Bestiality in the West: Geraldus of Wales's Fantasies about the Irish Borderlands: A Medieval Colonialist's Worldview

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Abstract: Medieval legal, theological, and scientific discourse was highly interested in the monstrous element both out of simple curiosity and because it represented 'the other' in epistemological terms. Monsters, however, were normally far-removed, and did not create real fear because they were the products of human fantasy. Bestiality, on the other hand, constituted a direct threat to the well-being of human society, breaching the boundary between humans and animals in a dangerous fashion. This article examines the discourse on bestiality in Geraldus of Wales's *Topographia Hibernica* (1187) through which he succeeded to erect a cultural barrier between the Irish on the one hand and the British on the other and to project them as uncivilized, backwards, and as a people that would need to be colonized. Geraldus thus emerges as a stalwart 'imperialist' *avant la letter*. A critical reading of his treatise allows us to apply this 'anachronistic' term to this influential medieval writer, which in turn makes it possible to extent our modern anti-colonialist discourse to the high Middle Ages, and perhaps also vice-versa.

Keywords: Monsters, Geraldus of Wales, bestiality, medieval anthropology, topography, sexual transgressions, medieval imperialism.

Bestiality has always been an unsettling phenomenon because it represented the transgression of a taboo. This was the case in the Middle Ages as well because it involved relationships between species and defied divine laws. Nevertheless, we can easily find examples of medieval writers (theologians, poets, philosophers, etc.) who drew attention to this form of sexual transgression for a variety of reasons. In order to discuss this discourse on bestiality, however, especially in the case of Geraldus of Wales, we also must keep in mind the closely related discourse on monstrosity, which found countless manifestations in the arts and literature.

Monsters, as described in many different medieval texts, images, and maps, appear in a range of various functions; some are simply horrifying, while others represent nothing but otherness without major consequences for humans. Medieval poets have consistently indicated that monsters, *per definitionem*, represent a threat to human society, and hence have to be eliminated. However, the vast number of fictional and scientific narratives incorporating monsters confirms that there was a great interest in and fascination with those beings. Despite monsters' repellent character and appearance, medieval poets and artists seem to have had what is almost a love-hate relationship with them; we can at least claim that they never hesitated to engage with them intensively whenever a possibility arose. The monstrous act of bestiality, by contrast, was consistently viewed as the ultimate sexual transgression and an accusation of bestiality was guaranteed to exclude certain individuals from common society.[1]

However, without monsters, there would not be heroes. Beowulf would not have anything significant to do without Grendel, his mother, and finally the dragon (ca. 700). Duke Ernst, in the eponymous Middle High German goliardic epic *Herzog Ernst*, would not achieve his personal goals without the challenges by entire monstrous peoples (ms. A, ca. 1180, ms. B, ca. 1220). In the Middle High German epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) Siegfried enters the stage after he has killed the dragon and taken a bath in its blood. That blood provides him then with an impenetrable skin, which makes him invincible and transforms him into a kind of (?) monster as well.[2] In the *lai* "Bisclavret" by Marie de France (ca. 1190), the poor husband is forced to shift into the shape of a werewolf for three days every week,

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[1]John Block Friedman, *Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the* Monstrous, ed. Asa Simon Mittman with Peter J. Dendle (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 261–62; Huw Grange, *Saints and Monsters in Medieval French and Occitan Literature: Sublime and Abject Bodies*. Research Monographs in French Studies (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017); see also the theoretical contributions to *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

[2]Albrecht Classen, "The Epistemological Function of Monsters in the Middle Ages: From *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* to *Herzog Ernst*, Marie de France, Marco Polo and John Mandeville. What Would We Be Without Monsters in Past and Present!" *Lo Sguardo: Rivista di filologia* 9.2 (2012): 13–34 (https://www.academia.edu/6744378/The_Epistemological_Function_of_Monsters_in_the_Middle_Ages_From_The_Voyage_of_Saint_Brendan_to_Herzog_Ernst_Marie_de_France_Marco_Polo_and_John_Mandeville._What_Would_We_Be_Without_Monsters_in_Past_and_Present; last accessed on Dec. 27, 2019.

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but he remains a noble individual on the inside. The Green Knight in the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370) is not really a monster; he only commands magical power given to him by Morgan the Fay, but his otherness is still terrifying.

Many scholars have engaged with medieval ideas of monstrosity,[3] but in this study the focus rests less on non-human monsters, and more on the monstrosity of a mutual attraction between a human and a non-human. In addition, bestiality itself was often identified as one way that monsters were created.[4]

Bestiality was, for virtually all medieval theologians, moralists, and other writers, simply repellent, an attitude that has continued in various social circles until today. Church laws stated explicitly that bestiality constituted a severe sin, but it seems clear that people committed it anyway. When we consider how often sexual relationships between humans and beasts were prohibited, it becomes clear that the temptation must have been continuous and the laws aimed at quashing bestiality must have been very ineffectual.[5] Even though most monster lore does not explain why monsters exist, it was known that they could be birthed by cross-species sexual relations.[6] Both literary poets and theologians, both philosophers and artists appear to have agreed on that point. Intriguingly, Geraldus of Wales commonly places blame for the sin of bestiality not on the animal but on lustful people, especially women, a charge which became a common trope in the late Middle Ages and the early modern age in association with alleged witchcraft.[7]

By contrast, the anonymous poet *Herzog Ernst* describes a quasi-sexual relationship (rape) between a male animal and a female human in which the woman is not at fault. On his way to the Holy Land after having been driven off-course by a strong storm, the protagonist encounters the monstrous Grippians, who are hybrid creatures, half-cranes and half-human. The Grippian king has just returned from a military campaign to India where he had killed the Indian king and his wife and kidnapped their daughter. Now, observing the wedding ceremony of the Grippian king and the Indian princess from a hiding place, Ernst witnesses to his surprise that the king kisses the princess by poking his beak into her mouth. This is certainly an indirect allusion to both fellatio and bestiality. She can only shriek out in her misery, which deeply appeals to Ernst's pity. At that moment, he and his companion Wetzel are discovered, and the Grippians fear that Indian warriors might have followed them secretly. Furiously, they attack the princess and kill her with their beaks in a kind of gang rape (?), but they all die themselves once the two men have stormed into the royal chamber and killed everyone present. In the end, both the monsters and the monstrous act of bestiality are punished.[8]

The usual charges of bestiality accused a male human of having sexual intercourse with a female animal. However, here the opposite is the case: the Grippian king, a hybrid creature himself, is trying to make love with the Indian princess, pushing his beak into her mouth (French kiss?). The act is still dangerous to both parties. Consequently, both die in that process, though not as a result of his bestiality: she is a victim of the crane people's aggression since they are afraid that, upon noticing the strangers, some Indians might have snuck into the palace to liberate the young lady, and the king and his courtiers are victims

[3]Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript*. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 433 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1993), 1–24; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. id. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25; *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles. Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger. Studies in Medieval Culture, 42 (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University. Medieval Institute Publications, 2002). The literature on this topic is legion by now.

[4]Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Justin T. Noetzel, "Monster, Demon, Warrior: St. Guthlac and the Cultural Landscape of the Anglo-Saxon Fens," *Comitatus* 45 (2014): 105–32; Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, "Introduction: A Marvel of Monsters," *Primary Sources on Monsters*, ed. id. Demonstrare, 2 (Plymouth, UK: ARC Humanities Press, 2018), 1–6; Sherry Lindquist and Asa Simon Mittman, *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders* (New York; The Morgan Library & Museum, 2018).

[5]For the most comprehensive study of Church laws regarding sexual practices, including bestiality, see James Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[6]Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). See also the contributions to *The Animal Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Angela N. H. Creager. Studies in Comparative History, 2 (Rochester, NY; University Press, 2002).

[7]Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004); see also the contributions to *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen: Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen*, ed. Andreas Blauert (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990).

[8]*Herzog Ernst*, ed., trans., and commentary by Mathias Herweg (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2019); Volker Zaph, "Herzog Ernst," *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon: Das Mittelalter*, ed. Wolfgang Achnitz. Vol. 5 (Berlin and Bonn: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 149–65; Sophie Marshall, "Queering and Things: Vectors of Desire in *Herzog Ernst B*," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 92.3 (2018): 287–316. As far as I can tell, no scholar has ever considered *Herzog Ernst* in the context of bestiality, although this scene with the Grippians and the Indian princess lends itself very well for such a reading. We would have to discuss this episode all by itself in a separate paper because it reflects deeply seated sexual fantasies and fears of crossing boundaries.

of Ernst's attack against them. Even though she is a member of a very different race (Indian, hence human) than he is, Ernst must rescue her from the monstrous king and save her from the act of bestiality. When Ernst and Wetzel appear, the cranes poke their beaks in the princess' body in order to kill her, an extreme form of sexual and physical violation. Tragically, however, Ernst is not able to preserve her life and can only take horrendous revenge on the Grippians.

Even today, the legal discourse about bestiality proves to be deeply troubling.[9] Lawmakers cannot come to any consensus about how to evaluate and possibly punish sexual intercourse between a human and an animal. Bestiality is sometimes identified as a major crime, sometimes as a misdemeanor, sometimes as acceptable if no violence or force are involved. With so much confusion in the courts, we can certainly profit from examining older approaches to bestiality. In standard courtly literature, medieval poets did not commonly address the topic of bestiality, but the authors of monster literature, travelogues, and other narratives engaged with fairies and similar beings were not so loath to reflect on the horrific "crime" of bestiality. In fact, they reveal a considerable degree of fascination with the topic, which we can see, for example, in the many accounts of Melusine, the hybrid snake-woman who marries a human man. She apparently commits bestiality with her husband, as all of her sons have monstrous forms. Her true identity is revealed only after many years of a happy marriage when he is driven by jealousy to investigate what is happening in her bathroom on Saturdays – he breaks a taboo she had imposed on him early on. However, this cross-species relationship does not seem to have provoked any particular objections from its authors or readers because these sons are successful military leaders and heroes, and their mother normally operates very much like an ordinary human being.[10]

Sometimes, artists included images of hybrid people in the margins of their manuscripts, such as Jews with bird heads in the *Birds' Head Haggadah* (early fourteenth century, upper Rhine region, southern Germany, written by a scribe named Menahem, today held in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem), which were undoubtedly the offspring of bestial copulation. Oddly, all Jewish figures wear the typical Phrygian hat, a reflection of the common stereotypes against Jews during the high and late Middle Ages, but the artist obviously was Jewish himself and did not intend, as far as we can tell, to denigrate his Jewish contemporaries.[11] Can we equate hybridity with bestiality? Both *Herzog Ernst* and the *Bird's Head Haggadah* signal that this possibility needs to be closely considered in the medieval context.

One fascinating case of an author who wrote explicitly about bestiality is Geraldus of Wales, also known as Giraldus Cambrensis, who gained fame for his extraordinary travelogues and natural descriptions. He wrote the *Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales* and, more relevant to our study, the *Topographia Hibernica* (Topography of Ireland, 1187) and the *Expugnatio Hibernica* (Conquest of Ireland, 1189). In the *Topographia*, we discover curious comments about monstrosity, hybridity, and bestiality. It is clear that, for Geraldus, Ireland was a borderland which did not deserve his or his audience's respect. He felt free to resort to many stereotypes about that westernmost country where sexual transgressions that had led to monstrosity were not unheard-of.[12]

Geraldus was born in 1145 or 1146 in Pembrokeshire, South Wales, the son of an Anglo-Norman knight, William de Barri, who was a member of a high-ranking Welsh and Norman family. Geraldus received a thorough clerical education and attended the university of Paris from 1165 to 1174. Upon his return, he quickly received ecclesiastical benefices/sinecures and emerged as a major reformer of the Church. However, his dream of being appointed as bishop of St. David's at the southwestern tip of Wales and establishing a more independent Welsh Church failed. He never rose higher in rank within the administration of the English Church administration, though he was appointed as archdeacon of Brecon in 1174, a post he held until his death in ca. 1223. He returned to Paris in 1176, where he stayed as a

[9]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoophilia_and_the_law (last accessed on Dec. 18, 2023).

[10]See the contributions to *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, ed. Misty Urban, Deva F. Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes. Explorations in Medieval Culture, 4 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017).

[11]This was recently reported online at: https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/birds-head-haggadah; For an excellent summary of what we know about this manuscript, and an extensive bibliography, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birds%27_Head_Haggadah (both last accessed on March 20, 2020). See Marc Michael Epstein, *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015); Carol Zemel, "Funny-Looking: Thoughts on Jewish Visual Humor," *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90–100.

[12]*Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Florin Curta. Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

teacher until 1179. King Henry II appointed him court chaplain in 1184. The following year, he accompanied Prince John to Ireland, where he himself stayed until 1186, and his experiences there formed the basis of the *Topographia Hibernica* and the *Expugnatio Hibernica*.

In 1188, he toured Wales in the company of Archbishop Baldwin to preach the Cross for a Crusade under Henry II, after which he composed his *Itinerarium Cambriae* (Journey through Wales, 1191) and his *Descriptio Cambriae* (Description of Wales, 1194). The following year, he spent time in France, in preparation for the crusade. However, Henry died in France and his successor, Richard I, sent our scholar back to England because he was not useful for him in the Holy Land.

Although Geraldus was offered various bishoprics during his life, his heart was set on St. David's. This never became a reality for him, as he reflected morosely in his autobiographical writing, *De rebus a se gestis* (The Events of His Own Life, ca. 1198) as well as in other texts. This was, however, not the end of his life, and he was active as a scholar and writer and a traveler (to Rome, back to Ireland, etc.) until his old age.

The twelfth century witnessed the rise of an interest in the study of foreign cultures, if not what we would today call anthropology. For instance, Adam of Bremen (before 1050–1181/85) and his continuator Helmold (ca. 1120–after 1177) focused on the Baltic people in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, whereas Otto of Freising (ca. 1114–1158) offered a description of the Magyar people (Hungarians) in his *Gesta Frederici*.[13] Similarly, the *Descriptio Cambriae* proves to be an extraordinary ethnological treasure trove, although the descriptions of the topography, the fauna and flora are combined with historiographical and religious commentary.

To the same extent that Geraldus espoused his love for his home country, Wales, he was prepared to vilify Ireland. He believed that some of the marvels and curious features he observed there were the result of bestiality.[14] Despite the fact that he had some respect for the country itself, the author harbored strongly negative feelings for its people. He did not hesitate to present a rather stereotypical portrait of the native population. Like many medieval authors in other eras who have viewed people on the margin as primitive or barbaric, he saw the Irish as degenerate, uncultured, and transgressive.[15] This made it possible for him to idealize the cultural progression of the English kingdom and to glorify it in its imperialist endeavors especially with regard to Ireland.[16] If we want to identify colonialist ideology in the Middle Ages, then here we confront the perfect example to verify that phenomenon.

THE IRISH IN GERALDUS'S VIEW

Like any good scholar both then and today, Geraldus begins *The Topography of Ireland* with rather objective observations concerning the topography of Ireland, as well as its dimensions and location. He also critically evaluates the opinions of other scholars concerning Ireland. We learn much about the climate, the flora and fauna, the lakes, the soil, and other aspects of the country. He mostly endeavors to maintain a sober mind at first, as when he examines the species of swans and storks:

> Swans abound in the northern part of Ireland; but storks are very rare throughout the island, and their colour is black. It is remarkable in swans that they teach us not to grieve at the fate of death for in their last moments, making a virtue of necessity, they exhibit by their funeral songs contempt for the loss of life. So men, who are clothed in white by the merits of their virtues, depart joyfully from

[13]Shirin A. Khanmohamadi, *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); see also the contributions to *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, ed. A. Joseph McMullen and Georgia Henley (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), and to *Writing History in the Anglo-Norman World: Manuscripts, Makers and Readers, c. 1066–c. 1250*, ed. Laura Cleaver and Andrea Worm. Writing History in the Middle Ages, 6 (Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press; Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydel and Brewer, 2018).

[14]Geraldus of Wales, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. and trans. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978); id., *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara (London: Penguin, 1982); id., *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1978). For an easily accessible online text version, see *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis: Containing the Topography of Ireland, and the History of the Conquest of Ireland: The Itinerary Through Wales, and the Description of Wales*, rev. ed. by Thomas Wright (1863; London: George Bell, 1905; New York: AMS Press, 1968); online available in various formats, but only the PDF correctly reproduces the text by Wright: https://ia800901.us.archive.org/12/items/historicalworkso00giraiala/historicalworkso00giraiala.pdf (last accessed on Feb. 3, 2023).

[15]*Les Barbares*, ed. Bruno Dumézil (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2016); Magali Coumert and Bruno Dumézil, *Les royaumes barbares en Occident*. Que sais-je, 3877 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010). There is a legion of relevant research on this topic, involving anthropology, sociology, historiography, and mythography.

[16]Wendy Marie Hoofnagle, *The Continuity of the Conquest: Charlemagne and Anglo-Norman Imperialism* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016); *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400–1000 CE*, ed. Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer. Oxford Studies in Early Empires (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

> the troubles of the present world, and thirsting for God, the only fountain of life, desire to be dissolved, freed from this body of death, and to be with Christ. (39, ch. XIV).

Likewise, he demonstrates his interest in wondrous accounts of animals. For instance, he tells a story of a man transformed into the shape of a wolf who needs a priest's help to give his wife, also in the shape of a wolf, the last rites (79, ch. XIX). He does not criticize the werewolves for being monsters, only expresses surprise and astonishment that they exist, certainly quite parallel to the *lai* "Bisclavret" by Marie de France (ca. 1190) where the werewolf man is ultimately allowed to return to his human shape and preserve that from then on. Geraldus also rejects as spurious the opinions held by some people that witches are able to shift their shapes:

> We agree, then, with Augustine, that neither demons nor wicked men can either create or really change their natures; but those whom God has created can, to outward appearance, by his permission, become transformed, so that they appear to be what they are not; the senses of men being deceived and laid asleep by a strange illusion, so that things are not seen as they actually exist, but are strangely drawn by the power of some phantom or magical incantation to rest their eyes on unreal and fictitious forms. (83–84)

God, however, has the full power to transform people or other creatures into whatever pleases Him (84). In ch. XX (Distinction 2), Geraldus relates a story of an extremely hirsute woman with a beard and a crest, though she is otherwise normal: "The woman, thus remarkable for two monstrous deformities, was, however, not a hermaphrodite, but in other respects had the parts of a woman; and she constantly attended the court, an object of ridicule as well as of wonder" (84). Next, he mentions a woman who is a really a hermaphrodite, which means that the left-hand side of her face is male and the right-hand side of her face is female. The author refrains from going into further details or specifying how he would have made that distinction, but affirms that this woman "partook of the nature of both sexes" (84). There is no attempt to explain anything, or to provide evidence that this account was accurate; instead, Geraldus tells sensational stories to excite his audience and to solidify their colonialist mentality.

Later, he discusses "a man-monster, if he may be called a man, the whole of whose body was human, except the extremities, which were those of an ox; they having the shape of hoofs, from the joints by which the hands are connected with the arms and the feet with the legs" (85). The miserable creature was, as the author emphasizes, the constant butt of jokes by the Irish youth, and at the end he was secretly put to death because his misshapen appearance was an embarrassment for society at large. The only explanation possible for how this hybrid monster could have been created was bestiality: "He was at last secretly put to death, a fate of which he was not deserving, in consequence of the jibes with which the young men about the castle assailed the natives of the country for begetting such monsters by intercourse with cows" (85). Geraldus alleges that bestiality was a common practice in some isolated communities in Ireland, and that it resulted in all kinds of strange mixed offspring. Geraldus, however, also admits his puzzlement as to how to categorize such creatures:

> Who can associate such a monster, an irrational animal, wanting altogether speech as well as reason, with the family of rational beings? On the other hand, who can disallow the claims of a creature which stands erect, laughs, and goes on two feet, to belong to the human species? (85)

Geraldus does not doubt the existence of such hybrid creatures, which seem to exist only in Ireland. He also does not condemn them altogether and tries, instead, to recognize their partially human character. Chapter XXVI deals with yet another sexual combination, this time not a product of a coupling of a human being with a beast, but of a stag with a cow, a coupling that resulted in a doe-calf. What is most notable is not how many of these hybrid creatures there are but how serious Geraldus is when he discusses them because he saw all of them through his epistemological, i.e., highly subjective and ideological filter and was caught in his paradigm about Ireland as a primitive, barbaric world.

Throughout the earlier chapters, he established his reputation as a solid researcher who studied all kinds of features characterizing Ireland. But in the passage about the doe-calf, the author appears to move away

from empirical investigation and probably relies entirely on fantasy and his imagination. Another possibility is that he may have witnessed individuals who looked monstrous because of birth defects, such as in this case. "Having more of the nature of cattle about it than of a wild animal, it found its place in the herd" (86). Curiously, Geraldus does not provide a moral commentary on the cross-species breeding and simply accepts the result as one additional feature of God's creation.

The next chapter introduces the case of a vile woman who could not control her sexual desire and had sex with a tamed goat under her care (86). Geraldus characterizes the woman as a contemptable victim of her lust, and casts the goat as innocent. Animals are supposed to serve people, as Bible commands, but this service was not supposed to go so far as to lead to sexual obedience:

> For although on both sides it is detestable and abominable, it is by far the least that brutes should be entirely submissive to rational creatures. But though brutes are destined by nature for the service of men, they were created for use, not abuse. (86)

We would misread this opinion if we assumed that it was an early commitment to the protection of animals against abuse. The real crime is that some people overstep the charge given by God to Adam and Eve in Genesis and utilize these animals for their own sexual gratification. Geraldus is only interested in commenting on the sexual intercourse between beast and woman, not sexual intercourse between beast and man. He underscores this immediately in the following chapter, where he mentions the love affair between a lion and its female attendant in Paris (87). It remains unclear whether this was an imported and domesticated animal or simply a creature in Geraldus's imagination. In this case, the lion appears as the dominant agent, whereas the girl is described as the more passive partner: "This lion was in the habit of having bestial intercourse with a silly girl, whose name was Joan" (87). Although the young woman seemed to have some kind of supernatural power over the lion because she could easily pacify the wild animal whenever she appeared in person, Geraldus condemns this form of bestiality utterly: "Both of these brutes merited a shameful death" (87). After all, for him, any sexual unions between an animal and a human being were nothing but "abominations" (87), and both parties involved deserved the death penalty.

Geraldus takes these examples as warnings that point to a universal tendency for people to fall back to an earlier stage of human development. He knows of much earlier cases of bestiality that are mentioned in Leviticus and voices deepest concern about the slippery slope back into the animal stage: "The beast was commanded to be slain, not for its guilt, of which its nature as a brute exculpated it, but as a memorial, to recall to the mind the enormity of the sin" (87). Again, for Geraldus, the fault does not lie with the animals, but with the humans who use animals to realize their unnatural sexual desires. Even though bestiality seems to be a specialty of the Irish, so to speak, it is not confined to them. All people have a potential interest in satisfying their own sexual lust with animals, as the account of the lion and the woman in Paris confirms.

Geraldus also hastens to note that the natural conditions in Ireland are not different from those in England or elsewhere, as confirmed by roosters brought over who crow at the same time as all others do in the world. Hence, the phenomenon of bestiality is not related to some specific natural circumstances in Ireland that might justify or even excuse this transgressive behavior. Neither the climate nor the soil, neither the food nor the social conditions, are identified as conducive to bestiality. In other words, it is not the animals that are different in Ireland, but the people. However, we also need to keep in mind that in many respects the author describes Ireland in simple topographical and biological terms and also wants to identify, or rather cast the Irish through colonialist lenses.[17]

Yet, considering how the author then wanders off in all kinds of narrative directions, relating miracle stories pertaining to saints, birds, and animals in various parts of Europe, we might wonder why Geraldus focuses so heavily on Irish bestiality. To Geraldus, Ireland seems to be a location where things in nature sometimes simply operate differently: "In Ireland, the wolves often have whelps in the month of December, either in consequence of the great mildness of the climate, or, rather, in token of the evils of treason and rapine, which are rife here before their proper season" (88, ch. XXVI). Chapter XXXIII, for instance, talks about a wandering

[17] Scott L. Taylor, "The Conquest of Sodom: Symbiosis of Calumny and Canon in the *jus Belli* from Ireland to the Indies," *War and Peace: Critical Issues in European Societies and Literature 800–1800*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Nadia Margolis. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 8 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 81–97, esp. 87–88.

bell, and the following chapter talks about miraculous fire that never extinguishes. The serious anthropological gaze is increasingly blended with the perspective of a preacher or religious storyteller who cannot resist relating the story of a hollowed-out stone next to St. Michael in Munster that is miraculously filled with wine every day (ch. XXX). God works miracles in Ireland, but the Irish are also barbarians when compared to the civilized people in Wales and other parts of Europe.

In fact, upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that many of Geraldus's comments about natural phenomena are mixed with religious explanations, which appears rather puzzling considering his otherwise very serious, factual reporting. But this is not so unusual within the larger medieval context. For example, he discusses a special kind of falcon that always spends its time alone without a female mate near the shrine of St. Brigit (ch. XXXVII). When the falcon is accidentally killed at the end, this serves as narrative material for a moral teaching: "Hence it is evident, that in prosperity we ought to be prepared for misfortune, and that we must not trust in the prospect of long life and cherished happiness" (99).

The workings of God and the saints are present wherever the author turns his eyes, and his interest in nature is deeply intertwined with his interest in spiritual manifestations. Chapter XLII, for instance, describes quite accurately how salmon swim upstream and leap over barriers. There are no further comments about this phenomenon, but the following chapter, dealing with the adventures of St. Brendan, concludes with the following fundamental observation:

> These things might truly be thought incredible, except that, to those who believe, all things are possible; and that the Lord hath done whatever he would in the heaven and in the earth, in the sea, and in the depths; and that God is wonderful in his saints, and great in all his works; and that the ends of the world are always producing some new wonder. Nature, who in a sort of way maintains her dignity in public, sports with more freedom in private. (103)

In a curious twist, Geraldus also notes that in Ireland, both the people and the deceased saints are harsh and vindictive. He explains that the absence of castles everywhere forces people to seek refuge in churches from the countless marauders. Those refugees, in turn, then seek revenge on their attackers (ch. LV): "there was frequent need that the church should visit her enemies with the severest chastisements" (111). Consequently, this has transformed all Irish into "a rude and irreligious people" (111). Does this explain why there is so much bestiality among the Irish?

The topic of the next book of the treatise lends itself well to this interpretation. The first people of Ireland are said to have descended from Noah's granddaughter Caesara, who survived the Great Flood and then departed from the ark, along with three men and fifty women, eventually reaching the westernmost part of Europe. The remote island of Ireland was considered to be free from all of the sins for which humankind had been punished by God with the Flood (Distinction III, ch. 1). Geraldus seems to know that these claims sound fabulous and insists that he is only recording what other people say: "For myself, I compile history: it is not my business to impugn it. Perhaps some record of these events was found, inscribed on a stone or a tile, as we read was the case with the art of music before the flood" (114). The author presents, in all seriousness, a highly detailed account of the next generations: the devastations, the new desolations, the appearance of new settlers, the battles and struggles. The first king of Ireland, Herimon, was said to have come from Spain, a fact which leads Geraldus to try his hand at spurious etymological explanations in the same way as Isidore of Seville had done it in his famous seventh-century encyclopedic work.

As meticulous as Geraldus appears to be in his discussion of the inhabitants of Ireland, addressing the raising of infants, the rough treatment of children, and the barbaric clothing, his account also proves to be stereotypical at times, certainly not a trustworthy ethnographic treatise in the modern sense of the word. He comments, for instance,

> But although they are richly endowed with the gifts of nature, their want of civilization, shown both in their dress and mental culture, makes them a barbarous people. For they wear but little woollen, and nearly all they use is black, that being the colour of the sheep in this country. Their clothes are also made after a barbarous fashion. (122)

Irrespective of any previous comments about the beauty of Ireland and the rise of the Christian Church

there, he holds a very low opinion of the people: "The Irish are a rude people, subsisting on the produce of their cattle only, and living themselves like beasts, a people that has not yet departed from the primitive habits of pastoral life" (124). Perhaps it is not surprising that beast-like humans sometimes copulate with beasts. Urbanization has not yet taken place, and instead the Irish hang on to their traditional rural lifestyle. Although they enjoy gold very much and could mine it themselves, they prefer to get it imported from Spain (124).

In many ways anticipating early modern European colonial discourse, Geraldus deprecates the Irish population, blaming them for numerous moral shortcomings: "abandoning themselves to idleness, and immersed in sloth, their greatest delight is to be exempt from toil, their richest possession the enjoyment of liberty" (125).[18] In other words, the author claims that the Irish are backward people who cannot live up to the standards that are held in Wales and England, or on the European continent because they are lazy and have no sense of obligation to work for the rich and wealthy.

Insofar as the Irish live at the westernmost point of the continent of Europe, they constitute the most extremely held-back stage of cultural development, being barely distinct from animals, as Geraldus believes: "Whatever natural gifts they possess are excellent, in whatever requires industry they are worthless" (126). The only exception Geraldus is willing to make pertains to the extraordinary musical skills of the Irish, somewhat rivaled only by the Welsh and the Scots (ch. XI et passim).

From chapter to chapter, the author highlights various vices common among the Irish, especially their tendency toward treachery, which Geraldus, like virtually all of his medieval contemporaries, regarded as one of the worst breaches of all ethics.[19] These ethically and aesthetically oriented comments underscore the degree to which the author – certainly not untypically for the Middle Ages – blends contemporary science with fiction, religion with philosophy, moral evaluations of bestiality with observations of miracles.

In this book, or distinction, the author also returns, though only indirectly, to the topic of the practice of bestiality when he describes the custom by which the Irish coronate their king. The author reports with disgust and rage that, in a remote part of Ulster, the chosen king enters a circle of the people, crawling on his hands and feet. Beforehand, a white mare has been brought in, and the future king then "pronounces himself a beast with no less impudence than imprudence," whereupon the horse is immediately killed and made into a broth. The new king then sits in the pot, eats of the meat and laps the broth, and his people eat as well: "These unrighteous rites being duly accomplished, his royal authority and dominion are ratified" (138).

Even if Geraldus does not directly imply any sexual intercourse here, the king "confess[es] himself a beast" (138) and thus identifies himself as deeply bonded with the horse. This is unsurprising, because some of the Irish are already so close to being animals. Geraldus offers many other examples of the barbarity and primitiveness of the Irish. Regarding the differences among the genders, for instance, he notes with puzzlement: "Likewise, in this nation, the men pass their water sitting, the women standing" (140). This unnatural behavior perhaps reflects their propensity to bestiality in that western country where, according to our author, everything was contrary to 'standard' courtly norms. He has praise only for the Irish clergy (ch. XXVII), but then undermines his praise by claiming that the Irish are overemotional. "Thus the bad are bad indeed there are nowhere worse; and then the good you cannot find better. But there is not much wheat among the oats and the tares. Many, you find, are called, but few chosen: there is very little grain, but much chaff" (141). He goes even so far as to blame the entire early Christian Church in Ireland for being passive and lame in its missionary zeal: they had only confessors, but no martyrs, since there had never been any bloodshed among them (ch. XXVIII).

Geraldus wonders about the large number of people with disabilities in Ireland and assumes that this phenomenon is God's punishment for their failure to uphold standard civilized norms and ideals: "a nation out of the pale of the laws, nature herself should be

[18]For a variety of parallel case studies pertaining to the early modern age, see Stephanie Leitch, *Mapping Ethnography in Early Modern Germany: New Worlds in Print Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Steven Sabol, *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2017). For broader perspectives, see Nicholas Canny, *The Origins of Empire*. The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[19]Albrecht Classen, "Treason: Legal, Ethical, and Political Issues in the Middle Ages: With an Emphasis on Medieval Heroic Poetry," *Journal of Philosophy and Ethics* 1.4 (2019): 13–29. See also the contributions to *Treason: Medieval and Early Modern Adultery, Betrayal, and Shame*, ed. Larissa Tracey. Explorations in Medieval Culture, 10 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019).

foully corrupted by perverse habits" (147). We are not told what those perversities might have been, but bestiality, which he has mentioned a number of times before, seems to be not the least of them. Geraldus only comments: "It should seem that by the just judgments of God, nature sometimes produces such objects, contrary to her own laws, in order that those who will not regard Him duly by the light of their own consciences, should often have to lament their privations of the exterior and bodily gift of sight" (147–48).

MONSTERS AND BESTIALITY – AGAIN

This now allows us to return to Geraldus's initial reflections on the many phenomena in this world and his opinions about both monsters and bestiality. As much as he expresses his abhorrence of the products of bestiality, he also accepts them to some extent because he recognizes in them the workings of God:

> It is not surprising that wonders should be discovered, related, and written concerning His works, who made all things according to his will; with whom nothing is impossible; who, as the God of Nature, moulds nature as he pleases, and makes that natural which appears unnatural. Moreover, how can any thing be said to be done contrary to primitive and true nature, which is God, when it is certain that he is the doer of it? Those things, therefore, are, in common phrase, rather than properly, said to be done contrary to nature, which appear to happen, not contrary to his power, but to his usual proceeding. (57–58)

He does not only credit God with the creation of monsters, but also claims that nature itself makes it possible for all kinds of hybrid beings and monsters to appear here on earth: "For nature always, and purposely as it were, interlards her works with some new ones, that she may thus plainly teach and declare, that although her usual operations may be comprehended by the human understanding, her mighty power cannot be understood" (58).

Although he characterizes bestiality as despicable, Geraldus includes hybrid monsters that are a product of bestiality in the larger divine order of things. Of course, he never tries to pretend that these monsters are not threatening, and he does not accept them as members of ordinary Christian society. In fact, he portrays the sexual act between people and animals as highly condemnable and sinful; and yet, bestiality does not constitute the end of the world, or the end of humanity. We can be certain, however, that this Welsh author viewed the Irish with considerable contempt and described them, whenever possible, as stereotypically barbaric and primitive, prone to commit bestiality.

Bestiality was, as unpleasant and revolting as it seems to him, certainly a part of that world. This kind of sexual deviation is also known in France, but most cases are located in Ireland, a 'fact' that served Geraldus well in claiming that Ireland was a most backward and uncivilized country. Hence, we recognize here a truly outspoken medieval colonialist and imperialist who uses the fanciful notion of sexual perversion among the Irish as a justification of their repression and servitude under the English. But we also have to acknowledge that he may have included so many accounts of bestiality mostly in order to add excitement, horror, and disgust to his account.

He does not specifically condemn this kind of sexual relationship between people and animals, probably because the examples mentioned imply already severe sexual transgression and as such were explicit enough as warnings to stay away from such transgressions. In other words, he did not feel the need to specify and explicate his disgust of bestiality since it was a given for him. Nevertheless, the products of bestiality are quickly dismissed, either because they were soon killed or disappeared from public attention.

In Geraldus's treatise we recognize an early anthropologist who was seriously concerned with providing information about Ireland that was as accurate as possible, at least as far as nature, the geography, the climate, and the fauna and flora were concerned. As soon as Geraldus turns his attention to the people in Ireland, however, he feels no hesitation to cast them in highly negative terms and to describe them in a most stereotypical fashion. From his historical perspective, there was no question that Ireland belonged to England for a variety of reasons, beginning with an ancient claim: "Arthur, the renowned king of Britain, had kings of Ireland tributary to him, and that Gillomarus, king of Ireland, with other kings of the isles, came to his court at Caerleon" (267, ch. VII, Book II). Ireland needed to be colonized by the British, among other reasons, because there were too many cases of bestiality.

Not surprisingly, the English king found it quite natural to belittle Ireland as an insignificant appendix to English rule, as expressed in his request to the pope: "he [who?] should be lord of Ireland, and have the power of reforming the Irish people, who were then very ignorant of the rudiments of the faith, by ecclesiastical rules and discipline, according to the usages of the English church" (260, ch. VI).

Geraldus seems to have forgotten about bestiality at this point and instead gives historical, geo-political, and mythological reasons why the Irish should be colonized. If the military situation changed or became unstable, the reasons were not anthropological (bestiality), but simply military and economic (270–72; ch. XIII). Hence, the rest of the account focuses on political and historical issues, introduces major figures, and reflects on wars, diplomatic efforts, and the like. Bestiality completely fades away in light of the questions about how to fortify the Irish landscape and to govern the country.

Originally, Geraldus uses bestiality in order to justify the conquest of Ireland: "shortly before the arrival of the English in the island, a cow gave birth to a man-calf, the fruit of an union between a man and a cow, in the mountains of Glendalough (Grlindelachan), that tribe being especially addicted to such abominations; so that you may be perfectly convinced that there is another instance of a progeny half-ox half-man, half-man half-ox" (85, ch. XXI). Such a barbarous people deserved to be conquered. But Geraldus ultimately dismisses this occurrence as nothing but eccentric and irrelevant: "But nature's eccentricities of this kind must be excused, and her judgments are rather to be dreaded, than made the subject of discussion and disputation" (86, ch. XXI).

The illuminator of Geraldus's text in British Library Royal 13 B. viii, f. 19r–v, 20r made some efforts to depict those hybrid creatures who were the result of bestiality, but there is nothing scary or disgusting about these small marginal drawings, and we cannot recognize any ethical, moral, or religious teachings contained in them. They served, primarily, as illustrations, and seem not to convey a particular theological message. In one image, a woman is in an erotic embrace with a goat, and in another, a woman is in the embrace with a hairy animal with an erect penis, with the species being unclear. But the viewer cannot detect any specific moral evaluation in these marginal drawings that serve primarily as entertainment and decoration.

How problematic, hence, was bestiality for the author and his illuminator in reality? If we consider, for instance, the wide-ranging popularity of the Melusine myth, which was predicated on the sexual union of a man and a fairy or snake-woman who eventually is driven out of this world because her husband has betrayed her by publicly by revealing her true identity, we can recognize the considerable interest in transgression, the uncanny, the unclean, and the sexual bastardization between humans and beasts across medieval European and other literatures. Geraldus's success with his works about Ireland had much to do with the grotesqueness of his descriptions of bestiality, something which for most contemporary ought not to happen and yet could allegedly be discovered in colonized Ireland after all.

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