

Karen Raber. *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*.

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In the conclusion to *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* Karen Raber outlines the book's key claim: "any human culture that attempts to construct something exclusively human is destined to find that it cannot shed its origins in the experience of embodiment that we share with animals" (179). Anyone who has followed the

emergence of the interdisciplinary field of animal studies over the past fifteen years or so will be familiar with this argument, but it is the focus on embodiment — on “how animals figure in the discovery of the body’s material functions, how they participate in erotic life, how they influence external human structures, how they in turn inhabit human bodies, and how they alter ideas of property” (28) — that, Raber argues, is this book’s crucial intervention. Where previous analyses of animals in early modern culture have focused their attention on reason — who has it, who might have it, what having it might mean — *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* proposes that “as long as we fight over reason, we are stuck on Descartes’ playing field” (11). The shift of focus onto bodies is, for Raber, a radical one.

To support the claim for the value in moving away from reason in our reading of human-animal cultures, Raber begins her study by reading Giovanni Battista Gelli’s 1549 rendition of Ulysses’s attempts to convince the humans transformed into animals by Circe to return to human form. In this narrative — much reproduced in Renaissance culture — only the elephant (a philosopher in former life) agrees to return: the other animals — snake, hare, lion, horse, goat, hind, dog, calf, mole — refuse. They have all realized that they have a “better life” in animal form. Blindness, for the mole, is not perceived as a lack. He understands himself to be, in Raber’s words, “physically and therefore morally perfect” (2). Reason is countered, she argues, with “animal contentment” (3).

Alongside this recognition of a Renaissance interest in body as well as — if not in place of — reason, Raber also cites current developments in biology, psychology, and ethology. Work from these fields reiterates the importance of acknowledging our shared corporeality with animals, as well as the embodied nature of mind. The Renaissance’s recognition of the close and inevitable cohabitation of humans and fleas is thus offered here as illustrative of another mode of engagement. Returning to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with an eye to those marginalized creatures that often escape critical notice, she argues, might offer us a revised genealogy for this new understanding of humans’ embodiedness in which we are creatures made in environments, not complete beings found only in the mind.

In the five main chapters of the book the focus on embodiment and its importance to an understanding of human culture is evidenced in human anatomical science’s reliance on animal models, the ubiquity of horses in early modern English culture, the use of animal and human products in recipes for health, the inevitability of living cheek by jowl with vermin, and in the presence of animal workers in the period’s agricultural economy. The materials Raber draws on as evidence for her argument include visual representations, from anatomical drawings to oil paintings; horse-training manuals; health and dietary regimens; rat-catching manuals; and literary texts, in particular, work by Shakespeare (*Venus and Adonis*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*) and Thomas More’s *Utopia* are read through contexts of animal-human interaction.

The concept of embodiment does slip sometimes: clearly present in discussions of anatomical science, and in the recurrent image of the centaur that Raber traces in discussions of horse riding, the final chapter seems to present the real (as opposed to the metaphorical) animal as equivalent to an embodied animal. I am not sure that

these are the same, and the lack of clarity does water down the book's overarching argument somewhat. Most successful, though, is Raber's reading of *Hamlet* in which the shared bodiliness of humans and animals is encountered through a discussion of the exchange of waste matter in Renaissance medical texts, and of the idea of "mutual consumption" that underpins numerous cures (104). Placing *Hamlet* in the context of dietary regimens and works detailing methods to trap vermin, Raber figures Hamlet and Claudius as linked in their relation to the small burrowing mammals of the play: the rats, mice, and moles. Here a shared human and animal world is encountered in ways that truly illuminate the play.

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