Jane Spencer, *Writing about Animals in the Age of Revolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 281. £60. ISBN 9780198857518.

Jane Spencer's splendid book represents the result of decades of work on approaches to animals in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and perhaps a lifetime of thought on this subject. It is in many ways a summation of the field, with enlightening revisits to some of the best-known material (original and critical) in this area; the introduction of previously unstudied contemporary works such as Margaret Cullen's novel *Mornton* (1814); and the gathering of the whole into a comprehensive, lucid, and always finely tuned exploration of what gave animals such an important place in revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) witing in this period.

Animal studies has come a long way since the 1990s, when I found that my 'animals and Romanticism' PhD topic – perhaps because of the assumed connection with writing for children – was sometimes regarded as not really erudite enough for doctoral level study. Since those ground-breaking days, Professor Spencer has contributed importantly to the developments that have seen the standing of animal studies in this period rise to become a well-respected, wide-ranging, and burgeoning field, approached through many disciplines both in the humanities and the sciences, and in notable cross-disciplinary ways. Her own previous work on the literary tradition of animal writing, and on gender and women's writing in the long eighteenth century, as well as her exploration of kinship and the canon, informs her approach here, with particularly interesting studies in the areas of religious tradition about animals; women's approaches to animals in this period; and the debates over the extent of kinship between human and non-human animals.

In the biblical field Spencer's discussion gives special attention to Balaam's ass from the *Book of Numbers* as a traditional lesson in which a humble and potentially ridiculous animal is the means of showing an arrogant man the error of his ways. She traces this theme from the mediaeval period through philosophical and moral prose writing such as that of Humphry Primatt (1766) and via Sterne, Cowper, and Coleridge, to a fine close reading and revelatory re-evaluation of Wordsworth's much-mocked *Peter Bell*. 'There is no doubt within this poem of the animal's potential to address the human: what is in doubt is the man's capacity to understand it' (68), Spencer writes.

Aspects of religious tradition and belief are also given prominence in Spencer's study of Mary Wollstonecraft's struggles with the place of animals in her arguments for women's rights, where Christian theology comes into conflict with the work of Buffon and other Enlightenment naturalists. The question of the degree of analogy between human and non-human animals was, Spencer shows, a difficult one for Wollstonecraft, because it threatened to undermine her contention that women equally with men have rights, 'as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties' and received from God, meaning they can never be undermined (127). 'Despite [Wollstonecraft's] insistence on the sharp divide between rational, improvable human beings and instinctive, static brutes, she accorded sufficient weight to theories of mind-body determinism, and to naturalists' related analogies between human and animal behaviour, to be troubled by them' (127), Spencer points out.

These analogies were at their most contentious in the arguments about race and slavery, especially in what the 'Sons of Africa' (a group of men of African origin who wrote to the press about a recent work on slavery) called 'the Oran Otang philosophers': those who claimed 'that African peoples looked like, were no more civilized than, or even interbred with, orang-outangs' (145). Spencer studies Edward Long's now-notorious *History of Jamaica* (1774) which argued that the 'negro' was a different species: 'Of other animals, it is well known, there are many kinds […] and why shall we insist, that man alone, of all animals, is undiversified',

Long queried (153). One of the strengths of Spencer's work throughout her book is the way in which material that now seems contentious or offensive is cited unflinchingly and in detail, allowing us to see these arguments in their full extent, bringing their chilling force much more powerfully to the fore than any polite paraphrase would do.

Long's ideas were taken all too seriously at the time, although by 1817 they were being subjected to urbane mockery by Peacock's Sir Oran Haut-ton – a non-speaking but polite, gentle, and brave baronet elected as MP for the rotten borough of Onevote. Burke's famous description of the populace as 'the swinish multitude', in contrast, provoked immediate outrage and satire, and the rich field of 'pig literature' with which working-class and other writers and artists responded to Burke is one of the most entertaining sections of a book that is a must-have for anyone studying and teaching in this field.

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