BOOK REVIEW

When Vegans Are Monstrous

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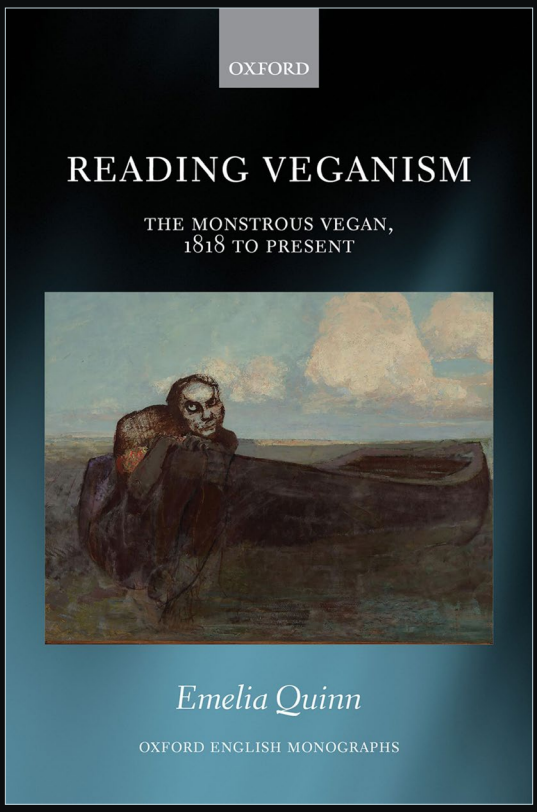

Review of:
Emelia Quinn, *Reading Veganism: The Monstrous Vegan, 1818 to Present*. Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
ix, 188 pp. £65.00 (hb).

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To many audiences the figure of the vegan stands as a moralizing, absolute, and ethically narrow-minded individual seeking to impose a doctrine on society writ large. In *Reading Veganism: The Monstrous Vegan, 1818 to Present*, Emelia Quinn delves into this abhorrence for veganism, analysing representations of what she terms the "monstrous vegan" in literature. Quinn's task is to recuperate these monsters. Taking Frankenstein's monster as the prototype, she theorizes monstrous veganism as imperfect, campy, and generative.

Working with a corpus of Anglophone texts from 1818 to the present, Quinn explores four key characteristics embodied by monstrous vegan characters. The monstrous vegans she identifies do not eat animals, "an abstinence that generates a seemingly inexplicable anxiety in those who encounter them" (3). They are hybrid creatures made of both human and nonhuman parts, "destabilizing species boundaries" (3). They come into existence outside of heterosexual reproduction, "the product of male acts of creation" (3). Finally, they are "intimately connected to acts of writing and literary connection" (3). Despite this schematization this is not an exhaustive study. Quinn's goal is rather to trace the many connections between literature's monstrous vegan characters, and she does so with a flexibility that enacts her own self-conscious refusal of vegan ethical rigidity. Against a vision of veganism as a logically and morally sound personal commitment, Quinn conceptualizes it as "a state of strategic insufficiency that aspires towards a pragmatic model of utopian thought" (8). She embraces monstrosity and failure in order to create space for the imperfection of vegan identities. Indeed, Quinn avoids exclusively focusing on vegans and vegetarian characters that are favourably written. Refusing to oversimplify, Quinn engages in close readings that deconstruct the myth of the perfect, abstinent vegan.

Although *Reading Veganism* is positioned primarily within the field of vegan theory, Quinn connects this emergent field with animal studies, food studies, queer theory, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism, an engagement that she mirrors by deftly manoeuvring between diverse theoretical thinkers. These range from Carol J. Adams's work

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on the feminist-vegan in her field-defining *The Sexual Politics of Meat* to Jacques Derrida's posthumous *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), from which Quinn derives the idea that vegetarianism is imperfect, "failing to escape [. . .] sacrificial structures" (15). Yet Quinn also challenges Derrida's argument that vegetarianism (and by extension veganism as a utopian vision of vegetarianism) creates an "illusory sense of freedom from complicity" that masks ongoing participation in the oppression of women and non-human animals (15). She argues instead that "veganism is messier and further reaching than that; an entanglement of identity, practice, and ethics that refuses to sanction the carnivorous human subject" (5).

Quinn argues that neither vegan nor carnist identities can be understood as stable or secure. To do so, she builds on Judith Butler's work on terms such as "queer" that refuse substantive and rigid definition, as well as adapting Susan Sontag's theory of camp to introduce the re-invigorating potential of vegan camp. Quinn's reference to "entanglement" above also recalls philosopher Lori Gruen's *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals* (2015). According to Gruen, we need to recognize our existing entanglements with the nonhuman world and respond with empathy in order to reach more ethical decisions and practices. As Quinn argues, the construction of vegan identities that are purportedly ethically superior conceals the implicit failures in veganism and provokes anxiety at points where these failures are exposed. It is important to note, though, that Quinn's recognition of veganism's imperfections—its entanglement with and inextricable relation to multiple forms of animal exploitation—does not ultimately capitulate to a quietist futility. Quinn wishes to emphasize that veganism does not escape or transcend ethical dilemmas, that ethics is always encountered in the enactment and performance of vegan choices.

Reading Veganism is structured in two parts. The first part identifies the prototype of the monstrous vegan and its implications, and the second part offers ways of engaging with monstrous vegan figures in a reparative manner. The first chapter of the book takes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the origin of the monstrous

vegan, arguing that the creature "reflects the ambivalence, contradictions and anxieties that cluster around vegan modes of being" (40). The creature displays an inconsistent morality that oscillates from a self-reported diet of nuts, roots, and berries that avoids animal exploitation, to the murders that he commits and his "inability to see the cow as a fellow sentient being" (41–42). The creature's rejection of meat is therefore ambivalent at best, characterized by "murderous actions and pacifist words" (59) that fail to live up to any ideal of moral purity—a failure that is crucial to Quinn's theorizing of vegan identity.

In chapter two, Quinn explores the relationship between sexual and alimentary desire in relation to monstrous futurity in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The Time Machine* (1895), in which veganism is an "ethical abstraction" that "is seen to result in a failure to acknowledge the reality of human desires" (61). Indeed, the monstrosity of Wells's vegetarian characters is "engendered by the failures and inconsistencies of their meat-free diets" (63). In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, these characters evoke both "anxiety and utopian aspiration" (63). Wells's monstrous vegan figures are "situated between the present and the future, as a looming spectre of evolutionary transformation" (88). The inconsistencies and repression associated with Wells's vegan and vegetarian characters contribute to their monstrosity, as he posits the failure of both a discursively imposed and a genetically bred veganism that constitute a "degeneration" (81). In the third chapter, Quinn argues that Margaret Atwood's *MaddAdam* trilogy (2003–2013) aligns with Derrida's "critique of vegetarianism as promoting only an illusion of 'good conscience'" (170). Quinn argues that vegan monsters in Atwood's work are "overdetermined literary constructions [that] signal the impossibility of connecting to a 'pure' or inherent vegan identity" (89), rendering veganism "a monstrous pretence of innocence that seeks to absent itself from late-capitalist structures" (115). It is precisely this purported distance from late capitalist exploitative structures of gender, race, and species that Quinn reframes, noting that entanglement and complicity are inescapable in spite of vegans' best efforts.

In the second part of her book, Quinn responds to the impossibility of a "pure" vegan identity. Arguing that veganism must be "fragmentary and hybrid" (90), she frames it as a performative practice in much the same manner as meat-eating is. She argues: "Vegan performativity [is] a mode of species trouble that challenges the supposed naturalness of omnivorous appetite" (119). Quinn follows this line of argument in chapter four, where she turns her focus towards J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). Much has been written about Coetzee's animal ethics and Elizabeth Costello's vegetarian thematics; Quinn's reading centres the titular character as a performative enactment of the monstrous vegan trope. She reads the novel as parodying attempts to assert a stable ethical identity. For Quinn, Costello addresses the difficulty of rendering animal suffering visible while also avoiding fetishizing violence as spectacle. Costello's monstrous veganism thus becomes something of a model for Quinn's own approach: by focusing on literary scenes not of violence against animals but in which monstrous vegans speak about violence against animals, Quinn practices a form of literary criticism that refuses the spectacle of industrialized farming.

In chapter five, Quinn enters the realm of pleasure, reading Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) and *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017) through the lens of vegan camp. Vegan camp, she says, is an "aesthetic lens and mode of reading that seeks pleasure from the spectacle of human exceptionalism" (26). This pleasure is derived from extravagant performances of vegan otherness and vegan failure. Hollinghurst's monstrous vegans are ostentatiously morally-wavering, anxiety-producing, repellent, or naïve. He uses humour to highlight the artificiality of veganism by representing his monstrous vegans as quasi-parodic extremists. To do so, Hollinghurst associates carnivory with homosexuality, puns frequently with the double-entendre of "meat", depicts vegetarianism as frustrated sexual desire, and writes undesirable — even repulsive — vegan characters. Vegetarian disgust at meat is seen, for instance, as a performance that has little to do with flesh itself, and rather is provoked by what meat signifies. This performative disgust "emphasizes the insecurity and unfixed nature of desire and abjection" (160). However, Quinn

argues that the artificiality of veganism "turns the gaze back on omnivores, forcing a confrontation with the limits and instabilities of the carnivorous appetites undergirding human desires" (165). In this way, vegan camp is employed as a humorous means of exposing the artificiality of both veganism and carnism. Embracing monstrous vegans through vegan camp highlights "the difficulties [for vegans] of living and desiring in a non-vegan world" and refocuses critical attention onto carnists (165). Camp thereby offers an alternative to the "sincerity and despair" that characterize much vegan discourse, reconciling the failure of veganism's practice with its pleasures and utopian aspirations (166).

Readers reluctant to engage with a "preachy" vegan text may rest assured: Quinn casts aside moralizing in favour of nuance and the recognition of the imperfections within veganism. By refusing the myth of a stable ethical identity, Quinn offers a more flexible veganism. In the absence of the expectation of perfection, vegans are afforded a degree of forgiveness: although they aspire to a minimization of harm, they are invariably imperfect, and the monstrous vegan trope becomes a tool for refiguring vegan identity. Alongside this, *Reading Veganism* suggests alternative ways of engaging with veganism outside of graphic and disturbing visual representations of animal suffering. Quinn foregrounds the pleasure, humour, and subversion accessed through vegan performativity and vegan camp.

Where vegan theory conventionally dwells on the despair produced by mass nonhuman suffering, Quinn's analysis in *Reading Veganism* suggests ways to exist in spite of, and within, a world of carnist violence. In this way her book could be read alongside Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, which sees moral perfection as a fantasy that can be productively queered. Moreover she argues that the fear and anxiety invoked by the monstrous vegan reflects gendered, sexual, imperial, and racial anxieties by their implied threat to white European patriarchy. Indeed, the monstrosity of these vegan figures is in many ways a reflection of human anxieties about certain appetites and behaviours, because they expose "unsettling questions about human needs and wants" (114).

Quinn's depiction of veganism is complex: veganism "represents a composite of modes of relation to nonhuman animals; functions as a queer positioning that destabilizes previously fixed ideas of gender, race, class, and sexuality; and raises questions about what it means to be a 'speciesed' subject" (62). She posits vegan camp as a productive alternative to the more conventional approach in vegan theory that seeks to restore the animals that have been disappeared into absent referents (148). Although such an approach might be accused of excessive detachment from interventionist discussions of animal exploitation, Quinn is not suggesting that an anthropocentric vegan camp is the *only* way to read veganism. Instead, she offers vegan camp as a new lens through which to engage with literary texts that are not ostensibly vegan, adding to the repertoire of vegan theory and expanding critical possibilities. One way that I would be interested in seeing Quinn's theory applied would be in vegan camp readings of texts that engage with existing entanglements with nonhuman animals. The impact of *Reading Veganism* goes far beyond the works that Quinn studies, inviting further reparative vegan readings, and raising questions about the purported stability of human subjectivities. Quinn asks her readers to reckon with how they construct and enact identities of consumption; *Reading Veganism* offers new ways of recognizing and acknowledging the power dynamics in our entanglements with nonhuman animals.