

Virtual Special Issue 2016: *Cryptozoology and Fabulous Beasts*--podcast text (written and read by Juliette Wood)

Belief in the existence of fabulous and supernatural creatures attracts novelists and scholars, writers and fantasy fans. It is both ubiquitous and timeless, and this Special Issue examines the question posed by Peter Dendle: 'Why does humanity, as a whole, . . . populate its border spaces with fascinating and sometimes threatening creatures?' (Dendle 2006, 191).

Classical sources considered the origins and characteristics of a wide range of creatures, many of which were located at the edges of the Greco-Roman world. Medieval sources continued to locate such animals at the margins, in the geographic East or Far North of the world, on mountain tops, or in the depths of the sea. Such creatures were interpreted as part of a divine plan whose existence provided moral lessons for mankind. Attitudes in medieval and classical sources ranged from complete acceptance of the reality of these species to ingenious rationalizations about their origins. More recently, the study of apparently mythical and unconfirmed species has developed into a recognized field, known as cryptozoology, which attempts to prove the existence of so-called cryptids—a term encompassing a whole range of unknown creatures—and to place them in the canon of recognized animal species.

The articles in this Special Issue approach the significance of fabulous animals in a variety of ways. In explaining the origin of the centaur, for example, some classical authors suggested that this human-horse hybrid was a monstrous offspring of bestial intercourse, while others claimed that it was a misunderstanding of early sightings of mounted horsemen (Scobie 1978). The fabulous creatures listed in Ellen Ettlinger's survey of 'Folklore in Berkshire Churches' carried moral lessons, such as the two-headed amphisbaena who symbolized the dual nature of hypocrisy (Ettlinger 1969). Margaret Robinson identified over one hundred named animals, birds, reptiles, and fishes that 'do not exist in nature', but appear in medieval European sources ranging from bestiaries to philosophical treatises (Robinson 1965, 273). Michael Drayton's seventeenth-century topographical poem, *Polyolbion*, includes references and anecdotes about creatures ranging from the phoenix to the basilisk, which sometimes accept and sometimes reject their authenticity ('Folk-lore of Drayton' 1884). Joshua Gregory's article considers specific qualities of these creatures, such as the deadly glance of the basilisk, in a wider context of magical beliefs (Gregory 1952).

Several articles look at these fabulous beasts in radically different ways. The wildman, so often placed at the margins of civilization, according to Gregory Forth, is a cultural artefact constructed from a plurality of ancient images and a complex interplay of factual accounts of species. In his examination of the wildman, a topic which bridges palaeoanthropology and cryptozoology, Forth assesses the interplay between the European image of the Wildman and what he calls 'folk zoology' in small-scale societies (Forth 2007). In a very different approach to the wildman image, Joshua Blu Buhs examines how it has informed ideas about the 'computer geek' and cyberspace (Buhs 2010). Reconfiguring the internet as a new frontier, the author suggests that that 'computer geek' as wildman represents both the stability of the pre-industrial past and innovative progress without the constraints of civilization, and is simultaneously a liberation from society and a threat to it.

H. Senn's study of the Romanian werewolf, focuses on the mythological connections between animals, masks, nature, and the way in which magical beliefs are integrated into a communal setting (Senn 1982). In his study of Scots-Gaelic tales of herding deer, Arthur Geddes considers the reindeer as a foreign rather than a mythical animal. Without coming to a final conclusion, the author ponders whether these herding tales refer to reindeer and if so where might they originate and what might be their significance. The author examines various theories from ancient cult, for which he finds little evidence, to introduction by Scandinavian visitors (Geddes 1951).

Two articles by Véronique Campion-Vincent and Michael Goss examine the factual and symbolic dimensions of sightings of mystery cats and other unknown beasts in Britain and France. According to Campion-Vincent, public reaction to policies surrounding conservation is an important factor shaping these sightings in France, while Goss stresses the role of media reporting in shaping and proliferating British sightings (Campion-Vincent 1992; Goss 1992). The ghostly beast known as the Black Dog is the subject of two papers. This beast always appears as a domestic dog, although it varies in size, and its nature, unlike the mysterious cats, is always spectral. Ethel Rudkin's seminal study of 1938 and Theo Brown's account of further researches identified distinct types of black dog phenomena in a variety of settings in which this complex and widespread supernatural apparition manifested itself, sometimes as a threat or a portent of death; at other times as a protector (Rudkin 1938; Brown 1958).

The pioneering work of classicist Adrienne Mayor links the discovery of fossils in the ancient world to the formation of ideas about mythical creatures. Her article, written in collaboration with Michael Heaney, examines traditions about griffins and their gold in the light of prehistoric fossils found in the Gobi desert (Mayor and Heaney 1993). Alexandra Van de Geer and her fellow authors apply this model to examples in India (Van der Geer,

Dermitzakis, and Vos 2008), and David S. Reese also explores folkloric interpretations of fossil bones (1976). Taken as a whole, these articles raise some interesting questions about how experience and observation can affect the emergence of imaginative categories.

Cryptozoology positions itself as a contrast to mainstream science and sees behind the mythological monsters not the supernatural beasts of legend, but real species whose existence can be proved by persistence. Dendle's observation that cultural and geographical spaces such as fields, mountains, and forests in inhabited countries can be re-classified and re-enchanted by the presence of cryptids applies to the work of several writers included in this Special Issue, such as Campion-Vincent, Goss, Brown, and Rudkin. An important trend in the articles reviewed here is the re-enchancement of social spaces. The search for such creatures as Bigfoot in areas of North America helped to revive the myth of the American frontier, while the absorption of wildman motifs into the image of the internet 'computer geek' has contributed to a new frontier in cyberspace. These patterns of belief have a long heritage, and the range of these articles shows how cryptozoological tropes from the medieval period to the present continue to fuel psychological and social needs.