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Abstract: The Beast Within: Bestiality in French Visual Culture, c. 1830-1850

Few sexual taboos remain in Western culture, but images depicting intercourse between humans and animals continue to shock us with their jarring incongruity. They upset a still-present belief in the natural order by replacing the human male with some other large, wild, and/or exotic species. Often sexual relations between different species should not even be physically possible, nor could they produce viable offspring. Yet, the illicit aspects of this boundary crossing fuel the artistic imagination. Indeed, contemporary sexologists argue that *imagined* visual and verbal depictions of bestiality far outnumber actual incidents of humans' sexual intercourse with animals. What can account for this incongruity between real and imagined/imaged occurrences? To probe this question, I present depictions of bestiality that convey both the desire for continued dominion over animals and the fear of its loss. My paper charts this theme in nineteenth-century French art, from the anonymous lithographs illustrating Alfred de Musset's erotic novella *Gamiani, ou deux nuits d'excès* (1833) to Auguste Clésinger's notorious sculpture *Femme piquée par un serpent* (1847). I assert that such works frequently continue the projects of control set about through the contemporaneous establishment of the public Ménagerie in Paris and the rise in pet-keeping by the bourgeoisie. In image and text, animals are harnessed – sometimes literally – to provide humans with sexual gratification, further demonstrating humanity's dominion over the beasts. Yet, on occasion, the animal appears to engineer its own satisfaction, upsetting the typical order and violating the last remnants of Cartesian belief in the beast-machine - that collection of moving animal parts that felt neither pleasure nor pain. These versions also represent deep-rooted fears that Western-European white men might lose power over women, slaves, or animals. They give titillating and terrifying forms to human anxieties during a period of intense scientific, ethical, and artistic efforts to define humanity's relationship to and its responsibilities towards animals.