

**Birds,**

**Bees,**

**& Bonnacons**

**An exhibition in  
St John's College  
Library**

**Email: [library@sjc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:library@sjc.ox.ac.uk)**

## Bestiaries

St John's holds two of the ca. 90 surviving manuscript bestiaries in Latin. Both are displayed here. These volumes were often, although not always, highly illustrated listings of beasts, birds, and sometimes rocks, combining folklore, classical learning and Christian allegory. The text was extracted from any one of several compendia of animal lore cited by classical authors, the oldest being the anonymous *Physiologus* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, but both examples from St John's belong to a group which draw on the book 12 of a major early medieval encyclopaedic work, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, dating to the 630s. The production of bestiaries didn't really get under way until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but continued throughout the high Middle Ages.

Although the lore bestiaries drew on was often popular, and sometimes widely believed, these were not primarily zoological statements, rather works of Christian spiritual allegory, in which narrative and symbolism played a major part. Thus the pelican is shown tearing at its breast in order to feed its young, in a parallel with the suffering and redemptive nature of Christ. The high status of the manuscripts, demonstrated by their lavish illuminations, also militates against the notion that lay people had easy access to them, and hence that they were manuals of scientific or practical knowledge. Instead they tended to be owned by religious houses, as both the manuscripts displayed here were, and furnished material and inspiration for sermons and religious life.







## The Lion

### 13<sup>th</sup> c. Bestiary from York

Uniformly placed at the beginning of the listing, owing to its status as the “King of Beasts”, the Lion appears here in a lavish 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript formerly owned by the Priory of Holy Trinity, York. The three principal natures of the Lion demonstrate its key place in Christian allegory. It covers its tracks, as Jesus covered his divine nature with his humanity; it sleeps with its eyes open, as Jesus remained spiritually awake at the moment of his death; and it gives birth to dead young and watches over them for three days, in a rather more transparent allegory of the Resurrection.

The illustrations here refer to the following pieces of text from the Bestiary:

*Top:* “A sick lion seeks an ape to eat so that he can be healed.”

*Middle:* “For the mercy of the Lion is apparent in continuous examples, for they spare the prostrate.”

*Bottom:* “The lion fears the cock, especially a white one.”

Apparently “They do not kill children unless they are very hungry”, which is reassuring.

Bequeathed to the College by Sir William Paddy in 1634.

MS 61

## Bonnacon & Ape



### Late 13<sup>th</sup> c. English Bestiary

“The nature of the ape is such that when she produces twin young, she prefers one and rejects the other ... When ... she is pursued by hunters, she holds the offspring she prefers in her arms, and carries the other on her back ... But when she is weary from running ... she drops the baby she prefers and involuntarily carries the one she scorns.” Within the schema of a bestiary the ape is a “thoroughly disgraceful” beast and an allegory of Satan, who similarly “has a head, but ... no tail”.

If the ape is at least recognisable, the cow-like beast with the poisonous bottom above it is perhaps less familiar. The ‘bonnacon’ dwells in Asia, having defensive horns that curl in on themselves, and so cannot cause injury. The offensive part of the animal is actually its other end, which “emits a fart three acres long” and is “so hot that it scorches whatever it touches”.

The later of St John’s two bestiaries dates from 1275-1300, and was originally owned by a monastic house in Westminster. It is situated in a volume containing several other tracts on astrology, philosophy and medicine.

MS 178

## Afterlife of the Bestiary

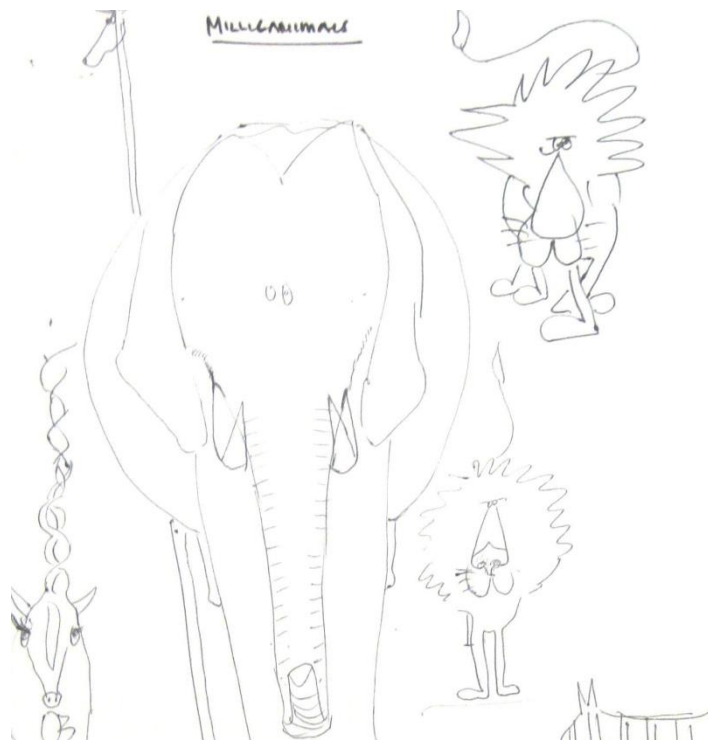
### Original sketches for *A Book of Milliganimals* by Spike Milligan (published 1968)

As other genres of text for University students and sermon compilers arose in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, such as alphabetically organized encyclopedias which were much more convenient to use, so bestiary production began to wane in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The notion of a book of beasts, especially fabulous beasts, however, is one that has persisted in popular culture, through writers such as Borges, and has often been adopted in fantasy works and children’s literature. Spike Milligan’s nonsense verse

take on the tradition appeared in the 60s, and still contains details of creatures which would have appeared in the medieval bestiary, such as the Tiger, the Elephant, and the Lion:

*If you're attacked by a Lion  
Find fresh underpants to try on  
Lay on the ground quite still  
Pretend you are very ill  
Keep like that day after day  
Perhaps the lion will go away*

The sketches here come from the College's Milligan archive.



## The Practical

**Scenes of animal husbandry from Pietro de' Crescenzi's *[Ruralia commodata]*.**  
[Speyer, Peter Drach, ca. 1490-1495].

Originally written between 1304 and 1309, at a time when bestiaries of the sort displayed opposite were still being created, this work gives a contrasting view of practical knowledge of, and familiarity with, animals and their management. Its author, Pietro Crescenzi (ca. 1233-ca.1320), produced it after he'd retired from a career as a judge and lawyer in Bologna that spanned thirty years, to spend more time in his rural villa, and based it on his own experience as a landholder as well as classical and medieval sources.

Dedicated to Charles II of Naples it was considered important enough for Charles V of France to have a translation made in 1373. It circulated in numerous manuscript copies, some with lavish illuminations of calendars of rural work, before becoming the first printed text on agriculture when it came off the press in 1471 by Johann Schüssler. The tradition of lively illustration continued in print, examples are shown here from the College's earliest copy, printed twenty years later, and the text was to remain the most popular work on farming for a further one hundred years, during which 57 editions in several languages appeared.

R.scam.2.19



## The Wonderful

**Sea Monsters from Konrad Lykosthenes' *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon*.**  
Basel, Heinrich Petri, August 1557.

Wonder as a response to beasts had been a key part of the bestiary, and such an attitude persisted well into the early modern period, and the appetite for the exotic was catered to by illustrated volumes detailing omens, marvels and monsters, such as the sea creatures displayed here. As illustrations were an expensive enhancement to a book, the same blocks would be used for different texts – so this image appears in the more purely geographical *Cosmographia* of Sebastian Munster of 1559. Some of the other blocks also re-appear in Gessner's work displayed opposite, and some are simply repeated throughout the text as stock images.



Konrad Lykosthenes (1518-1561) was born Konrad Wolffhart in Alsace, but changed it to the more classical translation 'Lykosthenes' following humanist fashion. He composed and translated numerous works, became a deacon in Heidelberg, and married into family of the influential Basel printer, Johannes Oporinus.

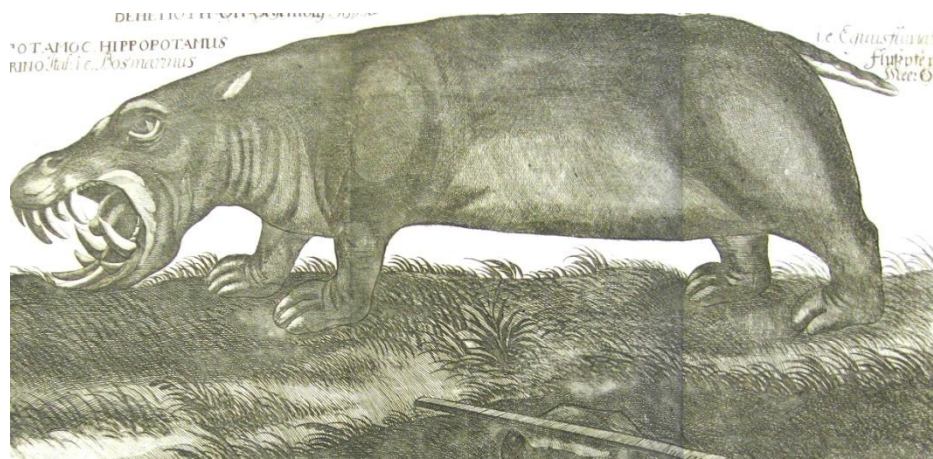
Given by Robert Travers in 1607.

Phi.1.26



## The Scholarly

**Hippopotamus from Hiob Ludolf's *Historia Aethiopica*.** Frankfurt, Printed by Martin Jacquet for Johann David Zunner, 1681



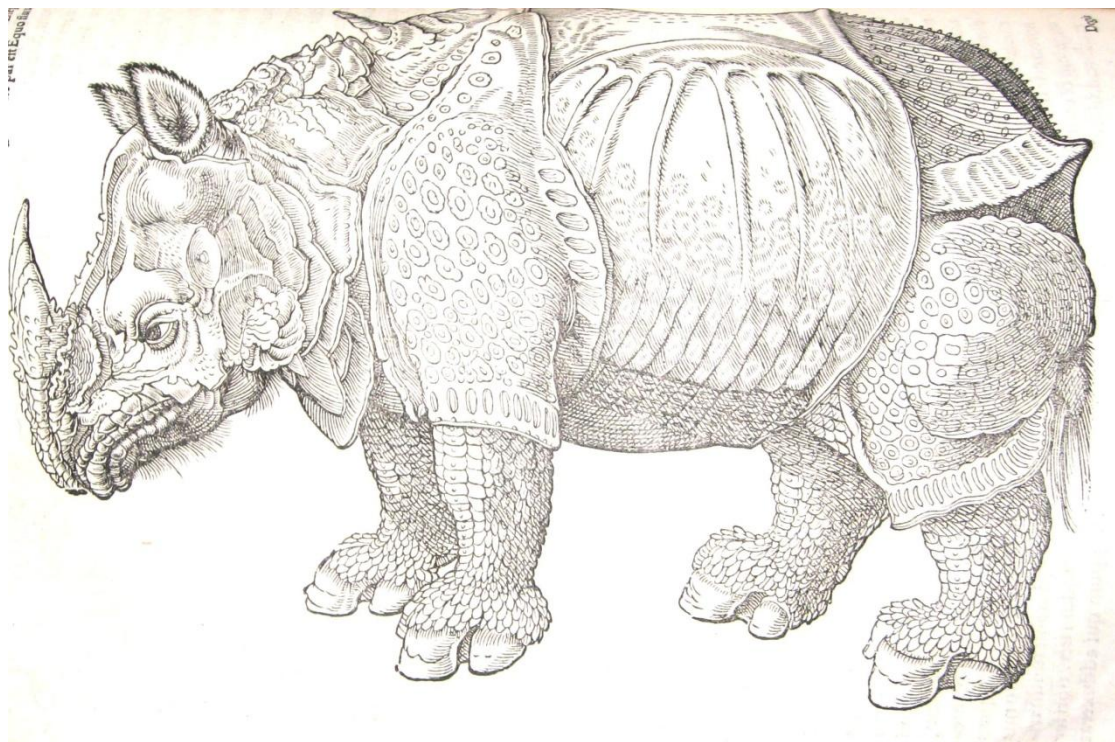
As early modern Europeans began to make contact with the broader world, the exotic beasts originally confined within the boundaries of the bestiary or books of wonders, began to migrate into geographical accounts of particular regions, and it was possible to draw on first hand observations to support their descriptions.

Although the German orientalist who penned this account of Ethiopia, Hiob Ludolf (1624-1704), never travelled to Ethiopia, he did gain much of the material for his book from an Ethiopian monk named Gregory whom he encountered in Rome, and who taught him Amharic. Although this volume is billed as a history, it includes details of geography, language, antiquities, liturgy, and most strikingly a series of dramatic plates illustrating local flora and fauna, represented here by a ferocious looking hippopotamus, but also including a herd of elephants, monkeys and detailed pictures of a banana plant. Ludolf, who apparently knew 25 different languages, became the foremost scholar of Ethiopia, producing grammars and lexicons, and even visited England in an unsuccessful bid to promote trade with Ethiopia.

Bequeathed by Nathaniel Crynes, 1745.

Xi.3.26

## Illustrating the exotic



**Gesner, Konrad, *Icones animalium quadrupedum uiuiparorum et ouiparorum, quæ in Historia animalium Conradi Gesneri libro I. et II. describuntur.***

Zurich, C. Froschauer, 1560.

The illustration on the left here is based upon one of the most influential animal images of all time: Durer's engraving of a rhinoceros, originally produced in 1515. Durer had never actually seen a rhino, but based his depiction on accounts of a rhinoceros sent as a gift to King Emmanuel of Portugal by King Muzafar of Cambodia, who then forwarded it as gift to the Medici Pope, Leo X. Unfortunately on the



journey to Rome the ship carrying it was wrecked and the animal lost. It did, however, achieve an immortality of sorts through Durer's work, and was to influence depictions of all species of rhinoceros for at least two centuries. A very similar woodcut, differing only in size, appears in Lykosthenes *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon* and numerous other 16<sup>th</sup> century books. John Johnston's *Historiæ naturalis de quadrupetibus libri* contains an engraved version of this image – still seen as the most accurate depiction of a rhinoceros 140 years after its first appearance.

The book it appears in here was put on the papal index as a prohibited item owing to its author's protestant convictions. Konrad Gessner (1516-1565) produced a monumental four volume work of zoology, *Historia animalium*, often seen as the foundation of the subject, of which the College has a copy (this particular volume is a slightly later condensation highlighting the illustrations). The text endeavoured to include the latest geographical and anatomical observation for accuracy of description, and this can be seen in many of the illustrations, but there it still fell back on the same sources as the bestiary for those (often non-existent) creatures for which such detail was hard to come by, making it a strange synthesis of the ancient and the modern.

Given to the College in 1599 by John Case.

Z.1.15 (2)

## The Great Chain of Being



**Chimpanzee from Edward Tyson's *Orang-outang, sive Homo sylvestris: or, The anatomy of a pygmie compared with that of a monkey, an ape, and a man.* London, Thomas Bennet & Daniel Brown, 1699.**

In spite of its rather dubious sounding title, this book was the first formulation of the structural similarities between men and other primates, and a pioneering work of

comparative anatomy. It arose as part of its author's, the physician and anatomist Edward Tyson (1650-1708), belief in a 'great chain of being' that linked all creatures in a hierarchical system. Thus Tyson believed that the porpoise was an intermediary form between fish and land creatures. Similarly the 'pygmy' was an intermediary form between man and apes. In drawing such comparisons Tyson was among the first scientists to position man as part of the animal kingdom. The supplementary essay ("*concerning the pygmies, the cynocephali, the satyrs, and sphinges of the ancients, wherein it will appear that they are all either apes or monkeys, and not men, as formerly pretended*") became highly influential on both anthropology and popular culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The engraving is by the Belgian émigré to London – Michael van der Gucht (1660-1725).

Given by John Merrick (d. 1757).

Z.4.42

## Illustration & text

**Elephant from John Johnstone's *Historiæ naturalis de quadrupedibus libri*, Amsterdam, Jan Jacobsz Schipper, 1650-53.**

Engraving of an elephant, obviously based on observation of a captive specimen, from a mid-17<sup>th</sup> century compendium of beasts. The image was produced by Matthaus Merian, the son of an eminent Swiss engraver and publisher. While the images are often based on observation, the text, by the son of a Scottish émigré to Poland, was considered one of the author's "laborious compilations" (ODNB), although apparently popular in England. The work makes little advance on Gesner's of a hundred years earlier, incorporating material on unicorns and griffins, alongside material on armadillos and antelopes.

Gift of John Hartop[?] 1666

Y.2.19

## Insult to injury

**Dodo from Francis Willughby's *Ornithologiæ libri tres*, London, For John Martyn, 1676**

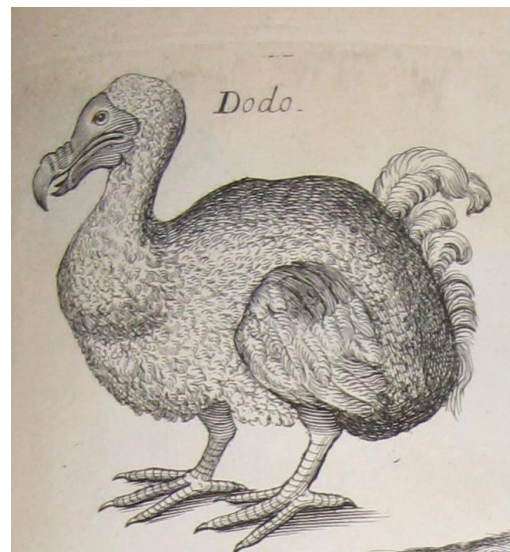
The name 'dodo' is of disputed etymology. The two favoured theories are that it came from the Portuguese 'doido' for 'fool', or from the Dutch 'dodaars' or 'knot-arse', referring to its tail feathers. The illustration here, from Francis Willughby's (1603-1675) *Ornithologia*, depicts a dodo amongst other exotic avians, and was published about fourteen years after the last confirmed sighting of the bird, by a ship-wrecked mariner. The engraving shows the familiar image of the bird – fat and

apparently capable of little more than waddling. Compare this with the reproduction of the illustration (below) from John Johnston's *De quadrupedibus*, of 1650, some twelve years before that final sighting. This shows a comparatively svelte-seeming bird, which looks quite capable of running. It is thought that the popular image of the bird resulted from depictions of captive and subsequently overfed specimens. It is in fact much more likely that the dodo was a victim of the introduction of competing animals by Europeans, rather than an animal that was too fat and stupid to avoid being eaten.

Francis Willughby (1635 –1672) was an ornithologist and ichthyologist. At Cambridge University he was the student, friend and colleague of the naturalist John Ray. Between 1662 and 1666 they travelled throughout Europe studying the behaviour of birds. Ray published Willughby's *Ornithologia libri tres* in 1676 a few years after Willughby's sudden death in spite of Willughby's deathbed wish that he shouldn't. Heavily edited by Ray, this work is considered the beginning of scientific ornithology in Europe, revolutionizing ornithological taxonomy by organizing species according to their physical characteristics.

Given by John Smith in 1688.

Y.2.5



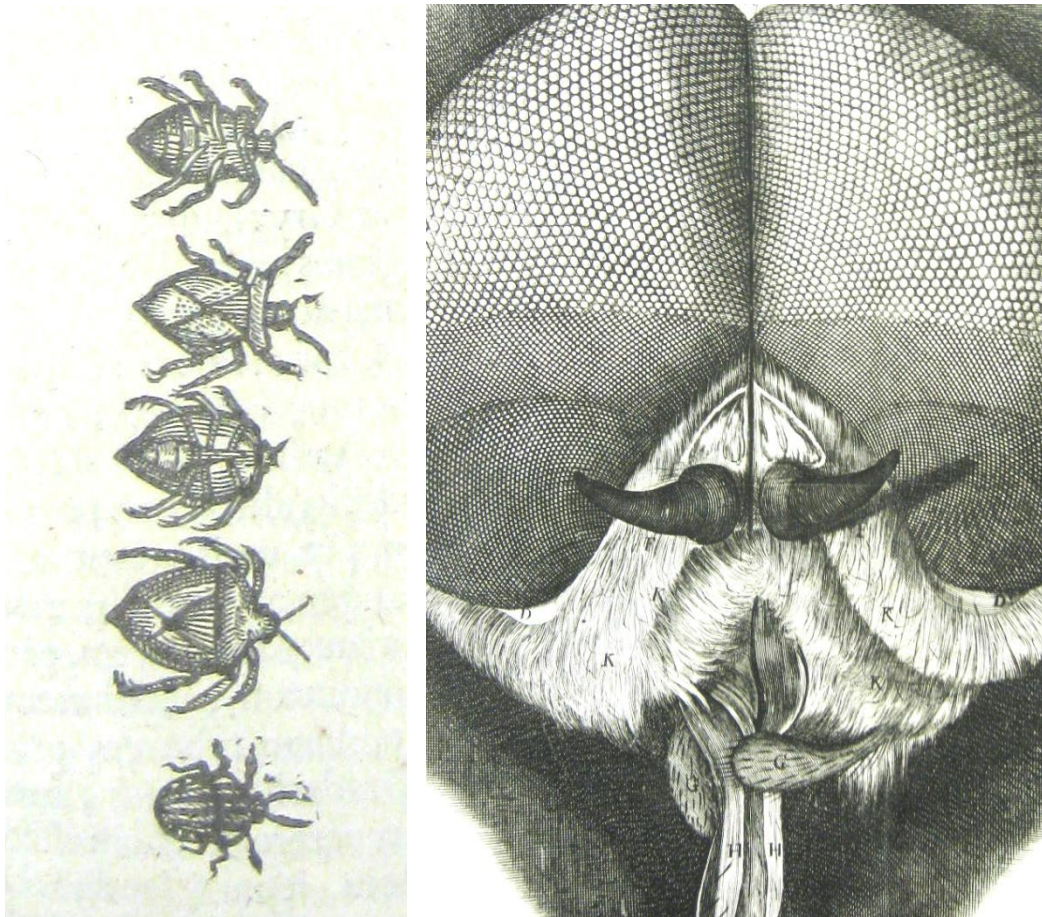
## Entomological illustration: woodcut

**Beetles from Thomas Moffett's** *Insectorum sive Minimorum animalium theatrum*. London, Thomas Cotes, 1634.

Originally a physician, Thomas Moffett's (1553-1604) interest in insects was sparked after a visit to Italy in 1580, where he studied silk-farming. He was later to play a key role in attempting to introduce sericulture to England at the behest of James I. During his career he managed to compile this work from material from Konrad



Y.3.28



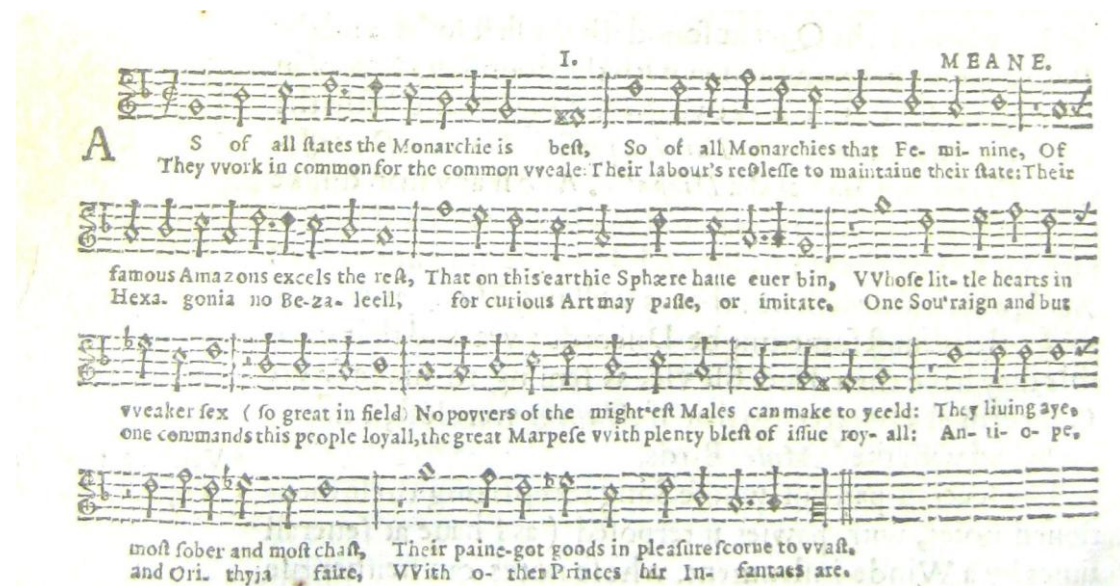
**Head of a fly from Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, London, Printed for John Martyn printer to the Royal Society, 1667**

Although Robert Hooke's (1635-1703) masterpiece, *Micrographia*, was not the first book to reproduce microscopical observations, it was the first devoted to them, and the first to reproduce observations made with Hooke's newly perfected compound microscope.

It was also the first book to include detailed illustrations for each section of text, drawn and in some cases also engraved by the author himself. Hooke observed the structures of many common things, such as woven cloth, a human hair and, in this case, the head of a fly. The advantages of engraving as an illustrative medium are evident here, in the level of detail and shading that can be achieved using it. Indeed, Hooke's illustration enabled the foundation of insect anatomy as subject, and his engravings of the flea and the louse are reported to have changed the hygiene habits of many of his contemporaries. On the other hand engraving was an expensive process, not least because, as an intaglio process, engravings couldn't be printed at the same time as the text, which was a relief process. Usually engravings were produced by an entirely separate print maker with an entirely different sort of press and added into the book later as plates, a practice that still continues today with photographic plates in many books.

Z.4.29

## Bees as royalists



**Bee music from Charles Butler's *The feminine monarchie, or The historie of bees*.**

London, John Haviland for Roger Jackson, 1623.

Charles Butler published three editions of this work, which became the seminal work in English on beekeeping until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of comb hives. The first attempted to indicate the piping made by queen bees using musical

notation. By the second edition, displayed here, this had become a four part madrigal. He was one of the first people to gender bees correctly, realising that the workers were female, the drones male, and popularizing the notion that the largest bee in a colony was in fact a 'queen' rather than a 'king'. The continued anthropomorphizing of animals and their behaviour is, however, made very striking in this volume, particularly as the lyrical content of the madrigal becomes a hymn to monarchy.

Butler was also active in the field of spelling reform, and had the third edition, which the College also holds, published in his own attempt at phonetics as the '*Feminin Monarchi*'.

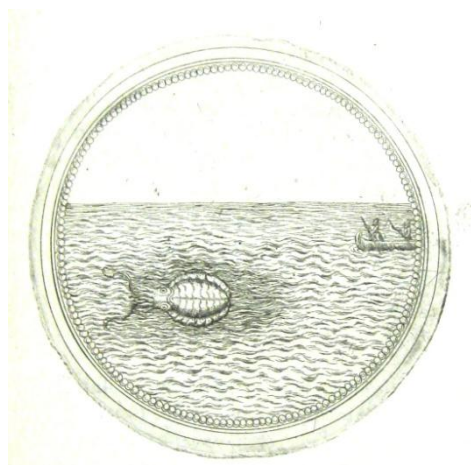
HB4/3.a.5.22

## Drawing meaning from nature

**Cuttlefish "escaping the nets of deception" from Joachim Camerarius the Younger's *Symbolorum et emblematum ex aquatilibus et reptilibus desumptorum centuria quarta*. [S.l., s.n.], 1604.**

The allegorical and moralistic functions of illustration exemplified by the bestiary found other outlets in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of these was the genre known as emblem books. In these an image was coupled with a short text to provide a focus for moral and philosophical contemplation for the reader. Joachim Camerarius the Younger (1534-1598) produced an example in the early seventeenth century which created emblems using flora and fauna. The work was in four parts, of which this, dealing with aquatic animals and reptiles is the final one, and was published posthumously by his son Ludwig. The previous parts had covered plants, quadrupeds, and birds and insects. Although the work's focus is primarily moralistic, Camerarius was a physician and botanist, and corresponded with other leading zoological and botanical scholars in the field such as Gessner and Carolus Clusius, so the work was informed by this humanistic sensibility.

HB4/1.b.3.16





## ‘Birding’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

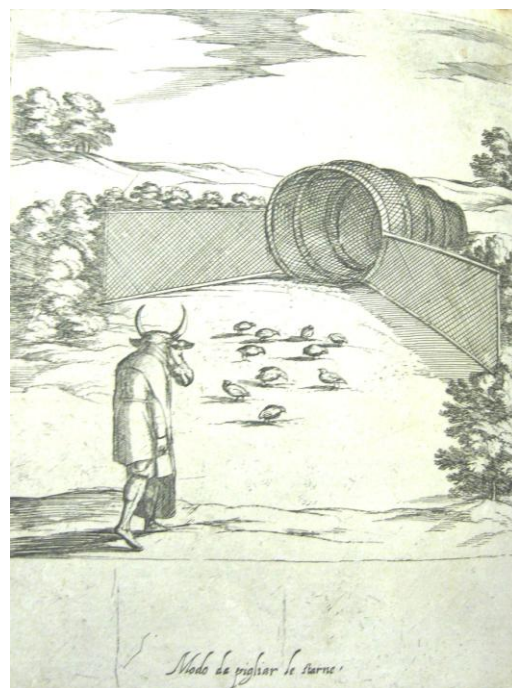
**Shrike** from Giovanni Pietro Olina’s *Uccelliera, ouero, Discorso della natura e proprieta di diuersi uccelli, e in particolare di que'che cantano...* Rome, Andrea Fei, 1622.

The exquisite engravings lovingly detailing each species produced for this work on songbirds belie the ultimate purpose of the book. Other plates later in the work give a clearer impression: they portray a myriad ways of catching these birds. An illustration near the beginning shows one of their ultimate destinations, depicting people preparing a meal of pasta with songbirds. Giovanni Pietro Olina’s (ca.1585-ca.1645) text which discusses the habits, diseases and methods of catching and keeping birds, was fairly derivative, drawing heavily on Antonio Valli de Todi’s less well known work *Canto de gl’augelli* (Rome, 1601), but it is the illustrations that single out this work. These were supplied by the artists Antonio Tempesta (1555-1630), who had worked on the interior decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence under Vasari, and Francisco Villamena (1566-1624), and make it one of the earliest works with engraved plates representing birds.

Note the adding in of English names for each species by an early owner. The bird shown is described as a ‘Fieldfare’ – but this is certainly not what is nowadays known as a fieldfare, a name reserved for a type of thrush. The bird depicted is possibly a shrike or butcher bird, perhaps why it is depicted with prey animals.

Given by Nathaniel Crynes in 1745.

Phi.3.41



## 'Birding' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century



**Thomas Bewick & Ralph Beilby's *History of British Birds***, Newcastle upon Tyne, printed by and for S. Hodgson, R. Beilby, & T. Bewick, 1797-1804.

Thomas Bewick was apprenticed to the engraver and jeweller, Ralph Beilby, at the age of 14, and went on to develop his own technique of wood-engraving, as opposed to copper engraving. He used the same tools as a metal engraver would, so allowing him to create images on wood that were more refined than was possible with traditional woodcuts, but which were also harder-wearing and longer lasting than copper engraving plates which degraded rapidly owing to the forces applied to them. His book on British birds, shown here, was seen as his masterpiece. The text was written by Beilby, but the book as a whole was informed by Bewick's own observations of, and familiarity with the countryside, to which he made regular excursions. The tradition of natural observation was evidently continued by a later owner, who left notes of observations inserted amongst its pages. The note displayed here describes observations regarding a pair of hen harriers at Hendon in Middlesex in 1833, and of an ascent of a tree to examine their nest.

HB4/6.a.1.5

