CHAPTER 2

Monkey in the Middle

Christina Normore

From the Middle Ages on, the anthropomorphosis of other species troubled Christian convictions concerning humanity’s special status. In their oscillating similarity and dissimilarity to mankind, monkeys in particular embodied a persistent concern that haunts the projection of human qualities onto non-human animals: just as beasts may act like people, so too people can appear all too bestial. Early Modern authors and artists repeatedly cast simians as irrational but highly skilled imitators ruled by their senses. These imagined monkeys not only encapsulated the fearful pleasures of the animal within, but also evoked the specter of a possible inhumanity lurking within the carefully wrought aesthetics of the creative arts and court culture.\(^1\) The complex interweaving of desire, fear, moralizing, and pleasure that encircled the figure of the monkey at the dawn of the Early Modern period can be seen in two depictions of the popular vignette of the Monkeys and the Peddler.\(^2\) Issuing from the elite culture of mid-fifteenth-century Flanders, the Cloisters Monkey Cup [Fig. 2.1] and the *entremets* from the third night of banqueting at the marriage of Margaret of York and Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy both cast monkeys as performers and connoisseurs whose ambiguous antics in the end draw the viewer into the realm of the beast. Exploiting simians’ close association with simulation, these seemingly fanciful explorations of humanity’s imperfect doubles directly engaged their viewers with the problems of sensual delight and mimetic representation in the courtly arts.

Simulating Simians

At once assigned human qualities and used as the quintessential sign of the non-human, animals and their depictions repeatedly tested the pre-modern

\(^1\) On the range of meanings assigned simians, see Janson H. W. *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: 1952); Sorenson J. *Ape* (London: 2009).

boundaries erected between mankind and all other species. Early Christian sources largely treat animals as objects or tools, but from the twelfth century, European art, literature, and legislation increasingly probed the boundary between man and beast. From the satirical adventures of Reynard the wily fox to the trials of crop-destroying locusts, medieval Europeans increasingly conceived of and treated animals as sentient beings that acted with human-like intent, even as theologians continued to insist that only humans possessed true reason. Many of the creatures selected for frequent attention either lived in close proximity to people (such as pigs) or had long been sanctioned by tradition (such as lions). Simians, however, rose to prominence in late medieval and Early Modern discourse despite their continued rarity in Europe,