

What is Queer Theory Doing With the Animal?
Inter-species Relationships and Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*

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“And of course that will traverse this whole seminar, whether it be present itself and pressing, itself, explicitly, in person, or indirectly, will always be that of the “proper to man.” And, moreover, bestiality, characterized either as perversion or sexual deviancy, zoophilia that pushes people to make love with beasts or to make love to beasts, or as cruelty - this bestiality, this double bestiality (zoophilic or cruel) would also be proper to man. ————— Derrida, *The Sovereign and the Beast*, 69

“You’ve read of spouses - God! I hate that word! - ‘spouses’ who all of a sudden start wearing dresses - yours, or their own collection - wives gone dyke... but if there’s one thing you don’t put on your plate, no matter how exotic your tastes may be is ... bestiality[...] the fucking of animals! No, that’s one thing you haven’t thought about, one thing you’ve overlooked as a byway on the road of life, as the old soap has it. ‘Well, I wonder when he’ll start cruising livestock.’ ————— Stevie, *The Goat*, 29

Regardless of the motivation or intent driving critical animal studies, a significant part of what interests academics, philosophers, and artists alike in the subject of the “animal” is the implications it holds for the subject of humans - a subject we can never really divorce ourselves from completely. This is not to say that this tendency is an unacknowledged or uncomplicated facet of animal theory - the most dedicated animal theorists are deeply troubled by the inevitable anthropocentrism of their work and make every attempt to minimize it as much as possible; however, while I am not advocating that the subject of “animals” should be used as a testing ground for exclusively human concerns, I will argue that because we cannot (and should not) construct such impenetrable barriers between humans and all other creatures, we do not need to be too

reticent in including the question of animal(s) in important discussions that have hitherto been considered relevant only to humanity. In an effort to model such an integration of subjects, this paper will consider how the questions we ask about animals (subjects othered by species) are energized and complicated by the questions we ask about queer humans (subjects othered by sexuality and gender). While “queerness” is generally thought of as a solely human phenomena, there is a strong recent discourse spanning the humanities and sciences that demonstrates the ‘legitimacy’ of non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality by examining the multifarious manifestations of sexual organs, sexual coupling, reproduction, and non-reproductive sexual activity amongst many different species, from mammals with close biological ties to humans to micro-organisms that most humans have never encountered (see Myra Hird’s “Animal Transex” for the most comprehensive account of this literature). The question of the animal has also been implicated in questions of queerness by the forces seeking its delegitimization: from the American Christian Right’s rhetoric of what is “natural to man” to anti-gay-marriage advocates who adopt the infinitely nuanced position of “what’s next, people marrying their dogs?” Responding to the tentative connections between animal theory and queer theory, Susan McHugh’s timely book review, “Queer and Animal Theories” establishes a strong foundation for this burgeoning discourse, emphasizing the “need for other models of agency at the bleeding edges of queer studies and animal studies” (155). Internalizing the potential complications that such a discourse might produce McHugh argues that:

Though one might expect that the humanities would provide better handles on representational issues [queerness and animality], these disciplines by

definition also bear the philosophical baggage of anthropocentrism, in which love of knowledge remains coupled with less ardent commitments to nonhuman companions. Their two very different approaches to theorizing queerness and animality — discursive grafting and transcoding between discourses — suggest far different potentials for the future of queer and animal theories.” (162-3)

But while McHugh’s concern that a commitment to the animal other might be subverted by a commitment to knowledge that holds ethical implications exclusively for humans is certainly justified, the potential ideological shifts that a careful and critical pairing of both animal and queer theories may foster are great enough to take the risk.

Queer animal studies, while still in its early stages, is already beginning to take on a number of different forms. Working with scientifically-inflected feminist theory, Lynda Birke, Nina Lykke, and Mette Bryld expand on the biological and rhetorical links drawn between queerness and animals and propose a paradigmatic connection:

Like queering, ‘animating’ is a discursive process, operating between these human/animal conjunctions (thus no longer across the border of those who use speech and those who do not). For example, how the term ‘animal’ operates will differ between a human-and-guide-dog dyad, and (say) a human-trapping-rats dyad; the relationship between human and non-human is very different in each case. This could matter in the case of disputed politics, such as disagreements between antivivisectionists, opposed to the use of any living animal in research, and those who seek legislative reform, for whom definitions of ‘animals’ may be contested. So, while it is an inexact analogy, we suggest that ‘animating’ can also do border work between these conjoint human/non-humans, just as queering does. (Birke et al 170)

What is so important about this move is that its practical implications are clearly directed towards the project of establishing a more ethical relationship between human and non-human animals; by emphasizing that it is humans (in power) who determine what is called “animal” just as they determine what is called queer and by demonstrating how these labels of alterity are part of a system by which the othered subject can be dismissed

and dominated, Birke et al follow the Derridean impetus to expose the word “animal” as not only an insufficient marker of all non-human others, but as a violently reductive and inane term that unifies the countless species it encompasses in order to subjugate all non-humans in an endlessly repeated rhetorical act to the carno-phallogocentrism of man. Furthermore, the term “animating” makes explicit that it is only in the imagined opposition to humans that a member of any given species is “an animal” as opposed to a singular living creature with distinct characteristics and habits. Thus the concept of the animal is held up as an arbitrary cultural construct (much like the concept of a man or a woman), and cannot be divorced from the humans who reproduce the construct. For this reason it makes sense that the crucial project of developing a code of ethics that encompasses all living beings must begin by interrogating the existing types of relationships between humans and non-humans.

Embarking on this project from within the humanities, McHugh provides a rich account of the crossover between queer and animal theories in four recent literary meditations on the complicated relationship that form between humans and non-humans. Focusing specifically on “the career paths of Kuzniar and Garber, as women working within queer literary and cultural studies who moved from questioning histories of human sex and gender to psychoanalyzing animal texts” McHugh argues that it “remains difficult to take the lives of animals seriously in all academic contexts. Animals may be approached as extensions of queer affect, only with profoundly ambivalent results for epistemological critique” (McHugh 163). But while the critical work being done on animals within the humanities is undeniably challenging, there are texts that do succeed

in communicating why the lives of animals are something that must be regarded with urgency and gravity. While many of the texts that provoke a critical and engaged questioning of the human-non-human relationship are philosophical and theoretical in form (Giorgio Agamben's *The Open* and Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* being perhaps the most influential) there are also a number recent texts that tackle the same questions through fiction and art criticism (specifically Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Kuzniar's *Melancholia's Dog*). Dwelling with the same types of issues and questions in dramatic form, Edward Albee's tragic play, *The Goat* (2003), would be a valuable addition to this archive - especially for the work it does surrounding the intersections of queer and animal theory. While, as Una Chaudhuri argues, "there is certainly no doubt that Albee is interested here, as he has been before, in the question of modern tragedy," I would add that *The Goat* reconceptualizes the modern tragedy as one that spans the species divide (11). The play is primarily a conversation between a husband (Martin) and wife (Stevie) over the revelation of the husband's affair. In *The Goat*, the question of the animal takes the form of the play's subtitle: *Who is Sylvia?*, and the answer is the central issue of the play. While we know from early on that Sylvia is a goat, the conflict that structures Albee's text develops between Stevie's position that she is "just a goat" and thus not even a viable candidate for an extra-marital affair, and Martin's position that she is a singular, wonderful, female with whom he is in love. The scenes in which this conflict plays out, while in part a typical representation of a family shattered by infidelity, are constituted as much by philosophical debate over the language that is used to describe Sylvia as they are an argument about the husband's infidelity. In fact, the fight between

the spouses is primarily a fight about the proper relationship between “animals” and humans; and while Chaudhuri claims that “much has already been written about Albee’s astonishing feat in drawing genuine pity and fear from a subject that is referred to in the play, repeatedly and hilariously, as ‘goat-fucking,’” I would argue that the repetition of “goat-fucking” becomes utterly devoid of humour as we follow Stevie’s re-cognition of the singular alterity of Sylvia (11).

Stevie begins the play as the character with whom the audience is best able to relate; as my second epigraph illustrates, she is as duly shocked and disgusted as we imagine any “normal” person would be upon learning her spouse has committed acts of “bestiality.” However, by the final scene, there is a drastic shift in Stevie’s understanding of who Sylvia is and the terms of the relationship the eponymous mistress has with her husband. Stevie’s cognitive leap takes her from regarding Sylvia as “a thing” and “an animal” that can only be specified to the species of goat to a singular creature who, while still a goat, is also her rival in the fight to insure the devotion of her husband.

Beginning with the question posed by both *The Goat* and Derrida’s most recent (post-humous) contribution to critical animal studies, *The Beast and the Sovereign* - how do conceptualizations of bestiality inform our relationship with animals? - I will grapple with the myriad ways in which Albee’s challenging play is, in fact, a staging of some of the central questions of animal theory: What is proper to man? What, if such a general question can even be asked, is proper to beasts? How does the language we use to talk about non-humans determine the limits of what can actually be said? What is it about the idea of a human having a sexual relationship with a non-human that is so offensive when

every other type of human/non-human relationship is celebrated in Western culture?

Returning to my first epigraph, we must consider Derrida's provocation that bestiality, is in fact, proper to man, not animals. Derrida acknowledges two different manifestations of bestiality: zoophilic perversion (a type of sexual deviancy that "pushes people to make love with beasts") and cruelty (that is so severe it is seen as inhuman, and thus classified as bestial or animalistic). Stevie keeps both Martin and the audience aware of the double meaning when she exclaims: "you ... rape this... animal and you convince yourself it has to do with love?" (43). There is no question for Stevie that Martin is using a helpless animal in order to violently and selfishly pleasure himself. She never acknowledges the possibility that the goat might have been a willing, or even an eager participant, as bestiality is understood as an exclusively human transgression that, in keeping with our other relationships to non-humans, only ever instrumentalizes the animal for human gain. While it may sound like the term "bestiality" identifies the beast as the object of desire, the "bestial" part of the word actually identifies the human perpetrator as behaving *like a beast*, not doing something *to a beast*. As Derrida argues:

At bottom, what Lacan and Deleuze are telling us about bestiality and (transcendental) betise is that they are reserved for mankind, that they are proper of mankind, that the beasts are incapable of them, that one cannot qualify as "bestial" or bete (bete in the sense of betise) beasts that have no relation to the law, that they cannot be cruel and responsible, i.e. free and sovereign (sovereignty being, even before defining politically the essence or vocation or claim of a sovereign of a nation-state or a people, the very definition of the juridical person, as a free and responsible person, able to say or imply "I, me," to posit itself as "I, me"). ("Beast" 178)

What this means is that animals cannot actually transgress, as by our understanding of animals (of what subjugates the animal to the human), there is nothing in place - no

culture, no rules, no prohibitions - for animals to abandon. According to our rhetoric of the animal, the human is the only species who can betray his species, and to behave “like a beast” is to do just that.

While he acknowledges that “bestiality” is sometimes used to classify a sexual act, Derrida sees the term as more often used to describe acts of intense cruelty or stupidity. For the same reasons that animals cannot commit sexual transgressions - they have no sovereignty or relationship with the law - they also cannot be cruel or stupid. Part of what Derrida means by sovereignty here is that it is only when an animal is singled out by a human, usually for the sake of pet-keeping, that he is given any identity at all beyond that of “an animal;” and any relationship that prompts a human to assign an identity to an animal is too steeped in human domination for that identity to pose a radical disruption to any concept of the undifferentiated “Animal.” As it does in a culture of pet-keeping, the question of the animal’s identity in *The Goat* hinges on the arbitrariness of a name. Stevie learns first that her husband is in love with a Sylvia, but when it is revealed that Sylvia is in fact a goat, she interrogates her husband on why he “called” her that:

Why do you call her Sylvia, by the way? Did she have a tag, or something? Or, was it more: Who is Sylvia, Fair is she That all our goats commend her [...] You just saw this ... thing, this goat, and you said to yourself ‘This is Sylvia.’ Or did you talk to it: ‘Hello, Sylvia.’ How the hell did you know it was a she - was a female? Bag of nipples dragging in the dung? Or isn’t this your first?!(31)

Stevie’s question is fair: How does Martin know her name is Sylvia? Either he must have named her or another human both named and tagged her. But while Stevie’s query is understandable, she approaches the mystery of Sylvia’s name in such a way as to mock the idea that a goat could even have a name; referring to Sylvia as a “thing” and equating

her femaleness with a “bag of nipples dragging in the dung,” she is not just concerned with how Martin “knew” her name, but also with why anyone would bother to name a goat at all.

Even if we accept Martin’s insistence that the name of the goat is Sylvia, the naming of animals is still a complicated question. Emmanuel Levinas’ essay, “The Name of the Dog” - a chilling reflection on the time he spent as a prisoner of war in a Nazi work camp - tells the story of the little dog that brought a rare and isolated moment of joy to the prisoners when he greeted them happily on their return to the camp after a day of work in the forest. While the dog was only allowed to stay a few weeks, the prisoners called “him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog” (153). Bobby is not a pet and the prisoners of the camp who give him his name exert no power over him, as they themselves are stripped of their “human skin;” however, this is a unique situation created by the singular conditions of the Holocaust (153). Generally speaking, the naming of animals is, however well-meaning, an act of domestication and domination. While in Western society, animals with names fare much better than those who do not (“pets” vs “livestock”), and the position of name-giver is, in this sense, one of great power, even sovereignty. And while Martin is anxious to exempt himself from this role, never affirming that he actually did name her and maintaining that “she is [his] first; she is [his] only,” we cannot ignore the immense amount of power a white human male has over a creature othered by both gender and species (31). As Theresa May posits:

In a gesture both of alienation and domination, believing himself in love, but performing master–slave, he fucks her / it. Martin languages his experience of Sylvia as “[n]ot a cunt, a soul!,” but he is helpless to relate to his new love in a way other than conquest (“I had to have her”). Sylvia is a stand-in for an

accessible “nature”—for pastorality, for a wilderness tamed. She is also a stand-in (albeit on four legs) for men, women, and children who have become—through skin color, gender, national origin, or simple dependence—at once the objects of desire and the consumables of a heterosexual patriarchy. Differences among humans—race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or nationality—then become petty by comparison. (May 98)

We cannot say in situations like this - the situation Albee challenges us to imagine - that we know for certain that the goat was harmed or was even an unwilling participant. But we can certainly be wary of Martin’s ability to know otherwise.

Analogous to the issue of intergenerational sexual relationships, inter-species “relationships” are troubled by matters of consent. If a sixteen year-old human does not have the mental faculties required in order to enter into a sexual relationship (and most North American legal systems say she does not), then we certainly do not have any measures in place for determining the consent of animals. But while Stevie accuses Martin of rape, she is not really concerned that the will of an innocent goat may have been violated. We know this because she slaughters Sylvia with her own hands at the end of the play. Rather, her distress comes from the fact that Martin has betrayed both the rules of marriage and the rules of humanity by engaging not only in extra-marital sexual relations, but extra-species sexual relations. Until the last scene of the play, Stevie emphasizes to the audience that Martin is not just a philanderer (which is forgivable), but rather a sick, perverted “monster” overcome by bestiality. Much in the way Michel Foucault describes the advent of the homosexual “species” in the nineteenth century - the cultural shift from viewing sodomy as an act to assigning those who engaged in the act (and other same-sex relations) to a new species - the homosexual - Stevie sees Martin as transformed into something less than human, a new species that is bestial to extent that it

can no longer be considered human. But while bestiality and homosexuality neither can, nor should, be seen as reducible to analogous expressions of non-heteronormativity, they can both be considered queer to the extent that they fall outside the normative strictures of sexual desire. However, assigning the qualifier queer to those whose desire is for a member of another species is a dangerous move, considering the positive political power the term queer holds and the intensely negative, stigmatized relationship we have with the concept of bestiality.

Albee provokes his audience to consider the possibility that bestiality and homosexuality might be on a spectrum of alternative sexual practices through an exchange between Martin and his gay son, Billy; however, Billy's response is one that likely appeals to even the most hetero-normative audience member:

BILLY. "You're fucking a fucking goat and you tell me not to swear?!"

MARTIN. "You know, your own sex life leaves a little to..."

BILLY. "At least what I do is with...persons!" [...] "Goat-fucker"

MARTIN. "Fucking faggot" (23).

In contrasting homosexuality and bestiality here, the play suggests on one hand that, while not hetero, gay and lesbian couples are normative to the extent that what they do is with "persons," while "zoophiles" are profane because what they do with their bodies is not with a person. It is interesting, however, that Albee chooses the word "persons" for Billy's account of with whom he does these unspeakable "things." Unlike the word "humans" - which would seem to be the natural choice and would set up the usual dichotomy between humans and animals and emphasize the "animality" of his actions,

Billy's use of the word "persons" evokes more than just humanity, it attributes personhood - citizenship, competency, identity - to his sexual partners while inversely evacuating these things from his father's sexual partner: Sylvia could just as well have been a chair or any other object with no connection to personhood. Billy's anger, of course, is justified considering that the slippery slope often constructed between bestiality and homosexuality is done so by anti-queer groups who suggest that homosexuality (which is gradually becoming less stigmatized as Western societies adopt more humanist political positions) leads directly to the dissolution of the symbolic order that prevents humans copulating with animals. However, what would it mean to take the position that for all species, humans included, sexual activity, desire, and the manifestation of sexual organs, (manifestations that humans have established norms for and have divided into two distinct genders), are varied and fluid to the extent that there is the possibility of inter-species relationships of all kinds? My wager is that for anyone interested in pursuing the question of the animal, this could be a very unpopular position.

Bestiality, or even the idea of bestiality, places limits on critical animal studies because, by dismantling boundaries between human and non-human others, it seems to run the risk of legitimating sexual relationships between different species, humans included, and the thought of humans engaging in sexual activity with animals is considered, in Western culture, to be the most revolting act a human can perform. But accepting Derrida's position that bestiality is, if proper to anyone, proper to man not animals, then it proves to be completely illogical that even the idea that a man may have sex with, say, a goat somehow necessitates that we hold on to the reductive ideology of

the animal” - an ideology that denies all non-human others access to ethical treatment and even the right to life - in order to prevent humans from crossing the species gap for the sake of sexual gratification. “Illogical not just because it is the human’s behavior that is undesirable, not the animal’s, but illogical because the prohibitive act of the taboo does not actually prevent such acts from being done by those disposed to do them, but rather classifies those who do them as abject vis-a-vis the rest of humanity; a man who succumbs to bestiality is somehow more animalistic than an animal to the extent that he has rejected the social order of humanity. Thus, the concept of bestiality, perhaps more than anything else, solidifies the idea of the animal in order to pathologize any sexual relationship between a human and a non-human. But in the interest of disturbing our ideology of the animal (and not in the interest of promoting human/non-human sexuality), it is prudent to ask: What is it about bestiality that our culture finds so unforgivably perverse? If Stevie is representative of the dominant attitude towards human/non-human sexual relations, and I believe she is, then an obsession with a certain model of hygiene is the first thing that comes to mind. Stevie is put off by the smell of the goat : “stay away from me; stay there. You smell of goat, you smell of shit, you smell of all I cannot imagine being able to smell. Stay away from me!” (25). That Sylvia spends her day in dirt and sleeps in a stall of hay (Stevie forgets that sanitary living conditions are not actually a constitutive part of being human, but rather being a certain class of human) is the first set of reasons she lists for her disgust. However, the argument that the flesh of non-human others is not clean enough to be in contact with the flesh of humans does not really stand up in a culture of pet-keepers and meat-eaters for whom the image

of a child and a dog sharing the same ice-cream-cone has become an icon of innocence and for whom the flesh of the same animals that do not make suitable sexual partners are eagerly ingested for dinner. If some non-humans, (specifically dogs and cats), are the beloved companions of our species and are celebrated through literature and art as others with whom humans form intimate relationships - relationships that often include sleeping flesh to flesh, washing, petting, and grooming, and the daily management of excrement - why is it such a stretch to imagine an acceptable human/non-human relationship that includes sexual intimacy? And why might Stevie feel that the odours endemic to a goat are ones she “cannot imagine being able to smell”? Alice Kuzinar’s remarkable text, *Melancholia’s Dog*, addresses the profound connections between humans and dogs through discussions of muteness, shame, intimacy, and mourning, but while she has every opportunity to consider how sexuality factors in these human/dog dyads, the closest she comes is to suggest that Rosalyn Drexler’s novel *The Cosmopolitan Girl* (1974), in which the narrator marries her dog, “teases the prudish reader with bestiality” (Kuzniar 109). As McHugh argues, although Kuzinar

seems poised to extend contemporary discussions in queer theory in important ways, her silence concerning companion species’ sex behaviors, whether in the textual representations or the lives of their pet-keeping authors otherwise so thoroughly investigated here, indicates the limitations of applying transcendent human models to documents of shared human-animal lives. This is not so much a critique of Kuzniar, whose curiosity and examples often prompt questions about this situation, as of the disciplinary pressures to avoid all that is not human. My own experience as a researcher in literary animal studies validates her complaint that our colleagues in literary and cultural theory largely have failed to acknowledge any questioning of animals as an acceptable research interest, a situation all the more surprising given claims about queering the final frontiers of the humanist subject.

Considering that Kuzinar’s other academic work is in queer German cinema, it is to some

degree surprising that her exploration of the affective relationships between humans and dogs does not consider on a more palpable level the ways in which these relationships can be considered queer; but given the general resistance to “animals” as a subject for academic study, it would likely be impossible to publish a book that melds academic theory with artistic criticism and includes in its scope a discussion of dogs and queer sexuality. However, even if no one is willing to admit it on paper, the intimacy of pet-keeping – similar to the intimacy of meat-eating¹ - calls into question the idea that sexual intimacy between some humans and some animals is too unsanitary to imagine.

These same cultural behaviours - pet-keeping and, to an even greater extent, meat-eating - also destabilize the second problem Stevie raises against Martin’s relationship with Sylvia: that it is self-serving and violent. After Martin insists that even though they have “gone to bed together” (40) it was not “about fucking,” that he and Sylvia were in love with each other (42), Stevie exclaims: “You take advantage of this...creature!? You...*rape* this animal and convince yourself that it has to do with love?” (43). But while Martin’s account of he and Sylvia’s courtship is so convincingly loving that it is hard to imagine him harming the goat, the question of animal consent is even more tricky than the ongoing problem of determining the age of consent for young humans. So even if we were to provisionally accept Stevie’s belief that all sexual relationships between humans and non-humans should be conceived of as rape, why would a culture that places no limits on the cruelty with which we daily slaughter millions of cows for food be

1 While one could certainly make the objection that, because we usually cook flesh before eating it, we to some degree “sanitize” the animal to make it suitable for our use, the fact that we attribute human health concerns to contaminated animal flesh (regardless of whether or not the contamination is actually the result of unhygienic human handling practices), and the reality that, in a society of voracious carnivores, there is a great deal of casual contact with raw animal flesh, the argument that meat-eating is form of human/non-human intimacy still stands.

concerned with the well-being of the handful of cows that might find themselves in a sexual relationship with a human? Similarly, while pet-keeping is often understood as a loving relationship based on companionship and mutual devotion, the power the human owner has over the non-human pet - the power to domesticate, to train the “animal” to best fit the human’s desire and need - problematizes the relationship as potentially complicit with other practices of human domination over non-humans. Even Kuzinar, whose book takes seriously the mutual aspects of human/dog relationships, acknowledges that the dog is primarily used to compensate for human lack. Furthermore, we have no evidence to suggest that all species have the same relationship with sexuality that we do, and even though “sex has replaced death as the psychic center” of our culture, it is possible that other species might be more concerned with mass-slaughter than isolated cases of sexual “assault” (McHugh 165).

To reiterate, I am not advocating that humans should consider it an unregulated prerogative to engage in a sexual relationship with any non-human creature they choose - this would mean reserving the right to not be sexually violated for humans and in effect would be a backwards step for an ethics that includes non-humans. Rather, my position is that we should reclaim the dominant objections to bestiality in such a way that it actually protects the beast (as opposed to just punishing the human) and extend the logic of the valid objections to inter-species sexuality (such as animal-cruelty) to the more common relationships we have with non-humans (such as factory farming). Considering that “ninety-eight percent of all animals with whom humans interact in any way, even including pets and zoo and circus animals, are farmed animals—that is, bred for human

use” it is much more pertinent that we question the violence and inhumanity of the more common “uses” we have for animals (Chaudhuri 10).

In closing, I want to look closely at the scene in Albee’s play that addresses most explicitly the central question set up by the two alternative titles: *The Goat* and *Who is Sylvia*. Here we must ask whether this is a play about a man whose “sexual perversion” drives him to fall in love with “a goat,” or a play about the tragic love affair between Martin and Sylvia. The scene begins with Martin telling Stevie that he is torn between she and Sylvia:

STEVIE. I’m your type and so is she; so is the goat. So long as it’s female, eh? So long as it’s got a cunt it’s all right with you!

MARTIN. A SOUL!! Don’t you know the difference!?! Not a cunt, a soul!

STEVIE. You can’t fuck a soul.

MARTIN. No; and it isn’t about fucking.

STEVIE. YES!

MARTIN. NO; no, Stevie, it isn’t.

STEVIE. Yes! It is about fucking! It is about you being an animal!

MARTIN. I thought I was.

STEVIE. Hunh!

MARTIN. I though I was; I thought we all were ... animals.

STEVIE. We stay with our own kind!

MARTIN. Oh, we fall in love with many other creatures...dogs and cats and...

STEVIE. We don’t fuck them! You’re a monster! (50)

In this short piece of dialogue Albee engages with a number of ongoing debates about animals and animality: Does the animal have a soul? Are humans and all other creatures really so distinct? What limits does our culture place on our relationships with non-humans? In an attempt to understand how her husband could be in love with both herself and Sylvia, Stevie is forced to find some connection between herself and a goat; all that she can come up with, however, is that they both “got a cunt.” Her ability to identify with the non-human other is so limited that she can only do so by reducing herself to the part

of her anatomy that she associates with “fucking,” because she believes, or at least wants to believe, that what went on between her husband and Sylvia is only a product of his carnal desire for sexual gratification, she refuses the idea that the goat could be anything more than a configuration of female (animal) body parts. Martin’s insistence that his relationship with Sylvia is based on mutual love and respect for her soul not only disturbs Stevie’s desire to pathologize Martin’s behaviour, it completely interrupts a social order that relies on the total domination of non-human others as justified by the belief that they are only the sum of their parts and that humans are much better able to put their parts to good use than they are.

Albee also addresses here the Derridean double concept of bestiality as both zoophilic passion and inhuman cruelty. Stevie insists that Martin’s affair is “about fucking” (which is used as a shorthand for cruel, selfish, pleasure) and about him “being an animal” (which is how she emphasizes that his behaviour is not acceptable to their culture’s understanding of humanity); however, neither of these issues implicate Sylvia as anything more than the object/subject upon which Martin acts out his desire. Derrida argues that “if the proper of man is the properly human, the proper of the bete is certainly neither the “properly bete” of bestiality nor the properly bete of betise. We were not far from considering that, in French at least, bestiality could well be the proper of man” (Derrida140). *The Goat* illustrates the violence of a system in which bestiality (as both cruelty and inter-species desire) is an exclusively human behaviour that is identified by a term designed to deny the very humanity of the human subject it is used to describe. Thus the logic that gives humans the right to do whatever we want with non-humans – with all

the creatures gathered under the term animal, (because we believe that they do not possess even the basest level of sovereignty that establishes their right to life), also denies “animals” the ability to behave like animals. If to behave like a beast – like an animal – is to violate the rules of humanity, a non-human creature can never actually behave like an animal because it is not bound by the rules of humanity. So if it is our behaviour that makes us what we are, Martin’s assertion that “we are all animals” is not just an idealistic plea to an essence of sameness that unites all creatures, but rather an assertion that all humans sometimes stray – or at least have the potential to stray – from the rigid cultural mores that we understand as being constitutive of our species. It is in this sense that bestiality can be understood as another form of queerness: not because inter-species sexuality and homosexuality are similar in the objects or expressions of their desire, but because hegemonic cultural beliefs dictate what forms of sexuality should be considered abject. To this extent, one answer to Albee’s question *Who is Sylvia?* is that she is a symbol of otherness – a metaphor for all illegitimate objects of desire. Amending her initial position, that Martin is “an animal,” to the position that he is “a monster,” Stevie shirks the baggage of the human/animal debate and settles for classifying his relationship as a monstrosity. This type of judgment, (labeling non hetero-normative sexual acts as monstrous), is all too familiar in a society still battling against violent homophobia and numerous anti-queer factions.

While Sylvia operates as a symbol of otherness and a site for discussions of animals, animality, and humanness throughout the play, the graphic final scene reminds the audience that “Sylvia is not only a metaphor for difference—Albee sees to that when

her bloodied body is brought onstage. She is she. She was a being, one who bleeds and suffers and one from whom life can be taken. To presume that suffering is only a human capacity is hubris” (May 98). The last image – that of Stevie holding the literal, slaughtered body of Sylvia – the goat that, in a fit of rage and passion, she has just killed with her own hands – is perhaps the only scene where the ongoing discussion of animals and animality is not primarily figurative. Stevie has not committed any crimes in the legal sense, (Sylvia is, after all, only a goat and is not protected by any code of human ethics or laws), but in the face of Martin’s intense grief it is hard not to see Stevie’s act as one of murder. Though it is problematic that only human affect frames Stevie’s slaughter of the goat as an inhuman act, the play certainly succeeds in disrupting the complacency of a culture which condones the daily torture of millions of non-humans. While not attempting to justify or legitimate inter-species sexuality, *The Goat* does provoke its audience to question if the very possibility of zoophilic bestiality is really the greatest threat to the sanctity of our species.

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