How to Make a Human

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CHAPTER 5

PIGS, BUTCHERS, AND THE ENDS OF HUMANITY

Hungry hog’ll eat almost anything. . . . All over the world, hog and human take each other’s measure. It is a delicate alliance, as your folks would have attested.
—Jane Smiley, Moo, 49

When a reporter’s hand was placed against the robot’s taste sensor, it was identified as prosciutto. A cameraman was mistaken for bacon.

I.

Dirty Pigs

For the period and places I consider in this book, meat was only a secondary product of most domesticated animals. Cows provided milk, oxen and horses labor, chickens eggs, and sheep wool; other animals—dogs and cats—provided companionship as well as more practical benefits, and in usual circumstances provided humans no meat at all. But their lives were still not their own. Humans would kill and eat a cow or chicken when it could no longer produce milk or eggs; cats might be skinned for their fur; people might even kill and eat the animals they loved, as starving knights sometimes did their horses.¹ Yet until the moment when the

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¹ For examples of crisis hippophagy, see Bartlett, England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225, 667. For cat-skinning, see Jones, “Cats and Cat-Skinning in Late Medieval Art and Life,” 104–9; and Thomas, “Perceptions Versus Reality: Changing Attitudes towards Pets in Medieval and Post-Medieval England,” in Pluskowski, Just Skin and
human killed and ate (or skinned) one of these animals, the relationship between them may have seemed to be characterized less by violence than by mutual dependence and even affection, though, of course, the human always remained in a position to unilaterally determine what to do with animals. By contrast, the violence of the relationship between humans and domesticated pigs was undisguised, since humans kept pigs only to kill and eat them. One of the multitude of lyrics by Eustache Deschamps, a late medieval French poet, describes the celebrations that follow a pig’s slaughter, how the pieces are shared out among neighbors, and also how pigs are agents of disorder and destruction that “tout gastent et font tant d’annoy” (lay waste to everything and do harm to all; 13); its refrain, “Pourcel ne fist bien en sa vie” (a pig does no good in its life), might be paraphrased as “the only good pig is a dead pig.” This poem accords with the medieval archaeological record, in which pigs appear primarily as young animals, indicating that they were slaughtered as soon as they could yield sufficient meat. As the porcine telos witnesses to the human-animal relationship at its most primordial, pigs can be thought to number among the most animal of animals.

Pigs are still more emphatically animal because of another peculiar trait, namely that more than any other animal, they resisted being put in their place. They were at once domestic and wild, at once the most humiliated by human violence and among the most dangerous. The Opus Synonymorum of the thirteenth-century grammarian John of Garland sorts pigs on the basis of gender and age rather than domesticity, as if there were no significant differences between wild and domestic varieties. The chanson de geste Aubery Bones, 98–99. For cows and sheep used primarily for uses other than meat, see Albarella, “The Mystery of Husbandry,” 868 and 870; and Christopher Dyer, Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 156.


4. PL 150: 1579B: “Porcus, aper, verres, mas est; sus, porcaque, scropha; / Femina; sed sucula, porcellus, diminutivum; / Sus, suis. Ex illo caro debet esse suilla.” John, who studied in Oxford and taught in Paris until c. 1272, wrote, in addition to several lexicographical works, a commentary on Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Stella Maris, a poetic compendium of frequently antisemitic Marian miracles. For the great popularity of the Opus Synonymorum, see Geoffrey L. Bursill-Hall, “Johannes Garlandia: Forgotten Grammarian and the
le Bourgoing calls the great white boar its hero hunts both “sengler” and “porc,” and Garin le Loherin calls the boar killed by Bègue “sengler” (e.g., 10189) and “vers” (10158) or, using language seemingly more appropriate for a domestic pig, “pors” or “porc” (e.g., 10289). The romance The Avowyn of Arthur, which I discuss in detail below, generally calls the animal Arthur hunts a “bore” (e.g., 72) but also refers to it as “sqwyne” (swine; 229) and “gryse” (pig; 32), likewise words more commonly used to describe domestic pigs. The indistinction between the two kinds of swine occurs even in works of natural history, a genre that might be expected to make clearer distinctions than chivalric narrative in its classifications of animals. Hildegard of Bingen’s Physica declares that the “silvester porcus eamdem naturam habet” (the wild pig has the same nature [as the domestic pig]; PL 197: 1325D). John Trevisa’s Middle English translation of Bartholomew the Englishman’s De Proprietatibus rerum muddles the taxonomic breaks between wild and domestic pigs through cross-referencing: the section “De porco” directs its reader to find more information on the subject under “apro” and “sue” [sow], and “De sue” closes the taxonomic circle by directing its readers to “Loke opere propreetes byfore in litera p de porco et in litera a de apro” (for other properties of the pig, look under letter p, de porco [pig] and letter a, de apro [wild boar]). The terminology suggests that the domestic


7. John Trevisa, On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ De proprietatibus rerum, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 18.7, 1120. See also Wilfried Schouwink, “The Sow Salaura and her Relatives in Medieval Literature and Art,” in Épopée animale, fable, fabliau: actes du IVe Colloque de la Société internationale renardienne, Évreux, 7–11 septembre 1981, ed. Gabriel Bianciotto and Michel Salvat (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1984), 512, which observes that in neither medieval natural history nor exegesis was the distinction between wild and domestic pigs firm, e.g., “Augustine’s commentary on the 79th Psalm and several 12th-century texts even indicate that the distinction sus-aper was not as strict as the early encyclopedias suggest.” But see Milo Kearney, The Role of Swine Symbolism in Medieval Culture: blanc sanglier (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991). This book, whimsically illustrated by the author, constructs a straightforward argument: for both the pre-Christian Celts and the Germanic peoples the wild boar and the pig represented fertility and the divinities associated with that trait. Under assault, at first from the decadence of Roman dietary excess after the Augustan age, then from the Christian church’s disapproval of corporeal delight and fertility, and finally from the refinements brought about by courtly love, the star of the swine, once an admired beast, sank further and further until it was held to be utterly contemptible. Kearney is prone to startling asides, such as his observation, at 103, that “Geographic environment tends to shape human
pig never quite lost its wildness, while the wild pig, for all its fierceness, has much in common with its degraded domestic cousins. Confusion between or conflation of the two types of swine is understandable on at least a morphological level. Iconography and archeology indicate that prior to the early sixteenth century, and, at the latest, prior to the introduction of the smooth, pink Chinese pig to Western pork husbandry in the eighteenth century, the wild and domestic pigs of Europe were all dark, bristly, tusked, arc-backed, and long-legged, in sum, nearly indistinguishable from each other. Neither did animal husbandry make a firm distinction: for much of the Middle Ages, domestic pigs led quasi-feral lives for most of the year, wandering the woods and eating the same foods as wild pigs, until winter forced them into shelter provided by their human masters; no doubt during this time domestic pigs interbred with their wild varieties, further compounding their uncultivated appearance. Pigs also wandered the streets of London and Paris, enjoy-

and animal species similarly; the curly-haired Neapolitan pigs mirrored their masters as much as the white-skinned pigs of Britain did theirs.” A more restrained assessment can be found in Michel Pastoureau’s early work on the pig, for example, “Histoire d’une mort infâme: le fils du roi de France tué un cochon (1131),” *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1992): 175, where he asserts that “la frontière symbolique . . . est imperméable” (the symbolic frontier . . . is impermeable) between the two kinds of pigs, and also *Couleurs, images, symboles: études d’histoire et d’anthropologie* (Paris: Léopard d’or, 1989), 251. “Dans sa soue, le cochon est un animal stupide et impur; au coeur de la forêt, il entre en contact avec le monde sacré des arbres, spécialement avec le roi des arbres dont il mange les fruits: le chêne” (in its sty, the pig is a stupid and unclean animal; in the heart of the forest, it enters into contact with the sacred world of trees, especially with the king of trees, whose nuts it eats: the oak). Pastoureau’s more recent work on the pig admits more ambiguities.

8. My research, conducted primarily through the examination of several hundred medieval images of swine available through Princeton’s online Index of Christian Art at http://ica.princeton.edu/ has confirmed the remark in Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer’s Animal World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), 77, on the iconographic indistinguishability between domestic and wild swine. By the end of the Middle Ages, visual depictions had just started to show the domestic pig without hair, arced back, or tusks; see Laurans, “L’élevage du porc,” 525–26; Perrine Mane, “‘ Toujours pourceaux paitront glands’ ou l’élevage du porc a travers l’iconographie médiévale,” in Život v archeologii středověku / *Life in the Archaeology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Jana Kubková, Jan Klápště, and Martin Ježek (Prague: Peres, 1997), 439–40. On the hairiness of British pigs until at least the sixteenth century, see Hagan, *Food and Drink*, 102. Wilson G. Pond and Harry J. Mersmann, eds., *Biology of the Domestic Pig* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9, accords with Pastoureau, *Couleurs, images, symboles*, 238: “Par rapport au cochon domestique, le sanglier a une tête plus allongée, des oreilles plus courtes, des défenses et des canines plus développées, des soies plus grosses et plus raides” (Compared with the domestic pig, the wild boar has a more elongated head, shorter ears, more developed tusks and teeth, and heavier and coarser bristles). Notably, the only distinction Pastoureau discovers between the wild and domestic pig, even after discussing the efforts of paleozoologists to distinguish the two, is that the wild pig is a hyperbolic version of its domestic cousin.

9. For pig husbandry, see Laurans, “L’élevage du porc”; Mane, “‘ Toujours pourceaux.”

10. Esther Pascua, “From Forest to Farm and Town: Domestic Animals from ca. 1000 to
ing a kind of wild liberty even in the heart of some of Europe’s greatest cities, eating whatever they could find, primarily garbage, but sometimes human corpses they disinterred from cemeteries.\textsuperscript{11} Nowhere, however, is the irrepressible wildness of domesticated pigs more evident than in their violent appetites. Evading human restrictions on and supervision of the consumption of meat by domestic animals, sows were notorious for eating their own piglets.\textsuperscript{12} Pigs sometimes even killed—and ate—humans. According to Thomas of Cantimpré’s \textit{Liber de natura rerum}, domestic pigs would attack anyone, “candida maxime veste indutum”\textsuperscript{13} (especially those dressed in white), a tendency that must have especially troubled Thomas: by the time he finished this work, he was a Dominican, and hence wore a white habit under a black cloak. Chaucer evoked the violence of pigs in the \textit{Knight’s Tale}, where Mars’s litany of terrors includes “the sowe [that] freten the child right in the cradel” (the sow that eats the child right in the cradle; I.2019); Deschamps similarly wrote that pigs “enfans estranglent es berseaulx” (kill children in their cradles; 16); the political prophecy of John Ergome or Erg-home pauses to dismiss the belief that Edward II’s nurse substituted the son of an \textit{auriga} (groom or swineherd) for her charge when a sow mauled him in his cradle;\textsuperscript{14} in 1379, three sows and their piglets overwhelmed and killed Perrinot Muet, a young swineherd;\textsuperscript{15} in Oxford in 1392, a sow killed and

\textsuperscript{11} For a law attempting to control urban wandering pigs, see Henry Thomas Riley, trans., \textit{Liber albus. The White Book of the City of London, Compiled by John Carpenter and Richard Whittington, 1419}, Rolls Series 12 (London: Longmans, 1859), 270. For other such laws, see Laurans, “L’élevage du porc,” 530. By the twelfth century, many of these pigs would have belonged to the Hospitaller order of St. Anthony, whose bell-wearing pigs, raised both for the medicinal effects of their lard and to feed the needy, were allowed to roam city streets. See the complaint in the satiric “Bible” of the twelfth-century French poet Guiot de Provins: “il n’est citeiz, il n’est chastials / ou l’on ne voie lor porceals / d’Escosse jusc’a Antioche” (there is no city, no castle, where one can’t see their pigs, from Scotland all the way to Antioch; 1961–63); Guiot de Provins, \textit{Les Oeuvres de Guiot de Provins, poète lyrique et satirique}, ed. John Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915). For the urban consumption of garbage and corpses by pigs, see Michel Pastoureau, “L’animal et l’historien du Moyen Âge,” in \textit{L’Animal exemplaire au Moyen Âge (Ve–XVe siècle)}, ed. Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Rennes: Rennes University Press, 1999), 19.

\textsuperscript{12} Trevisa, \textit{Properties}, 18.99, observes that the sow “eteþ alle [of its piglets] somtyme outake þe firste,” and Thomas of Cantimpré, \textit{Libe de natura rerum}, 4.5, 111, that “Pessime sues sunt, que filios natos laniant” (the worst sows are those who mutilate their own offspring).

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 4.4, 110.

\textsuperscript{14} For a discussion of the poem, which aimed to explain or excuse Edward’s notoriously inept reign, see Roy Martin Haines, \textit{King Edward II: Edward of Caernarfon, His Life, His Reign, and Its Aftermath}, 1284–1330 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 20 and 44.

\textsuperscript{15} Evans, \textit{Criminal Prosecution of Animals}, 144–45.
ate six-month-old Agnes Perone. All homicidal animals were subject to execution, but the evidence above and additional recorded attacks indicate that no domesticated animals were more murderous than pigs; as Michel Pastoureau observed, “la vedette du bestaire judicaire est toujours partout le porc” (the star of the animal trial is always and everywhere the pig). Violent and domestic pigs pose a danger worse than bodily harm: they affront the human itself. By killing and eating other animals, pigs lay claim to, even if only temporarily and without any institutional support, the dominion within human zones of control that only humans should possess. When pigs kill a human, they treat that human as if it were itself a pig, or, they would have, were the human not been supported by its interpassive network of care, exhibited, among other places, in the animal trials themselves. The trials do not so much elevate killer animals to the status of the human as they return humans, humiliated by having been killed by domestic animals, to the status of having been murdered.

In their violence, pigs behaviorally manifest a resemblance always present simply because of the anatomical likeness between humans and pigs. This point appears in Aristotle, and reappears throughout the Middle Ages in “le jeu de mots ana-grammatique porcus/corpus” (the anagrammatic play on words porcus/corpus) and in a great many texts and practices, whether a recent zoological handbook, which notes, “the digestive similarity and nutrient requirements of the pig and human are remarkably similar,” or several medieval anatomical manuals, such as the early-twelfth-century *Anatomia Porci*, sometimes ascribed to Copho the Salernitan, which states that “Et cum inter bruta animalia quaedam ut simia in exterioribus nobis inveniunt similia, interiorum partium nulla inveniunt adeo similia ut porci”.

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16. Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, 71. The sow was subsequently arrested.


18. Pastoureau, “L’animal,” 19. Pastoureau does not cite the section of Aristotle he is referencing, but he could have been referring to sections of *De Animalibus* I.16 and 17 or *De Partibus Animalium* III.12.


(although some animals, such as monkeys, are found to resemble ourselves in external form, there is none so like us internally as the pig): then, dissecting the human by way of the pig, it delves into the circulatory, respiratory, and other systems, concentrating on its uterus. Notably, Peter the Chanter’s *Verbum Abbreviatum* also observes that “porcus autem multam habet convenieniam cum homine in corpore, sicut ex anatomia et divisione ejus patet” (also, the pig has much in common with humans in its body, as is shown from the arrangement of its internal organs; *PL* 205: 337D–338A). Peter’s work has nothing to do with natural science or medical instruction; it is a moral treatise that makes this observation in the course of likening various animals to different kinds of people. The fact that a work so far removed from natural history or medical training contains not only the usual comparison, but also an echo of the *porcus/corpus* pun, suggests how commonplace the comparison must have been, at least in intellectual circles. Narrative as well as anatomical and certain doctrinal treatises also agree with the pun. My third chapter relates several stories in which human flesh and pork substituted for each other. Some additional, similar stories include one from Gervase of Tilbury, who recalls the customs of the Gauls of Arles before their conversion to Christianity, who fattened up several youths over the course of a year “as if they were pigs” to prepare them for sacrifice to their gods.²¹ *Decameron* 4.9 tells of a human heart disguised as a boar’s heart, served and eagerly consumed.²² Ademar of Chabannes speaks of Roger, a Norman duke operating in Western Spain, who in 1018 appalled his Saracen captives by daily taking a prisoner, “quasi porcum . . . dividens.”²³
him up as if he were a pig), and feeding him to the remaining survivors, while he pretended in their sight to eat a similar meal: to terrorize the region, Roger let the last prisoner escape to spread the news. Later in this chapter, I discuss a hagiographic tale in which Saint Nicholas resurrects three young scholars made into pork pies by a murderous butcher. Much is suggested, too, by theatrical special effects: in one Passion play, to simulate the bursting of Judas’s bowels when he hangs himself, the actor playing this part let slip a bag full of pig’s entrails.\textsuperscript{24} Because of all these points—the pig’s violence, its anatomical similarity to humans, and its failure to be fully domesticated—the pig, to recall \textit{Sidrak and Bokkus}, is the animal most “lich to man.”\textsuperscript{25}

As I have argued repeatedly, humans attempt to claim their position as human, with all this implies about human uniqueness, by dominating life that through legitimized domination becomes relegated to being animal. Paradoxically, the pig’s very likeness to humans further confirms the pig’s status as the most animal of animals, precisely because its likeness to humans demands that it be treated like a pig in order to be one. Subjugating pigs allows humans to become more confident of their claim to be human, since if a creature so resistant to occupying its place in the animal order could be treated like an animal, humans could be especially convinced of their abyssal difference from other worldly creatures. Nonetheless, the very necessity of dominating pigs also reminds humans of the mutual contingency of being pig and being human, for even a dominated pig remains a category violation. They are wild and domestic: as Hildegard of Bingen puts it, “et in aviditate sua lupinos mores habet, quoniam caetera animalia discindit; et caninos mores habet in eo, quod cum hominibus quemadmodum canis libenter moratur” (and in its greed it [the domestic pig] has wolfish habits, seeing that it tears apart other animals; it has in it also doggish habits, in that it stays freely with people just as dogs do; \textit{PL} 197: 1325D). It is animal-like and human-like, reviled for its appetite but useless without it, permitted to live only to be killed, but at the same time also fundamentally ungovernable, even murderous, qualities that in their aggregate bind pigs to their masters in a conflict that can never be settled.

\textsuperscript{24} Mons Passion Play (c. 1501). See Jody Enders, \textit{Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 178, and 285 n43, which cites this stage direction, “Ycy creve Judas par le ventre et les trrippes saillent dehors, et l’ame sort.”

Unsurprisingly, several medieval works deride those humans who refuse to subjugate animals, and especially those who refuse to subjugate pigs, as being themselves piglike or as being particularly vulnerable to pigs. In the “Former Age,” Chaucer calls the acorns eaten by the vegetarian ascetics of the Golden Age “mast, hawes, and swich pounage” (mast, haws, and such pannage; 7) and “mast or apples” (37). “Mast” and pannage refer solely to the food of pigs. Andrew Galloway reads Chaucer as ironically undercutting the traditional praise for the asceticism of the Golden Age: as Galloway observes, pannage is a winter food; therefore, the Golden Age diet represents seasonal shortage rather than praiseworthy restraint. This works, to a degree, since the diet of these Golden Age ascetics does recall the typical ascetic woodland diet of roots and herbs found in, for example, Sir Orfeo and Parnenopeu de Blois. However, creatures that customarily eat pannage, mast, and hawes, namely pigs, suffer hardship from neither winter nor this diet. Their hardship arrives from elsewhere, for the diet does not starve but rather fattens them, readying them for their winter slaughter, an event illustrated in innumerable medieval calendars. For Chaucer’s ascetics to eat mast and pannage may illustrate the necessities of government and commerce; the diet may suggest a renunciatory diet; but it also suggests another result for humans who live meatlessly: that having abdicated their human responsibility to dominate animals, they have lost their human protections and become as vulnerable as pigs to the appetites of properly carnivorous humans. The contrapasso is less subtle in tales that inculcated prejudice against religions opposed to eating pigs. In a representative scurrilous twelfth-century vita by Guibert of Nogent, Mohammed collapses, due either to epilepsy or to drunkenness, and is eaten by passing pigs. As Guibert mockingly explains, Mohammed’s humiliating death accounts for the Mus-


28. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., The Middle English Breton Lays (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), where, during Orfeo’s self-imposed exile, “he al day digge and wrote / Er he finde his fille of rote. / In somer he liveth bi wild frut, / And berien bot gode lite; / In winter may he nothing finde / Bot rote, grases, and the rinde” (255–60). Joseph Gildea, ed., Partonopeu de Blois: A French Romance of the Twelfth Century (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1967), where the hero explains to his sister-in-law, who finds him seeking death in the Ardennes, “A cotes et a genoz vois / Querant herbetes par ce bois” (I have been in the woods on all fours seeking herbs; 6135–36).
lim prohibition of pork. A similar logic pervades an antisemitic legend, especially popular in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, that imagines the Jewish ancestry of some pigs. During the Holy Family’s exile in Egypt, Jesus plays with children from the Jewish community, occasionally striking his playmates dead. Understandably nervous, the Jewish families decide to hide their children. Jesus finds his friends hidden in an oven, and questions its guard about its contents. When the guard claims not to know, Jesus asks what the oven contains. The guard lies again, saying, “Pigs.” And with that, Jesus transforms the Jewish children into pigs. As one version explains, “And euerech sethpe for to þis / Þis Gyv for broþur heold i wis / Euerech swyn in heore manere” (and ever since this happened, Jews consider all swine their brothers, as is their habit; 1043–45). Claudine Fabre-Vassas and Winfried Frey each observed that the consumption of pork can function as a kind of Eucharist, joining its eaters, like the Eucharist, to the Corpus Christi, while the Muslim and Jewish refusal to eat pork excludes them from this mystical body of the community of believers. But since

29. Guibert of Nogent, The Deeds of God Through the Franks, trans. Robert Levine (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997), 35–36: “But now to describe how this marvelous law-giver made his exit from our midst. Since he often fell into sudden epileptic fits, with which we have already said he struggled, it happened once, while he was walking alone, that a fit came upon him and he fell down on the spot; while he was writhing in this agony, he was found by some pigs, who proceeded to devour him, so that nothing could be found of him except his heels. . . . They imagined that he had been taken up into heaven, with only his heels left as a monument for his faithful adherents, who visit them with great veneration, and condemn eating pork, because pigs consumed their lord with their bites.” For such stories, see Norman Daniel, Islam and the West: The Making of an Image (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), 99–130. Note the confused example in Nigel R. Thorp, ed., La Chanson de Jérusalem (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), “La l’estranglerent porc, si con oï conter / Por çou ne valt Juus de car de porc goster” (there pigs strangled him, as I have heard told, which is why Jews do not wish to taste pigs’ flesh; 6154–55).


31. Fabre-Vassas, “Cochon,” 61, “Par le cochon . . . les juifs se sont séparés de leurs voisins et de leurs oppresseurs mais, inversement, le christianisme devait, pour s’affirmer, renier ses racines juives en renouant avec le cochon interdit” (Jews are separated from their neighbors and oppressors by the pig, but, inversely, to establish itself, Christianity had to
those who refuse to eat pork might as well be pork, these stories also expel Muslims and Jews from their worldly participation in the community of the human: those who dominate and consume pigs form what might be known as the *corpus hominis*, while distinguishing themselves from and generating the *corpus porci*. At the same time, these stories make nonchristians bear the burden of the failure of the operations of the human. If, as the stories claim, Muslims and Jews are especially vulnerable to pigs and to being confused with pigs, then any problem in the human system seems to be due to Muslim and Jewish irresponsibility in performing their human duties, rather than due to the general, and, it might be said, ecumenical inadequacy of the system itself, an inadequacy that is nowhere more evident than in the pig, this matter out of place, this uncategorizable filth whose filth is also the ineradicable filth of the human itself.

II.

Making Mastery in *The Avowyng of Arthur*

. . . [O]ur panicky pugnacity as we challenge him is not virtue but at bottom the irrational instinct of an active power organism in the presence of another such organism, of a sea slug of vigorous voracity in the presence of another such sea slug.

—Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, xxxii

The boar hunt narrated by one fifteenth-century romance illustrates these porcine-human dynamics especially well. This romance, the *Avowyng of Arthur*, is obscure enough to require a summary. After an invocation to renounce its Jewish roots in making up with the forbidden pig). She makes a similar point in *Singular Beast*, 155. Winfried Frey, “Jews and Christians at the Lord’s Table?,” in *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Melitta Weiss Adamson (New York: Garland, 1995), 113, argues that food was “a vehicle used by the Christian majority to secure its identity as a group while at the same time marginalizing the Jewish minority.”

32. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44, “If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”

33. The single extant copy of *The Avowyng of Arthur* appears in the mid-fifteenth-century Irish Blackburn Manuscript, which has two other romances, *The Awntyrs of Arthur* and *Sir Amadace*, and, in a separate hand, records and memoranda of the Manor of Hale in southwest Lincolnshire. It dates anywhere from the later fourteenth century to the mid fifteenth-century.
God, the story proper begins with Arthur, Gawain, Kay, and Baldwin in Carlisle, listening to a huntsman’s account of a mighty boar that killed many of his dogs. Thrilled by the tale, the knights go hunting, but the boar drives them off. Arthur vows to kill the boar and commands his knights to make their own vows: Gawain vows to keep a vigil and Kay to defeat any knight who impedes his forest perambulation, while Baldwin, distinctively, vows to be unstintingly generous with his food and never to fear death or be jealous over a woman. In the Avowyng’s first part (until line 477), Arthur kills and butchers the boar; Kay meets and is defeated by a knight, Menealfe of the Montayne, who has kidnapped a noblewoman; and Gawain, having kept his vigil, defeats Menealfe twice, first to ransom Kay and then to compel Menealfe to give up the woman and deliver himself to the judgment of Guinevere. In the second part (until line 909), Arthur tests Baldwin’s fidelity to his vows. First Arthur sends six knights in disguise against him; Baldwin’s refusal to acknowledge the combat to Arthur, let alone his victory, attests to his fearlessness. Arthur then commands a minstrel to scrutinize Baldwin’s generosity, a test Baldwin easily passes. Finally, after dispatching Baldwin on an overnight hunt, Arthur commands one of his knights to lie naked but still with Baldwin’s wife until Baldwin returns. When Baldwin discovers a stranger in bed with his wife and Arthur sitting on the edge of the bed playing chess with one of his maidservants, he keeps his last vow by refusing to be jealous or even to ask what could have led to such an odd scene. The romance’s final section comprises Baldwin’s account of several episodes from his life that explain his choice of vows and his values: the first episode, concerning murderous, jealous laundrywomen who double as camp prostitutes, demonstrates that jealousy and women are a deadly combination; the second, in which a cowardly knight hiding from battle is killed anyway, proves that no one can escape the ordained time of death; the third, in which besieged knights trick their enemy into thinking that they are well provisioned, demonstrates that goods should be freely shared. Arthur declares, “thine avowes arne profetabull” (your vows are well taken; 1130), and the work concludes with a prayer that echoes the romance’s first line: “Now Jhesu Lord, Hevyn Kynge, / He graunt us all His blessynge, / And gife us all gode endinge, / That made us on the mulde. Amen” (Now Jesus Lord, Heaven’s King, may he grant us all his blessing, and grant us good endings, who made us out of earth. Amen; 1145–48).

For a description of the manuscript and its contents, see Roger Dahood, ed., The Avowing of King Arthur (New York: Garland, 1984).

Criticism of the *Avowyng* that has not simply dismissed the romance as bad art has focused on its presentation of warrior masculinity, either by admiring it or by critiquing it, as does Patricia Clare Ingham, who argued that the warrior culture of Arthur’s court cements its authority at the expense of dead and silenced women.\(^{35}\) Women, however, are not the *Avowyng*’s only victims: the romance also kills off a boar, giving this death as much attention as it does those of the women. To be sure, at first glance the boar fight in the *Avowyng* simply follows the common formula of boar hunts in other romances. It begins with a futile charge on horseback that shatters the knight’s lance; then the boar kills the horse. This is the pattern of *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (391–93) and Malory’s *Tristrem de Lyones*, in which, during the mad Lancelot’s fight, the bore “rove oute the longys and the harte of the horse, that sir Launcelot felle to the erthe” (tore out the lungs and heart of the horse, so that Sir Lancelot fell to the earth).\(^{36}\) Also typical are Arthur’s fighting the boar on foot\(^{37}\) and the fight’s religious cast: Arthur prays to St. Margaret (probably Margaret of Antioch, for reasons to be explained below), while in *Bevis of Hampton* Bevis prays “to God and Mari” (to God and Mary; 804) for assistance in killing his boar. Nor does the *Avowyng* distinguish itself by calling its boar “Satnace/Satenas” (Satan; 67, 120) and “fynde” (fiend; 104), as comparisons between boars and the devil were a medieval commonplace: Rabanus Maurus, in his *De Universo* 8.8, explains that “aper propter ferocitatem et fortitudinem nimiam


diabolus intelligi potest” (the boar can be understood as the devil on account of its excessive fierceness and strength; PL 111:207B), while, from the later Middle Ages, Henri de Ferrières’s moralized hunting manual goes so far as to liken the boar to Antichrist. Amid all these similarities, the Avowyng’s hunt nonetheless distinguishes itself by being much more than a set piece or plot device. Unlike several other Middle English works that open with a hunt, such as The Awntyrs of Arthur, the hunt of the Avowyng does not convey the hunter toward an otherworld, a spirit, or a monster that constitutes or initiates the romance’s central conflict: for example, Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle follows its list of Arthur’s knights with a deer hunt that propels the work toward its narrative core, Gawain’s encounter and contest with a monstrous host. Other fights with anthropophagous boars in Middle English romance—in Guy of Warwick (6417–60), Sir Eglamour (346–504), and Bevis of Hampton (735–898)—only number among several other of their hero’s combats. The Avowyng’s boar hunt is Arthur’s only fight, in fact the only noble act of killing in the romance, as the deaths in Baldwin’s autobiographical exempla are either accidents of war or ignoble murders.

A symbolic interpretation, traditional to medieval animal studies, might interpret Arthur’s fight with the boar as an opportunity for Arthur to differentiate himself from a grotesque mirror of his royal authority. After all, in the Merlin prophecy often included in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of Britain, Arthur is the “Boar of Cornwall,” while boars in turn were often troped by knights, as in the cynegetic manual of Gace de la Buigne, the Roman de Deduis, which referred to the boar hunt and boar with terms equally suitable for a human opponent: “se combater,” “la bataille,” and “enmy.” John Trevisa wrote that the boar “useth tuskes in
stede of swerde and hath a hard schield brood and thikke in the right syde and putteth that always æazins his wepene that persueth him” (uses tusks instead of sword and has a hard, broad, and thick shield on its right side with which it counters the weapons used against him); the boar’s “schilde” in the \textit{Avowyng} is so strong that Arthur’s “grete schafte that was long / all to spildurs hit spronge” (great shaft was shattered into splinters; 196–98). The hunting manual of Gaston Phébus portrayed boars as the most dangerous opponent a hunter might encounter: Gaston attests that many times during boar hunts he was borne to the ground, his horse killed under him, and that, unlike the lion or leopard, the boar could even kill a man with a single blow that split him open from his knees to his chest, “combe on feroit d’un coutel” (as if it were using a knife). Given Gaston Phébus’s witness to the strength of the boar’s tusks, the boar might even do more than equalize the combat; the “boar hunt” might well refer to a hunt by a boar that uses its “knives” to butcher the butcher. In Arthur’s combat, then, he fights an animal outfitted with weapons and wearing armor as he was, and, once he lost his horse, he meets his opponent on a level field.

Before the boar’s den lies a grisly scene: “Men myghte noghte his cowch kenne / For howundes and for slayn men / That he hade draun to his denne / And brittunt all to bonus” (men might not see his den because of all the hounds and slain men that he had dragged there and butchered to their bones; 181–84). This clear evidence of the boar’s animal savagery also heightens the ambiguity of the boar’s resemblance to Arthur, for it invokes the consequences of martial dominion gone wrong, as described in late-fourteenth-century critiques of war that accused magnates of savage disregard for the common good. John Clanvowe’s Christian treatise, \textit{The Two Ways}, inveighs against both the “pe reuers . . . pat distroyen and wynnen manye

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43. Trevisa, \textit{Properties}, 18.7. See also MED “shēld” (4) (a), “the tough hide at the shoulders and neck of a wild boar.”


45. For a description of technique in a boar hunt, see Thiébaux, “Mouth of the Boar,” 281–82.

46. Ibid. points out the rarity of killing a boar from horseback in noble boar-hunting. I disagree with Alice Planche, “La bête singulière,” \textit{in La Chasse au Moyen Âge, 495}, who writes that fights with boars were not fights between equals since the boar lacked “l’auréole royale de lion, [et] il n’est pas comme l’ours capable d’adopter la station verticale qui permet le véritable corps à corps” (the royal glory of the lion and it was not, like the bear, capable of adopting the vertical posture that permits true hand-to-hand combat). For a reading of boar hunts agreeing with mine, see An Smets and Baudouin van den Abeele, “Medieval Hunting,” \textit{in Resl, A Cultural History of Animals}, 61: “the boar hunt was considered to be the most dangerous and martial form of hunting, a sort of man-to-man combat.”
loondis . . . þat woln bee venged proudly and dispitously of euery wrong þat is seid or doon to hem” (the despoilers that destroy and conquer many lands . . . who would be avenged proudly and mercilessly against every wrong said or done to them; 485–93) and the very “bookes and soonges” (books and songs; 494) that praise warriors, and Philippe de Mezière’s Letter to King Richard II contrasts the war, misery, and rapine of “le jardin horrible et perrileux” with a Utopian garden of peace.47 Ideal knights are supposed to defend kingdoms, save the weak, and uphold the law, but the boar, and “reuers” too, serve only their own appetites for flesh and violence. Roving knights such as Kay in the Avowyng, who refuse to behave with Baldwin’s moderation, vow “to dethe dighte” (fight to the death; 136) anyone who frustrates their desires, transform—or at least try to transform—sylvan retreats into horrible gardens filled with corpses. Arthur himself, as Ingham reminds us, establishes his order only at the expense of those too weak to resist him, and his mere curiosity compels him to send a cohort to fight against Baldwin. Then, like the tyrants of the Governance of Kings and Princes who “don wrong to citeseyns in wyues and douȝtres” (do wrong to citizens through their wives and daughters),48 he barges in on Baldwin’s protesting wife (821–32). The boar’s purpose in the Avowyng becomes obvious: only in comparison to an anthropophagous beast can Arthur’s violence satisfy any ideal of chivalric rectitude.

But as apprehensive as the Avowyng is about gender and right rule, it is also concerned with the question of the human, as is apparent from the romance’s very beginning:

He that made us on the mulde,
And fair fourmet the folde,
Atte His will, as He wold,
The see and the sande,
Giffe hom joy that will here
Of dughti men and of dere,
Of haldurs that before us were,
That lift in this londe. (1–8)


He that made us out of earth and shaped the firmament, the sea, and the sand, according to his will, let him give joy to those who will hear about doughty and fierce men, the leaders who lived before us in this land.

On their face, these lines only combine piety with the praise of warrior forebears to preempt the accusations of frivolity often leveled against secular narrative, such as that in the prologue to the Middle English translation of Robert of Greatham’s *Miroir*:

Loke nou to Tristrem, ofer of Gii of Warwike, ofer of ani ofer, & þou ne schalt finde non þat þer nis mani lesinges & gret; for hii ne be nouȝt drawn out of holi writ, bot ich man þat makeþ hem cformeþ hem efter þe wil of hiis hert and þenkeþ þat it is soþe. And ne for þan, al is it vanite for to here al swich þinges & vnderstonde hem þat þe soule ne mai no gode.49

Now consider Tristan, or Guy of Warwick, or any other, and you shall not find any without many great lies; for they are not drawn out of Scripture, but each man who makes them forms them after the will of his heart and thinks that it is true. And because of this, it is vanity to hear and understand all such things that may do the soul no good.

In promoting itself, the *Avowyng* also slyly degrades other Middle English romances. Several others, including Sir Isumbras, Octavian, and Sir Eglamour, open with prayers to Mary or Christ and reference an earlier time peopled with heroes: *The Awntyrs of Arthur*, which shares a manuscript with the *Avowyng*, opens “In the tyme of Arthur an aunter bytydde” (in the time of Arthur an adventure occurred).50 The *Avowyng* bypasses such intercessors to pray directly to God the Father and Creator, the divine force responsible for creating “us” out of earth. Furthermore, by reaching beyond the heroic past to begin, as it were, in the mud, the *Avowyng* claims an interest more foundational than any passing chivalric greatness and implicitly charges other works with pettiness. Only then does the *Avowyng* reference the “dughti . . . haldurs” (doughty . . . leaders), that is, the Arthurian characters usually invoked at a romance’s onset:

One was Arthur the Kinge,  
Wythowtun any letting;


50. The other romance in the Ireland Blackburn manuscript, *Sir Amadace*, is acephalous. For a general sense of the openings of medieval romance, I have examined the beginning of each romance available in the TEAMS Middle English texts series.
Wyth him was mony lordinge
Hardi of honde.
Wice and war ofte thay were,
Bold under banere,
And wighte weppuns wold were,
And stifly wold stond. (9–16)

One of these was Arthur the King, without any contradiction; with him were many hardy lords. Wise and wary they were, bold under banner, who bore mighty weapons, and staunchly would stand.

In the manner of other Middle English romances, the *Avowyng* invites readers to believe in the ancestral significance of Arthur and his retinue (“halldurs that before us were”) and to identify themselves with Britain (“this londe”) and perhaps even with Carlisle and Inglewood Forest, that is, with Cumberland in particular, where the *Avowyng* was probably composed.51

First, though, *Avowyng* requires its readers to identify themselves with the “us” made “on the mulde.” The *Avowyng*’s characters are more than merely martial and brave, more than just English, more than just local heroes whose prowess centers Britain on Cumberland. They are fundamentally human, distinguished by their mastery over the world; by their use of tools, “wighte weppons”; and by their ability to “stond,” that is, both to endure and to stand, to possess the authentic erect posture possessed only by rational creatures, “us.”

Yet the first line of the *Avowyng*, “he that made us on the mulde,” does not necessarily exclude “us” from animals, also creatures of the “mulde.” A belief in human earthiness is attested by Genesis 3:19 as well as by God’s creation of Adam from the “mulde” in Genesis’s second creation story (see also, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:47–49); even in the first story, because God creates humans, men and women, on the same day as terrestrial animals, they have a certain “earthiness,” shared with other creatures, per the logic of hexameral commentaries. For example, the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, a fifteenth-century guide for priests, explains why fish but no other animals can be eaten during Lent: God cursed the earth, sparing the waters, “and therfore in tyme of fastynge it is noʒt lawefull for to ete of eny beste that longeth to the erþe, be it birde, be it beste crepynghe or goynge on foure

51. Excepting the unlikely possibility that its author deliberately used a dialect other than his or her own, the *Avowyng* seems to have been set in the same region in which it was composed. Although its scribal features are those of the Midlands, its linguistic features are those of Cumberland, where the action of the poem occurs: see Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, 116.
feete” (and therefore in the time of fasting it is not lawful to eat of any beast that belongs to the earth, whether it is a bird, or a creeping beast, or one that goes about on four feet).\textsuperscript{52} That the earthiness of terrestrial creatures makes them akin to humans is clear in Aquinas’s own explanation for Lenten prohibitions in \textit{Summa Theologica}, 2a2ae q. 147, a. 8, “Whether it is fitting that those who fast should be bidden to abstain from flesh meat, eggs, and milk foods”: “since suchlike animals are more like man in body, they afford greater pleasure as food.” I have already observed the medieval fascination with the humanlike qualities of pigs’ bodies and the similarity between their flesh and human flesh. Because of this interconnection, no animal that “longeth to the erþe” lays better claim than the pig to inclusion in the “us” of the \textit{Avowyng}’s opening line, least of all because the pig more than any other animal proverbially “longeth to the erþe,” in the sense of \textit{desiring} the earth, longing to wallow in it.\textsuperscript{53}

The opening lines of the \textit{Avowyng} distinguish its subjects from the other creatures made from “mulde” by only two clear means, first and most obviously, by the references to “dughti men” (6), “prest men” (bold men; 19), and “wayt men” (mighty men; 24). The apparently unnecessary repetition of “men” suggests a struggle to limit the scope of the first line’s “us” against adjectives that may just as well be applied to boars: they too are “dughti,” “prest,” and “wayt”; because of their tusks and “shield,” they also “wighte weppuns wold were, / And stifly wold stond” (15–16), if “stond” is understood in what is undoubtedly its primary sense here, “withstand.” A surer containment of the “us” occurs when the \textit{Avowyng} describes its subjects as possessing the rational qualities of “kyndenesse and curtesy” (kindness and courtesy; 22). The capacities to make and keep vows, to care for women (though such care in this romance is predicated on female weakness and subjugation), and to worship God mark the human as human, for no animal—at least no ravenous boar—possesses these qualities. Thus, the opening lines of the \textit{Avowyng} sketch the trajectory of human self-identification that I have been describing, from the all-encompassing “mulde,” the corporeal substrate that humans share with terrestrial animals; through the doughtiness, the violence that humans share with and by which they distinguish themselves from animals; and then to “curtesy,” which can be possessed only through reason, to which humans lay claim only through the violence of the previous stage.

With all this said, it is perverse to argue that the “us” provoked an uncer-

\textsuperscript{52} Weatherly, \textit{Speculum Sacerdotale}, 53; its inclusion of birds among terrestrial creatures is unusual.

\textsuperscript{53} See \textit{MED} s.v., “lōngen” (v.1), 2(e), “yearn for (Christ, the Virgin Mary); long for (the presence of).”
tainty in the medieval readers of the *Avowyng*, since, then as now, the category of the human was generally presented and accepted as one whose naturalness required neither interrogation nor consideration. Moreover, the opening lines of the *Avowyng* are mostly typical of romance; they are a gesture towards piety, a bit of throat-clearing to get the romance moving, and connect in no obvious way with the romance’s narrative content. My unsuitable response is to take the lines too seriously by pausing in my progress into the narrative proper to demand why the *Avowyng* should devote several lines to establishing the humanity of its characters and why it should place these lines in a section of the poem likely meant to pass without notice.54 Even in a straightforward effort to establish narrative roots in the human, the very terms proper to the human cannot be considered as only human without some kind of intervention, an intervention, as it were, smuggled in before the romance proper begins. In short, it is evident here both that even a thoughtless presentation of human identity also articulates something that confuses it, and that—to intone the credo of critical theory—natural qualities always require an effort, perhaps an impossible effort, to be presented as natural.

This dynamic, which the opening lines only hint at, becomes more explicit with the appearance of the huntsman at Arthur’s court. His panicked recollection of his failed hunt concludes, “iwisse he were [I thought the boar was] wighte” (64). The huntsman might have used any number of words to characterize the boar’s violence. “Iwisse he were wrothe [crazed with rage],” which alliterates just as well as “wighte,” could have been a better fit, given the notorious fury of boars.55 Instead, the huntsman recalls the very word used to characterize the lawful and noble violence of Arthur and his knights, who, per the *Avowyng*’s introduction, “wighte weppuns wold were” (15). Furthermore, while the adjective “wighte” means “mighty,” as a noun it means “person,” as in the kidnapper Menealfe’s boast “There wan I this

54. In reading the opening lines too closely, I have been inspired by Žižek’s discussions of “over-identification,” as, for example, in Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 22, where he observes that “an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too-literal identification, which is why its successful functioning requires a minimal distance from its explicit rules. Is not an exemplary case of such a subversion-through-identification provided by Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Solder Schweik*, the novel whose hero wreaks total havoc by simply executing the orders of his superiors in an overzealous and all-too-literal way?”

55. See the early fifteenth-century *Livro da Montaria* of João I, king of Portugal, who writes in this hunting manual that the boar is “enraged” rather than courageous, because “rage describes a man whose heart is moved by anger, who, beyond the bounds of reason and self-awareness, forgets all danger to body, honor, and reputation, and seeks only to put an end to the thing which angers him, in order to venge his spite”; quoted in Cummins, *Hound and the Hawk*, 100.
The pun of the huntsman’s “iwisse he were wighte” may thus indicate that he has recognized the boar as being human like himself, but given what happens next, it may well indicate that the huntsman has recognized the humanity of the boar and begun to feel his own humanity slip. For when the noble hunting party, inspired by the huntsman’s tale, try (and fail) to kill the boar, the huntsman abandons them with this sneer: “butte sette my hed opon a store / Butte giffe he flaey yo all fawre” (but set my head upon a stake if [the boar] doesn’t flay all four of you; 110–11). The huntsman at once presents the boar as a butcher, the knights as potentially flayed prey, and himself, if the boar loses the next battle, as subject to treatment proper for a boar’s carcass.\textsuperscript{57} Here, then, the huntsman imagines the knights and especially himself as victims the boar’s hunting prowess, pointing to the full consequences of the inability to master the boar. Arthur vows “to brittun him and downe bringe” (to butcher [the boar] and bring him down; 121), which he does, at which point “the hed of that hardy / He sette on a stake” (the head of that bold one [i.e., the boar] he set on a stake; 259–60). Though he might have done otherwise, Arthur stakes only the boar’s head, sparing the huntsman the consequences of his vow—and this in a romance whose second half concerns itself exclusively with the necessity of fulfilling vows. In so doing, Arthur either shows the huntsman mercy, or rather, contemptuously delegitimizes the huntsman’s promise to show that only knights or even only those who live up to their human responsibilities can be heard to make vows worth honoring.

To arrive at his human supremacy, Arthur first has to defeat a creature that could kill, flay, butcher, and indeed, cook him before it eats him. The Avowyng uses the same word, “brittun,” to describe both what Arthur does to the boar and what the boar has done to its victims (121 and 184): the huntsman’s mistake, then, is committed by the poem as well. Furthermore, in an image unique among Middle English descriptions of boar hunts, the boar smells “as kyle other kechine” (like a kiln or kitchen; 231). The culinary reference may humiliate the boar by associating it with kitchen imagery,\textsuperscript{58} or, given the boar’s Satanic character, it may recall the hellmouth.\textsuperscript{59} But it also suggests

\textsuperscript{56} See the MED s.v., “wight” (adj.) and “wight” (n.). The spellings of the most common forms of the two words are identical, suggesting they had the same pronunciation.

\textsuperscript{57} See Bevis of Hampton (828–29) and Sir Eglamour of Artois (494–95), both of which appear in Herzman et al., Four Romances of England.

\textsuperscript{58} For kitchens as a place of humiliation in the Middle Ages, see Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 431–35.

\textsuperscript{59} I am indebted for the hellmouth observation to Hahn, Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, 155.
that the supposed uniqueness of human alimentary culture and modes of vio-
ence is, like so much else in this fight, only a matter of contingent structural
position. Arthur finally resists being cooked by praying to Saint Margaret.
His invocation is both a generalized sign of piety, as Margaret was one of
the most popular saints of late-medieval England,\(^6^0\) and also a particularly
efficacious defense against the boar: in the hagiography, a monstrous devil
appears to Margaret and, in most versions of the story, swallows her, only to
burst asunder when Margaret makes the sign of the cross. Osbern of Boken-
ham’s *Legendys of Hooly Wommen* provides a representative Middle English
exemplar of this story perhaps contemporary to the *Avowyng*:

>This horrible beste vp-on hyr heed
Put his mouth, whil she thus seyde,
And eek his tunge, wych was fer reed
Vndyr hyr hele anoon he leyde,
And swelwyd hyr in euene at a breyde.
And whan hyr cros in his mouth dede encrees,
He brast on two, & she scapyd harmlees. (708–14)

The horrible beast put her head in his mouth while she prayed in such a
way, and also his tongue, which was fire-red, he placed under her heels, and
swallowed her immediately, and when she made her cross in his mouth, he
burst in two, and she escaped uninjured.\(^6^1\)

By invoking Margaret, Arthur thus prays for more than celestial assistance:
he prays specifically to preserve his own human integrity against being swal-
lowed, and to preserve it by destroying his adversary. Only at this point
does Arthur finally defeat the boar, by stabbing “him inne atte the throte”
(him in the throat; 249), the body part through which his “brittuned” corpse
(or indeed carcass) would have passed on its way to being cooked. This is
not, however, a clear, final victory. The *Avowyng* ends the stanza imme-

\(^{60}\) Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Garland,
2000), 676, which points out that among churches dedicated to women Margaret ranks only
behind the Virgin. See also the introductory material on Margaret of Antioch in Sherry L.
Reames, ed., *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute

s. 206 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938). At lines 187–91, Osbern dates the beginning
of his work on the poem to September 7, 1443. For other Middle English lives, see Reames,
*Legends of Women Saints*, which edits an anonymous life as well as lives by John Mirk and
John Lydgate. Dahood, *Avowing*, 102, remarks on the similarity between Margaret and Ar-
thur’s demonic opponents, but makes no observation on demonic consumption.
ately prior to the boar’s death with “His maistry he mekes,” and begins the next with “Thus his maistry mekes he / Wyth dyntus that werun dughe” (His mastery he makes. Thus his mastery makes he, with blows that were doughty; 240–42). Antimetabolic links between stanzas are not unusual in Middle English poetry: see a thirteenth-century religious lyric on becoming a friar whose first stanza ends, “Becomen ich will frere” (I will become a friar; 6) and whose second stanza begins, “Frer menur I will me make” (I will become a Franciscan; 7); the second stanza ends, “Goddes wille to wurche” (God’s will to work; 12) and the third begins, “Wurche I wille this workes gode” (Work I will these good works; 13). But the “maistry” sequence is the only such linkage in the Avowyng.63 The unique repetition functions as more than a poetic or mnemonic flourish: it lends Arthur’s blow an outsized rhetorical force to emphasize that much more is happening than the killing of an animal. Arthur is crafting his own mastery: “His maistry he mekes. / Thus his maistry mekes he.” Even though he is a king, his mastery is not already accomplished, but must be made, in this moment, by Arthur himself. But the repeated lines also indicate that Arthur’s task can never cease. Arthur, always the agent, never the object, is trapped within the action, both because mastery, particularly over a pig, is a relative, contingent position always subject to loss, and because mastery as such never arrives.

The aporiatic and inconclusive operations of Arthur’s self-making resonate more richly if understood with Derrida’s “Force of Law,” an essay I introduced in the conclusion to my second chapter.64 This essay engages with Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” which distinguishes between foundational violence, “lawmaking violence,” and the succeeding violence of the status quo, “law-preserving violence,” which defends the new system and grants anteri or legitimacy to the founding act.65 Arthur’s violence

63. Lines 80–81 (“And furthe conne thay fare. / Unto the forest thay weynde”) and 176–77 (“So sore gerutte him to drede. / He hade drede and doute”) are as close as the Avowyng elsewhere comes to this repetition.
64. Derrida observes that the German Gewalt of Benjamin’s title can also be translated as “the dominance or the sovereignty of legal power, the authorizing or authorized authority: the force of law,” Derrida, Acts of Religion, 265.
65. There is a third key term, “divine violence,” an act of “pure violence” unmediated by any view to a particular end, which destroys rather than makes or preserves law. Benjamin arrives at this concept by isolating violence itself, which he distinguishes from violence as means (but which is still violence, as Žižek, who sees it in the acts, for example, of the sans-culottes, Violence, 201). Derrida treats divine violence at length in the last section of his essay. Although Benjamin had mobilized this concept to hope for a world beyond the cycles or dialectic of the foundation and destruction of legal systems, Derrida sadly suggests that divine violence might be a kind of prolepsis of the “Final Solution” (see also Žižek, Violence,
can initially be understood as law-preserving violence, simply because the  
Avowyng does not narrate his rise to kingship. He is already “oure Kinge”  
(161), by reputation the ideal ruler, and therefore incarnates the status quo.  
As I have argued, the status quo also includes human supremacy over ani-
mals, but the very act of defending this supremacy against the boar “lays  
bare the violence of the juridical order itself.” The boar nonetheless poses  
a threat still greater than the desublimation of the repressed violence of  
the human. The boar, which can butcher, flay, and cook like any human,  
can practice “informed mastery of the natural world, not just its violent  
domination,” which is, as Susan Crane argues, the key aspect to elite self-
conception of their hunting practices. The boar thus aims to do more than  
brake the law, for if the boar successfully resists human rule and substitutes  
its own, the boar could at once act as a lawmaker and expel humans into  
being only criminals. By means of lawmaking violence, which is “able to  
justify, to legitimate . . . or to transform the relations of law . . . and so to  
present itself as having the right to law,” the boar would transform the bro-
ken bodies of men, horses, and dogs around its den into legitimized signs of  
porcine superiority. It could claim the structural position of the human for  
itself and relegate Arthur and the knights to animality.

Even so, the boar should not be understood only as either a criminal—the  
target of law-preserving violence—or a lawmaker. The distinction between  
law-preserving and lawmaking violence ultimately cannot be sustained, for,  
as Derrida argues, “there is no more a pure foundation or pure position  
of law, and so a pure founding violence, than there is a purely preserving  
violence.” Given the boar’s quasi-chivalric traits, it can be seen as par-
ticipating in a mode of chivalric law-preserving violence in defense of its  
own porcine legitimacy, which, like Arthur’s, masters humans, horses, and  
dogs. Likewise Arthur can be seen at once a law-preserver and a lawmaker.  
Although the Avowyng may affect confidence in Arthur’s a priori regality,  
it also narrates the origin of the human and, for that matter, of the animal,  
both of which emerge out of the “mulde.” No sooner have humans emerged

199). For a differing, more enthusiastic reading of the term, see Giorgio Agamben, State of  
Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52–64, and for  
more cautious reading, attuned to ethics, see Judith Butler, “Critique, Coercion, and Sacred  
Life in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in Political Theologies: Public Religions in a  
Post-Secular World, ed. Hent Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Fordham  
University Press, 2006), 201–19.


Nature, 76.


69. Ibid., 272.
into doughtiness and rational behavior, than the huntsman announces the existence of another creature as earthy, doughty, and as skilled and eager in violence as the *Avowyng*’s human actors. The *Avowyng* decides in favor of humans, and presents humans as though their law has always been the only proper law. It presents itself as never having had to deliberately decide in favor of humans; nonetheless the events prior to the combat between Arthur and boar cannot but be recognized as taking place in the lawless aporia in which force tries to ground a new law.

In his *De naturis rerum*, Alexander Neckham explains that “dens apri ab apro seperatus acumen suum retinet quamdiu aper superstes est; quo mortuo, dens hebes efficitur”\(^\text{70}\) (the tooth of a boar separated from the boar retains its sharpness as long as the boar is alive; when it is dead, the tooth is made blunt). In defeat, the boar ceases to be a threat; in fact, the evidence of its ever having been a threat is erased. Arthur’s success quashes the resemblance between human and boar by securing supremacy and hence humanity for himself and his fellows, while condemning the boar to the degradation of being animal. The success, however, can only ever be temporary, because Arthur’s lawmaking against the boar, like human lawmaking against the animal and thus the human creation of itself, cannot cease. Arthur’s claim to the human remains secure only until he, always boarlike, meets his next chivalric, humanlike boar, with teeth just as sharp as any living boar’s. Pigs, both wild and domestic, must always be resisted; they must be continually consigned to animality; and any failure of human vigilance will condemn humans to piglike degradation. Facing off against a humanoid pig, the most animal of animals, humans can never “catch up to the law.”\(^\text{71}\) As humans, all they can do is keep fighting.

### III.

**Interlude: Grunnius Corocotta**

**Porcellus, euersor domi**

In a roughly 300-word late-antique parodic will, the *Testamentum Porcelli* (the Will of the Little Pig), a cook informs the pig Grunnius Corocotta

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Porcellus that he is about to be slaughtered. Grunnius pleads for mercy, but the cook grants him time only to write his will. In it, Grunnius bequeaths fodder to his relatives, bristles to cobblers, intestines to sausage makers, and, mixed among these practical legacies, his tongue to lawyers and “verbosis” (to the verbose; 5), and “cinaedis muscolos” (muscles or anus to the unmanly; 5). In the late-antique world, the Testamentum earned two separate sneering allusions from Jerome, and it retained some popularity during the Middle Ages: seven manuscripts survive, dating mostly from the ninth to twelfth centuries, as do several early-modern editions.73 The Testamentum is an early exemplar of the genre of animal testaments and parodic memorials for animals, many of which, like the “Testament of the Ass” and “The Little Hare Wept,” feature an animal bequeathing its dismembered body to various sectors of human society, and of which at least one, the pseudo-Ovidian “The Louse,” similarly describes a memorial inscription for the dead animal’s tomb.74

Like any pig, Grunnius Corocotta Porcellus is ambiguous. Like a human, he has an individual name, perhaps even the familial name of a Roman citizen, yet the names themselves combine porcine, alimentary, and generally bestial traits. Grunnius derives from grunnire, “to grunt,” while Corocotta derives from three sources: the name of a famous Iberian bandit; caro cocta, which means “cooked meat”; and a Plinian beast, a cross between a hyena

72. Alvaro d’Ors, ed., “Testamentum Porcelli: introduccion, texto, traduccion, y notas,” Suplementos de Estudios clasicos: Serie de textos 3 (1953): 73–83. I key my citations to the paragraph numbers of d’Ors, an edition I thank Martha Bayless for recommending to me. A Latin text of the Testamentum is also available in several places online.


and a lion. Hyenas themselves were notorious for their gender bimorphism and for luring people to their deaths by imitating human speech. Grunnius’s name, then, does not so much identify him as overload him with multiple, contradictory identifications; he is at once a criminal human, a cooked pig, and a hybridized, anthropophagous master of speech. Nor does the joke that Grunnius dictates his will, “quoniam manu mea scribere non potui” (since I cannot write with my hand; 2) identify him as being only animal: even lacking a hand, he can be a legal agent, and while pigs cannot write, neither could most fourth-century humans, or in fact, most humans during the time of the greatest production of Testamentum manuscripts.

Despite all this, the cook will kill and serve him. Grunnius’s will itself colludes in this violence. The fodder he promises to his family will fatten them for slaughter, while his bequeathal of his own body parts acknowledges and encourages his own butchery and the butchery of all pigs, since the fulfillment of the will requires that Grunnius not only die, but also be butchered. Finally, the names of the witnesses to the will—“Lardio,” “Ofellicus,” “Cyminatus,” “Lucanicus,” “Tergillus,” “Celsinus,” and “Nuptialicus”—all pun on pork products, mainly various kinds of sausage. Because the witnesses enter into their public role as food, they confirm that a pig, even one that can be recognized as having legal rights, is ultimately meant only for human appetites; Grunnius recognizes this simply by accepting these very edible pigs as his legal peers. The Testamentum’s emphasis on the propriety and necessity of slaughter suggests a final resolution of Grunnius’s ambiguity. As an edible animal, a pig should be subject to the dictates of human appetite, and a butcher should be indifferent to the personal interests of the animal he slaughters. The deaths of pigs should not witness to porcine responsibility, but to their instrumentality, to their being only for humans. Through this relationship, animals are made to play a function that makes them animal. Yet before Grunnius writes his will, the cook has already decreed his execution: “veni huc, euersor domi, soliuertiator, fugitiue porcella, et hodie tibi dirimo vitam” (come here, homewreaker, rooter, fugitive piglet: today I interrupt your life; 3). Causally linking the pig’s death to its crimes, the cook identifies Grunnius as subject to a criminal, that is, a human law. By killing Grunnius, the cook engages in two antithetical practices: one

in which to execute a pig is to treat it to legal procedures to which an animal should not be entitled, and one in which a legally recognized criminal is to be butchered and consumed. There can be only a false, temporary resolution. Grunnius is killed, but because the purpose and meaning of his death are never perfectly resolved, neither is his nature.

The joke of the Testamentum should work through a human identification with the cook, the agent of the social order, the character who knows what an animal should be. Alternately, the joke may work by mocking pig and cook both, since a testamentary pig is as ridiculous as a cook who grants a pig leave to write a will. Grunnius is not, however, on the outside of the Testamentum as a ludicrous object. He is a speaking subject, the primary speaker of the work. Because nearly the whole of the work is the will itself, simply reading it gives Grunnius a voice again, although it is undecidable whether this is the voice of a living pig writing his will or of a dead pig speaking to his heirs. Reading is also a bodily activity. Humans who participate in the joke of the Testamentum therefore must embody the victim as a speaking, legal, but still edible subject, indeterminately human, indeterminately pig, and indeterminately alive. Muddled so, the human becomes not only a pig, but also corocotta, hyena, another of Grunnius’s selves, the creature whose impersonation of human voices lures humans to their deaths. To what end does the human reader of the Testamentum lend a voice to a treacherous hyena? The reader, polluted by its own act of imagination, speaks as a human, as an anthropophagous hybrid, and as edible talking flesh in which eater and eaten, in which corpus and porcus, remain indistinguishable. As Grunnius Corocotta, the human must be the agent of its own destruction: by giving voice and body to the pig, by becoming a willing accomplice to its own predation by a hyena, and also, finally, by recognizing that even killing and eating the talking pig offers no sure way out of this confusion. Forced to this knowledge, the human evicts itself from the certainties of its distinctiveness. Its home has been wreaked by a butcher and pig, always present, with and through whom it recalls that what distinguishes human from animal is neither speech nor species, but who holds the knife and who, or what, suffers it, and whose voice is heard as the law, and whose heard, if at all, even through its blood, only as a joke.

76. Fable 30 in Avianus, Fables, ed. and trans. Françoise Gaide (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1980), 110–12, a collection contemporary to the Testamentum and far more widespread in the Middle Ages (Mann, From Aesop to Reynard, 6–7), lends itself to similar treatment. In it, a boar repeatedly breaks into a garden, and on each successive day, a servant “punishes” the boar by slicing off part of its body. Finally, the servant “executes” the boar before having it served to his master, whose favorite meal is boar’s heart.
IV.

Butchers

This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig.


Though butchers cut animals from humans, butchers themselves have been generally scorned as lowlifes and feared as murderers and agents of social disruption. Contempt for butchery appears in works as early as Cicero’s stoic treatise *De Officiis*, which ranks it among the most disreputable of trades, and Livy’s *History of Rome* records the disdain for a public figure who, in childhood, had helped out in his father’s butchery work.⁷⁷ Juvenal’s sneer that “gangsters, runaway slaves, sailors, thieves, coffin-makers, butchers, and eunuch priests” frequented the *popinae*, the fast-food establishments of the classical world, marks the debased place of butchers in his social imagination by the company they kept and where they kept it.⁷⁸ In the Middle Ages, the scorn for butchers takes the peculiar form of a late-medieval genre narrating conflicts between Lent and Christmas, which at their most extreme pitted armies of sausages against armies of fish: the King of Christmas, a Bacchic figure of unrestrained appetite, led the sausages, while an emaciated figure of Lenten asceticism—sometimes gendered as a woman—led the fish. In these works, charcuterie, if not butchers themselves, threatened the body politic.⁷⁹ Inspired by the works that their own work had inspired, the butchers of late-medieval London led the misrule of Christmastide, while their rivals, the fishmongers, championed order and sober public ceremony.⁸⁰ In an insurrection in Norwich on January 25, 1443, to prevent the dismantling of Norwich’s mills, the leader, John


Gladman, costumed himself as the King of Christmas, “trappid with smale bledders, puddyngs and lynks” (decked out with small bladders, puddings, and link sausage). Although Gladman was not a butcher, he exploited the misrule discursively coincident with butchery both to advance the city’s political goals and, later, when threatened by the law, to cloak his crime in Shrovetide’s relaxed or inverted norms. The city of Norwich itself joined Gladman in deception by falsifying its own record of the insurrection. For the description of his puddings and sausages it substituted a description of a costume of shimmering foil, that is, a piscine representation of Lenten sobriety, as the revision carefully explained. Neither disguise nor forgery worked. Gladman and Norwich both were punished, because neither could protect themselves from their own misrule any more than the human can protect itself from its own unruly appetites or its reliance on butchers. Because the asceticism of Lent is the exception, not the rule, the eating practices that butchers represent and enable are normative, internal to Christian alimentary practices. To blame butchers for misrule, then, functions as another example of hypocritical deferral discussed in my previous chapter: if butchers can be regarded, however tenuously, as uniquely responsible for certain kinds of social disorder attendant upon gluttony and violence against animals, everyone else can claim innocence, putting on a fishmonger’s costume, so to speak, while gorging themselves on what butchers provide them.

As I have already intimated, butchery additionally threatens to confuse human and animal bodies, since, as the Avowyng showed, to “brittun” one body is much like brittuning another. Thus, in the late-antique debate poem “Judicium coci et pistoris” (Judgment of the Cook and Baker), the Baker accuses the Cook of indifferently butchering both humans and animals: “tu facis in tenebris miserum prandere Thyestem, / nescius ut Tereus cenet facis, improbe, natum” (you make poor Thyestes lunch in the dark, / you make Tereus dine on his son unawares; 53–54).

82. On this event, see Norman P. Tanner, The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370–1532 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 148; and Phillipa C. Maddern, Violence and Social Order: East Anglia, 1422–1442 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 109 and 197–203. Both Tanner and Maddern argue that Gladman’s defense is patently a lie because Gladman rode out five weeks prior to Shrove Tuesday, while Humphrey, Politics of Carnival, 70–73, argues that Norwich defended Gladman (and itself) from the Crown by characterizing his procession as only akin to a Shrovetide procession. In any case, Norwich tried to make light of Gladman’s ride as just tomfoolery and therefore politically neutral.
83. Ibid., 66.
84. Edition from Barry Baldwin, Roman and Byzantine Papers (Amsterdam: J. C.
discovered a similar homicidal joke in the nickname, Cain, bestowed on a mid-thirteenth century butcher in Vermandois presumably because of the original’s fratricide rather than his equally notorious farming. The *Annals* of Colmar record another such joke about the leader of one of the many pogroms of fifteenth-century Germany: “Veniens in Franckoniam carnifex Rintfleisch, id est caro bovis, nominem, qui ludeos cepit et interfecit eorum res disripuit violenter” (there came into Frankonia the butcher [or “executioner”] named Rintfleisch, that is, “Beef,” who seized and killed the Jews and violently pillaged their goods). Other texts that are practical rather than parodic or historical suggest that butchers could make good soldiers. Raymon Llull’s astrological treatise asserts that someone born under the sign of Jove aspires to professions suitable to the Jovian disposition, such as tailor, painter, or any work involved with beautiful, ornamented clothes and buildings, or, also, “carnifex, venator, piscator et homo de armis, qui facit sanguinem vulnerando vel occidendo alium hominem” (butcher, hunter, fisherman, and warrior, who makes blood by wounding or killing another man). Christine de Pizan makes a similar observation in her *Fais d’armes et de chevalerie*. Her source, the fourth-century *De re militari* of Vegetius, suggested that “fabros ferrarios, carpentarios, macellarios et cernorum aprorumque venatores convenit sociare militiae” (it is suitable to...
conscript blacksmiths, carpenters, butchers, and hunters of deer and boar) as soldiers rather than those who served in “womanly” professions such as fishing and weaving. Christine shortens and modifies this list to include only carpenters, peasants, and butchers, perhaps eliminating huntsmen because of hunting’s importance as an entertainment to her elite audience. She further modifies her source by expanding Vegetius’s original criteria. While preserving the underlying utility of carpenters’ and villagers’ strength and hardiness, she adds that butchers are useful because they are accustomed “to shed blood and strike with an axe.” Whatever else they might share with carpenters and villagers, butchers possess that supremely serviceable skill shared only by soldiers. In Christine’s formulation, conscription transforms animal butchery into retroactive anticipation of, or even practice for, the killing of humans, and the ax that had once been merely a tool becomes a weapon. Her practicality brings to light all too clearly the reasons for the unease surrounding the butchers Reintfleisch and Cain and the cook of the Testamentum Porcelli: if the professional boundaries between butcher and soldier are either negligible (as in the astrological considerations of Llull) or readily overcome (as in Christine’s Fais d’armes), the butcher as soldier or murderer may not so much transgress boundaries as demonstrate, were it not for the cordon sanitaire of disgust, public disorder, or humor, all of which interpassively support the human, the coterminousness of the supposedly separate categories of animal and human flesh and lives.

The story of Nicholas and the Three Clerks, originating in the eleventh century and recently reproduced in Sweeney Todd, is the ne plus ultra of the butchery discourse under discussion here. In it, three young traveling scholars are murdered and prepared as meat by their host before being resurrected by St. Nicholas. The twelfth-century British historian Wace twice tells the

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90 Christine de Pizan, Chyualrye, 36. Note Jean de Meun’s translation modifies Vegetius only by turning his prose into octosyllabic couplets; see Jean de Meun, L’art de chevalerie, ed. Ulysse Robert (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1875), VII, 12.

91 For the legend’s development, see Otto Edwin Albrecht, ed., Four Latin Plays of St. Nicholas (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935), 36–43; Wace, La vie de Saint Nicholas, ed. Einar Ronsjö (Lund: Gleerup, 1942), 42–44; Charles W. Jones, Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 128–40. Albrecht disproves the still common notion (e.g., Pastoureau, Couleurs, images, symboles, 265) that the story developed from a misunderstanding of images of the story of Nicholas and the three prisoners in a tower; Albrecht agrees with those who posit that this story satisfied the need for a tale about the scholars who began to wander Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The story may derive from a combination of two separate elements—the murderous host and a malicious attempt to trick a guest into cannibalism—in Ovid’s story of the tyrant Lycaon; see Ovid, Metamorphoses, 1.208–37. Jones
tale in his *Vie de St Nicholas*. Many of the elements that would become common to the story are divided between the two versions. In the first (213–26), Nicholas, divinely appraised of the murder of three students, asks their host for them, and then resurrects them. In the later version, the victim is a traveling merchant rather than students, but it includes the references to barrels and meat that became the legend’s usual trappings. In this latter story, the murderous innkeeper does not discover the resurrection until his victim—who himself does not remember having been murdered—wishes him a good morning: “Al matin levat si apelat / L’oste par non sil saluat” (in the morning he arose and greeted his host by name; 1131–32). The innkeeper, justifiably astonished, confesses all. Wace narrates the crime itself as follows:

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Par nuit leva si l’èstranglat,
Puis les membres li detrenchat.
Quant par peces l’out detrenché,
En un tonel l’ad tut muscé.
Si le salat en tel endreit
Come char que l’om manger deit. (1103–8)
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The innkeeper got up at night and strangled and dismembered [the traveling merchant]. When he had dismembered him, he hid him in a barrel to salt him like the meat that one is accustomed to [or “should”] eat.

Notably, in this version, Wace likens the merchant to “char.” Although “char” is a feminine noun, Wace continues to refer to the dismembered, salted merchant with a masculine pronoun: regardless of what has happened to him, he is still himself, which means, not meat. Moreover, since the merchant has been preserved only “com char,” *like* meat, not meat itself, Wace marks him as not-meat: the simile compares rather than equates, preserving the differences between human bodies and edible bodies. Wace further distinguishes human flesh from animal meat with the phrase “char deit manger” (the meat that one should eat), which can be interpreted as both indexical, pointing to customary meat, and jussive, forbidding anthropophagy. Wace characterizes the slaughter of the merchant both as a crime and as a category violation, so that the merchant is not dehumanized; that said, Wace never explains on what basis he distinguishes between customary and improper meats.

The basis for that distinction in Wace may indeed be one only of custom:

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*Further argues that the story developed from both hymnology, 136–37, and from the allusion in liturgy to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, 138–39, and notes that several other saints, including Menas and George, resurrect people murdered by innkeepers.*
because humans are not usually eaten, their flesh can be only like meat. The customary distinction, at least in this story, became increasingly fragile over the next few centuries, since the clerks were murdered and cooked recurrently, in church painting and sculpture, and, of course, in other hagiography. One such reiteration of the story appears in the *South English Legendary* (hereafter *SEL*), a Middle English hagiographic collection.  

The *SEL* differs from Wace, among other ways, in the murderer’s profession: in Wace and other early versions of the story, the murderer was a private citizen or sometimes an innkeeper, which explains why the scholars sought accommodation from him. But by at least the fifteenth century, the murderer was almost invariably identified as a butcher, as in one mid-fifteenth-century English carol:

He (Nicholas) reysyd thre klerks from deth to lyfve,
That wern in salt put ful swythe,
Be-twyx a bochere and his wyfve,
And was hid in privyte.

Nicholas raised the three clerks from death to life, who had been put in salt without delay, by a butcher and wife, and who were hid away secretly.

By the later Middle Ages, what may have started as a story about the dangers of travel, or perhaps even about the dangers of transacting relationships through the anonymous and abstract medium of money, became a story about the dangers of eating and of the shared vulnerability of human and animal, particularly pig, flesh. The victims still wander, but they might

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92. Edited in Wace, *St. Nicholas ein altfranzösisches Gedicht des zwölften Jahrhunderts aus Oxford Handschriften*, ed. Nicolaus Delius (Bonn: H. B. König, 1850), 92–95. The manuscript, identified by Albrecht, *St. Nicholas*, 33 n83, is Cambridge, Bodleian MS Bodley 779 (c. 1400–1450), which has many stories, such as this one, told in no other witness of the *SEL*: see Manfred Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1974), 75–77.


94. Richard Leighton Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), Carol #316, 218, which Greene dates to the fifteenth century. The stanza relating this story is unusual (as is the stanza on the miracle of Nicholas saving a pig-thief, which Greene remarks, 410, that he found recorded nowhere else), since Middle English hagiography tends to omit it. Joel Fredell, “The Three Clerks and St. Nicholas in Medieval England,” *Studies in Philology* 92 (1995): 181–202, a deeply researched study, ascribes the unpopularity of this miracle in written sources to its somewhat subversive association with the “Boy Bishop” ceremonies.

95. For discussion of early modern (and following) discursive links between butchers, children, and pigs, see Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast* (see 186 for the Nicholas legend in
be thought now to wander like pigs, subject even to various thirteenth- and fourteenth-century London laws that made foraging pigs eligible to be eaten by anyone who captured them. The victims still die, but while on a twelfth-century font at Winchester Cathedral, the murder threatens the clerks with the blade of his ax, on a late fourteenth-century altarpiece from Ingham, Norfolk, the murderer threatens them with his ax’s blunt side. The latter method is precisely that used to stun a pig before killing it, as depicted, for example, in f. 82v of the early-fourteenth-century Queen Mary Psalter, produced in London: their death is no longer simply a murder, but, at the very least in technique, a slaughter.

The SEL version begins “on a tyne thre clerkis com wandry in a street / of hongred and ful sore athirst” (once upon a time, three clerks were wandered in a street, suffering much from hunger and thirst); the clerks plead with the butcher to board them (“her out that we ne sterue”); and then, all


97. For reproductions of the font and altarpiece see Fredell, “Three Clerks,” 193 and 195. For references to further medieval images, see Albrecht, St. Nicholas, 64–70; and for reproductions, Auguste Marguillier, Saint Nicolas (Paris: Laurens, 1930); Karl Meisen, Nikolauskult und Nikolausbrauch im Abendlande (Dusseldorf: Schwann, 1931); and Edward G. Clare, St. Nicholas: His Legends and Iconography (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1985). Most picture Nicholas standing before three barrels, out of which rise the naked, unmarred forms of the young scholars. For other depictions of the murderer about to stun the clerks with a heavy blow, as if they were animals about to be slaughtered, see the lower border of the fourteenth-century engraving commemorating Bishops Burchard de Serken and John de Mul, in Lübeck Cathedral (William Frederick Creney, A Book of Fac-Similes of Monumental Brasses on the Continent of Europe. With Brief Descriptive Notes [Norwich: A. H. Goose & Co., 1884], 13); a thirteenth-century window at Bourges Cathedral (Meisen, fig. 136; Clare, fig. 58); and a relief at the Swiss Cathedral of St. Nicholas at Fribourg/Freiburg (Meisen, fig. 212; Clare, fig. 47): this Cathedral, incidentally, is near Metzgergasse, Butchers’ Lane. For a reproduction of the Queen Mary’s Psalter image, see Christopher House Woolgar, The Great Household in Late Medieval England (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 116. Note that the version of the story in Cambridge, University Library, MS Trinity College 605, f. 115V (cited in Fredell, “Three Clerks,” 200), describes the murder as follows: “that ilke nyʒt wip a pol ax he hem gan to quelle” (that same night he killed them with a pole-ax). While it is tempting to believe the use of a pole-ax deliberately recalls animal slaughter, it seems this specific connotation is postmedieval. Per Vialles, Animal to Edible, 45, pigs are no longer stunned before slaughter; but this change in slaughtering practice occurred only late in the Middle Ages (see Mane, “Toujours,” 447).
the while invoking the name of Saint Nicholas, they eat and go to sleep: the
SEL’s unusual emphasis on the carnal appetites of the clerks already load-
them with a certain porcine quality, given the notorious gluttony of pigs (as
in a fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook produced in England, which
describes the god of gluttony as having “the head of a pig, for just as a pig
pokes its head and snout into everything, even the garbage, so gluttons want
to try everything”). In the night, the butcher murders them with an ax and,
as is usual, discovers that the clerks have nothing worth stealing, nothing,
that is, but their bodies. After slaughtering the clerks, the butcher does not
just hide the victims in a salting barrel, but agrees to his wife’s suggestion
that the corpses be made into “pastis and pyus . . . for pork hy cholleth
ben solde” (pasties and pies . . . they should be sold as pork). The butcher
announces that he is selling three pennies’ worth of pies for the price of one
(“for on peny ich wolde yeue, for hanseles sake, / that is worth to other thre,
whoso hit wolde take”), virtually completing the transformation of clerks
into pies, and murder into pig butchery: “virtually,” because the interpas-
sivity of the humanity of human flesh must be recalled. The full completion
of the clerks’ murder into a slaughter and butchery would require that they
lose the interpassive support through which they are sustained as human by
being (mis)recognized as having become edible flesh; they are saved from
this fate, of course, simply by having this story told about them. Yet they are
still in danger, for the loss of their support very nearly occurs when Nicholas
arrives with his retinue. Nicholas “axed of him what he hadde, and what
to sillin wolde” (asked him what he had and what he would sell), and the
butcher “answered baldeliche, pastis and pyes he hadde / and good chep”
(boldly answered that he had pasties and pies, and that for cheap); he then
intensifies his pitch, “and swythe loud he gradde / for a peny that is worth
to. to the ich wele selle / lok nouthe wher hit be gret chep. by hem yif thou
wille” (and he cried out very loudly, “I will sell two pennies’ worth to you
for one. You can’t find it this cheap anywhere else. Buy them if you like!”);
Nicholas then responds with the following demand:

hastou any other flesch. telle swythe anon
for ich wold ther of bigge. wel swythe gret won
of bacon that were fair and clene. fain ich wolden habbe
sel me so wel as thou wost. and nought that thou ne gabbe
other flesch nab ich non. tha thou sext her to sille
yis for soth hastou. bakis thre ich wene
that liggeth isilt ther in thy fate . . .

98. Siegfried Wenzel, ed. and trans., Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preach-
do and bringe me ther to. yif hit thin wille be
for my wil is of hem to bigge.99

“Do you have any other flesh? Answer quickly, for I would buy from you a
great deal of fair and clean bacon. I would gladly have this. Sell me as good
meat as you know of. And don’t lie.” “I have no other flesh except for what
you see here for sale.” “Yes, in truth, you do have [more meat/better meat].
I believe you have baked three that lay salted there in your vat . . . bring me
there, if it is your will, for it is my will to buy them.”

The butcher and his wife confess and cry for mercy, and Nicholas resurrects
the clerks.

By coming to the clerks’ assistance, describing their flesh as “so wel as
thou wost,” and resurrecting them, Nicholas rescues them from having been
treated as animals. Although Nicholas’s desire for delicious flesh brings him
 perilously close to dissolving a distinction between human and animal that
 was, because of what the clerks suffered, already under threat, he has also
recognized the clerks—to recall Butler—as “grievable lives,” as he would
have never done for a pig. Furthermore, he has elevated the delicious flesh of
the dead clerks above the common run of meat, so preserving a remainder of
the human in the clerkly flesh itself, namely its inherent superiority to other
meats. All would seem to have been made right had Nicholas’s request not
gone variously awry. He asks for the clerks as “other flesch,” which at once
distinguishes human flesh from, to recall Wace, “char deit manger,” and
includes the clerks’ within the whole catalog of meats, differentiated only as
varieties of edible flesh: to recall Innocent III’s letter to the anthropophagous
father, quoted in my third chapter, the clerks may simply belong among “de
caetero carnibus.” The request may indicate not so much concern as gusta-
tory preference: “clean bacon” rather than cooked pies, human rather than
pork, suggesting an epicure’s complicity rather than a saint’s disgust.

Nicholas’s preservation of the clerks goes awry, too, because of his ref-
erence to the clerks as the “thre” rather than as the “thre clerks,” and his
request for “other flesh” after the butcher’s initial pitch of the clerks to him
as pies. The reference to the “thre” would seem a minor point were the omis-
sion not repeated in another version of the tale, a fourteenth-century French
Vie Saint Nicholas that similarly declares that the butcher had “trois en une
auge bien saliez”100 (three, well-salted, in a barrel). With this admittedly tenu-

99. Ellipses in the original.
100. Kurt K. Rudolf Bohnstedt, ed., Vie Saint Nicholas, altfranzösisches gedicht (Erlangen:
Junge und Sohn, 1897), stanza 132. It does not resolve the identity of this “trois” until
Nicholas resurrects the clerks.
ous support, I will not discount the vague “thre” as the result of metrical exigencies or as evidence of authorial ineptness, but will argue that it should be interpreted, along with Nicholas’s otiose order. In neither case does Nicholas refer to the clerks directly or clearly. The “thre” and Nicholas’s misleading order suggest a textual inability, or refusal, to determine what or even where the clerks are between slaughter and resurrection, whether they are corpses, carcasses, pies, or all of these things at once. It suggests, as well, a refusal to recognize that the clerks have been treated like meat, a refusal to recognize them, that is, as anything but clerks. Wace tried to preserve the humanity of his merchant by calling him only “com char,” but the very fact of his intervention indicates how easy it is to treat, or to recognize, humans as meat; the intervention of the SEL’s misdirection indicates the same thing, although in more dire circumstances, because the murderer is a butcher rather than an innkeeper. Like the tale tradition as a whole, the SEL cannot help suggesting that to be fattened—as the clerks were when the butcher fed them—slaughtered, pickled, and cooked turns a person into, or reveals a person as, nothing more than “other flesh,” and that what saves the clerks from this animalizing fate is not their inherent humanity, but the desire of the other, in this case Nicholas, for their delicious flesh. No wonder the SEL hides the clerks from the direct view of the text while they are pies; but its furtive efforts to conceal the interpassivity of the human subject hide nothing. The furtiveness instead announces the presence of a secret; it gives up the secret, and what the secret wants to hide, the presence of narrative content too traumatic to relate directly: that all that saves human flesh from being “char” and not only “com char” is Nicholas’s recognition. Nicholas’s misleading requests therefore point away from the clerks, but they also point to an uncanny, inco

In chapter 3, I discussed Guibert of Nogent’s advocacy for the human consumption of even mother birds. In essence, his advocacy asked what the human would be without butchery. So too with the royal butchery of the Avowyng of Arthur, and, in a negative form, with Chaucer’s “The Former Age,” the Mohammad myth, and the story of Jesus and the Jewish children. But the butchers of the Nicholas story, the Testamentum Porcelli, and Christine de Pizan might just as well have served their customers as meat as served meat to them. Thus Guibert’s question also might be, how can the human protect itself when it requires butchers? For humans seem to retain their human privileges—and perhaps their humanity—only so long as they keep themselves safe from the butchers whose very labors are at the center of the human community.
Conclusion: Blood in the River

In his “Licit and Illicit Trades in the Medieval West,” Jacques Le Goff speaks of the persistence into the Middle Ages of what he calls the “old taboos of primitive societies,” among which is a “blood taboo” encompassing executioners and butchers. As he remarks, “the sanguinary medieval West seems to have oscillated between relish and horror of the blood it spilled.” The butchery regulations of late-medieval London emblematize the dynamic Le Goff describes. London wanted meat, but in 1273 or 1274, the Mayor of London ejected both butchers and fishmongers from the Chepe so that “no refuse might be found remaining in Chepe on the arrival of his lordship the King.” Some thirty years later, four women in East Chepe were charged with polluting the King’s highway with blood and offal and were commanded to dispose of the waste products in the Thames at ebb tide. A 1333 law decreed that animals not be slaughtered in the street and that entrails be sold on side lanes rather than main streets in order “to preserve a clean and decent way for magnates, for the honor of the City.” In 1371, Edward III demanded that beasts be slaughtered outside the city either at Knightsbridge or Stratford; his demand may have had little effect, for in 1380, the citizens of London, repeating the King’s order, themselves asked that butchers confine slaughter to Knightsbridge. In 1391, John of Gaunt, the Bishops of Lincoln and Ely, and various other elites complained of the “nuisance caused by the slaughter of animals near Holbournbrigge;
[and they demanded] that thenceforth no butcher deposit filth within one mile of the City and suburbs.”  

In 1392, Richard II also demanded that animals not be slaughtered in the city, but this time the citizens complained of the increased price of meat caused by higher transportation costs. Their complaint had results: animal slaughter returned to the city, but it could be performed only under certain complicated conditions. According to the record of the Liber Albus, to dispose of entrails—presumably those that were unsold— butchers were to bring them to a special house “in a decent manner,” cut them into small pieces “according to the size used in the City of old time, put [them] into boats [to be] taken to midstream where the river was deepest, and cast into the water when the tide began to ebb, but not between the Palace of Westminster and the Tower.”  

The Liber Albus likewise demanded that pigs be slaughtered indoors. The year 1488 saw the reenactment of another law intended to prevent the sight of offal from offending the city’s noble and clerical magnates.  

The laws decreed that animal slaughter be hidden away; meat (and sometimes offal), once separated from the carcass, would be sold and consumed, to be hid away in human bodies; slaughter’s inedible excess would be disposed of to ensure that it too would disappear, at least from the view of as many people as possible and especially from that of magnates. No other food trade was restricted to such covert production, vending, or disposal, or was regarded as septic. Given the foulness of butchery waste, hygienic explanations for the laws should not be discounted, especially since Edward  

107. Jones, Butchers of London, 80. See also Sharpe, Letter Book H, 392, which requires that a latrine on the bank of Thames owned by Robert de Parys be removed and a house built “for the use of butchers, where they may cut up their offal and take it in boats to midstream and cast it into the water at ebb-tide; and further than all filth, &c., on either side of the river between the Palace of Westminster and the Tower be removed before Pentecost next.”  
108. Riley, Liber albus, 270.  
109. Jones, Butchers of London, 81. For another city’s laws, see Auguste Pleindoux, Le Commerce de la boucherie et l’inspection des viandes dans le Département de Vaucluse autrefois et aujourd’hui (Avignon: Rullière, 1925), 18, which cites a medieval law of Avignon that forbade butchers from slaughtering or butchering animals except in the places designated by the authorities; and William Montorsi, ed., Statuta Ferrariae, anno MCCLXXXVII (Ferrara: Cassa di risparmio di Ferrara, 1955), 2.2999, where elites of Ferrara restricted butcher shops to certain places along the Po (similarly, see Statuti del Comune di Padova, dal secolo XII all’anno 1285 [Padua: F. Saccheto, 1873], 278–80). More generally, see Pleij, Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life, 142; and François Desportes, “Food Trades,” in Jean Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present, Albert Sonnenfeld, translation editor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 284, who both speak of the tendency of medieval urban legislation to demand a concealment of butchery.
III blamed the plague on the stench of slaughtered meat;\textsuperscript{110} certainly the laws evidence disgust, both at butchery waste and at the slaughter of animals. Nonetheless, the compulsion to hide butchery from sight, particularly from the sight of elites, suggests that butchery excited more concern than can be accounted for by the desire for urban sanitation; nor can the laws simply be understood as a practical response to hygienic concerns. While it may be hygienic to dispose of butchery waste carefully, only a symbolic hygienic argument justifies the requirement that animals’ slaughter and the sale of entrails be limited to side streets or the indoors. The laws’ repetition is evidence of judicial ineffectiveness; alternately, the repetition is evidence of legislation as an end in itself: it was not just that butchery was disgusting, but also that lawmakers wished to make it known that they found butchery disgusting. Elites never gave up meat-eating or patronizing the trade that fed their appetite, but by repeatedly performing disgust, they could absolve themselves of complicity in the various dangers—to the civic order, to other people, and to the human itself—that are attendant upon butchery.

Butchery materially enacts the divinely ordained privilege of being human. Through routine violence against animals, butchers produce not only meat but also the clearest proof of the human domination over—and therefore distinction from—animals. Yet at the same time, butchers mutilate bodies that, as blood, flesh, viscera, and bones, resemble the bodies of humans. As has been seen, butchery did not lose sight of this similarity. Far from it. No profession shows more clearly that the human is an effect, not a cause of, animal subjugation, that what distinguishes human from animal is that executioners and soldiers kill humans, and butchers animals, that humans are buried and animals eaten or discarded. The texts and practices considered in this and the previous chapter share an effort to deflect, conceal, or quarantine violence against animals, even when, or especially when, the text or practice promotes the subjugation of animals as divine right or the key to defining the human. Though Ratramnus’s cynocephali need to subjugate animals to prove their humanity, Ratramnus absolves them of their “gentle” domination by deflecting the violence onto the “bestial,” “fierce” animals themselves. Chrétien sharply contrasts the Wild Herdsman’s violence—tyrannical and untechnological, but foundational—to the noble violence of knights who would never have to engage, at least overtly, in the routine domination of animals to prove their human selfhood. In “Ante Cibum,” Prudentius praises the divine gift to humans of the domination of the animal world and presents humans as farmers or even domestic herbivores terrifying wolves and eagles; yet by characterizing some slaughter as barbaric, he

forbids his Christian subjects the untrammeled exercise of their God-given dominion. To conceal the practices and byproducts of butchery in the law, and to conceal or deflect the operations and effects of butchery in stories, is symptomatic of the desire to claim a “good conscience” for oneself and to establish a self-sustaining, essential human identity that need not be enacted on animals. Under the butchery laws, Londoners were meant to encounter animals as meat, stripped of inedible excess, cut up or already baked into pies. For the most part, Londoners simply did not see the violence needed to turn the animals into food, or, if they did, they imagined that they were seeing a violation of the law, an eruption of something alien and repulsive, rather than their own abyssal foundationless human selfhood.

In *Yvain*, The Herdsman boasts, “ne nus ne s’i porroit fier, / fors moi, s’entre’eles s’estoit mis, / que maintenant ne fust ochis. / Ainsi sui de mes bestes sire” (No one except me could have confidence among them, for he would be killed at once. Thus I am lord of my beasts; 352–55). This declaration attests to the Herdsman’s great strength and ferocity, though the joke is on him, for elites such as Calogrenant would disdain mastering animals because of the lowliness of the task. After all, knights kill noble beasts and hunt or go to war with their dogs and horses, while peasants slaughter livestock and labor with draft animals. While a peasant can kill an animal, only a knight can be victorious over one, and when knights kill animals, proving their humanity is only incidental to their overt purpose of proving their worth as knights: emblematically, when Yvain hunts with his lion, and especially when he encounters the lion and dragon fighting and saves the lion, in electing to succor the “beste gentil et franche” (noble and honorable beast; 3375), he demonstrates his nobility. The joke nonetheless turns again. Elites can no more be herdsmen than they can butchers, because to do either would be to admit the job’s importance. They would have to admit that Calogrenant’s fight to establish himself as grievable had already been won by the Herdman’s fists.