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## Review of Barbara K. Seeber, *Jane Austen and Animals*

### Abstract

In this review of Barbara K. Seeber's *Jane Austen and Animals* (Ashgate, 2013) Lucinda Cole summarizes this foundational book and emphasizes the role of animal studies scholars in linking feminism and environmental issues.

### Keywords

Jane Austen, animals, animal studies, feminism

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Barbara K. Seeber. *Jane Austen and Animals*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. xii, 150pp. ISBN: 9781409456049.

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Although Austen's depictions of nature have long been a popular subject in literary criticism, Barbara K. Seeber's *Jane Austen and Animals* is the first full-length study of Austen's treatment of the animal world. More precisely, it challenges from a broad ecofeminist perspective the "humanist" Jane Austen, expanding the readings of "nature" in Austen to include "the significance of the human relationship with nonhuman nature, including animals" (ix). The book promotes and supports two major claims: first, "Austen engages in a conversation with her contemporaries about nature and animals"; second, through all of her novels, Austen "interrogates the human-animal divide from a feminist perspective" (ix). Through a series of close readings beginning with *Mansfield Park* and ending with *Sanditon*, Seeber makes a persuasive case that, for Austen, the objectification and domination of animals is closely linked with the objectification and domination of women. To the extent that both animals and women are associated with "nature," Austen therefore emerges as a proto-ecofeminist, and her novels as critiques of anthropocentrism.

Chapter One locates Austen within an intellectual and political history populated by a familiar cast of Enlightenment characters—Rene Descartes, Catherine Macaulay, William Hogarth, Jean Jacques-Rousseau, Humphrey Primatt, Mary Wollstonecraft—all of whom, in different ways, linked gender and species hierarchy. It suggests that Austen, familiar with this tradition, smuggles it into her novels, where women are often aligned with other dominated creatures. Austen's correspondence, for example, "registers an anxiety" that women's reproductive function in marriage "reduces them to the status of animals, subject to ownership and mistreatment by men" (29). From Seeber's perspective, the marriage plots of the novels must be reread within a broader interpretative framework. Because marriage and reproduction are deeply bound to the animalization of women, attention to animal and animality in Austen's work helps us recognize the nature and object of her elliptical satire, characteristic ambivalences, and back-handed critiques of domestic life.

Central to Seeber's reading is the work of William Cowper who, in *The Task*, had popularized both a nascent animal-welfare argument and a critique of the sporting ideal. Austen develops the anti-sporting argument in several of her novels, among them *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Mansfield Park*, in which

compromised male characters—John Thorpe, Sir John Middleton, Willoughby, and Henry Crawford—are tethered to horses, shooting, and the hunting calendar. That all are found wanting as husbands and lovers may be attributed to their treating courtship as another hunting expedition, and women as potential prey. *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* (treated in Chapter Three) features, in contrast, bookish men. In his contemplative habits and disdain for rural sports, Darcy (unlike Bingley) offers what Seeber calls “a utopian challenge to the sporting world and its associated hierarchies” (55). In alliance with Cowper, Darcy refuses to extract his “pleasure” from “another’s pain” (69).

Chapters Four and Five expand Austen’s ethical critique of popular masculinities into more complex arguments about how Austen’s “green politics” can be brought to bear on postcolonial readings. Focusing on Fanny Price’s fluctuating status as both a pet and a thing, Seeber makes the not-entirely-convincing argument that, because she is “most feeling” being in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price challenges ideologies which “objectify women, slaves, and animals” (77). Chapter Five, “Legacies and Diets,” addresses the politics of food in Austen which, although related to hunting, is not equivalent to it. Seeber persuasively argues that Austen’s novels exhibit an “ambivalence towards meat” (99) in part because, like rural sports, meat-eating is associated with violence against women and nature.

*Jane Austen and Animals* is deeply steeped in a certain strain of feminist animal studies—one represented by Carol Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and Margerie Spiegel’s *The Dreaded Comparison*—and in a form of literary criticism that includes the work of Harriet Ritvo on nature, Laura Brown on pets, Christine Kenyon-Jones on animality, and Timothy Morton on food. In some sense, then, Seeber’s book is less about animals than it is a compendium of social justice issues that are often, for good reason, jumbled under the rubric “animal studies.” Some readers will balk at the ready associations among species, race, and gender, at a form of argument in which slaves, pets, women, and trees occupy interchangeable positions. But Seeber’s book will be a welcome study, I think, for avid readers of Jane Austen, in part because it recognizes the liminality of the “human” in this presumably most humanist of writers.