Defining the Indefinable:
The Cultural Role of Monsters in the Middle Ages

An Honors Thesis (HIST 440)
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Monsters appear in a variety of sources and from a variety of periods in the Middle Ages. That they laid so heavily on the medieval mind is evidence not that men of this period were ignorant and foolishly believed in fictional creatures, but rather that these frightening creatures served a vital cultural role. As the physical and cultural landscape of Europe underwent a number of changes in the Middle Ages, monsters aided Christian European men to define their relationship to the world around them. Monsters served as a counter example to humans, defining what mankind is by illustrating what it is not. But forming a comprehensive worldview is not an easy task, and while monsters could aide mankind in creating a cultural system, they could also tear it apart. In their very nature monsters are indefinable. They both form and deform man’s worldview.

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Introduction

The Middle Ages were littered with monsters. These strange creatures poked their heads out from behind courtly literature; they crept into theological discussions of the Church; they stood alongside factual persons in histories of the period; and they lurked always in the background of the medieval mindset. With monsters occurring in such a variety of sources of the Middle Ages, the modern reader cannot help but wonder- did medieval people truly believe in these bizarre creatures? Current audiences are driven to know the scientific truth to monsters, the explanation for their existence- if indeed they do exist. But this scientific quest is missing the point. Whether or not medieval Europeans believed in monsters as a reality is only secondary. The real question is why they wrote of monsters in the first place. Monsters played an invaluable cultural role, aiding medieval Europeans in their quest to define themselves, the world around them, and their place within it. It seems to be the human condition to ponder what exactly makes us “human,” and medieval Europeans were by no means excluded from this quest. Monsters were utilized in forming man’s conception of his humanity by providing an example of what he was not. By acting as the anti-human, monsters allowed medieval mankind to better define itself.

However, monsters played a double role in medieval culture. On one hand they could act as a clear idea or category to be set against humans for the sake of comparison. On the other hand the idea of monsters could be fickle, indefinable and unclassifiable. Here their dark side emerged. They lurked on the borders of the human world that they themselves had helped to create. As much as medieval man may try, the world can rarely be divided into clearly separate categories. There are countless things which exist in more than one category. Monsters highlighted this problem. At times they acted as border figures, showing how easily man’s carefully constructed worldview could be torn apart. As the Middle Ages progressed, this function of monsters became even more threatening. The world of the early Middle Ages seemed
tame in comparison to the changes which faced the High Middle Ages. The relationship between humans and animals changed, creating even more grey areas where monsters could hide. Christian Europeans became increasingly more aware of the diversity of the world, and united themselves behind their Christian banner while simultaneously excluding all others. The growth of courtly culture created further distinctions amongst the Europeans themselves, isolating the upper classes from the lower. Even within these courts there were female challenges to the male masculine worldview. With mankind’s relation to his world shifting at every turn, the undefined areas of man’s world grew. Monsters frightened man because they drew attention to the anomalies of his order.

In a strange twist, monsters could also be utilized to aid mankind in determining his relationship to the world and other people within it. There were a number of different groups whom the Christian men of Europe would have commonly encountered. Women and Jews, for instance, were a regular part of their social life. However, these people were not under the same social standards, as they were not Christian males. By utilizing the idea of the monster, Christian men were able to classify others into their own social organization. Although a monster is hardly under strict control, it is still a familiar idea to medieval man. When groups of people are associated with monsters, they can be handled in the same manner as other monsters. Although this does not necessarily eliminate the threat of these ‘other’ people, it does present the problem in a familiar format.

Monsters were an important cultural tool that aided medieval man in his quest to order the world and to situate himself within it. Yet at the same time they reminded man how futile his efforts were to impose structure on a shifting world. Like the physically diverse bodies they were often given, the role of monsters within medieval society was a composite of many abilities.
Although the truth of their existence was often debated and customarily accepted, monsters did not appear in so many aspects of medieval society because of their assumed reality. Rather, they played a crucial cultural role in helping mankind understand his world and his place within it.
Monsters as the Anti-Human

The term “monster” can be invoked to describe a wide variety of creatures or even behaviors. A misshapen human can be called a monster by unfriendly crowds; a terrifying animal could be referred to as a monster; even a physically normal person acting inappropriately can be labeled a monster. The uniting factor in these incidents is that a monster is simply anything which acts or exists outside of the ordinary. Nearly all humans seem to be uncomfortable in their own skin. They continually ask of themselves ‘what exactly makes me a human?’ and create stipulations of their humanity. When man gathers together all that he is, there remains behind a pile of all that he is not. This latter category, what man is not, is left to the monsters. This is perhaps the most important cultural role that monsters fulfill. By providing an image of man’s opposite, they allow man to better define himself. To put it simply, a person can assure himself that he is a human by listing how he is not a monster.

What then was a monster to the medieval man? As early as the fourth century, scholars such as Ambrose stressed that man was “capable of reason,” whereas other creatures were “irrational animal[s].”¹ God had endowed his chosen race with a rational mind, and this set them apart from all other beings. Monsters could imitate this reason, but never match it. In fact, their attempts allowed man to better define his own use of reason. When they lurked in the grey areas of reason, monsters provided man with an opportunity to determine a clear ‘white’ or ‘black’ to their use of reason, and thus of mankind’s own. Among the creatures which lacked their intellect were animals. Although not all animals were deemed “monsters,” much of the medieval notion of monsters is tied to the distinction between people and animals. One of the most common

features of medieval monsters is that they trod too close by the beastly realm. Humans were not animals, and anything that became too animal in its characteristics could become a monster. Animals also lacked interest in human objects and behaviors. They did not use noble weapons that were skillfully wrought; they had no use for textile products; and they certainly did not prepare or eat their food in a cultured fashion. Men could gain a sense of self-assurance by declaring that these were items and activities reserved solely for their kind. Animals and monsters did not use human reason, need human items, or dine in a human way precisely because they were not humans. In a somewhat paradoxical way, humans were not monsters because monsters were not humans.

Since reason was deemed one of the most important features of humanity, it was a key factor in separating man from other creatures. Ambrose, a fourth century scholar whose influence carried on throughout the later Middle Ages, declared that man differed from the animals because of his mastery of intellect. The sentiment was evident through the fifth century in Augustine’s writings. He declared that humans were “rational creatures” and that “brute animals” were denied this gift. This notion passed even into the thirteenth century when Thomas Aquinas asserted that animals differed from man because beasts had been made “without intellect.” With reason deep within the pocket of mankind, it was a useful tool when the notion of one’s humanity became less certain. It was a favorite weapon against the monstrous races found in popular travel logs which rose out of Pliny’s classical era and found new breath in those such as Mandeville of the mid-fourteenth century. In these travel narratives men journeyed to the edges of the European world and encountered a myriad of strange people waiting for them. In far-off lands such as Asia and Africa there dwelt people who had the heads of dogs (the

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3 Ibid., p 5.
4 Ibid., p 5.
Cynocephali), men with no heads who instead bore their faces in their chests (the Blemmyae), and natives who possessed only one immense foot which they used to shade themselves from the harsh sun (the Sciopods).⁵ These strange peoples were similar to Europeans. They physically resembled Europeans (although they were seldom identical); many had primitive clothes in the form of skins and loin-cloths; most of them lived in communities like the Europeans; and some of these monstrous races even had a rudimentary language.⁶ With so many of their habits resembling Europeans, were these foreign races included among God’s people? For many in the Middle Ages, reason was the crucial factor. Ratramnus, a French Benedictine of the late 800’s, was one such scholar who searched for a rational mind hidden beneath the dog heads of the Cynocephali. He cited the human practices of these creatures, claiming

“They form a society and live in villages; they cultivate fields and harvest crops; they cover their private parts through human modesty rather than exposing them like beasts; and for garments they use not merely skins but true clothes by which they indicate their modesty.”⁷

What is imperative to notice is that although Ratramnus lists all these human practices, it is not these in themselves which grant the Cynocephali human status. He continues with the statement "All of this [the human behaviors] leads you to believe that they [the Cynocephali] possess a rational soul."⁸ Whether or not these dog-headed creatures were to be considered monsters was hinged on their grasp of reason. Man was not an irrational creature, and if these Cynocephali were likewise not irrational beings, they were bestowed the mantle of humanity by Ratramnus despite their otherwise monstrous appearance.

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⁶ Friedman *The Monstrous Races*, p 2-23.
⁷ Ratramnus, as cited in Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, p 188.
The Cynocephali were among the most popular of the monstrous races, but few were treated with such scrutiny as the pygmy. The human status of this diminutive community was frequently debated. Pygmies were physically alike to European men in all ways save that they were drastically smaller. Furthermore, they lived in village communities, dressed in simple clothing, sowed seeds, and even made use of language (albeit only amongst themselves). With such similar attributes, could these creatures be counted among the rational beings? Many in the Middle Ages asserted that they could not. Pygmies were accused of performing “mimicry without understanding,” like a bird repeating human words without grasping their meaning. Albert the Great, who wrote in the twelfth century, was one such harsh critic who saw pygmies as little better than talking parrots. He declared that the pygmy “imitates reason even though he truly lacks it.” Just as Ratramnus granted humanity to the Cynocephali because he felt that their actions reflected reason, Albert denied humanity to the pygmies because he deemed their behavior devoid of rational thought. Albert admitted that the Pygmies employed language, an attribute typically reserved for mankind. However, he claimed that

“Pygmies do not speak through reason but by the instinct of nature,… speech motivated by the intellect is appropriate to man alone… and if some other species similar to man speaks like the Pygmy, this results from the acts of the simple imagination and not from actions of the intellect.”

Men are rational and monsters are not. Even if monsters such as Pygmies behave as men in some regards (such as the use of language), the European community determined them to be lacking of reason, and therefore of true humanity.

12 Albert the Great, as cited in Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, p 192.
The peculiar cases of the monstrous races illustrate the great value reason held to the medieval mind. If these ambiguous creatures were to be counted among men they had to exhibit signs of his rational thought. Similarly, when European man found himself in equally ambiguous spaces on the edge of the human realm, reason was crucial in asserting his humanity.

Werewolves posed just such an opportunity. The medieval werewolf was a strange case of transformation. In the popular werewolf tales that flourished in the courts of the twelfth century, our hairy hero was typically a nobleman trapped in the form of a wolf. Whereas the modern werewolf tale tends to describe an outburst of dangerously beastly nature from within a human, the twelfth century preferred a tale of a goodly knight exiled into animal form. In nearly all of the popular lays, the noble nature of the werewolf is stressed before his transformation. In the twelfth-century lay Biclarel, for example, before we learn of the protagonist's shape-shifting, we are told

"Biclarel was a knight-
Strong and brave and fierce,
Full of nobility and virtue-
Of the household of King Arthur."\(^{14}\)

The placement of Biclarel in the retinue of King Arthur is usually attributed to the contemporary popularity of Arthurian tales and the author's intention to increase the appeal of his lay through the connection.\(^{15}\) However, the fact that the audience accepted this close association with Arthur, the epitome of appropriate civilized courtly behavior, illustrates the importance of the werewolf's courtly beginnings. To the medieval audience, werewolves were true men encased in animal form.


\(^{15}\) Amanda Hopkins' introduction in *Melion and Biclarel, Two Old French Werewolf Lays*, p 22.
The initial emphasis on the nobility and humanity of the werewolves is imperative to the conception of the werewolf in his beastly form. Once the knight is changed into a wolf, the physical distinction between man and beast has been lost. A human defines himself in part by determining that he is not an animal. For a werewolf, the physical difference is lost, and as such other features of humanity are relied on to assure the audience that the man still survives under the animal shell. Reason is the most important of these attributes to the werewolf lay. In virtually all of the popular tales, the werewolves exhibit great intellect after their transformation. The werewolf in the tale of Melion, for example, is able to recognize shield patterns and identify them with their corresponding knights.\footnote{Melion, lines 352-359, also discussed in the Introduction to the work by Amanda Hopkins, p 33-34.} Similarly, all of the werewolves in the popular medieval lays have the good sense to appeal to nobility for the restoration of their human form.\footnote{Melion, Biclarel, Bisclarvet, Arthur and Gorlagon, Guillaume de Palerne, and even the old Irish Morraha contain werewolves which appeal to authority for aide.} Only the cognitive skills of man would be able to recognize the nobility of these men and furthermore to understand that their assistance will be the most helpful.

Beyond these subtleties, however, many of the werewolf tales declare outright that the protagonist retained his reason even when in animal form. It was said of the werewolf Melion that “even though he was a wolf,/ he retained the reason and memory of a man.”\footnote{Melion, lines 217-218.} A similar passage is found in the popular twelfth-century adventure Guillaume de Palerne. The tale relates that Alphonse, the werewolf in this fiction, “became a werewolf, but still had his wit.”\footnote{trans. Rev. Walter W. Skeat, M.A., Guillaume de Palerne, (London: Early English Text Society, 1867), lines 140-144.} The importance of the retention of human reason is also made apparent in the tale of Arthur and Gorlagon. In this story, the werewolf is transformed into a wolf by magic words spoken by his wife. When Gorlagon’s spiteful spouse performs the dreadful deed, the enchanting words are
meant to be spoken as “Be a wolf and have the understanding of a wolf.”

But even the wicked wife, who breaks a number of cultural and social rules in the course of the story, cannot break the rule that man must have reason. When she transforms Gorlagon she bids him to “have the understanding of a man.” Werewolves are ambiguous creatures who cast doubt onto the status of man. Humans define themselves as existing in opposition to animals. Men are not animals because animals are not rational. Even when man appears beastly, he can assert his humanity by exerting his intellect.

Man separated himself from the monsters not only by his command of reason, but also by the items he used. A man is not a monster because a monster has no use of man’s artifacts. One of the most essential of these items is clothing. Clothes were a common qualification of humanity, as there were no other creatures which dressed themselves. A man was a man because he was not naked. The value of clothing as a human artifact is quite visible in these werewolf lays of the twelfth century. With werewolves, the humanity of the protagonist has been thrown into question, and clothes are used a sign of his hidden humanity. In Bisclavret, arguably the most popular of these lays, the initial transformation is made possible simply by the knight removing his clothing. Another lay, Melion, uses a stone as the agent of transformation, but the werewolf must still be “undressed and naked” in order for the magic to take effect. These stories show that the humanity of the hero is tied to his garments. The audience is more comfortable with the shift from human to animal once the werewolf has lost his clothes. Removing his garments is a symbol of removing part of his humanity.

20 Ibid., p 238.
23 Melion, line 163.
Although this initial transformation is facilitated by the loss of clothing, the shift back to human form illustrates even greater the value placed on one’s accoutrements. In deliberate contrast to the monster’s ambivalence towards clothing, a human cannot exist without the proper attire. The lay of Bisclavret is the best example of this, in which the return to human shape is made possible solely through the return of the werewolf’s raiment. The werewolf Bisclavret warns that “if I were to lose them [my clothes],/ and then be discovered,/ I’d stay a werewolf forever.” A similar situation is found in the tale of Melion. At the moment of his return to human form, a knight intercedes “so that he [Melion] is not shamed in front of people.” In wolf form, the knight Melion had been part of the court’s company for many days without any clothes. Once he is to be a human, however, he cannot appear among his courtly companions without them. When Melion is taken to a private chamber to return to his human shape, he does not rejoin to the court until his lord has “rich clothing brought for him;” and has dressed him “and turned him out well.” The dressing of Melion is a ceremony of his return to humanity. Man is not a naked animal, and thus is not complete without his clothing. The werewolf Alphonse undergoes the same ceremony in Guillaume de Palerne. He is also presented with the opportunity to return to human shape in the midst of a court, and is likewise taken “into a private chamber” to undergo the act. Furthermore, once Alphonse regains his shape he “is ashamed of being naked.” Clothes are so intrinsic to his humanity that he emphasizes his need for them. Before he returns to the court, Alphonse requests that William, a nobleman whom he had served while in beastly form, become his lord. The way he expresses this desire, and the medium through which he then becomes William’s vassal, is his garments. Alphonse remains bare and

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24 Marie de France, Bisclavret, lines 73-75.
25 Melion, line 542.
26 Melion, lines 560-561.
27 Guillaume de Palerne, line 4422.
28 Guillaume de Palerne, line 4443.
sends a request to William that he perform the lordly duty of dressing Alphonse as his vassal. William brings clothes to Alphonse, dresses him, and presents him to the court.²⁹ His return to human society is not complete until he has donned the proper vestments.

Clothing was used as an indicator of humanity not only in cases of werewolves, but also in regards to the ambiguous characters of the Plinian races. Scholars continually argued whether these strange men could even be rightly called “men” because of their peculiarities. Even though they resembled (although rarely matched) Europeans in their behavior and physical shape, they were more often than not regarded as monsters and denied human status. The monstrous status of the Plinian races is evident in illustrations, which usually depicted them as naked. The lack of human accoutrements was an indication of the wild an uncivilized nature of these monsters.³⁰ As with werewolves, a human is not complete without his garments. Since the Plinian races were deemed by many to be deficient in their reason and behaviors, they had no use for man’s clothing. Man was not naked, and thus because these beings were bare, they could not be men. In addition to their naked disposition, many of the Plinian races were described with superfluous body hair. The manuscripts of Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, for example, typically illustrated the texts’ wild men as excessively hairy.³¹ Hairiness created a visual connection between the monstrous races and animals. Men were men because they were not covered in fur as animals. A monster’s hairiness was yet another indication of his lack of humanity.

For many of the Plinian races, the question of their human status did not find a simple answer. As with the pygmies and their imitation of human reason, many of the monstrous men wore degraded forms of human clothing. These were typically fashioned from animal skins. Not only would a monster’s hide-garment make a visual connection between himself and the beasts,

²⁹ Guillaume de Palerne, lines 4458-4549.
³⁰ Friedman, The Monstrous Races, p 31.
³¹ Ibid., p 154-156.
but would also highlight his failed attempt at humanity. The Europeans felt that these Plinian races were aspiring humans, reaching up from company with the beasts to grasp at human status. Their beastly attire visually depicts their blending of the human with the non-human. In a fifteenth-century version of The Romance of Alexander, the monstrous Gymnosophisti are covered in leaves in their illustration.32 A Cynocephali sports a hair shirt in De Naturis Retrum, another fifteenth-century work.33 Scholars of the Middle Ages theorized that the outside of a creature could affect its inner nature. In a dictionary from the late tenth to early eleventh century titled the Magnae Derivationes, Huguccio of Pisa even claimed that the very word “monstrum” (Latin for monster) was derived from the misuse of clothing. He argued that this term was in reference to the word “mastruca,” the rude clothing made from skins which typically adorned the monstrous men. Huguccio even went so far as to claim that “Who ever dresses himself in such garments is transformed into a monstrous being.”34 Men were not beasts or monsters because they dressed themselves in textile fabrics. The bare bodies or hair shirts of the Plinian races violated this distinction, and thus could not belong to true humans.

Just as man is the only creature that wears clothing, he is also the sole possessor and crafter of elegant weapons. The human connection to weapons is perhaps even more important to stress than with clothing because of the violent nature of weapons. In the Middle Ages, violence was considered a characteristic feature of animals.35 Man was driven by his reason, and animals were subject to their passions. Man was not ferocious, as animals were. However, when people engage in battle, slashing and hacking at one another with strong blows, their behavior sways uncomfortably close to the brutality of animals. A convenient way of solving this problem is to

32 Ibid., p 33.
33 Ibid., p 14.
34 Huguccio of Pisa, as cited in Friedman, The Monstrous Races, p 32.
35 Salisbury, The Beast Within, p 5.
simply create another qualification of humanity. Although both man and animal assault their enemy violently, a proper noble man has a weapon to separate him (literally) from the carnage that he is inflicting. He does not lay upon his foe with his bare hands, but rather allows a third party- which is to say a weapon- grant the killing blow.

The importance of weapons is evident in the influential early medieval epic *Beowulf*. The character of Beowulf is a fascinating example of the tension between man and monster. Although he is regarded as the bravest and greatest of all warriors, Beowulf can behave quite monstrously. When Beowulf confronts his beastly foe Grendel, the monster is appropriately without a weapon. The fiend is armed only with his mighty hands and his passions; he is “intent on evil, swollen with rage.”\(^{36}\) Likewise, Beowulf is described as “lying awake in anger for the enemy… his heart swollen with rage.”\(^ {37}\) This stands in greater contrast to previous warriors who awaited Grendel “with terrible blades.”\(^ {38}\) Both Grendel and Beowulf are characterized by their passions, not their reason. Furthermore, the poem repeatedly comments on the enormous strength in the hands of each fighter. Beowulf is said to have a “mightier hand-grip [than] any other man.”\(^ {39}\) Grendel’s hands are so fierce that the door to Herot “gave way immediately once he touched it with his hands.”\(^ {40}\) The stress placed on the prowess of these opponents’ hands signifies them as the fighters’ weapons. They are described just as the poet would write of a knight’s strong blade. When the two begin to scuffle, it is hard to tell where one enraged being differs from the next. Beowulf falls upon Grendel with his bare hands. In his rage, Beowulf tears Grendel’s arm right out of its socket.\(^ {41}\) This outrageous display of strength and violence is hardly

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p 69.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., p 57.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., p 71.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p 69.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., p 73.
human. His behavior mirrors that of Grendel, who had previously stormed Herot and slaughtered thanes with his terrifying claws. If men are to be rational, sword-bearing people, then Beowulf's violent behavior makes him monstrous.

Although Beowulf at times rejected weapons entirely, there were many other monstrous figures who attempted their use. Man was not a monster because monsters lacked weapons. But what precisely was a weapon? Fine pieces of armor, strong swords, and sturdy spears took a great deal of skill and effort to craft. They were complex pieces created exclusively by mankind. They were also closely tied to class. Only a nobleman would have the resources to obtain these items, and most importantly the skill to wield them. Celtic tradition of the early Middle Ages valued the sword as highly as the warrior who used it, and popular courtly romances of the late twelfth century would have but strengthened the value placed on swords. Noble men, the perfect examples of proper humans, used swords. But what of those beings whose humanity was unsure? If they were not entirely human, they could not use a noble human weapon such as a sword. Conversely, if they were not entirely monsters or animals, they would not be limited to their hands and teeth in their attack. The answer for many medieval people was to give such ambiguous figures an item which was still a weapon, yet lacked the noble connections and technical skills of the sword- a club. A wide variety of people were handed a club by the European upper classes. The Plinian races, giants, wild men, non-Christians, and even peasants were all given this sturdy stick at one time or another. Any one of these groups could appear as the ‘other’ to the nobleman, as something similar to himself but intrinsically different. These were lesser forms of men who used lesser forms of weapons. The Plinian races in particular provide a wonderful example of the monstrous club. It was constantly debated whether these strange men could rightly be called "men." It follows then that many were depicted holding
clubs, a crude weapon. The Blemmyae (headless men whose faces were on their chests), the Troglydotes (cave-dwelling speechless men), and the Panotii (men with immense ears) were but a few of these.\(^{42}\)

Clubs had further monstrous connotations in the Christian tradition. Cain, the vile brother of Abel, slaughtered his kin with what many medieval audiences took to be a club. The Biblical passage reports that it was a jawbone of an ass,\(^{43}\) but illustrations such as that in the Paris Psalter often depicted Cain with a club in hand.\(^{44}\) The association with Cain has particular interest to monsters because it was commonly held that all monsters were descended from this sullied man, just as all proper European men were descended from the noble Adam and his line through Abel.\(^{45}\) This was a fitting origin for monsters, as it placed them akin to humanity’s line, and yet apart. Like his abnormal offspring, Cain was a corrupted form of human, and thus used a corrupted form of man’s weapons.

Even more important than the items man used was the food he ate. In the Middle Ages, diet was one of the most fundamental aspects of not only of mankind, but of all creatures.\(^{46}\) What was eaten and the manner in which it was eaten were essential to the very essence of every creature. Medieval men interpreted themselves and the creatures around them through food. The influential scholar Ambrose pondered not only animals’ lack of reason, but also their relation to food. He felt that diet was so fundamental that it affected the physical shape of animals. He theorized that carnivores typically had short necks because "they bend down their necks and jaws

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\(^{42}\) Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, p 34, 19
\(^{44}\) *Ibid.*, p 34.
\(^{46}\) Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, p 44.
to the earth in the act of feeding." Likewise, herbivores had long necks because they would be "unable to feed on the smallest plants unless in the process of feeding [they were] able to extend [their] long neck[s] to the ground." The focus on "feeding" presented a great number of questions to theologians and philosophers. When one eats, one puts matter inside of oneself. On a physical and metaphorical level, the substance consumed is presumed to become part of the body. This was accepted as fact in the Middle Ages, and was even reported in the medical texts. The Roman physician Galen was regarded as one of the most important sources of medical knowledge up through the Renaissance. He claimed that blood, which carries the very essence of the human spirit, is formed from what one eats. Food was not just something which kept you from going hungry; it became part of your very being. This presented problems when humans ate the flesh of animals. If what you eat becomes a part of you, it would mean that the ingested animal has become a part of your body. If man is a human because he is not an animal, how can he remain human when he brings beastly bits into his body?

In addition to the fate of consumed flesh, medieval man was confronted with another dilemma involving the substance of his diet. He was a meat-eater. No courtly banquet was complete without a steaming serving of animal flesh. Although by the High Middle Ages meat was enjoyed more regularly by the upper classes, the diets of all social levels included meat to some degree. The problem with eating meat is that it is not a practice unique to humans. The beasts of the forest enjoy munching on the very same animals on which medieval humans dined. A wolf would not turn away from the same deer or pig that humans were after. One of the most

48 Ibid., p 246.
50 Salisbury, The Beast Within, p 56-58.
common ways to counter this similarity was to stress the manner in which man ate his meat. Although humans and animals both ate flesh, man was the only creature who cooked it. The special process of preparing the meat served as a sort of ritual, transforming it into fare suitable exclusively for people. The cooking process was used as a clarifier of his humanity. A man was a man because he did not eat his meat raw, as the animals did. Furthermore, men ate their meat together. Although there were many animals which ate in groups, men formed an elaborate event around their meals. Banquets were a grand and distinctly human occasion in the Middle Ages. The community aspect of a meal helped man assert himself. He was a man because he was in the company of men, enjoying cooked meat. In contrast, monsters ate raw foods alone and without ceremony.

The connection between raw meat and beastliness is evident in the popular “wild man” genre in courtly literature of the later Middle Ages. In tales of knightly adventures, it was quite common for the hero to temporarily go mad (typically because of some courtly transgression) and retreat into the woods. In this period he would tread dangerously close to the edges of humanity. In addition to forgoing his clothing (another mark of his humanity), he would eat the raw flesh of animals. Yvain, Lancelot, and Tristan are just a few such knights. The courtly behavior of these men in earlier passages was meant to be contrasted with their barbarous dining habits. Yvain, for instance, begins his tale as a shining example of chivalry. His adventure is set into motion by his knightly desire to defend the honor of his kinsman. This stands in stark contrast to Yvain’s later madness. The story relates that

“A whirlwind broke loose in his brain,
so violent that he went insane,
and clawed himself, tore off his clothes,
and fled across the fields and rows....

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51 Chretien de Troyes. *Yvain, or the Knight With the Lion*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), lines 637-680.
Once in the wood, he lay in wait
for animals, killed them, and ate
their flesh uncooked, completely raw,
like a wild man.,,52

Yvain's descent into madness is made apparent to the audience partly because of the change in diet. Instead of the communal setting of the king's hall, the wild man now dines with the beasts of the forest. Instead of a meal cooked with such attention that it resembles a ritual, he rips into his raw meat. If a man is a man because he eats cooked food in the presence of other humans, then Yvain has lost his humanity (although only temporarily).

Dining habits are also used as an indicator of inhumanity in the case of one of the most notorious medieval monsters, Grendel. Although his weaponless ferocity marks him as monstrous during much of the poem, at times Grendel is rather human-like. His behavior mimics that of a Dane in exile.53 He makes his home at the edges of the Danish community instead of within a swamp in the monstrous wilderness, as his mother does. He is at times bound by cultural rules of the Danes, such as his inability to approach the throne of the King Hrothgar.54 The poem even makes the direct connection between Grendel and an exiled man, as it refers to him as a "wretched creature" that "trod the paths of exile in the form of a man."55 Thus Grendel is similar to the wild knights of courtly literature. Both began as noble men, respected members of humanity. Unfortunately, they lost their human position, and evidence of their monstrousness is found in their dining habits. The wild knight participated in a distorted version of the courtly banquet, replacing the company of his fellow man with that of animals and the cooked meal with raw flesh. Likewise, Grendel's night raids on the Herot act as a negative of proper human

52 Ibid., lines 2637-2640, 2653-2656.
54 Köberl, The Indeterminacy of Beowulf, p 97-98; and Fajardo- Acosta, The Condemnation of Heroism, p 49.
55 Beowulf, p 99, line 1351.
behavior. Instead of dining with his heroic companions Grendel dines on them, reversing what should be an event which solidifies the human community of the mead hall.

Food was so essential to the medieval mind that the name “Grendel” itself is associated with barbaric eating, as it is related to “grindan,” which means “to grind, to rub, to scratch, to crunch, or to gnash.” The name Grendel is additionally related to a grouping of words which begin with the “gr” consonants and have a similarly violent interpretation: “ghren ‘to grind down’; ghrem ‘to rub,’ ‘to scratch’… gras ‘to devour’; gureugh ‘to crunch with one’s teeth,’ ‘to bite’… greues ‘to crunch’.” Many of these destructive terms also have connotations with food and eating, and as such Grendel’s name has the flavor of a fearful creature that would devour you whole. This does in fact turn out to be the case. Grendel chomps down as many as thirty of Hrothgar’s thanes in one sitting, stopping only to lick his fingers. In his very essence, his namesake, Grendel is a monster because of his connections to food and his monstrous (and violent) manner of eating it.

Food was also involved in the act which was most important in qualifying Grendel as a monster. Although both he and the wild knights dined upon uncooked food, Grendel gnashed through human flesh. Cannibalism was a troubling idea for the Middle Ages. If what one ate became physically and in some ways spiritually a part of the diner, a human ingested by another human would become a part of them. Further unsettling is the question of what happens to the human soul once the human body is devoured. Does it follow the flesh into the human who ate it? If that be the case, can a man still be a man if he holds two souls within himself? Cannibalism was disturbing on a more primal level as well. It was not out of the question for a medieval person to become lunch for some wild beast. The medieval mind was preoccupied with the

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56 Fajardo-Acosta, *The Condemnation of Heroism*, p 44.
58 *Beowulf*, p 41, lines 120-126.
knowledge that if given the chance, an animal would gladly eat a human. 59 This was a rather clear division between humans and nonhumans. A man was a man because he did not eat other men. This action was so connected to the monstrous that almost anything which ate humans was considered permanently a monster. The Plinian races were frequently given this terrifying attribute. The frightening Anthropophagi for example combined cannibalism with patricide by devouring their elderly parents. 60 They were in all ways physically the same as Europeans, and were even described with a complex social structure. However, the Anthropophagi were cannibals. To the European worldview, this alone was enough to bring them into company with monsters. Men were men because they were not cannibals. If these people were cannibals, the Europeans could not rightly call them men.

As oddly simple as it may seem, a man was a man because he was not a monster. Though the qualifications of these monsters were created by men themselves, it was a comfort to the insecure human to place himself opposite of monsters. Something cream-colored will look far whiter when compared to something brown. This same trick is applied to the psyche when man compares himself to monsters. The medieval men of Europe were not alone in their world. There were countless animals and other groups of men to contend with, each of which differing in some way from the Europeans. How did they stand in relation to all these creatures? European men could identify themselves by sorting out what they were not. These monstrous creatures lacked reason, and could at best only imitate man’s true reason. They lacked man’s items and his understanding of their proper usage. They certainly did not eat as men did. There were always further lines to draw, marking differences between the monsters and the humans. Abnormal creatures and people threaten the human view of themselves. If these atypical beings exist, how

59 Salisbury, The Beast Within, p 69-75.
do they relate to humans? They serve as a wonderful device for comparison. When confronted with the grey areas in man’s view of himself, he sets himself next to these monsters and suddenly his grey looks far whiter in comparison to their black. He is a man because he is not what they are- monsters.
**Heightening the Tensions**

As man attempted to define himself, he segmented the world around him into categories. He created groupings, placing himself in the most important class of all—mankind. In separating what was human, there remained a collection of that which was in-human. However, these classifications of “human” or “not human” were not entirely solid. It rarely happened that something was wholly within the spectrum of one and not the other. The world can seldom be divided into areas that are distinctly black or white. Instead, a myriad of grey can be found.

These unclear spaces challenged the medieval view of the world and man’s place within it. Here in these undefined patches lurked monsters. They held a great deal of fear and fascination in the medieval mind precisely because they heightened the tensions between man’s categories. Monsters moved in-between man’s groups, pointing out how frail the dividing line truly was.

Humans decided that there were to be animals and men, and that the two were not to coincide. Men were men and beasts were beasts. Monsters sent shivers down the spines of many because they found a loophole in this separation. They combined civilization and the wild, in their physical form as well as their actions. They mocked the partition between the human and the animal, bouncing from one realm to the next or settling squarely in between the two. Even the high ideas of good and evil, the most contradictory of all man’s categories, were not safe from the monsters’ corrupting touch. They contorted the features of one to fit the needs of the other. They existed in the grey glow in-between light and dark. Monsters were monsters because they did not fit into man’s ordered world. Instead, they found the holes in man’s patchwork universe and poked them wider.
One of the greatest worries that gnawed the medieval mind was the tension between man and beast. Humans were not alone in this world, and they continually questioned their relation to the hairy animals which walked among them. In an attempt to better define his own status, man in the early Middle Ages was relatively comfortable with placing humans and animals as polar opposites. There were beasts and there were men, and little was shared between the two.

Again we find Ambrose commenting on the position of animals. Although he wrote extensively of the nature of animals, he reflected the view that man and beast were separate. He scoffed at the idea that they could converge into one. “How...truly marvelous would it be,” he argued, “that the soul which governs man should be able to assume the nature of beasts, [which are] so opposed to that of mankind.”61 The rational mind of a human, he argued, was not compatible with the wild nature of animals. Ambrose, and indeed most Christians of his time, was skeptical that man and beast could physically combine because these creatures cannot be physically interchangeable unless they are first metaphorically interchangeable.62 To the Christians of the early Middle Ages, man was created in God’s image and animals were not, so there was little spiritual connection between the two.

However, as the decades progressed, the dividing line between man and beast began to blur and become more permeable.63 The apprehension between the realms of humanity and the animal began to increase. Once again, the celebrated werewolf tales of the late twelfth century speak to man’s uncertainty in his position. These tales, in which animal and man are merged, would not have been so widely accepted if they did not touch upon something deeper. Werewolves were so fascinating and unsettling because they played at the tension between man and animal. In addition to stressing the rational mind of the werewolves, the nobility of the

61 Ambrose, Second Oration, p 256.
62 Salisbury, The Beast Within, p 104, but 103-136 investigates the idea extensively.
63 Ibid., p 104.
protagonist was a crucial factor. As humans, they were “very courtly and noble,” and “made [themselves] beloved of all.” The noble king Gorlagon, the honorable werewolf of the twelfth-century tale *Arthur and Gorlagon*, is described as “noble, accomplished, rich, and far-famed for justice and truth.” How is it, then, that these model humans could take on the shape of a wild beast? Even more unsettling is the behavior of these men after they have undergone their transformation. Gorlagon, for example, descends into the mad behavior of an animal. Even though he is said to have retained his human mind beneath his canine form, Gorlagon “allied himself with a she-wolf, and begot two cubs by her.” This muddles the distinction between man and beast even further. Not only does it create a troublesome union between the human realm and the animal, but one that has been consummated as well. Furthermore, what would the Christian audience have made of Gorlagon’s cubs? They were animals, but were begotten by a man. With such close connections to humanity, could they possess a Christian soul? Gorlagon’s union with the she-wolf is monstrous and unsettling precisely because it draws attention to the uncertain relationship between man and beast.

The tale of Gorlagon pushes the boundaries between people and animals even further with the werewolf’s beastly behavior. As a man, Gorlagon is expected to act with reason as his guide. But there are many instances when humans act irrationally, throwing reason to the wind and allowing their passions to take over. As a monster, again we find the werewolf Gorlagon drawing awareness to this tension between reason and the passions. Gorlagon began his plight as a man, and as such “his human understanding remained unimpaired” when he transformed into a wolf. But, if he was able to cross the border between man and beast physically, what was to

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64 Melion, lines 7-8.
65 *Arthur and Gorlagon*, p 238.
66 *Arthur and Gorlagon*, p 240.
67 *Arthur and Gorlagon*, p 239.
stop him from doing so behaviorally? In addition to being banished from human shape and from his kingdom, Gorlagon’s cubs were slain by his wife’s lover, the usurping king. In furious retaliation, Gorlagon attacked the kingdom and “began to vent his rage with implacable fury, not only against the beasts but also against human beings.”68 Not only did he assault his own kingdom, but he also set upon two others, “greedy for bloodshed.”69 This violent behavior, especially since it is directed “against human beings” themselves, makes Gorlagon much more a beast than a man. He has a rational mind, yet he acts like a violent animal. As a monster, Gorlagon brings together the opposites of man and beast. He is so enthralling to the medieval audience because he combines these supposedly incompatible categories, showing that the features of humanity are not so definite after all.

Although Gorlagon’s monstrous behavior causes the audience to cringe, there is another monster which challenges the separation of man and animal even further. Gerald of Wales, a Welshman writing in 1185, tells of a peculiar pair of werewolves from the Irish town of Ossory. This town had quarrel with the saint Natalis, and as a result, “every seven years... two persons, a man and a woman, are compelled to go into exile not only from their territory but also from their bodily shape”70 and are turned into wolves. If after seven years have passed they have survived their exile, the exiles are fully returned to their human shape and status. To refer to the physical mixing of man and beast as an act of “exile” demonstrates how separate the realms of humans and animals were meant to be. Furthermore, these werewolves literally prowled the border between man and beast. In Gerald’s tale, a traveling priest encounters the two “in a wood on the

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68 Ibid., p 241.
69 Ibid., p 241.
borders of Meath. They are at the edge of a human settlement and a wild wood, finding an unsettling spot between territories that man had deemed separate. The insecurity of borders is even cause for the interaction between the priest and the werewolves. In the story, the she-wolf is dying and requires the priest to grant her last rites. She hovers between the living and the dead, not fully within either domain. Her beastly form and human soul simultaneously straddle the human and the animal domain. She even resides in a stretch of land which is not quite wilderness yet not within civilization. Everything about the she-wolf is uncertain, making her a perfect monster.

The tension in this story is finally brought to a head when the priest administered the last rites. He was reluctant to perform the ritual for the she-wolf, as it was a Christian ceremony reserved for humans alone. He eventually agreed to grant the werewolves’ request, likely because the male werewolf had “said some things about God that seemed reasonable,” proving that although he had a beastly form, he possessed a Christian soul (a monstrous combination indeed). The priest guides the dying she-wolf through the last rites, but cannot bring himself to give her the viaticum, the communion of the host. As the sacred body of Christ, the host was strictly an item of the human realm. Man was created in God’s image, and only men could take the host in communion with their Lord. Although the werewolves had verbally attested to the human soul beneath their hairy bodies, they were still beings of the boundaries, not fully human. As such they could not participate in the exclusively human activity of the viaticum. The only way around this conundrum was for the she-wolf to become more human. The male wolf is said to have “pulled all the skin off the she-wolf from the head down to the navel, folding it back with

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71 Ibid., p 69.
72 Ibid., p 70.
73 Ibid., p 71.
74 Salisbury, The Beast Within, p 65.
his paw as if it were a hand. And immediately the shape of an old woman, clear to be seen, appeared.” Only once the she-wolf had a human body to accompany her human soul was she allowed to receive the host. However, as soon as she does, “the skin which had been removed by the he-wolf resumed its former position.” The she-wolf is so unsettling because she can manipulate the physical boundaries of man and animal in order to partake in human activities. Although man and animal are not meant to meet, this monster slips in between these conflicting categories with ease.

The medieval concern with the relationship between man and animal was by no means restricted to werewolves. There were a great number of monsters lurking in the grey area between these two, mocking man’s designations by dwelling in the middle of them. Hybrid creatures were a popular breed, physically and metaphorically mixing the categories. Gerald of Wales places these creatures alongside the werewolves of Ossory in his twelfth century work, The History and Topography of Ireland. Gerald tells of a strange man who is half-ox. Being a mixture of supposedly opposing beings, the status of this creature is at once thrown into question. Although Gerald introduces the hybrid as a “man,” he then immediately muses “if indeed it be right to call him a man.” Gerald includes a lengthy passage concerning the description of the ox-man, evidence that both he and his audience were intrigued by the melding of man and beast. Not only does the ox-man physically combine the aspects of the two categories, but he also “attended the court,” bringing the beastly realm into the heart of human matters. Although Gerald expresses sympathy for this creature, the ox-man is ultimately not

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75 Gerald of Wales, History and Topography, p 71.
76 Ibid., p 72.
77 Ibid., p 73.
78 Ibid., p 73.
permitted to live. The hybrid is fittingly dispatched by members of his court, as it is man who is so threatened by the monstrous denial of order.

Gerald writes of another ox-man, one born “from a man’s intercourse” with a female cow. Of this hybrid Gerald has little to say, save where it belongs. He writes,

“It spent nearly a year with the other calves following its mother and feeding on her milk, and then, because it had more of the man than the beast, was transferred to the society of men.”

In the passage, Gerald does not focus on what the hybrid looks like or even how it came to be, but rather on its classification. As a monster, it defies the order of the human’s world, and stretches the boundaries of its categories. Yet another hybrid is reported with the same focus. Gerald writes of a creature which is half an ox and half a stag. Although this only crosses borders within the animal realm and does not violate the critical border between animal and human, it is still a violation of categories. As such, Gerald cannot help but to assign it a secure position within one group. He attests that “since it was more of a cow than a wild animal it stayed with the herd.” When man defines the world around him, he attempts to classify everything as black or white. Things are animals or they are humans. Hybrids arise out of the uncertainty of these classifications. They appear as grey, melding man’s groupings in an uncomfortable way.

Animals and men were supposed to exist in two separate realms. Men had their courts, and the beasts had their forests. Monsters, then, combined these divisions, bridging the tiny gap between man and beast. One such monster is found in the thirteenth century Welsh tale Owein, or The Countess of the Fountain. In this story, the brave knight Kynon encounters “a great black
man, no smaller than two men of this world.”84 The giant is further separated from his human companions as he has “one foot and one eye in the middle of his forehead.”85 He is physically at the borders of humanity, resembling a man and yet not duplicating him. This is no mere giant, however. He is called “the keeper of the forest,”86 and rules over the beasts of the woods in a manner much like a human court. When all of the animals are assembled, they pay homage to the giant in a very human-like fashion. They are said to have “bowed their heads and worshiped him as obedient men do their lord.”87 However, the method through which the giant summoned these beastly vassals is brute force. The story relates that “he took his cudgel and struck a stag a great blow so that it roared; with that wild animals came until they were like stars in the sky.”88

Violence is characteristic of animals,89 and its use by the giant places his humanity under further scrutiny. Furthermore, that he wields a club highlights the giant’s ambiguous position between animal and man. A club is a crude weapon unworthy of noble men, yet it is still a weapon (an artifact of humanity). Thus it is a fitting item for such an ambiguous character. This monster is a distortion of man’s assumed dominion over the animals. He rules over the animals as a true man would rule (by appearing as their lord); yet he holds his court in a forest outside the human realm and enforces his order through beastly force. By combining animal and man, he draws attention to the instability between their realms.

The giant keeper of the forest treads the edges of humanity in his speech as well. In the tale, it is repeatedly mentioned how “uncivilly”90 the giant converses. He calls the brave knight

85 Ibid., p 196.
86 Ibid., p 196.
87 Ibid., p 197.
88 Ibid., p 197.
89 Salisbury, p 81-84.
90 Ibid., p 197.
Kynon a “little man” more than once. Speech, and especially formal speech of courtly men such as knights, is a product of the civilized realm. The giant, as a denizen of the grey areas of man’s regimented world, can access this trait of humanity, but not excel at it. It would likely be rather unsettling to the medieval audience that a giant individual with only half of man’s proper limbs could still use man’s language (though poorly). Not only can the giant speak, but he can use the courtly device of shame as well. After Kynon’s humiliating defeat by the black knight of the fountain, he encountered the giant. Kynon remarked that “it is a wonder I did not melt into a pool with the shame that man heaped upon me.” Kynon’s shame must have been great indeed that even a monster had claim to berate him. This stressed the tension between the realms of civilized humans and of the wilderness. A being who was not fully within the realm of man was still able to apply standards to its human members. The giant dwelt in the grey space, reaching into both the black areas and the white.

The division between man and wild was of critical importance to the medieval mind, but of even greater importance was the dichotomy of good and evil. To the Christian mindset, these were two forces which stood in stark opposition to one another. There was little shared between the two. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of monsters was that they danced upon this dividing line, not necessarily becoming good themselves, but instead showing how close “good” and “evil” could really be. One of the most personal ways monsters accomplished this was through their origin. People of the Middle Ages were largely concerned with bloodlines. If monsters existed on the earth, medieval man pondered where they could have come from. A common theory was that monsters were descended from Cain, the notorious brother of Abel. Man, on the other hand, was descended from Adam. As the original human, Adam held a place of honor

91 Ibid., p 197.
in the medieval world. Some theologians even glorified him as the most Godly form of man, particularly those influenced by the rabbinic tradition. In a rabbinic commentary on Genesis, it is said of Adam that “His person was so handsome that the very sole of his foot obscured the splendor of the sun.” Cain, on the other hand, was a vile creature. In Genesis he is called a “vagabond and a renegade,” and is full of wrath. As the original murderer, he ignored his human reason and allowed his beastly rage to control him. He was a corrupted human, who through sin and malice allowed himself to sink to a sub-human level. This was a fitting foundation for monsters, as they were often degenerate forms of man. Most unsettling to the medieval audience, however, was that Cain, the source of monsters, and Adam, the source of true man, were direct relatives. Cain was in fact Adam’s son. The most Godly of men (save Jesus) to have walked the earth gave rise to the fountainhead of all monsters. This shows that good (in this case Adam) may be separate from evil (in this case Cain), but they are tied more closely than one might expect. Furthermore, it means that medieval man is related, albeit distantly, to contemporary monsters. Although he would like to separate himself entirely from the monsters, they are still man’s kin.

Not only were monsters begotten by an unpleasant link between good and evil, but much of their existence threatened the distinction between the two. The dragon, one of the most formidable of all monsters, constantly reminded man of how unclear goodness could be. The dragon was nearly always viewed as an evil creature with connections to the Devil himself. The Aberdeen Bestiary, a twelfth-century work that provided descriptions and allegories of animals, has little friendly to say of the dragon:

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94 Friedman, The Monstrous Races, p 92-93.
97 Freidman, The Monstrous Races, p 95-100.
"The dragon is said to be crested, as the Devil wears the crown of the king of pride. The dragon's strength lies not in its teeth but its tail, as the Devil, deprived of his strength, deceives with lies those whom he draws to him. The dragon lurks around paths along which elephants pass, as the Devil entangles with the knots of sin the way of those bound for heaven and, like the dragon, kills them by suffocation; because anyone who dies fettered in the chains of his offences is condemned without doubt to hell." 98

This passage illustrates how deeply the dragon was entangled with the Devil in the medieval mind. In creating his divisions of good and evil, man had nearly universally declared the dragon evil.

As in modern western culture, Europeans in the Middle Ages generally associated darkness with evil and danger, light with goodness and God. As a loyal member of the Devil's assembly, the dragon should be a being of darkness. However, one of the most defining features of the dragon is his ability to breathe fire, 99 essentially giving him control over light. The dragon's use of light should not be interpreted as a sign of a dragon's deeply hidden virtue shining through. Rather, this is a perversion of goodness, a wolf in sheep's clothing as it were. The dragon cloaks himself in light in an attempt to dazzle the viewer, in order to distract from the evil beneath. The Aberdeen Bestiary makes the same allegory with the Devil, claiming that "he transforms himself into the angel of light and deceives the foolish with hopes of vainglory and worldly pleasure." 100 Dragons could not change their status from "evil" to "good," but they could reach their sharp claws into the realm of God and steal some of its bright attributes for themselves. This metaphorical distortion of good and evil took shape in the dragon's physical distortion of the sky via its fire. In the epic ninth-century poem Beowulf, when the Geats see their dreaded dragon foe fly overhead, they refer to him as both "dawn-enemy" and "dawn-flyer." 101

100 Aberdeen Bestiary, folio 66r.
101 Beowulf, lines 2271 and 2760, p 143; also cited in Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, The Condemnation of Heroism p 139.
Fidel Fajardo-Acosta suggests that such contradictory terms for the dragon arise out of his mastery of light. The dragon is the enemy of dawn in that dawn is representative of Christian goodness. Yet he is a “dawn-flyer” in that the glowing light of his fiery breath makes the sky resemble dawn.102 Dragons, while still remaining within man’s allotment of “evil,” are able to manipulate the skies in a parody of man’s idea of “good.” They frightened man primarily because of this ability to take what should be clearly white or black and turn it grey.

As man navigated his place through the shifting cultural landscape of the Middle Ages, he attempted to organize the scattered world. By placing ideas into a system, man is able to gain a level of control over them. To describe something as “animal” does not change its essence, but it does provide a way to understand and approach it. This is the most elemental reason that monsters held such fear to medieval man. They tore through the labels that man assigned to the jumbled mess of his world by being themselves indefinable. If a monster was able to reject the idea of “animal,” then how stable could that category truly be? With monsters waiting to find the cracks in the seams of man’s understanding, even the ethereal ideas of good and evil could not be kept completely separate. The medieval world was by no means static, and every new creature, event, or person had to be assigned a place within the European worldview. Yet for every category that man created for his world a monster was left behind, sitting just beyond his reach. Monsters taunted man by evading his classification and by showing how unstable his worldview truly was.

Monsters as the Uncontrollable Other

Monsters were a useful tool in aiding mankind in his attempts to define himself and his world. But what exactly was ‘mankind’ itself? The European landscape was littered with a number of different people and cultures which shifted with every passing year of the Middle Ages. Amongst the Christian residents were scattered groups of Muslims, Jews, and other self-proclaimed Christians (such as the Albigensians) who were denied ‘Christian’ status by the Catholic majority. Although these peoples were generally physically identical to the Christian Europeans, their cultural behaviors were no less strange than if they had but one large foot. The Christian European definition of proper manhood was an idea unique to their culture and society. These groups, the ‘other’ men which they encountered in their lands, had entirely different standards of humanity. They seemed human, but did not conform to the Christian ideals of proper manhood. Monsters offer a helpful approach to these ‘others.’ Though monsters themselves are a slippery idea in the medieval mind, they are still an established idea. By associating these other men with monsters, Europeans are able fit them into their ideas of manhood. Yet there remained another group which defied the ideas of “manhood” at an even closer proximity. Women were a puzzling group for the male-dominated Middle Ages. As females they were unable to take part fully in masculine culture, yet they were an integral part of society. By ‘monsterizing’ women, men were able to gain a level of control over their dangerously unstable position within society. Although monsters were in general physically outside of the norms of European men, it was of greater importance that they acted differently. By associating ‘others’ with monsters, Christian Europeans were able to fit them into their worldview and gain a level of control over them.
One of the most common groups of non-Christians in Europe was Jews, dwelling in cities across the mainland as well as in England. Jewish men posed a real problem for the Christian world structure. There were set ideas of the standards of humanity, and sitting in the heart of Christian society, within their own cities, were Jewish men who denied these standards. Jews occupied a position in the margins of European society. They lived in the same settlements as Christians, and the two groups likely had a great deal of interaction. They did not, however, fully converge. A Jewish taboo on marrying outside the faith\textsuperscript{103} aided in keeping the two groups distinct; and both Jewish and Christian authorities preferred that Jews settled together, creating Jewish quarters in nearly every city.\textsuperscript{104} These “Jewries”\textsuperscript{105} held pockets of the Jewish worldview within the larger Christian communities of Europe. They were collections of the outsider (the Jew) positioned in the center of the Christian spatial world. The Jews were both within the European community and yet excluded from Christian culture. Just as hybrid monsters mocked the order of man’s world by residing in the borders of his categories, Jews occupied a marginal space in medieval Europe.\textsuperscript{106} As the Middle Ages progressed and the idea of a larger “Christian” community was stressed, this ambiguous position of Jews became even more evident. In the early thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III convened the Fourth Lateran Council. Although it addressed a wide breadth of issues, of the mandates which the Council issued was that Jews were to wear identifying badges on their clothing.\textsuperscript{107} The need for a distinguishing mark illustrates not

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p 115, 123.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p 123.
only the uncomfortably close similarity between the Jewish and Christian Europeans (that Jews could slip amongst Christians unnoticed but for their badge), but also shows the drive of man to bring his world into order. Jewish Europeans had to be assigned a position in Christian society, a status that was so important that it should be outwardly publicized. Just as medieval man struggled to place hybrid monsters within the categories they so boldly violated, he felt compelled to pin down a position for monstrous Jews within his Christian society.

The exclusionary factor of the Christian religion, however, was not as explicit as one might expect. It was accepted that Christians and Jews practiced different religions, but it was also acknowledged that the two faiths stemmed from the same source. The Old Testament of the Christians and the religious texts of the Jews shared the same holy people and events. Even the central Christian figure Jesus was born from a Jewish tradition. Although there was a painfully large separation between the two because of Jesus, it was still an accepted fact that Jews and Christians were distant cousins of the same religious family. As such, medieval Jews maintained an awkward position as both distinct from Christians and yet closely related. Just as the monstrous descendants of Cain were both related to the sons of Adam and yet separated from his human offspring, Jews were the religious ancestors of the medieval European Christians and yet were not members of their world.

Since these Jewish men existed alongside and yet not among the Christians, the question then became where they stood in relation to the proper Christian men. Because they were a marginal group, Jews threatened the Christian idea of their own humanity. The result for some was to cast Jews in the same roles as many monsters, specifically as a counter example to proper Christian male. Such is the case in the classic Spanish epic Cantar de Mio Cid. Although the date

of its first appearance is debated, this poem was widely popular in the late Middle Ages and serves as a window into the culture of the Spanish Christians during the thirteenth century. In this poem, the Christian protagonist Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar (also known as the Cid) is a bold knight. Sadly the first part of the poem is lost, and we are first introduced to the Cid after he has been wrongfully sent into exile by his king. Although this sentence shamed the noble Cid, we are reassured that he is a proper lord by the profound loyalty of his vassals. When he announces his imminent departure the Cid insists that his men are under no obligation to follow him. Immediately his first cousin, Alvar Fanez, stands and speaks for his fellows.

"‘We’re with you, Cid, no matter what, wild territory or town, and while we’re in one piece, we’ll never fail you. We’ll wear out everything around, our goods, the horses, the mules, our clothes, and, as your loyal vassals, serve you always.’ Everyone shouted together, ‘That’s right!’ to what don Alvaro had said. The Cid thanked them deeply for what had been decided there.”

This declaration of devotion to their superior, as well as the Cid’s graceful acceptance of the pledge, illustrates that our protagonist is a proper lord. He dutifully follows the orders of his superior, the king, by going into exile, and his own vassals were willing to do the same for him.

Not only does the Cid have the grace of a proper lord, but also the might of a strong warrior. An integral element of Christian manhood was the notion that proper men fought, and the Cid certainly did. In order to regain acceptance at the king’s court (and metaphorically speaking to the Christian community at large), the Cid embarks on a number of military campaigns against the Muslims of Spain. With the edge of his sword he earns wealth and honor, eventually being readmitted to the court and thus regaining his status as a proper human amongst them. This noble activity stands in stark contrast to two Jewish characters by the names of Vidas

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110 Mirrer, *Representing “Other” Men*, p 169, 171, and 185 specifically, but the theme is present throughout the piece.
and Rachel whom the Cid encounters in the tale. Rachel and Vidas are moneylenders (a common profession for Jews in Christian cities), and are fooled by the Cid into paying out interest upon two large chests that are filled of dirt instead of gold. Not only does this illustrate the foolishness of these Jewish characters, to be easily duped with false riches, but the poem notes how gleefully Rachel and Vidas accept the rouge. When loading the chests into their carts, "you could see how much they enjoyed it."\textsuperscript{111} The poem asserts that "They were merry, Raquel and Vidas, with such a mint."\textsuperscript{112} Rachel and Vidas even handle their own money with exceptional delicacy. When counting the interest to be paid to the Cid, they lay out their coins on a white linen fabric spread upon a prayer rug.\textsuperscript{113} The use of a prayer rug in their monetary transactions reaffirms the reverence these moneylenders paid to their wealth. Not only do these measures mark Rachel and Vidas as exceptionally greedy (a sin most grievous to good Christian men), but they highlight the improper nature in which their wealth was received. Whereas the Cid earns his riches on the battlefield, these Jews have not fought for the prosperity they enjoy, and thus did not gain it in an appropriate Christian fashion.\textsuperscript{114} The Cid is associated with the field of conquest, Rachel and Vidas with the home, the arena of their money-lending.\textsuperscript{115}

The exile of the Cid from his position in the court temporarily exiles him from mankind. The court is the focus of European nobility, the central grounds where the complex relations of mankind are played out. Since the Cid has been denied a definite place within the court, his place within humanity is likewise thrown into question. His efforts in the tale to regain access to the court serve as ways to reaffirm his human status. Just as monsters are implemented to define what man is by exemplifying what he is not, the Jewish characters in \textit{Cantar de Mio Cid} serve as

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, p 15.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid.}, p 16.
\textsuperscript{114} Mirrer, \textit{Representing "Other" Men}, p 181.
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Ibid.}, p 180.
counter-examples to highlight the proper human features of the Cid. The tenuous position of Jews as nearly human is utilized to help the Christian Cid better define his own humanity. He is a good Christian partly because he is not acting as a Jew.

Although Jewish men found themselves lacking the full requirements of Christian European humanity, they still retained a most vital element- they were men. Women posed a conundrum to men of medieval Europe. As a heavily male-dominated society, the idea of mankind was precisely that- the idea of men. Women were an undeniable part of society, and yet as females they could not participate fully in male ideas of humanity. Although they could be the object of knightly valor, they did not engage in any of the combat which largely defined males. Perhaps most unsettling to the medieval man was woman’s relation to power. Courtly society of the upper classes was a complex web of control and obedience. Vassals and lords each had a responsibility to one another, and any given man rarely held only one of these titles. Women, on the other hand, were neither vassals nor lords, yet they still enjoyed a level of influence over courtly life. How could women exert power over a social structure which they did not fully adhere to? Like monsters, women were not bound by the order of man’s world and, even more unsettling, had the ability to manipulate this world.

The disconcerting power of women is often associated with more obvious monsters in literature, such as with a number of werewolf tales. As is evidenced by preceding examples, werewolves draw upon the tension between the borders of man’s world. Werewolves such as the ferocious Gorlagon mixed categories between man and beast which ought to be kept separate. In a number of the popular werewolf tales, the disturbing blurring of divisions is executed by female characters. The werewolves in all of the previously discussed stories of Bisclavret,
Melion, Biclarel, Guillame de Palerne, and Arthur and Gorlagon are transformed by women.\textsuperscript{116}

That the werewolves of these five tales are all male characters additionally speaks to the potential danger of the female’s power. These women were able to defy the partition between man and animal (by creating a werewolf); but most unsettling is that this power stemmed not from within the worldview of men, but from some unknown source. The need to control and categorize women is evident in these werewolf lays as well. At the climax of Biclarel’s tale, when the men of Biclarel’s court suspect that the wolf among them is more than what he seems, the king (the chief of the courtly power structure) attempts to force the power of the female into his submission. He sets upon Biclarel’s wife, who secretly performed the werewolf’s transformation at the opening of the tale.

“At once he [the king] ordered the lady to be seized
And had her put in cruel fetters,
And he swore that he would put her to death
Or she would tell him the truth.
When she heard the king,
She complied in order to save her life.
She confessed the whole truth,
Both how she had betrayed her lord,
Through her lies and her trickery.”\textsuperscript{117}

What made her deed even more troubling was that it was a reversal of the proper flow of power within the late medieval court. She had used her abilities against her lord instead of acting as an obedient vassal. The fact that she was an insubordinate female merely provided another dilemma. Like other monsters which overturned man’s world, Biclarel’s wife had to be subdued. The unfortunate woman “was placed between walls/ from which she could never come out,”\textsuperscript{118} literally sealed within the figurative structure of the masculine worldview.

\textsuperscript{116} Arthur and Gorlagon; Melion and Biclarel; Guillaume de Palerne; and Bisclavret.
\textsuperscript{117} Biclarel, lines 435-442.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., lines 454-455.
Some monsters are easy to recognize. A missing or misshaped limb easily denotes a creature as in-human. However, not all monstrous beings are so readily identifiable. The cities and courts of Western Europe bustled with a number of different peoples outwardly very similar to Christian men. Yet an underlying difference was indisputable. Jewish residents lived close to Christians and were spiritually distant cousins, but were nonetheless not Christians. Women lived literally alongside the Christian men of the courts, but were clearly not males themselves. Man’s place in the world was increasingly less stable as the Middle Ages progressed, and he grasped for control wherever he could. By casting these puzzling people as monsters, man was able to assign a label to their problematic position. As monsters, Jews and women could be contained within the Christian male worldview using the same methods as with other monsters. This is not to say, however, that their status as marginal figures was entirely erased. Monsters could be ordered here and there, but there very existence laughed in the face of man’s efforts to mandate his world. But however slippery the status of “monster” was, it was still an idea. To assign women and Jews this position was still assigning them a position. In confronting those who seemed human, it was sometimes most helpful to call them monsters.
**Conclusion**

Humans are unique creatures in that they endlessly question themselves. “If I am a human, what exactly does that mean? What is it that makes me a human? What prevents other creatures from being human like me?” Monsters provided a vital tool for men of the Middle Ages in their search for answers to these questions. They served as a measuring guide by providing an example for man to compare himself against. He could assert his humanity by setting it against the monstrous behavior of other creatures. By situating himself further away from the monsters, man was bringing himself closer to humanity. Monsters could also be used to bring order to the uncontrollable. This is an interesting role for monsters, as they are themselves border figures. But even though they are poorly defined players in man’s worldview, they still have a part. To give something a name is to gain a level of control, even if a name is all you have. In this respect monsters can be a positive force in medieval society. The status of “monster” can be given and taken away as man desires, allowing man to define and order the world around him and compare his place within it. However, monsters did not always take this role willingly. Man held onto his monsters with a slippery grip. They were ambiguous and terrifying figures, able to slink away from their position as the bulwark of man’s ordered world and sit snugly on the borders of his worldview. No matter how man tried to classify the world around him, his attempts would never be perfect. Monsters continually reminded him of this fact.

Monsters held an ambiguous position as both defining the borders of man’s world while at the same time standing in opposition to this order. Their role as both under and outside of man’s control was even more valuable as the Middle Ages progressed. In the late fourteenth-century, the famous traveler Mandeville described this ill-defined position of monsters. He
declared that "a monstre is a þing difformed a3ên kynde [contrary to nature] bothe of man or of best or of ony þing elles & þat is cleped a Monstre." As "contrary to nature," monsters defy categories. They are not entirely men, nor entirely beasts, nor "ony þing elles," eliminating membership into any other groupings that man could possibly conceive. Yet as indefinable as monsters seem to be, Mandeville is able to casually describe them in one sentence. His discussion of a "monstre" is but a side note to his narrative, evidence that the concept was already present in the minds of his audience. It was this fluid position, this ability to be both an accepted idea and yet in their nature incredibly vague, that made monsters such an important cultural tool to the European society of the Middle Ages. Their presence as a factual truth in writings such as Mandeville's Travels illustrates that the medieval monster was not just a scary bump in the night. The monster played an active role in medieval culture, helping mankind navigate his way through the shifting cultural landscape of Europe in the Middle Ages.

Works Cited/Consulted

  This was an incredibly useful source. It was very easy to search and provided a view of the medieval attitudes towards many animals. When dealing with wolves in the primary sources, for example, this bestiary helped me to understand what the medieval man would have associated with these wolves. Furthermore, since it is connected to the University of Aberdeen, I trust that it is a reliable translation.

  Ambrose offered a very lengthy description of the six days of creation. A lot of this proved to be interesting, as it dealt as much with theological interpretations as with descriptions of animals and their behaviors which were intended to be factual. As such it was a useful look at the medieval view of the natural world and its relationship to man. The translation of this work is one of a large series of works, and seems to be reliable.

  Much of this piece was outside of my scope, but in his discussions of religion Ambrose offers a view into the spiritual perception of animals in the early Middle Ages. The translation is somewhat old, but seems to have been officially sanctioned for Catholic seminary study and thus should be reliable.

  Although this source reaches into the Renaissance period, it is born of the traditions of the Middle Ages. Being unable to find a version of the Vulgate Bible translated into English, I felt that this Bible was the most accurate source to turn to.

This work was extremely helpful, as it was focused on the role of monsters much in the same way as my paper. Particularly helpful were the introduction by the editors and the chapters by Bettina Bildhauer, Asa Simon Mittman, and Samantha J. E. Riches, which dealt with the monstrous role of Jew, ideas of the ‘other’ in Gerald of Wales, and dragon-saint battles respectively.

  
  From the selection of translations of this piece, this was among the most recent in Bracken Library. However, it is a “modern” translation, and the language is at times intentionally contemporary to the twenty-first-century and distracting from the medieval setting. It seems to be a very thorough translation however, with every line offering more detailed language than other translations I found.

- **Chretien de Troyes.** *Yvain, or the Knight With the Lion*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline.
  
  
  The foreword to this work praises the translator for her ability to keep to the poetic style of Chretien de Troyes while still avoiding archaisms. It seems to me that this is more or less correct, as the translation seems true to the period.

  
  This book was my main source for setting the historical background of the relationship between Christian and Jewish Europeans in the Middle Ages. Mark Cohen seems to be a reputable authority on the position of Jews in medieval Europe, as he has authored several pieces on the subject to which Bettina Bildhauer made several references in her work.

  
  I used this source mainly as a supplement to Salisbury’s work. Douglas was focused on the larger concept of werewolves in Western culture, and so only a few of his chapters were relevant to the Middle Ages in particular. Those chapters, however, were very helpful in providing analysis of the popularity of werewolves. His discussion of the wolf’s place in medieval Europe was particularly interesting.

- **Fajardo- Acosta, Fidel.** *The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of Beowulf*.
  
  
  The analysis of this author seemed at times rather scattered and slightly undeveloped. He did, however, make a few very interesting interpretations concerning the monsters in Beowulf. There was also excessive quoting of other authors, which was distracting to Fajardo-Acosta’s thesis, but aided his credibility. I primarily used the work as a compliment to my other Beowulf sources.

An in-depth look at the cultural role of the monstrous races of the mysterious edges of the world, this book offered useful insights into why the Plinian races retained their popularity throughout the Middle Ages. Friedman analyzes the characteristics of monsters and, more importantly, their relation to the European humans which (in a sense) created them. It also provided a useful list of monstrous races common in medieval accounts. The work seems very credible, as other sources made reference to it as well.


This piece was very useful as it combined the Celtic tradition of the British Isles with the High Middle Ages. The stories from this collection show the literary tradition as well as the contemporary worldview of medieval southern England. Each tale was accompanied by a useful introduction, but it would have been nice to have more analysis of the source.


The edition seems to be a reliable translation. It was nice for my purposes that Gerald’s original illustrations were copied with the text, as he depicted the hybrid creatures he wrote of.


The source seems reliable, as this is the same edition that was quoted by Friedman in his work. I used it only for the section describing Adam’s holy nature, but it was helpful to put this selection into the context of the work as a whole.


A new edition of an old translation, this source was a reliable find. Tristan’s battle with the dragon was the most helpful.


I found Heng’s work very difficult to handle and somewhat unrelated to my research. This was not a vital source of information for me, but merely provided some factual background to the Jewish-Christian relationship in the Middle Ages.

A translation of two popular werewolf lays of late Middle Ages. Although from an online source, it appeared to be reputable. The introduction by Hopkins was also quite useful in analyzing the similarities between these two lays and the popular *Bisclavret.*


A useful analysis of *Beowulf,* it explored the concepts of “hero” and “monster” and how they relate to *Beowulf* and Grendel. It was very good at contextualizing the epic in Germanic society, making interesting cultural analysis.


The author seemed well-versed in the study of *Beowulf* and made appropriate use of primary sources. I relied on one chapter in particular, which approached *Beowulf* from the same monstrous position as I did. It illustrated how *Beowulf* can at times be quite monstrous, and Grendel can be at times quite human.


This piece was a little difficult to handle due to the fact that it was not translated into modern English. However, with a bit of effort this work was a valuable complement to Friedman’s analysis of monstrous men. It was very useful to have a medieval depiction of the Plinian races.


Although I relied more on the lais of Marie, her fables provided an important look at the relationship between animal and man. How these groups interact in the fables, and (more importantly) how the animals portray human virtues show how the medieval person associated himself metaphorically with animals.


Since Marie’s lay *Bisclavret* was arguably the archetypal medieval werewolf tale, this source was invaluable. While I did not reference them, her other lais also provided useful insights into the relationship between men and women of the late medieval courts. The passages following each of the lais also provided useful analysis of her work.

This werewolf tale was from an early Celtic source, and as such was before the period of much of my research. It was useful, however, in that there were still many parallels to the later werewolf tales. This old story would have undoubtedly still been in the cultural mindset of those who heard the lay of Bisclavret, and affected its acceptance by Irish society. The translation itself seems to be credible, as it is recorded from the story-telling tradition that the tale would have originally been found it.


This book was aimed at the phenomenon of werewolves as a whole, including possible medical explanations for the legendary creatures. Since it attempted to cover such a large scope, much of the book was outside of the Middle Ages and thus useless to my research. The translation of Arthur and Gorlagon was very helpful, however, and gave a credible primary source.


This was an interesting piece in that it approached male relationships from the same direction as my paper. Mirrer described not just factual relationship between Christians and the “other” men of Europe, but more importantly how these Christians viewed the Muslims and Jews. She also made ample use of primary sources to illustrate her point, making the piece very easy to understand.


This was a short work that could have been improved had it devoted more attention to fewer chapters, but it was helpful in providing examples of dragons in literature. Its examples of saints battling dragons were a useful supplement to Rauer’s chapter addressing the subject.


This piece was more helpful to me for its analysis of dragons than for its approach of Beowulf. Her chapter characterizing fights between saints and dragons was particularly
useful. Although there were elements particular to hagiography, it was a helpful look into the role of dragons in the medieval mind.

  This is perhaps my most useful source on the changing relationship between man and beast in the Middle Ages. The book is excellently composed, illustrating how man related to his animal companions. It explored the connection between the two on both the metaphoric and mundane level. Most importantly, Salisbury illustrated how the shape of that connection changed throughout the Middle Ages.

  This source was somewhat difficult to handle, as it is not translated into modern English and has few explanatory notes accompanying the text. It is also a very old transcription of the work, and so I disregarded the editor’s preface, as any conclusions would have undoubtedly been outdated. It is, however, a complete copy of this rather lengthy piece, and it was helpful to have the original work in front of me.

  This translation stays true to the spirit of the original while still being easy to read. I also enjoyed the fact that Swanton placed his translation parallel to the original text. On the left side of every page is the Old English version, with the lines numbered.

  Covered with endnotes and references to other scholars, this source appears to be thoroughly researched. I would have liked to peruse the work further, as it seemed to be a well-written discussion of the role of Galen in European medicine. For this paper, however, I used if for its discussion of the formation of blood.

  Although the work appeared to be very credible, I did not rely heavily upon it due to the fact that the online transcription of the Aberdeen Bestiary was nearly identical. The Aberdeen Bestiary also was far easier to search, and it seemed to be that its translation was more complete than White’s. However, it was still useful to have another primary source to consult.