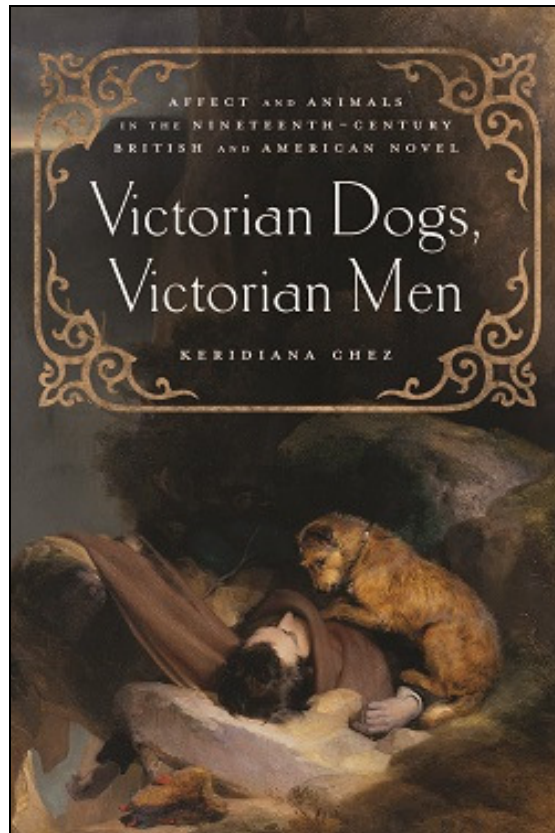


Reviews

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Phantom Limbs

Keridiana W. Chez, *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men: Affect and Animals in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*. The Ohio State University Press, 2017. 212 pp. \$69.95



Toward the end of the excellent *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men*, Keridiana W. Chez makes a claim that should sound plausible to anyone who has ever observed the pampered pooches of contemporary American metropoli: “We are not merely ‘Other Victorians’ (to paraphrase Michel Foucault’s famous 1978 opinion); we are obtusely and profligately ‘Victorian’ about our pets” (152). Dog spas, doggy daycare, dog high chairs, dog perfume, the Westminster Kennel Club, the movie *A Dog’s Purpose*, Sarah McLachlan crooning over a forsaken pitbull — so many phenomena across the landscape of contemporary American petkeeping have roots stretching back to the

nineteenth century, when, “by legislative fiat as well as social and cultural transformation, dogs in England and the United States were removed from the hands of the working classes and remade into objects of love and leisure for the bourgeoisie” (2). Chez is not the first thinker to address this Late Victorianism in the biopolitical arrangements of late capitalism; in *When Species Meet*, for instance, Donna Haraway admits that the “nineteenth-century family invented middle-class pet keeping,” and then adds: “what a pale shadow of today’s doings that was!” Nor is it Chez’s main project to apply lessons from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first: a historicist at heart, she remains squarely within her period. But there is much that feels suggestively (or at least potentially) present-tense in her explorations of nineteenth-century human-dog arrangements. If we are Late Victorians, we regard dogs not necessarily as people, nor necessarily as commodities: we regard them as prostheses.

Chez’s argument is consistent yet complex: feeling enervated and detached from others by the combined effects of rising urbanization and industrial capitalism, the nineteenth-century British and American bourgeoisie “developed the use of animal companions as emotional prostheses, attaching dogs to themselves to enhance their affective capacities and to complete their humanity” (2). Dogs came to be seen as necessary members of (or accessories to) the middle-class household in order to repair and consolidate affective pathways between *people* that had become denatured. In a similar way, participating in the nascent humane movement — a transatlantic moral discourse that Chez sees as totally intertwined with the anthropocentric logic of petkeeping — became a way to proclaim that one was “human.”

The prosthesis argument is not entirely new. In his 2009 essay “Anthroprosthesis, or Prosthetic Dogs,” which Chez addresses, Ivan Kreilkamp discusses how the texts of the Victorian age — “a thoroughly prosthetic age,” in his estimation — contain plenty of examples of humans using animals as “tools” that simultaneously “extend the human and mark the human being’s difference” (37). Chez takes a little bit of issue with this formulation by noting that pets constitute humanity through their inclusion, rather than their disavowal. For Kreilkamp, prosthesis is yet another ingenious function of Agamben’s “anthropological machine,” the vast and apparently inescapable set of conceptual apparatuses that we use to shore up human exceptionalism. For Chez, prosthesis is more of a bug than a feature, or at least a feature with a lot of bugs. As she notes, prosthetic human-dog arrangements came burdened with a set of unsettling implications, including the possibility that the human was always already a creature with a “lack,” and the prospect that “the human might be more attached to the dog than a mere prosthetic appendage deserved, thus inverting the proper power dynamic

between human user and animal tool" (20). Still, her overarching point is basically compatible with Kreilkamp's argument. Prosthetic dogs were not threats to human identity and human exceptionalism, even if the logic of prosthesis itself had destabilizing implications. They were crucial tools of distinction and self-definition.

The truly new insights in Chez's book lie in her treatment of the historicity of this prosthetic arrangement. The overall configuration stays the same throughout the nineteenth century: whether pampered or rescued, dogs remain tools that humans use to construct themselves as moral subjects. But the definition of "moral subject" changes over the course of the century, as does the definition of the dog itself. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as Chez explores through illuminating readings of novels by Charles Dickens and George Eliot, dogs are thoroughly loyal and intrinsically subservient beings that aid in the consolidation of family and community ties. Even in incredibly dysfunctional homes — such as, for instance, the "home" shared by the villainous Bill Sykes and the prostitute Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, a home wracked by domestic violence, eventually shattered by murder — the mere presence of a dog produces something closer to harmony, something closer to care, something closer to an ideal family arrangement predicated on the free flow of empathetic identification. There isn't much love between Sikes and Nancy, Chez admits, but the presence of Sikes' dog, Bull's-eye, as an abused double of Nancy (and an abusive double of Sikes) nevertheless creates a powerful network of feeling between them, creating a negative image of the family that has all the same affective infrastructure. If the ideal dog was, in the Victorian imaginary, a hearth-like centerpiece of the emotional life of the home, "against all odds, even such an un-ideal dog as *Oliver Twist's* Bull's-eye forms bridges of empathy between readers, the criminal Bill, and the companion he eventually murders" (27). In Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Adam's dog similarly helps solidify a circle of moral consideration that includes the family, but also extends further outward. In 1858, a friend wrote to Eliot feeling "in charity with the whole human race" because of the novel's portrayal of sympathetic canines.

Over the course of the century, however, dogs transition from being crucial aides to the consolidation of family and community to being the co-constructors of gender categories and other forms of social exclusion — including a model of masculine individuality that was predicated on, rather than averse to, sympathy and emotion. (As Chez points out, it was assumed that more "humane" colonial administrators would be more effective ones.) Hence the book's title: in its second half, it becomes about how Victorian dogs constructed Victorian men. Chez ends with an incisive reading of *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild* that reveals a very different version of the same prosthetic

configuration: rather than a subservient and unconditionally loving pooch aiding in the “affective resuscitation” of a cold bourgeois subject (a Victorian who *would* be able to love, were he or she not stifled by the cold logic of industrial capitalism), the novels depict an aloof, wolf-like dog bestowing self-reliance upon its master. Chez calls White Fang a “bare-dog,” riffing on Agamben: an imagined version of the original dog, the primeval dog, denuded of human influence — a “rewinding” of the “evolutionary tape” (131). Her argument builds to a satisfying conclusion when she shows how this creature — an exemplar of *detachment* rather than *attachment* — might have been a prosthesis as well.

With her groundbreaking *The Animal Estate* in 1987, the historian Harriet Ritvo was perhaps the first Victorianist to look at the English among “other creatures in the Victorian Age”; since then, there has been a large and growing scholarly conversation about the place of animals in the fabric of the Victorian social world, especially over the last 15 years or so. Chez joins the ranks of several recent studies that focus on the dog in particular (see also Kathleen Kete’s *The Beast in the Boudoir*, Beryl Gray’s *The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination*, Sarah Amato’s *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture*, and Monica Flegel’s *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture*), often using literary texts — especially panoramic Victorian novels — to locate the dog’s strange, shifting, and sometimes paradoxical place in a highly stratified society. In an essay for the influential 2007 collection *Victorian Animal Dreams*, Kreilkamp suggested that Victorian dogs were “metonymical human beings,” borrowing a phrase from Lévi-Strauss to connote their inconsistent and contingent status as quasi-humans: “Pet dogs, in British culture, typically possess a tantalizingly incomplete identity: they are granted a name and a place by the hearth in the family circle, but only temporarily, only as long as their human master permits it” (81). More recently, Monica Flegel has suggested that they played the role of complex surrogates, child- or partner-replacements who could fill out the “affective economy” of the home, but also queer it and deconstruct it by revealing its contingency on more-than-human participation. Chez’s argument is similar to both claims; she treats the dog as an ambiguous and partial member of the household that always threatens to reveal its unstable foundations. But she also commits consistently to a metaphor that eschews place in favor of function. The Victorian dog, in her view, is always already a technology, even and especially when it is celebrated for being a subject of its own.

It is possible that she clings to this metaphor too consistently. In nineteenth-century novels, which draw beings into webs of relationship by design, dogs rarely appear detached from humans. In lyric poetry, however, their irreducible alterity is a frequent

and vexatious subject, as is their resistance to reductionist, instrumentalizing definitions of what they are and what they are meant to do. In 1874, Robert Browning, a noted humane activist himself, published a poem about a dog named Tray who jumps into a river to save a doll from drowning, thinking it is a human child. The poem ends with a callous vivisectionist resolving to capture the dog and discern “how brain secretes dog’s soul” — an image that recapitulates but also satirizes the idea that dogs have a moral “soul,” an intrinsic orientation toward the lives of others, that humans can emulate and appropriate for themselves. A similar thread of epistemological self-doubt runs through the lyrics about Flush, the Brownings’ cocker spaniel, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (famously extrapolated into a novel by Virginia Woolf). In “Flush or Faunus” (1855) she begins in the mood of a confident portraitist, with a beguiling assertion: “You see this dog.” Over the course of the poem, however, it becomes clear that she deeply doubts her ability to capture him at all — or to capture what exactly is going on when “a head as hairy as Faunus, thrust[s] its way / Right sudden against my face.” By the end of the poem, she has committed completely to the “Faunus” metaphor, envisioning Flush as a spiritual reincarnation of the “the true PAN, / Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.” She defines him as an affective conduit: a “low creature” who shows her what “love” truly is. But the vivid depiction of their physical intimacy makes this abstract definition feel deeply unsatisfying. It remains an incomplete account of a being whose nature will always exceed her conceptual grasp.

Whym Chow: Flame of Love [1906], a bizarre and ostentatious collection of lyric poems by the aunt-niece duo Michael Field about their dead Chow dog, strikes a similar chord: they, too, allow the dog to remain at a remove from their own instrumentalizing and allegorizing gaze, even as they compare him (with a similar restlessness) to mythic figures like Bacchus, the risen Christ, etc. And yet, *Whym Chow* might have made for an excellent sixth chapter to Chez’s study, even if it complicates the narrative that, by this time, the dog was predominately an accessory to the male ego. Her prosthesis concept is revealingly compatible with the way the Fields envision the dog as an affective go-between, a mediator of their affection for each other, playing the role of “Holy Spirit” in their ultra-Catholic, Trinitarian imaginary. Also resonant is the way his very presence disrupts individualistic models of identity, creating a form of interspecies identity-in-relation in which all parties are complexly contingent on one another. This is the interesting side of the prosthesis arrangement from a posthumanist perspective: the way it produces queer forms of multispecies interdependency and intercorporeality, in which the human, always already “lacking,” is completed by a radically nonhuman entity. Many of the readings in *Victorian Dogs* show us something that almost looks like

Vinciane Despret's concept of "anthropo-zoo-genesis": animal and human, always intertwined, constructing and transforming each other in a ceaseless *pas de deux*.

Almost, but not quite. The dark side of the prosthesis arrangement is clear: a prosthesis is an object, always already instrumentalized, its sharp edges filed down until it becomes a useful tool. Chez finds a useful (if utterly disturbing) crystallization of this dark side in an 1890 *Scientific American* article that describes an attempt to graft a dog's bone into a boy's leg. So far, so good, except the surgery involved grafting *the entire dog* onto the boy's leg:

The boy and the dog were bound on a cot ... both under the influence of anaesthetics, but the dog, which was a black spaniel, was incased in a hardened plaster of Paris cast, his right foreleg and head and tail being free ... Great care has to be taken that the animal does not die, for it is a live, not a dead, dog bone that is wanted for the void in the boy's leg...

The image is grotesque for all sorts of reasons. But perhaps the worst part, as Chez observes, was that the dog's vocal cords were cut so that it wouldn't intrude upon the arrangement with outward signs of suffering. The procedure necessarily involved foreclosing the possibility of interspecies sympathy: "silencing the Other's voice and immobilizing its body — creating a life without a life" (19). The prosthetic arrangements that she explores throughout her study were more metaphorical than literal, of course. But they, too, required ontological reducing or demoting the dog in ways that could be easily effaced. "In the ongoing process of togetherness," she writes, "the Other is first flattened into a limited, unidimensional subject position.... The nineteenth century's human-dog attachment was intimate yet hierarchical: like a piece of a planet breaking off into space, then reeled in by that planet's gravitational force, the Other became a satellite tethered in the self's orbit" (59). This is a depressing summation — all the more depressing since self-doubting voices like Barrett Browning and the Fields are absent from her study. The narrative of *Victorian Dogs* is pessimistic, tracing a movement toward greater modes of dominance, anthropocentrism, and ontological certainty within an arrangement that can often seem refreshingly complex, de-hierarchized, and queer.

In some ways, though, this pessimism feels necessary. It provides a brisk corrective to discourses of multispecies utopianism that often stalk the human-dog relationship, not just in popular discourse but in animal studies as well. Legions of dog books on the bargain shelf at Barnes & Noble tell us — in their titles, in their breathless prose, in their

inspirational images — that it's a good thing that dogs have helped us realize what it means to be human. In a strange way, animal studies can sometimes tell us the same thing, celebrating human-dog entanglement as though entanglement itself were an intrinsic good. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway, one of Chez's persistent interlocutors, seems quite in favor of the ways that dogs and humans have always been "co-constitutive" species, shaping each other in complex ways. Chez is less sanguine, and she has Victorian literature on her side. She demonstrates how entanglements can breed hierarchies, how a messy and inchoate relationship can be just another place where anthropocentrism takes root. She shows us how even the most self-effacing rhetoric of interspecies dependency — "who saved whom?", ask the bumper stickers — can be another means of constructing humanness after all.

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