
The Basilisk and Rattlesnake, or a European Monster Comes to America

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This article looks at legends of the basilisk, a fabulous creature of ancient and medieval lore that was believed to kill with a glance, and shows how many characteristics of the basilisk were transferred to the rattlesnake in the New World. The deadly power of "fascination," also known as "the evil eye," which legend attributes to both basilisk and rattlesnake, was understood as an expression of resentment over the perceived lack of status of reptiles in the natural world and directed at so-called "higher" animals. The persistence of such legends suggests some of the limitations of capitalistic American society in dealing with inequalities.

Some fabulous animals such as the centaur and the chimera are clearly identifiable composites of actually existing creatures. Others do not follow any one universal formula. The dragon, for example, can have many possible combinations of anatomical features taken from lizards, snakes, birds, bats, human beings and other creatures. In some cases, the indefinite character of such a being may reflect a lack of belief in it or a less corporal identity assumed by the creature in the human imagination. In such a case, the lack of fixed features is almost part of its nature. The taxonomist of the human imagination need not follow the model of his biologist counterpart.

Ancient and medieval classifications lacked the exactness of modern biology since they were not made systematically. The anatomy of most creatures was, in fact, somewhat indeterminate. The bestiaries were full of arcane lore, but they matched names with physical traits and stories without much consistency. Often, distinct creatures became equated through etymological tangles. The attributes of an animal, in other words, were less fixed points of reference than motifs, constantly altered and recombined in novel ways.

Rather than being a matter of carelessness, this reflected a view of nature in which all boundaries were constantly fluid. The gaps between creatures would be

filled by transitional forms. Thus, for example, mermaids would mediate between people and fish, winged dragons between serpents and birds. This is what Lovejoy (1964, pp. 55-60) has called the "principle of continuity," the idea that nature does not allow for sharp distinctions. The notion, as Lovejoy has documented extensively, goes back to Aristotle, and has exercised a continuous influence in biology through the Middle Ages to the modern period. Even today, there are debates over whether categories like "species," used to classify animals, are divisions that exist in nature or arbitrary creations of the human mind.

The Old World Basilisk

The basilisk, though usually considered a serpent, does not have clearly defined anatomical features. In the visual arts, one cannot always distinguish a basilisk from a dragon, a serpent, a wyvern and other creatures. A basilisk can have bat or bird wings or no wings at all. It may or may not have a crown on its head. Sometimes the basilisk has an extra eye in its tail to strike down adversaries from all directions (Charbonneau-Lassay, 1991, p. 423). But there is no way to know how a basilisk appears, since looking at it, according to legend, brings death. It is almost always an icon of fear. The most characteristic feature of the basilisk is its ability to kill at a distance, either with venom or a glance.

No concrete image is ever so terrifying as the nebulous figures conjured in imagination, and so when people have believed in the basilisk, its form has generally not been fixed. The ability to kill with a glance, however, is shared by the gorgons of Greek mythology, who may be regarded as remote ancestors of the basilisk. Referring to the gorgons, Blumenberg (1985, p. 116) has written, "The most extreme intensification of the terrifying quality of a being is when its mere face drives out all life."

The most famous of these three terrifying sisters was Medusa. By guiding himself with a mirror, the hero Perseus fought Medusa and cut off her head. According to Blumenberg (1985, p. 117), the figure of Medusa began to lose its terror when, in the second century before Christ, Apollodoros fixed its representation as a woman with snakes for hair. Ironically, the figure that men could not even gaze upon became, in the Renaissance, a popular decorative motif. At least some of the associations of Medusa, however, seem to have been transferred to the basilisk. Like Medusa, a warrior with a mirror and a sword often fought the basilisk.



The Gorgon Medusa, from a Greek vase, sixth century B. C.

There are scattered references to the basilisk in the writing of antiquity. The most detailed and extensive come from Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century A. D. The following description has been especially influential:

The basilisk serpent also has the same power [as the catoblepas, to kill with its gaze]. It is a native of Cyrenaica, not more than 12 inches long, and adorned with a bright white marking on the head like a sort of diadem. It routs all snakes with its hiss, and does not move its body forward in manifold coils like the other snakes but advancing with a middle raised high. It kills not only by its touch but also with its breath, scorches up grass and burns rocks. Its effect on other animals is disastrous: it is believed that

once one was killed with a spear by a man on horseback and the infection rising through the spear killed not only the rider but the horse. (1963, book 8, chap. 33)

It is, in brief, an image of pure destructive power.

While Pliny's description is fairly naturalistic, medieval authors equated physical destruction with moral degeneration and further demonized the basilisk. In the Middle Ages, the basilisk became identified with the cockatrice, a serpent mentioned occasionally in Isaiah and other Old Testament books, the actual identity of which remains uncertain. Neckam (1863, chap. 120), writing about 1180 A.D. in *De Naturis Rerum*, called the basilisk "an evil unique in the world." He also reported that the basilisk or cockatrice hatched from the egg of an old cock, which is incubated by a toad (1863, chap. 75), a notion repeated in bestiaries prior to and including the Renaissance.



The basilisk, from a woodcut, Nuremberg 1510. In this representation, the basilisk has been fused with the cockatrice, a fabulous creature hatched from an egg laid by an old rooster, and shows features of a rooster as well as a snake.

This story contributed to the diabolic character of the basilisk. In addition to possessing enormous destructive power, it was an unnatural creature, produced through a confusion of both genders and species. Like hens that allegedly engaged in crowing, cocks that reportedly laid eggs were, in the Middle Ages, sometimes condemned to death (Evans, 1987, p. 10). In 1474, for example, such a rooster was ceremoniously executed in Bale, and a similar incident occurred as late as 1730 in Swiss Prattigau (Evans, 1987, p. 162). Pliny (1963, book 8, chap. 32) reported that the ability to kill by gazing was shared by the catoblepas, a creature whose head was so heavy it always looked at the ground. As previously noted, the identities of these fantastic creatures were ambiguous and almost interchangeable. Medieval copyists and translators sometimes equated the catoblepas and basilisk. Topsell (1968, book I, pp. 206-207), the Elizabethan naturalist, identified the catoblepas, as described by Pliny, with the gorgon.

What some believe was the last basilisk hunt in Europe took place in Warsaw during the year 1587, when two little girls had been found dead in a cellar. Authorities sent a condemned man in, outfitted with mirrors. He emerged with a snake that was judged to be a basilisk (Cohen, 1989, p. 227).

The New World Snake

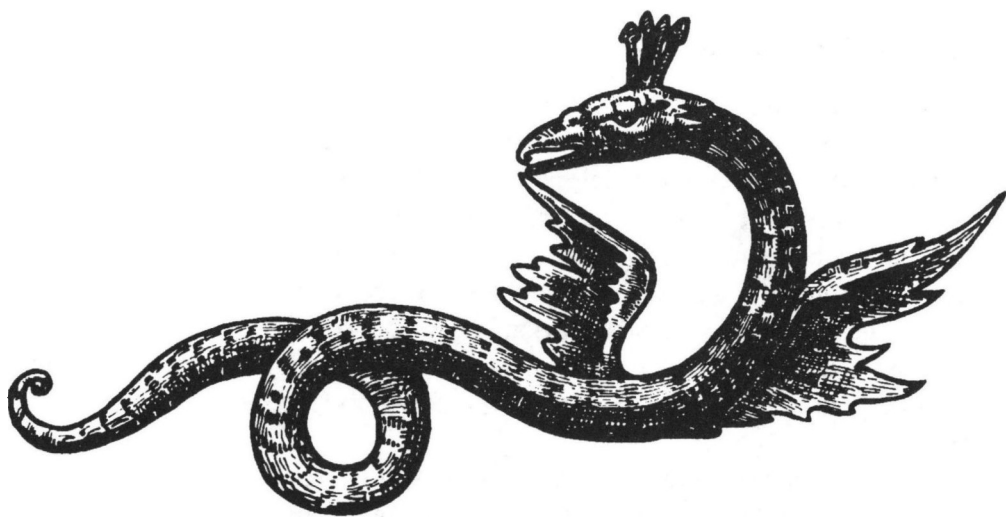
However, entering the modern period, the basilisk did not join Medusa as an innocuous decorative motif. Rather, it appears to have emigrated to the New World and adopted a different name. The power of killing with a gaze was attributed to American snakes, especially the rattlesnake. Cotton Mather even reported an incident in which somebody hit a rattlesnake with a stick and the venom passed up through the weapon, causing his hand to swell (in Masterson, 1946, p. 180). The event is nearly identical with the previously quoted account in Pliny of a man who attacked a basilisk with a spear. Similar occurrences were reported by many explorers and, as I will show, found their way into highly respected books of natural history.

The resemblance of these early accounts of snakes to the legends of the basilisk is far too close to be simply accidental. Accounts of both creatures typically involve a trail of devastation, birds fluttering in helpless confusion before falling dead, and often even the destruction of vegetation. It is possible that colonists first identified rattlesnakes as basilisks, at least in oral reports. Early explorers, overwhelmed by the novelty of the American flora and fauna, lacked a frame of

reference and a vocabulary to describe what they saw. In consequence, they equated the plants and animals with those in books of antiquity. Similarly, the Indians were variously identified with the ancient Greeks, Teutons and the lost tribes of Israel.

One of the first rattlesnakes seen by European explorers, a tropical variety known as the “Mexican West Coast rattlesnake,” has the scientific name “*Crotalus basiliscus*” (Wilson, 1987, p. 42, 62). The Latin designation is usually understood to mean “royal snake,” but it could also be understood as “basilisk snake.” Both the authenticated and fabulous serpents derive their names from the Latin root “basil” meaning “king.”

Some of the early representations of snakes in the New World incorporate the crown or diadem traditionally accorded the basilisk. One such picture, for example, is found on a frescoed ceiling of the Uffizi building in Florence, created by Lodovico Buti in 1588 (Honour, 1975, p. 32). An allegorical engraving from the early seventeenth century by the Dutch artist Crispijn de Passe entitled “America,” features a serpent-like creature with wings and a crown, clearly recognizable as a basilisk (Honour, 1975, p. 88).



A winged serpent from “America” by Crispijn de Passe in the early seventeenth century, clearly identifiable as a basilisk.

Nevertheless, the identification of the rattlesnake and the basilisk is not made fully explicit in any account from early America. It may be that stories of the basilisk created an intellectual paradigm, which could then be equated with the rattlesnake. In such a case, the rattler would be a successor to the basilisk in much the same way as the latter followed Medusa. What migrated to the New World, in other words, could have been a cluster of motifs, first identified with the basilisk and later with the rattlesnake. The power of the rattlesnake to kill with a gaze was known as “charming” or “fascination.” The snake, explorers reported, used a sort of hypnosis, compelling birds and rodents to approach against their wills. The victim would either move straight into the jaws of the rattler or, often, simply drop dead of fear.

Although reports of charming are largely an American phenomenon, there are hints of this in the Old World. In 1762, the naturalist Arcel presented a paper to the Swedish Academy in which he argued that the common viper was capable of fascination. To prove this, he placed a mouse in the same cage with a viper. The snake reportedly stood motionless “with fixed eyes and distended mouth,” while the rodent entered straight into its jaws (Good, 1826, vol. I, p. 431). In 1853 an English newspaper in India reported that a cobra had been seen charming a hawk. The bird of prey, according to the account, shrieked and struggled in fear, but was compelled to approach the adversary (Maloney, in Maloney, ed., 1976, p. 109). In the story “Kaa’s Hunting” from Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, written around the end of the nineteenth century, a python is credited with the ability to charm its prey. The serpent sways its head back and forth until its gaze completely overpowers a tribe of monkeys, that must then advance in unison toward its jaws on command (1895, p. 54). In Hardy’s *Return of the Native*, from the late nineteenth century, the dwellers on Egdon Heath need the boiled fat of an adder for a medicine. One of them remarks, “Neighbors, how do we know but that something of the old serpent in God’s garden that gied the apple to the young woman with no clothes, lives in adders and snakes still? Look at his eye – for all the world like a villainous black current. Tis to be hoped he can’t ill-wish us!” (undated, p. 367).

But these reports from the Old World could not match either the frequency or the pathos of accounts of fascination from America. Typical is the following passage from Rev. Bingley’s *Animal Biography*, a leading reference book on both sides of the Atlantic at the start of the nineteenth century:

Le Vaillant ... says that he saw, on the branch of a tree, a bird trembling

as if in convulsions, and at the distance of about four feet, on another branch, a large species of snake, that was lying with out-stretched neck, and fiery eyes, gazing steadily at the poor animal. The agony of the bird was so great that it was deprived of the power of moving away; and when one of the party killed the snake, it was found dead upon the spot – and entirely from fear – for on examination it appeared not to have received the slightest wound. (1805, book II, p. 83-84)

The sympathy with the author here is plainly with the bird, and the account probably is a projection of his own fear of the snake.

Though the actual events correspond to accounts of a creature being killed by a basilisk, there is no precedent for the psychological emphasis in such descriptions. The image of a bird being dominated and drawn, against its own volition, into the jaws of the snake is a suggestive one. It might, for example, call to mind a sinner, terrified but unable to reform, who must enter the mouth of hell. The image is, most especially, suggestive of sexual seduction.

Although many highly respected scientists reported observing rattlesnakes in the act of fascination, it was apparent to a few observers, even in early America, that the melodrama of the accounts rendered them suspicious. In his “Report on Amphibia” presented to the American Philosophical Society in 1799, De Beauvois stated:

If then the effects in question really exist, we may be allowed to believe that serpents, destined by nature (our common mother, always consistent with herself; always equally beneficent and just,) to subsist on animals which have the advantage of superior flight and speed, ought to be endowed with proper arms and a power by whose aid they may surprize and secure their prey. But what are these arms? What this power? Is it one of those secret operations which nature seems to envelope in impenetrable mystery? No. It is simply a fact till now unknown, merely because ... these animals, whose pretended ugliness and danger have been so much exaggerated, instill into us a species of repugnance which few have the courage to overcome. (1977, p. 364)

De Beauvois went on to refute the accounts, which satisfied many in the scientific community but had little immediate impact on popular publications.

There are a number of early American tales in which a human being

succumbs, or almost succumbs, to the power of fascination. An article by Thorpe published anonymously in an 1855 issue of Harper's *New Monthly Magazine* concerns a young girl who fell under the power of a black snake in Franklin county, Missouri:

The child had been sitting on the bank of the creek nearly all the forenoon until near dinner time, when she got up, went to the house, asked for a piece of bread and butter, and again returned to her place of watching. The father stealthily followed the child, and to his horror saw a huge black snake slowly raise its head into the child's lap, and receive the bread and butter from her hand; and when she would attempt to take a bite of the bread, the snake would become very angry, and the child, trembling like a leaf, would promptly return the food to the monster. The father was completely paralyzed, not being able to move hand or foot; the blood fairly clogged in his veins and he groaned in agony.

The account elaborates how the father eventually shot the snake, but that the little girl died almost immediately afterwards (1855, pp. 479-480). The story seems almost medieval. It suggests possession of the girl by the devil in the form of a familiar, the animal companion said to accompany a witch.

Today large predators such as the bear or wolf have long since lost their terror. Textbooks endeavor not to regard animals in a judgemental way. But, despite injunctions in the name of science and etiquette, the rattlesnake retains some of its diabolic character, at least in parts of the American Southwest. "Rattlesnake roundups," held annually in many Texas towns, are conducted with remarkable vehemence, as the hapless reptiles are unceremoniously herded, played with, slaughtered and finally eaten for the entertainment of a delighted public. As one folklorist reported, "I grew up understanding that a man even halfway decent would always shut any gate he had opened to go through and would always kill any rattlesnake he got a chance at" (quoted in Wilson, 1987, p. 57).

This feeling about rattlers is vividly rendered in a poem entitled "The Snake Hunters," written at the end of the seventies about the rattlesnake roundup in a Texas town:

Strangers sometimes call us cruel,
Say we upset nature's balance,
Jeer at our sport.

Have they ever seen a good bird dog bit?
 Seen his head swell with the black poison
 While we stood dumbly by?
 What do they know of evil
 In their shiny boots
 With their opinionated wives?
 What do they know of how we live down here?
 How bad a thing can be?
 Read your scripture,
 You'll see soon enough
 The serpent was the Lord's mistake!
 Chances are without it
 We'd be dancing in the fields of plenty,
 Instead of scratching hardpan.
 Leave us our pleasures, such as they are –
 A tramp in the woods, a mouthful of snake. (Flanders, 1979)

Many sophisticated people, I suspect, may share this view of the rattler, though few will openly admit to it.

The “Evil Eye”

The belief that the basilisk or rattlesnake could kill with a glance is, in fact, a variant of an ancient and very widespread folk belief known as the “evil eye,” the capacity to cause ill luck or even death with a gaze. Legends usually ascribe this ability to people, more rarely to snakes and other animals. The very word, “fascination,” that refers to the conquests by a rattlesnake, is also common in describing spells cast by people with the evil eye (Swiderski, in Maloney, ed., 1976, p. 29). Viewing the alleged ability of the basilisk and rattlesnake in a wider perspective raises some interesting questions. Why did sophisticated people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continue to ascribe the power of the evil eye to serpents, when they would have considered the phenomenon in a purely human context to be a preposterous superstition? And why was it specifically ascribed to rattlers rather than some other animal?

According to Garrison and Arensberg (In Maloney, ed., 1976, p. 286-328), belief in witchcraft is most characteristic of comparatively homogeneous, egalitarian cultures, while belief in the evil eye is characteristic of cultures that are stratified

but not yet bureaucratized. Both witchcraft and the evil eye are generally expressions of “invidia” or envy, in the latter case directed across barriers of status and position. Belief in both witchcraft and the evil eye, the authors argue, decline as political and social systems become bureaucratized and power becomes increasingly impersonal (1976, p. 322-324).

Accounts of the basilisk and rattlesnake seem to fit the pattern articulated by Garrison and Arensberg remarkably well. As Lovejoy (1964) has shown in his classic *The Great Chain of Being* (1964), the predominant view of nature has been, since antiquity, hierarchical, whether the ascending order has been called “providence” or “the scale of evolution.” Man has generally been placed at the apex of terrestrial creatures, followed respectively by mammals, birds and reptiles. Like the basilisk before him, the rattlesnake, a reptile, is almost always described as working its power of fascination on “higher” creatures. Many rattlesnakes, in fact, regularly eat lizards, but accounts from the early nineteenth century habitually mention only birds and squirrels as its prey. While Darwinian theory did add a hint of social mobility to the feudal kingdom of nature, this applied only to species and not to individual creatures. The rattlesnake and the basilisk were, in effect, venting resentment over their lack of status in the animal kingdom through destruction of animals ranked above them.

The rattlesnake, to put it differently, becomes a rebel against the elaborate hierarchical order of nature. But to challenge this order, it is necessary to first understand the order, so stories of fascination implicitly attribute to rattlesnakes a human sort of intelligence. The snakes appear more concerned with abstract qualities such as status than with instinctual drives. In order to demonize the snakes, then, it was necessary first to anthropomorphize them. Stories of fascination by rattlesnakes involve the blurring of boundaries between animals and humans which generally seems to accompany intense relationships between the two, whether of affection or enmity.

The evil eye is conventionally understood as an expression of covetousness, directed toward something like the fine clothes or position of another (Gordon, 1944, 237-239). But, while a sin in most traditional societies, covetousness is considered desirable in capitalist America. The evil eye might, at first, seem more appropriate to the Old World than to the New. Our conceptions of animals generally reflect relationships within human society (Sax, 1990), and the prevalence of stories about the rattlesnake’s evil eye suggests that covetousness remained a problem in America. People, no doubt, encountered the limitations of our capital-

istic society, where social mobility is actually restricted by a vast range of factors, ranging from bigotry to simple chance. It could be that American society – with its veneer of egalitarianism and its propensity to arouse unattainable desires through advertising – may engender the sort of covetousness which feeds belief in the evil eye to an unusually great extent.

Both the Aesopian and Christian traditions tend to view animals in symbolic ways. Some images, such as the use of the fox to suggest cunning or the bee to suggest industry, have remained remarkably stable since ancient times. But images of evil and devastation tend to lose their power eventually. By the late Middle Ages, the traditional devil with horns and a tail had become a figure of fun. The tiger, an icon of destructive power and cruelty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is now viewed as a benign figure, used to sell a vast array of products from breakfast cereal to gasoline. Even the visage of Hitler used to suggest diabolic power, but this image, through repetition, has lost much of its intensity. Such images in contemporary Western society seem to change increasingly rapidly. About a decade ago, the face of evil was supposed to be Ayatolla Khomeini of Iran, but he has now been replaced by Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

This sort of demonization is usually questionable, and a word needs to be said in defense of the rattlesnake. Despite the reputation, biologists consider the rattler to be a rather retiring creature, which is very unlikely to strike a person unless attacked. The venom of the snake, furthermore, is far less likely to prove fatal than most people believe. But morality, if it is to inspire people, must consist of more than philosophical abstractions. It requires compelling images as well. Perhaps the basilisk now needs another heir, replacing the rattlesnake in our imagination.

Note

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