

Animal Fictions through Literary History

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Office Hours: To be announced



Jost Amman, "Reynard Defends Himself Before the Court," from *Speculum Vitae Aulicae*

Course Description

This junior tutorial examines fictions from numerous points in literary history and within a wide array of genres in which animals feature as the primary actors. The goal of this capacious approach is to examine the ways in which animals assume symbolic significance in various literary contexts and become a means through which authors could explore an assortment of contemporary issues. Theoretical approaches from the field of animal studies will provide a persistent lens through which we'll examine our texts throughout the semester, and continually ground us in related contemporary political issues regarding animal welfare and exploitation. Though the periods and approaches covered from week to week are disparate—often chronologically separated by gulfs of hundreds of years—all the works included are united in their use of animals to expose the anxieties, paradoxes, ambiguities, and fantasies ingrained in the human imagination. By interrogating this relationship between the human mind and the imagined animal, we'll explore the ways in which animal fictions address the

question of what it means to be human. The animal subject will remain integral to our considerations throughout, but it will be accompanied by a recognition that animals become critical sites through which we conceptualize ourselves.

Beginning with Aesop, this course begins by examining the ethical utility of the animal fable before moving on to examine the animal itself as an allegorical symbol in medieval Christian modes of interpretation. Following these initial meetings, the course proceeds as a series of three “mini-units.” The first examines the ways in which animal fables have been used to explore political and social concerns contemporary to their periods of composition, exposing the allegorical animal fable as an endlessly flexible literary mode. Following this unit, we transition to a series of classes on human/animal transformations, from the medieval period and its incorporation of allegory to Kafka’s modernist critique of the assumed superiority of humankind. Our final unit moves beyond allegorical animals and hybrids to center animal experience; these texts depict animals we know, given voice and subjectivity. Animal studies features prominently as a critical methodology throughout, but during the first half of the course such approaches are also paired with a theoretical school pertinent to the primary texts under examination. During the second half of the course, we’ll shift from critical theory to pieces of secondary criticism meant to facilitate discussion about each week’s primary texts, as well as provide models for the sort of critical work students will be expected to undertake in their final paper.

Course Goals

Over the course of the semester, students will learn how to conduct scholarly research in the discipline of English literary studies, culminating in the composition of a 20-25 page research paper. Students will gain experience working with a variety of sources and applying various theoretical and critical approaches such as animal studies, Marxism, postcolonial, and feminist literary critique. Students will work closely with the instructor to hone integral scholarly skills, such as designing a research question, conducting research, compiling a critical bibliography, and sharpening writing.

Assignments and Grading

- **Short Essay** (Week 4, 10%): 5-6 page paper, comprising an extended close reading of one of the texts on our syllabus.
- **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (Week 6, 15%): 2-3 page prospectus of the paper before you begin to work on it. Your annotated bibliography should include 8-10 scholarly sources, and describe, in a few sentences, how each source engages with the thesis of your project.
- **Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full draft of the final paper will be due on Week 11 and then circulated among classmates the following week in preparation for a final paper workshop during the final tutorial meeting.
- **Final Essay** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper incorporating 8-10 critical sources.
- **Minor Assignments and Participation** (20%):
 - 2 short response papers of 1-2 pages, focusing on a passage from one of our primary texts (sign-ups during first class)

- 2 in-class presentations summarizing one of our critical articles (sign-ups during first class)
- **Participation and Preparation:** A small seminar thrives when students participate actively and offer thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Required Texts (most available as cheap mass market paperbacks or Penguin Classics)

Jesse Byock, trans. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*

Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (trans. Burton Raffel)

Ben Jonson, *Volpone*

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

Grant Morrison, *We3*

Laline Paull, *The Bees: A Novel*

Simpson, trans. *Reynard the Fox: A New Translation*

Brian K. Vaughan, *Pride of Baghdad*

H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*

All excerpts, short stories, and secondary readings will be available in PDF format on the course website.

Week 1: Fabulous Ethics

We start at the logical beginning, with the father of fables, Aesop, in order to introduce the “ur-form” and function of animal fables—humble incidents with animal subjects intended to convey simple truths. We’ll read selections side-by-side with a late medieval interpretation by the Scottish poet Robert Henryson, who demonstrates that the apparently simplistic form holds the potential for greater depth and complexity through rewriting, thematizing the entire purpose of the course! In this first class, we’ll also be introduced to animal studies as a discipline, which will undergird all our future work.

- Selections from Aesop’s *Fables* (between 620 and 564 BCE)
- Selections from Robert Henryson’s *Moral Fables* (late 15th century)
- Edward Clayton, “Aesop, Aristotle, and Animals: The Role of Fables in Human Life”
- Aaron Gross, “Introduction and Overview: Animal Others and Animal Studies”
- James Serpell, “People in Disguise: Anthropomorphism and the Human-Pet Relationship”

Week 2: The Animal Body as Symbol

For our second class, we turn from considering animal fables themselves to the ways in which medieval people understood animals as symbolic entities, conveyed by means of allegorical modes of reading (rooted in Biblical interpretation). Semiotics and structuralism will provide a theoretical basis for considering the ways in which animals mean beyond their observable, lived existence, and Chrétien de Troye’s romance centering the friendship between an Arthurian knight and a lion exemplifies the ways in which such symbolic understandings were put to literary use. Chrétien’s romance will also allow us to begin thinking about the animal as pet.

- Excerpts from medieval bestiaries
- Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (trans. Burton Raffel) (c. 1180)
- Roland Barthes, “The Structuralist Activity”
- Susan Crane, “A Bestiary’s Taxonomy of Creatures,” from *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*
- Marc Shell, “The Family Pet”

Week 3: Social and Political Animals Part I: The Subversive Fable as Satire

We begin the three “mini-units” that comprise the bulk of the course this week, the first of which is an exploration of the ways in which animal fables can be used to explore political and social concerns contemporary to their periods of composition. Animals retain their allegorical power, but, in addition to being symbols themselves, their narratives allegorize society as a whole. Both Caxton’s early printing of the Reynard tales in English and Ben Jonson’s early modern drama present biting social satire within the relatively tame realm of the animal fable. Marxist literary theory, introduced this week, provides a means of recognizing the ideologies that these beast tales subvert.

- James Simpson, trans., *Reynard the Fox: A New Translation* (1481)
- Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (1605)
- Terry Eagleton, “Literature and History,” and “Form and Content” from *Marxism and Literary Criticism*
- Philip Drake, “Marxism and the Nonhuman Turn: Nonhumans, Exploitation, and Politics with ANT and Animal Studies”
- James Simpson, “Consuming Ethics: Caxton’s *History of Reynard the Fox*”

Week 4: Social and Political Animals Part II: Beast Fable as Nationalist Discourse

****Short Essay Due****

What happens when the animal fable loses its subversive power, becoming co-opted by a nationalistic writer concerned with imparting such narratives with a jingoistic, pro-imperialist ethos? This will be our primary question as we dig into selections from Kipling’s *Jungle Books*. Postcolonial theory will provide the critical lens through which we can examine and critique Kipling’s fiction, and we’ll also devote attention to the intersection of postcolonialism and animal studies within our secondary readings.

- Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Books* (selections)
- Selections from Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*
- Alfred Crosby, “Animals,” from *Ecological Imperialism*
- Kaori Nagai, “The Beast in the Chinese Boxes: The *Jungle Books* as an Imperial Beast-Fable”

Week 5: Social and Political Animals Part III: Animal Allegory as Contemporary Social Critique

In our final class considering the social/political critiques that animal fable and allegorical storytelling afford, we turn to a contemporary novel as a means of questioning the continued efficacy of beast tales to convey pointed societal commentary. Our secondary readings explore feminism as a critical methodology, as well as the intersection of animal studies with feminism. *The Bees* and our critical texts ask us to draw parallels between misogyny and speciesism. Should we equate the two? Is the allegorical fable an appropriate means of exploring those parallels?

- Laline Paull, *The Bees: A Novel* (2014)
- Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time"
- Joan Dunayer, "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots"

Week 6: Library/Research Visit

Week 7: Animal Transformations, Part I: Classical Shapeshifters and Medieval Were-Wolves (and Were-Bears)!

**** Paper Prospectus and Bibliography Due****

We jump back into the past to begin a new "unit" exploring human/animal transformations in literary history. Throughout these classes, we'll consider the significance of such transformations, particularly with regard to cultural contexts appropriate to the periods in which they were written. This also marks our final class with a concerted theoretical methodology. Here, queer/gender theory will aid us in thinking through the conceptual significance of shifting bodies.

- Selections from Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (8 AD)
- Marie de France, *Lais* (*Yonec* and *Bisclavret*) (Late 12th century)
- Jesse Byock, trans. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (c. 1400)
- Carmen Dell'Aversano, "The Love Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond"
- Joyce E. Salisbury, "Humans as Animals," from *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*

Week 8: Animal Transformations, Part II: Animal Hybridity and the Scientific Imagination

****Optional: Revised Paper Prospectus and Bibliography****

Continuing our exploration of animal transformations, we move ahead to the late Victorian era to examine H.G. Wells' narrative of animal hybridity, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, paying particular attention into the emotional weight lent to the beastmen in the narrative, as well as the dangers of scientific progressivism. We'll also explore the effect of Darwinism on the cultural imagination via Wells and our secondary readings, particularly the idea that creatures were not perfect, immutable beings but rather products of a constantly evolving biosphere.

- H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)
- Selections from Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

- Gretchen Brain, “Empathy, Anxiety, and the Boundaries of Humanity: Vivisection Discourse and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*”
- Beatrice Laurent, “Monster or Missing Link? The Mermaid and the Victorian Imagination”

Week 9: Animal Transformations, Part III: Effacing Interspecies Boundaries

In our final class on animal transformations, we turn to the fiction of Franz Kafka. Rather than presenting hybridity as a monstrous crime against natural and religious forces, Kafka’s departures from realism, anticipating surrealism and magical realism, allow him to interrogate the assumed superiority and dominance of human beings over other animals.

- Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915)
 - Short stories: “A Report to an Academy” and “Investigations of a Dog”
- Marianne DeKoven, “Kafka’s Animal Stories: Modernist Form and Interspecies Narrative”
- Margot Norris, “Kafka’s Hybrids: Thinking Animals and Mirrored Humans”

Week 10: Hearing Animals Complain: Decentering Anthropocentric Modes of Understanding

This week, we shift our focus from hybridity and the effacement of species boundaries, turning back to speaking animals but with a twist: rather than representing some allegorical representation of human society, the animals depicted in the texts of the following weeks are domesticated pets, pack animals, or have in some other way been affected by human existence. These are the animals we know, given voice and subjectivity. Our texts this week represent medieval and early modern reflexes of such a gesture: in the 10th-century Islamic text, a group of animals granted speech pursue a legal case against humanity, during which they deny the superiority of humans and demand just treatment; Cervantes’ tale stages a dialogue between two dogs who reflect on their experiences with various human masters.

- Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, trans., *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn* (10th century)
- Miguel de Cervantes, *The Dialogue of the Dogs* (1613)
- Gabriela Carrión, “Beastly Men and Humane Dogs in *El coloquio de los perros*”
- Katharine Loevy, “The Ikhwan al-Safa’s Animal Accusers: An Islamic Debate on Animal Slavery”

Week 11: Living the Experience of the Domesticated Animal

****10 Pages of Final Paper Draft Due****

This week we explore the ways in which nonhuman experience and animal subjectivity are imagined by one of our most familiar animal companions, dogs, in two works that might initially seem an odd pairing: Virginia Woolf’s short novel *Flush* and Wes Anderson’s stop-motion-animated film *Isle of Dogs*. Both allow us to explore the question of what centering the animal subject reveals about anthropocentrism. How can a canine subject (or subjects)

challenge suppositions about life, normality, and interspecies relationships in ways that human characters cannot?

- Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (1933)
- Wes Anderson, dir. *Isle of Dogs* (2018)
- David Herman, “Modernist Life Writing and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*”
- Karalyn Kendall-Morwick, “Canine Bildung and the Feminist Critique of Anthropocentrism in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*”
- Ulrike Zimmerman, “Interhuman. Interspecies. Global: Heroism in Wes Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs*”

Week 12: War as Interspecies Event in Graphic Literature

****Full Draft of Final Paper Due****

Here we turn to depictions of the effect of war and the military-industrial complex on animal subjects by means of two graphic novels: Brian K. Vaughan’s fictionalized account of four lions that escaped from the Baghdad Zoo following an American bombing in 2003 and Grant Morrison’s tale of three house pets abducted and weaponized by a clandestine government organization searching for a way home. We’ll consider how the graphic mode affects animal narrative as well as the wider questions of animal involvement in war.

- Grant Morrison, *We3* (2004)
- Brian K. Vaughan, *Pride of Baghdad* (2006)
- Suzanne Keen, “Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization in Graphic Narratives”
- Colin Salter, “Introducing the Military-Animal Industrial Complex”

Week 13: Meeting on Equal Ground: Human-Animal Relationships (and Paper Workshop)!

We conclude with a bit of light, pleasurable reading, showcasing two short stories that stage interactions between their human and animal subjects showcasing a profound equivalency between species, as well as a film that highlights the potential for interspecies friendship and bonding (as well as biting criticism of GMOs and factory farming). During the first half of class, we’ll discuss the stories and film specifically, before opening up a general discussion about the course as a whole. During the final hour, we’ll hold a student paper workshop.

- Haruki Murakami, “The Elephant Vanishes”; “Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey”
- Bong Joon-ho, dir. *Okja* (2017)