
In this extremely stimulating study, Karl Steel explores some of the most important and fundamental aspects of human identity. Taking up the challenges of a ‘post-humanist’ critique, he considers the human and animal at an interface of power and violence, more specifically human violence exerted over animals. The discussion is nourished by a lively and enriching engagement with critical theory, drawing upon the work of diverse thinkers such as Derrida (in particular the posthumous *L'Animal que donc je suis*), Agamben, Lacan, and Žižek, rigorously in the service of a series of sensitive and rewarding close readings. The first chapter, entitled ‘How to make a human’, begins by asserting that it is the human exertion and control of violence over animals that establishes the human/animal dichotomy. Man’s reason allows him to dominate animals, while the proof of his superiority is this domination over animals: a circular argument. The second chapter, entitled ‘Mastering violence’, discusses in greater depth this notion of domination and the human control of violence, especially with recourse to a range of ways of understanding that exercise of power. Thus, the taboos around the human consumption of carrion, that is, animals specifically not killed by other humans, a ‘category scandal’ (in the words of Mary Douglas). As Steel says, ‘What matters is how they die’ (p. 80). The third chapter, ‘In and out of mortal flesh’, looks at the theological arguments on the inaccessibility of heaven to animals and the promise of resurrection. He also explores the problems posed when animals eat humans, with a fascinating discussion of accounts of how human flesh tastes. The fourth chapter, ‘Domesticating beasts: cynocephali, the wild herdsman, and Prudentius’s indomitable sheep’, looks at what might be called ‘animals on the edge’, wild men, or dog-headed men, cynocephali, who have tamed and domesticated animals, and are thus not quite animal and not quite men. The question of sympathy with animals is then discussed and how to interpret the many calls to restrict the cruelty inflicted on animals. This is seen as part of a wider discourse of humans not getting a taste for cruelty and being in danger of perpetrating such cruelty on other humans. The animal’s suffering is not at issue. The fifth and final chapter, ‘Pigs, butchers, and the ends of humanity’, has a compelling discussion of those other ‘marginal’ beasts, pigs. Often recognized as closest to humans, they are, at the same time, most
dangerous to them: they are ‘the most animal of animals’ (p. 180). Domestic yet not fully domesticated, they are never kept for pleasure or as pets, nor for work on the farm, but solely for slaughter. This exceptional status is explored in a range of texts in which the pig appears, with an extended discussion of The Awowyng of Arthur. An epilogue considers a series of texts that present what Steel refers to as offering ‘more generous, less anthropocentric modes of being with others’, including the tradition of the fifteen signs of the Last Judgement and Sir Gowther. The discussion closes with some vivid considerations of a more theoretical nature, engaging with critics in areas such as animal studies, ethics, and queer studies, urging for new ways of being in the world as animal with animals: ‘I seek a way of being with each other that could be enacted with an awareness of our shared vulnerability, the shared significance of all our deaths, our shared mobile being together, and even our shared deliciousness’ (p. 244).

This is an accomplished piece of work; highly engaging, serious as well as wryly humorous, it is a most enjoyable read. It will appeal to the medievalist and non-medievalist alike, and should certainly be read by both.

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Medieval culture, Mark Amsler reminds us, has long been read ‘within and against Latin writing and Latin language ideology’ (p. 6). Scholarship on vernacular language and literature in the later medieval period continues to be framed in terms of a series of conflicts between Latin and vernacular, clergy and laity. In Affective Literacies: Writing and Multilingualism in the Late Middle Ages, Amsler challenges the standard narratives around these conflicts: the hierarchy of Latin, French, and English; the ‘triumphal story’ of the emergence of ‘monologic vernacularity’ (p. 252); the unidirectional influence of the reforms associated with the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) in promoting the vernacular over Latin, and so on. In their stead, Amsler persuasively suggests we need a more nuanced understanding of what he terms ‘multimodal and multilingual’ (p. xv) literacies in this period, which is alert to the ways in which post-1215 contexts at times encouraged rather than repressed the use of Latin and the laity’s investment in Latin discourse. Amsler does so using predominantly linguistic approaches, in particular those furnished by critical sociolinguistics and the ‘marker’ model of literacy. According to one recent account, the emergence of critical sociolinguistics marks a turn away from the dominant theories of language that have made ‘form … central, meaning … marginal, and the linguistic … autonomous from the social’. In line with this ‘turn’, then, Amsler aims to reimagine medieval literacies as multiple and mobile, ‘as a fluid field of interrelated activities’ (p. xix).