

# When Drama Went to the Dogs; or, Staging Otherness in the Animal Melodrama

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IN 1803, ENGLISH AUDIENCES RAVED OVER THE DEBUT OF AN ACTOR named Carlo. His performances drew nightly crowds to London's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and rescued its manager from financial ruin. But while playgoers cheered Carlo's performance in *The Caravan* (1803; Reynolds), the conservative press jeered. Carlo, they insisted, was obviously unfit for the stage: he was not an actor at all but a Newfoundland dog.

When critics argued that animals had no place in a respectable theater, they were using the novelty of *The Caravan* to rehearse a common objection to contemporary drama. The introduction of a dog onstage was only the latest example of a trend toward hybrid theatrical forms—works of melodrama, burlesque, and extravaganza that flouted convention by mixing prose, poetry, music, dance, and tableaux. The very visible difference between Carlo and other actors made him a convenient symbol of this intermixing, and purists rushed to denounce interspecies entertainments as the epitome of dramatic decadence. Melodrama and other hybrid forms have enjoyed a radical reevaluation in the intervening years, but in one sense the purists' verdict proved conclusive: time has ushered Carlo from the footlights of Drury Lane to the footnotes of theater history.

Although *The Caravan* and its star are now forgotten, the controversy they spawned continues to shape and constrain emerging theories of animal performance. In keeping with the broader non-human turn in the humanities, theorists and performance artists have begun to embrace what Una Chaudhuri calls "the productive difficulty" that animals pose to drama, "this most anthropocentric of the arts" ("Of All" 520, 522).<sup>1</sup> By their own accounts, scholars of animal performance are motivated by drama's long history of animal exclusion; their work addresses the fact that "animals are not

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part of the tradition, even if they may sometimes have performed nearby” (Ridout 97).<sup>2</sup> Yet *The Caravan* was merely the first in a long line of productions that mixed human beings and other animals onstage. These quadruped dramas flourished well into the Victorian era. Only later, under the influence of theater histories that internalized the contempt of Carlo’s earliest critics, did these works effectively vanish from the cultural record.

Carlo’s debut thus set into motion a complex dialectic in which animals’ inclusion onstage was met with their excision from dramatic notice, as the increasingly common presence of animal actors was opposed and obscured by critics who redoubled their insistence on the untheatricality of animals. The success of this critical stance is legible in the odd position of those animal studies scholars today who passionately advocate for the inclusion of animals in the theater, more than two centuries after quadrupeds took the English stage by storm. Careful examination of the neglected dramas in which animals appeared suggests, moreover, that the current call to admit them into the theater is only the latest recurrence of a cyclical desire to readmit them—a desire generated not by an actual historical absence but, rather, by an established convention of treating animal actors as outsiders to the stage in order to use them as living symbols of the reality that lies outside theatrical representation.

Indeed, at the height of their influence, quadruped dramas explicitly thematized the otherness of animal performers, turning animals’ outsider status into a crucial and innovative element of their dramaturgy. Following Carlo’s stardom, interspecies theatricals exploded in popularity, converging with melodrama to produce conventions and character types developed specifically for animal performers. These animal melodramas cast dogs, elephants, and other creatures as the only characters capable of detecting and serving the otherworldly forces that impel the

story from ethical chaos toward moral order. Initially, these superhuman animal heroes seem ludicrous, but they actually constitute a canny response to the most common objection to animal theatricals. From the Victorian era forward, critics have argued that animals distract from dramatic productions because they cannot understand theatrical fictions—their presence only draws attention to the real world outside the theater, impeding the audience’s absorption in the play. The appeal of animal melodrama, however, draws on this distracting otherness: the live animal’s disruption of the dramatic illusion makes the animal a compelling stand-in for the providential powers that interrupt and intercede in the human plot to guarantee a just conclusion. Animal melodramas thus used live animals to interrupt their stagecraft in strategic ways. The melodramas reveled in alienation effects that align them more closely with the modernist and postmodernist performance practices that succeeded the nineteenth-century theater than with the animal spectacles that surrounded it. In the process, animal melodramas inaugurated a tradition of ushering animals onstage to stand for everything the theater cannot include.

### Animal Actors and the Mongrelization of Drama

For centuries, the critical fortunes of quadruped drama and the critical fortunes of Carlo have been intertwined. The dog’s appearance on the Regency-era stage turned performing animals into a flashpoint for the controversy over the distinction between high and low theater. Within a decade of his debut, Carlo’s unexalted function in theater history was secure. As one writer explained in 1813:

In the drama, our love of childish and unmeaning spectacle, has been too clearly evinced in the triumph of equestrian and elephantine exhibitions over truth and nature. That people

cannot surely pretend to the epithet of thinking, who . . . desert the representation of the legitimate drama to witness the dying agonies of expiring quadrupeds. When Drury-Lane was saved from bankruptcy by the intervention of a dog, the circumstance was lamented as indicating, on the part of the English people, the depravation of that correct and manly taste for which they had been distinguished even among their enemies. (P. P. 417–18)

In this early retrospective, Carlo figures as the leader of a pack of animal entertainments whose success signals the downfall of “the legitimate drama.” This evaluation, rooted in cultural anxieties that faded over a century ago, helped create a stereotype of quadruped drama that long outlived the debate over dramatic purity that spawned it. The image of quadruped drama as an undignified oddity—an amalgam of inferior theater and absurd animal tricks—consigned the form to the sideshows of theater history, masking both its innovative aesthetics and its influence as an enduringly popular form.

Condescension toward quadruped drama originates with responses to *The Caravan*, but the play itself hardly accounts for the backlash it received. Like many productions of the period, *The Caravan* features a stainless hero, the Marquis de Calatrava, suffering wrongful imprisonment at the hands of Don Gomez, the villain. Gomez lusts after Calatrava’s wife, whose beauty is matched only by her virtue. Over the course of the play, Calatrava escapes and defeats Gomez with the help of the clownish Blabbo and his dog, Carlo. Although Carlo was responsible for most of the play’s success, his time onstage was relatively brief and unscripted until the climax, when he plunged from a cliff into a pool of water and swam Calatrava’s drowning son to safety.

Small as it was, the role placed Carlo at the forefront of debates about the fate of the English stage. At the time, Drury Lane and its rival, Covent Garden, shared the distinction of being patent theaters, venues licensed to pro-

duce spoken drama during the regular theater season. Although other venues advertised theatrical entertainments, only patent theaters could stage legitimate works—that is, works by Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and other authors considered central to the English tradition. Defenders of this tradition saw the license as a badge of honor. In reality, however, Covent Garden and Drury Lane had notorious difficulty covering their expenses, because the traditional programming that won critical approval failed to generate revenue. Ironically, the licensing restrictions also inspired an exciting world of illegitimate theater, as unlicensed venues dodged restrictions by mixing spoken drama with music, dancing, poetry, and tableau. This illegitimate theater thrived, cannibalizing the audiences of the patent houses. By the early nineteenth century, both Drury Lane and Covent Garden had caved in to financial necessity: they regularly produced illegitimate works to offset other costs, much to the chagrin of critics.<sup>3</sup>

In a theatrical culture already rife with hybridity, then, Carlo seemed to annihilate one of the last distinctions left—the separation of human drama from animal entertainments. English audiences had long enjoyed animal exhibitions. Blood sports such as rat killing and bullbaiting traced their heritage back to the Middle Ages, and more humane performances by dancing dogs, sapient pigs, singing mice, and trained bullfinches provided popular street entertainment through the Victorian era.<sup>4</sup> Exhibitions of horsemanship and exotic creatures found a relatively new venue in the circus, which emerged in its modern form in Britain and France in the 1760s.<sup>5</sup> Yet an emphasis on spectacular display and a nebulous relation to licensing laws kept these performance modes distinct from theater through the end of the eighteenth century. Live animals had occasionally appeared onstage before, but critics insisted that Carlo was different: he was the main attraction of a play at one of London’s patent houses.<sup>6</sup> As

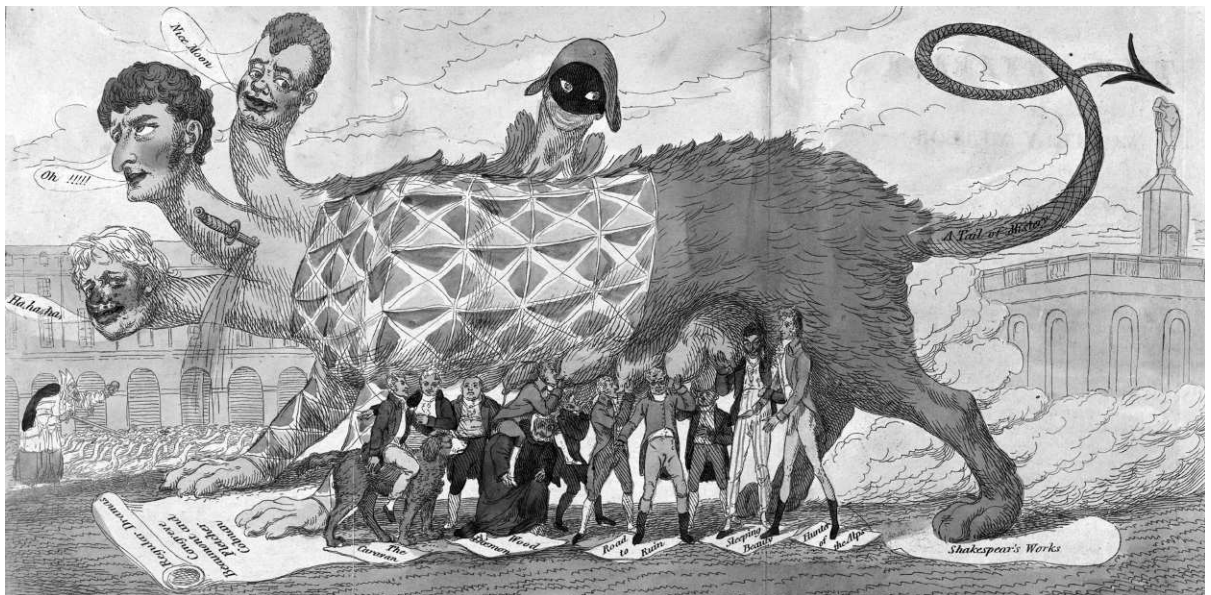
such, he seemed to push the mixture of high and low culture to its breaking point. No longer content to combine theatrical forms that ought to remain separate, playwrights and managers now disturbed the very order of nature, mingling human beings with beasts in a desperate bid for novelty.

A well-known cartoon from the *Satirist* captures Carlo's unique, enduring centrality to this narrative of dramatic hybridity and cultural decline. Commonly called "The Monster Melodrama" (1807), the image figures melodrama as a gigantic, destructive chimaera resembling Cerberus, the dog stationed at the gates of hell (fig. 1). The misshapen brute wears the checkered shirt of a harlequin—a gibe at the patchwork productions of illegitimate drama, which often incorporated harlequinades. The heads of this hellhound, however, are human, indicating that interspecies mixing was integral to drama's infernal descent. The monster's faces include the manager of Covent Garden, the manager of Drury Lane, and the clown Joseph Grimaldi. Pinned beneath the animal's front paws lies a scroll marked "Regular dramas." Her back feet trample "Shakespeare's Works," while her furred body shelters a new generation of il-

legitimate playwrights, many of whom suckle at her teats. Carlo and *The Caravan* are not only behind this conception of melodrama as a bitch-goddess, they are beneath it: there, huddled under her bulk, stands Carlo, with the play's author, Frederic Reynolds, on his back and *The Caravan* between his feet.

Critics were right to fear Carlo as the sire of a new brood of illegitimate offspring. His success unleashed a menagerie of animals onto the English stage, as live dogs, horses, elephants, camels, stags, zebras, and other creatures became increasingly common at patent and minor theaters alike.<sup>7</sup> Most of these animals served as mere set pieces. Camels added to the dazzling procession of a powerful sultan, for example, and horses enabled climactic equestrian battles in shows known as hippodramas. Commercial and artistic traffic among London stages, traveling circuses, and animal trainers soon blurred any simple, definitive line between traditional theaters and sites of animal performance.<sup>8</sup> The persistent popularity of these works ensured a steady stream of condescension from a conservative press that grew weary of justifying its contempt. By midcentury, reviewers could treat the absurdity of onstage animals

FIG. 1  
Hand-colored etching by Sylvester Scrutiny (Samuel de Wilde), originally published in 1807 in *The Satirist*; or *Monthly Meteor*. British Cartoon Prints collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, PC1-10796.





as self-evident to the point of tautology: an 1840 catalog of “things bad in general” notes that, among other dramatic errors, “it is bad to introduce quadrupeds on the stage where none but bipeds ought to ‘strut and fret their hour’” (“Varieties” 51).

Laughter and derision failed to halt the caravan of quadrupeds, however. While critics lampooned a static image of incongruous human-animal performances, playwrights were outbidding one another to develop more complex parts for animals, making them increasingly central to their stagecraft. Guilbert de Pixérécourt’s runaway success, *The Forest of Bondy; or, The Dog of Montargis* (1814), exemplifies the growing sophistication of animal characters in the decade following Carlo’s debut. Carlo’s part involved only one scripted action, whereas Dragon, the titular hero of Pixérécourt’s work, proves integral to the drama both onstage and off. William Barrymore’s hastily produced English translation has the canine actor enter with a flurry of crowd-pleasing tricks: “*The Dog, DRAGON, comes on, + scratches at the door of the Inn—Finding it is not open’d, he tries to get in by putting his paws upon the Latch—At last, he jumps up and seizes the handle of the Bell, and keeps pulling and ringing, till DAME GERTRUDE opens the Window*” (2).<sup>9</sup> Dragon’s actions offstage are even more extraordinary. Gertrude and other characters breathlessly recount how Dragon dug up the body of his murdered master, Captain Aubri; located Aubri’s missing pocketbook; overturned a false conviction; and hounded the true killers to bring them to justice.

Later quadruped dramas exhibit a similar expansion of animal roles. In *Magdalena and Her Faithful Dog* (1817), the dog Neptune proves an invaluable courier, delivering letters between otherwise isolated characters. He also saves his mistress’s life by carrying scraps of her clothing to rescuers (Roberts 61). In the Victorian production *The Pride of Kildare; or, The Dog of the Quarry* (1843),

the canine character repeatedly intervenes in human struggles, “leap[ing] thro’ window[s]” (78), “spring[ing]” (71) at enemies, and taking several bullets, a sacrifice that enables him to demonstrate his fidelity—and his impressive simulation of limping—by “following, lame” behind his mistress (80).

Although Carlo pioneered these parts and Dragon helped expand them, they were not confined to dogs. Because dogs were relatively easy to procure, train, and replace, they predominated onstage, but any teachable animal served. Horses sometimes acted alongside human beings, for example, instead of serving only as vehicles beneath them (Saxon 82). Exchanges between circuses and theaters produced even more exotic stars. The pantomime *Harlequin and Padmanaba* (1811) at Covent Garden introduced the public to the elephant Chune; he became a famous actor and, later, a favorite at the Exeter ‘Change menagerie until his gruesome execution in 1826 (Altick 310–17; Ritvo 225–28). Subsequent roles for elephants show advances in complexity that parallel the transformation of canine characters. By the time Philip Astley’s circus staged the melodrama *The Elephants of the Pagoda* with two live elephants, Gheda and Kelly, in 1846, the animals played a role in almost every scene. Among other feats of strength and bravado, they plucked fruit to offer the true prince, pulled down branches to shelter him from a storm, disarmed prison guards, and snatched treasure from a fleeing villain.

Strictly speaking, of course, these roles consisted of assorted animal routines carefully grafted onto human theatricals. Trainers taught animals to perform a set of standard maneuvers on cue, then worked those cues into the dramatic action. The repertoire for a canine actor might include limping, carrying baskets, and “taking the seize,” the industry term for latching onto the villain’s throat.<sup>10</sup> As they incorporated these behaviors into their plays, nineteenth-century dramatists effectively inaugurated what Michael Peterson has

described as “the entirety of animal-acting theory: develop a rote behavior for the animal ‘actor,’ then frame or ‘matrix’ that behavior so that it coincides with dramatic narrative” (36).

Because this process involves splicing together dramatic narrative and inflexible animal routines, critics who acknowledge the existence of quadruped drama overwhelmingly denigrate it as a form of empty showmanship distinct from proper theater. Indeed, many twentieth-century critics echo their predecessors in claiming that the rise of animals onstage showed theater managers’ willingness “to pander to a depraved taste,” as one puts it (Cross 93). Even A. H. Saxon, who literally wrote the book on hippodrama, maintains a sharp distinction between equestrian entertainments as historical phenomena and as works of cultural significance. “For obvious reasons the literary merits of the plays in question are rarely discussed,” he explains in *Enter Foot and Horse* (1968): “[T]his unique, hybrid form of drama may quite properly be regarded as a prodigy or freak” (28–29). If critics connect these oddities to theater history at all, they condemn the relation as disgraceful. Thus Michael Dobson recently argued that the stock performances of animals in quadruped drama are symptomatic of—and partially responsible for—“the mechanized, post-Enlightenment theatre’s reduction of any dramatic plot to a function of a dog’s repertoire of tricks” (123).

The animal routines of quadruped drama do show similarities to the stylized dramaturgy of other modern forms, especially melodrama. Yet the fact that there are clear convergences between quadruped drama and other theatrical modes does not spell cultural decline. As Martin Meisel observes of melodrama more broadly, “The mechanical and formulaic aspects [of such works] are immediately clear; but to stop there would be to miss what was most interesting and vital [in the art]” (10). Indeed, the interest and vitality of quadruped drama

emerge from its evolving relation to the formulaic conventions of melodrama. The correspondences between the routinized animal tricks of the one and the routinized acting of the other facilitated the integration of non-human animals into melodramatic works, spawning a new subgenre—the animal melodrama—that enabled playwrights to put the providential message of melodrama center stage by giving it living, breathing form.

### Providential Otherness in Animal Melodrama

In animal melodrama, every dog is a good dog. The same holds for elephants and horses, as the substantive roles allotted to these animals follow a predictable pattern that involves hunting down villains and righting wrongs.<sup>11</sup> When animal melodramas cast nonhuman characters as pillars of their moral architecture, they undertake a significant revision of melodrama’s typical representation of “overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue” (Brooks 11–12). They capitalize on the mysterious otherness of animals to suggest that animals have inexplicable but very real knowledge of the cosmic moral order that melodrama struggles to express. This knowledge makes nonhuman characters integral to the form, which figures them as quasi-angelic agents, intermediaries who enforce moral law in the sublunary world of human beings. Animals thus become bodily representatives of the providential force that is central to melodramatic plotting but difficult or impossible to realize onstage.

Melodrama is notorious for its simplified depiction of good and evil characters embroiled in conflicts that lead to improbable but morally satisfying conclusions. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), his foundational account of the moral workings of melodrama, Peter Brooks reads these generic features as responses to a particularly modern social crisis. The collapse of royal and

ecclesiastical powers during the French Revolution demonstrated how modernity undercut traditional sources of moral authority, throwing the existence of morality itself into question. “Melodrama,” Brooks argues, “starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (20).

Melodramas work to articulate this crisis and, finally, to resolve it. They open with characters whose virtue is apparent to the audience—reassuring examples of moral clarity in an uncertain world. In the typical melodramatic plot, however, some confusion causes the heroes’ goodness to go unrecognized, as villains manipulate social institutions to further their own self-interest. The heroes rout the villains only at the end of the production, when the dramatic tension explodes in a cathartic finale that sees virtue rewarded and villainy punished. Although melodramas frequently depict a confused moral landscape, then, their plots “[demonstrate] over and over again that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible” (Brooks 20). The providential structure of melodrama strives to manifest what Brooks calls “the ‘moral occult’: the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which [melodramatic authors] believe to be operative there” (20–21).

In the years following Brooks’s analysis, a number of critics have complicated his highly structural, schematic, and Continental image of melodrama. Meisel and Jane Moody have both traced the material and cultural conditions of melodrama as it arrived and developed in Britain; Elaine Hadley and others have contested the equation of melodrama with the morally conservative, antirevolutionary politics highlighted in Brooks’s account. Nevertheless, Brooks’s work remains the clearest description of melodrama as an attempt to confront intractable moral problems through the repetitive deployment of

highly recognizable conventions. It is here, in the interchange between artistic and moral meaning, that animal characters make their unique contribution to melodrama and, with it, to the history of modern performance.

Animal characters constitute one of melodrama’s many devices for depicting injustice as a temporary digression from an enduring moral order. The association of animal characters with goodness is an unspoken rule of melodrama—indeed, the loyalty of animals sometimes offers clues about the intentions of characters whose moral standing appears uncertain. Thus, in *Dhu Blanche; or, The Highwayman and His Dog* (1845), the dog, Dhu Blanche, enters as an accomplice of the robber Dick Atkins, who trained him to steal pocketbooks off unsuspecting victims. It soon becomes clear, however, that Atkins is not the shady character he seems. Rather, in the words of Kate, the good-hearted woman who reforms him, Atkins “has been thoughtless, wild, but the victim of villains & [he] will prove himself hereafter worthy of your good opinion” (389b). Long before Kate enters the action, however, the dog’s loyalty indexes Dick’s hidden virtue. Much of the plot revolves around Dhu Blanche’s efforts to absolve Atkins and reunite him with Kate, as the animal appears to recognize that her good influence can bring out Dick’s inner gentleman: “The name of Kate is a magic word, both to him & his master” (380b).

Conversely, when dubious characters really are as roguish as they seem, their animal companions abandon them. So, in the opening of T. G. Blake’s supernatural melodrama *The Mirror of Fate; or, The Gnome of the Gold Mine and the Demon and His Dog* (1844), the witty atheist Captain Schwarzwald banters with the drunken student Leopold Von Desterreich, and both seem irredeemable. It later develops that Schwarzwald is corrupting the good but misguided Leopold—Schwarzwald has, in fact, sold his soul and become the demon Waldenburg, a recruiter for the devil.

As the plot thickens, the dog who starts as Schwarzwald's pet (named, once again, Carlo) switches sides to help Leopold. This shift goes unexplained in the play because, by the conventions of animal melodrama, it needs no explanation: the dog's changing allegiance confirms that, of the two carousers, only Schwarzwald is beyond all hope of heaven.

Because Carlo, Dhu Blanche, and other onstage animals serve as speechless indicators of persecuted goodness, it is tempting to read them as examples of melodrama's broader exploration of muteness. Thus Brooks—who adopts *The Dog of Montargis* as a central text—characterizes onstage animals as minor variants of the melodramatic mute: “This dramaturgy of the non-human already suggests the importance of unspoken, non-verbal indicators of plot and meaning in the play. . . . But more important than the dog is the mute person” (57). When he aligns animals with the powerless mutes so prevalent in melodrama, Brooks upholds a long-standing Western tradition, described and critiqued by Jacques Derrida, in which the animal is both categorized and dismissed as an incapacitated human being, one “deprived of language” (Derrida 32). Yet most of these productions are remarkable for their defiance of this tradition.

Animal melodramas emphasize not animal muteness but the ability of animals to overcome the various “mutilations and deprivations” plaguing their human companions (Brooks 56), muteness included. When the virtuous, often mute figures of melodrama have been utterly subdued, animal characters come to their rescue, working to liberate and vindicate them against all odds. In the “dialectic of pathos and action” that Linda Williams identifies as characteristic of melodramatic plots, animals spring into action at precisely those moments when human “victim-heroes” have lost all hope (69, 66). The animals thereby provide a surprisingly palpable reassurance that, ultimately, the forces of good will prevail.

As melodramatic animals repeatedly intercede on behalf of powerless virtue, they acquire a certain superhuman glory. Indeed, their intervention often follows a prayer to God or Providence: a desperate character implores heaven for help but receives help from an animal instead. *The Dog of Montargis* sets the precedent when the maiden Lucille begs God for the exoneration of her mute lover Florio, who faces execution for a crime he did not commit. Falling to her knees, she cries, “Oh, thou, who know'st his innocence, save, oh save this unfortunate youth! Enlighten the mind of his Judge. . . . Let not the innocent be punish'd for the guilty” (Barrymore 42–43). No God arrives to answer Lucille's prayer, but Dragon does. The dog's insistent affection for Florio, and his hatred for the guilty Macaire, convince the magistrate to stay the execution and reopen the case.

When thanking their animal saviors, human characters demonstrate a pardonable confusion about where exactly to direct their gratitude. In *Wonga of the Branded Hand* (1844), Wonga, a noble but mute American Indian, falls into the clutches of his Shawnee enemies. Tied up and despairing, he is surprised to find his dog approaching him. “*One of his DOGS enters and instantly seizes the rope which he begins to gnaw,*” the stage directions read. “WONGA *regains his spirits[,] and inspired by hope of liberty encourages the DOG, who quickly gnaws the rope through—WONGA starts up overjoyed and kneeling returns thanks for his freedom*” (Atkyns 778). Though apparently unconverted, Wonga expresses his debt using a gesture of religious submission—a gesture whose addressee may be either the animal beside him or God above. Nor is this ambiguity simply a product of Wonga's supposed savagery. In W. T. Moncrieff's *Mount St. Bernard* (1834?), the thoroughly civilized heroes find themselves snowbound and freezing in an Alpine pass. As hypothermia sets in, they realize that the famous dogs of Saint Bernard are their only hope. At first, some of them lose



faith: “Has it come to this?—are our lives indeed dependent on the uncertain sagacity of brutes[?]” (54). When Uberto the Saint Bernard arrives with a cloak and flask, however, the heroine thanks God in a confusing series of apostrophes and asides that sound like appositives: “The Convent Dog—Father of mercies, hear my heartfelt thanks. Faithful, noble creature, he should bear aid.” “The Convent Dog” is not the “Father of mercies,” and the “Father of mercies” is not the “faithful, noble creature,” but the sandwiched terms create a telling ambiguity. Another traveler, volunteering to follow the animal in search of shelter, echoes this blurred belief in the divine and the canine: “Aye, aye, my life upon the brute—I will follow first to prove my faith” (55).

Occasionally the animal melodrama’s implicit equation of divine agency and animal agency becomes explicit. The exotic displacement of *The Elephants of the Pagoda* seems to enable a heightened self-consciousness about the conventions of the form itself, permitting the play to acknowledge and even question the theological consequences of its moral vision. The story line revolves around the restoration of the orphaned Prince Djelini after a cadre of power-hungry Brahmans murder his father, the Raja of Nagpore, and take control of the region. In this imperial setting, the unspoken assumption that animal characters possess knowledge of a transcendent moral order is projected onto local customs, which officially recognize animal sagacity as an instrument for resolving political disputes. As a holy man explains to the raja’s widow, “By the letter of our holy law it is written that in default of direct heirs, the sacred Elephant of the Pagoda shall by his marvelous intelligence point out to the people of Nagpore their rightful Sovereign.” This tradition presumes that the creature’s intelligence is otherworldly in origin: “It is the will of Brama that a portion of his mighty wisdom should descend upon the adored Animal—Towards Holkar the murderer he manifested constant

aversion, to your son the orphan the utmost solicitude” (Barber 300).

By spelling out the basic conceit of animal melodrama and assigning it to a distant, orientalized people, *The Elephants of the Pagoda* invites critical contemplation of the subgenre, creating a space for skepticism toward its conventions. Throughout the production, only Hindu characters express the belief that elephants have access to divine wisdom. Even among believers, the play leaves room for doubt. At one point Bassara, a scheming Brahman, discovers that one of the elephants has misplaced the scepter supposed to be given to the true king. He concludes that the elephant is unreliable as a source of divine guidance. “[S]urely the sacred elephant is no longer to be trusted,” he tells his coconspirator, Missouri: “I shall announce the fact to the populace.” But Missouri quickly cuts him off: “No, the credulity of the populace is our safeguard. . . . [W]e must not open the eyes of our fanatics” (313).

Such incidents have led one circus historian to characterize *The Elephants of the Pagoda* as a heavy-handed imperialist text that validates “contemporary [Victorian], particularly Christian, preconceptions about Hindu indulgence in idolatry, superstition, and heathen ritual, which was said to hamper British missionary activity” (Assael 77). Yet the plot of the play ultimately affirms the very idolatry it appears to criticize, because that idolatry is indistinguishable from the credulity of animal melodrama itself. In its most metatheatrical moments, *The Elephants of the Pagoda* nods to its own outrageous excess, acknowledging the dubiousness of a pair of elephants working in harmony to effect political restoration. But after entertaining that doubt, the play utterly demolishes it.

Although all factions in the play claim the authority of Brahma, the plot repeatedly affirms that only the elephants serve as true agents of supernatural intervention. In one early incident, Bassara explains that he has

killed the lead elephant and trained a replacement to hand the royal scepter to anyone who stands to his right. Hoping to install Missouri as the new king, he stages a coronation with Missouri in the prearranged position. But as the scene reveals, no behavioral training can override the pachydermatous sense of right and wrong:

ELEPHANT *opens coffer[,] takes out sceptre, walks past the CHIEF[,] stops for a moment before MISSOURI, then raises the sceptre above the heads of the assemblage[.] MISSOURI advances[.] ELEPHANT strikes him on the head with sceptre[.]*  
 MISSOURI. Ah! I cannot think how these creatures can be called intelligent.  
 ELEPHANT *clears a passage for himself and exits followed by the people.* (305)

The pattern of elephant autonomy that begins with this amusing defiance escalates in a series of spectacular comic and heroic feats that work to restore the divinely sanctioned Djelini to the throne. In each case, the elephants intervene—generally with little or no prompting from other characters—to protect virtue, punish vice, and restore the predestined political order. Subtle, humorous clues about the elephants' moral wisdom gradually develop into exhibitions of strength that register divine force through physical majesty. In a show of sublime power, the elephants use their trunks to pull the prince from a raging torrent, knock down trees to bridge rapids, pull apart prisons, and trample one of the villains to death. The supernatural moral imperative of the elephants becomes indivisible from their superhuman strength, skill, and bulk as they come to dominate the stage, crushing their opposition in a glut of dramatic overkill that betrays the flimsiness of the villains and even the theatrical scenery before the awesome power of their bodily truth.

It is a stunning display of animal physicality. But the elephants in Astley's production only exemplify, in hyperbolic form, the performance theory underpinning all ani-

mal melodrama. Animal melodrama uses the presence of animal actors to overwhelm audiences with a theatrical version of the reality effect, adding a much-needed materiality to the implausible moral organization of the melodramatic plot. In the process, these works cunningly turn the shortcomings of animal performance into aesthetic and ideological strengths.

### Experiencing Technical Difficulties: Alterity, Awe, and Animal Performance

As animal melodramas grew more sophisticated, so did objections to the presence of animals onstage. Early opponents of the quadruped drama could simply dismiss onstage animals as the latest of many theatrical gimmicks exploiting a decadent craving for spectacle. This type of dismissal never truly disappears; it ossifies into the axiomatic contempt that resurfaces in mid-Victorian periodicals and later histories of English drama. But popular fascination with animal theatricals outlasted the novelty they once possessed, and with time more discerning critics pondered the problem of animal performance in newly abstract terms. These later, more nuanced objections to quadruped drama build on prior claims of aesthetic incoherence by arguing that the insurmountable otherness of nonhuman animals makes interspecies performance philosophically impossible. Because animals cannot understand the fictional frame that defines theatrical performance, these critics insisted, they can never truly participate in the dramatic illusion—they can only interrupt it. This line of performance theory emerged in the Victorian era and remained influential for much of the twentieth century, even as some critics began to celebrate animals' disruptive presence instead of bemoaning it.

Animal melodramas embraced this element of disruption long before theorists did, however. These works turned animal otherness on its head, affirming and even

underscoring the contention that animal actors remained tethered to a reality forever outside the theater. In the process, they experiment with alienation effects in ways that make them important precursors to modernist techniques of estrangement. Animal melodramas thus constitute what are perhaps the earliest theatrical engagements with animal otherness as a “productive difficulty,” in Chaudhuri’s phrase. They embrace animal otherness as the occasion for more profound forms of engagement and inclusion—a strategy that persists in animal studies today.

As early as 1840, Edward Mayhew made the case that onstage animals undercut the illusion on which drama is founded. Part of his concern stemmed from the unpredictability of live animals. Because they do not reliably follow instructions, Mayhew suggests in *Stage Effect*, animals occupy murky aesthetic territory, falling somewhere between actors and props. “Properties should always be quiescent,” he insists. “It argues a want of perception to make them actors, or to entrust them with action” (58). A horse onstage, he worries, “will snort when the prince is talking, will make the canvass trees give way to his curvetings, and though a whole army may be perishing in a desert, he will look sleek and comfortable, and persist with his hoofs that the ground is made of wood” (60).

Nineteenth-century audiences had plenty of experience with the shattered illusions Mayhew describes. In fact, anecdotes of crowds cheering errant animals suggest that animal spontaneity only added to the appeal of quadruped drama. In an equestrian version of *Rob Roy* at Astley’s, for example, a tenor singing “My Love Is like a Red, Red Rose” found himself upstaged by his horse. As he led the horse and sang, the animal pulled a carrot-filled handkerchief from his pocket and waved it ecstatically behind the actor. “[A] universal burst of laughter and applause followed,” as one writer tells it: “The tenor[,] mistaking the uproar for approba-

tion, sang the verse through with increased energy” (Frikell 308). In an American performance of another quadruped drama, an elephant flooded the orchestra with urine—or, in the euphemism of one actor present, the animal performed “an unexpected hydraulic experiment . . . to the great astonishment and discomfiture of the musicians, [which] closed the performance amid the shouts of the audience” (Cowell 64).

Unscripted interruptions are not the primary cause of Mayhew’s concern, however. Even well-behaved animals create insurmountable difficulties for the drama, he argues. A good animal actor surprises the audience into pleasure at its ability to act at all. It thereby distracts from the drama, “claiming applause separate from the real interest of the scene” (58). Indeed, the trouble with animals is that they remind the audience that the “real interest of the scene” is not real at all. The physical presence of an animal startles spectators into awareness of the superficial fictions surrounding it. Existing in a liminal space partially inside and partially outside the world of the drama, animal actors draw attention to theater as an illusion that pales against the reality it imitates. “[L]iving animals,” Mayhew concludes, “have too strong a sense of reality to blend in with the scene” (59).

Mayhew’s singular “sense of reality” actually names and links together two distinct phenomena. It describes both the audience’s surprise at the presence of the animal onstage—the sudden recognition of the animal’s reality, which disrupts their viewing experience—and the animal’s internal perceptions of reality, its cognitive attunement to a material world distinct from the theatrical fiction. Spectators feel keenly that the animal’s presence contrasts with the artifice of stagecraft—in part because they realize that human actors lose themselves in an imitation of the reality that the animal actor, however well trained, still mentally occupies. The performances of animals thus transcend and effec-

tively shame the play occurring around them, reminding audience members of a world vaster than the make-believe in which human actors operate. In their very inability to act, animals achieve a kind of greatness that trumps the drama's hollow artifice:

The actor's art consists chiefly in forgetting his personality, and assuming a character and feeling foreign to his real one,—a delusion these simple creatures are incapable of abetting him in. The player may take on, but the horse is an honest, bona fide horse, without any love for hypocrisy. . . . All the vanity and frivolity of the stage is made apparent by the test of reality. (Mayhew 59–61)

Although subsequent theorists of animal performance rarely acknowledge any debt to Mayhew, they echo his arguments with surprising consistency. A *fin de siècle* writer for the *Westminster Review* repeats Mayhew's objection, attributing it to Joseph Addison: "[A]nimals on the stage, from sheer reality and spontaneity of action, completely upset the *optique du théâtre*" (Lawrence 283). More recent performance theorists reframe the case in explicitly semiotic and phenomenological language. Bert States considers animals a prime example of "things that resist being either signs or images" and so jeopardize the illusion of the theater (29). Like Mayhew, States grounds animals' resistance to signification in the otherness of their minds: "There is always the fact that [the animal] doesn't know it is in a play" (32). Onstage animals are, for States as for Mayhew, neither actors nor props but "nodes of reality extruding from the illusion" of drama (34). When we enjoy their performances, what we appreciate is "a real dog on an artificial street. . . . The theater has, so to speak, met its match: the dog is blissfully above, or beneath, the business of playing, and we find ourselves cheering its performance precisely because it isn't one" (33–34).

When States confesses to "cheering" animals for their inability to act, he demonstrates

an important shift in critical values from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Following Brecht's endorsement of epic and dialectical theater, he derives increased pleasure from performances that remind spectators that they are watching an illusion. Peterson has recently suggested, in fact, that twenty-first-century performance theorists may be overeager to idealize the disruptive presence of animals. "In the case of nonhuman animal performers," he writes, "it is easy to romanticize this resistance [to signification]. It is tempting, for example, to see the animal's own gaze as an onstage force that ultimately utterly refuses to partake in semiosis" (35). This new support for "recalcitrance in animal performance" identifies and names the phenomenon that troubled Mayhew; it simply sees the subversion of stage illusion as a positive rather than a negative possibility (Peterson 35n3).

Melodramas discovered the possibilities of animal recalcitrance long before critics did, and their innovative use of the phenomenon helps account for their enduring popularity. Recognizing that the presence of live animals distracts audiences, they incorporate this disruption into their dramaturgy. They routinely associate nonhuman actors with a Providence that intercedes to guide human society toward virtue. But the animals do more than provide a means of materializing the transcendent power of Providence; they perform that power, breaking into the human drama as reminders of a vast external reality that dwarfs human actions into insignificance. In the animal actor, melodrama's moral logic is embodied and its Word made flesh, albeit in a rather backward fashion: here, God is Dog.

The importance of real animal bodies to the animal melodrama is evident in the form's conflation of two different forms of superhuman power: the supernatural force of Providence and the natural but nonhuman capabilities of the animal body. *The Elephants of the Pagoda* provides only one instance of the form's generative confusion between the



powers of gods and animals. Sharp teeth are a mundane feature of canine physiology, but they become key to effecting Wonga's providential escape in *Wonga of the Branded Hand*. Similarly, Carlo can free Leopold from the demon's tower in *The Mirror of Fate* only because Carlo is not human. As Leopold's friend observes, "[N]othing but a Cat or a Monkey could ascend that crumbling pathway [to the tower]—Hey! a lucky thought—If I could only come across Carlo . . . he might carry up the key" (Blake, *Mirror* 88–89). In other plays, dogs move in and out of prisons with impunity or leap through windows to enter otherwise inaccessible rooms. As Toby's master, Peter Pandean, explains in the metatheatrical *Show Folks; or, Punch and His Dog Toby* (1851), otherness enables animals to move, spiritlike, across many physical and social barriers that are impenetrable to human beings: "[Toby] can enter anywhere, without being ask'd questions!" (*Show Folks* 875). The deeper link between the dog's physiological difference and his moral agency shows itself when Peter's praise dissolves into a catalog that depicts the dog as a blend of superhuman ethics and remarkable body parts: "Oh, we've an excellent go-between, a friend whom no bribery can tempt—a tongue that never rattles—a heart that never falters—and a will to serve his master, though death were in the doing of it!" (876b–877).

With its investment in the unfeigned otherness of animal performers, animal melodrama constitutes an early and important experiment in aesthetic alienation that reveals unexplored connections among melodrama, modernist theater, and postmodern performance. As Jane Shattuc notes, political critics have occasionally cast melodrama "as the precursor to Brechtian distancing," interpreting its histrionics as, in effect, so divorced from real life that they focus attention on theater's manipulative power over spectators' emotions (147). These accounts succeed, however, only when critics read melodrama

against the grain, assuming that audiences could not really take it seriously, could not be absorbed in its exaggerated ethical conflicts. Taking melodrama at face value, on the other hand, means admitting that—in the words of Benjamin Kohlmann—"melodrama more often than not succeeds in defusing and naturalizing these estranging effects" (342). But animal melodramas suggest a different relation between the moral absorption of melodrama and the aesthetic estrangement of its modernist and postmodern successors. The experiments in alienation of these melodramas neither destroy moral absorption nor downplay dramatic disruption. Instead, their playwrights harness estrangement to their own ends, using it to absorb the audience in melodrama's moral cosmology rather than undercut that cosmology. These experiments with disruptive dramaturgy begin when animal melodramas employ nonhuman agents to intercede on behalf of a superhuman Providence. They reach their culmination in those productions that extend the engagement with animal alterity beyond bodily difference and into the otherness of animal minds.

In their depictions of oddly perceptive dogs, elephants, and horses, animal melodramas offer a retort to a long tradition of debunking animal performance—and even animals' cognitive abilities—on the basis of differences between human and animal perception. The anthropocentrism of much performance theory registers this tradition, but the most influential instance of this thinking comes from the field of ethology. In 1907, the psychologist Oskar Pfungst used a series of experiments to demonstrate that Clever Hans, a horse who appeared capable of arithmetic and other complicated reasoning, was in fact solving problems by carefully reading the body language of his trainer. Remarkably, the trainer was innocent of any deception; he knew the answers and conveyed them unintentionally, through unconscious physical cues imperceptible to human observers. More

duplicious versions of this form of interspecies performance date back to at least the 1590s, when the showman William Bankes toured London with a horse, Marocco, who showed an eerie aptitude for performing mathematical calculations—and answering bawdy questions, too.<sup>12</sup>

In their exposés of intelligent animal performers, nineteenth-century skeptics exhibit the same enduring fascination with animals' access to sensory information imperceptible to human beings. An 1867 article in *All the Year Round*, for example, recounts the feats of the learned dog Munito, whose tricks involved packs of cards. "One of the spectators was requested to name a card—say the queen of clubs—the pack was spread on the floor in a circle, faces upward," the article explains. "Munito went round the circle, came to the queen of clubs, pounced upon it, and brought it in his mouth to his master" ("Performing Animals" 105). Munito appeared to know not only the fifty-two cards in a pack but also the letters and numbers on other decks spread out before him. After a second visit to the exhibition, however, the writer realized that Munito's trainer was secretly daubing aniseed oil on cards chosen by spectators; Munito simply smelled them out and retrieved them. "Many people," the article concludes after a related investigation of performing sparrows, "have seen an exhibition of a learned pig, whose performances were very similar to those of the learned dog: such as picking out cards, letters, figures, and numbers, and answering questions, and apparently showing mental powers, which were merely the result of the animal faculties of smell and taste" (105–06).

Like magic shows, these popular animal entertainments play on spectators' conflicting desires to explain away the marvelous and to believe in it. This dialectic between awe and explanation proves central to the ideology of animal melodrama. As their detractors have long noted, animal melodramas regularly showcase the sorts of parlor tricks that

deceptively exaggerate animal intelligence. The poodle Emile in *The Dog of the Pyrenees* (1845), for instance, overhears two villains discussing the location of their secret castle. The dog, though mute, is (luckily!) literate. Not only does he retain the name of the town where the hideout is located, but he also—like a melodramatic Munito—conveys it to the heroes by spelling it, using a set of alphabet blocks belonging to a local innkeeper. This action so astounds his companions that they ask him to perform it twice. Building this moment of incredulity into the play itself, *The Dog of the Pyrenees* acknowledges that the attraction of Munito and other nonhuman performers stems from their ability to exceed human expectations in ways that appear to defy materialist explanation.

The innovation and lasting interest of the animal melodrama, however, derive from the melodrama's ability to enlist both the awe and the mundane, materialist explanations of animal performance in the service of a providential worldview. Even the most rigorously skeptical explanation of animal sagacity—the sort of demystification displayed in *All the Year Round* or the investigation of Clever Hans—points to animals' otherness, their access to a vibrant sensory realm beyond the bounds of human experience. With their ability to detect and value material phenomena imperceptible to human beings, animals offer empirical evidence of a realm that is both material and otherworldly, one whose reality forever eludes our senses. Animal melodramas take advantage of this alien phenomenology, using animal actors to suggest that moral facts might have a material dimension despite our inability to perceive them. Animals, these works insist, can access a moral order that is at once totally comprehensive and totally incomprehensible to the human mind.

Animals' superhuman senses figure in some of the foundational works of animal melodrama. In *The Dog of Montargis*, Dragon smells Aubri's missing pocketbook on another

person. “Dang me,” one comic rustic exclaims, “if that ’ere dog bean’t a magicianer. . . . Lord love you, he be as sensible—Aye, as sensible as I—We had scarce gotten to the thicket where [Aubri] lay, then he began to sniff, sniff, sniff at [the] murderer’s pocket, + by + by a’ pops [his] snout right into’t” (Barrymore 31). *Sensible* works in a punning fashion here, attributing both intelligence and exceptional sensory abilities to the animal in the same breath. In this early example of the subgenre, Dragon’s superhuman senses mislead his human companions, who mistakenly convict Florio for robbery of a pocketbook that Aubri had entrusted to Florio for safekeeping. But Dragon makes up for this misunderstanding by subsequently licking Florio’s hand and attacking the true killers, Macaire and Landry, leading the authorities to reopen the case.

Later melodramas more consistently align animals’ extraordinary senses with the greater good, representing their scent and hearing as mysterious abilities central to their service of Providence. In *The Conscript* (1830), the aging veteran Philippe Debouche walks all night through the mountains to reach his unjustly conscripted son. As he steps across a darkened stage with his dog Fidele, he speaks to the animal, expressing his reliance on its senses for direction: “I must still confess myself your debtor—for how so dark a night as this to have made my way thro’ paths so intricate I know not” (Barrymore and Raymond 600b–601). In *The Miller’s Dog* (1849), the dog Yelt discovers and opens a trapdoor to the dungeon where the rightful heir lies imprisoned—a feat that Yelt, unlike his master, can somehow accomplish in the pitch dark.

The exact nature of these incredible abilities—whether they spring from better night vision, a more acute sense of smell, or some other source—remains ambiguous, because the discrepancy is more important than its explanation. When nonhuman characters like Fidele and Yelt navigate through total darkness, they dramatize the fact that human

beings and animals occupy radically different perceptual realities—the very feature of animal performance supposed to be hopelessly distracting to theatergoers. In the process, animal melodramas anticipate the skeptical objections of their most virulent critics. Indeed, these works depict the discrepancy between human and animal perception as inextricable from the creatures’ extraordinary moral agency. In representing the alterity of animal perception as a sort of superpower, these works invert a long history of “[h]umans . . . demonstrat[ing] their dominion over other species in performances featuring animals” (Orozco 25). They locate awe in the fact of alterity and draw on instances of incomprehension between human beings and other animals to open up the possibility of a more complete, more just, and more real world lying beyond the reach of human perception. If the reality we see and hear around us fails to confirm this moral order, the animal melodrama hints, the fault is not in our dog stars but in ourselves. The world obeys both material and moral laws, but only the superhuman powers of animals can make sense of them.

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## NOTES

1. For an overview of the growing critical interest in animals, objects, and ecology gathered under the heading of “the nonhuman turn,” see Grusin.
2. For other recent attempts to think performance beyond the human, see Chaudhuri, “Animal Geographies”; Orozco; Read; and the essays in Orozco and Parker-Starbuck.
3. For a full history of illegitimate theater and the controversies surrounding it, see Moody, chs. 1–2.
4. For an in-depth look at early modern animal performances, see Fudge, *Perceiving*, ch. 1. For animal performances as low entertainment in the nineteenth century, see Altick, ch. 22; Jay, ch. 2.
5. On the history of the circus, see Stoddart, chs. 1 and 4.
6. See Wright for more examples of early uses of animals onstage—generally “in comic scenes that have little bearing on the action of the play” (661).

7. On the diverse kinds and uses of animals onstage, see Nicoll 1: 25–26; Moody 69–72; and Saxon 7–8.

8. See Moody 24–36. See Saxon for the history of exchange that enabled the rise of hippodrama. For the history of the economics and aesthetics unique to the circus, see Assael; Stoddart.

9. Many of the melodramas I cite still exist only in hastily scribbled manuscript form. I have sometimes normalized variant spellings of character names and capitalized them to make it easier to read my quotations from these works.

10. On “taking the seize,” see Bondeson 75. For an example of a limping dog, see Blake, *Old Toll House* 1014. For an example of a dog carrying a basket, see Blake, *Old Toll House* 1011; *Dog* 476b; and Barrymore and Raymond 570b. Although training techniques lie beyond the scope of this essay, see Bondeson; Mayer and Mayer; Sample; and Tait for more details about them.

11. This pattern seems to apply to all individualized animal characters. Theaters did stage *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* using bloodhounds in the chase scenes, however, which suggests that those animals employed only to heighten the theatrical spectacle did not share this consistently moral function. For more on these bloodhounds, and for an interesting case study of animals and race onstage, see Weltman 14–22.

12. On Clever Hans, Marocco, and animal intelligence, see Fudge, *Animal* 113–17. For nineteenth-century debates about animal intelligence, see Ritvo 35–39.

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