

PUTTING ON THE DOG:
ON THE TRAIL OF MAN'S BEST FRIEND
AS SEEN THROUGH THE MIDDLE ENGLISH DICTIONARY ONLINE
AND THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CANON

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In recent years, a rich literature has arisen around the topic of animals in the European Middle Ages. Many pages of these studies are devoted to the domestic dog, which, along with its undomesticated counterparts the wolf and the fox, figures with particular prominence in the narrative literary genres of folktale, bestiary, and romance—all of which demonstrates a complex iconography of the canine species during the later Middle Ages in particular.¹ Kathleen Walker-Meikle observes that dogs became strongly associated with hunting, noble women, and qualities of loyalty or fidelity (*Medieval Pets* 75), even saintliness. At the same time, they could still be associated with bestiality and sin. Iconographic stereotypes have developed through study of a panoply of documentary sources, from the literary to the pictorial, but no survey to date has concentrated upon the development of canine iconography in vernacular English. The present essay aims to redress that lack by following arguably the most succinct and accessible resource we have for such etymological-*cum*-cultural investigation, the *Middle English Dictionary Online*, and by pursuing several new insights about the complexly collocated “venereal” relationships of canine and human that such a tool may enable us to uncover in several otherwise exhaustively documented Middle English texts.

Before resorting to the *MED*'s catalogue of literary usages, however, it may prove useful to unpack one canonical narrative featuring “man's best friend,” a tale widely distributed throughout Europe in a variety of vernacular and Latin texts, and one that serves both as a testimonial to the dog-human relationship and an indicator of the literary and iconographical inquiry the rest of the paper follows. The narrative in

question is a short detective fable cited by the *MED* that I have paraphrased from the *Gesta Romanorum* in Middle English (Additional MS. 9066, ca. 1450n).² One of the most famous stories in the collection, its treatment of the heroic greyhound recapitulates the twelfth-century *Chanson de Macaire* and derives ultimately from Plutarch's tale about Pyrrhus and the dog guarding its master's corpse.³ Although the narrative is usually interpreted as an exemplum of canine loyalty and perspicacity, a closer look shows that the tale suggests a greater structural incorporation of the dog within symbolic networks of human behavior than appears on the surface.

Charlemagne, the King of France, married Sibyl, the daughter of the Roman Emperor Constantine—a woman who was most fair, wise, well disposed, and devout. On one occasion when the king held a great feast with his barons, there entered a dwarf with a great head and belly, small eyes, a humpback, crooked feet, and dark skin, but despite his deformity, Charles took him into his service. Also at court lived a knight named Macharie, who burned for the love of the queen although he could not have his fleshly will of her. And so upon a day when he was left behind while the king went hunting, this lustful knight spurred on the dwarf to attempt the queen's virtue.

The dwarf, that wretch, went into the queen's chamber, but she broke three of his teeth. Afterward, he pretended that he had broken them in a fall, but the next night he crept into her bed while she was sleeping, and while pondering what he should do, he too fell asleep, until the two were discovered there by the king the next morning. The dwarf falsely swore that the queen had invited him into her bed, and Charlemagne condemned both to be burned. On the day appointed, clad only in her smock, the queen begged to be spared because she was pregnant. The peers Naymes, Roland, Oliver, Ogier, Denis, and others supported Sibyl's plea and it was granted by the king. But the dwarf stuck to his story and was put to the fire, and the devil bore away his soul.

The queen was banished from the realm, riding upon an ass and accompanied only by a trusted baron named Aubry of Mundider. While going through a great wood, they camped beside a well, and there Sir Macharie came after them. The traitor smote off Sir Aubry's head, but the queen fled while they were fighting

and was taken in by a powerful lord named Warkere. Struck by her beauty, he was going to make her his mistress until she revealed her identity, but upon learning it, he left his wife and children to lead her to Rome instead, where she was safely delivered of her child.

Meanwhile, Sir Aubry's greyhound guarded his dead master's body from scavengers for four days, but out of hunger ran to Paris on the fourth day. There he saw Macharie at the king's board, and knocked him off his seat. Then he seized a loaf and ran back to his master's body. The next day he did the same. On the third day the traitor's friends brought staves and were about to beat the hound to death when Duke Naymes intervened and counseled that they release the dog to see where he would go. Then they followed him and found him licking Aubry's wounds. The dead knight's body was borne back to Paris and worshipfully buried. But how to prove Macharie was his murderer?

By Naymes' advice, a trial by combat was decreed between Macharie and the greyhound, and the cursed knight was armed with a foot-and-a-half long staff. The dog was released, grievously bit Macharie on the hand, took the staff in his mouth, pulled the knight to the ground, and fixed his teeth on his throat until Macharie cried for mercy with a high voice and confessed all. Charlemagne had him burned at the stake, as he had burned the dwarf, and when this was done the greyhound lay three days at the tomb of his master, refusing meat, until he died. The king buried him outside the churchyard, opposite the tomb, remitted his sentence against the queen, and recalled her from Rome with great worship, and they lived long together.

In this tale Duke Naymes may solve the murder, but it is not the reasoning detective but the instrument of detection, "an vnresonable beste," who most engages our interest (Additional MS. 9066:72-74). Where most medieval tales have human protagonists at the center, this one has a dog. We detect a folktale adapted to elite culture by the presence of standardized aristocratic figures, particularly Charlemagne and his Peers, and the (briefly mentioned) Roman Emperor Constantine whose name derives both from the famed Byzantine ruler who proclaimed Christianity as the state religion and the rebellious British general who conquered Rome itself. For the purposes of the story,

Charlemagne's queen is named after the famed and generic classical prophetess. Here, however, she represents not *foresight* (which could have prevented the entire affair, leaving us no story at all), but rather *insight*, that which is needed to reveal the truth about her supposed infidelity, as well as Sir Aubry's murderer's identity and purpose. Aubrey is simply a noble Norman family name appropriate for this knight's role as king's agent. The chief human villain, Macharie, possesses a name derived from a loan word from Latin and Old French—*machination*—which enunciates the ill-intentioned scheming that must be unraveled, combined perhaps with a linguistically playful corruption of the *caritas* that he obviously lacks. Insight is regained, with its royal progeny, through the agency of a canine species favored by the medieval aristocracy, through its conjoined bestiality and loyalty (the hunger for both sustenance and vengeance).⁴ And another propriety of naming is observed, for both dwarf and hound, as presumptively less than human, remain significantly unnamed.

Given these lexical conventions, the tale itself wags upon clear structural parallels and counterpoints incorporating the greyhound within several stratified human social positions from small stature to great, low birth to high, villainous behavior to heroic. It contrasts a king in need of a disclosure that would save his marriage (and not coincidentally preserve his succession) with a peer who ultimately discerns the truth. Consequently, the insight that he has disowned returns to him from its symbolic protector, the Christianized Roman Emperor, whom it will one day help qualify him to succeed (an eventuality outside the tale but known to the medieval audience). Possibly it is for this future-oriented reason that Charlemagne's queen's name is given as Sibyl rather than, say, Sophia.

The tale further contrasts a knight motivated by illicit sexual desire and represented in the boudoir by his henchman, a dwarf, with an honorable knight and his greyhound, and its plot is resolved by an improbable but nonetheless *apropos* single combat between degenerate knight and dog. The dwarf and the dog are both instruments—the one wittingly of injustice, the other unwittingly of justice. The pair are conventionally characterized by subjection to beastlike appetites, but the dog, at least, epitomizes the chivalric virtue of loyalty. Both the traitorous Macharie and his doppelgänger henchman the dwarf are burned, consigned to hell; the loyal Aubrey and his dog are given

honorable burial, the dog's grave even physically aligned with its master's although appropriately outside of the Christian cemetery.

Not incidentally, these structural alignments deliciously reveal the divine hand of Providence and (one might add) the inbuilt absurdity of chivalric conventions by employing society's most peripheral, low, and mute (in terms of capacity for linguistic rationality and expression) to both threaten and restore the social order through their contrasting persistence, prowess, and self-sacrifice. Significantly, the chief events of the fable revolve around bodily functions with sexual desire and hunger as joint fulcrums, associating the material realities of fire, flesh, and bread with the qualities of lust, vengeance, and fidelity (or the lack of it). The faithful greyhound identifies the guilty knight through his desire for food, symbolically "eats" him and lays him low by taking in his jaws first the hand which signifies Macharie's agency, then the phallic staff that conflates both the knight's willed sexual transgression and his commission of murder, and finally the throat which thereby changes his tune, but refuses all food once vengeance is achieved. The guilty are consumed by fire in punishment for their enslavement to passion, the good are bodily interred in honor, and the queen, as token of a civilized court, having birthed a royal heir in imperial Rome, returns to her husband's soon-to-be imperial court. But what does the dog's honorific inclusion among the human actors really say about being human? Because it is unnamed, like the dwarf, its seeming personhood remains ambiguous, an extension of its master's. And is its imbrication within all these polarized values typical of Middle English literature?

Any search for meaning in Middle English literature does well to begin in the *Middle English Dictionary Online*, which sifts the textual corpus for each word's linguistic usages and establishes its semantic range. The *MED* lists 265 headword entries containing definitions and quotations where the word *dogge* occurs.⁵ That number alone suggests the intimate connection between canines and humankind. This list includes, but is not limited to, entries such as *bitch*, *cur*, *hound*, *puppy*, and *whelp*, as well as common types of dog such as *brache* and *mastiff*. By "not limited," I mean that *dogge* also occurs in proper names and common nouns that are not at all canine, such as those of plants, fish, insects, and tools or instruments. In these tangential cases, however, we may often suppose a metaphorical association, as in the dogtrot: a dance with something like a canine gait, or to "dog down the hatch": clamping closed an opening by tightening a bracket of some kind, which alludes to

a dog's propensity not to let go of something gripped by its jaws. Many of these usages survive in modern English, where they may still reveal, as in "dogfight" and "dogged," an attitude that is tinged with interwoven contempt and admiration.

Because dogs have been domesticated since prehistoric times, they are habitually contrasted to wolves (which modern science confirms as a separate species). Consequently, we find a frequent pastoral oscillation between references to wild and domesticated creatures: savage "dogs" (like wolves), tame ones, and other animals with doglike characteristics who may (or may not) fawn upon humans and are sometimes pets—including humans with loyal, brutish, or sycophantic characteristics. It is no surprise that dogs should be deeply woven into Middle English textuality. It is somewhat surprising, however, that there should be only one literary instance of its Old English etymon.⁶ Although Grendel's mother is referred to as wolfish, dogs are remarkably absent from *Beowulf*, for example, where one might reasonably expect some mention of them barking at the Geatish strangers, sensing and warning of Grendel's approach, or just scrabbling for scraps in the boisterous mead-hall. This parsimony might be at least partially explained by the relatively small and fragmentary nature of the old English corpus, but it tempts one to wonder whether the Anglo-Saxons did not particularly fancy dogs and failed to see in them any sign of human-like rationality, cultivated virtues, or symbolic value. The implication is that the special intimacy between man and dog implied by our word "pet" had yet to be forged in early English society.

According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, this negativity is also suggested by the "usually depreciatory or abusive" usages of *dogge* in early Middle English. While pejorative references remain predominant (retained by the word "cur" and the dwindling neutral usage of "bitch" as gender marker for a female dog), neutral and positive references (sometimes signaled by the more semantically flexible term "hound" despite its verb use to denote unwelcome persistence) increasingly redress them in later Middle English. Brigitte Resl points out that "the image of the dog in scriptural references is consistently unfavorable across about forty passages" in the Bible (25). However, from the twelfth century on, more favorable treatments appear among Christian scholars such as Alexander Neckham and Albertus Magnus, noting increasingly humanlike characteristics of canines. One speculates that shifting vernacular usage patterns parallel those in Latin. More important, they

also track changes in Anglo-Norman society such as the increasingly courtly culture of chivalry, the adoption of certain canine species (especially greyhounds) by the male aristocracy for elite hunting activity and small dogs by the female aristocracy as lap-pets, and perhaps even the gradually rising literary corpus and status of Middle English itself.⁷

Reasons for the continuing plurality of pejorative uses— especially in adjectival and adverbial form—are both religious and secular. Despite the popularity of the dog-saint Guinefort,⁸ religious references appear to have remained predominantly abusive, regularly connected to popular notions of bestiality and the Devil. The *Ancrene Riwe* (c. 1230) does so obsessively, describing Satan’s teeth as doglike and Satan himself as “þe fule cur dogge” (Corpus Christi 402:79a). The *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (1340) associates a nasty speaker with “þe felle dogge þet byt and beberþ alle þo þet he may” (Arundel 57:66/17). The Wycliffite Bible (1382) builds upon this theme, in Ecclesiasticus 13.22 contrasting “an hoeli man” to “a dogge,” and glossing the latter as “a doggische man, and siche is a chidere and a wrathful man and a glotoun” (Douce 369[1]). In these condemnations, it is not hard to discern the augmentation of biting and barking into at least two of the seven deadly sins (a possible third would be envy). Medieval authors frequently construe such doglike behavior as Christian sinning, either individual as in the example above or collective, as in the tongue-clucking reference of the *London Chronicle* (c. 1450) to “the sory doghole of Pount melank” (Cleopatra C.4:138),⁹ but they also extend it to non-Christian believers, particularly in the Middle English language’s developmental crusading context of Saracens and Jews.¹⁰

As a doglike form of speech, barking is paralleled not just to annoying or abusive human secular speech but to prayer: The *Ancrene Riwe* illustrates unrighteous prayer by the observation that “hare song ant hare bonen to god stinkeð fulre to him . . . þen ei rotet dogge” (Corpus Christi 402:53a); two hundred years later the beseeching and contemptible dog is implicitly redeemable in the *Orologium Sapientiae*: “Besechyng þe, my lorde god, þat þou dispise me no[gh]te, þat am but an vnclene worm & a deed dogge” (Douce 114:379/30). Nevertheless, a foreshadowing of the English Reformation may be seen in the concatenation of wagging tails, tongues, and papal documents in Capgrave’s *Abbreviation of Chronicles* (1464): “Thei seide pleynly that it was no more trost to the Pope writing than to a dogge tail” (Cambridge University Library Gg.4.12). This remarkable image cluster also evokes the quill for writing as tail and ink as excrement which wells forth from

beneath the tail. And in a rather different mode of prayer from 1450, Saint Katherine of Alexandria gleefully invites torture and martyrdom by exclaiming, “O, thou moost vnschameful dogge, do what euer þy moost wykked hert can þenke!” (Richardson 44:45). Such exclamations and epithets also pepper early drama, as in the *Ludus Coventriae*: “Fy on you, lousy doggys!” (Cotton Vespasian D.8:368/360), and *Towneley*: “A, ha, dog! The devyll the drowne!” (Huntington HM 1:72/253).

The strongly hierarchical character of English society after the Norman Conquest also seems to have created a dichotomy in usage parallel to that distinguishing court and country—the French-speaking aristocracy and the English-speaking lower orders. A quasi-social hierarchy like that of bestiaries is implied, for example, when dogs are contrasted with lions, as in the previously cited Wycliffite Bible’s proverb from Ecclesiastes 9.4: “Betere is a quyc dogge than a leoun dead” (Douce 369[1]), glossed as the critical difference between a living sinner, who may repent, and a dead one, for whom it is too late to be sorry. In fact, to the extent that all humans are sinners regardless of social station, all sinners are dogs and often contrasted with lions as a type not only of royal power but even of Christ. Clearly making this point is Wyclif’s *Chronicle of the Papacy* (1425), which admonishes, “þu schalt regne as a lion, butte þu schalt die as a dogge” (Emmanuel College 85: 182/216), a sentiment that also consorts well with the popular medieval image of Fortune’s wheel. The contrast of dog and lion also pertains within the secular domain. In Chaucer’s prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the royal lion “of his genterye, / Hym deyneth not to wreke hym on a flye, / As dooth a curre” (599, F ll. 394-396, G ll. 380-382). In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s Host makes another such comparison when he takes a swipe at the position his violent (and ironically named) wife Goodelief is prone to put him in by intemperately prompting his manly self-assertiveness: “Whan I bete my knaues, / She bryngeth me the grete clobbed staues / And crieth, ‘slee the dogges euerichon!” Comparing her to Melibee’s more aptly named wife Prudence, he protests that her vengefulness eggs him on to act like a “wilde leoun, fool-hardy” and thus little better than his servants (“The Prologue of The Monk’s Tale” 240: 1897-1900, 1916). Indeed, lions and dogs are not always considered opposites, for lions can even *be* dogs: every reader of chivalric romances knows (although more often from Chrétien de Troyes than Middle English) that Ywain’s lion shows the recovering hero doglike affection

and loyalty, reflecting his knightly but still imperfect puissance and repaying him life for life.

This kind of figurative thinking also causes different breeds of dogs to mirror different social stations as alluded to previously, leading to such statements as John Trevisa's (c. 1398) contrasting a *canis nobilis* with a *canes rurales*: "a gentil hounde . . . haþ lasse fleissh þan a dogge and schorter here and more þynne" (*Barth*. BL Additional 27944, 278a/a). Here is at work the metaphorical constellation that plays so strong a part in the detective story that we began with, and the widespread medieval wild man tradition that associates bulk and hairiness with bestiality and demonism through tales of bear's sons, lycanthropes, outlaws, and noble transgressors gone mad, contrasting it with the sleek shapeliness of domesticated culture and gendered courtly ideals of beauty.¹¹ This kind of thinking associates itself with women as well as men, so that sexuality is the hidden link between shape-shifting and giving shape through birth of offspring or other selves. Trevisa employs the miscegenation fantasy to tell how in the Indies female dogs are left in the wilderness to breed with tigers, "and þer of comeþ most scharpe houndes & swifte" (*Barth*. BL Additional 27944, 277a/b). And while not going so far as to blend canine and feline, *The Master of Game* by Edward, Second Duke of York (1410) demonstrates a fixation with dogs and misogyny in at least six references, among them remarking upon the monogamy of wolves and how "þe liken her kyndels as a biche doothe here whelpes," and observing that "when þe buche of hem is mooste hoote . . . þei goon alle aftir hur, as houndes do. . . . Men seyn . . . when eny woman doþ amys, that she is like to þe wolfe bicche . . . it is soth that þe biche of þe wolf takeþ hure to be þe foulest" (Cotton Vespasian B.12:32, 13, 31). Late in the Middle Ages, such references shade into the rhyming term "witch" playfully irrespective of gender: *The Friar and the Boy* (1475) declares, "Be God, he ys a schrewd byche; in faith, y trow he be a wyche" (Aberystwyth Brogyntyn. 2.1:54).

Such references conflate the wild with the domestic, yet even in pastoral settings the transformation of the species can become a cautionary metaphor. *An Alphabet of Tales* (*Alphabetum Narrationem* 1450) admonishes married women gullible enough to be seduced by the exemplum of a wise woman who "had a little bykk whelpe" that she claimed to be her daughter. "Because sho wolde not consent vnto a yong man þat luffid hur to be his luff, þus sho was shapen to be a biche whelpe" (BL Additional 25719:361/12,23): bestiality thrust upon the

unresponsive (and therefore unnatural) female as punishment. Very often the occupation of hunting serves as an initial context for gendered or sexual references (as indeed it still does), to the extent that one may well wonder if the phrase “dog for the bow” was coined for this purpose by uniting the hunt with subliminal associations of Venus and Cupid’s archery. Commenting on the old woman who acts as a go-between for Jason and Medea in *The Troy Book* (1412-1420), John Lydgate pronounces, “Pei in loue alle þe slei[gh]tes knowe, / And sche was made as dogge for þe bowe” (*Troy Book*, Cotton Augustus A.4:1.2802).

By this time, there had developed a full field of usages by which dogs and humans could be compared. Geoffrey Chaucer’s own works illuminate this capacious field, and two instances in *The Canterbury Tales* employ the idiomatic phrase just discussed, which by then carried a freight of medieval lore relating canine and human characteristics in vengery of all sorts. One is from the Friar Huberd’s attack on summoners, whom he characterizes as prone to blackmail by adroitly exploiting people’s weaknesses while simultaneously pretending to be friends who support them in their afflictions. In particular, his tale targets a summoner’s (and perhaps *the* Summoner’s) tactic of employing complicit women to set men up through seduction (a tactic he is all too well acquainted with through his confessional and personal facility with hastily arranged marriages): “For in this world nys dogge for the bowe / That kan a hurt deer from an hool knowe / Bet than this somnour knewe a sly lecchour / Or an avowtier or a paramour” (*The Canterbury Tales*, “The Friar’s Tale” 124:1369-72).¹² Again in “The Merchant’s Tale” Chaucer uses this dis-expected metaphor to underline innate hormonal urgency of the squire Damyan’s dissembling behavior, for although dogs are supposed to be loyal and unfeigned, in a fabliau world “craft is al, whoso that do it kan” (163:2016). After receiving his lord’s young wife May’s letter agreeing to an assignation,

“All passed was his siknesse and his sorwe.
 He kembeth ym, he preyneth hym and pyketh,
 He dooth al that his lady lust and lyketh;
 And eek to Januarie he goth as lowe
 As euere did a dogge for the bowe.” (2010-14)

As loyalty to the lord crumbles before the prospect of love-making with the lady, this dog knows he is about to have his day.

Late in the Middle Ages, then, the literary use of dogs and other animals for symbolic purposes had achieved remarkable subtlety with comic as well as didactic value. As I began by discussing in detail an exemplary text, so I will close with another, even better known one. By the fifteenth century, references to dogs frequently collocated not only with the imagery of field and forest, but even with interior courtly spaces where they were cosseted by lords and ladies, priests and nuns, as other essays in this issue discuss. Much in particular has been made of the venery scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400): it has long been a game of sorts to parallel its hero—who remains within the comfortable castle, resting up for his epiphanic assignation with the Green Knight while subject to a different sort of hunt—with the beasts successively hunted by Sir Bertilak and his male retinue in the wilderness outside. For example, John Cummins observes that “the essence of the poem...is in the contrast between the alternating scenes of energetic hunting by Sir Bertilak...and the languid ease of Sir Gawain, lounging in his bed and open to the corrupting overtures of Lady Bertilak” (3). But as Cummins also reminds us, too much sleep was understood as a spur to lechery (3), and in their “luf-talkyng” the courtly pair are being more “energetic” than their amiable repose and banter makes it appear. The contrasting activities are not so far apart, after all.

Susan Crane emphasizes this state of affairs by drawing attention to the parallel between hunting cries and “foreigner talk and baby talk.” In the poem, “braches bayed þe fore and breme noyse maked” (*Sir Gawain*, 32:1142). Not only do the dogs “speak,” but their handlers do as well: “mony watz þe myry mouthe of men and of houndez” (40:1447). This imagery reaches its peak when the poor fox is particularly targeted for verbal abuse by hounds and hunters, as if all were sharing the same language:

Suche a sorȝe at þat syȝt þay sette on his hede
 As alle þe clamberande clyffes had clattered on hepes;
 Here he watz halawed, when hapelez hym metten,
 Loude he watz ȝayned with ȝarande speche;
 Þer he watz þreted and ofte þef called (48:1721-1725).

Although none of this hue and cry fits that description, it emphasizes the hunters’ and hounds’ unity of purpose, and after, when the hunters “her hedeȝ . . . fawne and frote” (53:1919), they are surely (though the poet

does not tell us this) speaking fondly to their dogs in the way Crane suggests. It is surely not beyond the poet's considerable subtlety to omit mention of Gaston Phébus' recommendation to "speak to his hounds in the most lovely and gracious language that he can" (qtd. in Crane 114) precisely to draw attention to such "lovely" language being practiced within Gawain's chamber at that very moment. Such a technique of significant omission, coupled with the emphatic boisterousness of the prior hunting calls, can be a rhetorical strategy to further underline the parallel between bosky countryside and bedroom.¹³

The Gawain Poet does not make this easy sport: the exactness or ambiguity of possible symbolic parallels has been greatly debated and with good reason, with the preponderance of critical opinion falling on the ambiguous side. In her excellent, albeit brief, summary of this mode of interpretation, Anne Rooney observes, "the diversity of these symbolic readings of the hunts should alert us to their shaky foundations" (159). Regardless of how much or little Gawain may resemble the deer in his grace, the boar in his fierceness, and the fox in his cleverness—or, on the other hand, exhibit any symbolic moral deficiencies associated with them—I would suggest that hitherto critics have little noticed how it is really the hunting dogs upon which the comparison effectively turns for a medieval audience. Even Rooney omits mention of the canines that are the common element in all three hunts, although she does say that the poem is one of several "in which the hunt stands as an emblem of secular courtly life and indulgence" (161).¹⁴ There is little dispute that the image cluster of hunting and hunted animals induces the reader to consider Gawain's peril in the boudoir. As Crane comments, "I am reluctant to claim that there are specific symbolic connections between Gawain and the hunted animals. Yet in our experience of reading the poem, hunts and temptation scenes are intimately interlinked" (129).¹⁵ It might also be observed that for all of Bertilak's braches bringing the animals to bay in the woods, he has another dog in this hunt, who is tracking the gentle knight in the boudoir, and who appears to be fawning while she is actually testing his animal-like carnality, not merely his courtliness.

Gender equality-minded moderns automatically pair the mistress with the master of the castle, but it is not so simple in Middle English or indeed other vernacular courtly romances. Courtly convention treats the beloved in romance pairings from a predominantly masculine perspective through archetypes of opposition and absence, often by regarding the woman as not only of contrasting gender and "other," but as somehow

also out of reach, through social station, marriage, abduction or some other proscription.¹⁶ She is socially proscribed in this courtly archetype by being placed either above or below the man (and thus putatively made either unattainable or subjected), and often narratively by removing one or the other party from the scene, motivating a quest for reunion. When the two are brought together through sexual solacing and sometimes marriage, however—especially when the previously unattainable beloved becomes the subjected spouse—the archetype’s ubiquity is only confirmed. And that archetypal opposition and absence is, of course, what the romance seeks to surmount. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* further complicates matters when Morgan is revealed as placed above Bertilak, her vassal and agent in executing her challenge to King Arthur’s court, and because it is his wife, her supposed “niece,” whom we suspect of prostituting herself—also upon Morgan’s orders. Why, we ask ourselves, does the husband so readily accede to this violation of marital convention and perversion of guest rights?—Because Morgan is a “goddess.”

Like Arthur and Guinevere at the poem’s opening, the castle’s lord and lady are only observed together at banquets, where the exchange of winnings is discussed and carried out, and this in itself maximizes the venereal opportunities and complications for Gawain. By the terms of their pact, Gawain and Bertilak participate in each other’s hunt. After the Christmas celebration, dogs become involved. Bertilak’s hounds are prominently featured in the outdoor hunting scenes, where the entrails of the slain quarry are given them before the quarry is presented to Gawain. The Green Knight’s power and close association with nature (or Morgan) is implicitly represented by these scenes, as well as in the sexual attractiveness of his lady, but it also apparently declines while Gawain fulfils his bargain and resists temptation, for Bertilak’s hunts grow progressively less productive.¹⁷ Any “lap” dogs within the court, likely as common in medieval castles as kenneled working dogs without, remain significantly unmentioned, expunged from the poem. However, the canopied bed portrayed in the manuscript’s accompanying illustration is not warm, intimate, cozy or claustrophobic, but symbolically a room within a room—rather like an upscale kennel. Indeed, given this contained and bedded space, the interior scenes create even more troubling and ambiguous issues as to the degrees of his hosts’ complicity with Morgan and one another, the relation of the hounds’ “breme noyse” to the wife’s courtly cooing and blandishments, who must hold whom at

bay during the hunt, the exchange of kisses for prey, and the unanticipated perils of “heavy petting.” Despite the apparent freedom Gawain has been given within the castle, and even if he (as advertised) is more lion than dog, he becomes the prey in the confines of this bedroom.¹⁸

The poet is far too gentlemanly to characterize either Bertilak’s lady or her “aunt” with opprobrium such as “bitch,” but Gawain, gripped by humanly intense surprise, relief, and anger once the Green Knight tells all, rudely resorts to it in an uncharacteristic diatribe against women which reveals the side of him featured in romances where he is not such a paragon.¹⁹ Gawain is hounded by Morgan’s scheme and in his boudoir by Bertilak’s lady, and nothing if not dogged in meeting his assignation with the Green Knight, but dog or not, at the moment of his outbreak in the Green Chapel, Gawain might have preferred paying such a fine for his green girdle to receiving the mark of a hunted animal and obverse of a lapdog’s ornamented collar—that nick in his neck. In sum, the rich but unstated associations of the hunt and hunting dogs with courtly conduct and values link the activities of Bertilak, his lady, and Gawain as proxies in a high-stakes game between Morgan le Fay and King Arthur’s court.

In ways like these, the manifold references to dogs in Middle English literature enact retrograde fantasies of religion, race, gender and sexuality, and reconfigure various hierarchies of being in the “fair field of folk.” They constitute a wide borderland encompassing the immersion of the word “cur” in “curses” to the coded discussion of indelicate matters such as bodily elimination and sex and, alternatively, to exemplary social values such as fealty and devotion. In some late texts, the subtlety and symbolic complexity of these usages becomes extraordinary. It is for this reason that David Gordon White asserts dogs to be “the animal pivot of the human universe, lurking at the threshold between wildness and domestication and all of the valences that these two ideal poles of experience hold” (15). A striking semantic depth, range, and stratification characterize late medieval attitudes toward dogs in the Middle English corpus. In the tradition of medieval bestiaries, they serve not merely as man’s best friend, but as a palimpsest for humanity, and make up inflected tokens of human nature under the guise of another species. This is what it really means when Middle English is “putting on the dog.”

Notes

¹ See, for example, the books by Crane, Cummins, Salisbury, Steel, Walker-Meikle, and Yamamoto in Works Cited.

² In this and other sources of the *Middle English Dictionary Online*, I follow their practice of source manuscript citation, not all of which are available in modern editions. For the full text of the *Gesta Romanorum*, see *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage.

³ Plutarch's *Moralia: de Sollertia Animalium* tells the story thus: "And King Pyrrhus on a journey chanced upon a dog guarding the body of a murdered man; in answer to his questions he was told that the dog had remained there without eating for three days and refused to leave. Pyrrhus gave orders for the corpse to be buried and the dog cared for and brought along in his train. A few days later there was an inspection of the soldiers, who marched in front of the king seated on his throne, while the dog lay quietly by his side. But when it saw its master's murderers filing past, it rushed at them with furious barking and, as it voiced its accusation, turned to look at the king so that not only he, but everyone present, became suspicious of the men. They were at once arrested and when put to the question, with the help of some bits of external evidence as well, they confessed the murder and were punished" (381). The profound influence of this story may also be seen in Marie de France's *Bisclavret* (see Alison Langdon's essay in this issue) and the Middle English *Sir Tryamour* (see Harriet Hudson's essay in this issue), among other medieval tales.

⁴ Karl Steel sensitively explores the greyhound's role in configuring human values in another widely distributed medieval legend from *The Seven Sages of Rome*, wherein the dog is mistakenly assumed to be the slayer of a knight's infant heir instead of its savior (*How to Make a Human* 131-32, and especially "Ridiculous Mourning"). The sometimes fine lines of distinction between human and animal underscore the metaphorical issues I am discussing in the present article. A good all-purpose overview of dogs in the Middle Ages is Walker-Meikle's *Medieval Dogs*. A helpful social sciences source concerning all breeds of dogs is Sanders and Arluke's discussion of the anthropomorphism that has historically been associated with domestic canines as a means for analyzing human behavior through "minded cofactors, as virtual persons

whose abilities are quantitatively different, but not qualitatively different, from those of humans” (63). This qualitative similarity enables the symbolic moves discussed in the present article. It is provocatively complemented by the more philosophical perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, which finds the more monstrous implications of human affinity with animals an important means of expression for the marginalized or oppressed. In their interpretation, the human-dog affinity becomes not a simple matter of dialectic opposition, but a continuous and ever-changing maneuver of transition between species. Their line of interpretation obviously works better for stories such as “Bisclavret,” in which the same name applies to man and werewolf, than for the dog of Montargia. However, the Gawain Poet’s acknowledged complex treatment of characters and symbology invites its application to Gawain and Bertilak’s lady, as well as to the shape-changing Morgan and Green Knight, adding *frisson* to my interpretation of their story as a negotiation between human and animal states in the tale’s “green world.”

⁵ Unless otherwise cited, all references to manuscripts come from the *Middle English Dictionary* Online. For these *MED* mss. citations, I adopt the *MED* form. The *MED* also includes the following entries for the headwords *dogge* and *bicche*, given *verbatim*:

Dogge (n.) Also dog, doge, doke. Pl. dogges, doggen. [OE *docga* (only one instance) & cp. *doggene-berwe*, *-ford*, (place names). . . .]

1. (a) An ordinary dog or cure; *curre* ~; (b) as a term of abuse or contempt; a worthless or contemptible person; wretch, *cur*—also said of the Devil.

2. (a) A dog used in hunting or bearbaiting; ~ for the *boue*, a trained hunting dog; (b) a watchdog [cp. *bond-dogge*, *t(e)ie~*]; a herdsman’s dog; (c) fig. of a person: watchdog; (d) a male dog.

3. Proverbs and sayings: die as a dog; wake an old dog; two dogs over one bone; a dog returns to his vomit; etc.

4. A heavy metal clamp or brace of some kind; ~ of *iren*.

5. Cps. & combs.: (a) *dog-bold*, ?a watchdog; ?a tool [see OD *dogbolt*]; ~ *drape*, q.v.; ~ *fenel*, the plant *Anthemis cotula*, mayweed; ~ fighting, a dogfight (as a sport); ~ fish = *dogger-fish*, q.v.; also, as a transl. of *L canis marinus*, seal; ~ *flie*, a stinging insect of some kind, dogfly; ~ fox, a male fox [cp. 2 (d)]; ~ hole,

an insignificant or miserable town; ~ mouth, a dog's mouth; ~ ston, some kind of millstone; ~ tail, a dog's tail; ~ tonge, the plant *Cynoglossum officinale*, hound's-tongue; ~ toth, a cur's tooth; ~ trot, an easy pace, dogtrot; ~ wash, drowning like a dog; (b) dogges fenkel, the plant *Anthemis cotula*, mayweed; dogges grece, the fat of a dog; dogges litere, a dog's litter or bedding; dogges leden, dog's language; (c) in surnames & place names [see Smith PNElem. 1.134]; (d) dogge(s) sone, dog's son, son of a bitch. [See also band-dogge, bond ~; bocher ~; curre ~, tei(e ~, tie ~.)]

Dogged (adj. & adv.) Also dog(g)et. [From dogge.]

(a) Dog-like or currish in some respect: vicious, mean, surly, malicious, fierce; (b) adv. doggedly, viciously.

Dogged (adv.) Also -liche, doggetli. [From dogged adj. & adv.]

(a) Viciously, malignantly, fiercely; (b) terribly, cursedly.

Bicche (n.) Also biche, becche, buche, bikk. [OE bicce; cp. OI bikkja.]

1. (a) The female of the dog, a bitch; also, cur; ~ whelp, a female puppy; (b) the female of the wolf; wolf ~.

2. Used contemptuously or profanely: (a) of a woman: bitch; ~ clout; ~ daughter, nightmare; (b) of a man: cur, dog; ~ sone, son of a bitch; of bicches lines, of (heathen) dogs' descent; (c) ~ bones, cursed bones, i.e. dice.

⁶ It refers to Vincentius' torturers (*The Old English Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer* 70). The OE word "docga" is used to gloss "canis," Vincentius' metaphorical characterization of his torturer's strength. Ravens protect his corpse from vulture scavengers; dogs play no role in either action. One might assume from this mention that dogs played working rather than lapdog roles in Anglo-Saxon society, but it is difficult to build a case upon a single allusion.

⁷ Although Anglo-Norman French is out of the linguistic range of this article, readers have no doubt already recalled Marie de France's employment of the animal as bipolar werewolf and king's "lapdog" in *Bisclavret*. Further evidence of the dog's ambiguous textual status is adduced by An Smets and Baudouin van den Abeele in Resl's *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, commenting on the differing valuations of dogs in "moralizing" sources versus less religious ones: "These differences may be due to the sources authors used, as

especially biblical images carried over to Christian texts charged dogs with mainly negative stereotypes” (73).

⁸ See Jean-Claude Schmitt’s *The Holy Greyhound*.

⁹ Pont Meulent is a town in France, also mentioned in *The Paston Letters* (1422-1509).

¹⁰ For example, in *Of Arthour and of Merlin* (c. 1300) “Fele hundred Sarrazins/ He haþ wiþ him, of biches lins” (Auchinleck 8725) and “We han almost . . . / Four score þousinde,/ And Cristes grace, þat schal ous helpe,/ To kerue down ri[gh]t þe heþen welpes” (8732), *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1325): “Wit þis þai scott him als a dog/ Right vte o þair synagog” (Cotton Vespasian A.3:13658), and conversely of the Muslim point of view, *Mandeville’s Travels* (c. 1400): “Þei holden cristene men & Iewes as dogges” (Cotton Titus C.16:43/32). See also Irvn Resnick’s “Good Dog / Bad Dog” in this issue for the exegetical treatment of dogs.

¹¹ The figure of the wild man in medieval tradition continues to generate many studies: Two foundational works are Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, and Penelope Doob’s *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*.

¹² The Summoner requites Huberd, of course, by populating the anus under Satan’s doglike tail with a whole swarm of friars.

¹³ Gaston Phébus’ famous treatise was available in an early fifteenth-century Middle English translation by Edward, the Second Duke of York. And as if that were not enough, Crane also points out a possible parallel between the intimate confines of the bedroom and the relatively small enclosed parkland surrounding the moated castle, where the hunts could perhaps have occurred: “with a pyked palays pyned ful þik, / þat vmbeteþe mony tre mo þen two myle, / þat holde on þat on syde þe haþel auysed (110; Tolkien 22, 769-771). Of course, heavily contracted “baby-talk” usually addressed to pets, even if it is as “lovely” as Gaston recommends, is not exactly the same as the exquisitely inflected syntax of courtly love-speech.

¹⁴ Using Bertilak’s hunts as a chief example, Crane elaborates upon this idea in her treatment of the hunt *á force* as “instantiating human dominion over the created world, in keeping with God’s plan for humankind” (110), and as “structured so as to assert and act out the rightness of noble domination in the human social hierarchy, in analogy with the rightness of human control over animals” (118). (Or is it Morgan’s plan?) The “persistent, intimate contact” (119) between human

action and animal instinct during the hunt is certainly paralleled in the bedroom.

¹⁵ The temptation to educe symbolic connections is nonetheless hard to resist: see Rooney for examples. I have somewhat playfully proposed one more, though its original meaning is unknown, between the fox, Gawain, and the fox-fur armband worn by Lindow Man, the human sacrifice exhumed from a peat bog not far distant from the most likely locale for the Gawain Poet's court and Bertilak's Haut Desert ("Ritual Sacrifice" 78).

¹⁶ And when such women are within reach, as Harriet Hudson points out in her essay in this issue, they are often exchanged between males just as animals are, including animals exchanged between lovers. The exchanges between Bertilak and Gawain involve not only animals, but potentially Lady Bertilak herself. And the courtly convention itself often depends upon plots involving the supposed unavailability of the beloved through proscriptions of social station, marriage, or abduction.

¹⁷ The massive out-of-season slaughter of deer on the first day is not a hunt *à force*, like the following days' boar and fox hunts. While this might appear to be inconsistent with Lady Bertilak's stalking of just one quarry, it could nevertheless subtly underline the power and transgressive nature of Haut Desert's noble "Green World" society, and Gawain's initially unaware, unguarded condition.

¹⁸ Compare Walker-Meikle 109, on the conundrum of a pet's freedom and curtailment: "Pets benefited from many freedoms in interiors, as they were allowed to roam in all spaces, including sleeping quarters. They also occupied the close personal space of their owners, sitting on laps or by their feet. In exterior space, pets' freedoms were curtailed; they might be kept on a leash, restricted to an enclosed garden or held tightly in its [sic] owner's arms."

¹⁹ In fact, with regard to taking boudoir matters out of doors and "doing it in the road," there may even have been an ordinance for that in the real world outside of romance. The *Coventry Leet Book* (ca. 1525) includes mayor John Leeder's proclamation from 1421, which specifically prohibited pigs and ducks from roaming the streets and somewhat ambiguously decreed "þat no man hold no grett houndes ne byches goyng in the hy[gh]e way, up the payn of xl d. [40 pence] at euery trespass" (27). The Leet Book adds the marginal gloss "Grey-houndes," so the objectionable dogs could well be the property of gentry. The sexual connotation as opposed to merely walking or eliminating bodily

wastes is admittedly unintended by this ordinance, and it is unclear when usage of the word “go” alone began to encompass fornication. However, one cannot deny that the ordinance would necessarily cover dogs (whatever the breed) indulging in sexual congress, too.

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