

The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages, by Robert Bartlett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 170pp., Hb. £40.00, ISBN-13: 9780521878326; Pb. £17.99, ISBN-13: 9780521702593.

In the opening years of the sixteenth century, Christopher Columbus and the crew of his fourth voyage were marooned on Jamaica. In time the islanders tired of feeding them and were inclined to withhold their hospitality. Closing his eyes to his own science, he blinded the inhabitants with their own primitive belief. He said he would ask his god for a sign, fully knowing that there was to be a lunar eclipse that night. Of course, the food supply resumed.

That episode represents a tension and a transition of which this volume is a multi-faceted and scholarly exploration. Its publication usefully brings to a wider audience the Wiles lectures delivered at the Queen's University of Belfast in 2006. It may be appreciated at two levels: for the so called "general reader" there are four lucid and fluent chapters that can be enjoyed without interruption. For the more serious student the work is tightly referenced throughout with sources and Latin texts being given in easily accessible but unobtrusive footnotes. And the main themes are supported within the text by a series of illustrations reproduced in black and white from manuscript sources.

The emergence of the word and concept of the supernatural can be dated with some confidence: electronic searching is a more accurate and expeditious business than when scholars were obliged to reserve days and weeks in the British Library. So Robert Bartlett is able to start with a reliable account of the emergence of the notion of the supernatural as an organizing category in the thirteenth century. It began to be elaborated and applied in the development of questionnaires to used in the process of canonization: the criterion for sainthood was whether great works attributed to the candidate could be attributed to natural causes. But what is unnatural is not thereby supernatural: witness the case of bearded ladies, whom Gervase distinguished as marvels and Aquinas as monstrous. Magic and witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were regarded as supernatural but as exercises on the basis of natural knowledge: claims of a supernatural dimension were falsified in trials by ordeal, such as the dunking of witches.

The second chapter draws from the work of Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis in considering medieval accounts of the mechanistic properties of the universe. These include explanations of eclipses and of how water and land

come to be separated in an almost horizontal plane, without the heavier earth being entirely submerged by the lighter water. In the seventh century the bishop of Noyen urged people not to shout at the eclipsed moon or resort to witchcraft as it was by God's command that it was periodically darkened: to the extent that eclipses were pre-ordained, of course, his view of the universe as a machine accords more with later science, than did those who reckoned that human intervention might be effective.

There is an eclectic but thereto engaging account of bodies to which are attributed supernatural powers, whether incarnate or existing as spirits. Contemporary thinking about angelic bodies was theological, while documents relating to women who flew at night or copulated with demons was legislative.

There was a belief among some that there existed in India or Scandinavia beings that had the heads and vocal capacities of dogs, as well as otherwise human characteristics: compelled by a sense of duty to preach the gospel to all creatures, Christian functionaries proceeded toward them with missionary intent.

Bartlett points to a diversity of belief in the Middle Ages and we are not to suppose that dragons and dog-heads were ever of credal status. He justifiably uses the first person plural to include his readers with himself in a compact of disbelief in such things.

For its most part, the fourth chapter sits uneasily upon its three predecessors. It treats of the eccentric and arrogant English Franciscan Roger Bacon, a traveller and speculative scientist. Much of his concern was to discover and deploy the knowledge of nature that had remained inaccessible. He was interested in mirror technology as a strategy for overcoming the Muslims. He recognized the potential of fluency in foreign languages in order to acquire the secrets of non-Christian cultures. What warrants the inclusion of Bacon in this volume, however, is his take on magic which has a peculiarly twentieth century feel about it, in that he identifies the power of mind or belief. He denies the potency of magic, but acknowledges that firm intention can connect with the power of the heavens to bring about a desired outcome.

After chapters on "Dogs and dog-heads" and "The secrets of nature and art," I found myself hoping for another entitled "Kladrius and the unicorns." Perhaps there would have been a place for an account of the preternatural properties attributed to natural and mythical beings, not least because the meanings of some of them persist in symbolic form. The bestiaries and preaching manuals of such medieval doctors as William

Durandus and Honorius of Autun were used not only for sermons but in the more popular and durable communication of the gospel by artists and the decorators of churches. In the habit of the unicorn in coming to rest only in the lap of a virgin, it becomes an attribute specifically of the Virgin Mary. According to Honorius the fabulous bird Kladrus or Charidrius has the gift of knowing whether the indisposed will survive and it becomes a figure of the Annunciation, as in the stained glass at Lyons. This interplay of fable and exegesis is complemented by the method of citing of what was mistakenly thought to be natural. The peacock, whose flesh was supposed to be non-degradable, was an example of immortality. The pelican, which was believed to feed its young with drops of blood from its own breast, is a figure of the self-sacrifice of Christ, and thus continues to feature as a finial on sacramental tabernacles.

An account of these things would arguably have belonged within the purview of this book. Even without it, the four accounts that are offered are a valuable resource, each sufficient in itself and each supporting the students who will make of it the starting point for further research.

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