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Loving beasts

Susan Wiseman

> the crowing Cockrell helpes his Hen to defend her Chickens from perill, and will indanger himselfe to save her and them from harme. Seeing then that these unreasonable creatures, by the instinct of nature, beare such affection each to other, that without any grudge, they willingly, according to their kind, helpe one another, I may reason Ã minore ad maius, that much more should man and woman, which are reasonable creatures, be helpers each to other in all things lawfull[1]

So Rachel Speght defends marriage against the ‘woman-hater’, Joseph Swetnam. Speght assumes the affections of beasts as a simple starting point to argue from a small example of action to what ought to be the case in marriage; animal affection stands as a certainty beside debated human love. Yet what writing on general cultural matters takes for granted – that animals have affection, communication and, implicitly, love, some of the philosophical discourses of the seventeenth century spent much energy denying and unpicking. How, then, can we consider ‘love’ in the relationships amongst humans and beasts in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Anglophone culture?

This posture considers the potential for the category of love to form a part of our understanding of the human-beast relationship. As a category, the relationships of ‘love’ that Speght’s allegory takes for granted were deeply contested within philosophical debates on the human – and for some animal affection disappeared alongside the contested categories of the soul, thought, reason and language.[2]

Animal-human relationships were central to the writing of Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne begins by considering the human animal's pride 'that he ascribeth divine conditions unto himselfe', and challenges human insistence on separation from the animal to suggest 'paraitie':[3]

> How knoweth he by the vertue of his understanding the inward and secret motions of beasts? By what comparison from them to us doth he conclude the brutishness he ascribeth unto them?[4]

Montaigne acknowledges the beast as having an unknowable interior, present in interactions with humans but out of their grasp. He goes further to imply that true comparison with regard to brutishness might yield the opposite answer from the human prejudice against the beast. He does not directly address the subject of love but, famously, of play asking, '[w]hen I am playing with my Cat, who knowes whether she have more sporte in dallying with me, than I have in gaming with hir? We entertaine one other with mutuall apish trickes.'[5] Montaigne implies not only agency but reciprocity and potentially at least a current of mutual affection between human and cat. While eschewing the topic of love explicitly, he implies throughout that affection is bound up with relationships amongst companion species and does explicitly raise animal to animal 'kindness'. Writing of the question of language, Montaigne argues that animals can communicate not only with their own kind, as cats with cats and so on, but 'even of such as are of different kindes'.[6] However, it is not only if the animal can vocalise that it can communicate for '[ev]ven in beasts that have no voice at all, by the reciprocall kindnesse which we see in them' we know that they can communicate. Crucially, he attributes to them 'love' and 'friendship'.[7] Thus Montaigne proposes an animal richly capable of at least what was regarded in the Renaissance as affection and love to each other.[8] Montaigne appreciates animal companionship and implies that language in animal takes a form that indicates they have feelings for others. For contemporaries, Montaigne's writing became a touchstone in claiming the animal as an affective participant.

René Descartes made language key to recognition of the human and denied it to beasts. In doing so, he also challenged Montaigne's understanding of animals as feeling. He writes to a correspondent:

> As for brute animals, we are so used to believing that they have feelings like us that it is hard to rid ourselves of that opinion. Yet suppose we were equally used to seeing automatons which perfectly imitated every one of our actions that it is possible to imitate; suppose, further, that we never took them for more than automatons; in this case we should be in no doubt that all the animals which lack reason were automatons too.[9]

In order to deny that an animal has feelings, Descartes here resorts to an elaborate analogy to defamiliarise the animal and establish a similarity with automata through the lack of reason. For Jacques Derrida, our impoverished conception of both human and animal others is a consequence of the making of this debased, Cartesian, animal-automaton.[10] Moreover, as Erica Fudge notes, Christianity's hierarchisation of humans and animals meant many writers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England relied on the inferior status of animals to guarantee the 'human'.

However, beyond philosophy lay a culture where not only did many humans closely co-habit with animals but, for some, their status and success was bound up with animal well-being.[11] Sixteenth-century advice to purchase alert cattle that 'stare nat and that hee lycke' themselves and the sheer number of horse-related workers in the Duke of Newcastle's stables show us the detail with which humans related to livestock.[12] Moreover, Descartes' very acknowledgement of the prevailing assumption that animals have ‘feelings’ invites us to look for love in other kinds of texts, like those of Speght.

Animal feelings are pervasive in Renaissance culture. In allegories and in imagining emotions as embodied, Renaissance writers and readers use animal-human hybrids (like the centaur) to express human states, implying an imaginary correlation of human and animal states.[13] Mutual affection as well as civic and familial virtue is implied in the presence of canine companions in tomb monuments.[14] Moreover, as Karen Raber also notes, such blending was given explicit connections to love, as in Sir Philip Sidney’s investigation of himself as love’s horse, in whose ‘Manage I do take delight.’[15] ‘[C]herrishing’ words of reward to a horse spoken ‘smoothly and lovingly’ impart ‘cheerfulnesse of spirit, and a knowledge that he hath done wel’, Gervase Makham tells us, implying intimacy, care and even love between beast and human. [16]

The Renaissance, then, may not offer us many philosophical texts in which we can identify animals as having capacity to love and be loved. However, if we look beyond philosophy, many texts that sometimes directly, sometimes paradoxically, assume or imply what Martha Nussbaum calls the ‘capabilities’ of non-human animals to have ‘friendship and affiliation’ (and humans).[17]

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[1] Rachel Speght, *A mouzell for Melastomus* (1617), sig. D3r.

[22] See discussion Cecilia Muratori, ‘Introduction’, *The Animal Soul and the Human Mind Renaissance Debates* (Rome: Pisa, 2013), 9-26, especially 9-12.

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[3] Michel de Montaigne tran John Florio 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond' in *The Essayes* (London, 1606), p. 252-351; p. 260 [STC 18041 BL C.28.m.8].

[4] Florio, *Essayes*, p. 260

[5] Florio, *Essayes*, p. 260.

[6] Florio, *Essayes*, p. 260.

[7] Florio, *Essayes*, p. 271.

[8] Florio, *Essayes*, p. 260-272; see Charis Charalampos, *Rethinking the Mind-Body Relationship in Early Modern Literature, Philosophy and Medicine* (London, Routledge), p. 103-4

[9] René Descartes, 'To Mersenne, 30 July 1640' *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* ed John Cottingham et., al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 149. See also 'To the Marquiss of Newcastle, 21 November 1646) vol III, p. 302-4; p. 302.

[10] Jacques Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am* ed. Marie-Louise Mallet trans., David Wills ([2006] Ashland, Ohio: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[11] Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning Animals, Rationality and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 7-58; p.22.

[12] John Fitzherbert, *Boke of Husandrye* (London, 1523), eiiv; Peter Edwards, *Horses and the Aristocratic Lifestyle in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Bodell, 2018), pp. 98-99, 108-111.

[13] Karen Raber, *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 75-79. On the limitations of bestiality as an understanding of animal-human libido see Raber, *Animal*, p. 79; 85-92.

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[14] See eg Sophie Oosterwijk, ‘From Biblical Beast to faithful friend: A short note on the iconography of footrests on tombs’ in Laura D.Gelfan ed., *Our Dogs, Our Selves Dogs in Medieval and Early Modern Art, Literature and Society* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 243-260.

[15] Sonnet 49 *Astrophil and Stella – find best ed*

[16] Gervase Markham, *Country Contentments* (London, 1615) sig. Gr. I an grateful to Dr Nicole Mennell for discussion of horsemanship.

[17] Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006) on ‘capabilities’ p. 69-81 especially 76-78; p. 344 and see pp. 360; 398-9; 400-401