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"ANYWAY, WHAT'S A DOE MORE OR LESS?" ANDROCENTRISM IN *WATERSHIP DOWN* (1972) AND *TALES FROM WATERSHIP DOWN* (1996) BY RICHARD ADAMS

Abstract
When Adams's *Watership Down* reached the US market, it came under strong criticism for "its anti-feminist bias" (Resh Thomas 1974: 311). Several years later, Le Guin reiterated the censure of its "egregious sexism" (2009: 82), taxing the novel with falsifying animal behaviour. However, through the comparison of Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit* (1964) and Adams' text, it is possible to prove that the latter's representation of rabbits' society is actually strongly indebted to his source text for its blatant androcentrism. The sequel, *Tales from Watership Down*, published in 1996, ostensibly tries to give the does more "floodlight" (Adams in Monaghan 2011: 14) and make amends for some of the accusations received. However, as the paper highlights, while the novel undeniably conveys a strong ecological message, its point of view remains strenuously patriarchal.

Key words: ecofeminism, ecocriticism, androcentrism, sexism, *Watership Down*

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1. Introduction

In 1964, the ethologist Ronald M. Lockley concluded his study of wild rabbits' behaviour with these words: "Rabbits are so human. Or is it the other way round – humans are so rabbit?" (1964: 164). His observation was the fruit of several extended considerations about rabbits' social habits and, more poignantly, about their tendency to destroy their habitat with their unregulated breeding and feeding. Two years later, Richard Adams started writing his first novel, a story about rabbits he had invented to entertain his two daughters during a car trip to Stratford, and he used Lockley's essay to learn the fundamentals of rabbits' behaviour. When his book was finished, he sent it to several publishers; but it was rejected every time. Adams, however, did not give up and finally found a small publishing house, Rex Collings, which printed it in 1972.

A year before Lockley's first edition, in 1963, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the journalist and feminist thinker Gloria Steinem published the account of her undercover experience as a Bunny in a Playboy Club. In the collection of essays she released more than thirty years later, she thus epitomized the last, but not least, "long-term resul[t]" (1995: 74) the article had had on her life: "Realizing that all women are Bunnies" (1995: 75). The harsh description of the conditions in which the young waitresses were required to work, amid constant sexual harassment and garments constricting to the point of physical torture, confirmed the widespread objectification of women and their reduction to a homogenized sexual commodity, "a non-person in a bunny suit" (Steinem 1995: 54). This association of events is presented here not to suggest that Adams had any notions of Steinem's work, or any interest in feminist positions, nor to hypothesize any connections between *Watership Down*'s rabbits and Playboy Bunnies (as a matter of fact, it has already been done, as will be shown below). The purpose is to contextualize the birth of this literary work and to uphold the legitimacy of an ecofeminist appraisal of Adams's children's book.

The association between women and animals has been widely studied and dates back to the origins of the Western culture (see Plumwood 1993: 19). Moreover, it is made evident and consolidated in everyday language by using animal terms to describe women – "pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, mother hens, pussycats, cats, cheetahs, birdbrains, and harebrains" (Warren 1997: 12). The consequence

of this animalization of women in an anthropocentric culture such as ours, "where animals are seen as inferior to humans (men)", is, according to Warren, that of "reinforc[ing] and authoriz[ing] women's inferior status" (*Ibid*.). Likewise, the same is true for the reverse process: feminizing nature "reinforces and authorizes the domination of nature" (*Ibid*.) by attributing to it female qualities which, in an androcentric society, are considered "subordinate and inferior" (*Ibid*.). Words are not just words, then, since, as Carol Adams posits, "[a] primary means of making a subject into an object – of objectifying a being – is through depictions, representations" (2018: 18).

The juncture between inter-dependent forms of oppression is where, according to Gaard, ecofeminism originates and finds its reason to exist: from the twentieth century, women "[m]otivated by an intellectual and experiential understanding of the mutually-reinforcing interconnections among diverse forms of oppression" (Gaard 2012: 15), and guided by the feeling of a relationship between "other animals (including humans) and environments (specific trees, rivers, plants, as well as places)" (*Ibid*.), have started seeing "their own liberation and well-being as fundamentally connected to the well-being of other animal species" (*Ibid*.). Ecofeminist literary criticism, by combining feminist and environmental themes and methods of analysis, offers "literary and cultural critics a special lens" (Legler 1997: 227) to investigate not only the representations of nature and the environment in works of fiction, but also the way these "are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality." (*Ibid*.) In other words, ecofeminist criticism focuses both on ecological-environmental themes and on social (and interspecies) justice, and this perspective becomes of primary importance when applied to the study of children's literature because of the inherent pedagogical nature of this kind of fiction.

Watership Down is what Le Guin labelled as an "animal novel" (2009: 73), a book belonging to the "Jowl side of [her] spectrum" (*Ibid*.) which entirely focuses on "earth others"[1]. In stories such as Adams's, authors ground their plots and the way their protagonists behave in real science but, according to Le Guin, they also add "a fantasy element: what the animals do is a mixture of behavior proper to their species and human

[1] Here I adopt Warren's definition: "'human Others' (such as women, people of color, children, and the poor) and 'earth Others' (such as animals, forests, the land). The reference to 'Others' is intended to highlight the status of those subordinate groups in unjustifiable relationships and systems of domination and subordination." (2000: 1)

behavior" (2009: 73–4). Adams's original oral tale contained several fantasy elements: the rabbits had "bows and arrows … they built a bridge across a river" and even "pretended to be Chinese" (Bridgman 1990: 12) when they visited Efrafra. When he set down to transform the story into a novel, however, he decided to adopt a more rigid line about the amount of anthropomorphism he wanted to assign to his rabbits and, following Kipling's model, he determined "to attribute to his animal characters human thoughts, human powers of converse, even human values (e.g. loyalty) but never to make them do anything of which real animals would actually be physically incapable" (Bridgman 1990: 12–13). According to Plumwood, this form of "weak anthropomorphism" (2002: 57), which consists in "representing animals in intentional or communicative terms" (*Ibid.*), should not be considered a symptom of an anthropocentric attitude: endowing earth others with agency, intentionality, subjectivity and communicativity actually allows the writer to avoid the colonizing device of impoverishing and diminishing the other, actuated, in this case, by the "hyper-separation of human and animal natures" (*Ibid.*) which assumes that "there is no overlap of characteristics between humans and non-humans" (Plumwood 2002: 56).

I have elsewhere (Grandi 2021) argued that *Watership Down*'s defamiliarizing narrative technique enacts the posthumanist refusal of anthropocentrism and its embracing of an eco-centric mindset, that the rabbits' ability to communicate with their fellows and with animals of other species contends men's supposed intellectual superiority and that the book invites readers to embrace *animality* as a better, more inclusive, less-exploitative, more *humane* essence than humanity. The immersive narration which shifts the point of view from the human to the non-human sphere is what makes of this long – and sometimes difficult – novel a compelling read for children.

However, there is a second layer, or, better, a "clashing voice" as Mey (1999: passim) would call it, that, from time to time, breaks the illusion and awakens the more adult reader to a different perspective. The frequent authorial interventions and the epigraphs opening every chapter design a framework that can be defined as traditional and androcentric: the words of the author mingle with those of many other writers, thinkers, and commanders from the past. They belong to a Western culture which is white, Christian, classic, and – needless to say – male, and help identify the authorial ideology as conservative and traditionalist. In the midst of

the "unsatisfactory disorder of the Sixties" (Bridgman 1990: 5), Adams shaped his tale as an attempt "to restore moral and cultural touchstones to a generation that he believed had been robbed of them" (*Ibid*.) and, when considered in this light, the many rejections the novel received before its publication appear less surprising: as Bridgman suggests, "[a]ll those who read it, the men and women who turned it down, were also scenting unconsciously its authoritarian stance" (Bridgman 1990: 58).

2. Slaves and Kings

In the analysis of the rejection letters, Bridgman makes another interesting observation, i.e. that the harshest criticisms came from women editors, and hence wonders: "Did feminist hackles rise at reading a novel where the chief function of the female was to breed, whose author could be a chauvinist?" (Bridgman 1990: 54) Her question appears more than pertinent when we consider the reactions of two popular writers and critics after *Watership Down* regularly appeared on the US best-seller list. In June and August 1974, Selma G. Lanes and Jane Resh Thomas upbraided *Watership Down* for its being a work where the "males are superhuman and the females subhuman, creatures who occupy only a utilitarian place in the novel's world" (Resh Thomas 1977: 311) thus betraying an "anti-feminist bias" (*Ibid*.) and "an attitude toward females that finds more confirmation in Hugh Heffner's *Playboy* than R. M. Lockley's" book (Lanes 1974). Though Resh Thomas does not deny the overall worth of Adams's novel ("[he] has created a splendid story, admirable for its originality as much as for its craft" (1977: 311)), she gives voice to a feeling of injustice and offense that echoes in both Lanes's article and, many years later, in Le Guin's essay: "I felt he had treated me and my kind with a contempt I couldn't be silent about." (Resh Thomas in Piehl 1982: 17).

The core of the feminist argumentation rests on two pillars: one concerning the narrative construction of the plot and the characterization, and the other revolving around its betrayal of the scientific treatise Adams officially declares to be his source (an accusation which is, at least in part, unfair). In *Watership Down*, the first third of the book is devoted to the heroic, epic adventures of a "tenacious band" (Adams 2012[2]: 120) of bucks

[2] Henceforth abbreviated as *WD*.

as they leave their homeland to start a new warren. Only when they have finally settled down does their chief realise that "[d]oes are desperately needed, but only as instruments of reproduction, to save his male rabbits' triumph from becoming a hollow victory" (Lanes 1974). What follows in the remaining part of the novel is "a ruthless, single-minded and rather mean-spirited search for females – not because *Watership Down*'s males miss their companionship or yearn for love but rather to perpetuate the existing band" (*Ibid*.).

The females are procured with a mission that inevitably reminds us of the Rape of the Sabine women, with the mitigating circumstance that they are actually asked whether they wish to leave (though, in the original oral version they were in fact abducted)[3]. In her ground-breaking study about rape culture, *Against Our Will* (1975), Brownmiller explains how, historically, the status of women in patriarchal society was equal to that of "chattel" (1993: 17): a woman was man's "first piece of real property" (*Ibid*.), "the original building block, the cornerstone, of the 'house of the father'" (*Ibid*.), and a crime committed against her was "a property crime of man against man" (1993: 18). As a consequence of this, "bride capture, as it came to be known, was a very real struggle: a male took title to a female, staked a claim to her body, as it were, by an act of violence" (1993: 17), and this way of acquiring wives continued to be acceptable "in England as late as the fifteenth century" (*Ibid*.).

In *Watership Down*, does are represented almost as "mindless breeding slaves" (Le Guin 2009: 79), they are introduced merely for their biological role but systematically denied the psychological insight and the emotional investment the bucks are allotted, thus presenting them as "colourless", "peripheral" and "scarcely noticeable" (Resh Thomas 1977: 311). An exception to this is the character of Hyzenthlay, a "resolute, sensible" (*WD*: 340) doe graced by the gift of precognition like Fiver. From her first talk to Bigwig, she emerges as a complex personality and her name is cited throughout the novel twice as many times as that of Clover's and Thethuthinnang (59 to 27 and 31), two among the few other does to have a specific role in the tale. Notwithstanding all this, her role during the escape from Efrafra and the ensuing siege is passive and mostly silent.

The second flaw ascribed to the novel concerns Le Guin's "fantasy element": according to her and, thirty years before her, Lanes, *Watership Down* departs from reality in its depiction of the warren organization and

[3] Bridgman 1990: 13.

the role of does, which do not reflect what Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit* (1964) had described. Adams depends on the naturalist's study for most of his notions on rabbitry, his name appearing in the acknowledgments, twice in the epigraphs and two other times within the narration. However, Adams chooses to depict the rabbits' society as hierarchic and militaristic, even inventing a "band of henchmen or soldiers, the Owsla – all male" (Le Guin 2009: 79) under direct command of their chief rabbit. Moreover, as Lanes gathers in her "cursory reading" (1974) of Lockley's text, the scientist specifically writes that "[t]he doe is the centre of the rabbit community, a matriarchy" (1964: caption to picture 1), that "[i]t is always the doe who initiates the new colony" (1964: 154) and that "nursing does drive large cats away from nesting stops where young kittens [are] living. The doe will […] successfully defend her weanlings even against ferret, stoat or weasel; she seems endowed with a fierce maternal strength" (1964: 159). Adams's rabbit world, instead, is a patriarchy where does with litter hide trembling in their burrows and need to be entertained by the "rather effeminate" Bluebell (Lanes 1974) while the bucks fight against the invasion of the rabbits from Efrafra in chapter 47.

What Adams wrote in *Watership Down* would indeed be a sad betrayal of Lockley's ideas if these quotations reflected the real tenor of the treatise. Problem is, they do not. On careful – not cursory – reading, it appears evident that the sentences cited by Lanes and Le Guin are almost the only notions which can be found on these topics in the entire book. It is true that rabbit societies are matriarchies and that does have a very active role in them, but if our only source of information were Lockley's study, we could hardly be aware of it. The naturalist focuses most of his attention on the behaviour – more easily observable – of the bucks, talking about the dominant male as a "king" (Lockley 1964: passim), "a royal master" (Lockley 1964: 64), who "reign[s] supreme" (Lockley 1964: 42) over his territory, usurps another's "throne" (Lockley 1964: 54), and lives in a "royal palace" (*Ibid*.) with "his train of wife and concubines" (Lockley 1964: 64). He speaks of "the hierarchy of the royal court" (*Ibid*.) to describe rabbit society and even portrays one dominant male as "a model dictator, head of a benevolent autocracy" (Lockley 1964: 69). The king usually "behave[s] like a loyal, courteous husband" (Lockley 1964: 45) towards his queen, "obey[ing]" when she wants to be left alone (*Ibid*.) and "behav[ing] as a courtier to her, protecting her, licking her face, mating with her." (Lockley 1964: 63) The description of the does' behaviour could not be more

different: the dominant doe is not "unduly aggressive" (Lockley 1964: 46) towards other females, and she rarely moves "from a warren once she had bred there" (Lockley 1964: 72). It is not uncommon, finally, to find in Lockley the presence of "sweeping generalisations" (Le Guin 2009: 81) that assimilate does' and women's behaviour in an extremely regressive perspective: a "mature female rabbit" is like a "woman [who] makes the home and usually does not wish to leave it unless compelled by necessity, by fear or other *force majeure*" (Lockley 1964: 55); two adult does are compared to "middle aged ladies who, like the majority of women the world over, loved, lived, and stayed at home" (Lockley 1964: 76); a buck searching for the attention of his former mate is compared to "a husband temporarily tired of the too soothing company of a compliant wife" (Lockley 1964: 78), and he even explains that

> the queen doe will not actively prevent the king having sexual relations with her or the [secondary females], provided [they] do not enter her home and she will only attack them if they obstruct her path when grazing near by [sic]; married man has a similar relationship, albeit more furtive and clandestine, if he takes a "mistress". But neither man nor buck will usually allow another male to approach his female sexually, if he can prevent it. (Lockley 1964: 163)

The examples provided here do not mitigate the "egregious sexism" (Le Guin 2009: 82) that can be traced in *Watership Down,* but can perhaps absolve its author from the accusation of having "cheated … misrepresent[ing] Lockleys' actual description of rabbit behaviors" (*Ibid*.). Moreover, as Muth interestingly – but maybe a bit hastily – claims, since the novel addresses political concepts such as "totalitarianism, fairness, the nanny state, the police state, how to deal with crises of leadership, and so forth" (Muth 2017), we might also give it the benefit of the doubt and consider its depiction of a world featuring "an exclusion of women from decision-making and some degree of misogyny" (*Ibid*.) as "a win for realism" (*Ibid*.) and not a demerit.

3. The Sequel

We might give *Watership Down* the benefit of the doubt, that is, if we had not read the sequel *Tales from Watership Down* that Adams published in 1996, more than 20 years after his debut novel. Thanks to the unexpected success of his first work, Adams could resign from his job and become a professional writer, authoring 15 more books[4], including children's stories, an autobiography, and two erotic novels, *The Girl in a Swing* (1980) and *Maia* (1984), which is centred on the adventures of a young teenager who, after being – happily – seduced by her stepfather, climbs the social ladder from a talented sex slave to a satisfied family housewife. But the rabbits stayed with Adams all along, so, he decided to make a "concession" to all those faithful readers who "were clamouring for more" (Adams in Monaghan 2011: 14) and publish a collection of short stories which expanded on the rabbit mythology, depicted the future of the Watership Down warren, and even introduced new characters, does in particular. Adams openly admitted the latter to be one of the principal reasons behind his decision to write the new tales: even if, as he always maintained, his original novel "was simply told with no thought of reactions from the public. No idea it would be subjected to criticism as it has done. It was never an anti-feminist book, it was simply a spontaneous story" (AMA! 2013), he finally recognized the actual need to give the does more "of the floodlight" (in Monaghan 2011: 14) in his new work.

Not surprisingly, however, *Tales from Watership Down* is not entirely focused on female rabbits: the first two parts, consisting of 11 chapters, are mainly devoted to what we could call "Lapine lore". El-ahrairah is the protagonist of the majority of the stories, but other familiar characters, namely Rabscuttle, Lucy, and Lord Frith make their appearance as well. The opening chapter, "The Sense of Smell", is powerful and ambitious: it depicts the journey of the rabbit hero through the realm of the King of Yesterday, the netherworld of all extinct animal species such as Oregon bison, too many woodpeckers, some kinds of lions, tigers, jaguars (Adams 2012b[5]: 21) and so on. "It is entirely by human beings that every one of my subjects has been destroyed" explains the king, "Some, like my Mexican friend here [a grizzly bear], the men quite deliberately shot, trapped

[4] In the years from 1996 to his death in 2016, he published three more works.

[5] Henceforth *TfWD*.

and poisoned out of existence; but many others vanished because men destroyed their natural habitats and they couldn't adapt themselves to live elsewhere." (*TfWD*: 21–22) There is also a vast forest which "grows daily. … It consists of all the forest [sic] destroyed by human beings. Of late years it has grown so fast that Lord Frith has told me that he is thinking of appointing a second king to rule it." (*TfWD*: 22) This long passage conveys with vivid efficacy the feeling of the accelerated genocide[6] of animals carried out by humans and the "massive losses of species and biodiversity" (Colebrook 2018: 150) identified as the sixth mass extinction.

The eight remaining chapters give large space to the protagonists of the original novel, the bucks Hazel, Fiver, Bigwig and the others, but also the does Hyzenthlay, Vilthuril and Thethuthinnang. New characters are introduced as well, both male (Sandwort, Groundsel and Stonecrop in particular) and female (Flyairth and Nyreem). Is the inclusion of more does and the more ample space given to some existing female characters in *Tales from Watership Down* a real attempt at introducing the most basic gender diversity in the rabbit world, or should we instead talk about gender tokenism[7]? That is to say, is all this sufficient to make amends for the accusations of sexism and chauvinism which Adams's previous work received? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Not at all. While at least a couple of stories of the collection would probably pass the Bechdel-Wallace test[8], the representation of does the author provides still brims with patriarchy and androcentrism.

> There were two other bucks with me, my friend Stitchwort and a rather timid rabbit named Fescue. And there was a doe too – Mian. […] Everything went wrong […] a stoat found us […] we all three just sat there while it killed Mian; she never made a sound. (*TfWD*: 80–1)

> […] he began persuading other young rabbits, both male and female, to accompany him on expeditions beyond the warren […] "Where's Crowla?" asked Silver […] "How should I know?"

[6] For the use of the term "genocide" applied to non-human animals, see Cafaro 2015: 389.

[7] "Tokenism, n.: The practice or policy of making merely a token effort or granting only minimal concessions, esp. to minority or suppressed groups." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2021. Web. 15 October 2021.

[8] See Garber 2015.

> replied Sandwort. […] Crowla did not come back […] Sandwort showed no particular concern" (*TfWD*: 222).
>
> Campion had the sense to begin in a small way, with short, easy Patrols […] the first casualty occurred about midsummer, when a doe named Lemista […] fell victim to a dog (*TfWD:* 260–1).

On many occasions Adams introduces female characters in action sequences, he even gives them a name, but he provides no real characterization for them and this makes of them the predestined victims. Male characters are granted, in the great majority of cases, deeper insight, wider context and, thus, more ample chances of survival in the narrative. Does were already passive, silent and objectified in *Watership Down*: the beautiful but voiceless Nildro-hain (the few words attributed to her are only reported) dies off scene when the bucks leave the warren of the snares in chapter 17. Moreover, during the epic escape from Efrafra there are only two casualties: Thrayonlosa, fatally injured by a bridge girder, who dies in chapter 40, and another unnamed doe caught by a fox when they are almost safe. On her demise Blackavar callously comments: "Anyway, what's a doe more or less?" (*WD*: 387).

In her essay "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics", Plumwood offers a list of "the chief features" which help define androcentrism, that is the "centric structure between the masculine Center and the feminine Other" (1997: 337). Some of those are useful to describe, as well, the sort of "Buck-centrism" that can be identified in Adams's rabbit saga. The expendability of the does is a direct effect of the "homogenization" that the dominants project onto the subjects. When the Other is homogenized, it is not seen as "an individual but is related to as a member of a class of interchangeable items which are treated as resources to be managed to satisfy the center's need." (*Ibid*.). "We don't like our girls to have any background […] we just want you to fit the bunny image" is what Steinem (1995: 38) was told during her job interview to be accepted in the New York Playboy Club.

4. Androcentrism and Rape Culture

Adams's androcentrism becomes ever more conspicuous in the two extended episodes involving does which should constitute the core of the "amendment" provided by *Tales from Watership Down*. In chapter 12 we are introduced to the account of a "secret river" of knowledge, a "thought transference" (*TfWD*: 197) flowing directly from the warren Thinial to the does in Efrafra. The vision they receive night after night, is that of a community ruled by two does Flyairth and Prake, "so strong and confident about what they meant to do that they could persuade other rabbits, bucks and does, to come with them" (*TfWD:* 155). In that place a female Owsla ensured the order and "bucks seemed content under the control of the does" (*TfWD:* 157). Flyairth's "growing obsession" (*TfWD:* 159) with the Blindness (the extremely deadly and contagious myxomatosis), however, makes her behave more and more inflexibly, and she is finally dethroned and expelled. From chapter 13 to 15, then, the same Flyairth makes her entrance in the Watership Down warren where she is perceived as a threat by many bucks. In the end, she is allowed to take some rabbits with her to found a new warren elsewhere. When she departs, Silver's comment is "I'd imagine she'd be a very good Chief Rabbit, … as long as she had a male partner to – well, you know – to balance her when she needed it" (*TfWD:* 206).

The "model dictator" Hazel decides to act upon Silver's idea and offers to his mate Hyzenthlay the chance to share the power with him. Her acceptance speech sounds very much like the classic banter of a wife with her husband: "I promise to be the biggest nuisance he's ever met in his life, and to disagree with him about everything!" (*TfWD*: 206) The next chapter is entirely dedicated to "Hyzenthlay in Action": in her first day as Chief Rabbit – with Hazel far from the warren – she puts her life in danger during an expedition to save the life of Nyreem, a new doe in peril, but needs the help of Bigwig (who first questions her authority, then contravenes her direct order) to get back safe to the warren. After that exploit, her leadership disappears in the following chapters and Hazel remains firmly the maker of all decisions for the warren.

What is disturbing here is no longer the insignificance of does, but the way they are represented, in particular, the double-standard under which they are assessed. Quoting again from Plumwood, "radical exclusion marks out the Otherized group as both inferior and radically separate" (1997:

337), and in Adams it means that not only are does usually described as passive, easily frightened, and fickle in their resolves (as Nyreem in *TfWD*: 218–220) but, when depicted as strong and attempting to rise from their usual role to attain a higher position in the hierarchy, the same features and behaviours that in bucks were considered as signs of strength, in does are deemed as weaknesses. Hyzenthlay's action to save Nyreem's life is rushed and dangerous, while Hazel's standing by the injured Pipkin or running towards what was believed to be the Black Rabbit of Inlé in *Watership Down* (chapters 6 and 19) were pure acts of courage. Even worse is the treatment of Flyairth: her firmness and determination in the protection of her warren from the Blindness is described as an impairing obsession, while in *Watership Down* the Trearah "had coolly – some even said coldly – stood firm during the terrible onslaught of the myxomatosis, ruthlessly driving out every rabbit who seemed to be sickening. He had resisted all ideas of mass emigration and enforced complete isolation on the warren, thereby almost certainly saving it from extinction" (*WD*: 10). It is inevitable to think of de Beauvoir's observation: "Other seers prophesy that in casting off their femininity they will not succeed in changing themselves into men and they will become monsters" (1953: 681). The threat that this physically and mentally strong female poses to the balance of the warren is such that when Bigwig proposes "Shall I go back and kill her, now, before she does any harm?", the moderate and peaceful Hazel replies, "No don't do that … Or not yet, anyway" (*TfWD*: 202).

One last element which is worth noticing is the permanence in the sequel of a certain objectification of the female in the rabbit society, in particular with regard to mating. Plumwood talks about "instrumentalism", consisting in valuing a woman "as a means to ends … deriving her social worth instrumentally from service to others, as the producer of sons, etc." (1997: 338) and indeed in *Watership Down* there are numerous examples of how the does are considered principally as "breeding stock for the warren" (*WD*: 246) as Adams himself makes clear. After Hazel sets the two farm does free in chapter 27, they constitute "the warren's only asset" (*WD*: 228) but still he wonders "Are they any good?" (*WD:* 246). Moreover, the fact that the Watership Down rabbits only realize they need does once they have established their warren and gone through many adventures, could be easily explained as a consequence of "denial or backgrounding" that determines that "in an androcentric context, the contribution of women to any collective undertaking will be denied, treated as background,

as inessential, or as not worth noticing" (Plumwood 1997: 338). Once the bucks do, however, realise that they indeed need some females, an authorial intervention in the text points out a correspondence with man's behaviour which is extremely revealing: "It may seem incredible that the rabbits had given no thought to so vital a matter. But men have made the same mistake more than once – left the whole business out of account, or been content to trust to luck and the fortune of war" (*WD*: 185).

The "fortune of war" means the rape of the Sabine women, it means "raiding other groups for wives" (Sanday 1981: 164)[9], which, according to the American anthropologist, is an indicator to measure male aggression against women in a society. Another indicator is "the institutionalisation or regular occurrence of rape" (*Ibid*.) which, while not explicitly recognized, appears to be the praxis in Efrafra. During Bigwig's undercover mission, as a member of the Owsla, he is told that "if you want a doe, you have one – any doe in the Mark, that is. We're not officers for nothing, are we? The does are under orders and none of the bucks can stop you" (*WD*: 316). This custom is a matter of great distress for the females ("Oh, Thlayli! Shall we mate with whom we choose and dig our own burrows and bear our litters alive?" (*WD*: 328)) and in a very touching scene, Hyzenthlay seems to be utterly terrified at the prospect of a new violence perpetrated against her: "I am in the Mark, sir, and under your orders. But you have made a mistake." "No, I haven't," replied Bigwig. "You needn't be afraid. Come in here, close beside me." Hyzenthlay obeyed. He could feel her fast pulse. Her body was tense: her eyes were closed and her claws dug into the floor." (*WD*: 323) This fact is reaffirmed in *Tales from Watership Down* by Vilthuril as she remembers: "the officers wanted you to do absolutely nothing: to keep still, not to talk and not even to think, between silflays, unless you were required for mating, and there wasn't much enjoyment in that" (*TfWD*: 153–154). If we should choose the "fantasy element", according to Le Guin's labelling, that most departs from Lockley's account, it would be this: in his treatise, the naturalist makes it very clear that the choice of the buck to mate with and the time to do it are entirely a prerogative of the doe.

Fanghanel explains that "Rape culture describes a status quo in which sexual violence and exploitation (in all its forms) is normalised" (2019: 8), so the fact that we find it in Efrafra, a totalitarian, patriarchal, chauvinist community does not come as a shock. However, she continues, the fact

[9] See also the tables on pp. 253–-256.

that the female is perceived as "a sexual object within a heteropatriarchal striation of public space" (2019: 15) means that "the latent menace and objectification that accompanies this violence" also goes with "chivalry in the form of the advice about safe-keeping" (*Ibid.*). Perhaps, then, it should not surprise – yet it does – that in the penultimate chapter of *Tales from Watership Down*, when the newcomer Stonecrop fortuitously saves the liberal and civilized Vleflain warren from the attack of more than four weasels, the Chief Rabbit invites him to go to live there and, to make the proposal more enticing, adds "You can have your personal burrow and choose any doe you fancy!" (*TfWD*: 249), as if the warren females were a property the dominant male could freely dispose of.

5. Conclusion

In this short analysis, it has been suggested that some of the feminist criticisms that Adams' first children's novel received were, at least in part, not justified. It has been shown how the scientific source he used was itself pervaded by a male chauvinism that provided an idea of rabbit societies as patriarchies (while, instead, they are communities revolving around a dominant female).

We might wonder, then, what it would be like to live in a rabbit matriarchy. Adams made an attempt at depicting such an "exception" when he described Thinial. In the warren ruled by two queens, females were, finally, endowed with auto-determination in sexual matters: "the small Owsla of does … chose bucks whom they liked and mated with them" (*TfWD*: 158) and when they got pregnant, they could avail themselves of a sort of maternity leave until the moment "when the young rabbits didn't need them anymore, they rejoined the Owsla." (*Ibid*.) It all sounds very good, but if we consider that Adams published this in 1996 and maternity leave had been granted to all working women in the UK three years earlier, perhaps he could have stretched his imagination a bit further. The problem is that, in his attempt to imagine a model of rabbit matriarchy, Adams only limits himself to transforming male rules and structures into female ones, and gives shape to "a warren in which the does would predominate" (*TfWD:* 155), detaining the power and enjoying sexual liberty.

Ecofeminism, however, has taught us that things can, and should, be different. In was as early as 1911 when Charlotte Perkins Gilman published the first book of her feminist utopian trilogy *Herland*, in which she imagined a female society that knows no war or interspecies violence, "a vision that emphasized collectivity, emotional bonding, and an organic (or holistic) concept of life" (Donovan 1990: 358). In such a land, not only "there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals," (Plumwood 1993: 7) but also the peaceful feminine reign, by neutralizing the need for male "technological mastery" (*Ibid*.), prevents the destruction of "both nature and less technologically 'rational' cultures" (*Ibid*.) which we have witnessed so far. Indeed, according to Warren, ecofeminist ethic "must be anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-naturist, and opposed to any 'ism' that presupposes or advances logic of domination" (2000: 99).

In patriarchal, androcentric (and anthropocentric) societies, instead, women are otherized and objectified in the same way as animals and nature are. In *Watership Down*, when the liberated Efrafran does finally promise to repopulate the Watership Down warren, Bigwig rejoices: "It looks as though we really are going to live a natural life again at last, doesn't it?" (*WD*: 408). But "natural life" in *Watership Down* implies an objectification of the female, its systematic exclusion from power dynamics, and the unconscious endorsement of a rape culture. Inspired by de Beauvoir's reflections in *The Second Sex* (1949), we might say that the way women / does are represented in Adams's novel is not only the product of "anatomy and physiology" (1953: 18) but also of culture, a culture still deeply affected by a conception of a patriarchal society, of the passivity and weakness of women and of how their biological differences account for their inferiority (1953: 24). Only a few exceptional beings emerge from that condition and try to rise to the roles detained by men but, in doing so, they either show their inadequacy (Hyzenthlay), or lean into excess (Flyairth).

The anti-feminist bias of *Watership Down* and *Tales from Watership Down* should not blind us to the unquestionable merits of these works. They denounce "the fallacies and life-threatening impact of modernization on the natural world" (Battista 2011: 163) and deliver a strong teaching in interspecies respect and the importance of conservation. The rabbit world created by Adams in 1972 and then expanded in 1996 is indeed an ecocentric environment where the reader can experience what it feels like to be a rabbit in a man's world. However, when read with more care, they

also provide a sad depiction of what, in the mind of the author, it feels like to be a female in a male world.

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