

Assignment 3: Extract from the *Chronicon Anglicanum* (CA)

“CONCERNING A MERMAN TAKEN FROM THE SEA,
CONCERNING A CERTAIN BOY AND GIRL COMING OUT OF
THE GROUND, CONCERNING GIANT TEETH, CONCERNING
A CERTAIN FANTASTICAL SPIRIT”

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Concerning a merman taken from the sea

At the time of the King Henry II, when Bartholomew de Glanville was custodian of the castle of Orford, it happened that fisherman, fishing in the sea there, caught in their net a merman, who was handed over to the aforesaid castellan as a spectacle, he was entirely nude, and he had the appearance of human form in all his members.¹ He even had hair, but on the top it seemed as if it had been torn and destroyed, his beard was luxuriant and pointed, around his chest he was very hairy and shaggy.² Then the afore said knight had him guarded for a long time, for days and nights, so that he could not get to the sea. He ate avidly whatever was placed before him. He consumed fish whether it was raw or cooked, but he squeezed the raw fish very firmly in his hands until all the wetness was wrung out, and then he ate them. But he was unwilling to speak any language, or rather he could not, he was even hung by his feet and often savagely tortured.³ He was taken to a certain church, but he showed no signs at all of devotion or any kind of belief, either by bending his knees or bowing his head, however often he saw anything sacred.⁴ He always hastily went to his bed at sunset and stayed in it until sunrise. Also it came about that they took him once to the sea port, and released him into the sea, having placed in front of him strong nets in three layers. He, soon seeking the depths of the sea and going through all the nets, came to the surface again and again from the bottom of the sea, the onlookers on the

¹ Henry II was king from 1154 to 1189. Building began on Orford Castle in 1164 and was completed in 1173. Bartholomew de Glanville was named castellan in 1167 – so we can surmise that this story takes place between 1167 and 1189 – placing it in living memory (if indeed this event can be considered a memory) of Ralph of Coggeshall writing in the late 12th - early 13th century.

² The physical descriptions do not bring to mind the image of the fishtailed, body hair-less merman most people would be familiar with today. Medieval mermaids and other water fairies (eg: Melusine – the fairy founder of the House of Plantagenet) are depicted with a fish tail in England since at least the end of the 11th century. In antiquity, we do see fishtailed mermen (Triton, Glaucus) so there is precedence – indicating perhaps this merman is a British (or at least Western European) variant. Katherine Briggs in her book “The Vanishing People” states that Mermen in Britain are often uglier and rougher than their continental counterparts.

³ The lack of ability, or will, to speak is further emphasising the “otherness” of the merman. The torture of him suggests that the nobles do not have humanity for this man whom they clearly view as deviant.

⁴ The man does not recognise Christian symbolism and practices. It is likely no coincidence that this extract appears immediately in the CA after the account of the Pope’s appeal for people to join the fourth crusade. It is perhaps implying that this merman may look somewhat like members of English society on a human level, but he is not the same when it comes to belief and practices – perhaps alluding to followers of Islam.

seashore watched for a long time, he frequently immersing himself, and then after a little coming up again, as if mocking the spectators because he had escaped their nets. After he had played in this way in the sea for a long time, and when all hope of his recovery had been given up, he came back again to them of his own accord swimming through the waves, and he stayed with them again for two months. But since afterwards he was carelessly guarded and he was now held in aversion, he secretly fled to the sea, and never appeared again. Whether there was indeed a mortal man her, or whether it was some kind of fish assuming human form, or whether it was an evil spirit laying in the body of a drowned man, as one reads of a certain case in the life of the blessed Audoenus, cannot easily be determined, especially since so many astonishing things are told by so many people about events of this kind.⁵

Concerning a certain boy and girl coming out of the ground

Another marvel too happened earlier not unlike this in Suffolk at St Mary of Woolpit.⁶ A certain boy was found with his sister by the inhabitants of that place, near the mouth of some kind of pit which was there, who had the same shape as other man in all their limbs, but were different from all mortals of our knowledge in the colour of their skin.⁷ For all the surface of their skin was tinged with green.⁸ No one could understand their language. These children, therefore, were taken to the home at Wakes [Essex] of Richard of Colne, a certain knight, as a source of astonishment, and they wept inconsolably.⁹ Bread and other food was placed before them, but

⁵ Saint Audoenus is also known as Ouen and Audoin. The event depicted in this story is not present in *Vita Audoini Episcopi Rotomagensis* ("The Life of Audoin, Bishop of Rouen" – see Fouracre and Gerberding 1996) but it could be in a more obscure or even lost text.

⁶ No explicit date given other than earlier than that of the previous story. William of Newburgh, in an alternate telling of the story in his *Historia Anglicarum* (HA), places the events "in the reign of King Stephen" – which places it between 1135 and 1154.

⁷ Parallels with this story and Islam. Green is an important colour in Islam; the Quran mentions it eight times, especially when describing Paradise. There is additionally an important angel in Islam whose name (al-Khadir) literally means "The Green One".

⁸ "Tinged with green" here, but "completely green in their persons" in the HA. It is thought that the HA account is at least 20 years older than Ralph's account, and as there is no evidence of *Historia Anglicarum* having a version produced in Coggeshall it seems unlikely that he would have read it.

⁹ "Richard of Colne" (also called "Richard de Calne" or "Richard de Caine"), if he existed, does not have any appreciable historical record outside of this story. The Woolpit Parish Council website states that he lived at Wikes Hall in the village of Bardwell, six miles from Woolpit (not Essex). There is a town called

they did not wish to eat any of the food which was given to them, then as a result they were tortured by terrible pangs of hunger for a long time, because they believed all food of this kind was inedible, as the girl later confessed. Eventually, when some newly cut beans on their stalks were brought into the house, they made signs with greatest of eagerness that those beans should be given to them. These having been brought to them, they opened the stalks, not the pods of the beans, thinking that the beans were contained in the hollow of the stalks. But not finding the beans in the stalks, they again began to weep. When those standing by noticed this, they opened the pods, and showed them the uncovered beans, having been shown they ate them with great joyfulness, for a long time they scarcely touched any other food. Then the boy, always laid low as if by lassitude, within a short time died.¹⁰ Then the girl enjoying continuing good health, became accustomed to various foods and almost that the leek-green colour and gradually recovered the usual blood-colour over her whole body.¹¹ After she had been born again in the font of holy baptism, and remained for many years in the service of the aforesaid knight, (as we have heard often from that knight himself and his household) she lived excessively wantonly and pertly.¹² She was frequently asked about the men of her region, she asserted that all who lived there and everything that there was in that area was green complexioned, and that they saw no sun, but that they enjoyed a kind of light, such as there is after the setting of the sun.¹³ Questioned about how she had come to be in that area with the

Calne in Wiltshire, located in the historical kingdom of Wessex (as opposed to Essex), where perhaps he came from - although at the time this was written the kingdom had merged into England 150 years previously. Maybe the name was still used in common parlance.

¹⁰ William of Newburgh mentions that the boy was baptised shortly before his death – a detail missing from this account.

¹¹ She loses her greenness prior to her baptism, like she is proving her worthiness to become Christian by shedding her old life (ie: her allegorical belief in Islam).

¹² The accusation of the girl living “wantonly and pertly” is not in William of Newburgh’s account. Perhaps the implication in the CA is that non-Christians cannot change even if they become Christianised.

¹³ Proverbs 4:18: “The path of the righteous is like the light the first gleam of dawn, which shines brighter until the full light of day”. No sun is perhaps a metaphor for (Christian) godlessness. The dim light present in their land presumably refers to moonlight; the crescent moon and star are important symbols used by the Ottoman Turks from at least the 9th century – eventually becoming the symbol of the Ottoman Empire in 1299 (well after this story was written). William of Newburgh also claims that the female child stated they were from “The Land of St Martin”. There is no obvious link between St Martin of Tours and Islam, but a battle at Tours in 732 occurred where Islamic forces from Spain invaded Gaul. According to the

aforesaid boy, he replied because they had been following the herd, they had come into a certain cavern. Having gone into this, they heard some delightful kind of sound of bells; captivated by the sweetness of this sound they walked about in a wandering way through the cavern, until they came to the way out. Then coming put from there, because of the brightness of the sun and the unaccustomed temperature of the air they down for a long time at the mouth of the cave, as if stupefied and made lifeless. Since they were terrified by fear of what might happen to them, they wanted to escape, but they could not find the entrance to the cave at all, until they were caught by them.

Concerning giant teeth¹⁴

In the time of King Richard, in Essex, on the sea shore, in a village which is called Edolfsness, two teeth belonging to some kind of giant teeth belonging to some kind of giant were found, they were of such size that two hundred teeth such as men now have could have been made out of them.¹⁵ At Coggeshall we have both seen these teeth and handled them enough to be amazed.¹⁶ Also a rib of this giant was found there, of incredible size and breadth. Then too a gigantic head was found in the province of York on the sea shore, the capacity of that head was such that it could take a load of corn.¹⁷ All these things are proved to be true, because in ancient history books we read about giants. Indeed some of our people in Wales have seen a certain young man of immense size, whose height was five cubits, the length and breadth of whose fingers was very great, but who had lost his strength in his youth for some reason.¹⁸ In that same province there

Chronicle of Fredegar the reason for this was to pillage the wealthy Abbey of St Martin of Tours – but the link to this story is tenuous.

¹⁴ This story seems to be the least allegorical of all four and seems to be just a story of entertainment and wonder.

¹⁵ Story again between 1189 and 1199. “Edolfsness” could potentially be Foulness.

¹⁶ That monks experienced the teeth first-hand, if true, probably implies that they are fossilised dinosaur or mammoth remains. They could also be elephant remains from the Romans.

¹⁷ The North Yorkshire coast is renowned for being rich in fossilised dinosaur remains and footprints.

¹⁸ Five cubits is approximately 2.2 metres – certainly very tall but within human height constraints. This could be an individual with gigantism or Marfan syndrome. These conditions lead to excessive height and place immense stress on the body causing muscle wastage, explaining the strength loss detailed here.

appeared in the same year footprints of unusual size; and wherever these footprints were imprinted, the grass was left scorched as if by fire.

Concerning a certain fantastical spirit

In the time of King Richard at Dagworth, in Suffolk, a certain fantastical spirit appeared many times and often in the house of Osbern of Bradwell,¹⁹ speaking to the household of that knight, assuming in tone and the voice of a one-year-old infant, and it called itself Malkin.²⁰ She asserted that her mother lived in a nearby house with her brother, and she said that she was often scolded by them, and so, leaving them, she ventured to talk to men. She did and said wonderful and laughable things, often exposing other people's secret activities.²¹ At first the wife of the knight and the whole household were really terrified by these meetings with her, but afterwards they became accustomed to her speech and ridiculous antics, and they talked confidently and freely to her, asking her lots of questions. She spoke in English in the dialect of that area, but now and then she spoke in Latin, and discussed the scriptures with the chaplain of that knight, as he himself truthfully declared to us.²² She could be heard and felt, but could not be seen by a certain chambermaid in the shape of a very small baby, dressed in a sort of white tunic, before this she had been strongly requested and begged by the girl, to make herself visible to her. But she would not agree at all to this request, until the girl swore by God that she

¹⁹ This story is again set between 1189 and 1199. Interestingly, Dagworth is only five miles from Woolpit, where the previous story took place, possibly indicating that the source was from the area – or perhaps Ralph even came from there himself. Local Dagworth historian Jeremy Steventon-Barnes proposes that Osbern of Bradwell is an alternate name for Osbert Fitzhervey, a man from Dagworth who also owned land in the town of Bradwell in Essex. Bradwell is only 4 miles from the town of Coggeshall which again raises questions about the source of the stories.

²⁰ Malkin has several old meanings, ranging from cats (precursor to “Grimalkin” – grey cat), a nickname for women named Maud, and a misogynistic insult.

²¹ Playing on fears of the unknown, of invisible enemies in the community.

²² Probably meant to be funny as well as weird; a baby who speaks not only English but Latin too. Precedence of talking babies exists in the 11th century *Vita Sancti Rumwoldi* where a hallowed baby talks from birth.

would not touch her or take hold of her. She also admitted that she was born at Lanaham,²³ and while her mother was taking her with her to the fields, which she was harvesting with other people, and when she left her alone in part of the field, she had been carried off by someone else,²⁴ and she had now lived with her for seven years; and she said that after another seven years she would be returned to her former life with men.²⁵ She said that she and the others wore a certain hat, which made them invisible.²⁶ Very often she demanded food and drink from the servants, which were not found any more after they had been placed on top of a certain chest.

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²³ Probably Lavenham which is not far from Dagworth.

²⁴ Implication is that she is a fairy changeling, rather than a spirit.

²⁵ Seven years, and the number seven generally, is a recurring theme in fairy folklore and in the bible. Time in the fairy world is said to progress slower than the human world. Shows an adherence to storytelling convention.

²⁶ This has some Greek mythology precedence. The "Cap of Invisibility" is an item worn to turn the user invisible, owned by Hades but worn at various points by Athena and Hermes.

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