

MLA 2020 SEATTLE  
SESSION 495: LLC OCCITAN, “ANIMAL THINKING”  
11 January 2020

Good morning, I'd like to start with a land acknowledgement, in thanks to our hosts for their hospitality.

*We acknowledge that we stand on the unceded ancestral lands and the traditional home of the Duwamish people. We honor and thank all Coast Salish tribes and nations on whose land we occupy. We take this opportunity to thank the original caretakers of this land who are still here.*

Here in the traditional home of the Duwamish people, we are in a storied place, a place of storytelling, including stories of animal thinking and of what others outside think about as human/nonhuman relations. I'd like us to keep that context in mind; this talk is about the story of a course, taught further north in the same Salish Sea area, on Musqueam territory. It all started with the call for papers for this session. Here's what I said I'd do:

<https://blogs.ubc.ca/rmst221b/prologue/>

But of course the course changed shape along the way, once it turned into a class—that is, the translation from theoretical hypothesis to practice, to a collective of people in live interaction. We'll see one of these shapeshiftings: the start and end that is the course's frog frame.

1

Romance Studies 221B was an introduction to the medieval and early modern Romance-speaking literary world, with only two set texts, that were canonical Great Books of literature in French. I've taught it four times now, completely differently each time. This time, I wanted to try to read two writers from around the historical start and end of a historical period, its gateposts. Not as Great Books By Great Authors but as gateways into more, into a larger world. Reading them together, each week placed alongside other readings to offer some context; a contrapuntal way to include works, and a broader idea of literature and reading, from a surrounding world; a premodern Romance cultural ecosystem, if you will. We had to include Old Occitan poetry, of course; too often, students only meet it in the actual flesh to get their teeth into it in advanced undergraduate courses or graduate seminars, even if words like “Troubadour” and “courtly” might be familiar. Now, Occitan poetry has many excellent birds; I refer you to the work of, for example, Michel Zink, Eliza Zingesser, and Sarah Kay here present. We met some of these birds at the course's midpoint, its structural centre, weeks 5-8 circling around Marie de France's *Laiistic*: mostly nightingales, and hawks as a way to bring in Frederick II and plurilingual Sicily.

We started and ended, however, with Marcabru's frog.

<https://metametamedieval.com/2019/09/10/reading-frogsong/>

This poem is more usually discussed as political, ethical, and religious satire. But what happens if you read it not just as being about anthropomorphic frogs and zoomorphic humans, but read it from the point of view of a frog? What happens if you try to read a human world as a frog? Is that possible? What are and what should be the limits to human imagination? Sympathy can too easily fall

into the arrogant hubris of empathy, an arrogating colonialism. So, for example, I didn't and wouldn't retell Musqueam stories about frogs: it is not my place, I'm a migrant settler, it's better instead to refer students to more appropriate and authoritative sources and amplify their voices.

Looking more closely at a frog singing in a poem was part of introducing students to a doubly weird course: about a new alien universe, and about a different way of doing academic work with literature, with the expectation that at least one of these two will be unknowns. It's a knowing unknowing. Knowing that encountering the unknown will be about listening, and learning, and accepting that this will be strange and uncomfortable and unsettling, and that that is good. Stepping out of your comfort zone (as much for me, doing something experimental and knowing that it could fail and would certainly have ups and downs and changes). Acknowledging and embracing the unsettling, starting by throwing students in the deep end with an ancient foreign-language unsettled poem: one that has no single meaning and no fixed conclusion. It varies across manuscript witnesses, though it's less disordered—or rather, various—than many other Old Occitan poetic kin, in its contexts of a codex as a whole, each one a textual environment in its own right. Keep that word “unsettling” in mind; it's been haunting me for a couple of days now, thanks especially to Tarren Andrews and Blake Gutt from sessions 33 and 90 on Thursday.

We read the poem bilingually (I'm not completely heartless), picking at some individual words, seeing patterns and echoes, looking for resonances with English cognates. Reaching out for the familiar, for relationships, for kinship. Highlighting the slippery and “what the hell is going on here” zones, getting into closer reading, anchoring ourselves on the lily-pads of individual words. Here's what that looked like ...

<https://metametamediaval.com/2019/09/10/reading-frogsong/>

This poem gave us the opportunity to think about frogs, what frog associations would be around the mid 12th century, what a frog's world would look like, and what ours would look like from a froggish point of view. Instead of providing students with a background chronology before approaching a text and at the start of a course, the start rethought that kind of historical contextualisation and anchoring, its nature and purpose and point of view. Not a questing conquering hero seeing the lay of the land from a superior vantage point. Not intelligence reports for a state or business force as a preamble to invasion and occupation. We started out as frogs, small and situated low down but amphibious and with voices, looking out from a muddy pool and navigating a fast-flowing river; and thinking about frog history. A history of their world from a frog point of view and as part of a larger biosocial fabric, an alternative to narratives of great deeds by great individuals, of periodisation and paradigm shifts and progress, ever bigger and higher.

I fell into reading like a small muddy frog because of the strangely comforting story of the hunted hares and the frogs, one of the three cautionary frog tales retold by Marie de France in her *Fables*. The *Fables* led in turn to Big Books Of Everything and circled back to history being neither a single one nor a linear one.

Canvas > modules > weeks 1-2, then week 3; some of that is in the public syllabus at <https://blogs.ubc.ca/rmst221b/syllabus/>

And so it went on: pairing Marie and Montaigne, weaving in other premodern Romance works (not just in the vernaculars, and not just written texts), and adding in topical animals each week. Frogs remained in the background as we read amphibiously, moving through land and air and water, maybe panbiously in some of the stranger moments.

2

Any course is governed by time: fixed term dates, class times, and number of classes. It has a beginning and ending and some kind of story happens in between. What happens in the middle might be in a different temporality, maybe even feel out of time, a space of imagination and experimentation and free play. One reason for choosing Marie's *Lais* and Montaigne's *Essais* was their narrative structures, needing rereading and reinforcing non-linearity: circling, spiralling, tangling.

A second reason was to introduce a literature that's not just determined by the modern curriculum and by modern literary history and criticism; not just prehistoric precursors in a genetic lineage leading in inexorable progression to that imperial grand climax of western civilisation, the 19th-century novel. So we met Big Books Of Everything that are collections woven together by a frame narrative while maintaining an episodic identity within it; each a world with further worlds within. They contained multitudes and marginalities. Some were bestiaries. Many were didactic works; if I were teaching this course again, I might just call it "Mirrors for Princes."

A third reason for choosing our two set texts was that they're relevant and immediately useful and applicable—big ethical questions, lessons in leadership, and all that—and that they include multiple points of view and openings for discussion. It's symbiotic: the stories' morals depend on the context of their reading; making sense of them depends on seeing those other points of view. Starting by accepting that they *are* points of view and valuing them, even if the strangeness stays unsettling, even if that discomfort expresses itself in a complicated irony, and that then needs to be worked out in conversational continuation and analysis afterwards. Like, back in Marcabru's poem, the paradoxical "li rana chanta" at the start echoed in the *tornada's* postscript "avol valen" and "gonella camisa."

In the middle main part of the course, we fell into a weekly rhythm of discussion and commentary. Weekly discussions in class, written up and continued afterwards in online discussion, embedded sub-stories from students, adding extra parallels and retelling the path taken by digressions in live discussions. Montaigne's art of digression was, I am happy to report, a big hit in applied active practice.

21st-century Vancouver is as far from the 8th-12th centuries of *Kalila and Dimna* as they are in turn from the 3rd century BCE and before of the *Pancatantra*. Yet their animals are mutually intercomprehensible across time and space: frogs stay froggishly familiar. At the same time the discussions interspersed in both works remind us that their embedded sub-stories are much older and resolutely distant and strange, needing interpretation to make sense in each new translation and retelling. It's good, educational, and reassuring to see medieval readers struggling with older alien reading, seeing reading happen in live action and seeing how it's an interaction; not just humans reading animals, also animals telling stories with humans in them, and animals reading other animals.

*Kalila and Dimna's* frog-story is told by a crow (a spy) to another crow (his king) in an episode of the crow/owl war. Its topic: Can you trust an enemy who pretends to look like a friend, or should you distrust them, even if you have a larger aim of peace and security? And in judging such an enemy, how do you consider your shared characteristics in evaluating their intentions? It's a fascinating episode of animals thinking out loud about other animals thinking (and not just anthropomorphically), looking for signs of intelligent life such as the ability to reason. As political satire, it's unsettlingly timely.

The story goes: an old snake picks the wrong human to bite, whose father curses him, exiling and condemning him to eat only frogs given to him by the queen of the frogs (this seems to be king or queen depending on translation, but I haven't read every one nor the original, so if you know more about this please tell us in the questions after!). The frog-queen allows the snake to eat a specific number of selected frog-subjects every day, in exchange for riding him. They coexist contentedly. It's a very different story, and interpretative spin—going with the flow—from its darker frog and snake relative in the *Pancatantra*, and from other frog stories in the Aesopian group including Marie's ones.<sup>1</sup>

Working outwards from that frog: the crow-owl war is told within the story of the jackal Dimna's trial for the murder of the ox Chanzaba, at the court of the lion king Bankala. Outside that we have the brothers Kalila and Dimna at court, as told by the sage Bidpai to his king Debchelim. This is in turn one of the *Pancatantra* branches retold by the physician-scholar Borzouyeh, brought from India to Iran, and translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa in the main version that we have now and that moved around western Afro-Eurasia through the historical period in which our course was situated.

### 3

*Kalila and Dimna* ends with a doctor who brings from afar the greatest treasure, elixir of eternal life, that's a collection of stories. There's a possible healing note in Marcabru's frog poem too. Around the middle, the end of line 32, is a problematic word; possibly artemisia, possibly in reference to its use in pregnancy and childbirth, for pain management (there's other uses too but that's another story); see the note in the Gaunt, Harvey, and Paterson critical edition.

[cobla IV via <https://metametamedieval.com/2019/09/10/reading-frogsong/>]

A spring opening joke, it's a poem of catastrophe, of destructions caused by the worst human traits, and of paradoxical creation. Life goes on, resistant, reinforced. "Rana" echoes, but distorted, in the "bram'a" of nightingale shrieking; refracted through the whole poem's "-ama" c-rhyme. Our frog disappears before the end of the first cobla, reappears as a chorus of lousy humans, and becomes part of a third-person singular feminine pronoun that's an alliance of animal, human, personification, and "li francha causa."

We returned to Marcabru's frog in the last week of the course;

[Canvas > home]

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<sup>1</sup> *Pancatantra* (the frog + snake story: very interesting for thinking about sustainability) and the Aesopian thread via Marie's other frog stories (frog + mouse, akin to K+D toad + fish + crab; frogs + new king log/snake).

as a prompt for three visitors talking. It wasn't the very end: our last class had three further visitors read Montaigne's "Des Cannibales," students posted their public bestiary entries online, a week later we had an anti-exam, and then, finally, the submission of final projects. I don't much like endings, so why not have as many as possible ... And many students' independent work in the course was the unending of continuations.

Let's circle back to the middle of that poem again:

[cobla IV via <https://metametamedieval.com/2019/09/10/reading-frogsong/>]

"Arsemisa" rhymes with "pugn' i es misa," and if you squint at it and relax into loose translation and creative reading, it asounds like "ars i misa," offering a vision of hope, "per q'ieu n'esper ni aten" the "reviu" new life that could happen when a collective—the first-person plural of "retengam per meravilha"—put work into creating something. Offspring. A work of art, doing creative things with words, making a man-made artifact. The fruit at the end of a course, all puns intended. Remember, amid all these ramifying and perhaps over-extended metaphors, that "Bel m'es qan li rana chanta" is still and always remains a poem about a frog. It's easy to forget that, to lose sight of the poem's froggish nature; just as it is with humans, if you focus too much on their Aristotelian rational souls at the expense of the rest of them as a whole: losing touch with the animal and sensitive, and with the vegetative and nutritive, with all that grows outwards and sustains. In the line "qar de pauc albr' eis granz rama": that "rama" is a branch for a frog to sing on, for sap to rise to that frog and into her song, for the Animal Reading students and their future new songs. "Far d'avol valen" indeed: the lively sustainable new growth of postpremodern wild sprouts and shoots.