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LOUISE E. ROBBINS, Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris. Animals, History, Culture. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv+349. ISBN 0-8018-6753-3. £33.00 (hardback).

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LOUISE E. ROBBINS, **Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris**. Animals, History, Culture. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 349. ISBN 0-8018-6753-3. £33.00 (hardback). DOI: 10.1017/S0007087403235111

The bedroom which Frederick the Great prepared for his pet *philosophe*, Voltaire, at Sans-Souci in Potsdam is lavishly adorned with plaster reliefs of brightly coloured parrots, swinging from hoops. What Voltaire made of this exotic throng is doubtful, but reading Louise Robbins's book inclines one to make some rather unfortunate comparisons with ornamental captives admired for what was viewed as a purely mechanical ability to show off and speak.

Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots has rightly attracted plaudits for its richness and the fascinating subject – the multifarious worlds of animal trading and keeping in eighteenth-century Paris – which the author treats in extensive and well-researched detail. Full of colourful anecdotes and fascinating snippets, the book is an enjoyable read, well written and thorough, and undoubtedly contributes much to our understanding of a subject about which little was previously known. Where else could one learn that the Duc de Chartres, father of King Louis-Philippe, dressed up as a wild animal to gatecrash a dinner party? Or that Bougainville had a jaguar strangled in 1764? Exotic animals also provided materials for plays and satires, mediated diplomatic efforts and helped court paramours. We learn of the transformations of the Royal menagerie at Versailles, the Parisian shops selling exotic animals, the boulevard and fair booths and arenas. Robbins maps the geography of animal-keeping, from the palace to the salon, shipboard or street, and concerns herself with the social place of different sorts of animal display, from the monarch to the *bas peuple*. She shows how scientific practitioners and periodicals cooperated in weeding out fake exotic animals and, conversely, how animals long believed to be legendary could be reified

by the same means. Living exotic animals, it seems, could stand for many different things, from the concrete – gifts, ornaments, women's sexual organs – to the abstract – power, enlightenment, maternal devotion.

Through Robbins's wide-ranging surveys, we are introduced to the whole spectrum of animal trade, keeping and display in one particular culture. In this sense her book offers a cultural history of exotic animals; among other issues, she explores how the guilds, global trade routes and print variously mediated the place of exotic animals. One particular strength is her discussion of the significance of mimicry as embodied in animal behaviour. Another is her careful study of literary uses of Buffon, which was the original basis for the book. Robbins is good at teasing out the multiple uses of representations of, say, the caged animal: it could be an image of slavery, but also an image of freedom, of pastoral imaginings or a symbol of the King's role as liberator of his people. But the reader waits in vain for some discussion which might bring together all these apparently conflicting significances. Different meanings appear in one chapter, only to vanish in the next, and there is no account of how cultural work was done through juggling opposing ones. A deeper analysis of the themes raised is not infrequently swamped in her wealth of material. The exotic would, in the end, become utterly emblematic of the domestic in the form of the household canary, a rich man's craze in 1700, but ubiquitous by the end of the old regime and often synonymous with feminine chastity. Robbins too often carves a path through such tortuous issues, although, as her own sources show, female sexuality and political agency alike were increasingly managed through satirical reference and caricature involving animals. Here lies the heart of the difficulty of this rich book. Exotic animals are detachable from culture and, like mirrors, they merely reflect bigger analytical categories. Robbins's accounts of the diverse meanings of animals are thus asymmetrical: social or political reality is always a given, only animals are a construct.

Thus Robbins stops at characterizing Buffon's account of the wild state (appropriated by Rousseau for his famous discourse on inequality) as contradictory, without observing how the contradiction itself reveals that animals were discursive resources, serving now to contrast wildness with political sociability *à la* Montaigne, now to celebrate it as a resistance to degeneration into political tyranny *à la* Montesquieu. That animals might be instruments for intervening in culture – that they might be constituted by, and constitutive of, categories such as gender, social status or political agency – is not considered. Animals are 'metaphors' or 'symbols'; writing about them never changes or contributes to the many socio-political debates she touches on, such as slavery, luxury, exoticism, commerce or domesticity. As a result, certain sorts of historical issue are deemed worthy of extended discussion, such as the structure of the guild system, or the import trade in exotic animals, and these are fascinating and valuable. Others receive minimal attention; the account of animals as representative of different types of slavery is extended, but the account of contemporary writings on human slavery stops at a nod to the secondary literature. A broader trawl through the *Histoire naturelle*, taking in animals other than the exotic, or even humans, would surely have produced a richer account of the political purposes served by writing about animals as slaves, especially as Buffon was a renowned opponent of human slavery. One wishes Robbins had looked outside the boundaries of her project from time to time, and considered what happened to animals which ceased to be exotic, or which ceased to be alive. It seems clear that a royal need to immortalize the wondrous and exotic illuminates the origins of the Académie royale des sciences's programme for animal anatomy with its dissections of chameleons and beavers, yet neither that programme nor the issue of wonders in general is explored. Within the confines of her project it is not entirely clear why there is no sustained account of the wide range of issues raised by animal behaviour, including cognition, the origins of society and

language, the passions, and the status of man in relation to the animals. Animals are not so much, in her paraphrase of Lévi-Strauss, 'good for thinking with', as good for writing about. Ultimately, Louise Robbins's book leaves numerous questions about how the history of exotic animals might help to rewrite the history of eighteenth-century politics, gender, consumption or the sciences.

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PATRICIA FARA, *Newton: The Making of Genius*. London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2002. Pp. xvi + 347. ISBN 0-333-90735-3. £20.00 (hardback).
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This work is the most fully developed example, within the history of science, of what has recently been termed 'reputational studies' (David P. Miller, "'Puffing Jamie": the commercial and ideological importance of being a "philosopher" in the case of the reputation of James Watt (1736–1819)', *History of Science* (2000), 38, 1–24, 2). This field examines the 'basic insight' that 'characterizations of historical figures are clearly shaped by varying historical circumstances but also that reputations are often implicated in the justification and legitimation of action' (ibid.). This is not, therefore, a biography of Newton, but a cultural study of the development and uses of his reputation from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Fara has produced a fascinating and meticulously researched study of Newton as 'not just another dead white male scientist, but a major figurehead who symbolizes individual brilliance and scientific achievement' (p. xvi).

Fara traces the development of Newton's image from the reclusive scholar, who wrote more on alchemy and theology than on science, to the modern scientific icon. Newton's life has been constantly reinterpreted in ways that reflect the concerns of succeeding historical periods. The structure of the book is broadly chronological and describes clearly the journey taken by Newton's posthumous