



GRIFFINOLOGY



THE GRIFFIN'S PLACE
IN MYTH, HISTORY AND ART

A. L. McCLANAN





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*Dedicated to the boundless curiosity of my students, whose enthusiasm helped
hatch this endeavour and granted it flight*

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The bestiaries' organization served as a model for more encyclopaedic texts being written, such as the influential work by Bartholomeus Anglicus, or Bartholomew the Englishman (illus. 83), *De proprietatibus rerum* (On the Properties of Things, Books 12 and 18) of around 1242–7, which mentions, among other snippets, that a griffin's egg is an antidote to poison. Jean Corbechon translated Bartholomeus' Latin text into French, of which 46 manuscripts survive, this version made for King Charles v being the most lavish. Here the griffin holds pride of place in the centre of a grid and is by far the largest creature. Its compartmentalized animals, juxtaposing real and imaginary creatures but often emphasizing the latter, recall works such as the English *Aberdeen Bestiary* or the Spanish Rylands Beatus's *Noah's Ark* (both c. 1200) and had ancient antecedents as well.¹⁵ The visual ordering in the Bartholomeus manuscript, though, also looks forward to shifting paradigms in the early modern era that frame and interpret the natural world in terms of empirical evidence and carefully researched taxonomic structures. The sceptical detachment of early modern times is even more striking when we look at medieval perspectives preceding it, when the question that mattered wasn't the existence of griffins, but their moral significance.

The Bird's Head Haggadah

Fewer medieval griffins possess a positive moral spin, and one such representation comes from a manuscript likely produced in Mainz circa 1300, conventionally called the *Bird's Head Haggadah* (illus. 84). Throughout the manuscript, Jewish identity is denoted by means of distinctive pointed ears on the birdlike heads, identified as griffin heads by scholar Marc Epstein, whereas non-Jews, rendered with faces devoid of features, acquire a null value.¹⁶ The interpretative pathway leading to this use of griffin heads is quite nuanced but, to summarize: some rabbinic interpreters, writing about the curtain of the Holy of Holies, suggested the translucent curtain was layered so that the eagles and lions it depicted were mystically superimposed, becoming griffins in the eye of the beholder.¹⁷ Earlier manuscripts as in the *Ambrosian Tanakh* (c. 1236–8) deploy full griffin figures to render the Jewish mythological figure the *Ziz*, and later, sacred objects such as eighteenth-century Torah Ark valences also rendered griffins.¹⁸ Layered onto the hallowed status of the griffin on the ark's curtain, the overall positive attributes of lions and eagles in rabbinic literature may have possessed an especially poignant meaning for the Jewish population of Mainz: this city's victims of the infamous Rhineland massacres committed during the First Crusade were commemorated as being 'swifter than eagles and stronger than lions'.¹⁹ The quietly domestic act shown in this particular illumination was, in fact, fraught with significance – for baking matzo was, along with other Passover preparations, the target of especially heated antisemitic vitriol, in which the unleavened bread was wilfully misconstrued as an evil inversion of the Eucharistic host. Placing this image in the physical, as well as symbolic, heart of the manuscript worked as part of a visual polemic; the figure busily baking matzo in his



84 *Griffin-headed man placing matzo in an oven, illumination from the Bird's Head Haggadah, c. 1300.*

domed oven normalized this activity, which countered the swirls of suspicion and hostility surrounding it in certain medieval Christian sources.²⁰

That use of griffin imagery to offer an alternative positive set of values for Rhineland Jewish communities remains exceptional. Even recent literary uses of the griffin can absorb some of the earlier negative connotations, offering the hybrid creature up as a shorthand for various sorts of fakery. In Tade Thompson's Africanfuturist *Wormwood* trilogy of novels, the creature is the mental avatar for the psychic narrator. The dissonance between the character and this avatar is hinted at in its final mention in the first book where during a sleeping vision he finds himself to be his 'true self, not the gryphon'.²¹ Correspondingly in Chapter Seventeen of George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, the griffin signals artful dissimulation:

Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin – the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them which is not the exact truth.

What is perhaps most remarkable from this passage is that griffins create a kind of muddying backwash from the world of fantasy into the objective world. Indeed, it seems that once the hybrid form of the griffin has been touched upon, any depiction of its mundane parts will be unavoidably tainted – or, perhaps, augmented? – by style over meaning. Similarly, for Eliot, the modern writer's quandary is that, once fine style has hybridized with true content, the writer may never again be confident of speaking with pure honesty: it seems that, for her, tragically, words cannot serve two masters.