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The Wolf in the Dog: Animal Fables and State Formation

R. Howard Bloch

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Wolf in the Dog: Animal Fables and State Formation

R. Howard Bloch (bio)

At the time of her death, Naomi Schor had two projects in course: the conference that she had conceived and organized on man and beast and

a long-term, wide-ranging, impossibly difficult essay on what she termed "French universalism." What follows is in some sense a blending of the two as a homage to her and to the daily dialogue that made life with Naomi so intensely interesting and sweet. I begin with the following observations, hearing still her voice asking what entitled me to take for granted what had not been proven and protesting in frustration at my admittedly arrogant, "I just do." So, in keeping with the historical record, let us assume:

1. That the fable tends to appear at crucial moments in the development of cities and courts, moments also associated with state formation in the West: in the sixth century BC with Aesop and the rise of the Greek city-state; in the first century AD with Phaedrus, Babrius, and Rome; in the "cosmopolitan culture" of Charlemagne's court with its imperial and Roman revival; in the Anglo-Norman empire that, under Henry I and especially Henry II, offers, in what is sometimes referred to as the "Renaissance of the twelfth century," a model for almost all that follows **[End Page 69]** by way of centralized economic, judicial, and political institutions alongside the rise of the communes that on both sides of the Channel grew into what we think of as towns (in distinction, say, to the Italian city-state).¹ And that also produced the first woman poet in French, the remarkable Marie de France, whose 103 fables are a conduit of the animal tale from the Classical world to that of the sixteenth-century Renaissance as well as the court of the Sun King and Lafontaine. Nor, really, is the crystallization of the fable at moments of state formation restricted to the West, for the *Pancatantra*, source of the Arabic *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, was contemporaneous with the rise in the fourth and fifth centuries of ancient Indian civil administration.

2. Which brings me to my second assumption, in keeping with Adorno's dictum that "everything is not possible at every moment," that a subgenre of the animal fable plays a special role in the creation of urban space as well as state values and institutions, and nowhere more so than in the subgenre of tales involving changing places. I am thinking of those that focus upon the relationship between animals in the countryside and

those in town. These constitute a grouping inherited from the Classical animal tale visible as far back as Aesop's number 243, "The Field Mouse and the Town Mouse," a genealogy that reinforces the dynamic role of the fable at moments of intense negotiation between country and town, of which the second half of the twelfth century was certainly a high point.² In "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse," Marie's number 9, the urban rodent's visit to the country is capped by an invitation for "her country friend" to visit her "fancy rooms," which dazzle until the butlers enter and send both scampering, in a moral full of anxiety about town life:

I'm sorry I believed your talk!
You told me many pleasing tales
But left out all the bad details.
Yet now I see how much you fear
Men, cats, birds—all around here—
And traps men set to snap. I own
That I prefer my woods, alone,
In safety and without distress,
To grand rooms and unhappiness.

(v. 44)³

A companion piece is to be found in "The Wolf and the Dog" (Marie number 26, Aesop number 226) in which the wolf, lured to town with the promise of food and a life of ease, balks as soon as he catches a glimpse of the dog's **[End Page 70]** collar and leash. The wolf claims in this tale without a formal moral that, in a reversal of the German proverb that "city air makes free," he would rather live as a free wolf in the woods...

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2715 North Charles Street
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+1 (410) 516-6989



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