

“KING OF THE CHILDREN OF PRIDE:” SYMBOLISM, PHYSICALITY, AND THE OLD ENGLISH WHALE

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*Who can show a pedigree like Leviathan?
Ahab's harpoon had shed older blood than the Pharaohs.
Methuselah seems a schoolboy. I look round to shake hands with Shem.
I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced
existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale,
which, having been before all time,
must needs exist after all humane ages are over.¹*

In modern perception, the whale remains only one step away from the monstrous. Despite public relations campaigns for the “friendly giant” sponsored by conservation organizations such as the WWF, as well as films such as *Free Willy*, the stereotype of the whale as a vicious killer still exists. Internet comments on events such as the 2010 killing of an orca trainer at Seaworld, Florida, attest to this. Although such views are perhaps now the exception, they nevertheless draw on a longstanding tradition, which contributes to popular perceptions of the whale as an Other, a creature that is different from other animals, mysterious, and dangerous. The whale’s reputation as a ferocious and often malign creature finds expression in classic literature and pop culture alike. While *Moby Dick* draws on natural history, scripture, and folklore to construct an ambiguous figure who is neither fully animal nor fully demon, the works of Flannery O’Connor provide a modern echo of the hell mouth tradition of medieval popular theology, a tradition that is itself firmly linked to the whale and to modern misconceptions of the malicious beast.² Other modern writers explore the more fantastic characteristics of the whale, such as those depicted in the medieval bestiary tradition;

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Wordsworth Classics (London, 1993), 377.

² Gary D. Schmid, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1995), 13.

examples of these can be found in the fantasy genre, and in games such as *Final Fantasy IV* (most likely a direct reference to Tolkien's poem on the *Fastitocalon*)³ and the *Jasconius* card of an "island-fish" in the card game *Magic*. What remain in our own modern culture, therefore, are spectres of the early Christian and medieval traditions which in their totality have long since been confined to the fantastic. Such treatment, however, does not do justice either to the whale, unfairly tainted with the brush of evil, or to medieval writers, whose views of the whale are all too easily dismissed as naïve or ignorant. This essay explores shifting perceptions of the whale in medieval writings, many of which ultimately contributed to the whale's monstrous reputation, in both medieval and modern culture. Changing perceptions of the whale were caused by the conflation of ideas from a variety of traditions (e.g., scripture, natural history, folklore), as well as by lexical ambiguity, and by usage patterns of whale-related terminology. My study draws on a variety of examples from these different traditions in order to shed light on some of the processes which ultimately led to negative representations of the whale in medieval culture as well as post-medieval perceptions of the whale as a natural animal with demonic qualities.

In her discussion of medieval whaling practices in the North Atlantic, Vicki Ellen Szabo has put to rest a host of modern misconceptions concerning the medieval ignorance of naturally occurring whales.⁴ While her main aim is to unearth evidence for the natural whale as a resource (beached or hunted) and as an actual danger to seafarers, Szabo also offers useful introductions to the more mythical and symbolic narrative traditions relating to the whale.⁵ She points out that these two views (what today we would consider the "real whale" and the "mythical one") need not be mutually exclusive. Our modern understanding, after all, may impose distinctions where none existed at the time of writing:

One pitfall in studying medieval perceptions and use of animals is our ascription of an animal to a single conceptual category, for any creature could

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," in *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (London, 2008), 222–23. Tolkien's poem was inspired by the Old English poem *The Whale*, the only other text in which the name Fastitocalon appears, as will be discussed in more detail below.

⁴ Vicki Ellen Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic*, *The Northern World* 35 (Leiden, 2008). The book is likely to remain an important point of reference on medieval whaling for the foreseeable future. It is an insightful survey of medieval evidence and existing modern scholarship on the subject.

⁵ See also Sebastian I. Sobekci, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, *Studies in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2008). He treats the literary representations, especially in the later medieval period, in his monograph.

potentially function in several conceptual classifications simultaneously. An animal can be good to eat and symbolically potent at the same time.⁶

The whale, therefore, can be a source for whale blubber and ship ropes, but can simultaneously symbolize the devil, with a multiplicity of meaning that was well known through the four levels of exegesis (literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical). In addition to these straightforward allegorical functions, the Greek *Physiologus* reminds us of yet another conceptual dimension evident in pre-modern efforts to categorize the whale, as well as other animals. As Roger French points out, the *Physiologus* used animal stories to expose the *sensus moralis* symbolised by the animal's essence, its *natura*. According to French, this second-century text is the first to ascribe multiple *naturae* to one creature simultaneously in order to correspond to multiple planes of Christian symbolism.⁷ French uses the lion as an example:

The *naturae* are that

- [1] it “covers up its footmarks by brushing over them with its tail”
- [2] “he sleeps with his eyes open and is vigilant” [and]
- [3] “its cubs are born dead.”

The corresponding *figurae* are:

- [1] Christ hiding his divinity in a human form,
- [2] the death of his body while his divine self sits at the right hand of God, and
- [3] humanity as his cubs that need to be reborn in Christ in order to be saved.⁸

In this scheme one animal conveys multiple layers of meaning. Much like the literal level in biblical exegesis, characteristics of the animal which are not used for symbolic interpretation but arise instead from everyday contact with the animal can be understood as multiple features of the same concept. The whale, therefore, can be understood at one and the same time as a natural resource and as the devil. Furthermore, it can display different characteristics — such as the whale's breath or its size — which can simultaneously be assigned various symbolic meanings.

To complicate matters further, one *natura* can be shared by different animals. The *natura* of exuding a “sweet smell,” for example, is shared by the subjects

⁶ Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 22–23. Szabo here refers to Roger French, *Ancient Natural History* (London, 1994).

⁷ French, *Ancient Natural History*, 279. French earlier demonstrates that the introduction of allegory into the animal stories is itself a Christian innovation (276–77).

⁸ French, *Ancient Natural History*, 279. List numbers are my own.

of the two complete poems in the *Old English Physiologus* group of the Exeter Book: *The Panther* and *The Whale*.⁹

Æfter þære stefne stenc ut cymeð
 of þam wongstede, wynsumra steam,
 swettra ond swīþra swæcca gehwylcum,
 wyrta blostmum ond wudubledum,
 eallum æpelicra eorþan frætwwum. (*The Panther* 44–48)

[After that voice comes out a smell from that place, a most pleasant exhalation, a sweeter and more powerful fragrance than any from the flowers of herbs and the blossoms of the forest, or than any of the most excellent treasures of the earth.]¹⁰

[. . .]ðonne se mereward muð ontynedð,
 wide weleras; cymeð wynsum stenc
 of his innofe, þætte ofre þurh þone,
 sæfisca cynn, beswicen weorðap,
 swimmaþ sundhwate þær se sweta stenc
 ut gewitað. (*The Whale* 53–58)

[. . . when the guardian of the sea opens its mouth, the lips wide, out comes a pleasant smell from his innards, so that others—fishes of the sea—are seduced; they swim to where the sweet smell originates.]

While the poet interprets the smell associated with the panther positively (as another symbol for Christ), he interprets the smell emitted by the whale negatively, despite the fact that it is *wynsum* (“pleasant”), associating it with the deceptive strategies of the devil.¹¹ This kind of parallelism of *natura* as well as the

⁹ The designation “whale” needs to be treated with caution. Although it is the standard title for the poem in modern editions, this chapter will question to what extent the animal in the poem is equivalent to our modern concept, and indeed whether it is intended to be so.

¹⁰ All references to Exeter Book texts are to B. J. Muir, ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, rev. 2nd ed., Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies, 2 vols. (Exeter, 2000).

¹¹ The parallelism of the same *natura* with different *figurae* has been discussed in a number of articles in recent years: M.C. Hoek, “Anglo-Saxon Innovation and the Use of the Senses in the Old English *Physiologus* Poems,” *Studia Neophilologica* 69 (1997): 1–10; B. McFadden, “Sweet Odors and Interpretative Authority in the Exeter Book *Physiologus* and *Phoenix*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 42 (2006): 181–209; and Michael D. C. Drout, “‘The Partridge’ is a Phoenix: Revising the Exeter Book *Physiologus*,” *Neophilologus* 91 (2007): 487–503. The scent of the whale in particular will be discussed further below. As these studies show, the panther and the whale are not the only animals associated with a sweet smell. The same characteristic is mentioned in the case of the Phoenix, and Diekstra points out that the leopard also has a sweet smell: F. N. Diekstra,

proximity of the two poems is not unique to this manuscript, but is symptomatic of their position within the *Physiologus*. As F.N. Diekstra points out, “some animals are arranged to form oppositional or complementary pairs.”¹²

The fact that a single *natura* can be shared by different animals, and that this *natura* can ultimately be interpreted in different ways, has the potential to cause a confusion of referents and to lead to semantic blends, as characteristics of one animal become part of others. This need not necessarily be a bad thing, however. Old English poetry, with its rich associative layers, has proven particularly fruitful for the expression and artistic use of multiple meanings.¹³ Anglo-Saxon audiences were well acquainted with a poetic form that made frequent use of multiple associations, as well as flexible patterns of meaning, and would have been comfortable with such mixing of concepts. For many modern readers, however, less accustomed to these associative modes of conceptualization, a lack of concrete definitions may cause confusion, especially as some of the medieval referents are deceptively similar to their modern forms. However, it is important to remember that a *whale* is not necessarily the same as a *hwæl*. I will now turn to some of the most important schemata underlying the depiction and development of the *hwæl* in the Old English *Whale* poem.

The Old English Whale in the *Physiologus* Tradition

The structure and content of the first two poems in the *Old English Physiologus* of the Exeter Book invite comparison with the *Physiologus*, where the two corresponding sections also traditionally occur together.¹⁴ The textual tradition of the *Physiologus* is a collection of narratives on various animals, plants, and stones

“‘The Physiologus,’ the Bestiaries and Medieval Animal Lore,” *Neophilologus* 69 (1985): 142–55, at 144.

¹² Diekstra, “‘The Physiologus,’” 145.

¹³ Much good work has been done in a variety of different approaches to the different levels of meaning in Old English poetry, and especially the use of the familiar to build up such associations of meaning. See, for example, Peter Clemons, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry*, CSASE 12 (Cambridge, 1995); John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington, 1991); Michael D. C. Drout, *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century*, MRTS 306 (Tempe, 2006); Elizabeth M. Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York, 2006); and Carolin M. Esser, “Naming the Divine: Designations for the Christian God in Old English Poetry,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of York, 2006).

¹⁴ The versions of the *Physiologus* remained fixed until “in the twelfth century the material is regrouped according to Isidore’s classification in Book XII of his *Etymologiae*,” Hanneke Wirtjes, ed., *The Middle English Physiologus*, EETS, o.s. 299 (Oxford, 1991), lxxiii. At this point, further animals are introduced to the mix.

combining material derived from a variety of natural historical and folkloric traditions with moral interpretations of animal behavior. It therefore is a manifestation of the belief that God created nature for man, and that nature thus functions as a type of lesser scripture, or as a kind of picture book for teaching morality. It is this focus upon Christian morals that separates the *Physiologus* from previous works of a similar kind. For Christian audiences, God was so important that everything in His Creation signified Him. Parts of Creation were thus meant to symbolize God's actions, and the natures of animals were not merely physiological phenomena but also symbols of God's work. According to this logic, animals had been put on earth for the express purpose of representing various aspects of God's creation and hence for reminding man of his Creator.¹⁵

The author of the *Physiologus* most likely lived during the second century and is unknown, although the term "physiologus" (the naturalist) provides an important clue to the main source from which the writer derived his authority.¹⁶ The contents of the individual stories are by no means invented by the author, but demonstrate an almost encyclopedic knowledge of sources such as Aristotle and Pliny, as well as "a diluted form of a blend of Indian, Egyptian, Jewish and Hellenistic elements, a kind of synthesis between Greek science and oriental religion."¹⁷ Efforts have been made to reconstruct the lost Greek version of the text, which was available in many other languages, including Latin, as early as the fifth century.¹⁸ Numerous scholars, including Nona C. Flores, have pointed out that the *Physiologus* writer "reshaped his materials to conform with preconceived allegories related to specific biblical texts,"¹⁹ and it is widely accepted that elements from other natural histories and encyclopedic texts, such as excerpts from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, continued to be interwoven at later stages of the tradition, which "added to the encyclopaedic character of the work."²⁰ Indeed, within

¹⁵ French, *Ancient Natural History*, 277.

¹⁶ Michael Curley summarizes the various cases made for datings between the beginning of the second and the end of the fourth century. Only one of these cases (that made by Max Wellmann in 1930) speaks entirely against a dating in the second century, as he assumes this particular type of theology was inspired by Origen. Michael J. Curley, "Physiologus, Φυσιολογία and the Rise of Christian Nature Symbolism," *Viator* 11 (1980): 1–10, at 1. French, on the other hand, provides evidence that Origen in fact quoted the *Physiologus*, and therefore places it in the second century (French, *Ancient Natural History*, 277 and 245, n.71).

¹⁷ Diekstra, "The Physiologus, the Bestiaries and Medieval Animal Lore," 143. See also J. Scarborough and A. Kazhdan, "Physiologos," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (New York, 1991), 3:1674.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the manuscript tradition as it applies to the Old English version, see Ann Squires, *The Old English Physiologus*, Durham Medieval Texts 5 (Durham, 1988), 14–22.

¹⁹ Nona C. Flores, *Animals in the Middle Ages* (London, 1996), ix.

²⁰ Diekstra, "The Physiologus, the Bestiaries and Medieval Animal Lore," 146.

the later medieval period, there is a partial shift away from the *sensus moralis* at the centre of the stories, towards their encyclopedic and sensational content.²¹

Each entry within the classic *Physiologus* collections follows roughly the same structure: a brief biblical reference, followed by the description of one or more *naturae*, from which are then drawn moral conclusions through *figurae* for the education of the reader. The Old English *Whale* poem follows the structure and general content of what is more often found under the term *cetus*, or *aspidochelone* (asp-turtle) in the Greek and Latin texts.²² The poem focuses on both *naturae* which also occur in the earlier tradition of *Physiologus* that the poet draws on. The following list outlines the content traditionally found in the *cetus* section of the *Physiologus* texts. Elements which are NOT referenced in the Old English poem, *The Whale*, are italicized:

1. *Biblical Reference*: F. Sbordone's reconstructed Greek version (Milan, 1936) refers to the evil woman in Proverbs as biblical reference at the beginning: "Solomon advises us in Proverbs saying: Do not approach an evil woman for honey drips from the lips of a harlot: she smoothes your throat for the time being, but later you will find it more bitter than cholera and more poisoned than a two-edged sword. For the feet of folly lead those who use it to hell after death."²³ The passage is missing in both main Latin versions (Y and B). Unsurprisingly, then, the Old English version is also missing the reference and thus presents itself more as a natural history.
2. *Natura 1*: The whale as island. The whale has a habit of floating on the surface of the water, covered with sand and driftwood. Hapless sailors mistake its back for an island and decide to moor their ship. Once they have safely anchored and lit a fire, the whale dives, taking ship and sailors with it to a watery grave.

²¹ The thirteenth-century *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (13.26) by Bartholomaeus Anglicus uses the *Physiologus* stories in an encyclopedic context, for example—without the *figura*. The Middle English Bestiary in London, British Library, Arundel 292, however, which Wirtjes dates to "around 1300," still contains both the *natura* and the *figura*, or *signification*: Wirtjes, *The Middle English Physiologus*, ix.

²² Badke finds the story listed under the following terms in medieval bestiaries: Aspedocalane, Aspido testudo, Aspis chelone, Balain, Balainne, Balayn, Balene, Cete, Cethe, Coine, Covie, Fastitocalon, Lacovie. See David Badke, "The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages," www.bestiary.ca, accessed 10 November 2011.

²³ Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 112–14. The reference is to Prov. 5:3–5: "Favus enim stillans labia meretricis et nitidius oleo guttur eius. Novissima autem illius amara quasi absinthium et acuta quasi gladius biceps. Pedes eius descendunt in mortem et ad inferos gressus illius penetrant" [Vulg.].

3. *Figura 1*: This behavior is supposed to remind us not to fix our hopes on the false securities which the devil can offer us, so that we are not drawn into the abyss of hell.
4. *Natura 2*: The sweet smell. The second *natura* also concerns its hunting habits. When hungry, the whale exudes a sweet odor which lures small fish into its mouth. Once filled, the jaws snap shut and the fish are devoured. Larger fish, however, would not be affected, as they are not so easily deceived.
5. *Figura 2*: In a similar manner, warns the *Physiologus*, the devil will lure us with sweet words and promises, only to entrap us. Those of greater faith, however, will not be deceived by the devil. Both Latin versions given by Squires use this passage for biblical references.²⁴

The *cetus* sections in the *Physiologus* tradition as Squires presents them thus aim to extend the meaning of the “natural creature” by adding a figurative dimension in the form of a simile. Building on natural history, folkloric and biblical sources, and the authority of the language in the *natura* descriptions, many manuscript versions of the *Physiologus* draw on scriptural references to gain authority for the *figura* parts. The whale remains a natural being, and as such is not itself depicted as explicitly evil. Its association with the devil here is symbolic, not factual, even though the biblical reference in the reconstructed Greek version may invite such an association.

Cetus or *Balena*? Conflating Categories

Two further sources that feed into Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the whale are natural histories and scripture. As discussed above, these are not independent sources, and all three of them combine freely, especially in later bestiariums such as that of Philippe de Thaon, an Anglo-Norman text composed at some time between 1121 and 1135. Natural histories, scripture, and the *Physiologus* tradition all brought with them different kinds of knowledge, which began to merge as these different sources became intermingled with one another.

a) Natural Meanings

In his treatment of *de piscibus* in his seventh-century *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville refers to many maritime creatures, among them the *balena* and the *cetus*. Both of these animals are defined through specific traits:

²⁴ Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 112–14.

Ballenae autem sunt inmensae magnitudinis bestiae, ab emittendo et fundendo aquas vocatae; ceteris enim bestiis maris altius iaciunt undas; βάλλειν enim Graece emittere dicitur.²⁵

[Whales (*ballenae*) are beasts of enormous size, named from casting forth and spraying water, for they throw waves higher than the other sea animals; in Greek βάλλειν means “expel.”]²⁶

The *balena* is therefore defined through its function as “emitter.” Isidore does not discuss how the whale “casts forth” the water, focusing instead on the effect of “throwing waves higher.” Hrabanus Maurus copies Isidore’s definition almost verbatim in his own encyclopedic work, *De rerum naturis*.²⁷ The illustrated Montecassino manuscript of the work gives us an insight into at least one understanding of the process of casting forth (Fig. 12.1).²⁸ Here the water is exuded through the mouth. The drawing which accompanies the definition seems to refer more to the excess water expelled after the swallowing of a catch of fish than to a blow-hole. That this definition is not an exception, or even confined to a particular moment in time or location, is demonstrated by Cologne’s thirteenth-century scientist, philosopher, and theologian Albertus Magnus,²⁹ who offers a similar description in his blended classification of *cetus* and *balena*, where the water from the mouth is part of the breathing process.³⁰ Szabo, on the other hand, points to the definition of the *balena* as “a spouter from great height,” attested as early as Strabo.³¹ She also draws attention to another creature that is linked to the term: Illustrations of *balena* seem more often to depict walruses “with short paddle-feet

²⁵ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, Oxford Classical Texts (Oxford, 1911), 12.6.7.

²⁶ Translation from Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), 260.

²⁷ Hrabanus Maurus, *De rerum naturis* 8.5, PL 111:238C. This is still the only edition of the ninth-century text by Alcuin’s pupil. A new edition is in preparation by W. Schipper.

²⁸ Montecassino, Biblioteca di Abbazia, Cod. 132 (ca. 1023), p. 211b.

²⁹ For a brief overview, see “Albertus Magnus, St.,” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev., ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford, 2005), 34–35.

³⁰ “Os habet amplum et quando spirat evomit ex ipso multam aquam quae aliquando implet naviculas et submergit”: Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI nach der Kölner Urschrift* 24.1.23, ed. Hermann Stadler, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, Texte und Untersuchungen 16, 2 vols. (Münster in Westphalen, 1916–1920), 2:1523. Translation: Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica* 24.1.23, trans. and annot. Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr. and Irven Michael Resnick, 2 vols., Foundations of Natural History (Baltimore, 1999), 2:1667. Cf. Albertus Magnus, *Man and the Beasts: De Animalibus (Books 22–26)*, trans. James J. Scanlan, MRTS 17 (Binghamton, NY, 1987), 336.

³¹ Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 47. Szabo also claims that *balena* was initially used as reference to the *Physiologus* entry in question here, though she does not cite any source for this. Commonly, the connection is made between *aspidochelone* and *cetus*, not *balena* (including in the reconstructed Greek version by Sbordone). Cf. Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 112.

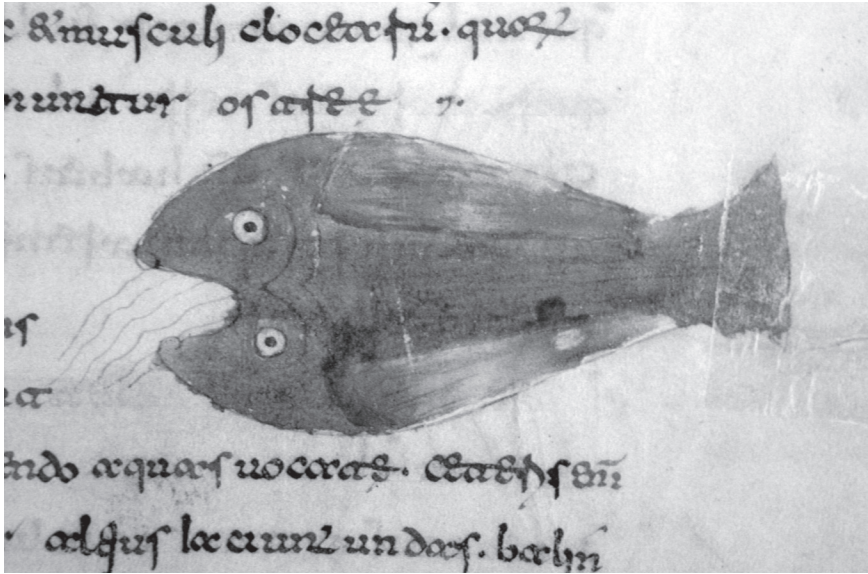


Fig. 12.1: Montecassino, Bibliotheca della Abbazia, Cod. 132 (1023), p. 211b.

Photo Credit: W. Schipper; published with permission of Archivio de Montecassino

and huge downturned tusks,” although sometimes a *balena* has the appearance of a whale or large fish.³²

References to *balena* might therefore be misleading to modern readers, as the term does not only refer to whales. The mapping between the two terms, *balena* and whale, is perhaps further encouraged by the modern biological term “baleen whale,” which refers specifically to filter-feeders, who do cast forth large amounts of water through the baleen in the mouth, just as depicted in the Montecassino manuscript illumination. Furthermore, modern Latin dictionaries, including Lewis and Short as well as Latham, give “whale” as the exclusive meaning for *balena*.³³

Equally confusing is the modern scientific term for the entire species: *Cetaceans*, which refers to “80 or so species of whales, dolphins and porpoises that

³² Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 47, citing Wilma George and Brunson Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London, 1991), 96. She also discusses a semantic connection between the *balena* and the dolphin here.

³³ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879), s.v. *balaena*; *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. R.E. Latham, fasc. 1 (London, 1975), s.v. *balaena*.

exist in the modern world.”³⁴ The name derives from the Greek κῆτος, or Latin *cetus*, the second animal in Isidore’s *Etymologiae* that is relevant to this discussion:

[8] Cete dicta τὸ κῆτος καὶ τὰ κήτη hoc est ob inmanitatem. Sunt enim ingentia genera beluarum et aequalia montium corpora; qualis cetus excepit Ionam, cuius alvus tantae magnitudinis fuit ut instar obtineret inferni, dicente Propheta (2,3): “Exaudivit me de ventre inferni.”³⁵

[The sea-monster (*cetus*, plural *cete*) is named κῆτος, plural κήτη, that is, on account of its vastness. These are huge types of sea-monsters (*bellua*), and their bodies are the same size as mountains. Such a *cetus* swallowed Jonah; its belly was so big that it resembled hell, as the prophet says (2,3): “He heard me from the belly of hell”]³⁶

For Isidore, the most striking feature of the *cetus* is its size. Isidore also classifies the *cetus* as a type of *belua*, a sea-monster. The translators caution that “Isidore misconstrues Servius,” and that “*bellua* and *cetus* can both mean either ‘large sea monster’ or ‘whale.’”³⁷ Lewis and Short are equally cautious, citing Pliny as an example for their definition of “any large sea-animal, a sea monster; particularly a species of whale, a shark, dog-fish, seal, dolphin, etc.”³⁸ Latham can only find uses of *cete* as “whale” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³⁹ The shift from any large monstrous animal to the biological whale has progressed significantly by this point. This is clear from the way Albertus Magnus defines *cetus* in his *De Animalibus*. His entry describes the walrus and the right whale, according to Scanlan, but Albertus then presents *balena* as the female of the *cetus* species. Scanlan suggests that the misinterpretation of the term is driven by the female grammatical gender of *balena*.⁴⁰ That such a mistake is possible, however, demonstrates that the categorical distinction between *cetus* and *balena* has become entirely blurred for this thirteenth-century author. And with this shift comes a conflation of characteristics. An illustration to the relevant passage in Philippe of Thaon’s *Bestiaire* in the thirteenth-century Merton College 249 (Fig. 12.2) shows

³⁴ Phil Clapham, *Humpback Whales*, rev. ed. (Grantown-on-Spey, 2004), 11.

³⁵ Isid., *Etym.*, 12.6.8. The reference to the *Propheta* is to Jonah 2:3.

³⁶ Isidore, *Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., 260.

³⁷ Isidore, *Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., 260, n. 17.

³⁸ Lewis and Short, s.v. *cetus*.

³⁹ R. E. Latham, ed., *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources, with Supplement* (London, 1980), s.v. *cetus*. But both the *Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources*, ed. James H. Baxter (London, 1934), s.v. *cetus*, and the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, s.v. *cetus*, provide citations earlier than the thirteenth century.

⁴⁰ *Cetus*: Albertus, *De animalibus* 24.1.23, ed. Stadler, 2:1522–25; Albertus, *On Animals*, 24.1.23, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1666–71; Albertus, *Man and the Beasts*, trans. Scanlan, 335–41.



Fig. 12.2: Philippe de Thaün in Oxford, Merton College, MS 249, fol. 7r.
With permission of the Warden and Fellows of Merton College Oxford

the *cetus* in its monstrous form. This form is also influenced by Leviathan, a creature from Scripture (Job 41:1; Ps. 74:14, 104:26; Isa. 27:1).

b) Scriptural References

Isidore links the *cetus* to the fish that swallowed Jonah in the Old Testament. The Vulgate, however, does not mention the term *cetus* in the book of Jonah. Rather, Jonah is swallowed by a *piscem grandem* (Jonah 2:1). A closer look at other biblical references, however, demonstrates the suitability of this link between *cetus* and Jonah's fish. The first big fishes that we encounter in the Bible are the *cete grandia*, created by God (Genesis 1:21). Of greater relevance, however, is the additional likening of the belly of the whale to hell (*ventre inferni*, Jonah 2:2). While the passage in Jonah continues to speak of the *ventre piscis*, Jesus makes the link between Jonah's fish, hell, and *cetus* explicit: "Sicut enim fuit Ionas in ventre ceti tribus diebus et tribus noctibus, sic erit Filius hominis in corde terrae tribus diebus et tribus noctibus" ("For as Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights: so shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights").⁴¹ Sobecki reminds us that an additional meaning of the Greek κῆτος is "abyss," a fact that further enforces the link between the animal and hell.⁴² However, Jonah's fish does not act out of malice. Rather, it gives shelter to "him whom man had repelled."⁴³ The monstrous fish acts as a servant of God, and thus

⁴¹ *The Holy Bible translated from the Latin Vulgate* [Douay] (Baltimore, 1899), Matt. 12:40.

⁴² Sobecki, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, 127.

⁴³ "quoniam exceperunt pisces quem homines refutarunt": Ambrose, *Exameron* 5.11.35, ed. Karl Schenkl, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Pars I, CSEL 32.1 (Vienna, 1887),

provides spiritual as well as physical salvation for Jonah. In the late fourth century, Ambrose of Milan described it thus:

Quid de Iona dignum loquar, quem cetus excepit ad uitam, reddidit ad prophetandi gratiam? Emendauit aqua quem terrena deflexerant: psallebat in utero ceti, qui maerebat in terris et, ut utriusque redemptio non praeteretur elementi, terrarum salus in mari ante praecessit, quia signum Filii hominis signum Ionae. Sicut iste in utero ceti, sic Iesus in corde terrae. In utroque remedium.⁴⁴

[How shall I adequately speak of Jonas, whom the whale swallowed to grant him life and to return him to his activity as a prophet? The water restored to him the understanding which the earth had taken away. He who grieved when on land began to sing psalms in the belly of the whale. Again, the redemption of both elements is not lost sight of. The salvation of the earth had its forerunner in the sea, because the marvellous act of Jonas stands for that of the Son of Man. As Jesus lay “in the heart of the earth,” so was Jonas in the whale’s belly. There is salvation in both elements.]⁴⁵

In this respect the big fish serves as a *felix naufragium*, a happy shipwreck, in parallel to the *felix culpa* in paradise: without the fall, mankind would never have received the promise of life after death in heaven, as opposed to earthly paradise.

Another creature, Leviathan, is similarly linked to the term *cetus* within the Old Testament, described by Isaiah as follows:

In die illo visitabit Dominus in gladio suo duro, et grandi et forti, super Leviathan serpentem vectem, et super Leviathan serpentem tortuosum, et occidet cetum qui in mari est.⁴⁶

[In that day the Lord with his hard, and great, and strong sword shall visit leviathan the bar serpent, and leviathan the crooked serpent, and shall slay the whale that is in the sea.]⁴⁷

The Douay-Rheims version is the only one to translate *vectem* as “bar.” The Septuagint uses the phrase ὄφιν φεύγοντα for *serpentem vectem*, and *vectis* and *fugax* (possibly influenced by the similar sounding word in the Septuagint) are often associated with the crocodile, famous for putting others to flight and fleeing itself in sight of stronger enemies, and whose rigid back made it resemble a

168–69; Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, Fathers of the Church 42 (New York, 1961), 190.

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 5.11.35, ed. Schenkl, 168.

⁴⁵ Ambrose, *Hexameron*, trans. Savage, 189.

⁴⁶ *Biblia sacra vulgatae editionis*, ed. Michael Hetzenauer (Regensburg, 1914), Isa. 27:1.

⁴⁷ *Holy Bible* [Douay], Isa. 27:1.



Fig. 12.3: Jonah emerging from the fish: The Stuttgart Psalter, Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Bibl. 23, fol. 147v.

Photo Credit: Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek

bar.⁴⁸ The Septuagint also speaks of τὸν δράκοντα (the dragon), not Leviathan, whose name itself derives from “twisted serpent.” The word *cetum* in Isaiah 27:1 is replaced with *draconem* in the New Vulgate, thus making the link between Leviathan and the dragon more specific.⁴⁹ During the medieval period, however, the blending between *cetus* and Leviathan, and by extension Jonah’s fish, was evident in numerous texts and images. The ninth-century illustration of Jonah’s fish in the Stuttgart Psalter (Fig. 12.3) clearly shows Jonah emerging from a Leviathan similar to the description by Isaiah. The link between *cetus* and Leviathan also associates the *cetus* with a powerful force of evil. In Job 41, the description of

⁴⁸ On the crocodile’s tendency to flee see, for example, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 8.25: *C. Plini Secundi Naturalis Historiae Libri XXXVII*, ed. Karl Mayhoff, 5 vols. (Leipzig, 1875–1906; repr. Stuttgart, 1967), 2:109: “terribilis haec contra fugaces belua est, fugax contra sequentes” (“[the crocodile] is a terrible animal to those who fly from it, while at the same time it will fly from those who pursue it”). Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 22.15.20, ed. “audax tamen crocodilus monstrum fugacibus; ubi audacem senserit, timidissimum” (“Yet daring as this monster is towards those who run from it, when it sees that it has a daring opponent it is most timorous”). See also George C. Druce, “The Symbolism of the Crocodile in the Middle Ages,” *Archaeological Journal* 66 (1909): 311–38.

⁴⁹ *Nova vulgata bibliorum sacrorum editio*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City, 1986), Isa. 27:1. Cf. *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs, 8th ed., 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1935; repr. 1965), Isa. 27:1: ἐπὶ τὸν δράκοντα.

the power and malice of the Leviathan is paralleled to the vulnerability of man without divine protection, and the passage culminates as follows:

Non est super terram potestas, quae conparetur ei, quia factus est ut nullum timeret. Omne sublime videt: ipse est rex super universos filios superbiae.⁵⁰

[There is no power upon earth that can be compared with him who was made to fear no one. He beholdeth every high thing, he is king over all the children of pride.]⁵¹

These verses not only stress the ultimate power of the biological creature, but also link it squarely with the devil. Here the subject is not a possible symbol for evil, but evil itself.⁵² The link between fish, hell, the demonic and salvation is taken up in other writings as well. St. Brendan, for example, celebrates two Easter vigils on the fish Jasconius. He and his monks are safe on the island-fish as long as they say their vigils and masses.⁵³ The one time, however, when the monks set up a pot and build a fire to prepare food, the fish dives and takes the pot with it into the deep. The fish, therefore, is by nature wild, and is commanded by God to act as a force of salvation for the monks, but it is also meant to serve as a symbol of hell during the Easter vigil, just as it will be re-enacted by monastic communities such as the nuns of Barking in centuries to come. Easter celebrations on Jasconius are not the only references to Leviathan and Jonah's fish within the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*. Dorothy Bray demonstrates how the overall references to sea-monsters and to Leviathan in particular in the text are used to express the savagery of the demon-beast and the range from perdition to salvation that is available at the hands of this creature in various forms.⁵⁴ Another passage from

⁵⁰ *Biblia sacra*, Job 41:24–25.

⁵¹ *Holy Bible* [Douay], Job 41:24–25.

⁵² See Schmid, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 51–53. For a discussion of Leviathan in connection with both the Antichrist and also the beast from the sea in Revelations, see Rosemary Muir Wright, "The Rider on the Sea-Monster," in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas R. Liszka and L.E.M. Walker (Dublin, 2001), 70–87.

⁵³ W. R. J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, eds., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter, 2002), 34–35 and 45. Latin text: *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* 10, ed. Carl Selmer, Publications in Mediaeval Studies (Notre Dame, 1959), 20–21; and *Navigatio* 15 (42). For further study, see J.S. Mackey, *The Legend of St Brendan* (Leiden, 2008); *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, ed. G.S. Burgess and C. Strijbosch (Leiden, 2006).

⁵⁴ Dorothy Ann Bray, "Allegory in the 'Navigatio Sancti Brendani,'" *Viator* 26 (1995): 1–10, at 8–10. Bray also points us to the following article, which discusses the confrontation of the sinner with the sea-monster in more detail: Theresa M. Carp, "The Three Late-Coming Monks: Traditional Invention in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 12 (1984): 127–42.

Ambrose also demonstrates how these scriptural perceptions of the *cetus* merge with those from the *Physiologus* to shape the image of the creature in the physical world of Anglo-Saxon writers. The following description from Ambrose's *Hexameron* is part of the fifth day of creation, and thus suggests the *cete grandia* of Genesis:

ueniamus ad Atlanticum mare. quam ingentia illic et infinitae magnitudinis cete, quae si quando supernatant fluctibus, ambulare insulas putes, montes altissimos summis ad caelum uerticibus eminere!⁵⁵

[We wish, now, to return to the Atlantic Ocean. What Whales are found there, a huge bulk and measureless size! If they were to float on the surface of the sea, you would imagine that they were islands or extremely high mountains whose peaks reach the sky!]⁵⁶

The scriptural uses discussed above therefore connect both Jonah's fish and *cetus* in general with Leviathan, and thus with a monstrous, non-whale exterior, as well as with hell. We have also observed different levels of culpability and malice attached to the *cetus* creatures within the scriptural sources and commentaries. There is clearly room for a natural and at worst deceitful creature on the one hand; close association with Leviathan, on the other hand, assigns a demonic force to particular appearances of the *cetus*. While the earlier versions of the *Physiologus* still clearly distinguish between the *natura* of an animal and its *figura*, this distinction becomes more blurred as time progresses. This blurring is further suggested by writers such as Ambrose and Albertus Magnus who try to rationalize the image of the whale and to discourage the easy conflation of animal and monster.

c) Nature and Myth in the *Physiologus*

It should be apparent, then, that for medieval writers the distinction between factual and mythical/symbolic realms of thought is not as clear-cut as modern scientific taxonomies would have us believe. Features that may seem curious to us (e.g., the island fish) are often cited by medieval writers alongside those that bear resemblance to our own physiological categorizations (e.g., expelling water through baleen). Such descriptions of the whale's natural features can easily be considered distortions, resulting from the transmission of stories by those having little connection to natural observation, either first-hand or through eyewitnesses. The sentiment that the categorization of creatures such as the whale may be more fictional than real is already expressed in the work of some medieval

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Exameron*, 5.11.32; ed. Schenkl, 166.

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *Hexameron*, trans. Savage, 187.

scholars, such as Albertus Magnus, who is at pains to distance himself from these earlier sources. He continually stresses that his elaborations draw upon eyewitness accounts, his own or those of experienced whalers, as opposed to the ancients “because they do not accord with the practical knowledge of experienced fishermen.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Diekstra is not alone in his claim about the *Physiologus* that “its images and those of its medieval descendants survived when its natural history had long been discarded as fabulous.”⁵⁸ However, while the Anglo-Saxon composer of the Old English *Whale* poem may never have seen a manticore,⁵⁹ or even a lion, secondary knowledge of both *cetus* and *balena* creatures is quite possible.⁶⁰ Indeed, as Squires points out, the whale in the Old English poem “is seen as a familiar danger; it is *unwillum oft gemeted*” (“often encountered unwillingly”).⁶¹ The reason that medieval writers make use of the *Physiologus* descriptions of the two natures of the whale is therefore not necessarily ignorance; rather, their descriptions point to an acceptance of seemingly conflicting notions as simply part of a single, larger concept. Here, too, *natura* and *figura*, biology and allegory, are not mutually exclusive.

But if a medieval taxonomy does not distinguish as rigorously as many modern taxonomies do, the question arises whether we have been too rigorous in our “discarding of the fabulous”:

While the whale’s malicious intent which lies behind these described behaviours is of course fictitious, actual observation of whales seems to be found in both depictions. Surfaced whales’ long, broad backs, when seen from a distance, could appear to be islands.⁶²

⁵⁷ “et ea quae scribunt antique praeferimus quia non concordant cum expertis”: Albertus, *De animalibus* 24.1.23, ed. Stadler, 2:1525, lines 29–31; Albertus, *On Animals* 24.1.23, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1671; Albertus, *Man and the Beasts*, trans. Scanlan, 341.

⁵⁸ Diekstra, “The Physiologus, the Bestiaries and Medieval Animal Lore,” 142.

⁵⁹ Like the chimera, a manticore is made up of parts of a number of animals, with a human head, a red lion’s body, and usually a scorpion’s tail.

⁶⁰ Ian Riddler’s contribution to this volume (337–54 below) gives further insight into the familiarity (or lack thereof) of the Anglo-Saxons with whales. The next section of this paper will discuss the use of terminology in Old English texts and what conclusions we can draw from that about Anglo-Saxon categorizations. Other stories, such as two encounters with whales in Adomnán’s *Life of St Columba*, attest to more “realistic” accounts. For a discussion of this account, see Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 51–52. The descriptions of whales in Ælfric’s *Colloquy* and in the *Voyage of Obthere* in the Old English Orosius similarly suggest a certain general familiarity with the physical/natural creature within the period, though possibly again by proxy.

⁶¹ Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 27.

⁶² Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 48.

In what might have surprised Albertus Magnus, Szabo's observation suggests there may be kernels of truth buried in these fantastic pre-modern stories. The sight of a surfaced whale does bear a resemblance to an island, as Ambrose had already pointed out. Nonetheless, this *Physiologus natura* seems to be very elaborate for such a fleeting resemblance. A more nuanced explanation is offered by Albert Cook, who sees the origin of the story in a taboo island called Ashtóla mentioned by Arrian (ca. 86–160 AD) in *De Indica*, a description of the travels of Alexander in the area, and later by Strabo (64 BC–AD 21) in his *Geographica*.⁶³ This island brings destruction to all who enter it, and is tested by Alexander's admiral Nearchus. George and Yapp also suggest Nearchus as an explanation for this story, but then claim that the answer to this riddle is undoubtedly a sea turtle.⁶⁴ Cook goes further and traces a succession of stories of a dangerous island in the same vicinity, which is sometimes cursed, and later becomes animate, either as a fish or as a turtle, and sinks and thus drowns those present on its back.⁶⁵ Cook contends that the evolving tradition of the island-beast story is further enriched by external traditions; while tracing the introduction and transmission of the detail of sand on the creature, Cook suggests that the additional presence of grass in some stories may be linked to real "islands of shrubbery which float away from estuaries into tropical seas."⁶⁶

Cook does not offer an explanation for the other *natura* of our *Physiologus* creature, but mentions briefly that the feeding patterns described are more suggestive of a whale than of a turtle.⁶⁷ Szabo is slightly more explicit in this respect: "Also, some baleen whales' surface feeding patterns, with their huge mouths agape, could appear as those described in the *Physiologus*."⁶⁸ This would

⁶³ Albert S. Cook, ed., *The Old English Elene, Phoenix and Physiologus* (New Haven, 1919), lxiii. See lxiii–lxxiii for full discussion. Arrian: Arrianus, *De Indica* 31, in Flavius Arrianus, *Scripta Minora et Fragmenta*, ed. A. G. Roos, 2nd ed. corr. Gerhard Wirth, Bibliotheca Teubneriana (Leipzig, 1968; repr. Munich, 2002), 54–55; Strabo: *Strabonis Geographica* 15.2.13, ed. August Meineke, Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1854–1877), 3:1011–12.

⁶⁴ George and Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts*, 95.

⁶⁵ Cook cites additional examples of fish thought to be islands from Pseudo-Callisthenes, 2.38 (quoted by Cook, *Old English Elene*, lxxi). He also quotes (lxxiii) a story about a turtle that appears to be an island until some sailors try to build a fire on its back. This story is from Buzurk ibn Shahriyār al-Rām Hurmuzī, *Kitāb ʿajāyib al-Hind* 18, ["Marvellous Tales from India"], in *Livre des merveilles de l'Inde*, Arabic text ed. P. A. van der Lith, trans. (into French) L. Marcel Devic, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1883–1886), 36–38. Buzurk ibn Shahriyār was a tenth-century writer who collected stories told by sea captains (Cook, *Old English Elene*, lxxiii).

⁶⁶ Cook, *Old English Elene*, lxxii, n 2. He goes on to explain that "floating islets of matted trees are sometimes seen fifty or a hundred miles off the mouth of the Ganges."

⁶⁷ Cook, *Old English Elene*, lxxix–lxxx.

⁶⁸ Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes*, 48.

include the right whale, the larger creature which Scanlan sees in Albertus Magnus' descriptions. As Wayne Ledwell observes: "Grazing right whales may be seen skim feeding at the surface, with their mouths open and baleen visible."⁶⁹ Indeed, the smell of the whale's breath is quite overpowering. However, while Albertus' whale is "very often caught when its overpowering greed for herring drives it to follow the food fish into shallow waters,"⁷⁰ the right whale feeds only on crustaceans, not fish, and also grazes aimlessly, rather than targeting particular prey.⁷¹ Such a targeted hunt using a whale's breath is performed by other types of whales, however. The humpback whale, for example, hunts with bubbles:

Alone among the baleen whales, humpbacks use bubbles to trap or concentrate their prey. Perhaps the best-known method involves what is called a bubble net. The whale dives below a school of fish, and swims slowly to the surface in a spiral; as it does so, the animal releases from its blowholes columns of bubbles at regular intervals. Together, the columns form a circular or spiral barrier around the fish, preventing them from escaping and probably also packing them more tightly. When the "net" is complete, the whale lunges, with its huge mouth open, through the centre, engulfing a vast quantity of water and most of the school of fish. The water is flushed out through the baleen, and the trapped fish that remain in the mouth are swallowed.

A second technique involves the creation of a single burst of bubbles in a huge cloud. This bubble cloud may be 20 m in diameter; unlike the much smaller columns in a bubble net, it is probably released from the whale's mouth. The effect, however, is similar: it concentrates, traps and probably disorients prey, as well as acting as a huge screen which prevents the fish from seeing the lunging whale until it is too late.⁷²

Bubble fishing was discovered only relatively recently, once aerial photos and other forms of observations allowed a more complete picture (Fig. 12.6). Seen from a "medieval perspective," manuscript illustrations of Jonah and the whale, such as those in Figs. 12.3 and 12.4, possess a mouth similar to that of the humpback whale in Fig. 12.5. Any observations of whales hunting would have

⁶⁹ Wayne Ledwell, *Whales and Dolphins of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Portugal Cove-St. Phillips, 2005), 48.

⁷⁰ "Frequentissime tamen capitur quando allec insequens ex aviditate nimis in litus se impingit quod ad aquam redire non potest": Albertus, *De animalibus* 24.1.23, ed. Stadler, 2:1524, lines 12–13; Albertus, *On Animals* 24.1.23, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1669; Albertus, *Man and the Beasts*, trans. Scanlan, 338.

⁷¹ For more information on grazing patterns of the right whale and other whales, see Alaska Fisheries Science Center, "Marine Mammals Education Web," www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/education/cetaceans/right.php; last accessed 20 November 2011.

⁷² Clapham, *Humpback Whales*, 33.



Fig. 12.4: Jonah emerging from the fish: Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 76 G17 (s. xiii), fol. 55v.

Photo Credit: Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek

seen them from a similar position, with just the gaping mouth visible. A ship that gets close to a bubble-fishing whale would therefore first see an explosion of water, or a boiling sea of bubbles. In the case of air from the mouth, this would immediately be accompanied by the typical overpowering smell. Immediately afterwards, a school of fish would become visible, either at the surface or already in the mouth of the surfacing whale. In the case of the bubble net, the smell would become noticeable only as soon as the whale's mouth was above the surface. Of special interest in this technique is that the bubbles disorientate only smaller fish. Larger fish would not be so easily disorientated, just as the *Physiologus* indicates. While none of the possible explanations above are conclusive, they demonstrate that natural roots for the *Physiologus* descriptions may easily have been overlooked, especially after centuries of transmission and blending of different concepts in a grand game of Chinese Whispers.



Fig. 12.5: Humpback whale in lunge: Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies.
Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies.



Fig. 12.6: Bubblenet: Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies.
Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies.

Hwæl or *Hran*: Who is Who in Old English Usage?

According to the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*, there are two Old English words of interest in this discussion: *hwæl* and *hron/bran*.⁷³ Both are here referenced under sub-section 03 “Large member of /whale/,” but only *hwæl* is listed as a term to delineate general membership of the category of cetaceans (01). *Hran* also appears under 01.02 *delphinus*. Bosworth-Toller parallels *hwæl* with Old Icelandic *hvalr* and Old High German *wal*.⁷⁴ These terms have also developed into cognates of the modern term “whale.” No cognates are cited for *bran*, however, which the *Historical Thesaurus* ascribes only to the Anglo-Saxon period. No reference to *bran* occurs in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and it appears that the term ultimately went out of use. A search for both terms within the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* already demonstrates a preference for *hwæl* (sixty occurrences as opposed to twenty-seven references to *bran*).⁷⁵ *Hran*-compounds are, however, in a slight majority among the related (and more conservative) kennings. The largest group by far is that of kennings for “sea,” which produces *hwæles eðel*, *hwælmere*, *hwælweg*, but also *hronrad*, *hronmere*, *hrones næsse* in multiple occurrences. At first glance, this could suggest a shift in progress, from *bran* to *hwæl*. The glosses, however, demonstrate that the main semantic feature remains synchronic rather than diachronic, that is, there is no historical development or extension of the meaning to a wider semantic field: *cetus* is without fail glossed as *hwæl* (eighteen times). Only once does *cetus* appear with the additional meaning of *balena* in order to gloss *bran*. *Balena* is more often translated as *bran* (nine times), with only four instances that connect *hwæl* and *balena*, two of which also mention *bran*. This relatively clear distinction between the two sets of terms (*cetus/hwæl* and *balena/bran*) is also apparent in other usage. All references to the scriptural attestations in Old English—Jonah, Leviathan, and the fifth day of Creation—use *hwæl*, and two further references to the “biggest” fish use *hwæl* as well. The exclusivity of *cetus* in scriptural sources is therefore mirrored in the Old English language choice. *Hwæl* appears to be the more popular word, both because the topics that are linked to this term are more frequent, and because the Latin term *cetus* is more frequent than *balena*.

In some of the biological categorizations, however, the uses of Old English and Latin terms contradict each other. *Hran* can, next to *balena*, also represent a

⁷³ C. Kay, J. Roberts, M. Samuels, and I. Wotherspoon, “Category 01.02.06.20” in *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary with additional material from A Thesaurus of Old English* (Oxford, 2009), 295.

⁷⁴ See Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *hwæl*.

⁷⁵ *Dictionary of Old English* [Electronic Resource]: Old English Corpus (Toronto: University of Toronto). The search which underlies all of the following frequencies used the following spellings: *hwæl*, *hwal*, *bran*, and *hron*. Only those referring to fishes of some kind were counted.

dolphin, or *musculus vel pilina* (mussels) according to a small group of glosses. In comparison, I noted above (287) that Lewis and Short list *cetus* as a cognate for dolphin, not *balena*. These uses of *bran* suggest that a smaller size was associated with this term. This is also attested in other sources. In the *Glossae in Psalmos*, for example, we are told exactly how many fish feed a seal, how many seals a *bron*, and how many *brona* a *hwæl*.⁷⁶ The smaller size of the whale is nonetheless still dangerous, as Ælfric's fisherman tells us in the *Colloquy*.⁷⁷ As mentioned before, George and Yapp, as well as Szabo, point out that the walrus is related to *balena*. In Germanic languages, however, it is associated with the *hwæl*. This is made explicit in its name: *horsbwæl* in Old English is cognate with *hross-hwæl* in Icelandic and *Walross* in German.⁷⁸ Furthermore, one of three existing references to the *hwælhunta*, the hunter of whales, glosses *cetarius*. As noted above, Albertus Magnus also makes a connection between the walrus and *cetus*, stating that

Thongs made from walrus hide are very durable and strong enough to lift ponderous weights when used in a block and tackle. Year round, one can find them offered for sale in the Cologne marketplace.⁷⁹

Another Old English text makes similar remarks about the usefulness of the walrus' skin for rope-making. Ohthere's description of his voyages in the Old English *Orosius*, the same location as the other two references to *hwælhunta*, describes the value of the walrus as commercial product:

Swiþost he for ðider, to eacan þæs landes sceawunge, for þæm horshwælum, for ðæm hie habbað swiþe æpele ban on hiora toþum — þa teð hie brohton sume þæm cyninge —] hiora hyd bið swiðe god to sciprapum. Se hwæl bið micle læssa þonne oðre hwalas: ne bið he lengra ðonne syfan elna lang.⁸⁰

[He went there mainly, apart from the exploration of the country, because of the walruses, because they have most excellent bones in their teeth — they brought some of the teeth to the king — and their hide is very good for the production of ship-ropes. The whale is much smaller than other whales, not longer than seven ells long.]

⁷⁶ A. S. Napier, "Glossae in Psalmos," in idem, *Old English Glosses Chiefly Unpublished* (Oxford, 1900), 220.

⁷⁷ Ælfric may here refer to a minke whale, or a lesser rorqual, for instance.

⁷⁸ See Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *horsbwæl*.

⁷⁹ "Corrigiae autem corii eius fortissimae sunt, ad magna pondera sublevanda per trocleas, et in Coloniensi foro semper venales perhibentur": Albertus, *De animalibus* 24.3.23, ed Stadler, 2:1525, lines 26–28; Albertus, *On Animals* 24.3.23, trans. Kitchell and Resnick, 2:1669; Albertus, *Man and the Beasts*, trans. Scanlan, 341.

⁸⁰ Janet Bately, ed., *The Old English Orosius* 1.1, EETS, s.s. 6 (Oxford, 1980), 14–15.

Here we have a taxonomic sub-categorization of the walrus as part of the *hwæl* family. While the description itself comes to King Alfred's court through a Viking trader, the voice of the text is that of a courtier, and the word-choice is therefore ultimately Anglo-Saxon. The two Old English terms *hwæl* and *bran* thus fulfil similar functions to their Latin counterparts, but also highlight some notable variations. Fluctuations of meaning and multiple referents are found within biological taxonomy and in connection with scriptural references and symbolic use in general. Yet if the blurring of boundaries between signifier and concept makes the categories of whale/monster, *cetus/balena*, and *hwæl/bran* confusing, such confusion is nevertheless potentially fruitful for giving rise to the various associative structures that so powerfully enrich Old English poetry.

Ahab and the Old English Whale: Conflating Categories of Creature and Demon

Ishmael's words quoted at the beginning of this paper, spoken among the fossil bones of his great Leviathans, express all of the awe, fascination, and terror in the complex conceptual mix that makes up the "medieval whale." Here we have nothing but the utmost respect for the dangerous foe that Ahab fought, and that stops Ælfric's fisherman from going out to sea. Here we are confronted with the terror inspired by that most ancient and powerful of creatures: Leviathan himself. Ishmael taps into an age-old emotion that links directly to the description in Job of the king of the children of pride. This is not just one creature, but an expression of the concept of a being which is repeatedly reincarnated in all our later renderings, adapted and adjusted, but always an heir to that primeval force. What makes the Old English *Whale* poem stand out from other renderings of the *Physiologus* is that it evokes the same mixture of emotions as Ishmael's words.

As noted above, *The Whale* broadly follows the classic pattern: an introduction precedes the *natura* of the island fish, which is itself followed by the corresponding *figura*. Then comes the second set of *natura/figura*, this time concerning the hunting using the sweet smell method. A concluding section explicates the *sensus moralis*, the message that readers are supposed to draw from all of the above. The literal story of *The Whale* is straightforward and unsurprising. What makes it special is how the story is told. The poet develops a continuous series of contrasts, the first of which is a successful link between the known fish and the mythical being of the *Physiologus*: the poet proposes to tell us of "þam miclan hwale" (line 3), which connotes both the larger whales, as seen in *Orosius*, and the *cete grandia* of Genesis.

Se bið unwillum oft gemeted,
frecne on ferðgrim, fareðlacendum,

nīþþa gehwylcum; þam is noma cenned,
fyrnstreama geflotan, Fastitocalon. (*The Whale*, lines 4–7)

[It is often met unwillingly by sailors, wicked and savage in all attacks; that one is known by the name Fastitocalon, the floater of ancient seas.]

This creature represents a real danger, something that can be encountered by any seafarer on any journey. Further references to the *micla hwal* (“large whale,” line 47), and the *wæterþisa wolnc* (“proud water creature,” line 50) also suggest a more realistic and literal encounter with a whale. Bosworth-Toller translates *wæterþisa* as “water rusher,” a literal translation of *balena*. But the passage above also clearly locates the poem (and the whale) in the *Physiologus* tradition: *Fastitocalon* has been identified as an Irish rendering of *aspidochelon* (ἀσπίδοχελώνη), the Greek term for asp-turtle.⁸¹ Its nickname “floater of ancient seas” enforces that link to the old textual tradition. Finally, a fourth aspect, Leviathan, is introduced in these few lines.

Physiologus texts usually describe the whale as a natural creature, albeit endowed with seemingly fantastic characteristics, and then demonstrate how these characteristics serve to illustrate something much more sinister. The devil himself, however, usually remains at a safe distance, in a secondary frame of reference, ready to be discussed and considered, albeit in a highly detached manner. *The Whale* nominally keeps this distinction through the phrase *swa biþ* (so is) at the beginning of both explicit *figura* sections (lines 32 and 62). But the big whale we met at the beginning of the poem is already more than just deceitful. It is *frecne* (wicked) and *ferðgrim* (savage), words that set up a scene capitalizing on the terror the whale can inspire. Moreover, in line 24 it is described as *facnes cræftig* (skilful in deceit), a term that links it directly to the devil, who appears as *se fæcna* in line 71. But the whale is also a malicious being in its own right, not just a mirror of the devil as such:

ðonne semninga on sealtne wæg
mid þa noþe niþer gewiteþ
garsecgas gæst, grund geseceð,
ond þonne in deaðsele drence bifæsteð
scipu mid scealcum (*The Whale* 27–31).

[Then suddenly the spirit of the Ocean goes with its treasure downwards, searches the abyss, and fastens the ships with crew—drowning—in the halls of death.]

Bosworth-Toller reminds us that *garsecg* (literally “spear-man”) is a reference to a type of Ocean, an analogue to Neptune, and that this goes back to a practice

⁸¹ Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 71.

to “place spears in the hands of the images of heathen gods.”⁸² The whale therefore seems to be depicted here as a heathen demon which endeavors to draw the unsuspecting into *deaðsele*, a rare term otherwise associated with hell.⁸³ Indeed, this would not be the only instance in Germanic lore in which a demon whale is used by a pagan deity to harm Christians. Szabo, following a similar train of thought, refers us to *Eiríks saga*, where a group of Christian settlers from Greenland and Iceland are poisoned by a whale sent by Thor in Vinland.⁸⁴ One of the main themes within the Old English *Whale* poem similarly emphasizes the demon whale as a dangerous and deceptive creature in which it is easy to place misled trust. Three times it appears to be an *ealond* (lines 12, 16 and 21), but, when the ship anchors, it turns itself into an *unlond* (line 14), a “not-land.” As Squires points out, the term only occurs once more in Old English poetry, there alluding to landscapes such as the fens, which “are not dry land.”⁸⁵ The particular reference “not-land,” as opposed to the specific naming of another kind of terrain, affirms that the importance here lies in the deception.

The classic story of Jonah in the belly of the fish underlies the narration of the second *natura* in the poem, where parallel word structures firmly link the grim jaws of the whale that clash together (he “hlemmeð togædre / grimme goman” [he “snaps together the fierce jaws”]; lines 62–63) to the enforced doors of hell (“he þa grimman goman bihlemmeð / [. . .] fæste togædre, helle hlinduru” [“he snaps the first jaws tightly together, . . . the doors of hell”]) (lines 76–78). Similar allusions, such as the parallelism between opening (*ontynan*) the mouth (*muð*), both in line 53 and *hell* in line 68, further suggest that these jaws of the whale are the hell mouth, ever present, not just a symbol for it. Gone is the safe distance between the reader and the jaws of hell. The natural animal has become a demon.

Conclusion

The Old English *Whale* poem makes use of numerous frames of reference for the whale in order to create an immediacy which is unusual for the *Physiologus* stories. It can do so because the lines between the different conceptual categories

⁸² Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *garsecg*.

⁸³ For an explanation of the meaning of *deaðsele*, see Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 82.

⁸⁴ Vicky E. Szabo, “Bad to the Bone? The Unnatural History of the Monstrous Medieval Whales,” *The Heroic Age* 8 (2005), §17; <http://www.heroicage.org/issues/8/szabo.html>. Cf. *Eiríks saga Rauða*, in *Eyrbyggja saga: Brands þátr Qrva, Eiríks saga Rauða, Grænlandinga saga, Grænlandinga þátr*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinnson, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík, 1985), 425; *Eiríks Saga* 8, in *Vinland Sagas: Grænlandinga Saga and Eirík's Saga*, ed. and trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (New York, 1965), 96.

⁸⁵ Squires, *Old English Physiologus*, 75.

are sufficiently blurred. Such ambiguity, however, promotes semantic shifts, and we see in later texts how both *cetus* and *hwæl* take over the biological taxonomies of the whale, alongside the old myths and scriptural references to Leviathan and other sea-monsters of old. Once the quest for a new type of scientific rigor made such a blend undesirable, supposedly fantastic elements became discarded. The images nevertheless remain, in stories, in metaphors, and in unexplained fears and stereotypes. Separated from its factual roots, the malevolent whale lives on as a ghost, and possibly will continue to exist—in some form—until “all humane ages are over.”

