

Julie A. Smith, “Representing Animal Minds in Early Animal Autobiography: Charlotte Tucker’s *The Rambles of a Rat* and Nineteenth-Century Natural History.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 43. 4 (2015): 725-744.

Julie A. Smith’s article enriches our understanding of early animal autobiography and its roots in natural history and the nineteenth-century science of nonhuman animals. Building on the research of scholars including Tess Cosslett and Harriet Ritvo, Smith’s article discusses the roots, features and functions of early animal autobiography – “a first-person fictional narrative in which an animal tells its own story” (725). This discussion indicates, first, that recent “posthumanist” animal autobiographies are indebted to these precursors, which already “took animals’ minds seriously” (726), and, second, that natural history did not only function to disseminate “the early modern discourse of reason that excluded animals” (742). This is a timely and instructive argument, even though Smith’s paper raises more questions than it can answer.

Not unlike a natural historian investigating a particular species, Smith’s paper first identifies the typical features of animal autobiography. These works feature an animal narrator; ostensibly target a younger audience while hinting at a larger readership; aim “to improve human behaviour through lessons about kindness” (725) even though they usually remain socially conservative; feature a string of loosely connected anecdotes “as does the picaresque novel” (739); and reveal a belief “that the minds of [these] animal characters were representative of their species as they existed in real life” (726). Smith’s subsequent argument explores the latter features in more detail, while stressing that the evocation of nonhuman minds in animal autobiography does not just derive from John Locke’s educational theories or a Romantic interest in animal consciousness but also and especially from natural history. As is well-known, the latter, incredibly popular genre discussed various species by describing typical features and by narrating exemplary anecdotes, with some proponents leaning more towards comparative classification and others embracing imaginative description. Zooming in on the writings of Sarah Trimmer and Charlotte Tucker, Smith shows that these writers explicitly drew on natural history, using what they viewed as “scientific data relevant to animal mental states” (734). What happened, Smith suggests, is that real-life anecdotes, “short narrative[s] of arresting animal action” (737), were expanded in fictional animal autobiographies. As the autobiography of an animal could show no true growth toward a fully individualised self according to prevailing doctrine, the options for writers expanding such anecdotes were narrow. They were forced to stress an always-already-realised animal self threatened by humans or to develop attested but astonishing feats of animal creatures, thereby inevitably hinting at a richer mental life – including a “theory of mind” (741) – then conventional natural history allowed. Supportive anecdotes could acquire a subversive quality, undercutting rather than illustrating generalisations about *the* rat, for instance. If this suggests that nonhuman autobiographies might promote kindness and animal welfare, Smith notes that their resistance to anthropocentrism remained partial. Though animals were shown to have meaningful inner lives, the “assumption of human superiority” (733) often remained intact – which is not surprising in a context where thinkers introduced increasingly refined conceptions of “instinct” and “sagacity” to avoid ascribing reason to nonhumans.

This argument is instructive, not only for identifying ties between natural history and early animal autobiography but also for showing that even early writing about animals took them and science seriously. As animal studies scholars have been arguing for some time, nonhuman characters cannot be shrugged off as childish fantasies or stand-ins for human concerns. The well-known question raised at the beginning of Smith's article – "do early animal narrators reflect human consciousness, particularly that of [...] disadvantaged human persons [...] or animal consciousness?" (728) – therefore seems to receive a clear answer. That non-stereotypical animal behaviour is interesting in this context and that the lives of nonhuman characters resist extended narration are important points, and reinforce similar claims by Raymond Malewitz and Ivan Kreilkamp, respectively. Not all of the issues raised by Smith receive answers, though. How strong is the tie between animal autobiographies and picaresque novels, and does this not suggest that animal characters were partly humans-in-disguise after all? How big a difference does it make that Smith's central case deals with rats rather than cats, say? Does every animal autobiography draw on natural history to the same extent, and how does animal autobiography relate to other genres, such as it-narrative and the novel? It is also confusing to hear at the beginning that earlier writers "took animals' minds seriously" (726) only to learn at the end that they raised questions about animal minds "without having to take them seriously" (741). This is not simple hairsplitting, because it ultimately remains unclear how subversive these writings were and were taken to be. Should we consider them frontrunners in assigning a theory of mind to nonhuman creatures or were they gatekeepers in underlining human superiority? These are questions beyond the scope of a single article, however, and we have Julie Smith to thank for raising them.

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