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Peggy McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2017. x + 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). 9-780226458922.

Review by Jonathan Morton, King's College London.

Over the past ten years the field of medieval studies in the Anglophone world has seen a significant increase in studies of literature that take as their subject the relationship between humans and other animals. More specifically, a series of books have been published that draw on modern continental philosophy to show ways in which literature can destabilize or disturb apparently settled categories, in particular the privileged human distinction as a rational animal. Recent monographs by Susan Crane (*Animal Encounters*), Karl Steel (*How to Make a Human*), Miranda Griffin (*Transforming Tales*), and Sarah Kay (*Animal Skins and the Reading Self*) have drawn in various ways on the work of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Lacan, and Giorgio Agamben to open up new and exciting ways of thinking about animal-literature and literature about animals. [1]

Peggy McCracken's *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* must be read as part of this trend of medieval literary studies which demonstrates that the ways in which medieval people thought or dreamed about animals, monsters, and hybrids goes to the heart of their ideas about humanity, subjectivity, gender, power, and society. Taking as its principal subject works of literature written in Old French, it is an important and valuable work of scholarship. It situates itself in dialogue with earlier interventions while offering a new insight into medieval ideologies of power, especially those conjured up by the modern term sovereignty and its Old French cousin-words, *seigneurie* and *maistrise* (p 5).

Composed of an impressively wide-ranging selection of texts, closely read with dexterity and intelligence, McCracken argues "that literary representations of encounters between animals and humans figure an interrogation of the forms of legitimate dominion and sovereignty over others, both human dominion over nonhuman animals and the power of some humans over others" (p. 3). The methodological principle is that such questions are "debated in encounters between humans and animals in which relations of mastery and submission are at stake" (p. 2). This inquiry raises the following question, which is of great importance for the study of medieval culture and thought through the analysis of literary works: what kind of thinking is done through the kinds of fantastical, fabulous, or fictional texts that are particularly named by the modern category of literature? If questions such as sovereignty are debated in literary texts, what is the nature of that debate, so different to the debates of the medieval schools and universities? McCracken's work seems to me to raise such questions, which I will consider after a presentation of its contents.

One of the most striking things about *In the Skin of a Beast* is the sheer range of its scope, considering both the most famous texts of what might broadly be called medieval French animal-literature – the *fables* and *lais* of Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier au lion* (*The Knight of the Lion*) – and more obscure texts whose interest McCracken makes abundantly clear. The book is elegantly structured, allowing it to

move into wider medieval thought and frequently to engage with modern theory. McCracken's overarching move, to think carefully about sovereignty and what it might mean, allows her to pick out moments in these texts and to look at them from a fresh angle, showing their value for understanding medieval thinking and modern theory.

Chapter 1 considers the relationship between the domination of animals, sanctioned for medieval culture by the book of Genesis, and the display of power, both over animals and other humans, through what McCracken productively terms "technologies of sovereignty." A technology of sovereignty is the use of animals to serve human needs "that constructs an essential relationship between human survival and animal slaughter" (p. 19), understood in relation to the Foucauldian concept of "biopolitics" (p. 29). Unlike Foucault, medieval people saw such domination as essential after the loss of human perfection that came with the Fall. Building on recent work by Kay and Griffin, McCracken considers the skinning of animals for the making of clothes and the parchment on which medieval texts were written in relation to political sovereignty by drawing on episodes in the *Conte du papegau* and on the strange *Roman des romans*. The *Conte du papegau's* monstrous Fish-Knight, whose armor is also its skin, is flayed so that its skin is "the material for a symbolic display of sovereignty" (p. 27). The speaking animals in the moralizing poem *Le roman des romans* criticize the technology of sovereignty that is the removal of their skin for human clothes. These imagined reproaches are read as opening up a "space of resistance" (p. 36) to the technology of sovereignty that puts them to death.

Chapter 2 reads a series of narratives of wolves in the alternative creation stories told in the *Roman de Renart*, in the long version of the bestiary ascribed to Pierre de Beauvais, in saint's narratives of the domestication of wolves, and, finally, in Marie de France's famous werewolf-*lai*, *Bisclavret*. In all these cases, the wolf is understood as the ultimate sign of wildness, the undomesticated animal, and stories of its taming are used, in McCracken's analysis, to understand feudal relationships of dominion, "an affective relationship desired by animals that live under human mastery" that "extend[s] these ways of envisioning governance to human interdependence" (p. 38). These texts, then, "redefine sovereignty as an elective, affective relationship, seen in relation to animals" (p. 67).

Chapter 3 takes on Chrétien's *Chevalier au lion*, read against the extraordinary fourteenth-century *Guillaume de Palerne*, in which the two young protagonists dress in bear-skins and then deer-skins to live as semi-feral hybrids before being rehabilitated to claim lordship. Both romances recount how a knight passes through a symbolic animality allowing him to achieve a sovereignty, strongly gendered, that entails the ability to protect and defend dominions. Yvain, the hero of the *Chevalier au lion*, loses his identity, living wild before being tamed and then, in turn, taming a lion who serves as his domesticated companion. The lion also becomes Yvain's heraldic emblem, a sign of his becoming-animal. McCracken brings new light to this well-studied text, in particular through the subtle analysis of his fight against the giant Harpin and through the close reading of manuscript illuminations, a repeated strength throughout the book.

Chapter 4 turns to gender, self-sovereignty, and recognition, looking particularly at the Genesis narrative of the Fall and Eve's relationship to the serpent, which in one medieval tradition mirrors her face the better to seduce her. In a striking and satisfying analysis, McCracken sees Eve's desire for knowledge as a desire for what she terms "self-sovereignty." After an analysis of the early mystery play the *Jeu d'Adam*, attention shifts to the power-relations of gender as they relate to animality in the analysis of two romances featuring hybrid snake-women, the *Roman de Mélusine* and *Le bel inconnu*. While Eve's claim to self-sovereignty through the promise of a snake leads to the permanent disaster of the Fall, the romance shows that the snake-women of romance, though themselves occupying sovereign positions, can only enter the state of becoming-human through the salvific agency of a man. Much work has been done on the understanding of sexuality and gender through animality in medieval thought, especially by Joan Cadden (*Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages; Nothing Natural is Shameful*).<sup>[2]</sup> McCracken shows the importance of the imaginary for thinking about how such pressure points of gender emerge in literature.

Building on Griffin's analysis of ideas of female monstrosity in medieval culture, she brings out the horror and its subsequent sublimation of *Le bel inconnu's* scene of the *Fier Baiser* (the Proud Kiss) in which a woman transformed into a snake kisses the hero with her seductive red lips before showing signs of submission.

Chapter 5 takes as its subject wild-men, living outside of the bounds of human society and of the sovereignty of others, especially in two unusual exemplars of the Old French epic tradition, the *Naissance du chevalier au cygne* and the gargantuan, fourteenth-century *Tristan de Nanteuil*. These texts, which are becoming better known, in no small part thanks to McCracken, Griffin, and others, need lengthy exposition for a discussion of the issues at stake. They receive it in this chapter, whose principal site of interest is the forest, in which savage children, separated from human society are brought up by nurturing deer. *Tristan de Nanteuil's* eponymous protagonist, transitioning between a wild and a civilized state, raises questions about the human distinction from other animals and McCracken sees his childhood in the savage community of beasts as an "alternative model of social organization, troubling the security of dynasties grounded in part on the violent subjugation of animals to the needs, both material and symbolic, of humans" (p. 156).

A brief epilogue discusses the *Bal des Ardents* incident during which the French King Charles VI dressed up like a madman with some of his courtiers, four of whom, having been set on fire, died in a tragic, grotesque accident. In this incident, the themes that McCracken has so carefully intertwined through the book—disguise, clothing, loss of reason, the animal-human distinction, and secular power—are shown to overlap in the extra-literary world of the fifteenth-century French court.

*In the Skin of a Beast* is rich and varied work and the verve with which it puts forward its ideas is the prompt for me to consider some of the methodological or perhaps theoretical questions which it raises, which pertain to the use of literary analysis and the study of literary text for cultural and intellectual history.

First is the question of corpus. Recent works with which this one may be compared suggest geographical specificity (Susan Crane discussing medieval Britain) or a specific textual corpus (Sarah Kay analyzing the bestiary tradition). Such unity is absent here, which raises certain issues. Given that the works in question do not often signal their relationship to each, what is the rationale for their selection? The logical explanation is that they are composed in French and that this book situates itself in the domain of French literature. The book does not suggest that French literature should be a uniquely privileged site to explore these questions; McCracken's stated goal, instead, "is to insist on the repetition of motifs or characterizations that put animals and humans into contact around questions of mastery, dominion, or sovereignty" (p. 8). These works can be seen, then, as symptoms of underlying structures of thought even as they critique them. In a sense, for all that this is an extremely literary book, centered around practices of close reading, it gestures towards anthropology, medieval political theory, theology, philosophy, and social history. The links between disciplines are generally left implicit, however, rather than explicit.

McCracken makes clear her aim to understand what such appeals to animal subjects reveals about the perspectives of their human authors and audiences (p. 66). Nevertheless, this book seems to privilege the theoretical over the historical, as the title *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* suggests, deliberately recalling Derrida's late work *The Beast and the Sovereign* (*La bête et le souverain*). McCracken particularly brings out moments in which hegemonies or orthodoxies are challenged, disturbed, or troubled, and Derrida's and Agamben's writing on animals and passages from Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux* are especially useful for this operation. This raises the question of how far these texts reproduce and back up claims that are made by modern theorists and how they might allow us to rethink those theorists, who are, like the medieval readers and writers in question, historically situated. It is suggested (p. 7) that the medieval texts modify or revise some of the theoretical models used but such reconfiguring does not for the most part occur in McCracken's readings, although there are places where

it might, such as in the discussion of recognition that takes place in chapter 4. The chapter draws on Derrida's undermining of the Enlightenment claim "that values such as freedom, responsibility, and decision are associated with the human ability to respond, whereas animal reaction is seen as instinctual, hard-wired, or fixed" (p. 93). In her reading of *Guillaume de Palerne*, McCracken shows, like Derrida, that the distinction between animal reaction and human response is not stable, but she inflects the opposition between the two terms with a third: recognition. What might such a consideration of recognition in medieval texts mean for Derrida's politico-animal philosophy?

McCracken's approach is to leave the term of recognition somewhat open. At the opening of chapter 4, she chiefly defines it in relation to political theorist Patchen Markell for whom recognition "anchors sovereignty in *knowledge*" (Markell's emphasis), both knowing one's own social identity and seeing it recognized by others (p. 98). The term is then used differently to discuss a passage from Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* when the serpent makes itself like Eve so that she will be more easily tempted and then to see herself as self-sovereign. How do these two kinds of recognition relate? McCracken notes that this mirroring "suggests that Eve recognizes herself in the crowned snake's face, and that what she recognizes is the possibility of sovereign agency" (p. 107). Later in the chapter, Raymondin is said to recognize his fairy-wife Mélusine's serpent nature by naming it, publicly acknowledging something he had already known privately, and this seems again a different kind of recognition. Privileging the detailed reading of scenes over longer theoretical discussion allows the different meanings to recognition to be suspended against each other and the tightness of style allows her readers to make links, but the book itself stops short of making explicit the theoretical ideas that inform it or of advancing claims about how the works in question might allow for new theoretical claims.

This brings me back to a question raised earlier, namely around the debate that McCracken asserts as taking place in literature. Does such debate allow claims to be made or is literary debate limited to troubling established categories, leaving theoretical assertions to the domains to philosophy and theology? Medieval theology is used at times to illuminate medieval approaches to sovereignty (p. 14), although other, more secular traditions in political thought that have things to say about civilization and wildness (for example, the opening chapter of Aristotle's *Politics*), are not. If such medieval traditions of debate are left to one side, it seems productive and useful to think about how it is that literature debates.

Perhaps it is fitting that McCracken's style is more discursive than it is declarative and her work opens up questions that will be useful for scholars of medieval literature and culture, in French and in other languages, and for broader theoretical questions about the relationship between humans and other animals.

## NOTES

[1] Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture) (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011). Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Jacques Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis*, Marie-Louise Mallet, ed., (Paris: Galilée, 2006). Jacques Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, 2 vols., Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, eds., (Paris: Galilée, 2008-2010). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Minuit, 1980). Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale* (Temi), (Turin: Boringhieri, 2002).

[2] Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge History of Medicine) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *Nothing Natural is*

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*Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Jonathan Morton  
King's College London  
[jonathan.morton@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.morton@kcl.ac.uk)

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