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**Linda K. Robertson**  
**HORSES AND HOUNDS:**  
**The Importance of Animals in *The Mill on the Floss***

It is not surprising that George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, set in rural Warwickshire in the early 1800s, should contain references to domestic animals and livestock. What is remarkable is the variety, including dogs, kittens, sheep, cattle, horses, rabbits, ferrets, rats, snakes, toads, spiders, wasps, snails, bears, wolves, boars, a beaver, a chimpanzee, a lion, and an assortment of fish and fowl. From the barking cur in the opening chapter to Bob Jakin's dog Mumps, who comforts Maggie Tulliver after her disastrous trip down the river with Stephen Guest, Eliot uses animals to develop the setting and to help the reader understand individual characters and their relationship to society. Because most of the creatures are associated with both outdoor experience and male characters, their inclusion also underlines the differences between the lives of men and those of women.

As a young man, Mr Tulliver rode a 'capital black mare'<sup>1</sup> and seemed to be following in the tradition of his ancestor Ralph Tulliver, noted for riding 'spirited horses', being 'very decidedly of his own opinion', and ruining himself through imprudence (274). After reading the news that Wakem owns the mortgage on the mill, Tulliver suffers a stroke and falls from his horse.

Considering the amount of riding in the novel, it is not unusual that some characters come off their mounts unexpectedly. However, three specific cases form important turning points. Mr Tulliver falls from his horse as he has fallen from his economic and social position. For the first hour after his stroke, he is attended only by his grey horse who sniffs about nervously with a horsey awareness that something is very strange. After his recovery, Tulliver rides a 'low horse' (356) in striking contrast to Wakem's 'fine black horse' and Philip Wakem's 'handsome pony' (297). The second unseating comes when Tulliver attacks Wakem and Wakem's horse throws him. Following his beating, the bruised and shaken Wakem is forced to ride the 'low horse' home. The third case of abrupt separation of horse and rider works in favour of the Tullivers. Jetsome, hired to run the mill, is thrown from his horse and severely injured (451), so Wakem is eager for the new purchasers to take possession of the property. This makes it possible for Guest and Company to place Tom at the mill as manager.

From his childhood, Tom's principles, a combination of the schoolboy code and the Dodson concept of correct behaviour, result in rigid ideas of the 'right' thing to do regarding both people and animals. Yap, his 'queer white-and-brown terrier' plays with Maggie when he is away at school, but the dog's loyalty is clearly to the boy. Tom enjoys knowing about and interacting with animals, although he sometimes gets in trouble, as when he cuts the pony's mane or throws stones at the fat toads at Uncle Pullet's. The first open conflict we see between brother and sister is over the lop-eared rabbits Maggie forgot to feed while Tom was away. She offers to pay for the rabbits, but he sees her failure as a breach

of trust.

Tom is not particularly bright when it comes to books, but he knows about animals, birds, fish, and even worms. It is on such knowledge that much of Tom's self image is based. From early childhood he has wanted 'mastery over the inferior animals, wild and domestic, including cockchafer, neighbours' dogs, and small sisters . . .' (92). Tom consoles himself for his inadequacy in lessons by telling himself 'he would make a figure in the world with his horse and dogs and saddle, and other accoutrements of a fine young man' (189).

At Mr Stelling's, Tom's fellow pupil is Philip Wakem, the intelligent but hump-backed son of his father's nemesis. Maggie decides she likes Philip because he tells good stories from his extensive reading and because in her own loneliness, she 'preferred the wry-necked lambs, because it seemed to her that the lambs which were quite strong and well made wouldn't mind so much about being petted . . .' (177). Even as an adult Philip is shy, but his intelligence is never sheep-like. Tom, on the other hand, is described as ox-like: 'Tom was an excellent bovine lad, who ran at questionable objects in a truly ingenious bovine manner' (176). Tom never gains much imagination or changes his tactics for dealing with difficult situations.

In knowledge of animals, Tom is surpassed by Bob Jakin, who has a remarkable acquaintance with fascinating bits of nature. One of Bob's first jobs is frightening birds from the fields. For rat-catching, he recommends that Tom buy white ferrets with pink eyes because they are not only more efficient than dogs but more entertaining for the purpose.

As an adult, Bob is a packman full of investment schemes who is accompanied by his 'huge brindled bull-terrier', Mumps (313). He tells Mr Glegg, 'I think my head's all alive inside like an old cheese, for I'm so full o' plans, one knocks another over. If I hadn't Mumps to talk to, I should get top-heavy an' tumble in a fit . . .' (314). Mumps is also important to Bob's decisions about the future. He continues, 'I'm gettin' so full o' money, I must hev a wife to spend it for me. But it's botherin', a wife is – and Mumps mightn't like her' (314). Mumps 'knows his company' (316) as well as ever, but he eventually gets along well with Bob's wife, baby, and carefully selected boarders. It is a powerful demonstration of loyalty when Bob offers Mumps as a temporary companion to the distressed Maggie. Bob explains, 'He's rare company.... You'd better let me leave him a bit; he'll get fond on you. Lorst, it's a fine thing to hev a dumb brute fond on you; it'll stick to you, and make no jaw' (489). This is precisely the sort of support Maggie needs at this point, from her human friends as well as from the dog.

Eliot describes Mrs Tulliver as being 'healthy, fair, plump, and dull-witted' (14). She clearly prefers Tom, but she also defends Maggie because, Eliot states, 'even a sheep will face about a little when she has lambs' (42). Mrs Tulliver is also associated with goldfish. For fourteen years, she has had an unerring ability to say things which make her husband do exactly the opposite of what she wants: 'as a patriarchal gold-fish apparently retains to

the last its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass' (75). Likewise, Mrs Tulliver lacks the ability to see without distortion beyond the confines of her own experience.

Throughout childhood, the adventuresome, unruly Maggie is compared to Cousin Lucy Deane, a well-mannered picture in pink and white. Generally, she could not be mean to Lucy any more than 'she could be cruel to a little white mouse' but Maggie pushes Lucy into the mud when Tom shows favouritism toward her. Usually the girls are friendly, and Lucy enters into Maggie's fantasies. Eliot explains:

Lucy had a delighted semi-belief in Maggie's stories about the live things they came upon by accident – how Mrs Earwig had a wash at home, and one of her children had fallen into the hot copper, for which reason she was running so fast to fetch the doctor. Tom had a profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie's, smashing the earwig at once as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story .... (99)

As an adult, Lucy is associated with Sinbad, her chestnut horse, with caged canaries, and with Minny, her fashionable King Charles spaniel (370, 367).

One of the fundamental differences between Maggie and Tom is illustrated by a childhood disagreement about imagination. Regarding her brother's bravery, the little girl speculates, 'I think you're like Samson. If there came a lion roaring at me, I think you'd fight him – wouldn't you, Tom?' His unimaginative response is, 'How can a lion come roaring at you, you silly thing? There's no lions, only in the shows.' Maggie's changing the scene to Africa is no help. 'But the lion *isn't* coming. What's the use of talking?' is Tom's impatient response (34-35).

Tom's term of endearment for Maggie in a moment of excitement is 'little duck' (40); this is more kind than it might seem, because wild birds are mentioned favourably (except for those that harm crops), and even barnyard fowl are fascinating to the children. As an adult, Maggie identifies with a more confined animal – a 'poor uneasy white bear' when she recalls the trapped feeling she had working in a school (373).

Through a combination of animals typical to a rural setting and a selection of comparatively exotic creatures, Eliot underlines the physical and social environments of the novel. She also expands the analysis of the personality, behaviour, and physical condition of various characters through their resemblance to various creatures.

#### Note

1. *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford, 1988), p. 133. Further references to this edition are given in the text.