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Loop-holes of Possibility in the Literary Imagination

Laura Brown. *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2010. xi + 156 pp. \$35 hc.

Laura Brown is the Wendell Anderson Professor of English and a vice-provost at Cornell University, and has a specialty in 18th-century English literature with interests in gender, race, and imperialism. *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* is, then, a literary examination of the roles of these two animals primarily in 18th-century English literature as it works through matters of gender, race, and imperialism. The preface tells us that the book arose from an undergraduate seminar on “The Idea of the Pet in Literature and History” (ix), and perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because Brown prefers it, the book is written in a very clear and direct style. The preface also asks “Which literary animal most fully expresses the raw alterity of animal-kind? Which are most evidently people in animal suits?” (ix). At least for the purposes of this volume, the answer to each question is: dogs and apes.

This is a slim volume, and even so, it feels padded. Here lies its major fault, which I would like to get out of the way now, before I move on to the content of the book and to its virtues. Many points are made repeatedly, major ideas are developed with more leisure than is effective, plots are given with too much detail, many quotes are offered in support of points when fewer would have been satisfactory: all this suggests that turning a collection of articles into a book (three of the five chapters had appeared in some form previously) was harder than had been expected, a lesson I must keep in mind myself as I write article after article on similar subjects. A smaller fault lies in the choice of books. Not being an expert on the 18th century, I found the scope of earlier texts enlightening and am eager to explore a number of the works she mentioned. But why does Brown then skip most of the 19th century and close with a single work from the 20th, Paul Auster’s *Timbuktu* (1999)? Perhaps it would have been good as well to justify why she selected the two animals on which she concentrates, dogs and apes, but there is so much literature on each, and they do seem so central to our concerns about other animals, that this did not bother me as much.

The book's introductory chapter, "Speculative Space: The Rise of the Animal in the Modern Imagination," begins with a lovely reading of *Melincourt; or, Sir Oran Haut-ton* (1818) by Thomas Love Peacock. Sir Oran is a noble and gallant orangutan, and Brown offers supple interpretations of the novel that illustrate the theses she will be tracking: that the animal's portrayal "evoke[s] animal-kind in order to define and advance prominent concepts of human virtue," that he is used satirically "to undercut such ideals," and that "new depictions of nonhuman animals might lean on antique or established traditions" (3); but also that Sir Oran interrogates notions of the great chain of being (4), that he "embodies the modern question of the role of speech in defining the human," that he "references the contemporary humanitarian movements that advocated the custodianship of animals," "reproduce[s] a disturbing contemporary fantasy of ape-human miscegenation" (5), and, in short, "provides an object lesson in the flexibility of the representation of animal-kind in the modern period" (6). This clear and flexible multiple reading is typical of Brown's best development and it outshines the merely repetitious sections. The chapters that follow alternately discuss of apes and dogs in literature to demonstrate her claim that "the aesthetic effects of animals and the kinds of conceptual or ontological thinking that they inspire are inseparable and systematically coordinated" (21). Further, they allow us to imagine new ways of thinking about human and animal difference that are unavailable to conventional understanding: they are good, as Levi-Strauss says, to think with.

Chapter two, "The Mirror Scene: The Orangutan, the Ancients, and the Cult of Sensibility," looks at the 18th-century consideration of the ape as a reflection of the human, a view that emphasizes similarity rather than difference. Brown sees two theses at work: first, that "mythological beings are replaced by apes" in this age of reason, and second, that attitudes of the time "anticipate notions of natural sensibility by projecting, through extended accounts of ape behavior, this being's inherent modesty, sympathy, and benevolence." The two theses, she says, "operate through two of the most prominent cultural and aesthetic modes of the period – the neoclassical and the sentimental" (29). Brown then examines a variety of 18th-century non-fiction accounts of apes, paying particular attention to Edward Tyson's *Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmie*

(1699). The book's title indicates how fluid the terms were at the time for what is actually a chimpanzee, even including a term later associated with the Bushmen of Africa. This elision, Brown makes clear, does not so much suggest that "Pygmie" humans are really a species of "lower" animals but that humans are very similar to apes. She cites Linnaeus: "I can discover scarcely any mark by which man can be distinguished from the apes" (32). An accretion of examples leads her to claim convincingly that

In the eighteenth-century imagination ... the hominoid ape is not a singular or a coherent individual... [but] a composite being, stitched together from remnants of past traditions and awkwardly linking those precedents with contemporary anecdote and empirical observation. (35).

Her further discussion of *Anatomy of a Pygmie*; Richard Blackmore's popularization of it (*Lay-Monastery*, 1714); the composite entity Martinus Scriblerus's parody of Tyson, *An Essay of the Learned Martinus Scriblerus, Concerning the Origine of Sciences* (1728); *Gulliver's Travels* (1726); and the contemporary accounts of "the five-month period in 1738 when a young chimpanzee ... was put on display" in London (53) illustrate how the growing interest in species taxonomy and the sentimental values of the sensibility cult converge to produce a relativist view of the relationship between humans and other animals. By this time, I was making note after note connecting these works, and Brown's readings of them, to *Frankenstein* (1816). And that is how she ends the chapter, seeing "Shelley's monster [as] ... a weird collation of the accounts and images that created this being in the eighteenth-century imagination" and "as a companion text to the contemporaneous *Melincourt*" (62) discussed in the introductory chapter. No direct connections, however, are made with issues of race, gender, or imperialism, although Brown supplies plenty of material for the reader to make those connections. *The Tempest's* (1611) Caliban also anachronistically haunts the chapter, but he makes no appearance either. Obviously, the chapter is good to think with and it certainly makes me want to read *Melincourt* and reread *Gulliver*. Indeed, I found this chapter to be the most stimulating, successful, and well developed of the book. It will be very useful for those of us in animal studies who are considering the recent spate of ape fictions such as Sara Gruen's *Ape House* (2010) and Benjamin Hale's *The Evolution of Bruno*

Littlemore (2011), alongside all the ethological and sociobiological work by Frans De Waal and others.

While there is also a rich contemporary literature about dogs and quite a few ethological books as well, the next chapter, on dogs, did not seem as useful to me. Chapter three, “Immoderate Love: The Lady and the Lapdog,” describes an “inter-species intimacy” both satirized and sentimentalized in 18th- and 19th-century fiction. As pet-keeping changes “the human relationship with nonhuman animals” (67), the pet begins to “play a complex cultural role in this period: as commodity, companion, paragon, proxy, and even kin” (69). Brown links this way of thinking about animals to colonialism, slavery, and misogyny. She looks at “the misogynist tradition of the 1680s and 1690s” in poetry, finding, with perhaps too exhausting a series of examples, that “the lapdog seems to be both an inappropriate or perverse sexual partner for the woman and also a metonym for female sexuality” (82). In these works, as in later satirical works about women and their dogs, Brown sees that “the structures of sudden inversion that derive from Augustan satire and that provide the figure of the lady and lapdog with its distinctive impact continue to inform that depiction of animal-kind” (77).

The fourth chapter, “Violent Intimacy: The Monkey and the Marriage Plot,” considers how “the monkey is the missing link between satiric treatments of marriage in the early eighteenth-century dramatic comedy of manners, on the one hand, and one of the major canonical idealizations of marriage in the domestic novel of the latter part of the century, on the other” (91). Brown uses as examples Frances Burney’s *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) and several plays, including William Taverner’s *The Artful Husband* (1735) and, more famously, William Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* (1675), in support of her thesis. Unfortunately, the chapter gives too much plot summary and quotation and too little analysis to be effective. It improves at the end when Brown begins to link the observations to some more general comments on how these works “open up a range of dissonant views of companionate marriage” (110), but the hints of relevance to growing racism in portrayals of apes as colonialism increases are never developed.

Like the second chapter, the book's final one, "Dog Narrative: Itinerancy, Diversity, and the Elysium of Dogs," makes us want to seek out and read several works of fiction: Cervantes's *El coloquio de los perros* [The Dialogue of the Dogs] (1613) and Francis Coventry's *The History of Pompey the Little; or, the Life and Adventures of a Lapdog* (1751) among them. Also like the second chapter, Brown makes stimulating use of these works. She summarizes the chapter's major themes:

By using or ventriloquizing human language, by occupying the traditionally human-centered role of literary protagonist, by wandering through the diverse world of human experience, by occupying the place of the displaced or the dispossessed as well that [sic] of privilege or fashion, and by undercutting claims to genealogical hierarchy and social regulation, the imaginary dog creates a unique cultural opportunity to consider an alternative to the structures and limits of the present day. (138).

The chapter's only weakness is the lack of transition or justification when Brown suddenly moves on to Paul Auster's *Timbuktu*. Nevertheless, that novel does, like the earlier ones Brown discusses, offer an elysium of dogs, a dog-paradise (138) for itinerant creatures that "indicates the speculative space that animal-kind lends to the human imagination" (143), a place Margaret Scott Gatty, in the novel *Worlds Not Realized* (1856), calls "a loop-hole of possibility" (qtd. 138).

I wish that the entire book were as strong as chapters one, two, and five, that the connections to race, gender, and imperialism had been more thoroughly developed, and that less valuable space had been taken up by summary and repetition, but the volume will nevertheless be very helpful for scholars who explore those very gaps. The book itself therefore provides "a loop-hole of possibility" to think with.