



Concerning Precious Topaz | De topasio pretioso

Text Information

Author | Nicolaus Pergamenus

Language | Latin

Period | 14th Century

Genre | Dialogue

Source | Grässe, Johann Georg Theodor. *Die beiden ältesten lateinischen fabelbücher des mittelalters*. Tübingen: Litterarischer verein in Stuttgart, 1880, 153-157.

Collection | Fantastic Fables: A 14th-Century Book of Moral Tales and Dialogues

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/creature_dialogue_precious_topaz/

Translation and introduction by Astrid Khoo.

Introduction to the Text

The *Dialogus Creaturarum* ('Dialogue of Creatures'), of which this text is one of eight published by the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, was composed in the fourteenth century. Its authorship remains debated, though it was historically attributed to either Nicolaus Pergamenus, about whom little is known, or Magninus Mediolanensis (also known as Mayno de Mayneriis), who was a physician. In recent years, beginning with Pierre Ruelle in 1985, scholars have tended towards the conclusion that the *Dialogus* was compiled in Milan, though not necessarily by Magninus.

The text consists of 122 dialogues largely populated by anthropomorphic 'creatures', loosely defined; sections translated for the *Global Medieval Sourcebook* feature elements (fire, water), planetary bodies (the Sun, the Moon, Saturn, a cloud), animals (the leopard and unicorn), as well as a talking topaz. Each dialogue is further divided into two sections, the first part depicting an encounter between these creatures—two is the usual number, though some dialogues have one or three—that ends in a violent conflict. This experience is summed up in a moral, typically delivered by the defeated party, which is then exemplified in the second half of the dialogue through citations from historiography, literature, and sacred scripture. Common texts cited include the pagan authors Seneca the Younger and Valerius Maximus, along with the Christian writers Paul, Augustine, and John Chrysostom and compilations such as the *Vitae patrum* ('Lives of the Fathers') and *Legenda aurea* ('Golden Legend').

The great precision with which these references are cited—often including book and chapter numbers—suggests that the *Dialogus* was designed as a reference text containing recommendations for further reading, and more specifically as a handbook for 'constructing sermons' (as indicated in the Preface). This purpose does not, however, detract from its entertaining style, which derives in no small part from the passionate dialogue that takes place between the 'creatures' and the fast-paced descriptions of their battles against one another. These features explain the popularity of the *Dialogus*, which ran through numerous editions from the late fifteenth century onwards. The illustrated text compiled by Gerard Leeu was printed eight times in the eleven years from 1480 to 1491, once in French, twice in Dutch, and five times in Latin.

Introduction to the Source

Two manuscript versions of the *Dialogus Creaturarum* exist. Of these, only the so-called 'short redaction' has been printed. Gerard Leeu opted for this version of the text in the first Latin edition (1480), and all the vernacular translations are based upon it. The 'short redaction' is attested in twelve manuscripts from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and is thought to best reflect the original text, which was composed after 1326. This dating derives from the fact that it borrows heavily from a compilation, the *Libellus qui intitulatur multifarium*, which was compiled at Bologna in that year (see Ruelle 1985, p. 22). In contrast, the 'long redaction' survives in only two manuscripts, both of which are comparatively late (in or after 1431): Toledo, Biblioteca Capitular, 10-28 and Torino, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, H. III. 6. In these manuscripts, the *Dialogus Creaturarum* is commonly presented under the title *Contemptus Sublimitatis* ('The Contempt of Worldly Power'), which reflects its structure as a handbook of moral examples.



About this Edition

The source used for transcription and translation is Johann Georg Theodor Grässe's 1880 edition, entitled *Die beiden ältesten lateinischen Fabelbücher des Mittelalters: des Bischofs Cyrillus Speculum Sapientiae und des Nicolaus Pergamenus Dialogus Creaturarum* (Tübingen: Literarischen Verein in Stuttgart). This edition can be accessed online [here](#). Grässe bases his text on the 1480 edition by Gerard Leeu, which is itself most likely derived from several of the manuscript copies; for a full list, see Cardelle de Hartman and Pérez Rodríguez 2014, pp. 199-200. A late medieval printed version of the text, dating from 1481, is held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris and is available to view online [here](#).

Further Reading

Cardelle de Hartman, Carmen, and Estrella Pérez Rodríguez. "Las auctoritates del Contemptus Sublimitatis (Dialogus Creaturarum)." *Auctor et auctoritas in Latinis medii aevi litteris/Author and Authorship in Medieval Latin Literature: Proceedings of the VIth Congress of the International Medieval Latin Committee* (Benevento-Naples, November 9-13, 2010), edited by Edoardo D'Angelo and Jan Ziolkowski, Florence: SISMEL - Edizioni di Galluzzo, 2014, pp. 199-212.

- Demonstrates that instead of nine manuscripts as previously thought, there exist fifteen complete manuscripts and a fragment, and outlines these manuscripts' relationship to one another.

Kratzmann, Gregory C, and Elizabeth Gee, eds. *The Dialogues of Creatures Moralised: A Critical Edition*. Leiden: Brill, 1988, pp. 1-64.

- Edition of the medieval English translation first published in 1530 (original author unknown), but the introduction contains information on the translation history and dissemination of the Latin *Dialogus* more generally.

Rajna, Pio. "Intorno al cosiddetto *Dialogus creaturarum* ed al suo autore." *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 10, 1887, pp. 75-113.

- Advances arguments for two possible authors: Nicolaus Pergamenus and the Milanese doctor Mayno de Mayneriis, with a strong preference for the latter, and summarises the style and contents of the *Dialogus*.

Ruelle, Pierre, ed. *Le "Dialogue des creatures": Traduction par Colart Mansion (1482) du "Dialogus creaturarum" (XIVe siècle)*. (Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Collections des Anciens Auteurs Belges, n.s. 8), Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1985, pp. 1-80.

- Annotated edition of the medieval French translation by Colart Mansion, but the introduction outlines the manuscript tradition and authorship of the Latin *Dialogus*.

Schmitt, Jean-Claude. "Recueils franciscains d'exempla et perfectionnement des techniques intellectuelles du XIIIe au XVe siècle." *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 135, 1977, pp. 5-21.

- Discusses the front matter in early manuscripts of the Latin *Dialogus*, which contained both a list of titles and an alphabetical index of moral lessons to facilitate citation.



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De topasio pretioso

Topasius, ut dicit Papias, est gemma, quæ omnium lapidum in se habet colores. Ysidor. Ethim. libro XVI. dicit, quod est gemma quædam ex virenti genere omnique colore splendens, inventa primum in Arabiæ insula, quæ dicitur Topazi, unde topazius dictus est ab insula. Quidam autem topacius de Arabia ductus est Romam et in ecclesia beati Petri super crucem collocatus est et consecratus est, in quo loco ab omnibus avidè videbatur. Hic a persuasione in ima ductus ait: quid est semper in ecclesia manere et nunquam recedere nec aliquid de mundo sentire?

volò enim cito ad seculum redire, ut aliquantulum cum secularibus recreari possim in seculo et regnare cum Christo. Cumque ad seculum reversus fuisset ac de sacrosaneta ecclesia recederet, ab illicitis concupiscentiis mundi captus exposuit se omnibus flagitiis. Ad extremum autem a barbaris repertus et ab ipsis incognitus collisus est et dispersus, ita quod nunquam comparuit. Tandem confractus ait: qui de loco sacro pergit, iustum est, si se dispergit. Ergo caveant religiosi ad seculum redire, ne similiter pereant. Concupiscentiæ enim sunt naufragia religiosorum. Et ideo dicit Augustinus: sicut dilectio Dei est omnium virtutum fons, ita dilectio mundi est fons omnium vitiorum.

Unde qui vult Deum possidere, mundo renuntiet, ut sit illi Deus beata possessio. Dicit Bernardus: perfectus servus Christi nihil habet nisi Christum et si aliquid præter Christum habet, perfectus non est. Unde idem: qui spiritualibus bonis sunt dotati, terrenis negotiis non debent implicari. Legitur in Vitas patrum [sic], quod quidam frater interrogavit senem dicens: quid faciam, quia cogitatio mea me non dimittit, me nec una hora sedere in cella mea? Et dicit ei senex: fili, revertere et sede in cella tua et labora manibus tuis et ora Deum incessanter et jacta cogitatum tuum in domino et cave, ne te quis seducat, ut exeas, et dicebat. Quidam secularis erat adolescens habens patrem et desiderabat fieri monachus. Et dum multum supplicaret patri suo, ut dimitteret eum converti, non acquiescebat pater.

Concerning Precious Topaz

Topaz, as Papias writes, is a jewel that holds the colors of all other stones in itself. Similarly, Isidor writes in book sixteen of the Etymologies that it is a primarily green-coloured jewel that also shines in every color, and was first discovered on an Arabian island called Topazi, whence topaz takes its name. Once, a topaz was taken from Arabia to Rome, and placed above the cross in blessed Peter's Church. It was consecrated there and admired enthusiastically by everyone. Convinced to exchange its lofty place for lower realms, the Topaz said, "Why must I always remain in the church and never leave, nor see anything of the world?"

I desire to go back to the world for a short while, so that I might have a little recreation with those of the world and then reign with Christ." However, after he had returned to the world and departed from the holy church, he was captivated by forbidden desires and exposed himself to sinful acts. Finally, the Topaz was discovered by barbarians, who did not recognise him. As a result, he was smashed and scattered so that he never appeared whole again. Finally broken, the Topaz said: "He who leaves a holy place is justly destroyed." Therefore, may the religious beware of going back to the world, lest they perish in the same way. After all, desire is a shipwreck for the pious. Similarly, Augustine writes, "Just as love of God is the font of all virtue, love of the world is the font of all sin."

Hence, whoever wishes to attain God ought to renounce the world so that he might achieve the blessed attainment of God." Thus also Bernard: "The perfect servant of Christ possesses nothing except for Christ; if he possesses anything else, he is not perfect." Additionally, Bernard writes, "Whosoever is endowed with spiritual goods need not be implicated in worldly matters." It is said in *The Lives of the Fathers*¹ that a young monk was asking advice from an old counterpart. He said, "What should I do? My thoughts doesn't leave me alone; I cannot meditate in my cell for even an hour." The old man responded, "Son, go away and sit in your cell. Work with your hands, and pray unceasingly to God, and cast your thoughts towards the Lord. Moreover, beware lest anyone should tempt you to exit your cell."² There was, once, a young man of the world whose father was still alive. He wanted to become a monk. However, although he begged his father many times to allow him to take his vows, his father refused.



Postmodum autem rogatus a fidelibus amicis, vix acquievit. Et egressus frater ille adolescens introivit monasterium et factus monachus cœpit omne opus monasterii perfecte perficere et jejulare quotidie. Cœpit autem biduanas et triduanas abstinere, similiter autem et semel tantum in ebdomada refici. Videbat eum abbas suus et mirabatur et benedicebat dominum in abstinentia et labore ipsius. Contigit autem post aliquod tempus, [quod] cœpit frater supplicari abbati suo dicens: rogo te, abba, ut dimittas me, et vadam in heremum. Dicit ei abbas: fili, noli hoc cogitare, non enim potes sufferre talem laborem propter temptationes diaboli et versutias ejus.

Et si contigerit tibi temptatio, non invenies ibi, quod te consoletur a turbatione inimici, quæ tibi illata fuerit. Ille autem cœpit amplius rogare, ut eum permitteret abire. Videns autem abbas ejus, quia eum retinere non poterat, facta oratione dimisit eum. Postmodum dicit abbati suo: rogo te, abba, ut concedas mihi, qui ostendat iter, quomodo ego pergere debeam. Et ordinavit cum eo duos monachos monasterii et abierunt cum eo, ambulantisque iis per heremum unam diem et alteram, defecerunt præ æstu et projicientes se in terram jacebant et soporati modice somno, ecce aquila venit percutiens alis suis, processit procul et sedit in terra. Et evigilantes aquilam viderunt et dixerunt ei: ecce angelus tuus, surge, sequere eum.

Et surgens valedicensque fratribus sequebatur eam et venit usque ubi stabat aquila ipsa. Quæ mox surgens volavit usque ad unum stadium et iterum sedit. Similiter sequebatur eam frater ille. Et iterum volavit et sedit non longe. Factum est vero hoc per horas tres. Postmodum autem, dum sequitur eam, divertit ipsa aquila in dexteram partem sequentis se et non comparuit. Frater vero ille nihilominus sequebatur eam et respiciens vidit tres arbores palmarum et fontem aquæ et speluncam et dixit: ecce locus, quem mihi dominus paravit! Et ingressus sedit in ea sumens cibum dactilorum et de fonte aquam bibens; et fecit ibidem annos sex neminem videns. Et ecce una die venit ad eum diabolus in similitudine cujusdam abbatis senioris habens vultum terribilem. Yidens autem eum frater ille timuit et procidens in orationem surrexit. Et dicit ei diabolus: oremus iterum, frater! et cum surrexissent diabolus dixit: quantum temporis habes hic? Et respondit: habeo sex annos.

Eventually, his father begrudgingly agreed, but only after been petitioned by his intimate friends. The young man left his home and entered a monastery. He became a monk and began to carry out all of his monastic duties perfectly, taking care to fast daily. Soon he was fasting for two or three days at a time, and once he ate only one meal from Sabbath to Sabbath.³ The abbot watched him and marveled, and even blessed the Lord for the young monk's abstinence and hard work. After some time, however, the brother began to entreat the abbot, saying, "O abbot, I ask you to send me away. I must go into the wilderness." The abbot said to him, "My son, do not think of such things. You cannot bear that sort of trial, for the devil has tricks and temptations up his sleeve."⁴

If you were to be tempted, you would not find anything there which would save you from the devil's disquiet, which will be imposed upon you." Nevertheless, the monk⁵ continued to beg the abbot for permission to leave. The abbot, seeing that that he could not restrain him, made a public prayer and sent him away. Then the monk said to the abbot, "I ask you to grant me someone to show the road that I must take." The abbot assigned to him two monks, who were part of the same monastery, and they went off together. For two days they walked into the wilderness before they gave up. Collapsing due to the heat, they fell onto the ground and slept for a short while. An eagle arrived from above, beating his wings together; it then proceeded to a far-off place and sat upon the earth. Waking up, the monks saw the eagle and said to their young brother, "Behold your angel. Arise: follow him."

Rising, he blessed his brothers and followed it, and reached the place where the eagle was found. The eagle immediately rose up and flew a stade⁶ away, where it landed once more. Again, the monk followed; again, the eagle flew for a short distance and sat down. This process repeated itself for three hours. The monk continued following, but then the eagle diverted his path eastwards, and did not show himself to his follower. Nevertheless the monk followed. As he looked back, however, he glimpsed three palm trees, a spring, and a cave, then said, "Behold this place which the Lord has prepared for me." He entered and sat down, consuming the dates and drinking water from the spring. He spent six years in that place, and saw no one during this time. One day the devil came to him in the semblance of an old abbot; he wore a terrible countenance. The monk was afraid and fell prostrate into prayer. After he had risen once more, the devil said to him: "Let us pray again together, my brother!" Once they had finished, the devil asked, "How much time have you passed here? The monk answered, "Six years."



Dicit ei dæmon: ecce te vicinum habui et non potui cognoscere nisi ante dies quatuor, quod hic habitares, et ego non longe habeo a te monasterium, et ecce anni sunt XI quod de monasterio non exivi nisi hodie, quia cognovi, quod in hic vicino habitares, et cogitavi mecum dicens, vadam ad hominem Dei istum et cum eo conferam, quod potest prodesse saluti animæ meæ, et hoc dico, frater, quod nihil proficimus sedentes in cellis istis, quia corpus et sanguinem Christi non percipimus, et timeo, ne efficiamur exteri ab eo, si nos ab hoc misterio elongaverimus.

Sed dico tibi, frater, ecce hinc tribus millibus est monasterium habens presbiterum, eamus ergo dominica die post duas ebdomadas et accipiamus corpus et sanguinem Christi et revertamur ad cellas nostras. Placuit fratri suasio illa diabolica et veniente die dominica ecce diabolus venit et dicit ei: veniamus, quia hora est. Et exeuntes perrexerunt ad prædictum monasterium, ubi presbiter ille erat, et ingressi in ecclesiam miserunt se in orationem, et exurgens ab oratione frater ille respiciens non invenit, qui adduxerat eum ibi, et dixit: ubi, putas, perrexit? num ad commune necessarium ambulavit? Et cum diu sustineret, non venit.

Postmodum autem exiens foras requirebat eum, et cum non reperisset, dixit ad fratres loci illius interrogans eos; ubi est abbas ille senex, qui mecum ingressus est in ecclesiam? Et dicunt ei: nos neminem vidimus alium nisi te tamen. Tunc cogitavit frater ille, quod dæmon fuisset, et dixit: vide, cum qua argutia diabolus eiecit me de cella sua, sed tamen non me poenitet, quia ad opus bonum veni, percipio corpus et sanguinem Christi et revertar in cellam meam! Et post missas volentem reverti tenuit eum abbas monasterii ipsius dicens: nisi te refeceris, non dimittemus te.

Et cum percepisset cibum et regredi vellet in cellam suam, ecce iterum diabolus venit in similitudine cuiusdam juvenis secularis et coepit eum respicere a summo capitis usque ad pedes et dicere: ipse est iste? non est hic. Et coepit eum considerare et dixit ei frater: quem sic respicis? At ille ait: puto, me cognoscis. Tamen post tantum tempus quomodo me habes cognoscere? Ego vicinus patris tui, filius illius. Quomodo? non est dictus pater tuus sic et mater tua tale nomen non habuit?

The devil said to him, "How can this be? All this time I had you as a neighbor, and yet I did not know that you dwelt here until four days ago. I govern a monastery not far from you, and I did not leave it for eleven years except for today. I left only because I discovered that you lived in the vicinity. I thought to myself: 'I will go to this man of God and confer with him, for he shall be able to do good for my soul.' I tell you, my brother, that we do not accomplish anything by sitting in our cells, where we do not receive the body and blood of Christ.⁷ Indeed I dread that we shall alienate ourselves from Him if we remain separate from this mystery.

Nevertheless, I assure you, brother, that there is a monastery with a priest just three miles from this spot. Let us therefore go there together on the Sunday after next and accept the body and blood of Christ, after which we will return to our cells." The devil's advice pleased the brother. On the Sabbath, the devil came and said to the monk, "Let us go. The hour has come." They left and, having arrived at the aforementioned monastery where the priest was, entered the chapel and began to pray. Rising from his prayers, the monk looked back but could not find the one who had led him there. He said to himself, "Where do you think he has gone? Surely he hasn't gone to the outhouse?" Although the monk waited for a long time, his companion did not return.

After a time he went out through the doors and sought him, and when he did not find him he spoke to the monks of that place, asking them, "Where is the aged abbot, who entered the chapel with me?" They said to him, "We have seen no man besides yourself." The monk then realised that the abbot had been the devil, and said, "Look: with what sophistry did the devil expel me from my cell! Nevertheless, I regret nothing, for I came for a good reason. I have partaken in the body and blood of Christ, and now I shall return to my cell." After mass, the abbot of the monastery would not let the monk depart, though he desired to do so. The abbot said, "Unless you dine with us, we will not let you go."

After he had eaten and again expressed his desire to leave, the devil returned in the guise of a worldly young man; in this form, he looked the monk up and down, from head to toe. He then said, "Is this the man? No, it cannot be he." The monk began to examine the young man, and said to him, "Whom do you look at in this way?" The young man responded, "I think that you know me. Do you recognise me after all this time? I am your father's neighbor, his son. How now? Was your father not called thus, and did your mother not have such-and-such a name?"



Tu et sic non vocaris et mancipia illa et illa sic non sunt dieta? Mater vero tua et soror tua ante tres annos mortuæ sunt. Pater autem tuus modo defunctus est et te fecit hæredem dicens: cui habeo dimittere substantiam meam nisi filio meo, viro sancto, qui reliquit sæculum et abiit post Deum? Ipsi dimitto omnia bona mea, modo autem qui timet Deum et seit, ubi est, dicat, ut veniens distrahat et eroget ea pauperibus pro anima mea et sua! Et perrexerunt multi requirentes te et minime invenerunt, ego autem, veniens ex occasione propter quoddam opus hic, cognovi te esse, unde non facias moras, sed veni et vende omnia et fac secundum voluntatem patris tui.

Respondens frater ille dixit: non necesse habeo reverti ad seculum. Dixit ei diabolus: si non veneris et deperierit substantia illa, in conspectu Dei tu exinde reddes rationem. Quid enim mali tibi dico, ut venias et eroges pauperibus et egenis quomodo bonus dispensator, ut non a meretricibus et male viventibus extricetur, quod pauperibus dimissum est? Aut quid onerosum est, ut venias et facias elemosinas secundum voluntatem patris tui pro anima ejus et revertaris in cellam tuam? Quid multa, suadens fratrem deposuit in seculum et veniens cum eo usque ad civitatem reliquit eum.

Yoluit autem frater ingredi in domum patris tamquam jam defuucto eo, et ecce ipse pater ejus vivus egrediebatur et videus non cognovit eum et ad eum ait: quis es tu? Ipse vero turbatus nihil poterat respondere, et cœpit iteratis verbis pater ejus interrogare eum, unde esset. Tunc confusus dixit ei: ego filius tuus. Et ait illi: ut quid reversus es? Qui erubescens dicere, quod verum erat, dixit: caritas tua me fecit reverti, quia desiderabam te. Et remansit ibi et post aliquantum tempus iucurrit fornicationem et multis suppliciis afflictus a patre suo infelix ille non egit pœniteutiam, sed remansit in seculo. Ideoque dico, fratres, quia monachus nunquam debet, quamvis suasus ab aliquo, egredi de cella sua.

Are you not also addressed so, and aren't these your servants' names? Your mother and your sister died three years ago. Your father has recently died and made you his heir, saying, 'To whom would I leave my possessions unless to my son, a holy man, who abandoned the world and went away in pursuit of God? To him indeed I bequeath all my possessions. May some God-fearing man who knows my son's whereabouts tell him that he may divide and distribute my estate among the poor, for the benefit of my soul and his.' Many men journeyed to find you and failed to do so. I, however, recognised you by chance when travelling here on an errand. Hence, do not delay, but come, sell all your possessions, and fulfill your father's will."

The monk answered him, saying, "It is not necessary for me to go back to the world." The devil said, "If you do not come and your estate is dispersed in the meantime, you will have to settle your accounts before God. Is it evil that I should encourage you to come help the poor and destitute as a good steward should, so that what was bequeathed to the poor is not taken instead by prostitutes and the debauched? Or is it a great burden to come and perform charity according to the will of your father, for the good of his soul, and then return to your cell?" Saying much more,⁸ he persuaded the monk and placed him back in the world; he accompanied the monk all the way to the city and left him there.

The monk wanted to go into his father's house, even though he was already dead. However he beheld his living father, who had seen him and was coming out of the house. Not recognising his son, he asked, "Who are you?" Disturbed, the monk was not able to answer, and his father enquired again as to who he was using the same words. Finally, the confused monk said, "I am your son." His father responded, "Why have you come back?" Ashamed to tell the truth, the monk said, "Your love has caused me to return, for I missed you." He stayed there; after a while, he fornicated and was punished for it by his father. However, that wretched man did not do penance, but remained in the world. Therefore I say, my brothers, that a monk should never—even when persuaded by others—leave his cell.



Critical Notes

Translation

- 1 There is a mistake in the Latin – marked by [sic]. "*Legitur in Vitas patrum*" should be "*Legitur in Vitis patrum*" as the preposition "*in*", when denoting location, requires the ablative case.
- 2 There is a hanging "*et dicebat*" here, which may suggest that the old monk tells the following story.
- 3 "Sabbath to Sabbath" means "within a whole week".
- 4 "To have [something] up his sleeve" is an English idiom and not present in the original Latin.
- 5 "*Frater*" is used throughout for "monk", literally meaning "brother". However the word "monk" is preferred as one would not translate "*pater*" in this context as "father", but as "priest".
- 6 A "*stade*" is a Greek measure of distance, equivalent to approximately a furlong, or 607 feet.
- 7 In this case—and indeed throughout the rest of this dialogue—the term "cell" likely means "cave" rather than a small room within a building.
- 8 "*Quid multa*" does not only mean that the devil said much more, but expresses the narrator's reluctance to go on listing what he has said. "What more should I say? In any case, the devil persuaded him..."