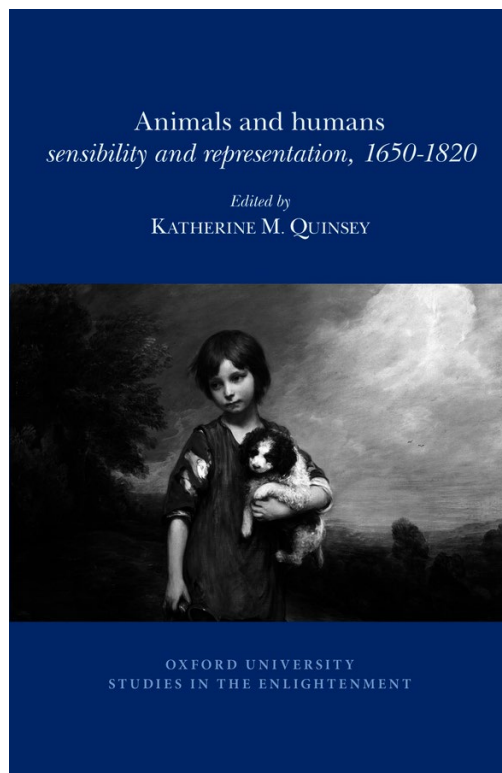


Reviews

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Sensibility and the Human-Animal Bond

Katherine M. Quinsey, ed. *Animals and Humans: Sensibility and Representation, 1650-1820*. OXFORD UNIVERSITY STUDIES IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT. Voltaire Foundation, 2017. 353 pp. £75.00



At its best, scholarship not only presses against traditional philosophical, ethical, legal, medical, moral, literary, and historical frameworks — thereby reimaging and reinventing trite discourses that no longer serve us — but opens up more meaningful ways of experiencing the world. Expanding the breadth and scope of scholarship on our relationship with non-human animals, as a means of approaching our current ecological and humanitarian crises, is a particular strength of this rigorous, thoughtful, and ambitious collection of essays. As a whole, this volume explores how eighteenth-century naturalists, activists, moral philosophers, painters, novelists, and poets offered scathing critiques of speciesism and ontological hierarchies; interrogated the Cartesian

fallacy that animals are machines that cannot feel or reason; and pushed back against common cultural perceptions of animals as abject or other. Despite the varying historical moments under examination, this book insists, repeatedly and compellingly, that acknowledging the power of the human-animal bond is fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be human and alive. As Katherine M. Quinsey asserts, the chapters in this volume “remind us human-animal relationship is as old as humanity itself, intuitive and instinctive” so that “we keep returning to this subject, as a place we have always known, to find ourselves” (288). With mutual epistemological recognition as their premise — combined with a desire to “challeng[e] current assumptions of sentimental writing [...] as pure anthropomorphism” (11) — these essays investigate how the eighteenth century created space for imaginative empathy while imagining possibilities to recognize animals as unique, irreplaceable beings. In doing so, these essays demonstrate the critical importance of this period in setting the stage for contemporary animal advocates and ecologists to unequivocally declare that any civil and moral society depends upon the ethical treatment of nature, the environment, and non-human animals.

Animals and Humans, which spans 170 years, is organized thematically rather than chronologically. The first two chapters focus on the ways that animals, specifically whales and elephants, straddled ambivalent attitudes at the heart of British Imperialism — paradoxically positioned as fetishized cultural objects, independent subjects, Christ-like and mythical creatures, inexhaustible suppliers of ambergris and ivory, and empathetic and moral beings simultaneously. The rest of the book is similarly structured, with several essays in a row devoted to unveiling the occasionally subtle and often overt critiques eighteenth-century thinkers made against very specific brands of human exceptionalism and speciesism, including concepts of anthropocentric teleology and human-centered models of the natural world. As these scholars demonstrate, eighteenth-century thinkers posed existential questions, such as whether animals have immortal souls or a right to happiness; how the rampant persecution of living beings epitomizes the Fall; whether animals possess language; where the human-animal bond might provide a pathway to sensibility; the ethical implications of consuming animal flesh; and what shared sentience would look like. Many also decried the cognitive dissonance implicit in committing violence against creatures who mesmerize and transfix us — and in whom we often see reflections of ourselves. Throughout this collection, beloved canonical figures -- including James Thomson, Alexander Pope, Anna Letitia Barbauld, William Wilberforce, Thomas Gainsborough, Arthur O. Lovejoy, John Aikin, and Jeremy Bentham — emerge as early animal and environmental advocates who highlight just how deeply the injustices of slavery,

Imperialism, class hierarchies, misogyny, and animal exploitation are intertwined. The significance of uncovering a shared sympathetic identification with animals and ecological consciousness among these influential thinkers cannot be overstated.

In these ways, the scholars in this collection reveal an early eighteenth century understanding of a kind of proto-intersectionality — that is, an awareness that White imperialist heteropatriarchy controls and brutalizes animal, Black, impoverished, and female bodies for its own pleasure and profit. More importantly, there is concern that abuse towards any one of these bodies will necessarily lead to abuses of the others. Early women poets and novelists used the discourse of sensibility and the trope of the sentimental heroine to highlight the links between misogyny, slavery, and the mistreatment of other species. In “Animals and the country-house tradition of Leapor and Austen,” for instance, Barbara K. Seeber contends that these two writers challenge the callousness behind the subjugation of women and animals by appealing to a higher moral sensibility. In *Mansfield Park* (1814), as Seeber rightly attests, “the Bertrams continually remind Fanny of her lower-class status, at times treating her like an animal” (283). Given the family’s ties to Antigua, their verbal assaults and cruelty to a sensitive female protagonist enable Austen to “demonstrate the interconnectedness of the ideologies which objectify women, slaves, and animals, but also [to] directl[y] challeng[e] them by clearly establishing Fanny as the most feeling being in the novel” (283). In emoting where others will not or cannot, Fanny is deemed morally superior to those who isolate and shame her. While Mary Wollstonecraft actively questioned sensibility’s fixation on women’s virtue and sentiments at the expense of their reason, she anticipates Austen’s concern that conflating female and animal bodies harms both, while simultaneously alienating already disenfranchised populations. *The wrongs of woman, or Maria* (1798) weaves in the distressing tale of the impoverished Jemima, who has been cast out of society through no fault of her own and forced to be an attendant in an asylum, to underscore her identification with animals since she receives the same treatment as they do: “I was the filching cat, the ravenous dog, the dumb brute, who must bear it all” (qtd. in Fitzer). Jemima may not be the most feeling character in eighteenth-century fiction, but she exemplifies Wollstonecraft’s rebuke of associations and assumptions about otherness “predicated upon a chain of being in which the urban poor occupied a rank just above the lower primates,” as Irene Fitzer points out in her essay, “An egg dropped on the sand: the natural history of female bastardy from Mark Catesby to Mary Wollstonecraft” (241.) Yet, as James P. Carson reminds us, even the philosophical understanding of the great chain of being during the period was complex and dynamic, not “simply hierarchical and not primarily anthropocentric but [also] conducive to animal rights” (99). The writers in this collection add invaluable insight to

conversations about Enlightenment science and ecology, unveiling previously unrecognized nuance and resistance to human domination.

While Quinsey claims that “A significant theme in this volume is the interrogation of the ideas of sentiment, sensibility, and anthropomorphism [which are] major threads in the eighteenth-century notion of animal welfare”(11), the relationship between the period’s obsession with the discourse of sensibility and its connections to non-human animals remains largely implicit. Permeating the cultural and political landscape, sensibility touted theories about how and why we feel for others; and writers and moral philosophers fixated on the readable body, believing that somatic expressions such as sighing, blushing, fainting, and tear-stained cheeks were direct reflections of internal states of mind, acting as windows into the heart. Entire studies have been devoted to the philosophical, aesthetic, medical, sartorial, religious, sexual, educational, and psychic frameworks of sensibility; however, this volume misses an opportunity to parse out the relationships between eighteenth-century theories of human bodies as decipherable texts to be decoded and glossed and animal bodies that are suspended between fundamentally unintelligible and strangely familiar. Sarah R. Cohen’s brilliant reading of Thomas Gainborough’s “fancy pictures” explains that “the artist used animals, and the human-animal connection, as a means of eliciting sensibility” (193); but how did sensibility also make animals appear more or less legible? Although many of these scholars suggest the eighteenth-century contemplated the sensory and embodied experiences of animals to undermine ideologies of human supremacy, the specifics of how sensibility’s reigning theories of subjectivity, sentiment, and corporeal transparency informed the period’s perceptions of non-human animals’ somatic expressions remain underexplored.

Still, *Animal and Humans* is refreshingly optimistic. The volume’s far-reaching cultural implications add much-needed nuance to current discussions in ecology and animal studies, offering a rich history of empathy that is not dependent on mere projection: as Rachel Swinkin puts it, “regarding an animal as a singular being is not necessarily the same as humanizing it” because when we think this way, “we risk repeating the Cartesian fallacy by assuming that only the human can be sentient and responsive” (177). While our current cultural climate often posits that empathy is a finite resource -- frequently pitting human and animals against one another in competition for compassion -- this volume reminds us that homophobia, racism, misogyny, ableism, and speciesism are part of the same broken notion that certain lives are far more valuable than others. In these ways, the eighteenth-century valued interspecies relationship as not just ideal but imperative for taking down the oppressive systems of

power that continue to plague us today. If James Thomson's *The Seasons* "encourages a phenomenological plasticity that responds to the ways in which multiple meanings interact" (76), as Denys Van Renen suggests, this volume helps readers historicize and participate in a similar kind of imaginative suppleness that embraces our dependence on the natural world. This work is prescient, timely, and vital.