

**The Representation of Animals and the
Natural World in Late-Medieval
Hagiography and Romance**

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes as its subject the representation of animals and the natural world in two key genres of medieval literature: hagiography and romance. Focusing on the early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, the romances *Sir Gowther*, *Octavian*, and *Sir Orfeo*, the Middle English Alexander Romances, and the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo*, it examines the diverse ways in which animals are portrayed in these texts, and the range of mimetic, symbolic, and representative functions that they fulfil. Rather than endorsing the view that medieval culture was characterised by a unified and homogenous attitude towards nature and the natural, the thesis draws out the diversity of opinion and outlook evident in the imaginative literature of the period, and demonstrates in detail the crucial role of genre in determining the representative strategies of individual texts.

Contents

Thesis Abstract	ii
List of Illustrations	iv
Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgements	vi
 Foreword	 1
 Introduction	 10
 1. Return to Paradise: Animals in the Early <i>Lives</i> of St. Francis of Assisi	 28
 2. Knights and the Brute Creation: Nobility and Sanctity in <i>Sir Gowther</i> , <i>Octavian</i> , and <i>Sir Orfeo</i>	 67
 3. Nature and Supernature: The Middle English Romances of Alexander the Great	 128
 Conclusion: Representing Nature in Medieval Literature	 175
 Appendix: A Note on the Early <i>Lives</i> of St. Francis of Assisi	 180
 Bibliography	 236

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Colantonio, *Saint Jerome and the Lion*, c. 1450, Naples, National Museum of Capodimonte, between pages 14 and 15.

Figure 2. Sassetta, *The Stigmatisation of Saint Francis*, 1444, London, National Gallery of Art, between pages 202 and 203.

Abbreviations

AAS - Acta Apostolicae Sedis

ANTS - Anglo-Norman Text Society

AUMLA - Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association

EETS O S - Early English Text Society, Original Series

EETS E S - Early English Text Society, Extra Series

EETS S S - Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series

MS - Manuscript

OED - The Oxford English Dictionary

FS - Franziskanische Studien

JEGP - Journal of English and Germanic Philology

JHS - Journal of Hellenic Studies

PL - Jacques Paul Migne, ed. Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus, 221 Vols (Paris, 1844 -1864)

PMLA - Publications of the Modern Language Association of America

STS - Scottish Text Society

All biblical quotations are taken from the Authorised King James Version of the Bible

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Foreword

As public awareness has grown during the last couple of decades of the increasingly adverse effect that human activity is having on the natural world, whether in the form of deforestation, global-warming, nuclear radiation, or air, water, and soil pollution, a new academic discipline, known as environmental history, has emerged that takes as its field of enquiry the complex and ever-changing relationship between human civilization and the world of nature.¹ In attempting to chart both the impact that human societies have had on the natural world, and the effects of such change on the subsequent course of human development, environmental historians have adopted a wide range of perspectives, and applied methods and insights from subjects as diverse as biology, archaeology, and geography.² However, while environmental history concerns itself with the many different ways in which human societies have physically affected, and in turn been affected by, the natural world, there is an alternative, considerably older tradition of

¹ In his useful overview of the emergence and development of environmental history, Donald Worster has noted that: 'The idea of environmental history first appeared in the 1970s, as conferences on the global predicament were taking place and popular environmentalist movements were gathering momentum in several countries.' See Donald Worster, 'Doing Environmental History', in Donald Worster ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 290-291.

² For instance, see I. G. Simmons's prefatory comments in his *Environmental History: A Concise Introduction* (Oxford, 1993), pp. xiii-xvi.

historical scholarship that explores not the reality of humanity's relationship with nature, but the history of men and women's perceptions of that relationship.

Two of the most influential contributions to this history of humanity's changing attitudes towards the non-human world have been Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea*, and Clarence J. Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*.³ Focusing on the Western intellectual tradition from classical antiquity to the enlightenment, both Lovejoy and Glacken examined how nature has been represented and understood in the specialist writings of philosophers, theologians, astrologers, geographers, and scientists, and how these ideas were in turn assimilated into the wider culture.

More recently, and with more relevance to my own work, Keith Thomas's highly-acclaimed study, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500 - 1800*, has further developed and refined many of the themes and issues explored by Lovejoy and Glacken.⁴ Unlike his two predecessors, Thomas concentrated on a single country and historical era, England during the early modern period, and by drawing on a broad range of literary and documentary sources, he investigated the different, sometimes contradictory ways in which men and women in all strata of society conceived of, and responded to, the natural world. As with much original historical research, Thomas's study raises many questions as well as offering a new way of

³ See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957), and Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1967).

⁴ See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500 - 1800* (London, 1983).

looking at the world, and by briefly considering some of the different arguments that it propounds, it is possible not only to demonstrate the value and usefulness of this type of social and cultural history, but also to suggest certain areas in which it is limited, and in which the present thesis will be able to contribute usefully to the debate.

Thomas's point of departure in *Man and the Natural World* is the observation that the compassionate and sympathetic attitude towards both animals and nature that has become so prevalent in England at the end of the twentieth century - an attitude that is reflected in the popularity of such organisations as Friends of the Earth, the National Trust, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, and the R.S.P.C.A. - would have been incomprehensible to the late-medieval and early modern inhabitants of the country, who believed that the intensive management of the natural world, along with the wholesale exploitation of its resources, was a sacred duty that had been enjoined on human civilization by God Himself. Thomas therefore set himself the task of drawing out the complex network of beliefs and assumptions about animals and the natural environment that were held by the people of England during the late-medieval and early modern periods, while also offering an explanation, or series of explanations, for the profound shift in human sensibilities that subsequently occurred. As Thomas observed:

it was between 1500 and 1800 that there occurred a whole cluster of changes in the way in which men and women, at all social levels, perceived and classified the natural world around them. In the process some long-established dogmas about man's place in nature were discarded. New sensibilities arose towards animals, plants and landscape. The relationship of man to other species was redefined; and his right to exploit those species for his own advantage was sharply challenged. It was these centuries which generated both an intense interest in the natural world and those doubts and anxieties about man's relationship to it which we have inherited in magnified form. ...But the aim of this book is not just to explain the present; it also attempts to reconstruct an earlier mental world in its own right. It seeks to expose the assumptions, some barely articulated, which underlay the perceptions, reasonings and feelings of inhabitants of early modern England towards the animals, birds, vegetation and

physical landscape amongst which they spent their lives, often in conditions of proximity which are now difficult for us to appreciate.⁵

According to Thomas, the inhabitants of late-medieval and early modern England possessed both an unshakeable belief in humanity's ascendancy over the rest of creation, and the certain conviction that all of the works of nature had been made by God for the exclusive benefit of humankind. In part, the profoundly anthropocentric spirit of the time was rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and can be traced back to God's decree - recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis - that humanity was to have dominion over all living things (Genesis 1: 28). This anthropocentric belief was further reinforced by classical authors such as Aristotle, whose deeply utilitarian attitude towards nature, and quasi-scientific ideas about the uniqueness of human beings, exerted a powerful influence on Western thought from the twelfth century onwards. Thomas argued that such anthropocentric beliefs had a profound effect on human behaviour. For instance, wild animals such as the wolf were hunted to extinction, while domesticated beasts were ruthlessly exploited (compared to the predominantly vegetable-eating peoples of the East, Europeans were not only exceptionally carnivorous, but were also extremely dependent on draught animals for labour). In addition, forests were relentlessly cut down, wetlands drained, and other wild and uncultivated land was taken for agricultural use.

As well as extending the physical frontiers of the civilized world by cultivating vast areas of wilderness, the people of late-medieval England had a strong psychological need to maintain a strict philosophical separation between the human and animal worlds. According to Thomas, they were plagued by the fear that in giving way to such 'bestial'

⁵ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 15-16.

vices as gluttony and lust, the crucial distinction between the categories of 'human' and 'animal' might be eroded. To be labelled a 'beast' implied that one existed outside the realm of moral consideration, and throughout the late-medieval and early modern periods marginal figures such as outlaws, the mad, and the homeless, along with so called 'savages', the Irish, women, children, and the poor, were identified as bestial and animal-like, and were thus denied the basic rights that were accorded to fully-fledged human beings. Conversely, social reformers appealed to this same ideology of human uniqueness and ascendancy in the hope of improving the lot of the poor and afflicted. Slavery, tyranny, and oppression were all attacked on the grounds that they blurred the sacred and inviolable distinction between rational and irrational creatures, and so failed to treat humans with the dignity that they deserved.

Thomas argued that no single cause was responsible for the profound change in attitude, the 'revolution in perception',⁶ that overtook the people of England during the early modern period. Rather, he claimed that a complex range of overlapping and mutually reinforcing developments all contributed to the shift in human sensibilities that occurred. The gradual development of the natural sciences, and the consolidation and dissemination of the scientific method were important factors in overturning the anthropocentric view of nature, while the rapid growth in the population of the cities led to a nostalgic longing for the countryside, and the emergence of a romantic and sentimental attitude towards rural life. Meanwhile, developments in theology both reflected and contributed to the changing view of nature. Increasingly, religious discourse came to reject the idea that humanity was duty-bound to subjugate the natural world in favour of the alternative notion that God had appointed humans to act as the

⁶ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 70.

stewards of creation. According to this theory, men and women were to consider themselves not the absolute masters of the earth, but merely its trustees, burdened with the responsibility of preserving the natural world in all its diversity for the benefit of future generations. Thomas also noted that by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many religious writers had begun to question the doctrine that animals did not have souls, a fact that dramatically highlights the extent to which the anthropocentric view of the Middle Ages had come to be rejected.

Thus, Thomas was able to trace the extremely complex process by which notions of conquest, exploitation, and ascendancy were slowly replaced by those of duty, responsibility, and stewardship. However, while acknowledging that modern men and women tend to treat animals with much more respect and compassion than did their medieval and early modern predecessors, he denied that human beings have become more moral during the last five-hundred years, arguing instead that they have simply broadened the definition of who or what is entitled to moral consideration. According to Thomas, the inhumane treatment that the people of late-medieval England habitually inflicted on animals was neither malicious nor sadistic. Rather, because animals existed outside the realm of moral entitlement, the cruelty they suffered was ‘the cruelty which comes from carelessness or indifference’, and not ‘the cruelty which comes from vindictiveness’.⁷ Moreover, Thomas observed that although modern men and women tend to be opposed in principle to the unnecessarily cruel and inhumane treatment of animals, in practice they have for the most part been unwilling to give up the kind of comfortable and secure existence that depends to a very great extent on the ruthless and efficient exploitation of animals in agriculture and the pharmaceutical industry. Thomas

⁷ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 148.

therefore concluded his study by arguing that modern civilization has not yet fully faced up to the conflict between the high moral principles that it proclaims, and the less edifying reality of the practices that it performs.

In this thesis I will take up some of the suggestions raised - as well as some of the loose threads left hanging - by Thomas's pioneering work. My focus will be on literary sources and the complex ways in which selected texts represent animals and the natural world, and human interactions with them. Although Thomas made extensive use of imaginative literature in his study, arguing that 'there is nothing to surpass it as a guide to the thoughts and feelings of at least the more articulate sections of the population',⁸ he treated literary sources very much in the same way that he approached their non-literary counterparts, reading them largely as unmediated reflections of their authors' attitudes to the subject in hand. For instance, when writing on late-medieval attitudes towards dogs, he noted that: 'Chaucer has nothing good to say about the dog and neither has Shakespeare',⁹ implying that neither author could have felt any sympathy with individual dogs in their everyday experience. What, of course, needs to be explored is the ways in which the literary context of such references not only qualified but actually conditioned the ways in which animals - in this case dogs - were represented and treated in literature.¹⁰

⁸ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 16.

⁹ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 105.

¹⁰ Although Chaucer and Shakespeare may have had little good to say about dogs, many of their contemporaries did. Note, for example, Sir David Lindsay's employment of a canine speaker - James V's hound, Bagsche - in his 'Complaint and Confession of Bagsche', a satire on courtly vices that explores the world of the royal kennels with evident knowledge and affection. See Sir David Lindsay, 'The Complaint and Confession of Bagsche', in *Sir David Lindsay's Works: The Minor Poems*, ed. J. A. H. Murray EETS OS 47 (London, 1871). That Shakespeare himself may have had a more nuanced attitude towards dogs is suggested, perhaps, in *Macbeth*, where the range of

This will be the subject of the study that follows, in which I will examine the ways in which the literary genres of hagiography and romance employ animals for their own ends. In particular, I will investigate the extent to which those fearful and hostile responses to the animal kingdom that Thomas saw as typical of late-medieval society can be found in the imaginative literature of the period. Discovering how far such texts give access to contemporary attitudes towards 'real' animals - even in those texts that purport to convey actual events - will be a central issue in what follows, as will the extent to which the real and the imaginary interact. Did authors respond to the animals they wrote about in experiential terms, bringing their knowledge of the dogs, cats, and horses that they saw around them to bear upon their portraits of the animals' imaginary counterparts, or did the conventional and symbolic associations of such beasts take precedence over quotidian experience? And what about those authors who turned to animals outside their direct experience, not only lions and crocodiles but also mythical creatures such as griffins and dragons? What principles would seem to underlie their representation? Finally, what can one tell about attitudes towards nature and the 'natural' more generally from those texts popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? And how was the natural world represented in relation to human nature itself?

By examining key literary texts with these questions in mind, we will be able to investigate an important aspect of the field opened up by Keith Thomas's study. This will enable us to understand better the ways in which attitudes towards nature and animals were encoded by contemporary authors in the stories that they told; an approach

character types found in human society is compared to the diversity of dog species in the canine world, from the noble 'hounds and greyhounds' to the base 'water-rugs and demi-wolves'. See William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, Act III, Scene 1, 91-100.

that not only recognises the importance of the material narrated, but that is also sensitive to the conventions and protocols of storytelling itself.

Introduction

Of all the animal stories that were circulating in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages, the one that appears to have exerted the strongest hold over the imagination of contemporary writers and artists was the tale of St. Jerome and the lion. Its hero, Jerome, was born during the middle of the fourth century at Stridon in Dalmatia (the exact date of his birth is unknown, but modern scholars estimate that it was some time between 331 and 347), and his greatest contribution to history, and the achievement for which he was most revered during the ensuing Christian centuries, was his production of a Latin translation of the Bible (which became known as the *editio vulgata*, the Vulgate or popular edition), a text that for almost a thousand years, and throughout the Latin-speaking West, was regarded as the standard version of the Scriptures.¹ However, in addition to his skills as a linguist, scholar, and translator, Jerome was also famed for his advocacy of the monastic life (a life that he himself practised, first in solitude in the

¹ For an excellent modern biography of Jerome, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London, 1975). Useful essays on Jerome, his biblical scholarship, and the medieval history of his translation of the Bible can be found in the first two volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Bible*. See H. F. D. Sparks, 'Jerome as Biblical Scholar', in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 510-541; Fr. E. F. Sutcliffe, 'Jerome', in G. W. H. Lampe, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 80-101; and Raphael Loewe, 'The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate', in Lampe, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 102-154.

Syrian desert, and then as the leader of a community of monks at Bethlehem in Palestine), and it is while he was residing in Bethlehem during the second phase of his monastic career that his miraculous encounter with the lion is supposed to have taken place.²

Jerome's extensive writings, and in particular the many letters that he wrote to his friends (and enemies), are full of personal information about his life and work, and these scattered autobiographical references - along with testimonials to his character from such eminent figures as St. Augustine, Sulpicius Severus, Gregory the Great, and Isidore of Seville - were the sources from which two ninth-century Latin *Lives* of the saint were compiled. These *Lives*, written independently of one another by anonymous authors, are known as *Hieronymus noster* and *Plerosque nimirum*, and were in turn used as sources for all of the subsequent medieval biographies of Jerome.³ However, as well as recording the known facts of Jerome's life, the author of *Plerosque nimirum* also included in his narrative the legendary story of the saint's encounter with the lion, a tale that had previously been told in relation to a near-contemporary of Jerome - the Palestinian abbot St. Gerasimus - by Joannes Moschus in his seventh-century collection of the lives of the desert fathers, the *Pratum Spirituale*.⁴

² For an account of Jerome's monasticism, see Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, pp. 46-55, and pp. 129-140.

³ See *Hieronymus noster*, in *PL* 22: 175-184, and *Plerosque nimirum*, in *PL* 22: 201-214. For a discussion of the sources of these two works, and their influence on the subsequent biographies of St. Jerome, see Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1985), pp. 23-48.

⁴ For the story of St. Jerome and the lion, see *Plerosque nimirum*, 209 ff. See also Joannes Moschus, *Vita Abbatis Gerasimi*, in *Pratum Spirituale*, in *PL* 74: 172-174. Eugene Rice has suggested that in all probability the story of Gerasimus's lion became attached to the figure of Jerome some time during the seventh century, after the military invasions of the Arabs had forced many Greek monks who were living in the deserts of the Middle East to seek refuge in Rome. Rice conjectures (*Saint Jerome in the*

According to the author of *Plerosque nimirum*, the encounter between Jerome and the lion took place one evening while the saint was listening to the sacred lessons with his fellow monks in the monastery that he had established at Bethlehem. A lion suddenly came limping into the building, whereupon everyone fled except for Jerome, who confidently approached the animal as though he were welcoming an honoured guest. The lion showed Jerome his paw, and seeing that the creature was badly injured the saint summoned his brothers and instructed them to wash and bind the wound with care. As the monks were performing this task they observed that the lion's paw had been scratched and torn by thorns, but they washed and dressed the wound so carefully that they were able to restore the animal to full health. From then onwards the lion lost all traces of his former wildness, and lived tamely alongside the monks, helping them with their labours.

The story of Jerome and the lion was widely disseminated in the late Middle Ages thanks to its inclusion in two of the most popular and influential books of the thirteenth century; Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, an account - completed in 1244 - of the history of humanity from the Fall to Vincent's own lifetime, and the *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of saints' lives written by Jacobus of Voragine, the Archbishop of Genoa, which dates from about 1260.⁵ However, the popularity of the

Renaissance, pp. 44-45), that because of the similarity between the names Gerasimus and Geronimus - the late Latin form of Jerome's name - 'a Latin-speaking cleric, an admirer of St. Jerome at home in the environment of Greek monasticism in Rome, made St. Geronimus the hero of a story he had heard about St. Gerasimus; and that the author of *Plerosque nimirum*, attracted by a story at once so picturesque, so apparently appropriate, and so resonant in suggestion and meaning, and under the impression that its source was pilgrims who had been told it in Bethlehem, included it in his life of a favourite saint otherwise bereft of miracles.'

⁵ See Vincent of Beauvais, *De Vita et Actibus Sancti Hieronymi Presbyteri et Gestis Eiusdem*, in *Speculum Historiale Vincentii* (Venice 1494), Book XVI, Chaps. 18-88, and 92-93, Fols. 198-207, and Jacobus of Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de*

story was not simply confined to the medium of literature; it is also reflected in the field of the visual arts. According to the art historian Grete Ring, Jerome was perhaps 'the most frequently represented saint in art from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, with the exception of the members of the Holy Family and St. John.'⁶ Although a number of different episodes from the legend of St. Jerome not involving the lion formed the subject of some of these fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century representations, the saint was most commonly shown dressed as a cardinal and seated on a chair in his study (or on a rock in the wilderness), either removing the thorn from the lion's paw, or reading a book with the animal lying quietly at his feet.⁷

The eminent Italian canonist Giovanni d'Andrea, who taught law at the University of Bologna from 1301 until his death in 1348, and who commissioned a number of paintings of Jerome, is usually credited with introducing the motif of the lion into the visual arts, and combining it with images of the saint as a scholar and

Voragine, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (London, 1941), pp. 587-592. The popularity of the two books is reflected in the large number of manuscripts that has survived from the period. Gregory G. Guzman has compiled a list of two hundred manuscripts of the *Speculum Historiale*, while according to Eugene Rice, there are over five hundred extant manuscripts of the *Legenda Aurea*. See Gregory G. Guzman, 'A Growing Tabulation of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale* Manuscripts', *Scriptorium: International Review of Manuscript Studies*, 122-125, and Rice, *St. Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 23.

⁶ Grete Ring, 'St. Jerome Removing the Thorn from the Lion's Paw', *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), p. 190.

⁷ The art historian Herbert Friedmann has observed that: 'The lion occurs in the great majority (more than three-quarters) of all paintings, graphics, and sculptures representing Saint Jerome in the wilderness. ...It also occurs in more than half of all renditions of the saint in his study chamber. The beast is to be found in many, if not the majority, of representations of Jerome's last communion and of his death, as well as in more than half of other compositions in which Jerome is shown, either by himself as a formal, hieratic figure of a great Church Father, or as one of the attendant, lateral figures in conventional altarpieces, especially in those created after the first years of the fifteenth century.' See Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington D. C., 1980), p. 229.

theologian.⁸ In his book *Hieronymianus* or *De Laudibus Sancti Hieronymi*, Giovanni wrote:

I have also established the way he should be painted, namely, sitting in a chair, beside him the hat that cardinals wear nowadays (that is, the red hat or *galerus ruber*) and at his feet the tame lion; and I have caused many pictures of this sort to be set up in divers places.⁹

The painting of St. Jerome and the lion by the Neapolitan artist Niccolò Colantonio (Figure 1), perfectly accords with Giovanni's prescriptions, and is one of the best known, and most interesting, artistic treatments of the subject.¹⁰ The painting is dominated by the figures of Jerome and the lion, both of whom are situated in the centre of the composition, and Colantonio successfully conveys not only a sense of the benevolence of the saint and the pathos of the injured animal, but also a strong feeling of trust and companionship between the two. However, the picture is also remarkable for

⁸ For a discussion of Giovanni's role in establishing the iconography of Jerome, see Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, pp. 64-68, and Ring, 'St. Jerome Removing the Thorn from the Lion's Paw', p. 190.

⁹ Quoted in Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 65. According to Rice, p. 33, before Giovanni had identified the lion and the cardinal's hat as Jerome's two attributes or emblems, the saint 'was typically shown seated on a chair or throne, made more comfortable by a cushion, his feet on a stool, reading from a book propped on a lectern, writing, dictating to a scribe or *notarius*, handing out copies of his translation of the Bible, or instructing one or two small figures, monks or clerics, who sit below him.'

¹⁰ Very little is known about Colantonio. His artistic education is thought to have taken place under the patronage of René D'Anjou, who reigned in Naples from 1438 to 1442, while his last work was commissioned in 1460 by Queen Isabella Chiaromonte, the wife of King Ferdinand I of Naples. The painting of *St. Jerome in His Study* (which formed the lower section of an altarpiece, the upper panel of which was a depiction of *St. Francis Giving the Rule to the First and Second Franciscan Orders*), was completed at the beginning of Colantonio's career, and although it is not known who commissioned the work, there is documentary evidence to indicate that it was originally housed in a chapel dedicated to St. Jerome in the Franciscan church of San Lorenzo, Naples. For a discussion of Colantonio's life and work, see Giovanna Cassese, 'Niccolò Colantonio', in Jane Turner, ed. *The Dictionary of Art* Vol. 7 (London, 1996), pp. 542-544. See also Penny Howell Jolly, 'Jan Van Eyck and St. Jerome: A Study of Eyckian Influence on Colantonio and Antonello da Messina in Quattrocento Naples' (University of Pennsylvania, Ph. D thesis, 1976), pp. 80-151.

SPECIAL NOTE

**THIS ITEM IS BOUND IN SUCH A
MANNER AND WHILE EVERY
EFFORT HAS BEEN MADE TO
REPRODUCE THE CENTRES, FORCE
WOULD RESULT IN DAMAGE**

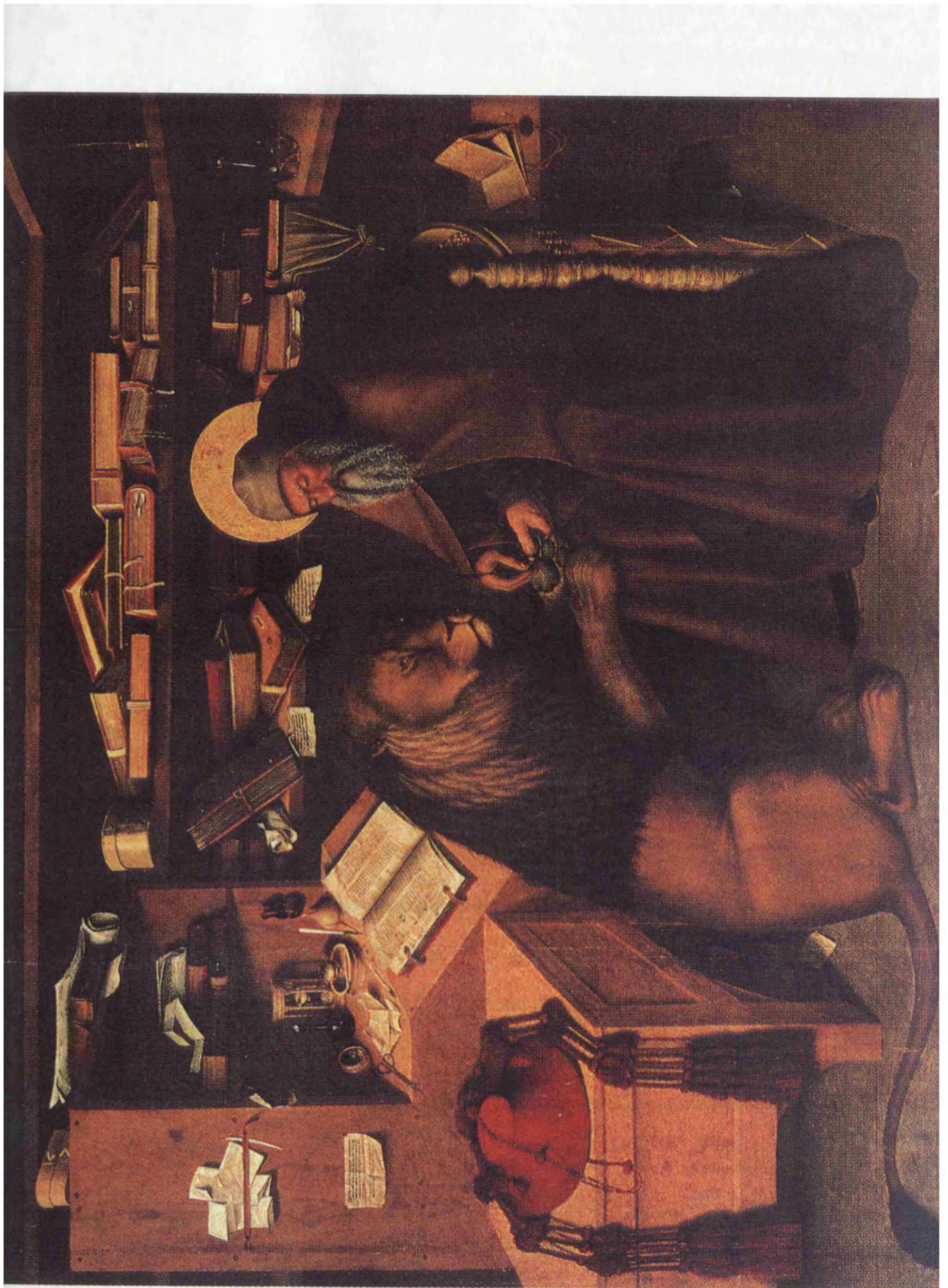


FIGURE 1: COLANTONIO, SAINT JEROME AND THE LION

the extraordinary detail with which it represents the interior of Jerome's cell.¹¹ The shelves are strewn with books, pens, and papers, along with all of the other equipment that one would expect to find in a scholar's study, while the book that is lying open on Jerome's desk, and the general atmosphere of disorderly clutter, gives the impression that the saint had been busy at work when the lion entered his room, seeking his help. Jerome himself is seated on an ornately carved chair. He is dressed in a brown habit and cloak, and is wearing a tightly fitting grey hat, while his tasselled, red cardinal's hat, the *galerus ruber*, is prominently displayed to the left of the lion, on a table in front of his desk. Finally, in the bottom right hand corner of the painting, behind Jerome's chair, a mouse can be seen eating a scrap of paper.

Amidst all the finely observed detail of Jerome's study, the lion remains a somewhat incongruous, almost enigmatic figure. In spite of the animal's large size and enormously powerful frame, he is stripped of the conventional leonine attributes of wildness and courage, and is pictured instead with a slightly mournful and subdued expression, looking rather ill at ease in the domestic setting of Jerome's book-lined chamber. The lion's former wildness stands in stark contrast to his present domesticity, and the encroachment of the animal into the indoor, human space of Jerome's study seems to blur the traditional opposition between the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture', 'wilderness' and 'civilization', and 'wild' and 'tame'. Moreover, Jerome's evident sympathy for the predicament of the lion, and the proximity and intimacy of the two, threatens to dissolve still further the conventional boundaries separating the human and animal worlds.

¹¹ Penny Howell Jolly ('Van Eyck and St. Jerome', p. 103), has suggested that Colantonio's painting 'is the first Italian representation of St. Jerome in his study to make the setting of such great importance'.

The story of Jerome and the lion, then, and in particular Colantonio's representation of it, would seem to challenge the view that medieval culture was universally hostile towards the natural world and indifferent to the pain of wild creatures, suggesting instead that the plight of a suffering animal - at least when it was presented in the context of the life of a saint - was able to elicit a compassionate and sympathetic response from contemporary viewers and readers. The painting therefore poses interesting and important questions about how animals were perceived in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, and how they were thought to relate to human beings, the two questions with which this thesis is principally concerned.

In contrast to the literary version of the story found in *Plerosque nimirum*, Colantonio chose to locate the action not in one of the monastery's public, communal areas, but in the private space of Jerome's study, a setting that enabled him to depict an impressive array of books and papers in the background of the painting. Furthermore, rather than following *Plerosque nimirum* and portraying a scene in which Jerome at first examined the lion's wound, and then delegated the task of washing and dressing it to his monks, Colantonio showed the saint actually removing the thorn from the animal's paw. (According to *Plerosque nimirum*, the lion did not have a thorn stuck in his paw, but merely a wound that he had received when his paw had been pierced with thorns.) The effect of these two changes was to simplify the narrative while simultaneously amplifying the role that Jerome played in it. By removing the other monks from the scene, and so making Jerome solely responsible for healing the lion, Colantonio eliminated all the superfluous elements of the story that could divert attention from the saint, and reduce not just the dramatic impact of the miracle that he performed, but also the strength of the bond connecting him to the lion. With great narrative economy, then,

Colantonio was able in the one painting to convey two quite distinct images or impressions of Jerome. On the one hand, he depicted a popular animal story in which a genuine sense of intimacy and companionship between the human and animal protagonists was conveyed, while at the same time he projected an image of the saint as a great scholar and theologian - reminding his audience of Jerome's reputation for erudition through the expedient of locating the action in his study.

Of course, in addition to these two aspects of Jerome's life and character, Colantonio - following the artistic convention established by Giovanni d'Andrea - also represented the saint as a cardinal, displaying his red cardinal's hat on the table situated in front of his desk. In the same way that the books and papers lining the shelves of Jerome's study lend intellectual weight to the portrait, so the presence of the *galerus ruber* invests the figure of the saint with considerable ecclesiastical authority, denoting as it does the important position that he was thought to have occupied in the governing hierarchy of the Church. However, it is important to note that the rank of cardinal was not actually established until the eleventh century, over six hundred years after Jerome's death, and it was not until the Council of Lyons in 1245 that Pope Innocent IV declared that the red hat should be worn by holders of the office.¹²

The anachronism of granting Jerome the title of cardinal reflects the way in which the writers and artists of the late Middle Ages tended both to visualise and understand historical figures in terms of the customs, fashions, and institutions of their own time. Interestingly, Colantonio's painting contains a number of such historical anomalies. For instance, the magnifying glass that is hanging from the shelf above

¹² For a discussion of the origins of the Cardinalate, see Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 37.

Jerome's desk is clearly a late-medieval detail, as such devices did not come into use until the end of the thirteenth century,¹³ while the folded document situated on the bench immediately above the mouse has a papal bull attached to it, which can be identified as late-medieval in origin from the heads of saints Peter and Paul that are visible on its seal.¹⁴ But, even more important than the anachronistic presence of these physical objects (at least from the point of view of the present discussion), is the fact that Jerome's relationship with the lion is also represented in an anachronistic manner, and an examination of this aspect of the painting will highlight discrepancies between the kind of attitudes towards animals and the natural world that were held by Jerome and his monastic contemporaries, and those that prevailed a thousand years later during Colantonio's lifetime.

Alison Goddard Elliott has observed that miraculous encounters with wild beasts are one of the characteristic features of the *Lives* of the early Christian anchorites, and that lions appear much more frequently in these stories than any other animal.¹⁵ Significantly, Jerome himself was the author of three biographies of desert saints, two of whom - Paul the hermit, and Malchus the monk - had dramatic encounters with lions in the wilderness. Thus, it is possible to compare Colantonio's late-medieval treatment of

¹³ As has been noted by George Sarton in his discussion of the technological developments that occurred in the field of optics during the late Middle Ages. See George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* Vol II (Baltimore, 1931), p.24.

¹⁴ According to Penny Howell Jolly ('Van Eyck and St. Jerome', p. 102), 'the heads of Sts. Peter and Paul ...[were] a commonly used form for the reverse of papal seals in the 14th and 15th centuries.'

¹⁵ See Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover, 1987), pp. 144-167.

the story of Jerome and the lion with two narratives, both involving saints and lions, that were actually written by Jerome himself.¹⁶

It is thought that Jerome wrote his *Life of St. Paul the First Hermit* some time around 376, while he was living the life of a solitary hermit in the Syrian desert.¹⁷ Jerome argued that contrary to received opinion - which regarded St. Anthony as the instigator of the monastic movement - Anthony had merely followed the example of his master, Paul of Thebes, who was in fact the first Christian monk to withdraw into the desert.¹⁸ At the very end of his narrative, Jerome described how - after enduring the privations of the wilderness for almost a century - Paul finally died, leaving his body to be discovered by Anthony, who grieved that he did not have any tools with which to dig a grave. However, two lions suddenly appeared from out of the desert, prostrated themselves before the dead body, wagging their tails and roaring loudly with grief. After communicating their feelings of sorrow in this way, they began to dig a hole in the ground not far from Paul's corpse, and when they had made a space large enough to contain the body, they respectfully approached Anthony, who sent them away with a blessing.¹⁹

The holy monk, Malchus, the subject of Jerome's second sacred biography, also had a miraculous encounter with a lion in the wilderness. After living in a monastery in the desert for a number of years, Malchus returned home to visit his widowed mother for

¹⁶ See St. Jerome, *Life of St. Paul the First Hermit*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in Roy J. Deferrari, ed. *Early Christian Biographies*, The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 15 (Washington, 1952), pp. 217-238, and St. Jerome, *Life of Malchus*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in Deferrari, ed. *Early Christian Biographies*, pp. 281-297.

¹⁷ See the comments of Sister Marie Liguori Ewald (p. 221), in her introduction to Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*.

¹⁸ See Jerome, *Life of St. Paul the First Hermit*, 1, p. 225.

¹⁹ See Jerome, *Life of St. Paul the First Hermit*, 16, p. 236.

one last time. On his way he was captured by Ishmaelites and sold into slavery. He eventually managed to escape with a fellow Christian slave, but they were pursued across the desert by their former master and his servant. Malchus and his Christian companion finally took refuge in a cave, convinced that they were about to be murdered, yet they were miraculously rescued from this fate by a lioness who attacked and killed their assailants, but left them completely unharmed.²⁰

As Alison Goddard Elliott has observed, the lions that feature in the *Lives* of the desert saints typically perform a similar function to the 'helpful beasts' of folklore, in that they willingly override or renounce their naturally bestial inclinations in order to grant their assistance to those holy figures whose innocence and sanctity they instinctively recognise.²¹ But, as well as using this common folkloric motif as a way of highlighting the holiness of Paul and Malchus, the two stories also share a similar location - a cave in the desert, beyond the boundaries of the civilized, human world. This wilderness setting, far from being incidental to the two narratives, actually reflects the theological concerns and convictions of the desert fathers themselves, for both Paul and Malchus chose to forsake the world and lead a solitary existence in the wilderness because they believed that the civic, humanistic values of late-classical society were incompatible with the ascetic ideals proclaimed by Christ in the Gospels.

The inherent sinfulness of human society, and the redemptive, purifying power of the wilderness, is a theme that is given particular prominence in the *Life of Malchus*. According to Jerome, Malchus first went into the desert in order to escape from the members of his family, who - ignoring his vow of chastity - were trying to force him to

²⁰ See Jerome, *Life of Malchus*, 9, pp. 296-297.

²¹ See Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 159.

marry. Then, having lived as a monk in the wilderness for many years, Malchus decided to visit his widowed mother one last time before she died, only to be told by his abbot that this seemingly innocuous wish was in fact a temptation from the Devil, and that in succumbing to it he would be placing his soul in great jeopardy. The abbot's forebodings proved to be well founded, for Malchus was captured by Ishmaelites on his journey home, and sold by them into slavery. In this captive state his virginity was again imperilled, this time by his new master, who tried to force him to marry a fellow slave, and it was in order to escape this threat to his sexual purity that he once again sought refuge in the desert. For Malchus, then, the harshness of the desert climate, and its general physical inhospitality, made it a place of spiritual safety, a religious haven where on two separate occasions he sought sanctuary from the moral corruption of human society.

Jerome's attitude towards the wilderness was identical to the view that he attributed to Malchus. In a famous letter that he wrote in 384 to Eustochium, the daughter of his friend, Paula, he reflected upon his own experiences of the austerities of the desert - with its potential for spiritual salvation - and compared it to the morally corrupt and decadent nature of life in the city:

Oh, how often, when I was living in the desert, in that lonely waste, scorched by the burning sun, which affords to hermits a savage dwelling place, how often did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome. ...Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert; and when I came upon some hollow valley or rough mountain or precipitous cliff, there I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh. There sometimes also - the Lord Himself is my witness - after many a tear and straining of my eyes to heaven, I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts, and in joy and gladness would sing:

'Because of the savour of thy good ointments we shall run after thee
[Song of Solomon 1: 3].'²²

Like Malchus, Jerome would seem to have regarded human society as beset with moral dangers, dangers that could best be countered by withdrawing from civic life and retreating into the desert. Of course, as Charles Segal has noted, such a complete and absolute rejection of the values and institutions of human society represented a profound political and philosophical break with the traditions of classical antiquity:

In classical thought the forms of civic life and social organization differentiate man from the beasts and constitute the essence of his true estate. Only by being a 'political animal,' in Aristotle's celebrated formulation, does man fulfil his humanity. For the desert saints, on the other hand, man's real goal is the heavenly kingdom, and civic life constitutes a state of alienation from his true condition. Hence to negate civilized life, to replace culture by nature, is also to bypass the fallen condition of humankind. To draw closer to the beasts is, paradoxically, to regain a lost proximity to the divine.²³

For Segal, then, the extreme asceticism of the desert fathers developed in part as a reaction to the civic values of classical society. The fathers' rejection of pagan religion led to their abandonment of pagan society's social and philosophical underpinnings, which in turn resulted in their withdrawal from urban life.²⁴ Alison Goddard Elliott has argued that because the lion was regarded in late antiquity as a symbol 'of everything

²² St. Jerome, 'Letter XXII: To Eustochium', in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, ed. and trans. F. A. Wright (London, 1933), pp. 67-69.

²³ See Charles Segal's, 'Foreword', to Elliott's, *Roads to Paradise*, p. x.

²⁴ Eugene Rice (*St. Jerome in the Renaissance*, pp. 8-9), also places considerable emphasis on Jerome's militant opposition to civic life, and the radical break with traditional values that this constituted: 'His abandonment of the earthly city for a *civitas nova*, the citizens of which meditate night and day on Scripture and God's law, was ...explicit. The wilderness and solitude, he thought, are lovelier than any city. Indeed, he believed the *civitas* incompatible with Christianity: "*quicumque in civitate sunt, Christiani non sunt*." [those who live in the city are not Christians.] From the remotest antiquity, urban living had distinguished the civilized from everything savage, rustic, and barbarous. Jerome's reversal of traditional values could hardly have been sharper.'

that does not obey man, of savage, non-socialized nature, thicket, and desert',²⁵ it came to be seen as the antithesis of the civilized, worldly values that Jerome, Paul, and Malchus had so emphatically rejected. More than any other creature, the lion was thought of as the archetypal representative of the natural, non-human world, and it is perhaps for this reason that the animal was viewed as the ally, as well as the emblem, of the early Christian hermits.

Although Paul and Malchus's lions symbolise the willingness of the two saints to renounce human society and accept the rigours of the desert, the lion that features in Colantonio's painting carries a very different meaning. Whereas both Paul and Malchus encountered their respective lions in a cave in the wilderness - the animal's natural habitat - the story of Jerome and the lion is, as we have seen, located within the walls of the monastery itself, with Colantonio setting the scene in the highly rarefied atmosphere of the saint's book-lined cell. Therefore, rather than abandoning human civilization and embracing the natural world in the manner of Paul and Malchus, Colantonio depicted Jerome accommodating the lion, and, by implication, the world of nature, within his private study. Significantly, there is nothing in Colantonio's painting to suggest a desert location. On the contrary, even though the historical Jerome shared the same hostile and distrustful view of the city that he attributed to Paul and Malchus, Colantonio chose to portray the saint surrounded by the kind of cultural artefacts that one would normally associate with a highly sophisticated, urban civilization.

It would thus appear that in the thousand years that separate Jerome's *Lives* of Paul and Malchus from Colantonio's painting of *St. Jerome in His Study*, there occurred a fundamental change in the way in which Jerome was thought to have manifested his

²⁵ See Elliott *Roads to Paradise*, pp. 166-167.

holiness in relation to the natural world. By the end of the Middle Ages, civic life was no longer associated with classical, pagan civilization, and the urban existence from which the desert fathers had so desperately tried to escape ceased to have exclusively threatening and sinful connotations. While power over wild animals continued to be interpreted as a sign of sanctity, it had become possible for the artists of the late-medieval period to portray miraculous encounters between beasts and saints in an urban, as well as a wilderness setting. Therefore, what for the desert fathers had been a symbol of their rejection of the sinful, urban culture of classical antiquity, had become for Colantonio an emblem of the redemptive capacity of the new, urbanised Christianity of early Renaissance Italy - a faith characterised most pointedly by the Franciscan Order, with its mission to preach to and redeem the towns.²⁶

This brief examination of the role and significance of the different lions that feature in Jerome's *Lives* of Paul and Malchus, and Colantonio's painting of Jerome and the lion, demonstrates the kind of contribution that a study of narrative can make to our understanding of late-medieval attitudes towards animals and nature. Of course, because the three texts under consideration describe a world that is extremely remote from ordinary experience, they tell us nothing directly about the treatment that was daily meted out to both wild and domestic animals by the people of the time. Rather, the value of such material lies in the light that it sheds on the workings of the human imagination;

²⁶ On the role of the Franciscans in ministering to the spiritual needs of the urban population, see John R. H. Moorman, *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester, 1940), pp. 153-154, and David Nicholas, *The Growth of the Medieval City from Late Antiquity to the Early Fourteenth Century* (London, 1997), pp. 209-210. It is perhaps significant that the altarpiece of which *St. Jerome in His Study* formed the lower part has a strong Franciscan connection. As noted above, it was originally housed in the Franciscan church of San Lorenzo, Naples, and the Franciscan association is further suggested by the subject of the altarpiece's upper panel: *St. Francis Giving the Rule to the First and Second Franciscan Orders*.

suggesting some of the different ways in which medieval writers and artists defined not only themselves, but also abstract notions such as holiness and civility, in relation to both the animal kingdom, and the wider world of nature.²⁷

Adopting this more holistic view, I will attempt to understand some of the wide range of symbolic meanings that late-medieval culture attached to non-human creatures by examining how relationships between humans and animals were depicted in the narrative literature of the period. I shall examine the ways in which ideas and models drawn from the animal world were used by contemporary authors either to express, or to clarify, different aspects of their own lives. In particular, because the thesis is concerned with the representation of animals in the literary genres of hagiography and romance, I will investigate both how and why human relations with the animal kingdom were of such central importance in portraying the ideals of sainthood and heroism.

²⁷ Clearly, my brief reading of Colantonio's *Jerome in His Study* comes nowhere near to exhausting the painting's possible meanings. The taming of the lion can be seen as a metaphor for the subjugation of the bestial side of human nature, what Plato in the *Republic* referred to as 'the wild beast in us'. [*The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford, 1941) IX: 571, p. 296.] Hence it is possible to see Jerome's mastery of the lion as representing the victory of human reason over animal passion, and civilization over savagery. On a more overtly religious level, the thorn that Jerome removed from the lion's paw inevitably calls to mind Christ's crown of thorns, and Eugene Rice (*St. Jerome in the Renaissance*, pp. 39-40), has suggested that whether it is protruding from the lion or piercing the head of Christ, the thorn symbolises sin, while Jerome - by removing the thorn from the lion's paw - is acting as a type of Christ, overcoming evil and redeeming human beings from their sins. The extent to which this kind of animal symbolism pervaded both Colantonio's thought and artistic method can perhaps best be demonstrated by considering the significance of one of the painting's more minor details - the mouse that is situated at the bottom right hand corner of the composition. Herbert Friedmann (*A Bestiary for St. Jerome*, p. 271), has pointed out that in Western art mice have traditionally symbolised the destructive power of time because of their habit of gnawing away at objects with relentless determination, eventually annihilating everything in their wake. It is therefore possible that Colantonio intended the mouse - like the hourglass on Jerome's desk - to be seen as an emblem of the transience of human existence, which was to stand as a warning against the vanity and futility of worldly pride and ambition.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 examines the early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, and will show how Francis's responses to animals were influenced both by ascetic feelings of contempt for his own body, and a contradictory, mystical awareness that the whole of nature reflected the glory of God, its Creator. As well as exploring Francis's complex emotional responses to animals, the chapter will investigate the moral status that was accorded to beasts by Francis and his biographers, questioning whether they considered members of the animal kingdom to be entitled to compassionate and sympathetic treatment from human beings. The sources for the *Life* of St. Francis will be examined in a separate appendix, which will also contain a discussion of hagiography as a literary genre.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus of the thesis from hagiography to romance. Concentrating on the Middle English romances *Sir Gowther*, *Octavian*, and *Sir Orfeo*, the chapter will explore how motifs and story-elements drawn from hagiography exerted a major influence on both the treatment of animals in romance, and the romance ideal of the courtly, aristocratic hero. The chapter will also investigate some of the ways in which the animal kingdom was thought to reflect the structure of feudal society, with noble beasts such as lions, falcons, horses, and hounds sharing not only an instinctive empathy with their counterparts in the human world, but also a common aristocratic disdain for creatures of low birth.

Finally, Chapter 3 takes as its subject the Middle English romances of Alexander the Great, and examines how Alexander's decidedly pagan identity - which he manifested in great part by asserting his god-like dominion over the natural world - elicited from both writers and their audiences strongly ambivalent feelings. Alexander was admired for the heroism and ambition that drove him to conquer his human

adversaries, and that in the romances gave him power over animals and the world of nature, and yet it was this very refusal to accept the limitations of his own humanity that led to his condemnation as an irreligious overreacher.

1

Return to Paradise: Animals in The Early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi

St. Francis: The Patron Saint of Ecologists?

On 26 December 1966, at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the historian Lynn White Jr. delivered a lecture entitled: 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', in which he argued that St. Francis of Assisi's attitude towards animals and nature was profoundly at odds with the official view that was disseminated by the medieval Church.¹ Characterising Christianity, particularly in its medieval, Latin form, as 'the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen',² White claimed that modern Western society has directly inherited from the Middle Ages an extremely destructive attitude towards the natural world; an attitude that not only regarded human beings as

¹ For the text of the lecture, see Lynn White Jr, 'The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207. According to Keith Thomas, such has been the influence of White's article that it has come to be seen 'almost a sacred text for modern ecologists'. See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1983), p. 23.

² White, 'The Historical Roots of Ecologic Crisis', p. 1205.

entirely separate from - and in a state of opposition to - nature, but one that also failed to place any moral impediment on the exploitation of natural objects, whether animal, mineral, or vegetable, for human advantage. However, White argued that in contrast to the harmful, oppositional view of nature typical of medieval Christianity, a radically different set of beliefs and assumptions about the natural world, and humanity's place within it, was held by St. Francis of Assisi, a figure who according to White 'tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation'.³ The tenor of White's argument is that it is only by rejecting the disastrous legacy of orthodox Christianity, and embracing instead Francis's democratic and respectful way of relating to animals and nature, that modern society can hope to avert the environmental crisis into which it appears to be falling, and he concluded his lecture by proposing that Francis should be declared 'the patron saint of ecologists' as a mark of his profound sympathy for the whole of creation.⁴

Despite White's fiercely critical view of what he considered to be the harmful effects on the environment caused by the teaching of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II did indeed proclaim Francis 'the heavenly Patron of those who promote ecology' (in November 1979), a declaration that he reiterated on January 1 1990 in a letter entitled: 'The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility'.⁵ In this letter, Pope John Paul asserted that

³ White, 'The Historical Roots of Ecologic Crisis', p. 1205.

⁴ White, 'The Historical Roots of Ecologic Crisis', p. 1205.

⁵ For the official Vatican record of the declaration, see 'Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos*'; AAS 71 (1979), 1509f. See also Pope John Paul II, 'The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility. Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990', in Margaret Atkins, *Must Catholics Be Green?* (London, 1995), pp. 21-32. Neither document makes any reference to White's lecture.

humanity is under a sacred obligation both to respect the natural world, and to protect it from harm, and he concluded his epistle by presenting St. Francis as a model of harmonious relations between humanity and the wider world of creation:

As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation - animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon - to give honour and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.

It is my hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of 'fraternity' with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created. And may he remind us of our serious obligation to respect and watch over them with care, in light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the human family.⁶

Although Professor White and Pope John Paul approached the question of humanity's relationship with the natural world from radically different political, philosophical, and theological perspectives, it is striking that they both considered St. Francis to be a figure who has much to teach modern society about living in peace with animals and nature.

Of course, one of the dangers of identifying Francis as an icon of the modern environmental movement is that his actions and utterances - when removed from their historical context, and viewed in terms of contemporary ecological preoccupations - may acquire meanings very different from those that the saint had originally intended.⁷ Indeed, this tendency anachronistically to endow Francis with beliefs and motives that he did not in fact possess is evident in Lynn White's reaction to one of the incidents from the saint's

⁶ John Paul II, 'The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility', pp. 31-32.

⁷ This has been pointed out by Roger D. Sorrell in his monograph, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 4-6, and 147-148.

career that has become crucially important to those who promote an ecological reading of his life: the story of the taming of the wolf of Gubbio.

In justifying his claim that 'Francis tried to depose man of his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures',⁸ White cited the story of the wolf of Gubbio without further comment, assuming its significance to be self-evident. As we shall see, however, the incident is far from simple. By subjecting it to a much more searching analysis than that undertaken by White, and placing Francis's words and deeds vis-à-vis the wolf within the context not only of his life and thought, but also of the wider hagiographical tradition, it will be possible to see this event in a clearer light. This in turn will allow us to arrive at a better understanding of the saint's relationship with creation.

The story of Francis's encounter with the wolf of Gubbio is found in only two closely related medieval texts, both of which date from over one hundred years after the saint's death; Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria's *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius* (*The Acts of Blessed Francis and His Companions*), and its Italian derivative, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* (*I Fioretti di San Francesco*).⁹ According to Ugolino's account of the incident, on one occasion when St. Francis was staying in the city of Gubbio, the

⁸ White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', p. 1206.

⁹ For a discussion of the major sources for the life of St. Francis, including the *Actus* and the *Fioretti*, see the appendix: 'A Note on the Early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi'. Because the *Actus* and *Fioretti* are very closely related, Raphael Brown's modern English translation of *The Little Flowers* is in fact primarily based on the Latin text of the *Actus*. See *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, trans. Raphael Brown, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), pp. 1267-1513. For Ugolino's version of the story (on which Brown's translation is based), see *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius*, ed. Paul Sabatier (Paris, 1902), Chapter 23, pp. 77-81.

surrounding countryside was inhabited by a fierce and hungry wolf who killed both humans and animals in his search for food. The people of Gubbio were so frightened of the wolf that they armed themselves whenever they went into the countryside, but such was animal's ferocity that even armed citizens were incapable of defending themselves from attack. As a consequence, most of Gubbio's inhabitants were too frightened to go beyond the city gate.

Taking pity on the plight of the people, St. Francis went out into the countryside in order to tame the wolf. After travelling only a short distance he caught sight of the animal, who was running towards him with his mouth wide open. Francis made the sign of the cross and ordered the wolf in the name of Jesus to cease his assault. As soon as the animal heard this command, he closed his mouth, bowed its head, and lay down at the saint's feet. Having thus succeeded in taming the creature, Francis then spoke to him, and condemned his terrible crimes:

Brother Wolf you have done great harm in this region, and you have committed horrible crimes by destroying God's creatures without any mercy. You have been destroying not only irrational animals, but you even have the more detestable brazenness to kill and devour human beings made in the image of God. You therefore deserve to be put to death just like the worst robber and murderer. Consequently everyone is right in crying out against you and complaining, and this whole town is your enemy. But, Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and them, so that they will not be harmed by you any more, and after they have forgiven you all your past crimes, neither men nor dogs will pursue you any more.¹⁰

After Francis had finished speaking, the wolf nodded his head, and moved his body, tail and ears so as to indicate that he understood and accepted everything that had been said. Once the animal had signalled his acquiescence in this way, St. Francis addressed him yet again:

¹⁰ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p.1349.

Brother Wolf, since you are willing to make and keep this peace pact, I promise you that I will have the people of this town give you food every day as long as you live, so that you will never again suffer from hunger, for I know that whatever evil you have been doing was done because of the urge of hunger. But, my brother Wolf, since I am obtaining such a favour for you, I want you to promise me that you will never hurt any animal or man.¹¹

By bowing its head, the wolf once again showed that he accepted what Francis had said, and as a pledge of his good faith he placed his paw in Francis's hand. Francis then ordered the wolf to return with him to the city, and in complete obedience the wolf followed him 'just like a very gentle lamb'.¹² On reaching Gubbio, the entire population of the city gathered around St. Francis, astonished at the sight of the tamed wolf. Francis then preached them a sermon:

saying among other things that such calamities were permitted by God because of their sins, and how the consuming fire of hell by which the damned have to be devoured for all eternity is much more dangerous than the raging of a wolf which can kill nothing but the body, and how much more they should fear to be plunged into hell, since one little animal could keep so great a crowd in such a state of terror and trembling.

'So, dear people', he said, 'come back to the Lord, and do fitting penance, and God will free you from the wolf in this world and from the devouring fire of hell in the next world.'¹³

After Francis had finished his sermon, he told the people of his pact with the wolf, and with one voice they agreed to supply the animal with all the food that he required. Once again, Francis invited the wolf to make a pledge of his good faith, and as before the creature did so by placing his paw in Francis's hand. The wolf then moved into the city, and was fed and cared for by the people until he finally died of old age two years later. The death of the wolf

¹¹ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p. 1349.

¹² *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p. 1350.

¹³ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p. 1350.

filled the citizens with great sorrow, for whenever they had seen the animal peacefully wandering the streets of their city, they had been reminded of the holiness of St. Francis.

It is not difficult to understand why the story of the wolf of Gubbio appealed so strongly to Lynn White, for it presents St. Francis as a figure of extraordinary benevolence, whose sympathy and compassion for the plight of both humans and animals not only enabled him to pacify a ravaging wolf, but also inspired him to reconcile the creature to the very community that he had formerly been terrorising. By refusing to condemn the wolf out of hand - choosing instead to forgive the animal, and provide him with the means of remedying his violent behaviour - Francis would appear to have recognised that the creature was an autonomous being in his own right, who was entitled to be treated by humans with respect and understanding, and not simply an inanimate object with no independent claim to life. This apparent willingness of Francis to acknowledge the wolf's entitlement to moral consideration is further suggested in the fact that he repeatedly referred to the animal as 'Brother', a mode of address that assumes the existence of a familial bond - even an equality - between the human and animal worlds.

For White, then, the empathy and understanding that Francis so conspicuously exhibited in relation to the wolf was symptomatic of his democratic and egalitarian attitude towards animals in general, an attitude that constituted a radical rejection of the anthropocentric world view promulgated by the medieval Church. However, as indicated above, this ecologically orientated interpretation of the incident presents only a partial, and ultimately misleading portrait of the saint. After all, Francis did not merely call upon the people of Gubbio to treat the wolf with consideration, he was also fiercely critical of the

animal's bestial and savage behaviour, condemning the creature's 'horrible crimes' in explicitly moral terms: 'you even have the more detestable brazenness to kill and devour human beings made in the image of God. You therefore deserve to be put to death just like the worst robber and murderer'.¹⁴ Moreover, having accused the wolf of criminality, Francis's forgiveness was conditional upon the animal abandoning his murderous actions, and moving into the city as an honorary member of the human community, where he was to live in accordance with society's rules. Francis's moral censure of the wolf, and his insistence that the animal curb his wolfish instincts, and abide instead by the laws of human civilization, would seem to reflect the anthropomorphic assumption that animals share with human beings a common moral sense of good and evil, an assumption that far from anticipating the opinion of modern environmentalists, was firmly rooted in the culture of the time.¹⁵

¹⁴ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p.1349.

¹⁵ E. A. Armstrong has noted that Francis's denunciation of the wolf as a murderer and robber, with the assumption of moral and legal responsibility that this implies, has much in common with the many criminal prosecutions that were undertaken of animals during the late-medieval and early modern periods. See E. A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis, Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 203. For a useful overview of the phenomenon of animal trials, see E. P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (London, 1906), and Gerald Carson, 'Bugs and Beasts Before the Law', *Natural History* LXXVII, 4 (1968), 6-19. A late reflection on the practice of executing wolves for murder can be found in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. During the trial scene, Gratiano tells Shylock that his inhuman lack of mercy is enough to make one believe that his body had been possessed by the soul of a wolf, hanged for murder: 'Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith, / To hold opinion with Pythagoras / That souls of animals infuse themselves / Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit / Governed a wolf, who - hanged for human slaughter - / Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet, / And, whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam / Infused itself in thee; for thy desires / Are wolfish, bloody, starved, and ravenous.' William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. M. M. Mahood (Cambridge, 1987), Act IV, Scene 1, 130-138.

Therefore, rather than viewing the story of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio through the distorting lens of contemporary ecological preoccupations, it is much more useful to try to understand the incident in terms that would have been readily comprehensible to Francis and his contemporaries. During the later Middle Ages, Francis's supernatural power over animals was interpreted as a sign of his remarkable sanctity, for such was his extraordinary holiness, innocence and piety that he was thought to have miraculously restored to the natural world the harmonious condition that it had originally enjoyed before the Fall. Thus, like countless saints before him, Francis was believed to have re-established the dominion over the animal kingdom that had once been exercised by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Writing in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, St. Bonaventure - Francis's official biographer, and the Minister General of the Franciscan Order from 1257 to 1273 - explained Francis's special affinity for animals in the following way:

If you ask what is the virtue which makes a person love creatures ...I reply that it is compassion and a sort of natural affection. For example, we see that even now a person can be very fond of a dog because it obeys him faithfully. In the same way, man in his original state had a natural inclination to love animals and even irrational creatures. Therefore, the greater the progress a man makes and the nearer he approaches to the state of innocence the more docile these creatures come towards him, and the greater the affection he feels for them. We see this in the case of St. Francis; he overflowed with tender affection even for animals, because to some extent he had returned to the state of innocence. This was made clear by the way irrational creatures obeyed him.¹⁶

Thomas of Celano, the author of two *Lives* of the saint, the first of which was written within three years of his death, gave personal testimony to the fact that Francis had temporarily re-

¹⁶ Quoted in Benen Fahy, trans. *Major and Minor Life of St. Francis with Excerpts from Other Works*, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), p. 849.

established the peaceful state of existence that had originally prevailed before the Fall. In his *Second Life of St. Francis* (composed in 1246), Thomas described how Francis's benign influence had ensured that peace and plenty had reigned during his own lifetime, but that once he had died - and his beneficent protection had been withdrawn from the earth - the moral and physical corruption of the fallen world had reasserted itself, to produce terrible famine and civil strife:

For all of us who saw it know what quiet and peaceful times passed while the servant of Christ lived and how they were filled with such an abundance of all good things. ...But after he had been taken away the order of things was completely reversed and everything was changed; for wars and insurrections prevailed everywhere, and a carnage of many deaths suddenly passed through many kingdoms. The horror of famine too spread far and wide, and the cruelty of it, which exceeds the bitterness of everything else, consumed very many. Necessity then turned everything into food and compelled human teeth to chew things that were not even customarily eaten by animals. Bread was made with the shells of nuts and the bark of trees; and, to put it mildly, paternal piety, under the compulsion of famine, did not mourn the death of a child, as became clear from the confession of a certain man.¹⁷

The wars and insurrections to which Thomas refers, here, were in fact local skirmishes in the much larger conflict between Pope Gregory IX and the Emperor Frederick II that broke out intermittently in the years following Francis's death. However, it is striking that Thomas attributed both the civil unrest, and the famine and privation that it produced, not to political

¹⁷ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), Book 2, Chapter XXIII, p. 409.

or diplomatic causes, but to the removal of the pre-lapsarian harmony that Francis had temporarily restored to the world.¹⁸

When writing of Francis's encounters with animals, then, it would appear that the interest of his biographers lay not so much in the animals themselves, but in what their peaceful and demure behaviour revealed about the holiness and purity of the saint. This was certainly true in the case of Ugolino, who claimed that the whole episode of the taming of the wolf had been ordained by God in order that Francis's sanctity might be made known to the citizens of Gubbio: 'But God wished to bring the holiness of St. Francis to the attention of those people'.¹⁹ However, the notion that animals were to be viewed first and foremost as signs, whose behaviour - when read symbolically - could impart to human beings important spiritual truths, was held not just by Francis's biographers, but by Francis himself. As we have seen, after Francis returned to Gubbio with the tamed wolf, he preached a sermon in which he invited the people to compare the purely physical devastation that the animal had wrought with the infinitely greater pain that they would experience if condemned to suffer the eternal torments of Hell. Therefore, like Ugolino, Francis would seem to have regarded the wolf as a symbolic object, seeing in the creature's ferocity and destructiveness a divine admonition, warning sinners of the urgent need to repent for their misdeeds.

For Francis's contemporaries, then, the taming of the wolf was not a revolutionary break with the past, as Lynn White Jr. maintained, but rather a deeply traditional

¹⁸ For a more extended discussion of this subject, see Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 50-54.

¹⁹ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 21, p. 1348.

manifestation of the saint's holiness and piety.²⁰ Instead of instituting 'a democracy of God's creatures', Francis was thought to have re-asserted humanity's original authority over the animal kingdom - a return to the state of primal innocence that caused the wolf to abandon his wild and savage behaviour, and adopt a life of dutiful obedience. Moreover, it would appear that Francis shared with his contemporaries a similar set of assumptions about animals, treating the wolf (at least in part), as though he were a sign that had been sent by God to alert wrongdoers to the terrible pain of damnation.

In the following section, I shall explore more fully the various philosophical and theological assumptions that underpin the idea of the return to Paradise by examining one of the stories from the *Life* of St. Francis that tells how he curbed his sexual desires by beating his body - which he regarded as a metaphorical animal, and pointedly referred to as 'Brother Ass' - in the hope of re-establishing the absolute control over his physical nature that humanity had once enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, but which - like the ascendancy over the animal kingdom - had been relinquished as a consequence of the Fall.

Dominion Over Animals: The Taming of 'Brother Ass'

Francis's relationship with the animal kingdom was inextricably bound up with his complex attitude towards his own body, and nowhere is this connection more strikingly apparent than in the story of his reproof to Brother Ass, an incident that was recounted by both Thomas of

²⁰ The traditional hagiographical motif of the saint's miraculous power over animals is also illustrated with reference to a wolf in the tenth-century *Life* of the English martyr-king, St. Edmund, in which a wolf guarded the saint's severed head before its discovery by his followers. See the *Life of St Edmund* by Abbo of Fleury, in Michael Winterbottom, ed. *Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 65-87.

Celano and St. Bonaventure.²¹ According to Bonaventure's account of the episode, one night while Francis was praying in his cell in the hermitage of Sarteano, he was visited by the Devil, who subjected him to the temptation of lust. As soon as Francis felt the first stirrings of his flesh, he removed his habit, and began to whip himself, saying:

There, Brother Ass, this is how you ought to be treated, to bear the whip like this. The habit serves the religious state and presents a symbol of holiness. A lustful man has no right to steal it. If you want to go that way, then go.²²

Once he had beaten himself severely, Francis went outside and rolled around naked in the snow. After some time he made seven snowmen, and standing before them, he again addressed his body:

Look, this larger one is your wife those four are your two sons and two daughters; the other two are a servant and a maid whom you should have to serve you. Hurry, then, and clothe them since they are dying of cold. But if it is too much for you to care for so many, then take care to serve one master.²³

With that, St. Francis conquered his lustful thoughts, and returned triumphantly to his cell, never to be afflicted by a similar temptation again.

Just as the taming of the wolf of Gubbio turned out to be a deeply traditional manifestation of Francis's sanctity, whose significance could only properly be understood with reference to hagiographical convention, so this incident, however idiosyncratic it may seem, has its conventional analogues: the saint was not alone in considering the human

²¹ See Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter LXXXII, pp. 458-459, and St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York, 1979), Chapter 5, pp. 220-221.

²² St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 5, pp. 220-221.

²³ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of S. Francis*, Chapter 5, p. 221.

body to be essentially asinine in nature. Writing in his *Life of St. Hilarion* (composed at the end of the fourth century), St. Jerome told how the Palestinian monk, ascete, and virgin, Hilarion, withdrew into the desert while still in his teens, where he successfully warded off lustful thoughts by beating his body, which he also referred to as an ass:

The Devil, consequently, tickled the boy's senses and excited the fires of passion usual in puberty. Christ's young novice was compelled to reflect upon what he knew not and to revolve in his mind processions of seductive images and scenes which he had never experienced. Enraged with himself, he beat blows upon his heart as if he could destroy the disturbing thoughts by the sheer violence of the attack. 'You ass,' he said to his body, 'I'll see that you don't kick against the goad; I'll fill you not with barley, but with chaff. I shall wear you out with hunger and thirst; I shall weigh you down with a heavy burden; through the heat and cold I shall drive you, so that you will think of food rather than lust.'²⁴

Like Hilarion almost a thousand years earlier, Francis would appear to have looked upon his own nature in profoundly dualistic terms, recognising that one of the functions of his rational, spiritual soul was to control - by resorting to physical discipline if necessary - the wayward sexual impulses that had their origins in, and derived their energies from, his irrational, animalistic body. That Francis actually conceived of himself in these warring terms was reiterated by Bonaventure, who observed that the saint 'used to call his body Brother Ass, for he felt it should be subjected to heavy labour, beaten frequently with whips

²⁴ St. Jerome, *Life of St. Hilarion*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in Roy J. Deferrari, ed. *Early Christian Biographies*, The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 15 (Washington, 1952), pp. 248-249. Francis's rebuke to Brother Ass is not the only aspect of the story to call to mind an incident from an earlier saint's *Life*. According to Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), St. Benedict of Niola overcame the temptation of lust by diving naked into a thick patch of nettles and briars, an action that clearly anticipated Francis's naked dive into the deep snow. See Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, The Fathers of the Church Vol. 39 (New York, 1959), Book 2, Chapter 2, pp. 59-60.

and fed with the poorest food.'²⁵ For Francis, then, the relationship between the soul and the body was analogous to that between the human and animal worlds, and his successful conquest of Brother Ass - paralleling as it does the dominion that he was thought to have established over the animal kingdom - has important implications for our understanding of the role of animals in the Franciscan legend.

This correspondence between humanity's control over the brute creation, and the soul's command of the body's erotic desires, was famously elaborated by St. Augustine in his discussion of original sin in the *City of God*, a work that he wrote during the second and third decades of the fifth century, and which, as Elaine Pagels has noted, 'became, for better and worse, the heritage of all subsequent generations of western Christians and the major influence on their psychological and political thinking.'²⁶

Augustine believed that an anatomy of the sin of lust - which he conceived of as spontaneous and uncontrollable sexual desire - could provide a unique insight into both the nature and origins of original sin, because each lustful thought or action contained within itself the same dynamic conflict that had accompanied humanity's first act of disobedience: Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. However, although Augustine insisted that lust was by its very nature sinful, and that it emerged as a direct consequence of the Fall, he did not consider human sexuality to be intrinsically evil, arguing instead that Adam and Eve could have conceived children in Paradise without lust,

²⁵ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 5, p. 222.

²⁶ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. xxvi.

since before the Fall their sexual organs were not subject to lustful passions, but to the rational control of the human will:

When mankind was in such a state of ease and plenty, blest with such felicity, let us never imagine that it was impossible for the seed of children to be sown without the morbid condition of lust. Instead, the sexual organs would have been brought into activity by the same bidding of the will as controlled the other organs. Then, without feeling the allurements of passion goading him on, the husband would have relaxed on the wife's bosom in tranquillity of mind and with no impairment of the body's integrity. Moreover, although we can not prove this in experience, it does not therefore follow that we should not believe that when these parts of the body were not activated by the turbulent heat of passion but brought into service by deliberate use of power when the need arose, the male seed could not have been dispatched into the womb, with no loss of the wife's integrity, just as the menstrual flux can now be produced from the womb of a virgin without loss of maidenhead. For the seed could be injected through the same passage by which the flux is now ejected. Now just as the female womb might have been opened for parturition by a natural impulse when the time was ripe, instead of by the groans of travail, so the two sexes might have been united for impregnation and conception by an act of will, instead of by a lustful craving.²⁷

Thus, according to Augustine, the origins of the sin of lust lay not in an innately corrupt human sexual nature, but in humanity's complete loss of conscious control over sexual feelings, a loss that Augustine believed occurred as a result of the Fall, and could best be understood in terms of the changing relationship between the body, the soul, and God.

Following the opinion of classical philosophers, Augustine assumed that human nature consisted of two elements; a rational soul and an irrational body, with the former exercising a natural authority over the latter:

For the body is undoubtedly a servant; as Sallust says, 'Our soul is appointed to command, our body to obey.' And he adds, 'One element in

²⁷ St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1984), Book XIV, Chapter 26, p. 591.

us we share with the gods, the other with the beasts,' for he is speaking about man, who, like the beasts, has a mortal body.'²⁸

In the same way that God had granted human beings an absolute right to rule over the animal kingdom - 'He [God] did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man, but man over the beasts'²⁹ - so Augustine believed that the soul had originally enjoyed an undisputed sovereignty over the body. For Augustine, then, there was nothing egalitarian or democratic about paradise. On the contrary, the state of harmony that existed before the Fall was founded upon the ascendancy of the rational over the irrational, whether manifested in the form of humanity's dominion over the animal kingdom, or the soul's mastery of the body.

Following the traditional Christian interpretation of the Fall, Augustine claimed that the prelapsarian state of harmony had been shattered at the very moment that Adam and Eve had disobeyed God's commandment by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, yet he viewed this primal act of human disobedience not just as an attack upon God's authority, but as an attempt by Adam and Eve to overthrow the hierarchical order that God had originally created. According to Augustine, the human soul - which should have remained subservient to the will of God - had been filled with a perverse desire for autonomy, and as a fitting punishment for its sinful wish for independence, it was forced to contend with an analogous act of rebellion from its own servant, the body:

The soul in fact rejoiced in its freedom to act perversely and disdained to be God's servant; and so it was deprived of the obedient service which its body had at first rendered. At its own pleasure the soul deserted its superior and master; and so it no longer retained its inferior and servant to

²⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book IX, Chapter 9, p. 354.

²⁹ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 15, pp. 874-875.

its will. It did not keep its own flesh subject to it in all respects, as it could have kept it for ever if it had itself continued in subjection to God. This then was the time when the flesh began to 'lust in opposition to the spirit', which is the conflict that attends us from our birth.³⁰

As Elaine Pagels has observed, Augustine conceived of Adam and Eve's sin in overtly political terms, seeing it as a revolutionary act that itself resulted in two further acts of rebellion - that of the body against the soul, and of the animal kingdom against humanity.³¹ For Augustine, then, the existence of lust was intimately connected with the disobedience of the animals, and both phenomena constituted painful and shameful reminders of humanity's corrupt and fallen nature.

Having briefly considered some of Augustine's comments on both the origins and the consequences of the sin of lust, it is possible to approach St. Francis's encounter with Brother Ass with more confidence and understanding. Clearly, Bonaventure considered that Francis's suppression of his lustful impulses, like his sovereignty over the animal kingdom, spoke of a perfect harmony that existed between his body and his soul, and his soul and God:

Francis had reached such purity that his body was in remarkable harmony with his spirit and his spirit with God. As a result God ordained that creation which serves its maker should be subject in an extraordinary way to his will and command.³²

Thus, Bonaventure was able to conclude his account of the taming of Brother Ass by claiming that Francis was never to experience a similar affliction again, indicating that just as he had re-established the state of peace and harmony that had originally characterised

³⁰ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIII, Chapter 13, p. 522.

³¹ See Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, p. 148.

³² St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 5, p. 225.

relations between humanity and the animal kingdom, so within the microcosm of his own self he had succeeded in permanently restoring the natural authority of his soul, and the innate obedience of his body.

However, as indicated above, the story of Brother Ass does not merely tell us something of Francis's attitude towards his own bodily desires and impulses, it also speaks of his underlying beliefs and assumptions about the animal kingdom, and in particular the nature of its relationship (whether pre- or post-lapsarian), with the human world. Because Brother Ass was a metaphorical animal, it does not necessarily follow that Francis either treated, or considered it acceptable to treat, real asses with the same degree of severity that he showed his own body. Rather, my interpretation of the story highlights the very great extent to which Francis shared what Keith Thomas has referred to as 'the breathtakingly anthropocentric spirit' of the time.³³ After all, the saint would appear to have believed that the original condition of the animal kingdom was one of natural servility and obedience to humanity, a state that he himself was miraculously able to restore thanks to his remarkable purity and holiness. Indeed, so conscious was Francis of the instinctive yearning on the part of animals to serve and obey their human masters, that according to his companions Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, he once exclaimed: 'all creatures say and proclaim; "God made me for you, O man."',³⁴

Francis was able to justify his belief that animals had been created for the benefit of humanity by appealing to the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, which relates how

³³ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 18.

³⁴ *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, ed. and trans. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford, 1970), Chapter, 51, p. 179.

God granted the first man and woman - whom He had made in His own image - dominion over the whole of the animal kingdom:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1: 28).

In the final section of this chapter, I shall explore some of the different ways in which the Bible governed Francis's perceptions of, and behaviour towards, animals, as he read events in the world around him both through and by specific biblical texts. For, as well as confirming his belief in the divinely ordained utility of the creation, alternative, sometimes contradictory ideas about the animal kingdom as a whole, and individual animal species, were suggested to him by passages from the Old and New Testaments.

Reading The Book of Nature: St. Francis, the Bible, and the Natural World

In the spring of 1213, a mere three years after Pope Innocent III had granted him permission to establish a new religious order, St. Francis suffered a major spiritual crisis brought on by uncertainty about the nature of his vocation. Deeply attached to the contemplative life, the saint questioned whether he should abandon the evangelical mission that he had been pursuing up to that point, and withdraw instead to a remote hermitage where he could devote himself entirely to prayer. Unable to decide which course to follow, he consulted two of his most trusted friends; a certain Brother Silvester, and St. Clare, who both urged him to continue with his preaching ministry. Believing their pronouncements to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, Francis - filled with a new spiritual enthusiasm - immediately

set off to preach the word of God, and it was during this preaching tour of the local Umbrian countryside that he delivered his famous sermon to the birds.³⁵

According to Bonaventure's account of the sermon, while Francis and his companions were travelling through the countryside near Bevagna, a village not far from Assisi, they came across a large flock of birds:

When God's saint saw them, he quickly ran to the spot and greeted them as if they were endowed with reason. They all became alert and turned toward him, and those perched in the trees bent their heads as he approached them and in an uncommon way directed their attention to him. He went right up to them and solicitously urged them to listen to the word of God, saying: 'Oh birds, my brothers, you have a great obligation to praise your creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with, provided you with the pure air and cares for you without any worries on your part.' While he was saying this and similar things to them, the birds showed their joy in a remarkable fashion. They began to stretch out their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks and gaze at him attentively. He went through their midst with amazing fervor of spirit, brushing against them with his tunic. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them his blessing and permission to leave, then they all flew away together. His companions waiting on the road saw all these things. When he returned to them, that pure and simple man began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to the birds before.³⁶

Here we have the archetypal vision of St. Francis, the lover of nature, preaching to birds as if they were a human congregation, affording them the same rights and responsibilities as a human audience. However, it is important to recognise that the sermon was as much a summation of traditional biblical attitudes towards nature, as a spontaneous and personal

³⁵ For the story of the sermon to the birds, see Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXI, pp. 277-278, St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 12, pp. 294-295, and *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 16, pp. 1336-1337.

³⁶ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 12, pp. 294-295.

response on the part of Francis to his avian audience. For, as well as enjoining human beings to preach to the animal kingdom (Mark 16: 15), the Bible also refers to the duty of non-human creatures to praise God,³⁷ and these two biblical injunctions would seem to lie behind Francis's call to the birds to honour their debt of gratitude to their Creator. Although Francis assumed that God valued humans more than animals,³⁸ he nevertheless argued that all creatures, regardless of their status, were under a moral obligation to praise God for the precious gift of life. Thus, in his sermon, the saint told the birds of the many blessings that God had bestowed upon them, claiming that their Creator had generously provided for their every need, and while this assertion ignores the reality of struggle and conflict that characterises the life of birds, it is nevertheless informed by one of the central tenets of the Christian religion; a belief - which can be traced back to the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis - in the essential goodness of the creation:

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1: 25).

Francis was, then, not actually breaking with theological tradition in the substance of his injunctions to the birds, although his mode of expression clearly struck his biographers as idiosyncratic. There were biblical precedents for treating the wider animal kingdom with something akin to the respect afforded to humanity, and these could have formed the basis

³⁷ For instance, the Book of Daniel tells of the three righteous Jews who called upon the birds of the air to glorify and exalt their Creator: 'O all ye fowls of the air, bless ye the Lord; praise and exalt him above all for ever.' (Daniel 3: 58).

³⁸ Francis's opinion on the relative worth of humans and birds echoes the judgement of Jesus: 'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feedeth them. *Are ye not much better than they?*' (Matthew 6: 26, my italics).

of a new and radical approach to the natural world. But, crucially, Francis did not exploit these texts in that way. It is important to attend to the true motivation behind this sermon, which, on closer inspection, proves to be less concerned with the nature of the birds themselves, than with the saint's wider theological preoccupations. Francis expressed in his avian sermon a belief in the goodness of the natural world; but it was a belief based not upon a sense of the intrinsic virtues of nature, but on the assumption that each and every creature reflected, and partook of, the glory of God. Francis loved and respected the birds because he saw in them a reflection of their Creator, a reflection that called to mind his own relationship with God. It was their great good fortune at having been clothed with feathers and housed in the air that reminded him of God's goodness, power, and wisdom, and it was this sense of God's generosity and bounty that prompted the saint to preach a sermon that is as much an expression of his own sense of gratitude for continued divine favour, as it is a statement on the real role of birds in the world.

Because no animal story from the legend of St. Francis reverberates with such biblical resonance as the narrative of the sermon to the birds, it is important to look beyond the words of the sermon, to the sacred texts upon which it draws.³⁹ As we have already seen, even the seemingly incidental detail of Francis's self-reproach - uttered for never having preached to birds before - would appear to have been inspired by a passage from the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus instructed his apostles to preach 'to every creature.' (Mark 16: 15). And this alerts us to a second, and perhaps more important dimension to the saint's motivation, his apparent need to fulfil through his own actions a rather literal reading of

³⁹ Roger D. Sorrell's excellent interpretation of the sermon treats its many scriptural allusions with great sensitivity. See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 59-68.

biblical injunctions. Francis's sermon to the birds was a reflection of his intensely biblicist approach to life in general, an approach that, as I shall demonstrate in what follows, saw the biblical texts as expressly and intensely applicable to the contemporary world, a world that in turn could be seen as a 'text' equally expressive of divine truth for those with the ability and desire to search out its deeper symbolic meaning.

Both Bonaventure and Thomas of Celano commented upon this capacity of St. Francis to see beneath the surface of things, and detect the secret signature that God had imprinted on all His work. To quote Thomas of Celano: 'he discerned the hidden things of nature with his sensitive heart, as one who has already escaped into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God.'⁴⁰ For Francis, then, all natural objects, whether animate or inanimate, were holy by dint of their association with God, so that he was filled with ineffable joy simply by contemplating the sun, moon and stars, while he exhorted flowers, vineyards, cornfields, forests and stones to thank their Creator for His goodness and liberality.⁴¹

Of course, the God who was revealed to Francis through his contemplation of the natural world was not an abstract or impersonal deity, but the divine being whose unfolding relationship with humanity had been recorded in the pages of the Bible. However, there was no conflict for Francis between what he had learnt about God from his reading of the

⁴⁰ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter, XXIX, p. 297.

⁴¹ See Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXIX, pp. 296-297. Edward Armstrong (*Saint Francis, Nature Mystic*, pp. 11-12), has summarised Francis's sacramental reverence for the natural world in the following way: 'For him nature spoke of God. All created things pointed beyond themselves to their Creator. ...It was because nature revealed in sight, sound, and fragrance the handiwork and glory of God that he admired and rejoiced in things of beauty. He envisaged all Creation, man supremely, as worshipping the Creator.'

Scriptures, and the image of the Creator that he saw reflected in the natural world. On the contrary, he saw in the cosmos much that he associated quite specifically with Christ and his incarnation. For instance, as Bonaventure observed, the sight of young lambs being led to the slaughter would remind the saint of the image of the lamb of God, which in turn would inspire him to save the creatures from their fate: 'He often paid to ransom lambs that were being led to their death, remembering the most gentle lamb who willed to be led to the slaughter to pay the ransom of sinners.'⁴² Bonaventure's comments would therefore seem to suggest that Francis loved lambs not because they were intrinsically loveable, but because they symbolised the meekness and purity of Christ. For Francis, favouring lambs was an act of religious devotion: an expression of his deep gratitude to Jesus for his sacrifice on the cross. Consequently, Francis's mystical contemplation of the natural world deepened not so much his respect and affection for animals, *qua* animals, as his personal love of Christ. To refer once again to Thomas of Celano:

among all the various kinds of animals, he loved little lambs with a special predilection and more ready affection, because in the sacred scriptures the humility of our Lord Jesus Christ is more frequently likened to that of the lamb and best illustrated by the simile of the lamb. So, all things, especially those in which some allegorical similarity to the son of God could be found, he would embrace more fondly and look upon more willingly.⁴³

There would appear, then, to be something of a contradiction lying at the heart of Francis's vision of the natural world, for while he is said to have loved all creatures 'on account of their Creator',⁴⁴ he nevertheless believed that some animals - such as lambs - spoke more

⁴² St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 8, p. 255.

⁴³ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXVIII, p. 293.

⁴⁴ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life Of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXIX, p. 295.

eloquently of God than others, and it was for these more symbolically articulate creatures that he reserved his special favour. Therefore, in addition to his general, all-embracing love of the natural world, Francis bore a particular love for those creatures that spoke symbolically of Christ.

The story of Francis's encounter with the solitary lamb forced to live with a herd of goats not only highlights this inconsistency in his attitude towards creation, but also reveals just how profoundly his perceptions of, and responses to, animals and nature, were determined by his reading of the Bible. According to Thomas of Celano, while Francis was travelling through the Marches of Ancona with a certain Brother Paul, he came across a shepherd who was feeding a large herd of goats, in the midst of which was a single lamb. Deeply touched with sorrow at the sight of this solitary little sheep, Francis said to his companion:

Do you not see this sheep that walks so meekly among the goats? I tell you that our Lord Jesus Christ walked in the same way meekly among the pharisees and chief priests. Therefore I ask you, my son, to have pity with me on this little sheep. Let us pay the price and lead her away from among these goats.⁴⁵

Having no money with which to purchase the animal, the two friars were wondering what to do when a merchant suddenly appeared and offered to pay the shepherd the required price. After the transaction was completed, Francis removed the lamb from the field of goats, and gave it to the community of Poor Clares at San Severino where it was well looked after. Some time later, the nuns of San Severino sent St. Francis a tunic that they had made using the lamb's wool.

⁴⁵ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXVIII, p. 294.

So all-encompassing was Francis's devotion to Christ, and so deeply had he immersed himself in the pages of the Bible, that he was able to transform the seemingly unremarkable sight of a solitary sheep surrounded by a herd of goats into a vision of Christ wandering meekly amongst the pharisees and chief priests. For Francis, the natural world was an allegorical text in which God had cryptically concealed certain signs and symbols whose underlying meaning could be recovered or deciphered only with reference to the holy Scriptures. But, it is important to note that in addition to viewing the lamb as a living emblem, who symbolically re-enacted a scene from sacred history within the Book of Nature, Francis - by accepting a tunic made from its wool - also recognised that on one level at least the animal was simply a domesticated, wool-producing beast, whose life was firmly rooted in the concrete, physical world of the here and now. Although there is a clear disjunction between these two responses to the lamb - the one transcendent, the other utilitarian - both reactions were informed by a similarly anthropocentric spirit, which saw the creature exclusively in terms of how its existence benefited human beings, whether in purely practical terms by providing men and women with wool for clothing, or in the spiritual sphere by encouraging individuals to mediate upon the life of Christ.

The story of Francis's encounter with the lamb and the goats is also significant because it demonstrates that there were some animals that the saint actively disliked. Prompted by the same biblical precedent that led him to bestow his special love and care on lambs, Francis felt compelled to view certain other animals - such as goats - as somehow evil or sinister. He probably derived his suspicion of goats from the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, where, in a parable on the day of judgement, Christ compared the

damned sinners who would have to endure an eternity of torment, to the unwanted goats that a shepherd separates from his sheep:

When the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory. And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from his goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. ...Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25: 31-33, & 41).

Francis's antipathy to goats illustrates with great clarity the inconsistency in his vision of the natural world to which I have already referred. On the one hand, he clearly believed that all creatures shared in the goodness of their Creator, and - as he indicated in his sermon to the birds - had a duty to praise and thank God for the precious gift of life. But, on the other hand, and in seeming defiance of this all-encompassing love of creation, his implicit faith in the veracity of the Bible encouraged him to discriminate between animals, viewing some as images - almost embodiments - of Christ, while seeing others as symbols of the damned.

Of all the members of the animal kingdom, Francis probably disliked pigs most of all, a fact that would seem to reflect their especially unwholesome reputation for uncleanness and greed, a reputation that finds expression in such biblical episodes as the parable of the prodigal son, in which Jesus told of a young man who was forced to suffer the terrible indignity of becoming a swineherd after he had recklessly squandered his father's inheritance, and the story of the Gadarene swine, which relates how Jesus cast a multitude of demons into a herd of pigs, causing the animals to stampede over a cliff.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ For the parable of the prodigal son, see Luke 15:11-32, while the story of the Gadarene swine can be found in Matthew 8: 28-32, Mark 5: 1-13, and Luke 8: 26-33. For a more extensive discussion of Francis's aversion to pigs, see Armstrong, *Saint Francis, Nature Mystic*, pp. 113-123.

Francis's moral disapproval of, and strong aversion to, pigs, is most conspicuously in evidence in the story of the wicked sow and the innocent lamb, an episode that was related by both Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure.⁴⁷ According to Bonaventure, while the saint was staying at the monastery of San Verecondo in the diocese of Gubbio, a new-born lamb was attacked and killed by a 'ferocious sow'.⁴⁸ The death of the lamb reminded Francis of the supreme sacrifice that had been made by the immaculate Lamb of God, and with this thought in his mind he cursed the sow for its act of murder, saying: 'Alas, brother lamb, innocent animal, you represent Christ to men. A curse on that impious beast that killed you; may no man or beast ever eat of her.'⁴⁹ As soon as he had uttered these words, the sow fell sick, eventually dying from her illness after suffering in terrible agony for three days. The sow's carcass was then thrown into the monastery moat, where - in fulfilment of St. Francis's curse - it remained completely untouched by even the hungriest animal.

Perhaps what is most immediately striking about this story is the sheer intensity of Francis's animosity to the sow, and his genuine sense of horror at its greed and savagery. The strength of the saint's aversion is revealed in the words of the curse that he directed against the animal, in which he accused her of committing an impious act of murder. In Francis's eyes, then, the sow's actions were overlaid with such religious significance that she was effectively guilty of sacrilege, having performed a deed that - in a symbolic sense at least - both recalled and repeated the crucifixion of Christ. Thus, once again, we find that a

⁴⁷ See Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book II, Chapter LXXVII, p. 454, and St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 8, p. 255.

⁴⁸ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 8, p. 255.

⁴⁹ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 8, p. 255.

couple of farmyard animals were transformed through the power of Francis's biblically inspired imagination into symbols of good and evil, enabling a seemingly unremarkable agricultural incident to be viewed as an allegorical confrontation between the most fundamental of cosmic forces.

But, as well as illustrating Francis's hostility to pigs, the story of the lamb and the sow is also interesting for the light that it sheds on the saint's attitude towards the eating of animals. For, in the malediction that Francis uttered against the sow, not only did he condemn her to death, but he also imposed a *post mortem* injunction preventing any creature - whether human or animal - from ever eating any of her flesh. This rather curious prohibition can be explained in two different ways. On the one hand, it is possible that Francis believed that the sow had rendered herself so spiritually unclean through her act of wickedness that both humans and animals would intuitively recoil from any contact with her impure and polluted carcass. On the other hand, however, the injunction against eating the pig might be seen as yet another penalty directed against the animal, over and above the taking of her life. According to this reading of the curse, by denying the sow the opportunity of being eaten, the saint was able to compound her punishment by preventing her from fulfilling one of the purposes for which she had been created.

This interpretation of Francis's curse would seem to suggest that the saint did not simply look upon animals as sources of food, but believed that this was how they actually perceived themselves. That Francis ate animals for food is beyond dispute, being well attested in the various sources, and yet his attitude towards meat-eating has been the subject of some confusion and controversy in recent years, with certain commentators - viewing his

relationship with the animal kingdom through the filter of the modern environmental and animal rights movements - expressing surprise and disappointment at his failure to become a vegetarian. For instance, after describing the saint's great love of creation (citing as proof both the sermon to the birds and the taming of the wolf of Gubbio), Morris Bishop went on to express his puzzlement at the fact that Francis did not refrain from eating meat: 'Curiously, this brother of all life did not take the next logical, almost inevitable, step and refuse to eat meat.'⁵⁰ However, far from opposing the killing of animals for food, Francis actually considered meat-eating to be a moral duty, basing both his own conduct, and the rule of the Franciscan Order on a literal interpretation of Christ's commandment to his apostles: 'eat such things as are set before you' (Luke 10: 8); an injunction that he incorporated into the Franciscan Rule of 1223 (the so-called *Regula Bullata*): 'Whatever house they [the friars] enter, they should first say, "Peace to this house" (Luke 10: 5), and in the words of the Gospel they may eat what is set before them (Luke 10: 8).'⁵¹ For Francis, then, the eating of meat was not just a matter of custom or necessity, it was a religious obligation that had been imposed upon humanity by no less a figure than Jesus.⁵²

⁵⁰ Morris Bishop, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Boston, 1974), p. 187.

⁵¹ St. Francis of Assisi, *The Rule of 1223*, trans. Benen Fahy, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), Chapter 3, p. 60.

⁵² The eating of meat also received divine sanction in the Old Testament. In God's *post diluvian* covenant with Noah, God granted Noah and his descendents the right to eat all the beasts of the earth, air and sea: 'And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you, even as the green herb have I given you all things.' (Genesis 9: 1-3).

Perhaps the most interesting story about meat-eating in the Franciscan canon - and certainly the one that casts the most light on the influence that Jesus's dietary habits had on the Friars Minor - concerns not Francis himself, but St. Anthony of Padua, one of Francis's earliest and most famous followers.⁵³ According to the *Actus Beati Francisci* (and its Italian derivative *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*), while Anthony was staying in the city of Rimini, he was confronted by a large group of heretics who were so stubborn that they refused to be swayed by his preaching. In order to expose both their obstinacy and the falseness of their dogma, the saint went to the mouth of a river near the sea, and began to preach a sermon to the fish, saying: 'You fishes of the sea and river, listen to the word of God, since the faithless heretics refuse to hear it.'⁵⁴ As soon as he had spoken these words, a great multitude of fish gathered before him, holding their heads above the water and gazing intently at his face. Having gained his audience's complete attention, Anthony then proceeded to enumerate some of the many favours that God had bestowed upon them:

My fish brothers, you should give as many thanks as you can to your Creator who has granted you such a noble element as your dwelling place, so that you have fresh and salt water, just as you please. Moreover He has given you many refuges to escape from storms. He has also given you a clear and transparent element and ways to travel and food to live on. Your kind creator also prepares for you the food that you need even in the depths of the ocean. When He created you at the creation of the world, He gave you the command to increase and multiply, and He gave you His blessing. ...You were chosen as food for the Eternal King, Our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ, before his resurrection and in a mysterious way

⁵³ St. Anthony of Padua (1193-1231), joined the Franciscans in 1220, and was appointed to teach the friars theology, first at Bologna, and then at Padua. He also travelled widely through Southern France where he preached against heresy, eventually winning the title 'the hammer of the heretics' for the effectiveness of his preaching. In deference to St. Anthony's great learning, St. Francis referred to him as 'his bishop'. See *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 39, p. 1390.

⁵⁴ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 40, p. 1391.

afterwards. Because of all these things you should praise and bless the Lord, who has given you so many more blessings than other creatures.⁵⁵

All the inhabitants of the city - including the heretics - were so amazed at the sight of this miracle that they sat down at Anthony's feet and begged him to preach them a sermon. Anthony acceded to their request, and spoke with such eloquence about the Catholic religion that he succeeded in converting all of the city's heretics.

In many ways, St. Anthony's sermon to the fish recalls St. Francis's sermon to the birds, for in both stories the animals were told of the extraordinary generosity of their Creator, and urged to praise and thank Him for His benevolence and wisdom. Moreover, just as St. Francis valued the birds not so much for their own intrinsic worth, but as creatures who were in some way touched by the glory of their Creator, so Anthony praised God by extolling the virtues of His creation. However, among the many acts of divine kindness for which Anthony expected his audience to be grateful was the somewhat dubious honour that Jesus had chosen to eat fish both before and after his resurrection. Once again, a story from the legend of St. Francis highlights the profoundly anthropocentric spirit of the age, with Anthony assuming not only that his audience of fish would instinctively understand that the role or purpose of their lives was to be eaten by humans, but also that they would experience a sense of pride and gratitude in the knowledge that their Creator, Jesus, had condescended to consume fish during his time on earth.

Anthony's sermon to the fish - and the attitude towards the animal kingdom underlying it - is therefore profoundly paradoxical in character. Like St. Francis before him, Anthony would appear to have believed that the lives of animals were entirely expendable,

⁵⁵ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 40, pp. 1392-1393.

and that their worth resided in their usefulness to humanity, as well as in the fact that they reflected the glory of God, their Creator. But, at the same time (and again following the precedent of the sermon to the birds), Anthony also treated his audience of fish as though it were endowed both with intelligence, and an instinctive, spiritual awareness of the presence of God. We are confronted, then, by a tension in Anthony's sermon between two conflicting views of the animal kingdom; one anthropocentric and pragmatic, the other transcendent and spiritual, a confusion that has been noted by the historian Colin Spencer:

After giving the sermon to the admiring fish, St. Anthony probably went back home and grilled a few of them for supper. Or if not, the fact that fish was an integral part of their diet, a necessity on fast days, was never questioned by either St. Francis or by St. Anthony, nor by the people who told the story. The fish might well have listened with greater attention than 'sinful heretics' but they could still be killed and eaten. The medieval mind saw the animal kingdom in a deeply complex and contradictory way.⁵⁶

Francis's attitude towards the eating of meat - and the complete absence from his thinking of any moral qualms about the killing of animals - probably finds its definitive, and most graphic expression in an incident recorded by Thomas of Celano in his *Second Life of St. Francis*. According to Thomas, on one occasion when Christmas happened to fall on a Friday - a day of fasting and abstinence - Francis was asked by a certain Brother Morico whether or not the friars were allowed to eat meat:

When the question arose about eating meat that day, since the Christmas day was a Friday, he [St. Francis] replied, saying to Brother Morico: 'You sin, Brother, calling the day on which the Child was born to us a day of fast. It is my wish,' he said, 'that even the walls should eat meat on such a day, and if they cannot, they should be smeared with meat on the outside.'⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism*. (London, 1993). p.174.

⁵⁷ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter CLI, pp. 521-522.

For Francis, the duty to celebrate Christmas outweighed any obligations on the part of the friars to abstain from meat-eating on a Friday. Moreover, far from being troubled by the morality of killing animals, Francis believed that a failure to eat meat on Christmas day would itself constitute an immoral act, arguing that it could be interpreted as something of an affront to Christ, whose birthday should be an occasion of joy and festivity. Therefore, not only did Francis associate meat-eating at Christmas with celebration and thanks giving, more importantly, he considered it to be a sacramental duty that symbolically conveyed humanity's gratitude to Jesus for his willingness to assume human form, and suffer death on the cross.⁵⁸

Francis's moral approval of meat-eating, and his intense aversion to pigs, find further expression in one final story from the Franciscan canon, a story that concentrates on the figure not of Francis himself, but of a certain Brother Juniper, one of the saint's holiest and most humble companions.⁵⁹ According to the *Life of Brother Juniper*, while the humble Brother Juniper was living in the church of St. Mary of the Angels, he asked a certain sick friar whom he was nursing if there was anything that he desired. When the friar answered

⁵⁸ Roger D. Sorrell has also suggested that Francis's enthusiasm for meat-eating was in part a reaction to the fact that vegetarianism was practised by the Cathars, a sect which - although at its strongest in Southern France - was not unknown in Northern and Central Italy. Thus, Sorrell argued that Francis deliberately emphasised the importance of meat-eating both for himself, and his followers, as a way of establishing his own orthodox credentials, and distinguishing the Friars Minor from the many heretical movements that were in existence at the time. See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 77-79.

⁵⁹ This episode is recounted in an anonymous fourteenth-century *Life of Brother Juniper*. See *Vita Fratris Iuniperi*, in *Analecta Franciscana* III (Quaracchi, 1897), pp. 54-64. For an English translation, see the *Life of Friar Juniper*, in T. Okey, trans. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* (London, 1910), pp. 134-147.

that what he most wanted was to eat a pig's foot, Juniper went to a wood where he knew that some pigs would be feeding, selected an animal, and chopped off one of its feet with a knife. Juniper then returned to the church of St. Mary, where he prepared the food, and gave it to his companion.

Meanwhile, the owner of the injured pig became so angry on discovering what had happened that he complained to the friars. St. Francis heard the uproar that the man was causing, and humbly tried to assuage his anger, but to no avail. The man could not be pacified, and returned home, raging against the wickedness of the friars. Suspecting that Juniper was responsible for the furore, Francis asked him whether or not he had chopped off the pig's foot, and because Juniper considered the deed to be an act of charity, he blithely told Francis the whole story. Fearful of the great scandal that might ensue, Francis instructed Juniper to follow the man, humbly beg his forgiveness, and do whatever was in his power to make amends. Juniper instantly complied with Francis's command, and once he had caught up with the man, he embraced him, and told him of the charitable motive that had inspired his action. At first the man was unmoved by these protestations, but after a while he became so touched by Juniper's simplicity and humility that he acknowledged his own wrong doing, and offered to kill the pig and give the rest of the carcass to the friars as a gift. All this was carried out, and after the animal had been delivered to the friars, Francis praised the patience and simplicity of Juniper, saying: 'Would to God, my brethren, that I had a whole forest of such Junipers.'⁶⁰

⁶⁰ *Life of Friar Juniper*, p. 137.

This is one of only a handful of narratives in the canon of Franciscan literature in which the holiness of St. Francis is eclipsed by the spiritual achievements of one of his companions. Despite the many criticisms levelled against him, Juniper is entirely vindicated at the end of the story, with his various actions - interpreted at first as misdeeds - being shown to be nothing more than expressions of his spiritual fervour and holy simplicity. Indeed, such was the humility of Juniper that he remained completely oblivious of, and indifferent to, the good opinion of others, with the result that even St. Francis fared badly in comparison, appearing somewhat worldly in his concern for the reputation of the Order.

Of course, from the point of view of the present discussion, what is most interesting about the story is the fact that far from eliciting the opprobrium or moral condemnation of the anonymous author, the act of chopping off the pig's foot was presented as an ideal example of saintly behaviour, which eventually won for Juniper the lavish praise of St. Francis himself. Significantly, neither Juniper nor Francis felt it necessary to address themselves to the subject of the compassionate treatment of animals, and at no stage did they suggest that pigs were either entitled to protection from unnecessary cruelty, or even capable of experiencing pain. Rather, Juniper succeeded in persuading both Francis and the pig's owner that his charitable responsibilities towards the sick friar outweighed the claims of ownership that any individual human might have over the animal itself:

I tell thee this much, that considering the consolation this friar of ours felt, and the comfort he took from the said foot, had I cut off the feet of a hundred pigs as I did this one, I believe of a surety God would have looked on it as a good deed.⁶¹

⁶¹ *Life of Friar Juniper*, pp. 135-136.

Although Juniper's treatment of the pig is the starkest example that we have so far considered of human indifference to animal suffering, it nevertheless typifies the low status that was accorded to members of the animal kingdom by both Francis and his biographers. Indeed, as the story of Juniper and the pig all too clearly reveals, Francis and his followers tended to look upon animals first and foremost as objects that had been created by God for human use, whether for food or clothing, or as transcendent symbols, designed to remind human beings of the spiritual reality lying beyond the material world. Even on those occasions when Francis celebrated animal life, such as his sermon to the birds, he would appear to have been using animals as a way of praising and thanking God for the glory of His creation, a fact this is borne out by one further observation that Francis made on the subject of the celebration of Christmas:

I would ask that a general law be made that all who can should scatter corn and grain along the roads so that the birds might have an abundance of food on the day of such great solemnity, especially our sisters the larks.⁶²

Francis's comments would seem to have been motivated not by compassion for the plight of larks in winter, but by a feeling that human beings were under a special obligation to care for God's creation on the anniversary of Christ's birth. Once again, the question of Francis's motivation is crucially important, for as we have seen, it was his intense love of God, rather than any particular affection for the individual creatures themselves, that lay behind his acts of kindness towards such creatures as lambs and birds.

In the next chapter, I shall shift the focus of the thesis from hagiography to romance, and explore how the themes and motifs that I have been investigating in relation to St.

⁶² Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book 2 Chapter CLI, p. 522.

Francis were adopted by the writers of romance literature, and used by them as a way of suggesting that holiness and piety were essential components of courtly, aristocratic nobility. Concentrating on the three fourteenth-century Middle English romances, *Sir Gowther*, *Octavian*, and *Sir Orfeo*, I shall examine through their respective depictions of the animal kingdom how the figure of the romance hero was able to reconcile such traditional saintly qualities as patience and humility, with more conventional chivalric attributes, like the love of hunting, and prowess in arms.

2

Knights and the Brute Creation: Nobility and Sanctity in *Sir Gowther, Octavian, and Sir Orfeo*

Introduction: Romance and Hagiography

In the *Dialogus Miraculorum*, a collection of miracle stories and exemplary anecdotes written between 1219 and 1223 for the edification of the novices at the monastery of Heisterbach, near Bonn, the Cistercian monk, Caesarius, recorded an incident that allegedly occurred during a sermon given by the previous abbot, Gevard:

When the abbot Gevard ...was preaching to us in the Chapterhouse on a certain festival, several of the Brethren, chiefly lay-brothers, went to sleep, and some even began to snore. He noticed this and cried out: 'Listen, brethren, listen; I have something new and important to tell you: There was once a king named Arthur' - there he stopped, and then went on: 'You see, my brothers, to how sad a pass we have come; when I was speaking to you about God, you fell asleep; but as soon as I began a secular story, you all woke up and began to listen with eager ears.'¹

The enthusiastic manner in which the monks are said to have responded to the name of King Arthur strikingly illustrates the enormously strong appeal that such romantic tales held during the early years of the thirteenth century for religious, as well as secular audiences, while the words of condemnation that their reaction elicited from the abbot

¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, Vol. 1, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (London, 1929), Book IV, Chapter XXXVI, p. 233.

Gevard echo the seemingly perennial complaint of religious figures down the ages, that secular stories of love and adventure are more popular than tales dealing with moral or religious subjects.² Of course, implicit in Gevard's comments is the assumption that religious literature is wholly distinct from, and antithetical to, its secular counterpart, yet although his criticism of the monks for preferring secular to religious stories was rhetorically effective, in reality, the line that divided sacred and worldly literature during the later years of the Middle Ages is much more difficult to draw than his remarks would seem to suggest.³

The impossibility of maintaining a strict separation between the realms of religious and secular culture can be illustrated by considering a couple of anecdotes taken from the early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, that demonstrate the profound influence that ideas and motifs drawn from the romance canon had come to exert on religious thought in general, and hagiographical writing in particular, by the beginning

² Gerald Owst has noted how, in the sermon literature of the late Middle Ages, preachers frequently berated their audiences because of their fondness for secular stories, and their indifference to tales of Christ and his saints. See Gerald R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 12-14.

³ The strong affinities between hagiography and secular romance have been the subject of much critical debate during the last thirty years. See, for example, Jennifer Fellows, 'St. George as Romance Hero', *Reading Medieval Studies* 19 (1993), 27-54; Susan Crane, *Insular Romance* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 92-133; Diana T. Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend: "Secular Hagiography" in Middle English Literature', *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978), 311-322; Thomas J. Heffernan, 'An Analysis of the Narrative Motifs in the Legend of St. Eustace', *Medievalia et Humanistica* n. s. 6 (1975), 63-89; Valerie M. Lagorio, 'The *Joseph of Arimathea*: English Hagiography in Transition', *Medievalia et Humanistica* n. s. 6 (1975), 91-102; David N. Klausner, 'Didacticism and Drama in *Guy of Warwick*', *Medievalia et Humanistica* n. s. 6 (1975), 103-119; Margaret Hurley, 'Saints' Legends and Romance Again: Secularization of Structure and Motif', *Genre* 8 (1975), 60-73; Kathryn Hume, 'Structure and Perspective: Romance and Hagiographic Features in the Amicus and Amelius Story', *JEGP* 69 (1970), 89-107; Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968), pp. 120-158; and L. Braswell, 'Sir Isumbras and the Legend of Saint Eustace', *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 128-151.

of the thirteenth century. In an incident related in the *Writings of the Three Companions*, Francis expressed his opinions on the subject of those friars who had abandoned the primitive simplicity of the Order by devoting their time to the study of theology.⁴ According to Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, Francis believed that those brothers who concentrated on intellectual pursuits at the expense of their more humble duties were motivated purely by vanity, and he contrasted their overweening pride, with the holy simplicity of the faithful friars who had remained loyal to the founding principles of the Order:

‘These [humble and simple] brothers of mine are knights of the round table who conceal themselves in remote and desert places that they may the more diligently apply themselves in prayer and meditation, and weep over the sins of themselves and others. Their holiness is known to God, though it may be unknown to the friars and to men.’⁵

That Francis chose to express his respect for, and fellowship with, his humble brothers by alluding to the tales of King Arthur and his knights, rather than to a biblical narrative or saint’s legend, is a testament both to the high cultural status that these secular stories enjoyed, and the close connections that existed at the time between the concepts of religious and secular virtue. Far from sharing abbot Gevard’s distrust of romance, Francis actually appropriated the figure of the Arthurian knight for his own religious ends, associating the penitence, humility, and simplicity of his ascetic followers, with the courtesy, nobility, and physical prowess that were the hallmarks of the knights of the round table. Although, to a modern sensibility, the affinities between a knight and a hermit might not be apparent, Francis nevertheless considered that the courtly and

⁴ For an account of the work of the three companions, and an analysis of its place within the wider corpus of Franciscan biography, see the appendix: ‘A Note on the Early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi’.

⁵ *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli Sociorum S. Francisci*, ed. and trans. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford, 1970), Chapter 71, p. 213.

martial attributes celebrated in the Arthurian romances were in some ways analogous to the religious virtues displayed by his holy followers.

This association in Francis's mind between the active, aristocratic qualities of nobility and courtesy, and the passive, religious attributes of humility and submission is further underlined in a story told by both Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure.⁶ Before becoming aware of his religious vocation, Francis had wanted to become a knight, an ambition that was fuelled by a dream in which he was shown 'a large and splendid palace full of military weapons emblazoned with the insignia of Christ's cross.'⁷ On asking to whom these riches belonged, he was told by God that they had been provided for him and his knights. However, lacking the experience of interpreting divine visions, the saint was unaware that the dream should have been read allegorically, believing instead that it was a sign that he was to win worldly honour and renown. As a result, he resolved to become a knight, and left Assisi shortly afterwards in order to enter the service of a certain count in Apulia.

Although Francis never realised his courtly ambitions - the day after he departed for Apulia he had another vision in which he was told to return to Assisi - the romantic imagery of the dream, and the underlying idea that it conveyed of entering God's service as a knight, maintained a strong hold over his imagination, and influenced the way in which both he, and his biographers, understood the nature of his relationship with God. This is borne out in a passage occurring near the end of the *Legenda Major*, where, in a

⁶ See the appendix for a discussion of the biographies of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure.

⁷ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York, 1978), Chapter 1, p. 187. See also Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), Chapter II, pp. 365-366.

discussion of Francis's various visions of the cross, Bonaventure returned to the subject of the dream, offering an allegorical interpretation of its meaning:

Now is fulfilled the first vision which you saw, namely, that you would be a captain in the army of Christ and bear the arms of heaven emblazoned with the sign of the cross.⁸

For Bonaventure, then, the dream was fulfilled not in a literal sense, but allegorically. Through his holy life, Francis had become a captain in Christ's spiritual army, and so had acquired the rich array of weaponry - 'the arms of heaven' - that he had been promised in his vision. Bonaventure's allegorical reading of Francis's mystical dream illustrates the ease with which concepts normally associated with the secular world of the romances could be adopted by religious authors, and used in hagiographical narratives. Of course, in the process of appropriating this chivalric material, it underwent a profound transformation, so that the social world of the court described in the romances was projected by Bonaventure onto a cosmic plane, with Francis, the 'knight of Christ',⁹ offering his fealty not to an earthly lord or monarch, but to the king of the court of heaven.

This vision of Christ as a feudal Lord, reigning over his celestial host of vassals, is something of a commonplace in the popular religious literature of the later Middle Ages. For instance, in Passus I of William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, an allegorical dream vision composed in Middle English during the second half of the fourteenth century, Christ, the king of kings, is said to have knighted the ten Orders of angels, giving them authority to rule over his lesser creatures:

But Crist, kyngene kyng, knyghted ten -
Cherubyn and Seraphyn, swiche sevene and another,
And yaf hem myght in his majestee - the murier hem thoughte -

⁸ Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, p. 312.

⁹ Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, p. 311.

And over his meene meynee made hem archangeles.
(Passus I. 105-108).¹⁰

Rather than viewing the order of chivalry as a secular institution, Langland would seem to have believed that it had originally been established by God in heaven, suggesting, perhaps, that he considered the human form of knighthood to be merely a pale reflection, or imperfect manifestation, of its ideal, celestial state. But, in addition to this picture of Christ as the overlord of the cosmos, dubbing angelic knights to act as intermediaries between himself and the more humble members of his creation, Langland - in his account of the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell (Passus XVIII of the B text) - also conceived of Christ as the chivalric hero of a romance, presenting him as a noble knight fighting the forces of evil in order to redeem the souls of fallen humanity.¹¹ Langland succeeded in skilfully weaving the Passion narratives of the canonical Gospels, along with the version of the story recorded in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, into the allegorical framework of his dream vision, using the conventions of courtly romance as a way of exploring not only Christ's noble and heroic stature, but also the paradoxical nature of his conflict with the Devil. Langland's allegorical vision of the Passion, then, was of a tournament held in Jerusalem in which Christ - cloaking his Godhead beneath the arms of Piers the Plowman - jousted with the Devil to decide the fate of humanity. In

¹⁰ All references to *Piers Plowman* are to A. V. C. Schmidt's edition of the B text. See William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B Text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1987).

¹¹ For a discussion of Langland's treatment of the Christ-knight figure, see R. A. Waldron, 'Langland's Originality: The Christ-Knight and the Harrowing of Hell', in Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson, ed. *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 66-81. Christ is also portrayed as a knight in the *Ancrene Wisse*, an early thirteenth-century devotional work written for the instruction of anchoresses. See *Ancrene Wisse: The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, EETS OS 249 (Oxford, 1962), pp. 199-201.

a dialogue with the allegorical figure of Faith, the dreamer, Will, learnt of Jesus's forthcoming contest:

'This Jesus of his gentries wol juste in Piers armes,
 In his helm and in his haubergeon - *humana natura*
 That Crist be noght biknowe here for *consummatus Deus*,
 In Piers paltok the Plowman this prikiere shal ryde;
 For no dynt shal him dere as *in deitate Patris*.'
 'Who shal juste with Jesus?' quod I, 'Jewes or scribes?'
 'Nay,' quod Feith, 'but the fend and fals doom to deye.'
 (Passus XVIII. 22-28).

Clearly, Langland's treatment of this episode is greatly indebted to the conventions of courtly romance, for in common with such heroic knights as Sir Lancelot and Sir Gareth, who deliberately concealed their noble identities by engaging in combat in disguise, Jesus hid his divinity from the world by entering the tournament in Jerusalem bearing the arms of the peasant, Piers the Plowman.¹² However, the victory that Jesus achieved over the Devil was gained not through force of arms, but by humble and patient

¹² The two competing theories of the redemption that held sway in the Middle Ages - on the one hand, the view that Christ concealed his divinity in order to trap the Devil into abusing his rights over humanity (the so-called Devil's rights theory), and on the other hand, the idea first proposed by St. Anselm of Christ's redemptive sacrifice - have been usefully explored in relation to *Piers Plowman* in C. W. Marx's recent study, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 100-113. However, my interest here lies not so much in the theology of the redemption itself, but in the fact that Langland chose to present the topos of the deceptive nature of Christ's incarnation in explicitly chivalric terms. Countless examples can be found in the Arthurian romances of Lancelot's desire to maintain his anonymity while participating in tournaments. For instance, see Sir Thomas Malory's, 'A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake', in Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1971), p. 155, and 'The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere', in Malory, *Works*, p. 623. Malory's, 'The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney', in Malory, *Works*, pp. 175-226, describes how Gareth, the youngest brother of Sir Gawain, and hence the nephew of King Arthur, refused to reveal his identity when he arrived at Camelot, and so was made to work in the kitchens, where he was given the name 'Bewmaynes'. In this humble guise, he set off on an adventure in which he defeated a number of valiant opponents, winning both worldly honour, and the love of the noble lady, Lyones. Very similar implications of humility, nobility, and heroism are inherent in Langland's use of this motif in relation to Christ.

sacrifice, and the coat of armour that he bore - which according to the allegorical schema of the poem represented *humana natura*, that is, his frail and vulnerable humanity - afforded him no protection against the weapons of his adversary. Thus, as James Simpson has observed, at the same time as he depicted Christ as a chivalric hero, Langland was also able to present him as a suffering human being, who, out of love for his fellow creatures, willingly accepted a painful and humiliating death.¹³

In some respects, then, like the two examples from the *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, Langland's portrayal of the knighthood of Christ is at odds with the self-assertive, chivalric ethos normally associated with the secular romances, and he further developed this image of Christ as a passive knight, who triumphed over his enemies through submission rather than physical assertion, in his account of the crucifixion. According to Langland, the Roman soldiers who broke the arms and legs of the criminals crucified on either side of Jesus did not - in deference to his knighthood - dare to do the same to him. Instead, they made a blind knight called Longinus attack Christ with his lance (Longinus's sight was then miraculously restored by the blood that flowed from Jesus's wound). This encounter between Longinus and Jesus is presented as a joust from which Jesus emerged victorious, in spite of the mortal injury that he received, for, in accordance with the principle '*Pacientes vincunt*' (Passus XIII, 172) - the patient conquer - it was only by dying that Jesus was able to triumph over his adversaries; the Devil and Death.¹⁴

Therefore, in Langland's depiction of the Passion, there is a palpable source of ethical and thematic tension between the theological imperative of presenting Christ as a

¹³ See James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B Text* (London, 1990), p. 211.

¹⁴ See Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Passus XVIII (71-109).

humble and passive figure, who both preached and practised a doctrine of non-violence, and the fact that romance - from which Langland borrowed his central allegorical motif - is a literary form that is chiefly associated with the celebration of assertiveness and violent adventure. However, Langland put this apparent inconsistency to creative use, portraying Jesus as a character with all the charisma and heroic stature of a knight, but one who abjured violence, and whose glorious victory over the forces of evil was achieved, paradoxically, through exclusively peaceful means. This example from *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, then, when considered in conjunction with the two episodes taken from the *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, suggests that the religious writers of the later Middle Ages were not only free to incorporate romance elements into their narratives, but also felt able - in the pursuit of doctrinal or dogmatic ends - radically to adapt the romance conventions on which they drew.

In the same way that the authors of religious works borrowed elements and ideas taken from secular literature, so the writers of romance frequently adopted hagiographical motifs, and an overtly pious tone, as a way of investing their stories with moral authority, and exploring the religious duties, as well as the ethical responsibilities, expected of a knight. The manner in which hagiographical themes and motifs were absorbed by the romances can perhaps best be illustrated by considering the anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English romance, *Sir Gowther*, which - while it refers to itself as both a Breton lay and a romance, and contains all of the secular elements of love and adventure that are conventionally associated with such a designation - nonetheless reverberates with biblical and hagiographical echoes, and concludes in the manner of a saint's legend with a description of the eponymous hero's holy death, as well as an

account of how his grave became a place of pilgrimage where many miracles were performed.¹⁵

The hybrid nature of *Sir Gowther* - encompassing as it does themes and motifs drawn from the two genres of romance and hagiography - is the aspect of the poem that has attracted most critical comment, a fact that is reflected in the different generic classifications that have been formulated to describe the work. For instance, Dieter Mehl labelled the narrative a 'homiletic romance', Andrea Hopkins preferred the term 'penitential romance', while E. M. Bradstock chose to call it a 'secular hagiography'.¹⁶ Moreover, as these various designations suggest, far from being a superficial or incidental detail, the fusion of religious and secular elements is fundamental to the meaning of the poem, and is woven into the very fabric of its narrative structure. Therefore, before embarking upon an analysis of the story's constituent parts, it will perhaps be helpful to provide an outline of its somewhat complex plot.

¹⁵ *Sir Gowther*, which is believed to have been written at the end of the fourteenth century in the North Midlands, survives in two manuscripts dating from the late fifteenth century: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1, and London, British Library, Royal MS 17.B.43. For a discussion of the date and provenance of the poem, see J. Burke Severs, *A Manual of Writing in Middle English, 1050-1500*, Vol. 1 (New Haven, 1967), p. 141. Although no direct source for *Sir Gowther* has been identified, it is closely related to the legend of *Robert the Devil*, which survives in many different forms - romance, chronicle, exemplum, and drama - and in a number of different languages - French, Latin, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese. For a discussion of *Sir Gowther*'s relationship to *Robert the Devil*, see Shirley Marchalonis, 'Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance', *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971), 14-29. All references to *Sir Gowther* will be to the text of the Advocates manuscript, edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. See Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, ed. *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, 1995), pp. 263-307. For an edition of the text of Royal MS 17.B.43, see Thomas C. Rumble, ed. *The Breton Lays in Middle English* (Detroit, 1965), pp. 179-204.

¹⁶ See Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, pp. 127-128; Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knight: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romances* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 144-178; and E. M. Bradstock, 'Sir Gowther: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?', *AUMLA* 59 (1983), 26-47.

Sir Gowther opens with the story of the eponymous hero's demonic birth. After ten years of marriage in which she had failed to produce an heir, and having been informed by her husband that he intended to abandon her, the Duchess of Austria prayed to God and the Virgin Mary for a child. Shortly afterwards, the Duchess was approached in her orchard by the Devil, who had perfectly assumed the physical appearance of the Duke, her husband. The Devil led her to a chestnut tree, laid her down on the ground, and made her pregnant. Then, with his wicked deed accomplished, he cast aside his human form, and in the guise of a shaggy fiend [a 'felturd fende' (74)], told her that she would give birth to a diabolical child who would become a wild and ungovernable youth.

When the boy was born, he was taken by the Duke to church and christened Gowther. But, even in his infancy his demonic nature was apparent, for such was the voraciousness of his appetite that he suckled nine wet-nurses to death, and when his mother was eventually obliged to feed him (because no more nurses could be found), he bit off her nipple. He grew prodigiously fast, and at the age of fifteen forged a falchion ['fachon' (142)], which he alone was strong enough to wield.¹⁷ Realising that Gowther could not be controlled, the Duke made him a knight, but this completely failed to curb his excesses. The Duke then died of sorrow, and the Duchess withdrew to the safety of a strong castle, leaving Gowther free to terrorise the land. Although violent towards everyone, Gowther's malign nature was chiefly directed against the Church, and he expressed his antipathy for all things sacred by forcing friars to leap off cliffs, hanging

¹⁷ *The Middle English Dictionary* defines faucoun (fachoun) as: 'A large, broad sword with a curved blade, a falchion: also, a short stabbing-sword or dagger.' According to the *OED*, a falchion is 'A broad sword more or less curved with the edge on the convex side. In later use and in poetry: a sword of any kind.'

parsons, killing other priests, and burning hermits. His hatred of the Church culminated in an attack upon a convent, in which he first raped all of the nuns, and then killed them by setting fire to the building.

Amid this mayhem, an old earl approached Gowther and told him that his unnatural behaviour suggested that he was the son not of a man, but a fiend. Unsure whether or not to believe this, Gowther confronted his mother, whereupon she revealed all the details of his conception. In a sudden act of conversion, Gowther began to cry, and in the hope of saving himself from his devilish father, he left his castle in the care of the old earl, abandoned all of his possessions except for his falchion, and set off for Rome to seek absolution from the Pope. On arriving in Rome, Gowther fully confessed his past wrongdoing, and the Pope imposed the penance that until he received a sign from God indicating that his sins had been forgiven, he was to remain silent, and was to eat food only taken from the mouths of dogs.

Leaving Rome, Gowther in time came to a hill, where, on three successive nights, a greyhound brought him food. When the greyhound failed to appear on the fourth night, Gowther continued on his way, coming at last to the castle of the Emperor of Germany. Gaining admittance to the main hall, he sat on the floor under the head table, and was granted permission to stay on account of his exceptional beauty. Gowther refused the fine food that he was offered, but began to eat a bone which he had taken from the mouth of a spaniel. Seeing this, the Emperor and Empress, along with the assembled knights and ladies, fed the hounds, and Gowther took his place beside them and proceeded to share their food.

The Emperor had a beautiful but mute daughter whom the Sultan of Persia wished to carry off by force and marry against her will. The Sultan brought his army to

the Emperor's castle, and on the morning on which the two adversaries were due to engage in battle, Gowther prayed for a horse and coat of armour so that he might assist the Emperor, his lord. Suddenly, a black horse and coat of armour appeared before him, enabling him to join the battle, in which he killed many Saracens with his falchion, and so won the day for the Christians. In the evening, Gowther secretly returned to the castle, his horse and armour disappeared, and he resumed his place under the table in the hall. The mute Princess was the only person to realise that Gowther was the heroic knight in black, and she washed the mouth of a greyhound with wine, placed a loaf of white bread between its teeth, and then sent the dog over to him. The following day, having been given a red horse and coat of armour, Gowther again performed valiant deeds on the battlefield, and in the evening was once again sent food in the mouth of a greyhound by the Princess. On the third and final day, with a white horse and coat of armour, Gowther rode out to battle, rescued the Emperor who had been taken captive, killed the Sultan, but in the process was wounded in the shoulder. When he received his wound, the Princess, who was watching proceedings from the castle, fell out of her tower from shock and sorrow. Believing her to be dead, the Emperor sent for the Pope to officiate at the funeral. However, the Princess woke up not only fully recovered from her fall, but also miraculously cured of her dumbness. Addressing Sir Gowther, she told him that God had absolved him of his sins, so that he was now free both to eat normally and to speak. The Pope confirmed that Gowther had indeed atoned for his crimes, and it was decided that he should marry the Princess. Returning briefly to his own land, Gowther gave his mother to the old earl in marriage, and built a monastery, endowing it with great wealth so that the monks could pray for the souls of all those whom he had killed. Soon afterwards, the Princess's father died, and Gowther succeeded him as Emperor of

Germany. He reigned for many years, discharging his duties as a perfect knight and monarch. He defended the Church against its enemies, the Saracens, cared for the poor, and was just to the rich. When he eventually died, he was venerated as a saint, and was buried in the monastery that he had built, which in time became a shrine to his cult.

As indicated above, perhaps what is most interesting about *Sir Gowther*, at least from the point of view of its generic characteristics, is the seamless way in which it integrates hagiographical elements into the broader framework of a chivalric romance. By presenting its eponymous hero as not only an exemplary knight whose chivalrous deeds were worthy of celebration, but also a saint who performed many miracles after his death, the poem refuses to recognise the sharp division between the genres of romance and hagiography that abbot Gevard, in the anecdote recorded by Caesarius of Heisterbach, had sought to maintain. Indeed, Sir Gowther's status as a knight is absolutely central to his role as a saint, and the poem admits of no conflict between these two aspects - the one secular, the other religious - of his identity.

The centrality of Gowther's knighthood both to the integrity of his personality, and to the wider meaning of the poem, has been recognised by Andrea Hopkins, who has observed that it is the medium through which the hero expressed first his sinful, and then his saintly, nature.¹⁸ Hopkins goes on to note that Gowther's identity as a knight is symbolically bound up with his falchion, the curved broad sword which he forged at the age of fifteen, and with which he initially persecuted, but subsequently defended, the Church. Throughout the poem, the sword is presented as an essential adjunct to Gowther's character, and hence it comes to assume something of the significance of a personal talisman. The importance of the sword is indicated by the Devil himself, when,

¹⁸ See Hopkins, *The Sinful Knight*, p. 159.

at the time of Gowther's conception, he revealed to the Duchess that their son would wield a mighty weapon in his youth:

He seyde, 'Y have geyton a chylde on the
That in is yothe full wylde schall bee,
And weppons wyghtly weld.'
(76-78).

Gowther's identity is mystically entwined with his falchion, for not only was he responsible for forging the sword, but he alone was strong enough to use it:

He made a wepon that he schuld weld,
No nodur mon myght hit beyr,
A facion bothe of styll and yron
(140-142).

Although dubbed a knight by his 'stepfather', the Duke, Gowther remained under the spell of his true father, the Devil, and continued to do his evil bidding by using the falchion to terrorise the Church. However, after his conversion, the sword was the one possession that Gowther refused to abandon, in spite of its association with his evil past. Indeed, such was Gowther's deep attachment to it, that he was even prepared to ignore the commandment of the Pope, who instructed him to cast the weapon aside:

'Lye down thi facion then the fro;
Thou schallt be screvon or y goo,
And asoylyd or y blyn.'
'Nay holy fadur,' seyde Gwother,
'This bous me nedus with me beyr,
My frendys ar full thyn.'
(289-294).

After travelling to Rome solely for the purpose of submitting himself to the will of the Pope, and having promised the Pontiff to observe his judgement to the full - 'Y schall the truly swere / At thi byddyng beyn to be' (285-286) - Gowther's act of defiance seems, on the face of it, quite remarkable. Shirley Marchalonis has argued that the knight's insistence on retaining his falchion - the emblem of his knighthood - indicates

that he recognised that his salvation was to be accomplished not by penance alone, but through the pursuit of the chivalric ideal.¹⁹ With this interpretation in mind, it is worth noting that it was not until he had fought valiantly against the Sultan, who was the enemy of the Church as well as the Emperor, that he was finally absolved of his sins. The redemptive nature of Gowther's armed combat is further suggested by the fact that not only was he miraculously supplied by God with the means of fighting the Saracens, but on the three successive days on which the battle raged, the colour of his horse and armour changed from black to red to white, a transition that would seem to symbolise the internal transformation within Gowther himself, from his initial, sinful condition, to a state of purity and grace.²⁰

Moreover, it is significant that the saintly life that Gowther led after becoming emperor is presented almost exclusively in terms of his role as an exemplary knight and monarch. He is said to have been the flower of chivalry, and to have performed all of the duties required of a just king - he was always willing to do whatever was asked of him in God's name; he was charitable to the poor, just to the rich, and used his power to defend the Christian faith:

And he lord and emperowr,
Of all Cryston knyghttus tho flowre ...
What mon so bydus hym for Godys loffe doo
He was ey redy bown thertoo,
And stod pore folke in styd,
And ryche men in hor ryght,
And halpe holy kyrke in all is myght;
(712-713 & 715-719).

¹⁹ See Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', p. 19.

²⁰ According to Shirley Marchalonis, 'Black, in fairly generalized terms, seems to represent the initial, germinal stage of all processes ...Red can indicate blood, fire, purification, activity, passion and the lifegiving principle; white denotes innocence and purity.' See Marchalonis, '*Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance*', p. 20.

Thus, not merely does the poem claim that there was no conflict between Gowther's dual roles as knight and saint, it actually seems to imply that God granted him a place in heaven as a reward for having conscientiously discharged the morally burdensome obligations expected of a knight. The idea that chivalry was a religious vocation, which was almost a guarantee of sanctity, was famously expressed by the Spanish Franciscan martyr, Ramón Lull, in his enormously influential treatise on knighthood, *Le Libre del Orde de Cauayleria*, which he wrote in Catalan during the closing years of the thirteenth century, and which was translated into English two hundred years later by William Caxton, under the title *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*.²¹ According to Caxton's translation of Lull's text, the first duty of every knight was to protect and uphold the Christian faith: 'The offyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende the holy feyth catholyque / by the whiche god the fader sente his sone in to the world to take flesshe humayne in the glorious vyrgyn oure lady saynt Mary.'²² To this end, the role of the knight was analogous to that of the priest, for just as God had instituted the priestly office to preach catholic doctrine, thereby ensuring that the claims of unbelievers could be disproved, so the order of chivalry had been designed with the intention of physically suppressing the enemies of the Church:

Thene in lyke wyse as our lord god hath chosen the clerkes for to mayntene þe holy feith catholyke with scripture & resons ayst the mescreauts & not bileuyng / In lyke wise god of glory hath chosen kny3tes / by cause þat by force of armes they vaynquysse the mescreautes, whiche daily laboure for to destroye holy chirche / & suche kny3tes god holdeth them for his frendes honoured in this world

²¹ Maurice Keen has claimed that Lull's *Le Libre del Orde de Cauayleria* is the classic account of knighthood written during the later Middle Ages. See Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 10-11. For Caxton's text, which was translated from a French version of Lull's work, see William Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, ed. A. T. P. Byles, EETS O S 168 (London, 1926).

²² Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, p. 24.

/ & in that other when they kepe and mayntene the feith by the whiche
we entende to be saued.²³

Lull's vision of the responsibilities and rewards of knighthood is entirely consistent with the view outlined in *Sir Gowther*. As Maurice Keen has observed, Christian romances (such as *Sir Gowther*) do not distinguish between worldly honour and the service of God, but rather assert that 'the knightly life, with all its violence and with all the richness and decor of its aristocratic trappings, is within its own terms a road to salvation.'²⁴ This interpretation is borne out in the final stanza of the romance, when the poet concluded the story by stating that Gowther's devotion to the ideals of chivalry had won him not only wealth and happiness in this world, but also eternal bliss in the next:

Thus Syr Gwother coverys is care,
That fyrst was ryche and sython bare,
And effte was ryche ageyn,
And geyton with a felteryd feynd;
Grace he had to make that eynd
That God was of hym feyn.
(745-750).

It is significant that the restoration of Gowther's earthly wealth and social status should be considered as noteworthy as the salvation of his soul, highlighting once again the way in which knighthood was treated as a calling that straddled the realms of both secular and religious culture.

Of course, before he was able to follow the active path of Christian knighthood, Gowther first had to atone for his past misdeeds by enduring the penance that had been imposed upon him by the Pope, and it is in its treatment of this initial, passive stage of Gowther's repentance that the narrative draws most heavily upon hagiographical conventions, and so comes closest to resembling a traditional saint's legend. Moreover,

²³ Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, p. 25.

²⁴ Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 62.

given the subject of this thesis, it is significant that these conventions are most obviously invoked through the use of animals. Thus, when he arrived in Rome, Gowther was told by the Pope that until he received a sign from God indicating that his sins had been forgiven, he was to remain completely mute, and was to eat food only taken from the mouths of dogs:

‘Wherser thu travellys, be northe or soth,
 Thu eyt no meyt bot that thu revus of howndus mothe
 Cum thy body within;
 Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud,
 Or thu reyde tokyn have fro God,
 That forgyfyn is thy syn.’
 (295-300).

The connection between dogs and penitential suffering has biblical precedent. In the parable of *Dives and Pauper* (Luke 16: 19-31), the poor man, Lazarus, who lay at the rich man’s gate, and who desired to be fed with the scraps of food that fell from his table, was comforted before his death by the dogs who came and licked his sores, while the Book of Tobit describes how Tobias, Tobit’s son, accompanied both by his dog and the angel, Raphael, undertook the long and strenuous journey from Nineveh to Media in order to redeem his father’s ten talents of silver (Tobit 5: 16 & 11: 4). Of course, while it is quite possible that the poem drew on this generalized association between dogs on the one hand, and arduous toil and purgative suffering on the other, it should be noted that Gowther’s experience of dogs was much more all-encompassing than that of either Lazarus or Tobias. For, unlike these two biblical figures, the extremely degrading nature of the penance that Gowther had to endure meant that he actually came close to losing his identity as a human being. Indeed, he can be said to have symbolically joined the ranks of the beasts, such was his enforced intimacy with them.

Gowther's close affinity with dogs, and the grave affront to his human dignity that this implied, is particularly evident in the passage which describes how - on first entering the Emperor's castle - he removed a bone from the mouth of a spaniel, and eagerly began to eat it:

Ther come a spanyell with a bon,
 In his mothe he hit bare,
 Syr Gwother hit fro hym droghhe,
 And gredely on hit he gnofe,
 He wold nowdur curlu ne tarte.
 Boddely sustynans wold he non
 Bot what so he fro tho howndus wan,
 If it wer gnaffyd or mard.
 (353-360).

This motif of the human hero reduced to the level of the beasts by having to share his food with animals, calls to mind another biblical story: that of the madness of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. According to the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar was driven from human society for a period of seven years as a punishment for his pride, during which time he lived with the beasts of the field, and ate grass in the manner of an ox (Daniel 4: 29-37).²⁵ It is interesting to note that Nebuchadnezzar's regression to a bestial, sub-human state - like the experience of Sir Gowther - was penitential in nature, for it resulted in both the forgiveness of his sins, and the eventual restoration of his

²⁵ Penelope Doob has drawn attention to the underlying affinities between Gowther's predicament and the fate of Nebuchadnezzar. See, Penelope B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 162-163. The story of the madness of Nebuchadnezzar was also recounted in the late-fourteenth-century Middle English religious poem, *Cleanness*, which is generally believed to have been written by the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. See *Cleanness* (1658-1704), in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (London, 1978). Significantly, in his description of Nebuchadnezzar's madness, the *Cleanness*-poet made much of the king's bestial appearance, and the fact that he considered himself to be an animal: 'His hert heldet vnhole; he hoped non oper / Bot a best þat he be, a bol oper an oxe' (1681-1682).

social position. Therefore, Gowther's degrading sense of kinship with dogs would seem to echo the madness of Nebuchadnezzar, signalling that like his biblical forebear, after undergoing a period of harsh atonement for his crimes, he was to be allowed to return to his rightful place at the apex of human society.²⁶

However, Gowther's close association with dogs was symbolic of more than just his penitential suffering, for as well as experiencing the indignity of having to eat bones which he had removed from the mouths of dogs, he was also - on three successive evenings following his departure from Rome - miraculously supplied with food by a greyhound:

He seyt hym down undur a hyll,
 A greyhownde broght hym meyt untyll
 Or evon yche a dey.
 Thre neythtys ther he ley;
 Tho grwhownd ylke a dey
 A whyte lofe he hym broghht;
 On tho fort day come hym non,
 Up he start and forthe con gon,

²⁶ The striking analogy between Nebuchadnezzar's madness and Gowther's penance is further suggested by another fourteenth-century Middle English romance, *King Robert of Sicily*, whose eponymous hero suffered a similar fate to that of Sir Gowther. Because of his sinful pride, Robert's position as King of Sicily was usurped by an angel who had perfectly assumed his physical appearance. Deprived of his regal office, and unrecognised by any of his subjects, Robert was forced by the angel to endure the further punishment of having to eat his meals on the floor with the dogs. Robert railed against his fate for three years, until, finally giving up all hope of regaining his crown, he reflected upon the figure of Nebuchadnezzar, whose predicament he recognised as identical to his own. The example of the Babylonian king taught Robert that he must submit himself to the will of God, and humbly accept his fate. Thus reconciled to his lowly condition, Robert's sins were forgiven, whereupon he was restored by the angel to his former position, and so reigned as a just and pious king for the rest of his life. For an edition of *King Robert of Sicily*, which is preserved in ten manuscripts dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and which is believed to have been written some time before 1370, probably in the South Midlands, see, *Robert of Sicily*, in Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale, ed. *Middle English Metrical Romances* Vol. II (1964), 933-946. For commentary and bibliography, see Lillian Hornstein's two articles, 'King Robert of Sicily: A New Manuscript', *PMLA* 78 (1963), 453-458, and 'King Robert of Sicily: Analogues and Origins', *PMLA* 79 (1964)13-21.

And lovyd God in his thoght.
(310-318).

This incident is reminiscent of the many episodes from sacred biography in which - as a sign of divine favour - holy men and women were miraculously fed by animals. For instance, Elijah was given bread and meat by ravens in the wilderness (1 Kings: 17, 6), St. Paul the hermit was supplied with bread every day for sixty years, also by a raven,²⁷ while St. Cuthbert was fed with a fish brought to him by an eagle.²⁸ It would thus appear that the poet consciously used the widely recognised hagiographical motif of the helpful animal as a way of marking the fact that Gowther enjoyed God's special love and protection, in spite of his demonic father and the many heinous crimes that he had committed against the Church. Indeed, Gowther himself seemed to recognise that the greyhound was an instrument of divine providence, for he interpreted the animal's failure to appear on the fourth day as a sign that he should continue on his journey.

In addition to the hagiographical connotations attached to the figure of the greyhound, the animal can also be viewed as an emblem of Gowther's noble nature, drawing attention to his role as an aristocratic hero of romance, as well as his identity as a saint. As Jean-Claude Schmitt has observed, unlike other dogs, who tended to be somewhat disparaged during the Middle Ages, greyhounds were prized for their innate nobility, and came to be regarded as symbols of 'the chivalric virtues (faith), occupations (hunting) and, more generally, the whole aristocratic way of life.'²⁹ It is this

²⁷ See St. Jerome. *The Life of St. Paul the First Hermit*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in Deferrari, Roy J. ed. *Early Christian Biographies*, The Fathers of the Church, Vol 15 (Washington, 1952), p. 233.

²⁸ See Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, trans. J. F. Webb, in J. F. Webb. ed. *Lives of the Saints* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 87.

²⁹ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Martin Thom (Cambridge, 1983), p. 59.

secular, chivalric aspect of the greyhound's symbolic identity that is emphasised in the two further scenes from the poem in which the animal makes an appearance. At the end of both of the first two days of fighting between the Christian and Saracen armies, the Emperor's daughter employed a couple of greyhounds - whose mouths she had washed with wine - to deliver bread and meat to Gowther as a way of rewarding him for the valiant deeds that he had performed on the battlefield against her father's enemies:

Tho meydon toke too gruhowndus fyn
 And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn
 And putte a lofe in tho ton;
 And in the todur flesch full gud;
 He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode,
 That doghty of body and bon.
 (445-450).

In a sense, this incident can be viewed as the secular equivalent of, or counterpart to, the previous religious scene, for just as the greyhound's miraculous appearance in the wilderness had signalled God's love of Gowther, so the Princess demonstrated her sympathy for the knight by using the two animals to send him food. Of course, by borrowing something of the symbolism of hagiography in order to illustrate the awakening of the Princess's human love for Gowther, the poet once again blurred the boundary between the realms of the religious and the secular, the saintly and the heroic, and the hagiographical and the romantic. Fittingly, then, the hybrid nature of both Sir Gowther himself, and the poem to which he gave his name, is emblematically reflected in the broad range of encounters that the poet depicted between the human and animal worlds.

The use to which animals are put in *Sir Gowther* is typical of the kind of representations that are to be found in the wider romance canon, and this is certainly borne out in the two other Middle English romances that I will be examining in this

chapter. While neither *Octavian* nor *Sir Orfeo* is as overtly religious as *Sir Gowther*, the protagonists of the two romances nonetheless exhibit the religious characteristics of the saint as well as the heroic, aristocratic qualities of the knightly hero - and this combination of hagiographical and secular elements is reflected in the way in which the animal kingdom is represented in the two texts. For, in much the same way that the various dogs in *Sir Gowther* drew attention to both the hero's religious virtues and secular attributes, so animals in *Octavian* and *Sir Orfeo* function as markers, indicating not only the social status of the different human protagonists, but also the extent to which they can be said to be favoured by God.

Octavian

Octavian is preserved in two different Middle English versions, both of which date from the middle of the fourteenth century, and which are both believed to derive independently from the same Old French source. The northern version, which is regarded as the more artistically successful of the two, and to which I will be referring throughout this section, is thought to have been composed either in the North East Midlands or slightly further to the north, and survives in two manuscripts dating from the fifteenth century; Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 91 (the Lincoln Thornton MS), and Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38.³⁰

³⁰ A useful discussion of the language and provenance of the northern *Octavian*, along with a consideration of the poem's relationship both to its probable source, and the southern version of the romance, can be found in Frances McSparran's parallel edition of the Lincoln and Cambridge manuscripts. See *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparran, EETS OS 289 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 21-53. (Unless otherwise stated, all references will be to the text of the Lincoln manuscript.) Frances McSparran has also edited the southern version of the romance, which is preserved in just the one manuscript, London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A. II, and which was probably composed in the London /

The title of *Octavian* can be viewed as something of a misnomer, since the poem is concerned not so much with the character and actions of Octavian himself - the Roman Emperor whose history the romance claims to narrate - as with the stoical suffering of his calumniated wife, and the heroic adventures of their twin sons. Although the opening rubric of the poem quite explicitly identifies Octavian as the hero - 'Here Bygynnes the Romance off Octoviane' - it is interesting to note that the Emperor enjoys the somewhat unusual distinction of being a rather marginal figure in his own story, appearing only twice in the narrative, first at its very beginning when he set the plot in motion by banishing his family in the mistaken belief that his wife was an adulteress, and his children illegitimate, and then near the end of the romance, when, with the cloud of suspicion having been removed, all the members of the family were once again happily reunited. This lack of a clearly identifiable hero means, as Dieter Mehl has noted, that the poem has a very diffuse plot, which is further complicated by the fact that it ranges across a number of different countries, and spans a period of almost two decades.³¹ A summary of the poem's extremely intricate story line will therefore act as a useful prelude to a discussion of its various motifs and narrative elements.

After seven years of loving marriage in which she had failed to produce an heir, the Roman Empress's fervent prayers for a child were finally answered when she gave birth to twin sons, much to her husband, Octavian's delight. However, Octavian's mother, motivated by sheer malice, was able to convince Octavian that he was not the father of the two boys, and so, in the erroneous belief that his wife was guilty of sexual

Essex area. See *Octovian Imperator*, ed. Frances McSparran, Middle English Texts 11 (Heidelberg, 1979).

³¹ See Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, p. 112.

treason, he condemned her, along with their twin sons, to be burnt to death, a sentence which he commuted to banishment from feelings of compassion. Therefore, at Octavian's command, his wife and two children were escorted to the boundary of his kingdom and abandoned in a dense forest full of wild beasts.

Having thus been left in the wilderness to fend for herself, the Empress suffered the further misfortune of having one of her children carried off into the forest by an ape. Then, while she was lying in a swoon, incapacitated from the shock, her other child was abducted by a lioness, who in turn was attacked by a griffin. The lioness (who was still holding the child in her mouth), was lifted into the air by the griffin and carried off to an island. However, as soon as the lioness was placed on the ground, she fought and killed the monstrous beast, whereupon she lay down next to the child, and began to suckle him.

The Empress, distraught at the loss of her two children, resolved to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to which end she boarded a ship which happened to sail past the island on which her child and the lioness were living. She asked to be taken ashore to retrieve her son, and when she came to the lioness's den, the animal meekly ['Full debonorly' (465)] allowed her to reclaim the child. Then, accompanied by the lioness, and carrying the boy in her arms, the Empress returned to the boat and continued on her journey to the Holy Land. When she arrived in Jerusalem she was recognised by the King of that city, who invited her to join his household. There, living with the lioness who had become her child's constant companion, she was treated with all the dignity that her royal status required. Her son was duly christened Octavian, and in the fullness of time was made a knight by the King.

Meanwhile, the Empress's other child, having been abducted by an ape, was rescued by a knight, who in turn was attacked and killed by a band of robbers. This group of outlaws, unable to kill the boy because of his innate nobility, decided to sell him instead. They came across a Parisian merchant called Clement who was returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and sold him the child for twenty pounds. When Clement returned home, he told his wife, Gladwin, that he was the father of the boy, and that the child had been born in the Holy Land of a Saracen woman. Gladwin immediately offered to adopt the boy, and they christened him Florent.

When he was old enough to earn a living, Clement and Gladwin decided that Florent should become a butcher, so one day they sent him out with a couple of oxen to learn the butchery trade. However, while travelling through the city streets, he happened to pass a squire who had a falcon which he wished to sell, and which Florent bought in exchange for his two beasts of burden. Clement was extremely angry about this, but after beating his son for his profligacy, he was persuaded by Gladwin that the boy was not suited to be a butcher. On another occasion, Clement asked Florent to deliver forty pounds of gold to his step-brother, a money changer, but once again he was distracted on the way, this time buying a fine, milk-white steed with his father's gold. Again he was beaten by Clement, yet his love of noble beasts, and his complete inability to learn a trade, convinced Gladwin that Florent could not be her husband's son, but must rather be descended from aristocratic parents.

At that time, the Sultan of the Saracen kingdom invaded France, and besieged Paris with his large army. The most fearsome of the Saracen warriors was a giant who was twenty-two feet tall, and who was in love with the Sultan's beautiful daughter, Marsabele. The giant promised to bring Marsabele the head of the King of France as a

token of his love, and he leant over the city wall and threatened to kill every man, woman, and beast in Paris unless the King came out to fight him. After five French knights who answered the challenge had been defeated, Florent, riding his milk-white steed and wearing Clement's rusty coat of armour, fought and killed the giant, and brought his severed head to Marsabele, thereby winning her love. Marsabele agreed to convert to Christianity, and was able, with Florent's help, to escape from her father's camp and enter Paris.

Back inside the besieged city, Florent was lauded by both the King of France and his own father, Octavian - who had come to lend his aid in the fight against the Sultan - neither of whom believed that such a brave and courteous youth could be the son of a merchant. Octavian therefore asked Clement how he came by the child, and on hearing that the boy had originally been taken from a woman in a forest, he wept, and claimed him as his own. In the fighting that ensued between the Christian and Saracen armies, Florent, Octavian, and the King of France were all taken captive, despite performing heroic deeds on the battlefield. However, they were soon released from captivity by young Octavian, who had travelled to France with his mother, the lioness, and a host of knights for the express purpose of fighting the Saracens. The family was thus joyfully reunited; Florent married the newly baptised Marsabele, and the Emperor's wicked mother - much to everyone's delight - cut her throat.

In her edition of *Octavian*, Frances McSparran has argued that the complexity of the poem's plot is due in part to its composite nature, for it combines in the one apparently seamless narrative two commonly occurring, but normally quite separate, story-elements; that of the unjustly persecuted wife who is ultimately vindicated after enduring much suffering (the so-called Constance story, versions of which are to be

found in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*), and the motif of the dispossessed hero whose noble identity is eventually acknowledged as a result of his prowess in arms (the basic plot of such romances as *Sir Degaré*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and *Sir Perceval of Galles*).³² Moreover, McSparran has also noted that each of these two story-elements draws on a different set of literary conventions. Thus, the Empress's narrative, with its emphasis on the heroine's innocence, patient endurance, and selfless resignation to God's will, has strong hagiographical overtones, while the parts of the story that are concerned with the character and development of her two sons are primarily secular, heroic, and (particularly in the case of Florent), social in tone. As in the case of *Sir Gowther*, this combination of hagiographical and romance elements is reflected in the poem's treatment of the animal kingdom, so that whether attesting to the Empress's sanctity, or revealing the nobility of the two royal children, the various animals that appear in the narrative occupy an absolutely central position, and perform a crucial function, within its symbolic world.

Clearly, the animal that figures most prominently in the romance is the lioness, the creature who was at first responsible for abducting young Octavian, but who subsequently suckled him after they were both transported to the island by the griffin, and who then came to live with him and his mother in Jerusalem. Although she was eventually to become the faithful companion and protector of both the Empress and

³² See *Octavian*, ed. McSparran, p. 62. See also, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Man of Law's Tale*, in Larry D Benson et al, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 87-104; John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* (2: 587-1598), in G. C. Macaulay, ed. *The Complete Works of John Gower: The English Works*, Vol. 1, EETS ES 81 (Oxford, 1901); *Sir Degaré*, in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, ed. *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, 1995), pp. 89-144; *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. M. Mills, EETS OS 261 (London, 1969); and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, in *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo, 1995), pp. 1-76.

young Octavian, the lioness is initially presented as a hostile, threatening beast, who is said to have abducted the child in order to feed him to her whelps. According to the poet, while the Empress was lying in a swoon, distraught at the loss of her first son, her second child was taken away by the lioness:

And in all þe sorow þat scho [the Empress] in was,
 Ryghte so com rynnande a lyones,
 Of wode als scho wolde wede.
 In swonynges als þe lady laye,
 Hyr opir childe scho bare awaye,
 Hir whelpes with to feede.
 (340-345).

However, despite her evil intent, the lioness was incapable of harming the child because he was of royal blood:

Bot for it was a kynge sone jwysse,
 The lyones moghte do it no mys,
 Bot forthe þerwith scho ȝede.
 (349-351).

The belief that lions were physically unable to injure those of royal descent also finds expression in another fourteenth-century Middle English romance, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, which describes how Josian, the daughter of King Ermin, was not harmed by a couple of lions whom she encountered in a cave because she was both a royal princess, and a virgin:

Iosian into þe caue gan shete,
 And þe twoo lyouns at hur feete,
 Grennand on hur with much granne,
 But þey ne myȝt do hur no shanne,
 For þe kind of lyouns, y-wys,
 A kynges douȝter, þat maide is,
 Kinges douȝter, quene and maide both,
 þe lyouns myȝt do hur noo wroth.
 (2387-2394).³³

³³ *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, ed. Eugen Kölbing, EETS ES 46, 48, 65 (London, 1885-1894). There is also a comic allusion to this tradition in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*,

Underlying these two examples from *Octavian* and *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* is the assumption that lions and lionesses - as the kings and queens of the animal world - were not only able to recognise humans of royal descent, but were actually physically incapable of doing them any harm, presumably on the grounds of their shared royal kinship.³⁴ Therefore, despite wanting to feed young Octavian to her whelps, the lioness's intuitive or unconscious awareness of their common nobility had the effect of suppressing her normal, predatory instincts.

However, the lioness's initial feelings of animosity for young Octavian were metamorphosed into an attitude of loving, maternal protection after she had killed and eaten the griffin who was responsible for carrying them both off to the island:

The gryffone thurgh Goddis grace scho [the lioness] sloghe,
And of þat fewle scho ete ynoghe
And layde hir by þat childe.
The childe sowkyde þe lyones,
Als it Goddis will was,
When it þe pappes felide.
The lyones gan it wake
And lufe it for hir whelpes sake,
And was þerwith full mylde.
(367-375).

The motif of the dispossessed child who is suckled by a wild animal recurs with great frequency in legend and romance. For instance, Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, was suckled - along with his twin-brother Remus - by a she-wolf after they had

when Falstaff claims that his reason for running away from Prince Hal when threatened by him at Gads Hill was because, like a lion, his instinct prevented him from attacking a royal prince: 'Why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules, but beware instinct. The lion will not touch the true prince. Instinct is a great matter. I was now a coward on instinct. I shall think the better of myself and thee during my life - I for a valiant lion, and thou for a true prince.' William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part I*, ed. David Bevington (Oxford, 1987), Act II, Scene 4, 260-265.

³⁴ This point has been made by Frances McSparran in her edition of the text. See *Octavian*, ed. McSparran, p. 59.

both been exposed as newly-born infants,³⁵ while the fourteenth-century alliterative romance, *Cheuelere Assigne*, a legendary account of the ancestry of Godfrey of Bouillon, the first Crusader King of Jerusalem, describes how Helyas (the putative grandfather of Godfrey), was suckled by a hind with his six brothers when they were abandoned in the wilderness as children.³⁶ The heroic credentials of young Octavian were therefore considerably enhanced not just by his association with the lioness, the animal that best symbolised his royal identity, but also by the poem's use of the suckling-animal motif, which placed the child in the company of such august figures as Romulus and Helyas.

The poem makes much of the contrast between the lioness's savage, bestial nature - which under normal circumstances was violently antagonistic towards human beings - and the benevolent feelings that she harboured for young Octavian and his mother. For instance, when the Empress's ship sailed past the island on which the lioness and young Octavian were stranded, a couple of sailors were sent ashore to replenish the boat's water supply, only to be attacked and killed by the lioness:

The lyones laye in hir dene
And was full blythe of þo two men,
And full sone scho had þam slayne.
(433-435).

A further party of twelve men then landed on the island in order to discover the whereabouts of their missing comrades, but quickly returned to the ship after witnessing the incongruous sight of the lioness peacefully playing with young Octavian near the remains of her two human victims:

³⁵ See Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I - V of The History of Rome From Its Foundations*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth, 1960), Book 1, p. 38.

³⁶ See *Cheuelere Assigne* (113-119), ed. Henry H. Gibbs, EETS ES 6 (London 1868, rpt. 1932).

Thay [the twelve sailors] tolde þe wondir þat þay seghe,
 And þat þay fonde on þe roche on heghe
 A lyones in hir den;
 A knauechilde þerin laye,
 Therewith þe lyones gan hir playe.
 And dede were bothe þaire men.
 (448-453).

The striking antithesis between the lioness's savage and ferocious treatment of the two sailors, and the maternal care that she lavished on young Octavian, once again underlines the impression - deliberately cultivated by the poet - of the child's inherent superiority to the mass of common humanity, a point that further reinforces his status as an innately royal and heroic figure.

The lioness also reacted in a similarly reverential way to the child's mother, although in the case of the Empress it was her holiness rather than her royal blood that was said to have given rise to the animal's meek and submissive response. According to the poet, on being told by the party of twelve sailors that a lioness was playing with a child on the island, the Empress asked to be taken ashore, whereupon she immediately ran towards the animal's den with all the strength that she could muster:

When scho com on þat roche on heghe,
 Scho ran ywhils þat scho myght dreghe,
 With full sory mode,
 The lyones, thurgh Goddis grace,
 When scho sawe þe lady face,
 Full debonorly vp scho stode.
 Thurgh þe myghte of Mary mylde
 Scho suffered þat lady to tak hir childe,
 And scho forthe with hir 3ode.
 (460-468).

Clearly, by attributing the lioness's deferential behaviour to the direct intervention of both God and the Virgin Mary, the poet - through the use of the hagiographical motif of the acquiescent animal - sought to highlight not so much the Empress's royalty

[although she was earlier identified as the daughter of the king of Calabria (190-191)], as her sanctity. However, as in the case of *Sir Gowther*, holiness and nobility are presented in *Octavian* as overlapping, almost synonymous characteristics, making it impossible to disentangle the Empress's saintliness from her royal identity as the daughter of a king and the wife of an emperor. This intermingling of the sacred and the profane, and the saintly and the aristocratic, is reflected in the actions of the lioness, who completely failed to distinguish between the religious virtues of the mother, and the secular attributes of the son - treating the holy Empress with exactly the same degree of honour and respect that she had previously shown the heroic figure of young Octavian.

This blurring of the boundaries between romance and hagiography is further evident in the poem's subsequent portrayal of the lioness. Frances McSparran has observed that as the story unfolds, the animal increasingly comes to resemble the grateful lion of St. Jerome, assuming the role of a faithful, domestic beast by first joining the Empress and her son on their journey to the Holy Land (472-483), and then living with them as a member of their household in the castle of the King of Jerusalem:³⁷

The kyng aftir hir [the Empress] sente;
He bad scho solde lett for nothyng,
And þe lyones with hir brynge.
To þe castelle es scho went.
(501-504).

Within the confines of the Empress's domestic circle, the lioness completely abandoned her wild and savage nature - 'The lyones þat was so wilde / Belefte with þe lady and þe childe:' (521-522) - and thus stripped of her erstwhile bestiality, she came to be treated like a domesticated family pet. However, in spite of this dramatic change to both her

³⁷ See *Octavian*, ed. McSparran, p. 59.

living conditions and behaviour, the animal retained the characteristically royal attributes of nobility, fidelity, and courage, attributes that she had the opportunity of exhibiting at the very end of the romance, when, out of loyalty to young Octavian, she bravely followed him into battle against the Saracens:

The lyenas þat was so wyght,
 When she sawe þe yong knyght
 Into the batell fownde,
 Sche folowed hym wyth all her myȝt
 And faste fellyd þe folke yn fyȝt:
 Many sche made onsownde;
 Grete stedys downe sche drowe
 And many hepen men sche slowe,
 Wythynne a lytull stownde.
 (1609-1617).³⁸

It is significant that the lioness should be depicted on the battlefield displaying the very qualities of strength, faithfulness, and courage that are conventionally associated with the figure of the romance knight, and which young Octavian himself exhibited during the same skirmish with the Saracens: ['Octauyon þe yong knyght, / Thorow þe grace of God almyght, / Full faste he fellyd ther pryde.' (1606-1608)]. Therefore, the strong sense of affinity that connected young Octavian to the lioness - an affinity that is of such symbolic importance in the construction of the child's identity as a royal hero, and that is so heavily emphasised throughout the poem - is given concrete expression in their shared acceptance of, and adherence to, this aristocratic, fighting code.

However, in contrast to young Octavian, whose royal and heroic nature was both acknowledged and validated by the lioness, Florent, his twin brother, received no such recognition from any member of the animal kingdom. Indeed, the ape - the animal that

³⁸ Because of a lacuna in the Thornton manuscript at this point in the narrative (caused by a torn page), this quotation has been taken from McSparran's parallel text of Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff. 2. 38.

was responsible for Florent's abduction - has traditionally been interpreted as a symbol not of nobility, but folly, since its appearance, which more than any other animal resembles that of a human being, was thought to represent or embody the absurdity, futility, and arrogance of an irrational beast attempting to imitate (ape) the behaviour of rational men and women.³⁹ It thus follows that rather than symbolising Florent's status as a royal prince, the ape - with its connotations of low foolishness - emblematically prefigured the humble, bourgeois, and occasionally comic environment into which the child was delivered by providence, and to which he was so constitutionally incapable of adapting.⁴⁰

Whereas the fabulous adventures of young Octavian and his mother - which drew heavily on themes and motifs taken from legend, romance, and hagiography - took place in the strange, 'fairy-tale' world of the wilderness, where the laws of nature had been partially suspended, the narrative of Florent's humble upbringing was set in the much more quotidian, workaday environment of the city. Reflecting this very different location, Florent's royal and heroic nature manifested itself not through prodigious or

³⁹ Because of the ape's association with foolishness, it was not only a widely recognised symbol of folly, but - as in the case of *King Robert of Sicily* - was also thought to be the appropriate animal companion for the figure of the court fool. A comprehensive discussion of ape symbolism in the art of literature of the late-medieval and early modern periods can be found in H. W. Janson's classic study of the subject. See H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London, 1952).

⁴⁰ On a number of occasions, Clement and Gladwin, and the mercantile world that they represent, are presented as comic or clownish objects to be laughed at by their social superiors. For instance, when Florent returned to Paris after killing the giant, the King of France prepared a great celebration in his honour. However, Clement - fearing that he would have to meet the cost of the entertainment - stole the cloaks ['mantills' (1069)] of all the lords that were present, and refused to return them until they agreed to pay all the expenses themselves. The King laughed indulgently at Clement's antics, and - as befits one of royal blood - generously indicated that he would pay for everything: 'Thereatt all þe kynges loghe; / There was joye and gamen ynoghe / Amonges þam in the haulte. / The kynge of Fraunce with hert full fayne / Said: "Clement, brynge þe mantils agayne, / For I sall paye for alle.'" (1077-1082).

supernatural occurrences, but rather, as Frances McSparran has observed, through his predilection for traditional, knightly pursuits, and his incompetence and lack of interest in the bourgeois occupations of business and trade.⁴¹ As was the case with young Octavian, the poet took every opportunity of asserting Florent's nobility, although in this instance the child's aristocratic nature was defined almost exclusively in terms of its opposition to the mercantile, commercial values of his adoptive father, Clement, for whom trading and bartering were so deeply ingrained into his personality that - on his return from the Holy Land - he could not prevent himself from haggling with the band of outlaws over the price to be paid for Florent, eventually managing to purchase the boy for only half the sum that the thieves had originally demanded (577-588).

Just as the lioness performed a pivotal role in confirming that young Octavian was of royal descent, so animals occupy a central position, and fulfil a key function, in Florent's narrative. However, in this latter case it was the hero's characteristically aristocratic attitude towards the animal kingdom, rather than the reverential response that his presence elicited from the various animals themselves, that helped to identify him as a person of noble origin. The first important incident involving an animal occurred when Florent was sent out into the city by his adoptive parents with two oxen in order to learn the butchery trade, only for him to meet a squire on a bridge with whom he exchanged his two beasts of burden for a 'gentill' and 'fre' falcon:

Als Florent our þe brygge gan go,
 Dryvand on his oxen two,
 A semely syghte sawe he:
 A sqwyere bare, als I 3ow telle,
 A gentill fawcon for to selle,
 That semely was to see.
 Florent to þe sqwyere 3ede,
 And bothe his oxen he gan hym bede

⁴¹ See, *Octavian*, ed. McSparran, p. 65.

For þat fowle so fre;
 þe sqwyere þerof was full glade,
 He toke þe oxen als he hym bade:
 Florent was blythe in ble.
 (652-663).

Florent's enthusiasm for the noble, aristocratic falcon - which elsewhere in the romance is identified by the poet as a hawk (665 and 670) - was not shared by Clement, who beat his adopted son severely for squandering the family's financial resources.⁴² But, just as Clement completely failed to understand why Florent was so appreciative of, and animated about, the falcon, so Florent found not only his father's anger, but also his indifference to the bird's qualities, equally baffling:

The chylde poght wondur thore
 That Clement bete hym so sore,
 And mekely he can pray:
 'Syr,' he seyde, 'for Crystys ore,
 Leue, and bete me no more,
 But ye wyste well why,
 Wolde ye stonde now and beholde
 How feyre he can hys fedurs folde,
 And how louely they lye,
 Ye wolde pray God wyth all your mode
 That ye had solde halfe your gode,
 Soche anodur to bye.'
 (685-696).⁴³

⁴² Although the anatomical differences between hawks and falcons were recognised by the compilers of contemporary hunting manuals, the author of *Octavian* failed to distinguish between the two species of bird, effectively treating the word 'fawcon' as a synonym of 'hawk'. Both species were used in falconry and prized for their nobility (hence the confusion between the two), but the hawk, with its rounded, comparatively short wings, chases its prey near the ground, while the falcon has long pointed wings and soars high into the air, from which lofty position it dives to dispatch its prey. For a discussion of medieval falconry - as it was both practised in the field and portrayed on the page - see John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk: The Art of Medieval Hunting* (London, 1988), pp. 187-233.

⁴³ Because the Lincoln Thornton MS is damaged at this point in the narrative, this, and all subsequent quotations, have been taken from McSparran's text of the Cambridge manuscript.

On one level, then, the falcon can be viewed as a focal point around which the class differences between Florent and Clement - differences which according to the poet were innate and not acquired - were able to crystallise. Thus, it would appear that Florent, completely oblivious of the commercial and utilitarian considerations that were uppermost in Clement's mind, instinctively recognised that the falcon was a fellow noble creature, and so, motivated by feelings of sympathetic kinship, felt compelled to buy the bird in exchange for his adoptive father's two humble, plebeian beasts of burden.

In the romance literature of the later Middle Ages, there are countless references to both the nobility of hawks and falcons, and their natural kinship with knights. For instance, in Marie de France's lay, *Yonec*, written in Old French during the second half of the twelfth century, a young and beautiful lady was imprisoned by her rich, elderly husband in a tower to prevent her from taking a lover. One day a hawk flew into the lady's room through an open window, and was suddenly transformed into a 'fair and noble knight'. According to Marie: 'The knight was extremely courtly and spoke to her first: "Lady, do not be afraid! The hawk is a noble bird."'”⁴⁴ (*Gentil oisel ad en ostur*).⁴⁵ The two became lovers, but the lady's jealous old husband, discovering the existence of the knight-hawk, attached a set of spikes to her window, thus impaling him as he flew to his beloved. Approaching this story from the point of view of the supposed social qualities of birds, then, it is significant that - of all the avian forms that were

⁴⁴ Marie de France, *Yonec*, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 87.

⁴⁵ Marie de France, *Yonec* (122), in *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert (Oxford, 1960).

available to Marie - she should consider the hawk to be the one that best embodied the nobility and courtliness of her exemplary, knightly hero.⁴⁶

In a discussion of the symbolism of falconry, John Cummins has argued that one of the reasons why hawks and falcons were viewed as noble creatures was because they provided the figure of the knight with an idealised image of himself:

The peregrine ...riding the wind, looking down on the world from above, or gentled and caressed on the falconer's wrist with its finely worked hood, its crest of feathers, its distinctive plumage, with those curved, cruel weapons which destroy inferiors at a blow, is almost a physiological extension of its master; an image, conscious or unconscious, of the knight, helmeted and armed in the panoply of the late-medieval passage of arms.⁴⁷

To return to *Octavian*, then, Florent's innately royal nature, which was completely unaffected by his life-long exposure to the environment of Clement's household, asserted itself not only through his complete ignorance of, and indifference to, the commercial interests of his adoptive father, but also through his aesthetic, almost narcissistic admiration for his fellow noble creature, the falcon. Therefore, the radically different responses of Florent and Clement to the bird demonstrate the extent to which they - and by extension the two social classes that they represent - were separated by a gulf of understanding that neither was capable of bridging.

This deeply hierarchical view of human society - which holds that it is nature and not nurture that is responsible for the formation of character and personality - is further propounded when Florent yet again incurred the anger of his adoptive father by

⁴⁶ The knight's many noble qualities were enumerated at the end of the narrative by the inhabitants of the country of which he was the king: 'the inhabitants began to weep and said amidst their tears that it was the best knight, the strongest and the fiercest, the fairest and the most beloved, who had ever been born.' *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 92.

⁴⁷ Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk*, p. 190.

purchasing another 'noble' animal: a horse. Having recognised that Florent lacked the necessary skills to become a butcher, Clement, as we have seen, instructed the boy to deliver forty pounds of gold to his step-brother (who was a money changer), only for Florent to spend it instead on a fine, milk-white steed:

Florent to the stede can gone,
 So feyre an hors sye he neuyr none
 Made of flesche and felle.
 Of wordys þe chylde was wondur bolde,
 And askyd whedur he schoulde be solde;
 The penyes he wolde hym telle.
 The man hym louyd for thyrtý pownde,
 Eche peny hole and sownde:
 No lesse he wolde hym selle.
 Florent seyde: 'To lytull hyt were!
 But neuyr þe lees þou schalt haue more.'
 Fowrty pownde he can hym telle.
 (721-732).

William Caxton, in his translation of Ramón Lull's, *Le Libre del Orde de Cauayleria*, attested to the nobility of the horse by claiming that when God instituted the Order of Chivalry, He chose this most noble of beasts to serve those noble, loyal, and courageous men whom He had appointed as knights:

And after was enquyred and serched / what beest was moost couenable
 moost fayre / most couragious and moost stronge to susteyne trauaylle
 / and moost able to serue the man / And thenne was founden / that the
 Hors was the moost noble / and the moost couenable to serue man /
 And by cause that emong alle the beestes the man chaas the hors / &
 gaf hym to this same man that was soo chosen amonge a thowsand
 men / For after the hors whiche is called Chyual in Frensshe is that
 man named Chyualler whiche is a knyght in Englyssh / Thus to the
 moost noble man / was gyuen the moost noble beest.⁴⁸

For both Caxton and the author of *Octavian*, then, the internal organization of the animal kingdom reflected the hierarchical structure of feudal society, with the horse occupying a position in the natural order that was analogous to the place of the knight in the social

⁴⁸ Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*. pp. 15-16.

world. Therefore, Florent's acquisition of the horse - an action that was motivated by a sense of sympathetic kinship with the animal - can be interpreted as yet another sign of his innate nobility and knightly destiny.⁴⁹ Indeed, Florent's strong affection for noble beasts constituted such incontrovertible proof of his aristocratic origins that Gladwin, his adoptive mother, became convinced that he could not be her husband's son, and it was for this reason that she implored Clement not to beat him:

The burges wyfe felle on kne þore:
 'Syr, mercy,' sche seyde, 'for Cryslys ore,
 Owre feyre chylde bete ye noght!
 Ye may see, and ye vndurstode,
 That he had neuyr kynde of þy blode,
 That he þese werkys hath wrought.'
 (751-756).

In many respects, the sense of sympathetic kinship that drew Florent to both the horse and falcon is similar to the unconscious or intuitive feeling of affinity that connected the lioness to young Octavian and his mother. For, although Florent was unaware of the circumstances of his own exalted birth, he was instinctively able - like the lioness - not only to recognise his fellow aristocratic creatures (whatever their species), but also to communicate his understanding of their shared nobility by responding to them in an affectionate manner. Moreover, the poem also suggests that the ties of common nobility that extended across the animal kingdom were stronger and more meaningful than the connections that existed between humans of different social classes. Thus, despite living together for years as members of the same family, the profound differences between Florent and his adoptive father, Clement, meant that the two men continually

⁴⁹ It is also worth mentioning that when purchasing the horse, Florent displayed the characteristically aristocratic virtue of largesse, paying forty pounds for the animal even though the man selling the creature had only asked for thirty. Once again, Florent's beliefs and actions are shown to be diametrically opposed to those of his adoptive father, Clement.

misunderstood one another, while the relationship that existed between young Octavian and his adoptive mother, the lioness, was based upon a deep sense of affinity and mutual affection.

In conclusion, then, it should be noted that the poet conceived of animals as more than just literary devices whose role or purpose in the narrative was - like the various dogs in *Sir Gowther* - to act as instruments of divine providence and markers of human nobility or saintliness. For, as well as performing these symbolic functions, the lioness, falcon, and horse were also endowed by the *Octavian*-poet with innately noble, aristocratic characteristics, which made it possible for them to forge companionable relationships with the different men and women - whether royal or holy - whom they happened to encounter. The bonds of sympathy and kinship that variously connected the Empress and her twin sons to the three noble beasts, and which at least hint at the possibility of friendship between the human and animal worlds, are all the more remarkable because they provide a contrast to the early *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi, in which (as I sought to demonstrate in Chapter 1), contrary to modern, popular perceptions of the saint, sentiments such as friendship and empathy for animals are conspicuous by their absence. The benign, companionable, almost empathetic attitudes towards the animal kingdom that are implicit in *Octavian*, are also evident in *Sir Orfeo*, the last of the fourteenth-century Middle English romances that I shall be considering in this chapter, and the text to which I shall now turn.

Sir Orfeo

In the Preface to his monumental study, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*, Francis Klingender argued that lying beneath the enormous variety of

different ways in which animals have been depicted in art and literature during the course of human history, two fundamental but contradictory psychological impulses can be discerned. On the one hand, reflecting the reality of humanity's gradual yet remorseless conquest of the natural world, Klingender claimed that artists and writers have sought to celebrate men and women's hard-won ascendancy over, and brutal subjugation of, the animal kingdom. On the other hand, however, he noted that it was also possible to detect an equally important tendency pointing in the opposite direction, a tendency that is neither aggressive nor triumphalistic, but that expresses the wish that the violent conflict that so characterises relations between humans and animals might eventually be brought to an end. According to Klingender, this desire, which manifests itself particularly strongly in the near-universal legend of the golden age, as well as in post-apocalyptic millennial fantasies, 'made men ignore the realities of struggle and exploitation altogether, thus transplanting them into a dream-world of wish-fulfilment where all creatures are friends.'⁵⁰ In the Western cultural tradition, the figure who probably best embodies this desire for peace and harmony between the human and animal worlds is Orpheus, the mythical Thracian musician who was able to charm even the wildest of beasts with the enchanting power of his music, and who - despite the antiquity of his legend - has continued to exert a strong hold over the imagination of writers and artists into modern times.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Francis Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. Evelyn Antal and John Harthan (London, 1971), p. xxv.

⁵¹ Evidence of the enduring potency and popularity of the Orpheus legend can be found in the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the most celebrated of twentieth-century poets. In 1904, Rilke recounted the story of Orpheus's descent into the underworld in his verse narrative *Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes*, and such was his fascination with the myth that he returned to the figure of the Thracian musician almost two decades later in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, which A. Poulin Jr. - in the Preface to his English translation of the *Sonnets* - has described as 'Rilke's greatest achievement and one of the most fully

It was not until the reign of the Roman emperor, Augustus, that Orpheus's fame as a musician, and his association with animals, were combined to produce the version of the legend popularised by the poets Virgil and Ovid, and which became the form transmitted to the Middle Ages.⁵² Distressed at the death of his wife, Eurydice, Orpheus journeyed to the underworld in order to plead for her return. Moved by the mournful beauty of Orpheus's music, the king and queen of Hades granted his request, and allowed him to lead his wife out of the underworld on condition that he did not look back at her until he reached the surface of the earth. But, such was Orpheus's love for Eurydice that he was unable to prevent himself from casting a backward glance at her just as he was about to emerge into the light of day, and so, having broken his agreement with the infernal gods, he lost his wife for a second time. Overcome with grief, Orpheus withdrew into the wilderness where he enchanted all of nature with his music. In memory of his wife he shunned the company of women [according to Ovid he sought consolation in the love of boys, thereby introducing homosexuality to Thrace (*Metamorphoses* X, 82-85)], and it was because of his renunciation of feminine love that

realized artistic statements of the twentieth century.' See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Orpheus Eurydike, Hermes*, in J. B. Lieshman, ed. and trans. *Rainer Maria Rilke, New Poems* (London, 1964), pp. 142-147; and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, in A. Poulin Jr. ed. and trans. *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus* (Boston, 1977).

⁵² See Virgil, *Georgics* IV (453-527), trans. L. P. Wilkinson (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 139-142, and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X (1-85), and XI (1-66), trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 225-227 and pp. 246-247. Knowledge of Orpheus was also handed down to the Middle Ages through the allegorical version of the legend recorded by Boethius (c. 480-524) in Book III Meter 12 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. See, Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (London, 1918), pp. 294-297. For a discussion of the representation of Orpheus in the earlier Greek literature of the Hellenic period, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (London, 1934, rpt. 1952), pp. 1-68; John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1970), pp. 1-12; and Emmet Robbins, 'Famous Orpheus', in John Warden, ed. *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 3-23.

the women of Thrace - believing themselves to have been snubbed - tore him to pieces while inflamed in their Bacchanalian revels. Ovid, whose account of Orpheus's death is not only longer than that of Virgil, but also seems to be more intent on evoking pathos, memorably cemented the hero's identification with his animal audience by describing how they shared the same violent fate at the hands of the wild and furious Thracian women:

The first victims were the countless birds, still spellbound by the voice of the singer, the snakes and the throng of wild animals, the audience which had brought Orpheus such renown. The frenzied women began by seizing upon these; then, with bloodstained hands, they turned to Orpheus himself, flocking together just as birds do, if they see the bird of night abroad by day.⁵³

For Ovid, then, although Orpheus's many sufferings leant a kind of tragic grandeur to his life, the source of his fame, and hence the characteristic or defining feature of his mythological identity, was the mesmeric power that he exerted over his animal audience.

The anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* was ultimately derived from this version of the Orpheus legend. However, as a summary of the plot of *Sir Orfeo* will show, in the hands of an unknown English poet of the late Middle Ages, the story of Orpheus's tragic love for Eurydice was transformed almost beyond recognition, with only the hero's reputation as a lover, and his power to enchant the animal kingdom with his music (along, of course, with his name), to connect him directly to his classical forebear.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XI (20-25), p. 246.

⁵⁴ *Sir Orfeo*, which is thought to have been composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century in the London area, is preserved in three different manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck MS); London, British Library, MS Harley 3810, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61. For a discussion of the date, provenance, and language of the poem, see *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss. 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1966), pp. ix-xxvii. All references to *Sir Orfeo* will be taken from Bliss's text of the Auchinleck manuscript.

According to its author, the romance of *Sir Orfeo* was originally composed as a lay by Breton minstrels, and it told of the great love that King Orfeo of England bore for his wife Queen Heurodis, of the suffering that he endured after they were forcibly separated, and of the joy that they both experienced when they were finally reunited. Set in the city of Winchester (which we are told was once known as Thrace), the poem opens one morning in the beginning of May when Heurodis, accompanied by two of her ladies, lay down to sleep in her orchard under a grafted fruit tree ['ympe-tre' (70)], only for her to wake up that afternoon in a mad frenzy. Tearing at her face and clothes, and crying out in terror, it took over sixty knights and ladies to carry her back to the palace and restrain her. Orfeo, pitifully beholding the bloody wounds that Heurodis had inflicted on herself, begged her to reveal the cause of her unhappiness, and in great distress she told him that they must part, for she had been visited in her dream by the king of the fairies who had forced her to accompany him and his entourage to the fairy-realm, and who had then, after restoring her to her orchard, warned her that he would return on the following day to take her away with him again, this time for ever. The next morning, determined to oppose the fairy king, Orfeo surrounded his wife with a guard of a thousand knights, but in spite of this precaution he was powerless to prevent her abduction. Devastated at the loss of Heurodis, Orfeo then renounced all of his possessions except for his harp, and entrusting the government of the kingdom to his steward, and donning a 'sclauin' (228) or pilgrim's mantle, he left the city to live with the beasts in the woods.

For ten years Orfeo suffered incalculable pain as he wandered alone in the wilderness, sleeping in the open and eating nothing but wild fruit, berries, roots, and grasses. Occasionally he played his harp and produced such melodious music that he

was able to charm the birds and animals of the forest. One day, he came across a group of sixty ladies hunting water-fowl with falcons by a river, and caught up in the excitement of the chase he rushed towards them only to find that one of the members of the party was his wife. He followed the ladies through a tunnel in a rock which led to the land of the fairy king, in the middle of which stood a castle so richly decorated with precious stones and metals that it resembled the court of paradise. In the guise of an itinerant minstrel he gained admittance to the castle, where he saw imprisoned within its walls a vast number of deranged or mutilated people who were thought to have died but who had actually been taken by the fairies, among whom he recognised his own wife, Heurodis, still sleeping beneath her 'ympe-tre' (407).

Orfeo then approached the king and queen and told them that it was custom of wandering minstrels to perform their music in the houses of great lords. He thus played before them, and his music cast such a powerful spell over the court that everyone in the palace was involuntarily drawn towards it. Moved by the performance, the king instructed Orfeo to name his reward, and Orfeo asked to be given Heurodis, a request which the king reluctantly granted. Orfeo then returned with Heurodis to Winchester, where - disguised as a beggar - he played his harp before his own court. Although the steward was unable to see through Orfeo's disguise, he did recognise his sovereign's harp, and in response to his enquiry Orfeo told him that he had found the instrument in the wilderness by the body of a man who had been eaten by lions and gnawed by wolves. Hearing this, the steward broke down in tears, bitterly mourning the death of his king. Having thus tested the steward's love and loyalty, Orfeo revealed his true identity, rewarded the steward for his fidelity, and was welcomed back to court with much rejoicing.

As this somewhat lengthy recapitulation of the plot reveals, *Sir Orfeo* bears only the most perfunctory resemblance to its classical sources. In the process of transforming a legendary story of antiquity into a romance, the setting was moved from ancient Greece to medieval England, the hero and heroine were reincarnated as a noble and courtly king and queen, the underworld of classical mythology was replaced by the fairy-otherworld of Celtic legend, and most significantly of all, rather than ending with the tragic death of the two lovers, the story concluded with the joyful and triumphant return of Orfeo and Heurodis to their kingdom. Moreover, *Sir Orfeo* is framed by a prologue and epilogue in which the poet - instead of citing the Greek myth of Orpheus as the source of the romance - claimed that the work had originally been composed as a lay by Breton minstrels, and as G. V. Smithers has usefully pointed out, it is with this tradition of the Breton lay, and not with its classical antecedents, that the poem has most in common.⁵⁵

Amidst these radical changes not only to the form and content of the narrative, but also to the identity of the hero and heroine, it is interesting to note that the one episode that the poet faithfully preserved from the classical legend was the hero's

⁵⁵ See G. V. Smithers, 'Story-Patterns in Some Breton Lays', *Medium Aevum* XXII (1953), 61-92. Breton Lays have proved to be a very difficult to define generically, since they are virtually indistinguishable from conventional medieval romances. However, as in the case of both *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gowther*, Breton lays purport to be literary versions of traditional songs that were originally sung by the people of Brittany in their ancient Breton language. The genre only emerged (as a literary form at least), in the second half of the twelfth century with the appearance of the Old French lays of Marie de France (which are generally believed to have been written between 1170 and 1189). There are nine poems in Middle English, all of which date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that are designated as Breton Lays: *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay le Freine*, *Sir Degaré*, *Emaré*, *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gowther*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*. For a general introduction to the Breton lay in both Old French and Middle English literature, see Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, 1969).

charming of the animals with his music, suggesting that for the author of *Sir Orfeo* at least, the essential characteristics of the Orpheus-Orfeo figure were his skill as a musician and his association with the animal kingdom. The first intimation of the hero's special relationship with animals comes when Orfeo announced to the assembled nobles of his realm, that because of the great sadness that he felt at the loss of his wife, he intended to abandon his kingdom in favour of a life of exile in the wilderness:

He cleped to-gider his barouns,
 Erls, lordes of renouns,
 & when þai al y-comen were,
 'Lordinges' he said, 'Bifor 3ou here
 Ich ordainy min hei3e steward
 To wite mi kingdom afterward;
 In mi stede ben he schal
 To kepe mi londes ouer-al,
 For now ichaue mi quen y-lore,
 þe fairest leuedi þat euer was bore,
 Neuer eft y nil no woman se,
 In-to wilderness ichil te,
 & liue þer euermore
 Wip wilde bestes in holtes hore;
 & when 3e vnder-stond þat y be spent,
 Make 3ou þan a parlement,
 & chese 3ou a newe king
 - Now dop 3our best wip all mi þinge.
 (201-218).

Orfeo's determination to abjure the company of women and live instead 'Wip wilde bestes in holtes hore' (214), mirrors the actions of the classical Orpheus - related in the accounts of Virgil and Ovid - after he had failed to recover his wife from the underworld.⁵⁶ But, beyond the fact of this literary parallel, Orfeo's actual motives for relinquishing his temporal power and abandoning human society remain obscure, and

⁵⁶ See Virgil, *Georgics* IV (507-520), pp. 141-142, and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X (76-77), p. 227.

have been the subject of considerable critical debate.⁵⁷ For instance, it has been argued that Orfeo was subject to the same kind of love-madness that beset the romance heroes Lancelot, Ywain, and Tristram, all three of whom - like Orfeo - withdrew from human society into the wilderness after being deprived of the love of their respective mistresses, Guenevere, Alundyne, and Isolde.⁵⁸ However, rather than spontaneously losing his reason and violently running off naked into the forest (the sequence of events enacted by Lancelot, Ywain, and Tristram), Orfeo freely chose to forsake the civilized world, and in so doing he not only displayed sufficient presence of mind to announce his intention of abdicating in advance, but he also had the foresight to stipulate before an assembly of his vassals the manner in which his kingdom was to be governed after his departure.

In contrast to the love-madness of the three Arthurian heroes, the poet's account of Orfeo's sojourn in the wilderness is couched in religious language and imagery, and seems to owe more to the hagiographical tradition of the saintly hermit than to the romance convention of the forlorn lover. On losing Heurodis, Orfeo renounced his position in society, assumed the appearance of a religious figure by putting aside his secular garments in favour of a 'sclauin' or pilgrim's mantle, abandoned all of his possessions (except for his harp), and finally passed barefoot through the city gates:

⁵⁷ A summary of the various critical positions that have been adopted on the subject can be found in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury's note on lines 227-271, in their edition of the text. See *Sir Orfeo*, in Laskaya and Salisbury, ed. *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ See Dean R. Baldwin, 'Fairy Lore and the Meaning of *Sir Orfeo*', *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 41 (1977), 129-142. According to Baldwin, p. 137, by choosing to withdraw into the wilderness, Orfeo was 'unconsciously following the tradition of lovers generally and romance lovers in particular'. A description of the love-madness of both Lancelot and Tristram can be found in Thomas Malory's 'The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones'. See Malory, *Works*, pp. 487-500, and pp. 303-308. Ywain's madness is related in the anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Ywain and Gawain*. See *Ywain and Gawain* (1649-1656), ed. Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, EETS OS 254 (London, 1964).

Al his kingdom he for-soke,
 Bot a sclauin on him he toke.
 He ne hadde kirtel ne hode,
 Schert no no noþer gode,
 Bot his harpe he tok algate
 & dede him barfot out atte 3ate;
 No man most wiþ him go.
 O, way! What þer was wepe and wo
 When he þat hadde ben king wiþ croun
 Went so pouerlich out of toun!
 þuirth wode & ouer heþ
 in-to þe wildernes he geþ.
 Noþing he fint þat him is ays,
 But euer he liveþ in gret malais.
 (227-240).

As well as willingly accepting a life of poverty and physical hardship, Orfeo's newly acquired identity as a humble saint and penitent also manifested itself through his relationship with the animal kingdom. On the most basic level, his decision to live with the beasts of the forest might be seen as a deliberate echo of Jesus's forty day retreat in the wilderness, during which time, according to St. Mark's Gospel: 'he was ...with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.' (Mark 1: 13). More significantly, however, it was while he was living in the wilderness that Orfeo charmed the birds and beasts with his music, an episode which - despite its classical, pagan origins - contains clear echoes of many of the *Lives* of the saints:

His harp, where-on was al his gle,
 He hidde in an holwe tre,
 & when þe weder was clere & bri3t
 He toke his harp to him wel ri3t
 & harped at his owen wille.
 In-to alle þe wode þe soun gan schille,
 þat all þe wilde bestes þat þer bep
 For ioie abouten him þai teþ,
 & alle þe foules þat þer were
 Come & sete on ich a brere,
 To here his harping a-fine
 - So miche melody was þer-in;
 & when he his harping lete wold,
 No best bi him abide nold.

(267-280).

The picture of the barefooted Orfeo, dressed in religious raiment and peacefully surrounded by a group of birds and beasts, inevitably calls to mind those saintly figures - such as the desert fathers and Francis of Assisi - whose extraordinary purity and holiness, as we have seen, made it possible for them to restore to the natural world the harmony that it had originally enjoyed before the Fall. Through the melodious power of his music, then, Orfeo was momentarily able to re-establish amongst his audience of animals the peaceful condition that had at one time prevailed in the garden of Eden - a miraculous power that was earlier alluded to in the prologue, when the poet compared the beauty of Orfeo's harping to the joys of paradise:

In al þe world was no man bore
 þat ones Orfeo sat bifore
 (& he miȝt of his harping here)
 Bot he schuld þenche þat he were
 In on of þe ioies of Paradis,
 Swiche melody in his harping is.
 (33-38).

This ability of Orfeo metaphorically to transport his audience of animals to paradise - a power which enabled him to create, in the words of Seth Lerer, 'an Eden in the wilderness'⁵⁹ - lasted only for the duration of his musical performance, for the birds and beasts immediately dispersed as soon as his playing had come to an end: '& when he his harping lete wold, / No best bi him abide nold.' (279-280). Once the brief, paradisaical interlude of Orfeo's harping was over, then, the postlapsarian discord between humans and animals was instantly restored.

⁵⁹ See Seth Lerer, 'Artifice and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*', *Speculum* 60 (1985), 92-109, p. 102.

Although the peaceful and harmonious relationship that Orfeo established with his animal audience was only fleeting, his encounter with the birds and beasts nonetheless points to an underlying connection in the poem between the human and animal worlds. For, it is clear that the various wild creatures who gathered round Orfeo in the wilderness had the ability - generally thought to be the exclusive preserve of human beings - to experience delight in music. Indeed, it would appear that the melodious strains of Orfeo's harping had the effect not so much of lulling the animals into a state of non-violent passivity, but of actively awakening within them feelings of joy: 'all þe wilde bestes þat þer bep / For ioie abouten him þai tep' (273-274). Thus, Orfeo - who both sought and found in the playing of his harp consolation from the rigours of his life in the wilderness - was able to unite with his audience of beasts and birds in a shared moment of musical enjoyment.

The power of music to forge connections across the animal kingdom is also in evidence at the very beginning of the poem, when Heurodis - accompanied by two of her ladies - withdrew into her orchard in order to listen to the birds sing:

þis ich quen, Dame Heurodis,
Tok to maidens of priis,
& went in an vndrentide
To play bi an orchard-side,
To se þe floures sprede & spring,
& to here þe foules sing.
(63-68).

Just as the birds gathered in the wilderness to hear the music of Sir Orfeo, so Heurodis and her ladies sought out the birds for their song. Thus, a kind of reciprocity between humans and animals is suggested in the poem, with each able to take pleasure and delight in the music of the other.

However, a very different incident involving animals, and one that casts light on the complex and multi-faceted nature of Orfeo's identity, occurred at the end of his ten years of exile in the wilderness, when, wandering alone through the forest, he came across a party of sixty ladies hunting water-fowl with falcons:

And on a day he seiȝe him biside
 Sexti leuedis on hors ride,
 Gentil & iolif as brid on ris;
 Nouȝt a man amonges hem þer nis;
 & ich a faucoun on hond bere,
 And riden on haukin bi o riure.
 Of game þai founde wel gode haunt,
 Maulardes, hayroun & cormeraunt;
 þe foules of þe water ariseþ,
 þe faucons hem wele deuisseþ;
 Ich faucoun his pray slouȝ.
 þat seiȝe Orfeo, & louȝ:
 'Parfay!' quap he, 'þer is fair game;
 þider ichil, bi Godes name!
 Ich was y-won swiche werk to se.'
 He aros, & þider gan te.
 (303-318).

Unlike Orfeo's previous encounter with the animal kingdom, which is marked both by its harmoniousness, and its fabulous, other-worldly atmosphere, this episode is rooted not only in the reality of everyday human experience, but also in the natural conflict and struggle for survival that characterises relations between animal predators and their prey.⁶⁰ For, although it subsequently transpires that the sixty ladies had come from the realm of the fairy-king, their falcons, and the three species of water-fowl on which the falcons preyed - the mallards, herons, and cormorants - are all unmistakably native to England. But, even more significant than the portrayal of the birds themselves is the poet's description of Orfeo's reaction to them, because through his typically aristocratic

⁶⁰ This point has been made by A. J. Bliss in the introduction to his edition of the text. See, *Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss, pp. xlii-xliii.

and courtly response to the spectacle of the hunt, he revealed a completely different side to his character from the one that he had earlier displayed while enchanting the animals with his music.

In contrast to the peaceful and contemplative mood that surrounded the previous scene, Orfeo greeted the violent sight of the falcons hunting and killing the water-fowl with a spontaneous and uninhibited expression of joy, first laughing, and then going towards the ladies in order to gain a better view of the proceedings. Of course, the pleasure that Orfeo experienced - which is all the more powerful (and poignant) coming as it does after the long description of his travails in the wilderness - was due at least in part to the fact that the hunt reminded him of his former, happier life at court: 'Ich was y-won swiche werk to se.' (317). However, as well as triggering memories of his past, it would seem that the sight of the falcons hunting their prey actually enabled Orfeo to recover or rediscover within himself his own aristocratic identity. For, in the same way that his peaceful, musical encounter with the birds and beasts somehow accorded with, or was a manifestation of, the spiritual side of his nature, so his delight in falconry can be seen as a trait that corresponds to, or is indicative of, his identity as a noble king.

Hunting in one form or another constituted the principal leisure activity of the medieval aristocracy, and proficiency in its various arts was considered a necessary courtly accomplishment.⁶¹ Moreover, just as Florent's love of falcons in *Octavian* drew attention to his royal origins, so a knowledge of the esoteric rules and rituals of hunting and falconry - when displayed by a hero in romance - was a sure sign of his nobility. For instance, in *Sir Tristrem*, an anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English romance (the

⁶¹ For a discussion of the importance of hunting in aristocratic life, see Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk*, pp. 1-11.

only copy of which is preserved in the Auchinleck manuscript), the eponymous hero came across a party of huntsmen in a forest inexpertly breaking up a stag. Appalled by their ignorance of hunting lore, Tristram intervened and performed the task with great dexterity, thereby revealing himself to all present as a man of noble birth.⁶² In much the same way, Orfeo's enthusiasm for falconry confirmed that, despite his wild, grizzly, and decidedly uncourtly appearance, his nature was essentially noble.

One of the reasons why falconry appealed so greatly to the medieval aristocracy was because it offered those of noble birth a reassuringly familiar and comforting view of the natural world, with the divisions within the animal kingdom between the predatory falcons and their prey seeming to reflect, and in a sense vindicate, the hierarchical structure of feudal civilization. As John Cummins has noted, the falconer saw in his activity:

a confirmation of the structure of human society, with certain natural and ineradicable divisions; he accepts that there are beings inherently superior to others, over which they have the power of life and death; beings stronger, abler, cleaner and more refined; in a word, more 'gentle'.⁶³

Possibly then, Orfeo's pleasure and excitement at the sight of the birds was an expression of his affinity for, and identification with, his fellow aristocratic creature, the falcon. It follows from this that he may have regarded the bird's successful slaying of its prey as an example of a noble creature exercising its natural - almost feudal - prerogative over the plebeian mallards, herons, and cormorants.

⁶² See *Sir Tristrem* (445-539), ed. George P. McNeill, STS 8 (Edinburgh, 1886). This episode is also recorded in Gottfried Von Strassburg's *Tristan* - the classic version of the story of Tristram and Isolde - which was written in Middle High German in the first decade of the thirteenth century. See Gottfried Von Strassburg, *Tristan*, trans. A. T. Hatto (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 78-86.

⁶³ Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk*, pp. 189-190.

The changing nature of Orfeo's relationship with the animal kingdom reflects the two tendencies within his character - the one religious and penitential, the other regal and courtly - that I have identified. When, at the beginning of the poem, Orfeo was prompted by an overwhelming sense of grief to withdraw into the wilderness, his peaceful commune with the birds and beasts symbolised his rejection of human society and renunciation of the world, while his joyful reaction to the sight of the falcons - marking as it does the end of his self-imposed exile in the wilderness, and the overcoming of his despair - signalled the re-emergence of the royal, courtly, and assertive side of his character. However, it is interesting to note that in contrast to both *Sir Gowther* and *Octavian*, in which there is a considerable overlap between the realms of religious and secular culture, with the attributes of the knight merging imperceptibly with those of the saint, these two aspects both of Orfeo himself, and the poem to which he gave his name, are never fully integrated. Whereas Gowther achieved sainthood through his pursuit of the chivalric ideal, and the religious virtues of the Empress in *Octavian* are virtually indistinguishable from her attributes as a noblewoman, Orfeo completely abandoned his quasi-religious persona when he returned to Winchester with his wife, Dame Heurodis, and re-assumed his identity as a king.

Sir Orfeo's distinctive use of hagiographical and romance convention can perhaps be better understood if it is approached through the kind of archetypal criticism pioneered by Northrop Frye. According to Frye, romance narratives typically describe the metaphorical descent of a hero or heroine into a nightmare world of suffering and confusion (sometimes represented by a wilderness, labyrinth, or prison), in which they experience either terror, grief, or awe, and suffer a profound loss of identity. However, Frye claims that in romance, this tragic mood of confinement and enchantment is

eventually broken, allowing the hero or heroine to recover their former identity, and so return (ascend) to the world from which they had originally come.⁶⁴

An archetypal reading of *Sir Orfeo*, then, would emphasise the cyclical nature of the narrative, with its symmetrical themes of descent and ascent, loss and restoration, and exile and return. Such an interpretation would therefore regard Orfeo's ten years of exile in the wilderness as a metaphorical descent into the subterranean world of grief and suffering, and his adoption of a saintly, hagiographical persona simply as a manifestation of the sense of alienation, confusion and loss of identity that is conventionally associated with such a state. Furthermore, and with striking relevance to our current concerns, Frye also notes that the moment at which the romance hero recovers his former identity is often marked on his part by a spontaneous release of laughter, which signals a change in the prevailing narrative tone from tragedy to comedy.⁶⁵ As we have already observed, Orfeo greeted the sight of the falcons - which, of course, is the point in the narrative where he recalled his past life and rediscovered his former self - by laughing: 'Ich faucoun his pray slou3. / þat sei3e Orfeo, & lou3' (313-314).

Frye's critical method is founded on the assumption that, although superficially different in regard to their content, all literary works, regardless of when or where they were produced, make use of a small number of recurring narrative patterns, which embody the deepest wishes and anxieties of humanity. Frye claims that it is only by accepting the existence of such universal or archetypal structures that one can explain

⁶⁴ Frye's theory of romance is outlined in his book: *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1976).

⁶⁵ See Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 129-131.

how stories are able to travel across the barriers of language, custom, and religious belief, and so take root in cultures remote from one another in terms of both their geographical location and historical setting. But, specifically in relation to romance, Frye further notes that the pattern of descent and ascent that describes the trajectory of the romance hero was itself derived from the structure of vegetation and solar myths, myths that acquired their meaning and significance from the fact that they reflect, and give expression to, on the one hand the different rhythms of the natural world (for instance, the cycle of the seasons, with the annual disappearance of plant life in the autumn, and its re-emergence in the spring), and on the other hand the cyclical movements of the celestial bodies (such as the daily setting and rising of the sun).

When considered in the light of Frye's theory, then, *Sir Orfeo's* origins in, and close connection to, the world of both Classical and Celtic mythology become all the more apparent. From the point of view of an archetypal critic, Orfeo's ten years of exile in the wilderness can be seen as a kind of symbolic death, and it is perhaps for this reason that the saintly persona that he assumed during this period is so disconnected from the royal identity that he renounced at the beginning of the story, and which he re-discovered at its end. However, it should be noted that in contrast to *Sir Orfeo*, Frye's cyclical pattern does not apply quite so neatly to either *Sir Gowther* or *Octavian*. Of course, both the eponymous hero of *Sir Gowther*, and the Empress and her two children in *Octavian*, undergo a period of exile in the wilderness, from which - like Orfeo - they are eventually able to emerge renewed (or in Frye's terms, out of which they are able to ascend, symbolically reborn). But, unlike *Sir Orfeo*, whose plot is almost perfectly cyclical (so that Orfeo and Heurodis find themselves at the end of the narrative in a virtually identical position to the one that they had originally occupied at its beginning),

the protagonists of both *Sir Gowther* and *Octavian* grow, develop, and change. Thus, we find that Gowther leaves his kingdom as an unmarried sinner, but ends his days as a married saint, while young Octavian and his brother, Florent, are sent into exile as newly-born babies, only to be finally re-united with their father as fully-grown men. In both *Sir Gowther* and *Octavian*, then, the cyclical motif of descent and ascent is used in conjunction with a linear narrative, and it is this combination of linear and cyclical elements that enables the themes of courtliness and saintliness - themes that are treated in *Sir Orfeo* as alternative, mutually exclusive categories - to be seamlessly integrated. Frye's model, then, while helpful, really takes account of only one variety of romance experience, touching only tangentially upon the other kinds of narrative structure that have been considered in this chapter.

Even amongst the romances that borrow from, and have affinities with, hagiography, then, individual works employ hagiographical themes and motifs - especially those associated with animals - in their own distinct ways. However, there is a further category of Middle English romance - best exemplified by the legendary tales of Alexander the Great - that draws upon, and is closely connected to, not the *Lives* of the saints, but the genres of chronicle and history. I shall be examining this tradition of pseudo-historical romance narrative, and exploring the different symbolic and narrative uses to which it put the animal kingdom, in the next chapter.

3

Nature and Supernature: The Middle English

Romances of Alexander the Great

Alexander: Romance and History

Of all the historical figures from classical Antiquity whose lives were known during the Middle Ages, there was no one who could rival the fame and popularity enjoyed by Alexander the Great. Writing at the end of the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer - in a much-quoted passage from *The Monk's Tale* - attested to Alexander's extraordinary renown:

The storie of Alisaundre is so commune
That every wight that hath discrecioun
Hath herd somewhat or al of his fortune.¹

The reasons why the story of Alexander appealed so strongly to a medieval audience are not difficult to understand, for his life - like that of a romance hero - was packed full of fabulous incident and dramatic adventure. He was born in 356 BC, the son of Queen Olympias and King Philip II of Macedon, and in his youth he came under the influence of the philosopher, Aristotle, who had been appointed by Philip to act as his tutor. Alexander succeeded to the Macedonian throne at the age of twenty (after the

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Monk's Tale*, Fragment VII *The Canterbury Tales* (2631-2633), in Larry D. Benson *et al*, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1988), p. 250.

assassination of his father), and as soon as he had ensured the security of his realm by putting down a series of rebellions in Greece and the Balkans, he led an army across the Hellespont into Asia on a campaign against the Persian emperor, Darius III. Despite the vast numerical superiority of the Persians, Alexander achieved three decisive military victories at the battles of Granicus (334 BC), Issus (333 BC), and Gaugamela (331 BC), as a result of which he found himself - at the age of twenty-five - the ruler of a vast territory that stretched from Libya in the west to Bactria (modern Afghanistan) in the east. But, not content with simply preserving the boundaries of Darius's empire, Alexander pressed on into India, only ending his eastward march at the banks of the river Beas in the Punjab, when his troops - seeing no end to the campaign, and exhausted after their years of toil and fighting - refused to advance any further. Therefore, unable to conquer the whole of India as he had intended, Alexander reluctantly returned to Babylon, the administrative centre of his empire, where he unexpectedly died of a fever in 323 BC, at the age of thirty-two.²

It would appear from this brief biographical sketch that Alexander owed his enduring fame to a number of different factors, the most obvious of which were his seeming invincibility in battle, the unprecedented size of the territory that he had conquered, and the very young age at which he achieved his victories.³ However, while

² Numerous biographies of Alexander have appeared in recent years, among the most highly regarded of which are W. W. Tarn's *Alexander the Great* 2 Vols (Cambridge, 1948); Robin Lane Fox's *Alexander the Great* (London, 1973); and A. B. Bosworth's *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1988).

³ An anecdote from the life of Julius Caesar recorded by the Roman historian, Suetonius, reflects precisely these aspects of Alexander's posthumous reputation. According to Suetonius, while Caesar held the rank of questor - the most junior of all the Roman offices of state - he was sent on a mission to Further Spain, where: 'he saw a statue of Alexander the Great in the Temple of Hercules, and was overheard to sigh impatiently; vexed it seems, that at an age when Alexander had already conquered the

the scale and historical significance of Alexander's accomplishments have never been in dispute, the nature of his personality and the morality of his actions were the subject of a fierce debate that raged throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, and medieval periods. On the one hand, he was regarded by some as a heroic figure whose stupendous achievements set the standard of military excellence that all subsequent kings and generals sought to follow.⁴ Conversely, he was believed by others to have been a cruel tyrant whose character contained all that was most evil in human nature, and who was responsible - during the course of his campaigns - for causing untold human misery and suffering.⁵ As an historical figure, then, Alexander impressed himself so forcibly on the world that not even his most vehement critics could deny the importance of his

whole world, he himself had done nothing in the least epoch making.' See Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 16.

⁴ Alexander's inclusion in the list of the nine worthies - the catalogue of the nine noblest men in history that was first drawn up at the beginning of the fourteenth century by Jacques de Longuyon in his verse romance, *Les Voeux de Paon*, and which was frequently repeated in the popular literature of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries - reflects the Macedonian emperor's status as an exemplary, chivalric hero. The nine worthies consisted of three pagans: Hector, Alexander, and Julius Caesar; three Jews: Joshua, David, and Judas Maccabeus; and three Christians: Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon. The most notable Middle English treatments of this theme can be found in two alliterative poems of the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries; *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (300-583), and the *Morte Arthure* ((3223-3455). See *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ed. M. Y. Offord, EETS OS (Oxford, 1959), and *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, in Larry D. Benson, ed. *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthure and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Indianapolis, 1974).

⁵ Alexander was condemned for just this reason by Paulus Orosius in his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, which was written in the early years of the fifth century at the request of Orosius's friend and mentor, St. Augustine, and which became a standard textbook on the history of the classical period during the Middle Ages. Orosius portrayed Alexander as a ruthless sadist who was impelled ever onwards by his love of cruelty. For instance, in his account of the subjugation of Bactria, Orosius claimed that: 'Alexander, insatiable for human blood, whether of enemies or even allies, was always thirsting for fresh bloodshed. So with a stubborn heart, he received in surrender the Chorasmii and Dahae, a tribe which had not been conquered.' See Paulus Orosius, *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, Book 3: 18, p. 105, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, 1964).

accomplishments, yet his deeds elicited violently opposing responses in the work of poets, philosophers, theologians, and preachers.⁶

Although Alexander's place in medieval culture's pantheon of great and famous men was not in doubt, the path by which knowledge of his life was passed down to posterity was far from straightforward. None of the accounts of his career that were written by his contemporaries has survived; and their descriptions of his actions and assessments of his character are now only known at second or third hand through the work of Greek and Roman historians of the first and second centuries AD, such as Arrian, Plutarch, and Quintus Curtius Rufus.⁷ However, the work of Arrian and Plutarch was not available in Western Europe during the Middle Ages; which meant that the principal historical sources that shaped medieval perceptions of Alexander's reign were Curtius Rufus's, *History of Alexander*, Orosius's, *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, and its source, Marcus Julianus Justinus's *Epitome* of the lost *Historiae Philippicae* of Pompeius Trogus.⁸

But, in addition to these historical works, medieval knowledge of Alexander was also derived from an alternative, legendary tradition, which was ultimately based on a

⁶ For a detailed consideration of the wide range of different attitudes towards Alexander that can be found in the literature of the Middle Ages, see George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956), *passim*.

⁷ See Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth, 1971); Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert, in Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 252-334; and Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, trans. John Yardley (Harmondsworth, 1984). For a brief discussion of the problems faced by modern historians of Alexander because of the loss of the primary sources for his life, see Fox, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 499-500.

⁸ The medieval reception of these texts is examined at some length by both George Cary and David Ross. See Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, pp. 62-70, and D. J. A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature* (London, 1963), pp. 67-83.

highly romanticised biography of the Macedonian emperor that is thought to have been written by a Greek inhabitant of Alexandria some time between 200 BC and 200 AD, and which is known as *Pseudo-Callisthenes* because of an erroneous attribution to the Peripatetic philosopher, Callisthenes, in one of the manuscripts.⁹ Two Latin translations of *Pseudo-Callisthenes* were of particular importance for the reception of the romance in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. The first, known as the *Res Gestae Alexandri Magni*, was undertaken in the early fourth century by a certain North African called Julius Valerius, and it achieved considerable popularity from the ninth century onwards in an abridged version (known as the *Zacher Epitome*). However, the *Zacher Epitome* was itself superseded in the later Middle Ages by the *Historia de Preliis Alexandri Magni*, a translation of *Pseudo-Callisthenes* which was made in the mid-tenth century by Archpriest Leo of Naples, and which was widely known in three different versions (the so-called J¹, J², and J³ interpolated recensions). Together, the works of Julius Valerius and Leo of Naples spawned hundreds of derivatives in the different vernacular languages of Western Europe, including all of the Middle English romances of Alexander the Great, of which the most coherent and artistically successful is *Kyng Alisaunder*.¹⁰

⁹ *Pseudo-Callisthenes* - derivatives of which were known as far afield as Iceland, Ethiopia, and China - was pivotal in disseminating the fame of Alexander far beyond the boundaries of his empire, and the extremely wide diffusion of the romance has made it, as Robin Lane Fox has noted, possibly the most widely read tale 'in world history to have spread without a religious message.' See Robin Lane Fox, *The Search for Alexander* (London, 1980), p. 40. The complex process by which *Pseudo-Callisthenes* was translated into Latin and the vernacular languages of Western Europe has been exhaustively documented by George Cary. See Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, pp. 9-16, and pp. 24-61. For a modern English translation of *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, see *The Greek Alexander Romance*, trans. Richard Stoneman (Harmondsworth, 1991).

¹⁰ *Kyng Alisaunder* is in fact a translation of Thomas of Kent's *Le Roman de Toute Chevalerie*, which was written in Anglo-Norman at the end of the twelfth century, and which in turn was derived from the *Zacher Epitome* of Julius Valerius. *Kyng Alisaunder*

Because it is so conspicuously lacking in reliable historical and biographical detail, modern critics have tended to look rather disparagingly on the tradition of the medieval Alexander romance. For instance, David Ross began his study of the illustrated Alexander literature of the Middle Ages by describing *Pseudo-Callisthenes* as ‘a work of ...excessive mediocrity’, and he further noted (somewhat dismissively), that it was the ultimate source from which ‘the average illiterate or semieducated man from late Antiquity to the Renaissance gleaned his knowledge of Alexander the Great.’¹¹ However, while to a modern sensibility, the medieval adaptations of *Pseudo-Callisthenes* might appear to be works of frivolous entertainment, suitable only for the ‘illiterate or semieducated’, this was certainly not the view that was held by those - such as the author of *Kyng Alisaunder* - who were actually responsible for producing the romances. Indeed, in the prologue to *Kyng Alisaunder*, the Middle English poet insisted upon the seriousness of the work, citing a collection of popular sayings that were attributed to the Roman moralist Cato (the *Dicta Catonis*), to justify the claim that those people who reflected upon the deeds of others were able to gain some much needed

is believed to have been composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century in the London area, and is the only Middle English version of the Alexander story to survive as a complete text. It is preserved in three manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates’ 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck MS); Oxford, Bodleian Library, Misc 622; and London, Lincoln’s Inn 150. All references will be to G. V. Smithers’s edition of the Laud MS. See *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, EETS OS 227, 237 (1952-1957). For an edition of *Le Roman de Toute Chevalerie*, see Thomas of Kent, *The Anglo-Norman ‘Alexander’ (Le Roman de Toute Chevalerie)*, ed. B. Foster, ANTS 29, 31 (London, 1976). The two other surviving full-length treatments of Alexander’s career that were written in Middle English - *The Wars of Alexander* and *The Thornton Prose Life of Alexander* - both date from the fifteenth century, and are translations of the J³ recension of the *Historia de Preliis*. See *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. H. N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, EETS ES 10 (Oxford, 1989), and *The Prose Life of Alexander from The Thornton Manuscript*, ed. J. S. Westlake, EETS OS 143 (1913).

¹¹ See Ross, *Alexander Historiatus*, p. 5.

comfort ['solas' (15)], from the relentless pain and suffering to which human beings are habitually subject:

Bysynesse, care and sorou₃
 Js myd man vche morow₃e,
 Somme for sekenesse, for smert,
 Somme for defaut oiþer pouert,
 Somme for þe lyues drede
 þat glyt away so floure in mede.
 Ne is lyues man non so slei₃e
 þat he ne þoleþ ofte ennoy₃e
 Jn many cas, on many manere,
 Whiles he lyueþ in werlde here.
 Ac is þere non, fole ne wys,
 Kyng, ne duk, ne kni₃th of prys,
 þat ne desireþ sum solas
 Forto here of selcouþe cas;
 For Caton seiþ, þe gode techer,
 Opere mannes lijf is ouer shewer.
 (3-18).

This tone of moral and intellectual seriousness is evident throughout the poem, but it is particularly to the fore in the sections of the romance that are concerned with the wonders of the East, those marvellous human, animal, and plant forms that Alexander is said to have observed in the eastern lands through which he travelled, and which the poet claimed had originally been recorded by the philosopher, Aristotle, who (according to the poet), actually accompanied his former pupil on the journey to India:

þoo Alisaunder went þorou₃ desert,
 Many wondres he sei₃ apert,
 Whiche he dude wel descryue
 By gode clerkes in her lyue -
 By Aristotle, his maister þat was.
 Better clerk siþen non nas -
 He was wiþ hym, and sei₃ and wroot
 All þise wondres, God it woot.
 (4763-4770).

As Dieter Mehl has noted, the pseudo-scientific tone used to describe the many curious phenomena - whether botanical, zoological, or anthropological - encountered by Alexander in India, sets the poem apart from the more conventional courtly romances of the later Middle Ages, and gives it something of the character of an academic treatise.¹²

It could be argued, then, that the claims to historical authenticity and scientific authority that were made by the author of *Kyng Alisaunder* have the effect of blurring the boundary between the genres of history and romance. Similarly, the line dividing history and legend occasionally becomes unclear in those historical accounts of Alexander's life that were written during the classical period, with the result that the Macedonian emperor was at times portrayed by such eminent historians as Plutarch and Quintus Curtius Rufus more in the manner of a romance hero than a genuine historical figure. For instance, Plutarch began his biography of Alexander by asserting that his subject was descended from Hercules on his father's side, and Aeacus the grandfather of Achilles on his mother's, and he went on to assure his readers that those facts at least were beyond dispute, as they were universally accepted by all the authorities.¹³ But, as well as tracing Alexander's ancestry back to the mythological past, both Plutarch and Quintus Curtius Rufus also embellished their narratives of his life by describing encounters that he is said to have had with legendary peoples from far off lands. One such story famously describes Alexander's supposed meeting with Thalestris, the queen of the Amazons, who came to his camp in order to conceive his child, and whose sexual appetite was so prodigious that it took Alexander thirteen days fully to satisfy her

¹² See Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968), p. 231.

¹³ See Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 1, pp. 252-253.

desires.¹⁴ However, although the classical histories of Alexander's reign contain clear traces of legend and romance, while the romances aspire to the status of history, the two types of writing are nonetheless distinct from one another, and one of the ways in which the formal differences between the two can be drawn out is by comparing their respective treatments of Alexander's relationship with the animal kingdom, a relationship that is encapsulated in the story of how - while still a child - he succeeded in taming his horse, Bucephalas.

Knowledge of Bucephalas - the horse on whom Alexander was eventually to ride to India - spread far and wide along with the fame of his master, and such was the extent of the animal's renown that in legend and popular folklore he came to be regarded as the archetypal great horse, a creature whose strength, courage, and nobility were comparable to those of his heroic rider.¹⁵ The only surviving historical account of the taming of Bucephalas - which was the occasion on which Alexander first encountered his horse -

¹⁴ See Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, Book 6, pp. 127-128. Plutarch was slightly more circumspect in his account of this episode, reporting that many years after Alexander's death, his one-time bodyguard, Lysimachus, on hearing the story, 'smiled and asked quietly, "I wonder where I was then."' See Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 46, pp. 302-303.

¹⁵ Striking proof of the endurance of the Bucephalas legend was provided by the Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, whose journey to China during the latter part of the thirteenth century took him through many of the lands that Alexander had conquered over sixteen hundred years earlier. When passing through Badakhshan (a province located in modern-day Afghanistan), Marco Polo heard of a local breed of horses which was said to have been descended from Bucephalas, and which had only recently died out: 'And Messer Marco was told that not long ago they possessed in that province a breed of horses from the strain of Alexander's horse Bucephalus, all of which had from their birth a particular mark on their forehead. This breed was entirely in the hands of an uncle of the king's; and in consequence of his refusing to let the king have any of them, the latter put him to death. The widow then, in despite, destroyed the whole breed, and it is now extinct.' See Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Henry Yule (London, 1903), p. 158. For a general discussion of the representation of Bucephalas in history and romance, see Andrew Runni Anderson, 'Bucephalas and His Legend', *American Journal of Philology* 51 (1930), 1-21.

is contained in Plutarch's *Life*, and is one of a series of anecdotes concerning Alexander's childhood and adolescence that were recorded by the Greek historian:

There came a day when Philoneicus the Thessalian brought Philip a horse named Bucephalas, which he offered to sell for thirteen talents. The king and his friends went down to the plain to watch the horse's trials, and came to the conclusion that he was wild and quite unmanageable, for he would allow no one to mount him, nor would he endure the shouts of Philip's grooms, but reared up against anyone who approached him. The king became angry at being offered such a vicious animal unbroken, and ordered it to be led away. But Alexander, who was standing close by, remarked, 'What a horse they are losing, and all because they don't know how to handle him, or dare not try!' Philip kept quiet at first, but when he heard Alexander repeat these words several times and saw that he was upset, he asked him, 'Are you finding fault with your elders because you think you know more than they do, or can manage a horse better?' 'At least I could manage this one better', retorted Alexander. 'And if you can not,' said his father, 'what penalty will you pay for being so impertinent?' 'I will pay the price of the horse', answered the boy. At this the whole company burst out laughing, and then as soon as the father and son had settled the terms of the bet, Alexander went quickly to Bucephalas, took hold of his bridle, and turned him towards the sun, for he had noticed that the horse was shying at the sight of his own shadow, as it fell in front of him and constantly moved whenever he did. He ran alongside the animal for a little way, calming him down by stroking him, and then, when he saw he was full of spirit and courage, he quietly threw aside his cloak and with a light spring vaulted safely on to his back. For a little while he kept feeling the bit with his reins, without jarring or tearing his mouth, and got him collected. Finally, when he saw the horse was free of his fears and impatient to show his speed, he gave him his head and urged him forward, using a commanding voice and a touch of the foot.

At first Philip and his friends held their breath and looked on in an agony of suspense, until they saw Alexander reach the end of his gallop, turn in full control, and ride back triumphant and exalting in his success. Thereupon the rest of the company broke into loud applause, while his father, we are told, actually wept for joy, and when Alexander had dismounted he kissed him and said, 'My boy, you must find a kingdom big enough for your ambitions. Macedonia is too small for you.'¹⁶

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 6, pp. 257-258.

Although Bucephalas is the ostensible subject of this story, it is interesting to note that Plutarch showed relatively little interest in the horse himself. There is no physical description of the animal, and beyond the fact that Philip and his friends at first thought him to be wild and unmanageable, but that once he had been freed from his fears by Alexander he showed himself to be full of spirit and courage, no further mention is made of either his temperament or demeanour. Indeed, the only indication to suggest that Bucephalas was in any way exceptional has to be inferred from the fact that Alexander considered him to be worth thirteen talents, a sum which - according to Robin Lane Fox - was more than three times the amount ever known to have been paid for a horse in Antiquity.¹⁷ Consequently, the real subject of this anecdote, and the figure on whom all the attention is directed, is not Bucephalas, but Alexander. After all, he alone recognised that Bucephalas was not wild, but merely fearful of his own shadow, and this insight did not simply allow him to ride a horse considered by everyone else to be unbroken, it also revealed him to be an astute and observant figure who was capable of assessing a situation from more than one point of view, and then acting boldly on his conclusions. In short, by taming Bucephalas, Alexander displayed in miniature the very qualities of courage, intelligence, and imagination that he was subsequently to demonstrate on a much grander scale during his career as a great general and conqueror. Therefore, as well as being a charming tale in its own right, Plutarch's account of the taming of Bucephalas suggests that Alexander's successes on the battlefield could have been predicted from the flamboyant and daring behaviour that he exhibited as a child.

Turning from Plutarch's *Life* to the version of the incident found in *Kyng Alisaunder*, it becomes immediately apparent that the Middle English poet employed a

¹⁷ See Fox, *Alexander the Great*, p. 47.

completely different mode of representation from that used by the Greek historian. According to the author of *Kyng Alisaunder*, one day while King Philip was out with his men, he was presented with a wild and ferocious horse called Bulcyfal who had been captured in a forest:

In þis tyme fel a chaunce;
 Kyng Philippe pleyed in a pleyne.
 His man hym brouȝth by a cheyne
 A grisely beest, a rugged colt,
 He had ylauȝth in an holt.
 He presented it to þe kyng.
 Jt þouȝth hym a selkouþ þing.
 Jt had a croupe so an hert,
 An heued so a bole, cert,
 An horne in þe forehede amyrdward
 þat wolde perce a shelde hard.
 Jt was more þan any stede,
 And rede wete me miȝth it fede,
 Ac mannes flesshe leuere hym was
 þan hay-rek oþer corne-tas.
 In an out-hous jn yrn bende;
 Jt stood, and no man it hende.
 All þeues þat shulden ben ylore
 Men brouȝtten þat hors bifore.
 He had soner y-eten a man
 þan two champyons a han.
 Bulcyfal þat hors hete;
 Many man in his lyue he frete.
 No-man ne durst þere-on ycome
 Bot Alisaundre þe gode gome.
 Ne most noman it bistride
 Bot Alisaundre, ne on hym ride.
 To hym he wolde wel obeye -
 He most on hym ride and pleye.
 (682-710).

Unlike the historical Bucephalas, the medieval Bulcyfal is presented as no ordinary horse, but a freak of nature - a hybrid creature whose monstrous body consisted of the hind-quarters of a hart, the head of a bull, and a unicorn's single horn, and whose savage temperament (and penchant for human flesh), made him uniquely qualified to perform

the role of official executioner. Although Alexander is barely mentioned in the passage, his identity is inextricably bound up with the temperament and appearance of the horse, for the more vicious and savage the portrait of Bulcyfal, and the greater the sense of terror that the animal aroused in Philip's subjects, the more exceptional becomes Alexander's achievement in subduing him. Moreover, it should be noted that in this instance the act of taming the horse cannot be put down to human ingenuity - as was the case with Plutarch's Alexander - but was rather the result of the hero's innate, supernatural powers. Therefore, in striking contrast to Plutarch's historical account of the episode, the romance version of the story describes a miracle performed by a figure of such superhuman stature, that his status was comparable to that of a god.

This incident has a sequel in *Kyng Alisaunder* that further highlights the supernatural aspect of the narrative, and provides yet more clarification of those elements that distinguish the Middle English poet's treatment of the episode from Plutarch's. King Philip, unsure as to which of his two sons should succeed him to the throne, consulted an oracle on the subject and was told that whichever of the two was able to ride Bulcyfal should be declared the rightful heir. The king therefore sent for his two children, but whereas his second son, who also happened to be called Philip, was so fearful of the horse that he did not dare to approach him, Alexander proved himself the lawful successor by leaping upon Bulcyfal's back with ease:

A voice ansuered in an ymage,
 'Kyng, þou hast a colt sauage.
 Who so may þere-on skippe,
 Be it Alisaunder, be it Philippe,
 He shall of Corinthe toun
 After þee bere coroun.'...
 þe kyng in to court wendeþ.
 þe children sone he ofsendeþ.
 Bulcyfal nayȝeþ so loude
 þat it shrilleþ in to þe cloude.

þai wenten alle to þe stable
 þere it was tyed jnne, saun fable -
 For a þousande pounde of golde
 Phillippoun it neiȝen wolde,
 Ac Alisaundre lep on his rygge
 So a goldfynche doop on þe hegge...
 Nys he bot of twelue ȝer olde -
 His dedes weren stronge and bolde.
 Fele weren at his liȝtting þare
 þat reuerence gret hym bare,
 And seiden it was worþi þing
 He were þe nexte crowned kyng.
 (765-770, 773-782, and 789-794).

Thus, as well as being a monstrous freak of nature, Bulcyfal was also an instrument of divine providence, a creature who - by allowing himself to be ridden by Alexander - was able to demonstrate beyond any doubt that the young prince was indeed the rightful heir to the throne. In a sense, the meaning of Bulcyfal's existence was only fulfilled once he had consented to be tamed and ridden by Alexander, and it is for this reason that in contrast to the guile, ingenuity, and courage shown by Plutarch's Alexander, the hero of the medieval romance did not have to do anything exceptional in order to tame the horse, he merely had to be.

Therefore, it is the presence or absence of a supernatural component to the story that most obviously distinguishes the way in which it was depicted in the two literary works. On the one hand, Plutarch's Alexander is presented as an exceptional individual who applied his remarkable intelligence to controlling a seemingly unmanageable horse, while on the other hand his medieval counterpart simply drew on his store of miraculous power to tame a beast of unnatural savagery. One useful way of approaching these very different conceptions of Alexander is through the use of Northrop Frye's theory of fictional modes, a theory that Frye outlined in his seminal work, the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Borrowing an idea from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Frye argued that fictional

narratives can be classified in terms of the hero's power of action over his environment. Thus, Plutarch's Alexander, who succeeded in taming Bucephalas through human genius alone, corresponds to what Frye has called the hero of the high mimetic mode, as he is a figure

superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment ...He has authority, passions, and power of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and the order of nature.¹⁸

In *Kyng Alisaunder* on the other hand, it is possible to detect within Alexander himself the presence of a superhuman force that places him above the natural world, and gives him power over it. Frye's description of the hero of the romance mode succinctly delineates the powers that were at the disposal of the medieval Alexander. According to Frye, the romance hero is superior in degree both to other men and his environment, and he

moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended, prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.¹⁹

Thus, the story of the taming of Bucephalas offers an interesting point of comparison from which to assess the differences between the historical and romance narratives of Alexander the Great. In *Kyng Alisaunder* and the wider romance tradition to which it belongs, we repeatedly find that the biographical facts of Alexander's life - such as his taming of Bucephalas - were enlarged upon and embellished with legendary material, thereby transforming the recognisably human figure of the histories into a virtual god. As was the case with the story of Bucephalas, this process of romantic exaggeration and

¹⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 33-34.

¹⁹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 33.

elaboration frequently pertains to Alexander's relationship with the animal kingdom, and in the final section of this chapter I shall examine how the Macedonian emperor's scientific interest in the zoology, botany, and geography of the East (an interest that was fostered by Aristotle, and which is well documented in the historical sources), was the inspiration behind fantastic tales that appear in the romances of his encounters with fabulous beasts, and his dealings with monstrous and exotic peoples. However, the next section - while continuing with the general animal theme - explores not Alexander's relationship with the animal kingdom as such, but the various ways in which animals were used in the romances to symbolise the mysterious story of his conception and birth, a story which - although ultimately based on legend - nevertheless took its inspiration from certain rumours that were circulating during Alexander's own lifetime; rumours that would seem to indicate that he actually believed himself to be the son of the Libyan god, Zeus Ammon.

Alexander's Miraculous Conception and Birth

In the spring of 331 BC, after his unopposed invasion and occupation of Egypt, Alexander travelled to the oasis of Siwah in the Sahara desert in order to consult the oracle of the god, Ammon. Although originally a Libyan deity, Ammon - who was depicted in the form of a man with a ram's head - had been known and worshipped in the Greek world for over a century, having been identified as a local North African manifestation of the Olympian god, Zeus. The oracle of Ammon at Siwah was widely respected throughout Greece and Greek Asia Minor, and it enjoyed a reputation for

truthfulness and infallibility that was comparable to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi.²⁰ Alexander's motives for embarking on the long and arduous journey to Siwah are not altogether clear, but according to Arrian - whose account of the episode is fuller than those found in any of the other ancient sources - he 'had a feeling that in some way he was descended from Ammon ...[and] he undertook this expedition with the deliberate purpose of obtaining more precise information on this subject.'²¹ Alexander questioned the oracle in private, never making known what was revealed to him, but despite the secrecy that surrounded the incident it is reported that he was publicly greeted by the chief priest of the temple, who addressed him as 'son of Zeus'.²²

The extent to which Alexander actually believed himself to be the son of a god, and the effect that this had on his attitude towards Philip, as well as his understanding of his own nature, remains unclear, but his visit to Siwah, and the rumours of his divine lineage that resulted from it, irrevocably altered the way in which he was perceived by both his contemporaries and posterity. Amongst Alexander's troops, his claim to divine parentage was at times treated with ridicule and contempt. For instance, on one occasion shortly before Alexander's death, his relationship with his soldiers had become so

²⁰ For a discussion both of the cult of Zeus Ammon, and the shrine to the god at Siwah, see H. W. Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona - Olympia - Ammon* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1967), pp. 194-241. Useful discussions of Alexander's visit to Siwah, and his claims to divine parentage can be found in Fox, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 194-218, and Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp. 278-290.

²¹ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book 3, p. 151.

²² According to Plutarch, the divine honour that the Libyan priest paid Alexander was in fact unintentional, resulting from his poor command of Greek: 'Others say that the priest, who wished as a mark of courtesy to address him with the Greek phrase "*O, paidion*" (O, my son) spoke the words because of his barbarian origin as "*O, pai dios*" (O, son of Zeus), and that Alexander was delighted at the slip of pronunciation, and hence the legend grew up that the god had addressed him as "O, son of Zeus".' See Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 27, pp. 283-284.

strained that they sarcastically called on him to dismiss them all, and continue his campaigns with his father, Ammon.²³ The derision of his troops was later to be echoed in the work of such historians as Quintus Curtius Rufus, Paulus Orosius, and Marcus Julianus Justinus, who all viewed his willingness to entertain a belief in his own divine origins as evidence - along with his adoption of the barbaric customs of the Persians - of the degeneration of his personality, which was ultimately brought about by the corrupting influence of good fortune. Thus, Quintus Curtius Rufus's account of the visit to Siwah is strongly censorious in tone:

the king ...was addressed as 'son' by the oldest of the priests, who claimed that this title was bestowed on him by his father Jupiter. Forgetting his mortal state, Alexander said he accepted and acknowledged this title, and he proceeded to ask whether he was fated to rule over the entire world. The priest, who was as ready as anyone else to flatter him, answered that he was going to rule over all the earth ...Alexander thereupon offered sacrifice, presented gifts both to the priests and to the god, and also allowed his friends to consult Jupiter on their own account. Their only question was whether the god authorised their according divine honours to their king, and this, too, so the priest replied, would be agreeable to Jupiter.

Someone making a sound and honest judgement of the oracle's reliability might well have found these responses disingenuous, but fortune generally makes those whom she has compelled to put their trust in her alone more thirsty for glory than capable of coping with it. So Alexander did not just permit but actually ordered the title 'Jupiter's son' to be accorded to himself, and while he wanted such a title to add lustre to his achievements he really detracted from them.²⁴

Therefore, amongst those classical historians who wrote about Alexander's life, his assumption of divine honours tended to provoke a mixture of embarrassment, scepticism, and ridicule. However, the disdainful attitude that is so evident in many of the histories did not influence the way in which the episode was treated in the romance

²³ See Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book 7, pp. 359-360.

²⁴ Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, Book 4, 7, 25-30, p. 68.

tradition: the principal medium through which Alexander's association with Ammon came to be transmitted to the world.²⁵

Although ultimately derived from the historical accounts of Alexander's journey to Siwah, the story that is recorded in the romances of his miraculous conception and birth was further complicated by a local Egyptian legend which identified the conquering Macedonian king as the son of the last indigenous Egyptian pharaoh, Nectanebo II.²⁶ Nectanebo fled Egypt in 343 BC before the advancing armies of the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes III, but while it is now generally believed that he took refuge in Ethiopia (where he entirely vanishes from the historical record), an alternative destiny is ascribed to him by a nationalist Egyptian legend (which would seem to have been circulating as early as the third century BC), according to which he actually travelled to Macedonia where he became first the lover of Olympias, Philip's wife, and then in due course the father of Alexander, her son.²⁷ This legend therefore enabled the Egyptian people of the third century BC to claim Alexander as a native hero, and to view

²⁵ Alexander's connection to Ammon was certainly known to the Jewish author (or authors) of the Book of Daniel, which is thought to have been written in the middle of the second century BC, for it is in the guise of the 'ram with two horns', a clear allusion to his putative father, the ram-headed, Ammon, that Alexander appears in one of Daniel's prophetic visions: 'Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ran which had two horns; and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand, but he did according to his will, and became great.' Daniel 8: 3-4.

²⁶ The Egyptian background to the romance tale of Alexander's birth is explored by Betty Hill in her article: 'Alexanderromance: The Egyptian Connection', *Leeds Studies in English* 12 (1981), 185-194.

²⁷ For the fate of Nectanebo, see Fox, *Alexander the Great*, p. 197. In the introduction to his translation of *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, Richard Stoneman explores the Egyptian milieu from which the nationalist legends of Nectanebo and Alexander emerged. See *The Greek Alexander Romance*, pp. 11-12.

his invasion of their land not as an inglorious foreign conquest, but as a great patriotic victory over their hated enemies, the Persians.²⁸

This Egyptian account of Alexander's conception, while seemingly incompatible with Alexander's own professed beliefs in his divine parentage, was in fact ingeniously combined with it to form the version of the story found in the romance tradition. The Libyan god, Ammon, provides the link between the two alternative accounts, for not only had he been appropriated by the Greeks, and identified with their god, Zeus, but he had also been assimilated by the Egyptians into their pantheon, and equated with the ram-headed god, Amun, the creator of the universe, and the divine father of the pharaoh.²⁹ It was Amun's role as the begetter of the pharaoh - a function that he performed by making love to the consort of the reigning monarch in the guise of her husband - that enabled these two seemingly incompatible legends to be reconciled.³⁰ For, once Alexander, who had assumed the title of pharaoh by right of conquest in the autumn of 332 BC, went on to identify himself as the son of Ammon at Siwah in 331 BC, it was possible for the Egyptian people to interpret these claims in the light of their own religious beliefs, and so assert that in accordance with the customary Egyptian practice, *their* god Amun had adopted the form of the pharaoh, Nectanebo, in order to conceive their future king, Alexander.

²⁸ The author of *The Greek Alexander Romance* refers to this Egyptian legend at the very beginning of his work: 'Many say that he [Alexander] was the son of King Philip, but they are deceivers. This is untrue; he was not Philip's son, but the wisest of the Egyptians say that he was the son of Nectanebo, after the latter had fallen from his royal state.' See *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Book 1, p. 35.

²⁹ The absorption of Ammon into the system of Egyptian religious belief is discussed by Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus*, pp. 194-197, and Fox, *Alexander the Great*, p. 202.

³⁰ This is examined by Betty Hill in her article: 'Alexanderromance: The Egyptian Connection', pp. 185-186.

Thus, the account of Alexander's conception that finally found its way into the romances was composed of elements drawn from two seemingly incompatible sources. In this composite story, Alexander could be identified as the son of both Ammon and Nectanebo, although this somewhat complex resolution inevitably presented those medieval writers (such as the author of *Kyng Alisaunder*), who were faced with the task of making sense of the material, and who presumably possessed little knowledge of either ancient history or comparative religion, with considerable scope for confusion and misunderstanding.³¹

In *Kyng Alisaunder*, the historical Nectanebo is transformed into the mysterious figure of the Egyptian king, Neptenabus, a monarch wise in the arts of astrology and magic, who learnt through the exercise of those arts that his land was soon to be conquered by an army led by Philip of Macedon. In order to avoid this impending defeat, Neptenabus fled his kingdom, and - determined to gain his revenge on Philip - he journeyed to Macedoyne, Philip's capital, where Queen Olympias was reigning in her husband's absence. Overwhelmed by the queen's personal beauty, Neptenabus managed to obtain a private audience with her by claiming to be a revered Egyptian astrologer. During their meeting he prophesied that she would soon be abandoned by Philip for a new wife, yet he was able to console her with the news that she would give birth to a son

³¹ The story of Alexander's miraculous conception is found in four Middle English works: *Kyng Alisaunder* (71-456); *The Wars of Alexander* (23-405); John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (6: 1789-2366), in G. C. Macaulay, ed. *The Complete Works of John Gower: English Works*, Vol. 2, EETS ES 81 (London, 1901); and a fragmentary account of Alexander's life consisting of 1242 lines of alliterative verse, which is thought to have been composed in the third quarter of the fourteenth century, and which is known as *Alexander A*. See *Alexander A* (453-790), in *The Romance of William of Palerne*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS ES 1 (London, 1867).

begotten by the god, Ammon, and that her child would grow up to avenge Philip and conquer the world.

That night while Olympias was sleeping, Neptenabus cast magic spells over a waxen image of the queen, causing her to have an extraordinary dream in which a dragon came to her chamber, entered her bed, and impregnated her. The following morning, believing the dream to have been a confirmation of Neptenabus's prophecy, and now entirely confident in the truthfulness of his testimony, Olympias invited him to become a member of her household, and entrusted him with all of her private affairs. That night Neptenabus secretly disguised himself as Ammon by covering his body with dragon skin and concealing his face behind a mask of a ram's head, and in this guise he came to Olympias's bed, where she conceived Alexander, her son.

Paradoxically, then, Neptenabus is revealed to be both a charlatan and a true prophet. Motivated by a mixture of lust and vengeance, he managed to trick his way into Olympias's bed by fabricating a fictitious story about the god, Ammon, and yet as a result of their adulterous union the queen did indeed give birth to a remarkable son, just as Neptenabus had prophesied. The magical dream that Neptenabus induced in the queen was absolutely central to the deception that he practised on her, and - reflecting the ambiguous character of its author - the dream itself turned out to be both a misleading travesty, and a truthful prophecy, of future events:

þe leuedy in her bed lay,
 Aboute myd-ni₃th, ar þe day,
 Whiles he made his coniuryng,
 She sei₃ ferly in her metyng.
 Hire þou₃th a dragoun adoune li₃th
 To hire chaumbre and made a fli₃th.
 Jn he com to hire boure
 And crepe vnder her couertoure.
 Many siþe he hire kyste

And fast in his armes priste,
 And went away so dragon wylde;
 Ac gret he lete hir wiþ childe.
 (343-354).

A 'dragon wylde' (353) is in fact a suitably alien and awe-inspiring form for a divine being to adopt, for not only does it aptly suggest the inhumanity of a god's nature, but its appearance, like that of a god, is liable to instil in any human observer a profound sense of fear. Terror was certainly the overriding emotion experienced by Olympias on waking up - 'Olympias of slepe awook. / She was a-grised for þe nones, / þat alle quakeden hire bones.' (356-358) - and in the dream itself it would seem that her extremely submissive response to the approach of the domineering dragon was motivated by her fear of him. Whatever its pleasures and compensations, then, sex with a god - at least as depicted in Olympias's dream - would seem to be a profoundly shocking and frightening experience, and any child born of such an unnatural union, it is reasonable to assume, would inevitably inherit some of the super-human powers of its divine father.

On the following night, Neptenabus attempted to reproduce Olympias's dream experience in reality by first changing his appearance to resemble that of a dragon, and then making love to the queen in that guise:

Jn bed wook dame Olympyas,
 And aspyed on vche manere
 3if she mi3th ou3th yhere
 Hou Amon þe god shulde come.
 Neptenabus his charme hap nome,
 And takeþ hym hames of dragoun,
 From his shuldre to hele adoun;
 His heued and his shuldres fram
 He di3tteþ in fourme of a ram.
 Ouere hire bed twyes he lepeþ,
 þe þrid tyme and jn he crepeþ.
 Offe he cast his dragons hame
 And wiþ þe lefdy playeþ his game.
 She was þolemood and lay stille;
 þe fals god dude al his wille.

Also ofte so he wolde,
 þat game she refuse nolde.
 (380-396).

It has been suggested that the poet's treatment of this incident, with the emphasis on Neptenabus's deception and sexual exploitation of Olympias, owes more to the genre of fabliau than romance.³² The passage certainly has a low-comic tone, and it is immediately apparent that 'þe fals god' (394), Neptenabus, bears very little resemblance to the awesome figure of Olympias's dream. Indeed, far from transforming himself into a dragon, the exiled king merely assumed a vaguely dragon-like appearance by covering his body with dragon skin, and then leaping twice over the queen's bed (presumably in imitation of a dragon's flight), before creeping into bed with her. Thus, Neptenabus is presented not as a powerful god, but as a lecherous trickster who was able to take advantage of the queen's credulity in order to satisfy his lust.³³

The contrast between Olympias's fabulous dream and the rather squalid reality that she actually experienced should have implications for the character of Alexander, since romance convention dictates that a child's heroic stature is determined by both the identity of his father, and the circumstances of his conception. The miraculous nature of Olympias's dream calls to mind those marvellous tales from classical mythology (such as the stories of Leda and the swan and Europa and the bull), in which immortal gods -

³² See Betty Hill, 'Alexanderromance: The Egyptian Connection', p. 189.

³³ Of course, as well as covering himself with dragon skin - which he removed once he got into bed with the queen - Neptenabus also wore a mask of a ram's head, no doubt as a gesture towards the ram-headed, Ammon. However, by combining both dragon and ram elements in his disguise, Neptenabus ended up resembling neither the dragon of Olympias's dream, nor the ram-headed god of Libyan tradition. In a sense, Neptenabus invested himself with too much significance, and his attempt to forge onto his one body two quite separate symbolic identities merely has the effect of exposing him still further as a fraud.

having assumed animal form - father children on mortal women.³⁴ As we have just seen, however, according to *Kyng Alisaunder* and the romance tradition to which it belongs, Alexander was descended not from a god, but from 'þe fals god', Neptenabus, a fact that would seem to compromise his claim to heroic status, and deny him the power and privileges conventionally accorded to the son of a divine being. Indeed, rather than being a source of pride, Alexander's origins in an adulterous union might be regarded as dishonourable and belittling, yet strangely the Macedonian king was depicted in the romances as no less of a hero for being a bastard, and no less god-like for failing to have a divine father.

There is therefore something slightly puzzling, indeed paradoxical, about the story of Alexander's conception, since the portrait of Neptenabus as a fraud and an impostor is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Alexander himself is presented as a figure possessing all of the heroic attributes conventionally enjoyed by the son of a divine being. The ambiguous nature of Neptenabus's character is perhaps due to the Egyptian origins of the story, and results from a sense of confusion - first manifested by the author of the original Greek romance, and subsequently shared by the work's countless translators and adaptors - about the precise nature of the relationship between the Egyptian god, Amun, and the pharaoh, Nectanebo (Neptenabus). As Betty Hill has noted, whereas in Egyptian belief the god Amun assumed the form of the reigning pharaoh in order to father the future king, this chain of events was reversed in the

³⁴ Zeus is said to have transformed himself into a swan before making love to Leda, who laid an egg from which was hatched Helen of Troy. See Euripides, *Helen*, 212 ff., in Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, 1954), p. 132. On another occasion Zeus took on the attributes of a bull, in which guise he carried off Europa, on whom he fathered Minos, the king of Crete. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II (836-875), trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 72-73.

tradition of the Alexander romances, with Nectanebo impersonating the god Ammon as a way of seducing Olympias, an act that only incidentally resulted in the conception of the future pharaoh, Alexander.³⁵ It could be argued, then, that during the process of cultural transmission, the esoteric details of Egyptian religious practice were jumbled and misunderstood by the author of the Greek romance, as a consequence of which Nectanebo came to be assigned a very different role in the Alexander romances from the one that he had originally performed in the nationalist Egyptian legend.

This sense of confusion about both the extent of Neptenabus's powers and the motives underlying his actions, is also evident in two further scenes from *Kyng Alisaunder* in which the exiled Egyptian king is depicted in animal form. Because Olympias feared that she would be abandoned by her husband when he heard of her pregnancy, Neptenabus directed magic spells towards the pavilion where Philip - who was still campaigning with the army - was sleeping, causing him to have a dream in which he was both forewarned of Olympias's condition, and led to believe that it was caused by an act of divine intervention. In the dream, a goshawk settled on his sleeping-quarters, opened his mouth, and stretched out his wings. This was witnessed by a dragon who flew from his lair, approached the queen, and then blew a breath of fire into her mouth. Soon afterwards, a lion sprang from the queen's navel and darted forth into the east, conquering all before him:

þat ilk ni₃th Neptenabus
 Made so stronge sorcery,
 And adressed it by þe sky,
 þat it com to þe paubloun
 þere þat lijþ kyng Philippoun,
 Also he lijþ in slepe by ni₃th,
 Hym þinkeþ a goshawk in grete fli₃th

³⁵ See Betty Hill, 'Alexanderromance: The Egyptian Connection', p. 190.

Settleþ on his herbergeynge,
 And 3yneþ, and sprat abroad his wenge.
 A dragoun of his denne gan flei3e,
 Whan he þat goshawk ysei3e,
 And settleþ sone after þas
 On stede þere þe quene was.
 Sone so he þe quene fonde,
 In hire mouþe he blew a bronde.
 þere-after nou3th swiþe lang
 A lyoun at hire nauel out sprang.
 þe lyoun smoot in to þe est;
 Ne durst hym wiþstonde beest,
 þe goshawk of hym was a-gast
 (478-498).

Unsure as to the meaning of the dream, Philip asked his various scholars and counsellors to explain its significance. Eventually, Abyron, the 'Wisest clerk of euerychon' (504), was able to interpret the vision for him (505-516), explaining that Philip himself was represented by the goshawk, while the dragon symbolised some god or 'sterne man' (509), who - having slept with the queen - had begotten on her a son (represented by the lion), who was destined to reign over the whole world.

Because it alludes both to the strange circumstances of Alexander's birth, as well as to his subsequent career of conquest and world domination, Philip's dream can be seen as presenting a highly condensed version of the romance itself, cast in the form of a beast allegory. The nobility of the hawk and the royalty of the lion - the traditional symbolic attributes of the two animals - make them fitting emblems of Philip and Alexander respectively, while Neptenabus's supernatural power and god-like status is suggested not only by his dragon form, but also by the highly symbolic way in which he impregnated the queen, an act which - as G. V. Smithers has pointed out - recalls the

moment in the second creation story of the Book of Genesis when God animated Adam by filling his nostrils with the breath of life (Genesis 2: 7).³⁶

But, in addition to appearing in Philip's dream in the guise of a dragon-god, Neptenabus actually transformed himself into a real fire-breathing dragon in order to defend Olympias from the anger of her husband. According to the author of *Kyng Alisaunder*, having learnt of the queen's pregnancy, Philip was determined to denounce her as an adulteress at a public banquet. However, before he had the opportunity of making his accusation, a dragon flew into the hall, breathing fire from his nostrils and scattering the assembled company with his long tail:

For a dragon þere com jn fleen,
Swithe griselich on to seen.
His tayl was fyue fadem lang;
þe fyre out at his nose-þerles sprang.
By þre, by foure, myd þe tayle
To þe grounde he smoot saunz fayle.
Wiþ þe mouthe he made a beere
So al þe halle shulde ben a-fere.
þe kyng had wele grete hawe;
Alle his barouns to chaumbre drawe.
þe lefdy ȝede vnto þe drake.
He lete his rage for hire sake,
And laide his heued in hire barme
Wiþouten doying of any harme.
(545-558).

Unlike the previous occasions on which dragons of one form or another made an appearance in the romance, the huge creature who flew into Philip's hall - whose tail alone was said to be five fathoms long - has far too palpable a physical presence to be mistaken either for a dream symbol, or for a man disguised in a dragon costume (Neptenabus's two previous dragon incarnations). Furthermore, because the ability to

³⁶ See Smithers, ed. *Kyng Alisaunder* Vol. II, p. 74. Smithers has also noted that this detail is not to be found in any of *Kyng Alisaunder*'s sources.

transform oneself into a ferocious fire-breathing monster would seem to be a task beyond the reach of even the most knowledgeable magician, the performance of such a feat by Neptenabus once again raises questions about the nature of his identity, and in particular the balance in its composition between the natural and the supernatural, and the human and the divine. For, although he was roundly exposed by the poet earlier in the narrative as a base impersonator of the god, Ammon, Neptenabus's dramatic defence of Olympias is the kind of undertaking that only a god would have the power to accomplish.

Therefore, the sense of confusion surrounding the figure of Neptenabus - a confusion that ultimately has its origins in a Greek misunderstanding of the religious practices of the ancient Egyptians - is reflected in the dragon symbol that was variously used in *Kyng Alisaunder* to depict the exiled Egyptian king. Combining potency with an inhuman otherness, the dragon is powerfully suggestive of divinity, and it is no doubt for this reason that in the two dreams that he magically induced - the first in Olympias, the second in Philip - Neptenabus chose the figure of the dragon to represent the god, Ammon. Of course, in the romance tradition, Neptenabus was not a god himself, but merely an imitator of one, a fact that is highlighted in the comic scene in which he disguised himself as a dragon in order to seduce Olympias. Paradoxically however, although he was presented as both a trickster and a fraud, Neptenabus was also depicted as a figure who possessed the attributes of a god, as he spectacularly revealed in Philip's hall with his awesome display of power and majesty.

As we have seen, this ambivalence towards Alexander's claims to divinity was central to many aspects of his life and legacy. In his lifetime, even his own troops received with some incredulity his demand to be considered the natural son of Zeus

Ammon; by the medieval period that ambivalence was compounded by the confusion of the inherited sources, and Christian scepticism about pagan spirituality. And yet, an aura of the supernatural persistently surrounds Alexander. His refusal to accept the conventional limitations of human ambition has prompted many commentators to ascribe to him superhuman powers, whether metaphorical or literal: he is a figure who stands at the nexus of the human, the natural, and the supernatural worlds. According to the romance tradition, he inherited something of Neptenabus's supernatural power, and the young prince's divine (or semi-divine) nature was revealed at the very moment of his birth, which was marked by the whole of the natural world with a series of wonders; the earth trembled, the sky turned black, the sea turned green, thunder and lightening struck, and everyone was afraid (638-644). This power of Alexander to dominate the world of nature - to make it his subject rather than to be subject to it - stayed with him throughout his life, and is a theme that becomes particularly important in the romance accounts of his travels through India and the East, the subject to which I shall now turn.

The Wonders of the East

The Middle English romance *Kyng Alisaunder* is divided into two approximately equal sections, with the first half (1-4738) describing Alexander's miraculous conception and birth, his childhood and adolescence, and his various campaigns against the Greeks and the Persians, while the second half (4739-8021) is principally concerned with his travels through India and the East, and tells of his war against Porus, the Indian king, and his encounters with the many exotic peoples and animals of that land. Although this account of Alexander's career is entirely lacking in reliable historical and geographical detail, its basic structure does roughly follow the trajectory of the Macedonian emperor's life and

travels, and it is also worth noting that despite its extensive use of legendary material, most of *Kyng Alisaunder*'s cast of characters - such as his human parents Philip and Olympias, his principal adversaries Darius and Porus, and his two generals Ptolemy and Perdikkas - are genuine historical figures. Moreover, in both romance and historical narratives, the pivotal moment in Alexander's life - the incident that brought to an end the first phase of his military career, and inaugurated the second - was the final, decisive victory that he gained over the Persian emperor, Darius III.

Alexander inflicted a crushing blow on the forces of Darius at the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC, and although Darius himself fled from the battlefield unharmed, he was never able to recover from the huge losses that he suffered, and was killed soon afterwards by two of his own satraps - Bessus and Nabarzanes - before Alexander had the chance to overtake and capture him.³⁷ However, in spite of the fact that Alexander's victory at Gaugamela eliminated the only serious threat to his sovereignty in Central Asia, a number of the tribes that inhabited the eastern provinces of the former Persian Empire - in particular the Bactrians, Sogdians, and Scythians - continued to oppose his rule, and as a consequence Alexander had to postpone his planned invasion of India for a number of years while he forced them into submission. According to Quintus Curtius Rufus's account of this period, on one occasion Alexander was visited by a Scythian ambassador, who addressed him in the following defiant manner:

Had the gods willed that your stature should match your greed the world could not hold you. You would touch the east with one hand and the west with the other, and reaching the west you would want to know where the mighty god's light lay hidden. Even as it is, you covet things beyond your reach. From Europe you head for Asia; from Asia you cross to Europe. Then, if you defeat the whole human race, you

³⁷ For a modern account of Alexander's victory at Gaugamela, and the assassination of Darius, see Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp. 74-85, and pp. 94-100.

will be ready to make war on woods, on snow, on rivers, on wild animals.³⁸

Taking its cue from the comments of the ambassador, the romance tradition actually describes how Alexander - having completed his conquest of Darius's Empire - marched on into India where he proceeded to wage war not just on the country's human population, but on its wild animals as well.

The extraordinarily bellicose nature of India's indigenous animals is first indicated early on in Alexander's Indian campaign, when a number of Macedonian troops who happened to be swimming across a river were set upon and eaten by terrifying hippopotami - animals that were said to be larger than elephants.³⁹ Soon afterwards, Alexander's army was attacked by a bewildering succession of ferocious beasts, including boars, bears, lions, elephants, tigers, dragons, unicorns, leopards, scorpions, snakes of incredible size dripping poison from their eyes, crabs whose shells were harder than the skin of crocodiles, white lions larger than bulls, a horse-like animal both larger and fiercer than an elephant (known as an 'Anddontrucion'), mice as big as foxes, and bats as large as doves. The Macedonian troops were initially dismayed by the size and savagery of the creatures that attacked them, but taking their lead from their heroic king, they eventually managed to fight off the army of animals, although not without first suffering considerable casualties.⁴⁰

Nature, then, at least as it manifested itself in India, is presented in the Alexander romances as a hostile, threatening force that existed in direct opposition to humanity.

³⁸ Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, Book 7, 8, 12-13, p. 168.

³⁹ This incident is recorded in *Kyng Alisaunder* (5157-5162). It can also be found in *The Wars of Alexander* (3969-3975), and *The Prose Life of Alexander*, p. 69.

⁴⁰ For a description of the attack on Alexander's army, see *Kyng Alisaunder* (5215-5446), *The Wars of Alexander* (3977-4075), and *The Prose Life of Alexander*, pp. 69-72.

But it is a force that Alexander - with his customary display of invincibility - was able to subdue in much the same way that he had overcome all of his previous foes. It is interesting to note that the Indian animals that assailed the Macedonian army were said to have been both larger and more ferocious than creatures from other countries (for instance, India's white lions were the size of bulls, while its mice were as large as foxes), and as John Block Friedman has argued, such representations belong to a tradition in Western literature that can be traced back as least as far as Ctesias, a Greek travel writer of the early fifth century BC, who depicted India as a land inhabited by terrifying animals and monstrous peoples, in which the normal laws of nature did not apply.⁴¹

But, in addition to waging war on the creatures of the East, Alexander was also said to have been driven by a spirit of scientific curiosity into observing their many peculiar anatomical and behavioural characteristics, characteristics that he was believed to have recorded - along with a number of observations on India's geography, natural history, and monstrous peoples - in a letter to his teacher, Aristotle, that was known as the *Epistola Alexandri Magni ad Aristotelem Magistrum Suum de Situ et Mirabilibus Indiae* (*The Letter of Alexander the Great to His Teacher Aristotle about the Geography and Wonders of India*).⁴² Although *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* clearly belongs

⁴¹ See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1981), p. 5.

⁴² Based on a Greek original (which was possibly written as early as the third century AD), the *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* survives in three Latin versions. The first frequently accompanies the *Zacher Epitome* of Julius Valerius's *Res Gestae Alexandri Magni*, the second is a unique copy preserved in the famous Bamberg Manuscript containing Leo of Naples's Latin translation of *Pseudo-Callisthenes* (Bamberg, Staatliche Bibliothek, MS E.iii.14), while the third (which is considerably longer than either of the other two), dates from the ninth century, and was by far the most popular of the three. For a discussion of the textual history of the *Epistola*, and a modern English translation of the text, see Lloyd Gunderson, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle about India*

to the romance tradition, containing as it does fabulous descriptions of India's miraculous flora and fauna, it nonetheless came to be regarded in the Middle Ages as a work of serious scholarship, which was thought to have provided the philosopher Aristotle with much of the material from which he compiled his work on natural history, *De Animalibus*.⁴³ Alexander certainly received much praise during the later Middle Ages for his supposed contribution to the study of the natural sciences. For instance, the fourteenth-century English Benedictine monk, Ranulf Higden, whose encyclopaedic work the *Polychronicon* related the whole of human history from Creation to his own day, claimed in his chapter on the life of Aristotle that Alexander - inflamed by a burning desire for knowledge, and eager to gain an understanding of all creatures - had sent his teacher many animals from Asia (along with thousands of men to look after them), in order to assist him in his researches. According to John Trevisa's late-fourteenth-century Middle English translation of Higden's original Latin:

þe grete Alisaundre brende in covetise of knowleche of þe kynde of bestes, and sente to Aristotel meny þowsandes of men of Grees, of Asia, and of Tracia, þat fedde bestes and foules wilde and tame, and al þat beep i-take wiþ haukyng, oþer wiþ hontyng, and hadde alle maner bestes in kepyng in hyves, in layes, in fisse weres and pondes, for he wolde knowe al þing þat is broȝt forþ in kynde. Aristotel

(Meisenheim am Glan, 1980). The *Epistola* was translated into Old English perhaps at the beginning of the tenth century (the first Alexander text to have been translated into any medieval language), and is preserved in the Nowell codex, which contains the unique copy of *Beowulf*. See *Three Old English Prose Texts: Letter of Alexander the Great, Wonders of the East, Life of St. Christopher*, ed. Stanley Rypins, EETS OS 161 (Oxford, 1924). The *Epistola* was also translated into Middle English in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and is found in a single manuscript: Worcester Cathedral F.172. See Vincent DiMarco and Leslie Perelman, ed. *The Middle English Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, in *Essays on English and American Language and Literature* n. s. XIII (1978).

⁴³ For a discussion of the medieval reception of the *Epistola*, see Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, pp. 6-7, and Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, pp. 105-110.

examyned hem al besiliche, and made aboute an fifty volyms of þe kynde of bestes.⁴⁴

Alexander was therefore regarded as a man with a great longing not just for new conquests, but for knowledge as well, and these two aspects of his reputation converge in the romance accounts of his journey through India to produce a figure who was seen as the embodiment of philosophy in action. Nowhere is this combination of worldly ambition and intellectual curiosity better illustrated than in the two legendary stories - both of which were recorded in the *Historia de Preliis* and its derivatives - that tell of Alexander's aerial flight and his journey to the depths of the ocean.⁴⁵ Consumed with a desire to explore the heavens, Alexander ordered that a flying machine should be constructed consisting of a chariot surrounded by an iron grating, so that he could sit safely inside the device while in flight. Securing four griffins to the chariot with metal chains, and attaching a bait of meat to a spear that he suspended above the chariot just beyond the creatures' reach, the Macedonian king was lifted high into the heavens by the four animals. After making his celestial journey, Alexander was then overtaken by a similar desire to examine the creatures that inhabited the depths of the ocean. To achieve this end he ordered his men to build a transparent glass barrel that was to be fastened with iron chains. Entering the barrel, he commanded his strongest soldiers to lower it over the side of a ship into the sea, thus enabling him to view the many fish and

⁴⁴ Ranulf Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis: together with an English translation of John Trevisa and an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*, ed. C. Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, Vol. III (London, 1871, rpt. 1964), Book 3, Chapter XXIV, p. 367.

⁴⁵ These two episodes can be found in *The Wars of Alexander* (5633-5680) and *The Prose Life of Alexander*, pp. 105-106. For a discussion of the artistic treatments of the story of Alexander's flight, see Victor M. Schmidt, *A Legend and Its Image: The Aerial Flight of Alexander the Great in Medieval Art* (Groningen, 1995).

monsters that lived beneath the surface of the waves, and that had previously been unknown to humanity.

Of course, Alexander's insatiable curiosity meant that he was forever dissatisfied with his condition, constantly thirsting for yet more conquests, and a better understanding of the world. Richard Stoneman has observed that Alexander's refusal to accept the normal limits of human ambition - his desire both physically and intellectually to go 'where no man has gone before'⁴⁶ - tended, as we have seen, to provoke an ambivalent response even within the romance tradition itself. For, on the one hand, his restless ambition and all-consuming appetites were regarded as moral failings, which stood in stark contrast to the self-denying contentment experienced by philosophers and sages, and yet as Stoneman has also noted, it was precisely this moral flaw in the king's character that has made him such an enduring hero, a figure who more than any other came to be seen as the embodiment of the restless, questioning, questing spirit of humanity.⁴⁷

The confused and ambivalent response to Alexander's god-like aspirations is perhaps best encapsulated in the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo*, a legendary text that describes how the Macedonian king - having travelled to the very edge of the known world - entered into a correspondence with Dindimus, the philosopher king of the Brahmans, in which they debated both the meaning of human existence, and the nature of nature itself.⁴⁸ The Brahmans of the *Collatio* were said to have been a nation of

⁴⁶ See Richard Stoneman, 'Romantic Ethnography: Central Asia and India in the Alexander Romance', *The Ancient World* 25 (1994), 93-107, pp. 95-96.

⁴⁷ See Stoneman, 'Romantic Ethnography', p. 102.

⁴⁸ The origins of the *Collatio* are obscure. It is thought that the text was originally written in either the fifth or sixth century AD, although it achieved great popularity from the eleventh century onwards after it was incorporated into the J¹ interpolated recension

Indian sages who inhabited the land lying to the east of the river Ganges, where they led a life of extreme self-denial, and the text consists of five letters, with Alexander opening and closing the correspondence, in which the two protagonists vehemently contested the merits of their respective customs and religious beliefs. Essentially, then, the *Collatio* is a dialogue in epistolary form, that debates the questions: what does it mean to be a human being, and what is the nature of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Alexander's fictional encounter with Dindimus would seem to have been inspired by a number of genuine meetings that he had with philosophers and wise men during his army's occupation of the Indian city of Taxila, in 326 BC. For instance, the historian Arrian tells of a conversation between Alexander and an Indian ascetic called Dandamis, who was strongly critical of the Macedonian emperor's arrogance and insatiable ambition:

Dandamis ...refused either to join Alexander himself or to permit any of his pupils to do so. 'If you my Lord' he is said to have replied, 'are the son of God, why - so am I. I want nothing from you, for what I have suffices. I perceive, moreover, that the men you lead get no good from their world-wide wandering over land and sea, and that of their many journeyings there is no end. I desire nothing that you can give me; I fear no exclusion from any blessing which may perhaps be yours. India, with the fruits of her soil in due season, is enough for me while I live; and when I die I shall be rid of my poor body - my unseemly housemate.'⁴⁹

of the *Historia de Preliis*, from where it found its way into numerous Alexander romances. In Middle English, the correspondence is preserved in *The Wars of Alexander* (4316-4841), and the *Prose Life of Alexander*, pp. 77-89. It can also be found - along with a description of Alexander's encounter with another tribe of Indian philosophers, the Gymnosophists - in a fragmentary work of alliterative verse dating from the fifteenth century, known as *Alexander B* or *Alexander and Dindimus*. See *The Alliterative Romance of Alexander and Dindimus*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS ES 31 (Oxford, 1878). For an account of the textual history and reception of the *Collatio*, see George Cary, 'A Note on the Medieval History of the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo*', *Classica et Mediaevalia* XV (1954), 124-129.

⁴⁹ See Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book 7, p. 350.

This brief encounter between the world-conquering hero, whose appetite for power and glory was unquenchable, and the ascetic sage, entirely satisfied with his lot, contains the essential features of, and rehearses the same arguments as, the fictional correspondence between Alexander and Dindimus, to which I shall now turn.⁵⁰

According to the romance accounts of the correspondence, Alexander's confrontation with Dindimus occurred at the very end of his military career, after he had successfully defeated all of his adversaries.⁵¹ With his numerous victories behind him, he continued to advance through India until he finally came to the river Ganges, which proved to be impassable because of the many hippopotami, crocodiles, and scorpions that were swimming in its waters. Seeing a number of men standing on the opposite bank, Alexander called out to them in the Indian language, and asked who they were. On

⁵⁰ The meeting also recalls the encounter that took place almost a decade earlier in the Greek city of Corinth between Alexander and Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of the Cynic school of philosophy. According to Plutarch's account of the incident (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 14, p. 266), Alexander sought out Diogenes, whom he found lying in the sun: "The king greeted him and inquired whether he could do anything for him. "Yes," replied the philosopher, "you can stand a little to one side of my sun." Alexander is said to have been greatly impressed by this answer and full of admiration for the hauteur and independence of mind of a man who should look down on him with such condescension. So much so that he remarked to his followers, who were laughing and mocking the philosopher as they went away, "You may say what you like, but if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes." The similarity between the disdainful attitude of Diogenes, and that of the Indian sages whom Alexander encountered in Taxila, has caused some modern commentators to suggest that figures such as Dandamis (or Dindimus) were used by the historians of Alexander's reign simply as mouthpieces through which to express Cynic, and later Stoic and Christian ideas. For instance, see Beverly Berg, 'Dandamis: An Early Christian Portrait of Indian Asceticism', *Classica et Mediaevalia* XXXI (1970), 269-305. However, this view is disputed by Richard Stoneman, who has argued that both historical and romance accounts of Alexander's dealings with Eastern philosophers preserve some authentic Indian details. See Richard Stoneman, 'Who are the Brahmins? Indian Lore and Cynic Doctrine in Palladius' *De Bragmanibus* and its Models', *Classical Quarterly* 44 (1994), 500-510, and 'Naked Philosophers: The Brahmins in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romances', *JHS* CXV (1995), 99-114.

⁵¹ I shall be basing my discussion of Alexander's encounter with Dindimus on the version of the correspondence found in the *Prose Life of Alexander*.

hearing that they were Brahmans, he was filled with the desire to communicate with Dindimus, their king, and so, ordering the construction of a small boat built of reeds, he sent one of his knights to the opposite shore with a letter for Dindimus, in which - after referring to himself as the king of kings and the son of the god Ammon - he asked the Brahman king to explain the customs and beliefs of his people.

Dindimus responded to this letter with a letter of his own in which he claimed that it would be difficult for Alexander to embrace the Brahman way of life since the manners and customs of their two peoples were very different. According to Dindimus, the Brahmans led a simple and pure existence. They did not commit any sins and they denied themselves everything that was not absolutely necessary for the maintenance of life. The Brahmans did not practice agriculture, as they refused to plough the soil, plant food, hunt, or fish. Instead, they ate only what nature - their bountiful mother - provided for them. The Brahmans went around naked and were able to endure physical hardship with patience and equanimity, and because they had conquered all of their internal enemies, they were not afraid of their external foes, and so led a life entirely free from fear. The Brahmans had no need for law courts since there were no criminals for them to prosecute, and they lived in a society in which everyone was equal, and everything was shared. They rejected the art of rhetoric and the schools of the philosophers, choosing instead to speak and live simply, and while they did not enjoy playing games, they were able to experience wonder and delight in observing natural phenomena, taking particular pleasure in the sight of leaping dolphins, the smell of flowers, and the sound of bird song.

After expounding the ascetic philosophy of the Brahmans, Dindimus then went on to offer a vigorous critique of Alexander's worldly way of life. He accused Alexander

of tyranny, claiming that he interfered with the course of justice, and deprived free men of their liberty. Dindimus also condemned Alexander's insatiable lust for power, arguing that although he had conquered a vast empire, the boundaries of the earth were not large enough to contain his limitless ambition. In a striking analogy, Dindimus compared Alexander to Cerberus, the canine guardian of the Underworld, claiming that like the three headed monster of myth, the Macedonian emperor was completely incapable of satisfying his voracious appetite, however much he might consume.

Having condemned Alexander for his boundless ambition, Dindimus then launched a fierce attack upon the Greek gods, whose sinful deeds both encouraged and justified immoral behaviour in humanity. Dindimus argued that Alexander was completely in thrall to these wicked gods, and that he was driven by their example to commit ever more lewd and depraved acts. In contrast to the idolatry of Alexander, Dindimus claimed that the Brahmans had rejected the Greek gods in favour of the one true God who reigned in heaven. Finally, after he had completed his denunciation of Alexander's religious beliefs, Dindimus concluded his letter by declaring that in the life to come, the Macedonian emperor was destined to suffer grievous torments as a punishment for his sins.

George Cary has shown that Dindimus - with his strict ascetic practices, emphatic rejection of the Greek gods, and unstinting espousal of monotheism - came to be viewed by the medieval readers of the *Collatio* as a figure who offered a recognisably Christian alternative to the worldly, pagan values that were embodied by Alexander.⁵²

⁵² See Cary, 'A Note on the Medieval History of the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo*', pp. 126-129. For instance, Cary cites Peter Abelard's *Introductio ad Theologiam* (PL 178, 1033-1034), in which Dindimus is said to have been one of the four pre-Christian kings (along with David, Solomon, and Nebuchadnezzar), who foresaw the coming of Christ.

This specifically Christian interpretation of Dindimus and the Brahmans can also be found in *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*, an extremely popular (although entirely fictitious) mid-fourteenth-century account of an imaginary English knight's journey through the Holy Land and the East.⁵³ The Brahmans were praised by the author of *Mandeville's Travels* for worshipping the one true God, observing the ten commandments, and abstaining from every kind of sin,⁵⁴ and having enunciated their proto-Christian credentials, the author then went on to claim that as a reward for their moral purity and religious observance, God had made their land more blessed than the territory of any other people:

And because thei ben so trewe and so rightfulle and so fulle of alle gode condicouns, thei weren neuere greued with tempestes ne with thonder ne with leyt ne with hayl ne with pestylence ne with werre ne with hunger ne with non other tribulacioun as wee ben many tymes amonges vs for our synnes. Wherefore it semeth wel that God loueth hem and is plesed with hire creance for hire gode dedes.⁵⁵

The description of the land of the Brahmans in both the *Collatio* and *Mandeville's Travels* would therefore appear to owe something to the tradition of the Earthly Paradise, for in both texts Dindimus and his people are shown leading a life of innocence and holiness similar to that enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,

⁵³ Almost the only thing that can be said with any certainty about the author of *The Book of Sir John Mandeville* is that he was not called Sir John Mandeville. The text was originally written in French in 1357, although translations into Latin and the vernacular languages of Western Europe (including several Middle English versions) soon followed. For a discussion of the relationship between the different Middle English versions, see M. C. Seymour's *English Writers of the Late Middle Ages: Sir John Mandeville* (Aldershot, 1993). All references will be to Seymour's edition of the so-called Cotton version (London, British Library, MS. Cotton Titus C. xvi), which was written at the beginning of the fifteenth century. See *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford, 1967).

⁵⁴ See *Mandeville's Travels*, Chapter XXXII, pp. 211-212.

⁵⁵ *Mandeville's Travels*, Chapter XXXII, p. 212. The rather more diffuse treatment of this theme can be found in *The Prose Life of Alexander*, pp. 78-83.

before nature and humanity had suffered the corruption of the Fall. Like Eden, the world of the Brahmans is one entirely without conflict or struggle, in which all creatures live in harmony with one another, and have their needs supplied by the bounty of the earth. It is perhaps for this reason that - from the point of view of the Fallen world - Dindimus's account of Brahman society seems to be both utopian and unobtainable, and why Dindimus himself appears to possess a very different nature from, and inhabit an alternative world to, Alexander and the Greeks.⁵⁶

It was Dindimus's wholly benign conception of the natural world, and his somewhat naive understanding of humanity's place within it, that Alexander criticised most forcefully in his response to the Brahman king. According to Alexander, if what Dindimus had said were true, then only the Brahmans were good men, and every activity undertaken by the Greeks was a sin. Indeed, Alexander declared that it was impossible for the Brahmans to follow human nature, since their beliefs and practices forced them

⁵⁶ This identification of the land of the Brahmans with the Earthly Paradise is further suggested by its geographical location on the eastern bank of the river Ganges, which was traditionally believed to have been one of the four rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden. For instance, St. Jerome - in a letter to a certain young monk called Rusticus - identified the Ganges with the river Phison, which according to Scriptures (Genesis 2: 11) had its source in Paradise. See St. Jerome, 'Letter CXXV: 'To Rusticus'', in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, ed. and trans. F. A. Wright (London, 1933), pp. 402-403. Drawing on the traditional Western view of India as a place of wonder, Jerome (p. 403) went on to describe the territory surrounding the Ganges in a way that echoes the marvellous depictions of India found in the Alexander romances: 'This land is the home of the carbuncle and the emerald, and those gleaming pearls which our great ladies so ardently desire. There are also in it mountains of gold which men cannot approach because of the dragons and griffins and other huge monsters set there to show us what sort of guardians avarice employs.' A Jewish legend of Alexander that bears no direct relation to the romances, but that was nonetheless translated into Latin some time during the twelfth century under the title *Alexandri Magni Iter ad Paradisum* (*The Journey to Paradise of Alexander the Great*), describes how the Macedonian king actually discovered the site of the Earthly Paradise on an island in the river Ganges, but was prevented from entering the sacred land by the high wall that surrounded it. See *Alexander the Great's Journey to Paradise*, in Richard Stoneman, ed. and trans. *Legends of Alexander the Great* (London, 1994), pp. 67-75.

to condemn all those activities that were habitually carried out by human beings. However, Alexander claimed that in reality it was poverty and not choice that determined the simple and austere life of the Brahmans. As proof of this contention he pointed out that they were so primitive and impoverished a people that they had not yet acquired a knowledge of agriculture. Alexander therefore regarded their simplicity as contemptible, and he compared their dependence upon plants to the predicament of hungry cattle. He argued that unlike the Brahmans - who idealised poverty and self-denial - it was admirable to practice moderation and self-control amid one's wealth

Furthermore, Alexander considered that the unwillingness of the Brahmans to study philosophy provided yet more proof of their inhuman lack of ambition, and their kinship with the beasts. He claimed that for rational men with free will, life offered many pleasures, yet because the world was forever changing, unhappiness was an unavoidable condition of human existence, and that sadness inevitably followed joy. Alexander believed that there were many harmless, sensual activities that could lead to human happiness such as singing, dancing and eating. In addition, all the abundant produce of the earth was available for human consumption. Therefore, a figure like Dindimus who abstained from worldly pleasures was either too proud to accept such abundant gifts, or envious that they had been more generously bestowed elsewhere. Thus, Alexander concluded his letter by arguing that Dindimus's life of self-denial owed more to folly than to wisdom.

Perhaps what is most striking about this letter is that Alexander reveals himself to be not the debauched and decadent figure portrayed by Dindimus, but a rather reasonable spokesman for 'decent' and 'moderate' worldly values. Unlike Dindimus, Alexander saw nothing sinful in satisfying the desires of the body. On the contrary, he

rejected the Brahman way of life precisely because he believed that the renunciation of sensual pleasure constituted a denial of one's humanity. For Alexander, then, the Brahmans were reduced by their life of abstinence to the level and condition of the beasts.

In his final letter, Dindimus rejected the worldliness of Alexander by arguing that humans were not the masters of the world, with rights of ownership and permanent residence, but merely pilgrims passing through life on a journey to their lasting place of abode. However, Dindimus claimed that the Greeks were so bloated with wealth and pride that they had forgotten that they were mortal, and actually believed themselves to be gods. After roundly condemning Alexander for his pride, Dindimus then accused the Macedonian emperor of avarice. He argued that gold and silver were utterly worthless since they could neither sustain the body nor save the soul. Moreover, unlike food that satisfies hunger, and water that quenches the thirst, gold was especially pernicious because the more of it one possessed, the more covetous one became.

Alexander was equally combative and uncompromising in his final letter. He told Dindimus that as a consequence of their refusal or inability to travel, the Brahmans had failed to mix with people from other nations, and so had remained confined within their own land as though incarcerated in prison. He therefore argued that the Brahmans suffered the same torments that the Greeks imposed on their prisoners, and he concluded by claiming to mourn for the wretched and miserable lives that they were forced to endure. After completing this last letter of the correspondence, Alexander raised a large pillar of marble which marked the furthest limit of his empire, and on which he inscribed a brief account of his many achievements.

This final act of Alexander is full of symbolic meaning. In a sense, the pillar is an emblem that both triumphantly proclaims the full extent of his worldly achievements, while at the same time establishing a boundary beyond which he does not, or cannot, pass. Thus, in the same way that the opinions of Alexander and Dindimus are fundamentally irreconcilable, so their worlds do not meet. This complete failure of Alexander and Dindimus to resolve their differences is one of the most interesting features of the correspondence. The *Collatio* is not a dialogue between an evidently correct and incorrect point of view, and the text refuses to condemn the values of either participant, but treats both protagonists as exponents of equally legitimate and coherent philosophies.

This refusal of the text to proclaim either protagonist a winner - despite the fact that Dindimus clearly represents a proto-Christian point of view - unsettled many of the medieval writers who referred to the encounter, and it prompted some authors to rewrite the dialogue in a more didactic, less open-ended way. For instance, Ranulf Higden devoted four chapters of the *Polychronicon* to the life of Alexander (Book 3, Chapters XXVII-XXX), one of which (Chapter XXIX) was concerned with the Macedonian emperor's encounter with Dindimus.⁵⁷ In Higden's account, Dindimus both initiated and concluded the correspondence, and it is his opinions that are clearly intended to be seen as correct. Indeed, Higden's Dindimus is invested with such natural authority that Alexander emerged from the debate a completely broken man; he was forced by the unwavering moral integrity of the Brahman king to concede defeat, and admit to leading

⁵⁷ See *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis*, Vol III, Book 3, Chapter XXIX, pp. 454-479. Higden's treatment of this episode is also discussed by Gerrit Bunt in his useful survey of Middle English Alexander literature. See Gerrit H. V. Bunt, *Alexander the Great in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (Groningen, 1994), pp. 37-38.

a miserable and fearful life. After making this confession, Alexander offered Dindimus an array of expensive presents as a sign of his esteem, but the only gift that Dindimus was prepared to accept was oil, which he immediately threw onto the fire. Of course, the radical changes that were introduced by Higden, changes that so altered both the tone and meaning of the correspondence, actually demonstrate just how genuine a balance was maintained between the two protagonists in the *Collatio*, a fact that is all the more remarkable considering the profound importance to a medieval audience of the issues under debate.

Although the *Collatio* is a text in which theological concerns feature very prominently - with the idealised figures of Alexander and Dindimus representing an active, worldly paganism on the one hand, and a contemplative, ascetic Christianity on the other - the correspondence is not exclusively concerned with narrowly religious issues, for it can also be seen as a debate between two fundamentally different ways of thinking about the natural world, and humanity's place within it. Thus, the attitude of Alexander and the Greeks, who saw nature not only as an arena of struggle and conflict between humans and animals, but also as a vast reservoir of resources to be used by human beings for their own benefit, is placed in direct opposition to the reverential, self-denying view of the Brahmins, who abstained on principle from any interference with, or exploitation of, what Dindimus referred to as, 'þe erthe oure allere moder'.⁵⁸ Dindimus's conception of the underlying harmony of all living things is reflected in his account of Brahman society, which is entirely lacking in any form of violence or human conflict, while for Alexander on the other hand, the inherent harshness of the natural world has a salutary effect on human nature, forcing individuals to use their intelligence

⁵⁸ *The Prose Life of Alexander*, p. 79.

and ingenuity to better their natural condition, thus enabling them to rise above the level of the beasts. Moreover, by cultivating human intelligence through the study of philosophy - something that the Brahmans conspicuously failed to do - Alexander claimed that the Greeks had not only acquired the necessary skills with which to overcome the challenges of life, but that they had also gained the intellectual capacity to make moral and aesthetic judgements, a capacity that - according to Alexander - the Brahmans (along with animals) did not possess:

3e hafe na liste to studie aboute lerynge, ne 3e seke na mercy ne does nane till oper. And all this 3e hafe in comon wit beste3. For ri3te as beste3 hase nowþer reson ne discrecion, ne hase na felynge of gode, ri3te so þay hafe na delite in gode.⁵⁹

In the *Collatio*, then, the familiar aspects of Alexander's reputation - his insatiable ambition, his love of learning, and his determination to gain ascendancy over both humans and animals - are once again in evidence. Significantly however, for the first time in his career the Macedonian emperor was confronted by an adversary whom he was not able to defeat. Dindimus's respect for the sanctity of the natural world is profoundly at odds with Alexander's wish to dominate and exploit it, and their ensuing debate - in which both parties powerfully advanced their positions, and from which neither emerged victorious - provided the extensive medieval audience of the Alexander romances with both the opportunity, and the conceptual framework in which, to reflect upon humanity's relationship with the natural world.

⁵⁹ *The Prose Life of Alexander*, p. 86.

Conclusion: Representing Nature in Medieval Literature

One of the reasons why the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo* is of such inestimable value to the modern scholar - particularly one investigating medieval attitudes towards nature - lies in the very form in which the dialogic narrative is cast. For, in bringing together two conflicting and mutually exclusive accounts of humanity's relationship with the natural world, and exploring each in sufficient detail to establish their philosophical coherence and legitimacy, the text demonstrates that the culture of the late Middle Ages was capable of speaking with more than one voice when it came to debating humanity's place within the wider world of nature, a conclusion that would seem to run counter to Keith Thomas's findings in *Man and the Natural World*. While the opinions of King Alexander - who claimed that human beings were the undisputed masters of creation, and as such were entitled to exploit its abundant resources for their own ends - perfectly accord with the anthropocentric world view that Thomas considered to be typical of late-medieval society, the same cannot be said for Dindimus, whose reverence for the natural world made him see any human interference in its processes as a violation of its sanctity. Of course, as Richard Stoneman has suggested, the great respect that Dindimus accorded to all forms of life may reflect the fact that the

Collatio preserves some of the authentic opinions of the various Eastern philosophers - whether Buddhist, Hindu, or Jain - whom Alexander actually encountered on his Indian campaign.¹ However, whatever Dindimus's origins, it is significant that medieval writers such as Peter Abelard and Ranulf Higden seem to have held him in high esteem, and interpreted his harmonious relationship with the natural world in the light of Christian tradition, seeing it as evidence of his prelapsarian innocence and holiness.

The opposition between the self-assertive, secular attitude of Alexander, and the self-denying, proto-Christian view of Dindimus draws attention to perhaps the central feature of this study; the crucial role that was played by the two narrative genres of hagiography and romance in determining how animals and the natural world were portrayed in the imaginative literature of the period. As we have seen, one of the key ideas that underpinned the treatment of the animal kingdom in the early *Lives* of Francis of Assisi was the belief that the saint's remarkable purity and innocence enabled him to re-establish the state of peace and harmony that had originally been enjoyed by Adam, Eve, and the animals in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Francis's extraordinary affinity for the animal kingdom was therefore presented by his biographers as a sign of the very high favour in which he was held by God.

Because hagiography enjoyed such high cultural prestige during the later Middle Ages, saintly virtues (such as penitence and humility) proved to be just as important to many of the heroes of romance as the more conventionally heroic attributes of nobility and courage. For instance, as we saw in Chapter 2, Sir Gowther's sanctity was integral

¹ See Richard Stoneman's two articles on the historical and romance accounts of Alexander's meeting with the Brahmins: 'Who are the Brahmins? Indian Lore and Cynic Doctrine in Palladius' *De Bragmanibus* and Its Models', *Classical Quarterly* 44 (1994), 500-510, and 'Naked Philosophers: The Brahmins in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romances', *JHS* CXV (1995), 99-114.

to his role as a knightly hero, and one of the ways in which he manifested his holiness was through his relationship with dogs. Thus, the hagiographical motif of the return to paradise was used extensively in the canon of Middle English romance to suggest that the secular qualities of the aristocratic hero were closely related to, and merged imperceptibly with, the religious characteristics of the saint. However, as well as using the animal kingdom to indicate that holiness was an essential component of a knight's identity, a very different set of ideas about animals - and their relationship to humanity - was invoked by the authors of the same Middle English romances examined in Chapter 2. Reflecting the class divisions within feudal society, the animal kingdom was presented in *Sir Gowther*, *Octavian*, and *Sir Orfeo* as profoundly hierarchical in structure. Those beasts that were especially favoured by the aristocracy - such as lions, falcons, greyhounds, and horses - were identified as inherently noble in nature, and thus were seen to share not only a natural sense of empathy with their counterparts in the human world, but also a common feeling of superiority to all creatures - whether human or animal - of low degree.

These two fundamentally different ways in which animals were represented and understood in the hagiographical and romance literature of the period - the one ostensibly spiritual, the other social - present us with some rather unexpected conclusions. As we have seen, St. Francis's modern reputation as a lover of animals and nature is to a very great extent based on an anachronistic misreading of the early sources. Francis and his medieval biographers tended to value creatures not for their own sake, but as objects that reflected, partook of, and pointed towards the goodness of God, their Creator. However, this failure of Francis to engage with the animalness of the various animals he encountered stands in contrast to the experience of at least some of the

protagonists of the romances that I have examined. For instance, Florent, one of the two young heroes of *Octavian*, displayed a genuine sense of affection for the falcon that he purchased with his adoptive father's money. Of course, Florent's fondness for the 'aristocratic' bird was used by the poet as a device to draw attention to the prince's own innately noble nature, a nature which - in spite of the humble circumstances in which he found himself - could not be suppressed. However, what members of the medieval aristocracy (even fictional ones like Florent) prized in falcons, and what led to the bird's identification as a noble creature, was its power, speed, and sleekness: the very physical qualities that made it such an efficient hunter of prey. This sense of an authentic engagement with the falcon *qua* falcon is also evident in the scene in *Sir Orfeo*, where the eponymous hero chanced upon the hawking party in the wilderness, and laughed for sheer joy at witnessing the skill and proficiency with which the avian predators dispatched their game. Thus, it was the potency and ruthlessness of the falcon - rather than the symbolic qualities that it might possess - that was admired by Florent and Orfeo; a fact that tells us much about the values and self-image of the medieval aristocracy.

Finally, perhaps what the thesis has demonstrated most definitively is the sheer multiplicity of representations of, and attitudes towards, animals and nature that are to be found in medieval literature. In the different narratives I have examined, animals perform a range of symbolic, allegorical, and mimetic functions, although the divisions between these categories are sometimes difficult to draw. Thus, St. Francis treated real animals such as pigs, goats, and sheep as though they were religious symbols enacting a spiritual drama within the book of nature, while the story of Alexander's miraculous conception and birth - involving as it does a dragon that was at one and the same time a

figment of a dream, a man dressed in a dragon costume, and a genuine fire-breathing monster - resists all attempts at classification. The abundance and complexity of such images would seem to indicate that both the producers and consumers of medieval literature were capable of engaging with the natural world in a rich and varied way. Therefore, while this study has in no way exhausted the range and diversity of representations of animals in medieval culture, it has demonstrated that the commonplace view of the Middle Ages as unified and simplistic in its outlook is misconceived.

Appendix:

A note on the Early *Lives* of

St. Francis of Assisi

Introduction

In the Prologue to his *First Life of St. Francis*, Thomas of Celano described how his biography, which was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX, was based not only on his own personal recollection of Francis's words and deeds, but also on the testimony of other eye-witnesses who were well acquainted with the saint:

But in as much as no one can retain fully all the things that Francis did and taught, I have tried, at the command of our Lord, the glorious reigning Pope Gregory, to set forth as I can, though indeed with unskilled words, at least those things that I have heard from his own mouth or that I have gathered from faithful and trustworthy witnesses.¹

Thomas of Celano received his commission from Pope Gregory around the time of Francis's canonization, in July 1228, less than two years after the saint's death, when many of the figures who had known him most intimately were still alive, and it was on the authority of these eye-witness accounts (along with his own personal testimony), that

¹ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), p. 227.

Thomas claimed that his biography was a truthful and accurate record of the saint's life. St. Bonaventure, Francis's second official biographer, made a similar claim to historical accuracy in the Prologue to his biography of the saint, which he wrote some thirty years after the appearance of Thomas's *First Life*:

In order to have a clearer and more certain grasp of the authentic facts of his life, which I was to transmit to posterity, I visited the sites of the birth, life and death of this holy man. I had careful interviews with his companions who were still alive, especially those who had intimate knowledge of his holiness and were its principal followers. Because of their acknowledged truthfulness and their proven virtue, they can be trusted beyond any doubt.²

Like Thomas before him, Bonaventure sought to establish the authenticity of his narrative by assuring his readers of the honesty and reliability of the informants whom he had consulted. Both biographies therefore purport to be faithful, historical records of Francis's life and work.

However, while neither Thomas nor Bonaventure seem to have had any hesitation in claiming that their works were honest and accurate accounts of the life of St. Francis, it is much harder for a modern reader to share their confidence. The different medieval biographies of Francis abound in stories of his miracles, and it is difficult to reconcile their unquestioning acceptance of the reality of the saint's supernatural powers with the prevailing scepticism of the modern age. The erosion of belief in the supernatural and the miraculous, and its replacement with an empiricist world view that seeks a rational, scientific understanding of phenomena, has inevitably undermined the claims to truthfulness not just of Francis's biographers, but of the genre of hagiography as a whole. Consequently, for a modern reader - with a very different understanding of

² St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York, 1978), p. 183.

what constitutes a faithful, historical narrative from the view that prevailed in the late Middle Ages - the classification of Francis's biographies, and the interpretation of Francis himself, have become extremely problematic issues.³

In this appendix, I will examine the major narrative sources for the life of St. Francis of Assisi (the two *Lives* of Thomas of Celano, the Writings of the Three Companions, the *Major Life* of St. Bonaventure, and *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*), considering not only how they came to be composed, but also how they relate to each other, and where they fit in the wider context of the early development of the Franciscan Order.⁴ In addition, I shall question whether the various *Lives* are best understood as literature or history, or whether they resist such easy and simplistic attempts at

³ For medieval historians, the writing of history served an overtly didactic function, presenting the reader with a cast of heroes whose noble actions were to be emulated, and villains whose infamous deeds were to be avoided. For instance, writing in the first half of the twelfth century in the Prologue to his *Historia Anglorum*, Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, justified the study of history by stating that: 'in the recorded deeds of all peoples and nations, which are the very judgements of God, clemency, generosity, honesty, caution, and the like, and their opposites, not only provoke men of the spirit to what is good and deter them from evil, but even encourage worldly men to good deeds and reduce their wickedness. History therefore brings the past into view as though it were present, and allows judgement of the future by representing the past.' See Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford, 1996), p. 5. Post-enlightenment historical writing carries none of the moralistic connotations of its medieval counterpart, with history generally being understood as a truthful account of past events, told for its own sake, without the express intention of improving the moral character of the reader. This is the meaning reflected in the definition of history recorded in the *OED* (Sense 3): 'That branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained; the formal record of the past, esp. of human affairs or actions; the study of the formation and growth of communities and nations.'

⁴ I will not be discussing any of the other medieval *Lives* of St. Francis, such as the metrical life (the *Legenda Versificata*) of Henry of Avranches, or the *Life of St. Francis* by Julian of Speyer, both of which are based almost entirely on Thomas's *First Life*. Nor will I be discussing the *Sacred Converse of the Blessed Francis with Lady Poverty*, an anonymous text, which - in describing how Francis wooed and won the Lady Poverty for his bride - is more an allegorical meditation on the nature of his devotion to that virtue, than a work of biography.

classification. Finally, bearing in mind that the way in which the sources are classified inevitably effects how Francis himself is interpreted, I will assess the extent to which the saint should be treated as an historical figure, or read as a literary character. This in turn will lead to a consideration of whether it is possible to separate the 'real' Francis of history from the 'fictional' Francis of legend, or whether the historical and legendary elements of his life and character are so deeply and inextricably entwined as to render any such attempt unfeasible.

The two *Lives* of Thomas of Celano

Very little is known about Thomas of Celano. The date of his birth remains unknown, although the few facts of his life that have been established suggest that he was probably born during the closing years of the twelfth century.⁵ It is thought that he was received into the Franciscan Order by Francis himself some time around 1215, when the saint returned to Italy after failing in his efforts to reach Morocco, where he had hoped either to convert the Muslims to Christianity, or to be martyred in the attempt. Writing in Chapter XX of *The First Life of St. Francis*, Thomas implied that - mindful of the author's own spiritual welfare - God had deliberately frustrated Francis's missionary intentions:

he [Francis] started on a journey toward Morocco, to preach the Gospel of Christ to Miramamolín [The Sultan Emir-el-mumenín] and his people. ...But the good God, whom it pleased in his kindness to be mindful of me and of many others, withstood him to his face (Galatians 2: 11) when he had travelled as far as Spain; and, that he might not go any further, he recalled him from the journey he had begun by a prolonged illness.⁶

⁵ See Placid Herman's comments in his Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, p. 179.

⁶ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XX, p. 276.

Thomas then went on to state that when Francis returned to Assisi, he accepted 'some educated and noble men' into the Order. It is generally assumed that Thomas was one of these men.⁷

Nothing is known of Thomas's whereabouts for the next six years, but according to the *Chronicle of Brother Jordan of Giano*, an account of the early history of the first Franciscan settlements in Germany, Thomas was among the party of friars that was sent to establish a mission in Germany in 1221.⁸ Thomas is known to have remained in Germany until at least 8 September 1223, when, according to Brother Jordan, he was present at the provincial chapter held at Speyer.⁹ However, this is the last occasion on which his name is mentioned in the *Chronicle* in relation to the German mission, and it is now generally thought that he returned to Italy at about this time.¹⁰

Francis died on the evening of 3 October 1226,¹¹ so assuming that Thomas did indeed return to Assisi in either 1223 or 1224, his account of the last two years of

⁷ See, for instance, John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order from its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford, 1968), p. 279.

⁸ See Jordan of Giano, *The Chronicle of Brother Jordan of Giano*, trans. E. Gurney Salter, in E. Gurney Salter, ed. *The Coming of the Friars Minor to England and Germany* (London, 1926), Chapter 19, p. 149.

⁹ See Jordan of Giano, *The Chronicle of Brother Jordan of Giano*, Chapter 33, p. 160.

¹⁰ John Moorman has argued that Thomas's account of Francis's celebration of Christmas at Greccio in 1223 may have been 'based on his own remeniscences as it is full of detail and is not recorded in any other document which has come down to us.' See John R. H. Moorman, *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester, 1940), p. 62. Jordan of Giano later states that he met Thomas at Assisi in 1230, when Thomas gave him some relics of St. Francis to take back with him to Germany. See Jordan of Giano, *The Chronicle of Brother Jordan of Giano*, Chapter 59, pp. 178-179.

¹¹ The date and time of Francis's death was first recorded by Brother Elias, the Minister General of the Franciscan Order, in a letter that he wrote to a certain Brother Gregory, the Minister of the Province of France, announcing the saint's death. See 'Letter of Brother Elias', in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 4th edn. (Chicago, 1991), pp. 1955-1960.

Francis's life - the period that he actually described in most detail - could have been based, at least in part, on his own personal recollection of events. However, there is no evidence in any of the sources to indicate that Thomas was one of Francis's close companions, and it is now generally assumed that he was commissioned by Pope Gregory to be Francis's biographer not because he was an intimate friend of the saint, but for his skill as a writer, and his knowledge of the Bible and the corpus of saints' *Lives*.¹² Although Thomas was probably not well acquainted with Francis, his description of the saint's canonization, an event that took place on 16 July 1228, certainly suggests that he was present at the ceremony, and it seems likely that it was on this occasion that he was commissioned by Gregory IX to write Francis's *Life*.¹³ It is almost certain that Thomas completed his biography before 25 May 1230, because he failed to mention the important event in the posthumous history of St. Francis that occurred on this date; the translation of his body from the Church of St. George to the new basilica in Assisi that had been built in his honour.¹⁴ Therefore, it is now generally accepted that *The First Life of St. Francis* must have been completed by Thomas in either 1229, or early 1230.

¹² For instance, see Rosalind Brooke's comments on Thomas's qualifications to write a biography of St. Francis in her essay, 'The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', in *Latin Biography*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London, 1967), 177-198, pp. 182-183.

¹³ See Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 3, Chapter I, pp. 333-341. Gregory travelled to Assisi to officiate at the ceremony.

¹⁴ Significantly, Thomas included a description of this event in a subsequent work, *The Legend for Use in the Choir* (*Legenda ad Usum Chori*), a much shortened form of *The First Life of St. Francis*, which he wrote at the request of a certain Brother Benedict some time around 1230. See Thomas of Celano, *Legenda ad Usum Chori*, Paragraph 13, in *Analecta Franciscana*, X, fasc I (Quaracchi, 1926), p. 124. See also Placid Hermann's comments on *The Legend* in his Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, pp. 199-200.

The First Life is divided into three unequal parts. Book One covers the first forty-three years of Francis's life, describing his birth and dissolute youth, his conversion and the founding of the Order, and his teaching and holy life (including many of his miraculous encounters with animals). Although Thomas claimed that 'the first book follows the historical order',¹⁵ he was nonetheless rather vague in his observation of the chronology of events, giving no dates, and mentioning very few concrete facts. Book Two, which is about a third of the length of Book One, concentrates on the last two years of Francis's life, and tells of his stigmatization, his last illness, and his death and burial. Finally, the third Book describes the canonization of Francis, and relates the miracles that were read at the ceremony.

As mentioned above, Thomas claimed that his narrative was based on both his own memory of Francis's words and deeds, and the accounts of those people who had known him well. Thomas appears to have made very little attempt to find people who were well acquainted with Francis during his youth, for out of a total of forty-two chapters, only three are concerned with the first twenty-four years of his life (the period before his conversion). This very brief account of Francis's early years places great emphasis on the saint's supposedly wicked and sinful behaviour (as a youth he is said to have 'walked about the streets of Babylon'),¹⁶ a fact that has led John Moorman to suggest that these youthful anecdotes may have been included by Thomas simply as a way of emphasising the dramatic impact, and pivotal importance, of the saint's conversion experience.¹⁷

¹⁵ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 227.

¹⁶ See Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter I, p. 231.

¹⁷ See Moorman, *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis*, p. 65.

Thomas also failed to mention the serious disagreements that were beginning to divide the friars into rival factions during the last years of Francis's life, disagreements that were concerned with the nature of the Franciscan Order, and the future course of its development. As Rosalind Brooke has noted, conflict within the Order was one of the inevitable consequences of its rapid expansion, for in the space of less than twenty years (from its foundation to the time of Francis's death), it was transformed from a small group of uneducated, wandering beggars, dedicated to a life of preaching, into a large and powerful organization with close ties to the Papacy, and with members scattered in houses and hermitages throughout Italy, France, Spain, England, Germany, and Hungary.¹⁸ The very success of the Order, then, caused considerable tensions to develop between those who wanted to remain faithful to the spirit of poverty, simplicity, and humility that had originally inspired St. Francis, and a more pragmatic party that sought to reform the Order, and dilute its founding ideals through a more flexible and relaxed interpretation of its Rule. Most prominent among the group that resisted all attempts at reform were Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, the constant companions of Francis during the last years of his life, and amongst his most trusted and intimate friends.¹⁹ Although Thomas never mentioned this group of friars by name, he did refer to them, albeit cryptically, on one occasion:

he [St. Francis] committed the care of himself to certain brothers who were deservedly very dear to him. ...These [men] tried with all vigilance, with all zeal, with all their will to foster the peace of mind of their blessed father, and they cared for the infirmity of his body,

¹⁸ See Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ The writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, will be considered in the next section of the appendix.

shunning no distress, no labors, that they might give themselves entirely to serving the saint.²⁰

Thomas claimed that his reason for withholding the names of these brothers was 'to spare their modesty, which is a familiar friend to them since they are spiritual men'.²¹ However, some modern historians have cast doubt on this explanation, suggesting instead that - under pressure from the two leading promoters of the reform of the movement, Pope Gregory IX, and Brother Elias - Thomas deliberately omitted to mention the names of Francis's closest companions, thus minimising the importance of their role in his life, and undermining not only their personal authority, but also the validity of their cause.²²

In contrast to Leo and his companions, who were almost entirely removed from the narrative, Thomas fully acknowledged the significance of the part played in Francis's life by Pope Gregory IX and Brother Elias. Gregory was not actually elected pope until 1227, one year after Francis's death, but as Cardinal Ugolino of Ostia, he was both a close friend and confidante of the saint, and the first Cardinal Protector of the Friars Minor.²³ Along with Gregory, it is evident that Thomas also relied very heavily

²⁰ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter VI, p. 317. Although it is not possible to identify these brothers with absolute certainty, it is now generally thought - as Rosalind Brooke has observed - that Thomas was referring to Brothers Leo, Rufino, Angelo, and John de Laudibus. See *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli Sociorum S. Francisci*, ed. and trans. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford, 1970), pp. 10-11.

²¹ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter VI, p. 317.

²² The French historian, Paul Sabatier, whose *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* - which appeared in 1893 - was the first modern biography of the saint, has been the most vociferous proponent of this theory. For Sabatier's comments on the supposed attempt of Thomas to diminish the importance of Francis's closest companions, see Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Louise Seymour Houghton, (London, 1894), p.368.

²³ After lavishing much praise on Ugolino - 'he was simple with the simple, humble with the humble, poor with the poor' - Thomas then went on to describe how Francis

on the testimony of Brother Elias, the Minister General of the Order at the time of Francis's death.²⁴ Thomas presented Elias in an unambiguously positive light, claiming that he was the figure whom Francis chose 'to take the place of a mother in his own regard and to take the place of a father in regard to the rest of the brothers.'²⁵ Later on in the narrative, Thomas dramatically confirmed Elias's status as both Francis's pre-eminent follower, and his chosen successor, by relating a special blessing that he received from the dying saint:

Since Brother Elias was sitting at [Francis's] left side, with the other Brothers standing about, Francis, crossing his right hand over his left, placed his right hand upon Elias' head: and, deprived as he was of the light of his bodily eyes and of their use, he said: 'On whom am I holding my hand?' 'On Brother Elias,' they said. 'That is what I wish,' said Francis, 'you, my son, I bless above all and throughout all (Ephesians 4: 6), and, just as the Most High has multiplied my brothers and sons in your hands, so I also bless them all upon you and in you. May God, the King of all, bless you in heaven and upon the earth. I bless you as much as I can and more than I can, and what I cannot, may He who can do all things do in you. May the Lord be mindful of your work and of your labor, and may a share be reserved for you in the reward of the just. May you find every blessing you desire, and may whatever you ask worthily be granted to you.'²⁶

However, Brother Elias fell into disgrace soon after Francis's death, as a result both of the opulence of his lifestyle - which was in flagrant disregard of the Rule - and his

petitioned Pope Honorius III, Ugolino's predecessor as pontiff, to allow Ugolino 'to be the father and Lord of himself and all his brothers.' Thomas continued: 'The lord pope granted the prayers of the saint and graciously made over his authority over the order of brothers to Hugo [Ugolino].' Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter IV, pp. 314-315.

²⁴ The Minister General was the head of the Order, a position that Francis resigned in either 1217 or 1218. On retiring, Francis nominated as his successor his trusted companion, Peter Catanii, and when Peter died in 1221 he was succeeded by Elias on Francis's recommendation. See Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 76-83.

²⁵ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter IV, p. 313.

²⁶ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter VII, pp. 321-322.

autocratic approach to governing the Order.²⁷ He was eventually forced from office in 1239 by Gregory IX, after a group of friars had presented the pope with evidence of his lax behaviour. Shortly afterwards, Brother Elias suffered the further penalty of excommunication for travelling to the court of the excommunicated emperor, Frederick II (Gregory IX had pronounced a general sentence of excommunication against anyone who consorted with Frederick, but added a personal penalty of excommunication against Elias himself.) A number of attempts were made to reconcile Elias to the Papacy, all of which failed, and it was only as he was dying in the spring of 1253, that he finally sought absolution, and was received back into the Church.²⁸

In the light of this scandal, the prominence given to Elias in *The First Life of St. Francis* became a source of acute embarrassment to the Franciscan Order, and the later *Lives* reacted to his dishonour by either erasing him altogether from the story of Francis's life (the strategy adopted by Bonaventure in his *Major Life of St. Francis*), or presenting him as an apostate and traitor of the Order, the course pursued in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.²⁹ Significantly, the story of Francis's valedictory blessing of

²⁷ For an account of Brother Elias's fall from grace, see Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 106-122, and Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 96-104.

²⁸ Elias was absolved on Holy Saturday 1253, and received the Holy Sacrament on Easter Monday, the day before his death. See Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 102-103.

²⁹ A story is told in *The Little Flowers*, of how Elias was strongly rebuked, first by an angel, and then by St. Francis himself, for disregarding the Gospel and the Rule. According to *The Little Flowers*: 'Francis ...scolded Brother Elias in a loud voice, saying: "You do wrong, proud Brother Elias, for you drive away the holy angels who come to visit and instruct us. And I tell you, I strongly fear that your pride will make you end your days outside this Order." And so it happened to him later, as St. Francis had prophesied to him, for he died outside the Order.' *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, trans. Raphael Brown, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapter 4, p. 1311. Another story relates how Francis told Elias that he was not only destined to

Elias was not repeated in any of the subsequent biographies of the saint, an act of historical revision that required their accounts of his final days to be reworked radically.³⁰ This discrepancy between the treatment of Brother Elias in Thomas's *First Life*, and the approach taken in all of the later biographies, inevitably raises questions about the objectivity and trustworthiness of the corpus as a whole, for it would seem to suggest that even the most important details of Francis's life - such as the identity of his chosen successor - could be altered in response to embarrassing 'political' developments within the Order.

Brother Elias has remained a controversial figure, and modern debate about the historical value of the *First Life* tends to hinge upon the value of his testimony, and the influence that he exerted on Thomas of Celano. Paul Sabatier has argued that the portrait of the saint in Thomas's *First Life* bears the unmistakable mark of Elias's influence, and it is for this reason that he has expressed serious doubts about its reliability as an historical source.³¹ Sabatier claimed that in order to produce a biography that was acceptable to Elias, Thomas not only exaggerated the importance of Elias's role in Francis's life, but also failed to mention the vehemence of Francis's opposition to the

die outside the Order, but that he would also suffer eternal damnation. Elias then urged Francis to intercede with God on his behalf, and such was the love that God bore the saint that Francis was able to obtain for Elias the promise that he would not be damned. See *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapter 38, pp. 1388-1390.

³⁰ For instance, in *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Bonaventure described the scene in this way: 'While all the friars were sitting around him, he extended his hands over them, crossing his arms in the form of a cross - for he always loved that sign - and he blessed all the friars, both present and absent, in the name and power of Christ crucified.' St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 14, p. 319. Therefore, not only did Bonaventure fail to mention Elias by name, but he gave no indication to suggest that anyone was singled out by Francis for special favour.

³¹ According to Sabatier: 'Every opportunity is seized [by Thomas] to give a preponderating importance to Elias. It is a true manifesto in his favor', Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 367.

reforming party within the Order.³² Other critics, while sharing some of Sabatier's reservations, have nevertheless arrived at a much more positive assessment of the historical value of Thomas's narrative. For instance, Rosalind Brooke has ranked the *First Life* above all of the other biographies as a source for Francis's life,³³ arguing that the scandal that was subsequently to surround Elias in no way detracts from his reliability as a witness:

Elias's disgrace and notoriety do not alter the fact that St. Francis loved and trusted him. As a witness to the saint's life and character the only criticism that could be levelled against Elias would be that he was partial, that he admired and loved him so much that he would be unable to say anything to his discredit. And that indeed could be said of all Celano's informants, the Pope included.³⁴

Placid Hermann has also defended the *First Life* from Sabatier's criticisms, arguing that Thomas's primary aim was to produce an intimate spiritual biography of Francis, and not a general history of the Franciscan Order. In this regard, Hermann considers Thomas to have been very successful.³⁵

³² Sabatier has argued that: 'The last five years of his life were only one incessant effort at protest [against the reforming tendency], both by his example and his words.' Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 276.

³³ See Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, p. 8.

³⁴ Brooke, 'The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 184. Elsewhere, Brooke observes that: 'The impression left [of Francis's relationship with Elias] is of mutual friendship, esteem and trust, and Elias appears as St. Francis' close companion almost to the exclusion of those who so proudly described themselves as 'nos, qui cum ipso fuimus' ['those of us who were with him' - the verbal formula habitually employed by Leo, Rufino, and Angelo].' Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, p. 10. Brooke has also noted that Elias was loved and respected not just by Francis, but by St. Clare as well: 'In a letter to the blessed Agnes of Bohemia, St. Clare included an exhortation to her to follow the counsels of Brother Elias, and to prize them above every other gift. Her sister, when she had been sent as abbess to the convent at Florence, wrote to Clare, grieving at their separation, and desiring the consolation of frequent visits from Elias. Their words are a striking proof of trust, and strengthen the probability that, as Celano said, Elias was indeed beloved of St. Francis.' Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, p. 14.

³⁵ See Placid Hermann's Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, p. 203.

However, it could be argued that in their attempts to uncover or recover the authentic Francis of history, modern biographers of the saint have not fully acknowledged the problems associated with using hagiographical works as historical sources. As indicated above, most of the discussion of, and controversy surrounding, *The First Life of St. Francis*, revolves around the question of whether Thomas was unduly influenced by Brother Elias, and the effect that this might have had on his account of Francis's attitude towards the reform of the Order. Whatever their differences, then, the majority of twentieth-century commentators on the *First Life* would seem to assume that Thomas behaved in a similar way to, and was subject to the same kind of pressures and inducements as, a modern biographer or historian. That Thomas's biography may have been shaped by criteria other than the historical 'facts' of Francis's life (as that term is now understood), does not appear to have received sufficient recognition. Seemingly alone amongst recent scholars, Rosalind Brooke and John V. Fleming have tried to take account of the narrative constraints that were necessarily imposed on Thomas by his use of the hagiographical form. For instance, Brooke has noted that in its 'overwhelming concern with the impact of supernatural power on the natural world', the *First Life* adheres to a very different set of formal conventions from the ones that govern modern historical and biographical writing.³⁶ But Brooke goes on to argue that in spite of the highly formal nature of its arrangement and organization, the *First Life* was nonetheless able to convey historically accurate and useful biographical information about St. Francis, embedded within a conventional hagiographical framework.³⁷ Similarly, John Fleming has pointed out that before

³⁶ See Brooke, 'The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi', pp. 179-180.

³⁷ See Brooke, 'The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 181.

arriving at any 'authentic' details of Francis's life, the modern reader of Thomas of Celano must first sift through the catalogue of narrative clichés, and the plethora of borrowed miracles and dialogue, that his account contains.³⁸ I will be returning to this question, and exploring in detail whether any of the early *Lives* can be said to be 'historical', in my discussion of Bonaventure's *Major Life of St. Francis*.

Whatever the verdict of modern historians, dissatisfaction with Thomas's *First Life* had become sufficiently widespread by 1244 for Crescentius of Jesi, the newly appointed Minister General of the Order, to issue a general invitation to all those who had known Francis to send in any information that they might possess that could be used for the composition of a new biography.³⁹ Paul Sabatier has argued that the reason why Crescentius made this request was because Elias's conspicuous presence in the *First Life* had rendered the work completely untenable.⁴⁰ However, Thomas's contemporaries were no doubt conscious of other flaws in his narrative that made the production of a second biography necessary. In all probability, it took Thomas little more than a year to write the *First Life*, and he himself readily acknowledged that it was a far from complete account of the acts and teaching of the saint: 'It would take too long and it would be impossible to enumerate and gather together all the things the glorious Francis did and taught while he was living in the flesh.'⁴¹ It is therefore possible that in issuing his call

³⁸ See John V. Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1977), pp. 36-37.

³⁹ Crescentius's call for material is recorded in *The Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals*, an account of the first twenty-four Minister Generals of the Order from St. Francis to Leonard of Giffoni, which was written in the second half of the fourteenth century by Arnold of Sarano. See *Chronica XXIV Generalium*, in *Analecta Franciscana* III (Quaracchi, 1897), 1-575, p. 262.

⁴⁰ See Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 372-373.

⁴¹ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXIX, pp. 295-296. Of course, this disclaimer may simply have been used by Thomas for rhetorical

for further biographical material, Crescentius was simply giving voice to a widely held feeling amongst the friars that a more comprehensive and detailed narrative of Francis's life was needed.

Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, the constant companions of St. Francis during the last years of his life, responded to this request by sending Crescentius a substantial collection of material based both on their own recollection of the deeds of the saint, and the memories of some of his other close friends.⁴² The task of composing a new biography from this fresh information fell to Thomas of Celano, and in his Prologue to *The Second Life of St. Francis* (in which he dedicated the work to Crescentius), he not only described how the biography came to be written, but he also drew attention to the additional material that it contained:

It has pleased the entire holy assembly of the past general chapter and you, Most Reverend Father, not without the dispensation of divine wisdom, to enjoin upon our littleness that we set down in writing for the consolation of those living and for a remembrance of those to come the deeds and also the words of our glorious father Francis, in as much as they were better known to us than to the rest because of our close association with him and our mutual intimacy. ...This little work contains in the first place certain wonderful facts about the conversion of St. Francis that were not included in the legends that were composed some time earlier because they had not come to the notice of the author. Then we intend to portray and to declare with careful zeal what was the good and acceptable and perfect will of Francis both for himself and for his followers in every practice of heavenly discipline and in zeal for the highest perfection which he ever had

effect, an echo, perhaps, of St. John's Gospel: 'And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written.' (John: 21, 25)

However, later on in the *First Life* (Book 2, Chapter 1, p. 303), Thomas further conceded that his work was less than exhaustive in its treatment of Francis: 'at present we intend to note down only those things which were of greater importance, so that they who wish to say more about them may always be able to find something they can add.'

⁴² I shall be discussing the writings of the three companions in the next section.

toward God in his sacred affections. and toward men in his examples.⁴³

The influence that the three companions exerted on Thomas can be gleaned even from these prefatory remarks. Nowhere in the *First Life* did Thomas suggest that he was a close acquaintance of Francis, yet from the opening paragraph of the *Second Life* onward, it becomes apparent that he was writing not simply as an individual, but on behalf of a group of friars who were able to claim privileged knowledge of the saint by virtue of 'our close association with him and our mutual intimacy.' Moreover, as the spokesman for Francis's companions, Thomas presented an interpretation of the saint that was entirely consistent with their stance against the reforming party within the Order.⁴⁴ While Thomas steered clear of controversy in the *First Life* by assiduously avoiding all mention of divisive subjects, he clearly felt under no such obligation in the *Second Life*, where he recounted a large number of incidents in which Francis rebuked his followers for either falling short of the rigorous standards of moral and religious conduct that he expected of them, or for their general lack of spiritual zeal.⁴⁵

The *Second Life of St. Francis* is divided into two unequal parts. Book One, which is much the shorter of the two, is an account of Francis's life told in chronological sequence from his birth up to the time of Ugolino's appointment as Cardinal Protector of

⁴³ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, pp. 359-360. Crescentius of Jesi was replaced as Minister General by John of Parma in July 1247, so it is likely that Thomas completed the *Second Life* some time before that date.

⁴⁴ This has been noted by John Moorman in *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis*, p. 121.

⁴⁵ There are numerous instances of this sort in the *Second Life*. For instance, Thomas devoted whole chapters to the subject of Francis's insistence on the observation of absolute poverty: one of the most contentious of the issues dividing the Order. See, Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Chapters XXIV-- XL, pp. 410-423.

the Order, and it was evidently designed by Thomas to act as a supplement to the *First Life*, since it mostly consists of new material, and contains very little that is repeated from the earlier work. However, Thomas dispensed with this chronological framework for most of Book Two, which he organised instead along broadly thematic grounds, illustrating Francis's various qualities (his compassion for the poor, his zeal in prayer, his understanding of Holy Scripture, etc.), with a collection of stories on each subject. But at the end of Book Two, Thomas once again reverted to a chronological ordering of events, with a discussion of Francis's stigmatization, death, burial, and canonization.

In his Prologue to the *Second Life*, Thomas stated that 'certain miracles are inserted, as occasion for inserting them presents itself,'⁴⁶ yet in spite of this claim, the work was judged to be sufficiently lacking in examples of Francis's miraculous power for John of Parma - the Minister General of the Order from 1247 to 1257 - to have felt it necessary to instruct Thomas to write a further work dealing specifically with the miracles that were performed by Francis during his own lifetime, and those that were worked through his intercession after his death.⁴⁷ About a third of the stories included in *The Treatise on the Miracles of the Blessed Francis* can be found in one or other of Celano's two earlier *Lives*, while most of the other material relates to the posthumous miracles of the saint, so overall, the work contains virtually no new biographical information.

⁴⁶ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 360.

⁴⁷ This is recorded in *The Chronicle of the Twenty-four Generals*. See *Chronica XXIV Generalium*, p. 276. From internal evidence, *The Treatise on the Miracles of the Blessed Francis* can be dated to some time between 1250 and 1253. For a text of *The Treatise on the Miracles*, see *Tractatus de Miraculis B. Francisci*, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, fasc. III (Quaracchi, 1928).

Amongst historians of the Franciscan Order, the *First Life* of Thomas of Celano ranks much higher in importance as a source for the life of St. Francis than either of his subsequent works, a precedence that it owes to its early date of composition.⁴⁸ In addition, because both the *Second Life* and the *Treatise on the Miracles* were written to supplement the *First Life*, one of the criticisms that is often levelled against them is that they lack coherence and narrative unity.⁴⁹ Moreover, Thomas took many of the anecdotes that he recounted in the *Second Life* from the biographical material that Leo, Rufino, and Angelo supplied to Crescentius of Jesi, and for this reason there is a tendency amongst modern historians to look upon the *Writings of the Three Companions* - the document to which I shall now turn - as much more authoritative than Thomas's *Second Life*.⁵⁰

The Writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo

Much of our knowledge of the circumstances that gave rise to the composition of the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli* was supplied by the three companions themselves in a letter that they wrote to Crescentius of Jesi from the hermitage of Greccio, on 11 August 1246. The letter, which contains the companions' response to the Minister General's request for new biographical information on St. Francis, briefly, but authoritatively, describes the nature of the material that they had been able to gather. Because the letter

⁴⁸ Placid Hermann reflects this view in his Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, p. 187.

⁴⁹ For instance, see Rosalind Brooke's comments in 'The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 187.

⁵⁰ This is reflected in Rosalind Brooke's remarks in 'The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 187. I will be questioning the validity of this kind of historical judgement in my discussion of the *Major Life* of St. Bonaventure.

has been central to all modern discussions of the work of the three companions, it is worth quoting in full:

To their revered father in Christ, brother Crescentius by God's grace Minister-General, brother Leo, brother Rufino, and brother Angelo, formerly companions, though unworthy, of the most blessed father Francis, offer due reverence and devotion in the Lord. By command of the last general chapter, and of yourself, the brothers are bound to send you, father, such signs and miracles of our most blessed father Francis, as they know or can discover. We who, though unworthy, lived long in his company, thought it right to send to your holiness - with strict attention to the truth - a few accounts of his many acts, which we ourselves have seen, or could discover from other holy friars: and especially from brother Philip, visitor of the poor Clares, brother Illuminato de Acre, brother Masseo de Marignano, brother John, companion of the venerable father, brother Giles, who received much of his information from the holy brother Giles, and brother Bernard of holy memory, St. Francis's first companion. We were not content simply to narrate miracles, which do not create, but only demonstrate holiness; we wished to make known striking examples of his discourse and his holy will and pleasure, to the praise and glory of God and of our holy father Francis, and for the instruction of those who wish to follow in his footsteps. We do not write in the manner of a *Legenda*, since *Legende* have been composed long since about his life and the miracles which God has wrought in him; but we have picked as it were from a field of flowers those we thought the more fair: we have not followed a continuous narrative, but have carefully omitted many events elegantly and accurately told in the *Legende*; and if in your wisdom you think it right, you can have our little collection which we have written, placed in its context in the *Legende*. For we believe that if had they been known to the venerable men who composed the *Legende*, they would not have passed them by, but would have adorned them with their polished style to the best of their ability and left them for posterity to recall. May you fare well for ever, holy father, in the Lord Jesus Christ, in Whom we commend ourselves to your holiness as your devoted sons. Given in the convent at Greccio, 11 August 1246.⁵¹

Perhaps what is most immediately striking about this letter - particularly when compared to the prefatory material found in the *First Life* of Thomas of Celano - is its close attention to detail. Unlike Thomas, who simply made a rather vague reference to

⁵¹ *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 87-89.

consulting 'faithful and trustworthy witnesses',⁵² Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo explicitly named their informants, all of whom it is possible to identify as intimate acquaintances of the saint from other, independent sources. Three of the friars mentioned in the letter - Brother Bernard, Brother Giles, and Brother Philip - were amongst Francis's twelve earliest companions, with Bernard and Giles his first and third followers respectively.⁵³ Brother Illuminato accompanied the saint to Egypt, where Francis met, and tried to convert, the Sultan, Melek-el-Kamil,⁵⁴ while Brother Masseo was a witness to what has probably become the best known episode from the life of St. Francis; his sermon to the birds.⁵⁵

In addition to the testimony of these eye witnesses, Leo, Rufino, and Angelo also indicated that they themselves, having 'lived long in his company', were able to relate 'a few accounts of his many acts'. The little that is known about the lives of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo has had to be pieced together from a variety of different sources, yet among the Franciscan writers of the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, the three companions, and in particular Brother Leo, enjoyed the reputation for being not just Francis's closest and most trusted friends, but also the best witnesses to his life.⁵⁶

⁵² See Thomas of Celano, *First Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 227.

⁵³ The conversions of Brother Bernard and Brother Giles are recorded by Thomas in *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter X, pp. 247-249. Brother Philip's name is recorded in the list of Francis's first twelve companions that is to be found in the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapter 1, pp. 1301-1302.

⁵⁴ Illuminato is named as Francis's companion by Bonaventure in his *Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 9, p. 269.

⁵⁵ Masseo is mentioned in the account of the episode that is recorded in the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapter 16, pp. 1335-1336.

⁵⁶ For a survey of the sources for the lives of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, see Rosalind Brooke's Introduction to the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 7-17. John Moorman has noted that before Leo's death in 1271: 'he came to be loved and venerated as the one who had known Francis best. "*Leo, qui omnia viderat*" he came to be called - Leo, who

It is thought that all three of the companions entered the Order during its very earliest days. Brother Angelo was one of Francis's first twelve followers,⁵⁷ while Leo and Rufino are believed to have become friars minor not long after 1210, when Francis - accompanied by his first eleven disciples - travelled to Rome to have the Rule approved by Pope Innocent III.⁵⁸ But although it would appear that the three friends were members of the Order from virtually the time of its foundation, they do not, as Rosalind Brooke has observed, emerge as especially close companions of Francis until a comparatively late date.⁵⁹ During the last six years of his life, Francis suffered from a succession of serious illnesses, which increasingly forced him to withdraw from public view, and Brooke has suggested that the reason why he surrounded himself with a small group of intimate friends at this time was so that he might constantly have people in attendance who could minister to his various physical, spiritual, and emotional needs.⁶⁰

had seen it all. Those, therefore, who really wanted to know about S. Francis were told to go and find Brother Leo.' See Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, p. 109.

⁵⁷ See, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, Chapter 92, pp. 248-249. According to *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapter 1, pp. 1301-1302, Angelo was also the first knight to join the Order.

⁵⁸ It is almost certain that Leo joined the Order before 1213, because *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* states that Leo was with Francis when he first met Count Orlando of Chiusi. It was at this meeting that the count gave the saint the mountain of La Verna in Tuscany to use as a place of retreat. Orlando's sons later declared that this meeting took place on May 8 1213. See *The Little Flowers*, Part 2, Chapter 1, pp. 1429-1430. See also Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 401.

⁵⁹ See Brooke's comments in her Introduction to the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁰ See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 10. References to the close relationship that developed between Francis and the three companions are particularly prominent in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. Leo (whom Francis referred to as his 'Little Brother Lamb'), and Angelo, are named in *The Little Flowers* as the saint's sole attendants at the time of his forty day vigil in the hermitage at Mount La Verna, the occasion on which he is said to have received the stigmata. See *The Little Flowers*, Part 2, Chapters 2-3, pp. 1436-1455. The five wounds of Christ that were imprinted on Francis's flesh were regarded by the Franciscan Order not simply as the most dramatic proof of his sanctity, but as a miracle totally without precedent in any of the *Lives* of the

However, the companions' introductory letter does not simply give the names of the various friars whom they had consulted while compiling their collection of biographical material. It also describes the kind of information that they collected, and the form in which they sent it to Crescentius. The companions indicate that their work was not organised in the manner of a traditional *Life*, but was rather a collection of anecdotes that were intended to reveal 'striking examples of his [Francis's] discourse and his holy will and pleasure'. In order to avoid repetition, they 'omitted many events elegantly and accurately told in the *Legende*'. Instead, they offered Crescentius new material in the hope that it could be used to supplement the existing *Lives*, believing that had their various anecdotes been known 'to the venerable men who composed the *Legende*, they would ...have adorned them with their polished style ...and left them for posterity to recall.' Thus, it would seem that the three companions promised Crescentius a compendium of material, none of which had been used before, and which did not conform to the conventions of a traditional legend.

As it has come down to us, the companions' introductory letter is attached to an account of Francis's life - known as the *Legend of the Three Companions* - that, in terms

saints, and thus a special sign of the extraordinarily high favour in which he was held by God. Almost inevitably, then, Leo and Angelo's association with an event that was considered to have constituted the spiritual culmination of Francis's time on earth, lent considerable moral authority to their accounts of his life. Significantly, Leo is often presented as a witness to the stigmatization in artistic treatments of the subject. For instance, in a depiction of the scene painted on an altarpiece panel by the Sienese artist, Sassetta, Brother Leo is shown on the right of the picture kneeling in prayer, as the six-winged seraph descends to mark the five wounds of Christ on Francis's flesh. See Figure 2, Sassetta, *The Stigmatisation of St. Francis*, 1444, London: National Gallery of Art. Although Rufino did not attend Francis on Mount La Verna, such was his intimacy with the saint that - along with Leo - he enjoyed the unique privilege of placing his hand inside the wound in Francis's side. See, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 1460. Moreover, Francis is said to have been told by God that Rufino was one of the three holiest people on the earth, and so confident was he in his friend's sanctity that he habitually referred to him as St. Rufino. See, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Part 1, Chapters 29-31, pp. 1375-1378.



FIGURE 2: SASSETTA, THE STIGMATISATION OF SAINT FRANCIS

both of its form and content, contradicts the stated intentions of Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo.⁶¹ The *Legend of the Three Companions* is divided into eighteen chapters, the first sixteen of which contain an account of Francis's life which follows the chronological sequence of events, from his birth and childhood to the approval of the so-called Rule of 1221 by Pope Honorius III. Strangely, the last five years of Francis's life (1222-1226) - years that were of such crucial importance in respect both to his spiritual development, and the expansion and evolution of the Order - are passed over in silence, with the final two chapters describing his death, burial, canonization, and the translation of his body. Although attempts have been made to account for the 'missing' five years, the reason for the *Legend's* silence on the subject remains obscure.⁶² An even more problematic issue, however, concerns the glaring discrepancy between what the companions stated in their letter, and what the *Legend* actually delivers (the *Legend* is a continuous narrative, not a collection of anecdotes, it repeats material from Thomas's *First Life*, and contains very few examples of Francis's direct speech). This

⁶¹ For a discussion of the relationship between the *Legend of the Three Companions* and the companions' introductory letter, see Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 69-72. The *Legend* has been translated into English by Nesta de Robeck. See, *The Legend of the Three Companions*, trans. Nesta de Robeck, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, pp. 853-956.

⁶² For instance, Paul Sabatier has argued that the text of the *Legend* is incomplete. According to Sabatier, Crescentius of Jesi deliberately removed the material relating to the last five years of Francis's life because it did not accord with the image of the saint that he wanted to project. See Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 375. Sabatier went on to argue, pp. 379-385, that these missing writings of the three companions were preserved in the *Speculum Vitae Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius*, an anthology of biographical anecdotes drawn from a wide range of early sources, the oldest surviving copy of which was printed in Venice in 1504. However, as Théophile Deshonnet has pointed out, the discovery in 1922 of Manuscript 1046 of Perugia, in which the authentic writings of the three companions are now thought to be preserved, has discredited Sabatier's theory. See Théophile Deshonnet's Introduction to the *Mirror of Perfection*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and*

inconsistency between what is promised in the letter, and what is actually recorded in the *Legend*, has led most scholars to conclude that the *Legend* is not the document referred to by the companions, but a later work that somehow became attached to their letter, and that was composed by an unknown author who used as his sources the authentic collection of stories compiled by the companions, along with the two *Lives* of Thomas of Celano.⁶³

Although it is now generally accepted that the *Legend of the Three Companions* has an erroneous and misleading title, the authenticity of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo's letter has not been seriously questioned, and many attempts have been made during the last hundred years to isolate and identify their genuine writings.⁶⁴ The point of departure for this search has been the two fragmentary accounts of the deeds and sayings of St. Francis preserved in the work of Ubertino da Cassale and Angelo Clareno, which both authors claimed to have taken from a larger collection of stories about the saint that they attributed to Brother Leo.⁶⁵ The longer of these two extracts, known as the *Intentio Regulae*, was quoted by Ubertino da Cassale in the *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae*, which he completed in 1305, while some fifteen years later Angelo Clareno included the so-called *Verba S. Francisci* in his *Exposito Regulae Fratrum Minorum*.⁶⁶ In a much quoted

Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis, 1105-1113.

⁶³ See Rosalind Brooke, 'The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 188. See also Placid Hermann's comments on the *Legend* in his Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, p. 195.

⁶⁴ For an overview of the current state of research on this subject, see Rosalind Brooke, 'Recent Work on St. Francis of Assisi', *Annalecta Bollandiana* C (1982), pp. 653-676.

⁶⁵ A useful introduction to the life and work of both Angelo Clareno and Ubertino da Cassale can be found in Decima L. Douie's *The Nature and Effect of the Heresy of the Fraticelli* (Manchester, 1932), pp. 49-80, and pp. 120-152.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of Ubertino and Angelo's use of the two extracts from Brother Leo, see Rosalind Brooke's Introduction to the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini, et Angeli*, pp. 51-66,

passage from the *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae*, Ubertino discussed the writings of Brother Leo (he did not refer to either of the other two companions), describing the path by which they had come down to him:

What follows comes from the holy brother Conrad (of Offida), and he heard it from the mouth of the holy brother Leo in person, for he was present and wrote the Rule [Leo was Francis's secretary, and the Rule was dictated to him by the saint]. The story is said to be contained in some *rotuli* [scrolls] written in his own hand, which he entrusted to the convent of Sta Chiara (in Assisi) to be preserved as a memorial for posterity. He wrote many stories in them, such as he had heard from the holy father's mouth or seen him do; in them are contained marvellous accounts of the saint's wonderful works; also prophecies of the Rule's future corruption, and of its restoration; about the mighty events surrounding the institution and renewal of the Rule by God; of St. Francis's intention on the observation of the Rule, according to the intention he said he had received from Christ. These stories were purposely omitted by brother Bonaventure, who did not wish to write them for all to see in his *Life*, especially because some of them openly showed how they were departing from the Rule at that time, and he did not wish to disgrace the brothers prematurely before those outside the Order. Manifestly, it would have been far better to include them, since such a fearful falling off would perhaps not have happened, and the one which follows was especially ignored from that time. With great sorrow I heard that those *rotuli* had been scattered (*distractos*) and possibly lost - especially some of them.⁶⁷

From this passage, it would appear that Ubertino's aim in quoting the *Intentio Regulae* was to draw attention to the gap that had opened up between the lofty ideals expressed by St. Francis in the Rule, and the shameful reality of contemporary practice. It is significant that he referred to Leo as the figure who 'was present and wrote the Rule', thus presenting him as the ultimate authority on the subject of how Francis intended the Rule to be observed, the key issue around which the extremely bitter dispute between

and Théophile Deshonnet's Introduction to the *Legend of Perugia*, trans Paul Oligny, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, pp. 959-971. The *Intentio Regulae* comprises Chapters 66-77 of Brooke's text (pp. 202-223), with Chapters 111-115 (pp. 284-289), constituting the *Verba S. Francisci*.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 54

the so-called 'Spiritual' and 'Conventual' factions revolved.⁶⁸ Ubertino was a vociferous advocate of the Spiritual party's austere and literal interpretation of the Rule, and in a pamphlet he wrote in 1311 in preparation for the Council of Vienne - where Pope Clement V hoped finally to settle the conflict within the Order by inviting representatives from the two factions to debate the issues concerned - he once again had cause to allude to the Writings of Brother Leo:

Of all the things which in this reply I say Francis intended, many are evident enough in the Rule, the Testament, and the *Life*: but all without exception are revealed by his own words which were written with pious care (*solempniter*) by the holy man Leo, his companion - both on the saint's command and out of his own devotion - in the book, which is preserved in the friars' book cupboard (*in armario fratrum*) in Assisi and in his *rotuli*, which I have by me, written in the handwriting of brother Leo, in which the intention of St. Francis as to the poverty of the Rule is perfectly declared against all abuses and transgressions, which these folk strive to defend⁶⁹

Unfortunately, Ubertino did not explain how he managed to gain access to the same *rotuli* of Brother Leo, which, in 1305, he claimed had been scattered and lost. But, although a certain amount of ambiguity continues to surround Ubertino's statements about Leo's authorship of these stories, making it impossible to pronounce with absolute certainty on the reliability of his testimony, a number of factors indicate that he can be accepted as a trustworthy witness. Paul Sabatier has pointed out that during the period running up to the Council of Vienne, none of Ubertino's opponents accused him of misquoting or falsifying his citations from the work of Brother Leo, which would seem

⁶⁸ For an account of the emergence and development of the 'Spiritual' and 'Conventional' parties within the Order, see Douie, *The Nature and Effect of the Heresy of the Fraticelli*, pp. 1-21, and M. D. Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty: The Doctrine of the Absolute Poverty of Christ and the Apostles in the Franciscan Order* (London, 1961), *passim*.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini, et Angeli*, p. 55.

to indicate that his quotations were accurate.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Rosalind Brooke has observed that in spite of his reputation for eccentricity, Ubertino was an exceptionally learned scholar, who invariably took considerable pains to ensure that his citations were correct.⁷¹

Much more compelling, however, is the evidence provided by Manuscript 1046 of the Biblioteca Augusta Comunale Perugia, which almost perfectly reproduces the fragments of Leo's writings preserved by Ubertino da Cassale and Angelo Clareno, amidst a larger collection of stories of identical style, which in terms both of their form and content accord with the intentions expressed by the three companions in their letter to Crescentius.⁷² In addition to this series of biographical anecdotes (which comprise one-hundred and seventeen chapters, including the *Intentio Regulae* and the *Verba S. Francisci*), the manuscript contains a further compilation of stories about St. Francis taken from the *Second Life* of Thomas of Celano, and the *Major Life* of Bonaventure, as well as a copy of the Rule of 1223 (the so-called *Regula Bullata*), and a collection of papal bulls relating to the Order. The manuscript was almost certainly compiled in Assisi c. 1310-1312,⁷³ and the nature of its contents, when taken alongside the time and

⁷⁰ See Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 376.

⁷¹ See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 56.

⁷² For a description of the manuscript, and a discussion of its contents, date, and provenance, as well as its implications for the study of the writings of the three companions, see Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 26-32, and Deshonnetts, *Legend of Perugia*, pp. 962-969.

⁷³ The manuscript contains copies of all of the papal bulls relating to the Franciscan Order from the first - Honorius III's *Solet amuere* (1223) - to Clement V's *Dudum ad Apostolatus* (21 March 1310). The first bull concerning the Order not to be included in the manuscript is Clement V's *Exiui de Paradiso*, issued on 6 May 1312, and its absence has led the majority of commentators to conclude that the manuscript was compiled some time between 1310 and 1312. The evidence of the bulls also points to Assisi as the probable place of composition, as copies of all of the papal bulls relating to the Order are known to have been kept at the Sacro Convento in Assisi. Moreover, if Ubertino da

place of its composition, has led Rosalind Brooke to suggest that in all likelihood 'it was written for the Minister General's brief for the Council of Vienne.'⁷⁴

As indicated above, both the style and content of the stories preserved in the Perugia manuscript are entirely consistent with the schema that was outlined by the companions in their letter to Crescentius, and it is on the basis of this internal evidence, as much as on the testimony of Ubertino da Cassale and Angelo Clareno, that they have come to be accepted as the authentic writings of the three companions.⁷⁵ The anecdotes do not constitute a traditional *Life*, but are rather a collection of biographical vignettes recording Francis's words and actions. It has often been noted that these writings are characterised by the frequent repetition of a number of phrases such as '*nos qui cum ipso fuimus* (we who were with him), and *tunc temporis* (at that time),'⁷⁶ and in so far as the use of these verbal formulae - which are unique to this material - strongly create the impression of a personal memoir, their presence in the text would seem to corroborate still further the attribution of the work to Brothers Leo, Rufino, and Angelo.⁷⁷

Cassale is to be believed, then this was also the place where the writings of Brother Leo was preserved, a fact that accords with the theory that the manuscript was not only compiled in Assisi, but that it also contains a copy of Leo's writings. See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 27-32.

⁷⁴ See Brooke, 'The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 190. Brooke's hypothesis is based on the assumption that - in order to prepare himself properly for an argument with the Spiritual party about the interpretation of the Rule - the Minister General would have wanted to furnish himself with a document containing a copy of the Rule itself (along with all the papal bulls relating to its interpretation), as well as a full copy of the writings of Brother Leo, in which, according to the Spirituals, St. Francis's intentions for the observation of the Rule were outlined. See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 31-32, and p. 52.

⁷⁵ See Rosalind Brooke's comments ('The *Lives* of St. Francis of Assisi', p. 191), on the tradition of subjective or intuitive criticism in Franciscan scholarship.

⁷⁶ For instance, see Moorman's discussion of the stylistic peculiarities of this collection in *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis*, pp. 99-100.

⁷⁷ Although both Ubertino de Cassale and Angelo Clareno ascribed the stories to Leo alone, the repeated use of the first person plural pronoun would seem to indicate that the

It is often claimed that in contrast to the two *Lives* of Thomas of Celano and the *Major Life* of St. Bonaventure, which present highly conventional portraits of Francis, the saint, the collection of anecdotes found in the Perugia manuscript portrays Francis as he must have appeared to his close friends. For instance, Théophile Deshonnets has suggested that the artless naiveté of this collection, eschewing as it does much of the rigid, formulaic quality of conventional medieval saints' *Lives*, would seem to approximate much more closely to modern conceptions of biography than any of the other *Legends* of St. Francis.⁷⁸ It is this more personal, less formal aspect of the work that has elicited most comment, with the historian R. W. Southern going so far as to claim that - along with Joinville's *Life* of St. Louis - the writings of the three companions constitute the most successful example of intimate biography that was produced in the medieval period:

In both these cases, the recollection of unlearned men long after the events they described, achieved a poignancy and intimate truth seldom obtained in this branch of literature. These *Lives* were the work of old men with a unique experience to communicate. They were of a friendship that had been the chief events of their lives, and they wrote as naive men who were not overshadowed by great literary models.⁷⁹

collection was the work of more than one author. Moreover, as Brooke (*Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 56), has observed, the Leonine book had no doubt lost its introductory letter by the beginning of the fourteenth century, the time at which it would have been consulted by both Ubertino and Angelo.

⁷⁸ According to Deshonnets (*Legend of Perugia*, p. 970): 'This portrait has all the qualities of a memoir. Its tone is simple; there is no laboured style nor tendency to moralize that betrays the professional writer who is thinking of his public like Celano or St. Bonaventure. The accuracy of the details, precious for the historian, shows us that the narrator remade in spirit the journeys that he had previously made in the company of Francis, and that he had relived the events in which he had participated. Lastly the everyday blends with the sublime as in every human life, and Francis looms not as a stained-glass saint but as one who is very close to us.'

⁷⁹ R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer: A Study in Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 336.

However, it is necessary to introduce a note of caution here, for it is important to recognise that - although the work exhibits many of the qualities of a memoir - the testimony of the three companions cannot be accepted uncritically: they were not as guileless as they might at first appear. For instance, Théophile Deshonnetts has also observed that it is possible to detect in the material both a hankering for the past, and an acute dissatisfaction with the present, that would lead one to suspect the authors of occasionally using St. Francis as a mouthpiece through which to express their own reactions to events that occurred after his death.⁸⁰ This is particularly evident in their account of how Francis came to compose the Rule of 1223 (the *Regula Bullata*), an incident that is recorded in one of the chapters of the *Verba S. Francisci*, and which was subsequently quoted by Angelo Clareno in his *Exposito Regulae Fratrum Minorum*.⁸¹ The episode describes how Francis, accompanied by Brother Leo and a certain Brother Bonizo of Bologna, withdrew to a mountain in order to compose the Rule. However, a number of unnamed ministers of the Order, who were concerned that the Rule would be too strict, urged Brother Elias to appeal to Francis to reduce its severity. Fearful of Francis's reaction, Elias at first refused, and only yielded to their request on condition that they accompany him in petitioning the saint. When Brother Elias, followed by the ministers, came to Francis, he told the saint of their anxieties:

Then St. Francis turned his face towards heaven and addressed Christ thus: 'Lord, did I not tell you that they would not believe you?' Then the voice of Christ was heard in the air replying: 'Francis, there is nothing of yours in the Rule, but all which is there is mine. I want the

⁸⁰ See Deshonnetts's Introduction to the *Legend of Perugia*, pp. 930-931.

⁸¹ In total, Francis wrote four Rules for the Order of the Friars Minor during the course of his life (he also composed Rules for the Poor Clares and the third Order, both of which are now lost), and as with so many other aspects of early Franciscan history, the story of how and why the different Rules came to be composed is mired in confusion and controversy. The circumstances surrounding the writing of the Rule of 1223 are examined by Rosalind Brooke in her *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 91-95.

Rule to be observed as it is to the letter, to the letter, to the letter, and without gloss, and without gloss, and without gloss.' ...Then St. Francis turned to the brothers and said to them: 'Do you hear? Do you hear? Would you like me to have it said to you again? Then these ministers retired abashed, blaming one another.'⁸²

It is obvious why this story appealed so strongly to Angelo Clareno and the Spirituals, for it would seem to prove that by refusing to observe the Rule to the letter, the Conventuals were not merely acting against the wishes of St. Francis, but were actually defying the will of Christ. Indeed, the story could not be more emphatic in its endorsement of the Spiritual position, as it asserts that the Rule was sacrosanct, being the work not of St. Francis, but of Christ Himself, a fact that the anonymous group of ministers - whose position on the subject anticipated that of the Conventual party - could not dispute, thus rendering them completely unable to respond to Francis's sarcastic question: 'Would you like me to have it said to you again?' But, a story in which Christ miraculously intervenes in order to settle a dispute between St. Francis and a group of his fractious followers can hardly be said to resemble an incident from a modern biography. Rather, because it lends itself so neatly to the Spiritual cause, Rosalind Brooke has voiced the suspicion that the episode was written as propaganda to counter the reforming tendencies of the mid-thirteenth century.⁸³

Although reservations have been expressed about the veracity of a number of the stories that were told by the three companions, their collection is generally thought to have evoked both the eccentric, erratic character of Francis himself, and the spiritual and emotional environment that he and his friends inhabited, more successfully than any of

⁸² *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, Chapter 113, p. 287.

⁸³ See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 63.

the other early *Lives* of the saint.⁸⁴ I will be examining the validity of these claims, and asking whether any of the early *Lives*, including the writings of the three companions, can be said to present a character study of the saint in the sense that the term would now be understood, in my discussion of Bonaventure's *Major Life of St. Francis*, the text to which I now turn.

Bonaventure's *Major Life of St. Francis*

The work of the three companions, with all its intellectual simplicity and apparent disregard for hagiographic convention, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to the theologically dense and allusive *Major Life of St. Francis* by Bonaventure, which was by far the most popular and influential biography of the saint written during the late-medieval period.⁸⁵ But, in spite of the great admiration and respect that was accorded the *Legenda Major* at the time of its composition, it has not fared so well recently, with modern scholars, beginning with Paul Sabatier at the end of the last century, comparing it unfavourably with the two *Lives* of Thomas of Celano and the writings of the three companions, on the grounds that it was little more than a pastiche of these works.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ For instance, John Moorman's comments (*A History of the Franciscan Order*, p. 286), on the writings of the three companions express what has become the scholarly consensus: 'in this collection of material, we are brought into the circle of S. Francis' closest friends, men who had the highest authority for declaring where the real wishes of the saint lay.'

⁸⁵ The *Major Life* got its name to distinguish it from the *Minor Life* (*Legenda Minor*), a much abridged version of the biography, produced by Bonaventure for use in the choir. For an English translation of the *Legenda Minor*, see St. Bonaventure, *Minor Life of St. Francis*, trans. Benen Fahy, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, pp. 789-831.

⁸⁶ Sabatier (*Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 394), damns Bonaventure's *Major Life* with faint praise: 'God forbid that I should say or think that St. Bonaventura was not worthy to write a life of St. Francis, but the circumstances controlled his work, and it is no

Moreover, it has often been argued that in his role as Minister General of the Order, Bonaventure was more interested in reconciling the different factions within the movement, and presenting a positive image of the Order to the outside world, than producing an historically faithful portrait of the saint.⁸⁷

However, it is both inappropriate and anachronistic to judge the *Major Life* by the rigorous standards of accuracy and objectivity that are applied to works of modern historical scholarship. Bonaventure shared none of the aims, methods, or assumptions of twentieth-century biographers, who would no doubt see their primary role as gathering, verifying, and recording the events that comprised their subjects' lives. Rather, believing that Francis was 'the model of penance, the herald of truth, the mirror of holiness and the exemplar of all Gospel perfection',⁸⁸ Bonaventure sought, in the words of Richard Emmerson and Ronald Herzman, 'to proclaim to the largest possible audience the meaning of Francis's life.'⁸⁹ Therefore, instead of disparaging the *Legenda Major* for its

injustice to him to say that it is fortunate for Francis, and especially for us, that we have another biography of the Poverello than that of the Seraphic Doctor.' John Moorman (*A History of the Franciscan Order*, p. 286), shares Sabatier's dismissive view, observing that Bonaventure: 'has very little that is new to offer. At least eighty per cent of his book is little more than a rewriting of passages from the works of Celano.'

⁸⁷ According to Sabatier (*Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 380), Bonaventure 'wrote not only for the purpose of edification, but also as minister general of the Minor Brothers. From this fact his first duty was to keep silent on many facts, and those not the least interesting. What shall we say of a biography where Francis's Will is not even mentioned?' Once again John Moorman shares Sabatier's reservations about the *Legenda Major*, claiming that 'when we compare it with the writings of Celano - or even more with the writings of Brother Leo and his companions - we see how inadequate it is. Bonaventura was working to a definite policy [to justify the Order in the eyes of the world and to draw the conflicting parties among the friars into greater accord], and we must see his work in that light. But if we had no other source than this for our knowledge of S. Francis we should be immeasurably the poorer.' Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, p. 287.

⁸⁸ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 15, p. 321.

⁸⁹ See Richard K. Emmerson and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia, 1992), p. 41.

apparent failure to engage fully with the 'historical' Francis, it is far more fruitful to study the *Life* on its own terms. Such an undertaking, while adding virtually nothing new to our knowledge of the Francis of history, will bring us closer to understanding how his life was interpreted by his most influential biographer - an interpretation that came to be invested with such authority that all subsequent medieval treatments of Francis's life, whether literary or artistic, were to a greater or lesser extent shaped by it.

Despite being regarded as one of the foremost philosophers and theologians of the late Middle Ages, relatively little is known about the life of St. Bonaventure.⁹⁰ He was born in 1217 at Bagnoregio near Orvieto, and the only incident from his childhood of which we have any knowledge was recorded by Bonaventure himself in his Prologue to the *Major Life*, in which he explained that the reason why he was especially devoted to St. Francis was because he fell gravely ill while still a child, and was only saved from death thanks to the intercession of the saint.⁹¹ Bonaventure duly became a friar minor, although the exact date of his reception into the Order is unknown. His intellectual gifts were early recognised, and he was sent to the Franciscan school at the University of Paris to study under Alexander of Hales. In 1248 he received his licence to teach, and in 1253 he was appointed Master of the Franciscan school in Paris. In 1257, when the then

⁹⁰ An account of Bonaventure's life and work can be found in E. Gilson's, *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*, trans. I. Trethowan (London, 1938). For an analysis of Bonaventure's role as Minister General of the Order, see Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 270-279, and Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 140-154. In addition, John Fleming offers a very illuminating discussion of Bonaventure's mystical writings, and their influence on later devotional and mystical works. See Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, pp. 190-234.

⁹¹ According to Bonaventure (*The Major Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 182): 'when I was a young boy, as I still vividly remember, I was snatched from the jaws of death by his invocation and merits. So if I remained silent and did not sing his praises, I fear that I would be rightly accused of the crime of ingratitude. I recognise that God saved my life through him, and I realize that I have experienced his power in my very person.'

Minister General, John of Parma, was deposed for his adherence to the heretical doctrines of Joachim of Fiore, Bonaventure was elected Minister General of the Order.⁹²

As we have seen, in the thirty years between Francis's death and Bonaventure's election as Minister General, a number of different *Lives* of the saint, each with its own point of emphasis or interpretation, entered into circulation. In addition to the works of Thomas of Celano, the writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, and the so-called *Legend of the Three Companions*, the early years of the Order also saw the production of the highly derivative biographies of Francis by Julian of Speyer and Henry of Avranches.⁹³ However, each of the early *Lives*, even the officially approved ones of Thomas of Celano, tended to exacerbate the conflict within the Order, for they all presented an interpretation of the saint that was favourable to one or other of its internal factions, with none of the *Legends* managing to appeal to the movement as a whole. It is now generally believed that it was as a response to the proliferation of these partial and inadequate accounts of Francis's life, and in an attempt to present a portrait of the saint which could command widespread, popular approval, that Bonaventure was commissioned to write a new biography by the Chapter General of the Order, when it met at Narbonne in 1260.⁹⁴

⁹² For a discussion of the events leading to John of Parma's removal from office, and his replacement by Bonaventure, see Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government*, pp. 267-271, Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty*, pp. 103-125, and Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, pp. 145-146.

⁹³ Julian of Speyer's *Vita Sancti Francisci*, and Henry of Avranches's, metrical life, the *Legenda Versificata*, were both written some time between 1231 and 1235. Both texts have been edited by the Quaracchi Fathers in *Annalecta Franciscana* Vol X, fasc 4 (1936).

⁹⁴ Bonaventure referred to this commission in his Prologue: 'I feel that I am unworthy and unequal to the task of writing the life of a man so venerable and worthy of imitation. I would never have attempted it if the fervent desire of the friars had not aroused me, the unanimous urging of the General Chapter had not induced me and the devotion which I am obliged to have toward our holy father had not compelled me.' St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 182. The Chapter General of the Friars Minor,

Bonaventure must have completed his *Life of St. Francis* some time during the next three years, for his biography was presented to, and approved by, the next Chapter General, which was held at Pisa in 1263.⁹⁵ The *Legend* came up for discussion once again at the Chapter General of Paris, in 1266, where it was proclaimed the official *Life* of the saint, and a resolution was passed calling for the destruction of copies of all earlier biographies.⁹⁶

The consequences of this decree, as well as the motivation underlying it, have aroused much controversy and debate in recent years amongst historians of the Franciscan movement.⁹⁷ It is difficult to gauge just how successful the officials of the Order were in their efforts to eradicate the various non-canonical biographies, but it is interesting to note that of the twenty surviving manuscripts of Thomas of Celano's *First Life* (of which five are complete), a total of eleven came from Cistercian or Benedictine monasteries (where the decrees of the Chapter General had no jurisdiction), with only one coming from a Franciscan source.⁹⁸ However, whatever its impact on the fate of the unofficial biographies of the saint, the decree of 1266 ensured that Bonaventure's

which met every three years, and whose membership comprised the most senior officials of the Order, functioned as the parliament of the Franciscan movement.

⁹⁵ See Ewert Cousins's Introduction to *The Major Life of St. Francis*, p. 40.

⁹⁶ 'The General Chapter likewise orders under obedience that all the Legends of the Blessed Francis which have been made should be deleted, and where these may be found outside the Order, the friars should strive to remove them, since the Legend made by the minister general has been compiled as he received it from the mouth of those who were always with the blessed Francis and had certain knowledge of everything, and proven facts have been diligently placed in it.' Quoted in Cousins, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, p. 40.

⁹⁷ For instance, see Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 395-396, and Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*, p. 287.

⁹⁸ See Placid Hermann's remarks on the decree in his Introduction to Thomas of Celano's, *Lives of St. Francis*, p.211. Hermann goes on to point out that the *Second Life* and the *Treatise on the Miracles* fared even less well than the *First Life*, with only two manuscripts of the former, and one of the latter, surviving.

biography came to enjoy what John Fleming has referred to as 'an authoritative monopoly' in the late Middle Ages.⁹⁹ Elsewhere, Fleming has observed how, as a result of its official status, the *Major Life* was guaranteed an extremely wide circulation:

[The *Legenda Major*] must surely be one of the most widely disseminated texts of the later Middle Ages. The General Chapter held in Paris in 1266, which confirmed the work, decreed as well that every convent in the Order should be supplied with a copy of it. In Dante's time there were well over a thousand Franciscan houses in Europe, and in Chaucer's there were nearly two thousand, counting those of the Second Order. It was thus the required reading for a spiritual army, numbering at the very least in the hundreds of thousands, which included amongst its ranks some of the most important cultural arbiters of a century of European history. ...Several Franciscan texts regarded as of considerable importance have survived in only a few copies. One or two - such as the Perugia *Legenda* and Bonaventure's sermon on the *Rule* - exist in a single medieval manuscript. There are over four hundred surviving manuscripts of the *Legenda Major*.¹⁰⁰

Given that of all the early biographies of St. Francis, Bonaventure's *Major Life* was by far the most widely read, it is surprising that its importance has not been more fully appreciated. On the grounds of its popularity alone, the *Major Life of St. Francis* is a text that demands closer study and attention.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ See Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ John Fleming's *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, and *From Bonaventure to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis*, have gone some way to remedying this critical neglect. In the former, p. 44, Fleming claims that: 'It can credibly be argued that St. Bonaventure is the greatest Franciscan writer that ever lived', while the latter draws heavily on the theology of the *Legenda Major* as a way of illuminating the subtle iconography of Giovanni Bellini's painting, *San Francesco nel deserto*. More recently, Richard Emmerson and Ronald Herzman have devoted a chapter to Bonaventure's *Major Life of St. Francis* in their 1992 study: *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*. As the title of their work suggests, Emmerson and Herzman draw attention to the strongly apocalyptic nature of Bonaventure's interpretation of Francis's life (a subject that I shall be examining below), yet they also argue that Bonaventure's writings in general, and the *Major Life of St. Francis* in particular, should be placed at the centre not just of the Franciscan literary tradition, but of the wider culture of the high Middle Ages. See Emmerson and Herzman, *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*, pp. 37-75.

As mentioned above, in composing the *Major Life of St. Francis*, Bonaventure drew very heavily on the two biographies of Thomas of Celano, yet in the process of editing and re-writing the material that he borrowed, he produced an account of Francis's life, which - in terms of the subtlety and complexity of its theological ideas - is recognisably distinct from the work of any of his predecessors. For Bonaventure, the bare facts of Francis's life were charged with spiritual significance, and the key to unlocking the meaning of those facts was the Bible. Through a series of parallels and correspondences, Francis was typologically linked to various figures from both the Old and New Testaments, and by reflecting upon the significance of these connections, Bonaventure was able to claim that the saint had been especially appointed by God to renew the Church before the coming of the Apocalypse.¹⁰² However, rather than attempt a thorough exposition of the theology of the *Legenda Major*, a task which lies well beyond the scope of this appendix, I will confine myself to an examination of Bonaventure's treatment of the stigmatization of St. Francis, the miraculous event to which he repeatedly returned in the pages of his biography, and on which his interpretation of Francis's pivotal role within the broader history of the Church was ultimately based.

On the most basic level, the importance that Bonaventure attributed to the stigmatization can be discerned from the space that he devoted to it. In addition to the

¹⁰² This is one of the central themes both of John Fleming's *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, and Richard Emmerson and Ronald Herzman's reading of the *Legenda Major* in *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*. According to Fleming, implicit in Bonaventure's biography is the belief 'that Francis of Assisi is a saint different rather in kind than in degree from all other saints. Francis' divine appointment plays a crucial role in the history of Salvation at a crucial moment in God's calendar, near the end of man's Time. His is the special office of apocalyptic prophecy, of the final call to penance.' See Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, pp. 160-161. See also Emerson and Herzman, *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*, pp. 37-75.

many allusions to the stigmata that are scattered throughout the *Legenda Major*, Bonaventure dedicated an entire chapter of the work (there are fifteen in total), to a discussion of the miracle itself, and a consideration of its many different meanings. Moreover, for someone who exhibited such little interest in chronology that he failed to record either the date or year of Francis's birth,¹⁰³ the fact that Bonaventure chose to identify both when and where the stigmatization took place reflects the great significance that he attached to it. According to Bonaventure's account of the stigmatization, then, two years before Francis's death (the year 1224), and after a period of intense activity, the saint was led by divine providence to a mountain called La Verna, where he began a forty day fast that was to end on the feast of St. Michael the Archangel. When he arrived on the mountainside, Francis realised through divine inspiration 'that just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion.'¹⁰⁴ Then, one morning during the course of the retreat, on or around the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross [14 September]:

he saw a Seraph with six fiery and shining wings descend from the height of heaven. And when in swift flight the Seraph had reached a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the figure of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross. Two of the wings were lifted above his head, two were extended for flight and two covered his whole body. When Francis saw this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that he was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword of compassionate sorrow (Luke: 2, 35).

¹⁰³ In the Prologue, Bonaventure himself observed that: 'To avoid confusion I did not always weave the story together in chronological order. Rather, I strove to maintain a more thematic order, relating to the same theme events that happened at different times, and to different themes events that happened at the same time, as seemed appropriate.' St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 183.

¹⁰⁴ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, p. 304.

He wondered exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, realizing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the Seraph's spiritual nature. Eventually he understood by a revelation from the Lord that divine providence had shown him this vision so that, as Christ's lover, he might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the fire of his love consuming his soul.

As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body markings that were no less marvelous. Immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and feet were round and black; their points were oblong and bent as if driven back with a hammer, and they emerged from the flesh and stuck out beyond it. Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and underwear.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps what is most immediately striking about Bonaventure's treatment of this most sublimely transcendent of Franciscan miracles is that his account is so firmly rooted in the physical and the particular. According to Bonaventure, in order to resemble Christ perfectly, and so come to share in his immortal, seraphic nature, Francis first had to experience the same corporeal sufferings that Christ had taken upon himself during his passion. As Thomas J. Heffernan has observed, the medieval saint existed simultaneously in two worlds - the known and the unknown, the human and the divine - and it would seem that for Bonaventure, the greater the physical pain that Francis endured, the more he was able to participate in the divinity of Christ.¹⁰⁶ Paradoxically, then, Francis's moment of supreme transcendence is characterised by its intense physicality. Hence, Bonaventure never lost sight of the physical reality of the episode,

¹⁰⁵ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, pp. 305-306.

¹⁰⁶ See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988), p. 38.

recording not only the time and place at which the miracle occurred, but also the actual appearance of the stigmata themselves, and the fact that Francis's clothes were often stained by the blood that flowed from the wound in his side.

Although Bonaventure considered the stigmatization to be a miracle totally without precedent, his treatment of it, and in particular the balance that he maintained between its spiritual and physical elements, is typical of the representation of the supernatural that is to be found not just in the *Major Life of St. Francis*, but throughout the corpus of Franciscan biography. It would appear that for Bonaventure, there was no disjunction between the historical events of Francis's life, and the deeper religious meanings that those events conveyed. As John Fleming has noted, the physical reality of Francis's earthly existence was itself thought to be symbolic, with real things becoming 'the occasion of symbolic truth.'¹⁰⁷ Thus, Bonaventure placed history entirely at the service of theology. Even the date on which the stigmatization was supposed to have occurred - the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross - was, for Bonaventure, replete with symbolic significance, announcing as it does the central theme with which the miracle was concerned; Francis's intense identification with, and devotion to, the person of the crucified Christ.

More than any of his other miracles, the stigmatization was viewed as a sign of Francis's conformity to the life of Christ, and the strong affinity between the two figures is a constant motif running through the work not just of Bonaventure, but of the wider canon of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Franciscan literature.¹⁰⁸ Yet, in addition to

¹⁰⁷ See Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of the topos of Francis's physical and spiritual resemblance to Christ, see Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, pp. 66-72.

confirming Francis's status as an *alter Christus*, a second, or other Christ, the stigmata also connected Francis typologically to Moses. For, like Moses, Francis spent forty days on a mountainside where he had a vision of God, and from where he returned bearing 'an image of the crucified which was depicted not on tablets of stone or panels of wood by the hands of a craftsman, but engraved in the members of his body by the finger of the living God,'¹⁰⁹ a clear allusion to the biblical account of Moses's descent from Mount Sinai with the tables of the Law (Exodus 31: 18). Elsewhere, Bonaventure made this identification with Moses even more explicit by relating a miracle in which - in order to quench the thirst of a poor labourer - Francis caused water to flow from a rock,¹¹⁰ an obvious echo of the story told in Exodus 17: 1-6, where Moses provided the Israelites with water by striking the rock of Horeb with his staff.¹¹¹ However, it is important to note that through this typological link with Moses, Bonaventure was able to associate St. Francis all the more closely to Christ, since according to traditional Christian exegesis, the covenant that God renewed with Moses on Mount Sinai was fulfilled in the person of Jesus, while St. Paul himself explicitly identified the rock of

¹⁰⁹ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, p.307.

¹¹⁰ See St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 7, p. 248.

¹¹¹ Likewise, as Rosalind Brooke has suggested, the incident related by the three companions in which St. Francis composed the Rule on a mountainside, and then called upon Christ to confound the dissenting ministers, would appear to be an allusion to the biblical story of God's recitation of the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). See Brooke, *Scripta Leonis*, p. 63. No doubt anxious to assert the authority of the Rule, the three companions sought to emphasise Francis's role as lawgiver, thereby drawing attention to the analogies between Moses and Francis, the ten commandments and the Franciscan Rule, and Mount Sinai and the unnamed Italian mountain to which Francis had retreated. It is therefore interesting to note that even a supposedly unsophisticated 'memoir' like the work of the three companions recognised in Francis's life echoes from the Bible, suggesting that Leo, Rufino, and Angelo saw the saint not simply as an 'historical' figure in the sense that the term would now be understood, but as someone with a complex series of typological relationships with sacred history.

Horeb as Christ (1 Corinthians 10: 4).¹¹² Thus, it was possible for Bonaventure to deepen his identification of Francis with Christ, by drawing upon their shared typological connection to Moses.¹¹³

After relating a series of supernatural occurrences and eye-witness accounts that testified to the truth of the stigmata, Bonaventure concluded his chapter on the stigmatization by offering yet another interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon. Addressing Francis directly, Bonaventure wrote:

Now, finally toward the end of your life you were shown at the same time the sublime vision of the Seraph and the humble figure of the Crucified, inwardly inflaming you and outwardly marking you as the second Angel ascending from the rising of the sun and bearing upon you the sign of the living God. (Apocalypse 7: 2)¹¹⁴

The connection that Bonaventure made, here, between St. Francis and ‘the second Angel ascending from the rising of the sun’ (the Angel of the Sixth Seal from the Book of Revelation), is not a casual one. Joseph Ratzinger has pointed out that in the *Collations on the Six Days* (*Collationes in Hexaemeron*), Bonaventure’s major contribution to the theology of history, Francis is compared to the Angel of the Sixth Seal on five separate occasions,¹¹⁵ while he is further identified with the Angel by Bonaventure in his Prologue to the *Major Life*:

And so not without reason is he considered to be symbolized by the image of the Angel who ascends from the sunrise bearing the seal of the living God, in the true prophecy of that other friend of the Bridegroom, John the Apostle and Evangelist. For ‘when the sixth seal was opened,’ John says in the Apocalypse, ‘I saw another Angel

¹¹² John Fleming discusses the various correspondences between Francis and Moses at considerable length. See Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, pp. 47-74.

¹¹³ This point has been forcefully made by Emmerson and Herzman in *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*, p. 50.

¹¹⁴ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 13, p. 313-314.

¹¹⁵ See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, Trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago, 1971), pp. 33-35.

ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God.' (Apocalypse 7: 2)¹¹⁶

The text from the Book of Revelation to which Bonaventure refers, reads as follows:

Then I saw another angel ascend from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.' (Apocalypse 7: 2-3)

It would appear that for Bonaventure, as well as symbolising Francis's conformity to the life of Christ, and further reinforcing his typological association with Moses, the stigmata were a sign of the apocalyptic mission to which he had been divinely called. As Richard Emmerson and Ronald Herzman have pointed out, this identification with the Angel of the Sixth Seal was central to Bonaventure's conception of Francis, for it enabled him to place both the saint, and the Order that he had founded, within an apocalyptic context.¹¹⁷ According to Bonaventure's eschatological reading of the stigmata, then, having miraculously received the seal of the living God from the six-winged Seraph on Mount La Verna, it was Francis's divinely appointed role - a role adumbrated by St. John in the Book of Revelation - to save others from tribulation by symbolically marking their foreheads with the same seal of God.

The scriptural resonances of Francis's identification with the Angel of the Sixth Seal, along with the redemptive nature of his apocalyptic mission, were further expounded by Bonaventure in his Prologue to the *Major Life*, with an allusion to the Book of Ezechiel, one of the key apocalyptic texts of the Old Testament:

We can come to the conclusion, without any doubt, that this messenger of God [the Angel of the Sixth Seal] - so worthy to be loved by Christ, imitated by us and admired by the world - was God's

¹¹⁶ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, p. 181.

¹¹⁷ See Emmerson and Herzman, *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*, p.45.

servant Francis, if we consider the height of his extraordinary sanctity. For even while he lived among men, he imitated angelic purity so that he was held up as an example for those who would be perfect followers of Christ. We are led to hold this firmly and devoutly because of his ministry to call men to weep and mourn, to shave their heads, and to put on sackcloth (Isaiah 22: 12), and to mark with a *Tau* the foreheads of men who mourn and grieve (Ezechiel 9: 4), signing them with the cross of penance and clothing them with his habit, which is in the form of a cross.¹¹⁸

In this passage, Bonaventure gathered together the evidence proving that Francis was indeed the Angel of the Apocalypse. Along with his sanctity and angelic purity, reference is made to his mission to call sinners to repentance, and in particular the role that he performed of marking 'with a *Tau* the foreheads of men who mourn and grieve.' John Fleming has observed that although the *tau* symbol (written as a Roman majuscule T), was the Scriptural emblem with which Francis identified most deeply, the word *tau* appears only once in the *Vulgate* (in the ninth chapter of Ezechiel), and not at all in either the *Septuagint*, or any of the other Greek or Latin translation of the Bible.¹¹⁹ The ninth chapter of the Book of Ezechiel, alluded to by Bonaventure, describes an apocalyptic vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, in which God visits tribulation upon the people of the city for their sinfulness and corruption. Six men, with weapons in their hands, are assembled by God to destroy everyone in their wake. But in their midst there is a seventh man, clothed in linen, and with a writing case at his side:

And the Lord said to him [the man clothed in linen], Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon

¹¹⁸ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Prologue, pp. 181-182.

¹¹⁹ According to Fleming (*From Bonaventure to Bellini*, p. 115): 'The fact that the word *tau* makes its sole appearance in Ezechiel 9 is something of a philological accident. The word *tau*, the sign T, actually denoted 'sign' or 'mark', as in the phrase 'X marks the spot' in modern English. The Hebrew word that became *signum thau* in the Vulgate text of Ezechiel 9, is merely 'sign' or 'mark' in the Septuagint and other translations, as it indeed is elsewhere in the Vulgate itself. Hence, the saving angel who makes a mark on the forehead of the servants of God is perforce a *tau*-writer, for to write a mark is to write a *tau*.'

the foreheads [*Vulgate*: “*et signa Thau super frontes.*”] of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark. (Ezekiel 9: 4-6.)

Like the Angel of the Sixth Seal, the mission of the man in linen was to mark with a sign the foreheads of all those who were to be saved from apocalyptic destruction. Joseph Ratzinger has drawn attention to the fact that the affinity between these Old and New Testament figures was recognised from late-antiquity onwards,¹²⁰ while according to John Fleming: ‘The Angel of the Sixth Seal is an obvious New Testament reflex of the man in linen, and Bonaventure, who was sure that Francis was the former, naturally therefore identified him as well with the latter.’¹²¹ Thus, for Bonaventure, the role that Francis had been divinely appointed to fulfil - that of penitential preparation for the coming of the Apocalypse - was prefigured in the pages of both the Old and New Testaments.

Although my discussion of Bonaventure’s treatment of the stigmatization has been far from comprehensive, I have been able to demonstrate something of the richness and complexity of his conception of sacred history, and his understanding of St. Francis’s place within it. According to Bonaventure, the bare facts that comprised Francis’s biography had a multiplicity of symbolic meanings, so that in order to arrive at a more complete or holistic appreciation of the significance of his life, it was first necessary to unravel the series of correspondences that connected the real, historical

¹²⁰ Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, p. 35.

¹²¹ Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, p. 115.

events of his existence, to the different biblical episodes in which they had been miraculously foreshadowed.

It should also be noted that while the *Legenda Major* is by far the most elaborate and theologically sophisticated *Life* of Francis, all of the saint's early biographers - even the three companions, as they themselves revealed in their scripturally allusive account of the composition of the Rule - conceived of their subject in a broadly similar way, making sense of his life by relating what they considered to be the factual, biographical events of his material existence, to biblical and other hagiographical narratives.¹²² Of course, to a modern sensibility, this dense theological apparatus can make the resulting portraits appear both remote and contrived. Furthermore, for twentieth-century readers more used to a strict division between the categories of literature and history, fiction and non-fiction, the early *Lives* of St. Francis seem to resist simple generic classification. Similarly, because the St. Francis who emerges from these works - like the Old and New Testament figures with whom he is identified - is composed of both historical and metaphysical elements, it is impossible to categorise him as either a literary, or an historical character.

Where, then, does this leave the historian's search for the authentic Francis of history? First, it is important to recognise that while the various medieval biographies of the saint do not constitute works of history in the sense that the term would now be

¹²² John Fleming's comments on the sheer allusiveness of the opening of Thomas of Celano's *First Life of St. Francis* is worth quoting here: 'The first sentence of the first chapter [of Thomas's *First Life*] is a manipulation of the first sentence of the book of Job, and in the first two paragraphs of the work there are at least twenty scriptural borrowings, two overt allusions to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, and a formal citation of the *Moral Epistles* of Seneca. The reader is further isolated from any immediate and vital sense of Francis' presence by an elevated and artificial rhetorical style.' Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, p. 38.

understood, they nevertheless contain important historical information about the life of their subject. By gathering material scattered throughout the corpus of Franciscan biography, it has been possible for modern biographers of Francis to reconstruct with considerable chronological detail many of the events of which his life was composed. Furthermore, simply as a result of the sheer weight of anecdotal material that is to be found in the various *Lives*, something of the character of the saint is inevitably conveyed. For instance, two episodes related by Thomas of Celano, the ostensible purpose of which was to exemplify Francis's spiritual fervour, also present a vivid picture of his eccentric personality. In the *Second Life of St. Francis*, Thomas described how the saint would often sing in French when filled with spiritual joy, and would pretend to accompany himself on the violin by drawing a stick back and forth across his outstretched arm.¹²³ The idiosyncratic manner in which the saint displayed his spiritual enthusiasm is also the subject of a highly revealing story told by Thomas in his *First Life*. On one occasion when Francis happened to be in Rome, he revealed to Cardinal Ugolino that he wanted to preach a sermon before Pope Honorius and the college of cardinals:

When the Lord Hugo [Ugolino] the glorious bishop of Ostia, who venerated the holy man of God with a special affection, understood this, he was filled with both fear and joy, admiring the fervor of the holy man but conscious of his simple purity. But confident of the mercy of the Almighty ...the bishop brought Francis before the lord pope and the reverend cardinals, and standing before such great princes, after receiving their permission and blessing, he began to speak fearlessly. Indeed, he spoke with such great fervor of spirit, that not being able to contain himself for joy ...he moved his feet as though he were dancing, not indeed lustfully, but as one burning with fire of divine love, not provoking laughter, but drawing back tears of grief. For many of them were pierced to the heart in admiration of divine grace and of such great constancy in man. But the venerable lord bishop of Ostia was kept in suspense by fear and he prayed with all his

¹²³ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter XC, p. 467.

strength to the Lord that the simplicity of the blessed man would not be despised, since the glory of the saint would reflect upon himself as would his disgrace, in as much as he had been placed over Francis's family as a father.¹²⁴

Almost inadvertently, this anecdote communicates much more than it actually says, for as well as offering a glimpse of the personalities of the two protagonists, it also hints at a source of tension in their relationship. As with the previous incident, the highly distinctive way in which Francis is shown giving physical expression to his feelings of intense joy, suggests that the story is authentic, yet although Thomas is unstinting in his praise of the saint's spiritual zeal, it is possible to discern, lurking in the background, a slight note of disquiet. For, by acknowledging Ugolino's anxieties, Thomas alerts his readers to the fact that while Francis won the admiration and respect of the Pope and cardinals, Ugolino had reason to fear that his friend's display of childlike simplicity and religious fervour might have aroused their contempt and derision. This anecdote therefore raises the possibility that for Ugolino, far from being an unambiguous cause of delight and celebration, Francis's erratic, spontaneous, and unpredictable behaviour, was at times a source of concern and embarrassment.

Finally, there is one further way in which the early *Lives* of St. Francis can be said to be historic. One of the recurrent criticisms levelled against Bonaventure is that in composing his portrait of the saint, he imposed upon the simple, unpretentious Francis of history, his own highly elaborate theological design. However, John Fleming has argued that the 'theologised' Francis of the *Legenda Major*, linked as he is to figures from the Old and New Testaments by a series of typological correspondences, was not an invention of Bonaventure, but was in actual fact broadly in tune with how the

¹²⁴ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St. Francis*, Book 1, Chapter XXVII, pp. 289-290.

historical Francis conceived of himself.¹²⁵ One of the pieces of evidence that Fleming produced to justify this claim was that Francis personally identified with, and had an intense veneration for, the *tau* symbol, which might indicate that - fully conscious of its scriptural associations - he believed that he had actually been chosen by God to fulfil the apocalyptic mission of Ezechiel's man in linen. Both Bonaventure and Thomas of Celano pointed out that Francis was so devoted to the *tau* that he used the symbol as a personal mark with which to sign his letters. According to Bonaventure:

The holy man venerated this symbol with great affection, often spoke highly of it and signed it with his own hands at the end of the letters he sent, as if his whole desire were to mark with a *Tau* the foreheads of men who have been truly converted to Jesus Christ and who mourn and grieve, according to the text of the Prophet (Ezechiel 9: 4).¹²⁶

Clearly, the inference that was drawn by Bonaventure was that Francis knowingly appropriated the *tau* symbol as a way of aligning himself with the man in linen, and this interpretation would seem to be confirmed by one of the two surviving documents bearing the authentic autograph of the saint himself - the *Praises of God*, written for Brother Leo.

Preserved in a reliquary in the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi, there is a piece of parchment secured between two planes of glass, so that both sides of the sheet can be

¹²⁵ 'It is true that for, say, Bonaventure Francis was a second Moses and that for the whole tradition summarized by Barthelmy of Pisa he was a second Christ; but there is also a profound sense in which, quite clearly, Francis had seen himself in such terms too. That is, early Franciscan writers do not impose a biblicism on their materials, they find it waiting to be drawn out.' Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, p. 29.

¹²⁶ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 4, p. 214. In the *Treatise on the Miracles*, Celano mentioned that Francis not only signed his letters with the *tau*, but also painted it on the walls of all the cells. See Thomas of Celano, *Tractatus de Miraculis*, II, 3, p. 651.

read.¹²⁷ On one side of the sheet are written the words of a prayer composed by Francis, and known as the *Praises of God*, while on the other side there is a blessing that the saint wrote for Brother Leo, and that he signed with a *tau*. Beneath the *tau*, at the bottom of the page, Brother Leo added the following explanatory note:

Two years before his death St. Francis kept Lent in the house on La Verna in honour of the blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of God, and of the archangel Michael, from the feast of the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary until the feast of St. Michael in September. And the hand of God was upon him. After the vision and speech of the seraphim and the impression of Christ's stigmata on his body he composed these praises that are written on the other side of the leaf, and wrote them with his own hand, giving thanks to God for the benefit conferred on him. St. Francis wrote this blessing for me, brother Leo. Likewise he made this sign of the cross (*fecit istud signum thau*) with his own hand.¹²⁸

Not only does the blessing for Brother Leo corroborate the testimony of St. Bonaventure and Thomas of Celano that Francis did indeed use the *tau* as his personal autograph, but the scriptural resonance of the blessing itself, repeating almost verbatim the verbal formula that was employed by Aaron to bless the children of Israel (Numbers 6: 24-26), further demonstrates just how attuned Francis's imagination was to typological modes of thought.¹²⁹ John Fleming has observed that Aaron came to be associated during the

¹²⁷ For a description of the piece of parchment bearing the *Praises of God*, see Brooke's Introduction to the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, pp. 7-8, and Benen Fahy's Introduction to his translation of *The Writings of St. Francis*, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, pp. 123-124. Brooke has included a photograph of the parchment as a frontispiece to the *Scripta Leonis*. According to both Brooke and Fahy, the authenticity of the document has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Brooke, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli*, p. 8. Both Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure describe the scene on Mount La Verna, although neither author mentions Leo by name. See Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, Book 2, Chapter XX, p. 406, and St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, Chapter 11, pp. 286-287.

¹²⁹ The blessing reads: 'God bless you and keep you. May God smile on you and be merciful to you; May God turn his regard towards you and give you peace. May God

medieval period with both the figure of the man in linen, and the symbol of the *tau*, on account of the striking affinities between Ezechiel's vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the story of the Passover related in Exodus 12, where it is described how God passed through the kingdom of Egypt destroying the first-born of both man and beast, sparing only those who had marked their doorposts with the blood of a slaughtered lamb. As Fleming has noted, although the text of Exodus 12:7 would seem to imply that the blood of the lamb was to be sprinkled or daubed on the doorposts of each house by its occupants, a tradition developed in the literature and art of the later Middle Ages of depicting this mark as a *tau*, and the writer of the *tau* as Aaron.¹³⁰

Although the blessing for Brother Leo does not constitute definitive proof that Francis thought of himself, and understood his role, in exactly the same terms as Bonaventure, it does strongly suggest that his imagination was charged with apocalyptic ideas, and that he identified deeply with those biblical figures who had been appointed to save God's chosen people from cataclysmic destruction. If this interpretation is to be accepted, then it should also be recognised that Bonaventure's theologically ornate and sophisticated biography of St. Francis, so frequently criticised for its artificiality, was in actual fact true to the spirit of its subject, conveying through its complex and elaborate design, something of the essential character of the saint.

The Little Flowers of St. Francis

bless you, Brother Leo.' *The Writings of St. Francis*, p. 126. Significantly, Brother Elias, in his official letter announcing Francis's death, compared the saint to Aaron: 'It is pious to weep over Francis, for, he who went about as did Aaron, who presented to us both new and old gifts out of the treasury, who consoled us in every trial - he has been taken from our midst, and we are orphans without a father. See 'The Letter of Brother Elias', p. 1960.

¹³⁰ See Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini*, pp. 117-119.

There is one final narrative source for the *Life* of St. Francis that remains to be considered; Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria's *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Eius* (*The Acts of Blessed Francis and His Companions*), a text that is much better known - from the title of its anonymous late-fourteenth-century Italian translation - as the *Fioretti di San Francesco: The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.

Amongst modern historians of St. Francis and the Franciscan Order, the *Little Flowers* enjoys a very different status from that of the other sources that I have so far examined. It owes its unique position in the canon of Franciscan biography both to its late date of composition (the *Actus* is believed to have been written some time around 1327 - over one-hundred years after Francis's death), and to the fact that Ugolino based his account on an oral, rather than a written, tradition. However, although the *Actus* is now generally regarded as an extremely unreliable historical account (for instance, Paul Sabatier claimed that: 'With the *Fioretti* we enter definitively the domain of legend'),¹³¹ it has nonetheless come to be valued as a repository of Franciscan lore; a text that not only preserves a number of episodes from Francis's life that are found in none of the other sources (such as the story of his encounter with the wolf of Gubbio), but that also describes with great authenticity the milieu within which the saint and his early followers led their lives. To quote Sabatier once again: 'Here are words that were never uttered, acts that never took place, but the soul and the heart of the early Franciscans were surely what they are depicted here.'¹³²

Very little is known about Ugolino beyond what he revealed about himself in the pages of his book. On one of the two occasions on which he actually named himself in

¹³¹ See Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 415.

¹³² Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 417.

the author of the work, he claimed to have been personally acquainted with a certain Brother John of Penna ('And Brother John himself told me, Brother Ugolino, all these things'),¹³³ a figure who is known to have died in 1270, suggesting that Ugolino must have become a member of the Order some time before that date. However, a document that has recently been uncovered shows that Ugolino was still alive in 1342, some seventy-two years after John's death, which would seem to indicate that he could not have been born much earlier than 1250.¹³⁴

The *Actus* is divided into two sections. The first part is a collection of stories about Francis and his closest companions that were passed down to Ugolino by friars who - after the saint's death - had themselves become the friends of his erstwhile companions. For instance, in his account of Francis's sermon to the birds, Ugolino identified his source for the incident as a certain Brother James of Massa, a figure who 'said he had all the above facts from Brother Masseo, who was one of those who were the companions of the holy Father at that time.'¹³⁵ Thus, the *Actus* claims to enter the world of Francis's inner circle, and in so doing it gives great prominence to the words and deeds of his closest friends: - such as Leo, Rufino, Angelo, Bernard, Giles, Masseo, and Silvester - whose importance tended to be overlooked in the earlier *Lives* of the saint.

¹³³ See *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 45, p. 1406. For the date of John of Penna's death, see Raphael Brown's Introduction to *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, p. 1276. The other instance on which Ugolino named himself as the author occurs in Chapter 41 (p. 1396 of Raphael Brown's translation).

¹³⁴ For details of this document, see Raphael Brown's Introduction to *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, p. 1276 and p. 1281.

¹³⁵ *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 16, p. 1336.

The second part of the work describes the holy deeds of those same friars whom Ugolino had used as sources for his first section; figures such as James of Massa and John of Penna, who - while joining the Order after Francis's death - had been told of his deeds by his closest companions. This second generation of Franciscans, who are shown leading reclusive lives of extreme self-denial in isolated hermitages in the Marches of Ancona, were presented by Ugolino as heroic opponents of the dominant party within the Order, the party which - contrary to Francis's express intentions - had succeeded in diluting the severity of the Rule. The *Actus*, then, is very much a partisan account of early Franciscan history, glorifying in the heroic virtue of those who kept alive the founding spirit of the Order. Its value to the scholar therefore lies more in the light that it casts on the atmosphere and ethos of the Spiritual Franciscans than in the absolute authenticity of its detail.

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