

***The Middle English Physiologus:*
A Critical Translation and Commentary**

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(ABSTRACT)

The tradition of the *Physiologus* is an influential one, and informed medieval literature—not to mention medieval art and architecture—more than we know. The *Physiologus* was “an established source of Medieval sacred iconography and didactic poetry” and still continues to rank among the “books which have made a difference in the way we think” (Curley x). Thus, our understanding of the *Physiologus* and its subsequent tradition becomes increasingly important to the fields of medieval literature, humanities, and art.

Considering the vast importance of the *Physiologus* tradition in the Middle Ages, one would expect to find that scholars have edited, translated, and studied all of the various versions of the *Physiologus*. While most of the Latin bestiaries and versions of the *Physiologus* have been edited, translated, studied, and glossed, the *Middle English (ME) Physiologus*—the only surviving version of the *Physiologus* in Middle English—has neither been translated nor strictly studied as a *literary* text. In light of the *Physiologus* tradition’s importance, it would seem that the only version of the *Physiologus* that was translated into Middle English would be quite significant to the study of medieval literature and to the study of English literature as a whole.

Thus, in light of this discovery, the current edition attempts to spotlight this frequently overlooked text by providing an accurate translation of the *ME Physiologus*, critical commentary, and historical background. Such efforts are put forth with the sincere hope that such a critical translation may win this significant version of the *Physiologus* its due critical and literary attention.

Acknowledgements

Translating the *Middle English Physiologus* and creating this present edition can be likened to the blossoming of a rose bud: what once seemed so tightly contained and neat became more and more complex as it continued to unfold, unravel and blossom under the scope of research and the process of translation. However, at the same time, I must admit that it has been a privilege to be allowed to try and create a translation of a text that is just beginning to be seriously studied and understood.

It is my pleasure to thank those who have helped me in my attempt to create this present edition. My first debt is to my thesis director, Dr. Anthony Colaianne, who first inspired me to pursue my long held interest in the bestiary and *Physiologus* tradition during a summer school course in Early English Authors. I am also grateful to Christopher McClinch and Michael Frase for their constant reminders that a translation of the *Middle English Physiologus* is a worthwhile endeavor, and I would also like to extend my gratitude to T.H.White, whose charming translation of a twelfth century bestiary inspired me to create a translation of my own.

I would like to thank my three thesis advisors -- Dr. Colaianne, Dr. Joseph Eska, and Dr. Karen Swenson -- for reading consecutive drafts of this edition. Dr. Colaianne and Dr. Eska have been a tremendous help with the translation itself and have provided insightful editorial remarks and constructive criticism on the various commentary included in the edition. I would also like to thank all three advisors for the reassurance and boosts of confidence throughout the often intimidating process of writing a Master's thesis.

Finally, I am indebted to all of the scholars who have dedicated their lives, their careers, and their hard work to the study of the bestiary and *Physiologus* tradition and genre. Their hard work and discoveries have made a critical commentary and compilation of the *Middle English Physiologus* possible. I would especially like to thank Hanneke Wirtjes for her comprehensive edition of the *Middle English Physiologus*, as her remarkable edition inspired me to create a modern translation of the *Middle English Physiologus*.

Last, but not least, I extend my utmost thanks to the British Library in London, England for allowing me to view the manuscript of the *Middle English Physiologus* with my

own eyes, and for granting me permission to reproduce a facsimile of the manuscript itself. I am indebted to their service and assistance.

I have had all the help that I could wish for, and I sincerely hope that this present translation and commentary are worthwhile, helpful, and insightful to bestiary scholars, medieval scholars, and literary scholars alike.

M.A. Armistead

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Chapter I: Introduction

*“Every creature of the world
Is like a book and a picture
To us, and a mirror.”*

-- Alan of Lille

Animals have long fascinated us—their strength, their beauty, their peculiarities. They have informed our most sacred myths and legends and influenced our most beloved literature and art. The Middle Ages are no exception to this phenomenon, as the literature and art of this period are rich with animal iconography, symbols, and allegory. However, what is so significant about the animal exempla and iconography that frequent medieval art is that they originate from a most curious and often overlooked tradition—the tradition of the *Physiologus*. When Chaucer, for instance, features the turtle-dove who professes marital fidelity in the *Parliament of Fowls*, he is drawing upon this very tradition, and he even refers to the *Physiologus* specifically in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”:

Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
Soong murier than the mermayde in the see
(For Physiologus seith sikerly
How that they syngen wel and myrily). (3269 - 72)

This tradition of the *Physiologus* is an influential one, and informed medieval literature—not to mention medieval art and architecture—more than we know. As Michael Curley notes in his recent edition of the Latin *Physiologus*, the *Physiologus* was “an established source of Medieval sacred iconography and didactic poetry” and still continues to rank among the “books which have made a difference in the way we think” (x). Thus, our understanding of the *Physiologus* and its subsequent tradition becomes increasingly important to the fields of medieval literature, humanities, and art.

Considering the vast importance of the *Physiologus* tradition in the Middle Ages, one would expect to find that scholars have edited, translated, and studied all of the various versions of the *Physiologus*. While most of the Latin bestiaries and versions of the *Physiologus* have been edited, translated, studied, and glossed, I was surprised to find that the *Middle English (ME) Physiologus*—the only surviving version of the *Physiologus* in Middle English—has neither been translated nor strictly studied as a *literary* text. In light of

the *Physiologus* tradition's importance, it would seem that the only version of the *Physiologus* that was translated into Middle English would be quite significant to the study of medieval literature and to the study of English literature as a whole.

While there have been several critical editions of the *ME Physiologus*—Wright (1837), Morris (1969), Wirtjes (1991) and an excerpt in the *Middle English Literature Anthology*—there is no existing modern translation. Although Reverend Morris provides modern English glosses in the margins of his edition, they hardly constitute a translation. Of course, Morris was glossing the text, not translating the text, so this is to be expected. Hanneke Wirtjes' 1991 edition of the text also does not provide a translation of the text, but does include a very thorough glossary of all of the words appearing in the *ME Physiologus*—including their origin and etymology.

In light of this discovery, the current edition attempts to spotlight this frequently overlooked text by providing an accurate translation of the *ME Physiologus*, as well as (1) background information on the *Physiologus* tradition and the *ME Physiologus* specifically (2) the transcription of the original manuscript of the *ME Physiologus* and (3) critical commentary. The critical commentary focuses not on linguistic concerns per se but (1) the visual appearance of the original manuscript, (2) the reasoning behind particularly difficult sections in the translation, (3) the structure, content, and organization of the text (4) similarities between the *ME Physiologus* and other versions of the *Physiologus*, (5) sources that may have influenced the *ME Physiologus*, both directly and indirectly, and (6) parallels between Middle English Literature and the *ME Physiologus*. Such efforts are put forth with the sincere hope that such a critical translation may win this significant version of the *Physiologus* its due critical and literary attention.

Chapter 2: The *Physiologus* Tradition

In order to fully understand the significance of the *ME Physiologus*, it is essential to understand the tradition of which it is a part—its origin and purpose, its sources and inspiration, its history, and its significance in the Middle Ages.

2.1 Origin

The *Physiologus* is an ancient tradition, although the date and location of its origin is speculative. It is accepted that the initial work entitled *Physiologus* originated in Alexandria, Egypt around the year 140 A.D. However, other scholars such as Carl Ahrens, M. R. James, and Max Wellman, argue that the *Physiologus* was composed much later in the fourth century. The author of this text is also ambiguous, although at one time or another, it has been suggested that either Aristotle, Peter of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Athanasius, Ambrose, or Jerome may have authored the *Physiologus*. However, a definite author remains unknown.

Written in Greek, the original *Physiologus* (Greek for “The Naturalist”) described the characteristics of animals and birds—both real and fantastical—and provided allegorical interpretations of the characteristics enumerated. T.H. White described the *Physiologus* as a “kind of naturalist’s scrapbook”—a compilation of animal description, lore, and myth.

However, the *Physiologus* is not to be confused with a work of natural history such as Aristotle’s *Historia animalium* (231). Rather, it was a sort of allegorical work—a work meant to instruct individuals in Christianity through the compelling and entertaining exempla of animals. As L. A. J. R. Houwen explains in “Animal Parallelism in Medieval Literature and the Bestiaries,” “whereas Aristotle’s *Historia animalium* had aimed at a systematic investigation of nature, the *Physiologus* tried to explain and justify the ways of God to men” (483). “Nature,” as Wirtjes explains in her edition of the *Middle English Physiologus*, “[wa]s not studied for its own sake but for what it [could reveal] about God’s purpose and about how [to] conduct [one’s life]” (lxix).

In short, the *Physiologus* is best described as the “great source-book of Christian nature symbolism,” in which nature is not treated as an object of scientific study, but as a metaphor for Christianity and for God (Diekstra 142). For instance, the Eagle soaring to the sky and plunging into a cool well becomes an allegory for baptism, while the descent of

the lion from the hilltop becomes an allegory for Christ's descent to Earth. In this sense, visibilia (animals) were thought to reflect invisibilia (God).

2.2 Sources

The sources and roots of this animal lore, description and allegory are difficult to determine. As Michael Curley notes in his recent edition of *Physiologus*, “we know of no single source which provided [the author of the *Physiologus*] with the material for his work,” as it draws upon pseudo-science, folk legends, and animal lore that was common to a number of Eastern Mediterranean cultures—Roman, Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, Indian (xxi). The descriptions of the animals featured in the *Physiologus*, for instance, are informed by and can be traced to ancient sources, including Aristotle (4th c. B.C.), Pliny (1st c. A.D.), Oppian (late 2nd c. AD), Aelian (2nd/3rd c. AD), Solinus (3rd c. AD), Horapollon (4th or 5th c. AD), and others.

Although the animal lore present in the *Physiologus* stems from a wide variety of sources, the *Physiologus* frequently alters or shapes these sources in order to harmonize them with Christian doctrine. As Wirtjes notes, such descriptions are “there only so that a moral can be drawn” (lxxi). That is to say, what was essential to the author of the *Physiologus* was not necessarily the natural history of animals, but the way that natural history could lend itself to Christianity. In this way, the author of the *Physiologus* fused pagan sources with Christian moral and mystical teaching, creating a work that is wholly original “in its deliberate application of animal lore to illustrate Christian doctrine” (White 21).

Aside from the descriptions of the animals featured in the *Physiologus*, its manner of teaching—using visible marvels (visibilia) to inculcate the basic tenets of the Christian faith—can also be traced back to an earlier source and tradition. Specifically, the didactic flavor of the *Physiologus* finds its roots in the Judeo-Christian method of biblical exegesis that was practiced in Alexandria by such Christian theologians as Origen in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. As Houwen notes, the *spirit* of the *Physiologus* is indeed very similar to Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, as it, like the *Physiologus*, professes the philosophy that the invisible truths of God can be known through the visible marvels of this world:

The Apostle Paul teaches us that the invisible things of God may be known through the visible (*invisibilia Dei visibilibus intelligantur*), and things which are not seen may be contemplated by reason of and likeness to those things which are seen. He shows by this that this visible world may teach about the invisible and that earth may contain certain patterns of things heavenly, so that we may rise from lower to higher things (*ut ab his, quae deorsum sunt, ad ea, quae sursum sunt possimus adscendere*) and out of those we see on earth perceive and know those which are in the heavens. .And perhaps every single thing on earth has something of an image and likeness (*habent aliquid imaginis et similitudinis in caelestibus*) in heavenly things. (trans. Houwen 483)

The *Physiologus*, in this sense, is reminiscent of Neoplatonic philosophy (of which Origen was a part), as the visible world is regarded as a reflection of an absolute ideal—God and His ultimate purpose. It is certainly possible, then, that this element of the *Physiologus* is rooted in Christianized Neoplatonic theology and doctrine.

2.3 Tradition and History

With its diverse roots in Eastern Mediterranean lore, Classical natural history, Judeo-Christian exegesis, and quite possibly Neoplatonism, the *Physiologus* became immensely popular all over the world and was subsequently translated into a diversity of languages: Ethiopian, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, Latin, Russian, Flemish, Provencal, Old English, Middle English, Icelandic, and many others. According to E.P. Evans, “no book except the Bible has ever been so widely distributed among so many people and for so many centuries as the *Physiologus*” (62).

According to Willene Clark and Meredith McMunn in their critical work *Birds and Beasts in the Middle Ages*, scholars have recovered and identified over 64 distinct Latin versions and over a hundred distinct vernacular versions (in all different languages) of the *Physiologus* or its descendent, the bestiary. Classification of these versions is based on a number of factors: (1) geographical origin (2) the language in which it is written (3) any difference in content (the description or allegories of the animals).

What is especially interesting to note amongst these bestiaries and various versions of the *Physiologus* is that the meanings and Christian equivalents of the animals enumerated

continually shift and alter from one version of the *Physiologus* to the next, and from one redactor to another. In many instances, as well, the Christian equivalents are often a composite of various other versions of the *Physiologus*. Nevertheless, from one version of the *Physiologus* to another—and even within the same version of a *Physiologus*—the unicorn is often Christ as well as Satan; the fox is often wisdom as well as fraud. As Umberto Eco says so succinctly, “it was a kind of polyphony of signs and references” (56). Or to borrow the terms Dante Alighieri coined in his *Letter to Con Grande*, the allegorical significance of the animals in the *Physiologus* and bestiary tradition was *polysemous*.

Although the *Physiologus* has been translated into a host of languages, the majority of the translations that have survived are in Medieval Latin. The Latin redactions can be classified into four main groups—*versiones* x-, y-, a-, and b-. *Versio* x is found in the manuscript known as Bern 318, which dates back to the ninth century. This translation, however, did not have any influence, as far as we know, on any of the other Latin or vernacular versions of the *Physiologus*. All other versions—Latin and vernacular—can be traced back to *versio* y-. However, as Wirtjes notes, *versio* y- has not been preserved and can only be “reconstructed from its surviving descendants, *versiones* a- and b-” (lxxiii). *Versio* a- is the longer of the two *versiones*, although its influence on later versions of the *Physiologus* is limited. However, *versio* b-, although it is the shorter of the two texts, “lies behind all the later Latin and vernacular versions” (lxxiii).

Versio b- inspired several Latin manuscripts that feature excerpts from the *Physiologus*, such as the *Glossary of Ansileubus*, the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, Hugh of St. Victor’s *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, and many others. *Versio* b- also inspired the most well-known Latin *Physiologus*, or at least the version that was most familiar to Medievals—the *Theobaldus-Physiologus* which was an eleventh-century metrical version of the *Physiologus*. This version, which describes only thirteen animals and features a unique chapter on the spider, is the very version that certain authors from the Middle Ages are referring to when they quote the *Physiologus* as an authority. As Curley explains, this version was popularly used as a school text, and thus authors of the Middle Ages were most familiar with it above all other versions of the *Physiologus* (xxviii).

The various Latin versions were then translated into various vernacular European languages, including French, German, Italian, Middle English, and Old English. However, by the twelfth century, several of these Latin and European vernacular versions gradually

developed into a popular nature-book known as a “bestiary.” These bestiaries were inspired by Isidore’s *Eytmologies*—an encyclopedic compendium of etymologies and animal lore which included various excerpts from the Latin versions of the *Physiologus*—as well as by other writers who drew upon and edited excerpts from the *Physiologus* (Albertus Magnus, the Hugh of Saint Victor, Alexander Neckham, and Bartholomew Anglicus). The gradual absorption of such material resulted in the “bestiary”—a work that differed from the *Physiologus*, as it included more chapters, incorporated Isidore’s etymologies, adopted an encyclopedic categorization of chapters into mammals, fish, birds, and fictitious animals, and frequently featured illustrations of the animals enumerated. Thus, even though the bestiary tradition stems from the tradition of the *Physiologus*, the two are distinct and fairly different from one another.

2.4 Significance in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, the bestiaries tended to be more popular than the various versions of the *Physiologus*, as the bestiaries tended to include illustrations. However, the *Physiologus*, rather than the bestiary, was used as the definitive text in schools, the monastery, and in sermons that were intended for mass audiences (McMunn and Clark 3). As a result, the *Physiologus* was the primary source for Christian iconography and was heavily alluded to in medieval literature (Chaucer, for instance, refers to the *Physiologus* in the *Nonne’s Priest’s Tale*: “For Physiologus seith sikerly”).¹

The *Physiologus* and bestiary tradition was so incredibly important to people of all classes in the Middle Ages because it perceived the animal kingdom, and all of nature, as an allegory of God and of Christianity. The *zeitgeist* of the Middle Ages was that of a theocentric world, and all of nature was regarded as a reflection of God himself—as a visible sign system that signified the spiritual and the holy. As Hugh of St. Victor explains: “visible beauty is an image of invisible beauty.” According to Eco in his dissertation *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, nature was meant to be studied and read the way the Bible was studied and read—allegorically (56). That is to say, nature and the animal kingdom were seen as earthly instructors of the divine and holy—a philosophy that is strongly reminiscent of the ancient Christian theology of Origen in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

¹ Because of the sheer number of bestiaries and versions of the *Physiologus* in existence, it is very difficult for literary scholars to draw clear and distinct parallels between a *specific* descendent of the *Physiologus* tradition and a literary work (from this time period or any other).

In this way, the *Physiologus* and bestiary tradition offered Medievals a glimpse of God and His word, as the animals enumerated—both real and fictitious—signified certain spiritual figures, Christian practices, or guidelines for leading a devout Christian life. While it may strike us as odd that fictitious animals could be seen as illustrations of invisible beauty, the Medievals did not find this problematic. As T.H. White suggests, “it did not matter whether certain animals existed; what did matter was what they meant” (245). In this regard, mythical animals became just as real as live flesh-and-blood animals in the medieval mind, as they, too, offered a glimpse of God.

Chapter 3: The *Middle English Physiologus*

The *ME Physiologus* is a curious text and one that is quite significant to scholarly study, as it is the only existing version of the *Physiologus* written in Middle English. In order to appreciate the significance of this text, however, it is important to understand its origin, its style and appearance, its sources and inspiration, and its intended audience.

3.1 The Manuscript

The manuscript of the *ME Physiologus* was discovered by Lord Arundel (1585-1646) in Norwich Cathedral Priory in the East Midlands of England. The *ME Physiologus* is found in folios 4v-10v of the Arundel 292 manuscript—named after its discoverer—and is currently kept in the British Library in London, England. In the manuscript, the *ME Physiologus* appears after *The Creed*, *The Lord's Prayer*, *Hail Mary*, *In manus tuas*, *Three things that make me fear*, and *Meditation on death* (all of which are written in ME verse)—and before the *Fables of Odo de Cheriton* (written in Latin prose). As Wirtjes notes, none of the original items that appear in Arundel 292 “are inappropriate for the library of a religious foundation” (xii).

The redactor of the text is anonymous, and scholars debate over whether there was one redactor or several, as the manuscript reflects two or possibly three different styles of handwriting. However, as Wirtjes notes, the body of the text is clearly written in one hand, and one hand only, while additions and corrections in the margins appear to be written in another hand (possibly two) (x). Wirtjes theorizes that this second (and perhaps third) hand made these additions after the initial date of composition. Nevertheless, the redactor (or redactors) were most likely monks residing in Norwich Priory.

Aside from the identity of the redactor and the number of redactors, the date of composition is also difficult to determine; however, scholars generally agree that the *ME Physiologus* was created sometime around the year 1250, although this date is much debated. Wirtjes argues that the text was actually composed much earlier, as the vellum and handwriting of the manuscript dates from the thirteenth century, while the language of the text dates from the twelfth century. Wirtjes attempts to explain this by suggesting that the *ME Physiologus* currently held at the British Library may be a transcription of an earlier *ME Physiologus* that was originally composed in the twelfth century. She postulates that our ME redactor copied *litteratim* this supposed “original” nearly almost a century later,

which “explains why a text that has come down to us in a manuscript of around 1300 is written in the language of the previous half-century” (lii). According to Wirtjes, if the *ME Physiologus* was indeed a transcription of an earlier, pre-existing *ME Physiologus*, we might be able to explain why there are so many mistakes, misspellings, and missing words in the current manuscript, as such errors may indicate a garbled transmission. However, such theories are speculative, as this supposedly “original” manuscript has not been recovered nor identified. As such, we are left with different dates for the vellum and handwriting of the *ME Physiologus* and the language of the *ME Physiologus*. Therefore, scholars tend to base the date of the manuscript on material evidence—handwriting, paper, ink—and theorize that the twelfth-century old language has somehow been maintained well into the mid thirteenth-century. More evidence and research is certainly needed in this area before a conclusive date for the manuscript can be established.

In the manuscript itself, the *ME Physiologus* is one continuous fourteen-page block of prose. There are no spaces, headings, or paragraph breaks. There is no punctuation except for a punctum (a dot) that functions as sort of a multi-purpose punctuation mark. That is to say, the function of the punctum shifts, since it can be equivalent to a colon, comma, semi-colon, exclamation point, question mark, or even a period. Interestingly, the first letter of the first word following a punctum mark is written in red, working, in a way, to emphasize the punctum itself. Wherever a punctum mark is absent, there are long series of dashes or scrolls written in red. Finally, the majority of the text is written in lower case letters with the exception of the first letter of the word that begins a new section and a few randomly capitalized letters.

The text is comprised of thirteen chapters—each on a different creature: the lion, the eagle, the serpent, the ant, the hart, the fox, the spider, the whale, the mermaid, the elephant, the turtle dove, the panther, and the dove. For the most part, each chapter is separated into two Latin headings—*Natura* and *Significacio*—which signify the description of the beast and the corresponding moral allegory. However, there are deviations: the final chapter—on the Dove—combines the description and the allegory into a single passage, and the chapters on the Lion and Hart feature more than one moral allegory; the Lion chapter presents a *Significacio prime nature* (The Significance of the First Characteristic) and the Hart chapter presents a *Significacio prima* (First Significance) in addition to a *Significacio* (Significance). Similarly, the chapter on the Fox presents a second heading entitled *Significacio*. The chapters on the Lion, the Serpent, and the Hart also feature numerical

abbreviations in their headings, which designate the 1st, 2nd, or sometimes 3rd quality of an animal: *ij^a*, *ij^a*, etc.

Nevertheless, all chapter headings—*Natura*, *Significacio*, *Significacio prima*, *Significacio prime nature* and the name of the animal—appear in red, are bracketed by *puncti*, sometimes followed by extended dashes (-----), and are always found either in the text at the end of a line or in the margins of the manuscript itself

3.2 The Text

The *ME Physiologus* is complex in terms of its language and metric structure. The vocabulary of the *ME Physiologus* is a curious combination of French, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon. As Wirtjes notes, the largest part of the vocabulary featured in the *ME Physiologus* is Anglo-Saxon, while a “considerable number of words, often nouns and verbs denoting ordinary things and activities and also prepositions and conjunctions” are Scandinavian (xxx). French “borrowings” tend to be “incidental,” as Wirtjes describes them, as they tend to only fill a “lexical gap,” such as the names of animals. Nevertheless, the majority of the text is Anglo-Saxon in vocabulary.

Aside from vocabulary, the text is also complex in terms of its metre and form. Wirtjes identifies four different metrical forms in the *ME Physiologus*:

- (1) septenaries for the *Nature* and the *Significance* of the turtle dove
- (2) couplets, both three and four stress, that follow the rhyme scheme *aabb* for the Hart, the Whale, the Elephant, the Panther, the Dove, the *Nature* (but not the *Significance*) of the Eagle, and the *Significance* (but not the *Nature*) of the Fox and the Mermaid
- (3) ballad stanzas for the *Significance* (but not the *Nature*) of the Eagle
- (4) alliterative long line for the Lion, the Ant, the Spider, the *Nature* (but not the *Significance*) of the Fox and the Mermaid (not to mention that several of the alliterative long line sections turn into septenaries).

Needless to say, the *ME Physiologus* is very complicated in terms of its metrical form. Wirtjes suggests that the text is so diverse because the ME redactor was attempting to imitate the range of metrical forms in the very version of the *Physiologus* that he was supposedly translating—the *Theobaldus-Physiologus* of the eleventh century (liv-lv).

Looking at the text, one might go so far as to say that the redactor is “showing off,” as though he were in direct competition with Theobald.

3.3 Sources

According to Wirtjes, the *ME Physiologus* is a descendent of the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*. Like the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*, the *ME Physiologus* contains thirteen chapters and is written in a wide variety of metrical forms (lxxix). For this reason, Wirtjes classifies this text as a version of the *Physiologus* rather than a bestiary, since it is a direct descendent from a Latin version of the *Physiologus* and contains no etymologies nor classification schemes (classifying animals into distinct chapters on fish, birds, and animals) after Isidore. Wirtjes rightly notes the definition and distinction between the two genres; thus, according to this definition, the *ME Physiologus* is most certainly a version of the *Physiologus* and not a bestiary.

Although the *ME Physiologus* is a descendent of the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*, it is hardly a literal translation, as the text frequently departs from the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*. As Wirtjes notes, “the ME poet did not set out to produce a slavish rendering of his source” (xci). The greatest differences between the *ME Physiologus* and the *Theobaldus-Physiologus* is that the *ME Physiologus* deletes the original chapter on the Onocentaur, transposes the chapters of the Fox and the Stag, and adds an entirely new version of the Spider. There are also minor, yet significant, ways the *ME Physiologus* departs from the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*—all of which are addressed in detail in the critical commentary following each translated chapter.¹

Aside from drawing upon the *Theobaldus-Physiologus*, the ME redactor was also somewhat inspired, it seems, by a wide variety of other sources, although as Wirtjes notes, the ME redactor “consults other sources but rarely and bases his *Physiologus* primarily on Theobald’s *Physiologus*” (xci). Nevertheless, the ME redactor draws on other books recording animal lore, such as Alexander Neckham’s *De naturis rerum* (12th c A.D.), the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, and Hugh of St. Victor’s *De bestiis et aliis rebus* (12th c A.D.).¹ It is also quite possible that Bartholomew Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus* (12/13th c A.D.) inspired the *ME Physiologus*; however, as the date of Bartholomew’s text is uncertain (1260

¹ All source criticism is not discussed here, but in the critical commentary sections following each translated chapter.

or before), it could just as easily have been influenced by the *ME Physiologus* (which was written 1250 or before). It is difficult to say. Finally, of course, the *ME Physiologus* echoes the voices of Pliny, Aelian, Oppian, Solinus, and even Aristotle—just as its ancestor, the original *Physiologus*, initially drew upon these sources.

3.4 Audience

The specific, intended audience for the *ME Physiologus* is difficult to determine, although John Frankis, as discussed in his work “The Social Context of Vernacular Writing in the Thirteenth Century,” suspects that it was used either as a teaching text for the clergy or as a source for sermons that were intended for mass audiences. According to Frankis, the *ME Physiologus*, along with the other pieces included in the Arundel 292 manuscript, were assembled in order to transmit them to the clergy as well as to the laity at large (184). This would certainly seem likely, as the *Physiologus* and bestiary tradition, according to G.R. Owst in his work “Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England,” was thought to be an effective means to inspire a congregation to virtue (195). As Beatrice White explains, “most monasteries and ministers possessed copies for consultation” for this very reason, and thus the *ME Physiologus* may very well have served as this consultation source for creating sermons that would simultaneously entertain and educate the laity about God and his purpose (26). In this way, the laity (artists, writers, etc.) would have certainly been exposed to and inspired by the specific descriptions and allegories featured in the *ME Physiologus*.

¹ The exact date of the *Dicti Chrysostomi* is unknown, but it is from before the ninth century (Wirjtes lxxxiii).

Chapter 4: Translator's Note

In order to ensure an accurate translation of an eight hundred year old text, one must return to the initial source itself—the manuscript. Although a recent transcription of the *ME Physiologus* is currently available—I am referring specifically to Hanneke Wirtjes' 1991 edition—I felt that I needed to verify such a transcription with my own eyes at the British Library in London, England. Upon transcribing the text myself, I found Wirtjes' transcription to be remarkably accurate. Furthermore, I found her explanations and suggested emendations regarding the ambiguous places in the manuscript insightful and probable. Therefore, the present transcription and translation are based upon Wirtjes' own transcription and suggested editorial emendations.

However, it is important to note that the transcription featured in this edition maintains the original format of the manuscript—block prose that is only punctuated by the punctum mark—rather than Wirtjes' modern line breaks and punctuation. I have done this solely for the purpose of presenting readers with a more accurate impression of the visual form of the *ME Physiologus*. The critical commentary on the transcription, therefore, only revolves around the appearance of the text in the original manuscript (page breaks and the placement of headings), since a detailed rationale for the present transcription has already been provided by Wirtjes in her 1991 *Middle English Physiologus*.

As far as the *translation* is concerned, I have remained faithful to the literal meaning of the text in lieu of remaining faithful to the metrical form. Although the diversity of metrical forms featured in the *ME Physiologus* is fascinating and impressive, I found that recreating such forms interfered with the literal transmission of the text into modern English. Of course, in my attempt to capture the literal meaning of the text, I have frequently opted to translate idiomatically for the sake of clarity and smoothness. Wherever an idiomatic translation *dramatically* alters the literal translation of the text, I have included a note of explanation in the critical commentary sections following each chapter.

In creating this translation, Wirtjes' critical edition of the *Middle English Physiologus* proved to be most helpful, as I relied heavily on her appended glossary and linguistic research into the words which occur in the *ME Physiologus*. In a few particularly difficult areas of the text, I have also resorted to the advice and suggested translations provided in *Selections from Early Middle English* edited by Joseph Hall, *Early Middle English Verse and Prose* edited by G.V. Smithers and J.A.W. Bennett, and Smithers's

article “A Middle English Idiom and Its Antecedents.” Whenever I have adopted such advice, I have included a note of acknowledgement in the critical commentary following each chapter.

As far as the visual form of the translation is concerned, I have not maintained the prose-block format of the original manuscript, but rather have inserted the artificial line breaks that Wirtjes uses in her 1991 transcription. These line breaks occur after every other punctum mark featured in the original manuscript. For instance, the lines

· *bi wilc weie so he wile* · *To dele niðer wenden* · *Alle hise fet step-*
pes · *after him he filled* ·

are formatted in the following way in the present translation:

by whatever way he will go down to the valley.
All his footprints he fills up after him;

This format, I feel, allows readers to follow the *Physiologus* smoothly and with relative ease, as it groups together phrases that form a complete thought or significant action. Other editors of the *ME Physiologus*, such as Morris, insert line breaks at every punctum mark; however, this, I feel, creates a much more choppy, stagnant, and disorienting text. Thus, I have adopted Wirtjes’ line breaks for the present translation.

Finally, I must also note here that I have inserted my own modern punctuation marks, since there are no punctuation marks present in the original manuscript itself (with the exception of the punctum mark). Essentially, I have eliminated the traditional punctum marks and the occasional dashes that follow headings, and I have added punctuation marks wherever I felt that they might heighten understanding for the modern reader. I have also added capitalization for the same reason.

The *ME Physiologus* is certainly a challenging text in a number of ways—translation concerns, visual form and punctuation. However, I must say that it is a charming rendition in the *Physiologus* tradition, and that I sincerely hope my translation of it is as delightful and as true to the original Middle English text.

Chapter 5: The Translation

5.1 The Lion

Leun stant on hille · & he man hunten *Natura leonis i^a*
here · Oðer ðurg his nese smel · smake ðat he negge · bi
wilc weie so he wile · To dele niðer wenden · Alle hise fet step-
pes · after him he filleð · Drageð dust wið his stert · ðer he
stepped · Oðer dust oðer deu · ðat he ne cunne is finden · ðri –
ueð dun to his den · ðar he him bergen wille · *ij^a-----* ¹
An oðer kinde he haueð · wanne he is ikindled · stille lið
ðe leun · ne stire he nout of slepe · Til ðe sunne haueð
sinen ðries him abuten · ðanne reised his fader him ·
mit te rem ðat he madeð · *ij^a-----*
Îe ðridde lage haueð ðe leun · ðanne he lieð to slepen ·
sal he neure luken · ðe lides of hise egen · *Significacio* ·
Welle heg is tat hil · ðat is heuenriche · Vre · *prime nature* · ²
louerd is te leun · ðe liued ðerabuuen · wu ðo him like ·
de · to ligten her in erðe · migte neure diuel witen · ðog he
be derne hunte ·

The First Nature of the Lion

- 1 The lion stands on a hill, and when he hears a man hunting, ³
Or scents a man approaching,
By whatever way he will go down to the valley.
All his footprints he fills up after him;
- 5 He drags dust with his tail wherever he steps down —
Either dust or dew so that he cannot be found —⁴
And hastens down to his den, where he may take refuge.

2

- The lion has another characteristic: when he is born,
The lion lies still; he stirs not from sleep
- 10 Until the sun has shone thrice around him;
Then his father rouses him with his cry. ⁵

3

The lion has a third characteristic: when he lies sleeping,
He never closes the lids of his eyes. ⁶

The Significance of the First Characteristic

- Very high is that hill, which is heaven's kingdom;
- 15 Our Lord Christ is the lion, who lives above.
Oh! When it pleased our Lord to come down here to earth, ⁷
The devil did not know, though he hunts stealthily,

hu he dun come · ne wu he dennede him · ⁸
in ðat defte meiden · Marie bi name · ðe him bar to man-
ne frame · Îo ure drigten ded was · & doluen also his · *if^a et iif^a*
wille was · In a ston stille he lai · til it kam ðe dridde dai ·
his fader him filstnede swo · ðat he ros from dede ðo · Vs to
lif holden · waked so his wille is · so hirde for his folde · he
is hirde · we ben sep · silden he us wille · If we heren to his
word · ðat we ne gon nowor wille ·

How he descended, nor how he sought shelter in that humble maiden,
Mary, who bore him for the salvation of all mankind. ⁹

2 & 3

- 20** When our lord was dead and buried, as was his will,
He lay still in the stone tomb until the third day.
Then his father helped him rise from the dead so that
He might give us life.
He keeps watch –this is his will – as a shepherd for his flock.
- 25** He is the shepherd, we are the sheep; he will protect us—
If we obey his word—so that we do not go astray.

Commentary

1

ij^a -----: This is a numerical abbreviation, indicating the second characteristic of the lion. These numerical headings (*j*^a, *ij*^a, *iiij*^a) are equivalent to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, respectively, and also appear throughout the chapters on the Serpent and the Hart. It is also important to note that the headings in the manuscript are frequently followed by long dashes. Wherever a dash is present, the usual punctus mark is absent. This practice is not consistent throughout the entire *ME Physiologus*, however.

2

Significacio prime nature: This heading — *The Significance of the First Characteristic* — appears only in the chapter of the Lion. However, the chapter on the Hart features a similar heading: *Significacio prima (The First Significance)*, and the chapter on the Fox features a second *Significacio*. In the manuscript, *Significacio* and *Prime nature* appear on separate lines (as shown in the present transcription).

3

The lion stands on a hill, and when he hears a man hunting: The *ME Physiologus* begins, like all versions of the *Physiologus*, with the lion, King of the Beasts, or, as Wirtjes points out, with the ultimate symbol of Christ (lxxiii). However, the *ME Physiologus* has omitted the traditional Prologue that appears not only at the beginning of the Lion chapter in Theobald's version of the *Physiologus*, but also at the beginning of the Lion chapter "in all surviving manuscripts of the Latin original" (Wirtjes lxxx). In Theobald's version, the Prologue explains what he sets out to do – to catalogue the animals, provide allegories, and write in different meters:

Tres leo naturas et tres habet inde figuras
Quas ego, Christe, tibi ter seno carmine scripsi.
Altera divini memorant animalia libri,
De quibus apposui, que rursus mystica novi.
Temptans, diversis si possem scribere metris;
Et numero nostrum complent simul addita soldum.

The lion has three natural characteristics and hence three allegorical interpretations, which I have described for you, Christ,

in a poem of eighteen verses. Holy books record the other animals, about which I have added the mystic allegories I have got to know, trying to see if I could write in different metres; and, at the same time, additions fill up our sum-total (Eden 25).

In the *ME Physiologus*, the redactor has eliminated this Prologue entirely, and has simply started with the three characteristics of the Lion.

4

He drags dust with his tail where he steps down / Either dust or dew so that he cannot be found: The source of this image – the lion dragging its tail in order to obliterate its tracks – is difficult to determine, and, as McCulloch suggests, “in ancient literature the erasing of the tracks by the lion’s tail is not attested” (137). However, this image of the Lion can be compared with Aelian – author of *De Natura Animalium* – who explains that when the Lion returns to its den it erases its path by running about (ix.30). McCulloch notes this as well (137).

5

The lion lies still; he stirs not from sleep...Then his father rouses him with his cry: In the *ME Physiologus* and Theobald’s version, the manner in which the newborn lion is resuscitated differs from that of the *Physiologus* tradition. As McCulloch notes, most versions of the *Physiologus* describe how the *breath* of the father lion revives the dead cubs (137). However, in the *ME Physiologus* and Theobald’s version, the lion is awakened not by the breath of the father, but by his roar. Although the ME redactor and Theobald have altered the manner of resuscitation, this characteristic of the lion is meant to echo Genesis 49:9 (“Judah is a lion’s whelp; who has awakened him?”) (Wirtjes 24).

6

He never closes the lids of his eyes: The lion sleeping with its eyes open, as McCulloch notes, is perhaps the most popular image in medieval art, as it signifies the ever-watchfulness of Christ (140).

7

Oh! When it pleased our Lord to come down here to earth: Hall suggests translating “Wu!” as “how when it pleased him...” (176-96). However, Wirtjes argues that this is incorrect and inaccurate, as “Wu!” is an Old English exclamation or exultation (24).

Literally, this would translate as “Wow!” or “How!” However, as both “wow” and “how” are a little awkward, I have opted for “Oh!” as it seems to carry the same power of exultation while blending much more smoothly with the remainder of the translation.

8

hu he dun come · ne wu he dennede him: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “be derne hunte ·”

9

Mary, who bore him for the salvation of all mankind...He is the shepherd, we are the sheep; he will protect us”: As McCulloch notes, the three characteristics of the lion – covering tracks upon smelling a hunter, sleeping with open eyes, and rising from the dead upon inhaling the father’s breath or, in the case of the *ME Physiologus*, upon listening to the father’s roar – correspond to three allegories: the Incarnation of Christ, the ever-watchfulness of Christ’s divinity, and Christ’s resurrection on the third day (137). Just as the lion covers his tracks, Christ covered the traces of his divinity by assuming a human form. Just as the lion sleeps with its eyes open, Christ’s body may sleep, but his divinity is ever watchful. Just as the father lion arouses the lion cub with his breath, or his roar, the omnipotent Father revived Christ on the third day. The order of these characteristics and their corresponding allegorical interpretations, then, follows the Incarnation of Christ, his burial and resurrection, and his ever-watchfulness.

5.2 The Eagle

*Natura aquile-----*¹

Kiden I wille ðe ernes kinde · Also Ic it o boke rede · wu he
newed his gudhede · hu he cumed ut of elde · siden his
limes arn unwelde · siden his bec is alto wrong · siden his
fligt is al unstrong · & and his egen dimme · hereð wu he ne -²
wed him · A welle he seked ðat springed ai · boðe bi nigt &
bi dai · ðerouer he fleged · & up he ted · til ðat he ðe heu-
ne sed · ðurg skies sexe and seuene · til he cumed to heuene ·
so rigt so he cunne · he houed in ðe sunne · ðe sunne swi-
ðed al his fligt · & oc it maked his egen brigt · hise fedres
fallen for ðe hete · & he dun mide to ðe wete · falled in ðat
welle grund ·

The Nature of the Eagle

I will speak of the nature of the eagle,
As I have read of it in books: ³
How he renews his youth,
30 How he escapes old age,
When his limbs are weak,
When his beak is completely twisted,
When his flight is feeble,
And his eyes are dim.
35 Hear how he renews himself: ⁴
He seeks a well that always springs
Both by night and day.
He flies above it and up he goes
Until he sees heaven;
40 Through whatever clouds may chance to come his way ⁵
He reaches heaven,
And hovers as straight in front
Of the sun as he can. ⁶
The sun singes his wings,
45 And clears his eyes; ⁷
His feathers fall off from the heat, ⁸
And he —down— into the water—
Falls to the bottom of the well,

ðer he wurðeð heil & sund · & cumeð ut al 9
newe · ne were his bec untrewē · his bec is get biforn wrong ·
ðog hise limes senden strong · ne maig he tilen him no ·
fode · himself to none gode · ðanne goð he to a ston · &
he billeð ðeron · billeð til his bec biforn · haueð ðe wrenc -
ðe forloren · siðen wið his rigte bile · takeð mete ðat he wile ·
Al is man so is tis ern · wulde ge nu listen · *Significacio* ·
Old in hise sinnes dern · or he bicumeð cristen · & tus he
neweð him ðis man ðanne he nimeð to kirke · Or he it bi -
ðenken can · hise egen weren mirke · forsaket ðore satanas

Where he would become healthy and sound
50 And emerge anew
If his beak was not still crooked. ¹⁰
But his beak is still twisted in the front,
And even though his limbs are strong
And he may not procure food
55 Of any benefit to himself.
He then goes to a stone
And he strikes on it;
He strikes until his beak
Is no longer crooked.
60 When his bill is right,
He takes food whenever he wishes. ¹¹

The Significance

As is man, so is the eagle.
Listen now:
He is old in his innate sins
65 Before he becomes Christian. ¹²
Thus man renews himself
When he goes to church.
But before he considered it,
His eyes were dim.
70 He renounces Satan

& ilk sinful dede · taked̄ him to Iesu Crist · for he sal
ben his mede · leued̄ on ure louerd Crist · & and lered̄ pre -
stes lore · of hise egen wered̄ ðe mist · wiles he drecched̄
ðore · his hope is al to gode ward · & of his luue
he lered̄ · ðat is te sunne sikerlike · ðus his sigte he be -
teð · Naked falled̄ in ðe funt fat · & cumed̄ ut al newe ·
buten a litel wat is tat · his muð is get untrewe · his
muð is get wel unkuð · wið pater noster and crede · fare he
norð er fare he suð · leren he sal his nede · bidden bone
to gode · & tus his muð rigten · tilen him so ðe sowles fode
ðurg grace off ure drigtin ·¹³

And each sinful deed;
He devotes himself to Jesus Christ,
For Christ shall be his reward.
He believes in our Lord Christ,
75 And learns the teaching of priests;
The mist of his eyes fades away ¹⁴
While he remains there.
His hope is all toward God,
And he learns that God's love
80 Is surely the sun; ¹⁵
Thus his sight is restored.
Then he falls naked in the font
And emerges all anew,
Except for a little thing - and what is that?
85 His mouth is still crooked.
His mouth is still completely unacquainted
With Our Father and the Creed. ¹⁶
He may travel north or he may travel south,
But he will learn what is necessary for himself:
90 He shall ask a request of God,
And thus his mouth will be right;
Procure the food of the soul
Through the grace of our Lord.

Commentary

1

Natura aquile-----: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Lion section. As noted earlier in the discussion of the *Middle English Physiologus* manuscript, all “headings” appear either in the body of the text itself or in the margins . That is to say, they are not readily recognizable as headings, or titles of chapters, except for the fact that they are written in red and bracketed by *puncti* .

2

fligt is al unstrong · & and his egen dimme · hereð wu he: In the manuscript, this line marks the start of the second page.

3

As I have read of it in books: It is unclear as to what “books” the ME redactor is specifically referring to here. However, as Wirtjes notes, the ME redactor was certainly familiar with the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, Pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor’s *De bestiis et aliis rebus* and Alexander Neckham’s *De Naturis rerum* (lxxxiii). Perhaps these are the “books” to which the redactor is referring. If not, then perhaps he is simply referring to the *Physiologus* tradition itself.

4

Hear how he renews himself: Authorial intrusion (“I will speak of the nature of the eagle”) and direct address to the readers or listeners (“Hear how he renews himself”) is not, as Wirtjes notes, paralleled in other Latin versions of the *Physiologus*. While both Theobald’s version and the *ME Physiologu* are similar in terms of authorial intrusion, the *ME Physiologus*, unlike Theobald’s version, does not directly address Christ in second person (i.e., *The lion has three natural characteristics and hence three allegorical interpretations, which I have described for you, Christ, in a poem of eighteen verses*).

5

Through whatever clouds may chance to come his way: Bennett and Smithers suggest translating “skies” as “clouds” and the curious phrase “sexe and seune” as “chance” (165-73). They argue that “sexe and seune” is a variation on “cinque et six,” the highest throw at dice, and is thus associated with “chance.” As Wirtjes notes, such a phrase also

appears in *Troilus and Criseyde* IV 622, “But manly sette the world on six and seven,” and this occurrence, curiously enough, is the first instance of the phrase that is recorded in the O.E.D.

6

And hovers as straight in front / Of the sun as he can: I have reversed the word order in these two lines. Following the original word order renders an awkward translation: “as straight in front as he can / he hover in the sun.” Therefore, I have altered the word order with the intention of best capturing the literal meaning of the poem, which is an image of the eagle hovering straight in front of the sun.

7

The sun sings his wings / And clears his eyes: Literally, this translates as “the sun sings his winge entirely / And it makes his eyes clear.” However, for the sake of clarity and smoothness, I have translated idiomatically here. It is also important to note here that in later works of literature, the eagle (the animal whose eyesight is restored by flying to the sun) becomes the animal agent that helps other characters renew their “sight” — that is to say, the eagle is the animal agent that helps characters reach enlightenment. In medieval dream visions, the eagle is frequently seen carrying the pilgrim toward the heavens. For instance, in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, an eagle lifts Chaucer into the air, and carries him to a strange celestial city in the sky, where he becomes enlightened about the consequences of words and poetry, among other things. Allegorically, the eagle lifting the narrator into the sky is the pilgrim’s first step toward enlightenment — the first step toward a new way of “seeing.” This motif of the eagle carrying the pilgrim toward enlightenment most likely has its roots in the bestiaries and versions of the *Physiologus*.

8

His feathers fall off from the heat: The feathers of the eagle are not typically mentioned in the *Physiologus* tradition. However, it is interesting that the feathers are described in Bartholomew Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus*: “and so then by the heat the pores are opened and the feathers chafed” (Steele Translation 118).

9

ðer he wurdēð heil & sund · & cumeð ut al: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “welle grund ·”

10

If his beak was not still crooked: Hall suggests translating this line as “If his beak was not still crooked,” meaning that the eagle has emerged anew from the well, but its beak is not perfect, as it is still crooked and twisted in the front.

11

He then goes to a stone...He takes food when he wishes: Since the eagle’s beak is twisted, it has difficulty obtaining food. To remedy this problem, the eagle strikes its beak against a stone in an attempt to straighten it, and henceforth to procure food. It is also interesting to note that the eagle’s renewal process involves all four elements (air, fire, water, earth): the eagle must fly upward to the sky (air), singe its wings against the sun (fire), plunge into a well (water), and strike its beak against a stone (earth). The renewal process, it seems, involves the integration of all four elements.

12

As is man, so is the eagle...Before he becomes Christian: Just as the eagle renews his youth by flying up to the sun and plunging into the well, we are made young again, we are cleansed of original sin through baptism.

13

ðurg grace off ure drigtin: In the manuscript, this line marks the start of the third page.

14

The mist of his eyes fades away: Bennet and Smithers suggest translating this line as “The mist of his eyes fades away” (165-73). However, Morris translates this line as “From his eyes he keeps off the mist.” I have adopted the advice of Bennet and Smithers.

15

And he learns that God's love / Is surely the sun: As Frank notes, the comparison of God and the sun is not present in Theobald’s version of the *Physiologus* (72). At this point in the text, the *ME Physiologus* is perhaps most similar to the a- and b- *versiones* of the

Latin *Physiologus* which cites Malechia 4:2: “As you fly into the height of the sun of justice, who is Christ, as the Apostle says” (Curley translation).

16

His mouth is still completely unacquainted / With Our Father and the creed: Just as the sun and the fountain do not fully renew the eagle, faith in God (sun) and baptism (fountain) are not sufficient for salvation. Rather, we must study the creeds and God's prayer. Just as the eagle must sharpen his beak if he is to eat meat, our mouths must learn the lore of God if we are to feed our souls (we are suddenly reminded of Psalms 103:5: “Your mouth will be renewed like the eagle’s”). Wirtjes notes, however, that this allegorical interpretation is the ME redactor’s own invention – or at least it is not Theobald’s, nor does it appear “in any other version of the *Physiologus*, or in the Latin works which the ME author may have known, the *Dicta Chysostomi*, Psuedo-High of St. Victor’s *De bestiis et aliis rebus* and Alexander Neckham’s *De naturis rerum*” (lxxxii-iii).

5.3 The Serpent

Natura serpentis j^a ----- 1

An wirm is o werlde · wel man it knoweð · Neddre is te name · ðus he him neweð · ðanne he is forbroken & forbroiden · & in his elde al forwurden · fasteð til his fel him slakeð · ten daies fulle · ðat he is lene & mainles & iuele mai gangen · he crepeð cripelande forð · his craft he ðus kideð · sekeð a ston ðat a ðirl is on · narwe bu - ten he nedeð him · nimeð vnneð es ðurg · for his fel he ðer leteð · his fles forð crepeð · walkeð to ðe water ward · wile ðanne drinken · oc he speweð or al ðe uenim · ðat in his brest is bred · fro his birde-time · drinkeð siðen · *ij^a* · inog · & tus he him neweð · ðanne ðe neddre is of his hid naked · & bare of his brest atter · if he naked man se · ne wile he him nogt neggen · oc he fleð fro him · als he fro fir sulde · if he clodeð man se cof he waxeð · for up he rigteð him redi to deren · to deren er to ded maken if he it muge forðen · wat if ðe man war wurd e · & weren him cunne · figteð wið ðis wirm · & fareð on him figtande · ðis neddre siðen he nede sal ·

The First Nature of the Serpent

- A worm is in the world — man knows it well.
- 95** Serpent is its name, and he renews himself in this way:
When he is broken, made monstrous, and in his old age all enfeebled,
He fasts ten full days until his skin grows loose on him,²
So that he is emaciated and weak and can scarcely crawl.
He crawls forth lamely, and his skill he thus exercises:
- 100** He seeks a stone with a hole in it,
And forces himself to be narrow, but goes through with difficulty,
For his skin he leaves behind there, and his flesh crawl forth.
He moves toward the water where he will drink,
But before he does he spews out all the venom
- 105** That has bred in his breast since his birth-time.³
Then he drinks a great deal and thus renews himself.

2

- If the serpent is bare of skin and of the venom in his breast
And he sees a naked man, he will not approach him,
But will flee from him, as he flees from fire.
- 110** If he sees a clothed man, he grows fierce,
For he assumes an upright position, ready to inflict injury;
To injure or to kill—if he may achieve it.
But what if the man were capable and became aware of him
And fights against this serpent and attacks him?
- 115** Then this serpent, since he is need,

Makeð seld of his bodi · & ⁴

sildeð his heued · litel him is of hise limes · bute he life holde ·
Knov cristene man · wat tu Crist higest · Atte kirke dure ⁵
ðar ðu cristned were · ðu higtēs to leuen on him · & hise
lages luuien · to helden wit herte · ðe bodes of holi kirke ·
if ðu hauest is broken · al ðu forbredes · forwurðes & for-
gelues · eche lif to wolden · elded art fro eche blis · so ðis
wirm or werld is · newe ðe forði · so ðe neddre doð · it is te ned
· Feste ðe of stedfastnesse · & ful of ðewes · & helpe ðe poure
men · ðe gangen abuten · ne deme ðe nogt wurði ðat ⁶
tu dure loken · up to ðe heuene ward · oc walke wið
ðe erðe mildlike among men · no mod ðu ne cune ·
mod ne mannes vncost · oc swic of sineginge · & bo-
te bid tu ðe ai · boðe bi nigst & bi dai · ðat tu milce
mote hauen · of ðine misdedes · ðis life bitokeneð ðe
sti · ðat te neddre ganged bi · & Crist is ðe ðirl of ðe ston·
ðat tu salt ðurg gon · let ðin filde froðe · so ðe wirm
his fel doð ·

Makes a shield of his body and protects his head.
He cares little about his limbs, so long as he protects his life.

The Significance

- Know, Christian man, what Christ promised you
At the church-door, where you were christened;
- 120** You promised to believe in him and love his laws,
To practice with sincerity the precepts of the holy church.
If you have failed to obey, then you are corrupted;
You are lost and withering as far as the attainment of eternal life is concerned.⁷
You have failed to attain eternal bliss, as the worm of this world has.⁸
- 125** Renew yourself, for that reason, as the serpent does: it is your need.
Confirm yourself in steadfastness and full virtue,
And help the poor men who wander from place to place.
Do not deem yourself so worthy that you dare look
Up toward heaven,
- 130** But walk with the people of the earth, humbly among men;
Do not have pride — as pride is an evil feature of man —
But stop sinning
And always ask for forgiveness, both by night and by day,
So that you may have forgiveness for your sins.
- 135** This life symbolizes the path by which the serpent moves,
As Christ is the hole in the stone that you must go through.⁹
Cast your filth from you, as the serpent does his skin;
-

Go þu þan to Godes hus · ðe godspel to heren · ¹⁰
ðat is the soule drink · sinnes quenching · oc or sei þu in
scrifte · to ðe prest sinnes tine · feg ðe þus of ði brest
filðe · & feste ðe forðward · fast at tin herte · ðat tu fir -
mest higtes · þus art tu ging & newe · forðward be
þu trewe · nedeð ðe ðe deuel nogt · for he ne mai ðe de -
ren nogt · oc he fleð from ðe · so neddre from ðe nakede ·
on ðe clodede ðe neddre is cof · & te deuel cliuer on
sinnes · ai ðe sinfule bisetten he wile · & wið al mankin
he haueð nið and win · wat if he leue haue of ure heuen
louerd · for to deren us · so he ure eldere or dede · do we ðe
bodi in ðe bale · & bergen ðe soule · ðat is ure heued geue -
lic · helde we it wurðlic ·

Go then to God's house to listen to the Gospel:
That is the soul's drink, and sin's quenching.

140 But before you confess your sins to the priest,
Cleanse yourself of the impurity in your breast and confirm
Firmly in your heart what you promised foremost:
Thus you are young and renewed; from now on be true.
The Devil will not oppress you, for he cannot inflict injury on you,

145 But he will flee from you, as the serpent from a naked man.
Towards the clothed man the serpent is fierce & the Devil highly skilled in seizing sins.¹¹
He will always beset the sinful
And towards all mankind have malice and animosity.
But what happens if he has permission from our Lord of Heaven

150 To harm us, as he did our ancestors before us?
Then let us subject the body to the sufferings of the world and protect the soul —
Which is equal to the serpent's head — and hold it in high esteem.¹²

Commentary

1

Natura serpentis j^a: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Eagle section. This “heading” is also one of the very few which include a numerical abbreviation — *j^a*. In this case, the *j^a* indicates that this is the first nature of the serpent. This kind of abbreviation also appears later in the Serpent chapter — *ij^a* (which indicates the second nature of the serpent) — as well as in the chapters on the Lion and the Hart.

2

...in his old age all enfeebled / He fasts ten full days until his skin grows loose on him: There are two items that are noteworthy of comment here. (1) The serpent and eagle – two animals who are old and enfeebled and who seek to renew themselves – are placed side by side here and in Theobald’s version, as well. Whether this arrangement is intentional is unclear. Also, according to Hassig, pagan sources on the serpent (specifically Aelian, Pliny, and Solinus), unlike the Physiologus tradition, mention neither the old age of the serpent nor how it fasts for an extended period of time. Hassig suggests that these elements are “original contributions that served the Christian moralization,” in which old age serves as an allegory of sin and fasting serves as an allegory of spiritual purification or cleansing (157). (2) Also, unlike the *ME Physiologus*, Theobald’s version does not specify an exact period of fasting. In the most common versions of the Latin *Physiologus* and bestiaries, though, the length of time that the serpent fasts is forty days and forty nights not ten days (McCulloch 170).

3

But before he does he spews out all the venom / That has bred in his breast since his birth-time: This image of the snake spewing forth venom can be traced back to Aelian’s *De naturis animalium*, in which the snake is said to deposit all of its venom in the ground before mating with the muraena (ix.66). McCulloch notes this as well (170-1).

4

Makedð sold of his bodi · &: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “ðis neddre siðen he nede sal ·”

5

Knov cristene man · wat tu Crist higest · Atte kirke dure: This would seem to be the start of the *Significacio* section of the Serpent; however, there is no *Significacio* heading in the manuscript itself. It seems that the ME redactor may have overlooked this heading accidentally.

6

men · ðe gangen abuten · ne deme ðe nogt wurði ðat: In the manuscript, this line marks the start of the third page.

7

You are lost and withering as far as the attainment of eternal life is concerned: Literally, “eche lif to wolden” translates as “to desire eternal life.” However, the sense here is that those who have failed to follow the precepts of the church cannot attain eternal life. Thus, Hall suggests translating this line as “far as the attainment of eternal life is concerned”. This seems to capture the sense effectively, and, therefore, I have adopted it for the present translation.

8

You have failed to attain eternal bliss, as this worm of this world has: In the *ME Physiologus*, the allegorical interpretation of the serpent is twofold: the serpent is both the prudent man and the devil himself — the “worm of this world.” However, in Theobald’s version, the serpent is not the Devil. Rather, Theobald asks us to *imitate* the serpent, not to be wary of it: “*Ergo sis semper imitator anguis...*” (“therefore, you may always be an imitator of the snake”). The serpent as Devil is seems to be an innovation on the part of the *ME* redactor, as noted by Wirtjes (lxxxiii).

9

And Christ is the hole in the stone that you must go through: *Versio b-* of the Latin *Physiologus* includes a quotation from Matthew 7:14 to further explain the hole in the stone or, allegorically speaking, “the way of Christ”: “The gate is narrow and there is tribulation on the way which leads toward life and few are those who enter it.” Thus, it seems that the serpent squeezing itself through a hole is an echo of Matthew 7:14.

10

Go ðu ðan to Godes hus · ðe godspel to heren : In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “his fel doð · “

11

But he will flee from you, as the serpent from a naked man / Towards the clothed man the serpent is fierce, and the Devil highly skilled in seizing sins: It is interesting that the serpent has two allegorical interpretations (1) The serpent who casts off its skin and rids itself of venom is analogous to the prudent man who casts off and confesses sin as he passes through the door of Christ (2) The serpent who flees from the naked man, but attacks the clothed man, is analogous to the Devil who flees from those who have cast off sin and seizes those who have not. The serpent is the only animal in the *ME Physiologus* which has a contradicting, twofold, allegorical significance. However, this kind of contradiction (whereby the serpent could be both the Devil and the prudent man) is common amongst many animal symbols and icons of the Middle Ages. As Eco explains so succinctly: “it was a kind of polyphony of signs and references” (59). Here, the serpent seems to be a polyphonic symbol, as it shifts smoothly between allegorizing the Devil and allegorizing the prudent man.

On another note, clothing here seems to be an allegory for sin. In *versio b-* of the Latin *Physiologus*, the serpent fleeing the naked man and attacking the clothed man is compared to the way the serpent fled Adam in the garden of Eden and the way the serpent attacked Adam when he dressed in a tunic:

Spiritually we, too, ought to understand that when the first man, our father Adam, was naked in paradise, the serpent did not succeed in attacking him, but when he dressed in a tunic (that is, the mortality of a sinful fleshly body), then the serpent assaulted him (Curley 19).

Clothing is associated with the Fall, with mortality, whereas nudity is associated with bliss, perfection, the Garden of Eden, the way of God. The *ME Physiologus* does not include this exact explanation, which is found in later Latin versions of the *Physiologus*; however, the significance of clothing as sin and nudity as the way of God remains similar.

12

Which is equal to our head—and hold it in high esteem: The “head,” of course, refers to the head of the serpent: just as the serpent protects its head and subjects its limbs to the blows of attack, so should we protect the soul and subject our body to the woes of the world. Just as the serpent values its head, we hold our souls in the highest esteem.

5.4 The Ant

Natura formice ----- ¹

ðe mire is magti · mikel ge swinked · in sumer & in softe we -
der · so we ofte sen hauen · in ðe heruest hardilike ganged ·
& renned rapelike · & rested hire seldum · & feched hire fo -
de ðer ge it mai finden · gaddred ilkines sed · boden of
wude & of wed · of corn & of gres · ðat ire to hauen es · ha-
led to hire hole · ðat siðen hire helped · ðare ge wile ben winter
agen · caue ge haued to crepen in · ðat winter hire ne ²
derie · mete in hire hole · ðat ge muge biliuen · ðus
ge tiled ðarwiles ge time haued · so it her telled · oc
finde ge ðe wete · corn ðat hire qwemed · Al ge forleted
ðis oðer sed ðat ic er seide · ne bit ge nowt ðe barlic beren
abuten · oc suned it & saked forð · so it same were · get is
wunder of ðis wirm · more ðanne man wened · ðe corn ðat ge
to caue bereð · al get bit otwinne · ðat it ne forwurðe · ne
waxe hire fro · er ge it eten wille ·

The Nature of the Ant

- The ant is strong: greatly she toils,³
In summer and in mild weather, as we have often seen.
- 155** In the autumn she moves about vigorously
And runs hurriedly and seldom rests
And fetches her food wherever she may find it.
She gathers seed of every kind, both from trees and plants,
From grain and grass, so that she may have bounty.⁴
- 160** She then drags to her hole that which helps her:
There she will meet winter.
She has a cave to crawl into, so that winter does not injure her,
And food in her shelter so that she might remain alive.⁵
Thus she procures while she has the opportunity, as it says here.⁶
- 165** But if she could find wheat —grain that is pleasing to her —
She will always abandon this other seed that I described before.
She does not wish to carry barley from place to place,⁷
But avoids it and moves on, as if it were something to be ashamed of.
Yet there is another marvel concerning this insect — greater than one expects:
- 170** The grain that she carries to the cave, all of it she bites in two,
So that it does not perish, so that she does not lose it, before she eats it.⁸
-

Significacio ----- 9

Îe mire muned us mete to tilen · long liuenode ðis lit-
tle wile · ðe we on ðis werld wunen · for ðanne we of wenden ·
ðanne is ure winter · we sulen hunger hauen · & harde sures ·
buten we ben war here · do we forði so doð ðis der · ðanne be
we derue · on ðat dai ðat dom sal ben · ðat it ne us harde
rewe · seke we ure liues fod · ðat we ben siker ðore · so ðis wirm
in winter is ðan ge ne tileð nummore · ðe mire suned ðe barlic
ðanne ge fint te wete ðe olde lage we ogen to sunen · ðe newe
we hauen moten · ðe corn ðat ge to caue bered · all ge it bit
otwinne · ðe lage us lered to don god · & forbeded us sinne · it
ben us erðliche bodes · & bekned euelike · it fet te licham & te
gost · oc nowt o geuelike · vre louerd crist it leue us · ðat
his lage us fede · nu & o domesdei & tanne we hauen nede ·

The Significance

- The ant admonishes us to procure food —
Long-lasting provisions for the little time we are in this world —
For when we die, it is our winter.¹⁰
- 175** We shall have hunger and severe attacks of pain, unless we are prudent here:
Let us for that reason, then, be strong like this creature
On that day of judgment, so that it will not grieve us severely.
Let us seek our life's provisions, so that we are safe there,¹¹
As this insect is in winter, when she labors no more.
- 180** The ant shuns barley when she finds wheat —
The old law we ought to shun, the new we must have.¹²
The grain that she carries to her cave, all of it she bites in two —
The law teaches us to do what is good and to forsake sin;
It offers us the teachings of this world and shows us the spiritual,
- 185** It feeds the body and the spirit, but not equally.
Our Lord Christ grants us the law that will feed us,
Now and on Doomsday and when we have need.

Commentary

1

Natura formice: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Serpent section.

2

agen · caue ge haueð to crepen in · ðat winter hire ne: This marks the start of the fourth page of the manuscript.

3

The ant is strong: greatly she toils: The ant is only one of six animals in the *ME Physiologus* which are feminine. The others include the spider, the fox, the mermaid, the turtle-dove, and the dove. It is also interesting that both insects featured in the text are feminine — the spider and the ant. However, in later Latin versions, the ant becomes masculine. The reason for the shift in gender is unclear.

4

Of grain and of grass, so that she may have bounty: Bennett and Smithers translate this line as “that is to be had for her” while Hall suggests “which constitutes her wealth.” Wirtjes, though, recommends translating the line as “that she has as her property” (30). I have translated this line, differently from Bennet, Smither, Hall, and Wirtjes: “so that she may have bounty.” I feel that this best captures the idea that the ant collects seeds and food *so that* she may have wealth, possessions, bounty. Nevertheless, this is a difficult point of translation.

5

Food in her shelter so that she might remain alive: Wirtjes recommends that “dat she muge biliuen” be translated “so that she might remain alive” (30). I have adopted this translation.

6

Thus she procures while she has the opportunity, so it is says here: The *Natura* section of the Ant is very reminiscent of Aesop’s fable “The Ant and The Grasshopper.” Also, in the later Latin versions of the *Physiologus*, the chapter of the ant includes a citation from Proverbs 6:6-8: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard: consider her ways and be wise...

Provideth her meat in the summer and gathereth her food in the harvest.” The *Natura* section of the Ant chapter in the *ME Physiologus* is fairly reminiscent of this very passage from Biblical scripture.

7

She does not wish to carry barley from place to place: The translation of “bit” is under critical debate. Matzner suggests that “bit” is “eats” (55-75) However, this does not fit the context. Smithers, on the other hand, in his article “A Middle English Idiom and its Antecedents” argues that “bit” is from the Old English word “biddan” and means “wishes to” (101-13). The latter seems to fit the context of the line better: “She does not wish to carry barley from place to place.” Wirtjes argues this as well (30).

8

So that it does not perish, so that she does not lose it, before she eats it: The *ME Physiologus* does not include a detailed explanation as to why the ant divides the grain in two, unlike the later Latin versions of the *Physiologus*, which explains that the division (the breaking of the seed) prevents the germination of the grain — which is crucial if the ant wishes to devour the grain as *food*, not as a full-blown plant:

...when it has hidden the grain in its dwelling, it separates it into two parts so that winter might not destroy it nor the flooding rains germinate it and the ant perish of hunger (Curley 21).

In the *ME Physiologus*, the only explanation given as to why the ant divides the grain in two is so that she does not “lose” the grain.

9

Significacio :: In the manuscript, *Significacio* appears in the body of the text, at the end of the line “waxe hire fro • er ge it eten wille • “ It is also worthwhile to note that Theobald’s version of the *Physiologus* does not feature a separate *Natura* and *Significacio* section, but blends the two together, so that each characteristic of the Ant is immediately followed by its allegorical meaning. The ME redactor, however, restores the familiar pattern of *Natura* and *Significacio*. Wirtjes notes this as well (lxxxiv).

10

Long-lasting provisions for the little time we are in this world— / For when we die, it is our winter: The ME redactor has eliminated the reference to the Jewish people that is present in Theobald's text:

Exemplum nobis prebet formica laboris,
Quando sup solitum portat in ore cibum;
Inque suis factis res monstrat spiritualis,
Quas quia Judeas non amat, inde reus.

The ant furnishes us with a model of toil when she carries her usual food in her mouth, and in her doings she indicates spiritual qualities which the Jew does not love — and so he stands accused. (Eden 41)

As Wirtjes notes, the ME redactor has not included this reference to the Jewish people and their supposed distaste for allegorical explanation (Wirtjes lxxxiv).

11

Let us seek our life's provisions, so that we are safe there: Both the chapters on the Ant and on the Eagle focus on procuring food for the soul. The eagle scrapes his beak alongside a stone in order to straighten it so that he might procure food; the ant gathers food all summer long so that she will have plenty of food in the dead of winter. In the Eagle chapter, we learn that we must study the Word of God (straighten our beaks and procure food on earth) if we are to be saved, and, in the ant chapter, we learn that we should be prudent on earth (procure food while in the heat of the summer) so that we will be saved on the Day of Judgement. Both chapters focus on the procuring of food in life, on earth, in hopes of the attainment of eternal bliss in the afterlife.

12

The old law we ought to shun, the new we must have: The ME redactor and Theobald do not offer any explanation of the “old law” or the “new law.” However, according to Eden, the “new law” is the “allegorical interpretations acceptable to Orthodox Christianity”, whereas the “old law” is the “insistence that the Scriptures should be regarded as conveying nothing more than truth at a literal level only” (41). Therefore, just as the ant shuns barley and accepts wheat, we, too, must shun the old law (we must shun the idea that the Bible can only be interpreted literally) and accept the new law (that the Bible

can be interpreted both literally and allegorically). In *versio b-* of the Latin *Physiologus*, shunning the barley is analogous to shunning the teachings of heretics.

5.5 The Hart

Îe hert haueð kindes two · & forbisnes oc also · *Natura cervi* · ¹
ðus it is on boke set · ðat man clepeð Fisiologet · he draged
ðe neddre of ðe ston · ðurg his nese up onon · of ðe stoc er
of ðe ston · for it wile ðerunder gon · & sweleð it wel swiðe ·
ðer of him brinneð siðen · of ðat attrie ðing · wiðinnen he
haueð brenning · he lepeð ðanne wið mikel list · of swet water ²
he haueð ðrist · he drinkeð water gredilike · til he is ful wel
sikerlike · ne haueð ðat uenim non migt · to deren him
siðen non wigt · oc he werpeð er hise hornes in wude er
in ðornes · & gingið him ðus · ðis wilde der · so ge hauen
nu lered her ·

The Nature of the Hart

The hart has two characteristics
and allegorical interpretations as well:

190 Thus it is set down in a book
By that man called 'Physiologus.'³
The hart drags the serpent from the stone
Up by his nose at once,
From a tree trunk or from a stone,

195 For it will go under
And swallow it very quickly:⁴
Then because of it he burns himself.
From that venomous creature
He has burning pain inside.

200 He rushes then with great dexterity:
He is thirsty for fresh water.
And so he drinks water greedily
Until he is completely full:
That venom does not have the power

205 To injure him any more then.⁵
Then he casts off his horns
On a tree or on thorn bushes
And thus this wild creature rejuvenates himself,
As you have now learned here.

Significacio prima · 6

Alle we atter dragen off ure eldere · ðe broken drigtin-
nes word ðurg ðe neddre · ðer ðurg haueð mankin ·
bodeñ nið & win · golsipe & giscing · giuernesse & wissing
pride & ouerwene · swilc atter imene · ofte we brennen
in mod · & wurðen so we weren wod · ðanne we ðus bren-
nen · bihoueð us to rennen · to Cristes quike welle · ðat
we ne gon to helle · drinken his wissing · it quenchet
ilc siniging · forwerpen pride euerilic del · so hert doð hise
hornes · gingen us tus to gode ward · & gemen us siðen
Natura ij^a forðward · 7

The First Significance

- 210** All of us draw venom from our ancestors, ⁸
Who failed to obey the word of the Lord through the serpent.
Because of this, mankind has
Both malice and animosity,
Lechery and covetousness,
- 215** Gluttony and concupiscence,
Pride and presumption,
Such venom together.
Often we burn in anger
And we become as though we were mad;
- 220** When we thus burn,
It is fitting for us to run
To Christ's living well, ⁹
So that we do not go to hell.
Let us drink his guidance:
- 225** It extinguishes every act of sinning;
Let us cast off pride completely,
As the hart does his horns; ¹⁰
Let us be rejuvenated thus in God
And take heed from now on.

Îe hertes hauen anoder kinde · ðat us og alle ¹¹
to ben minde · Alle he arn off one mode · for if he fer fecchen
fode · & he ouer water ten · wile non at nede oðer flen · oc on
swimmeð biforn · & alle ðe oðre folegen · weder so he swimmeð
er he wadeð · is non at nede ðat oðer lateð · oc leigeð his skin
bon · on oðres lendbon · gef him ðat bigorn teð · bilimpes
for to tirgen · Alle ðe oðre cumen mide · & helpen him for to
herien · beren him of ðat water grund · up to ðe lond al heil
& sund · & forðen here nede · ðis wune he hauen hem bitwen
Significacio ij^a · ðog he an hundred togiddre ben · ¹²

The Second Nature ¹³

- 230** The hart has another characteristic ¹⁴
That ought to be in all our minds:
All are of one mind,
For, if they fetch food far away
And they go over water,
- 235** They will not desert another in distress,
But one swims in front
And all the others follow.
Whether he swims or he wades,
He does not abandon the other in distress.
- 240** But places his chin
On the other's haunch.
If that one in front happens to grow tired,
All the others with him will come and help to drag him, ¹⁵
And carry him from the bottom of the river
- 245** Up to the land all healthy and sound
And provide for his needs.
This practice they have among them
Even if a hundred of them are together.
-

Îe hertes costes we ¹⁶

ogen to munen · ne og ur non oðer to sunen · oc eurilc
luuen oðer · also he were his broðer · wurðen stedefast his
wine · ligten him of his birdene · helpen him at his nede · ¹⁷
god giued ðerfore mede · we sulen hauen heuenriche ·
gef we betwixen us ben briche · ðus is ure louerdes lage
luuelike to fillen · herof haue we mikel ned · ðat we ðar
wið ne dillen ·

The Second Significance

The habits of the hart we ought to consider:
250 Do not shun others
But let everyone love each other,
As if he were his brother;
Let us become steadfast toward his friend,
Let us relieve him of his burden;
255 Let us help him in his time of need;
God therefore gives a reward:
We shall have the kingdom of heaven
If we are helpful amongst ourselves.
Thus is the Lord's law lovingly observed;
260 Concerning this we have great need, so we should not be slothful about it.

Commentary

1

In Theobald's text, the fifth chapter is not the hart, but the fox. The ME redactor, however, has transposed the two chapters, so that the chapter on the Hart appears before the chapter on the Fox. Lauchert explains that the ME redactor purposefully transposed the two chapters so that the Fox would appear next to the three chapters which feature the other sinful animals or animals representative of the Devil: The Fox, the Spider, The Whale, The Siren (124-25). Lauchert argues that the ME redactor transposed the two chapters in order to group the fox with the other allegories on sin and the Devil. However, Wirtjes argues differently, suggesting that the reordering of the chapters is accidental and not intentional on the part of the ME redactor (lxxx). She argues that if the ME redactor had purposely placed the Fox closer to the other three allegories on sin and the Devil, he would have also systematically grouped the other chapters as well (such as grouping the chapters on the Lion, Eagle, Ant, and Hart together and removing the chapter on the Serpent, which is a barrier between the chapter on the Eagle and the chapter on the Ant). Therefore, because the ME redactor's grouping is not uniformly systematic, Wirtjes concludes that the ME redactor accidentally transposed the two chapters on the Hart and the Fox.

2

haued brenning · he leped ðanne wið mikel list · of swet water: In the manuscript, this line marks the start of the sixth page.

3

By that man called Physiologus: This is the only reference to “The Physiologus” in the text. The *Physiologus* refers to the actual compiler himself — the original author of the *Physiologus* — and not the title of the book. According to Curley, *Physiologus* does not simply mean “The Naturalist.” Rather, the term refers to “one who interpreted metaphysically, morally, and finally, mystically the transcendent significance of the natural world” (xv). The author of the original *Physiologus* remains unclear. However, Curley notes that throughout the Medieval period, the *Physiologus* was thought to be a wide variety of people: Aristotle, Solomon, Peter of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Athanasius, Ambrose, and Jerome (xvi).

4

He drags the serpent from the stone...And swallows it very quickly: The hart and the serpent are enemies, as the hart drags the snake from its hiding place and devours it. This antipathy of the snake and the hart is a traditional one, dating back to Antiquity. Specifically, this antipathy can be traced to the Greek philosopher and naturalist Oppian in his work *Cynegetica*: “All the race of snakes and deer wage always bitter feud with one another” (ii.233). McCulloch notes this as well (173).

5

And so he drinks water greedily...That venom does not have the power to injure him any more then: According to McCulloch, the reason that the hart seeks water after it is poisoned by a snake is explained in Pliny and Oppian (173). According to Pliny (who quotes Thrasyllas) in his work *Naturalis historia* “there is nothing so antagonistic to serpents as crabs; that swine, when stung by a serpent cure themselves by eating them” (xxxii.5.19). Oppian explains this further in his work *Cynegetica*: “[the stag] seeks everywhere for the dark stream of a river. Therefrom he kills crabs with his jaws and so gets a self-taught remedy for his painful woe” (ii.284). In other words, the hart seeks a river in the hopes of finding crabs whose sting will ultimately remedy the poison of the serpent. This fable is not present in the *ME Physiologus*.

6

Significacio prima: In the manuscript, *Significacio prima* appears in the body of the text, at the end of the line “nu lered her •”

7

Natura ij^a: This “heading” appears in the left hand margin of the manuscript. It is also important to note that this is one of the very few headings that includes a numerical abbreviation. In this case, the numerical abbreviation indicates the *second* nature, or characteristic, of the hart. This type of abbreviation (i^a, ij^a, iij^a representing 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, respectively) appears later in the Hart chapter, with *Significacio ij^a*, as well as throughout the chapters on the Lion and the Serpent.

8

All of us draw venom from our ancestors: We draw venom (original sin) from our ancestors (Adam and Eve). In the *Physiologus* tradition, however, the hart devouring the snake is most frequently an allegory for Christ vanquishing the Devil, not for humankind

possessing the original sin of Adam and Eve (Hassig 50). On another note, the venom motif is consistent in the *Physiologus*: (1) in the Hart chapter, we learn that our ancestors, Adam and Eve, and by extension all of us, are imbued with the venom of the serpent: just as the hart becomes poisoned by venom the moment he swallows the serpent, Adam and Eve Fall become poisoned by sin the moment they "swallow" the lies of the serpent in the Garden and eat the fruit from the Forbidden Tree; (2) in the Serpent chapter, we learn that we must spit out all our "venom" — that we must confess all our sins — in order to be forgiven and cleansed by God. In the Hart and the Serpent chapters, venom seems to serve as a symbol of original sin. As we learn in the Serpent chapter, venom — sin — "has bred in [our] breast since [our] birth-time." The Hart chapter nicely continues this motif, explaining how, exactly, we came to be born with such "breast-filth."

9

It is fitting for us to run / To Christ's living well: Just as the hart seeks a well to dilute the poison it has swallowed, we must seek baptism (the living well of Christ) in order to vanquish our original sin. Humanity is deceived by a serpent, and thus we must seek the well of Christ. This line echoes strongly of Psalms 42:1, which is included in the a- and b-versions of the Latin *Physiologus*, but not here in the *ME Physiologus*: "As the stag longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God."

10

Cast off pride completely / As the hart does his horns: The casting of the hart's horns refers specifically to the casting off of pride. It is interesting that the text focuses on a concrete sin here — pride — even though it lists a wide variety of sins earlier in the text (Wrath, Lust, Envy, Avarice, Gluttony). To be rejuvenated in God, we must cast off our pride.

11

Îe hertes hauen anoder kinde · ðat us og alle: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after "*Natura ij*" forward · "

12

***Significacio ij*:** This "heading" (*The Second Significance*) appears in the left-hand margin of the manuscript.

13

The ME redactor maintains Theobald's organization — *Natura, Significacio, Natura, Significacio* — to designate the first nature and significance of the hart and then the second nature and significance of the hart.

14

The hart has another characteristic: The second nature of the hart — crossing the river in a herd — does not appear in other versions of the *Physiologus*. Rather, it only appears in Theobald's version and in the *ME Physiologus* (Rowland 94). That is to say, this second nature is not part of the *Physiologus* tradition proper.

15

If that one in front happens to grow tired...All the others with him will come and help to drag him: “In Theobald's version, the one tired merely moves to the rear — that is to say, he is not rescued by a whole band of harts as he is in the *ME Physiologus*. There is a significant difference here between Theobald's version and that of the ME redactor. Wirtjes suggests that it is a mistake on the part of the ME redactor; however, it is also possible that the ME redactor wanted to emphasize the helpfulness of the harts — the harts not only help each other in need, they help those who are *helping* others in need. This is certainly a possibility.

16

Îe hertes costes we: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “ðog he an hundred togiddre ben ·”

17

wine · ligten him of his birdene · helpen him at his nede ∴ This line marks the beginning of the seventh page of the manuscript.

5.6 The Fox

Natura vulpis · 1

A wilde der is · þat is ful of fele wiles · fox is hire to name
for hire qweðsipe · husebondes hire haten · for hire harm
dedes · ðe coc & ðe te capun · ge fecched ofte in ðe tun · &
te gandre & te gos · bi ðe necke & bi ðe nos · haleð is to
hire hole · forði man hire hatieð · hatien & hulen · boðe
men & fules · listned nu a wunder · þat this der doð for hun-
ger · god o felde to a furg · & falled ðar inne · in eried
lond er in erð chine · for to bilirten fugeles · ne stered
ge nogt of ðe stede · a god stund deies · oc dared so ge
ded were · ne draged ge non onde · ðe rauen is swiðe redi ·
wened þat ge rotieð · & oðre fules hire fallen bi · for to
winnen fode · derflike wiðten dred · he wenen þat ge ded
beð · he wullen on ðis foxes fel · & ge it wel feleð · ligtlike
ge lepeð up · & letteð hem sone · get hem here billing ·
raðe wið illing · tetoggeð & tetired hem · mid hire teð sar-
pe · fret hire fille · & god ðan ðer ge wille ·

The Nature of the Fox

- A wild creature that is full of many wiles:
The Fox is named for her wickedness.
Householders hate her for her harmful acts:
She steals the cock and capon from the farm-yard,
265 And snatches the gander and the goose, by the neck and by the nose.
She drags them to her hole, and for that reason men hate her;
Both men and birds hate her and chase her away with shouting.²
Hear now about a wondrous method whereby this creature satisfies its hunger:
She goes to a furrow in a field and falls into it,
270 Either in ploughed land or in a crevice in the ground to deceive birds.
She does not stir from that place for a good many days,
But lies still and does not breathe as though she were dead.
The raven—who is always alert—believes that she is rotting,
And the other birds along with it come down to her to obtain food.
275 Without hesitation, without doubt, they think that she is dead.³
They desire the fox's flesh and she perceives it completely:
So she leaps up quickly and prevents them at once,
And rewards their pecking with injury,
And pulls and tears them to pieces with her sharp teeth;⁴
280 She eats her fill and then goes where she will.

Significacio · ⁵

Twifold forbisnes in ðis der · to frame we mugen finden
he · warspie & wisdom · wið deuel & wið ieul man · ðe
deuel derað dernelike · he lat he ne wile us nogt biswike ·
he lat he ne wile us don non loð · & bringeð us in a sinne ·
& ter he us sloð · he bit us don ure bukes wille · eten & drin-
ken wið unskil · & in ure skemting · he doð raðe a foxing ·
he billeð one ðe foxes fel · wo so telleð idel spel · & he ti- ⁶
reð on his ket · wo so him wið sending · & for his sinfule werk ·
Significacio · ledeð man to helle merk · ⁷

The Significance

Twofold are the allegorical interpretations of this creature,
And to benefit we must find them:
They are prudence and wisdom
Against the devil and evil man ⁸

285 The devil harms stealthily:
He pretends he will not deceive us,
He pretends that he will not do us any harm
And then he drives us to sin and there he slays us.
He bids us to do the will of our belly, ⁹

290 To eat and drink excessively,
And in our enjoyment
He does at once the fox's trick. ¹⁰
He who pecks on the fox's skin
Tells idle stories,

295 And he who tears into flesh
Feeds on sin;
May the devil reward such pecking
With shame and with disgrace,
And for his sinful behavior

300 May he lead man to dark hell.

ðe deuel is tus ðe fox ilik · ¹¹

mið iuele breides & wið swik · & men also ðe foxes name ·
arn wurði to hauen same · for wo so seieð oðer god · & ðen-
keð iuel on his mod · fox he is & fend iwis · ðe boc ne le-
geð nogt of ðis · so was Herodes fox & flerd · ðo Crist kam
into ðis middel erd · he seide he wulde him leuen on · & ðo-
gte he wulde him fordon ·

The Significance

The Devil is thus like the fox,
With his evil tricks and treachery,
And men, like the fox's name,
Are deserving of shame ¹²

305 For whoever says good to another
And thinks evil things in his mind
Is a fox and a fiend indeed —
The book does not speak falsely of this.
In the same way Herod was a fox and a deceiver:

310 When Christ came into this world
He said he would believe in him
And thought how he would kill him. ¹³

Commentary

1

Natura vulpis: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Hart section.

2

Both men and birds hate and chase her away with shouting: There is speculation over the correct translation of “hulen.” Hall translates “hulen” as “hardly possible” (176-96). Wilson and Dickinson interpret “hulen” as “revile” (58-61). However, Wirtjes argues that “hulen” is best translated as “chase away by shouting” (34). Such a translation is suggested in the Middle English Dictionary, and, even though this particular meaning of “hulen” appears in the year 1332 (much later than the supposed date of the *ME Physiologus*), it seems to fit the context beautifully .

3

Without hesitation, without doubt, they think that she is dead: Wirtjes suggests translating “derflike” not as “boldly, fearlessly, sternly, vehemently” (as definition I(a) in the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests), but as “without hesitation or delay” (as definition I(b) in the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests).

4

She goes to a furrow and falls into it...She pulls and tears them to pieces with her sharp teeth: The fox as the ultimate symbol of fraud, of deception and hypocrisy, is quite frequent in the Medieval time period. This particular image of the fox feigning death and ensnaring birds is, as Rowland notes, “depicted on a misericord at Chester, over the church doorway at Alne, Yorkshire, and elsewhere” (78). Also of note, while the characteristics of animals presented in the *Physiologus* are rarely based on observation, this description of the wily fox feigning death may very well be true. Kenneth Varty, in his work *Reynard the Fox: A Study in Medieval Art*, presents four stills from a Russian film made in 1961 in the Caucasus, which reveal a fox faking death in hopes of attracting birds and then snatching a crow (91-2). Wirtjes also notes this (34).

5

Significacio: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears at the end of the last line of the *Nature* of the Fox section.

6

he billed one ðe foxes fel · wo so telled idel spel · & he ti-: This line marks the beginning of the eighth page of the manuscript.

7

Significacio: This “heading” appears in the left-hand margin of the manuscript. It is also worth noting that the chapter on the Fox is the only chapter in the *ME Physiologus* that features a second *Significacio* heading.

8

Twofold are the allegorical interpretations of this creature...Against the devil and evil man: The allegorical interpretations of the fox are twofold: the fox as the Devil, and the fox as the evil, deceitful man. The ME redactor maintains the second heading of *Significacio* (which appears after line 300) in order to visually separate these two allegorical interpretations.

9

He bids us to do the will of our belly: This warning against gluttony does not appear in Theobald’s version, nor in any other version of the *Physiologus* (Wirtjes lxxxvi). It is the invention of the ME redactor. Furthermore, this is the second time that a particular sin has been singled out by the redactor; the first was pride (in the chapter on the Hart), and the second is gluttony (in the chapter on the Fox).

10

He does at once the fox's trick: The Devil, like the fox, pretends innocence. As Eden notes, “those who thought him dead have death inflicted on them by the Devil” (47). Such is the nature of fraud and deception.

11

ðe deuel is tus ðe fox ilik :: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “leded man to helle merk · “

12

And men, like the fox's name / Are deserving of shame: The ME redactor has eliminated Theobald's reference to "the men of these times": "Et cum fraude viri sunt vulpis nomine digni / Quales hoc omnes tempore sunt homines" (19-20). Instead of saying that "men of deceit, like all men of these times, are worthy of the name of the fox," (Eden translation) the ME redactor writes, "And men, like the fox's name, are worthy to experience shame." Wirtjes argues that the ME redactor's translation of Theobald's text is confusing and inaccurate and should be "And deceitful men are worthy of the name of the fox" (35).

13

In the same way Herod was a fox and a deceiver...And thought how he would kill him: Herod (referring to Herod Antipas) is compared to a fox by Christ in the Bible: "Go ye and tell that fox/ Behold I cast out devils" (Luke 13:32).

5.7 The Spider

Natura iranee · 1

seftes sop sure seppande · sene is on werlde · leiðe & lodlike ·
ðus we it leuen · manikines ðing · alle manne to wissing ·
ðe spinnere on hire web swiðe ge weved · fested atte hus rof hire
fo ðredes · o rof er on ouese · so hire is on elde · werped ðus
hire web · & wened on hire wise · ðanne ge it haueð al I-
digt · ðeden ge driued · hitt hire in hire hole · oc ai ge it
biholdeð · til ðat ðer felges faren · & fallen ðer inne wi-
ðeren in ðat web · & wilen ut wenden · ðanne renned ge
rapelike · for ge is ai redi · nimeð anon to ðe net · & nimeð
hem ðere · bitterlike ge hem bit · & here bane wurðed ·
dreped & drinkeð here blod · doð ge hire non oder god · bute
fret hire fille · & dareð siðen stille · *Significacio* ·
Îis wirm bitokened ðe man · ðat oder biswiked on stede
er on stalle · stille er lude · in mot er in market · er oni
oder wise · he him bit · ðan he him bale selleð ·

The Nature of the Spider

- Creatures created by our Creator are evident in the world —
Hideous and horrible —and we believe that
- 315** Many different kinds of creatures are for man's guidance.
The spider quickly weaves her web,
By fastening her threads at the roof of a house,
On a roof or on eaves, as if she were on a hill, ²
And thus casts her web and weaves it in her habit.
- 320** When she has it all ready, from that place she hastens,
And hides herself in her hole, but always watches it
Until flies come and become trapped in it,
Who struggle in that web and wish to get out.
Then she runs quickly, for she is always prepared:
- 325** She goes at once to the net and seizes them there.
Fiercely she bites them and here becomes a murderer,
She kills and drinks their blood, she does herself no other kindness, ³
Except eat her fill and then sit still.

The Significance

- This insect symbolizes the man who deceives another, ⁴
- 330** Anywhere, at any time,
In meeting or in market, or in any other way.
He bites him when he inflicts pain

& he drin-
ked his blod · wanne he him dreued · & ðo freteð him
al · ðan he him iuel werkeð ·

And drinks his blood when he vexes him
And devours him when he works evil upon him.

Commentary

1

Natura iranee: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Fox section

2

On a roof or on eaves...as if she were on a hill: As Wirtjes notes, “it is for her as if on a hill” is a literal translation of this line (36). Wirtjes, though, suggests translating this line as “as if she were on a hill,” meaning that “the spider moves about on the roof and the eaves as if she were on a hill” (36).

3

Fiercely she bites them and here becomes a murderer / She kills and drinks their blood, she does herself no other kindness: As Wirtjes notes, unlike Theobald’s version, the *ME Physiologus* does not focus on the fragility of the spider’s web but rather on the spider as a murderer — drinking the blood of her victims (36-7). At this point in the text, *the ME Physiologus* is a loose translation of Theobald’s version of the *Physiologus*. Also, the line “she does herself no other kindness” is slightly ambiguous. It seems, at least, to suggest that the spider does not need anything else to sustain herself except the blood and flesh of her victims. There seems to be a slight irony here in the word “kindness.”

4

This insect symbolizes the man who deceives another: Both Theobald’s version and the *ME Physiologus* allegorize the Spider as a deceitful man, but, as Wirtjes notes, Theobald seems to concentrate more on the fragility of the Spider web, which he connects to the “futility and short-lived nature of human evil.” The *ME Physiologus* contains neither a description of the web’s fragility, nor a moralization about the futility of human evil. It is also interesting to note that the Spider — a chapter on deception — follows right after the chapter on the Fox — the ultimate symbol of fraud and deception. This lends possible support to Lauchert’s theory: that perhaps the ME redactor intentionally transposed the chapters of the stag and fox so that the fox could appear right next to the spider — yet another chapter on deceit.

5.8 The Whale

Natura cetegrandie · ¹

Cethegrande is a fis · ðe moste ðat in water is · ðat tu
wuldes seien get · gef ðu it sogē wan it flet · ðat it ²
were a neilond · ðat sete one ðe se-sond · ðis fis ðat is vn-
ride · ðanne him hungred he gaped wide · Vt of
his ðrote it smit an onde · ðe swetteste ðing ðat is
o londe · ðerfore oðre fisses to him dragen · wan he it
felen he aren fagen · he cumen & houen in his muð ·
of his swike he arn uncuð · ðis cete ðanne hise chaeles lu-
ked, ðis fisses alle in suked · ðe smale he wile ðus biswiken ·
ðe grete maig he nogt bigripen · ðis fis wuned wið ðe se-grund ·
& liued ðer eure heil & sund · til it cumed ðe time · ðat storm
stired al ðe se · ðanne sumer & winter winnen · ne mai it wunen
ðer inne ·

The Nature of the Whale

335 The whale is a fish,
The largest in the water.
You would say, moreover,
If you saw it when it floated,
That it was an island
340 That sat on the bottom of the sea.
When this enormous fish
Is hungry, he opens his mouth wide.
Out of his throat rushes a breath,
The sweetest thing that is on the earth.³
345 Therefore other fish are drawn to him.
When they feel it, they are glad.
They come and linger in his mouth;
But of his treacherous intent they are unaware.
This whale then closes his jaws,
350 And the fish are all sucked in.
The small he will thus deceive;⁴
The big he may not seize.
This fish dwells on the bottom of the sea
And lives there all the time healthy and sound
355 Until the time comes
When the storm stirs all the sea,
When summer and winter contend:
He may not dwell therein,

So droui is te sees grund · ne mai he wunen ðer ðat ⁵
stund oc stired up & houed stille · wiles ðat weder is so ille ·
ðe sipes ðat arn on se fordriuen · loð hem is ded & lef to liuen ·
biloken hem & sen ðis fis · a neilond he wenen it is.
ðerof he aren swiðe fagen · & mid here migt ðarto he dragen · si-
pes on festen · & alle up gangen · of ston mid stel in ðe tun-
der · wel to brennen one ðis wunder · warmen hem wel
& heten & drinken · ðe fir he feled & doð hem sinken · for
sone he diued dun to grunde · he dreped hem alle wið-
uten wunde · ðis deuel is mikel wið wil & magt · so · *Significacio* · ⁶
wicches hauen in here craft · he doð men hungren & ha-
uen ðrist · & mani oðer sinful list · tolled men to him
wið his onde ·

So turbid is the bottom of the sea,
360 That he can not dwell there at that time
But must move up and hovers motionless
While the weather is bad.
The ships that are on the sea are tossed about by wind or waves,
Hateful to them is death, and life to live;⁷
365 They look around and see this fish:
And think it is an island.
Because of this they are very glad
And with all their might they move toward it
And the ships moor on it
370 And all go up to it.
From stone and steel in the tinder
A blazing fire they kindle on this marvel,
And warm themselves thoroughly and eat and drink.
Then he feels the fire and sinks them,
375 For at once he dives down to the bottom
And he drowns them all without wound.⁸

The Significance

This devil is great with deceit and power,
As witches are in their sorcery.
He makes men feel hunger and thirst
380 And many other sinful desires.
He entices men to him with his breath:

Wo so him foleged he finded sonde · þo 9
arn ðe little · in leue lage · ðe mikle ne maig he to him
dragen · ðe mikle · I mene ðe stedefast · in rigte leue · mid
fles & gast · wo so listned deules lore · on lengðe it sal him
rewen sore · wo so fested hope on him · he sal him folgen to helle
dim.

Whoever follows him, will find disgrace.
Those who are small, are weak in faith;
The large he is unable to draw to him —
385 By large, I mean the steadfast,
Those who are right in faith with flesh and spirit.
Whoever listens to the devil's lore,
In the end shall grieve bitterly:
Whoever puts trust in him,
390 Shall follow him to dark hell.

Commentary

1

Natura cetegrandie: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Spider section.

2

wuldes seien get · gef ðu it soge wan it flet · ðat it: This line marks the beginning of the ninth page of the manuscript.

3

The sweetest thing that is on the earth: In Theobald’s version, the sweetness of the whale’s breath is compared to flowers:

Unde velut florum se flatus reddit odorum (Line 7)

From which there pours a stream of odors sweet as flowers (Eden 57)

Here, in the *ME Physiologus*, however, the sweetness of the whale’s breath is simply described as the sweetest thing on earth. It is also worthwhile to note that the Panther in the *Physiologus* also emits sweet breath — the sweetest in all the land. However, the breath of the Panther is allegorized as the Word of God, whereas the breath of the whale is allegorized as the lore of the Devil. The Panther and the Whale, then, seem to form an opposition pair. As Diekstra notes, “In contrast to the breath of the panther, [the whale] symbolizes damnation” (145). This arrangement of opposites, this attention to symmetry, this inclusion of sympathies and antipathies, is quite frequent in the various versions of the *Physiologus*.

4

The small he will thus deceive: The ME redactor has eliminated the allusion to Jonah which appears in Theobald’s text:

Non sic, son sic jam sorbuit ille Jonam (Line 12)

not so easily did it once suck down the prophet Jonah (Eden 57)

In fact, the entire *ME Physiologus* omits any Biblical allusion or passage from scripture, which are frequent amongst the other versions of the *Physiologus*. In this sense, the *ME Physiologus* is extremely minimalist in comparison to the other versions of the *Physiologus*.

5

So droui is te sees grund · ne mai he wunen ðer ðat:: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “ðer inne ·”

6

Significacio ·: This “heading” appears in the right-hand margin of the manuscript.

7

Hateful to them is death, and life to live: This utter despair of the sailors — this hopelessness and dreariness of being cast away on the cold sea — is strangely reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry (e.g., “The Seafarer.”).

8

The whale is a fish... He drowns them all without wound” These lines (335-376) reverse the traditional order of the whale’s characteristics. Here, in the *ME Physiologus*, the redactor represents the whale as deceiving small fish before presenting him as deceiving the sailors at sea. As Wirtjes notes, *versiones* a- and b- of the prose Latin *Physiologus* present the Whale drowning the sailors first and eating the small fish second (37). The order is also reversed in the bestiary fragments found in the *Exeter Book*, in which the whale drowning the seafarers appears first, and the whale enticing small fish appears second. It is also interesting to note that the whale, like the fox, deceives its prey with pleasantries: the whale entices the small fish with its sweet breath and sailors with its island-like appearance, while the fox entices fowl by feigning death and offering himself up as a means of sustenance. It is interesting to note that in both chapters the means of enticement involves an appeal to sustenance — food, warmth, comfort.

9

Wo so him foleged he finded sonde · ðo: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “wið his onde · “

5.9 The Siren

In ðe senden selcudes manie · *Natura sirene* ----- ¹
ðe mereman is a meiden ilike · on brest & on bodi · oc
al ðus ge is bunden · fro ðe noule niðerward · ne is ge
no man like · oc fis to ful iwis mið finnes waxen · ðis
wunder wuned in wankel stede · ðer ðe water sinked ·
sipes ge sinked · & scaðe ðus werked · mirie ge singed
ðis mere · & haued manie stefnes · manie & sille · oc it
ben wel ille · sipmen here steringe forgeten for hire stefninge,
slumeren & slepen · & to late waken · ðe sipes sin-
ken mitte suk · ne cumen he nummor up · oc wise men
& warre · agen cunen chare · ofte arn atbrosten · mid
here best ouel · he hauen told of ðis mere · ðat tus
unimete · half man & half fis · sum ðing tokned bi
· *Significacio* · ðis · wele men hauen ðe tokning · of ðis forbisnede ðing²
· wiðuten weren sepes fel · wiðinnen arn he wulues al · he wulues al · he

The Nature of the Mermaid

In the sea there are many marvels.
The mermaid is like a maiden:
In breast and body she is thus joined:
From the navel downward she is not like a maid
395 But a fish very certainly with sprouted fins.³
This marvel dwells in an unstable place where the water subsides.
She sinks ships and causes suffering,
She sings sweetly —this siren—and has many voices,
Many and resonant, but they are very dangerous.
400 Sailors forget their steering because of her singing;⁴
They slumber and sleep and wake too late,
And the ships sink in a whirlpool and cannot surface anymore.
But wise and wary men and are able to return;
Often they escape with all the strength they have.⁵
405 They have said of this siren, that she is so grotesque,
Half maid and half fish:something is meant by this.

The Significance

Many men have the sign
Of this thing that is given as an example:
Outside they wear a sheep's skin;
410 Inside they are all wolves.

speken godcundhede · & wikke is here ded · here ded is al
vncuð · wið ðat spekeð here muð · twifold arn on mode ·
he sweren bi ðe rode · bi ðe sunne & bi ðe mone · & he ðe legen
sone · mid here sage & mid here song · he ðe swiken ðeri-
mong · ðin agte wið swiking · ði soule wið lesing ·

They speak piously
And their deeds are wicked. ⁶
Their behavior is different
From that which is spoken from their mouth.

415 Twofold are they in mind:
They swear by the Cross,
By the sun and by the moon,
And they soon deceive themselves.
Meanwhile with their words and with their song

420 They betray you:
Your possessions with deceit
The soul with lying. ⁷

Commentary

1

In ðe senden selcude manie · Natura sirene-----: This line marks the beginning of the tenth page in the manuscript.

2

· **Significacio** ∴ In the manuscript, this heading appears in the left-hand margin.

3

From the navel downward she is not like a maid / But a fish very certainly with sprouted fins: The Siren is the only fictitious beast that is catalogued in the *ME Physiologus*. This description of the siren differs dramatically from that of Theobald and other Latin versions of the *Physiologus*. In Theobald's version and in a vast majority of other versions of the *Physiologus*, the siren is not a mermaid (she is not half maid and half fish), but half maid and half bird, similar to the sirens of Classical antiquity. Faral argues that this image of the Siren (half-maid, half-fish) originated from the *Liber monstrorum* (written in the late seventh or early eighth century) (433 - 506) (also noted by McCulloch 167). According to Hassig, the half-fish, half-maid siren was very common in medieval imagery (105). However, as Rowland notes, the respective features of the siren and the mermaid tended to blur and became confused in Medieval times: "They might be all woman, part fish, part fowl, or even part horse" (140). Nevertheless, the ME redactor appears to be more familiar with the *Liber monstrorum* tradition. Finally, the description of the mermaid in Bartholomew Anglicus' *De proprietatibus* is strikingly similar to that which is presented in the *ME Physiologus*: ""wonderly shapen as a maid from the navel upward and a fish from the navel downward" (Steele Translation 167)

4

Sweetly she sings—this siren—and has many voices... Sailors forget their steering because of her singing: This is reminiscent of the *Odyssey*, in which Ulysses has to tie himself to the mast of his ship and stop up the ears of his sailors with wax in order to defend against the powerful, seductive, but all too mortal, voice of the Sirens. The song of the Sirens lures sailors away from their steering to destruction, to a watery death, as it does in this text as well: "Sailors forget their steering because of her singing."

5

Often they escape with all the strength they have: Wirtjes suggests that this phrase is an idiom meaning “by the skin of their teeth” (40).

6

They speak piously / And wicked are their deeds: In Theobald’s text, the Siren and the Onocentaur (a creature who is half ass, half man) share the same allegory: be wary of saying one thing and doing another. However, the ME redactor has completely eliminated the chapter on the Onocentaur and simply used this allegory for the Siren. Also, it is worth noting here that hybrid animals frequently allegorized “two-faceness,” “deception,” and “fraud” in the Medieval period (the most notable, perhaps, is Geryon from Dante’s *Inferno*). Here the half-fish, half-maid, hybrid creature allegorizes a *twofold* mind: the words may be pretty, but the actions are deceptive.

7

Your possessions with deceit / The soul with lying: This line does not appear in Theobald’s text. Instead, Theobald explains how those who talk about virtue and indulge their vices will find the “stage” attractive:

Ut pote sunt multi, qui de virtute locuti
Clunibus indulgent: his o quam pulpita fulgent

In just the same way there are many who talk about virtue and indulge their vices; how dazzlingly attractive these men find the stage. (Eden 63)

It is unclear whether Theobald is referring to the platform for a preacher or to an acting, performing stage. Nevertheless, Theobald seems to associate the actor on the stage, the theatre, or even the clergy (which are all “performances” in a manner of speaking) with hypocrisy itself.

5.10 The Elephant

Natura · ¹

Elpes arn in Inde riche · on nodi borlic berges · *elephantis* ·
iliche · he togaddre gon o wolde · so sep ðat cumen ut
of folde · & behinden he hem sampnen ðanne he su-
len oðre strenen · oc he arn so kolde of kinde · ðat no
golsipe is hem minde · til he noten of a gres · ðe name
is mandragores · siðen he bigeten on · & two ger he
ðermide gon · ðog he ðre hundred ger · on werlde more wuneden her ·
bigeten he neuermore non · so cold is hem siðen blod & ²
bon · ðanne ge sal here kindles beren · in water ge sal stan-
in water to mid-side · ðat wanne hire harde tide · ðat
ge ne falle niðer nogt · ðat is most in hire ðogt ·

The Nature of the Elephant

Elephants are abundant in India,
And are big in body like mountains.
425 They wander together over the world,
Like sheep that come out of an enclosure,
And come together in the rear ³
When they beget another.
But they are so cold by nature
430 That no lechery is in their minds
Until they eat from a plant,
By the name of mandrake. ⁴
Then they beget one
And for two years they carry it.
435 Even if for three hundred years
They dwelled here in this world,
They do not beget ever again—⁵
So cold is their blood and bone.
When she shall give birth to her young one
440 She will stand in water—
In water to the middle of her side—
So that when her hard time happens, ⁶
She will not fall down. ⁷
That is foremost in her mind,

for he ⁸

ne hauen no lið · ðat he mугen risen wið · hu he rested
him ðis der · ðanne he walked wide · herkne wu it telled
her · for he is al unride · a tre he seked to ful igewis · ðat is
strong & stedefast is · & lened him trostlike ðerbi · ðanne
he is of walke weri · ðe hunte haueð biholden ðis · ðe him
willen swiken · wor his beste wune is · to don hise willen ·
saged ðis tre & underset · o ðe wise ðat he mai bet · &
hiled it wel ðat he it nes war · ðanne he madeð ðer to
char · him seluen sit olon bihalt · weð er his gin him out
biwalt · ðanne cumeð ðis elp unride · & lened him up
on his side · sleped bi ðe tre in ðe sadue · & fallen boden
so togaddre · gef ðer is no man ðanne he falled · he re-
med & helpe called ·

445 For they do not have any joints
That they might rise themselves up with.⁹
As to how this creature rests himself
After walking a great distance,
Listen to what is said here:

450 Because he is always unwieldy,
A tree he seeks—to full certainty—
That is both strong and firmly rooted
And leans himself confidently against it
When he is weary from walking.

455 The hunter has observed this,
Who will trap him
Wherever the best opportunity arises
To do his will.
He saws through this tree and props it up

460 In a way that might be better
And conceals it well, so that the elephant is not aware of it
When he goes to that place.
Then the hunter sits himself down and watches alone,
As to whether his trap succeeds in any respect.

465 Then comes the unwieldy elephant
And leans himself up on his side.
As he sleeps by the tree in the shade
They both collapse together.
If there is no man, when he falls,

470 He roars and calls for help.

remed̄ reufulike on his wise · hoped̄ ¹⁰

he sal durg helpe risen · ðanne cume er on gangande ·
hoped̄ he sal him don up standen · fiked̄ & foned̄ al his
migt · ne mai he it forðen al his wigt · ne canne ðan no
oðer · oc remed̄ mid his broðer · manie & mikle cume
ðer sacande · wenen him on stalle maken · oc for ðe
helpe of hem alle · ne mai he cumen so on stalle · ðan-
ne remen he alle a rem · so hornes blast · oðre belles
drem · for here mikle reming · rennande cumed̄ a gung-
ling · raðe to him luted̄ · his snute him under puted̄ · &
mitte helpe of hem alle · ðis elp he reisen on stalle · & tus
atbrested̄ ðis hundes breid · o ðe wise ðat Ic haue gu seid · ¹¹

Îus fel Adam durg a tre · vre firste fader · *Significacio* ·
ðat fele we ·

He cries out pitifully in his way,
Hoping he shall rise through help.
Then there comes one walking,
And the elephant hopes that he will help him stand up.
475 He struggles and tries with all his might;
He cannot achieve it,
Nor can the other,
But he cries out with his brother.
Many and great come walking there,
480 And expect to put him back on his feet,
But in spite of the help from them all
He is not able to get back on his feet.
Then they all utter a cry
Like a horn's blast or a bell's sound.
485 Then, because of their great roaring ,
A young one comes running:
At once he bends down to him,
And puts his snout under him
And with the help of them all,
490 They put this elephant back on his feet,
And thus he escapes this hunter's trap
In the way that I have just said.

The Significance

Thus Adam fell by means of a tree—
Our first father, from whom we fell. ¹²

Moyses wulde him reisen · migte it no wigt ¹³
forðen · after him prophetes alle · migte here non him
maken on stalle · on stalle I seie · er he er stod · to ha-
uene heuenriche god · he suggeden & sorgeden · & weren
in ðogt · wu he migten him helpen ogt · ðo remeden he
alle ore steuene · alle hege up to ðe heuene · for he-
re care & here calling · hem cam to Crist heuen king ·
he ðe is ai in heune mikel · wurð her man & tus was
litel · ðrowing ðolede in ure manhede · & tus Adam he un-
dergedede · reisede him up & al mankin · ðat was fallen to
helle dim ·

495 Moses wished to raise him,
But it was not achieved,
And after him all the prophets
Could not put him back on his feet—
On his feet, I say, where he stood before,
500 To have the reward of the Kingdom of Heaven.
They sighed and grieved and were anxious
As to how they might help him at all.
Then they all cried out in one voice,
All loudly up to the heavens.
505 Because of their distress and their cries,
Christ, the King of Heaven, came to them.
He, who is forever great in heaven,
Became a man and thus was small:
He suffered tribulation in our human form
510 And thus he died for Adam,
And raised himself up and all of mankind, ¹⁴
Who had fallen into dark hell.

Commentary

1

Natura ∙: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Mermaid section. The second part of the heading “*elephantis*” appears on the line just below “*Natura*” and after “Elpes arn in Inde riche ∙ on nodi borlic berges ∙ “

2

bigeten he neuermore non ∙ so cold is hem siðen blod &: This line marks the beginning of the eleventh page in the manuscript.

3

And come together in the rear: This is a curious phrase. In Theobald’s text, the elephants mate in “seclusion;” however, here, the ME redactor has translated the Latin “aversi” in its most literal sense as “behinden” or “from behind.” However, at the same time, the ME redactor may not have made a mistake. As Houwen notes, it was believed in the Middle Ages that elephants copulated back to back. In fact, “the belief was widespread and formed one of the standard elements in the bestiary description of the elephant” (487). Perhaps the ME redactor was familiar with this widely held belief concerning the elephant and altered the text accordingly.

4

Until they eat from a plant / Called mandrake: This connection between the elephant and the mandrake root is not present in Theobald’s text, nor is it found in Pliny, Solinus, Isidore, or Neckham (Wirtjes lxxix). This seems to be an innovation on the part of the ME redactor. According to Rowland, however, mandrake, or the mandragora tree, is “renowned for its aphrodisiacal properties,” which would certainly explain why “no lechery is in their minds / Until they eat from a plant / Called mandrake” (72).

5

They do not beget ever again: It was believed that the elephant only mated once in its entire life. Considering that the elephant was renowned for its chastity, it is interesting that bestiaries were consumed and intrigued by the elephant’s supposed retro-sexual practices (487).

6

So that when her hard time happens: As Wirtjes notes, “harde” refers to the birth pangs of the mother elephant. However, Wirtjes suggests translating this word as “difficult time,” or “hard time” (41).

7

In water she will stand... She will not fall down: In the *ME Physiologus*, as well as in Theobald’s text, it would appear that the mother elephant wades into the water when she is about to give birth so that she will not fall down. That is to say, it seems as though the water is responsible for keeping the mother elephant upright and afloat. However, as Wirtjes notes, the *Dicti Chrysostomi* and various versions of the prose Latin *Physiologus* offer a different explanation (41). These texts explain that if the mother elephant were out of water, the elephant’s enemy, the dragon or serpent, would devour its young. Theobald and the ME redactor seem to have left this explanation out of their respective versions entirely, however.

8

for he: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “ge ne falle niðer nogt · ðat is most in hire ðogt ·”

9

For they do not have any joints / That they might rise themselves up with: Aristotle refutes the notion that elephants have jointless legs in his *Historia animalium* (ii. 498a).

10

remed refulike on his wise · hoped: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “med & helpe calleð ·”

11

atbrested ðis huntis breid · o ðe wise ðat Ic haue gu seid ·: This line marks the beginning of the twelfth page of the manuscript.

12

Thus fell Adam through a tree / From our first father, so that we suffer: Just as the elephant fell when he rested against the tree, Adam fell when he ate from the tree of Knowledge. The hunter figure then, who assembles the trap for the elephant, can be seen as an allegory for the serpent in the garden of Eden.

13

Moyses wulde him reisen · migte it no wigt: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “ðat fele we · “

14

Because of their distress and their cries...And raised himself up and all of mankind: Just as the cries of the elephants summoned the baby elephant, the prayers of the prophets summoned Christ. The baby elephant places the fallen elephant back upon his feet just as Christ offers us salvation from the Fall. However, the baby elephant has widely different interpretations (e.g., in his work *De naturis rerum libro duo* Neckham regards the baby elephant as the sinner pursued by the Devil) (222-226).

5.11 The Turtle Dove

Natura turturis · ¹

in boke in ðe turtres lif · writen o rime wu laglike · ge
holdeð luue al hire lif time · gef ge ones make haueð ·
fro him ne wile ge siden · muneð wimmen hire life · Ic
it wile gu reden · bi hire make g sit o nigt · o dei ge
god & fleged · wo so seit he sundren ovt · I seie ðat he
leged · oc if hire make were ded & ge widue wore · ðanne
fleged ge one & fareð · non oder wile g more · buten o-
ne god · & one sit · & hire olde luue abit · In herte haueð him
nigt & dai · so he were o liue ai · *Significacio* ·
List ilk lefful man her to · & herof ofte reche · vre sowle
atte kirke dure · ches hire Crist to meche · he is ure soule
spuse luue we him wið migte · & wende we neure fro him
ward · be dai ne be nigte · ðog he be fro ure sigte faren
be we him alle trewe · non oder louerd ne leue we · ne non
luue newe · leue we ðat he liued ai upon heuen riche · & ²
ðeden he sal cumen eft · & ben us alle briche · for to demen
alle men · oc nout o geueliche · hise lode men sulen to
helle faren · hise leue o his riche ·

The Nature of the Turtle Dove

- In books the life of the turtle dove is written in rhymed verse,
How she is faithful in love her entire life:
- 515** Once she has a mate, from him she will not part —
Admonish, women, her life, I advise you! ³
At night she sits by her mate, at day she flies;
Whoever says that they part, I say that he is lying.
But if her mate dies and she is a widow,
- 520** Then she flies alone and wanders—no other will she take again.
So alone she goes and alone she sits and waits for her old loved one:
She has him in her heart night and day, as though he were alive forever. ⁴

The Significance

- Listen to this, every pious man, and take heed:
Our soul at the church-door chooses Christ as its mate.
- 525** He is our soul spouse, so let us love him fervently
And never go away from him by day nor by night.
Although he wanders from our sight, let us be true to him:
Believe in no other lord, nor a new loved one.
Believe that he lives forever on high in the kingdom of heaven ⁵
- 530** And from that place he shall come again and be helpful to us all,
In order to judge all men, but not equally:
His foes shall go to hell, his beloved to his kingdom. ⁶

Commentary

1

Natura turturis: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Elephant section.

2

luue newe · leue we ðat he liued ai upon heuen riche · &: This line marks the beginning of the thirteenth page of the manuscript.

3

Admonish, women, her life, I advise you!: This direct address to women is not in Theobald’s text; this seems to be an innovation on the part of the ME redactor.

4

Once she has a mate, from him she will not part...She has him in her heart night and day, as though he were alive forever: Aristotle refers to the turtle-dove’s single mate in *Historia animalium* (viii.600a 20). McCulloch notes this as well (178). It is also worthwhile to note that the turtle-dove was the ultimate symbol of chastity, monogamy, and fidelity in the Medieval period (McCulloch 178). The monogamy of the turtle-dove is strongly echoed in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*:

‘Nay, God forbede a lovere shulde change!’
The turtle said, and wex for shame al red,
‘Though that his lady evermore be straunge,
Yit lat hym serve hire ever, til he be ded.
Forsothe, I preyse nat the goeses red;
‘For though she dyede, I wolde non other make;
I wol ben hire, til that the deth me take.’ (582-588)

However, it is not certain whether Chaucer is drawing from the *ME Physiologus* in the *Parliament of Fowls*. It is not even clear whether Chaucer was aware of or familiar with the *ME Physiologus*. It is clear, however, that he was aware at least of the *Physiologus* tradition, as his narrator in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” makes a passing reference to a certain *Physiologus*:

Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
Soong murier than the mermayde in the see
(For Physiologus seith sikerly
How that they syngen wel and myrily). (3269 - 3272)

Based on this single reference of the *Physiologus* in “The Nun's Priest's Tale,” it is certainly probable that Chaucer was also drawing on the bestiary/*Physiologus* tradition in *The Parliament of Fowls*. However, whether he is drawing directly from the *ME Physiologus* is not certain — although it is certainly possible.

5

Our soul at the church-door chooses Christ as its mate... Believe that he lives forever on high in the kingdom of heaven: Just as the turtle-dove chooses a single mate, we too must choose Christ as our mate and love Him always, even in death. Versions b- and a- of the *Physiologus* include a citation from Psalms 27:14 to emphasize the fidelity and faith we should have to Christ, “Be strong and let your heart take courage, and yea, wait for the Lord!”, as well as Matthew 10:22, “He who endures to the end will be saved.”

6

“His foes shall go to hell, his beloved to his kingdom”: Literally, this translates as “Men hateful to him shall to hell go, those pleasing to him to his kingdom.” However, I have taken the liberty of translating “men hateful to him” as “foes” and “those pleasing to him” as “his beloved,” as this reads less awkwardly while still conveying the sense of the poem. It is also of note that this reference to heaven and hell is not mentioned in Theobald’s text, but is an addition of the ME redactor.

5.12 The Panther

Natura pantere · 1

panter is an wilde der · is non fairere on werlde her · he is
blac so bro of qual · mið wite spottes sapan al · wit
& trendled als a wel · & itt bicumed him swiðe wel · wor so he
wuned ðis panter · he feded him al mid oder der · of ðo ðe
he wile he nimed ðe cul · & fet him wel til he is ful · in his
hole siðen stille · ðre dages he slepen wille · ðan after ðe
ðridde dai · he rised & remed lude so he mai · ut of his
ðrote cumed a smel · mið his rem forð oueral · ðat ouer
cumed haliweie · wið swetnesse · ic ge seie · & al ðat eure
smelled swete · be it drie be it wete · for ðe swetnesse off
his onde · wor so he walkeð o londe · wor so he walkeð er
wor so he wuned · ilk der ðe him hereð to him cu-
med ·

The Panther

The panther is a wild creature;
There is none more beautiful in this world.

535 He is as black as the back of a whale
And created with white spots—
White and rounded like a wheel—²
And it suits him very well.
Wherever he dwells this panther

540 Feeds on all the other creatures.
From those he will choose
And feed well until he is satisfied.
In his hole without moving,
He will then sleep for three days,

545 And after the third day
He rises and roars as loud as he can.
When he cries forth in every direction,
A smell emerges from his throat³
That surpasses sweet healing liquid—

550 A fragrance, I say to you,
And all that ever smelled sweet,
Be it dry or be it wet.
Because of the sweetness of his breath,
Wherever he walks on land,

555 Wherever he journeys or wherever he dwells,
Each creature who hears him comes to him

& folegen him up one ðe wold · for ðe swetnesse ðe ⁴
ic gu haue told · ðe dragunes one ne stiren nogt · wiles
ðe panter remedð ogt · oc daren stille in here pit · als so
he weren of ded offrigt · *Significacio*

Crist is tokned ðurg ðis der · wos kinde we hauen told
gu her · for he is faier ouer alle men · so euen sterre · ouer
erðe ben · ful wel he taunede his luue to man · wan he ðurg holi
spel him wan · & longe he lai her in an hole · wel him ðat he
it wulde ðolen · ðre daies slep he al onon · ðanne he ded
was in blod & bon · vp he ros & remede in wis · of helle pine
of heuen blis · & steg to heuene vuenest · ðer wuned wið
fader & holi gast · amonges men a swete smel · ⁵

And follows him on the earth ⁶
Because of the sweetness that I have described to you.
Only the dragons do not stir
560 While the panther cries out
But lie still in their pit
As if they were frightened to death. ⁷

The Significance

Christ is symbolized by this creature—
Whose nature we have described to you here—
565 For he is fair above all men
Like the evening-star over the dirt of the earth.
Full well he showed his love to man
When through the Gospel Christ redeemed him
And for a long time lay there in the hole —
570 May good fortune befall him who would suffer it.
For three days he slept continuously
When he was dead in blood and bone.
Then up he rose and cried out
Of hell's torment, of heaven's bliss
575 And ascended to heaven's highest,
Where he dwelled with the Father and the Holy Ghost.
A sweet smell among men
He let from his Gospel, ⁸

he let her ⁹

of his holi spel · wor ðurg we mugen folgen him · into his
godcundnesse fin · & ðat wirm ure wiðer wine · wor so of
godes word is dine · ne dar he stiren · ne no man deren · ðer
wile he lage & luue beren ·

Through which we may follow him
580 Into his perfect divine nature.
And wherever God's word is sound,
That serpent— our enemy—¹⁰
Dares not stir, nor harm any man,
While his law and love are obeyed and cherished.¹¹

Commentary

1

Natura pantere: In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Turtle Dove section.

2

White and rounded like a wheel: This description of the panther’s white spots as “rounded like wheels” is entirely the ME redactor’s, as it does not appear in Theobald’s text.

3

When he cries forth in every direction / A smell emerges from his throat: I have reversed the order of these lines for the sake of clarity. Originally, the lines appear in the opposite order: “Out of his throat emerges a smell / When he cries forth in every direction.”

4

& folegen him up one ðe wold · for ðe swetnesse ðe: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after “með · “

5

fader & holi gast · amonges men a swete smel · This line marks the beginning of the last page of the manuscript.

6

Out of his throat emerges a smell... And follows him on the earth: The sweet odor of the panther is noted by Aristotle in his *Historia animalium* (ix 612a 13). According to Rowland, “in illustrations in bestiaries, in carvings, and sculptures, the panther may be seen breathing upon smiling, transfixed animals” (131). However, according to Aristotle, the panther uses his sweet odor to lure and catch animals (ix 612a 13) (this is also noted by McCulloch 149). This seems very reminiscent of the whale whose sweet breath entices small fish. It is interesting to note that while both the panther and the whale exude a sweet smell with which they attract “food” (small creatures), the whale is rendered as a fraudulent beast, while the panther becomes a Christ figure. The sweet smell which resonates from the

Whale's mouth is compared to the enticing breath of sin, of the Devil. However, the sweet smell that resonates from the Panther's breath is compared to the enticing sweetness of Christ's love, Word, and Gospel.

7

But they lie still in their pit / As if they were frightened of death: This is also an addition of the ME redactor — the description of the dragon cowering, of being frightened to death in its pit, is not present in Theobald's text. However, it is common in animal lore that the panther terrifies the serpent. For instance, Isidore refers to the panther as a friend of "all animals" except the dragon or the serpent (xii.2.8, 9) (this is also noted by McCulloch 149). As Rowland notes, "The panther symbolized Christ overcoming the Devil (in the form of a Dragon) and drawing men unto him" (131). It is also interesting to note that the serpent is the common enemy throughout the *ME Physiologus* — at least to the Hart and the Panther. The hart devours the serpent, while the Panther sends it cowering to its cave. These two chapters seem to provide a kind of symmetry to the text.

8

A sweet smell among men / He let from his Gospel: The panther's sweet breath is Christ's voice calling out to us after his resurrection. Interestingly, this allegory of the panther's breath as the Gospel, as the word of Christ, is not present in Theobald's text.

9

he let her: In the manuscript, this appears at the end of the line, after "fader & holi gast · amonges men a swete smel ·"

10

And wherever God's word is sound / That serpent—our enemy—: I have reversed the order of these two lines for the sake of clarity. Originally, they appear in the opposite order.

11

Wherever God's word is sound...While his law and love are obeyed and cherished: As Wirtjes notes, this "emphasis on obeying God's precepts in order to defend ourselves against the Devil" is not present in Theobald's text (xc).

5.13 The Dove

*Natura columbe & significacio*¹

ðe culuer haueð costes gode · alle wes ogen to hauen in
mode · seuene costes in hire kinde · alle it ogen to ben
us minde · ge ne haueð in hire non galle · simple & softe
be we alle · ge ne liueð nogt bi lagt · ic robbinge do we
of hac · ðe wirm ge leteg & liueð bi ðe sed · of cristes lore
we haue ned · wið oðre briddes ge doð as moder · so og ur
ilk to don wið oðer · woning & groning is lic hire song ·
bimene we us · we hauen don wrong · in water ge is wis ·
of heukes come · & we in boke wið deules nome · in
hole of ston ge madeð hire nest · in cristes milce ure ho-
pe is best.

The Nature and Significance of the Dove

- 585** The dove has good habits:
They should always be in mind.
There are seven habits in her nature,²
And all of them ought to be in our thoughts.
She has no malice in her—
- 590** Honest and gentle we all should be.³
She does not live by snatching –
Let us abandon robbing without hesitation.
The worm she leaves and lives on seed –
We have need of Christ's teaching.
- 595** To other birds she acts like a mother –
So ought everyone do with others.
Her song is like lamentation and wailing –⁴
Let us lament: we have sinned.
In the water she is aware of the hawk's approach –
- 600** And we in the book of the devil's seizing.⁵
In the hole of a stone she makes her nest –
In Christ's forgiveness our hope is greatest.
-

Commentary

1

Natura columbe & significacio. In the manuscript, this “heading” appears in the body of the text, at the end of the last line of the *Significance* of the Panther section. It is also important to note that Theobald’s version ends not with the dove, but with a formal conclusion:

Carmine finito sit laus et gloria Christo,
Cui, si non alii, placeant hec metra Tebaldi

Now that the poem is finished, praise and glory be to Christ: may these metres of Theobaldus please him if no one else. (Curley translation)

The *ME Physiologus* does not possess any conclusion; instead, it includes a chapter on the dove. Wirtjes notes that the chapter on the dove was, in part, inspired by Alexander Neckham’s *De naturis rerum* (xc). In Neckham’s piece, each characteristic or description of the dove is followed immediately by its corresponding allegory. This pattern is also adopted by the ME redactor. The fact that the ME poet concludes the *Physiologus* with the dove — the bird of promise and hope, as it appears in the Biblical Flood myth — is significant, as well. Perhaps the ME poet is strategically leaving us with a sense of hope, redemption, and salvation. This would certainly be confirmed by the last line of the *ME Physiologus*: “In Christ’s forgiveness our hope is greatest.”

2

There are seven habits in her nature: While the *ME Physiologus* lists seven habits of the dove, Neckham (the supposed source for the chapter on the dove) lists eight, but (as Wirtjes notes) not all the characteristics listed in the *ME Physiologus* are included in Neckham’s work (xci). However, *six* of the dove’s characteristics also appear in chapter nine of the *Aviarium*: its song is a lamentation, it lacks gall or malice, it does not live by snatching or stealing, it feeds on seed, it nests in the holes of rocks, and it floats on streams in order to see the reflection of the hawk. In the majority of French and Latin bestiaries and versions of the *Physiologus*, the dove is discussed very differently: most manuscripts describe it in terms of its various colors and their correspondence to the diverse “manners of speaking through the laws and prophets” (McCulloch 111).

3

Honest and gentle we all should be: The dove is traditionally associated with gentleness: “Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

4

Her song is like lamentation and wailing: Wirtjes suggests translating this line as “her singing is like wailing and lamentation” (45).

5

In the water she is aware of the hawk’s approach / And we in the book of the devil’s seizing”: The dove sits upon the water and uses its surface as a mirror “in which she can see the shadow of the approaching hawk” (Wirtjes 46). Just as the dove uses the surface of the water to see the hawk, we should use the Bible “as a mirror to defend ourselves against the devil.”

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