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Dogs and Servants

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Cocker spaniel (PSF) by Pearson Scott Foresman [Public domain],
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Dogs and Servants

Every time I watch *The Wizard of Oz* I worry about the fate of Toto. Oh, I know he's going back to Kansas with Dorothy, I've seen the film a hundred times. And I don't worry that Dorothy will be stuck in Oz, or the Scarecrow will go up in flames. So why do I have this intense emotional response to Toto every time he disappears from the screen, especially when he's snatched up by the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys? Anticipating your possible reaction to this pathetic confession, I summon Donna Haraway to my defense. Writing on the highly emotional scenes of parting between master and dog on the TV show *Cell Dog*, she threatens: "I dare you to be cynical, even if all the knives of critical discourse are in your hands" (*When Species Meet* 65). Yes, I admit it, I have a knee-jerk response to Toto, yet I'm not normally sentimental. So why? I think I feel so strongly because if Toto were lost, I can't follow him, I can't put myself in his place. Not that I can imagine myself a flaming scarecrow, but Scarecrow talks. He has consciousness, if not a brain, and thus he can be the center of consciousness. Toto cannot, which makes him more vulnerable, perhaps, more deserving of my empathic response, while at the same time foreign, so absolutely "other." To put it in the common parlance of the literature classroom, I identify so strongly with Toto precisely because I *can't* identify with him. I am woman, Toto is dog.

Just six years before Victor Fleming's classic film, Virginia Woolf published her popular novel—a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in the U.S.—*Flush*, based on the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel as narrated in the Brownings' letters. Reading those letters, Woolf responded so strongly to the figure of the dog that she "couldn't resist making him a life," she wrote (L5 162). Woolf too responded so intensely to the dog, I want to suggest, because she could not—indeed, would not—identify with him. Still, Quentin Bell's delightful and often-quoted remark that *Flush* is not so much a novel by someone who loved dogs as a novel by someone who wanted to *be* a dog, is apropos here. Just what kind of identification is this, this empathic response, to quote Jacques Derrida writing on his encounter with a cat, in the face of the "absolute alterity of the neighbor," or companion species (360)?

I am interested in the relationship between dogs and domestic servants in Woolf's novel. As Marianne DeKoven writes in her *PMLA* guest column on animal studies, many scholars use "nonhuman" animals because they are "motivated by the parallels between animals and subjugated human beings" (363), such as domestic servants.¹ In *Flush*, parallels abound. Both dog and servant are severed from family ties. Flush must part, wrenchingly, from Miss Mitford in being given as a gift to Miss Barrett.

A door shut. For one instant he paused, bewildered, unstrung. Then with a pounce as of clawed tigers, memory fell upon him. He felt himself alone—deserted. He rushed to the door. It was shut. He pawed, he listened. He heard footsteps descending. He knew them for the familiar footsteps of his mistress. [...] Miss Mitford was slowly, was heavily, was reluctantly descending the stairs. And as she went,

¹ My initial writing on *Flush* focused on the function this popular novel performs in Woolf's canon. I read *Flush* as the *excess* of a canonical theory of value that sets up distinctions between good and bad literature, high art and popular fiction, providing us instead with a noneconomical, or noncanonical, theory of value (Caughie 145).

[...] panic seized upon him. Door after door shut in his face as Miss Mitford went downstairs; they shut on freedom; on fields; on hares; on grass; on his adored, his venerated mistress [...] on all he had known of happiness and love and human goodness! There! The front door slammed. He was alone. She had deserted him. (*Flush* 21-22)

Likewise, Lily Wilson, Miss Barrett's maid, would have parted from her family in going into service, though no emotional scenes of parting are narrated, and she had to part from her fiancé in following Miss Barrett to Italy. Both dog and servant are bound to their mistress through affective ties and familial intimacy. So strong is that bond that Lily elopes to Italy with her mistress just as Flush, out of love for Miss Barrett, conquers his biting jealousy of Robert Browning. Both dog and servant, at least in London, are restricted to confined domestic spaces: for Flush, Miss Barrett's back bedroom, for Lily, Mr. Barrett's house on "the most august of London streets," Wimpole Street—a house first described in terms of the dress and rituals of its servants (16-17). Such confinement, moreover, marks their status as property. Donna Haraway remarks that the nineteenth-century bourgeois family invented the practice of middle-class pet keeping, and Woolf notes that had Lily not gone to Italy with Miss Barrett, she would have been "turned into the street before sunset" (170). In another Woolf novel, *The Years*, Crosby, the old family housekeeper, is "identified with [...] the furniture she spends her life polishing," as Alison Light says in *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*, and is described as "following Eleanor about the house like a dog" (71). Dogs and servants are faithful (185). Like dogs, Light remarks, "servants belonged to another species" (141). Cross-species identification is evident in Woolf's personal writings on domestic servants as well. In her diaries and letters, she describes her domestic Lily as having "charming, stupid, doglike eyes" (Light 133), and Lottie "works like a horse" (Light 142). At one point, in frustration with Lottie, she writes, "Considering their unimportance they must be compared to flies in the eye for the discomfort they can produce in spite of being so small" (D1 197).

As I pursued the many parallels between dog and servant, I kept coming back to a remark a student made about this novel in what my graduate students have dubbed my "class on class." Isn't it interesting, Erin said, sardonically, that Woolf can get into the mind of a dog but not the mind of a servant. Certainly, as I have written elsewhere, Woolf does seem to have trouble getting into the heads of domestics:

Visions of joy there must have been at the wash-tub, say with her children, [...] at the public-house, drinking; turning over scraps in her drawers. Some cleavage of the dark there must have been, some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued to twist her face grinning in the glass and make her, turning to her job again, mumble out the old music hall song. (TTL 131)

So writes Woolf of Mrs. McNab, the woman who cleans and tends the Ramsays' summer home in *To the Lighthouse*. Similarly, the biographer-narrator of *Flush* appends a note on the "extremely obscure" life of Lily Wilson. "Since she spoke almost as seldom as Flush," writes the narrator, "the outlines of her character are little known" (169). Echoing the earlier novel, the passage continues:

Then Mrs. Browning had died—there can have been no lack of thoughts in Wilson's old head as she sat at the window [...]. But nothing can be more vain than to pretend that we can guess what they were, for she was typical of the great army of her kind—the inscrutable, the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history. (174)

At first it seems contemptible—or at the very least, remarkable—that Woolf can get into a dog's head but not a servant's, as if she were indifferent to the latter's visions of joy or daily sufferings. For all Woolf's empathy with outsiders and her pleas for writers to give us the "lives of the obscure" so that we might bridge the class divide, and despite her lament in *Three Guineas* that the Dictionary of National

Biography contains no lives of maids, for, as she writes in *Flush*, “biography had not then cast its searchlight so low” (170), Woolf, it seems, is far better able—not to mention more willing—to write from the perspective of a cocker spaniel than of a serving woman.² Why? Rather than exposing her insensitivity to servants (for which there is ample evidence in her diaries and letters), I want to explore the conventions of proximity and identification in Woolf’s writing about dogs and domestics. What different modality of identification is operating in the representation of dogs and servants in *Flush*? Or in my response to Toto?

If, as animal studies scholars argue, in writing about animals we are to resist making the dog a person, thereby making the animal a figure for the self, why would it be possible, or what could it mean, to make the person a dog? In his chapter on Gertrude Stein in *Cruising Modernism*, Michael Trask writes of Stein’s use of dogs and their importance to the “making” of persons. Dogs, like servants, play a supporting role, subordinate yet essential, especially for anchoring “mobile persons” (75) in a rapidly fragmenting society. The increasing demand for domestic servants in response to an ever-expanding middle class, writes Light, came at the very time live-in service was on the wane (179-80). Employer and servant alike now wore the same clothing styles, attended the same cinemas, voted for the same political party, and listened to that great leveling device, the BBC. Those who are “in danger of sliding out of place,” Trask writes, are “in dire need of the categorical fastness that dogs [and, I would add, servants] [...] exemplify” (75). Thus the domestic dog, “at once obedient and misbehaving, faithful and straying” (76), he says, becomes a figure for the contradiction of modernity: an imperative to obedience within a social system that was fragmenting. Dogs as “modern subjects,” writes Haraway, require “self-rewarding discipline from legitimate authority” (64). Similarly, Light says that dogs “embodied the Victorian past with their ready capacity to obey authority and respond to discipline” (50), much like servants. “In her clean white apron and cap,” Light remarks, “the servant kept all kinds of disorder at bay” (82).³

Woolf’s novel *Flush* exemplifies as well modernity’s desire to control behavior, exposing the “categorical fastness” (Trask 75) that a fragmenting society desires. Comparing canine and human aristocracies, Woolf’s narrator finds the canine much superior because the Spaniel Club establishes definitive signs of good breeding based on ears, eyes, noses, and coats. Curled ears, a light nose, or a topknot are, the narrator tells us, “nothing less than fatal” (6). Distinctions in human society are far less definitive: a coat of arms may be forged, an income may be earned, and coats can be bought off the rack. Throughout the novel Woolf has Flush learn to make distinctions, to draw boundaries. In the city, he must be led on a chain; in the countryside, he may run free. In London he must curb his sexual instincts, in Florence he can indulge them. In London he drinks from a purple jar, in Florence he eats off the street. In Wimpole street all dogs are purebreds, in Pisa they are mongrels. Such distinctions in the novel are explicitly *class* distinctions. Indeed, it is Flush’s dognapping that leads Barrett to the London slums to see firsthand the lives of others bordering on her own genteel neighborhood. For Woolf, dogs, like servants, “exist on the margins,” in the proximate social spaces both Stein (Trask 79) and Woolf seek to narrate. In narrating these spaces, Woolf discovers that dogs play an important role in negotiating the problem of identification in modernist writing. By making the person a dog, establishing an identification between dogs and servants, Woolf discovers a way out of the double bind of the modernist writer who would write across class lines without

² So too Barrett Browning could write about Flush but not about Lily, as the narrator remarks in a passing phrase that “since Miss Barrett never wrote a poem about her,” we don’t know Lily (169).

³ Writing on Lily in her long note, the narrator wonders how she came to be Barrett Browning’s maid, whether perhaps she had become known to the Barretts’ cook “by the decency of her demeanor and the cleanliness of her apron” (168).

making her character—whether Lily Wilson or Mrs. McNab—a representative figure of the working classes.

Trask asserts that behaviorists and evolutionary biologists of Woolf’s day were blurring the lines between animal and human behavior to establish a “natural” model of subjectivity. But Woolf, significantly, keeps animal and human distinct. Woolf gently satirizes precisely this behaviorist psychology in the scene after the emotional parting, where Flush and Miss Barrett gaze into each other’s eyes for the first time:

Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! [...] Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? (23)

This is the kind of sympathetic identification Woolf deflates. Instead, Woolf emphasizes the world of difference between canine and human: “But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog” (23).

Woolf keeps the canine and the human distinct for good reason. For the social spaces Woolf seeks to narrate are at once as proximate and as remote as the canine’s world of smells: “Where Mrs. Browning saw, [Flush] smelt; where she wrote, he snuffed”:

Here, then, the biographer must perforce come to a pause. Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see [...] there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. (129-30)

I want to suggest that *Flush* models precisely the kind of writing needed to enter into those social spaces, the manifold and shifting social spaces between the classes, and to respond to “the absolute alterity of the neighbor” (Derrida 380). Imagining life from a dog’s perspective provides a view—or a sniff—from the margin without having to identify with that position—an identification that is always discomfiting if ever really possible. It provides what I have termed an ethics without identification.

In *When Species Meet*, Haraway provides a clue to the alternative reading of dogs and servants I’m suggesting here: “we might nurture responsibility with and for animals better by plumbing the category of labor more than the category of rights” (73). The category of rights is based on an assumption of similarity between positions that are not only *not* symmetrical, but that necessarily entail the use of one another’s bodies (79)—as fleas use Flush’s body, as the Brownings use Lily’s. So when we read “visions of joy there must have been,” we needn’t see this as a refusal to *respond* but as a refusal to *identify*. The assumption that in refusing to identify with servants, Woolf fails to give them their due is based on a notion of rights structured by a larger economy of the law. And here I turn to one final text that explores the boundary between animal and human: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Writing about the violence done in trying to bring the so-called Third World Other into the circuit of the law, as Victor Frankenstein does with his monster, or Charlotte Brontë does with Bertha, the madwoman in the attic, Spivak writes that their failure to do so “reminds us that the absolutely Other cannot be selfed” (850). Not writing from the Other’s point of view, not making the Other speak, can itself be a responsible act, a *response* to the “absolute alterity of the neighbor.” In fact, a writer in Woolf’s position, a member of the

**Here Ends the Special Issue on
Virginia Woolf and Animals**

Truly Miscellaneous

**Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde Park Gate:
Echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson in *Mrs. Dalloway***

A writer, plumbing the cavernous depths of the human psyche, explores in an experimental “phenomenon of style” (Nabokov 184) the “competing tugs of the conscious and the unconscious, [...] the life-denying Thanatos principle and the life-enhancing Eros” (McLynn 262) and invents two separate characters who share, enigmatically, one self. The text described here is Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but the portrayal lends itself just as easily to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. While Woolf and Stevenson are far too dissimilar to share much common space in modern literary studies, striking echoes nonetheless resonate between these London novels, particularly in their treatment of literary doubles and their parallel scenes of transformation and suicide.

Virginia Woolf’s early journals reveal her fascination with Stevenson. A 1905 diary entry provides a glimpse of her running “Out to Hatchards to buy Stevenson and Pater,” seeking the essays “not to copy, I hope, but to see how the trick’s done” (*Passionate Apprentice* 251). Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, an “eminent Victorian” in his own right, may have helped inspire his daughter’s early interests. Sir Leslie had known Stevenson long before Virginia arrived; born a generation before Woolf in 1850, Stevenson was a literary acquaintance of Stephen. Biographer Frank McLynn gives Stephen, as editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, a special position in Stevenson’s career as advisor and mentor, writing that “Before the 1880s, Leslie Stephen [...] was the only man in Britain of editorial status to be certain of Louis’s genius” (101). Stephen encouraged and published some of Stevenson’s early works, including a significant essay on Victor Hugo that Stevenson later felt “marked [...] the beginning of his command of style” (Graham Balfour qtd. in McLynn 102) and one of his first notable short stories, “Will o’ the Mill,” in 1879 (McLynn 139).¹ Woolf echoes her father’s sentiments by glimpsing in Stevenson seeds of literary genius worth cultivating.²

Woolf’s keen affinity for Stevenson did not last, however. Though she once admired Stevenson’s essays, she later offers only lukewarm praise of his fiction. In “Phases of Fiction” (1929), Woolf favors Stevenson’s works over those of Sir Walter Scott in her discussion of the Romantics, writing that “any page of *The Master of Ballantrae* [...] still stands wear and tear; but the fabric of *The Bride of Lammermoor* is full of holes and patches” (67). She admires Stevenson’s knack for storytelling and his artful treatment of romance, admitting that passages of his are “lovely and brilliant” (68) taken alone, though she feels unsatisfied by

¹ We also have Sir Leslie Stephen to thank, indirectly, for one of the most famous literary characters of all time, since he introduced Stevenson to writer William Ernest Henley, whose amputated leg made him the inspiration for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

² Stevenson’s personal history, as the son and grandson of lighthouse designers, might have held additional interest for Woolf. In fact, Robert Louis Stevenson’s only writing for the Scottish Society of Arts was “a paper on a proposed new device to make lighthouse lights flash” (Harman 3). The Stevenson family designed several lighthouses on the Isle of Skye, where Woolf’s 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* takes place. Indeed, when I read of the stocking Mrs. Ramsay is knitting for the Lighthouse keeper’s “little boy, who was threatened with a tuberculous hip” (TTL 5), I think of Stevenson, who was a sickly little boy thought to suffer from tuberculosis.

middle-class who employed domestics, cannot turn the servant-other into a self without violence. To quote Spivak again, “the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (846)—or the middle-class self. Domestic service, like imperialism, is a “territorial and subject-constituting project,” entailing a “violent deconstruction” of oppositions between human and animal, speech and silence, freedom and bondage (843). Writing on Derrida’s essay, “The Animal that I Therefore Am,” Haraway commends him for rejecting the “facile and basically, if generally well-intentioned, move of claiming to see from the point of view of the other” (21). In forbidding himself to assign meaning onto the cat, by insisting the cat is a real cat and not a metaphor, Derrida asks, “must I conversely give in to the other violence or stupidity, that which would consist in suspending one’s compassion and in depriving the animal of every power of manifestation [...]?” (387). Clearly not, as Woolf shows in that highly charged scene of parting described above.

It’s not, I would argue, that Woolf’s writing about servants does no political or ethical work insofar as she remains distant from the servant’s interior; it’s that it doesn’t do the work we may want, the work that sustains our sense of self, that makes us feel good because we can sympathize with the other. An ethics without identification *does* work, though, as a way of negotiating proximate social spaces, and the alternative between, to quote Derrida, “a projection that appropriates and an interruption that excludes” (388). If, as Haraway argues, the category of labor provides a model for writing about dogs without giving them an identity (that is, dogs are not analogous to wage laborers), then animal studies might provide a model for writing about domestic servants that requires a response to, but not an identification with, that subject position. When Alison Light says that dogs appear in Woolf’s writings “as a stand-in for that other dogsbody, the servant” (50), we need not take that as a commentary on Woolf’s scandalous view of servants, but as a clue as to how to read her modernist project of writing across class lines.

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