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Review: Kathleen Walker-Meikle, Medieval Pets; Medieval Dogs; Medieval Cats

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These three books by the British scholar Kathleen Walker-Meikle fit nicely together to form a basis for evaluating attitudes towards pets in the Middle Ages, as well as providing numerous representations of them in medieval and early modern art. Readers will get little documentation in the two British Library books so it may be more appropriate to consider *Medieval Pets* first.

This work consists of six chapters and a conclusion, detailed notes, a bibliography and an index. It also has extensive, though idiosyncratic, pictorial treatments of pets of all sorts—that is, animals kept indoors, given a name and not eaten, to use Keith Thomas’ formulation of a pet—from dogs, cats, simians, squirrels, and birds (especially parrots and crows that speak) to badgers and even marmots, the European members of the family that includes the woodchuck or ground hog. The majority of the pictures come from medieval manuscripts and artifacts in the Museum Meermanno in The Hague, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library, and the British Museum, with a number from stained glass and wall painting. The color plates are of good quality, the in-text black and white photos less so.

The book is logically arranged with the first chapter, “The Medieval Pet,” telling what a pet is and reviewing a number of earlier theoretical discussions of pet keeping, showing that the desire for pets of all sorts is a very old and widely shared human characteristic. The second chapter treats “Getting a Pet,” the third “Pet Welfare,” including feeding and veterinary care; the fourth treats “Living with Pets,” and the fifth is devoted to “Pet Iconography,” where, for example, pets are often shown on the personal seals of female owners; the last chapter discusses “Pets in Literature.” A brief Conclusion ties up this material, although, as other reviewers have remarked, Walker-Meikle avoids problematizing or theorizing the existence of and desire for medieval pets, and the Conclusion opens few new avenues for research.
Though the title of the book suggests it will treat the Middle Ages, the author extends her research well into the Renaissance, giving as much weight to John Caius’ *Of Englishe Dogges* written in 1570 as to the encyclopediae of Bartholomaeus Anglicus and Thomas of Cantimpré. Concern for pets in the Renaissance is especially evident in the section on “Pets in Literature” treating various pet elegies and encomiae, such as those by Antonio Tebaldeo (1463-1537) and Francesco Beccuti (1509-1553). Indeed, the incorporation of this humanist material seems to have come from another project altogether, oddly skewing the book’s time frame.

While there is some attention to hunting and other outdoor dogs, such as those of shepherds, the focus is on indoor animals with much discussion of pets on tables, on beds, and in intimate domestic interiors, such as the studies of clerics and scholars and the cells of monks and nuns, where—taking a leaf from earlier studies of melancholia—the author connects keeping pets, especially dogs, with this humoural malady.

Some of the author’s assumptions about categories of pets may be based more on intuition than evidence. However much she “genders” dogs, associating lap dogs, for example, with women and breeds like the braque or greyhound with men and the outdoors, my own sense is that women were quite fond of hunting greyhounds and kept them and treasured their collars after they died. For example, an expenditure account not cited by the author for Charles, Count of Angoulême, and Louise de Savoie in 1454 shows payment for eight copper escutcheons with the arms of Charles and his wife to attach to the collars of Louise’s greyhounds. Moreover, Walker-Meikle’s own evidence contradicts her on the male/large/outdoor paradigm since she cites the accounts of Charles VIII of France (1470-98) for the expense during the winter for a quarter aune, perhaps eleven inches, of a bright green woolen to make a jacket to keep warm a very small lap dog.

Her sweep is wide and ranges from the more familiar animals of medieval poetry, such as those owned by Chaucer’s Monk and Prioress, to orders for unusual cats from Syria and birds from the *oiselleries* in Paris. Love of pets by the aristocracy is shown by their presence, usually *couchant*, on many funeral effigies, often with the pet, most frequently a lap dog or a greyhound, named by an inscription on the effigy. The author relies too heavily, perhaps, on English monumental brass collections so that, from this extensive section of the book, one might think the presence of dogs on funeral effigies was a fourteenth-
fifteenth-century English phenomenon. But the Ermengol IX tombs in the Cloisters show that it was also common in Iberia and can be dated far earlier than Walker-Meikle suggests. That Ralph Neville, Earl of Westmorland, was buried with his greyhound in 1425 is one of the many charming bits of “funerary” information the reader will get from this part of the book.

The author’s treatment of ornamented collars and those bearing bells for dogs is extensive and very useful for persons interested in fashions and accessories for animals. She might, however, have noted the broad heraldic and motto-bearing fabric collars on dogs in the Unicorn Tapestries in the Cloisters. Many of the extravagant expenses for these accessories are documented from largely French royal accounts, though she does cite the inventories of King Henry VIII of England. A comparison of the actual French texts of some of the accounts with Walker-Meikle’s English translations given in the book shows that the author is often a little casual with the originals, leaving out or mistranslating key phrases. For example, the author on pages 51-52 gives descriptions of collars from the inventory of Charles V of France: “these include . . . a very small collier à chiene made with blue cloth adorned / with golden fleur de lys with three little golden bells and secured by a gold buckle.” The actual passage from Jules Labarte, ed., Inventaire du mobilier de Charles V, Roi de France (Paris 1879) reads “item un colier a chien, d’un veluiau bleu, ferre d’argent, dont la longe est de mesmes” (219, no. 1924). The spelling differs, the fabric is actually blue velvet, and the metal is silver not gold, while the material on the fleur de lys has migrated from a later entry on a greyhound collar, no. 2221.

Medieval Pets is well documented and has an extensive bibliography. The book is carefully proofread and I note only a few misprints such as an incorrect accent on siècle (138, n. 43) and misspellings of Katharine MacDonogh’s name (169 and 135, n. 64). The partial title of Manning and Serpell’s book (169) is Perspectives not Perceptions. Many of the great nineteenth-century sources for royal accounts such as Victor Gay’s Glossaire archaéologique and Alfred Franklin’s La vie privée d’autrefois have been digitized by Google and are readily available on line, a fact that the author might have noted.

Medieval Pets is a necessity for a reader wishing to engage with the author’s smaller—primarily picture—books, Medieval Dogs and Medieval Cats, since it supplies the documentation required to make full use of the smaller works. Medieval Dogs offers an attractive selection of
miniatures drawn entirely from manuscripts in the possession of the British Library—often very well-known ones such as the Golf Hours with its rich *bas-de-page* scenes. Each of the miniatures faces a brief text paraphrasing a comment on dogs in a medieval work such as Gerard of Wales, the *Menagier de Paris*, Rhabanus Maurus’ *De Universo*, and Hildegarde of Bingen’s *De causae et curae*, to name only a few. The comment, however, is not necessarily related to the pictures. As with *Medieval Pets*, she gives examples of indoor dogs, hunting dogs, and those associated with shepherds.

The material on dog names (21, 82) mirrors similar material in *Medieval Pets* but is actually a little fuller. Dogs associated with saints, for example, such as that often shown with St. Roch, are discussed in conjunction with the saints’ biographies. The interest in elegies for dogs in *Medieval Pets* is also rehandled, with an example from Thierry, Abbot of St. Thond [*sic*] (78). A discussion of veterinary medicine relating to dogs (43-51) is drawn from Albertus Magnus and the *Master of Game*, though the pictures offered opposite the comments only in one instance relate to this topic.

Preumably to make her book fit the physical standard of the series, Walker-Meikle has incorporated material such as a page and a picture devoted to the Cynocephali of the Monstrous Races tradition, which is only tenuously connected to her subject. The book concludes with a helpful though brief list for Further Reading.

*Medieval Cats* follows the same format and layout as *Medieval Dogs*, beginning with a brief overview account of cats (3). In some ways, the Cat volume is more useful to the student of medieval animals since it gathers many more unfamiliar or difficult to locate pictures, again drawn largely from manuscripts in the British Library. Interestingly, to judge from this book, cats in medieval art are more often found in marginalia rather than in main miniatures and are usually comically or wryly treated. And they are often more accurately rendered than are medieval dogs. The author treats a wide assortment of topics in the head notes for the pictures, such as names for cats and the various cat references in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tale*. Many of the head notes, since cats received little extended treatment in encyclopedias and other such sources, are briefer and more anecdotal than those for *Medieval Dogs*. Though the author claims that “there are copious collections of cat lore in works on natural history and encyclopedias” (44) giving examples from Thomas of Cantimpré and Albertus Magnus (where the quotations consist pretty much of everything those authors say about cats), this is
not really true. Treatments of dogs are far more common and elaborate than material about cats in such works. Indeed, the scholar will find rather little, relatively speaking, on cats in medieval scientific accounts. One area of particular interest that she does highlight is the presence of cats at various nativity scenes in medieval manuscript miniatures (19). Though the author does not offer an interpretative explanation, the cat was often vilified for licking the milk from infants’ lips and this may be the association in such pictures.

Though cats were certainly doted on by their owners—Walker-Meikle gives many examples of costs for cats and purchases of fabric for their cushions (14)—she also notes that cat skins were sold for various purposes (28) and the life of the outdoor cat was perilous as they were eaten during famines (27). They were, as well, often killed as “ritual scapegoats” in various civic celebrations of an apotropaic type (23) since they were associated with magic, sorcery, and heresy (70, 73).

The book ends with a list for Further Reading, which is a bit more interesting and less familiar than that which finishes Medieval Dogs. These three charming, informative, and well-illustrated volumes will form an indispensable part of the library of any medievalist interested in animals.

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