Remembering the Elephant: Animal Reason before the Eighteenth Century

BRYAN ALKEMEYER

ESPECIALLY BEFORE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, THE ELEPHANT often occupies the ambiguous position between human and animal that the ape subsequently adopts in European thought. I intend for this perhaps surprising claim to complement scholarship on the eighteenth-century "discovery of the great apes" by illuminating an earlier conception of the human-animal relationship that continues to be influential on many later writers.[1] While my analysis generally supports notions of the eighteenth century as a pivotal moment, I also complicate this modernization narrative by calling attention to representations of animals that affiliate the eighteenth century with earlier paradigms.[2] In spite of similarities between apes and human beings, which have been familiar since antiquity (Janson 14, 73), many early modern and eighteenth-century writers regard the elephant as the most humanlike animal because of its high degree of intelligence, even attributing rationality to it. Unlike relatively recent perspectives on apes, largely forgotten perspectives on elephants challenge the concept of the human by suggesting that the category "rational animal" includes beings with emphatically nonhuman shapes.[3] As I add the rational elephant to Bruce Boehrer's list of "creatures forced to the margins of existence" in literary history (199), I argue that the rational elephant can help us read early modern speciesism against itself and distinguish early modernity from modernity in ways that historicize—and denaturalize—their different speciesisms.[4] Remembering this creature from a bygone paradigm, one that was more capable of recognizing rationality across differences in physical form, enables us to understand the past more closely in its own terms. It also provides a historically grounded vantage point from which we can question modern assumptions about the special status of nonhuman as well as human primates.

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Modern perspectives on great apes have been traced to eighteenth-century origins. In a classic study, H. W. Janson argues that Edward Tyson's 1699 anatomy of a chimpanzee "marks the formal entry of the anthropoid ape into the consciousness of Western civilisation" (336).[5] Before Tyson, Janson explains, "reports of man-like simians . . . were received with almost complete equanimity" (327). Other scholars have attributed similar importance to Tyson's study: M. F. Ashley Montagu calls it "epoch-making" (392), and Laura Brown maintains that "Tyson's work was the first to document the connection between human and animal through the link of the anthropoid ape" (*Fabl* 225; see also Wokler 2304–05). Thus, Susan Wiseman expresses a peculiarly modern conception when she writes that "the ape was where the border between the human and its others was both maintained and dissolved" (215). Registering the new significance that apes take on in the eighteenth century, Londa Schiebinger observes, "[T]he great apes held a very special place in the European imagination" (80). Brown similarly claims that "apes staged the question of the relation between human and animal most directly in eighteenth-century experience, and most explicitly in the print culture of the period" (*Fabl* 236). More recently, she has argued that the eighteenth-century "discovery of the great ape . . . is directly linked to the vital ontological debates that have shaped modernity" (*Home* 35).

The rational elephant is a much earlier figure. Its locus classicus appears in Pliny's first-century *Hi* (*Nat* - *t*). When introducing the elephant, the first animal to be discussed after the book on the human, Pliny writes:

> The largest land animal is the elephant, and it is the nearest to man in intelligence [*s* - *bus*]: it understands [*i*] the language of its country and obeys orders, remembers duties that it has been taught, is pleased by affection and by marks of honour, nay more it possesses virtues rare even in man, honesty [*pr*], wisdom [*pr*], justice [*aequi*], also respect [*r*] for the stars and reverence [*ve*] for the sun and moon. (2–3; book 8, sec. 1)

Italo Calvino calls Pliny's elephants "a people with a culture different from ours" (328). Citing Calvino, Brian Cummings argues, "Pliny presents nothing less than the ethnography of the elephant" (173). This perspective offers a compelling alternative to interpretations of early modern accounts of elephants as anthropomorphic.[6] In contrast to such interpretations, Cummings credits Pliny with founding an influential "countertradition on the question of animal rationality" (182), one that is anti-Aristotelian and anti-Cartesian.[7]

In my readings of early modern and eighteenth-century texts, I similarly argue that accounts of elephant reason and culture resist Aristotelian and, later, Cartesian definitions of the human. As Keith Thomas writes, the notion of the distinctively rational human being "was accompanied by a great deal of self-congratulation" (31). Representations of elephant intelligence undercut such anthropocentric self-aggrandizement; more crucially, they do so in its own favored terms—of human self-definition according to the criterion of rationality.[8] Often despite a text's avowed anthropocentrism, the rational elephant has what Philip Armstrong would call an "anthropoluotic" effect: that is, it tends to "demolish, unfasten, annul, delegitimize or subvert" the human (11; see also Armstrong 227n7). My readings thus bear out Cary Wolfe's assertion that "humanism must, if rigorously pursued, generate its own deconstruction once these 'defining' characteristics [of the human] are found beyond the species barrier" (42). The rational elephant represents a mode of questioning human-animal distinctions that predates and then resists "the rise of comparative anatomy," which, along with related innovations, "created a new conceptual environment for the human engagement with

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the hominoid ape" by the eighteenth century (Brown, *Homeless Dogs* 29). Whereas the modern paradigm takes anatomical resemblance as the point of departure for human-animal comparisons, the earlier paradigm finds humanlike rationality in massive quadrupeds with dexterous trunks.

While G. A. Bradshaw suggests "understanding an elephant much like we would a person from a different culture" (117), my essay does not make claims about real animals but rather investigates the elephant's significance in European cultural history. To that end, I first offer a new reading of Giovanni Battista Gelli's *La Circe* (1549), especially its culminating dialogue, between a human being and an elephant. This reading dramatizes how the natural history of the elephant must be suppressed in order for a philosophy of human exceptionalism to be produced. I next track the rational elephant through subsequent works—literature, natural history, and travel writing—up through the late eighteenth century. These representative works show that the elephant's undermining of human-animal distinctions is not peculiar to Gelli but pervasive and remarkably persistent, even across Enlightenment reconceptualizations of the human. I conclude by considering the rational elephant as itself a speciesist figure before speculating about its further implications, especially for destabilizing modern speciesism.

[I]

La Circe is an early and ambitious Renaissance adaptation of Plutarch's human-animal dialogue, often called *Gryllus* after the speaker who finds, following his transformation by Circe, that he would rather be a pig than a human being (Plutarch, "Beasts"). After Gelli's Circe restores speech and reason to the human beings she has transformed, Ulysses speaks in turn with eleven different creatures, arranged approximately in ascending order along the chain of being: oyster, mole, snake, hare, goat, deer, lion, horse, dog, calf, and elephant. Although Ulysses attempts to convince each of the creatures that human beings are superior to animals, the first ten follow the example of Plutarch's Gryllus by refusing the opportunity to return to human form. The elephant, however, agrees to be transformed back into a human being—an Athenian philosopher named Aglafemos—whereupon he regains certain distinctively human properties, such as religion. *La Circe* concludes as Aglafemos joins Ulysses on his return voyage to Greece.

The elephant is the crucial figure in *La Circe*'s attempt to test Renaissance notions of human excellence by comparing human and animal existences. Ostensibly, its final dialogue affirms human superiority by exposing dramatic differences between human beings and even the highest animal in Gelli's chain of being. After hearing Ulysses's case, the elephant exclaims, "No more, no more Ulisses, cause me nowe to leave this beastyshe nature, and to become man agayne, for my losse was to great, to have bene so longe tyme converted by Cyrces into an Elephante" (T1r).[9] Upon his transformation, Aglafemos ecstastically proclaims his new appreciation of human nature: "Oh, what a fayre thynge, Oh, what a marveylous thing it is to be a man! Oh how well I nowe knowe it better then I did before, for I have proved the one and the other" (T1v). Since one of the main arguments by which Ulysses persuades the elephant to return to human form is an extract from the *Oration* (1496) of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94 [Gelli S8v; Pico 226]), Aglafemos's conversion might seem to endorse Pico's notion of the distinctively free-willed and "self-transforming" human being (Pico 225).[10] Indeed, in his dedication of *La Circe* to Cosimo de' Medici, Gelli announces exactly this intention after reproducing the same extract from Pico's *Oration* (A4r).

In spite of Gelli's professed aims, however, the relation between his elephant and those of natural histories is too complex for

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the final dialogue to be read as unproblematically confirming human exceptionalism. The connection that I am drawing is far from arbitrary: evidencing *La Circe*'s closeness to natural history, Gelli's text incorporates material from works by Pliny, Plutarch, and Aelian.[11] Even though these authors' claims and anecdotes about the humanlike characteristics of elephants have currency around the time of *La Circe*'s publication (1549), which I will document by noting where key quotations from these authors recur in the first volume of Conrad Gesner's *Historia animalium* (1551; "History of Animals"), they are unrehearsed by *La Circe*'s speakers. Their omission seems especially conspicuous because natural history so clearly determines the elephant's placement at the apex of an ascending sequence of animal speakers and so palpably—but not consistently—informs Aglafemos's characterization. The intellectual attributes that Aglafemos claims to regain on transformation turn out to be ones that elephants share with human beings, according to natural histories. Meanwhile, Aglafemos's persuadability, which differentiates him from the previous animal speakers, reiterates natural historians' claims that elephants have certain humanlike rhetorical capacities. Thus, Gelli's text both disingenuously denies and tacitly acknowledges elephants' humanlike qualities.

Apprehending the final dialogue's relation to natural histories reveals its underappreciated complexity while circumventing an impasse in criticism. Although critics have been divided over whether and to what extent *La Circe* endorses or challenges human superiority to animals, they have generally regarded its final dialogue as a humanist antithesis to the preceding dialogues. Those finding that *La Circe* endorses notions of human superiority privilege the ostensibly humanist perspective of the climactic dialogue. Gail Kern Paster, for instance, discusses "Gelli's polemical purposes first to sabotage and then to reaffirm the dignity of man" (186).[12] Meanwhile, those finding that *La Circe* undercuts notions of human superiority emphasize the vehement arguments against humanity in the first ten dialogues. As Karen Raber writes, "[T]he conversion of Aglafemos hardly counterbalances the influence of the other animals' often compelling positions" (3).[13] *La Circe*'s central interpretative dilemma has thus seemed to be how to weigh the perspective of the first ten animal speakers against that of Aglafemos. Even critics who have detected significant ironies in *La Circe* have judged the final dialogue to be, in the words of Marilyn Migiel, "admittedly a victory for a humanist point of view" (231).[14]

As an alternative approach to interpretation, I would shift attention to evaluating Gelli's selective and problematic use of natural histories. Two contrasting hypotheses deserve consideration. If Gelli sharpens distinctions between human and elephant that are unacceptably vague in the natural histories, the final dialogue is humanist propaganda. If, instead, Gelli implicitly invokes the natural histories to debunk the final dialogue's human-elephant distinctions, the dialogue furnishes the ironic clincher to *La Circe*'s critique of anthropocentrism. In the first case, my analysis exposes the text's ideological agenda to suppress accounts of humanlike elephants; in the second, it explicates the text's ironic argument that human exceptionalism depends on such suppression. Either way, Gelli's studied and careful handling of natural histories reflects broader perceptions that elephants pose an urgent threat to human self-definition.

In advance of the elephant's transformation, *La Circe* sets up religious awareness as a characteristic distinguishing human beings from animals. After the snake explains that animals do not contemplate their own mortality or anticipate punishment in an afterlife, Ulysses responds, "[T]hou haste altogether lost thy knowledge, begynning to doubte of religion, thynges even convenyente

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to a beaste as thou arte" (E1v). Speaking with the calf, Ulysses reiterates the view that religion is a criterion of humanity. According to Ulysses, animals "not onely know not the goddes, but also have no thoughte or beliefe at all that they be, not having the discourse of reason" (Q3v). Unlike the snake, the calf argues that nonhuman beings do have religious capacities: as evidence of sun worship, the calf mentions morning birdsong and the inclination of plants toward light. Ulysses, however, denies that such phenomena qualify as religion because they occur without reason: "This commeth by no knowledge, that any of them hath of him, as of a devine thinge: but by the helpe and comforte that they take by his lyghte, and hete" (Q4r). In the subsequent dialogue, with the elephant, Ulysses argues that reason entails awareness of a creator, which is a principal advantage that human beings have over animals. Ulysses tells the elephant that human beings apprehend "the fyrste cause of all thinges, unto the whiche knowledge, neyther the phantasie, nor the estimative, nor any other of your powers can arive" (S4v). Thus, throughout the dialogues, Ulysses maintains that the intellectual faculties enabling religion distinguish human beings from animals absolutely.

Ulysses's concept of the distinctively religious human being is seemingly ratified by the elephant's transformation. Aglafemos presents religion as an entailment of his newly regained humanity when he announces his intention to offer a prayer of thanksgiving: "it semeth to me that nature hath shewed me that it apperteyneth unto man so to doo" (T1v). After Aglafemos concludes his prayer, Ulysses questions him closely: "Thou hadst not this knowledge of the first cause of this hole world, whiles thou livedst in that body of a beast" (T3r). Aglafemos answers, "No: but as sone as I was become man againe I felt it spring in my mind, almost as my naturall propertie: or rather to say better, I felt it returne into me againe. For before I was transformed by Circes into an Elephante, I remember that I had it" (T3r). This labored exchange seemingly confirms religion as a point of dramatic distinction between human beings and animals, including elephants.

Natural histories, in contrast, offer accounts of elephants who contemplate their mortality, conduct funerary rites for their dead, and practice a version of the solar religion described by Gelli's calf. As noted above, Pliny claims that elephants show "respect for the stars and reverence for the sun and moon" (3; book 8, sec. 1 [Gesner 423]).[15] Aelian similarly writes that elephants revere the moon as a "goddess" (1: 225; book 4, ch. 10 [424]) and that they "do obeisance to the rising sun by lifting their trunks like hands to face its beams" (2: 159; book 7, ch. 44 [424]).[16] Pliny further reports, "[T]hey have been seen when exhausted by suffering . . . to lie on their backs and throw grass up to the heaven, as though deputing the earth to support their prayers [*precibus*]" (3–5; book 8, sec. 1 [424]). Just before rehearsing this account, Aelian, if somewhat skeptically, relates the following claim: "if one Elephant sees another lying dead, it will not pass by without drawing up some earth with its trunk and casting it upon the corpse, as though it were performing some sacred and mysterious rite on behalf of their common nature" (1: 347–49; book 5, ch. 49 [424]). The final testimony of Gelli's elephant remains plausible as an endorsement of human exceptionalism only so long as it is read separately from—or, perversely, as supervening—such anecdotes of elephant religion.

La Circe's claims about the distinctively human memory are similarly inconsistent with natural history's depiction of the elephant. In his dialogue with the dog, Ulysses distinguishes human memory from the "imaginative" faculty of animals, which does not organize events in time (O4r). Ulysses lectures the dog, "See then howe man only, for that he knoweth the tyme, is he that hath memorie, whereby he onely, amongest all

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other beastes, may be called wise" (O4v–5r). Later, the calf concedes that memory is exclusively human, but for the calf this is a reason to prefer animality. When Ulysses reproaches the calf for wishing to remain on Circe's island instead of returning to Greece—"Doeth no remembraunce at all move the, either of kinred, or of frendes, that thou lefte there in the countrye, to desyre to se them againe, or at the least the country it selfe"—the calf responds that he enjoys oblivion: "And thys is one of the bourdens that man hath, to have almost alwaies mo thoughtes, and mo cares in his mind, because of his kindred, of his frendes, or of his country, then he hath of him selfe" (P2v). Ulysses once again presents memory as an advantage human beings have over animals in his debate with the elephant. Ulysses tells the elephant that human beings possess "intellective memorie: the which is so farre more worthy then your sensitive, as those understandinges of the which the same memorie is keper, ar more worthy, then those sensitive knowledges that your sensitive memorie kepeth" (S6r). This Aristotelian perspective would have been familiar to Renaissance readers: as Erica Fudge argues, "intellective memory" is integrally related in Renaissance thought to other supposedly unique attributes of the human, such as rationality, free will, and religious capacity (24–26).

Aglafemos's transformation seems to confirm Ulysses's arguments about memory as a distinctively human faculty. When Ulysses questions Aglafemos about his recovered religious capacity, Aglafemos explains, "[A]s sone as I was become man againe I felt it spring in my mind, almost as my naturall propertie: or rather to say better, I felt it returne into me againe. For before I was transformed by Circes into an Elephante, I *remember* that I had it" (T3r; my emphasis). According to this account, Aglafemos's existence as an elephant is an interim of forgetfulness. On regaining human form, Aglafemos also becomes eager to return to his homeland. He says, "Then lette us flye Ulisses, let us flye these wicked bankes, where this deceitfull and subtill woman, with her intisements, causeth men to live, not onely after the fashion of beastes, but in the bodyes of them also. And let us retourne to lyve freely, and accordinge the use of reason, in our owne howses" (T3v–4r). Ulysses's earlier exchange with the calf makes Aglafemos's desire to return home signify his recovery of human memory. Like the return of his religious awareness, Aglafemos's recovery of memory seems to dramatize human superiority by making sharp distinctions between human and elephant.

Gelli's forgetful elephant strongly contrasts with the elephants of natural histories, whose remarkable memories testify to their humanlike intelligence. After relating Juba's accounts of elephants who have fallen in love with human beings, Pliny declares, "Nor is it surprising that animals possessing memory are also capable of affection. For the same writer records a case of an elephant's recognizing many years later in old age a man who had been its mahout in its youth" (13; book 8, sec. 5 [423]). The long memories of elephants manifest themselves not only in their recognition of others after years of separation but also in their enduring attachments to their homelands. Aelian describes the pining of elephants for the lands of their birth: "Elephants when withdrawn from the country to which they are accustomed . . . do not erase from their memory the spell of the country that fostered them. At any rate the majority die of grief, and some have actually lost their sight through the floods of tears past measuring which they have shed" (2: 309; book 10, ch. 17 [424]). Pliny presupposes elephants' impressive memories when he describes their reluctance to leave their countries: "They are also believed to understand the obligations of another's religion in so far as to refuse to embark on board ships when going overseas before they are lured on by the mahout's sworn promise in regard to their return" (3; book 8,

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sec. 1 [421]). While the desire to return home seems to mark a difference between human and animal in Gelli's *La Circe*, it is an aspect of the remarkably humanlike memories of elephants in natural histories. Thus, yet another point of differentiation between elephant and human turns out to be a point of indistinction in Gelli's source material.

While the final dialogue's key human-elephant distinctions blatantly contradict natural histories, Aglafemos's transformation depends on one humanlike quality that Gelli's elephant shares with natural history's elephants. Among *La Circe*'s animal speakers, Aglafemos alone evinces the persuadability that Ulysses, in keeping with the rhetorical tradition, defines as constitutively human. In natural histories, one of the remarkable traits of elephants is their participation in rhetoric—as both agents and objects of persuasion. The fact that Gelli's elephant—and none of his other animals—is persuadable poses a problem for the text's attempts to differentiate human beings from animals because it follows natural historians in crediting elephants with capacities that are supposed to define the human.

After Ulysses has spoken with five transformed creatures, he outlines a view giving rhetoric a crucial role in differentiating human beings from animals:

> Our wise menne of Gretia are wont to saye, that they, who can be counsailed by them selves, to live well and honestly, are put in the first degre of vertue. And they that can not of them selves, but beleve the counsell of those who are wiser then they, are put in the second degre: but he that can not of him selfe, nor yet will take counsell of others, is thought by them not worthy to be numbred among men. And of this sort are they with whom I have spoken: So that it is no marvaile, though they wyll not become men againe. (H7v–8r)

This conception of the human, derived from a passage in Hesiod quoted with approbation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (13; book 1, sec. 4), makes persuadability a minimum criterion for human (as opposed to animal) nature or status. In asserting that human beings may not realize their humanity, this view is afflicted by a paradox that is endemic in Renaissance conceptions of human nature. Fudge describes the widespread Renaissance view: "The being called human, by failing to use its rational part, risks losing its humanity. Such failures are almost always figured as a descent to the level of the animal" (35). Many Renaissance writers, Fudge explains, subscribe to a tautology according to which human beings' distinctive reason consists in acknowledging that reason makes human beings superior to animals (2–3, 27).[17] While Ulysses similarly declares that creatures failing to recognize human superiority fall beneath the threshold of humanity, the elephant evinces the persuadability that is supposed to be properly human. Paradoxically, Aglafemos seems to qualify as human even before his transformation, yet his transformation also seems to ratify Ulysses's human-animal distinctions.

Ulysses's definition of the human in terms of persuadability rehearses the rhetorical tradition's stories of the origin of humanity. As Wayne A. Rebhorn explains, the numerous "Renaissance tellings of the myth of the orator-civilizer" find their "most important and extensive" source in Cicero's *De inventione* (25). Cicero writes, "For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength" (5; book 1, sec. 2). According to Cicero, human beings first become distinct from animals through the intervention of an idealized orator, the discoverer of persuasive speech:

> At this juncture a man—great and wise I am sure—became aware of the power latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop

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> this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk. (5–7; book 1; sec. 2)

Aglafemos replays the story of rhetoric's inauguration of a rational humanity through his dialogue with Ulysses, the ideal orator of classical epic. Aglafemos even attributes his return to humanity to Ulysses's rhetoric: "Ulisses I thanke thee moost highlye, that thou haste with thy learning caused me to knowe the trueth, and with thine eloquence hast allured me to folowe it" (T1v). Gelli's text thus seems to endorse the rhetorical tradition's conception of the human, especially since Aglafemos acknowledges the decisive influence of Ulysses's "eloquence."

Gelli's distinctively persuadable elephant resembles and arguably derives from the rhetorically sophisticated elephants of natural histories. Pliny delivers a report of elephant gladiators who, despairing of their lives, appeal to the audience:

> But Pompey's elephants when they had lost all hope of escape tried to gain the compassion of the crowd by indescribable gestures of entreaty, deploring their fate with a sort of wailing, so much to the distress of the public that they forgot the general and his munificence carefully devised for their honour, and bursting into tears rose in a body and invoked curses on the head of Pompey for which he soon afterwards paid the penalty. (17; book 8, sec. 7 [426])

The elephants persuade the audience to change their attitudes toward Pompey, toward the violent spectacle, and toward the elephants themselves. As Cicero writes in his own account of the same elephant combat, "[T]he mob and crowd were greatly impressed, but manifested no pleasure. Indeed the result was a certain compassion and a kind of feeling that that huge beast has a fellowship [*societatem*] with the human race" (*Letters* 6–7; book 7; letter 1).[18]

Another influential anecdote, which Gesner derives from Plutarch, represents the elephant as capable of deliberating on alternatives and responding to persuasive appeals. After relating two other anecdotes about elephants, Plutarch writes, "And another in Rome, being tormented by little boys who pricked its proboscis with their writing styluses, grabbed one of them and raised him into the air as if to dash him to death; but when the spectators cried out, it gently set the child down on the ground again and passed along, thinking it sufficient punishment for one so young to have been frightened" (*Whether Land or Sea Animals* 375 [425]). As this elephant reconsiders its intention to kill the boy, it displays not only self-restraint but also something like the rhetorical skill of *argumentum in utramque partem*. In anger, the elephant initially sees the situation only from its own aggrieved perspective. In response to bystanders' outcries, though, the elephant sees the situation from the perspective of the boy and his human community. Corroborating Pliny's claim that elephants have a sense of "justice" (3; book 8, sec. 1 [423]), the elephant concludes that killing the boy is out of proportion to the grievance that it has suffered. This change in the elephant's attitude testifies to its ability to weigh one perspective against another, and the anecdote thereby presents elephants as amenable to persuasion—and capable of reasoning.

Connecting *La Circe* to its source material short-circuits the final dialogue's apparent dramatization of human exceptionalism. Gelli studiously presents an elephant lacking such signal attributes as religion and memory. At the same time, Gelli's decision to make the

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only persuadable animal interlocutor an elephant seems to be motivated by anecdotes illustrating elephants' participation in rhetoric. A vantage point from which *La Circe*'s relation to natural history can be articulated demonstrates how elephants might explode notions of the distinctively rational human being. Gelli himself occupies this vantage point but obscures it for inscrutable reasons: perhaps to fulfill, disingenuously, the anthropocentric program announced in *La Circe*'s dedication or perhaps to mock anthropocentrism's willful ignorance of elephant rationality.

[II]

In this opaque manner, *La Circe* furnishes my first early modern example of the rational elephant, whose main historical horizon is "the discovery of the great apes." Early modernists have tended to orient their own studies of animals in relation to another important turning point, the unprecedentedly sharp human-animal distinction introduced by René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637). They have unearthed various pre-Cartesian paradigms: a "discourse of reason" whose "simple distinction between reason and unreason . . . was constantly being eroded" (Fudge 145), "an Aristotelian taxonomy of shared attributes" (Boehrer 9), and a "cosmopolitical vision," or "zootopianism," that "enlists terms of political relation *across* species" (Shannon 18). Descartes supplants each paradigm by introducing, respectively, "an absolute and, within the context of his discourse itself, unquestionable distinction between humans and animals" (Fudge 153), "a new notion of character" serving "as an instrument for defining and maintaining the species barrier" (Boehrer 9), and "the fundamentally modern sense of '*the* animal' or even 'animals' as humanity's persistently ontological foil" (Shannon 10). Although the rational elephant flourishes in pre-Cartesian environs, it survives later as a remarkably enduring challenge to human exceptionalism. Even as the anthropoid ape increasingly displaces the rational elephant over the eighteenth century, the rational elephant persists in opposition to Enlightenment science, particularly to the classification of human beings with apes in Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* (1735).

Michel de Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sebond* (1580; *Apology for Raymond Sebond*) assigns elephant and ape distinct roles in its critique of human-centered assumptions: while the ape deflates human beings' pride in their supposedly noble form, the elephant demonstrates that the human being does not possess a monopoly on reason. Rejecting celebrations of the human physique, Montaigne writes, "The animals most like us are the worst and the ugliest of the bunch: the one with an outward appearance and face closest to ours is the baboon" (539).[19] While the ape destabilizes the human being's privileged position because of their physical similarities, the elephant does so because of its remarkable intelligence. Interrupting a litany of anecdotes about elephants and other animals, Montaigne remarks, "[S]o many of their actions bring elephants close to human capacities that if I wanted to relate in detail everything that experience has shown us about them, I would easily win one of my regular arguments: that there is a greater difference between one man and another than between some men and some beasts" (520). Eroding the human-animal boundary, Montaigne asserts that the difference between human and elephant intelligence is insignificant in comparison with the range of intelligence among human beings. The elephant is an especially important example of the inadequacy of the human-animal distinction, as it is usually conceived, but Montaigne does not limit rational faculties to human beings and elephants. After reviewing evidence of elephant religion, Montaigne warns that the religious behaviors of other species may be less immediately

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recognizable: "there may be no obvious similarities in other animals, but that does not allow us to make judgements about their total lack of religion" (522). At the same time that the elephant provides key evidence of nonhuman rationality and culture, Montaigne uses the elephant to expand the category "rational animal" to include, potentially, all animals.

Although Edward Topsell's *Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607) is not a deliberately polemical text, it also challenges the human being's status as the rational animal through representations of elephants rather than apes. Like Montaigne, Topsell remarks the external similarities of human beings and apes: "Apes do *outwardly* resemble men very much" (3; my emphasis). But while Montaigne finds that human-ape resemblances place human beings in a negative light, Topsell declares that "the body of an Ape is Ridiculous, by reason of an indecent likenesse and imitation of man" (4). This judgment of the ape's form assumes—or, perhaps, defensively asserts—a great distance between the intellectual attributes of human and ape.

In Topsell's entry on the elephant, the human-animal distinction becomes progressively less secure in the face of reports of elephant intelligence. Asserting that elephants are the most intelligent animals, Topsell writes, "There is not any creature so capable of understanding as an Elephant" (196). This assessment establishes a special intellectual proximity between human and elephant. A subsequent example of elephant intelligence defies human-animal distinctions: "They are so loving to their fellowes, that they will not eat their meat alone, but having found a prey, they go and invite the residue to their feastes and cheere, more like to reasonable civill men, then unreasonable brute beasts" (196). Topsell compromises the human being's status as the rational animal when he suggests that the elephant is more appropriately categorized with human beings than with animals. Later, Topsell even claims that the elephant's intelligence sometimes surpasses the human being's. He writes, "[T]hey are apt to learne, remember, meditate, and conceive such things, as a man can hardly performe" (206). Elephants also emerge as superior to human beings in a statement attributed (perhaps mistakenly) to Cicero: "*Cicero* affirmeth that they come so neare to a mans disposition, that their small company or Nation seemeth to overgoe or equall most men in sence and understanding" (209).[20] Regarding elephants as a nonhuman people and estimating elephant intelligence to exceed the human norm, Topsell's Cicero implies that the elephant has a stronger claim to be the rational animal than the human being has.

The rational elephant persists in Joannes Jonstonus's *Historia naturalis de quadrupedibus* (1650; *Natural History of Quadrupeds*), even though this text postdates Cartesianism and an important event in "the discovery of the great apes." In 1641, Nicolaas Tulp publishes an image of "the first anthropoid ape known to have reached European shores" (Janson 334–35). Jonstonus's natural history includes a description of Tulp's ape, "limmed so like a man, that an egge is scarsely liker an egge, resembling man in elbows, fingers, thumbs, thighs, calves, heels" (76).[21] While noting these striking physical resemblances, Jonstonus remains convinced that beings without anthropoid shapes have more humanlike intelligence. The entry on elephants declares, "There are many things that witnesse their singular nature and *ingenuety*; that it is no wonder, that *Pliny* calls him the wittiest of all that go on four feet" (17). Referring to Cicero's account of Pompey's infamous elephant combat, Jonstonus writes, "Cicero is of opinion that they are great *lovers* of mankind, and there is a kind of a conversation between them" (18). A successor of Pliny, Jonstonus continues to believe the elephant displays something like parity with the human being—in spite of Descartes's intervening assessment that animals "have no mental

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powers whatsoever" (48). Furthermore, Jonstonus expressly ranks elephant above simian intelligence when describing apes that he calls *cynocephali*: "Of a singular wit they are, comming nearest man, except the Elephant" (78).[22] Undeterred by Tulp's ape, Jonstonus adheres to the traditional elephant-centered conception of the human-animal relation.

Over the seventeenth century, travel writers publish reports of elephants that both rehearse and provide new evidence for the claims of natural history. Of the travelogues excerpted in Buffon's entry on the elephant (1764), three make especially emphatic assertions of elephant rationality. According to François Pyrard's *Voyage* (1619), "The elephant is the largest of all animals, with the most judgment and intelligence; one might even say he possesses the use of reason" (343).[23] Because the phrasing is so reminiscent of Pliny, it seems probable that natural history has conditioned Pyrard's interpretation of the elephant behaviors that he subsequently describes. Edward Terry, in *A Voyage to East-India* (1655), likewise uses an eyewitness account to endorse natural history's assessment of elephants. Initially, Terry expresses the familiar view that, among animals, elephants "come neerest unto reason" (143). Slightly later, however, in a passage quoted (in French translation) by Buffon, Terry reports "many things most remarkable, which seem indeed to be acts of reason rather than sense" (144; Buffon, "L'éléphant" 85). By claiming that elephant behaviors cannot be explained except in terms of reason, Terry promotes elephants to a fully humanlike status. Yet another example of this affinity between human and elephant intelligence appears in Philippe de la Très Sainte Trinité's *Voyage d'Orient* (1669; *Voyage to the East*), which holds that elephants "closely approximate human judgment and reasoning" (361).[24] Philippe directly compares simian and elephant intelligence, to the ape's disadvantage: "if one compares apes to elephants, apes seem like nothing but very dull and very brutal animals" (362; Buffon, "L'éléphant" 82). For Philippe, the elephant reveals the wide gap that separates human and ape despite their similarities in shape. Philippe's comment illustrates that in the early modern period the rational elephant poses a more profound challenge to the definition of the human than does the ape.

The rational elephant does not abruptly disappear in the eighteenth century; in fact, it appears in some of the period's most famous works of literature and natural history. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733–34) exemplifies the uneasy coexistence of the older human-animal paradigm, centered on the elephant, and the protomodern one, centered on the ape. The latter governs the following verse paragraph:

> Superior beings, when of late they saw
> A mortal Man unfold all Nature's law,
> Admir'd such wisdom in an earthly shape,
> And shew'd a NEWTON as we shew an Ape.
> (epistle 2, lines 31–34)

A comparison of this passage with a structurally similar statement from *The Spectator* is instructive: "an Angel looks down upon a Man, as a Man doth upon a Creature which approaches the nearest to the rational Nature" (125; 17 Nov. 1714).[25] This analogy makes explicit one of the assumptions of Pope's lines, where the "Creature which approaches the nearest to" human reason is the ape.

In another passage, Pope offers a different version of the chain of being, which gives the place below the human being not to the ape but to the elephant. Pope purports to explain and defend human superiority to animals (epistle 1, lines 229–32), but elephants' humanlike qualities produce a contrary effect:

> How Instinct varies in the grov'ling swine,
> Compar'd, half-reas'ning elephant, with thine:
> 'Twixt that, and Reason, what a nice barrier;
> For ever sep'rate, yet for ever near!
> (epistle 1, lines 221–24)

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If Pope draws an "insuperable line" between animal instinct and human reason (epistle 1, line 228), he all but admits the distinction's inadequacy when he claims the elephant merits recognition as "half-reas'ning." Similarly, while Pope claims that there is a "barrier" between human and elephant intelligence, it is only a "nice" one. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites this passage as an example of the use of *nice* to mean "slight, small" ("Nice," def. A.7.b). Finally, Pope's assertion that human and elephant intelligence are "sep'rate" is more than counterbalanced by the subsequent assertion that they are "near," which receives more emphasis because it simultaneously concludes a sentence, line, and couplet.

When Pope marvels at the elephant's humanlike capacity for reason, he resembles earlier writers who view the elephant as the creature that most profoundly challenges the human-animal distinction. In the lines immediately after his description of the "nice barrier," Pope writes, "Remembrance and Reflection how ally'd; / What thin partitions Sense from Thought divide" (epistle 1, lines 225–26). Pope does not philosophize about abstractions in these lines; rather, he participates in a tradition of admiring the remarkable memory of the elephant, which defies familiar distinctions between animal sensation ("Sense") and human reason ("Thought").

While Pope does not arbitrate the ape's and elephant's rival claims to the position of most humanlike animal, Buffon's later *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* (1749–88; *Natural History, General and Particular*) decides in favor of the elephant. Implicitly rejecting Linnaean taxonomy, Buffon's entry "The Nomenclature of Apes" makes this summary statement: "the ape, which philosophers, as well as the vulgar, have regarded as a being difficult to define, and whose nature was at least equivocal, and intermediate between that of man and the animals, is, in fact, nothing but a real brute, endowed with the external mark of humanity, but deprived of thought, and of every faculty which properly constitutes the human species" (*Natural History* 8: 76). This perspective strikingly resembles Descartes's account that human beings would be indistinguishable from animals except for the provision of "a *rational soul*" to perform "those functions which, being dependent on thought, are the only ones that belong to us as human beings" (39). Buffon insists that "the ape . . . holds not the first rank among the animals; because he is by no means the most intelligent. The relation of corporeal resemblance alone has given rise to the prejudice in favour of the great faculties of the ape" (*Natural History* 8: 72). Descartes's radical mind-body distinction—"our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body" (48)—serves Buffon's purpose of dismissing inferences drawn from the ape's humanlike anatomy.

Buffon's admiration of elephant intelligence, however, troubles the seemingly orthodox Cartesianism that he deploys to resist modern attitudes toward apes. While his chapter on elephants complains that previous writers "have given to these animals rational manners" (*Natural History* 6: 7), Buffon's own account likewise threatens to collapse human-animal distinctions. Near the beginning of the entry on the elephant, Buffon writes, "[B]y his intelligence, he makes as near an approach to man as matter can approach spirit" (6: 1–2). As Louise E. Robbins observes, "The elephant held a special place in the *Histoire naturelle* as the pinnacle of the animal hierarchy, brushing its broad back up against the lowest rung of the human species on the ladder of beings" (193). Like sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, Buffon believes the elephant is the animal with the most humanlike intelligence, but this perspective troubles his Cartesianism. Officially, Buffon would agree with Descartes that the human being's distinctively "rational soul . . . could not possibly be derived from the potentiality of matter" (48). Marveling at the elephant's close intellectual proximity to the human being, however, de-

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stabilizes distinctions between "matter" and "spirit," on which the Cartesian definition of the human depends.

Buffon's subsequent descriptions of elephants end up crediting them with rationality, or something quite like it. When Buffon writes that an elephant's eyes differ "from the eyes of all other animals" because of "a pathetic expression of sentiment, and an almost rational management of all their actions" (*Natural History* 6: 47), the elephant seems more nearly human than animal, especially because rationality is supposed to be the prerogative of the human. Buffon's account of how the elephant reacts to a trainer has similarly anti-Cartesian implications: "He seems to reflect, to deliberate, to think, and never determines till he has several times examined, without passion or precipitation, the signs which he ought to obey" (6: 48). Although the training scenario reinforces human distinctness from, and superiority to, animals, the elephant engages in mental activities difficult to distinguish from reasoning—in spite of Descartes's insistence on language as reason's index (47–48). As Buffon deems the elephant contemplative and judicious, reason no longer seems characteristically human.

A passage inverting the categories of human and animal exemplifies how the elephant undermines the definition of the human. In an account of African elephants, Buffon writes, "They treat the Negroes with that natural and supercilious indifference which they entertain for all animals. They regard not man as a powerful or formidable being, but as a crafty creature, who knows only how to lay snares in their way" (*Natural History* 6: 37). This passage is part of an argument by which Buffon portrays Africans as primitive compared with Asians, who know how to tame elephants. The passage is also remarkable, though, because the elephant seems to become the rational animal, from whose perspective the human being is merely one among many inferior species. This inversion carries the profound implication that there is an elephant-centered perspective analogous to the human-centered one—and that the human-elephant difference is a subject for ethnography as well as zoology.

Thomas Pennant's *Synopsis of Quadrupeds* (1771) is perhaps a fitting final example because it recapitulates themes from Pope and Buffon. Denouncing Linnaeus's taxonomy, Pennant perpetuates conceptions of the elephant as the most humanlike creature:

> I reject his first division, which he calls *Primates*, or Chiefs of the Creation; because my vanity will not suffer me to rank mankind with *Apes, Monkies, Maucaucos* and *Bats*, the companions Linnæus has allotted us even in this his last System.
>
> The second order of *Bruta* I avoid for much the same reason: The most intelligent of Quadrupeds, the half-reasoning *Elephant* is made to associate with the most discordant and stupid of the creation, with *Sloths*, *Ant-eaters* and *Armadillos*, or with *Manaties* and *Walruses*, inhabitants of another element. (v–vi)

Claiming that the classification of human beings with apes impugns human dignity, Pennant also argues that Linnaeus's scheme fails to acknowledge the elephant as "half-reasoning," the same adjective used in Pope's *Essay on Man*. Pennant's suggestion—which he does not carry out in his alternative classification scheme—seems to be that human beings would be more appropriately classified with the elephant than with the ape because the elephant is closer intellectually to them.

Nigel Rothfels, who has attempted to periodize Euro-American views of elephants, arrives at a conclusion different from mine. According to Rothfels, Buffon's natural history inaugurates a new view of the elephant, as "an animal that feels, experiences, and is somehow physically, intellectually, and emotionally deeply sensitive to its surroundings" (107–08). This "*E.* [*Elephas*] *sentiens*" (108), Rothfels contends, supplants the earlier

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"*Elephas horribilis*—a creature that was spectacularly terrifying, dreadful, and horrible but also astonishing, amazing, and tremendous" (104). The evidence that I have surveyed shows that the view of the elephant as an intellectually sophisticated creature predates Buffon considerably; indeed, Buffon should be seen as continuing (apparently unintentionally) a tradition that stretches back to Pliny. Furthermore, a better name for this view of the elephant might be *Elephas sapiens* because the elephant is supposed, more than any other animal, to approach, equal, or surpass human rationality.

[III]

As I remember the elephant, I want to forfend several conclusions that might otherwise be drawn from the case that I have made. The anthropoid ape's succession to the rational elephant's place is not a story of scientific progress, in which comparative anatomy (or, later, evolutionary biology) reveals the more truly humanlike animal. This narrative makes the rational elephant an obsolete concept or historical curiosity; it deploys post-Enlightenment science to insulate modern readers from the threat that rational elephants might otherwise pose to human self-conceptualization. Conversely, it would be a mistake to wish, nostalgically, for a return to the earlier conceptual paradigm, whatever its charms might seem to be. As the examples of Buffon, Pennant, and even certain earlier writers (like Topsell and Philippe) suggest, the rational elephant can become part of a strategy for resisting the anthropoid ape's own disturbing challenges to human exceptionalism. Another misguided response would be to accept elephants alongside apes as remarkably humanlike beings, with ethical entitlements above those of other animals. The changing significance of elephant and ape over time should, rather, inculcate deep suspicion toward evaluations of some animals as more or less humanlike than others, as well as prompt intense scrutiny of criteria and motivations for making such judgments.

Although the rational elephant constitutes an implicit critique of anthropocentrism before modernity, it is an undeniably speciesist construction. This fact becomes especially apparent when the elephant's remarkable intelligence is established at the expense of other creatures, such as apes. To the extent that early modern beliefs about elephants are analogous to modern beliefs about primates, they rely on problematic assumptions exposed by Wolfe: "great apes possess the capacities that we possess, but in diminished form, so we end up ethically recognizing them not because of their wonder and uniqueness, not because of their difference, but because they are inferior versions of ourselves, in which case the ethical humanism that was the problem from the outset simply gets reinforced and reproduced on another level" (192). Citing Wolfe, Raber has issued a similar warning about the elephant's role in early modern works, including Gelli's *La Circe*, as well as in recent writing: "setting the elephant apart confirms a hierarchy based in humanist anthropocentrism that confers superior status on the human and all species that resemble it" (184). Almost all the writers analyzed here exhibit speciesism in regarding elephants as distinctively intelligent animals. Perhaps the only exception is Montaigne, who mentions the elephant as a particularly legible example of animal rationality.

There is an instructive difference, though, between the criteria by which early modern and modern speciesisms judge proximity to the human. Since the earlier paradigm prioritizes intelligence (conceived in admittedly anthropocentric terms), it recognizes affinities across categories of physically quite distinct beings. The modern paradigm, in contrast, seems obsessively fixated on the anthropoid shape; in this way, it is even less able to appreciate species differences than the earlier paradigm. Although it would not do to trade

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one speciesism for another, the value of remembering the elephant is to overthrow the primacy of the primates.

Notes

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1. For examples or close variations of the phrase "discovery of the great apes" in some important scholarship on this topic, see Janson 327; Thomas 129; Schiebinger 75; and Brown, *Fables* 14 and *Homeless Dogs* 19–20.

2. Some of the ideas in this essay have been discussed, more briefly, in Brown and Alkemeyer.

3. For influential texts defining the human as *animal rationale*, see Crane 245–49.

4. Peter Singer, noting a debt to Richard Ryder (269n4), defines *speciesism* as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (6).

5. The title of Tyson's text is *Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris; or, The Anatomy of a Pygmie Compared with That of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man*.

6. For examples of such accounts, see Fudge 107–09; Hall 50–51; and Raber 181, cf. 217n4.

7. See Cummings on Pliny's anti-Aristotelianism (174) and anti-Cartesianism (180–81).

8. According to Erica Fudge, early modern writers define the human according to intellectual rather than physical properties (7–8).

9. Citations of the English text refer to Henry Iden's 1557 translation (Gelli). For an Italian edition, see Giovan Batista Gelli; *La Circe*; *Dialoghi*, edited by Roberto Tissoni, Laterza & Figli, 1967, pp. 143–289.

10. For the publication history and changing titles of Pico's *Oration*, see Papio, especially pp. 46–48.

11. For examples of Gelli's borrowings from Pliny, Plutarch, and Aelian, see Adams xxiii–xxv. Although Plutarch is not technically a natural historian, his works are frequently cited in natural histories.

12. For similar accounts, see Boas 35; Wolloch 122; and Connon 81. Adams qualifies—without entirely rejecting—the humanist interpretation (xliii–xliv).

13. For similar arguments, see De Gaetano 173–74, 221; and Shannon 155.

14. See also Migiel 230–32; De Gaetano 219, 221; and Adams xxx, xliii–xliv.

15. Numbers in square brackets refer to the pages in Gesner's *Historia animalium* where the cited quotations appear, in Latin.

16. Page 424 is misnumbered as 428 in Gesner.

17. Further discussion of such paradoxes can be found throughout Fudge's book (especially ch. 2, "Becoming Human" [39–58], and ch. 3, "Becoming Animal" [59–83]). In a theoretical register, Giorgio Agamben makes a related point while critiquing Pico's influential definition of the human: "The humanist discovery of man is the discovery that he lacks himself" (30).

18. On the anti-Stoic significance of Cicero's claim, see Sorabji 124; see also 122, 127.

19. For a French edition, see *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*; *Les essais de Michel de Montaigne*, edited by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, Presses Universitaires de France, 1965, pp. 438–604.

20. Topsell derives the statement from Gesner, who takes it from Pierre Gilles (1490–1555; Gesner 423). When Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) repeats the statement, he disputes its source in the works of Cicero (443).

21. For the original Latin description from which Jonstonus borrows, see Tulp 274–76.

22. On the ambiguity of ape terminology inherited from antiquity, see Janson 15.

23. Buffon quotes the passage from Pyrard in the original French in "L'éléphant" (81).

24. The passages from Philippe in this sentence and the next are quoted in French by Buffon in "L'éléphant" (82). English translations from this French edition (the one cited by Buffon) are mine. I have not consulted the original Latin text, *Itinerarium Orientale* (1649).

25. For Arthur O. Lovejoy, both quotations exemplify the widespread eighteenth-century view that the human being occupies an abject position in the chain of being (189–95).

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