CHAPTER TWO

RENAISSANCE NATURALISTS AND ANIMAL SYMBOLISM:
FACT AND FANTASY

Progress of experimental science and the humanist revival of classical texts were two major factors in precipitating a turning point in the history of zoological literature and illustration by the late fifteenth century. Nevertheless, it will be underlined below that, while more objective ways of looking at animals were introduced, this did not necessarily entail a rejection of the allegorical tradition. There is a tendency in modern literature to overemphasize the predominance of descriptive and empirical elements in Renaissance zoological texts, based on the assumption that moralizations and religious allegory were passé. If we examine the more focused Renaissance naturalist studies, such as Pierre Belon’s De aquatilibus libri duo (Paris, 1553) and L’histoire de la nature des oyseaux (Paris, 1555), or Guillaume Rondelet’s Libri de piscibus marinis (Paris, 1553), this indeed seems to be the case. Contemporary and later writings, however, by Conrad Gesner (1516–65), Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), Joachim Camerarius (1534–98) and Edward Topsell (1572–1625), demonstrate that the traditional allegorical approach, and moralistic conceptions of the natural universe and its fauna, maintained their popularity in encyclopedic compilations well into the seventeenth century. Before clarifying the relationship between innovative and traditional elements in the zoological literature of the sixteenth century, let us examine two contributions that represent stages of transition.

Bestiaries of the Fifteenth Century: The Monsters of Pier Candido Decembrio’s De animantium naturis

In 1460 the eminent humanist Pier Candido Decembrio (1392/99–1477) presented his unique five-book bestiary manuscript, called De

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Pier Candido Decembrio’s *De animantium naturis* focused on the theme of monstrous and marvelous creatures. Some were derived from myths and legends, others from traveler’s descriptions. Adopting the zoological categories of Thomas de Cantimpré, and references from Pliny’s *Historia naturalis*, as well as other sources, he used descriptive terminology and dropped the traditional moralizations that would later be reproduced by Gesner, Aldrovandi and Camerarius. In this respect his work has been cited as a precedent for the later development of scientific zoology, but scientific accuracy was not Pier Candido’s concern, and another century would pass before such compilations contained descriptions that were based on direct observation.

Although areas were left blank for miniatures, this codex was enriched by magnificent tempera illustrations over a hundred years later. Some of the latter were influenced by the printed illustrations in Conrad Gesner’s publications of 1553, 1560 and 1587, which included derivations from drawings and prints by Dürer (Fig. 8). It is curious that Andrea Mantegna, who began painting at the Gonzaga court in 1460, just when the text was completed, and probably executed miniatures early in his career, was not enlisted for the undertaking. The hybrid creatures he subsequently painted in the *Triumph of Virtue* for Isabella d’Este’s *Studiolo* (ca.1502, Paris, Louvre), for example, and the marine monsters in his mythological prints, attest to Mantegna’s talents in this field. Decembrio’s descriptions of zoological marvels and the analogous

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See *Animalia Prodigiosa* (as in note 2), 48–84, regarding the extraordinary miniatures in cod. Urb.Lat. 276 and comparisons with the Gesner illustrations, as well as other visual sources.