Patrizia Lendinara[*]

Song and sea in the Middle English Bestiary*: the chapter on the siren*

1. *The* Middle English bestiary

The *Middle English bestiary* (henceforth *MEB*) is a translation of a work attributed to Theobald, a master and grammarian living in central or northern Italy in the eleventh century, whose identity is otherwise unknown (Eden, 1972: 5-7). This vernacular *Physiologus*, which includes the description and moralization of twelve animals and hybrids, met with widespread success[1].

The *MEB* is only preserved in London, British Library, MS Arundel 292, written in Norwich after 1272. The codex is a miscellany with texts in different languages, including, among others, the animal fables by Odo of Cheriton in Latin and a sermon in verse in Old French. It was most likely assembled in order to provide material for writing sermons and preaching to the laity. Hanneke Wirtjes would date the codex to early in the second half of the thirteenth century (Wirtjes, 1991: xl–lii). The corruptions in the text of the *MEB* show that it is a copy, but nothing is known of either the date of composition or its author[2]. A peculiar feature of the *MEB* is the use of a range of metres to render those of its Latin source[3].

The *MEB* follows, but for two cases (exchanging the chapters on fox and stag and dismissing the onocentaur), the structure of Theobald's *Physiologus*, which had selected and originally arranged its sequence of

[*] Università degli Studi di Palermo.

[1] Eden (1972) lists over seventy manuscripts of Theobald's *Physiologus*.

[2] The text might have been composed up to half a century earlier than the date of the manuscript (Wirtjes, 1991: xl–lii).

[3] Versification changes from chapter to chapter and Theobald used the hexameter for the lion, siren, onocentaurs, and panther (the chapters on the eagle, ant, fox, stag, whale, and elephant are in elegiac couplets, that on the serpent in sapphic stanzas, that on the spider in hypercatalectic dactylic trimeters, while that on the turtle employs adonics). On the meter of the *MEB* see Faraci (1990: 35-36) and Kano (2007).

chapters (12- or 13-chapter versions). The arrangement of the chapters is apparently employed to highlight a number of themes. In several cases, a chapter echoes the previous one to emphasise a particular message. The condemnation of lust and lying is evident not only in the chapter on the siren, but also in those on the snake, stag, fox and spider. The chapter on the siren shares the theme of the 'misleading' physical appearance along with other chapters of the bestiary, such as that of the whale, which has something in common with the siren, and also the theme of hunting and ensnaring others. The chapter on the siren also features a connection with the following chapter devoted to the elephant, which is centred on the animal's voice.

In 1990, Dora Faraci edited the *MEB*, analyzing the text within the frame of the *Physiologus* literature and studying its sources, which are not limited to Theobald's work. Moreover, Faraci provided an illuminating investigation of the visual iconography of bestiaries and highlighted how, in many instances, the images of the manuscripts do not match the text they accompany.

2. *The algid siren*

In the twelve chapters of the *MEB*, the text of Theobald's is at times much changed, as with the case of the spider; the description of the siren (ch. 9) follows the original's guidelines, but introduces much new material and either omits or emphasizes the cornerstones of Theobald's narrative.

Natura Sirene.
In ðe se senden selcuðes manie.
Ðe mereman is a meiden ilike
on brest and on bodi. Oc al ðus ge is bunden:
fro ðe noule niðerward ne is ge no man like 420
oc fis to fuliwis, mið finnes waxen.
Ðis wunder wuneð in wankel stede,
ðer ðe water sinkeð. Sipes ge sinkeð and scaðe ðus werkeð.
Mirie ge singeð ðis mere and haueð manie stefnes,
manie and sille, 425
oc it ben wel ille.
Sipmen here steringe forgeten for hire stefninge,
slumeren and slepen

and to late waken.
Đe sipes sinken mitte suk, 430
ne cumen he nummor up.
Oc wise men and warre
agen cunen chare,
ofte arn atbrosten mid here best[4] ouel.
He hauen herd told of ðis mere, ðat ðus uniemete, 435
half man and half fis.
Sum ðing tokneð bi ðis.

Significacio
Fele men hauen ðe tokning
of ðis forbisnede ðing:
wiðuten weren sepes fel, 440
wiðinnen arn he wulues al.
He speken godcundhede
and wikke is here dede,
here dede is al vncuð
wið ðat spekeð here muð, 445
twifold arn on mode.
He sweren bi ðe rode,
Bi ðe sunne and bi ðe mone
and he ðe legen sone.
mid here sage and mid here song 450
he ðe swiken ðer imong,
ðin agte wið swiking,
ði soule wið lesing. (Faraci, 1990: 80 and 82)

There are many marvelous things in the sea.
The mermaid is like a maiden
in breast and in body, but she is bound together just so;
from the navel down she is in no way like a person,
but very certainly a fish with fully-fledged fins.
This wonder dwells in a precarious place where the water dwindles.
She sinks ships and thus causes sorrow.
Sweetly she sings, this siren, and has many voices,
many and melodious, but they are very malicious.
Sailors forget their steering because of her sound,
they slumber and sleep and awake too late:
the ships sink in the eddy[5], they never again resurface.

[4] *Mid he brest ouel* MS. In this instance, I follow the emendation of Wirtjes (1991: 15) and Cavell (2022: 96). See also Wirtjes (1991: li and 39-40).

[5] With regards to 'eddy', I do not follow Cavell (2022: 97) who renders *suk* with 'snare',

But wise and wary men are able to turn back,
often they break away with their best effort.
They have heard told of this siren, that extraordinary one,
half human and half fish, something is signified by this.

Significance
Many people have the meaning
of this allegorical thing:
they wear a sheep's skin without;
they are entirely wolves within.
They speak spiritual matters
and bad is their behaviour.
Their behaviour is entirely unrelated
to what comes out of their mouth.
They are of two minds:
they swear by the cross,
by the sun and the moon
and they immediately give lie to that.
With their speech and with their song
They betray you at the same time:
your possessions by deceiving,
your soul by lying. (Cavell, 2022: 95-97)

Theobald IX. De sirenis

Sirene sunt monstra maris resonatia magnis
Vocibus et modulis cantus formantia multis,
Ad quas incaute veniunt sepissime naute,
Que faciunt somnum nimia dulcedine vocum
Et modo naufragium, modo dant mortale periclum;
Quas qui fugerunt, hi tales esse tulerunt:
Ex umbilico sunt ut pulcherrima virgo,
Quodque facis monstrum, volucres sunt inde deorsum.

Sirens are monsters of the seas, resounding with loud voices and moulding their songs with many measures; sailors very often approach them without caution; and they cause sleep through the overpowering sweetness of their voices and produce sometimes shipwreck and sometimes peril of death. Those who have escaped them have reported them to be like this: from the navel up they are like a most beautiful maiden and – what makes them monsters – from there downwards they are birds. (text and translation: Eden, 1972: 60-61)

see below for this word in the *MEB*.

2.1 *Voice, song, and music*

Vocality remains a constant in the description of the siren: the seduction and the ensuing ruin of the men is first aural and afterward sexual. The latter kind of allurement is more visual than textual and is accentuated in the interpretations of the narrative. The metamorphosis into a fish-woman did not entail a silencing, as fish are mostly mute, while song, which is often connected with birds (think of the nightingale or the cuckoo), seemed more apt for the half-bird siren. As for the sexual appeal, it becomes progressively more accentuated, also due to the connection with harlots advocated by Isidore (*Etym*. XI.iii.31; Lindsay, 1911), but anticipated by Servius (*Comm*. *Verg*. *Aen.* V.864; Thilo & Hagen, 1881-1902: I, 654-655).

The *MEB* pays a keen attention to the song of the siren and how it sounds. After all, this is the only thing that the siren does: her song is not addressed to a single ship, but to all the mariners that happen to fare close enough to hear it. Layamon (*Brut* lines 663-668) described the song of the siren as *murie* 'merry' and *swete* 'sweet' and such that none is weary to hear it (Brook & Leslie, 1963-1978: I.34). However, he seems aware of their deceitfulness and praises Brutus for having escaped the sirens without harm.

Sarah Kay (2016: 89) underscores how the chapter of the *MEB* performs a «reorientation from visual to aural appeal», which is in line with the attention paid to sonority and versification by this bestiary, and Liam Lewis (2022: 30) proposes an «alternative model of a sound milieu», as a tool to judge both the sirens' and the sailors' behaviour[6].

[6] The sailors do not receive any typification in line with their stereotypical role of victims of the sirens. Administrative records on the activities of ships and mariners in later medieval England, which become more and more numerous, supply us with a body of information (see Runyan, 1977). Records of English medieval ships are overwhelmingly royal in nature and ships of war are the best-documented, although there is no clear-cut difference between royal and merchant marine shipping. In England, mariners were 'impressed' by the king in wartime: the ship taken under control often had a suitable crew which could be pressed into service along with the ship. The commitment of the 'Cinque Ports' (Dover, Hastings, Hythe, Romney and Sandwich; Rye and Winchelsea were added later) dates from the time of Edward the Confessor (ca. 1003-1066). English merchants were unwilling to involve their ships in royal service, owing to the loss of revenue from their trading routes and the prospect of a damaged or destroyed ship. In 1230 Henry III recruited 288 ships for his passage to France, and another 161 ships were taken into royal custody but not used. As far as literature is concerned, much later on for instance than the *MEB*, Geoffrey Chaucer would include a seaman in his *Canterbury*

While the performative skill of the siren is praised, the context is such that «musical and moral value are opposed» (Leach, 2006: 188). The connection of lechery and gluttony to music is not exclusive to the *MEB,* and the negative ethical musical connotations are not, in my opinion, a result of the fact that the sound is produced by a nonhuman creature addressing a human audience (Lewis, 2022)[7]. The sirens singing and, in several visual instances, playing an instrument such as the harp or lyre, or the pipe, alone or in a group of two or three, call to mind the narratives of women, whose musical virtuosity (and, more generally, any sort of capability, artistic or not) is blamed more or less overtly[8].

As is made clear from the shipwreck, the song of the siren is malicious and malevolent, and one should guard against its lure. The 'Significatio' explains that the siren's song is the sign of hypocrisy, and is like the talk of those persons speaking virtuously but who are indeed wolves inside («wiðinnen arn he wulues al»: line 441). This last warning reinforces the implicit message of the shipwreck and invites us to experience wariness, stigmatizing once more the song of the sirens as a worldly lure.

The images which accompany a number of contemporary bestiaries offer a realistic reproduction of the danger inherent in the music of sirens. Leaving aside any metaphor, sirens are even portrayed attacking the sailor using their pipes as clubs, and swinging their instruments to hit the men on board[9].

Tales (*The Shipman's Tale*) creating a literary figure. Notwithstanding their number and role in England's economy, sailors are hardly represented in the genre of estate satire.

[7] Lewis (2022) highlights the «gendered and sonic tension» of the episode and quotes from medieval writings about music that consider nonhuman «musical» sounds as irrational when compared to human sounds. On the connection between feminine and irrational, see Leach (2006: 188-208). On music and sirens see Phyllis & Naroditskaya (2006).

[8] The siren had been described as «a harlot in the bloom of youth, delighting in her vulgar music» by Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 12.1-3; Butterworth, 1919: 253). In the image of the bestiary of Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk.4.25, f. 77v (ca. 1230; London) (the folio is mutilated), three sirens with bird legs and two also with a fish tail wear the *chapelz* and the tunic of contemporary women and the «costumes suggest their identification with contemporary prostitutes, even courtesans» according to Hassig (2000: 79). See also Hassig (1995), especially ch. 10.

[9] In a manuscript of the *Bestiaire divin* by Guillaume le Clerc, Paris, BnF, fr. 1444 (s. xiii ex; France), a siren hits the sailor on the head with the *bucina* (Old French *buisine*: a type of straight medieval trumpet) she was supposed to play (f. 245va); in the same codex, similar images accompany the *Bestiaire d'amour* of Richard de Fournival (f. 259rb). Both Guillaume and Richard are explicit on the siren killing the sailor as soon as he falls asleep.

It should be finally remarked that when the siren entered the *Physiologus*, the song *per se* became a trivialization of what Ulysses wanted to hear from the sirens and his striving for the knowledge of good and evil. In the *MEB*, the sailor who succeeds in escaping the siren, steering his ship before it enters the eddy, does not gain wisdom, but saves his life and brings back knowledge of the existence of sirens. What is portrayed is more a successful exercise of rationality than an enrichment of the mind.

2.2. *A maiden mermaid*

The *MEB* describes how the siren's body is like a *meiden*'s. *Meiden* 'young woman' repeats the *virgo* of Theobald, but drops the adjective *pulcherrima* of its source, in line with the general restraint which characterizes this chapter. Both texts strike a note of mystery in the general presentation of the subject: Theobald uses twice the term *monstrum*, at the beginning and the end of his description. In the English version, the siren is soon enlisted in the many marvels of the sea («In ðe se senden selcuðes manie»: line 417) while, towards the end, she is connotated by the adjective *uniemete* 'immeasurable'[10].

The *MEB* offers a detailed description of the siren's anatomy, specifying her features twice, in the opening lines and, again, at the end of the 'Natura' description. As has often been remarked, while Theobald portrays a siren as a bird from the navel downward, the siren of the *MEB* is 'half human half fish'. The two texts draw on different traditions, the oldest one and that destined to become the favourite[11].

Although belonging to the latter tradition, the *MEB* does not allude

[10] Among the several meanings of Latin *monstrum* 'an omen, a portent, marvel, wonder, monster', *MEB* seems to choose that of the marvel, whereas Theobald, who initially employs *pulcherrima*, in the last line seems keen to specify that it is her hybrid nature that makes a monster of her.

[11] The *Physiologus* (Carmody, 1939: 25) spoke of deadly animals («animalia mortifera»), with a human appearance («figuram hominis»), referring to bird-women. A well-known image of two sirens with a fish tail is that of the bas-relief of Ahnas (IV-V century AD), now at the Icon Museum of Recklinghausen. The sirens stand beside a small tree from which both pick up a fruit. Among the few possible previous examples is the clay oil lamp of unusual square shape with the scene of Ulysses, now at the Canterbury Museum & Galleries (I-II century AD). However, the image of the siren with a fish tail trying to get on board might be a later addition. These images apparently borrow from the iconography of the tritons (as far as the morphology of the siren is concerned) and the Graeco-Roman *anguipedes.* See, among others, Leclercq-Marx (1997; 2002).

directly to the exposed nudity of the human half. Moreover, neither work refers to the sirens as prostitutes. They are described as 'deadly creatures' who use their song to lull sailors to sleep. By the same token, men are not warned against lust and sinful pleasure but against treachery and making false oaths.

The agency of the sirens is limited to their singing and they have no physical involvement with their prey. The scene does not take place close to the land but in open sea. The *MEB* describes the shipwreck, but has no siren tearing apart the corpses of the sailors or luring them to have sex with her. It is the ship which sinks in a dangerous stretch of sea, right where one should have been even more careful navigating.

2.3. *Contemporary sirens*

The siren of the *MEB* stands alone in the panorama of contemporary works. The siren singing in an undefined region of the high seas and sending the sailors to sleep does not participate in the following events, as the urgency to stress the moral of the tale does not allow for further details[12]. In the contemporary descriptions in the bestiaries and some encyclopaedias a negative image of the siren prevails, and the progressive humanization seems to foster the deterioration of the siren within bestiaries and encyclopaedic literature, and also in the illustrations accompanying this kind of work, independently of how consonant these were with the text.

The different versions of the bestiaries circulating in England tell of sirens tearing apart their prey (White, 1954: 134), and both Richard de Fournivall (first half of the thirteenth century) and Guillaume le Clerc (his *Bestiaire divine* was written in 1210-1211) specify that the sirens come close to the sleeping sailor to kill the victim[13]. In the *Bestiaire d'amour* by Richard de Fournivall the lover affirms that his lady's voice has killed him, but that he is as much to blame for listening. In the earlier bestiary of Philippe de Thaon (first half of the twelfth

[12] Sirens on board the ship and assaulting the sailors are represented in the second of the three images of Ulysses and the sirens (f. 221r-v) in the *Hortus deliciarum* by Herrad von Landsberg, abbess of the Hohenburg Abbey in Alsace (s. xii ex) – the manuscript was burnt and destroyed in 1870, but is known from drawings. These are the only representations of this topic datable to the twelfth century, see Green *et al.* (1979).

[13] See respectively Zambon (1987: 48-49) and Hippeau (1852: 224-226). See Pakis (2010) for a roundup on the siren, possibly too much focused on the physical aspect.

century), the initial description features the motif of the siren rejoicing and singing when there is a storm and crying when the weather is fine (lines 1361-1373; Walberg, 1900: 51-52): the sailors, seduced by her song, fall asleep and forget about the ship («la nef met en ubli»: line 1373). The conclusion is left open, but the image might have been an inspiration for the *MEB*. In the long moral of Philippe de Thaon, sirens are used to symbolize the riches of the world and the evils which arise from them. On the other hand, in the bestiary of Gervaise (end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century) the narrative of how the siren attacks, tears apart and devours her victims (lines 316-320; Meyer, 1872: 430) is abruptly followed by a short moralization[14]. In both versions of the French prose *Bestiaire* attributed to Pierre de Beauvais (before 1218), sailors, inebriated by the song, fall asleep and the siren attacks and kills them[15].

In all these bestiaries the connection between 'nature' and 'moral *significatio*' is deeper than in the *MEB*, which compares the siren to the hypocrite and, in doing so, employs the image of the wolf in disguise. This contrasts with the foregoing marine representation. Think of the long version of the bestiary of Pierre de Beauvais where sirens typify the women who attract men with their blandishments and bring them to a life in the gutter and death. Moreover, none of the bestiaries accords much space to sea and ships.

In the same period, Thomas of Cantimpré (*Liber de natura rerum* VI.46; Boese, 1973: 246) provides an unattractive description of both the appearance and the voice of sirens[16], and seems to enjoy telling how some sailors make fools of them, with a story that apparently originated with Thomas. When a ship meets a siren, sailors throw an empty jug into the sea and while she plays with the jug, they escape the danger. The trick of the jug is represented in a few illustrations[17].

More crude is the description of Bartholomaeus Anglicus who

[14] In London, BL, MS Add. 28260, ff. 84r-100v, the work, known as the *Bestiaire de Gervaise*, is called *Li Livres des bestes*. The bestiary in French verse is quite close to the *Dicta Chrysostomi.*

[15] The long version is a reworking by an unknown author of Pierre de Beauvais' early thirteenth-century text, dated to between 1246 and 1268. See respectively Mermier (1977: 68) and Cahier & Martin (1851: 173).

[16] The *Liber de natura rerum* was written between 1225 and 1244. Sirens are defined as irrational monsters and it is said that their voice produces a non-articulated song.

[17] See the illustration of the *Liber de natura rerum* in Valenciennes, Médiathèque Simone Veil 320, f. 118v (s. xiii; Saint-Amand).

resorts to different sources and quotes a number of authorities to begin with from the *Physiologus.* Bartholomaeus also cites the *Letter of Alexander*[18], whence he possibly drew the further gruesome tale of the sirens who lure sailors to dry land, attempt to have sex with them, and eat them if they refuse (*De proprietatibus rerum* XVIII.95)[19].

3. *The sea and the eddy*

3.1. *The shipwreck*

The marine environment is evoked in the first line of both Theobald and the *MEB*, and the sea, which is apparently well-known to the latter author, plays an important role in the whole chapter of the English version. Whereas the Latin bestiary highlighted the frequency of the event (*sepissime*) and how misguided the sailors were (*incaute*), albeit offering two possible negative outcomes, the shipwreck or the risk of one's life (*modo… modo*), the English text crystallizes the event which becomes exemplary, also because it is the only possible outcome. The men who escape the fate are those who are capable of turning the bow of their ship (lines 432-434), thus acting as unpretentious surrogates of Ulysses. There was no shipwreck in the passage of the *Odyssey* (XII.37-57 and 165-200), when the sailors disembark and come close to the sirens. Isidore of Seville, following Servius, speaks of a *naufragium* (*Etym*. XI.iii.30); the latter occurrence of *naufragia* (iii.31) refers metaphorically to the ruin of those at the mercy of the siren-harlots; while the *Physiologus* stops the narrative with the sleeping sailors falling prey to the sirens, to resume the same image in the moral where it is applied to those falling prey to the delights and displays of the world, theatrical performances, tragedies and music («qui deliciis huius saeculi et pompis et theatralibus uoluptatibus delectantur, tragediis ac diuersis musicis melodiis dissoluti»: Carmody, 1939: 25-26).

A few cues anticipate the shipwreck of the *MEB*. The sirens

[18] Among the women described in the Legend of Alexander (see Lendinara, 2019), in the *Epistola Alexandri* there are beautiful women («specie mirabiles») inhabiting the Occluada river. When they see a man swimming in the river, they either drown him or assault him sexually in the nearby cane thicket (Boer, 1973: 56-57).

[19] See *Bartholomaei Anglici* (1650/1964: 1113). The *De proprietatibus rerum* is dated to ca. 1240; on the siren in the *De proprietatibus rerum*, see Hassig (1995: 105).

apparently lay in wait for the ship in a stretch of sea close to an eddy («in wankel stede, ðer ðe water sinkeð»: lines 421-422). The sleeping sailors let the ship run into the eddy and the unsteered vessel disappears into the waters, sinking in a kind of maelstrom. When not a description based either on a personal experience on the sea or on stories told by mariners, the chapter of the *MEB* allows us to infer some knowledge of the legend of Charybdis and Scylla, another portent wreaking havoc in the sea that is sometimes coupled with the siren[20].

Records for losses of ships are scarce until the latter part of the medieval period when wreck accounts become increasingly plentiful (Cressy, 2022). In England, by the time of the *MEB,* the memory of the disaster of the White Ship which sank off Normandy on 25th November 1120 should have been still alive. Historians such as Orderic Vitalis, *Historia ecclesiastica* XII.26, William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum* V.419 and many other writers have left accounts of this shipwreck which caused the death of the heir to the English throne and hundreds of nobles. Archaeology has furnished documentary sources as in the case of the so-called Mortar Wreck. A sunken ship, carrying a cargo of limestone, was discovered off the coast of Dorset: the shipwreck is dated between 1242 and 1265, during the reign of Henry III.

Shipwrecks were popular subjects for storytelling: they feature in Homer's *Odyssey* (where Odysseus also creates shipwreck stories when he lies to Polyphemus and Eumaeus: IX.283-286, XIV.293-315), as well as in the Bible with St Paul's shipwreck at Malta (Acts 27). The author

[20] Isidore describes Scylla immediately after the siren (*Etym*. XI.iii.32: «Scyllam quoque ferunt feminam […]»). The *Liber monstrorum,* often called upon as the first text where the siren is represented with a fish tail, devoted a chapter to the siren (I.vi) and another to Scylla (I.xiv). Indeed, the siren plays a remarkable role in the *Liber monstrorum* and its author, in a bold simile, compares his work to the sirens, «quod per haec antra monstrorum marinae puellae quandam formulam sirenae depingam, ut sit capite rationabili quod tantae diversorum generum hispidae squamosaeque sequuntur fabulae» (because through the caves of these monsters, I will depict a small cast of a sea-girl or siren, so that she has a head capable of reasoning that is followed by so many shaggy and scaly tales of diverse genres) (prologue: Porsia, 1976: 126-129). The attributes of Scylla are drawn from lines 424-428 of the third book of the *Aeneid*, where it is said that the sea monster has human features and its upper portion resembles a fair-bosomed maiden (compare «Prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo» [line 424] with «pectore virginali sicut sirenae» of the *Liber*), but it has a wolf's womb and dolphin's tails (compare «delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum» [line 428] with «luporum uterus et caudas delphinum» of the *Liber*). The final description of the sea-dogs which surround Scylla is also taken from line 432 of the *Aeneid*; see Lendinara (1999). Faral (1953) attributes a relevant importance to Scylla in the representation of the siren with a fish tail.

of the *MEB* might have been thinking of the second shipwreck of the *Odyssey*, when the ship of Ulysses, partly destroyed by a lightning bolt hurled by Zeus (XII.407-419), is driven by the wind to the whirlpool Charybdis (XII.426-446)[21].

3.2. *The eddy*

The eddy responsible for the wreck is referred to in line 430 and is portrayed like an abyss in line 423 of the *MEB*. The Homeric image of Charybdis looms in several narratives and might have inspired the author of the *MEB*.

Whirlpools of the northern seas are recorded by historians predating the *MEB*. Paul the Deacon (eighth century) includes in his *Historia Langobardorum* the description of the large tidal whirlpool west of the Lofoten islands that is commonly identified with the Moskstraumen. Paul the Deacon had previously described the land of the Scritobini, likely the Sámi of northern Scandinavia (I.5; Waitz, 1878: 50). The whirlpool on the edge of the world is represented as a «maris umbilicum» (I.6) and it is said that Virgil called that «vorago sive vertigo» *Caribdis* (quoting Virgil's *Aeneid* III.420-424). Paul writes that there are similar whirlpools in the sea between the island of Britain and the province of Galicia (some manuscripts have Gallia; Waitz, 1878: 51). Other vortices are recorded in the Adriatic Sea, near the coasts of the Venetian regions and Istria; in fact, these areas merely have strong tidal races. The largest part of Paul's chapter reports, with a breadth of detail, the tale of a nobleman from Gaul about the shipwreck of several ships engulfed in the vortex not far from the island of Alderney, which had only one survivor.

Adam of Bremen (second half of the eleventh century), in the fourth Book of his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum*, tells of two

[21] Strabo, *Geographia* I.2.13, comments on the episode of Ulysses' wanderings, the sirens and the whereabouts of their meeting. Strabo also adds his remarks on the description of the whirlpool Charybdis. As for England, tales of shipwrecks were included in both English and Anglo-Latin literature, e.g. the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s shipwreck records or those in the translation of Apollonius of Tyre. Most often the talk is about wreckage avoided by divine intervention or the commonplace metaphor of shipwrecking (e.g. Guthfrith and Utta both saved from shipwreck in Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* V.i). The heaven-sent drowsiness of the ship captain (e.g. in the poem *Andreas* lines 818-828, see also the description of the storm in lines 352-536) would be worth investigating and contrasting to the sailors falling asleep to the song of sirens. In other contexts, the drowsiness sent from heaven affects the entire crew but not the saint steering the vessel to safety (*Vita Birini* ch. 13).

sea chasms. The first «inmane baratrum abyssi» (a Virgilian echo) is met by the king of Norway, Harald, on a sea expedition to the extreme north (IV.39). Harald's ship succeeds in getting out safely from the chasm. In the next chapter (IV.40), Adam describes another sea abyss lying between England and the Orcades («hanc dicunt esse voraginem abyssi») and tells the story of the Frisian sailors who were sucked into the chasm eventually to be ejected and who were capable of escaping with the help of God and by force of the oars («oportuno Dei auxilio liberati toto nisu remorum fluctus adiuvarunt»; Schmeidler, 1917: 275-278).

Theodoricus monachus (twelfth century), in his *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, a Latin account of the kings of Norway from Haraldr hárfagri to Sigurdr Magnússon, comments on the whirlpool north-east of Stroma in the Pentland Firth (ch. 16)[22]. King Hakon Eiriksson, on his way back to Norway, perished at sea («in illam imam voraginem»). In the next chapter (ch. 17), Theodoricus monachus, who had called Charybdis the Swelchie (McDougall & McDougall, 1998: 23), comments on the nature of sea abysses quoting a number of fake authorities but indeed drawing on Isidore, *Etym*. XIII.xx.1. The only precise reference is that to Paul the Deacon, which triggers a digression on Lombards and Huns (McDougall & McDougall, 1998: 24-25)[23].

Gerald of Wales (ca. 1146-ca. 1223) in his *Topographia Hibernica* (Distinctio II.14), having spoken of Iceland and its islands, describes a whirlpool in the northern Ocean, to be identified with that on the coast of Norway, between the island of Wéro and the Loffoden islands. Gerald explains that there are four whirlpools («oceani voragines») in the four quarters of the world (Dimock, 1867: 96-97)[24].

The close proximity of the monastery at Iona to the Corryvreckan whirlpool fostered the tales of eddies in insular medieval hagiography.

[22] This has been identified with the whirlpool known as the Swelchie (Old West Norse *Svelgr(inn)*). It is mentioned in the *Orkneyinga saga* ch. 74, and in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* ch. 327. McDougall & McDougall (1998: 80, note 150) remark that only Snorri (*Saga Óláfs konungs hins Helga* ch. 180; *Óláfs saga Helga* ch. 184) «shares with Theodoricus monachus the detail that Hakon met his end in the Pentland Firth, where he was sucked into the Swelchie».

[23] Theodoricus monachus, speaking of a vortex in front of the coasts of Hålogaland, north of Trøndelag (*Halogia*), in his *Historia Norwegiae* (Storm, 1880: 78-79), mentions both Charybdis and Scylla. On the representation of 'vorago' and other sea phenomena from antiquity to early Middle Ages, see Dalché (1988).

[24] Olaus Magnus will include the *Moskstraumen* in his maritime map, the *Carta Marina* published in Venice in 1539, adding the rubric «hec est horrenda Caribdis» to the drawing of a circular chasm.

In Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae*, Colmán is sailing to Iona: his boat happens to sail across a whirlpool in the vicinity of an island named Rechru[25], «in undosis carybdis Brecani aestibus» (I.5), and Columba seems preternaturally aware of this event (Anderson & Anderson, 1991: 28)[26].

In the Irish glossary *Sanas Cormaic* ('Cormaic's glossary'), preserved in several manuscripts (short version: late ninth or early tenth century), there occurs an entry about the whirlpool of Coire Brecáin[27], for which also see below. The standard view of where the whirlpool, now Corryvreckan, was located is that the name probably originally referred to a whirlpool off Rathlin Island, but that another eddy, which lay between the islands of Jura and Scarba in the Hebrides off the northern coast of Scotland in the Pentland Firth, was also given the same name since at least the late fourteenth century (Watson, 1993: 63, 94-95).

Old Norse literature tells of a whirlpool formed as the sea rushes through the center hole of the quernstone Grotti that is sunken into the sea. As for the legend, a Danish king, Fróði kept two enslaved giantesses endlessly at work turning the millstone in order to grind gold – Grotti has the power to grind out whatever it is asked to grind – until the giantesses hatch a plot against Fróði. Whatever the course of the story, at the end the ship carrying away the mill, loaded with piles

[25] Rechru has been associated with Rathlin Island, but the reference might otherwise be to the vortex in the strait between the islands of Jura and Scarba; see below for the identification of the whirlpool.

[26] The whirlpool is also mentioned in the Life of Colmán Elo in the *Codex Salmanticensis* (Brussels, KBR, 7672-4), ch. 13: in this narrative, Colmán, who was sailing away in self-imposed exile, is saved from the whirlpool by St Columba and sent back to Ireland where his future lies. In the Lives of Ciarán of Clonmacnois, St Columba is returning from a visit to Ciarán's monastery when his ship is thrust towards the whirlpool of Coire Brecáin (First Latin Life ch. 37), which is compared to Scylla and Charybdis (Second Latin Life ch. 23). Large vortices are met by Brendanus in his sea travels in the Irish sources, but are not mentioned in the Latin version of his *Navigatio*. For example, *Dá apstol décc na hÉrenn* ('The twelve apostles of Ireland') tells how, during a storm, the monks are dragged towards the whirlpools, but Brendan, in the manner of Christ (Mt 8:25), calms the waves.

[27] Irish and Scottish Gaelic *coire Brecáin* means 'cauldron of Brec(c)án' (if *Brecáin* is not taken to be a proper noun, it may be translated as 'cauldron of the speckled seas'). In Scottish mythology, the great winter hag Cailleach was said to use the gulf of Corryvreckan to wash her great plaid. A Gaelic ballad ('MacPhail of Colonsay and the Mermaid of Corryvreckan') tells of a man carried off by a mermaid and living together with her in a cave beneath the sea. According to Celtic tradition the whirlpool was an entrance to the Otherworld.

of salt, sinks and Grotti falls into the depths of the sea[28]. While the *Snorra Edda* tells that the sunken hand-quern is responsible for «svelgr í hafinu» (*Skáldskaparmál* ch. 43; Faulkes, 1998: 52), the *Litla Skálda* localizes its sinking to the Pentland Firth («á Péttlandsfirði»: Finnur Jónsson, 1931: 259) (see Jesch, 2009: 154).

The *MEB* describes the sinking of the ship by repeating the verb *sinken* (lines 423 and 430) three times; as for the chasm where the ship disappears, it employs ME *suk*, whose exact interpretation has been debated. The *MED* includes *suk* among the variants of ME *swĭ̄k(e)*, which means 'deceit, deception, treachery', 'a trick', 'a trap, pitfall, snare' (also in figurative sense) and descends from Old English *swice*. This is also the choice of Megan Cavell (2022: 96-97), who translates 'the ships sink in the snare'. On the other hand, Faraci (1990: 81 and 219) and Wjrties (1991: 15 and 61) read *suk* as 'sucking'. ME *sŏuke*, also *sucke*, *sok*, which is related to the ME verb *souken* 'to draw with the mouth' (from OE *sūcan*), is only attested in reference to 'the act of sucking milk from the breast', but might well represent the sucking of the eddy. The verb *souken* is used in line 350 of the *MEB*, where, of the whale, it is said that «ðise fisses alle in sukeð» ('sucks in all these fish'). Also Lewis (2022: 31) translates the passage of the chapter on the siren 'the ship is sucked downwards'[29].

Note that in the entry of *Sanas Cormaic*, the twofold movement of the whirlpool is described by using the verbs 'to suck' and 'to vomit': *suigthe* (Y = Yellow Book of Lecan, entry no. 323), *suidet* (B = *Leabhar Breac*, entry no. 255), *suigthius* (M = Book of Uí Maine, entry no. 250) 'sucks' and *fo·cherad ind for aonchói* 'again it vomits up

[28] For the poem *Grottasǫngr* and the kennings (for either gold and sea) alluding to the legend of Grotti quoted by Snorri and in the corpus of skaldic verse, see Quinn (2013): the sources of Snorri date to the twelfth and early thirteenth century. The story of the millstone in the bottom of the sea is alluded to in the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (III.6,10), within the story of Amlethus, where the prince replies wittily to the remark about the sand that had been called flour, that it had been ground by the foaming billows.

[29] The composition of the *MEB* has been set in the East-Midlands (Wirtjes, 1991: xxxiv-xl, see also the Scandinavian elements: xxxi-xxxii). In this part of England, interest in Scandinavian history continued for several centuries and literary narratives based on this subject had wide circulation. Among others, think of the romance of *Havelok the Dane*, which has been connected also with the topics of Hamlet's story resurfacing in Saxo Grammaticus (see Collinson, 2011: 677-679 for the links with the sea-grinder Grotti of Old Norse literature). Havelok himself is shipwrecked and, early in the story, lives with a salt-selling fisherman and his wife in the wrecked boat.

that mouthful'. Moreover, at the beginning of the interpretation of the glossary lemma, *Coire Brecáin* is described as 'open-mouthed' (*obele*)[30].

4. *Images*

Indeed, in the bestiaries, there is no trace of the ancient tale of Ulysses tied to the mast and saving the sailors instructed to fill their ears with wax, the latter being supplanted in many bestiary images by men putting their hands over their ears. If some illustrations show a sail hanging motionless for lack of wind, others rather represent boats without a mast and oars falling overboard.

In the image of the bestiary in London, BL, Harley MS 4751, f. 47v (s. xii ex-xiii in; Salisbury?), a very large siren stands high above the boat and holds its prow. The mast and sail have fallen overboard and the ship appears to be sinking. One sailor is steering and another is standing, covering his ears. Also in London, BL, MS Sloane 278, f. 47r (s. xiii$^{2/4}$ or $^{3/4}$; Northern France), one of the three sailors on board blocks his ears, while another is being pulled overboard by the hair by a siren with the tail of a fish[31]. One of the most striking images features an aggressive siren harpooning a ship: the image where a half-fish siren boards a boat with four sailors accompanies the *Dicta Chrysostomi*[32] in the so-called *Fürstenfelder Physiologus* in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 6908, f. 79v (s. xiv; Admont), written and possibly illustrated by the monk Englebert[33].

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[30] See Russell *et al.* (2023). See Collinson (2011: 684-687), for the possible association with the motion of mill-paddles in the entry of this glossary. For an interpretation of «the image of the three seas swirling together into one whirlpool» see Russell (1995: 201-204).

[31] The ship has neither mast nor sail. An onocentaur holding a bow is shown at the right of the siren below the boat. The genitals of the onocentaur are well evidenced in line with its being a symbol of lust.

[32] The *Dicta Chrysostomi* was written in France around the year 1000; this bestiary is generally illustrated and represents both the siren and the onocentaur.

[33] In this image the siren wears a sort of crown, owing, in my opinion, to the influence of the Serra or sawfish which races against the ship raising its wings. A similar crown is worn by a Serra in the fragment of the *Physiologus* in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 35a Helmst., f. 1v (s. xii; Augsburg, SS Ulrich and Afra). The Serra is said to have a serrated crest that it uses to cut into the ships. In the *Physiologus* of Melk (Melk, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 867 (18; A 20) (before 1419; St Lambrecht or

The only manuscript of the *MEB*, Arundel 292, is not accompanied by images and the narrative of the chapter has no direct counterpart in the illustrations of the bestiaries, though these portray a stormy sea and ships which have lost the mast and the oars[34]. Several features of the chapter remain exclusive to the English text. The shipwreck scene, on the other hand, finds a reification in the well-known image of *Les abus du monde* (New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M. 42, f. 15r: ca. 1510; Rouen), where a winged siren strides above a group of men, all clothed and wearing hats, struggling to stay afloat in water where they are doomed to drown. This siren, who is represented frontally all naked, holds a harp in the right hand and a shawm (a woodwind instrument) in the left; the lower part of body is of a bird and she has the tail of a fish.

5. *Conclusions*

Medieval misogyny is a complex issue and one must always be vigilant when addressing topics such as sirens in the *MEB* and their contemporary representation[35]. The siren of the *MEB*, in my opinion,

Altenburg?), ch. IV bears the title Sira (for Serra), but describes the nature and meaning of the siren, while ch. XVII on the Cilla (for Scylla) describes the sawfish. The cross-over or interference is also evident elsewhere in the image of the Serra in the bestiary of Brussels, KBR, 1066-77, f. 142r (s. x ex; Meuse), where a creature with a curled tail and a couple of small wings behind each arm approaches a boat, with its sail hauled down and the sailors asleep.

[34] In the *Dicta Chrysostomi* of the Morgan Library and Museum, MS M. 832, f. 3v (ca. 1140-50; Göttweig, Austria) there are five sailors asleep, two still holding oars. In the *Dicta* in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 2655, f. 96v (1295-1308; Aldersbach, St. Maria) the sailors are all asleep and one siren plays a sort of *aulos* while apparently perching on the ship's stern.

[35] The connotations of the *MEB* siren are negative and her portrait does not show any sign of ambivalence or any feature that might connect her to the Germanic and Celtic biform females. I am quite sceptical of the insistence on a generalized syncretism of the sirens of the Greek-Roman tradition with half-piscine or serpentine women such as Ondine or Melusine, see e.g. Leclercq-Marx (1997: ch. 5 [who also includes Morgan le Fay in the parallels]; 2002: 64). The same is true of the mermaids of Old Norse literature, such as those of the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* dated to the mid-thirteenth century, which appear before a violent storm. The situation is different with regard to the Legend of Lorelei and the eddy of the Rhine. By singing, Lorelei lured sailors to shipwreck on the rock where she stood on the river bank.

does not play a major role in the narrative, notwithstanding the accurate description of her song, which is represented as a sort of musical performance on a maritime stage.

The barycentre of the chapter is the ship and its destiny, described with pathos and a keen knowledge of the dangers of the open sea. The *MEB* is quite pragmatic and betrays a mercantile mindset alongside an acquaintance with the sea and its perils[36]. The progress made by science brings with it a different approach to nature and less interest in marvels. The positive note struck by moving the adverb *sepissime* of Theobald (who underscored how frequent it is to run into a siren) to the second part of the narrative is remarkable, with the result that the sailors are 'often' capable of escaping the snare and surviving the encounter with the siren. The ship which sinks represents the man's goods, which are lost, and, on a higher level, his soul which is damned; however the 'Significatio' does not draw this parallel and the shipwreck image is not pursued in the second part of the chapter on the siren.

The ship, for once, seems more important than the sailors in this description of the conflict between the risk and the hard work of men toiling in the ships on the routes from England to the North and the South and alas susceptible to succumbing to the temptation to stop and rest, which is representative of the journey of human life. In line with the general vein of the narrative and anticipating the moral, the *MEB* admonishes the rash crew to resist and, at the same time, praises those who are capable of escape by their own efforts.

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[36] For cases of wreck and early wreck legislation see Raich (2016).

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