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Animal or Animality?

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The March 2009 *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Language Association) devotes over 100 pages to the convergence of animal studies and literature. Just as the May 2004 issue that devoted itself to the “Special Topic: ‘Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium’” marked a certain juncture at which the grand old dame of American literary scholarship nodded in recognition of sf, so too does the issue under review here acknowledge her approval of this growing field of study. There are differences, of course. The sf issue was devoted entirely to its “Special Topic,” while in the present issue “theories and methodologies: Animal Studies” must share room with a “Victorian Cluster,” and another “theories and methodologies: Medieval Studies in the Twenty-First Century.” If typeface is any indication, Clusters and Special Topics, which are capitalized, are more significant than theories and methodologies, which are not. Apparently, then, the field of animal studies and literature has not yet received full approval of this particular arbiter: certainly, it has not yet had time to develop such a vast repository of criticism as sf had before receiving its nod. On the other hand, the special issue on science fiction, “coordinated” by Marleen S. Barr and Carl Freedman, was not so successful as its luminary line-up of contributors might promise, and its cover, which included an actual bug-eyed monster, did nothing to advance sf’s seriousness of purpose in academe. The relatively modest offering on animal studies offers more rigorous thinking, on the whole, and has a perfectly splendid cover, in the form of a detail of an “ex libris” from 1407, lush with animal imagery.

The parts of the issue devoted to animal studies consist of a guest column at the front of the journal by Marianne DeKoven called “Why Animals Now,” then the “theories and methodologies” section of 103 pages with twelve relatively short articles (all under 10 pages in length), followed by an article by Cary Wolfe under the heading “the changing profession” called “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” and, off in the section on medieval studies, an article by Bruce Holsinger, “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal.” The result is quite substantive, if slightly mysterious. Was there a guest editor? Is there a particular rubric for “theories and methodologies”? Are they somehow different from “Clusters” or “Special Topics”?

Marianne DeKoven's introductory column on "Why Animals Now?" begins with a gloss of Myrtle's puppy in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and then points out quite sensibly that "All literary representations of animals no more form a unified or even meaningful category than do those of women or the working class" (363). She sees "most work in animal studies" as "motivated either by direct advocacy for animals or by the connection of animals with other subjects of political advocacy" (367). She, as do several other contributors, introduces the question of terminology—is it "animal studies" or "animality studies?" In an endnote, she differentiates the two terms, so that "animal studies" is more concerned with "animal advocacy and ... the human-animal relation" and "animality studies" is the practice of "theorists of the posthuman, who want to move beyond the human-animal distinction" (368). Maybe.

The first of the articles under the "theories and methodologies" heading is the compact and elegantly reasoned "The Eight Animals in Shakespeare: or, Before the Human" by Laurie Shannon. Its subject is not the animals in Shakespeare but the significance of how seldom the word "animal" occurs in Shakespeare. While that word only occurs eight times, "beast" occurs 141 times and "creature" 127 (474). The significance for her is that "animal" becomes the word of choice only after the human exceptionalism of Cartesian dualism: "To put it in the broadest terms: before the cogito, there was no such thing as 'the animal'" (474). "Animal" is the word to use, then, when other species are relegated to some separate, inferior, and invisible category.

Nigel Rothfels has written importantly about the history of zoos (*Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* [2002]): here he gives a brief overview, concluding that "People go [to zoos] not because they fail to see the limitations of the place but because they are searching for the possibilities" (486). Susan McHugh follows with an exhaustively and exhaustingly endnoted "sketch of the history of literary animal agents" (492). Both of these articles will be useful for readers new to the field of animal studies but they do not offer new thinking. Presumably, they were not meant to.

Michael Lundblad's very short "From Animal to Animality Studies" is a plea to differentiate between the two terms that DeKoven mentioned in her column, although his distinctions differ from hers: for him "animal studies" refers to advocacy discussions and "animality studies" to "work that expresses no explicit interest in advocacy" (497). The article makes frequent use of the locution "I want to..." as in "I want to associate animal studies..." (496), "I want to argue for 'animality studies'..." (497), "I want to identify..." (497), and "I also want to acknowledge..." (497).

Unfortunately, whatever we may want, only time will tell what terminology will dominate the discussion. It may become more useful to make these differentiations, or it may become more helpful to have a term that encompasses both advocacy and thinking about animals (or creatures, for that matter). I myself want terminology that avoids separating advocacy from discipline. I want cross-fertilization and hybrid vigor rather than pure breeding. I want animal studies, apparently. A further objection for me lies in the definition of “animality” that emphasizes the separation between human and animal, as in “a quality or nature associated with animals,” including “natural unrestrained unreasoned response to physical drives or stimuli” in the first definition, and “the animal nature of human beings” in the second (*Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary*). Yep, I want animal studies: we can be animals, too.

Ursula K. Heise’s “The Android and the Animal” addresses what she calls “animality” studies, using, among other science fiction works, Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), Tepper’s *The Family Tree* (1997), and Oshii’s anime *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004). She sees “recent science fiction” as “structurally split[ting] the figure of the alien into the android and the biologically altered, evolved, or cyborgized–animal” (504). Often, she believes, science fiction “tend[s] to articulate humanist perspectives that sit uneasily with the hybrid and clearly posthuman social and biological environments they portray” (508), although she sees exceptions in both Tepper and Oshii, in whose works “human consciousness is not a priori set apart as unique” (509). I might add a number of other works, from Le Guin’s collection *Buffalo Gals and other Animal Presences* (1987) to Karen Traviss’s six-volume *The Wess’har Wars* (2004-2008) to her list of exceptions. While the number of exceptions suggests that the “humanist” generalization may not be the rule, the article was nevertheless stimulating and made good use of the ideas of Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Cary Wolfe in its argument.

Two articles explored the use of animals in American literature: these would, I suppose, be fairly clear examples of “animality” rather than “animal” studies, if we want to make the differentiation. Susan M. Griffin’s “*Understudies: Miming the Human*” looks at Mary Wilkins Freeman’s collection of stories about animals and flowers as asking the question “who are the understudies and who are the leads—animals or humans?” (511). Colleen Glenney Boggs examines Emily Dickinson’s use of animals, and claims that Dickinson “locates animal presence in orthography, in writing itself” (538). Both articles are clearly reasoned and convincing.

Una Chaudhuri’s compelling argument in “‘Of All Nonsensical Things’: Performance and Animal Life” is that “If language is indeed a barrier [to understanding between the

species], then the quest for a deeper, richer mode of understanding the animality we share with nonhumans might logically lead one to the embodied arts of performance” (520). When she says, “Determinedly material and immanent, performance animalizes philosophy” (522), we realize how difficult it is to separate “animal studies” from “animality studies.” Indeed, since this article, and Heise’s, discussed above, are both so strong, they persuade me, at least, of the hybrid vigor of a more inclusive view of the field, one in which advocacy is not hived off from other aspects of study. Rosi Braidotti’s “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others” also deploys hybrid vigor as she works to “deterritorialize, or nomadize, the human/animal interaction” (526), declaring that “The animal can no longer be metaphorized as other but needs to be taken on its own terms” (528).

In fact, all the other articles under consideration, including the one in the section on medieval studies, have something to say about both advocacy and more literary matters, so none of them would fit the narrow field of “animality studies” as defined by DeKoven and Lundblad. Bruce Boehrer’s “Animal Studies and the Deconstruction of Character” claims that “the notion of character develops in English writing as an early effort to evade this philosophical crisis: as a means of manufacturing and perpetuating the distinction between people and animals” (543). He makes the elegant point that “the study of rhetoric and the study of natural history, the study of people and the study of animals, emerge as parallel expressions of the same taxonomic impulse” (544). Kimberly W. Benston’s “Experimenting at the Threshold: Sacrifice, Anthropomorphism, and the Aims of (Critical) Animal Studies” uses Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1886) to develop her argument that “cultural animal studies [another variation in the terminology] becomes a project capable of identifying the conceptual machinery manufacturing our contradictory relations to animals” (551). Neel Ahuja reminds us, in “Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World,” that although “Histories of race and empire have shaped the field imaginary of species studies [yet another entry in the terminology contest] from its inception” (556), they are not the same: “if we are to take seriously nonhuman performance and representation, we must acknowledge the monkey’s own gaze” (560). The article in medieval studies, “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal” by Bruce Holsinger, looks at the phenomenon of animal trials that extended well beyond the medieval era and reminds us that medieval texts were written on parchment, the skins of pigs, concluding that “The animal’s *mec*, its ‘me,’ holds up an ethical mirror to the centuries of slaughter that gave us a millennium of medieval writing” (622, emphasis in original).

Under the heading “the changing profession,” Cary Wolfe offers a valuable overview of the field of animal studies. He reminds us that the idea of the animal as separate from human “is better seen as marking a brief period ... bookended by a pre- and posthumanism that think the human/animal distinction quite otherwise” (564). He goes on to summarize major events, works, journals, and so on, in the fast-growing (and broadly understood) field. He warns us against turning animal studies, a term that aligns it too closely, he believes, to cultural studies, into a branch of humanism by making it a site for “the sort of ‘pluralism’ that extends the sphere of consideration (intellectual or ethical) to previously marginalized groups without in the least destabilizing or throwing into question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralization” (568). This point extends nicely from Ahuja’s acknowledgment of the monkey’s gaze. Wolfe’s summary of animal studies provides both a helpful introduction to newcomers and thoughtful insights for those familiar with the field, along with an extensive and useful Works Cited.

This special issue of *PMLA* provides, then, a helpful introduction to animal studies for scholars who want to use its theories and methodologies for their investigation of literature, and some thoughtful insights for people on both sides of the animal studies/literary criticism equation. Like most issues of *PMLA*, it suffers from some very dry, dense, and dull prose in places, but it is a genuine contribution to our field. For readers who would like a livelier, though still academic, introduction, however, I would direct them to the 23 October 2009 issue of *The Chronicle Review*. There one finds four articles under the heading “Confronting the Animal.” First is an overview of the field by Jennifer Howard called “Creature Consciousness.” Next is a short article on morality in animals, “Moral in Tooth and Claw” by Jessica Pierce and Marc Bekoff. Jeffrey J. Williams provides a sketch of Donna Haraway’s work (“Donna Haraway’s Critters”), and the section concludes with a review by Eric Banks of the *Animal* series from Reaktion Books. No new insights here, nor does the *Chronicle* introduction provide a huge range of sources, but it is a much more accessible introduction. It might make a suitable introduction to the *PMLA* issue. Although the exact rubric of the *PMLA* issue remains mysterious, as does its process of selection, the section on animal studies and literature nevertheless serves both literature and animal studies well.