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Response: Monster Pets

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Monster Pets

Response by KAREN RABER

I WAS BIGFOOT'S SEX SLAVE, blares one headline; LOCH NESS MONSTER IS DEAD reads another (and hilariously: "Dick Cheney is a Robot" yet another).¹ *The Weekly World News*, favored repository for tabloid accounts of monstrous and imaginary beasts covers Bigfoot, Nessie and others with devoted adoration, not least for the numbers their appearance can add to circulation. Like the sensationalist accounts of dragons Jan Stirm analyzes, tabloid creatures thrill and titillate, fascinate and terrify. Their role is partly social—they are "about" the social itself, creating relationships among their readers who are "insiders" with special knowledge about the world that others do not see. These are monsters with an important purpose, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out: the monster's body is a "cultural body" that emerges only at a specific time and place, birthed from cultural patterns, shocks and adaptations that require a beast on which anxieties and aspirations can be inscribed.² Monsters register unstable boundaries between groups of things that should remain divided by category, by species, or other qualities; they "rebuke" traditional modes of knowledge, yet warn against certain kinds of exploration. "The monster resists capture in the epistemological nets of the erudite."³

Here be Stirm's dragons, then, with their multiple origins in both nature and the supernatural, revealing human desires in all their improbable forms; here also are Christopher Clary's witches' familiars, shapeshifters and skinwalkers like *The Witch of Edmonton's* Tom, who participate in a world filled with the pitfalls of perversion. I want to respond to this cluster of essays on fabulous beasts by focusing on the interconnections between Stirm's clearly marked monsters, and Clary's possibly less obvious ones. Clary wants to move beyond the kind of knowledge that has usually derived from exploring liminal creatures, knowledge that dead-ends in observing the dismantling of a binary, and seeks instead to chart "early modern anxieties about female autonomy and desire, the body's vulnerability, and a wide variety of threatening human-animal relationships." Yet his essay begins by invoking two creatures from *Macbeth* that are not quite identical in origin or connotation. While "paddock" is a type of toad or frog (Edward Topsell), "Grimalkin" or "Graymalkin" is, according to the OED, "A name given to a cat; hence, a cat, esp. an old she-cat; contemptuously applied to a jealous or imperious old woman." One is a "simple" beast, then, while the other is a companion animal. William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* tells the tale of one Grimalkin who swallows up a sheep and a cow stolen by a kern and his boy after they murder the animals' owners, but is then herself killed by the kern when she attacks and eats the child. This Grimalkin is also, however, "a witch in a cat's

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likeness,” since “Malkin is a woman’s name” according to a member of the human audience to the tale.⁴ Woman and cat, then, overlap as monstrous for their exercise of appetite, which seems to clearly signal they are instruments of the Devil, and at the same time act as agents of justice and retribution. Elsewhere in early modern literature, however, Grimalkin might merely be a common name for a “harmless” household cat.⁵ The full account of cat subculture in *Beware the Cat*, in fact, emphasizes the bond that links household pets, in this case kittens, to the shape-shifting cat lady—one tiny “kitling” claws to death the kern himself as he narrates his adventure to his wife. If Grimalkin is a (shapeshifted human) witch, the kittens who gather news of her death and abandon or attack their human companions are clearly ordinary animal companions. The text, in other words, links Grimalkin’s capacity for monstrous behavior to every “grimalkin’s” similar potential.

Clary is right in calling for an advance on the usual conclusion that animals trouble the ontological status of the human and confuse supposed boundaries between species. He is right again for pointing to the role of embodiment, especially human bodily vulnerability in concocting the attributes that define the witch’s familiar. It is no accident that one of the most common memes concerning monstrous beasts in today’s tabloids involves sex and reproduction. Monsters pierce the matter that is us; they consume us; they make a mockery of histories or schema involving species distinctions altogether. Fear of the monster is also desire for it (although what that means for Dick Cheney I hesitate to speculate)—desire not just for the monster’s bodily qualities, to either possess them or lose oneself in them, but desire also for the kind of knowledge the monster seems to promise, the position it occupies outside of the constraints of social convention. Baldwin’s tale, after all, revolves around a human, Master Streamer, who is willing to dose himself with magical potions to enter the feline world. The “grotesque and disordered diversity” of the witches’ cauldron in *Macbeth*, or Elizabeth Sawyer’s description of the “common sink” of men’s mouths certainly does, as Clary observes, put the accessibility of women, their mobility (both categorical and physical) and their desire at the heart of the familiar’s disruptive “disorienting” nature in these plays. But I think singling out witches’ familiars as distinct from ordinary household companion creatures may create a distinction where there is, for both early moderns and postmoderns, not so much of one.

Others have walked right up to the household pet and observed its monstrosity, but have turned away from making a clear statement about it: in at least two of his essays on monsters, for instance, Cohen almost names this link.⁶ We are accustomed to thinking of pet-keeping as a positive, even healthy undertaking, but early moderns mainly disagreed.⁷ Those who showered attention on mere animals were suspected of being guilty of a number of sins—from Chaucer’s Prioress, whose misdirected sensitivities and privileged comfort is signaled through her love of a lap dog, to Sidney’s Stella, who dotes overmuch on her own pet pooch, pets usurp the place of human familiars (understood in the root sense of family), but also the resources, emotional and material, that should ideally be bestowed on people.⁸ They draw human focus away from the

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claims of species kinship. The moral pressure to devalue animals in early modernity (and sometimes in postmodernity), I would argue, is also motivated in part by the secret fear humans harbor that in fact they are not as worthy of love and plenty as non-human creatures might be, an example of what Laurie Shannon explores as negative exceptionalism in the case of Shakespeare's plays, but more widely understood and distributed across species than Shannon may imagine. Where pets are concerned, we could add to her list of physiological and moral attributes that humans lack the capacity to give and accept love without conditions and across the abyss of difference.⁹ Divine injunctions to "love thy neighbor" lead to a sense of betrayal felt by those who attend to them when those neighbors prove that they are, in fact, not superior to animals, not endowed with higher capacities of reason or affection. In a fascinating sixteenth-century ballad, *Great News from Southwark; or The Old Woman's Legacy to her Cat*, the original "cat lady" is paradoxically berated for being "covetous" because she denies herself food or clothing, and subsists on her neighbors' charity, all the while showering love and food on her pet cat, her "small family," who grows plump as she grows thin.¹⁰ When she dies those neighbors find her stash of 1800 pounds, ultimately "wasted" in a legacy to the beloved animal. Meanwhile the balladeer of *My Dog and I* announces "We write no fights of Dutch or French, / . . . / No Monsters, Wonders in the Air," but only "of my Dog and I." The dog, the ballad insists, is the perfect companion, joining the speaker in contriving a sex-filled "single life" by offering women "from fifteen to fifty" the remedy for barrenness or greensickness. At the end of his life, the ballad tells us, we'll find the speaker in the grave "Cheek by jowl my Dog and I."¹¹

Animals fill a need that humans don't, perhaps that humans can't. There may well be erotic pleasures we can attach to pets that are inexpressible in human terms—the pleasures of scent and touch, unimpeded by socially fraught meanings. Pets in themselves are necessarily multiple, like Stirm's dragons, assignable to too many categories. They are human mirrors, assumed to offer evidence of our supposed superiority; but they are funhouse mirrors, distorting our image, reflecting dimensions of ourselves we aren't entirely comfortable with, as Derrida finds to his chagrin when his little cat peers at his naked body.¹² Pets are at once essential prostheses (no human can hunt mice and rats as well as a cat) and completely useless pits of resources (feeding hounds and horses could bankrupt an early modern household). They must be able to turn instantly from agents into objects, according to Yi Fu Tuan: "The pet, if it is to find acceptance in a well-run household, must learn to be immobile—to be as unobtrusive as a piece of furniture."¹³ This might sound an overly modern expectation to apply to early moderns, but *Beware the Cat* makes it clear that the various cats and kittens Streamer encounters are indeed treated as if they are mere objects, part of the environment with no agency of their own. The sheer matter of a pet is malleable: through breeding, they become at once more and less than "nature" once made them, growing or shrinking, developing particular coloring or anatomical qualities. As Stirm observes, most ecocriticism is occupied with the problem of knowing a nature that either withdraws or transforms as we attempt to know it. Pets are the material reminder that this is so—they seem to straddle the

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borderline between wild and domestic, but the more we attempt to know them as nature, the more they resemble us, something recent scientific studies keep proving over and over.¹⁴ And knowing a companion species is an exercise in quantum physics: as soon as we investigate, as soon as we focus our epistemological apparatus on that animal, it changes, it becomes something other. In the end, all pets are Schrödinger's cats (existing in multiple states of being at once), and all are also *Edmonton's* Tom, whose "true" shape is unknowable under the layers of corpse clothing that make him what he is.

Companion animals may occupy the margins of households, but they are somehow ambiguously powerful, as Clary's account of familiars makes clear. Where Stirn's dragons seem distinct from household pets because they are distant, "wonderful" creatures onto which are projected human epistemological desires that can't be satisfied, pets appear to allow those same desires exercise closer to home. But what if dragon tales also express the unsatisfiable desires familiar animals arouse—evidence, for one thing, that we can't have the encounters with non-humans that we wish we could have? To be Bigfoot's sex slave is to be diminished, reduced to sexual object; but also to belong, to have possession in the animality that defines Bigfoot. We love our pets because we long for union with the nature that they are, and are not. The poor old cat lady of *Great News from Southwark* keeps nothing of her "belly-money" for herself, but she showers her animal with "dainties" so that it is "plump as any doe."¹⁵ The ballad turns on the trick that though she treated the cat as a child of her own flesh ("Her belly sav'd it for her Cat" repeats the poem) "Puss must show the will" to inherit, mocking the animal with its extra-legal status. We know that cat ladies disrupt social norms by treating cats as surrogate children; what we often fail to ask is why a cat is a preferable recipient of attention and affection to a child.

Monsters, critics are fond of pointing out, are labeled with a term that derives from the Latin *monstrum* for portent or sign. Fabulous, on the other hand, signifies both a product of fabulation or falsehood, but also part of the traditional of fables or myths.¹⁶ Monstrous and fabulous creatures are thus caught up in two intersecting epistemological networks, one that requires reading and interpretation to understand a larger dimension of reality, the other that hints at the hazards that attend any such effort. Stirn's and Clary's fabulous monsters invite and perplex because they are both near and far, human and non-human, boundary crossers and boundary creators. We see them diffusely, partially, through a fog, much as we see Bigfoot or Nessie. And what we see is always in part only our desire to see, to understand, to "know" both carnally and intellectually.

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Notes

1. I found these online of course, because as an educated intellectual, I have naturally never, ever purchased or read a tabloid.
2. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25.
3. Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6.
4. William Baldwin, *Beware The Cat, The First English Novel*, ed. William Ringler Jr. and Michael Flachmann (San Marion: Huntington Library Press, 1988), 20.
5. The reference to a harmless cat is, of course, to Shylock's remark about the "harmless necessary cat" in *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1.55); see William Shakespeare, "The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice," in Volume 1 of *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, Gordon McMullan (New York: WW Norton, 2016), 1327-1393. In Bruce Bohrer's analysis of the play, Shylock refuses to take up the position of domesticated pet, rather than wild beast; see "Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet: Thinking Exclusion in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50:2 (1999): 152-70. But I'm arguing that distinction may be illusory—indeed, if we combine Bohrer's and my positions, it would seem that opting to be a pet would only make Shylock a different kind of monster.
6. See for instance, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Postscript: The Promise of Monsters," where Cohen deals extensively with Derrida's cat, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 449-464.
7. This line of argument about the benefits of pet-keeping appears, for instance, in James Serpell's *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Keith Thomas does observe that the suspicion of pet-keeping was changing throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; see *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 100-120.
8. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, notes that James I was accused of loving his dogs more than his subjects (103) and Anne Boleyn was so attached to her pet dog that no one wanted to tell her of its death (108).
9. See Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 127-73.
10. See "Great News from Southwark: or, the Old Woman's Legacy to her Cat," (London, 1695), University of California-Santa Barbara's *English Broadside Ballad Archive*, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/22336/xml>.
11. "My Dog and I," (London, 1678-80), University of California-Santa Barbara's *English Broadside Ballad Archive*, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21889/image>.
12. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). See also Cohen, "Postscript."
13. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 107.
14. I'm referring to the ever-expanding body of research that confirms that our companion animals have been transformed into subtle versions of ourselves, while the non-domesticated species we examine come more and more to seem as if they always did share human qualities and potentialities—dogs and horses, we now recognize, read human emotions in a way they can't possibly do for their own species; meanwhile, wolves have a sense of fair play and elephants suffer PTSD. Either this is the most anthropocentric development in the history of science, or we are in the process of discovering exactly how impossible it is to discern something called "nature" that is not already shaped either by human material interventions or by human epistemological systems. Or both.
15. "Great News from Southwark" (London, 1695)
16. See "fabulous, adj," 2v-4a, OED Online, December 2015, Oxford University Press, accessed February 17, 2016.

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