According to the Book of Genesis, human beings have two distinct relationships with other animals: in one version of the creation story Adam gives them names, in the other they are created to keep him company. Whether non-human animals are creatures to which we assign meanings, or whether they are our interlocutors, is thus a dilemma formulated from the outset. It will provide the overall framework for this course in we examine how animals are interpreted metaphorically or symbolically, as if they were texts, and how they are also represented as speaking to us, as if they were producers of texts. We will work mainly on written documents ranging from the Bible and Antiquity through the Middle Ages and the premodern period (mainly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), reaching forward occasionally into the contemporary world for current examples. Some materials are literary (like fables and fairy stories), some philosophical, others historical. We will also consider visual materials from manuscript illuminations to recent films. And we will evaluate the role of animals in cultural practices other than literary or artistic works – for instance, in hunting or in zoos – and discover how, in this sense, they are like texts that we can read and analyze.

The syllabus follows a three-part trajectory, with the first part setting out from the view of animals as a part of the overall book of Nature and the third focusing on them as interlocutors, or perhaps as co-authors. A middle section, which leads into a discussion of fairy tales, deals with human identification as or with another animal, where the animal may be both an emblem to be deciphered and a party to human conversation – a useful reminder that the role of animals as texts is rarely simple. Each section traces a chronological development from antiquity to the early modern period, with the latter part of the semester being more weighted toward modernity. Poetic and scientific accounts of animals become more divorced from one another and the older conceptions of (hum)animality as communicative creatures like ourselves sputter and fall away.

Course materials on the syllabus range from "high" philosophy to "low" genres like fables or children’s tales. This zig-zag between high and low is crucial to the conception of the course, which is intended to help students to see the relevance of abstruse reflection to everyday experience, and conversely to appreciate the complex assumptions and implications that lie behind supposedly simple phenomena. Students will thus learn to examine critically and even reconsider taken-for-granted aspects of modern life by learning about their development over time and the philosophical positions on which they rest.

The course will also create opportunities for personal reflection and observation on the role and depiction of other animals in the world around us. Short weekly writing assignments will ensure that students engage with, and write critically about, the texts or images or experiences which they
encounter, while the three essay assignments, which correspond with the three sections of the syllabus, offer opportunities for creative writing as well as (or instead of) analytical discussion.

**Required readings**

Selection of texts on NYU classes, plus additionally:
Barber, *Medieval Bestiary*
Richard de Fournival, *Bestiary of Love*
Chrétien de Troyes, *Knight of the Lion*
La Fontaine, *Fables*

**Participation**

...is mandatory. Students must read the assigned readings in advance of lectures, attend Recitations already bursting with thoughts and ideas to discuss, and contribute vigorously to class discussion. Since many of the course readings are being made available on NYU classes and the use of online resources is recommended for certain sessions, the use of computers is allowed – especially of e-readers or tablet computers – for academic purposes only. Abuse of computing devices for any other purposes (such as social media) will be penalized.

**Assignments**

Weekly writing assignment (guide length 250 words) responding to a text, image, or event in the week’s syllabus.  
Three writing assignments (guide length 4 double-spaced pages) corresponding to each section of the course. Students may be directed to rewrite and resubmit either of the first two essays at the discretion of the preceptor.  
Final exam.

**Assessment**

Positive assessment:  
Participation including weekly writing assignments and class discussion 20%; three short essays 20% each; final exam 20%  
Negative assessment:  
Marks will be deducted for missing recitations or submitting work late without prior notification or a valid excuse, and for using computers in class or lectures other than for the immediate academic purposes of the class.
Detailed syllabus

Week I Introduction – some examples of animal texts: a bestiary chapter, a fairy tale, a fable. Animals “in the beginning” and “at the end”: Genesis, Augustine, Derrida, Agamben.

Recitation: a case study of an exemplary short text (Puss in Boots?) in conjunction with a theoretical text (Derrida?)

Weeks 2-5 Animals and the book of Nature

Week 2 Animals in a late antique world: natural histories of Pliny and Physiologus; Isidore, *Etymologies*, as an encyclopedia

Recitation: students to explore bestiary website re Physiologus, look at a specified set of beats, and write a short response to one.

Week 3 Overview of the medieval bestiary. Examples of Philippe de Thaun and the Second-Family bestiary. The concepts “animal,” “beast” and “nature” and their evolution.

Recitation: “Nature” and “text” in the Second-Family bestiary

Week 4 Extending the implications of bestiary images. Richard de Fournival, doctor, bibliophile and author of the *Bestiary of Love*. Bestiaries beyond the middle ages.

Recitation: is the Lady’s “Reply to Richard’s Bestiary” a reply to Richard’s Bestiary?

Week 5. Living bestiaries: the spectacular history of zoos from antiquity to Versailles.

Recitation: commentary on a visit to Central Park Zoo (and comparison with the Bronx Zoo?)

[First essay due by the end of Week 5.]

Weeks 6-9 Identification with/as animals

Week 6 Totemic animals. heraldry, and costume. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*.

Hunting and/as identification. The stag in the Life of St Eustace, the Life of St Julien, and Guigemar,

Recitation: discussion of Lévi-Strauss and Guigemar

Week 7 Hunting continued: stag, boar, wolf; the *lais* of Guigemar, Guingamor, and Bisclavret.

Start Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Lion*.

Recitation: the hero saves the lion in *The Knight of the Lion*.

Week 8 *The Knight of the Lion* continued and concluded.
Recitation: Yvain and the lion, the lady and the snake?

Week 9 The “savage mind” and the child’s mind. Fairy stories by Perrault and d’Aulnoy

Recitation: Beauty and the Beast.

[Second essay due by the end of week 9]

Weeks 10-14 Do animals speak to us?

Week 10 Talking animals. Philosophy and comparative psychology in antiquity: Aristotle’s and Plato’s views of animal souls. Aesop’s fables

Recitation: Aesop’s “philosophy of the soul”

Week 11 Theology and comparative psychology in the Middle Ages: Aristotle’s and St Bernard’s views of animal souls. Medieval Fables. Critical readings.

Recitation: what do “human” and “animal” mean in Marie de France’s *Fables*? (Or Chaucer, maybe?)


Recitation: Getting to grips with La Fontaine’s « discourse to Mme de la Sablière »

Week 13 The structure and development of La Fontaine’s Fables. Critical reading: Odette de Mourgues, Senior

Recitation: selected fables of La Fontaine.

Week 14 The premodern animal on trial. Film: “The Hour of the Pig” : when animals can speak no more.

[Final essay due by the end of week 14]