

Reading Pierre de Beauvais' *Bestiaire*

Pierre de Beauvais was a cleric from Beauvais (in northern France, modern-day Picardy), and was active in the first part of the 13th century. The *Bestiaire* is his best-known work, but he also produced a number of other pieces in French, among them *La mappemonde* (a verse description of the world) and several narratives of the lives of saints. Have a look at the following selections from Pierre de Beauvais' French, taken from the *Bestiaire*. What can you work out about their meaning, based on their similarities to English? (The images may also help!)

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Uns oisiaus est qui est apelez 'fenis'.

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Une beste est qui est apelee en griu 'monocheros', c'est en latin 'unicorne'.

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Une beste est qui est apelee pantere, colouree de moult de diverses colours.

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Li dragons aime moult les hauz monz. Ceste beste est moult cler veant et moult voit loinz.

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Some helpful vocabulary (limited to forms found in the texts)

Articles: *li, les* = 'the' (definite article). // *uns, une* = 'a' (indefinite article).

Verbs: *est* = 'is' (3rd person singular) of *estre*, 'to be'. Also has a sense of '(there) is'. // *apelez, apelee* = passive forms of *apeler*, 'to call' (here, 'to be called', as in modern French *je m'appelle*). // *aime* = from *aimer*, 'to like'. // *voit, veant* = both from *voir*, 'to see'.

Nouns: *oisiaus* = 'bird'. // *beste* = 'beast'. // *monz* = plural of *mont*, 'mountain'. // *griu* = 'Greek'.

Adverbs: *moult* = 'very'. // *cler* = 'clearly'. // *loinz* = 'far'.

Putting it all together

We'll finish today with a couple of longer passages, which offer more of an insight into a couple of animals' respective personalities. These are quite a bit trickier than the single sentences (particularly since I've left out the vocabulary -- do ask for help if you need it!), but they're definitely doable: the trick is to start with what you recognise, and work outwards from there.



Li goupieux (the fox)

Li goupieux est moult trichierres et plain d'engin. Quant il a faim et il ne treuve que mengier, il s'envelope en rouge terre, si qu'il pert estre touz sanglanz. Puis s'estent a terre tout envers, comme s'il fust morz. Li oisel qui le voient si cuident q'il soit mort, si s'avient sor lui, et il les prent donques.

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Du pelican (on the pelican)

Phisiologes dist du pelican qu'il aime moult ses oiselez. Quant il sont né et creu, il fierent lor pere enmi la face, et li peres, irriez, refiert aus et les ocist. Au tierz jor, fiert son costé, et se couche sor les oiseles morz, et espant son sanc de son costé sour aus, et ainsi les suscite de mort.

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Some helpful vocabulary (again, limited to forms found in the texts)

Adjectives: *plain* = 'full' (modern French *plein*). // *rouge* = 'red'. // *sanglanz* = 'bleeding'. // *morz, mort* = 'dead'.

Verbs: *treuve* = 'find' (from *trover*). // *mengier* = 'to eat'. // *pert* = from (*a*)*pereir*, 'to seem'. // *voient* = from *voir*, 'to see'. // *cuident* = from *cuidier*, 'to think, believe'. // *avient* = from *avenir*, 'to come upon'. // *prent* = from *prendre*, 'to take'. // *né* = 'born'. // *creu* = 'grown'. // *fierent* = from *ferir*, 'to strike'. // *ocist* = from *occire*, 'to kill'. // *se couche* = from *se coucher*, 'to lie'.

Nouns: *engin* = 'cunning, trickery'. // *faim* = 'hunger'. // *terre* = 'ground'. // *oiselet* = from *oisel*, with the diminutive suffix *-et*. // *Phisiologes* = 'Physiologus', i.e. the original source of the Bestiary.

Adverbs: *envers* = 'backwards' (here 'on its back'). // *donques* = 'therefore'. // *au tierz jor* = 'on the third day'.