“Ðæt Is Wrætlic Deor”: Fantastic Creatures’ Alternate Natures as Metalwork, Architectural Works, and Other Highly-Wrought Objects in Old English Writings

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Abstract
The conflation of fantastic beasts and monsters with highly-wrought objects constitutes a heretofore-critically-unacknowledged yet prevalent mode of representation in Old English literature. The Anglo-Saxon writers and poets utilizing this mode notably mobilize a number of strategies to blur the line between the bodies of such creatures and the associated manmade items, including figurative relationships, parallelism linking two accounts within the larger narrative, the conceptual pairing or collocation of seemingly-unrelated entities within a particular account, the description of a creature’s body with an adjective that normally applies to highly-wrought objects, and the destruction of a creature’s body in the precise manner befitting the destruction of a material artifact. Considering that each of the writers and poets utilizes two or more strategies to link a given fantastic beast or monster to the indicated object or objects, the depictions ultimately convey the sense that the amazing creatures literally possess alternate natures as the exquisite items. In turn, the fundamental identification of living entity with material artifact in the different accounts enables the creatures to perform the important cultural work of responding to insular fantasies and anxieties tied to the perceived moral worth of certain kinds of splendid objects produced by or otherwise encountered within Anglo-Saxon England. The depictions specifically serve this end by effectively granting these objects beastly lives and a remarkable level of creaturely agency in the landscapes or seascapes of man’s moral universe. The objects enabled to enjoy such animal existences most frequently fall into two main, sometimes overlapping craftwork categories: insular and Roman items of smithwork and Roman/extra-insular architectural works, including entire buildings and individual architectural elements. Several documented aspects of Anglo-Saxon material culture stand to shed light on the writers’ and poets’ inspiration to work with a theme of crafted objects’ moral worth in the first place, their tendency to engage the theme by conflating the material artifacts with the bodies of fantastic beasts and monsters, and their choice mainly to merge the fabulous creatures with architectural works and/or smithwork, with occasional recourse to other types of craftwork.

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Legendary creatures have often been incorporated into heraldry and architectural decoration. This is particularly the case with those symbolizing great strength or other power. In contemporary times, many legendary creatures appear prominently in fantasy fiction. These creatures are often claimed to have supernatural powers or knowledge or to guard some object of great value. Some of these creatures may have existed in the past, and many believers have produced fossils and other evidence for their previous existence. Some, such as the Loch Ness Monster or Sasquatch, continue to be “sighted” and sought to this day. While the origins of these fabulous creatures are varied, and often disputed, they have played significant roles in human society. Old English poetry is of two types, the heroic Germanic pre-Christian and the Christian. It has survived for the most part in four manuscripts. The first manuscript is called the Junius manuscript (also known as the Caedmon manuscript), which is an illustrated poetic anthology. Two poetic figures commonly found in Old English poetry are the Kenning, an often formulaic phrase that describes one thing in terms of another, e.g. in Beowulf, the sea is called the swan’s road and Litotes, a dramatic understatement employed by the author for ironic effect. Deor is a lyric, in the style of Consolation of Philosophy, applying examples of famous heroes, including Weland and Eormanric, to the narrators own case. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle contains various heroic poems inserted throughout. One of the major Old English works produced during the reign of King Alfred (d. 899) was a translation of a history of the world written by Paulus Orosius (d. 420) as a defence against the charge that the adoption of Christianity and the neglect of the old gods had brought catastrophe upon the Roman Empire. Orosius’s work is more polemic than history—a dreary recital of the many calamities that had befallen the earth while Rome worshipped pagan gods. Nevertheless, it was enthusiastically read in the Middle Ages, which regarded it as an authoritative history of the world. The Old English translator greatly expanded this with a survey of the Germanic nations and other matter; embedded in this survey are the narratives of two travellers, Ohthere and Wulfstan.