

DOG AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND ENGLISH CANINE MELO- DRAMA: *THE LIFE OF CARLO, THE FAMOUS DOG OF THE DRURY-LANE THEATRE* (1806)

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine Elizabeth Fenwick's narrative, *The Life of Carlo, or the Famous Dog of Drury-Lane Theatre* (1806), through the lens of the melodramatic conventions that informed Frederick Reynolds's play, *The Caravan; or the Driver and His Dog* (1803), upon which the story is based. Focusing on the centrality of the dog in both works, the study first explores the key elements of classical melodrama evident in the play and the novel. It then investigates how Fenwick's narrative engages with nineteenth-century discourses on the relationship between childhood and non-human animals. Finally, the analysis situates Fenwick's work within the framework of classical melodrama's ideal of citizenship, particularly as it relates to childhood and the domestication of animals.

KEYWORDS: Elizabeth Fenwick, Frederick Reynolds, Melodrama, It-Novels, Performing Animals, Human-Animal Studies

AUTOBIOGRAFÍAS DE PERROS Y MELODRAMAS INGLESES CANINOS:
THE LIFE OF CARLO, THE FAMOUS DOG OF THE DRURY-LANE THEATRE (1806)

RESUMEN:

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el relato de Elizabeth Fenwick titulado *The Life of Carlo, or the Famous Dog of Drury-Lane Theatre* (1806) a la luz de los mecanismos melodramáticos que articularon la obra teatral de Frederick Reynolds en la que se inspira, titulada *The Caravan; or the Driver and His Dog* (1803). Tomando como denominador común el protagonismo del perro en sendas obras, se lleva a cabo, en un primer momento, un análisis de los principales resortes procedentes del melodrama clásico presentes tanto en la obra de teatro como en la novela. Acto seguido, se incide en cómo el relato de Fenwick aborda el vínculo entre la condición infantil y los animales no humanos durante el siglo XIX. En tercer lugar, la obra de Fenwick es estudiada a partir de la noción de ciudadanía vehiculada por el melodrama clásico en relación con la infancia y el encuadre doméstico del animal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Elizabeth Fenwick, Frederick Reynolds, melodrama, *It-Novels*, animales actores, estudios humanimales.

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On the evening of December 5, 1803, the audience at London's Drury Lane Theatre was treated to an extraordinary spectacle: on the stage, a dog leaped from an elevated platform (fashioned as a rock) into a pool to dramatise the rescue of a child from drowning. The thrilling stunt marked the climax of *The Caravan; or the Driver and His Dog*, a "grand serio-comic romance" penned by Frederick Reynolds with music composed by William Reeve. The production sought to reignite the theatre's profitability after a string of financial setbacks (Rahill 1967, 112). In the play, Julio, the young son of the Marquis of Calatrava, is thrown into the water by an agent of the villainous Count Navarro as an act of vengeance against the boy's mother, the Marchioness, for rejecting the Regent's amorous advances. Equipped with the bravery that is such a defining part of his nature, the dog, a Newfoundland by the name of Carlo, "leaps from the Rock into the Water—and is seen swimming after the Child" (Reynolds 1803, 2). Although London audiences were no strangers to theatrical productions featuring animals as performers (Wilson 2015, 8-25), Carlo's heroic act quickly became the centrepiece of the show. Reviews praised the performance, raving about the audience's enthusiastic applause (Mantzius 1921, VI, 44), and Frederick Reynolds later recounted in his autobiography the anecdote of how the theatre director personally visited the dressing rooms after the show to commend the remarkable canine (Reynolds, 1826, II, 194).

The success of the play marked the beginning of a trend of melodramas centred around quadrupeds' dramatic rescues of helpless children or women from a sure death (frequently by drowning). A striking example appears in the second act of *Timour the Tartar*, a "grand romantic melodrama" by Matthew Lewis (1811). In this scene, Agib, princess Zorilda's son, heroically rescues his mother after she falls into the water. Agib appears riding a white horse in a breathtaking moment where the boy "seizes a banner, leaps his Horse over the Parapet, and disappears," only to reemerge moments later with Zorilda safe in his arms (Lewis 1830, 39-40). Such antics proved crucial to the play's success, with contemporary accounts describing how "the people rose with simultaneous impulse to their feet, and, with canes, hands, and wild screams, kept the house in one uproar of shouts for at least five minutes" (Grimsted 1968, 101). Unsurprisingly, Carlo achieved fame rivalling that of human actors, drawing comparisons to the likes of illustrious performers such as Garrick and Betterton (Mantzius 1921, VI, 44). His celebrity status was woven into the fabric of popular culture with lithographs, illustrations, and journalistic anecdotes that heightened his "persona," contributing to what Diana Donald terms the "glorification of the dog" (Donald 2007, 136) that is characteristic of 19th-century literature, art, journalism, dog breeding, and scientific discourse.

Amid the commodification of theatrical stardom during an era of growing industrialisation in the theatre, a canine autobiography purportedly "written" by the dog himself, *The Life of Carlo, or the Famous Dog of Drury-Lane Theatre* (1806), was published shortly after the premiere of Reynolds's play. The book chronicled Carlo's life, from his birth to his service under the director of the Drury Lane Theatre, and began with a "dedication" ostensibly signed by Carlo. The aim was "to increase [the children's] good opinion of him, and to add to their pleasures" (Fenwick 1806, 4). The author, Eliza Fenwick—a close friend of Mary Wollstonecraft—was known for

her work in children's literature, critiques of slavery, and animal advocacy (Cope 2023, 232, 238). Carlo's account was part of the nineteenth century's so-called "it narratives," a literary subgenre where inanimate objects or animals assumed the role of protagonists, often imbued with subjectivity, consciousness, and a personal voice to recount their own stories (Blackwell 2007, 10). Rooted in the broader philosophical discussions of the late eighteenth century on materiality and animal consciousness, "it narratives" –also called "novels of circulation," "object tales," or "spy novels"– offered insights into the evolving relationship between humans and the objects they possessed. In Blackwell's words, they examined "the ways in which people have been shaped by their changing relationships with the things they own" (Blackwell 2007, 10).

This article seeks to examine Fenwick's work as an explanatory epitext (Genette 1987, 11) to the theatrical play that inspired its publication. *The Life of Carlo* is a narrative that describes the vital circumstances that enabled the canine star to take Reynold's play to the next level. Yet if Fenwick's tale qualifies as an "it-narrative" capable of recounting the animal's "secret history," it is not solely because, as Swenson observes, "the secret history of the *it* is a primary focus" (Swenson 2017, 117), that is, it is a narrative form that, unlike others that treat the animal as a mere pretext, allows readers to intimately connect with the protagonist's personality and story. It is also because the tale probes the mechanisms that fuelled the success of Reynolds's theatrical production in its era. Situated at a crossroads between the "beastly fable" and children's didactic literature, Fenwick's work adheres to the structural conventions of melodrama while simultaneously serving as a metanarrative that reflects those very conventions in Reynolds's play. Through *The Life of Carlo*, readers gain a deeper understanding of the scenographic and symbolic principles underpinning classic melodrama as enacted in Reynolds's production.

To support this claim, I will first identify the principal dramatic devices that define Fenwick's narrative as a classic melodrama. Next, I will explore how the story engages with broader debates surrounding the conditions of animals and children in the early nineteenth century, exemplified by the bond between children and animals in the iconic rescue scene from *The Caravan*. Then, I will analyse Fenwick's work in the context of the ideal of citizenship propagated by classic melodrama, particularly in its connection to childhood and the domestication of animals. I will argue that Fenwick's text transcends the realm of children's literature to serve as a melodramatic blueprint for normative behaviour, equating the dog's actions with those of a child within the framework of national identity. I will conclude by stating that Fenwick employs the resources of melodrama to articulate early signs of the connection between the animal protection/humane movement and feminism, with values such as compassion at the centre of her ethos.



1. CANINE AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MELODRAMATIC AESTHETICS

Fenwick's story, featuring a dog as the protagonist who recounts his numerous life experiences, falls within the subgenre known as "animal autobiography" – a narrative told from the first-person perspective of an animal that conveys his/her thoughts to the reader (Smith 2015, 725). Popularised during the second half of the eighteenth century, and often associated with children's literature (Cosslett 2006, 63), animal autobiographies' representation of the mind of another living being constituted a reflection of the cultural beliefs, expectations and knowledge that society had of such species, which was informed by prevailing zoological, natural history and biological treatises. Within this wide array of "speaking" animals, first-person canine narratives led to the emergence of a distinct subgenre in its own right. Largely inspired by the popularity gained in eighteenth-century Britain by Cervantes's *El coloquio de los perros* (1613) – translated into English by Harry Bridges in 1728 as *The Dogs of Mahudez*, and again in 1766 as *The Dialogue of the Dogs* by Robert Goadby – works such as *History of Pompey the Little* (Francis Coventry, 1751), *Biography of a Spaniel* (attributed to a certain "Mrs. Showes", 1797), *Keeper's Travels in Search of His Master* (Edward Augustus Kendall, 1798), and, moving into the nineteenth century, *Dog of Knowledge; or, Memoirs of Bob the Spotted Terrier* (Harrison Weir, 1801), established key features of the (sub)genre, creating a form of "canine subjectivity" through human writing. Fenwick's novel represents a distinctive link in this chain, notable for its ability to illuminate and serve as an "external" entry point (Genette 11), an epitext that circulates alongside Frederick Reynolds's play, showcasing both the inherent goodness of the animal and the intricacies of his life, which lead to his success on the stage. As Lissa Paul notes, Fenwick demonstrated her skill by drawing upon "her keen awareness of her immediate environment and her potential for fiction (...) [she] took the news of the day and quickly fashioned a variation on a 'Lassie-come-home' adventure story/celebrity biography, (...) capitalizing on the popularity of the dog. The hit stage play would generate a market for *The Life of Carlo*, a kind of prequel to the play" (Paul, 2019, 318).

With its very title, Fenwick's canine autobiography intertwines Carlo's destiny with the theatrical world. *The Life of Carlo, or the Famous Dog of the Drury-Lane Theatre* links the celebrated quadruped to one of London's patent theatres, where illegitimate drama was gaining ground as a rival to the circus (Purinton 2017, 138). The visual emphasis is evident from the title page itself, which pairs the main title with an explanatory subtitle: "with his portrait, and other Copper Plates" (Fenwick, front cover, 1806). This visual focus is further amplified by the frontispiece engraving, portraying Carlo in full profile. The dog dominates the frame, nearly eclipsing the faintly rendered landscape in the background. The image's composition underscores the dog's proportions relative to his surroundings, with the side-profile view offering a complete depiction of his shape. Carlo's imposing size is a deliberate nod to the attributes of the "Majestic Newfoundland, of which size is a prominent characteristic" (Walsh 1872, 166). This physical grandeur reinforces his strength and bravery – qualities epitomised by his heroic rescue of a child from certain drowning, a feat frequently lauded in nineteenth-century canine manuals (Lydekker 1893-1898, I,



528). This type of rescue first appeared in *Biography of a Spaniel*, and would just as much be present in other canine biographies prior to Fenwick's story, such as *Keeper's Travels in Search of His Master* (Brown 2010, 133). The engraving is accompanied by a caption that reads: "The Portrait of Carlo taken from the life" (Fenwick 1806, n.p.). Its purpose is to visually authenticate the dog's image and, by extension, the remarkable deeds that inspired Fenwick to write his story.

The primacy of visuality is a hallmark of melodrama, as Théophile Gautier observed in an era when words "annoy[ed]" (*ennuient*) and "exhaust[ed]" (*fatiguent*) (Gautier 1859, II, 175). Fenwick's work emphasises this visual prioritisation through paratextual elements that complement and enhance the narrative. By doing so, Fenwick remains true to a fundamental principle of melodramatic composition: the image must convey semantic meaning as powerfully, if not more so, than the text itself –what Brooks describes as "a plastic tableau, the arena for represented, visual meanings" (1995, 47). This visual clarity, which allows melodrama to render characters' moral traits immediately apparent, has drawn criticism on the grounds of a perceived "sentimentalism" and "simplification" (Przybos 1987, 9), yet it remains central to the genre's widespread appeal. The opening illustration of Carlo embodies this principle, portraying the dog with a commanding presence: head held high, gaze intent, jaw slightly parted, and legs slightly apart, signalling a poised readiness for action. The depiction exudes vigilance, suggesting the dog's preparedness to respond to any situation requiring his intervention. Through this image, Fenwick sets the stage for a narrative defined by the dog's vitality and profound connection with humanity.

The narrative's textual elements amplify the visual emphasis central to melodrama, as noted by Gautier. The straightforward storytelling, the focus on Carlo's pivotal scenes, the minimal use of rhetorical devices that could detract from the action, and the integration of illustrative imagery, transform the text into a kind of voiceover –one that gives shape not only to the animal's life but also the critical moments of the theatrical production. While Fenwick's text traces Carlo's life from birth, it zeroes in on the heroic deeds dramatised on stage, directing the audience's attention to these enacted exploits. *The Life of Carlo* recounts the dog's relationships with his various masters –first Edward, then Tom, and ultimately the sailors who care for him until his arrival at Drury Lane. It emphasises his steadfast loyalty, moral integrity, and extraordinary ability to rescue those in aquatic peril, including a girl who falls into a river (Fenwick 1806, 38-39) and the wayward Vincent, who is accidentally plunged into the sea (Fenwick 1806, 49). These incidents mirror scenes from Reynolds's play, where Carlo is depicted as both loyal –he refrains from revealing that the maid Rosa broke "one of the Marquis's fine looking-glasses" (Reynolds 1803, 26)– and courageous, capable of attacking a man and sending him "hopping back to Madrid" (Reynolds 1803, 11) or saving someone in distress from drowning –a scene included as frontispiece of Reynolds's published version of the play (Reynolds 1803, n.p.). Both in Fenwick's narrative and in Reynolds's play, the itinerancy of the dog is central to the syntax of the work and the ontological consideration of the canine species. The dog's constant movement is highlighted through an "arbitrary transition" (Brown 2010, 133) between masters and scenes



that illustrates the animal's physical movement –eloquently emphasised by the “caravan” that titles the theatrical work. Being on the move equips the dog with the experiences that allow him to develop a more refined intuition and a deeper understanding of human nature. In the manner of a canine picaresque character, the dog's physical itinerancy aligns with the succession of scenes in Reynolds's play and the progressive action that supplies the rhythm to Fenwick's narrative. Both formally and thematically, Fenwick's narrative functions as a printed counterpart to the theatrical performance—a kind of playbill or stage direction detailing the animal's actions onstage. Through the interplay of text and performance, the two mediums bolster and validate one another. The dog's feats, witnessed by the audience, are immortalised in the autobiography, which itself becomes a near-verbatim transcript of what spectators experienced in the theatre.

The drive to authenticate the dog's actions for both readers and spectators is further echoed in the play. Carlo was not a symbolic representation performed by a human actor or conjured through dialogue; he was a real dog, owned by the proprietor of an “À la mode beef shop” (Reynolds 1826, II 194). His breathtaking jump into the water was no technical artifice or illusion; it was genuine. In his autobiography, Reynolds highlighted the unprecedented nature of these elements, explaining that the introduction of real water on stage, combined with the dog's actions, “were both incidents, at that time, so entirely unknown in theatrical exhibitions, that their very novelty rendered everybody most sanguine as to its success” (Reynolds 1826, II 193). The use of actual water, “hired from Old Father Thames” (Reynolds 1826, II 194), further enhanced this authenticity, as contemporary reviews acknowledged. A certain “Dog-Berry” remarked that “[t]he spectators in the gallery who love nature, are delighted with the scene of real water. None of your made stuff” (“The New Performer” 1805, 45). The incorporation of this natural element aligned Reynolds's play with the aquatic melodramas of the era, often advertised with the enticing phrase “Real Water!” (Singer 2017; Stalter-Place 2023). The *realness* of the water served to further authenticate the truthfulness of the action and the dog's stunt, and so, by breaking with the conventions of theatrical artifice and illusion, the theatre transcended its traditional role as a space of simulation. The set's integration of an element as intrinsically alien to the stage as water helped to transform it into a space where nature was appropriated, domesticated, and commercialised for entertainment purposes.

Furthermore, the presence of real bodies of water evoked the naval victories dramatised in naumachias and aquadramas staged in parks, coastal cities, gardens, and theatres during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ramos-Gay 2015). The intricate hydraulic engineering that allowed London theatres –particularly Sadler's Wells– to channel water from the Thames symbolised the appropriation and redefinition of nature within the theatrical domain. This interplay between nature and artifice mirrored the role Carlo was meant to embody on stage. Like the water flowing across the set, Carlo personified nature itself, his presence subverting the conventional notion of acting as mere imitation. In contrast to Garrick, whose artistry rested on mimetic skill, Carlo epitomised authenticity. With Carlo, “nature,” an anonymous poem stated, “takes the field” (Donald 2007, 136).



Carlo's portrayal in Fenwick's narrative and on stage is deeply entwined with the moral binaries that structure melodrama. Defined by the stark opposition of good and evil, melodrama thrives on the polarisation of heightened emotion and what Brooks identifies as the "triumph of virtue" (1995, 15). Fenwick rigorously reproduces this framework and devises Carlo as a moral exemplar, thereby taking a firm position in the broader debate over whether non-human species can be moral agents or mere moral patients (Sapontzis 1987; Clark 1984). By endowing Carlo with a clear subjectivity—to the extent of being able to narrate his autobiography—Fenwick attributes to him not only reason, but also, perhaps more importantly, virtuous moral agency, in consistency with Hume's perspective that sentiment, rather than rationality, underpins morality (Clement 2013, 2). Carlo's conduct distances him from the deterministic interpretations of behaviour rooted in Cartesian mechanism, instead ascribing to him moral traits often reserved for humans. Fenwick stops short, however, of extending this "gift" to all dogs or the wider animal kingdom. Her narrative deliberately singles out Carlo—a unique specimen of a specific breed. This individuality is emphasised through his proper name and a detailed engraving designed to set him apart from his peers. By doing so, Fenwick assigns Carlo what Emmanuel Lévinas describes as a "face," not merely as a physical identifier but as an ethical presence that demands recognition and moral responsibility for his distinct otherness. While Levinas maintains that animals possess a secondary or "afterwards" (Lévinas 1988, 172) face compared to humans, he nonetheless acknowledges their capacity to elicit ethical responses: "one cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal" (1988, 169), he claims. In narrating Carlo's life, Fenwick effectively gives him such a face in Levinasian terms. As Una Chaudhuri would have it, this act of storytelling grants Carlo what Cartesian thought denied him: "a soul, a place in our moral universe, and the opportunity to be seen and known as our fellows" (Chaudhuri 2007, 15).

Carlo's virtue must be as tangible as the moral principles that undergird melodrama itself: not merely an abstract concept but a narrative or theatrical action brought to life. As Brooks notes, in moments of heightened emotional and psychological conflict, language alone becomes "inadequate to bear the charge of meaning required," necessitating "mute gesture" to "express its most extreme meanings." In other words, melodrama aims to "make the terms of the moral dilemma visible" (Brooks 1995, 552). For an animal like Carlo, it is insufficient to embody virtue abstractly—his virtue must be rendered visibly apparent. As Steve Baker suggests, what we know about animals is mainly channelled through their representation (Baker 2001, xvi). Given animals' inability to represent themselves—a limitation Fenwick seeks to overcome with Carlo's autobiography—and given that representation inherently involves mediation, Carlo's actions and movements must be cyphered within the convention of pantomimic characterisation, leaving no space for ambiguity in either the theatrical performance or the text. As Brooks emphasises, melodrama thrives on "making its terms clear and stark" (1995, 552), and visual representation offers a medium far less susceptible to misinterpretation than words or abstract actions.



Fenwick adheres closely to this principle, offering vivid depictions of Carlo's heroic leaps into the water to rescue a young girl or his master's rival, the young Vincent. Through these dramatised accounts, Fenwick eradicates all moral uncertainty regarding Carlo's behaviour: his actions only allow one interpretation. Even when Carlo hesitates –briefly swayed by resentment– before saving Vincent, who had previously abused Carlo's friend, Edward, he ultimately follows the dictates of his virtuous nature. "I believe my resentment against him was so strong that I should have suffered him to perish (...) My heart relented (...) I leaped into the sea, and saved the boy" (Fenwick 1806, 51-52). Whether or not Carlo consciously and fully comprehends the reasons and maxims behind his actions almost becomes a secondary issue; it is his moral integrity that remains unequivocal and acquires a visible dimension.

And in the same way that virtue is to be made visible, so must suffering be explicitly displayed as well. Scenes that depict Carlo's hunger or his self-sacrificing decision to leave Edward's care to avoid burdening the boy serve as Fenwick's response to eighteenth-century debates over animal suffering (Wolloch 2012, 123-144). In opposition to claims that animals do not suffer, melodrama –which is particularly reliant on pathos for its impact– presents animals as emotional mirrors of humanity. These scenes evoke audience identification by framing suffering as an internalised experience. Carlo's anguish mirrors that of the child beside him, a compelling image that encourages the audience to empathise with both subjects equally.

Ultimately, *The Life of Carlo* is an it-narrative that exposes the structural mechanisms of melodrama, grounded in the presence of providence as the locus of the protagonist's conflict. Swenson interprets the text as a "narrative about nonhuman perspective (...) that reveals privileged information thanks to its protagonist's undercover sentience" (2017, 117). Swenson argues that Fenwick's account underscores Carlo's capacity for autonomous decision-making in defiance of his natural instincts. The dog's hesitation –termed "Carlo's dilemma" (Swenson 2017, 125)– over whether to rescue Vincent, who falls into the water due to his own malicious behaviour, demonstrates a degree of agency. This dilemma, as Swenson puts it, encapsulates "the paradox of so-called subjectivity as an organic, evolving, unknowable conversation between native qualities, environment, and what the hero perceives as choice" (2017, 118). Rather than merely showcasing a simplistic "power-of-choice," Carlo's actions "radically reframe consciousness and personality as products of organic, ongoing, unknowable negotiation between nature, conscious choice, and the unpredictable effects of environment and experience" (Swenson 2017, 123).



2. DOGS AND CHILDREN ONSTAGE

A striking feature of canine melodramas is their tendency to centre the spectacle of their climactic scenes on the rescue of a child in peril. While these works often depict dogs attacking villains, defending women, or obeying their masters' commands, the culmination of the action usually involved the combination of water, a helpless child and a brave dog coming to the rescue. Such scenes were frequently performed by child actors whose emotive portrayals made them a perfect match for the protective canine characters, and their action-packed chemistry certainly contributed to their critical acclaim as a pair. Referred to as "infant prodigies," actors like William Henry West Betty –also known as Master Betty– "created sensation" (Varty 2008, 78) in Europe's leading theatrical capitals at the beginning of the century. The widespread admiration for young actors, whose tender age contrasted with their remarkable stage mastery, extended in some respects to the realm of performing animals. As Grimsted observes, "after all, who could say that the six-year-old who had learned all these lines and accompanying gestures might not develop into a more competent player?" (Grimsted 1968, 103). Both child performers and animals, as previously noted, defied theatrical conventions by embodying a "natural simplicity" (Grimsted 1968, 103) that contrasted with more intricate forms of artifice. Beyond the protective domestic role often attributed to canines –illustrated by French writer Alphonse Esquiros, who observed that "these model dogs protect the weak and oppressed, watch over their master's corpse, and defend on the stage with a thorough national ardour the flag of Old England" (Esquiros 1862, 210)– melodramas forge a symbolic bond between animality and childhood. The dog's most honourable role would be that of guarding the child's innocence, an idealisation of the domestic ethos that could visibly materialise itself in the triumph of the rescue before an enraptured audience.

The connection between children and animals emerged as a recurring motif throughout the nineteenth century, influencing not only culture but also the economy, philosophy, politics, and the legal framework of the state. The association was rooted in "a connection of the child with the animal as similar 'feeling subjects'" (Flegel 2016, 41). At a time when the concept of the child was still "a figure very much under construction," its identity was shaped by debates about "what it could or should do, what could or should be done to it," and "how one could or should react to it" (Flegel 2016, 3). The analogy between children and animals thus offered a lens through which to better understand and define the child's place in society.

The dog, as the quintessential domestic animal, provides a compelling example of this parallelism. During the nineteenth century, both animals and children underwent a transformation from being integral to the household economy to becoming symbols of domestic affection (Ritvo 1987; Kete 1994; Howell 2015). The ideal of domesticity that emerged during this period positioned them as central to the family, not as labourers but as sentimental figures. Over time, children and domestic animals became signatory recipients of an ethic of care and compassion, shaped by the Romantic ideal, the stigmatisation of cruelty as a marker of lower-class behaviour, and the influence of Christian evangelicalism.



Children and animals also shared a set of cultural representations. Both were seen as lacking the inherent power of language, as children had not completed full verbal mastery and development. Both were also portrayed as vulnerable victims, and framed within a binary construct that emphasised their profound emotional bond. This bond was further reinforced by the growing investment in the affective economy of domesticity. The emergence of child protection organisations, such as the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCCs), underscores this shared perception of both groups as “oppressed sufferers worthy of legal intervention” (Pearson 2011, 2). The founding of the first American SPCC in 1875 by Henry Bergh and Elbridge Gerry (the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NY-SPCC)), as an offshoot of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), epitomises this connection. Prompted by the so-called “myth” (Pearson 2011, 191) of Mary Ellen Wilson (a pivotal figure in the history of child protection in the United States whose case in 1874 was the first documented instance of child abuse to receive widespread attention), the movement to safeguard both children and animals under a unified framework of rights reflected “an ideology of sentimental liberalism, a rhetoric forged by animal and child protectionists that reconciled dependence with rights and pledged the use of state power to protect the helpless” (Pearson 2011, 3-4).

Drawing on advancements in psychology, anthropology, and philosophy, animal studies have underscored the evolutionary bond between children and animals, encapsulated in the “biophilia hypothesis” (Beck and Katcher 1996; Melson 2001). This theory posits that “through the course of evolution humans have developed an innate orientation towards the natural world” (Tipper 2011, 146). Melodrama as a genre vividly exemplifies this connection, intertwining the lives of children and animals. In *The Life of Carlo*, the dog’s fate is inseparably linked to that of his young owner from the outset. Carlo, born to a father he “never saw” (Fenwick 1806, 6) and “torn from [his] mother’s side” (Fenwick 1806, 7), is saved from the dreadful fate suffered by his sixteen siblings, all of whom are drowned, and taken in by a young boy called Edward. The narrative follows the structure of a classic *Bildungsroman*, in which “a young person fac[es] the challenges of growing up” (Graham 2019, 1). Like a canine counterpart to *David Copperfield*, Carlo recounts his adventures from birth to his eventual role at Drury Lane. The choice to begin Carlo’s story at the very moment of his birth reflects an effort to provide the most comprehensive and authentic account possible. Moreover, as in classic *Bildungsroman*, in Fenwick’s work, the journey shared by dog and child constitutes “the earlier bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity” (Sammons 1991, 42). The parallelism between Carlo and his young owner is highlighted through their shared physical and moral traits. The dog and the boy are both small in stature and suffer the pangs of hunger (Fenwick 1806, 18). Little is known about their parents, Edward lives under the care of an uncle. Thus, from the beginning, the domestic sphere appears devoid of traditional caregivers. The tragic drowning of Carlo’s “sweet sisters” and “darling brothers” –who long struggled to survive in the water amidst “sad (...) terrors” (Fenwick 1806, 8)– intensifies the



narrative's emotional weight and introduces a formative trauma that allows him to come full circle, as in time he will go on to rescue another innocent from drowning both in real life and onstage (two restorative acts that symbolically right the fatal ending that the universe had in store for his brothers and sisters).

Morally, the bond between Carlo and Edward is rooted in shared values of generosity and virtue. Both Edward and, later, Tom, Carlo's new owner, show compassion toward the dog. Edward even goes so far as to steal food for Carlo, despite being threatened to be taken "before the Lord Mayor" for his actions (Fenwick 1806, 27). Thrown into the harshness of the world, the boy and the dog are defined by a difficult and unstable past, and their present revolves around a ceaseless yearning for affection and domestic belonging. Carlo's journey, in particular, is marked by transience, as he moves from one home to another—living on a ship, residing in a monastery, and eventually establishing himself as a professional actor at Drury Lane. His ultimate reward comes in the form of recognition, as his bravery and selflessness secure him a place within the human world of labour and social significance.

In her exploration of the psychological bond between children and their pets, Tippet (2011, 146-147) criticises a pervasive flaw in childhood studies: the tendency to perceive the child not as a fully realised state—what she calls "being a child"—but rather as a transitional phase that is teleologically directed toward adulthood, which is regarded as the one true and fixed ontology. Such view positions the child as a liminal figure, whose actions are often dismissed as insignificant due to their presumed lack of the maturity necessary to render them meaningful. Fenwick's depiction of Carlo's life mirrors this framework: the dog's actions are recounted not to illuminate his past but to justify and provide a logic to his present role on the stage. The narrative charts Carlo's metaphorical journey to "adulthood," culminating in his initiation in the world of labour. His integration into the Drury Lane Theatre signifies stability, marking the end of his nomadic existence. The theatre offers Carlo a space of protection and purpose within the otherwise chaotic force of the public sphere, and it incorporates him in the wheel of production by making an actor out of him. His past experiences legitimate his value as a performer of the type that is truly able to comprehend the feats of the character he plays because he has known and confronted similar perils in his real life.

As traditional *Bildungsroman* journeys go, transformation and change mark the stages of the life of Edward and Carlo, setting them apart from the adult human world. They both acquire knowledge through lived experience rather than formal education, learning through the trials and tribulations of their respective journeys. Key to their transformation is a formative process of instruction, which will allow them to grow into an identity of their own. In this sense, learning to read acts as a mechanism that tempers the innate qualities of the dog, singling him out as an individual that deserves moral and civic consideration. Fenwick's text, much like Reynolds's theatrical work, underscores this educational process as fundamental to Carlo's potential. Fenwick recounts how the child teaches the dog to read (Fenwick 1806, 13) and how their companionship becomes a pedagogical relationship, with Carlo emulating the boy's virtuous behaviour. The boy's kindness and generosity toward Carlo instil in the dog a similar capacity for benevolence toward others



–“Gratitude! Thou dog’s best virtue! Teach me to repay, with a faithful relation of his kindness to me, the preserver of poor Carlo’s life!” the dog states as a foreword to his narrative (Fenwick 1806, 8).

As if anticipating modern insights from animal psychology (Huber, Range and Virány 2014), the autobiography suggests that the dog mirrors the conduct of his owner. Within the Romantic framework, where children are idealised as embodiments of virtue –“Where there are children, there is a Golden Age” (Novalis 1837, 271)–, this reading becomes central. It foregrounds the animal’s ability to be educated, a theme that Fenwick’s narrative highlights and that Reynolds’s theatrical adaptation renders vividly before the audience. This dual portrayal celebrates the potential for moral and social refinement in both child and animal, illustrating their shared capacity for growth and transformation.

Carlo’s acquired literacy, coupled with his eventual heroic act of saving a human from drowning, draw attention to the nineteenth-century debate on the potential capabilities of children and animals: What are they truly capable of? More specifically, what can they achieve with their bodies? In both cases, the physical possibilities of children and animals are seen as vital markers of identity. Taken to the space of the theatre, their physicality and their movement become inserted in a public sphere that operates through (adult) visual consumption. The autobiography’s grand theme of the performing animal interrogates the very behavioural act of playing –an activity shared by both children and animals. While both dogs and children engage in play for recreational and developmental purposes, they can also perform in a professional sense, signalling their potential inclusion in the labour force within the spectacle, where their efforts can be fully appreciated. This is suggested by Carlo himself in Fenwick’s story, “when implying that Reynolds’s play capitalized on his impressive feats” , “and [his] reputation as a good actor [was] universally established” (Fenwick 1806, 66).

The “testing” of physical capabilities became, unsurprisingly, problematic. For one thing, the stunt in the water was inherently risky, which was yet another reason laid out by child protection societies at the time to have children removed from the hazards of the entertainment industry and street performances (Pearson 2011, 3). As Monica Flegel observes, the child actor was “a vexed figure, straddling, on one side, the world of Fancy, imagination, and pleasure, and on the other, the world of commerce, training, and labour” (2016, 73). In Fenwick’s novel, Carlo’s master is responsible for his initiation in the theatrical realm. The dog was tested by the company so as to find out his capability to perform. “Noises were made in the pit, and in many parts of the house, to see if I should be alarmed by them, but I played my part with zeal and sagacity” (Fenwick 1806, 65-66). Both in Fenwick’s narrative and in Reynolds’s play, the theatrical space becomes the arena where the dog’s full range of actions is realised, much to his own contentment. In Carlo’s own words, “the praises bestowed on me by my young friends (...) have been my highest gratification” (Fenwick 1806, 66).

Flegel further highlights that in mid nineteenth-century Victorian novels such as Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839) and *Hard Times* (1854), and Wilkie Collins’s *Hide and Seek* (1854), the theatre “provides protection for those rejected



or endangered by the outside world, and in particular, by the failings of their own families” (2016, 81). In this sense, rehabilitation comes in the form of productivity, as the theatre offers them salvation from previous states of aimless wandering and “homelessness,” that is, lack of domesticity. The theatre thus becomes “a kind of surrogate family,” a “kind of home a place of safety, acceptance, and love” (Flegel 2016, 81). By turning child and dog into productive subjects, they become agents that contribute to the larger fabric of the state and national identity. It is their integration into the labour force that truly marks their status as respectable citizens, and so the child actor thus transitions into adulthood and Carlo achieves recognition as a valuable member of society. They become active participants in the cultural and economic structure of the nation, and their earned, “elevated” role legitimates their contribution to social order.

3. DOGS, CHILDREN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

As suggested thus far, the portrayal of the dog as a wandering orphan, bereft of stable domesticity and social connections, mirrors the nineteenth-century literary archetype of the child-victim. Reformist and philanthropic literature of the era often featured children as nomadic orphans in need of rescue from neglectful parental figures that could bind them to a life of crime or prostitution. As Lydia Murdoch (2006) notes, reformist writings by figures like Barnardo, along with state child protection laws, leaned heavily on melodramatic stereotypes to craft an image of the child as a vulnerable being in need of moral guidance from caring adults. Murdoch contends that this vision was less a reflection of reality than an “imagined” construct—a cultural narrative intended to legitimise the imposition of formal education, one that would integrate children into a national ideal of civility and citizenship rooted in Victorian bourgeois values.

In this context, educating children in accordance with bourgeois principles became a pressing necessity. It was up to society to rescue children from the streets and to integrate them in environments that restored their lost sense of domesticity—a cultural investment in the creation of productive members of society. Orphaned and vagrant children, often referred to as “street Arabs” in nineteenth-century fiction and philanthropic texts, were likened to stray animals—rootless, in need of rescue, and requiring social reintegration. Their “independence and liberty to the rights of property” constituted “a direct defiance of the state” (Murdoch 2006, 28), a threat paralleled by the stray dog, whose aimless street presence stood in stark contrast to the pet confined within bourgeois spaces such as “homes, shops, and schools” (Pemberton and Worboys 2007, 9). These philanthropic narratives employed a profoundly melodramatic tone that sought emotional support for their cause by presenting a dichotomous world of antagonistic opposites (Murdoch 2006, 24).

Fenwick’s narrative adopts this same framework, applying the reformist view of childhood to dogs. Carlo, like the children in such literature, is depicted as an orphan consigned to the streets, stripped of property and domestic stability. His life unfolds in episodic adventures evocative of the traditional picaresque,



ultimately culminating in a happy resolution founded on key societal values. Carlo is reclaimed as property, symbolising his reintegration; he gains social productivity by taking a role in a theatre, and he secures a position within the social hierarchy. Fenwick's tale thus echoes the principles of philanthropic literature, portraying the dog, like the child, as a figure with the potential to adapt and equip himself with the skills and functions to serve the state and the nation as a spoke in the wheel of employability, societal contribution, and domesticity. Until this ideal is achieved, both the child and the dog are viewed as existing in a transitional state, their value tied to their potential for future integration. In Carlo's case, this transformation reaches its final stage with his employment at Drury Lane, a milestone that justifies and immortalises his journey in an exemplary narrative.

Furthermore, Fenwick's narrative, anthropomorphic as it may be, is indicative of an evolving and enlightened awareness of the dog as a self-conscious subject (Cosslett 2006; DeMello 2013). The story's repeated assertion that the dog himself authored the narrative ("it is to increase their good opinion of him, and to add to their pleasures, that he has now composed the narrative of his life," Fenwick states (1806, iv)) positions the text as a kind of Lacanian mirror stage *avant la lettre*. Through a tripartite temporal framework, Carlo's story portrays a dog with an acute sense of self. By acquiring speech, the dog transcends his status as the etymological *infans* –an entity lacking *logos* and, consequently, substance or identity, according to classical anthropocentric views. Anthropomorphisation, while a fictional device, becomes a necessary strategy deployed by Fenwick –like many other storytellers– to convey a profound message: the dog has achieved the status of a human narrator, rising above the significance of species taxonomy and standing on equal footing with the author, whose own identity is eclipsed by that of the animal.

Yet Carlo's tale sits at a paradoxical crossroads, for although in the narrative the education of the dog is conveyed as a means through which to mold a rational subject from whom goodness can be extracted, the reality of theatrical "education" functioned quite contrarily. Training for the stage was carried out through conditioning –Reynolds states that, so as to make him jump from the rock into the water, Carlo's attention had to be "removed from the distraction of stage lights, boards, *et cetera*" (Reynolds 1826, II 194)– and the dog's capacity to learn in such ways was deemed as less impressive than the possibility of him having an innate moral virtue, which is what the play sought to convey to audiences. The theatrical performance aimed either to refine or to accentuate this moral valuation. To project and represent canine moral goodness for the audience, the dog, therefore, had to undergo a process of "denaturalisation" (if conditioning is to be understood in such terms) so as to make him controllable and to automate his response into a reaction. Reynolds's comment in his biography that water was easier to handle than the dog further highlights Carlo's agency as a "battle of wills" (Howell 2019, 207) as much as a token of "resistance" (Despret 2013, 41). In Reynolds's terms, "The water we found tractable and accommodating; but during the first and second rehearsals, Carlo (...) sulked, and seemed, according to the technical phrase, inclined to 'play booty'. After several other successive trials, he would not jump; but at last (...) he immediately made the desired leap, and repeated it at least a dozen times, as much



to his own, as to our satisfaction” (1806, 194). Reynolds’s statement reveals not only the shared view of both elements –water and the dog– as external to the theatre and subjugated to human control but also the necessity of breaking and taming them to reintegrate them into a space governed by illusion.

4. CONCLUSION: CHILDREN, MELODRAMA AND ECOFEMINISM

A timeworn theatrical adage advises against sharing the stage with children and animals. Their unpredictability and their potential to eclipse adult performers in the eyes of the audience can put the play or the performance in “danger.” Perceived as intruders in the theatrical realm, the risk of imploding the simulation taking place on the stage becomes too great, and brings the performative act into a precarious tension between the “natural” and the artificial.

Fenwick’s text laid the groundwork for a series of popular canine autobiographies, extending the tradition of the subgenre well into the nineteenth century. Riding the wave of breed fancy, many authors continued to rely on the Newfoundland as the most apt narrator and protagonist –the most famous being Mary Burrow’s *Neptune, or, The Autobiography of a Newfoundland Dog* (1869). Other species soon joined the trend: horses and donkeys entered the literary scene, gradually advancing an exploration of the animal perspective and its broader significance in the art of narratology –the Comtesse de Ségur’s *Mémoires d’un âne* (1860) and Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877) probably being the most renown. As popular culture integrated animals (and dogs, in particular) in the theatrical and literary expressions of a growing appreciation for the urban and the domestic, their representation must also be read in light of additional literature and texts aiming to redefine their proper “place” and behaviour in these changing social spaces. These texts often advocated for the humane treatment of dogs, recognising them as sentient beings deserving of protection from pain and proper education. While the primary concern remained the utility of the dog to human interests (that is, anthropocentrism was never really questioned), these works nevertheless ventured, however tentatively, into the realm of canine psychology in order to identify and establish the conditions that could best guarantee their wellbeing.

It is unavoidable to link Fenwick’s defence of Carlo as a sentient being to the animal protection movements that gained prominence in nineteenth-century Britain and that ultimately led to the founding of the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824. This connection becomes even more significant considering, as Diana Donald (2020) has shown, these movements were largely initiated, organised, and led by women –despite the intellectual credit for these efforts often being attributed to men (Gaarder 2011, 95). As Lissa Paul (2019) observes, Fenwick was a prominent figure in early modern feminist activism, though the interplay between this activism and her advocacy for children and animals in her work remains to be fully explored. Undoubtedly, in her text, the association of the dog’s vulnerability with that of the child is closely tied to a portrayal of women as victims of oppression, in alignment with the classical melodramatic aesthetics



of victimhood (Thomasseau 1984, 35). As contemporary ecofeminist criticism has argued, both animality and femininity form two key vertices of a shared “constructed connection” (Gruen 1993, 61), recognised as expressions of the natural, the vulnerable, and the oppressed under patriarchal systems of exploitation (Gaard 1993; Birkeland 1993; Adams and Donovan 1995).

It could therefore be argued that Fenwick was a pioneer in connecting the humane values of animal protection to feminism, particularly through her use of melodramatic theatrical aesthetics. Her work plays a crucial role in the emerging defence of children, animals, and, by extension, women, articulated through a rhetoric of sentiment. In line with contemporary ecofeminist thought, the expression of suffering in this context should not be interpreted as a passive, helpless element reflective of female inaction, but rather as a proactive one, embodying feminine agency through the “performance of emotion” that underpins “the politics of protest and reform of the period” (Newey 2018, 149). This performance aims to evoke empathy from the audience, encouraging solidarity for the animal, the child, or the woman. As Laura Brown observes, there is an “engagement with the literary representation of dogs” that “coincides with and contributes to the rapid development of the humanitarian movements of this period” (Brown 2010, 130). This engagement is most evident in the deliberate use of melodramatic aesthetics, emphasising compassion, visual immediacy, and the suffering of the most vulnerable. The stage itself was instrumental in cultivating this sentiment, delving into what Haraway terms “multispecies companionship” (Haraway 2003, 11-14) – a concept also articulated by the French historian Jules Michelet, who, in his *Bible de l’humanité* (1864), described such companionship as “fraternity” among living beings (Michelet, 1864, 61). Amy Hughes notes the rise of *dogaturgy* – the proliferation of melodramas featuring dogs in the first half of the nineteenth century – and observes that these animals, including Reynolds’s Carlo, exuded “loyalty, care, warmth, affection, determination,” and if the audience “loved” them, it was because they were portrayed onstage as more than mere beasts: “they are love. They are more than beasts; they are best friends” (Hughes 2021, 225). As Laura Brown further asserts, in canine narratives, both dogs and children speak “the idiom of sentiment,” functioning as a “trans-species mode of communication” (Brown 2010, 135). The language of sentiment thus appeals to emotion, evoking empathy and a mood that are central to the success of melodrama. Fenwick’s text, therefore, not only illustrates how sentiment transcends species boundaries, but, like the mechanisms of melodrama, it demonstrates how this sentiment can bridge the gap between stage and audience, as well as between theatrical and literary forms. In other words, Fenwick’s conjoining of humane and feminist sentiment is rooted in her ability to integrate melodramatic aesthetics into her work, channelling a “creative compassion” (Gilmour 2020) that fosters a sense of kinship among all vulnerable living beings, beyond the confines of species, literary genres, and cultural formats.

Tragically, Carlo’s real-life fate stood in stark contrast to the ideals espoused in Fenwick’s narrative. Contemporary newspapers revealed that the dog was destroyed only a few years after achieving theatrical fame, following an attack on Reynolds’s son. An article titled “Death of Carlo” published by *Sporting Magazine* in



1806 reported that, following such “crime,” and by virtue of his “ungrateful nature,” the dog was led to a butcher’s slaughter-house in Clare market “where his vital thread was cut ‘with edge of penny cord’” (1806, 6). The bitter irony lies in the fact that Carlo’s stage training, designed to depict him as a rescuer of children, ultimately and in reality resulted in aggression toward a child. This anecdote of course echoes the numerous accounts of animals exploited for entertainment who, after enduring the relentless demands of show business, eventually “turn against” their handlers or owners (Peterson 2007, 33). One may deduce that Carlo’s training –of which little is known beyond Reynolds’s remarks about his lack of cooperation– mirrored the coercion and cruelty often associated with Victorian accounts of child performers exploited behind the scenes of theatrical productions (Flegel 2016, 73-108). It is not difficult to imagine that Carlo, a victim of the theatre industry’s negligence, long runs and pursuit of profit, became in life the antithesis of the symbol he represented on stage and in Fenwick’s narrative. Once again, human interference appears to have warped the natural goodness of the animal, fulfilling its tragic propensity to corrupt what it seeks to control.

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