


# Animal Crossings of Human Borders

## Human–Animal Relationships in Three Lays by Marie de France

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**Abstract** This article examines a selection of border crossings carried out by animals in three of Marie de France’s lays. It will be argued that the animal characters perform acts of border crossing that introduce and highlight a non-traditional representation of the human–animal relationship. The examples encompass the speaking hind in ‘Guigemar’, whose anthropomorphised representation destabilises the human–animal border; the weasel in ‘Eliduc’, which revives its mate and crosses the boundary of life and death; and the messenger swan in ‘Milun’, which disregards man-made (physical) borders and, as a pet, occupies an intriguing position on the human–animal spectrum. Besides their implied subversive potential, the three acts of border crossing also raise questions of agency, self-awareness, emotional capacity, and rational thought. Drawing on these concepts of animal studies, I aim to analyse the animals’ representations and to contextualise them in the philosophical, scientific, and cultural environment of the 12th century.

**Keywords** Animal Studies; Border Crossings; Human–Animal Studies; ‘Lais’; Marie de France

Animals' coexistence with humans is an age-old phenomenon. Part of the interest in studying the representation of animals in historical (fictitious) texts is their potential position as a platform to negotiate and, ultimately, question normative assumptions like the human–animal binary. Such re-negotiation is particularly salient when linked to the concept of crossing borders, these being structures that present—with their ability to divide and label—a basic category of the human way of thinking. Destabilising these fundamental forms of human conceptualisation also implies a threatening subversion of social norms.

One example of such subversive potential is found in the work of Marie de France, the author of a collection of twelve Old French Breton lays dating from around 1170. The 'Lais' offer a wealth of animal border crossings, which depict concrete examples of human–animal relationships and showcase the cultural construction of animals. Drawing on modern Animal Studies concepts, this article analyses the portrayals of animals in three lays and attempts to situate them in the wider cultural–literary context of 12th-century Anglo-Norman culture. I argue that the animal characters perform acts of border crossing which introduce and highlight a non-traditional representation of the human–animal relationship. Such disregard for boundaries challenges binary systems and questions normative assumptions regarding their supposed natural rigidity, thus hinting towards a fluid and heterogeneous understanding of alterity concerning medieval animals.

I first focus on the animal portrayals of the speaking hind in 'Guigemar', whose anthropomorphised representation destabilises the human–animal border, and then on the weasel in 'Eliduc', which revives its mate and crosses the conceptual boundary of life and death. The third case study is the messenger swan in 'Milun', which shows empowerment through its complete disregard of man-made physical borders and, as a pet, occupies an intriguing position on the human–animal spectrum.

Addressing medieval theoretical contemplations on animals, one key component is the ecclesiastical point of view, in particular the Genesis tradition. This biblical book states: *And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion [...] over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.*<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo comments on this quote in the late 4th/early 5th century and argues that "[f]rom this we are to understand that man was made to the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses the brute beasts. This is, of course, his reason or mind or intelligence".<sup>2</sup> This widespread medieval discourse understands animals as fundamentally different from humans, and the hierarchical structure of humans being superior to animals as fixed, God-given, and therefore

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1 Gen 1:26. King James Bible.

2 Augustine: *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3, 20, 30, p. 96.

natural. As McCracken contends, “[i]t is surely fair to say that in the stratified society of medieval Europe, [...] [e]ven those who had little political or social agency probably felt that they were different from beasts”.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Augustine’s passage is also indicative of the argument “that only humans possess [...] free will”,<sup>4</sup> while animals are conceptualised mainly by their lack of all these features.

Another source for discussions on animals in this period is the ‘Physiologus’ material, one of the most crucial animal-related discourse traditions in the Middle Ages. Originally an ancient Greek work, this anonymous compendium of Early Christian natural science was translated into multiple languages throughout the medieval period, though its exact date of composition is unknown and much debated. Each animal entry is followed by a moral interpretation that is aimed at the spiritual improvement of the reader. Partially drawing on ‘Physiologus’ material but adding more empirical information on animals, Isidore of Seville’s 7th-century ‘Etymologiae’, too, is considered a ground-breaking work regarding medieval discourses on animals. This famous encyclopaedic compilation, which also includes a detailed section on animals, was essential to the composition of the bestiaries of the High Middle Ages. The comparatively high number of surviving bestiaries today also attests to the wide interest in animals in the medieval period. It is fundamental to note that, despite the variety of presentations and didactic goals of the previous sources, a common feature shared by them all is the implied conceptual divide between humans and animals.

Advocating for a more nuanced take on the human–animal relationship in medieval sources, recent scholars such as Kay and McCracken identify in their analyses a fluidity between the medieval conceptual representations of humans and animals. Kay presumes a certain level of permeability between the two categories and contends that this is emphasised by the relation of medieval bestiaries to the parchment page. Analysing, for instance, an illustration of Adam naming the animals, she states that the uncoloured “parchment, made of animal skin, represents ‘human’ skin in the case of Adam but ‘animal’ skin in the case of the animals”,<sup>5</sup> thereby highlighting the similarities between the two categories of being. Likewise, McCracken draws on vernacular texts such as ‘Guillaume de Palerne’ or ‘Le Roman de Melusine’ to question the strict species hierarchy in medieval cultures. She argues that “[medieval] literary representations of encounters between animals and humans figure an interrogation of the forms of legitimate dominion and sovereignty over others, both human dominion over nonhuman

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3 McCracken 2017, p. 1.

4 Crane 2013, p. 36.

5 Kay 2017, p. 39.

animals and the power of some humans over others”.<sup>6</sup> The animals in the ‘Lais’ echo these tensions between scholastic discourses and vernacular texts, marking their textual representation as a product and a reflection of their socio-political environment.<sup>7</sup>

## 1 Fable Tradition: The Talking Hind

One of the most striking representations of animals in the ‘Lais’ is the talking hind in ‘Guigemar’, whose anthropomorphism—the attribution of supposedly human-only features to animals—blurs the line between species. Guigemar, a knight, encounters a hind during a hunting trip. He shoots her with an arrow, which bounces back and wounds him as well. The injured hind then foretells that Guigemar and his future lover will suffer greatly due to their love for one another.

Anthropomorphism has been criticised by scholars<sup>8</sup> who suggest that attributing human traits to animals waters down the latter’s otherness and would not, therefore, contribute to an approach that aims to view animals as more than their functionality to humans. Nonetheless, anthropomorphism in general is an established concept both in literature and culture. In fact, anthropomorphic perceptions can also act as a useful tool because they “revise and reject the classificatory split between human rationality and animal lack. [...] [They] attempt[t] to characterize nonhuman mentalities and behaviors”.<sup>9</sup> The anthropomorphic portrayal of the hind challenges the aforementioned discourses of a strict species split based on a lack of reason and intelligence and allows her to claim these traits for herself.

The strongest indicator for the hind’s acquisition of these characteristics is her ability to speak. In fact, she is the only speaking animal portrayed in the ‘Lais’; not even the shapeshifters in ‘Yonec’ and ‘Bisclavret’ speak when in their animal forms.<sup>10</sup> Since Classical Antiquity, speech has been one of the major indicators of humanity and possibly the most fundamental aspect of the human–animal

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6 McCracken 2017, p. 3.

7 In fact, Marie de France is assumed to have been a highly educated woman; thus, she was likely aware of these discourses.

8 For more information on anthropomorphism and the debate surrounding it, see Daston and Mitman 2005, especially pp. 2–5.

9 Crane 2013, p. 98.

10 This situation is, of course, genre-specific; fables, for example, are famous for their speaking animals. Marie’s knowledge of the fable tradition (gained through her translation of Latin fables), her choice of Breton source material, and her incorporation of both discourses into a romance plot portray the hind as an intriguing merging of genre conventions. See Spitzer 1930.

distinction:<sup>11</sup> not only did the lack of (human) speech signify inferiority in a general sense, but it was also suggestive of other dualisms, such as rationality/irrationality and, by extension, the question of animals' possessing immortal souls. In the ecclesiastical discourse of the medieval period, only humans were considered to be in possession of immortal souls, an assumption that also excluded animals from the afterlife. Thus, the hind's display of speech and the consequent attribution to her of a supposedly human-like soul also posits her as a human-like creature in a religious framework.

At first, the encounter between hind and knight conforms to the notion of human exceptionalism that portrays an animal as being subjected to human violence without the ability or power to avoid it. However, a transgression occurs, which brings about a drastic reversal of hierarchies. The revelation of the hind's ability to speak emphasises her humanisation as well as her agency, and the power dynamics between the two characters shift. Predicting her offender's and murderer's future, she succeeds in partially stripping herself of the passive victim role and takes the lead instead: while Guigemar initiates the interaction between the two with his shot, it is the hind who initiates the conversation. In fact, the human party remains conspicuously silent throughout the entire encounter. The hind is also the one *ending* the exchange, and she does so by dismissing Guigemar like a servant: "Go from here; let me have peace!" (*Va t'en de ci; lais m'aver pes!*; l. 122).<sup>12</sup> The result of such an anthropomorphised description is a sense of equality between the two participants.

The act of prophesying Guigemar's fate highlights the imbalance of knowledge between the two, putting the hind in the dominant position from which she can exercise power over Guigemar and become a figure of authority herself.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the beginning of her prophecy is particularly telling: "And you, vassal, who wounded me, | let this be your destiny" (*E tu, vassal, ki m'as nafree, | Tel seit la tue destinee*; ll. 107f.). BROOK sees this phrasing as clearly indicative of the hind's "supernaturalness [...] along with her superiority, [...] [due to] the content and tone of her speech".<sup>14</sup> While I agree with this assessment, I would go one step further and claim that this address also emphasises the hind's position as a person rather than an animal. After all, who would address a knight as 'vassal'

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11 Aristotle argues that only "[m]an has reason" (Politics VII, 13, 1332b5f., p. 2114) and "the gift of speech" (Politics I, 2, 1253a9f., p. 1988) and claims that "animals [were made] for the sake of man" (Politics I, 8, 1256b21f., pp. 1993f.).

12 All quotes from the 'Lais' are taken from Waters's 2018 edition.

13 McCash 1994 calls the hind's announcement of Guigemar's fate a curse, or revenge, rather than a prophecy. This implies agency as well as the display of the complex emotion that is revenge and the concepts behind it.

14 Brook 1987, p. 98.

but his (human) lord or the lady he courts? Crucially, it is Guigemar himself who accepts her sovereignty over him and thus consolidates the reversed hierarchy, both by remaining silent and by following her instructions without question or interruption.

Here, the hind is linked to and reflects the human lady from later in the tale, not only by her implied portrayal as a courted female but also by the content of her speech, in which she instructs the knight to find his (human) lady. Guigemar's adventure is thus framed by two encounters with female characters: the hind kick-starts his journey and his reincorporation into the normative courtly society that sees knights as open to love and sexual relationships (two aspects that Guigemar had, so far, rejected); the human lady carries out the act of healing, both physically and emotionally. The hind's subtle mirroring of the lady would, thus, be further indicative of her humanisation and the consequent undermining of a strict human–animal dichotomy.

The instability of the inter-species border is further amplified by the hind's subversion of an intra-species border—that of traditional gender norms, to be precise. Although the being is clearly identified as a hind and is explicitly stated to be with a fawn, her status as completely female remains in suspense, as she also has “stag's antlers on [the] head” (*[p]erches de cerf[...] en la teste*; l. 92). The portrayal of both male and female features has led PICKENS to call the hind an “androgynous beast”<sup>15</sup> and LEICESTER to contend that she is marked by “an instability of gender identity”.<sup>16</sup> This seems particularly relevant when taking into consideration that gender is an inherently human construct, which is, as such, usually not applied to the animal realm. Thus, the hind unites male and female attributes on a physical level as well as a conceptual one (that of sex and gender). Doing so highlights the artificiality of the gender border in the first place: her existence and implied gender fluidity question the presumably natural and inherent order (and distinction) of the sexes.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the hind displays a sense of fluidity and a simultaneous rejection of clear-cut boundaries, a portrayal which caters to the blurred species line posited by authors such as KAY and McCracken.

These individual instances of border crossing are intertwined and, thus, reinforce one another. They contribute to and strengthen the overall sense of instability

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15 Pickens 1974, p. 335.

16 Leicester 2005, p. 134. The hind's rejection of a clear gender categorisation and the underlying binary system also reflects the protagonist's similar position between medieval normative gender representations, a status which manifests in his wound: “It is well known that a wound in the thigh in medieval literature can serve as a euphemism for male impotence” (Whalen 2013, p. 144).

17 Willging 1995/96, p. 132, even claims that by blurring the line between these two poles, Marie ultimately “confounds the real and the fantastic, the body and the imagination (the mind)”, implying yet another border crossing.

and subversion that surrounds the depiction of the hind. However, the hind's unrealistic portrayal and seemingly close link to genre conventions of the fable tradition can also decrease the impact on and subversion of the human–animal border. To offer an alternative perspective, the representations of the second and third animals are more conventionally ambiguous and original, respectively.

## 2 Speaking without Talking: The Weasel

The weasel in 'Eliduc' is the second case study. After its mate has been killed, a weasel runs into the surrounding forest, finds a red flower, and revives the dead animal. This act is observed by a lady, Guildelüec, who imitates the weasel and so manages to revive her husband's dead lover, Guilliadun. The weasel's actions present a crossing of the life / death border that has implications with respect to the animal's mental faculties.

Weasels have a rich history in Western culture. The Latin 'Physiologus' material, for instance, demonstrates the animal's importance in the Christian tradition by providing it with an individual entry. There, it says that the "female receives the seed of the male in her mouth and [...] gives birth through the ears".<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, despite Isidore's rejection of this notion in the respective entry of his 'Etymologiae',<sup>19</sup> the weasel's curious manner of reproduction was still included in many weasel entries in bestiaries. A second peculiar characteristic of the weasel often mentioned there is the animal's presumed ability to "bring her dead pups back to life by making use of a miraculous herb",<sup>20</sup> which draws on the ancient trope that equips weasels with revival skills.

In 'Eliduc', the focus lies clearly on the weasel's healing ability instead of its peculiar method of reproduction. The scene begins with Guildelüec finding a young woman, Guilliadun, lying in a chapel, seemingly dead. She deduces that this must be her husband's lover when a weasel appears and runs over the dead lady's body. A squire accompanying Guildelüec kills the weasel and throws it carelessly away. So far, the depiction fits the stereotypical power dynamics between humans and animals: the inferior animal is being subjected to the arbitrary decisions and actions of the superior human. It is supposedly the human's right to choose who lives and who dies.

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18 Physiologus 35, p. 50. For his English translation, Curley uses two Latin manuscripts prepared by Francis Carmody: the y-version (based on manuscripts from the 8th and 9th c.) and the b-version (based on source material from the 9th to the 13th/14th c.).

19 Isidore of Seville: Etymologies XII, iii, 3, p. 254.

20 Bettini 2013, p. 99; see also p. 277, n. 42 for more information.

A second weasel appears and attempts to awaken its “companion” (*cumpaine*; l. 1039). When this does not work, the animal displays “sorrow” (*doel*; l. 1044). The implied attribution of the ability to experience grief situates the weasel in a conceptual framework that carries a multitude of connotations and associations—for instance, burial rites or the notion of an afterlife—which, in turn, serve to further the animal’s anthropomorphism. Placement on an instinct/emotion continuum often accompanies and reinforces modern discussions of an animal/human binary,<sup>21</sup> and, according to CRANE, a similar idea that “animals are driven by instinct”<sup>22</sup> can also be found in medieval discourses.

After the weasel’s realisation that its mate is dead, it runs out of the chapel into the forest and returns with “a flower | all of a red color” (*une flur | Tute de vermeille color*; ll. 1047 f.). It is this specific choice of colour that leads some scholars, such as GUREVITCH, to assume that the red flower could refer to the *red verbena*. This plant was known in medieval times for its healing abilities and was often used to treat brain-related ailments, including nervous disorders—a feature that modern science has managed to support to some degree.<sup>23</sup> However, the fact that the body of the comatose, or dead, Guilliadun remains healthy and beautiful even after several days without nourishment does imply at least a partially supernatural phenomenon. This ambiguous representation “reflects the strong alliance between experimental science, religion and magic [in Marie’s times]”.<sup>24</sup> Such an alliance highlights the obscurity and complexity of the line between the three fields and, in doing so, is suggestive of another border that is crossed by the animal.

The weasel actively puts the flower into the mouth of its dead mate and thereby revives it. In a way similar to that in the case study of the hind, the transgression of the border—here, between life and death—indicates the moment in which the power dynamics shift drastically. The weasel’s act of revival recalls the powerful role the squire played in the killing of the first animal; this time, however, it is the weasel that decides about life and death, and not the human. Hence, the weasel is also endowed with the notion of agency. In a peculiar reversal of the previous situation, the weasel’s revival of its mate displays an ability that the human characters lack, thus emphasising a strong disparity between the two groups. Ironically, this imbalance is not a physical one but takes place on the level of mental faculties (knowledge of the floral powers), the one field which humans have considered to be their forte.

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21 Notions of suffering and empathy in particular are of interest in modern scholarship; see, for instance, Derrida 2002.

22 Crane 2013, p. 36.

23 See Gurevitch 2011, pp. 213 f.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 211.



Moreover, the scene implies a curious mix of reason and, for lack of a better word, instinct. The weasel's actions raise the question of whether the healing is the result of intention, a rational decision that is based on achieving an intended outcome, or something the creature does due to its nature as an irrational animal. The fact that the weasel runs into the forest, returns with a specific flower, and knows what to do with it—"put it in the mouth | of [its] companion that the servant had killed" (*Dedenz la buche en teu manere | A sa cumpaine l'aveit mise*; ll. 1050 f.)—bears implications for both arguments. However, in light of the previous attribution of emotions to the weasel, the healing, too, gains a decidedly human quality and leans more towards the pole of rational thought and intention. If one follows this reading, the weasel appears to display a sense of self-awareness concerning others as well as its own actions.

Witnessing the weasel's ability, Guildelüec orders the squire to get the flower, which he does by throwing a stick that hits the animal. As he does so, we are briefly reminded of the traditional power relations that should be featured here, but the moment is too short and the action described too superficially to do more than highlight their absence instead. Acquiring the flower, Guildelüec copies the weasel and revives the supposedly dead Guiliadun. Her response to the animal's actions marks her as the human spectator who observes the animal performer in a non-traditional manner, since her imitation of the weasel casts the animal in a teaching role. This interpretation once again emphasises the usefulness of anthropomorphism, as it portrays an "attemp[t] to characterize nonhuman mentalities and behaviors".<sup>25</sup> The 'positive' reversal of power—teaching instead of violently asserting dominance—provides a contrast with the squire's exhibition of power earlier in the lay, which displayed "the human monopolization of violence [...] [as] the fundamental tool of domination".<sup>26</sup> Responding immediately and unquestioningly to the animal's actions by copying it, Guildelüec herself also expresses her acknowledgement of the weasel's authority and position of power—just like Guigemar did when he remained silent and obedient in the face of the talking hind.

Like 'Guigemar', 'Eliduc' encourages a continuous negotiation of the human-animal relationship. The lay's shifting power relations hold the acknowledgement of potential equality between the species in suspension while refusing to take specific sides. Tension is created by a sense of animal power, implied by Guildelüec's voluntary imitation and the repeated glimpses of the traditional power dynamics. The more ambiguous classification of the weasel's abilities as either supernatural or scientific adds to this conflict. Unlike the hind, the weasel conveys information not verbally but non-verbally, that is, through action. In doing so, speech is shifted to

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<sup>25</sup> Crane 2013, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Steel 2011, p. 24.

a symbolic level, which also distances the weasel's representation from the talking animals of the fable genre. The clever use of scholastic material and contemporary scientific knowledge puts a spotlight on the human–animal relationship in this lay. The act of border crossing entails a shift in power dynamics from traditional beliefs that are in accordance with widely known scholastic opinions to non-traditional representations that subvert the normative assumptions regarding the human–animal dichotomy.

### 3 Naturalism: The Swan

The third animal example is the messenger swan in 'Milun'. A knight, Milun, falls in love with a lady; they begin an affair, and she bears him a son. However, due to external circumstances, the lady is married off to another lord, forcing the lovers to mostly communicate secretly through a messenger swan for twenty years.

In contrast to 'Guigemar' and 'Eliduc', 'Milun' does not draw on supernaturally coloured genre conventions or attributions for its leading animal. Even the bird's symbolic interpretation appears to play only a secondary role in the narrative. Both of its positions—as a token for the couple's loyal love and as a symbol of their grief for and lament of the limited realisation of their relationship—have surprisingly little attention drawn to them in the lay's narrative.

Instead, 'Milun' displays a remarkably "naturalistic"<sup>27</sup> portrayal of the swan, its behaviour, and its contemporary treatment and training. The swan is given to the lady by Milun with the help of a squire. The latter pretends to be a fowler who caught the swan close to Caerleon and who now asks for protection in exchange for the bird. BULLOCK-DAVIES claims that this representation fits the historical 'facts' regarding swan-breeding—the area below Caerleon was "an ideal breeding-place for swans" in the past<sup>28</sup>—and the legal context in which this bird was allowed to be hunted.<sup>29</sup> Such a portrayal is interesting insofar as it allows for the swan as a (symbolic) token of love and the swan as physical creature to be conflated without either disappearing completely.<sup>30</sup> Explicit attention is drawn to the swan's corporeality every time its task as a delivery man is mentioned, while the bird also manages to retain its (subtle) symbolic meaning(s). The ambiguity that results from this depiction remains present throughout the entire lay.

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27 Bruckner 2011, p. 171.

28 Bullock-Davies 1972, p. 24.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 24f.

30 The nightingale in 'Laüstic', for instance, is little more than its symbolic meaning, and its status as a physical creature only plays a minor role.

After the gift has been delivered, the lady finds Milun's letter around the swan's neck, which explains that she must feed the bird well and let it rest for some time, and then "let it fast [...] for three days" (*sil laist tant juner | Treis jurs*; ll. 244f.). The bird will then carry her letter back to Milun in order to get fed. BRUCKNER notes that "[s]uch details of animal training were well known to Marie's aristocratic readers".<sup>31</sup> Upon its arrival, Milun repeats the process and sends the swan with a letter back to the lady. This role as messenger also posits the swan as an animal that bears a strong link to the silent speech of the written word.

Moreover, the detailed account of the swan's training emphasises its complete dependence on its human owners for survival. In fact, DEMELLO sees the keeping and breeding of pets as "one of the most concrete, corporeal ways in which humans exercise control over animals".<sup>32</sup> Thus, the bird's status as an owned creature is already a clear indicator of the human-animal relationship and the corresponding power dynamics that are being represented: it is a relationship which, by means of its more naturalistic quality, illustrates the lived reality of the general discourse of subordinate animals.

At the same time, however, the swan is also shown to surpass humans in their physical abilities (flying). What upsets the traditional power relation and adds another nuance to its representation is the swan's ability to cross barriers that are impossible to overcome for the human characters. While Milun is unable to enter the lady's castle, the swan can fly straight into her very chamber without hindrance. Although the swan's taming and its subjection to and dependence on its owner's treatment is impossible to overlook, the fact remains that the swan succeeds in something that is out of reach for the two humans involved: the crossing of physical walls. In its complete disregard of the man-made border (wall)—an obstacle which not only presents a physical boundary but also carries heavy social implications—the swan both displays its (context-related) empowerment generated by its non-human ability (flying) and emphasises, by implication, the human lack thereof.

Moreover, the detailed and naturalistic representation of the swan and its treatment highlight that the bird's position of partial power exists naturally. In contrast to the talking hind, whose abilities (speaking/foretelling) are clearly non-natural, or the weasel, whose healing powers at the very least have a strong supernatural undertone, the swan is firmly situated in a realistic setting and disconnected from the supernatural realm. As MCCASH puts it, "Marie not only does nothing to violate the physical reality of the swan, she seems also to make

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31 Bruckner 2011, p. 174.

32 DeMello 2012, p. 162.

every effort to give it a natural function within a realistic, plausible setting”.<sup>33</sup> The ability at the root of its empowerment is real and natural, not a magically enhanced one; the swan has no need for supernatural modifications in order to surpass humans in certain areas. Analysing a similarly naturalistic portrayal of a raven in an Irish hagiography, CRANE notes “[i]n presenting a natural world so continuous with human society”, the story’s “hierarchy of species looks less than vertical, tilting over toward horizontality”.<sup>34</sup> In other words, embedding both categories of being in the same plausible setting ultimately foregrounds human and animal similarities.

It is partially this extraordinarily realistic illustration of the swan that delineates the bird as being more than a tamed animal: it becomes a pet and, thus, a companion to its human owners.<sup>35</sup> Milun cares a great deal about the bird—“When he saw it, he was very happy” (*Quant il le vit, mut en fu liez*; l. 267)—and the swan lives in the lady’s chamber during its time with her: “She kept it in her chamber for a month” (*Dedenz sa chambre un meis le tint*; l. 253). In contrast to other domesticated animals, and even ordinary hunting dogs, medieval pets “were allowed into spaces where access was granted to few apart from chosen servants and retainers”.<sup>36</sup> The bird’s placement in the lady’s chamber also accentuates their proximity for an extended period of time, a circumstance which would favour and facilitate the formation of any meaningful emotional relationship based on companionship between human and animal.

Furthermore, the bird becomes a proxy representing each of the two human partners to the other. The swan is their sole “messenger” (*messenger*; l. 281) and remains for some time with each lover alternately for twenty years.<sup>37</sup> That both humans would project their feelings for their loved one onto the bird, an essential figure to their love, and take comfort in the animal’s regular appearance and subsequent presence does not seem like a far stretch. In fact, WALKER-MEIKLE argues that in medieval romances, the pet often becomes the “representative of the absent lover”.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the swan acquires the status of a human, though its naturalistic humanisation is not expressed on a physical level, like the supernaturally permeated anthropomorphism of the hind. As a result, it becomes clear that “becoming human is troubled by persistent ties to animality”,<sup>39</sup> which,

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33 McCash 1995, p. 392.

34 Crane 2013, p. 39.

35 Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 1, defines pets as “animals kept by humans for companionship”.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

37 Though it is said that the lovers do meet, the lay offers this information only in passing compared to the amount of time spent on the description of the avian method of communication.

38 Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 90.

39 McCracken 2017, p. 131.

in turn, acknowledges the species border to be more fluid and movement on the human–animal continuum to be possible.

Despite the animal's realistic humanisation, however, several questions arise. If the swan is situated within the human system of emotions by virtue of having attributed to it the ability to provide comfort, what does this say about its position on the human rationality/animal irrationality continuum? Unlike the weasel, the swan is never said to display any specific emotions unless they are related to the desire for food (cf. ll. 261–263), a relation which facilitates its attribution to the instinctual pole of the continuum. Moreover, the original function of the swan (carrying messages) is never forgotten or downplayed in the lay. Consequently, its training method and the rather harsh treatment of repeated starvation also remain a present note throughout the story and highlight that the swan is not only a pampered and beloved pet, an “honorary huma[n]”,<sup>40</sup> but also a working animal. The continuous mediation of both the pet and the servant positions makes it explicit that both categories are social constructs that “shape not only how the animals are seen but also how they are used and treated”.<sup>41</sup> The thereby-created tension regarding the human–animal divide ultimately leaves the swan's relation with the humans ambiguous.

The swan's realistic setting makes it perhaps the most impactful of the three examples. Not only is the swan's ‘speech’ silent instead of a verbalised act like the hind's, or an active physical performance like the weasel's, but the bird's situation in a plausible framework and consequent detachment from unrealistic genre conventions also means people could, in theory, encounter it in their everyday lives. The naturalistic portrayal of a real-world creature combined with its pet status also provides an alternative to other animal depictions (for instance, animals as beasts of burden, hunted animals, animals as food) and offers a way for humans to engage with animals beyond these inferior roles.

## 4 Conclusion

As has been shown, the hind, the weasel, and the swan in Marie de France's ‘Lais’ provide ample opportunity to engage with the representation of animals and their relations to humans in medieval culture. The swan's combination of (physical) empowerment and blurred conceptual categories of pet and working animal leads to a continuous negotiation of the human–animal relationship, both in the context of literary conventions as well as cultural traditions. ‘Milun’ alternately casts

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<sup>40</sup> Walker-Meikle 2012, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> DeMello 2012, p. 10.

the humans and the swan in the position of power but never commits to either choice. Likewise, the weasel's circumvention of the life / death boundary and its subsequent display of potentially rational thought and intentionality reflects a struggle in relation to power dynamics that is never resolved. Conversely, the hind takes an in-your-face approach with her crossing and consequent subversion of the human–animal border. However, even the hind's representation, culminating in the animal's death, remains ambiguous about the final power distributions.

The analyses also show how a decrease in the animals' conventional portrayals and more pronounced links to the fable tradition corresponds with an increase in human relatability. While the hind exhibits relatively explicit fable genre markers (primarily, her speech), the weasel's representation is much more ambiguous: instead of actually talking (performing a speech act), this animal 'speaks' through actions, i.e. non-verbally. Combining this way of handling language with the lay's large amounts of doubling and mirroring, the weasel can be seen as a point of intersection of the other two animals. Finally, in the swan's portrayal, there is little left regarding links to the fable genre, making it perhaps the most original and unconventional of the three examples in terms of genre. Here, the animal is completely (but naturalistically) silent. Nevertheless, it retains a striking, yet passive, connection to speech in the form of the letters it carries. Like the animal itself, its speech has become silent but is expressed in writing.

All three examples depict the human–animal border as more fluid and, by implication, the corresponding dichotomy as a (social and genre-conventional) construct. While the 'Lais' do not perform an outright deconstruction of the human–animal border, they serve well to highlight questions of the binary's traditional representation and open up the stage for further discussion. This is particularly true for some of the discourses regarding human superiority and animal inferiority—a notion which may also have facilitated the overall engagement with animals as non-human others in the socio-political context of contemporary audiences. What should have become clear, however, is the productive results that a critical engagement with the human–animal binary in medieval literature can lead to, and the positive influence that Animal Studies can have on our understanding of medieval cultures. Both fields can profit from one another, and the need for further interdisciplinary research is evident.

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