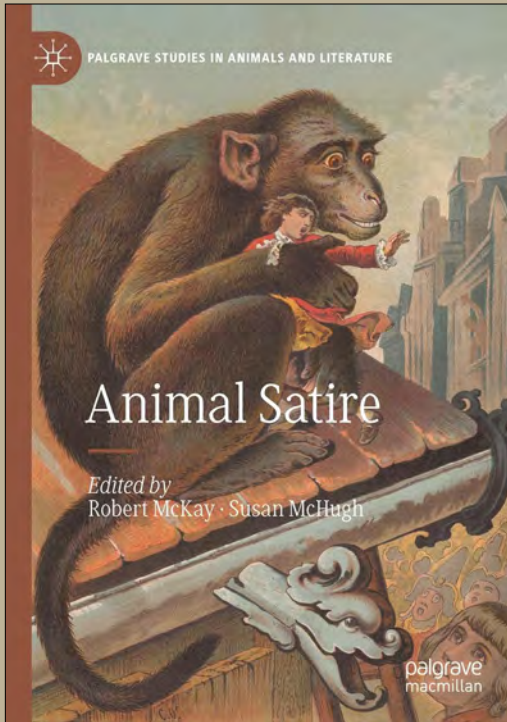


“A satire is when it’s the same as here but there’s animals in it.”

Emelia Quinn



*Review of:*

Robert McKay and Susan McHugh, eds., *Animal Satire*. Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. xii + 431 pp. 14 illus. \$159.99 (hb).

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In a 2014 episode of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* entitled “Satire”, British stand-up comedian Stewart Lee explains satire to his audience: “If anyone ever says to you ‘What’s a satire?’ and you want to look clever [...] a satire is when it’s the same as here but there’s animals in it.” If this seems simple enough, he then offers some words of mocking caution to his viewers: “not everything with animals in it is a satire. Don’t get carried away, people at home, if you’re out and about, and you see a little vole by the canal, cleaning its whiskers. Don’t be looking at it thinking, ‘Oh is this supposed to be Theresa May?’ It doesn’t know. The vole doesn’t know what that is, it’s not interested. Not all animals are trying to satirize things.”

Offering a definition of satire that is itself satirical, Lee’s skit nonetheless relies on our recognition of the close imbrication of animals and satire. As Robert McKay and Susan McHugh’s 2023 co-edited volume *Animal Satire* attests, the history of satire is a history of satirical animals, with animal satire employed to mock the politically powerful for over 2500 years. It is thus particularly surprising that animal satire, at least according to McKay and McHugh, remains largely unaddressed in academic criticism, with almost no scholarship to date having explored the link between animals and satire in any depth.<sup>1</sup>

As academic heavy weights in the field of literary animal studies, and series editors (alongside John Miller) of *Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature*, in which this edited volume sits, McKay and McHugh are well positioned to address this critical lacuna. However, positioning such work within the field of animal studies is not without its challenges. For one, as McKay and McHugh acknowledge, satire is “deeply invested in the figure of the human” (13). Satirical animals often appear as little more than allegories for human experience with seemingly little to say about actual animals (or the disinterest, as Lee notes, in wry fashion, that such animals would likely have towards human political affairs). This investment

1 A caveat absent from the introduction is that such an absence is a perhaps better defined as an absence from *Anglophone* scholarship.

in human allegory implicates animal satire in a troubling anthropocentrism that is antithetical to the aims of much of the work of contemporary animal studies.

A further challenge is that academic attention to animal satire is an activity seemingly always at risk of becoming itself a self-satirizing enterprise. Academia has indeed long been a target for satire. Matthew Hosty's chapter on animal satire in the Ancient Greco-Roman tradition, for instance, asserts the long lineage of satirical animal academics, where in both *Batrachomyomachia* and a fragment from Timon of Phlius, we encounter scholars "as small, plump, harmless, and prone to ferocious battles." Hosty acknowledges that "Like many of the best satires, it is a verdict that remains uncomfortably recognizable to this day" (71). For McHugh and McKay, this is related to the fact that satire's exposure of humanity's folly is accompanied by an implicit educative function: disabusing human self-importance with the aim of promoting self-reflection and change in a way that imbues the satirist with their own air of authoritative self-importance (aptly performed by Lee above) that is itself ripe for satirical treatment. McHugh and McKay thus argue that "the best satire" must remain "excoriatingly aware of *any* authority's potential subjection to ridicule, of the very pompousness of the corrective purpose itself" (13). McKay and McHugh are at pains throughout their introduction to stress that the best academic work on animal satire must remain similarly aware of its own potential to be subject to satire.

If the pretensions and petty rivalries of academia seem to be an easy satirical target, this seems to be doubly the case when it comes to scholars working in animal studies. I am all too aware of the ways in which academic work on animals can incite derision, as someone who was recently somewhat bemused to discover that a 2016 article I had written on vegan reading practices had been promoted to the 53,000 followers of the Twitter account "New Real Peer Review" as a satirical example of the excesses and lack of scholarly rigour of the humanities. As McKay and McHugh observe, academic concern for animals is "an irresistible subject to be satirised" (28). Many high-profile academic hoaxes of recent years have incorporated

animals into their sham papers, part of a reactionary politics that relies on the “the silliness of the very idea that [...] animals are meaningful or might have interests at all (let alone rights)” (25), often with the intention of satirizing work promoting the rights of other minority subjects.

For McKay and McHugh, their response to the risk of being satirized before they begin is an irreverent “Hee-haw” (28). This asinine response is a recognition and reclamation of the folly that might be attributed to their volume. It is also a stubborn insistence that a closer consideration of the animals of animal satire, and animal satire itself, is an important and intellectually valuable enterprise. As McKay and McHugh argue, “despite the reactionary uses to which animal satire has often been put,” animal satire possesses an “indefinite but nevertheless unique capacity to advance multispecies politics” (27). We might read this statement as much as an assertion of the value of animal satire as an assertion of the value of animal studies scholarship in the face of its increasingly public lampooning.

The comic “Hee-haw” also attests to the light-hearted spirit with which McKay and McHugh have approached *Animal Satire*, refusing to commit the perhaps cardinal human folly of reading satire with a straight face. While a weighty and academically rigorous volume, *Animal Satire* makes room for multiple comic digressions. David Brooks provides three satirical pieces for the volume, labelled as satiric interruptions between sections: “The Hall of the Sovereigns”, “A Slaves’ Revolt”, and “How to Slaughter a Human”. A fourth interruption by Human McStew (McHugh’s comic pseudonym) provides a final satiric conclusion, “The Need for Giant Ape Protection: A Petition to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.”

These satirical offerings join McHugh and McKay’s introduction, a list of selected animal satires for further reading, and eighteen essays by scholars working across literature, history, media studies, geography, classics, and creative writing. The essays are divided into three parts, arranged chronologically with broad temporal divisions: Part I considers classics and the medieval and renaissance periods; Part II the period from early modernism through to high

modernism; and Part III the contemporary. In evidence of the proposal that “satire is more usefully understood as a practice than as a genre [...] or mode” (21), the formal remit of the collection is also broad, spanning novels, short stories, plays, periodicals, films, television, and social media posts, and ranging across high and low brow genres, from canonical authors such as Virginia Woolf to Seth MacFarlane’s *Family Guy*.

The principal achievement of McKay and McHugh’s playful and rich volume is the exposition of what animal satire can *do*, across a wide range of contexts. One of the most noteworthy achievements praised in the volume is satire’s ability to advocate for better treatment of animals. While the human focus of satire limits its ability to foster empathy for animals themselves, it does prove effective at exposing the pernicious human attitudes undergirding their mistreatment. Jennifer Schell’s chapter, for instance, draws on Nicole Seymour’s concept of “bad environmentalism”<sup>2</sup> to argue that the 1850 letter “A Polar Whale’s Appeal” is a prescient example of the effective appeal of irony and humour over sentimentalism in the service of environmentalist activism. Paul Fagan’s essay argues that Frances Power Cobbe’s 1877 satire *The Age of Science* allowed her anti-vivisection and women’s rights message to reach a broader public audience than it otherwise might have. And Mo O’Neill’s chapter, while acknowledging the “inherent risk of political satire being taken seriously by those it lampoons” (237), considers the value of the satirical efforts of The Humanitarian League in revealing the consequences of a human society that has normalized the processes by which animals are rendered absent referents. Brooks’ satiric interruptions to the volume also gesture to the ability of animal satire to critique anthropocentrism, refusing to position animals as mere allegories for human concerns by offering forceful critiques of the horrors of speciesism. “How to Slaughter a Human”, for instance, educates a society of pigs on how to prepare a human for consumption, satirizing, in the process, meat-eating practices and drawing attention to human brutality towards animals raised for slaughter.

2 Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Beyond activism on behalf of animals, Erica Fudge's illuminating essay on Ben Jonson's 1606 *Volpone* tells us how animal satire can aid our understanding of human–animal relations. Fudge's essay is one of the standout contributions to the volume, establishing in clear terms what a study of animal satire can contribute to the discipline of animal studies. Fudge begins by challenging the conventional wisdom that beast fables only ever explore the human condition, with animals as mere vehicles for the human. Expounding the relation of *Volpone* to contemporaneous Christian beliefs about the Fall from Grace, Fudge argues that in this period, the human was seen as under threat, like the animal, of becoming wild without due rational control and taming. However, because of their God-given capacity to act with reason, humans could fall further and become worse than animals, since the latter acted only by their nature. Reading *Volpone* in this way disrupts humanist ideas of a rigid separation between human and animal and makes visible “how humans were once viewed as inseparable from animals” (110). For Fudge, such a reading demonstrates that “being a human is a product of a group of ideas that are in action at a particular moment; that that human is situated, constructed, and so can change” (110). Fudge's analysis chimes with the concerns of much contemporary theory, akin, for example, to Sylvia Wynter's work on the overrepresentation of Man,<sup>3</sup> or Cary Wolfe's work on posthumanism,<sup>4</sup> and speaks to the growing desire to rethink and reposition the idea of the human in the age of the Anthropocene. For Fudge, “that thing called the human is not and never has been permanent, and it might be that it is in the beast fable—the most anthropomorphic of all genres, the place where animals speak in human voices in order to voice human concerns—that we are offered the best starting point to engage with that idea” (114).

Peter Sands's essay on satirical misanthropy in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* similarly considers how satire can work to challenge the permanence of the idea of the human, turning not to the past of

3 Sylvia Wynter. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

4 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

beast fables but to imagined beast futures. Sands considers Vonnegut's satirical novel as a reconfiguration of anthroponormativity ("the discourse that takes the human as the measure for both affirmative and pessimistic visions of futurity" [294]) by imagining "a future constituted according to an *animal norm* whereby the values of foreseeable, planned, or programmed futures are underwritten by the logics of creaturely chance and evolutionary contingency" (294). The misanthropy of *Galápagos* is thus presented as "a strategy for problematising the process whereby human identity—even as the object of disdain—is constituted as the norm" (294) and for imagining "a form of futurism that need not exclusively disavow the masterful human subject, but rather denature its exclusive hold over the future as an object of knowledge and hope" (309).

Beyond a consideration of what animal satires do, McKay and McHugh are also interested in addressing the question of *why* animals are so prevalent in satire. They note that Gilbert Highet's 1961 *The Anatomy of Satire*, the only academic text they cite as having paid any close attention to animals in satire, "has little specific to say" (11) about this question. They therefore position *Animal Satire* as an attempt at an answer. However, while the form of the edited collection is well suited to the task of drawing out the varied functions of animal satire, able to cover a broad range of overarching themes and trends via the collective scholarly knowledge of academics working across different periods and disciplines, it is limited in how much detail and focused attention it can pay to the question of why animals and satire seem so inextricably linked. The question is indeed only fleetingly addressed by a handful of the contributors and a monograph on the topic remains a desirable addition to the field.

In their introduction, McHugh and McKay do note that one reason for the prevalence of animals in satire is that "animals and their ways of life are so conventionally and comprehensibly reduced to stereotypes and because such stereotypes can in turn be manipulated to epitomize any aspect of folly that the satirist wants to mock" (8). This, however, is just one of many reasons, with this justification largely inadequate as a rationale for animal studies scholars to invest

attention in animal satire. Several contributions to the volume seek to demonstrate, by contrast, the potential agency that remains for satiric animals beyond such stereotyping, suggesting that a better answer to the question of why is found in the animal's status as an outsider or other to human culture.

This is the argument made by Adam James Smith and Ben Garlick in their co-authored chapter on Eliza Haywood's *The Parrot*. Considering Haywood's 1746 periodical, they acknowledge that while, on the one hand, Haywood's avian narrator is "quasi-allegorical stand-in for a range of human agents, which include but are not limited to women writers, slaves, colonial subjects, and Jacobite sympathisers," it is also, on the other hand, very much a parrot: "an exotic outsider who looks askance at human activities, rendering the familiar unfamiliar and revealing false assumptions, hypocrisies and absurdities that the quotidian world of the reader has normalized and rendered invisible" (140). Smith and Garlick thus refuse the claim that animals are solely allegorical presences in satire and suggest that their presence *as* animals also matters.

Julia Ditter's chapter on Saki's short stories makes a similar claim, arguing that "The animals of Saki's short fiction are [...] not merely satirical symbols or allegories to describe the human: they are agentic characters and subjects, crucially shaping the meaning of these stories and engaging readers in reflections about human-animal relations" (244). For Ditter, what renders animals an apt force for satire is the fact that they can look back at us. Of Saki's short story "Tobermory" she comments that "Like Derrida's cat, Tobermory looks back at humans, but he also shares a perspective on what he sees" (259). Referring here to Jacques Derrida's famous reflections on being looked at naked by his cat,<sup>5</sup> to be regarded by the animal other is to recognize that the animal has a perspective regarding us. This investment in animal perspective is also evident in Christopher Douglas's chapter on nineteenth-century children's it-narratives, where the cat of *Felissa* is seen as party to the secret of the moral bankruptcy of the human elite.

5 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).



Perhaps most interesting, at least for me, is the unarticulated anxiety in these readings regarding not just what it might mean, on an ontological level, to recognize that animals can look back at us, but to acknowledge that the assessments of such observing animals would not be favourable to humans. Even our most intimate companion animals may secretly despise us. Such satirical animals, in this sense, are not simply convenient devices that offer an outsider perspective on humanity (as in any of the other inanimate objects popular in the it-narratives that Douglas considers) but confront us with the fact that we *are* being watched each day by real animals and, more troubling, that they do not like what they see.

Jason Hribal's *Fear of the Animal Planet* (2011) and, more recently, Ron Broglio's *Animal Revolution* (2022) have demonstrated the prevalence of both a fear of, and desire for, animal vengeance in the contemporary period, and the frequency of news stories and creative fictions that promote animal resistance to their human captors. David Brooks's "A Slaves' Revolt" fits this trend by fictionalizing a lost history of pig revolt against their human captors. While working to satirize the history of human colonialism, Brooks' short piece also works to forcefully critique human domination of animals and practices of meat eating through a vision of animal revolt. The idea of animal revolution does seem an inescapable site of satire. As Broglio notes, "animal revolution is a good joke. The idiocy of the position makes us laugh." However, for Broglio, our craving for, and fellow feeling with, popular animal revolutionaries means that while "We stand within a cultural circle that gets the joke," we also "extend ourselves outside the circle through a sympathy with the revolutionary beasts." In his own defence of the value of satirical animals, Broglio argues that the joke therefore "holds in suspense other possibilities and other possible communities yet to come."<sup>6</sup> McKay and McHugh make a similar claim as to the possibilities for thought opened by animal satire, whether in Ditter's sense that Saki's stories acknowledge animals "alternately as individual agents, co-habitant species, companions, and a collective

6 Ron Broglio, *Animal Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 53.

force” (247–48), or in Sands’s argument of the possibility of envisioning a future constituted in accordance with an animal, rather than anthropocentric, norm.

Productive possibilities are also revealed through what we might ostensibly label as anti-animal satires. By way of example, we might consider how even the most disparaging of animal studies satires, in the form of the hoax papers detailed in McKay and McHugh’s introduction, tend to do as much to disparage animal studies as to support its work, revealing the threatening instability caused by work challenging anthropocentric value systems and exposing a level of vehemence against concern for other lives that seems itself to be irresistibly satirical. As Kári Driscoll has argued, the animal hoax, “reveals more about its perpetrators than it does about the object of their scorn,” and he encourages us, rather than simply dismissing the academic hoax “as a misguided and ultimately reactionary gesture—though it is that—[. . . to] take it seriously as an object lesson on the importance of the question of the animal.”<sup>7</sup>

While the tripartite structure of *Animal Satire* suggests distinct periods of animal satire, the edited collection form means that McKay and McHugh’s volume doesn’t offer any explicit reflections on the transitions and shifts in animal satire across time. I was left wondering whether there is a case to be made that certain forms of animal satire, such as those involving animal revolution, have become less funny, or at least less amenable to satire, in recent years. We might look, by way of example, at the vast tonal difference between the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* (listed on McKay and McHugh’s list of prominent animal satires), and the 2011 remake *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. The former offers an overt (and campy) political satire of capitalist human society while the latter insists on the agency of its genetically modified apes in a distinctly non-satirical rejection of their cruelty at the hands of humans. While the idea of an ape society previously allowed for a playful lampooning of human society, its remake offers a speculative exploration of the consequences of human

7 Kári Driscoll, “Perpetrators, Animals, and Animality”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020), 192–93.

attempts at mastery over the animal world. That our exploitation of the natural world now threatens human extinction and promises that the future is indeed more than likely to be animal rather than human, means that the idea of an ape society is perhaps no longer so easy to read as mere anthropomorphic allegory.

At the very least we might anticipate that the growing climate of misanthropy in our present age may contribute to and influence the future development of contemporary animal satires. In their introduction, McHugh and McKay note that the key vision of satirical humanism is the idea that humanity is inescapably entangled with folly: “a deep susceptibility to stupidity that is thought to be more truly human than any particular political or moral error” (15). This general despair with humanity’s inescapable folly seems to characterize both misanthropic and satiric work. Sands’ chapter is worth again singling out for praise as a welcome reflection on the misanthropic underpinnings of the satiric impulse. Drawing on Tom Tyler’s work on the possibility of misanthropy without humanity, Sands offers a critique of the misanthropic position through its failure to account for its own human positionality where “Misanthropy’s dissident vehemence fuels the satirical irony of its tunnel-vision, only drawing the human further into focus as the object of universal and passionate disdain” (293). This observation is perhaps akin to the *bad* satire implied in McHugh and McKay’s introduction: a satire that fails to acknowledge its own impulses towards pompous authority. Both misanthropy and satire thus seem to require a component of self-loathing that is at risk of simply perpetuating that which it avers. While misanthropy continues to envelop contemporary society, often as a response to the climate crisis and animal exploitation, what many of the contributions to this volume show, not least Fudge and Sands, is that animal satire, and its misanthropic impulses, offers an opening to new ways of interrogating the human from within its bounds. In this challenging of the human and opening out into a world of talking animals, we are encouraged to see satire, to repeat McKay and McHugh’s optimistic refrain, as possessing “unique capacity to advance multispecies politics” (27).

*Animal Satire*, taken as a whole, is an expansive volume that offers reflections on the how, what, and why of animal satire. The volume will likely appeal to many kinds of readers and promises to draw a wider readership to a consideration of literary animals. It provides much-needed attention to the place of animals in satire, offering a history of animal satire from the plays of Aristophanes to satirical birds on Twitter. In the process it shows what satire can do *for* animals, in terms, for instance, of advancing animal rights messaging, and chimes with recent work (most notably Seymour's) that seeks to establish the significance of humour and irony for environmental and animal activism. In the process, McKay and McHugh demonstrate that while animal studies may itself often be the target of satirical critique, satire is just as powerful as a weapon for animal studies scholars to wield themselves. If this seems itself to be a satirically circular proposition, McHugh and McKay encourage us to respond to such charges with a simple Hee-haw.