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The Three Beasts
Animal Symbolism and its Sources in the *Comedy*[*]

The fauna has been present in popular imagination as well as in culture, theology, literature, and the arts and cultural history in general for several thousand years, which indicates the privileged role that the animal kingdom has had in man's relationship with the surrounding world. God-created animals are ubiquitous, populating both the educated and the popular imagination: in fact, for millennia, the extremely complex nature of the relationship between humans and animals has been evident in written memories, the works of philosophers, poets, painters, and sculptors, with particular regard to the importance of moral teaching. Ever since the eras of ancient Greco-Roman culture, there has been no literary genre on the level of myth and reality without a symbolical depiction with animals transforming them into messages of universal value by observing their characteristics and unique nature. For the man of the Middle Ages, it may have sufficed to read the book of Job to get an explanation as to how divine wisdom is manifested in animals:

> ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12,7–10, NRSV.)

The content and form analysis of the *Comedy*, the hermeneutical diversity of texts and contexts, the rich symbolism of religious-historical-poetic images and its symbol system in general also offered and still offer endless possibilities of interpretation as to Dante's conception of nature. His cosmology, astronomical and

[*] The related research was carried out with the support of the *MTA-SZTE Antiquity and Renaissance: Sources and Reception* Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Szeged (TK2016-126). The present study is a revised version of an article in Hungarian (see Vígh 2017).

astrological, physical, mathematical knowledge, as well as his poetic representation of natural phenomena are organically matched by the symbolic depiction of animal behaviour, that is, the depiction of real or fantastic beings for poetic–moralizing or descriptive purposes, sometimes taking advantage of their expressive power, other times of their paraenetic or imperative character. When analysing the relationship between animal symbolism and the *Comedy*'s message, one cannot ignore the many ideological, poetic, and spiritual aspects that have obviously left their mark on Dante's cosmology. The poet viewed all the creatures of the universe as elements in a cosmic order, and this order of nature means the principle or form that makes the entire universe similar to the Creator:

> […] Le cose tutte quante
> hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma
> che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.
> […]
> Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
> tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
> più al principio loro e men vicine;
> (*Par*. I. 103–105; 109–111.)[1]

On this basis, the diversity of created animals also fits perfectly into the Dantean order, and accordingly, the *Comedy* shows different approaches and different poetic-moralizing-descriptive intentions to the presentation of imagined and real animals.[2] The research conducted on the role and interpretation of animals reflecting any poetic intent – "bestiality" – in the *Comedy* is remarkably diverse, and a separate detailed study would be needed to collect and evaluate these in terms of methodology and content.[3] In the Middle Ages, the external or internal characteristics of animals, the stories about them, especially the bestiaries – just like herbariums or lapidaries –, were all enveloped in symbolic meaning, and all aimed at conveying moral instruction. Whatever encyclopaedic culture

[1] All quotations from the *Comedy* are taken from Giorgio Petrocchi's edition (Dante 1966–1967).

[2] As of today, we do not have a complete summary on the fauna in the *Comedy*, although the increasing number of studies on individual animals in recent decades has indicated the popularity – and the complex nature – of the task. The various repertoires charting the *Comedy*'s animals feature more than a hundred real or imaginary creatures. The first and only repertoire on Dante's fauna is Holbrook 1902, now available in reprint and electronic form; whereas Celli – Venturelli 1995. 109–117 set remarkably wide limits to the classification of (real and imaginary) animals summarized in tables; and the most recent, useful, hypertextual list of sources (Mouchet 2008) contains 111 animal-related Dantean passages and a number of additional references from the field of zoology, supplemented by a basic bibliography.

[3] On the extremely diverse research directions and reception history, see the exhaustive summary by Crimi 2013. 14–33; Ledda 2008. 139–140. On the zoomorphic imagery of morality, see Vígh 2011.

they reflected, they formed part of a remarkably precise cosmography: nature, as a mirror of divine revelation, corresponded to a higher reality. Within this framework, animals acted as markers for the discovery of moral-allegorical realities. As a typical educational genre of the era, the bestiary translated nature into morality and poetry, focusing not so much on the precise description of animals but rather – as a moral example with a focus on instruction – on enriching the rhetorical praxis of those who had to address the community. The heyday of illustrated bestiaries following the example of the *Physiologus* – produced in the period from the second to the fourth centuries AD in Alexandria, in Greek, preserved in several versions and languages, reflecting a variety of pictorial fantasies – was around the twelfth–thirteenth centuries,[4] and their moral–pictorial messages have been passed down to posterity through representations in fine art too. In Dante's time, they were considered useful manuals throughout Europe, including real and imaginative animals and hybrid beings indiscriminately; in fact, *Liber monstrorum*,[5] widespread from the ninth century, demonstrates that the strange creatures falling into the category of monsters also enriched the scope of moral interpretation.

Encyclopaedias, summarily containing information taken over from ancient sources, were also important for intellectuals of the era. The authors of the fundamental works of medieval animal interpretations were Isidorus of Seville, also esteemed by Dante (see "l'ardente spiro / d'Isidoro" [*Par*. X. 130–131]), the author of the *Etimologiae* along with the medieval encyclopaedias; as well as theologian and naturalist St. Albert the Great (*Par*. X. 98), the author of *De animalibus*. Although the relationship between the animal imagery conveyed by the encyclopaedias and allegory is a controversial issue, there is no doubt that medieval encyclopaedias based on antique sources conveyed essential knowledge (cf. Van Den Abeele 1999). The *De proprietatibus rerum* (and its section devoted to animals) by the Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus – or even its translation into the Mantuan dialect by Vivaldo Belcalzer – may also have been an important source for Dante.[6] At the same time, the poet was well versed in the scientific reading of ancient authors, although he was familiar with Pliny's natural history only indirectly. Nonetheless, when he mentions scholars who greatly contributed to humanity, in *Inferno, canto* IV, "Euclide geomètra e Tolomeo, /

[4] McCulloch 1960; Baxter 1998; Van Den Abeele 2005; Clark 2006; and Pastoureau 2011 are fundamental for the temporal and spatial classification, history, and reception of bestiaries. Due to its summary nature, see also: Payne 1990.

[5] The latest critical edition of the *Liber monstrorum* is Porsia 2012 (the previous version: Bologna 1977). The monsters of the *Inferno* have also inspired researchers; only a few out of the ever-growing literature: Luciani 1975; Livanos 2009; Seriacopi 2014. The *actae* of the conference on the monster-imagery of Dante and the Middle Ages are also worth consulting: CISAM 1997.

[6] Regarding the Italian reception of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, see the still indispensable Cian 1902.

Ipocràte, Avicenna e Galïeno, / Averoìs, che 'l gran comento feo" (142–144), he betrays direct scientific knowledge.

He must have come into closer contact with the works on animals by Aristotle, the master of all scholars ("'l maestro di color che sanno" [*Inf.* IV. 131]), as the science adviser and astrologer of Emperor Frederick II, Michael Scotus ("Michele Scotto fu, che veramente / de le magiche frode seppe 'l gioco" [*Inf.* XX. 116–117]) translated these works into Latin still prior to 1220, in Toledo. These works on biology resonated greatly in contemporary intellectual circles.[7] Even a short outline of the relationship between Dante and the sciences would go beyond the scope of this paper, so the above list is far from complete, limited to only the most important works and authors, with the aim to hint at the nature of the resources known in Dante's era and his cultural circles, or born in his ideological, linguistic, and cultural context. In fact, these exerted a profound effect on the poet, who was interested in ancient and contemporary culture, and assimilated these organically into his work.

In Italian culture at the turn of the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, in the immediate vicinity of Dante, a series of literary and philosophical works were born with an emphasis on animal symbolism. These are definitely indicative as to the contemporary concepts on and approaches to animal symbolism. Brunetto Latini, the poet's beloved and esteemed master (cf. *Inf.* XV. 43–44, 97), in Book I of his *Trésor* (esp. in Part V), discusses the nature of animals in seventy chapters from fish to bear following the concepts and methods known from the encyclopaedias. The third chapter of the *L'Acerba* textbook by Dante's contemporary, Cecco d'Ascoli – also known for his invective against the fairy-tale-like, contrived, and chattering nature of the *Comedy* – is about morals and their symbols, with the author discussing the natural, zoomorphic equivalents of virtues and vices in the form of a brief bestiary. Travel descriptions describing real experiences (or interwoven with mysticism and visions) could not lack zoological observations either. However, Dante's poetic sensibility cannot have been left untouched by the ideological-cosmological and cultural background shown in the animal symbolism of troubadour poetry (and of the love bestiary of Richard de Fournival), the zoomorphic emblems of the Sicilian poetic school, traceable also in Chiaro Davanzati's and Dino Frescobaldi's poetry, and in the animal symbolism of the *Mare Amoroso,* the Gubbio *Bestiario moralizzato* and the *Detto del gatto lupesco*.[8] These works and authors provided a complete repository of zoomorphic rhetorical figures and, in their own ways, styles, and messages, enriched the medieval imagery of animal symbolism, and convey it to today's readers as well.

[7] For thirteenth-century translations to Aristotle's books on animals and their reception, see Van Oppenraay 1999; Beullens 1999; whereas for a discussion on the natural philosophy of Michael Scotus and Dante, see Ciccuto 2003.

[8] For a comparison of the *Comedy* and the *Gatto luspesco,* see Suitner 2013. 37–61.

Thus, when one takes a brief account of the rich zoononymous and zoomorphic elements of the *Comedy* or seeks for a connection between the symbolism and poetic depiction of certain animals, one must also take into account the ideological-spiritual background by which Dante was obviously inspired. The poetic depiction of the Dantean fauna was not so much due to the observation of nature as to his faith and literary knowledge: the Bible; classical literary sources; the medieval encyclopaedic tradition; the moral admonitions in the bestiaries; travelogues; as well as the moral instructions of Aesop's (and Phaedrus') tales and apologies all enriched the functional, rhetorical, and poetic world of the *Comedy*. Dante, however, did not slavishly take over the zoomorphic rhetorical figures of ancient and medieval culture, some of which had already stiffened into *topoi*. A good example of this is the griffin, "la biforme fera" (*Purg.* XXXII. 96), whose body inherited the shape of the two most glorious animals on earth and in heaven to symbolize the human and divine natures of Christ, thereby illustrating Dante's conceptual operation, his ability to perform poetic transformation.[9]

As early as in *canto* I of the *Inferno*, the appearance of the three beasts in the poet's path, conveying (also) zoomorphic symbolism, indicate the important role attributed by Dante – and medieval worldview – to animal symbolism. I will be attempting to chart the possibilities of zoomorphic interpretation through interpretations related to the three best-known animals in the *Comedy*, and the reason for this lies precisely in their notoriety, as the mottled feline, the lion, and the she-wolf symbolize *something for everyone*, owing to centuries of commentaries on Dante. It is worthwhile, therefore, to approach the problem of zoomorphic symbolism determining the beginning of the *Comedy* through those methods of interpreting animal symbolism that were canonical in Dante's time, and to emphasize Dante's poetic genius when we witness his unique usage of literary antecedents to systematize the beasts obstructing his path.[10] The panther/lynx (*lonza*), the she-wolf, and the lion appear in different, sometimes contradictory, images in the bestiaries. It cannot be my task now to address all the symbolic explanations on the three animals known to researchers in the field of the varied Dantean exegesis; I will only focus on those features that are relevant to zoomorphic (and sometimes zoomorphic-physiognomic) interpretation.[11]

[9] For Dante's depiction of the hybrid, the griffin, as well as its aftermath and the animal's symbolism in general, see Vígh 2014. 341–358.

[10] It is important to point out that the researchers almost unanimously indicate the Book of Jeremiah as the literary antecedent for the three beasts. There, in fact, they appear at the same time and symbolize the obstacles that make sinful souls stumble: "Therefore a lion from the forest shall kill them, a wolf from the desert shall destroy them. A leopard is watching against their cities; everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces – because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great." (Jer. 5,6.)

[11] On the three beasts of *canto* I, from a physiognomic-zoomorphic approach, see Vígh 2013. 150–168. See also these animals from a moral perspective: Ledda 2019. 46–62.

Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy* (mid-fifteenth century).
London, British Library (ms. Yates Thompson 36, f.2.)

https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=56664

The mottled beast described by Dante, the "lonza leggiera e presta molto, / che di pel macolato era coverta" (*Inf.* I. 32–33), pops up unexpectedly, and although most translations identify Dante's *lonza* as a *panther*, numerous assumptions have been proposed as to the exact identity of the animal,[12] as is well known; as its denotation[13] and its connotation both raise a number of questions. Due to its meaning, Dante's *lonza*, this large feline may also be seen as a pun, an etymological – and, above all, zoological – enigma to be deciphered on the basis of then-current texts. Aware of the variety of interpretations that can all be legitimate – indicating a panther, a leopard, a lynx, or any feline with spotted fur – we will now focus on the zoomorphic symbolism of panther and lynx, appearing in most translations and interpretations. Undoubtedly, Dante could rely on a range of classical and medieval encyclopaedic or literary, ecclesiastical or secular sources when creating the shape of the mottled monster. To consider the most common identification, it is worth starting with the ancient source tradition, namely, Aristotle. The philosopher described the panther as a seductively beautiful beast that attracts her prey with her fragrant breath (Aristotle: *Hist. anim.* 612a 13). Pliny, in addition to describing the panther's spotted fur, joins the Greek philosopher by registering the *topos* of the fragrance used to seduce prey. In addition, he distinguishes the female (*panthera*) and the male (*pardus*), describing in detail the colour and shape of their spots and, based on what he

[12] For a summary of some common explanations on symbols, see entries *lonza* and *fiera* (the latter for all three animals) in Bosco 1970–1978.

[13] *Lonza*, as is known, is etymologically related to Latin *lynx*, stemming from its female form (*lyncea*); and appears with a wide variety of names (e.g., *leonza, leonça*) in thirteenth-century literature.

had heard from others, states that the *panthera* is distinguished by her bright white fur from the *pardus* (Plinius: *Nat. hist.* VIII. 23. 63).

In the Christian approach, the interpretation of the panther is ambivalent. The cruel beast occurs several times in the Old Testament: for example, the multicoloured, mottled fur of the panther is mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah (13,23); and in the book of Hosea (13,7), we read about a panther (and a lion) "lurking beside the way." The *Physiologus*, on the other hand, refers to the *topos* of the fragrant breath in Christian reading as belonging to the female panther (*panthera*): the scent of the words of Christ who was risen on the third day proclaims peace between believers far and near (cf. also Eph. 2,17). Furthermore, the beauty and colourful fur of the calm, gentle panther is likened here to the dress of Joseph: "omnimodo varius est sivut tunica Ioseph, et speciosus. […] Panther quitum animal est et mitissimum nimis" (*Phys.* XXXIX. 162–164). The question is further complicated by the fact that the lavishly beautiful animal with spotted fur is given a different name in medieval encyclopaedias: Isidorus of Seville (and several bestiaries following his lead) – pursuant to Pliny, probably – distinguishes, even with their names, between male (*pardus*) and female (*panthera*) with obvious references to the Bible and the *Physiologus*. In the case of the male, he writes of a swift, mottled, bloodthirsty animal that, by its lush nature, mates even with the lion; therefore, in the *Comedy*, the sin of fornication attributed to the *lonza* suits Isidorus' male animal. The leopard (*leopardus*) is born out of this "matrimony;" apparently, as an etymology to the composition of the words *leon* and *pardus* (Isidorus: XII. 2, 10–11). The female, on the other hand, is indebted to the Christian explanation: Isidorus derives the etymology of her name from the Greek *pan*: the panther is liked by *all* animals except the dragon: "Panther dictus, sive quod omnium animalium sit amicus, excepto dracone, sive quia et sui generis societate gaudet et ad eandem similitudinem quicquid accipit reddit. Πᾶν enim Graece omne dicitur" (Isidorus: XII. 2, 8–9).

Many of the bestiaries also form their image of the panther on this basis: in addition to their beautiful, spotted fur, their breath is attractive to all animals except the dragon, like the words of Christ to believers, with only the devil who flees from Him. The bestiaries unanimously echo the position of the *Physiologus*, and by categorizing *pardus*, *panthera*, and *leopardus* into separate groups, most of them also classify the above briefly outlined moral interpretation accordingly. It is worth recalling that Dante uses the metaphor of the (albeit unnamed) panther in Book I of his *De vulgari eloquentia* (Chapter XVI), referencing the panther's beauty and attractive scent, where he is guided by the desire to choose the most beautiful of the various dialects, and he wishes to catch the beast whose scent is felt everywhere but is nowhere to be seen.

As for the panther's "character traits," we find a number of useful indications in ancient and medieval physiognomic treatises about which Dante was knowledgeable in addition to Michael Scotus (i.e., "Michele Scotto" [cf. *Inf.*

XX. 116]) who wrote the first systematic work on physiognomy in the Middle Ages and commented on Aristotle's works on animals. One of the most important methods of physiognomy, which promotes the thesis of correspondence between the external features of one's body and one's character, is the method of zoomorphic comparison, so almost every treatise pays great attention to animals. The zoomorphic analogy reveals the moral attitude, which is also relevant from the viewpoint of animal symbolism. Aristotle writes of the panther's attitude, "such is its bodily aspect, and in soul it is mean and thievish, and in a word, the beast of low cunning" (Aristotle: *Physiogn.* 1913. 810a8). The fundamental thesis of late antique physiognomy, quoting from the Latin Anonymus, "who is similar to a leopard, is cunning, ruthless, savage, and reckless" ("qui pardo est similis, insidiosus, rigidus, saeuus, audax" [Anon. Lat. §46]), while in Polemon's physiognomy the "panthera impudens adultera malevola se occultans amans necare et vincere eum qui ipsi se opponit, pacata cum pacato, superba fastosa nec mansueta nec domanda" (Polemon 1893. 172). The panther, he posits, is shameless, unfaithful, malevolent, untamed; that is, there was an unmanageable beast blocking Dante's way.

Giovan Battista Della Porta, collecting and synthesizing the descriptions of ancient and medieval sages, also conveyed centuries-old interpretations in characterizing animals. The image of the lascivious feline, for this sixteenth-century author, takes the form of a leopard. For him the literary antecedent was Dante's description: "Dante Alighieri depicts fornication as a leopard, which copulates with animals of different species and, at the time of coitus, cries out to calls the animals of its own kind and other kinds". As per the the characteristics of a leopard, it is full of deceit and shrewdness, and (like cats in general) shy and bold at the same time: "delicate, effeminate, wrathful, treacherous, fraudulent, bold, and timid at the same time; and the shape of its body properly befits its manners". The physiognomic features of the animal are in perfect harmony with its attitude: "it is proud and full of deceit and treachery, and at the same time bold and fearful: its form befits its manners" (Della Porta 2013. 521, 89 and 46). He lists the panther (*pantera*) as a symbol of shyness, while the panther *(pardo)* – the beast of the Bible and bestiaries – is an epitome of humility. These mutually contaminated definitions by Della Porta provide a good illustration as to the zoonymic, descriptive, and moral confusion characterizing the symbolism of the mottled beast, and also indicate how Dante's poetic invention was interpreted in the late sixteenth century. Based on what has been said so far, we can only be sure that the semantics of the panther are at least as rich – and even more complex – than that of the animal named *lonza*, which, for Dante, by unique and rather intricate symbolism, may have meant any graceful, large feline with spotted fur.

Apart from the assumptions that the choice of *lonza* here may have been motivated by rhetorical reasons; namely, that the names of all three *beasts* had to be-

gin with the same consonant (*lonza, leone, lupa*), lynx could be the best candidate on an etymological basis. Aristotle and Pliny both wrote about this feline, and the authors of medieval bestiaries were particularly fascinated by the *topos* of the gemstone formed from its urine, the linkur.[14] Ailianos likens this predator – with a slightly flatter nose, tassels on its ears, and the ability to overpower its prey by jumping on it – to the leopard (Aelianus: *De Nat. Anim.* XIV. 6). Ovid associates the lynx with the spotted panther (Ovid: *Met.* III. 668–669). Under the guidance of zoomorphic physiognomy, reading Polemon again, we learn that the lynx, like most animals, has virtues and vices alike, such as being sincere, courageous, sublime, proud, agile, but also shy and noisy, ("lynx quae eadem caracal adpellatur impudent audax elati animi alacris timida superba garrula sincera" [Polemon 1893. 172]). In the Middle Ages, the etymologization by Isidorus (Isidorus: XII. 2, 20) associated the lynx with the wolf, so the bestiaries posit that its spotted fur resembles a panther, its shape is reminiscent of a wolf; moreover, it is envious by nature.[15]

What is remarkable for an exegesis on Dante, is that no ancient or medieval text depicts the lynx as a fornicator, but the sin of envy is repeatedly emphasized by the use of the Latin verb *invidere* (look with envious eyes, be jealous). In Ovid, King Lyncus, who nurtured murderous intent out of envy, is turned into a lynx by Ceres (cf. Ovid: *Met.* V. 659–661). According to Pliny (*Nat. hist.* VIII. 57, 137), the lynx, out of envy or jealousy, scrapes its urine (whose solidified form is the aforementioned gemstone); and the same is reiterated by Solinus and Isidorus, in addition to most bestiaries. Considering medieval animal symbolism and the term *lonza*, the spotted beast in *canto* I of the *Inferno* could also be identified with a lynx in the light of the above, and thus symbolizes the sin of envy rather than fornication. Incidentally, this seemed to be an acceptable solution as early as in the sixteenth century, by Castelvetro, who also indicated, in his commentary on Dante, that the order of the three beasts suggests that the sin of envy is the less heinous out of the sins they symbolize, compared to the lion's pride and the wolf's greed: "yet envy is less despicable when compared to the lion's pride and the wolf's avarice" (Castelvetro 1886. 13–14).

Another circumstance that is perhaps more than interesting is that Dante was keen on reading Aesop's tales.[16] In one of the animal tales, known as "The Blind Man and The Whelp" – available, apparently, in several versions and with different characters –, the cub of a beast is handed over to a blind man who is said to be able to recognize any animal by touching it, and he says, "I do not quite

[14] Cf. Aristotle: *Hist. anim.* 499b, 500b, 539b, etc.; Pliny: *Nat. hist.* VIII. 70, 84, 137.

[15] Among the many consistent descriptions, cf. the modern edition of Ms. Bodley 764: *Bodley* 1992. 38. Brunetto Latini writes similarly about *leonza* in his *Trésor* (Brunetto Latini, I. V. 176).

[16] For the relationship between Dante and Aesop's animal tales, cf. Marcozzi 2013. 131–149.

know whether it is the cub of a fox, or the whelp of a wolf, but this I know full well. It would not be safe to admit him to the sheepfold." And the moral explanation is also substantiated by physiognomy: "evil tendencies are shown by one's physique." With regard to the *lonza*, I believe Dante may have had similar thoughts when he came up with the name and image of the mottled beast in his poetic fantasy: he offered his readers – as the blind man was offered in the tale – an animal that was spotted, that is, not immaculate in character, and scary by its sheer appearance. Thus, the reader, if unsure, can "palpate" with the help of animal symbolism, which animal is this; and we can be certain that the poet implies, if not a panther, but definitely a scary, large, spotted – that is, sinful – feline.

As for the symbolism of Dante's lion, looking for prey, angrily signalling hunger with its head raised ("con la test'alta e con rabbiosa fame" [*Inf.* I. 47]), it is certainly one of the oldest and most detailed symbols since antiquity: a symbol of strength, courage, generosity, pride; that is, the virtues of rulers, yet it often symbolizes violence, ruthless plunder, and arrogance. Although "la test'alta" can also be a symbol of legitimate pride, courage, and self-confidence, Dante's description reveals the image of a haughty, prey-hungry, angry beast reminding St. Peter's first epistle: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour" (1Peter 5,8). However, the Bible also portrays Jesus as the lion of the tribe of Judah, who triumphed over sin (Rev. 5,5). The lion's symbolism, therefore, has always been ambivalent: dangerous, cruel, the embodiment of evil, yet brave, strong, and compassionate. It would be impossible to cite all the biblical zoomorphic or zoonymic occurrences of the lion here, yet in any case, their sheer number[17] indicates the positive and negative message values of the king of the animals in Christian symbolism. Ancient sources are also plentiful, as the male or female lion, even its hybrid forms with other animals into fantasy-created beings, is a recurring character from mythology to beast fables, from epics to works on nature: present everywhere, not only in words, but also carved in stone, and painted. Therefore, when Dante's lion is in front of us, its diverse interpretation almost hinders us, like the lion arrested Dante, from moving forward, especially because the reader is glad to linger with the abundance of symbolic meanings the lion provides.

In the *Physiologus*, all "traits" of the image of the lion are placed into a Christological dimension and interpretation (to be precise, there are three of these). Isidorus also calls the lion "king" (Isidorus: XII. 2, 6); and by the twelfth century, dethroning the bear,[18] it had become the king of the beasts in the bestiaries too,

[17] In the Bible – obviously, depending on the translation – lions are mentioned in about 120–140 different verses.

[18] In the Middle Ages, the bear gave over its throne (not voluntarily) to the lion. For this exciting process of cultural and ideological history, cf. Pastoureau 2007.

which mostly follow the descriptions of the *Physiologus*. According to this work, the lion wipes his own mark with its tail, just as Christ hid his own divinity by being born of Mary; moreover, the animal sleeping with open eyes symbolizes Christ lying in the tomb yet still guarding us; the fact that the male lion awakens its stillborn cubs on the third day with its breath evoked the image of the resurrection for believers; the animal spares the life of its defeated adversaries just as the Lord saves sinful souls who repent of their sins, and so on. Medieval people could encounter live lions thanks to the showmen, but they could see the image of the now unconditional king of untamed animals even more often in the ornaments of Romanesque and Gothic churches. Therefore, when Dante was approached by this animal with a well-known positive character and symbolism in Christology, he was obviously highlighting the figure of the most formidable beast, which, according to the *Liber monstrorum*, is portrayed poets, orators, and naturalists as a king of animals due to its strength and fearsome nature: "leonem, quem regem esse bestiarium ob metum eius et nimiam fortitudinem poetae et oratores cum physicis fingunt, in frontem beluarum horribilium ponimus" (Porsia 2012. 257). *Inferno*'s lion is indeed so frightening that the air trembles, "sì che parea che l'aere ne tremesse" (*Inf.* I. 48), as medieval encyclopaedias also attest that its roar terrifies all other animals (cf. Bart. Angl. 1601. 1083; Cecco 1927. 39).

Dante banished the Christian interpretation of the *Physiologus* and the bestiaries from the figure of the lion and presented an image of an animal with a choleric nature. In terms of its symbolism, though, the poet did not add to it, nor did he take from it; instead, he took over and conveyed the ambivalent symbolism that had existed for centuries (and that would remain for centuries to come) for the characterization of the king of animals. Like Boncompagno, who presented, in his *Rhetorica novissima*, the lion that had become God and the lion that had taken up the image of the devil,[19] Dante merely adapted the image of the haughty animal to poetic fiction, to symbolize not only the sin of pride, but the sin of anger too. The lion and the traits that can be associated with it appear in several other *canti* of the *Comedy*. In the episode about Guido da Montefeltro's sin, the lion is an archetype of strength and courage, as opposed to the fox that symbolizes cunning (*Inf.* XXVII. 74–75). Elsewhere, it is a symbol of militancy and strength (*Par.* XII. 54); or appears as a constellation (*Par.* XXI. 14), or as a parable when Dante meets Sordello, who at first views the two poets with dignity, almost contemptuously, "a guisa di leon quando si posa" (*Purg.* VI. 66). In any case, the polyvalence of the lion images provided by Dante in all three realms of the afterlife also indicates the hermeneutic complexity of animal symbolism.

Whereas the symbolism of the lion bears negative and positive traits alike, the third beast, the wolf has almost always carried sinister and ominous messages

[19] On the impact of Boncompagno da Signa and the medieval tradition in general on Dante, cf. Dronke 1990; Marcozzi 2009.

in the beliefs and myths of every people for thousands of years. Aside from the fact that in ancient mythology, it was the sacred animal of Apollo and Mars,[20] and that the she-wolf carries a positive connotation in the foundation myth of Rome; this beast has always been a symbol of savagery, greed, with the addition of licentiousness, lust, and heresy for its female: in Della Porta's physiognomy it is more depraved than any other animal ("devourer, treacherous, wrathful; it is worst of all" [Della Porta 2013. 53]). Aristotle describes the anatomy, mating, and eating habits of the wolf in detail.[21] In Aesop (or even in the Latin Phaedrus who translates Aesop into poetry), the wolf is mostly a villain, in about two dozen tales: a symbol of vileness, injustice, and greed. Pliny's natural history is also remarkably detailed in relation to the description of the animal and the beliefs associated with it (cf. Pliny: *Nat. Hist.* VIII. 34, 80). The wolf is predominantly negative in several books of the Bible too. The prophets, for instance, call the wicked officials of Israel, the judges who abuse their power, wolves who "tear the prey, shed blood, destroy lives to get dishonest gain" (Ez 22,27). Wolves, again, are a symbol of hypocrisy when Jesus warns his disciples: false prophets "come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Mt 7,15).

In the *Physiologus,* the wolf is a cunning and evil animal that paralyzes man before it attacks. According to St. Basil the Great, this is how hypocritical people behave. In medieval encyclopaedias (cf. Isidorus XII. 2, 23–24) and bestiaries following Pliny and the *Physiologus*, the wolf is a cruel, greedy, and horrific beast that, before devouring its preys, mauls and tortures them, just like the devil does with people before shoving into the abyss of hell; in a word, the wolf is the devil himself: "thus the wolf is to be intended as the devil" (*Best. Val.* 1984. 283). Medieval bestiaries, in reliance on ancient depictions, state that the wolf is also a constant threat to man. In the form of a she-wolf, "che di tutte brame / sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza" (*Inf.* I. 49–50) Dante draws, in concise poetic imagery, the centuries-old image of the she-wolf laden with the sins of greed and lust, also conveyed by bestiaries.[22] In addition to greed and lust, it is often identified with deceit and hypocrisy, on the assumption that the wolf mimics the sound of the doe in order to lure the kids out of the pen. In addition to its cruelty, cunning is also associated with it: for one, it moves against the wind so that its smell is not felt by the other animals (Bart. Angl. 1601. 1090). Polemon characterizes it by several seemingly opposite traits when he adds a series of negative traits to the wolf's courage and helpfulness to its peers: it is unreliable, malicious, depre-

[20] Regardless of being Apollo's sacred animal, it is also a veiled symbol of ambition, greed, and unreliability. Cf. Homer: *Iliad* IV. 1–158.

[21] On the appearance of the wolf in ancient Greek literature, cf. the bibliographic summary of Maria Fernanda Ferrini in Aristotle: *Fisiognomica* 2007. 262–265.

[22] "Lussuria" and "golositate" are the wolf's two main sins, yet the bestiaries give a very detailed description of the "nature" of the beast, illustrating its "depravity" with examples: cf. *Best. tosc.* 2018. 1878–1880.

datory, bloodthirsty, unjust, and cunning ("lupus audax perfidus iniquus raptor avidus iniuriosus dolosus auxilium praebens ad iniuriam inferendam, amicum adiuvans" [Polemon 1893. 172]).

Remarkably, of the three beasts blocking Dante's path, the wolf is granted the longest description. The predator's unbridled desire to possess has already plunged so many people into misery and mourning that the poet's fear at the sight of the beast is justified. It pushes forward, unstoppably, and casts the poet back into the dark forest of sins ("mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace" [*Inf.* I. 60]). Scrolling some *terzina*s down, Dante returns to the greed and unbridled nature of the wolf, when he puts into Virgil's mouth that the wolf's hunger is not sated after eating ("dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria" [*Inf.* I. 99]); that is to say, its greed and indomitable possessiveness functions as a zoomorphic symbol representing one of the seven deadly sins, *avaritia*. Needless to say, modern ethology in many cases refutes antique and medieval zoomorphic metaphors and symbols related to animal behaviour and "rehabilitates" the wolf and many other animals associated with negative "moralities" in bestiaries. In Dante's time, however, the wolf was equated with the figure of evil, morally reprehensible, depraved man.[23] The symbolism of the she-wolf used in *canto* I is used similarly in other parts of the *Comedy*: a symbol of greed and avarice, without any positive connotations. And considering that for Dante, this sin is easily associated with several others ("Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia" [*Inf.* I. 100]), it is clear that he considered the wolf – greed, the exact opposite of *charitas* – to be, of all three animals, the most detrimental to the soul. Later in the *Comedy*, the symbol of the animals standing in Dante's way in *canto* I, and the sins they signify, are revisited: the poet declares with the words of Brunetto Latini that the Florentines are an envious, haughty, and miserable people ("gent' è avara, invidiosa e superba" [*Inf.* XV. 68]); namely, the three beasts simultaneously symbolize the poet's home city.

The beast with unbridled appetite also appears in *canto* XX of *Purgatory*, where souls are waiting to be cleansed from the sin of avarice: "Maladetta sie tu, antica lupa, / che più che tutte l'altre bestie hai preda / per la tua fame sanza fine cupa!" (*Purg.* XX. 10–12). Nor could the wolf be left out of the scene of *Inferno*'s Pluto, who guarded the entrance to the circle of avarice and greedy, and whom Virgil silenced as a cursed wolf ("Taci, maladetto lupo!" [*Inf.* VII. 8]). Moreover, Dante evokes the greedy, predatory nature of wolves in two *canti* of his *Paradise* too: in *canto* XXV, where the poet expresses his hope to return to Florence, owing to the reputation of his "'l poema sacro" (1) – that is, the *Comedy* –, evokes that the inhabitants of the city, acting like wolves, expelled him, the poet living as a lamb: "che fuor mi serra / del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello, / nimico ai

[23] On the relationship between man and wolf, and on the relationship between reality and mentality, cf. Ortalli 1997.

lupi che li danno guerra" (4–6). The poet considered himself a good and just citizen, an adversary of the wolves declaring war on what is right.[24] In *canto* XXVII., though, St. Peter himself utters harsh words against the wolves concealed in the shepherd's clothing, that is, the deceitful popes: "In vesta di pastor lupi rapaci" (55). Finally, let me only remind of how often bestiaries talk about the feigning, deceitful wolf (Bart. Angl. 1601. 1090), whose favourite prey is lamb, approaches the pen against the wind, sometimes in sheepskin, in the manner of false prophets (*Best. Val.* 1984. 283).

The scope of interpretation of the various animals in the *Comedy* is, of course, not limited to a zoomorphic depiction of sins. Virtues can also take zoomorphic forms, so the polysemic richness of animals and the nuance of their meanings offer further complex analytical possibilities for those pursuing this line of research. I consciously chose, for my analysis, the three animals of the *Comedy* that are – certainly in terms of their moral and political symbolism – the best-known since annotated editions have granted every reader an interpretative framework about these. On the one hand, I wished to show what knowledge Dante might have had at his disposal, and from what variety of – biblical, literary, artistic, and encyclopaedic – sources he could draw from. On the other hand, we can see how many different sources of cultural history can help the reader to decipher the symbolism related to animals. Elements of poetic symbolism, natural realism, erudite and folk imagination are mixed in Dante's brilliant imagery, either in a symbolic or in a realistic sense, or in the form of rhetorical figures depicting animals in poetic cues by way of the observation of their behaviour. At the same time, let us not forget that Dante is first and foremost a poet, and a careful examination of extraliterary elements – in the light of his texts and contexts – is also essential to come to an understanding of his worldview and his work. His zoonymic and zoomorphic figures always enrich the symbolism of the poem following meticulous consideration, so we must always keep in mind the functionality of the zoomorphic representation when interpreting the *Comedy*'s rich and varied bestiary.

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[24] For a detailed analysis of this (self) reflection, see Vígh 2018.

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