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"WE DID BECOME": SHERI S. TEPPER'S *GRASS* AND POSTHUMAN COMPANIONSHIP BEYOND THE ANIMAL/HUMAN BINARY

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ABSTRACT. ***"We Did Become": Sheri S. Tepper's* Grass *and Posthuman Companionship Beyond the Animal/Human Binary.*** Sheri S. Tepper's *Arbai* trilogy (1989-1992) is the home for beings that pose a challenge to the binaries behind the establishment of hierarchical relations between humans and animals. In the first volume of the series, *Grass*, originally published in 1989, Marjorie Westriding, a noblewoman, revolts against anthropocentric and patriarchal social structures when she abandons her husband and becomes a companion to one of the aliens who inhabit the planet Grass and are perceived by humans as foxes. Marjorie's eventual symbiosis with the creature grants her eternity, and turns her into a prophetess, a unique being that can travel through time and space along with the "foxen," the Grassian term for "one or a dozen" foxes. Her status as neither human nor alien (or animal) allows her to form a posthuman identity that no longer places anthropocentrism at the core of the conceptualization of human/non-human relations. This article therefore discusses the possibility of a posthuman and ecofeminist critique of anthropocentric and patriarchal hierarchies through the lens of Tepper's novel, by focusing on the symbiosis and companionship relation Marjorie establishes with the foxen. This relation is mainly analyzed under the light of Ralph R. Acampora's concept of 'symphysis,' particularly emphasizing Marjorie's ability to share symphysical experiences of embodiment with other non-human beings instead of simply feeling sympathy for them.

Keywords*: animal studies, anthropocentrism, ecofeminism, posthumanism, Sheri S. Tepper*

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REZUMAT. *„Am devenit într-adevăr”:* Grass *de Sheri S. Tepper și companionul postuman dincolo de dihotomia animal/om*. Trilogia *Arbai* (1989-1992) de Sheri S. Tepper adăpostește ființe care pun în dificultate dihotomiile din spatele ansamblului de relații ierarhice între oameni și animale. În primul volum al seriei, *Grass*, publicat inițial în 1989, Marjorie Westriding, o femeie de rang nobiliar, se revoltă împotriva structurilor sociale antropocentrice și patriarhale, părăsindu-și soțul și devenind companioana unuia dintre exteratereștrii de pe planeta Grass percepuți de oameni ca fiind vulpi. Simbioza ulterioară cu creatura îi conferă nemurire și ea se transformă într-o profetesă, o ființă unică având capacitatea de a călători în timp și spațiu împreună cu „vulpeiul” ei, termenul grassian pentru „una sau o duzină” de vulpi. Statutul ei ca nefiind nici umană, nici extraterestră (și nici animal) îi permite să formeze o identitate postumană care nu mai pune antropocentrismul în nucleul conceptualizării relațiilor umane/non-umane. Articolul de față discută astfel posibilitatea unei critici postumane și ecofeministe a ierarhiilor antropocentrice și patriarhale prin perspectiva romanului lui Tepper, focalizând asupra relației simbiotice și de companie pe care Marjorie o stabilește cu vulpeiul. Această relație este în principal analizată prin prisma conceptului de „symphysis” al lui Ralph R. Acampora, accentuând mai ales capacitatea lui Marjorie de a împărtăși experiențe simfizice ale întrupării cu alte ființe non-umane, în locul doar al unor sentimente de simpatie față de acestea.

Cuvinte-cheie: *studii despre animale, antropocentrism, ecofeminism, postumanism, Sheri S. Tepper*

Despite her prolific career as a science fiction author, Sheri S. Tepper (1929-2016) remains understudied, regardless of her works being the locus for ecofeminist reflections, including the questioning of the human/animal binary structures. Her work is part of a “long history of [science fiction works] thinking about alterity, subjectivity and the limits of the human [...] [which contain] many animals and a plethora of perspectives on the nature of animal existence” (Vint 2014, 2). *Grass*, published in 1989, constitutes the first volume of a trilogy in which Tepper explores the relationship of humans to non-human nature. This initial installment sets the overall atmosphere of the series by both discussing the harm done to Earth and the domination structures at play in humans’ relations to those constructed as ‘other,’ including animals. In *Grass*, Tepper emphasizes the role of women regarding the preservation of the environment, a role that coincides with the historical involvement of women in green and animal liberation movements, where they would constitute the majority of members, despite not being their main voice (Gaard 1998; Gaarder

2011; MacGregor 2006; Merchant 2005). Particularly, Tepper explores the perspective of an inherent association between women and nature due to their subordinate status to the common oppressive structures that comprise sexism and capitalism. Female characters in her novel have a greater tendency towards taking care of non-human beings and nature, while men are the ones who, for the most part, enact exploitative practices.

In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1989) Carolyn Merchant advocates for transcending dualist perceptions of reality regarding men and culture/women and nature, as she calls for "a new partnership between humans and the earth" (xv), which she develops further in *Earthcare* (1996), where she highlights the importance of an 'ethic of earthcare.' Merchant emphasized the need for humanity as a whole to work towards improving its interactions with nature, as she moves away from essentialism when discussing the connections between women and nature:

> [The] celebrations of the connection between women and nature contain an inherent contradiction. If women overtly identify with nature and both are devalued in modern Western culture, don't such efforts work against women's prospects for their own liberation? Is not the conflation of women and nature a form of essentialism? Are not women admitting that by virtue of their own reproductive biology they are in fact closer to nature than men and that indeed their social role is that of a caretaker? Such actions seem to cement existing forms of oppression against both women and nature, rather than liberating either. (Merchant 1989, xvi)

Indeed, the status of 'nature' and 'women' as socially constructed concepts throughout history bestows on them a contingent character that, far from being essential at their core, is dependent on historical and social circumstances, rendering these concepts unstable and prone to modification and negotiation. Accordingly, Tepper's depiction of the connection between nature and women, while it could be regarded as essentialist, is rather based on an ecofeminist critique of common mechanisms of exploitation that justify sexism and speciesism (along with the abuses against nature and its subordination to capitalism in general).

Her novel *Grass* is set on a planet with the same name, characterized by its greenery. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the Westridings, an aristocratic family from Terra (which is the name given to Earth in the series), where there is an overpopulation crisis caused by the scarcity in natural resources after centuries of greedy exploitation of the environment. This crisis serves as an excuse to Sanctity, the theocratic and patriarchal government of Terra, to condemn the lower classes for having too many

children and requiring more resources, while at the same time forbidding any sort of birth control or pregnancy termination measures, as they are considered to go against the religious foundation of Sanctity. Those who have more than two children are deprived from their rights and sent, along with their 'excess' descendants to Repentance[2], in exile. Additionally, there is a plague ravaging Terra. The only human-inhabited planet free from these vermin is Grass, a centenarian human colony long detached from Sanctity that, as a plague-free planet, is not keen on receiving foreigners to examine their idiosyncratic nature.

The Westridings, who are part of the high classes of Terra, are chosen to travel to Grass and collect information that would be useful to save the other planets ruled by Sanctity from the plague. Upon arrival, the Terran family realizes that Grass is a greatly hierarchical, patriarchal society that has as its main sport the hunting of "foxen," an autochthonous alien species from Grass that humans there have assigned the role of foxes to be hunted with the help of the "Hippae," another local alien species that are treated as horses by humans on the planet. In configuring these beings as animals, the humans on Grass enter a position of superiority that justifies them using these species as tools for their own entertainment, in a conceptualizing process that, as Sherryl Vint (2014) points out, causes these non-human beings to be "inevitably caught up in human social systems and the language we use to create and give meaning to the world. [Thus,] animal lives are complexly interrelated with human culture. How we think about animals affects how we live with them, and how we live with them determines who they are, socially and biologically" (8). Once the foxen are relegated to be the substitute for the foxes on Earth, they cannot be regarded as anything other than a commodity for human entertainment, establishing killing at the center of the human/animal relation.

The social systems involved in the domination of people and animals in the novel are also deeply gendered. Women—along with a few isolated men that revolt against the patriarchal and religious society they inhabit—tend to be more prone to being sympathetic to non-human beings, while most men are shaped by violence, whether it takes the shape of hunting or it is used for keeping their family under control (aristocratic patriarchs in Grass, such as Stavenger bon Damfels, force their children to participate in the hunt and punish those who dare contravening their demands; such is the fate of his wife, Rowena). As a result of the entrenched dualism that informs the relations of domination and subordination in the societies of Terra and Grass, men occupy a privileged, superior position that relies on the domination of women and

[2] Repentance is the planet where those who transgress the laws of Sanctity are sent as a punishment, usually when dealing with overpopulation matters, as a means to reduce the number of inhabitants in Terra.

animals, who are placed at the same level of exploitation. In her explanation of "dualism," Val Plumwood highlights that "the most valued side (male, humans) is constructed as alien to and of different nature or order of being from the 'lower,' inferiorised side (women, nature) [...]; the dominant side is taken as primary, the subordinated side is defined in relation to it" (1993, 32). Likewise, she insists on the way this dualism encourages the appropriation and incorporation of the subordinated subject into the culture and selfhood of the master (1993, 41), which in the case of *Grass* translates to the need for the aristocrat hunters to both prey on the foxen, considered as inferior animals, while also ensuring the submission of the humans that are considered to be beneath them (mostly women) so they can retain their privileges. Along these lines, the logic based on dualism perpetuates oppression:

> The concept of reason provides the unifying and defining contrast of the concept of nature, much as the concept of husband does for that of wife, as master for slave. Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him (Plumwood 1993, 3).

Types of exclusion of the other, such as sexism or speciesism, are based on the presentation of women (and other non-conforming genders) and animals as separate from the concepts of rationality or culture upon which the oppressive system is built: "to be defined as 'nature' [...] is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject. [...] It means being seen as part of a sharply separate [...] lower realm, whose domination is simply 'natural'" (Plumwood 1993, 4).[3] Women and animals in the novel are placed within this nature, hence being excluded from the concept of 'human,' characterized by its ability to dominate the other.

Nevertheless, the protagonist of the novel, Marjorie Westriding, revolts against the concept of 'human' that is prevalent to her society and that of Grass. While she is still on Terra, she acts against the Sanctity authority by helping

[3] Just as Merchant addressed the unproductiveness implied in fully embracing a total identification of women with nature, Plumwood also warns of the issues that lie in replacing the image of women as the angels of the house with that of "the angel in the ecosystem" (1993, 9), thus perpetuating the idea of women being born with some inherent qualities in relation to nature. As she points out, this connection does not have an actual ground in reality, since many women have contributed to the exploitation of nature indirectly through their participation in consumer society (ibid.). However, Plumwood also cautions about some feminisms embracing the *upward* move of women from the natural realm to the cultural one without questioning the exclusive and oppositional implication of celebrating culture and reason above nature (1993, 20).

women from the lower classes to get abortions in order to prevent them from losing their rights as citizens once they have too many children according to the theocratic government's regulations. Her sympathy for the ones she should execute her privilege over extends to animals too: throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that Marjorie has a respect and understanding for non-human beings that are not matched by the other characters in *Grass*. In accordance to Ralph Acampora's (2014) notion of 'symphysis,' Marjorie manages to share experiences of embodiment with other non-human beings instead of simply feeling sympathy for them. Consequently, Marjorie is able to almost become one with her horse, Quixote, without needing to communicate or indicate the animal to carry out any actions: "Then Quixote charged. She hadn't signaled him to do it. He simply did it. [...] She dismounted and struggled to get [her son] on to Quixote's back. The horse knelt to receive him, again without a signal to do so" (Tepper 2002, 469). Marjorie's rapport to horses even affects her husband's perception of their marriage, as he is unable to understand such a bond with a non-human being, which makes him jealous: "Long ago [Rigo] had told himself that Marjorie would never love him as he had dreamed she would because she had given all her love to horses. He had even thought he hated Marjorie's riding because she gave the horses the thing she would not give him—her passion. Horses. Even more than motherhood, or her charities" (Tepper 2002, 194).

Marjorie's symphysical relation to animals reaches its peak when she manages to establish a telepathic connection to one of the foxen in Grass. Communication—or apparent lack thereof—is the main justification for humans' disregard for the foxen: since these aliens are not able to produce a spoken speech like that of humans, they are considered to be lesser beings. In managing to establish an exchange outside of the ruling of speech, Marjorie embodies Derrida's 'chimerical' suggestion of regarding "the absence of the name and of the word otherwise and as something other than a privation" (2008, 48). Marjorie instead takes this absence as an opportunity for her own liberation, but also that of foxen and fellow humans. Her relation to the foxen becomes more intimate, as she defies the patriarchal structures that tie her to a guilt-ridden subordinate role to her husband and children. Eventually, Marjorie and the foxen physically transcend the animal/human binary by having a quasi-spiritual, intimate encounter:

> Beneath her the muscles of his shoulders moved like fingers, touching her. [...] In the dance he [...] changed, becoming manlike, [...] not a man but manlike, [...] as he drew her into a closer dance. [...] No words. Purring, roaring, growling [...] penetrating deep. [...] [No] thought at all. Sensation only. [...] Claws touched her, gently, drawing down her naked flesh like fingernails [...]. The edge of his tongue touched her naked thigh,

> sliding like a narrow, flaming serpent into her crotch. [A] flaming symbol with two parts which moved together to fuse with aching slowness into one. (Tepper 2002, 406-407).

Despite Marjorie's initial rejection, which is deeply influenced by the clash between her social and religious learnings and her new way of relating, her symphysical bond to these creatures from Grass prevails, and finally leads her to leave her husband and family and stay on that planet instead of returning to Terra. The foxen and her develop a new way of life, outside of the aristocratic society of Grass.

Marjorie challenges anthropocentric conceptions of reality since she questions the idea of humans as superior to non-humans and thus becomes a harbinger against speciesism. In doing so, she also rejects patriarchal social structures, as she leaves her husband in order to stay by the foxen's side and become their companion. Vint remarks that "like the animals, women have been named in patriarchal discourse, given identities and roles that capture perhaps only a part or perhaps none of their being" (2014, 93). By sharing embodied experiences with the foxen—whether they fuse into one consciousness as a means to communication, or they share a union that also transcends the limitations of physical encounters—, Marjorie creates a new ethic that transcends that of humans. This new ethic mirrors Merchant's 'partnership ethics' (a revision of her 'ethic of earthcare'), and that she encourages in *Radical Ecology* (2005), which consists in "equity between the human and nonhuman communities; [...] moral consideration for both humans and other species; [...] respect for both cultural diversity and biodiversity; [...] inclusion of women, minorities, and nonhuman nature in the code of ethical accountability; [...] and an ecological sound management" (83). Marjorie, thanks to the foxen, makes her ethic of earthcare a way of life that most men, and particularly her husband, cannot understand since they are seemingly unable to see past their patriarchal, anthropocentric point of view.

The interspecies physical exchange with the foxen, portrayed as a quasi-spiritual experience, is the trigger for Marjorie's final decision to let go of any societal chains that are holding her accountable to the patriarchal society from Terra. She then becomes the prophetess for the Arbai.[4] By obliterating the limits between human and non-human, Marjorie reaches her own sense of personal liberation, while also liberating the foxen from the humans in Grass. Through the partnership they create, Marjorie and the foxen manage to move beyond the

[4] The Arbai are an extinct alien species that used to live in Grass. They were killed by the Hippae before the humans colonized the planet, and they were characterized for their peaceful behavior and trust in the Hippae's good intentions, despite being killed by them.

dualist categories of human/animal, embracing a posthuman identity that no longer places the latter below the former. Through this union, Tepper explores the possibilities of the posthuman, which, as Opperman argues, encourages radical change "in the sense that women's bodies and animal subjectivities are no longer viewed as the ultimate other that can be colonized, oppressed, and subjugated" (2013, 28). Without falling in what Vint refers to as "romanticised versions of human-animal relationships" (2014, 69), the two main characters in *Grass* offer an alternative mode of relating to each other, moving towards a posthuman stance.

In contrast to the foxen and Marjorie's joint posthuman identity, there is the anthropomorphism that appears in relation to the Hippae, the aliens who are used as horses to hunt the foxen. While these aliens are used by humans for their own entertainment, just like the foxen are, Marjorie discovers, upon talking with the foxen, that the Hippae have been hypnotizing the humans in Grass in order to destroy the other species of aliens on the planet. Furthermore, the Hippae are behind the vermin that spread through the rest of human-inhabited planets: they would spread the plague in the commercial spaceships that leave Grass. The role of these animal-like aliens serves as a metaphor for human parasitic behavior in relation to other species and the environment: while, at first, it may seem that they are a tool for humans to carry out their hunting practices, the reality is that the Hippae are the ones utilizing humans in order to kill other species. In an ironic turn of events, most of the patriarchs of Grass that exercised their domination over those below them, both human and animal, are precisely killed by some of these animals that present quite a human-like thirst for colonization. By the end of the novel, it is revealed that those who rode these creatures were actually mentally manipulated by them so that they would kill the foxen, their nemesis in Grass, although humans had all too willingly let themselves into that manipulation, since their desire for killing animals through hunting had suited their own purposes: "'Humans have been *used* by Hippae to kill foxen [...].' At least partly a lie, too. Humans had been all too willing to lend themselves to that Hunt" (Tepper 2002, 466).

Through the Hippae, Tepper subverts the domination system based on humankind's exploitation of animals by making them victims of the ones they were oppressing to begin with. Humanity's destructive potential is reflected via the Hippae, turning them into human-like creatures in their behavior. The boundary between human and animal is established based on who kills whom, and, as Vint (2014, 33) points out, while humans are understood to be the ones who prey on animals, when these roles are inverted and the animals are the ones preying on the humans, the former are considered to have altered the

natural order of things. Marjorie, however, quickly understands that the Hippae have all along been behaving just like humans:

> 'The Hippae enjoyed the killing. [...] They think they have a right to kill everything but themselves [...]. [Is] that so unusual? Look at our own poor homeworld. Didn't man think he had a right to kill everything but himself? Didn't he have fun doing it? Where are the great whales? Where are the elephants? Where are the bright birds who once lived in our own swamp forests?' (Tepper 2002, 422)

Destruction is then presented as a behavior found in humans instead of animals. The superiority by which the killing of the foxen seems to be justified is eventually questioned when the humans are the ones being hunted.

The once glorified species of the Hippae are then proved to be the cause of human extinction due to the plague, while the foxen are the ones who propose a move beyond the human/animal binary that will help end all forms of oppression present in the societies of Terra and Grass. It is precisely through her relationship with the foxen that Marjorie creates a posthuman identity that is not human nor animal/alien, and that no longer places anthropocentrism at the core of the conceptualization of human/non-human relations. Reflecting on the requirements for dominating nature, and by extension animals, Merchant (2005) explains that domination "depends equally on the human as operator, deriving from an emphasis on power and on the human as manager, deriving from the stress on order and rationality as criteria for progress and development" (53). Humans in Grass did try to carry out these two roles, operator and manager, when it came to the animal-like aliens inhabiting the planet, which led them to their own destruction. Ultimately, domination of animals by humans only succeeds as long as those animals do not revolt: the moment another species controls humans, the roles in the dynamic of domination change and the latter become the objects of domination.

Ralph Acampora (2014) advocates for an understanding of what "being-with" other beings entails and means, since this will give us "all the mileage we need for tracking cross-species community" (27). Marjorie and the foxen learn to be-with each other, precisely creating a community of their own once the human decides to leave her husband and stay in Grass with her new partner in order to spread an intergalactic message across different planets that encourages people to leave aside societal structures that predetermine their ability to relate to others, whether these are humans or animals or aliens. By rethinking our relationship to animals, as Marjorie does, we can also reinterpret what it is to be 'human': "in reconnecting with animals, we are also reconnecting with our

embodied being," (Vint 2014, 9) which can lead, consequently, to posthuman identities that go beyond the division of animal/human.

In alliance with the foxen, the new Marjorie, the one that stayed in Grass, exchanges letters with people from Terra in order to ensure this conceptual change is not restricted to her but rather reaches other fellow humans. Indeed, her nephew, a priest of Sanctity, brings the good news that a new form of relating to the foxen is in the making: "I've already sent an inquiry to Shafne, to the Church in Exile. [...] I'm confident the Secretariat will think it important for us to find bonds of friendship with the foxen. Kinship, as it were. To find a way to share ourselves. Marjorie says that even small beings may be friends" (Tepper 2002, 528). Founding their relationship with these animals on kinship instead of domination undermines the concept of 'human' and puts an end to the division between humans and animals. This new manner of "being-with" highlights the fact that "animal," as Derrida reflects, is just "a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (2008, 23). Through their symphysical connection, Marjorie and the foxen are no longer human and animal, respectively, but something else that does not belong to those opposing categories anymore.

In her last letter to Terra, Marjorie emphasizes the need of becoming something else beyond human:

> Mankind thought that his was the only intelligence and earth was his only place, [and believed] that *each* man had individual importance. [...] How foolish the idea was. [...] Compared to the size of creation, what were we but very small beings [?] [...] Corn becomes bread; bees make honey; grass is turned into flesh, or into gardens. Very small beings are important, not individually but for what they become [...]. Mankind almost failed. [...] We left [Terra] because we had ruined our planet and had to leave or die. [...] We grew. We multiplied. We did not become… (Tepper 2002, 537-538).

In Marjorie's words, there is an obvious link between the social belief of human exceptionalism above any other species and humankind's stagnant situation (and potential disappearance). Establishing a relationship based on kinship and companionship allows Marjorie to overcome her own human limitations and *become*. Aided by her symphysical connection to the foxen, which is established in several moments throughout the novel, mainly when they communicate through telepathy and when they have that one intimate encounter, which takes place at both a physical and a mental level, Marjorie becomes more than human: she becomes a new sort of being. It is through the mutual vulnerability found in

the way human and animal relate when it comes to Marjorie and the foxen that those boundaries can be removed. As Vint writes, "shared vulnerability—recognition of similar, mortal embodiment—becomes the basis for a new conception of subjectivity and a concomitant new human/non-human sociality. [...] By sharing physical embodiment with some of the alien, animal-like species [...], the human characters in [science fiction] come to an understanding of personhood that exceeds their preconceived prejudices" (2014, 154). Their shared embodiment allows Marjorie and the foxen to evolve and represent a new order of relating that does not rely on dualism or oppression anymore.

Grass serves as a reflection on the possibilities of questioning the way humans relate to and interrelate with non-human beings and nature. Presenting hunting as the epitome of the practices involved in the domination of both animals and those who do not conform to society—after all, as it has been highlighted previously, everyone is forced to participate in this activity and those who dare question it have to endure punishment—prompts a reflection on the divisions between human and animal/other. Tepper allows the reader to imagine, through the foxen and Marjorie's relationship, a fruitful outcome from the interactions with other creatures that are not necessarily human. This is precisely one of the main possibilities animals in science fiction have to offer, according to Vint: "animals in [science fiction] suggest many themes, but perhaps the most promising is this aspiration that humans might interact with an intelligence other than our own and be transformed by it, a recurrent dream of [science fiction]" (2014, 227). Change, becoming something other than what the category of "human" entails is at the core of Tepper's *Grass*. The embodied experience that Marjorie and the foxen share allows imagining a posthuman future where different types and modes of consciousness outside of human-made norms and categories can become real. The eventual immortality that these two characters achieve precisely due to their union into a new entity, the prophetess, evokes an influence that our present may have in the future yet to come. The continuity—and possibility—of a posthuman companionship starts at the present moment when a human can see beyond the animal/human binary and symphysis is enacted. It is then when we do become.

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