INTRODUCTION

THE CASE OF THE CAMEL

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In the second of his *Just So Stories*, ‘How the Camel Got His Hump’ (1974), Rudyard Kipling recounts that, when the world was new and the Animals were just beginning to work for Man, the Camel refused to play his part, and went instead to live in the Desert where he ate thorns and milkweed and prickles. One after another the domesticated beasts came to the Camel, the Horse with a saddle on his back, the Dog with a stick in his mouth, and the Ox with a yoke on his neck. Each implored the Camel to lend a hand with Man’s work, and to each the Camel uttered but a single word: “Humph!” Man explains to the Horse and the Dog and the Ox that, due to the Camel’s willful idleness, they must all work harder still. The three hold a pow-wow, discontented as they are with their lot. The Djinn of All Deserts takes pity on them, however, and resolves to compel the Camel to contribute. After one “humph” too many the Djinn casts a Great Magic and there appears on the Camel’s back a large, lolloping humph, or ‘hump’ as it is known today. Sustained by this hump, the Djinn explains, the Camel will now be able to toil for three days without eating, and thus make up for the work he missed. For all that, however, Kipling tells us that the Camel “has never yet learned how to behave” (p. 25).

Kipling’s tale presents us with a number of animal encounters, all different in tone. That between the three domesticated creatures is harmonious, a meeting of like minds, albeit one prompted by their disgruntlement with the camel. The conference called by Man, meanwhile, is directive and serves to steer the conduct of horse, dog and ox. Finally, the encounters between the camel and each of his would-be interlocutors are discordant, even quarrelsome. The camel has long been portrayed as an irritable, ill-tempered creature, whose relations with others are fractious and antagonistic. Foucault highlighted the distinction, however, between antagonism and agonism (2001, p. 342). He characterised the antagonistic encounter as “a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides”, a standoff that serves only to suppress
each adversary. The agonistic relationship, on the other hand, is one of “mutual incitement”, a “permanent provocation” that has the potential for reciprocal stimulation. In Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, for instance, the Israelite champion initially endures an antagonistic impasse with his Philistine captors, but his agonistic encounters with successive prison visitors spur him ultimately to spectacular and terrible action. We might choose to consider the camel’s conduct, then, at least prior to the Djinn’s despotic intervention, as rousing rather than merely resistant.

The fast-growing field of Animal Studies, to which this collection contributes, is a varied domain. Encounters with animals have encouraged collaborations between researchers and writers within the arts, humanities, and social sciences, that have been every bit as wide-ranging as those between Kipling’s creatures. In coming together to discuss other animals there has been agreement and convergence amongst some, as well as considerable divergence amongst others. With researchers arriving to the field pursuing dissimilar objectives and preoccupations, employing different disciplinary tools and methods, how could it be otherwise? The name of the field itself is contested: should it be ‘Animal Studies’ (Shapiro 1993), ‘Human-Animal Studies’ (Shapiro 2008), ‘Anthrozoology’ (Rowan 1987), or something else again? Indeed, no consensus exists even regarding the nature or bounds of the object—or subject—of study, ‘the animal’ (Ingold 1994). These varying, even conflicting approaches that characterise the field are a strength rather than a weakness. They denote a genuine and entirely healthy multidisciplinary engagement, by which diverse disciplines bring to bear unique contributions to the question of animal encounters (Wolfe 2009). As an open, contested field, with no clear canon, Animal Studies is a meeting point where different species of researcher gather. The agonistic encounters that inevitably result demonstrate precisely the mutual incitement and productive provocation suggested by Foucault.

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1 In pharmacology an agonist is a chemical that triggers a response in a cell, whilst the antagonist has the effect of inhibiting such reactions. Similarly, in physiology agonist muscles effect the movement of a body part, whilst antagonists work to restore a limb to its initial position.