

Hybrids in Choir Stalls: A Myth Transgressed or Aristotle Denied?¹

WELLEDA MULLER

Paris-Sorbonne University (*Musiconis* Project)

Abstract:

Numerous examples of hybrids exist in the iconography of choir stalls. Two kinds of hybrids can be found, most frequently on misericords and armrests. The first category consists of 'stable' hybrids, such as mermaids or centaurs, constituted by a human element and by a recurring animal element. The second category includes multiple and little recurring associations between human, animal and even vegetal elements. The questions that arises are why are there so many hybrids and monsters in the carving of choir stalls? And how were these characters perceived by the medieval viewer? Real or imaginary animals were listed in the Bestiaries, from the Greek *Physiologus*. Each animal was described and a precise symbolic, often ambivalent meaning was attached. Yet no connection was made between animals and humans. The mermaid is thus described just as any other animal in the bestiary. Links bewteen animals and humans also seem to be rejected in the Middle Ages: when the great philosopher Aristotle established analogies between animals and humans, he was criticized in a *lai* and in images in which he is reduced to an animal.

Keywords:

Aristotle's *History of Animals*; choir stalls; hybrids; *Lai d'Aristote et Phyllis*; transgression; bestiaries.

¹ Many thanks to Morgan Dickson (lecturer in medieval litterature in University of Amiens) who reviewed and corrected this article.

Late medieval choir stalls present the peculiarity of offering the viewer 'profane' iconography in the sacred frame of the choir in religious buildings. Within this visual context, very diverse characters can be found: animals and naturally the most varied monsters. These monsters, which could also be qualified as imaginary animals, are mostly hybrids. I thus suggest analyzing the iconography of these hybrids in the medieval choir stalls of the Grand Duchy of Burgundy² in the 15th and 16th centuries. Then I will look at the different conceptions of animals and monsters in medieval thought. Finally, I will examine the sculptured hybrids as an image of the transgression of the medieval system in which order reigns, as well as of an earlier culture, dominated by the experience of the imagination to the detriment of what became the experience of the sensitive world, for which Aristotle, in a way, laid the foundations.

HYBRIDS IN CHOIR STALLS

Hybrids thrive in medieval choir stalls, particularly in France and in Flanders; two distinct sorts can be identified: the stable hybrids, consisting of a human element and a recurring animal element; the centaur and the mermaid are the best examples, which are found not only in choir stalls, but also in other materials, such as the margins of gothic manuscripts and in monumental sculptures. The second main group includes multiple and little-recurring associations between human, animal and even vegetal elements. Hieronymus Bosch, moreover, showed extraordinary imagination in the association of human and animal elements in his paintings, constituting hybrid beings which are called 'grylles'³.

It is important to differentiate between stable hybrids, which are found in the sculpture of liturgical furniture as well as in the texts of the medieval Bestiaries that stem from *Physiologus*, and the protean hybrids, which appear above all as taxonomic aberrations that contradict both the order of the Creation and the laws of nature. These protean hybrids embody transgression. Among the most recurrent stable hybrids in the sculpture of the choir stalls are certainly the mermaid and the marine warrior, who are often associated with one another, since both possess a human torso and a fishtail. So, in Diest (Belgium), in Louvain (Cathedral of St Peter, Belgium) and in Walcourt (Belgium), two misericords –folding benches against which a singer in a monastery or Cathedral might lean during the long chanted offices– represent a mermaid and a marine warrior; the first one shows off, combing her hair and using a mirror, while the second is completely encased in armour, without even his helmeted face to be seen (FIG.1-2). It is worth noting that the comb and the mirror are the most frequent attributes of the mermaid, suggesting pride and lust to the medieval viewer. The centaur comes next, provided with the body of a horse from the bust downwards. He is very often in an attitude of a warrior: in Breda (Netherlands) and in Bruges (Cathedral of St Saviour, Belgium), he uses a bow. In contrast to the mermaid, centaurs are very often dressed in the choir stalls: they wear tunics and hats.

² My geographic domain of researches privileged emerges from my PhD *L'art des huchiers restreint au mobilier liturgique des chœurs dans le Grand Duché de Bourgogne sous la dynastie des Valois*, Université de Bourgogne, 2009. Under the dynasty of Valois (1361-1477), the Grand Duchy of Burgundy was composed of the current French regions of Burgundy, Franche-Comté, French Flanders and Belgian Flanders, and the southern part of the present-day Netherlands.

³ The origin of the word 'grylle' is to be found (as is often the case) in Greco-Latin Antiquity. The term comes from a text by Pliny the Elder, concerning the caricature of Gryllos (piglet), made by a contemporary of Apelles, Antiphilus the Egyptian. The term first serves to name the satiric genre of painting with strong deformations, and it comes to apply exclusively to the glyptic representing beings whose bodies consist of heads. J. Baltrusaitis informs us that the word 'grylle' is used in this modern meaning by a collector of Bosch, who was his near contemporary (Don Felipe de Guevara in his *Commentarios de la Pintura* from 1560).



FIG. 1. MERMAID, MISERICORD, DIEST (1491-1493), BELGIUM, CHOIR STALLS MADE BY JAN BORREMAN, © W. MULLER

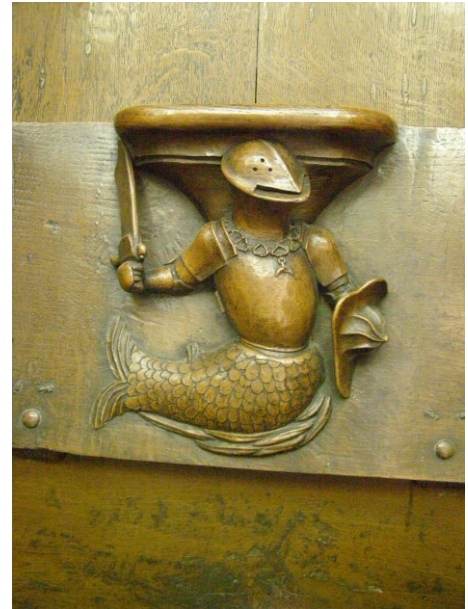


FIG. 2. MERMAN, MISERICORD, DIEST (1491-1493), BELGIUM, CHOIR STALLS MADE BY JAN BORREMAN, © W. MULLER

From a symbolic point of view, Bestiaries mention that the mermaid and the centaur are two ‘negative’ hybrids, marked by the vice of lust, to which is added the vice of anger for the centaur; however, the moving representations of mermaids by woodcarvers in choir stalls somewhat contradicts this purely negative meaning. We shall see that this ambivalence to hybrids seems to be a constant in the Middle Ages.

The dragon is also a hybrid, the base of which is a snake. It is difficult to classify it in one or the other categories, because although it has recurring constituents such as a long tail, the wings of a bat and an elongated head looking like that of a dog, artists often gave free rein to their imaginations in order to compose dragons with diverse appearances; maybe to bring to light the main characteristic of the dragon: the transgression of the animal species.

The multi-form hybrids are much more difficult to classify. However, they can also be separated into two categories: hybrids containing at least one human constituent and hybrids mixing animal parts (generally mammals). The most frequently occurring of the multi-form hybrids consist of the body of an animal surmounted by a human head. They are found in both Flanders and France.

In the examples that I have found, only the head of the hybrid creature is human and it is placed on an animal body that rests on all fours, and which oscillates between a dog, a horse and a goat. It is worth noting that in most cases, the lower legs end in hoofs. Their bodies are frequently provided with wings. The head is sometimes that of an old man (Diest, Belgium; Bois-le-Duc, Sittard (FIG.3), Netherlands) wearing a hood, sometimes bearded, sometimes contorted; sometimes the head is that of a woman (Breda, Bois-le-Duc, Netherlands). After these types come any possible combinations for composing grylles. In Laizé (Burgundy, France), on one armrest, a creature draws my attention: here a human head is fitted with two legs of goats –with two fingers– and put on another head, animal this time, but much too damaged to identify it exactly.

In Bois-le-Duc (Netherlands) (FIG.4), another grylle is interesting; it consists of a feminine head wearing headgear of draped cloth put on an equine animal body, to which are joined two human legs (thighs, knees, calfs and human feet) forming a bizarre angle. Finally, a last example in Diest (Belgium), shows a great 'fantasy', with a grylle consisting of a dog's head fitted with a trunk spitting a human head wearing a goatee, pulled over two pig's feet.

The hybrids consisting of animals and human beings are certainly those found most frequently in the iconography of the choir stalls, yet another type of hybrid that appears to a lesser degree is not insignificant: the *silvani*. Indeed, these characters, part human being, part vegetal, are particularly numerous in the art of stalls from the beginning of the 15th century through the end of the 16th century. Now, while it is clear that these phytomorphous beings carry strong ornamental potential, this does not exclude the fact that they also convey a real meaning. To this end, P. Morel, sees *silvani* as the iconographic expression of the theories which blossom in this period concerning the resemblances between human beings, their anatomy, including their organs and the various vegetables of earth and sea⁴. Giambattista Della Porta, in his treaty *Phytognomonica*, published in Naples in 1558, lists all the resemblances that exist between the constituent elements of the human beings and vegetables; he did several drawings to support his theories.



FIG. 3. HYBRID, ARMREST, SITTARD (1425), NETHERLANDS, © J. VERSPAANDONK, CKD NIIMEGEN

⁴ P. MOREL, *Les Grottesques, les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris, 2001, pp. 81-82.

Generally speaking, hybrids are most frequently carved on misericords and armrests, leaving the jouees (the carved panels at the end of a group of choir stalls) and the dorsals to religious iconography. Moreover, hybrids are much more numerous than 'real' animals in the sculpture found on choir stalls. Thus, whilst dragons are extraordinarily numerous, it is much more difficult to find 'common' animals such as those of the farmyard (rabbits or hens), with which this period must have teemed. This suggests the importance of the imagination for the woodcarvers of the period over their interest in representing the natural world.

HYBRIDS IN THE MIDDLE AGES: IMAGINATION *VERSUS* NATURE

In the Middle Ages, hybridization would seem to provide the general characteristics of the 'monster'. Indeed, behind the generic name 'monster', lies a multiplicity of interpretations, but hybridization seems to

be a common feature for the majority of them. Moreover, the bat is considered to be a hybrid (being half-rodent, half-bird) and a rather negative symbolism is attached to it.

M. Camille writes that in Gothic art, the animal kingdom is usually separated from the human race in a clear way.⁵ It is in the hybrid monster that their bodies mingle. This is precisely the period in which nature becomes a means of arbitration for the writers of canon law. It is of use for them in order to arbitrate between normal acts and those that are abnormal, even 'unnatural', such as sodomy or onanism, which relegated man to the level of an animal.

Medieval society is thus marked by order however, the transgression exists. Bestiaries show the extent to which order and the desire for classification reign, within a world treated vertically in a hierarchical basis. However, despite the will to attribute positive or negative symbolism to animals, an important number of them remain ambivalent. On reading these medieval Bestiaries, I also notice that 'stable' hybrids (mermaids, centaurs and even dragons) are considered to be animals just as more familiar species are. Indeed, Bestiaries, in the lineage of Pliny's *Natural History* (23-79 A.C.) and of the Greek *Physiologus*, offer lists of animals containing descriptions and especially symbolic explanations, without distinction between real and imaginary animals; there does not seem to have been a debate about those that 'really exist'.



FIG. 4. HYBRID, PARTITION, BOIS-LE-DUC (1430-1460), NETHERLANDS, © J. VERSPAANDONK, CKD NIJMEGEN.

⁵ M. CAMILLE, *Le monde gothique*, coll. Tout l'Art, Paris, 1996, pp. 152-153.

The second type of hybrids, whose main characteristic is the big variety of combinations between humans, animals and plants, is not theorized anywhere and embodies the 'confusion of the genres'. This 'confusion' between the various species seems to attract disapproval in the Middle Ages when order and a vertical hierarchy seem to prevail. Moreover, humankind is never included in the Bestiaries and no analogy is made to the various animals; there is certainly no move to consider humanity as an animal. According to G. Bartholeyns, P.-O. Dittmar and V. Jolivet, hybridization was, in the Middle Ages, the standard privileged way "to think of transgression in images". Between the 12th and the 16th centuries, in carving and illumination, monsters thus proliferate, as well as the hybrid figures that mix man with diverse creatures of the animal kingdom; this feature is moreover so striking because it has proven to be a peculiarity of western medieval art. This 'confusion' intrigues, and the extreme rarity of sources dealing with these hybrid creatures has aroused a multitude of hypotheses as to their meaning. The only one which holds the authors is one which takes hybridization 'literally': these beings evoke a "breaking down of the borders", a confusion between man and animal, and between the animals themselves⁶.

The singular value of transgression in the West today cannot be understood without the continuing in the Antique tradition, order at its base is the movement determined by the planets, in which each element holds its place and supplies a model of harmony for all Creation. In this context, the first transgression, performed by Adam et Eve, takes on a meaning that exceeds the simple disregard of a divine prohibition. By tasting the fruit of the knowledge of Good and Evil, the couple acquires a capacity strictly reserved for God ? This consequently questions the initial status of humanity; by inventing transgression, they weaken the borders that separate the species and the categories of beings and so introduce some future into a world which was hitherto constituted only by essences. The hybrids sculpted in choir stalls or painted in the margins of manuscripts are indeed the result of this transgression of species.

In several episodes of Genesis –Nebuchadnezzar, for example, is animalized by God to punish him for his pride; some animals are not saved from the Flood– the categories are broken down both through sin and by punishment. The man who tries to equal God immediately finds himself equal to the animals. The ambiguous connections which link people and beasts appear as so many symptoms of the altered relationship between humanity and God. There is thus a constant reaffirmation throughout the Middle Ages of a clear separation between the species. The principal question is that of finding the original order, of not allowing any further deterioration of the confusion introduced into the world. By successive transgressions, humanity moves away, a little more each day, from the adamic model created by god. A significant part of ecclesiastical speech, following Saint Paul and Saint Augustin, goes to discussion of this mixed man, this hybrid, in terms of a mixture between an animal and a human part of man. The representation of hybrids thus seems to collide with the very orderly conception of the diverse species in the Middle Ages; they are the very embodiment of a transgression.

⁶ G. BARTHOLEYNS, P.-O. DITTMAR, V. JOLIVET, *Image et transgression au Moyen Âge*, coll. Lignes d'art, Paris, PUF, 2008, 190p., p. 26.

ARISTOTLE

Bestiaries are obviously the starting point for the study of animals for the Middle Ages, but other texts in circulation, in particular Classical texts, also show an interest in the classification of animals. If Pliny and Aelian propose a commentary on animals, treated one by one, without distinction between real and imaginary animals –and this kind a classification is continued in medieval Bestiaries–, the treatment proposed by Aristotle –the other great specialist of the natural history– is different.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), in his *History of Animals* (in nine books), indeed observes and thinks in a logical way about animals, which results in a precise system of classification (animals with blood or without blood, for example), yet he also proceeds by analogies. He then compares human organs and animal parts. In his study, no place is granted to hybrids, which break the species; so a horse such as Pegasus is not treated, because it is a hybrid between the quadruped and the bird. This study would obviously have been able to pass unnoticed in the Middle Ages, but we know that Albert the Great (1193-1280) translated and retranscribed the Aristotle's *History of Animals* in his *De Animalibus*.

However, P. Duhem has noticed that in the introduction of his treaty, Albert does underline the fact that he does not adhere to Aristotle's theories, that he is only presenting them, without commenting on them moreover⁷. In this, he marks the detachment of the Middle Ages as regards naturalism, since medieval thinkers preferred a theological zoology where animals are not studied for themselves, but for the divine symbols which they convey, without distinction between real and imaginary animals. And contrary to the writs of Aelian and Pliny, which are almost quoted verbatim in many Bestiaries, Aristotle's *History of Animals* does not seem to have been the object of comments written in the Middle Ages, because it considered man as a plain animal, to the detriment of his divine image such as Christian doctrine taught.

However, in spite of the high consideration in which scholasticism held Aristotle, I think that his zoological theories must have raised some reaction. Indeed, in the 13th century, *Aristotle's Lai*⁸ appears. Composed by the Norman singer Henri d'Andeli, then resumed and transformed several times, this fabliau sees the great philosopher criticizing Alexander the Great for his attachment to a prostitute named Phyllis; she then takes her revenge by seducing Aristotle and granting him her favours on condition that she should ride him as an animal. Obviously the philosopher agrees and Phyllis puts a bit in his mouth and rides him beating him with a donkey's jawbone. This particular image of Aristotle been ridden by Phyllis, who spurs him on as a mule, was frequently represented in choir stalls at the end of the Middle Ages (FIG.5)⁹. I think that both the *Lai* and the related sculptures could result from criticism of the Aristotelian vision which brings man closer to animals – as it was the case for Darwin in the 19th century, when he was caricatured as a monkey after the publication of his *On the Origin of the Species*. Moreover, Phyllis is a prostitute who may be called 'peripatetic'¹⁰, and the philosophers of Aristotle's school are also called 'peripatetics' because of their wanderings during their reflections and teachings. Besides, the name 'Phyllis' is very close to

⁷ P. DUHEM, *Le système du Monde, histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, Paris, tome VI, 1958, p. 3.

⁸ HENRI D'ANDELI, *Le lai d'Aristote*, publié d'après le texte inédit du ms. 3516 de la Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, avec intro. Par A. Héron (<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30592665t>), impr. De L. Gy (Rouen), 1901.

⁹ In the Grand Duchy of Burgundy, this image can be seen in the choir stalls of Montbenoit (France, Franche-Comté) (FIG.5) and in Hoogstraeten (Belgium). But this image is so popular that we can see it on several artistic media (tapestry, ivory, engravings, aquamaniles) from the end of the 13th century through the early 16th century.

¹⁰ Because prostitutes walk a lot.

the Greek word *Phusis*, which means 'nature' (in the biological sense of the term), which indeed indicates the criticism of Aristotle reduced to the state of animal by nature. Besides, Phyllis rides on Aristotle's back, making him underneath everything. Finally, Phyllis hits Aristotle with a donkey's jawbone in order to incite him to move forward faster, and the donkey is traditionally equated with stupidity, which reinforces the critique of the philosopher by the authors of the *Lai*. Thus, the image presents a critical evocation of Aristotelian zoology in the Middle Ages: mainly the analogies made by the philosopher between different animals, but especially between man and animal. Moreover Aristotle's classification and analogies will not be used again until the 19th century by Cuvier (1769-1832)¹¹ and by Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844)¹².

Aristotelian analysis thus excludes total hybrids, because they are the result of a mixture of species. In Aristotle's zoology there is a logical chain elaborate with a sensitive observation of nature and animals, which makes that hybrids cannot exist. Nevertheless, it would seem that hybrids are more the result of Aristotle's concealment than a real transgression. This does not excluded the fact that hybrids are still a transgression of the medieval way of thinking, which prefers to place humanity in a position of superiority over the other creatures. By sculpturing snails with human busts or dogs with a man's head, the artists broke the order of Creation and the laws of nature that were so dear to medieval theologians.

Let us return to the hybrids in choir stalls; although they are the image of a kind of transgression, their presence in the choir of the church proves that they were not totally rejected, but that they were rather part of a universe in which the imagination prevailed on the observation in the modern sense of the term. Besides, by presenting various mixed species, hybrids could correspond in fact to an expression of unity amongst the living, rather than a form of transgression. This is how, for example, that Goethe (1749-1832) in Germany and Saint-Hilaire in France envisaged it. The various animal forms were for them the metamorphosis of the principle of unity of organic composition.

In fact, the Middle Ages retains a Platonic way of thinking of zoology by refusing to animalize the human. Despite of the fact that Aristotle was admired and often established as an absolute reference for the Middle Ages, in particular by scolasticism, his analogies between animals and humans were rejected. Besides, the method used by Aristotle, namely the observation of the sensitive world and the appeal to a logical way of thinking, allowed him to establish analogies between species, seems to have been so far from medieval preoccupations that the only means of criticism that was formulated in the period was that of satire.

¹¹ G.CUVIER, *Règne animal distribué selon son organisation*, Paris, 1816.

¹² E.G. SAINT-HILAIRE, *Principes de philosophie zoologique*, Paris, 1830.



FIG. 5. ARISTOTLE RIDDEN BY PHYLLIS, JOUEE, MONTBENOÎT (1525-1527), FRANCE, FRANCHE-COMTÉ, CHOIR STALLS MADE BY JEAN JUYLOT, © W. MULLER