

Sentimental Apes, Naughty Monkeys, Erotic Lapdogs, and Canine Pilgrims

Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination. Laura Brown. Cornell 2010. 143 pp.

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<1>Laura Brown has written an original and learned account of human-animal portrayals in British imaginative literature. Her study focuses chiefly on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but she also makes forays into the Victorian era and even into the twenty-first century, with her interpretation of Paul Auster's homeless dog novel *Timbuktu* (1999). Brown analyzes fictional encounters between human and nonhuman animals in the years following the discovery of the great apes, an era that also witnessed the rise of bourgeois pet keeping, as we learned from Harriet Ritvo's *The Animal Estate* and Kathleen Kete's *The Beast in the Boudoir*.(1) At times, Brown's text evidences a deeper familiarity with her field of literature than with the burgeoning literature of Animal Studies, as when Kete's germinal study is mentioned glancingly only once or Ivan Kreilkamp's and Grace Moore's brilliant work on nineteenth-century dogs is not referenced at all.(2) These omissions prove relatively minor, however, in the context of the deep philosophical, scientific, and historical backgrounds to Brown's study that make it an important new contribution to Animal Studies as well as to the history of modern consciousness.

<2>Her first chapter, "Speculative Space: The Rise of the Animal in the Modern Imagination," is a fine survey of the emergence of human and nonhuman animal encounters in British imaginative literature. A significant aspect of Brown's study is its examination of the gendered interactions in the human-nonhuman animal encounter, from her discussions of female chimpanzees who are admired for their modesty through loyal dogs that are preferred to their human male—or female—counterparts. The second chapter, "Mirror Scene: The Orangutan, the Ancients, and the Cult of Sensibility," focuses upon the depiction of apes in the wake of the discovery of the hominid ape, whose likeness to humans makes us look into the mirror to examine our own human animal identity. In compelling discussions of less generally well known texts such as Edward Tyson's *Anatomy of a Pygmy* (1751), Thomas Boreman's *A Description of Three Hundred Animals* (1730), the Scottish philosopher James Burnet, Lord Monbaddo's *On the Origin and Progress of Language* (1774), and Thomas Love Peacock's sentimental novel *Melincourt; or Sir Oran-Hauton* (1818) through examinations of canonical literature including Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Brown analyzes the ways in which writers grappled with knowledge of the human's intimate relation to another creature during the long century before Darwin. By looking closely at many eighteenth-century texts, Brown finds conflicting portrayals of the great apes in relation to human beings, "a 'motley', composite

being . . . In the mirror held up by human-kind, human beings recognized themselves in a weird hominoid creation—a hairy reanimation of the beings of classical mythology, a naturally sensible, innately modest ape of feeling” (35-36).

<3>Several of Brown’s analyses made me rethink texts I teach nearly every year. Her interpretation of Book IV of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* historicizes the instabilities of Swift’s text in relation to the discovery of the great apes: “. . . in both cases—horse to human, and human to horse—the reciprocal movement between animal and human produces a disturbing ambivalence, an echo of that same confusion that we have located at that new proximity of human and hominoid ape” (49). One of Brown’s most startlingly original analyses occurs in her study of *Frankenstein*. This is all the more surprising in that it might seem nearly impossible to write something new about a canonical novel that has received close critical attention over the past three decades by a host of scholars with bents from the feminist to the postcolonial to the Marxist. Gendered readings of *Frankenstein* have treated Shelley’s novel as a narrative of the female artist, as a myth or autobiographical tale of reproduction and childbirth, as a description of the force of misogyny, and as a covertly homoerotic or homophobic text. *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* contributes to this scholarship by introducing the influence of the hominid ape and literature responding to its discovery into her interpretation of *Frankenstein*. Brown argues that “Shelley’s monster is extensively indebted to the eighteenth-century creation of the hominoid ape as we have traced it through Tyson and Swift through Monboddó” (59). Brown’s study reorients debates about the ‘otherness’ of the monster and of his dual nature of tenderness and fierceness. *Frankenstein* thus broadens the investigation of modern consciousness by depicting both kinship and cultural difference within this human-animal relation.

<4>In Chapter Three, “Immoderate Love: The Lady and the Lapdog,” Brown is concerned with “imaginative experience” engendered by living with domestic dogs and other companion animals, “inspired by the particular, striking, and now pervasive kind of intimacy—the inter-species intimacy engineered by the rise of modern pet keeping . . . in which ideas of alterity are instantly transformed into experiences of intimacy” (65). Gender structures the animal/human relation here through the eroticized image of the lady and the lapdog that emerged in early eighteenth-century literature and served as a trope for anxieties about male-female human intimacy. The image can be further interpreted, Brown contends, as a figure for “encounters experienced by Europeans at this crucial moment in the expansion of their culture across the globe” (65). Brown sees this paradigm as suggesting “a special role for gender in the imaginative involvement with animal-kind, since women are constitutive both of this distinctive, domestic representation of human-animal conjunction and of other, global inter-species connections” (65). Women are, then, represented as open to this transformative encounter with the other.

<5>Brown’s study of canine literature spans works from Chaucer through Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Dickens, to Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1933), the mock biography of Barrett Browning’s spaniel. This survey begins with a host of early eighteenth-century lyrics that eroticize the lady and the lapdog, with “the full repertory of lapdog imagery: the bed, the breast, and the caress, combined with raptures, kissing, crying, and climaxing with the licking tongue” (74). Brown traces the shift from this trope to the Romantic image of dogs as the companions of solitary male characters—“wanderers, hunters, shepherds, hikers, and poets

especially” (77). Moving to the Victorian era, Brown looks at Minnie Meagles’s intimacy with the faux artist Henry Gowan in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) as seen through her would-be lover Arthur Clennam’s eyes “as both a testimony to Minnie’s natural sentiment and a signal of impropriety, and both of these effects are pursued within the novel, as Minnie’s true virtue is confirmed, while her marriage to Gowan—her dog’s master—leads her to ruin” (82). The fact that Dickens gives Minnie the nickname of “Pet” serves Brown’s argument, although she doesn’t mention this detail. Similarly, the larger context of the book prompts speculations beyond Brown’s discussion of *David Copperfield* (1849-50). Not only does this instance of the immoderate love between Dora and her lapdog/double Jip reveal Dickens’s critique of gender ideals that ornamentalize and infantilize women in domestic spaces, but surely Jip’s Pagoda doghouse might lead to some speculations about race and empire as well.

<6>The fourth chapter of *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* is entitled “Violent Intimacy: The Monkey and the Marriage Plot.” Here Brown moves from fantasies of inter-species love as a marriage alternative to “a more direct attack on the conventional notion of love and marriage as the ultimate goal of virtuous female conduct: the pet monkey” (91). With Fanny Burney’s novel *Evelina* (1778), Brown interprets the encounter between the monkey and the male fop just at the climax of the marriage plot as “a fantasy that links the monkey to the marriage plot and the violent inter-species embrace to the desire to identify human being itself” (94). The monkey not only symbolically attacks the institution of marriage, but his appearance also introduces the “problematic nature of intimacy itself as it is figured forth in the modern era, where any connection between human beings generates fundamental questions of identity and difference” (110).

<7>Brown’s work closes with the chapter “Dog Narrative: Itineracy, Diversity, and the Elysium of Dogs,” in which she writes about the eighteenth-century dog narratives that informed the “rise of the dog narrative” in the last decades of the nineteenth century; both “offer critiques of religion, female fashion, and social excess” (132). (After reading many Victorian imperial dog narratives in the British Library, I would add that dog narrators often criticize the Empire when their English masters are imagined as unable or unwilling to do so.) Brown’s chapter begins and ends with Auster’s *Timbuktu*, told through the narrative consciousness of the itinerant dog Mr. Bones, who is looking for his Elysium in Timbuktu, “where dogs talked as equals with men” (*Timbuktu* 108 qtd. in Brown 116). Mr. Bones’s quest narrative—a nod to Bunyan might be warranted here—“indicates the speculative space that animal-kind lends to the human imagination” (143). Brown’s analysis might have gained from a deeper consideration of Auster’s title in relation to the Victorian history of imperial dog narratives. Surely the ethos informing *Timbuktu* could be interpreted as a transformation of the once exotic, imperialized, and colonized into a democratic utopia of all races—and into home.

<8>Laura Brown’s *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* makes us think not only about the search for home but also about the quest for our human identity in relation to the animal. By attending to the nuanced gendering of texts that figure the inter-species encounter—in particular, in her interpretation of the “lady and the lapdog” trope—Brown offers us a lens through which we can see new forms of gender critique, interrogations of female nature and sexuality, and the

institution of marriage itself. Brown offers us a more capacious history in which can locate ourselves both as human—and as animal.

Endnotes

(1) Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989; Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. (^)

(2) See Ivan Kreilkamp, "'Petted Things': *Wuthering Heights* and the Animal." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.1 (Spring 2005): 87-110; Kreilkamp's "Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*," and Moore's "Beastly Criminals and Criminal Beasts" in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in *Victorian Animal Dreams*. Eds. Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. (^)