Manipulative Pet Ownership: The Vain Devolution of Breeding
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One of the most amazing things I ever witnessed was the miracle of birth. I stood outside of the operating room with my face pressed up to the viewing glass, watching the doctor meticulously working under the florescent lights. His careful hands delicately performed a Caesarian section on the mother lying on the operating table. A few minutes later, emerging from the small abdominal incision was a tiny, healthy, beautiful... bulldog.

My best friend’s bulldog, Annabelle, had just given birth by C-section (a routine procedure for the breed) to deliver a single pup. The valued standards of the breed inhibit vaginal birth because the mother’s hips are too narrow for the pup’s large skull to pass through unobstructed. Bulldogs’ physical build not only prevents natural birth, but also natural mating. Because their large heads make male bulldogs too “top heavy” to get up onto their back legs and impregnate a female naturally, Annabelle had to be artificially inseminated. The physical traits carefully bred into bulldogs over the years also give them life-threatening breathing problems, trouble regulating internal body temperature, shorter than average lifespans, and a plethora of skeletal problems. But hey, their smushed faces and awkward, stumpy bodies sure are cute.

Finicky dog owners expect breeders to mold many dog breeds to fit their own aesthetic standards. However, while breeding dogs to possess certain physical characteristics may be please dog fanciers’ eyes, doing so puts the dogs at risk for multiple health problems that can condemn them to chronic pain and ultimately shorten their lives. Owners and breeders are abusing their dominance over animals by creating “perfect dogs” that often primarily serve as fashion accessories and status symbols rather than companions. Bulldogs are prime examples of this repressive breeding. In order to ensure the survival and quality of life of the breeds they claim to love, both pet owners and breeders need to prioritize animal welfare and stop altering their physical appearance to suit their aesthetic tastes.

According to the United States Humane Society, there are 78.2 million dogs in American households ("U.S. Pet Ownership Statistics"). Of these dogs, nearly forty million are purebreds (Robins). Clearly, the popularity of dog ownership in America is dominated by the trend to possess a recognizable, dignified breed. The Ameri-
can Kennel Club defines a dog as a purebred if “the sire and dam of a dog are members of a recognized breed and the ancestry of a dog consists of the same breed over many generations” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). Dedicated dog fanciers may argue that owning a purebred guarantees the dog’s temperament and health, since the owner can track the pedigree of a purebred rather than risking the uncertainty of a mixed-breed dog’s background. But while some genuinely concerned dog owners may select purebreds as companion animals for these reasons, many of the millions of purebred dog owners have more trivial, selfish reasoning behind their purposes of dog ownership.

Purebred dogs often serve as living, breathing fashion accessories. A recent study of dog owners conducted at the University of Melbourne showed that many of the participants chose their dogs for superficial reasons. The majority of owners were primarily concerned about their dog’s aesthetic traits (size, color, facial features), while only some valued internal properties: intelligence, individuality, and other personality characteristics. Researchers found participants preferred small dogs because they are commonly associated with cuteness and helplessness—another feature favored by superficial owners. Participants reported finding pleasure in activities that made them feel more like a parent than an owner, such as taking care of the dog, dressing up the dog, and carrying the dog (Beverland, Francis, and Ellison 492). This study suggests that rather than viewing a dog as an addition to the family or a companion, most pet owners’ desires and expectations for their dogs are egocentric: they value their dogs’ appearance—picking the breed solely based on its cuteness rather than temperament or intelligence because of how it affects their own appearance and status.

Proud owners’ childlike treatment of dogs is explained in Jeffery Nash’s article, “What’s in a Face?” Nash explains, “[the] bonds of affection form between humans and animals whenever people dominate and modify animals, making them dependent on humans for their very existence” (365). An example of this is seen in bulldog owners. They select their dog because of its aesthetically pleasing features—the flattened, wrinkly face and round body stacked on top of shortened legs—and finance the medical bills for the underlying health problems created by those genetic defects.

Bulldog owners obviously take pride in their canine dependents because they pay for their adoption, kennel club registration, medical bills, and other expenses like dog shows, grooming, accessories and toys. The money and effort these owners invest in their dogs lead them to become status symbols. According to Nash, “the character and appearance of their dogs [reflects] their own” (365). The breed and quality of their dog becomes symbolic of the owner’s lifestyle and importance.

The idea of using a certain breed of dog to inflate one’s social standing is not a modern trend, but rather a persevering fashion in English and American culture. Dogs such as the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel have been painted seated at the sides of their noble English masters for hundreds of years (“The Cavalier King Charles Spaniel…”). But the real obsession with the purebred prestige originated in the Victorian era. A breeder at the time summarized the power of owning a purebred in Victorian society: “Nobody who is anybody can afford to be followed about by a mongrel dog” (Ritvo 227). Many 19th century aristocrats took up the pastime of “dog fancying”—selectively breeding dogs by prioritizing aesthetic standards over the traditional, practical functions of the breed. Because dogs had greater variation in physical appearance than other domestic animals, it was easy to differentiate between noble breed standards. By the late 1800’s, wealthy owners wanting to ensure they possessed a top dog created Kennel Clubs. Registering one’s dog with a Kennel Club meant it was regarded as one of the finest specimens of the breed, which in turn increased the owner’s repu-
The breed and history of one’s dog could distinguish one’s standing in the social hierarchy. No breed has evolved as a more distinguishing symbol of social class than the bulldog. According to historian Sandy Ritvo, “the history of the bulldog and bulldog fancy in the nineteenth century epitomized the way in which pedigree dogs could represent the aspirations of their compulsively respectable owners” (245). The dog fancying boom marked the humble beginnings of bulldog we know today: within the nineteenth century, the bulldog was transformed from a cruel sporting dog associated only with the lower classes to the ultimate refined upper class breed. Like its name suggests, the bulldog’s original purpose was bull-baiting, a cruel sport confined to the working class where several dogs were released onto a bull or other large animal to attack it until its death. Upper class elitists viewed the sport as proof of the division of morality and taste between the classes. Thus, the bulldog symbolized the essence of the working class: they were hard working, simple, tough, and completely disregarded by the upper class. The sport of bull-baiting and the lower class status of the bulldog prospered until the mid 1800s, when bull-baiting was finally outlawed (Ritvo 245-247). With the enforced ban on the sport, bulldogs faced extinction because their popularity plunged with its absence. But the ban occurred at the height of the dog fancying boom, which presented breeders with the opportunity to transform a lower class sporting dog into a status symbol for the elite.

In 1864, a small group of bulldog admirers took upon themselves the task of preserving the breed’s noble qualities: courage, intelligence, tenacity, and strong athletic stature. But in order to transform the bulldog into a suitable upper class pet, the dog fanciers had to conceal the traits characteristic of the bulldog’s origin as a sporting dog. The furious, fighting tendency of the bulldog had to be “bred out” of the breed’s standard by selecting dogs of calm temperament to mate and nurturing the pups early to suppress their aggressiveness (Thompson 221). By retaining bulldog’s desired qualities and breeding out the characteristics associated with lower class activities, dog fanciers created a smaller, calmer dog better suited to upper class owners. They then created exclusive Bulldog Clubs that launched the craze of the bulldog at the end of the nineteenth century. The breed acquired a following of wealthy aristocratic admirers, and from there the craze quickly migrated to the United States (Ritvo 245-247). The Bulldog Club of America was founded in 1890, and soon afterward several large and prestigious universities like Georgetown, the University of Georgia, and Yale adopted the dog as a mascot (Dearth). Within a few decades, the bulldog was reformed, cut off from any associations with its working class history, and refined into a breed for the elite.

Today, the bulldog continues to be a status symbol. Just as the breed was a coveted possession for the wealthy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bulldogs are still proudly owned and displayed by modern-day, trendsetters such as George Clooney, Reese Witherspoon, and Martha Stewart. Bulldogs can be seen in every media outlet: blockbuster movies, primetime television shows, and even in BMW’s Mini Cooper’s advertisement campaign. Not only have bulldogs continued to win over Hollywood’s affection, but they have won over rest of America’s affection as well. In 2010, they were the sixth most popular dog in the United States (Denizt-Lewis 6). By owning a bulldog, an owner can appear to be trendy and give others the impression they are well off, as English bulldogs can cost upwards of $6,000. Being seen with a bulldog on a leash can enhance one’s reputation and social cache. Unfortunately, dog owners’ prevailing desire to have an elite, choice dog comes at the expense of the animal’s health. In a little over a century, the bulldog has been degraded from its once strong and fierce reputation to a dysfunctional,
debilitated lapdog. When humans view a dog as a symbol of social statuses and a possession, what would stop them from going to extremes to have it look the absolute best? This ideology is too common of a problem in dog breeding—shaping the dog’s appearance to fit humans’ desires, often while disregarding the negative consequences to the breed. Bulldogs have gone through one of the most aggressive physical devolutions of any dog breed due to humans selectively altering their appearance.

This rapid transformation is evident in written breeder records, illustrations, photographs, and even preserved skeletons from throughout the breed’s history. In the early 1800’s, bulldogs were sporting dogs and had bodies to match. They were extremely muscular and resembled mastiffs or pitbulls rather than the round, stumpy bulldogs of today (Thompson 220). Most weighed close to one hundred pounds - about the size of a modern day Rottweiler (Nash). The breed also had a short muzzle, but not nearly the flat-faced appearance of present day (Thompson 220).

While it is unclear what breeds defined the early bloodlines of bulldogs, the foreshortened face and chunky body of the modern breed are the result of multiple genetic deformities. All of the dominate bulldog characteristics—their shortened muzzle, round body, large head, and short, bowed legs—are mutations that were bred into the breed’s standard (Nash). Such defects as chondrodystrophy (shortened bone growth) of the skeleton and dwarfism of the limbs were birth defects dog owners found attractive, so the breed standard was altered to include them. In order to conform and quickly advance these features, severe and excessive inbreeding was used (Thompson 222-223). The bulldog we recognize and glorify today, with its flattened face and the slow moving, plump body, is far from the athletic and regal stature of its ancestors because humans decided that was what the dog should look like and took steps to ensure every bulldog looked that way.

Of course, quickly warping a dogs’ physical make up, especially by means of inbreeding, inevitably creates negative health side effects. Transforming a one hundred pound dog to nearly half its size in the short span of a century is not healthy. A study published in the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine found that bulldogs suffer the most deaths of any dog breed due to respiratory illnesses. They are also the breed with the second highest number of deaths due to congenital heart failures (Denizt-Lewis 3). As mentioned earlier, artificial insemination and Caesarian section are necessary for the breed’s reproduction because their large head and narrow hips make natural reproduction nearly impossible. Almost all bulldogs suffer hip dysplasia—a bone abnormality causing severe arthritis—at some point in their lives. Other major health concerns are joint conditions such as patellar luxation, shoulder luxation, and elbow dysplasia, which predispose the dogs to dislocate joints. They are also prone to multiple skin and eye problems such as eczema, infections in their skin rolls, mange, cataracts, and dry eye. A particularly worrisome eye condition found in bulldogs is cherry eye, where the gland under the inner eyelid becomes visible and inflamed (Dearth). Many, if not most, of these conditions are directly caused by the physical charac-

Two bulldogs, photographed in 1903. This picture appeared in the dog owner’s handbook British Dogs, Their Points, Selection, And Show Preparation by W. D. Drury.
teristics that were deliberately bred into the breed standard.

One of the breed’s most serious health issues comes from its exaggerated shortened muzzle, which creates a wide range of breathing problems that can be life-threatening. Dr. John Lewis, professor at University of Pennsylvania’s veterinary hospital, provides an analogy for the respiratory problems of bulldogs: Lewis explains that for a human to experience the breathing difficulties that bulldogs suffer, it “would be as if we walked around with our mouth or nose closed and breathed through a straw” (Denizt-Lewis). Because of these breathing difficulties, bulldogs have difficulty regulating heat, so they cannot tolerate extreme weather and suffer from strokes quite regularly. For instance, The University of Georgia’s mascot, Uga, is naturally on the sidelines at the school’s football games every Saturday in the fall, but unlike most mascots he spends the games lying in an air-conditioned doghouse on top of bags of ice to make sure he stays conscious.

It should come at no surprise that this long list of health concerns affect the bulldog’s lifespan. According to the Journal of Small Animal Practice, a bulldog’s life expectancy is not much longer than six years—the life span of an average dog is closer to twelve or thirteen (Denizt-Lewis). Bulldogs live shorter lives because of the physical traits humans selected for them to be desirable pets. The standards bulldogs are held to, and the ways humans have shaped them to fit those standards, are cruel and demeaning.

The modern-day bulldog is a contradiction. Jeffery Nash describes it as a cultural creation “ambiguous of nature and society.” In no way is it natural for dogs to struggle to breathe or to be unable deliver—or even conceive—their own pups. Appreciating an animal for its physique or beauty is not wrong, but endangering its health and physiological functioning in pursuit of that beauty is exercising aggressive domination with no regard for the animal. With the power humans have to control animals’ health, appearance, and overall fate, breeders foremost must breed with the animal’s best interest in mind, ensuring it the fullest and healthiest life possible.

A positive step towards achieving better health and quality life for the bulldog would be for breeders to take action on the breed’s genetic makeup. While it is impossible to regress the breed back to its original bull-baiting physique, breeders can eliminate the birth defects that endanger the dogs health by diluting down the mutated genes in the bulldog’s gene pool. For example, two bulldog breeding pioneers have successfully introduced new genes by cross-breeding and created two bulldog variants that have significantly fewer health problems. One is the Olde English Bulldogge, created by David Leavitt. In 1971, Leavitt started introducing different breeds into the bulldog gene pool via a breeding scheme developed for cattle at Ohio State University (Thompson 223). He bred Bullmastiffs, Pitbulls, and American Bulldogs with his English Bulldogs. After nine generations of breeding, he created a dog closely resembling the nineteenth century bull-baiting bulldog (Leavitt). The second new bulldog breed is the Victorian Bulldog created by Ken Mollett. Simultaneously with Leavitt’s breeding in the United States, Mollett worked to breed healthier bulldogs through his own methods in England. He breed exclusively Kennel Club of Great Britain registered Staffords, Bullmastiffs, and Bull Terriers with the healthiest possible English Bulldogs (Jenkins and Mollett). Both Leavitt and Mollett have boasted their success creating a healthier bulldog that suffers from fewer ailments while still maintaining the personality and demeanor cherished in the breed. In particular, these bulldogs have longer muzzles and legs, which changes the animals’ appearance but significantly reduces respiratory and joint problems.

Breeders have made efforts to improve the bulldogs’ health; now the real responsibility lies with the owners. Are dog owners willing to make
the sacrifice of having a less cartoonish pet in order to enjoy an animal that has a healthy, functional life? Unfortunately, the answer for a majority of bulldog owners remains no. When a primary reason for owning a dog is for its fashionable appearance, most owners will not be satisfied with a fashionable looking breed. Ideally, dog owners should prioritize health over physical features, but when owners treat their dogs as extensions of their pride, they will not want to compromise the quality of their status symbol. As long as the stumpy, flat-faced bulldog waddles in the spotlight of pop culture, nothing else will do.

Watching Annabelle’s C-section birth felt like I was waiting for the arrival of human baby. My best friend Chelsey had been waiting for months for the bulldog puppy’s birth, and she could not have been more excited. Reflecting on that moment, I cannot help wondering about how my friend, an ethically strong person I have known for most of my life, could do this to her dog. The puppy she purposefully brought into the world will encounter multiple health battles in its inevitably shortened life, and Chelsey had full knowledge of this. Many dog owners claim to treat their dogs as children, but no one would intentionally breed a deformed baby knowing it will have chronic, life-long problems. In fact we do the very opposite for our human children: we try in every way to prevent birth defects from occurring and attempt fix any that develop despite our best efforts. Yet thousands of dog owners seek out breeders to produce an unhealthy pet for them for the sake of trendy aesthetics. While I have seen the happiness bulldogs have brought to my friend’s life, I cannot accept that the social appeal of owning a bulldog outweighs the physical burdens our society has placed on these dogs. Fashion and cuteness are frivolous human desires, and they certainly do not justify breeding an unhealthy animal.

Works Cited

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