theories and methodologies

The Eight Animals in Shakespeare; or, Before the Human

LAURIE SHANNON

THE POVERTY OF THE SINGLE-DIGIT SUM IN MY TITLE, I TRUST, RAISES A BROW. AFTER ALL, THE UBIQUITY OF THOSE WE CONVENTIONALLY SHEPherd into the enclosure of the term *animals* stands out as a feature of both Shakespearean material and early modern texts generally. The animal footprints in this archive result from the frequency with which early moderns encountered living and butchered animals in their daily routines. Hardly an urban, rural, or domestic scene was painted without them. For illustration, Jan van der Heyden's cityscape of Amsterdam's main public square dramatizes the civic visibility of dogs and horses (alongside the town hall and the New Church) and muddies any distinction between beasts of burden and creatures of leisure—especially beneath that vast early modern sky (see next page). In a prescient intimation of modernity, Thomas More's *Utopia* imagined a noncitizen, butchering class performing its labors, deemed too brutal for citizens to witness, out of sight (75). Early modern humans had more contact with more animals than most of us now do.[1] For a species with weak ears and a terrible nose, out of sight *is* out of mind.

Beyond such daily and bodily engagement, animal effects extended to characterizations drawn from the bestiary tradition, with its inventory of attributes (the elephant's memory, peacock's pride, dog's loyalty, rabbit's fearfulness, fox's cunning, and so on). They included classical natural histories like Pliny's *Historia naturalis* (c. AD 77), read in Latin and new vernacular translations and universally tapped for animal lore; husbandry and hunting manuals, often translated from medieval and contemporary European texts; and a wave of natural-history writing, fueled by colonialism and the concatenated rise of a "science of description" (Ogilvie).[2] Both ordinary observation and diverse forms of reading, then, made the representational archive *zootopian*—not a utopia for animals, but a domain constituted by a more pervasive cognizance of them than our own.[3]

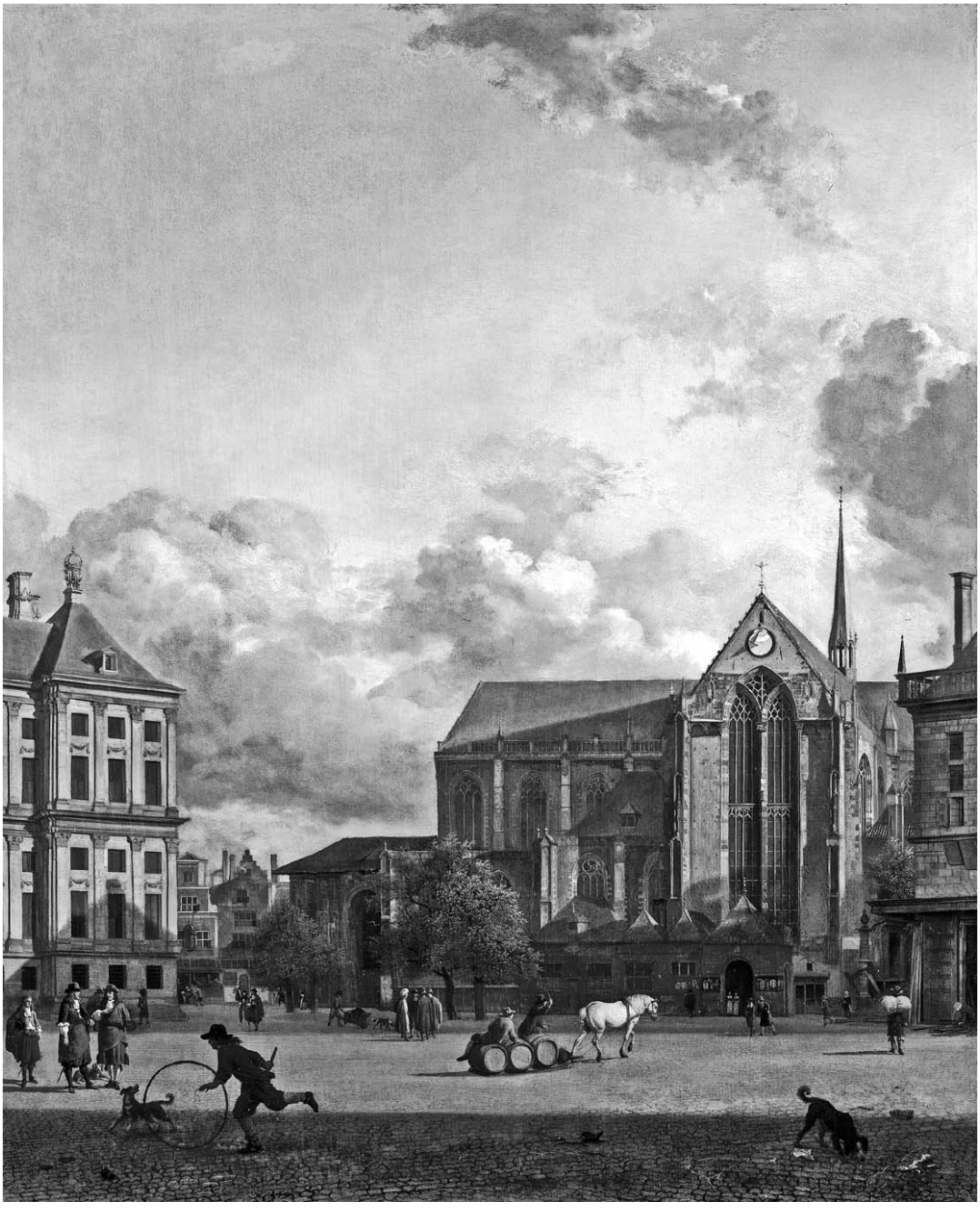
Early modern idioms are also more broadly zoographic than ours. By *zoography*, I refer to the way writing in that period relies pervasively on animal reference and cross-species comparison, while at the same

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time proceeding from a cosmological framework in which the diversity of creaturely life is finely articulated, whether as a "great chain" of being or to indicate nature's virtuosity.[4] In other words, this repertoire is not provincially human. To return to Shakespeare, animals even appear among the plays' *dramatis animalia*. We find Crab, the shaggy cur in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; the notorious stage direction in *The Winter's Tale* ("Exit, pursued by a bear" [3.3.57]); and the dogs in *The Tempest*, sounding their "bow-wow" as a "burden, dispersedly" to Ariel's song (1.2.385). If we tried to number all the species Shakespeare mentions—the



Jan van der Heyden, *De Dam* (*The Dam Square*), 1668. Oil on canvas, 68 × 55 cm. Amsterdams Historisch Museum.

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winter lion, Hyrcanian tiger, and baited bear; the little shrew and the necessary cat; bottled spiders and horned toads; brave harts and gentle hinds; the forward horse and preposterous ass; the temple-haunting martlet, morning lark, nightly owl, and winging crow; the nibbling sheep and hunger-starved wolves; the chafed boar, princely palfrey, fat oxen, and spotted leopards; stranger curs, mastiffs, hellhounds—we would be, as the saying goes, herding cats. In what way, then, are there only eight animals in Shakespeare?

Shakespeare's Eight Animals

While references to the creatures now gathered as animals defy inventory, the collective English word *animal* appears a mere eight times across the entire verbal expanse of Shakespeare's work. His practice on this point of nomenclature tilts overwhelmingly against the word. By contrast, Shakespeare uses the terms *beast* 141 times and *creature* 127 times (Spevack).[5] In this pattern, he is typical. As the *OED* confirms, *animal* hardly appears in English before the end of the sixteenth century. What does the scarcity of this collective noun, despite the texts' menagerie, suggest about present idioms concerning the forms of life, idioms that habitually invoke a dualistic logic of human versus/and animal? Also at stake are the questions of when and why it became conventional to speak using those blunt, nominalized adjectives *the human* and *the animal*, where humanity is characterized by a positive attribute, however slippery (language, a soul, existential possibility, tool use, etc.), and animality by a corresponding deficit or privation. Jacques Derrida dubs this reductive binarism a case of intellectual *bêtise*, or "beastly idiocy," a word choice that deconstructs—and knowingly repeats—the human/animal divide in question (400). If the extreme generality of these nomenclatures leaps out on briefest reflection, why do they still shape our vocabulary, especially in academic contexts?

As Donna Haraway urges, "[W]e have never been human" (2). At the same time, "we" have almost always been human-exceptionalist. Even so, historical attention to the lexicons for living things gives a date to what we now repeatedly posit as "the human/animal divide" and "the question of the animal," revealing them to be modern rhetorical propositions rather than universal or inevitable features of thought (philosophical or otherwise) on these subjects. As propositions, they descend from Enlightenment modes of science and philosophy that have been largely qualified in contexts like subjectivity, rationality, and liberalism. Yet they persist as a conventional framework for species considerations. In the seventeenth-century Cartesian iteration of the human, *cogito ergo sum* inaugurated—among the many other things already charged to its account—a species definition. It culled humans, who alone were equipped with a rational soul, from the entire spectrum of creatures, and the rest were then compressed within the mechanistic limits of purely instinctual behavior (in what has since been termed the *bête-machine* doctrine for its denial of a difference between animals and clocks or other automatons).[6]

To put it in the broadest terms: before the cogito, there was no such thing as "the animal." There were creatures. There were brutes, and there were beasts. There were fish and fowl. There were living things. There were humans, who participated in animal nature and who shared the same bodily materials with animals (Paster). These humans were measured as much in contradistinction to angels as to animals, taking their place in a larger cosmography, constitution, or even "world picture" than the more contracted post-Cartesian human/animal divide with which we customarily wrangle. None of these classifications line up with the fundamentally modern sense of the animal or animals as humanity's persistent, solitary opposite. That conception derives from a mode of thought

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whose trajectory can be said to end with a late (and hesitating) suggestion in Derrida's long essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am." To deconstruct the confinement of "the animal," Derrida writes, would require "perhaps acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical . . . that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as *something other than a privation*" (416; emphasis mine). As his speculation suggests, our thin vocabulary isn't the only problem: the exceptionalist premise of signification as exclusively human (a claim now eroding under the scrutiny of science) circumscribes our thinking.

Shakespeare by contrast, like his predecessors and contemporaries, wrote from a cosmography that drew on broadly textual ideas like the Book of Nature and the Book of Creatures.[7] Partly theological and partly empirical, these notions challenge a simple, exceptionalist sense of language, signification, or writing as a human monopoly. Here is a scriptural instance of the persuasive force attributable to animals:

> Aske now the beasts, and they shall teach thee, and the foules of the heaven, and they shall tell thee: Or speake to the earth, and it shall shewe thee: or the fishes of the sea, and they shall declare unto thee. Who is ignorant of all these, but that the hande of the Lord hath made these? In whose hande is the soule of every living thing, and the breath of all mankinde.
>
> (*Bible*, Job 12.7–10)

A familiar Shakespearean passage connects to this larger principle: in woodland exile, Duke Senior in *As You Like It* finds "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stone, and good in everything" (2.1.16–17). Both passages show that elemental materials too (earth, stone) participate in this cosmic voicing. I stress here the participation and authority that the Book of Nature accords to all creatures, the theologically derived category including humans, animals, plants, and elements, all created by the "hande" of a divine craftsman.[8] When we think historically, something timely can be gleaned from the broadly constitutionalist discourses ratifying animal membership before and against Descartes. Timely, that is, if—as we abandon the spurious compass of the human/animal divide to navigate a wider sea of new ecosystemic, genetic, and posthumanist knowledges—we aim for a more creaturely and less human-exceptionalist vision of cosmopolity.

Creatures of Language

The word *animal* itself embeds an etymological collision between classical and biblical perspectives. Despite their alleged lack of a soul, animals are called by the name of *anima*, the Latin noun for soul, breath, or spirit. Aristotle's widely influential *De anima* had postulated the ensouledness of all things, giving a taxonomy of souls (vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, locomotive, and intellective). Each higher form of life in this order necessarily incorporated all the kinds of soul below it. Here, animatedness, or the possession of soul, likens all living creatures, even if a hierarchy of souls also ranks them.

In early modern English, commonplace phrasings likewise manifested a more elaborate census than the impoverished dualism of human versus animal. As we have seen already, *animal* was an uncommon word. When one subcategory of what we call animals was intended, *beast* often served. But *beast* was no synonym of the modern *animal*, since *beast* (at least when referring to nonhumans) intended neither fish nor fowl but a quadruped, usually livestock. When the aim was to denote more than one subcategory of animals, a list was likelier than a single collective word. To give a Shakespearean instance: "We cannot live on grass, on berries, water, / As beasts and birdes and fishes" (*Tim.* 4.3.427–28). This litany of kinds—beasts, birds, fishes—draws its rhythms from Scripture; in English translations of Genesis we find "the fish of the sea,"

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"the foule of the heaven," and "the beast of the fielde." (1.26, 2.18, and passim). While some enumerations ground humankind's claims to authority ("over the fish of the sea, and over the foule of the heaven, and over the beastes, and over all the earth, and over every thing that creepeth and moveth on the earth"), others grant rights of sustenance to animals exactly as those rights have been conveyed to humans: "Likewise to every beast of the earth, and to every foule of the heaven, and to every thing that moveth upon the earth, which hath life in it selfe, every greene herbe shall be for meate" (Gen. 1.28–30). These creaturely inventories in the vernacular bibles and homilies of the Reformation reinforced a traditionally expansive cosmic census: they attentively noted the presence of other creatures by listing them (see Bond 161–73).

When a higher level of generality is sought, Scripture again plays a role, supplying terms like "creatures," "living things," and "living beings."[9] We have seen Job refer to "every living thing." Genesis, too, makes numerous collective references. For example, "God spake . . . to Noah . . . saying, Behold . . . I establish my covenant with you, and with your seede after you, And with *every living creature* that is with you, with the foule, with the cattell, and with every beast of the earth with you, from all that goe out of the Arke, unto every beast of the earth" (9.8–10; emphasis mine). This passage uses both the general category of creatures and the enumerative approach to representing animals, a legalistic variation that suits the quasi-contract being made. With characteristic period emphasis, when *creature* appears in these incalculably influential texts, it is commonly intensified by *every*, as here. But *animal* never appears in the benchmark English of the Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), or the King James Version (1611).

What, then, are Shakespeare's eight *animals* doing, and what do they tell us? Two uses of the word involve persons failing a (gender-vexed and class-inflected) human standard. In *Much Ado*, a disenchanted suitor accuses his beloved of a lack of self-government, an unchastity "more intemperate . . . / Than Venus, or those pampered animals / That rage in savage sensuality" (4.1.58–60). In *Love's Labors Lost*, a curate classifies the illiterate Dull according to Aristotle's additive model of souls. Dull evidences only the lower forms of soul, showing no sign of the higher, intellective forms: "He hath not eat paper . . . ; he hath not drunk ink. His intellect is not replenished. He is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts; And such barren plants are set before us that we thankful should be . . . for those parts that do fructify in us more than in he" (4.2.25–29). The logic posits distinctions among humans and animals and plants while undercutting them by calling a human specimen a nonhuman "animal" (and also a plant).

No fewer than three of Shakespeare's eight *animal*s inhabit *As You Like It*. Each implicitly critiques Genesis, reading human dominion in terms of a searing issue in Renaissance political thought: tyranny. Orlando, oppressed by a brother who denies him an education, laments, "I . . . gain nothing under him but growth, for the which his animals on his dunghills are as much bound to him as I . . . the spirit of my father, which I think is within me, begins to mutiny against this servitude" (1.1.16–24). Meanwhile, in Arden's woods, Jacques observes a wounded stag, a "wretched animal" who "heaved forth such groans" that those taking up exile in the forest are called "mere usurpers, tyrants, and what's worse, / To fright the animals and to kill them up / In their assigned and native dwelling place" (2.1.39, 65–67). These three political animals are radical animals, claiming an authority beyond any human master. In Renaissance political theory, what is "worse" than a usurper or tyrant?

The last three *animal*s in Shakespeare bear philosophical or cosmological weight—but with a twist. In *The Merchant of Venice*, an *animal* appears when Gratiano addresses

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Shylock on the transmigration of souls: "Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith / To hold opinion with Pythagoras / That souls of animals infuse themselves / Into the trunks of men" (4.1.130–33). Here animal ensouledness is not already in man but is an alien infusion, consistent with the play's religious attentions. Hamlet, in a sarcastic staging of mental instability for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, calls man "[t]he beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! . . . And yet . . . Man delights not me" (2.2.308–10). Last, Lear, in his cosmic crisis on the heath, classifies "unaccommodated man" as "a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.105–06), which is to say man is insufficient by an animal standard. In an instance of what I call human *negative* exceptionalism, here only the appropriated coats and borrowed practical knowledge of other creatures equip humankind for the world, while all other creatures are understood to arrive prepared.[10] Shakespeare deviates from his customary vocabulary and uses *animal* when critically posing what we might well call "the question of the human" rather than when humanity is asserted. This contradicts the coming Cartesian dispensation, which seeks to secure the human by according it a unique, positive attribute that all animals can be said to lack. In *King Lear* in particular, animals are comparatively integral and sovereignly competent; humankind is inadequate, the weaker vessel.

Tailpiece

Two points seem especially salient. First, animals represented no single, philosophically invested category in early modernity; they instead suggested populations. English speakers almost never grouped together all the creatures we call (nonhuman) animals under that name, preferring a more articulated list influenced by the cadences of Scripture and cognizant of plants and minerals as well. Second, their failure to group all creatures under *animal* evidences a different cosmology that, whatever we might say about its hierarchy or rigidity, was not essentially binary in the way the modern duo of human/animal is. In the anti-Cartesian instances of Shakespearean usage, *animal* comes most into service when humanness is least secure and cross-species likenesses are most evident. There are scales of being, of course, but early modern humanity is relatively ecosystemic: it always has animality (and divinity and plants and elements) in or with it.

As subsequent attentions became relatively contracted to a human/animal divide and as the vitality and claims of other creatures were closely impounded in the post-Enlightenment philosophical category of the animal, a technologically fortified human exceptionalism found more advantageous linguistic conditions in which to evolve. The disappearance of the more protean *creatures* into the abstract nominalizations of *animal*, *the animal*, and *animals* parallels livestock's banishment to a clandestine, dystopian world of industrial food production, where the unspeakable conditions of life depend on invisibility.[11] It mirrors, too, the increasing confinement of wildlife in preserves as wild spaces disappear with alarming speed. By this double apartheid (a segregation in language and of bodies), our conceptions of a we and the public square in which that we is performed give new meaning to the phrase *human error*. As creatures whose sensory skills are largely visual, what we see determines what we say. And the ways we have seen fit to speak about the framework of species, compressing our most vivid planetary array of polymorphous embodiment into the confines of "the animal," determine our ignorance. A 1594 translation of La Primaudaye's *French Academy* cited in the *OED* harbors one of the rare *animals* of the sixteenth century, asserting, "Many men, by reason of their ignorance in the Latine tongue, think that Animal is a beast, whereas it signifieth a living creature." Modern habits of language and thought demonstrate a similar species provincialism. Indeed, since

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the cosmos has never coincided with "the human," we aren't even cosmopolitan yet.

Notes

1. Berger explores the disappearance of the animal's returned glance with industrialization.

2. On science and empire, see Parrish; Schiebinger.

3. In my book manuscript in progress, entitled "The Zootopian Constitution: Animals, Membership, Early Modernity," I stress the scope and consequences of this engagement.

4. Calarco considers animals in Continental philosophy. It's extraordinary how human-exceptionalist and nonzoographic that tradition is. As Connor suggests, "It is a mystery that this . . . tradition, which has been preoccupied to the point of mania with alterity—with human others, and the problem of the 'other' for humans—and has so intensely pondered questions of 'the human,' the 'inhuman' and the 'posthuman,' should have managed to remain so singlemindedly uninterested in the proximate otherness represented by the animal." Santner employs the term *creature* but restricts its sense to torsions within the human: "what I am calling creaturely life is a dimension of human existence" (xv). Early modern discourses, by contrast, are zootopian: a place well populated with animals.

5. *Creature* is the broadest term, *beast* the narrowest. Even so, Shakespeare sometimes denotes humans by all three words.

6. Descartes develops the *bête-machine* doctrine in part 5 of the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and in letters addressed to the marquess of Newcastle (23 Nov. 1646) and Henry More (5 Feb. 1649 [*Philosophical Essays* 275–76, 292–96]).

7. For a history of these conceptions, see Pedersen.

8. For a good theological and theoretical discussion of creatureliness, see Lupton.

9. Earlier wording is more accurate than modern translations. However, the original Hebrew "nefesh chaya" means "living souls" (despite the tradition of reserving those words for Adam while rendering the phrase as "living creatures or things" for nonhumans). See Hyland 73. In Latin scientific writings, the term *animalia* is highly evident; in at least one instance of early modern translation (William Harvey's 1628 *De motu cordis*), *animalia* was anglicized predominantly as "living creatures" (see my "Invisible Parts").

10. For a fuller discussion, see my "Poor, Bare, Forked."

11. On speaking of "life" in this context, see Coetzee. When these conditions are made visible, as they were during the Proposition 2 campaign in California in 2008, they are judged intolerable—in that instance by a strong majority (63.5% ["California"]).

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