Kate Fox. WATCHING THE ENGLISH?

Pet Rules and ‘Petiquette’.

Keeping pets, for the English, is not so much a leisure activity as an entire way of life. In fact, ‘keeping pets’ is an inaccurate and inadequate expression – it does not begin to convey the exalted status of our animals. An Englishman’s home may be his castle, but his dog is the real king. People in other countries may buy luxurious five-star kennels and silk-lined baskets for their pets, but the English let them take over the whole house. The unwritten rules allow our dogs and cats to sprawl all over our sofas and chairs, always hogging the best places in front of the fire or television. They get far more attention, affection, appreciation, encouragement and ‘quality time’ than our children, and often better food. Imagine the most over-indulged, adored bambino in Italy, and you will get a rough idea of the status of the average English pet. We had the Royal Society for the Prevention Cruelty to Animals long before the establishment of the national Society for the Prevention Cruelty to Children, which appeared to have been founded as somewhat derivative afterthought.

Why is this? What is it about the English and animals? Yes, many other cultures have pets, and some, particularly our colonial descendants, are in their own ways as soppo about them as we are, but the English inordinate love of animals is still one of the characteristics for which we are renowned, and which many foreigners find baffling. The Americans may outdo us in gushy sentimentality and extravagant expenditure on pets – all those cheesy, tear-jerker films, elaborate pet cemeteries, luxury toys and dogs got up in ludicrous designer costumes. But then they always outdo us in gushiness and conspicuous consumption.

The English relationship with animals is different: our pets are more than status indicators (although they do serve this purpose) and our affinity with them goes well beyond sentimentality. It is often said that we treat them like people, but this is not true. Have you seen how we treat people? It would be unthinkable to be so clod and unfriendly to an animal. OK, I am exaggerating – a bit. But the fact is that we tend to be far more open, easy, communicative and demonstrative in our relationships with our animals than with each other.

The average Englishman will assiduously avoid social interaction with his fellow humans, and will generally become either awkward or aggressive when obliged to communicate with them, unless certain props and facilitators are available to help the process along. He will have no difficulty at all, however, in engaging in lively, amicable conversation with a dog. Even a strange dog, to whom he has not been introduced. Bypassing all the usual stilted embarrassments, his greeting will be effusive: ‘Hello there!’ he will exclaim, ‘What’s your name? And where have you come from, then? Do you want some of my sandwich, mate? Mmm, yes, it’s not bad, is it? Here, come up and share my seat! Plenty of room!’

You see, the English are really quite capable of Latin-Mediterranean warmth, enthusiasm and hospitality; we can be just as direct and approachable and emotive and tactile as any of the so-called ‘contact cultures’. It is just that these qualities are only consistently expressed in our interactions with animals. And unlike our fellow Englishmen, animals are not embarrassed or put off by our un-English displays of emotion. No wonder animals are so important to the English: for many of us, they represent our only significant experience of open, unguarded, emotional involvement with another sentient being.

An American visitor I met had suffered for a week as a guest in a fairly typical English household ruled by two large, boisterous and chronically disobedient dogs, whose ineffectual owners engaged them in non-stop, stream-of-consciousness chatter, indulged their every whim and laughed affectionately at their misdemeanours. She complained to me that the owners’ relationship with these pets was ‘abnormal’ and ‘unhealthy’ and ‘dysfunctional’. ‘No, you do not understand,’ I explained. ‘This is probably the only normal, healthy, functional relationship these people have.’ She was, however, sensitive enough to have picked up on an important rule of
English ‘petiquette’ – the one that absolutely forbids criticism of a person’s pets. However badly your hosts’ ghastly, leg-humping, shoe-eating dog behaves, you must not speak ill of the beast. This would be a worse social solecism than criticizing their children.

We are allowed to criticize our own pets, but this must be done in affectionate, indulgent tones: ‘He is so naughty – that’s the third pair of shoes he has wrecked this month, ah, bless!’ There is almost a hint of pride in these ‘isn’t he awful?’ complaints, as though we are secretly, perversely, rather charmed by our pets’ flaws and failings. In fact, we often engage in one-upmanship over our pets’ misdemeanours. Just the other night, at a dinner party, I listened to two Labrador-owners capping each other’s stories of the items their dogs had eaten or destroyed; ‘It wasn’t just shoes and ordinary things, mine used to eat mobile phones.’ ‘Well, mine chewed a whole HiFi system to bits!’ ‘Mine ate a Volvo!’ (How do you top that, I wondered: Mine ate a helicopter? Mine ate the QE2?)

I am convinced that the English get great vicarious pleasure from our pets’ uninhibited behaviour. We grant them all the freedoms that we deny ourselves: the most repressed and inhibited people on Earth have the most blatantly unreserved, spontaneous and badly behaved pets. Our pets are our alter egos, or perhaps even the symbolic embodiment of what psychotherapists would call our ‘inner child’ (but not the sort of inner child they mean, the one with big soulful eyes who need a hug – I mean the snub-nosed, mucky, obnoxious inner brat who needs a good slap). Our animals represent our wild side; through them, we can express our most un-English tendencies, we can break all the rules, if only by proxy.

The unspoken law states that our animal alter egos/inner brats can do no wrong. If an English person’s dog bites you, you must have provoked it; and even if the attack was clearly unprovoked – if the animal just took a sudden irrational dislike to you – the owners will assume that there must be something suspect about you. The English firmly believe that our dogs (and cats, guinea pigs, ponies, parrots, etc.) are shrewd judges of characters. If our pet takes against someone, even if we have no reason at all to dislike the person, we trust the animal’s superior insight and become wary and suspicious. People who object to being jumped on, climbed over, kicked, scratched and generally mauled by English animals who are ‘just being friendly’ also clearly have something wrong with them.

Although our pets usually provide a vital therapeutic substitute for emotional relationships with human beings, the superior quality of our communication and bonding with animals can sometimes also have beneficial side effects on our relations with other humans. We can even manage to strike up a conversation with a stranger if one of us is accompanied by a dog, although it must be said that both parties are sometimes inclined to talk to the canine chaperone rather than address each other directly/ non-verbal as well as verbal signals are exchanged through the blissfully oblivious dog, who happily absorbs all the eye contact and friendly touching that would be regarded as excessively forward and pushy between newly acquainted humans. And pets can act as mediators or facilitators even in more established relationships: English couples who have trouble expressing their feelings to each other often tend to communicate through their pets. ‘Mummy’s looking really pissed off, isn’t she, Patch? Yes she is. Yes she is. Do you think she is annoyed with us?’ ‘Well, Patchy-poo, Mummy is vewy, vewy tired and she would appreciate it if your lazy old Daddy gave her a bit of help round here instead of sitting on his arse reading the paper all day.’

Most of the above rules apply across class barriers, but there are a few variations. The middle-middles and lower-middles, although just as dotty about their pets as the other classes, tend to be somewhat less tolerant of mess, and rather more squeamish about the ‘ruder’ kinds of misbehaviour than those at the top and at the bottom of the social scale. Middle-middles and lower-middle pets are not necessarily any better behaved, but their owners are more zealous about cleaning up after them, and more embarrassed when they sniff people’s crotches or try to have sex with their legs.

The type and breed of pet you keep, however, is a more reliable class indicator than your attitude towards animals. Dogs, for example, are universally popular, but the upper echelons prefer
Labradors, golden retrievers, King Charles spaniels and springer spaniels, while the lower classes are more likely to have rottweilers, poodles, afghans, chihuahuas and cocker spaniels. Cats are less popular than dogs with the upper classes, although those who live in grand country houses find them useful for keeping mice and rats at bay. The lower social ranks, by contrast, may keep mice and rats as pets – as well as guinea pigs, hamsters and goldfish. Some middle-middles, and lower-middles with aspirations, take great pride in keeping expensive exotic fish such as Koi carp in their garden pond. The upper-middles and upper classes think this is ‘naff’.

Horses are widely regarded as ‘posh’ animals, and social climbers often take up riding or buy ponies for their children in order to ingratiate themselves with the ‘horsey’ set to which they aspire. Unless they also manage to perfect the appropriate accent, arcane vocabulary, mannerism and dress, they don’t fool anybody.

What you do with your pet can also be a class indicator. Generally, only the middle-middles and below go in for dogs shows, cat shows and obedience tests, and only these classes would put a sticker in the back window of their car proclaiming their passion for a particular breed of dog or warning other motorists that their vehicle may contain ‘Show Cats in Transit’. The upper classes regard showing dogs and cats as rather vulgar, but showing horses and ponies is fine. There is no logic to any of this.

Middle-middles and below are also more likely to dress up their dogs and cats in coloured collars, bows and other tweenesses – and if you see a dog with its name in inverted commas on its collar, the animal’s owners are almost certainly no higher than middle-middle. Upper-middle and upper-class dogs usually just wear plain brown leather collars. Only a certain type of rather insecure working-class male goes in for big, scary, aggressive-looking guard dogs with big, scary, studded, black collars.

English pet-owners are highly unlikely to admit that their pet is a status signal, or that their choice of pets is in any way class-related. They will insist that they like Labradors (or springer spaniels, or whatever) because of the breed’s kind temperament. If you want to get them to reveal their hidden class anxieties, or if you just like causing trouble, you can try the following test: put on your most innocent face, and tell a Labrador-owner ‘Oh, I’d have seen you more as an Alsatian [or poodle, or chihuahua] sort of person.’

If you are of more kind and affable disposition, note that the quickest way to an English person’s heart, no matter what their class, is through their pet. Always praise people’s pets, and when you speak to our animals directly (which you should do as much as possible) remember that you are addressing our inner child. If you are a visitor eager to make friends with the natives, try to acquire or borrow a dog to act as a passport to conversation and as a chaperone.