

## **Human/non-human: Gender dynamics and the female/animal condition in medieval culture**

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### **Abstract**

The “question of the animal” has recently challenged the anthropocentrism of the western philosophical tradition, by regarding humans and animals as basically non-distinct species. The dissolution of the frontiers between these two realms, however, was a common motive in ancient cultures, where primeval bonds between animals and humans were taken for granted. Classical, as well as Germanic, Celtic and biblical contributions turned the Middle Ages into a most peculiar cradle for our current consideration of this relationship. Legatee to quite diverse and even contradictory perspectives and aspects of such connections, the Middle Ages produced a concomitant complex net of categories from which these dynamics were to be surveyed. The ubiquitous presence of the animal element is shown clearly in medieval literary and artistic representations as evidence of its crucial role in the shaping of perceptions of sexuality, food, natural sustainability, property or governance. If the Genesis master narrative substantiates the basic divide separating beasts from men, the role of women in the myth remains, however, a controversial issue. The cultural construction of gender allowed a short distance between the animal and the female conditions, given the essential material and reproductive values they were equally endowed with. Processes such as hybridation and metamorphoses reveal the ambiguous space occupied by women’s bodies as intermediaries between culture and nature, and thus, as marginal destabilizing elements in the configuration of the boundaries between the human and animal spheres. This paper will analyze some of the medieval representations of the female element in its proximity to the animal nature in order to reflect on the relationship between the social construction of women and the oppression of animals. Departing from contemporary concern in authors like Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Calarcos or Haraway, the paper will not only reflect on the visual and metaphoric quality of the images but also insist on the broadening of this symbiotic

tandem –women/animals—as prefiguring some of the contemporary attitudes to and representations of femininity.

Key words: animals, women, Middle Ages, specieism, cultural representation.

1

“The question of the animal” has recently challenged the anthropocentrism of the Western philosophical tradition, by regarding humans and animals as basically non-distinct species. This interest results from the more general concern about nature, which has fostered debates and revealed some of the discontinuities among diverse contemporary theories and activist positions. The feminist movement has been addressed and encouraged to get involved in the fight for the welfare of nature and the planet, after the premise that some of the issues pertaining the current consideration of nature have been previously met and shared by women. This relationship between women and nature has, however, been one of the crucial targets of the early feminist movement. One of Simone de Beauvoir’s tenets was precisely the disavowal of the tradition that regarded women as natural beings, and nature, reversely, as showing a motherly profile (and thus, liable to be treated accordingly). The tandem nature/women, as opposed to that of culture/men, stands as one more piece in the basic binary set of structures on which the whole Western linguistic and cultural building is erected. Whereas many feminist currents which follow an anthropocentric line have taken a deep interest in telling women away from nature, the so called “critical integrationists” consider such bond an inalienable one, difficult to reject and unwise to deny. Determined to make virtue of necessity, these authors have defended the essentialist relationship between nature and female bodily expressions (such as sentimentalism and care ethics, motherhood, all of them condensed and acknowledged in the cult to the goddess of pre-Indoeuropean cultures). According to Lori Gruen “(...) radical feminists see women as closer to nature and men as closer to culture and thereby reject the cultural in favor of the natural”. Whereas within the wide label of “feminism of difference” these authors maintain the classical dualities by simply reversing the weight of the pros and cons in the balance,

a new kind of ecofeminism claims to go against the binary structures altogether in order to overcome gender, racial, or animal –specieist-- oppression. These authors have pointed out the key importance of alterity both as the origin and as a possible way out of these organized binary dispositions, and have searched for different standpoints from which to advance a new design for the male-female relations as well as for human interaction with the medium.

## 2

My concern in this paper is twofold: on the one hand, to present a survey of the historical construction of the bond women/nature during the Middle Ages and, on the other, to try and link part of that medieval legacy to current concerns in the animal question. I hope this may prove a fruitful relationship, since the Middle Ages represent within the Western historical narrative the very notion of otherness, with which we shall be dealing.<sup>1</sup> As for their relationship with the medium, the image which has prevailed is that of a basic autarchic underdeveloped agrarian model which would result in regular intervals of hunger and disease and in general scarcity. However, Lynn White warns us that it was by the 11<sup>th</sup> century when a clear exploitive attitude appeared in the Western agrarian world. Developments as that of the heavy --8 oxen drawn-- plow lead us into the picture of a much better organized society, willing to undertake deforestation and intense cultivation of the soil. In like manner, and following the precept of the Genesis, animals, as part of nature, were conceived of as liable to be used fully beyond any further consideration. This exploitive attitude can be appreciated in illustrated calendars, where the months are no longer identified through the image of a classical god, but through the monthly agrarian activities in which both people and animals are equally immersed.

In these calendars, the image is one of absolute harmony between nature and humankind, between men and women, between time and eternity; in fact, one has the feeling that human beings share an animal submissive quality in simply obeying the divine mandate of working the land. But it is another previous biblical commandment: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (....) that reveals the bond between women and animals. Humankind is urged

there to reproduce in order to control nature through the dominion over animals. One would assume that women would participate equally in the human superior position over the animal realm. However, the human reproduction and the sovereignty over animals are based on exactly the same operation: the domestication process, and this places women as an intermediary between the two realms.

During the Middle Ages, the age-old process of producing new animal breeds and domesticating them went on and intensified; of course the hunting and fishing activities were crucial to the economic reality of these countries (and in some cases they were even attributed special spiritual qualities), but it was the domestication and breeding of animals that allowed the spread of this civilization (selective horse breeding with the Franks, bovine selection, domestication of the wild boar; and after the 11<sup>th</sup> c, sheep raising, which turns England and Flanders centers of cloth industry). Isidore of Seville distinguished cattle or domestic ones from beasts or wild ones, a most significant and lasting duality.

Whatever the historical circumstances and diverse discourses accounting for the rise of the Western gender system, we cannot deny the affinity between the domestication of animals and that of women. If animals require a spatial definition to fall under human control, women equally occupy the domestic sphere in the gender organization ruled by the family unit; reciprocally, animals are not only to be controlled as providers of labour force, food or clothes, but simultaneously through the administration of their reproductive capacity; it is no wonder then that female animals are of special concern to today's ecofeminists, for whom these reproductive qualities have been the real drivers of female animal exploitation throughout centuries (the overproduction exacted from industrial exploitation and mistreatment of hens and cows is the most evident case nowadays).

In the Middle Ages the kinship systems --as described by Levi-Strauss-- kept women sharing with animals not only their domesticity and reproductive nature, but also their chattel quality. Historical and literary medieval evidence confirms that early medieval societies would organize themselves on the basic marriage contract, through which families, clans, tribes would make peaces and enlarge their economic and cultural patrimonies. Women would never travel alone: their worth was declared and reinforced by the chattel nature of the animals

they brought about to the new family, part of their dowry in some cases. Thus, animals and women were to be perceived again as close in nature and roles. It is in these centuries when the Church turns this lay practice of marriage into a sacrament first instituted by God in the Garden of Eden with animals as the only witnesses. The sacredness of procreation within marriage was thus permanently supervised by the religious institution.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the interest of recent anthropological and historical research has been focused on determining how women came to be perceived and dealt with as natural matter to be tamed and shaped through male control. As well known, philosophical, religious and scientific discourses in antiquity contributed to the rise of a gender system which responded and organized itself on the duality between the bodily and the spiritual. Whereas in the axis male/female the bodily aspects were associated to the female feature, in the more general distinction between human and animal species, the bodily as a quality was associated to the animal. Thus, the bond between the female and the animal was taken for granted and could only receive further explanation by medieval exegetes. It is quite revealing, on the one hand, that these authors needed animal skin to produce their writings; that bodily aspect --the writing on the surface of calfskin hides properly handled for parchment-- was undeniable and thus had to be transcended through abstract quality allowed by the written code. This way, the message was safely conveyed beyond its base animal skin level<sup>3</sup>. Women, in sharing the animal nearness to nature through their bodily condition (theirs was considered a failed cold and humid physiological nature, characterized by the superfluity of blood and lacking in heat. Menstruation, pregnancy and lactation as biological contingencies marked their closeness to nature's cycles and elements) were also worked out by these early authors as the base matter, the body, on which the spiritual male principle was to be stamped, incised, written down, dictated, and from which it would transcend. Thus, women at large were symbolically portrayed as the skin, parchment, the paper, or the covering of the hidden spiritual principle which was contained in and departed from it. Theirs was the realm of the superficial, of the cosmetic. Having been created after men (according to the Priestly version of the Creation), their secondary duplicitous behavior, as well as their intellectual incapacity became a given. However discouraging

this picture, Christianity offered some degree of flexibility in its description of the gender system, by creating a divide not between the bodily and the spiritual but between the fleshly and the spiritual. Thus, it was the principle of the flesh that had to be avoided or transcended; the body itself could now become the site for virtues and divine power, as confirmed by the cult of relics. Women could, thus, be endowed with the capacity to transcend the principle of flesh without having to renounce to their bodily or spiritual qualities. Could animals do the same? If women could transcend base animal instincts in order to reach the divine, could animals transcend as well their mere chattel nature and be considered somehow as human?<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that the process through which women and animals were allowed into unexpected degrees of resourcefulness and responsibility responds to the rise of a new appreciation of nature that took place by the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3

One of the issues pointed out by philosophers who have dealt with “the question of the animal” is the fact that the concept itself refers under a single homogenous heading to a huge variety of creatures; Regan talks of the rights and values of animals, Singer of their capacity as sentient beings... Due to the tremendous differential scope in their relationship with human beings, animals in their endless diversity have been perceived according to those distances as symbolically standing for human diversity itself. This is what fables have reflected traditionally: the particularity of each animal in a precise situation, leading us to learn from the moral but also to measure the difference between ourselves and those who would behave like the animal. To this basic attitude that suggests the possibility of some degree of intimacy with the other we share our space with, a more scientific and detached approach to animals was carried out by the authors of the allegorical 2<sup>nd</sup> century treatises known as “The Physiologus”, which turned into handbooks for the knowledge of animal behavior (Hassig). By the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries collections of descriptions of animals or bestiaries were popularized, together with those of fables, and became educational tools in the learning of rhetoric. Thus, through literature and language, both in the religious and the secular spheres, ranging from the popular to the allegorical and scientific levels, animals had access to the human world

not only as providers of basic raw materiality but as carriers of abstract meanings.

This greater visibility was the consequence of a wider and more sensitive appraisal of the material world. The fact that a woman, Marie de France, wrote fables along with love lays, or that Franciscan preachers used as many as 311 fables in their *exempla* reveals a new will to listen to and speak for nature and its creatures. These were, of course, animals, but also women. Precisely it is by the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the celebration of Christ's most female side --his capacity to suffer and endure bodily pain at the cross through love of his creatures--is echoed in secular literary circles by the rise of the courtly love model. If courtly ladies are treated into the language of adoration, mystic women will soon reproduce this discourse of love in their dialogues with the divinity, attaining an unheard of degree of popularity. If love and sentiment --so far ignored-- are being taken into account as part of a human and divine nature, in philosophical debates and legal procedures the notion of individual intention will be equally significant. Thus, this 12<sup>th</sup> century humanism does bring into account feeling and intention, and proves unable to keep animals away from the effects of this revolution. This tendency had a wide repercussion among the scholastic circles, which started to interpret the Aristotelian legacy on the types of souls of animals along with the Pauline dictums. Questions about the meaning of the animal presence to Christ's birth, for instance, led to concerns such as whether they could resurrect and go to heaven, or whether they should be allowed to rest on Sunday, and this attitude developed into an interest in their moral condition. It was customary that humans were held responsible for the actions of animals of their property<sup>5</sup>; by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, however, animals were being held responsible before the law for their own behavior (Salisbury), and we count as many as 93 cases of criminal proceedings against them. Michel Pastoreau comments on the famous trials to pigs; certainly it is in these most dramatic stances where the stunning capacity of medieval authors and judges for analogy leads us into questioning their appraisal of the diversity of limits they were dealing with.<sup>6</sup>

4

Whereas the discourse we first associate to nature today is that of science, during the Middle Ages nature was conceived as the mirror where human beings were supposed to

read God's will and to measure and tell their own flaws; that is, the discourse associated to it was a moral one, lying on exegetical and literary traditions. Therefore, through the animal examples a huge moral typology would emerge. The limits among the different animal types were as ambiguous as those pertaining the human conduct itself. In the prologue to her tale to the Canterbury pilgrims, Chaucer's female character, the wife of Bath, presents herself being nightly nagged by her husband's reading of misogynous stories. The wife of Bath demands to him: "who painted the lion, tell me who? had women written the stories, they would have fared differently" (WBP, ls. 692 ff).<sup>7</sup> Well aware of the existence of anthropocentric and androcentric intellectual frames, she compares the female impossibility to interpret the world to that of animals to have it changed. If it was all a question of interpretation, as she claims, how were animals and women measured, how did they meet their ends, where did their ends meet?

As said before, the common fabric onto which animals and female humans had been outlined was no other than flesh, the basic material condition accounting for the biological need for food or sex. Whereas some authors underline the life-giving quality of animals in the form of food as a primary source of their relation with the human realm, others stress the opposite picture, the human fear of being devoured by beasts as the trigger of such process. Some of the radical ecofeminists would link the latter to a cultural drive reflecting the male need to organize social structures on the bases of violence.<sup>8</sup>

The connections between the eating habits and the sexual practices of these societies is quite revealing of the deep bond between animals and women. It is in eating and in sexual intercourse where the frontiers between the bodies are eroded and become invisible, where the dangers to bring the too different or too similar natures together bring about impurity and pollution. Hounds, for instance, were allowed to eat from the entrails of the hunted animal they had helped to chase; should any person dip some bread in the blood of the noble piece once it had been tasted by the dogs, he would be contaminating his nature with the canine one. Similarly, the custom of eating in a reclined position after the Roman style was soon abandoned since it would degrade people to the beastly four-legged closeness to the ground. Of course, of all of these prescriptions, the most general one occupied fasting



regulations –in coincidence with the earthly agricultural cycles-- since it would be clear both to the religious and the lay population that the ingestion of animal flesh would alter the quality of the person's nature.

As for women, their fleshly condition would be confirmed by their avowed lust, dealt with through the vocabulary of hunger (the best example being the topic of the *vagina dentata*, which speaks the male fear of being devoured sexually);<sup>9</sup> but if women were regarded as ferocious insatiable devourers, through pregnancy, however, their body would turn into a life giving organism which in return offered itself as food and clothing to the unborn one, in a basic analogy to the animal uses (Caroline Bynum).<sup>10</sup>

This enigmatic quality of motherhood was privileged in the portrayal of Christ having received his fleshly nature completely and exclusively from a woman; Christ's humanity was thus bound to the female character at large, and the god's capacity for humiliation and feminization caused a mirror refraction attitude whereby on the whole femininity came to symbolize humankind in its relationship with the divinity; thus, in the eyes of such visionaries as St Francis, animals and humans and all the elements in nature formed a all-embracing brother/sisterhood. The mystics were the ones who best expressed the symbiotic process among the different creatures in nature. When humanity sees itself as female, animals are equally restored to grace. It is then when the medieval symbolic training will incorporate the animal icons massively. Notwithstanding these promising intersections and gender distortions, or maybe precisely because of the scary dissolution of strict frontiers, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards just as animals start to receive further attributes, they start being thrown beyond the limits of the natural towards the unnatural regions. At the rise of an increasingly individualistic and persecuting attitude in this society, the reaction against such tolerance reached animals and women alike. Once more, their reciprocity was reinforced, now in the shape of the monstrous liaison.<sup>11</sup> Shildrick's statement can be most pertinent for the situation we refer to: "The animal is the other in the comforting guise of absolute difference, but in its lack of humanity it cannot appeal directly to the heart of our own being. Those monsters that are at least in an ambivalent relationship to humanity, however, are always too close for comfort. They invoke vulnerability". (20) This is precisely what monsters stood for in this fragmentary

medieval world. After the ancient and biblical legacies, these authors elaborated further on the notion of the monstrous races that inhabited the uncivilized parts of the planet; just as with animals, excessive, defective or mixed hybrid misconception would be the basis of the perception of the other, the fruit of the human fantasy of a realm where animals and humans could belong together. Again here, the female capacity to gestate was the key to a monstrous nature, pregnancy itself being the icon of a body containing an-other, a monstrous sight; just as monstrous as the unicorn that could only rest –though not safely—on a maiden's lap. Along with the proliferation of fantastic animals during the late Middle Ages, some of the regular almost familiar beasts were also marked as signs of a possible oddness. It's the case of goats or cats, natural preys of the devil's embodiment and the most popular incarnations of the bond between beasts and witches.

5

In the survey just offered we've been able to guess the difficulty in deciding the degree of anthropocentrism found in the Middle Ages. There was a culture that did not preclude deformed babies from being born and becoming the sign of God's will and of occult realities; one that enacted the ceremonies and rites through which the human being could at times play the role of the animal, as well attested in the study of Carnavalesque and other dramatic habits. The centuries that followed would disallow any expression of closeness between the human and animal natures, and in fact, most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical approaches to the question of the animal depart, not so much from the concern with the animal condition as with that for the degradation of the human one. Since dealing with the wide range of standpoints from which the issue has been presented would be impossible, let me just point out that some of the most insightful modern contributions try to delve into the logics of the principle of opposition in order to perceive the nuances and permeability that such operation may offer. Despite the temporal gap, these authors' will to trespass the binary set system reminds of the late medieval mystic transcendental depictions of an open world, the ethics of the vulnerable, or the visions of becomingness, where the hybrid quality of the endless set of transformations is operated upon the new species. Maybe the postmodern transformation of the modern subject has fostered this new

interest in merging genders and species respectively; let's remember that it is usually alleged that during the medieval centuries this subject was just being born... Whatever the roads, these wide landscapes are the ones vindicated by ecofeminist movements (Gates 2010: 175).

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1 From its very inception in historiographic discourse, the Middle Ages have been presented as the uneven, irregular, imperfect amalgam of former and incompatible elements, such as the Classical, the Germanic, the Celtic or the Christian ones. They were, therefore, the hybrid awkward breed of such matings, and thus, incapable of any healthy achievement. Labeled after its position in between two glorious moments of history, these dark centuries stand as an ominous reminder of humankind's liability to fall easily into superstition, barbaric cruelty, simple-mindedness and social injustice.

2 Keeping to the household space seems an exclusive doom for wives and mothers; however, in the Middle Ages even those women that did not participate in the dynamics of biological reproduction –namely, nuns-- were supposed to surround themselves by the symbolic protection of the convent. A whole discourse of enclosure (Shari Horner) developed in the early Middle Ages, focused on describing female virginity as the only way to attain the primeval condition of humankind. In avoiding the animal bodily demands, these virgins achieved instead a kind of spiritual fertility that projected itself as prosperity for the community. In sacrificing sexuality and personal fecundity for the sake of the spiritual cause, the virgin woman enacted symbolically the possibility for humankind to return to paradise (Sara Salih 2001: 22). Kept within the cloister walls, the virgin herself symbolized the integrity of her body and of the Edenic myth she stood for. In many of the lives of early ascetic saints, desert animals, like the lion, are brought into the narrative in order to emphasize that human capacity to overcome the beastly earthly bodily element. In these hagiographies the wildest animals recognize the superior human nature of the saint, precisely through his or her rejection of the flesh. The virginity model was thus one of the most powerful instruments through which medieval women could evade some of the gender constraints –namely, marriage and procreation- although in return for the duty of keeping to their cell. The imposition of enclosure was a gradual process, since the early Church was ready to accept women in apostolic roles, thus allowing them to travel so as to organize monastic houses which would comprise, for instance, the assistance to pilgrims or ill people. In fact, much of the female correspondence in the early medieval centuries refers to the travel experience.

3 Even within this code, the letter itself, the *littera*, was perceived as too close to the animal material, too easy to read and touch; thus the literal had to be transcended, be brought into the abstract through the diverse levels of reading described by the exegetes (Potkay & Evitt).

4 When looking again at the calendars and their harmonious picture of the world, nature stands as a symbol for the divine comprehensive world order, the so called “great chain of being”. According to Christopher Manes, Renaissance humanism transformed that vision of nature in favor of one in which the human being was superior to the natural world; the latter underwent a process of mechanical and scientific discernment and exploitation. As part of nature, the consideration of animals lowered to the extent of them being regarded devoid of any sense of pain or suffering, part of a machine. Descartes represents best this modern stance (DeGrazia).

5 Salisbury reminds how these owners would be punished accordingly, by receiving some kind of humiliating symbolic treatment that reduced them to the animal level.

6 Some of the animals accused of murder were put to jail and judged, paraded in human clothes around the village, tortured and publicly executed. Such was the case of the Falaise swine, guilty of having killed a baby while his father slept. All the regular judicial proceedings were observed except that of offering ecclesiastical confession. On general cases against wild animals or plagues, the procedure will be that of ex-communication, whereas in those of bestialism, the indictment will reach both the human and the animal involved in the crime.

7 This quote echoes Aesop's fable where a lion, looking at a painting which represented another lion killed by a man, protests that had it been painted by a lion, the picture would have referred to the hunting of the human being instead.

8 According to Alicia Puleo (2001: 135), Mary Daly's proposal in *Gyn/Ecology* was the return to nature precisely because culture was but a sign of the cult to death performed by androcentric patriarchal societies. In referring to the “origin stories” concocted by anthropologists, Donna Haraway reports her suspicion about the figure of man-the-hunter as created by them: “(...) it defined a biologically determined being whose ‘natural’ behavior served as the foundation of culture. It is hardly a coincidence that the act of killing was what established the superiority of man over animal and that the value of such behavior was naturalized and exalted

(1989:5).

9 In his taxonomy of the body monstrous, David Williams states: “The figure of the *vagina dentata* is the most overt identification of sex with eating, eating with sex, in which both acts, fundamental to life itself, become life’s destruction. Mircea Eliade sees the vagina monster as the sign of the regression to the womb, and his investigation and analysis of initiation rites reveals the symbolic presence of the vagina dentate everywhere within the ceremonies having to do with symbolic death and return to the womb and rebirth: ‘The return implies the risk of being torn to pieces in the monster’s jaws (or the *Vagina dentata* of Mother Earth) and of being digested in its belly’.” (p. 165)

10 The same reason accounts for images in which female animals swallow human beings, as happens with whales or sea creatures in general, symbolically associated to the female liquid nature.

11 Antiquity had of course provided the most lasting examples of hybrid creatures which we still may find in many of our popular legends all over the world; in most of them, the male character is transformed into an animal or shares some beastly feature with them, or else can understand their particular language. In wondering why these metamorphoses or hybrid identities don’t affect female characters in the same degree, the only answer I can find is that the meeting of the animal and the female traits in the same person would be redundant, since both share the same fundamental nature and thus there would be no significant progress in the action; it would be more meaningful, thus, for a male character to undergo and overcome his transformation into an animal than it would be for a female one.