

## AMBORGS AND KINSHIP IN GARRY KILWORTH'S ANIMAL FANTASY FICTION

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze Garry Kilworth's animal fantasy fiction in the context of Joan Gordon's figure of the amborg in order to demonstrate how Kilworth's re-imagining of interspecies boundaries undermines the Anthropocene's meta-narrative of human dominance. The three works chosen for analysis—the stand-alone novel *Midnight's Sun* (1990), the *Welkin Weasels* series (1997-2003), and the short story "The Fabulous Beast" (2012)—differ considerably in their depiction of the animal Other yet are linked by a shared message of interspecies kinship, which corresponds to the calls for interconnectedness expressed by many leading researchers of the Anthropocene. Overall, this paper argues that Kilworth's animal fantasy, and much of contemporary speculative fiction in general, invites its readers to deconstruct the Anthropocene by realigning their optics and seeing the Self in the animal Other, the animal Other in the Self.

**Keywords:** animal fantasy; Garry Kilworth; amborg; the Anthropocene

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Contemporary Anglo-American fantasy is, in a way, a highly ambiguous genre. While scholars agree that its shared roots are located in European myths, legends, fairy stories, and folktales, and that the English writer J.R.R. Tolkien is one of its key architects, they also indicate that the British, American, and Canadian variants of genre fantasy display, not surprisingly, noticeable differences in their historical development and preference for certain themes (Kincaid 1995, 5-6; Manlove 1999, 2-9). One example of these differences is the presence of anthropomorphic animal protagonists who are, arguably, considerably more prominent in British fantasy fiction. Though American and Canadian fantasy often does complement its cast of heroes with sentient animals, these characters—in contrast to their kin from across the Atlantic—seldom function as protagonists of animal-centered tales and they are often inspired by mythic figures such as Coyote, Raven, and Bear, who must be read within the context of Native American traditions. In *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction* (2016), Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn assert that “great late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British tradition of literary animal fantasies [...] has no equivalent in American children's literature” (62). Levy and Mendlesohn do provide some examples of American and Canadian animal fantasies produced in subsequent decades, yet these do not match the variety and popularity of British animal fantasy narratives.

The aim of this work is to investigate a selection of animal fantasy narratives by Garry Kilworth, a contemporary British fantasist, in order to read their concern with human-animal relations against the current recognition of the intersections between speculative fiction and the challenges of the Anthropocene. First, I briefly examine animal presence in British literature, particularly in children's and fantasy literature, so as to contextualize Kilworth's fiction. Second, I delineate Joan Gordon's concept of the amborg, which serves as the primary tool for the analysis of Kilworth's works, and further contextualize it within Indigenous perceptions of interspecies kinship. The three works chosen for investigation are the stand-alone novel *Midnight's Sun* (1990), the *Welkin Weasels* series (1997-2003), and the short story “The Fabulous Beast” (2012).<sup>1</sup> The analysis of these three works allows, on the one hand, to illustrate the different ways in which Kilworth approaches human-animal relations and, on the other, to explore their shared message that humanity, rather than a disease that devastates the Earth (Hern 1993), is an inherent element of its ecosystems. The proposed analysis will contribute to the ongoing study of how speculative fiction responds to the challenges of the Anthropocene via its numerous scenarios of humanity's demise and survival during an ecological apocalypse. It will also expand the existing scholarship on British fantasy since Kilworth has received markedly less attention than such bestselling fantasists as Terry Pratchett and J.K. Rowling.

## Animal Presence in British Literature

While sentient animals have always maintained a strong presence in British fairy stories, folktales, and fables (Swinfen 1984, 14-15), an exponential rise in their popularity occurred in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century together with the rise of children's literature (Cosselett 2016, 9-36). Building on previous literary traditions, narratives such as John Gay's *Fables* (1727, 1738), Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (1778-79), and Sarah Timmer's *Fabulous Histories* (also known as *The History of the Robins*, 1786) educated British children about the richness and complexity of animal life, in that way developing their sensitivity towards the natural world and convincing them of the necessity of animal protection. Perhaps in order to address any parental doubts raised by the sometimes heavily anthropomorphized characters, the prefaces to many of these works reassured their young readers that real animals cannot talk and that the presence of such creatures in the tale is just a literary liberty exercised by the author (Cosselett 9-36). Still, in spite of their insistence on maintaining a façade of realism, Karen Patricia Smith (1993) labels these works as examples of "didactic fantasy," explaining that they share with the fable the figure of the sentient animal and yet are more detailed and offer more complex characterization (54-55). Smith then divides didactic fantasy into three categories, depending on whether the animals communicate only with the audience, with each other, or with the human character (56). The last category is the least numerous, because—being the most revolutionary—it was the most threatened by rejection and hence less explored (Smith 56). Examples include Dorothy Kilner's *The Life and Perambulation of a Mouse* (1783-1784) and the anonymous *The Escapes, Wanderings and Preservation of a Hare* (c. 1820), in which animal protagonists describe their adventures and misfortunes, often caused by human ignorance and cruelty (Smith 57-63).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century further strengthened animal presence in British imagination. Encountered as pets and labor force, inhabitants of zoos and private menageries, exhibits in museums and taxidermy collections (many of which were addressed specifically at children), animals permeated the life of Victorian Britain (Talairach 2021, 2-7). The rising number of schools and the growing availability of cheap printing contributed to the increase in children's literacy and appetite for fiction (Talarach 6). Thus, children's literature continued to flourish, and numerous works entertained their young audience with animal imagery ranging from naturalistic accounts of wildlife to downright fantastic beasts (Ayers and Maier 2020, 7). Some of the most memorable works of this period include Lewis Carroll's *Alices Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), in which the heroine encounters several anthropomorphized creatures, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), in which the eponymous horse describes his life in what is considered one of the first animal autobiographies, and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894), in which the boy Mowgli is raised by animals in the Indian jungle. These and other narratives invited their readers to look at the world from the perspective of the

animal Other and thus transgressed the human-animal binary fundamental to Western mentality.

It is worth noting that the proliferation of children's literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the publication of works which later became crucial for the emergence of fantasy as a modern genre. The fantastic novels of George MacDonald (e.g., *Phantastes*, 1858; *At the Back of the North Wind*, 1871; *The Princess and the Goblins*, 1872) and the medieval romances of William Morris (e.g., *The Wood Beyond the World*, 1894; *The Well at the World's End*, 1986) invited Victorian readers of different ages to explore imaginary worlds filled with magic and marvelous creatures. While anthropomorphized animals rarely appear in these narratives, Morris and MacDonald established a literary tradition that, soon perfected by J.R.R. Tolkien and developed by other fantasists, quickly began to gain in popularity. Though children's literature and the genre of fantasy are, by no means, synonymous categories, the sentient animal character serves as one of the bridges between them, and works such as Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), and A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) are considered classics in both fields. Potter's delightful story of a mischievous rabbit that poaches in Mr. McGregor's vegetable garden where he ultimately loses his jacket and shoes, Grahame's humorous tales about the adventures of Mr. Toad (largely motivated by his obsession with cars), and Milne's heart-warming tales about the inhabitants of The Hundred Acre Wood both strengthened animal presence in British literature and contributed to the creation of modern animal fantasy.

Many subsequent fantasy narratives adopted or exclusively focused on anthropomorphic animals. In T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), for instance, young Arthur's education on his path to kingship includes transformation into different animals and life among them offers him invaluable lessons on leadership. C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56), another children's and fantasy classic, abounds in sentient animals that accompany the Pevensie siblings in the imaginary world and features one of the most inspiring animal characters, the lion Aslan, who is Narnia's equivalent of Christ. Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) is a dark and poignant tale about a community of rabbits who, inspired by mystical visions and fleeing from human cruelty, search for a new home. A similar quest drives Colin Dann's *The Animals of Farthing Wood* series (1979-94), whose non-human protagonists exercise their liberty in an act of defiance against human indifference to their suffering and death. William Horwood's *The Duneton Chronicles* (1980-89), *The Stonor Eagles* (1982), and *The Wolves of Time* duology (1995-97) are lengthy epic fantasies in which different animal communities, whose histories, cultures, and social structures Horwood develops in great detail, are challenged by prophecies and conflicts that subvert their existence. Brian Jacques' sprawling *Redwall* series (1986-2011) features numerous animal protagonists who brave one adventure after another in a pseudo-medieval setting centered around Redwall Abbey. Finally, Robin Jarvis' *The Deptford Mice* trilogy (1989-1990) depicts fierce

interspecies wars which culminate in a struggle against an evil Dark Lord figure well-known to fantasy fiction.

Even this brief selection of titles demonstrates that modern animal fantasy, as Ann Swinfen calls these and other works in her *In Defence of Fantasy* (1984), operates with a number of techniques and different levels of anthropomorphism: the comic nature of *The Wind in the Willows* is much different from the epic tone of *The Sword in the Stone*, which is still different from the very naturalistic setting of *Watership Down*. Swinfen observes that modern animal fantasy, possessing “one of the longest and strongest traditions of all types of fantasy” (12), is typically set in the primary world rather than a fantastic otherworld and that it is strongly inspired by fables and other literary predecessors (12-13). *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) confirms the primary world setting of animal fantasy and adds that tales written in this tradition, though they bestow sentience and speech on their animal characters, also pay attention to the behavior typical for the species in question (Clute and Grant 31). While *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* argues that satirical and allegorical portrayals of sentient animals should rather be categorized as examples of beast fables than modern animal fantasy, it admits that in the case of many works, e.g., *Watership Down*, it is impossible to allocate them to only one of these categories (Clute and Grant 31). Since discussing the internal taxonomy of genre fantasy is not the aim of this article, suffice it to say here that all of the above-mentioned narratives contributed to the creation of a very distinctive tradition in British fantasy, which entertains the reader with the marvelous guised as anthropomorphized animals who subvert the nature-culture dichotomy through their combination of the human psyche with the non-human body.

Garry Kilworth is a contemporary British writer who has greatly contributed to the tradition of animal fantasy. Previously a successful cryptographer with the Royal Air Force, Kilworth began publishing in the 1970s and eventually became a full-time writer in the 1980s (Harris-Fain 2002, 261-263). Commended on his ability to transgress the boundaries between genres, Kilworth has established himself as a prolific author of science and fantasy fiction (Zipes 2002, 276). Many of his fantasy novels, e.g., *Hunter's Moon* (1989)—cited as an example of animal fantasy in the studies by Paul Kincaid (36) and Nicholas Tucker (2006, 361), *Midnight's Sun* (1990), *Frost Dancers: A Story of Hares* (1992), *House of Tribes* (1995), *Welkin Weasels* series (1997-2003), and *The Lantern Fox* (1998), feature complex animal characters whose lives are challenged by extraordinary adventures and clashes with humans. In the following paragraphs three of Kilworth's works—*Midnight's Sun* (1990), the *Welkin Weasels* series (1997-2003), and “The Fabulous Beast” (2012)—are examined through the lens of Joan Gordon's concept of the amborg. Since Kilworth has received less attention from critics than other British fantasists, this study not only adds a new thread to the ever-expanding body of research on Anglo-American fantasy, but also integrates Kilworth's fiction with recent debates recognizing speculative fiction as a powerful tool for addressing

the challenges and possible outcomes of the Anthropocene (Trexler 2015; Wolf-Meyer 2019; Oziewicz, Attebery, and Dědinová 2022).

### **Anthropomorphized Animals and Ambborgs**

Gordon develops the concept of the amborg in her investigation of Sheri S. Tepper's sf novels to address some characters that transgress the human-animal boundary. Examining the varied interactions between the human protagonists and the representatives of animal, or generally, non-human species, Gordon notes that Tepper's heroes experience a profound psychological transformation in response to their encounters with the Other. This transformation is what produces the amborg—a coinage inspired by both Donna Haraway's cyborg and Jacques Derrida's *animot*—whom Gordon defines as an ambiguous and ambivalent organism that is both human and animal (2008, 190-191). Gordon categorizes the amborg as part of the “new megatext or meta-narrative” of postmodernity (189), in which the fallacious belief in humanity's dominance over other forms of life is substituted by arguments emphasizing species equality and interconnectedness. Looking to the rise of cybernetics, virtual realities, and AI, Gordon believes that the amborg “offers an alternative posthumanity rooted in carbon instead of silicon” (190). Thus bridging the great species divide, the amborg is not an individual fixed in a single identity dictated by the human-animal binary, but, affected by its interactions with other species, an entity that renegotiates its identity and is constantly *becoming* something more (Gordon 195). This process is conditioned primarily by the “amborg gaze” that Gordon defines as “an exchange between subjects” (189), i.e., a process during which human subjects perceive themselves through the eyes of the sentient Other and, if they are to successfully undergo amborgization, they reevaluate both their Self and their relationship with the Other via this novel perspective (Gordon 192-200). This mental revolution can be accompanied by a physical transformation facilitated by the premises of speculative fiction, which further emphasizes the liminal position of the amborg.

While Gordon's investigation is mostly concerned with human amborgization, she does acknowledge that the concept can apply also to animals “that interact with, exchange glances with, and acknowledge the presence and sentience of another species” (191). Speculative fiction allows to explore the sentience and identity of the animal Other, its perception of humanity, and its own transgressions of interspecies borders, which ultimately lead to its transformation into a being that is more-than-animal. As Gordon explains: “The [amborg] gaze is not only returned, it is exchanged; it is in a feedback relationship—unstable, unpredictable, dynamic, teeming with implications political, social, and ethical about our place(s) in the world.” (195) Adopting Gordon's critical lens, I would argue that the anthropomorphic animals appearing in fantasy fiction acquire a new meaning when they are read as ambborgs: from creatures endowed with reason and emotions for the sake of a didactic ecological allegory, they shift into

liminal beings whose existence challenges the human protagonists to realign their optics. As Gordon argues: “Amborg is a word that recognizes that, while we humans are clearly our own species, we are also clearly animals” (191). Thus, her approach favors kinship over separation, and amborgs serve as mediators between species.

Interspecies kinship is one of the central ideas in the debates on the challenges of the Anthropocene and has been frequently voiced by many scholars, with one of the leading voices being Donna Haraway. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway offers a powerful reimagining of human relations with non-human or “more-than-human” entities (101), positing that interspecies kinship, based on respect, responsibility, and possible cooperation, is vital for pursuing “multispecies ecojustice” (102). It is worth noting that Indigenous philosophies, which continue to gain prominence in Anthropocene discourse, have long supported similar worldviews. The involvement of Indigenous communities with the Anthropocene in terms of their contribution to it in comparison to capitalist settler-colonial states and their continuing subjection to settler-colonial policies (including ecological matters) has been raised by several scholars (Whyte 2020, 2-7). Many Indigenous researchers, artists, and activists argue that their traditional lifeways and ways of knowing, which they now wish to revive and reclaim, have always embraced a sense of strong relationality with the natural world. Patty Krawec (Anishinaabe), for instance, explains: “Our language does not divide into male and female the way European languages do. It divides into animate and inanimate. The world is alive with beings that are other than human, and we are all related, with responsibilities to each other.” (2022, 1) Recalling the traditional story of the deer who withdrew away from the tribe once their very survival became threatened by human greed, Krawec indicates that her community has always been taught responsibility towards the non-human Other (19, 171-174). Similarly, the Lakota phrase “*mitakuye oyasin*,” roughly translated as “all my relations,” also denotes the interconnectedness between various entities (Krawec 1). Other Indigenous communities have developed their own concepts of a balanced existence. As the Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte argues: “indigenous peoples understand their societies and relationships as inclusive of diverse beings and entities beyond humans [...]. [...] the violations of consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity are also against relatives such as plants, rivers, animals, insects, seas, mountains, fishes, among others.” (2) Consequently, Indigenous speakers raise the issue of developing and sustaining a kincentric perspective (Salmón 2000, 1327-1332; Whyte 4-5), which will invite humanity to rethink their position among other species. Such a perspective can be easily connected to Gordon’s concept of the amborg as both reach out beyond the human.

### **The Wolf that Tamed the Man**

*Midnight’s Sun* (1990) is the least fantastic of the three narratives chosen for analysis, because while it strongly anthropomorphizes its animal protagonists,

it does so by depicting them as creatures with complex personalities and inner lives, without adding the supernatural elements present in Kilworth's other works. As such, the novel represents the more naturalistic vein of Kilworth's literary *oeuvre*, and it is reminiscent of narratives written by Jack London and James Oliver Curwood, whose tales about wolves, bears, and other inhabitants of the American wilderness have enchanted generations of readers with their deep sympathy for the animal Other. *Midnight's Sun* follows the adventures of the tundra-dwelling wolf Athaba whose ordinary life is disrupted first by expulsion from his pack and later by human captivity. In the note preceding the narrative, Kilworth remarks that though he consulted relevant research on wolf behavior to ensure a level of plausibility, the novel is essentially a work of fiction. Consequently, though Kilworth pays considerable attention to the body language and hunting methods of his wolves, at the emotional and spiritual level they are similar to humans as their existence is fraught with love and hate, structured by ambitions, embedded in ancestral memory, and enriched by a deep mystical connection to the surrounding environment.

The protagonist, Athaba, differs from his fellow pack members due to his inquisitive nature, openness towards other species, and ability to adapt to new circumstances, all of which later facilitate his survival and growth. Since most packs, as Kilworth explains, function according to a set of beliefs and behaviors, which ensure their prosperity, Athaba's otherness is potentially dangerous to the well-being of his kin and described as "*unwolfiness*" (*Midnight's Sun* 27). This label marks him as a liminal creature that transgresses established boundaries—an amborg in the making. A foreshadowing of Athaba's amborgization occurs when, injured and desperate for food, the wolf enters a human camp and there suddenly "a pair of grey eyes met his. For a moment the two creatures, wolf and man, were locked and lost in one another" (*Midnight's Sun* 55-56). This fleeting encounter, which implies that the animal and the human can share a moment of spiritual recognition that overcomes the language and species barriers, is eventually fully realized in Athaba's relationship with the human Koonama.

The event that sets Athaba on the path leading to Koonama and amborgization is his expulsion from the pack. Rejected by his kin, the wolf must now feed with the scavenging birds, and it is due to this alienation and loss of identity that he begins to communicate with other creatures, among them ravens and weasels (*Midnight's Sun* 73). As an outcast, Athaba is liberated from the constraints imposed by his own species, and this independence allows him to explore other lifestyles and modes of thinking. He also learns to distinguish between two types of humans encountered in the wilderness: the "southern hunters" who stink of civilization and kill for pleasure (*Midnight's Sun* 96), and the native hunters whose skills are on par with those of wolves. In fact, according to wolf mythology the latter were once outlawed wolves who acquired the gift of physical transformation, and even though that cost them some of their abilities, they remained connected to the land and "still had the eyes of a wolf" (*Midnight's Sun* 133). This tale of a shared

origin and reference to eyes—so, in extension, to the act of gazing—highlight species kinship and hint at the exchange that facilitates amborgization.

But Koonama, who survives a plane crash together with Athaba, is not a native hunter that would, presumably, be more receptive toward the wolf Other, but a “southern” visitor. Freed from captivity, the wolf begins a return journey to his original territory and the man, whose real name and thoughts are never revealed, chooses to accompany him. Since *Midnight’s Sun* is delivered entirely from the perspective of the animal, humans are presented as a mass of incomprehensible and usually malevolent creatures who desperately struggle with life in the wilderness. Athaba quickly establishes himself as the more skilled and knowledgeable creature on whom Koonama must rely for food and protection. While initially the wolf is not particularly pleased with his human companion and regards him with curious apprehension, by the end of their journey he thinks of the man as a subordinate member of his own pack (*Midnight’s Sun* 163) and names him Koonama, after one of his ancestors that liked to eat cooked meat (*Midnight’s Sun* 171). This act of naming, apart from epitomizing a reversal of biblical roles according to which it is the human that dispenses names to other creatures, indicates a deepening bond between the animal and his companion.

Athaba is eventually pleasantly surprised by Koonama’s amborgization in the course of their journey. Initially, the change in the man is mostly physical:

The southern hunter had made a good start at growing back into nature, becoming more a part of the tundra and less a human carrier of the stink of civilisation. Tundra soil smeared the man’s clothing, his boots, his leggings. The scent of the moss was on him where he had lain in it. Clean wholesome tundra air was scouring his skin, filling its pores with its moisture. There were seeds in his hair and there was dirt between his toes and fingers. He was growing into nature, and nature was growing into him. (*Midnight’s Sun* 155-156)

Soon, Koonama undergoes also a spiritual transformation as the wilderness forces him to forsake the habits of the civilized world in favor of the practices of his wolf companion:

It seemed to Athaba that Koonama was becoming more animal than man. When they stopped to eat, Koonama would tear at his food like a wild beast, and bend down to drink at the water’s edge like a real wolf. [...] He still walked on two legs, but Athaba did not expect the impossible. He still used his eyes more than his nose and ears, but was *becoming* more in tune with these latter senses. There was indeed hope that the wolfman might save himself, if they spent a season or so in getting where they were going. (*Midnight’s Sun* 174-175)

Recognizing his immersion in the wilderness, the narrative begins to refer to Koonama as “the wolfman” (*Midnight’s Sun* 174) who embraces his animal side in a feat of atavistic regression, epitomized by his howling at the stars with other

wolves (*Midnight's Sun* 195). By the end of their journey, Athaba observes that Koonama's "human spirit had been eroded by the landscape and replaced with something else, something not human" (*Midnight's Sun* 206). He acknowledges his responsibility for the man's transformation: "He had changed an adult from a hunter into a subordinate pack member: a hunter who looked unhuman in his musk-ox cloak and skin covered in sores and wild matted hair." (*Midnight's Sun* 214) The wolf even fears that his deed might be a crime, because Koonama will never be able to return to his former life.

Yet the same applies to Athaba, though he is very sensitive about the power dynamics between himself and Koonama, and even declares: "the wolf did no manly things, while the man followed the wolf in all its ways. If he thought he had changed me, he would have kept me after capturing me again. He knew he had not tamed me: I had tamed him. [...] Koonama *knew*, that was the important thing." (*Midnight's Sun* 317) Athaba's amborgization is not as spectacular as the man's, since the wilderness has always been his home, yet the time with Koonama allows him to bond with a representative of an enemy species and eventually perceive both him and himself from a new perspective. The weeks spent on observing the man's behavior, protecting him from other beasts, and learning to hunt with him instill in Athaba a sense of responsibility and companionship so strong that he eventually realizes that while he cannot remember the smells of his dead siblings, his memories of Koonama will never disappear (*Midnight's Sun* 254-255). He then accepts that these memories are something he might have to forever keep to himself, because it would be difficult to share them with other wolves. Koonama experiences a similar sense of separation from his own species when, during a mass hunt for mankilling wolves, he deliberately spares Athaba. The paradox of amborgization lies in the fact that while it fosters interspecies kinship, it simultaneously creates a rift between the individual and their original community, because the former—having recognized themselves in the Other—must now navigate between two worlds. However, such a rift and the ensuing shift in one's mindset are indispensable, and perhaps even inevitable, for breaking Anthropocentric molds which confine humanity to its singular worldview with itself at its center. This disempowerment of the human falls in line with Indigenous knowledge which recognizes the needs and rights of different species and thus promotes greater awareness of and responsibility for one's actions in the world.

### Weasels to the Rescue

The three original volumes of the Welkin Weasel series—*Thunder Oak* (1997), *Castle Storm* (1998), and *Windjammer Run* (1999)<sup>2</sup>—follow the adventures of Sylver and his band of outcast weasels, who set upon a quest of discovering why humans disappeared from the island of Welkin long ago. Employing a carnivalesque reversal of roles, Kilworth creates a world in which, once the humans had vanished, the animals acquired a new level of intelligence (*Thunder Oak* 40) and subsequently discovered the usefulness of tools, the comforts of

human houses, and their own greed for material wealth, eventually establishing feudal communities ruled by local lords and ladies in a system visibly inspired by the Middle Ages. Sylver,<sup>3</sup> always ready to rebel against ignorance and injustice, is determined to bring humans back because the animals are unable to rebuild the structures protecting their villages from the rising sea level. This epic quest for truth and salvation forces Sylver and his friends, a motley group of unique characters, to journey across various kingdoms and distant seas, and it is only thanks to their courage and perseverance that the weasels eventually succeed (Harris-Fain 266).

The animals of the Welkin series are notably different from the wolves of Kilworth's previous work in that they reject traditional lifeways of their species in favor of human culture and technology, which function as markers of their physical amborgization. Yet this type of anthropomorphism is already well-known from the tales of Kenneth Grahame and Beatrix Potter, in which animals also wear clothes and use tools; it is the spiritual transformation that the animals of Welkin undergo in the wake of their technological evolution that merits attention. To start with, the Welkin animals cannot undergo a full amborgization, because they have actually never met any humans and thus regard them only as mythical creatures (*Windjammer Run* 387). Yet by inhabiting human spaces, performing human jobs, and adopting human entertainment they do experience the life of the Other, and this inevitably changes their perception and behavior. Unfortunately, this change frequently results in moral corruption and self-proclaimed superiority particular to human beings. The indifferent cruelty present in the natural world, in which one species is designed to feed on another, is now substituted by malevolent exploitation of the weaker by the stronger. The ruling class of Welkin consists of stoats who wage wars, persecute dissidents, force weasels into servitude, and do not refrain from torture and murder. Basking in power and wealth, the stoats are almost entirely disconnected from their animal heritage (other species generally live closer to and feed off the land), and this separation is embodied by the stoat Prince Poynt who suffers from cold because he refuses to change his coat with seasons (*Thunder Oak* 19). But as Sylver learns on his quest, many other animals are also very protective of the comforts acquired due to human absence and do not wish for the humans to return.

Some oppose Sylver's quest also because their species memory still recognizes the human as the enemy Other—an alien entity who cannot be comprehended and accepted even if the animals embraced its material culture. The alienness of the human (body) is highlighted when the rats are disgusted by the fact that people do not have tails:

No tails? Why, everything had a tail, even if it was an almost-one like a rabbit's. How could any creation of nature have no tail? It did not bear thinking about. It revolted the mind. These humans were not animals; they were mutants from a strange place, probably from somewhere deep in the earth. They were as bad as adders, which were *all* tail. (*Windjammer Run* 196)

Then, during one of their many adventures, Sylver's friends are captured by a witch who turns them into rabbits and people. Afterwards, Bryony refuses to ever eat meat, because she feels disturbed by the idea of consuming the flesh of other creatures, even if that lies in the nature of her kind. But what is more surprising is that none of Sylver's friends ever comments on the experience of being human as if they lack the words for expressing their ordeal—or would rather entirely erase it from memory (*Thunder Oak* 182). This recurring suggestion that humans and the human body are a source of unfathomable terror indicates that while the animals might have adopted human customs, this lifestyle change has not affected their fear of humanity, which denotes an incomplete amborgization. Deprived of the opportunity to have a meaningful exchange with the Other since humans are absent for most of the tale, the animals are unable to develop their amborg gaze which would challenge their fearful perception of humanity.

Yet as the series continuously reiterates, humans must return to Welkin to save the land and its inhabitants from annihilation, so the animals will eventually need to address their fears.<sup>4</sup> Sylver discovers that it was a supernatural force that made people fall into a magical sleep to end their destructive wastefulness and lack of respect for other species (*Windjammer Run* 59). His companions believe that perhaps this time animals and humans will learn to cooperate to achieve a shared goal. The first to be wakened from their sleep are children who, symbolically being closer to the natural world than adults, serve as mediators between the species. After a short display of arrogance and obstinacy, the humans eventually agree to return and help. The weasel Bryony warns them, however, that the previous status quo is gone as the world changed after their departure; yet she also admits: “the land is not the same without you, despite the fact that we feared and hated you. Humans are needed as much as any other creature. There is an empty place, which can only be filled by you.” (*Windjammer Run* 393) *The Welkin* series thus ends on a positive note, with the image of a land saved from destruction by the joint efforts of animals and humans. Recognizing their interdependence for survival and shared rights to the land, the species can now focus on establishing cooperation and kinship, which will lead to the emergence of proper animal and human ambborgs that accept the Other as a sovereign subject and, in response to their exchange of gaze, reevaluate their own identities and obligations. Such coexistence is promoted by Indigenous philosophies which recognize that all species have their proper place within the ecosystem and that the absence of one might severely disrupt the harmony of the whole. Thus, as the *Welkin Weasels* series implies, it is not the complete disappearance of humanity that will save the world from Anthropocentric destruction, but the creation of interspecies communities which are guided by a kincentric perspective and in which all forms of life are valued as important and respected for their contribution to the well-being of the world.

## One Womb, One Tomb?

Though “The Fabulous Beast” is not an animal fantasy in the same sense as the previous works, because the animal, in spite of its pivotal role, is never a point of view character, it complements Kilworth’s exploration of interspecies relations and adds another layer to the notion of amborgization; hence, it merits inclusion. The story begins within the convention of a “found manuscript” as the protagonist, David Wilkins, sets on a quest to recreate the eponymous creature after finding hints of its existence in some ancient scrolls. Soon, Wilkins acquires scrolls written on an extraordinary hide whose separate fragments magically meld into one another. He undertakes the arduous task of gathering other pieces and realizes that, over the centuries, they have been used for holy scriptures and ceremonial objects, which emphasizes the marvelous nature of the creature. Eventually, the protagonist gathers enough fragments that they miraculously recreate the entire hide and the hide fills out with flesh and bones; the animal—which resembles a musk ox—regains life and, being a female, begins to give birth to mythical beings. The narrative, delivered entirely from the perspective of Wilkins who grows obsessed with the creature (the Mother), does not reveal whether it is a sentient being as it never communicates with the protagonist. Its ancient origins and supernatural abilities render it less as a beast of the natural world and more as a numinous entity whose existence escapes human comprehension. In this sense, no exchange of gaze between the protagonist and the animal is possible, which hinders the possibilities of amborgization.

But amborgization is located in this story entirely elsewhere. Wilkins does experience a temporary deconstruction of his humancentric perception when he discovers that a shirt he made for himself from the Mother’s shed hide has melded with his own skin. As a result, he feels refreshed and connected to other living creatures, even calling the Mother’s mythical offspring his siblings (“The Fabulous Beast” 85). However, soon it becomes evident that these new experiences only serve to stroke the protagonist’s ego. Not founded on any genuine recognition of the non-human Other, the fragile bond is shattered when Wilkins discovers that the last creature born of the Mother’s womb, before she escapes from captivity, is unmistakably a close kin to humans. Deeply disturbed by this revelation and its significance for the fundamental tents of human biology and culture, Wilkins is intent on recapturing the beast, though it is not revealed what exactly he plans on doing once he succeeds. Yet given his previous remarks, it can be assumed that the protagonist, shaken as he is, will try to profit from his discovery. When the Mother started birthing mythical creatures, his immediate reaction was quite telling:

we had the makings of everlasting fame and fortune in our hands. I needed time and space to think, it being crucial to make the right decision on how to present this discovery to the world. It is so big, so earth-shattering in its revelation, I know that even so-called incorrupt governments would

have no hesitation in ignoring laws regarding ownership. I do not want my discovery taken out of my hands immediately I make it known to the world, which is what will happen if I do not take firm, prior steps to protect my proprietorial rights. ("The Fabulous Beast" 84)

Wilkins' thoughts not only reveal his hunger for recognition but expose one of humanity's primary fallacies which distorts its relations with other species—Wilkins immediately assumes ownership of the beast, diminishing it to an object within his possession and a resource to be handled at will. As much as he physically takes care of the Mother, his actions are dictated by greed and hope for future profit, not by any genuine sympathy for the creature or deeper spiritual connection to it. This is clear when Wilkins proclaims:

I have reached the point where I would have no hesitation in preventing anyone who tries to harm her. I am her protector. She is more precious to me, to the world, than any other living creature. There is not one other animal alive, including man or woman, who is more valuable to the heritage of our planet. A heritage lost until my discovery. ("The Fabulous Beast" 84-85)

The last words reflect the depth of the protagonist's arrogant self-centeredness. Evaluated via the lens of Anthropocentric debates, Wilkins embodies humankind's worst qualities. That is why the story ultimately pushes humanity down from its self-appointed place at the pinnacle of creation and instead presents it as an aberrant life form that has its origin in the womb of an entity that combines divine nature with an animal body. Aberrant, because all the creatures born from the Mother are sexless, and humankind alone developed the ability to reproduce, which allowed it to become self-sufficient in terms of having offspring but, presumably, distorted the natural order of things and ultimately lead to overpopulation and extinction of other creatures.

While Wilkin's amborgization is a failure, "The Fabulous Beast" shares with Kilworth's other works and Gordon's amborg the idea of species kinship, symbolized here by the Mother's womb as the source of all life. Wilkins is terrified of how this scientific discovery could result in the downfall of human civilization:

It is possible that such a revelation might eventually be welcomed as a wonderful and marvellous thing, but initially it would undoubtedly send the human race reeling from the shock of a discovery that might take decades and many violent upheavals to overcome. Old religions, cultures, beliefs and scientific philosophies would fall, new ones arise, and in that terrible mix there would be chaos and confusion, madness, terror and despair. ("The Fabulous Beast" 90)

And yet, such a deeply disturbing revelation might be exactly what people need to dismantle the structures that legitimize the belief in humanity's exceptionalism, the overconsumption and wastefulness of capitalism, and the disregard for animal and plant life. While Kilworth's story does not openly chastise humanity

for its destructiveness, hints of criticism are present when the protagonist briefly speculates about how, at some point in time, people mutilated the fabulous beast, probably in order to stop her from birthing new creatures, to forget about their origins, and to legitimize their control over the world with traditions that separate the human from the animal. It is this forced separation that has led humanity to the ruin of the Anthropocene. But as Indigenous scholars engaging with ecocritical and Anthropocentric debates indicate, the knowledge of shared origins, kinship, and interconnectedness has always informed Indigenous lifeways, and the forced separation falls in line with the Western capitalist perspective which commodifies and exploits the world around it. Thus, extrapolating from the implicit message of Kilworth's story, if modern people do not reclaim their inherent connection to other living beings—if they do not gaze at the animal Other and the Self from the perspective of the Other, thus opening themselves to amborgization—they will eventually also share the same tomb, because humanity cannot sustain a healthy life in an ecologically-devastated world.

## Conclusion

If humanity is a cancerous disease that consumes the planet through overpopulation and exploitation of resources (Hern 1993), then a cognitive shift which protects biodiversity and promotes interconnectedness and kinship over human dominance might be one of the available cures (Haraway 2016). Popular culture—and speculative fiction in particular—is one of the venues for addressing and endorsing that shift. In his animal fantasy fiction, Garry Kilworth creatively explores species coexistence by looking at the world and its human inhabitants from the perspective of the animal Other. Reading his anthropomorphized animals via the lens of the amborg reveals that Kilworth, like Gordon, believes that the animal Other can be a subject, not an object, of a conscious exchange between species, and that humans should reevaluate themselves through this exchange. Such narratives revitalize the readers' "ecological imagination" (Lee 2018, 145) by inviting them to rediscover the world through "imaginative cross-species connections" (Borkfelt and Stephan 2022, 25).

Of course, it can be argued that animal fantasy is not entirely free of the problems present in its literary predecessors, i.e., their varying degrees of anthropomorphism, which generally transpose the matrix of human emotions and behavior over the animal Other. Such degrees of anthropomorphism are visible even in the works analyzed in this paper. In *Midnight's Sun*, anthropomorphism operates on the psychological level as Kilworth endows his wolf protagonist with feelings, ambitions, and fears typical for humans, but not necessarily for wolves. The Welkin Weasel series, similarly to many British works of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, goes a step further and situates the animals in a human-like society in which they not only think as humans, but also live and act as humans. "The Fabulous Beast" is the least anthropomorphic of the three narratives in that the eponymous creature is a completely alien entity detached from human thinking

and culture. Overall, the presence of anthropomorphism does question, at some level, the very ability of these narratives to work against the Anthropocene, since they attempt to conceptualize the animal Other within the boundaries of human behavior and culture. On the other hand, given the fact that we are yet to fully comprehend and communicate with non-human species, a writer of fiction who wishes to explore the mind of the animal Other can do so mostly through an imaginative extrapolation from the emotions and behavior of the human being. In this respect, the value of works such as Kilworth's animal fantasy stories lies not in their ability to decipher and aptly represent the minds of wolves or weasels, but in their ability to appeal to the sensitivity of the human recipient of the story and contribute to the development of their kincentric perspective. By temporarily dislocating the reader's consciousness into the mind of the animal, such works allow the reader to partake, however briefly, of the amborg gaze and see the Self in the animal Other—and the animal Other in the Self.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

1. "The Fabulous Beast" was first published in *The British Fantasy Society Yearbook* (edited by Guy Adams).
2. After closing the original trilogy, Kilworth continued to expand the *Welkin* series with the adventures of Sylver's distant descendants who inhabit a realm somewhat reminiscent of Victorian Britain.
3. Kilworth fashions Sylver and his band as the animal version of Robin Hood, who challenge Sheriff Flashed and Prince Poynt—the series' equivalents of the Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John. The series abounds in references to other historical texts and figures, such as *The Battle of Maldon* (in *Thunder Oak*), *Macbeth* (in *Castle Storm*), *Moby-Dick* (in *Windjammer Run*), the inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada (in *Castle Storm*), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet* (in *Castle Storm*), and the Venerable Bede (in *Castle Storm*).
4. In this way, Kilworth's series challenges works such as *Watership Down* and *The Animals of Farthing Wood* series, in which animal communities are destroyed by humans and the trajectory of their quest leads in the opposite direction, i.e., to separate the animals from people rather than establish kinship.
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