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Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture by Karen Raber

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Animals in Early Modern Culture

***Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* by
KAREN RABER**

U of Pennsylvania P, 2013 \$58.50

Reviewed by **CHAD WEIDNER**

Although there is a good deal of recent scholarship on material ecocriticism, as well as on the relationship between humans and animals, many questions remain unanswered. Karen Raber's *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* brings these exciting areas together in a dense piece of academic writing. Her book explores the shared material space between humans and animals in the early modern period, and the deep complexity of those relationships. This book will be especially interesting for Renaissance scholars working in ecocriticism, as well as for those working in ecocriticism or animal studies.

The structure of the book is scholarly but accessible. Five content chapters fit between a tight introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides important context for the book, as well as justifications for the study. Raber poses important questions here, and sums up the ambitions of the study: "This book begins to chart the questions and issues raised by early modern animal embodiment for both early modern and modern theories of the human" (5). The book exceeds an ordinary academic study by connecting to relevant wider discussions of human exceptionalism, animal rights, postcolonialism, and gender.

The content chapters of the book are logically ordered. The first two chapters discuss horses in terms of the early modern fascination with anatomy, as well as the ways the animal connects to human thinking about eroticism. Chapters three

and four cover forms of life ranging from mammals to parasites, from cats and dogs to worms. The fifth chapter discusses the important question of labour in the context of animals. While it is not possible to examine all of the chapters in detail here, a look at representative sections of the book can help provide a good sense of the arguments Raber puts forward.

The chapter entitled "Erotic Bodies: Loving Horses" discusses the myriad ways early modern humans venerated horses, but also saw them as partner, and even as erotic symbol. Raber briefly reflects on the horse in Western mythology over time, and the ways in which the image of the centaur complicates assumed distinctions between the human and nonhuman. She then discusses poems that highlight the erotic nature of the human-horse relationship. Interesting are the ways the chapter begins with what seems a general literary reading of poems about horses to much more complex considerations of eroticism and even interspecies sex. While this chapter specifically considers horses as erotic subject, Raber argues that the discussion extends to other creatures, including "pets, various sorts of animals, and even plants" (80). This chapter is certainly thought provoking, and I would like to see Raber position her argument against Carol Adams' *Sexual Politics of Meat*. While Adams' book clearly has a different purpose and audience, many of the same issues echo between her book and Raber's chapter: Appropriation, subjugation, commodification, gender, and materiality.

The fifth chapter of the book, "Working Bodies: Laboring Moles and Cannibal Sheep," discusses labor and property. More specifically, this chapter examines the mole creature in *Hamlet*, and the sheep found in Thomas More's *Utopia*.

In the first pages of this section, Raber provides contextual information regarding the mole that highlights its strange position as locus for various ideological arguments. One question that Raber poses is whether moles and animals more broadly have a right to their own labor. We can consider this fascinating question today, but as Raber rightly points out, such a concern was simply not part of the early modern discussion. She shows ways moles evade classification by humans. In the section of this chapter called "Cannibal Sheep," Raber contrasts the lowly but opportunistic mole with the pastoral image of the sheep in the Western imagination. She provides intriguing discussion of Thomas More's *Utopia* in terms of animals, labor, and the historical connections between humans and animals. She says that More already "laid the groundwork for challenging economic systems" (177) that apparently suggest that ownership is what separates humans from nonhumans. She also challenges the idea that "distinctions [can be made] between species on the basis of the work they do" (178). Thus, Raber effectively does the heavy lifting to show subtle cracks in our thinking about animals in the early modern period.

Raber's book is a fascinating read, and I am left with a few lingering questions. I missed some of targeted connections Raber might have made to the scholarship of Randy Malamud, as well as to Simon Estok's work, which seems especially relevant. I also think that materialist scholarship generally fails in explaining

intangible qualities important to aesthetics: The power of art, the consciousness, and the human imagination. Moreover, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of nonhuman creatures. Thomas Nagel points out in "What is It Like to Be a Bat?" that our understanding of other creatures is ultimately only partial since "Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited" (439). Thus, we have to acknowledge that our understanding of animals is terribly incomplete. At the same time, we should also recognize the essential otherness of nonhuman creatures. Therefore, readings of human cultural texts cannot fully handle the question of the animal. Raber's book is certainly successful in generating new questions. It brings human attitudes toward animals in the early modern period directly into the contemporary conversation in ecocriticism and animal studies. Highly recommended.

Works Cited

Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435-50.

CHAD WEIDNER teaches English and film at University College Roosevelt, Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He has published on ecocriticism, experimental aesthetics, Dadaist film, William Burroughs, and other Beat Generation writers.