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POLITICAL ANIMALS

Dogs and the Discourse of Rights in Late Eighteenth-Century Print Culture

Amy Milka



IN THE SPRING OF 1796, at the height of the war with revolutionary France, when England experienced severe food shortages and political unrest, MP John Dent proposed a tax on dogs. After several weeks of heated parliamentary debates, the bill was drawn up on 28 April and became law on 19 May. Many of the social and economic discussions surrounding the tax had been heard before when the issue of regulation was debated in Parliament.¹ But the new bill, which earned its champion the nickname 'Dog Dent' and prompted an outpouring of responses in print culture, brought different anxieties to the fore.² In parliamentary debates, newspaper reports, letters to the editor, poems and pamphlet responses, the proposed tax played on new uncertainties about the relative status of humans and animals in eighteenth-century society. The burgeoning debate about animal welfare rubbed shoulders with relatively new ideas about the privilege of pet ownership, and issues of public safety came up against the lower classes' right to privacy and property.

This article addresses the vexed issue of animal rights at the end of the eighteenth century, when the discussion of human rights and citizenship was often thought to be synonymous with radical politics. In the 1790s, the discourse of rights was mobilised to discuss the social, legal and political status of an ever-increasing number of 'citizens of the world'.³ Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–92) provided a new programme of social and political thought, and a new vocabulary and vernacular style in which ordinary people could understand and articulate their rights.⁴ This paved the way for discussions of the rights of working-class men, women, servants, slaves and even animals. Christine Kenyon-Jones explains changing eighteenth-century attitudes to animals as part of 'the continuum of better rights and treatment', where the extension of liberty to subordinated people led to a consideration of other creatures.⁵ The assumption that rights filtered down a hierarchical chain of being underpins much scholarship on historical attitudes to animals. In contrast, this article argues that arguments for animal rights were instrumentalised to highlight inequalities among humans. In literature and print culture, the language of the rights-bearing subject was strategically and directly applied to the issue of animal welfare. Using the 1796 dog tax as a case study, I show how satirists, newspaper commentators and poets harnessed the language of the *Rights of Man* to discuss animal rights. But while these arguments made clear recent advancements in thinking about animals as

sentient creatures who felt pleasure and pain, to whom humans had a duty of care, they also highlighted inequalities in the recognition of rights in other areas of society. Although Hilda Kean has characterised animal welfare as a 'safe' cause in a period when philanthropy and radical politics often went hand in hand, the debate over animal rights was heavily influenced by—and influential in—radical discourse.⁶ As David Perkins asserts, 'you could not grant a right to animals that you denied to subordinate classes of humans'.⁷ This essay takes up Perkins's claim, demonstrating the political consequences of deploying the language of rights in relation to animals.

The relationship between humans and animals in the eighteenth century has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years.⁸ This work has shown the extent to which animals were integral to constructions of selfhood and identity, and how advances in social and political thought relied on understandings of the distinction between humans and animals.⁹ Studies of the rise of pet-keeping reveal the increasing importance of the sympathetic connection between humans and animals, starkly contrasted with the upper classes' indifference to social inequalities and the suffering of others.¹⁰ Advancements in scientific and philosophical knowledge regarding animal consciousness, passions and rationality have received attention as the building blocks of animal welfare efforts in the nineteenth century.¹¹ The representation of animals in literature and culture is the focus of a significant body of work, including new scholarly editions of important texts such as Francis Coventry's novel *The History of Pompey the Little* (1751).¹²

The dog tax has also been addressed, most thoroughly in an article by Lynn Festa.¹³ Providing extensive commentary on parliamentary discussions of the tax, Festa interrogates the categories of 'person, animal, thing', emphasising the discordance between the increasingly sympathetic relationship between humans and animals, and the treatment of dogs as luxury goods to be taxed.¹⁴ The relationship between dogs and their owners was such that a dog could be seen as 'property expressive of or essential to the embodiment or self-constitution of human personality', and therefore deserving of special legal protection. Festa exposes the double standards in eighteenth-century attitudes to animals, complicating their status as objects, but refusing to accord them legal protection. These limitations, she claims, 'remind us that humanitarian concern for animals does not necessarily dislodge the human from center stage'.¹⁵ This article furthers and complicates Festa's argument by suggesting that in both visual and textual representations of the tax, dogs were presented as 'persons' with rights independent of their owners.

In print culture, techniques of personification conferred a type of personhood upon animals, transforming them from objects or 'things' into subjects with rights to defend. Prosopopoeia empowered animals to speak, employing human language or their own distinctive gestures to make their thoughts and feelings heard.¹⁶ The newspapers of 1796 were populated by talking dogs, bemoaning the tax and addressing their human aggressors. Opponents of the dog tax depicted the canine species speaking for themselves, forming associations, petitioning Parliament and advocating reform. They capitalised upon contemporary arguments

about the similarities between humans and animals to suggest the basis for shared social and political recognition and a shared voice. But while these arguments contributed to the nascent movement for 'animal rights' in the modern sense of the term, they were also concerned with illustrating the power and utility of universal rights discourse in the hands and mouths of the lower and middling classes. As Paine asserted, 'once any object has been seen, it is impossible to put the mind back to the same condition it was in before'.¹⁷ Giving voice to animals was a rhetorical strategy designed to highlight injustices and empower readers to discuss and express their own political opinions. Man's best friend provided a model to the disenfranchised, and a reminder of the avenues for resistance which were open to them.

As I argue, the competing elements of the dog tax debate were harnessed for a radical political agenda. Part I offers an overview of the arguments for a tax, and connects the tax and its effects to eighteenth-century concerns about animal welfare and public morals. Part II demonstrates the intervention of visual satire in the dog tax debate, arguing that satirists collapsed the human/animal divide by transforming politicians into dogs experiencing the pain of capital punishment. Finally, Part III suggests the ways in which speaking dogs in print satire, poems and songs, employed the language of rights to defend themselves and their interests. The disturbing depiction of politically informed and active animals acted as a challenge to readers, defying them to assert their own interests against their oppressors in the government.

I. The Dog Tax and Eighteenth-Century Attitudes to Animals

Throughout the eighteenth century there had been repeated calls in Parliament and elsewhere for a tax to help regulate the numbers of dogs on the loose.¹⁸ Arguments used in favour of the tax fluctuated during this time, and the bill passed in 1796 reflected developing ideas about animal and human relationships.¹⁹ In Parliament, John Dent, the MP for Lancaster, made a threefold argument for a tax, which he proposed to supplement the Poor Rates.²⁰ First, he cited the number of stray dogs, pets, working animals and packs of hounds that ran wild, worrying and killing livestock and causing hundreds of pounds' worth of damage.²¹ Second, he emphasised the threat of disease posed by dogs of all types: newspapers frequently reported alarming cases of hydrophobia, the aversion to water caused by the bite of a rabid dog. Third, he referenced the food shortages caused by the failed harvests of 1793, arguing that pampered dogs consumed valuable provisions, and that the poor were excessively burdened by having an extra, canine mouth to feed.²² Despite these arguments, however, the basis of the tax and how it should be collected was the subject of significant parliamentary debate. While some politicians voiced condescending opinions about whether those claiming the Poor Rate had the right to keep pets, others expressed more sympathetic identification with the hardships and consolations of the poor. Even Prime Minister William Pitt, while tirelessly working to appropriate revenue from the tax for the war effort, proposed not to tax the poor because dogs afforded their poor owners some

'rational amusement'.²³ The discussions in Parliament and elsewhere reflected changing understandings of the relationship between humans and animals, and challenged deep-seated assumptions about the rights of dogs and their owners. These debates were taken up in print culture, where the discussion of animal rights also served to highlight social and political injustices.

Innumerable dogs would be destroyed by owners who could not (or would not) pay the tax, and there would be no penalty for 'converting' an untaxed dog to one's own use, upending notions of property.²⁴ Many were concerned about the effect that killing dogs *en masse* might have on the public.²⁵ As Festa has shown, the potential for the public massacre of dogs to degenerate into French Revolutionary violence was painfully clear to politicians and commentators alike.²⁶ Concerns over the effects of the tax fed into broader discussions about animal welfare and animal cruelty. Animal cruelty (in the form of cruel sports or general mistreatment) has been traditionally accepted as a characteristic of early modern life. Descartes' theory that animals were like machines, with 'no mental powers whatsoever' and an inability to feel pain, was routinely used to legitimate violence towards animals.²⁷ However, Erica Fudge has persuasively argued that animal cruelty was not 'outside the terms of moral reference'. Fudge describes the early modern ethic of 'self-serving kindness', based on the 'egocentric' notion that the 'government of the self' and 'of the passions' was the foundation of virtue. Cruelty towards animals was reprehensible not because of the creature's suffering, but because of the individual's failure of self-control.²⁸ This attitude was evident in literature for children, where among other things, 'animals [were] an object lesson in the dynamics of class relations', teaching kindness to inferiors.²⁹ Time and again, the failure to control one's baser impulses was represented as a stepping-stone to greater offences, for example, the trajectory depicted in William Hogarth's engravings of *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) and referenced in John Oswald's vegetarian manifesto *The Cry of Nature* (1791).

Although cruelty to animals was a common problem, the rise in pet-keeping made it difficult to sustain the argument that animals could not feel. Dog owners saw daily examples of their canine companions reacting to pleasure or pain, and demonstrating signs of emotion. Descartes' suggestion that these behaviours were learned reactions was increasingly questioned by philosophers and scientists who all claimed that, in one way or another, animals could feel.³⁰ Practices such as vivisection made this inescapably clear. Hume expressed the popular understanding propagated by anatomy that

where the structure of parts in brutes is the same as in men, and the operation of these parts also the same, the causes of that operation cannot be different, and that whatever we discover to be true of the one species, may be concluded without hesitation to be certain of the other,

an observation repeated by Erasmus Darwin in *Zoonomia* (1794–96).³¹ Moreover, Hume, David Hartley and others recognised that animals also appeared to feel many of the same emotions as humans.³²

While observations about animal rationality, feeling and similarity to humans made cruelty to animals even more unconscionable, and perhaps helped to alter individual behaviour and motivate an interest in animal welfare, they did not immediately lead to legislation to protect animals, or 'animal rights' in any modern sense of the term.³³ Rob Boddice argues that despite the historical importance placed upon Jeremy Bentham's statement that 'the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?', for Bentham and his contemporaries, the treatment of animals was contingent upon their usefulness to humans.³⁴ The refusal to fully recognise animals and their suffering was based upon not only economic but also political considerations. Capitalising on the debate sparked by Paine's *Rights of Man*, John Lawrence argued for 'The Rights of Beasts', complaining:

It has ever been, and still is, the invariable custom of the bulk of mankind, not even excepting legislators, both religious and civil, to look upon brutes as mere machines; animated yet without souls; endowed with feelings, but utterly devoid of rights; and placed without the pale of justice. [...] Brute creatures are not yet in the contemplation of any people, reckoned within the scheme of general justice; [...] they reap only the benefit of a partial, and inefficacious kind of compassion.³⁵

In addition to ambivalence about animal pain, this 'inefficacious compassion' was perhaps the result of tensions over the discourse of rights. While most open-minded individuals could concede that limiting animal cruelty benefitted the spiritual and moral wellbeing of humans as well as the physical safety of animals, animal *rights* evoked the 'levelling' principles of English and French radicals. As David Perkins explains, 'one obtained animal rights by extending rights from human beings downward'.³⁶ Between the privileged classes and their pets existed a social gulf filled with groups who were disenfranchised in one way or another: the working-classes, women, servants, the enslaved. These people had been marginalised in part because of claims about their physical inferiority, ignorance and brute-like nature.³⁷ If animals were proven to be sentient, feeling, rational creatures, more like humans than previously thought, the justification for social and political exclusion must also be brought into question. And if animals were to be accorded rights, it would become impossible to ignore the claims of these other groups to representation, freedom of person and adequate legal protection. As the following sections demonstrate, the treatment of animals in visual satire and print culture exploited this dilemma, and, while ostensibly arguing for the rights of animals, threw the focus back onto the inalienable rights of man.

II. Pain, Punishment and Personhood: The Dog as Moral Agent

Several visual satires addressed the dog tax directly, depicting the appeals of owners and the vengeance of dogs, or caricaturing politicians as untaxed curs to be rounded up and hanged. These images combined debates about dog ownership with a discussion of French Revolutionary principles, party politics and the evils of taxation.³⁸ Ruthless and shocking, they make a pointed political argument by

depicting suffering and pain. In an unfinished sketch by James Gillray (Figure 1, below), the patriotic figure John Bull undergoes the excruciating operation of having the 'worm' (the frenulum) beneath his tongue cut out, a practice which was commonly thought to prevent rabies in dogs.³⁹ Depicting humans undergoing the same treatment as animals lent a new perspective to traditional beliefs that animals could not feel pain.



FIG. 1. JAMES GILLRAY, *CURING JOHN BULL OF HIS CANINE APPETITE* (1796?).

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FIG. 2. JAMES GILLRAY, TO BE PAID FOR—THE DOG TAX (1796).
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FIG. 3. ISAAC CRUIKSHANK, *GIVE A DOG AN ILL NAME, THEY'LL HANG HIM*, 1796.

© PUBLIC DOMAIN. PAUL MELLON COLLECTION, YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, NEW HAVEN.

In other images (see Figures 2 and 3, above), politicians are metamorphosed into dogs 'not worth the tax' and experience first-hand the cruelty their policies inflict. Grotesque images of hanging dogs with half-human, half-canine faces, wearing the eponymous 'hang-dog look' or disfigured by pain, collapse the distinction between human and animal. The malicious destruction of dogs depicted in caricatures relied on the notion that animals (like politicians) felt pain. As Fudge has suggested, when the destruction and torture of animals were staged as a punishment for wrongdoing (in this case for destroying livestock, spreading hydrophobia or any number of hypothetical crimes), animals were being judged by human standards and held accountable to human laws.⁴⁰ Fudge's analysis of retributive action against 'animals who kill' exposes the dichotomy between early modern beliefs that animals are irrational objects, and cannot feel pain, and the desire to punish crimes against society. Rather than framing animal violence as spontaneous and irrational, the staging of punishment implied that animals were capable of reasoning and distinguishing between right and wrong. In the caricatures surrounding the dog tax, early modern animal cruelty as entertainment came head-to-head with a depiction of punishment for crime. By confounding these attitudes and collapsing distinctions between human morals and animal behaviour, the dog tax satires troubled the status of animals in eighteenth-century law and society. If animals, like humans, were held accountable to moral codes and laws, then like humans, they should also benefit from certain rights and legal protection: they should be considered 'persons'.

The conditions of personhood, in the moral, legal and metaphysical senses, were by no means settled in the eighteenth century.⁴¹ The fashion for 'It'-narratives throughout the period suggests the slipperiness of the categories of subject and object, animal and thing.⁴² According to Locke, a person was 'a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery'.⁴³ It is not difficult to imagine that, according to emerging eighteenth-century understandings of animal bodies, animal reason and animal feelings, certain species of animals might be perceived as members of this category. During the dog tax debate, for example, one MP described the dog as 'a sagacious animal' that 'associated ideas', and could form a syllogism better than his peers in the House of Commons.⁴⁴ Animal rationality alone might provide the grounds for personhood, but the argument did not stop here. In 1750, a 'freethinker' in Coventry's *Pompey the Little* was prepared to go further and argue that animals were 'moral agents'.⁴⁵ For other commentators, sentience was grounds enough to connect animals with vulnerable 'persons' who had a right to protection and care. Frances Hutcheson asserted that 'Brutes may very justly be said to have a right that no useless pain or misery should be inflicted on them [...] 'Tis true brutes have no notion of rights [...] but infants are in the same case, and yet have rights, which the adults are obliged to maintain'.⁴⁶ The erosion of the human/animal divide strengthened the argument that animals should be treated as 'persons'.

In the next section, I demonstrate how this notion of animals as 'persons' was employed in print culture surrounding the dog tax. Numerous publications gave animals a voice, which allowed them to complain about human cruelty and to deliver moral messages more directly. This also enabled more pointed social and political criticism. By personifying their canine subjects, many of the texts produced as part of the dog tax debate expressed concerns about the emotional capacities of animals, their physical welfare and human morality. The act of personification created personhood, and conferred agency.⁴⁷ As we shall see, dogs were presented as legal subjects with the ability to reason and moralise, and the right to make their complaints heard.

III. Rover's Remonstrance: Politics, Personification and the Rights of Dogs

Animals featured prominently in political pamphlets and satires during the 1790s, often with reference to Edmund Burke's description of the common people as a 'swinish multitude'.⁴⁸ Burke's attempt to bestialise the lower classes famously backfired, as responses to his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) appropriated his epithet as a way of unifying hardworking and disempowered Englishmen against supporters of an archaic and hierarchical version of English 'rights'.⁴⁹ Farmyard metaphors were common, from the representation of the king as the simplistic 'Farmer George', to the patriotic character John Bull, who was frequently transformed into a stubborn and thick-headed bovine by caricaturists. He was present again in the dog tax debate, this time as a bulldog. Traditional associations between the animal 'kingdom' and social hierarchy lent themselves to political critique. In 1793, the writer and intellectual John Thelwall was tried for seditious libel for a regicidal fable in which he decapitated a rooster who tyrannized over his farmyard.⁵⁰ The use of allegories involving animals was an obvious tool for entertainment and political instruction.⁵¹

While animals have always featured prominently in allegories and fables (where they 'stand for something else'), Jane Spencer argues that increasingly in eighteenth-century literature, 'animals stand for—and speak for—themselves'.⁵² Similarly, Laura Brown discusses eighteenth-century 'dog narratives' which question 'species boundaries and the definition of the human' by switching the narrative perspective to the canine protagonist. The social and geographic mobility or 'itinerancy' of canine narrators facilitated satire and presented readers with a cross-section of human behaviours, concerns and language.⁵³ Progressively empathetic portrayals of animals drew on contemporary debates about animal rationality, animal language and the human/animal divide. Jason Hribal argues that the representation of labouring animals' voices and experiences in print culture promoted 'identification and solidarity' between the beleaguered working classes and the animals that worked with them.⁵⁴ Many of these narrative techniques were present in discussions of the dog tax in newspapers, poems and pamphlets, where animal voices routinely addressed human readers. Dogs were frequently represented as speaking for themselves, in what we might describe as prosopopoeia.

In the debate over the tax, canine characters spoke the moral and political language of the day, employing the discourse of rights to argue their position.

Writers on the dog tax were not the first to use the new 'discourse on rights' to discuss the status of animals. The arguments of Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft and other radicals cut both ways and were often used by satirists to ridicule advocates of the rights of man. For example, Thomas Taylor's *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (1792) satirised Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's rights by applying her rationale to animals. Speaking about animal rights could either remind readers of the justness and universality of Paine's arguments or satirically associate them with the ignorance of the brute creation. *The Rights of Asses* (1792), a satire on the Society of the Friends of the People, mocked the democratisation of political ideas by suggesting that even animals thought they had rights, a strain taken up by many conservative satirists. In another pamphlet, Paine's argument for natural rights was applied to the brute creation, with problematic consequences:

For as far as the right is *natural*, beasts must have it as well as man; and what will it prove? It will prove in the *rat*, a right to gnaw our victuals, and undermine our habitations; in the fox, a right to take the *poultry*; in the *wolf* a right to eat the *sheep*; for all creatures have the right to live, and it is the *nature* of these creatures to live in this manner.⁵⁵

Invariably, in conservative responses to Paine, the connection between common people and animals was revived, if not by the epithet 'swinish multitude', then by the continued implication that the poor, like beasts of burden or wild animals, lacked the mental capacity to be trusted with political power.

While Paine's *Rights of Man* did not explicitly comment on the political status of animals, it provided both a theoretical framework and a vocabulary for others to do so. In May 1791, following rumours of a tax, the *London Chronicle* ran a petition of dogs to the king:

That at the present liberal and enlightened era, when even Lords themselves are considered as no better than your petitioners, they humbly conceive that they are entitled to equal privileges and equal rights [...] the maxim that *all men are equal*, is perfectly applicable to your Majesty's petitioners, who humbly think, that by the same rule, 'all dogs are equal,' and that the 'rights of dogs,' are founded not upon *compact*, but are *natural* and *imprescriptible*.⁵⁶

Quoting the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), the petition implied that animals were also covered by Paine's explanation of natural rights. Likewise, in 1796, the *London Packet* reported a 'General Meeting of Dogs' who resolved to petition Parliament against the tax.⁵⁷ The depiction of dogs organising meetings, debating and drafting petitions, was meant as a model for their human counterparts to follow. At least four separate petitions by dogs were described in newspapers and magazines, in addition to letters to the editor by dogs proposing alternative taxes on the 'asses' or 'sad dogs, lazy dogs, and puppies' in Parliament.⁵⁸

The insinuations that animals were more politically informed and active than their human owners were intended to shame as much as to incite indignation.

While radical texts inspired most responses to the tax, dogs also phrased their resistance in the language of conservative loyalism. The notion that Englishmen were tenacious defenders of their rights and liberties was ingrained in loyalist rhetoric and upheld by repeated references to the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Bill of Rights. Edmund Burke described English liberties as an '*entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity'.⁵⁹ Writers on the dog tax co-opted this position to claim the continuation of their traditional rights. Canine petitioners begged: 'That your Majesty will be pleased to continue and ensure to them the privilege of the *bones*, the liberty of the *scraps*, and other rights and immunities, which time immemorial has conferred upon them.'⁶⁰ A correspondent to the *Western County Magazine* likewise claimed that he could not 'bring my reason, my understanding, and humanity to think that the dogs should suffer the infraction of their ancient charter'.⁶¹ Enumerating the many virtues of dogs and their service to humans over the centuries, such accounts mixed natural rights theory with appeals to hereditary right, casting dogs as loyal subjects deserving of protection.

Many newspaper responses to the tax commented on the nobility, loyalty and honour of dogs, who faithfully served kind masters, but were also symbols of English courage.⁶² Even the bite of a rabid dog became a form of honourable resistance to taxation. The *Morning Post* suggested that

Dogs feel & resent their injuries with more spirit than Englishmen. The Dogs wish to be revenged on the people for taxing them through their Representatives in Parliament. They are determined to shew the Minister the danger of burthensome them, while Tax upon Tax is heaped on JOHN BULL, and he bears them with the dullness and indifference of an *Ass*.⁶³

Likewise, Edward Nairne transformed hydrophobia into 'cordophobia' and 'taxation fear', suggesting that dogs were driven mad by the many 'wrongs' they suffered (a subtle reference to Wollstonecraft).⁶⁴ Nairne's disenfranchised dogs chose to form an association and applied to 'dogs of wisdom' to guide them in their resistance. Instrumental in organising their petition was Hareskin, based of course on the lawyer Thomas Erskine, who had famously defended Thomas Paine in 1792, and Thomas Hardy and other radicals accused of treason in 1794. The poem emphasised Hareskin's radical credentials as a '*Hardy* dog', who showed his compatriots how to 'legally resist' the tax. These political and politicised animals were a challenge to human readers, who were characterised as dull, spiritless and passive creatures. They lacked the courage, or maybe even the inclination, to stand up for themselves and assert their rights. If dogs could take legal advice, form rational arguments and even draft petitions, they offered a model of resistance for disenfranchised humans.

The argument for better rights and treatment was evoked by writers on the dog tax by connecting the dogs' plight with the plights of other victims of oppression.

A proposed 'Inscription for the Collars of Taxed Dogs' deployed the satirical representation of middle-class sensibility as a study in the abuse of power and privilege. The collar represents oppression but also the affective connection between the dog and its owner, by whose bounty the dog can 'breathe another year':

'Die puppy!' Was a *brother's* harsh command,
A friend repriev'd me with a pitying hand;
Dropp'd at my rigid fate a manly tear,
And told me I should breathe another year.⁶⁵

The collar highlights the subordinate position of the creature who cannot protect its own life, and who is reprieved at the whim of a capricious sensibility. The reference to condemnation by a 'brother' and redemption by a 'friend' made a pointed critique of the notion of dogs as 'man's best friend', but also harnessed a motto which would be very familiar to newspaper readers. Josiah Wedgwood's image of a kneeling slave, asking 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' became the ubiquitous and fashionable symbol of abolitionism in the late 1780s. By creating a connection with this famous slogan, the verse attempted to engage the sensibility of philanthropic readers in the cause of animal welfare, while also taking a subtle jab at the commodification of suffering practised by the middle classes. Other dog tax satires harnessed the image of the suffering slave to parody the fickle sensibilities of politicians. 'The Remonstrance and Petition of Rover, a Poor Dog' (1796) addressed 'unpitying Dent', accusing: 'tir'd, for a while, with Negro banging, | Thoud'st take a turn at spaniel hanging'. Dent was presented as unmoved by the suffering slave, but grown 'tender' over the death of an old weather sheep killed by a stray dog.⁶⁶ The implication was that Dent chose his sensibilities to suit his political agenda. Conversely, the canine characters represented in the debate surrounding the dog tax refused to be sacrificed to an economic or political agenda, asserting their rights and demanding equitable treatment.

As we have seen, the debate over animal feeling had extended from a discussion of physical sensibility to moral and emotional capacity. Laura Brown points to several dog narratives published in the 1790s and early 1800s which extol the morality and virtue of dogs and the 'Christian lessons' their behaviour represents.⁶⁷ In a poem entitled *The Lamentation of a Dog, on the Tax, and its Consequences* (1796), the canine narrator celebrates the many virtues of his species:

They, teiz'd and dragg'd by restless Children round,
Graz'd not their tender skin with slightest wound.
And still, when Friends forgot, Relations fled,
The World oppress'd, rever'd the once lov'd head:
Not e'en by Famine driven to retreat;
Dear his affection still, without the Meat:
Dear e'en his Prison:—and when Life is gone,
Dear, to watch nightly by the nameless stone.⁶⁸

The dog exercises rational and moral restraint: he does not lash out when teased by children, and he does not forsake his master in hunger, poverty or even in death, belying his status as a brute. This recalls the early modern virtue of self-governance:

the dog is presented as capable of reason and empathy, and acts as a moral agent, fulfilling the requirements for personhood. From this moral high ground, the canine narrator offers social and political criticism. Borrowing from Paine's critique of the tax burden on the lower classes, the poem attacks the government for re-appropriating funds: 'yet these our Wrongs we better could endure, | Were it, as first propos'd to feed the Poor'.⁶⁹ This argument foregrounds the responsibility of all masters not to abuse their position of power and privilege. The dog is willing to be taxed, and perhaps even to die for his master or for the benefit of other humans, emphasising the virtuous qualities of obedience and loyalty. However, the implicit suggestion is that no compassionate master would ever require such a sacrifice. A position of superiority confers a duty of care over others, and masters of all stripes should be encouraged to protect the rights of their inferiors.

While arguments about human superiority often cited the sophistication of human language, early modern philosophers accepted that animal language (including sounds and physical gestures) facilitated communication and expressed passions.⁷⁰ Tobias Menely argues that this 'impassioned voice' formed the basis of a sympathetic communication which was seen to diminish the gap between humans and animals.⁷¹ By representing actions, gestures and sounds from a third-person narrative perspective, literary productions attempted to construct a sense of an animal's interiority. Nairne's poem, for example, depicted canine behaviour as a persuasive technique in the manner of oratory: 'with our tail, address this mighty lord, | And beat a parley on the sounding board'.⁷² Similarly, in mid-April 'Mrs Eyre', a frequent contributor to the *Oracle & Public Advertiser*, addressed a letter to Parliament opposing the dog tax. Eyre's observations of animal behaviour allow her to recount the emotional state of the dog:


Who can describe the vast pleasure of the dog when he hears the footstep of his master—he humbles himself at his feet—he licks his hand—he caresses him—and by his pleasure welcomes him home by a thousand ways of truth and sincerity, far beyond the most studied speech!⁷³

Dogs are not defenceless or inferior because they cannot speak. Here, the dog's body 'speaks' the feelings of pleasure he experiences. Eyre claims that these physical demonstrations of devotion are more powerful expressions than language itself: they have a kind of emotional honesty. This type of sympathetic prosopopoeia would be familiar to polite readers as a regular figure in sentimental literature. In Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling* (1771), for example, dogs are repeatedly described in ways which suggest their emotional integrity, and are used to provoke sentimental reactions in the reader. Perhaps the most well-known example is old Edwards' dog Trusty, who shares his master's grief at being forced off their land. The tear-jerking story of the old dog's visible heartbreak, as he staggers out into the yard for the last time, 'gave a short howl, and died', demonstrates his physical and emotional exhaustion. Indeed, the emotional affinity between man and beast is emphasised by Edwards' admission that 'I could have laid down and died, too'. The protagonist Harley's 'face is bathed in tears' as he listens to this sad tale,

modelling an appropriate reaction for the reader.⁷⁴ In these accounts, sensibility is its own language, which emphasises the connection between man and beast.

But affection has its limits, and Eyre's dog provides a cautionary tale for all masters. While extolling its many virtues, such as fidelity and courage, Eyre painted a picture of domestic felicity maintained by the emotional labour of a subordinate member of the family hierarchy: dogs 'shall not open their mouth against an inhuman master, but lick the hand lifted up to shed their blood'.⁷⁵ By reminding her readers that the persecuted dog always has the potential to bite, Eyre cautions tyrannical masters to beware of their subordinates. As Hribal suggests in his discussion of animal agency, animal behaviour could often be read as a deliberate and practiced resistance.⁷⁶ If animals were capable of feeling pain, reasoning and feeling emotions, then those who stole food, escaped captivity, refused to work or who turned upon their masters were exercising intentional defiance. Indeed, some canine commentators on the dog tax modelled this resistance by suggesting rapacious politicians should be '*scented out and run down*'.⁷⁷ One Towser claimed that 'there is not a dog in the nation that will fight more desperately, or bark louder, in a good cause', demonstrating his willingness to stand up for himself and his kind.⁷⁸ The lesson for readers was twofold. While social inferiors, like domestic animals, might learn enough self-governance to submit to ill-treatment for a time, they were not necessarily passive or unthinking creatures. But more importantly, by associating together, defending their rights, and articulating their demands, the canine characters of 1796 taught their owners a valuable lesson in political engagement.

Conclusion

The dog tax was repealed in April 1798, just two years after its inception, and was reincarnated in 1812 when the stray dog population once again became a national issue. The 1796 tax was just one piece of legislation in a long line of attempts regulate dog ownership, but nonetheless it demonstrated an unprecedented concern with the question of rights. While some of the responses to the dog tax advocated for animal rights, the dog was primarily a cipher for his human owner. Festa concludes that 'humanitarian claims on behalf of dogs in the debate over the dog tax are not designed to enlarge the class of those entitled to rights'.⁷⁹ It was too soon, she suggests, to speak of animal rights: indeed, bills to protect animals were laughed out of Parliament well into the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ But as this essay has shown, the diverse discussions of the rights of dogs challenged readers to reconcile their compassion for animals with the social, legal and political inequalities they witnessed daily amongst humans. Rather than viewing better animal welfare as a trickle-down effect of the rights of man, these texts circumnavigated the chain of being, bridging the gulf between the privileged classes and their social inferiors from the bottom up. In newspapers, poems and pamphlets, dogs modelled behaviour and resistance. If animals were capable not only of feeling pain, or thinking, but of moral and emotional refinement, then surely the same had to be said of their owners, no matter how indigent they might be. And if animals could petition Parliament, albeit by proxy, then surely their owners shared that right. 

NOTES

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1. Dog tax bills were unsuccessfully introduced in the House of Commons in 1755 and 1776. See John D. Blaisdell, 'The Rise of Man's Best Friend: The Popularity of Dogs as Companion Animals in Late Eighteenth-Century London as Reflected by the Dog Tax of 1796', *Anthrozoös*, 12 (1999), 76–87 <<https://doi.org/10.2752/089279399787000363>>; Ingrid H. Tague, 'Eighteenth-Century Debates on a Dog Tax', *Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), 901–20 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X08007127>>.
2. The nickname appears to have been coined by the *Morning Post* (see e.g. 8 Apr 1797 and 22 Feb 1798).
3. Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London: Cadell, 1790), p. 10.
4. On Paine's language, see Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 104–06; Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 18–46; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), pp. 35–67. Conversely, Darren Howard argues that maintaining the boundary between humans and animals was essential to the arguments of prominent political authors in the 1790s—Darren Howard, 'Necessary Fictions: The "Swinish Multitude" and the Rights of Man', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 161–78 (pp. 166–67).
5. Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic Period Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 40.
6. Hilda Kean suggests that 'those supporting humane treatment for animals adhered to no one political or ideological set of beliefs', and that in the 1790s, attitudes to animals could allow politically disparate individuals to 'make common cause'—see *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (London: Reaktion, 1998), pp. 24–25.
7. David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 43.
8. Lucinda Cole offers a comprehensive survey of the field, in 'Animal Studies in the Eighteenth Century: The Nature of the Beast', *Literature Compass*, 16.6 (June 2019) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12536>>.
9. Rob Boddice, *A History of Attitudes and Behaviours toward Animals in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Tobias Menely, *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Penguin, 1983); Susan Wiseman, Erica Fudge and Ruth Gilbert (eds), *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
10. Blaisdell, 'Rise of Man's Best Friend'; Markman Ellis, 'Suffering Things: Lapdogs, Slaves, and Counter-Sensibility', in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Cranbury: Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp. 92–113; Lucinda Robbins, *Elephants and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Ingrid H. Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

11. Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion, 2007); Kean, *Animal Rights*; Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights*.
12. Laura Brown, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010); Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes*; Frank Palmieri (ed.), *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Francis Coventry, *The History of Pompey the Little* (1751), ed. by Nicholas Hudson (New York: Broadview, 2008).
13. Lynn Festa, 'Person, Animal, Thing: The 1796 Dog Tax and the Right to Superfluous Things', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 33.2 (Spring 2009), 1–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-2008-044>>; Ingrid H. Tague, *Animal Companions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).
14. Festa, 'Person, Animal, Thing', pp. 3–4.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
16. 'A rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting', see *Oxford English Dictionary*.
17. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London: Jordan, 1791), p. 121.
18. Unsuccessful dog tax bills were introduced to the House of Commons in 1755, 1761 and 1776 (see Tague, 'Debates on a Dog Tax', p. 902). Newspapers frequently discussed the problem of rabies, and this was increasingly associated with the idea of a tax on dogs. See e.g. a letter to the *General Advertiser*, 26 Feb 1749; *North Briton*, 5 Mar 1763; *The Times*, 9 June 1785; a letter to the *London Chronicle*, 25–27 Jan 1791.
19. As many of these arguments are explained in detail in Festa's article, I cover them only briefly here.
20. The Poor Rate was a property tax levied in each parish, which was used for the relief of the poor. Throughout the century, the assessment, administration and efficacy of the Rate was widely criticised, and many reforms proposed. See Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700–1930*, *Social History in Perspective* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002).
21. *Oracle & Public Advertiser*, 6 Apr 1796.
22. *Parliamentary Debates*, 5 Apr 1796, p. 368.
23. *Parliamentary Register*, 5 Apr 1796, p. 511; from 1794–97, the government passed new taxes and increased existing duties on 'luxuries' such as hair powder, servants, windows, rum and brandy. See John Jeffrey-Cook, 'William Pitt and his Taxes', *British Tax Review*, 4 (2010), 376–91.
24. *London Packet*, 18 Apr 1796.
25. During debates on the tax in parliament, Richard Brinsley Sheridan warned that hanging untaxed dogs would harden the minds of the lower classes and 'stimulate them to acts of inhumanity' against 'animals of a superior nature' (*Whitehall Evening Post*, 21 Apr 1796). See also the Member of Parliament John Courtenay's remarks during the same debate on 25 Apr 1796—see William Woodfall, et al., *The Parliamentary Register*, 4 vols (London: Chapman, 1795–96), IV, 203.
26. Festa, 'Person, Animal, Thing', pp. 26–27.
27. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637), ed. by Ian Maclean (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 125.

28. Erica Fudge, 'Two Ethics: Killing Animals in the Past and the Present', in *Killing Animals*, ed. by the Animal Studies Group (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 99–119 (pp. 99–100).
29. Howard, 'Necessary Fictions', p. 163; see also Kenyon Jones, 'Person, Animal, Thing', pp. 51–78; Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 109–66.
30. For an overview of attitudes to Descartes, see Anita Guerrini, *Experimenting with Humans and Animals: From Galen to Animal Rights* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 34–45.
31. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738–40), ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 325.
32. Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights*, p. 24.
33. The first piece of legislation relating to animal welfare was the bill to Prevent the Cruel Treatment of Cattle (1822).
34. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: Payne, 1789), p. 309; Boddice, 'The Moral Status of Animals and the Historical Human Cachet', *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture and Politics*, 30 (2010), 457–89 (pp. 473–74).
35. John Lawrence, *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses, and on the Moral Duties of Man Towards the Brute Creation*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1796–98), I, 118–19.
36. Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights*, p. 43.
37. See Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 42–44.
38. The printed caricatures mentioned here (Figures 2 and 3) are held in the British Museum Satires collection, and their political symbolism is explained in detail by M. Dorothy George's *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, Volume VII (London: British Museum, 1942).
39. John Bull was a symbol of the no-nonsense English yeomanry who was alternately a patriotic symbol and a national laughing-stock.
40. Fudge, 'Two Ethics', p. 112.
41. On personhood studies and their implications for animal history, see Cole, 'Animal Studies in the Eighteenth Century', pp. 12–15.
42. See Blackwell (ed.), *Secret Life of Things*, especially Liz Bellamy, 'It-Narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre', pp. 117–46. An 'It-Narrative' follows a non-human protagonist, typically an object or animal: eighteenth-century It-Narratives detailed the adventures of dogs, fleas, coins, garments, household items and even vehicles.
43. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689); quoted in John Barresi and Raymond Martin, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.
44. *Parliamentary Register*, 25 Apr, p. 516.
45. Francis Coventry, *The History of Pompey the Little; or, the Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog*, 2nd edn (London: Cooper, 1751), p. 248.
46. Francis Hutcheson, *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755); quoted in Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights*, p. 42.
47. On the social and political uses of personification in the eighteenth century, see Heather Keenleyside, 'Personification for the People: On James Thomson's *The Seasons*',

- English Literary History*, 76 (2009), 447–72 (p. 458) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.0.0044>>.
48. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Cooper, 1790), p. 117; Carl Fisher, ‘“Politics and Porcine Representation”: Multitudinous Swine in the British Eighteenth Century’, *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, 10 (1999), 303–26 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10436920008580250>>; Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes*, pp. 39–40.
 49. One of the ‘Swinish Multitude’, *A Rod for Burkites* (1790); James Parkinson, *An Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Swinish Multitude* (1793); and the periodicals *Hog’s Wash* (1794–95) and *Pig’s Meat* (1793–96).
 50. John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 112–13; Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 111–25.
 51. On the pre-eminence of animal ‘meanings’ over animals themselves, see Fudge, ‘Two Ethics’, p. 106.
 52. Jane Spencer, ‘Creating Animal Experience in Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative’, *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33 (2010), 469–86 (p. 471) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-0208.2010.00318.x>>; see also Frank Palmieri, ‘The Autocritique of Fables’, in *Humans and Other Animals*, ed. by Palmieri, pp. 83–100.
 53. Brown, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes*, p. 125; Nicholas Hudson, ‘It-Narratives: Fictional Point of View and Constructing the Middle Class’, in *Secret Life of Things*, ed. by Blackwell, pp. 292–306.
 54. Jason C. Hribal, ‘Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below’, *Human Ecology Review*, 14 (2007), 101–12 (p. 106).
 55. *A Letter to John Bull, Esq. from his Second Cousin, Thomas Bull* (London: Rivington, 1793), p. 12; see also *The Rights of Asses* (Edinburgh: Robertson & Berry, 1792).
 56. *London Chronicle*, 7–10 May 1791.
 57. *London Packet*, 18 Apr 1796.
 58. ‘The Remonstrance and Petition of Rover, a Poor Dog’, *Monthly Magazine*, 3 (Apr 1796), 225; *Morning Post and Fashionable Times*, 5 Apr 1796; for alternative taxes, see ‘Observations on the Intended Tax Upon Dogs’, *Town and Country Magazine* (June 1791), 270; ‘Towser’s Scheme for a Poll-Tax on that Part of the Human Species’, in *The Comick Magazine; or Compleat Library of Mirth, Humour, Wit, Gaiety, and Entertainment*, 1.5 (1797), 134–35.
 59. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 47.
 60. *London Chronicle*, 7–10 May 1791.
 61. *Western County Magazine*, 5 (1791), 156.
 62. In the eighteenth century, the bulldog was a stalwart of English liberty and strength. In the example from the *London Packet*, an ‘English Patriotic Bull-Dog’ chairs the meeting.
 63. *Morning Post*, 22 July 1796, n.p.
 64. Edward Nairne, *The Dog Tax, a Poem* (Canterbury: For the Author, 1797), pp. 1–6.
 65. ‘Inscriptions for the Collars of Taxed Dogs’, *Oracle & Public Advertiser*, 26 Aug 1796, n.p.
 66. ‘Remonstrance and Petition of Rover’, p. 225.
 67. Among these are *The Biography of a Spaniel* (1796); Edward Augustus Kendall, *Keeper’s Travel in Search of his Master* (1798); and *The Dog of Knowledge* (1801): see Brown, pp. 131–33.

68. *The Lamentation of a Dog, on the Tax, and its Consequences. Addressed to the Right Hon. William Pitt* (Bury: Symonds, et al., 1796), p. 9.
69. *Lamentation of a Dog*, pp. 9–10; Paine criticised taxes on ‘articles of consumption’, rather than upon land, arguing that the consequence was ‘a constant encrease [*sic*] in the number and wretchedness of the poor, and in the amount of the poor rates’: see *Rights of Man, Part the Second* (London: Jordan, 1792), p. 101.
70. R. W. Serjeantson, ‘The Passions and Animal Language, 1540–1700’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (2001), 425–44 (p. 433) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2001.0029>>.
71. Menely, *Animal Claim*, p. 2.
72. Nairne, *Dog Tax*, p. 22.
73. *Oracle & Public Advertiser*, 15 Apr 1796.
74. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. by Brian Vickers, Stephen Bending and Stephen Bygrave (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 66–67.
75. *Oracle & Public Advertiser*, 15 Apr 1796.
76. Hribal, ‘Animals, Agency, and Class’, p. 103. Stephen F. Eisenman identifies such actions as ‘animal protest’: see *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London: Reaktion, 2013), p. 14.
77. ‘Observations on the Intended Tax upon Dogs’, p. 270.
78. ‘Substitute for the Dog Tax’, *Comick Magazine*, 1 (1797), 133. ‘Towser’ was a name frequently given to the large dogs used for bull and bear-baiting.
79. Festa, ‘Person, Animal, Thing’, p. 30.
80. Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes*, p. 79.

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