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Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. xv + 203 pp. Plates, figures, appendix, notes, and index. \$49.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-022643673-9; \$10-\$49 (eb). ISBN 9-78-022643687-6.

Review by Cary Howie, Cornell University.

Sarah Kay's new book makes two claims that can help orient the novice reader: on the one hand, she says, early in her introduction, that she aims "to sketch a speculative phenomenology of the parchment book" (p. 3). On the other, she admits, in her conclusion, that this book is the first in English since 1962 to "attempt a review of the corpus" of medieval Latin and French bestiaries (p. 149). (The book includes, in its appendix, a "Chronology of Latin and French Bestiary Versions.") Bestiaries, in this sense, are texts, closely or loosely inspired by a tradition traceable at least to the late-antique Egyptian *Physiologus*, that at once catalog and allegorize animals (and, as Kay points out, sometimes plants and stones; p. 2). In medieval manuscripts, those depictions and interpretations of animal life themselves take place on animal stuff: the variously rendered skin out of which parchment was manufactured. Kay is particularly drawn to the ironies—and identities—implicit in the contact between a human handler and an animal page. How does our sense of allegory change when the animal it attempts to explain, and sometimes to explain away, is recalled by the flesh of the page? How do we understand and inhabit our own, or others', flesh as a result of such an encounter with the page's complexity as letter and figure, as skin that is meaningful and skin that just *is*?

Those questions are at the heart, and on the surface, of Kay's "speculative phenomenology." A reader familiar with her work will recognize the tension between these questions and the meticulously researched archival apparatus that goes along with them: at its best, this articulation of the conceptual with the philological produces moments of incredible critical *frisson*. The book is as packed as a 200-page ark: its intensity is bracing, if potentially a little overwhelming for a reader, like this one, who was being asked to learn, very quickly, what distinguished a Second Family manuscript from an H-type B-Isidore, for example; or for whom a succession of critical terms—e.g. anthropological machines, invagination, skin egos—may seem no less odd, and tantalizing, than the creatures that the bestiaries describe.

The book consists of six short chapters; an introduction; a conclusion; an appendix listing in chronological order the Latin and French bestiary versions upon which the book's argument has relied; and an astonishing number of illustrations: 28 color plates and 28 black and white reproductions from manuscripts of various degrees of illumination and various qualities of parchment.

In the introduction, “Skin, Suture, and Caesura,” Kay introduces one of her crucial insights: that frequently in bestiaries skin, human or animal, is outlined but not painted, so that it becomes “identical with the skin of the page” (p. 7). Kay is especially interested in “moments of (mis)identification that suture the reading subject to the book” (p. 17). She emphasizes that bestiaries organize “a reading experience that enfolds [the reader] in what is literally as well as metaphorically a second skin” (p. 21). The literal and the figurative—as well as what Kay will later call the realized and the represented (see p. 92)—are grafted onto one another throughout this book: like plants or, yes, like skin.

Chapter one, “Book, Word, Page,” observes, “Bestiary creatures are textual creatures” (pp. 27-8), and it is that relationship between material systems of signification (images, texts) and the “creatures” they both *are* and represent which seems crucial for the readings that follow. Kay goes on to demonstrate how bestiaries draw upon biblical as well as etymological authorities in their attempt to separate the human from the animal, a separation that, as Kay notes, eventually shows itself to be “provisional and finite” (p. 40). Along the way, a creature called a Bonnacon farts fire, and Adam and Eve, in an illumination Kay reproduces from the Northumberland Bestiary (plate 5), boast prodigious amounts of pubic hair.

Chapter two, “Garments of Skin,” begins with an assertion that Kay will repeat throughout the book: “As material books, bestiaries are made of actual pages that show themselves as such” (p. 40). Kay is particularly fascinated with how different manuscripts’ parchment may be differently “redolent of the body” (p. 48). Discussing the Hydrus (a serpentine creature who invades and then breaks, Alien-like, out of the Crocodile), Kay notes how one later manuscript (Merton MS 249) “depicts not allegory as theological content but allegoresis as textual process” (p. 54). To the extent that Kay’s book has a historical argument, this is it: as time goes on, interpretation, like nature, matters more for its own sake. This chapter also features the first instance of Kay’s most beguiling critical practice: she pays close attention to the perforations, scars, and stitches that take place on the manuscript pages whose textual and illuminated content she’s interpreting. Noticing how another manuscript (BL MS Stowe 1067) features writing that adapts itself to holes in the parchment, she observes: “Faced with a page that aligns itself more with the defeated Crocodile than with the Savior-Hydrus, such a reader may be more likely than a reader of the relatively even-colored and undamaged surface of Merton 249 to perceive his reading self as breached and perforated” (p. 58).

This practice will show up in greater and more provocative detail in the subsequent chapter, “Orifices and the Library,” whose title comes from a short story in which psychoanalyst Didier Anzeu writes, “A library is a vagina” (p. 69). (Kay can be wry, as when she describes a recently castrated Beaver later in this chapter as pointing to his crotch as if to say “Look, no balls” [p. 74]. Here, however, she fails to point out that this would be a very dusty vagina.) The chapter’s highlights are the passages in which Kay places represented animal bodies in the context of their imperfect pages: for example, in the twelfth-century Morgan MS M.832, “the excessive quantity of the Hyena’s orifices is echoed in the multiple perforations of the page” (p. 71). Likewise, she reproduces the text of Vienna cod. 1010’s description of the Beaver as follows:

that when [the Beaver] was pursued by the hunter, looking behind him and seeing the huntsman, with one bi<HOLE>te he cuts them off, and throwing them in the face of the hunts<HOLE>man he flees. The huntsman, gathering

the testicles, ceases his pur<HOLE>suit of him (p. 77).

I find these transcriptions fascinating, even as I am left with questions about the particularities of each perforation: how is a bite like a huntsman, or like the adverb *ultra*, “further,” which Kay has rendered here as “pursuit”? And how do all three of these terms reveal themselves in their moment of interruption? What kind of absence at their core binds them all together?

Kay closes the third chapter by meditating, via the figures of the Weasel and Asp, on how “concern with bodily apertures in these chapters evokes human worry about having a body that is excessively leaky or permeable—or else too closed up and *impermeable*” (p. 85). That risk of excess—as source of worry and, as she says, “enjoyment” (p. 86)—continues in the discussion of vulnerability in chapter four, “Cutting the Skin.” Here I appreciate above all Kay’s sensitivity to how, looking at the red paint through which blood is depicted (especially in representations of the Christ-like Pelican), it is “as if the reader’s role was conjoined with those of butcher, parchmenter, and rubricator” (p. 95). In fact, even more than the solidarity between humans and animals, I feel as though this may be the solidarity Kay is arguing for: that we, readers of whatever kind, are complicit with or, better, participate in the very material processes through which our objects have come to us. We might lose an innocence in coming to terms with this; but we gain our bodies (and those of the world, very much including those of even our print-and-paper books). It is here, too, that Kay gives us a vivid example of her powers of observation, *vis-a-vis* St. John’s College MS 178, where she acknowledges how words mean in relation not just to their ostensible object within the sentence (here, the Elephant) but their adjacent objects on the page (here, the Unicorn; p. 96).

Chapter five is called “The Riddle of Recognition,” and while the riddle is never explicitly brought into dialogue with what it means to be riddled (i.e., with holes), that sense, conscious or unconscious, is never far from the spirit, much less the letter, of Kay’s book. Kay is particularly interested here in the devices by which manuscripts produce similarity between humans and animals, devices she calls “networks of resemblance” (p. 111). In fact, allegory itself becomes, in Kay’s reading, “not merely figurative but reaches down into the riddle of likeness in which all being is configured” (p. 111). If I understand this correctly, I think Kay wants not only to say that allegory mends the gap between humans and animals as much, or as often, as it produces that very gap; I think she wants also to suggest that our moments of greatest solidarity with others—with *all* others—may occur in the least, as well as in the most, literal places and practices.

Chapter six, “Skin, the Inner Senses, and the Soul as ‘Inner Life,’” is a bit of an oddity in that it is very straightforwardly about two writers, Hugh of Fouillois and Richard of Fournival, and the kinds of nurture that occur through their allegories of nature. In their works, especially Hugh’s twelfth-century book of birds, written for monks, and Richard’s thirteenth-century secular *Bestiaire d’amours*, written for a lady, “the reader’s interior self is encouraged to take shape via imagination more than indoctrination” (p. 130). Kay accordingly lingers on images of animal mothering, especially representations of the Ape and the Elephant, as she advocates for a “codicological unconscious” whose source “lies in the primitive relation to the mother” (p. 142). I am more convinced by the unconscious effects of a book upon a body than I am by the maternal story that psychoanalysis likes to tell, but I find utterly moving the account Kay gives of how a rip in the flesh of a parchment page may reproduce, and somehow make real, not just

the ripping-open of an always-vulnerable body but also the sundering of other psychic and social relationships.

Kay's conclusion is a red herring—or, really, a white elephant. It's a little more canny and controlled, and a little less true to its wild and wooly objects, than the book as a whole. Read it not for what Kay says she's shown you but for what she *does* show you: an image of an Elephant giving birth, produced on a "radiant" bit of animal skin that allows this figure (of Christ, as well as both Mary and Eve) to shine, as its appearance on the page and its placement in the manuscript refuse to let banishment and repudiation win out over novelty and redemption (p. 153). If redemption is (theologically speaking, at least) the ultimate irony, then this scene is a fitting, and redemptive, coda for a book whose otherwise supple sense of irony, capable of noticing how a Hydrus and a Viper appear to be identical but "mean opposite things" (pp. 60-1), nonetheless stops short of noticing its own association of lightness (of parchment and skin tone) with humanity (see esp. 106, 156). Like the Elephant, I found myself looking back, as I prepared to close the book (and exit, so to speak, the library), to the book's beginning, with its affirmation of a "desire for inclusiveness" (p. 2) and, even more, its sense that "the work 'as such' does not exist except in its multiple manifestations" (p. 11). So, too, may the parchment page as such, or even the scholarly book as such, be unthinkable without its multiple manifestations, into whose history of appearing the reader is being invited; a history of appearing which is also a history of contingency, of what has fallen into one's hands, whose work—like any allegory, like any flesh—remains unfinished.

Cary Howie  
Cornell University  
[cs34@cornell.edu](mailto:cs34@cornell.edu)

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