ABSTRACT

THESIS: Burden of the Beast: Animals in Traditional Europe and Their Role in Guiding Society

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DEGREE: Master of Arts

COLLEGE: Sciences and Humanities

DATE: May 2020

PAGES: 92

ABSTRACT: This thesis examines the development of anthropocentric interpretations of nonhuman animals throughout Europe by tracing the ongoing transformation and usage of bestiaries. The Introduction outlines previous emblematic research, focusing on the relationships between cosmologies (e.g., Cosmic Hunt, Ursa Major, Orion’s Belt, and Pleiades) and ancient manuscripts (e.g., Pliny the Elder’s Natural History, Aesop’s Fables, the Greek Physiologus, and Isidore of Seville’s Etymologiae). This exploration serves as justification for this research by providing diachronic evidence for the prominent role of nonhuman animals in perpetuating societal mores and morality. Part One provides an overview of the geography and utilization of bestiaries throughout the Middle Ages, with a focus on Central Europe. Part Two conducts an in-depth examination, arguing that the early development of Germanic fairy tales represents the creation of a new medium within the existing compendium of bestiary texts. Like medieval bestiaries, the fairy tales gathered and edited by the Brothers Grimm used culturally constructed groupings of beasts to teach morals, continuing a tradition dating back to pre-Christian antiquity. The relevant features of each group and its members are discussed in detail, and the results of this examination are then used to propose new patterns of bestiary development and exchange between medieval texts and modern texts. Part Three summarizes the modifications made to each selected story and shows how the altered sense of morals and the text of each tale have been applied.