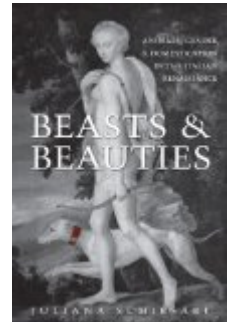


Juliana Schiesari. *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xii + 157 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-9922-8.



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With her study *Beasts and Beauties*, Juliana Schiesari makes a significant contribution to the ongoing critical dialogues on post-humanism; animal studies; and intersections of race, class, gender, and species identity. Schiesari's work picks up on the scholarship of Erica Fudge, who focuses on animals and humans in early modern English culture in several of her works. Schiesari shifts her emphasis, however, from England to Italy. In her examination of literature and painting, she uses feminist psychoanalysis as well as animal studies to analyze developing concepts of domestic space that serve as a meeting point for issues of both species and gender in their construction of otherness. In this respect Schiesari's book has a dual focus; it is concerned with the representation of animals and women. It seeks to foreground those hierarchies of being, with their roots in both Aristotelian materialism and Platonic idealism, that seem inevitably to have come into play in the project of articulating what it means to be human during this early chapter in many genealogies of modernity. The paradigm of domestic space under

discussion is the single-family domicile prioritized by classic humanism, a microcosm of patriarchal structures. Schiesari focuses specifically on Titian, Francesco Petrarca, Leon Battista Alberti, Giovan Battista della Porta, and Ludovico Ariosto, with chapters on the Diana myth and on Sigmund Freud's much-discussed reading of Leonardo da Vinci.

In the first chapter, we encounter lapdogs. Schiesari discusses the sleeping dog found in Titian's painting *Venus of Urbino* (1538), and interprets the dog's presence as a cornucopia of richly subversive possibilities that assert themselves against the grain of the patriarchal gaze. After a deftly constructed argument to support this interpretation, she conjectures that "perhaps that incredible fear of dog bites one encounters even in the most macho of men is nothing more than the terror of an overpowering feminine sexuality" (p. 16). This, of course, is not exactly a principal point of the chapter, which goes on to discuss canto 43 of the *Orlando furioso* as well, but it is sentences like these that make the book

delicious to read. Schiesari has a very keen eye for the thematic “nooks and crannies” in question, of both visual and written texts, and there is no point in *Beasts and Beauties* at which the agile and precise character of her analysis lags even a bit.

In her second chapter, amusingly titled “Portrait of the Poet as a Dog,” Schiesari joins the comparatively quite small company of writers who have studied Petrarca’s *Epistolae metricae* (composed between 1331 and 1361). Her treatment of Letter 3.5 is, therefore, valuable even outside the context of her study as a substantive critical reflection on one of the poet’s little-known and less-discussed poetic works. Schiesari conducts a remarkably nuanced and creative psychological reading of the poem, ultimately locating in it a “window onto the early humanist understanding of the animal world and, in particular, the privileged position of the domestic dog as a transitional figure right on the border between human culture and that other world later writers would describe as ‘nature’” (p. 32). After this engaging discussion, we reach what is in many ways the centerpiece of the book: her third chapter on Alberti and his infrequently studied treatise on horse training, the *De equo animante* (1441). Schiesari does a compelling job of showing how Alberti’s ideal orderly household, the model of domesticity that he outlines in his *Libri della Famiglia* (composed between 1433 and 1441), is extended to include the horse, which occupies a more elevated position in Alberti’s hierarchy than do women.

In the fourth chapter, Schiesari takes Della Porta’s 1610 treatise on physiognomy *Della fisiognomia dell’uomo* as her principal text, noting how, for Della Porta, “bodily symptoms are not simply the translation of a mental or emotional disposition; they are the trans-species signs of those dispositions” (p. 59). A distinction, indeed, that Della Porta’s book does us the favor of richly and rather curiously illustrating, filled as it is with rather amusing images of humans and animals

that bear a striking if occasionally forced resemblance to one another. The text supporting these images reveals, under the careful gaze of Schiesari’s analysis, the manner in which the blurring of the boundaries between species is ideologically driven, rooted in the patriarchal structures that occupy the central focus of her book.

The fifth chapter of *Beasts and Beauties* is a useful rereading of Freud’s notorious “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood,” carried out in an effort to reevaluate the decidedly vexed relationship between psychoanalysis and Renaissance studies. The final chapter broadens the focus of analysis to survey the recurrent appearance of the myth of Diana in Italian and French texts over quite a broad span of years. The chronological and cultural breadth of this last chapter is justified by the lapidary, conclusive turn it provides on Schiesari’s beginning theme: *la bella* and *la bestia* and their subversive alliance with one another through the Italian Renaissance and into the modern era. With regard to this chapter in particular, however, one might have asked for a slightly more thoroughly contextualized and well-researched treatment of the traditions of folk magic and religion to which Schiesari refers when she discusses Charles Leland’s 1899 *Vangelo delle streghe*.

Overall, *Beasts and Beauties* is a singularly diverse and broad-ranging treatment, especially for such a slim volume, of gender and the nonhuman both in and beyond the Italian Renaissance. The readings are thorough, exciting, various, and erudite. That variety may serve somewhat to diffuse the overall sense of focus in the book, but it is not my impression that this is a serious detriment—if anything, it lends an intriguing sense of structure to the argument that expands on, rather than enervates, the general force of the latter. This will no doubt be an important book for scholars of animal studies and gender in the early modern period, as well as those who have a particular interest in psychoanalytic theory and the Renaissance.

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