

HIST 5506D
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Term Paper

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Exotic Beasts on Display: Menageries and Zoological Gardens on Socialisation in Victorian Britain

Introduction

“With chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,
And children whirling in their roundabouts;
With those that stretch the neck and strain the eyes,
And crack the voice in rivalry, the crowd
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons
Grimacing, writhing, screaming...”¹

Such was the scene at the St. Bartholomew Fair in London, one of the largest fairs at the time, with various shows and exhibitions geared to public entertainment. William Wordsworth, one of the most famous British poets between the 18th and 19th centuries, gave a detailed description of the scene in the fair, where humans mingled with their fellow monkeys and buffoons. On closer inspection, one senses an eeriness in which there is no distinction between the two in Wordsworth’s prose. The question of whether humans bear much more resemblance to animals than expected is worth exploring.

Human-animal relationships have been intricate since human civilisation, and they underwent peculiar changes in Victorian Britain, as menageries and zoological gardens emerged and introduced animals, particularly exotic ones, to the public, who observed them in close proximity. Kept in cages and carriages, unique animals were displayed to the public in fairs as a mixed form of recreation and education, which received much popularity. Moreover, menageries and zoological gardens presented themselves as proponents of social forces, where they adopted different ways to enforce socialisation and instilled values into nationhood. Under this context, exotic animals became tools for humans to exert dominance and manipulation over others.

The paper attempts to analyse the changes in human-animal relationships in Victorian Britain by examining the scale and impact of menageries and zoological gardens as evidenced by reports in contemporary newspapers and magazines such as *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Punch*. Editors

¹ “The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth – Volume 3 (of 8).” Project Gutenberg, December 14, 2020, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12383>.

and authors provided valuable insights and comments on the condition and value of animal exhibitions that entailed social and political overtones. The paper wishes to address the following questions: Did menageries and zoological gardens share similar goals? Why were exotic animals specifically chosen for display? Were these institutions powerful in effecting social transformations? Finally, did the human-animal relationship in Victorian Britain witness a seismic change where animals gained *de facto* recognition and respect from their masters? The paper first provides a literature review of menageries and zoological gardens as successful and influential establishments that provided entertainment, education, and socialisation. Then, it analyses selected newspaper reports on zoological organisations in Victorian Britain from 1837 to 1901; it examines their socialising power via the use of exotic animals in two ways: the cultivation of the British identity, and the civilisation of other humans who resemble barbaric animals, as well as the animals themselves. Answering the above questions ensures a comprehensive understanding of human-animal relationships in the new epoch, which introduced a power dynamic and inequality between human beings and animals in a modernising world which famously first found its roots in Britain.

Literature Review

Existing literature has confirmed the educational and recreational purposes of menageries and zoological gardens. One of the leading experts on Victorian zoos was Helen Cowie, who explored the multiple roles of animals in public exhibitions and emphasised their ability to evoke empathy, serve educational purposes, and provide a form of “rational recreation”, where the audience was able to enjoy exhibitions and obtained zoological knowledge simultaneously.² By discussing the development of menageries and zoological gardens, she argued that exhibitions, albeit some motivated by commercial gains, were generally designed to not only showcase exotic beasts but also cultivate an understanding of animals with which the general public was less familiar. In addition, she critically examined the underlying exploitative nature of such displays and suggests that the projected sympathy obscured the reality of civilisation and manipulation, as she stated, “concerns about cruelty often focused less on the pain experienced by an animal and more on the brutalising effect that witnessing such cruelty might have on human spectators.”³ The paper builds on her discussions that zoological organisations consisted of socialising effects that targeted specific groups, which did not align with social norms. These institutions exerted socialisation as seen from newspaper reports. For instance, children and schoolboys were instructed by zookeepers to appreciate animals in an acceptable manner.⁴ This extended to the broader narrative of control that governs human-animal relationships: exotic humans remained as tools for humans to fulfil their desires in society.

The socialising effect manifested itself further as a form of imperial ideology, as menageries and zoological gardens served as metaphors for the British Empire to project its power during the 19th century. As the British Empire was occupied with overseas expansion and colonial conquests, animals became symbols of the British people to express their imperialistic agenda. In particular,

² Helen Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Empathy, Education, Entertainment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

³ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 207.

⁴ “Bartholomew Fair,” *Punch* 3, no. 61 (1842.9.10): 113, Gale.

exotic animals hunted and captured in conquered places like India were brought back to the domestic land and displayed to the public as signs of national victory and pride. John Mackenzie investigated the imperial hunting in India and identified three animals in India with which the British had a special hunting relationship: the tiger, the elephant, and the pig.⁵ Joseph Sramek expanded Mackenzie's analysis and linked tiger hunting in India to British masculinity. Since tigers were dangerous and powerful beasts, tiger hunting "represented a struggle with fearsome nature that needed to be resolutely faced like a Briton".⁶ Kurt Koenigsberger explored the interaction between animal exhibitions, contemporary literature, and imperial ideology during the Victorian period. Through the lens of literature, animals were depicted as objects of fascination and representations of colonial subjects. As exotic animals were mostly bought and captured in foreign lands controlled by Britain like India, Koenigsberger came up with the concept of the "imperial menagerie" where "exhibitions of zoological exotica have generated and mingled with a series of memorable narratives of England and Englishness."⁷ This perspective highlighted how exhibitions served as commercial, educational, and political tools to reinforce colonial ideology and British identity, whereby animals were manipulated to reflect notions of human ambition and superiority. While Koenigsberger studied in detail the relation between menageries and the British nation, the paper analysed newspapers that paid attention to the acquisition and appearance of exotic animals that were bought for zoological gardens.⁸ It proposed that menageries acted as social apparatus, and the treatment of exotic animals, which became representations of conquered countries and suffered from abuse, revealed a discriminatory tendency towards animals as a whole, despite the seemingly kind-hearted proclamation of zoological education.

Building on the above scholars' opinions that menageries and zoological gardens were powerful institutions that aimed to enforce socialisation and uniformity, it is worth exploring the notion of the "exotic animal". Echoing Wordsworth's prose in the introduction, the exotic element did not reside solely in animals but also in humans, as the distinction between the two became blurred. Similar to a clear demarcation between humans and animals in the modern sense, the two were frequently compared and contrasted in Victorian Britain, given the rise of Romanticism and Darwinism. Adrian Franklin outlined the development of human-animal relations in modernity, and one of the remarkable stages was Darwinism, where humans were considered more unique than and superior to animals, thus exercising power over them.⁹ Nadja Durbach explored the relations between humans and animals by studying freak shows in the 19th century, which were concurrent exhibitions with menageries that included both human and non-human entities.¹⁰ Freaks were seen as monstrous "because of the instability of the body... the freak could be both

⁵ John Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester University Press, 1988), 179.

⁶ Joseph Sramek, "'Face Him Like a Briton': Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800-1875," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2006), 659, Project Muse.

⁷ Kurt Koenigsberger, *The Novel and the Menagerie: Totality, Englishness, and Empire* (Ohio State University Press, 2007), 4.

⁸ "Voracity of a Boa Constrictor," *The Times*, no. 17636 (1841.4.5): 6, Gale.

⁹ Adrian Franklin, *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-animal Relations in Modernity* (Sage Publications, 1999), 34.

¹⁰ "Opening of Barnum's Show," *The Times*, no. 32854 (1889.11.12): 7, Gale.

human and animal at the same time.”¹¹ The difference from the social order made humans with animal-like features frightening and disgusting, which were displayed in public to warn the audience against nonconformist ideals. To add on Franklin’s and Durbach’s observations, the paper argues that menageries were aware of their control of animalistic beings and intended to emphasise their differences from social norms. Accidents were frequently reported in newspapers where animals escaped their cages and wreaked havoc, resulting in varying injuries.¹² Behind such reports lay an assumption that the zoo represented humanity’s triumph over nature through its control of wild animals. However, animal escapes reflected an anxiety among the public about humans’ limitations in dominating animals and other humans. Such zoological intuitions reinforced the distinction between the exotic barbaric beasts and the civilised humans, putting further strains on their relationship.

Exotic Animals and Cultivating the British Identity

As mentioned by Cowie, menageries and zoological gardens, although similar in terms of their recreational and educational values, were two distinct entities; menageries, which were targeted at common people, appeared around 1780, with a variety of showmen like George Wombwell and Thomas Atkins displaying animals and earning much fame.¹³ Zoological gardens were a more formal and more respectable form of zoological exhibition, the most famous being the London Zoo founded in 1828 by the Zoological Society of London with the particular aim, one of many, to acclimatise and domesticate useful foreign animals.¹⁴ Both menageries and zoological gardens were prominent domestic agencies that contained a unique British identity and were soon regarded by Europe as the model for contemporary zoological collections.¹⁵ Monthly meeting minutes by the Zoological Society were regularly featured in newspaper reports, which proved the qualities of transparency and democracy as social enterprises. One newspaper report in November 1837, approximately five months after Victoria’s succession, described the meeting by the society in great detail; from July to October, the number of people admitted to the zoos and the entrance fees were listed neatly, alongside the different donations of animals by prestigious people.¹⁶ Some members also voiced suggestions on further promoting the zoos, one of which was the construction of a suspension bridge to connect other branches of society.¹⁷

Besides social enterprises, zoos were even frequented by the British royal family. Queen Victoria and her family enjoyed visiting zoos as a source of entertainment and rejoicing in personal and national glory. Royal support and patronage imbued zoos with a national quality that was

¹¹ Nadja Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (University of California Press, 2010), 3.

¹² “Extraordinary Fight,” *The Times*, no. 22834 (1857.11.10): 5, Gale.

¹³ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 56-57.

¹⁴ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 20.

¹⁵ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 19. It is also worth mentioning that the rise of formal zoological gardens was a response to the National Menagerie in Revolutionary France in 1792 as a symbol of nationalism.

¹⁶ “Zoological Society,” *The Times*, no. 16564 (1837.11.3): 6, Gale.

¹⁷ “Zoological Society,” 6.

increasingly linked to the nation itself. As Koenigsberger attested, “the menagerie models successful forms of imperial management” that “[t]he menagerie and the empire become mutually reinforcing figures”.¹⁸ Queen Victoria was not unfamiliar with exotic beasts; before she acceded to the throne, she was a patron of the Surrey Zoological Gardens, which housed her favourite monkey Jocko.¹⁹ As Queen, she received numerous exotic animals from other foreign countries as gifts, but there was not enough space to house them. The satirical magazine *Punch* even advised the royalty to set up a menagerie in Buckingham Palace and gave the giraffes sufficient ground for air and exercise, which had the added benefit of enabling the public to see the collection of wild beasts, for they were mostly large and visible over the top of the wall to the passers-by.²⁰ One of the most renowned zoological visits was in 1847 when Wombwell’s Menagerie visited Windsor Castle. British newspapers, including *The Times*, gave a comprehensive account of the schedules on Thursday and Friday, noting that the collection consisted of 500 wild beasts and birds contained in 36 immense caravans.²¹ As Queen Victoria wished to see the large elephant Jammaonah, which was fully caparisoned with its rider Miss Chapman, the “Lion-Queen”, Chapman rode around the menagerie for the Queen.²² The performance continued the next day as Chapman gave the Queen and her entourage a performance that showcased her command over the wild animals.²³

In fact, the animals with which Queen Victoria and the general British public were obsessed were exotic in a way that they represented Britain’s colonial and imperial agenda in the historical context. Koenigsberger argued that the colonial character of the exotic was instrumental in the collection of zoological exotica, and the English, thanks to their wealth during the Industrial Revolution, travelled abroad and collected specimens of exotic fauna.²⁴ Alongside the colonial climate, zoos became symbols of Britain’s dominance over its colonial subjects. In commemoration of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1886, *Punch* depicted the Queen standing on a stage surrounded by soldiers, subjects, and an assortment of animals: kangaroo, sheep, lion, dog, elephant, horse, tiger, and snake.²⁵ It was obvious that the kangaroo represented Australia, and the tiger India. But the association of unique animals with specific nations was purely a human construct for the sake of classification and discrimination. There were several reasons why tigers were associated with India, but one of which was the tragedy that befell England in 1792 when the son of Sir Hector Munro was devoured by a lion on Saugor Island near Calcutta in India.²⁶ Despite their reverence for tigers, the British harboured anxiety and distrust towards one of their largest colonies, thus keeping tigers in zoos for the public to acknowledge the danger of exotic animals and lands. One newspaper report commented on the two tiger boa constrictors brought from Calcutta, one of which showed a great appetite and ate many small animals.²⁷ To spend extra detail on the origins of the exotic

¹⁸ Koenigsberger, *The Novel and the Menagerie*, 40.

¹⁹ Koenigsberger, *The Novel and the Menagerie*, 2.

²⁰ “The Pimlico Menagerie,” *Punch* (1846.6.27), Gale.

²¹ “Windsor, Thursday Evening,” *The Times*, no. 19693 (1847.10.29): 4, Gale.

²² “Windsor, Thursday Evening,” 4, Gale.

²³ “Windsor, Friday,” *The Times*, no. 19694 (1847.10.30): 5, Gale.

²⁴ Koenigsberger, *The Novel and the Menagerie*, 9.

²⁵ “Mr. Punch’s Celebration of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee, 1886,” *Punch* (1886.1.1): 9, Gale.

²⁶ Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, 179.

²⁷ “Voracity of a Boa Constrictor,” 6.

animals was not only to strengthen Britain's overseas power and national identity but also to exert its dominance over its colonial subjects.

Exotic Animals and Civilising the Barbaric Individuals

Apart from national identity, exotic animals in zoos were potent strategies to enforce social conformity. Against the backdrop of scientific discoveries and animal welfare movements, zoos should contain educational value as opposed to fairs, which were traditionally seen as “sites of vice, indecency and debauchery”.²⁸ Even though such fairs gradually closed down, the infamous Bartholomew Fair closing in 1859, the British public remained fascinated by unique animals, as the second half of the 19th century saw a steady growth of freak shows, where in the United Kingdom, people with special features like armless men, hairy women, and dwarfs could be easily seen.²⁹ Concomitant with the emergence of menageries, freak shows took a step further in drawing a connection between humans and animals, but by highlighting humans with abnormal bodily features that resemble animals, the exhibitions ironically reinforced the distinction between the two. Newspapers spent great lengths introducing the special guests of the freak shows to attract interest. One of the most successful entrepreneurs was P. T. Barnum, an American who brought circuses and exhibitions to England. His 1889 London circus, heralded as “the greatest show on earth”, featured a large number of animals and unique individuals as described by *The Times*: an 18-year-old dwarf called Dudley Foster, two Kentucky giants, a bearded lady, a fat woman, a man who wrote with his toes, a skeleton-like man, a two-headed child, a man with hardly any legs, a tattooed lady, two Aztecs, and a mermaid.³⁰ The features of abnormal performers were amplified to distinguish them from ordinary humans: one comic strip depicted the freaks backstage of Barnum's 1889 show in a disorganised and chaotic manner; the bearded lady tried to take off his skirts in front of everyone, while the skeleton-man put on oversized clothes.³¹

The emphasis on the eccentricities and abnormalities of individuals was also driven by racial and cultural bias. Under the influence of British imperialism, there was a need to identify freaks as social outcasts who did not align with the British spirit; the cultural and racial differences of “savages” were “cast as a bodily anomaly analogous to physical deformation.”³² Reusing the example of the bearded lady trying to remove his skirts, he was portrayed as a Chinese Emperor wearing a dragon-like crown and dressed in a flower-patterned robe.³³ The association of the bearded lady with Chinese elements underlined a prejudice against the Qing court. Other regions were not immune to this. One famous exhibit was Krao, a seven-year-old girl with a small, dark-skinned, and hairy body taken from Thailand, although Victorians generally referred to the area as

²⁸ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 66.

²⁹ Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 4-5.

³⁰ “Opening of Barnum's Show,” *The Times*, no. 32854 (1889.11.12): 7, Gale.

³¹ “A Fair Knock-out,” *Funny Folks* XV, no. 788 (1889.12.28): 4, Gale.

³² Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 8.

³³ “A Fair Knock-out,” 4.

“Indochina” for their imagination of it as a “mysterious and savage outpost of empire”.³⁴ However, what was apparent was an Anglocentric perception that the savages were brought up in uncivilised regions like Southeast Asia and thus required salvation and naturalisation in Britain. As geopolitical and racial tension motivated the British to condemn the Burmese as “uncivilised, corrupt, and barbaric”,³⁵ there existed a juxtaposition between the “Western humanity and civility and Eastern savagery and bestiality”.³⁶ Whereas Krao was intelligent and admired by some, the bearded lady suffered a more tragic fate. Hirsuteness, a defining characteristic of the primitive body, was associated with “unbridled, perverse, and pathological sexual drives”, a testament to the animalistic quality as civilised people were self-disciplined and able to control their instincts.³⁷ Bearded ladies suffered discrimination and marginalisation, which were occasionally articulated in newspapers. One article informed readers of the post-mortem on the body of William Ratcliffe, a bearded lady in country fair exhibitions, who was found dead near his house in Sheffield. The doctor claimed that it was probably a murder due to the serious damage made on the skull.³⁸ Despite the unknown motive, Ratcliffe might have been the subject of hate and discrimination due to his identity. Another article addressed the complaint made by the performers at one of Barnum’s shows in 1899 that the term “freak” was unjust and offensive, as they, like ordinary human beings, have limbs and hair; their characteristics were “marked and distinctive”, but should not be accorded a negative impression.³⁹

The social and moral overtones delivered by freak shows marked a shift in the attitude towards animalistic features, which were savage, barbaric, and visible even in humans who were physically deformed or peculiar. The fact that the freaks were “socially and politically disruptive” and “frightening” due to their “corporeal and cultural volatility” incentivised zoo managers to be vigilant and exercise control over animals who broke rules, a process that stressed order and conformity in like-minded humans.⁴⁰ Accidents of animal violence towards visitors in menageries were regularly observed in newspapers to warn their audience of potential dangers and attract their attention, but such accidents often occurred when animals on display were under stress and prone to inflicting harm to protect themselves.⁴¹ Attention should be given to accidents in which animals escaped the confinement of their own volition without external constraints, but caused a public nuisance. Two reports were chosen to shed light on the issue. First, a full-grown tiger escaped from Wombwell’s menagerie on Sunday night. It walked along the centre of the road when a large bull terrier kept by a man rushed towards it. The ensuing fight was bloody as the tiger managed to kill the dog and ate it in front of a house. It proceeded to knock on the doors of the houses nearby, but luckily, no further casualties were caused.⁴² The second one was less brutal, as an elephant

³⁴ Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 98; “Krao,” *The Times*, no. 30706 (1883.1.2): 9, Gale. Like most Victorians, the reporter had little understanding of where Krao originated from, listing the lesser-known places as “the wilder States to the north-east”.

³⁵ Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 98.

³⁶ Koenigsberger, *The Novel and the Menagerie*, 22.

³⁷ Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 108, 110.

³⁸ Untitled report, *The Times*, no. 30956 (1883.10.20): 7, Gale.

³⁹ “The “Freaks” at Olympia,” *The Times*, no. 35720 (1899.1.7): 6, Gale.

⁴⁰ Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity*, 4.

⁴¹ “Accident at Wombwell’s Menagerie, Stamford,” *The Times*, no. 19509 (1847.5.29): 3, Gale.

⁴² “Tiger Chase Extraordinary,” *The Sunday Times*, no. 847 (1839.1.13): 7, Gale.

escaped from a fair at midnight by forcing open the door of the hostelry. It then continued to demolish the wall and fruit trees along its way, eating some vegetables in the garden before being secured by the keeper.⁴³ Both accidents reflected two concerns: the lack of control by authorities and the barbaric behaviour displayed by animals. A civilised society required order and control to operate; nevertheless, socialisation was not a complete process, as people's fear of frequent escapes implied the limits of humanity to assert control over exotic animals and, by extension, other uncivilised humans.

Conclusion

In retrospect, Wordsworth's prose succinctly summarised the awkward relationship between humans and animals in Victorian Britain. While the distinction between the two was unclear at times, their seemingly harmonious co-existence was accompanied by violence, distrust, and manipulation. Menageries and zoological gardens exhibited a wide range of animals for the public to appreciate and acquire a deep zoological understanding, but their functions in society were manifold. By analysing the socialising power of menageries and zoological gardens via the use of exotic animals with the aid of reports and commentaries from contemporaneous newspapers and magazines, the paper discovered two avenues in which exotic animals were employed to achieve the purpose: the cultivation of the British identity and the civilisation of barbaric animals and humans who exhibited unusual animalistic features. The first method revolved around Britain's imperialistic policy to showcase its power domestically and overseas. Via cultural imperialism, exotic animals like tigers and elephants captured in foreign landscapes were displayed in zoos and served as reminders of British supremacy. Royal patronage was another powerful force that brought the zoos ever closer to the British Empire. The second method focused on the uniformity of individuals to prevent social and moral disorder. In spite of their entertaining value, freaks such as Krao and the bearded lady were considered barbaric and savage as they contained animalistic features. Anglocentric prejudice and rational recreation prevented the public from generating a positive impression of abnormal people, who were stigmatised and isolated as social outcasts. The constant threats posed by animals to humans in accidents demonstrated the need for and limits of social control, as human dominance over wildness and nature was not as palpable as one thought. Nonetheless, menageries and zoological gardens were important institutions that provided entertainment and education for different echelons in society, ranging from the Queen to the working class. Exotic animals penetrated the social fabric in the 19th century, when the public was able to witness them in their daily lives. As Cowie put it, "Exotic beasts were not just cultural references for nineteenth-century Britons; they also had a strong physical presence".⁴⁴ Only with careful analysis can one discern the socialising process of Victorian zoos, which was influenced by national, racial, and scientific factors. Despite their growing interaction with humans, animals remained passive and were manipulated by humans for their personal and collective benefits within the scope of anthropocentrism.

⁴³ "An Elephant at Large," *The Times*, no. 20576 (1850.8.24): 5, Gale.

⁴⁴ Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 205.

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