

**Barbara K. Seeber, *Jane Austen and Animals*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 150. £55. ISBN 9781409456049.**

In the preface to *Jane Austen and Animals*, Barbara K. Seeber describes an early reaction to her project from a colleague: 'he remarked "but there are no animals in Jane Austen"' (x). The strength of this book lies not only in its refutation of this claim, but also in its attachment to it. Seeber admits that she is focussing on a comparatively minor theme while also demonstrating its centrality to many of the most discussed aspects of Austen's writing. What might traditionally have been seen as incidental details of environment or setting in Austen's works are brought into the foreground and carefully studied on their own terms and with an impressively sensitive eye to fresh dimensions of even critically well-trodden texts.

*Jane Austen and Animals* is arranged thematically rather than chronologically or by work. This structure is flexible and allows for unusual connections to develop across Austen's oeuvre both temporally and generically. Seeber works with the novels of course, but also Austen's correspondence, juvenilia, short fiction and poetry. The book also touches on more than its title suggests. Its chapters include discussion of women, hunting, masculinity, diet, landscape and environment. These themes further broaden out into larger issues: one is the question of Austen and nature; another places discussions about gender politics in the context of contemporary debates about the status of animals. The first chapter, for example, considers Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft in order to show that 'what came to be termed the Woman Question was connected to the Animal Question' (25). The second and third chapter demonstrate Austen's participation in the controversy over rural sport in the period's literature, but also extend its relevance into a proto-feminist domain (38): John Thorpe and Henry Tilney's contrasting attitudes to animals in *Northanger Abbey* are also apparent in their differing treatment of women (40-42); Willoughby's pursuit of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* is repeatedly figured as 'sport' (44-45); and Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park* 'synchronizes his dalliance [with Fanny Price] with his hunting' (46).

Seeber's chapter on food also pays attention to seemingly small details in the novel. It enacts the book's broader argument in microcosm by critiquing Maggie Lane's *Jane Austen and Food*, which argues that 'the mundane' plays more of a role in early and informal writings than it does in the work that Austen intended for publication (93). In contrast, Seeber argues that the nonhuman mundane is essential to Austen's work throughout her career. In this respect, her work resonates with recent thinking in the humanities concerned with the nonhuman, materiality, and objects and things as agents. This is not a connection that Seeber explores explicitly, however, and this is a slight weakness. The book might have benefitted from more detailed engagement with philosophic writing on nature, the problem of animality, and relations between humans and animals both in Austen's period and our own. This is not to ask for a dogmatic 'application' of theory onto Austen's writing. Rather – and especially when handled by a reader as sensitive to similarity and difference as Seeber – a broader consideration of intellectual traditions shaping Austen's and our own literary-critical viewpoints might have permitted greater conceptual sophistication.

An exception to this general rule is the beginning of the fourth chapter, which openly discusses postcolonial approaches (73-5). This chapter is particularly impressive for its combination of close reading and broader theoretical awareness: for example, its exploration of the inconsistency of pronouns used for Lady Bertram's 'pug' (80) or its analysis of the verb 'creep' in *Mansfield Park* (84). The book's unsurprising emphasis on the social significance of the nonhuman is also refreshingly left behind in the book's final excellent chapter on 'Sanditon', which argues that nature is 'not only acted upon' as 'a passive backdrop' but is a 'character' that 'acts' (115). This is linked to the evasion of the marriage plot in Austen's final work through close rhetorical analysis and careful attention to broader

structures in the novel (120).

Increasingly, the intersection of animal and literary studies induces a return to the usual suspects of authors with an obvious interest in animals. Seeber's book is an exemplar of how to read literature that appears not to be explicitly concerned with the nonhuman. Seeber is resolute in her refusal to overread the role of animals in Austen's oeuvre, while delicately drawing out their significance. In this respect, this book is not only of interest to scholars of Jane Austen and early nineteenth-century prose. It is also a model on how to work with less immediately promising authors within 'the nonhuman turn'.

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