

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/188672/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Lewis, Liam 2026. Sloughing the lion: Skin and sovereignty in a Medieval bestiary and "sketchbook". *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes - Journal of Medieval and Humanistic Studies* 1 (51) , pp. 411-434. 10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-20944-7.p.0411

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-20944-7.p...>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Sloughing the Lion: Skin and Sovereignty in Philippe de Thaon's Bestiary and Villard de Honnecourt's 'Sketchbook'

Abstract

Medieval viewers of bestiaries were accustomed to encountering 'angry' lions on the surface of parchment skins through text and image that emphasised these creatures' dual status as symbolic King of Beasts and allegories for Christ. Comparing a sketchbook with the first bestiary written in French, I argue that the surfaces of these texts enjoin audiences to slough off layers of artistic and textual interpretation to consider their affinity with sovereign lions as creatures living in skin.

5 keywords: Lion, Affect, Skin, Nonhuman, Sovereignty

The various models for the representation of lions in the Middle Ages reveal the plasticity of premodern thinking about animal identity. Medieval Christianity drew on biblical images of lions, such as the battle between Samson and the lion and the symbol for St Mark from the Tetramorph, whilst literary narratives created spaces for leonine depictions, as in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier au Lion*; in this romance, the knight Yvain is accompanied by a lion he has rescued, creating a composite assemblage that challenges models of equine mastery and cross species "mutual desire"¹. Whilst the semiotics of lions and other nonhuman animals in medieval religion and literature have been explored in depth, the methods used to represent them on manuscript pages remain underexplored. Furthermore, the processes by which manuscript pages themselves invite audiences to decode layers of interpretation offer a rich field of study recently invigorated by the materialist turn. Scholars have begun to ask how reading on or about animal skins creates an affinity between animal and human, or conversely emphasises boundary crossings through the ruptures of parchment pages. Sarah Kay has proposed that the torn or perforated parchment pages of some bestiary manuscripts (which usually begin with a chapter on the lion), and which resembles human skin, produces uncanny suspensions of the traditional distinction between textual content and writing support². Likewise, Karl Steel has noted that in medieval literary culture "there is no way to get past the skin, no way to avoid touch, and no way [...] to make any lasting claim to ownership of what we tend to think of as so intimately ours"³. Skin has also been raised as a twenty-first-century feminist and epistemological issue, as it defines sites of difference which are "always/already apparent at the surface"⁴. This new research highlights the complexity of a shared experience of living in, reading on, and touching skin, and points the way to a sharper understanding of how encounters with animals both living and dead shaped medieval textual culture.

The following discussion broadens Kay's thesis to enter this conversation about animals on and as pages, arguing that the sovereignty attached to the figure of the lion in medieval manuscripts creates the conditions for viewers to gaze at themselves through the parchment, as

¹ J. J. Cohen, "Chevalerie", in *Medieval Identity Machines*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 35-77, at p. 56. For Yvain, see Chrétien de Troyes, "Le Chevalier au Lion", ed. D. F. Hult, *Romans*, ed. M. Zink, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1994, p. 705-936.

² See B. Holsinger, "Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal", *PMLA*, 124, 2, 2009, p. 616-623; S. Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017; P. McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 70-96; and E. Campbell, *Reinventing Babel in Medieval French: Translation and Untranslatability*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 258-225.

³ K. Steel, "Touching Back: Responding to *Reading Skin*", in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. K. L. Walter, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 183-195, at p. 183.

⁴ M. Shildrick, "'You are there, like my skin': Reconfiguring Relational Economies", *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. S. Ahmed and J. Stacey, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 160-174, at p. 160.

opposed to disrupting the reading process. It thus contributes to a broader field of study concerning surface encounters with animals. As artists and writers seek ever more effective ways to depict encounters with nonhuman creatures, they have drawn attention to sites of “productive engagement with the world of animals”, in turn inviting reflection on the feeling of skin and illustrating subjective modes of encounter heightened by sight and touch⁵. Pages featuring lions in medieval texts exploit a sense of affinity with the sovereign lion to nurture a deep kind of thinking about what it means to depict a nonhuman being that may experience the world in similar ways to ourselves, underpinned by emotions and a desire for self-expression. These parchment pages achieve this by inviting viewers to look at the skins on which lions are drawn and to think beyond the impressions made by sketch lines or by French and Latin text. By enjoining the viewer to interact consciously or unconsciously with skin through the transparency of figures’ bodies, the parchment on which the sketches are drawn makes its own claims as to the nature of the artistic process as well as that of the counterfeited animal⁶. The process by which the viewer uncovers meaning is one of shedding or stripping away semiotic and physical layers of interpretation and getting back to surfaces as primary sites of encounter, in other words, “the sloughing of preconceptions and of identities”⁷.

Lions on bestiary skins

The lion’s status as King of Beasts was deeply entrenched in Western European medieval literature and culture. Lions appeared in fables, in manuscript illuminations, and as architectural figures throughout the Middle Ages. Medieval writers and artists used lions as supports for the conception of royal and noble strength alongside religious potency, perhaps even as a millennium-long strategy to displace the cultural supremacy of native fauna such as the bear⁸. In the mid-to-late Middle Ages, lions rampant and passant began to appear as heraldic symbols, especially in the Low Countries and Picardy, often implying terrestrial nobility⁹. The lion is thus the most important medieval example of how the power and authority of a living animal could be mapped onto human social, cultural and religious codes. Simultaneously, other fauna took on symbolic and cultural meanings that were specific to a medieval context: in literary circles the fox-as-trickster was a standard trope explored in the *Roman de Renart*, and in medicine the properties of products from animals, such as bear bile, were highly prized¹⁰. The mirroring of human systems with the essences of various animals thus became a standard trope in medieval thought.

Bestiaries (pseudo-encyclopaedic texts featuring chapters on various animals) do not claim to depict actual lions, even if illustrators may have had possibilities to encounter lions in the

⁵ R. Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. xvii.

⁶ The notion of reading skin as a “surface” may be differentiated from the work of scholars such as N. K. Turner, who highlights the need to centre other factors, such as “the animal species of the skin, the particular method of manufacture, the preparation of the surface for writing, its codicological features, and its subsequent treatment history”, “The Materiality of Medieval Parchment: A Response to the ‘Animal Turn’”, *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 71, 1, 2018, p. 39-67, at p. 41.

⁷ The notion of sloughing the animal is a response to S. Baker, “Sloughing the Human”, , *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. C. Wolfe, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 147-164.

⁸ M. Pastoureau, *L’Ours: Histoire d’un roi déchu*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007, p. 181-207.

⁹ F. McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1962, p. 137-140; M. Pastoureau, *Traité héraldique*, Paris, Picard, 1993, p. 136-146; and W. B. Clarke, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary: Commentary, Art, Text and Translation*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2006, plate IV, and fig. 1, 30, 32a, 37, and 47.

¹⁰ *Le Roman de Renart*, ed. G. Bianciotto, N. Fukumoto, N. Harano, and S. Suzuki, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 2005. Bear bile was used as a sterilizer, and to cure baldness, epilepsy, rage, and gout. See Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum naturale*, Douai, Company of Jesus, 1624, book XIX, chap. CXVI-CXX.

flesh in menageries such as the one at the Tower of London¹¹. Rather, bestiaries express idealised animal behaviours with the aim of revealing religious and moral allegories and expressing God's invisible nature¹². As Emma Campbell notes, bestiaries combine referential and religious modes of representation, offering "composite and multimodal networks engaged in creating the world, rather than simply describing it"¹³. Lions were therefore not only exotic fauna and familiar heraldic symbols – they also functioned as allegories for Christ. The reasons for the association between the lion and Christ were many: lions were, supposedly, the strongest of beasts; the word *leo* in Greek was thought to translate into "king" in Latin; and lions exhibited certain behavioural characteristics, called "natures", reminiscent of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection¹⁴. These natures "translate" the Christian Neoplatonic concept of the "book of the world" by revealing spiritual truths. To take an example, the first of the lion's "natures" is that he can cover his own tracks to thwart the hunters pursuing him, a trick that mirrors Christ's incarnation into human form, to the surprise of the unwitting Devil. Secondly, the lion sleeps with his eyes open, as the Lord remained awake after the Crucifixion according to Christian eschatology. The lion's third "nature" is that the lioness gives birth to dead cubs, which are only revived on the third day by the lion breathing in their faces¹⁵. Bestiaries developed important sensory aspects to imagining such scenes, with sight, breath and sound featuring significantly as ways in which human readers could imagine and interpret leonine behaviours. Added to the sensory schema of bestiary narratives, bestiary illustrations often represented lions by emphasising the similarity between leonine and canine, rather than feline, form. It was not unusual for medieval artists to adapt representation in such ways; many associated the lion with the quasi-leonine "leopard" used as a counterpart to house the lion's negative characteristics, but in no way related to the leopard that we know today¹⁶. In the first French bestiary written in Anglo-Norman by the twelfth-century writer Philippe de Thaon, the lion is said to have many natures, including the three that circulated widely in bestiaries, described above¹⁷. However, contrary to what modern readers might expect from the King of Beasts, the illustrations that accompany the text in an early thirteenth-century version of the text tell a rather different story about how we should interpret these figures. The manuscript, Oxford, Merton College Library, MS. 249, contains an illustration of the lion facing a figure of a man (fig. 1), presumably Christ, holding a staff split into a tripartite bauble. The artist has depicted the lion in profile and the animal resembles a dog or small quadruped rather than *Panthera leo*.

¹¹ J. A. Givens, *Observation and Image-Making in Gothic Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 63-64.

¹² D. Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 168.

¹³ E. Campbell, "Sound and Vision: Bruno Latour and the Languages of Philippe de Thaon's *Bestiaire*", *Romanic Review*, 111, 1, 2020, p. 128-150, at p. 148.

¹⁴ F. McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, p. 137-140, and L. Lewis, *Animal Soundscapes in Anglo-Norman Texts*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2022, p. 41-47.

¹⁵ W. B. Clarke, *A Medieval Book of Beasts*, p. 120.

¹⁶ R. Viel, *Les origines symboliques du blason*, Paris, Berg International, 1972, p. 31-91.

¹⁷ Philippe de Thaon, "Il 'Bestiaire' di Philippe de Thaün", in *Bestiari Medievali*, ed. L. Morini, Turin, Guilio Einaudi, 1996, p. 101-285, at p. 120, l. 165-167, p. 130, l. 329-330, and p. 132, l. 363-368, respectively.

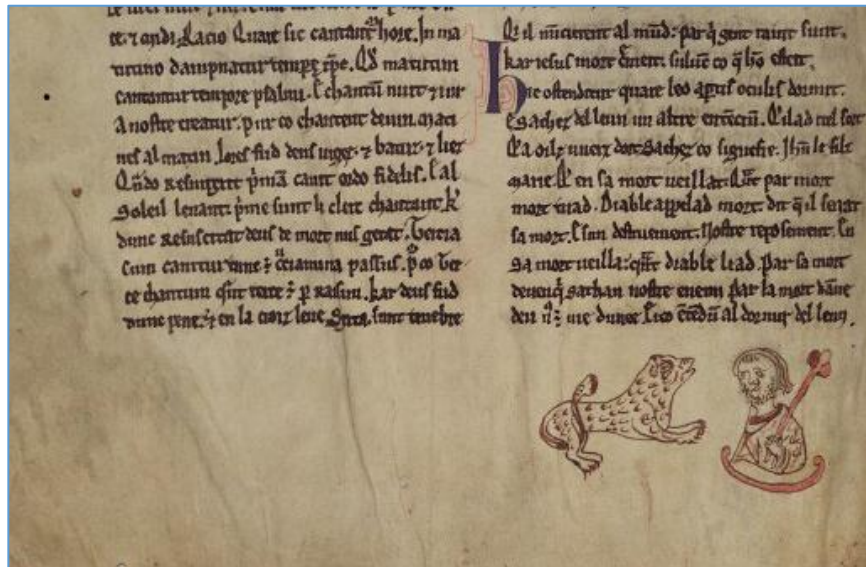


Fig. 1. The lion faces Christ. Oxford, Merton College Library, MS. 249, fol. 2^v. Reproduced with the kind permission of The Warden and Fellows of Merton College Oxford.

As Campbell suggests, the “authentic reference” of these vernacular bestiaries is “divine rather than mundane”, and the tripartite imagery may reference Philippe’s wider project to depict animals for memory training or to classify animals, birds and stones according to levels of spiritual progress or “relative proximity to God”¹⁸. However, as prominent and familiar animals in medieval art and text, sketches of lions such as the one on the folio above map out symbolic relations onto quasi-domestic imagery, incorporating complex entanglements of domestic relations as the primary visual symbolic. Illustrations that depict lions with the exterior features of dogs present conceptual problems for the interpretation of human and lion representation, not least because a shift to schematism in the early thirteenth century is reflected in many bestiaries, especially in the flatness of their illustrations.¹⁹ The lion’s profile in fig. 1 balances “leonine” and human aspects – the same eye level and a raised tripartite tail/staff contained within the width of the column of text above – suggesting that the lion and Christ are indeed one and the same, gazing at each other. The performance of sovereign symbolism in this bestiary thus forges parallels between lions and divinity even as the visual schema conceptualises a hierarchical relationship between species influenced by domestication and cohabitation.

The reproduction of lions onto the page can entail manipulation, especially since many bestiaries tell stories in which “animals manipulate and falsify their signs,” generating plural, malleable interpretations of behaviours rather than fixed ones²⁰. Viewers can see this in practice on the recto side of the same folio of MS. 249 (fig. 2). The manipulation of signs is a direct characteristic of the lion to whom conscious volition is attributed when the lion eludes hunters by brushing and covering its tracks with its tail.

¹⁸ Campbell, *Reinventing Babel*, p. 235-239.

¹⁹ D. Hassig, “Beauty in the Beasts: A Study of Medieval Aesthetics”, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 19/20, 1990/1991, p. 137-161, at p. 140.

²⁰ S. Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, p. 97.

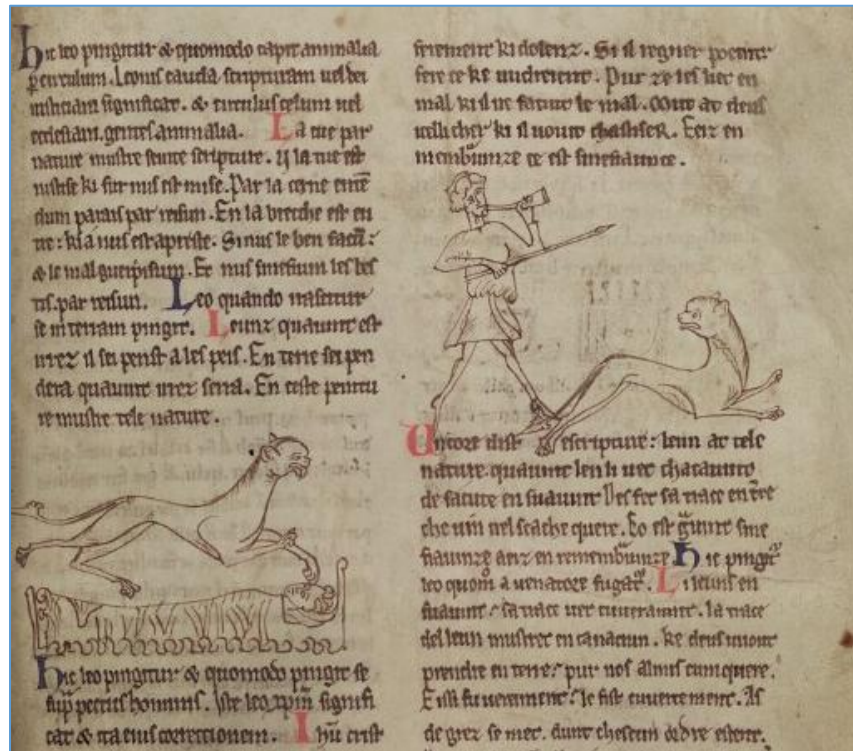


Fig. 2. The lion hovering over a recumbent man (left) and effacing its tracks when hunted (right). Oxford, Merton College Library, MS. 249, fol. 2^r. Reproduced with the kind permission of The Warden and Fellows of Merton College Oxford.

These illustrations juxtapose lion and human sovereignty in provocative ways. The bestiary lion on the left in fig. 2 hovers above a sleeping man (or perhaps the image of a man), reflecting the text's comment that when it is angry the lion paints itself with its feet in the earth ("se peint od ses piez en terre", v. 122-3). The text notes that 'this' painting (referring to the illustration) demonstrates this nature. A rubric in Latin below the image states that the lion is depicted painting himself above the man's chest ("*Hic leo pingitur et quomodo pingit se supra pectus hominis*"), a figurative portrayal of the text's instructive rubrics that have been studied by Muratova and analysed as memory aids by Carruthers²¹. Kay suggests that this image may reflect the tradition of the lion "recognising itself in man's likeness to God", an interpretation supported by Phillippe de Thaon's own allegory, which posits the lion as Jesus Christ who chastises us for not loving God since we are his earth and fashioned in human form, thus bound by God to constrain our sins (v. 127-56)²². The symmetry of the left-hand side illustration in fig. 2 suggests just such an interpretation as the lion's body is stretched out to the full length of the body of a man. The lion is even touching the image of itself as a man in the earth, thus touching its own human form. As such the viewer sees the lion painting itself as a human, a visual impression made all the more compelling in these colourless illustrations as both lion and human share the same "pigment" for their skin—the parchment page itself. In this way the

²¹ X. Muratova, "The Decorated Manuscripts of the Bestiary of Philippe de Thaon (the MS. 3466 from the Royal Library in Copenhagen and the MS. 249 in the Merton College Library, Oxford) and the Problem of Illustrations of the Medieval Poetical Bestiary", *The Third International Beast Epic, Fable and Fabliau Colloquium, Münster 1979 Proceedings*, ed. J. Goossena and T. Sodmann, Bohlau, Cologne, 1981, p. 217-246; and M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 159-160.

²² Kay, *Animal Skins*, p. 187, n. 43. Another "nature" of the lion in the Long Version of the bestiary by Pierre de Beauvais is that when the lion sees a man watching him eat, he is afraid of the man's gaze, a behaviour Kay argues could jar with "the reality of [the lion's] sovereign identity" (p. 120).

bestiary renders visible God's invisible nature, but this process occurs through the writing support as well as the text and image.

As the human viewer looks at the page, he or she witnesses an entanglement of human and nonhuman natures – an angry lion composed of skin and ink painting itself in human form. Such a reading of this page jars with William Worringer's explanation of schematism as an expression of "the alienation between man and his natural surroundings", and instead highlights how bestiaries "seek to emphasise, rather than deny, man's relationship to nature"²³. This entanglement can also be read at a deeper level; as a human looks at the page, he or she is enjoined to slough off layers of representation in order to arrive back at skin as the primary material for encountering the lion. Understood in the context of bestiaries' agenda of providing a means "of more fully aligning human nature with its intended, ideal form", such a process involves the human "slowly giving up preconceptions and learning something of what the animal has to offer"²⁴. It is no surprise that the sloughing in question occurs in the chapter on the lion in this bestiary. The lion epitomises sovereignty, and thus offers a direct comparison of, and challenge to, the figure of the Anthropos with which it shares its form (through skin or earth) in these visual and textual depictions.

Sketching lions "al vif"

In contrast to the leonine figures that fill the pages of vernacular medieval bestiaries, images of lions from a medieval 'sketchbook' make a claim for depicting animals as "drawn from life" (*al vif*), adding complexity to medieval encounters with lions on parchment. The sketchbook or portfolio by Villard de Honnecourt, likely produced in the early thirteenth century, is an album comprising 33 parchment folios²⁵. The sketchbook, a rare survival from the Middle Ages contains numerous drawings or sketches that illustrate a range of topics, ideas and figures. These include diametric drawings, illustrations of objects, a perpetual motion machine, studies of architectural forms, and representations of living organisms, including royal and religious figures, an owl, and a swan and bear, to name but a few examples. A substantial number of the images are accompanied by written text that explains the subjects and purposes of the images without recourse to the type of moralisation found in bestiaries. It is likely that the text was written after the individual folios had been bound into the codex, producing an ekphrastic relationship between text and image that bears debts not only to drawing from life, but also to the empirical spirit of Aristotelian science already revived in the cultural context of the twelfth century²⁶.

Very little is known about Villard de Honnecourt, but scholars have attempted to draw details of his professional life from the sketchbook. James Bugslag summarises a number of possibilities: he was "a practicing goldsmith who would have been trained in figural and drapery rendering; he was a building administrator with a vested interest in the workings of both practicing and designing masons; he was literate and close enough to learned court circles to be aware of current new ideas; and his professional activities encompassed a somewhat comparable geographical and artistic range" (p. 374). However Villard made his living, there is an important distinction in the sketchbook itself between representations that convey

²³Hassig, "Beauty in the Beasts", p. 147, n. 46. See also W. Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, Schocken Books, New York, 1964, p. xi.

²⁴ Campbell, *Reinventing Babel*, p. 248.

²⁵ For a recent facsimile with extensive commentary, see C. F. Barnes, JR., *The Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt: A New Critical Edition and Color Facsimile*, Oxford, Routledge, 2009. The sketchbook is now housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS fr. 19093).

²⁶ J. Bugslag, "'Contrefais al vif': Nature, Ideas and Representation in the Lion Drawings of Villard de Honnecourt", *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 17, 4, 2001, p. 361-378, at p. 362 and 367.

physiognomic and physiological likeness (Villard's technique of *portraiture* that nevertheless founded itself on geometric principles), and those images that the text states were "drawn from life" ("contrefais al vif")²⁷. Competing schools of artistic thought thus fuse in the sketchbook, including a new empiricism associated with Aristotelianism and Neoplatonic ideals of universal essence found in bestiaries. This combination has led to various interpretations about Villard's craft, with some speculating that he drew what he immediately saw in front of him, whilst others propose that his drawings must have been from memory, from other drawings, or even from imagination²⁸. The assertion that some drawings were connected to the practice of life drawing highlights a radically different approach to representation from that found in the bestiary discussed above. Nevertheless, drawing *al vif* in this sketchbook is not regulated by a desire for complete accuracy, but is influenced by medieval conceptions of the essence or innate nature of an animal or object.

A comparison with vernacular bestiaries nevertheless offers a way of moving beyond debates about the sketchbook as predetermined according to geometrical schemata or as a kind of visual shorthand²⁹. The argument here is that the layering of what we might recognise today as competing cultural and artistic techniques and ideals provides an invitation to see right through Villard's depiction of lions back to a mirror image of the human. This occurs on two separate folios of the sketchbook, with alternative effects for the lion's sovereignty. Firstly, the sketchbook depicts a man with two dogs turning backwards to see a crouching lion in chains (fig. 3). The lion is accompanied by a Latin *titulus*, a description in French, and a separate profile of a roaring lion in drypoint and sepia ink above and behind the crouching lion. The French text describes how the trainer commands the lion to train him to do his bidding and beats his dogs to make the lion fear him and lose his courage. The final statement stipulates that the lion, here also associated with anger, was reproduced from life ("contrefais al vif"):

De l'enseignement del lion vos vel ge parler. Cil qui le lion doctrine, il a .ii. chaiaus; qant il velt le lion faire faire aucune coze se il comande. Se li lions groigne, il bat ses kaiaus, dont a li lions grant doutance qant il voit les kaiaus battre, se refraint son corage et fait co c'on li comande; et s'il est corecies sor co ne paroil mie, car il ne feroit por nelui ne tort ne droit; et bien sacies que cis lions fu *contrefais al vif*.

I want to tell you about the training of the lion. He who would train the lion has two dogs. When he wants the lion to do something, he commands him. If the lion growls, he beats his dogs, at which the lion has great fear when he sees the dogs beaten. He loses his courage and does that which is commanded of him. And concerning when he is enraged, I will not speak of that, for no one can make him do right or wrong. And know this; that this lion was *drawn/reproduced from life*.³⁰

The scribe's insistence that the lions are drawn from life is a rare assertion in medieval texts and art from this period. The use of the phrase "contrefais al vif" to describe the artist's method of drawing has attracted significant attention from scholars, who have argued that the Old French verb *contrefaire* (to act counter to something, imitate, reproduce, design, paint, renew, affect, or make something look a certain way) is used in this manuscript invariably as an indication that Villard was drawing from life in front of a lion, that he was imitating the essence of a lion that he had previously seen, or conversely that he was producing a counterfeit or false depiction of a lion³¹. The *contre* of "contrefais" teases out the element of the English

²⁷ Barnes, *The Portfolio*, p. 168-169.

²⁸ Bugslag, "'Contrefais al vif'", p. 361. See also C. F. Barnes JR., "The Codicology of the Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS FR.19093)", *Scriptorium*, 42, 1, 1988, p. 20-48.

²⁹ Hassig, "Beauty in the Beasts", p. 148.

³⁰ Text and translation adapted from Bugslag, p. 363, with my emphasis.

³¹ F. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX^e au XV^e siècle*, vol. 2, Paris, F. Vieweg, 1883, p. 273; and Tobler-Lommatzsch *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, Wiesbaden, 1956, vol. 2, p. 793-795. For the debate on *contrefaire*, see M. Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*, New York, 1996, p. 143;

word ‘counterfeit’ that is essential to all artistic process, whether or not the artist was literally sitting in front of a lion. However, it is also possible that the phrase “al vif” refers to Villard drawing a lion that was alive or living – a lively lion – as opposed to a model. In Old French the phrase “contrefais al vif” encompasses these different meanings, whilst maintaining a suspension of meaning in which all might be true to certain degrees. The folio therefore presents the viewer with a remarkably flexible – and one might say, postmodern – interpretive framework.



Fig. 3. How to train your lion.
Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS fr. 19093), fol. 24r.

Whilst real lions were occasionally kept in medieval menageries, it is only speculation to suggest that Villard drew his image from an encounter with one because we know so little about his life³². It is, however, highly likely that Villard used depictions of lions from manuscripts, architecture and art alongside any real animal encounter. The lion’s cringing pose in fig. 3 could be an indication of the artist’s attempt at drawing from life, perhaps in imitation of dogs, but just as with literary examples of the scene of the cowering lion, this pose is also a visual motif that can be traced back to Classical Greece³³. Likewise, Barnes suggests that the inspiration for this scene may have been a textual one, deriving from Thomas de Cantimpré’s *Liber de natura rerum*³⁴. In any case, were this to be a drawing from life in a modern sense it would almost certainly be a big cat stretching, rather than preparing to pounce³⁵. The image of the crouching lion can thus stand as a close study of “trained” leonine behaviour, a portrayal of ferocity and response from the humans and dogs, and as a snapshot into the semiotics of leonine behaviour, poised between crouching and roaring.

and H. Swenson, “Lions and Latour Litanies in the Sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt”, *Postmedieval*, 4, 3, 2013, p. 257-269.

³² *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. F. Klingender, E. Antal, and J. P. Harthan, Cambridge, Routledge, 1971, p. 448-449.

³³ Bugslag, “Contrefais al vif”, p. 364-366. See also H. R. Hahnloser, *Villard de Honnecourt: Kritische Gesamtausgabe des Bauhüttenbuches ms. fr. 19093 der Pariser Nationalbibliothek*, Wien, A. Schroll, 1935, p. 397-401; and J. Boardman, “Leaina”, *Enthousiasmos: Essays on Greek and Related Pottery Presented to J. M. Hemelrijk*, ed. H. A. G. Brijder, A. A. Drukker and C. W. Neeft, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum, 1986, vol. 6, p. 93-96.

³⁴ Barnes, *The Portfolio*, p. 165.

³⁵ I am grateful to Hannah O’Regan for her meticulous analysis in personal correspondence of the physiology of Villard’s lions.

Putting to one side conjecture concerning actual and figurative lions, an important effect of describing the lion as drawn or reproduced “from life” is that it enjoins the viewer to participate in surface readings similar to those discussed in relation to the bestiary above. To imagine the lion as living is to bring close attention to the surface of the parchment page as the site of a productive encounter between human viewer, lion, and the hair side of parchment skin. As with the bestiary lion, these sketches allow viewers to look straight through the image to the parchment surface, creating the illusion that humans and animals are kin of the same material, but bound up in uneven power struggles that are distorted by the fragmentary nature of the images, in this case the lion’s crouching body underneath the floating lion’s head. The folio becomes the site of surface reading and to a “codicological unconscious shaped by the surface of the skin”³⁶.

A dialectical relationship between words and images emphasises not only affinity with the page-as-skin but also human supremacy through fear and sovereignty. This is highlighted by the potential for whipping the dogs’ skins, which will be hit by the tamer’s cat o’ nine tails to bring the lion into submission. The description of the image of the crouching lion incorporates an element of possibility that highlights the conditional source of the whipping: “Se li lions groigne, il bat ses kaiaus” (“If the lion growls, he beats his dogs”). The sovereign power performed by the human trainer thus opens the sketch to interpretation through the filter of skin. Haylie Swenson has suggested that this folio acts as “a corrective to traditional, correlationist philosophy and [interrupt] conventional understandings of artistic encounter” by emphasising the complexity of such encounter when triggered by affect and the memory of an agentive object³⁷. By describing the content of illustrations, and accompanying these with a brief flavour of the artistic process under which they were produced, the sketchbook fires the viewer’s imagination to consider embodied process alongside objective representation.

The fusion of text, image and the shared experience of skin creates a multisensory experience of “text” exemplifying how “medieval pictures cannot be separated from what is a total experience of communication involving sight, sound, action and physical expression”³⁸. Each of these modes of viewing the page feeds into a loop of interpretation that creates an affinity between the human and the nonhuman; skin provides the medium to establish an intimate form of interspecies relation and “for thinking about the self, supporting but also belying the fantasy of the self’s wholeness or unity”³⁹. This is especially the case as the lion exhibits behaviours identified in terms that readers can understand; the lion becomes enraged during the training process in which the dogs are beaten and the sketchbook links this emotional response with the act of description and depiction, stating (perhaps in frustration) that the persona will speak no further of the lion’s anger because the lion is practically untrainable. There is a striking similarity here with the bestiary lion painting itself in human form when it is angry, and the accompanying textual description. These surface readings of lions on parchment foster a link between anger (whether from God in the bestiary or the lion in the sketchbook) and the act of drawing or painting.

Does the lion have a face?

³⁶ Kay, *Animal Skins*, p. 17. See also S. Kay, “Surface and Symptom on a Bestiary Page: Orifices on Folios 61^v-62^r of Cambridge Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 20”, *Exemplaria*, 26, 2-3, 2014, p. 127-147; and Holsinger, “Of Pigs and Parchment”, p. 616-623.

³⁷ Swenson, “Lions and Latour Litanies”, p. 258.

³⁸ M. Camille, “Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy”, *Art History*, 8,1, 1985, p. 26-49, at p. 43.

³⁹ *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. K. L. Walter, New York, Palgrave, 2013, p. 2.

But what if a lion stares at the viewer directly in the face? The reverse side of the folio depicting the crouching lion (the flesh side) features a famous figure of a lion in drypoint and then inked as seen from the front (fig. 4). A small porcupine in a less accomplished hand appears in the bottom left quadrant. A large *titulus* in Latin reads “LEO” to the right of the lion’s head. This is accompanied by a short textual description in Old French, explaining how the lion was drawn “from life” (*al vif*): “Ves ci .i. lion si com on le voit p’devant; et sacies bien qu’il fu contrefais al vif” (“See here a lion as seen from the front, and know that it was reproduced from life/drawn as if alive”). As with the description of the crouching lion discussed above, the assertion that this lion was sketched from life, or in the state of living, offers a tantalising glimpse into how the artist may have intended the viewer to interpret the image. It raises further questions about the nature of skin and what types of ethical exchange occur when looking into the face of a “living” nonhuman agent.



Fig. 4. The lion as seen “from life”. Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS fr. 19093), fol. 24^v.

Looking into the eyes of a lion staring straight out of the sketchbook invites a further, deeper act of sloughing off, an act which is also a creative one of “becoming-animal”, drawing attention to the artistic process whilst simultaneously undermining the text’s claims to depict the lion as “drawn from life”⁴⁰. What type of conceptual work is happening if a geometrically symmetrical lion perhaps also with features of a dog anticipates or confirms the human viewer’s own gaze? This sketch confirms what it is like to encounter the gaze of an angry

⁴⁰ For the theory of “becoming-animal”, see G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press and Continuum International Publishing Group, 1987.

lion—a process intimately bound with artistry—and to inhabit the perspective of a nonhuman animal which is able to match human sovereignty.

Scholars have generally expressed scepticism about the authenticity of claims that the front elevation of the lion was drawn from, or to, life in a modern sense. Swenson notes that “the central vertical fold of flesh between the front legs, the tufts of hair on the legs, the joints of the feet, and even the visual impression of three toes all suggest direct experience”, and read literally as an image drawn from life, the lion’s unusually small head shape or limited retractable claws could suggest an animal suffering from malnutrition or arthritis (both high possibilities for any lion in a medieval menagerie)⁴¹. However, “contrefais al vif” does not register on this folio as an aim for exact visual verisimilitude because the lion has too many uncannily human features to register as fully lion-like. Rather, the image pertains to the living state of a lion, its “‘objective’ nature embodied in ‘universals’, or further, to the production of a morphological imaginary”, in contrast to anatomical specificity⁴². That is to say that Villard may have focused on the essence of the lion rather than its objective particularities, combining natural historical record with cultural semiotics into an image suggestive of lived encounter, but not confined to such an interpretation⁴³.

Alongside claims to actual encounters, this image performs further conceptual work that draws attention to an understanding of the structure of the object⁴⁴. The image attests to a multilayered, schematic, staged composition process using geometric aids: a pinprick in the centre of the lion’s chest marks the centre of the “compass-inscribed circle that defines the width and height of the lion’s body” and likewise for the centre of the face; the diameter of the head circle is exactly half the diameter of the chest circle; and the graphite arcs beside the lion’s right eye are “post-Villard additions”⁴⁵. The geometric circles express some of the underlying principles of geometry present in artistic works from the period that feature elsewhere in the sketchbook in a floorplan of a church and a symmetrical hexagonal overlay covering two flamingos⁴⁶. The rounded body, visual symmetry and anthropomorphised face create a bizarre overlap with human features through ears and teeth that look “suspiciously human”, although the lion’s eyes are remarkably leonine since they enclose the eyeball within another, larger structure in “the unique teardrop shape characteristic of a lion’s eyes”, in this case accompanied by a furrowed brow that denotes anger in a human face⁴⁷. Is this lion a microcosm of man in animal form, or a conflation of the essential components of leonine identity, material and symbolic, in a single, but uncanny, figure?

Sloughing off layers of geometric design, verisimilitude and penwork, the viewer of the folio reaches the membrane itself. As in the bestiary, the lack of colouration articulates the lion’s face and the image invites viewers to test the lion’s gaze. Does the viewer see in this image the lion, the counterfeit of a lion, the folio as a mirror image, or actually a human, looking through the membrane of animal skin back to him- or herself. In a drawing that outlines

⁴¹ Bugslag, “‘Contrefais al vif’”, p. 371.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 368.

⁴³ Further scholars who have claimed that Villard may have seen an actual lion include: J. B. A. Lassus, *Album de Villard de Honnecourt: Architecte du XIIIe siècle, manuscript publié en facsimile*, Paris, Leonce Laget, 1858, p. 252; Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought*, p. 449; and R. Willis, *Fac-simile of the Sketch Book of Wilars de Honcort with Commentaries and Descriptions by M. J. B. A. Lassus and by M. J. Quicherat: Translated and Edited with Many Additional Articles and Notes by the Rev. R. Willis*, London, John Henry and James Parker, 1859, p. 173.

⁴⁴ S. Perkinson, “Portraits and Counterfeits: Villard de Honnecourt, and Thirteenth-Century Theories of Representation”, *Excavating the Medieval Image, Manuscripts, Artists, Audiences: Essays in Honor of Sandra Hindman*, ed. D. S. Areford and N. A. Rowe, Aldershot, Routledge, 2004, p. 13-35.

⁴⁵ Barnes, *The Portfolio*, p. 168.

⁴⁶ M. Zenner, “Villard de Honnecourt and Euclidean Geometry”, *Nexus Network Journal*, 4, 2, 2002, p. 65-78.

⁴⁷ Bugslag, “‘Contrefais al vif’”, p. 363. For the lion’s eyes, see Swenson, “Lions and Latour Litanies”, p. 266-267.

the animal's face, the folio lays bare the separate components of the lion's design to expose these to the human viewer, even as the Latin *titulus* draws attention to the lion as a transcendent symbol or emblem. The viewer can thus strip away layers of identification (including geometrical frameworks as well as conceptual ideas of how the image was drawn from the text) to arrive at the same material as his or her own body – skin. The process by which this is achieved is through close identification with the material components of the page, as well as through staring into the face of another predator.

The question whether an animal can have a face was taken up by the twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In his project of writing a phenomenology of intersubjective responsibility, Levinas questions whether the animal, at points of contact with the “Other”, can “take on a face” in the way two humans can, which raises ethical implications concerning the nature of suffering in Western philosophical and judicial systems⁴⁸. Matthew Calarco has challenged this phenomenological approach to the ethics of contact with alterity, arguing that we should be “ethically attentive and open to the possibility that anything might [or might not] take on a face”, and thus require ethical responsibility for the other⁴⁹. The image of the lion in Villard's sketchbook exemplifies Levinas's theory and provokes the question of whether, in this context, the lion has a face because of its humanoid qualities, or because it demands an ethical or emotional response from the viewer. Accentuated by a type of facial and ethical no-man's land, the lion's gaze in Villard's sketchbook provokes an identification with the skin of the page, even as the lion stares out menacingly. This response invites another question of whether the human viewer of the sketchbook has a face, since he or she is the object of a nonhuman gaze, perhaps from an angry lion. In the lion's gaze, the human viewer becomes faceless, losing the specificity of human sovereignty in the encounter. By sloughing off the interpretations anticipated by each of these layers – perspective, geometry, uncannily familiar features, and explanatory notes in Latin and French – the viewer uncovers the lion's constitutional elements that combine to make this assemblage, and engages in a process of becoming-animal and of ethical relation with the membrane itself.

The sketchbook reveals a somewhat different performance of ethical relation compared to Philippe de Thaon's bestiary. In both cases, the parchment juxtaposes images of taming or hunting angry lions with indications of the artistic process. The bestiary exemplifies the artistry of its lions by linking the behaviour of lions in images to the allegorical interpretation of such behaviour and to the lion's self-depiction in human form. In the sketchbook the viewer is invited to test the lion's angry gaze and to consider its liveliness. In each case, the visual depiction associates the power of lions with sovereignty, whether that be of animal, trainer, human, king or Christ. The bestiary reinforces the lion's sovereignty by juxtaposing lions and Christ, as well as through a dedication of the text to a female patron at the royal court⁵⁰. However, in the sketchbook the lion's gaze prompts a revaluation of what it means to come face-to-face with the nonhuman as images of lions are cross-referenced with material reality by claims that they are drawn from life or as if alive. In this way viewers are enjoined to consider how they are reading on animal skins, and to slough off layers of interpretation to see themselves depicted on the page.

⁴⁸ E. Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” trans. P. Atterton, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 10.

⁴⁹ M. Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 73.

⁵⁰ See ‘Prologue’ and v. 1-24, in “Il ‘Bestiaire’ di Philippe de Thaün”, p. 112-115. For further discussion on patronage, see L. Lewis, “Adeliza of Louvain: Patron”, *Normans to Early Plantagenet Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty*, ed. A. Norrie, C. Harris, J. Laynesmith, D. R. Messer, and E. Woodacre, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 83-98.

Whereas the sketchbook lion, commonly described as angry, looks back to the reader as a challenge to human sovereignty, different animals in Villard's sketchbook allow for comparisons. On the folio preceding the image of the crouching lion, a passive horse's gaze forestalls a direct invitation to affective response from the viewer (fig. 5). The horse's gaze provides a focal point for the image, as two human figures on either side act as primary points of human identification (there is no such human figure next to the front elevation of the lion). On the left, a study of a figure of a man crouching, either asleep or weeping, contrasts with the sturdy anticipation of the warrior ready to mount the horse in his stirrup on the right. The crouching figure weeps into his arms, obstructing the gaze, and even the face, as points of encounter. The figure of the domesticated horse provides an alternative to the sovereignty of the lion in fig. 4, as the horse is being mounted by the knight. This image of human-animal interaction exhibits humankind's dominion over the horse and does not bring man's dominion into question.



Fig. 5. A weeping man (left) and the knight with horse (right).
Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS fr. 19093), fol. 23^v.

The knight mounting the horse nevertheless invites a type of skin-thinking that fosters an awareness of how the horse experiences the world in comparison to the lion. Vicki Hearne has observed that compared to the primary senses of dogs—that of smell—the horse experiences the world through touch in ways that humans can barely imagine: “if scent is ineluctably ‘a queer thing’ as one canny dog trainer had it, so is the horse’s sense of touch”⁵¹. Narrating how the horse experiences the world of touch in a way that is vastly superior to humanity’s comparative sense, Hearne comments that with horses as with dogs, “the handler must learn to believe, to ‘read’ a language s/he hasn’t sufficient neurological apparatus to test or judge.” Perhaps the horse’s gaze in Villard’s sketchbook is asking us precisely not to look back at its face, but to read the skin of a page which holds an image of close interspecies touch, and to imagine how the horse experiences the human touch as the assemblage of knight and horse is forged.

Conclusion

⁵¹ V. Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2007, p. 106-107.

Sloughing off layers of artistic representation, cultural ideology and textual explanation, readers and viewers experience different modes of encounter with the nonhuman in Philippe de Thaon's bestiary and Villard de Honnecourt's sketchbook. Moments of encounter afforded by depictions of lions invite audiences to abandon themselves to an affiliation with skin in ways that modern audiences have lost. Villard's sketchbook offers examples of medieval illustrations that depict human and nonhuman affinity by drawing on purported lived experience, copying from life, or reproducing what is or has been alive. By framing some of the images in the sketchbook as reproduced from life, or from the experience of being alive, the pages of the sketchbook open debate about medieval artistic process and the affective relations established between image and viewer on parchment skins. In doing so, certain pages of the sketchbook enjoin audiences to enter into ethical enquiry with the nonhuman, to "become-animal" through seeing themselves depicted in angry lions or interacting with nonhuman creatures, and by looking the lion directly in the face. In this way the sketchbook is a key medieval example of how images and art have "scope for unsettling things" on the question of the animal, especially compared to philosophy's tendency to try to settle matters⁵². Villard's lions bear some of the foundational traits of *Panthera leo* but slip into the uncanny, demonstrating just how much like ourselves the lions are. Rather than presenting an easily tamed and domesticated beast, the sketchbook lion thwarts the figure of the human and gazes piercingly outwards from the membrane of the folio. By taking this gaze as a challenge and sloughing off the layers that form the image of the lion, the viewer arrives at a deeper understanding of the complexity of medieval image-making (combining sketching, geometry, narrative explanation, symbolism and allegory) and its relationship with a world of viewers ready to question the lion's gaze.

Villard's lions bear an affinity with the lions in a manuscript of Philippe de Thaon's bestiary, namely that the colourless sketches of lions in both works enable a type of skin-thinking. On one hand, the bestiary encodes depictions of lions in religious symbology even as the images that depict them ground them in domesticated, familiar contexts for viewers of manuscripts. Depicted in canine or feline forms, viewers can relate to encounters with domesticated animals. On the other hand, the bestiary invites a self-reflexive process of skin-thinking as one folio depicts an angry lion painting itself in human form. As viewers contemplate the meaning of such a process, they also find themselves entering an affective relation with the sovereign lion. What is notable about the comparison of the bestiary with the sketchbook is that it is angry lions who produce the strongest reflection not only of skin, but also of artistic practice. The link between art and emotion is a familiar one for modern audiences, but in these case studies it is the lions, and not the humans, who create the images, or participate in their depiction on parchment (whether actually or imaginatively), from which they gaze out into the world. These are sovereign lions saturated in codes, narratives and layers of design that medieval viewers could slough off to get back to the skin as primary medium. Through that very sovereignty lions commanded viewers to look back at themselves and to question their affinity with the books they were holding. Viewing such images today in libraries or via digital means, we should ask ourselves how the medium on which we are reading speaks to our increasingly fraught relationships with animals that have lost the ability to look back and challenge.

Liam LEWIS
Cardiff University

⁵² Baker, "Sloughing the Human", p. 153.