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Animal Origins in Perceforest

Abstract : The animal lies at the heart of Perceforest's *representation of origins*. This article explores, with reference to Agamben's work on the circular logic which connects human and animal, a series of interrelated episodes tracing the intimate relations between the civilised and the savage in this cyclic romance. The animal is a means of figuring that which is savage and primitive, from which courtly culture wishes to distance itself. Yet the division between the animal and the human is constantly renegotiated in Perceforest: while humans can appear bestial, individual animals can be portrayed as displaying qualities more associated with the rational human.

Résumé : *Au cœur de la représentation des origines* dans le roman cyclique de Perceforest, l'animal figure ce qui est sauvage, primitif, tout ce qui menace et tout ce qui sous-tend la civilisation courtoise. Dans cet essai, nous examinons, par une lecture des théories d'Agamben, une série d'épisodes interdépendants, qui tracent les liens intimes entre l'animal et l'humain. La division entre ces deux catégories s'avère fluide, susceptible de redéfinition au cours du roman. Tandis que certains personnages humains agissent d'une façon brutale, certains animaux démontrent des qualités qu'on associe plutôt à la raison humaine.

Le Roman de Perceforest articulates a fantasy of origins¹. Tracing the history of Britain from Brutus, via Alexander, to the inception of the Arthurian epoch, it invents and instigates an illustrious past worthy of its literary and historical heritage. In this article, I shall explore the way in which the notion of origin, in relation to both the individual and the collective, is constructed in Perceforest with reference to the animal. Many depictions of the establishment of British civilisation and sovereignty in Perceforest involve encounters with animals; and several narratives of the genealogy and birth of the romance's heroes are constructed in relation to animals. The animal, I shall argue, can be seen in Perceforest as a means of representing that which is savage and primitive, from which the civilised culture wishes to distance itself. And yet, as I shall show, individual animals can be portrayed as displaying qualities more associated with the rational human. In Perceforest, the articulation of the human and the animal orchestrates a narrative about the construction of civilisation in general and the courtly culture of late medieval romance in particular. The civilised is portrayed as stemming from, and superior to, the savage; yet nature red in tooth and claw emerges and returns within the biographies of characters in this cyclic romance, and in its accounts of chivalry and courtly life.

¹ Perceforest, ed. G. Roussineau (première partie [2 vols], deuxième partie [2 vols.], troisième partie [3 vols.], quatrième partie [2 vols.], (Geneva, Droz, 1979-2001). This edition will be referred to by part and volume in the text of the article.

Attention has been drawn by Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, and other scholars responding to their work², to the way in which the category of the animal is self-reflexively human, a means of examining what it means to be human by constructing and excluding that which is labelled as not-human. The animal thereby becomes a category which is neither wholly inhuman – since it is delineated and understood via the processes of rational thought which humanity assumes for itself – nor wholly human – since it is precisely constructed as that which lies beyond or beneath the human. The animal functions as the foundation upon which humanity constructs its image of itself as distinct from, yet related to, the animal. The pun in the title of Derrida's work, *L'Animal que donc je suis*, highlights the way in which the category of the animal is positioned in relation to the human such that it is understood as a primitive, simple form of life which inevitably leads to humanity (so that « suis » comes from « suivre »), while at the same time, the idea of the animal stands at the very heart of what it means to be human (so that « suis » comes from « être »).

Derrida and Agamben focus on the ethics of separating the human from the animal, and the subsequent significance each category is accorded. Agamben's formulation of « bare life » is a classification which can be allotted to any form of life which is beyond recognition or respect as these are regulated by sovereign power. As Agamben shows, decisions about who or what is human or animal are based upon these relations between bare life and sovereign power. Agamben uses Bisclavret, the twelfth-century werewolf lai attributed to Marie de France, as an example of these relations and the decisions which result from them³. This example highlights two ideas which are crucial to my reading of *Perceforest*: first, the need for a decision reveals that the division between the human and the animal is both contingent and a matter of human judgment; and second, contemporary theoretical enquiry into the interdependence of the human and the animal has its roots in a reading of literature of the Middle Ages. As Karl Steel reminds us in his article *How to Make a Human*, « the essential role the subjugation of animals plays in human self conception [is] an inheritance from the Christian Middle Ages »⁴.

The plot of *Perceforest* is rife with individuals whose status in relation to the categories of human and animal is subject to confusion and debate, and the reader is

² The theorists and works which inform my approach in this article are J. Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis*, Paris, Galilée, 2006; G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. K. Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998. For an overview of « the question of the animal » in continental philosophy, see M. Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.

³ On Agamben and Bisclavret, see M. Griffin, « The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation: Bisclavret, Melion and Mélusine », in *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, ed. A. Damlé and A. L'Hostis, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 139-150; and E. Campbell, « Political Animals: Human / Animal Life in Marie de France's Yonec and Bisclavret », in *The Other Within: Imposing, Imposed and Self-Imposed Identities in Medieval French Narrative*, ed. A. Tudor and K. Burr, forthcoming 2013.

⁴ K. Steel, « How to Make a Human », *Exemplaria*, 20, 2008, p. 3-27 (p. 3).

invited to reflect on the proper designation of a passionate monkey, some warlike fish, a dwarf, a valiant hunchback, pregnant women, a werewolf, a bear who behaves like knight, a handsome young man who looks like a bear, and a beautiful feral girl. These are just the examples I shall discuss in detail here : in an article of this length, it is evidently impossible to mention, let alone discuss in detail, every encounter with the animal in Perceforest. Lyonnel's name and story, for instance, indicate the importance of the animal in defining identity, as do those of Le Tor. Human-animal metamorphosis punctuates the coronation of Gadifer and Bétis by Alexander (I.i, 105-9). And surely the most striking image of the alluring, menacing, monstrous hybrid is provided in Perceforest by the *Beste Glatissant*⁵. However, what I want to emphasise in this article is the way in which the fluctuating boundary between the human and animal is a subject of constant revision in Perceforest. The romance's cyclical structure means that stories of encounters between humans and animals, and the originating role of animals in the establishment of human culture and its institutions, are recast as the narrative traces the rise, fall and rise again of courtly culture in Britain.

In order to forge a link between the role of the animal in the origins of the community and those of the individual, I concentrate in this article on episodes from Perceforest which involve the connections between animality, identity and parentage. I start with a reading of the «raison» informing the experiments undertaken by the philozophe Nardan as he seeks to prove the legitimacy of the deformed yet noble knight Le Bossu de Suave. Nardan's rationale is based on the coincidence of the theses that the human is sufficiently similar to the animal yet entirely different to it. As I shall show, this rationale is unsettled when the story of Le Bossu's conception is echoed and distorted by the narrative of Le Bossu's own experience of paternity. While Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's reference to the fusion of animal and human in the definition of pure chivalric identity is initially informed by queer theory, his account of the inhuman at the heart of the exclusive institution of «Chevalerie» resonates with my argument that the animal is essential to the formulation of fantasies of origins⁶. In the second part of this article, I shall explore the way in which chivalry is explained in Perceforest with reference to animals. In the last section, I explore the animality which characterises two of the principal lineages traced in Perceforest, lineages which retrospectively establish the genealogy of earlier prose romance, and underpin a fantasised courtly ideal.

⁵ On the *Beste Glatissant* in Perceforest, see S. Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions in the Roman de Perceforest : Cultural Identities and Hybridities*, Cambridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2007, p. 55-59 ; Ch. Ferlampin-Acher, « Le monstre dans les romans des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles », in *Écritures et modes de pensée au Moyen Âge (VIII^e - XV^e siècles)*, éd. D. Boutet et L. Harf-Lancner, Paris, Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1993, p. 69-87 ; and « La peur du monstre dans le roman médiéval », *Travaux de littérature : Les grandes peurs*, vol. 2 : *L'Autre*, Genève, 2004, p. 119-134.

⁶ J. J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 35-77.

Copying Paternity

The logic which binds together the human and the animal in the scientific experiments conducted by Nardan in the first part of *Perceforest* is crucial to the argument of this article. Undertaking to prove the legitimate paternity of Le Bossu de Suave, the philozophe sets out to demonstrate that it is fear of, rather than sex with, a dwarf, which has resulted in the deformity of the son of the lord and lady of Suave. The lord of Suave refuses to believe that he could be responsible for the conception of this hunchbacked child, and accuses his wife of having slept with the dwarf whom his father-in-law gave the couple as a wedding present. Since the dwarf's stature denotes him, in medieval eyes, as sub-human and monstrous, he is never asked for his account of events: he is marked as an animal, an object of exchange and fear, rather than as a speaking subject whose opinion is worth asking⁷.

The story is told as part of Le Bossu's autobiographical account of his own conception – conception being the operative word here, since it is the very concept of a hunchback dwarf which proves more powerful than the physical prowess of Le Bossu's father in engendering Le Bossu. As Le Bossu himself says, his appearance is caused by « ung nayn boçu et contrefait, en moy pouez veoir la copie » (I.i, 418). The notion that a pregnant woman's imagination was both so strong and so impressionable that it could influence the appearance of her unborn child was common in the Middle Ages⁸. Initially, Nardan attempts to assure the lord of Suave that his wife's fear of the dwarf is to blame for their son's form by telling him a story of sheep which gave birth to spotted lambs after seeing speckled sticks, and then glosses his story as exemplary and irrefutable:

Dont je vous prouve par la grande merancolie et la paour que elle avoit de vostre nayn elle conceut de vous fruit semblant a luy, sy que vous pouvez veoir que l'ymaginacion que la femme a en concepvant sur quelque chose que ce soit est sy forte que la tendreur de la conception le sent. (I.i, 427)

The lord of Suave remains unconvinced, however, and Nardan, now under considerable pressure from the enraged husband, who is threatening to burn both wife and philozophe, designs two experiments, once more turning to the animal kingdom to provide a model for his hypothesis of Le Bossu's birth. In one experiment, a hen who incubates her eggs while looking at a sparrowhawk hatches eggs which contain chicks with sparrowhawk feathers; in the other, a rabbit in a

⁷ On dwarves in medieval romance in general, see A. Martineau, *Le nain et le chevalier. Essai sur les nains français au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003. On the medieval view of the monstrosity of small people, see D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1996, p. 111-113.

⁸ J. E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, New York-London, Routledge, 1994, p. 146; Ch. Ferlampin-Acher, « Le rôle des mères dans *Perceforest* », in *Arthurian Romance and Gender*, ed. F. Wolfzettel, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1995, p. 274-284 (p. 277); and M. Szkilnik, « "Des blancs moutons pasturans les rais du soleil". Le Paysage dans les marges du Roman de *Perceforest* », *Cahiers du Séminaire Espace / Littéraire*, 2, 1997, p. 31-54 (p. 43).

room painted with black and white rabbits gives birth to black and white rabbits. For Nardan, then, these animals are the ground, the foundation upon which human nature can be understood. When Nardan's hypothesis is vindicated, he proclaims the lady of Suave innocent :

Sire, or pouez vous veour se je vous ay dit verité. Et par ceste raison pouez vous sçavoir que vostre femme conceut l'enfant de telle faicture par la paour qu'elle eut de vostre nays en concepvant. (Li, 428)

Nardan draws attention to his anagogical logic, based on the given that animal fear and birth mirrors human fear and birth, with the collocation « par ceste raison », showing that his experiments have achieved *quod erat demonstrandum*. Yet his ability to articulate this understanding stems from his exclusively human « raison ». The reason with which Nardan proves the legitimacy of Le Bossu's paternity both distinguishes humanity from the animals who are the subjects of his experiments, and reveals humanity to be so similar to these other animals that animal behaviour can be observed in order to model, predict and understand human behaviour⁹. Humans have an animal physiology, but a rational mind: the fear experienced by the hens, rabbits and the Lady of Suave is posited on the boundary between the human and the animal.

In *The Open*, Agamben explores what he describes as the « metaphysical play of presupposition and reference, privation and supplement, between animal and man »¹⁰, in other words, humanity's preoccupation with classifying and constructing itself as distinct from, yet based upon, the animal. Agamben interrogates the Heideggerian notion that the animal is essentially incapable of conceiving of itself in relation to – being open to – the world which surrounds it, whereas the human is marked as such by its ability to understand its relation to the world and its place in it. Man recognises himself within, and yet apart from, the animals which he classifies and subjugates. This is the process at work between one of the most significant representations of the relations between humanity and other animals for the Middle Ages : Adam's dominion over and naming of the beasts in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis¹¹. It is worth noting that in the creation story related in Genesis chapter 1 animals are created before humans, whereas in chapter 2, God creates man, then the animals and then woman. This blurred hierarchy is inherited, reiterated and rewritten throughout the Christian Middle Ages¹².

⁹ On medieval animal experiments as a means of understanding creation, see P. Buellens, « "Like a Book Written by God's Finger". Animals Showing the Path toward God », in B. Resl (ed.), *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*, Oxford-New York, Berg, 2007, p. 127-151.

¹⁰ Agamben, *Open*, p. 50

¹¹ See Salisbury, *Beast Within*, p. 6-8. Steel identifies this subjugation of animals as the defining characteristic of the human in medieval representations : « Humans have a faculty animals lack, and the proof of this faculty's possession is not the ability to universalize or construct syllogisms or other such operations, but rather the ongoing human domination of animals » (p. 13).

¹² See P. de Leemans and M. Klemm, « Animals and Anthropology in Medieval Philosophy », in Resl, *A Cultural History*, p. 153-177 (p. 157-158).

The work of John Block Friedman and David Williams examines the criteria by which the precarious division between animal and human life was constructed and reconstructed in the Middle Ages¹³. The category of the monstrous – and the figure of the monster – are often deployed in order to scrutinise the defining similarities and differences between these categories¹⁴. Since St. Augustine's *City of God*, the monster has been linked to the demonstrative, via the etymological connection between *monstrum* and *monstrare*, to show, and monsters are understood as showing the will of God, which is nevertheless beyond human understanding¹⁵. As Williams puts it, « the language of the monstrous [...] points to utterances that lie beyond logic »¹⁶.

The lord of Suave accepts Nardan's « *raison* », making a neat articulation between, on the one hand, what he sees as the monstrosity of the body of the child he finally accepts as his son, and, on the other, the demonstrative logic displayed by the philozophe :

Selon ce que je sçay qu'il advint ainsy entre moy et elle du nayn et que vous m'avez monstré qu'il puet estre ainsy par bonne esprouve et belle, je tieng bien qu'elle n'a coulpe au fait. (I.i, 429)

The lord of Suave has accepted the reasoning that proposes an analogy between humans and animals via the monstrosity of his son. Although the Bossu de Suave grows up to be a gentle, noble and popular knight, at birth he is marked as monstrous not just by his disability and deformity, but also by the means by which his paternity is proved with recourse to the animal.

For Agamben the category of « human » is empty apart from the capacity to define itself: « *Homo sapiens*, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human »¹⁷; the implication is that humanity also constructs itself as uniquely able to identify and recognise what it is not¹⁸. Nardan's experiments rely on the assumption that the animals he uses are simpler, more basic versions of the human, and yet completely different from the human: the chicken and the rabbit are governed entirely by brutish fear, whereas the reason and wisdom of man enable him to intellectualise this process. However, the meticulous experimental and logical work carried out by Nardan to prove his legitimacy is troubled when Le Bossu becomes a father himself. In the second part of *Perceforest*, Le Bossu is married to a beautiful woman named Cleoffe, who has fallen in love with him because of his « *plaisance* », and with whom he has two sons, described as « *beaux* » (II.ii, 179) (later a daughter,

¹³ J. Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge MA-London, 1981; Williams, *Deformed Discourse*.

¹⁴ See C. Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York, Zone Books, 2001; Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, p. 137-166; Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 179-207; Ferlampin-Acher, « *Le monstre dans les romans* ».

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. H. Bettenson, London, Penguin, 2003, book XVI, chapter 8.

¹⁶ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Open*, p. 26.

¹⁸ On Agamben's notion of the anthropological machine, see Calarco, *Zoographies*, p. 92-95.

Gloriande, is named (II.ii, 258)). Much later in le Bossu's story, however, he is portrayed as fathering children who are disturbingly monstrous.

Telling his tale in part I, Le Bossu describes himself as a « copie » of the dwarf of whom his mother was so frightened ; and this copying is revisited – if not quite copied – later in the romance¹⁹. In the fourth part of the romance, the fear experienced by his mother when faced by the hunchbacked dwarf is rewritten as desire for Le Bossu's body experienced by a female monkey, a *singesse*, who rescues Le Bossu from an attack by her fellow monkeys. Once more, Le Bossu's tale is related in his own words, as he recounts his adventures to King Perceforest. Such was the *singesse*'s desire for Le Bossu, he recalls, that two of her four babies resembled him. Le Bossu is eager to stress that these children are not the result of a sexual encounter between himself and the *singesse* :

Encoires fut mon aventure plus merveilleuse, car tant repairay autour de celle *singesse* que, par la convoitise charnelle qu'elle avoit en ma personne tant seulement, elle engendra ne sçay par quel moien quatre petit singos, dont les deux, après ce qu'elle les eut mis sus terre, me ressembloyent assés bien. (IV.i, 66)

Sylvia Huot points out the similarities between the conception of Le Bossu and the two little singos²⁰. Although Le Bossu is portrayed as an exemplary knight elsewhere in Perceforest, there is more than a whiff of disingenuousness about his denial (« ne sçay par quel moien »), marking the significant differences between his conception and that of the baby monkeys. The way in which the « copie » of Le Bossu's own paternity is played out in this tale of the spontaneous generation of baby monkeys rewrites the logic by which Nardan proved the innocence of the Lady of Suave. Le Bossu's mother was simply frightened by the dwarf as she had sex with the Lord of Suave ; the *singesse* seems to have conceived the singos solely via her desire for Le Bossu. Thus, while Nardan's experiments, with recourse to « raison », prove that Le Bossu, despite appearances to the contrary, is not the offspring of the dwarf, the episode on the island of monkeys suggests that the baby monkeys are indeed the offspring of Le Bossu. Certainly no alternative father is mentioned as a partner for the *singesse*. The implication is, then, that if Le Bossu is a « copie » of the dwarf, it is not for the same reason that the singos are « copies » of him²¹.

Huot also remarks on the resonances with depictions of Dido and Medea evident in the the *singesse*'s enraged reaction to her abandonment by Le Bossu²². I would argue that the references to classical tales of vengeful, spurned women in the description of the *singesse*'s filicide reinforce the impression that Le Bossu is the singos' father. His horrified recollection of this episode suggests that he what he was witnessing was the murder of his own offspring :

¹⁹ On the structural significance of the practice of repetition in the narrative of Perceforest, see A. Berthelot, « Répétition et efficacité narrative dans le Roman de Perceforest », *Le Moyen Français*, 30, 1992, p. 7-17.

²⁰ Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 66.

²¹ For a fascinating reading of copying and conception in this episode, see Szkilnik, « “Des blancs moutons” », p. 42-43.

²² Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 67.

Dont me prins a regarder la malicieuse beste qui se demenoit tres laidement, dont il en avint une merveilleuse chose. Car quant elle me vey en la nef, elle prinst l'un des quates singos entre ses bras et en l'eslevant me monstroït, et sambloit qu'elle vouloit dire :

« Haa ! faulz homme, comment puez tu laisser celle quy t'a fais tant de biens comme de toy avoir preservé de mort ? » (IV.i, 67-8)

The impassioned eloquence Le Bossu imputes to the singesse portrays the monkey as at once a « malicieuse beste » and as a human, able to express revenge and fury, and to do so with recourse to (imagined, projected) language. Although her murderous acts are repellently violent, the singesse's behaviour is more than singerie : it is not portrayed as senselessly savage aping, but is characterised by a human, not to say literary, cruelty.

These mirrored stories of parentage and animality which bookend the biography of Le Bossu in *Perceforest* reveal the monstrous logic of the relationship between the human and the animal, which are both portrayed as being at once original and copy. A preoccupation with articulating a causal link between these categories is evident, yet so too is the difficulty of doing so. Le Bossu is an exemplary knight, but he is one who is haunted, in the narratives surrounding his appearance and its cause and effect, by animality and monstrosity. In the next section of this article, I want to explore the way in which the figure of the knight, the emblem of courtly culture and romance, is constructed around the animal in *Perceforest*.

Animal chivalry

The first time Le Bossu de Suave is encountered by the reader of *Perceforest* is at the very first tournament held in Britain, under the aegis of Alexander, who is attempting to civilise this wild yet once noble kingdom²³. The description of Le Bossu's physical deformity is meshed with the exaltation of his chivalric strength, strength which is being tested and defined for the very first time :

Mais de layde figure estoit, car il avoit les espauls haultes et bochues et le col court et la teste grosse et le corps court et gros, les braz longz, ossus et nervus et les jambes ossues et plaine de nerfz et si longues qu'il mectoït ses piés ensemble par dessoubz le ventre d'un grant cheval et le çaingloit si fort que, s'il n'eust a sa selle ne cengle ne poïstral, sy ne trovast on sy fort chevalier qui le peust tirer jus. (I.i, 131)

Le Bossu and his fellow knights are all able to acquit themselves well, despite all being debutants at jousting, since Alexander has only just formulated the idea of an

²³ On the importance of this tournament, see Ch. Ferlampin-Acher, *Perceforest et Zéphir. Propositions autour d'un récit arthurien bourguignon*, Genève, Droz, 2010, p. 102sq.

« esbanoy qui fut puis nommé tournoy » (I.i, 117), inspired by the memory of some remarkable fish he encountered during his marine voyages²⁴.

Il avoit veu une maniere de poissons que on appelloit chevaliers de mer, qui ont les testes façonnees a maniere de heaulme, et au dessus tenant une espee par le pumel, et par dessus le dos ung escu. La veyt le gentil roy ces poissons tournoier et batailler les ungs aux autres tant for que merveilles estoit a veoir, en donnant l'un a l'autre grans coups d'espees et occioient aucunes foiz l'un l'autre. (I.i, 116)

Bethidés encounters these fish-knights in the third part of Perceforest (III.ii, 273-85), where they display the seemingly human characteristics of speaking a language and obeying a king²⁵. If the inauguration of one of the most characteristic activities of the chivalric romance, the tournament, is predicated on Alexander's proto-scientific observations of the « chevaliers de mer », then courtly language and hierarchy, it is implied, may also be markers of civilisation which are copied from the animal kingdom.

As Cohen points out, the construction of chivalric identity is ever predicated on the fusion of man and animal. « Chevalerie » depends upon knights' intimate relation with horses, « creatures that conjoined in their own chivalric bodies flows of violence (kicking, rearing, hurling, biting) to a responsive docility »²⁶. In the conception of the chivalric ideal, both the man and the animal he rides, lives with and loves are characterised by instincts which are simultaneously noble and savage ; and this is manifested in Perceforest by the location of animal activity and animal form as the inspiration for the tournament. In the descriptions of Le Bossu and the « chevaliers de mer » I quote above, our attention is drawn to the conjunction of the chivalric and animal body : Le Bossu's body is described in detail as it fits with that of his horse, and it is impossible to distinguish the fish's scales from the accoutrements of the well-equipped human knight. The use of the « chevaliers de mer » as prototypes upon which human chivalry is modelled is a useful illustration of the circularity of the logic which characterises the way in which animality is deployed as that which both grounds, and yet is excluded from, rational humanity.

For Agamben, this difficulty of definition stems from the production of the boundary between human and animal at the centre of human identity.

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible²⁷.

²⁴ On the Alexander tradition in Perceforest, see Ch. Ferlampin-Acher, « Perceforest et le roman : “Or oyez fable, non fable, mais hystoire vraye selon la cronique” », *Études françaises*, 42, 2006, p. 39-61.

²⁵ See Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 59-63 ; Ferlampin-Acher, « Le monstre dans les romans », p. 85, and K. Steel and P. McCracken, « The Animal Turn. Into the Sea with the Fish-Knights of Perceforest », *Postmedieval*, 2.1, Spring 2011, p. 88-100.

²⁶ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, p. 49.

²⁷ Agamben, *Open*, p. 15-16.

Further, Agamben advocates an imperative and radical reassessment of the human body and soul: not just the relation between them but also what these terms might mean:

In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. What is man, if he is always the place – and at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?²⁸

The ideas that the division between the human and the animal is an essentially human and contingent production, and that this might affect our understanding of the relationship between body and soul, are played out in the transformation of Estonné into a bear by Lydoire, the Reine-Fée. Furious that Estonné, whom, along with Le Tor, she blames for her husband's wounding by a boar, has turned up in Scotland, Lydoire makes use of her learning in order to exact her revenge:

Lors ala assamblar toute la somme de sa science de nigromancie et tourna et retourna ses experimens et ses conjuracions et fist en telle maniere que Estonné, qui estoit ou prael, fur mué en semblance d'un ours a la veue de tous ceulx qui le regardoient, et luy mesme le cuida estre vrayement et eut en luy grant partie de la nature d'un ours. (II.i, 322)

Whereas Nardan's experiments relied on one of aspect the similarities and separation between human and animal, Lydoire's « science » and « experimens » provoke another: Estonné looks to others like a bear, believes himself to be one, and has acquired a fair amount of ursine « nature »²⁹.

The bear becomes the pet of Blanche, Lyrioie and Priande, to his delight:

Sy en estoit la beste lie a merveille, qui plus de sens avoit que ce que elle fust beste naturelle, combien que l'enchantement de la royne luy en eust tollu la plus grant partie. (II.i, 325)

Both Estonné's body and soul (the latter of which might be understood by « nature » and « sens » in the quotations above) are marked by both the human and the animal. In Agamben's terms, his identity is riven with the « inimate caesura », the suture which divides and joins the animal and human, in a line which transects both body and soul. The bear is again described as being in possession of « sens » when he almost loses it through rage at the sight of his three owners being attacked by evil,

²⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁹ On this transformation, see D. Delcourt, « Magie, fiction et phantasme dans le Roman de Perceforest: pour une poétique de l'illusion au Moyen Âge », *Romanic Review*, 85, 1994, p. 167-177, and Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 49-50.

rapacious knights descended from the maleficent Darnant : « il fut si courroucié que a pou qu'il n'yssoit du sens » (II.i, 326). This near-departure from his « sens » is triggered by a civilised, not to say chivalrous, response : that of a need to defend women from rape³⁰. His furious and fatal attack on the knights is all the more remarkable because he uses their own swords and shields against them. In another configuration of animal body and chivalric equipment, the bear is described as wielding a sword in « la dextre pate » (II.1, 327). Gadifer and Lydoire are faced with the extraordinary sight of a beast using chivalric weapons to defeat knights who were in thrall to their base, brutal instincts :

Sy en avoit le roy et la royne tresgrant merveille comment telle beste, qui est rude et pesant de sa nature, se puet ne scet si bien deffendre ne soy sçavoir si bien couvrir de l'escu ne ferir de l'espee. (II.i, 327)

But this beast is not entirely « rude et pesant de sa nature », as we see when the victorious bear « prist a mugier aussi qu'il vouldist dire : “Ay je bien fait ?” » (II.i, 328) : it is hard to miss the similarity between this imputed speech and that which Le Bossu imagines the singesse delivers as she slays her own children. Once more, a human emotion is expressed through inferred language : the singesse and the bear are construed as possessing human emotion and human speech by their human spectators.

Delcourt and Huot both remark on the similarity between the story of Estonné's transformation and that of Bisclavret³¹. Like Estonné, the werewolf in Bisclavret becomes a pet of the court, reacting with violence and fury only when he is faced with sexual misconduct as it is defined by the rules of the court : the werewolf bites off the nose of his adulterous wife and Estonné defends his beloved Priande and her companions from would-be rapists. The Perceforest author would almost certainly have been familiar with werewolf lais such as Bisclavret and Melion, and we may well see a *clin d'œil* in their direction in Blanche's initial reaction to glimpsing the « sy laide beste » that Estonné has become :

Je croy que ce soit le viel bon homme qui repaire en la cuisine de ceans, que l'en dit qu'il est leu waroux par nuyt. (II.i, 323)

It is, of course, no elderly kitchen hand-cum-werewolf that the frightened young women glimpse from their window, but a very different rank of man who has been transformed into a beast. This fleeting mention reminds us that Perceforest deems only a certain rank of human – even in animal appearance – worthy of narrative attention. A lycanthropic kitchen-hand may be seen by courtiers as « rude [...] de sa nature » in both wolf and human form. By contrast, the bear is worthy of attention and narrative because it acts like a knight : indeed it is much more chivalrous – both in motivation and swordsmanship – than the knights it defeats.

³⁰ For the significance of the prohibition of rape in the founding of the civilisation in Perceforest, see Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 73-78.

³¹ Delcourt, « Magie, fiction et phantasme », p. 168 ; Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 51-52.

Along with the alteration in his « nature » and his appearance in the eyes of others, Estonné's transformation by Lydoire also results in a change in his name :

Mais sur toute riens l'ours sievoit Priande et avoit chier sa compaignie, dont tous ceulx de l'ostel l'appelloient Priant et a tel nom il venoit et non par autre. (II.i, 325)

The pet bear is named for the young woman to whom he is already betrothed, and whom he discovered earlier in this the second part of *Perceforest* with Gadifer in the Scottish wilderness :

Ilz regardent avant ou parfont de la prairie et voient qu'il y avoit vaches domestez et couroient entre elles enfans de .X. ans et de .XII. tous nudz, fors qu'ilz estoient envelopez de peaulx de moutons. « Par ma foy, dist le roy, je voy enfans entre ces bestes qui sont en celle prairie ». (II.i, 5).

Gadifer's pronouncement implies that it is so difficult to tell apart animal and human life that the words of the sovereign need to intervene in order to make this distinction. Estonné scoops up one of these feral children, substitutes his own cloak for her sheepskin garment, and takes her back to Lydoire at court. The queen names the savage child as a reminder that the people of Scotland are descended from Priam's sister, yet themselves seem to have forgotten their illustrious Trojan heritage : « je l'ay appellee depuis Priande a la recommendacion de sa lignie, qui ne fait pas a oublier » (II.i, 21)³². Priande's transformation into a young lady of the court might be seen as the inverse of the transformation Lydoire works upon Estonné : both transformations transgress the border between animal and human, civilised and savage, but in different directions – yet both are consistently marked by the intimate caesura.

Of course, Priant is a much more suitable name for a knight than Estonné. The mutation between a heroic bear named after a Trojan king and a knight with Trojan origins, whose name refers to a rather undignified state of befuddlement, encapsulates the way in which the divisions and overlaps between human and animal are configured throughout *Perceforest*. In the first part of the romance, Estonné's peculiar name is glossed :

Et sachiez que Estonné, a qui le nom venoit de sa nature, se deffendoit si estonneement qu'il n'y regardoit ne sens ne catel, car il frappoit sur eulx sy habandonneement qu'il ne luy challoit ou. (I.i, 177)

Since name and « nature » are explicitly connected in this description it is quite appropriate that, when one changes, the other follows suit³³. The *Perceforest* author continues the play on Estonné's name in the second part of the romance : when Priant the bear is fighting the sons of Darnant, for example, he is dealt such a blow by one of them « que l'escu ala feindre sur la teste de l'ours si dur qu'il en fut

³² On colonisation via naming, see Huot, *Postcolonial Fictions*, p. 31-32.

³³ On the possible etymology of Estonné's name, see Ferlampin-Acher, *Perceforest et Zéphir*, p. 22-23.

tout estonné » (II.i, 327). The bear is « tout estonné » in the sense that he is momentarily stunned by this assault, but also in the sense that he is acting entirely in the way that Estonné the knight would act. Conversely, in his human form, Estonné is repeatedly dazed and confused by Zéphir's tricks. When Lydoire restores him to human appearance, Estonné believes himself to be waking from a dream, and his bewildered mutterings as he comes round reveal a division within his identity: he addresses himself in the second person, wondering: « Qui es tu? N'es tu pas Estonné? » (II.i, 329). « Estonné » could be read here as a proper noun or an adjective, and Estonné's question voices uncertainty as to his own name or his dazed mental state. When Estonné and Le Tor encounter the « pilier Estonné », on which is depicted in detail the events he believed he dreamt, both knights are so stunned that they are almost oblivious to the arrival of Lydoire, Blanchette, Lyriope, Priande and their entourage, as well as challenges issued to them by two knights. These latter knights, indignant at being ignored, knock Estonné and Le Tor from their horses, and it is only the shock of this which brings them round, « tous estonnez du cheoir » (II.ii, 13). Once more, the encounter with his animal avatar leads Estonné to an interrogation of his chivalric identity.

Wild maternity

If the effect of Estonné's transformation on his « nature » and mental state is articulated in his own name, then its physical repercussions are seen in both the name and body of Ourseau, the child conceived the very night on which Lydoire conjures Estonné's ursine appearance. In a manner reminiscent of Le Bossu's mother and the singesse³⁴, the physical appearance of Lydoire's child is formed via her sense of sight. Lydoire is « lye quant elle veyt qu'elle fut venue a son entente, car elle veoit aler le chevalier a maniere d'un ours » (II.i, 323). The reiterated references to sight reveal that Lydoire's illusory magic is so convincing that the sight of this knight influences the appearance of her own offspring³⁵.

When Ourseau is first encountered in Perceforest, the terms in which he is described are reminiscent of the depiction of Priande when she is first spotted by Estonné. Twelve Roman knights, riding through a « mout estrange forest », encounter a young boy:

Mais il estoit merueilleux a regarder, car il estoit tout nud sans aucunes vestures [...]. Et sachiés que tout son corps estoit aussi pelu comme un ours, mais tant estoit le poil qu'il avoit sus lui jansne et de couleur reluisant ainsy comme se c'eust esté fin or brunty. (IV.ii, 527)

Like Priande, he is naked, and his wild appearance stands in contrast to his shining golden hair; like Priande, Ourseau is taken from his wild habitat (where his foster mother is so poor and savage that she wears only a « peau de mouton » (IV.ii, 530)), to be civilised. He enters the service of a senator, marries the senator's daughter and fathers twelve sons, one of whom, also called Ourseau, « estoit pelus comme son

³⁴ On the connections between Le Bossu and Ourseau, see Ferlampin-Acher, *Perceforest et Zéphir*, p. 111sq.

³⁵ See Ferlampin-Acher, « La Peur », p. 129.

pere et tresbon chevalier » (IV.i, 650), and goes to Britain to trace his family roots. When he finally finds his grandmother, the conversation between them functions as a retrospective summary of many of the events of *Perceforest* (IV.ii, 988-98), and the anticipation carefully signalled by the narrative voice in the episode of Estonné's transformation and Ourseau's conception is finally realised.

Sy fait l'ystoire mencion de sa conception cy endroit affin qu'il souviengne a ceulx qui orront l'ystoire cy après de ceste aventure pour le damoiseil qui estoit encores enherbé et enchanté. (II.i, 323)

Priande and the elder Ourseau, then, are linked by the association of their names with Estonné's transformation, and also mirror one another in the trajectories their biographies trace from origins in the uncivilised wilds to a civilising transformation which reflects their genealogy. And, like the mothers of Ourseau and Le Bossu, Priande also experiences an extreme vision which will mark her offspring for life. Giving birth to Passelion, Priande has a prophetic dream about Estonné's death. She screams to her as-yet-unborn child to avenge her as-yet-undead husband's murder.

Commença a dire tout hault, aigrement et piteusement : « Tenés le traître Bruiant qui a occis mon mary ! » Et sachiés qu'elle demena tant cel horrible et haultain cry que les dames d'entour elle en eurent pitié et horreur. (IV.i, 158)

The women who attend the birth act as a surrogate audience, bearing witness to Priande's cries of labour-pain, which are indistinguishable from her cries of grief at her husband's prefigured death, and are echoed by cries of anger from her still as-yet-unborn son, from within his mother's womb. As soon as Passelion enters the world (breaking through his dead mother's chest in his haste to be born) Lyriope tells him of he need to avenge his father's foretold death; but this is somewhat unnecessary, since Passelion is grasping a bow and arrow, fashioned from the his mother's « char nerveuse » (IV.i, 160), ready to do so as soon as possible. Passelion's strange birth therefore nuances Cohen's account of the heterogeneity of the chivalric body, and recalls the uncanny, originary chevaliers de mer. In both these cases, the chivalric body is not overlaid with arms and armour: these are formed from flesh itself³⁶.

Priande's cries of pain and terror are much wilder than the growling of Priant the bear or the chattering of the singesse, both of which are interpreted by their human interlocutors as voicing human emotion. The « horrible et haultain cry » Priande utters echoes the way in which she is heard to « crier ainsi que s'elle fust hors du sens » and her « maniere de parler descongneu » (II.i, 6) when first snatched by Estonné. Her voice seems to hark back to her savage childhood whilst anticipating her son's and husband's future. Although her first appearance in *Perceforest*, as a feral, dishevelled girl, is in some ways diametrically opposed to her last scene, in which she appears as a courtly lady preoccupied with the continuation

³⁶ Ferlampin-Acher notes the similarity of Passelion's birth to that of Athena (« Le rôle des mères », p. 279).

of her doomed husband's lineage, Priande's voice marks her as the savage creature as which she started.

The cyclic patterning of origin and descent in Perceforest is such that I will finish this article where I began, with the figure of the frightened mother : just as Priande's cries recall her brutish beginnings, the lady of Suave's fear is read by Nardan as equating her to the rabbits, sheep and chickens he uses to prove his wisdom. In both cases, the pregnant woman is presented in terms which frame her as an animal : the division between human and animal can be deployed to represent some humans as more animal than others. As I have shown in this article, wild children, rapacious knights, hunchbacks and dwarfs are also categories of the human which can be viewed in the Perceforest as partaking of the animal. This classification of some groups as sub-human can be seen as a product of the intimate caesura which runs through humanity's understanding of its relationship to the animal. The animal is displaced from the dominant discourse, which gets to define male, able-bodied people as the human norm from which diversions are conceived of as monstrous.

This displacement is at work in Le Bossu's father's stubborn refusal to read his son's body as a product of his own, and his conviction that it must be the sign of his wife's infidelity.

Seigneurs, je n'en feray riens, car, combien que vous dictes que tesmoignaige ne court pas contre elle, sy ne puet il estre par nature que homme de telles faictures que je suy engendrer puist en telle dame comme elle est telle creature qu'elle a apporté sur terre, et bien appert aux faictures que il a que le nayn de ceans l'engendra. (I.i, 425)

In other words, it is an affront to the bodily perfection of himself and his wife – but especially of himself – that their union could have produced an offspring of this kind. What the lord of Suave seeks to occlude from his view of his marriage is his own animal savagery, the reckless, heedless desire he had for his wife when he returned home from accompanying his father-in-law back to his domain. Despite his wife's fear that the dwarf will come into their chamber, and her repeated requests that he close the door to keep the dwarf out, the lord of Suave is too intent on having sex with his wife to listen to her protestations : if Le Bossu's mother's fearful fixation on the dwarf is responsible for his appearance, his father's precipitate behaviour exacerbates this.

Conclusion

In Perceforest, animals are fabricated as causes or origins for human behaviour or identity : Ourseu's appearance ; the practice of tournaments ; British kingship. But these animals' retrospective construction means that they are can never be entirely non-human or separate, since they are the product of human fantasies. The definition of an individual as legitimate and legible in the newly-re-civilised Britain of the Perceforest depends upon the construction and disavowal of

the retrospectively posited animal. In the cyclical structure of *Perceforest*³⁷, genealogies are traced, history anticipated and repeated, and the crucial role of the animal in constructing origins is recast as the narrative of these origins is rewritten. Thus Le Bossu's encounter with the singesse rewrites the relationship between the human and animal as it is figured in the story of his own conception ; Estonné's ursine escapades shed light not just on the grounds of his own chivalric identity but also the wild origin and appearance of Ourseu ; Estonné's relationship with Priande is haunted throughout by animality, as her death scene recalls the capture which initiated her absorption into the Scottish court and British history. The retrospective articulation of the stories of Le Bossu and Ourseu also draws our attention to *Perceforest*'s essential cyclicity : they bear witness to the way in which the romance rewrites an embedded past to explain the present and anticipate a future.

Perceforest responds to and builds upon the tradition of earlier prose romance, both in content and form. It constructs a pre-history for the Arthurian world it inherits, articulating this pre-history in relation to the wildness represented by animality in general, and a set of individual animals in particular. It might be argued that this is especially revealing in a reading of *Perceforest* since this is a romance which purports to recount the founding of a particularly influential manifestation of humanity : the European courtly ideal³⁸. This ideal is portrayed as emerging from a fusion of history and pre-history : documented (if not verifiable) records are retold against a fantasised wild landscape, in which only an anxious distinction can be made between people and animals.

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³⁷ See J. Taylor, « The Sense of a Beginning. Genealogy and Plenitude in Late Medieval Narrative Cycles », *Transtextualities : Of Cycles and Cyclicity in Medieval French Literature*, S. Sturm-Maddox and D. Maddox (eds), Binghamton-New York, SUNY, 1996, p. 93-124.

³⁸ In her most recent book on *Perceforest*, *Perceforest et Zéphir*, Ch. Ferlampin-Acher argues that this romance precisely represents the expression of the particular image and ideal propagated by the Burgundian court of Philippe le Bon.