual instructs the curate to take four “sods” from each corner of the land, blend oil, honey, yeast, milk, and parts of trees and herbs from the land and mix them with holy water, and let this concoction “drip three times on the bottom of the sods.” The curate should then recite: “*Crescite, grow, et multiplicamini, and multiply, et replete, and fill, terram, the earth. In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti sitis benedicti,*” and afterwards say an “Our Father.” Finally, the sods should be carried to the church, where a priest will sing four Masses over them and “turn the green sides to the altar,” after which they can finally be returned to the land before the setting of the sun.⁶⁷ The “field ceremony” is a prime example of the “nature mysticism” typical of the early medieval period, which “reveals the existence of holistic worldviews lacking the fundamental distinctions of natural-supernatural and reason-revelation taken for granted in modern Western

⁶⁵ Salisbury, *Medieval World of Nature*, xii.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Jolly, 221.

culture.”⁶⁸ In other words, this rite is a prime example of a fundamentally “enchanted” perception of the natural world, where the earthly realm and its plants, animals, and other features serve as a permeable canvas for supernatural influence. As a result, this ceremony demonstrates how purposeful human actions and ritualistic supplications could invoke divine favor and blessings within the earthly realm. In addition, the field ceremony represents the fundamentally syncretic nature of medieval magic by invoking God the Father and the “mother of earth,” as well as combining distinctly pagan elements (plant and animal ingredients, timing with planetary movements, the use of corners and directions) with Christian prayers, holy water, and the Mass.⁶⁹ Thus, these magico-religious crossings serve to illuminate “mystical” medieval perceptions and interpretations of the natural world, which in turn support their rationale of how magic could be utilized to influence their lives.

This syncretic blend of classical influence (namely the Neo-Platonic conception of the universe), Germanic folk traditions, and Christian philosophy also combined to create a uniquely medieval worldview in which “the microcosm and macrocosm were interconnected through God, and everything was alive in the presence of God and other spiritual beings.”⁷⁰ Like many fundamental aspects of medieval magic, this macrocosm-microcosm interpretation of the universe was also principally derived from classical tradition. This ancient doctrine pairs small and large cosmological sectors within the structure of an “ordered world,” which in turn presents a “corresponding similarity in

⁶⁸ Jolly, 224.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

pattern, nature, or structure” between all earthly beings and the greater universe.⁷¹ In other words, because the earthly realm was essentially a smaller version of the universe, these two cosmological spaces shared many basic similarities, and the power of the heavens could affect all life on earth. A fascinating document known as the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds* contains a compelling passage illustrating the medieval interpretation of this doctrine, stating that: “man is a little world by himself, for the likenesses and similitudes that he hath of the great world, which is an aggregation of the nine skies, four elements, and all things in them contained.”⁷² As this passage demonstrates, medieval conceptions of this doctrine generally focused on humanity, particularly the reflection of the universe within the body and the symbolic value of the cosmos as an anthropomorphized yet ultimately divine construction.

The microcosm-macrocosm was also believed to imbue power into other aspects of the earthly realm besides humanity. Thus, as the English theologian Thomas of Chobham wrote in the *Summa Confessorum*, “natural philosophers say the power of nature is concentrated above all in three things: in words and herbs and in stones.”⁷³ In other words, much like the eternal “aether” that Ptolemy believed affects the earth, water, air and all the plants and animals within them, medieval Europeans saw cosmological influence reflected in all beings, which often corresponded to a sense of intrinsic supernatural power.⁷⁴ Because medieval Europeans “experienced and knew this unified reality through their senses an interior reflection on what they perceived,” notions of

⁷¹ “Microcosm and Macrocosm,” *New World Encyclopedia*, accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Microcosm_and_Macrocosm.

⁷² Guy Marchant, *The Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds* (London: Peter Davies, 1930), 100.

⁷³ Thomas of Chobham, quoted in Rider, 40.

⁷⁴ “Configurations of Sun, Moon and Stars,” in Copenhaver, 141.

magic and the supernatural utterly saturated their perceptions of the natural world.⁷⁵ As a result, this interpretation of the microcosm-macrocosm was particularly influential in shaping both the underlying principles of medieval occult practice as well as general conceptions of nature and its creatures.

The most relevant aspect of this belief in relation to animal symbolism within medieval magic is that macrocosmic power also extended to and was contained within a wide variety of earthly creatures. As with human beings, these heavenly movements directly dictated animals' behavior, influenced their appearance, and resulted in specific properties within their derivative parts. Another excerpt from the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds* perfectly illustrates this relationship as well as highlighting the intimate and highly symbolic associations between humans and animals. The section of this text on medical philosophy contains an illustration and written description of “the four complexions” – specific personality traits corresponding to the four humors (essential fluids in the body that formed the basis of medieval medicine).⁷⁶ The illustration depicts four men with different clothes (in type and color), facial expressions, and professional attributes in order to demonstrate the disparate nature of the four complexions (Figure 1). This image was a common motif in medieval medical texts, and as such will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Four; however, the *Kalendar's* version contains a particularly unique and relevant inclusion. As shown in Figure One, each of the four men is accompanied by animals (the lion, the ape, the ram, and the hog, respectively), which the text explains correspond to each complexion's personality. For instance, the “fiery, hot, and dry” choleric type, who is standing beside a lion, “hath wine of the lion, that is to say,

⁷⁵ Jolly, 224.

⁷⁶ Marchant, 151.

when he is drunken he chideth [and] fighteth.” By contrast, the melancholic man, who is flanked by a hog, is “heavy, covetous...and slow,” and “when he is drunketh desireth sleep, and to lie down.”⁷⁷ It is also relevant to note that the only other element in this illustration is a sky filled with large stars (a common motif throughout the text, shown in Figure 2), which denotes the movements of the heavens on the four bodily humors, as well as reflecting the interrelated macrocosmic and microcosmic realms. In directly relating human and animal behaviors and their correspondence to the body, the *Kalendar* provides a revealing glimpse into medieval conceptions of the natural world and the symbolic supernatural elements that were entwined within.

This chapter has outlined the basic principles of medieval magic, from its classical inheritance to the “common tradition” among various practitioners, as well as surveying the “mystical” elements of nature, in which supernatural influence directly extended to the land and animals.⁷⁸ As such, I argue that classical paganism formed the basis for medieval understandings of occult theory and practice despite the doctrinal incompatibility between these beliefs and Christianity. In addition, the co-opted ancient notion of the microcosmic-macrocosmic universe imbued medieval understandings of the cosmos with a sense of spiritual interconnectedness between all living beings. In order to comprehend a worldview so different from our own, it is essential to outline basic theoretical principles as well as contextualize these elements within contemporary principles of rationality. Although overlooked or underemphasized by the vast majority of scholars studying medieval magic, natural elements such as plants, animals, and minerals played a vital role in shaping how medieval Europeans sought to change or

⁷⁷ Marchant, 151.

⁷⁸ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 56; Jolly, 230.

influence their lives. However, this examination of medieval occult theory is also missing another critical component: the pervasive influence of Christianity on physical and spiritual aspects of the world. The following chapter explores this topic in greater depth in order to properly contextualize medieval cross-species connections and symbolic interpretations of mundane and magical animals. In doing so, it serves to highlight the theoretical foundations of syncretic animal magic, which became surprisingly widespread in various aspects of daily life.

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE, DEMONIC MAGIC, AND MEDIEVAL PERCEPTIONS OF ANIMALS

Contemporary standards of historical scholarship and anthropology have drawn sharp lines between the disciplines of magic, science, and religion. These boundaries largely stem from differences in motivations, types of practitioners, operational principles, and other key conceptual and contextual factors. For instance, magic's emphasis on active manipulation is different from religious prayer and invocation, and natural philosophy's acknowledgement of occult virtues in nature is at odds with modern scientific principles. In the medieval world, however, such boundaries were far less distinct, and the real question in determining relationships between these categories was their correspondence to "approved" standards of religion and "ordinary" science. Thus, although the terms magic and religion were both "current in medieval discourse," they "would not usually have been viewed as opposites or even as essentially distinct categories"; in fact, these practices were often closely intertwined.⁷⁹ Outlining the complex and often-cooperative relationship between magic and religion is an essential prerequisite for investigating any aspect of medieval occult systems, including the use and meaning of syncretic animal symbolism. This chapter will explore how Christian doctrines, the Bible, and scholastic theologians shaped medieval magic, most notably in drawing distinctions between its natural and demonic forms. It will also highlight how Christianity influenced perceptions of the natural world and the animals that dwelled within it, most notably in heavenly dictation of their magical and mundane uses and the association of certain beasts with demons, filth, and sin. I will argue that medieval

⁷⁹ Kieckhefer, "Specific Rationality," 821.

Christianity built upon classical perceptions of occult forces in the natural world in a fundamentally syncretic process that imbued animals with positive and negative forms of supernatural power to alternatively help or harm magical practitioners.

The previous chapter has already outlined key distinctions between categories of natural and demonic magic; however, in order to understand the rationale behind this separation, we must contextualize their meanings within medieval Christian thought. First, we will examine the theory and practice of natural magic. Derived largely from classical writings and tradition, natural magic combined the influences of ancient scholars such as Pliny and Galen with Arabic tradition to explain the hidden wonders of the natural world.⁸⁰ Closely allied with the trope of wonder, natural magic attempted to provide satisfactory explanations for mysterious virtues contained in plants, animals, the cosmos, and other facets of the world that could not be sufficiently explained by natural philosophy. These included, for example, “action of distance” behind the basilisk’s murderous gaze, magnetic attraction, and poisonous or healing properties in certain herbs.⁸¹ As such, natural magic was generally a benign and often beneficial endeavor, particularly because practitioners often attributed such virtues to God’s wondrous and purposeful plan for creation. Demonic magic, on the other hand, involved human manipulation of the world through alliance with supernatural forces, which necessarily involved a “complex interplay of wills.” In this sense, although forms of natural magic could be equally complex, their workings were “less fraught with [potentially dangerous] personality.”⁸² In classical antiquity, *daimones* were portrayed as morally ambivalent beings believed to dwell in the murky “middle air” between the earth and moon, although

⁸⁰ Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” 818.

⁸¹ Page, 32.

⁸² Kieckhefer, 820.

their movements were by no means restricted to this region.⁸³ Ancient authors such as Plato and Chalcidius classified *daimones* as intermediaries between the gods and men who could be summoned by learned practitioners for divinatory or other occult purposes.⁸⁴ However, like Christian theologians, they also recognized that such forms of magic often worked through the “deliberately sought intervention” of spirits willing to collaborate in nefarious activities, including murder, forced seduction, and personal aggrandizement.⁸⁵ With the influence of Christian doctrine derived primarily from the Bible, demons became associated with moral failings, evil, and corruption, and those who summoned them were also subject to the same spiritual flaws.⁸⁶ As hideous, malicious beings that had fallen from God’s grace, demons could thus form profane alliances with humans in order to fulfill their darkest and most corrupt desires.

In order to comprehend the multifaceted medieval medley of classical paganism and Christianity, we must first identify their similarities and differences and contextualize their major doctrines. For both learned scholars and common folk alike, the defining principles of magic within a Christian worldview came from three primary sources: the Bible, theologians, and popular practice. Examining these sources both individually and in conjunction provides a more nuanced understanding of the increasing separation between natural and demonic magic within medieval intellectual tradition. This separation also led to a notable shift in perception around the thirteenth century, as natural magic began to serve an “operative” function in explaining mysterious principles of the natural world, while demonic magic was regarded as self-serving, evil, and

⁸³ Saunders, 14; Flint, 103.

⁸⁴ Flint, 103.

⁸⁵ Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” 825.

⁸⁶ Flint, 105.

malicious.⁸⁷ In this sense, natural and demonic magic gained different degrees of acceptability within a medieval Christian worldview, which subsequently led to increased instances of syncretism. In addition, these shifting views of magic and intrinsic occult virtues directly influenced how medieval Europeans viewed the natural world, its creatures, and humanity's place within it.

It should come as no surprise that the biblical attitude toward magic is one of firm denunciation. This is mainly due to two of its central ten commandments: “you shall have no other gods before me,” and the ban against worshipping false idols – both of which were pagan practices, and thus explicitly forbidden (Exod. 20:3-4 (NIV)). Another prohibited pagan practice was the use of magic. Interestingly, despite its generally negative characterization, both the Old and New Testament contain many detailed references to magic. In her examination of these references, Corinne Saunders notes that the *possibility* of magic is not called into question in the Bible; rather, such passages scrutinize the *extent* of occult powers, as well as judging their respective status as licit or illicit. This contrast serves to differentiate between benevolent and evil forces within the supernatural dimension, where the power of demons and other forms of illicit magic are “repeatedly contrasted with the power of Yahweh and found wanting.”⁸⁸ It also inadvertently provides a window into the reality of ancient occult practice, which has intrigued historical and contemporary scholars alike. One illustrative example is a passage from the Book of Exodus describing the plague of boils – one of the ten plagues God sent to punish the Egyptians for their crimes against the Israelites. Despite their supposed prowess, the Egyptian magicians could not predict (through the use of

⁸⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 12.

⁸⁸ Saunders, 36.

prophecy) or stave off (through magical or other means) this horrific curse, nor could they stand before Moses in order to seek retribution, “for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians” (Exod. 9:8-12). By contrast, in the Book of Genesis, Laban states that “I have *learned by divination* that the Lord has blessed me because of you” when he urges Jacob and his family to stay with him despite their protests (Gen. 30:27). As these examples illustrate, certain aspects of magical practice such as prophecy, divination, or authorized forms of ritual were acceptable when involving God, particularly in a passive context (God bestowing blessings, knowledge, or miracles on His followers) versus an active one (when magicians attempt to foresee or manipulate a certain outcome, often with the aid of demons).

The New Testament continues this denunciation of the occult by contrasting Christ’s miracles with magicians’ parlor tricks, as well as showcasing His power over demonic forces. For instance, the Book of Acts tells of a man named Simon who “had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria.” When Simon “heard the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ,” he believed, converted, and was baptized, after which he was continually “astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw” (Acts 8:9-15). The trope of the reformed magician is a common and meaningful biblical theme, as it serves to simultaneously showcase the falsity of sorcery, potential dangers of the occult, and the superior power of God’s workings in enriching human lives.⁸⁹ In another passage from the Book of Matthew, Jesus frees two men from torturous possession by casting demons out of their body and into a herd of pigs (Matthew 8:28-34). The act of casting demons into animals is an important

⁸⁹ For other examples, see Acts 13:6-11 and Acts 16:16-19.

detail warranting analysis later in this chapter; until then, the major takeaway from this scene is Christ's superior, divinely-sanctioned power, as well as the demons' malevolent assault on human beings. As this passage demonstrates, Judeo-Christian doctrine transformed demons from their classical status as morally-neutral spiritual messengers to "agents of human misfortune," who dwelled in the underworld with the Devil and issued forth to torment people.⁹⁰ Together, these examples illustrate the biblical treatment of magic as a "deeply suspect activity," while also highlighting the existence of a "multi-faceted" supernatural dimension.⁹¹ Most importantly, they also establish a clear spiritual hierarchy, with God's miracles, divine power, and blessings cast as superior and triumphant over pagan charlatans and demonic magic.

Medieval theologians combined these foundational biblical teachings with the prevailing religious, intellectual, and social contexts of their time. Although these writings, like the Bible, generally condemn magical practice, they also contain surprisingly rich insight into medieval understandings of the shadowed realm of the occult. In particular, the writings of Augustine of Hippo, Isidore of Seville, and William of Auvergne reveal highly nuanced interpretations of both natural and demonic magic as these authors tried to interpret such practices within a Christian worldview. A common theme within these works is the acknowledgement and explanation of occult virtues in nature, which led to attempts to differentiate between their licit and illicit functions. In *The City of God*, for instance, Augustine acknowledges that there are many "marvels" in the world that human reason cannot account for, but which are nevertheless true. These

⁹⁰ Flint, 20; Jeffrey Burton Russel, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 71.

⁹¹ Saunders, 36.

include mares in Cappadocia that are impregnated by the wind, apples from Sodom that crumble to dust despite appearing ripe, a Persian stone called selenite whose “interior brilliancy” reflects the moon, and the diamond’s resistance to breakage by any substance except goat’s blood.⁹² Although such properties are technically classified as occult due to their mysteriousness, Augustine asserts that they derive this perplexing power from God’s role as the “Prime Mover” of the universe.⁹³ Thus, according to the medieval interpretation of the classical microcosm-macrocosm, the existence of occult virtues within plants, animals, minerals, and stars could be appropriately reconciled with Christianity. However, Augustine explicitly condemns magical operations that utilize such powers, as they invoke the aid of demons to bend natural forces to human will.⁹⁴ Similarly, Isidore’s *Etymologies* argues that “magic arts” such as divination (geomancy, hydromancy, augury, casting lots, etc.) and necromancy rely on “the summoning of demons,” while other magical phenomena such as portents in dreams, oracles, and monstrous prodigious births arise from “God wanting to indicate what is to come,” and are thus valid and acceptable.⁹⁵ Additionally, he classifies the practice of astrology as “partly natural, and partly superstitious”; it is natural and acceptable when charting the movements of celestial bodies with the seasons (in pursuit of understanding), but superstitious and verging on forbidden magic when using these movements for divination or in correspondence with the body (in pursuit of manipulation).⁹⁶ William of Auvergne was one of the first Western writers to explicitly categorize natural magic as a form of natural philosophy and recognize its possibilities; however, like Augustine and Isidore,

⁹² Augustine, *City of God* 21.5, 21.4.

⁹³ Saunders, 64.

⁹⁴ Page, 32.

⁹⁵ Isidore, *Etymologies* 11.3.4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.27.1.

he portrays all other forms of magic in extensively negative terms, stating that they are “largely ineffectual without the aid of demons or idols, and hence, forbidden.”⁹⁷

According to Richard Kieckhefer, these theologians’ writings provide “definitive formulations” of demonic magic in the West. In particular, the use of the term *magia* reveals the medieval scholastic belief that demonic intervention was a consistent factor in all magical transactions, which were essentially derived from the “conflict model of spiritual process.” According to this model, although a Christian person’s life was generally one of spiritual ascent to a state of purity and closeness to the divine, he or she was also subject to constant conflict with invisible, potentially malevolent spirits.⁹⁸ This conception of the unseen universe would greatly impact how medieval Europeans understood both positive and negative life circumstances as well as anxieties regarding diabolical malice, trickery, and temptation. In addition, these influential theologians provide compelling insight into how medieval Europeans sought to reconcile conflicting principles within their spiritual worldview. This philosophical grappling with contradictory elements such as classical intellectualism, monotheistic denunciations of paganism, and the lingering influence of nature mysticism produced a fascinating, multi-layered, and ultimately syncretic interpretation of spiritual forces operating within the physical world. These intellectual interpretations would also filter down into the common, everyday conceptions of magical practice, which generally harnessed natural elements rather than demonic forces.

As the central notion of the “common tradition” of medieval magic reminds us,

⁹⁷ Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” 819; Saunders, 112.

⁹⁸ Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” 817.

medieval Europeans from all levels of society practiced various forms of magic in their daily lives.⁹⁹ From monks and parish priests to physicians and folk healers, the use of occult practices – even if they were not explicitly understood as such – offered the potential to produce good fortune, spiritual comfort, physical healing, and other benefits or securities in a harsh, uncertain world. Examining how ordinary medieval Europeans interpreted and practiced intermingled pagan and Christian understandings and forms of magic allows us to gain further insight into the dualistic process of division and syncretism that these competing influences produced. In her groundbreaking work *Magic in the Cloister*, Sophie Page highlights the blurred boundaries between medieval Christianity, natural philosophy, and the occult by examining the magical texts found in St. Augustine’s Benedictine abbey. According to Page, there is strong evidence that monks at St. Augustine’s and other monasteries studied and practiced magic to serve their community’s needs.¹⁰⁰ The reason that such works were tolerated within this orthodox religious context was their focus on “natural” or “licit” forms of magic; in other words, because intrinsic occult virtues in natural materials such as plants, animals, and minerals were derived from the Creator, the monks at St. Augustine’s could utilize and study them without being accused of demonic magic.¹⁰¹ Some ordained practitioners, however, did use illicit forms of magic, such as clerical necromancers who claimed to conjure neutral spirits but often explicitly identified these beings with demons from Christian theology, although such instances were extremely rare and highly taboo.¹⁰²

The use of magic also extended beyond learned religious communities into the

⁹⁹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 56.

¹⁰⁰ Page, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 31.

¹⁰² Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” 835.

general medieval populace. Ronald Hutton's analysis of pagan practices among medieval English peasants provides fascinating insight into this phenomenon. In examining the nature of medieval Christianity, Hutton characterizes this religion as "a kind that matched paganism in so many structural respects that it provided an entirely satisfactory substitute for it," particularly as certain features transferred largely intact from old to new.¹⁰³ More specifically, he argues that practices such as vestigial polytheism (the cult of saints), seasonal festivals, women's ritual involvement, and the central rite of sacrifice demonstrate this continuity, although medieval peasants could not be explicitly classified as pagan, as they worshipped the Christian God.¹⁰⁴ Although the widespread use of oral tradition makes it difficult to know whether such practices actually involved demonic forces, they do serve to illustrate the coexistence of classical paganism and Christianity among the general population. In addition, these examples illustrate an important feature of medieval occult tradition: that the basic principles ascribed to magic were part of a "common culture," even if the theological foundation of those principles was part of a "specialized subculture."¹⁰⁵ In other words, complex scholarly understandings of magic eventually filtered down to the masses, where they took on their own nuanced syncretic meanings when applied to everyday existence. This phenomenon would become particularly apparent within the field of medicine – so much so that it warrants its own detailed analysis in the following chapter.

In addition to various forms of natural and demonic magic, the Bible and its interpretation by theologians also influenced how medieval Europeans viewed and

¹⁰³ Ronald Hutton, "How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?," *Folklore* 122, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 241.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 242-244.

¹⁰⁵ Kieckhefer, "Specific Rationality," 835.

interacted with all aspects of creation. The main foundational principle informing these perceptions was the account of Earth's creation in the Book of Genesis, in which God says, "Let us make mankind to our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen. 1:26). This line would profoundly impact the medieval view of nature by establishing the principle of God-given human dominion over all other forms of life. The notion of mankind's dominion was further reinforced by another biblical passage that emerged as a popular motif in medieval art: Adam's naming of the animals (Gen. 2:20), which demonstrated that he "understood their true nature and had the right and ability to control and use them" (Figure 3).¹⁰⁶ Medieval Europeans interpreted this biblical authority by reasoning that animals existed for human benefit – namely by providing meat, milk, fiber, labor, and other primarily agricultural uses. Contemporary theologians also echoed and expanded on animals' God-given purpose to serve mankind. For instance, a passage from Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis* directly references 1:26, stating that:

At this point we must also note that God, after saying "our image," immediately added, "And let him have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air," and the other irrational animals. From this we are to understand that man was made in the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses the brute beasts. This is, of course, his reason or mind or intellect, or whatever we wish to call it.¹⁰⁷ This passage also introduces another fundamental element informing medieval perceptions of animals: the

¹⁰⁶ Joyce Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

¹⁰⁷ Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 1.96, quoted in Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 33.

superiority of human reason and its absence in “brute beasts.”¹⁰⁸ Numerous works from influential scholars such as John of Salisbury and Thomas Aquinas re-affirm the role of human reason in emphasizing mankind’s uniqueness and reinforcing his control over all other earthly beings. According to several scholars studying medieval Animal History, this trend served two main purposes: to demarcate clear boundaries between humans and animals in order to distinguish Christianity from paganism (where these lines were often blurred), and to emphasize “the goodness and harmony of God’s creation and its use by mankind.”¹⁰⁹ Medieval intellectuals and theologians also interpreted human-animal relations by placing them within an overarching cosmic structure known as the Great Chain of Being. Originally derived from classical authorities, particularly the Neoplatonists, this conception of the metaphysical order of the universe linked all beings in a hierarchical ladder to form one interconnected whole.¹¹⁰ Medieval intellectual tradition added to this order by imposing Christianity on its existing structure, which placed God at the top in the celestial realm, followed by angels, humans, animals, plants, stones, and all other lower earthly beings arranged in descending ranks. Together, these complex perceptions of animals and nature set the stage for highly nuanced symbolic meanings associated with certain creatures.

These mixed tenets of Judeo-Christian and classical philosophy influenced not only medieval European theoretical conceptions of animals – they also shaped their lived experiences with such creatures. Medieval animals generally fell into two broad categories shaped by their interactions with humanity: wild and domestic. According to

¹⁰⁸ Steel, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 3; Page, 36.

¹¹⁰ “Great Chain of Being,” *New World Encyclopedia*, accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Great_Chain_of_Being.

theologians such as Ambrose of Milan and Isidore of Seville, wild animals were controlled by God himself, while domestic beasts were subject to and created to serve man (as we have already seen in Genesis 1:26).¹¹¹ In this regard, domestic animals were considered human property, and were valued for three main contributions: materials, labor, and social status, which served as a “constant sub-text” informing human-animal relations.¹¹² In accordance with this understanding, medieval Europeans utilized livestock for meat, milk, fibers, and other natural resources, which fulfilled these creatures’ God-given purpose. They also hunted and harvested wild beasts for practical and recreational use, which often carried a dualistic symbolic connotation, such as the stag’s role both as venison and a sign of the hunter’s noble status.¹¹³ In addition, animals and their derivative products also became a fundamental element of magic. Thus, as Thomas Aquinas expressed in his statement “the life of animals...is preserved not for themselves but for man,” magical texts mirrored the Christian principle of useful properties in animal bodies by outlining methods for their use in ritual, divination, the creation of amulets, and various forms of healing.¹¹⁴ These mundane and magical uses of animals and their derivative parts to sustain and improve human life illustrates how classical and Christian syncretism shaped positive perceptions of non-human beasts in both theoretical and pragmatic dimensions.

Not all Christian interpretations of animals were positive, however. As with the principle of man’s dominion over the natural world and all its creatures, many of these negative traits originated in the Bible. Certain animals, for instance, became associated

¹¹¹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹¹⁴ Page, 36.

with sin, particularly the seemingly unassuming goat. In Leviticus 16:1-10, for instance, Moses instructs his brother Aaron to make a sacrifice of two male goats, one for Azazel (a demon of the wilderness) as a vessel to cast out sin, and another for the Lord. Another notable passage predicts a scene in the Second Coming where Christ separates the sheep from the goats in an allegorical association of the latter creature with damnation (Matt. 25:31-41). As a result of this association, the goat would emerge as a particularly enduring symbol of evil and diabolism in medieval and early modern occult discourse, most notably as one of the Devil's favored earthly forms and a compatriot of witches (Figure 4). Another animal with similarly negative biblical connotations is the pig. In addition to being classified as "unclean" and thus unfit for the Israelites' consumption, the pig also serves as a suitable vessel for sin, as depicted in a scene where Jesus frees a possessed man from "impure spirits" by sending them into a herd of pigs, which subsequently run into a lake and drown (Mark 5:1-42).¹¹⁵ Other animals were responsible for or particularly representative of human suffering. The serpent and the toad had strong symbolic associations with death, pain, and divine punishment in medieval literature and art, as shown in a macabre illustration depicting a foul mass of snakes and toads writhing over an open grave (Figure 5). As with other animals, this status was primarily derived from biblical associations, such as the Devil's appearance as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, the plague of snakes sent to punish the Israelites for their indolence, and toads feasting on corpses in the Book of Revelations (Num. 21:4-29).¹¹⁶ Medieval scholars and theologians echoed many of these negative associations. For instance, in her section on reptiles in *Physica*, Hildegard von Bingen describes "diabolical" qualities in dragons,

¹¹⁵ In Lev. 11:1-8, God tells Moses and Aaron, "You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud"; although pigs have divided hooves, they do not chew cud, and are thus considered unclean.

¹¹⁶ Mary Robbins, "The Truculent Toad in the Middle Ages," in Flores, 26, 31, 34, 41.

snakes, and toads, as well as their uselessness in medicine compared to other creatures.¹¹⁷

Thomas Aquinas explains the origins of such qualities in the *Summa Theologica*, stating that Adam's disobedience led man's harmonious dominion over nature to be tainted by "fierce, poisonous, biting, and stinging creatures" that defied his will as punishment.¹¹⁸

As these sources demonstrate, both positive and negative medieval perceptions of animals extended well beyond physical associations and into the symbolic realm, which was heavily influenced by Christian understandings of the natural world.

One of the most compelling aspects of these negative associations is the medieval depiction of the Devil and demons with distinct bestial traits. Although surprisingly understudied by contemporary scholars, this phenomenon is highly relevant to our examination of syncretic animal magic in two main regards: first, it sheds much-needed light on the relation between symbolic interpretations of specific animals within medieval Christianity, and two, it provides insight into the general role of animals in more illicit forms of magic, as demons formed a key component of these practices. The earliest known image of the Christian Devil is a sixth-century Byzantine mosaic depicting the biblical separation of the sheep and goats (Figure 6). In this image, the Devil appears not as a monster as we are used to seeing, but as Lucifer the fallen angel (an unassuming humanoid figure). The only unusual feature is the figure's blue-tinged skin, which is a reference to the color of the "lower air" in which he dwells; by contrast, the angel beside him is colored red, indicating the ethereal realm where heavenly beings reside.¹¹⁹

Interestingly, the Bible barely mentions the Devil's physical description (partially due to his ability to shape-shift), and instead emphasizes his behavior, which is characterized by

¹¹⁷ Hildegard Von Bingen, *Physica*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 231.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 26.1; Page, 42.

¹¹⁹ Russel, 24.

sin, temptation, cunning, torment, lies, and murder.¹²⁰ Medieval written sources exhibit this same behavioral focus, such as an account of a possessed woman driven to insanity when the Devil entered through her ear during a domestic spat.¹²¹ However, in the few instances that he is described in the Bible, the Devil takes on a distinctly monstrous and animalistic form, most notably by assuming the guise of a serpent or a dragon, as well as the allegoric passage “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”¹²² Although these physical descriptions are few and far between, medieval artists and writers latched onto the trope of the Devil’s bestial appearance, which they used to emphasize and amplify his terrifying power.

In medieval European art and literature, the Devil is depicted as above all monstrous, marked by grotesquely deformed features that “betray his inner defect.” His primary color is black (black skin, black clothing, or in the guise of a black animal), often with secondary shades of red (in clothing, bodily features, or a flaming beard) – dramatic hues that invoke images of darkness, death, fire, and blood. His body is grotesque, lame, and generally misshapen, referencing the fall from heaven and the physical marks of sin. He is often holding chains, a sword, or instruments of torture, and has disturbing features such as backwards knees, extra faces on the belly, knees, or buttocks, glowing “saucerlike” eyes that occasionally shoot fire, and a perpetual sulfuric stench.¹²³ Most notably, medieval depictions of the Devil emphasize a few key animalistic traits. These include Saturnine features (horns, a tail, and cloven hooves), pointed ears, coarse black hair, batlike wings, sharp protruding teeth and claws, and usually a lack of clothing, often

¹²⁰ See, for instance, John 3:8, Matt. 4:1-11, 2 Cor. 11:3, and John 8:44.

¹²¹ Caesar of Heisterbach, *Dist.* V, Cap. XI.

¹²² Gen. 3:1-5, 2 Cor. 11:3, Rev. 12:9-17, Pet. 5:8-9.

¹²³ Russel, 67.

with genitals on full display. The Devil is also capable of shape-shifting into animals, usually a serpent, goat, or dog, and is sometimes accompanied by a variety of other creatures, which range from “diabolical” reptiles such as snakes, lizards, and toads to both wild and domestic mammals (cats, dogs, horses, boar, deer, leopards, and hyenas just to name a few) as well as birds and insects.¹²⁴

Of course, describing artistic images with words does not do them full justice; thus, I have included several pictorial representations of the Devil in medieval art to illustrate these trends. The first is a miniature portrait depicting Pope Sylvester II with the Devil (Figure 7). In this illustration, the Devil is dark brown in color and covered in red hair, with goat-like horns, ears, and cloven hooves, leathery bat-like wings, and horrifying extra faces on his elbows, knees, buttocks, and stomach. This image serves to highlight the Devil’s hideous, amalgamated form by placing him next to a human being for contrast, which further emphasizes his crudely spliced bestial features. In addition, the use of red ink for accent details juxtaposes the pope’s holy vestments to the Devil’s naked, corrupted body and his tormented expression to establish and reflect their spiritual hierarchy. Another interesting motif is the so-called “Hellmouth,” as depicted in Hugo von Trimberg’s *Der Renner* and an illustration from Augustine’s *City of God* (Figure 8). Although the Devil is not present in these illustrations, there are a number of lesser demons with the same bestial traits, as well as the same penchant for tormenting humanity – which showcases their evil nature and inner and outward corruption. In addition, the fact that the entrance to Hell is depicted as a wolf-like face with gaping jaws that swallows the damned underscores how already-fearsome facets of certain earthly

¹²⁴ Russel, 67-68.

creatures could be twisted by diabolical forces to use against humanity. Although there are many more compelling examples of the Devil and demonic entities within medieval art, these images provide a meaningful sample of negative symbolic associations surrounding certain animals, which evolved from subtle biblical references to permeate medieval consciousness.

In his detailed analysis of the Devil in the Middle Ages, Jeffrey Burton Russel argues that the increased occurrence of bestial features demonstrates a key transition from early to high medieval art. Thus, medieval artists shifted from humanoid depictions of the Devil such as the Byzantine mosaic, to the inclusion of certain animal parts on a roughly human figure, and finally to a monster created from an amalgamation of animal and human parts, which falls into neither of these categories in a mockery of God's created world.¹²⁵ I believe the medieval reasoning behind this phenomenon is threefold. First, the Devil and lesser demons are reminiscent of twisted versions of certain pagan gods, particularly deities of fertility and nature. These include anthropomorphic gods such as Cernunnos and Pan, who share animalistic features such as horns or antlers, cloven hooves, and goat-like beards and hair with remarkable similarity to medieval depictions of the Devil and demonic entities (Figure 9).¹²⁶ As early Christians attempted to convert potential followers from paganism, these bodily amalgamations took on new meanings as frightening, corrupt deformities rather than emblems of the mystical connection between mankind and nature, which served to discredit and discourage worshipping these deities. Second, many of these images directly reference biblical and classical Christian descriptions of the Devil and lesser demons. For example, Isaiah 34:8-16 describes "goat-

¹²⁵ Russel, 130, 211.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 63, 68.

demons” as well as ordinary animals (which are most likely shape-shifting demons) consorting with the female Hebrew demon Lilith. Additionally, a passage from the *Life of Anthony* recounts the Devil and his “soldiers” ability to transform into “wild animals and crawling things” to torment the protagonist, including lions, bears, leopards, bulls, snakes, scorpions, and wolves.¹²⁷ As these examples demonstrate, although God originally created animals for beneficial human use, diabolical forces also claimed some semblance of dominion over the natural world, which they subsequently tainted and corrupted in a subversion of natural magic. Third, grotesque hybrid forms threatened medieval Christian boundaries between human and animal bodies, in which the former represents reason and the latter its lack.¹²⁸ As we will see in my discussion of magical animals in medieval literature, these boundaries became increasingly blurred and fragile, which led to significant confusion, anxiety, and the prevalence of subversive hybrid tropes. Thus, medieval depictions of the Devil and demonic entities with animalistic features reveal how syncretic processes increasingly imbued nature and its creatures with complex and highly nuanced moralistic meanings.

The first two chapters have examined the major theoretical aspects of animal symbolism within medieval magic, including the foundations and operations of occult systems and the role of Christian doctrine in shaping mundane and fantastical perceptions of nature and its creatures. In surveying this latter influence, I have demonstrated how Christianity simultaneously retained yet profoundly altered pre-existing classical perceptions of animals and nature, which resulted in new and at times negative connotations within these later contexts. Because of the pervasive influence of Christian

¹²⁷ “The Coals of the Devil’s Deceit: Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony*, 3-9,” in Copenhaver, 234.

¹²⁸ Steel, 44.

philosophy and practice within medieval European culture, it would seem logical that magical perceptions and activities would be fundamentally incompatible and subsequently frowned upon. However, the vast majority of medieval magical practices were syncretic in nature, which aided in their acceptability as well as spiritual resonance and social utility. The following chapters shift the focus from intellectual foundations to specific examples of animal magic and magical animals in medicine and literature. While medico-magic represents the practical application of these theories, medieval literature reveals the highly nuanced symbolic value surrounding certain creatures. Together, these sources reveal how medieval Europeans continued to view animals as intrinsically powerful beings, both in spite of and because of the pervasive influence of Christianity.

ANIMAL USE AND SYMBOLISM IN MEDICAL MAGIC

Our investigation into syncretic animal symbolism within medieval magic began with excerpts from a text known as the “Letter of the Vulture,” which details the many wondrous virtues that this creature provided for mankind. We must now return our focus to this document once more in order to examine its primary function: the use of the vulture’s organs for medicine and healing. For instance, according to this text the vulture’s eyes wrapped in wolf skin can cure ailments of the head and eyes, as well as bestowing good fortune on those who wear its tongue in their right shoe.¹²⁹ Rather than our primary formative question of *why the vulture?*, however, this chapter poses a more specific line of inquiry: why the organs, why the wolf skin, and why the placement in the shoe? As with any period prior to the advent of modern medicine, medieval medical practitioners relied heavily on natural pharmacopeia to soothe and heal their patients. The most widely utilized ingredients were plants (herbs), minerals (including precious stones), and animals – all of which were said to contain specific healing virtues.¹³⁰ These ingredients were also frequently combined with various forms of magic in order to enhance their therapeutic potency – a practice that attests to the widespread belief in natural substances’ intrinsic powers, as well as a profound acknowledgement of magical legitimacy. By examining the widespread use of animals in medieval medical magic, this chapter reveals the central role and symbolic function of animals in shaping theoretical operations and their practical application within a Christian world. As such, I will argue that animal symbolism in medico-magic provides a compelling practical example demonstrating complex syncretic understandings of nature and its creatures.

¹²⁹ Mackinney, 495.

¹³⁰ Saunders, 93.

As with the foundational principles of magic itself, medieval medical theory was largely derived from classical Greece and Rome. In her comprehensive overview of medieval and Renaissance medicine, Nancy Siraisi traces the origins of “rational medicine” to ancient Greece, which emerged at approximately the same time as “rational natural philosophy.”¹³¹ In order to comprehend the presence of disease and illness within the limited scientific frameworks of their time, the Greeks developed an “all-embracing and eminently coherent” explanation: that the human body operated as a microcosm of the universe and worked according to the same basic principles.¹³² As we have seen in Chapter Two, the discipline of natural philosophy originally emerged to observe and explain the unknown virtues of the natural world in an explicit and rationalized manner. However, the shadowed, complex, and at times inexplicable nature of occult properties in both heavenly and earthly realms meant that natural philosophy often strayed into the realm of magic. Thus, these proto-scientific intellectuals remained steeped in the principles of magic and religion that governed many other aspects of their world, resulting in the coexistence of seemingly dissimilar elements. A similar phenomenon occurred within the field of medicine. As Siraisi argues, in Greek antiquity “secular and religious forms of healing flourished side by side,” particularly in the island of Cos, the birthplace of Hippocrates, which emerged as both a center of rational medicine and one of the main centers of worship for Asclepius, the god of healing and physicians.¹³³ An important aspect of this phenomenon is the definition of rationalism in ancient medicine, which was very different from our contemporary perception of this term. Although

¹³¹ Nancy Siraisi, *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

¹³² Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995), 32, quoted in Kiehlbauch, “Wisdom of the Cosmos.”

¹³³ Siraisi, 2.

Hippocratic medical authors often criticized certain traditional beliefs and attempted to construct “causal accounts” of human health without reliance on religion, mythology, or magic, ancient medicine was *not* fully divorced from religious and occult beliefs and forms of healing, as evidenced by myriad folkloric remedies found in medical treatises.¹³⁴ Thus, classical approaches to medicine contained “diverse and often contradictory elements,” including various forms of magic.¹³⁵

It was precisely this phenomenon which led Pliny to state that “nobody will doubt that [magic] first arose from medicine” in the beginning of his book of *Natural History* on magic.¹³⁶ This work also provides a particularly compelling example illustrating this connection. One of Pliny’s most elaborate descriptions of the “mages”’ medical prescriptions is their use of parts from a hyena: an animal “held in the highest admiration by the magicians, who have gone so far as to attribute to it certain magical virtues.”¹³⁷ For each of these functions, the mages’ prescribe one of four corresponding applications (as well as any additional ingredients): in amulet, in salve, by ingestion, and by fumigation.¹³⁸ As these applications demonstrate, the functions ascribed to the hyena’s parts are “overwhelmingly medical.”¹³⁹ This is particularly evident not only in their application as prescriptions, but also in each part’s associated effects. For example, the hyena’s eyes were said to cure barrenness and insanity, its liver could alleviate glaucoma, the backbone marrow soothed sinew pains and averted hallucinations, and the male

¹³⁴ Siraisi, 2.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Pliny, *Natural History* 30.1, quoted in Flint, 240.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 27.143.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 27.146-153.

¹³⁹ Daniel Ogden, “Animal Magic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. by Gordon Lindsey Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96.

genitals could act as a potent aphrodisiac.¹⁴⁰ Despite this distinct medical focus, however, Pliny's account of the hyena also reveals the latent magical contexts permeating ancient medicine. First, the majority of these remedies reflect the doctrine of sympathies (like for like, such as skull bones for headache, bladder for incontinence, feces for dysentery, etc.) – one of the most important operational principles of ancient and medieval magic. Pliny also describes a variety of more explicitly occult practices within this volume, including divination, cursing, averting the evil eye, and engendering hatred or eroticism, in which hyena parts and other animal ingredients play an important role.¹⁴¹ In addition, he also emphasizes the mages' use of hyena parts in amulets – the most overtly magical of the four applications – more than any other form.¹⁴² Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of our investigation, Pliny's account of the hyena implies that magical power is “resident or latent in the various parts themselves” rather than imbued externally through ritual practice.¹⁴³ This power seems to stem from two main sources: the living animal itself, as the hyena “possesses certain magical virtues” such as the “power of alluring” and ability to change its sex, and secondly, as I will argue, the microcosmic power of the heavens.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, the hyena's characteristics and associations in *Natural History* have many parallels to ancient folkloric traditions from West Africa and the Middle East, which also regard this creature as a particularly potent magical beast.¹⁴⁵ These similarities illustrate how medico-magic simultaneously encompasses and thrives

¹⁴⁰ Pliny, 27.146-153.

¹⁴¹ Ogden, 297.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 298.

¹⁴⁴ Pliny, 27.143-144.

¹⁴⁵ Ogden, 299.

within folkloric contexts, including in the later context of medieval Europe, where these “enchanted” facets of creation obtained additional forms of complex social meaning.

Of all the classical scholars who influenced medieval medicine, the two most important were Hippocrates and Galen. Although most of these scholars’ theories were not explicitly magical, they nonetheless provided rich contextual background for medieval European understandings of medico-magic. Born on the island of Cos in 460 BC, Hippocrates was a highly skilled, widely-renowned, and well-respected physician whose theories formed the basis of medical knowledge up until the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁶ His most notable and influential concept was the theory of the humors, originally published in *The Nature of Man*, which set forth the standard of four bodily fluids – blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile – that controlled virtually all aspects of human health.¹⁴⁷ According to Hippocrates, the proper balance of these fluids led to an ideal healthy state, as man “enjoys the most perfect health when these elements are duly proportioned to one another...and when they are perfectly mingled.” Pain or ill health, on the other hand, is “felt when one of these elements is in defect or excess, or is isolated in the body without being compounded with all the others.”¹⁴⁸ Humoral theory perfectly encapsulated the overarching classical tenet of the macrocosmic-microcosmic universe, as these four fluids in the human body reflected the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) recognized by natural philosophers.¹⁴⁹ Born in Rome in 129 AD, Galen was a formally trained physician and surgeon who gained great esteem both for his medical expertise and interest in experimentation. Known as the “great synthesizer,” Galen spent

¹⁴⁶ Rawcliffe, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Hippocrates of Cos, *Nature of Man*, in the Loeb Classical Library, accessed March 23, 2018, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/hippocrates_cos-nature_man/1931/pb_LCL150.13.xml, 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴⁹ Rawcliffe, 33.

considerable effort expanding established medical knowledge – particularly the writings of Hippocrates, whom he openly admired – in everything from prescriptions and surgery to medical astrology and anatomy.¹⁵⁰ Most importantly for the context of medieval medicine, he also established what is known as the quaternary system (Figure 10). According to this arrangement, the four humors of the human body reflect the four essential cosmic elements, each of which combines two of four essential qualities – wet, hot, cold, and dry – to create a certain “character.” This “character” or “complexion” was believed to influence virtually all aspects of human health, as well as shape a person’s physical appearance and emotional state. For example, a person with an overabundance of black bile was considered melancholic, which resulted in health problems such as an overactive spleen as well as a depressive and lethargic personality.¹⁵¹ In this sense, Galen built upon Hippocrates’s humoral theory and the central notion of cosmography to characterize human health as simultaneously internal yet subject to the (potentially magical) powers of the cosmos. As such, both of these physician-scholars would play a vital role in shaping both practical and magical applications of medieval medicine.

Medieval concepts of health, healing, and the body were largely inherited from ancient medical treatises and practitioners, but healers also synthesized and expanded on these sources to develop several distinct theories.¹⁵² The basic medieval understanding of the human body can be outlined as the “things natural,” which were subsequently grouped into three subcategories: the naturals, the non-naturals, and the contra-naturals. The non-naturals and the contra-naturals encompassed elements outside the body that directly impacted a person’s health. These included specific pathological conditions as

¹⁵⁰ Rawcliffe, 33; Siraisi, 4.

¹⁵¹ Louise M. Bishop, *Words, Stones, and Herbs* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 54.

¹⁵² Siraisi, 97.

well as various physiological, psychological, and environmental factors (including air, exercise, rest, sleep, food, drink, repletion, excretion, and emotions) that could potentially cause illness. These factors also formed the framework for most curative measures, as medieval prescriptions often involved modifying daily habits (such as eating or limiting certain foods) in order to restore humoral balance.¹⁵³ The naturals were perhaps the most important of these categories, and were further subdivided into three organizing principles: complexions, the four humors, and systems assigning relations between body parts and functions. More specifically, the things natural:

Joined together all alleged material components imperceptible to sense (the elements of earth, air, fire, and water in the human body, and *spiritus*, which was supposedly a substance manufactured in the heart from inspired air and transmitted through the body via the arteries); physically perceptible body parts (humors, that is, bodily fluids; and members, that is, parts of the body); and activities or functions (viruses and operations).¹⁵⁴ Out of all these essential categories, the most fundamental for medieval medicine was the theory of the humors, which governed the vast majority of explanations and treatments for disease. The principal members and their associated systems thus extended these foundational theories onto specific organs and physiological systems of the human body. Thus, by this logic, the body functioned as a “hierarchical” system of separate yet unified working parts encompassing physical and spiritual dimensions into one harmonious whole.¹⁵⁵ In addition, as in ancient Greece and Rome, this status would also open medieval medicine to both religious and occult influence in order to further enhance practitioners’ effectiveness.

¹⁵³ Siraisi, 101.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 108-109.

In addition to providing convincing explanations for illness, disease, and suffering, these foundational principles also made medieval medicine particularly compatible with magic in several key regards. First, despite the relative rationality of medical theory for its time, illness and disease were still largely mysterious. As a result, treatment options often yielded limited, ineffectual, or even harmful results, which further contributed to pre-existing anxieties surrounding mortality and sickness in a fundamentally uncertain world.¹⁵⁶ The limits of human medical intervention and the “enigmatic” nature of illness thus “illuminated the powerful role of destiny and providence” in the healing arts, which in turn encouraged the use of magical and religious remedies that combined natural and supernatural forces.¹⁵⁷ Second, medieval understandings of the body – in both a healthy state and one of illness – depended heavily on the notion of natural correspondences. As a microcosm of the universe, the human body was believed to be particularly permeable to cosmic forces, especially the movements of the planets and the stars.¹⁵⁸ This is particularly evident in the recurrent image of the “Zodiac man” in medical treatises, which depicts these cosmic influences on certain parts of the body (Figure 11). As Corinne Saunders explains, this understanding meant that medieval medico-magic occupied an intellectual “grey area,” as each respective practice “depended upon notions of correspondences within the cosmos and the harnessing of natural forces,” and “applied remedies to the body with accompanying rituals.”¹⁵⁹ This characteristic also accounts for the fundamentally “holistic” nature of medieval medicine, which focused on healing both the body and the soul through

¹⁵⁶ Flint, 325.

¹⁵⁷ Saunders, 90.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 94.

mundane, magical, and/or religious means.¹⁶⁰ Third, occult principles became particularly intertwined with specific forms of medical treatment. Thus, out of the “things natural” arose the three primary instruments of medicine: diet, medication, and surgery (cautery and phlebotomy). Of these, medication was the most widespread form of active intervention used to combat disease and was typically comprised of readily available natural substances, namely plant, animal, and mineral ingredients.¹⁶¹ Because each of these ingredients was believed to possess intrinsic powers, it is no surprise that their use within this context frequently and easily crossed into the realm of the occult.

The varied nature of medieval medical practitioners further contributed to the widespread use of medico-magic. Although university-trained physicians became more common over time, a wide array of social groups practiced some basic form of medicine, primarily out of necessity. These included monks, parish priests, barber-surgeons, midwives, and various forms of folk healers that also comprised the “common tradition” of medieval magic.¹⁶² The fact that most of these practitioners – particularly those available to common folk – did not have adequate medical training based on academic standards meant that they tended to rely more heavily on magical, religious, and superstitious remedies. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in responding to the needs of a society characterized by hardship and ill health, magic offered some semblance of physical and spiritual healing as well as added comfort when medical care failed or was simply unavailable.¹⁶³ By placing our analysis of medieval medico-magic within this respective worldviews, the widespread use of practices such as making

¹⁶⁰ Rawcliffe, 33.

¹⁶¹ Siraisi, 137, 141.

¹⁶² Siraisi, 51; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 56.

¹⁶³ Siraisi, 42.

amulets, reciting charms, and mixing healing potions from bile, herbs, and magic stones suddenly becomes more understandable and subsequently less bizarre.

Now that we have outlined the theoretical principles of medieval medico-magic, we must also examine the specific nature of its practices. Although many works on medieval medicine include some discussion of magic, few historians have analyzed the significance and symbolic meaning of animal ingredients, and no current scholarly works focus solely on this topic. Thus, my in-depth analysis of primary source material seeks to fill this void while drawing original connections between medieval medico-magic and the emerging field of Animal History. In addition to classical influences such as Pliny, Hippocrates, and Galen, Germanic medical and protective magical traditions also carried over into medieval medicine.¹⁶⁴ Some of their major tenets include the use of plant and animal substances, principles of sympathy and antipathy, a blend of arcane language and Christian ritual, and the enduring use of amulets, ligatures, and talismans, which were often made from or combined with prayer or religious objects.¹⁶⁵ Although the ingredients for these remedies were mostly simple, basic, and readily accessible in nature, they often had to be gathered, prepared, or worn in specific ritualized ways in order to achieve magical potency or effectiveness.¹⁶⁶ For instance, The *Letter of the Vulture* contains specific instructions for the bird's slaughter: "At the hour at which it is captured, kill it, using a sharp reed instead of a sword. Let him who kills it be alone, and before he decapitates it, let him say unto it: 'Angel Adonai Abraham, on your account the word is completed.'"¹⁶⁷ Similarly, the eleventh-century *Lacnunga* contains a recipe for a healing

¹⁶⁴ Saunders, 93.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Mackinney, 495.

salve made from the butter of a completely red or white cow, to which fifty-seven specified herbs are added; before use, the mixture must be stirred with a stick on which the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are inscribed in Latin, and several charms and incantations sung over the finished salve.¹⁶⁸ According to Corrinne Saunders, the continuation and prevalence of such practices in medieval Europe reveals that medical magic was a decidedly “grey area,” as both disciplines “depended upon notions of correspondences within the cosmos, and the harnessing of natural forces; both applied remedies to the body with accompanying rituals.”¹⁶⁹ In addition, while the use of charms and remedies fundamentally depends on a perception of the cosmos as “organic” and made up of “interconnected supernatural forces,” it also reveals a worldview that includes a myriad of supernatural powers, including the Christian God, planetary and Germanic gods, angels, demons, and other spirits.¹⁷⁰

In order to comprehend and appreciate this worldview, we must examine a few specific medieval medical treatises in greater detail. One particularly compelling example is the leechbook of Bald – a mid-tenth-century Old English compendium of medical remedies and recipes, diagnostic guides, and charms. Translated into modern English and divided into three volumes under the name *Leechdoms, Wortcutting, and Starcraft of Early England*, Bald’s leechbook provides a fascinating glimpse into the formative influences and general character of early medieval medicine. The remedies within this text rely on a wide variety of natural ingredients (most notably plants, animal parts, and certain minerals), although for the sake of brevity I will focus exclusively on animal-related recipes. In some cases, the text simply instructs the healer to combine certain

¹⁶⁸ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Saunders, 94.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

ingredients and administer them as a form of medication. For instance, the remedy for leprosy is horse fat mixed with salt smeared on the patient's body, and a cure for incontinence involves ashes from burnt boar's claws as well as bladders from a pig and goat.¹⁷¹ Other remedies utilize specific forms of magico-religious rituals in order to enhance these naturally-derived prescriptions. Thus, to cure "venomous swelling," a healer should "take butter and sing over it nine times a litany, and nine times Paternoster, and nine times [another] incantation"; for hearing problems "take ram's gall with urine from the patient, [and] after a night's fasting mix it with butter and pour into the ear"; for "lunacy" recite a spoken charm ending in "Amen" while hitting the afflicted person with a porpoise-hide whip.¹⁷²

As these examples demonstrate, the leechbook of Bald contains a plethora of medical remedies utilizing animal ingredients, the most common of which are grease/fat/lard, eggs, butter, milk, gall, and ashes from burned bones and teeth. This inclusion of animal products such as dairy demonstrates that healing virtues could extend from the animal itself to its derivative products, which echoes the biblical principle that animals were created for beneficial human use. More importantly, many of these recipes utilize specific forms of ritual (rules regarding combination, application, or accompanying action), which attests to the enduring belief that such practices served to increase the efficacy of natural ingredients with intrinsic healing properties. These ritualistic components include both explicitly magical connotations such as spoken charms, hand-crafted amulets, and references to "elf-shot" (illnesses caused by supernatural beings such as elves and faeries) as well as Christian religious elements such

¹⁷¹ Thomas Oswald Cockayne, ed., *Leechdoms, Wortcutting, and Starcraft of Early England* (London: The Holland Press, 1961), 79, 89.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 113, 41, 335.

as prayer, parts of the mass, and invoking certain saints. Thus, the leechbook demonstrates that even early medieval source material reflects a syncretic understanding of the natural world and its use in medicine. In addition, several references to remedies that can heal specific ailments in both humans and livestock (such as a “blood staunching” ritual for man and horse) attest to the interconnectedness of God’s creation, which as we have seen throughout this work often assumed additional mystical dimensions.¹⁷³

Another notable example is the Wolfsthurn handbook – a comprehensive guide to household management found at the Wolfsthurn Castle in Tyrol. Compiled by an unknown author, the book serves as a manual for the practical, everyday concerns of a medieval household, from washing clothes and catching fish to crafting basic necessities such as leather, soap, and ink. The text also contains diagnostic guides and basic medical prescriptions for both human and animal ailments.¹⁷⁴ Like the Leechbook of Bald, many of these prescriptions incorporate both magical and religious elements along with traditional forms of healing. A cure for epilepsy, for example, instructs the healer to secure a deerskin strap around a patient’s neck while he is seizing, bind the sickness to the strap while invoking the Holy Trinity, and then bury the deerskin in the ground alongside a dead body. The handbook also recommends rubbing a person’s eyes with bat’s blood to ensure good vision, carrying the plant artemesia to ward off sorcery, and ingesting a certain herb for fever after inscribing Latin prayers on its leaves.¹⁷⁵ Although this source is relatively specific and obscure, the Wolfsthurn book is a valuable example of medieval medico-magic in three major regards. First, the fact that it was written in the

¹⁷³ Cockayne, 55.

¹⁷⁴ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

vernacular language (German) rather than Latin hints that the author was a layperson rather than a scholar or clergy member.¹⁷⁶ This detail along with its pragmatic household focus demonstrates the widespread belief in various forms of medico-magic, which became deeply engrained within the rhythms of daily life. Second, the heavy emphasis on natural ingredients (including, most notably, animal products) demonstrates continued adherence to the classical principle that intrinsic occult virtues existed within nature, and could subsequently be utilized to help or harm mankind. Finally and most importantly, the remedies within this text are fundamentally syncretic, combining distinct elements of magic (binding, ritual, sympathetic correspondences) and religion (prayer, relics, and invocations) into acceptable and efficacious instructions for running a successful household.

It is important to note that the authors of these early texts do *not* explicitly reflect on the relationship between magic and medicine or indicate the respective use of occult vs. ordinary power; rather, according to medieval understandings of rationality, they would have relied on experience to justify their workings rather than intellectual principles. However, their work does reflect certain key features that characterize magical medicine. These include:

- 1) Drug preparation with the observance of taboos, i.e. the ashes of a raven are only useful for gout or epilepsy if the bird is taken live from its nest, carried without touching the ground, and burned in a new pot.
- 2) The choice of healing ingredients dictated by principles of sympathy, i.e. earthworms with “yellow knots” for the yellowed skin of jaundice.

¹⁷⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 3.

- 3) Attention to the effects of heavenly bodies on certain ingredients, i.e. herbs should be picked at sunrise or bark gathered from the eastern side of a tree.
- 4) The use of “arcane language,” i.e. a recipe for sciatica that reads “Dialanga dracumino diazinsebri, equally much.”¹⁷⁷

These ways of approaching the healing process seem to have been common for a wide variety of healers, which further underscores the ubiquity of medico-magic in the Middle Ages as well as the deeply entrenched belief in a world filled with occult powers that existed simultaneously with Christianity.¹⁷⁸ However, the highly nuanced nature and presence of contradictory supernatural forces (natural vs. demonic) in medieval medico-magic also led to heated intellectual debates among scholars, theologians, and members of the clergy.

Because many aspects of medieval medicine were saturated in contested forms of magic, several influential scholars debated the efficacy and acceptability of such practices. Some of their analyses were particularly condemning. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, for example, Augustine condemned the use of “all amulets and charms...whether those involve enchantments, or certain signs called ‘characters,’ or the hanging, attaching, or in a way the dancing of certain objects...according to certain portents, either obscure or evident” as invoking idols or demons, and therefore forbidden.¹⁷⁹ John of Salisbury echoes Augustine by referring to “silly charms...condemned by the whole medical profession.”¹⁸⁰ Similar to Augustine and Isidore, Caesarius of Arles also condemned such practices, warning readers to “not hang

¹⁷⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 67-68.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷⁹ Flint, 244.

¹⁸⁰ Saunders, 102.

on yourself and your family diabolical phylacteries, magic letters, amber charms and herbs.”¹⁸¹ However, the actual line between acceptable and outlawed forms of medico-magic were far more blurred than these scholarly debates reflect, even among those who seemed to entirely condemn them. For instance, in a later section of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine declares that an object worn on the body deemed powerful “by its own virtue” (intrinsic organic influence) rather than enchantments is in fact acceptable for Christian healing – a “loophole” that proved crucial for the continued practice of medico-magic, particularly among the clergy.¹⁸² John of Freiburg and other pastoral writers from the thirteenth century onward also singled out certain amulets and incantations as unacceptable (namely those with ‘unknown names or characters’), but viewed others as entirely admissible.¹⁸³ Nicholas of Poland even promoted the therapeutic ingestion of serpents, toads, and lizards to avoid certain ailments, arguing that “God had conferred marvelous virtues on all nature,” and “the more filthy, abominable, and common things are, the more they participate in these marvelous virtues.”¹⁸⁴ Thus, although medieval theologians, clergy, and other intellectuals policed the boundaries of magic and natural philosophy to prevent their flock from trespassing into the demonic realm, healing magic was more widely accepted and less frequently dismissed than the other most widely-used form of magic: divination.¹⁸⁵ This difference can be reduced to one major aspect: the continued belief in the ancient principle of inherent occult powers

¹⁸¹ Flint, 245.

¹⁸² Ibid., 301.

¹⁸³ Rider, 38.

¹⁸⁴ Francis B. Brévar, “Between Medicine, Magic, and Religion: German Wonder Drugs in German Medico-Pharmaceutical Treatises of the Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries,” 48.

¹⁸⁵ Rider, 26-27.

in plants, animals, and minerals, which coexisted with Christianity to form a syncretic and “enchanted” perception of the natural world.

Interestingly and perhaps surprisingly to some, many precedents for the syncretic nature of medieval medico-magic have explicit theological roots. For instance, the “natural virtues” loophole has distinct biblical foundations, such as the justification for powers in stones (especially white ones like crystal with characters carved in them) in Revelations, and the Archangel Raphael’s directions for the healing efficacy of a fish’s heart and liver.¹⁸⁶ This precedent along with selective scholarly leniency, the natural limitations of medieval medicine, and anxiety surrounding illness, disease, and death all combined to ensure the widespread use of various forms of medico-magic in the Middle Ages. This resulting combination had several important implications for its enduring practice, particularly those centered around animal ingredients. First, there was a strong tendency to “Christianize” various charms, amulets, and ligatures in order to subvert their status as condemned. This practice included creating magical objects with both Christian and pagan elements, such as a gold reliquary shaped like a wolf, in which a traditionally protective beast guarded a sacred relic.¹⁸⁷ Second, it became acceptable for monks and other members of the clergy to collect works on natural magic that pertained to healing, as well as to administer such practices to their parishioners. In her compelling case study of St. Augustine’s monastery, Sophie Page provides a comprehensive list of magical works that were collected and potentially utilized at the abbey. Many of these works surveyed certain animals and various uses for their bodies, including descriptions of these

¹⁸⁶ Flint, 310.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 304.

properties, their practical utility, and their place in the “display of wonders.”¹⁸⁸ These texts also had an overwhelmingly medical focus, detailing the uses of charms, amulets, and ligatures such as a hare’s heart suspended from the neck to cure *quartan ague*, wrapping a turtledove’s heart in wolf skin and wearing it to prevent desire, and hanging a mule’s testicles around a woman’s neck to prevent conception.¹⁸⁹ In examining the use of medieval medico-magic as a whole, Valerie Flint argues that “we must remember that we are not dealing with filtered memories of paganism, but a form of Christian resistance to pagan competition as skillful as it was vigorous.”¹⁹⁰ However, rather than viewing these syncretic principles as a “competition,” I propose that we focus on their surprisingly harmonious union as evidenced by the continuing and widespread practice of animal-centered medico-magic in medieval Europe.

As one of the most widely utilized examples of medieval occult practice, medico-magic offers historians important insight into the overarching principles and generalized practice of magic during the Middle Ages. As such, this section argues that medico-magic is a particularly multi-layered and symbolically rich facet of medieval European life that demonstrates the surprising melding of Christian and pagan influence in understanding health, the human body, and the interconnected universe. It also emphasizes the widespread use of animal-derived ingredients combined with occult elements – a phenomenon that is rarely analyzed by scholars yet deserves attention due to its ubiquity and importance. Because the body was believed to be permeable to cosmological influence as well as supernatural forces, magic offered a compelling sense of comfort and human agency during a time of limited medical knowledge or

¹⁸⁸ Page, 35.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁹⁰ Flint, 310.

advancement. By utilizing animal-derived ingredients that contained intrinsic power and specific healing properties, medieval Europeans took some semblance of control over their uncertain fates while simultaneously reflecting on the symbolic place of animals within the created world. Most importantly, medico-magic crossed numerous cultural and social boundaries due to its perceived effectiveness, which resulted in its widespread practice among clergy members, educated and lay medical practitioners, and ordinary people that sought to help their loved ones or community. As such, in order to maintain acceptability and achieve utmost effectiveness, medieval medico-magic took on a fundamentally syncretic nature that combined the powers of the earth and its creatures with God's divine will and influence.

MAGICAL ANIMALS AND ANIMAL MAGIC IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

It should come as no surprise given their ubiquity and utility within medieval society that animals also figured prominently within the realm of literature. This literary presence includes both figurative and surprisingly literal dimensions, for magical and mundane animals not only appeared as characters and subjects in these works – their hides served as the canvas for such stories to be written. As Bruce Holsinger reminds us in his compelling essay “Of Pigs and Parchment,” “medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts.” Before the widespread use of paper, medieval Europeans primarily used parchment (mostly made of tanned sheep, lamb, calf, and goat hides) for records, treatises, and books at a remarkably extensive scale. For instance, the production of the *Codex Aniatinus* along with its two sister manuscripts required over five hundred sheepskins from the regions of Wearmouth or Jarrow, reflecting a process in which “whole villages of animals” could be easily converted to a single book.¹⁹¹ Thus, just as in many other aspects of medieval life, animals were everywhere, and the stories written on their hides reveal deeply held and highly complex symbolic meanings within a range of unembellished and imaginative contexts. This chapter will examine the underlying symbolism of animal magic and magical animals in various literary forms, including occult treatises, the beast fable, hagiography, and romance. In this regard, my analysis extends syncretic animal symbolism from its practical use in medico-magic to more theoretical dimensions, which combined Christian and pagan principles to further complicate the boundaries between the animal and human within medieval consciousness.

¹⁹¹ Bruce Holsinger, “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009): 619.

In the few instances that scholars have written about medieval literary animals, they usually focus on two specific genres: texts describing the various virtues of animals, also known as bestiaries, and medical treatises involving animal ingredients, which we have discussed in the previous chapter. Although these texts allow historians and literary scholars to gain fascinating, detailed insight into medieval perceptions of the natural world, they most often present animals in an unimaginative or utilitarian context. For example, bestiaries primarily serve a “taxonomic” function by detailing animals’ physical appearance, basic behavioral traits, benefits to humankind, and specific place or role within God’s created world.¹⁹² Medical treatises, on the other hand, focus on parts of the animal rather than the whole and serve primarily as informative guides to prescriptive preparation and effects. Although both of these works were often combined with religious or magical subtexts (nature’s place in the Great Chain of Being and medico-magical rituals, respectively), the animals within these texts are real, physical beings, and it is human description or involvement that shapes them into something meaningful and potentially mystical.

Animals also made appearances in more explicitly occult texts, which imbued them with intriguing new dimensions of symbolic meaning. These works generally served as guides or handbooks for complex and highly-ritualized magical arts for skilled practitioners, and were thus distinct from sources on low or folk magic, which were utilized by common or everyday practitioners such as monks and healers. Because of their relatively rare production and convoluted rhetoric, few scholars have attempted to translate and analyze such texts. However, the potential insight that they can provide into

¹⁹² Crane, 72.

animal symbolism within medieval magic means that this analysis is valuable and warranted, particularly because this is one of the few instances where animals are presented within explicitly occult dimensions. One of the most well-known, complex, and compellingly bizarre examples of animal magic in this genre is the *Liber vaccae*, or *Book of the Cow*. Originating from a lost Arabic text produced in the late ninth century, this manuscript became known to the medieval world from a “cryptic” Latin translation produced in twelfth-century Spain.¹⁹³ As was common for treatises involving magic, the work’s author is anonymous, and the text masquerades behind an “elaborate artifice” as a commentary by Galen of a work by Plato, which was translated into Arabic by the physician Hunayn ibn Ishaq.¹⁹⁴ In nine out of the ten surviving manuscripts, the *Liber vaccae* is preceded by a short text called *De proprietatibus* – a translated Arabic work on animal, plant, and mineral substances utilized in magical amulets, suspensions, and ligatures to cure disease or influence female fertility, which justified both the existence of occult properties in nature and their use in medicine. In addition to providing some theoretical background and justification for this “defense of hidden virtues,” the inclusion of the *De proprietatibus* also served to further disguise this treatise as an academic text, when in reality, as we will see, it was far more arcane and controversial.¹⁹⁵

The *Liber vaccae* is divided into two sections called the Major and the Minor, each of which contains approximately forty “experiments” to achieve various magical ends. The Minor contains commentary and instructions for creating magic lamps and other comparatively benign illusions, while the Major contains rituals that are much more

¹⁹³ Maaïke Van Der Lugt, "'Abominable Mixtures': The 'Liber Vaccae' in the Medieval West, or the Dangers and Attractions of Natural Magic," *Traditio* 64 (2009): 222-223.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

complicated and less familiar. The Major experiments primarily concern the creation of a “rational animal” (a human or humanlike being also known as a homunculus) from various human and animal parts, substances, and fluids, which are then combined with specific magical ingredients and rituals to produce a new living being.¹⁹⁶ Although each of these experiments is quite long and detailed and thus cannot be reiterated here in full, it is worth summarizing at least one of them to identify major thematic threads and reveal the text’s rich analytical potential. The first experiment calls for the magician to take some of “his own water” (sperm), mix it with powdered sun stone, and use it to inseminate a female cow or ewe. He must then plug the animal’s vagina with sun stone, smear its genitals with the blood of the animal not chosen for insemination (as well as mixing this blood into its food), and keep it in a dark house for several days. Once the ewe or cow gives birth to an “unformed substance,” the magician smears the newborn with a powder made from sun stone, sulphur, magnet, green tutia, and sap from a white willow, which causes it to grow human skin. The homunculus can be kept in a glass or lead vessel for three days until it is “very hungry,” after which the magician feeds it the decapitated mother’s blood for seven days, until it has developed into a “complete animal.”¹⁹⁷ Once the homunculus is fully formed, it can be utilized for specific magical purposes. For instance, if the creature is decapitated, the man who drinks its blood will assume the form of a cow or a sheep, and if anointed on his body he will assume the form of an ape. Alternatively, when fed a diet of milk and blood for forty days, the creature’s extracted innards rubbed onto a man’s hands and feet will allow him to walk on water or “travel around the world in the winking of an eye.” Other specific diets, mixtures, and

¹⁹⁶ Van Der Lugt, 234-235.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 235.

ritualistic forms of slaughter allow the homunculus to assume some sort of special powers, such as the ability to tell prophecy, or cause unusual natural phenomena such as a full moon to appear on the last day of the month.¹⁹⁸

The other experiments to produce “rational animals” are essentially the same, with some variation in the recipient animal’s womb, the specific herbs, minerals, and human and animal substances used, and associated rituals – all of which directly influence the resulting homunculus’s powers and appearance.¹⁹⁹ In addition to these experiments, the *Liber vaccae* contains recipes for other magical purposes, such as invisibility, conversing with spirits, making rain, causing plants to grow quickly or trees to bend, crafting magical houses where people suffer epileptic fits, and making armies, giants, and other forms appear in the sky.²⁰⁰ Some of the methods for these experiments are nearly as complex as those for artificial generation, while others are more straightforward, such as a recipe for understanding bird language that calls for mixing several avian body parts (liver, brain, and upper pallet) and drinking the resulting beverage in three gulps.²⁰¹ To contemporary readers, the experiments of the *Liber vaccae* are undoubtedly bizarre, disturbing, and seemingly nonsensical – how then did medieval Europeans make sense of and interpret them? Like other occult sources from this period that I have examined, the effectiveness of these experiments largely depend on the inherent properties (or intrinsic occult virtues) of animal bodies (mostly blood and organs), as well as vegetable and mineral materials and human body parts. They also generally follow the doctrines of sympathy and antipathy, and correspond to basic

¹⁹⁸ Van Der Lugt, 235.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 235-236.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 237.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

principles of Galenic physiology, most notably in the recipe for bird language, which utilizes organs believed to hold life's essential essence. In this regard, the *Liber vaccae* may be defined as an example of "organic" or natural magic, and in many ways resembles the use of animal parts in medico-magic discussed in the previous chapter.²⁰²

Certain experiments in the *Liber vaccae* also sharply deviate from the comparatively benign principles of natural magic, particularly those in the Major section of the text. More specifically, the specific steps and results of these experiments are far more "spectacular," their use allows the magician to assume "superhuman, almost Godlike powers," and there is a clear "theatrical quality" to the creation of such wonders.²⁰³ These qualities also directly influenced the opinions of certain medieval scholars, who generally dismissed the *Liber vaccae* as "abominable" and "full of perversion," and accused it of "uprooting the laws of nature" and "violating its secrets."²⁰⁴ Among the several varieties of these objections, two in particular stand out in highlighting debates between natural and demonic (and thus acceptable and condemned) forms of magic. The first is the objection to so-called "abominable mixtures," particularly the crossbreeding of humans and animals.²⁰⁵ In his analysis of the *Liber vaccae*, William of Auvergne states that such crossbreeding "perverts the order of nature" because it does not happen "spontaneously," but instead requires "unnatural" and deviant sexual practices such as bestiality and sodomy. This argument can be understood within the context of upholding the normative, divinely-sanctioned laws of nature, which reflect the natural order of the universe – including distinct separation between humans and

²⁰² Van Der Lugt, 238-240.

²⁰³ Ibid., 239.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 229.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 232.

animals.²⁰⁶ In addition, scholarly condemnations of this text reflect the medieval contention between categories of natural and demonic magic. Augustine, for instance, characterized classical stories of beast transformation as the work of demons, as only God could create new beings, and such mis-matched parts were therefore composed in mockery of his creation.²⁰⁷ Demons were also believed to possess knowledge of secret powers in both art and nature, which they could impart to magicians who summoned and served them. Because crossbreeding and hybridization were regarded as physically impossible, it seemed that the power of demons could theoretically be harnessed to disrupt the natural order in creating hybrid beings.²⁰⁸

The actual interpretation and use of the *Liber vaccae* is far more complex and nuanced than this seemingly damning characterization would suggest. In her study of the magical texts collected at St. Augustine's monastery, Sophie Page shows that the highly controversial *Book of the Cow* was just one among a multitude of occult treatises in its library. How could the monks justify keeping such a work that theologians believed violated the divinely-ordered world of nature? Their reasoning reveals important complexities within this and other magical works, most notably those that highlight an essentially syncretic context. First, the text was grouped with other treatises on natural magic that had an underlying medical focus, similar to the inclusion of *De proprietatibus* prior to the *Liber vaccae*. This correlation served to make the text more acceptable within a religious context, as it could be used for studying the natural world to discover healing benefits for humankind rather than engaging in experiments to actively manipulate or violate God's creation. Second, despite their questionable and often perverse and violent

²⁰⁶ Van Der Lugt, 258-259.

²⁰⁷ Page, 59-60.

²⁰⁸ Van Der Lugt, 262-263.

nature, the experiments never explicitly appealed to demonic entities. Although some ritual magical texts involve killing an animal to communicate with spirits (a genre that the monks avoided), the *Liber vaccae*'s killings were never made as offerings to spirits, but as sacrificial processes that rendered organic matter more malleable.²⁰⁹ Thus, despite the fact that they manipulate and change certain aspects of creation, these experiments still technically fall within the category of natural magic, as they rely on the magician's knowledge and power rather than explicit appeals for demonic aid. Finally, the inclusion of this text at St. Augustine's reflects the general medieval fascination with the unnatural and the monstrous, as seen in numerous examples of literature and art highlighting animal-human hybrids such as werewolves and wild men, mal-formed prodigious births, and imaginary amalgamated creatures such as gargoyles.²¹⁰ In following this line of reasoning, it is also entirely possible that the monks simply found these experiments morbidly fascinating. After all, despite his harsh condemnation of the *Liber vaccae* as well as many other occult works, even William of Auvergne had an admitted fascination with certain forms of magic, confessing that he read many works of this genre in his youth.²¹¹

One vital and perplexing question still has yet to be answered: what does this text reveal regarding syncretic animal symbolism within medieval magic? In his analysis of the *Liber vaccae*, Maaike Van Der Lugt argues that the primary historical takeaway from this text is “[illustrating] the distinctions between the natural and the demonic, between the allowed and the forbidden,” which despite their theoretical separation “remained

²⁰⁹ Page, 71.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

²¹¹ Van Der Lugt, 251.

highly problematic and ambiguous.”²¹² Although carefully articulated and generally well-supported, this analysis provides a rather obvious surface reading; thus, my interpretation of the *Liber vaccae* will focus more specifically on the symbolic and distinctly occult meanings surrounding certain animals, as well as highlighting the fundamentally syncretic nature of medieval magic. The most significant aspect of the experiments within this context is the act of combining human and animal parts and substances to create new hybrid beings known as homunculi. In analyzing these experiments, one might notice that the processes used to produce these beings as well as the creature’s hybrid form itself are violent, grotesque, and fundamentally transgressive. More specifically, the homunculus is conceived by forbidden sexual acts between humans and animals (which is a vile sin in and of itself), which produces a monstrous trans-species embryo, which is then grown to gestation in a surrogate animal’s womb. The various rituals surrounding the experiments are also characterized by violence, blood, and sacrificial slaughter, which emphasize their unnatural and forcible manipulation of creation. Additionally, the homunculus’s physical form is horrifyingly grotesque, as evidenced in one passage that describes the creature as “a small cow with a human face and eyes, wings, and claws like a bird.”²¹³ This description marks the homunculus as an animal that does not normally exist in nature, and can thus be classified as magical – but rather than something enchanting or wondrous, it is distinctly reminiscent of a monster or a demon. Although the *Liber vaccae* may not explicitly reference specific pagan or Christian religious principles, certain elements of its experiments are implicitly syncretic. For instance, the homunculus’s monstrous hybridity is strikingly similar to ancient and

²¹² Van Der Lugt, 231.

²¹³ Ibid., 236.

medieval accounts of deformed humans and animals, which were often regarded as bad omens. The creature's ritualistic slaughter and other forms of bloody violence also recall the ancient practice of animal sacrifice, in which certain beasts served as offerings to attain divine blessing or some form of occult power. Medieval scholars' interpretation of this text also reveals its associated Christian contexts and meanings. Most notably, the "rational animal's" distinct lack of thought and emotion reflects the boundaries between human and animal cognition, which made it particularly offensive and transgressive. Additionally, the *Liber vaccae*'s framework within a contrived medical context (which also served as a defensive mechanism) points to a surprisingly syncretic character commonly seen within these texts despite the fundamentally forbidden nature of such knowledge.

Another literary form where magical animals play a central role is the classically-inherited beast fable. The basic definition of a fable is "one of the smallest of the 'small' literary forms" – in other words, it lacks many of the hallmarks of larger and established imaginative works such as characterization, motivation, foreground and background, and circumstantial detail. What the fable does contain is plot, or some kind of central conflict or rudimentary story, which is most often carried out not by human actors, but by animals.²¹⁴ Thus, in its most essential form, the beast fable is a brief story used to convey a moralistic message through the use of animals (as well as trees, plants, and other non-sentient beings) that are mysteriously capable of human speech.²¹⁵ Most of us are at least somewhat acquainted with this genre through the remarkably enduring stories known as

²¹⁴ Howard Needler, "The Animal Fable Among Other Medieval European Literary Genres," *New Literary History* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 428.

²¹⁵ Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28.

Aesop's fables. Although Aesop is a primarily legendary figure who left no writings of his own, the animal fable does indeed have roots in classical Greece and Rome.²¹⁶ A prime example of this genre is the fable "The Wolf and The Lamb." The story opens with an idyllic scene depicting the two creatures drinking at a stream. When he notices the water become muddy, the wolf "fiercely" accuses the lamb of purposely dirtying the stream to prevent him from drinking, which the lamb "meekly" and respectfully denies. After a heated quarrel in which the wolf hurls insults and grows increasingly perturbed, he finally seizes the poor lamb, carries him off to the woods, and eats him – which as the cryptic ending reveals was the wolf's intention all along.²¹⁷

"The Wolf and Lamb" exemplifies many of the fable's major thematic traits. First, it serves to illustrate a specific moral message, which in this case presents a story of the wicked and the innocent to warn against the act of slander.²¹⁸ Second, the animal actors use human speech to communicate with one another. This characteristic serves to classify the beast fable as a "fantastic, obvious fiction" and make it more appealing to a younger audience, as well as providing a convenient function to deliver the central moral lesson.²¹⁹ Third, despite possessing human speech, the animals still fall within established lines of natural behavior. In this case, the fact that the story ends with the wolf devouring the lamb illustrates base instincts between predator and prey – one of the beast fable's most common and enduring tropes.²²⁰ Although some scholars believe that animal speech within the beast fable primarily serves a practical rather than symbolic function (namely to deliver a clear lesson), I believe that within their original classical context as well as

²¹⁶ Jeremy Lefkowitz, "Aesop and Animal Fable," in Campbell, 3.

²¹⁷ Joseph Rundell, ed., *Aesop's Fables* (London: Cassel, Petter, and Galpin, 1869), 5.

²¹⁸ Mann, 29.

²¹⁹ Lefkowitz, 11.

²²⁰ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 84.

the subsequent medieval adoption, this behavior can classify such creatures as magical. As we have seen in previous examples such as the amalgamated body of the Devil and the grotesque alchemical creation of the *Liber vaccae*'s homunculus, blurred and broken boundaries between humans and animals defy the laws and order of God's created world, which in turn classifies such beings as outside the realm of nature and into the allegoric realm of subversive mysticism. In the case of the beast fable, these forms of human/animal hybridity do not extend to their physical bodies; rather, they manifest in the puzzling contrast between natural animal behaviors and the possession of human speech (and therefore some semblance of rationality). Interestingly, however, as the beast fable's popularity suggests, these hybrid characters were not seen as fundamentally transgressive; rather, their symbolic function served to exemplify human values and illustrate social norms and rules, both in their original classical context and particularly within medieval Europe.

As with many other inherited aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture, the beast fable assumed new forms of meaning and metaphoric potential within a medieval context. One of the most important aspects of this phenomenon was the use of fables to reflect and reinforce behavioral norms and social order. For instance, in Marie of France's popular tales, "noble" lions and eagles act as just and powerful rulers, predatory wolves and foxes are "evil, greedy, and gluttonous" (a metaphor for nobility gone astray), and meek and demure creatures such as lambs and other livestock serve their lords to reinforce hierarchical harmony and order.²²¹ Medieval fables also took on additional dimensions of Christian religious meaning. For example, Marie of France tells of a

²²¹ Salisbury, "Human Animals of Medieval Fables," in Flores, 52-53.

village priest instructing a wolf to read. Although the wolf is easily persuaded to reiterate the letters of the text, when urged to recite them independently he instead cries, “Aignel, aignel! (“lamb, lamb!”), which reveals his overriding instinctual preoccupation.²²² Finally and most importantly, medieval beast fables commented on the boundaries between animal and human behavioral norms. As we have seen in Chapter Three, medieval perceptions of animals were primarily governed by Christian doctrine that separated them by tiers of reason and emphasized humanity’s God-given dominion over the natural world. This notion also extended to animal behavior, as emphasized in Thomas Aquinas’s assertion that instinctual actions “revealed God’s workmanship in the animal kingdom.”²²³ However, from the thirteenth century onward, medieval perceptions of animals became less concrete – a change that corresponded with increased appearances in fables, romance, poetry, and other literary forms.²²⁴ Although these talking animals with human-like behaviors were often not explicitly magical (mainly because these powers were naturally pre-supposed rather than supernaturally imposed), I believe there is something inherently mystical in this hybridization, a major aspect of which has to do with religion. However, in order to fully develop this theory, we must first examine magical animals within two other literary genres: the hagiography and the romance.

Hagiographies are a religious sub-set of biographies that detail the lives and veneration of various Christian saints. They generally trace the major events in saints’ lives that led them to become devoted followers of Christ, as well as divine signs that attest to their holy status. In particular, these stories emphasize good works, personal

²²² Needler, 430-431.

²²³ Peter Sobol, “The Shadow of Reason: Explanations of Intelligent Animal Behavior in the Thirteenth Century,” in Salisbury, *The Medieval World of Nature*, 121.

²²⁴ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 81, 89.

struggles, inspirational acts of devotion such as martyrdom, and miraculous events that occurred either during the saints' lifetime or after their death through relics, tombs, statues, or icons. Although hagiographies have been written since the second century C.E., they became particularly widespread and popular during the Middle Ages, where they served as illustrative examples of how to live a wholesome Christian life.²²⁵ One particularly compelling yet often-overlooked aspect of medieval hagiographies is the prevalence of animal-related miracles within these texts. According to literary scholar Susan Crane, historical, literary, and cultural scholars have turned to this genre for "reliable contemporary evidence about the aspirations and culture of a people," yet have also generally dismissed saints' animal miracles as "folk-lore fantasy" or "a transhistorical boilerplate unworthy of scholarly attention."²²⁶ Crane believes, however, that these works are highly valuable for understanding the full scope of medieval religious belief, as animal miracles demonstrate how "the world of Christian study and spiritual care intertwines with more than a human world," which serves to construct "a single environment drawn into harmony through holiness."²²⁷ More importantly, however, they also serve to show how animals could push the boundaries of normative behavioral patterns to display complex symbolic meanings often verging on the mystical.

Several textual examples illustrate this intriguing phenomenon. In the *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, for instance, the saint has an unusual experience with "two quadrupeds, called otters, [who] came up from the sea, and, lying down before him on the sand, breathed upon his feet, and wiped them with their hair after which, having received his blessing,

²²⁵ "Hagiography," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hagiography>.

²²⁶ Crane, 24.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

they returned to their native element.”²²⁸ In another part of this text, St. Cuthbert and his horse cannot find any shelter during a winter storm, so they wait together in a vacant dwelling for the storm to pass. As Cuthbert is praying to God while dwelling on the hunger gnawing at his stomach, he sees his horse “lift up his head and pull out some straw from the roof, and among the straw there fell down a linen cloth folded up, with something in it: half of a loaf of bread, still hot, and some meat, enough of both to serve him for a single meal.”²²⁹ Other hagiographies describe saints actively influencing or changing animals’ behavior in extraordinary ways. In one such text, the saints Fintan, Cainnech, and Finan command wolves to guard cattle “like ordinary dogs,” and Finan separates cows from their calves by drawing a line on the ground with his staff that “none of them dared to cross.”²³⁰ In addition, wild animals can also follow saints’ verbal instructions despite possessing no apparent understanding of human speech. For example, returning to the *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, when the saint commands a flock of ravens to stop destroying the thatched roof on his guesthouse, they miraculously obey his order, and even beg St. Cuthbert for forgiveness for their transgression.²³¹

Although all forms of historical literature provide valuable insight into the past, hagiographies offer a particularly unique perspective on medieval Christian religious doctrine as well as highlighting the spiritual conceptions imbued in daily life. In this regard, the animal-related miracles within these texts serve to reveal additional medieval perceptions of the natural world, specifically those that emphasize divinely-sanctioned

²²⁸ Peter Halsall, “Medieval Sourcebook: Bede: The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindesfarne (721),” Fordham University, last modified June 1997, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/bede-cuthbert.asp>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Crane, 32.

²³¹ Ibid., 37.

connectivity between mankind, the land, and earthly beings. In her analysis of animals in hagiographies, Susan Crane argues that miraculous cross-species encounters first and foremost serve to demonstrate the hierarchical, harmonious, and “coherent” order of God’s creation. More specifically, they illustrate how “society and nature flow into one another” within a coherent cosmic structure, as well as providing insight into “how creation is ordered and how it might be revised through faith.”²³² An important aspect of this meaning is hagiography’s emphasis on “hospitality,” such as the sea otters’ caresses and Cuthbert’s horse’s meal-retrieval, which demonstrate the Christian virtue of kindness to all aspects of creation.²³³ On the other hand, these stories serve to emphasize human control over animals, whether through miraculously-heeded verbal commands or some other power like Finan’s cow-repelling staff.²³⁴ In this sense, the beast fable and the hagiography share several distinct features in general form and function as well as moralistic purpose: they are short and simple, written to portray an overarching truth or lesson, and most importantly describe behavior distinct from the animal’s natural state. Although numerous scholars have examined at least one of these literary forms, they generally fail to acknowledge the potentially magical dimensions within these impossible or miraculous behaviors.²³⁵ In the beast fable, for instance, animals can speak, wear clothes, and participate in social functions, which allows them to cross the threshold into human reason and blur the boundaries between species. The hagiography contains many similar instances of impossible behaviors, such as the ravens’ understanding and

²³² Crane, 25.

²³³ Ibid., 28.

²³⁴ Ibid., 32.

²³⁵ See, for instance: Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*; Lefkowitz, “Aesop and Animal Fable,” in Campbell, 1-23; Salisbury, “Human Animals of Medieval Fables,” in Flores, 49-66; Needler, “The Animal Fable Among Other Medieval European Literary Genres.”

intelligent response to St. Cuthbert's scolding, which could also assume a sort of mystical context as a result of its impossibility. The most important similarity between these literary forms is their medieval application in relating such human-like behaviors to illustrate God's divine power within the natural world, in which potentially subversive allegories took on a fundamentally syncretic union.

The third medieval literary genre that contains magical animals in a more explicitly supernatural context is the romance. Common tropes within these works include sorcerers and witches, various forms of enchantment, villainous monsters and demonic entities, and both mythical and ordinary beasts.²³⁶ As with the beast fable and the hagiography, these literary animals can take on numerous symbolic qualities within either explicit or implicit supernatural dimensions. These include exhibiting human traits or powers, embodying specific virtues, or transforming into different creatures (including humans) through voluntary or forced enchantment.²³⁷ Certain animals within medieval romance are more obviously magical than others. A prime example of the former is the "fairy dog" Petitcreiu from *Tristan and Isolde*. In this story, the hero Tristan steals Petitcreiu from an elf-woman in order to gift it to his mistress. Although "no one can well describe its kind or beauty," the dog is "delicate and fine...with soft hair like samite," and has several strange unearthly qualities. Most notably, Petitcreiu wears a bell around its neck that "tinkled so gaily, and so clear and so soft, that as Tristan heard it, he was soothed, and his anguish melted away...for such was the virtue of the bell and such its

²³⁶ Saunders, 1.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

property: that whosoever heard it, he lost all pain.”²³⁸ In addition, the dog’s coat changes color from different perspectives, it never whines or barks, and shows no need or desire to ever eat or drink.²³⁹ In her analysis of *Tristan*, Margaret Schleissner argues that the “wonder dog” Petitcreiu primarily serves as a metaphor for the magical and idealized nature of the hero’s love.²⁴⁰ However, I believe that this creature also represents an additional symbolic function. Unlike animal characters in the beast fable and hagiography, Petitcreiu is classified as a distinctly magical being because of his appearance and attributes (changing colors, the bell that removes sorrow, lack of need for food and drink) rather than purposeful behavioral changes (such as the ability to speak or understand human speech). In this sense, Petitcreiu represents an animal imbued with supernatural power not from his intrinsic nature or association with magically-powerful individuals, but from his origin with elves or faeries – a force outside the typical boundaries of creation. These supernatural beings were a prominent motif in pre-Christian literature and oral tradition, where they were known for bestowing either blessings or mischievous misfortune on their human neighbors.²⁴¹ Although, as with most romances, *Tristan* is not an explicitly Christian moralistic text, the fact that distinctly pagan elements such as faeries, elves, sorcery, enchantment, curses, and shape-shifting remained imbued within this genre attests to their persistence and eventual syncretic evolution.

²³⁸ *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, ed. Joseph Bedier and trans. Hilaire Belloc (Edinburgh: Ballantyne Press, 2004), accessed May 24, 2018, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14244/14244-h/14244-h.htm>.

²³⁹ Margaret Schleissner, “Animal Images in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*: Structure and Meaning of Metaphor,” in Salisbury, *Medieval World of Nature*, 83-84.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴¹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 53.

Other magical animals within medieval romance display more explicitly syncretic commentary regarding man's relationship to the natural world. One of the most well-known examples is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which contains numerous stories prominently featuring such creatures. The "Squire's Tale," for instance, describes a "steed of brass" gifted to the King of Tartary as tribute.²⁴² According to the messenger who presents him, the brass steed can travel any distance within a day, run with remarkable speed or fly through the air, and chart or change his course without human direction – for "he who made this steed made him more than a horse."²⁴³ Besides these astonishing physical abilities, Chaucer's description of the crowd's reaction marks the brass steed as a marvel imbued with mystical power. For instance, one passage states: "It seemed quite clear, to everyone standing there, / That neither nature nor art could have made him better. / But mostly, looking it over, people wondered / Just how this horse of brass could move those thunderous / Hooves. It had to be magic, from Faerie land."²⁴⁴ This description marks the brass steed as somewhere between mechanical and organic – he is made out of brass, moves with the turning of a pin, and yet possesses a "gentle" personality and "sensitive, shining eyes."²⁴⁵ This fantastical hybridity leads the steed's observers to classify him as a "magic" being, which simultaneously falls within and outside the natural order.

The brass steed is a particularly fascinating and symbolically rich example of magical medieval literary animals with underlying spiritual significance. On the one hand, the creature's simultaneously organic and mechanical form reveals another subtle

²⁴² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Neville Coghill (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 297.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

yet essential aspect of medieval perceptions of the natural world. In his description of instinctual animal behavior, Thomas Aquinas makes an intriguing “mechanical analogy,” noting that “all creatures of the same kind behave in the same way” just as all clocks operate according to the same basic principles.²⁴⁶ For instance, all sheep will run away from wolves because of their instinctive sense of imminent predatory danger. Aquinas cautions, however, that this is not a sign of human-like intelligence or rationality, as “any apparent wisdom or prudence in animal behavior is simply a manifestation of God’s creative genius, just as a clock reflects the creative genius of its human builder.”²⁴⁷ By imbuing the brass steed with distinctly mechanical, clocklike elements, Chaucer provides fascinating insight into similar medieval understandings of nature and its creatures. The brass horse is not just an engineering marvel, but also a partially organic being brought to life by natural magic that imparts wonder and amazement to its viewers. Thus, in contrast to the horrible human/animal homunculi, this hybrid creature exhibits distinct elements of both Christianity (God’s mechanical genius) and paganism (the use of natural magic imparting life) that unite within a positive, fantastical, and purely imaginative context.

Chaucer’s choice to use an equine form for this supernatural being is particularly compelling when we analyze the surrounding medieval connotations of the horse. The horse was an immensely useful beast of burden and thus highly valued within many sectors of society, from peasants for their use in plowing to knights and royalty in warfare. More importantly, this animal’s intelligence, sensitivity, and high level of trainability led to uniquely intimate relationships between a horse and rider, which in turn resulted in multifaceted symbolic meaning. Most notably, even within the distinct

²⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on *Physics*, quoted in Peter Sobol, “The Shadow of Reason,” in Salisbury, *Medieval World of Nature*, 120.

²⁴⁷ Translated paraphrase of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1-2.13.2, quoted in Sobol, 120.

Christian boundaries separating animals and humans by way of reason, the horse occupied a sort of liminal, mystical space in regards to its intelligence. For example, Isidore's *Etymologies* states that:

Horses exult in fields, can smell war, and are roused to battle by the sound of the trumpet; when provoked by a voice to race, they exult when they win but grieve when they lose. Some horses recognize enemies and attack them by biting. They recognize their own masters, and some will not allow anyone else to ride them. They weep for dead or dying masters, being the only animal to do so.²⁴⁸

This passage matches with countless other medieval literary works in describing horses as possessing something eerily akin to human reason – which as any equestrian will tell you still rings true today. Although very few medieval accounts of animals stray into the realm of cross-species affection or emotional connection, human-equine relationships are often portrayed as a mutualistic partnership or even as a friendship, with loving bonds between a rider and his loyal steed.²⁴⁹ Thus, Chaucer's brass steed plays on the horse's already-established semi-magical nature to create a being that falls within (as a mechanical object made by human hands that submits to human will) and necessarily subverts (through fundamentally magical traits) Christian hierarchical order within the natural world.

Another example of a magical animal from medieval romance is the werewolf. One particularly compelling case comes from the long alliterative poem *William of Palerne*. This work tells the story of William, the son of the king of Sicily, and his love Meliors, who are unable to marry due to political disputes between their families. In order

²⁴⁸ Isidore, *Etymologies* 1:41-59.

²⁴⁹ See for instance, Crane, 153.

to escape, the two lovers disguise themselves in animal skins and run into the woods, where they meet a friendly werewolf who remarkably comes to their aid.²⁵⁰ It is eventually revealed that the werewolf is Alphouns, the son of the king of Spain, who was enchanted by his wicked stepmother so her own son could inherit the throne. By the story's conclusion, Alphouns's repentant stepmother restores his human form, William and Melior marry, and the kingdom generally returns to a state of harmony and peace.²⁵¹ According to Norman Hinton's analysis of this poem, the "witty werewolf" is a central component of the plot, leading other scholars to assert that the werewolf is in fact the hero rather than William.²⁵² The werewolf itself is an ancient mythological and literary trope, but is generally portrayed as fearsome, monstrous, and evil rather than heroic. For instance, the *Otia Imperialia* of Gervaise of Tilbury describes a nobleman who "in wolf's form...devoured infants, [and] tore old people into wild beast's morsels"; he was also "gravely wounded by a woodcutter, when a blow of an axe cut off one of his feet, at which time he immediately resumed human form."²⁵³ This nobleman's behavior is "that of the 'textbook' werewolf" – he is ravenous, preys on the young and old, and assumes a lupine form as a result of madness. In addition, he also becomes violently disfigured while in wolf-form – another common werewolf trope that signifies losing part of one's humanity.²⁵⁴

When compared to the more typical werewolf in the *Otia Imperialia*, Alphouns's lupine persona is remarkably distinct. Although he does exhibit some animalistic traits, including howling, roaring, twisting his feet, and eating dirt, Alphouns does not act

²⁵⁰ Norman Hinton, "The Werewolf as *Eiron*: Freedom and Comedy in William of Palerne," in Flores, 133.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

²⁵² Hinton, 133-134.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

²⁵⁴ Crane, 65.

violently toward William and Melior, and instead continually helps them.²⁵⁵ Most notably, he utilizes certain animal behaviors in order to achieve this purpose, such as growling and pretending to attack a peasant so he drops his bag of food for them to eat.²⁵⁶ Thus, the author of *William of Palerne* depicts the werewolf not as a senseless beast or monster, but rather as a “tricky servant,” which is further emphasized by his frequent characterization as “witty,” which is rarely used to describe the humans in the story.²⁵⁷ In this sense, Alphouns’s werewolf form can be interpreted as a commentary on medieval perceptions of animals and humans. As we have already discussed, various forms of medieval literature from the thirteenth century onward contain heavy emphasis on allegorical and symbolic animals, many of which are depicted with human attributes and behaviors.²⁵⁸ This phenomenon reflects increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and animals within medieval intellectual and religious thought, as the fable’s notion of hybridity is “a pagan genre lingering in a Christian world.”²⁵⁹ However, there is also a more explicitly religious context surrounding Alphouns’s hybrid form. For instance, despite his animalistic traits and lack of fully-developed human speech, the werewolf at one points “invokes God” – an impossible and distasteful feat for most ancient and medieval werewolves.²⁶⁰ This ability serves to illustrate “his good and human nature and an alliance with God,” which in turn underscores the fact that Alphouns was changed into a werewolf by enchantment rather than an inherently evil nature or some form of

²⁵⁵ Hinton, 136.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁵⁸ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 81.

²⁵⁹ Mann, 44.

²⁶⁰ Hinton, 136.

madness.²⁶¹ Thus, this intriguing account of the symbolic features of the werewolf represents a classical pagan trope that has been re-structured to fit within medieval Christian hierarchical representations of the natural world.

This examination of medieval literature reveals additional symbolic and remarkably complex meanings within syncretic understandings of mystical and monstrous forms of nature. Although essentially disparate in context, form, and function, these examples of magical treatises, fables, hagiography, and romance serve to highlight the multifaceted nature of magical animals. As Susan Crane states in her analysis of “animal encounters” within medieval literature, many scholars tend to discount or overlook the creatures that crawl, fly, swim, leap, and bound through the pages of these texts.²⁶² In surveying these animals and placing them within medieval religious, social, and intellectual boundaries, this chapter serves to highlight the symbolic dimensions of mystical and mundane animals in the “enchanted” intellectual landscape of medieval consciousness. Although they each come from different periods, regions, authors, and contextual backgrounds, the *Liber vaccae*'s homunculi, Saint Cuthbert's horse and ravens, the brass steed, and Alphouns the werewolf represent a world in which the boundaries between animal and human, religion and magic, and scientific and symbolic interpretations of the natural world frequently blended into and enriched one another.

²⁶¹ Hinton, 143.

²⁶² Crane, 24.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on philosophical debates surrounding Stoic and Neoplatonic interpretations of animals, the third-century Greek philosopher Aelian discovered profound evidence of “divine providence” in the stories he collected, stating that: “The gods have taken thought for them, neither looking down on them nor reckoning them of small account. For although destitute of reasoning power, at any rate they possess understanding proportionate to their needs.”²⁶³ As we have repeatedly seen throughout the course of this investigation, medieval Europeans echoed this inherently spiritual view of nature, as both divine and cosmic forces imbued the land and all its creatures with intrinsic power and specific purpose in one harmonious whole.

This examination of animal symbolism within medieval European magic has surveyed four distinct thematic trends and their associated meanings, each of which reveals the fundamentally syncretic nature of such practices. The first main chapter serves to establish the classical foundations of occult theory and practice, including the central notion of a microcosmic-macrocosmic universe which resulted in a fundamentally “enchanted” view of nature. The pervasive influence of Christianity simultaneously co-opted yet profoundly altered this perception, resulting in new syncretic understandings that emphasized God-given human dominion over animals and cast certain creatures in a negative, demonic light. Although many tangible aspects of medieval magical practice have been lost with the passage of time or simply unrecorded, historians and other scholars can still gain important insight by examining certain available sources. Two particularly revealing resources are medical treatises and literary works, which provide a

²⁶³ Maureen Tilley, “Martyrs, Monks, Insects, and Animals,” in Salisbury, *Medieval World of Nature*, 98.

uniquely intimate and nuanced glimpse into how medieval people viewed and interacted with their world. Many of the remedies and recipes in works such as Bald's leechbook and the Wolfsthurn handbook demonstrate the explicitly syncretic melding of pagan and Christian elements, which were believed to imbue animal-derived and other natural ingredients with supernatural power to increase their existing organic effectiveness. Magical animals and animal magic also figured heavily in medieval occult treatises, fables, hagiographies, and romance, where they served as canvases for social values and commentary on what makes us human. Together, these four thematic threads attest to the fundamentally "enchanted" and syncretic medieval understanding of the universe, which influenced practical and symbolic perceptions of animals and all other life on Earth.

By examining the theoretical foundations of ancient and medieval magic, Christian interpretations of classical occult beliefs, the use of animal ingredients within medico-magic, and examples of magical animals in various forms of literature, I have attempted to underscore each facet's highly nuanced meanings in order to reveal the spiritual dimensions of how medieval Europeans viewed, interpreted, and lived within the natural world. Throughout this investigation, I have also consciously employed Animal History's signature interdisciplinary framework by combining historical, theological, literary, and cultural analysis in order to emphasize the "living animal" as medieval Europeans would have viewed and coexisted alongside them. This theoretical approach serves to shed much-needed light on a period erroneously categorized as backwards, superstitious, and spiritually conservative, when in reality medieval Europeans' "enchanted" perception of the world stemmed from a complex blend of intellectual,

religious, and historical perspectives culminating in the meaningful interconnectedness of all existence.

Animal History is a relatively new and constantly evolving field that provides exciting potential for original analysis of countless periods, problems, and topics within the historical field. In recent years, this discipline has been employed to offer compelling alternative perspectives to complement and enhance previous forms of scholarship. For instance, Virginia Anderson's *Creatures of Empire* analyzes colonial livestock husbandry to reveal complex relationships between colonists, Native Americans, and the land on which they lived. Similarly, Martha Few and Zeb Tortocini's *Centering Animals in Latin American History* analyzes cross-species encounters to re-center and complicate colonial narratives of power, conquest, discovery, and indigenous knowledge. Despite the numerous examples and immense value of these works, however, very few scholars have extended Animal History to the realm of the occult. This is partly due to the interdisciplinary nature of this field, which frequently utilizes scientific and environmental data, as well as the innate complexity of magical history, theory, and practice. It is also in part due to the steadily increasing de-emphasis on spiritual aspects of the world as humanity moves toward a future devoid of religious meaning, as technology grants mankind an ironic sense of God-like power over a remarkable array of formerly inevitable aspects of existence.

As Richard Kieckhefer states in his analysis of the occult within medieval Europe, “magic is worth studying because it serves as a starting point for excursions into so many areas of medieval culture.”²⁶⁴ In following this logic, my investigation into syncretic

²⁶⁴ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2.

animal symbolism within medieval magic serves as a starting point to comprehending how occult and religious sensibilities became fundamentally entwined as medieval Europeans sought to navigate, survive, and thrive within an uncertain world. It is also a profoundly important and revealing discussion for contemporary culture, as we live in an age of rapidly disappearing species, disturbing environmental repercussions from large-scale animal agriculture, and scientific research capable of creating living human-animal chimeras. These trends also beg a question that may seem deceptively simple: are animals still at all magical to us? To most, the answer is most likely a resounding no, but the reality may perhaps be somewhat more complex. After all, we share our homes and form mutualistic loving bonds with cats, dogs, and other pets, establish a working partnership with horses to achieve incredible athletic feats, rely on wild animals and livestock to provide resources and food, and study biology to unlock the mysterious mechanisms of existence. In all of these connections, some semblance of the symbolic and even mystical still remains, as all earthly life is still interconnected, even if our understanding of the universe has changed.

While pondering my own answer to this fundamental question, I immediately recalled a scene from the 2009 Wes Anderson film *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. As the band of animal protagonists are riding a motorcycle down the highway, they come across a forest clearing dusted with a thick blanket of snow, where a large black wolf is standing and regarding them intently. Mr. Fox repeatedly attempts to speak to the wolf, first in English, then in Latin, and finally in French, asking him if “he thinks we are in for a hard winter.” Receiving no response, he concludes that the wolf “doesn’t seem to know,” nor does he understand any spoken language. Before departing, Mr. Fox makes one last effort

to communicate, looking directly at the wolf and stretching his paw up to the sky. After a moment of anticipation amidst haunting operatic background music, the wolf makes the same gesture back before disappearing into the woods as mysteriously as he arrived (Figure 12).²⁶⁵ The talking, anthropomorphized animals within this scene – as well as countless other modern films, television shows, and other visual and written stories – are remarkably reminiscent of the medieval beast fable and other imaginative interpretations. More importantly, however, the scene’s powerful juxtaposition of the mysterious, wild wolf with its more “civilized” counterparts and the transcendence of cross-species emotion over intelligible language references the enduring bridge between reality and the mystical world of nature. Because the ultimate goal of Animal History is to better understand our selves, more work has yet to be done to uncover these connections, as well as marking their extension to the present, future, and past.

²⁶⁵ Fandango Movie Clips, “Fantastic Mr. Fox (5/5 Movie) CLIP – Meeting The Wolf (2009) HD” (video), posted Feb. 12, 2016, accessed May 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELqdLvz60zA>.

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Appendix



Figure 1: The four complexions with their animal companions, from the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds*.



Figure 2: These illustrations from the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds* also serve to showcase the medieval emphasis on cosmological movements in governing earthly life, such as agriculture/tending livestock (left) or the turning of the seasons in accordance with the zodiac (right).



Figure 3: Adam naming the animals, from the *Peterborough Bestiary*, c. 1304-21.



Figure 4: Witches worshipping the Devil in the form of a goat, from *Johannes Tinctor's Invectives Against the Sect of the Waldensians*, c. 1460.



Figure 5: Illustration from the Vienna *Book of Relics*, c. 1502 – the motto reads, “Everybody afterwards” (source: *Animals in the Middle Ages*).



Figure 6: Sixth-century Byzantine mosaic featuring the earliest depiction of the Christian Devil (right).



Figure 7: Miniature portrait depicting Pope Sylvester II and the Devil, c. 1460.



Figure 8: “Hellmouth” from Hugo von Trimberg’s *Der Renner*, c. 1425 (left) and Augustine’s *City of God*, 14th c. (right).



Figure 9: Roman mosaic depicting Pan, the god of shepherds, with goat horns and legs.

Galen's Quaternal System

Element	Quality	Humor	Character
Fire	hot and dry	choler or yellow bile	choleric
Water	cold and wet	phlegm or mucus	phlegmatic
Earth	cold and dry	black bile	melancholic
Air	hot and wet	blood	sanguine

Figure 10: The quaternal system (source: *Words, Stones, and Herbs*).

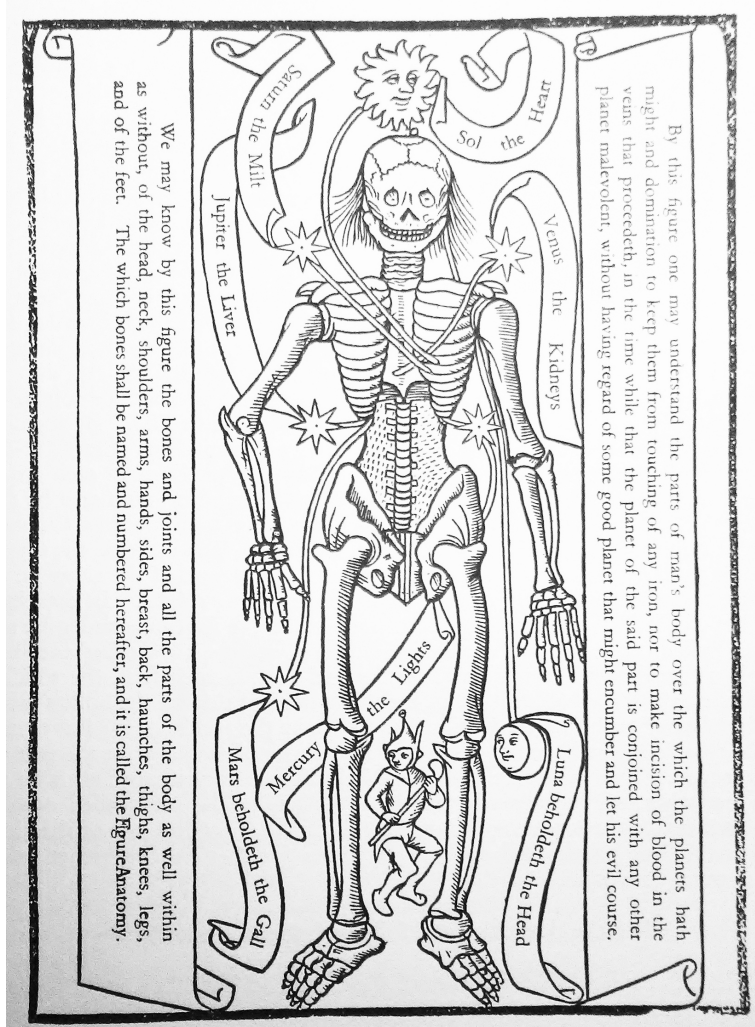


Figure 11: “A picture of the physiognomy of man’s body that showeth in what parts the seven planets hath dominion in man,” from the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds*.



Figure 12: The allegoric wolf scene from *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (source: Fandango Movie Clips).