Emotions in Menagerie Acts

Peta Tait[1]

This article considers precepts of emotions in relation to menagerie big cat acts prior to Darwin's work on emotional expression in human and nonhuman animals.[2] It argues that the impact of menagerie acts was heightened by exaggerated coercion in the staging such as that presented by Van Amburgh. Since menagerie spectators and lion tamers accorded rage to a whole species—used here to mean genus—lions or tigers were also stigmatised by adverse emotion.

Demonstrations by animal handlers in mid-nineteenth century travelling menageries were the forerunners to trained wild animal acts in the circus from the 1890s.[3] The spread of European colonial control during the nineteenth century increased the numbers of captured exotic animals that could be traded by expanding species businesses and which supplied menageries. Big cat acts were underpinned by Biblical narratives that contained emotional significance and which supported belief in a natural order of emotions and human dominance over animals. John Stuart Mill claims, however, that the courage to confront wildness in nature was a social attribute.

Tamers

Big cat acts started as staged physical contact in small menagerie cages. In 1825 an unnamed keeper at Atkins' Royal Menagerie in England entered a partitioned cage holding a lion and tigress and their offspring and interacted playfully with them. William Hone observes how:

> the man then took a short whip, and after a smart lash or two upon his back, the lion rose with a yawn [… and] by coaxing, and pushing him about, he caused the lion to sit down, and while in that position opened the animal's ponderous jaws with his hands, and thrust his face down into the lion's throat, wherein he shouted, and there held his head nearly a minute.[4]

This would become a standard menagerie feat and be interpreted as a demonstration of human courage in handling dangerous animals.

There is uncertainty about which handler was first to do an act handling big cats in the menagerie cage, and who subsequently invented specific feats. This was complicated by publicity that routinely laid claim to presenting a first. Atkins' keeper was entering the cage in 1825, although Frank Bostock credits George Wombwell with the idea of putting on display the keeper of two sick cubs who he had nursed to health, sitting with the cubs and billed as a "lion-tamer."[5] By the 1830s menageries regularly presented handlers who emulated the bravery and endurance of the Bible story about the persecuted Daniel emerging from the lion's cave unscathed.

The 1825 act by the Atkins' keeper also included some simple tricks as the tigress jumped numerous times through a two-foot diameter hoop and, after perseverance, the

lion reluctantly followed and at the end, the keeper lay on the floor sandwiched between both animals.[6] The keeper was showing how the wild beasts would acquiesce with this lamb-like behaviour because these animals had been subdued in the manner of Biblical narrative. Rhetorical claims about tigers and lions, however, reinforced their aggressive temperaments. Hone writes that the temperament of the tiger is "fierce", "cruel" often reacting without a reason, a species capable of "uniform rage, a blind fury."[7] A wild animal species was being judged according to perceptions of emotional qualities, but negatively since rage indicated hostility. While this followed a nineteenth-century tendency to classification, it was this adverse emotion attributed to a species that in part situated it at the bottom of a hierarchy with humans.

Acts of handling animals were soon copied. In the USA, Charles Wright entered a lion's cage in 1829.[8] As a boy in the mid-1830s in England, Thomas Frost remembers seeing the Wombwell's menagerie keeper, Manchester Jack, enter Nero's cage "and sit on the animal's back, open his mouth."[9] By the mid-1830s, Henri Martin – who pioneered menagerie appearances in Europe and probably from the 1820s – and Issac Van Amburgh in the USA had established reputations as the leading tamers.

Lion kings in England, called lion tamers in the USA, came to dominate mid-nineteenth-century wild animal exhibitions in menageries. The title of "king" or "lord" was promoted for the human trainer although, in species hierarchies, the lion with his majestic mane and control of the pride was also considered a king among animals. While the handling methods were highly questionable, an impression of force may have been exaggerated as a deliberate strategy to enhance the spectacle. In line with "hopelessly and perversely" contradictory attitudes toward animals,[10] proximity and handling also carried the misconception of a false compatibility between humans and wild animals. Menagerie demonstrations by tamers were periodically integrated into pantomime spectacles in the circus and the theatre from the 1830s, presenting narratives in which even friendship between humans and lions was possible in a faraway land. The emotional tone from the circumstances depicted in a theatricalised spectacle was more nuanced than that of the menagerie act demonstration, but this also made it more misleading.

Van Amburgh's Crow Bar

American Isaac A. Van Amburgh became the best known of the nineteenth-century menagerie performers and his act is discussed here in detail: "Since the year 1834, the public of both hemispheres has looked upon him as the greatest lion-tamer in the world."[11] Whether or not he was "the greatest," Van Amburgh was certainly the best known. The tamer's feat of putting his head in the lion's mouth was subsequently claimed for Isaac Van Amburgh, who was clearly not the first handler to undertake it.[12] He was probably entering cages with a mix of lions, tigers, and leopards in the USA by 1833, and in England at Astley's by 1838, where he acquired the label of the "American Lion King." While entry to the cage aroused spectators' fear for the handler's safety, there was also some compassion expressed for the animals since they appeared to be physically subdued by Van Amburgh in his act. His theatrical style and accompanying rhetoric espoused his capacity to tame animals and he became much better known than a nominated seven predecessors who were reportedly milder in their handling techniques. Apparently Van Amburgh's display of dominance over the animals involved aggressive bravado and it was his act that came to typify human–animal menagerie acts.

Born in July 1811, Van Amburgh worked for a large travelling menagerie, cleaning cages by the early 1820s.[13] The contemporary biographical details about how

Van Amburgh came to work with big cats vary, and it is likely that these accounts were embellished after Van Amburgh became well known, to support his elevated status.[14] R. H. Horne, writing as Ephraim Watts, met with Van Amburgh and claims that he "distinguished himself" after a head-keeper died trying to move a lioness into another cage, and Van Amburgh "offered to tame her spirit" and entered her cage "with his crow-bar."[15] Apparently the crow-bar remained a prop in his act.

Watts' description of Van Amburgh's physique is intriguing. He was five foot ten-and-a-half inches and handsome, although his body was "steep-looking", "narrow-sided", "long-backed" and, while he was exceptionally strong, he was not muscular.[16] In contradiction is the admiration expressed by another observer for his "Herculean caste" and "extraordinary muscle power."[17] Van Amburgh's physique seemed to be on show with the animal bodies. His facial features were "especially delicate, almost female," with "extraordinary" eyes: "the balls project exceedingly, and it seems as if he could look all round him without turning his head." But while his eyes are "bright" and "shining", they are also "cold" and "whitish" like "a dead ghost's."[18] Watts claims that it was the power of Van Amburgh's eyes that wild beasts would fear (rather than his crow-bar).

Watts' account also states that Van Amburgh's grandfather was an American Indian named "Great King of the Forests," and that his mother dreamed of roaring beasts during her pregnancy.[19] Nineteenth-century accounts repeatedly locate wild animals in forests.[20] As well as a reputation for forceful methods, Van Amburgh is described as having the power to subdue "man-eating" big cats through his presence. This narrative is traced back to a childhood love of animals and naturalist study that led to a capacity to have "a commanding influence over most of the smaller animals which came in his way."[21] "He not only tamed all those he had an opportunity of meeting a few times, but also acquired a surprising influence over them."[22] Similar comments circulated in newspapers and potentially influenced public opinion and spectators.[23] A mythic ideal of the heroic tamer arose amidst claims that the mere presence of Van Amburgh could make animals go against their natural inclinations.

Contemporary accounts of the act reiterate the forceful effect of Van Amburgh on wild animals and on spectators:

> The Lion halted and stood transfixed – the Tiger crouched – the Panther, with a suppressed growl of rage and fear sprang back, while the leopard receded gradually from its master. The assembled spectators were overwhelmed with wonder […] Van Amburgh had triumphed over both men and beasts.[24]

There were approving shouts from spectators. One reviewer reveals, however, that Van Amburgh "cuffed and struck at the lion and tiger, pinched their ears, and slapped them right and left."[25] Apparently Van Amburgh countered the criticism that animal acts caused moral ruin and religious offence by quoting Genesis, in which humans are accorded dominion over other animals.[26] There was a circular effect as this biblical defence was reproduced within descriptions of the act: "[t]he Lion licked the hand that overcame him, and knelt as his conqueror's feet; the Leopard fondled as playful as a domestic tabby; the Tiger rolled on his sides."[27] He created a tableau in which he called animals to come to him as "the proud King of the animal creation. It was a striking exhibition of love and confidence reigning where fear and power could only be supposed."[28] Is this interaction deemed "love" because the lion licks his hand and he caresses the leopard and shows no physical sign of fear? Watts is at pains to point out that rather than being fearful of the animals, Van Amburgh "looks upon himself as an object for them to fear" because they are "cowards at heart" and their "terribleness" can be overcome because he was accorded boldness as well as a modesty and a "kind, communicative" temperament.[29] In a hierarchical arrangement of emotions, cowardly, fearful behaviour was inferior to courageous bravery, and thus it was

acceptable for humans to exercise power over animals because they displayed the lower order of emotions.

Following Martin's pantomime precedent, Van Amburgh appeared at Astley's between 27 August and 20 October 1838 costumed as a Roman, Malerius, in a melodrama, *The Brute of Pompeii*, *or*, *The Living Lions of the Jungle*, cast in among lions, tigers and leopards in the arena at Pompeii.[30] Malerius befriends the big cats and diverts their attack. The display was transferred to the Drury Lane theatre in a different melodrama, albeit one with a similar narrative. Early in 1839, the young Queen Victoria went to see it six times, and even made a back stage visit to watch the animals being fed, in defiance of the outrage expressed in newspapers about this type of display in a London theatre.[33] On her second visit, Drury Lane took over 712 pounds, the largest box office amount in its history.[34] The Drury Lane run ended abruptly when Andrew Ducrow and Van Amburgh came to blows behind the scenes for an unknown reason.[35] Van Amburgh went on to present his act – which included introducing a lamb into the big cat cage[36] – in the Christmas pantomime.

Van Amburgh toured Britain and an Edinburgh review gives a somewhat more detailed account of the actions of the animal performers:

> The den containing the wild beasts occupies the whole breadth of the stage, and is divided by a partition in the middle. The occupants of the one section are a lion, two tigers, and three leopards, and of the other, a lion and lioness, and three leopards. There must have been few of the spectators who did not feel a shudder, when the intrepid man stepped into the first den, and stood calmly amid the monsters […] lion crouched […] tigers lay […] leopard prowled […] At a signal they spring upon his shoulders and rest upon his head, or spread themselves on the ground to make a pillow for him. They box with him, and growl, and snarl, and snap with their long fangs when he indulges them in a playful combat; but though he may irritate them by knocking their heads on the ground, or cuffing their ears, yet a hint is sufficient to still the angry growl, and to bring them crouching to his feet. He distended the jaws of the lion while it roared, and then shut and opened them rapidly, breaking the roar […] pressed its nuzzle lovingly against his cheek.[37]

But when a lioness snapped, Van Amburgh came closer and looked at her and she shrank away. This act involved a handling-the-animals routine but there is minimal evidence of even rudimentary trained feats by the animal performers; a lack of the basic hoop-jumping trick performed elsewhere may indicate a turnover of animals. A later newspaper description of Van Amburgh's touring menagerie performance confirms this description. It outlines how he displayed a giraffe before entering the big cat cages as Rollo, whip in hand, to be

> saluted by a savage growl from the tiger, who stood erect on his hind legs against the bars of the cage, while the lion maintained a dignified appearance and the leopards continued to gambol around the den [… he] actually put his face into a lion's mouth: during all of which the spectators could scarce repress a shudder of horror.[38]

Van Amburgh could attract 2,000 spectators to a show, including "distinguished members" of Oxford University.[39]

Historical references and narratives were part of big cat acts, although reliant on quasi-historical costuming. A well-known painting by Edwin Landseer shows Van Amburgh in a simple Roman-style shift costume, while illustrations show him in a more decorative costume suggestive of a soldier or gladiator.[40] His bare arms and legs conveyed some vulnerability in the immediate circumstances of the act that offset an impression of strength from a fighting persona. One illustration by Henri Martin with a lion shows him in a Roman-style shift, but in a second, he wears an animal skin suggestive of a prehistoric hunter, while in a third he is dressed in a white shirt and trousers.[41] Van Amburgh's rival John Carter – who followed in his wake at Astley's in 1839 and also performed in Europe and the USA – is drawn bare-chested in one

illustration.[42] In a ten feet square cage, Carter stopped fights and was the "master of the wildest and savage creatures" who "trembled with fear at his presence."[43]

Acts with exotic animals expanded on Judeo-Christian themes with alluring orientalist narratives, as well as staged episodes from history and geographical exploration. Van Amburgh toured England in 1841 in a pantomime in which he played Karfa, an Arab slave who accompanied Mungo Park as he discovered the source of the Niger. In this production, a tiger entered without a cage and "the dramatic effect of this feline actor's *entrée* [was] most powerful,—indeed several ladies screamed"; Van Amburgh rolled over with him, saving his (Christian) master, an army officer and a naturalist, from wild animals and Moorish enemies.[44] His later encounters were in a den at the behest of the Moorish leader, which he left triumphant. The inclusion of animals in the dramatised spectacle might have been popular for its realist effect but some spectators did find it confronting. Van Amburgh and Carter appeared in an orientalist theatre fantasy *Aslar and Ozines, or the Lion Brothers of the Burning Zaara* in 1843, but not to acclaim, as the critics criticised the acting of the "brute-tamers."[45]

These pantomimes drew on vague associations between exotic animals with a foreign geography that also could be misleading about these animals. Carter had an act with a lion (called a "Brazilian tiger") pulling a chariot, though the animal was most likely a jaguar.[46] While handling acts misrepresented an animal's temperament, this act distorted ideas about a whole species. In 1848, Van Amburgh performed in *Morok the Beast Tamer*, at Astley's, in a drama based on the story of the Wandering Jew, and was billed with a "black tiger" that was probably a panther.[47]

Van Amburgh was understood to have used a crow-bar for protection, and he was also reputed to beat and starve the lions and tigers to make them react during performance. Joys writes that it is hard to separate such accusations from promotional hype, especially as such accusations were offset by creationist claims that the animals kneeled in submission according to religious expectations.[48] Van Amburgh's crow-bar and Carter's suppression of fighting animals were possibly not indicative of how all their contemporaries were viewed; Martin was thought to be considerate of his animals, as was Manchester Jack. Whether or not they used theatrical effects, some tamers did use techniques to force caged animals to react.[49] This also happened with animals other than big cats: for example, piano strings were used to lift the arms of chimpanzees tied to their seats on stage.[50] The increased number of big cat acts also led to critical examinations of the acts and the handlers' manners. A contemporary account, however, dismissed claims of "furious attacks," explaining that Van Amburgh controlled the animals with commands and "ha[d] no occasion to use any peculiar violence in his discipline, or subject even a tiger to 'severe corporal punishment with a large horsewhip.'"[51] While the crow-bar was possibly a prop and/or a protective device of last resort, and the whip provided sound effects, the man-handling of wild animals nonetheless communicated dominance.

A Fearful Nature

The handler/presenter entering the big cat cage had become a standard feature of menageries by the 1850s. There was controversy over the proliferation of these acts in England fuelled by the occasional bloody spectacle of tamers being mauled and the tamers' reputation for drinking heavily. Accidents may have happened because of alcohol use by presenters, but it is also likely that some reports of injuries were exaggerated to take advantage of the publicity. The menagerie act was supposedly a display of courage and the risk of attack was promoted as part of an act's appeal.

When John Stuart Mill explored the concept of nature and its cruelty in the 1850s in his essay on nature, he discerned that an experience of wildness arises out of fear but that this can be overcome through courage.[52] While acknowledging some ambiguity in his use of terms, Mill found that nature "denotes the entire system of things" or things "apart from human intervention," but also that humans are inseparable from the spontaneous process of "nature's physical or mental laws," and that their actions either alter or improve nature.[53] Significantly, the natural world was widely understood to be cruel and harsh, full of conflict and killing. Mill wrote that "cultivated observers regarded the natural man as a sort of wild animal," although "craftier" than most, "and all worth of character was deemed the result of a sort of taming" within culture.[54] Courage, too, was considered part of an untamed natural state, and the overcoming of fear could be understood as a social virtue. Mill disagreed and argued that courage is socially produced, and conflicting emotions are required in which humans may be "naturally pugnacious, or irascible, or enthusiastic, and these passions when strongly excited may render them insensible to fear."[55] In Mill's analysis, written prior to the publication of Darwin on emotions, social imperatives can alleviate nature's condition of fear through facilitating courageous behaviour.

Wild animals in cages or chained alluded to the way in which nature's wildness was separate from humans and their world, and could be subdued. The conflation of animals with nature allowed a menagerie handler to represent social notions of courage. Meanwhile, the reputed fierceness of exhibited wild animals pitted against handlers — and possibly exaggerated in the staging — compounded notions that fear was omnipresent in the harsh and dangerous natural world. By regularly entering menagerie cages, however, handlers were probably more pugnacious than courageous.

Notes

1. Peta Tait, who holds a Chair in Theatre and Drama at La Trobe University, is both a scholar and a playwright with an extensive background in theatre, dramatic literature, performance theory and creative arts practice. She researches in the interdisciplinary humanities fields of emotions, body theory, gender identity and animal studies. Among her many wide-ranging publications are the recent monographs, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (Routledge, 2005), and *Performing Emotions: Gender, Bodies, Spaces, in Chekhov's Drama and Stanislavski's Theatre* (Ashgate, 2002).
2. C. Darwin (1999), *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Fontana Press, London. The year of the Minding Animals conference in Newcastle, 2009, was an important anniversary year for commemorating Darwin's work, with numerous publications on his major works on evolution and natural selection. I find, however, that there has been far less scholarly and media attention given to his work on emotions in humans and animals published in 1872.
3. I am currently writing: P. Tait (forthcoming), *Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals, Emotions, Circus,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
4. W. Hone (1838), *The Everyday Book and Table Book*, vol. 1, Thomas Tegg and Son, London, pp. 1180–1.
5. F. Bostock (1903), *The Training of Wild Animals*, The Century Co., New York, pp. 28–9.
6. op.cit., Hone, p. 1181.
7. ibid, p. 1178.
8. S. Thayer (2005), *The Performers: A History of Circus Acts*, Dauven & Thayer, Seattle, p. 129.
9. T. Frost (1875), *Circus Life, Circus Celebrities*, Tinsley Brothers, London, p. 89.
10. D. Hancocks (2001), *A Different Nature: The Paradoxical World of Zoos and Their Uncertain Future*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 5.
11. O.J. Ferguson (1861), *A Brief Biographical Sketch of I. A. Van Amburgh*, Samuel Booth, New York, p. 14.
12. "Literature," *The Operative*, London, 6 January 1839, pp. 10–11.

    "Wonderful Fact. […]
    He entered the cage with his whip in his hand,
    And dauntless amidst the fierce crew did he stand;
    Then played with their mouths, without terror or dread—
    But the lion waxed wrathful and snapped off his head.
    The actors they screamed, and the audience ran out, […]
    —Van Amburgh arose!"

13. A.H. Saxon (1978), *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 321. Saxon said that Van Amburgh started out with Rufus Welch and the New York Zoological Institute, Bowery, and that he first entered the cage in 1833 and became an overnight success. E. Watts (1838) (pseudonym for R. H. Horne), *The Life of Van Amburgh: The Brute-Tamer, with Anecdotes of his Extraordinary Pupils*, Robert Tyas, Cheapside, London, p. 27. Watts called the menagerie owner Titus.
14. op.cit., Watts; op.cit., Ferguson.
15. op.cit., Watts, p. 27–8.
16. ibid., p. 14.
17. *The Times,* London, 11 September 1838, p. 5.
18. op.cit., Watts, p. 14; See the sketch of Van Amburgh in Ferguson, ix.
19. op.cit., Watts, p. 14–16.
20. For example, the "wildest and most savage creatures of the forest,""Carter and His Lions," *The Hull Packet*, Hull, 18 December 1840, p. 8, *19th Century British Library Newspapers*, http://0-find.galegroup.com.alpha2, accessed November 2008.
21. op.cit., Watts, p. 18.
22. ibid., p. 20.
23. See *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, Dublin, 26 September 1838; *The Aberdeen Journal*, 10 October 1838, issue 4735.
24. op.cit., Ferguson, p. 12.
25. *The Aberdeen Journal*, Aberdeen, 23 August 1843, issue 4989.
26. op.cit., Watts, p. 36.
27. op.cit., Ferguson, p. 12.
28. ibid., p. 12.
29. op.cit., Watts, p. 36, p. 42.
30. op.cit., Saxon, p. 323.
33. ibid., 325-6; N. Rothfels (2002), *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Zoo*, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, pp. 158-9, quoting Van Amburgh.
34. op.cit., Ferguson, p. 17.
35. ibid., 323–4.
36. ibid.
37. *A Concise Account, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Mr. Van Amburgh's Celebrated Collection of Trained Animals, including The Giraffes and the Performing Elephant* (1841), J. W. Peel, London, p. 10.
38. D. Jamieson and S. Davidson (1980), *The Love of Circus*, Octopus Books, London, p. 39.
39. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, Oxford, 13 May 1843, p. 3.
40. G. Speaight (1980), *A History of the Circus*, The Tantivy Press, London, p. 84.
41. A.H. Coxe (1980), *A Seat at the Circus*, Archon Books, Hamden, Conn., p. 129; H. Thétard (1947), *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*, 2 volumes, Prisma, France, vol. 2, p. 228.
42. op.cit., Thétard, vol. 2, 228.
43. op.cit., "Carter and his lions," p. 8.
44. *Preston Chronicle and Lancaster Advertiser*, 23 January 1841, p. 2, a reprinted review from the *Manchester Guardian*.
45. op.cit., Speaight, pp. 82–3.
46. op.cit., Frost, pp. 90–1.
47. op.cit., Speaight, p. 82.
48. J.C. Joys (1983), *The Wild Animal Trainer in America*, Pruett Publishing Co. Boulder, p. 7.
49. J. Culhane (1990) *The American Circus: An Illustrated History,* Henry Holt, New York, p. 21. Nathaniel Hawthorne's account of seeing a 1838 big cat act in the USA described the animals as "torpid" and stated that the attentiveness of the audience was more impressive than the showman putting his arm and head in a lion's mouth. This tamer may not have been Van Amburgh, as Culhane claims. Was it Solomon Bailey working after 1834 or John Carter or Lemuel Word or Mr Lewis (see op.cit., Thayer, p. 131)?
50. C. C. Ryley (1928), *Lions 'N' Tigers 'N' Everything*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, pp. 9–10.
51. *The Times*, London, 11 September 1838, p. 5.
52. J.S. Mill (1969), "Nature", in J. M. Robson (ed), *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society,* University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Toronto.
53. ibid., pp. 401–2.
54. ibid, p. 393.
55. ibid.