



The Moral Dialogue of Creatures [Preface] | Dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus [Præfatio]

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, 127-128.

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

URL | https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/creature_dialogue_preface/

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 Ruelle 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*, edited by Edoardo D'Angelo and Jan Ziolkowski. (Benevento-Naples, November 9-13, 2010). Florence: SISMEL - Edizioni di Galluzzo, 2014, pp.199-212.

- Demonstrates that instead of nine manuscripts as previously thought, there instead exist 15 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.

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.

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*.



The Moral Dialogue of Creatures [Preface] | Dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus [Præfatio]

Præfatio in librum, qui dicitur dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus

Praefatio in librum, qui dicitur dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus, omni materiae morali jocundo et edificativo modo applicabilis, incipit feliciter. Quoniam sicut testatur Ysidorus in libro de summo bono, libro primo capite quarto dicens, quod ex pulchritudine circumscriptae naturae ostendit nobis deus pulchritudinis suae partem aliquam. Qui circumscribi nequit et intelligi, ut ipsis eisdem vestigiis homo revertatur ad deum, quibus aversus est a Deo, et qui per amorem pulchritudinis creaturae a creatoris forma se abstulit, rursus per creaturae decorem ad creatoris sui pulchritudinem revertatur.

Quae quidem creaturae ctsi nobis, sicut liber iste fingit, dyalecticæ voce formata non loquantur, inclinatione tamen et naturalis institutionis proprietate nos docere nostrosque mores corrigere, si bene pensamus, non desinunt. Quod illud gloriosum lumen doctorum sanctus Augustinus optime intelligebat, cum dicebat: o domine deus, omnes creaturae tuæ, quas fecisti, ad me clamant et clamare non desinunt, ut te solum deum creatorem meum super omnia diligam. Et ideo auctor libri istius hæc rite considerans quosdam dyalogos creaturarum ad sanam et moralem doctrinam applicavit, confinxit et composuit, ut per creaturarum quasi nobis loquentium proprietates simul in moribus erudiamur et tædium audientium evitemus et ipsorum audientium memoriam adjuvemus, quod maxime per rerum similitudines procuratur. Salvator enim noster omnium prædicatorum perfecta forma fabulis, palæstinorum more usus est, ut rerum similitudine ad viam veritatis homines perduceret.

Auctor ergo libri præsentis jocundo modo morales doctrinas in exterminium vitiorum et virtutum promotionem introducit. Quod utique licet et expeditus est, ut dicit doctor sanctus secunda secundæ qu. CLXVIII in solutione ultimi argumenti et hoc, si fictio exterior interiori devotioni et dispositioni bonæ conveniat. Utilis est ergo præsens liber prædicatoribus et aliis quibusque intelligentibus contra fationem animalem, ut per delectationem jocundæ materiae aliquantulum intermissa intentione ad insistendum rationis studio simplicium animi ad altiora trahantur.

The preface to the book, **The Moral Dialogue of Creatures**

The preface to the book, **The Moral Dialogue of Creatures**, which pertains to every moral subject and is written in a pleasant and didactic style, begins thus: **Just as Isidor the Witness says in his book De Summo Bono (On the Highest Good) in part one chapter four, God shows us some part of His own beauty through the beauty of enclosed nature. Indeed, God - who cannot be comprehended or enclosed - does so, in order that man might return to God by retracing those very tracks which he has followed when turning away from God; and in order that the man, who through love of a creature's beauty has snatched himself away from his Creator's form, might again turn back to his Creator's beauty through the elegance of the creature.**

Admittedly, creatures do not speak to us in reasoned phrases, as this book pretends; however, if we ponder them well, they neither cease to teach us about the tendencies and qualities of the institution of nature nor to correct our customs. Indeed, if we consider their words well, they will not cease to help us. The glorious light of the learned, Saint Augustine, understood this when he said, "O Lord God, all Your creatures, which You have made, cry out to me and do not cease to cry out: they do this, so that I may love You alone, God my Creator, above all things." Rightly considering this, therefore, the author of the **Dialogue** devised, composed, and applied creatures' dialogues to healthy and moral doctrine so that we might be edified through the characters of creatures who speak just as we do; moreover, that we might simultaneously avoid inflicting boredom on our listeners and aid their memory. All this is best attained through parables. Our Savior perfected the form of the preacher's fable – according to the tradition of the Palestinians¹ – and used it to lead men by way of imitation towards the way of truth.

Likewise, the author of the present book introduces moral doctrines in a pleasant manner to exterminate vices and promote virtues. As the learned Saint [Aquinas] says in the second part of the second part [of the Summa Theologiae], in the solution to the final argument of question 168: "Undoubtedly, that which is expedient is permitted, as long as one's external pretence matches his internal devotion and good character." Hence, the present book is useful for preachers and all others who understand that by enjoying pleasant matters, which somehow provide a break from difficult work and minimise human fatigue, simple minds might be naturally² drawn to higher matters.



Sicut in Collationibus patrum legitur, quod beatus evangelista Johannes, dum quidam scandalizaretur, quod eum cum suis discipulis ludentem invenit, dicitur illi mandasse, qui arcum gerebat, ut sagittam traheret. Quod cum pluries fecisset, quæsit, utrum hæc continue facere posset. Qui respondit, quod, si hæc continue faceret, aut arcus frangeretur aut remissius telum projiceret. Ex quibus beatus Johannes intulit, quod similiter animus hominis frangeretur, si nunquam a sua intentione relaxaretur.

As the collections of the [Church] Fathers' sayings attest, someone was once scandalised to find the blessed evangelist John frolicking with his disciples. In response, John ordered him – since he carried a bow – to draw his bowstring. When the man had repeated this action several times, John asked him whether he could continue doing so indefinitely. The man answered that if he did so, he would either break the bow or shoot his arrow³ less forcefully. Through this, blessed John implied that a man's mind might break in the same way if it were never released from its strain.

Et hoc idem dicit philosophus in IV Ethicorum, quod in hujus vitæ conservatione quædain animæ requies cum ludo seu jocunditate habetur, quæ utique virtuosa est, sicut dicit Ambrosius in primo de officiis. Hoc in talibus jocundis actionibus verbis caveamus, ne, dum relaxare animum volumus, omnem harmoniam bonorum operum per contemptum quemdam solvamus. Iste ergo liber, dyalogus creaturarum appellatus, sic materias jocundas pingit, ut morum gravitas et aptitudo doctrinæ ex his accepta per sanctorum auctoritates doctorum exornetur, habens duas tabulas prænotatas. Quarum prima exprimit, de quibus creaturis tractant singuli dyalogorum, ut lector quo citius habeat, circa quæ versatur ejus intentio. Secunda tabula alphabetico ordine generaliter singulas materias virtutum et vitiorum ad mores componendos et corrigendos predicatorum et inquirentem docet, quo sint quæque loco reperiendæ, quæ scilicet cuilibet narrationi sibi in processu sermonum convenire possunt.

The Philosopher says this same thing in book four of the Ethics: in order to conserve life, the mind must gain rest either in play or in pleasantness. Moreover, as Ambrose says in his first book on the duties [of the Clergy], rest is indubitably virtuous. Nevertheless, when engaging in such delights, actions, and words, let us beware – even as we seek to relax our minds – not to undo all the harmony of our good works with some contemptible act. This book, therefore, which is entitled The Dialogue of Creatures, depicts pleasant matters in order that the gravity of its traditions and the effectiveness of its teachings might be adorned according to the authority of the learned saints. It consists of two indexes. The first index outlines the creatures which are discussed in each of dialogues, so that the reader might identify more quickly that which he wishes to examine. The second index, arranged in alphabetical order, instructs both preachers and enquirers where specific information can be found. This information concerns virtue and vice and is aimed at the organisation and correction of human behaviour; therefore, it is likely to be of use in constructing sermons.

Critical Notes

Translation

- 1 I would much rather translate "*Palaestinatorum mores*" as "the tradition of the **Israelites**", as it is closer to the intended meaning. However, I follow the example of Reisner (2009) 122, who renders Milton's "*Palaestinus...vates*" as "the prophet of Palestine".
- 2 "*Rationis studio*" is literally "by the strong inclination of reason", but here "naturally" reads far better.
- 3 "*Telum*" is not only used for spears but for any type of projectile; here it refers to the arrow.