


Recentring the Rabbits: An Analysis of Animality and Anthropomorphism in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*

Therese Villemoes Marstal 

Introduction

Published in 1972, Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down* became first a bestseller and then a classic of children's literature. It tells the story of a small group of rabbits who, due to a prophesied catastrophe, decide to leave their warren and travel across the English countryside to find a new place to live. As in most stories that take animals as their main characters, the rabbits are heavily anthropomorphized – they are given language and mythology, human-adjacent problem-solving skills, and a vaguely monarchic societal structure with militaristic rankings among the rabbits. Perhaps because of this, scholarship on the novel has largely centered on the allegorical or human-centered aspects of the text, such as the rabbit mythology (Meyer; Bridgeman; Chapman) and the role of storytelling within the novel (Peters), or concerned itself with the meta aspects of the text, such as its genre (Miltner; Hammond), to an extent where the fact that the main characters are rabbits has been treated as almost incidental. In this paper, I argue for the necessity of a re-centering of animality in the story, and through my analysis aim to show that the rabbithood of its characters is not only non-incidental, but crucial to the novel, as animality is not just a lens through which the story is told, but in fact a central theme of the work.

In order to open up this aspect of the novel, I draw upon animal theory. Animal theory as a strategy for literary analysis offers theoretical frameworks for approaching the depictions of and relationship to animals in human culture. While the term covers a wide variety of philosophical and critical approaches, from the fairly abstract to quite concrete activist manifestations, Derek Ryan suggests a clear common aim in his book *Animal Theory: A Critical Introduction*, where he writes:

Scholars working on questions relating to animals and animality share the aim of countering anthropocentrism by simultaneously critiquing human exceptionalism – the sense that we are a superior species – and more rigorously exploring the representation,

lives and interests of animals which have at best been undervalued and at most gone unnoticed. (13)

Despite this devaluation of animal lives and interests, animals are not *absent* from literature – in fact quite the opposite. In *Thinking with Animals*, Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman explore how humans have historically assumed “a community of thought and feeling between themselves and a surprisingly wide array of animals; they also recruit animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of their own experience and fantasies” (2). This creates an interesting and paradoxical relationship between humanity and animality, because while on the one hand animals might inspire “a community of thought and feeling” (2) and therefore constitute a pervasive presence in philosophy, mythology and fiction, human-animal relations are also marked by violence and subjugation in the realms of “the global agricultural industry, medical and cosmetic research, hunting, the destruction of natural habitats, domestication and the captivation of animals in zoos” (Ryan 13).

Within animal theory, no extensive work has yet been done on *Watership Down* specifically, and so this paper constitutes a new addition to the growing body of scholarship on literary depictions of animality. *Watership Down* is an especially interesting case study when approaching the paradoxes of human-animal relations, as it brings into play several different modes of what Daston and Mitman call “thinking with animals.” It is on one level an allegorical tale in which the anthropomorphic rabbits serve as a vehicle for commenting on “human nature and the human predicament” (Hammond 48). On another, Adams’ keen attention to both rabbit physiology and the landscape of the English countryside, as well as his frequent references to R. M. Lockley’s 1964 nonfiction work *The Private Life of the Rabbit: An Account of the Life, History and Social Behavior of the Wild Rabbit*, makes the story feel almost like a nature documentary, in which the plot and the personalities of the rabbits are merely a “hook” to draw the reader in. Perhaps in line with this documentarist mode, the story also occasionally becomes a raging indictment of human cruelty towards animals. Lastly, the novel engages the more nebulous concept of what Daston and Mitman have described as the “intense yearning to transcend the confines of self and species, to understand from the inside or even to become an animal” (7). I do not engage with all of these aspects of the novel with equal depth in this paper, but I touch upon most of them in the following analysis.

Anthropomorphism in animal theory

A central question within animal theory in literary studies has been how to approach anthropomorphism and more specifically “whether it can or should be avoided” (Ryan 36). At the

heart of this debate is the question of whether or not anthropomorphism is inherently anthropocentric, and therefore damaging to human-animal relations, or whether anthropomorphism has the potential to function as a tool to dismantle anthropocentrism and the othering of animals by helping humans to inhabit animal points of view and thereby making them open to less anthropocentric ways to think about and treat animals. Arguments that anthropomorphism should be avoided fall largely within two categories: First, that anthropomorphizing animals risks no longer treating them as animals, but simply making them stand-ins for humans. In *Animal Theory*, Ryan addresses how this has often been the case in theoretical writings about animals, that tend to “transform [animals] into symbols and metaphors to explain primarily human concerns” (17), such as in Lacan’s writing on psychoanalysis in which “interest in animality is often undermined by the use of animal figures as substitutes for human fears and desires, or as points of contrast for an exploration of human language” (17). The second category of arguments against anthropomorphism centers on the observation that understanding the subjective experiences of animals is fundamentally beyond human capability, and so “[t]he imaginative act of trying to explain their world runs the risk of becoming a kind of lie” (36). This view is heavily informed by philosopher Thomas Nagel’s 1974 essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” While the main focus of Nagel’s essay is to address the mind-body problem within philosophy, the central thought experiment from which the essay takes its name aptly illustrates the limitations of humans trying to inhabit an animal point of view:

[B]at sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. [...] It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one’s arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals [...]. Insofar as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. (168)

Nagel’s argument is that any attempt by humans to imagine the subjective experience of a bat, or any other animal for that matter, will inevitably fall short. From Nagel’s thought experiment, it follows that anthropomorphism inevitably answers the wrong question: “What is it like for a human

to be an animal?” rather than “what is it like for a given animal to be that animal?” Accepting this, anthropomorphism becomes inherently anthropocentric: If any attempt by humans to approach or imagine animal subjectivity is bound to fail, anthropomorphism becomes simply an act of erasure, replacing the actual subjective experiences of animals with human subjectivity.

However, several theorists have challenged this claim. Mark Payne in *The Animal Part* argues first that Nagel does imagination an injustice when he describes the act of imagining what it is like to be a bat as “a kind of nonactualized dressing up in which we imagine attaching some prosthetic to ourselves that mimics the animal’s body” (14). He then argues that Nagel’s emphasis on the differences between the sensory equipment of humans and bats overlooks the other, more essential commonalities between them: “[W]e share the ground of our being with all the other animals, thinking our way into the life of any one of them only requires us to extend to them the same sympathy that we use to think about the lives of other human beings” (15). This emphasis on commonality between humans and animals is similarly the focus for Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal,” as well as Anat Pick’s notion of “creatureliness.” These theories serve as a challenge to Nagel’s conclusions regarding the limitations of human imagination: They argue for the feasibility of imagining the animal mind. They further emphasize that while it might be impossible for a human to fully understand what it would be like to perceive the world via echolocation rather than sight, this does not render the act of trying to imagine it meaningless. As Jane Bennett writes in *Vibrant Matter*, “an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances. [...] In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture,’ anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms” (99).

Animality and anthropomorphism in *Watership Down*

Approaching *Watership Down* with these theories of anthropomorphism in mind, it becomes apparent that the anthropomorphism in the novel places itself somewhere in between a Nagel-like acknowledgement of the limitations of human imagination in inhabiting animal subjectivity, and an insistence on approaching that subjectivity and seeking commonality anyway. At first glance the story seems relentlessly anthropocentric in its anthropomorphism, making its rabbits merely furred stand-ins for humans: Adams’ rabbits are given language, a tradition for storytelling and an extensive mythology, as well as societies and relationships explicitly mirroring those of humans. This is clear from the opening of the novel, which introduces the frail, prophetic rabbit Fiver and his kind and protective brother, Hazel. While out feeding, the two encounter a noticeboard announcing that the field near Sandleford Park, where their warren is situated, is going to be

developed for the construction of human residences. The rabbits can't read the sign, but upon seeing it, Fiver has a vision of a coming danger and the field being covered with blood. He insists that they must evacuate the warren. Fiver and Hazel then go to see the Chief Rabbit, who disregards Fiver's warning, leading to the two of them instead recruiting a small group of rabbits that are willing to go with them. When they try to leave, they are intercepted by the warren's "owsla" – a sort of rabbit-militia "or group of strong or clever rabbits [...] surrounding the Chief Rabbit and exercising authority" (Adams 17). With help from the defected owsla-officer Bigwig, Hazel, Fiver and their band of rabbits manage to escape and start their journey. All of this seems largely allegorical, a conflict and societal structure that reflects human lives and interests more than those of rabbits. The final arc of the novel, in which the Sandleford rabbits are in conflict with another warren of militaristic rabbits is similarly fantastical and human. However, despite this initial anthropocentrism, the text still engages actively with the animality of its characters – and it does so in four central ways, which I will analyze in the following sections. First, I will examine the novel's close attention to rabbit physicality. Second, I turn to the novel's use of myth as cultural translation between human and animal perception. Third I analyze the actual act of translation incorporated in the text with regards to the invented rabbit language of the novel. And finally, I analyze the novel's depiction of vulnerability both as a general existential condition of rabbithood and specifically in human-animal relations.

Animal physicality

In the introduction I alluded to the occasionally documentarist quality of the novel. This quality stems primarily from how the text pays close attention to rabbit behavior, needs and physicality. This is especially clear in the rabbits' journey from Sandleford to Watership Down, which is fragmented and slow and distinctly attuned to the way rabbits move, both in terms of pure physicality, as when it is described how "[rabbits] have two natural gaits – the gentle, lolloping forward movement of the warren on a summer evening and the lightning dash for cover that every human has seen at some time or other" (Adams 36), as well as the manner in which their constant attention to signs of danger affects their ability to travel as a group: "[I]n this low undergrowth their disorganized progress and uneven, differing rhythms of movement delayed them still more than in the wood. There were continual stampings of alarm, pausing, freezing to the spot at the sound of movement" (65). This careful attention to details of rabbit physicality is also present in descriptions of how one rabbit is "opening and shutting his mouth and licking his lips, much as a cat does when something disgusts it" (59) in fear when encountering a dead hedgehog, and in how, when Hazel returns to the group after scouting ahead, "they raised their heads and gazed at him,

all together, for a moment, before returning to their feeding” (51). Coupled with the fact that the rabbits, despite their internal anthropomorphism, never carry out any physical act that would not be possible for a rabbit, this serves to anchor the story in the animality of its characters. At the same time, the text does not present the reader’s ability to inhabit a rabbit body as unproblematic – it becomes instead something that requires an intermediary, a guide or a translator, which takes the form of an omniscient narrator. The novel’s use of an omniscient narrator is one of the most effective tools that it employs in approaching animal subjectivity, as well as modulating the distance between (human) reader and (animal) characters. Throughout the story, the narrator will occasionally interrupt the flow of narrated events to explain some detail or other to the reader. In almost every instance, it is to explain some aspect of rabbit life or rabbit perspective that is deemed to be counterintuitive or foreign to a human reader. One example of this is when the rabbits arrive at Watership Down and have to climb the hills:

A man walks upright. For him it is strenuous to climb a steep hill, because he has to keep pushing his own vertical mass upwards and cannot gain any momentum. The rabbit is better off. His forelegs support his horizontal body and the great back legs do the work. [...] On the other hand, the man is five or six feet above the hillside and can see all round. [...] The rabbits’ anxieties and strain in climbing the down were different, therefore, from those which you, reader, will experience if you go there. Their main trouble was not bodily fatigue. When Hazel had said that they were all tired out, he had meant that they were feeling the strain of prolonged insecurity and fear. (133)

What is interesting about this passage is that it actually increases the distance between the reader and the rabbits. The passages immediately before are descriptions of the landscape and close narration of the actions and thoughts of the rabbits, a style in which the presence of the narrator as mediator between the narrated events and the reader is minimized, but in the extract above the narrator addresses the reader directly, thereby calling attention to the fact that the events of the story are being communicated with the reader in mind. The extract thus calls attention to the limitations of the reader’s imagination in inhabiting the world of the rabbits – it is telling the reader that here they might have imagined wrong. In this sense, the text seems to align with Nagel’s view of animal subjectivity as fundamentally inaccessible, but the close attention to rabbit physicality can also be seen as doing the exact opposite – namely emphasizing commonalities rather than differences between human and animal existence. As Anat Pick emphasizes in *Creaturely Poetics*, “the corporeal reality of living bodies” (3) can be a particularly salient starting point for exploring the

commonalities between humans and animals. Pick introduces the concept of “creatureliness” to describe this commonality, creating a shared category for humans and animals in that they are all creatures. She writes that “the creature, then, is first and foremost a living body” (5). In Pick’s writing, an emphasis on the external and on embodiment becomes a means to address the existential conditions that follow from having a body, and therefore are shared by all creatures. In terms of the role physicality plays in *Watership Down*, it is perhaps less a question of commonality and more one of comprehensibility – while the rabbits’ subjectivities are anthropomorphized to make them relatable to a human reader, their bodies are not. Instead, the text guides the reader’s attention to these bodies, to the ways they move and are situated within the landscape, implying that attention is all that is required for understanding – the fact of external, bodily existence is treated as perfectly comprehensible, even to a reader in possession of a vastly different body.

Myth as interspecies translation

This emphasis on rabbit physicality is not the only way in which *Watership Down* engages with the animality of its characters. The story is not just placing human minds in animal bodies, it also engages actively with the notion of animal subjectivity. In *Watership Down*, the anthropomorphic elements of speech and mythology serve as a form of translation, intended to bring the human reader as close to a rabbit point of view as possible, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of ever fully inhabiting this position. One example of this is “The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrairah,” the rabbit creation myth told in chapter 6 of the novel. In this story-within-the-story, Frith (a god-like figure vaguely equated with the sun) creates the world as well as “all the animals and birds” – but, the story emphasizes, “when he first made them they were all the same. The sparrow and the kestrel were friends and they both ate seeds and flies. And the fox and the rabbit were friends and they both ate grass” (Adams 37). The story then introduces its mythological hero, El-ahrairah, the Rabbit Prince, whose people have grown so numerous that “the grass began to grow thin and the rabbits wandered everywhere, multiplying and eating as they went” (38). Frith asks El-ahrairah to control his people, but El-ahrairah replies that he will not: “My people are the strongest in the world, for they breed faster and eat more than any of the other people” (38). In order to punish El-ahrairah and keep his people in check, Frith decides to make the animals different from each other by giving them each a gift, and this is how predators are created: While the blackbird is distinguished from other animals by his beautiful song, the stoat, the weasel and the fox are given “cunning hearts and sharp teeth” (39), the cat is given “silent feet and eyes that can see in the dark” (39), and all of them are given “the desire to hunt and slay and eat the children of El-ahrairah” (38). When El-ahrairah hears this, he starts digging holes to hide in and refuses to

come out even when Frith comes by to bless him too. Impressed by El-Ahrrairah's perseverance, Frith decides to bless the bottom half of him that is sticking out of the hole, and this is how the rabbits end up with their powerful legs that allow them to run "faster than any creature in the world" (40). The story ends with Frith announcing the dual curse and blessing of the rabbits: "All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed" (40).

Of course, as an approximation of how rabbits actually perceive the world around them, this story widely misses the mark. Not only is the need for a creation myth to explain the world in the first place a distinctly human trait, "The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrrairah" also echoes Adams' own very specific and not particularly rabbit-like situatedness in a Christian culture, with its monotheistic emphasis on a singular powerful being as the creator of the world with a chosen people among his creations, who start out in a Paradise-like existence that is then lost and replaced by a life of hardship. However, the function of the creation myth within the novel overall aligns quite well with getting a human reader to inhabit a rabbit point of view. It asks the reader to set aside preconceived ideas of human exceptionalism, by implying that while humans of course consider their own people to be "the strongest in the world," this is not a universal truth, but instead contingent on a human point of view that can therefore be set aside. In this way, the myth can be considered an example of the kind of "carefully approached" anthropomorphism that Ryan argues "can provide a useful mode of conceptualising multiple agencies that are not human, and in the process can 'counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world'" (Ryan 41). The myth is also a concrete example of how the novel engages thematically with the concept of rabbithood, as it explores the existential conditions of rabbits: If the first function of the myth is to guide the reader into assuming a point of view in which rabbits (rather than humans) are the center of the world, the second function is to explore the ways in which this world-view would differ from a human one. The inclusion of a rabbit creation myth in *Watership Down* is the text posing the question: *If rabbits used mythology to explain the world the way humans do, what would they need to explain?* The answer it provides is that they would need to explain why they seem to live in a world where everything wants to kill them, thereby centering the existential conditions of prey animals. It further asks: *If rabbits were to consider themselves a chosen people, separate from the rest of creation, what might be the virtues they would laud themselves for and emphasize when explaining their own uniqueness?* And provides the answer that they would celebrate their own speed and multiplicity. These values might be understandable to a human reader, but they are still slightly off-center from the qualities humanity has historically praised itself for, such as "language,

reason and ethical judgement” (Ryan 6). The myth presents a carefully balanced push-and-pull between familiarity and othering – otherness made familiar. This approach to animal subjectivity is characteristic of the work as a whole: *Watership Down* does not ignore the alienness of animal consciousness to a human mind, nor does it replace animal subjectivity with human subjectivity in its depiction of its rabbit characters. Instead, it sets out to translate rabbit subjectivity into human terms and human ways of imagining the world, while at the same time emphasizing rabbit interests and existential conditions.

Rabbit language and translation

Another act of translation and another way in which the novel mediates between the actual human subjectivity of the reader and the imagined and to some extent unimaginable animal subjectivity of the rabbits, is through the novel’s invented rabbit language. Throughout the novel, rabbit vocabulary is introduced for various reasons, and used with varying consistency – for instance, cars are referred to as cars in the narration, but in direct speech the onomatopoeic rabbit word “hrududu” is used instead, to imply the unfamiliarity of cars to the rabbits. But perhaps more interesting are the words that remain “untranslated” throughout the novel – namely the words for concepts that do not have an equivalent in human speech. The novel introduces the term “silflay” to describe the concept of going above ground to feed. No human language is likely to have a single vocabulary term for this concept, because it is not a frequent or relevant part of human life, but if rabbits did have language the way humans do, they would probably need a word for it. The fact that the text introduces the term at all illustrates the novel’s effort to approach animal subjectivity despite the many human attributes it assigns to the rabbits. It also serves to underline the general framing of the text as a translated work, by including vocabulary that it insists is untranslatable – something that becomes even clearer when looking at another rabbit vocabulary term: “tharn”. When one rabbit is referred to in direct speech as the “*marli tharn*” (Adams 338), it is followed by a translation note: “*Marli* – a doe. *Tharn* – stupefied, distraught. In this particular context, the nearest translation might be ‘the maiden all forlorn’” (338). The fact that the translation note implies uncertainty is of course a pretense, because the word as well as the context in which it is used are both invented by the author, but within the communicative situation of the novel, it creates an interesting effect. First, to insist on the untranslatability of “tharn,” the novel calls attention to some aspect of rabbit subjectivity that remains inaccessible to humans – humans can imagine what it might be like to be “tharn,” they might even have seen a rabbit go “tharn” (when the novel first introduces the term, it uses the example of a rabbit frozen in front of headlights (36)), but they can never know what it is like for a rabbit to be “tharn.” Second, unlike “silflay,”

the word “tharn” does have possible one-word translations in English (“stupefied,” “distracted,” “forlorn”) but the insistence on treating the invented word “tharn” as untranslatable undermines the otherwise confident anthropomorphism of the novel as a whole. The uncertain suggestion that “the nearest translation might be ‘the maiden all forlorn’” (338) implies that something is lost in the translation, and that there is an element of localization necessary in the translation – a localization not related to making the text understandable between cultures, but between species. Framing the text as a translation calls attention to the entirety of the text as a construct explicitly manufactured to make rabbits understandable to humans. The presence of the untranslatable rabbit language opens the possibility of seeing the anthropomorphic elements, such as the rabbit mythology, as parts of a larger act of translation intended to bridge a species gap in perception, not as an attempt to replace rabbit subjectivity with a more human one.

Vulnerability and human-animal relations

In the previous sections I have analyzed how *Watership Down* thematically engages with the existential conditions of rabbit life and how it attempts to approach animal subjectivity. In the final part of the analysis, I turn to the question of how *Watership Down* depicts animality in human-animal relations, and I once again draw upon Pick’s concept of creatureliness. In the first part of my analysis, I used the term creatureliness to describe the cross-species commonality emphasized in *Watership Down* through its attention to rabbit physicality. In this section, I introduce Pick’s notion of vulnerability alongside her concept of creatureliness, which complicates the idea of creatureliness as commonality.

In her essay “Vulnerability” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, Pick presents the concept of vulnerability as a lens through which to approach the complexities of human-animal relations, as well as the fraught human-animal distinction. Pick argues that vulnerability is both a shared existential condition for humans and animals, a consequence of embodied creatureliness, but it is also a defining condition in the unequal relationship between humans and animals, in which animals are comparatively more vulnerable than humans. Pick describes this as “the duality of vulnerability as the condition of fragility and finitude shared by everything that lives and as susceptibility and exposure to orchestrated violence that affects some lives more than others” (“Vulnerability” 410), and summarizes: “[V]ulnerability is universal but unequally distributed” (410). Pick’s concept of creatureliness is thus closely intertwined with vulnerability, as vulnerability in Pick’s writing is framed as the existential condition of all embodied creatures. Vulnerability is also at the heart of *Watership Down*, something perhaps most easily illustrated by looking once again at “The Story of the Blessing of El-Ahrairah,” which remains a salient microcosm of many of the central themes of

the novel as a whole. Reading the myth with Pick in mind, it becomes clear that it places vulnerability at the absolute center of (rabbit) existence. The myth defines rabbit life as one in which “all the world will be your enemy” (40), in which the only defense is a fair chance at escape, and survival lies in multiplicity, in the survival of the people as a whole, not the individual: “Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed” (40). The conflicts of the novel continually center on the question of how the rabbits should handle their own vulnerability. Especially the early chapters of the novel depicting the journey from Sandleford to Watership Down are an exploration of what exactly it means to have the whole world as your enemy – all places are dangerous and every encounter is terrifying. These scenes, in conjunction with their mythological equivalent in “The Story of the Blessing of El-Ahraidh,” emphasize vulnerability as an existential condition of rabbit lives. However, the unequal distribution of vulnerability that Pick describes is not primarily about animals in the wild, or the vulnerability of prey animals. Pick’s main focus is the vulnerability of animals in relation to humans, and the violence of humans perpetrated against animals. This distinction is also very present in *Watership Down*.

So far, I have kept my focus on the relationship between humanity and animality in terms of the anthropomorphization of the rabbit characters. However, the relationship between the rabbit characters and the humans they encounter, directly or indirectly, is equally important in *Watership Down*. The story takes place in the English countryside, so while the main characters are wild animals, the areas they inhabit and travel through are also populated by humans. While some of the encounters with humanity are benign, such as when the rabbits pass through a field, spot a car, or cross a road, others stand out as some of the darkest parts of the novel. Furthermore, while the threat from humans is perceived as more ambiguous than that of for example a fox or a stoat, it carries a sense of alien terror that sets it apart from the many other dangers the rabbits face. The perhaps clearest example of this is the destruction of the Sandleford warren.

The destruction of the Sandleford warren is the inciting incident of the story that starts the rabbits on their journey, and so the reader learns of it at the story’s very beginning, through Fiver’s chilling prophesy (“There isn’t any danger here, at this moment. But it’s coming – it’s coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It’s covered with blood!” (19)) and the announcement on the noticeboard, which is illegible to the rabbits, but still printed in the book for the reader: “THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS” (20). However, since the rabbits leave Sandleford before the destruction happens, it is only quite late in the story that they (and the reader) learn exactly what it entailed. This happens when two rabbits, Bluebell and the injured Captain Holly, show up at Watership Down, having tracked Hazel’s group all the way from Sandleford. Their recount of the

destruction of the warren is one of the most viscerally horrifying parts of the novel. The first part is told by Captain Holly, who was outside the Warren when it was destroyed and saw humans arrive, covering up the runs and setting up their equipment. He describes how, even outside the warren, “the air began to turn bad” (159). At this point the reader is able to figure out that the humans are using some form of poison gas to kill the rabbits, but the actual cause and effect of the destruction remains vague and mysterious to the rabbits themselves, and the emphasis instead is placed on Bluebell’s experience of the chaos within the warren:

‘By this time the poisoned air must have been spreading through the runs and burrows underground. I can imagine what it must have been like-’

‘You can’t,’ said Bluebell. [...] ‘I heard the commotion beginning before I smelt the stuff. The does seemed to get it first and some of them began trying to get out. But the ones who had litters wouldn’t leave the kittens and they were attacking any rabbit who came near them. [...] Very soon the runs were crammed with rabbits clawing and clambering over each other. They went up the runs they were accustomed to and found them blocked. Some managed to turn round, but they couldn’t get back because of the rabbits coming up. And then the runs began to be blocked lower down with dead rabbits and the live rabbits tore them to pieces.’ (163)

The destruction of the Sandleford warren is not the only encounter between rabbits and humans, nor the only one in which humans pose a danger to the rabbits, but it is the most overwhelming example. The destruction of the Sandleford warren introduces a different kind of vulnerability to the one explored in other parts of the novel, because the manner and the scale of the killing is so different from anything else the rabbits have encountered. While the rabbits are constantly in danger and some of them die during their adventures, these deaths are treated as manageable existential conditions, the kind that can be accounted for in myth – rabbits might have the whole world as their enemy, but their deaths are individual. They are not in danger unless they are caught, and their multiplicity protects them from ever being truly eradicated. The vulnerability of rabbits in relation to humans is a different one, in which the scale of the violence is solely determined by human whim, and is not something the rabbits can protect themselves against or escape from. The novel is fairly heavy-handed in marking this distinction, not just between humans and rabbits, but between humans and animals in general, when it has Holly remark that: “All other elil¹ do what

¹ Meaning “the thousand”, the rabbit-language word for referring to their many enemies. Humans seem to exist on the periphery of this category; they are both elil and something else.

they have to do and Frith moves them as he moves us. They live on the earth and they need food. Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals" (159).

The fact that the account of the destruction of the Sandleford warren is placed fairly late in the novel is also not unimportant: It comes at a time when the reader has become familiar with inhabiting the anthropomorphized rabbit perspective. In the previous sections, I have emphasized how the novel in many ways attempts to bridge the species gap in perception by seeking commonality or understanding between human and rabbit subjectivities. The destruction of the Sandleford warren to some extent smashes that bridge, or reemphasizes the gap. The extreme violence and horror of the destruction of the warren creates an interesting juxtaposition between the "human" qualities of the rabbits and a very unflinching description of the violence perpetrated by humans against animals. It underlines the complexity of the thematic exploration of animality in *Watership Down*: On the one hand, *Watership Down* utilizes anthropomorphism to emphasize creatureliness and thereby blurs the human-animal distinction. On the other, the text makes a point of marking species distinction in the encounters between humanity and rabbits by emphasizing the unequal distribution of power and vulnerability.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed Richard Adams' *Watership Down* with a focus on the central role of animality in the narrative, and the thematic exploration of the existential conditions of rabbithood. Through the analysis, I have illustrated how the novel maintains questions of rabbit interests, subjectivity and experience as central foci despite the thorough anthropomorphization of its characters. In *Watership Down*, the anthropomorphism tilts away from anthropocentrism first by paying keen attention to rabbit physicality, thereby emphasizing the shared creatureliness of humans and rabbits. Second, by a kind of poetic translation, where aspects of rabbithood are conveyed through the invented mythology of the rabbits. And third, through the framing of the story as a translated work, that has been localized for the benefit of a human reader. In these ways, the novel explores and emphasizes the value of the subjective experiences of rabbits, and makes this the guiding viewpoint of the text. This emphasis on the subjective experiences of rabbits is further coupled with depictions of great violence committed by humans against the rabbits, highlighting an uneven distribution vulnerability in human-animal relations. Through this coupling, the novel becomes an exploration of the rabbit experience of vulnerability, as well as an indictment of human violence against animals.

Works Cited

- Adams, Richard. *Watership Down*. Penguin, 1976.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter a Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822391623>.
- Bridgeman, Joan. "The Significance of Myth in *Watership Down*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1993, pp. 7–24.
- Chapman, Edgar L. "The Shaman as Hero and Spiritual Leader: Richard Adams' Mythmaking in *Watership Down* and *Shardik*." *Mythlore*, vol 5, no. 2 (18), 1978, pp. 7-12.
- Daston, Lorraine J., and Gregg. Mitman, eds. *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. "Becoming-Animal." *The Animals Reader: the Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, ed. Linda Kalof and Amy J. Fitzgerald, Berg, 2007, pp. 37-50
- Hammond, Graham. "Trouble with Rabbits." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 4, no. 2-3, 1973, pp. 48–63.
- Meyer, Charles A. "The Power of Myth and Rabbit Survival in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1994, pp. 139–150.
- Miltner, Robert. "*Watership Down*: A Genre Study." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1993, pp. 63–70.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Payne, Mark Edward. *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Peters, John G. "Saturnalia and Sanctuary: The Role of the Tale in *Watership Down*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1993, pp. 51–62.
- Pick, Anat. *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- . "Vulnerability." *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen, University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 410-423.
- Ryan, Derek. *Animal Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.