

Possible Love



*This essay looks at what a film does to imagine what a film could do. Departing from the 1980s medieval fantasy film *Ladyhawke*, it looks at what kind of relationships and affects can emerge between a woman and a wolf, a man and a hawk, to wonder how love beyond the species divide may help to renew the way in which people connect to, care for and fit in the natural world.*

In my early teenager years, I had a soft spot for *Ladyhawke*, a romantic fantasy film set in the Middle Ages that took an unusual turn to tell a usual story, that of the impossibility of love. Set in Aquila, Italy, in the thirteenth century, *Ladyhawke* depicts the misadventures of a couple, Isabeau d'Anjou (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Etienne Navarre (Rutger Hauer), which has been cursed by the Bishop of Aquila (John Wood). Pining with unrequited love, the bishop uses black magic to turn woman and man into animals, reverting at once the biblical order of creation and the Darwinist theory of evolution. The woman becomes a hawk during the day, regaining her human form at night, and the man retains his shape during the day and turns into a wolf at night. I was fascinated by the therianthropic capacities of the two humans, depicted in a romantic rather than a horror genre: about the potential to exist across the species divide, cycling between a human, wolf and bird form. Rethinking this film in recent years, I wonder how much it influenced my early interest in interspecies affects while also infiltrating normative patterns in my social and emotional imaginary.

The film's plot relies on the bishop's moderate viciousness. He could have turned the couple into "lesser" animals, say a slug and a mosquito, or extended their biological mismatch by transforming them into beings that would have had trouble meeting, like a fish and a bat, for instance. Instead, both hawk and wolf incarnate classical tropes of wildness and prestige, which have provided political figurations and symbolic representations throughout the centuries. If the couple has been forced to exist in an ongoing creaturely negotiation, their metamorphosed counterparts pertained to the most reassuring kinds of animals.

Ladyhawke's narrative seemed to suggest that, by becoming animal, the two individuals have lost their capacity to experience and express love. Instead of imagining the possibility of an interspecies alliance, the film accentuates how their respective



umwelts are disjointed. Under the curse, the film's heroes are deprived of any possibility of communicating with one another. Their only hope is the reversion of this condition. For this to happen, they need to be together in the presence of the bishop, during an eclipse, "a day without a night and a night without a day." Only if the bishop witnesses the metamorphosis of the woman into bird or the man into wolf is the curse broken. It is as if what the clergyman most desired was not the woman's love but to see, at least once, such a powerful spectacle of transubstantiation.

Released in 1985, *Ladyhawke* was directed by Richard Donner, a financially successful director and producer behind major commercial hits such as *Superman I*, *X-Men*, *Lethal Weapon*, *The Omen* and *The Goonies*. The film introduces some curious elements for the kind of historical context it approaches. One of them is the collaboration with British prog rock musicians Allan Powell and Alan Parsons, who oversaw the soundtrack of the film. The other is this fantastic representation of two loving persons who become animals. But in general, its narrative enacts many of the tropes of violence and brutality that were popularly associated with the Middle Ages, while reinforcing stereotypes of racism, ableism and misogyny, revealed in the disparity between the treatment of the male and female characters, human and non, and by the fact that both people of color and female actors, with the exception of the lead actress and a handicapped peasant woman, are largely excluded from the film. The film also promotes the generalization of fears of the natural world, namely lupophobia, which impact efforts in wildlife preservation.¹ While I missed these limitations as a teenager, it is worthwhile thinking with and through the film in the present, to understand what it proposed and imagine what it could have achieved otherwise.

1. Cf. Elizabeth Marshall, *Wolves in Beowulf and Other Old English Texts* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2022).

Considering Downer's engagement with fantasy cinema, the film could have conceived the possibility of the couple expressing their love and desire in the shape they had assumed. It would have been great fun to see the bishop's curse turn against itself, by making an occasion for hybridity and an interspecies encounter between woman and wolf, hawk and man, their intimacy not interrupted but potentiated by difference. This would have explored a case of animal-human intimacy, a topic of great concern for Christian religious matters.

In the white West, sexuality has historically been of ecclesiastic interest given its potential to control people and govern their dos and don'ts. Sexual practices were prescribed through the alliance of canonical and civic laws. They were promoted by the church and enforced by its sacramental rituals of marriage, penance and ordainment. Sexuality mattered because it surveilled the reproductive force of individuals. The regulation of sexuality was applied towards the growth and expansion of communities, to assure that practices were focused on



reproduction. The goal was to maximize results (population control and growth) and reduce superfluous activities (individual and collective forms of non-reproductive pleasure). Biological, political and ideological reasonings are difficult to disentangle in the construction of notions of deviancy throughout modernity. By deeming acts such as masturbation, oral sex, sodomy and homosexual intercourse as unnatural and perverse, the state-church alliance minimized (through culpability, criminalisation and punishment) intimate relations that did not lead to reproductive success.² Other such acts included zoophilia (the attraction of humans towards other animals) and bestiality (sexual intercourse between a human and another animal). Even worse than the waste of reproductive time was the potential to create aberrations, monsters and hybrid creatures that would challenge the vector of civilization and reverse the “natural” process of evolution and threaten the purity of a species. As Lorraine Daston argued, there was a straightforward reason why “Christian theologians in the Aristotelian tradition such as Thomas Aquinas considered bestiality a worse sin than adultery or other sexual transgressions: such pairings overstep a boundary between species natures drawn by the ‘author of nature,’” and thus risked creating monstrous beings that would interrupt “a continuum that begins when the offspring fails to replicate its male parent [...] and stretches to the extreme point when it does not even resemble its parents’ species.”³

2. On the construction of the correlation between moral and natural orders, see Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

3. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

Returning to *Ladyhawke*, the possibility of upturning the bishop’s curse by exploring interspecies intimacy would also row against a tide that was about to be set in motion in the epoch in which the film is set. During the Middle Ages, the terrain for the consolidation of an anthropogenic world was being prepared, one in which the human (predominately white Western men) would become the dominating presence in a context that it would steadily control, eliminating many of its nonhuman beings and spaces. This kind of human would not only be the central presence in its environment, it would also pursue a process of division and classification that had already been initiated by such epistemological traditions as Aristotelian natural philosophy, with its degrees and hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions. Many of these traditions had been turned into natural moral laws and axioms by Christian theology, and further consolidated by the scientific revolution as manifestations of divine logic and will. It is therefore not surprising that in the eighteenth century, European naturalists, such as Carolus Linnaeus and Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, created taxonomic schemes for ordering the natural world that also determined the hierarchy of the living and placed humankind as far away as possible from other species. The civilized human should not be mixed with other animals, as this would signal humanity’s intrinsic belonging to “nature.”

Accompanying such an ordering of the world, humans performed their humanity with distinction, learning how to conceal their



animality by taming their behaviors and bodies, as if they were evidence of a wildness that would betray the Western narrative of human progress. Women were considered, at least since Aristotle, lower than men and closer to animals. Despite arguing that female animals are in general cleverer and have better memories,⁴ Aristotle saw them as “deformed males.”⁵ Women ought to remove the animal traces from their bodies with even more diligence. In parallel, such power over the female body was further applied by a predominately masculine medicalization,

4. Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* VIII (IX).1, 608a25–28, 608b10.

5. Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* IV.6, 775a16. For an important update and consideration of Aristotle’s understanding of women and its implications for later philosophical thought, see Sophia Connell, *Aristotle on Women: physiology, psychology, and politics. Elements in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).



invested in the control of reproductive means and force.⁶ Those who refused to accept this regime were considered “the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeah woman who poisoned the master’s food and inspired slaves to revolt.”⁷ Aesthetics and hygiene walked hand-in-hand with science (the shaved, perfumed, pathogen-free, uncontaminated, reproductive body), ethics and religion (the clean soul in the clean body) to shape the image of a modern, unsullied and pure civilization.

6. On the subject, see Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

By celebrating the two characters’ love across taxonomic borders, *Ladyhwawke* could also revisit the traditions of the medieval bestiary, in which creatures real and fantastic, moral and absurd, coexist. Many medieval animal figurations offered metaphorical representations of people and a complex weaving



of human and nonhuman realms.⁸ Such closeness, if enacted in the film, would show how humans and animals share so much. A common feature to many living beings is love, a creaturely feeling, a drive for togetherness with what is outside the self. At the same time that people have attempted to differentiate themselves from other beings, they have also recognized the expressions and manifestations of animal affect, even love, both between themselves and other animals and between similar animals.

Besides the bishop's curse, the story told by *Ladyhawke* is that of a heteronormative couple's drive to create a nuclear family, which seems the actual reason for these two persons' urge to regain their human form. But a different outcome would have been possible, one that re-proposes what kind of affects, prospects and desires may constitute a family, beyond the union between a woman and man and their capacity to procreate. An alternative *Ladyhawke* could tell the story of the union of a woman and a wolf, who become companions and fulfill their common desires for food, comfort, warmth, company and security. It could have an outcome in which a man and a bird aren't in a desperate quest for a reproductive partner and instead learn to exist through one another's relationship to space and time. This would be extremely important, as it would help to revise terms and concepts, such as those of friendship, love or care, which are so much under the human monopoly. The internet is full of alternative plots for *Ladyhawke*. Stories of friendship and love between crows and cats, badgers and wolves, deer and monkeys, humans and octopuses abound. They play together, chase and run after one another, in some cases they desire and stimulate one another. They are not fictional but real, mostly captured by amateur cameras and quickly elevated to an audience sensation. People are desperate to go beyond the last leftovers of the Cartesian machinic explanations of the natural world and find examples that animals are people too. Proofs from the "real" world abound. Now it's time for *Ladyhawke* to follow these examples and tell stories of emancipation, transformation and ecological intersectionality about them.

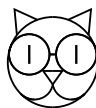
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8. For a feminist reading of medieval bestiaries, see Carolynn Van Dyke, *Women and Other Beasts: A Feminist Perspective on Medieval Bestiaries*, *mff*, Vol. 54, no. 1, 2018: 94–117.



BIO

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