

An Australian Bestiary: The Wombat



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This poem about the wombat imitates the style of a medieval bestiary or *Physiologus* text.

Bestiaries sit uneasily with modern taxonomies of genre. They may appeal to modern readers as curiosities, but the form struggles to find a place in a world that divides rigidly between science and art. Neither approach to bestiaries – as science or as fantasy – fully accounts for medieval responses to bestiary texts. Since modern categories of reading prove inadequate for translating the bestiary, I attempt an inverse experiment: translating modern experience into the medieval. Medieval bestiaries are at least as concerned with ethics as they are with animals. I attempt to construct an ethical reflection on the situation in which we find ourselves in 2020: isolation to curb the spread of COVID-19. The bestiary offers a unique opportunity to engage with this situation by fusing moral discourse with a sense of wonder in what Umberto Eco describes as the medieval ‘unity of ... moral and aesthetic responses to things.’¹ The genre allows reflection upon a challenging situation with levity, but without undermining its seriousness. By using the bestiary to reflect upon our current, modern, world, I hope to elucidate something analogous to the response the bestiary likely provoked for medieval readers.

¹ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 16.

The language used in this poem imitates the Middle English dialect of the early-13th-century West Midlands, and is especially similar to the idiolect of Laȝamon's *Brut*. A full linguistic description of Laȝamon's language as represented in BL MS Caligula A.ix would be inappropriate here.² Instead, I shall single out two salient features that are most relevant to my poem. Laȝamon's language favours use of the Old English long 'a' in place of the later Middle English 'o'.³ As in the language of the *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group, the earlier velar consonant represented by 'h' or 'ȝ' occurs in words such as 'ahen' and 'buȝen'. For example 'mid his aȝene honden', 'with his own hands' (*Brut* l. 861); 'Heora aȝeine speke', 'their own language' (*Brut* l. 987);⁴ 'þa þider sculde buȝen', 'who should go thither'. (*Brut* l. 8614). Similarly, *St Juliana* has 'for þi ne ahest tu nan milce to ifinden.', 'therefore you ought to find no mercy', and the *Ancrene Wisse* has 'Speoken ne ahe ȝe', 'You ought not speak'; 'ȝe ne ahen nawt to unnen þet uel word beo of ow', 'You must not allow an evil word [to be spoken] about you.'⁵

I have chosen this dialect rather than the Middle English *Physiologus*' late-13th-century Norfolk dialect, because Laȝamon's language is archaistic rather than archaic. It is less historically anchored than other dialects in that it was not spoken as written. It lends itself to imitation eight centuries on, because it was already artificial at the time of its use.

² For a more thorough description, see *Laȝamon's Brut, or Chronicle of Britain*, ed. by Frederic Madden, 3 vols (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1847), I, p. xxviii–xxxiv; xliii–liii.

³ For more extensive treatment of this phenomenon, see Eric Stanley, 'Laȝamon's Antiquarian Sentiments', *Medium Ævum* 38 (1969), 23–37.

⁴ For these two examples, see the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v., 'ouen' adj., 2a–b <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED31050/track?counter=3&search_id=6808768> [Accessed 27/04/2021]. These and following translations into Modern English are mine.

⁵ For these examples see *MED*, s.v. 'ouen' v., 4a <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED31051/track?counter=4&search_id=6808768> [Accessed 27/04/2021].

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Natura Vombati

An anelich dere þe wombat beoð,
Huddende hym-self þe eorðe bi-neoðe,
He slepeð aldai and wakeð alniȝt,
Leof him is þester and lað him is liht.
Hwan þat hit limpeþ mon erst him to sen, 5
He semeð an smale, rounde beore to ben.
Bi ane he woneð, ȝet nis he sare,
Forþat he cunneð wombattes lare.
He seð nat his freondes, nis he freondles þer-fore,
Ac euer he luuieð his freondes þe more. 10
Freondes hað he, in herre ahne eorþ-husen,
Hwenne ful selde heo mihten ifusen,
Hwar-fore heo cunnen an diȝeliche speche,
Ac hit ic ne cunne, ne mai hit þe teche,
For ic eam nat wombat ne wombattes cun, 15
Forwhi heo ne maþelen to me heore run.
Ac enne þing ic cnawe and sucge þe to soþe:
Ahten we al don swa þe wombat doþ.

Significacio

Þe wombat us lereð, wiðute eni doute,
To wike in ure wones hwan þe quale is ut. 20
Þenç on þe wombat hwan þu anelich eart,
And for freondscipe mest ȝerneð þine hert,
Þenç on his warscipe and muchel his dome,

And wurche þi-self to herien wisdome.

Hit nedeð þe nat ben bi-deled of blisse,

25

Ac maþele mid freondes misliche, iwisse.

Swa maist þu helpen to halden heore hele,

And don hit to timen al murie and wel.

[The Nature of the Wombat

The wombat is a solitary animal, hiding itself beneath the earth. It sleeps all day and stays awake all night. Darkness is dear to it, and light is unpleasant. When it comes about that someone first sees it, it appears to be a little round bear. It lives by itself, and yet it is not pained, for it understands the teaching of the wombat. It doesn't see its friends but is not therefore friendless; it loves its friends all the more. It has friends in their own burrows, from which they can very rarely come out. For this reason, they speak a secret language – but I don't understand it, nor can I teach it to you, for I am not a wombat nor a wombat's relative, so they don't tell me their secrets. But one thing I do know, and I tell you it as the truth: all of us ought to do as the wombat does.

Meaning

The wombat teaches us, without a doubt, to stay in our homes when the plague is out. Think on the wombat when you are alone, and your heart most desires friendship. Think on its prudence and its great judgement, and strive to honour wisdom. There is no need for you to be deprived of happiness, but speak with your friends in different ways, indeed. Thus you may help to maintain their health, and cause everything to turn out merry and well.]

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