

Review: *A Dante Bestiary* by Judith Mason

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Image and Text

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Introduction

Artists' books are tremendous creations. They are art bound in book form. These pieces of art use the medium of a book to have conversations with writing, responding to it with images, and sometimes omitting writing altogether. I will be reviewing the artist's book *A Dante Bestiary*, created by Judith Mason, published by Ombondi Editions in 1989. This artist's book is an homage "to diverse beasts, creatures, monsters, figures and spiritual beings from LA DIVINA COMMEDIA of DANTE ALIGHIERI, the Florentine". It is a selection of parts from *La Divina Commedia* in conversation with brilliantly done images, which were hand drawn by Mason, and then added into the actual finished bestiary with prints made in metal.

I have always had an interest in bestiaries, and when I inquired about such a book in the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, and whether they had something like a bestiary in their collection, I was told yes, and instantly became excited when I laid eyes on this monumental creation. Its presentation was so fancy and reminded me of genuinely important documentation in history, with the protective sleeve and the concept that a bestiary could look like a genuine historical artifact fascinated me. Upon opening it, the texture and the weight of the cover surprised me, although I am not sure why, since I expected it to be as heavy as it was. I suppose it might have been the pages that surprised me. Their raw edges, to be exact. This added to the impression that it was an artifact meant to be preserved. Coming across the first drawing after a few blank pages drew me in. I could not look away. I started flipping through the pages, taking in the visuals of the book first. I noted the strange font and became immediately overwhelmed by the typeface I'd never seen before, wondering how I'd be able to read it, as a person who struggles to read certain fonts due to dyslexia. I shook myself out of the overwhelm, and started from the beginning, and immediately, I sensed the conversation between the images and the text.

I will be focussing on the main contents of the book, the conversation between the text and the images, and how the main structure and the binding of this book house this conversation within a certain context.

Overview of the Artist's Book

The book is large. It is A3 in size and expertly bound. She had the book hand bound by Eric Zimmerman at Markay and Asplund, Foster, Rhode Island. The book comes in a lipped clamshell box, which was manufactured by Stuart Einhorn at Portfoliobox inc. Providence, Rhode Island. The spine and the first few centimetres of the cover are bound in dark leather, which is stated to be “variously combining sheepskin Nappa from the Karoo, calf velum” while the remainder of the cover on each side is bound with printed book cloth. The font of the book is unique. She used the Visigoth font for all of the text she uses, aside from some occasional words scribbled into the drawings, which I cannot read due to her handwriting. The font is set in this typeface, which was specifically designed by Cynthia Hollandworth of AlphaOmega typology in New York for Ombondi Editions for this work specifically. Each page is thick and seems to be made from watercolour paper, with rough, perhaps torn, or uncut pages. The drawings and the text sometimes take up their own spreads, and sometimes they interact with one another over a spread or even a page. It feels like watching a film, in which the text describes an experience, and the image solidifies it and contextualises it.

The text is written in a font that forces the reader to slow down while reading, because it is not the most legible font to breeze through. This allows the reader to take in each of the elements of the story that is being told. The first drawing that responds to the text does so as a surprise. It is only a part of the creature, and it is located so far away from the text that it jumps out at the reader in almost the same way one might imagine it does for the narrator in the story. While the text is written in a very unified and coherent format, blocks of text that do not spiral or shift from its lines, the drawings mingle with the writing, sometimes going into the passages of the writing, and being printed across both pages. Sometimes there is no drawing to accompany the writing on a spread, and vice versa, but the corresponding drawing will appear on the following spread. They tell a unified story, the journey of the narrator through a landscape filled with strange and fantastical creatures and how the narrator grows from their experiences.

The images of this artist's book contribute to the story in such a way that it mimics the actions of the depicted creatures and the emotions of the narrator. They add to the flow of the story and how one experiences the book. It gives the *Bestiary* a kind of story-book-feeling, where a great epic of old is being retold to the inner child of an adult.

Critical Analysis

The book seems to document a hero's journey, however every passage is broken up by some time in between. Of course, the passages are not printed in the order they happened from which they were taken, and yet, they still convey a beginning, an inferred journey, and an end. It reads like an ancient epic, which, I suppose is the point, given the passages are taken from such a source. There are consistent mentions of faith, sin, punishment and celestial legends within this work, leading me to interpret this as a commentary on the modern systems of faith, and how certain individuals might misunderstand what is written in their holy scripts and mould them to fit into their own interpretation of the scripts and have that version serve their current mindset instead of serving as a teaching tool. The grotesque and often very surreal drawings of Mason's are a perfect way to portray the twisting of such beliefs, with the conversations the images have with the perfect and uniform texts. It all creates a larger image of wisdom, and the messages the texts aimed to achieve in the first place, and what could happen if they are not interpreted at face value.

Along with the creation of *A Dante Bestiary*, Judith Mason also gave the journal she took notes in for its creation to the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts. I, however, am completely incapable of reading her handwriting. What I can infer, however, is that she decided on a Bestiary fairly late in the process, and mostly focused on which passages from LA DIVINA COMMEDIA of DANTE ALIGHIERI she would use. She was not the only person who wrote notes in this book, because there are notes from a person whose name I cannot read and whose handwriting is markedly distinct from Mason's script. There are notes on the publishing of the book, notes on how to print it, notes on how to format everything, and creative ideas and thumbnails for said ideas that were never implemented. It seems, from what I could gather from the notes, that *A Dante Bestiary* was supposed to be a commentary on faith and the context that old world beliefs had, and how they still hold wisdom in modern day. My interpretation of these notes will certainly be different from those who can read her handwriting, and that is fine by me. I enjoyed reading what I could and deciphering the creative scribbles and the erratic notation of ideas within the journal's pages. In comparison, *A Dante Bestiary* is clean and almost perfect.

Hero's journey. Point, explanation, evidence, link. First he is trapped in a forest, by the end he's literally meeting God as an angel, and has ascended to forever be in awe of God's concept.

Pg. 2 (Inf. 1: 1-9) "Midway in our life's journey, I went astray – from the straight road and woke to find myself – alone in a dark wood. How shall I say – what wood that was! I never saw so drear; – so rank, so arduous a wilderness! – its very memory gives a shape to fear: – Death could scarce be more bitter than that place! – but since it came to good, I will recount – all I found revealed there by God's grace."

This is the passage chosen to be the beginning of *A Dante Bestiary*, archiving the grave wolves of a dark and dreary wood in which the narrator is lost. This is the beginning of a retelling of the narrator's journey, though he tells us "but since it came to good, I will recount – all I found revealed there by God's grace." While terrified and lost in the middle of his life, he finds safety with the idea that God gave him lenience and carried him through a fear more terrible than the idea of death itself. This seems to be how many people find their faith: after going off of 'the straight and narrow' path to being a good person and having a good life, finding oneself terrified at the consequences of one's actions, and placing one's faith in an otherworldly concept in order to find the strength to right that path.

pg. 157 (Par. XXXIII: 85 - 145) "Thither my own wings could not carry me, – but that a flash my understanding clove, – whence its desire came to it suddenly. High phantasy lost power and here broke off; – yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars, – my will and desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and the other stars". 139 – 145

Here, one finds the narrator at the end of his journey, perhaps already dead, or perhaps old and wise, telling the story to the reader and stating that he became an angel, his life bettered by the presence of love in his life, which is what ultimately moves him towards betterment, rather than the angelic wings, which could not carry him to the final point of his journey.

This, I believe is the point that many members of any religion miss in their teachings. Plainly, the message is clear: faith alone cannot carry you through hard times. It is love and the support of a community built up from friends, family and acquaintances that carries us through hard times. Faith merely gives a person the strength to keep going when things seem darkest, but faith alone cannot build community for you, cannot foster relationships or build a life for you. You must find the will to do so yourself, be it by the guidance of the teachings of religion, or sheer determination, but the source is the same, regardless of the beliefs one may carry. It is bravery: the bravery to face another day when the point seems to evade you and

the sun does not shine. I admit that faith gives many bravery, but that bravery can and is misplaced in many ways. Bravery is the beginning of a hero's journey, and that is the key link between these two passages, and the common thread throughout the journey of the narrator.

The story as it is set out in *A Dante Bestiary* is allegorical of Christian and Grecko-mythical beliefs of the time, which still mirror current belief systems, despite contrasting them in some ways. The Christian and Greek belief systems are fairly far apart in their structure, Greek beliefs embracing the idea of multiple gods representing multiple aspects of life, while Christian beliefs hail the singular being of God as the creator, controller and destroyer of life, while the devil represents the antithesis of the teachings of this system, and the consequences of deviating from them.

Pg. 122-123 (par.Xiii: 52-69, 73-78) 52-54: "All things that cannot die – are the reflected splendor of the Form – our Father's love brings Forth beyond the sky." 73-78: "Were the wax most ready and free of every dross, – and were the heavens in their supreme conjunction, – the light of the seal would shine through without loss; – – but nature fumbles, with no command – over her tools, like an artificer – who knows his trade but has a trembling hand."

Here, in the story of *A Dante Bestiary*, Christianity is centred as the soul belief of the narrator, while Greek myth still affects his journey implicitly, due to the fact that he features multiple creatures from the Greek belief systems, seeming to ignore their origin in the multifaceted god system that Greek mythology had. While the devil is not originally placed as the consequence of breaking the teachings of his God, it is later clearly stated that the punishment for the worst people of the narrator's past is to be gnawed on by the faces of the devil.

Even the inclusion of various Greek myths is rewritten to fit into the Christian model, rather than the Greek system. This is seen with the mention of Cerberus and the Minotaur.

Cerberus pg. 15-17 (inf. VI: 10-27) 13-18 "Here monstrous Cerberus, the ravening beast, – howls through his triple throats like a mad dog – over the spirits sunk in that foul paste. – His eyes were red, his beard is greased with phlegm, – his belly swollen, and his claws – to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them."

Cerberus is the guard of the gates of the underworld, which served the same purpose as hell, however, the hound is The Hound of Hades, a God (the God of Death) entirely unmentioned in this piece. This role is re-scribed onto the devil.

The Minotaur pg. 24-25 (inf. XII: 10-27) 10-15: "Such was the passage down the steep, and there – at the very top, at the edge of the broken cleft, – lay spread the infamy of Crete, the heir – of bestiality and the lecherous queen – who hid in a wooden cow. And when he saw us, – he gnawed his own flesh in a fit of spleen."

The fact that the narrator calls the mother of the minotaur a "lecherous queen" is irritating, because it entirely discards the fact that she was made to want this by Poseidon, who arranged her fate with Aphrodite, for the broken promise her husband made with the sea God. Minos wanted to ascend to the throne and asked Poseidon for a snow-white bull to cement his favour with the gods and guarantee his position, but failed to sacrifice the bull back to the sea god, who created the aforementioned plan as revenge. The erasure of the Greek gods involved places blame on the wife of Minos, and therefore, the offspring of a broken vow is now the offspring of a lecherous queen, the consequence of breaking one of the commandments, instead of the promise made to the sea.

A Dante Bestiary seems to be a sort of warning against sin, rather than a teaching of how the world works. The entire point of the Greek myths and their gods is to teach the Greek people of the time how the world works. Zeus abuses his power as the head of Olympus, because that is what a king does. Artemis has wild and destructive outbursts that are unpredictable, because that is how nature is. Hades will snatch a young girl away from her mother's arms without warning, because that is what death does. The Gods are reflections of their domains and positions, more than personalities to look up to, because they were teaching tools. The Christian God is also placed as a teaching tool, but this time with concrete rules in the form of the Ten Commandments, and the consequence of hell upon death. Each of the quotes I have provided and discussed have features some variation of the Greek mythology and the twist that was made in the story to place the blame onto the sins committed. The teachings of Christianity here propose that, as a Christian, one is no better than an insect.

Pg. 137 (purg. X: 118 - 126) "O you proud Christians, wretched souls and small, – who by the dim lights of your twisted minds – believe you prosper even as you fall – Can you not see that we are worms, each one – born to become the Angelic butterfly – that flies defenseless to the Judgement Throne?"

What have your souls to boast of and be proud? – you are no more than insects, incomplete – as any grub until it bursts the shroud.”

This is supposed to teach humility and humbleness, to show that all life on the planet is equal and must therefore be respected equally, however, it sprinkles in the reward of flying off as a beautiful butterfly to the judgement throne, becoming something beautiful and being rewarded for it, but that this must be done without being greedy, without being proud, without thinking anyone is better than anyone else. These are part of the commandments as well, are they not? While I agree with the basic stance of “don’t be greedy, proud, or think you’re better”, I don’t believe that there should be the idea of hell in afterlife as a consequence. I believe the consequence should come from community, from intrinsic remorse, from the inherent value of life.

The conversation that *A Dante Bestiary* has with its perfect text and it’s grotesque, misshapen, and twisted pieces of art is a perfect representation, in my opinion, of what the narrator does to the myths in order to fit them into his Christian beliefs. This dialogue that the text and the image have with one another is the perfect representation of the messages that are being warped and how they are being warped. After analysing the quotes and the story, and thinking back on the accompanying artworks, my interpretation stays strong, and my understanding of the book deepens with the knowledge of each myth reshaped.

Personal Response

I was immediately amazed by the book and the illustrations inside. The more I read, the more I became immersed within the concepts. It felt as if I had been sucked into an abstract story. When the story shifted from fantastical beasts to Christian allegories and stories akin to biblical preaching, I started to lose interest but continued for the sake of the drawings and Mason's interpretation of the infamously difficult to describe creatures of the heavens. At first, I interpreted this as a story of a man on a quest through Greek myths and the like. Of course, the more Christian stories were told, my interpretation changed alongside the story. I have mixed feelings about the Christian religion, as I have my gripes with certain features of it, so I began to have mixed feelings around the poems I read. Something I know about myself is that I want to have an open mind to more things, so this was a good exercise in doing that towards those mixed feelings.

I loved the physicality of the book, from its box, to the journal, to the cover of *A Dante Bestiary* and its pages. The heaviness of the book forced a careful and controlled hand, and so did the grandeur of the pages. A grand story and a grand interpretation of the creatures deserve a grand book as their home. I greatly enjoyed handling and reading this book.

I found new interpretations of well-known myths and a better understanding of why said myths became so popular. The difficulty came with the language of the text. I am a very literal thinker, and some of the implications and metaphors went entirely over my head, even having me note to myself: "I don't get that", even with Mason's interpretation in image form right beside it, I still was not able to form a coherent understanding of what was being portrayed, as the images are often as abstract as the text, which I mostly enjoyed. I really love the ideas that sprouted from reading this. I have a much more creative understanding of how I could construct my own works in future, and still have them be understandable enough to explain. While I already had a broad understanding of the definition of "book", I think this has expanded farther into the visual arts spectrum of creativity, and I love that.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, I have found that *A Dante Bestiary* is a book that reveals the erasure of pagan beliefs through the Christian rewriting of Greek Myths to fit them into the Christian ideology. The text and the story that the text tells, has a very clear conversation with the morphed, warped drawings of pagan figures, to make it clear that this is what the story from the narrator's point of view, as a Christian, is doing to the Greek myths. Through the compelling nature of the hero's journey, and the bravery that the narrator consistently shows, and the fact that he states that this bravery is given to him by his god, it is written in such a way as to make the Christian faith more attractive than the Greek Myth and the Pagan beliefs those myths are based on. The point is further driven home when analysing stories about the minotaur and Cerberus, and realising that the involvement of the Greek gods and their roles has been entirely omitted, and the blame is placed on anything that isn't a man: eg. The "Lecherous queen" and the monstrous dog, instead of the woman who was made to be impregnated by a bull by two gods and their sick idea of revenge, and a dog who is guarding the gates of the underworld as the companion of Hades, the God of death. The Christian narrative erases the teaching tools that the Greek gods were meant to be, and replaces them with fear mongering and the consequence of eternal suffering if one does not follow the rules. Finally, and this drives the point home for me, is the statement that every person is born at the same level of importance as any other animal, however, only humans have the power to let go of their sins and rise to the great heavenly gates, however, they are all terrible and greedy and proud, so they need to follow the rules to stop doing that, otherwise they burn in hell.

It is incredible to me, that despite being unable to really dive deep into Judith Mason's intent with *A Dante Bestiary*, that I was still able to find the meaning behind it, and understand the message that the book is trying to send, with the warping of Greek Myth and the grotesque depictions of their figures culminating in the very real and important message of erasure. Pagan beliefs should not have been rewritten and no one should have been forced into believing anything they did not want to.