Man and Animal in Early Modern Europe—Annotated Bibliography

The medieval and Early Modern animal was defined, primarily, in opposition to the human. However, there were moments where the boundary between human and animal was blurred, threatening the idea of what it meant to be a human, as well as undermining the broader system of societal organization. In some cases, as with women, Jews, and those of the lower classes, the line was intentionally blurred or shifted to further “other” these marginalized groups and uplift those who fell neatly into the elite. Those who were not at risk of being “othered” generally aligned with those in control of the boundary; when it could be played with, and exactly how porous it could be.

The tradition of trying and punishing animals is an example of just how much was at stake when an animal defied expectations—defying the established hierarchy. Further, the environment an animal was in heavily determined how they were received. For example, a pig wandering freely in a city would be seen as a transgressor of the human-animal boundary, and this presented a problem. The purely negative connotation of the pig was really only attached to the environment of the city. In a carnival or fair setting, however, a pig transgressing the same boundary was celebrated as entertainment. Literature suggests that human intolerance of animals was often spurred from a lack of boundary; when the line between human and animal behavior became increasingly blurred. Religious oversight fed into this intolerance, as any animal whose actions ultimately harmed a human was viewed as trying to destroy the hierarchy that God had established—a hierarchy that states humans are more valued than animals. Intolerance of animals and their behavior partially stems from the medieval desire for society to function in a way that pleases God. This, perhaps, is the reason as to why animal trials and animal intolerance became commonplace.

Yet not everyone at the time agreed with this way of thinking. Even some religious figures saw ways around this separation of humans and animals, while still employing what is sacred. Townspeople would often hold animal weddings, baptisms, and other religious rituals presided over by priests, as a way to reject the oversight of religious authority in their lives while simultaneously poking fun at elite culture. These practices allowed for a return to carnivalesque and animalistic behavior while still maintaining the religious hierarchy God had intended; a way in which to celebrate animal and human behavior in conjunction with one another.

The compiled sources below provide specific insight into the relationship between humans and animals in the medieval era, while touching on central themes of wildness, carnivalesque/grotesque bodies, and religion.


Girgen’s article is an analysis of the intention behind animal trials in the medieval period, looking at the separation of ecclesiastical trials and secular trials and discerning exactly what motivated them. Girgen comes to several different hypotheses, including the establishment of church power, the act of revenge against the animal, and also the enforcement of religious hierarchy of animals. This source gives a lot of insight into the judicial ways of human and animal interaction, and the ways in which animals were anthropomorphized for these trials; but is also valuable in establishing what the expectation for animal behavior was in the medieval period. These trials are places where animals are defying the behavior expected of them, and Girgen’s analysis of the reasons behind why that was so problematic for medieval society gives light to what constructed “animal” or “beastly” behavior. For domesticated animals, their behavior was established through the expectation of obedience, and subservience to human masters. “Beastly” behavior is then these cases where animals defy that standard, killing and maiming humans. To be beastly is to defy expectations, and Girgen’s understanding of how these trials were a response to enforce those expectations and curb “beastly” behavior shows that clearly. This kind of answer is very valuable as then questions of how that behavior expands outwards—its
connections with humans and the line between humans and animals, is then centered around notions of obedience and rebellion— and Girgen’s analysis of the reasons behind the trials then translates to how that behavior would be reacted to outside of an animal setting.


This book is a collection of the history of the prosecution of animals, both an essay discussing the medieval practice and belief behind these animal trials, as well as a repository for documented animal trials in the medieval period. Evans has collected a stunning amount of trials for discussion, using them to understand the phenomenon and the trends that are present throughout. What’s particularly interesting about this source, and its view into what the boundaries of human versus animal behavior are, is its involvement of religious discussion, which Girgen touches on, but doesn’t go incredibly in depth into. In Evans’ case, the essays provided in great detail the ways in which animals on trial were connected with possession and demons, and how their behavior like murder and maiming was connected to that religious aspect. This brings into question the definition of “beastly” behavior as a condition of animals versus as a condition of devils, and how that translates into the human perception of that behavior.


This source analyzes the practice of animal ceremonies in colonial Mexico during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. Tortorici discusses the ways in which people would incorporate animals, particularly dogs, into Catholic rituals— dog weddings, funerals, and baptisms— put on by townspeople and officiated by priests. These ceremonies soon gained negative attention from the Inquisition, who believed that performing these animal rituals desecrated the sacredness attached to them. Many of these rituals resulted in the officiating priest being tried by the Inquisition for a crime relating to heresy. This source provides insight into the ways in which religion interacted with notions of civility, wildness, and animal behavior. Furthermore, it details the ways in which the Inquisition, and therefore the Catholic Church, was involved in and influenced the lives of everyday people. Tortorici goes in-depth with his analysis of animal rituals, claiming that these practices were a source of amusement used by townspeople to poke fun at the elite class and the religious culture the elites engaged in. Recreating these rituals utilizing animals was a way for townspeople to invert the social order and put elites into the same status as animals—animals, who in their society, were deemed unkept and unclean.


In Goldberg’s “Pigs and Prostitutes: Streetwalking in Comparative Perspective”, the author explores the streetwalking of pigs and prostitutes in the early modern in a comparative fashion. They use an ordinance from York as their jumping off point and from there seek to compare attitudes towards free roaming swine and prostitutes within the city walls throughout Europe. I found the revelation of the pig as a representative as the sin of Lust to be rather intriguing. As the author touches on, at first glance it is difficult for the modern reader to understand what links the pig and the prostitute. Yet, for the medieval law writer the connection clearly existed for this ordinance to come to pass. This connection between pigs and lust, and therefore lust and prostitution pulls the reader in and makes them begin to believe in a somewhat logical connection between the two, at least from the medieval perspective. The treatment of wandering pigs and prostitutes under the law is also surprisingly similar. Goldberg’s exploration of the role of the prostitute in medieval Europe allows for a comparative understanding of the treatment of outside groups of people in
comparison with how medieval people treated animals. There is a line drawn between beasts and with people who are outside the desirable norms of society and Goldberg explores this comparison by looking closely at prostitution in the medieval period.


In Claudine Fabre-Vassas’ *The Singular Beast*, she looks at medieval anti-semitism and its most common sources throughout Europe. In chapter three, “Circle of Metamorphoses” she dives into the figure of European Jews and the idea of the pig in medieval Europe and where these concepts overlap. This ethnographic, archaeological, and sociological exploration by Fabre-Vassas allows the reader to explore the “othering” done by medieval Europeans using the comparison to groups of people they saw as different from the norm. When lines were blurred between groups of people and beasts it inherently othered these groups of people and accounted for a sort of rationalization for people within the norm for how they treated people they saw as other and as beast.


Stallybrass’ description of the marketplace pig in “The Fair, The Pig, Authorship” is heavily informed by Bakhtin’s ideas of carnivalesque culture and the grotesque human body. While Stallybrass takes issue with the way in which Bakhtin oscillates between two definitions of the grotesque (as either the opposite of the official, or as a hybridization and subversion of the official), he largely takes up the latter Bakhtinian notion of subversion, ambivalence or hybridization, and demonization as the three components of the grotesque carnival figure. Stallybrass effectively transposes Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque onto the carnival animal, namely the pig. Despite all three aspects of the grotesque working to shape Stallybrass’ carnival pig, the hybridization and ambivalence of the animal is perhaps the most significant in terms of how the pig became both a symbol and a ritual of the carnival. The pig’s ambivalence is largely attributed to their status as in-between pet and livestock due to the fact that they were kept in close proximity to the house. However, Stallybrass also highlights their human-esque features, especially in piglets: the lack of hair, their pink skin, and their diets. Pigs then presented a challenge in that they transgressed the given categories of being. However, this kind of transgression was welcome in, and characteristic of, the marketplace environment. These qualities were put on display, played-up, with acts like Tobias the Learned Pig as well as the crying piglet concealed in a swaddle to be later revealed as non-human. The ritualization of the pig’s carnivalesque characteristics was also seen in the consumption of the pig at the fair. As Stallybrass points out, pig-consumption rituals were used to demonize Jews who could not take part in the ritual. The consumption ritual that saw Jews being compared to the pig illustrates the malleability of the animal, because of its ambivalence: it is able to be used to demonize, or it can itself be demonized; it can be presented and put on display as a human figure, or it can be consumed like an animal.

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