

CHAPTER 3

SHREWS, RATS, AND A POLECAT IN “THE PARDONER’S TALE”

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While historically existing animals and literary animal characters inform allegorical and metaphorical characterization in *The Canterbury Tales*, figurative usage does not erase recognition of the material animal. “The Pardoner’s Tale,” for one, challenges the terms of conventional animal metaphors by refocusing attention on common animals as common animals and common human creatures as something worse than vermin. Most attention has been paid to the larger animals—goat, hare, and horse—that constitute the physical portrait of Chaucer’s Pardoner in the “General Prologue” and in the prologue to his tale.¹ Like these animals, rats and a polecat, together with rhetorical shrews, appear in this tale as well as in other literature, including bestiaries and natural histories. Equally to the purpose, these animals could be physically observed as constituents of both urban and rural landscapes in fourteenth-century England.² In the Middle Ages, animals were part of the environment as well as part of the culture: they lived inside as well as outside the city gates, priory walls, and even domestic spaces; a rat in the street or the garden might not be any less welcome or uncommon than encountering someone’s horses and goats nibbling vegetation or blocking a passage. Not being out of the ordinary, though, such animals could (and can) be overlooked or dismissed as common, too familiar to register. This chapter reveals why readers and listeners should pay close attention to the things they think they know and what they hear about what they think they know.

When the Wife of Bath alludes to an Aesopian fable, she reminds us of the importance of being aware of who is responsible for representing

characters in a particular way. In the tale, her rhetorical question, "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?,"³ is intended to draw attention to how women have been represented in the antifeminist tradition; the irony of the question partly resides in knowing that in the fable a lion is the one challenging a man's assertion of human superiority based on a statue of a strangled lion.⁴ Still, even in Aesop's fable, when the lion speaks, it is a human author who has put words in its mouth. Chaucer scholars have lately become interested in the implications of Chaucer's use of animal discourse. Lesley Kordecki, for one, has looked at how nonhuman discourse in "The Squire's Tale" leads to "consideration of subjectivity and, conversely [how] the possibility of animal discourse challenges the very foundation of subjective authority, authenticity and privilege. In other words, talking animals make Chaucer reflect upon his own hegemonic ownership of words."⁵ This is also one response to the Wife of Bath's question regarding subjectivity and authorship.

But in "The Pardoner's Tale," animals that are physically rendered and represented as animals don't talk. The Pardoner does: he insists on his authority, displays his command of language, and is represented as painting himself in his prologue and tale. He reveals his rhetorical intentions and his methods, admitting to having a single focus in his "prech[ing]," that of "coveitise" (VI.423–34). To this intent, he puts words in the mouths of his characters who serve his "moral tale" that greed is the root of all evil (VI.460, 426). Among the characters that he creates are those he calls "shrews" or "cursed rioters," one of whom he represents as inventing a story to accomplish his own greedy purpose—to kill his companions and keep all the treasure for himself. In that story, both the human "shrew" and his own inventor exploit assumptions about two other familiar, common animals: rats and a polecat.

The animals of particular interest to us are creatures that function in two distinct ways: as familiar dead metaphors and as familiar live animals. The metaphoric creatures are the "shrews," that is, the debased "riotoures."⁶ This epithet is a dead metaphor to us now, but may then have evoked an image of the animal that contributed to its association with unsavory humans. The other animals, so-called vermin that one of the rioters identifies as "rattes" and a "polcat" (VI.854–58), are implicated in destructive actions ironically describing the human characters or aforementioned shrews. Through a smaller self-serving fiction within the larger tale, one of the characters presents himself to an apothecary as a property owner beset by common rapacious creatures consuming his stock. The apothecary may seem to be taken in by this story; that other auditors and readers may be, as well, could be part of the joke. Believing the companion's story may be one means of implicating the audience.⁷

Not only does human credulity compromise the human audience, it threatens what could be considered the ultimate "Other": one that is local, not exotic; male or female; and represented as literal animals, two uncharismatic species very different from other kinds of nonhuman creatures appearing, for example, in "The Squire's Tale" or "The Manciple's Tale."⁸ What might be seen as the most unlikely of creatures to be represented as exploited victims are these putative "vermyn," a term that may also simultaneously refer to the companions plotting against him. These two animals are assumed by critics to be more convincing as threats than as victims. Yet the depredations against property and livestock that the tale bearer claims these creature-characters commit are a fiction. Indeed, the claimant bears false witness against these animals to satisfy his own distinctly human greed. However maligned for their perceived—and their true—natures, the nonhuman animals in this particular case are blameless.

The Human Animal and Creature Shrew

Among perceived greedy predators of the English landscape are the social creatures called "shrews." Our use of the term "social creature" here is a modification of Elizabeth Fowler's terminology, specifically her use of "social person" in relation to "habitus" to describe the "shaping of the body that comes from practices and social environment."⁹ Fowler specifically uses the Pardoner as one of her principal examples of the construction of character as social person, though the practices and social environment that she addresses are primarily religious ones. Although she examines how animals in the Pardoner's portrait serve characterization, she does not consider animals as separate characters or as distinctly animal.¹⁰ The word "shrew" typically describes the most unsavory of social human creatures. In *The Canterbury Tales*, shrews are first mentioned by the Host, who, when he yields to the Reeve's importunity to requite the Miller, notes the time and the place, "Grenewych," where "many a shrewe is inne" (I.3907). Benson notes that Chaucer "was probably living" in Greenwich¹¹—which provides a joke about the Host's claims regarding the social scene there. But such characters cross borders. They are known everywhere and to all estates, as is made clear:

The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame. (I.3182–85)

By reminding readers of what they "knowe wel" (3182), the narrator absolves himself (3181) of any "yvel entente" (3173) and transfers

responsibility to the reader, who can turn the page and choose another tale (3176–77). That particular social creature or type is apparently common not only in Greenwich.

The Pardoner, among the most debased of social creatures, is not among those explicitly identified as a shrew in *The Canterbury Tales*; rather, he tells a tale involving characters who are, and who share some of his values and behaviors: greed, mendicancy, aggressive verbalizing, and godlessness. The Pardoner admits to sermonizing with “yvel entente,”¹² confessing his methods to his fellow pilgrims: “Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse” (VI.421–22). This action, spitting venom, as well as his other behaviors and physical appearance in the “General Prologue,” have prompted scholars to note his resemblance to certain animals. Fowler, for example, focuses her attention on the three animals to which his physical features are compared: hare, goat, and horse.¹³ She ascribes these metaphors entirely to “medieval sexual iconography” that signifies his spiritual sterility.¹⁴ This reading may be seen to reinforce Susan McHugh’s point that some literary critics view animality “as a repressed deconstructive element, a marker of difference internalized in human species being,” implying that “animal subjectivity remains significant only as an essentially negative force against which the human is asserted—hence the appeal of metaphoric animals.”¹⁵ But while the animals serving as metaphors discussed by Fowler may be seen as signifying markers of difference in the portrait of the Pardoner, “The Pardoner’s Tale” reverses this convention in which the human is valorized at the expense of the animal, for he and the characters of his tale are the negative forces against which animals, with their contrasting innocence, are “asserted.” The animals invoked in the tale become detached from their conventional allegorical meaning, while the human characters increasingly accrue allegorical value in the exemplum. For Erica Fudge, “A symbolic animal is only a symbol (and therefore to be understood within the study of iconography, poetics) unless it is related to the real.”¹⁶ In the “General Prologue,” then, the animals, when used as sexual iconography to reveal the Pardoner’s spiritual sterility, function symbolically, with little or no connection to their more common animality.

Our concern is not with the tale teller’s metaphoric resemblance or relationship to horse, hare, or goat, where the critical emphasis has primarily fallen,¹⁷ but with the three main characters of “The Pardoner’s Tale,” the so-called “shrewes” or “yonge folk that haunteden folye” (VI.464) who discover a cache of gold coins that tempts them from their quest to defeat Death (692–710). After the youngest is dispatched to buy bread and wine, one of the characters, referred to as “the firste shrewe” (819), suggests a plan to kill their absent colleague, thereby increasing their share of the gold. The Pardoner summarizes the agreement between the two: “And

thus acorded been thise shrewes tweye / To sleen the thriddre” (835–36). In this way, he confirms that the third, like the other two, is to be understood as a “shrewe” as well.

The metaphoric shrews define a familiar social creature. “Shrew” was a common epithet in the Middle Ages, and, like the names of rats and weasels, it was used in “extremely derogatory senses” when applied to humans.¹⁸ Typically, “shrew” referred to “wicked” or “evil-disposed” men,¹⁹ associations particularly apt for the three companions of “The Pardoner’s Tale” and the teller of their tale. The Pardoner uses these characters as embodiments of greed and selfishness, as men without loyalty or love for anything but their own pleasures and gain—men not unlike himself. In the Bodleian Bestiary, the animal shrew, or “*sorex*,” by being classified with Mice, is identified as specifically representing “greedy men who seek earthly goods, and make the goods of others their prey”;²⁰ this commentary provides a gloss on the Pardoner, the “yonge folk” of his tale, and the putative lesson he says he invariably teaches.

The shrews may serve to embody two processes of animal symbolism discussed by anthropologist James Howe: the “comparison of features between different domains taken as equivalent”; and the “circular loop of symbolic transfer, from humans to animals and back to humans.”²¹ The difference here is that the shrews are represented as humans and, etymologically speaking, the word “shrew” may or may not have been used in the Middle Ages to represent animals as well as humans.²² Despite limited lexicographical evidence for “shrew” being understood as animal as well as man in the fourteenth century,²³ the connection is suggestive: the human shrews seem to have subsumed the animal in the evolution of the word; and, as we will see, medieval classification offers another way of understanding the potential circular transfer from human (shrew) to animal (rats and polecat) and back to human (shrew), or from shrew (animal) to human (vermin) and back to shrew (animal).

Etymology contributes to the definition and classification of animals in the bestiary that informs Chaucer’s representations of animals in “The Pardoner’s Tale.” The Bodleian Bestiary description of *sorex*, allegorical as it is, may nevertheless incorporate what was considered common knowledge of certain characteristic behaviors of the animal shrew.²⁴ These behaviors include the very sins attributed by the Pardoner to the “riotoures” or shrews. The Pardoner explicitly associates such revelers with the sin of gluttony, which his apostrophe identifies as the “first cause” for the Fall:

Senec seith a good word doutelees;
He seith he kan no difference fynde
Bitwix a man that is out of his mynde
And a man which that is dronkelewe,

But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrewe,
 Persevereth lenger than doth dronkenesse.
 O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!
 O cause first of oure confusioun!
 O original of oure dampnacioun,
 Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn! (VI.492–501)

Eating and drinking are resonant motifs relevant to creatures of all kinds in this tale. The Pardoner apostrophizes gluttony—eating and drinking—for causing man's fall. The young rioter buys the food and drink he was sent for and will poison. As Alastair Minnis explains, the offer of bread and poisoned wine travesties the blood and body of Christ and the sacrament of communion, making wine the means of death, rather than of eternal life in this *exemplum*.²⁵ The natural imperative to protect life-sustaining foodstuffs also offers the rioter a seemingly justifiable reason to purchase poison: he says rats have plundered his grain and a polecat ravaged his pullets. As lies used to gain the means of killing his companions, they, too, invert that which is life sustaining and poison it, turning provender into a signifier of death. In this sense, the rats and polecat more accurately, if ironically, become the human shrews that are the young rioter's real targets.

Wild shrews in the fields outside towns and taverns, as well as those within them, are in fact known for their appetites. Scientific observation suggests that the image of medieval shrews may be based on actual behavior.²⁶ To stay alive, a shrew must eat more food in relation to its weight than either a rat or a polecat.²⁷ In short, shrews are gluttons by necessity. They have been kept in captivity at least since Pliny,²⁸ possibly for medicinal or veterinary purposes that required live animals,²⁹ so their large dietary requirements and their constant and aggressive mode of feeding likely were well known.

Moreover, shrews have been considered venomous beasts at least since Aristotle, and, if the number of possible treatments recorded throughout history is any gauge, the belief was widespread and long-held. Pliny, for example, provided no fewer than eighteen cures for the bite of the shrew, including the shrew itself "torn asunder" and applied to the wound.³⁰ Not only was the bite considered poisonous, but physical contact with the shrew was thought to render much larger animals, especially horses and cattle, lame.³¹ As the Roman rhetorician Aelian remarked, "every beast of burden dreads the shrew-mouse."³² That the youngest of the human shrews plans to poison his prey is significant in relation to how the animals themselves were understood as venomous.³³ His expressed need, therefore, to purchase poison to "quelle" rats identified as "his"

(VI.854) and exterminate "vermyn" (858), including "a polcat in his hawe" (855), is ironic in how it self-consciously subsumes these so-called vermin with his companion shrews. Perhaps there is some added irony, too, for animal shrews come "equipped" with their own poison and, therefore, would not need to use others in accomplishing their instinctive goals of defending their territory to survive. The shrew has a long history as "a ravenging Beast, feigning it self gentle and tame, but being touched, it biteth deep, and poysoneth deadly."³⁴ The Pardoner describes himself in similar terms when he admits, "Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe" (VI.421–22), the venom and what cloaks it being his rhetorical creation, the very tale that he says he tells to extract money from his unwitting audience. To associate the Pardoner's venom with a shrew is not to reject the more traditional association of venom with the serpent. Just as the serpent could represent Satan, the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that "shrew" was a fourteenth-century nickname for the Devil.

Rats and a Polecat

The rats and polecat serve as a credible substitute target for the poison the rioter will purchase to kill his fellow human shrews. These creatures are also among the types the audience would "knowe wel." As such, they function both as actual animals here and, conventionally, as metaphorical figures. Part of a symbolic loop, these animals appear to reverse the convention wherein human elides into animal and returns to human, and, instead, the cycle begins with the animal that then signifies human creatures—the Pardoner and the companions of his tale—until returning again to animal.

The origin of the loop of transference is easy to trace: the youngest of the human creatures takes for granted that rats and polecats are so without value that asking for poison to exterminate them would be considered justified by a purveyor of poison. Chaucer, however, may use these animals to break the symbolic loop to save them, despite their reputation and association. In any case, the would-be poisoner ascribes his own sins—gluttony and murder—to these historically maligned animals. A look at the passage and critical responses to it suggests how unquestioned are accusations of the destructive behavior of these animals and how anti-pathetic human response is to them in "The Pardoner's Tale":

And forth he gooth, no lenger wolde he tarie,
 Into the toun, unto a pothecarie,
 And preyde hym that he hym wolde selle
 Som poyson, that he myghte his rattes quelle;

And eek ther was a polcat in his hawe,
 That, as he seyde, his capouns hadde yslawe,
 And fayn he wolde wreke hym, if he myghte,
 On vermyn that destroyed hym by nyghte. (VI.851–58)

Critics' responses to the expressed need for the poison reinforce assumptions about those animals; they also extenuate the sale of the poison. Raychel Haugrud Reiff suggests that the reason for the addition of the polecat is that "possibly the apothecary is not swayed by his need to kill rats" and then concludes, "This argument is evidently persuasive, and the young man buys the poison, adds it to the wine, and gets rid of his fellow thieves."³⁵ Similarly, Beryl Rowland contends that "the specific reference gives credibility to the man's request . . . Chaucer shows the man getting poison in a way which does not arouse suspicion."³⁶ More recently, Dorothy Yamamoto remarks that the character's use of vermin "readily persuades an apothecary to sell him the deadliest poison he can find so he can get rid of them."³⁷ She adds, "We would agree with him that rats are vermin."³⁸ Historically, readers do seem to have agreed.

The rat has served as shorthand for villainy for long enough to be taken for granted, both as a dangerous pest and as a conventional scapegoat; suspicion is deflected to the recognizable villain and justifies acting against it.³⁹ In fact, the rat does opportunistically consume human foodstuffs and other materials. Its omnipresence during plague would not have improved its reputation or attitudes toward it. Negative attitudes to the second kind of vermin mentioned, the polecat, were also common. It, too, was associated with barnyard depredation, as the etymology of its name—"poule cat" or "pullet cat"—attests: Beryl Rowland writes that "pole" derives from "*poule*," alluding to what she calls its "fondness for chickens."⁴⁰ As Albertus Magnus presciently noted, the polecat is of the same genus as the weasel and the ermine,⁴¹ and likewise is predatory and unapologetically carnivorous. To those dependent upon chickens for food or an income, polecats would be seen as a menace.

Not surprisingly, then, it may seem that the eradication of these threats to property would be a common and understood need. Richard Ireland notes that "by the fourteenth century poison was readily available for the eradication of vermin."⁴² There may have been concerns regarding the selling of poison, however, because its use "was regarded within the Middle Ages as an offence which bore a specific connotation of necromancy, an invocation of Dark Power with all the dangers for the soul as well as for the body which that entailed."⁴³ As Ireland claims, in the Middle Ages both the common use, to kill vermin, and its more ominous

associations—with necromancy or poisoning human creatures—were understood. The perceived need and practice of exterminating vermin probably would have been more common than its use in either necromancy or murder, though neither Ireland nor his sources cite any particular regulations for the selling of poison.

But the *persuasiveness* of the young man's explanation is a red herring here. A widespread association between poison and necromantic murder might provide even better reason to be suspicious of a certain type of social creature that requested poison. For if shrews and rioters are readily identifiable social creatures ("ye knowe wel this"), the apothecary could, like the larger audience for the tale, recognize the type of person requesting the poison. This customer, resembling neither a peasant nor a householder, is not the usual social type with cause to eliminate rats from grain bins or polecats from chicken coops. Moreover, the twofold excuses this character gives for his purchase—"Rats. Oh, and *also* a polecat"—parody the embroidering of a lie. Yet the apothecary sells the young man a powerful poison (VI.859–67), "strong and violent" (867), without obvious hesitation. The legitimacy of the request and the apothecary's readiness to fulfill it, though, may be partly the point: Chaucer also satirizes apothecaries for their questionable morality when it comes to profiting from their wares. In the "General Prologue," the physician's apothecaries "sende hym drogges and his letuaries, / For ech of hem made oother for to wynne" (I.426–27). The implication is that the apothecary who sells the poison, even without being tipped off as we have been, would recognize his customer for what he was—a young man with suspect motives, but one with a full purse.

Classification

When the youngest character explains why he needs the poison he wants to buy, he makes assumptions about how humans traditionally have responded to rats and weasel-like animals. In this sense, his explanation to the apothecary takes for granted the relations between humans and these animals. One source for understanding such relations in the Middle Ages is the bestiary. Yamamoto is correct in her claim that the bestiary is "a key text for exploring how the relations between humans and animals were construed"⁴⁴; it is also, therefore, important for appreciating interrelationships as they were then understood. The bestiary's period-specific taxonomy offers an organizational scheme for cataloging and characterizing animals and humans and their interconnectedness in the Middle Ages. As Susan Crane has convincingly shown in her examination of

second-family bestiaries,

they examine the animal realm for its material, social, and spiritual importance by tracing how humans and other animals are related to and different from each other. Taxonomy offers an attractive way into the second-family bestiaries' project, redirecting attention away from the dichotomy between each animal and its moralization, and towards the complex inter-relations of all God's creatures.⁴⁵

The claims Crane makes for the bestiary taxonomy are important for understanding how shrews, rats, and polecats might be classified together and reveal "the complex interrelations of all God's creatures."⁴⁶

The immediate relationships among these so-called vermin may seem straightforward: the rats and the polecat are shrews, or companions, that the youngest plans to poison. In the exchange between the would-be murderer and the apothecary, the category of "vermin" implicitly includes human shrews, based on how the reference functions both as a metaphor for the tale's conspiring characters whom the poison will kill and as a literal reference to the threatening animals that the poison is said to be purchased to kill. Considering the three shrews in this context, however, makes "real" animals, specifically the so-called vermin conventionally represented and constructed as negative, morally superior to them. As the teller of their tale, the Pardoner is the progenitor of the shrews; as such, his confession of this poisonous production could be seen as making him the shrew of shrews. The other creatures incorporated in the tale, namely rats and polecat, are part of the production, too.

The tale within "The Pardoner's Tale" reinforces how all creation suffers at the hands—and mouth—of false speaking that is born of evil intention and sin. While the Pardoner and the youngest shrew of his tale take for granted the reputation of vermin—no matter who or what those vermin actually mean to them—their choice of scapegoat is significant. In the Middle Ages, rats and polecats were perceived as sharing a kind of family history with the animal shrew. In the Bodleian Bestiary these three animals, which today we assign to distinct families and orders of mammals (figure 3.1), are similarly classified and taxonomically related. Apparently, the creatures were recognized for sharing certain superficial physical and behavioral characteristics. All three have long, slender furry bodies, pointed noses, and slender tails; move rapidly; and seem voracious, a trait that in humans would be associated with gluttony. All three also smell "bad," in our parlance. In addition to these shared physical and behavioral characteristics, the three animals all signify death or rapaciousness in the context of medieval metaphor and iconography, a

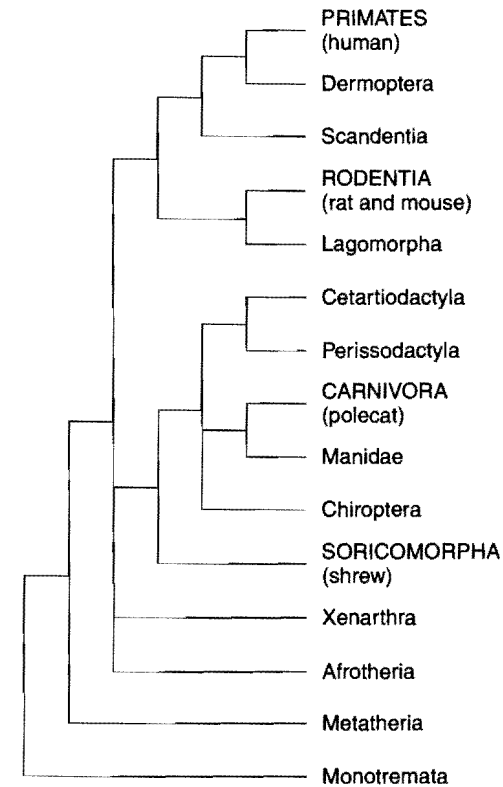


Figure 3.1 Simplified phylogenetic tree illustrating a modern understanding of evolutionary relationships among taxonomic orders of mammals. A taxonomy based on these relationships yields broad distinctions among Polecat, Rat, and Shrew.

Source: Adapted from Olaf R. P. Bininda-Emonds, Marcel Cardillo, Kate E. Jones, Ross D. E. MacPhee, Robin M. D. Beck, Richard Grenyer, Samantha A. Price, Rutger A. Vos, John L. Gittleman, and Andy Purvis, "The delayed rise of present-day mammals," *Nature* 224 (2007): 507–12.

context perhaps originating in common observation and experience. In the Middle Ages, these three animals—rat, polecat, and shrew—were recognized as distinct beasts, yet they were considered related as well. All three could, in effect, be categorized as varieties of mice.

Centuries after the Bodleian Bestiary associated shrew, or "sorex," with "mus" (mouse),⁴⁷ Edward Topsell also remarked on the resemblances among shrews, mice, and weasels. He cites the ancient Greek Aetius, "who writeth that it [the shrew] is called *Mygale*, because in quantity it exceedeth not a Mouse, and yet in colour it resembleth a Weesil, and therefore it is

compounded of two words, *Mys*, a Mouse, and *Galee*, a Weesil.⁴⁸ He notes the confused assumption of another ancient Greek writer, Amyntas, who he says “is of opinion, that it is so called, because it is begot betwixt a Mouse and a Weesil.”⁴⁹ In the past, then, these animals were thought to be more than just related physically and behaviorally, they were imagined to breed with one another and produce hybrid offspring.

Two other classical names for the shrew—the Latin *musaraneus* (or, *mus araneus*)⁵⁰ and Greek *Migale* (*μυγαλι*)—etymologically relate the animal to a “field mouse.” Following the classical writers, Albertus Magnus classified the shrew as a form of mouse, describing “a very small, red genus, with a short tail and high-pitched voice. It is properly called the *sorex* [shrew] and is poisonous. It is therefore not caught by cats.”⁵¹ Both Albertus and Bartholomaeus Anglicus state that *Mygale* is a small, poisonous type of weasel.⁵² Albertus specifically identifies the polecat, referred to by him as *putorius* (stinking), as of the same kind as a weasel, which he as well as many bestiaries describe as “*mus longus*,” “a long mouse.”⁵³ As for the rat, Albertus considers this “a large genus” of mouse.⁵⁴ Thus it follows that the shrew could be a field mouse or a weasel; the polecat, being of the same “genus” as the weasel, becomes a long mouse; and the mouse is just a small rat. (These relationships are illustrated diagrammatically in figure 3.2.)

All three words, “rat,” “polecat,” and “shrew,” were used negatively in the Middle Ages, as they are in the present, to describe human behavior. Chaucer alludes to the common knowledge of the time, based on certain apprehensible facts as well as misconceptions that are consistent with their earliest descriptions by classical natural philosophers. There is an understanding of the distinctiveness of each of the named animals, yet their

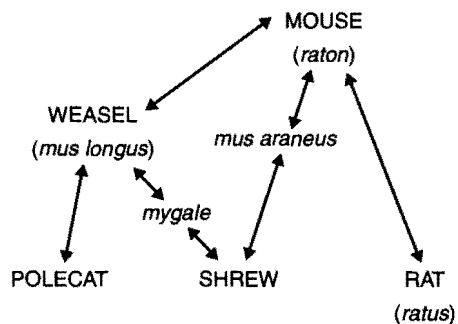


Figure 3.2 Simplified diagram of medieval relationships among Polecat, Rat, and Shrew, illustrating how all three beasts might be classified as forms of mice.

Source: This diagram is based on information derived from the writings of Albertus Magnus, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Isidore of Seville, and the Bodleian Bestiary.

shared characteristics allow for a sense of interchangeability, especially as pests or vermin.

The representation of these animals is important for what was known about them and what was ascribed to them. What was—and is—known, assumed, and constructed comes to take the place of the animal itself, even when the animal is present. To their detriment, material shrews, rats, and polecats can hardly be recognized beside the familiar fictions created about them and around them, as Chaucer demonstrates. In “The Pardoner’s Tale,” the usual vermin—rats and polecat—are innocent of willful action or any action at all. Their alleged crimes are a convenient fiction used to serve a murderous motive, just as “The Pardoner’s Tale,” as its teller admits, is used to serve his avaricious interests, and by Chaucer to expose this type that “ye knowe wel.”

In addition to murder, avarice, and gluttony, this tale reveals the commission of another sin, one against God’s smaller, typically unappreciated creatures who are falsely accused, as ironic as the particular sin of bearing false witness may seem in this context. These animals cannot refute the charges and few would speak for them; but, in this case, at least, they don’t suffer the ultimate consequence—death—for the crimes of human vermin or for being anathema as a species. The intended sin for which the poison is purchased—premeditated murder of one’s own kind—far exceeds any destructive actions attributed to these creatures or those material rats or polecats upon which such behavior could be based. The symbolic loop is thus cut. For the poison is in the very soul of the shrews, as it is in the spiritually bankrupt teller of their tale.⁵⁵

Notes

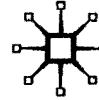
1. Most recently Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 147–69, discusses the image of the horse and goat and, in so doing, reviews the earlier scholarship, especially that which associates these animals with the Pardoner’s sexuality and the implications for his spirituality (see note 16); see also Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 68.
2. Animals have become of increasing interest in medieval studies. See, for example, many of the works cited below as well as the special *PMLA* section on “Theories and Methodologies in Animal Studies,” *PMLA* 124.2 (2009); and the animal thread at the New Chaucer Society Congress in Siena, 2010, to name a few indications of interest.
3. Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), III.692. All citations to Chaucer’s works will be from this edition and will be

- provided in the text by line number alone, unless otherwise necessary for clarity. This line has precipitated considerable discussion. See, for example, Marjorie M. Malvern, "'Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?' Rhetorical and Didactic Roles Played by an Aesopic Fable in the Wife of Bath's Prologue," *Studies in Philology* 80.3 (1983): 238–52; David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2001); and, more recently, Al Walzem, "Peynted by the Lion: The Wife of Bath as Feminist Pedagogue," in *The Canterbury Tales Revisited—21st Century Interpretations*, ed. Kathleen A. Bishop (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 44–59.
4. Aesop, "The Man and the Lion," in *Fables*, 10th edn., ed. George Fyler Townsend, 1880. <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=AesFabl.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=29&division=div1> (accessed March 1, 2012).
 5. Lesley Kordecki, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*: Animal Discourse, Women, and Subjectivity," *Chaucer Review* 36 (2002), 292 [277–97].
 6. Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Tale," VI.661, 692, 716, 768. The word "riotours" is unique to this tale. The more common appellation, "shrewe," also used to refer to these characters, appears three times in this tale (496, 819, 835) and thirty-five times throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.
 7. Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 76–77, 82–84, and 92–93, for one, discusses the means by which the Pardoner implicates and potentially compromises his audience.
 8. See, for example, Susan Crane, "For the Birds," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 23–41, and Kordecki, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*."
 9. Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 67. She uses these terms to define "literary character" and begins her discussion with Chaucer, whom she sees as the originator of literary characterization.
 10. Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 32–94.
 11. Benson, gen. ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, 78 n3907.
 12. Note the contrast not only with the disclaimer by the narrator-author in "The Miller's Prologue" (I.3172–73), cited above, but also with the Wife of Bath, who asks the other pilgrims not to take her words "agrief" because "myn entente nys but for to pleye" (III.189–92).
 13. Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 68.
 14. Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 68 and 73–74.
 15. Susan McHugh, "Literary Animal Agents," *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 489 [487–495].
 16. Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 7 [3–18].
 17. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, pp. 147–69, reconsiders the meaning of the mare and gelding as signifying the queering of the Pardoner's sexuality and defining his manliness, or lack thereof; he reviews the criticism beginning with Monica McAlpine, "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and Why it Matters," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8–22, and extending to more

- recent treatments, including Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexual Communities Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) and Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Minnis concludes, "geldying and mare are neither literal description nor scientific description—but meant to be insulting" (156). He also discusses the representation of the Pardoner's voice in the "General Prologue" as the small one of a goat, in contrast to his self-described ringing performance in the prologue to his tale (168).
18. N. C. W. Spence, "The Human Bestiary," *The Modern Language Review* 96.4 (2001), 918 [913–30], primarily discusses contemporary usage in modern European languages.
 19. "Shrew," *Middle English Dictionary*, Entries 1 and 2.
 20. Richard Barber, trans., *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764 with All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1999), p. 109.
 21. James Howe, "Fox Hunting as Ritual," *American Ethnologist* 8.2 (1981): 291 [278–300]. Susan Crane, "For the Birds," mentions Howe's "symbolic loop" as a means for considering the origins of merit when it comes to species and the effect of the loop in establishing and then destabilizing the sense of "founding subjectivity" (28).
 22. See Sandy Feinstein, "Shrews and Sheep in the *Second Shepherds' Play*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 36 (2001): 64–80, for a discussion of the history of the word "shrew" and the use of animals in the play.
 23. See Henry Sweet, trans., *The Epinal Glossary, Latin and Old-English of the Eighth Century* (London: Philological and Early English Text Societies, 1883), p. 15, l. 26, for the Anglo-Saxon *screawa*, likely precursor to Middle English "shrewe," which first appears in the eighth century. In the Epinal glossary, the Anglo-Saxon equivalent for "screuua" is listed as the Latin "musiranus" [sic] (the animal shrew). Thomas Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabulary*, 2nd edn., ed. Richard Paul Wülcker (London: Trübner & Co., 1884), documents the use of "screawa" for *musaraneus* as late as the eleventh century. Thomas Elyot, *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot knyght* (London: Thomae Berteleti, 1538), EEOB, Pennsylvania State University (accessed June 1, 2011), defines *Scytala* as "a lytel beaste callyd a shyrewe," providing the next explicit recorded evidence for the use of the word "shrew" as an animal. In "The Addicion of Syr Thomas Eliot Knight unto his Dictionarye" in the back pages of his *Dictionary*, he defines *Mygala* as "a feldmouse with a longe snoute, callyd a shrewe." The intervening 500-year gap includes uses of *mygale*, *musaraneus*, and possibly *sorex* to designate the animal, but no documented usage of Anglo-Saxon *screawa* or Middle English *shrewe*.
 24. Wilma George and Brunson Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts* (Worcester, UK: Duckworth, 1991), p. 66, remark the curious rareness of the shrew's presence in the bestiaries, an absence they find "strange" because "the shrew is a familiar animal and immediately recognizable by its long nose." In addition to citing the Bodleian Bestiary, they note that the

- shrew, *sorex*, as well as the "domesticated polecat" or ferret, *furo*, and "the long mouse" or weasel, *Mustela*, appear in Westminster MS 22, where the shrew is associated with "the vice of luxury" and the dormouse, *glis*, is identified with greed (pp. 66–68).
25. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, pp. 135–147. Earlier scholars, as he notes, discuss the imagery as more generally sacramental, for example, H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "'Synne Horrible': The Pardoner's Exegesis of his Tale and Chaucer's," in *Acts of Interpretation*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), pp. 40–41 [25–50].
 26. The maintenance of a stable, optimum internal body temperature requires a constant supply of energy that mammals obtain by eating regularly. Although smaller mammals eat less than larger mammals simply because they are smaller, they actually must consume more energy per unit of body weight. See, for example, James H. Brown, *Macroecology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 119–24.
 27. Sara Churchfield, *The Natural History of Shrews* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock, 1990), p. 94, notes that measured estimates indicate shrews consume approximately 30–55 percent of their body weight each day. Smaller species, such as the Eurasian Pygmy Shrew (*Sorex minutus*), typically eat a higher percentage of their body weight (125%) than larger species like the European Common Shrew (*Sorex araneus*) (80–90%).
 28. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, 10 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3: 82.
 29. Columella, *Rei Rustica*, trans. E. S. Forster and E. H. Heffner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), Book VI, Ch. XVII, Sec. 1 [2: 171]. See also Gilbert White, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, Letter 28, 1776, ed. J. G. Wood (1860; rept. Surrey, UK: Unwin Brothers, 1979), pp. 240–42, regarding the establishment of a curative "shrew ash."
 30. Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, trans. D. M. Balme (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), Book VIII, Ch. xxiv [1: 186–87]. Pliny's cures are scattered among Books XX, XXIII, and XXVII–XXX of his *Naturalis Historia*; the use of the shrew to cure its own bite is in Book XXIX, Ch. xxvii, Sec. 88–89 [8: 240–41].
 31. Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae. Eliotis Librariet* (London, 1542), <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/home> (accessed June 1, 2011), defines *Mus Araneus* as "a kynde of myse called a shrew, whyche yf it goo ouer a beastes backe, he shall be lame in the chyne" (n.p.). In *A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious, and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English* (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1598), <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/home> (accessed June 1, 2011), John Florio similarly defines the Italian *museragno* as "a kinde of mouse called a shrew, deadlie to other beastes if he bite them, and laming any bodie if he but touch them" (p. 235).
 32. Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, trans. A. F. Scholfield, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), Book VI, Ch. 22 [2: 39].
 33. Though like the serpent the shrew is associated with the devil, it is not specifically identified with man's fall and the loss of Eden. The venom spit out by the Pardoner has been identified with the serpent, for example, in Richard W. Ireland, "Chaucer's Toxicology," *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 82 [74–92], though his point is the diabolical venom, which may be compassed by both creatures; admittedly, the allegory is less pat if the Pardoner's venom alludes to a shrew rather than a serpent.
 34. Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*, 3 vols. (1658; rept. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1967), 1: 416. Topsell's view reflects the earlier opinion on the "migale" by Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, ed. Kenneth Kitchel and Irven Resnick, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 2: 1523, who states, "It has a cruel spirit but hides this and lures animals on, killing them with its poison if it can." According to Topsell, though, its venom extends beyond the physical, for he adds, "It beareth a cruel mind, desiring to hurt anything, neither is there any creature it loveth" (1: 416).
 35. Raychel Haugrud Reiff, "Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale,'" *The Explicator* 57.4 (1999): 195 [195–98].
 36. Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 66.
 37. Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 14.
 38. Yamamoto, *Boundaries of the Human*, p. 14.
 39. See S. Harris and D. W. Yalden, eds., *Mammals of the British Isles: Handbook*, 4th edn. (Southampton, UK: The Mammal Society, 1988), pp. 156–57, for information on the implicated rat, *Rattus rattus*, commonly known as Black Rat, Roof Rat, or Ship Rat, a species of rodent that now occurs nearly worldwide, but then was a relative newcomer to the British Isles, having arrived with the Romans. Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, p. 66, offers a later date, suggesting that "the black rat was probably imported to Europe from the Levant by the Crusaders." She says it was unquestionably known in France at least from the early thirteenth century. According to Harris and Yalden, p. 151, the other primary species of "Rat" in Great Britain, *Rattus norvegicus*, commonly known as the Common Rat, Brown Rat, or Norway Rat, did not arrive there until the eighteenth century, possibly ca. 1720. For more recent examples justifying ill treatment of mice and rats or discussing human antipathy toward them, see, for example, M. A. C. Hinton, *Rats and Mice as Enemies of Mankind*, British Museum (Natural History), Economic Series 3 (1918), pp. i–x, 1–63; and Hal Herzog, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), the book cover of which has the title words "some we hate" written inside the body of a silhouetted rat.
 40. Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, p. 66.
 41. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 2: 1532.
 42. Ireland, "Chaucer's Toxicology," 79.

43. Ireland, "Chaucer's Toxicology," 79. See also Richard W. Ireland, "Medicine, Necromancy and the Law: Aspects of Medieval Poisoning," *Cambrian Law Review* 18 (1987): 52–61. Unfortunately, no evidence for the claim that poison was commonly used to exterminate vermin is offered. A later case citing a "molecatcher" is discussed, but the utility of poison to the profession is taken for granted (54, 58). Ireland returns to this point in the later article, "Chaucer's Toxicology," 79.
44. Yamamoto, *Boundaries of the Human*, p. 15.
45. Susan Crane, "A Taxonomy of Creatures in the Second-Family Bestiary," *New Medieval Literature* 10 (2008): 7 [1–48].
46. Crane, "A Taxonomy of Creatures," 7.
47. Barber, trans., *Bestiary*, p. 109.
48. Topsell, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*, 1: 415.
49. Topsell, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*, 1: 415.
50. Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, p. 66, notes that though rats are not mentioned in the Epinal glossary, "the word *mus* is applied to shrews." The Epinal glossary states of the Latin "*sorix*" [sic] "*id est mus*."
51. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 2: 1524.
52. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 1: 391 and 2: 1522–23; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, trans. John Trevisa (Westminster: Wynkyn de Worde, 1495), Book XVIII: lxxiii.
53. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 2: 1523, 1532–33; Barber, trans., *Bestiary*, p. 110; George and Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts*, pp. 66–68. This description of the weasel as sort of a long mouse extends back at least to Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum Sive Originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), XII, iii, section 3, line 8.
54. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 2: 1524.
55. An early version of this chapter was presented at the 17th Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society. Matthew Buffington, R. Terry Chesser, and Mercedes Foster provided much appreciated comments on previous drafts of this chapter. Any use of trade, product, or firm names is for descriptive purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the US government.



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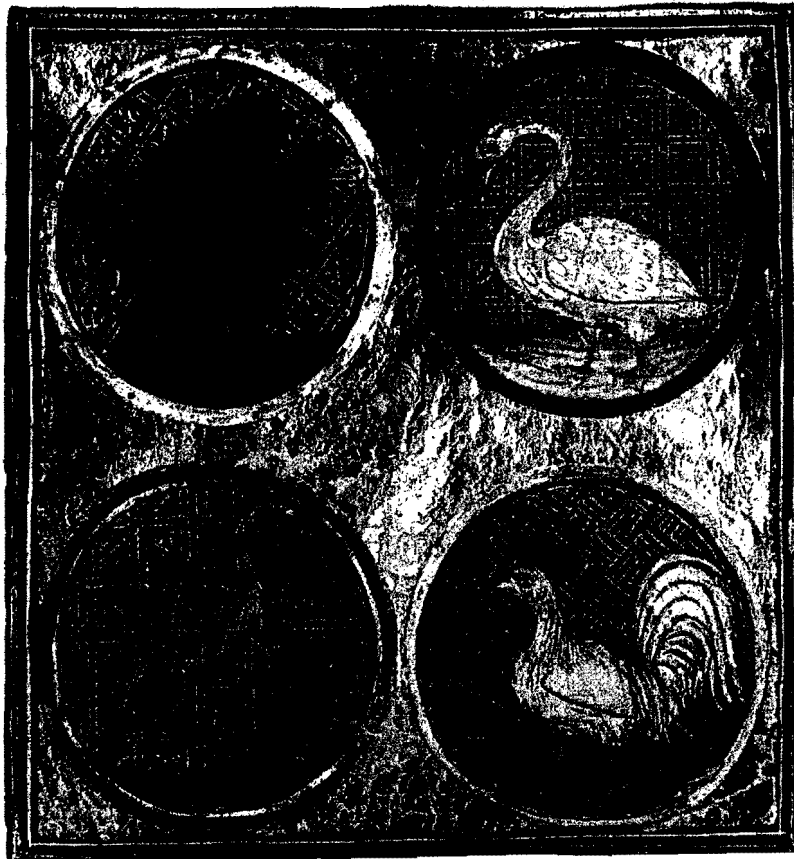
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