

**The Siren in the Storm and the Wild Man's Solace:
A Folkloric Motif in Fifteenth-Century Spanish Poetry**

Roger Boase
(Queen Mary, University of London)

No bestiary is complete without a section on the siren, a creature usually depicted as half-woman and half-bird, with the talons of a falcon, and frequently in medieval iconography with a mermaid's tail.¹ However, only a fraction of what is termed bestiary material actually derives from bestiaries (Salvador Miguel 311-35), and the curious folkloric motif of the siren that sings or rejoices in the storm, which seems to be associated with the pre-Christian mythology of the wild man or woodwose, is not found in medieval bestiaries, nor in the classical sources, such as the Latin Physiologus, whence much of the bestiary material derives. The only exception is the Anglo-Norman Bestiaire by Philippe de Thaon, dedicated to Alice of Louvain, wife of Henry I of England, soon after her marriage in 1121 (Walberg lines 1361-64; McCulloch 167; Boase 824):

Serena en mer hante,
cuntre tempeste chante,
e plurë en bel tens,
itels est sis talenz.

(The siren dwells in the sea; / it sings at the approach of the storm, / and weeps in fine weather; / such is its nature). In his immensely popular treatise on the natural sciences *De proprietatibus rerum*, completed c. 1235, and translated into many European languages, the English Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus mentions the siren rejoicing in the storm (*in tempestate gaudet, in sereno autem dolet*), and he refers to the *Physiologus* as his only authority, although, as I have said, there is no evidence that this motif comes from a classical source.²

I have found thirty examples of the wild man behaving in this same fashion in medieval French, Provençal and Italian literature from the poetry of Raimon Jordan (fl. 1178-95) to Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, left unfinished in 1486 and first published in 1495.³ To this list I should add two passages by Guillaume de Machaut. The first is

¹ Debra Hassig (105) notes in a study of 22 Latin bestiaries of English provenance that this iconographic change from half-bird to half-fish occurs sooner in the illustrations than in the accompanying text so that, in the majority of cases, words and images do not correspond.

² Cited in Faral (493). The first printed edition of a late 14th-century Castilian translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus by Fray Vicente de Burgos was published in Toulouse in 1494 by Henricus Mayer, and later printed in Toledo in 1529 by Gaspar de Ávila.

³ There are many examples of this motif in the poetry of Giacomo da Lentini and other poets at the Sicilian court of Frederick II in the decade 1230-40. It is mentioned in two late 13th-century Italian repertoires of poetic imagery: the versified *Mare amoroso* (Vuolo), composed c. 1270-1280 in the region of Florence or Lucca, formerly ascribed to Benedetto Latini; and *Lo diretano bando: conforto et rimedio delli veraci e leali amadori* (Casapullo 47), an Italian translation of the last section of Richard de Fournival's *Bestiaire d'amour* (composed c. 1231-1240). Neither of these works is, properly speaking, a bestiary. See citations in Boase, Appendix, and Mulertt.

from *Le Remède de Fortune* (lines 2698-702), completed in 1341, when Esperance tells the lover to follow the wild man's example: ⁴

Ne dit-on que li homs sauvages
s'esjoïst quant il voit plouvoir,
et chante? Qui l'i fait mouvoir?
L'espoir qu'il prent en son revel
qu'après le lait il fera bel.

(Isn't it said that the wild man rejoices and sings when he sees the rain? What is it that motivates him? From his revelry he derives the hope that after the foul weather it will be fine.)

The second passage is from Machaut's *Voir Dit* (lines 5472-75):

Ainsi com fait l'omme sauvage:
quant il voit plouvoir ou boscage,
il espoire qu'il fera bel,
pour ce chante et est en revel.

(This is what the wild man does: when he sees it rain in the woods, he hopes it will be fine, and so he sings and is merry.)

However, before the fifteenth century in Spain, I can give only one other example in European literature of the siren singing in the storm. Jean de Dreux (1217-1286), Count of Brittany, when scorned by his lady, compares himself to the siren (Bédier 494):

Tot ausi com la serene
qui chante quant il fet torment,
chante je quant plus aie painne
por cuidier que allegement
me veigne [...]

(Just as the siren / sings in the stormy weather, / so I sing the more I suffer, / mindful of the relief / it brings.)

The finest example of this image is found in the opening lines of *La mort per amor*, a short poem by Joan Roís de Corella (1435-1497) (Miquel y Planas 427; Martos 166; Martínez Romero 197-98):

Si en lo mal temps la serena bé canta,
yo dech cantar, puix dolor me turmenta
en tant extrem, que ma penssa és contenta
de presta mort; de tot l'aldre s'espanta.
Mas, si voleu que davall vostra manta
muyra prop vós, hauran fi mes dolors:
seré l'oçell que en lit ple de odors

⁴ Álvaro Alonso (214) drew my attention to this first passage. Cerquiglini-Toulet (108), who cites these passages, compares the lyricism of Polyphemus with that of the wild man.

mor, ja content de sa vida ser tanta.

(If, when the weather is foul, the siren sings well, / I should also sing, since my sorrow's torment / is so extreme that my mind is content / with a swift death; it is scared of all else. / But if you wish that beneath your cloak / I might die near you, then my sorrows will end: / I shall be the bird who in a bed of fragrances / dies, still happy that so much life is his.)

The two amatory *exempla*—the siren singing in the storm and the dying phoenix—both offer an optimistic message that a change of circumstances may bring about an end to the poet's mental anguish, and a 'death' that will give him a sense of fulfilment and a new lease of life.

This *exemplum* has little in common with the conventional, classical and misogynistic image of the siren as a carnivore that lulls its victims to sleep by means of its seductive singing, an image that one finds, for example, in Juan de Mena's "¡Guay de aquel ombre que mira!" ("Solamente con cantar / diz que engaña la serena", Pérez Priego, lines 41-42); in Rodrigo Cota's *Diálogo entre el Amor y un Viejo* ("el qu'es cauto marinero / no se vence muy ligero / del cantar de la serena", lines 124-26); or in Auto XI of *La Celestina* when Pármeno, who is thinking of Melibea, says: "el canto de la serena engaña los simples marineros con su dulçor".⁵

Roís de Corella mentions sirens in two other works. In his *Historia de Leànder i Hero*, the sirens are praised for their wisdom:

¡O, gran saviesa! ¡O, animós reçel, al temps de la adverssa fortuna, estalviar la vida per a la prosperitat esdevenidora! Axí canten les serenes en lo temps de la mar tempestuosa, esperant la tranquilitat quieta. (Martos 166; Miquel y Planas 111, lines 473-77)

(What great wisdom! What brave fear! To save one's life in a time of misfortune for the sake of future prosperity! Thus the sirens sing at a time when the sea is stormy, hoping for calm tranquillity.)

A more imaginative reference to sirens is found in a poem, which Miquel y Planas (419) named *Cor crudel*, where the narrator, before resigning himself to the role of martyr, protests that the sea pays more heed to the singing of the sirens than the lady pays to his complaints (Martínez 54):

I l'alta mar, moguda fins al centre,
 escolta més lo cant de les serenes,
 que vós, cruel, mon trist plorar e plànyer,
 al meu gran plant més sorda que no l'aspis.

(And the high sea, drawn to the centre, / harkens more to the sirens' song / than you, cruel one, to my sad weeping and lamenting; / to my great complaint you are deafer than the asp.)

⁵ See Kerkhof and Deyermond 2001 for further citations. Another example of the conventional image of the siren occurs in an anonymous *villancico* (c. 1502), "Quien de amor más se confía" (Dutton: ID 4908, NN2-5): "huyamos d'esta serena / que con el canto nos prende" (lines 30-31).

There is an implicit analogy here between the seductiveness of the songs of the sirens, the power of magic, and the appeal of poetry. The bestiary asp makes itself deaf by pressing one ear to the ground and by blocking the other with its tail so that it cannot be enchanted by the music of the snake-charmer (White 173). However, Corella's immediate source was probably Petrarch, who, in his sestina "Là ver l'aurora, che sì dolce l'aura" (Durling 398-401), complains that while poetry can even enchant asps, Laura is deaf to the music of his sorrowful verses. It is also likely that Corella would have known Santillana's Sonnet 21, which contains these lines:

Non de otra guisa el índico serpiente
teme la encantación de los egipcios
que vós temedes, señora excelente,
qualquiera relación de mis servicios.⁶

(Excellent lady, your fear of any account of my services is no different from the fear of the Indian snake for the magic spell of the Egyptian snake-charmers.)

It is possible, as Deyermond has suggested (2007: 125), that Corella's immediate source was a sonnet by the Marquis of Santillana (Gómez Moreno & Kerkhof 65):

En el próspero tiempo las sirenas
plañen e lloran, recelando el mal;
en el adverso, ledas cantilenas
cantan, e atienden al buen temporal.
Mas, ¿qué será de mí? Que las mis penas,
cuytas, trabajos e langor mortal
jamás alternan nin son punto ajenos,
sea destino o curso fatal.

(In the fine weather the sirens / weep and lament, fearing ill; / in the bad weather they sing merry songs, / and await the fair season. / But what will become of me? For my sorrows, / afflictions, troubles and mortal languor / never change, nor are they at all foreign to me, / whether it be my destiny or fatal course.)

The seemingly irrational pleasure that sirens derive from stormy weather has been explained as follows: since, in classical mythology and medieval bestiaries, these creatures are depicted as man-eaters who lull mariners to sleep with their singing so that they can later tear them to pieces and devour them, a rough sea offers them the happy prospect of a shipwreck and easy prey. In other words, they are rejoicing at the delightful prospect of eating human flesh. This is the explanation implied by Pero Tafur, in his *Andanças*, completed by 1454, in a passage about the sirens that dwell in the straits of Messina: "ellas [las sirenas] nunca cantan sinon quando la fortuna es tan grande, que aquellos que están en la mar serié maravilla escapar" (156). But, with regard to the poems by Roís de Corella and Santillana cited above, there are surely good reasons for refuting this very logical rationalisation of the sirens' conduct. First of all, the poet who portrays himself as a victim would hardly wish to be identified with such a predator; in fact it would surely be more appropriate to compare the hard-hearted lady rather than her suitor with a siren because it is she who may lure the lover to his death. Secondly, if one looks again at the lines from Santillana's poem, one will perceive one key point: it is the

⁶ This sonnet is well analysed by Deyermond (2000: 98-101).

expectation of joy that makes the siren sing so well in the storm and it is fear for the future that makes this creature weep when the weather is fine. In other words, “there is no hint of seduction or of a song that lures men to their deaths” (Deyermond 2000: 85), and this is equally true of the sirens described by Corella.

In this respect, the siren’s behaviour is evidently modelled on that of the wild man, who, by singing in the storm, demonstrates the virtue of hope in the chill of love’s adversity.⁷ Indeed, in European folklore, the two are sometimes bound by ties of kinship. For example, the hero of the fourteenth-century romance of Tristan de Nantueil is a wild man whose foster-mother was a siren, and in the German romance of *Wigamur* the mermaid has two brothers who live in the forest (Bernheimer 158, 38). By alluding in this way to what Provençal poets, such as Raimon Jordan and Raimbaut de Beljoc, call *lo conort del salvatge*, the wild man’s solace, it would seem that Corella is identifying himself with the wild man who, as in Diego de San Pedro’s *Cárcel de amor*, personifies sexual desire or *fol amour*.

Deyermond (2000: 87; 2007: 180) points out that wild men and sirens are depicted together in the full coat-of-arms of the scholar and bibliophile Jacques d’Armagnac (1433-1477), Duke of Nemours and Count of La Marche, a gentleman who, between 1452 and 1461, dedicated a work on tournaments to Carlos, Prince of Viana.⁸ There is a fine example of a similar heraldic achievement at the base of the frontispiece of a manuscript of Flavius Josephus, *Antiquités judaïques* (Fig. 1; cf. Phillpotts 43), which he inherited from his father Bernard VIII d’Armagnac (1400-1462), Count of Pardiac. The painting on the frontispiece representing the creation of Adam and Eve is thought to be the work of the Maître de l’Hannibal de Harvard c. 1420, but the sirens and wild men were probably added between 1462 and 1465 by the court artist Jean Fouquet, or by his son the Maître du Boccace de Munich (Avril & Reynaud no. 71; Avril 310-27). In view of Corella’s association with the Prince of Viana, with whom he exchanged a series of epistles, it is possible that he was familiar with the Armagnac armorial device.

⁷ The best general study is still Bernheimer 1952. Good illustrations are found in Husband 1980, a catalogue of an exhibition held in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁸ *La forme quon tenoit des tournoys et assemblées au temps du roy Uter Pendragon et du roy Artus entre les roys et princes de la Grant Bretagne et chevaliers de la Table Ronde* (Harvard Ms Typ 131). This treatise forms an introduction to King René d’Anjou’s *Livre des tournois*. Just as the Academy of the Gay Science was established in Barcelona in 1393 in order to revive the art of the troubadours, so Jacques d’Armagnac sought to reinvigorate the art of jousting, another form of archaism, by investigating its Arthurian origins. See Stanesco (112). Louis XI confiscated his magnificent library in 1477 after executing him on a charge of treason. The siren was the emblem of Jacques d’Armagnac’s grandfather Bernard VII, Constable of Armagnac (Blackman 37). For this and other information I am much indebted to Susan Blackman.



Fig. 1: Wild Men and Sirens, Heraldic Achievement of Jacques d'Armagnac, Flavius Josephus, *Les Antiquités judaïques*, probably by Jean Fouquet, or by his son Maître du Boccase de Munich (c. 1462-65), reproduced by courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms Fr 247, fol. 3^r

Deyermond (2000: 88-89; 2007: 182) mentions two other examples of sirens behaving like wild men, both composed in the 1440s: Juan Rodríguez del Padrón's "Fuego del divino rayo" (ID 0408; RC1-9) ("el canto de la serena / oya quien es sabidor, / la qual, temiendo la pena / de la fortuna mayor, / plañe en el tiempo mejor"); and Carvajales' "Pues mi vida es llanto o pena" (ID 0607; RC1-87; Scoles 86) ("siguiendo voluntad una, / faré como la serena / que canta con la fortuna⁹ / y en bonança sufre pena"). While admitting that an exact chronology is hard to establish, Deyermond (2000: 90) conjectures that "the most likely hypothesis is that Santillana and Carvajales borrowed independently from Rodríguez de Padrón".

A much later example of this motif, illustrating the close kinship between wild men and sirens, is found in Gil Vicente's *O Triunfo do Inverno* (1529). In this festival play or masque, the figure of Winter, dressed as a wildman in furs, introduces three sirens (Hart 1972: 199):

Porque no pueda faltar
a mi triunfo cosa alguna,
la cumbre de la fortuna
quiero luego demostrar.
Veréis cantar las sirenas,
que es señal de grande afrenta,
y cantan haziendo cuenta
que todas bonanças buenas

⁹ The word *fortuna*, in the sense of 'storm', is an Italianism. There is a similar use of *fortuna* by the Castilian gentleman in Gil Vicente's *Auto da India* (1509): "Y ando un cuerpo sin alma, / un papel que lleva el viento, / un pozo de pensamiento, / una fortuna sin calma" (Hart 69, lines 109-12, and note 112). It is used as a pun in Vicente's *O Triunfo do Inverno* (line 873), and belongs to the nexus of ideas: *sirena*, *tormenta*, *palma*, *fénix* and *calma*.

son después de la tormenta. (lines 871-79)

(So that nothing may be wanting in my Triumph, I shall presently show you the height of fortune. You will see sirens singing, which is a sign of great infamy, and they will sing to recount how all good periods of fine weather occur after the storm.)

Here one sees a merging of the folkloric motif of the sirens who behave like wild men with that of the sirens of bestiary lore. The latter are frequently depicted as three musicians, one who sings and the other two who play wind or stringed instruments, such as a triple recorder and a psaltery (Fig. 2), or, as in Brunetto Latini's *Li Livres dou Tresor*, a flute, and a harp, psaltery or zither.¹⁰



Fig. 2: Two sirens play a psaltery and triple recorder and a third sings, Latin Bestiary, late 13th century, reproduced by courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, Ms 602, fol. 10^r

¹⁰ See passages from the Castilian translation, edited by Spurgeon Baldwin, and the Aragonese version by Dawn E. Prince, cited in Deyermond 2001: 166-67.

Works Cited

- Alonso, Álvaro. "Sobre los orígenes de un motivo en la lírica cancioneril". *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 70 (1993): 213-18.
- Avril, François, & Nicole Reynaud. *Les Manuscrits à Peinture en France, 1440-1520*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1993.
- . *Jean Fouquet, peintre et enlumineur du xv^e siècle*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2003.
- Bédier, Joseph. "Les Chansons du Comte de Bretagne". In *Mélanges de linguistique et de littérature offerts à M. Alfred Jeanroy par ses élèves et ses amis*. Paris: E. Droz, 1928. 477-95.
- Bernheimer, Richard. *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1952.
- Blackman, Susan A. *The Manuscripts and Patronage of Jacques d'Armagnac, Duke of Nemours (1433-1477)*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1993.
- Boase, Roger. "The 'Penitents of Love' and the Wild Man in the Storm: A Passage by the Knight of La Tour-Landry." *The Modern Language Review* 84 (1989): 817-33.
- Casapullo, Rosa, ed. *Lo diretano bando: Conforto et remedio delli veraci e leali amadori*. Quaderni degli Studi di Filologia Italiana 13 (Florence: Accademia della Crusca), 1997.
- Cerquiglini-Toulet, Jacqueline. "Polyphème ou l'ancre de la voix dans le Voir Dit de Guillaume de Machaut". In *L'Hostellerie de pensée: Études sur l'art littéraire au Moyen Âge offertes à Daniel Poirion par ses anciens élèves*. Ed. Michel Zink & Danielle Bohler. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995. 105-18.
- Clark, Willene B., & Meradith T. McMunn, eds. *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and its Legacy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
- Deyermond, Alan. "The Siren, the Unicorn, and the Asp: Santillana's Bestiary Sonnets". *Santillana: A Symposium*. Ed. Alan Deyermond. PMHRS 19. London: Queen Mary, 2000. 81-111.
- , "Serenas del cancionero folklórico de México y su ascendencia medieval". *Anuario de Letras* (special issue for Margit Frenk), 39 (2001): 163-97.
- . "Las imágenes del bestiario en la poesía de Joan Roís de Corella". In R. Beltrán, J. L. Canet and M. Haro eds. *Poesía de cancionero del siglo xv*. Valencia: Col.lecció Honoris Causa. Universitat de València, 2007. 119-31.
- Durling, Robert M., trans. & ed. *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The 'Rime sparse' and Other Lyrics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Dutton, Brian. *El cancionero del siglo xv, c.1360-1520*, 7 vols. Salamanca: Biblioteca Española del Siglo XV – Universidad de Salamanca, 1990-91.
- Faral, Edmond. "La queue de poisson des sirènes", *Romania* (1953), 74: 433-506.
- Fournival, Richard de. *Lo diretano bando: Conforto et remedio delli veraci e leali amadori*, ed. Rosa Casapullo, *Quaderni degli Studi di Filologia Italiana*, 13 (1997) Florence: Accademia della Crusca.
- Gómez Moreno, Ángel, & Maximilian P. A. M. Kerkhof, eds. *Obras completas de Íñigo López de Mendoza, marqués de Santillana*. Barcelona: Planeta, 1988.
- Hart, Thomas R., ed. 'Triunfo do Inverno' In Gil Vicente, *Farces and Festival Plays*. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon, 1972.

- Hassig, Debra. *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Husband, Timothy. *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980.
- Kerkhof, Maxim P. A. M. "Sobre la sirena en la literatura española del siglo xv". In *Studia in honorem Germán Orduna*, ed. Leonardo Funes & José Luis Moure. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá, 2001. 341-46.
- Martínez, Tomàs, ed. *Rims i proses de Joan Roís de Corella*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1994.
- Martínez Romero, Tomàs. "De poesia i lògica corellana: comentaris a *La mort per amor*", *Estudis Romànics*, 22 (2000): 197-212.
- Martos, Josep Lluís, *Les proses mitològiques de Joan Roís de Corella*. Biblioteca Sanchis Guarner 55. Valencia: Universitat d'Alacant-Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2001.
- McCulloch, Florence. *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*. University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 33. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970.
- Miquel y Planas, Ramón, ed. *Obres de J. Roig de Corella*. Barcelona: Casa Miquel-Rius, 1913.
- Mulertt, Werner. "Der wilde Mann in Frankreich", *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 56 (1932): 69-88.
- Pérez Priego, Miguel Ángel, ed. *Obra lírica de Juan de Mena*. Madrid: Alhambra, 1979.
- Phillpotts, Beatrice. *Mermaids*. London: Russell Ash; Leicester: Windward, 1980.
- Salvador Miguel, Nicasio. "Las sirenas en la literatura medieval castellana". In *Sirenas, monstruos y leyendas (Bestiario marítimo)*. Ed. G. Santonja. Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Lisboa '98, 1998. 89-120.
- Scoles, Emma, ed. Carvajal, *Poesie*. Officina Romanica 9. Rome: Ateneo, 1967.
- Stanesco, Michel. *Jeux d'errance du chevalier médiéval: Aspects ludiques de la fonction guerrière dans la littérature du Moyen Âge flamboyant*. Leiden: Brill, 1988.
- Tafur, Pero. *Andanzas y viajes de un hidalgo español*. Biblioteca de Viajeros Hispánicos, 13. Madrid: Ediciones Polifemo, 1995.
- Vuolo, Emilio, ed. *Il mare amoroso*. Rome: Università di Roma. Istituto di Filologia Moderna, 1962.
- Walberg, Emmanuel, ed. *Le Bestiaire de Philippe de Thäin*. Lund: H. J. Möller, 1900.
- White T. H. *The Book of the Beasts, being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*. London: Jonathon Cape, 1954.