

## **“Bend or Break”: Unraveling the Construction of Children and Animals as Competitors in Nineteenth-Century English Anti-Cruelty Movements**

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Children and animals are often constructed, particularly in anti-animal rights discourse, as somehow in competition with each other for rights and protections,<sup>2</sup> a construction very much in existence at the emergence of anti-cruelty to children societies in both America and England. One supposed source of this competition was the assumption that animal lovers did not value children. For example, as one late-nineteenth-century commentator explained, “Those who are kind to their fellow creatures will almost always be found to be also kind and considerate to animals; while, on the contrary, those who are merely fond of animals are known to be often averse to children” (Warren 20).

Though early child protection advocates did not necessarily hold these views, they often suggested that animals, as a result of this sentimental investment, received greater protections than did children. For example, in July 1888, *The Child’s Guardian*, the official journal of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), published a commentary from the *Morning Advertiser* on the Bill before parliament to bring about legislation criminalizing cruelty to children. The *Advertiser* supported the Bill, exclaiming: “It does seem anomalous that it should be easier to punish a man or woman for ill-treatment of a dog or cat than for cruelty to their own children; but such is the state of the law at

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<sup>2</sup> A problem reflected in the title to Gary Francione’s animal rights text: *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). Though Francione argues that this is an “unfair hypothetical” (Francione xxii), it is nevertheless a comparison that is often presented in ethical debates, particularly in anti-abortion rhetoric. See, for example, John Smeaton’s “In Britain, Unborn Children are Treated Worse than Unwanted Dogs” (<http://spuc-director.blogspot.com/2008/09/in-britain-unborn-children-are-treated.html>).

present” (*The Morning Advertiser* 58). This complaint echoed that of early child-protection advocates in the United States, particularly in the wake of the infamous Mary Ellen case.

Etta Angell Wheeler, a volunteer “making her usual rounds through the tenements of the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhoods tending the souls of the poor and the sick” (Pearson 1) discovered the young Mary Ellen in an abused and neglected condition. After consulting, to no avail, with numerous authorities in an attempt to intervene, Wheeler finally approached Henry Bergh, the president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), and, “according to Jacob Riis, who was then a reporter for the *New York Herald*, Bergh ... declare[ed] that ‘the child is an animal. If there is no justice for it as a human being, it shall at least have the rights of a cur in the street’” (Pearson 2-3).

The Mary Ellen case led to the formation of the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874, and given the circumstances behind this formation, it is hardly surprising that the development of similar societies in England utilized similar rhetoric about the supposed greater rights enjoyed by animals. Though the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (which would later become the National Society) did share many things in common with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in England, Benjamin Waugh, the first director of the NSPCC, nevertheless often castigated the people of England for caring more for animals than for suffering children.<sup>3</sup> Nor do the facts surrounding the passage of laws and the formation of anti-cruelty societies seem to contradict the narrative that “curs” had more protection: as James Kincaid points out in *Child-Loving*, the Victorian Era was “comparatively neglectful of the young in its reforms” (77) pointing

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Waugh’s complaint in the NSPCC’s journal, *The Child’s Guardian*, that “if wretched children were only dogs, what sunlight would fall into their doomed and dismal lives!” (Waugh, “Notes,” 84).

out that the London SPCC was not formed until 1884,<sup>4</sup> even though the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had been in existence since 1824.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the first laws protecting animals from cruelty had been passed in 1835,<sup>6</sup> while the Children's Charter was not passed until 1889. Evidence such as this would seem to support the long-standing representation of the English as a people whose sentimental attachment to animals represents either a displacement of, or worse a perversion of, a proper investment in human beings.

Examining the origins of the anti-cruelty to children movement in fact displays something quite different than the "irony that an organization existed to protect animals but not children" (Gerry 4). Prior to the child-protection movement, children were protected under the same laws that safeguarded other humans from assault and murder, and parents had been prosecuted, long before the advent of the Children's Charter, for the abuse of their children.<sup>7</sup> What animal-protection discourse provided was not the ability to see children as deserving of better treatment, but the ability to see children as deserving of better treatment *in much the same way* as animals. That is, it had to be possible to see children as something like animals in order for similar (and in some cases, shared) anti-cruelty societies to come into being. In many cases, this did in fact mean that children should be protected from cruelty and neglect, but in others, it meant delineating proper control over and discipline of the child, to the extent of safeguarding particular forms of violence *against* children.

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<sup>4</sup> The first SPCC in England was in fact the Liverpool Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, founded in 1883.

<sup>5</sup> The prefix "Royal" was added in 1840.

<sup>6</sup> The Martin Act was passed in 1822, and prevented cruelty to cattle. It was extended to include other domestic animals in 1835.

<sup>7</sup> In *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900*, Linda Pollock argues "that the law and society condemned child abuse long before the specific Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act appeared in 1889. Parents who abused their offspring were generally considered 'unnatural' and the cruelty as 'horrific' or 'barbaric'" (94). As well, no new laws were required to save Mary Ellen from her home, nor was she represented under laws that protected animals.

In other words, a close examination of the relationship between anti-cruelty to children and anti-cruelty to animals reveals not an English preference for safeguarding animal life over child life, but instead a problem at the heart of protectionist discourse: that safeguarding both animals and children is not solely about preventing cruelty, but also about preserving both animal and child as useful, pleasurable objects. In an examination of “Bend or Break,” a story of child abuse published in the RSPCA’s *Animal World* in 1870, I argue that this story’s representation of suffering childhood works very much within the more common characterization of children within that journal as sadistic abusers of animals. Far from constructing two contradictory narratives of childhood – one, violent and out of control, the other, victimized and endangered – the representations of children in *Animal World* instead work together to present models of “appropriate” discipline, narratives that instruct *Animal World* readers on how they might bend a child’s will without breaking that child, and which coincide with the journal’s articles on how to control and care for animals themselves. Rather than providing a discourse of rights, anti-cruelty societies like the RSPCA—and later, the NSPCC—instead generated narratives of kindness that nevertheless produce justification for power over the animal and the child, and stress the necessity of control over both. What is important about the construction of these similar agencies, therefore, is not that animals received greater protection than children, but that *both* animals and children, in protectionist discourse, are presented as disempowered subjects.

### **“Bend or Break: A Story for Parents”**

“Bend or Break,” a story specifically concerned with the emotional and physical abuse of a young boy by his parents, was published serially in 1870 and 1871, and thus predates the emergence of anti-cruelty to children societies in England. The publication of a story with such a subject in the RSPCA’s *Animal World* might seem somewhat odd, given that journal’s

commitment to animal protection issues, but it is important to note that calls for the inclusion of children in animal protection had already taken place in its pages: in the February 1870 issue of *Animal World*, for example, a letter from “A. B.” asks,

May I venture, through your valuable medium, to call the attention of humane people to a class of animals whose sufferings have hitherto been little regarded? . . . . They are as helpless as any class of creatures. . . . yet those who have tried only know how difficult it is to rouse an interest in them—I mean *Children*. (“The Protection of *All Defenceless Animals*” 94)

In order to justify the inclusion of children in the anti-cruelty-to-animals movement, the writer attempts to construct the two as similar: both are “helpless,” and “completely in their power, and at the mercy of those they happen to belong to” (95). That is, like animals, children cannot speak on their own behalf, and must rely on the care and protection of those who, it would seem, own them, as the “belong to” in that sentence suggests. A second letter, written by an “Old Bachelor,” and published in *Animal World* in April of 1870, reaffirms this position, stating, “The power, absolute to an almost terrible extent, which parents and guardians possess over their children or wards, morally and intellectually, the ability to make or mar their little lives is often abused sadly enough, and for this there is no remedy” (“The Protection of Children from Cruelty” 125). What unites children and animals in these letters, and therefore makes them both candidates for the same protections (as the first letter specifically asks that the RSPCA expand its mandate to simply include children), is their defenseless position.

Such calls for child protection fit well within the object of the RSPCA’s journal, which was, as expressed in the appropriately-named editorial, “Our Object,” “to protect animals from torture, and ameliorate their condition, and to awaken in the minds of men a proper sense of the claims of creatures placed under their dominion” (8). It goes on to state that “The animal

kingdom consists of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ beings, of which man forms a part; and we shall be bound, therefore, in THE ANIMAL WORLD—a title made comprehensive enough to include ‘both man and bird and beast’—to advocate man’s interests as well as the happiness of his subordinates” (8). Children, of course, fell within the category of “man’s interests,” particularly in terms of the adults they would one day become and the adulthood for which they were being shaped, and the RSPCA’s dedication to humane education was often in evidence within the pages of the journal. Children also, however, easily fit within the category of “subordinates.” As Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), “It is only to animals that children *can* do good, men are their superiors” (16). In a hierarchy in which children are significantly below adults, it is not a far leap to see the concerns of abused children as also falling within the purview of “the claims of creatures placed under [man’s] dominion,” as evidenced by both the letters published in *Animal World* on behalf of abused children, and the publication of “Bend or Break” later that same year.

However, we must also remember that there were “substantial and widespread cultural associations between animals and children” (Pearson 92) that also served to strengthen the argument for including children in animal protection. In addition to their shared position as subordinates and disempowered subjects, children and animals were often linked together in terms of their supposed nature. The “Romantic Child,” a construction of idealized childhood that writers such as Judith Plotz identify in particular with male Romantic writers, imagines the child as “embodying what is best in the physical endowment of humanity and also a link to mute insensate things” (Plotz 6). In Romantic discourse, “children are regularly depicted as the indigenes of nature: at once *originary* models of ideal nature, unselfconscious and self-sufficient models of natural beauty, and irrepressible engines of vital power” (6). Though not inseparable from or interchangeable with the animal, the child and the animal nevertheless

shared space in the Romantic imagination: both perceived to be outside of human culture, and the industrialization and destruction of the natural world associated with it, animals and children were seen as uniquely threatened by modernity. The influence of the Romantic child remained within more sentimental representations of children in nineteenth-century England. Both *Animal World* and *Band of Mercy*, the RSPCA's journal for children,<sup>8</sup> were filled with stories and illustrations that celebrated the supposedly natural bond between children and animals: an illustration in *Band of Mercy* for example entitled "Grandpapa's four pets,"<sup>9</sup> includes a pony, two dogs, and his granddaughter, while another picturing a young smiling boy embracing a lamb is merely entitled, "They understand each other."<sup>10</sup> Images such as these, Susan Pearson argues, show the animal and the child's "mutual status as objects of the sentimentalizing gaze" (69). Such sentimentalism plays a large part in what Pearson identifies as the growing appreciation for the "pet" in the nineteenth century, an appreciation in part resulting from "industrialization and the separation of home and work, a process during which children, and many domestic animals, were removed from the labor force and valued precisely for their helplessness, dependence, and innocence of worldly ways" (58).

But if the animal and the child were celebrated for their innocence, playfulness and beauty, they were also simultaneously feared and disciplined for their supposed "savagery"—the violence that was equally seen to be a part of being closer to the "natural world." At times, the savage/unspoiled binary was managed through categorization of animals and children: dogs were valued for their loyalty, for example, and for the fact that their relationship with humans "epitomized the appropriate relationship between master and subordinates" (Ritvo

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<sup>8</sup> This journal was initially published as *The Band of Mercy Advocate* by Mrs. Smithies and her son, T. B. Smithies ("The Band of Mercy Movement" 6); however, the journal was passed on to the RSPCA's Ladies Committee in 1883, and renamed simply *Band of Mercy* ("Notice" 2).

<sup>9</sup> Cover illustration for *Band of Mercy*, 6.71 (November 1884).

<sup>10</sup> *Band of Mercy* 9.104 (August 1887): 60.

20),<sup>11</sup> while cats were reviled for being “deceitful and difficult to train” (22). So too the middle-class child might be a treasured pet while a lower-class child could be seen as wild, dangerous and uncivilized.<sup>12</sup> Often, however, in RSPCA discourse, stories of the child as pet appear side-by-side with stories of the child as vicious instigator of violence, and for every sentimental narrative about a child and animal pair in the RSPCA’s journal, there is a competing narrative of some child’s sadism towards helpless and defenseless animals. Stories of cruel boys in particular filled the pages of the journal, with the aim both of instructing parents on how they might curb that cruelty, and of modeling proper behavior for the child reader. One story, “Only for Fun!” tells of young Harry who when caught “pulling the legs and wings off a poor fly” has his hair pulled out by his dutiful mother so that he might learn “the pain you have inflicted on the poor fly” (19). Another common story found in both journals was that of the fantastic reversal: dreams or enchantments in which young boys find themselves made small, and at the mercy of animals they have previously tortured.

While such stories construct the animal as victim of (young) human savagery, it is important to note that discipline, and not necessarily the suffering of the animal, is the primary concern. In *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain and Humanity in the Victorian Mind*, James Turner somewhat problematically observes that “Presumably little boys have for centuries satisfied their curiosity and their sadistic impulses by tormenting unlucky cats and dogs” (12), but notes that it was not until “the eighteenth century—due partly to new attitudes towards animals, partly to the influence of Evangelicalism at the end of the century, and perhaps partly to increased interest in child rearing as such—[that] this juvenile barbarity [began] to

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<sup>11</sup> Even dogs, however, could be divided into “classes”: as Harriet Ritvo points out, discourse surrounding rabies in the nineteenth century “divided society into respectable and dangerous classes—potentially offensive dogs were invariably identified by their social status, which reflected that of their owners, rather than their biological category or breed—and it located the most urgent threat to health and safety among the disorderly poor” (176).

<sup>12</sup> As Lydia Murdoch notes, “animalistic and subhuman terms classified poor children as physically and morally different from the English. The philanthropist Ellen Barlee described children in a ragged schoolroom as the ‘most curious motley of zoological specimens possible’” (26).

disturb many adults” (12).<sup>13</sup> Though it is true that concern for the suffering animal inspired protests against child cruelty to animals, it is also important to remember that it was the fear that torturing an animal “was the first brutalizing step on the road to callousness, sadism, and—who could say?—murder” (Turner 12-13) that inspired much anxiety. Immanuel Kant, in his “Duties towards Animals and Spirits,” used Hogarth’s “The Four Stages of Cruelty” to illustrate this point:

Hogarth depicts this in his engravings. He shows how cruelty grows and develops. He shows the child’s cruelty to animals, pinching the tail of a dog or cat; he then depicts the grown man in his cart running over a child; and lastly, the culmination of cruelty in murder. He thus brings home to us in a terrible fashion the rewards of cruelty, and this should be an impressive lesson to children. (174)

The belief that children required this lesson—along with those often associated with children, people of the lower classes and of “savage” cultures—demonstrates the extent to which “humane” behavior was linked to a particular subjectivity that combined the Evangelical “pursuit of personal self-discipline” (Harrison 116) with a focus on civilization, “a word with great currency in the nineteenth century, reflecting a particular set of attitudes towards behaviour that became associated most strongly with middle-class cultural tastes” (27). As a result, both child and animal alike represented problematic subjects, very much in need of taming.

The nature and character of that taming, however, was not always the same. Children, though considered to be like animals in many ways, were also adults-in-training and as such the

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<sup>13</sup> The presumption made here seems to rely on social constructions of gender and the naturally “sadistic” child, neither of which, I believe, can be simply “presumed.”

position they occupied was in many ways very different from that of the animal. Both child and animal could be ruined by improper handling, but the child could be ruined both as child and as future man—two very different roles that required different instruction. The odd position of children in the social hierarchy is perfectly captured in “Bend or Break” in the description of the young protagonist struggling with his gloves: “‘I never can put on lavender gloves without papa, or else I make them so dirty,’ said Bertie, looking piteously at his little brown paw, on which the glove stood at attention, half on and half off. ‘I have such a nice pair in my pocket, do let me wear them!’ ‘What are they?’ ‘Dog-skin....’” (77). Little Bertie struggles with the dress restrictions his parents place on him, restrictions the narrator ably captures in the battle between lavender gloves and “little brown paw.” Bertie’s dirtiness and paws speak to his boyishness and connection to nature, both of which, as we shall see, are valorized in the story, but his dog-skin gloves also speak to his position of power *over* nature—to a nascent manliness that rejects lavender gloves in favor of the more rugged option, and that clearly revels in man’s dominion over animal at the same time. The struggle to define just what space Bertie occupies—playful, improperly managed child with “little brown paws,” or little man who must learn proper authority—provides a glimpse of the issues at stake in the collision of anti-cruelty to animals and anti-cruelty to children discourse.

“Bend or Break” fits very much within the RSPCA’s goal of humane education and the production of civilized (middle-class, adult) subjects. The subtitle is “a story for parents” and, throughout the text, advice on child-rearing and proper child management are liberally mixed in with the narrative.<sup>14</sup> In his rantings against the mistakes of parents, and in his appreciation of childhood exuberance and elderly sagacity, the narrator seeks to demonstrate how parents should shape their boys, and instructs them in the ways of boyhood and boy nature so as best

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<sup>14</sup> The story is published anonymously, though later chapters include the sub-heading, “By an old bachelor,” indicating that it may have been written by the same person who wrote to the RSPCA on behalf of suffering children.

to understand and nurture them. Beginning with little Bertie's sad complaint, "If only I wasn't so ugly and stupid" (44) and ending with the tragic death of Bertie and his brother Alfie, after Alfie's abused pony propels them both over a cliff and into a quarry, the story makes clear that the parents, the wealthy Fanes, are very much in need of good instruction. The father is supercilious in his dealings with others, but always concerned about the family's reputation, while the mother is vain and selfish.

There are three boys in the family: Bertie, the eldest, who is abused and reviled by his parents for his exuberant boyishness and plain looks; Alfie, who is adored (particularly by his mother) for his beauty, feminine qualities, and malleability; and Hugh, whose only purpose seems to be to leave his parents with one last child to prove they have learned some lessons after the deaths of the first two. The abuse that Bertie suffers at the hands of his parents is both physical and psychological: he is "beaten and kept in the oak room for three days on bread and water" (44); he is told that he is a "wicked, ungrateful, unnatural child" (45); and he is continually rejected by his father after Bertie's numerous attempts to show respect, affection, and love towards him.

The complex similarities and distinctions between child as animal and child as future adult are very apparent in the parental instruction the reader receives from the story on the proper way to "bend" not "break" a child. As Susan J. Pearson notes in "The Rights of the Defenseless," "Thanks to changes in ideas about violence, discipline, and the natural disposition of humans and animals, reformers inhabited a world in which ideals for the proper management of animals and children were remarkably similar" (74). Certainly, the story does suggest that, in some ways, the treatment of the two should be much the same: Bertie's careful instruction of his dog, "Bounce," for example, in which he lovingly puts Bounce

through his drills and rewards him accordingly giving only the admonishment “Naughty” as needed (76), provides a sharp contrast to the thoughtless and rigid disciplines his parents mete out against their children. When Bounce gets caught poaching, Mr. Fane promises to punish “dog and poacher [Bertie]” alike, with the punishment against the dog, locked away without food, identical to the punishment Bertie receives at the beginning of the story. While this kind of discipline is frowned upon by the narrator, it is important to note that it is not the similarity of the boy’s and the dog’s punishment that is criticized; instead, it is suggested that such a punishment suits *neither*. When it comes to boys and other pets, Mr. Fane does not exercise the light hand and understanding heart such creatures most require, demonstrating a failure to recognize the affective value child and dog should hold within the domestic realm. After the death of his two children, Mr. Fane can only ask himself if he “had tried to manage them, even taking the word in its accepted sense in the stables? No, he could not honestly say that he had. He had punished them when they did wrong, or displeased him; but had he ever rewarded them by a kind look, a changed tone, a word of encouragement...when they did well?” (103).

Yet if the story recognizes similarities between boys and pets, the word “even” suggests that while such equal treatment would be preferable to the cruelty exercised upon Bertie, “even” the management that happens in the stables is not quite right as treatment for boys. Mr. Fane seems to consider his duty as father and as “famous stock farmer” (44) as one and the same: “he saw that his children had a comfortable nursery, and a competent governess...and a careful groom to take charge of them when he rode out” (44), while in terms of his animals, “he regularly visited the stable, the farm, and sometimes the kennels” (44). His dutiful if perfunctory treatment of both speaks more to his style as caretaker than it does to his knowledge of what management best suits the animals and children in his care, for though he

gives the animals “the food most adapted to them and the sort of breaking-in or rearing most likely to make them serviceable” (44), his treatment of the boys can lead only, the narrator assures the reader, to their ruination. The narrator’s dry observation that “it would have done no harm if he would have spent as much time and personal attention in supervising the rearing and education of his children” (44-45) raises the specter of competition between animal and child, with the father privileging the animals who “brought Mr. Fane both money and credit, while his children only cost him the former” (45). Mr. Fane’s misplaced priorities, though clearly linked to his personal vanity and new-money status (59), are implicitly connected by the narrator to larger societal preferences: “The slaughter of a blue-rock pigeon furnishes abundant ground for a harrowing display of fine writing, but a dingy-complexioned, ill-dressed, and half-washed child, with its back all over bruises, is hardly a picturesque object!” (91).

But if the story wishes to castigate readers and parents for appreciating attractive and/or financially-compensatory animals over messy and physically-unattractive children, it does so by valorizing and celebrating boyhood, and by producing a competing aesthetic that glories in the rough-and-tumble style of the true English boy. Harold Annesley, an artist hired to produce a portrait of Mrs. Fane, represents the ideal father, one who, the narrative suggests, allows his boys to be boys: “He was himself the father of a merry, noisy, romping family of six boys, who ran wild about his studio” (59). These boys are messy, spilling “his turpentine over their pinafores and jackets” and making themselves “ill with tasting his paints” (59). Bertie is himself a messy boy, destroying a mechanical sheep used by Mr. Annesley in his portraits, breaking a billiard cue, and burying his youngest brother in a rabbit hole. Though his parents despise him for this, the reader is meant to recognize, through the voice of Mr. Annesley and others, the truly “manful way” (61) Bertie comports himself. Managing such a

nature as his requires the proper handling: as Mr. Annesley proclaims to Mrs. Fane, “The thing seems to me to be merely to be thoroughly just to them, and at the same time perfectly firm, and of course, thoroughly to understand them” (62).

Breaking in a boy, the narrative continually reiterates, requires understanding a boy’s nature, while also taking into account the man he will one day become. The father and mother’s inability to properly consider the difference that future adulthood means in terms of the temporary similarity of children and animals is continually demonstrated in their rearing of their boys. Alfie is usually cared for and loved in the story, but to such an extent that he becomes weak, cowardly, and selfish: Bertie notes that “he’s delicate, and gets petted, and that makes him more like a girl” (44). Bertie, on the other hand, is treated harshly: as Bertie himself asks, “Must they pen him up like a sheep in a slaughter-house when they had given him punishment already?” (45). In both cases, the reader is meant to understand that children suffer as a result of their parents’ inability to distinguish their children’s needs from their animals’ needs: made into a ridiculous pet or treated like a sheep to be slaughtered, neither boy is given the upbringing required to shape them into a proper man. Instead, what the boys learn is the violence enacted upon them: Alfie, after being castigated by the groom and by Bertie for beating his horse replies, “papa says, animals were only made for our pleasure,” and continues, “papa beats us” (77). The fact that Alfie models his treatment of animals on his father’s treatment of the boys speaks to the role that pet-keeping played in the shaping of the young adult, and in the teaching of the proper exercise of power: as Pearson notes, pet-keeping was a “didactic enterprise: to teach children to become adults who can exercise self-control in their dealings with equals, and more importantly, subordinates” (60). However, Alfie clearly recognizes that in his relationship to his father, he is in a very similar relationship as his pony is to him.

In Alfie's understanding lies a paradox: though the story clearly seeks to demarcate the distinct differences between boys and animals so as to suggest the proper handling of both, yet its construction of childhood and boyishness repeatedly indicates the similarities between them. The reader is asked to consider the effects punishment has upon the child's "mirth" and "spirits," "spirits and mirth which come to them naturally, as bloom to flowers or songs to birds" (103). Mr. Annesley's perfect boys are "wild" (59) and Bertie's, we are told, singularly wonderful nature springs from "sheer happiness and abundant spirits...just as the flowers bloom because the sun shines hot, and waters ripple because the winds blow soft" (103). The story reminds us the "Youth is to be revered for its pure unknowingness" (91), an innocence that, when placed within the context of the descriptions linking the child to the natural world, places the child firmly outside adult human rationality, experience, and responsibility.

Such a fetishization of the child does not of course allow for a discourse of child rights, for if a child like Bertie is meant to be appreciated in all his natural glory, he must also, like the animal, be properly managed and controlled—that is, kept in line and preserved in helplessness so as to safeguard the pleasure adults find in him. In an essay on "Kindness to Animals," printed in *Animal World* in 1882, George Lowe argues that "animals, like human beings, need correction, but two things are necessary to make it of use. One is not to punish them too severely, which only hardens them in rebellion; the other is, never to beat them at all, except for real fault.... Otherwise the poor beast, not knowing when or why it may be beaten, gets confused and foolish, as any boy might do from being in a great fright" (Lowe 90). The essay continues, "An animal, or a boy either, living in constant fear of ill-usage whether he deserves it or no, will get so stupid or careless as seldom to do what is required"

(90). Though the essay seeks to demonstrate the wrongness of cruelty, it does so through elucidating its ineffectiveness—the extent to which cruelty prevents the subject from doing “what is required.”

The suggestion that improper treatment “hardens” subordinate animals “in rebellion” is a threat that “Bend or Break” continually applies to young boys as well. Though everyone in the household recognizes the parents’ flaws, Bertie is continually reminded to respect them, and to recognize that they have his best intentions in mind (even when it is clear that they do not). Bertie’s observation that his father was “very unkind” (44) towards him, though accurate, yet demonstrates the beginnings of a rebellion against parental authority. The fault for this rebellion may lie with the father, but such a lack of respect is nevertheless represented as ultimately damaging to the child. The story clearly states that “it is right [that children] should obey the rules of their elders” (45), and by setting unclear rules or by punishing inappropriately, Mr. Fane fails to properly “break in” his sons. Such a failure may result in a frightened effeminate boy like Alfie, but it also holds out the possibility of creating a “hardened child,” a child that can only be produced, the narrator states, when they “have been long and systematically mismanaged; misgoverned because miscomprehended” (45). The deaths of the children, caused by the mismanagement of a cruelly-treated pony, are a not-so-subtle reminder that improper training – in the case of poorly-trained Alfie, too cowardly to control his animal, and poorly-trained pony, too abused to be controlled - can have disastrous results. As the narrator observes, “Long punishments harden by rendering obstinate high-spirited children; make them desperate by cowing the timid ones, break their spirit, make them deceitful....” (45). Children, like animals, can be spoiled by mismanagement, growing up to be “at the bottom of the social kennel, moral ‘slag’” (103).

Though the narrator laments that “we ‘bit’ our children” (59), therefore, the story is clearly concerned with demonstrating how to kindly and properly do just that. Furthermore, though it laments the supposed preference for pretty birds over ugly children, yet in its championing of Bertie, it does not challenge the assumption that protection should be given most to pleasing, deserving objects. Alfie, though pretty, is cowardly and unlikable, and the reader is meant to appreciate Bertie’s threat of “I shall break your switch and punch your head” (77) in response to Alfie’s spoiled behavior. The story warns that children who are mismanaged will become hardened and “vicious” with “blighted lives” (45), yet little Bertie, who receives the harshest treatment of any creature in the story, remains unstained. He might be physically unappealing with his “by no means pretty face” (45), but he is to the end a “true, chivalrous, self-sacrificing,” “merry, manly, unimpressible,” and most importantly, “blameless” (103) little boy. His response to a beating, “not that I minded” (44), is crucial as it suggests that it is his “unimpressible” nature that sustains him, but also because it is central to his role as victim in the text; it is his blamelessness, rather than simply his right to freedom from abuse, that should protect him from harsh punishment.

Both *Animal World* and *The Band of Mercy Advocate* spoke approvingly of punishments for children who misused animals, and, as noted, Bertie himself sought to teach Alfie a thing or two when Alfie beat his pony. One gets the distinct impression that if Alfie had either been petted less or beaten more, he and his brother would have survived the story. Where it is necessary to keep a child managed from that greatest of sins, disobedience, violence towards a child is not in and of itself unethical. When violence ruins an animal or a child, preventing either from providing pleasure to adult humans, then violence is presented as a problem. For example, Bertie comments to his father that Alfie should not use spurs on his pony because the pony “doesn’t never want it. I can make him go like anything when I ride him. He only

wants you to shake the reins, and pat his neck, and say ‘Come up’...and he’s off like the wind” (102). The lesson Bertie is giving his father here is not, of course, about what the pony actually wants, but about what one must do in order to make the pony do his pony job. Treating it gently results in a pleasurable ride; treating it roughly results in death over a cliff. The distinction between a discourse that stresses the importance of proper management to the value of a child or animal—that is, to keeping them unspoiled and obedient—and a discourse that asserts their right to freedom from pain and cruelty is that the former preserves the right of adult, human control over and investment in an inferior object. However, such a discourse also makes the savage animal and the difficult or vicious child problematic objects of concern, and it should be noted that the death of Alfie and Bertie, though presented as tragedy, also “saves” them from a life of ruined adulthood. A dead child, it would seem, is infinitely preferable to a ruined one.

## **Conclusion**

Arguments that focus on the “irony” of animal protection preceding child protection do so in a context that presumes child and animal alike as disempowered subjects, as distinctly other than and separate from adult humans. I have argued here that such a construction of the child and the animal is essential to protectionist discourse, rather than something against which it defines itself. And while I am far from arguing that protections should be rescinded, I would suggest that battles over which victim society prefers, the animal or the child, should not be confused with actual considerations of the rights either group should be granted. Instead we should be asking: what inequities are we protecting within these protectionist models? The fact that corporal punishment of children is still allowed in England, Canada, and the United States demonstrates that protection models do not necessarily challenge the parental “right” of violence towards the child, and the RSPCA’s current stance on animal experimentation

demonstrates that animals' use value still trumps their rights to life and freedom from pain.<sup>15</sup> I am not suggesting that these are similar or equal oppressions; instead, I argue that my very need to clarify the comparative magnitude of a child being spanked and an animal being experimented upon speaks to the problem at hand: how does one sort through cultural representations that present "the child" and "the animal" as similar constructs without producing analogies that succeed in demeaning both?

The best answer I can give to this question is that it is necessary to recognize that various forms of oppression can be mutually reinforcing, without necessarily being experienced in exactly the same ways. Animals, children, and for that matter, women, racial others, and members of lower classes, all "live in an adult-centered, age-segregated world that better serves the political and economic interests of powerful adults" (Kurth-Schai 194), and have all been subject, at various times in English history, to "social restrictions...often justified in terms of protection, affection, and assistance" (194).<sup>16</sup> Too often, groups representing disempowered others do so through a "single-mindedness so common in Western institutions" (Gruen 60), a single-mindedness that, I argue, sometimes leads to narratives of competition that place one victim in opposition to the other. While ecofeminists have done excellent work arguing that "an adequate ecofeminist theory must not only address the opposition of women and nature, but must specifically address the oppression of the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet" (61), I believe there is still significant work to be done to unravel the web of similarities and contrasts linking (and separating) animal and child victims. Until the connection between the child and the animal receives the critical attention it deserves, the oft-repeated argument that animal lovers care more for

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<sup>15</sup> For an outline of the RSPCA's stance on research animals, see the following:  
<http://www.rspca.org.uk/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RSPCA/RSPCARedirect&pg=researchanimals>.

animals than they do for children will continue to undermine activism on behalf of both animals and children in contemporary society.

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