An Interpretion of Brunetto Latini's *Tresor* in a Fifteenth-Century Miscellany Manuscript

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The fantastic is rooted in the mundane and the search for truth ultimately requires the creative faculty of imagination. So it will come as no surprise that any non-fictional work, especially one that is not scientific in the modern sense, relies on fictions, not only in the sphere of explanation, but also in the discovery phase. This is true in the case of Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, a popular cultural *summa* of the mid-to-late thirteenth century that has come down to us in nearly one hundred manuscripts (and in many other codices if we include the Tuscan versions).[1] Originally written in French during his exile at the hands of the Florentine and Tuscan Ghibellines, the work was translated into the vernacular, circulating widely among the different ranks of the merchant and artisanal classes.[2] Relying on ancient sources, Brunetto's *Tresor* treats the practi-

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1 Brunetto Latini, *Tresor*, ed. P. G. Beltrami, P. Squillacioti, P. Torri, & S. Vatteroni (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), xlvii–lv. Brunetto Latini, *Il Tesore di M. Brunetto Latino Firentino, precettore del Divino Poeta Dante nel qual si tratta di tutte le cose che a mortali se apertengono* (Venice: Gioan Antonio & Fratelli da Sabbio, ad instanza di Nicolo Garanta & Francesco da Salo libbrari & compagni, 1528).

2 As one of the great public intellectuals of Medieval Italy, Brunetto's works enjoyed a wide readership, despite Dante's fictional condemnation of him. Whatever the *Tresor*'s success, Dante's vivid representation of their encounter among the sodomites demonstrates his *maestro*'s moral and, possibly, linguistic shortcomings. For instance, in speaking about contemporary Florence, Brunetto uses naturalistic words and metaphors, such as, "lungi fia dal becco l'erba" ("keep the grass far from the goat's mouth," *Inferno* XV 72) and "Faccian le bestie fiesolane strame/di lor medesime" ("Let the beasts from Fiesole make forage of themselves," vv. 73–74), not to mention, among others, references to "lazzi sorbi" ("sour sorbs," v. 65), "dolce fico" ("sweet fig," v. 66), and "letame" ("dunghill," v. 75). We would expect a loftier linguistic register from this great rhetorician. In

cal matters and philosophical concerns of men, such as cosmology and world history in Book One. He also describes the many wonders both natural and unnatural in his bestiary. Book Two is essentially a popularization of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*; whereas in Book Three Brunetto reprises Aristotelian rhetoric as a guide for his contemporaries engaged in civic politics, updating it and contextualizing it for the unstable medieval Italian commune. The latter two books have enjoyed critical attention because of their author's status as a leading civic figure in his day and as an instance of how Aristotle's politics and rhetoric were interpreted and applied in thirteenth-century Italy. We shall consider Book One and, in particular, Brunetto's bestiary as a representation of a collective subjective understanding of mankind's relationship with nature. At the same time, to focus on one section without consideration of the others is to undermine the integrity of Ser Brunetto's intellectual project. The different books and, hence, themes of the *Tresor* are germane to one another in a way that is not readily evident to modern readers.

At the time of the *Tresor*'s composition, reason and argument were the preponderant features of intellectual discourse and in representing the world. However, in commerce and technology, as well as in painting and sculpture, the tendency toward a more scientific and secular sensibility had begun to assert itself. So, why is Brunetto's bestiary being copied in the fifteenth century nearly two hundred years after its author's death (and fictional condemnation to Hell) and why was his *Tresor* printed during the Renaissance? To put it bluntly, why would fifteenth and sixteenth century audiences wish to read an outdated description of the world? Was it respect for Brunetto or the power of received knowledge? Or was there some other reason, such as, perhaps a disconnect between the natural philosophy of elite intellectuals and popular beliefs about the world? Beliefs die slowly even in the face of incontrovertible evidence; but typically they die not because they are proven scientifically false, but because they no longer serve a practical purpose.[3]

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the *Convivio* (I xi, 1–2) moreover, the poet condemns those writers who "a perpetuale infamia e depressione de li malvagi uomini d'Italia commendano lo volgare altrui e lo loro proprio dispregiano" ("to the perpetual infamy and discredit of the wicked in Italy commend other vernaculars but despise their own"), perhaps including among them Brunetto. I am grateful to Prof. Franco Masciandaro for his reflections about Dante's Brunetto.

3 In their monumental study, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park [*Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998)] examine the evolution of

In this paper therefore, I will discuss the enduring fascination with Brunetto's bestiary as an example of the interdependence between science and philosophy on the one hand and vernacular thinking and beliefs on the other. I will illustrate this point with a fifteenth-century manuscript, a miscellany of literary, religious, cosmographic, and mercantile texts that had aesthetic, philosophical, and also practical value to its owners and readers. It is worth stating that most works of the Italian Middle Ages and Renaissance have come down to us in miscellanies, the general term used by many rare book librarians, cataloguers, and scholars to denote codices containing heterogeneous texts. Although miscellanies themselves are distinct from anthologies (that feature an editorial plan) and from *zibaldoni* (or author-centered notebooks containing a variety of texts, such as letters, notes, and drafts of works), they are very complicated material artifacts. Miscellanies typically contain a hodgepodge of texts that are gathered catch as catch can. Of course, this is not always the case as we know and, in fact, it is a myth of sorts that manuscript scholars must debunk. As I will attempt to show, Brunetto's bestiary appears alongside other texts (see note 6) that initially seem unconnected in the manuscript discussed below. Nevertheless, contemporary readers cannot help but notice the thematic complementarity between several of the texts and, more importantly, the overall scientific orientation of the manuscript's contents. Graphic features (such as script, rulings, text layout) and also para-texts (such as colophons and rubrics) also enhance a sense of a book's structural unity and they also lend a "feel" to the book. If miscellanies necessarily contain different texts and are indeed idiosyncratic collections, they often present underlying formal or thematic qualities that allow readers to see interconnections between the contents. In other words, it behooves scholars to examine what makes a miscellany so idiosyncratic and different from another miscellany containing the same or similar works. Miscellanies moreover, like other manuscript genres, are often copied over a time period that reflects the changing sensibility of scribes and readers. For the above and for many other reasons, therefore, miscellanies are perhaps the most interesting of ancient artifacts. They often provide a window on

"wonder" in its myriad forms as an object of critical inquiry for medieval and early modern writers and thinkers. This paper deals more with the reasons for scientific anachronisms about the natural world and how they continued to circulate widely in the mercantile class than with the development of wonder as an intellectual category.

the cultural imagination of an earlier period and they allow scholars to make reasonable assumptions about the scribes' and readers' beliefs, attitudes, and taste.

As the Greek *Physiologus* was transformed by Isidore of Seville in the seventh century and by other medieval thinkers to suit the Christian context, scholars have considered bestiaries as a mystical zoology that reflect an allegorical or moralizing vision of reality. Modern scholars have applied their knowledge of bestiaries to interpret animal imagery in art and architecture. At least one scholar, however, Ron Baxter, has criticized the traditional view of bestiaries as a 'system' of mystical zoology that was first set forth in the nineteenth century, arguing that it reflects more the bias of those scholars than the attitudes of medieval readers.[4] Because much of the information in bestiaries "could not be based on observation, since the animals in question do not behave like this even when they exist,"[5] we can assume that the interpretation of bestiaries varied and likely depended on the different contexts of their production and consumption. In short, a bestiary means one thing to a community of monks living in a monastery of central Italy and something else to merchants and craftspeople in Milan. Brunetto himself, a lay intellectual, would likely have been aware of this fact. Besides the classical sources of the genre, Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, Livy, and the *Physiologus*, and Latin versions of Aristotle, he would have been readily familiar with the French bestiaries that had long circulated widely, such as the one assembled by Pierre de Beauvais and the very popular *Bestiare d'Amour* of Richard de Fournival.

Brunetto's bestiary occupies chapters 130–200 of Book One and it begins with the description of all manners of 'fish' and ends with that of the 'bear'. Aside from the broad taxonomy of fish, reptiles, fowls, and mammals, the bestiary considers crocodiles, dolphins, hippopotami, and sirens as fish; chameleons and ants as mammals; and, includes, of course, a description of the fiercest of beasts, the unicorn which can only be tamed by a virgin.

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4 Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users in the Middle Ages* (London: Sutton, 1998), 6.

5 Ibid., p. 72.

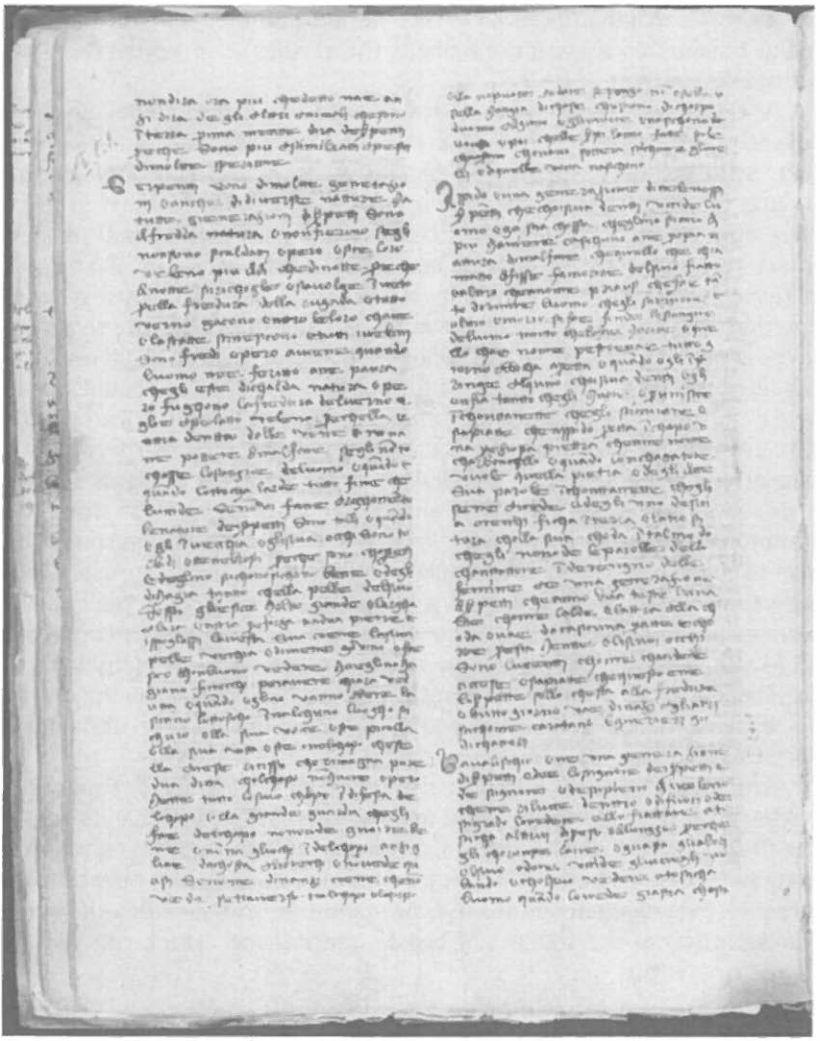

Figure 26: New Haven, CT, Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 52v.

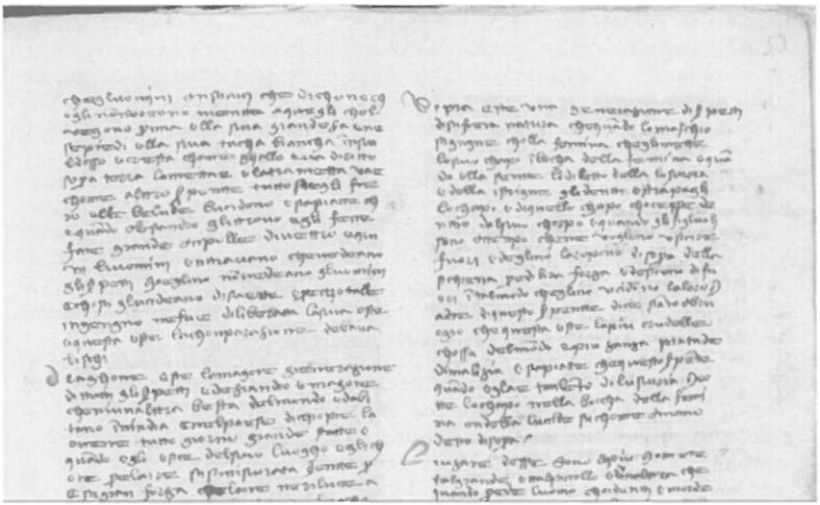

Figure 27: New Haven, CT Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 53r.

Let us briefly consider Brunetto's description of the 'basilisk' in an early-fifteenth century manuscript, New Haven, Beinecke Manuscript and Rare Book Library, 1030 (Figure 26 and 27).[6]

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6 Written in the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth-century:
1. fol. 1r–2r. Inscriptions and entries with dates of 1484 and 1501.
2. fol. 2v–18v. Ricordi, 1423 // Domenicho Antonio di domenicho delmonte asansovino ... che tu gli presti cio chio o lasciato.
3. fol. 20r–24r. Sermons. Do(meni)ca dopo la penti(coste) // Multi sunt vochati pauci vero electi amen ... e la madre / di gesu xpo vera dovete sapere charisimi chel nostro signore gesu xpo ordino.
4. fol. 25r–48r. Goro Dati, *La sfera*. Al padre e figlo allo spiritto santo ... lasia mag(i)ore il fiume tanai.
5. fol. 50r–75r. Brunetto Latini, selections from *Il Tresor* (bks. 3, 4, 5, 8, 9), Et pero le gentti si amagionano sopra ... po / polo a ttutte umanittade che avere.
6. fol. 76r–81r: Artte di stolomia (Book about prognostications and astrology). Artte di stolomia prencipiatta per giafette figliolo di noe perittrovare il suo figluolo ... E chosi sara anchora delle femine che / nasceranno in questi sengni.
7. fol. 81v–108r: Detta charttigine e buono portto (Portolan). Detta charttigine e buono porto e a inannsi unisolla pichola dinansi apuntta/lungha circha a 1° miglio ... qui finisce ilibro del maestro deportti deo graziase (sic).

Bavalischio ène una gienerazione di serpentti. Ed èe lo signore dei serpentti; ~~ed è signore~~ ed è sì pleno di veleno che ne rilucie denttro e di fuori; ed è sì grado lo vedere e·llo fiattare atosicha alttrui dipresso o di lungge perché gli choronpe l'aire e guasta gli abori; e 'l suo odore uccide gli uccegli volando e cho' 'l suo vedere atosicha l'uomo quando lo vede; grasia chosa che gli uomini ansiani che dichono ch' egli non nuocc(i)ono nientte a quegli che 'l vegono prima. E lla sua grandezza ène se' piedi e lla sua tacha biancha in sul dosso e cresta chome ghallo; e va diritto sopra terra la mettàe e l'altra mettà vae chome l'alttro serpentte tutto sù. Egli [è] fiero e lle belude l'ucidono e sapiatte che quando Alesandro gli ttrovò, egli fecie fare grande anpolle di vettro e giùvi li uomini enttravano che vedeano gli serpenti ma eglino non vedeano gli uomini e chosì gli ucideano di saette; e per chottale ingengno ne fue diliberatta la sua oste e questa oste la chonparazione de bavalischi (cc. 52v–53r).

Bavalischio (Basilisk) is a kind of serpent. And it is the king of serpents. And it is king, and it is so full of venom that it shines inside and out. And it is so pleasant to behold, and its breath poisons anyone who is near or far because it corrupts the air and lays waste to the trees, and its odor kills birds that fly by and with its stare poisons man when he sees it; despite this, elderly men say that it does not hurt the first person that sees it at all. And it is six feet long and has a white spot on its back and a crest like a rooster. And it moves with half of its body erect on the ground and the other half like other serpents with its head raised. It is fierce, and weasels kill it. And know that when Alexander found one, he had great jars of glass made and he had several of his men hide within them who could see the serpents, but the serpents could not see them; and so they killed the creatures with arrows. And with that ingenious idea, Alexander's host was delivered and freed from chance encounters with the basilisks.

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8. Three unattributed sonnets (*Cara vetoria e de virtù ornata*, *Com'animal c(h)'è in cac(i)a ad altrui è g(i)oco*, *Ricordati ora mai c(h)e cener sei*) on a small loose leaf (219mm x 114) inserted inside front cover.
Paper (watermark very similar to Briquet Tour 15864 documented in Lucca, 1419 and Florence, 1422–27), 110 cc. (109 and 110 are blank), modern foliation in lead in the top right corner of recto and ancient numbering to c. 19 in brown ink, the same used for texts, 295 x 220. Vertical lines ruled in lead, except for *Tesor* and *Artte di Stolomia* written in double columns.
I^8(-3a, -6b), II^8 (-5a, -7a), III^8 (-7b), IV^8 (-1a), V–VII^8
Written in a simple, unadorned *mercantesca* by one hand, with the exception of the *ricordi* at the beginning of the book that is written in another, more cursive, mercantile script.
There are painted initials and illustrations in the section of the *Sfera*, as well as running headers in the *ricordi* section with the dates 1422–24.

In Isidore's *Etymologiae*,[7] *basiliscus*, or "little king," is a reptile that is about six inches long and has a white spot shaped like a "diadem."[8] It is similar to scorpions in that it seeks dry places and bites its enemies after coming to water, making its victims hydrophobic and lymphatic. It has a crest, like a rooster, with a snake's tail and typically extends the front part of its body upward as in the description. We shall return to this description shortly and have more to say about the manuscript. Our purpose here is simply to offer one example of the wondrous beasts described in bestiaries.[9]

At the end of Book One the author states his reason for the partial and idiosyncratic structure of his work to this point, claiming that

> Perché se il Maestro l'avesse voluta mettere più estesamente per iscritto e mostrare di ciascuna cosa il come e il perché, il libro sarebbe stato tanto grande da non finire più, perché a questo scopo sarebbero state necessarie tutte le arti e tutta la filosofia. 2. Per questo dice il Maestro che la prima parte del suo tesoro è in denari contanti. E come gli uomini non potrebbero venire a capo dei propri bisogni e delle loro attività senza soldi, allo stesso modo non potrebbero riconoscere la verità delle cose umane se non conoscessero questa prima parte del trattato (Latini, *Tresor*, I 200, i–ii).[10]

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7 Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis. De natura rerum liber*, ed. Gustavus Becker (Amsterdam: Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert, 1967), xii, 4, 6–9.

8 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935–63), viii, 21, 33, and xxix, 4, 19.

9 Paula Findlen, in her essay, "Inventing Nature: Commerce, Art, and Science in the Early Modern Cabinet of Curiosities," in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Paula Findlen and P. H. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 297–323, analyzes the Renaissance's fascination with dragon-like figures, such as the hydra and the basilisk, and in particular the creation and collecting of real and fake animals. She offers a brief history of the representation of the basilisk from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries, stating that: "The longevity of the basilisk, well beyond the period in which there was any doubt about its authenticity, suggests the importance of understanding the relations between science and art in the early modern period. Certainly the decision to make basilisks a prominent part of the iconography of natural history was a contributing factor. Each image created a prototype of an object that could be made by looking at its engraving, and remade by copying these images into new natural histories." (p. 313). The general fascination with the fictitious animal in the Renaissance was based on a long tradition of verbal descriptions and illustration in bestiaries and other works from antiquity through the Middle Ages and reflected the coexistence of empirical and folkloric views of nature.

10 The French version reads: "Car se le maistre le vosist plus largement metre en

> Because if the Master (i.e. Brunetto) had wanted to lay it out in writing further and show the how and the why of each thing, the book would have been infinitely great, and all of the arts and all of philosophy would have been necessary to this end. For this reason, the Master says that the first part of his treasure is hard currency. And just as men would not be able to satisfy their needs and conduct their business without money, in the same way they could not understand the truths that concern mankind if they did not know the first part of this treatise.

Cosmology, world and natural history have been epitomized for editorial reasons, with clearly an eye to the practical needs of Brunetto's public, rather than to the subject matter that requires a more exhaustive treatment. The second part of his statement is particularly intriguing because his comparison between commerce and the structure of his work reveals an awareness about his primary audience's pragmatic sensibility ("And just as men could not satisfy their needs and conclude their business without money, they could not understand the truths that concern mankind if they did not know the first part of this treatise.").

For Brunetto, the topics of Book One belong to the realm of theory that comprises the first body of philosophy. Thus, he is less concerned with confirming or dispelling the received science of his time, as he is with providing the necessary background for the more practical and logical truths of his treasure, that is, his treatment of Aristotelian ethics, political principles, and rhetoric. At the same time, his acceptance of this received body of knowledge contained in the first book, including the bestiary, also legitimates what is the subtext of Books Two and Three, the critique of Florentine politics, by linking it to traditional beliefs about the world, defusing any potential controversy about his text. Given the overall context of the *Tresor* therefore, Brunetto's bestiary is clearly not a guide to religious allegory, at least in the conventional sense of contemporary art history and literary criticism, and it can be read for its political symbolism (similar to the political interpretation of the beasts at

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escrit et mostrer de chascune chose por quoi et coment, le livre seroit grant sens fin, car a ce besoingneroient toutes les ars et toute philosophie. Et por ce dit li maistres que la premiere partie de son tresor est en deniers contanz. Et si come les genz ne porroient pas chevir lor beseignes et lor mercheandises sens monoie, tout autresi ne porroient il savoir la certeineté des humanes choses se il ne seussent ceste premiere partie dou conte" (Brunetto Latini, *Tresor*, ed. P. G. Beltrami et al., 326).

the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*),[11] or even as a repertoire that blends empirical and fantastic descriptions.

Merchants and politicians probably interpreted bestiaries differently from priests, as we have already mentioned. What matters is not that the descriptions correspond to real life, but that they reflect an understanding about the interrelation between the real and the fantastic in a socially and culturally acceptable way, different from, but also analogous to, our own ability to suspend our disbelief in reading fiction and viewing film. And like Baxter, I am not keen to interpret bestiaries, especially Brunetto's, as an instance of natural history (unless we mean 'stories about nature,' rather than as an empirical, early scientific account of the animal world) because of the danger of anachronism. I do believe, however, that Brunetto's bestiary illustrates a secular sensibility about the interplay between rational and creative faculties at a time when both were considered distinct, but not separate, intellectual functions and when both were beginning to be interpreted as being integral to each other. This will be evident later on in Dante's *Commedia* in which imagination even trumps reason as the necessary cause of the poet's vision and salvation. Brunetto is, therefore, an anti-Scholastic thinker despite being heavily influenced by the Scholastics.

The secular and pre-scientific attitude that I am referring to can be illustrated in Beinecke 1030 and in a handbook of popular science, Girolamo Manfredi's *Liber de homine*, better known as *Il libro del perché*.[12] Beinecke 1030 is a Florentine merchant miscellany manuscript of 110 paper *chartae* written in a modest, rapidly executed mercantile cursive. Dating to the 1420's, it contains business accounts, religious homilies, an illustrated version of Goro Dati's cosmological poem in *ottave*, the *Sfera*, excerpts from Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, an astrological treatise (*Artte di stolomia*), and a portolan, that is, a guidebook to ports in and around the Mediterranean Sea. There are also three sonnets written in another hand likely that of one of the manuscript's owners on a smaller sheet that has been tucked into the front of the volume. Copied almost entirely by one scribe, this early fifteenth century compilation of vernacular texts clearly has a literary, religious, scientific, and practical character. The particular

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11 Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia. Nuovo testo critico secondo i più antichi manoscritti fiorentini*, ed. A. Lanza (Roma: DeRubeis, 1995).

12 Girolamo Manfredi, *Liber de homine* (Bologna: Ugo Ruggerius & Doninus Bertochus, 1474).

versions themselves are interesting, if not fascinating, not in the usual genealogical sense of text critics, but as documents of the writing and linguistic practices of the scribe and the book's readers and for what it reveals about its owners' understanding and attitudes about the world. In one of the colophons, Domenico di Neri di Miniato del Sera recounts how he inherited this manuscript from his deceased father because (Domenico, and probably Neri) (Figure 28):

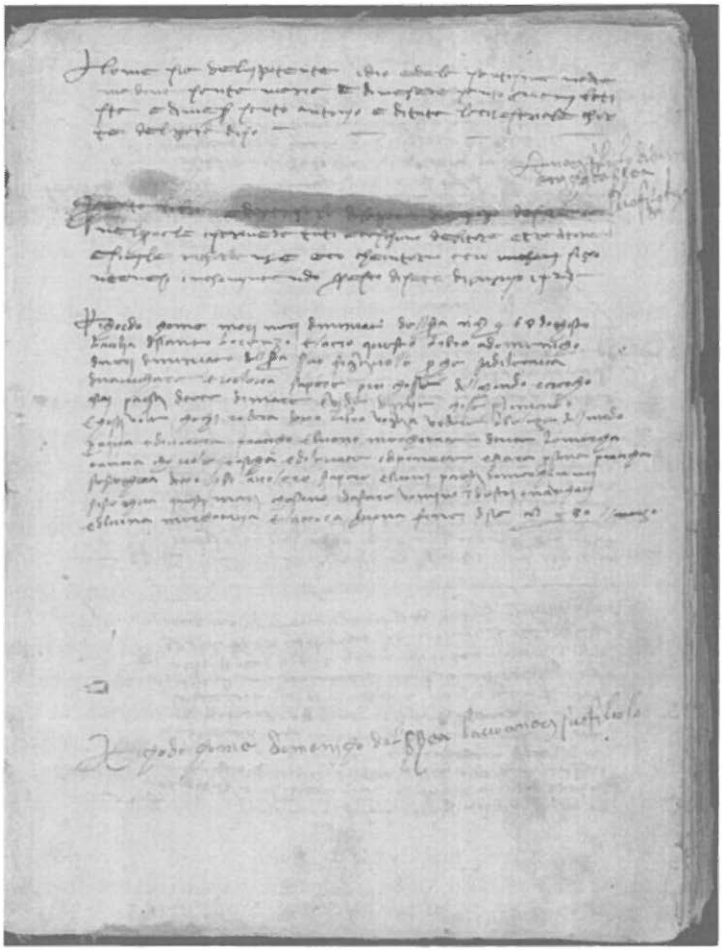

Figure 28: New Haven, CT Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 2r.

... si diletava di navichare e voleva sapere più chosse del mondo, e cierchò asai paesi di tere di mare e vide d'ognie chose per lo mondo. E chosì vole che chi vedrà detto libro voglia vedere le beleze dell mondo per aqua e diventerà praticho e buono merchatante di tuta le merchatantia che vole toscha e di levante o di ponentte; e sarà persona praticha se seghua detto libro a volere sapere e' buoni paesi da merchatanti; si seghua questi mari che sono da fare uomini industri e navichanti e di buona merchatantia e lascierà buona fine di sé. M480 marzo (*c.* 2r).

... he enjoyed traveling by sea and wanted to know many things about the world. And he traveled many countries by land and by sea, and he saw all types of things in the world; and so he wanted that, whoever will read this book, will also want to see the beauties of the world by sea and will become an expert and good merchant of all kinds of goods, be they from Tuscany, the East, or the West. And that person will become expert if he follows this book in order to know which are the good countries to do business with. He must travel these seas that make men industrious and seafaring and good merchants and he will have made something of himself. March 1480.

Domenico is writing for his son, Neri, and he, too, leaves his mark in the book in 1501. The Del Seras were active in the wine trade in Florence and were probably prominent members of a lower guild.[13] Although they were not exactly among the city's richest and most powerful families, they certainly had high expectations for themselves as merchants. Three generations cherished the volume for the information it conveyed. But from Domenico's inscription it is also clear that the book was a talisman of their mercantile identity, as "uomini industri e navichanti e di buona merchatantia."

The section of Brunetto's *Tresor* occupies 25 *chartae* in the middle part of the codex. The work has clearly been anthologized. Dispensing entirely with the author's prolegomena, the sections about ancient and modern world history and with Latini's cosmography, the scribe of Beinecke 1030 cuts to the chase and begins with the sound advice about how to pick out a good piece of real estate for home building. Without any significant interruption in the text, he copies ample sections of Bru-

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13 In documents concerning the Florentine *Tratte of Office Holders* (David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, A. Molho, and R. Barducci, eds., *Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532*, machine readable data file, Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG, Brown University [Providence, R. I., 2002]). Neri di Miniato del Sera was selected as a consul of the Arte dei Vinattieri on 25 August 1468, but is also listed as having recently died at the time of his election.

netto's bestiary. As we stated above, many of the names of animals are distorted and reflect popular spellings (such as *chorcorello* for *coccodrillo* and *inpotaine* for *ippopotamo*). The bestiary is followed by abridged versions of Books Two and Three. The sections are all unnumbered and untitled in the codex. Excerpts aside, a collation of the text with a Renaissance edition published in Venice (Latini 1528) and Pietro Beltrami's recent edition of the *Tresor* reveals substantial differences in form and content between them. The abridged version in the Beinecke manuscript reflects a different editorial plan and purpose of copy. It is and is not Brunetto's text because it reflects a very different context of production from Brunetto's original and it also reveals the scribe's and owners' use value. Latini composed his work for the cadre of civic intellectuals during the Florentine commune, whereas the Del Seras (who were also involved in local guild politics) are interpreting their abridged version of the *Tresor* at the time of segneurial rule. The immediate purpose of their manuscript copy is to make them better merchants, not necessarily better citizens. It is safe to say that whatever meaning the *Tresor*'s bestiary had for its author and his contemporaries therefore is different in Beinecke 1030. If Latini's bestiary tells 'stories about nature' that mix popular myth with a hint of empiricism and much imagination in order to confirm a democratic and civic ideology, the Beinecke codex underscores the integrity (integralness) of an early scientific view that blends instrumental reasoning (pragmatism) and an irrational view of the world. Although technically a miscellany, the Beneicke codex verges on being an anthology of popular and applied science because of the complementarity of the texts without, however, having an ostensible, unified plan. Had Beinecke 1030 been copied in the mid-thirteenth century instead of the early fifteenth century, we would be less surprised perhaps. But the world view expressed in the *Quattrocento* codex underscores how belief systems were slow to change despite advances in science, technology, and philosophy.

Brunetto's bestiary in Beinecke 1030 is on the same textual level as the accepted truths in Dati's Ptolemaic cosmography, the *Artte di stolomia* and the cursory portolan that was more useful to adventure-seeking merchants than it was to mariners and ship pilots (who required much more precise information). The thematic congruence of Beinecke 1030 is also reflected in the popular linguistic features of the description of the basilisk we cited above. Whether or not Neri di Miniato, Domenico, and Neri di Domenico del Sera (the three successive owners of the manuscript) believed in this and other mythological creatures in Brunetto's

bestiary is a little like asking whether Dante's audience believed that the poet actually travelled to the beyond and back. To understand the cultural mindset of the Del Seras living on the cusp of important developments in science and in world exploration is to appreciate the complexities and contradictions in their world view and to appreciate that they were as influenced by potential realities as they were by their immediate environment. It would be mistaken to attribute a naïve world view to them for the same reason that considering the thirteenth-century bestiary as an instance of natural history is anachronistic. Far from being ingenuous, the Del Seras copied Brunetto's *Tresor* because it offered empirical information and a way of thinking about the world.

A far more curious and telling instance of the intersection between science and popular belief about natural phenomena is evident in Girolamo Manfredi's *Liber de homine* (more widely known as the *Libro del perché*). Manfredi was a renowned physician in Bologna during the latter half of the fifteenth century, having published his popular tract in 1474. As Paolo Cherchi has explained,[14] the *Libro del perché* belongs to the same genre as Aristotle's *Problemata*, yet it is structurally and thematically a very different kind of work. A physician, Manfredi addresses a long series of questions concerning everything from health to the causes of passion in the nine chapters of his book. Each entry begins with the disarmingly simple question "Perché?" and is followed by a concise, if not always convincing, explanation. The most interesting feature of this popular work of medicine is its treatment of everyday phenomena that are curious and mysterious. Why is it that one gets more drunk on watered down wine than on wine alone, asks the author (cap. XXV), voicing a common concern. His answer: Because water, being "thinner" than wine, penetrates more fully into our organs and, therefore, enhances the inebriating effect of the wine. In another curiosity, why is it that an individual that has a thin nose loves to argue? ("...ha le extremità del naso sottile è huomo che ama le lite?") to which Manfredi replies:

> Signo è che tal huomo è di complexione collerica per ché la subtilità e la magreza procede el più dele volte da abundancia de collera: & anche tal huomini che hanno sottile la extremità del naso hanno li busi del naso strecti: de che non si può tirare pur aiere a refrigerare il cuore: Imperò rimane il cuore quasi sempre caldo: che è casione de accendere collera e di mover e' lite (cap. XL).

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[14] Paolo Cherchi, "La Cazzaria di Vignali e Il libro del perché di Manfredi," *Annali Online di Ferrara – Lettere* I (2007): 106–16.

> The symptom that a man has a choleric temperament is that his sharpness and gauntness most of the time comes from a surplus of choler, and also such men having thin noses with narrow nostrils draw less air to refresh their heart, so that the heart almost always remaines overheated which is the reason why these men are prone to anger and to argument.

Like all doctors, Manfredi relies on the Galenic theory of the humors, which is the basis for understanding the physiological causes of human behavior and health.

Manfredi's tract reveals that his fifteenth-century public was intrigued by everyday unexplained phenomena. Seemingly simple, logical, unproblematic questions about health, physiology, the passions, and our environment are fraught with mystery and wonder. It is in this context that everyday life can be interpreted as being fantastic. If the public was satisfied with such unscientific answers, then interpreting bestiaries as potentially naturalistic and accurate descriptions is not so far-fetched. At the same time however, as science (mostly in the form of a greater sense of the measurability of things than in its more modern, experimental form) circulated among different social classes and throughout institutions during the *Quattrocento*, there developed an even deeper sensibility for the fantastic than in previous centuries. Science and technology were indeed a catalyst for the imagination in the usual sense, that is, encouraging visions of possible worlds. But it is also that in expanding knowledge of the workings of natural phenomena and, thereby, demythologizing Nature, science paradoxically underscores the psychological need for the fantastic and, more generally, for myth.

Brunetto's and Manfredi's fifteenth-century readers were certainly not afflicted with the sense of alienation from nature expressed by modern philosophers and writers. But it would be inaccurate not to state that Brunetto's and Manfredi's lay readers were unaware of the tension between a traditional, Scholastic natural history and cosmography on the one hand and the developments in science and technology that challenged Catholic orthodoxy on the other. It is difficult to gauge the level of sophistication of readers, like the previously mentioned Del Seras. Whatever their level of intellectual engagement with the debates and ideas of their day, they probably welcomed scientific innovation because it had practical applications, something they could relate to more readily. Nevertheless, bestiaries, these repertoires of animal imagery, were considered a curious mix of fact and fiction.

During the following century, bestiaries were no longer as prominent a zoological genre, having been replaced with more naturalistic tracts.

Consider, for example, the impact of Spanish, French, Italian, and British adventurers to the New World who brought back even stranger tales about peoples, animals, and plants. As scientific awareness became more widespread among the literate, the bestiaries gradually ceased to be of primary importance. Nonetheless, Brunetto's *Tresor* continued to be published, perhaps because of its emphasis on rhetoric and ethics. We cannot help but imagine however that his readers during the Renaissance would have been amused by the quaint descriptions of Sirens and other improbable beings. Although maybe, just maybe, the equally marvelous reports about wild men and animals from distant lands hitherto unknown to Europeans only confirmed in the minds of many that bestiaries were indeed fact and not fiction.

Medieval Manuscript Miscellanies:
Composition, Authorship, Use

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SONDERBAND XXXI

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Table of Contents

List of Figures
Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION 1
Lucie Doležalová and Kimberly Rivers

I. TAXONOMY AND METHODOLOGY

Medieval Miscellanies and the Case of Manuscript British Library, Cotton Titus D.XX 14
Greti Dinkova-Bruun

The Art of Regensburg Miscellanies 34
Adam S. Cohen

Looking for the Purpose behind a Multitext Book: The Miscellany as a Personal "One-Volume Library" 70
Eva Nyström

II. AUTHORSHIP AND NON-AUTONOMY OF TEXTS

Non-autonomous Texts: On a Fifteenth-Century German "Gregorius" Manuscript (Constance, City Archive, Ms. A I 1) 84
Diana Müller

The Appearance of "Artes praedicandi" in Medieval Manuscripts 102
Siegfried Wenzel

Creating the Memory of God in a Medieval Miscellany: Melk MS 1075, Jean de Hesdin (fl. 1350–1370), and Late Medieval Monastic Reform 112
Kimberly Rivers

Multiple Copying and the Interpretability of Codex Contents: "Memory Miscellanies" Compiled by Gallus Kemli (1417–1480/1) of St. Gall 139
Lucie Doležalová

III. Use

An Educational Miscellany in the Carolingian Age: Paris, BNF, lat. 528 168
Alessandro Zironi

The Constitution and Functions of Collections of Patristic Extracts: The Example of the Eucharistic Controversy (9th–11th centuries) 182
Stéphane Gioanni

Theological Distinctions, Their Collections and Their Effects. The Example of In Abdiam *and* In Naum 194
Csaba Németh

The Wiesbaden Miscellany. The Deliberate Construction of a Haphazard Collection 218
Kees Schepers

An Interpretation of Brunetto Latini's Tresor *in a Fifteenth-Century Miscellany Manuscriptnuscripts* 240
Dario del Puppo

The Romances of British Library, Cotton Vitellius D.III 256
Elizabeth Watkins

Contributors 270
Index librorum manuscriptorum 275
General Index 279
Colour Plates 285

Figures

Figure 1: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 14731, fol. 78r, Table of the Temple Showbread (*Mensa propositionis*). See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 2: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 14731, fol. 80r, Noah's Ark. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 3: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 14731, fol. 82v–83r, Labyrinth / Jericho. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 4: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 14731, fol. 83v, World map. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 5: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 13002, fol. 7v, Microcosm. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 6: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 13105, fol. 83r, Initials from Honorius, *Inevitabile*. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 7: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 13074, fol. 81v–82r, Scenes from the Life of James the Less. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 8: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 14159, fol. 187v, Sons of Noah diagram. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 9: An example of an easily recognizable break between codicological units, where the blank leaf at the end of the preceding unit was later used for personal annotations by an owner of the book (Cod. Ups. Gr. 8, fol. 87v- 88r).
Figure 10: Compared to Figure 9, the break between the units is here less apparent, since the space left over at the end of the quire was in a second relay utilized by the scribe himself. The micro-texts added at the end of the unit link up with the preceding narrative and rhetorical texts, whereas the next unit, beginning on f. 104, is devoted to medical texts (Cod. Ups. Gr. 8, fol. 103v-104r).
Figure 11: Drawing of a cherub. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 12465, fol. 75v. By permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 12: Drawing of a seraph. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 12465, fol. 76v. By permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 13: Conrad Celtis's mnemonic alphabet, Melk, Stifstbibliothek, 1075, pp. 878–79. Image provided by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Collegeville, MN.
Figure 14: Alphabetic table to the Rule of St. Benedict: *Signationes capitulorum Regulae S. Benedicti secundum alphabetum*. Melk, Stifstbibliothek, 1075, pp. 881–82. Image provided by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Collegeville, MN.
Figure 15: St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, 972b, p. 150, *Cena nuptialis*.
Figure 16: St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, 293, p. 29, *Cena nuptialis*.

Figure 17: St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, 692, p. 13, *Cena nuptialis*.
Figure 18: St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, 692, cover.
Figure 19: Paris, BNF, lat. 17371, fol. 153 (electronic elaboration).
Figure 20: Paris, BNF, lat. 528, fol. 71v (electronic elaboration).
Figure 21: Paris, BNF, lat. 5340, fol. 146v, 11th century.
Figure 22: Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, 3004 B 10, fol. 1v: *Salvator Mundi* (copyright Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv). See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 23: Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, 3004 B 10, fol. 2v (copyright Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv). See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 24: Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, 3004 B 10, fol. 3r (copyright Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv). See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 25: Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, 3004 B 10, fol. 24v: *The Adoration of the Magi* (copyright Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv). See also the colour plate at the end of the volume.
Figure 26: New Haven, CT, Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 52v.
Figure 27: New Haven, CT, Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 53r.
Figure 28: New Haven, CT, Beinecke Library, 1030, c. 2r.

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