

Introduction:

Does It Have to Be About Women?

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ONE OF MY FAVORITE Kalamazoo sessions in recent years was a 2016 roundtable called “New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer.”¹ The intellectual excitement generated by the panelists was palpable and contagious. Nonetheless, several speakers presented discouraging information about the field as a whole: recent medieval studies conference programs had included surprisingly few papers with titles suggesting a feminist focus. Someone in the audience observed that medievalists are doing feminist work under other headings, including ecocriticism. I nodded vigorously at that comment, thinking particularly of Lesley Kordecki’s *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer’s Talking Birds* (New York: Palgrave, 2011). But the discussion left me uneasy about my own work. A young colleague at my institution had told me recently that when she asked a leading feminist theorist about incorporating her newfound interest in critical animal studies into her dissertation, the older scholar reacted with dismay, as if my colleague had proposed to jettison feminism. And I realized that I had not been conscious of writing as a feminist since my personal “animal turn.” What *is* feminist, I wondered, about my new field of interest?

1. “New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer,” Fifty-First International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 2016. The session was organized by Samantha Katz Seal and presided over by Eve Salisbury; it included presentations by Holly Crocker, Suzanne Edwards, Emma Lipton, Elizabeth Robertson, Samantha Katz Seal, Tara Williams, and (as respondent) Nicole Nolan Sidhu.

After consulting some colleagues, I proposed the 2017 Kalamazoo roundtable on which this special issue is based. I also started looking into other scholars' analyses of the relationship between critical animal studies (sometimes called zoocriticism) and feminist criticism.

I found two broad approaches. One is provided by Carol Adams in response to the question, "why do women work for animals instead of women and other disenfranchised humans?" "One answer," Adams writes, "is that feminism led us here. . . . Activism for justice isn't easily divisible into 'human' and 'nonhuman.'" ² By implication, feminist principles inform our work on nonhuman animals. That captures my own experience: what I learned from feminist criticism was the basis for my work in animal studies. In the same way that I'd combatted the totalizing construct "woman," for instance, I came to question collective singulars like "the dog" or "the animal." Just as I had learned to detect female objectification, I came to see literary animals as agents rather than semiotic vehicles. Perhaps, then, "theorizing about difference in terms of race, class, gender, and heterosexism" leads naturally to "theorizing about difference in terms of species." ³

But does that path produce intersection or just succession? In her 1997 collection *Ecological Feminism*, Karen J. Warren offers a second and more pointed formulation of the relationship of gender-work and species-work. Warren categorizes ecocriticism as, loosely, feminist, anti-feminist, and nonfeminist. She explains that a "nonfeminist position" can be "*compatible with or mutually reinforcing of independent feminist conclusions and reasons,*" but it "does not use the lens of gender or focus on gender as a category of analysis. In particular, [a nonfeminist position] does not take the perspectives of women as integral to its

2. Carol J. Adams, foreword to *Sister Species: Women, Animals, and Social Justice*, ed. Lisa Kemmerer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), ix–xii, at ix.

3. The quoted phrases are from Greta Gaard's summary of Adams's argument that feminists have pursued the first set of concerns, the exclusively human ones, at the expense of the second. See Greta Claire Gaard, "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Gaard (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 1–12, at 8; and Carol J. Adams, "The Feminist Traffic in Animals," in Gaard, *Ecofeminism*, 195–218.

analysis.”⁴ That seems right to me. To answer the question posed in my title, yes, feminism has to be about women. On the whole, my animal studies work has been nonfeminist.

Well, okay. No great crone in the sky is going to brand me a traitor to The Cause for having pursued another interest. But another thing I learned from feminism is that to see from women’s perspectives is to see more completely and more clearly. A deliberate engagement with feminist criticism would provide an opportunity to broaden or deepen anyone’s work in animal studies.

Some outstanding scholars had already pursued that opportunity, and I am grateful that my colleagues in the 2017 roundtable are continuing to do so. All six papers that follow demonstrate the mutual enrichment of feminist analysis and animal-centered ecocriticism, but we approach those ecofeminist interactions from different directions.

The texts treated in four of the essays represent confrontations across the species divide; those analyzed by Sara Petrosillo and Alison Langdon cross the gender divide as well. Petrosillo’s “Flying, Hunting, Reading: Feminist Poetics and Falconry” explores representations in both literary texts and material culture of the power dynamic between a gendered falcon and a human handler. In late medieval texts, she shows, power would seem to be doubly vested in a man who controls a female bird, but resistance is always at least latent in the raptor. Resistance to patriarchal culture increases when the handler is female, as in the designs for women’s seals. And both forms of female autonomy, the bird’s and the female handler’s, correspond to the resistant readings elicited by these texts and objects. Langdon demonstrates in “La Femme Bisclavret: The Female of the Species?” that a rethinking of anthropocentrism can clarify Marie de France’s representation of both animality and femininity. Contrary to a common reading, Marie does not equate the perspicacity and loyalty of the werewolf with humanness and the failings of his wife—and, by implication, of femininity itself—with animality. Rather, Bisclavret demonstrates sound judgment when he behaves like a dog, while the noselessness apportioned to the lady and inherited by

4. Karen J. Warren, introduction to *Ecological Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1–8, at 1; italics are Warren’s.

some of her daughters signifies their abandonment of the fundamental discernment epitomized by dogs. Differences in power (Petrosillo's main subject) and in moral value (Langdon's focus) cannot be ascribed categorically to either gender or species.

Depicting cross-species encounters that involve female characters, the texts analyzed by Melissa Ridley Elmes and Liberty S. Stanavage have often been read in terms of gender; these two essays offer more complex and satisfying feminist readings by taking a zoocritical perspective. As indicated by its title, "Compassion and Benignytee': A Reassessment of the Relationship Between Canacee and the Falcon in Chaucer's 'Squire's Tale'" concerns a female bird and a woman. In contrast with some other critics (among whom I count myself), Elmes does not regard the falcon as an anthropomorphic projection. In affirming its nonhuman species, Elmes can also—perhaps paradoxically—emphasize the characters' shared gender. Indeed, she claims that the shared female experience of masculine betrayal suspends the species divide, moving Canacee toward the avian. By implication, gender rather than species is the foundation of identity. The opposite seems to obtain in the text explored by Stanavage. In "Questioning Gynocentric Utopia: Nature as Addict in 'Description of Cookham,'" Stanavage challenges the premise that by virtue of their shared subordination in patriarchy, women and nonhuman nature are fundamentally allied. Reading from the viewpoint of the creatures and landscape in Aemilia Lanyer's ostensible utopia, Stanavage reveals that the female characters need and presumably construct the self-endangering subservience of their nonhuman cohabitants. An approach through critical animal studies leads to a newly critical perspective on gender.

Wendy A. Matlock and I pursue feminist readings of texts whose characters are all nonhuman. In "Women and Other Beasts: A Feminist Perspective on Medieval Bestiaries," I use Warren's "lens of gender" to explore bestiaries' gendered grammar, their female readership, and their transformation by a female author. Inconsistent gender references to bestiary creatures reveal androcentric bias; an exclusively male readership is presupposed by bibliographic and discursive practices, but there is evidence that bestiaries served as teaching texts for bourgeois women. The most radical intervention in androcentric bestiary norms is an ecofeminist beast-book by Hildegard of Bingen, four books in her *Physica* that

treat animals as agents rather than signifiers and represent them through interspecies analogy and reciprocity. In “Belligerent Mothers and the Power of Feminine Speech in *The Owl and the Nightingale*,” Matlock shows that the poem’s interavian debate centers on material and textual fertility. The birds’ sophisticated allusions and debating strategies are grounded in their bodily reproduction and mothering; simultaneously, the debate performs textual reproduction, particularly the skillful reuse of material from Marie de France. “In this light,” Matlock writes, “*The Owl and the Nightingale* encourages feminist labor when it recounts a woman’s writing without acknowledging her authorship and material feminist analysis when it puts such an artful dispute in the voices of vividly embodied avian mothers.” That is, the poem itself reproduces ecofeminist reading.

We hope this collection will do the same.

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