Reviews

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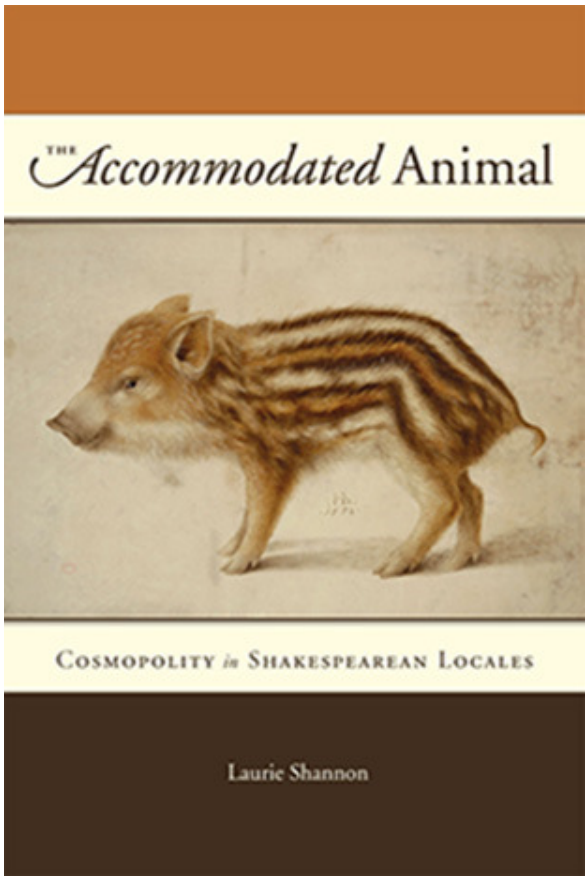
A Cat May Look Upon Descartes

Laurie Shannon. *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 290 pages. $78.00 hb; $26.00 pb; $14.49 Kindle.



There's a cat watching me write this review. Here at the American University in Cairo, where I work, the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, animals and humans, are much less formal than at American campuses and the courtyard of this building is home to an extended family of semi-tame cats. The cats occasionally wander into the little cafeteria where I'm typing, and a kitten has just hopped onto a nearby chair, idly gazing at me, occasionally licking her chops.

Laurie Shannon's *The Accommodated Animal* sits under this animal gaze, recreating it through a rich selection of early modern English texts. Shakespeare tends to make his appearances at the ends of chapters, when detailed discussions of commentaries on Genesis, bestiaries, hunting guides, political pamphlets, and philosophical dialogues lead to new (if typically brief) readings of familiar figures like *As You Like It*'s deer, "in their own confines with forked heads […] their round haunches gored" (Shakespeare 2.1.24-25), Shylock as "stranger cur" (1.3.116) in Venice, or King Lear's lament that man is a "bare, forked animal" (3.4.107), lacking the natural protections beasts bear against the elements.

Starting in the first chapter, Shannon seeks to recreate a pre-Cartesian polity, a "Zootopian Constitution" (40), grounded in the six days of creation described in Genesis. Shannon argues that the early chapters of Genesis "do not distinguish man and animal for every purpose," but rather unite them as creatures, "living artifacts of Creation in a shared status that is, at once, both contingent and stakeholding — the classic ambivalence inherent in the structure of the political subject as such" (40-41). This argument, which owes much to both Bruno Latour's "Parliament of Things" (144-45) in *We Have Never Been Modern* and Julia Reinhardt Lupton's influential article "Creature Caliban," recasts nature as politics, with human beings as just one constituency among many, surrounded by other creatures who care little for our pretensions of dominance. *Creature* is a marvelously rich term, derived from the future-active form of the Latin *creatura*, denoting, in Lupton's words, "a made or fashioned thing but with a sense of continued or potential process, action, or emergence" (1). The term thus links humans, animals, and other created things in a great drama of continual emergence. Shannon notes that in all of Shakespeare's works, "animal" appears only eight time, while "beast" appears 141 times and "creature" 127 times (9). Shannon argues, "before the *cogito*, there was nothing exactly comparable to "*the* animal" (9). While I believe Shannon is positing far too sharp an epistemological break here, I appreciate the distinction she makes. Her early modern world is populated by creatures, not animals, and those creatures exercise cosmopolitan rights of their own.

Many of these creatures are cats, and the power of a cat's indifferent gaze to puncture fantasies of superiority is repeatedly invoked. Cats look upon their humans in Michel de Montaigne's "Apologie for Raymond Sebond,"and Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the essays from which *The Accommodated Animal* departs. In John Florio's translation, Montaigne asks, "When I am playing with my cat, who knows whether she have more sport in dallying with me, than I have in gaming with her?" (399). Derrida stands naked before the irreducible peculiarity of his own "real cat, truly, believe me, *a*

little cat" (6), and uses this encounter to argue that Montaigne's "Apologie" is "one of the greatest pre- or anti-Cartesian texts on the animal" (6). Descartes, and his reduction of animals to mere *bête-machines* in *The Discourse on Method,* is Shannon's great adversary, the devil in the garden, whose promises of human exceptionalism led to the fall of Zootopia, the cleaving of the mind from the body, and the negation of animal reason, emotion, and desire. Building on Derrida in chapter four, Shannon positions Montaigne as the anti-Descartes, lamenting that the "Apologie" "is barely known, while the Cartesian motto, 'I think therefore I am' has proven to be staggeringly durable" (186). Shannon attempts to imagine a modern world in which Montaigne, rather than Descartes, defined humanity's relationship to animals, pulling human beings into "the generall throng" (406) of creatures, rather than endorsing the "foolish-hardiness and self-presumining obstinacie" of "sequester[ing] ourselves from their condition and society" (186). The cat watches Descartes write that she is a mere machine, and dismisses him with an indifferent gaze.

Shannon crafts this creaturely counterhistory from zootropic texts that cast human beings as ill-suited interlopers in an animal world. In Shannon's hands, these obscure texts become delights. Chapter three uses Giovanni Battista Gelli's 1549 *La Circe*, a series of dialogues in which Ulysses tries and fails to convince the animals of Circe's island to return to their former, human forms, to recast Lear's lament that "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.105-07) as awareness of the animal virtues denied to human beings. The second chapter takes its title from Anthony Weldon's 1652 republican pamphlet *A Cat May Look Upon a King*, whose frontispiece (pictured below), skewers the absolutist pretensions of James I with the sublimely bored gaze of the cat on the facing page. Beneath James' portrait sits a list of epithets for monarchs beginning with Henry VIII. This litany descends the great chain of being from divine "*Mars*" to James' sinister "*VULPES*" (fox), his son Charles I's "*Leo*," and ending in "*Nullus*," naming a republican future with no monarchs, only a great commonwealth of creatures in which human beings get no special status.

We get a possible model for this republic in chapter four, where Shannon describes the early modern night as a frontier beyond human rule. In its place, we find a nocturnal commonwealth of cats, described in William Baldwin's 1570 prose thriller Beware the Cat. Baldwin's protagonist, Streamer, having dosed himself with pills, poultices, and potions made from pieces of a cat, a hare, a kite, a fox, and a hedgehog, finds himself able to understand the languages of animals. His once-quiet home is suddenly unbearably loud, as his newly sensitive ears are assaulted by the

> Barking of dogs, grunting of hogs, wawling of cats, rumbling of rates, gaggling of geese, humming of bees, rousing of bucks, crowing of cocks, sewing of socks, cackling of hens, scabbling of pens, peeping of mice, trulling of dice, curling of frogs, and toads in the bogs, chirking of crickets, shutting of wickets, shirking of owls, flittering of fowls, routing of knaves, snorting of slaves, farting of churls, fizzling of girls, with many things else. (208)

Augmented cognition reveals a world much richer and more populous than previously believed. With his new ears, Streamer eavesdrops on a moonlit court of cats, gathered to

hear charges against one "Mouse-slayer," whose testimony reveals a cat culture that both reflects and diverges from the daylight human culture. The cat empire stretches across England and Ireland; its monarch rules by both "inheritance and our own election"; and features a "perversely feline," to use Shannon's term, "law for adultery," forbidding females from refusing "any males not exceeding the number of ten in a night" (209). Against this orderly night-republic, Baldwin contrasts the nocturnal humiliations of humans maladapted to the dark. Bumps in the night send the denizens of a brothel screaming outdoors and collapsing into naked heaps in the street, their clothes — which, as King Lear knew in his madness, are mere "lendings" from animals anyway (3.4.107) — left behind to reveal how unsuited humans are to the world they live in.

The sun starts to set on Zootopia in chapter five, as Shannon charts the movement of animals, over the course of the seventeenth century from a realm of law they shared, at least partially, with humans, to the realm of scientific experimentation. If the cat serves as Shannon's symbol of cosmopolitan indifference to human claims of superiority, the dog serves as the unfortunate victim of the enforcement of those claims. This reflects Shakespeare, who tended to use the dog as a figure for "revulsion and violent ejection from human company" (241). Shylock is a "stranger cur" (1.3.116) in Venice and "A staff is quickly found to beat a dog" (*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.171). Tracing the history of the expression "hang-dog look," Shannon describes the legal trials, and hangings, of misbehaving dogs in the early seventeenth century and the dogs cut open alive or suffocated in vacuum chambers in the scientific theaters of the late seventeenth century. Drawing again on Latour, and on Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's *The Leviathan and the Air Pump*, Shannon argues that "In the spectacles of vivisection and the air pump, creatures were endlessly cast for seventeenth-century audiences as the 'machines' they allegedly already were" (226). The dog's old legal status, however tenuous it was, dissolved, leaving it gasping to death in an airless class jar before assembled human beings. It's a chilling portrait of modernity.

Shannon's decidedly political approach to the problem of the early modern animal has its limits. Her descriptions of a pre-Cartesian Zootopia sometimes seem to forget that animals were not treated so well by before Descartes, either. A just commonwealth of humans and animals has been imagined, but never existed. The literary scholar's

emphasis on shifts in language can also be misleading, as the medievalist Karl Steele notes in his own review of *The Accommodated Animal*:

> But in their concentration on words and terms, literary scholars perhaps more than others risk the danger of strong Whorfianism, whose cure is close attention to practices rather than texts, if this precritical distinction can be momentarily allowed. While medieval and early modern people had no singleword corresponding to animals, they nonetheless still treated humans with a respect or at least pleasure afforded nothing else.

While Shannon's contrast between Montaigne and Descartes is highly productive, she perhaps makes too much of the epistemological break between them. The language used to discuss animals changed, gradually, but human practices toward animals changed little over the course of the seventeenth century.

But these are minor caveats. *The Accommodated Animal* offers us the chance to look back on the early modern era and its literature with cat's eyes, and the new perspective alone is worthwhile. Like the medicines applied by the protagonist of Beware the Cat, Shannon's book opens our eyes and ears a little wider, making us aware of the barking, grunting, chirping, mewling commonwealth that was always already around us.

The kitten has grown bored with me and wandered away. It's now curled up asleep on another chair across the room, blissfully indifferent to the people around it, confident that this world belongs to it.

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