
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Raber, Karen. Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture

Philip D. Collington

Volume 38, Number 4, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087372ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26399>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Collington, P. (2015). Review of [Raber, Karen. Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(4), 218–221. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26399>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

The essay by Piéjus analyzes the eulogy Piccolomini wrote for Siense gentlewoman Aurelia Petrucci, sent to her sister after the funeral. Since it was written post-mortem, it was not meant to be read at the memorial. In the eulogy, Petrucci is represented as the ideal Renaissance woman—a paragon of domestic and social virtues—and illustrates Petrucci’s central role in Siense society. It also shows how Piccolomini’s world was a place where women carried considerable practical and social clout. The oration is included in the book.

The value of this collection of essays, aside from being a remarkable work of erudition, is its ability to discuss the many facets of Piccolomini’s great and varied learning, as well as the remarkably active social and cultural life of the academies in the Renaissance.

CRISTINA PERISSINOTTO

University of Ottawa

Raber, Karen.

Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture.

Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 235. ISBN 978-0-8122-4536-3 (hardcover) \$65.

Sir Philip Sidney famously opens his *Apology for Poetry* with an anecdote about how a dinner guest at Emperor Maximilian’s court waxed so poetical about the excellence of battle-steeds “that if I had not been a piece of a logician before I came to him, I think he would have persuaded me to have wished myself a horse.” Sidney’s joke is premised on the longstanding assumption that the ability to reason demarcates human from beast, and ineluctably elevates the former over the latter. No educated courtier would cross the species barrier—no matter how much he admired his animal companion. Yet in *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*, Karen Raber (professor of English, University of Mississippi) dismantles the enduring misconception “that reason is the basis of human excellence” (1). An emerging understanding of our shared embodiment with animals—in genetic ancestry, in physiological functions, in sensory and cognitive processes—contradicts the anxious and self-interested separation of man from beast that has long enabled the domination and exploitation of the non-human. Although most Britons no longer depend on animals for

transportation, hunt or butcher their own meat, or share living-spaces with livestock, in early modern England the interdependence of human and animal was pervasive. As the apposition of her title suggests, Raber does not search out animal imagery to shed light on the abstract intellectual achievements of the Renaissance (poetry, art, drama, and so forth); rather, she documents how animals permeated every aspect of early modern life. Animal bodies produced Renaissance culture, as cultured Renaissance bodies were so like animal bodies.

The book contains five chapters, each exploring how a particular animal came to shape English life-experiences and artistic endeavours. Chapter 1 documents how animals proved instrumental in the transition from abstract Galenic to hands-on Vesalian approaches to anatomy. The continued presence of monkeys and dogs in the margins of illustrations and frontispieces serves to remind us how animal analogies were fundamental to this science; and thanks to our common “creatureliness,” animals “remain the ground on which epistemological and ontological understandings of the human body are constructed” (33). Exquisite depictions of skeletal and muscular structures on improbably trotting horses underscore how artistic conventions were used to conceal the grisly realities of this science. Chapter 2 contrasts the mythical centaur Chiron with his irrational counterpart Nessus in order to propose a “more flexible, less defensive understanding of human-animal intersexualities” (77). This chapter juxtaposes love sonnets with riding manuals in order to explore the proprioceptive intimacy of *manège*, whereby through careful training and correct posture, horse and rider become one—a pleasure “both exhilarating and dangerous to the rider’s sense of self” (88). From these early chapters, it becomes apparent that literature will play a supporting role in Raber’s study—as discussions of the courser and jennet episode in *Venus and Adonis*, and of Hotspur’s preference for horse over spouse in *1 Henry IV*, take a back seat to the author’s enthusiasm for the science and aesthetics of horsemanship. Like the French Dauphin in *Henry V*, Raber can’t resist talking about these “beautiful beasts” (96).

Chapter 3 turns inward, literally, by exploring the symbiotic relationships of parasite and host in an era when poor hygiene and slipshod sanitation ensured that most people experienced the intimate discomforts of fleas, ticks, flukes, intestinal worms, and a host of other “internal pests” (111). By situating Hamlet’s obsession with vermin and decay—mice, worms, maggots, and kings going on progress through the guts of a beggar—Raber further erodes human/animal boundaries. After all, animals consumed grass grown in the soil

of decomposed human flesh, and were in turn consumed by humans. Hamlet's discovery of this uncomfortable fact—that “[a]ll eating is in some degree cannibalism”—fuels his disgust at “the cyclical nature of food production” in a play that Raber suggests is “fundamentally about parasitism” (110–11). Chapter 4 further explores the constant presence of vermin in urban environments where architectural design sought in vain to demarcate human from non-human. As Raber notes, boundaries like fences, windows, and doors do little when broached by pests that neither understand nor respect artificial constructs enforcing “the rules of propriety and the boundaries that defined property” (143). Raber rounds out her chapter with a discussion of human degenerations into the bestial behaviour of brawling dogs (e.g., Samson and Gregory) and undisciplined cats (e.g., Mercutio and their “prince” Tybalt) in the streets of *Romeo and Juliet*—though her exploration of Verona's inability to police private and public spaces proves less compelling than the primary materials she musters in order to deconstruct these distinctions in the first place.

Chapter 5 explores the agricultural ambiguities of moles and sheep—the former literally undermining farmers' gardens, and the latter (in the provocative first book of More's *Utopia*) rapaciously eating up the English countryside. Neither creature respects boundaries or property, and both undermine the agricultural labourers with whom their lives intertwine. Raber really hits her stride in this final chapter, theorizing that *Utopia* reverses the anthropomorphizing tendencies of much moral commentary; for instance, she highlights More's nightmarish account of how “the elimination of private property leads to the ‘animalization’ of humans,” such as through slavery (175). Even in this her most sustained literary “reading,” however, Raber is most convincing when explicating the gritty details of actual phenomena—equine tail positions when mating and defecating, the grazing preferences of sheep, the use of animal excreta in medicinal cures, and so forth. Sir Thomas may have been the pre-eminent humanist of Tudor England, but for Raber his credibility stems from his appointment in 1514 as commissioner of sewers: “More was familiar with the problem of removing butchers' filth, which so plagued London that its water was known to be too foul to drink safely” (176). Throughout her study, animals and natural processes do not stand for other things; a mole represents *moleness*, and rot is actual *rot*—neither is symbolic of political turpitude or moral decay. Perhaps this is why the analyses of “canonical works” so breathlessly advertised on the book's dust-jacket come up short; after exploring with erudition and sympathy the natural elements

of town and country, Raber eschews the exploitation of animals in the service of purportedly higher human concerns, such as literary explication.

Not surprisingly, Edward Topsell looms large in Raber's study, and she relies heavily on his *History of Four-footed Beasts* (1607) to speak for the general English experience of, say, burrowing moles and barking dogs. But this is preferable to the over-reliance on Ovid that features in so many studies of animals and Renaissance culture; indeed the *Metamorphoses* are mentioned only once in Raber's study, a conspicuous marginalization of a literary source that exemplifies her methodological critique of materialist criticism that is not sufficiently *material*. Raber is generous in acknowledging the work of her predecessors and colleagues in the field; and minor disagreements on points of interpretation are discretely stowed in the endnotes. The book is thoroughly researched, meticulously edited, and handsomely illustrated with more than two-dozen figures. And Raber's conclusion is genuinely moving, as it surveys the mourning practices of elephants to demonstrate how animals command language, display complex social organization, and exhibit collective memory—further undermining the grounds on which Cartesian dualism and human exceptionalism are built. In myriad ways, she concludes, animals share “those attributes of the mind—reason, emotion, moral judgment—that define the category ‘human’” (185), and her fascinating study consolidates the place of our shared embodiment in early modern studies.

PHILIP D. COLLINGTON

Niagara University

Ray, Meredith K.

Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. 291. ISBN 978-0-674-50423-3 (hardcover) \$45.

This book represents a significant step forward in our appreciation of the role early modern women played in the understanding and development of natural philosophy and alchemy in Italy. *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* is a pioneering text that brings together unheard, forgotten, or simply unexamined voices of intellectual women who operated