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Political Animals: Form and the Animal Fable in Langland's Rodent Parliament and Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*

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Abstract: Chaucer and Langland have generally been read independently of one another, in large part due to the profound formal differences of rhyme, metre, and lexical features within their poetry. However, a broader definition of form, that sees texts receiving their shape from an animating concept at their core, affords richer purchase on the potential convergences between the two poets. I take as my paradigmatic example of this phenomenon Chaucer's and Langland's mutual choice to couch their rare topical references in retellings of well-known animal fables (Langland's Rodent Parliament and Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*). Animal fables, I argue, are governed by a specific formal logic that allows both poets to draw attention to structural power imbalances in contemporary English society without entirely upending them.

Keywords: Chaucer, Langland, animal fables, ecocriticism, formalism, Rodent Parliament, *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

♣ In his well-known essay, 'Langland and Chaucer: An Obligatory Conjunction (1980)', George Kane observed of the apparent scholarly hesitation to discuss Langland and Chaucer side by side:

on clear consideration the near-contemporaneity and adjacency of the two poets is bound to contain a challenge [...] For prima facie the one poet can appear historically more remote than the other; with the other we sense closer kinship; he seems more accessible, which means in effect more easily modernizable.¹

Our reluctance to read Langland and Chaucer together, in other words, has to do with our sense of their relationship to our idea of English literary history. As Kane added in a follow-up piece,

[i]n a comparison Langland's modes can seem provincial, up-country, and Chaucer's polished, urbane, international [...] It is easy to take for granted the sense Chaucer confers of being in a literary milieu, forgetting that this tradition is his own unprecedented creation. Correspondingly Langland's performance can seem remarkable.²

Langland's alliterative verse seems to remove him from late medieval London both geographically and temporally, while Chaucer's fluid, Frenchified and Latinate rhyme seems

I am indebted to *YLS*'s two anonymous readers, and to Katharine Breen and Alastair Bennett, for their excellent feedback over the course of this essay's development, as well as to Eric Weiskott and Stephanie Batkie for putting together this essay cluster.

¹ Kane, 'Obligatory Conjunction', p. 123.

² Kane, 'Langland and Chaucer II', p. 140.

to look towards England's cultural and political future. These perceptions, however, Kane reminds us, have ultimately been fostered for us by the intricate formal design of the two poets' literary projects.

In reality, there are significant convergences between the two poets: both Langland and Chaucer engage extensively with the dream vision, for example, and both focus their major works on exploring a broad cross-section of contemporary society within the over-arching framework of a pilgrimage. Both authors also largely eschew grounding their work in references to contemporary events, deploying topical references but sparingly. On the rare occasions that they do make reference to contemporary events, furthermore, both Langland and Chaucer couch these references in surprisingly similar textual vehicles. One of Langland's two major topical references occurs in his application of the well-known 'belling the cat' fable to the events of the Good Parliament of 1376 and the Hilary Parliament of 1377.³ Meanwhile, Chaucer's most overt topical reference — to the 1381 Peasants' Revolt — occurs within the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, in a rewriting of the fable of the cock and the fox. That both authors should turn to the animal fable, of all literary possibilities, suggests that there is something about the animal fable itself that makes it particularly well suited to topical discourse.⁴ Investigating this function of the animal fable, therefore, especially given the scarcity of both authors' reliance on topicality, offers an opportunity to bring these two authors together where literary history has driven them apart.

In his chapter for Paul Strohm's edited volume *Middle English*, Christopher Cannon offers the following definition for literary form:

the form of a text not only consists of all the structural levels we traditionally anatomize when we refer to 'literary form' (as we look, almost always by turns, at its metre, rhyme scheme, or style; at its metaphors or patterns of imagery; at its generic affiliations or plot), but of the integration of all those levels, along with any other aspect of a particular text which may be seen to structure it.⁵

Form, in Cannon's definition, is not confined to its more readily apparent manifestations, such as metre and language, these being the same features, we note, that have done the most to pull Chaucer and Langland apart in our cultural imaginary. It resides instead in the pervasive logic that sutures a particular text together. As Cannon puts it several pages later,

[form] is the idea that, by informing a given raw material, gives the object its particular (and defining) shape [...] In fact, such an equation of thought and thing, when applied rigorously to a textual form, necessarily defines every contour that might be discerned in a text, not just as a clue to an originating thought (or set of them), but as a version of it.⁶

This definition, Cannon specifies, reaches back to thirteenth-century discussions of the ways in which texts' structural shapes are seen to proceed from their original formal causes, in the

³ Huppé, 'Date of the B-Text' and Orsten, 'Ambiguities'.

⁴ See, in this cluster, Christopher Cannon's 'The Ploughman's Tale', where he notes on p. 00 that the standard canon of medieval classroom texts included Avianus's fables; in other words, both authors would have encountered Aesopic fables in their respective schoolrooms; see further his *From Literacy*, pp. 159–64. Cf. also Eustache Deschamps's use of the 'belling the cat' fable to discuss failed French plans to invade England in 1385–86 (see my 'Who Will Bell the Cat?', pp. 257–59). Interestingly, a 'belling the cat' allusion also occurs in an anonymous political macaronic Anglo-Latin poem dated to 1388: 'The kyng knowyth not alle, | *non sunt qui vera loquuntur*. | He and he seyð well, | *et sermo placere videtur*; | The cattys nec to the belle | *hic et hic ligare veretur*' (The king does not know everything, | there are none who speak the truth. | This one and that one spoke well, | and the discourse seems to please; | This one and that one fear to bind | The cat's neck to the bell') (*World of Piers Plowman*, ed. by Krochalis and Peters, pp. 88–95, quotation at p. 90, ll. 95–100; translation my own).

⁵ Cannon, 'Form', p. 178.

⁶ Cannon, 'Form', p. 182. Cf. also Cannon, *Grounds of English Literature*, pp. 1–12.

Aristotelian sense.⁷ Cannon is suggesting that texts take on specific features in a reflection of the animating concept at their core.⁸

Cannon's account of form helps to unlock the relationship between animal fable and topical discourse. As scholars such as Jill Mann have observed, the animal fable is structured according to the natural food chain.⁹ The fox must try to trick the rooster because foxes eat roosters, and the rodents must gather to discuss the feline menace because cats eat mice. Being predicated on commonly accepted notions of real-life animal behaviour lends the animal fable a governing *formal* logic that affects the shape of the rest of the text. Since the contours of the animal fable derive from the original idea that animals live in a world of stark power imbalances, the animal fable therefore shapes the text's larger topical critiques of social hierarchies and the structural oppressions they fuel.

Given its formalist focus, this article is only interested in animals and their real-world existence insofar as that existence informs the literary representation of their behaviour within the form of the animal fable. That is to say, I concentrate on animals as a literary device and am not undertaking the posthumanist project of recent critical animal theory that has been productively challenging the primacy of the anthropocentric subject.¹⁰ As this piece argues, the literary form of the animal fable offers Langland and Chaucer a particularly canny discursive register of political critique that carefully draws attention to structural power imbalances in contemporary English society without entirely upending them. Animal fables, I will show, are not just concerned with predation but with the *economic effects* of predation on fragile ecosystems. In this lies, I argue, the full formal logic of the animal fable, which Langland and Chaucer productively apply to the human world. Imagining human kingdoms as ecosystems through the animal fable opens up a capacious space for Langland and Chaucer to think through strategies of survival and the importance of sustainability to the maintenance of a functioning society. Specifically, by using animal fables in topical applications both poets are able subtly to critique the inherent rapaciousness of sovereign power. In the process, they advance strategies for how subjects can leverage arguments for their survival and reorient their sovereigns' predatory instincts onto new targets without advocating for open rebellion. Langland and Chaucer thus demonstrate the value of robust intercessory politics by the commons before predatory sovereigns. The striking similarity of these twin blueprints for canny intercession from the two poets suggests that the form of the animal fable itself furnishes the discursive register required for visions of resistance without open revolution.

Animal Fables: Origins, Form, and Central Themes

The 'Aesopic' animal fable originates with the mysterious figure of 'Aesop', purportedly living in the early sixth century BC, attributed as the author of short stories about the animal kingdom

⁷ Cannon, 'Form', pp. 179–82. Cf. Smith, 'Medieval *Forma*', pp. 42–43.

⁸ For a useful overview and critique of rediscoveries of formalism, see Levinson, 'What Is New Formalism?'. On key discussions of New Formalist methodologies in medieval studies, see Marshall and Buchanan, 'New Formalism' and Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, pp. 12–15; for the dialectic between formalism and historicism, Lerer, 'Endurance of Formalism'; for an Adornian reading of form, Nolan, 'Making the Aesthetic Turn'; for an Aristotelian reading of form, Smith, 'Medieval *Forma*' and Cannon, 'Form'; for formalism's relation to medieval book history, Bahr and Gillespie, 'Form, Aesthetics'.

⁹ Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 33–39. Cf. Narkiss, 'The Fox, the Cock', p. 46.

¹⁰ For seminal works in this area, see Derrida, *L'Animal*; Calarco, *Zoographies*; Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*

by figures like Herodotus, Aristotle, and Aristophanes.¹¹ In the first half of the first century CE, Phaedrus created a Latin collection of short tales about animals, giving Aesop as his ultimate source, while Babrius produced a similar collection in Greek in the late first or early second century. This Greek collection was translated into Latin at the turn of the fifth century by Avianus who likewise alleged Aesop as a source. Babrius, Phaedrus, and Avianus were a staple of late antique classroom education; already in the *Orator's Education*, Quintilian instructs young students to start their training by learning to rewrite and creatively paraphrase 'Aesopi fabellas' (I.ix.2–3).¹² By the tenth century, Phaedrus's difficult Latin was recast into a number of simplified Latin prose translations, of which the so-called 'Romulus' (named after the signature on its prefatory epistle), first extant in a ninth-century manuscript but probably composed some centuries earlier, swiftly became the most popular, eclipsing the original Phaedrus itself. This text seems to have become the ultimate basis for a number of twelfth-century rewritings, including Marie de France's *Fables* and the monumentally popular 'verse Romulus' or 'elegiac Romulus', also known as the 'Esopus', 'Ysopet', the 'Anonymus Neveleti', or the 'Pseudo-Gualterus Anglicus', extant in over two hundred manuscripts, and translated into French multiple times by the end of the Middle Ages. Another highly influential source of fables for late medieval authors was the Latin collection of the English preacher Odo of Cheriton, composed after 1225. Several animal fables centred on foxes, wolves, and roosters from a combination of these sources also went into the enormously popular *Roman de Renard* cycle, which first appeared in the 1170s and developed into its own robust tradition of beast epic.¹³

The form of the animal fable is generally fairly simple: it consists of a brief, bare-bones narrative and a promythium or epimythium, or short moral either at the beginning or end; the short moral is the central feature distinguishing it from other short-form narrative genres.¹⁴ The vast majority of Aesopic animal fables consist of a dialogue between two animals, whose adherence to the laws of the animal kingdom, or lack thereof, furnishes the narrative with dramatic tension. As Mann puts it:

Animals are chosen [...] because their actions can be assumed to be dictated by nature, and this lends a quasi-inevitability to their actions, even when they are not such as the 'natural animal' would commit [...] [T]he narrative expectation is even stronger in fables which begin with animals wanting to act *unnaturally*, to transgress the bounds of nature, for it is obvious that the attempt to do so must come to grief.¹⁵

This dialogue may be between predator and prey (e.g., cat and mouse), two competitors or rivals (e.g., fox and wolf), or more randomly combined creatures where the moral does not lie in their interpersonal relation but elsewhere (e.g., frog and cow, in which a frog, envious at a distance of the cow's size, puffs itself up until it bursts).¹⁶ Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* derives from the tale of the fox's capture of the cock (or partridge) by flattering it to close its eyes, one of the more popular fables in the whole tradition. It originates not in the original Phaedrus, but is found instead in the late eighth-century writings of Alcuin of York and the eleventh-century

¹¹ 'Introduction', in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. XXXV–XLVI.

¹² Text from Quintilian, *Orator's Education*. On Aesop and education, see Lerer, 'Aesop, Authorship' and Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop*, pp. 32–96; see further pp. 97–123 for Wheatley's interesting argument that the structure of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* mirrors medieval classroom commentaries on fables.

¹³ For more on the animal fable and its relationship to yet distinction from beast epic, see Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 2–31; cf. Honneger, *From Phoenix*, p. 178 on animals in fables as flat types versus the more complex characters in beast epic. On the 'beast poem' as a distinct but related genre from the other two, see Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*, 1–12.

¹⁴ Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁵ Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 39, emphasis original.

¹⁶ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 218–20.

fables of Ademar of Chabannes, as well as the early medieval beast poems forming key sources for the *Roman de Renard*; it came to Chaucer through a combination of Marie de France and *Renard* and its later derivatives.¹⁷

Langland's Rodent Parliament, however, belongs to a category of animal fable in which two or more animals are present within the setting of a hierarchical collective, usually the farm, home, or forest. The dramatic tension between individual predator and prey widens in these fables into larger narrative concerns concerning predators' capability of menacing a whole community or some internal dysfunction that threatens to destroy the sustainability of the collective and/or leaves it vulnerable to external predation. Thus, for example, in the famous 'lion's share' fable, the narrative problem is that the lion, the fox, and the ass have teamed up on a hunt, but the lion, dissatisfied with the equal division of their prey, demands a surfeit, his 'lion's share', and turns on his compatriots for it, destroying their crafted community.¹⁸ Another version of this phenomenon is the introduction of a new element from outside that destroys the previously sustainable and self-contained system, such as the man who agrees to let a wolf guard his sheep, or the man who traps a lion in his yard in order to capture it, only to realize later that his actions result in the death of all of his livestock.¹⁹ In another fable, the unsustainable element becomes the farmer himself: trapped by a storm, a man eats his way through his livestock until his dogs realize it is time to flee because, they reason, if he will not spare his valuable oxen, who help him till his land, then he surely will not spare his dogs.²⁰ The canines thus quickly evaluate their own position in the farm's ecosystem and determine that their rank and role will not protect them from a farmer bent on destroying his entire enterprise. In the case of the 'belling the cat' fable, which originates with the 'verse Romulus' and threads through the fourteenth-century English preaching tradition, the rodents are similarly trying to decide how to control a cat that is unsustainably decimating their community.²¹

In other words, since consumption is the central mechanism of the animal world, the fable is profoundly concerned with the limits on that consumption. For this reason, as soon as the plot of the animal fable widens to admit more than two characters, the narrative tension often turns on how to organize and maintain consumption between predator and prey in a sustainable fashion without exhausting the established ecosystem. The link between this set-up and issues of power in the human world suggests itself: already by the twelfth century adaptors of animal fables, such as Marie de France, were substituting the fables' ethical categories ('good man', 'wise man', 'wicked man') for socioeconomic ones (king, prelate, rich man, peasant).²²

If the very narrative premise of the animal fable — the prey before its predator, the (dys)functional ecosystem — lends itself to easy comparison with sociopolitical relationships in the human world, then so too, significantly — and this is the heart of my argument — the formal narrative developments of the fable's plot map onto possible human actions in response to sociopolitical circumstances. The farmer's dogs' flight in the fable above furnishes one narrative answer to the problem of the overburdened ecosystem. The dialogic form of the animal fable invites another key strategy: the idea of intercession between prey and predator, a

¹⁷ For an early version of this fable, see *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 525–26. There has been some debate as to whether Chaucer is drawing more on the Aesopic tradition or the *Renard*: see Pratt, *Old French Sources*; Wheatley, 'Nun's Priest's Tale'; and Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 238–61. Either way, Russell's flattery and capture of Chaunticleer and the rooster's escape follow the original 'cock and fox' fable.

¹⁸ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 449–50.

¹⁹ For the wolf guarding sheep, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 467–68, and, for the lion in the yard, p. 448.

²⁰ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, p. 430.

²¹ On Langland's sources for the fable, see my 'Who Will Bell the Cat?', pp. 256–57.

²² Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 58–67; Salisbury, *Beast Within*, pp. 129–30; Henderson, 'Medieval Beasts', p. 41.

strategy that turns, in that narratively broader type of fable concerned with ecosystems, on the prey's centrality to the maintenance of that ecosystem. Isidore and Aquinas divided animals into two main categories: the domesticated, i.e., property used for food, products such as milk and wool, and labour power; and the undomesticated, i.e., wild animals who pose a threat to property animals, whether as predators or vermin.²³ In a two-character dialogue set on a farm, a woman overhears her sheep in an effort to get more wool from it, harming its skin in the process. The sheep pleads with her that she needs to decide what she wants — meat or fleece — and either hire a professional butcher to make a quick end of the sheep or else a shearer who, the sheep says, will do the job properly.²⁴ The sheep argues, in other words, that its body is precious to its owner and its consumption must be minimally wasteful. In one of Odo of Cheriton's fables, sheep successfully bring a complaint before the lion, whom they address as 'domine rex', about their families being unsustainably decimated by a wolf, whose rapaciousness the lion immediately condemns to death by hanging.²⁵ These two fables remind us that, although they are exemplary victims of exploitation, sheep paradoxically also have intercessory power before their masters because they are valuable animals, on whom the whole ecosystem depends.²⁶

In another fable, however, the centrality of the sheep to the farm economy is challenged by another animal, highlighting the complexity of the intercessor's subject position. Here a sheep also complains of exploitation: the farmer, it laments, shears it for clothing, makes cheese from its milk, and uses its reproductive body to grow his flocks, yet he sustains the sheep on meagre grass, while the dog enjoys far better food. In this case the intercession fails, as the dog retorts that it serves the key function of protecting the sheep from thieves and wolves and thus allows it to eat the grass in peace.²⁷ This more complex scenario turns on the question of *what* makes the ecosystem sustainable. The sheep does not feel adequately rewarded for its labour, but its attempts to declare itself more worthy than the dog are silenced when the dog points out that its protective labour allows for the sheep's labour and, therefore, demands better compensation. The question of the sheep's exploitation is left suspended, emphasizing the challenges of establishing what types of labour are more or less essential to an economy. At the same time, this fable continues to remind us that subordinate animals can make powerful, and sometimes competing, claims for their own self-preservation by citing their role within a larger ecosystem.

That said, while the fable's readiness to transform animals into human stand-ins because of their capacity to die seems to invite issues of animal ethics suggesting concern with the value and dignity of animal suffering, the animal fable, to my mind, resists the posthumanist approach. As Karl Steel argues in *How to Make a Human*, humans fundamentally define themselves by asserting the worthiness of their lives against those of animals:

These acts of boundary-making subjugation include the acts not only of eating, taming, and killing but also categorizing, through which humans mark one creature as merely animal — as something that should be eaten, tamed, or killed, that is destined only for dust rather than for immortality — and mark another, themselves, as a life that [...] should never be treated instrumentally. To put it simply, an animal is human when it can be murdered.²⁸

²³ Salisbury, *Beast Within*, pp. 10–13.

²⁴ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 66–68.

²⁵ For the Latin original, see Hervieux, *Fabulistes*, IV, 196–97; for an English translation, see *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, p. 539.

²⁶ See Salisbury, *Beast Within*, pp. 24–26, on the importance of the sheep to late medieval economies on both sides of the Channel.

²⁷ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, pp. 164–66.

²⁸ Steel, *How to Make a Human*, pp. 14–15.

When animals in fables intercede before their predator and argue for the value of their labouring bodies to the economy, they start to make precisely the claims outlined by Steel above. Their arguments turn on the irreducibility of their bodies to mere instrumentality for the purposes of satisfying hunger. Thus, for example, when the dogs prepare to flee their rapacious master in the fable cited above, it is because they claim their death will be a homicide. That moment reveals the degree to which the animal fable, despite its interest in the sustainability of animal consumption to household economies, is nevertheless fundamentally discursively treating animals as humans. This rhetorical operation is then what allows the animal fable to represent the human world.

Thus, when Langland and Chaucer choose the animal fable as their mutual vehicle of topical commentary, they are choosing a form that, by its own internal adherence to the logic of consumption in the animal world, repeatedly plays out a central paradox: (1) as the fable focused on the predator versus its prey reveals, predators' impulses are fundamentally unstoppable; however, (2) as we learn when the 'predator-prey' fable widens into the 'ecosystem' scenario, predators' impulses must, nevertheless, be stopped. As has been noted, both Langland and Chaucer make original additions to their versions of the 'belling the cat' and 'cock and fox' fables. Langland's rodents, in contrast to the original 'belling the cat' fable, decide to back down from their belling project and discuss the inevitability of their victimization by the feline. Chaucer's 'cock and fox' fable, meanwhile, stresses its farmyard setting, rather than just focusing on Russell and Chaunticleer. Langland's addition thus narrows the 'ecosystem' concerns of his fable into those of the 'predator-prey' fable, while Chaucer's performs the opposite operation of integrating his 'predator-prey' fable into a larger 'ecosystem' scenario. As we will see, both poets' careful inclusion of both the straight 'predator-prey' and broader 'ecosystem' dimensions into their rewritings of animal fables allows them to harness the full discursive power of the fable's form and its concern with the destructive power of predators. Through manipulating the different dimensions of animal fable, Langland and Chaucer advance nuanced arguments about the value of intercessory politics to communities unsustainably governed by predators that productively critique the power dynamics of those communities without calling for revolution.

Herding Rats in Langland's Rodent Parliament

Langland's Rodent Parliament begins in line with the traditional 'belling the cat' fable. A group of rodents, tormented by a cruel feline, form a parliament to discuss placing a belled collar on the cat that would warn the mice of its approach. However, as in the fable, no rodent dares come forward to execute the projected counsel. In a departure from his sources, however, Langland has one of the mice advise the rest of the rodents to leave the cat be:

Though we hadde ykilled the cat, yet sholde ther come another
To cracchen us and al oure kynde though we copen under benches.
Forthi I counseille al the commune to late the catte worthe. (B.Prol.185–87)²⁹

Previous scholars have argued that this moment demonstrates a thoroughly defeatist position on the part of the rodents and is intended by Langland to represent dysfunction within the contemporary English Parliament.³⁰ I have an alternative reading, however: rather than

²⁹ All quotations from Langland, *Piers Plowman B*, ed. by Schmidt.

³⁰ Huppé, 'Date of the B-Text', sees this as a reminder of the Hilary Parliament of 1377 that undid the anti-corruption measures of the Good Parliament of 1376; Orsten, 'Ambiguities', p. 237, suggests that the mouse counselling inaction stands in for John of Gaunt, whose influence shaped many of the Hilary Parliament's

demonstrate the failure of representative assembly, the rodents are actually acting as a courageous governmental body concerned with the preservation of the realm. In my earlier article on this passage, I noted a particular detail in Langland's presentation of the rodents' balking before belling the cat: 'Ther ne was raton in al the route, *for al the reaume of Fraunce*, | That dorste have bounden the belle aboute the cattes nekke, | Ne hangen it aboute his hals *al Engelond to wynne*' (B.Prol.177–79, emphasis added). These phrases, which invoke the ongoing contemporary conflict between England and France, suggested to me a different topical context for the debate staged by the rodents in this scene. As the *Anonimalle Chronicle* and the Parliamentary Rolls for 1376–77 reveal, concerns about financing England's involvement in the Hundred Years' War and the pressures placed by over-taxation and subsidies on the country were central to parliamentary debates in 1376–77. I therefore proposed that the rodents' suddenly fatalistic position speaks to anxieties over the wartime stability of the realm in the wake of devastating wartime losses of English strongholds on the Continent and the deaths of Edward the Black Prince in 1376 and Edward III in 1377 that left England with a 'kitoun' (B.Prol.194), ten-year-old Richard II. In 1376–77, in other words, extreme governmental reform became an impractical pipe-dream, hence Langland's representation of the rodents as backing away from their original plan. Langland, I concluded, represents the commons as strategic rather than cowardly, concerned with finding the best way to maintain the country during a costly war that was, at the time, going particularly badly.

The rodents' decision to abandon their plan, for which my 2016 article offered a purely historicist answer, becomes even more legible when understood within the form of the animal fable. The mouse's comment — 'Though we hadde ykilled the cat, yet sholde ther come another' — points to the single unalterable rule of the animal fable: predation is the mechanism on which the animal kingdom runs, and to conceptualize a world without a top-down hierarchy is impossible. That there is a predator in charge is, therefore, not actually the substance of the rodents' problem; predatory rule is a constant in the animal world rather than an aberration. Their specific problem, necessitating convening the representative assembly, is that the predatory ruler is *too* predatory:

a cat of the court cam whan hym liked
 And overleep hem lightliche and laughte hem at his wille,
 And pleide with hem perillousli and possed hem aboute. (B.Prol.149–51)

The cat's consumption of the rodents is unregulated and unchecked, as the emphasis on the cat's capricious and unpredictable attacks on the rodents for the purposes of deadly play, rather than actual satisfaction of hunger, reveals. Belling the cat is one solution, since it enables the rodents to flee, but it does not actually solve the core of the problem: namely, how to restore sustainability to an ecosystem headed by an insatiably rapacious predator, given that the hierarchical position of the predator is required by the ecosystem itself. The solution comes in the form of the mouse's very next phrase after it suggests abandoning the belling project: 'The while he [the cat] caccheth conynges he coveiteth not our caroyne, | But fedeth hym al with venysoun' (B.Prol.189–90). The mouse's suggested strategy, since the cat's rapaciousness itself cannot be changed, is simply to reorient it onto other targets — rabbits — that exist in some separate ecosystem; this solution deflects the inviolate natural impulses of the predatory cat without disturbing the hierarchical order of the ecosystem itself.³¹ Read back into its topical

decisions; Anna Baldwin (*Theme of Government*, pp. 16–18) and Andrew Galloway (*Penn Commentary*, I, 135–36) suggest that Langland is counselling royal rule as ultimately preferable to parliamentary dysfunction; see also Gross, 'Langland's Rats', Dodd, 'Parliament', and Lassahn, 'Langland's Rats Revisited' for further discussions of this scene as responding to contemporary anxieties over endemic corruption in the Houses of Parliament.

³¹ See my 'Who Will Bell the Cat?', p. 268 for a suggestion that the 'conynges' be specifically understood as French soldiers.

context of late 1370s parliamentary debate, Langland's rewriting of the 'belling the cat' fable offers a clever intercessory strategy for dealing with rulers, all of whom, he suggests subtly, are inherently, by their very nature, a potential problem to the system. Nevertheless, rulers' compulsion for destruction can be cannily channelled outwards onto other targets, a solution that is particularly efficacious in times of open war. In this way, Langland is able to offer a quiet critique of sovereign rule as inherently dysfunctional, while suggesting a simple strategy that can fix the system without entirely upending it.

Langland's political commentary, however, is not solely focused on sovereigns but, significantly, includes the commons with it in a dual-pronged critique that leaves no one unscathed and yet continues to leave room for productive reform. Earlier in the Prologue, Langland appears to offer a favourable vision of the commons as a well-ordered branch of government which makes productive contributions to the realm:

the kyng and knyghthod and clergie bothe | Casten that the commune sholde hire communes
fynde. | The commune contreued of kynde with craftes, | And for profit of al the peple plowmen
ordained | To tilye and to trauaille as trewe lif asketh. (B.Prol.116–20)

Langland's decision to use the 'belling the cat' fable, however, presumably because it explicitly features animals organized into a political body ('concilium' in the Latin, translated into French as 'parlement'), necessarily alters the characterization of the commons from positive to negative by making them rodents.³² While it seems, at first glance, to offer an inconsistent view of the commons, this move allows Langland to deepen his careful critique of contemporary politics when he harnesses the animal fable's focus on sustainable ecosystems by having the rodents briefly consider their own fitness for rule. In its final argument before the rest of the assembly for submission to the cat, the mouse warns the rodents:

For may no renk ther reste have for ratones by nyghte,
For many mannes malt we mees wolde destruye,
And also ye route of ratones rende mennes clothes
Nere the cat of the court that kan yow overlepe;
For hadde ye rattes youre wille, ye kouthe noght rule yowselve. (B.Prol.197–201)

This moment seems especially indicative of parliamentary critique in its flat dismissal of the rodents-as-commons as capable of self-rule. I have argued, however, that the 'belling the cat' fable, in illustrating an animal collective, is therefore imagining an ecosystem, meaning it is centrally concerned with managing sustainability. This sustainability is only achievable when all animals accept their specific place in the order of the ecosystem: we remember the complaining sheep who needed reminding that the dog's labour is more valuable because it enables the sheep's labour. By suddenly insisting that the commons are rodents, Langland supplies an extra edge to the parliament's deliberations concerning managing their cat. Rodents occupy an interstitial zone that is adjacent to both the domestic and extra-domestic spheres in both rural and urban ecosystems. They do not hunt their own prey nor produce anything; rather, they scavenge products of domesticated animals' and human labour that is destined for human consumption. The mouse's specific insistence on the nuisance rodents cause — keeping people awake, consuming their grain, and gnawing through their clothes — emphasizes the rodents' sideways incursions into the top-down structure of the food chain.³³ Rodents, the mouse reveals, are agents of *unsustainability* because, as scavengers, they do not participate in normative power structures of production and consumption. They must therefore be kept from power, for, were they indeed to rule themselves, they would only destroy the economy. The mouse's acknowledgment of the rodents' position in the natural order shapes its suggestion that the cat

³² I cite the text from *Ysopet-Avionnet*, ed. by McKenzie and Oldfather, pp. 190–92.

³³ Cf. Salisbury, *Beast Within*, p. 67, on the Church's special penalties for consuming food tainted by rodents.

be tolerated, as a necessary check on the rodents' own destructive tendencies, but reoriented onto other prey for the creation of ideal social order. Langland's transformation of the commons from producers to scavengers winds up portraying the commons as a highly self-reflective governmental body.

The rodents thus emerge as ineffectual leaders, but ones that are cognizant of their role in the hierarchical structure of their society, importantly self-aware of their limitations as a governing body, and deeply concerned with maintaining balance in their world. Rather than corrupt, as they have been read, the rodents can instead be seen as wise, if flawed arbiters of the social good. In this way, the Rodent Parliament, generally viewed as a self-contained episode within the Prologue, sets up one of the central themes developed in *Piers Plowman's* later passūs: the proper organization of labour in a sustainable society, most immediately observable in the fraught ploughing of the half-acre.³⁴

Scholars such as Ellen Rentz and William Rhodes have already drawn our attention to contemporary manorial stewardship manuals as key contexts for understanding why the division of agricultural labour on the half-acre serves as Langland's prime metaphor for a spiritually robust society.³⁵ Thinking through the form of the animal fable can complement these historicist readings in drawing our attention to the larger political imaginaries surrounding sustainability that underpin salvationist visions of organized labour. A moment in passus 9 of the C text is a particularly cogent example. Here Langland inveighs against false hermits, who claim work exemption based on their service to the Church but sponge off the rich instead of dedicating their lives to spiritual devotion. Langland goes on to compare these hermits to wolves that 'ar writhen' into sheepfolds while guard-dogs remain silent (C.9.260); furthermore, he laments, farmers no longer stock good tar against sheep mange, preferring ineffective treatments instead (C.9.261–63). As a result, '[t]hy shep ben ner al shabbede, the wolf shyte the wolle' (C.9.265), and the farmer falls into spiritual arrears (C.9.272–75). In her analysis of this passage, Rosemary O'Neill, who also invokes contemporary husbandry manuals, argues that it points to what she calls an 'ethos of stewardship' since it centres on specifically economic damage as the index of clerical corruption.³⁶ The animal fable's interest in sustainability offers additional purchase on Langland's focus here on the fragility and precarity of the sheep's labouring body. The farmer's inattention to the material condition of his flock leads to sheep whose damaged, mangy bodies are no longer economically viable, which results in turn in his impoverished spiritual condition before the Lord, here cast as his economic debt to an overseer. To make matters worse, in abandoning his flock to the wolf, the farmer abandons his ecosystem: the wolf, interested in the sheep only as a source of meat, also destroys the useful remains of the sheep's formerly fruitful labouring body in its rapacious consumption by defecating on (or defecating out?) the sheep's wool.³⁷ The bad farmer-cum-bad steward is thus revealed to be an iteration of the dangerously self-destructive farmer of the animal fable, but here replayed in a devotional key.³⁸ Borrowing on the animal fable's preoccupation with ecosystems, Langland critiques the clergy for failing to foster sustainable communities in which subordinate subjects are valued for their contributions and afforded protection to perform them to the best of their

³⁴ See, *inter alia*, Middleton, 'Acts of Vagrancy'; Aers, *Community, Gender*; Hewett-Smith, 'Allegory on the Half-Acre'; and, in particular, Johnson, 'Poetics of Waste', on the poem's pessimistic outlook on the viability of sustainable ecosystems.

³⁵ Rentz, 'Half-Acre Bylaws' and Rhodes, 'Medieval Political Ecology'.

³⁶ O'Neill, 'Counting Sheep', pp. 92–95.

³⁷ The association between this moment and the animal fable is strengthened by the fact that Langland's source here, which he tags in Latin immediately following this moment in the C text, is the *Liber parabolarum*, a popular schoolroom text that circulated with the fables of Avianus: see Cannon, *From Literacy*, pp. 60–69.

³⁸ Cf. the conclusion of Odo of Cheriton's fable concerning the sheep who bring a complaint against wolves before the lion in note 25 above, with an epimythium that compares the wolves to clerics who destroy their flocks.

ability, echoing his larger critique of sustainability in the Rodent Parliament that restores dignity to subjects while inveighing against their overlords. As we are about to see, Chaucer's decision to emphasize the farmyard setting of his animal fable in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* allows him similarly to emphasize the economic significance of subordinate subjects and the political power that significance can produce.

The Fox in the Henhouse: Understanding Chaucer's 'Jakke Straw' Reference

Chaucer's only explicit topical reference to contemporary politics bursts through the barnyard romp of the *Nun Priest's Tale*, confusing critics as to its presence and import. After Russell the fox successfully makes off with the rooster Chaunticleer, the scene erupts into noise as the widow, her daughters, neighbours, dogs, cows, and hogs chase the fox, further frightening geese, ducks, and bees into joining the fracas (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, 7.3371–92). In the very midst of this comic chase, Chaucer suddenly alleges that, in comparison to this 'hydous noise',

Jakke Straw and his meynee
Ne made never shoutes half so shrille
Whan that they wolden any Fleming kille,
As thilke day was maad upon the fox. (*NPrT*, 7.3394–97)³⁹

Several scholars have read this moment as a decidedly negative depiction of peasants that follows on the rhetoric of the earlier *Visio Angliae* (1381), in which John Gower famously elaborates a nightmarish vision of the Peasants' Revolt as barnyard animals run riot.⁴⁰ Gower presents the peasants as transforming into animals that act contrary to their usually placid and subordinate natures: asses, for example, throw off their bridles and demand bejewelled saddles (VA, ll. 183–200), and oxen buck and rip off their yokes (VA, ll. 245–50). Gower then works his way through a hierarchy of animals in or adjacent to the farm, beginning with beasts of burden (the aforementioned asses and oxen), food animals (pigs), then smaller four-legged animals (dogs, cats, foxes), followed by farm birds (chickens, geese, barn-owls) and, finally, vermin (flies, wasps, gnats, locusts, frogs). This organization is similar to Chaucer's own presentation of the fox chase, which also runs hierarchically from people to dogs, cows, pigs, ducks, geese, and, finally, bees (*NPrT*, 7.3375–92).⁴¹ However, Gower's *Visio*, besides very broadly adhering to the animal fable's narrative logic of exploring the 'naturalness' of animal behaviour, really contains no other animal fable features. Its lengthy hierarchical list evokes the idea of the farm ecosystem, but the animals are presented paratactically, rather than in interdependent relationships. The point of the list seems mainly to demonstrate the magnitude

³⁹ Quotations from *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson.

⁴⁰ See Aers, 'Vox populi', pp. 450–51; see also Staley, *Languages of Power*, pp. 142–43, who suggests that the fox's capture of Chaunticleer, who occupies the position of king in the yard, leads to the same kind of social chaos unleashed historically by the Peasants' Revolt, and Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 208–16, for whom loudly crowing, pompous Chaunticleer is a pointed parody of Gower's narrator's claims, in the *Visio* and the rest of the *Vox clamantis*, to speak for the communal voice of the people. Cf. also Strohm who suggests that Chaucer is replaying the violence of the Revolt 'in a decidedly minor key', and thereby dehistoricizing it, in *Social Chaucer*, p. 165. For an edition, see Gower, *Poems*, ed. by Carlson.

⁴¹ Of additional interest, linking Chaucer's and Gower's presentation of peasants, is both poets' inclusion of lists of peasant names in Gower's intercalated verse of the peasants called forth by Wat Tyler (VA, ll. 783–94) and in Chaucer's fox chase (*NPrT*, 7.3382–84): see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 211–13, 217–18. On Gower's list of peasant names, see further Galloway, 'Gower in his Most Learned Role', esp. p. 333; and Steiner, 'Naming and Allegory', pp. 267–73.

of the revolt. Gower's choice to endow his animals with fantastical details — his asses, for example, grow horns (VA, ll. 221–31), and his oxen have bear's paws, dragon's tails, and breathe fire (VA, ll. 255–7) — further reveals the distance of his project from the animal fable, in which the only element of fantasy is that the animals speak.⁴² Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, on the other hand, is based on an especially popular animal fable, and it spends substantial time detailing its farmyard setting, which points to his engagement with the animal fable's preoccupations with ecosystems.

Exploring the animal fable's sustainability concerns offers a far more positive reading of Chaucer's choice to align his peasants with animals in a way that tracks with the fable's investments in the dignity of all labouring bodies, as we just saw explored in Langland's passage on the false hermits in the C text.⁴³ To equate the peasants with animals certainly seems to afford them the status of the subhuman, as Gower does in the *Visio*. But it also again emphasizes the significance of their socioeconomic function at the labouring end of late medieval society, as Gillian Rudd suggests when she notes that reading the animals within the matrix of labour relations reminds readers that 'all of those mentioned in this depiction of chaos are there to be consumed, literally or metaphorically; actually and/or economically'.⁴⁴ Like the sheep in the animal fables, Chauncicleer is also the prized property of a widow, whose poverty is heavily emphasized in the opening to the tale: she has a 'narwe cottage' (*NPrT*, 7.2), her rooms are '[f]ul sooty' (7.2832), and she eats 'ful many a sklendre meel' (7.2833) that, notably, includes 'somtyme an ey or tweye' (7.2845). Her livelihood appears to consist entirely of her farm, rendering Chauncicleer's happy 'feathering' of his seven chickens crucial to the widow's sustenance. Thus, the peasants and animals involved in trying to rescue Chauncicleer from his rapacious predator are actually performing, in this moment, not an act of destruction but a lifesaving economic service to the widow. The fox, explicitly rendered a 'Flemyng', is painted as a foreign economic rival, as opposed to a class enemy, from whom the ecosystem must be rescued.⁴⁵ From this perspective, Chaucer's peasants are trying to protect their little world. Rather than destroyers of property like Gower's animals in the *Visio*, the peasants of *this* Peasants' Revolt are the *preservers* of the property in their ecosystem against alien invasion.

Langland, we remember, unexpectedly recast his productively labouring commons as scavenging rodents in order to highlight the importance of knowing one's place in the social hierarchy for producing wise political counsel. Chaucer's animal fable also contains a key internal narrative shift, where power dynamics between animals are renegotiated to admit greater self-reflexivity on the part of the political subject. Several scholars have argued that handsome Chauncicleer is a figure for royal power. In particular, Larry Scanlon notes that contemporary mirrors-for-princes warned against the evils of flattery, and Richard II was perceived as particularly susceptible to flattery from malicious advisors. Recognizing that

⁴² It is noteworthy that both Babrius and Phaedrus make apologies for precisely this feature. Babrius takes the time to explain that animals were able speak back in the Golden Age (Prol. 5–7): *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. by Perry, p. 2. In his preface (p. 190), Phaedrus writes: 'calumniari si quis autem voluerit, | quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae, | fictis iocari nos meminerit fabulis' (Should anyone choose to run it down, because trees too are vocal, not wild beasts alone, let him remember that I speak in jest of things that never happened) (1.5–7).

⁴³ Cf. for other positive readings of the peasants, Fehrenbacher, 'Yeerd Enclosed', who sees the Peasants' Revolt reference as not pronouncing judgement on the peasants but reminding readers of the violence of history, otherwise repressed in the tale, and Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer*, pp. 261–63, who notes that the 'hydous noise' can also be read as a plea, or a challenge, thus opening room for seeing the rebels as beyond merely dumb, enraged beasts.

⁴⁴ Rudd, "'rather be used'", pp. 329–30. See also Lisa Kiser's discussion of four instances in the *Canterbury Tales* in which Chaucer references animals to evoke and comment on predatory social dynamics, particularly in relation to gender, in 'Animals That Therefore'.

⁴⁵ On the peasant rebels' attacks of the Flemish and the latter's role in the London wool trade, see Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 195–97, and Astell, *Political Allegory*, pp. 60–62.

Russell is attempting to take over his authority, Chaunticleer encourages him to fully inhabit his role as the new usurping power by turning around to confront the pursuing mob (*NPrT*, 7.3407–10). Intended to remind readers of Richard II's famous confrontation of the peasants during the Revolt, Scanlon argues, the fox's decision to assert his new royal authority proves his undoing: Chaunticleer flutters out of the fox's mouth in a demonstration that royal power rests entirely with the rooster.⁴⁶

While I agree with reading Chaunticleer as *kingly*, the particularities of Chaunticleer's escape, in conjunction with the tale's reliance on the animal fable, reveal a significant narrative rupture in Chaunticleer's position within the *Nun's Priest's Tale* that sets up Chaucer's demonstration of the power of intercessory politics. The fox's alien status and comparison to the Fleming firmly associates him with menacing economic foreign power, while his penetration into the yard from outside underscores his role as an agent of foreign invasion. The appearance of this foreign power, moreover, is irrevocably at odds with the existing power dynamic within the widow's yard. Chaunticleer is the economic centre of the yard's activity as its most valued subject, on whom the whole ecosystem depends; hence his *sense* of sovereign authority, visually manifest in his regal appearance and behaviour: that this status is contingent and illusory is foreshadowed by the variously comical undercuttings of this authority by Pertelote's sage wifely advice and his own foolishness. From this contingent space, we follow the fox and his avian prisoner into the narratively shrunken forest world of the 'predator-prey' animal fable. In this new world, Russell cannot be a direct substitute for Chaunticleer's authority, *contra* Scanlon, because Chaunticleer is no longer in his yard, meaning his position has become radically altered. Russell is representative of a power wholly novel to Chaunticleer: that of the predator, previously unknown to Chaunticleer as his enigmatic dream of a 'beest [...] lyk an hound [...] | [in] colour bitwixe yelow and reed' (*NPrT*, 7.2899–3002) makes clear. As the fox bears him beyond the yard, Chaunticleer is forced beyond the political world of the domestic, in which the widow's animal consumption had been stringently regulated, into the foreign 'wild', a space consisting only of rapacious predator Russell and his prey Chaunticleer. In this new world, Chaunticleer's authority of king over chickens is not just absent — it is no longer relevant. In this new world, Russell is king, and Chaunticleer is subject and, furthermore, a far lower subject than he had been in the widow's yard, for Russell has no use for Chaunticleer's otherwise fruitful labour, only his flesh, much like the wool-befouling wolves of Langland's C text. Newly made into a low subject, Chaunticleer must now adopt the prey's intercessory strategy of redirecting his predator's natural aggression onto the new external target of the mob, in a move strikingly similar to that of Langland's rodents attempting to manage their predatory cat. It is because Chaunticleer's position has been so radically renegotiated that the plan works beautifully, and Chaunticleer escapes back into the world of the domestic where he is able to regain his authority, which we now realize to be profoundly circumscribed by the 'yeerd [...] enclosed al aboute' (*NPrT*, 7.2847). Chaunticleer saves himself not because he is king, but because he is an economically valuable subject; this recognition initially motivates the farm's peasants and other animals to a rescue attempt. When that attempt fails, it is the subject's own ability to recognize the alteration of his status, due to the loss of his ecosystem environment (farm to forest), that successfully impels his intercession before his new sovereign and proves to be his ultimate salvation.

In this way, by engaging with the animal fable's concern with the rapaciousness of predators, both Langland and Chaucer make a case for the efficacy of the same strategy: speaking to an overweening figure, heedless of the fragility of economic sustainability, from a profoundly subordinate subject position with the aim of cleverly channelling economically damaging consumption onto externalized targets to preserve the domestic economy as a whole.

⁴⁶ Scanlon, 'Authority', pp. 61–64. Cf. for a similar argument, Astell, *Political Allegory*, pp. 112–15.

In both cases, these strategies reveal themselves as especially useful before the threat of foreign invasion. Further, in both cases, the animal-as-common subject additionally emerges as the unexpected source of clever political counsel due to his ability to recognize the particular contours of his subject position within his ecosystem and strategically deploy them.

Conclusion: Using the Form of the Animal Fable for Topical Critique

The form of the animal fable thus allows Langland and Chaucer to think carefully through best practices for political change, in which the stark power dynamics between subjects and sovereigns can be productively altered without upending them entirely, or even particularly redrawing them. As Gower's representation of the peasants as monstrous beasts in the *Visio* suggests, supporting revolution is decidedly not the political object of mainstream late fourteenth-century literary imaginings. This apparent reluctance before the idea of revolution may seem perhaps somewhat unsatisfactory to modern audiences, but, despite their insistence on preserving the larger hierarchical social order, Langland's and Chaucer's responses may not be as completely conservative as they may seem. Both authors insist on two key aspects of the political world they make through an animal fables lens: both subtly but profoundly critique the broad dimensions of sovereign power, and both insist, with surprising directness, for the value of the labouring commons, although the weight placed by each poet on either proposition is different.

Langland's cruel cat demonstrates particularly clearly that sovereigns are vicious predators, compulsively rapacious by their unalterable nature, and their instincts must be curbed for the good of the realm, as the sovereign's subjects wisely realize. On the one hand, this formulation paints sovereigns in a wholly negative light, while elevating the commons as purveyors of masterful political insight. However, inasmuch as the form of the animal fable introduces this radical critique, it also allows Langland simultaneously to undercut it. Although the rodents' concerns over their treatment by the cat are justified, the rodents also importantly realize their own parasitic role in the ecosystem due to their own overly rapacious consumption that also needs curbing by a predator. In this way, Langland can critique sovereign power while asserting its immense value for economic stability, and he can also insist on the intercessory power and wise political acumen of the commons, while reminding readers of the commons' fundamental unfitness for rule. As a result, Langland satirizes the functional dysfunction of the whole system, of sovereigns and subjects, without introducing any revolutionary impulse.

Chaucer, meanwhile, achieves an identical effect, albeit through opposite means. Chauncleer begins the tale as the notoriously arrogant and pompous subject of the yard, oblivious to external threats to his dominion and overly assured of his worth. Nevertheless, despite his literally cocksure attitude, he swiftly accepts his come-uppance in the space of the forest and demonstrates his own skills at intercessory diplomacy by cannily effecting a quick escape. The peasants, meanwhile, although they are valiantly trying to protect him, are wholly ineffectual through their inability to organize themselves beyond the shape of a chaotic mob, but they do prove their usefulness when Chauncleer uses them as a target for Russell's aggression. Like Langland's Rodent Parliament, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* thus also offers us a world of inherently flawed sovereigns and flawed subjects, who nevertheless redeem themselves by ultimately working in concert, albeit with lines of social stratification carefully drawn between them, to rehabilitate a disrupted status quo. If Langland points to the functional dysfunction in his political imaginary, then Chaucer offers us a slightly brighter perspective of dysfunctional function, as long as everyone accepts his or her place in the ecosystem.

Thus, as we have seen, despite their appearance as minor, self-contained episodes within larger allegorical narratives, Langland's and Chaucer's topical animal fables open up a surprisingly capacious space for nuanced political critique while stringently asserting the value of social hierarchy. Animal fables achieve this effect, furthermore, through the seeming simplicity of their structure that has relegated them, since Late Antiquity, to the status of children's literature. In this way, the fable itself mirrors one of its own key narrative operations: just as the animal on the very bottom of the food chain can paradoxically exert political influence through intercessory rhetoric, so too does the lowly form of the fable demonstrate unexpected discursive power to argue for viable political change within a set social structure. The animal fable reveals itself to be an 'intercessory' form *per se*, through which Langland and Chaucer can advance strategic political arguments. This operation thus suggests to us that we might firstly consider recuperating the animal fable as a particularly potent form within late medieval political discourse. It also reminds us that the animal fable is a paradigmatic example of the ways in which an originating concept can shape a text on all of its levels, as Cannon has proposed. In the process, thinking through animal fable as a form, and the light it sheds on the similarities between Langland and Chaucer that have ironically been obscured by other formal considerations, invites us to continue broadening our definition of form, its textual effects, and the previously unexamined connections between authors and texts that formalist methodologies reveal.

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