

## Not a Conclusion to Gender and Species, Ecofeminist Intersections

Lesley Kordecki

THE 2017 KALAMAZOO ROUNDTABLE that initiated this cluster of essays drew a room filled with young and older scholars anxious to see how these considerable, not to say trendy, categories of gender and species might be negotiated by medievalists. Presiding over the session, I was happy to see the expectant faces and to hear the differing approaches of the colleagues whose work resulted in this collection of essays. It's safe to say that we are not yet at the point of delineating a consistent methodology for medieval or early modern ecofeminist analysis, and this may be a good thing, but we need to move forward analyzing species with the help of the more overt example of gender hierarchies all around us and all around writers from centuries ago. A lack of policy never before stopped wily and determined thinkers and certainly should not stop medievalists.

Some years ago in a bookstore in Toronto, I happened upon a new study by Val Plumwood entitled *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1994). Her philosophical tenets, generated out of a desire to expose the dominant binaries that reduce the spectrum of Western understanding, made great sense. At the risk of sounding trite, especially in light of many profound subsequent studies of ecofeminism, this book made me “turn the corner” and see both streets as one. I was studying animals in medieval texts, but the persistent “mastery” of the animal relentlessly paralleled antifeminist measures to master women in the patriarchy. Ecofeminism teaches that women and nature, especially that part of nature most startlingly embodied in the form of animals, are analogously

perceived and oppressed in our society. And we can learn much from this likeness; indeed, we cannot avoid it, if we are honest. The juncture of these two transepts is not simply an attempt to fuse in literary criticism two provocative methodologies, feminism and critical animal studies, although it somewhat does do that. The confluence reveals the world, and thereby the world of the text, as ineluctably driven by linked, less visible, and often uncomfortable impulses.

In her Introduction to this collection,Carolynn Van Dyke relates how some fear that the feminist movement may be losing steam in medieval inquiry, but she also adds that “to see from women’s perspectives is to see more completely and more clearly.” Here we have a perfect case. We have diminished the nonhuman in so many arenas (e.g., philosophical, biological, literary) that it is difficult to see the category outside of our cultural bias, a bias that needs to prioritize the human in an attempt to legitimize our often pathetic defense of human exceptionalism. Probing the relationship between gender and species, as these essays show, is not a choice, but a necessity. Our study of earlier eras requires this prefatory acknowledgment. Happily, our unpacking of the phenomenon in literature is not just to lament destructive reductions, but to see how some writers attempted centuries ago to escape from them. So we see that it “has to be about women,” since our culture is constructed with crucial ramifications for both gender and species.

As these essays reveal, early texts are not always what we think or have learned to think from our private readings, from classrooms, and from journals. Hence, the wife of a werewolf in Marie de France’s poem can be seen to shade the symbolic hierarchies of male and female, and human and animal, destabilizing our assumptions. Even in the common representation of the human female as a bird, a ubiquitous ecofeminist icon, we learn that the gender of the falconer turns the symbol on its head. And just as procreative and maternal authority can slyly undermine the traditional equations for an owl and a nightingale, we entertain the notion that Chaucer’s Canacee can usefully be seen as radically avian. Further, if we parse conventional definitions of medieval beasts, we are heartened to find that all animals can be, and unexpectedly were, more gynocentrically re-presented if a woman like Hildegard of Bingen is the representer. As a cautionary note, the union of women and nature

may not always fall into pat and kindly formulae, if we prod the early modern sensibilities of a poem by Aemilia Lanyer. Clearly, we have to be on our toes.

The broader concerns of ecofeminism are not period specific, but our particular piece in the puzzle will be an essential foundation. One example is that international literary scholars of assorted specialties are involved in discovering what speculative fiction can tell us about ecofeminist alignments. Since many now seriously question the kind of cultural stereotyping that believes that our society is hardwired to see women and animals as lesser, we rejoice in the possibilities that such stories provide. Science fiction can challenge these oppressions in lively and imaginative maneuvers, revealing what may be Earth's legacy but not necessarily her destiny. And the literature from our early centuries can point the way, unmasking dual oppressions, true, but also optimistic chinks in the adjoining walls of misogyny and speciesism.

*DePaul University*