Sing the Alarm: Sirens, Prostitutes, and Silenced Voices in the *Bestiaire d'amour*

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Bestiaries are books of beasts in which each animal's nature is described and accompanied by a moral lesson.[1] Stemming from a Classical tradition, they appeared in Western Europe in vernacular illuminated manuscripts from the twelfth century onwards. As a literary genre, the bestiary was revolutionised in the middle decade of the thirteenth century by the French cleric Richard de Fournival (1201–1260?). Richard's *Le Bestiaire d'amour* secularises the formerly-pious genre by co-opting its traditional animal *exempla* into an analysis of the *ars amatoria.* Unlike earlier bestiaries, Richard's 'Bestiary of Love' is addressed not to a generalised Believer, but to an anonymous *dame*. This innovation is the source of the problematic nature of the text: in an extraordinarily self-pitying series of *exempla*, Richard reveals his rampant misogyny. The author's culpability in their participation in an anti-feminist literary tradition is of further concern when we consider their work as part of (and progenitor to other works in) this tradition. In short, misogyny in an individual work is a rotten rose by any other name. I suggest that although Richard may not have been a misogynist *per se*, the *Bestiaire* has misogynist meaning and impact, and it is this—the text, its images, and their immutable symbolism—we must consider. The height of this misogyny is embedded in the complicated iconography of Richard's entry on the siren. Thus, I explore the image of the siren in a fourteenth-century English *Bestiaire* manuscript, BL Harley 273, and other contemporaneous English versions of the siren image, aiming to expose the multivalency of Richard's misogyny through a text-image study of the Siren entry. I then proceed to consider the connections between sirens and prostitutes in medieval thought, and how Richard's application of these to the *dame* by positing her as a public woman underscores his misogyny.

Medieval misogyny is a complex issue. We must always be vigilant against the naturalisation of female inferiority, as a consequence of identifying the subsequent *milieux,*

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present throughout human history, in which anti-feminist sentiment is so rife as to seem standard. But it is also important to acknowledge, as R. Howard Bloch does:

> The very real disenfranchisement of women in the Middle Ages [... the] essential differences in men's and women's rights to possess, inherit and alienate property [... their] civil and legal rights [... that] sons [were] treated better than daughters to the extent of creating a higher infant mortality rate among females. (Bloch, 1987, p.9)

In many ways, the frustrations facing the average medieval woman are tiresomely similar to those of the modern woman, and I make no apology for my definition of misogyny as any and all institutionalised attempts to disadvantage the female, applied for no other reasons than: 1) the person who is to be disadvantaged is female, and 2) the attempts stem from a(n irrational, generalised) hatred of the female. This definition spans any and all time periods. In turn, I consider strictly etymological definitions to be reductive. Logically, the opposite of a misogynist (Greek μισο-, 'hatred' + γυνή, 'woman') would be a lover of woman, or philogynist; but I would argue, as many, including Bloch, have done before me, that this is in fact misogyny in another guise. One only has to look at the far-reaching implications, now and in the past, of the cult of Mary as evidence for the detrimental effects that obsessive love for female figure can have on the female consciousness, both public and private.

It is also important to distinguish between the modern definition of misogyny and the specific *milieux* surrounding its medieval counterpart (such as its biological and theological contexts). I consider Galenic/humoural theory below; and although it would be impossible to summarise all the theological bases for Christian misogyny here, it is worth recapitulating the implications of that most ubiquitous root, The Fall. Genesis has extra relevance in relation to the bestiary: Eve is created after the beasts and assigned semiotic significance in the same manner as they—exactly as Richard's *dame* is conflated with the animal *exempla*. Genesis casts Eve as, literally, a side-issue. Medieval patristic sources constantly reiterate Eve's weakness as the reason for mankind's suffering, and purport the concomitant weakness of her daughters against which all men must guard. The fact that the *dame* makes no overt attempts at seduction does not absolve her, but only proves Richard's point that her nature is one so immutably culpable that her mere existence is enough to cause sin. Indeed, in a further parallel, her presence is the source of Richard's temptation away from the Church, just as Adam's love for a woman wrought his

expulsion from Eden. In essence, the *Bestiaire d'amour* assumes as the basis for its moral stance the framework of the foremost anti-woman narrative in Christian ideology.

Anti-feminism is found throughout the *Bestiaire*, but it is the entry on the Siren that provides the most prominent platform for Richard's misogyny. Perhaps best seen as a secular hybrid of the biblical figures of the Serpent (strongly identified with Satan in traditional Christianity) and Eve, the Siren's mixture of aural and sexual seduction and destruction typifies 'Everywoman [...] against whose aggressive sensuality every male victim is passively helpless' (Beer, 2003, p.47). Richard's Siren entry is in its entirety as follows:

> *Car il sont .iij. manieres de seraines, dont les .ij. sont moitié femes et moitié poisson, et li autre moitié feme et moitié oisel. Et cantent toutes trois, les unes en buisines, les autres en harpes, et les tierches en droites vois; et leur melaudie est tant plaisans que s'uns hom l'ot, ja tant n'iert loins qu'il ne lui couviegne venir; et quant il est pres, si s'endort. Et quant la seraine le trueve endormi, si l'ochist. Si me sanle que la seraine i a grant coupes quant ele l'ochist en traïson, et li hom grant coupes quant il s'i croit. Et se je sui mors par tele occoison, et jou et vous i avons coupes. Mais je ne vous os sus metre le traïson, si n'en mec les coupes fors que seur moi, et dirai que jou meisme me sui mors.*[2] (Bianciotto, 2009,pp.182–83)

Richard's argument here is as sinuous as any serpent. Jeanette Beer (2000, p.86) notes that the syntax of the entry shifts suggestively: there is a change within the passage from the plural *seraines* to the generalised singular *seraine* that extends its message to the whole of womankind. However, it is how specifically he directs this misogyny at the *dame* that is of most interest. His method includes the text of course, but also the illuminations. Harley 273 (produced in Ludlow during the fourteenth century) has a number of simple pen drawings which correspond to the bestiary entries. Not only luxurious images are needed to seduce the eyes and memory of the reader; the effect of modest images can be as great, and they allow us to gather information about readers from various social strata (including a segment of society not necessarily as wealthy as those commanding the luxury illuminated manuscripts). This is especially pertinent as there are,

[2] There are three sorts of siren: two are half woman and half fish, and the third is half woman and half bird. All three make music; the first with trumpets, the second with harps, and the third with straight voices. Their melody is so pleasing that, however far away, no man hears them without being forced to approach. When he is near, he falls asleep, and when the siren finds him asleep, she kills him. And it seems to me that the siren has much guilt for trusting himself to her. And I am dead through such a killing, in which you and I are guilty. But I do not dare to accuse of treachery, I shall take full blame upon myself, and shall say that I killed myself. (p.14)

de facto, fewer extant manuscripts of lower obvious artistic quality, and so the different effects of their circulation are all the more pressing. Although it is true to say that the illuminations play no small role in catching and holding the reader's attention, it is vital that the significance of text is in no way undermined. In keeping with this statement, I suggest that it is the *combination* of text and image, their interrelations and interdependence, which provides the thrust of the *Bestiaire*'s seductive power.

The closing lines of Richard's Siren entry are a prime example of his manipulation of standard rhetoric. Initially, it seems that he absorbs chivalrously all blame for the consequences of having fallen for the *dame* ('*si n'en mec les coupes fors que seur moi, et dirai que jou meisme me sui mors*'). However, it is important to remember that the *dame* has enacted no murder, and so any blame for his 'love-death' is surely on Richard's inability to acquiesce to her reservations. His metaphorical self-mutilation creates a chiasma of culpability whereby:

> A legacy of patristic attitudes quickly undermines his generosity and makes it impossible to conclude anything else than IT WAS THE WOMAN. (Beer, 2000, p.13, emphasis in original)

In one reading of the siren entry, Richard's offer to fall on his sword is 'chivalric' in the widest sense, and his refusal to apportion blame to the *dame* is a kindness. In the following sentence, however, he clearly states that both 'you and I are guilty' ('*et jou et vous i avons coupes*'), and syntactically the siren is awarded greater agency in the state of affairs producing the guilt. She is guilty of possessing an all-consuming sexual desire; Richard is guilty only of succumbing to her as he inevitably must.[3]

Medieval scientific theory supported this misogynistic idea. Galenic medicine held that the female, cold of humour, seeks the heat of the male, hot of humour, and is for this reason dangerously lusty at all times (cf. Salisbury, 1996, pp.81–86): an accusation revealing less the fear of the monster and more an acceptance of a natural 'danger' to the morals of men and women alike. This theory increases the connection between the Siren entry in the *Bestiaire* and the *dame* to whom the whole work is addressed. The traditional siren, gendered female, is not

[3] In keeping with the traditions of the courtly lover he paints himself as, Richard could not possibly resist. We see this in seduction of the eponymous hero of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, amongst others: how could he, Gawain, in denying the advances of his lady, safeguard his knightly chastity without giving offence?

monstrous because of her sexual desires—that, in Galenic theory, is the condition of all women: 'in medieval thinking phylogenesis implies ontogenesis, and Eve's sins have been passed down to her descendants as their genetic inheritance' (Beer, 2003, p. 48). The Siren caricatures female sexuality; what makes her a monster superficially is the fact she is part-beast; what makes her *monstrous* is the fact she also part human female and so has uncontrollable sexual urges. Acting on these urges may lead to temporary gratification, but they also render her murderous, and cannibalistic. The Siren thus functions as an admonition to all of her gender who cannot contain their lust, as well as a warning to all (heterosexual) men drawn to acting on their basest impulses. This logic belies the unsavoury genius of Richard's work. By positing himself as the passive acceptor of the siren's lust, the author attempts to induce guilt at the *dame*'s systematic 'rape' of his love and intentions.

Let us also consider the effect of image on Richard's seduction. There is a wide range of siren imagery in extant bestiary manuscripts. The Cambridge Bestiary image (fig. 1.0) depicts an amalgamation of the three types Richard outlines—a woman with wizened, pendulous breasts, a long fishtail, feathered midriff, and clawed feet, holding a large fish.

Figure 1.01 Siren. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ii. 4.26.f 75 r. Photo: Personal, by permission of the CUL.

Her head is proportionally extremely small, suggesting a more quantifiable advance on Carmen Brown's assertion that:

> Though the figures have human heads and therefore presumably have the capacity for advanced reasoning, their half-animal natures suggest that their behaviour is governed by baser physical instincts. (Brown, 2000, p.60)

Both illustrations of the siren in Harley 273 (figs 1.02–3) are interesting in their departure from this traditional entry, reflecting Richard's own reworking of the text. Fig. 1.02 depicts a sweetly smiling female with a fishtail (and no indication of avian features) holding sheet music and singing to a male figure, who is resting on some rocks amongst the waves. Fig 1.03 features a fish-tailed siren focussing her gaze, and raising a hand, to a ship in full sail. There are two aspects of these depictions that are significant in relation to Richard's *Bestiaire*: firstly, the implications of the fishtail, and secondly, the fact that the siren's arms are obscuring her breasts.

Figure 1.02 Siren A. London, British Library, MS Harley 273, f. 73r. Photo: By permission of the British Library.

In some ways, the image here serves to underscore Richard's statement to the *dame* that he will not accuse her of treachery ('*Mais je ne vous os sus metre le traïson'*), and this is largely grounded in the pescatory rendering of the siren. As Hassig (2000, p.76) has argued, '[o]n the whole [... fishes'] moderate sex lives won for fish promotion to a higher spiritual position within the bestiary.' Fish were known to be able to reproduce without copulation, and were therefore models of God's wish that women would 'wex forth and multiplye' while simultaneously preserving their chastity The illustration's preference for fish over bird suggests,

iconographically, that the *dame* whom it represents is not entirely culpable, and this is in keeping with Richard's address to her.

But what does this tell us about the misogyny behind the entry? If we take the illustration as part of a wider iconographic tradition (and not unreasonably; cf. image 1.05), then there is little to detract from the suggestion that this implication merely provides another platform for the trope of the 'uncontrollable woman' to be touted. The fact that the siren-as-fish would be able to reproduce without sexual intercourse, but continues to lure seamen, suggests a perversion of the nature given to fish by the Creator , which only serves to emphasise her monstrosity. She may have been granted, in the half containing her genitals, a pescatory chaste nature, but this purity is destroyed by the governance of the other half, in which the mind lies: the naked woman.

Furthermore, the siren is not known (at least not in Richard's version) to birth babes. Her seduction of the men is purely on lustful grounds, and to make matters worse, she both murders and (often) eats their bodies, absorbing unclean flesh into the 'purity' of her own pescatory half (indeed, fish was considered the most suitable for consumption in monasteries because of its chaste nature; cf. Hassig, 1995, p.78 and Salisbury, 1994, pp.80–2). Thus, this rendering of the siren actually draws attention to her perversion of purity, specifically damning any actions she undertakes to satisfy her base needs of hunger, and lust. This extends to all women who dare to take such action, however moderate in contrast to the cannibalistic beast.

In addition, the Siren's obscured breasts are unusual in manuscript illustrations of this kind. A great number of bestiaries across the period portray sirens' breasts, with varying degrees of naturalism (see figs 1.03–1.05):

Figure 1.03 Sirens. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 602, f 10r. By permission of the Bodleian Library. c.1230-50.

The significance of this obfuscation is complex. It is possible that Harley 273's artist (as we have established, of no great skill) merely created this type of illustration in keeping with their own skill-level. However, considered alongside the text, the obscured breasts can be placed within a Western artistic tradition identified by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (1992, p.71): 'the male is the glorified nude, while the female is shamefully naked.' If the frontal nudity of most siren entries conveys their sexual aggression, then obscured breasts could reflect their place in the tradition of female sexual shame, as descendants of Eve.

Figure 1.04 Siren. London, British Library, MS Harley 4751 (Bestiary), f. 47 v. Photo: By Permission of the British Library. c. 1225-50.

Indeed, the concealing effect is reminiscent of Adam and Eve's fig leaves. In this interpretation, the hidden breast is a reminder of the female awareness of her sexual shame. This tradition begins in the light of God's post-lapsarian disapproval which, over time, became part of female societal conditioning in secular contexts as well as religious. This explains the effect of this image even in a romantic text, due to the pervasive nature of Eve imagery throughout the medieval period. As Margaret R. Miles (1989, p.86) observes, Eve was 'understood to be a prototypical woman; her personality traits and behaviour [...] characteristic of all women [and] instructive to men.' In this case, the links between the siren and Eve become strongest in relation to their nudity, as they both make attempts to hide their bodies after they enter a sinful state. If we continue to be concerned with the effect of art over its intended outcome, it can be argued that the siren's arm functions as the fig leaves do; not just obscuration for the sake of propriety, but a signifier of Eve's subsequent Knowledge and contrition, despite her continuous sinful behaviour.

Figure 1.05 Siren. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 88, f. 21v. By permission of the Bodleian Library. c.1200-1300.

Indeed, even a cursory glance at representations of Eva/Ave throughout the Middle Ages reveals the cause and effect of hiding the body—or not—on traditional religious iconography. Consider the contrast between the Virgin's draped form and the detailed outline of Eve's body, where one denotes piety and the other, wantonness. By both revealing and obscuring, the Harley 273 image evokes both the passion and penitence expected of the medieval woman. This image thus supports the complex ironies of Richard's text, as he both apportions and accepts total blame for his own seduction, in the manner of patristic religious scholars discussing Eve. By evoking Eve, the illustration relates to Richard's attempts to seduce the *dame* (and the lady-reader) by inducing this shame in her.

But the brief Siren entry also has more quotidian associations; Richard's most generalised admonishment of the *dame* is inextricably (through both text and iconography) linked to the culture of blame surrounding the prostitute.[4] The conceptual relationship between the siren and prostitute is mainly one of disenfranchisement. Both occupy a highly public position, providing both the temptation and its satiation; but neither is attached to any organisation legitimised by civilised society (I think here of the brothel and its bawds.) If we view the medieval female's position only in terms of her relation to the male (whether she is a sister, daughter, wife, etc.) then the prostitute/siren becomes a jarring outsider, both wanted and rejected by men

In the Middle Ages, the prostitute became a locus for both sin and redemption. Reviled but ripe for conversion to Christianity, they were viewed as:

> A necessary social evil [...] in lieu of available women, the imagined alternatives—sodomy and sexual perversions—were believed to have far worse social and spiritual consequences [...] (Hassig, 2000, p.81)

For Richard, the *dame* is as prime a candidate for conversion (or coercion) as the prostitute. As he rewrites the Christian moralising of traditional bestiaries for his own seduction purposes, Richard's attempts to persuade the *dame* to acquiesce echo the Church's insistence on

[4] There is an interesting dichotomy in source material as to whether the sirens were human females, monsters, or a hybrid version caused by some unholy alliance. No strict conclusion is to be reached here, but it is worth noting that Isidore of Seville's entry states his belief that the sirens were not mythical creatures, but 'actually prostitutes who led travellers into poverty.' (Isidore of Seville, Book 12: 4.29).

conversion of the kind of 'fallen woman' exemplified by Mary Magdalene. Under the guise of paternalistic concern, Richard's wooing of the *dame* allows him to perform the ritual of ensnarement which, so disturbing in the siren's tale, is perceived as natural habit, or right, of the male.

If we study the *Bestiaire d'amour* as a discrete entity (not unduly: the *Response* is appended to it in only four surviving manuscripts), then we see the *dame* as necessarily mute and passive. She is like a literary prostitute for Richard's posturing. In this way, his ravings against the chevaliers competing for her love ('*Et Ke plus est,mais ke pis est, il li samble k'il'il couvient avoir j menestrel ki crit a la bretesce ke ses sires ne fait ne largece ne proece fors pour l'amour a cele bele couce, cui tous li mons doit aourer'* (p.234)) are rendered hypocritical.[5] The *dame* functions as a vessel for his male ego, and his need to compete. She is called upon when needed, abused, and discarded once the charade (be it a jousting match or bestiary) ends. She is also subject to the spiritual and social dangers that the prostitutes were. Banished to certain *loci* (the tower or the wrong side of the tracks); at the mercy of male control and commerce of her body (father/husband or bawd/customer); unable to report, with any reciprocal gravity, crimes against her (Richard's libellous seduction or rape): the parallels are myriad.[6]

Richard's misogyny here may have been grounded in the idea that there were rewards for reforming the prostitute; Pope Innocent III issued decrees stating that those who married prostitutes would receive spiritual awards (Rossiaud, 1988, p.41). Although he never explicitly refers to his *dame* as such—an accusation both impractical and risible, given her social standing—Richard nevertheless suggests links between her and the siren, the prostitute's bestiary doppelganger. The most striking example of this is the University Library Bestiary's siren entry (fig 1.06), produced at the same time as the *Bestiaire,* which 'serves to identify the mythical siren with their human female counterparts, the *meretrices*' (Hassig, 2000, p.80). In summation, by creating an Everywoman to fulfil his didactic purposes, and creating a text to be bought, sold,

[5] 'He seems to think that he must have a minstrel shouting from the parapets that his lord is performing each and every act of generosity and prowess solely for the love of that sweet creature whom the entire world must adore.' (Beer, 2000, p.25)

[6] Much has been written on the marriage commerce of the Middle Ages; suffice to say that for Richard's *dame,* ultimate designation of her body (as male property) lay with her father until she married. The prostitute was similarly disenfranchised, accepting 'complete loss of social standing; she could not inherit property nor accuse others of crimes.' (Hassig, 1995, p.111)

discussed and shared amongst patrons, readers, and viewers, Richard's work means that the *dame* has become as much a public woman as any prostitute.

Figure 1.17 Sirens. University Library Bestiary. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, f. 116 v. Photo: Personal, by permission of the CUL.

It is through the siren exemplum that de Fournival can most clearly communicate his allegorical love-death; as these mythical beasts are not only female, but also have homicidal

tendencies realised specifically through lechery. The siren entry is also of special interest here because of how de Fournival identifies their method of luring their prey:

> *Et leur melaudie est tant plaisans que s'uns hom l'ot, jua tant n'lert loins qu'il ne lui couviegne venir; et quant il est pres, si s'endort. Et quant la seraine le treuve endormir, si l'ochist*.[7] (p.184)

The theme of 'attack on the senses' is common throughout the *Bestiaire*, but it is the feminine voice that is of particular note. Richard himself asserts that: '*Et si a encore vois molt d'autres forces dont li communs de la gent neset mot*' (p.188).[8] Creating another link between his subject and the siren, Richard insists specifically on the importance of his *dame*'s voice, and its great power: '*Et pur che que chans a si grant force, don't ne fu che mie merveille se jou m'i endormi*.' (p.198).[9]

But (once again taking the *Bestiaire* as a discrete entity, and discounting its *Responses*) we never hear the *dame*'s reply, rebuttal, or acquiescence at all. She remains either a voiceless Heloise (fig. 1.06) or a mute figure in the *specula* imposed by Richard's obsessively public love-declarations. Ironically, his chatter prevents such an action within the bounds of this text. This self-righteous denial to the right of communication is perhaps the crux of Richard's misogyny. He insists on what the most correct the *dame*'s actions should be, while threatening his own ontological suicide—his 'love-death'—if she does not comply, thus creating an impossible bind, the effect of which is to preclude any agency on her part. Worst of all, Richard presents the *dame*'s responses to the *Bestiaire* as a *fait accompli*, and provides us with what may well be false accusations of the *dame*'s pride, vanity, and stupidity. These are couched in a rhetoric which lurches from self-pity, through insidious sniping, and a final call for 'mercy', or a relief from her

[7] 'Their melody is so pleasing that, however far away, no man hears them without being forced to approach. When he is near, he falls asleep, and when the siren finds him asleep, she kills him.' (p.11)
[8] 'And voice has many other powers of which ordinary folk know nothing.' (p.52)
[9] 'This power is the most miraculous that exists and no such power is found in anything but voice...it was not surprising that I was put to sleep by the power of (the voice) .. of the loveliest creature I had, in my judgment ever seen.' (p.14)

patent disinterest: '*Et pour che que nule force de parole ne me puet vers vous riens valoir, si ne vous os requerre nule riens fors merchi*'(p.274).[10]

The *Bestiaire*'s use of text and image to evoke the monstrosity of the *dame* is wide-reaching and deeply misogynistic. Through the effective combination of illumination and text, the work provides a multivalent platform for Richard to communicate his crisis: namely, that his need to overpower the *dame* before her lust destroys him is at war with his need to be cosseted by this ideal of womanhood. He compares her to beast and fowl, to monstrous cannibal and the original sinner: in short, his attempts at seduction serve only to paint her as Woman, who 'as secondary, derivative, supervenient, and supplemental, assumes all that is inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse' (Bloch, 1987, p.10).

But what of the *dame* herself? Certainly, an amount of *noli me tangere* is self-evident: but is the *dame* so violated, so passive, or so silent? It is a complex question—but to aid a search for the answer, we must turn to the anonymous *Response du Bestiaire* which could, like the siren's song, lead Richard's arguments onto the rocks.

[10] 'Nevertheless, since no rational argument can avail me anything with you, I ask nothing from you but mercy.' (p.36)

Fig. 1.06: The *dame* listens to Richard's lessons. London, British Library, MS Harley 273, f. 70r.Photo: By permission of the British Library.

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