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## Introduction: Fabulous Animals

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# Fabulous Animals

HOLLY DUGAN AND KARL STEEL

Were dragons real? Can squirrels sail? Do bears rape people? Taken out of context, such questions seem a bit ridiculous. The answer seems both illusive and obvious: No. To distill literary tales about animals into such simple questions about truth and fiction risks missing their point: they focus on the wrong parts of the story, fixate on the literal embedded in the metaphorical. Yet we start here to offer an incitement we think useful at this critical moment for those of us studying human entanglements with animal lives in the past: what would it mean to answer yes? What is historical in fiction? And what is fabulous in history? What is the role of fabulous animals in historically-minded critical animal studies?

Up at least through the end of the seventeenth century, the word “fabulous” was a synonym for a particular kind of story: mostly classical mythology, but also fables, that narrative genre in which animals, mountains, or other supposedly voiceless things spoke, squabbled, and taught humans lessons in wariness, justice, and, especially, social conservatism.<sup>1</sup> Collections of fables were foundational to medieval and early modern training in both literacy and the affiliated skill of interpretation, and therefore also taught readers the necessity of distinguishing fiction from truth. Young readers learned that while the narrative itself was merely fabulous, the moral that followed the story (the epimythium) or prefaced it (the promythium) was meant to provide a good, true lesson. Fiction had its value because it was understood to be a vehicle for making the hunt for truth a game.<sup>2</sup>

Most fable collections therefore led off with a story designed to teach proper practices of reading: many began with a rooster that prefers a dunghill to the gem it finds in it. The usual ending lesson explains that we should not be like the rooster, preferring the base animal materials to the true moral values secreted within these squalid and puerile narratives; another epimythium instead teaches that we should be like the rooster and know our place, leaving the gems for those who can appreciate them.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the animal material is meant to be understood as “fabulous,” fictional, connotatively equivalent to myths or even to false hopes, as when a fourteenth-century English translator of a Latin history sneers at the “fabulous” apocalyptic political hopes of the Welsh.<sup>4</sup> The other material, the moral, is meant to be understood as abstractly true, suitable for reasonable creatures like the elite, literate, generally male humans who themselves so rarely appear in fable narratives.

This interpretative split works best with stories of talking animals: the clever fox who convinces a crow that its voice is beautiful, and then absconds with the cheese that drops from the bird’s mouth as it proudly croaks out its

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song; the lion whose legal speech bullies other predators into giving him their shares of a carcass; the mice who convince a sleeping lion that only a tyrant would punish them for the *lèse-majesté* committed when they scampered across his vast body as he slept: given the general humanist conviction that animals had no spoken language, and certainly no language that could be shared between species, these kinds of fables would have been easy to understand as mere fictions, with the animals mere materializations of certain moral qualities, like credulousness, gluttony, and meekness. If the trait is noble, then that too is imaginatively surrendered to humans: in Phillip Sidney's "Philisides," for instance, each beast offers its present to humanity: "the fox its craft," the crocodile, "its tears," and the cony, "its skill to build."<sup>5</sup>

It works less well, however, when the animal behaves only like any other animal of its species. A rooster would probably prefer the contents of a dunghill to the beauty of a gem. The rooster's thoughts about the gem may be only fictional, but the rooster's behaviors are exactly what one would expect. For this supposedly "fabulous" story, a certain kind of truth resides on the side of the narrative, one perhaps more solid than a moral that might change from telling to telling, or that might be ignored, misused, or otherwise waylaid by the fable's reader. A rooster stands on a dunghill, eating what can be eaten: this really seems to have the quality of truth, because it exists regardless of what the reader thinks about it.

Yet truths more "fabulous"—in a modern sense of the word—can still be found on the narrative side of things. Not all the animal narratives are either obviously false stories of animal intelligence or true stories of unadorned bestial appetites. One popular fable features a story of a clever and patient animal, whose standard *epimythia* aims to teach exactly these qualities. This is the fable of the crow and pitcher, which appears in Avianus's foundational Latin collection, in the late medieval collections of Caxton and his source, Steinhöwel, and in other compendia through to our present.<sup>6</sup> A crow finds a pitcher, its base full of water, and cannot get its beak down the pitcher's narrow neck. We might imagine another fable of a clever crow that tricks a hapless monkey, equally thirsty, into tipping the contents of the pitcher down the crow's throat. Instead, in the actual fable, the crow plunks a succession of pebbles into the pitcher to displace the water up through its neck. The clever, patient crow quenches his thirst, and, by imitating it, we learn, as Caxton explains, "that wytte or fapyence is a moche fayr vertue, for by fapyence or wytte, thow Ihalt mowe refyfte to all faultes." This wit of the crow is, in fact, the wit of a crow: crows really can do this.<sup>7</sup> These notoriously clever birds have become the darlings of ethology, and of posthumanists eager to crowd nonhumans in on humans' arrogant claims to lonely rationality. It could have been found in classical natural history, which from Pliny through the bestiaries, held that crows were absolutely dedicated to their nestlings and the recipients of news of the future from God Himself (even if Isidore's *Etymologies*, a foundational medieval encyclopedia, complained that such belief was "a great sin").<sup>8</sup> Instead, we have a fable of crows being crows as we know them. And as we know them, we stop being so sure of the mere

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fabulousness of fables, or we find new wonder in the world we thought we already knew.



Still more fabulous behavior need not be sought out only among mythical hybrids and other monsters. The “fabulous” animal—in the sense of animals that inspire wonder, a suspension of certainty— could just as well be sought at home, among the jumble of outmoded and disdained knowledges of the Middle Ages and early modern periods. For prior to the rise of modern animal science, what might strike us as only mundane animals were thought to practice a wide range of naturally bizarre behavior. Consider, for instance, the account of sailing squirrels in Edward Topsell’s *History of Four-footed Beasts*:

when hunger or some conuenient prey of meat costraineth her to passe ouer a riuier, shee seeketh out soe rinde or small barke of a Tree which shee setteth vppon the Water, and then goeth into it, and holding vppe her taile like a saile, letteth the winde driue her to the other side.

Topsell names Olaus Magnus as his source; this fact also appears in Olaus’ contemporary Conrad Gesner. The belief in sailing squirrels appears as early as the thirteenth century, in the natural histories of Vincent of Beauvais and Thomas of Cantimpré, the latter of which would be adapted delightfully in this medieval Dutch verse, “ende [the squirrel] sitter op, alst in een scip ware, / ende

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metten staerte seyltet over dare.” Even Carl Linnaeus includes sailing squirrels in his great work of taxonomy (“superfluum cibum defodit; Cortice interdum navigat”), while it shows up as late as the children’s classic *Squirrel Nutkin*.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, squirrels do not actually navigate across rivers on scraps of wood, using their tails as sails. But for nearly five hundred years, the most reputable scientific sources believed they did. There was the fabulous, up in a tree, just outside our window.

Let this be a temptation to imagine outdated ethologies as other sites of the fabulous, the mythical, the strange. Too often this material continues to be considered embarrassing, too often subjected to what we might call scientific Euhemerizing. Skeptical ancients, Christian and pagan both, insisted that centaurs were “really” just very able riders, and that the gods had once been only human heroes with names like Zeus or Hercules, and more recent rationalists have held that supposed werewolves were really just people with hypertrichosis, that is, thick hair growth all over the body. By the same logic, we might imagine that someone had once perhaps witnessed a squirrel afloat on a bit of wood amid a swollen river, and perhaps that squirrel had leapt to the bank and scampered up an acorn-swollen tree. But what of it? If this had been the origin of a story that in the thirteenth century entered squirrel lore — a rather thin archive, to be sure — it still does not exhaust the thrill of imagining that these nimble creatures in times of need collectively decide to become sailors. What wonder! This ethology should be taken as a kind of counternatural natural history, not as yet another record of power/knowledge or mere delivery to the mastery of instrumental reason, but rather as a site of resistance to the complacency of the known, and of the domestic, even parochial certainty that the fabulous can only be expected “out there.”

The category “nature” too often functions as the great comforting “ought”: it is what we ought not to be (because we are civilized); it is what we ought to be (because we are God’s creatures, or because of the implacable and inevitably antifeminist rationality of genes). Counternatural history, materials from nonhumans that topple our natural categories, is fabulous history, a yoking of these opposites that speaks fiction and truth at the same time: a truth infested with the uncertainty of fiction.

One last example before we introduce the articles themselves: we recommend Colin Dickey’s recent review of Marah J. Hardt’s *Sex in the Sea*, which, like Joan Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow*, frustrates any attempt to ground a supposedly fundamental gender binary in nature.<sup>10</sup> Dickey begins “First, it’s important to ruin *Finding Nemo* for you.”<sup>11</sup> We might humbly suggest the following revision: First, it’s important to make *Finding Nemo* fabulous.

The natural world swarms with parthenogenetic female wasps, multigendered flounders, while the vast majority of life — which is microscopic — reproduces without sexual congress at all. Amid these swarms, we hairy terrestrial vertebrates are the aberrations.<sup>12</sup> We are the fabulous animals. This is not a matter of playing the cosmopolitan skeptic, like Montaigne, and simply seeing things from another perspective, but rather of recognizing how very parochial our way of life is. The other perspective really ought to be the default.

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Properly understood, Nemo made “weird” by an accurate natural history is far less fabulous than we bare, forked, generally binary creatures are.

This collection of essays and responses is thus our attempt to capture some of the lively debate around these issues that happened last spring at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America.<sup>13</sup> There, two very different seminars on animal studies—Karen Raber’s seminar on “animal materialism” as well as ours on “animal encounters”—allowed a group of us working in medieval, early modern, and Enlightenment-era critical animal studies to begin a conversation about our shared approaches and our differences in studying animals: For whom are we speaking when we write about animals? Should our work actively contribute to improving animal lives? What do we mean by the term animal and what is included in its definition? And, perhaps most surprising: are we working on “real” animals?

These essays and their responses have been curated to reflect this encounter: We’ve chosen the theme of fabulous animals as a reminder that animals and the stories we tell about them have long and complicated histories. What are the fictions embedded in our current material investments in animal lives? What are the roles of fabulous animals (and fabulous knowledge about real animals) in this field that has been dominated by historicist methods of research? To begin to capture the liveliness of our debate, we’ve invited participants from both seminars to write and respond: all of the essays focus on animals that are fabulous in a modern sense, in that they seem more the stuff of history or myth. A few are fabulous in early modern ways, in that they seem to materially emerge from classical myth or from the “native” mythical materials of Germanic legend—the dragon at the heart of Jan Stirm’s essays. Others are more familiar, like the cats rendered diabolical through witchcraft in Chris Clary’s essay. Some emerge as fabulous only when interpreted against our human scales of measurement—the squirrels elevated on shields in Kathryn Will’s study of armory. And some frustrate both material and mythical approaches—the single bee that Keith Botelho traces in his essay. Read together, these animals are both familiar and fabulous. And, as our three respondents argue in their thoughtful and generous readings of the essays, these animals provide a way to evaluate both where the field has been focused in the past and where it might be heading.

That dragons and bees are discussed here with historicist methods, while cats and squirrels take on sinister and noble allegorical meanings is an irony not lost on us, and hopefully not on you. The dragons, satanic cats, bees, heraldic squirrels, and yes, even fabulous Nemo offer a provocation. Let’s begin.

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## Notes

1 See the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v., “fabulous,” *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (available online from the University of Chicago’s *Logeion* website), s.v. “fabulosus”; and “fabulous” at the *EEBO-TCP Key Words in Context* website managed by the Humanities Digital Workshop at Washington University in St. Louis.

2. See also Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern Culture* (Urban-Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 2002), who writes: “Aesop’s fables illustrate the two sides of humanist endeavor: the operation of grammar and the importance of moral action” (72). For a good treatment of the classical and medieval consolidation and diffusion of the fable genre, see Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3. This is John Lydgate’s, in *Isopes Fabules*, ed. Edward Wheatley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013).

4. Ralph Higden, *Polychronicon*, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby, vol. 4 of 6 (London: Longman and Co, 1876): “But y suppose that the oppinion of men of Wales to be fabulose, and as fable, seyenge that they schalle have kynges ageyne when the boones of Cadwaladrus be broughte from Rome, like to the story of Gaufride [= Geoffrey of Monmouth] in the ende” (161).

5. Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (1593), *Early English Books Online*, accessed February 29, 2016, sig. Kk5v

6. For the medieval life of this fable, concentrating on German examples, see A. E. Wright, “*He lert uns der meister*”: *Latin Commentary and the German Fable, 1350-1500* (Tempe, AZ: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), or, more briefly, Seth Lerer, *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 43.

7. Leyre Castre and Ed Wasserman, “Crows Understand Analogies: What Birds can teach us about Animal Intelligence,” *Scientific American*, Feb 10, 2015, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/crows-understand-analogies/>.

8. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, with Muriel Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 267.

9. Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (London, 1668), 509-10; Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus, earumque diversis statibus &c* (Rome, Giovanni M. Viotto, 1555) 18.18, 615; Conrad Gesner, *Historiae animalium, Liber I: de Quadrupedibus viviparis* (Zurich, 1551), 956; Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum*, ed. Helmut Boese, s.v., “pirolo,” (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 161; Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale*, (1624; Graz: Graz University Press, 1964 reprint), 1440; Jacob van Maerlant, *Naturen bloeme [The Flowers of Nature]*, ed. Eelco Verwijs (J. B. Wolters, 1878), ll. 3385-86; Carl Linnaeus, *Systema naturae* (Stockholm, 1758), 63; and finally Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* (New York: Frederick Warne and Co, 1903): “Each squirrel had a little sack and a large oar, and spread out his tail for a sail” (14).

10. See Colin Dickey, “The Sex Lives of Sea Creatures,” *The New Republic*, Feb 11 2016, accessed March 2 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/129669/sex-lives-sea-creatures>. See also Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

11. Dickey, “The Sex Lives of Sea Creatures.”

12. For more on this topic, see Scott Richard Shaw, *Planet of the Bugs: Evolution and the Rise of Insects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014)

13. We’d like to thank Dr. Miranda Nesler, who collaborated with us and published our reports of the conference on her blog “Performing Humanity.” See Holly Dugan, “Animal Encounters: A PH Collaboration for Shakespeare Association 2015,” *Performing Humanity*, April 1, 2015, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://performinghumanity.wix.com/blog#!Animal-Encounters-A-PH-Collaboration-for-Shakespeare-Association-2015/cmbz/551b7fda0cf21933cd29cfc6>; and Karl Steel, “Meat & Sympathy: the Uses of the Past,” *Performing Humanity*, April 18, 2015, accessed

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March 1, 2016, <http://performinghumanity.wix.com/blog#!Meat-Sympathy-the-Uses-of-the-Past/cmbz/5532b3c60cf266495e2fed90>.

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