

8-4-2017

Creaturely Love: How Desire Makes Us More and Less than Human by Dominic Pettman

Gina M. Granter
Dawson College

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Granter, Gina M. "Creaturely Love: How Desire Makes Us More and Less than Human by Dominic Pettman." *The Goose*, vol. 16, no. 1, article 18, 2017,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss1/18>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Animal Passions: A Posthumanist Study of Human Adoration

***Creaturely Love: How Desire Makes Us More and Less than Human* by DOMINIC PETTMAN**

University of Minnesota Press, 2017 \$32.98

Reviewed by **GINA GRANTER**

The cover of Dominic Pettman's *Creaturely Love* is a depiction of carnality as intriguing as the book's title: two anthropomorphic lions in crowns embrace on an elk skin, tongue-kissing, feet caressing, while an amused primate looks on in amusement, tying the lions' tails together. The lions lie next to a banquet table at which other predators tear into flesh on their plates and fight each other. It is a depiction of indulgence of multiple creaturely acts among the accoutrements of civility: a set table, jewelry, swords, flatware, and goblets — including one broken on the floor. The appropriateness of this scene to Pettman's text is immediately evident in the preface:

As humans, we like to think that we love the other for their unique *humanness* . . . The beloved is always encountered *in media res*, embedded in a cultural context . . . [but] what we love in the beloved precedes and exceeds that abstract element we call the human. . . . Whether it is the texture of the beloved's skin or hair, [or] their singular scent . . . we love the creaturely in the other, as much as their humanity. (x-xi)

The broken drinking glass is evidence of this intersection of culture and the creaturely; think of the term 'bodice-ripper' as a term

for serialized romance novels: so-called animal passions override, on occasion, societal efforts to constrain and define. Pettman examines the love/desire distinction in his introduction, acknowledging that while his title uses the terms as synonyms, that love "provides the processing power for making the anonymous pulsions of desire (what Lacan called *extimacy*) feel intimate and unique" (3). In the cover image, the marks of humanity, and particularly the crowns that make both the lion's and the lioness' heads regal, and that signal a partnership, are analogous to love, while the actions of the subjects surrounding the table are ones of desire. The reader who sees anthropomorphized animals, or animals humanized, upon picking up Pettman's book will, upon closing it, see that the lions also humanize animality. They are a reminder of the term "human animal" as our species distinction in the field of animal studies because of its simultaneous acknowledgement of, and distinction from, our animality.

Just as Pettman does not hierarchize love and desire, but rather sees them as distinct yet also largely similar concepts, neither does he hierarchize humans and animals, despite the terms "more" and "less" in the book's title. As Pettman notes in his introduction,

To behold the creaturely aspect of ourselves is not to simply 'reduce' the human to the animal—or, conversely, to 'raise' the animal up to the human . . . It is to rejoice in the miraculous singularity of the being that one is with, while also understanding the profound universality represented by his or her presence: the fact that the

embraced body is but a temporary refuge for a universe of generic, genetic materials. (8)

It is with human animals that Pettman's study, the forty-second book in Cary Wolfe's *Posthumanities* series, is primarily concerned, but not because of a humanist impulse to privilege that species. Pettman makes it clear that his book does not explore whether animals experience love, because "[t]o hazard a guess would be precisely that, to hazard a guess, without even the benefit of rigorous ethological observation" (7). Nor is he interested in bestiality. He is, however, interested in the "intersubjective intimacy" offered by childhood pets and companion animals and laments that such relationships are "too often cast" as "less meaningful or affectively charged as that for a sibling or a friend" (27). More centrally, though, Pettman is interested in how two — and sometimes more than two — human subjects perceive each other, long for each other, and in some cases touch each other, in creaturely terms.

What exactly, then, is "creaturely love"? The author dedicates his first chapter to the term, and in Chapter 2 offers this: creaturely love is "the nonhuman, ahuman, more-or-less-than-human passion or affect that attracts us to the other in a register beyond or outside the conventional discourse of soul mates" (18). The chapters are increasingly fascinating as they progress, particularly once Pettman has established his terms, and as he examines relationships beyond monogamous heterosexual ones. Pettman's is not a book that examines animal symbolism or merely tracks references to animals in the discourse between and about lovers; it is a work, like other posthumanist works, that

destabilizes the traditional human subject without completely collapsing or shoring up animal-human distinctions. To do this, Pettman provides readings of a variety of media, from photographs to letters and diary entries, from short stories to Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2014) in which a human man falls in love with the digital assistant in his smartphone: creaturely love expands even beyond the organic. The epilogue, subtitled "Tesla and the White Dove," is as delightful a narrative as it is compelling intellectually, and offers one of the most satisfying and beautiful sentences to finish any literary or academic text.

In light of Pettman's book, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "The Secret to Relationship Success May be Bunny Photos" that was making social media rounds in the week of its June 2017 publication seems less laughable and more reasonable: in the article, Elizabeth Bernstein summarizes the findings of a study published in *Psychological Science* that found that people grew fonder of a partner after seeing images of that person among images of cute animals. One need not wonder how Pettman would respond to this: in *Creaturely Love*, he provides readers with ample support to examine such texts on the terms he sets within. Bettman's ideas and readings will doubtless find application in future scholarship; his text makes readers eager to see all genres of cultural production in the new framework this exciting work provides.

GINA GRANTER teaches English at Dawson College in Montreal, where she lives with her children. Her research interests include animal studies, ecocriticism, and Canadian literature.