What Is It Like to Be a Bête: Anthropomorphism, Unknowability and Readers' Empathy in Adam Roberts' *Animal Kingdom*

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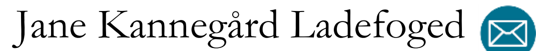

> [D]umb or bête, herb eater or carnivore, all animals that have eyes that can look into our eyes. It asks: *What are you*? And it is the same question as *What am I*? What do we do? We walk. We live through the day, day by day. We grow strong, and we grow weak. We pass through birth, but we never pass through death because there is nothing on the other side of death to pass *into*. Homo sapiens, Homo loquens, Homo bête. All the same. (Roberts 284)

These are the words of Graham Penhaligon, the main character of Adam Roberts' futuristic novel *Bête* (2014), in which animals have been given the ability to speak through a microscopic brain chip. The novel takes place in a world where most humans have become vegetarians and wineglasses have the ability to remind you to hold back on the alcohol. The novel deals with questions of anthropomorphism and empathy and does so in an intricate and unique way, and this article aims to examine these aspects both separately and together. Theories of anthropomorphism and empathy are combined in the article in order to create an angle particularly aimed at examining *Bête*'s unique subject matter.

I start the article with a characterization of Graham Penhaligon with emphasis on character development, as this aspect is especially important for the question of anthropomorphism, and anthropomorphism is the focus of the next part of the article. In this part, I will examine how *Bête* deals with anthropomorphism in a unique and intricate way. In the discussion, I will bring into question the topic of empathy by using Suzanne Keen's theory on readers' empathy and from this point I will examine how empathy relates to anthropomorphism. In this final part of the article, I examine a number of factors in the novel that both shed light on and complicate the question of empathy.

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Through aspects of hierarchy, oppression, unappealing characters, consciousness, tragicomedy and contemporary political topics, the subjects of anthropomorphism and empathy become highly obscured in *Bête*. These aspects come to illustrate that man and animal are not that different and that readers' empathy does not depend on any particular species or character trait.

The main character of *Bête*, Graham Penhaligon, is a farmer who is decidedly against the idea of talking animals. At the novel's starting point, Graham kills a so-called canny cow, a bête, although the cow begs him not to. Graham is a stubborn man who unremittingly fights the idea of bêtes through heavy use of sarcasm and with an impenetrable sense of logic, which keeps him believing that the bêtes' ability to talk comes from clever programming only and not from true consciousness. The cow tries to reason with Graham by explaining to him how consciousness works:

> 'There's nothing magical or spiritual about consciousness, Graham,' said the cow. 'Any cortical architecture which can support learning and recall and which involves multiple, hierarchically organized loops of axonal projections converging on nodes out of which projections also diverge to the points of origin of convergence is functionally conscious.' 'Grass, yum,' I said. 'Moo moo'. (Roberts 5)

Although the bêtes are able to speak clearly and articulate concise and intellectual sentences, Graham's piercing sarcasm aims at illustrating the opposite: he wishes to display the animals as dumb and expose their consciousness as fake. At this point, Graham is in *anthropodenial*; he refuses to acknowledge any kinds of human characteristics within animals and vice versa (de Waal 52). It seems, however, that although Graham outwardly tries to convince the reader (and himself) of his stance, he is not able to uphold the clear division he argues there is between man and animal. He provides the reader with clues that render him unreliable: "'Oh, *Mister* Penhaligon,' the cow said, sarcastically. We'll have to assume, for the moment, that cows are capable of sarcasm" (Roberts 3). As a first person narrator, Graham has the ability to distort the story to his own advantage, and when he overtly applies a sarcastic voice to a cow he does not believe is capable of using sarcasm, he reveals to the reader that he cannot be trusted as a narrator.

When Graham meets Anne, he crosses swords with her bête cat, Cincinnatus, who greatly gets on his nerves. At one point, Graham describes the cat as "rub[bing] itself like a pole dancer around the legs of the table" (69). According to Sowon Park, "social recognition depends on processes that are automatically put into place without our conscious awareness and that it is switched on all the time

whether we are aware of it or not" (9), which might indicate that Graham is ascribing human skills to Cincinnatus without truly being aware of what he is doing. Furthermore, he also does the opposite when he describes him and Anne having sex. Anne is making "owl-like hooting sounds" (Roberts 61), and Graham is "grunting like a bear, as men do" (61). These situations are important, as they are evidence that Graham's anthropodenial is not as convincing as he would like it to be. Whether or not the application of human agency to Cincinnatus and the application of animal characteristics to himself and Anne are conscious or not, Graham is a character one has to observe meticulously as a reader, since he displays signs of unreliability while also undergoing tremendous development throughout the novel.

The novel is divided into three parts – parts that are significant for understanding the development in Graham's character. Part one is titled "Two legs in the morning" (1). As illustrated above, Graham is unyielding in his attitude towards animals in the novel's first part, although his tone of voice and actions often tell the reader otherwise. The meaning of "two legs" can be interpreted as Graham's starting point as one-hundred percent human. Whether or not this interpretation is accurate is debatable, however. This is a point I will return to. Through part one of the novel, Graham gradually becomes more inclined to accept the idea of true consciousness in the bêtes: "I remembered what Cincinnatus had told me (….) the bêtes were living creatures, with conscious minds. Not conscious to a very advanced level, of course (…) Much of what the cat said to me was computer, but maybe some of it was echt cat" (107). Furthermore, Graham is forced to live in the woods and begins to refer to himself as "an animal in the wild" (140), because he is solely focused on survival and finding food.

Part two of the novel is titled "Three legs in the afternoon" (225), and quite literally refers to Graham's appearance when he suffers an injury to his leg: "And so it was that I stomped off leaning on a walking stick for every swing of my left leg, like an old geezer. Three-legged man" (228). At this point, Graham lives in the woods and appears to have become a kind of fusion of man and animal. He is three-legged; somehow neither man nor animal, but he still refers to himself as a man. Graham continuously refuses to be called by his name. He consistently responds with "don't call me Graham" (7), when other characters – humans as well as bêtes – call him Graham. It remains unclear why no one besides his wife and mom are allowed to call him Graham, but when Cincinnatus introduces the idea of giving Graham access to his mind and thereby to his memories of Anne, he suddenly changes his mind: "'*You* can call me Graham,' I told the cat" (229). At this point, it is clear that Graham gradually begins to give up the strong boundaries he has upheld between himself and the bêtes.

The final part of the novel is titled "four legs in the evening" (287) and represents the final stage in Graham's development: "The homo sapiens was laid out on the table, and he was dead. His skin was white as lard. His name had been Graham Penhaligon, but he didn't have a name now, because names are uniquely properties of the living" (289). It is unclear what precisely has happened to Graham at this point in the novel, but the position of the narrator shifts and the reader is told that "[s]ome come to bêteness by chance, devouring a chip inadvertently in the course of feeding. Others are selected. I was the latter. Except that I am not yet. She is still vixen" (291). If the lines between man and animal were blurred before, they have now become further obscured and impossible to distinguish. At this final stage, it appears that man has become animal, and animal has become man. Graham has vanished and the vixen emerges.

Anthropomorphism is naturally very much in focus in *Bête*. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to something non-human such as an animal. The contrasts between man and animal are highly obscured in the novel, and this is of course mainly because bêtes have the ability to speak. Speech is often used to illustrate differences between humans and animals, and the ability is under tremendous discussion throughout the novel. The characters spend a lot of time discussing whether the ability should exist at all, but also whether or not the chip is able to translate the true consciousness of the animals into speech or if the speech is solely computer-driven. The brain-chip grows into the brain tissue and cannot be removed without killing the bête that occupies it (Roberts 7), which naturally becomes cause for complication when the bêtes turn into a threat.

Within studies of anthropomorphism, one question that is greatly debated is whether animal and man should be seen as binaries or through a spectrum of more overlapping and inconclusive boundaries. Sam Cadman argues the latter and claims that a spectrum

> may provide important insights not only into how anthropocentric values are propagated in fictional forms commonly accepted as benign, indeed as promoting empathy towards other species, but also how creative practitioners may self-reflexively employ fictional animals as a means of promoting post-anthropocentric consciousness and species plurality. (162-63)

The idea of a spectrum is particularly important for Roberts' novel, because a new species emerges, which carries traits from both humans and animals. The cow that Graham kills in the beginning recalls: "I remember what it was like before. What I was like. My upgrade contains within it large amounts of

data, including complete files on the organization that implanted it" (Roberts 5). The word "upgrade" is especially noteworthy here, as the wording suggests that the bête cow is now more highly ranked than animals that have not been given the ability to speak. This notion is further substantiated by the fact that the animals without speech abilities are referred to as "dumb" (38). This distinction creates a hierarchy between the animals, a hierarchy that arguably creates a considerable discrepancy between 'dumb' animals and bêtes. Although the 'upgrade' appears to be an advantage for the bêtes, it is thought-provoking to consider what it means for the animals that are not granted speech. Would you think of a certain animal as dumb if there were not an upgraded animal with the ability to speak to compare it with? An argument can be made for the fact that the emergence of bêtes places the 'dumb' animals lower in the hierarchy than they would have been before this significant revolution. Their place in society is weakened and this is further corroborated by the fact that the killing of bêtes becomes illegal. Giving the bêtes the ability to speak naturally makes them more human-like, which is arguably why they become illegal to kill. However, it does add to the decline in the position of 'dumb' animals, because their privileges (or lack thereof) can be compared to the privileges of the bêtes. Of course, the 'dumb' animals are not able to communicate this issue and it is left unsaid what consequences this creates for them.

The reader is not told specifically who has made the decision to put chips in certain animals. A choice however, has been made about what *kinds* of animals should get this new privilege: "The move to grant animals 'rights' had been building for decades. Not all animals: not the cholera bacillus, or the hagworm or the mosquito of course. But the fluffy ones. The pretty ones. Kittens and baby seals and the like" (24). This also points towards a hierarchy within the animal kingdom of *Bête*. The fact that someone has made a choice about which animals *deserve* the right to speak is somewhat absurd, and, as it turns out, ends up backfiring on the humans when war erupts. As Graham's friend Preacherman argues, "[i]f we'd stopped at giving the ruminants speech it would have been fine. But giving the predators speech – that was asking for trouble" (27-28). This blending of races and overlap of character traits show that in *Bête*, man and animal cannot be seen as simply a binary opposition, but are part of the complicated spectrum that Cadman describes, which makes a clear-cut distinction between the two virtually impossible.

When it comes to the discussion of consciousness in the bêtes, it is important to consider how they differentiate themselves from humans and how they are similar. For example, when Graham talks to a pig, it claims that bêtes "have not acquired that human skill – the ability to *lie*" (48). This claim along with Graham's application of sarcasm to a cow's voice are examples of possible differences

between humans and bêtes. These examples suggest that the bêtes are more innocent and virtuous than humans – lying and being sarcastic are not options for them. This notion points back to a central idea in *Gulliver's Travels,* which John Simons uses as an example in his book on animal rights. He emphasizes that the so-called Houyhmhms were "far superior, both functionally and morally, to the slippery and duplicitous languages of humans" (Simons 134). The idea of a morally superior race is also applicable to *Bête*, but becomes complicated by the war that emerges between bêtes and humans, because the bêtes mirror human war strategies to win. In a way, the integrity of the bêtes becomes tainted when they begin to imitate human behavior.

The war entails a series of paradoxes in the novel and questions of oppression and hierarchy are especially significant in this regard. As Preacherman argues: "'It's not *them*! The dumb animals are the ones you *should* feel guilty about killing. They're innocent! It's the ones with chips we should be killing. They're the devil! The software algorithms are using these various animals as tools, as cat's-paws, that's all. And they're wielding them for the devil'" (Roberts 38). Preacherman believes that the bêtes have taken control over the entire animal kingdom, and thus have become the superior animal race.

The bêtes become a substantial threat to humanity when war emerges. But exactly what do the bêtes want and why? Graham points to the fact that "[m]ost humans, for most of human history, have not loved animals (…) They have loved *eating* animals. They have loved hunting, killing and butchering animals. It's difficult to see how the animals, now they were learning to talk, would be anything other than annoyed by this deep history" (45). When the issue of animal exploitation is set up in this manner, the ability to speak seems like a small and insignificant way for the humans to apologize for their mistakes. Although it is mere speculation to consider the speaking abilities of the bêtes as an apology, this interpretation paves the way for some interesting aspects. When discussing animals with regard to oppression, a well-known analogy is the genocide of World War II. This is because "[t]he history of oppression has always been marked by arguments that the oppressed are not worthy of consideration because they do not possess fully human characteristics or, to put it baldly, are more like animals than humans" (Simons 129). In the world of *Bête*, an oppressed species has obtained a quality that is so connected to the idea of humanity that this argument of oppression cannot be applied. However, it is questionable if speech is enough to keep the bêtes from being oppressed and whether it helps them become legitimate citizens.

Bête citizenship is discussed on multiple levels in the novel. In the news, it is debated how to best integrate the bêtes into society: "Once the canny beasts are granted full citizenship they can be

taxed! Why deny the contribution they can make to European productivity? Here is the key to a renewal of prosperity: instead of treating them like second class citizens, integrate them fully into society" (Roberts 88). Whether taxation would benefit the bêtes is highly questionable. It *is* possible to argue that the idea builds on equality and could help obstruct part of the aforementioned hierarchy, bringing the rights of bêtes closer to the rights of humans. However, more than anything else, it appears to be a purely economic and egocentric measure that benefits man only. Taxation functions as a new way for the humans to exploit animals.

The idea of bête citizenship does not last for long. Graham points out: "'last year we were thinking of making bêtes citizens and now we're burning bêtes in big pyres all across Northumberland.' 'Because humans so are scrupulous about not killing other humans, you mean?' miaowed the cat smugly. 'Because citizenship is the infallible protection about being shot, bombed, gassed or burnt to death?'" (187). With citizenship comes the risk of being killed by other citizens, which essentially leaves the bêtes in the same – or perhaps even a worse – societal position than before bêteness. Being at war with humans is no desired position to be in.

The previously mentioned paradoxes of *Bête* appear multiple times in the novel, both in relation to speech abilities and with regard to war. Preacherman argues:

> 'I told them people would get fed up with listening to animals talking of nothing but Green propaganda. You know what they said to me? They said: why, what *else* would the animals say to humankind, Preacherman? You think maybe they would speak words of kindness for our hundreds of thousands of years of exploitation and slaughter? Of course they're angry! *We're* just giving them a voice to voice their anger'. (26)

The bêtes are quite literally ready to talk, but the question is whether the humans are ready to listen to the bêtes and thus be confronted with the mistakes they have made in the past. Numerous factors indicate that humans have regrets about the brain chips. The bêtes not only confront humans about thousands of years of exploitation, but also become a substantive threat to human life. The bêtes are able to communicate with each other through a shared WiFi-based consciousness, and this is something that Graham comes to experience. His killing of the bête cow thus comes to all of the bêtes attention, which makes him ponder: "[o]f course they knew who I was. It dawned belatedly on me, standing there, that – like Anne's cat – all these cows had read my piece. That they probably regarded me as a murderer. Awkward. But then again: fuck it" (79). This shared consciousness gives the bêtes a

substantial advantage in the war with their enemy. Furthermore, "they are using the tactics humans have used since the first armies were conscripted. They're raiding, destroying what they can, killing people" (187). The bêtes' use of human war tactics against the humans is deeply ironic and proof that man unintentionally has created a highly advanced enemy. As Mary, a woman who gives Graham shelter, points out, "[w]hen you think what *our kind* has done to the natural world,' she said, in a gloomy voice. 'Why should we expect mercy from them?" (207). It is curious to think about what kind of reaction the humans had anticipated from the bêtes when implanting them with chips. As implied by Mary, it is not surprising and even understandable if the bêtes seek some sort of revenge.

The subject of empathy is essential for *Bête*, wherefore I will utilize Suzanne Keen's theory on readers' empathy in the following section. Keen argues that "empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization" (69). This is an important point with regard to *Bête*, because the novel takes place in a futuristic world and is about a species that does not exist in real life. It goes without saying that readers' empathy is subjective and is influenced by a number of factors, which are difficult to control for both author and reader. However, it is still important and intriguing to consider different aspects of empathy in *Bête*, because the novel deals with the topic in an intricate and extraordinary way. When we consider the aforementioned topic of oppression, it is certainly relevant to look at the differences between man and bête. Although one might initially presume that readers tend to feel more empathy with other humans than say, a talking animal,

> a strong pattern emerges supporting the notion that character identification lies at the heart of readers' empathy. These characters need not be human (…) This suggests that character identification and empathy felt for fictional characters requires certain traits (such as name, a recognizable situation, and at least implicit feelings) but dispenses with other requirements associated with realistic representation. (Keen 68)

It is essential for *Bête* that the species of a character is not important for the feeling of empathy. Some of the bêtes have names and they are able to express their feelings through speech, which, according to Keen, is enough to lay the groundwork for empathetic reading. Keen also suggests that "many readers report that novels in which child characters are subjected to cruel or unfair treatment evoke empathy" (69). I argue that it is possible to make a connection between children and animals in this regard. Children and animals are both generally viewed as innocent creatures and often rendered more

or less defenseless. Therefore, fictional animals, generally speaking, can also appeal to the empathy of a reader. The bêtes, of course, are not animals as we know them. Graham believes that the bêtes are the result of a strategy meant to stop people from eating meat, which is a curious thought with regard to empathy. Is the ability of speech empathy-evoking? Speech certainly gives the bêtes agency, which Keen also argues is important in creating character identification (68). It is debatable whether speech is an advantage or a disadvantage for the bêtes when it comes to empathy. They are able to stand up for themselves and argue intelligently with the humans: "'I know what I feel the same way you know what you feel,' said the cat. 'My consciousness is blended machine and animal brain. Yours is like mine, but less. How can you be sure that what *you're* feeling is genuine? How to stand outside oneself?'" (Roberts 102). The intelligence of the bêtes can be seen as an advantage in the way that they can argue their viewpoints and defend themselves. However, Cincinnatus' cunning and sarcastic manner often puts him in a dangerous position, because Graham is provoked by it. In fact, the speech ability ends up being an argument for the humans to justify killing the bêtes.

One could ask the question: which characters does the reader feel empathy for in *Bête*? As mentioned, empathy will undoubtedly vary from reader to reader, but one aspect that is often mentioned with regard to readers' empathy is narration (Keen 93). Roberts uses first person narration, which naturally brings the reader closer to the character from whose perspective the story unfolds. First person narration is often strongly connected to empathy, because the ability to see inside the mind of the character makes them easier to understand and their actions easier to follow. However, as the first part of my analysis showed, Graham shows signs of unreliability while also possessing character traits that are not very sympathetic. He is stubborn, sarcastic and treats the people and bêtes around him badly. How then, does this closeness to an unlikeable character affect readers' empathy? "The phenomenon of empathy for unattractive characters actually strengthens the case for the idea of minimal requirements for identification", Keen argues (75-76). We need only to find a fraction of Graham's personality appealing in order to empathize with him. Aside from his problematic character traits, Graham also addresses the reader directly in a very coarse way: "You think I killed that cow like a hunter? I killed it out of my own stubbornness and wrath. You dislike me for killing it. *You're* no vegetarian, though, hypocrite, reader, my image. My friend" (Roberts 9). Calling the reader a hypocrite is bold and insulting, and thus develops the risk of alienating the reader. At the same time however, Graham is self-conscious of his issues. He knows that he is stubborn; he knows that he is bitter, and he openly shares this with the reader. This could help him in winning the reader over, because he demonstrates self-awareness. Keen argues that characterization "such as naming, description, indirect

implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness, may be assumed to contribute to the potential for character identification and thus for empathy" (93). Graham's self-awareness demonstrates roundness in character, and his sarcasm and use of humor might soften the readers' impression of him. If the reader likes his coarse humor and nothing else, this is enough to establish empathy.

Bête deals with issues such as vegetarianism and examines what the future might hold. These topics are under ample discussion in international politics today and are often the cause of great controversy and debate. Choosing such topics for a novel risks further alienating the reader: "Negative factors such as prejudice, bias, impatience with a particular literary style, or feeling rushed or pressured might also account for unresponsive reading" (72), Keen mentions. Some elements of *Bête*, vegetarianism for example, might cause the reader to feel pressured to respond in a certain way, but as established, the novel gives no right or wrong answer to the sensitive questions it poses. Its main topics are intricately portrayed and different characters illustrate different beliefs, which augments the ways in which the reader can or will feel empathy. The intricacy of the questions also makes it challenging to unveil what viewpoints are considered to be 'correct' by the implied author (73). Readers must decide for themselves what they consider the right interpretation.

Humor and irony play a big role in the novel, and it is not only seen in Graham's behavior. Multiple absurd scenarios unfold in the novel, for example when Preacherman and Graham talk about the bête war:

> 'when you go into combat against other human beings, you have to – you know. The problem is you have to kill human beings.' 'I would have thought that was rather the point.' 'Ah, but fighting bêtes is different, you see. The troops get markedly *less* PTSD'ed by gunning down cows and dogs.' (…) 'You scorch down the enemy with your modern weapons, and a lot of them burn, and there's this stench of burning human flesh, which is apparently really unsettling and disturbing. But fighting the bêtes? Burn them up and it just smells like a barbecue'. (Roberts 253-54)

This scene is so absurd that one feels compelled to laugh, but at the same time a certain logic characterizes it – it makes sense that killing an animal does not provoke PTSD in the same way as killing humans does and it also makes sense that burning animals smell like food. However, the

situation becomes more tragic than comical when one remembers that the bêtes are informed and articulating creatures. This tragicomic interchangeability creates a turbulence of feelings within the reader that is not easily controlled or understood. Empathy comes and goes throughout the novel and shifts as the characters develop and change. This arguably makes the novel appeal broadly, because the different shifts throughout the story make it possible to establish readers' empathy in multiple ways.

Within the study of anthropomorphism, one question is central: can anthropomorphic fiction tell us anything about what it is like to be an animal? Thomas Nagel's paper "What is it like to be a bat?" is often used to discuss this issue. In his paper, Nagel discusses to which extent it is possible for humans to understand what it is like to be a bat. Derek Ryan explains:

> Nagel conceives of this kind of knowledge of the animal's experience as a sliding scale where the 'distance between oneself and other persons and other species can fall anywhere on a continuum'. Humans have their place on this scale, where we cannot, strictly speaking, know what it is like to be another human (even though we may know what it is like for us to *act like* another human) (…) When we take into account the multiplicity of differences between species as well as within species, the difficulty of the task is furthered. (38)

With this in mind, one could ask what the difference is between trying to put oneself in another person's place and in an animal's place. Is there a limit to what a writer can and *should* do in this regard? *Bête* highly blurres the lines between what is animalistic and what is not and with this, the idea of literary characters also becomes obscured. The use of speech in the novel creates a complication, because bêtes and humans become difficult to distinguish from each other. The medium contributes highly to this complication. We naturally cannot see the characters; we use our imagination to create images of how they might look. But when a non-human character is given a feature that is so profoundly connected to humanity, it is possible to forget – even if for a moment – that the talking character is not human. Thus, when a cow says: "This actual world of what is knowable, in which we are and which is in us, remains both the material and the limit of our *consideration*" (Roberts 44), the phrase functions on more than one level. It creates a paradox in the representation of a non-human character through direct speech, but it also illustrates what one might refer to as unknowability (Park 11) – the ever-present fact that we can never know how other species experience the world.

What then, does *Bête* tell us about being human and being an animal and in which ways? Arguably, besides examining the differences between animal and man, the novel also explores what it means to be human. As previously mentioned, Graham physically comes to resemble an animal more and more throughout the story. His inner character, however, seems to move in a different direction:

> Graham seems to become softer and more *human*. His love for Anne, and his eventual pact with animal-tribe leader The Lamb gives the reader hope that Graham might finally view the animal kingdom as more than a source of income, or as 'dumb' pets. Is what Roberts is getting at here, then, the theme of *tolerance*, and the idea that each human and indeed each animal is different, and as such will lead their lives in a different way? (Rogers, "Language and Ethics…")

In this interpretation, there seems to be a distinction between what it means to be *human* and what it means to be *humane*. Graham softens his view on bêtes and ends up becoming non-human but increasingly humane. As previously mentioned, Graham applies human characteristics to animals and vice versa, although he contends that animals and humans should not and cannot be compared. This barrier is slowly erased throughout the novel and thus, as Graham becomes increasingly animalistic in character, the more conscious he becomes of the intricate connections between humans and animals. Graham's true consciousness surfaces.

John Simons distinguishes between fables, trivial anthropomorphism and strong anthropomorphism. According to his definitions, *Bête* qualifies as representing the latter:

> Strong anthropomorphism is a category of representation which deals with animals as if they were humans but does it in such a way as either to show how the non-human experience differs from the human or to create profound questions in the readers' mind as to the extent to which humans and non-humans are really different. (120)

The complicated spectrum of species in the novel inarguably makes one consider the differences and similarities between humans, animals and bêtes. The bêtes are unlike 'normal' animals but also unlike humans, so the question is whether they are supposed to tell us something about being an animal or something about being human. Perhaps the answer is that they tell us something about both. The question of unknowability emerges when we consider whether a human author can tell us something

about what it is like to be a bat (or a bête). However, the question of unknowability is similar when, for instance, a female author writes from the perspective of a man or the other way around. Interestingly, realism is not what is not what is central to anthropomorphic fiction (Cadman 174) and as previously illustrated, realistic characterization is not necessary for readers' empathy either. Set in a futuristic and bizarre world, *Bête* makes the reader think deeply about both the inner lives of animals and empathy. Although most researchers of anthropomorphism agree that humans cannot know what it is like to be an animal, *Bête* forces us to try. The fact that we do not know should never keep us from trying: "What we don't know about animals and what we get wrong about animals have great significance in their own right as something separate from securing ultimate certainty, for the process of extended scrutiny and investigation is in itself a political and ethical bridge" (Park 13). The novel can be seen as a critique of human greed and selfishness. It shows us what happens when humans take advantage of animals and use them for their own benefits. That is, until they regret this decision and realize that a strong and possibly vindictive species threatens humanity. Moreover, the novel also builds on the idea of unknowability in the way it examines consciousness. Perhaps the fact that we do not know and presumably cannot ever know how animals feel and why they behave the way they do should be enough knowledge to treat them like we (should) treat humans – with respect and empathy: "Homo sapiens, Homo loquens, Homo bête. All the same" (Roberts 284).

In this article, I have examined Adam Roberts' *Bête* through the lens of anthropomorphism and empathy. I began by characterizing the main character, Graham, and found that he starts out as an incredibly stubborn and arrogant character, who shows signs of unreliability. However, he undergoes great development over the course of the novel. This development brings into question what it means to be human, what it means to be animal and shows how these two are more connected than one might assume. The complicated spectrum of species in *Bête* creates different forms of hierarchy. Humans have chosen which animals should be given the ability to speak. The ones chosen, the bêtes, become illegal to kill – but only until they pose a threat to humanity and a war must be fought. Meanwhile, the 'dumb' animals remain legal to prey on. The bête war entails questions of oppression and revenge. After years of exploitation and killings, the bêtes are angry – and they now have an actual voice to declare this anger with.

The topic of readers' empathy is established on multiple levels but also becomes obscured along the way. The reader is inside the head of Graham, an unappealing character, which simultaneously makes us understand him and dislike him – empathy comes and goes. The current topics of

vegetarianism and dread of the future can both engage the reader but also risks alienation through didacticisms. Through the use of tragicomedy, multiple absurd scenarios play out in the novel, which places the reader in a position where it is difficult to find the right response and perhaps this is because there is no right response. When the burning of bêtes is described as smelling like a barbecue, it is difficult not to laugh, but also difficult not to ponder over the immorality of the scene. One thing is for sure, *Bête* is an expression of strong anthropomorphism. It makes us consider what it is like to be a human, what it is like to be an animal and what it is like to be a bête.

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