CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Abstract  This short conclusion summarizes the developments analysed in the book and assesses how far they remained influential beyond the thirteenth century. It argues that several of them retained considerable significance well into the early modern period, notably the authority and methodology of Aristotle, the sometimes tortured questioning of the animal-human divide, and many aspects of the use of animals for didactic purposes. By contrast, the medieval chivalric code had largely perished well before 1500 – though heraldic devices remain widespread in many contexts; and the tension between violence and affection towards animals is still very much with us today.

Keywords  Aristotle • Covid-19 • Emblem-books • Modern heraldry • Montaigne

I

The foregoing chapters have argued that thirteenth-century Western Europe witnessed an Animal Turn – understood as a cultural change in which scholars become increasingly aware of and interested in animals, and develop new ways of looking at them and writing about them which have implications also for sectors of society situated outside the academic world. The case has been made with reference to five developments in particular:
1. The availability in Latin, from the third decade of the thirteenth century, of an accessible translation of Aristotle’s natural historical works, and the reception of these by philosopher-scientists such as Albert the Great, encyclopaedists such as Thomas of Cantimpré and learned laymen such as Emperor Frederick II. The cumulative effect of the Aristotle-inspired writings on animals datable to between 1220 and 1270 was a highly significant one: they spread knowledge of long forgotten or previously unknown species, conveniently systematized what was known about the natural world and, perhaps most importantly in the long term, modelled and promoted an approach to looking at nature that relied more on observation and personal experience, and less on uncritical quotation from venerable authorities. Arguably for the first time since the classical era, animals came to be regarded as valuable and fascinating subjects of study in their own right.

2. An extension and revivification of the traditional use of animals to construct theological and moral meanings of relevance to human beings. This resulted from the – in some ways unlikely – joint influence of Aristotelian perspectives and new moral imperatives, felt in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, to communicate the doctrinal and ethical demands of Catholic Christianity to a broad-based lay audience. The ancient idea of nature as a book through which God reveals himself to people was not discredited; but it was significantly modified – with the result that it took on board new animals and new meanings, encompassed new literary forms, was restructured after the manner of a thirteenth-century nature encyclopaedia, and above all began to be revised on the basis of such classic Aristotelian priorities as observation and rational plausibility.

3. A marked increase in the frequency and creativity with which animals were used to construct aristocratic identity, during a troubled, unsettled period in the history of chivalry. Of particular importance here are heraldic emblems, a large proportion of which depicted animals, and the use of which in the thirteenth century went far beyond their original purpose as means of identification. Such emblems were widely used to connote both individual and dynastic identity; and they, and some of the animals they represented, were put to highly inventive use also in works of courtly literature that thematized issues concerning thirteenth-century knighthood.
4. A heightened tendency to challenge – as distinct from definitively refute – the age-old belief in humans’ supremacy over, and qualitative difference from, the animal world. This questioning attitude can be seen in many contexts we have alluded to: in the rather uncomfortable and muddled treatment of the subject in some scientific literature; in works of imaginative fiction that posit notably porous, symbiotic relationships between knights and their horses; in a – for a time – almost modish fascination with the civilized, courtly centaur; and in a number of outlandish legal prosecutions of animals – based, as they seem to have been, on an instinctive assumption that their physical and moral capacities can barely be differentiated from those of humans.

5. Evidence of greater affection being felt, or at least shown, towards domestic companion animals – be it a knight’s destrier or, most strikingly, a lady’s lapdog. This development, however, existed in a state of (unconscious or hypocritical) tension with a continued use of unrestrained violence towards animals that retains the power to shock and disgust even averagely animal-friendly modern readers – and that seems indeed to have been exacerbated by some thirteenth-century people’s physically aggressive reactions to the prejudice of their own innate superiority to animals being questioned or contested. This tension between violence and affection seems to have been as intrinsic to the thirteenth century as it is today, and to have characterized a wide range of contexts, ranging from comic tales to the life of St Francis of Assisi.

II

At the end we must essay a (very) brief survey of the extent to which these developments continued to be influential beyond the thirteenth century. The scientific progress made by the thirteenth-century followers of Aristotle seems generally to have satisfied their fourteenth- and fifteenth-century successors, but not those who, in the early modern period, sought to expand knowledge by means of observing – and also collecting – natural historical phenomena, and subjecting them to ever more stringent classification. With reference to England, for example, Keith Thomas (52) speaks of “an unbroken succession of
active field naturalists, from William Turner (born 1508) to John Ray (born 1705)
who were in turn “members of a wider European scientific community” – a community
which was to include such luminaries as Ulisse Aldrovandi, Conrad Gessner and the Comte de Buffon. Such figures also, however, very much saw themselves as Aristotle’s disciples;
and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that the scholarly methods and habits he inaugurated and thirteenth-century scholars began to apply retained a significant level of authority well into the modern period.

The use of symbolic or allegorical animals for the purposes of theological and moral instruction also continued apace in the later Middle Ages and beyond. Indeed, several of the trends we observed in our third chapter (the use of “new” animals, the introduction of new spiritual and secular meanings, the tendency towards systematization, the grounding of symbolism in “real-life” natural characteristics) were if anything still more pervasive and influential in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than they had been in the thirteenth – as indeed was the popularity of preaching. A certain caesura was to come, of course, with the Reformation, in the light of which animal imagery became at once more confessional, more political and more visual; and the two latter categories at least apply equally to the emblem books of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These tended also to be much more heavily indebted to classical sources and ethics than their medieval predecessors; and all in all one could not really claim that the medieval model of the Book of Nature survived the Baroque period intact. That said, some individual images at least were to prove remarkably long-lived: even today we might spontaneously refer to someone being eagle-eyed, having a basilisk stare, or rising like a phoenix from the ashes, without pausing to reflect that we are, in effect, quoting from the Physiologus.

An earlier casualty than the spiritual interpretation of animals was the use of animals to construct chivalric identity. As we have seen, the thirteenth century was remarkably productive in this regard, but already in the fourteenth century the whole edifice of chivalry became embroiled in what was to prove a terminal crisis, as “the devastation, misery and social dislocation caused by warfare focused … general and widespread attention on the problem of the violence of the knightly order, and so on the relation between the ideals of chivalry and the value of peace” (Keen 1996, 9). That said, of course, heraldic emblems
continued to be used in tournaments and other forms of post-courtly display, became more and more rigidly standardized and codified, and remain in use today in an astonishingly wide range of civic, sporting and political contacts – in reunified Germany, for example, no fewer than fifteen of the sixteen Bundesländer into which the country is now divided sport a heraldic animal or animals on their coat of arms (the sole exception being Saxony).

Meanwhile the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries’ penchant for questioning and challenging conventional ideas of the anthropological difference between human and animals bore little perceptible fruit until the sixteenth century. Then, Michel de Montaigne’s famous question, “when I am playing with my cat, who knows whether she is amusing herself with me more than I am with her?” provocatively raised the possibility that animals at least might possess cognitive and communicative abilities that approach, or even exceed, those of humans; and it led to problems with the orthodox view of human superiority being extensively discussed by leading philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Hume and Bentham. The truly revolutionary thinker on these matters was, however, Darwin, since the publication of whose Origin of Species in 1859 it has been extremely difficult to deny that we humans are ourselves animals, and that the many characteristics and abilities we possess are therefore by definition animal ones.

If the tension between humanity and animality with which our medieval authors struggled has – at least in theory – long been resolved, the tension between treating non-human animals with affection and violence remains a contemporary, indeed perhaps a timeless one. Much progress has, of course, been made: out and out cruelty to animals is nowadays widely proscribed (with whatever success) by law; most people believe that animals have certain basic rights which should be protected; and our understanding of and respect for animal intelligence is growing all the time. Yet many issues remain. At the time of writing, indeed, several of these are being highlighted by the Covid-19 virus, whose causes and consequences clearly have much to do with the way human beings continue to mistreat animals. The “spillover” of animal diseases on to humans occasioned by the exploitation of wildlife and its concomitant loss of habitat; the deleterious results of an excessive reliance on antibiotics in intensive meat farming; the potentially uncontrollable effects on health of “wet” live animal markets – all these and other factors have been plausibly
adduced as in part responsible for the calamity which befell much of the world in early 2020. Perhaps one day we will learn that, in order for human beings to thrive, animals must be allowed to do so as well. But that is a hard lesson, and one that will not be learnt by all overnight.