

## Women and Other Beasts: A Feminist Perspective on Medieval Bestiaries

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And thus birds are created and placed, that with them it [the soul]  
should know and understand and feel, what is to be known of itself.

—Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica*, book 6

AS I BEGAN WORK recently on a twelfth-century Middle English poem, I was eager to read an analysis by Christopher Cannon, a prominent young medievalist. Cannon's insights were indeed helpful, but I was startled by what he presents as a feminist reading. Discussing the shortcomings of past criticism, he writes that "we had . . . to wait for our own feminism to catch up with *The Owl and the Nightingale* before we could notice that these birds are not only represented as women, but that what they actually talk most *about* is women."<sup>1</sup> I was a little perturbed at his assumption that "we"—presumably, the scholarly community as a whole—were incapable of a feminist perspective until the late twentieth century. More particularly, I resisted Cannon's implication that feminist readers would assent to his assertion that the poem's avian protagonists are "represented as women." Granted, the Owl and Nightingale are unquestionably female—but female *birds*, concerned with building nests and hatching eggs. And while they also pontificate about women, they do so from a detached—indeed, a privileged—perspective. Cannon's reading is admittedly more fully feminist than many of its predecessors in which the Owl and Nightingale are often treated as spokesbirds for male-dominated institutions or practices. But Wendy Matlock's essay in this issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* demonstrates that andropomorphism need not be simply replaced by what

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1. Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129.

we might call gynomorphism. That is, powerful readings can center on the intersection, in medieval animal texts, of gender and species.

Here I intend to test that proposition against the best known and most prolific of medieval animal genres, the beast-book. Beginning with Latin bestiaries produced in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, I will “tak[e] the perspectives of women as integral to [my] analysis” in three ways: women as objects of representation, as readers, and as an author.<sup>2</sup>

### Subjects of the Bestiary: Naturalized Androcentrism

Animals have sex, in both senses: most species are sexually differentiated and they reproduce by exchanging gametes. It is therefore somewhat curious that bestiaries are not particularly sexy, in either sense. Copulation goes mostly unmentioned; so does the animals’ biological gender. The creatures are named with undifferentiated collective nouns—the lion, the dog, the ant. There are a few chapters on the female of a species—lioness, sow, cow—but those look like appendages to the generic entries. In one way, of course, gender attaches to all bestiary creatures, as it would to any Latin noun: *leo* (lion) is masculine, *formica* (ant) feminine. But as with other nouns in many languages, those grammatical inflections need not correspond to biological sex. For the most part, bestiaries do not deal with female animals, let alone with women.

Within bestiary chapters, however, gender inflections can be inconsistent, and their anomalies implicate the secondary subjects of bestiaries: human beings. *Aquila* (eagle) is feminine, for instance, and the adjective in the first line of its entry in the Second-family bestiary, “vocata” (called), is feminine.<sup>3</sup> But after the initial accounts of aquiline vision and

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2. The quoted phrase is Karen J. Warren’s criterion for a “feminist” as opposed to a “nonfeminist” position. Karen J. Warren, *Ecological Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

3. Most scholars assign bestiaries to successive groupings: the foundational *Physiologus* texts, originating in Alexandria in the second century and classified in turn into different versions; “transitional” or “First-family” texts incorporating in particular the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville; overlapping with those, the large and influential Second-family grouping, my focus here; and a Third or even Fourth

flight, which leave the bird's gender unspecified, the Eagle turns male: we read that it rejects a weak chick "as unworthy of such a father."<sup>4</sup> Like Americans who attribute masculinity to their national emblem, the bestiary honors androcentric norms rather than the natural superiority in size and strength of female raptors. Human norms also seem responsible for some gender shifts between the two sections characteristic of bestiary entries, the description or *natura* and the application or *significatio*. Thus man, "homo," is urged to imitate the diligence and prudence of the female Ant. The *Pantera* (panther), feminine in Latin, becomes masculine in the *significatio*, as an emblem of Christ (124). Occasionally it is the feminine sex stereotype that dominates: the *Turtur* (turtledove), masculine by default, turns feminine in the longer bestiaries as she becomes a paradigm for the Church or the virtuous soul, devoted to the divine bridegroom (185).

In at least one case, androcentric gender norms render a bestiary species incoherent. *Perdix* (partridge) is among the animate nouns classified as "common gender," treated variably as masculine and feminine. Initially the Second-family Partridge is male, but he is a gender outlaw—a "woeful and unclean bird, for male mounts male, and lust rashly forgets gender" (obliviscitur sexum libido praeceps). The Partridge is also deceitful: he "plunders eggs of other birds" (179). So too, we read, the Devil steals the Creator's offspring. Fortunately, when the purloined hatchlings fledge, they hear the voice of "her who bore them" and fly back to her. So too, when those whom the Devil seduced hear Christ's voice, they "assum[e] spiritual wings" and return to him (179–80). The analogy is clear enough, but it rests on an unacknowledged contradiction: members of the same species that is branded as indiscriminately lascivious and diabolically larcenous also figure as the Christ-like "propria genetrix"

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family. See Willene B. Clark, ed. and trans., *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary: Commentary, Art, Text and Translation* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 7–14 and 47–50. Except as otherwise noted, I will take quotations and other references from Clark's edition of the earliest known Second-family text, London, British Library MS Add. 11283 (ca. 1180).

4. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 166–67. Future citations to Clark's edition will be documented parenthetically by page number. Translations are Clark's unless otherwise indicated.

(true mother) of the repenting chicks (which apparently grow up to be lascivious and larcenous). The simplest resolution is a distinction by gender: mother birds do not share in male wickedness. More precisely, though, the text distinguishes the mother partridge not from males but from *Perdix*, the species itself. In a structure familiar to feminist critics, the species is essentially male.

Indeed, beasts whose names are marked feminine in Latin often turn grammatically masculine even when the creature in question lacks traditionally masculine characteristics. *Ovis* (sheep) is feminine, but its description acquires masculine inflection, despite being followed by a chapter on the masculine *Vervex* and *Aries* (wether and ram) (151). Wilene B. Clark appropriately translates pronomial references to the Fox as “he” and “him” even though, as she observes, the “feminine word *vulpis* applies to both genders” (141n115). Of course, the pull of the masculine declension is not particularly medieval; children today use “he” and “his” for a real or toy animal of indeterminate sex. That is, not only is maleness the unmarked gender in language; male biology is also, by implication, the universal standard in nature. But the didactic rhetoric of bestiaries adds moralizing force to such usage: the shaping of bestiary animals by human gender norms itself turns normative.

Circular justification—attributing a human norm to nature and simultaneously validating the norm because it is natural—also appears elsewhere in bestiaries. As I have already noted, the bestiarist labels the Partridge “woeful and unclean” because males sometimes mount other males; projected onto an anthropomorphic account of animal behavior, human sexual morality presents itself as grounded in nonhuman animals.<sup>5</sup> In a passage directed to women, the Turtledove chapter makes that process explicit. Alleging that a dove whose mate dies will refuse ever to mate again, the bestiarist observes that even Saint Paul refrained from explicitly mandating such chastity for human widows, but in fact, Paul “desire[d] in women what in turtle doves is an enduring characteristic.” It was God, then, “who infused the turtle doves with

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5. In *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Duckworth, 1991), Wilma George and Brunson Yapp report that adolescent partridges do engage in erotic play without respect to a partner's sex (154). In fact, then, exclusive heterosexuality lacks a natural rationale.

this grace or capacity for affection, giving them the virtue of continence; God, who alone can set forth the law which all should follow.”<sup>6</sup> For the bestiary, divinely created nature, inscribed with scriptural principles, trumps Scripture itself.<sup>7</sup>

The Turtledove chapter is exceptional in its explicit reference to women, but its *significatio* is typical in naturalizing clerical views of gender. Subtending the bestiaries’ particular teachings is a persistent message of gender asymmetry: male exemplars stand in for species. We can of course take such practices as implicitly inclusive, incorporating both human genders into the collective singulars and allegorizations: women can read themselves into *Leo* as well as *Aquila*. But when a bestiary adds a chapter on the Lioness after a long one on the Lion or identifies *Aquila* as a father, the book of beasts makes female marginality a fact of creation.<sup>8</sup>

### Bestiary Readership: Brothers, and a Few Mothers

Xenia Muratova opens her richly informative essay on bestiary patronage by transcribing and translating a “more or less contemporary inscription concerning the donation” of “a sumptuously decorated English bestiary of the last quarter of the twelfth century.” The donor, a canon named Philip Apostolorum, intends his gift “for the edification of the brethren” of the Church of St. Mary and St. Cuthbert of Radford.<sup>9</sup> He

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6. *Aberdeen Bestiary*, The Aberdeen Bestiary Project (University of Aberdeen, 2015), <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary>, fol. 32r, accessed July 8, 2017; Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 185–86.

7. As Clark observes, a chapter on the Crow and another on the Viper and Moray Eel pair adjurations to females and to males (*Medieval Book of Beasts*, 43–44, 183–84, and 195–97). Because those admonitions concern contemporary practices and norms rather than biblical or canonical dictates, they do not naturalize ideology as does the Turtledove chapter.

8. For the Lioness following the Lion, see, e.g., Christopher de Hamel, ed., *Book of Beasts: A Facsimile of MS Bodley 764* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008), fols. 3r–6r; for the *Aquila* called a father, Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 166–67.

9. Xenia Muratova, “Bestiaries: An Aspect of Medieval Patronage,” in *Art and Patronage in the English Romanesque*, ed. Sarah Macready and F. H. Thompson (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1986), 118–44, at 118.

announces that at the request of said brethren, anyone who removes any of those books from the house of St. Cuthbert is to be summarily excommunicated. Moreover, he declares, even a temporary removal from those precincts will summon God's wrath on both loaner and recipient.<sup>10</sup>

With or without such weighty proscriptions, most bestiaries seem to have resided in the libraries of male religious orders. The earliest Latin bestiaries, sometimes termed "transitional," were probably owned by and produced in monasteries.<sup>11</sup> For later texts, Clark writes, "there is very little contemporary evidence regarding patrons, original owners, and use,"<sup>12</sup> but internal evidence suggests at least lingering monastic influence: the Second-family texts that I have cited contain long sections of an overtly monastic aviary and an unillustrated, animal-free chapter that could be an address to a monastic community.<sup>13</sup> In *Bestiaries and Their Users*, Ron Baxter writes that where medieval booklists indicate the locations of English bestiaries, "[i]n every case but one, the localization is to a religious house." After discussing those locations, he notes that he has "found no book list of any kind from any house of religious women."<sup>14</sup>

Such book lists exist, at least as portions of more comprehensive bibliographies, but they do not contravene Baxter's implication that there were no Latin bestiaries in the libraries of women's religious orders. The 144 manuscripts in nuns' houses identified by David N. Bell include no bestiaries in Latin and only one in a vernacular language, Guillaume le Clerc's French verse *Bestiaire*.<sup>15</sup> Between fifty and 120 Latin bestiary

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10. Muratova, 119.

11. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 49–50 and 86.

12. Clark, 86.

13. Clark, 47, 47n83, and 96–97.

14. Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users in the Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), 50 and 164. Below I endorse Clark's reservations about Baxter's attribution of bestiaries to (male) religious houses.

15. David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 37 and 158. Bell writes on page 1 that he began his research with "two bibliographies that include convent libraries: Neil Ker's *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (London, 1964) and Andrew Watson's *Supplement to the Second Edition* (London, 1987)." He locates Guillaume's *Bestiaire* in Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MS McClean 123 (thirteenth century), held by the Priory of BVM of Nuns of Fontevault in Nuneaton (Warwickshire).

manuscripts survive, depending on one's definition.<sup>16</sup> Including the many now lost, medieval bestiaries must have been numerous enough that their absence from women's religious houses calls for explanation. We might suspect that monastic officials followed the lead of Canon Philip in securing bestiaries for the exclusive use of the brothers.

There are, of course, other explanations for that outcome. For instance, with their lower endowments, women's houses may have chosen books newer and thus less expensive than bestiaries, most of which predate a significant decline in manuscript production costs.<sup>17</sup> In addition, genre—itself linkable to gender—may have played a large role in the acquisition of manuscripts. Most works owned by women's religious houses seem to have been liturgical or devotional—bibles, books of hours, psalters, ordinals, hymns, obituaries, and especially saints' lives.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the texts that Baxter found to be shelved or bound with bestiaries were more theological: "works on virtue and vice, penitentials, and sermons and sermon material in the form of *distinctiones*, *summae*, and instructions to preachers."<sup>19</sup> Genre and timing may have kept bestiaries from female readers regardless of the possessiveness of male canons.

But it is also possible that our understanding of bestiaries as a genre has itself been distorted by gender-linked assumptions about readership. The search for bestiary manuscripts in convents presupposes that bestiaries were, in the words of Christopher de Hamel, "strictly religious books."<sup>20</sup> So they are, in a broad sense: bestiaries presume and promote Christian doctrines, which can in turn shape the animal descriptions. But it is unclear that bestiaries are narrowly doctrinal, as De Hamel's "strictly" suggests. Many of their features—the strikingly animated illustrations, the absence of moralization in many chapters, the

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16. Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users*, 226; Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 93.

17. On the lower production costs of manuscripts after 1300, see Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 14–16. It appears from Bell's list of the date ranges of nuns' book holdings (p. 34) that only 32 of the 144 manuscripts in convent libraries date from the period of major bestiary production, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Bell also points out (p. 35) that different kinds of material had different rates of survival, particularly after the dissolution of monastic orders.

18. Bell, 35.

19. Bell, 192.

20. De Hamel, *Book of Beasts*, 13.

tentativeness and occasional playfulness of many significations—indicate that Second-family bestiaries set out not to proselytize but “to transmit everything ever known, stated, or merely believed” about birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and a handful of mythological beasts.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, they probably responded to the curiosity of secular readers.

Among the most important developments in modern bestiary scholarship is Willene Clark’s thorough reassessment of the bestiary. Contesting widely held views, Clark argues, first, that we have reliable early evidence of monastic ownership for only five of the forty-nine surviving Second-family bestiaries; second, that bindings that assemble bestiaries with homiletic and monastic material were not the original settings; and third, that bestiaries were not important sources for sermons.<sup>22</sup> In short, circumstances of ownership and use indicate that although the Latin bestiaries were not secular books, “they were also not ecclesiastical, addressing some formal purpose in the Church.”<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with textual evidence, Clark proposes an alternative classification: “the bestiary as a book for the people.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast to its forebearer, the densely hermeneutical *Physiologus*, the “lore and moralizations chosen by the Second-family compiler emphasize ethical-moral teachings founded on only the most basic tenets of the faith.”<sup>25</sup> Second-family bestiaries also feature familiar and domestic animals more prominently than fantastic and non-European ones, and they base many descriptions on sources more encyclopedic than allegorical: Solinus, Ambrose, and Isidore of Seville.<sup>26</sup> Manuscript illustrations depict animals as expressive and lively (56–57), and human beings in the images are “mostly . . . ordinary people of the lower levels of the social

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21. Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 88, quoting Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap between Science and the Humanities* (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), 37. Regarding chapters in the Second-family bestiary that lack moralization, see, for instance, Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 45 and 45n73.

22. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 86, 30, 90, and 94–96.

23. Clark, 30.

24. Clark, 91.

25. Clark, 36.

26. Clark, 104.

hierarchy.”<sup>27</sup> To judge by certain features of both text and illustrations,” Clark concludes, “the most likely audience is the lay public, specifically children and untutored adults, and the immediate context was a growing movement in the later twelfth century to improve the educational opportunities and educational level of the laity.”<sup>28</sup> In physical format, font, and page layout, she observes, bestiaries are typical of texts used for elementary instruction; their use of animals also associates them with the fables common on contemporary lists of school texts.<sup>29</sup> Canon Philip’s closely guarded *volumine elegantissimo* belonged to a genre that became an interactive resource.

Clark goes on to suggest that women engaged with that resource. By way of context, she quotes an important treatise that “includes girls and even household servants among those who should receive basic instruction in reading and writing, which is understandable with the growth of recordkeeping in households and on estates.” “In bourgeois homes,” she adds, “where a literate parent—usually the mother—might teach children, . . . the bestiary could . . . be used for both classroom and family readings.”<sup>30</sup> She sees indications of such use in the early-fifteenth-century manuscript known as the bestiary of Anne Walsche (or Walshe). Citing an article by David Badke, Clark concurs that the book was indeed owned by Anne Walsche, who signs her name with alternative spellings on different folios. Scribbles in the same hand, apparently “alphabet pen-practices,” are scattered through the manuscript, as are “references to her ‘humble duty.’”<sup>31</sup> Those inscriptions “could mean,” Clark adds, “that [Walsche] was involved in teaching. By that time, the education of females was common, and many educated women acted as teachers in their own households.”<sup>32</sup>

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27. Clark, 99.

28. Clark, 91.

29. Clark, 103 and 111.

30. Clark, 104.

31. David Badke, “The Bestiary of Anne Walshe,” *Medieval Bestiary* (2001), [http://bestiary.ca/articles/anne\\_walshe/#\\_ftn2](http://bestiary.ca/articles/anne_walshe/#_ftn2), accessed December 28, 2017. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 230 and 113.

32. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 113. At least one laywoman seems to have owned a bestiary: the French verse bestiary of Philippe de Thaun (1120s) is dedicated to “Queen Aelis (Adela),” second queen of Henry I (Muratova, “Bestiaries,” 120).

Also in the fifteenth century, several women—and, inferably, children—left traces of their use on a thirteenth-century bestiary. That manuscript, London, British Library, MS Harley 4751, is one of several in which “English animal names in late medieval scripts” appear, in different hands, alongside the Latin equivalents: apparently someone used the text’s especially clear illustrations to learn or teach Latin vocabulary.<sup>33</sup> And there is evidence of use by mothers in marginalia: recipes for cough syrup in English. The clearest, on folio 24v, calls for “horehound, hyssop, maidenhair fern, figs, honey or mead, licorice, and ginger, most of which were common antitussants.”<sup>34</sup> As Clark writes, “In the home a mother usually functioned as physician and pharmacist, as well as a teacher. A bestiary would have been useful for reading to her children, and for recording her favorite medicinal recipes.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the bestiary seems also to have facilitated an exchange between women: the recipes, written on three of five adjoining leaves, are in two different hands. After reporting damage to several parts of MS Harley 4751 (including one of the leaves with the recipe), Clark comments, “Rips and discoloration could result from use by children.”<sup>36</sup>

We can only speculate about whether or not cloistered medieval women read Second-family bestiaries. We know, if only from Anne Walsche’s experiments with her signature, that at least some secular

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Muratova asserts that “the bestiary served as entertaining and moralizing reading for the royal ladies” (120–21); I have been unable to find the documentation to which she refers in 138n19. In *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, ed. Debra Hassig [Debra Higgs Strickland] (New York: Garland, 1999), 82 and 92n75, Debra Strickland refers in more general terms to female patronage of bestiaries, but I have found no specific references to such patronage other than the one to Queen Adela.

Incidentally, Clark notes that Philippe describes his translation of a Latin bestiary as “a grammar book,” which could mean “a scholar’s book” or “a grammatical book” (*Medieval Book of Beasts*, 113). She regards the description as additional evidence that bestiaries were intended for lay educational use. I would add that Philippe’s female patron (whom Clark does not mention) ties it also to the involvement of women—specifically here, a noblewoman—in private teaching.

33. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 105 and 235.

34. Clark, 87n14; see below, figure 1.

35. Clark, 87.

36. Clark, 235.



Figure 1. Leaf of thirteenth-century manuscript; fifteenth-century cough syrup recipe in bottom margin.

women did, though perhaps not contemporaneously with the manuscripts' production. I would like to know more: how many female readers there were, which chapters particularly appealed to them, and especially whether and how they reacted to the reinscription of female marginality in nature. But we can safely say that at least a few women put bestiaries to their own uses. In doing so, they modeled an open-ended understanding of the bestiary genre. The length and the segmented structure of bestiaries invite selective, interactive reading. Merging naturalism

with received knowledge, engaging curiosity and reflection, bestiaries are capacious resources over which a woman could exercise a kind of pedagogical authority.

To that, the annotators of Harley 4751 add the authority of their expertise over another realm of the natural world, healing plants. They probably did not know that they shared such expertise with a cloistered forebear who produced a radical alternative to the bestiary.

## Hildegard of Bingen and the Feminist Beast-Book

In Deuteronomy Moses said while blessing Joseph, “His beauty is that of the firstling bull, and his horns are the horns of the unicorn” [Deut. 33:17]. . . . The unicorn has one horn because the Savoir said, “I and the Father are one” [John 10:30].<sup>37</sup>

The unicorn (*unicornis*) is more hot than cold. Its strength is greater than its heat. It eats clean plants. . . . Pulverize the liver of a unicorn and put this powder in fat prepared from the yolk of an egg, making an ointment. There is no leprosy, of any kind, that will not be cured if you often anoint it with this ointment, unless death is present for the one who has it, or God does not wish to cure it.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Michael J. Curley, trans., *Physiologus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 51.

38. “Unicornis plus calidus est quam frigidus, sed fortitudo eius maior est quam calor ipsius, et mundas herbas comedit. . . . Iecor autem unicornis pulueriza et puluerem sagimine de uitello ouorum paratum immitte et sic unguentum fac, et nulla lepra est, cuiuscumque generis sit, si eam sepe cum hoc unguento unxeris, quin curetur, nisi mors illius sit, qui eam habet, aut deus illum curari non uult.” Hildegard von Bingen, *Physica Edition der Florentiner Handschrift (Cod. Laur. Ashb. 1323, ca. 1300) im Vergleich mit der Textkonstitution der “Patrologia latina” (Migne)*, ed. Irmgard Müller and Christian Schulze (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 2008), 328–29; Patricia Throop, trans., *Hildegard von Bingen’s Physica: The Complete English Translation of Her Classic Work on Health and Healing* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 210. In what follows, citations of the Latin text of *Physica* will be documented parenthetically as “Müller and Schulze” with a page number. The latter refers to the second of two consecutive pages bearing the same page number. Müller and Schulze present two versions of each passage, assigning the same page number to each version. The first presents the passage from the *Patrologia Latina* edition of a fifteenth-century printed text; the second, the basis of my analysis, is Müller and Schulze’s critical

Hildegard of Bingen's *Physica* (1151–58) is, in the literal sense, *sui generis*. The topics of its nine books—plants, elements, trees, stones, fish, birds, animals, reptiles, metals—suggest encyclopedic scope; indeed, each book inventories its topic as a medieval encyclopedia might do. But the text's contents differ radically from any apparent antecedent or analogue. Rather than describing animals, Hildegard categorizes them according to the binaries familiar from humoral theory (hot/cold, moist/dry, and so forth). And she follows her brief descriptions of plants and animals with longer recommendations for using each item, particularly for health care. Indeed, some manuscripts are titled *Liber simplicis medicinae* (Book of simple medicines), and the English translator of *Physica* calls it Hildegard's "Classic Work on Health and Healing."<sup>39</sup> But *Physica* is "classic" only in being very old and in Latin (with occasional Germanic neologisms), and its advice on health runs to such impracticalities as mounting a vulture's eye on a ring and placing the dried heart of a lion on the patient's breast for a very short time.

The most defensible generic classification is the capacious one denoted by *physica* itself, variously translated as "natural science, natural philosophy, physics" and "medicine."<sup>40</sup> But there is evidence that Hildegard proposed a more specific designation. Not long after finishing what we know as *Physica* and a companion text, *Causae et curae* (Causes and Cures), Hildegard writes that she has composed a work on *Subtilitates diversarum naturarum creaturum* (Subtleties of the different natures of creatures).<sup>41</sup> The work to which she refers must have

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edition of the corresponding passage in the thirteenth-century "Florence manuscript" (MS laur. Ashb. 1323), now acknowledged as the closest extant witness to the original. Translations in what follows are documented parenthetically with "Throop" and a page number. Throop's base text is the fifteenth-century *Patrologia Latina* text; where I cite a translation as "Throop, modified," the changes are my own, to conform with the Florence manuscript.

39. Throop, *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica*, subtitle.

40. *Logeion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011–17), s.v. "physica," accessed January 15, 2018, <https://classics.fas.harvard.edu/links/λογειον-logeion>.

41. Barbara Newman, "'Sybil of the Rhine': Hildegard's Life and Times," in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Newman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–29, at 15; Debra L. Stoudt, "The Medical, the Magical, and the Miraculous in the Healing Arts of Hildegard of Bingen," in

included *Physica*. While *creaturae* can bear the broad meaning “created things,” I will exploit the more biological denotation to claim that four of the nine *Physica* books—Fish, Birds, Animals (quadrupeds), and Reptiles—constitute beast-books and thus can legitimately be compared with *Physiologus*, the Urtext of the bestiary.

My claim rests, first, on a broad structural similarity. Like bestiaries, the four animal books in *Physica* are directories to be consulted at will rather than read sequentially. Each chapter represents a kind of creature (roughly, a species), designated by a singular collective noun. And each chapter is roughly subdivided between the creature’s *natura* and its significance for human beings. In addition to that structural parallel, some topics in *Physica* are familiar from bestiaries—particularly the unicorn, the chaste elephant, the egg-burying ostrich, the wolf that is dangerous if not seen first, the lion cubs that initially look dead, and the pelican that kills but then revives its chicks.

The chief reason to contest my comparison is, admittedly, that those points of contact have led no one to call *Physica* a bestiary. Bestiaries are distinguished by conspicuous intertextuality—that is, by verbal and graphic similarities that have led them to be grouped in a few large families and collectively appellated “*the* bestiary.” Knowing that Hildegard wrote during a century when bestiaries were produced and circulated in great numbers, some scholars find it remarkable that she did not borrow extensively from them.<sup>42</sup>

Geography provides a plausible explanation: as Clark writes, “bestiaries, Latin and vernacular, never found a significant place” in “German-speaking lands.”<sup>43</sup> But a closely related genre enjoyed an unusually long run in those regions: *Physiologus*, originally a second-century Greek text that became, in its Latin recensions, the bestiaries’ forerunner.<sup>44</sup> Indeed,

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*A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. George Ferzoco, Beverly Kienzle, and Debra L. Stoudt (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 249–72, at 252–53.

42. Kenneth F. Kitchell and Irven M. Resnick, “Hildegard as a Medieval ‘Zoologist,’” in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McInerney (London: Garland, 1998), 26–52, at 26.

43. Clark, *Medieval Book of Beasts*, 114.

44. Clark observes that in contrast to bestiaries, “*Physiologus*, in the D[icta] C[hrysostomi] and Theobald versions, and in German translations, persisted to the

the bestiary topoi mentioned in my previous paragraph originated in the version of *Physiologus* known and translated in Germany from the tenth century.<sup>45</sup> Nikolaus Henkel writes that the material in some of Hildegard's animal stories coincides with that of *Physiologus* and its sources, albeit "disfigured and reshaped."<sup>46</sup> There is no evidence, external or internal, that Hildegard knew *Physiologus* directly. Although the Latin *Physiologus* was used in schools, she had no access to formal schooling or even to instruction from a "wandering scholar."<sup>47</sup> Instead, she probably heard or read at second or third hand about the seemingly dead lion cubs, the unicorn's antipathy to men, and so forth; such material was occasionally used in sermons, and some of it seems to have originated as folklore and probably persisted in that form.<sup>48</sup>

Wherever she obtained those anecdotes, the structure in which she placed them is broadly similar to that of *Physiologus*, but their effect is not. *Physiologus* texts are not just intertextual but logocentric. Biblical quotations open most *Physiologus* chapters and multiply throughout, absorbing zoological details and moral applications into complex hermeneutical chains. Most observations are attributed explicitly to David, Moses, Paul, or "the Prophet." They are also attributed, recursively, to "Physiologus"—simultaneously the texts' legendary originator and the text itself. Immediately after the verse from Genesis that opens the first chapter, we read that "Physiologus said that the lion has three natural

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end of the Middle Ages" in German-speaking lands (*Medieval Book of Beasts*, 114); she cites Nikolaus Henkel, *Studien zum Physiologus im Mittelalter* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1976), 29–42 and 110–28. The *Dicta Chrysostomi*, through its manifestation in *Physiologus* version B, was the basis for German prose translations in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

45. Graeme Dunphy, "Physiologus," in *Routledge Revivals: Medieval Germany (2001): An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep (London: Routledge, 2017), 616–17.

46. Henkel, *Studien*, 155.

47. Newman, "Sybil," 6–7.

48. Classical and early Christian writers also transmitted some beliefs about, for instance, lion cubs born lifeless (Pliny the Elder) and a one-horned beast, a "monoceron," capturable only by a virgin girl (Isidore of Seville). Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. 3: *Books 8–11*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 353 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 8.17; Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.2.12.

properties”; the chapter ends by reiterating the scriptural citation.<sup>49</sup> The animals of *Physiologus* are predominantly textual.

Those of *Physica* are predominantly material. The authority of Hildegard’s text rests not on scriptural resonance but on consistent reference to a set of bodily properties. “The swan (*cyngnus*) is cold and moist,” we read. “It has some of the nature of a goose, some of the nature of a duck. . . . Its flesh is good for healthy people to eat” (Throop, 180.) Bodies are central—not just those of the fish, birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles, but also those of the humans who might be nourished or healed by those creatures. The discourse itself proceeds between embodied agents: unlike *Physiologus* and bestiaries, *Physica* has an identifiable author and is addressed to the circumstances of particular readers, such as someone “whose flesh around the teeth is rotting and whose teeth are weak and fragile” (Throop, 166).

With good reason, Throop and others conclude from such passages that the central concern of *Physica* is the human body. But that reading unduly privileges Hildegard’s pharmaceutical remedies, the element that modern readers find most striking.<sup>50</sup> Those medical applications are situated in a larger organic context, a vision of the natural world that can be called ecofeminist, by Hildegard’s theoretical prefaces and her animal descriptions.

In its first lines, the general preface to *Physica* conveys a vision of interspecies reciprocity. Hildegard writes that when “all the elements of earth” witnessed man’s creation from earth, they responded by working

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49. Francis James Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus: Éditions Préliminaires, Versio B* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1939), 11–23.

50. Classifying *Physica* as a pharmacological text parallels a comparably unbalanced characterization of *Physiologus* as essentially didactic, with the animal descriptions serving only “to justify the moralizations” (Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users*, 72). In both texts, the pairing of animal descriptions with human applications rests not simply on a rhetorical strategy but on a conception of reality. In *Physiologus*, the ontology might be called divine semiosis: “Nihil ergo sine intentione intellectus de uolatilibus et animalibus divine scripturae dixerunt.” (Holy Scriptures have said nothing concerning birds and animals without the purpose of our understanding.) That is, the book of Scripture and that of nature express the same truths. Francis James Carmody, “Physiologus Latinus Versio Y,” *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 12 (1944): 95–134, at 124; Curley, *Physiologus*, 42.

on man's behalf as he did toward theirs. Thus "earth gave its vital energy in accord with types and natures and behavior in every region of humans" (Et terra dabat uiriditatem suam secundum genus et naturam et mores et omnem circuitiorem hominis).<sup>51</sup> Moreover, earth and humankind are homologous: "The material in trees and wood, which is made into rope, is comparable to human veins. The earth's stones can be compared to human bones, and their wetness [to] bone marrow." (Quod uero in arboribus et lignis est, unde funes fiunt, assimilatur uenis hominis. Lapides etiam terre ossibus hominis comparantur, et humiditas lapidum medulle ossium.) (Müller and Schulze, 1; Throop, 9.) Beyond those correspondences, human and natural intertwine, providing spiritual guidance through their shared development: "Through the beneficial herbs, the earth brings forth the range of mankind's spiritual powers and distinguishes between them; through the harmful herbs, it manifests harmful and diabolic behaviors." (Terra enim cum utilibus herbis ostendit circuitiorem spiritalium morum hominis eos discernendo. Sed cum inutilibus herbis demonstrat inutiles et dyabolicos mores hominis.) (Ibid.) Nonhuman nature vitalizes, mirrors, and informs.

That premise becomes more specific in the prefaces to books 6 and 7, "On Flying Creatures" and "On Quadrupeds." Introducing the former, Hildegard writes that while the soul resides in the body, "it is lifted high and sustained by air, lest it suffocate in the body: and it dwells in the human body with sensitive intelligence and stability. And thus birds are created and placed, that with them it should know and understand and feel, what is to be known of itself, that since birds are lifted by their feathers into the air and dwell everywhere in the air, so the soul, while in the body, is lifted by its thoughts and expands everywhere." (<C>um anima in corpore hominis est, aer eius est, quamdiu in corpore manet, ita quod aere attollatur et sustentatur, alioquin in corpore suffocaretur: et in humano corpore cum sensibilitate, intelligibilitate et stabilitate uersatur, et ad hec uolatilia creata sunt et posita, cum quibus ipsa sentire et intelligere et scire debet, que sibi scienda sunt, quoniam uolatilia in aere pennis suis attolluntur et ubique in aere uersantur; sic et anima, dum in corpore est, cogitationibus suis alleuatur et ubique se dilatat.)

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51. Hildegard, ed. Müller and Schulze, 1; my translation.

(Müller and Schulze, 275; Throop, 177, modified.) While birds give self-knowledge to the human soul, land animals do the same for the human actor. We read in the preface to book 7 that animals “represent the thoughts and meditations a person brings to completion in work. . . . And so human rationality says to each person, ‘You are this or that animal,’ since animals have in them qualities similar to the nature of the human.” (Animalia autem . . . cogitationes et premeditationes, quas homo opera perficit, designant. . . . [E]t ideo rationalitas hominis inuenit, quod unumquemque hominem dicit: ‘Tu es animal illud uel illud, quoniam animalia quedam nature hominis similia in se habent.’) (Müller and Schulze, 318; Throop, 205.) Whatever the pragmatic usefulness of *Physica’s* medical advice, Hildegard’s first aim is to call our attention to the holistic insight shared among living creatures.

In the chapters that follow each preface, *Physica* does not turn that insight into figuration, as might be expected by readers of Latin beast-books. The transspecies correspondences of *Physica* produce an ecofeminist zoology very different from the allegorized animals of *Physiologus*.

The contrast is partly narratological: unlike the narratives in *Physiologus*, those in *Physica* adopt the animals’ point of view. *Physiologus* introduces the unicorn via scriptural allusion, describes it briefly, and then relates the behavior for which the creatures are now famous: a unicorn will evade human hunters, but they “place a virgin girl in a place where he lingers and leave her alone in the woods, and upon seeing her, he quickly leaps into her lap and embraces her, and thus he is surrounded, and exhibited in the king’s palace.” The allegorization follows: “And thus our lord Jesus Christ, the spiritual unicorn, descending to the virgin’s womb, having taken on flesh through her, was captured by Jews, condemned to death on the cross: of whom David said: He was loved like the son of unicorns [Ps. 28.6].”<sup>52</sup> The unicorn of *Physica* also flees other animals, especially men, but watches women—like the serpent, Hildegard adds, presaging some kind of allegorization. But she pursues neither that association nor the parallel with Christ’s Incarnation, choosing instead to attribute the unicorn’s docility around young girls to its

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52. Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus: Éditions Préliminaires, Versio B*, 31; my translation.

own curiosity. One day, she writes, a hunting party happened to include young girls, who wandered apart from the others to play among flowers. “A unicorn, seeing a girl from afar, wonders that she has no beard but does have a man’s shape. If two or three girls are together, it is more amazed, and it is caught more quickly when its eyes are fixed on them.” (Nam unicornis a longe uisa puella miratur, quod barbam non habet, sed tamen formam hominis; et si due aut tres puelle sunt, tanto plus miratur et tanto citius capitur, dum oculos suos in eas figit.) (Müller and Schulze, 328; Throop, 210, modified.) The trap is unintended, the creature’s behavior unmysterious.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly animal-centered and un-metaphorized is Hildegard’s version of the lion cubs’ apparent stillbirth. In *Physiologus*, the lioness “brings the cubs forth dead,” but after three days the male lion revives them by breathing on their faces—a parallel to Christ’s resurrection by the almighty Father.<sup>54</sup> In *Physica*, the apparently lifeless cubs are awakened (after no specified interval) by their father’s roar; when they roar in response, “the lioness hears them and happily runs up to them. She chases the lion from them, warms them, and makes them get up” (“quod leena eos audit, et mox leta occurrit, ac leonem ab eis depellit et eos fouet et sugere facit”) (Müller and Schulze, 323; Throop, 207.) So too, Hildegard supplies understandable motives for the Pelican. Pelican chicks in *Physiologus* strike out for no apparent reason at their parents, who kill them in retaliation but revive them after three days with their own blood, adumbrating the Atonement.<sup>55</sup> In *Physica*, the mother kills the hatchlings because she does not recognize them as her own—perhaps a plausible consequence, in nature, of avian nest-raiding?—but grieves over their deaths and resuscitates them with her blood. In place of allegory, Hildegard follows the story with an account of the pelican’s empathy with human emotions (Müller and Schulze, 300). The text enacts its own fellow-feeling, extending to readers the subjectivity of nonhuman creatures.

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53. Hildegard credits the first-hand discovery of the unicorn’s motive to “enim philosophus . . . qui naturas animalium perscrutauerat” (Müller and Schulze, 328); that sounds to me like a remote memory of the eponymous source of *Physiologus*.

54. Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus: Éditions Préliminaires, Versio B*, 11–12.

55. Carmody, 17.

Beyond shaping the narratives in *Physica*, animals' motives and intentions begin many of Hildegard's formulaic descriptions. Throughout chapters five through eight, we learn first about the creatures' likes and dislikes—preference for daytime or nighttime, choice of dwelling-place, and so forth. But in most of book 7, ascriptions of volition also govern the initial assignments of heat, cold, moisture, and dryness.<sup>56</sup> Whereas about a quarter of the chapters simply assert that the animal has heat, for instance, or is hot, a different pattern emerges in the sixth chapter. The Tiger, Hildegard writes, “in desiderio est et calidus est”—that is, is in desire and is hot (Müller and Schulze, 330). In the next chapter, the Panther “is in desire very hot in its nature” (in desiderio est, ualde calida in natura sua) (Müller and Schulze 331, my translation). The Ass, subject of chapter nine, “in uoluntate est et plus calidus est quam frigidus”—is in will or disposition, and is more hot than cold (Müller and Schulze, 334). *Desiderio* and *uoluntate* alternate (along with the simple *habet*) until chapter 14, which proclaims that the Ox “in perfectione est et frigidus in temperamento est et siccus”—is in perfection or completeness, and is cold and dry in temperament (Müller and Schulze, 340). Those three formulations open thirty-four of the forty-six chapters, declaring fifteen animals to be in *desiderio*, nine in *uoluntate*, and ten in *perfectionem*. None of the clauses appear in the fifteenth-century printed source of the *Patrologia Latina* edition and, in turn, of Throop's translation; there, for instance, the Tiger simply is hot (*calida est*; Throop, 211).

To borrow Melitta Weiss Adamson's explanation for other omissions in the fifteenth-century edition, the *desiderio / uoluntate / perfectione* clauses may have been dropped during “attempts by a later audience to turn Hildegard's description of nature into a text suitable for medical practice.”<sup>57</sup> Alternatively, or concomitantly, copyists may have dropped those clauses out of uncertainty about what it might mean for a tiger, for instance, to be in desire.

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56. Florence Eliza Glaze writes that Hildegard derives those physiological binaries from the “*Dynamidia* tradition” of pharmaceutical effects: “Medical Writer: ‘Behold the Human Creature,’” in *Voice of the Living Light*, ed. Newman, 236n34.

57. Melitta Weiss Adamson, “A Reevaluation of Saint Hildegard's *Physica* in Light of the Latest Manuscript Finds,” in *Manuscript Sources of Medieval Medicine*, ed. Margaret Rose Schleissner (London: Routledge, 2016), 55–80, at 61.

An explanation for those somewhat enigmatic formulas lies in their resonance with the preface to book 7. Following the opening sentence of the book, quoted above, Hildegard explains that “as good will (*bona uoluntas*), right desires (*recta desideria*), and righteous sighs [longings] come forth, the Maker of the world finishes them (*ea . . . perficit*) in heaven; they are not completed there (*nec ibi perficiuntur*) before they have come forth in the world in thoughts of spiritual desire” (Müller and Schulze, 318; my translation). That is, she introduces the three conditions in which animals exist as three stages in the earthly accomplishment of God’s will. The preface even aligns two of the three with particular groups of animals: “But lions and similar animals show the will (*uoluntatem*) of a person, which he wants to bring forth in works. But panthers, and those similar to them, show the ardent desire (*desiderium*) which already is in the incipient work. But other forest beasts designate abundant fullness, and demonstrate that humans have their own impossibility to complete (*perficere*) useful and useless tasks.”<sup>58</sup> I have not discerned Hildegard’s reasons for allocating the terms to individual animals; the Panther of chapter 7 is indeed *in desiderio*, as in the preface, but none of the creatures said to be *in perfectione* in book 7 are clearly “forest beasts,” and the Lion’s human force—“*de ui hominis in se*”—does not quite match his prefatory designation as “*in uoluntate*” (Müller and Schulze, 322). But the collective effect of the three phrases is clear and powerful: they locate animals in divinely ordained states of being. In the first two cases, particularly, those states are intentional. Hildegard’s animals exist independently, in conditions to which human beings are also subject: willing, desiring, attaining fulfillment. The creatures of *Physiologus* are signifiers; those of *Physica* are agents.

Those agents are not only embodied but also gendered, and predominantly gendered female. None of the animals in book 7 is male in physiology or behavior, though some explicitly include both sexes: *Ouis*,

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58. Throop, 205, modified. “Sed leo et sibi similes uoluntatem hominis, que iam opus proferre uult, ostendunt; sed panthera et sibi similes ardens desiderium, quod iam incipiente opere est, designant. Ceterae autem siluestres bestiae designant plenitudinem effluentiae, quod homo impossibilitate sua habet, utilia et inutilia opera perficere demonstrant” (Müller and Schulze, 318). The *Patrologia* text has “possibilitate” rather than “impossibilitate”—a more plausible if less interesting reading.

*siue aries, siue agna sit* (the Sheep, whether ram or ewe lamb; Müller and Schulze, 342). In *Physiologus* and the bestiaries, many inset narratives concern stereotypically masculine behavior, particularly predation by or against animals: the antelope's entangled antlers prevent flight from hunters, the fox feigns death to trap birds, the panther's sweet breath attracts prey, the beaver castrates itself to evade capture. *Physica* includes only one predation tale, the hunting of the unicorn. Instead, a dominant theme in Hildegard's beast-book is reproduction and parenting, usually centering on the mother. Book 5, on fish, is devoted to accounts of spawning and milting. Most of the narratives in books 6 and 7 involve copulation, egg-laying or birthing, and mothering. The latter sometimes entail maternal protection: the peahen conceals her eggs and chicks from the male, who "hates" and would destroy them; the female lion keeps the male away from the cubs until they are grown (Müller and Schulze, 280 and 322–23). Consistent with the emphasis on female animals is Hildegard's attention in at least six chapters of *Physica* to treatments for human problems with menstruation, female fertility, and childbirth (chapters on the crane, lion, sheep, beaver, monkey, and mouse).

The extent of *Physica's* gynocentrism is clearest, however, in the treatment of grammatical gender. As noted in my discussion of bestiaries (fourth and fifth paragraphs of this essay), *aquila* (eagle) is feminine and *perdix* (partridge) is common gender, but bestiary narratives treat the exemplars of all creatures, including those two, as male. In contrast, *Physica* represents both birds consistently as female, narrating the Eagle's careful choice of a site for her eggs and likening the Partridge to the hen (Müller and Schulze, 285–86 and 290).

More striking is Hildegard's treatment of grammatically masculine creatures. The fish name that Hildegard renders as *Culbouet* or *Rulb-haubt* seems to be masculine and is so treated by at least one translator, but after "it spawns . . . sending its roe out . . . , [t]he male pours a little wetness, not milt over it": the referent of the first clause, the species itself, must not be male.<sup>59</sup> *Grifo* (griffin) correctly takes masculine

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59. Throop, 173; Müller and Schulze, 270. The translation to which I refer is Pierre Monat, *Le livre des subtilités des créatures divines: Les plantes, les éléments, les pierres, les métaux* (Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 1988), vol. 2, 103. Monat translates the fish's name as "chabot" (sculpin).

adjectives in *Physica* (e.g., “calidus”), but its exemplar functions as female: “when the time comes for laying its eggs, it looks for a cave.” (Sed cum tempus instat, quod oua sua ponet, speluncam querit.) (Müller and Schulze, 276.) Also masculine in inflection but biologically female is the oviparous *Trusz* (ostrich) (Ibid., 277). *Cattus* (cat) is masculine, but the generic cat carries its young within itself (“cum etiam catulos in se portat”) (Ibid., 351). And although the *Sisegoume* (pelican) takes the correct masculine pronoun, *ille*, Throop is probably justified in using “she” in translating that chapter, for it would normally be the mother who “first see[s] chicks emerge from their eggs” (cum pullos suos de ouis primo egredi uiderit) (Throop, 192; Müller and Schulze, 300). Throop’s choice of pronoun may also reflect her recognition that whenever a description or action in *Physica* is not gender-neutral, it is male. That is, the default sex of creatures in *Physica* is female.

Medievalists may recognize the congruence of this nonhuman gynocentrism with the “argument for women’s *imitatio Christi* through physicality” that Caroline Walker Bynum finds in Hildegard’s other writings. “From Hildegard of Bingen and Elizabeth of Schönau to Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich,” writes Bynum, “women theologians in the later Middle Ages used *woman* to symbolize *humanity*. . . . The image of both sinful *and* saved humanity is [for Hildegard] the image of woman.”<sup>60</sup> Small wonder, then, that Hildegard’s salvific lion is a *leena* (lioness) protecting her cubs.

## The Ecofeminist Bestiary

Canon Philip might have been pleased to see that at the close of the Middle Ages, men controlled not just physical access to costly bestiaries but also their authorship, their readership, and the gender of their nonhuman subjects. But he might not have recognized that such exclusivity betrays its own incompleteness, an unnatural androcentrism that is evident to feminist analysis. The habitual masculinity of bestiary species produces grammatical anomalies; in the high Middle Ages,

60. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 263 and 265.

social changes took bestiaries beyond monasteries and cathedral schools, opening them to use by laywomen. Meanwhile, a brilliant female monastic departed radically from the tradition based on the self-referencing “Physiologus” by representing fish, birds, and beasts as female agents. In short, a feminist reading illuminates not only the history of medieval beast-books but also the limitations of the traditional bestiary.

But an ecofeminist reading can also illuminate the limitations of feminist humanism. The paradigmatically female creatures of *Physica* are not “represented as women,” as Christopher Cannon writes of the debating Owl and Nightingale.<sup>61</sup> Hildegard leaves no doubt that her fish, birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles belong to distinct species, alien to us in important ways. She writes that weasels can bring each other back to life with a certain herb unknown to humans but that such knowledge would be useless to us anyway; the herb “has to receive its power from the weasel’s breath and urine” (Throop, 224; Müller and Schulze, 358). And her soaring female birds evince not just the capacities but also the incapacities of the human spirit. To possess the knowledge that shines in the Eagle’s powerful heart, Hildegard warns, is beyond human means and human tolerance (“Et siquis cor eius tante fortitudinis habere posset, ut in ea est, tamen scientia supra humanum modum in eo claresceret, quod cor hominis sufferre non posset eam”) (Müller and Schulze, 286). Some years ago, Carol Adams charged that most feminism was “a species-specific philosophical system, in which (an expanded) humanity continues to negate the other animals precisely because their otherness is located in the natural sphere.”<sup>62</sup> For Hildegard of Bingen, the entire natural sphere is the source of humanity’s own self-knowledge, embodied in the soaring birds and the desiring, intending, and perfecting beasts.

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61. Cannon, *Grounds*, 129.

62. Carol J. Adams, “The Feminist Traffic in Animals,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Claire Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 195–218, at 204.