

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Boria Sax. *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature*. Blacksburg, Va.: McDonald & Woodward, 1998. vii + 268 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-939923-68-7.

Reviewed by Marie-Francoise Guedon (University of Ottawa)  
Published on H-Net (March, 1999)



To begin with a disclaimer: I (Walter) prejudged this book, knowing I was going to like it even before I saw it. After having followed Boria Sax's far-ranging, knowledgeable, meticulous, and even-tempered contributions about animals and nature, society and whatnot, in Internet forums, I came to the book prejudged in its favor. I was not disappointed.

The publisher sent me not one but two copies, so I sent one to Marie-Francoise Guedon, anthropologist and professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Ottawa, who is more qualified than myself by an order of magnitude to review it. The following is mainly by Marie—except for any howlers.

I found it—Marie said—a very intelligent book; and I think my kids will enjoy it as much as I did. After reading it, you will read Snow White or Cinderella in a different way.

It is a scholarly book, so you know you have something of substance in your hand. It is detailed and precise. Boria Sax knows his folklore studies. His references are fine, so if you have an interest in classics or are inclined to follow up with further reading, you can really enjoy his exploration. It takes you much further into myth and into religious questions than a simple summary of folktales would.

The book jacket tells us, "*The Serpent and the Swan* is a history and analysis of animal bride tales from antiquity to the present—the animal bride being, among many other representations, Eve taking an apple in the Garden of Eden, Medea casting spells, Cinderella riding to the royal ball in a pumpkin coach, or the Little Mermaid rising from the waves."

Sax's subject is the tales and, to thicken the plot, a number of versions of them—a far-reaching complex of tales. Compared with Joseph Campbell, Sax, who is not concerned with mysticism, is less psychological, more philosophical—and more readable.

He covers mostly tales of Mediterranean, Indo-European brides, and he makes a case for the rarity of animal husbands—the Frog Prince being an exception. Sax is very much aware of the cultural context, and he deliberately limits himself to our cultural area to keep his subject manageable. But it should be noted that among Amerindians, you have animal husbands as well as animal brides. They look at things differently. Here, for every story of a bear wife, you have a bear husband.

When considered literally, the animal bride stories—like folk tales generally—seem to be about bestiality and cannibalism. It is interesting to note that the sexual theme is muted. Otherwise it would be uncomfortably close to bestiality, given our world view of the last twelve centuries. These are definitely not Christian stories! (Unless you take them as allegories—as for example Beauty and the Beast being about the redemption of a sinner, for example.)

In any event, the tales raise far-reaching philosophical questions. For example, if you have a union between an animal and a human being, you want to ask—and Sax wants to ask—What happens to the soul? Because this is what is supposed to distinguish the human from the animal, at least in the Christian system.

Sax finds that *The Little Mermaid* for example raises cosmic questions: how does one acquire a soul? Do animals have a soul? Further, to discuss the tale, you have to discuss these questions. Consider these fairy tales, and

you have to consider your whole world view. So at the outset the tales lead Sax to ask, What is human? What is nature? What is gender? What is animal? What is marriage?

When we define ourselves—but not animals—as ensouled beings, what does this say about our society and its values? What sort of society do we live in, in which nature is perceived without a soul? In Christianity, the soul is what separates us from nature. A study of comparative anthropology reveals that this world view is far from universal; it is in fact the exception. (Though the problem of defining human beings by opposition to non-humans is universal.)

So *The Serpent and the Swan* is really about how we look at the world. Who are we? What does it mean to be a human being? To define yourself, you must do so in terms of something that you are NOT. Animals have historically served in this regard, and they provide the basis for Sax's analysis.

Traditionally, women are associated with nature, and men with culture. These complexes of tales get us to reexamine this, from a feminist perspective, and they provide a neat introduction to this issue. I (Guedon) will assign this in my course on women and religion.

The fairy tales lead us from our familiar view of man-versus-animal to a reorienting of the definition of animals and humanity. They lead us to a sense of difference between ourselves and the rest of the zoological kingdom, not from the perspective of biology or the Bible, but one we arrive at by going back imaginatively to a different kind of world view; one which is not anthropocentric, one which makes nature not into a thing, but again into a sacred space.

Sax calls for a resacralizing of the world, a world view in which nature is not an object apart, and a means to our ends, but as a space to be shared.

If you reintroduce the animal back into the world as a partner, as—to paraphrase Heidegger on other minds—those among whom we are, rather than those over and against whom we are, this leads to a different definition of ourselves. This redefinition goes back at least to Darwin, but Sax's method is not biological, nor psychological, but literary and philosophical: A folklorist, he analyzes myths.

By acquainting themselves with Sax's method and analysis, students can trace back the perceptions they have of themselves, as humans or as men or women, to

views that are buried in symbols we use for identity. We tend to think in psychological terms more than in mythical terms. But our views were shaped by the fairy tales we heard as well as by what our parents and the media had to say to us.

One of Sax's propositions is that given our dominant Christian mythology, in which our being is defined in terms of its otherness from nature, we yearn for a return to nature—and that this is part of the appeal of the animal bride tales.

If you live in a world in which you are wholly different from animals, then you don't know who you are. The Christian myth tells us that we are not part of nature, but in reality we are. So in legends we can go back to a time when we could reunite with nature, but we do it safely, because at the same time as we draw closer to animals, the legends reaffirm our difference from them. And in the tales, and in reality, the animals often end up very badly.

So in legend we reunite with nature, but we get punished for it, and so do the animals. The fairy tales reintroduce the animals, but they reintroduce them with a vengeance.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sax writes, "Such comparisons lead us back to questions with which this book began. Is it true that human beings are more vulnerable to suffering than other creatures? Can human beings transmute this suffering into spiritual strength? What is consciousness? How, if at all, may this be recognized? Does it admit of degrees?"

"We can no more ignore these questions than answer them unequivocally. The power of our technologies gives us, as human beings, a collective responsibility beyond what we know how to bear. How can we measure the interests of human beings against those of wolves? How can we measure the interests of wolves against those of rabbits or field mice?"

Today we can't ignore the fact that animals suffer. If we give animals back their souls, this has practical consequences. When more than eight billion animals are raised in appalling, unnatural conditions in factory farms, and when the activities of humans are resulting in a planetary spasm of extinction comparable to that at the end of the Triassic, the questions have a pressing practical import.

In a chapter on "Toward a Sacramental View of Animal Rights," Sax considers some implications of his anal-

ysis, and raises some interesting points: “Daily contact with animals invites use. Attempts to avoid using animals could lead us to move them ever further from the center of our lives. This distance could lead to increasing resentment of animals, if we are constantly asked to spend money for their care and preservation while being unable to take anything in return. As we replace leather with plastic, zoos with videotapes, experiments with theory, and meat with genetically engineered soybeans, we could move toward an increasingly artificial society. Animals could be further marginalized, perceived as superfluous, and increasingly driven to extinction.”

Such considerations lead Sax to a view in which the USE of animals is not tabooed, but for ethical justification must be accompanied by a proper sense of gratitude, and by “fair compensation,” so that for example a tax on pork would be used to improve the lives of pigs. “I support the eating of meat,” Sax writes, “not to signify that humans are superior to other creatures, but, on the contrary, to signify that we are not.” Although Guedon endorses this

reasoning, I (Miale) find that the abstract consideration pales alongside the reality that my demand for meat is satisfied at the expense of the animal who involuntarily provides it, and is the cause of its suffering.

Despite the attention we have given to the thematic questions in this review, *The Serpent and the Bride* is not only about philosophy. The tales, of Melusine, half woman and half fairy; of Aesop’s Cat Maiden; the Peri Wife, the Geese Maidens, and many others, are all here to speak for themselves and to entrance, sans the reflected illumination of interpretation.

We came away from the book with the realization that there really is more to fairy tales than we had supposed.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas>

**Citation:** Marie-Francoise Guedon. Review of Sax, Boria, *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2857>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).