LIT 520: Chaucer and the Natures of the Human
Dr. Ashby Kinch
Tuesday, 6-8:50, LA 204
Office: LA 221; NO PHONE NUMBER; email: ashby.kinch@umontana.edu
Office Hours: TTh 2-3; W 9-11; by apt.

Course Description
In an era when “human life” is both a contested category and a precarious mode of
existence, we must take the question of the relationship between the human and
nonhuman worlds seriously in both its historical and contemporary forms. This
seminar will do just that, reading and thinking about a variety of recent work in
medieval studies, as well as in the broader fields of anthropology, biosemiotics, and
ecocriticism. What are the biological underpinnings of the human tendency to “read
signs” in the world around us? What forms of thought spring from the animal world
for medieval writers? When and where do the boundaries shift between definitions
of the human and the animal, and how do these shifting boundaries change
definitions of various forms of the human? What does it mean to contest these
boundaries, both in medieval cultural formations and in our own?

In addition to Chaucerian anchor texts (Book of the Duchess, Parliament of Fowls,
House of Fame, Knight’s Tale, Squire’s Tale, Nun’s Priest’s Tale, and Maunciple’s Tale),
we will read a range of medieval texts that take up some of these same problems in
different historical and geographical co-ordinates, including Alain de Lille’s De
Planctu Naturae, Chretien de Troyes’ Knight with the Lion (Yvain), selections of
Marie de France’s Fables and Lais. Alongside these primary texts, we will read an
array of criticism that thinks about medieval literature from the perspective of
animal studies, anthropology, ecocriticism, and post-humanism.

Students will write weekly position papers; make two presentations; and write a
seminar-length paper of 15-20 pages grounded in their independent research and
thinking. Students will be encouraged to develop reading projects in areas of
interest to them.

Texts: See email for detail about alternate texts

Course Requirements: See document on Moodle for detail
Weekly Moodle position papers: 30%
Two Seminar Presentations: 20%
Seminar Paper: 50%
Reading Schedule

*Nota Bene: We may decide to alter this schedule in ways large and small. I will keep an updated syllabus on the Moodle page and draw your attention there when significant changes are made.

Aug 30th: Introductions, Concepts, Inclinations
Medieval Anthropology / Human in-of-and Nature
In-class reading: excerpts from Chaucer’s translation of Boethius; *The Former Age*
Chaucer's Writing Career / Biography

Sept. 6: H(e)art-Hunting, Neoteny, and the Human Life-Cycle
*Literature:*
Chretien, *Knight with the Lion*
Marie de France, *Guigemar, Bisclavret*
Geoffrey Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*

*Background / Criticism / Theory:*
*The Medieval Natural World,* Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10 (MOODLE)
J. Allan Mitchell, “Being Born” (1-21)

Sept. 13: Sym-Bio-Semiotics: Signs of / and Life
*Literature:*
Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess* (cont’d)
Guillaume de Machaut, *Fountain of Love* (Norton Critical Edition)
Marie de France, *Le Fresne, Chevrefoil*

*Background / Criticism / Theory:*
Eduardo Kohn, “The Open Whole” (MOODLE)

Sept. 20: Nature-Human-Animal: Disjunctive Continuities
*Literature:*
Alain de Lille, excerpts from *De Planctu Naturae* (MOODLE: Parts I and II)

*Background / Criticism / Theory:*

3 Student Presentations

Sept. 27: Beastliness
*Background / Criticism / Theory:*
Crane, Intro + “Cohabitation,” from *Animal Encounters,* 1-41 (MOODLE)
Hoffman, “Homo et Natura,” 11-38 (MOODLE)
Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” 41-64 (MOODLE)

3 Student Presentations
Oct. 4: Bird-Talk
Marie de France, *Milun, Laustic, Yonec*
Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*

**3 Student Presentations**

Oct. 11: Nature and the Proliferation of Meaning
Optional: Kinch, “Mind Like Wickerwork” (MOODLE)

**3 Student Presentations**

*Prospectus due Oct. 17th*

Oct. 18: Human Type, Speciation and the Problem of the Portraits
Chaucer, “General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*”
*Knight’s Tale*, I. 1462-1714; *Miller’s Tale* I. 3187-3287
Sarah Stanbury, “EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Literature” (MOODLE)

Oct. 25: “My Tale is of a cok”: Between the Species and the Specific
*Nun’s Priest’s Tale* + 455-466 in Norton Critical Edition
Peter Travis, “Aesop’s Animal Tongues” (MOODLE)

Nov. 1: “By kynde, and by no other lore”: Chicken Cognition
Read a chapter of Peter Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*
Read any other article on Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*

Nov. 8: NO CLASSES; meet with me to discuss final projects

Nov. 15: Boundaries of the (In)Human
*Franklin’s Tale*; selected criticism

*Annotated Bibliography due Nov. 21st*

Nov. 22: Problems with / in the Garden
*Merchant’s Tale, Shipman’s Tale*; selected criticism

Nov. 29: The (Self-)Destructive Nature of Human Imagination
*Miller’s Tale*; selected criticism

*Draft of Final Paper due on Moodle December 5th*

Dec. 6: Presentations / Evaluations

*Seminar Paper Due: Dec. 16th*

*Meet for final presentations*