

Abstracts for Seminar: The Future of Renaissance (Non)Human Animal Studies

Keith Botelho

Creaturely Sanctuaries in Shakespeare

Many of Shakespeare's real and imagined habitats (from *habeo*, meaning to possess, occupy, dwell) are similar to those spaces occupied by nonhuman beasts in the natural world: caves in *Timon of Athens*, hives in *The Merchant of Venice*, webs in *Othello*, nests in *Romeo and Juliet*, hollows in *King Lear*, cells in *The Tempest*, to name just a few. What does it mean to adopt the dwellings that echo or resemble those of animals? Do the characters that inhabit these spaces ever take on those beastly characteristics of their intended or former inhabitants? The essay will attempt to read these spaces as sanctuaries, and, using the work of Timothy Pachirat, Lori Gruen, and Sue Donaldson & Will Kymlicka, I will think about these spaces as potential sites of rupture and resistance. By examining the behavior and organization of animals living together individually or in groups (social zoology, social entomology), we can map how this animal architecture often resists the humans who attempt to occupy it. These dwellings also offer readers and performers "ways in" to the mental geographies of these characters, many of whom occupy a place of indistinction in becoming like the creatures of the natural world.

Erika Carbonara

"Thy Love Was Far More Better": Animal Companionship, Loss, and Grief in

Early Modern Poetry

Recent studies have shown that, for many, bereavement over the loss of an animal companion may be synonymous with the loss of a human companion (Eckerd, Barnett, & Jett-Dias, 2016; Cleary et al., 2021; Riggs et al., 2021). Many of these studies suggest that this equivalence reflects a recent shift in our beliefs regarding human primacy over the natural and non-human animal world. In this essay, I read Andrew Marvell's 1681 pastoral poem "The Nymph Complaining

for the Death of Her Fawn” as an early example of the substantial grief that often accompanies the loss of an animal companion. Rejecting the anthropocentric interpretation of the poem as a biblical or political allegory, this reading posits that the poem’s titular nymph participates in many common rituals of grief surrounding pet loss, such as narrativizing the human-animal bond, memorializing the companion through keepsakes, and envisioning a future with the companion animal that defies corporeality.

In this paper, I first outline the nature and history of the relationship between the nymph and her fawn and the occasion of its death. The fawn’s death is not natural, as it has been shot by “wanton troopers” (1). Despite this, the poem’s focus very quickly turns from this act of violence to the focus of immortalizing the fawn, reasserting my interpretation of grief as the poem’s primary focal point. I then turn to an analysis of the more provocative moments of the poem, in which the nymph captures the fawn’s tears “in a golden vial” to “o’erflow [it] with [hers]” (101, 103), before concluding with a close reading of the nymph’s declaration that they shall be immortalized in marble together. Sitting at the crux of early modern animal studies and contemporary death and grief studies, this exploration showcases the lasting value of the human-animal companionate bond.

Douglas Cavers

The Parrots and Curse of Fracastoro’s *Syphilis*

The Italian physician and polymath Girolamo Fracastoro devotes the last book of his medical didactic poem *Syphilis* to representing the first poetic account of Columbus’ voyage. In an ornately imagistic episode of this account, Fracastoro depicts Columbus’ men shooting several parrots shortly after embarking on Hispaniola. However, they discover that these parrots are sacred to Apollo when one parrot survivor articulates a curse on the Spaniards’ imperial project, of which syphilis’ advent is one dimension (*Syphilis* 3.151-93). Latinists David Quint (1993) and Philip Hardie (2004) have compellingly cast allusions in this episode to Book 3 of the *Aeneid* as

imbuing Fracastoro's text with an anti-imperialist politics, with the birds' death representing the violence committed against indigenous peoples. As for my paper, its first goal will be to place these philological insights in dialogue with early modern animal studies, particularly Timothy Reiss' work on early modern "Bird Islands" as well as Bruce Boehrer's book on how "parrots serve... to mark European civilization's successful confrontation with the world beyond its frontiers" (Boehrer 2010: 2). At the same time, I will interrogate the critical and political load that such an interpretation places on Hispaniola's parrots. Since Fracastoro ahistorically depicts Spanish-indigenous relations as quite amicable (*Syphilis* 3.200-31), what politics might inform this shift or erasure of colonial violence onto the parrot? Granted, the parrot's voice may be vulnerable to the structuring of logocentric humanisms. However, my paper will attempt to look towards the several other animals represented in Fracastoro's poem, animals which do not verbalize their suffering. For the famous Columbus account is not the poem's only origin story of syphilis. It also imagines an alternative outbreak in ancient Syria, in the form of Book 2's "Ilceus" epyllion, in which a shepherd wrongly sacrifices a sacred bull in an attempt to relieve the scorching heat tormenting his herd (*Syphilis* 2.281-458). While still noting how Fracastoro's medical gaze spectacularizes these animals' abjection, I will explore how the "curse" of syphilis interconnects textual allusion to the unforeseen catastrophes that befall mortal flesh and questions the efficacy and suprema

Taylor Culbert

The Affective Impact of Strange Fish: Early Modern Sea Creature Displays and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

"A strange fish!" Trinculo exclaims upon meeting Caliban, "Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There

would this monster make a man.” The phrase “strange fish” is not unique to Shakespeare – it appears in a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pamphlets that document the capture, killing, and display of sea creatures, from squid to sharks, who had found themselves in proximity to the shore. Modern researchers have suggested that humans struggle to empathize with piscine beings because they do not exhibit recognizable facial expressions. In this essay, I examine the affective impact of the “strange fish” that humans encountered on the shores and surfaces of the ocean, querying how early modern perceptions of aquatic bodies and sentience might have enabled the inquisitive violence inflicted on cephalopods, sharks, and other sea-dwelling creatures. How did the people who encountered such beings while they were alive feel and respond to their presence? How did reactions change or differ for audiences who encountered these beings only after their death? These spectacles were startlingly generative, with live audiences measuring, marveling at, and eating the strange fish, and subsequently publishing the events to circulate amongst a wider audience. Such depictions of sea life created both real and imagined knowledge of the ocean and its inhabitants that resonated across other parts of early modern culture, including the theatre.

Given Trinculo’s reference to putting Caliban’s fishy body on display, I draw a comparison between the affective exchanges amongst humans and fish depicted in the pamphlets and Caliban’s interactions with other characters in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. I argue that this character’s othering is far more specific than dehumanization: his piscinization evokes a particular kind of non-feeling and non-expressive being, enabling the violence inflicted upon him by other characters.

Perry Guevara

Shakespeare’s Bird Brain: Avian Pity and Cognitive Ecology in *Titus Andronicus*

When Titus Andronicus exhausts possibilities for human compassion, Shakespeare assigns the work of mourning to the birds. Lucius condemns Tamora's lifeless body to be "prey" for animals, concluding, "Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity" (5.3.201-202). This striking couplet resonates with Lavinia's earlier plea for mercy, in which she cites folk knowledge that "ravens foster forlorn children" (2.3.153). Across the play, birds emerge at the interchange of pity and predation, where animal instinct blurs with human emotion. What might it mean—cognitively, ecologically, and emotionally—for birds to experience pity? What are the stakes for Shakespearean tragedy? This essay first situates these scenes in relation to biblical, Ovidian, and Chaucerian precedents before turning to cognitive ecology, a paradigm adapted from neurobiology that not only acknowledges inhuman modes of cognition but also registers how cognition is distributed across the brain, body, and environment. Drawing on Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Franz de Waal's research on animal empathy, and Eva Meijer's work on interspecies communication, I argue that birds in *Titus Andronicus* not only figure pity but also feel it—or at least something akin to it. To support this claim, I look to neuroethological research on consolatory behaviors in corvids and pallial brain structures in birds more broadly. By reading Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedy alongside avian neuroscience, I aim to show that when the play's characters can no longer muster pity for their fellow humans, birds may intervene. Furthermore, neuroscience illuminates how avian cognition and behavior shapes their representation in Shakespearean drama, such that their presence is not merely symbolic but manifestly affective. That is to suggest that Shakespeare's birds might be more than a contradiction or a cog within a larger scheme of pathetic fallacy; their flights invite us to imagine the emotional dynamism of bird brains, hollow bones, windswept feathers, and quivering hearts.

Jason Hogue

“The little dogs and all”: Affection for Canines in Shakespeare

As Bruce Boehrer laid out in a 1999 article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, not all canines in Shakespeare are created equal, and in fact, some of his plays establish a kind of opposition or continuum of human perception of dogs, with “cur” on the negative end and “lapdog” on the positive end, a distinction that “recapitulates discriminations between the socially unacceptable and the acceptable, between baseness and gentility” (155). Boehrer emphasizes this difference in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* by contrasting the “sourest natur’d” cur Crab (2.3.5) to Proteus’s lapdog, a “little jewel” (4.4.47). My paper will consider this distinction in the context of *King Lear*. “Man’s best friend” is not likely the first description that comes to mind when one comes across the dog references in *King Lear*. Like the sentimentalized innocence of children that we now often take for granted, the acceptance of the beloved domesticated dog in the average household was not the norm in England until more recent times. Bernadette Paton describes the miserable life of the medieval and early modern dog as “vicious, ravenous, and watchful,” traits repeatedly confirmed in references throughout *King Lear*. However, Lear’s vision of “little dogs” complicates the play’s representation of typical early modern human-canine relations. Granted, Lear’s behavior in the cave implies mental breakdown and hallucination, but even if his words are infected with insanity, they nonetheless afford a clear picture of human sentimentality toward dogkind that presages the place of the dog as the ideal companion animal in many households today. Lear’s statement is also important in Shakespeare as a site of dog naming that also confirms this affection: “The little dogs and all, Trey, Blanch and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me.” (*King Lear* 3.6.60-61). By examining this particular detail in the play, I am interested

in how pet/dog naming conventions in Shakespeare and early modern literature more generally convey or complicate such sentiments.

Olivia Leonard

Perceptive Worm-men, Contemplative Flies: Insect Knowledge in Cavendish and Traherne

Within historic and literary animal studies, Descartes' 1637 *Discourse on the Method* often marks a fundamental rupture in its description of the *bête machine*, a claim of absolute difference between the human and non-human animal. By exclusively granting rational and linguistic capacities to the human, Descartes strips interpretive significance from the non-human animal's interactions with the world and its co-inhabitants: such animals may take in sensory data, but they cannot "make sense" of those impressions or perceptions, either in their own minds or via communication to others. The world thus remains essentially unknown by the non-human animals who collectively populate it, including the 10 quintillion insects interacting with their environment at any given moment. Indeed, Descartes reserves his most emphatic denials of capacity for insects, such as the fly and ant described as figures of absolute alterity in the *Discourse* and the "worms, gnats, caterpillars" who serve as negative exempla in his 1649 exchanges with Henry More regarding animal souls.

This paper locates an alternative ecological model in the works of two of Descartes' early modern contemporaries and respondents: Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Traherne. Both authors move beyond prevailing narratives of insect-as-object for human observation and interpretation—as emblem (Moffett), hieroglyph (Browne), or scientific specimen (Hooke)—to consider insects as vital participants in systems of experiential knowledge and exchange.

While Cavendish formally responds to the *bête machine* in her *Philosophical Letters*, the animal natures possessed by *The Blazing World's* hybrid scientists—particularly the social sensory

knowledge attributed to the Worm-men—offer an imaginative engagement with Cartesian mechanism and its articulations of non-human alterity. Eliding distinctions between sense perception and rationality, Cavendish considers worm knowledge as local and cooperative, itself an alternative “discourse” that contributes meaningfully to broader ecological understanding. This project extends that discourse to the insect subjects of Thomas Traherne’s cosmology, including the ant of *The Commentaries of Heaven*, who “sees and enjoys the Heavens and the Earth,” and the fly who surveys the world as a “Sensible King” in *The Kingdom of God*. Sharing Cavendish’s interest in atomic vitalism, Traherne compares insects and atoms to model an interdependent universe composed of joyful communications and exchanges between even the smallest living entities and material particles. I consider these insect interlocutors as an early modern resource for ecological thinking in terms of shared environments and experiences, in which networks of perceptions, knowledges, and even mutual enjoyments include quintillions of participating insects.