

---

H-France Review Vol. 15 (February 2015), No. 17

Catharine Randall, *The Wisdom of Animals: Creatureliness in Early Modern French Spirituality*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. 192 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-268-04035-2; \$19.60 U.S. (eb). EISBN 978-0-268-09180-4.

Review by Jolanta N. Komornicka, University of Virginia.

Catharine Randall's book examines how animals served as a "vehicle for knowing" in the spirituality of the early modern period (pp. 4-5). The book is a series of case studies, looking at five different authors from the period, plus a handful of others when comparisons warrant. Randall supplies enough detail to make the texts at the center of her argument intelligible to those who have never read or long forgotten them. Although each chapter focuses on a particular early modern author (with the exception of the last, which examines two together), Randall foreshadows and refers back to other case studies, creating an at times forced but nevertheless welcome narrative continuity. The overarching themes she presents are three-fold: how humans looked to animals for spiritual understanding and growth, how over time animals increasingly were presented as subjects in their own right, and how Protestants and Catholics differed in their approaches to the preceding two themes. The first two are on the whole well-developed and integrated into each chapter. Although she repeatedly comments on the Catholic versus Protestant theological differences, this part of her argument falls short, largely because of her five major authors, only one was a Protestant, and she makes limited use of other Calvinist authors. The contention that Protestants preferred to rationalize their use of animals over the Catholic tendency to instrumentalize is supported by her choice of texts, but the sample size, even including the bibliographic apparatus, remains too small to be fully convincing.

Randall's first case study is Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), and through him she introduces a running concern for all of her authors: humanity's relationship to the animal world and the degree of the former's superiority (or indeed, inferiority) over the latter. Any student of the history of animals or zoological ethics will find Randall's attention to detail in her approach to the texts useful. She mines the *Essais* for animal referents and argues that Montaigne's insightful observations about the self must be read in tandem with his estimations of the superiority of the animal world, particularly as concerns the infallibility of animal instinct when compared with human reason.

Randall contrasts Montaigne's advocacy of the emulation of animals, most particularly the swallow, with Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas's celebration of human dominion over the natural world. Where Montaigne's texts provide a plethora of animal life both to serve as exemplars and due to his own personal penchant for observation, the Calvinist Du Bartas (1544-1590) composed a list driven by the desire to catalogue, label and arrange. Where for Montaigne animals were fully developed subjects, capable of teaching and surpassing humankind, for Du Bartas they remained objects controlled by humans whose purpose was to point the human observer toward God. The two chapters juxtapose well, though Randall misses an opportunity to move beyond the collector mentality of Du Bartas to showcase the rationalization that she argues in her conclusion was part of the Protestant use of animals. Randall notes that Du Bartas favored some animals more than others, and two pages later we learn that the wolf, fox, and dog predominated. Yet, she does not let the reader see how these canidae fit into the text the way she does for Montaigne's swallows, which she discusses and analyzes at length and to good

effect. The lack of a similar analysis in this second chapter leaves the reader wondering why our collector had such preferences, and what was the context for their arrangement on his textual shelf. Moreover, as the lone Calvinist devoted any great space, the omission cannot be filled by another author or text.

The third chapter, on St. François de Sales (1567-1622), is the most problematic for its ahistoricity. Throughout the book, Randall seeks to show that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a qualitatively new approach to animals arose in Christian spirituality. In this chapter, however, her argument for newness falters for lack of an adequate grasp of medieval precedents. Randall is right to point out that something new was happening with animals in de Sales's devotional text, though he did not introduce nuance into animal depictions as she contends (p. 71). I must also note that Randall is simply wrong in stating that "the image of a dog equaled Christian fidelity, for everyone and in every circumstance or context" (p. 70). Her statement possesses no scholarly or primary support, nor could it, as any overview of the treatment of dogs between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries shows.<sup>[1]</sup> Randall does provide a significant contribution in her observation that the animals in de Sales's work started to carry the divine within themselves and thus partook of a subjecthood that did not limit them to the realm of the symbolic. Yet even in these passages, Randall's lack of familiarity with late medieval spirituality shows. For instance she writes: "An immense distance has been traveled from the Thomist position of considering animals as second-order creatures...to de Sales's depiction of *animals as Christ*" [emphasis in original] (p. 73). Her example is that of a lamb representing the suffering of Jesus. Since before Carolingian times, lambs had visually and figuratively portrayed Christ as the *agnus Dei*, and later medieval authors such as Margery Kempe linked animal suffering more generally to that of Christ.<sup>[2]</sup> None of this is to say that de Sales did not do something new or different, only that the lack of context leaves the contribution ambiguous at best.

Similarly, Randall argues that de Sales introduced animals as spirit guides, a promising avenue of research. Unfortunately, the story she uses to illustrate the concept—that of a hunter stealing cubs from a tigress—is a clear reworking of the medieval bestiary story. De Sales altered the story in a key detail, discarding not a mirror to fool the tigress, but one of her stolen cubs. The change is intriguing. In the medieval bestiary, the tigress's sense of duty to protect her cubs was savage but quickly tricked when she mistook her own reflection in the mirror for her cub, thus losing "both her revenge and her baby."<sup>[3]</sup> For de Sales, the tigress regained one of her lost cubs and coddled it out of a similar sense of motherly devotion. Randall points out how de Sales uses the tigress as an object lesson for bishops to care for souls, but the example is complicated by this earlier and popular version of the story. As with other places in the book, the lack of social and cultural context leaves her arguments and authors adrift. Even a brief survey of what other spiritual, theological, and proto-scientific texts her authors might reasonably have read would, as in this instance, ground the intellectual discussion and offer researchers more avenues for study.

If the third chapter leaves something to be desired for the pre-modern historian, the fourth offers a welcome dose of analysis and contextualization in Randall's examination of Guillaume-Hyacinthe (le père) Bougeant's forays into heresy. Le père Bougeant (1690-1743) posited that animals had souls, but that those souls were actually due to demons inhabiting the animals. We find a nice return in this chapter to the theme of animal superiority first introduced with Montaigne. Where Montaigne privileged animal instinct over human reason, Bougeant focused on animal purity compared to human sinfulness, for the animals did not create the demons from their own sin, but were infected by human sins in the form of demons (p. 105). Randall demonstrates how le père Bougeant did not invent wholesale the idea of animals having souls. His predecessor in French salon culture, the fabulist Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), also granted animals souls, though without the demons. The discussion in this final chapter is the most intriguing and vibrant and no doubt will cause scholars of witchcraft and demonology to pay attention.

This review would not be complete, however, without some attention paid to the sources and methods that underlie the argumentation in Randall's chapters. The choice to structure the book chronologically is a good one, as it permits the reader to examine the change over time occurring within the intellectual and spiritual traditions. Unfortunately, the historical change is undercut by Randall's repeated introduction of modern theologians. In the introduction, authors such as Andrew Linzey provide a where-we're-going note, but their inclusion in the analysis of pre-modern thinkers is flawed from a historian's perspective. Randall does not make clear how a modern critique of hunting helps us understand sixteenth-century human-animal relationships, how modern British theological criticism of Calvinist literalism pertains to the intellectual culture of sixteenth-century France, or how modern theological assessments of the meaning of God's gaze relate to early modern understandings of who God was or could be. Perhaps for the modern reader interested in deepening a spiritual understanding of humanity's place with relation to animals in a Christian framework, such ahistoricity is less important than the ways of knowing offered by moderns and pre-moderns alike. For the historical examination outlined in the introduction, however, the liberal inclusion of modern theology without appropriate bracketing is problematic.

In this book, Randall has offered the reader multiple avenues for entry: as a historian of animals, as one of early modern spirituality or of currents in the proto-scientific movement, and as an individual on a personal spiritual journey. Randall leaves the reader with many directions for further research. Her brief references to metamorphosis and hybridity offer as-yet unexplored connections with studies on the monstrous, the grotesque, and of course the monstrous races that peopled travel literature in both the medieval and early modern periods. Her use of theology to explore the proto-scientific use of animals leads naturally to questions about the seventeenth-century work on blood transfusions, first performed in the 1660s between animals and humans. Similarly, the spiritual valuation of animals presented in the texts Randall examines spark questions on eating, whether in relation to the resurrection of the body or to early modern vegetarianism. Randall has produced a book provocative in its methodological apparatus, valuable in its textual analysis, and stimulating less for its conclusions than for its inspiration toward further research.

#### NOTES

[1] I should add that even should the medieval sources not remain relevant, the Bible's overarching negativity toward dogs surely does. See for instance: Joyce E. Salisbury, "Human Animals of Medieval Fables," in Nona C. Flores, ed., *Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 56; Charles Bergman, "A Spectacle of Beasts: Hunting Rituals and Animal Rights in Early Modern England," in Bruce Boehrer, ed., *A Cultural History of Animals in the Renaissance* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), p. 59; Mark S. R. Jenner, "The Great Dog Massacre," in William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts, eds., *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 55. Additionally, a survey of dog references in late medieval and early modern French proverbs displays a wide variety of attitudes towards humanity's canine companions. A non-exhaustive sample can be found in the pages of the following compilations: Le Roux de Lincy, *Le livre de proverbes français, précédé de recherches historiques sur les proverbes français et leur emploi dans la littérature du moyen âge et de la renaissance* (Paris: A. Delahays, 1859), pp. 165-182; Joseph Morawski, *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVIe siècle* (Paris: É. Champion, 1925), pp. 2, 44, 14, 83-90.

[2] John Osborne, "A Carolingian Agnus Dei Relief from Mola di Monte Gelato, near Rome," *Gesta* 33 (1994): 73-78; Lisa J. Kiser, "Margery Kempe and the Animalization of Christ: Animal Cruelty in Late Medieval England," *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009): 299-315.

[3] Terence Hanbury White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Dover, 2010), p. 13.

Jolanta N. Komornicka  
University of Virginia  
[komornicka@virginia.edu](mailto:komornicka@virginia.edu)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172