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Medieval

Treating medieval posthumanism may seem a ludicrous task, since, at least in common wisdom, the Middle Ages lacked the technology, philosophical habits, or looming ecological collapse that would enable or encourage a dissolution of a settled belief in human supremacy; or, it simply lacked a recognizable humanism altogether. Some of these contradictory, albeit aligned, caricatures of the period leave premodernity mired in a jealously guarded anthropocentrism, masked under a theocentrism, without the suspicion, let alone the comparative anatomy or genetics, that would allow humanism to get over itself. Or they imagine the medieval as essentially instinctual, because of its presumptive submission to some universal religion; its hostility to science and to this world as a whole; its adherence to millennia-old textual traditions, transmitted mechanically and uncomprehendingly; and, finally, its squalor and savagery, in which an ovine populace cowered before a "feudal" lord in a non-politics in which sovereign and law were one and the same. In either case, in the long development of posthumanism, the Middle Ages is presumably what must be sloughed off. Modernity needed to await what the medieval lacked, namely the invention of the individual, a systematic atheism, and other such discursive developments that might finally save us from, or deliver us entirely to, the technoindustrial catastrophes and mass extinctions of our present.[1]

This chapter aims to shake up these prejudices, by examining a set of "hot spots" in medieval thinking, primarily concerning the human body, human language, and, finally, the problems inherent to the belief in human free choice. My survey should be understood not as attempting to identify a kind of "proto posthumanism" in the Middle Ages but as suspicious about the very temporal boundaries of "proto" and "post," and, especially, as arguing that any systematized humanism will always fissure under the pressure of its own efforts at coherence. Posthumanism does not follow humanism; rather, it is inherent in its own claims.

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Humans and/as Animals

The Middle Age's most systematic attempts to define the human were chiefly devoted to distinguishing humans from all other worldly, mortal life. The first obvious difficulty was one of vocabulary. No medieval word in French, English, or Latin functioned exactly like the modern English or French words "animal."[2] The medieval genre of the bestiary – natural histories, often lavishly illustrated, loaded with moral commentary – invariably treated lions, dogs, wolves, eagles, sometimes stones; but they sometimes considered humans as well, understanding them to be, at least for the purposes of the genre, an animal like any other.[3] In Old French, "animality" is simply the set of faculties any given living thing possesses, while the closest etymological derivative of "animal," "almaille" or "aumaille," means only "livestock" or even just "horned livestock" rather than all nonhuman life.[4] A Middle English encyclopedia explains that "all that combines flesh and the spirit of life," that is, the *anima*, "is called an animal, whether it is an airy beast like a bird, a watery beast like a fish, or those that go on the ground, like humans or wild or tame beasts."[5] Another text speaks of humans and "other beasts."[6]

For its part, medieval Latin tended to divide nonhuman fauna into either domesticated animals, termed *pecores* or *jumentes*, or wild or dangerous animals, termed *bestiae* or *ferae*. *Bruti*, another common word, when appended as an adjective to "animal," meant most irrational fauna, but it tended to leave out snakes, insects, toads, and other creeping things, which were instead collected under the name of *reptiles*. Conversely, the Latin word "animal" could include a number of possible groups. For example, the entry on "animal" in the Alan of Lille's twelfth-century dictionary of theological terms neatly assembles several quite distinct meanings: like the Middle English above, as describing humans or any creature whatsoever having a soul capable of sensation (that is, nonvegetal living things); or only "brute" animals, used in the Bible, as when Noah and his sons go into the ark with all animals; and sometimes, surprisingly, *only* rational animals, as when Psalms 144:16 says, "Thou openest thy hand, and fillest with blessing every living creature [in the Latin Vulgate, 'animal']," which was, as Alan explains, a category that could include only humans, since none but rational creatures could receive this blessing.[7] Furthermore, a great deal of medieval art and literature is indifferent or even hostile to any systematic effort to cordon humans off from other life. This sentiment operates most obviously in material that developed independent of academia, monastic textuality, or other professionalized, closely supervised Christian literacies. A work like the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, set in sixth-century

Denmark, perhaps derived from much older sources, features, among other characters, a prince transformed into a bear by a wicked queen, killed by his father, and fed to his beloved, who bears three sons: one merely a great leader, another with dog's feet, and the other an elk from the navel down. *Hrolf Kraki* considers these brothers more wonderful than horrifying.[8] Another Old Norse work, the thirteenth-century *Konungs skuggsjá* (King's Mirror), draws on Irish writing and storytelling to imagine the fate of men driven mad by battle: they flee into the woods, where they grow feathers, and "run along the trees almost as swiftly as monkeys or squirrels."[9] Marie de France's twelfth-century "Bisclavret," like her other lais, professes to be based on the native stories of Brittany. This werewolf story does nothing to condemn the monster, neither does it imagine him to be cursed or diseased, but instead portrays him as being simply what he is: his wife is the story's villain, because she betrays him as soon as she learns of his dubious humanity.[10]

Another set of stories sought to free nobles from a mundanely human ancestry by associating their lines with animal or otherwise nonhuman progenitors. The mythical King Avidus of Crete, begotten upon the king's wife by a necromancer, thrived as a child, despite being repeatedly thrown to hungry beasts. Nurtured by deer's milk and thereby taking on the deer's own fleetness, he finally becomes king, where his nonhuman kinship allows him to invent the paradigmatically human technologies of domestication of oxen, plowing, and the planting of wheat.[11] Finally, the Lusignans, one of the noblest houses of Europe, promoted the myth of their descent from Melusine, who, once a week, secretly took on the form of a dragon, and whose children tended to be as monstrous as she was. Melusine abandons her family when her husband and brother-in-law refuse to be satisfied until they know her true nature.[12] In these and many other similar medieval tales, the category of the human is simply insufficient either for illustrating intense emotional states or for distinguishing nobility from more quotidian people. And in "Bisclavret" and *Melusine*, the human functions as little more than a pathetic prejudice and a temptation to normalize.

Nonetheless, even absent a clear linguistic division, and against this mass of storytelling, mainstream medieval thought, like mainstream thought now, remained committed to arguing that humans were a uniquely special form of life. When Marx says that "man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like,"[13] almost no medieval thinker would disagree with him. His "anything else you like" sounds like nothing so much as a slight adaptation of Saint Augustine of Hippo's assertion that humans surpass "brute beasts" by "his reason or mind or intelligence, or whatever we wish to call it."[14] For the strain of medieval thought

that Marx inherited and, we might say, automatically repeated, humans alone among mortal creation had reason, language, free choice, an immortal soul, the capacity to laugh, the upright posture that was itself the physical manifestation of their unique capacity to analyze things "as such," and so on.

A few examples will suffice to give a sense of what will likely strike moderns or supposed postmoderns as all too familiar. Here, again standing for Christian doctrine as a whole, Augustine affirmed that "the human mind, when judging visible things, can recognize that it itself is better than all visible things."[15] Here representing secular thought, the thirteenth-century political theorist Marsilius of Padua affirms, without any reference to ethology, that "man alone among the animals is said to have ownership or control of his acts," that is, we alone have free will.[16] From these jealously guarded unique possessions followed a set of rights and obligations: chiefly the right to be treated as an object of direct care (while, as in Kant, nonhuman animals could only be indirect objects of care) and the concomitant right not to be treated as merely a thing.[17]

Within this reasoning, humans could demonstrate their rational particularity more directly, not through displays of rational behavior – writing poetry, building churches, generating philosophy, and the like – but rather by dominating animals, for, according to this reasoning, no rational creature would allow itself to be so debased. The abbot Ratramnus of Corbie's ninth-century "Letter on the Cynocephali" finally determines that these dog-headed monsters are human and therefore deserve a missionary outreach, not on the basis of their political organization, nor from their use of clothing, itself evidence of their shame or modesty, but rather because they domesticate other animals: no animals but humans, reasons Ratramnus, keep livestock.[18] Similarly, if more cartoonishly, several medieval biographers found evidence of Charlemagne's sovereignty and warrior virility in his outsized appetite for animal flesh. Not only could he split a man into two with a single blow of his sword, or lift a fully armored man above his head; he also "ate but little bread, but at once he would eat a quarter of a ram, or two hens, or a goose, or a swine's shoulder, or a peacock, or a crane, or a whole hare."[19]

Certainly, some beasts could be treated well: like the moderns, medieval people kept pets, favoring lapdogs and other small animals, like squirrels, dormice, or even the occasional badger.[20] Elites admired and even mourned their horses, dogs, and hawks; the latter, for example, were sent to the shrines of saints to be healed, and those who mocked this saintly solicitude for mere beasts tended to find themselves blinded or paralyzed.[21] And being compared to a beast, even behaving like a beast, was not necessarily a moral or political catastrophe. Chivalric literature and heraldry frequently and favorably

likened knights to lions, boars, bears, or eagles.[22] The avidity of the hungry Charlemagne looks like nothing so much as the bestial appetites of the giants and monstrous boars of medieval romance, or the barbaric carnivorousness of the Scots or Mongols in medieval polemic ethnography. Yet this diet, even in a document written by and for an ideally ascetic clergy, aims only to praise a masculinity whose outsized force disdains merely human rules. In all this material, we see yet another example of how human elites sought to naturalize their own supremacy, even amid a general practice of scorning most bestial life. Then as now, the intersection of class and humanity benefits some animals and harms most humans.

We can clearly discern this scorn in poems like a short French satire poem, "Contempt for Peasants," which pretends to be astonished that peasants should eat fish, beef, or wheat, when they should be pasturing on all fours on thorns and roots, like other livestock.[23] We can even more clearly discern it in medieval texts that imagined certain kinds of bodies as properly edible. A fifteenth-century Middle English monastic poem, "Disputation Between the Body and Worms," delights in its horrific representation of a beautiful woman now thronged with hungry vermin in the grave, thus joining itself to other medieval misogynist works that imagined women as particularly fleshly and putrid.[24] Meanwhile, the crusading fantasy sometimes splits Christian from Muslim bodies by imagining the latter as, essentially, meat. During a war against Iberian Muslims, the Norman knight Rotgerio fed his captives to each other, "dividing them up for food as if they were pigs."[25] A Middle English romance of Richard the Lionheart admires its hero for his enthusiasm for eating Saracens, whose bodies he found more restorative and delicious than the finest pork.[26]

One of the most elaborate of such stories is a popular fourteenth-century legend that during the Holy Family's exile from the threat of Herod, Jesus played with children from among the Jewish community, occasionally striking his playmates dead or resurrecting them. Understandably growing nervous, the Jewish families hid their children, in, of all places, an oven, placed under guard. When the guard tells Jesus that the oven contains only pigs, Jesus responds by transforming the Jewish children into just that.[27] According to some versions of the story, this is why Jews refuse to eat pork. The story may have been promulgated as a response to still other anti-Semitic stories that imagined Jews kidnapping Christian children and basting and roasting them like meat,[28] thus answering one anthropophagic legend with another: pigs are, after all, the one large domestic animal raised only to be eaten. These and other such tales remind us that the question of human recognition, and the accompanying question of who or what will be treated "as animals," will always be answered in ways that fall unequally and cruelly

on the most vulnerable, and that any promise of technobiological or philosophical "escape" from humanism must always remember those humans deemed insufficient: too bodily, too emotional, too sick.[29] The category of the human has always endangered certain humans.

Even amid this unrelenting humanism, a posthumanism still remained possible, at least implicitly articulated by medieval textuality's own unrelenting attempts to set humans apart from the rest of creation. I might hesitate to call this critique – or, more precisely, this failure – of humanism a *post*humanism, since it did not follow a clearly articulated humanism so much as it surrounded it, ran alongside it, or even inevitably followed efforts to define human supremacy, which, as they do so often, devoured the very humanity this humanism was meant to defend. The remainder of this chapter will examine logical problems inherent to claims for the ultimate immortality of the human body and the aligned claims for the uniquely human possession of language and of free will, both evidence of the immortal, rational soul that humans, alone among animals, were thought to possess.

Mobile and Everlasting Bodies

First, immortality. Only a few scattered medieval thinkers allowed that nonhuman animals might have immortal souls like humans: all living things had souls, but only rational souls lived forever. The opposite position, that all souls were mortal, entirely immanent to this material world, was typically reserved in medieval writings for pagans or "natural philosophers," invented only as strawmen awaiting defeat by right belief. One medieval thinker, however, did develop this point on his own: this was Blaise of Parma, a late medieval Italian called by his contemporaries the "Doctor Diabolicus." Until his forced recantation in 1396, Blaise argued that the soul was entirely immanent to matter. He maintained no boundary that would reserve spontaneous generation only to the "imperfect" animals like gnats, bees, mice, eels, and toads, arguing instead that humans, along with their rational soul, could emerge spontaneously, so that life was itself nothing more than one more material effect of the action of celestial bodies upon this planet.[30]

Against this position, mainstream medieval humanism held that not only the rational soul but also the human body would enter into immortality. While all nonhuman worldly life was destined for death, humans, by contrast, would be reunited with their own reconstituted bodies upon the Day of Judgment. For this belief, based on a pre-Cartesian notion of the "psychosomatic unity" of the human subject, the human body was both mortal and, like the soul, promised to immortality, either to the eternal stasis of paradise or to the eternal flux and degradation of hell.[31] This "posthuman" body frees

the body of the mortal and even corporeal limitations of being a body, both for good and for ill, by realizing the inherent perfection and inescapable perpetuity of the human self that was lost when God expelled Adam and Eve from Eden.

The full terror of this posthuman condition may be discerned in the Thomas of Cantimpré's thirteenth-century life of Christina Mirabilis ("the Astonishing"), who was from what is now Sint-Truiden in modern-day Belgium. After dying briefly, and then being restored to life, she now has the benefits of the resurrection body, but in this world. She first eats a meal, as if to demonstrate that her body is indeed a real body. Later, however, she feeds only on her own milk and throws herself into a series of purgatorial punishments, leaping into fires or boiling pots, standing for hours on end in the frigid Meuse, stretching herself out on professional instruments of torture, lying in new graves, and whirling about on a millwheel, suffering terribly throughout all this, but emerging each time without showing the slightest sign of injury. Elsewhere, she collapses her limbs "together into a ball as if they were hot wax" so that "all that could be perceived of her was a round mass," and then, once finished with her "spiritual inebriation," she returned to her proper form, "like a hedgehog" unrolling itself.[32] Finally, having become a spectacle, she flees into the wilderness, the treetops, or to the deep waters, emerging at last to serve as a political advisor and prophet for the community and its nobility. Her body seamlessly expresses her frenzied holy will. It is a perfection of human possibility that takes Christina and her body beyond anything recognizably human or even beyond any recognizable expression of a rational soul, showing the human dream of bodily perfection in all its shocking possibility.

Spoken Language and Gesture

Human language, like the human body, was another key site of human difference, though just as prone as the body to bloom into something other than human. Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" is a key example of what is at stake in claims that only humans possess language. The tale grants animals the ability to speak, while all but stripping it from his human characters: the rooster Chaunticleer, his wife Pertelote, and the wily fox all speak with great, if self-serving, erudition, while the poor widow and her retinue are for the most part able only to "shriek" and "howl" as they scramble after their stolen property, and otherwise have nothing to say.[33] The possession of rational language is a zero-sum game, where rationality and its benefits must always be the sole possession of some particular group. Yet medieval art and literature is full of animal communication, shared with humans,

conducted not through spoken language but through gesture, without any failures of expression. Bede's eighth-century life of Cuthbert features ravens who steal some of the saint's crop and then return, repentant, "with feathers outspread and head bowed low to its feet," and even give Cuthbert a gift of a lump of pig's lard.[34] The lion of Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century *Yvain* first allies with the titular knight by bowing and stretching out his paws before him in a gesture of vassalage: in a society full of meaningful gestures, this voiceless lion, in effect, is able to sign a contract.[35]

Finally, we can return once more to Marie de France's "Bisclavret," as its werewolf expresses himself often through gesture, especially when he kisses the king's foot to show his allegiance and when he attacks his former wife and her new husband. The men of the court understand this creature's behavior as rational. At his first gesture of homage, the king declares that "ele a sen d'ume" (154; it [or, less likely, "she"] has human intelligence) and then revises himself three lines later: "ceste beste a entente e sen" (157; this beast has understanding and intelligence).[36] The king admits that beasts might have their own intelligence, which is not a wan imitation of human reason but rather their own. Yet Bisclavret's gestures might be as easily comprehendible as simply canine: dogs show affection, or abasement, by licking and, of course, attack when they're frightened or angry. The recognition of rational language here has nothing to do with the presence or absence of spoken language, nor of legibly contractual gesture, but rather only with the royal recognition that this wolf's violence and power befit his court.

Free Will and Mechanicity

One of the primary concerns of "Bisclavret" is free will: does the werewolf have it, or indeed, do Bisclavret's wife or the king, committed as they are, respectively, to running the scripts of human difference and masculine royal authority? Consider the chivalric romance *Octavian*, which concerns a lost, chivalric child raised by merchants and rechristened Florent (like a modern child named "Dollar"). He recurrently frustrates his parents by showing his true, chivalric value, for example, by trading two oxen for a falcon and by haggling a horse trader *up* to ensure he pays full price for a glorious, white steed. Here, despite claims of "freedom" – the Middle English "fre," among other meanings, can indicate "generous," "legally free of bondage," "noble," or "unconstrained" – Octavian's nobility is not an autonomous act but rather a program run by anyone descended from noble blood, whose very automatism proves Octavian's hardwired, unchosen superiority.[37]

We see a still more explicit questioning of free choice in the medieval epistolary debate between Alexander the Great and Dindimus, leader or spokesman of a vegetarian sect of Brahman philosophers. Both sides accuse the other of abandoning their human prerogatives: so far as Dindimus is concerned, Alexander is driven relentlessly and irrationally by an instinct for conquest, while Alexander considers the virtuous, anarchic vegetarianism of these fictionalized Brahmans only a symptom of their bestial misery, suffered amid a wretched absence of natural resources. Both sides of the argument presume themselves to be the sole human; both suppose themselves to be exercising their free will, either through the enjoyment (and conquest) of the world or through its rejection. Arguably, we may understand the debate instead as little more than the clash of a warrior-machine with an ascetic-machine, each able to do nothing but occupy the positions each is compelled to take.[38]

My final example will be an equally widespread medieval imagining of the pagan far east, the tradition of Barlam and Josephat, a Christianization of the life of the Buddha, itself based on Manichean and Islamic adaptations.[39] A Middle English version of the story often condemns idolaters for believing that idols were "those who made us," explaining that these mere objects, like beasts, are properly here only to serve humans, who alone among created things have a "reasonable will and desire" to choose to "do good or evil."[40] But the Christians decrying idolatry themselves hardly seem free of being objects. Their one difference from the idols is that they are not *silent*, as they recite a limited set of scripts in a manner most reminiscent of amusement-park animatronics. It is not only that the text always resorts to the same language to condemn idols – on three widely separated occasions it calls them "dumb and deaf" – as if it were following a recipe rather than freely arguing;[41] it is also that its often (and, given its audience, unnecessarily) repeated Christian credos have themselves been fossilized into orthodoxy by centuries of doctrinal pressure. The "freely chosen" belief praised by this text is also, like the idols, a man-made fetish invested with freedom, all the while evacuating any chance to break with the old debate between objects and agents, constraint and free will.

A fully posthumanist investigation must engage primarily with any given culture's rules for being human; it must delineate "what goes without saying" before deciding, more or less happily, that this supposed natural foundation has been lost. Dominant medieval philosophy and doctrine continually defined and defended a concept and practice of human supremacy and belief in language and freedom. These ontotheological claims persist in our supposedly secular era. We are not yet done with the Middle Ages. Of course, more "properly" posthumanist sites of investigation in the

Middle Ages will easily reward investigation: the biotechnological assemblage of knights with their horse and armor, whose most bizarre form is the so-called *poisson chevalier*, the fish knight, where mount and arms and warrior are all one creature; automata both imagined and real (like the hydraulic monkey sculptures of the medieval estate of Hesdin); and relics and other holy objects, especially the Eucharistic Host itself, a living, fleshly technology that bled copiously and exacted terrible revenge when challenged. But critical resistance to humanism requires knowing that the first site for posthumanist scholarship is not these limit cases but the human itself. Confronting the medieval inheritance requires upsetting claims of bodily integrity, rational language, and especially beliefs in individual free choice and agency that persist spectrally even in efforts to get "beyond" the human.

NOTES

1. For one example of these prejudices, Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).
2. On the medieval and early modern vocabulary for "animal," see Pierre-Olivier Dittmar, "Le Propre de la bête et le sale de l'homme," in *Adam et L'astragale: L'humain par ses limites de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Hommes, 2007), 147–64; Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
3. For example, the *Aberdeen Bestiary* (Aberdeen University Library MS 24), easily available online with an edition, translation, and commentary.
4. Fréderic Eugène Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du 9^{e} au 15^{e} siècle*, 11 vols. (Paris: Vieweg, 1881), s. v., "animalité"; "Anglo-Norman Dictionary," *Anglo-Norman On-Line Hub*, accessed June 12, 2015, www.anglo-norman.net/, s. v., "aumaille."
5. John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, cited in the *Middle English Dictionary*, accessed June 12, 2015, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/, s. v., "animal."
6. John C. Hirsh, ed., *Barlam and Iosaphat: A Middle English Life of Buddha* (London: Early English Text Society, 1986), 71.
7. Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrilogiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, 217 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1844), *Distinctiones dictionum theologicalium*, Vol. 210:701A–B. Biblical quotation from the Douay Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.
8. Jesse L. Byock, trans., *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (London: Penguin, 1999), 35–52.
9. Laurence Marcellus Larson, ed. and trans. *The King's Mirror (Speculum Regale–Konungs Skuggsjá)* (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1917), 116.
10. One of several good English translations available is *The Lays of Marie de France*, trans. Edward J. Gallagher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 68–72.
11. Mary Macleod Banks, ed., *An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th-Century Translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench,