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PRIDE, POPES AND VOWS: SOME MEDIEVAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PEACOCK

I

Few animals or birds are as firmly linked in the popular imagination to a particular moral quality as is the peacock. To be ‘as proud as a peacock’ is a long-established and still common idiom, which is so deeply ingrained in our ways of thinking that one of the collective nouns used in English to describe a group of peafowl is an ‘ostentation’. Moreover, no doubt because its spectacular and seemingly self-important tail display is performed only by males, we tend to associate the bird specifically with the showier manifestations of masculine pride. The ‘peacock effect’ is, for example, a term well known to business analysts and educationalists as a means of accounting for obtrusively attention-seeking male behaviour, or for that matter attire.

In the Middle Ages also the peacock was a frequent symbol of pride.¹ The usual *tertium comparationis* involves, as one would expect, the peacock’s extravagant tail display;

¹ See the examples from mainly German and Latin sources in my article ‘Der Pfau bei Konrad von Megenberg – und anderswo’, in *Konrad von Megenberg. Ein spätmittelalterlicher Enzyklopädist im europäischen Kontext*, ed. by Edith Feistner, Jahrbuch der Oswald-von-Wolkenstein Gesellschaft, 18 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2011), pp. 175–88 (p. 175). To these can be added: Tommaso Gozzadini, *Fiore di virtù*, ed. by Agenore Gelli, 2nd edn (Florence: Le Monnier, 1856), pp. 76–77; William Langland, ‘*Piers Plowman*’: *A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1995), B. 12. 235–39; Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Reeve’s Tale’, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 3925–26; Hans Vintler, *Die Pluemen der Tugent*, ed. by Ignaz von Zingerle

this was often contrasted with its ‘greyish horny-brown [...] legs, which sit oddly with the glamour of the rest of the bird’, and are as such suggestive of pride’s brittle superficiality.² Of course, such associations of the peacock with pride were by no means confined exclusively to medieval literature: examples from the classical period include Polyphemus’s description of Galathea as ‘prouder than the vaunted peacock’ in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid,³ and the Greek-writing Roman author Aelian, whose chapter on the peacock in his *De natura animalium* begins with the assertion that the bird is both proud and haughty.⁴ Moreover, proud peacocks remained current well into the early modern period: they are found in several emblem books, as well as in the works of such very different eighteenth-century

(Innsbruck: Wagner, 1874), lines 4578–85; Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1977), I. 4. 7 (lines 150–4).

² Christine E. Jackson, *Peacock* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 22.

³ ‘Laudato pavone superbior’. *P. Ovidii Nasonis ‘Metamorphoses’*, ed. by R. J. Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), XIII, 802.

⁴ Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals*, ed. by T. H. Page, Loeb Classical Library, 447–49, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), I. 5. 32.

contemporaries as William Cowper and George Washington;⁵ and they were well known also amongst artists.⁶

The problem with such a long-lived and seemingly ubiquitous association as that between the peacock and pride is that it can obscure the importance of, and indeed deter scholarly research into, other perceptions and uses of the bird. This is no doubt one of the reasons why we still lack a coherent monographic account of the peacock's career in medieval culture: the valuable initiatives of Helmut Lothar, Julius Schwabe and Karl-August Wirth deal predominantly with other periods, and in any event have found no recent successors;⁷ and the books of Ernst Thomas Reimbold and Christine E. Jackson are by design broad-based general studies that concentrate particularly on the pictorial and plastic arts. Furthermore, our understanding of the medieval peacock – as distinct from, say, the horse or

⁵ See Johann Mannich, *Sacra Emblemata* (Nuremberg: Sartorius, 1624), no. 24; Otto van Veen, *Zinnebeelden* (Amsterdam: Danckerts, 1703), no. 22; also William Cowper, *Poems* (London: Johnson, 1805), p. 44; George Washington, *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* (Williamsburg, VA: Beaver, 1971), no. 54.

⁶ See, most famously, Brueghel's 1558 engraving of the Seven Deadly Sins, reproduced by Ernst Thomas Reimbold in *Der Pfau. Mythologie und Symbolik* (Munich: Calwey, 1983), pp. 122–23.

⁷ Helmut Lothar, *Der Pfau in der altchristlichen Kunst. Eine Studie über das Verhältnis von Ornament und Symbol*, Studien über christliche Denkmäler, 18 (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1929); Julius Schwabe, 'Lebenswasser und Pfau, zwei Symbole der Wiedergeburt', *Symbolon*, 1 (1960), 138–72; Karl August Wirth, 'Imperator pedes papae deosculatur. Ein Beitrag zur Bildkunde des 16. Jahrhunderts', in *Festschrift für Harald Keller* (Darmstadt: Roether, 1963), pp. 175–221.

the wolf – has not been significantly enhanced by scholars working within the ‘(Human-) Animal Studies’ paradigm, which by definition concentrates mainly on creatures that (unlike peacocks) tend to interact with humans in some dynamic or concerted way.

There is, then, a good deal of work still to be done. The present article seeks to do at least some of it by taking two main initiatives. Firstly, it will re-examine the closest there has been to a consensus view of pre-modern peacock symbolism, namely that the Middle Ages turned on its head an earlier very positive view of the bird. Schwabe, for example, speaks of a medieval ‘devaluation and denigration’ of the peacock; and Wirth states that ‘the *interpretatio ad bonum* which had prevailed in early Christian times was superseded in the Middle Ages by the opposite evaluation of the bird’.⁸ Secondly, this essay will discuss in turn two significant but barely researched associations which the peacock took on in the later Middle Ages with particular groups of people: members of the clergy (particularly high-ranking ones), and courtly knights. It will focus especially on uses of the peacock to represent Popes, and on a late-medieval French tradition of employing it to embody and signify (albeit usually when dead) particular conceptions of chivalry. To these lengthier sections we will append a series of brief reflections on what our – far from complete – account of the peacock’s career can teach us about the nature of medieval animal symbolism more generally.

II

So, first of all, did the pre-medieval period possess a set of positive connotations of the peacock which then, in the course of the Middle Ages, underwent a ‘devaluation and

⁸ Schwabe, p. 172 (‘Abwertung und Verunglimpfung’); Wirth, p. 175 (‘Die in frühchristlicher Zeit herrschende *interpretatio ad bonum* wurde im Mittelalter verdrängt durch eine gegenteilige Bewertung des Vogels’).

denigration' of the kind that Schwabe suggests? Certainly one can adduce a good deal of evidence in support of the first half of this statement. Already in its native India, the peacock had many links with the divine. Peacocks were the mounts of a number of important Hindu gods and goddesses: Saraswati, the goddess of poetry and wisdom and wife of Brahma; Kartikeya, the god of war; and Kama, the god of love. Buddha himself is often depicted as riding on a peacock, and the bird was used as an emblem of several Tibetan deities.⁹ In ancient Greece, the peacock was above all the bird of Hera, wife and sister of Zeus and the goddess of women and marriage – by dint not least of its glorious blue tail populated by numerous ocelli, seen as reminiscent of heaven and its stars respectively.¹⁰ Almost inevitably, the Romans then transferred the peacock to Hera's successor goddess Juno, to whom mythology attributes the origin of the peacock's ocelli: after Argus has been slain by Mercury, Juno takes his hundred eyes and transfers them on to the tail of her 'own' bird, the peacock.¹¹

Given that it is not just a male bird, but is often thought of as an ostentatiously masculine one, it is perhaps surprising that the peacock should have been associated in ancient times particularly with female divinities – as well as with empresses, whom it was often held to accompany to their apotheosis.¹² This ancient link between the peacock and the feminine was to prove influential, however: it is likely to have underlain later interpretations of the bird as representing not just female vanity but also, *in bonam partem*, the Virgin Mary

⁹ For an overview of perceptions of the peacock in India and Tibet see Jackson, pp. 44–47, 61–79, 82–84.

¹⁰ See for example Reimbold, pp. 21–25.

¹¹ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 668–746.

¹² Reimbold, p. 27.

or St Barbara;¹³ and just as likely that the peacock's strikingly frequent use in the early Christian centuries as a symbol of the resurrection derived ultimately from its earlier associations with Hera, and hence with heaven.¹⁴ Certainly, thanks also to St Augustine's assertion (in *De civitate Dei* XXI, 4) that the flesh of a peacock never decays, there can be no doubt that, in late antiquity and into the early Middle Ages, the prime connotation of the peacock in western culture was indeed not pride, but rather the Christian resurrection to eternal life. Lothar's monograph abounds with examples of this association, and a sample especially of the numerous surviving mosaics also adorns Reimbold's pictorial history.¹⁵

All in all, then, it is legitimate to claim that, for the two millennia following its putative introduction into the Judaeo-Christian orbit on the occasion of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon,¹⁶ an essentially positive view of the peacock does seem to have prevailed. There were exceptions to this rule: Hera/Juno was herself far from a wholly laudable figure (Homer, for example, presents her as vengeful, jealous and domineering),¹⁷ and the peacock's image will for certain have suffered by association. Moreover, the early fabulists Aesop and Cyrillus present the bird's own behaviour in a questionable light: the peacock complains to

¹³ See *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermons of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (London: Nutt, 1890), 273^{ter}; Jackson, pp. 42–43; Reimbold, pp. 44–45, 59–60, 113.

¹⁴ See Lothar, *passim*.

¹⁵ Reimbold, pp. 87, 89, 95–96 (the mosaics are mainly Italian, from between the third and twelfth centuries).

¹⁶ So tradition has it, though peacocks are not specifically mentioned in I Kings 10 or II Chronicles 9.

¹⁷ See Joan O'Brien, 'Homer's Savage Hera', *The Classical Journal*, 86 (1990), 105–25.

Commented [LO1]: Worth providing a reference to an edition in a note?

Juno that his voice is less beautiful than the nightingale's, boasts to the raven about his sumptuous feathers, and correspondingly mocks the crane for the functional plainness of his plumage.¹⁸ Ultimately, though, these are little more than exceptions to a pervasive rule.

The second part of the assertion with which we began – that such an essentially positive view of the peacock was 'superseded in the Middle Ages by the opposite evaluation of the bird' is, however, rather more questionable. It is true that, as we have seen, many medieval authors and artists alluded to the pride of the peacock, and true also that the bird was associated at times with other vices, or indeed with the Devil himself.¹⁹ It would, however, be wrong to underestimate the essential polyvalence of the peacock, as of so many other medieval animal symbols. Authors such as Odo of Cheriton and John of San Gimignano, for example, seem to have found no difficulty in assigning the peacock to

¹⁸ Bibliographical references to all relevant versions are given by Gerd Dicke and Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. Ein Katalog der deutschen Versionen und ihrer lateinischen Entsprechungen*, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 60 (Munich: Fink, 1987), nos 362, 454–58.

¹⁹ The bird is compared to envy: Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturalis* (Douai: Bellère, 1624), XVI, 122 (col. 1223); Marcus of Orvieto, *Liber de moralitatibus*, ed. by Girard J. Etzkorn, 3 vols (St Bonaventure, NY: St Bonaventure University, 2005), III, 33 (I, 365–66); John of San Gimignano, *Summa de exemplis et similitudinibus rerum locupletissima* (Lyon: Tinghi, 1585), IV, 43 (fol. 108^{ra}). To lechery: John, IV, 50 (fol. 108^{vb}). To avarice: Pierre Bersuire, *Reductorium morale* (Venice: Scot, 1583), VII, 62 (no. 1). To *detractores et blasphemos*: Marcus, III, 3 (I, 363). To the Devil: Bersuire, VII, 62 (no. 5); John, IV, 2 (fol. 101^{ra}); Marcus, III, 3 (I, 364–65); *Der sogenannte St. Georgener Prediger*, ed. by Karl Rieder, *Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters*, 10 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1908), p. 263, line 2.

virtues (perseverance and generosity respectively), as well as to vices;²⁰ and the fifteenth-century *Tosco-Venetian Bestiary*, whilst using the bird to exemplify pride, also relates the many ocelli of its tail to the virtue *providenza*, understood as a quality akin to prudence.²¹ Similar interpretations are given by Guillaume de Deguileville and by Richard de Fournival.²² In addition, even some moralizations that associate the peacock with pride see the bird also as providing an object-lesson in humility – on occasions when it looks away from its luxuriant tail and focuses instead on its much less alluring feet and legs. A good example of this is the preacher’s companion known as the *Fasciculus morum*. Humility must be striven for, its compiler asserts, ‘because it reflects on its shortcomings and hides its good qualities, like the peacock which, seeing that its feet are most vile, forgets about its splendid tail’.²³

²⁰ Odo, no. 66, in Léopold Hervieux, *Les Fabulistes latins depuis le siècle d’Auguste jusqu’à la fin du moyen âge*, 5 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1884–99), IV, 238; John, X, 61 (fol. 258^{ra}).

²¹ *Ein Tosco-Venezianischer Bestiarius*, ed. by Max Goldstaub and Richard Wendrin (Halle: Niemeyer, 1892), no. 23 (pp. 43–44).

²² *Le ‘Pelerinage de vie humaine’ [sic] de Guillaume de Deguileville*, ed. by J. J. Stürzinger (London: Nichols, 1893), lines 7771–74; *‘Li Bestiaires d’amours’ di Maistre Richart de Fornival e ‘Li Response du bestiaire’*, ed. by Cesare Segre (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1957), p. 47.

²³ ‘Quia mala sua recogitans est bonorum morum occultatrix, sicut pavo aspiciens pedes turpissimos caudam suam dimittit lucentem’. *‘Fasciculus morum’*. *A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Handbook*, ed. and trans. by Siegfried Wenzel (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 64–65.

Indeed, perhaps the most eloquent evidence against seeing medieval perspectives on the peacock in too monochrome a light is to be found in late-medieval sermons. For example the anonymous ‘St. Georgener Prediger’ develops a rather unusual peacock *proprietas* into a substantial comparison between the bird and a ‘blessed man’. The peacock, when waking at midnight, checks to see if he has lost his beauty; when he finds that he has not, he goes back peacefully to sleep. Similarly, a ‘blessed man’ should check whether he has retained his ‘burning love for God’ and, if he has, should rest peacefully in the Lord.²⁴ Furthermore, the fourteenth-century Cistercian Ulrich von Lilienfeld’s massive collection of model sermons has several peacock moralizations, nearly all of which compare the bird to Christ himself, but in a wide diversity of ways: the moulting of the peacock’s feathers is compared to Christ being divested of his clothes during the Passion narrative, and the bird’s ability to predict rainfall to his prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost and of grace; the venomous creatures who flee at the sound of the peacock’s call are like the demons who flee from the possessed at the sound of Jesus’s voice; and the peacock adopts his young only when their feathers resemble his own, just as Christ adopts as his children those who have begun to demonstrate his virtues.²⁵

Overall, then, the picture of peacock symbolism in the Middle Ages is by no means as straightforward as one might think, or as has on occasion been asserted; and certainly any attempt to think of it primarily or exclusively as an emblem of pride would be misleadingly reductive.

III

²⁴ *St. Georgener Prediger*, p. 263, lines 20–33.

²⁵ Ulrich von Lilienfeld, *Die ‘Concordantie caritatis’*, ed. Herbert Douteil, 2 vols (Münster: Aschendorff, 2010), I, 298.

Having pointed to the broad palette of meanings assigned to the peacock in the Middle Ages, we will now proceed to consider the marked, if hitherto barely researched, tendency of medieval authors to associate the bird with the clergy, especially though not exclusively with its most senior representatives.

Connections between the peacock and priests occurred at least as early as the twelfth century. The moralized bestiary *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, for example, often attributed to Hugh of Folieto (died c. 1173), equates the bird's 'terrible voice' with a preacher 'threatening sinners with the inextinguishable fire of hell'.²⁶ Well into the fourteenth century, and far beyond, the peacock continued to be thought of at times in connection with an 'ordinary' priest: one of Ulrich von Lilienfeld's outlines of a sermon for the ordination of a new priest, for example, uses the peacock's display as a symbol of the devotion a priest should show when asked by his simple parishioners to intercede with God;²⁷ and at an ordination service held in Rome as recently as April 2015, Pope Francis referred to the bird, this time *ad malam partem*, in his homily to the assembled ordinands. 'A priest is ugly who lives for his own pleasure', the pontiff remarked: 'he acts like a peacock'.²⁸

Especially from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, however, the peacock tended to be used specifically to signify members of the higher echelons of the clergy. One suspects that a combination of factors worked together to make this association appear both appropriate and eloquent. As we have seen, in the ancient world the peacock often had both

²⁶ Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CLXXVII, cols 12–163 (attributed to Hugh of St Victor): 'Habet, inquam, pavo vocem terribilem, quando praedicator peccatoribus comminatur inextinguibilem gehennae ignem' (col. 53).

²⁷ Ulrich, *Concordantiae*, I, 482.

²⁸ Quoted on the front page of the *Catholic Herald*, 27 April 2015.

royal and religious associations; and peacock feathers had long had a liturgical use, having been used to make flabella, which were used as fans to ward off insects or, in the case of the notably ornate papal flabellum, as a decoration to accompany the Pope's journeys in his *sedia gestatoria*. It is both tempting and plausible, however, to link the marked increase in incidences of the peacock representing prominent clergy with developments in the history of vestments and with the gradual rise of anti-clerical sentiment. In the light of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and more particularly of the increasing incidence of Corpus Christi celebrations in the decades that followed, processional vestments – as distinct from 'standard' liturgical ones – came to be worn more often, and to take on more lavish, indeed ostentatious forms. This was true above all of copes, some 74 of which are recorded as having been in use at Exeter Cathedral alone in 1327.²⁹ Semi-circular in shape, often colourful and 'fantastically embroidered',³⁰ copes – especially episcopal ones and the papal *mantum* – conjured up associations with the raised train of a peacock, not least in the eyes of those discomfited by displays of clerical opulence. The fifteenth-century Scots poet Robert Holland, for example, describes his papal peacock as sporting a 'bright cope' and 'beautiful robe';³¹ and a century or so later the Protestant William Harrison (1534–93) denounces the pre-Reformation English clergy in the following crisp terms:

²⁹ Sarah Bailey, *Clerical Vestments: Ceremonial Dress of the Church* (Oxford: Shire, 2013), p. 17.

³⁰ Bailey, p. 17.

³¹ Richard Holland, *The Buke of the Howlat*, ed. by Ralph Hanna, Scottish Text Society, Fifth Series, 12 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014) lines 82, 84 ('clere cape' and 'schene wede').

They went either in divers colours like players, or in garments of light hue, as yellow, red, green, etc., with their shoes piked, their hair crisped, their girdles armed with silver, their shoes, spurs, bridles, etc., buckled with like metal, their apparel (for the most part) of silk, and richly furred, their caps laced and buttoned with gold, so that to meet a priest in those days was to behold a peacock that spreadeth his tail when he danceth before the hen, which now (I say) is well reformed.³²

One should not assume, however, that all authors who called upon the peacock to illustrate the appearance or behaviour of church dignitaries did so in a spirit of disapproval. I have discussed elsewhere the extensive peacock chapter in Konrad von Megenberg's vernacular nature encyclopedia *Das Buch der Natur* (c. 1350), which offers seven moralizations of the bird as a good bishop – all part of a consistent attempt on Konrad's part to defend the established Church, its hierarchy and its institutions at a time of controversy and division.³³ A rather more balanced view of episcopal peacocks is meanwhile taken in the *Reductorium morale* of the Benedictine Pierre Bersuire (c.1290–1362). He interprets the peacock's habit of following his peahen around in order to search out and break her eggs as the behaviour of 'impious prelates', who 'envy the simple souls under their care, and attack their eggs, that is, their riches and temporal goods, in order that they might plunder and

³² William Harrison, 'Elizabethan England', from *A Description of England*, ed. Lothrop Withington (London: Scott, 1876), p. 78.

³³ See Harris, pp. 176–83.

consume them by extortion and excoriation'.³⁴ Later in the same chapter, however, Bersuire relates peacocks' supposedly solicitous desire to defend incubating peahens from attack by foxes to the care good prelates should take to protect their subjects from 'demons, heretics, tyrants, or all kinds of evil men'.³⁵ Moreover, these are not isolated examples. It is clear that the association between the peacock and a positively presented bishop endured at least into the late fifteenth century: it is maintained, for example, by an illustration in Bona Sforza's Book of Hours, originally made in Milan and now in the British Library, in which a bishop blesses his flock accompanied, in the foreground, by a handsome blue peacock.³⁶

When one turns to associations of the peacock specifically with Popes, one finds that its presentation tends strongly, though not exclusively, towards the negative. In the Latin poem *Pavo* (c. 1285) by the Cologne canon Alexander von Roes, the papal peacock is unequivocally malevolent. This representative of the international 'Parliament of Fowls' tradition places its protagonists in the context of a General Council of the Church – one which bears a number of resemblances to the Council of Lyon of 1245, but which is used by Alexander to illuminate issues that remained current in his own day, notably the ongoing power struggle between the Pope and the Emperor (represented, predictably enough, by an

³⁴ 'Suis subditis simplicibus inuident, et ouis eorum, id est diuitijs et bonis temporalibus insidiantur, vt ipsos per extortiones et excoriationes diripiant et consumant'. Bersuire, VII, 62 (no. 3).

³⁵ 'Sic vere prelati inesse vnica debet cura, vt foeminae suae, id est, simplices subditi a vulpibus, id est a demonibus, haereticis, vel tyrannis, vel a quibusuis malis hominibus tueantur'. Bersuire, VII, 62 (no. 13).

³⁶ London, British Library, MS Add. 34292, fol. 201^v.

eagle). From the very beginning Alexander's narrator makes it plain that the peacock is not a good Pope:

Nature gave to the peacock above all the other birds a fearsome voice, feathers, and the mantle of love. So when the flock of doves lacked a ruler, they unanimously chose him to be their lord – him whose voice made them tremble and whose beautiful mantle did him honour. Thus abounding in such good gifts given him by nature, the peacock became puffed up. These favours of nature gave rise to error, and promising beginnings became the origin of vice. For he is already thinking to lord it powerfully, like a king over the wild birds – he whom the timid ones wanted to be a father.³⁷

And so it proves: we are later told, for example, that all the birds tremble at the peacock's words, sure as they are of the imminence of bloody schism (lines 157–58); they call him a tyrant (line 160); and, turning the initially positive imagery on its head, the imperial envoy the jackdaw draws attention to the peacock-Pope's essential superficiality and misguidedness:

³⁷ 'Pavoni natura dedit cum voce timoris / Pre reliquis avibus plumas et amoris amictum. / Cumque columbarum grex preceptore careret, / In dominatorem concordi voce vocatur, / Quem vox tremificat, quem pulcher amictus honorat. / Tantis ergo bonis nature munere pollens / Intumuit pavo. Peperit mox gratia culpam / Principioque boni vitiorum crevit origo. / Namque feras iam pensat aves superare potenter / Ut rex, quem timide fecere patrem sibi sponte'. *Die Schriften des Alexander von Roes*, ed. by Herbert Grundmann and Hermann Heimpel, *Deutsches Mittelalter: Kritische Studentexte der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 4 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1949), pp. 104–22, lines 9–18.

‘It is the office of the peacock to make a loud noise with his sonorous voice, to display the feathers of his brilliant tail, and delight in himself deludedly when he is mocked.’³⁸

We have already briefly met the flawed peacock-Pope of Richard Holland’s *Buke of the Howlat*, which Ralph Hanna has suggested can be dated to between 1442 and 1452, and most plausibly around 1448; but there is a little more to be said about him here.³⁹ In the *Howlat*, a largely comic reworking of ancient fable material, Holland describes an owl who, dissatisfied with his dowdy appearance, approaches the Pope, a peacock, with a request to be made into a ‘fair foule’ (line 115). The peacock, whose coat of arms is ‘associable with the antipope Felix V’,⁴⁰ is unable to make a decision, so refers the matter first to a General Council of the Church, then to the Emperor (again an eagle), and finally to Dame Nature, who initially grants the owl his request but eventually, in consequence of the newly beautified owl’s insufferable arrogance, rescinds her permission.

Holland’s concept of the papal peacock is rather more differentiated than that of Alexander von Roes. His portrayal is also essentially satirical: the peacock is not exactly decisive, presides over a monumentally slow and convoluted bureaucracy, shows few signs of high intelligence or great wisdom, and seems unduly interested in the outward trappings of church dignity. Nevertheless he is handsome, virtuous and in many ways well intentioned. The owl initially describes him as ‘the pleasant peacock, precious and pure, constant and churchmanlike under his bright cope, mitred as the manner is, mild and mellow, bedecked in

³⁸ ‘Cumque sit officium pavonis voce sonora / Clangere, fulgentis caudeque extendere pennas / Et delectari delusus ab ore iocantis’. Alexander, *Pavo*, lines 171–73.

³⁹ *Howlat*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Howlat*, p. 13. The peacock’s arms are described in lines 339–50. Felix held a claim to the papacy from 1439 to 1449.

his beautiful robe, fair in his figure, steadfast in his sanctity, steady and sure’;⁴¹ and this proves an accurate enough assessment. Overall, Holland’s presentation of the peacock, as indeed of most of his avian figures, is characterized by a certain lightness of touch, which has the effect of implying that the great late-medieval ecclesiastical power struggles that had so preoccupied Alexander von Roes and, in a different way, Konrad von Megenberg, had, at least in mid-fifteenth-century Scotland, lost some of their sting.

IV

Having examined a fruitful literary connection between the peacock and members of the higher clergy, which almost certainly arose out of the perception of a certain natural symbolism, we now turn to another aspect of the peacock’s career that stemmed from the productive interaction of medieval reality and artistic creativity. This time, though, we shall focus mainly on the world of the secular aristocracy in high- and late-medieval France.

The peacock, in spite of its historical connections with royalty, was not a ‘naturally’ aristocratic animal in the sense that, say, horses, dogs or falcons were; and neither was it a staple of courtly literature. Indeed, its appearances in such important vernacular genres as bestiaries, fables and beast epics were rare and generally inconsequential: the only notable French exceptions are the *Bestiaire d’amour* of Richard de Fournival (whose peacock

⁴¹ ‘Þe plesent pacok, precious and pure, / Constant and kirklyk vnder his cler cape, / Miterit as þe maner is, manswet and mure, / Schroude in his schene wede, schand in his shap, / Sad in his sanctitud sekerly and sure’. *Howlat*, lines 81–5.

material is based in turn on Pierre de Beauvais), and reworkings of two fables: Avian's of the peacock and the crane, and Aesop's of the peacock and Juno.⁴²

That said, actual peacocks are likely to have played at least a tangential role in the lives of many high- and late-medieval aristocrats. Charlemagne was certainly not the last nobleman, for example, to have kept peacocks on his estate; there is evidence of peacocks being offered as prizes in courtly games such as tilting;⁴³ and, at least from the thirteenth century onwards, the bird was a common enough heraldic device: Heiko Hartmann tells us that a peacock was first recorded in such a capacity in 1223.⁴⁴ Moreover, arrows were often made from peacock feathers – which were prized by bowmen, as Kenneth J. Thompson has recently shown, more for their practical effectiveness than for any contribution they made to courtly display.⁴⁵

Above all, however, the peacock was a byword for fine dining. It had been so already in ancient Rome: the friendly rivals Hortensius and Cicero are both known to have consumed

⁴² See above, pp. 00 and 00, and n. 23.

⁴³ See Jackson, p. 100, who gives the example of 'Running at the Quinten', in London in 1253–54; and Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, 'Les *Vœux du paon*, une grande œuvre à succès de la fin du Moyen Âge', in *Les 'Vœux du paon' de Jacques de Longuyon: originalité et rayonnement*, ed. by eadem (Paris: Klincksieck, 2011), pp. 7–32 (p. 25). She mentions a similar procedure at Valenciennes in 1334.

⁴⁴ As the emblem of Lothar von Wied. See Hartmann, 'Tiere in der historischen und literarischen Heraldik des Mittelalters. Ein Aufriss', in *Tiere und Fabelwesen im Mittelalter*, ed. by Sabine Obermaier (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 147–79 (p. 151).

⁴⁵ Kenneth J. Thompson, 'The Yeoman's "Pecok Arwes"', *The Chaucer Review*, 55 (2020), 55–69.

large quantities of peacock; and the latter clearly saw it as an achievement that he had managed to provide the gourmet Aulus Hirtius with a satisfactory dinner even though he had *not* served peacocks.⁴⁶ Hence the bird continued to be associated with aristocratic culinary lavishness throughout the Middle Ages – seemingly indeed until the first European settlers in the New World discovered turkeys (which they originally believed to be peacocks) and found them superior.⁴⁷

In high-medieval narrative literature also, the peacock is primarily a source of food. Friedrich Bangert finds examples of peacocks being eaten in some twenty-four French vernacular narratives from between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries;⁴⁸ and in the vast majority of these texts, the peacock is simply eaten in the context of a banquet, and described at most with a culinary adjective such as ‘ro(s)ti’ (roasted), ‘lardé’ (larded) or, quite often, ‘empevré’ (peppered). It was only in the early fourteenth century that this essentially passive, and passing, role of the dead peacock developed in certain chivalric contexts into something considerably more significant. The key figure here is Jacques de Longuyon. His substantial narrative poem *Les Vœux du paon* (8784 lines) was commissioned by Thiébaud de Bar, Bishop of Liège from 1302 until his death in combat in 1312 – an event recorded in Jacques’s text as having happened recently, thus enabling a datation to 1312 or 1313. Thiébaud was a major political player, related by blood to Emperor Henry VII and by marriage to the English

⁴⁶ ‘Sed vide audaciam: etiam Hirtio coenam dedi, sine pavone tamen’. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Epistulae*, ed. by L. C. Purser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), ‘Epistulae ad familiares’, IX. 20. 2.

⁴⁷ See Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 133–63.

⁴⁸ See Bangert, *Die Tiere im altfranzösischen Epos*, Ausgaben und Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiete der romanischen Philologie, 34 (Marburg: Elwert, 1885), pp. 215–16.

king Edward I, and not least for these reasons determined to oppose the gradual encroachments made by the French kings (notably Philip the Fair, 1285–1314) into the ancient privileges and powers of the high nobility – especially that of the Lorraine area in which he, and Jacques de Longuyon, were primarily active. Given this context and an abundance of supporting evidence from the text itself, Martin Gosman is surely correct to define the subject of the *Vœux du paon* as ‘the social code of an aristocratic caste which believes itself to be threatened by changed socio-political conditions. The *Vœux* seek to consolidate the *raison d’être* of a nobility faced by an ever more independent monarchy and an ever more demanding Third Estate’.⁴⁹ And the perhaps unlikely symbol of this code is a roasted peacock.

There is good reason to think that Thiébaud de Bar hit upon the conceit of a peacock in consequence of an actual experience. He is believed to have been present at a banquet at the court of Edward I at Pentecost in 1306, when – on the point of launching a military action against the Scots – the King and his knights swore vows upon two roasted swans. If this is true, then the decision to switch from a swan to a peacock is an interesting one. Maybe Thiébaud de Bar saw the swan as an emblem peculiar to the Plantagenet court, where it featured widely and was regarded, in deference mainly to the Lohengrin tradition, very much

⁴⁹ ‘[L]e code social d’une caste nobiliaire qui se voit menacée par les conditions socio-politiques changées. Les *Vœux* cherchent la confirmation de la raison d’être de la noblesse face à une royauté de plus en plus indépendante et un tiers état de plus en plus exigeant’. Martin Gosman, ‘Au carrefour des traditions scripturaires: les *Vœux du paon* et l’apport des écritures épique et romanesque’, in *Au carrefour des routes d’Europe: la chanson de geste*, Senefiance, 20, 2 vols (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 1987), I, 551–65 (p. 552).

as an Arthurian bird.⁵⁰ No doubt also, however, he – or Jacques de Longuyon – was familiar with aspects of peacock imagery which seemed to render the bird a particularly apt vehicle through which to achieve his cultural and political ends. As we have seen, peacocks were part of the knightly world, had long-standing religious connotations, and in particular were connected with the concepts of resurrection and renewal (here, perhaps, of the chivalric and aristocratic interests to which Thiébaud was passionately committed).

Be that as it may, the peacock on which nine knights and three ladies swear their oaths in the *Vœux du paon* plays a central if not superficially extensive part in Jacques's poem. The whole narrative concerning the peacock vows and their fulfilment is a kind of supplement to a romance about Alexander the Great, who goes to the aid of one Cassamus when he and his family are besieged in Ephezon by Clarus, King of India; and the peacock itself appears only briefly, during a truce between these warring factions. Porrus, the son of Clarus, is being held prisoner in Cassamus's castle in Ephezon, when he spies a peacock walking with raised tail on the roof of the no doubt significantly named Chamber of Venus. For no very obvious reason Porrus desires to kill the peacock, and is given a pebble and a sapwood bow ('un arc d'aubour') by a 'varlet' (lines 3861–62). Thus armed, 'he raised the bow, drew it and, seeing the peacock well, hit him at the front of the head. He made the peacock's eyes jump and his brain fall out, and the peacock fell to the ground, wings a-quivering'.⁵¹ Not only Porrus's weapon, but also the manner of the bird's death are here

Commented [LO2]: Which volume does the quotation come from – can this be added into note 51?

⁵⁰ On this context see R. S. Loomis, 'Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), 114–27.

⁵¹ 'Porrus entoise et trait, bien le vait avisant; / Li paöncel ataint en la teste devant, / Les iex li fist saillir, le cervelle en espant; / Li paöns chiet a terre, des eiles fretelant'. *The Buik of Alexander*, ed. by R. L. Graeme Ritchie, 4 vols, Scottish Texts Society New Series 12, 17, 21,

described in terms familiar from the *chanson de geste* tradition, and represent perhaps the first clear indication that the peacock is to be identified closely with knights and knighthood.

A mere ten lines later, however (3889), the peacock is being carried into the kitchen for roasting; and it is only a request made at the ensuing banquet that transforms its role from the usual desultory cameo into one of real thematic import. In lines 3910–12, Cassamus asks that, in accordance with the customs of his country, all his guests swear oaths on the bird before it is finally consumed. They proceed to do this. Some of the resultant vows are military in nature: Cassamus's nephew Gadifer, for example, undertakes to knock down Clarus's battle standard (4278–84), and Lyoné to challenge the Indian king's eldest son to a joust (4156–59). Other vows, however, have more to do with love than with combat: Aristé vows to serve Cassamus's niece Fezonas (3971–78); and the lady Ydorus vows to be true to her lover Betis (4124–31). Edea's oath, however, is different again: she vows to fashion a peacock out of fine Arabian gold and to place it on a pillar, also made of fine gold – this, as she says, will be the 'restor' (the restoration, or perhaps recreation) of the peacock Porrus has killed, and all who see the golden bird will remember the original (4076–80).⁵²

These vows then act as a catalyst for the remainder of the work's plot, in the course of which all of the vows, with the exception of Edea's, are eventually fulfilled. Throughout this process Jacques de Longuyon never states explicitly what precise conception of chivalry he is seeking to convey to his audience; but the vows addressed to the peacock, in combination

25 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1921–9), lines 3876–9. The *Vœux* is printed in parallel with the Scots Alexander poem in volumes 2–4.

⁵² 'Et je veu au paön que restorés sera / Du plus fin or d'Arrabe que on trouver pora; / Sor .i. piler d'or fin li ouvriers le metra. / Ce sera le restor, et si en souvendra / A celui et a cele qui le paön verra'.

with other elements, do nevertheless suggest, to use Gosman's terms, what kind of aristocratic code, or *raison d'être*, he wished to consolidate. The chivalric ethos of the *Vœux* is plainly to some to some degree nostalgic, or at least backward-looking in character. The vow made by Edea already insinuates that concepts of memory, or restoration and recreation, are to be regarded as important; and so, elsewhere in the romance, does the use of so familiar an historical and literary figure as Alexander – here presented, however anachronistically, as a model courtly lord. Moreover, and remarkably, Jacques de Longuyon appears to have been the first author to utilize the later highly influential concept of the 'Neuf Preux', or 'Nine Worthies' – Jacques simply calls them the '.ix. meilleurs' (7574) – whose achievements are described in an excursus lasting for almost 100 lines (7484–579). Again, the reader is not pointed directly towards specific characteristics that she should imitate; but they are plainly to be understood in a general sense as exemplary and still relevant figures from the past.

Any sense that the form of chivalry symbolized by Jacques's peacock is purely old-fashioned or 'macho' is, however, effectively counterbalanced by other aspects of the vows and their consequences. Firstly, it is surely significant that three of the – numerically significant – twelve aristocratic swearers of peacock oaths are female. This statistic is reinforced by the unusual level of prominence allotted by Jacques to female characters elsewhere in the poem, not least during its many fight descriptions. For example, to use Ritchie's quaint formulation, 'ladies are present on the battlements, watching with practised eye [and often commenting on, N. H.] the knightly skill and, with beating heart, the swaying fortunes of the brave who combat for the fair'.⁵³ Overall, then, Jacques's 'peacock version' of chivalry is one in which, paradoxically perhaps, the role of women in the various aspects of court life is highlighted and honoured.

⁵³ *Buik*, I, xxxvii.

Secondly, and perhaps relatedly, it is an image of chivalry in which love is writ large. Several of the vows sworn on the peacock, after all, specifically concern amatory commitments; and, largely in consequence of this, the romance ends in a climactic triple-wedding. Moreover, even the little we are told about the peacock prior to its roasting is of considerable consequence for establishing the importance of love in the scheme of things: not only does Porrus first see the bird on the roof of the Chamber of Venus, but even his seemingly gratuitous killing of it leads directly to an encounter between him and the dead peacock's nominal owner Fezonas – and they immediately fall in love.

Thirdly, and very importantly, Edea's vow in particular underlines the importance of artistic creativity in the aristocratic code that Jacques is suggesting. The proposed golden peacock is of course central to this, constituting as it does the inspiration, the material substance, and – indirectly – the ultimate purpose of her enterprise. No expense will be spared in the creative task of 'restoring', 'resurrecting' the peacock; and its fruits will be real, profound, and applicable to the whole of courtly society—; both men and women ('celui et cele') will be enabled to remember both the living peacock and the set of still relevant values it embodies.

For all this, within the context of the *Vœux du paon* itself, Edea's vow remains tantalizingly unfulfilled. Both Jacques's and Edea's creative projects were, however, consciously 'completed' in or around 1338 by Jean Brisebarre (or Le Court) in his programmatically titled romance *Li Restor di paon* (2826 lines). The circumstances of Jean's life and working environment remain frustratingly opaque, but he clearly set himself the specific task of filling in the gaps left by Jacques a generation earlier – including, not least,

Edea's unfulfilled vow.⁵⁴ Hence her golden peacock is indeed made, and in fine style and detail,⁵⁵ by an expert team of craftsmen she assembles from far afield. As in the *Vœux*, this inanimate peacock does not exactly contribute a great deal to the plot of the *Restor*, but it is much described and commented on, with the result that it becomes clear enough to the reader what perspectives on the courtly world it is intended to represent. Firstly, the peacock's function as a focus of chivalric memory is one of the aspects of the 'social code' surrounding it that Jean Brisebarre brings out more overtly than Jacques de Longuyon had done. A lengthy speech by Edea herself, which constitutes the whole of *laisses* 33–35 of Part I,⁵⁶ begins with the resonant statement that the golden peacock is 'a relic, noble and marvellous' ('une relique, noble et esmerveillans', I, 1208), and one which conveys, amongst other blessings, remembrance to those who are forgotten. Edea reinforces this later in her speech by her use of terms such as 'souvenance' (1253), 'ramembrance' (1259) or 'recordance' (1275, 1280), and by asserting that the golden bird represents both the living and the dead ('qui represente (chi) et les mors et les vis', 1339). The peacock, then, traditionally a symbol of resurrection and of eternal life, here emerges as, in effect, a totemic bird commemorating the deeds and honour of those who have sworn vows on it and, by implication, of the knightly caste more generally.

Furthermore, this knightly caste consists of people who are not only courageous combatants, but also committed lovers. Edea sees her peacock as being about 'les amans et

⁵⁴ The poem is available in an expert modern edition: Jean Brisebarre, *Li Restor du paon*, ed. by Enid Donkin, Texts and Dissertations, 15 (London: MHRA, 1980).

⁵⁵ Not only is the gold of the highest quality, but the model peacock is 'oelletés et signés' (I, 135), 'equipped with eyes and marked' – presumably with lines scored to indicate feathers.

⁵⁶ I, 1207–357. The division of the poem into two parts is discussed by Donkin, p. 39.

les preus' (I, 1338), and as possessing 'great meaning in respect of love and of arms' ('grant senefianche / En amors et en armes', I, 1249-50). The part of this quintessentially courtly duality about which she claims to know more is, however, love (1314); and so it is to love that she devotes the greater part of her disquisition. She offers, for example, allegorical interpretations of various parts of the peacock's body (something which occurs surprisingly rarely in literary treatments of the bird); and her interpretation of its tail in particular focuses squarely on love. The tail is reminiscent of the rewards of love ('merchi', 1282), and the lightness of its feathers evokes the fragility and unreliability of such rewards (1283-87); meanwhile the tail's ocelli, which are numerous but unseeing, represent that fact that love is 'both a pleasant delight and a blindness' (1288-91).⁵⁷ Further, the golden peacock Edea presents is decorated with seven precious stones, all of which are interpreted by her as qualities pertaining specifically to love: the sapphire, for example, means virtue (1225-26), the ruby simplicity of heart (1228-29), the emerald the pleasures and joys of love (1233-34), and the hyacinth a lover's patience and long suffering (1241-43).

One could of course argue that such allegoresis proposed by a figure in a narrative should not be taken as programmatic for the work as a whole. In the case of the *Restor*, however, it is abundantly clear that its poet, Jean, and his character, Edea, enjoy a particularly close, indeed symbiotic relationship – based on their shared status as creators and completers of a work of art that significantly promotes the cause of the courtly world. So much so, indeed, that their involvement in and comments on the processes of artistic creativity emerge

⁵⁷ 'Ce qu'il a tant d'yex, luisans sans cognissance, / Et qu'il ne voient riens, mostrant sans comparance / Qu'amans ait a merci l'eul par grant desirance. / C'est uns plaisans deduis et une aveulissance'.

as a third key feature of the *Restor*'s chivalric value set, to be placed alongside memory and love.

In both Jean's case and Edea's, artistic creativity is itself set in train by a conscious act of memory. Edea initially seems – however implausibly – to have forgotten her peacock vow until, in the midst of a courtly festivity, she remembers it ('Du paon li souvint', I, 108) and swears, this time by her gods, finally to accomplish it. Meanwhile Jean's 'poetic I' attributes the need to write about Edea and her peacock to an unfortunate *lapse* of memory on his predecessor's part. Jacques de Longuyon quite simply forgot the proposed restoration of the peacock ('oublia ce restor', I, 66) – with the result that now he, Jean, has chosen to graft ('enter') the necessary account on to the part of Jacques's story that describes the death of Clarus (I, 66–67). This he proceeds to do, to the extent that his insertion essentially merges into the text of the *Vœux* – so much so that 'the borderline between the two texts is not easily distinguishable, especially since the *Restor* never appears without the *Vœux* in any of its sixteen manuscripts'.⁵⁸

Jean twice characterizes this process of inserting new text as 'grafting' (also I, 11), and both this term and the marked element of textual fusion it leads to have the effect of underlining the essentially joint, collaborative nature of his literary project: he may not approve of Jacques de Longuyon's forgetfulness, but he is wholly dependent on his predecessor's efforts, and consistently complements them, rather than destroying or superseding them in any way. Meanwhile, dependence on others is very much part of his character Edea's creative experiences also. She goes to great trouble and expense to recruit a suitably skilled team of goldsmiths to construct her peacock, and stresses with some force

Commented [L03]: Worth providing the original in brackets? 'Greffer', presumably?

⁵⁸ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 'The Poetics of Continuation in the Old French *Paon* Cycle', *Romance Philology*, 39 (1986), 437–47 (p. 440, with examples).

their need to work as a team. She has sent for them all, she says, not because she doubts the skill of any individual, ‘but in order that all of you may undertake it and finish it well, and in order that the work may be of the highest worth’ – not least because God can ‘show to one person what another has missed’.⁵⁹ In sum, then, *Li Restor du paon* depicts an intratextual and an extratextual process of collaborative artistic creativity, which **however** proceed in parallel, and which ultimately have a very similar, and explicitly didactic function: ‘they serve as aides-mémoires for “cil qui après venront”’,⁶⁰ whilst reminding their contemporaries also of what is truly important in the courtly world, and what is not.

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Sadly we do not know what, if anything, Jacques de Longuyon would have made of the essentially sympathetic efforts of both Brisebarre and Edea to complete and develop his peacock-centred brand of chivalry; nor, still more sadly, do we know anything about the specific political constellation into which the *Restor du paon* was written. We do know, though, that a certain aristocratic ‘peacock tradition’ continued beyond the works of Jacques and Jean, but that its representatives never again approached their levels of creativity or sophistication. This is true already of the third part of what tends to be called the ‘*Paon* cycle’, Jean de la Mote’s *Le Parfait du paon* (1340); and it is certainly true of several other French narratives which foreground the motif of swearing oaths on peacocks or other birds of comparable size, such as sparrowhawks, herons or pheasants.⁶¹ Meanwhile, oaths on roasted

⁵⁹ ‘N’esse mie por chose que mes cors ne soit fis / Que cascuns ne soit bien de science garnis, / Mais por ce qu’on l’eüst bien parfait et empris, / Et por ce que li oeuvre en soit de plus haut pris / ... / Et diex moustre a l’un ce qu’autres n’a apris’ (I, 138–41, 143).

⁶⁰ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, p. 442.

⁶¹ The main examples are: Simon de Marville (?), *Les Vœux de l’épervier* (c. 1315); *Perceforest* (between 1313 and 1344); *Les Vœux du héron* (1340); *Ysaïe le triste* (c. 1400);

birds continued to be sworn at actual courtly banquets, for example at the court of Aragon in 1381, in Seville in 1404 and, most famously, at Lille (under the auspices of Philip the Good of Burgundy) in 1454.⁶² In the fifteenth century also, the peacock, for Jacques de Longuyon not least a symbol of anti-monarchical baronial power, in a sense changed sides and became a prominent personal device of King Charles VI (1380–1422) and of his brother Louis of Orléans. In a piquant if probably coincidental irony, in this royal context the peacock tended to be depicted alongside another animal known to earlier centuries for its pride and vanity, namely the tiger.⁶³

V

How, in conclusion, might the foregoing discussion of the peacock reinforce, challenge or broaden our understanding of medieval animal symbolism more generally? A perhaps obvious initial comment in this regard is that we should be wary of taking on board the often lazily made assumption that such symbolism has little in common with ‘real-life’ observation or experience of the animal or bird in question. On the contrary: especially from the High Middle Ages onwards, when westerners tended to come into contact with a greater range of species and gradually to acquire habits of scientific study adopted from Aristotle and his

Cleriadus et Meliadice (1435–45); *Les Vœux du faisan* (1454); *Les Trois fils de rois* (mid-fifteenth century).

⁶² For further examples, and for analysis of the political motivations that often underlined these courtly displays, see Michel Margue, ‘Les Vœux sur les oiseaux: fortune littéraire d’un rite de cour – usages politiques d’un motif littéraire’, in Gaullier-Bougassas, pp. 255–89.

⁶³ See the pictures printed by Jean-Bernard de Vaivre, ‘A propos des devises de Charles VI’, *Bulletin monumental*, 141.1 (1983), 92–95 (p. 94).

followers, authors' presentation of animals often owed much to actual encounters with them. In this respect the peacock is very much a case in point: one can surely see traces of real peacocks in, say, the bird's symbolic association with colourfully clad priests and Popes, or (through knights' increasing exposure to peacocks as pets, in arrows, on dinner tables and on shields) with a particular version of the chivalric code.⁶⁴

Secondly, our discussion can serve to remind us of the essential polyvalence – and hence variability – of medieval animal symbols. In principle, of course, any natural phenomenon could be used to 'mean' anything, particularly in theological or moral terms; but in practice also the range of interpretations to which animals and birds were actually subjected was wider than we often imagine. There are, of course, a few exceptions to this rule: if one sees, for instance, a medieval depiction of a pelican, one can assume reasonably safely that it is intended to allude to Christ. Most animals were not perceived in so narrow a way, however; and the peacock is perhaps a more revealing and eloquent example of this fundamental polyvalence than has hitherto been appreciated.

Thirdly, the cultural history of the peacock offers a timely reminder of how robustly many pre-medieval traditions, including non-Christian and non-literary ones, survived into and beyond the Middle Ages. In the case of our bird this is true particularly of the red thread which regularly links him, seemingly the most 'macho' of creatures, with a diverse succession of women – from Saraswati, Hera, Juno and Galathea, through the Queen of Sheba, the Virgin Mary and St Barbara, to Edea and Fezonas. The reason behind such a striking set of associations is very much a matter for speculation. In some contexts, no doubt, women and peacocks were held to share a certain superficial vanity; and it may also be

⁶⁴ On this subject see also Stephen L. Wailes, 'The Crane, the Peacock, and the Reading of Walther von der Vogelweide 19, 29', *Modern Language Notes*, 88 (1973), 947–55.

relevant to recall that the peacock's conspicuous tail display is in essence part of a courtship ritual. Juno was not exactly an impressionable peahen, however; and these lines of thinking hardly get us very far. In the end, the reasons for the peacock's recurring role as companion to or representative of a variety of divine or human females are shrouded in mystery – and as such [are](#) a valuable reminder of how little we sometimes know about medieval animal images and the motivations behind people's use of them.

Finally, the case of the peacock presents a challenge to medievalists – not least those who, like myself, attach particular weight to the *Physiologus* and its successor didactic traditions – to be wary of assuming that medieval 'meanings' of animals can easily be reduced to clear-cut moral or theological categories conveyed through the medium of point-by-point allegoresis. Our brief history of the peacock has shown us that things are much more fluid and elusive than that. We have seen, for example, that episcopal or papal peacocks can share something of the moral ambiguities and self-contradictions of actual human clerics; and that the socio-ethical values of the French 'peacock tradition', for which the bird acts as a kind of iconic shorthand, are by definition neither unequivocally good nor unequivocally evil. Moreover the *Paon* cycle in particular bears eloquent witness to the wide range of literary forms and functions which creatures like peacocks can be called upon to inhabit in medieval literature. The bird is at various times a bit-part player or plot device in a courtly narrative; the embodiment of a certain set of aristocratic values; a dynamic symbol of artistic creativity and its processes; a totem of collective chivalric memory; and a tool of socio-cultural and, at least implicitly, political propaganda. Hence, all things considered, the peacock has emerged not only as a rather more regular participant in medieval literary culture than it is generally given credit for, but also as a much more complex and sophisticated one. It seems therefore both salutary and somehow satisfying to reflect that this quintessential avian symbol of pride

– whether dazzlingly adorned, opulently gilded, or for that matter roasted in pepper – can also be paradoxically adept at encouraging us to cultivate a certain intellectual humility.

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