
How to Swing a Mouse:
Intersections of Female and Feline in Medieval Europe
(Part I)

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Medieval Women Writers

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Western culture today abounds with feline representations of women and the feminine. Regardless of where one finds them, in literature, visual art, films, or everyday language, analogies between woman and cat are unsurprising to our modern sensibilities, so natural and commonplace do they seem that they approach the status of cliché. Halloween storefront displays with their requisite witches and black cats scroll by unremarked; perhaps we chuckle at some vintage horror movie she-devil with horns, slitted cat's eyes, claws and tail; we groan at the prospect of yet another Catwoman, probably slinkier, stealthier and more digitally enhanced than the last. Yet, as with most idiomatic pairings, the connections between women and cats arose from a gradual conceptual merging, in this case over several millennia. Egyptian cat worship is common knowledge enough, but the Middle Ages, the era that gave us the witch's familiar, emerges as another pivotal historical period in the relationship between humans and cats. While it was not until the late Middle Ages and Renaissance that foreshadowing solidified into trend, converging intellectual and popular perceptions of women and cats left an intriguing trail of documents and artifacts scattered throughout all of the Middle Ages. Physical and behavioural similarities and connections to the domestic sphere were two of the most potent medieval associations between women and their feline companions. Also significant was the survival of pagan beliefs in rural areas throughout medieval Christendom, but that is a topic that must be saved for another day.

Though not persuasive enough by itself to forge a decisive affinity, similarity of physiology and temperament between women and cats did not escape notice in the Middle Ages. Cunning, deceit and the ability to capture prey, whether they be mice or men, were considered attributes of both. We are already familiar with Chaucer's Wife of Bath, the merry Alisoun who "lay as I were deed" until her husband repented out of fright, whereupon, undaunted, "I hitte

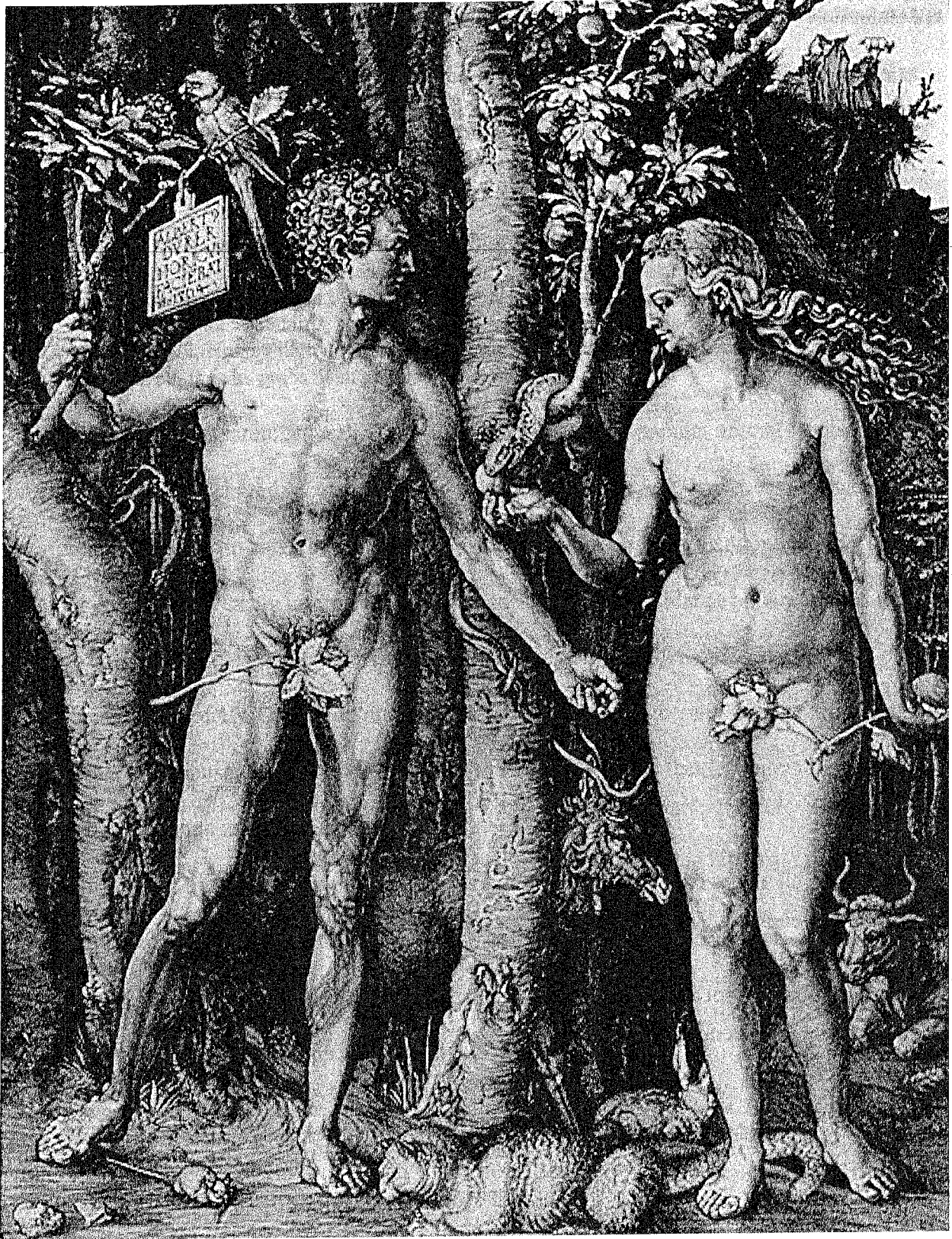


Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve* (1504), engraving printed in black on laid paper

hym on the cheke.”¹ Likewise, the cat that played dead to catch its rats was a story circulated in bestiaries and fable collections. White gives us a version involving foxes and birds, but notes that the same tale was told in the Middle Ages about the cat. I quote it here for the delightful intricacy of the ruse:

He is a fraudulent and ingenious animal. When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood with his tongue hanging out, think he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up.²

Cats were sometimes interchangeable with foxes and weasels in popular animal stories, presumably for their shared reputations as sly tricksters. The serpent, however, was another creature associated with cats, for they both possessed sinuous physiques and moved in a silent, slinking gait that was easily interpreted as deviousness. This resemblance apparently led to the Gnostic belief that a cat guarded the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Whether or not Dürer’s engraving of 1504 had anything to do with that belief is uncertain, but the prominently featured cat and mouse, positioned respectively at Eve and Adam’s feet, encourage a parallel reading of the human and animal pairs (Fig. 1).³

In spite of the cat’s notorious treachery, medieval bestiaries tend to cite its predatory skills and keenness of sense first and foremost, albeit with a tinge of the sinister. In truncated versions of the bestiary text, these characteristics often become the sole information offered on the animal. I quote one entry on the cat complete:

She is called MOUSER because she is fatal to mice. The vulgar call her CATUS the Cat because she catches things (*a captura*) while others say that it is because she lies in wait

¹ Chaucer, “General Prologue,” *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 787-811.

² White, 54.

³ Citing medieval humour theory, where man was created sanguine and became contaminated by the other humours when Adam ate the apple, Panofsky asserts that “an educated observer of the sixteenth century, therefore, would have easily recognized the four species of animals in Dürer’s engraving as representatives of the ‘four humours’ and their moral connotations.” He goes on to assign the cat the quality of choleric cruelty. This interpretation, though highly interesting, is nonetheless quite suspect, as the scene also includes the serpent, a mouse and a bird, all of which Panofsky has conveniently ignored (85).

(*capit*) i.e. because she ‘watches’. So acutely does she glare that her eye penetrates the shades of darkness with a gleam of light. Hence from the Greek comes ‘*catus*’, i.e. ‘acute’.⁴

Cats’ eyes, whose pupils range daily between luminous rounds and their trademark slits, were thought to mirror the phases of the moon. The other creature known for its lunar-governed bodily cycles was, of course, woman. Composed sometime between 1151 and 1158, Hildegard of Bingen’s theory of human physiology in *Cause et cure* is often dependent upon lunar influences, sometimes to intriguingly minute levels of detail. She offers a surprisingly plausible rationale (considering the other surviving explanations) for the phenomenon of menstruation: “For as the moon waxes and wanes, so for woman the blood and the humors are purged at the time of menstruation. Otherwise she could not survive because she is moister than man and would incur serious infirmity.” She also claims that menstruation is accompanied by greater discomfort if it occurs during the waxing moon, for it lowers the blood level at the time that it ought to increase with the moon.⁵

Fertility, a concept that springs naturally from any discussion of women’s physiological cycles, was yet another link between female and feline. Much like rabbits today, cats, whose habits were better understood because of their early domestication, became renowned amongst their human keepers as extremely fertile creatures. By Engels’ calculation, a pair of cats and an average of four kits per litter could conceivably, in five years, multiply to a population of

⁴ White, 90-91. I used White’s version because his translation reads with more literary flair than most, but almost the exact same text is given in the *Aberdeen Bestiary* (23v) and, to a slightly lesser extent, Barber’s translation from the M. S. Bodley 764 (109). Albertus Magnus’ *De animalibus*, intended as a more “scientific” treatise, opens one entry on the cat thus: “The *musio* [cat] is a familiar animal which some call the *murilegus* [mouse-catcher] and others *cattus* from its catching [*capiendo*] or its cleverness [*astutia*]” (*On Animals*, 1523).

⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, 80, 79. A different treatise, composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the widely circulated *De secretis mulierum* asserted that menstrual blood in women was simply an inferior form of male semen, since women’s lower body temperatures could not make female seed sufficiently “cooked and digested.” The author also claimed that women’s hair became venomous while they were menstruating, during which time you could pluck them and sow them in manure to grow a bumper crop of serpents—as long as you took care to do the planting under the auspices of certain constellations (Albertus Magnus, *Secrets of Women*, 64, 96).

354,294 cats!⁶ Fertile nature, however, for both women and cats, was frequently also construed as lustful instinct. If any distinctive sound is attributed to cats other than its pleasant purr, it is the dreadful siren of the caterwaul. The thirteenth-century *De proprietatibus rerum* captures it with aplomb: “Among cattes in tyme of love is hard fightyng for wyves, and oon craccheth and rendeth the other grevousliche with bytyng and with clawes. And he maketh a reweliche noyse and horrible whan oon profreth to fighte with another.” Much to the delight of literary ailurophiles everywhere, the author also serves up an eminently quotable one-line summary of the creature. “[H]e is a ful leccherous beste in southe,” he declares, “swyfte, plaunte, and mery.”⁷ It is a description not unworthy of our dear old Alisoun. For a more scientific parallel, the sanguine women of Hildegard’s *Cause et cure*, quite the exemplars of moderation when considered alongside the other temperamental types, nonetheless require an outlet for their fertile instincts. “If they remain without a husband so that they do not bear offspring, they will possibly suffer physical pain,” warns the abbess. “But if they have a husband they are healthy.”⁸

Finally, if one is to mate, one must also keep up an appearance worthy of a mate. Albertus Magnus comments on the feline pastime universally recognized as second only to sleeping: “It takes delight in cleanliness and for this reason imitates the washing of a face by licking its front paws and then, by licking it, smoothes all of its fur.”⁹ Unfortunately for the meticulous cat, attention to personal grooming was all too easily reinterpreted as vanity. At a time when Christian doctrine encouraged inner piety and the rejection of bodily cares, the cat’s constant interest in its coat was not kindly looked upon. Just as St. Jerome advised Christians to “let a squalid garb be the evidence of a clean heart,” Hildegard about seven hundred years later was still telling her readers that “it is of no advantage to human beings to bathe frequently in

⁶ Engels, 8.

⁷ Wheen, 317, excerpt titled “Smale Wilde Bestes” from Bartholomew Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*.

⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, 63.

⁹ Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 1523.



Three cats from the Ashmole Bestiary of the late twelfth to early thirteenth century (Clutton-Brock, 48).

water unless they are thin and withered and get cold or hot easily because they have thin flesh.”¹⁰ No ducks themselves, cats would have been happy to be counselled thus. With free rein to wander between hearth and alley, however, domestic felines were equally suspected of the usual reasons for female preening. Bartholomew Anglicus is appropriating a well-known proverb when he says, in his celebrated description of the cat: “And whanne he hat a fayre skynne he is as it were prowde therof and goth faste aboute; and whanne his skynne I ybrende thanne he abydeth at home.” One might recognize it as well from Chaucer’s later versification in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, where, midway through her catalogue of misogyny, Alisoun renders the old analogy anew:

Thou seydest this, that I was lyk a cat;
 For whoso wolde senge a cattes skyn,
 Thanne wolde the cat wel dwellen in his in;
 And if the cattes skyn be slyk and gay,
 She wol nat dwelle in house half a day,
 But forth she wole, er any day be dawed,
 To shewe hir skyn and goon a-caterwawed.
 This is to seye, if I be gay, sire shrewe,
 I wol renne out my borel for to shewe.¹¹

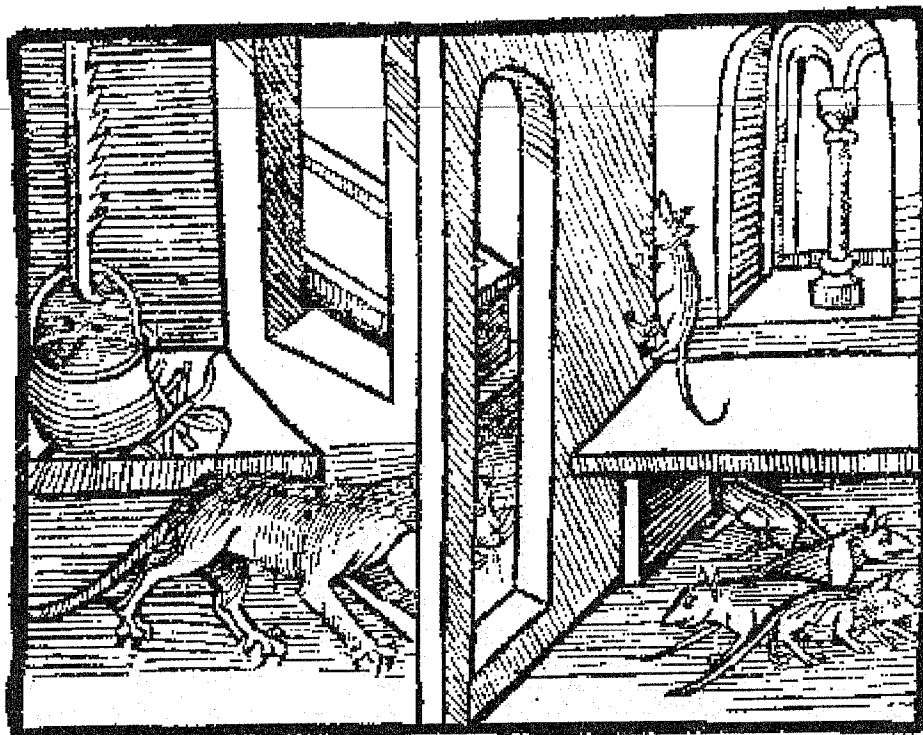
Evinced here is the second web of associations between women and cats upon which it is high time to embark: their situation in the domestic sphere.

Unbeknownst to those humans who discouraged their fellow Christians from bathing, they were providing a catalyst for the very catastrophe that would make them need cats more than ever. The Black Death of 1346 to 1351 was the culmination of increasingly devastating waves of bubonic plague, which, riding on the surf of urbanization and unhygienic practices, surfaced intermittently throughout the Middle Ages. As part of the witchcraft hysteria, the mass killing of cats in medieval towns had eliminated the last line of defense against disease-ridden

¹⁰ Engels, 144-145; Hildegard of Bingen, 96.

¹¹ Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 348-356.

rodents; pandemic, looming just on the horizon, took over.¹² Before the witchcraft scares, however, cats were invaluable additions to a household as expert mousers. Any abode, whether it was rural or urban, required some form of prevention against food contamination by rats and



A medieval woodcut showing a cat preying on mice in a kitchen.

mice. Cats were so valued for this service, in fact, that a law was established in tenth-century Wales laying out the duties of a cat and standardizing its monetary worth.¹³ In monasteries, convents and the homes of book-owning layfolk, there was also concern for those precious tomes, whose pages were apt to be soiled or nibbled by the ever-present vermin. Exeter Cathedral, for instance, kept a cat at least from 1305 to 1467, for which time the cathedral's account books contain regular entries of a penny a week paid to *custoribus et cato*—the keepers and the cat.¹⁴ Presumably the salary was to keep the cat fed in times of fewer rodents.

¹² Engels, 160.

¹³ Bryant, 136-137, excerpt titled "The Law of the Cat" from *The Codes Enacted by Howel the Good, King of All Wales* (see Appendix A).

¹⁴ Reeves, 129. Evidence for the common existence of abbey cats can be found in two literary works, where the animal seems almost to achieve human dignity. Odo of Cheriton's fable collection includes a story about a cat who, disguised as a monk, sits in the dining hall with the rest of the brothers in order to capture one particularly coveted

By 1475, which was roughly when Antonella da Messina painted his version of *Saint Jerome in His Study*, the cat seemed, at least in this picture, to have achieved iconic status as a guardian of books (Fig. 2). Friedmann makes much ado about the diminutive, inconspicuous feline in the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, and justly so, for he notes that this is the only domestic cat to be found in the thousand or so artistic renditions of Saint Jerome he had studied. Before launching into an ultimately fruitless survey of its possible symbolic meanings, he inserts this disclaimer:

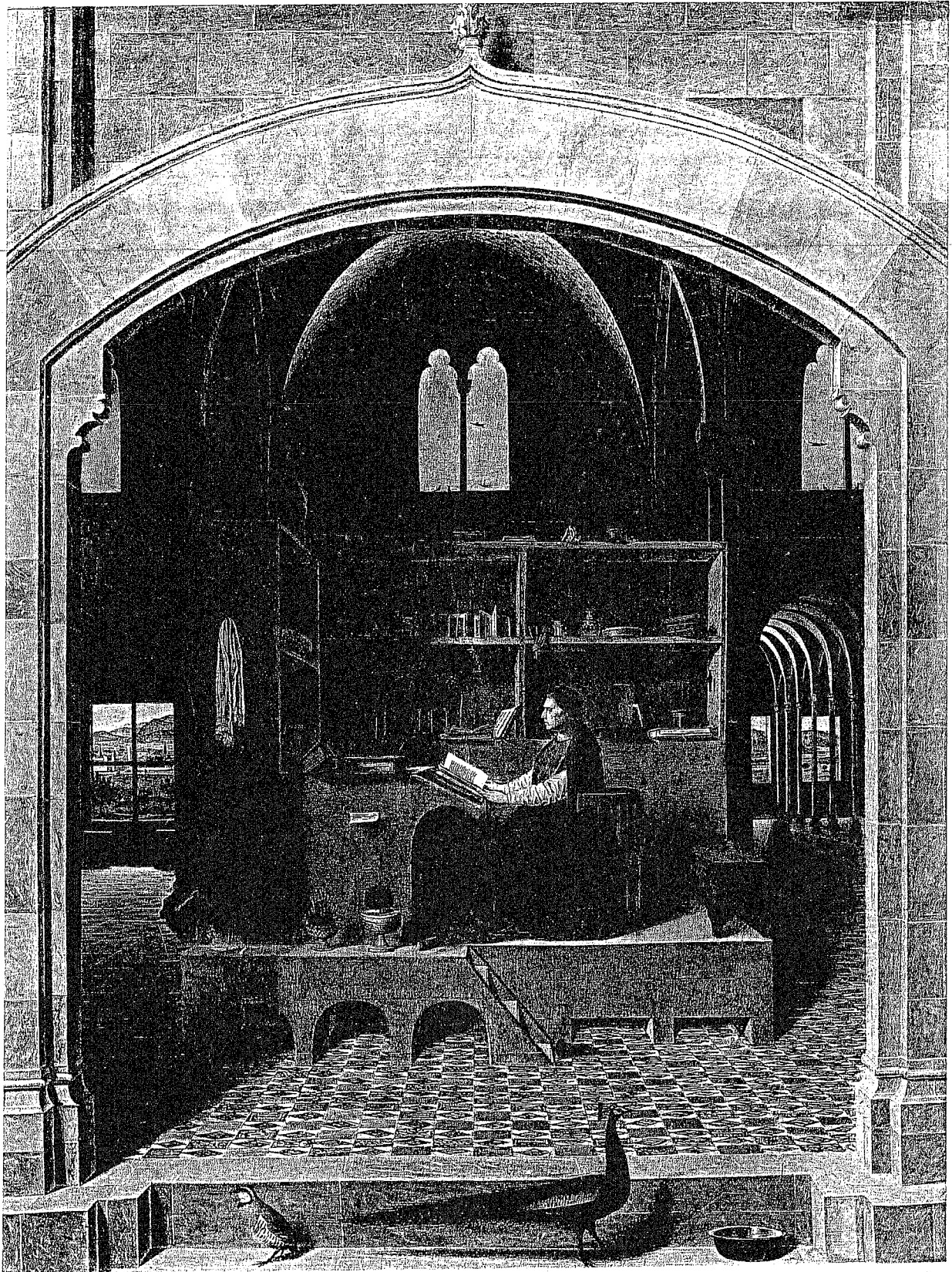
It is, however, not a very important addition, either pictorially or symbolically. When dealing with so unemotional and precise an artist as Antonello, his great qualities as a painter notwithstanding, one is almost inclined to accept the cat as a factual part of an everyday domestic menage, and to think no more about it.¹⁵

I agree indeed that the cat was included for its domestic associations, but I can hardly say that one ought therefore to ignore it. The cat sits with its back to the saint, its body slanted at the same angle as Jerome's left leg. More importantly, it is positioned on the very threshold between the bookcase and a rear chamber that looks somewhat like a kitchen or pantry, some darkened room where rats are likely to prowl. Almost camouflaged in the shadow, and probably unnoticeable by any creature exiting the back room, the cat functions as gatekeeper to the books, and thus a kind of intellectual bodyguard for the saint whose livelihood depends upon his books. Could the increasing perception of cats as protectors of books have fanned the flames of Richard de Bury's famous misogynistic rant in *Philobiblon*? Women, who probably had to deal with the cat's propensity for stealing household food, or who perhaps pampered it so that it was distracted from its more noble duties, may not have been perceived as the best influence on the beasts.¹⁶

mouse (*The Fables*, 85). An absolute literary treat, the eighth-century poem "Pangur Bán" by an Irish monk of Carinthia draws stanza-by-stanza parallels between the monk's book-learning and his white cat's mousing (see Appendix B).

¹⁵ Friedmann, 162.

¹⁶ Gluttony was a well-known trait of felines, as demonstrated in the fable about a man who set a cat on a cheese-hungry mouse, only to have the cat eat both mouse and cheese instead (Aesop, "The Man and the Cat", #435 in *Aesop's Fables*). Disharmony between wife and cat is also implied in the following nursery rhyme, an Oxfordshire version of the irreverent "Confessional" game: "Father, O father, I'm come to confess, / Well, my daughter, well! /



Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in His Study*.
London: The National Gallery. Photo by John Webb (Friedmann, 158)

Though too far beyond my present materials for the formulation of a complete argument, I cannot help but wonder if any medieval trends led to our present-day stereotype of the book-loving cat lady, known in some forms as a librarian. An engraving of a witches' sabbath from 1514 shows a cat in the bottom right-hand corner reading some kind of spell book. It is the opinion of one historian that "clearly, neither ordinary cats nor demons needed to consult texts of any sort. So the reading cat is almost certainly intended to represent a recently transformed woman, rather than a literal housecat or a demonic familiar."¹⁷

In spite of its witchcraft connotations (and inevitable frictions over who stole the meat), the combination of wife and cat was also construed in the Middle Ages as the foundation for domestic harmony and prosperity. The ruddy young wife, warmed by the smells of the kitchen, would have made a pleasant homecoming for the medieval layman. The presence of a cat in numerous English nursery rhymes completes the domestic scene, albeit serving at times as an involuntary diversion for bored children with access to a well.¹⁸ Back in its mousing days, the sight of a rotund cat snoozing on the hearth also suggested that it had either little to do or had already done its job; either way, it meant that no rodents lingered to spoil one's supplies. However, this comfortable domestic scene does not appear to be something a man could take for granted in the Middle Ages. More often than not, literary sources that depict wives and cats as domestic mainstays simultaneously betray a fear of their inclination to wander. Such proverbs as "a good wife and a good cat are best at home" and the one quoted earlier by the Wife of Bath suggest that women and cats were considered dangerous creatures when allowed to roam abroad.¹⁹ According to the *Proverbs of Alfred*, "Idleness and pride teach a young wife evil

Last night I call'd the cat a beast. / Shocking, my daughter, shocking! / What penance? my father, what penance? / What penance! my daughter, what penance! / What penance shall I do? / Kiss me" (Halliwell, 121).

¹⁷ The engraving was too dark to be reproduced in black-and-white, but can be found online (Hans Baldung Grien, *Witches' Sabbath*); Walter Stephens, 298-299.

¹⁸ Halliwell, 3-7, 9, 30, 43, 79, 82-84, 87, 90, 95, 121, 125, 131.

¹⁹ Rogers, 169; for the proverb used by the Wife of Bath, see p. 5 of this essay.

manners.” Instead, a husband ought to keep his wife “sweaty with toil,” so that she did not revert to wild ways like the proverbial cat that continued to mouse even when it was no longer required to.²⁰ Chaucer, too, makes use of this idiom. In the Manciple’s Tale, Phebus has a wife whom he adores, and therefore keeps her shut in the house all day out of jealousy. The Manciple, however, says that it is pointless to shut up a wife, for a good wife does not need to have this done to her, and a bad one will give trouble regardless. He goes on to illustrate his point:

But God it woot, ther may no man embrace
As to destreyne a thyng which that nature
Hath naturelly set in a creature.

Lat take a cat, and fostre hym wel with milk
And tendre flessh, and make his couche of silk,
And lat hym seen a mous go by the wal,
And anon he weyveth milk and flessh and al,
And every deyntee that is in that house,
Swich appetit hath he to ete a mouse.
Lo, heere hath lust his dominacioun,
And appetit fleemeth discrecioun.²¹

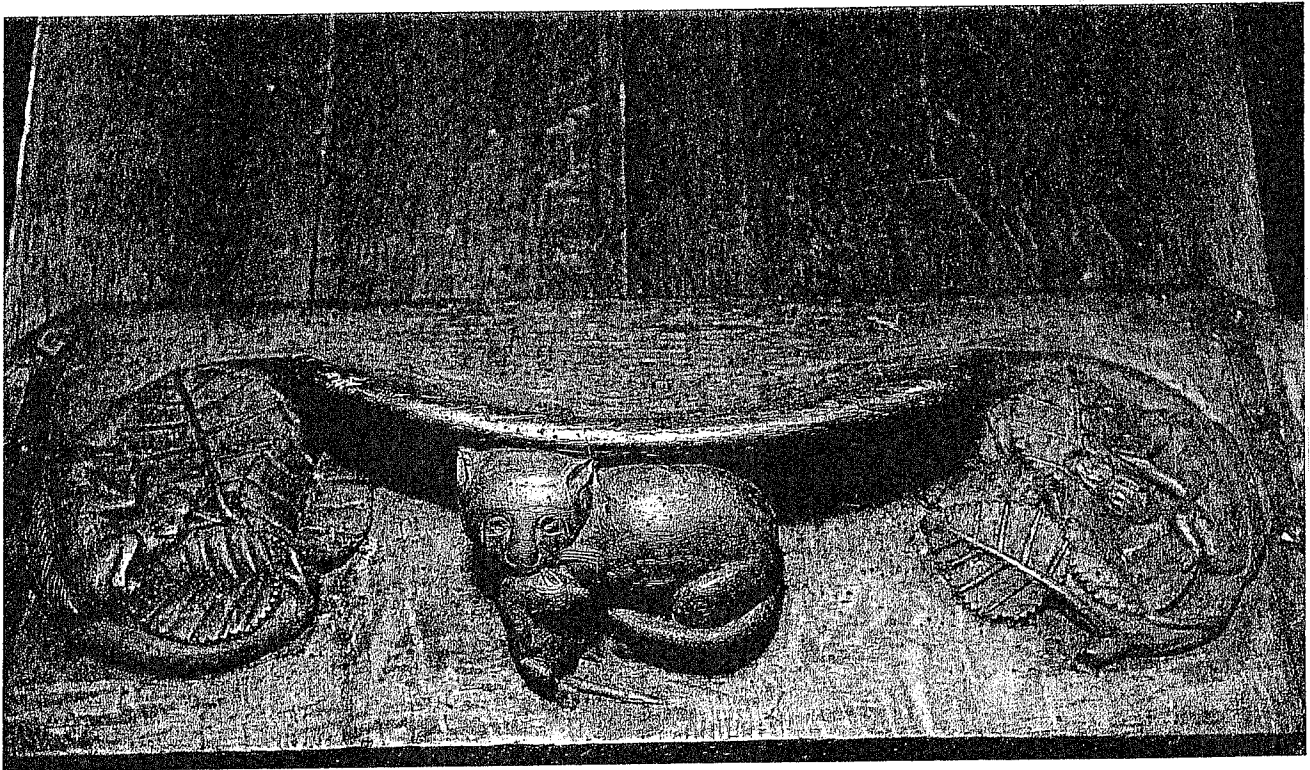
The nature of women and cats, then, was to be natural, and hence to wander. Seen in this light, the illusion of wife and feline as domestic comforts was little more than sugar coating over what was almost a kind of necessary evil.

By nature “wild” and yet needed in and sometimes dependent upon the civilized world of men, women and cats lived their lives on the uneasy threshold between domesticity and freedom. They were suspected of embodying very different personalities outside the domestic sphere, personalities which men knew nothing about, and therefore perceived as mysterious or threatening. It is interesting here to consider the fact that cats were the only animal allowed as anchoresses’ pets. Certainly the cats were useful for controlling the mouse population, but it would be hard to imagine that anchoresses and their cats did not develop some fondness for each other. Most intriguingly, the cat would have been the only living creature able to pass freely

²⁰ Morris, 120.

²¹ Chaucer, “The Manciple’s Tale,” *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 139-154, 160-162, 175-182.

between the anchorhold and the outside world, it being small enough to enter and leave through one of the anchorhold's windows.²² The cat, in a sense, might have been the anchoress' medium between two worlds. The accoutrement of cat skins just recently made a comeback in runway fashion as well. Clad in royal leopard and ravishing lynx, the models were well-equipped "to project a sexy fusion of raw and refined, civilized and wild."²³ It is impossible at this point to speculate further on cats and women as dual, mediating creatures without calling upon the complexities of visionaries, witchcraft and pagan worship. But suffice it to say that what I have presented in this paper ought to be firm enough grounding for that discussion, which I hope eventually to undertake. This is, after all, only the beginning of a project that looms larger by the minute.



Carving of a cat with a mouse in its mouth on a misericord in Winchester Cathedral, c. 1305 (Clutton-Brock, 49)

²² Millet and Wogan-Browne, 135; Cannon, 109.

²³ Glueck, accessed online on 10 December 2004. For an intriguing early example of the powers of feline garments, the story of Catskin tells of a girl whose father disowned her even before she was born, for he only wanted a boy. She eventually escaped the confines of her boarding school and made her way into the world disguised in a catskin robe (Halliwell, 48-57).

Appendix A: The Welsh Law for Cats

The Vendotian (or North Wales) Code

The worth of a cat and her teithi is this:

1. The worth of a kitten from the night it is kitted until it shall open its eyes is a legal penny.
2. And from that time, until it shall kill mice, two legal pence.
3. And after it shall kill mice, four legal pence; and so it always remains.
4. Her teithi are, to see, to hear, to kill mice, to have her claws entire, to rear and not to devour her kittens; and if she be bought, and be deficient in any one of those teithi, let one-third of her worth be returned.

The Gwentian (or South-east) Code

1. Whoever shall kill a cat that guards a house and a barn of the king, or shall take it stealthily, it is to be held with its head to the ground and its tail up, the ground being swept, and then clean wheat is to be poured about it, until the tip of its tail be hidden; and that is its worth.
2. A common cat is four legal pence in value.
3. The teithi of a cat are, that it be perfect of ear, perfect of eye, perfect of teeth, perfect of tail, perfect of claw and without marks of fire; and that it will kill mice well; and that it shall not devour its kittens; and that it be not caterwauling on every new moon...
5. A pound is the worth of a pet animal of the king.

Appendix B: "Pangur Bán" (Wheen, 314-315)

I and my white Pangur
 Have each his special art:
 His mind is set on hunting mice,
 Mine is upon my special craft.

I love to rest – better than any fame! –
 With close study at my little book;
 White Pangur does not envy me:
 He loves his childish play.

When in our house we two are all alone –
 A tale without tedium!
 We have – sport never-ending!
 Something to exercise our wit.

At times by feats of derring-do
 A mouse sticks in his net,
 While into my net there drops
 A difficult problem of hard meaning.

He points his full shining eye
 Against the fence of the wall:
 I point my clear though feeble eye
 Against the keenness of science.

He rejoices with quick leaps
 When in his sharp claw sticks a mouse:
 I too rejoice when I have grasped
 A problem difficult and dearly loved.

Though we are thus at all times,
 Neither hinders the other,
 Each of us pleased with his own art
 Amuses himself alone.

He is a master of the work
 Which every day he does:
 While I am at my own work
 To bring difficulty to clearness.

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