

Names of the Beasts: Tracking the *Animot* in Medieval Texts

Carolynn Van Dyke
Lafayette College

The domination which God gave people over all living creatures is implicit throughout all Bestiaries. Names and their etymology are very important parts of [Bestiary texts]. It is a well-known psychological concept that to give a name to something is a way of controlling it.

—Christopher de Hamel, Introduction, *Book of Beasts*

On farms where cows were called by name, milk yield was 258 liters higher than on farms where this was not the case ($p < 0.001$).

—Catherine Bertenshaw and Peter Rowlinson, “Exploring Stock Managers’ Perceptions of the Human-Animal Relationship”

THE EMERGING FIELD GENERALLY KNOWN AS “animal studies” is vexed by a problem familiar to medievalists: the reference of general names. Among scientists, names for species and genera have been subject to debate and revision at least since Charles Darwin undermined the assumption that organisms can be assigned to stable categories. More fundamentally, many contemporary scholars echo the medieval debate over the most general names, universals, with their challenge to *animal* itself. The most widely cited version of that challenge is central to Jacques Derrida’s *L’animal que donc je suis* (2006), edited and translated as *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Derrida opens the lecture on which the book is based by acknowledging his embarrassment when naked before the gaze of his “little cat,” who is, he insists, a truly singular creature, not “the exemplar of a species called ‘cat,’ even less so of an ‘animal’ genus or kingdom.”¹ *Animal* epitomizes the “general singular” name, he argues, with which we claim “to designate every living thing that is

¹Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 9.

held not to be human.” Even to use that name constitutes an “asininity,” a “*bêtise*.” Derrida exposes the *bêtise* with the brilliant spotlight of another coinage, *l’animot*—a “chimerical word” signifying that “animal” is not a biological reality.² Throughout the book, however, Derrida continues to use “animals” and “the animal.” And the many writers who take up his attack on the “general singular” seem similarly unable to dispense with it.³ Semantic disputes are of course common in academic fields, but animal studies (like its variants, including critical animal studies, human/animal studies, animal cultural studies, and animality studies) may be the only discipline unable to dispense with a self-designation that it finds wrongheaded and even unethical. *Animal* unsettles the field’s practitioners as much as the gaze of his cat did Derrida.

Many writers who express this discomfort seem to regard it as both admirable and recent. That is, they imply that earlier thinkers had no scruples about “homogenizing” animals.⁴ Derrida “venture[s] to say that never, on the part of any great philosopher from Plato to Heidegger, . . . have I noticed a protestation *based on principle*, . . . against the general singular that is *the animal*.”⁵ Medieval thinkers in particular are said to have affirmed a separation of “man” and “beast” ordained when God invited Adam to name the other animals.⁶ In the

²Ibid., 31–32, 41.

³Among those who continue to use *animal* even as they denounce it are Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2002); Leonard Lawlor, *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and several contributors to the “Theories and Methodologies: Animal Studies” section of *PMLA* 124.2 (March 2009): 361–575.

⁴I take “homogenization” from Clare Palmer, “Madness and Animality in Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*,” in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 72–84 (83); in turn, Palmer refers (Calarco and Atterton, *Animal Philosophy*, 209 n. 37) to the “discussion of homogenization and ‘hyper-separation’” in Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁵Derrida, *The Animal*, 40.

⁶See, for instance, James J. Sheehan, Introduction to Part 1, *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines*, ed. Sheehan and Morton Sosna (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 27–35 (28); Harriet Ritvo, “The Animal Connection,” in Sheehan and Sosna, *Boundaries of Humanity*, 68–84 (68); Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior, Introduction, *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Ham and Senior (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–7 (4); Joyce E. Salisbury, “Human Beasts and Bestial Humans in the Middle Ages,” in Ham and Senior, *Animal Acts*, 9–21 (10) (referring specifically to the era before the twelfth century), and *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 62; Kelly Oliver, *Animal*

passage with which I open this essay, Christopher de Hamel suggests that medieval writers emphasized the names of animals to reassert human control. Nor did onomastic dominion weaken, according to a common metanarrative, until the modern or even the postmodern era: Darwin and other nineteenth-century scientists undermined the Christian paradigm of “superiority and dominion”; in the twentieth century, philosophers have at last challenged the view maintained “throughout Western civilization” that the animal existed to serve the human.⁷ In a pattern familiar to medievalists, the metanarrative casts premodern positivism as the Other of postmodern questioning.

Like most such self-congratulatory stories, the notion that we are only now rattling the semantic cages constructed by premoderns rests on oversimplifications, both historical and theoretical. Naming practices in medieval animal texts are hardly uniform. Derrida is right that medieval writers do not criticize *animal* explicitly, but they certainly scrutinize it. Moreover, some use this term, or *beast*, with destabilizing inconsistency, alternately including and excluding human beings. And many medieval texts name and rename nonhuman creatures dynamically, mixing levels of abstraction to suggest an interplay of generic and singular identity. Thus they demonstrate that naming can signal not control but recognition, even deference.

After sketching some medieval theories of appellation, I will follow animal namings in the encyclopedia of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, the Middle English *Owl and the Nightingale*, Caxton’s version of the Reynard cycle, and a remarkable thirteenth-century lyric called “The Names of a Hare in English,” finding in most of them complex ways of representing species that avoid linguistic and conceptual *bêtise*.

Singularity in Paradise

Oversimplified descriptions of medieval naming practices often refer to the originary text cited by many medieval writers themselves: Adam’s naming of the beasts and fowls in the second chapter of Genesis. The

Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 240.

⁷The statement about Darwin is in Fudge, *Animal*, 19; the reference to philosophers since 2004 is from Peter Singer, Preface, Calarco and Atterton, *Animal Philosophy*, xi–xii (xi).

significance of that scene depends in part on the first chapter, in which God blesses humankind, bidding them “rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth” (Douay-Rheims, Gen. 1.28). The second chapter reprises the Creation (in significantly different order), then adds that God “brought [the beasts and birds] to Adam to see what he would call them: for whatsoever Adam called any living creature the same is its name” (Gen. 2.19). The power to name the animals thus appears as an aspect or confirmation of human dominion.

As de Hamel notes, names and etymologies are central to encyclopedias and bestiaries. The authors and compilers of those texts may indeed be seeking psychological control, as de Hamel implies; in any case, their ways of using names also assert epistemological and even ontological mastery. And Derrida’s meditations on the general singular illuminate a key element of that mastery. Adducing the essence of a species from its name, many medieval writers claim to delimit the attributes and behavior of an uncountable number of beings at once. Isidore of Seville identifies “castrated” as the defining feature of any cock, presumably because *galli* could designate not just cocks but also the eunuch priests of Cybele. Isidore also writes that the Greeks called the panther Πάν or “all” “because it is the friend of ‘all’ animals, except the dragon, or because it both rejoices in the society of its own kind and gives back whatever it receives in the same kind.”⁸ Particular explications may be murky, but the premise is clear: to understand the name is to grasp the species’ nature.

But the connection between appellation and hegemony in the Genesis story is complicated by visual images of the biblical text. If natural historians summarize or invoke the naming scene, graphic artists recreate it, often and richly. Sometimes their images do convey human mastery—through the animals’ submissive postures, for instance, or perhaps through their “stand[ing] before Adam raising a front hoof or a paw.”⁹ But illustrators necessarily represent the creatures as acting for themselves as well, submitting or deferring voluntarily. And while we might debate the degree to which such submission is truly voluntary,

⁸Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XII.vii.50 and XII.ii.8.

⁹Henry Maguire, “Adam and the Animals: Allegory and the Literal Sense in Early Christian Art,” *Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (January 1987): 363–73 (366).

the gestures must be read in conjunction with another element of the illustrations: individualization. Necessarily, the beasts and birds strike us not as schematic representatives of their species but as particular creatures, rendered naturalistically but displaying something like personality.¹⁰ Thus individualized through expressive faces and postures, the animals in illustrations of the scene seem less subjects than responsive agents.¹¹

The biblical text does not disclose the names that Adam gave the birds and beasts. We might imagine, following the illustrators, that he confronted one or a pair of each type. Perhaps, then, he named them as individuals; perhaps he had no conception of species. The Bible's next reference to animals is the statement that Abel is "shepherd of sheep" (Gen. 4:2). By that point, *ovis* presumably covers and in a sense levels

¹⁰Debra Hassig finds similar indications of individuation and affect in bestiary illustrations, contrasting with the generalized moralizations found in the accompanying texts; perhaps that counterpoint reflects the difference between visual and verbal media. "Beauty in the Beasts: A Study of Medieval Aesthetics," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 19/20 (1990): 137–61 (151–57).

¹¹Typical are the images of Genesis 2:19 available through the ARTstor database (<http://www.artstor.com/c/htm>). For instance, in Lorenzo Maitani's marble relief on the facade of the Duomo di Orvieto from the last quarter of the twelfth century, Adam reaches toward a lion, with whom he exchanges serious but benign gazes, while a ram imitates his gesture with a raised hoof. A fresco in the nave of San Pietro a Valle, Ferentillo, shows Adam reaching down with his right hand toward a canine of some sort while resting his left hand on the head of a smiling ram. The creatures in a thirteenth-century cupola mosaic in the atrium of Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice are all paired, as they are in a "creation of the living creatures" mosaic in the same installation that shows (as do other illustrations of the same scene) a male and female of each type, but the members of each pair differ in features and expressions. Again Adam rests his hand on the head of one creature, here a lion. He looks, however, not toward the animals but back at God, who extends his open hand toward Adam—perhaps a delegation of power but also a chain of recognitions. A fourth illustration of the Genesis scene, this time from a manuscript—the Ashmole Bestiary—seems to fuse Adam with the scholars who extended his appellations in encyclopedias and bestiaries. A fully clothed Adam sits on an elaborate chair in the upper left of five rectilinear frames, which are separated by bars into what look like rooms in a multistory building with the front wall removed. Groups of beasts occupy the other rooms, some only partly visible as they approach from the right. But the frames seem permeable. In some cases a creature's foot or nose edges over a floor or wall. Adam's foot too crosses into the lower of the frames to his right, and he gestures and gazes toward the rabbit, three beasts, and two birds in the frame above it. He and they appear able to see one another. In some cases, particularly the bottom frame, the animals look at each other or at something they are eating, as if unaware of what occurs above them. Other plates in the Ashmole Bestiary use the same reticulation, particularly those illustrating God's creation of sea creatures and birds and beasts; but the naming scene evokes for me the work of the encyclopedist or bestiary himself, defining and to some degree confining the creatures while also recognizing their agency and particularity.

all of the beasts under his control. But of course Abel's semantic (and physical) corralling postdates the Fall. As Richard Sorabji observes, the killing and eating of animals also begins after the Fall; indeed, only after the Flood does God classify "omne quod movetur et vivit" (everything that moves and lives) as food for human beings.¹² In the state of innocence, on the other hand, men needed the animals in order "to acquire an experiential knowledge of their natures" [ad experimentalem cognitionem sumendam de naturis eorum]; this is "suggested," Thomas Aquinas writes, by God's having led them to Adam to be named.¹³ Presumably experiential knowledge would have begun as Adam (and Eve?) encountered particular creatures.¹⁴ And perhaps an unfallen humanity would have continued to identify animals as individuals, neither wanting nor needing to stamp them with generic templates.

Falling into Species

Like other linguistic practices, collective naming does not simply represent human epistemological control; it doubles back to shape human perception. In particular, it reflects and confirms perceptions of nonhuman creatures, supporting a view that I will call species determinism.

As is commonly known, medieval authorities vigorously debated the extent of human self-determination, but almost no one attributed individual autonomy to other animals. Jan M. Ziolkowski points out that biblical animals act only as "tool[s] of God's will" or "implement[s] in a miracle."¹⁵ Aristotle denied intentional agency (though not volition) to animals, and the Stoics held that animals "can be activated (*energein*), but cannot act (*prattein*)."¹⁶ Similarly, medieval philosophers and theologians held animals to be incapable of intentional choice. Aquinas ac-

¹² Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 198; citing Genesis 1:26–30, 3:21, 4:3–5, and 8:20–9:4.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Blackfriars edition (Latin and English), 61 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–73), vol. 13, 1a. 96, q1.

¹⁴ Of course, Aquinas does not mention Eve in this passage, but he does refer to human beings in the plural. In contrast, Kelly Oliver is right to point out, expanding on Derrida's treatment of the Genesis story, that not only does Adam name the animals only in the second Creation version—in which man and woman are created separately—but he also "names woman *in the same way* that he names the other animals" (*Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2009], 142–43).

¹⁵ Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750–1150* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 33.

¹⁶ Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals*, 108–10, 53.

knowledges that animals seem to choose among alternatives, but he attributes such apparent voluntariness to the “sensitive appetite,” not the will. “Once presented by outward sense or imagination,” he explains, “the desire is moved without choice to something to which the animal has a natural bent, as flame leaps up when fire is kindled.”¹⁷ As Eve Salisbury writes, “medieval philosophers attributed animal action to instinct, and animals (unlike humans) were incapable of acting apart from instinctive behavior.”¹⁸

Crucially, this instinctive, involuntary motivation was thought to operate at the level of species. To support his argument that even “examples of sagacity in animal behaviour” arise from “a natural inclination to carry out the intricate processes planned by supreme art,” Aquinas adduces “the fact that all members of the same species display the same pattern of behaviour.”¹⁹ Abelard writes that dogs bark “in order to express a precise concept (anger, pain, or bliss),” but not by their own will; “rather, [the dog] acts by another will, which is of a natural order (a kind of ‘agent will,’ we would say, which is the same for all dogs).”²⁰ Species determinism even informed canon law: at times “[w]hole species of insects and rodents were excommunicated if they caused damage to crops.”²¹ Karl Steel suggests that species determinism rested in part on the conviction that animals do not share “the key privilege of the human likeness to God”: immortality. “Salvation,” Steel points, out, “requires being singled out” rather than “meld[ing] into an undifferentiated mass.”²²

Of course, few would dispute that an animal shares many of its features and habits with its conspecifics. Today’s popular commentators echo Aquinas when they tell us what to expect from a (any) dog or cat. Researchers report on the behavior of snakes, prairie voles, the thick-

¹⁷ Aquinas, *ST*, vol. 17, 1a2æ. 13, q2.

¹⁸ Salisbury, *Beast Within*, 5.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, vol. 17, 1a2æ. 13, q2.

²⁰ Umberto Eco, Roberto Lambertini, Constantino Marmo, and Andrea Tabarroni, “On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs,” in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, ed. Eco and Marmo, Foundations of Semiotics 21 (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989), 3–41 (15); citing Peter Abelard, *Dialectica*, I.iii.

²¹ Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*, 33.

²² Karl Steel, “How to Make a Human,” *Exemplaria* 20 (2008): 3–27 (16). The “mass” to which Steel refers here is the threatened amalgamation of humans with other animals, but the encyclopedic text that he analyzes in this article—like others of the genre—treats species categorically, suggesting that nonhuman creatures were not “singled out” between or within their own species.

tailed opossum, and captive white-winged vampire bats, to cite a few recent titles. Studying a species or subspecies as a whole permits the broad, reproducible conclusions fundamental to science. But modern science sometimes joins medieval theology in the degree to which it disregards variations within species. According to Marc Bekoff, mistrust of anecdotal evidence leads many scientists to avoid reporting or even acknowledging individual behavior.²³ Indeed, lab animals are often specially bred for homogeneity.²⁴ According to the authors of *The Evolution of Animal Communication*, even evolutionary biologists have focused unduly on species, assuming that selection operates at the group rather than the individual level.²⁵ Phylogeneticists, breeders of experimental animals, and many behavioral researchers posit that “all members of the same species display the same pattern of behaviour.”²⁶

This concurrence across the centuries further complicates the self-congratulatory story to which I referred earlier, in which enlightened constructivism has replaced medieval positivism. We might conclude that both eras adhere to a strong version of species determinism, viewing animals as instances stamped from Platonic templates. But there is another way to explain the concurrence, one that I intend now to pursue: in neither era does this orthodox paradigm dominate completely and continuously. Creatures did not undergo one cataclysmic fall into species. They have been plunged repeatedly, by human discourse and human acts, into collectively determined categories; but they climb back.

In our era, some scientists challenge the assumption that behavior and evolutionary development are to be considered only on the level of species or subspecies. Bekoff and others have published longitudinal

²³ Marc Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2007), 119–20.

²⁴ Mary T. Phillips, “Proper Names and the Social Construction of Biography: The Negative Case of Laboratory Animals,” *Qualitative Sociology* 17.2 (1994): 119–42 (130); Jackson Laboratory, “The Importance of Understanding Substrains in the Genomic Age: The Jackson Laboratory,” *JAX NOTES* 491 (Fall 2003), <http://jaxmice.jax.org/jaxnotes/archive/491a.html>; Canadian Council on Animal Care, “Guide to the Care and Use of Experimental Animals Volume 1—Chapter VII,” *CCAC Programs*, 1993, http://www.ccac.ca/en/CCAC_Programs/Guidelines_Policies/GUIDES/ENGLISH/V1_93/CHAP/CHVII.HTM.

²⁵ William A. Searcy and Stephen Nowicki, *The Evolution of Animal Communication: Reliability and Deception in Signaling Systems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 219.

²⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, 1a2æ. 13, q2 (cited above).

studies of individual animals—chimpanzees, gorillas, and one famous parrot. Some academic researchers study “animal personality” not just across but within species.²⁷ In developmental biology, William Searcy and Stephen Nowicki are not alone in contesting the emphasis on group selection. As I suggested earlier, Darwin’s work undermined the essentialist view of species, leading to fundamental questions about taxonomy. Reviewing many such challenges, some researchers refer to a “cognitive revolution” or “paradigm shift,” one that they acknowledge to be neither complete nor uncontested.²⁸

As far as I know, no medieval investigations of animals herald a cognitive revolution; but dissent from species determinism emerges in various ways, some limited and some systematic. The limited challenges appear in both expository and fictional genres. It is hardly surprising that pragmatic texts such as hunting manuals acknowledge variations within species. The fourteenth-century *Master of Game* traces those differences to the same causes that influence human beings:

Some [deer] goeth better and are better running and fly better than some, as other beasts do, and some be more cunning and more wily than others, as it is with men, for some be wiser than others. And it cometh to them of the good kind of their father and mother, and of good getting (breeding) and of good nurture and from being born in good constellations, and in good signs of heaven and that (is the case) with men and all other beasts.²⁹

The hunter must take these varying traits into account, responding as he would to an agent little more predictable than he is himself. But

²⁷ Oliver John et al., “Animal Personality,” Department of Psychology, University of Texas, December 20, 2009, http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/gosling/animal_personality.htm; Charles Locurto, “Individual Differences and Animal Personality,” *Comparative Cognition & Behavior Reviews* 2 (2007), <http://psyc.queensu.ca/ccbt/Vol2/Locurto.html>. The parrot to which I refer is the subject of Irene Maxine Pepperberg’s research, reported most fully in *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Searcy and Nowicki, *Evolution of Animal Communication*, 25. A useful summary of issues in taxonomy is provided by Marc Ereshefsky, “Species,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/species/>, section 5. For references to a cognitive revolution in animal science, see, for instance, Pepperberg, *The Alex Studies*, 2; Charles Siebert, “Watching Whales Watching Us,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 10, 2009, sec. MM; and Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*, xviii.

²⁹ Edward of Norwich, *The Master of Game: The Oldest English Book on Hunting*, ed. William A. Baillie-Grohman and F. Baillie-Grohman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1909), 30; parenthetical interpolations in edition. Here Edward closely follows his

there is no evidence that the operational attribution of individual self-determination challenged the orthodox position on species determinism. Much the same can be said of individualized animals in narrative fiction. Romances, religious legends, beast epics, and fables often depict specific creatures that make choices based on particular motives. But most such narratives turn on supernatural causation; in many, the creatures are heavily and consistently anthropomorphized. Once again, species determination and representations of individual agency failed to intersect.

Nonetheless, in many animal texts they do intersect—neither through generalizations about animals nor through fictional narration but through a more widespread semiotic practice: naming. Some non-fictional and fictional texts that represent the acts of animals equivocate in referring to them. “The owl” or “the fox” might be an individual creature, or a species, or a hypothetical creature meant to epitomize the species. An ostensibly individual name may turn out to be stereotypical, even generic. A few remarkable texts foreground such slippages, compounding possibilities in a productive but self-deconstructing way. To varying degrees, unstable namings convey, paradoxically, a powerful and credible sense of animals as self-determining agents.

Ways of Naming

Questions about naming—the relation between name and referent, the differences between proper and common or “improper” names, the ways in which names’ referents could be extended or restricted, the status of verbs as names, and so on—were central to medieval grammar, semantics, and logic. Particularly relevant to naturalist and literary texts is the complex and changing discussion of appellation. For Abelard, *appellatio* differed from another form of naming, *significatio*, in that a noun “appellates” things of which it is true but “signifies” a property of whatever it appellates.³⁰ Later writers continued to use “appellation” primarily in the first way, for deictic reference, but differences arose over the range of reference. Both William of Sherwood and Roger Bacon defined appellation narrowly as “the present correct application of a term.” Presum-

source text: compare Gaston Phébus, *Livre de chasse*, ed. Gunnar Tilander, *Cynegetica* XVIII (Karlshamn: E. G. Johanssons Boktrycker, 1971), 1.58–59.

³⁰Martin M. Tweedale, “Abelard and the Culmination of the Old Logic,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 143–57 (149).

ably, if Adam did intend to name only those individual creatures facing him, he was appellationing them in this strict sense. But William of Sherwood stipulates that an appellation “may be [either] ‘ampliated’ or ‘restricted’ within the proposition for some reason, e.g., because of the past or future tense of the verb of that proposition, or as a result of the use of such words as ‘potest’ (‘can’) which amplify the appellation to include merely possible individuals.”³¹ So Adam might have been conferring “lion” not just on a beast in his part of the garden but on unseen, even unborn, conspecifics. Indeed, writes L. M. de Rijk, “The anonymous *Fallacie Parvipontane* says that the appellative noun was invented in order to bring together all things denoted by it (its *appellata*) under one and the same name. However, which *appellata* are actually referred to in a proposition depends upon the verb of that proposition.”³² Adam left us no propositions in which he may have used his animal names, but of course later writers did. Their verbs—and other “ampliating” or “restricting” words—can determine whether a given name designates perceptible individuals or “all things denoted by it.”

Animals play a significant role in medieval discussions of such questions. Problems in semantics and ontology are often illustrated with names of species or with the hypernym *animal*, and occasionally with stereotypical animal names such as *Brunellus* (for a donkey).³³ That may be because such terms illustrate problems of appellation especially clearly. Out of context, *animal* and species-names refer ambiguously to particulars and to groups, or even to properties—“the animal in him,” “don’t be a rat.”

In context—particularly in literary texts—we can see those philosophical ambiguities in operation. To trace their operations, I propose a rough taxonomy of the ways of naming animals in medieval encyclopedias, bestiaries, and narratives. The five practices that I will identify overlap, particularly in use, but their prototypical uses differ in ways that carry contrasting ontological implications.

³¹L. M. de Rijk, “The Origins of the Theory of the Property of Terms,” in Kretzmann, Kenny, and Pinborg, *Cambridge History*, 161–73 (165). On Bacon’s agreement, see (in the same volume) Alain de Libera, “The Oxford and Paris Traditions in Logic,” 174–87 (180).

³²De Rijk, “Origins of the Theory,” 165.

³³For instance, “every man is an animal” (as the first term in a paradigmatic syllogism) goes back at least to Aristotle and recurs throughout Western and Arabic commentaries. Later in this section of my text, I cite philosophers’ references to species and individual names.

I begin by positing two extremes, one maximally general and the other maximally particular.

(1) **Generic:** Names of species often encompass innumerable past, present, and potential individuals. Insisting on the particularity of his “little cat,” Derrida acknowledges that we commonly take *cat* to designate “the exemplar of a species called ‘cat,’” or even “an ‘animal’ genus or kingdom.”³⁴ In English, the most generic appellations for animals are governed by the definite article. *The*-plus-noun is not always generic, of course: “the book” normally refers to one particular book. Acknowledging that such constructions can be generic, however, one philosopher of language cites animal examples: “the whale is a mammal”; “the dog is a loyal friend.”³⁵ What distinguishes those phrases as generic is that they govern predicates, in the simple present, that indicate recurring acts and habitual states: “The viper (*vipera*) is so named because it ‘spawns through force’ (*vi parere*),” writes Isidore of Seville; according to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, in John Trevisa’s translation, “the owle . . . is always iholde with slouþe, and is feble to flee” [gravi semper detenta pigritia, debilis est ad volandum].³⁶

(2) **Proper:** In sharp contrast, some animals in romance and legend bear individualizing names, appropriate to their distinctive roles, including their ability to recognize individual human beings. The hound in the Middle English *Sir Tryamour*, named “Trewelove,” “[h]alpe his maystyr and be hym stode. / Byttryly he can byte.”³⁷ Such appellations can be called proper names—that is, noun phrases that “can occur with markers of definiteness.”³⁸ Among those markers are the deictic modifier (here, “his hound so gode”) and preterite or other perfective verbs (“helped,” “stood”). Both subject and verb are thus singular. Trewelove is no less an individual agent than are the human characters in *Sir Trya-*

³⁴Derrida, *The Animal*, 9.

³⁵Peter Ludlow, “Descriptions,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/descriptions/>, section 9.

³⁶Isidore, *Etymologies*, XII.iv.10; John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, A Critical Text*, gen. ed. Maurice Charles Seymour, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–88), XII.vi; Bartholomaeus Anglicus [sic], *De rerum proprietatibus* (1601; rpt. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), XII.v.

³⁷*Sir Tryamour*, in *Four Middle English Romances*, ed. Harriet Hudson, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), 313–15.

³⁸Sam Cumming, “Names,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/names/>, section 1.

mour; indeed, shortly after the passage that I cited above, the French version of the dog's name will be given to the newborn (human) hero.³⁹

Somewhere between those poles are two uses of the generic with more complex implications. If pluralized, generic names can avoid categorical homogenization: "vipers" or "owls" allows for individual differences. Nonetheless, a text can still represent such groups categorically, as when Bartholomaeus writes that hounds "haueþ opere propretees þat beep nought ful goode; for houndes haueþ contynual bolysme, þat is 'immoderate appetit.'" ⁴⁰ Thus plural species names can either acknowledge or obviate individuality. Similarly flexible is a fourth method: indefinite singular generics, marked with an indefinite article in languages that lexicalize indefiniteness. Sometimes these names govern habitual verbs, equating the individual with the species—"A hare [being chased] shall last well four miles or less"⁴¹—but a creature initially identified as "a hare" might also enter a particular, if fictitious, time and place, becoming no less distinctive than an unnamed man or woman in a naturalistic novel. Thus Trewe-love's temporal and spatial localization would make him an individual agent even if he had been introduced as "a hound" rather than with a proper name. Singular generics can also be individualized by demonstrative and possessive determiners. Commenting in the fourteenth century on Aristotle's *De anima*, John Buridan called appellations such as "this man" "the most proper singular term[s]" because they "must point to one united existent present object"; the same would surely apply to "this hound" or "Derrida's cat."⁴²

³⁹Trewe-love's acts might seem as generic as those of Isidore's dog (*Etymologies* XII.25); encyclopedists and natural historians commonly attribute fidelity even past death to dogs as a species. The editor of *Sir Tryamour* notes also that both "Trewe-love" as a dog's name and "Tryamour" as a human name occur in other romances (Hudson, ed., *Sir Tryamour*, 191 nn. 313 and 452). But a long series of narrative details confirms the individualization of this faithful hound. Equally important, human characters in romance also behave in accordance with stereotypes. The locus of agency is determined not by analogues but by the syntax, deictic or generic, of a particular narrative.

⁴⁰Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.xxvii; closely following Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XXVIII.xxvi.

⁴¹Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game*, 15.

⁴²Buridan's statement is quoted in E. Jennifer Ashworth, "Medieval Theories of Singular Terms," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/singular-terms-medieval/>, section 9. I must acknowledge, however, that Buridan would probably not regard "this hound" as a "proper singular" equivalent to "this man." According to Ashworth, singularity for Buridan requires continuous identity through time, something possessed in the fullest sense only by God. "Man" is a proper singular in a more limited sense because his soul is also continuous through time. Animals, human bodies, and rivers display only the

Finally, a common variation on the proper name itself can be called a fifth method, one that moves from deictic *appellatio* back toward descriptive *significatio*. Among the proper nouns applied to medieval literary animals, “Trewelove” is unusually individualizing. More often, names that are grammatically “proper”—not governed by determiners, capitalized in modern editions—were closely tied to entire species, semantically or by convention. French cats in at least two texts were *Tiberz*; translating one of those texts, Chaucer substitutes “Gibbe,” a “common English name for a tomcat.”⁴³ The *Middle English Dictionary* cites two texts in addition to Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* in which dogs are named “Talbot.” “Scot” was “apparently a common name for a horse,” and “Brok (‘badger’) was commonly used for gray farm animals.”⁴⁴ In beast epics, a wolf was often Isegrim, a bear Bruin, and the fox so predictably Reynard that the name could take the indefinite article. Thus conventionalized, proper names can be little more individualizing than are generic ones: successive cats might be “Gibbe,” and the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests that by the sixteenth century, a woman behaving like a male cat could be said to be “play[ing] the gib.”

That history epitomizes the referential malleability of animal names: “Gib” might be male or female, human or feline, categorical or particular. Such alternatives do not amount to anarchy; names imply degrees of individuation. By default, proper nouns “represent,” in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “the *quanta of signification* below which one no longer does anything but point.” They lie on the margin of a “general system of classification,” opposite, I would argue, the upper margins occupied by generics like *fox* and ultimately *animal*. As Lévi-Strauss demonstrates, cultures largely determine the degree to which a lexeme is “perceived as a proper name,”⁴⁵ and a particular written text can particularize a species name or render a proper noun common. The importance of forms of appellation lies in their openness to reinterpretation.

Many medieval writers exploit that openness, alternately confirming

continuity of diverse parts succeeding one another (Ashworth, “Medieval Theories of Singular Terms,” section 10).

⁴³*The Romaunt of the Rose*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 6204, and Alfred David, Explanatory Notes, in *Riverside Chaucer*, 1113 n. 6204.

⁴⁴Janette Richardson, Explanatory Notes for *The Miller’s Tale*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, 876 n. 1543.

⁴⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 215; my emphasis in the phrase quoted last.

and undermining the expectations raised by names. I turn now to four texts that appellate, to powerful effect, the equivocal agency of the non-human.

Tracking the *Animot*

The Gendered Generic

Pilke þat beþ in oon forme in general kynde haþ oon general name in kynde, as man is animal and hors is animal, and so of oþer bestes.⁴⁶

John Trevisa's translation of *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Anglicus provided medieval English writers with a vernacular version of "the standard medieval encyclopedia."⁴⁷ Bartholomaeus, a Franciscan born around 1200, maintained many practices of earlier medieval encyclopedists. The first of his nineteen volumes "treteth of God and of his names and nownes þat he is inempned by, touchinge beyng and persone oþir effect, doynge, and propirte."⁴⁸ Names and etymologies continue to be central in the lengthy volume dealing with animals. Even when he passes from "generalle" to "special" discussion, Bartholomaeus opens each segment with a generic name governing habitual predicates: "The asse hatte *asinus* and haþ þat name of *sedendo* 'sittyng' as it were a beste to sitte vpon. . . . And is a malencolik beste þat is colde and druye and is þerfore kyndeliche heuy, slowh, and lustiles" (XVIII.viii). He shares with Isidore of Seville (one of his major sources) and with bestiarists the kind of naming practice that homogenizes members of a category.

But Bartholomaeus's encyclopedia also presented English readers with slippages in that naming practice. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the passage that I quote above as the earliest English use of "ani-

⁴⁶Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XIX.cxvi.

⁴⁷A. S. G. Edwards, "Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum* and Medieval English Literature," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 222 (1985): 121–28 (121).

⁴⁸Trevisa, *On the Properties*, Prohemium. Trevisa uses both "names" and "nownes" for "nominibus divinis" in *De rerum proprietatibus*. Unless otherwise noted, future references to Trevisa's translation will be to this edition and will be documented in the text by book and chapter number. Where I cite only Trevisa, I have judged his translation faithful to Bartholomaeus's Latin as represented in the 1601 printing of *De rerum proprietatibus* cited above. Trevisa's "actual copy-text is not known to survive" (Seymour, Introduction to Trevisa, *On the Properties*, vol. 1, xii).

mal”; perhaps because the term was unfamiliar, Trevisa paraphrases it in a previous section of the text: “a best.”⁴⁹ But the English term does not cover the same range as the Latin. A few lines later, Trevisa will use *best* to translate *bestia* in reference to a particular kind of animal, one that contrasts with “men” rather than including human beings as does Bartholomaeus’s *animal* (XVIII.1). That awkwardness epitomizes a problem that appears throughout the text: the unstable reference of names for animals in both—if not in all—languages.

Some anomalies appear even in a list of chapter titles in *De proprietatibus rerum*. One involves the placement of birds: Bartholomaeus describes thirty-eight kinds of flying creatures in his twelfth book, *De avibus*, but the eighteenth book incorporates birds under animals. The duplication may reflect two methods of organization, one hypotactic and the other paratactic. The second mention (in Book XVIII) locates birds in a familiar hierarchy, with *animal* embracing successively smaller subcategories. The earlier treatment, the book entirely devoted to birds, immediately follows *De aere et eius passionibus*, the book on air, weather, and wind. Birds belong here by contiguity rather than subcategory: birds and fowls “pertain,” as Bartholomaeus puts it, to the height, beauty, and ornamentation of the air (XII.i).

Contiguity trumps hierarchy in another way as well, this one more accidental: like his contemporary Vincent of Beauvais, Bartholomaeus arranges species not in larger families, as does Isidore—grouping lion, tiger, panther, and leopard—but “by the ordre of a. b. c.” (XVIII.ii). Thus in Book XVIII, six chapters on large mammals (*ariete* through *asino*) are followed by a long one on serpents, a shorter one on the adder, a chapter each on spiders and bees, then *De boue* (the ox), and so on. The structure gives the reader access to any species directly rather than through a larger category.

In fact, the alphabetized sequence defies categorization. The *f* section begins with *fauni*, which (along with *satiri*) are “wonderlich yschape wiþ likenesse and schappe of men” [bestiæ monstrosæ, effigiem quidem hominis habentes].⁵⁰ The fauns are not the only legendary creatures intercalated with ordinary animals. Even more anomalous is the next entry: *De femina*, treating females in general but with ample reference to women and girls. Next come chapters on the *fetans* (fertile—or preg-

⁴⁹OED Online (March 2011), s.v. “animal. n.”

⁵⁰Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.xlviii; Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XVIII. xlvi.

nant—creatures of any species) and the fetus. And the chapter on the ox is immediately followed by *De bubulco*, “[a]n oxeherde” (XVIII.xiv). A human occupational group is structurally equivalent to an animal species, a legendary one, a gender, and a cross-species developmental stage. Individuals included under any category could belong to others—the ox-herd is also an adult human male—and the categories themselves are not controlled by a logical hierarchy.

In fact, two of the largest categories of *De proprietatibus rerum*—*animal* and *homo*—are ambiguously ordered. After treating God and the angels in books I and II, Bartholomaeus devotes five books to human beings (books III through VII). Although we might expect animals to follow, the next nine books treat inanimate things, with birds included in the book on the air and fish treated in “*De proprietatibus aque*” (books XII and XIII). Animals get their due in Book XVIII, exceeded in length only by its predecessor, on the plants. The animals may in fact get more than their due here, for they now include creatures treated earlier—not just birds but also mankind. “*Dicitur autem animal,*” Bartholomaeus explains, “*omne quod consistit ex carne & spiritu vitæ animatum, sive sit aereum, ut volitalia, sive aquaticum, ut natatilia, sive terrenum, sicut sunt agrestia & gressibilia, scilicet homines, reptilia, bestiae & iumenta*” [And all is called “animal” that consists of flesh and the animating spirit of life, whether aerial or flying, or aquatic or swimming, or land-based, as are wild and tractable [creatures], men, crawling things, beasts, and beasts of burden].⁵¹ To appellate man as a type of animal was of course traditional; following Isidore and echoing other patristic writers, Bartholomaeus defines man in Book III as *animal deiforme*.⁵² In itself, that name positions humankind at the intersection of a superior and an inferior category, precisely the hierarchy implied in the early books of the *De proprietatibus rerum*. But the eighteenth book proposes an alternative ontology, with man as subcategory or cognate of animal.

Bartholomaeus may have been influenced in this regard by sources other than Isidore and Augustine, particularly Aristotle and the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Although Aristotle classifies animals on a hierarchical *scala naturae* (*Historia animalium* VIII.i), he also includes human beings under a binary distinction between animals with and without blood (*Historia animalium* I.iv), just as Bartholomaeus makes

⁵¹ Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XVIII.Proem (my translation).

⁵² *Ibid.*, III.i; Trevisa, *On the Properties*, III.i.

men one subdivision of *animal*. Aristotle and Avicenna also treat animals topically by system, feature, or part, rather than by species, often including man along with other species in elaborating a given topic. Bartholomaeus follows them in the lengthy first section of Book XVIII. He cites Avicenna for the observation that some beasts have parts in common, as man and horse do with flesh and sinews. He notes later that some animals whose lips are full and equal drink by sucking, “as man, hors, cow, and mule and opre suche.” Similarly, some animals increase or decrease in marrow and blood at different times, “as it is openliche yknowe in schellefish of þe see and in mannes brayne”—and perhaps, Bartholomaeus adds, in the brain of any animal.⁵³

Use of Greek and non-Western sources has been cited as an innovation of *De proprietatibus rerum*.⁵⁴ If, as I am suggesting, those sources prompted Bartholomaeus to mix top-down taxonomy with metonymic associations and lateral comparisons, they thereby influenced his representation of animals. When “the horse” or “the ox” parallels “female” and “ox-herd,” and when mules or shellfish share physiological and even behavioral features with humans, the creatures do not seem determined solely by species.

Aristotle and Avicenna evidently influenced Bartholomaeus to loosen the rigidity of generic naming in a more overt way as well: through narration. Encyclopedias and bestiaries commonly include brief narratives, but the agents remain generic thanks to minimal detail and habitual predicates. Thus Isidore writes that when lions walk, “their tail brushes away their tracks, so that a hunter cannot find them. When they bear their cubs, the cub is said to sleep for three days and nights, and then after that the roaring or growling of the father, making the den shake, as it were, is said to wake the sleeping cub.”⁵⁵ Bartholomaeus spins longer and less categorical stories. Many chapters provide alternate

⁵³ Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XVIII.Proem; Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.i. For the last observation, Bartholomaeus again cites Aristotle, but the statement in question comes from *De proprietatibus elementorum*, one of several texts incorrectly attributed to Aristotle (see the Index of Authorities in the third volume of Trevisa, *On the Properties*, 316).

⁵⁴ For instance, Lynn Tarte Ramey, “Monstrous Alterity in Early Modern Travel Accounts: Lessons from the Ambiguous Medieval Discourse on Humanness,” *L’Esprit créateur* 48.1 (2008): 81–95 (86); and Eva Albrecht, Excursus to “The Organization of Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum maius* and of Some Other Latin Encyclopedias,” *Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Bar-Ilan University Conference*, ed. Steven Harvey (New York: Springer, 2000), 58–74 (65–67).

⁵⁵ Isidore, *Etymologies*, XII.ii.5.

accounts of various members of a species; many attribute the actions of a creature to internal motivations. For instance, the generic opening of *De asino* is followed by several colorful anecdotes. Bartholomaeus cites both Avicenna and Aristotle for the observation that the ass is loathsome to small birds that nest in bushes and briars (“*minutis avibus . . . est exosus*”) because he eats and abrades their nesting material. The vicious assaults then launched by sparrows might be regarded as instinctive defenses of territory, but that is not the case with the next instance of hostility. For unspecified reasons, the raven—not a small bird that nests in bushes and briars—also “*hateþ ful moche þe asse,*” again as per Aristotle and Avicenna, and seeks opportunities to peck out his eyes.⁵⁶ The use of “*hateþ*” and “*odit*” here might be called anthropomorphic, but some ethologists would regard such terms as the most parsimonious representation of observed behavior.⁵⁷ In any case, the narrative crosses species boundaries, lifting sparrows and asses alike out of categorical determinism.

In another section, Bartholomaeus provides a more benign version of creaturely habits:

And whenne he findeþ mete he [the rooster] clepiþ his wifes togedres with a certeyn voys and spareþ his owne mete to fede þerwiþ his wifes. And settiþ next to him on rooste þe henne þat is most fatte and tendre and loueþ hire best and desireþ most to haue hire presence.

In the morning, Bartholomaeus continues, the rooster lays his side next to the favored hen’s, and “*bi certeyne tokenes and beckes*” he “*woweþ and prayeþ hire to tredinge*” [*per quosdam nutus ipsam ad sui copulam allicit & invitat*].⁵⁸ The behavior of this cock may be amplified to all and only those creatures driven by a generic “agent will,” but Bartholomaeus represents him with subjective terms applicable to many species and with details that evoke individual intent. Indeed, the passage seems to have engendered one of the most distinctive protagonists in medieval literature. Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* adheres closely enough to Bartholomaeus’s text to convince several scholars of direct influence.⁵⁹ Trevisa’s

⁵⁶ Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XVIII.vii; Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.viii.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*, 121–23.

⁵⁸ Bartholomaeus, *De rerum proprietatibus*, XII.xvi; Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XII.xvii.

⁵⁹ Edwards, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De Proprietatibus Rerum* and Medieval English Literature,” 126; and compare Chaucer, *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, VII.2865–76, 3167–83.

translation may have supplied a particular hint: in the passage just quoted, Trevisa elaborates on his initial translation of *quosdam nutus* with “as it were loue tacchis.” Whether or not Chaucer used Trevisa, Chaucer demonstrates that Bartholomaeus has moved his *Gallus* very close to a creature with whom many readers identify, one with enough free will—indeed, willfulness—to ignore his sound generic instincts.

Species-Climbing Specimens

“Veir!” fet il, “veirs est dist en engleis: *Stroke oule and schrape oule and evere is oule oule.*”

[“You’re right,” he said. “It’s true what the English say: *Stroke an owl or scrape an owl but always an owl’s an owl.*”]⁶⁰

Ich habbe bile stif & stronge
 & gode cliuers scharp & longe:
 So hit bicumeþ to haukes cunne.
 Hit is min hiȝte, hit is mi wunne,
 þat ich me draȝe to mine cunde.
 Ne mai me no man þareuore schende.

[I’ve got a hard, strong beak and long, sharp claws, as is fitting for a member of the hawkish clan. It is my joy and my delight to associate myself with those who are of my kind. Nobody can reproach me for that.]⁶¹

The speaker in the second of these epigraphs might, if real, have taken serious issue with her portrayal in *De proprietatibus rerum*. According to Bartholomaeus, *bubo*, the owl, resembles hawks only in its feathers and bill. It lacks the “boldnesse and vertue” of other predators, being sloth-

⁶⁰From Nicolas Bozon (Anglo-Norman, fl. c. 1320), *Contes moralisés*, ed. Lucy Toulmin-Smith and Paul Meyer (Paris, 1889), 23; as reprinted and translated in Neil Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 100. My excerpt comes from an anecdote cited by Cartlidge as an analogue for lines 101–38 in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. “It” in the passage is a hawk whose nest has been fouled by owlets.

⁶¹Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 269–74. Future references to the *Owl and the Nightingale* will be documented in the text by line number (underlining in his edition indicates additions to the base text, London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ix). All will be to this edition and translation, except that I provide my own translation of the following passages: 129–30; 969–70; 1099; 1788; 1794.

ful and feeble in flight; moreover, the owl signifies destruction and death, eats excrement, and is hated by other birds.⁶² The self-satisfied owl in *The Owl and the Nightingale* (dated by its recent editor around the middle of the thirteenth century) will have none of that. Just before the excerpt that I quote, her antagonist has paraphrased the anecdote from which my first quotation is taken, concluding that no good can come from the “ungood one that comes from a foul breed” (129–30). In response, the Owl not merely admits but rejoices that she acts according to her *cunde*, a kind that, she alleges, the Nightingale has seriously misrepresented.

The Owl and the Nightingale names its protagonists in a formally straightforward way. Never receiving individual names or characterizations, the birds begin as specimens, “[a]n hule and one niȝtingale” whose “grete tale” the speaker heard in an out-of-the-way valley (1–4). Both the determiners and the preterite verbs establish the species names as singular generics. But the early confrontation over the Owl’s *cunde* typifies three complications. First, the names will often function as fully generic rather than individual, appellating the species as a whole. Second, those generic references will be made not by a human commentator but by the birds themselves. Just as the Owl defends her species in the passage quoted above, the Nightingale will later reject or reinterpret generic slanders recorded in other texts (e.g., 1043–110, 1347–77). Used that way, the categorical terms actually combat categorical homogenization: the birds claim the right to define their species. Derrida might applaud these beasts’ attack on semantic *bêtise*. Of course, they can make such an attack only with capabilities that they ought not, as members of their species, to possess. That constitutes the third and most serious complication in the protagonists’ identities. The weakness in their claims to define their *cunde* is not simply their fictitiousness: in other texts, notably Chaucer’s, fictional female characters persuasively model a real woman’s sovereignty over her category.⁶³ The problem is, rather, their relationship to their real correlatives, who cannot verbally assert anything at all. The birds’ deployment of their own species names raises a fundamental question about the species—indeed, the biological kingdom—to which they belong.

⁶²Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XII.vi.

⁶³Many writers have analyzed texts in which—to cite Susan Crane’s phrase—female characters “[respeak] and remanipulat[e] familiar gender paradigms” (*Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 55).

That question has shaped scholarly response to *The Owl and the Nightingale*. In one way or another, any reader must deal with the birds' use of human discourse. Most critics take one of two opposing approaches, but I have found none who can keep them separate. On the one hand, many early analyses and some recent ones focus on the discourse itself, treating its avian origin as a convention without significance. That is, the birds are ventriloquists, to adapt Jill Mann's term,⁶⁴ for a debate whose antagonists have been variously identified as human individuals, professional groups, nationalities, attitudes, institutions, rhetorical or musical styles, ethical or ideological stances, legal or judicial practices, or philosophical positions. More recently, on the other hand, many commentators note that the diversity of those discourse-centered readings undermines any one of them.⁶⁵ Thus these writers focus on the birds themselves, creatures that the poet "endows . . . with a creatural realism that makes them not icons but ornithological specimens."⁶⁶ Not just the bodies but also the attitudes of the birds are, writes Neil Cartlidge, "too specific and too irreducibly avian for the contrast between them to constitute any kind of statement about life in general."⁶⁷

Neither approach avoids awkward confrontations with its alternative, backtrackings often registered by inconclusive references to fictionality or comic incongruity. Thus Tamara A. Goeglein, who reads the poem through John of Salisbury's treatment of the "universals problem," ends by conceding that the issue "is given a comic turn when we recall that this particular owl is actually a literary fiction."⁶⁸ Goeglein does not specify where this "comic turn" leaves the philosophical argument. Beginning from the avian side, Mann finds it "impossible to say that the Owl and the Nightingale represent anything other than themselves" but adds that the "playful yoking of animal nature and human verbiage is a way of expressing a serious point about the function of rhetoric in

⁶⁴Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168.

⁶⁵That the disparity of readings undermines any one of them is suggested by Thomas Honegger, *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996), 115–16; Cartlidge, Introduction, *Owl and the Nightingale*, xvi–xvii; and Wendy A. Matlock, "Law and Violence in *The Owl and the Nightingale*," *JEGP* 109 (2010): 446–67 (446–47).

⁶⁶Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, 169.

⁶⁷Cartlidge, Introduction, *Owl and the Nightingale*, xvii.

⁶⁸Tamara A. Goeglein, "The Problem of Monsters and Universals in 'The Owl and the Nightingale' and John of Salisbury's 'Metalogicon,'" *JEGP* 94 (1995): 190–206 (205).

human life.”⁶⁹ Mann says little, however, about that serious point or its connection to the self-representing birds. And Cartlidge ends his bird-centered reading with a major concession: the poem’s “collapsing of the distinction between human reason and animal instinct is only made possible by a fiction—that birds might talk—but it is nevertheless slightly disquieting, as well as comical.”⁷⁰ “Comical” forestalls an explanation of what he finds “disquieting,” and “fiction”—here as elsewhere—seems to dismiss altogether the significance of the birds as birds. Might the debate have been essentially the same if voiced by two plants, or two men?

Goeglein expands her point about fictionality with a statement that suggests a resolution of the interpretive impasse. As a “literary fiction,” she writes, the Owl is what the Nightingale calls her: an *unwiʒt* (literally “un-creature”).⁷¹ *Wiʒt* and its derivatives appear often in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and their meaning telescopes in the same way as that of “beast” in *De proprietatibus rerum*. In fact, the referential focus of *wiʒt* is even more unstable: while “beast” sometimes embraces and sometimes excludes human beings, *wiʒt* refers at various times to an animal, to a human being, or indeterminately to either. In branding the Owl *unwiʒt* for singing only at night and in lamentation (217–20), the Nightingale might mean that her opponent acts unlike all other birds, or unlike all other creatures, or, as her ensuing paraphrase suggests, contrary to human norms (235–38). The poem juggles those levels of reference. We might say, paraphrasing Luce Irigaray, that the Owl—like the Nightingale, and like its readers—is a *wiʒt* that is not one.⁷²

In neither Irigaray’s usage nor my own does “not one” equate with “nonexistent.” The birds fit no single taxonomic or ontological template, but they represent two kinds of extratextual reality: biological and intersubjective.

The poem is certainly grounded in avian behavior. The Nightingale’s initial “speech” is simply her song, which seems better to the narrator than pipe or harp music (19–24). When she shifts to English words, it is to berate the Owl because the proximity of the latter—a predator,

⁶⁹ Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, 190.

⁷⁰ Cartlidge, Introduction, *Owl and the Nightingale*, xxxvii–xxxviii.

⁷¹ Goeglein, “Problem of Monsters,” 205–6.

⁷² I refer to Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); originally published as *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, 1977. Of “woman,” Irigaray writes, “She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no ‘proper’ name” (26).

after all—interrupts her singing (25–36). The nocturnal Owl waits until evening to respond that she too sings, though not with “twittering,” and that the Nightingale’s habitual insults could someday end “ȝif ich þe holde on mine uote” (41–54) [if I got a hold of you in my foot]. Their antagonism is of long standing, and it is entirely indigenously. The Nightingale goes on to insult the Owl by listing what owls—particularly of the species *Strix aluco*—do in fact look like, sound like, and eat.⁷³ Thomas Honegger adds the important observation that “the debate is not only carried on by birds, but it is primarily about birds”; thus the subject matter upsets readers’ expectations that animal debaters must be transparent vehicles for human concerns.⁷⁴ As I will argue later, the denouement of the debate resembles the outcome of many natural confrontations between predator and potential prey. This is not ventriloquism, unless the poet is the dummy;⁷⁵ it is a verbalized ornithological face-off.

It does not follow that we can easily read the poem as burlesque, a mere bird-brawl tricked forth as a debate. The debate achieves another kind of credibility: rhetorical persuasiveness. The birds voice their genuinely avian interests in finely crafted, pungent octosyllabic couplets. Editing the poem in 1922, J. W. H. Atkins called its characters “birds with the minds that human beings would possess, could we imagine them transformed, for the time being, into birds.”⁷⁶ Notwithstanding Atkins’s nervous conditionals, he reveals that at least one reader *has*—“for the time being”—imagined himself into the minds of the birds. I do not mean that readers experience life as an owl or a nightingale: these word-birds are not quite literary versions of *Luscinia* and *Strix aluco*. Rather, the birds co-opt the reader’s subjectivity. The poem draws us into the perspective of agents that are credibly avian but also intentional, self-aware, and partly self-determining—in short, a perspective both within and beyond species determination. That will turn out to be a subject-position not limited to birds.

⁷³Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, “The RSPB: Tawny Owl,” October 2, 2010, <http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/t/tawnyowl/index.aspx>.

⁷⁴Honegger, *From Phoenix to Chanticleer*, 121, 115.

⁷⁵Jill Mann similarly contests readings that regard the birds as channels for human discourse: “If this is ventriloquism, then the ventriloquist is giving his dummies their own voice” (*From Aesop to Reynard*, 171). I would go further: initially, the poet is the channel for avian voices.

⁷⁶John William Hey Atkins, ed., *Owl and the Nightingale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), lxxix.

A key expressive strategy of these *unwiȝt* subjects is name-calling. As Mann observes, “the Owl and the Nightingale are at once individuals and generic representatives.”⁷⁷ But her “are” is insufficiently transitive: the birds cast themselves and each other as generic representatives, but with revealing slippages. In a passage to which I have already referred, for instance, the Nightingale places her opponent, improbably, into an anecdote from “some years ago”: “You,” she claims, “crept in [to a falcon’s nest] one day, and laid in there your own nasty egg”; eventually the falcon detected the alien chick because it had fouled the nest (101–26). The Owl does not respond by distinguishing herself from the owl of the story; on the contrary, she embraces their common identity, voicing the celebration of Owl Pride that I quoted earlier (272–73). Later she will subject her opponent to a similar vicarious slander when she localizes an exemplum about a nightingale. “Once you sang near a certain bedroom—I know well where!” she begins (1049–50). This identification of anecdote with addressee is not merely improbable but impossible, since the story ends with the nightingale’s death: having induced a lady to commit adultery, the Owl reports, the bird was captured, convicted, and “torn apart by wild horses” (1050–62). But the Nightingale voices no objection to being coindexed with a dead bird. Instead, she objects (strenuously though not credibly) to the Owl’s incomplete version of the story. I sang out of compassion for the lady, she insists, and good King Henry had the husband banished and fined for killing that little bird; so the whole story “was wurpsipe al mine kunne” (brought honor to all my kind; 1083–99). Like the Owl, the Nightingale accepts categorical appellation but contests the category’s signification. In flagrant but somewhat charming self-contradiction, she proclaims that the law of that species compels her to aspire above it: “Hit is mi riȝt, hit is my laȝe, / þat to þe hexst ich me draȝe” (969–70) [It is my right, it is my law, that I draw myself toward whatever is superior].

That the birds object to being defined generically would be enough to make *The Owl and the Nightingale* richly comic. What makes the poem brilliant is that they do the same thing to each other and occasionally to themselves—inconsistently, and out of self-interest. Their feathers and beaks protect the reader only weakly from recognizing those tactics.

⁷⁷ Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, 177; for an earlier observation to the same effect, she cites E. J. Dobson, “A New Edition of ‘The Owl and the Nightingale,’” *N&Q* 206 (1961): 373–78, 405–11, and 444–48 (410).

If we remember that we inhabit bodies that can be variably appellated as subjects of species determinism or as autonomous selves, we may acknowledge that we too affirm or deny individual autonomy depending on our interests of the moment. We may admit, for instance, that although we equate ourselves with the authoritative “Nicholas of Guilford,” the properly named but never-located adjudicator of the poem’s debate, we sometimes take refuge in versions of species determinism, attributing individual acts (our own or others’) to the nature of “man.” Or woman. Or human animality—or, conversely, to a higher agency.

“Man” and “woman” are in fact the terms that dominate the last half of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The debaters devote far less attention to specifically avian topics; instead, they declaim on sin and redemption, justifications for adultery, the weaknesses of women, and the validity of astrology. Readers can be excused for concluding that here, at any rate, the birds are merely conventional devices for exploring human issues. In fact, however, no single issue emerges clearly, and the speakers cannot be aligned consistently with opposing positions on any issue. Instead, the issue is alignment itself—the ways of naming, and thus judging, creaturely behavior.

The debate’s reorientation begins when the Nightingale adopts a new strategy: defense by cross-species association. From the outset, both birds have occasionally described their own habits and traits interchangeably with human proverbs and lore about other species. Now, in response to the Owl’s charge that nightingales do nothing but sing and thus promote sensuality, the Nightingale equates her own singing at some length with liturgical music. Just like priests in church, she declares, she sings to remind men that their destiny is heavenly bliss, “[p]ar euer is song & murȝpe iliche” (713–42). The Owl astutely attacks the cross-species analogy: nobody mistakes your “pipinge” for a priest’s singing, she sneers (901–2). But she also challenges the Nightingale’s premise about church music, alleging that men have even greater need for calls to repentance, conveyed in sounds of “longinge” like her own (837–86).

Many scholars read past the feathered vehicles and regard the passage as a debate about styles of preaching, prophecy, music, or poetry.⁷⁸ But a larger consideration underlies this and the other hermeneutical tactics

⁷⁸See Kathryn Hume’s summary and critique of such interpretations (proposed by, among others, G. R. Owst and J. W. H. Atkins) in “*The Owl and the Nightingale*: The Poem and Its Critics” (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 53–60.

that the birds deploy. The debate can reference human practices only on the basis of correspondences whose fundamental validity we should recognize. Granted that the Nightingale is indeed no priest, her “piping” contrasts with owl-hoots much as liturgical or rhetorical styles do with each other. And, more important, the birds associate their generic songs with those contrasting styles for the same reason that groups of practitioners contest each other’s musicology, poetics, or homiletics: self-interest. Their cross-species affiliations exhibit, to borrow again from J. W. H. Atkins, the mentality “that human beings would possess, could we imagine them transformed, for the time being, into birds”⁷⁹—here, the “mentality” of special pleading.

Following the musical debate, the cross-species alignments become increasingly ambitious but remain poised between objective credibility and self-interest. The Nightingale first claims, and claims to trump, human regional identity. Returning to the Owl’s charge that she never ventures to cold, waste areas where people most need her joyous singing, she asserts that people in such areas live like “wild animals” (995–1012). Not only do they eat raw food and wear pelts, but they are irredeemable: a missionary from Rome could no more reform them than he could teach a boar to use shield and spear (1009–24). Representing herself as a rational agent choosing to avoid an instinctively driven subspecies of humanity, the Nightingale closely mimics human regional and categorical prejudices. Perhaps members of all species assert autonomy partly by constructing categories for others.

Both birds then affiliate with a larger and even more contested human category: women. Here their self-identifications correspond with human categorizations not just in being self-serving but also in lacking coherence. The Nightingale defends her stereotypic association with eroticism by exonerating women’s sexual behavior in a series of inconsistent ways: first as the natural order, then as fleshly frailty that leads some women to “[go] outside the nest for [their] breeding” (1385–86), next as youthful experimentation that can be remedied by marriage (1423–32). The last extenuation leads to a vehement denunciation of the unfaithful wives whom she earlier excused, and finally to an odd diatribe on the folly of male adulterers (1467–1510). Reflexively, the Owl then champions unfaithful wives because husbands often neglect them for unworthy rivals; for good measure, she curses jealous husbands

⁷⁹ Atkins, *Owl and the Nightingale*, lxxix.

who lock up their wives (1511–62). In themselves, these arguments have dubious moral or analytical weight. Equally doubtful is the arguments' function as self-defense. The birds choose sides like unprincipled tacticians rather than advocates for any species, ideology, or social category. Because their imitation of human disputation also invokes natural territorialism, it does not amount to complete anthropomorphism—or gynomorphism, as Christopher Cannon suggests.⁸⁰ The birds are represented here not as people but as cross-species egos, intent on self-assertion.

If the debate ended here, it would suggest a reductive vision of creaturely behavior. The birds are displaying the individuality associated with proper names—as Cartlidge writes, readers respond to them as “characters”⁸¹—but in the process they give singularity itself a bad name: selfishness. But the last two exchanges produce a fuller resolution.

The first involves a new form of name-calling, flattering self-metaphorization. In response to the charge that everyone hates her because her calls portend calamity, the Owl reinterprets the connection between hooting and disaster as testimony to her prodigious wisdom (1175–1232). On one level this is hubristic self-anthropomorphism, but readers may be reminded that encyclopedias and bestiaries explain the owl's cries as warnings of ill fortune, the kind of signal God intends for our benefit.⁸² Indeed, the Owl adds that her foresight does not cause the misfortunes against which she tries to warn people; everything happens through God's will (1233–56). Her humble concession is a tacit claim to ulterior importance. Deferring to the supreme supernatural agent, she positions herself as God's instrument. She returns quickly to grandiloquent bragging, but she will claim Christian instrumentality more

⁸⁰ Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Pointing out that the poet stresses the birds' grammatical gender to an extent unusual at this stage in the development of Early Middle English, Cannon argues that they are “represented as women” (129)—that is, in the marked, female position. But I take that as another instance of cross-species congruence rather than as gynomorphism: these are female birds, not women. As Mann observes, “the animals cannot at one and the same time represent humans and argue about their usefulness to humans” (*From Aesop to Reynard*, 189–90).

⁸¹ Cartlidge, Introduction, *Owl and the Nightingale*, xix.

⁸² Isidore, *Etymologies*, XII.38; Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XII.vi. On the providential role of birds, in particular their calls, see *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouillois's Aviarium*, ed. Willene B. Clark (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 226–27.

powerfully in two subsequent self-characterizations. The first leverages human subjectivity with particular effectiveness. To counter the Nightingale's self-identification with lust-tormented young girls, the Owl claims that her own plaintive songs commiserate with more deserving victims—abused and lonely wives; but she supports the claim not with disputation but by voicing, in the poem's most lyric passage, the suffering of someone whose beloved husband is absent for blameless reasons:

Hauēþ daies kare & niȝtes wake;
 An swuþe longe hire is þe hwile,
 An ech steape hire þunþ a mile.
 Hwanne oþre slepeþ hire abute,
 Ich one lust þar wiȝþute
 An wot of hire sore mode,
 An singe a niȝt for hire gode,
 An mine gode song for hire þinge
 Ich turne sundel to murnige.
 Of hire seorhe ich bere sume:
 Forþan ich am hire wel welcome. (1590–1600)

[She has anxiety by day and sleeplessness by night. For her, the time seems to go very slowly and every step he [her voyaging husband] takes seems like a mile. When everyone else is fast asleep around her, I alone am listening outside and I fully appreciate her anguish. I sing at night for her benefit and, on her account, I give my song a little touch of mournfulness. I bear some of her sorrow and that's why she welcomes me.]

The poet evokes human grief simultaneously with the real habits of owls—their mournful singing at night in lonely places—and thus represents the Owl as an instrument of cross-species compassion. He goes on to align her with an even higher form of selflessness. Returning to the charge that human beings despise her, the Owl acknowledges that people stone and mutilate her and then hang her up to scare off magpies and crows. But thereby, she says, “ich do heom god / An for heom ich chadde mi blod. / Ich do heom god mid mine deape” (1615–17) [I do them good when I shed my blood for them. I do them good when I die]. In itself, this is true. And the startling analogy with Christ's sacrifice gains some credibility because it remains implicit. The analogy is the poet's half-serious gift, probably modeled on Christological interpre-

tations of other creatures in bestiaries but grounded in the treatment of real owls.⁸³ The poet reinscribes the dead bird as pan-generic savior.

As if to confirm that the poet's gift was only half-serious, the Owl herself uses the scarecrow argument not to redeem but to attack. Unlike my species, she tells the Nightingale, yours serves no purpose; I don't know to what purpose you even produce young—"liues ne deapes ne deþ hit god" (1618–34) [dead or alive it'll never do any good]. Thus she enacts opposing conceptions of creaturely behavior: on the one hand, redemptive self-sacrifice; on the other, an invitation to species-suicide. Saint and predator meet in one interspecies body. It is a standoff more significant than the forensic stalemate toward which the debate seems to be heading.

Both deadlocks, forensic and ontological, are resolved in a surprising but natural way. The final reconfiguration of creaturely identity begins with a regression toward the level of predator and prey. The Nightingale, either missing or dismissing the point of the scarecrow defense, proclaims that by acknowledging that humans persecute her, the Owl has lost the "game" (1635–52). She sings so jubilantly that other songbirds flock to the site. The Owl scoffs at their jeers, reminding them of the superior fighting strength of her own kind, particularly the hawks (1673–88). The debaters are initiating what ornithologists call a mobbing, "the assemblage of individuals around a potentially dangerous predator."⁸⁴ Mobbing can involve various species, including fish, but are particularly common between birds of prey and songbirds. They rarely include physical attack; rather, they proceed with threatening gestures and vocalizations, intended perhaps to preclude mutually damaging violence.⁸⁵ They are, in short, hostile rhetorical confrontations—like the one we have just followed.⁸⁶

⁸³For medieval references to the use of owls' bodies as scarecrows, see Cartlidge, *Owl and the Nightingale*, 91–92 n. 1623–30. In bestiaries and some encyclopedias, the lion, the pelican, and the vulture are among the creatures said to imitate Christ, sometimes through behavior attested only in legends and sometimes via strained explications. Hugh of Fouilly figures the *Nycticorax*—night heron or owl—as Christ by reading *in bono* the bird's nocturnal habits as avoidance of vainglory (Clark, *Medieval Book of Birds*, 172–75).

⁸⁴Wallace J. Dominey, "Mobbing in Colonially Nesting Fishes, Especially the Bluegill, *Lepomis macrochirus*," *Copeia* 1983, 4 (1983): 1086–88 (1087).

⁸⁵Paul Ehrlich, David Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, "Mobbing," *Birds of Stanford*, 1988, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Mobbing.html>.

⁸⁶For a provocative discussion of pan-species rhetoric, see George A. Kennedy, "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25 (1992): 1–21.

Mobbings generally do not end with victories and defeats; this verbal one certainly does not. Like ornithological *flytings*, the debate has arisen not from contrary propositions (not even “nightingales are better” versus “owls are better”) but from conflicting interests. It has placed the nature of those interests under playful but intense scrutiny. As they abandon physical threats, the birds renew their agreement to submit to “riht dom” (1692), but what they seek is not a verdict on some charge or issue. It is a more generic—and more personal—kind of vindication. They, and we, seek a *voir dit* on themselves.

That verdict is of course the poem itself, which ends by sentencing creatures to a mutual recognition of singularity. The mobbing has brought in more birds who express interests. Leading them is “the Wren”—introduced with the definite article, as if she embodies a species, but soon revealed as a remarkable *umwiæt*. She was bred in the forest but educated among mankind and may speak wherever she wants to, even before the king. Recalling that the single word *regulus* could itself mean “little king” and “wren” (and could even refer to a poisonous serpent),⁸⁷ we may suspect the poet of engaging in Derridean wordplay. Fittingly, this polyspecies *animot* mediates among the other agents. She voices the king’s (her own?) objection to any breach of peace and urges the birds to seek judgment forthwith. The Nightingale accedes—of her own free will, she insists—and reminds the Owl that they have agreed to be judged by Master Nicholas (1739–49). The poem ends before the birds locate this individual. By sad coincidence, scholars have also failed to identify him definitively; moreover, the Wren laments that bishops and others who “of his nome / Habbeþ ihert” have not adequately recognized him (1760–63). They could learn much from his wise words and writings, she adds (1755–68).

If Nicholas is the poet, as most believe, he may be equating his situation with that of owls and nightingales: people know his name but do not listen to his voice. But he has earned the Wren’s praise for his wisdom by ending his own silence and the birds’ at once. In a poem that appellates other creatures as intentional agents, he inscribes his own singular though multireferential name. And whether or not he is Nicho-

⁸⁷“Wren” is attested around 1290: R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources* (London: British Academy / Oxford University Press, 1965), s.v. “regula.” Citing Isidore, Bartholomaeus translates “cockatrice” as *basiliscus* in Greek and *regulus* in Latin, the latter because “he is king of serpentes” (Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.xvi).

las, the poet has amplified his voice by conveying the voices of birds. In turn, the birds agree to transmit their voices through each other. When the Nightingale asks who will relay their speeches to Nicholas, the Owl affirms that she herself can repeat each of their words, in order. She then adds a crucial proviso: “An ȝef þe þincþ that ich misrempe / þu stond aȝein & do me crempe” (1787–88) [But if it seems to you that I go astray, stand up and hold me back]. Mobbing becomes mutually beneficial détente; name-calling turns into antiphonal storytelling. The poem’s last line—“Her nis na more of þis spelle” (1794) [Here is no more of this story]—is pleasantly ironic, for there has been plenty already: a rich comedy of cross-species subjectivity, generated by the ontological expansions and contractions of “an owl and one nightingale” (4).

Proper Appropriation

The name that was gyuen to him / abydeth alway styлле wyth hym / he hath lefte many of his craftе in this world.⁸⁸

. . . þe der þat nomon nedar nemnen.⁸⁹
[The animal that nobody dares name.]

The Owl and the Nightingale contravenes a natural assumption that texts relying on categorical animal names will not do justice to what Derrida calls the “heterogeneous multiplicity of the living.”⁹⁰ I turn now to the complementary assumption, equally natural, that proper names automatically individualize their referents. Grammatically proper nouns often individualize, of course, but they can also produce categorical misrepresentations.

In popular understanding, a proper name indexes a unique referent but has no meaning in itself. Philosophers and semioticians complicate that understanding, pointing out that proper names can be pluralized (“are there any female Shakespeares?”) and are used of hypothetical referents (“Homer did not exist”). Thus proper names serve a second, descriptive function, beyond the indexical one: they designate features of

⁸⁸ William Caxton, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, ed. N. F. Blake, EETS 263 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 110, lines 8–9.

⁸⁹ A. S. C. Ross, “The Middle English Poem on the Names of a Hare” [edition and commentary], *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Literary and Historical Section* 3.6 (1935): 347–77 (351, line 54).

⁹⁰ Derrida, *The Animal*, 31.

the referent (“Homer” equals “blind bard believed to have composed the *Iliad*”). They share that second function with common nouns, including the names of species when used to appellation specific referents. The indexical function, by contrast, is served paradigmatically by the names of individual human beings. Indeed, in Western culture, we privilege that function by avoiding human names with clear descriptive associations. Mary has her name not because she shares some feature with other Marys but because her family has thus confirmed her individuality. Of course, a few general features attach to such names—gender and linguistic affiliation, for instance—and biographical features soon accumulate (the Johnsons’ first daughter, born in a certain hospital, longer than most newborns), but those associations are incidental to the designation of uniqueness. Even characteristic-based nicknames (Blondie, Shorty) deindividualize only partially, usually in a teasing way.

By contrast, many names given to individual animals do not privilege the indexing function over descriptive associations. “Blackie,” “Champion,” and “Buttercup” not only characterize their referents, like human nicknames; in addition, as I have already noted, many proper names for animals are associated by convention with a particular species, even when they lack obvious descriptive meanings (“Ned,” “Rex,” “Polly”). Some conventional names slide toward common status (“a chauntecleer,” “eight reynards”). If medieval people generally avoided using the same names for human beings and for animals, as Robert Bartlett reports, a key distinction between the two sets may have been that only the latter denoted or connoted species-wide features.⁹¹

Those onomastic distinctions figure prominently in the beast epic, not least through their manipulation. “It has been suggested,” writes N. F. Blake, “that the medieval beast epic came into being when the animals of the earlier fables were given [historically] human names.”⁹² Like other writers, Blake locates the transition in the mid-twelfth-century *Ysengrimus*, which expands widely circulated stories of the fox and wolf. The names, he writes, “fall into two broad categories”: “sim-

⁹¹ Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 668. See also Keith Vivian Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 114. Westerners now use unique, nondescriptive names for their companion animals, but those are advisedly exceptional: the grammatically proper “Maggie” or “Mrs. Dalloway” is semiotically *improper* for a dog or cat. We seem to be acknowledging, perhaps with self-directed irony, our appropriation of the animals to quasi-human status.

⁹² Caxton, *History*, ed. Blake, Introduction, xi.

ple human names” such as Reynard and Isegrim, and those that “imply the character or a particular characteristic of the animal in question.”⁹³ What Blake does not note is that both kinds, but particularly the former, were followed habitually with a species sobriquet: “Reynard the Fox,” “Isegrim the Wolf.” A generic name apposites for an indexical one; that is, the characters are appellated both as humans would be and as animals normally are. In fables, in contrast, the one-named “fox” remains a generic hybrid—a typical fox aside from its ability to verbalize behavior that it shares with certain human beings. But the double names in the beast epic distinguish the human and nonhuman components enough to reveal the tension in their union.

The impossible conjunction epitomizes the powerful but peculiar agency of the characters thus named. As often noted, characters in beast epics are mostly inhuman physically but have human biographies (fraudulent monastic vows, visits to Rome or Jerusalem) and human desires (gold and silver, ornate combs), not to mention multilingual competency. But the split is even more pervasive. Even their bodies are inconsistently named: in Caxton’s translation of Middle Dutch Reynard stories, Chauntecleer smites together “his handes and his fetheris,” while two of his hens have limbs with which they can carry lighted tapers upright; later, Reynard is advised to soak his tail in urine and “smyte the wulf therewyth in his berde.”⁹⁴ More conspicuously impossible are the interbreedings. That Reynard raped Isegrim’s “wife,” as the wolf claims (7/6–24; 9/16–23; 89/3–20), might represent natural though deviant behavior, though a union of fox and wolf would be infertile. But the imagination fails to account for Reynard’s allospecific nephews: not just Isegrim but also a badger (his “suster sone”; 8/29), a bear, and an ape.

We may well *try* to imagine how a fox could be a badger’s uncle, though. Although the text presupposes the possibility of such kinships just as *The Owl and the Nightingale* presupposes that birdsong can become Middle English, the effect is entirely different. In the earlier text, the birds’ speech and attitudes were congruent with the behavior and even the physiology of nightingales and owls. Nothing in natural science explains a fox’s rape of a wolf, much less a candlelit procession of hens

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xi. Blake cites *Ysengrimus* as the transition point on xvi.

⁹⁴ Caxton, *History*, ed. Blake, 10, lines 21–27, and 97, lines 7–8. Future references will be to this edition and will be documented in the text by page and line number, separated by a solidus.

to the inscribed marble tomb of one of their “sisters” (10/21–28). The personages of *Reynard the Fox* are mutants: nonhuman bodies onto which human consciousness, kinship relations, and a few appendages have been unsuccessfully grafted.

Moreover, some of the species-mixing is difficult to pass over as conventional anthropomorphization. Bodies metamorphose within the narrative, sometimes in ghoulish ways. Pretending to undertake a redemptive pilgrimage, Reynard convinces the Lion king and queen to let him take “as moche of the beres skyn vpon his ridge [back] as a foote longe and a foot brode for to make hym therof a scryppe” (43/11–13). They agree that he will also need “foure stronge shoon,” two from Isegrim and the others from the latter’s wife—who has little need for good shoes because “she gooth but lytil out / but abydeth alway at home” (43/14–23). It isn’t clear how Reynard will wear the “shoes,” but we witness their removal from the Wolf’s feet, pulled off from claws to sinews; “ye sawe neuer foule that men rosted laye so styлле / as Isegrym dyde / when his shoes were haled of / he styred not / and yet his feet bledde” (43/34–36). Comparably brutal is the remedy later devised by the king: to let the Bear and wolves use the “tabart” of Bellyn the Ram to replace their own skin (50/22–26, 51/13–14). The physiological incongruity heightens the characters’ appropriations of each other’s bodies.

Mutant beings exert their own fascination, as witness the long-standing popularity of fantasy and tales of marvels. At one point Reynard locates his own narrative in an alternative universal history like that of science fiction: “I shal saye the trouthe / lyke as myn elders haue alway don / syth the tyme that we fyrst vnderstode reson” (90/31–32). But beast epics also exert a deeper appeal. Their mutant personages attract us through a common mechanism of comedy: a balancing of the preposterous and the recognizably mundane. The Lion king’s cruelty, physically monstrous but superbly articulate, is all too human. That may again recall the polygeneric protagonists of *The Owl and the Nightingale*. But the conjuncture of species in the beast epic is less balanced. If the Owl and Nightingale have the minds that we ourselves might possess, the Lion, Fox, and Wolf have the kind of mind that we attribute to some of our fellow humans—perhaps those whom we simultaneously despise and admire. Their mutant singularity illuminates not the fundamental shape of creaturely behavior but the distortions of a particular kind of human agency, one prone to ruthless appropriation. And it rep-

resents that kind of human behavior by appropriating the identities of nonhumans.

Two passages in Caxton's *Reynard* exemplify both kinds of appropriation, behavioral and semiotic. The first passage completes a triad of episodes in which Reynard has exploited other beasts by pretending not to know what members of their species eat. When Bruin the Bear comes to conduct him to the king's court, Reynard complains of sickness from eating too much honey. He feigns surprise when Bruin eagerly praises that food but offers to share his source—which turns out to be a beehive that Reynard knows to have been wedged open by a carpenter. As Bruin begins to eat, Reynard releases the wedge. The king next commands Tybert the Cat to summon Reynard. The Fox agrees to go but apologizes as they leave his "castle" that the only road-food he can offer is honey. When the Cat predictably declines, venturing that he would prefer a mouse, Reynard again feigns surprise at such dietary habits but proposes that Tybert visit the mouse-infested barn of a priest—where, he knows, Tybert will spring a trap set to stop Reynard himself from stealing hens (19/25–23/31).

The last installment of the triad begins when Reynard finally allows himself to be led to the court, primarily, one suspects, to exhibit his verbal wiles at the expense of Noble the Lion himself. During his devious self-exoneration, the Fox complains that Isegrim has cheated him of a share of calves and sheep but adds, in an ostensibly generous aside, that he doesn't mind the loss because he has "so grette scatte [treasure] and good of syluer and of gold that seuen waynes [wagons] shold not conne carye it away" (34/9–11). The king takes the bait. Burning with "desyre and couetyse," he demands to know where the riches are (34/12–14), and Reynard's execution is indefinitely postponed. The catachresis—lions do not crave silver and gold—resembles the earlier identification of wolf-paws as shoes, but this one lacks physical enactment. Here, the misfiguration can be resolved hermeneutically. Among the major characters, the king has been the most simply appellated. Since his introduction as "lyon the noble kynge of all beestis" (6/26), he has been referred to as the king, named by position rather than by proper name plus species. That position might pertain to human and non-human social structures alike: Noble could be imagined as human ruler or most powerful carnivore. In this episode, his gold-lust splits the two possible referents, pointing toward a man—but, crucially, one who acts inappropriately bestial. Reynard tempts Noble with treasure in the same

way that he lured the bear with honey; thus the text reappellates the cupidity of human nobles (even kings) as an “animal” appetite. The denatured lion becomes a signifier for human carnality.

The second parable of appropriation uses animal figuration similarly but against a different human target: clerics deluded by intellectual pride. During a long self-styled “confession,” Reynard says that he once agreed to ask a mare to sell her fat foal to the nearly starved Isegrim. According to Reynard, she refused to take money for the foal but added that her terms for a trade were written under her back foot. Reynard says that he reported this to Isegrim, claiming (falsely) that he himself could not read. The Wolf fell into the trap set by both mare and Fox. Boasting that he knew four languages, had studied at Oxford, was licensed in canon and civil law, and could thus read whatever “ony man can deuyse” as perfectly as his own name, Isegrim went to “read” the mare’s terms—and, predictably, took a nearly fatal blow from her newly shod hoof (58/10–59/21). Reynard recalls having taunted the bleeding Wolf by asking if the writing was in prose or rhyme. Alas, Isegrim replied, I thought those six nails in her shoe were letters (59/26–35). The catachresis here is sharper than in the earlier episode: lions and kings might be commonly blinded by appetite, but there is no lupine equivalent of erudite stupidity. Reynard delivers a *sentence* that locates the episode’s significance in the human world: “it is true that I long syth haue redde and herde , that the beste clerkes , ben not the wysest men , the laye peple otherwhyle wexe wyse” (59/38–60/1). That formulation *almost* renominates Isegrim (and presumably Reynard) as human. The “Fox” and “Wolf” parts of their names still matter, but only as signifiers of deviant human behavior, comparable to the king’s bestiality. The nonhuman component gives a particular force to human-directed satire. Isegrim’s extratextual correlative is not simply a foolish cleric; he is a cleric who has fooled himself into believing that he is not fundamentally a wolf. Indeed, in masking his predatory instincts, the wolfish clerk has forgone the innate survival skills that we attribute to nonhuman predators.

Nor are clerics the only target. Behind a scrim of feigned ignorance, Reynard outflanks Isegrim’s linguistic skills: not only can Reynard read (59/38), not only does he know rhetorical terms (59/27–28), but he can use his knowledge to manipulate others. Perhaps he represents fraudulent monastic populism. Or he may be a self-mocking figure for the

human author, since he not only moralizes the episode but also re-counts—or invents—the action.

In any case, beginning with this passage, human targets proliferate while the animal vehicles lose differentiation. Norman Blake notes that shortly before the mare's-hoof episode, the text that Caxton is translating changes mode. According to Blake, the first part of the Middle Dutch *Hystorie van Reynaert die Vos* functions primarily as parody; the second part recapitulates and expands events but renders them as didactic satire, often directed at particular locales and individuals.⁹⁵ In inset fables and anecdotes, the characters allude to corrupt clerics and rulers, sometimes particular ones notorious for greed and fraud, and to the pope and his close associates.⁹⁶ A consequence of the change that Blake does not discuss is that we lose track of who is voicing those digressions; the characters are disembodied vehicles for satiric attacks on human targets. Even when they return to attacking each other, they do so with decreasing reference to their own nominal species. They also report—or misreport—the main action itself. As Paul Wackers points out, readers have no way to distinguish (fictional) truth from the self-interested accounts by Reynard, Isegrim, Grymart, and Rukenawe. "Reality is always being manipulated," Wackers writes, "and if it is not by one person it is by another."⁹⁷

Wackers's "person" represents a choice among various problematic names for all the agents in beast-epic. Blake calls them "personages"; I have mostly used "characters," a word whose semantic range also includes human linguistic artifacts, comparable to Derrida's *animots*. As Wackers's generalization implies, in the last part of the *Historie* the characters become interchangeable except as competing egos. They differ by what we can indeed call "personality," but nothing marks their monologues as the products of fox, badger, or ape. That they are nominally nonhuman matters a great deal, but it signifies not specifically—not by species—but as an undifferentiated whole. It constitutes the amoral impulse toward survival and self-aggrandizement that we often call animality. The characters make sense as human beings who are comically improper.

⁹⁵ Caxton, *History*, ed. Blake, Introduction, xix–xx.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60/27–62/7, 66/9–19, 66/31–67/6; see also Blake's note 64/21 on page 131.

⁹⁷ Paul Wackers, "Words and Deeds in the Middle Dutch Reynaert Stories," in *Medieval Dutch Literature in Its European Context*, ed. Erik Kooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131–47 (141–44, and 144).

That semiosis appears most clearly when it is occasionally interrupted. Like its sources, Caxton's *Reynard* climaxes in a battle between Reynard and Isegrim that briefly recasts the beasts as fully integrated hybrids rather than mutants. They fight *as* fox and wolf, vividly represented, even as they continue to speak and think. Rukenawe prepares her "nephew" as if he were indeed a fox with a human brain: she advises him to shave and oil his body, to minimize his opponent's handholds by flattening his ears and tucking his tail between his legs, and to drink enough that he will be able to soak his tail in urine. The urine-soaked tail, with which Reynard will indeed blind Isegrim, would remind readers of the way foxes mark their territory. Similarly grounded in nature are the Wolf's size advantage, the rivalry of the two species, and even Reynard's wiliness, attested in the folklore and hunting texts of many cultures. Even the ritualized proceedings (formal expressions of defiance, initial postures, angry vocalizations, feints) correspond to behaviors noted by ethologists.⁹⁸ Perhaps most crucial is that the motives expressed in the characters' human language are also grounded in nature—that is, in trans-species behavior. Single combat for physical dominance and even survival, balanced between rule-governed ceremony and unprincipled brutality, is a form of "animality" not just accepted but celebrated among men. As Blake observes, the episode parodies combat in courtly romances.⁹⁹ Parody distorts, as he also notes, but its success depends on generic—and here, genetic—congruence. Here, that is, the parts of Reynard's name appellate him synergistically. With good reason, Blake concludes that "the battle exemplifies all that is best in the Reynard story."

By contrast, it does not typify the *History of Reynard the Fox*. As soon as Reynard wins, parody yields to satire, a mode that bends the beasts back toward human figuration. Concomitantly, the action also returns to exploitation. Reynard's victory attracts hordes of previously unmentioned characters who proclaim kinship and demand a share of the spoils. Had the Fox actually slain the Wolf, this opportunism might mimic nonhuman scavenging. Instead, the text points again toward humans who behave inappropriately like animals (or like denigrated *ani-*

⁹⁸See, for instance, Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*, 97–98, and Gregory Bateson's account of behaviors (Bateson calls them metamessages) through which animals differentiate threats from play. Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," 1954; rpt. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 170–93 (179–81).

⁹⁹Caxton, *History*, ed. Blake, Introduction, 138 n. 98/13.

mots). The narrator breaks his customary silence with an anthropocentric moralization (“Thus fareth the world now. who that is riche and hie on the wheel. he hath many kynnesmen and frendes”; 105/21–22). Reynard himself then appellates his kinsmen as two species: he compares them to dogs fighting over a bone but also calls them extortioners who, when “made lordes,” act worse than greedy dogs (106/18–107/36). With superlative irony, he contrasts these “false extorcionners” with himself, boasting that no man can say “that I haue don otherwyse than a trewe man ought to doo / *Alleway the foxe / shal a byde the foxe*” (107/31, 108/3–7; emphasis added).

The last clause is true because it is false—because, that is, it is not really about foxes. When the Owl embraces her species in a similar way—“It is my joy and my delight to associate myself with those who are of my kind”—she refers to the nesting and predatory behavior that are indeed proper to her *cunde*.¹⁰⁰ And throughout that poem, she remains both generic owl and individual voice. In contrast, Caxton, like his source, gives us a fox that splits himself between true man and inveterate fox. The narrator later echoes Reynard’s oxymoronic tautology with an important difference. Indirectly explaining how fox, badger, wolf, ape, and hangers-on of other species can be kin, he writes, “The name that was gyuen to hym / abydeth alway styлле wyth hym / he hath lefte many of his crafte in this world. . . . Ther is in the world moche seed left of the foxe” (110/8–15). Reynard is right that “the Fox” will remain unchanged—but only as the name that those who call themselves human give each other. And the narrator is right that this fox has left “much seed” in the world. Reynard, his allospecific relatives, and his human progeny all descend from the name with which we appropriate the nonhuman, of whatever species: *bêtise*.

In my focus on the characters with individual-plus-species names, I have neglected a large supporting cast who contribute to the richness of Reynard’s fictional world. There are, for instance, human characters with categorical or individual names: “the preest of the chirche,” “[t]he prestis wyf Iulok” (16/18–20). There are also nonhuman characters designated only by species—the mare that clobbers Isegrim, for instance, and the ferret, mouse, and squirrel who claim kinship with the victorious Reynard (105/17). Finally, one somewhat important character acts,

¹⁰⁰ Cartlidge, *Owl and the Nightingale*, lines 272–73.

and is named, in accordance with his species stereotype: Cuwart the Hare, Reynard's principal victim. "Cuwart" is only marginally proper, a Middle English and Old French common noun; it reifies the generic temerity that the Hare consistently enacts.¹⁰¹ Cuwart exemplifies the anonymous and powerless of all species: when Reynard's victims vainly accuse the Fox of Cuwart's death, the narrator remarks that it "wente with hem as it ofte doth the feblest hath the worst" (30/30–31). If Reynard and his kin point toward "animalized" humans, sometimes particular ones, Cuwart's only extratextual referent is the nameless mortal creature.

It is thus particularly notable that a hare receives the most successful proper-naming of a nonhuman animal that I have found in the literature of any era. Bodleian MS Digby 86, a late thirteenth-century manuscript, includes a sixty-three-line Middle English poem headed, in French, "the names of a hare in English."¹⁰² The poem's speaker avers that any man meeting the hare will never "be the better" unless he puts down whatever rod or bow he is carrying and says a prayer "in þe worshipe of þe hare."

The *oreisoun* offered by way of example consists of seventy-seven names, the majority of them *bapax legomena*.¹⁰³ Morphologically, the names span and even expand the naming practices I have discussed. The title and the closing section appellate a single member of the species—*vn leure*, addressed directly as "sire hare." In contrast, the first line uses the collective generic, "the hare"; the names themselves similarly begin with the definite article and lack verbs that might particularize their reference. Among the names are one or two species stereotypes, notably *couart*. But far more are sobriquets that would, if capitalized, resemble *Sir Tryamour*'s properly named *Trewe-love*: "stele-awai," "wint-swiff," "liȝtt-fot." Four names—*bouchart*, *goibert*, *turpin*, and *wimount*—were otherwise used as human proper names. In his 1935 edition and commentary, A. S. C. Ross writes that at least two of those individual human names had become categorical pejoratives.¹⁰⁴ If so, in applying

¹⁰¹ Cuwart is in fact the only character slain by Reynard, and almost the only one that dies in the *History*. Reynard "confesses" to having killed Dame Sharpebek the Raven, but that happens (if it does) off-stage. Before the story opens, he has apparently killed Copen the Hen. Assuming that the hen's name originated in the French *Roman de Renart* as *Couppée*—a reference to what Reynard did to her head—all of these proper names are characterizations rather than simply indices.

¹⁰² Ross, "Middle English Poem," 350.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 350, lines 1–9, and 348–49 n. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 353.

them to an individual animal, the poet reversed the process by which *gib* was first generalized to all housecats and then used for a promiscuous woman. Most remarkably, some names are morphologically human but semantically appropriate to the hare. Ross notes that *deubert*, *swikebert*, *scotewine*, and perhaps the fifteen names ending in *-art* employ “well-known endings of [human] proper names” such as *Edwin*, *Godwin*, *Albert*, and *Osbert*.¹⁰⁵ Here the suffixes are grafted onto roots that somehow characterize hares: “dew,” “traitor,” “scot” meaning “hare,” “frisk” in *skikart*, and so forth.

Most of the names blend species appellations with tokens of individuality much more closely than do the proper-plus-generic names in the *History of Reynard the Fox*. They can justly be called proper—or appropriate—to their referent, which is, like all creatures, at once singular and generic. Of course, we expect individuals to bear a single proper name, or perhaps a few, whereas these names tumble forth in apparently inexhaustible number, perhaps suggesting an obsessive use of Adam’s prerogative to control by naming. That the poem serves, rather, to recognize a hare, if not exactly to show it “worshipe” (line 9), follows from its onomastic tour de force. The namings posit, simultaneously, three realms of reference: hares, human perceptions, and the act of naming itself. It is in acknowledging those three standpoints, each limited, that the names become comprehensively apt.

Of the seventy-seven names, most “derive,” in Margaret Laing’s words, “from observed natural behaviour of the hare.” Modifying Ross’s five-part categorization, Laing sorts all seventy-seven names into six categories, noting that they “follow no particular order in the poem, although similar types do sometimes seem to cluster.”¹⁰⁶ Ross and Laing list a few terms that simply mean “hare” (*bare*, *scot*, *scotewine*). For the others, I propose two large categories. The first includes forty-eight terms that Ross groups together because they “indicat[e] points in connection with the hare of a fairly obvious nature.” These appellate physical characteristics, behavior, and habitat: “short-animal,” “long-eared,” “white-bellied,” “side-looker,” “nibbler,” “fast-traveler,” “jumper,” “hopper-in-the-dew,” “sitter-in-the-bracken,” “grass-biter,” “kalehart,” “cat-of-the-woods.” Ross lists fifteen others that refer to “points

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 353 and 353 n2.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Laing, “Notes on Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, *The Names of a Hare in English*,” *MÆ* 67 (1998): 201–11 (202).

in connection with the hare which are not altogether obvious,"¹⁰⁷ but most of them also reflect "observed natural behaviour," as Ross indicates in annotating particular lines. For instance, "*þe go-mit-lombe*" probably refers to reports of hares' "concealing their scent when hunted by mingling with a flock of sheep"; "*þe bert wiþ þe leþerene hornes*" may testify to a disease in which "wart-like excrescences, often exactly like a pair of horns," grow on the head of an otherwise healthy hare.¹⁰⁸ Several of Ross's notes cite details in Edward of Norwich's *Master of Game*, whose references to the hare as a ruminant may also confirm one of Ross's proposed translations of *momelart*, "mumbler (of food)."¹⁰⁹ The cascade of evocative coinages sends the reader (and the annotator) repeatedly back to naturalists' accounts of the hare. Each epithet implies a fresh act of perception; some seem to catch a hare in action, the way Bartholomaeus's short narratives particularize the raven and the cock.

As naturalistic observations, the perceptions are often highly subjective. The second large group of appropriate names is, somewhat paradoxically, those that we impose: several dozen names conveying human judgments on the hare. Among these are the two that Ross categorizes, tendentiously enough, as indicating "moral characteristics" of "a fairly obvious nature": *couart* and *babbart*, the latter a *hapax legomenon*, which he also translates "coward." He also lists six "general terms of abuse," three of which apparently referred earlier to disreputable men (*turpin*, *bouchart*, *goibert*; also *srewart* "scoundrel," *choumbe* "numbskull," and *chiche* "niggard"). Perhaps he should have included among the abusive terms *soillart* "filthy beast" and *frendlese* "friendless"; in contrast, he might have balanced those with the more positive *brodlokere*, *liȝtt-fot*, *wint-swifft*, *tirart* "fast traveler," and *coe-arise* "get-up-quickly." Finally, at least four terms from Ross's other categories convey human reactions not attributively but directly: the hare is *þe der þat alle men scornes*, *euelemet*, *make-fare* "cause-to-travel," and *þe der þat no-mon nedar nemmen*.¹¹⁰

However arbitrary they may seem to modern readers, those responses are as fully grounded in natural history as the names in my first category—grounded in the natural history, that is, of human beings. Medie-

¹⁰⁷Ross, "Middle English Poem," 354.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 368 n. 45 and 369 n. 51.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 358 n. 18; see Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game*, 181, and Appendix, 221.

¹¹⁰Ross, "Middle English Poem," 353–55.

val texts record unstable but powerful reactions to hares. By contrast, a hare is the paradigmatic prey for humans and foxes alike, a role dramatized in *Reynard* and objectified in the contemptuous quasi-generic name *couart*. Bartholomaeus reports that the hare is “fereful, and fighteþ nouȝt” and is “feble of sight” (XVIII.lxviii). But hunting texts express respect for hares’ ability to run long distances and to deceive pursuers.¹¹¹ The hare, writes Edward of Norwich in *Master of Game*, is “king of all venery” as well as “the most marvellous beast that is,” in part because of its unusual digestive habits.¹¹² Particularly marvelous was the creature’s alleged sexual ambiguity. Beginning with Pliny, writers report that hares are bisexual or can change sex.¹¹³

Whatever their basis, those reactions indicate ambivalence about a small, apparently defenseless herbivore with surprising resilience and unusual physiology. Representations of its behavior could flip-flop: in some folktales, the hare takes the place of the fox as duplicitous victimizer, even as cross-species rapist.¹¹⁴ That a hare crossing one’s path brought bad luck is the pretext for “Names of a Hare.” That belief persisted into the 1880s, when William George Black opened an essay for *The Folk-Lore Journal* by “admit[ting] that the hare is regarded as an ‘uncanny’ animal.”¹¹⁵

Freud, who attributed the feeling of the uncanny to the return of the repressed, might have recognized the narrator’s advice: to put down one’s defenses (“be it staf, be hit bouwe”) and talk. In this case, the talk is not about but *to* the uncanny agent. And that speech act constitutes a third, vital realm of reference in “Names of a Hare.”

Appellation here takes much of its significance from its rhetorical and prosodic form. “Names of a Hare” differs in both those ways from the other texts that I have considered. It is, first, a sustained first-person

¹¹¹ See Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game*, 14–16.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 181; see the editors’ note on 221.

¹¹³ E.g., Trevisa, *On the Properties*, XVIII.lxviii, and Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game*, 14 n. 1 and 181.

¹¹⁴ Essays by Kenneth Varty and Elina Suomela-Härmä show that a hare takes the place of a fox or wolf, as aggressive trickster, in some oral analogues to the Reynard stories. See Kenneth Varty, “The Fox and the Wolf in the Well: The Metamorphoses of a Comic Motif,” in *Reynard the Fox: Social Engagement and Cultural Metamorphoses in the Beast Epic from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Varty (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 245–56 (252–56); and Elina Suomela-Härmä, “The Fox and the Hare: An Odd Couple,” in Varty, *Reynard the Fox*, 257–67 (263–67).

¹¹⁵ William George Black, “The Hare in Folk-Lore,” *The Folk-Lore Journal* 1.3 (March 1883): 84–90 (84). See also John Andrew Boyle, “The Hare in Myth and Reality: A Review Article,” *Folklore* 84 (Winter 1973): 313–26 (315).

address to a creature. More precisely, the speaker addresses a hypothetical human listener confronting a hare, but the address puts words into that speaker's mouth. Indeed, because the initial speaker addresses any person confronting any hare, he could become that inner speaker. The addressee's ambiguity, simultaneously an indefinite "anyone" and a present "I," resembles appellations like "the cock" or "the hare," which can also be either general or singular. Addressing an indefinite number of hearers, the poem is as much an exhortation to name as a catalogue of names.

It is also a virtuoso performance. As I hope to demonstrate in the following paragraphs, the poem's prosody merits explication on the basis of its formal craft alone. Its strong but varied rhythms suit the movements of an alternately wind-swift, lurking, scuttling, leaping ground-sitter. More fundamentally, the prosodic momentum deflects a reader's attention from individual names, engaging us in the act of naming itself.

The poem opens with five couplets in predominantly trochaic tetrameter:

De mon þat þe hare Imet,
 Ne shal him neuere be þe bet,
 Bote if he lei doun on londe
 Þat he bereþ in his honde,
 (Be hit staf, be hit bouwe),
 And blesce him wiþ his helbowe.
 And mid wel goed devosioun
 He shal saien on oreisoun
 In þe worshiþe of þe hare;
 Þenne mai he wel fare.¹¹⁶

{Things will never go well for the man who meets the hare unless he lays down on the ground what he carries in his hands (whether it be rod or bow) and blesses himself with his elbow, and with utmost devotion he shall say a prayer, in honor of the hare; then he may fare well.}

The last ten lines match those opening ones in meter and rhyme scheme. But between these formally unremarkable passages, the forty-three lines

¹¹⁶Ross, "Middle English Poem," 350–51, lines 1–10. Future references to "The Names of a Hare in English" will be from the edition on pages 350–51 of Ross's article and will be documented in the text by line number.

of names make masterful use of the form now associated with John Skelton: short, isochronous lines, nearly all two-stress, often with a caesura, in sporadic runs of strong rhyme sounds.

Although most textbooks now call Skeltonics “irregular” and “rough,” in this case the changes in line length and rhyme sound are carefully controlled. There are, first, nine lines with two stressed syllables each, all ending in the unstressed suffix *-art*:

Pe hare, þe scotart,
 Pe bigge, þe bouchart,
 Pe scotewine, þe skikart,
 Pe turpin, þe tirart,
 Pe wei-betere, þe ballart,
 Pe gobidich, þe soillart,
 Pe wimount, þe babbart,
 Pe stele-awai, þe momelart,
 Pe euelelmet, þe babbart . . .¹¹⁷

The first four of these are essentially pairs of amphibrachs (x / x // x / x), but the number of unstressed syllables after the first stress gradually increases from one in lines 11 and 12 to three in lines 18 and 19. A reader who respects the two-beat isochrony will speed up to accommodate the extra unstresses, but the acceleration is orderly because the expansion proceeds in line-pairs identical in length. The momentum slows in line 20, which drops from six unstressed syllables to three. The change is subtly underlined by a shift in rhyme sound to *-ert*, maintained for three lines that again accelerate somewhat: “Pe scot, þe deubert, / Pe gras-bitere, þe goibert, / Pe late-at-hom, þe swikebert . . .” (20–22). Two triplets follow: three lines that rhyme on *-cat* and three on *-kere* (23–28). The first five of those lines are metrically consistent (“Pe fren-dlese, þe wodecat, / Pe brodlokere, þe bromcat . . .”), but line 28 decreases to five syllables, with, exceptionally, only one medial slack: “And eke the roulekere.”

After this pause, acceleration resumes through ten lines rhyming on *-ere*, with an expansion to six unstressed syllables (29–30). Then a couplet with long lines, rhyming in *-ille* or *-ulle*, precedes a major shift to four short-line couplets—possibly monometer, in contrast to the rest of the poem—of somewhat ominous content:

¹¹⁷Lines 11–19. For translations of these terms, see the preceding paragraphs.

þe coue-arise,
 þe make-agrise,
 þe wite-wombe,
 þe go-mit-lombe. (42–45)

Next are five lines that resemble the first sequence of Skeltonics in meter and in rhyming on *-art* (46–50; compare 11–19). The last of these lines breaks the nearly universal anaphora on “the” to announce that the hare’s “hei nome is srewart” (scoundrel). Only four lines now remain before the closing frame. The first three are long enough to be read with three stresses, and their syntax changes from simple to recursive noun phrases: “þe hert wiþ þe leperene hornes, / þe der þa woneþ in þe cornes, / þe der þat alle men scornes” (51–53). And the fourth line stands out both in form and in content. The sole nonrhyming line in the poem, it disavows everything that has gone before: “þe der þat nomon nedar nemnen” (54).

That no man dares name the hare probably alludes to one of the ancient taboos that Ross and Laing mention.¹¹⁸ Thus the poem may be imputing to hares a potency that annuls the ontological and psychological control that we assert by naming. By contrast, having just flouted any such prohibition seventy-six times, the speaker may be mocking both the taboo and the hare itself. In fact, neither extreme is tenable. The poem has neither cowered before the hare nor submerged it under human nominations. The names have, rather, defined deftly but glimpsingly both a recognizable creature and its impact on our own minds. All the while, the names, in their inventiveness and inventedness (many names are, as per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “alleged” names of the hare), proclaim themselves as tentative and conditional. Perhaps no man should dare to appellate the categorical hare, but we may all “be þe bet” if we honor creaturely particularities with fresh verbal inventions.

The poem’s final naming is its most contingent. The speaker has assured his unnamed human listener, perhaps himself, that after saying “al þis,” he will have diminished the hare’s agency and reclaimed his own: “þenne is þe hare miȝtte alaid. / þenne miȝtt þu wenden forþ, / Est and west and souþ and norþ . . .”; 55–57). He then addresses the hare in his own right:

Haue nou godnedai, sire hare!
 God þe lete so wel fare,

¹¹⁸Ross, “Middle English Poem,” 355; Laing, “Notes,” 202.

þat þou come to me ded,
 Oþer in ciue, oþer in bred! Amen. (61–64)

[Have now good day, sir hare! God let you fare so well that you will come to me dead, either in stew or in pastry. Amen.]

The cheerful farewell brings a particular hare into the speaker's own present, only to dismiss it into his future. There the speaker proposes to greet the returning creature with a terminal appellation: as food. It may seem that the elaborate naming exercise boils down (so to speak) to control in its most primal form. But the poem folds back into its beginning: upon encountering any hare, the speaker would incur his own adjuration to drop his weapons and recite "on oreisoun" like this one. Thus he defers the grasping (and eating) indefinitely, releasing the hare that he confronts into its singular mortality, pursued by properly endless namings.

Naming Matters

Nonacademic journalists and commentators gave unusual attention to a 2009 research report entitled "Exploring Stock Managers' Perceptions of the Human-Animal Relationship on Dairy Farms and an Association with Milk Production." Particularly prominent in headlines and summaries was the finding excerpted in my second epigraph to this essay: that dairy farmers who gave their cows names, as they did on 46 percent of the farms surveyed, realized greater milk production than those who did not.¹¹⁹ Most commentators turned the observed correlation into a causal claim that they reported flippantly or dismissively. "Will Bessie make more milk if you call her by name? British ag specialists say she will," reported the blogger for *Scientific American*.¹²⁰ A trade publication, *Neuromarketing*, included the causal claim in its "Weird News" column and noted, as did many other reports, that the work had won the satirical "Ig Nobel" prize.¹²¹ The mockery was somewhat off-target. The increase in milk production had been modest, about 3.4 percent per lactation, and

¹¹⁹Catherine Bertenshaw and Peter Rowlinson, "Exploring Stock Managers' Perceptions of the Human-Animal Relationship on Dairy Farms and an Association with Milk Production," *Anthrozoös* 22 (2009): 59–69 (62).

¹²⁰Jordan Lite, "News Blog: Cows with Names Make More Milk," *Scientific American Blog*, January 28, 2009, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/post.cfm?id=cows-with-names-make-more-milk-2009-01-28>.

¹²¹Roger Dooley, "Weird News: Cow Names Matter," *Neuromarketing: Where Brain Science and Marketing Meet*, October 2, 2009, <http://www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog/articles/weird-news-cow-names-matter.htm>.

the scientists mentioned naming practices only incidentally in their analysis of farmers' attitudes and behavior toward cows. That is, Catherine Bertenshaw and Peter Rowlinson did not argue that individual names in themselves affected the cows.

But their study, and the subsequent reaction, demonstrated that names did matter, in two indirect ways. For the cows, naming marked a broader set of practices that the researchers summarized as "human attention to the individual animal," and those practices improved the cows' health.¹²² To some commentators, however, the very idea that naming matters mattered in a negative way: they inflated or even invented such a claim in order to belittle it. Perhaps we both anticipate and resist a mandate to appellate animals—at least, animals other than pets—as individuals.¹²³

Naming matters in equally complex ways in laboratories. In a three-year study of twenty-three biomedical and behavioral labs, Mary T. Phillips found that scientists seldom give individual names to animals used in research.¹²⁴ Like the dairy study, Phillips's work elicited strong human responses. Many researchers dismissed the idea of individual names for laboratory animals as patently inappropriate, even silly. Some reacted defensively, misinterpreting her questions as advocacy—somewhat the way commentators projected a brief for naming into the findings of Bertenshaw and Rowlinson. And some lab supervisors greatly exaggerated their use of individual names, "apparently on the assumption," Phillips reports, "that I would take [individual naming] as evidence that they cared about their animals."¹²⁵ Evidently animal studies is not the only discipline whose practitioners are uneasy over the semantic homogenizing of our fellow creatures.

I cite those nonliterary studies in part because my topic is not narrowly literary. Nonhuman creatures matter, to themselves but also to human beings. The names that we give to other animals reflect and affect our perceptions of them, which may in turn shape the ways we

¹²²Bertenshaw and Rowlinson, "Exploring Stock Managers' Perceptions," 59.

¹²³Differences in naming practices are one reason Erica Fudge offers for suggesting that in a real sense, pets are not "animals" (*Animal*, 27–34).

¹²⁴Phillips, "Proper Names and the Social Construction of Biography," 124. See also Marc Bekoff, "Should Scientists Bond with the Animals Who They Use? Why Not?: Book Review of Davis & Balfour on Human-Animal-Bond," *Psychology* 4.37 (1993), <http://www.cogsci.ecs.soton.ac.uk/cgi/psyc/newpsy?4.37>; and Thomas L. Wolfe, "Introduction: Environmental Enrichment," *Enrichment Strategies for Laboratory Animals, ILAR Journal* 46.2 (2005), http://dels-old.nas.edu/ilar_n/ilarjournal/46_2/html/v4602wolffe.shtml.

¹²⁵Phillips, "Proper Names and the Social Construction of Biography," 125.

treat them. One worker interviewed by Phillips indicated that to name his research subjects might make it impossible to kill them in the course of research.¹²⁶ Phillips proposes no particular correlation between naming and treatment, nor will I. But certain parallels between literary and extraliterary practices can clarify the prior correlation: between naming and perception. By way of conclusion, then, I return to the problem of general names for nonhuman animals.

What I earlier called the default operation of general names obtains in labs and on farms as well as in literature: in contrast to proper nouns, species names promote collective representation. Just as the panther is categorically “friend to all,” the members of *Rattus norvegicus* are presumed to be interchangeable, whereas Isegrim and Bessie should be individuals. Equally important, however, those default associations commonly weaken or even fail in practice. Narratives, for instance, particularize the bearers of collective names: Phillips summarizes a highly personalized biography that a science journalist constructed for a laboratory rat known only by number;¹²⁷ centuries earlier, as I have argued, Bartholomaeus turned the etymologically homogeneous ass and rooster into protagonists in intermorphic anecdotes, and “an owl and one nightingale” distinguished themselves by articulating their categorial identities. Conversely, proper names can obscure animals’ identities. Some researchers studied by Phillips did name their animals, for instance, but the names alluded to well-known scientists or to students’ romantic rivals; naming thus “had less to do with recognizing the animal’s individuality than . . . with poking fun at [a human] namesake”¹²⁸—a more directed version of the use of “Reynard,” “Isegrim,” and “Rukenake” to impute animality to certain clerics or counselors. In neither the lab workers’ joke nor the beast epic’s satire does the animal’s meaning depend on its species. Such practices “deindividuate,” to use Phillips’s term, not by aggregating creatures into species but by bypassing species altogether.

Those outcomes should counter categorical objections to categorical names. Species names do not preclude a full representation of animals’ identity as individuals; they mediate it. Phillips even suggests—inadvertently—that the “general singular” itself, by which we “corral

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132–33.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 136–37; referring to Robert Kanigel, “Specimen No. 1913: A Rat’s Brief Life in the Service of Science,” in *The Sciences* (NYAS), January/February 1987, 30–37.

¹²⁸ Phillips, “Proper Names and the Social Construction of Biography,” 133.

the heterogeneous multiplicity of the living,” need not constitute what Derrida calls *bêtise*.¹²⁹ Phillips reports that scientists commonly refer to experimental subjects “merely as the ‘animal,’” not even “‘rat,’ or ‘monkey.’” Like Derrida, she regards that habit as the epitome of deindividuation. One of her two examples supports a different view, however. Addressing a rat recovering from anesthesia, an experimenter asked, “Are you light, animal?”¹³⁰ A neuroscientist colleague of mine explains that the question “would mean that the effects of the anesthesia had almost worn off and the animal may start experiencing pain.”¹³¹ Thus the researcher may have been acknowledging the rat’s dual identity—as a paradigmatically generic lab specimen and as a fellow creature whose experience he understands. He or she gave “animal” a second name, the singular “you.” Thereby he modeled, on a small scale, the same escape from the *animal* trap that some medieval texts perform at length. The path can begin at any point on the naming continuum, but it does not rest at one point. It travels from the categorical concept to the finely observed particular and back again, exhibiting toward its referent both cognitive appropriation and agnostic deference.

I have no doubt that the author of “Names of a Hare” did eat hare stew. But in his little *oreisoun*, he engages in what Derrida calls metonymic “eating well”: an assimilation of the other that involves “*addressing oneself to the other*” while also “absolutely limiting understanding itself.”¹³² The poet addresses the hare with compelling and relentless immediacy, naming it so comprehensively as to disclose the limits of comprehension. So too *The Owl and the Nightingale* appellates its speakers in a full range of convincing but insufficient ways—as natural specimens, interspecies hybrids, metaphors, and self-defining subjects. Both overdetermined and indeterminate, the animal Others in both poems enact the interchange of species determinism and singular freedom that is the condition proper to any *animot*, be it owl, nightingale, woman, or man.

¹²⁹Derrida, *The Animal*, 31.

¹³⁰Phillips, “Proper Names and the Social Construction of Biography,” 138.

¹³¹Lisa A. Gabel, e-mail to author, January 17, 2011.

¹³²Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” in *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 255–87 (283); emphasis in original.