

7-1-2016

## Response: Literary and Multispecies Entanglements and the Challenges of Historical Animal Studies

Brett Mizelle  
brett.mizelle@csulb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mizelle, Brett (2016) "Response: Literary and Multispecies Entanglements and the Challenges of Historical Animal Studies," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 11, Article 9.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol11/iss1/9>

This Seminar Essay is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Modern Culture by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

# Literary and Material Multispecies Entanglements and the Challenges of Historical Animal Studies

Response by BRETT MIZELLE

As a historian of human-animal relationships and multispecies entanglements working at the intersection of "animal studies" and American Studies, I learned much from engagement with these fabulous essays about early modern humans and their real and metaphoric animals. Examining canonical and noncanonical texts, these essays all contain reflections to varying degrees on the question "why look at animals?" while highlighting the challenges of reconciling representational and materialist approaches in historical and literary animal studies. Although most of my scholarship addresses the modern period, one marked generally by a greater distance between humans and animals, at their best, these four essays remind us of how early modern humans lived with animals, sharing, cooperating, and creating ties with them in life and in death.

Keith Botelho's "Honey, Wax, and the Dead Bee" importantly notes that we only tend to pay attention to bees and other nonhuman animals when they affect us, something true both in the early modern period and today, when we either see bees as stinging nuisances or in the context of concerns about the effect of colony collapse disorder on agriculture. Botelho's essay nicely connects the symbolic bee, so useful "as a model of good governance and policy," and material bees in multispecies lives in the Renaissance. Reflecting a turn in animal studies from the representational to the material, he looks at the physical afterlife of bees and the hive in honey and wax, charting some of medical and dietary uses of hive products and bees themselves that highlight the complex entanglement between humans and bees. He raises an important question for animal studies by calling attention to the different ways we think of the individual versus the collective animal. While Botelho, quoting Samuel Purchas, notes that "one Bee is no Bee," I am struck by our modern tendency to privilege the individual animal over its group, especially in popular culture (for example, Jerry Seinfeld's non-conforming Barry B. Benson in the animated *Bee Movie*) and activism, where a focus on individual animals to gain the public's attention to the plight of wildlife or to the suffering engendered by the meat industrial complex often occludes the herd. This problem of scale in the way we approach nonhuman animals is, of course, inextricably linked to the question of species and to the different ways humans relate to different types of nonhuman animals. Botelho's species-specific study also reminds us that harvesting honey in the

## Early Modern Culture

Renaissance typically meant killing bees, foregrounding the ongoing centrality of killing animals to our histories and societies.

In “When is a Panther Not a Panther?” Kathryn Will follows Erica Fudge in “Renaissance Animal Things” in showing how animals in the heraldic tradition were not merely representations, but materially present as “*animal-made* objects constructed from dead creatures.” Charting debates over legitimate heraldry at a time of the democratization of status, Will shows the contestation over both the depiction of animals in heraldry and their meaning as symbols. Her examination of the desire of artists and promoters of heraldry to have animals “portrayed and interpreted within a positive schema that redounds to the benefit of both the animal's and the bearer's reputation” reminded me of one of my student's projects on animal tattoos (tattoos on humans of animal images, as opposed to our frequent tattooing of animals for identification). My student found that people who chose to get a tattoo of an animal often saw it, as did those engaged in early modern English heraldry, as a totem animal, one that possessed positive traits shared by or transferrable between man and beast. But, as in Will's essay, these images, then and now, are unstable and were prone to being interpreted in different ways. One's reaction to images on the website tattoos.com, for example, often diverges significantly from what we imagine the recipient of these tattoos might have hoped. While none of the contemporary panther-themed tattoos I examined have large phalluses, they do mobilize a ferocious animality to further gender the body in a form of modern heraldry that continues to have potentially problematic connotations in linking nonhuman animals to human identities.

Christopher Clary's essay “Familiar Creatures: Witchcraft, Female Bodies, and Early Modern Animals” highlights the liminality of the witch's familiar while arguing that those of us who have made the animal turn may perhaps find it too convenient to find in this hybridity “an early modern anxiety about the permeability of the categories of 'human' and 'animal' and the unconscious and inevitable acknowledgement of mankind's own constructed exceptionalness.” Rather than look at the instability of the human, Clary focuses on gender, desire, and vulnerability in *Macbeth*, *The Witch*, and *The Witch of Edmondton*. Analyzing the feline and canine familiars in these plays, Clary shows us not a divide between human and nonhuman, but their complex entanglements, ones that produce “a multiplication of anxiety, erotic possibility, and authorial disruption.” Things get messier, not simpler, when we center animals in our histories, thus demanding that we, following Donna Haraway, need to “stay with the trouble” rather than seeking simple answers and returning to old binaries. Although Clary's focus is on theatrical representations and concerns, I believe we must always imagine humans and animals together, looking not just at multispecies entanglements but working for multispecies justice, a task that will require respect, care, and radical hope in the face of the vulnerability of our cultures, bodies, and multispecies planet.

Jan Stirm's “Enter the Dragon” focuses on the reports of a dragon in Sussex in 1614, tracing the printed natural history of and theological perspectives on serpents and dragons. Like the authors of the three other essays, much of

## Multispecies Entanglements

Stirm's emphasis is on indeterminacy: it is not clear what, if anything, was seen in St. Leonard's Forest, nor is it clear from the text or from the delightful image of the serpent (or dragon) what this “true and wonderful” story should mean. Traditionally “dangerous, aggressive dragons are a sign of God's judgment and punishment for human sin,” but Stirm cleverly suggests that this may be, in fact, an early example of ecocriticism, with the text and image reflecting and critiquing environmental changes to forests caused by development. Stirm notes that finding the “real” that lurks “behind” this story is impossible (although I want to believe in ecocritical dragons!), but that through our critical readings we can trace the “desires [that] drive our readings [of] texts and nature,” including those for “authentic” experiences of animals and nature.

These four essays enhance our knowledge of human-animal relationships in the early modern period while prompting us to reflect both upon the contexts in which we do our scholarly work and the ways in which we are always mapping our desires on nonhuman animals and nature. After all, in both the past and the present we lack unmediated access to animal lives, minds and agency and we are often limited in our work to documents written by humans about animals. But we must nevertheless attempt to escape the human perspective and foreground the nonhuman animal side of our multispecies relationships. These provocative essays illuminate many of the challenges facing those of us pursuing historical and literary animal studies while being keenly aware of the limits of our knowledge. While I would like to know more about how these ideas about and practices toward nonhuman animals charted in these texts are historically specific and rooted in lived relations, taken together, these essays point not just to the complicated and indeterminate meanings of animals in the early modern period, but urge us to think about the profound implications of these ideas for animals themselves and our multispecies worlds in the past and present.

---

Brett Mizelle is Professor of History and Director of the American Studies Program at California State University Long Beach. His publications include books, articles, book chapters, and reviews in the fields of nineteenth-century American history and the history of human-animal relationships. His book *Pig* (Reaktion Books, 2011) charts how humans have shaped the pig and how the pig has shaped us, focusing on the unresolved contradictions between the fiction and the reality of our relationships with pigs. His most recent articles trace the contestation over the training and exhibition of horses and big cats in the history of the American circus (in *The American Circus* [Bard Graduate Center & Yale University Press, 2012]) and connect environmental history and American Studies by looking at historical and contemporary American food production and consumption (in Marguerite S. Shaffer and Phoebe S.K. Young, eds., *Rendering Nature: Animals, Bodies, Places, Politics* [University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015]). He is working on a book-length critical animal studies project on the

## Early Modern Culture

discursive and material making and taking of animal life in nineteenth-century America and on the Reaktion “Animal Series” book *Squirrel*. He is also a co-founder and editor of the H-Animal Discussion Network (<http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>) and the recipient of the Humane Society of the United States’ “Animals and Society Course Award” for his class “Animals in American Culture.”