Review Section

""

A Haunted Text

Laura Brown


Laura Brown (2010) has written a scholarly work about the provenance of primates and dogs in the literary imagination beginning in the 18th century. She stipulates that her focus is “the realm of representation” (p. x) and that she will be considering “the power and effect of purely imaginary animals” (p. x). At the same time, she demonstrates that 18th-century views of nonhuman animals still have contemporary currency, analyzing fairly well-known writers, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Frances Burney and contemporary writer Paul Auster, as well as lesser-known authors.

What is curious about Brown’s treatment of her material is that nonhuman animals are rendered as ciphers rather than as subjects, their animality deployed merely for its cultural, symbolic significance. In The Lives of Animals, J. M. Coetzee (1999) has Elizabeth Costello differentiate between poetry, which “finds an idea in the animal, which is not about the animal” and that which is a “record of an engagement” (p. 51) between human and nonhuman. Costello favors writing that attempts to embody animals and relate to them. Brown, on the other hand, does not. Admittedly, some of the nonhuman beings who appear in Brown’s text are purely imaginary—Frankenstein’s monster, anthropoid apes, Swift’s Yahoos; even so, relationship across the species barrier is possible. In addition, the book features many lapdogs and pet monkeys who have some basis in the “real” and for whom precedents of relationship exist.

Reviews that carp about a book not fulfilling another version of itself can be counterproductive, but Brown herself raises the vexed issue of “lived relationships between humans and other animals” (p. ix), which she included in a course on The Idea of the Pet in Literature and History, a prime inspiration for this book. What transpired in the course, however, is that the literary animals
came to seem much more interesting than those who appeared in veterinary texts. For me, as an animal studies scholar who wants to know about these “lived relationships” and about interspecies encounters, the excluded ghosts of these “real” animals shadow the text, reducing greatly my appreciation of *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes*.

Because Brown’s commitment is to celebrating the richness and multivalence of literature in which the imaginary animal exceeds any one interpretation, not only does the “real” animal fade into insignificance, but animal studies theorizing is also lacking. Brown includes an overview of such theories, polemically categorizing them either as “human-alienating” or as “human-associated.” The former she defines as those theories that repudiate “any simple or direct forms of engagement, communication, or proximity” (p. 13) between humans and other animals, citing the work of Deleuze and Guattari as an example. Human-associated theories, for Brown, are exemplified by Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2008) and Vicki Hearne’s *Adam’s Task* (1987).

To categorize both scientific discourse about animals and animal studies theorizing as dichotomously constrained is somewhat reductive, and to label another dichotomy in relation to animals as anthropomorphism versus alterity is to ignore the complexities and nuances of current debates. In *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, for example, Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman move beyond the tired definitions of anthropomorphism as negative. Animals, they suggest, may be “symbols with a life of their own” (p. 13), but they also embody their own subjectivities, agency, and emotions. Attributing language to them is therefore tantamount to an ethical act.

If Brown does not push forward animal studies debate, she certainly contributes to debates on 18th-century literature as she opens up interpretations of the nonhuman and the human. The second chapter, entitled “Mirror Scene: The Orangutan, the Ancients, and the Cult of Sensibility,” has humans and apes holding up mirrors to themselves and seeing their opposites. The scientific place of apes in the 18th century is grounded within extraordinary detail, and the analysis of *Gulliver’s Travels* and the hominoid ape connects Yahoos to orangutans, to “savage man” or Hottentots. The monster in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is convincingly located within 18th-century perceptions of the hominoid ape as well.

Chapter Three, Immoderate Love: The Lady and the Lapdog, interprets this dyad as the “first trope of interspecies connection” in “[e]arly eighteenth-century literary culture” (p. 65). The sexualized relationship between dog and woman in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Flush or Faunus” is analyzed in detail as a cultural phenomenon and as a literary trope that may be deployed satirically in other texts. Instances from Dickens’s narratives provide further