

French 401: Studies in Early Modernity
Encountering Animals, Plants, and Others in Early Modern France
Professor Natania Meeker
Fall 2024, Monday and Wednesday, 2-3:20 PM

Literature and culture offer a rich reflection on human experience, but they also provide a way of coming into contact with non-human, posthuman, or transhuman beings. In this class, we will explore seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary, scientific, and visual texts as zones of encounter with animals, plants, cyborgs, atoms, extraterrestrials, and automata— among others. We will study the way in which the boundaries of the human shift and evolve in response to changing ideas about what it means to be an animal, a plant, a machine, or an alien. We will analyze how different genres allow human observers to come into contact with different life forms, making their specific needs, interests, and competencies both accessible and exciting. And we will investigate moments when literary, scientific, and visual texts both objectify and animate non-human beings: offering them up for experimentation and exploitation at certain moments; lending them agency and ability at others. Our work will cut across the domains of science, literature, and art, and authors we will study include d'Aulnoy, Condillac, Diderot, Descartes, Du Châtelet, La Mettrie, Robinet, Saint-Pierre, and De Staël, among others. Throughout, we will work with USC Special Collections and their remarkable archive of early modern naturalist texts.

