PART ONE

SETTING THE SCENE
CHAPTER ONE

ANIMALS IN EARLY MODERN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

The way in which animals are viewed and valued in a society depends on a range of factors and has changed dramatically over the centuries. Historically, the differences between humans and animals tended to be based on very different criteria than we use today. Veterinarian and historian Susan Jones believes that there are three main criteria that have been used historically to define animals: our ‘market or financial relation’ to them; our cultural beliefs and the type of interactions we have with them in ‘a particular time and place’. In twenty-first century Britain our definition of animals is fairly broad and biologically defined which tends to blur the boundaries. As a result, many scholars feel that twenty-first century animals are seen in anthropomorphic terms, as ‘different but nevertheless clearly defined shadows of ourselves’.

One of the defining features of modern human-animal relationships is the huge popularity of pets, or in current terminology ‘companion’ animals. According to some academics, the former is somewhat demeaning to creatures who were domesticated to fulfill the ‘human desire for companionship’. This emotional interest is linked to the ‘animal welfare’ and ‘rights’ movements to protect them from abuse in laboratory experimentation. Some have argued, however, that while many people have ‘emotionally invested’ in specific dogs or cats, most are unable or unwilling to see ‘the larger consequences’ of our societies on the natural world.

Of course, the ways in which humans perceive and treat animals has always had some type of effect on animals. In the early modern period, these were molded by prevailing anthropocentric ideas. According to

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