

The Friar's Tale

The *Friar's Tale*: Animals and the Question of Human Agency

Karl Steel (ksteel@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

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Tools

Though the *Friar's Tale* has three laboring horses, it's not the usual place to begin a study of the *Canterbury Tales* and animals; it is, however, as I'll show below, a good tale for talking about how the *Tale* complicates our sense of what makes the *human* animal supposedly unique among the beasts. The more expected place would be with one of Chaucer's many tales that features animals as characters: the talking crow of the *Manciple's Tale*, the wily fox and learned chickens of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, or the lovelorn bird of the *Squire's Tale*. An equally expected way to talk about these and Chaucer's other animals — the Prioress's pets, the cat to which the Wife of Bath compares herself, or the many martial animal comparisons of the *Knight's Tale* or their parodies in *Sir Thopas* — would be to understand these animals in relation to their widespread symbolic value.

This symbolism is laid out in fables and in the medieval genre of the bestiary, each of which were repeated, excerpted, and alluded to in sermons, church art, manuscript illustrations, proverbs, and so on. Fables are short, moral, fictional narratives, often featuring talking animals that tend to embody fixed character traits: the ancient Greeks told them; the Bible (2 Sam. 12:1–12) has one; and they continue to be told into this century. At least because they were key to early childhood education, fables would have been known to any educated medieval person: all would have been familiar with tales of meek sheep, stupid wolves, and greedy (or noble) lions. Bestiaries, like the [Aberdeen Bestiary](#), were encyclopedias that often first described the natural history of animals, as it was known to medieval tradition (for example, lions were said to grow feverish if a human saw them, but could recover their health by eating a monkey), and then interpreted the animals' behavior as symbolizing Christian doctrine or morality. Fables and bestiaries thus furnish a straightforward, medieval framework for understanding what the tales' various animals might mean.

This kind of interpretation can suffer from the limitation of presuming that the *Canterbury Tales* does nothing but simply reproduce already existing symbolic codes. Another interpretative fault often follows from this “application” of medieval symbolism, namely, that of assuming that textual animals exist primarily to be made use of symbolically by human readers. This notion of animals as predictable “raw material” (a lion is reliably either noble or tyrannous, for example)

for human culture supports the belief that animals and humans can be arranged neatly on either side of a binary split. In turn, this split reproduces one of the main ideas of medieval (and indeed modern) thinking, namely, that among living, mortal things, only humans were thought to have immortal souls, language, and free will, and that therefore (in an astonishing logical leap) animals could legitimately be used for by humans for whatever purpose: for food, labor, or, for that matter, literary interpretation.

But medieval thought about nonhuman animals could be far more complex than any traditional symbolic program or binary arrangement. The bestiaries themselves sometimes included entries on humans: the Aberdeen Bestiary uses its entry on this topic to emphasize human difference from animals (we, unlike them, stand erect, so we look naturally at the heavens), but also to list shared qualities, like the senses, and shared features, like teeth: we have canid teeth, and, [as the bestiary observes](#), “Dogs use these teeth to break up bones, just as men do.” Notably, medieval French, English, or Latin — the main languages of fourteenth-century England — possessed no single word that functioned exactly like the modern English or French word “animal.” The Latin “animal,” from the noun “anima” (soul), could simply mean “living thing,” and therefore could include humans. Rather than simply dividing humans from animals, England’s medieval languages tended to divide animals between domestic or wild, reserving separate categories for fish and for small, swarming things, like insects. Fable collections often included stories of peasants conversing with beasts, a sign that medieval literature could consider some humans less human than others. Chaucer’s works and own life furnish two examples of the opposite tendency: Chaucer’s Prioress feeds her pet dogs white bread and roast meat (PrT 146), without much obvious concern for the poor humans whom most would think better deserve her charity; during England’s wars with France, the young Chaucer was ransomed for considerably less money than the captured warhorse of his countryman Robert de Clinton (Crow and Olson 24).

And however much medieval intellectuals sought to separate humans from animals, in practical life, nonhuman animals were far more present in medieval life than they are in twenty-first century industrialized cities (where, for example, an “escaped” cow in New York City becomes the object of several days of news stories). Though mainstream medieval Christian resurrection doctrine argued that no mortal life but humans would be resurrected, medieval paintings of heaven would still sometimes feature small animals, like rabbits and birds, as if no paradise worth the name could be imagined without the company of small animals (for example, [Giovanni di Paolo’s 1445 Paradise](#)). More mundanely, in Chaucer’s London, wandering pigs were garbage disposals, nuisances, and dangers (as grimly recalled in the reference in the *Knight’s Tale* to the “sowe [that] fretten the child right in the cradel” (KnT 2019); dogs were indispensable to hunters (a chief entertainment both of aristocrats and of London’s elite [Orme 135]); humans did not just use, but relied on, the labor of oxen or horses for agriculture; and by and large, medieval literature required animal death, as medieval copies of Chaucer’s works tend to be written on parchment, animal skin treated to be flexible, smooth, durable, and thin. In short, any medieval studies that doesn’t pay some attention to human interaction with nonhuman animals is missing much of what made up medieval life.

Attention to the variety of possible categories, emotional ties, and symbolic uses humans make of nonhumans in cultural history is one of the duties of a field called “critical animal studies.” In particular, this field complicates cultural distinctions between humans and other animals. Like

many other kinds of cultural studies, critical animal studies understands a supposedly natural division — in this case, human and animal — as an always shifting relation produced by more or less conscious cultural labor. Critical animal studies does not erase the line between human and nonhuman, but rather studies how limits work conceptually, how they vary, and how they are undermined by their always inadequate and contradictory logics (Derrida 29). At its best, like the work of Erica Fudge (for example, Fudge), the cultural study of animals preserves the complexity of human/nonhuman relationships in their interdependencies, their cruelty, and their love. It treats the categories of the human and animal as open questions rather than settled answers.

Text

The Friar's Tale is directed at the Summoner, one of the Friar's fellow pilgrims, his rival for correcting the sins of Christians. Employed by an archdeacon, who is himself employed by a bishop, the Tale's summoner, this man at the bottom, has the job of summoning sinners to the church court to pay fines. Like his immediate employer, he concentrates on sexual offenses: to keep his revenues high, he himself employs prostitutes, who inform on their customers, whereupon the summoner extorts bribes to let them go. As he heads out to accuse a poor widow of adultery, he meets a man dressed all in green, like a forester (the profession responsible for protecting and patrolling royal hunting preserves). He and the man fall into conversation, and, after the stranger entices the summoner to visit his country with offers of gold and silver, they swear an oath of brotherhood to each other. As it turns out, the stranger is a devil, and his country, of course, Hell, and he, like the summoner, complains about his job. The summoner's only response to learning the truth is to demand a quick lesson in demonology, and to insist that, as sworn brothers, they split their winnings equally. They soon encounter a carter with an overloaded cart, who damns his own horses in frustration (FrT 1537-1570). When the summoner encourages the devil to take his due, the devil demurs, insisting that the man had not been sincere. Then they find the widow, who, after suffering the summoner's increasingly rude demands for money, finally damns him to hell. The devil leaps at the chance: when he asks the widow to confirm her sincere intention, her response is an enthusiastic yes, so the devil takes the summoner down to hell. The friar finishes this short tale with a professional, preacherly flourish, briefly warning the assembled pilgrims about the dangers of the devil.

Nonhuman animals show up in this tale several times in comparisons, insults, and proverbs: the summoner's prostitutes are his hawks (FrT 1340); just as a dog can distinguish an injured deer from an uninjured one, the summoner can spot a sinner (FrT 1369-70); the devil can take on any shape, whether a human, ape, or angel; (FrT 1464-5); when the widow demands the summoner repent, he calls her an "olde stot" (FrT 1630), a [misogynist livestock insult](#); and the friar concludes the tale by warning us that the lion, that is Satan, always thinks of slaying the sinner (FrT 1657-8). But the only nonhuman animals that appear directly are the carter's three horses: cursed when the wagon they pull is stuck briefly in a deep-rutted road (FrT 1542-1547), they are praised just as suddenly when they yank it free (FrT 1561-1565). Though we might think the carter is clearly different from his horses, medieval moralists might have thought otherwise. A traditional medieval image portrayed the relation between body and soul as that of horse to rider: falling prey to appetite, or strong emotion, like anger — which "reveth hym the quiete of his herte and subverteth his soule" (ParsT 560) — was like losing control of the "horse," and

therefore of one's human self-mastery. It is no wonder, then, that the devil resists the summoner's encouragement to take the carter and his goods down to hell. It is not simply that the carter does not really mean it when he damns his horse. It is that he seems so wrapped up in his immediate circumstances, so intent on his business of getting the cart from one place to another, that it may be hard to differentiate him from his actions. He seems to have no power of reflection, and therefore none of the rational distance from his own actions that would grant him moral responsibility. Indeed, if his oaths, both of them, are mere emotional expressions, without the reasonable action of the will, then we can no longer be certain that the possession of spoken language neatly divides humans from animals: the paradox of exclamations — *unreasonable language* — may well be worth investigating further. While V. A. Kolve understands the Carter as emblematically human (Kolve 82) because of his hapless ignorance — surrounded by forces that that might damn or save him, while he unwittingly goes about his business — this very unwittingness, viewed differently, might make him seem more horse than human.

This characterization is almost right, but it must do more to question the comfortable opinions of powerful people, certain that they would be far more rational than a mere carter. The philosopher Jacques Derrida observed that one key way to reconsider the differences philosophy has made between animals and humans is not to discover how animals have abilities that philosopher has traditionally believed to be unique to humans, but to ask “whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man...what he refuses the animal” (Derrida 135). Medieval philosophers and church doctrine routinely argued that animals had no free choice, and that humans did, and that this was why we alone among mortal life could sin or do good, and be rewarded accordingly. To put this in the terms of Derrida's critique, humans have traditionally thought that animals can only react to things, while humans possess free will, and therefore can really *respond*, acting and thinking freely through deliberation, evaluation, and choice.

The *Friar's Tale* makes such an easy distinction between reaction and response impossible, and therefore confounds any easy distinction between nonhuman compulsion and human freedom of choice. For example, the tale's summoner is wicked simply because the story requires that he be so; but if he is sincere when he complains to the devil about his working conditions, he is also wicked because his employer, the archdeacon of the cathedral, does not pay him enough. As he explains (or justifies himself), “therfore by extorcions I lyve” (FrT 1429). The truly responsible party may be the archdeacon himself; or the bishop above him; or perhaps it is the summoner's own position as summoner: after all, by never giving him his own name, the tale implies no summoner could ever possibly make an honest living. Responsibility may be distributed throughout a network of causes and agents (a money economy, the needs of the story, and so on), none of them quite fully responsible, none of them quite fully explained by mere one-to-one cause and effect relation, or, to put this in the terms of medieval scholastic philosophy, of a relationship of mover to moved (for two quite different views of intention and responsibility in this tale, compare Passon to Bryant).

As for the devil, although he intends to damn people to hell by tempting them to sin, he explains, “somtyme we been Goddes instrumentz” (FrT 1483): for withstanding temptation can be “a cause of...savacioun” (FrT 1498). Then as now, the word “instruments” referred primarily to tools, implements generally thought to have no agency of their own. The devil's green costume further hints at an uncertain responsibility. He is dressed as a yeoman, recalling the Yeoman of

the *General Prologue*, an employee of the powerful Knight and Squire, a pilgrim who gets no tale of his own. He is also dressed like an agent of the forest law, and therefore represents a distrusted, and, by Chaucer's day, nebulous authority. Perhaps he is dressed like the forest bandits who robbed Chaucer of horse and money in 1390, at the very period when Chaucer himself was a forest bureaucrat (for more, see Weiskott), as if he does not represent himself so much as the more abstract, impersonal power and threat of the forest. It's possible that the devil in green even resembles a fairy, a figure of magic and wonder, and, as the Wife of Bath explains, the former denizens of the woods, at least before the friars and their blessings spread themselves everywhere (WBT 864-881). Determining this devil's true jurisdiction, and therefore his responsibility, is no easy matter.

The last key figure for reconsidering these problems is the widow, Mabely (a character who, unusually for this tale, has a name). When the summoner tries bilking her out of her little store of money, she kneels and throws his threat of excommunication back at him, and at her pan too, which the summoner had also demanded. The problem of money and social power again arises here: the summoner thinks her poverty makes her an easy mark, while this very poverty may be why her initial politeness collapses so quickly into anger. Her supposed personal intention cannot easily be distinguished from her social class. The devil asks her whether it is her "wyl in earnest" (FrT 1627) that the summoner be damned, and then surprisingly asks the summoner if he plans to show the widow any mercy. This last request suggests that the widow's sincerity has force only if the summoner joins her in it. If a sincere damnation requires a kind of partnership between the target and the curser, the question of moral choice and responsibility can no longer center exclusively on just one person (for further discussion that rightly stresses Mabely's importance to the narrative, see Blamires 186).

The tale's focus on characters entangled in systems far more powerful than they are complicates any straightforward attempt to make them fully responsible for their actions or even their thoughts. Are we more like free agents, or more like the horses, dragging carts through the mud for purposes we can only barely understand, damned or saved more through the chance of circumstances than through our own, free decisions? Having a "wyl" fully "in earnest" with one's intention would seem to require far more fundamental freedom of action than any of these characters possess, given their entanglement within a corrupt ecclesiastical economy, bonds of private oaths and God's divine justice (see Kline), a poverty to which women were particularly susceptible, or even the still larger issue, that of being characters in a story not of their own making. Free will has been traditionally thought to be a requirement for being fully human: but who, if anyone, in the Friar's Tale has it?

Transformation

Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefore I Am* is a foundational book in the academic field of "critical animal studies." It is thrilling, often fun to read, but also often daunting: it assumes the reader will be familiar with decades of Derrida's earlier work, as well as with a set of figures of European philosophy — chiefly Jacques Lacan, Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas — on whom Derrida commented throughout his career. Most scholars who have built on Derrida's thoughts on animals have tended to concentrate only on his first chapter.

Medieval cultural studies of animals initially tended to concentrate on animal symbolism (for example, Beryl Rowland's *Animals with Human Faces*); several decades ago, Joyce Salisbury's *The Beast Within* demonstrated that medieval Christian doctrine, literature, dietary, and archaeological evidence could be discussed together, showing that animal studies need not just be an out-of-the-way subset of medieval studies. Medieval studies joined the conversation with contemporary critical animal philosophy not long afterward, with books by Dorothy Yamamoto, Susan Crane, and me. Some medievalists, like Sarah Kay and Bruce Holsinger, have written extensively about the philosophical and cultural implications of medieval literature largely being preserved on the skins of dead animals. Chaucer scholars have also contributed to all these discussions: the anthology *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts* is a good place to find other critical conversations you might join, as is the "Animalia" cluster of short essays in the 2012 issue of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. These studies might encourage you to read outside the *Canterbury Tales* to look at Chaucer's attention to animals in his other works: the dog that joins the mourning nobleman in *The Book of the Duchess*, the wise, talking eagle of *The House of Fame*, and the debating birds of his *Parliament of Fowles*. Finally, a short poem like Chaucer's "Former Age," about the poor but virtuous culture of the earliest humans, might lead you to examine medieval thinking about vegetarianism.

Questions and Projects

1. Why do so many adjectives for violence — "brutality," "ferocity," and "bestial" — come from Latin words having to do with animals? Can an animal be "bestial"? Is it praise or an insult when the Knight compares the fighting noblemen of his tale to savage beasts (KnT 1656-8)? Are certain genders, professions, or classes praised for being "brutal" and others not?
2. The story of the rooster and the fox is very common in fable collections. Chaucer's version, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is unusual in its inclusion of human characters. The tale's animals are educated and chatty, while the tale's poor humans, mostly women, seem to have no language at all, but instead only howl and shout (NPT 3375-3401): why is this? And why do you suppose Chaucer added these characters to the story?
3. Consider how the division of human and animal intersects and amplifies gender divisions and hierarchies. You might start by observing how animal references — ferrets, wool, ponies — cluster around Alisoun's portrait in the *Miller's Tale* (MilT 3233-70). Does this suggest that she is somehow more "natural" than the tale's conniving scholars? Does it even suggest that the Miller makes a mistake by perceiving her as more "natural" or more "domestic" (as these are mostly domestic animals)? Is it possible, that is, for animal comparisons made by a narrator to be incorrect?
4. Who, if anyone, has free will, that supposedly defining human trait, in the *Clerk's Tale*? Griselda may be bound to obey her husband because of her gender and because she is a peasant, while Walter's compulsion to test his wife is likened to the cruel sport of bear-baiting: some people, once they have an intention, keep to it "right as they were bounden to that stake" (CIT 704). Consider how both characters are simultaneously responsible for their actions and compelled by forces outside their control.
5. The philosophers Deleuze and Guattari once observed that "a racehorse is more different from a workhorse than a workhorse is from an ox" (Deleuze and Guattari 257). In *The Summoner's Tale*, Cyrus the Persian mourns his horse by destroying a river (SumT 2078-

82); the noble Canacee in *The Squire's Tale* thinks a falcon worthy of her conversation and pity (SqT 409-670); but the carter's horse merits none of this noble attention. How do animals not simply represent "nature" but also class? You might pay attention, for example, to the different kinds of horses the pilgrims ride in the *General Prologue*, and compare this to the social status of various breeds of domestic animals in the present.

6. The *Canterbury Tales* has several cats: Alison of Bath and one of her husbands both compare her to a sleek cat, proud of its appearance (WBT 348-55); a greedy friar brushes one off a bench in the *Summoner's Tale* (SumT 1775); and a hole in a door, big enough for a cat to creep through, is key to the plot of the *Miller's Tale* (MilT 3440-3443). A former generation of critics tended to say that Chaucer was interested only in textual animals, while many modern historians still tend to claim that medieval people kept animals only for practical uses, and never as pets: but Chaucer's cats suggest both his regard for real animals, and his amused awareness of the way that certain small domestic animals claim space as their own. What are the particular ways that cats interest Chaucer, and what does this have to do, for example, with modern cat memes?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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