CHAPTER 1

HOW TO MAKE A HUMAN

I.

“Elles were Beest Lich to Man”:
Dominance, Human Reason, and Invocations
of Likeness in Sidrak and Bokkus

Sidrak and Bokkus is a 12,000-line metrical encyclopedia in which the
philosopher Sidrak answers the questions of King Bokkus. Translations
into Danish, Dutch, and Italian survive, as do more than seventy manu-
scripts of the French original, which was written no earlier than 1291, and
several manuscripts of English verse and prose translations. Its question-
and-answer structure is common among medieval encyclopedias, such
as the Prose Salernitan Questions and Honorius of Autun’s Elucidarium,
although, unlike these, Sidrak and Bokkus does not organize its entries in
any particular order.1 Sidak and Bokkus’s questions consider the nature
of God, angels, precious stones, celestial bodies, eschatology, and natural
events such as thunder or earthquakes. Other questions advise on mar-

1. Brian Lawn, ed., The Prose Salernitan Questions: An Anonymous Collection deal-
ing with Science and Medicine written by an Englishman c. 1200 with an Appendix of Ten
Related Collections (London: Oxford University Press, 1979); and also Honorius of Autun’s
Elucidarium (PL 172: 1109A–1176D). For the roots of this genre, see Annelie Volgers and
Claudio Zamagni, eds., Erotapokriseis: Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature
in Context. Proceedings of the Utrecht Colloquium, 13–14 October 2003 (Leuven: Peters,
2004); and the classic treatment in Heinrich Dörrie and Hermann Dörries, “Erotapokriseis,”
Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum 6 (1966): 342–70.
riage, social conduct, and warfare. A great many others resolve binaries into hierarchies—men over women, the soul over the body—to determine the proper relationships among humans, between humans and the rest of Creation, and most importantly between humans and their Creator. On none of these points does *Sidrak and Bokkus* break new ground. Built from the common material of medieval Christian doctrine, its only distinguishing features are its length, popularity, and its frequent consideration of animals. All these factors make it an ideal work for illustrating how doctrinal Christianity defined and defended the human in the Middle Ages.²

At one point, *Sidrak* poses the question “Siþen we of Goddis liknesse be, / Whi mowen we not doo as did he?” (Since we have God’s likeness, why can’t we do as he did?; 2787–88). The answer demonstrates both the pedagogical purpose of the question and the anxiety that the paired question and answer were meant to quell: in this case, the answer concludes that although humans “mowen not neuerþelesse / Be as stronge and as wijs as” (might not nevertheless be as strong as wise as; 2806–7) God, they are still “worpi to þat blis” (worthy of that bliss; 2816) of spending eternity with God in heaven. Clearly, *Sidrak*’s worry is less about human likeness to God than about whether humans can ultimately escape death. To arrive at this point, *Sidrak* might have employed any number of doctrinal proofs, perhaps by arguing for the immortality of the rational soul, or by recalling God’s particular solicitude for humans, evidenced in the special attention humans received during creation; the incarnation and crucifixion, meant to rescue humans from Adam’s guilt; or even, tautologically, the human resurrection itself. Instead, *Sidrak* proves human immortality by remembering that humans subjugate animals.

For, as soon as it poses the question of human likeness to God, *Sidrak* responds:

To Goddis liknesse we ben dight:
Perfore he haþ ʒouen vs might
Aboue eche oþer creature

---

². T. L. Burton, ed., *Sidrak and Bokkus: A Parallel-Text Edition from Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 559 and British Library, MS Lansdowne 793*, 2 vols., EETS o. s. 311, 312 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Burton’s introduction discusses genre, manuscripts, and sources. I will be quoting from the Lansdowne manuscript, which is the lengthier of the two. Apart from their differences in length, the Lansdowne and Laud versions are largely the same for the points discussed here. Both manuscripts date from the second half of the fifteenth century. Although the encyclopedia begins with a narrative of the philosopher converting the king to Christianity, in the encyclopedia itself, the two names function only as designators for “question” and “answer.” Henceforth I refer to *Sidrak and Bokkus* as *Sidrak*, identifying the “characters” as “question” or “answer” if necessary.
We are made in God’s likeness: therefore, he has given us might over every other creature that he made here; and because of that likeness, we know all earthly things. We can work diligently and profit, and know good deeds from sin; we can take all creatures and make them servants to us; and all other things here that are not made in God’s likeness have no knowledge nor any might to do all the things that we do here, nor may they command us, as we command them every day.

Sidrak’s division of sentient worldly life into the two categories “human” and “animal” is of course as much a commonplace as is its ranking of humans above animals. So too is the importance Sidrak places on human reason for distinguishing between human and animal. Participating in a Western philosophical tradition that, as Richard Sorabji argues, originates with Aristotle, Christian thinkers as diverse as the foundational Augustine and the ninth-century court scholar John Scottus Eriugena, whose Periphyseon would repeatedly be condemned as heretical, think much the same thing on reason, humans, and animals: “Animals do not laugh or make jokes, but that is not the highest human activity; nor do animals seek fame.

3. Unsurprisingly, the definition of the category “reason” was subject to much debate in medieval Christian doctrine and philosophy. For a wider consideration of the various definitions of this term, particularly in its polemical uses, see Gilbert Dahan, “L’usage de la ratio dans la polémique contre les juifs,” in Diálogo filosófico-religioso entre cristianismo, judaísmo e islamismo durante la edad media en la Península Ibérica: actes du colloque international de San Lorenzo de El Escorial 23–26 juin 1991, ed. Horacio Santiago-Otero (Turnhout: Brepols, 1994), 289–94.

and glory and power, but our desire for these does not make us better than
animals. The difference is in reason”; 5 “For it is precisely this that is man’s
difference from the other animals, that he possesses reason, just as it is their
difference from him that they do not.” 6 John of Salisbury’s argument in his
Metalogicon for the distinctiveness of humans among all other mortal life
neatly encapsulates the tradition:

Although brute animals have a certain power of discernment, whereby they
select their food, shun snares, leap across precipitous places, and recognize
relationship, still, they do not reason, but are rather moved by their natural
instincts. . . . [At Creation] God, breathing life into man, willed that he
partake of the divine reason. The soul of man, which comes from, and will
return to God, alone contemplates divine truths. This prerogative is, in fact,
almost man’s sole claim to preeminence over other animals. 7

Like the Metalogicon, Sidrak binds the human monopoly of reason in this
world to the uniquely human assurance of immortality and speaks of human
“knowledge” as so extraordinary that, were it not for angels, demons, and
God, the phrase “human knowledge” might be understood as pleonastic.

The complex of capabilities encompassed by knowledge in Sidrak
includes moral knowledge of the distinction between “almesdede” (good
deeds) and “synne” (sin), and, in addition, the potential to “know . . . alle
þinges þat in earthe be” (know all earthly things; 2792). Whatever animals
know how to do, they fall short of human capabilities, for they “haþ no
knowing ne might þerto / to do al þing þat we here do” (have no knowledge
nor any might to do all the things that we do here; 2801–2). Sidrak’s off-
kilter comparison of animal knowing to human action implies that animal
irrationality bars them from far more than thinking abstractly or meditating
on divinity. What “we here do” may include good deeds and the compiling
of encyclopedias, but in this answer it primarily means subjugation:
because animals “kunne” (know) less than humans—and “kunne” encom-
passes both “knowing how” and ability, “being able to”8—animals “ne

5. Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN:
Hackett, 1993), 69.
6. John Scottus Eriugena, Periphyseon (The Division of Nature), trans. John O’Meara
8. See MED, s.v., “cŏnnen” (v.), definitions 1–5, especially 1, “to have ability, capability,
or skill,” and definition 3, “to have mastery of (a skill), be versed or competent in (a craft,
occupation, activity).”
Animal ignorance delivers them to human domination while protecting humans from being dominated in turn by animals. But animal ignorance does more than this: confronted with their own worldly weakness, confronted with the certainty of death, humans recall their domination of animals and find in this domination a guarantee of human rationality and immortality.

In making this argument, Sidrak joins a Christian tradition given voice in, among other works, Hugh of St. Victor’s commentary on the Pentateuch, which observes, “sicut Deus hominibus, ita homo animalibus dominatur” (just as God rules over man, so does man rule over animals; PL 175:37D), and the Pentateuch commentary of pseudo-Bede, which likewise states, “homo autem ad imaginem Dei factus dicitur secundum interiorem hominem, ubi est ratio et intellectus; non propter corpus, sed illam potestatem Dei, qua omnibus animantibus imperat ” (man is said to be made in the image of God according to his interior, where there is reasoning and understanding, but not in his body, except for that power of God by which he commands all living things; PL 91:200D). Both commentaries echo a key interpretation of medieval Christianity’s foundational statement of human uniqueness and animal degradation, Genesis 1:26—“And He said: Let Us make man to Our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth,” glossed as follows in Augustine’s Literal Commentary on Genesis:

At this point we must also note that God, after saying “Our image,” immediately added, “And let him have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air” and the other irrational animals. From this we are to understand that man was made to the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses [antecellit] the brute beasts. This is, of course, his reason or mind or intelligence, or whatever we wish to call it.11

9. The Lansdowne manuscript omits the “we”; the Laud manuscript reads “as we doo hem every day” (1756).


Augustine relies on the human domination of animals to prove human rational distinctiveness in at least in two other places. In his *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, he poses the question “What Proof is There that Men are Superior to Animals,” and answers, “Among the many ways in which it can be shown that man is superior to animals by virtue of his reason, this is clear to all: animals can be domesticated and tamed by men, but men not at all by animals.” In his dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will* Augustine considers the relationship between reason and dominance more thoroughly. To prove that humans can choose to follow or not to follow the Eternal Law, he must prove that humans possess reason. He might have pointed to human laughter, architecture, or self-restraint. Instead, he veers away from a direct proof by first considering animal irrationality:

We often see animals that have been tamed by human beings. I don’t mean just their bodies; their spirits too are so much under human control that they obey a human will by a kind of instinct and habit. Do you think that there is any way that a wild animal, however strong or ferocious, however keen his senses, could in turn attempt to subdue a human being? Even though it could destroy a body by stealth?

His interlocutor admits that animals are animate, and then adds, “there is something that is present in our souls in virtue of which we are superior, which is lacking in their souls, thus allowing them to be subdued by us. It is obvious to anyone that it is something of considerable importance. What

---


13. Augustine, *Free Choice*, 13. For other, later versions of such an argument, see Neil Cartlidge, ed. and trans., *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 773–88, where the nightingale, to dismiss the importance of the owl’s strength, argues that her clever song is like the force of human reason, which can subdue all animals, no matter how strong or swift; and Adelard of Bath, *Conversations with His Nephew: On the Same and the Different; Questions on Natural Science; and, On Birds*, ed. and trans. Charles Burnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *Questions on Natural Science*, Section 15, which explains that humans, despite lacking horns or great strength or swiftness, master other animals: “For he has that which is much better and more worthy than these—I mean reason, by which he excels the very brute animals so much that they are tamed by it, and, once tamed, bridles are put on them, and once bridled, they are put to various tasks.” Burnett’s note, 230 n27, links Adelard’s argument to Cicero, *De re publica* III.2, and Lactantius, *De opificio Dei* III, 16–19. For other early articulations, see Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.8.7–8, and Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogy* 3.12, quoted and discussed in Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 19 and 37.
better name for that than ‘reason’?” Augustine applauds the efficiency of this answer. Augustine might instead have pointed out that animals cannot write treatises on free will; he might have referenced physiological arguments against animal reason common in ancient natural history; he might have considered animals or humans in isolation from one another. Instead, for Augustine, humans and animals can each be understood as such only in relation to the other, specifically, in a relation in which humans naturally dominate all animals. From this relationship of domination, Augustine infers that humans, unlike animals, have reason and therefore know they are alive, which in turn allows humans to know the eternal law, which, finally, allows humans to choose to follow or abandon it. Although the keystone of Augustine’s entire argument is the human subjugation of animals, his logic is at best flimsy: the invisible capacity through which humans dominate animals apparently stronger than they are need not be honored with the name “reason.” Whatever this capacity is, through it humans degrade animals and elevate themselves, and through this humans name, distribute, or deny capabilities as they like, condemning animals to a merely mortal existence, meant only for human use, while claiming immortality for themselves.

Sidrak simply restates the Augustinian point more explicitly. Animal servitude is human certainty. This is true to such a degree that in this tradition animal servitude may be understood as the cause of human uniqueness. To recapitulate Sidrak’s explanation, since humans were made in God’s likeness:

> Therefore he haþ ʒouen vs might
> Aboue eche oper creature
> ʒat he made here forto dure;
> And for ʒat liknesse so knowe we
> Alle þinges ʒat in erthe be. (2790–94)

Therefore, he has given us might over every other creature than he made here; and because of that likeness, we know all earthly things.

Capabilities that the French original, Sydrac le philosophe, presents in a list the translation presents in what might be understood as a causal rela-

---

15. The French version of this passage in *Sidrak* reads: “Le roi demande: Puis que nos somes fait a la semblance de Dieu, por qoi ne poons nos faire comme il fait? Sydrac respon: Voirement Dieu nos a fait a sa semblance, et por ce nos a il doné seignorie sur toutes autres creatures que il fist et que totes nos facent reverence et sont a nostre commandement. Et por cele meesme semblance connoissons nos les choses qui sont et ont esté et seront, et si coinnois-
tion. The function of the clause “for þat liknesse” (because of that likeness) is enigmatic: “liknesse” may indicate a general resemblance to God, which includes both the capacity to dominate and, as rational creatures, to know all earthly things; or “liknesse” may reference God’s “might” over creatures specifically, which consequently—“for þat liknesse so” (because of that likeness [to God’s domination of his creation], therefore)—results in the human possession of reason. This may indeed be overreading, but even if Sidrak only implies, through its muddled translation, that the human domination of animals causes rather than just demonstrates human rationality, it nonetheless organizes the passage to assert that human rational uniqueness would be unrecognizable without animal subjugation.

Sidrak supports its human system through several forceful arguments for the total availability of animals to humans for slaughter and consumption. It avers that “Fruit in erþe and fleisshe in lond / And fisshe in water, þoruz his sond, / To mannes nede is ordeined al / And þerby he lyue shal” (fruit on earth and flesh on land, and fish in water, through [God’s] dispensation, is all meant for man’s need, and thereby he shall live; 3617–20) and, in two other entries, makes the same argument at greater length. When it asks, “Is it any synne a man to ete / Al þing þat he may get?” (is it a sin for man to eat anything that he can obtain?; 6771–72), its answer has the implicit support of traditional Christian exegesis of the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” and of Genesis 9:2–4, in which God grants Noah and his descendants the right to kill and eat animals. Augustine established the foundational exegesis of the Sixth Commandment by declaring that the commandment applies to neither plants nor animals, and Bede’s Hexaemeron the foundational exegesis of Genesis 9:2–4 by explaining that God gave humans domination over animals but “profecto esse super homines prohibit” (surely it is forbidden to be over men; PL 91: 107A): from this insight, he develops a theory of right rule, without ever pausing, as did some commentators, to question whether present-day humans should follow the diet of Noah and his flood-weakened...
family. For its part, Sidrak explains:

> He made him [that is, humanity] lord of alle þise
> Hem to putte in his seruise
> And forto vse hem to his fode.
> For God made alle þinges gode
> And sithen he ʒaf hem leue þertil,
> He doth no synne, me þinke by skil,
> Þat of alle þinges eteth
> In mesure as he it geteth.
> For what he eteþ wiþ good wille,
> It may neuere do him ille,
> Þogh it were addre or snake. (6779–89)

He made humanity lord of all this to put them in his service and to use them as food. For God made all things good, and since he gave them permission to use them, no one sins, I think for this good reason, who eats in moderation whatever he obtains. For whatever he eats with good will never do harm to him, even though it were an adder or a snake.

Sidrak’s injunction that humans should eat “wiþ good wille” recalls a Christian limitation on meat-eating repeated at least since Augustine, namely that one must eat with gratitude and proper regard for one’s creator.

17. For a few of Bede’s inheritors, see Gregory the Great, Moralia 21.15, PL 76: 203C–204A, and Jonas of Orleans, De institutione laici 2.22, PL 106:213D. Peter Comestor’s Historia Scholastica, a twelfth-century doctrinal compendium surviving in more than 800 manuscripts, sees meat-eating as a concession to human weakness and the weakness of the world more generally: “ferunt enim vigorem terre ac fecunditatem longe inferiorem esse post diluvium. Unde esus carnium homini concessus est post diluvium, cum antea fructibus terre victitaret” (for they say that the vigor and fertility of the soil were greatly reduced after the Flood, for which reason the eating of meat was granted to mankind after the flood, when before he had lived on the fruits of the earth; PL 198: 1082C). For another, earlier expression of this widespread opinion, see Alcuin of York’s Opusculum Primum, which poses questions and provides answers to a number of doctrinal cruxes: “Inter. Cur esus carnium post diluvium homini conceditur et non ante? Resp. Propter infecunditatem terrae, ut aestimatur, et hominis fragilitatem” (Question: “Why was the eating of meat allowed to humanity after the flood and not before?” Response: “Because of the infertility of the earth, as is thought, and the fragility of humanity”; PL 100:516C). Although humans may have been vegetarian before the Flood, they still dominated animals; e.g., the Historia scholastica on Lamech’s accidental killing of Cain while hunting, which explains that Lamech hunted “pro delectatione tantum, et usu pellium, quia non erat usus carnium ante diluvium” (only for pleasure, and for the use of the hides, since flesh was not used before the Flood; PL 198: 1079C). For further discussion, see Jack Pearl Lewis, A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 110–19.
No thought is to be spared for the animal, except insofar as the animal’s death reaffirms the human relationship to God. The range of God-given killing and eating includes even poisonous serpents, which suggests the legitimacy of eating any animal, no matter how repugnant or dangerous. When Sidrak later reviews the question from a medical, rather than moral, perspective (10431–45), it does restrict the diets of sick people, but only for the duration of their illness. Once again, so long as the meat is eaten in moderation, and so long as the eater is in good health, all “was for manis mete / And al is holsom for to ete” (all was [made] for food for man, and all is wholesome for eating; 10435–36) and “to his kynde noon outrage make” (will not harm his nature; 10438), which is to say, it could harm humans morally if they ate it with the wrong intention. Sidrak’s commitment to virtually unlimited consumption of animals contrasts, for example, with the dietetic analysis of Hildegard of Bingen’s Physica, which catalogs animals, considers their edibility, and denies those with noxious flesh—piglets, crows, and horses, among others—to human eaters. Although Sidrak’s catalog of monstrous races and foreign rites implicitly condemns the human consumption of dogs and cats (3874), nowhere does it address the Christian proscriptions of hippophagy, and the two entries on human meat-eating explicitly forbid humans no meat. Furthermore, these entries ignore the Christian cycles of fasting, which were well developed by the time of Sidrak’s composition and whose proscription of many animal products for nearly a third of the year would seem to invite explanation in a work so given to moral and naturalistic explanations. By omitting these

18. The sick should eat piglets, but only until their health returns (PL 197: 1326A). The flesh of crows is unhealthy for humans because the crow is a natural thief (PL 197: 1298C); horseflesh is unhealthy because the flesh of nonruminating animals is more difficult to digest than that of ruminates (PL 197: 1319B–C). Although Hildegard denies the flesh of certain animals to health-conscious human eaters, she never questions the right of humans to slaughter animals for food: she does not so much spare certain animals as reject them. For possible background for the medical tradition in which Hildegard was working, see Dianne M. Bazell, “De esu carnium: Amald of Villanova’s Defence of Carthusian Abstinence,” Arxiu de textos catalans antics 14 (1995): 234–37.

19. For seasonal Christian abstinence from meat, see Bruno Laurioux, Manger au Moyen Âge: pratiques et discours alimentaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles (Paris: Hachette, 2002), 103–13; and Bernard Chevalier, “L’alimentation carnée à la fin du XVe siècle: réalité et symboles,” in Pratiques et discours alimentaires à la Renaissance: actes du colloque de Tours de mars 1979, ed. Jean Claude Margolin and Robert Sauzet (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982), 193–94. Sidrak’s silence on this may be contrasted with the Speculum sacerdotale, a fifteenth-century work that explains that Lent forbids the eating of terrestrial animals but allows the eating of fish because God cursed the earth and not the water (Edward H. Weatherly, ed., Speculum Sacerdotale, EETS o. s. 200 [London: Oxford University Press, 1936], 53); the Speculum perhaps draws on a source such as Alcuin, Quaestiones in Genesim, PL 100: 518B. Sidrak might have taken stock of local Lenten custom, which may have al-
considerations, *Sidrak* represents human dominance over animals as unlimited, and thus rejects any infringement upon that dominance that might hamper its enactment or that would question the preeminence—and hence the existence—of the human subject.

Per the Augustinian tautology, the routine slaughter and consumption of animals by humans sufficiently demonstrates animal irrationality. However, as if unsure of the justness of slaughter and indeed of the general human domination of animals, *Sidrak* repeatedly emphasizes that animals lack selfhood, responsibility, and language. Joining in a longstanding tradition of encomia for dogs, *Sidrak* states that the dog is the “wittiest” beast (6959) but qualifies its admiration with the observation that there is “noon [other animal] kyndelokere to man” (no other animal more beneficent to man; 6962),20 for in *Sidrak*, dogs devote their intelligence entirely to hunting on their masters’ behalf. Elsewhere, it characterizes certain animals—apes, bears, and hounds—as having more understanding than other beasts, but only insofar as it makes them more receptive to human instruction (11453–66). Similarly, when *Sidrak* considers whether “Fisshes and foules and beestis echoone, / Haue þei soules or haue þei none?” (fish and birds and beasts have souls or not; 3633–34), it answers:

no good kunne þei do
But þat men hem norisshþ to—
Þanne haue þei witte of manis lerninge
But of hemself haue þei noþinge. (3655–58)

They can do no good except for what men train them to do; they have their knowledge because of man’s learning, but of themselves they have nothing.

Animals can earn neither praise nor scorn by their assistance to humans, since anything admirable in an animal comes from human training. There is therefore no such thing as animal responsibility. Without responsibil-
ity, animals cannot accrue merit through “almesdede” (good deeds) that would enable them to be, like humans, resurrected into Heaven, fit to be the companions of angels (3635–38). Even if animals could accrue merit, it would die with their bodies: while animals have a kind of soul that moves their bodies and senses things, animal souls, unlike immortal human souls, do not transcend or outlast their bodies.\footnote{For further discussion of the mortality or immortality of animals souls, see chapter 3.} The animal soul is merely an “oonde,” a breath:

\begin{quote}

But her soule, þat I oonde calle,
Whanne þe body is deed, shal falle:
It fereþ as an onde of thi mouth
For it is to no man kouth;
For whan þe word is out spoken
And þe soun awey is croopen,
It vanissheþ in þe eir away
And no lenger it dure may. (3661–68)
\end{quote}

But their soul, which I call a breath, when the body is dead, shall die: it fares as does a breath from your mouth, for it is known to no man; for when the word is spoken out, and the sound creeps away, it vanishes into the air, and may endure no longer.

By analogizing the animal soul to speech, Sidrak seems to grant animals precisely what, as irrational brutes, they should lack: language. It does so, however, only to deliver animals more surely to mortality, for in this passage spoken language, being evanescent, lacks any claim to perpetuity in the textual networks in which Sidrak itself participates. Elsewhere Sidrak altogether denies animals language: it wonders “Haue foules and beestes any speking / Or vnderstonding of anybing?” and observes that “foules and beestis crieþ, bydene” and “Whanne þat oone make a cry, / Þat other hereþ it redily / And crieþ to him aþein foot hoot” (do fowls and beasts have speech or understanding of anything . . . fowls and beasts cry out, indeed . . . when one cries out, the others hear it and return the cry immediately: 11339–53). Sidrak forestalls the possibilities that it has raised, here and elsewhere, by dismissing all animal “speking” (speaking) as mere noise:\footnote{For a survey of medieval considerations of animal language, see Umberto Eco, Roberto Lambertini, Costantino Marmo, and Andrea Tabarroni, “On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs,” in Umberto Eco and Costantino Marmo, eds., \textit{On the Medieval Theory of Signs} (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1989), 3–41.} animals do
make sounds, but “what þei mene þei ne woot” (what they mean they don’t understand; 11354). Sidrak makes several points here: animals make noise only by “kinde” and “vsage” (nature and instinct; 11356); this instinctual animal noise lacks meaning, so far as communication between animals is concerned; and the meaninglessness of animal noise has meaning (observe: “what þei mene”), insofar as it demonstrates to humans that animals lack knowledge: “God to hem dighte” (God gave them) this lack of language so that “men shulde haue ouer hem mighte” (men should have might over them; 11357–58). As an interpretable sign of animal irrationality, animal noise justifies human dominance, and animals’ subjugation to this dominance, as in Augustine, demonstrates the uniqueness of both human rationality and human responsibility.

In this, Sidrak’s assertions about animal irrationality differ from the commonplace denials of reason to certain human groups so frequent in the history of reason. Although Sidrak describes women as suffering from “lightnesse of þe brayn” (lightness of the brain; 10395) compared with men, and treats as a quandary the salvation of human “fooles þat no good ne can / ne no wit haue of man” (fools, who know nothing of good, nor have any human understanding; 9933–34), it does not encourage fully rational men to kill and eat, nor even to enslave, members of either one of these groups; nor does it deny them resurrection. By contrast, Sidrak’s proclamations of animal irrationality have everything to do with delivering animals to all human uses and elevating humans exclusively to resurrection: woman may be the symptom of man, but the animal is the symptom of the fear of death. For, as Sidrak explains, animals must be denied souls “elles were beest lich to man” (otherwise beasts would be like men; 3646).

While Sidrak does not elaborate on what would happen if beasts were like humans, another popular, compendious work from roughly the same period, the Roman de la Rose, suggests a possibility. In Jean de Meun’s thirteenth-century continuation of the Roman, the allegorical figure of Nature observes that if animals were reasonable, “mal fust aus omes”23 (it would go badly with men; 17779), just as Aelred of Rievaulx warned in the passage of his De Anima that may be Jean’s source text. At the very least, as Jean’s Nature explains, animals might band together in rebellion against human oppression: “jamais li bel destrier crenu / ne se laisseraient donter, / ne chevaliers aus monter” (beautifully maned warhorses would never allow themselves to be broken nor to be mounted by knights; 17800–17802) and “ja chien ne chat nou serviraient, car senz ome bien cheviraient” (no cat

or dog would ever serve us, since they can get along well without men; 17813–14). Nature goes on to imagine monkeys making armor, writing, and helping other animals in the eternal war against humans. For his part, Aelred proposes:

If sparrows and crows had the dictates of reason to tell them what to do, where to do it, and what precautions to take, how many cities and castles could they not burn down? If they enjoyed reason and were equal to men, could not all the birds and beasts mass together and destroy the human race?24

Nonetheless, even as Aelred and Jean imagine the relationship of humans and animals as fundamentally violent, the threat they invoke is relatively minor compared with that evoked by Sidrak’s logic. In Sidrak, if animals were like humans, if animal objects became subjects of their own lives, then its claims of human specialness among worldly things, supported as they are by the human separation from and domination of animals, would be undone. The problem is not merely whether animals might rise to a status “lich to man,” but rather one of symmetry: to the extent that beasts are like humans, humans are like beasts. Should all creatures meld into an undifferentiated mass, then none could gain salvation, for, as Sidrak’s answer on God’s omnipotence makes clear, salvation requires being singled out.

The human relation to God is, however, one of both exaltation and abasement, but the very abasement further secures the human position over animals and thus the human itself. Sidrak’s question “Siþen we of Goddis liknesse be, / Whi mowen we not doo as did he?” (Since we have God’s likeness, why can’t we do as he did?; 2787–88) constructed the human by abasing the animal, and, in so doing, implicitly likened that abasement to that of humans before God. It also conceived of God not primarily as a creator, savior, or font of wisdom or love; it conceived of God primarily as the supreme power: as it says elsewhere, God “is lord and we knaue” (is lord and we are servants; 2811), and if He “walde bidde hem bothe sinke, / Anoon he shulde do his biddinke” (would bid them [i.e., Heaven and Earth] sink, they would do it immediately; 8119–20). If animals are to humans as humans are to this conception of God, then animals can no more rebel against humans than humans can rebel against God. Nevertheless, the invocation of likeness and dominance drives the analogy both ways: the mutual nature of likeness complicates domination’s guarantee of difference. Sidrak

argued that human domination over animals proved human likeness to God; if humans are to animals as God is to humans, then animals must share a similar relationship, one of likeness, with their immediate masters, as humans do with theirs. This allows humans to repeatedly play the role, so to speak, of the God of Babel or Eden, Genesis 11:6 or 3:22, disquieted because of human threats to his uniqueness, for just as often as Sidrak tries to prove human dominion over animals, it also raises and denies the possibility of animal likeness to humans. While it is easy to understand these moments as anxious defenses of the boundary between humans and animals, maintained against animal incursion, they may be better understood as deliberate invocations of likeness to allow for the reenacting of domination. Each paired consideration and rejection of the animal as a possible equal to the human enacts the human once again. Sidrak’s constant return to animals thus enables the action so important to its concept of the human: humans know themselves as human because animals have “no knowing ne might þerto / To do al þing þat we here do” (no knowledge nor any might to do all the things that we do here; 2801–2). Subjugation is the chief of these actions.

Mary Midgley’s Animals and Why They Matter relates a story that illustrates this self-forming dynamic of comparison and rejection: a hunter on safari takes great pride in prolonging the death of an elephant, going so far as to take a coffee break between shots. As Midgley remarks:

Sane people do not usually congratulate themselves in this way if they have merely smashed a machine or a plastic toy, or even blown up an enormous boulder. They choose a large animal because they can think of it, not just as an obstacle, but as an opponent—a being like themselves having its own emotions and interest.25

So too in Sidrak, which cannot help but present the human as a structural position rather than as an essence. It differentially produces the human through repeated assertions that God created animals for the sake of humans and through denials of animal-human likeness. To create the opportunity for such denials, Sidrak must constantly raise the possibility of just this likeness, so preserving the minimal threat required for a denial to have any force.26 The force of this denial, however, can work only so well. Derrida


26. Such arguments are not uncommon; for example, see Susan Schibanoff, “Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale,” Exemplaria 8 (1996): 64, which draws on Jonathan Dollimore’s Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde,
remarked of the subject that “Not to be able to stabilize itself absolutely would mean to be able only to be stabilizing itself”; in *Sidrak* the human requires a continual reenactment of subjugation to attempt a stabilization it can never attain. At the same time, if the impossible were achieved, if in this world the human arrived at some final certainty—or if, as I suggest in my epilogue, it gave up on domination—it would cease to be human. In order for humans to enact their dominance and therefore to try to establish themselves as human, animals must continue to be a threat. Dominance, and therefore the human, must fail where there is no suitable object to be dominated: the “beest” must be recognized as some way “lich to man” to allow a meaningful denial of likeness and for domination to be proven and thus for the human continually, ineptly to make itself human.

II.

The Reasonable Body

*Sidrak* arbitrarily draws distinctions between humans and animals: it can do no more than declare that animals lack language, reason, responsibility, and immortal souls. The many medieval arguments that compare human to animal bodies may seem to offer more secure grounds for asserting human difference. However, a commonplace of critical theory holds that the body arrives to the understanding always already discursive. Traditional medieval comparisons between human and animal bodies do not possess more solidity than traditional medieval comparisons between human and animal reason; rather, in the comparisons, rhetoric only pretends to solidity, or indeed not to exist at all, by lodging or hiding itself in bodies. In the corporeal tradition, those traits that supposedly distinguish human from bestial bodies—bipedalism and the possession of hands—also proclaim or even, in some articulations of the tradition, enable the human possession

*Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) to explain that the “rhetoric of proximity” “ultimately serves the monitory purpose of displaying evil’s disturbing likeness to good; it sounds the alarm, so to speak, that mobilizes the faithful to repel evil into a clearly delimited position as Other. The rhetoric of proximity thus plays an indispensable role in maintaining rigid binary oppositions by temporarily destabilizing them.”


28. For a convenient summary of constructivist positions on bodies, see Masha Raskolnikov, *Body Against Soul: Gender and Sowlehele in Middle English Allegory* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 26–27.
of reason, with all this implies about human supremacy. Ovid’s description of Prometheus’s creation of humans in the *Metamorphoses* is a *locus classicus* for this corporeal tradition in the Middle Ages. Prometheus makes humans “into a shape not unlike that of the god. / But one way or another, man arose—erect, / Standing tall as the other beasts do not, with our faces / set not to gaze down at the dirt beneath our feet / but upward toward the sky” (I.79–83). These verses were quoted, glossed, or echoed in sentiment repeatedly, among other places, in exegetical discussions of the precise ways in which God made humans in his image and likeness. Each time, the verses support the argument that the upright human form both allows and reminds humans to direct their eyes away from mundane desires and toward the heavens. As for animals, the tradition characterizes their bodies as prone to the ground and their eyes directed only at their food, which evidences animals’ merely terrestrial appetites and irrationality. A typical example of the argumentative tradition appears in a late-twelfth-century moral treatise, the *Verbum Abbreviatum* of Peter the Chanter, a cleric affiliated with Paris’s Notre Dame. Peter quotes the Ovidian maxim and supplements it with models from standard monastic hagiography:

Unde et B. Martinus oculis ac manibus semper in coelum intentus, etc.
Paulus primus eremita ab Antonio inventus est erectus, et quasi orans mortuus. Vincentius in tormento, semper erectis luminibus aspiciebat in coelum. (*PL* 205: 265C)

For which reason the Blessed St. Martin always strained his eyes and hands to heaven, etc. Paul, the first hermit, was found dead by Anthony, and upright as if praying. Vincent, while in torment, always looked up at heaven with his upraised eyes.

29. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. David Slavitt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994). Despite the widespread use of the sentiments expressed in this passage, many medieval commentaries on *The Metamorphoses* say nothing about it, likely because they tended to focus on the poem’s narrative to the exclusion of the more theoretical passages. However, Cornelius de Boer, ed., *Ovide Moralisé*, 5 vols. (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915), book 1, 432–51, does include the usual material of the corporeal tradition: humans look upon the sky, animals at the ground; beasts can think of nothing except feeding themselves, whereas humans can concentrate on how to save their souls, the “mestre et dame” of their bodies, for paradise. The other *locus classicus* for this insight is the exegesis of Psalm 48:21, “Man when he was in honor did not understand: he hath been compared to senseless beasts, and made like to them.” Cassiodorus’s commentary on the Psalms, *PL* 70: 344D–345A, furnishes a typical interpretation.

30. Dahan, “Exégèse Genesis 1, 26,” 139.
According to Peter, since such saintly postures are the ideal human postures, any human who concentrates on earthly matters spurns both the rational birthright and—as the tradition more or less explicitly asserts—human supremacy over animals. For example, the Sentences commentary of Robert of Melun observes that the upright human form signifies that humankind “praeter cetera animantia rectum habet” (has rulership over other living things). Peter the Chanter himself, in his On Penitence and Its Parts, provides a more complex version of this aspect of the tradition when he explains why the devout should kneel to pray:

Una est quod ad memoriam reducimus quo modo in paradiso cum angelis stetimus; nunc inter bruta animalia in terra iacemus et animam nostram corporali mole in terra deprimi ingessimus. Alia vero causa est, quia ille qui stat erectus aliis omnibus coequatur. Postquam vero in carnis desideria cecidimus; cum bestiis quasi inrationabilibus in luto reperimus. One reason is that we are led back to the memory that we lately stood in paradise with the angels; now we lie among brute creatures on the earth and we bear our soul, weighed down by corporeal bulk on the earth. Another reason is that he who stands upright is equal to all others. After paradise we fall into carnal desires; we find ourselves in the mud with the beasts as if we were irrational beings.

Peter identifies kneeling with the characteristic bodily form of beasts but also with human submission, primarily to God but also, implicitly, to any human to whom deference is owed. The standing position signals the prelapsarian condition of humans, proper thinking, and two additional elements: equality, when all parties are standing, and dominance, when only one is. Paradoxically, Peter argues that even, or perhaps especially, in kneeling, humans recall their innate superiority, because kneeling is only a temporary state for humans. It signifies the fallen state of all humans, to be redeemed for all good Christians in the afterlife; the posture befits those who ritually abase themselves; however, a human who kneels only dons a bestial, submissive posture. Beasts, being unable to doff their lowly


posture, in either this world or the next, cannot help but manifest their inferiority and subjugation to humans.

Many additional examples of this corporeal tradition could be cited, including one from Jacques de Vitry’s exempla, in which a she-wolf stole several human children to raise them as its own. One children tried to stand, but the wolf “pede percutit eum in capite nec permissit ut se erigat sed cum pedibus ac manibus bestialiter eat” (struck him on the head with her paw, and would not allow him to walk except bestially, on his hands and feet). The wolf wishes to raise an animal, but the human form resists, compelling the child towards its reasoning inheritance. The tradition, here as elsewhere, tends to present bodies and their associated capabilities as either human or animal: humans are inherently upright, reasonable, and mighty, and animals are inherently prone, irrational, and dominated. This fundamental, natural division dissolves when the tradition challenges itself by considering marginal cases. As I will argue, in these challenges, the tradition ceases to present different corporeal forms as naturally and indissolubly connected with particular identities or selves. Revealing its dehumanizing logic through the challenges, the tradition presents different bodies as activating different forces or capabilities, available to anyone or anything living through any given form.

Humans whose bodies diverge from the stereotypical “human” bodies of the tradition by not allowing them...
to gaze at the heavens or to walk upright without assistance would seem to be the place to begin investigation into the challenge of marginal cases, but I have encountered no example of the tradition specifically considering such forms.  

Gerald of Wales may, however, have had the tradition in mind in his characterization of the incestuous, adulterous Irish as tending towards blindness, lameness, and other bodily defects. As he concludes, “Et digna Dei vindicta videtur, ut qui interiore mentis lumine ad ipsum non respiciunt, hi exterioris et corporeae lucis plerumque doleant destituti” (it seems a just punishment from God that those who do not look to him with the interior light of the mind should often grieve in being deprived of the light that is bodily and external). A peculiar discussion in the Physics of the Human Body, by the twelfth-century Benedictine Abbot William of St. Thierry, nonetheless comes closer than Gerald does to directly considering the problem of human disability by hypothesizing about naturally handless humans. That this speculation occurs in the section of his work concerned with the human soul only underscores the connection—whether causal or merely evidentiary—William draws between bodily form and spiritual capacities. William’s hypothesis at once reaffirms the corporeal tradition and clarifies its logic by presenting the animal form as if it were essentially disabled:

All the beasts have feet where men have hands. Although nature has given man hands for many life functions in war and in peace, yet before all it is for this: if man had no hands his mouth would have to be fashioned like those of quadrupeds so he could take food from the ground. The length of his neck would have to be increased, his nose shaped like that of a brute animal. He would have to have heavy lips, thick, coarse and projecting, suited to cutting fodder. The fleshy part around the teeth would have to be solid and rough, as in dogs and other animals that eat meat. Thus if hands

36. For example, “Medieval Theoretical Concepts of the (Impaired) Body,” chapter 3 of Irina Metzler, Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400 (New York: Routledge, 2006), concentrates on scriptural background, resurrection theology, and theories of ugliness, among other topics, but not on the stereotypical human body’s distinction from animal bodies.

had not been provided for the body, an articulated and modulated voice could not exist. Man would have to bleat or low or bark or make some other kind of animal noise. But now, with the hand serving the mouth, the mouth serves reason and through it the intellectual soul which is spiritual and incorporeal. This is something not shared with irrational animals.  

If they were handless, humans would have to eat like quadrupeds, which would cause them to lose the ability to speak and, as he goes on to say, to write. Since the human voice would become a mere “oonde,” a bleat or low or bark, it could no longer even be written: according to a longstanding grammatical formulation, echoed in William’s discussion, and stated succinctly in Marius Victorinus’s fourth-century *Ars Grammatica*:

> vocis formae sunt duae, articulata et confusa. Articulata est quae audita intellegitur et scribitur et ideo a plerisque explanata, a nonnullis intellegibilis dicitur. . . . Confusa autem est quae nihil aliud quam simplicem vocis sonum emittit, ut est equi hinnitus, anguis sibilus, plausus, stridor et cetera his similia.

There are two forms of the voice, articulated and indistinct. The articulated is that which, when heard, is understood and written and therefore explained to many and is said to be understandable to many. . . . The indistinct however is that which is nothing but the single sound of a voice cast

---

38. McGinn, *Treatises*, II.2, 131. William draws on the fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa’s *De Opificio Hominis* (On the Making of Man), VIII.8, via Eriugena’s Latin translation of Gregory’s Greek. For a later articulation of this point, see Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 91, a. 3, “Whether the body of man was given an apt disposition,” reply objection 3, “if man’s stature were prone to the ground, and he used his hands as fore-feet, he would be obliged to take hold of his food with his mouth. Thus he would have a protruding mouth, with thick and hard lips, and also a hard tongue, so as to keep it from being hurt by exterior things; as we see in other animals. Moreover, such an attitude would quite hinder speech, which is reason’s proper operation.” Note that arguments such as these may explain the romance *Guillaume de Palerne*’s emphasis that, even while going about on all fours while disguised as bears, Guillaume and his beloved Melior still eat with their hands; see Leslie Sconduto, trans., *Guillaume de Palerne* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 3319–28.


40. Marius Victorinus, *Ars Grammatica*, ed. Italo Mariotti (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1967), II.2–4, 66. For one peculiar example of this tradition, see the protests of a tenth-century Cluniac monk against his order’s new imitation of the silence of angels: “God did not make me a serpent, so that I should hiss at you, nor did he make me an ox, so that I should bellow, but he made me a man and gave me a tongue so that I might speak!”; from John of Salerno, *The Life of Odo of Cluny*, 2.23, *PL* 133:74A, quoted and translated in Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900–1200* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 50.
out, as is the neighing of a horse, or the hissing of a snake, or clapping, hissing, or other such things.

Thus, to be without hands would force humans to graze with eyes downcast, cut off entirely from documentary culture and from being recognized as humans. Deprived of the ability to raise their eyes and thoughts to heaven, handless humans would even lack the ability to think as humans should. They would be indistinguishable from animals. Yet it must be recognized that William’s departure from the usual paths of the corporeal tradition has led him back to agreement with it: by William’s reasoning, the host of capacities unique to rational creatures requires a certain bodily form; animals lack this form, and therefore must lack these capacities.

William limits his consideration to hypothetical humans who lack the proper upright form, while other examples of the tradition consider degraded humans, bipedal animals, and even monsters, all of which scandalize the tradition by improperly wielding the bodily form that supposedly unites reason and dominance. The thirteenth-century anti-peasant polemic “Le Despit au vilain” recommends that peasants should “manoir en bos, / et ester de séu enclose” (live in the woods and be enclosed in a sty), be forbidden to eat beef, and “mangier chardons / roinsectes, esprines, et estrain” (eat thistles, / brambles, thorns, and straw). It is not enough for the “Despit” to reduce peasants to animal shelter or herbivorous diets, for it then demands that peasants “pester herbe avoec les bues cornus, / a iiiij. piez alez toz nus” (pasture on grass with the horned cows on all fours, entirely naked). This poem is as clear an illustration as one could hope for of Cary Wolfe’s observation that “as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systemically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well.”


42. Wolfe, Animal Rites, 8.
set aright the wavering logic of the corporeal tradition, the “Despit” advocates a kind of sumptuary law directed at posture itself. Peasants, being so dominated, should cease to muddle the distinction between themselves and their betters by abandoning their illegitimate possession of the posture of dominance.

If the bipedality of peasants affronts the logic of the corporeal tradition, it does so only minimally: peasants, even if subject to dehumanizing insults, are generally recognized and treated as humans. Their lords would only metaphorically kill and eat them, and no one seriously doubted that peasants would eventually find a place in the afterlife. Bipedal animals pose a far stronger challenge to the corporeal tradition simply because there is no conceptual space for them in a tradition that presents the animal form as quadrupedal. Moreover, while the corporeal tradition only occasionally argues that the upright bodily form signifies or enables worldly dominance, it always argues that this form signifies or enables reason. A telling response to the challenge of animal bipedalism appears in *Ci nous dit*, an early-fourteenth-century compendium of exempla and doctrine. First, it restates the familiar relationship between human form and reason:

> Les bestes vont à .III. piés en senefiant qu’il sunt en leur paîz; et nous alons a .II. en senefiant que nous ne sonmes pas ou nostre. . . . Et quiconques met l’amour de son cuer en terre, ainsi se fait il semblans aus bestes; maiz dev-ons avoir tous nous desiriers ou ciel, que pour ce nous a Diex faiz.\textsuperscript{43}

Beasts go on four feet to show that they are in their country; and we go on two to show that we are not in ours. . . . And whoever puts the love of his heart in the world makes himself resemble beasts; but we ought to have all of our desire in heaven, which is what God made us for.

It then immediately turns to the problem of “cinges et pluseurs bestes” (monkeys and several [other types of] beasts), which “soivent bien aler a .II. piés” (often go on two feet). *Ci nous dit* manages to defend the corporeal tradition by declaring “si n’i vont pas voulentiers s’il n’en sont contraint, pour ce qu’il n’ont pas sens raisonnable” (but they do not walk that way willingly if they are not compelled to, because they are not reasonable). *Ci nous dit* thus restores the ambiguous body of the monkey to its proper, irrational place by subordinating it to human dominance: if monkeys walk erect only under compulsion, then their intermittent occupancy

of the posture of reason in fact shows them at their most dominated, that is, at their most animal. Correspondingly, the argument produces human posture and reason as authentic, reassuring humans that their upright posture is a free choice, at once representative of and enabling their refusal to lead a bestial life. The bear pictured in an early-twelfth-century copy of Jerome’s Biblical Commentaries (Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.4.7, fol. 75r) functions similarly: the bear stands upright, and even speaks the letter A. Yet its speech only imitates that of the figure standing to its left, its human master, who surpasses his pupil by speaking “ABC,” and who compels with a cudgel both the bear’s standing and its speech.  

Monsters cannot be as readily classified as either clearly irrational or rational. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observed, among the symbolic functions of the monster is to refuse “to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things,’” to be a form “suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions,” whereas the symbolic function of the animal is primarily to reassure humans of their fundamental difference from other kinds of living things. The corporeal tradition tends to silently bypass the problem of monsters, many of which are hybrids of human and animal forms. A rare direct engagement occurs in Thomas of Cantimpré’s mid-thirteenth-century encyclopedia, the Liber de natura rerum. The tradition does not emerge unscathed from its teratological dalliance, for, by the time Thomas concludes his argument, he has contradicted himself and exposed the corporeal tradition’s typically unexpressed, dehumanizing logic. The section on the human body, which considers the relationship between various body parts and the human as such, tends to adhere to traditional interpretations of the characteristic human form. Its entry on the hand is typical:

44. Reproduced in Lisa Kiser, “Animals in Medieval Sports, Entertainment, and Menageries,” in Resl, A Cultural History of Animals, 122. For a similar image, in another early-twelfth-century English manuscript, now Vatican Library, Rossiana MS 500, fol. 148, see figure 7 in Laura Cleaver, “Taming the Beast: Images of Trained Bears in Twelfth-Century English Manuscripts,” IKON 2 (2009): 243–52. For an allied reading of mimetic simians, see Cary Wolfe, Animal Rites, 184, which, in discussing the apes of Michael Crichton’s Congo, draws on Michael Taussig and Homi Bhabha to observe that “the animal other is accorded impressive mimetic prowess, only to have it immediately put to the service of a mechanical obedience whose most famous name in the philosophical tradition . . . is Descartes.”

Manus in homine loco pedum anteriorum naturaliter create sunt, ut dicit Aristotiles, quoniam homo maioris intellectus est omnibus animalibus et maiores ingenii, et ideo, habet maius instrumentum motionibus et operationibus multis. 46

Hands were naturally created for man in place of the front feet, as Aristotle says, since man is more intelligent than all animals and more crafty, and therefore, he has a greater instrument for movements and doing many activities.

Hands do not cause uniquely human qualities; rather, God gave humans hands so that they might fully express their rationality. Thomas’s implicit argument is that handless creatures lack hands because they do not need to do as much as humans do, nor are they as intelligent. 47 However, in the section “De monstruosis hominibus orientis” 48 (the monstrous humans of the East), significantly located between sections on the human soul and on animals, Thomas considers aberrations from the ideal human form. Although the section’s title itself acknowledges the humanity of these creatures, Thomas devotes its preface to contradicting just that point. First, he asserts that no monster could be descended from Adam. Thomas briefly entertains the possibility that an onocentaur—partly human, partly donkey, a product of bestiality—could be human, but he stifles the challenge, somewhat inadequately, by stating that no such creature could long survive its birth: he notably does not speculate on the perpetuity or destination of the soul of the dead onocentaur infant (or foal). His next approach, more sustained and better considered, sees Thomas partially retell a story from Jerome’s Vita sancti Pauli in which the hermit Anthony encounters a grunting centaur and a talking satyr (PL 23:23A–24B). Thomas omits the centaur, but includes both the satyr and its conversation with Anthony in which it condemns those who worship its race as gods and begs Anthony

47. Thomas’s logic echoes that of, for example, the early-twelfth-century Second Salernitan Anatomical Demonstration, which, in a typical passage, states, “each kind of animal has bodily members appropriate to serve its spirit and nature. The lion, for example, since he is of bold and angry spirit, has a body perfected to these qualities and is provided with suitable weapons in the shape of claws upon his feet and very sharp teeth in his mouth”: for the translation, see George Washington Corner, Anatomical Texts of the Earlier Middle Ages: A Study in the Transmission of Culture with a Revised Latin Text of the Anatomy Cophonis and Translations of Four Texts (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1927), 54.
48. Thomas of Cantimpré, Liber de natura rerum, 97. All subsequent references to this preface are to this page.
for a prayer. Thomas finishes the narrative with a paraphrase of Jerome’s authenticating claim, “Et ne, inquit Ieronimus, hoc fabulosum quis estimet, nostra estate in Alexandria huiusmodi animal captum est” (“and lest,” said Jerome, “this should be thought fabulous, in our era such a creature was captured in Alexandria”). In the original, Jerome identifies the satyr successively as “humunculum,” “animal,” “bestia,” and “homo,” as if unable or unwilling to determine whether it possesses a rational soul, but he finally seems to decide in favor of its humanity when Anthony bursts into tears and prays for it. Thomas, less willing than Jerome to tolerate ambiguity, refers to the satyr first as a “monstrum” and then, in the authenticating claim, substitutes “animal” for Jerome’s use of “homo.” This is his first, subtle exclusion of the satyr from humanity. Thomas might then have followed the example of his master, Albert the Great, by declaring that the satyr, “which on rare occasions walks erect . . . submits to domestication,” a judgment which surely recalls the truism that no human can be domesticated. Thomas instead aims to exclude satyrs and all monsters from humanity. He does this by revising Augustine, who wrote in the City of God, “Whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast,” namely Adam, and is therefore human. By arguing that a rational, mortal creature should be identified as a descendant of Adam no matter what [quamlibet] form it has, Augustine holds open the possibility that any monster might actually be human. Thomas, however, writes that “secundum Augustinum” (according to Augustine), “neque tantum forma, sed actus et habitus hominem manifestant” (not only form, but also deed and deportment show them to be human; my emphasis). Through this change, Thomas simultaneously rewriting Augustine, contradicts him, and insolently ascribes to Augustine the constrained classificatory system that he substitutes for Augustine’s own formulation. Thomas concludes his epitome of Jerome and revision of Augustine’s teratology with a flat denial that attempts to altogether erase the “hominibus” of the section’s title: “animalibus vero monstruosos animam inesse non credimus” (truly I do not believe that monstrous animals have a soul). With this, Thomas retroactively resists the evangelistic import and taxonomic flexibility of Jerome’s story. Regardless of the “deed and

deportment” of satyrs, including their resistance to being worshiped as
gods—which might be thought to indicate their moral sensibility—and
their desire for Christian salvation, they must not be considered human,
because, being only partly human-shaped, they fail the initial test of form.

Thomas requires further explanation, however, to fix his argument
securely. The satyr not only has hands, the crafty organ suitable only for
humans; it also speaks. Simply by writing out the satyr’s words, Thomas
would seem to have already admitted it to humanity, since his categori-
zation in De natura rerum of types of vox explains, “Omnis autem vox
articulata est aut confusa: articulata hominum, confusa animalium. Articu-
lata est, que scribi potest ut a, e; confusa, que scribi non potest ut gemi-
tus infirmorum et voces volucrum aut bestiarum”51 (all voices are either
distinct or indistinct: the human voice is distinct, and animal indistinct.
A distinct voice is one that can be written, such as A or E; an indistinct voice
is one that cannot be written, such as the moaning of the sick or the voices
of birds and beasts). To preserve human distinctiveness against his own
earlier taxonomy, he requires an approach more sophisticated than that of
the traditional corporeal argument. First he explains that any monster that
behaves in characteristically human ways does so only “ad rationis motum
sensu estimationis” (because of the estimative sense), a capacity which
medieval natural science concocted to explain apparently “reasonable” ani-
mal behavior.52 The satyr’s words may therefore be only a kind of instinct.
He then concludes:

Et non mirum, si monstra huiusmodi alicuius actus habilitatione ceteris ani-
malibus preferantur, quia forte secundum quod plus approprinquant homini
exteriori forma in corpore, tanto illi approprinquant sensu estimationis in
corde.53

52. For this sense, one of the five internal senses described in Avicenna’s De Anima, as
discussed and developed by Thomas’s teacher Albert the Great, see Nicholas H. Steneck, “Al-
bert the Great on the Classification and Localization of the Internal Senses,” Isis 65 (1974):
193–211; for specific attention to this sense in regard to animals, see Salisbury, Beast Within,
6–7, and Marie-Françoise Notz, “La notion de comportement animal et le savoir médiéval:
Hildegard de Bingen et Albert le Grand,” in L’histoire de la connaissance du comporte-
ment animal: actes du colloque international (Liège, 11–14 mars 1992), ed. Liliane Bodson
(Liège: University of Liège, 1993), 194–95. In the discussion of animal sense in Pieter de
Leemans and Matthew Klemm, “Animals and Anthropology in Medieval Philosophy,” in
Resl, A Cultural History of Animals, 169–73, it is clear that late-medieval analyses of animal
cognition strove less to ascribe capacities to animals than to preserve the uniqueness of hu-
man reason and moral responsibility.
53. At least one translation of this observation survives; see the quotation and transla-
tion from the Middle Dutch version of Thomas’s De natura rerum, Der naturen bloeme (The
And no wonder if the abilities of some of these monsters rise above the other animals, since perhaps the more they approach the human outwardly in bodily form, the more they approach [human sense] in the estimative sense in their mind.

His efforts to define monsters as capable only of inauthentically imitating human reason diverges sharply from the usual expressions of the corporeal tradition, in which the human body is as unique to and essentially part of humans as their mental and spiritual capacities. Thomas, like William of St. Thierry, severs this essential connection, William by considering animalized humans, Thomas, in essence, by considering humanized animals. When William imagines handless humans as bestial and reason facilitated by the possession of hands, he presents the human separation from animals as caused by manipulative capacity. Thomas arrives at a similar conclusion when he suggests that certain monsters might seem to be more reasonable because they have a form more conducive to reason. Thomas still preserves a bulwark between humans and animals by granting animals only an estimative sense, but this is a weak defense, maintained only by a logic that imagines monsters as capable of approaching the human form only asymptotically. But Thomas, like William, has already suggested that the rational and dominating human or the irrational and dominated animal are products of corporeal happenstance rather than of qualities innate to humans or animals. William and Thomas thus dehumanize the human body by identifying its characteristics not as essentially human but as technologies that could be enjoyed by whoever, or whatever, possessed them; likewise for the animal body. Stereotypical human or animal forms are no longer the form of humans or animals. The ideas of anthropomorphism or zoomorphism must be jettisoned, for upright creatures possessing hands are not “human-shaped” so much as “shaped appropriately—or nearly appropriately—for reason,” and vice versa. Because satyrs possess elements of the so-called human form, they have some modicum of (inauthentic) speech and reason, whereas humans are fortunate enough to possess the full panoply of corporeal qualities necessary for (authentic) reason: at least, this would be

true for humans considered by the dominant discourses to be “complete” in body. This, rather than some innate quality, may be what vaults humans over the estimative sense and into reason.

Thomas has been led to his peculiar solution by his attempt to negotiate a compromise between the corporeal tradition’s two disharmonious goals: to maintain that the shape of the body, whether characteristically human or characteristically animal, means something, and to preserve human distinctiveness. But to arrive at his solution, he must contradict his earlier statements on hands and vox. Thomas could be faulted for his error, but the mistake has its own strength, one perhaps greater than that granted by intellectual coherence, for through the muddled proof Thomas demonstrates that he can include or exclude creatures from the human according to his whim. This whim operates just as forcefully in Ci nous dit, where the mental disposition of the monkey matters far less than the human act that confines the monkey to animality. A pertinent joke appears in Diogenes Laertius’s Lives of Eminent Philosophers. After Plato defines the human as a “two-legged creature without feathers,” the Cynic Diogenes, Plato’s frequent irritant in this work, plucks a chicken, presents it to the Academy, and declares it to be “Plato’s Man,” whereupon Plato eludes the challenge by adding to his definition “having broad nails.”

If Diogenes had persisted in his joke by producing a circus-trained elephant or even a legless human, Plato would presumably have had to retreat from proof by physical form and to reveal his underlying purpose, which is not to find an adequate corporeal definition for humans but to declare humans human and animals animal regardless of evidence, corporeal or otherwise. In excluding the plucked chicken or the trained elephant, Plato would make only a provisional definition of the human, yet he would gain greater assurance of his ability to define what is not human. In so doing, although he would evacuate the human of any claim to an essence, he would be able to do what really matters for the human, to put animals in their place.

My presentation of medieval texts as relentlessly pessimistic and anxious in their interaction with what they designate as animal must be tempered by recalling the slipperiness of any category, that, like the monster, the animal—to quote Cohen again—can be “a rebuke to boundary and

enclosure.”

The pessimism must be tempered by expecting that some humans who tarry with the abjected animal will emerge from their sojourn less committed to their humanity. Thomas’s denial of humanity to monsters cannot erase the “hominibus” of his section’s title; this initial designation persists, provoking but confounding all his denials. What if Thomas had stopped trying so hard? In his prologue, Thomas encounters the odd traits, habits, cultures, and bodies of monsters and animals as a threat. Through these encounters, he nervously reassures himself of his humanity, but he might have been inspired to surrender the defense of his humanity and to abandon himself to previously unthought possibilities. Even *Sidrak* does not unrelentingly degrade animals. It awards the cock the title of fairest fowl through criteria that have nothing to do with human needs or even human distinctiveness: the cock’s “crown” and spurs, sense of time, and conjugal jealousy are such advantages that if the cock lived in the wild, all other birds “shulde do him reuerence” (would honor him; 11418). At least within the space of this entry and a few others, *Sidrak* ceases to worry about human supremacy, imagining animal hierarchies and processes wholly unconcerned with human needs or interests and even exceeding all human understanding. When *Sidrak* wonders how birds fly, it answers by considering not the moral significance of bird flight nor by arguing for the inferiority of airborne creatures to creatures formed from the solid earth, but by explaining how flapping wings thicken the air, enabling it to hold aloft a bird’s light body (5285–308). The “eerne” (eagle; 3589) rejuvenates itself by flying “hiƷer þan any man may see” (higher than any man may see; 3593), as if escaping the grasp of human knowledge. The adder might live more than 1,000 years, whereupon it will grow a horn and soon after become a “firy dragoun” (fiery dragon; 3608), thus exceeding human chronological grasp. In these animal encounters, *Sidrak* offers animals to humans not for domination, not even quite for understanding, but for interest and wonder in a world no longer anthropocentric.

Sadly these encounters are only oases amid a textual landscape otherwise blighted by human superiority. Notably, as soon as *Sidrak* concludes its entry on the eagle and adder, its least anthropocentric entry on animals, it insists on the moral legitimacy of humans’ slaughter and consumption of animals. Striking down its own wonderful possibilities, *Sidrak* overwhelmingly supports the human system: it deploys category disruption not to unlock fixed categories—for better or worse—but only to provide opportunities for the human to dominate animals and to repair categories and thus to reassure itself of its existence. Generally speaking, *Sidrak* addresses the

animal not because animals are indubitably irrational, but rather because they so usefully resemble rational humans. Jeremy Bentham suggests that “the day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny.” Bentham rejects appeals to reason for determining rights, arguing that one should ask of animals not “Can they reason? nor, Can they talk, but Can they suffer?”

In the human system, animals must suffer to guarantee humans the opportunity for meaningful domination, by which humans claim exclusive possession of reason, speech, and immortal souls. Generally speaking, no one’s humanity is reassured by destroying a rock. Wild boars, on the other hand, possessed strength, bravery, and vigor against which knights, during the hunt, proved their own ideal possession of the same traits. Other animals, including dogs and predatory birds, were admired for their prowess in hunting. Some animals might even be honored as co-worshippers, as in the Southern German ritual of the Umritt, in which horses were blessed with holy water and ridden into specially designed churches to gaze upon the Host. But for all this, the domination of animals also requires that animals be scorned, their corpses treated as no human body should be: the boar is eaten, the dog’s corpse left in a ditch, the bird’s on a dung heap, and the horse’s, too, left to rot.

56. Angus Taylor’s discussion of Bentham in Animals and Ethics: An Overview of the Philosophical Debate (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2003), 46–49 (this quotation is on page 47; original emphasis) usefully summarizes his place in animal rights debates.

57. Lionel Rothkrug, “Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and Their Role in German Cultural Development,” in Religion and the People, 800–1700, ed. James Obelkevich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 30, describes the Umritt and contextualizes this ceremony (c.1300 on) within the emancipation of the ministeriales, who cemented their new position through sponsoring pilgrimages, reverence for the Host, and increased persecution of the Jews.

58. For example, the citizens of late medieval London used a place called “Houndsditch” beyond the city limits as a dumping place for refuse, including dead dogs (Ernest L. Sabine, “Butchering in Mediaeval London,” Speculum 8 [1933]: 351). A sermon in Woodburn O. Ross, ed., Middle English Sermons Edited from British Museum MS Royal 18 B 23, EETS o. s. 209 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 239, observes that “Trewly birdes rauenerys, when þei die þei be cast away vppon þe myddynges as no þinge of valew, bot þe birdes þat þei dud þer raueeyn too ben born to lordes tables. Sicurly, on þe same maner is of þise rauenerys when þat þei die. But iff þat þei amend þei ben throwon owte in-to þe donghull of hell” (Truly raptors, when they die, are thrown out onto dungheaps as valueless things, but the birds that they themselves killed are taken to lords’ tables. Certainly, [it is the same with us] as with these raptors when they die, for unless we amend, we will be thrown out onto the dunghill of Hell). In Lydgate’s “Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep” (The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, 2 vols., EETS o. s. 192 [Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1934]), the horse’s opponents scorn him because “A ded hors is but a fowl careyn” (204; a dead horse is nothing but a foul carcass) and, in an aggregation of Job 39:19–25 and the De contemptu mundi tradition, “Entryng the feeld he pleyeth the leoun;
like human life, merits respect; animal death, for the most part, merits no commemoration. (I must stress for the most part, because the exceptions, to which I turn in my epilogue, aspire to better relations than those I have described so far.) Likewise, the expression of likeness and denial in Sidrak and other texts continually reforms the human; it provides occasions for the domination of animals, the ongoing action that unceasingly and vainly strives to make the animal animal and the human human. 59

/ What folwith aftir? his careyn styketh sore” (entering the field, he plays the lion; what follows after? His carcass stinks terribly; 222–23). Also see Umberto Albarella, “Meat Production and Consumption in Town and Country,” in Town and Country in the Middle Ages: Contrasts, Contacts, and Interconnections, 1100–1500, ed. Kate Giles and Christopher Dyer (Leeds: Maney, 2005), 139, who suggests that the great number of horse bones in the barbican ditch of Norwich castle indicates that horses’ carcasses were dumped there.

59. My point harmonizes with Erica Fudge, Pets (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 51, “We humans are constantly anxious about our status and so we do something utterly paradoxical to address this. We construct animals as beings like us in order to show how powerful we are in our control over them and simultaneously we make it appear that our power is natural in that it is given by animals that we have also constructed as instinctive and not rational. In such a narrative, we construct pets as both like us and not like us in order to reinforce and naturalize the fact that we are the only beings that really count in the world, all because we are anxious that that might not be true.”