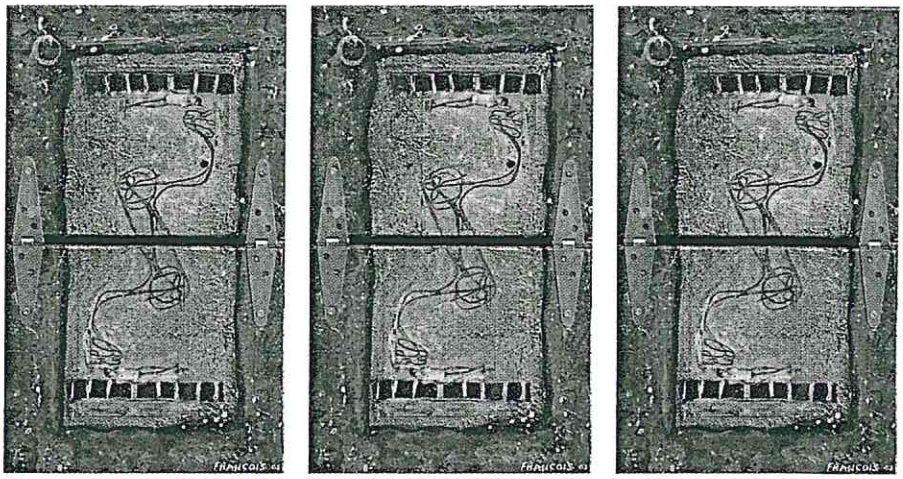
The Power of Words

Studies in Honour of Moira Linnarud



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Of "Beast" and "Man"

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In the screenplay to the movie *Runaway Train*, Japanese director Akira Kurosawa stages a tense drama escalating into a final showdown between escaping convict Manny and prison director Frank Barstow, a drama that beyond the usual genre expectations adds existential questions: what makes us human, and what are the limits to that humanity?[1] The movie shows how, when pushed into a corner, human beings commit worse atrocities than the wild beasts stalking the Alaskan wilderness through which the train speeds. In a climactic scene involving Manny and Sara, the lone civilian trapped on the train, the following dialogue occurs:

> [Sara:] You're an animal.
> [Manny:] No, worse. Human.

To reinforce this message, transforming it from seemingly random remarks to the movie's central theme, the following lines from Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1.2.71-72) are inscribed in red letters right before the credits:

> [Anne:] No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.
> [Richard:] But I know none, and therefore am no beast.

For the rest of this short essay I will investigate the topic of those lines in a sampling of English literature, with a focus on the plays of Shakespeare, where we find allusive comparisons between animals and humans used frequently and with far-ranging associative power. The most common synonym for "human" in Shakespeare and elsewhere is the word "man." The essay will explore the term's gendered connotations, but it will also delineate two approaches to the relationship between "man" and "beast," one largely pessimistic (see above in Kurosawa and Shakespeare), and the other more optimistic.

For an Elizabethan, or even for a contemporary of Alexander Pope some 150 years later, the juxtaposition of the words "man" and "beast" would have evoked a whole world view, a comprehensive system that, while not hard and

[1] Kurosawa was to have directed the movie himself, but due to his illness the project, filmed in Alaska and Montana, was instead helmed by Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky.

fast, contained certain basic notions. Stemming from Aristotelian and other classical roots it would have had additions and variations introduced through the centuries by monk, scholar and poet alike. I have selected Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733-34) as a late but representative description of this system, in part because the neoclassicist poet rarely moved beyond cultural commonplaces:

> What would this Man? Now upward will he soar,
> And little less than Angel, would be more;
> Now looking downwards, just as griev'd appears
> To want the strength of bulls, the fur of bears. (*Essay on Man* 1: 173-6)
> . . . . . .
> Vast chain of being, which from God began,
> Natures aetherial, human, angel, man,
> Beast, bird, fish, insect! (*Essay on Man* 1: 237-39)
> . . . . . .
> He [i.e., Man] hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
> In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer, ...
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world! (*Essay on Man* 2: 7-18)

This and similar descriptions delineate a vertical and hierarchical system in which "man" is placed somewhere between the animal below and the angel above, often unsure of what his exact position and role is. While often found wanting in his physical attributes when compared to the animal kingdom (he lacks "the strength of bulls, the fur of bears"), "man" is nevertheless seen as superior to the beast in his reasoning and his language abilities.

In its most common form, this system is static, i.e., once you have found out who you are, stay in place. In Pope's words, "Know thy own point: This kind, this due degree / Of blindness, weakness, Heav'n bestows on thee. / Submit —" (*Essay on Man* 1: 283-85). In fact, the desire to either rise or fall had strong moral connotations: for a human to become an animal is to give in to "beastly" desires, to let instincts or feelings rule instead of reason. On the other hand, to want to become an angel is to fall prey to pride, worst of the seven deadly sins. Indeed, much of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* centers on this theme. Satan, in the guise of a serpent, is using his own example to convince Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. Supposedly an animal, the serpent claims to have become endowed with reason, i.e., become human, through eating of the fruit (this of course is a lie, but Eve does not know that):

> Look on me,
> Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,
> And life more perfect have attained than fate
> Meant me, by vent'ring higher than my lot.
> Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast
> Is open? (*PL* 9: 687-92)

According to the satanic logic, Eve in turn will become godlike by doing the same:

> ye shall be as gods,
> Knowing both good and evil as they know.
> That ye should be as gods, since I as man,
> Internal man, is but proportion meet,
> I of brute human, ye of human gods. (*PL* 9: 708-12)

The Miltonic irony is of course that once Adam and Eve have eaten of the fruit, they become not angelic but bestial in their "sensual appetite":

> high winds worse within
> Began to rise, high passions, anger, hate,
> Mistrust, suspicion, discord, and shook sore
> Their inward state of mind, calm region once
> And full of peace, now tossed and turbulent:
> For understanding ruled not, and the will
> Heard not her lore, both in subjection now
> To sensual appetite, who from beneath
> Usurping over sovran reason claimed
> Superior sway: … (*PL* 9: 1122-31)

For Milton it was the very desire to become like an angel that forever caused "man" to be continually drawn downwards towards the beast.

But in both Milton and Shakespeare the gendered aspects come to the surface. As in *Runaway Train* and *Richard III*, the dialogue in *Paradise Lost* takes place between a woman and a man (insofar as Satan can be described in terms of gender). More importantly, the system itself not only separates the "man" from the animal or the angel, but also the "man" from the "woman," with the former associated with reason and the latter with emotion and appetite; that, of course, is why, within this system, the man is deemed higher and must govern the woman, who in effect is considered to be one step closer to the irrational animal. As Friar Lawrence says to Romeo when the young lover is attempting suicide:

> Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art;
> Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote
> The unreasonable fury of a beast.
> Unseemly woman in a seeming man!
> Or ill-seeming beast in seeming both! (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.3.109-13)

One of the things that Eve ponders in *Paradise Lost* after she has eaten of the fruit (but before Adam has done the same) is whether she should let Adam in on her secret. Before concluding that she had better have Adam join her new state — if not, God might simply replace her with a new mate — she toys with the idea of letting Adam remain a mere "man" while she gains the upper hand: "And render me more equal, and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior; for inferior who is free?" (PL 9: 823-25). Eve's last phrase — "for inferior who is free?" — echoes similar pronouncements by Satan, and indeed sums up his main gripe against God; by putting this phrase in Eve's mouth, Milton in effect equates a striving for gender equality with the initial disobedience that "Brought death into the world, and all our woe" (PL 1: 3). This is quite logical since the fault of the erring party in both cases consists of the desire to climb up the ladder rather than being content with staying put on the assigned level.

Some half a century before Milton composed those lines, Shakespeare in *Macbeth* I.7 sets up a scene with similar ingredients: a discussion between a man and a woman about the distinction between "man" and "beast," and with the woman doing what Eve only considered, i.e., closing the gender gap. The woman, of course, is Lady Macbeth, who in a previous scene had asked the spirits to "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* 1. 5.39-41). In scene 7, Macbeth is having second thoughts about murdering King Duncan, and when his wife tries to make him go ahead with the deed, taunting him with lack of courage, the following dialogue ensues:

> MACBETH Prithee peace!
> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do more is none.
> LADY What beast was't then
> That made you break this enterprise to me?
> When you durst do it, then you were a man;
> And to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more the man. (*Macbeth* 1.7.46-51)

The key issue for Macbeth in this dialogue is the possible loss of his humanity, as well as his manhood, and both he and Lady Macbeth recognize that the murderous impulses are "beastly," thus pulling them both downwards. The desired goal, however, ascending the political ladder ("to be more than what you were") for Lady Macbeth justifies the means. Not only does she try to convince her husband that following these "beastly" impulses makes him a real "man," to reach her ambitious goal she is herself willing to set aside the love and tenderness associated with womanhood: "I would, while it [i.e., her baby] was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out" (*Macbeth* 1.7.54-59).[2] As in *Paradise Lost*, however, their aspirations fall back on the ambitious couple. The price they pay for upsetting the order (both in political and in gender terms), is to create chaos not only within Scotland but within themselves: Lady Macbeth moves towards madness and eventual suicide, while her husband turns more callous than an animal (which is an ironic point made both here and in *Richard III*: human evil is bottomless, enabling human beings, while trying to ascend, to move lower than animals, restricted by their beastly nature).

The merging of mental chaos, beastliness and humanity is a theme revisited by Shakespeare more than once,[3] and never with more power than in *King Lear* when the deposed king, meeting up with Edgar in the guise of a naked madman,[4] strips himself and joins the howling storm:

> LEAR: Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. [*Begins to disrobe.*] (*King Lear* 3.4.96-103)

Here Shakespeare moves beyond simply describing the movement up or down between the moral categories of "man" and "beast" by allowing Lear to question the distinction itself. To be human may mean no more than to be "a

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[2] From Macbeth's response we see that he recognizes and approves of his Lady taking on "male" characteristics: "Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (*Macbeth* 1.7.72-74).

[3] Another powerful example is *Timon of Athens*, which dedicates scene 3 of act 4 to probing the question of humanity vs. beastliness at length.

[4] Edgar is clear about the animal connotations of his madman disguise when he decides "To take the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury, in contempt of man, / Brought near to beast" (*King Lear* 2.3.7-9).

poor, bare, forked animal," and not a very resilient one at that since the naked man, unlike the worm, the beast or the sheep, has neither silk, hide or wool to protect himself with.[5] In other words, man is a beast, and nothing but a beast.

This pessimistic evaluation is not Shakespeare's final word, and must primarily be attributed to a desperate character within the fictive world. It nevertheless shows a philosophical and religious position available at the time, one in which no room at all is allowed for progress or vertical ascent. But to end this essay I will point to the very opposite possibility, a position that goes against the static and conservative views depicted so far. Not everyone saw the levels as given, or punished the ones trying to ascend the ladder. A celebrated example of the opposite impulse is the neoplatonic view Pico della Mirandola proposes in the "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (written in the 1480s). According to Pico, God addresses the newly created Adam in the following words:

> 'Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what function thou thyself shalt desire.... Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.' (Mirandola 224-25)

It quickly becomes clear that Pico is thinking in terms of the traditional "chain of being," with "man" hemmed in by the animal and the angelic realms, to which he in this version has full and free access:

> '... thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.' (Mirandola 225)

As Pico goes on to comment on this divine pronouncement it becomes clear, however, that he sees a moral imperative in the desire to ascend to the angels rather than in descending to the beasts. Like Shakespeare, Milton and Pope, he too sees "beastliness" in terms of libido and non-rationality, but unlike the

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[5] The last comparison was a commonplace (for another example, see *Essay on Man* 1: 75-76 above); what is much less common, however, is Lear's wholesale reduction of humanity to the level of the animal. The lists of the areas of animal advantages is traditionally compared to other factors, such as reason and language, that in turn elevate humans above animals.

other three he attaches no stigma to the opposite endeavor. Indeed, the ascent is the goal of humanity: "There is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven, divided in a series of many steps, with the Lord seated at the top, and angels in contemplation ascending and descending over them alternately by turns" (Mirandola 229). This optimistic view has often been construed as the prototypical renaissance stance, sometimes as its distinguishing mark (set against the gloomy view of the preceding Middle Ages). But as our other examples show, this was not an uncontested position during the early modern period. Even in the Catholic southern part of Europe, more people would probably have agreed with the three English poets than with the Italian neoplatonic philosopher.

We have to move beyond Alexander Pope into the romantic period for the more optimistic view to take root, and then shorn of many of its older trappings. It is highly significant that for William Blake, Satan was the real hero of *Paradise Lost*, precisely because the fallen angel was not content with his position but wanted to rise higher. As Blake claims in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Milton was really of the devil's party: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake 150). Or as the romantic poet expressed the same striving in "There Is No Natural Religion": "less than All cannot satisfy Man. / ... / The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite" (Blake 97). From here it is not a very long step to Darwin, for whom the ascent of man forms the centerpiece of a general theory of progress up the evolutionary ladder, albeit without the moral implications. Indeed, despite their obvious differences, the evolutionary ladder and the great chain of being are both highly visual metaphors that share the same upward thrust from animal to human and beyond (whether seen as a danger or as a possibility).

If we started this essay with a bleak cinematic description of the relationship of "man" and "beast" in *Runaway Train*, another movie can exemplify the competing view. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001* we are presented with a picture of humanity (thanks to the graces of some extraterrestrial entity) being elevated at some prehistoric time from beast to man, and on the verge of a new, evolutionary breakthrough. The final image of the movie depicts a celestial baby, a transformed and reborn astronaut about to fulfill all that Pico and Blake dreamed of: a heavenly man finally removed from his beastly origins. What the two movies reveal is that we are still thinking in categories not dissimilar to those envisioned by Pico, Shakespeare, Pope or Blake, and that there is still a

debate going on whether we as a species are ascending a ladder or are tied down by a chain.

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