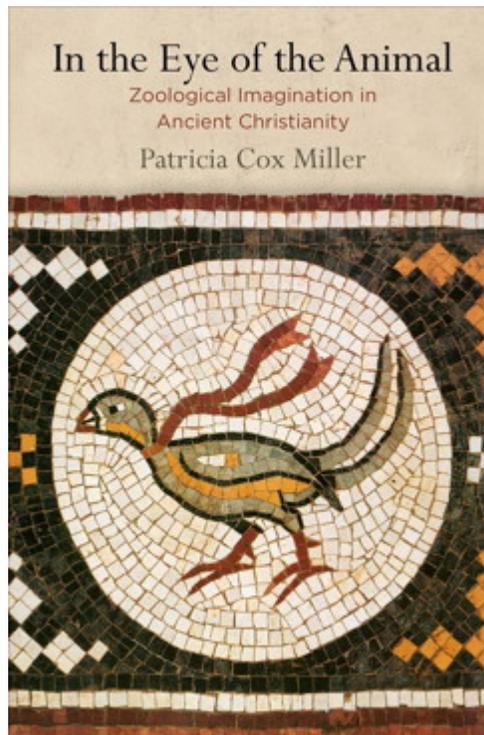


## Reviews

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### The Zoological Imagination of Early Christians

Patricia Cox Miller. *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*. DIVINATIONS: REREADING LATE ANCIENT RELIGION. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 280 pp. \$79.95.



Patricia Cox Miller's *In the Eye of the Animal* adds nuance to the common picture of ancient Christian rhetoric as wholly anthropocentric and hostile toward nonhuman animals. She engages a number of ancient Christian writers, including Augustine, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea, as well as anonymous texts such as the *Physiologus*. She provides close readings of short passages from these sources, noting where and how they treat the topic of animals. Contemporary critical animal studies provides a helpful partner as she re-interprets her texts, drawing especially on Jean-Christophe Bailly, with other thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Alice Kuzniar, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jane Bennett making appearances too. The book consists of an introduction, five body chapters, and an afterword. Eleven images of animals in

(mostly) ancient art appear throughout the text, though the table of contents regrettably lacks a list of these figures. The endmatter contains a helpful appendix with brief biographical information for the ancient Christian authors Miller discusses, in addition to endnotes, a bibliography (divided between ancient and modern works), and a detailed index.

Miller lays out her main argument in the introduction. Ancient Christian writers undoubtedly spoke pejoratively about nonhuman animals; they often relied on and advanced a “rhetoric of domination and superiority [that] relies on an animal-human binary that privileges difference rather than similarity” (4). In Miller’s view, however, a “countercurrent” appears throughout and within those pejorative moments which views animals much more sympathetically, casting doubt on the presumed division of human from animal and taking these nonhuman creatures as foundations of theology and ethics and even examples to follow. In short, in contrast to this “rhetoric of domination” stands the “zoological imagination” (4), a phrase she chooses because it “exposes an animal richness that ancient Christian exceptionalism obscures” (10). Citing Derrida, she suggests that these ancient Christians saw animals as mirrors through which they may better understand themselves. The introduction then concludes with a summary of the five body chapters.

Chapter 1 treats birds in the ancient Christian imagination. Many early writers relied on a rhetorical strategy that Miller calls “animal interiority,” in which one employs animals “to imagine the contours of human identity and self-knowledge” (11); in the case of birds specifically, this becomes something of an “avian inner self” as writers imagine their different desires, needs, and faculties through bird symbols (17). For instance, for Origen, the birds and creeping things of Genesis 1’s creation account represent good thoughts and evil thoughts respectively, with birds being the lofty good thoughts, ascending skyward in a perspective in which “flight is fundamentally ethical” (17).

Miller makes an aside here to note that some animal studies scholars warn that a focus on *metaphorical* animals can obscure *flesh-and-blood* animals — if the birds in these examples are presented by human writers for human purposes, do they say anything about the “real” creature? Is there any “real” bird left after all these metaphors are applied? Animal imagery runs the risk of turning the animals in question into mere “absent referents,” in the words of Aaron Gross (qtd. in 18). Miller responds that these metaphors do not construct a hierarchy of human over animal but rather a relationality

of human *with* animal. For Miller, Origen's use of flight as a metaphor for human thinking does not erase birds themselves but rather brings them in closer contact with humans. This response to animal studies scholars' concerns occurs quite swiftly and would be more persuasive if it were expanded. Given the fact that all of Miller's sources are depictions of animals by human authors, the threat of losing sight of the *literal* animals that these textual animals refer to is very real. Miller will make use of cognitive ethology and other research from the biological sciences throughout the book, so she herself does not forget these "real" animals, but more could be said in this chapter to fully explain how these texts affect the lives of flesh-and-blood creatures.

The remainder of chapter 1 provides more examples of the "avian inner self" in ancient Christian literature. In Ambrose's *Hexaemeron*, cranes are cooperative in contrast to humanity's hierarchical leanings. For Basil, storks are hospitable in contrast to humanity's inhospitality. For Augustine and the Physiologus, pelicans are Christological symbols. For Ambrose and Cyprian, the preening of male and female doves in mating is tantamount to kissing and a symbol of divine peace ("Ethology has shaded into theology" [34]). The chapter concludes with a coda that, in contrast to all of the previous examples, explores moments in which birds appear completely meaningless; considering how different this is from the foregoing material, much room remains to more fully relate this coda to the preceding chapter.

Chapters 2 and 3 are companions of one another, the former covering *zoomorphism* and the latter *anthropomorphism*, both under the rubric of what Jean-Christophe Bailly calls the "pensivity of animals" (qtd. in 44). This term could be more thoroughly defined here, but Miller's presentation of Bailly casts animals as "a 'thought' of Being dispersed in and traversing the world" (44); this dispersal is in stark contrast to a more traditional reading of human uses of animals merely for human designs. From here, Miller proceeds to outline the structure of zoomorphism and anthropomorphism. She alludes to the debates in the sciences about anthropomorphic descriptions of animal behavior and highlights cognitive ethology's findings that have seriously questioned human uniqueness; the charge of anthropomorphism reifies the division of human from animal when in reality we are closer than many of us think.

Miller goes on to present how "early Christian texts offer ways of imagining human/animal relationships that, perhaps surprisingly, blur the supposed boundary between human and animal just as effectively as contemporary ethology" (51). This blurring can occur even in texts that are otherwise quite anthropocentric, so that "anthropocentrism has a way of undermining itself from within" (46). In particular, for

this chapter, animals frequently appear in early writings as examples that Christians should follow. For Augustine, the believer should be humble like a donkey and in so doing allow Christ to be one's rider, drawing on the imagery of the Triumphal Entry. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa encourages the Christian to long after the good just as the deer of Psalm 42 longs for water. In a less convincing example, Origen often uses animals as negative role models, but for Miller, even this is an instance deploying animals as the ground for ethical and theological thought. In encouraging their audiences to be like (or not be like) these animals — that is, to be zoomorphic — these writers urge them to “become entangled with an animal, and to explore the possibilities of meaning that such a venture opens up” (55). In contrast to the divisions formed by the human/animal binary, “zoomorphism regularly underscores relation rather than separation where animals and humans are concerned” (74).

Chapter 3 continues this discussion of the “pensivity of animals,” turning to passages that function in the other direction, anthropomorphically. In the texts treated here, animals act much like humans; these stories show speaking lions that call for baptism, hyenas requesting that a saint heal their cubs, and elephants embodying ascetic ideals about sexuality. In these fabular tales, nonhuman animals recognize holiness in others and desire it in themselves, and as a result, there is a very real “connection between humans and animals” that presents a “countertradition to anthropocentrism” (80–81). For Miller, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, these stories demonstrate “a style of being that advertises human-animal intertwining” (88). Regarding the actual behavior of the “real” counterparts of these animals, Miller notes that these writers are relying on the lore they have received, which is often inaccurate when judged from a modern scientific viewpoint. For instance, elephants and turtledoves do not in reality exhibit the chaste behavior these writers assume. A reader may wonder, then, how helpful these stories are if they are not responding to the actual behavior of these animals — are these creatures merely being used and their actions fabricated for the purpose of curtailing what these human writers believe to be unrighteousness? Miller does not fully explore the relation of these depictions to flesh-and-blood animals, but she does show that, at least at the level of rhetoric, the human/animal binary loses some of its stability in these narratives.

Chapter 4 discusses desert monks and their nonhuman companions. While there are some stories of desert monks being cruel or unforgiving to nonhuman animals, Miller argues that the majority of the tales involving their interactions with animals are

peaceful. Drawing on affect theory, Miller argues that these interactions show an “intensity of resonance” between human and animal that is “based not on calculative reason but rather on compassionate understanding” (126). In these stories, a lion and a monk share food in the desert, a monk heals a lioness’s cubs’ blindness, and a monk drinks an antelope’s milk for sustenance. In two longer examples, Miller relates John Moschus’s fifth- or sixth-century tale in *The Spiritual Meadow* about a lion who, when helped by a monk, joins his community, take on their chores, and mourns the monk’s eventual death. In this peaceful lion, the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11:6–9 can be seen: “The echoes of paradise regained really do seem to reverberate through ancient Christian lions” (136). Miller also recounts a story from Sulpicius Severus’s *Dialogues* about a monk who feeds a wolf each night, but at his absence one evening, she steals some bread but later expresses remorse for her theft. While the story is obviously fictional, Miller sees some truth in the wolf’s social nature, drawing on Mark Bekoff’s cognitive ethological work: “In Sulpicius’s zoological imagination, ethics as well as emotional bonding are paramount in the animal-human relationship that the story depicts” (141). In fables like these, “there is no hint of hierarchical relationships that would position the animals as ontologically or mentally lower or inferior to the human beings with whom they interact” (126). Instead, there is a relationality, shared touch and shared compassion.

Miller’s fifth chapter discusses the “small things” in ancient Christian tradition — frogs, worms, insects, and other diminutive creatures (155). Here, she draws on new materialist Jane Bennett’s phrase “vibrant matter” to show that even these small beings are lively and significant. As an example, Augustine speaks of animals in general rather negatively, deeming them inferior to humans on the basis of a supposed lack of rationality; however, when speaking about particular species or individuals, Augustine’s words become more positive, as Miller demonstrates with a passage praising worms (157). Worms for him can point to the glory of the Creator and even represent Jesus — divinity and worms thus coincide in a “vermicular Christology” (165). Similarly, for Basil of Caesarea, worms (or more accurately, caterpillars) are such vibrant matter that they become butterflies (166). This transformation is a symbol of the resurrection for him, but Miller notes that the butterfly is still very much physical matter, so the resurrected body in this view retains some of its vibrant materiality. Beyond worms, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine all use flies to make ethical points, casting them as the stinging deception of competing traditions, or as symbols of the effects of the passions on the soul, or as physical torments to counter the believer’s pride. In this way, flies impart a physical sensation that is symbolically or literally a guide to ethical behavior. Even stinging insects can be what Bennett calls a “site of

enchantment” (qtd. in 176). Ancient Christians also spoke of frogs, often in conjunction with the exodus narrative, and they are spoken of pejoratively, or in Miller’s words, with a “negative vibrancy” (186). Miller contrasts Gregory of Nyssa’s negative portrait of frogs with archaeological finds of ancient Egyptian lamps emblazoned with frogs and Christian designs; these lamps present a different picture of frogs as matter that is quite literally vibrant in its luminosity (187). Miller ties Gregory’s negative depiction of frogs together with the lamps’ more positive depiction under the rubric of “intensity” (189), though this is not a particularly compelling unifying factor, and more could be said to relate these two disparate images. In any case, however, despite their small size, Miller successfully shows that these worms, insects, and frogs take up immense space in Christian discourse and stand in for weighty ethical and theological matters.

Finally, in an afterword, Miller rehearses her main argument that in spite of Christianity’s history of anthropocentrism, ancient Christian writers had a complex relationship with animality and had room to invoke a zoological imagination in their theological thinking: “there are resources in ancient Christian texts for imagining otherwise the basis of human-animal relations, even when those relations are paradoxically presented as both positive and negative in the same text” (192). Without denying or excusing the rhetoric of human domination, Miller points to an alternative path: “Alongside the rhetoric of human exceptionalism [...] there was *another* rhetoric, a rhetoric of cosmic resemblance, connection, harmony, and affinity that does not debase animals but includes them along with everything else in the material and spiritual enchainments that are the created order” (194).

*In the Eye of the Animal* raises for the reader a large quantity of ancient Christian passages relating to nonhuman animals, and the book is largely successful in its complication of the usual scholarly view of these texts. Far from being irredeemably anthropocentric in orientation, many early Christian writers expressed surprisingly complex views about the animals with whom they shared their world as well as about the lines (or lack thereof) that divided them from those animals. To be sure, human exceptionalism still occurs frequently, but this is not the full story. These writers were at times able to think beyond a limited view of humanity and animality and were able to look at nonhuman animals as models, as theological foundations, and even as companions and co-religionists. There are moments in Miller’s book, as I have mentioned, that would require a more detailed explanation to persuade me, especially as they pertain to the connection between textual animals and “real” animals and to the

often pejorative portrayals of some of these creatures. On the whole, however, Miller has offered a valuable contribution to any reader interested in early Christianity, patristic writings, or the history of animals in literature. Her readings of Augustine, Origen, and others should certainly be consulted in future discussions of these texts, and her work should be considered in discussions of Christian views toward nonhuman animals. Miller has brought together many examples of animals in ancient Christian thought and has paired these examples with critical animal studies and animal-centered philosophy. The result is an informative and engaging picture of early Christians' "zoological imagination."