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Imbruted Souls in Milton, MacDonald, & Lewis

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VI

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Sixth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Imbruted Souls in Milton, MacDonald, & Lewis

Larry E. Fink

Abstract:

Beginning with classical literature, the motif of humans being turned into animals has been common (Odysseus' men transformed by Circe, some of the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). In English literature, as early as Chaucer we find mentions of a time when "Beestes and brides couden speke and singe." As a rule, talking animals appear in stories of an innocent time or in stories for children, fulfilling the wish that pets and wild friends could join fully in our play. The effect is nostalgic, humorous, comic, or simply charming. However, when humans become animalized, moral degeneration is usually the theme, and horror the tone. George MacDonald regularly quotes or alludes to Milton. One of his most compelling characters, Lilith, owes much to Milton's Satan, as I have argued in another paper. Here, I will explore Milton's concept of the brute--the animal--in contrast to human nature, both created good as portrayed in PARADISE LOST, and consider possible connections between Milton's *Comus* and MacDonald's Curdie stories, particularly how brutish behavior turns people—outwardly or inwardly—into animals. Finally, I will examine "The Adventure of Eustace" in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Imbruted Souls in Milton, MacDonald, & Lewis
Larry E. Fink

“Wouldn’t it be dreadful if some day in our own world, at home, men started going wild inside, like the animals here, and still looked like men, so that you’d never know which was which?” -- *Prince Caspian* Chpt. IX “What Lucy Saw”

Lucy’s question in *Prince Caspian* touches a chord as we watch the news of the world or read our local newspapers. But the idea of such transformations is nothing new. It appears in literature from ancient times to the present. In Classical literature, instead of people “going wild inside”, as Lucy describes, we find people being turned into animals on the outside, particularly, in Homer and Ovid. Medieval and Renaissance writers adopted and adapted this motif, and the process continues today. Since Milton was a major influence on both C. S. Lewis and his mentor, George MacDonald, I will concentrate on Milton’s use of this pattern of events—primarily in *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, better known as “Comus”, before briefly discussing its appearance in MacDonald’s Curdie stories and in Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

This is clearly a Classical motif, not a biblical one; I can think of only two animals speaking in the Bible: the serpent in the garden and Balaam’s ass. In the first case, we generally infer that Satan is the force behind this wonder, that the serpent has no idea what is going on. In the second, we are told “the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, ‘What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?’” This seems like a simple case of divine ventriloquism; however, when we read the rest of the donkey’s words, we might wonder:

29And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

30And the ass said unto Balaam, “Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee?” and he said, Nay.

It sounds as if she is actually remembering her years of silent service to Balaam and offering them up to argue the injustice of his treatment of her. And then the angel’s rebuke of Balaam almost makes it sound like the angel sees the ass as a creature capable of choices that can affect her relationship to an angel—a being at least two steps above her in the hierarchy of things:

31Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

32And the angel of the LORD said unto him, “Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me:

33And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive.”

I am glad that since this is a literature conference—not a Bible conference—I don’t have to explain that text.

A couple of New Testament passages might remind us of shape changing--the story of the demons entering the herd of swine, for instance--but it doesn’t quite fit the pattern of people

being turned into animals. In a sense, the prodigal son momentarily wished he were a well-fed hog. This turned out to be a constructive line of thought, for, about that time, he came to himself, realizing his true nature—one worthy only to be a servant. But we needn't worry too much about this incident because it is only a parable. Though people are not turned into animals in the Bible, they are sometimes compared to them. Psalm 73.22 reads "I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you." Titus 1.12: "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'" And 2 Peter 2.12: "But these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish." Clearly, the Bible is not full of stories of people-to-animal transformation. This is a Classical motif, one that Milton incorporates in *Comus* to promote his Christian world view.

Homer's account of Odysseus' men turned to pigs by Circe seems to be the model that later writers build on. Homer writes:

Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
Bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
So squealing, in they went. And Kirke tossed them
acorns, mast, and cornel berries—fodder
for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

Eventually, Circe returns them to human form:

"I saw her enter,
driving those men turned swine to stand before me.
She stroked them, each in turn, with some new chrism;
and then, behold! their bristles fell away,
the coarse pelt[,] grown upon them by her drug[,]
melted away, and they were men again,
younger, more handsome, taller than before."

-- *The Odyssey* Book 10 (trans. by Robert Fitzgerald)

Notice that their minds were unchanged, only their bodies, and that when restored to human form, they were physically improved. Also, the change was instantaneous and had little or nothing to do with the men's character or moral choices.

As we examine Milton's references to animals, we find that he uses a word that I thought, at first, was a Briticism, like "biscuit" for the American "cookie", "dear" for "expensive", "torch" for "flashlight", etcetera. The word is "brute." When Milton uses it, he means simply and literally, an animal, a creature without the God-given gift of reason, much as does the Authorized, or King James Version, of 1611. Mine, and I think most Americans', first mental picture when hearing or reading the word is of a violent or cruel person. This suspicion is confirmed by *The Cambridge Dictionary of American English*. Its *first* definition is "a person who is offensive and rude, and often violent." Other dictionaries—some old, some recent--list Milton's sense of the word first. For instance, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, offers the following definitions: 1, "a nonhuman creature; beast" and 2, "a brutal, insensitive or crude person". *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary's* first two definitions are 1, "a violent or savage person or animal" and 2, "a cruel person". *The American Heritage Dictionary* reads, 1, "animal, beast" and 2, "brutal, cruel, insensitive person". Finally, *Webster's Dictionary, 1913* matches most closely Milton's use of the word; in fact it cites Milton

as an example: definition 1, “Not having sensation; senseless; inanimate; unconscious; without intelligence or volition; as, the brute earth; the brute powers of nature.” Number 2, “Not possessing reason, irrational; unthinking; as, a brute beast; the brute creation: [and now, quoting Milton] ‘A creature . . . not prone And brute as other creatures, but endued With sanctity of reason.’ *Milton*.” So, is this a Britishism? No. Is it an archaic usage? Not according to a variety of dictionaries. Though Lewis called himself a dinosaur, I think the following quote from *An Experiment in Criticism*, reflects his every-day usage: “My own eyes are not enough for me . . . I will see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many is not enough . . . I will see what others have invented. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee. More gladly still would I perceive the olfactory world charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog” (*An Experiment In Criticism*, 1961). In conclusion, perhaps one dictionary’s label—“literary”—best suits Lewis’ usage of “brute” (*Encarta*).

THE WORD “BRUTE” IN *PARADISE LOST*

Milton’s *Comus* includes descriptions of people being turned into animals, not *Paradise Lost*, but to illustrate just what the word meant to him, here’s a summary of his use of it in the epic. He uses “brute” roughly twelve times in *Paradise Lost*; in half of these, he specifically mentions that animals—the brutes—lack the reason, sense, or language that God gave Adam and Eve. In one passage he explicitly mentions humanity’s place in the hierarchy of creation between the brutes and angels (9.712). He uses “brutal” once, to describe an unreasoning animal, rather than a cruel and insensitive person (9.565). In one passage, he suggests that the animals are incapable of doubt, and by implication, faith (9.95). Finally, he uses “imbrute” to describe the process of degeneration that Satan undergoes in order to enter and use the serpent (9.165). In short, in Milton’s epic, “brute” simply means “non-human animal.”

COMUS & POSSIBLE INSPIRATIONS FOR MACDONALD

As I have pointed out in other papers, George MacDonald intimately knew and was influenced strongly by the writings of Milton. This is most clearly seen in his masterpiece, *Lilith*; the title character owes much to Milton’s Satan of *Paradise Lost*. “Comus” includes several notable ideas and images that appear slightly changed or more fully developed in MacDonald, particularly, variations on Homer’s story of Circe’s transforming magic. Milton’s Comus is the son of Circe and Bacchus, and inherits his mother’s habit of changing people into animals—with three variations: 1, his victims’ bodies are only changed from the neck up; 2, they do not retain their memory of their original state and believe themselves improved, and 3, their immoral choices are partly to blame for their transformations. Here is Milton’s description of Comus’ treatment of his victims:

[He offers] to every weary Travailer,
His orient liquor in a Crystal Glasse,
To quench the drouth of Phoebus, which as they taste
(For most do taste through fond [foolish] intemperate thirst)
Soon as the Potion works, their human count’nance,
Th’ express resemblance of the gods, is changed
Into some brutish form of Woolf, or Bear,
Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat,
All other parts remaining as they were,

And they, so perfect in their misery,
Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
But boast themselves more comely then before
And all their friends, and native home forget
To rouse with pleasure in a sensual stie. (63-77)

Notice, that unlike Odysseus' men, Comus' victims' character—their moral choices—play a role in their transformation: “most do taste through fond [foolish] intemperate thirst”. After describing the purifying effects of chastity, Milton warns the reader of the effects of indulging lust:

But when lust
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by leud and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
The soul grows clotted by contagion,
Imbodies, and imbrutes, till she quite loose
The divine property of her first being. (463-469)

This process is similar to that by which the people of Gwyntystorm—in *The Princess and Curdie*—devolve into various sub-human creatures, from the inside out. The grandmother figure explains to Curdie: “. . . all men, if they do not take care, go down the hill to the animals' country; . . . many men are actually, all their lives, going to be beasts.”

What does MacDonald add to this motif? One, the change is gradual, not the result of an instantaneous act of magic; it is a process, beginning from the inside of a person and working itself out. Two, the subject is much less a victim of deception; his destiny is much more dependent upon his own choices. And three, the process is reversible. Characters like Lina are in the process of regaining their human form.

In addition to the transformation motif, I found two other passages in *Comus* that strongly remind of MacDonald, considering how well he knew the work of the epic poet. Note the proximity of these images: a mine, a goblin, and a vulnerable young woman.

Som say no evil thing that walks by night
In fog, or fire, by lake, or moorish fen,
Blew meager Hag, or stubborn unlaid ghost,
That breaks his magick chains at curfeu time,
No goblin, or swart Faery of the mine,
Hath hurtful power o're true virginity. (432-437)

In the second passage, we are reminded of Mossy and Tangle's quest:

Yet som there be that by due steps aspire
To lay their just hands on that Golden Key
That ope's the Palace of Eternity. (12-14)] END FOOTNOTE

C. S. LEWIS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUSTACE CLARENCE SCRUBB

C. S. Lewis' links to Milton and MacDonald need not be rehearsed here; nor do we need to review Lewis' knowledge of Classical literature. In “The Adventures of Eustace”, chapter six of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis also builds on and adapts the classical tradition. Eustace is the most dynamic character in *Dawn Treader*, and changing him requires radical surgery. As a result of sleeping with dragonish thoughts on a dragon's hoard, Eustace is transformed into a dragon and endures approximately a week of life as a dragon: killing and

eating like one, flying, breathing fire, shunned and feared by humanity until his identity is discovered, all the time in physical pain from the too-small gold band on his front leg. What does Lewis borrow from and add to the transformation tradition? Eustace is transformed by both magic and his own faults. He is thoroughly changed, outwardly, yet he and retains all of his identity. He begins to change from the inside out. We read this observation about him while he is still a dragon: "It was . . . clear to everyone that Eustace's character had been improved by becoming a dragon." Perhaps borrowing from MacDonald, Eustace, like Lina and the Ugliers, must endure an extended period of brutish living as his character turns around. Finally, Lewis adds the subject's failed attempts to rid himself of his problem, followed by the work of another doing for him what he cannot do himself. Lewis also adds a baptism-like experience. Interestingly, in *Dawn Treader*, Lewis uses "brute" in both senses of the word: "a reasonless animal" and, "a cruel person." In fact, Eustace uses it to describe the Pevensies—before his "conversion experience," and to name the dragon he assumes he wakes up with, before he realizes that he is seeing part of his own body. "Brute" is also used in reference to the sea monster in chapter eight. And one of the Telmarines says, "We are . . . men, not brutes." Finally, there's a charming allusion to a Shakespearean transformation in the chapter called "The Magician's Book." Lucy reads about charms "to call up (or prevent) wind, fog, snow, sleet and how to give a man an ass's head (as they did to poor Bottom)."

In conclusion--Milton, MacDonald, and Lewis—linked closely by their intense, personal, and intellectual faith, are also part of the brotherhood of artists that stretches back to the beginning of Western civilization. What Lewis wrote about medieval writers, applies to himself and the other artists considered here: ". . . we might equally well call our medieval authors the most unoriginal or the most original of men. They are so unoriginal that they hardly ever attempt to write anything unless someone has written it before. They are so rebelliously and insistently original that they can hardly reproduce a page of an older work without transforming it by their own intensely visual and emotional imagination . . ." ("The Genesis of a Medieval Book" in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*).

As Milton adopted and adapted earlier stories to show us the beauty and power of chastity, MacDonald and Lewis transformed the classical transformation motif to show us redeemer figures who perform acts of aggressive grace on behalf of the otherwise un-transformable.

Human-to-Animal Transformations

	HOMER <i>Odyssey</i>	MILTON <i>Comus</i>	MACDONALD <i>Curdie Books</i>	LEWIS <i>Dawn Treader</i>
Free will, Moral choices Involved?	NO	YES	YES	YES
Outward Change?	YES, whole bodies instantaneous	YES heads only instantaneous	YES whole bodies gradual	YES whole body over night
Inward Change?	NO	YES	YES cause of outward change	NO
Aware of change?	YES	NO	ONLY GRADUALLY	YES
Reversible?	YES	DOUBTFUL	YES	YES
Effects of Reversal?	Physical improvement	Not Applicable	Positive; spiritual, moral growth	Positive; attitude & personality enrichment