

BEASTLY LESSONS

Natural Utopias and Animals as Teachers in Seventeenth-Century England

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Abstract

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The present study investigates the motif of virtuous animal instructors in three selected English texts from the second half of the seventeenth century: James Howell's *The Parly of Beasts* (1660), Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), and Thomas Tryon's *The Way to Health* (1683). These authors proposed solutions to the challenges facing early modern England, most notably the Civil War, the emerging empirical science, and the incipient colonization of the Americas. By contrast to those contemporary thinkers who sought to reestablish lost dominion over the natural world, Howell, Cavendish and Tryon located their blueprints for human betterment in the animal kingdom. They thereby revived theriophily, the ancient notion that animals are superior to humans by virtue of their naturalness. In this study I examine how in the selected works this idea takes on a distinct, context-specific form. I introduce the genre category *natural utopia* to capture the authors' fusion of natural ideals with the utopian impulse that pervaded late seventeenth-century England. Through close readings that counter presentist interpretations, I examine the animals in the texts in light of the era's shift from an emblematic to an empiricist perspective on nature, highlighting four themes: animal exemplarity, politics, malleability, and animal language. Throughout, I show how Howell's, Cavendish's and Tryon's animal characters introduce a metaperspective on the human/animal relationship, denouncing both general anthropocentric claims to human preeminence, as well as local cultural developments in their era. The selected texts, I argue, depart from established genres of beast literature like fables and bestiaries, and also from speculative literature from the same era. Ultimately, my study shows how these works, while varying greatly with respect to form, content and the authors' political orientations, are united in a green, countercultural protest against the early modern period's increasing objectification and destruction of the natural world. My study foregrounds aspects of the texts that have hitherto received little scholarly attention and thereby deepens our understanding of animals in the selected texts, as well as in the seventeenth century's intellectual landscape.

