

Albion Tetralogy

- I. The Changeling's Mirror
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Albion Tetralogy, Part II. Interlude: The Island of the Mighty

[§ 1, The Illuminated Manuscript]¹

On the pages of illuminated manuscripts of the later Gothic centuries a strange habit can be observed. Jesus Christ may be in the middle of the page, but the margins are covered with birds and beasts and little scenes from everyday life and grotesque caricatures of such scenes. These things were called *babwyneries*, that is, babooneries, or monkey-business. [...] if one tries to trace the baboonery to its source, one finds that it originated in England. Here it appears already at the classic Gothic moment, in the middle of the thirteenth century, and by 1300 it had become a universal English fashion – just at the moment when the religious representations on the same pages had become most exquisite, sophisticated and often most exacting in their emotional intensity. The polarity expressed in this will engage our attention later. As regards the marginal grotesques...

– Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*

The reader is meant to meet this passage as the playful opener to the second part of the work, the interlude ‘The Island of the Mighty’, flanked by two, less ludic, narrative blocks. This middle section seeks as a whole to build the wider world in which this version of the Arthurian story takes place, supplying a Pastoral and Georgic anti-epic of “small” things, nested within the epic. Cyclic Nature through which passes the linear narrative of the great figures of the heroes; the agricultural Labours of the Months, and a syncretistic, “asterisk-reconstruction” of a heathen ritual calendar, the Wheel of the Year, of the peasants: a microcosm of the island-kingdom of a fictional, but traditional, Arthurian Albion. The opening conceit pursued in the babooneries passage is that we are now reading some retelling of the ancient originally oral Matter of Britain as written down much later in an illuminated manuscript, just as, historically, the Arthurian legends were. Whereas in the first part the narrative took centre-stage, to be resumed in the third, this interlude seems to shift focus – a move a mediæval work would never have made – to what lies at the edges of the action, beginning even with the very borders of the manuscript-page. Here the marginalia, with their babooneries and bestiary, become, impossibly, the subject of the poem, invading and waylaying the main text, whilst the narrative, with which it should be concerned, hangs in abeyance.

Quod est superius est sicut quod inferius: et quod inferius est sicut quod est superius.

– Tabula Smaragdina

¹ The versification is Old English such as that of *Beowulf*.

Now eye and ear err a moment.
What odd items edge these pages,
beckon from the borders? — Babooneries flaunt.
Of the narrative, enough! Ignored margins,
choked cheek-by-jowl with the chief purpose,
reveal devices: the verges swarm;
so turn from the text to tarry idle
amid the scribe's sketches.

In the margins: The Babooneries

On the scraped parchment
round the writing, there wreath framing
grisaille tableaux; designs and scenes
blazoned about the black letter,
over and under in the uncial quires:
emblems circle on either side
in linked legendry, a limner's doodling
fool-fantasies — or in fable-talk;
the key to the code, correspondence:
a ladder linking least to greatest,
above and below bound by signatures.

Here an obscure master skilfully made
interlacing illustrations
in painted panels: picturings such
as to beguile our gaze. This forgotten artist
(minor maker, of a mannered school)
drew drôlleries, his dreaming quill
—in silver-point, then sepia tincture
culled from cuttlefish, or by cooking together
oakgalls and iron with Arabic gums—
wove the wormshapes.

Wire-drawn spiral
vinescrolls advance — or reverse forwards —
either-ended amphisbænæ;
ink lacertines interlace links:
rubrisher's rusts rouged miniatures
illuminated in lavish colours
of crimson lake, copper verdigris,
lapis-lazuli and leaf-of-gold.
No spandrel space but it is spilling over-
stuffed with inhabited historiation:
the page-portals' posts and lintels,
topping titles, in tail-pieces,
from capital headings to the colophon-leaf,
these thresholds thrive.

Thronging creatures
nest initials; in narrow captions,

coil clustering; from carpet-pages
invade versals: cavorting apes
and gubber-tushed, gurning monkeys
moon meddlesomely from majuscule letters
or stalk on stilts. Stags chase huntsmen.
Hags horse on grooms, or in the high welkin
pilot kettles. Pigs soar aloft
with fish in the air. Feuding lindworms,
reptilian-taloned, tongue-uncurling,
beak-snouted beasts with bodies like ribbons,
liripipes looping from their lips' barbels,
twist twaytorsos, entwining necks
(a single cephalon serves four shoulders)
to attack their tails; which turn to fronds,
as their feet finial with foliations
gargoyles lurk in: the goblin-kindreds
in their beastly bawdry.

A Bestiary

Basilisks staring;
those gold-guardians, gryphons rampant,
or sergreant seeing they have sweeping wings:
pennons of eagles from pelts of lions;
hound-headed people; from hottest deserts,
sunshade-footed sciapodes;
these blink from their nipples: the blemmyæ,
their face in their chests: faraway tribes.
Amid pulling mouths and poking tongues
shanks-akimbo sheelanagigs
are straddling boldly at the beard-strokers
(an archer's aiming... an arse his target);
with snake-sneezers, the snail-jousters,
the knuckle-gnawers and nose-thumbers,
motley monsters – manticora,
a-prowl hungry for human prey;
the catoblepas, cockatrices,
onocentaurus, ouroboros;
mocking mongrels of Man and fish;
taproot-tortured, tendril-spewing,
the Jacks-in-the-Green, jailed in garlands:
woodywoses; wyverns that duel
the yale and pard, and unicorns
but maidens tame – they manifest here
their hybrid heraldries.

He heeds them less
who is lured through lattices of labyrinthine
braided brambles, embroiled in sprouting

Interlace; keyfrets

crinkum-crankums of crossed briars
like withes wattled; through this weave our sight
– tracery-tranced by trellis-layered
ringchains and ribs in ravelling knots,
their shapes shimmering – shuttles dazzled,
fuddled by fretwork's forks and puzzles:
as recursive patterns repeat and recall
somehow they seem to seethe moving
and writhe at rest; reach out and spire,
and stir in starts, yet to our staring gaze
stay still-standing; steps forth retrace
through curlicues. by counter-turnings
on retrodden trails, two steps backward,
boggled by bosage; we are baffled by the clew
that threaded the maze. Enthralling stems
snaggle in snarling snaky suckers,
grasp us grovelling in gripping coils,
limb-leashing thorns lock their pinions
and we are entailed in the trammels of the tanglewood.
From blocked blunder in blind alleys,
kimb-kamb stymied key-angled nooks,
wood-bewildered, the way thwarted
by strangling strands of striving branches,
gnarled vignetting of gnawing roots,
our eyes witness windows open:
look now we light on levels beyond
timbered textures, trapping friezes,
rick-rack fylfots whose roads meander;
forests of filigree.

In figures-of-eight,
honeycombed hollows: on hubs the cusps
cinch circlewise their cinquefoil lobes,
rayed like roses. Horizons dawn
in the spaliered spangles. Spy medallions
a cunning wright enriched with curious
knotwork niches, that nest rosettes
finely faceted with figural schemes,
inked with images: illustrations
mime mortal life in miniatures
that catch as in crystal, compassing all,
mappæ-mundi, the mind-landscapes
of our rubricator. In registers here
details deepen, like doors parting.
Cartouches teem; in trompe-l'œil,
are shown like shadows the shapes of Man-,

Roundels

Miniatures

Beast- and Birdkind. There are bustling scenes
of worldly tasks: The Works and Days.
Our regard is guided, as though a gate opened
in the painted page. We pass inward,
where fictive phantoms unfold alive:
survey visions, in view at once,
of worlds in worlds.

A world in little:

The Seasons' cycle; there are suns and moons,
wearing faces of worthy semblance;
the Sun's portrait, a powerful sovereign
chaired in his chariot with champing steeds,
heroic king, with rays like flames:
heat-haloed lord. The heavens' regent
and source of Life, in solar splendour
— golden godhead — goes west yet in
triumph returns to the temples of stones.



Full-faced the Moon is a fair Matron;
in her charge the sway of this changeful world:
high-horned her crown. Whole and waxing,
her beaming smile with buxom dimples
throbs down its thrills of thriving growth,
crescent bounties — yet to crooked banes,
madness and murrain from her milky vapour,
in her fickle humours, as she fades wilting,
her blessings wane, the blighting quarter
when her silver sickle sends pestilence;
mistress measuring monthly courses
of ardour and œstrus and the ocean swell,
she fulfils her phases floodtide to ebb:
at new a nymph, nubile Virgin;
hooked, hollowcheeked, humped and gibbous,
the wizened waniand: witch-favoured Crone.



Star-signs are stelled: through their stations suns,
from house to house, haste in transit:
observe this zone, the Zodiac's belt,
its sigils circling. The Solstice-feasts,
the hours of Equinox, asterisk-marked,
Cross-Quarter Days, this chronicle charts
written in roundels whose rims and spoked
clockwork-like cogs recall armilla
or astrolabe's orbits of rings
and wheels in wheels, the whirligigs
of that greatest mill, the grinding heavens'
turning spindle: thus Time's axletree

The Zodiac

The Calendar

metes out the months. Each mansion helmed
by a star-steerer, in each storied sphere
the manikins mimic the Month's Labours;
as parents drudge, prattling youngsters,
with toys and tag and tugs-of-war,
ply their pastimes. Their play is short.
From childer-gaming, they grow to chores,
harsh husbandry and home-making;
as The Wheel of the Year whirls its cycle
their tasks are winding through turning seasons:
Summer-sultry heat.

The Labours of the Months

Children's games

The Seasons

Save the harvest:
rainshowers reek;
rank and clammy
Autumn Equinox.
Air is changing.
The woods wither.
Winds are mournful.
Days are dwindling
to the dead season.
In raw darkness
rime chains the ground,
cold come again.
Clay is frozen.
Winter weathers
are warmed by Spring
when lithe lenten
unlocks the frost's
icy shackles.
Earth enlivens.
Buds burgeoning.
Birds sing anew.
Crops are planted.
The corn ripens.
The seas are sailed.
The Sun's shining.
Dogstar at dawn: dazing swelter
– from sward-delving, to death of swine,
through harvest-home, and hay-making,
a calendar-table of common duties:
these atomies perform the almanac's
round-running year. They wrest their yield
from acre, orchard; eke out their lives:
beeskep and byre, amid beast and fowl
in swink and sweat, swive and gender.

Butterflies and birds; bats and vermin;
the hodmandods (the house-bearer),
the drumbledrones, drowsy chafers;
the biting bugs, bots and weevils,
ladybeetles and leatherjackets;
moths and midges and mawkish grubs,
earwigs and emmets (attercop spinsters
wait in their parlours to welcome guests):
Nature's menagerie from gnats to dragons
in stylised studies – stars to insect
creepy-crawlies – crowds around them
(in a marge muster the mice and frogs;
as their hosts battle herons are waiting).
Planting and ploughing; their plots tended,
the fields feed them till they fatten the dung
with their dust in death; after days patterned
by eternal returns. [...]

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