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Bestiaries in Wood? Misericords, Animal Imagery and the Bestiary Tradition¹

Although misericords have often been neglected by main stream art historians because of their popular background, these carved oak blocks found as part of mercy-seats in choir stalls of cathedrals, collegiate churches, and abbeys in certain parts of Western Europe from the late twelfth century onward have in recent years been attracting more attention. Book-length studies have appeared on misericords in the Iberian peninsula, France, Germany and Britain and more are on the way. Articles abound and even have a journal devoted to them, *The Profane Arts*, published by Misericordia International.

Animal imagery on misericords has long since been a favourite topic for research and much work has been done and much progress has been made on the identification and classification of animal scenes. The actual interpretation of animal imagery on misericords is a different matter, however. When such imagery is deemed worthy of discussion this rarely progresses much beyond the inevitable references to the *Physiologus* and bestiary traditions with their moralised animal lore and well-developed animal iconography. In this paper I shall evaluate the various ways in which such animal imagery can be read and was likely to be read in later medieval times. The paper will concentrate on animal imagery found on British misericords, but its conclusions will be valid for the entire area where such imagery appears. It will be argued that even when traditional iconography is transferred to the misericords this does not mean that it is accompanied by its original (moralised) sense. This, it will be shown, not only hold true for bestiary imagery but also applies to other realms like that of the *Roman de Renart*. This inevitably has serious consequences for the moral interpretation of misericords, and I will consequently argue that we have to read this imagery differently.

¹ A much expanded version of this article will be published in: *The Playful Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Elaine C. Block*, ed. P. HARDWICK (Turnhout) [forthcoming].