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Louise E. Robbins, *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xiv + 349 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$48.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-6753-3.

Review by Rebecca L. Spang, University College London.

Readers of the Paris *petites affiches* in December 1804 might have been intrigued by any number of the thousands of announcements and advertisements packed into its tightly printed pages. Some, no doubt, were delighted to discover that *bonbons à l'Empereur* were available in the boutiques of numerous candy makers; others might have charted the daily temperatures recorded by Chevalier's precise new thermometer or been pleased to see that rose essence from Constantinople was again in stock at a certain shop. Still others might have lingered over the comparatively lengthy account of the two llamas sent by the prefect of Saint Domingue and now resident at Malmaison. The article reported that this docile "species of camel" was both easily domesticated and, itself, very domestic, forming monogamous loving couples that "lived together forever." Gentle and steady, these handsome beasts would willingly carry a heavy pack for twenty kilometers—and twenty kilometers only. Asked to go farther, a llama would simply lie down in the path. Prodded or whipped, it would "kill itself by hitting its head on nearby rocks."<sup>[1]</sup>

The moral economy's suicidal llama does not appear in Louise Robbins' entertaining and exhaustively researched *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, but it very well could have. Using an impressively broad range of sources, Robbins gives a comprehensive account of the many unlikely spaces (literal and figurative) occupied by exotic animals in eighteenth-century Paris. From travelers' descriptions and aristocrats' memoirs, Robbins culls stories of the princesse de Chimay's pet monkey and of the seal lovingly exhibited by a fairground entrepreneur; from police reports, she traces the workings of the Paris bird-sellers' guild; from the colonial archives (and those of the king's menagerie), she charts the routes of African, Asian, and American animals on their way to the French capital. She uses the lost-and-found columns of the *Affiches* to identify pet owners and reads Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (among other works) to describe changing attitudes to nature. In short, Robbins' book is the product of research that was thorough and thoughtful—it must also have been very time consuming.

Robbins' prose is clear and the structure of her book easy to follow. Her first chapter helpfully situates the numerous exotic animals of eighteenth-century Paris within broader frameworks of expanding global trade networks and French imperial aspirations. If, by the end of the old regime, many Parisians kept a parrot, parakeet, or monkey as a pet, that was at least in part because hundreds of ships every year traveled between French ports and those in Africa and the Caribbean. Various species of exotic animals, like other consumer goods, were simply much more readily available in 1790 than they had been in 1690.<sup>[2]</sup>

Her second and third chapters discuss two of the most common venues for seeing exotic animals: the permanent royal menagerie at Versailles and the annual Paris street fairs in the districts of Saint

Germain, Saint Laurent, Saint Ovide, and Saint Claire. Foreign aristocrats and visiting *savants* accounted for a considerable proportion of visitors to the menagerie, but ordinary Parisian working people still had numerous opportunities to view lions, tigers, bears, and other large, non-native animals. Sometimes displayed in small enclosures, and sometimes exhibited in bloody combat with specially trained dogs, these carnivores attracted sizeable audiences. Two enormous gray visitors surpassed them for sheer rarity however: the famous rhinoceros of 1749 and the popular elephant of 1771. Both creatures, Robbins demonstrates, stimulated considerable excitement, provoking fads for rhino- and elephant-shaped decorative objects and generating markets for natural-history texts and images.

In her fourth and fifth chapters, Robbins shifts from Parisians' interactions with the large exotic animals they observed to their attitudes toward the small ones they owned. If exotic birds and monkeys never became as common in households as dogs (or even cats), they nonetheless were increasingly familiar pets in late-eighteenth-century Paris.[3] A baker, a grocer, and a button maker—along with a notary, three goldsmiths, and many other merchants—feature in Robbins' inventory of individuals who placed notices about their lost parrots or parakeets in the period 1778-1789. Nor were psittacids the only non-European birds kept as pets—I was intrigued to learn that the *oiseleurs* did a booming business in cardinals and also sold less common but equally colorful species, such as blue jays and indigo buntings.

With chapters six and seven, Robbins moves from a self-described attempt to recover the traces of “real” animals and their “experiences” (p. 8, see also p. 33) to a consideration of how animals were represented in a range of texts. Wisely wary of our contemporary insistence on the distinction of fiction from non-fiction, Robbins notes that eighteenth-century authors of animal fables attempted to distance themselves from the immensely popular works of La Fontaine (of which more than one hundred editions appeared during this period!) by stressing their own stories' realistic depictions. No longer would a conversation between a crow and a fox set the fabulist's tone; Houdar de la Motte, for instance, wrote a fable that highlighted recent scientific discoveries about the regeneration of crayfish legs (p. 161). If fables could be used to teach lessons in zoology, the converse was also true: Robbins shows that the most popular works of natural history were those texts “that provided moral, social, and political lessons in a manner similar to fables” (p. 5). (The description of llamas as creatures that neither shirked hard work nor tolerated unreasonable demands certainly falls into this category.)

The first book in a new series, “Animals, History, Culture” (Harriet Ritvo, series editor), *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* has the strengths, and also the weaknesses, of many recent works of cultural history. As a collection of anecdotes and an index of information the book is very strong and easily appreciated. Though structured as an academic monograph, the book might have worked just as well in some other format, as a “cabinet of curiosities” for the delectation and surprise of twenty-first-century readers.[4] Yet while Robbins' scholarship is extensive and often quite imaginative, her interpretive framework does not really do her material justice. By dividing the book's first five chapters (on real animals) from the next two (on representations), her analysis falls short of exploiting her research fully. I am not intimating that the distinction between reality and representation has no value; knowing, for instance, that llamas reputedly bled out their brains when pushed to overwork, it would be important to know if any actually existing llama had ever done so. Assuming (as I, perhaps naively, do) that most llamas do not combine stubbornness with workplace morality and self-destructive tendencies, it would then be necessary to identify the function and source of this account. For instance, might insistence on the South American camelid's fundamental decency be part of the Black Legend of Spanish imperial *indecency*?[5]

As Robbins rightly notes, writing about exotic animals was often a way of commenting on European humans. If this point is less surprising after two decades of scholarship inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, it is nonetheless worth making. Still, it comes close to posing the question of whether Robbins, in focusing on exotic animals, actually has a historical problem of her own. Indeed, throughout the book, Robbins seems torn between two difficult-to-integrate imperatives: she both wants to insist

that exotic animals in eighteenth-century Paris constitute a worthy research topic in their own right *and* to demonstrate that this perhaps peripheral-seeming subject has a bearing on themes well established in French historiography. So, she reads post-1750 attitudes to the royal menagerie as indicative of the same “desacralization” previously revealed by criticisms of court intrigue and condemnation of monarchical splendor. Working peoples’ pets show that Cissie Fairchild’s discussion of “populuxe” goods can be further expanded; animal imagery in pamphlets from the period 1789-1794 demonstrates the by-now-familiar rhetorical construction of “aristocrats” and “sans-culottes.” Perceptive as all of these points are, their accumulation undermines the idea that there might be something distinct and new to learn by studying “exotic animals.”

In conceptualization, *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* is a sort of zoo: it brings all the exotic animals together in one place. Yet by the very validity of many of its claims (about desacralization, commercialization, Empire, etc.), the book works against this sort of topic-based confinement. For the book does not effectively suggest that there is an exciting new set of arguments to be made, if only we would pay attention to the non-human animals. Rather, it implies that historians of the eighteenth century need to keep Robbins’ sources in view, no matter what their topic. Two examples from recently published books may help to make this point: David A. Bell, in his study of eighteenth-century ideas of the nation and patriotism, might have drawn on Robbins’ sources that describe species said to love their homelands above all else (such that exporting them was impossible); Sophia Rosenfeld, analyzing eighteenth-century theories of language, might have further enlivened her discussion with the parrot-training manuals to which Robbins briefly alludes.[6] In either case, an independent and clearly articulated argument might have been enriched by acknowledging the animals to which eighteenth-century authors often referred. Since authors used examples drawn from wildlife to support so many different claims, however, it is difficult to shape an equally coherent argument around the creatures themselves. At various junctures, Robbins intimates that she wants to challenge disciplinary anthropocentrism and write the animals’ own histories. Yet how might she do such a thing? Social historians hope, rightly, that reading official documents “against the grain” allows them to identify repressed and marginal voices; using accounts of Atlantic crossings “to find out about monkeys’ experiences on ships” (p. 33) seems, even in this light, a fairly utopian venture.

Robbins also suggests that focusing on exotic animals will allow us to understand changing attitudes to nature in eighteenth-century France. Yet the comparative narrowness of her study (necessitated, I suspect, by her scattered sources) means we get a fragmented sense of those broad changes (assuming they took place). Exotic animals, after all, were only a tiny part of nature; given the ways they were imported and exhibited, pampered and trained, they may have been one bit of nature that eighteenth-century French people transformed into culture. In order to tell us about “changing attitudes to nature,” these monkeys, parrots, and zebras would have to be integrated with much other scholarship—Antoine de Baecque’s study of the body and Londa Schiebinger’s of nature’s gendering are only two examples.[7] Moreover, there is no reason to privilege animate nature (especially given the overwhelming place of agriculture in France during this period). The future scholar who re-writes Jean Ehrhard’s classic *L’Idée de la nature en France* (1963) will have to attend to plants as well.

My final cautionary note about the limitations of Robbins’ book as a study of “changing attitudes to nature” can be extended to many other recent works as well. That is, it is tempting with research topics such as this—topics where, as Robbins admits, part of the “pleasure” (p. 3) comes simply from finding more references in unexpected places—to concentrate on “attitudes” without worrying too much about whose they may have been or how widely they might have been shared. In researching voraciously across genre boundaries, Robbins has integrated hundreds of passing references into a highly readable book. Yet with the exception of the chapter on fable writing and natural history, we get little sense of how these varied texts operated as responses to, and re-workings of, each other. It would have made for a very different book, but Robbins might have chosen to concentrate on specific networks of authors, thereby demonstrating the place of exotic animals (and ideas about them) within a particular social

configuration, much as Emma Spary does in her study of the Jardin du Roi's transformation into the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle.[8] While this would not have helped her in evoking a monkey's shipboard experiences, it might have allowed Robbins to specify *whose* attitudes had changed and why.

## NOTES

[1] *Affiches, annonces, avis divers* [Paris], 1 nivôse XIII (22 December 1804), p. 7248. For the bonbons, see pp. 7324, 7370; for the thermometer, p. 7265; for the rose essence, p. 7420.

[2] Much work on the eighteenth-century "consumer revolution" focuses on Great Britain, but there is now a growing body of literature on the French context as well. See, among others: Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Annik Pardaillhé-Galabrun, *The Birth of Intimacy*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Colin Jones and Rebecca Spang, "Sans-culottes, sans café, sans tabac: Shifting Realms of Necessity and Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France," in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 37-62.

[3] The classic, if slightly impressionistic, account of cats as pets in eighteenth-century France is Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), chapter two; for a later period, see Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994).

[4] For a book that directly uses the form of natural-historical materials to pose bigger questions about history writing as a genre, see the very interesting study, Florike Egmond and Peter Mason, *The Mammoth and the Mouse: Microhistory and Morphology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[5] Accounts of the particularly brutal nature of Spain's American conquests were central to early modern French and, especially, English analyses of both European and imperial politics. Labeled the "Black Legend" by Julián Juderías in 1914, this theme played a vital part in numerous eighteenth-century debates, as demonstrated by Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[6] David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[7] Robbins refers to these books, but she does not demonstrate fully how her work might challenge or confound their arguments and conclusions. Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

[8] E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Régime to Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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