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The original layout of the Cathedral provided first and foremost for the services of its Benedictine community. The monks had opted to separate themselves from ordinary life and a double screen divided their approach to the High Altar from the sections of the Cathedral where the laity had access. So the medieval pilgrim was not granted right of entry to the holiest parts of the Cathedral, but pilgrimage or the Christian journey through life remained a central preoccupation.

We are inclined today to regard the layout of the Cathedral as a single liturgical space, a response in common to the sacred. This layout similarly embodies a journey, from West to East, or from the font to the High Altar, where the repeated piers of the nave draw the eye along the direction of travel (Fig1).

Entry into the sacred centre of the Cathedral was under the Cross of the former rood screen into the quire, a darker place where life in its complexity of good and evil, of base reality and of fantasy, is arrayed and passed through, before the passage to the light of the High Altar (Fig 2).
All humankind is there in the quire, from royalty (Fig 3), bishops (Fig 4) and sages (Fig 5) in the corbels, to the mass of common humanity in the heads above each stall (Fig 6). Scenes of everyday life (Fig 7) are mixed with themes drawn from popular tales, for example the cunning fox tricking the vain cockerels being one of the commonest (Fig 8). Animals of all kinds abound, from domestic (Fig 9) to those inspired by the medieval bestiaries (Fig 10), and monstrous creatures lurk on all sides (Fig 11).

As Denise Willows put it in her article for the Cathedral Record, The Wild Wood in the Quire, [1] “All these are embedded in a tanglewood of leaves and branches of plants…What we are seeing is the medieval world in microcosm - a bewildering mixture of fact and fiction.”
Whereas writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to the view that, as one put it, “the ingenious artists carved animals as they did flowers, simply to express some aspect of nature that appealed to them” [2], the feeling now is that the function of these images is far from purely decorative. The carvers would have assumed that any observer of their work, including the laity, had been immersed in a Christian culture for the entirety of their lives. Since the quire stalls in the Cathedral were for the use of monks, how much more would the images confronting them during their daily round of offices be more than just decorative?

The work of the monks was the Opus Dei, praying to God for the salvation of the souls of their fellow creatures, a spiritual function carried out on behalf of those in secular life. In the quire, there were originally biblical scenes occupying the space now filled by starred panels [3], perhaps in counterpoint to a depiction of that secular life. It is often remarked that one looks in vain for a coherent overall scheme in the quire stalls; ambiguities and contradictions are everywhere to be found. Rather than a unified pattern, one is presented with a celebration of life in its complexity.

However, there is a consistency of purpose; the carvers made the images to reinforce or highlight the Christian pathway for medieval society. The images warn against sin and depict evil and temptation, often represented by strange, indeed, monstrous creatures. Wickedness is often revealed by otherness and these creatures make visible a realm of otherness. Thus the dragon (or wyvern in the Cathedral) is the quintessential creature of hell, seeking to invade even the most sacred spaces around the High Altar (Fig. 12).

Animals are used in profusion to convey moral messages. The medieval Bestiary developed from a collection of descriptions of fabulous beasts and had become popular in England during the 1200s. It described the habits of natural and mythological animals and interpreted them in a moral manner; and it greatly influenced the carvers of the quire stalls. The fox is crafty (Fig 8, page 2), and the monkey is wicked and foolish (Fig 13). The owl is the bird of darkness and ignorance (Fig 14), and the lion by contrast is noble (Fig 15).
The moral intention to warn against sin certainly did not preclude humour. Laughter was a part of everyday life; the profane could keep company with the sacred at the heart of religious experience as elsewhere. Comical images can be found among the upper quire stall images (Figs 16 and 17).

Humour is particularly prevalent in the images underneath the misericords, whose position beneath the bottom line, as it were, is often reflected in the treatment of their subject matter. Here, for example, moral values could be reinforced by exposing and lampooning their violation (Fig 18). The pig is a dirty animal; music and dancing were considered bawdy and lustful, because music, and the pipes in particular, aroused the passions.
Alternatively, sin could be warned against by negative example. Fig 19 can be interpreted as the devil flanked by attractive ladies, a clear enough message, or as Tutivillus, the devil who had the special duty of collating sins of speech. Whether slanderous gossip, mumbled prayers or chattering in church, Tutivillus gathered the sins into his sack and carried them back to hell for storing until the Day of Judgement.

**Fig 19** Temptation or Tutivillus

**FOLIATE MASKS AND GREEN MEN**

The carvings in the quire stalls and on the misericords include a rich store of foliage, foliate masks, and Green Men. The foliate mask appeared in Roman art in the second century and became a Church motif from the fourth or fifth century: it evolved to become part of the symbolic language of the Church and frequently took on a demonic character by the medieval period. These examples from the quire stalls bear witness to that (Figs 20 and 21).

**Fig 20** Foliate mask in roundel  **Fig 21** Misericord foliate masks

The thinking behind this may be attributable to an influential eighth century theologian, Rabanus Maurus, who quoted from the books of Ezekiel and Job to show that leaves represented the sins of the flesh, or lustful and wicked men doomed to eternal damnation.

**LEAVES AS SINS**

One interpretation of images in the quire stalls begins by laying stress on the significance of the cinquefoil pattern enclosed in the roundels above and at the back of the stalls (Fig 22). The pattern of five leaves is a powerful symbol in Christianity, linked to the five wounds of Christ; these symbols are ubiquitous in the quire stalls and are to be seen as a protection: they enclose and capture the evil represented by the free-ranging leaf motif, which would otherwise spread abroad.
A similar intention sees the wyverns in Figs 11 and 12 confined within their spandrels. Figures among the leaves show the menaces to the soul to be found on the outside and the leaves which emerge from the mouths and noses of the Green Men are sins emanating from within. The process depicted in Fig 23, whatever it is, is clearly a source of distress, not to say agony.

This interpretation, which picks up that of Rabanus Maurus already mentioned, is backed up by references to Christ’s identification of sins which come from the heart and emerge via the mouth, as speech. Chapter 7 of Mark’s Gospel, for example, records Jesus as saying: “That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the hearts of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders . . . blasphemy, pride, foolishness . . . ”

LEAVES AS LIFE

An interpretation more or less diametrically opposed to the negative version just outlined would derive from chapter 15 of John’s Gospel, which has Jesus saying to the disciples: “I am the vine and ye are the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit . . .” Christian theology teaches that Christ’s death on the cross makes it possible for man to enter a new life after death. It has been argued that this life, as fresh green leaves, is what is pouring forth from many Green Men.

These two interpretations provide opposing positive and negative ideas. Good spiritual ideas could be the ordered foliage emerging from the mouth of a good man, while disordered foliage
emerges from the mouth of a worldly, sinful person. The leaves in Fig 24 are disordered and could be hawthorn, which carries the negative connotations of the Crown of Thorns [4], or thistle, a plant linked to the expulsion from Eden [4], whereas those in Fig 25 are ordered and have been identified as alchemilla [4] whose popular name of Our Lady’s Mantle sufficiently conveys its positive connotations. The Green Man in Fig 24 appears to be in greater discomfort than that in Fig 25.

A broad distinction between positive and negative leaves is plausibly detectable among the quire stall images. However, reading more specific messages into the leaves is a hazardous enterprise. Even where the leaf type is readily identifiable, the message can sometimes be consistent and sometimes inconsistent with ideas commonly associated with the leaf.

Fig 15 shown on page 5 is consistent: the lion is a noble beast and appears amid vine leaves. It is standing by or possibly on its cub, which calls up the legend that lion cubs are born dead. The male lion breathes on them to bring them to life after three days, and the resurrection reference is clear. On the other hand, Fig 26 is inconsistent: the leaf is again alchemilla and the presentation is ordered. It is hard however to regard the image of the harpie as having positive intent.
There is a similar contrast between Figures 13 and 14 illustrated on page 4; ivy can be seen as a symbol of death [4] and this accords well with it accompanying the owl as the bird of darkness in Fig 14 (though it may be noted that, as an evergreen, ivy can also be associated with fidelity and everlasting life). In Fig 13, however, the monkey, while foolish and pointing at its rear end, is found amid oak leaves, linked to positive ideas of strength and reliability [4].

The misericord shown in Fig 27 presents a similar conundrum. The ape leading out the blinking owl are both negative figures, but here again the supporter foliage is oak.

There are cases in which an apparent inconsistency can be accounted for. The wyvern in Fig 28 looks negative enough, but the tail becomes a branch with leaves that are ordered and regular. The leaf may be artemesia, which can convey the idea of spiritual healing [4] and there are examples of negative beasts, such as wyverns, being redeemed and cleansed by the Christian message, and thereby able to produce holy foliage. This could be such an example.

There is no figure at all in Fig 29, but the leaves in the spandrel are vine on the left, presented in ordered fashion, and hawthorn on the right, presented as more disordered. Vine connotations are
positive [4] and hawthorn connotations generally negative. The linkage and the significance here remain mysterious.

Fig 29 Vine and Hawthorn

CONCLUSION

In the light of all the inconsistencies and uncertainties, it seems preferable to leave aside the search for a solution to a puzzle and to regard the wide scope for interpretation of these images as part of their appeal and interest. Humour and artistry are there for all to see; the possible meanings underneath add richness which is increased since the meanings are elusive.

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REFERENCES


FURTHER READING

Challis, M G, Life in Medieval England as Portrayed on Church Misericords, Nettlebed, 1998