Introduction

Animal Studies and the Problem of Character

In February 1944, having just completed the manuscript of Animal Farm, George Orwell submitted to one of the most melancholy rituals to darken any professional writer’s life: finding a publisher for his newly finished book. While making the usual rounds, he had the misfortune to send his novel to the American offices of Dial, whose response he recalled two years later in a letter to his agent, Leonard Moore: “I am not sure whether one can count on the American public grasping what [Animal Farm] is about. You may remember that the Dial Press had been asking me for some years for a manuscript, but when I sent the MS of AF in 1944 they returned it, saying shortly that ‘it was impossible to sell animal stories in the USA.’ Just recently they wrote saying that ‘there had been some mistake’ and that they would like to make another offer for the book. I rather gather they had at first taken it for a bona fide animal story” (Orwell 4:110). For Orwell (who never had much use for the United States), this incident reflects on the obtuseness of the American reading public; for me, it says more about the failures of the literary profession. In addition, it says something about the uncomfortable relationship between nonhuman animals and modern notions of literary character.

This book deals with a period of literary history—the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries—that substantially predates Animal Farm. Still, one way to understand Orwell’s novel is to place it within the European tradition of beast fable, poetry, and prose narrative that stretches back to Aesop and encompasses works directly germane to the present study: for example, the Roman de Renart (twelfth and thirteenth centuries), Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale (1396-1400), Skelton’s “Speke, Parrot” (c. 1525), and the fables of La
Fontaine (1668). However, this tradition has largely gone fallow over the past two centuries, with the result that modern literary works foregrounding animal subjectivity usually tend to be marginalized as genre fiction: for instance, children’s literature (The Wind in the Willows, Winnie the Pooh) or fantasy (His Dark Materials, The Chronicles of Narnia). It is in this general spirit that Dial’s reader understood and dismissed Orwell’s novel as an animal story. Granted, one may also make sense of modern works dealing with animal characters by classifying them as exercises in allegory or surrealism or experimental fiction (Kafka’s “Report to an Academy” and “Investigations of a Dog” come to mind). Indeed, the real failure of the reader for Dial Press is that she misidentified a work we tend to locate in the latter of these categories (allegorical and experimental) as belonging to the former (naïve genre fiction). However, even literary works in the second category end up outside the literary mainstream, defined either as retrograde (for example, allegory or idiosyncratic (for example, experimental fiction). In any case, what Dial Press called “animal stories” seem to require a special dispensation for their continued existence in the modern literary world. They stand as deviations from the norm, to be tolerated rather than encouraged.

John Ruskin offers us a way of understanding this development when he introduces his notion of the pathetic fallacy in Modern Painters (1843). For Ruskin, the pathetic fallacy is “always the sign of a morbid state of mind” (368) while also managing to be “eminently characteristic of the modern mind” (369)—observations that, taken together, lead inevitably to a debased and pathological view of modernity. Indeed, the pathetic fallacy’s fallaciousness and its morbidity consist in the very same thing: “a falseness in . . . our impressions of external things,” which results from “a mind and body . . . too weak to deal fully with what is before them” (364, 365) and which invests the natural world with the observer’s own passions. Weakness of temperament (we might say weakness of character) generates the error, which leads the afflicted individual to invest brute nature with emotions she experiences but which, by virtue of its very brutishness, nature cannot share. The self is so overwhelmed with itself that it imprints itself on the rest of the world.

Ruskin’s examples of this phenomenon are all drawn carefully from nonsentient nature: shivering crocuses, dancing leaves, “raging waves,” “remorseless floods,” “ravenous billows,” and so forth (367). However, a moment’s reflection shows that nonhuman animals may serve as a marginal case of the same mental event: their obvious ability to react to their surroundings complicates matters since it supplies proof of sentience, but their inner life—
susceptibility to what we might call human passion—remains inscrutable. So what does one do with raging lions or timorous lambs, with stubborn mules or proud peacocks, or with any of the innumerable other commonplaces whereby traditional language assumes a continuity between human and nonhuman animal experience? What, in the broader sense, does one do with the impulse to think of nonhuman animals as subjects—as characters—in their own right?

From the standpoint of the pathetic fallacy, one must concede that this impulse looks suspicious. Even granting that nonhuman animals are in some sense aware, we remain a long way indeed from endowing them with the mental and emotional furniture of human experience. To do so—especially in light of our proved tendency to extend this endowment to rocks and trees and other nonsentient natural entities—looks very much like a first step in the direction of sentimental anthropomorphism. In this respect, to allow that animals are more like us than like stones seems to entail a rich panoply of cultural silliness, ranging from pet cemeteries to childish fantasies about talking pigs. Indeed, when considered from the standpoint of the pathetic fallacy, animals appear particularly noxious. They are, as it were, the thin end of the wedge.

**Humanity, Modernity, Character**

Ruskin’s work brings pressure to bear on the notion of modernity, which he considers especially susceptible to the silliness at the heart of the pathetic fallacy. The following pages, by contrast, focus on animal character in the early modern period, for it is the span from about 1400 to about 1700 that witnesses the birth of the intellectual dispensation Ruskin takes for granted. At heart, one could describe the present book as a set of interrelated zoological histories, or perhaps less pretentiously, as a series of character studies of early modern animals. It concentrates on animal character, in turn, because I consider this crucial to the development of notions of literary character in general. My underlying argument here is simple: that the problem of literary character may best be understood from the standpoint of animal studies, as an instance of broader philosophical and scientific problems in theorizing the human-animal divide.

That the concept of literary character is a problem—or at least entails problems—I take as axiomatic. It was certainly so for L. C. Knights
when, in 1933, he published his classic essay “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?”2 A brief for New Critical formalism, Knights's article also mounts an attack on the methods of character analysis that dominated earlier critical practice as exemplified by the study of Shakespeare: “The habit of regarding Shakespeare’s persons as ‘friends for life,’ or, maybe, ‘deceased acquaintances,’ is responsible for most of the vagaries that serve as Shakespearean criticism. . . . It is responsible for all the irrelevant moral and realistic canons that have been applied to Shakespeare’s plays, for the sentimentalizing of his heroes (Coleridge and Goethe on Hamlet) and his heroines. And the loss is incalculable” (50). Knights’s critique has produced a kind of queasy ambivalence in more recent literary criticism, which remains attached to the notion of character without really wanting to be; as Elizabeth Fowler summarized matters in 2003, “Literary scholarship . . . speaks of characters as if they were real people and, just as frequently, warns us that they are not” (6). The resulting dilemma receives fine comic expression at the hands of David Lodge, an author with credentials both as a theorist and as a writer of fiction. In the 1988 academic novel Nice Work, Lodge’s narrator is awkwardly obliged to introduce a character who “doesn’t herself believe in the concept of ‘character’”—one “Robyn Penrose, Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge” (21). Penrose’s objections to the concept—that is, “that character is a bourgeois myth, an illusion created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism,” obscuring the crucial insight that “[t]here are no selves, only production, and we produce our selves in language” (21–22)—attest to the role of Marxist and postmodernist theory in assailing the legitimacy of character as a literary construct.

However, the Marxist-postmodernist critique of literary character did not develop in a vacuum; it runs parallel to a broader assault on the category of the human. This broader line of argument is typified by the poststructuralist tradition in current animal-studies theory, which objects to the Benthamite and Kantian schools of animal-rights philosophy, represented by Peter Singer and Tom Regan respectively, on the grounds that these seek to protect nonhuman animals by extending to them a notion of human rights (or in Singer’s case, human ethical subjectivity) that is intellectually untenable.3 Thus, Derrida refuses “to assign, interpret, or project” meaning onto the animal other (this being, I take it, the impulse of traditional animal-rights theory) while likewise resisting the Cartesian reflex to “suspend . . . one’s compassion and . . . deprive[e] the animal of every power of manifestation” (387). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari replace the notion of being with one of becom-
ing, located in “an objective zone of indetermination or uncertainty . . . ‘that makes it impossible to say where the boundary between the human and animal lies’” (273). Giorgio Agamben, arguing that “[i]n our culture, the decisive political conflict . . . is that between the animality and the humanity of man,” concludes that “what is decisive here is only the ‘between,’ the interval . . . between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence” (80, 83; my italics). Each of these positions assumes that to ground political or ethical action on notions of the human is to perpetuate the very inequities that politics and ethics are intended to remedy; hence the deconstruction of the human emerges as a philosophical imperative.

There can be no doubt that literary criticism’s discomfort with the concept of character is related to this growing theoretical impulse to deconstruct the human-animal divide. After all, if a given philosophical category (the human) proves defective, it follows that the category’s major literary manifestation (character) should share in its inadequacies. In what follows, I argue that the notion of character develops in English writing as an early effort to evade this very philosophical crisis as a means of manufacturing and perpetuating the distinction between people and animals.

This is not how the turn to character and character criticism has usually been understood. Knights explains it in classic New Critical fashion, as a failure of linguistic engagement—in the case of Shakespeare scholars, “an inability to appreciate the Elizabethan idiom and a consequent inability to discuss Shakespeare’s plays as poetry” (26). Lodge’s Robyn Penrose, for her part, follows the Brechtian aperçu that literary illusionism aims to transform audiences into “the passive consumer[s] of a finished, unchangeable art-object offered to them as ‘real’” (Eagleton 64); thus, for her, “the rise of the novel (the literary genre of ‘character par excellence’) in the eighteenth century coincided with the rise of capitalism” and its endless search for pliable markets (21). For scholars following Ian Watt, the rise of literary character derives from the eighteenth-century tendency to “pay[ ] greater attention to the particular individual than had been common before” (Watt 18), a tendency deriving from the philosophical skepticism of figures such as Descartes, Locke, and Hume. While these narratives trace the ascendency of literary character to different historical events (the development of new language practices, the birth of capitalism, the rise of scientific empiricism), they agree by locating it in the eighteenth century and identifying the novel as its exemplary genre.

Still, if one takes at face value the eighteenth-century passion for Shakespeare as a creator of characters, it challenges both the chronological focus on
the eighteenth century and the generic focus on prose fiction. In any case, as Fowler's recent work with Chaucer has shown, it is patently silly to suppose that pre-Enlightenment authors had no literary characters, if one defines these simply—in Fowler's preferred way—as "social persons" (27). Moreover, even the term "character," as applied to the "description, delineation, or detailed report of a person's qualities" (Oxford English Dictionary [hereafter OED], s.v. "character," s.b. 14), predates the eighteenth century. The OED's earliest recorded instance of this usage comes from James Howell's Letters of 1645, but even this is unfairly belated; with the publication of Joseph Hall's Theophrastan Characters in 1608, the English already possessed a fully formed literary exemplar of the definition. Indeed, Theophrastus's works play a central role in establishing the noun "character" as an English literary term, and in the process they reveal the word's embeddedness in an ancient tradition of philosophical meditation on the nature of human identity.

Theophrastus is best remembered for treatises in the fields we would now call biology and psychology. These works span the disciplinary divide—between "the representation of nonhumans" and "the representation of citizens" (Latour 28)—that Bruno Latour identifies with modernity's "separation of natural and political powers" (t3). In this regard, they preserve the cross-disciplinary focus of Theophrastus's master, Aristotle, whom he succeeded in 322 B.C.E. as head of the Peripatetic school in Athens. Indeed, if readers of Theophrastus have detected a "botanical" impulse in his Characters (Boyce 5), that is because Theophrastus was working squarely within an Aristotelian tradition in which "[t]he methodical treatment of poiesis in the Poetics is similar to the orderly classification of the body in the History of Animals" (Craik 158). In this tradition the study of rhetoric and the study of natural history, the study of people and the study of animals emerge as parallel expressions of the same taxonomic impulse.

It may be objected that this is merely a matter of form, that in substance the two undertakings differ considerably. Perhaps, but the most recent translators of Theophrastus's Characters have traced its antecedents back to the lengthiest surviving verse fragment by Semonides of Amorgos (seventh century B.C.E.), consisting of character sketches of women whose "various vices (e.g. filthiness, cunning, extravagance) are explained by their creation from animals (e.g. the pig, fox, horse)" (Rusten and Cunningham 17). If, as these same editors aver, "the notion that individual good or bad traits of character may be isolated and studied separately" is "basic" to the philosopher's "whole enterprise" (t3), then the Characters participates in an ethical project...
that encompasses the world of nonhuman animals as well. That, at least, is a major assumption of the bestiarists, those other heirs to Aristotle, when they identify the behavior of the halcyon hen as “an unexpected celebration of kindness” (White 12.4) or attribute to horses the capacity “to weep for man and feel the emotion of sorrow” (86) or expound upon “[t]he merciful nature of lions” (Barber 25). As quaintly familiar as such language may be, it points to the historical investment of character study in observation of the nonhuman world.

Thus, from the standpoint of animal studies, it becomes appropriate to view the bestiary entry as a particular variety of character study and to view the Theophrastan character as a particular variant of the bestiary entry. In terms of early modern English literary history, this linkage becomes especially visible in the “birds of prey”—Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino—who populate Ben Jonson’s Volpone (1605; 1.2.89), as well as in Nano’s claim, in the same play, to have passed former lives as an “ox and ass, cannonell, mule, goat, and brock” (1.2.22). Volpone’s characterological bestiary draws simultaneously on the traditional figures of beast fable and epic, deriving from post-Aristotelian animal lore, and on the stock figures of New Comedy, based on post-Aristotelian psychology. In the latter respect, the linkage to Theophrastus again seems clear enough; Menander is said to have been one of the philosopher’s students (Diogenes Laertius 485; 5.36–37). Later English usage retains the affinity between human and animal traits in the sense of “character” as denoting “the distinguishing features of a species or genus” (OED, s.v. “character,” sb. 8b).

Jonson’s carrion birds by no means exhaust the characterological possibilities of the animal in early modern literature. If we accept Fowler’s working definition of literary characters as “social persons” compounded from overlapping “legal,” “civic,” “corporate,” “economic,” “kinship,” and “literary” identities (16–17), the heavy integration of animals into all these aspects of early modern society makes it hard to see how one could reasonably deny them status as literary characters in their own right. Consider Montaigne’s Apology for Raymond Sebond (1576), which, apart from its inscrutable cat, abounds with sentient beasts: a magpie who, after “a profound study and withdrawal within herself,” learns to mimic the sound of trumpets (341); elephants who help each other escape from traps (342); cranes and swallows with “the faculty of divination” (345); and so on. Or consider Baiardo in Lodovico Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (1516), a steed so cunning and faithful to Rinaldo that he refuses to let the latter mount him lest his master might call off the
horse’s steadfast pursuit of Rinaldo’s beloved Angelica (Caretti, ed., 2.20–23). Or consider the beginning of Sir Philip Sidney’s Defense of Poesy (1580–85), where John Pietro Pugliano praises the horse as “a peerless beast . . . , the only serviceable courtier without flattery, the beast of most beauty, faithfulness, courage, and such more . . . that I think he would have persuaded me to have wished myself a horse” (3).

One might protest that for Sidney, Pugliano serves as an object of derision, an exponent of “unbelieved” opinions, who defends these with “strong affection and weak arguments” (3). However, this fact speaks precisely to my broader point: that in early modern culture, the literal and figurative proximity of nonhuman to human animals elicited anxiety, generating what René Girard has called a “crisis of distinctions” (49). Pugliano’s character as a horseman (or horse-man) inspires Sidney’s disapproval, and yet Pugliano also provides Sidney with the model and motive—“self-love” (3)—for the latter’s defense of verse. In fact, Sidney’s relation to Pugliano is far too close for comfort. It is the archetypal relation of “scholar” to “master” (4), fraught with tension and ambivalence, which qualities receive figuration across the species barrier. Thus it stands as a further irony that in Sidney’s case, “self-love” is the love of Philip, phil-hippos, bearing within itself the trace of the anathematized other.

This “crisis of distinctions” can be presented more broadly in Kuhnian terms, as an emerging dilemma in the early modern discourse of species—in effect, as a philosophical problem for which Descartes and his followers presented a paradigm-shifting solution.5 Erica Fudge has traced this dilemma to inconsistencies within the early modern understanding of how and when a human being may be regarded as truly rational and therefore truly human: on one hand, “infants are not fully human, insofar as human status can only be designated truly by the actions that evidence the possession of a rational soul” (BR 48); on the other hand, “a human can literally become an animal when acting without reason” (66); and various subaltern categories of humanity (for example, women, slaves, ethnic others) present further challenges to a conventional understanding of humanity as grounded in reason. In sum, “There are natural born humans who can only be human because they possess the rational soul. Then there are humans in possession of the rational soul who require education to become truly human. Finally, there are humans who possess rational souls, can be educated, but are still less human than the human. Thus the category begins to collapse into absurdity” (58). Descartes solved this problem with mathematical elegance by elevating
human reason to the status of a first principle, requiring no proof outside the philosopher's own inference. The way was thus clear to discount the apparent sentence of other animals by dismissing it as an anthropomorphic projection, so that how beasts behaved no longer told us anything about what they thought or felt.

To this extent, the Cartesian cogito is itself a product of the inward turn, an application of skepticism to the philosopher's own beliefs and instincts until what remains—skepticism itself—becomes the ground of his identity as a rational being. Appropriately enough, this inward turn takes the confessional mode as its proper form of literary expression: "I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, and I rejected as false all the reasoning I had hitherto accepted as valid proof. Finally,... I resolved to pretend that everything that had ever entered my head was no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I noted that, while I was trying to think of all things being false in this way, it was necessarily the case that I, who was thinking them, had to be something" (Descartes 28; 4.32). In effect, the Cartesian self arises from and entails the exploration of a new notion of character: not an Aristotelian taxonomy of shared attributes, but rather a sense of personal identity as singular and doubtful, consisting in particularity and observation, privileging mind over body and interior over exterior. This, of course, is the mode of character celebrated in the grand literary achievements of the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries: the novel, the illusionistic theater, the cult of sentiment, and the critical veneration of Shakespeare.

Hence we may recognize this notion of character, in its originary Cartesian moment, as an instrument for defining and maintaining the species barrier. It is no accident that the Discourse on Method (1637) remains almost equally famous for two distinct philosophical postulates: the cogito and the bête-machine. These principles emerge hand in hand from Descartes's meditations, in symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relation: the former crafts a notion of humanity composed of inwardness and speculation, while the latter denies such qualities to the nonhuman. Taken together, these philosophical constructs offer a response to earlier notions of human character that had come by the early modern period to appear increasingly untenable. In the process Descartes's principles also paved the way for new literary techniques of representing the human, techniques that in turn proved essential in consolidating the species distinction on which they were based.

But to return to more conventionally literary writing, what then of
Shakespeare? How is this very pre-Cartesian playwright conscripted so durably into the Enlightenment project of literary character construction? We might start to answer this question by noting how haunted Shakespeare is by the relationship between people and other animals. From Launce and Crab to the asinine Bottom, from the "inexorable dog" Shylock (Merchant of Venice [1596–97] 4.1.128) to Banquo's currish murderers (Macbeth [1606] 3.1.91–104), from Lear's "pelican daughters" (3.4.75) to the man-fish Caliban, the poet's work seems like nothing so much as a protracted, uneasy meditation on the ties that bind species together and the traumas that tear them apart. From this standpoint, Shakespeare's particular claim to fame may lie not so much in the characters he created as in the discomfort he expressed through them: that is to say, in the resonance and clarity with which he lent voice to the problem of distinctions that preceded the Cartesian moment. Perhaps there is something a bit complacent, even self-infatuated, in recent efforts to celebrate Shakespeare as the inventor of the human. Perhaps we should remember him instead as the poet of humanity in crisis.

Character and Premodernity

Hence my core argument: Shakespeare and his contemporaries inherit a crisis of distinctions that expresses itself through a fixation on the human-animal relationship; Descartes resolves this same crisis a priori, by granting humanity exclusive access to consciousness via the ability "to use words or other signs ... to declare our thoughts to others" (46); and in the process, he also creates a new purpose for literary activity—that of drawing and redrawing the species boundary through the elaboration of literary character as defined by the revelation in words of a distinctive personal interiority. This, of course, is the very same mode of revelation through which Descartes confirms humanity's unique access to the exercise of reason, and its presumed absence in nonhuman animals leads him to conclude that they, by contrast, "have no mental powers whatsoever" (48).

By no accident, this notion of the species boundary conforms to Bruno Latour's "modern Constitution" (29): that grand division of the map of knowledge into two zones—a "scientific" one for "representing things" and a "political" one for "representing subjects" (29)—that Latour regards as distinctive of society in its modernized western form. Insofar as literature, the arts, and the humanities count for anything at all in this dispensation, they belong
squarely within the second of these two zones. Thus it makes perfect sense that they should be charged with the task of representing, defining, and refining the human through the creation and exploration of character. Likewise, it makes equal sense that the assignment of human attributes to nonhuman beings—the problem that Ruskin calls the pathetic fallacy—should emerge as a compound form of category confusion, not only confusing people with nonpeople but simultaneously confusing the modes of discourse proper to the understanding of each. On this logic the humanities should rightly declare that *Nihil humanum mihi alienum est*, whereas the pathetic fallacy drops the first adjective.

To this extent we might, in fact, take the pathetic fallacy as an error peculiar to the arts and humanities, in any case, that is certainly how Ruskin presents it. Latour’s critique of the modern constitution, however, suggests something very different: that despite the most rigorous attempts to suppress them in the name of modern disciplinarity, such modes of category confusion have become more the rule than the exception. For Latour, the modern constitution must be understood as a mode of false consciousness, seeking an unattainable ideal of “analytic continuity” (7) consistent with the distinction between scientific and sociopolitical modes of understanding. However, its efforts in this direction are forever frustrated by the appearance of “entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture” (10), of which Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy, with its distinctively modern morbidity, may be seen as only an initial instance. For Latour, indeed, this is the very tragedy of the modern: that its dream of discursive purity lies forever out of reach, that “the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes.” (12).

One may therefore find it instructive to discover a parallel to the language of pathetic fallacy operating not in the disciplinary regime of the humanities but rather in that of the biological sciences. Here again questions of animal consciousness throw the problem into relief. Surveying the vocabularies of zoological and ethnological observation, Eileen Crist concludes that differing scientific idioms generate very different ways of understanding the inner life of animals. On one hand, the “Cartesian verdict of an unbridgeable hiatus between humans and animals” (1) produces “a technical and causal language” of scientific observation that “leads to the portrayal of animals as objects,” “blind to the meaning and significance of their activities and interactions” (5). On the other hand, “the Darwinian affirmation of evolutionary continuity” (1) elicits a very different model of discourse, which “deliver[s] subjectivity to
the world of animals” by presenting their actions “as meaningful, authored, and continuous” (4). In both cases there is a sense in which the scientific methodology in question actually invents the conclusions it is ostensibly designed to discover, so that “divergent portrayals of animals as subjects, on the one hand, and as objects, on the other, form the conceptual foundations that, respectively, allow the emergence of animal mentality or preclude its very possibility” (6).

Crist’s narrative is rich with irony. To begin with, it yields the spectacle of a Darwinian theory apparently grounded in Cartesian empiricism yet nonetheless producing a view of “animal mentality” at odds with that proposed by Descartes. (Darwin draws on scientific observation to argue for the development of certain species out of others through a process of adaptation and natural selection; adaptation, in turn, argues for some kind of individual agency; however, to attribute agency to animals is to endow them with the beginnings of a mental life, despite the fact that Descartes insists they have “no mental powers whatsoever.”) This, in turn, leads to the further ironic possibility that Descartes’s empiricism might prove less rigorous than it at first appears, since it is grounded on the a priori assumption that the human-nonhuman species barrier is defined by “mental powers” or their lack. This suspicion, in turn, gives way to yet another layer of irony, if one agrees with Crist that neither the Cartesian nor the Darwinian position can be accepted as rigorously empirical, insofar as the language of observation employed by each tends to predetermine the significance of what is being observed. From Latour’s perspective, both Cartesianism and Darwinianism are hybrid constructs, aspiring to an “analytic continuity” they can never possess. From the perspective of Ruskin, both are forms of the pathetic fallacy, projecting onto the nonhuman world the mental environment of its human observers.

So far, I have spent a good deal of time here defining and investigating the emergence of modern attitudes toward animal mentality and its relation to human character. However, my purpose in doing so is to move beyond these attitudes, in effect by moving behind them to the issues and developments that preceded them. My instrument for doing so is character study, that most domesticated and disrespected of critical tools, which I shall reconfigure so as to render it amenable to the treatment of nonhuman animals. In so adapting the notion of character, I return it to its pre-Cartesian status as elaborated in the Aristotelian and Theophrastian tradition of nature writing and animal writing that dominated western philosophy from classical times well into the early modern period. Since this tradition diverges sharply from
its successor on certain points while on other points the two systems retain a surprising consistency, the major differences and similarities at stake here should be clarified.

Let us begin with terminology. As is well known, the English noun "character," which by the seventeenth century refers to the artificial human beings created by writers in writing, originally refers to the act of writing. Theophrastus's charactarēs is a plural substantive formed from the Attic chararēs, "to engrave, carve," "inscribe," or "simply, write" (Liddell and Scott "chararēs" v. III.1), and in its Theophrastan application the noun thus refers simultaneously to the "distinctive mark, characteristic, character" that has been "impressed (as it were) on a person" (Liddell and Scott "chararēs" d1. II.4) and to the act of impression or inscription. In this respect, the noun chararēs is similar to the historia of Aristotle's Historia Animalium, which refers to "information obtained through investigation" (Peck 1:v). In both cases we encounter from the outset a hybrid of object and subject: a catalog of observable qualities fabricated by the observer's stylus. However, in their English Nachleben the two terms part company. English "history" emphasizes the objective nature of reportage so relentlessly that Hayden White's rediscovery of the narrative element in historical writing could become a major twentieth-century intellectual event. Literary "character," on the other hand, comes to denote invention rather than reportage, fiction rather than fact. Thus both words are subjected to a sort of spurious purification, consistent with their original reference to nonhuman and human subject matter, respectively.

This false purification furthers the efforts of history to distinguish itself as the most scientific of the humanities—efforts that arguably reach their apex late in the 1800s with the alliance of history and economics under the banner of historical materialism. However, from the standpoint of the study of character, this same purification still invests contemporary approaches to Theophrastus, which generally seek to identify his Characters as a study in "moral behavior" (Rusten and Cunningham 13). On this view, Theophrastus's work finds its closest Aristotelian relative in the Nicomachean Ethics, and in this spirit Theophrastus's most recent translators remind us that the title of the Characters is really a misnomer of sorts—that "the Greek word for character is usually ethos" (Rusten and Cunningham 13). All of this is very true but also quite misleading: it implies that Aristotle and Theophrastus distinguish the ethical from the scientific in ways that they do not, and that instead typify more modern forms of disciplinary thinking.
14 INTRODUCTION

In fact, Aristotle declares early on in the Historia Animalium that this work, too, is much concerned with character. After three opening pages on comparative anatomy, the philosopher proceeds to other points of interest: “Further differences exhibited by animals are those which relate to their manner of life, their activities and their dispositions [kai ta ethēs], as well as their parts” (τ6–7; 487a10–12). Aristotle promises to give special attention to each of these categories, and later sections of the Historia repeatedly engage questions of animal character or disposition or temperament:

The characters of the animals [Ta d’ethēs ton zoon] are less obvious to us by perception in the case of the less developed and shorter-lived ones, but more obvious in the longer-lived. (τ3:15; 608a1–3)

The females are softer, more vicious, less simple, more impetuous, . . . while the males on the contrary are more spirited, wilder, simpler, less cunning. There are traces of these characters [ton ethon] in virtually all animals, but they are all the more evident in those that are more possessed of character [en tois echeos u malon ethos] and especially in man. (τ3:18–19; 608a34–608b7)

The animals’ characters [ta d’ethēs ton zoon], as we have said earlier, differ both in respect of cowardice, mildness, courage, tameness, and also in mind and ignorance. (τ3:23; 610b20–22)

Just as it comes about for all animals that their activities accord with their occasional bodily states, so again their characters too change [ta ethēs metabolous] according to their activities. (τ3:39; 631b3–7)

The animals change their forms and character [kai to ethos] not only, in certain cases, according to their ages and the seasons, but also through being castrated. (τ3:39; 631b19–21)

On the basis of word choice alone we must grant that the Historia Animalium is in some significant degree an ethical treatise, concerned with questions of character, temperament, and/or disposition. In this respect it sets an important precedent for the bestiaries’ quaint concern with similar matters, and the behavior traits on which it focuses very much include the sort that interest Theophrastus in his Characters.
Some [animals] are mischievous and wicked, e.g., the fox; others are spirited and affectionate and fawning, e.g., the dog; some are gentle and easily tamed, e.g., the elephant; others are bashful and cautious, e.g., the goose; some are jealous and ostentatious, like the peacock. (Aristotle, *Historia 1*:19, 488b20–24)

[Animals] are seen to have a certain natural capability in relation to each of the soul’s affections—to intelligence and stupidity, courage and cowardice, to mildness and ferocity, and the other dispositions of this sort. Certain animals at the same time are receptive of some learning and instruction, some from each other, some from humans. (Aristotle, *Historia 3*:215, 608a14–19)

Aristotle’s word for “cowardice” (*deilía*) in the second of these passages also provides the title for one of Theophrastus’s *Characters* (2); the fawning behavior Aristotle associates with dogs receives treatment in not one but two Theophrastan characters (2: Flattery, 5: Obsequiousness); and Aristotle’s word for “wickedness” in the former of these two passages (κακονοργία—literally “evildoing,” or “bad behavior”) could arguably serve as an organizing rubric for all of the traits explored in Theophrastus’s treatise.

Consistent with *De Anima*’s assignment of an inorganic rational soul to humanity alone, as distinct from the lower creation, the *Historia Animalium* insists on a sharp difference between the mental capacities of human beings and those of other animals. “The only animal which is deliberative is man. Many animals have the power of memory and can be trained; but the only one which can recall past events at will is man” (1:19; 488b24–30). However, this distinction coexists uncomfortably with the notion that human beings and other animals share the same basic components of character—“intelligence and stupidity, courage and cowardice, . . . mildness and ferocity,” and so forth. It is a nice question, for instance, to what extent intelligence and stupidity may be gauged independently of the deliberative faculty, and thus by the seventeenth century it had become a popular topic of academic debate to argue whether or not dogs can form syllogisms. Elsewhere, Aristotle claims, “In general, with regard to their lives, one may observe many imitations of human life in the other animals” (2:254; 612b18–20). Moreover, Aristotle’s argument that physical conditions—castration, for instance, or procreation—can affect animal character carries over to human beings as well, suggesting that despite the supposedly inorganic nature of the rational soul, human
character too can have a physiological basis. Thus on the predictable issue of
gender difference Aristotle remarks that “a wife is more compassionate than
a husband and more given to tears, but also more jealous and complaining
and more apt to scold and fight” (3219; 608b9–11). On the subject of human
facial features, he maintains, “Persons who have a large forehead are sluggish,
those who have a small one are fickle; those who have a broad one are excitable,
those who have a bulging one, quick-tempered” (339; 49b11–14). The
former of these observations points to a causal relationship whereby anatomy
influences character, whereas the latter assumes the opposite: that character
expresses itself in the lineaments of the body, and especially the face. It is in
this latter capacity, of course, that Marlowe’s Tamburlaine can refer to the
“characters graven in [Iheridamas’s] brows” (t.2.169), thus exploiting the seman-
tic duality of the Greek χαρακτήρ while also reading character anatomically,
in a manner we can trace directly to the Historia Animalium.

Thus we can understand the notion of character in Aristotle and Theophras-
tus as a complex of ethical qualities or predispositions (for example,
courage and cowardice, generosity and jealousy, calmness and irascibility),
shared by human and nonhuman animals alike to a greater or lesser extent,
related to the body in both a causal and an expressive manner, and suscepti-
ble to classification just as are the physical qualities that distinguish one class
or species of being from another. This sense of character is readily available
to European writers of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, many if not
most of whom were well trained in the Aristotelian-Theophrastian tradition.
Furthermore, this sense of character exists in tension both with Aristotle’s
insistence on human uniqueness (as registered by the possession of a rational
soul) and with later notions of literary character grounded in exercise of the
distinctively human rational faculties.

So, is the difference between human and nonhuman animals one of kind
or of degree? At heart the two theories of human-animal relation that have
contended most fiercely to replace Aristotle’s as the dominant model—the
Cartesian and the Darwinian—offer different answers to this question, with
Descartes insisting on difference in kind and Darwin favoring difference in
degree. Aristotle anticipates both positions while trying to have the argu-
ment both ways; his “conflicting comments about animals . . . reflect Ari-
stotle’s recognition of a continuum between human beings and animals while
seeking to distinguish human beings on the basis of their rational capacities”
(Steiner 76). In other words, both Descartes and Darwin may be seen to adopt
and develop certain tendencies in the Aristotelian tradition. Most famously,
Descartes inherits the notion of the rational soul, which he transforms into the cogito through the process of inner-directed skepticism described above. As is well known, this process accords with Descartes’s Thomist Catholicism, which regards the immortal soul as an exclusively human property; in this respect, Cartesian philosophy may be understood as an effort to resolve the inconsistencies in Aristotle’s theory of animals while also preserving the species barrier. The Darwinian tradition, although less directly indebted to Aristotle, nonetheless insists on a notion of relationality across the species barrier—what Gary Steiner calls “a continuum between human beings and animals”—that conflicts with the insistence on difference in kind.

The model of literary character explored in the following chapters derives expressly from Aristotle’s notion of the interspecies continuum, as this is manifested in his zoological treatises and remains implicit in the ethical work of his successor Theophrastus. This latter work helps convey the term “character” into English as a word for the fictional persons created by writers, but even before the term becomes thus established, the sense of character that underwrites it is available for literary exploration. This sense of character openly creates a space for the interaction of human and nonhuman species. Aristotle describes the latter as generating “imitations of human life” (minima...taes anthropinae socrates) [3:257; 612b19–20]), but it takes little effort to imagine this mimetic impulse as reversing course, in which case nonhuman animals put pressure on the development of human personality as well. Indeed, this is just how Theophrastus presents the figures in his Characters: for instance, the boar “stands in rapt attention at the sight of a cow, an ass, or a goat” (4.8); the obsequious man “is apt to keep a pet monkey” (5.9); the garrulous man “appear[s] to chatter more than the swallows” (7.7). Here, too, lies one arguable reason for the preoccupation of Enlightenment authors with creating singular human personalities in their work: earlier notions of literary personhood take species mixing for granted, developing in a dynamic and indefinite space for which Leviticus reserves the special name of “confusion” (Leviticus 18.23). Under the circumstances some clarification might seem in order.

The Immediate Field of Study

Starting with the model of pre-Cartesian literary character delineated above, the rest of this book is devoted to a series of what might be called brief liter-
introduction

ary biographies—if we accept that the subjects of these mini-biographies are nonhuman rather than human and that they are the creations, rather than the creators, of literature. In terms of genre choice, distant antecedents here thus include Theophrastus, Pliny, the bestiariists, and (in a different way) Plutarch, Aubrey, Hall, and Sir Thomas Overbury. The main literary evidence on which I base my character portraits comes from European works produced between 1400 and 1700. Given my own training, it is inevitable (if perhaps regrettable) that English-language materials should take up the lion’s share of the bibliography. However, I also discuss selected relevant works from France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Low Countries, and the Holy Roman Empire.

In keeping with the Aristotelian-Theophrastan tradition, these character portraits focus on broad groups rather than singular beings; in other words, they presume that character exists primarily as an instrument of class taxonomy rather than as a mode of individuation. Particular traits help to define broad affinities, and these, in turn, do not simply distinguish one species or genus of animal from another; they also trace modes of similitude and affiliation between different species and genera. As a result, each of the animals studied in the following chapters displays particular qualities that find a complement of sorts in human behavior and human social groupings. Given early modern European culture’s well-attested fixation on issues of religious practice and social rank, it should come as no surprise that the animals studied here all interact with these variables in especially suggestive ways.

As for the particular species of animal I have chosen for study, I have chosen these in part because they represent each of the three principal uses to which early modern Europeans put the beasts in their lives: haulage, companionship, and food. For the latter two of these categories, two chapters apiece are devoted to beasts with high and low social associations, respectively. In the first case, that of haulage, a single, exceptionally lengthy chapter focuses on the horse. This seems appropriate given that horses assume such preeminent material and symbolic importance in early modern culture, given that different breeds of horses acquire very different rank-specific associations during the period from 1400 to 1700, and also—most important—given that the precise nature of the horse’s elite social significance undergoes an important shift during the same period.

The unmanageable breadth of equestrian reference in early modern European literature also prompts me to pursue a limited authorial focus in these two opening chapters. Rather than seeking to produce a thick description of horses in European culture from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries—a
topic worthy of many volumes—I have attempted a reading of equine character as manifest in the works of the period’s principal writers of continental romance—Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso—and its influence on the two dominant English authors of the same age: Shakespeare and Milton. One could portray the resulting story, in its English dimension at least, as a contrast between secular and sacred idioms, or between Tory and Whig politics. For his part, Shakespeare invokes equine character in ways that recall the horse’s traditional chivalric associations, while also registering the English gentry’s incipient transformation from a warrior class to a leisure class. What emerges is a conflicted vision of horse character: one drawn nostalgically to conventional models of equestrian heroism while also recognizing the limitations of these models in an era of courtly display and administrative intrigue. As for Shakespeare’s dramatic representatives of this new era, they figure either in the comic mode, as effete ninnies, or in the tragic mode, as figures out of step with the world of sixteenth-century courtiership and the Machiavellian political theory that underwrites it.

Milton, by contrast, seems to feel no nostalgia at all for the age of knighthood. His epic references to chivalric lore and classical horse culture are extraordinarily consistent, reflecting a wholesale rejection of the martial values endemic to traditional heroic verse. However, if Milton turns his back on the age of classical and medieval equestrian exploit, he also turns inward, to a spiritual realm that serves as a prior and superior model for the debased heroism of the classical epic tradition. Here, in the heaven of Paradise Lost (1667), one encounters another sort of steed entirely: fiery angelic coursers through which the Father’s transcendent power manifests itself in something like animal form. This reconstitution of the equine within the field of the spiritual marks a particularly fascinating moment in the history of literary character and its accommodations to the nonhuman.

If the western world’s most important species of animal transportation, the horse, undergoes a change of character between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the same is also true of certain key species of companion animal. Dating as it does to ancient times, the practice of pet keeping is by no means an early modern innovation; however, the early modern period witnesses an explosion in both the number of animals and the range of different animal species kept as pets. Likewise, the nature and intensity of human intimacy with companion animals seems to undergo a transformation during the same period. In England, as Keith Thomas has remarked, “it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that pets seemed to have really estab-
lished themselves as a normal feature of the middle-class household" (Man 110); indeed, the noun "pet," as a referent for companion animals, first enters English usage in the early 1500s. In the growth of pet culture, as in other ways, English practice lags a bit behind that of the Mediterranean nations, where household animals and private menageries begin their proliferation about a century earlier.

When it comes to the pets of distinguished individuals, I focus on an order of birds I have had occasion to write about before and which leaves a far less extensive trail of documentary evidence in the early modern period than do horses: the order Psittaciformes, consisting of parrots and cockatoos. Here I trace the emergence of parrots as conventional figures of mindless mimicry in European satire and comedy. As it happens, this familiar model of animal character evolves directly from the association of exotic birds with the sacred and secular Catholic nobility of the late Quattrocento. As the Reformation gains head in early sixteenth-century Europe, its exponents increasingly employ these birds—which initially served as markers of authority and distinction—in a countersignifying capacity, to represent the vacuous extravagance of the Catholic elite who owned them and to epitomize the mindlessness of prayer in ancient languages and set forms. Once parrots had thus acquired a new sort of literary character, in keeping with the sectarian tensions of the Reformation, that new character could be further translated—as it is by writers such as Shakespeare and Jonson—into a generic, secular model of empty-headed silliness that remains common even today.

On a humbler level, it is in the 1500s and 1600s that cats make the transition from tolerated household scavengers to beloved animal companions. In examining this shift, I concentrate on the semiotic residue of earlier social practices as these inform a tradition of cat torture that survives even into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Again, this tradition speaks to an early understanding of the cat as character—marginal, tricky, inscrutable, opportunistic, associated with demonic or diabolical forces. In this vein, the practice of cat torture develops in pre-Christian times as a means to ward off evil by punishing its representatives, and medieval Catholicism assimilates such pre-Christian practices to its own spiritual agenda via calendar festivals and witch lore. However, during the Reformation such practices become representative of Catholic superstition more generally, and here the tale takes its most ironic turn. Rather than rejecting the superstitious devices of its despised enemy, the Protestant faith actually adopts them, but with a difference, translating cat torture from an efficacious ritual to an insulting sign of
Catholic ignorance. Thus, even as the rise of Protestant belief makes possible a culture of sentiment in which house pets notably participate, it also keeps alive the bloody practices of an earlier spiritual dispensation, which serve now as an index of the reformed faith’s relative enlightenment.

When it comes to the relationship between people and food animals, we approach a subject of primary anthropological significance, a centerpiece of the emerging discipline of food studies. For early modern Europeans, it is also a subject deeply embedded in complex systems of social precedence and spiritual significance. In the three centuries from 1400 to 1700 it undergoes a rapid series of changes as new food animals become available to European diners, new modes of culinary preparation and consumption come to the fore, and regimens of diet and health undergo a major shift. As Robert Appelbaum has put it, “The early modern period . . . constituted a unique chapter in the history of food and food practices” (xv). In the process it also changed the way people treated and viewed the animals they ate.

From the standpoint of what we might call the food of privilege, I see this change embodied in the most important new animal foodstuff to reach the Old World from the Americas: the turkey. While it participates, over the course of two centuries, in a broad transformation of western culinary practices, this fowl at first gains European acceptance by being assimilated to traditional medieval models of courtly dining. Indeed, the turkey gradually claims for itself the traditional spectacular position reserved on the medieval table for grand banqueting birds. In the process, as successful domestication leads to an increase in their numbers and a decline in their cost, turkeys also make it possible for a form of the grand banqueting fowl to appear more frequently on humbler tables, in ways that force a reconception of the idea and character of elite dining.

Thus the turkey begins its western existence as a culinary marker of aristocratic culture but gradually metamorphoses into something more modest. In a reversal of this pattern, one of the commonest and most humble of European food animals, the sheep, acquires symbolic preeminence through its association with the Eucharist and the figure of Christ as Agnus Dei. However, this is only one of many narrative figurations through which sheep acquire significance as characters in early modern writing; one may mention as well their association with the pastoral mode, with emergent literatures of animal husbandry and georgic nationalism, with debates over enclosure and engrossing, and with the conflict between carnival indulgence and Lenten abstinence. In exploring the various relations between these forms of meaning, I
conclude that animal character is always necessarily figurative, a result of socially generated patterns of meaningful action that ethologists have arguably discerned within animal behavior, prior to its contamination by the human. To this extent—and despite Erica Fudge's exhortation that we attend to "the literal meaning of animals" in early modern texts (Brutal Reasoning 4)—one emerges with a sense of animal character as that which arises through group interaction, in the space between individuals. Whether the groups in question are intraspecies or cross-species, they generate a sense of social being that cannot be reduced, as it were, to a literal notion of the Tier an sich.

From Chapter 1 forward, this book draws on an eclectic variety of cultural materials with the aim of showing readers how particular kinds of animals acquire a distinct set of attributes and meanings within the framework of early modern society. To that end, discussion includes the romances of Renaud de Montaubon, Luigi Pulci, Matteo Boiardo, Lodovico Ariosto, and Torquato Tasso; the verse of John Skelton and Jean Lemaire de Belges; the prose fiction of François Rabelais and William Baldwin, Miguel de Cervantes and Sir Thomas More and the Roman de Renart; paintings by Jan van Eyck and Andrea Mantegna, Hans Baldung Grien and Vittore Crivelli; husbandry manuals by such writers as Gervase Markham and Leonard Mascall and Conrad von Heresbach; natural histories by the likes of Edward Topsell and Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, plays by William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and others; as well as travel narratives, cookbooks, theological treatises, and more. My aim is not to provide a thorough treatment of any of these genres of cultural production but rather to draw from them all, as necessary and appropriate, to illustrate the character of the animals that are my more immediate concern. The book concludes with a brief coda addressing the work of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and most particularly her Blazing World (1666). Coming as it does toward the end of the three centuries of cultural activity surveyed here, this peculiar narrative helps to summarize many of the concerns of this book as a whole, while also providing a sense of the new character dispensation that enters European experience with the Cartesian revolution.

The Species Divide and Theories of Literary Personhood

This book traces notions of literary character, and animal character in particular, through the Aristotelian and Theophrastan tradition of classifying
types by their shared attributes. This tradition manifests itself both in works on human behavior such as Theophrastus’s *Characters* and in the conventions of natural history as these developed from Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium* through Pliny, the Physiologus, and the bestiaries. This model of character study has the advantage of participating in a well-recognized, influential school of ancient philosophical practice, and it also forges etymological (and therefore conceptual) links between classical thought and modern literary conventions. But such an approach to character also deserves to be situated amid more recent scholarship on the subject of literary character.

The scholarly discussions of literary character to appear since 1970 exhibit predictable differences of methodology and nuance, but they share certain emphases worth mentioning here. For one thing, they are frequently committed to a notion of character that privileges interiority—a notion I have presented as consistent with Cartesian definitions of the human. This focus is perhaps most clear in works such as Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds*, which casts itself as a study of literary “modes for rendering consciousness” (11): the techniques whereby an author creates “beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will” (4). This premium on the inner life of literary personages leads Cohn to a heavy concentration on the nineteenth-century novel. Similarly, Martin Price locates literary character in “that stream of images, feelings, ideas, and fantasies that make up mental life” (38). For him, too, literary character is largely invested in “intellectual history” (99), thus producing a kind of “(virtual) being” that encourages one to speculate “about what characters think and feel” (64). Unsurprisingly, Price, too, finds his test cases of literary character in the realm of the novel: Austen, Stendhal, Dickens, Eliot, James. Using a more varied and idiosyncratic vocabulary, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty marshals a series of related terms—for example, character, figure, person, self—to distinguish different modes of literary personage; however, in the process she, too, repeatedly privileges the inward turn, emphasizing “dispositional characteristics” (80), “insight” (91), and “the tensions within selves” (92) in a critical lexicon that presents “the idea of a person [as] the idea of a unified center of choice and action” (85). For Rorty, too, novelists such as Dickens, Dostoevsky, Austen, James, and Woolf provide illustrative material.

This focus on inner being, privileging unseen mental processes as these are relayed through literary conventions such as free indirect discourse, comprises a mainstay of recent character theory, and as the foregoing examples illustrate, it is usually regarded as arising in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Katharine Eisaman Maus, on the other hand, argues for a
model of the inner-directed character that predates the Enlightenment and that privileges the drama. For Maus, 1980s-era critics "who . . . claimed that the Renaissance lacked a conception of inwardness" had it wrong (32); on the contrary, "in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century England the sense of discrepancy between 'inward disposition' and 'outward appearance' seems unusually urgent and consequential for a large number of people" (13). As I hope is already clear, neither Maus's position nor the more conventional one presents any particular problem for the present study. On the contrary, I have no interest in denying an inner life to citizens of pre-Enlightenment Europe, and my own reading of late Renaissance culture as marked by a crisis of species distinctions bears some broad resemblance to Maus's view that the period was subject to ongoing "crises of authenticity" (Maus 32). For Maus, the disjunction between inner life and outer life serves as the source of these crises; in my judgment, it comes closer to supplying the solution. That is to say, discrepancies between the inner self and its outward manifestations become increasingly representative of human experience, in proportion as an inner self is denied to nonhuman experience. With interiority or its lack thus foregrounded as the prime determinant of human identity, the stage is set for the introspective, self-absorbed characters of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment fiction.

While expressing interest in the interior function of literary character, scholars have also remained mindful of the Aristotelian commitment to character as a delineation of general "ethical types" (Lynch 39). For instance, Deidre Shauna Lynch has recalled the persistence of the Theophrastan character study into eighteenth-century literature (39–53), while noting that the Aristotelian system for "thinking about typicality as such" existed in tension with the impulse to endow characters with "individuated, psychological meanings" (9). Distinguishing between the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic functions of character—that is, character's simultaneous impulse to reproduce living beings, to fabricate nonexistent beings, and to delineate exemplary figures—James Phelan has likewise acknowledged that "the distinction between the mimetic and thematic components of character is a distinction between characters as individuals and characters as representative entities" (13). Most recently Elizabeth Fowler has opted for a model of character as "social persons" or "sets of personae" (2) that seem particularly indebted to the Aristotelian tradition: "abstract figurations" such as "alewife, merchant, and buyer, . . . Moor, Scythian, and Briton" or "senex amans, author, and allegorical personification" (16–17). While I agree with Phelan that character
as individuation—the mimetic function—and character as ethical or social type—the thematic function—may and often do coexist in literary character depiction, I adopt a fairly conventional view of the history of literary character as marked by a gradual impulse to privilege the former over the latter, an impulse that gains unprecedented strength in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Concurrent with their focus on interiority and typicality, recent theorists of literary character exhibit one other trait worth mentioning at the outset of this book: they usually—and most of the time quite casually—assume that characters are by their very nature human. Martin Price ends the first paragraph of his book on character by defining the term as “the spectrum of attitudes and feelings we loosely call human” (xi). Dorrit Cohn speaks of character as “revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit a fictional world (5). More suspicious of the humanist project than these authors, Deirdre Lynch still ties eighteenth-century character writing to the project of “anthologiz[ing] and... sum[ming] up human nature” (55). Elizabeth Fowler’s study Literary Character is subtitled The Human Figure in Early English Writing. The common assumption here is obvious enough, and on the surface it seems reasonable enough as well: literary character is an imitation of the human that tells us something about what it means to be human.

However, as James Phelan observes with particular acuity, there are “messy problems” underlying any such assumption: “[A]ll this talk about characters as plausible or possible persons presupposes that we know what a person is. But the nature of the human subject is of course a highly contested issue among contemporary thinkers... [To explore this issue properly would] require lengthy excursions into biological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and economic territories” (11). The present study addresses this issue from one limited perspective: the perspective of animal studies that questions how well the human may be understood as a category qualitatively distinct from nonhuman animal life. To that end, it is worth returning briefly to Elizabeth Fowler’s sense of characters as social persons, for Fowler is operating in the same chronological and conceptual universe to be explored in the following chapters: the Aristotelian and pre-Cartesian universe, in which character functions primarily as a categorization of types. One thing to note about the type categories Fowler invokes is that some of them—for instance, “allegorical personification,” or, as Foucault has shown, the “author” (Fowler 17)—can be called “human” only in the most capacious and indeed figurative sense of the term, whereas others—for instance, “Scythian” and “Briton”—
are geographical or racial designations that extend just as properly to kinds of nonhuman animals (Scythian horses, British bulldogs) as they do to kinds of people.

This is not a frivolous objection. Fowler offers us a sophisticated way “to make sense of pre-modern ideas of person” (2.49), and her system for doing so is grounded on commonly recognized social types: figures of kinship, civic entities, economic agents, legal entities, and so forth. However, premodern society admits nonhuman animals into these categories on a regular basis, in ways that modern or postmodern analysis has trouble accommodating. When it comes to kinship, the term “family” originates in Roman legal thinking as a means of classifying property, including livestock, and as late as the 1800s at least one English writer could still call the pig “an important member of the family” (quoted in Harrison 63). As mascots, commodities, and emblems, animals were indissolubly associated with civic and economic life. On the legal level, “[d]omestic beasts were often treated as morally responsible” (Thomas, Man 97), with the result that they—and wild animals as well—were notoriously liable to prosecution and punishment in European courts of law.15 As Keith Thomas has observed, “In the towns of the early modern period, animals were everywhere... Dwelling in such proximity to men, these animals were often thought of as individuals... Shepherds knew the faces of their sheep as well as those of their neighbors... [D]omestic beasts... were... frequently spoken to, for their owners, unlike Cartesian intellectuals, never thought them incapable of understanding” (Man 95–96). To neglect this aspect of early modern life is not only to misunderstand the nature of early modern animals; it is also to misunderstand the nature of early modern personhood.

Of the animal characters studied in the following chapters, some have been endowed by their creators with a semblance of inner life: for instance, Lodovico Ariosto’s Baiardo, William Baldwin’s Mouse-slayer, John Skelton’s Parrot, Jean Lemaire de Belges’s Amant Vert, and Tybert from The History of Reynard the Fox. Others, such as the theatrical sheep of Middleton and Shakespeare and The Second Shepherds’ Pageant (c. 1475), seem innocent of interiority. In one instance—the “Cherubic shapes” that motivate “The Chariot of Paternal Deity” in Milton’s Paradise Lost (6.753, 750)—we seem to encounter an amalgam of animal and divinity whose consciousness transcends not just the human but species distinction of any sort. In every case, however, we meet with figures that speak to the nature of personhood, that provide mod-
els for significant behavior across the species boundary, and that attest in the process to the interrelation of the human and the nonhuman.

In pointing this out, I do not seek to make broad claims for the politically or ethically ameliorative power of this book. I agree with Cary Wolfe that "there is no longer any good reason to take it for granted that the theoretical, ethical, and political question of the subject is automatically coterminous with the species distinction between Homo sapiens and everything else" (1). However, I see no reason to claim that this book therefore helps detach "a properly postmodern pluralism from the concept of the human with which progressive political and ethical agendas have traditionally been associated," or, more grandly, that it offers "a posthumanist and transdisciplinary theory of the relation between . . . species, ethics, and language, conceived in its exteriority and materiality" (9, 11). While I sympathize with these objectives, I cannot help tempering them with the comic realism of David Lodge, one of whose fictional characters exclaims that the rituals of academic discourse have "no point, . . . if by point you mean the hope of arriving at some certain truth. . . . When did you ever discover that in a question-and-discussion session?" (Small World 32). Bearing in mind the inherent limitations of the scholarly idiom (not least of which is its reliable tendency to take itself too seriously), I have here sought to write a book of modest aims, one that simply seeks to sketch in a bit of western literary history by studying the development of concepts of literary character from the standpoint of interspecies relations. That is the book's sole purpose and the sole aim in light of which it should be evaluated.