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## **ANIMALS AS 18TH-CENTURY TEXT: THE CONTEXTUALIZED PRACTICE OF GOLDSMITH'S WRITING AND GAINSBOROUGH'S PAINTING**

*Lewis Caccia, Jr.*

All animals tell a story. The story may be about themselves, their masters, the values within a geographical framework, the economic affordances and constraints of a temporal dimension, or any combination of these. For example, a dog trembling on a porch along a rough city street where windows are boarded up will convey different messages than a dog relaxing in an air-conditioned doghouse situated well beyond closed gates. Likewise, two different conclusions can be drawn when a rare Baltimore oriole or a chicken hawk occupies a tree branch in northeastern Ohio. While driving, one might reflect on cows differently when they are in a pasture than when one has escaped and is lumbering along the road. Moreover, one can be sure a horse is serving a different purpose when it is sweaty, physically undefined, and confined to a muddy pen than when it is groomed, prominently toned, and grazing on green grass.

In Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, animals are used in some scenes to help advance the story. The use of animals develops the plot, defines the characters, details the setting, and maintains the humorous tone. Individually, the different scenes convey important points about the role of animals in eighteenth-century life and about socioeconomic class issues of that era. Furthermore, the socioeconomic issues reflected by Goldsmith's literature have also been illustrated in country paintings, particularly the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough. The similarity of the messages conveyed by the two genres and their accurate depiction of real life—as verified by modern, non-fiction accounts—truly indicate that Goldsmith shaped his text to create not only an entertaining comedy but also a narrative art.

As the plot emerges, birds are used to introduce the primary conflict of the story, the conflict between Dr. Primrose and Squire Thornhill. Primrose recalls, “our tranquility was soon disturbed by the report of a gun just by us, and immediately after, a man was seen bursting through the hedge to take up the game he had killed. This sportsman was the Squire’s chaplain, who had shot one of the black-birds that so agreeably entertained us” (43). In *Oliver Goldsmith Revisited*, Peter Dixon elaborates on this conflict between the protagonist and antagonists: “it shows up the callousness of Thornhill, and the crassness of the chaplain” (82). On a larger level, this scene represents a conflict between two classes of society that is also explained by Dixon: “This pastoral scene, like others later, exists to be shattered: the calm and sanctity . . . is rudely demolished” (81). Thus, even within the country setting, values still typically differ according to one’s socioeconomic class. By taking time to listen to the birds rather than hastening to shoot them, Primrose’s family can be representing the simple pleasures of experience while the Squire could be demonstrating the materialistic pleasure of possession.

Goldsmith’s depiction of how the idea of pleasure represents a difference between two social classes rather than just between two people or values themselves is echoed in some of Gainsborough’s paintings. In particular, *Peasant Smoking at a Cottage Door* (Cormack 181) features a rural family relaxing in the evening twilight. This painting extends beyond mere physical description to offer a visual *commentary* that William Paley explains in *Reasons for Contentment Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Republic*, dated 1792:

If the face of happiness can anywhere be seen, it is in the summer evening of a country village, where, after the labours of the day, each man at his door, with his children, amongst his neighbours, feels his frame and his heart at rest, everything about him pleased and pleasing, and a delight and a complacency in his sensations far beyond what either luxury or diversion can afford. The rich want this; and they want what they must never have . . . (Cormack 180)

The response of the rich lends greater credibility to Paley’s interpretation. Malcolm Cormack explains, the rich “did not buy representations of [this sentiment] from Gainsborough. His landscapes . . . were not well appreciated” (180). Hence, the use of discretionary income is as indicative of eighteenth-century class values as it is of the tendencies of the different economic demographics existing today.

In addition to suggesting a difference between the values of two socioeconomic classes, Goldsmith’s scene also implies a deference to the upper classes. To understand this interpretation, consider the scene following the shooting of the blackbird. Specifically, the chap-



**Peasant Smoking at a Cottage Door.** Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles; Gift of Mrs. James Kennedy. UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

lain offers Sophia the game he had just killed. In response, “she was going to refuse, but a private look from her mother soon induced her to correct the mistake and accept his present, though with some reluctance” (*Vicar* 43). Sophia’s initial refusal of the gift and her mother’s urging to accept it may represent how young people are less conscious of social classes while adults usually defer to higher classes.

Certainly, there was much deference to the upper classes when it came to hunting. Stella Margetson explains in *Leisure and Pleasure*

*in the Eighteenth Century*, “though the English upper classes were far less autocratic than their continental neighbors, the shooting of game was a privilege they guarded very closely” (124). This exclusivity of hunting rights was even mandated by law:

No one not having an estate worth L40 per annum or goods and chattels worth L200 was allowed by the Game Act to go out . . . to kill partridges, pheasants, hares, and rabbits . . . which developed during the century into a disastrous war between the rich and poor, causing much ill-feeling and much hardship to the unprivileged section of the community. (124)

The ramifications of this legal disparity damaged more than the feelings of the lower classes. With the laws created to favor the “richer neighbors,” the rural hunter was now “forbidden to kill the plump fowls of the air which might have kept his wife and children from starvation. . . . The sport was really his necessity” (124). Consequently, the necessity to eat inspired many of the rural poor to take up poaching, which stretched the already existing tensions between the wealthy and poor. Ironically, the idea of poaching became publicly romanticized much like the gunfights of America’s Old West. “It had an irresistible fascination . . . and a very old country labourer asserted with dignity: ‘Us don’t see no harm in it, for the Bible says the wild birds is sent for the poor man as well as the quality’” (125). With these hunting conflicts in mind, Goldsmith may have been motivated by the romanticism in establishing the humor of someone enjoying birds getting into a conflict with someone who hunted them. Likewise, he may have been motivated by the serious ramifications of the laws in using the humor to subtly critique the laws of the time. Collectively, the truths of Gainsborough’s visual interpretation of two different value systems and of Margetson’s account of the differing laws for the rich and poor suggest Goldsmith’s bird scene as a truly multi-faceted depiction.

As the plot thickens, the Primroses’ personal shortcomings are emphasized when they are swindled out of horses. Two chapters beforehand, Goldsmith carefully prepares this characterization by first establishing the importance of horses to the pastoral way of life. Specifically, while twenty-first-century society enjoys horses as pets or grooms them for shows, Primrose’s plans demonstrate how eighteenth-century rural society looked down on horses that didn’t perform some kind of work:

Now, my dear, my proposal is this: there are our two plow horses . . . that have scarce done an earthly thing for this month past and are both grown fat and lazy. Why should not they do something as well as we? And let me tell you, when Moses has trimmed them down a little, they will not be so contemptible. (50-51)

The choice of the words “earthy thing” represents how horses were not for entertainment but for practical purposes. Likewise, the word “contemptible” reinforces the rural view that horses were useless as a luxury and had to justify their being kept.

This prevailing view of horses sparked debate about what provisions should be made for their well-being. In Gainsborough’s *Peasant with Two Horses* (Barrell 36), this debate is vividly depicted. Specifically, the painting includes a boy resting atop a white horse under the shade of a large tree, a location that suggests the scene is taking place during the heat of summer. Meanwhile, a black horse rests its head on the rump of the white horse. In the distant background, other workers labor hard. The choice of black for one horse and white for the other is most reflective of the discrepancy Gainsborough seems to portray. John Barrell addresses this discrepancy in *The Dark Side of the Landscape*:

The contrast tells us much about what was an important issue in moral and religious debate in the eighteenth century: whether the good life was one of unremitting toil . . . of the curse of Adam, or a life of intellectual, and so moral, self-improvement, such as can be undertaken only by those with leisure for the task. (35-36)

This contrast of two value systems was further complicated by a disagreement among country people about how important horses were to the nature of work. As T. S. Ashton explains in *An Economic History of England: The 18th Century*, horses offered greater efficiency in the production of food as they had largely taken the place of oxen at the plow (55). However, when wheat prices were skyrocketing, many people complained that too much land was going unused for food production, “that large resources of land were being absorbed in the raising of horses” (55). Likewise, horses were being utilized for factory industry and in the army, but these were at the expense of soil erosion, leading many to call the horse, “the most dangerous moth in the whole web of agricultural economy” (55). This temporary ascription of the horse is most indicative of the temporal quality of cultural values, including eighteenth-century values.

Ultimately, a favorable recognition of the value of horses prevailed. By 1773, horses had increased ten-fold to find employment “not only in the army and the hunting field, but also in and about collieries and industrial establishments” (Ashton 87). Moreover, one of the lesser known yet equally important occupations of eighteenth-century rural life was that of the saddler. A. E. Richardson elucidates in *Georgian England* the importance of saddlers to the rural economy as a whole:

. . . the saddler made coach and chaise harness, bridles, reins, whips, and traces. He employed a whole band of tradesmen, ranging from the leather cutter, the currier, and the embroiderer. He bought . . . from the draper . . . the mercer . . . the laceman . . . and the haberdasher. His trade, therefore, was a comprehensive one. (71)

Hence, horses were vital to the country way of life. Depending on one's profession, horses were used to hunt for food, plow for crops, raise horses for sale, provide services for others with horses, or any combination of these.

By establishing the importance of horses, Goldsmith heightens the effect of the swindling. The embellished consequence builds upon the obvious storyline of a family that receives bad break after bad break. Additionally, the scene offers a commentary about the lack of social mobility the pastoral population faced. Specifically, Primrose sends Moses to the fair, trusting his son to develop his intellectual skills, "As I had some opinion of my son's prudence, I was willing enough to entrust him with this commission" (57). However, Moses not only makes a bad deal but even "parted with the colt, and brought us back nothing but a gross of green paltry spectacles!" (59-60).

In *The True Genius of Oliver Goldsmith*, Robert Hopkins explains this message of social immobility: "It is the Vicar who designed Moses 'for business,' but when Moses and his father are swindled at the fair, both are shown to be yokels" (192-193). While this irony of Primrose's reasoning is humorous, it also makes the point that all decisions and expenditures had to be devoted to maintaining whatever profession the rural person was in, that time and money couldn't be spared to enter a profession of a higher social status. Indeed, as stated by Hopkins, "A few critics have suggested . . . *The Vicar of Wakefield* is not only a satire on complacent optimism but also a burlesque of the shallow" (200).

The lack of social mobility in the eighteenth century is well documented. According to Roy Porter's account in *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, "the English social ladder was indeed precisely graded" with many levels between the top and the bottom (49). He also explains that "England was a society in which the fences dividing social ranks were, in theory and practice, jumpable" (50). However, this recognition of social mobility is tempered with an admission of the many constraints that kept the mobility very restricted, especially for country inhabitants:

. . . so long as mass concentrations of workers remained highly exceptional and the Poor Law regulated rural society, there was no imminent threat to stability. Limited access to upward mobility and the rise in tandem of aggregate wealth and social pretensions ensured that the social order neither collapsed nor was overthrown. (97)

This description suggests that the opportunities granted to rural people were often designed to keep them happy in the status they already held. In particular, the word “aggregate” suggests that the main goal of the economic system was to ensure that people within a level were truly equal to each other while a few individuals were enabled to advance in order to keep the remainder of a particular socioeconomic class believing in mobility and continuing to work hard at their level.

The lack of social mobility reflected in Goldsmith’s fiction and Porter’s non-fiction is likewise illustrated by Gainsborough. For example, in *Village Scene with Peasants on Horseback* (Barrell 64), as stated by Barrell, “a more dejected portrayal of the village community could hardly be imagined” (64). Specifically, peasants sit with heads downcast atop of horses, also with heads downcast. In the background, three larger-than-scale people—two women, one nursing a baby, and a man—huddle in despair. A church steeple in the distance suggests a betrayal of promises made to the rural community. Linking the messages conveyed in both literature and painting, Barrell explains, “Goldsmith had shown the jolly village of Gay’s *Shepherd’s Week* as having been destroyed by the rapacity of the new rich: Gainsborough’s picture shows the surviving village too as a place of poverty and despair” (65). In correlation with Gainsborough’s illustrations and the non-fiction accounts of horses and social immobility, Goldsmith’s swindling scene advances the Job-like plot, characterizes two of the Primroses, extends the humorous tone, and takes place in a setting typical of pastoral life. Hence, Goldsmith’s scene reflects not only aspects but also complications of the country way of life.

No animal defines individual people like the dog. Bulldog. Chinese chow. Labrador retriever. Pit bull. Every breed says something different about their master’s place of residence, financial status, and/or personality traits. Additionally, many people develop closer relationships with dogs than any other animal. Dogs can share in one’s celebrations, sadnesses, work, and even safety. With these canine qualities in mind, it is most fitting that the “An Elegy of the Death of a Mad Dog” serves as the novel’s climax, a point after which Primrose’s condition could still improve or worsen. Moreover, the elegy signifies a change in the tone of the novel and occurs in the chapter that starts the second half of the novel. In *Oliver Goldsmith: A Georgian Study*, Ricardo Quintana explains the contrasts that occur before and after the elegy:



The memorable episodes present in the first half are all perfectly attuned to the spirit of family life as it runs on tranquilly . . . . [In the second half], the characters are thrust into the world; their experiences are violent: movement, chase, travel are forced on them. (110)

Equally important, the elegy reinforces the characterizations of both Primrose and Thornhill and alludes to the outcomes that await them in the remaining chapters. Specifically, Primrose is symbolized by the kindly man described in the lyrics: "A kind and gentle heart he had,/To comfort friends and foes;/The naked everyday he clad,/When he put on his clothes" (82). On the other hand, Thornhill is unfavorably analogized as a dog who "when a pique began,/The dog, to gain his private ends,/Went mad and bit the man" (82). Likewise, their fates are symbolically foreshadowed; Primrose "recovered of the bite" while Thornhill becomes "The dog it was that died" (83). Indeed, as stated by Hopkins,

Not only does "An Elegy" foreshadow the reversal of the end of the novel but, most significantly, the reader is warned about the intensified structural burlesque that is about to ensue in *The Vicar* itself . . . . Immediately afterwards, the narrative structure becomes extremely exaggerated with fluctuations between states of happiness and misery (205-206).

It is most appropriate that Primrose indicated his preference for a song about dogs rather than swans because the types of dogs owned by the wealthy and by rural class individuals alike told much about an individual's interests, economic status, and general personality. Richardson explains,

Hunting the fox was the prerogative of the landed gentry . . . . Fishing was a sport for quieter, studious men . . . and fowling was pursued with due regard to economy in powder and shot . . . . Each of these sports . . . produced definite codes, special breeds of horses and dogs, and customs peculiar to it (74-75).

Similarly, Gainsborough included dogs in many of his portraits to help define the people he was illustrating. For example, in his rural paintings, such as *Peasants Going to Market* (Barrell 53), dogs tend to be thin and are striding to keep pace with their masters. On the other hand, paintings such as *William Poyntz* (Cormack 73) feature a wealthy hunter who is nonchalantly leaning against a tree with a well-fed dog who is also relaxing beneath the tree. Regarding the concept of hunting, it is also most interesting that very few of Gainsborough's paintings feature *rural* hunters, perhaps a reflection of the hunting laws during his era.

Another painting in which a dog helps to advance the story is *Carl Friedrich Abel* (Cormack 121), a portrait of a musician/composer.

In this portrait, the dog sits underneath the table while Abel composes. Resting his head on his paw but with his eyes open, the dog patiently waits—conveying the numerous hours a composer needs to perfect his craft. Likewise, *The Reverend Henry Bate* (Cormack 129) features a dog with utmost erect posture, eyes locked upward to his master. It is a most appropriate representation as Bate was a very pugnacious clergyman. Known as the “Fighting Parson,” he even “fought a duel on behalf of his opinions in the press” (Cormack 128).

On a softer note, *Mrs. Mary Robinson* (Cormack 135) is a portrait of romantic disappointment as she holds a picture of her unrequited love and stares forward, wistfully. Her dog shares in her emotion by sitting on a ledge that is closer to her level and likewise stares forward, wistfully. In these paintings, Gainsborough constructs settings that allow carefully chosen spaces for dogs. It is a technique that tells a story, ascribes the characters, and sets a tone with images much like Goldsmith does with words. In this fashion, both genres convey real-life themes that span across different personalities, occupations, and events.

After the climax, Primrose must sink to his lowest point in order for the happy ending to achieve its maximum effect. Specifically, when Squire Thornhill is unable to persuade Primrose to approve his plans for Sophia, the Squire hits Primrose with utmost financial ruin:

The consequence of my incapacity was his driving my cattle that evening, and their being appraised the next day for less than half their value. My wife and children now therefore entreated me to comply upon any terms, rather than incur certain destruction. (130)

Accordingly, Dixon confirms how this incident aptly initiates the series of misfortunes that befall Primrose, and he explains the incident’s broader implications: “The ruin appropriately begins with Thornhill’s steward driving away Primrose’s cattle. The pastoral and peaceable world of hay and cider and cattle rearing is torn apart. . .” (81). Thus, Primrose’s struggle with his cattle reflects the economic fragility of pastoral life.

Although Goldsmith’s use of comedy includes exaggeration, the importance of *owning* livestock to the economic stability of farmers was no exaggeration. According to Roy Porter, there was a great economic disparity between tenant-farmers who were able to own a portion of the land they worked on and tenant-farmers who merely received wages. To explain, land ownership “enabled the poor man to support his family, and bring up his children. Here he could turn out his cow and pony, feed his flock of geese, and keep his pig” (94).

On the other hand, non-tenant farmers were “more dependent on money wages” and “also without employment for much of the year” (94). The struggles of eighteenth-century non-tenant farmers become more perceptible when considered along twenty-first-century parallels. The struggles facing non-tenant farmers were much like the struggles facing migrant farm workers today.

Having Primrose lose his cattle from being driven off is an apt exaggeration that emphasizes the difficulty of raising cattle in the first place. Ashton explains this difficulty, “small, thin cattle could be raised on” barren land or hills; however, the profits of quality cattle were not enough to outweigh the cost of setting up quality pasture land (52). Additionally, farmers needed large amounts of capital to withstand the initial costs of acquiring cattle and the need to allow several years to raise fattened cattle. Those with sufficient capital still faced difficulties: “a failure of the hay crop, or a shortage of oats might make it impossible to keep livestock through the winter” (52). As if those challenges weren’t enough, cattle always faced the possibility of disease (52-53). Again, these challenges become all the more lucid when viewed through a twenty-first-century lens. Farmers still need large capital to keep current with modern farming technologies, and mad-cow disease has posed danger to the cattle industry as of late.

Illustrating the real-life facts of eighteenth-century farming, Gainsborough’s *Herdsmen and Cows* (Hayes 73) says much about the importance of livestock and the difficulty to maintain it. Specifically, there are two herdsmen tending three cows on a hill. The close proximity of a small, humble house suggests that the herdsmen are tenant-farmers who own the livestock rather than just earn wages. The leaveless trees suggest a poor quality of land and the sawed-off branches suggest a scarcity of resources. Moreover, the cows’ waists are indented to reflect the fragile state of livestock economy. Applying this fragility of economy in his fiction, Goldsmith shows how country residents are as affected by their environments as city people. In the words of Ricardo Quintana, “So is the comedy of life enacted in the idyllic setting of the little farm where the Primroses take shelter from the accidents of the outer world” (115). Perhaps it is the substantial quantity of these accidents experienced by both character and reader that allows Goldsmith’s book to appeal to collective humanity.

Throughout *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Oliver Goldsmith includes animals to help advance his story. Specifically, the bird scene early



***Herdsmen and Cows.*** The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis.

in the novel establishes the primary conflict, characterizes the protagonist and antagonist, details the setting, and builds a humorous tone. As the novel develops, the horse-swindling scene takes place at a fair, a typical country setting; also, the scene develops the Job-like plot, further characterizes the Primrose family, and once again enlivens the humorous tone. Beginning the second half of the novel, the dog elegy serves as the novel's climax. After the climax, cows are driven away to sink Primrose to his lowest in order to maximize the effect of his favorable resolution.

In addition to advancing Goldsmith's fiction, the use of animals strongly correlates to real-life issues that are confirmed by the modern, non-fiction accounts and by Gainsborough's illustrations of the country way of life. As Quintana proclaims, "the real theme of this seemingly innocent book is discovery about life" (115). Indeed, the bird scene develops the concept of pleasure as perceived by two different socioeconomic classes and builds into a depiction of the deference to the upper classes. Similarly, the horse scene implies much about the horse's place in eighteenth-century society and the general social immobility of the society itself. Furthermore, the dog was the most apt of subjects for the elegy as dogs arguably define

their masters more effectively than any other animal. Finally, Primrose's difficulty with the cows reflects the difficulty of the country way of life itself, let alone the influences of class differences.

With these real-life depictions in mind, readers are left with the question of whether Goldsmith was purposely trying to bring these issues to light or was just utilizing popular issues to create an entertaining read. Accordingly, Hopkins offers a perspective that speculates a possibly intentional nature of the novel: "If this interpretation is right, then the improbability of plot, instead of being a weakness, is in reality a deliberate stratagem on the part of Goldsmith" (200). Actually, we can't be sure of Goldsmith's motivations, but many of the best writers throughout the centuries have been those who recognize the important issues of their time and apply them to their writing—if only for entertainment purposes. If nothing else, *The Vicar of Wakefield* is valuable for inspiring readers to consider the influences of the time, influences that shaped a comedy that remains popular more than two centuries later.

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