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Fabulous or Spectral?

Response by IAN F. MACINNES

These four essays on “fabulous” animals typify a potential change in the direction of Renaissance literary animal studies. More than fifteen years ago, thanks in part to Erica Fudge’s seminal *Perceiving Animals*, the field made an ethical choice to focus on the presence of living animals in the early modern world, in contrast to an earlier scholarship which tended to conflate living animals with those that are symbolic, imaginary, emblematic, or already rendered into objects.¹ Now the field is returning to such animals and animal products, but it is doing so for equally ethical reasons. In the last twenty years a new ethical dimension has been added to the discussion of human cultures’ relationship to the natural world. Ecocriticism has encouraged us to think about that relationship not only as a matter of our behavior toward individual living creatures but also as a larger system of exploitation in which animal products (literal and figurative) have both potential cultural agency and serious ethical implications.² One of our greatest contemporary issues is that our growing exploitation of the natural world is progressively more invisible. As Keith Botelho puts it in his essay, “we sometimes pay attention to the nonhuman world only when it forces its way into our collective consciousness.” Ecocriticism in general seeks to reveal the presence and impact of the natural world even when it has been commodified or rendered into object. And literary animal studies in particular has begun to ask how the animal remains present in those distant and objectified forms. Each of these essays offers an answer to this underlying question by examining early modern England, a society that witnessed a significant increase in the commodification of animals. They deal alternately with animals that are symbolic (Katie Will’s heraldic beasts), imaginary (Jan Stirm’s dragon and Christopher Clary’s familiars), emblematic (Keith Botelho’s bees) and objectified (Will’s shields and Botelho’s beeswax, etc.). Each essay offers convincing explanations, yet each essay also flirts with a similar moment of impasse when it comes to the persistence of the animal in objects or symbols.

The most obvious challenge is encountered by Katie Will in her essay on animals in heraldry, since this phenomenon is so formalized and stylized that it has long been dismissed as having anything to do with real animals at all. In addition, as Will points out, “most early modern English people had never seen a lion,” the most popular heraldic animal, and several other heraldic animals were completely imaginary. Nevertheless, Will convincingly demonstrates that heraldry drew material, both symbolic and visual, from early modern natural philosophy and that heraldic designs were criticized based in part on claims

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about real animals. She is also perhaps the first to discuss the fact that many heraldic designs replicate the animal skins which were used to make and decorate shields, a fact which leads her to employ Erica Fudge's terms to describe them: "both animal-made objects constructed from dead creatures, and animals made-object—objectified beasts who retained a degree of agency by protecting comparatively fragile human bodies."³ Yet heraldic devices were only figurative representations of implied objects that in any case no longer protected human bodies (outside of tournaments). How meaningful is the persistence of animals in heraldic discourse? And how do these competing claims of authority between various parties and classes shape the representations of animals? Does the fact that those claims sometimes revolved around the way heraldic animals were drawn (or painted) reflect the continued agency of the animal itself?

Keith Botelho has an easier task since bees were a significant part of England's rural economy, and his essay is particularly helpful in delineating the complex interplay between traditional allegorizing (in which the hive is so often an emblem of divinely sanctioned social order), natural history, and early modern beekeeping. He is also able to suggest how particular cultural practices, like the number of recipes using dead bees, can arise from the animal system — apiculture at the time tended to produce a lot of dead bees. The fact that bee products like honey and wax were so intimately related to human health for the early moderns should also suggest that the bee retains a certain cultural agency even when commodified. But Botelho himself remains unsure, and the essay is full of questions. "How are we to imagine bee presence in these materials once they become commodities?" Botelho asks. And "do myths allow us to see real animals more or less clearly?" Most significantly, he calls the bee a "specter" in objects like candles. To what extent are such spectral animals meaningful as animals?

Christopher Clary's essay on witches' familiars appears to bypass this issue since he does not connect familiars with ordinary animal-related practices or knowledge. Instead they are an unstable category, ranging from demons in animal form to animal assistants, and he is most interested in their imaginary qualities (and their presence in literature). Yet Clary's piece actually engages more explicitly with the recent history of animal studies than the other essays. In particular, he wants to avoid what he calls the "inevitable and inescapable scholarly cul-de-sac" that results from reading all representations of animals as involving "the blurring of 'animal' and 'human.'" As a result, he convincingly argues that the familiars in the plays he examines demonstrate "not categorical confusion, or not only confusion, but a multiplication of anxiety, erotic possibility, and authorial disruption." If these seem like a subset of "confusion," however, it may be the result of detaching the fabulous and imaginary from the mundane. Without even the specter of the living animal, fabulous creatures may inescapably begin to suggest abstract collapsing oppositions between "the human" and "the animal."

It is Jan Stirn who addresses the impasse in dealing with fabulous animals most explicitly in his discussion of a report of a dragon in Sussex. She has the advantage of writing about an animal that is not just fabulous but

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apparently nonexistent as well. “The one thing I am absolutely sure of,” she says, “is that there was no dragon in Sussex in 1614.” Or was there? Stirm repeatedly alludes to the desire of the reader (including herself) to know the true story, to know “what, if anything, could have happened in St. Leonard’s forest.” Stirm’s answer to her own question cleverly locates meaning on a meta-level. Since the dragon story is fiction, “looking for an authentic/real event or nature ‘behind’ the text [is] impossible, and thus an ecocritical reading of the text reveals how desires drive our readings [of] texts and nature.” If Stirm is right, then at least some fabulous animals are not really animals at all, and there may be a distinct difference between the animal-made object and the animal-made symbol.

The challenge these essays have in confirming the “animal” in “fabulous animals” is part of a much larger issue. It is the basic problem facing ecocritical attempts to show how the most objectified and commodified products still reveal the agency of the natural world. These essays work so valiantly to narrow the impasse, however, that they offer distinct hope for this direction in literary animal studies.

Notes

1. Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002). Fudge’s shadow looms large over these essays. In some ways the field changes in these essays reproduce Fudge’s own trajectory from her early insistent attention to living and real animals toward her more recent attention to animal products in her essay, “Renaissance Animal Things,” in *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist (University Park, Pa: Penn State UP, 2012), 41–56.

2. In addition, the more arcane field of object-oriented ontology (OOO) has undermined the absolute privilege of the living over the non-living, opening up new critical approaches.

3. Will cites Erica Fudge’s distinction between animal-made objects and objectified animals articulated in “Renaissance Animal Things,” 42, 49-50.

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