

# WANGERIN AND WYRM

## Christine Norvell on a Great and Cosmic Evil

In the beast fables *The Book of the Dun Cow* and *The Book of Sorrows*, Walter Wangerin, Jr. crafted a living bestiary complete with a great and cosmic evil, one he carefully chose —

I discarded the notion of a human enemy, as it is in *Watership Down* since humans in that fantasy seemed, to me, to trouble the human reader's ability to identify with the animals. I rejected next the notion that the enemy would arise from the animal kingdom itself since I wanted this to be evil, "das ding an sich" the thing itself rather than bad animals. Finally I hit upon the acceptable notion: that my evil would be framed in the solid, complex history of myth.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Wangerin chose a creature that, by its nature, had always existed. The *Wyrm* of Old English and Old Saxon lore became a literal gargantuan worm trapped in the bowels of the earth, much like the Jörmungandr of Norse mythology. Wangerin says, "The apple has a grub in it, the earth a tapeworm."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow* (New York: HarperCollins, 1976), 245.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Wangerin, *The Book of Sorrows* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 150.

Though many bestiaries date back a full millennium or more, the Aberdeen Bestiary from the year 1200 AD describes similar dragon-type creatures with explicit teaching. Wangerin employs the serpent of old, the medieval snake or dragon of the Aberdeen Bestiary, “a viper that pours out its poison,” a living thing that preys upon hope, spewing doubt into the minds of the creatures of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Of the dragon: The dragon is bigger than all other snakes or all other living things on earth. For this reason, the Greeks call it *dracon*: from this is derived its Latin name draco. The Devil is like the dragon; he is the most monstrous serpent of all; he is often aroused from his cave and causes the air to shine because, emerging from the depths, he transforms himself into the angel of light and deceives the foolish with hopes of vainglory and worldly pleasure. The dragon is said to be crested, as the Devil wears the crown of the king of pride. The dragon's strength lies not in its teeth but its tail, as the Devil, deprived of his strength, deceives with lies those whom he draws to him.<sup>4</sup>

Wangerin's Wyrms must tempt and deceive God's creatures if he is ever to escape his prison, but first Wangerin introduces us to his menagerie above the earth's crust, borrowing from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. As in Chaucer's tale, Wangerin's beasts can speak and sing, yet they are unaware of the power of sin or the growing evil below. This is most

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<sup>3</sup> Viper. From the *Aberdeen Bestiary*, English 1200. Aberdeen University Library MS 24, Folio 67R.

<sup>4</sup> Dragon. Folio 66R.

evident in Chaucer's central character, the rooster Chauntecleer:

There was not his peer in crowing . . .

By nature he knew (the hour of) each  
ascension . . .

His comb was redder than the fine coral,

And notched with battlements as if it were a  
castle wall;

His bill was black, and it shone like the jet  
stone;

Like azure were his legs and his toes;

His nails whiter than the lily flour,

And like the burnished gold was his color.<sup>5</sup>

Chaucer's Chauntecleer is haunted by dreams of his doom, soon to come to light in an equally proud fox. In *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, pride causes both a fox and a rooster to fall, but Chauntecleer learns from his mistakes. As in any good fable, the moral is clear — pride is a vice, and flattery is dangerous.

In *The Book of the Dun Cow*, however, Wangerin deepens the animal character of Chauntecleer to a firmly human status. Unlike Chaucer's direct morals and the medieval bestiaries, Wangerin doesn't overtly

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue of the Nun's Priest," *Harvard University*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/prologue-tale-and-epilogue-nuns-priest>, lines 2850-2864.

sermonize. At first, Chauntecleer reigns with bluster and fuss over his coop and the animals of his kingdom. His hens live in fear of him yet care deeply. He rages at Mundo Cani Dog yet values him. He is the most emotional rooster you could ever meet. But that can be a strength because Chauntecleer is not a picture of perfection. He instead exemplifies virtue in his weakness.

When his hens reveal their eggs are being stolen, Chauntecleer cries crows of grief to mourn their loss and his loss of the children that could have been. Yet he turns with wit and wisdom to angrily battle the thief and murderer, Ebenezer Rat. Instead of killing him in the fight, which would appear just, he stabs two of his own pin feathers into the rat's shoulders as the rat gnaws at Chauntecleer's belly. Ebenezer can never hide in a hole again or sneak with ease into the coop. Chauntecleer defends his hens perfectly.

When Chauntecleer must save the Widow Mouse's children, he knows he must. She is stunned with grief at her husband's murder and can barely speak, yet he wisely asks, "I want to love your children. I want to see them living that I may love them."<sup>6</sup> He persuades her to break from grief so he can help. And he must persuade her tiny children to trust him, a stranger. Chauntecleer is more than winsome. He discerns what the children need to hear.

When Chauntecleer must persuade the beautiful hen Pertelote to let her guard down, to love him truly, he cries, "Tell me, so that I never become the thing you fear. Pertelote, I should despair to be the thing that makes

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<sup>6</sup> Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, 51.

you afraid.”<sup>7</sup> He desires a love without barriers because he loves well. Even in the first day of battle against the evil rooster Cockatrice, Chauntecleer “choked on his love” for his animals.<sup>8</sup>

When the earth itself responds in cloud and rain to Wyrn’s rising evil, Chauntecleer knows. If the sun cannot mark the day, he will. His crowing “had become both sunlight and certitude for his animals; it made for them the day they never saw. It pointed placement for all their scattered and shredded feelings. And it brought them through in good order,” much like the cock and his crows in the Bestiary.<sup>9 10</sup>

When John Wesley Weasel reacts to the death of the Widow at the bite of the basilisks, he begs Chauntecleer to allow him to kill, “One wants hating. Pleads for hating. Kills for hating.”<sup>11</sup> But Chauntecleer is more measured. “I don’t ever want to hear that again. Never again in this Coop or on this land do I want to hear that you hate a living soul.”<sup>12</sup> His wisdom seems God-given at a time when fight is needed.

But Chauntecleer is far from perfect. He knows God has placed him as a leader over this part of the earth yet he does rage against God when things go awry. When the rains are unceasing, when his three sons are killed by the basilisks, when his animals die by scores in the

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<sup>7</sup> Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, 73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Cock. Folio 39R.

<sup>11</sup> Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

final battles, Chauntecleer is filled with doubt at the suffering. This is no simple fable with a single lesson.

It asks the why of evil. “Why is Wyrms?” Pertelote asks of Chauntecleer. “Wyrms is,” Chauntecleer responds. More importantly, the Wyrms of these stories uses the foundational tales from the 9th and 10th centuries. A wyrms, a draco, a dragon are all evil. Unlike Satan, these creatures were never created as good. None made a choice and transformed from good to evil. They simply are the evil that must be.

Early in the first book Wangerin reveals this medieval cosmography, a universe where the earth is at its center. The animals on its crust are the earth’s Keepers, “the last protection against an almighty evil which, should it pass them, would burst bloody into the universe and smash into chaos” all things orderly and good.<sup>13</sup> By Chapter 12, Wyrms rejoices that he has weakened a spot in the crust. He would be free to “gallop through the spheres of the universe. Oh, he would swallow the moon in a gulp. He would bloody the sun. And he would roar almighty challenges to the Lord God Himself.”<sup>14</sup> But this medieval God is distant, deistic. By preventing Wyrms from accessing the surface, God allows his Job-like creatures to suffer internal attacks first. Wyrms has the power to send dreams, dreams that appeal to Chauntecleer’s pride and his power. Sin gains ground in the hearts of those who doubt and weaken, and the earth’s protective crust is softened. With the rains that last for months, Wyrms gains his freedom and

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<sup>13</sup> Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

attacks with the might of his basilisks who inspire fear and despair while killing with their bites.

In the sequel, *The Book of Sorrows*, Wangerin says of his animals: "But Keepers of the universal evil can never retire to a quiet insignificance. They participate in the universal; the good order of the whole creation looks to them, and what they are gives heaven pause, whether they know it or not."<sup>15</sup> It's a humble status like our own as mankind.

Yet Wyrm grew in power, hating God more than ever, longing "to destroy the work of his holy hand: chaos, cold, and the illimitable dark! He meant to sink the mighty God into the same deep gloom which now was his own world."<sup>16</sup> Wyrm picks at God's creation, at places of pain, at the loss of relationships, insinuating himself. Though he is severely injured at the end of *The Book of the Dun Cow*, enough to withdraw from the surface, he does not die. More than one animal sacrifices themselves to cause injury, to blind him forever, but evil is not conquered.

In *The Book of Sorrows*, Wyrm's tack changes. He continues to wage war through dreams and doubt, but in the most fearful paradox, Wyrm chooses to sacrifice himself, so that his spirit is free to continue chipping away at the animals.

This mutation is altogether horrific. There's an attitude to sacrifice, to the ransom paid to evil being the means of evil's defeat, that is thematically Christian.

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<sup>15</sup> Wangerin, *The Book of Sorrows*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

That, after you have received the Holy Spirit, that is the spiritual, apprehensible dove, descending and remaining upon you, you are not caught outside eternity, set apart from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; and that the **dragon**, that is, the Devil, does not kill you. For if you have the Holy Spirit, the dragon cannot come near you. Take heed, therefore, O man, and stay within the catholic faith, live within it, remain steadfast within it, within the one catholic church. Be as careful as you can that you are not caught outside the doors of that house, that the dragon, the serpent of old, does not seize you and devour you, as Judas was at once devoured by the devil and perished, as soon as he had gone forth from the Lord and his brother apostles.<sup>17</sup>

And this remains the warning, not the moral, of this second beast fable. Wangerin humanizes Chauntecleer the rooster in frailty and strength. Chauntecleer falters most when he is unable to receive love and healing from others. In both stories, it is when he isolates himself, when he feels most damaged, that Wyrms overwhelms his mind and heart. It is the constant internal battle against the dragon that must be overcome as the Bestiary warns. To live within the strength of the community, within the universal church, is the care of each soul even when most exposed. Wyrms insidiously destroys the animal kingdom, targeting the most shallow creatures first, further using them for his ends before killing them. He kills the Keepers so that they can

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<sup>17</sup> Dragon. Folio 65R.

no longer keep. They can no longer hold onto the community God designed. Wyrn is the dragon, one who “transforms himself into the angel of light and deceives the foolish with hopes of vainglory and worldly pleasure.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dragon. Folio 66R.

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