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Literary Beasts: Use of Animal Imagery in *The Canterbury Tales*

Animals have been one of the few constants throughout human history. They were domesticated early on and have remained in close proximation to man ever since. Humans have made use of these creatures in a variety of ways—companionship, food, travel, and even as literary tropes. However, there were very different conceptions of what these numerous roles actually meant. Different species or sexes of animals were often considered to be more valuable than others and humans categorized the various animals according to how useful they might have been. Similarly, there is also the idea that these creatures were treated differently as a whole depending on the specific time period that they were found in. During the Middle Ages, animals were often considered to be a lot more valuable than now, both in a monetary and metaphorical sense. Humans were in closer contact to them and relied on them more for their daily lives. From the closer connection to the animals of this time period, a sense of meaning and importance accompanied the creatures.

Geoffrey Chaucer, a well-known writer from the Middle Ages, is one author whose stories depict these uses of animals and meanings within *The Canterbury Tales.* Through his various portrayals of the animals, Chaucer shows how the animals are used in different ways and highlight the importance of the relationship that man had with animals during this time period. Chaucer employs animals as allegorical shorthand meanings that his readership would have understood, as characters in stories that are used ultimately as tools of some sort, and as general

depictions of animals in everyday life use. However, these animals are used mostly to invoke a range of meanings that a medieval audience would have easily understood. Even the representations of animals that are meant to be accurate everyday uses are still used in a metaphorical sense. There is an ever-present idea that literary animals are figurative instead of literal, even if they are being used to simply pull a cart (Crane, “Cat, Capon, and Pig” 319). Because animals were meant to be so much more to the average medieval person, they often represented a certain type of meaning and concept, even if it was not their primary function.

While animals were worth a lot more and held more meaning to the people of the Middle Ages, there was still a sort of divide between man and animal. Susan Crane writes:

> In medieval writing the grip of a certain humanism was strong, as it is today: the humanism conceives all other animals in opposition to humankind, and hierarchizes the binary opposition so that animals are distributed along a single axis of lack (*Animal Encounters* 169).

This concept of hierarchy in often reinforced throughout the texts and stories produced during the Middle Ages. Starting from the Genesis creation story, humans were able to justify considering these living creatures as being below them—God created man in His image and gave them jurisdiction over all other creatures. *The Canterbury Tales* does depict the animals within it as being more important and valuable than their modern counterparts, but it also follows this idea of a hierarchy. From this, animals are given more worth but are still under the control of man.

Bestiaries

Some of the more common texts that were read during the Middle Ages were bestiaries, collections of short moralized descriptions of various animals. These texts were used in the medieval world as a way of "exploring how the relationships between humans and animals were construed" (Yamamoto 15). There are many versions of bestiaries that have survived into the modern era, which indicates how wide-spread and popular they were during the time period. These texts often were used as a way of sharing a common idea and knowledge about the animals that they were written about. Bestiaries were essentially texts that assigned certain meanings to animals and distributed those meanings and ideologies among humans. As stated previously, man was typically considered to be above animals and able to do whatever they wanted with the creatures, including assign meanings. Michel Zink writes, "in medieval writing the animal, like the rest of creation, is unworthy of attention except insofar as it is a bearer of meaning. The elucidation of this meaning is the whole purpose of bestiaries" (59). Because these types of texts were so commonly read, most people would have been able to extract meaning from certain animals in part because of this written shared knowledge. It is interesting to note, however, that bestiaries were not solely about animals: they often included the Genesis creation story that they reinforce and occasionally had sections about humans, mythical creatures, and even trees (Yamamoto 17). This shows that there are many different concepts of what animals actually meant and presented the various ideas that were associated not only with animals but also with people and plants.

Through these bestiaries, people are able to share a common ideology of creatures and create a sort of short-hand for what animals would be signifying. These manmade ideas that are assigned to these creatures present the animals as a way of representing human life. Animals are

thus “agents of meaning in human life” (Szell 148). Because of this general idea that humans are able to dictate what the animals mean and what they stand for, we are able to exercise control over where the line between man and animal is drawn and, “having drawn it, how, why, when, and where we may cross or blur that line” (Rudd 326).

Since there are a few instances in which Chaucer alludes to bestiary texts, it would be assumed that he was influenced by their depictions and meanings of animals for *The Canterbury Tales*. His depictions of Russell, the fox from “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” follows that of what would have been found in bestiaries of the time. Through his use of bestiaries and the general knowledge that his readers would have had, Chaucer is able to convey meanings through his animals in ways that modern readers would not immediately recognize.

Through this paper I am going to argue that animals from the Middle Ages held more worth and were often considered to be more important than their modern counterparts. This gets shown through the three types of ways that animals are used within *The Canterbury Tales.* First, they are used as allegorical shorthands that imply more meaning with a fewer amount of words; this concept is primarily shown in “The Miller’s Tale” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” Secondly, animals are crafted into characters but still end up being used as tools by other characters or Chaucer himself. For this, I explore “The Manciple’s Tale” and the animal fable of the collection, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” Lastly, animals are shown within *The Canterbury Tales* as just depictions of everyday life. From these specific depictions, readers are able to derive more information about the characters that they are associated with. For this I use “The Reeve’s Tale,” “The Friar’s Tale,” and “The General Prologue.” From all of these uses and depictions, Geoffrey Chaucer presents animals as being more diversely employed by the medieval people.

Allegories and Analogies

Across cultures and time periods, animals have been deployed in works of literature often as a means of depicting something besides the animal entirely. Chaucer's works are no exception to this literary tactic. Most of the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* that feature animals construct a layer of meaning that surround the animal and provide a different interpretation. Even more of the *Tales* simply reference animals as a means of portraying a certain aspect of a specific human character. Animals get used as a kind of shorthand way to tell us a lot about a character very briefly, but doing so relies on shared understandings of animals at that time. This shorthand tells us a lot about how animals were valued and perceived during the Middle Ages.

Analogies are one of the more common features of *The Canterbury Tales*. These analogies are used as a way of telling the readers what to think and provide a deeper understanding through just one or two words. The ideologies associated with specific animals are invoked and provide more context for the audience. In the allegorical uses of animals as a sort of shorthand, "man is conventionally identified with this or that animal because certain animals are identified with particular human characteristics" (Needler 426). These characteristics that associated with the animals are those of human design.

The pilgrim characters tell many different stories in which they reference an animal as a means of exemplifying some characteristic or trait of a human. These references often are used to depict the personality or temperament, physical appearance, and even mannerisms of a character. It is generally accepted that "[comparisons] with animals might be used to degrade" the character as a whole (Yamamoto 13). Since animals are often thought of as being subordinate to humans—thanks in large part to the Genesis creation story—the use of them as a means of

characterizing someone is generally seen in a negative and insulting light. However, there are few instances in which these animals might be used as a way of showing grace, beauty, or other positive features. One story that employs animals in both a negative and positive sense is "The Millers' Tale." Within this story, the Miller employs animals and how medieval society interprets them as a means of telling the readers how to feel about two characters in particular: Absolon and Alisoun.

Absolon's relation to an animal follows the idea that animals are considered primitive and, therefore, is used as a way of representing an undesirable aspect of his personality. The passage reads:

> Somtyme to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye
>
> He playeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye.
>
> But what availleth hym as in this cas?
>
> She loveth so this hende Nicholas
>
> That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn.
>
> He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn.
>
> And thus she maketh Absolon hire ape
>
> And al his ernest turneth til a jape (*MillT* 3383-90).

Here, Absolon is directly being called Alisoun's 'ape.' In this context, the word 'ape' is used to show that the character is being made a fool of. The last line of this section even goes as far as saying that Absolon's seriousness became a sort of joke because Alisoun loved another man. During this time period, apes were not too uncommon of a sight. They were often seen as "the companion of the street-musician," wearing the typical small red hat and pants. Sometimes,

wealthy households would even keep apes as a sort of "exotic pet" (Rowland 13). This idea of performance ties in with the concept of drama presented in the comment about 'Herodes' comment. With the added medieval concept of an 'ape' being directly related to a pet that follows around their companions in silly outfits and the use of performing drama, this comparison would have been an even more insulting jab at Absolon.

In addition to this cultural understanding of what an ape was and where it belonged in social standing, there was also a theological association of the ape with the sin of pride:

> Christian theology assumed that since God had created all things perfect the ape must have originally had a tail. It must have been deprived of it when it 'fell from grace.' The tailless posterior of the ape was therefore regarded as an indication of [sic] *hubris,* of pride, of the animal's desire to aspire beyond its station (25).

With the addition of this allegory, Absolon is not only a pet, but a prideful one. Although he is a parish clerk, Absolon is described as having curly, golden hair and red tights (*MillT* 3314; *MillT* 3319). While he does not have control over how his hair looks—that is genetic—he had a choice in his clothing. Beyond being tied in to the performing outfit that apes would have worn during this time period, red was also seen as the color of kings and lovers ("The Meaning of. . ."). As someone who worked for the Church, Absolon should not have been wearing this type of color. In fact, it could be taken as a sign of the boy regarding himself as more important than he actually was. So, the pride associated with the ape could be used as a way of reinforcing the idea that Absolon is prideful in his appearance.

While Absolon is criticized through a comparison to an ape, Alisoun's animal imagery shows a more pleasant side of analogy. She is described using five separate animals: a weasel, a

swallow, a kid (young goat), a calf, and a colt. While some of these animals might not come across as a positive creature to be compared to—especially the weasel—all five of them are used in a way that "[evokes] Alisoun's youthful beauty and attractiveness" (Lavezzo). Through careful use of language and choosing specific qualities about these animals that could be made into a positive attribute, Chaucer creates a lovely image of Alisoun.

The first of the animals that is used is the weasel. In the beginning of the long description of the girl, the Miller tells the readers:

> Fair was this yonge wyf and therwithal
>
> As any wezele hir body gent and smal (*MillT* 3233-4).

Here, the weasel is being used in a positive manner to describe Alisoun's physical appearance as thin and graceful. However, that is not where the use of weasel imagery ends. Chaucer even goes as far as to replicate the colors of a weasel's coat—white with specks of black—in Alisoun's clothing and describes her eyes as being lustful and bright—two concepts commonly associated to the weasel (Rowland 26-7). Modern society thinks of someone as being oily and unpleasant if they are associated with a weasel. However, that is not the image of a weasel that Chaucer has chosen for this character. Instead of portraying something generally disliked by society, Chaucer made the weasel seem to be noble. By telling the readers that the weasel was slim and graceful and had a beautiful fur coat, he effectively presents an entirely different view of the animal.

The second animal that is used to describe Alisoun is the swallow. This bird is a type of songbird that often could be found around farms. The depiction reads:

> But of hir song, it was as loude as yerne
>
> As any swalwe sittynge on a berne (*MillT* 3257-8).

During this time period, songbirds were strongly associated with nobility (Yamamoto 36). In a sense, this would have been because the only people who would be able to afford to keep a bird around just for their songs would have had to have money. Alisoun being compared to a swallow implies that she is from a higher social status than those around her—in other words, Alisoun was too good for her husband. It is said within the text that this woman is significantly younger than her husband—the tale even warns against this type of marriage outside of one's social grouping. Because she is depicted as this bird that would have been of noble standards, she is immediately shown to be different and higher up than everyone else.

The next animals appear together: the kid (baby goat) and the calf. They are used within the description of Alisoun as a way of telling the reader that this woman is playful and young:

> Therto she koude skippe and make game
>
> As any kyde or calf folwygne his dame (*MillT* 3259-60).

As mentioned above, Alisoun is a lot younger than her husband, leading to her adultery and unfaithfulness. This point is brought to attention again within these two lines. Both a kid and a calf are baby animals that would still need their mother to learn from. This implies that Alisoun is also still too young to be out in the world on her own. Because of her youth, she is able to play around and be happy, but she would still need someone to lead her around.

The final animal that is used to describe Alisoun is another baby: a colt. A few lines after the comparison to the kid and calf, the Miller tells the audience:

> Wynsynge she was as is a joly colt,
>
> Long as a mast and upright as a bolt (3263-4).

These two lines point towards another characteristic of rather young animals: their skittishness. Alisoun is being compared to young horse, the image drawing to mind a jangly creature stumbling around and being easily spooked. In addition to this idea of the young animal being skittish, readers are also able to take away meaning from the fact that horses are valuable during this time period. Because horses were generally used for a wide variety of things—transportation, livelihood, and even war—they were worth a considerable amount. In addition to the worth of the horse itself, the care of these creatures would have been a lot more costly. Comparing Alisoun—who was already described as slender, graceful, young, playful, and noblesque—to such a valuable creature would only tell the reinforce the idea that this character is special. However, animal comparisons show that Alisoun is still from a lower class. Since animals were often related and thought of in comparison to peasants, being described (even in a positive way) in relation to them would signify that this character is not a courtly lady (Lavezzo; Steel, "Animals and the Question").

However, these allegories are not only found in analogies used to portray specific characters. Through references to animals and animal bodies, these allegories are continued throughout different tales. One allegory that is particularly interesting is the reference to Ovid within "The Wife of Bath's Tale." The woman mentions:

> Ovyde amonges othere thyngs smale
>
> Seyde Myda hadde under his longes heres
>
> Growynge upon his heed two asses eres,
>
> The which vice he hydde as he best myghte
>
> Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,

That saves his wyf, ther wiste of it namo (*WBT* 952-7).

While this specifies Ovid as the reference, this specific tale of Midas—there are multiple—comes from Greek mythology. The story behind this myth is that Midas decided that Pan, the god of nature, was a better musician than Apollo, the god of music. Because of this opinion, Apollo exchanged the king's ears for those of a donkey, signifying his ignorance and stupidity ("Midas"). Interestingly, this is not the only myth that features someone being cursed with donkey ears to show their stupidity. Since knowledge of the classical myths was common during this time period, it can be assumed that the readers would have known what these ears were meant to symbolize and the story behind them. This allegorical meaning of a donkey as being stupid still holds true in modern society.

Another mention of animals in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is within what could be assumed is a colloquial saying and deals with the notion the worth of an animal. These colloquial phrases and idioms rely on the same concept of animals being invoked as a shorthand. Because they rely on common information and association within this time period, they can be slightly confusing to a modern reader. While Alisoun is compared to animals that were highly prized and worth a lot, the Wife of Bath alludes to an animal as a means of showing how something is worthless:

But for ye speken of swich gentillesse

As is descended out of old richnesse,

That therefore sholden ye be gentilmen,

Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen (*WBT* 1109-12).

Hens were probably one of the more common animals in the Middle Ages. People would often keep them as a means of food and livelihood. Unlike a horse, hens would have been easy to

procure, reproduce, and would not have been too expensive to keep. Because of their general commonness and ease of reproducing, hens would not have been worth too much. In the above paragraph, the Wife of Bath makes sure the readers know that the arrogance of the knight's claim to nobility is worthless.

The use of animals to portray the cultural and social meanings ascribed to them by humans is a common literary trope (Oerlemans 296). While these are specific examples of analogies and allegories within two stories from *The Canterbury Tales*, there are many more examples throughout the collection. These ideas about animals are not only used in reference to humans or to portray a specific idea, but they end up being attached to animal characters as well. Because of this general attachment of animals to meanings that is presented throughout commonly read bestiaries during this time "[animals], like nature more generally, become not beings or phenomena that exist for their own sake but vehicles through which human meanings are expressed" (Cohen 43). Allegories continue to interject meaning into the various texts regardless of the status of the animal itself.

Characters and Tools

While analogies and allegories are brief but tell a lot, Chaucer integrates animals in a much more extensive way elsewhere within *The Canterbury Tales.* A few stories rely on animals being portrayed as characters instead of merely as shorthand connotations. These animals are used as a sort of tool by other characters, the pilgrims telling the stories, or Chaucer himself. By using animals as characters, Chaucer is able to evoke more emotion from his audience. This is primarily because these readers would be more willing to sympathize with an animal that is shown to have feelings and the ability to think for itself. While these animals are used as tools, they are

nonetheless characters within the stories. These animal characters may be presented as a pet, a wild creature, or even the focus characters in an animal fable.

Bestiaries and the creation story presented an idea of animals as being lower than humans—this was often reinforced in the theology of the time period through Biblical works. Because of this hierarchy that was offered in these well-known texts, society was able to justify the use of animals in whatever way was deemed fit—as labor, food, or literary devices. *The Canterbury Tales* is one of the works of literature that supports this idea of animal serving man. It does so in the use of animal characters. The relationship between a nobleman, Phoebus, and his pet crow in "The Manciple's Tale" is such an example of an animal being used to serve a human's needs. However, this crow is described in a way that is very unlike our modern concept of what a crow actually is:

> Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe,
> Which in a cage he fostred many a day
> And taughte it speke as men teche a jay.
> Whit was this crowe as a snow-whit swan,
> And countrefete the speche of every man
> He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.
> Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale
> Ne koude by a hundred thousand deel
> Syngen so wonder myrily and weel (*ManT* 130-8).

In this description, the normally black crow is presented as white. Additionally, the crow can speak fluently enough to tell stories and sing sweeter than a nightingale. From an allegorical

standpoint, the crow is being presented as both noble and good—nobility stemming from the relation of songbirds to noblemen and the goodness coming from the color white that was commonly associated with the idea of being 'pure.' These two allegorical meanings behind the crow's character become more relevant later on in the story. However, the crow is shown to be loyal to his owner, Phoebus.

Immediately after the introduction to the white crow, the Manciple tells the readers of nobleman's wife and how much Phoebus loves her. Unfortunately for him, she cheats on him with someone who is from a lower class. This status of the man being considered a peasant and the wife being immoral is brought out through animal comparisons. Yamamoto states, "The sordid nature of their affair is brought out by animal comparisons, such as the she-wolf's choice of 'The lewedeste wolf that she may fynde' (line 184) as a mate, and by the Manciple's use of the word *lemman"* (46). The affair is presented by using animals in an allegorical way as a means to signify to the readers that they should sympathize with Phoebus and decry his wife and her lover.

In one particular incident of infidelity, the wife brings her lover home and has sex with him on her marriage bed, a huge taboo during the Middle Ages. The crow witnesses her lustful affair and tells Phoebus exactly what happened:

"By God," quod he, "I synge nat amys.

Phebus," quod he, "for al thy worthynesse,

For al thy beautee and thy gentilesse,

For al thy song and thy mynstralcye,

For al thy waityng, blered is thyn eye.

With oon of litel reputacioun,

Noght worth to thee in comparisoun,

The montance of a gnat, so moote I thryve,

For on thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swy[ve]" (*ManT* 248-58).

As one would imagine, Phoebus is not pleased with hearing this news (despite the copious amounts of praise the bird gave him while delivering it) and goes on to kill his wife. The crow is being used here both as a tool for furthering the story and as a scapegoat for the nobleman's actions. Distraught at what he had done, Phoebus ends up blaming the crow and takes away his ability to talk and sing and replaces his white feathers with black ones (292-302). In essence, the bird was stripped of all the traits that coded it as noble and good to become the image of the crow that is known to modern readers. This stripping of nobility is another way the crow character is being used. The Manciple tells how Phoebus destroys in his anger any objects that could be related to that of nobility prior to taking away the bird's abilities. The crow thus becomes a tool to represent the loss of this nobility and the shift in class even further.

While "The Manciple's Tale" features a bird being used as a spy and scapegoat, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" focuses more on the animal characters. These animals are being used not only by their owner, but also Chaucer himself. The writer goes to great lengths to depict a rooster as a character—giving him human attributes, knowledge, and even an in-depth physical description that rivals those of humans. After crafting this bird as equal to that of a human character, he pulls readers from this story and back into reality. These animals are created to be characters in order to add a layer of emotional attachment for the readers. Because of this attachment and façade that the animals are 'just like us,' we feel more sympathy towards their plights, even though they would still be considered less than humans.

When Chauntecleer is introduced, he gets a lot of description. In a sense, the bird is being described in a way that a human would be described. While it is clear that he is still a rooster, Chauntecleer is presented in a way that gives him a lot more worth than he already had. Readers would end up seeing him as more than the average rooster and would be willing to follow along with his story:

A yeerd she hadde enclosed al aboute
With stikkes and a drye dych withoute,
In which she hadde a cok heet Chauntecleer.
In al the land of crowing nas his peer.
His voys was murrier than the murie orgon
On messedayes that in the chirche gon.
Wel sikerer was his crowing in his logge
Than is a clokke or an abbey orlogge.
By nature he crew ech ascencioun
Of the equynoxial in thilke toun.
For whan degrees fifteen weren ascended,
Thanne crew he that it myghte nat been amended (*NPT* 2847-58).

From this excerpt alone, we are shown that Chauntecleer is special because of how perfectly he crows with the time. He also has a more beautiful voice than that of the Church's organ. Because of these two remarkable and unordinary abilities, he is able to gain value beyond that bestows upon him for being a rooster. His physical description matches those a human would receive as well: he is described with a focus on colors—red, black, gold, and azure—and other physical

attributes like his comb and how it looks like castle walls (2859-64). So, in addition to being about to out-perform other roosters in his crowing and voice, Chauntecleer is made to be a good-looking bird that readers would be able to compare to other men through the collection of tales.

When Chauntecleer receives his dream vision, he is able to display his human knowledge as well. Dream visions are a common literary device within medieval literature, but Chauntecleer's description of it is one of the better, citing many sources to back up his theories and ideas that go along with it. Most of these Biblical and literary sources would not have been known to most of the audience during this time period; they would have been mostly provided to educated men or came from classical works. This leads to the idea that Chauntecleer has more human knowledge than the people who would have been reading the story. It also adds a layer of drama to the animals that would have otherwise been missing. However, after all of this discussion, the rooster is told to ignore his dream vision by Pertelote, his favorite hen-wife.

Chauntecleer isn't the only creature within this story that is humanized. While most animals do not receive the same description or traits that the rooster does, there are two others: Pertelote and Russell the fox. The humanization of these animals adds to the drama and story. Chauntecleer is presented as having seven hen-wives, but Pertelote is the only one that receives a name, introduction, and personality. She is compared to the other hen-wives:

> Of whiche the faireste hewed on hir throte
>
> Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote.
>
> Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire
>
> And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire
>
> Syn thilke day that she was seven nygth oold,

That trewely, she hath the herte in hold

Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith.

He loved hire so, that wel was hym therwith (2856-76).

Here, Pertelote is being described as many of the female characters of *The Canterbury Tales* are described: beautiful, gracious, courteous, fair, and even as a courtly lady. It is interesting to note, however, that the hens on this farm are referred to as Chauntecleer's "wives," ignoring the more obvious reasoning as to why there would be multiple hens: eggs. Pertelote, being the most beautiful, is thus his favorite wife.

Pertelote is also shown to be a fairly religious hen. With the discussion of the biblical stories during their argument about the dream vision, Chauntecleer and Pertelote round themselves out to be more like human characters. The two even reference god and Pertelote claims, "by my faith" (2911). Since a good portion of the readers would have also been Christians, they would have felt a closer connection to these two animals. In addition to establishing a sense of community with the birds, the readers would have seen them as good citizens, ultimately forgetting that they are, in fact, chickens living on a farm.

The next animal that is introduced is Russell the fox. He is described as being "full of sly iniquity" and as having watched Chauntecleer and his wives for three years. This matches the description and allegorical associations with foxes that are found within bestiaries. Bestiaries are essentially little handbooks about animals that were widely read and popular during the Middle Ages. They included sections on the Genesis creation story, various animals and what they stand for, humans, and even plants. Dorothy Yamamoto describes a few ways foxes were viewed during the Middle Ages in her quote:

> Foxes were also linked with darkness, the underground, with evil, and with the Devil himself . . . The fox's russet coat prompted comparisons with Judas, the arch-betrayer, who was traditionally red-haired (61).

This russet coat is part of the aspect of the fox that is first introduced to readers in the dream-vision. Chaucer even goes so far as to refer to Judas when describing Russell's plan to steal Chauntecleer. Even beyond being compared to the man who betrayed Jesus, Russell gets likened to Ganelon (who betrayed Roland in *The Song of Roland*) and Sinon (who betrayed Troy in *The Illiad*):

> A colfox ful of sly iniquitee,
> That in the grove hadde woned yeeres three,
> By heigh ymaginacioun forncast,
> The same nyght thurghout the hegges brast
> Into the yerd ther Chaunteceleer the faire
> Was wont and eek his wyves to repaire,
> And in a bed of wortes stille he lay,
> Til it was passed undren of the day,
> Waitynge his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,
> As glady doon thise homycides all
> That in await liggen to mordre men (*NPT* 3215-25).

The fact that the interactions between Russell and Chauntecleer as described as homicide and murder makes them come across in a more human way and amps up the drama even more. This completely ignores the very realistic fact that foxes need to eat.

After presenting his readers with very human-motivated animals—gracious, loving, sinister—Chaucer breaks the scene with a moment of barnyard frenzy. This immediately follows Russell taking Chauntecleer and is where the character aspects of these animals is interrupted. The story goes abruptly from human characters to weeping about their stolen husband to a widow realizing her hens are crying about her rooster being taken by a fox.

> This sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two
>
> Herden thise hennes crie and maken wo,
>
> And out at dores stirten they anon
>
> And syen the fox toward the crove gon
>
> And bar upon his bak the cok away,
>
> And cryden, "Out! Harrow!" and "Weylaway1
>
> Ha! Ha! The fox!" And after hym they ran.
>
> And eek with staves many another man
>
> Ran Colle oure dogge and Talbot and Gerland
>
> And Malkyn with a dystaf in hir hand.
>
> Ran cow and calf and the verray hogges,
>
> So fered for berkyng of the dogges
>
> And shoutyng of the men and wommen eek.
>
> They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breek.
>
> They yolleden as feendes doon in Helle.
>
> The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle.
>
> The gees for feere flowen over the trees.

Out of the hyve came the swarm of bees (3375-92).

This chaotic scene of men screaming, dogs barking, cows and pigs running in fear, birds flying to get away, and even bees coming out of their hive brings the readers back to reality: Chauntecleer is a rooster on a farm. The high drama that was occurring lines ago was happening between animals. The reason that there is such a big commotion about Chauntecleer being taken, is because he is the only rooster. He is the only alarm clock on the farm and, without him, the seven hens do not produce baby chicks. Because of his accurate depiction of the time, Chauntecleer would have been a vital and prized part of the daily life on this farm. Similarly, he would have been extremely valuable due to the reproducing with the seven hens. The chickens sired by Chauntecleer would have been a means of either money-making for the farm or feeding the human inhabitants. If something had happened to him when he was taken by the fox, the humans that owned the farm would lose income and a source of food. This would explain the huge frenzy that accompanied his disappearance.

However, Chaucer did not want this to be the ending of his story. This insertion of the barnyard frenzy provides humor to the animal fable. Without aspects of humor to make the story popular and enjoyable, nobody would have read it. Regardless of humor, however, Chauntecleer is able to save himself. The story is broken by this moment of chaos and hilarity only to go back to the little shell of an animal world on this farm. Chauntecleer is able to trick the fox into letting him go and the Nun's Priest then ends his own tale by explicitly stating the moral.

This idea of a moral is common for this type of story. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" occupies the position of being the animal fable of this collection. Animal fables were popular during the Middle Ages. As a whole, fables were used in a way to makes them an extended metaphor and

allegory. Joyce Salisbury states, “While these texts seem to be about animals, in fact, the works use animals to discuss human society, to mirror humanity” (49). In other words, animal fables were often used a means of teaching a lesson. In fact, these fables surrounding animals were “key to early childhood education [and] . . . 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” (Steel, “Animals and the Question”). This widespread popularity of animal fables and their inclusion in education enabled the writers to use them as a means of presenting Christian morals (Rowland 5). This idea of animals being used as a means of teaching humans lessons or morals is represented within the tale. The fable ends happily and with the moral of: do not be careless or negligent and do not trust flattery (*NPT* 3436-7). However, immediately following this declaration is advice from the Nun’s Priest:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye
>
> As of a fox or of a cock and hen,
>
> Taketh the moralite, goode men.
>
> For Seint Paul seith that al that written is,
>
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis.
>
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
>
> Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
>
> As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
>
> And brynge us to his heighe blisse. Amen! (3438-42).

Here, the Nun’s Priest is blatantly pointing out that, while this story is about a fox, a rooster, and a hen, the morals that are presented within it should be applied to every man’s life. This moral

of not being careless and not listening to anybody who is overly-flattering must have been a popular lesson to teach because there are many variations of this particular tale that were written throughout the Middle Ages.

Even the animals that are being used as characters within *The Canterbury Tales* are essentially used as tools, either by other characters or the author of the stories. However, it is important that they are used as characters instead of just animals within a story. As characters they help readers connect more closely to the struggles and hardships they experience as opposed to an average animal. In order to make everyday creatures seem to be more personable and allow readers to create stronger attachments to them, Chaucer shows different aspects of their personalities and the idea that these creatures are able to feel emotions. Without this sympathy for the animal characters, the stories would not be able to portray as strong an argument or moral lesson.

Everyday Life

During the Middle Ages, animals held more immediate importance than their contemporary counterparts. Animals were often considered to be a large part of day-to-day life during this time period partially because of the sheer amount of daily contact that people would have had with them. Various species of animals were kept as pets—including some species that would not be considered pets by modern viewpoints—or sources of transportation and food. Susan Crane writes, “The people of medieval Britain lived in daily contact with domestic and wild animals. Forest and wasteland loomed over settlements, and even city streets teemed with all kinds of creatures” (*Animal Encounters* 1). The abundance of these animals throughout the medieval world is primarily because of their uses and the fact that some were a source of

livelihood for particular groups of people. However, the relationship between humans and animals were different than the relationship of a modern person to their pets. In a sense, animals were being used primarily as tools for plowing, transportation, hunting, food, and other physical uses (as opposed to being character tools in literary works). While there are some instances of people keeping pets and caring about them as a modern human would, animals mainly served a purpose during this time period. Since these animals were used more often and had more purposes within the daily life of people during the Middle Ages, the medieval audience would derive more meaning from the literary versions of the animals and would have noticed dynamics that occurred around them more easily; with their daily contact and knowledge of these creatures from bestiaries, purposes, value, and functionality would have been easy to discern.

As stated in the section on allegories and analogies in "The Miller's Tale," horses were one of the more expensive and valuable animals of this time period. They were used as transportation and sometimes were created into creatures of war. Often times the horses of poorer families would sleep in the same bedroom as their owners at night due to lack of resources and space and the general importance of the creature. From their sheer size, functions, and how much it would have cost to maintain keeping a horse, they were often highly prized. In fact, at one point during his life, Chaucer was captured by the French and ransomed back to England for less money than the warhorse of Robert de Clinton (Crow and Olson 24). Horses hold an important place in society, but also within *The Canterbury Tales.* There are horses shown throughout the entirety of the collection of works. They are depicted as means of travel, livelihood, and as battle partners. However, the horses featured within "The Reeve's Tale" and "The Friar's Tale" are used more as everyday life tools than those of war.

"The Reeve's Tale" features a horse that was originally used as a means of transportation for two clerks. Even though there are two of them, they share one horse to get to their destination. This is primarily because of the fact that horses were not cheap. However, the horse does not play too major of a role until they arrive at the miller's house. There, the horse is employed as a physical tool by the miller to trick the two students and gypping them of what they are supposed to receive. The passage reads:

> Out at the dore he gooth ful pryvely
>
> Whan that he saugh his tyme softely.
>
> He looketh up and doun til he hath founde
>
> The clerks hors ther as it stood ybounde
>
> Bihynde the mille under a lefsel.
>
> And to the hors he goth hym faire and wel.
>
> He strepeth of the brydel right anon
>
> And whan the hors was laus he gynneth gon
>
> Toward the fen ther wilde mares renne,
>
> And forth with "Wehee" thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne (*RT* 4057-66).

After being let loose by the miller, the horse follows his natural instincts and runs after mares grazing in a field nearby. This shows the horse's natural instincts to find a mate and emphasizes the natural animal concept associated with it. The two clerks then get into a small frenzy as they chase after the horse for a long period of time, only finally catching him in a ditch. Their panic at losing their horse derives mostly from the fact that they were about to lose a very expensive and valuable creature that (most likely) did not belong to them to begin with. Not to mention, without

their horse the two clerks would not be able to return back to the college from the miller's house. There is also the added idea that these two clerks are on a noble mission for their college. This idea of being noble is generally associated with knighthood. Along the same vein of thought, knights are commonly pictured with or on their horses. A knight's relationship to his horse is often either that of partner or tool; the knight might even be defined by his horse and how he conducts himself in regards to the creature (Crane, *Animal Encounters* 138). For the clerks, the horse serves more as a purpose of tool and imagery than that of a real partner. Without their horse, the two clerks could not play at their role of being the noble knights of the college that are going to right the wrongs that have been done to them.

However, horses were not always associated with knighthood and dramatics. Horses were often used as a means of living and were treated generally as partners. "The Friar's Tale" presents three horses that are used as a way of extending the carter and showing that his horses are partners rather than just tools. When a carter runs into trouble with his cart full of hay, he curses his horses. The scene is as follows:

> They saugh a cart that charged was with hey,
>
> Which that a cartere droof forth in his wey.
>
> Deepe was the wey for which the carte stood.
>
> Thise cartere smoot and cryde as he were wood,
>
> "Hayt, Brok! Hayt, Scot! What spare ye for the stones?
>
> The feend," quod he, "yow fecche, body and bones,
>
> As ferforthly as evere were ye foled,
>
> So muche wo as I have with yow tholed!

The devel have al, bothe hrose and cart and hey!" (*FriarT* 1539-47).

The Devil does not take the horses from the carter like the summoner suggest, claiming that the carter did not actually mean his damnation. While the horses are being used here as literal tools of transportation, they are shown to be as a sort of extension of the carter himself. Karl Steel writes:

> Though we might think the carter is clearly different from his horses, medieval moralists might have thought otherwise. A traditional medieval image portrayed the relationship between body and soul as that of horse to rider: falling prey to appetite, or strong emotion, like anger . . . was like losing control of the 'horse,' and therefore of one's human self-mastery ("Animals and the Question").

Since the carter was having such a hard time getting his cart out of the mud, the idea that he does not have control over his horses—and therefore, his own life—is presented to the readers. This carter relies on his horses and the partnership that he has with them for his livelihood and being able to survive.

Another animal that is commonly considered to be in a "partnership" with humans is the dog. These creatures were commonly kept as pets during this time period for their overall companionship. Within *The Canterbury Tales,* dogs are primarily found in "The General Prologue" in the introductions of the pilgrims. The first pilgrim that keeps these animals as pets is the Prioress. She is introduced to the readers as a gentle sort of person who really loves animals:

> But for to speken of hire conscience,
>
> She was so charitable and so pitous,
>
> She wolde wepe if that she saugh a mous

> Kaught in a trappe if it were deed or bledde.
>
> Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
>
> With rosted flessh or milk and wastel breed.
>
> But soore wepte she if any of hem were deed
>
> Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte (*GP* 142-9).

The Prioress was so fond and animals and loved her dogs so much that they are depicted in this passage as having been fed better than most humans. The "wastel breed" that she feeds her little lapdogs is essentially white bread, a rare delicacy that would have only been had by those of noble standing. Nobody from the lower class would have been able to even try this type of bread because it would have been too expensive for them to afford. Yet, the Prioress does not give this bread to the poor, she gives it to her pets. However, this idea of the Prioress having lapdogs to begin with would not have been too uncommon of a thing. The Holy Rood Church in Sparsholt, England features effigies of Sir Robert Achard and his two wives—one of which has two small lapdogs. A leaflet written by an unknown author presented to visitors of this church reads:

> The presence of lap dogs at the feet of the effigy of lady Agnes need not surprise us, even though she was probably at her death the inmate of a nunnery. Most ladies of noble birth kept their pet dogs constantly with them; even in bed they served the purpose of foot-warmer. And a lady who entered a nunnery would not leave her dogs behind (Honegger 2).

Honegger even inserts a little footnote to this quotation stating, "The anonymous author of the leaflet could have pointed to Chaucer's Prioress and her lapdogs in 'The General Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales* to underpin his observation." Because the Prioress has these two small lapdogs

and is able to feed them well, it can be assumed that she herself was from noble birth before entering a nunnery and that her love for her two pets was so great that she brought them with her. Modern readers could associate with this idea as well since contemporary pets are associated with this idea of love in the same way.

While dogs were commonly kept as pets simply for their companionship, there were also other purposes to the creatures. As stated above, the Prioress's lapdogs would have been able to be used as foot-warmers at night. Similarly, the Monk is also introduced in "The General Prologue" as keeping two dogs himself, but probably for different purposes:

> Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight.
>
> Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare
>
> Was al his lust. For not cost wolde he spare.
>
> I seigh his sleeves ypurfiled at the hond
>
> With grys—and that the fyneste of a lond.
>
> And for to festne his hood under his chyn
>
> He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn.
>
> A love knotte in the gretter ende ther was (*GP* 190-7).

The Monk is supposed to be a religious man but is depicted here as enjoying hunting and having very find pieces of clothing. He apparently also spent a lot of money for his greyhounds, a hunting dog commonly associated with nobility during this time period. In fact, hunting dogs were also treated in a very luxurious way similar to that of the Prioress's lapdogs:

> There is a great deal of evidence to show that medieval hunting dogs were indeed both highly prized and lovingly tended. They were often given as noble gifts. Elaborately

> jeweled collars were wrought for them, while some wore ornate body armour as an additional protection. The kennels the hounds lived in were constructed with regard for both their comfort and hygiene, and one of the hunt attendants slept with them at night to make sure their rest was undisturbed (Yamamoto 116).

"The General Prologue" thus presents its readers with two religiously affiliated pilgrims that have expensive dogs that must be treated better than some humans. Because these pilgrims come from a nunnery and a monastery, their diligence and spoiling of their dogs would be a troublesome and problematic depiction of ecclesiastic life.

Both horses and dogs were some of the more expensive animals to be found during the Middle Ages. While animals were abundant and in constant contact with humans, these are some of the only species that could be regarded as a partner or companion in any way. However, even then these creatures serve a role of sorts—be it their primarily purpose or just an added benefit. Because people during the Middle Ages would be able to acknowledge the distinctions and ideologies associated with both of these animals, they would have been able to derive more context and background information on the characters that use them. While there are a few instances of domesticated medieval animals being kept because of their owner's love for them, the relationship between owner and pet that is present during this time period is distinctly different than that of modern times.

Through his uses of animals and animal imagery, Chaucer depicts a society that dealt more with animals on an everyday level. Specific animals had more general ideologies and meanings attached to them during this time period. While some of the shorthands and concepts behind animals still remain today, the depth of meaning associated with being called or

compared to certain animals has faded away. Modern society does not rely as heavily on these creatures as a means of livelihood and transportation and, often times, the only relationship with animals that people have are with their pets. Most modern readers would understand the ideas of a fox being sly, but it would be difficult for them to know right away that apes were once performance animals. Because of the importance of these creatures during the Middle Ages and the distinct prominence of bestiaries, most people would have been able to code a lot more meaning into the creatures they were reading about.

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