# Germanic Texts and Latin Models

## Medieval Reconstructions

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# Fish and Fowl: Generic Expectations and the Relationship between the Old English *Phoenix*-poem and Lactantius's *De ave phoenice*

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An article appearing in the science section of the *New York Times* a few years ago outlined a simple chemical procedure for refining gold.[1] In this procedure a gold alloy is dissolved in molten antimony sulphide. The antimony sulphide reacts with the base metals of the alloy, converting them to an easily removed sulphide scum. When this scum is removed, the remaining metal is purified gold.

This, at any rate, is the gist of the process as it has been translated by modern historians of science. In its original form — as a copperplate illustration to a seventeenth-century book of alchemical emblems (plate 1) — the process was explained in terms far less recognizable to the modern reader. In the foreground to this illustration we see a grey wolf (antimony sulphide) scavenging the body of a dead king (the gold alloy); in the background, the same wolf can be seen burning on a flaming pyre — modern lab technicians prefer a Bunsen burner — while the king, now representing refined gold, walks away revivified.

The procedure I have just outlined is interesting neither for what it tells us about the state of Renaissance alchemical knowledge, nor for the fact that it demonstrates that Renaissance alchemists, whose ranks included such now-famous 'men-of-science' as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, were interested in serious chemistry alongside their more easily satirized rigmarole about 'piss and eggshells, ... chalk, merds, and clay'.[2] As recent historical research has shown, the recipe is only one of a number of similarly cryptic (to us) descriptions of legitimate chemical procedures found in sixteenth- and

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[1] Malcolm W. Browne, 'In Alchemists' Notes, Clues to Modern Science', *New York Times*, Tuesday April 10, 1990, p. C1. The research discussed in the article has since been published. See Lawrence M. Principe, 'Robert Boyle's Alchemical Secrecy: Codes, Ciphers, and Concealments', *Ambix* 39 (1992), 63–74, and 'Newly Discovered Boyle Documents in the Royal Society Archive: Alchemical Tracts and his Student Notebook', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 49 (1995), 57–70. I am grateful to L.A.J.R. Houwen, Jim Marchand, and Lawrence M. Principe for their bibliographic help with this article, and to Fred C. Robinson and Inge Genee for their comments on earlier drafts.

[2] Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* II.iii.194–95.

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seventeenth-century alchemical notebooks.[3] Rather, what is interesting about the procedure is the fact that it needs to be translated at all: the fact that modern audiences — chemists, historians of science, and lay readers of the *New York Times* — are able to appreciate the legitimacy of the science involved only after it has been translated from an allegorical illustration into something more approximating the kind of prose we tend to associate with a first-year chemistry text. For while few modern newspaper readers are themselves chemists, nearly all know how modern chemistry should sound. And newspaper readers know that real chemistry involves dissolving gold alloy in molten antimony sulphide (though few, perhaps, will know much of an idea what this second substance is) and not flammable grey wolves with a taste for dead kings. What is interesting about this illustration is the fact that its failure to meet our generic expectations for how science should sound makes the science it actually contains almost completely unusable without translation.

I bring up this piece of scientific trivia because I believe the process it illustrates helps explain another case of generic translation which has proved remarkably troublesome to modern critics — the relationship between the Old English *Phoenix* poem and its late classical Latin source in Lactantius's *De ave phoenice*. Read as a simple translation, the Old English *Phoenix* is a surprisingly difficult text to understand. A relatively faithful reproduction of Lactantius's poem for its first 380 lines, the Old English text closes with an apparently original Christian allegory of nearly the same length again. In Christianizing his translation, moreover, the Old English poet does a surprisingly uneven job. While he removes or adapts many of Lactantius's references to pagan mythology, he also leaves some intact and fails to use in his subsequent allegory a number of symbols he *does* go to all the trouble of Christianizing.

But it is also possible to read the Old English *Phoenix* poem as a *generic* translation. In the *De ave phoenice*, the Old English *Phoenix* poet discovered a Latin text that described the habits and features of the phoenix in a comprehensive but hopelessly out of date fashion. Like the historians of science described in the *New York Times* article, he therefore was forced to seek a generic model for his translation in order to make it intelligible as natural history to contemporary readers. It is only by discovering this model and reading his translation in its light that we can hope to understand the nature and goals of the *Phoenix* poet's work.

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5   For a discussion and recent bibliography on the relationship between Renaissance chemistry and alchemy, see William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, 'Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake', *Early Science and Medicine* 3 (1998), 32–65.

The problematic relationship between the Old English *Phoenix* and Lactantius's *De ave phoenice* is well known. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that the Old English poet set out, on at least one level, to translate Lactantius's text. Both poems begin with a brief description of the paradisal Eastern garden in which the phoenix lives (Lactant.Phoen. 1–30; Phoen 1–84).[4] Both then go on to describe the bird's habits and appearance. The phoenix — neither poet is sure of its sex (Lactant.Phoen. 163; Phoen 355b–57a) — lives in joy in its garden for a thousand years, during which time its principal activities consist of saluting the sun each morning and watching it set each night (Lactant.Phoen. 33–58; Phoen 90–152). At the end of the millennium, the bird, now heavy with age, leaves its homeland and flies to Syria where it builds a nest in a palm tree from a variety of sweet-smelling herbs. The sun's rays set the nest on fire and the bird is immolated (Lactant.Phoen. 59–98; Phoen 153–222a). After a brief period, the phoenix is reborn from its ashes, gathers together the remains of its former incarnation, and, accompanied by a troop of lesser birds, begins the long flight home, disposing of its ashes along the way (Lactant.Phoen. 99–158; Phoen 222b–46a). It arrives alone again in its Eastern garden, and the cycle begins anew (Lactant.Phoen. 158–70; Phoen 346b–80).

But while the Old English *Phoenix* poet follows the gist of Lactantius's description fairly closely, it is also clear that he intended his version to function as something more than a mere 'Englishing' of the Latin original. For while it is possible, as Mary Cletus Fitzpatrick has argued, to discern 'traces of distinctly Christian ideas' in Lactantius's account of the phoenix's behaviour and habitat despite its many references to classical mythology and Egyptian Sun worship,[5] it is impossible to mistake the solid — one is tempted to say stolid — Christianity of the Old English poet's translation. If nothing else, there is the long allegorical discussion he appends to its end. Where Lactantius closes his account with a brief ode to the phoenix's chastity, the Old English poet continues for another 297 lines (or about forty percent of his poem's total length) of

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[4] References to the text of the *De ave phoenice* are to the edition of Mary Cletus Fitzpatrick, *Lactanti de ave phoenice*, PhD Diss. University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1933); the Old English *Phoenix* poem is cited from the text of George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3 (New York, 1936), pp. 94–113. Old English and Latin texts are cited according to the short titles and editions listed in Antonette di Paolo Healey and Richard L. Venezky, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English: The List of Texts and Index of Editions* (Toronto, 1980; rev. 1997); and *Dictionary of Old English: Abbreviations for Latin Sources and Bibliography of Editions*, compiled P.A. Thompson (Toronto, 1992; rev. 1998).

[5] *Lactanti de ave phoenice*, ed. Fitzpatrick, p. 35. Fitzpatrick supports her argument by pointing to scriptural reminiscences of the 'Garden of Eden and Fountain of Life' in the Latin poem's opening lines, to a reference to the reign of death ('tunc petit hunc orbem, mors ubi regna tenet', 64) and to an emphasis on chastity in the closing lines. See also J.E. Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. Robert P. Creed (Providence, 1969), pp. 129–52, at 130 and fn. 7.

apparently original exegesis — based in part on Ambrose's *Hexameron* — on the bird's habits.[6]

But even in the first half of the poem, where he is still largely following Lactantius's original text, the Old English *Phoenix* poet quite freely adapts and alters the details of his source in order to bring them into line with a Christian perception of the world. As O.F. Emerson has pointed out, the Anglo-Saxon poet simply omits a number of Lactantius's most intractable references to pagan mythology and religion.[7] Where Lactantius portrays the phoenix as a conscious votary of the sun, 'venerating' the fiery head of Phoebus each evening, and presenting the ashes of its former incarnation *in aede sacra* (Lactant.Phoen. 51–54 and 121–24), the Old English poet presents the bird in the more 'rationalized' form of an animal wisely impressed by the majesty of God's creation: instead of *worshipping* the sun as it passes, the Old English phoenix is instead inspired to silent meditation, *pances gleaw* 'good in its thoughts' (Phoen 144a). And in disposing of its ashes, the Old English poet has his phoenix skip over its excursion to the sun's temple altogether, preferring instead to fly to the *sunbeorht gesetu* 'sunbright seat' (278a) of its *epellond* 'homeland' (279a).

Less unambiguously pagan references are also often subtly Christianized. The lush edenic garden in which the phoenix lives in Lactantius's poem, for example, becomes Eden itself in Old English, defended by the might of the (Christian) God who created it (1–14a, especially 5b–6). And as J.E. Cross has pointed out, where Lactantius describes how this *locus felix* had remained inviolate in the face of both the 'fires of' Phaethon' and the floods of Deucalion (11–14), the Old English poet — who, as a Christian, does not believe in a *historical* great fire — reconciles the Latin poet's mythology to the truth of Christian revelation by advancing the tense of the original reference to make the lines conform to the predictions of Revelation 20:9:[8]

> Cum Phaethoncis flagrasset ab ignibus axis,
>     ille locus flammis inviolatus erat,
> et cum diluvium merisset fluctibus orbem
>     Deucalioneas exsuperavit aquas. (Lactant.Phoen. 11–14)

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[6] No single source has been found for the poem's exegetical section, although, as Joanne Spencer Kantrowitz has shown, the poet's allegory is deeply nested in contemporary exegetical thought. See 'The Anglo-Saxon *Phoenix* and Tradition', *PQ* 43 (1964), 1–13. The relationship to Ambrose's *Hexameron* bk v, chs 79–80, is discussed, along with other possible sources, in *The Phoenix*, ed. N.F. Blake, Old and Middle English Texts (Manchester, 1964; rev. edn 1990), p. 19–22. The connection was first made by H. Gaebler, 'Ueber die Autorschaft des angelsaechsischen Gedichtes vom Phoenix', *Anglia* 3 (1880), 488–526.

[7] Oliver Farrar Emerson, 'Originality in Old English Poetry', *RES* 2 (1926), 18–31, especially 20–23.

[8] Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', pp. 133–34.

When the sky had blazed with the fires of Phaethon that spot was unharmed by the flames; and when the flood had overwhelmed the world with its waves it overcame the waters of Deucalion.⁹

      leaf under lyfte,    næfre brosniað
      æfre to ealdre,    ne him lig scebð
      worulde geweorðe.    Swa iu wætres þrym
      calne middangeard    mereflod þeahte,
      corþan ymbhwyrft,    þa se æþela wong,
      æghwæs onsund,    wið yðfare
      gehealden stod    hreora wæga,
      eadig, unwemme,    þurh est godes;
      bideð swa geblowen    oð hæles cyme,
      dryhtnes domes,    þonne deaðræced,
      hæleþa heolstorcofan,    onhliden weorþað. (Phoen 38b–49)

The leaves under the sky shall never wither away, nor the fire ever do them hurt, before a change comes over the world. When long ago the torrent of water, the sea flood whelmed all the world, the circuit of the earth, then by God's grace the noble field stood secure from the rush of wild waves, no whit harmed, happy, undefiled. Thus it shall bide in blossom till the coming of the fire, the judgment of God, when the graves, the tombs of men, shall be torn open.¹⁰

In reading the Old English *Phoenix* poem in this light — as a Christian adaptation of a work employing a much larger number of references to pagan mythology — I am, of course, relying heavily on the work of earlier *Phoenix* scholars. For while it has not often been the source of intense critical debate, the *Phoenix* has done relatively well by those critics who have devoted much attention to it. The extent to which the Old English poet has Christianized or omitted Lactantius's references to pagan mythology was pointed out by Emerson in his important, if now somewhat dated, article on 'The Originality of Old English Poetry'. The extent to which this Christianization is related to the poet's subsequent allegorization of the bird's habits is the subject of N.F. Blake's essay 'Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation in the Old English *Phoenix*'.¹¹ The extent to which this reworking of Lactantius's material allows the poet to make his source 'fit Christian reality and to place the Phoenix story

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9  Translations from the *De ave phoenice* are from Fitzpatrick's edition.
10  Translations of extended passages of Old English are from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. R.K. Gordon (London and New York, 1959). Glosses of individual Old English words and phrases in the body of this essay are my own.
11  *Anglia* 80 (1962), 50–62. See also *The Phoenix*, ed. Blake, pp. 33–35.

within a Christian historical context' has been demonstrated by Cross and Joanne Spencer Kantrowitz.¹²

And yet, despite the success of their more detailed explications of how the *Phoenix* poet adapted his source, I believe critics have on the whole been less successful — partially as a result of their common failure to find a suitable generic model for the poem — in their attempts to explain *why* he would choose to adapt the text the way he does in the first place. Emerson's original discussion of the Christianization and expansion of Lactantius's poem, concerned as it is with demonstrating the 'power and personality' of the Old English poet through a straightforward catalogue of the alterations he introduces,¹³ never really manages to address the *end* to which these changes were accomplished. Blake, in emphasizing the extent to which the Old English poet's alterations to Lactantius help prepare the reader for the allegorical exegesis which follows, falls in the end into a rather forced reading of the text's ostensible subject as a mere means to the translator's 'real' allegorical ends:

It seems to me wrong therefore to stress the great beauty of the descriptions of the phoenix as some critics do. For the poet the phoenix was merely a means to an end, and to praise the poetic descriptions of the phoenix in their own right is likely to lead to a distorted view of the poem. It all too quickly degenerates into seeing the poem as a beautiful natural description to which an allegory was unfortunately appended.¹⁴

And even Cross, whose reading of the poem as a 'poetic homily' based on Lactantius's *De ave phoenice* as 'the fullest and most suitable historical description' of the bird comes closest to my own approach,¹⁵ nevertheless finds himself faced with the difficulty of trying to explain why his Old English 'homilist' would on the one hand neglect some of the most easily allegorized elements in his source, and, on the other, fail to incorporate into the allegory many of the details he in fact *does* adapt:¹⁶

Now it is of no account that the Old English poet omits Latin ideas such as the fountain of life, which could have easy Christian application, or that additions are made such as

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12  Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', p. 139. Kantrowitz, 'The Anglo-Saxon *Phoenix* and Tradition', *passim*. Kantrowitz's detailed essay mentions the *Physiologus* tradition as a possible parallel to certain elements in the Old English *Phoenix*-poem (see particularly pp. 6–7). She does not mention the strong structural influence of the *Physiologus* on the Old English poem discussed in this essay, however.
13  Emerson, 'Originality in Old English Poetry', p. 18.
14  Blake, 'Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation', p. 56.
15  Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', p. 137.
16  Stanley B. Greenfield, *Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London, 1972), pp. 141–45, has also criticized Cross's reading of a 'clear line of demarcation' between the four levels of allegory in the *Phoenix*.

the second thousand-year cycle of life for the Phoenix ... Within his own Christian terms, the Old English poet is free to write a historical description as he wishes; to extend, change, or omit material from Lactantius; even to anticipate his own interpretation. But there is no need for him to interpret every detail that he has presented in that historical description. In Cassian's classic case, to illustrate the fourfold method of interpretation, Jerusalem 'historically' is a city of the Jews, but in the 'allegorical' interpretation, when Jerusalem represents the Church of Christ on earth, no one would ask openly whether the Jews should not be Christians.[17]

But it is here, I believe, that it is helpful to keep in mind my analogy with modern attempts at translating allegorical alchemical recipes. For the Old English poet has done more than merely Christianize Lactantius's poem. On the one hand, he would almost certainly have considered the phoenix to be an accepted fact of natural history: belief in the bird can be found throughout classical and medieval literature, including the Church Fathers.[18] At the same time, however, it is equally certain that, as an Anglo-Saxon Christian who believed that all creation served to reflect the divinity 'se hit on frymþe gescop', 'who created it in the beginning' (84b), he would not have mistaken Lactantius's portrait of the phoenix as true natural history. At best, the Latin poet's use of pagan mythology and his representation of the phoenix as a sun-worshipper would have seemed an egregious and distasteful example of poetic swōlcraft (see especially 546–48a); at worst, it would have seemed the grossest of heathen errors.[19] The Old English poet is as interested in the phoenix as a phenomenon of natural history as he is interested in it as a fit subject for Christian allegory, then homiletic exegesis, or demonstrating how original he can be. He adapts Lactantius's description of the bird's habitat, behaviour and appearance to make them fit contemporary Anglo-Saxon generic expectations for how such natural history should sound. In removing his source's references to overt and conscious pagan behaviour on the part of the phoenix, in Christianizing the more ambiguous references he retains, and in appending an allegorized and explicitly Christian exegesis of the bird's behaviour, the Old English poet takes as his model the characteristic format and style of

17  Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English Phoenix', pp. 139–40.
18  The point is a commonplace. See Kantrowicz, 'The Anglo-Saxon Phoenix and Tradition', p. 1; Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English Phoenix', p. 150, fn. 38; and The Phoenix, ed. Blake, pp. 8–13. A useful index of passages concerning the phoenix legend in classical and patristic authors appears in Fitzpatrick on pp. 12–15.
19  On similar hesitations about and omissions of pagan practice in Anglo-Saxon literature, see Seth Lerer, Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England (Lincoln, 1991), pp. 38–39 (Historia ecclesiastica), and Fred C. Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville, 1985), p. 11 (Beowulf). A recent discussion of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards pagan literary culture can be found in William D. McCready, Miracles and the Venerable Bede, Studies and Texts 118 (Toronto, 1994), especially pp. 9–43.

the Physiologus, an increasingly common and popular contemporary work of natural history.[20]

At a structural level, the poet's debt to the Physiologus is obvious, even if its generic significance has gone largely unremarked upon in the critical literature. In dividing his material into two parts, the first devoted to an account of the phoenix's behaviour and habitat, the second to its Christian significance, the Phoenix poet is simply mirroring the organization of the archetypal Physiologus entry as described by F.N.M. Diekstra:

The ...[entries] have a very simple schema: a first passage, occasionally preceded by a quotation from the Bible, contains the natural historical information, nearly always introduced by 'Physiologus has said'. Then the Christian moralisation follows, endorsed with Bible quotations.[21]

The same can be said, moreover, for the poet's use of Ambrose's work in his allegorical section. The Hexaemeron was commonly used as a source of additional material in adaptations of the Physiologus,[22] and, indeed, is likely itself indebted to earlier recensions of the natural history.[23]

Other, potentially confusing, aspects of the Old English translation are clarified through a comparison with the Physiologus tradition. In contrast to Lactantius who once addresses Phoebus directly (58) and rarely refers to external authorities in the course of his poem,[24] the Old English poet follows the standard Physiologus practice of stressing the debt he owes to others for his information. Where Lactantius begins his poem with a forthright statement of the location of the phoenix's home ('Est locus in

20  Recent general discussions of the Physiologus and its descendent traditions can be found in I.A.J.R. Houwen, 'Bestiaries', in Mittelalter Mythen 2: Dämonen, Monster, Fabelwesen, ed. U. Müller and W. Wunderlich (St Gallen, 1999), pp. 59–75; Debra Hassig, Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology (Cambridge, 1995), especially pp. 1–28; Willene B. Clark and Meredith T. McMunn, Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and its Legacy (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 1–7 and Appendix; and F.N.M. Diekstra, 'The Physiologus, the Bestiaries, and Medieval Animal Lore', Neophilologus 69 (1985), 142–55. See also Florence McCulloch's seminal work in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries, rev. edn (Chapel Hill, 1962), especially pp. 21–44. 'Physiologus' and 'Bestiary' are often used interchangeably in medieval book lists and modern scholarship. This paper follows the traditional use of 'Physiologus' in Anglo-Saxon studies to describe vernacular manifestations of the bestiary tradition and its source. For a brief discussion of the terminological problem, see Clark and McMunn, Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages, pp. 2–3.
21  Diekstra, 'The Physiologus', p. 144.
22  For an example, see McCulloch's discussion of the twelfth-century 'Second Family' Bestiary in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries, pp. 34–38.
23  See McCulloch, Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries, p. 20.
24  The only exception is his citation of general opinion in explaining the worm that grows out of the phoenix's ashes in lines 101–02: 'Hinc animal primum sine membris fertur oriri sed fertur vermi lacteus esse color', 'Men say that from it a living thing without limbs first arises; but the worm, they say, is milky-white in color'.

primo felix oriente remotus', 'There lies a spot, blessed, in the farthest East', 1),[25] for example, the Old English *Phoenix* poet qualifies *his* opening with the explanation that he has 'learned' about its location (1a). Later, he twice adds more specifically that his knowledge comes from those who *gewritum secgaþ*, 'make known through writing' (30b, 332b). This is a rare collocation found in only two other texts in the extant Old English poetic corpus: Cynewulf's *Elene* (826b, 1255b) and, significantly, *The Panther*, one of the two surviving Old English *Physiologus* poems (14b).[26]

The *Physiologus* tradition also provides an appropriate model for Cross's observation, quoting Emerson, that the changes introduced by the Old English poet 'were not made merely to "Christianize ... the source before him" ...' but to '[adapt] the Latin poem to fit Christian reality and to place the Phoenix story within a Christian historical context'.[27] As Cross and Emerson have noted, the Old English *Phoenix* poet accepts a number of potentially Christian symbols from Lactantius and adapts a number of other non-Christian elements in the first part of his poem — only to ignore them in his second, explicitly allegorical, section. Examples include the fountain of life (Lactant.Phoen. 25; cf. Phoen 63b–64a); the phoenix's sojourn in the wilderness with his followers (Lactant.Phoen. 155–58; cf. Phoen 158b–67a and 335b–56a); and the confusion over whether the bird carries his remains to the sun with his 'feet' as in Lactantius and the first part of the Old English poem (Lactant.Phoen. 121; Phoen 276–77, 578a) or his wings as in the allegorical section (Phoen 652–53) and, as Cross notes, *Physiologus* tradition.[28]

This failure to exploit significant and potentially Christian symbolism from the poem's first half in the subsequent allegory raises difficulties if the Old English poet is understood to be following a primarily homiletic or exegetic generic model as Blake and Cross suggest. But it is perfectly in keeping with contemporary developments in

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25 Translation adapted from *Lactanti de ave phoenix*, ed. Fitzpatrick.
26 The *Physiologus* poems, like the *Phoenix*, were once counted among Cynewulf's poems, although scholarly opinion now does not favour this attribution. See Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), p. 249, and *The Phoenix*, ed. Blake, pp. 22–23. In addition to this phrase, the *Physiologus* poems and the *Phoenix* also share at least one other unusual word: *wælcreft*. This is found in Old English only in the *Phoenix* and the *Whale*. In two out of the three examples, the poet(s) use the term to describe their own activities (Phoen 548a, Whale 2a); in the third, it describes the phoenix's song (Phoen 127a). All examples are drawn from *The Complete Corpus of Old English in Machine Readable Form (TEI compatible version)*, ed. Antonette di Paolo Healey, second TEI-conformant edn (Oxford, 1994).
27 Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', p. 139.
28 For this last point, see Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', p. 133. On the poet's failure to include Christian or potentially Christian details from the description of the phoenix in his allegory, see Cross, 'The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*', pp. 139–40, and Emerson, 'Originality in Old English Poetry', pp. 28–29.

the *Physiologus* tradition. For while, as Dickstra points out, the most important organizing feature of the early Christian *Physiologus* was not so much its natural history as its Christian symbolism,[29] later developments placed an increasing emphasis on the natural history: Latin recensions of the tradition begin to acquire natural historical lore from other sources before the end of the Anglo-Saxon period; by the thirteenth century, adaptations such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* radically reorganize the order of animals and, in some cases, drop the allegorical material altogether.[30]

The most important objections to this reading of the Old English *Phoenix* as a Christianized work of natural history based on the generic model of the *Physiologus* have been raised by Blake, who insists that 'the phoenix was for ... [the Old English poet] nothing more than a symbol and the phoenix story was of little interest to him in itself'.[31] In the first place, Blake points to what he believes to be the poet's failure to distinguish between the phoenix's cremation and the inhumation of human remains in lines 267 and 270:

... If the *of greote* at *The Phoenix* l.267 should be translated 'out of the grave', it means that the poet has here confused inhumation with cremation. This must be because the poet wanted to stress the parallel between the phoenix and mankind. The phoenix's bones are of course not buried in any grave in Syria (where the action of ll.267–9 takes place), and there is no question of the phoenix being resurrected from the grave ... Thus when the poet writes *of greote* in his description of the rebirth of the phoenix, there can be little doubt that he means us to have the allegorical interpretation in mind. We are to realize that the phoenix is only a symbol. To fail to see that there is a reference to the grave here weakens the poem, for the grave plays an important part in the poet's belief ...

The same confusion between cremation and inhumation is found a few lines later in the same passage. The word *gebrosnad* in l.270 *ban gebrosnad, after bælfyrace* means 'decayed, putrefied', and is normally used in OE with reference to the putrefaction of the body in the grave or the decay of buildings no longer in use ... Once again it must be that the poet had in mind the putrefaction of human bones in the grave in the long wait between death and Doomsday (489–90) ... The word *gebrosnad* does not refer to the speedy destruction by fire of the phoenix's bones; it points to the allegorical interpretation.[32]

But while the use of such sepulchral imagery certainly does seem to be at odds with the myth of the 'speedy destruction by fire of the phoenix's bones', it is not nearly as

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29 Dickstra, 'The *Physiologus*', p. 143.
30 Dickstra, 'The *Physiologus*', p. 146.
31 Blake, 'Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation', p. 56.
32 Blake, 'Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation', pp. 51–53.

incompatible with either Lactantius's original poem or an interest in the phoenix as a phenomenon of natural history as Blake suggests. The phoenix's nest is frequently referred to in both the *Hexameron* and later examples of the Latin *Physiologus* tradition as a *theca* — a word that can be used for 'coffin' or 'sepulchre' in medieval Latin.[33] The bird's use of sweet smelling herbs in the construction of its nest is likewise seen as a method of covering up the odour of its decomposition — an association made explicitly, indeed, in a twelfth-century Latin Bestiary preserved in Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.4.26:

> Quis igitur huic annuntiat diem mortis ut faciat sibi thecam et impleat eam bonis odoribus atque ingrediatur in eam et moriatur illic ubi odoribus gratis fetor funeris possit aboleri?

> Who tells the simple Phoenix the day of its death — so that it makes its coffin and fills it with fine spices and gets inside and dies in a place where the stink of corruption can be effaced by agreeable smells?[34]

Perhaps more importantly, both images also appear in Lactantius's original poem. Thus after its immolation and resurrection, the phoenix rolls its remains into a ball, anoints them, and deposits them obsequially in the sun's sacred temple:[35]

> Ante tamen, proprio quidquid de corpore restat,
>     ossaque vel cineres exuviasque suas
> unguine balsameo myrraque et ture Sabaeo
>     condit et in formam conglobat ore pio.
> Quam pedibus gestans contendit Solis ad ortus
>     inque ara residens ponit in aede sacra. (117–22)

> Yet first, whatever remains of her own body, bones or ashes and her own shell, she covers with balsam ointment, myrrh, and Sabaean incense, and rounds it into shape with her loving beak. Carrying it in her claws, she hastens to the Sunrise, and alighting on the altar, places it in the holy fane.

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33 R.E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources with Supplement* (Oxford, 1994), s.v. *theca*.

34 Quotations from this manuscript are from the facsimile, *The Bestiary*, ed. M.R. James (Oxford, 1928), f. 37'. The translation is that of T.H. White, who bases his work on the same manuscript. See *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* (New York, 1954), p. 127. See also McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, p. 36. CUL, MS Ii.4.26 is a 'second family' bestiary, a member of a textual group that developed in the course of the twelfth century (McCulloch, p. 34). The manuscript is being cited as evidence of an analogous development in the tradition rather than a textual source for the Old English *Phoenix* poet. See Kantrowitz, 'The Anglo-Saxon *Phoenix* and Tradition', for a justification of this approach.

35 Blake cites lines 117–20 but omits the deposition of the remains in the temple in lines 121–22 ('Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation', p. 51).

In an earlier passage describing the nest's construction, moreover, the connection between nest and grave is made explicitly:

> Construit inde sibi seu nidum sive sepulchrum;
>     nam perit, ut vivat ... (77–78)

> She next builds herself a nest, or if you will, a tomb, for she dies that she may live ...

Blake's second objection to the idea that the Old English poet was interested in the phoenix as a feature of natural history in its own right rather than simply as a subject for allegorical exegesis involves the two parts of his chiastic translation:

> It is evident ... that the OE poet altered his Latin source in order to pave the way for the allegory which is to follow. Another method of accomplishing this that the poet uses is a distinct tendency to anthropomorphize the phoenix in the first half and to give the bird characteristics which are more appropriate to men and heroes. The reverse of this is to refer in the second half to the blessed and Christ in terms which are more fitting for the phoenix. Yet although we accept quite readily references to the blessed as birds, we have more difficulty accepting the anthropomorphic nature of the phoenix, despite the fact that this is merely the same process in reverse.[36]

But such chiastic anthropomorphism is also a feature of the *Physiologus*, the text of which is filled with animals whose behaviour is described in human terms — from the astronomer ostrich to the evil-minded lynx. Indeed, vestiges of this anthropomorphism are preserved right through into encyclopaedic, non-allegorical adaptations of the work in the later Middle Ages.[37] Thus, Bartholomaeus Anglicus's non-allegorical *De proprietatibus rerum* preserves both the tradition that elephants habitually eat mandrake before copulation, a habit linked to original sin in allegorized versions of the story, and the curious fact that large elephants can only be lifted by little ones, a device used in earlier versions of the *Physiologus* to allow for the allegorization of the little elephant as Christ and the New Testament.[38] Closer to home, the author(s) of the Exeter Book *Physiologus* poems the *Panther* and the *Whale* describe their subjects in language remarkably similar to that used by the Old English *Phoenix* poet: where the Old English phoenix is described as being *beaforof* 'famed in war' (228a) and *beaducraeftig* 'skilled in battle' (286a) and is said to receive *ealdordom* 'dominion' (158b) over the lesser birds, the Old English panther is *ellen-*

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36 Blake, 'Some Problems of Interpretation and Translation', p. 53.

37 See Diekstra, 'The *Physiologus*', p. 146.

38 See Diekstra, 'The *Physiologus*', pp. 143 and 144 (on the allegorical implications of mandrake consumption) and p. 143 (on Christ and the little elephant).

*ref* 'famed for courage' (Pan 40a) and a *feondwiga* 'great warrior' (Pan 38a), and the Old English whale, *wlonc* 'proud' (Whale 50a) and a *mereweard* 'sea-guardian' (Whale 53a)[39] — descriptions which in this last case might equally well have been applied by the *Beowulf* poet to Hroðgar's coastguard. Explicitly allegorized versions of the *Physiologus*, moreover, also make heavy use of animal symbolism in their allegorical sections: the Latin *Physiologus* text of the twelfth-century CUL, MS Ii.4.26 discussed above, for example, describes Christ as the *verus pantera* 'the true panther' in its panther entry,[40] while its Old English poetic counterpart, the *Physiologus Panther* poem, compares the devil to a dragon, traditionally the sole enemy of its friendly and sweet-smelling subject:[41]

> Swa is dryhten god, dreama rædend,
> eallum eaðmede oþrum gesceaftum,
> duguða gehwylcre, butan dracan anum,
> attres ordfruman. Þæt is se ealda feond,
> þone he gesælde in susla grund,
> ond gefetrade fyrnum teagum,
> biþeahte þreanydum ... (Pan 55–61a)

Thus the Lord God, the Ruler of joys, is benignant to all other creatures, to every man, except one dragon, the author of venomous evil; that is the ancient fiend whom He bound in the abyss of torments, fettered with fiery chains, laid under dire constraint ...[42]

And so it turns out that the Old English *Phoenix* poet is like *both* the historians of science described in the *New York Times* piece with which I began this article *and* their subject, the Renaissance alchemists whose jottings we now find so hard to understand in their original form. Like the alchemists, the *Phoenix* poet does not share modern audiences' preoccupation with separating science from art. For him natural history could be poetic as well as prosaic and a creature like the phoenix perfectly capable of functioning as both a spectacular fact of 'true' natural history and evidence for the perfection of God's creation. But like modern historians of alchemy, the Old English poet also recognized the extent to which 'scientific' information from one time must be translated to fit the generic expectations of another if it is to be truly understood. See-

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39 Citations from the *Panther* and the *Whale* are from *The Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, pp. 169–74.
40 *The Bestiary*, ed. James, f. 5r.
41 See Diekstra, 'The *Physiologus*', p. 145.
42 Translation adapted from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. Gordon, p. 253. For 'dragon' (*dracan* 57b), Gordon reads 'monster'.

ing in Lactantius's *De ave phoenice* both a handy description of an intrinsically interesting animal, and the raw material for demonstrating the truth of Christian revelation as he understood it, the Old English *Phoenix* poet turned to the *Physiologus* to provide him with the most suitable generic model for his translation. Only when we understand the influence of this model can we hope to understand his goals in making the translation in the first place.