

7

THE FAMILY PET

OR

The Human and the Animal

INTRODUCTION

Pets are everywhere. In our homes there are millions of pet dogs, cats, gerbils, birds, fish, rabbits, snakes, and monkeys. Our political economy includes a multibillion-dollar service industry that provides veterinary medical care, food, breeding, and assorted paraphernalia.¹

Why do we have such an institution? Pet owners and pet lovers join the pet industry in detailing benefits that pet ownership confers: Pets, they say, provide pleasure, companionship, and protection, or the feeling of being secure.² Owning pets decreases blood pressure and increases life expectancy for coronary and other patients.³ Pets provide an excuse for exercise and a stimulus to meet people.⁴ They help children to learn gentleness and responsibility, they help young couples to prepare for parenthood, and they give their owners some of the pleasures of having children without some of the responsibility. (From pet dogs and cats, writes Gomperz in *Moral Inquiries* [1824], “mankind may learn maternal, filial, conjugal, and in some cases paternal affections.”)⁵ Pets help people to deal with the death of a friend or relative.⁶ Not least of all, pets are useful in many kinds of psychotherapy and family therapy.⁷

What is it about pets that makes them beneficial in these ways? In this chapter I will explore one possible answer to this question. I will suggest that pethood derives its power from its ability to let pet owners experience a relationship ever-present in political ideology—that between the distinction of those beings who are our (familial) kin from those who are not, on the one hand, and the distinction of those beings who are our (human) kind from those who are not, on the other. Pethood, it would seem, lets us experience and enjoy that crucial distinction in a harm-

less and even comforting way. And, indeed, we generally think of pethood as one of consumer society's innocuous and even trivial institutions.⁸ We will see here, however, that the particular idealized articulation of kinship with kind that the contemporary institution of pethood helps to maintain conceals from would-be kindly human beings a brutally inhumane political reality.

A pet "is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly," writes Christopher Smart in his poem "Of Jeoffry, His Cat."⁹ That the individual pet is in some fashion the expressive mirror of its owner is a longstanding commonplace; Barbara Woodhouse, the dog trainer, goes so far as to claim that "we get the animals we deserve."¹⁰ In this essay, however, I will be concerned not so much with the neat expression of an individual pet owner by his individual pet as with the general expression of Western familial and national structure in its unique *institution* of pethood. It is a generally accepted doctrine nowadays that "the human/pet relationship, while biologically derived and universal, may also serve a particularized psychopathologic purpose";¹¹ I here want to discuss the sexual, familial, and finally social role that the institution of pethood plays in contemporary politics and ideology.

THE KIND AND KIN OF PETS

A little less than kin and more than kind.

—*Hamlet*, 1.2.65

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "pet" as "any animal domesticated or tamed kept as a favorite or treated with indulgence."¹² This is a reasonable preliminary definition. And since it passes over, even obscures, certain potentially discomfiting ramifications of what it may mean to domesticate animals and to indulge them, it is also a socially useful definition.

The Kind, or Species

The ordinary definition of the family pet as an animal tends to obscure the essential demarcation between human beings and other animals since it implies that any animal, including a human being, can be a pet. To put the matter this way is, however, to assume that there is an essential interspecies demarcation between human and animal beings, which pet lovers might deny. Pet lovers, after all, "find it difficult to separate people and animals," as Betty White confesses in her book *Pet-Love*;¹³ they would have it that we humans can sometimes have a special, or super-special, kinship with the particular living being who is a pet of ours.¹⁴

In America today, our thinking of pets as human and our treating them as human has many aspects. We feed our pets human food, for example, and celebrate their birthdays.¹⁵ More than half of American pet owners look upon their pets as

“almost human,” nine-tenths talk to their pets as though they were human,¹⁶ and six hundred pet cemeteries in the United States imitate the burial or cremation service for human beings or bury animals alongside their human owners.¹⁷

For pet lovers this interspecies transformation of the particular animal into a kind of human being is the familiar rule. (It is the rule also in the legend of “Beauty and the Beast,” where a friendly monster is metamorphosed into a family man, and in the Homeric tale of Circe, where men are metamorphosed into domestic animals.¹⁸) Likewise, it is the rule expressed in the typical English pet lover’s practice of giving his animal a human name—a practice which suggests that the pet lover regards his pet as though it were human. Indeed, “to pet” can mean “to treat a human being as an animal.”¹⁹

The tendency to erase—and, if you wish, also to rise above—the ordinary distinction between human and animal beings suggests the first potentially disturbing question raised, not only by the ordinary definition of *pet*, but also by the institution of pethood itself: “What kind of animal is a pet?,” or “As what kind of animal is a pet *thought* of?” Another way to put the same question is, “What is (a) human being?”

The Kin, or Family

Ordinary definitions of *pet* obscure not only what man and animal are but also what the place of the pet in the family structure is. For pet lovers, as for Betty White, “animals have always been a part of [the] family.”²⁰ The “cade lamb,” which is the archetypal pet in the Scottish and English traditions, is a being raised by hand in the family; it is a being in the household as well as the house.²¹

For many pet lovers, their animals are thus not only surrogate family members that function as children, grandchildren, spouses, or parents,²² or that are considered to be as important as family members.²³ Rather, *pets are* family.

But how can an animal be in my family, or be thought of as being in my family? What is my pet’s kinship relation to me, or its kind of kinship relation to me?

Bestiality and/or Incest

Somehow the family pet is, or is thought of, as familiar enough to be both in the special family, or in humankind, and in the particular consanguineous family.²⁴ It is worth noting that although the French language has no single word to indicate the kind of being that we mean by *pet*—few, if any, languages do—French does bring out the relevant ambiguity of most pethood in its term *animal familier*, which is the closest equivalent in the language to the English word *pet*. *Animal familier* means “familiar animal” and “family animal.” That is, the French term for *pet* indicates an animal that is at once part of the family’s kinship structure and also, like an *animal domestique*, part of its property. If my pet animal is somehow human, or is thought of as being somehow human, and if my pet is also somehow in the family,

