

## “Love Me, Love My Dog”: Exotic Pets and Reciprocity in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda*

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In this paper, I argue that Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) charts an ethics of hospitality by sanctioning and indicting different kinds of interspecies relationships. In the novel, exotic pets serve as emissaries of reciprocity in a fraught network of domestic relationships that explore broader concerns regarding national identity and empire. Juba, a “large dog” of unknown origin, signals the fragile, and often feigned, reciprocity that exists between Mr. Vincent, a wealthy West Indian creole, and the aristocrats who host him.

My analysis foregrounds the crucial role of anthropomorphism—the attribution to animals of features which in the eighteenth century are defined as exclusively human (reason, language, and the soul)—and animalization—the attribution to humans of animal behavior (crawling or barking)—in the construction and regulation of self-stranger relationships in the novel. By studying *Belinda*’s structures of hospitality through the lens of critical animal studies, I demonstrate how interspecies relationships model self-stranger relationships while imparting crucial lessons about gender, class, and nation at home. When only fashionable ladies echo Mr. Vincent’s love for his dog, the novel suggests that his West Indian masculinity is akin to the worst kind of British femininity. *Belinda*’s allusion to *Beauty and the Beast*—a story which casts self-stranger exogamy as an interspecies relationship—conjures up the cannibal, a quintessential trope of eighteenth-century narratives of hospitality, and foregrounds her society’s fear that the guest might eat the host. However, while the novel animalizes Mr. Vincent to warn the reader that certain forms of affiliation with strangers can jeopardize domestic social order, it is in the end the host who threatens to eat the guest. After all, Mr. Vincent only barely eludes bankruptcy when his English hosts attempt to finish his fortune at the E-O Table.<sup>1</sup> And while he is exiled from British soil, exotic pets (a blue macaw, a bowl of goldfish) remain, along with other forms of colonial wealth. In the end, *Belinda* sanctions moderate reciprocity to animal beings, preferably mediated through scientific curiosity, while firmly limiting reciprocity between England and the West Indies to commercial exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor’s Note]. E-O, or Even-Odd was an eighteenth-century version of roulette.