

*'The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into':  
Bestiality and the Wilderness  
of Human Nature  
in Seventeenth-Century New England*

JOHN CANUP

THE PURITANS and sex (or the repression thereof) have long been intimately intertwined in the popular historical imagination. Though scholars have done their best to disabuse the public of its most cherished clichés on the subject, the vigorous academic interest in the Puritans' sexual habits has in fact confirmed the common assumption that one cannot fully comprehend these people without prying into their most private pastimes. Thanks to Edmund Morgan, the prolific Fathers of New England no longer have to be defended against the charge of unwholesome (and unrealistic) prudery. And more recently, Roger Thompson, with considerable provocation from Lawrence Stone, has supported Morgan's essential points, while adding some remarkably colorful details to our picture of the Puritans' sexual activities.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Edmund S. Morgan, 'The Puritans and Sex,' *New England Quarterly* 15 (1942): 591-607; Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). Thompson's book is pitched as a critical response to Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). On Puritan attitudes toward sexual practices, see also: Henry Bamford Parkes, 'Morals and Law Enforcement in Colonial New England,' *New*

---

JOHN CANUP is assistant professor of history at Texas A & M University.

Copyright © 1988 by American Antiquarian Society

But as scholarly voyeurism expands our understanding of sex in colonial New England, certain aspects of the phenomenon, especially 'deviant' sexuality, remain stubbornly resistant to exposure. Perhaps the greatest puzzlement prevails with regard to bestiality, a form of sexual gratification from which even the modern mind recoils with understandable distaste and astonishment. A few well-known examples of colonists who indulged in sexual relations with animals have provided a rather dark comic relief in otherwise sober lectures on social customs and legal procedures, but the full significance of bestiality is still tangled in the toils of seventeenth-century rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Read in the proper intellectual context, however, the Puritan leadership's reactions to bestiality shed light not only on contemporary attitudes toward deviant sexual practices but also on the Puritan view of human nature, the relationship of that nature to the American environment, and the formidable challenge of maintaining a transplanted English culture in a fundamentally alien New World.

## I

John Donne, in his poem "To Sr *Edward Herbert*," made some observations concerning the nature of man that would have had peculiar meaning for the guardians of culture and civility in colonial New England:

Man is a lumpe, where all beasts kneaded bee,  
Wisdome makes him an Arke where all agree;

. . . . .

---

*England Quarterly* 5 (1932): 441-47; David H. Flaherty, 'Law and the Enforcement of Morals in Early America,' *Perspectives in American History* 5 (1971): 201-53; and Kathleen Verduin, "'Our Cursed Natures': Sexuality and the Puritan Conscience," *New England Quarterly* 56 (1983): 220-37.

2. The fullest consideration to date of bestiality as a social phenomenon in colonial New England is Robert F. Oaks, "'Things Fearful to Name': Sodomy and Buggery in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978): 268-81. As his subtitle suggests, Oaks is largely concerned with a broader spectrum of 'deviant' activities, including homosexuality. See also Bradley Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606-1660* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 38-39, 127-29.

How happy is hee, which hath due place assign'd  
To his beasts, and disaforested his minde!<sup>3</sup>

As that preeminent Puritan ark the *Arbella* released its passengers onto the shores of Massachusetts Bay, John Winthrop found no release from his Noachian task of making sure that these frequently unruly 'beasts' kept their due place in the social order. While the colonists went on with the domestication—and the attendant 'disafforestation'—of the land, it was imperative that they not neglect the ongoing disafforestation of their inner wildernesses. For into the complex lump of human nature, as Winthrop understood it, was kneaded a leaven of near-bestial wildness that under the proper stimulus could spoil the whole confection, easily overcoming the rather feeble restraints of human 'Wisdome.'

Winthrop understood this because he had wrestled often enough with his own inner beast, in that warfare of the spirit against what he called 'this wanton bruitishe fleshe.'<sup>4</sup> And it followed logically that what was true of human nature individually was also true of human nature collectively. In 1645, Winthrop, again in his role of Puritan Noah, warned against the sort of brutish, headstrong 'liberty' that rocked the ship of state and made men 'grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts.' Indeed, the liberty of undisciplined nature was itself, in Winthrop's rhetoric, 'that wild beast, which all the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it.'<sup>5</sup>

It did not require a Puritan magistrate in extremis to arrive at this seventeenth-century commonplace. But from Winthrop's perspective, Old-World commonplaces were acquiring urgent New-World meaning. In the context of New England, which he once described as a place 'where are nothing but wild beasts and

3. John Donne, 'To Sr Edward Herbert. at Julyers,' in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Sir H.J.C. Grierson (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 170-71.

4. *Winthrop Papers*, 5 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-47), 1: 194.

5. John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649*, 2 vols., ed. James Savage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1853), 2: 280-81.

beastlike men,<sup>6</sup> the 'wild beast' of human nature threatened to draw encouragement from an environment quite different from the relatively tame landscape of England. In America, the fearful symmetry of external and internal wilderness strained the tenuous continuity of civility upon which the successful transplantation of culture seemed to depend. And so long as the wilderness remained potent, either as objective reality or as myth, the possibility existed that like would call to like, that the howling wilderness would find a sympathetic echo in the wild nature of English colonists. If Winthrop and his colleagues failed in their custodial duties, the English themselves might emerge as the true 'beastlike men' of New England.<sup>7</sup>

The environmental circumstances of America thus offered to intensify a danger that Europeans of the seventeenth century assumed was present universally in the human soul. Man's rather precarious place on the Chain of Being implied not only the hopeful prospect of eventually climbing (or being lifted) into the realm of pure spirit but also the possibility of being dragged downward

6. Winthrop, *History of New England*, 2: 104. By 'beastlike men,' Winthrop meant the Indians, but his view of human nature suggests that he would also have regarded the term as potentially applicable to the English.

7. On the Puritan concept of wilderness, useful works include: Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629-1700* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Alan Heimert, 'Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier,' *New England Quarterly* 26 (1953): 361-82; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982); John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982); Cecelia Tichi, *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Whitman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought: The Biblical Experience of the Desert in the History of Christianity & the Paradise Theme in the Theological Idea of the University* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962); and Michael Zuckerman, 'Pilgrims in the Wilderness: Community, Modernity, and the Maypole at Merry Mount,' *New England Quarterly* 50 (1977): 255-77. And on the related Puritan fear of an Indian cultural influence, see especially Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Richard Slotkin and James K. Folsom, eds., *So Dreadful a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip's War, 1676-1677* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978); and James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

by the lusts of the 'bruitische fleshe' into a bestial condition. The complementary notion of the composite soul, which ascribed bestial as well as rational faculties to man, held equally disturbing implications for the stability of human reason. 'In briefe,' Sir Thomas Browne concluded, 'we all are monsters, that is, a composition of man and beast,' a condition that made it necessary 'to have the Region of Man above that of Beast, and sense to sit but at the feete of reason.' But if sense refused to sit meekly at reason's feet like a faithful hound, the beast would become master of the man, who would then have only the mockery of his divine image to testify to his human identity. In an essential moral sense, he would have become, in fact, a bestial monster.<sup>8</sup>

Though the Puritans shared these ideas with other Europeans of their century, an unusually strong sense of fallen man as a creature utterly depraved and deranged in all his faculties made their ears especially sensitive to the growlings of the beast within. Cotton Mather may have been retailing a commonplace when he reminded his audience that 'we are all of us compounded of those two things, *the man* and *the beast*,' but he also carried that inclusive 'all of us' to heart, confessing privately to his sense of failure in keeping his own bestial side under control: 'Lord,' he exclaimed in his diary, 'I *am viler than a Beast before Thee!*'<sup>9</sup>

8. Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 129. On the Chain of Being, the composite soul, and the bestial element in human nature, see: Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng.: Harvard University Press, 1936); E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), pp. 25-36, 66-79; C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 152-54; D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 153-54; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 240; and Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp. 30-31. For contemporary notions of bestial nature as they were applied to the American Indians, see Bernard W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge, London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 3.

9. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England* (1702), 2 vols. (Hartford, Conn., 1852; repr. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 1: 537; and *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2 vols. (New York: Frederick Ungar, n.d.), 1: 16-17. See also *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan*, ed.

However devoted to self-mortification, Puritans (and Cotton Mather must certainly be included) were seldom content to listen only to the stirrings of their own inner natures; they also kept their ears cocked for any growl that might escape from their neighbors. Corporal punishments were considered especially appropriate for offenses that most clearly spoke of the human 'beast': New Haven's law code specified 'brutish folly' and 'bestly cruelty' as among the cases in which 'Stripes, or whipping' was 'a correction fit.'<sup>10</sup> Moreover, sermon rhetoric tended to dehumanize the ungodly, as when Thomas Shepard told his flock that the man who would not pray to God was worthy to live only 'among bears, and wolves, and beasts in the wilderness.'<sup>11</sup> And in John Cotton's categorization of hypocrites as either 'Goats' or 'washed Swine' there is an intimation of a full moral correspondence quite at odds with references to Christ's sheep or lambs.<sup>12</sup> Heresy also suggested a lapse into a more bestial frame of mind: Samuel Gorton and his followers were compared to 'beasts in the shape of men.'<sup>13</sup> Even Roger Williams, who had himself been driven out as an unclean beast, played doggedly on the implications of George Fox's surname. For Wil-

---

Edmund S. Morgan (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 54, 61. Scriptural justification for such attitudes could easily be found in Ecclesiastes 3:18.

10. Charles Jeremy Hoadly, ed., *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven, from May, 1653, to the Union. Together with the New Haven Code of 1656* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Company, 1858), p. 611. On the peculiarly impersonal nature of Puritan punishment, see Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 143-44, and Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, and Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), pp. 188-90. On the New Haven Code, see also Lilian Handlin, 'Dissent in a Small Community,' *New England Quarterly* 58 (1985): 212. Chapin includes whipping in his discussion of colonial judicial proceedings (*Criminal Justice in Colonial America*, p. 53), while Jules Zanger argues that Puritan punishments were relatively lenient; see 'Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 22 (1965): 471-77.

11. Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Unfolded*, in *The Works*, 3 vols., ed. John Adams Albro (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853; repr. Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1971), 2: 584.

12. John Cotton, *The New Covenant* (1654), in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1: 314.

13. Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked* (London, 1646; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), p. 61. See also Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2: 505. On the Puritan association of idolatry, heresy, and sex, see Verduin, "Our Cursed Natures," pp. 229-30.

liams that name was no mere pun; the 'finger of God' had pointed out this verbal emblem as a clue to the Quaker's true nature.<sup>14</sup>

Such rhetoric may have tempted the Puritans to try to purge themselves of their own sense of bestial corruption by projecting their fears onto heretical or unregenerate scapegoats. And in some respects New England was ideally suited for such a strategy, since the orthodox magistrates enjoyed the convenience of expelling the 'goats' into the surrounding wilderness where they presumably belonged. Unfortunately, however, the fallen heart of man was so variously bent upon wickedness that it proved impossible to identify bestial sin exclusively with heresy or other more easily objectified beliefs and practices. Certain especially seductive, or especially elemental, lusts persisted in reminding the godly that the wilderness within harbored strange creatures who were only partly human.

## II

A particularly insidious stimulus to the brute within was that powerful solvent of human reason that, as one writer put it, left 'the man confounded with the Beast': 'O Potent Rum!'<sup>15</sup> *Beastly* had little competition as the most apposite word for describing those sad cases in which humanity itself had been drowned in alcohol.<sup>16</sup> As Cotton Mather bluntly declared, 'The man who does make *himself Drunk*, does make himself a *Beast*.'<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the two-backed beast of fornication, 'wherein men show their brutishness,'<sup>18</sup> could unseat reason and enthrone the bestial soul in its place.

14. *George Fox Digg'd out of His Burrowes* (1676), in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7 vols., ed. Reuben Aldridge Guild et al. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 5: 53.

15. Sarah Kemble Knight, 'The Journal of Madam Knight,' in Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, 2: 431.

16. See, for example, Nathaniel B. Shurtleff and David Pulsifer, eds., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, 12 vols. (Boston, 1855-61), 1: 75; 3: 212.

17. [Cotton Mather], *A Monitory, and Hortatory Letter, to Those English, Who Debauch the Indians, by Selling Strong Drink unto Them* (Boston, 1700), p. 6.

18. A New Haven magistrate, quoted in Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, pp. 36-37. On the bestial connotations of sex, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American*

But if alcohol or fornication degraded man to the level of the animals, there was another form of lust that confirmed the fragility of human identity in even more appalling ways: sexual bestiality. Given the seventeenth-century concern with preserving the uneasy distinction between humans and beasts, it is not surprising that the question of man's relations with domestic animals was especially delicate.<sup>19</sup> In a predominantly agricultural society, contacts between animals and their owners were bound to be frequent and close, but it was important that these contacts not be too close. Certainly, any sexual interaction across species boundaries was greatly abhorred, not least because of the suggestion that humans could, if provoked by bestial lust, join themselves to the animal kingdom in a horrifyingly literal sense. Sexual bestiality was also disturbing in that, like drunkenness or fornication, it could not be safely isolated and identified with an objective ideological or doctrinal error. How was society to account for this impulse, except by reference to the corrupt nature that all men shared? The temptation to bestiality, like the inveterate tendency of Englishmen to drink more than was absolutely necessary, was thus a germ that society carried within it, a chronic infection that required vigilant monitoring and persistent efforts of suppression.

In the period 1640–42, John Winthrop was sufficiently disturbed by three outbreaks of this infection to make special note of them in his journal. The first case involved a 'wicked fellow, given up to bestiality'—so given up to it that, by his own confession, 'he never saw any beast go before him but he lusted after it.'<sup>20</sup> Then, as if to confirm the infection's spread, a young servant in Salem 'was found in buggery with a cow, upon the Lord's day.' William Hackett (or Hatchet), who was about eighteen or twenty years old, tried to deny that he had actually gone through with the act, but

---

*Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1977), pp. 32–33.

19. See Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 36–41; and Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 277.

20. Winthrop, *History of New England*, 2: 26. Trying to escape the long arm of Puritan justice, the man fled to Long Island, where he drowned.



the court decided otherwise. He received the death penalty, as prescribed by Leviticus, and the guilty cow was killed as a prelude to his own execution.<sup>21</sup>

Winthrop, obviously shocked, sought to deflect responsibility for this wickedness from the society that had harbored Hackett by observing that 'he was noted always to have been a very stupid, idle, and ill-disposed boy, and would never regard the means of instruction, either in the church or family.' Nevertheless, however idle or ill-disposed, the accused was not so stupid as to remain unmindful of what lay in store for him. With the prospect of the noose looming before him, 'his hard heart melted.' He made a full confession and began to display the usual signs of regeneration—and not a moment too soon, considering that his execution was scheduled for the next day. In light of this sudden, hopeful change of heart, the authorities graciously delayed the inevitable for another week, and Winthrop believed that the Lord had admitted Hackett's soul 'to his mercy.' But mercy in this case belonged to the Lord alone, not to the Massachusetts Bay magistrates, who were more concerned with justice. Hackett's timely conversion could not save him from the gallows.<sup>22</sup>

And yet, in taking away the life of William Hackett, the court could not purge New England of Hackett's sin. In 1642, word of the case of George Spencer reached Winthrop from New Haven. It seems that a sow there had given birth to a pig with certain 'human resemblances.' Specifically, as Winthrop reported the details, it was bald, and (most revealing) 'it had also one eye

21. Winthrop, *History of New England*, 2: 58-60; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1853-54), 1: 339, 344. For the colonial laws on bestiality (derived from Leviticus 20: 15-16), see Max Farrand, ed., *The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, Reprinted from the Copy of the 1648 Edition in the Henry E. Huntington Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 5; John D. Cushing, ed., *The Laws of the Pilgrims: A Facsimile Edition of "The Book of the General Laws of the Inhabitants of the Jurisdiction of New-Plimouth. 1672 & 1685"* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1977), p. 4 (original pagination of 1672 laws); J. Hammond Trumbull and Charles Jeremy Hoadly, eds., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, 15 vols. (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1850-90), 1: 77; Hoadly, ed., *Records of . . . New Haven, from May, 1653, to the Union*, pp. 576-77. Oaks presents a convenient summary of the details of the Hackett case in "Things Fearful to Name," pp. 274-75.

22. Winthrop, *History of New England*, 2: 58-60.

blemished, just like one eye of a loose fellow in the town.' Sure enough, when the loose fellow, Spencer, was urged to confess, he admitted his paternity, though perhaps merely on the mistaken assumption that he would thereby get off with lighter punishment. Despite subsequent efforts to retract his confession, he met the same fate that had claimed Hackett.<sup>23</sup>

New Haven seems to have been especially afflicted by this form of lust. In 1647, the same sort of paternal resemblances that had helped to convict George Spencer got Thomas Hogg into trouble. It is likely that the unfortunate man's name in itself suggested the same accusing finger of God that would put Roger Williams onto George Fox's trail. Whether by Providence or bad luck, Hogg seemed destined for a bestiality charge, and when another suspicious-looking litter of pigs appeared, he became the prime suspect. In a strange instance of using bestiality to obtain evidence of bestiality, the authorities confronted Hogg with his supposed partner in crime: 'They bid him scratt the sow that had the monsters, & immedyatly there appeared a working of lust in the sow, in-somuch that she powred out seede before them, & then, being asked what he thought of it, he said he saw a hand of God in it.'<sup>24</sup> The magistrates agreed, and without the ambiguity latent in the accused man's answer. The hand of God was clearly pointing out the filthy handiwork of Thomas Hogg. Still, it was not enough to convict him of a capital offense in a civil court, and although Hogg was whipped for other misconduct, he escaped hanging.<sup>25</sup>

23. Winthrop, *History of New England*, 2: 73. And see Charles Jeremy Hoadly, ed., *Records of the Colony and Plantation of New Haven, from 1638 to 1649* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Tiffany & Company, 1857), pp. 62-73 (where a more detailed inventory of the 'human resemblances' is available); John M. Murrin, 'Magistrates, Sinners, and a Precarious Liberty: Trial by Jury in Seventeenth-Century New England,' in David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate, eds., *Saints & Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), pp. 177-78; Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 275; and Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America*, pp. 38-39, 128-29.

24. Hoadly, *Records of . . . New Haven, from 1638 to 1649*, pp. 295-96.

25. Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 276; Murrin, 'Magistrates, Sinners, and a Precarious Liberty,' p. 178; and Gail Sussman Marcus, "'Due Execution of the Generall Rules of Righteousnesse': Criminal Procedure in New Haven Town and Colony, 1638-1658,' in Hall, Murrin, and Tate, *Saints & Revolutionaries*, pp. 115-16.

Whatever else these proceedings say about the ignorance and credulity of the New England justices (who were, after all, at the mercy of their century's conventional wisdom in such matters), there can be no more vivid testimony to the contemporary belief in the possibility of dissolving the boundaries between humans and animals through sexual communication.<sup>26</sup> But as embarrassing as the monstrous 'offspring' of bestial couplings were to both society and the presumed human parent, bestiality was most troubling through its demonstration that the man who engaged in the act was as much of a monster as his unnatural issue. Cotton Mather, recording with fastidious horror yet another New Haven case, referred to the guilty man himself as a 'monster' who had been seen 'confounding himself with a *bitch*' and 'hideously conversing with a *sow*.' In calling this miscreant a 'hell hound' and a '*bewitch'd beast*,' Mather added rhetorical force to the implicit assumption that these hideous, confounding conversations permitted the melding of what should have remained two distinct realms of creation.<sup>27</sup>

But the definitive New England statement on the confounding effects of bestiality came in Samuel Danforth's *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into; Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, for His Prodigious Villany* (1674). Benjamin was a Roxbury lad of seventeen or eighteen years, and the prodigious villainy in question consisted of his having committed 'Bestiality with a Mare . . . at noon day in an open yard.' As punishment for this particularly flagrant violation of human identity and God's law, Goad was sentenced to be executed on April 2, 1674, when (according to precedent) the mare 'was first knocked in the head under the Gallows in his sight.'<sup>28</sup> Goad's crime, among other

26. On the belief that humans could engender offspring through sexual intercourse with animals, see Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 134-35; Oaks, 'Things Fearful of Name,' p. 277; and Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America*, pp. 127, 128.

27. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2: 405-7.

28. Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 2 vols., ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 1: 4. See also Edward Rawson's letter of March 14, 1674, to John Winthrop, Jr., *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d

current vexations, prompted the General Court to set aside a day of humiliation a week before the execution, and Danforth seized the opportunity to clarify without equivocation the threat that bestiality posed to those who gave in to it.<sup>29</sup>

In his sermon, Danforth acknowledged that bestiality was only one type of uncleanness among many others, including self-pollution, whoredom, adultery, incest, and sodomy. Those who wallowed in any of these lusts were '*Dogs and Swine.*' But if this were true of 'the lusts of Uncleanness' in general, it was more blatantly true of bestiality. 'This is monstrous and horrible *Confusion,*' said Danforth. 'It turneth a man into a bruit Beast. He that joyneth himself to a Beast, is one flesh with a Beast.'<sup>30</sup>

This was the golden age of the jeremiad, and, as one of its virtuosi, Danforth could not resist exploiting Benjamin as a goad to incite the rising generation to greater efforts of self-discipline. Indeed, his audience surely expected him to do more than merely heap curses on poor Benjamin's head. They wanted to hear from Danforth the fuller implications of Goad's crime; they wanted to learn the extent to which society had to share the shame and guilt of this horrible deed, itself both sin and affliction. Danforth did not disappoint them. He reminded his younger listeners, and their parents or guardians, that Benjamin had been 'extremely addicted to Sloth and Idleness; which is a great breeder and cherisher of Uncleanness.' With such evidence before them, could anyone doubt that 'lust is usually warm and stirring in idle bosomes'? Warm lust had obviously stirred in Goad's bosom until God had finally abandoned him to his bestial desires. In reviewing this rather spotted career, Danforth posited a natural progression from 'Disobedience to his Parents,' through 'Lying, Stealing, Sabbath-breaking,' and neglect of catechism, to 'Self-pollution, and other

---

ser., 10 (1849): 98. Oaks states that this was 'the last execution for buggery by the Massachusetts Court of Assistants' ("Things Fearful to Name," p. 277).

29. *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d ser., 10 (1849): 98.

30. S[amuel] D[anforth], *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into; Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, for his Prodigious Villany* (Cambridge, Mass., 1674), pp. 3-6.

Sodomitical wickedness.<sup>31</sup> The chain of causation seemed clear: it was only a short step from sloth to sodomy.

In using Goad's case as a cautionary tale, Danforth necessarily emphasized the fundamental universality of the boy's sin over its particularity. Without accusing the entire congregation of complicity in bestiality, Danforth still managed to suggest that they were not wholly untainted by the evil to which Goad, in his 'licentious liberty,' had given free rein. What Benjamin had done—'in the sight of the Sun, and in the open field, even at Noon-day; proclaiming his sin like *Sodom*'<sup>32</sup>—was to give open release to a basic corruption that all men harbored, like a familiar serpent, in their breasts. By implication, all New England—indeed, all mankind—stood convicted alongside Goad, and if the people looked into their own hearts they would find similar if not quite so horrible sins that were equally deserving of God's judgment. Danforth assured his audience that 'the gross and flagitious practises of the worst of men, are but Comments upon our Nature. Who can say, I have made my heart clean? The holiest man hath as vile and filthy a Nature, as the *Sodomites*, or the men of *Gibeah*.'<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the congregation was sufficiently scandalized by Goad to take this message as more than a variation on a rather threadbare theme. Surely their awareness of the beast within was especially strong as they left the meetinghouse that day. But Danforth, by stressing the universal qualities of Goad's bestiality, left his flock a way out of their filthy mire. If Goad's sin compromised his humanity and set him apart from society, his paradoxically representative qualities made him useful as a scapegoat for his neighbors. Goad simultaneously polluted his community and furnished the means for a ritual purge of the pollution. As Danforth put the case, 'Though he be a Youth in respect of years, yet he is grown

31. Danforth, *Cry of Sodom Enquired Into*, pp. 8–9. And see Sewall, *Diary*, 1: 4. On Sodom's importance for Puritan preachers as a symbol of sexual transgression, see Verduin, "Our Cursed Natures," pp. 228–29. Verduin also notes the Puritan interpretation of idleness as the prime instigator of uncleanness, following Ezekiel 16:49 (pp. 232–33).

32. Danforth, *Cry of Sodom Enquired Into*, p. 9.

33. Danforth, *Cry of Sodom Enquired Into*, p. 11.

old in wickedness, and ripe for Vengeance. The Church cannot be cleansed, untill this wicked person be put away from us. . . . The Land cannot be cleansed, untill it hath spued out this Unclean Beast.<sup>34</sup>

### III

But could the land really cleanse itself by spewing out such unclean beasts? In order for the scapegoat to fulfill his purifying function, there would have to be a sharp distinction between the realm of civilization and the wilderness into which the goat was to carry his burden of pollution. In a material sense, the expansion of settlement in New England was gradually making the distinction clear enough. But bestiality complicated matters: just as it blurred the inner boundary between man and beast, it also weakened the comfortable external dichotomy of civilization and wilderness. The occurrence of bestiality within the pale of English culture suggested that while the colonists might conquer the wilderness as a physical presence, its moral influences were not so easy to combat. And if the curse of wilderness had taken root in the colonists and their culture, no scapegoat could possibly draw off all the corruption they would generate.<sup>35</sup> New England could easily purge itself of Benjamin Goad by sending him to the wilderness of hell. But the land would not thereby rid itself of all its uncleanness when the land itself elicited bestial behavior from its inhabitants.

In the early 1640s, when bestiality was threatening to assume epidemic proportions, William Bradford shared John Winthrop's need to deal with this phenomenon in the history he was writing. And while Bradford reacted to bestiality with an abhorrence equal to Winthrop's, he was more willing to dig beneath the surface

34. Danforth, *Cry of Sodom Enquired Into*, p. 9. On the social value of 'deviance,' see Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*.

35. The Puritan sense of wilderness as a potential source of cultural and moral contamination was strongly influenced by biblical traditions. For a suggestive discussion of the Hebraic background, see Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture, I-II*, trans. Aslaug Møller and Johannes Pedersen (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 453-96.

details and confront their environmental implications. He was obviously mindful that the Pilgrims' pretensions to social as well as doctrinal purity focused critical attention on their ability to practice what they preached. They had, in fact, 'so narrowly looked unto, and severly punished' wickedness that they had been 'some-what censured, even by moderate and good men, for their severitie in punishments.'<sup>36</sup> But now events suggested that their efforts had really been futile. Something in America did not love the Puritan wall of discipline and was breaking out in foul eruptions, and not just in the old familiar forms of drunkenness and fornication, for 'even sodomie and bugerie, (things fearfull to name,)' had cropped up 'oftener then once.'<sup>37</sup>

One case in particular was enough to raise doubts in Bradford's mind about the inward health of his colony. In 1642, all the uncleanness of an unclean year came to a head in the bizarre career of Thomas Granger of Duxbury. Young Granger had left his parents' home in Scituate to serve in the family of Love Brewster, Elder William's son. But despite the good example of this 'honest man,' Granger fell into practices that both repelled and strangely fascinated Bradford. 'Horrible it is to mention,' he admitted, 'but the truth of the historie requires it.'<sup>38</sup> The Pilgrim historian was not, however, simply sacrificing his sense of literary propriety on the altar of truth. He seemed drawn to expose Granger to the light of history so that he could rid himself of the fear that Granger's sins were somehow a natural consequence of transplantation into a wilderness environment.

The horrible truth was that Granger had committed 'buggery . . . with a mare, a cowe, tow goats, five sheep, .2. calves, and a turkey.' He had apparently been gratifying his bestial lusts for some time before he was caught in the act with the mare. ('I forbear perticulers,' Bradford tersely commented.) Upon examination,

36. William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, 2 vols., ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912; repr. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 2: 308

37. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 308-9.

38. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 328; 328, n. 1.

Granger confessed in full, and the authorities, with some difficulty, went about rounding up the suspected accomplices. In a perverse, monstrous (though surely inadvertent) parody of the last judgment, Granger had to pick the guilty sheep out of a lineup. As Bradford explained, 'wheras some of the sheep could not so well be knowne by his description of them, others with them were brought before him, and he declared which were they, and which were not.' This done, the animals and Granger (in that order) were dispatched on the authority of Leviticus. And 'a very sade spectakle it was,' Bradford assures us.<sup>39</sup>

Naturally enough, the Plymouth magistrates were interested in finding out how Granger had acquired such eccentric tastes, and they were doubtless relieved to learn that, in this case at least, bestiality was imported vice, not homemade sin. According to the boy's own testimony, 'he was taught it by an other that had heard of shuch things from some in England when he was ther, and they kept catle togeather.'<sup>40</sup> This reassuring revelation allowed Bradford to blame part of the recent carnival of crime on the mixed multitude that had followed the Pilgrims into the wilderness 'for the loaves sake.'<sup>41</sup> As he might have added, it also followed (from Numbers 11:4) that 'the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting.'

So it did, but Bradford could not easily view the Granger incident solely in the context of Plymouth's servant problem, and this was clearly more than a matter of one boy's unfortunate choice of sexual expression. At bottom, as always, there lay 'our corrupte natures, which are so hardly bridled, subdued, and mortified.'<sup>42</sup> This root of evil ran so deep that it could account for any act of wickedness, without distinction of mere geography. Still, it was the sort of explanation that explained too little by explaining too

39. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 328-29; Shurtleff and Pulsifer, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, 2: 44; Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 275. According to Bradford, Granger 'left a wife and children' (2: 329, n. 1).

40. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 329; and see Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 275.

41. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 330.

42. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 309.



much. Bradford ultimately had to confront the possibility that Plymouth's corruption, as represented by Thomas Granger, was related specifically to American circumstances. Something about the place seemed to attract the attention and energies of the devil. The Pilgrims could consider themselves flattered if Satan harbored a special grudge against them for their devotion to 'holynes and puritie.' For his part, Bradford admitted he 'would rather thinke thus, then that Satane hath more power in these heathen lands, as som have thought, then in more Christian nations, especially over Gods servants in them.'<sup>43</sup> If America proved to be Satan's, not God's, country, it was likely that the Pilgrims by settling there had subjected themselves to an environment that, through its diabolic nature, would inevitably frustrate the transplantation of civility and Christianity.

Rather than confront openly such an ominous conclusion, Bradford hurried on to other explanations that reassured him of the basic soundness of the colonial venture: perhaps repressed wickedness was simply breaking forth like a dammed stream; perhaps Plymouth was more rigorous in exposing and punishing evil, thus creating the false impression that the colony actually suffered more from human depravity than other lands that complacently allowed the filth to remain hidden. 'Besides,' he observed, 'here the people are but few in comparison of other places, which are full and populous, and lye hid, as it were, in a wood or thickett, and many horrible evils by that means are never seen nor knowne; wheras hear, they are, as it were, brought into the light, and set in the plaine feeld, or rather on a hill, made conspicuous to the veiw of all.'<sup>44</sup> Thus Bradford contrived to tell his horror story of bestiality, while simultaneously absolving America and himself, as Christian magistrate, from any direct complicity in the matter. But the strained, and apparently unconvincing, nature of this rhetorical gambit is revealed in the strange reversal of imagery that he applies to the contrast between America and Europe. Under Bradford's

43. Ibid.

44. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, 2: 309-10.

hands, civil, populous, cultivated Europe takes shape improbably as 'a wood or thickett' that conceals evil, while America oddly emerges as a 'plaine feeld' or (even more resonant) 'a hill, . . . conspicuous to the veiw of all.'

This comforting rhetoric was undermined not only by the inconvenient persistence of America's own relatively abundant woods and thickets but also by the wilderness connotations of bestiality. Bradford wrote from within a tradition that viewed the wilderness as the antithesis of civilization and a place where men were in danger of degenerating to the level of wild beasts.<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, Thomas Granger, in the literal wilderness condition of Plymouth colony, was merely pursuing with perverse abandon the brutal fate that also subtly threatened his neighbors.

Since Bradford saw fit to 'forbear perticulers,' it is impossible to reconstruct the exact circumstances of Granger's crime. Like Benjamin Goad, Granger may actually have committed the act in a 'plaine feeld' or 'open yard.' But in October 1681, long after William Bradford had ceased to worry about such matters, a case of bestiality arose in Plymouth that moved much further toward confirming the connection of bestiality, wilderness, and the devil. Thomas Saddeler was haled before the court on the charge of 'buggery' with a mare, the same act that had occasioned Granger's downfall. The formal statement of the charge warrants quotation at some length:

[T]hou, having not the feare of God before, nor carrying with thee the dignity of humaine nature, but being seduced by the instigation of the divill, on the third of September in this present year, 1681, by force and armes, att Mount Hope, in the jurisdiction of New Plymouth, a certaine mare of a blackish couller then and there being in a certaine obscure and woodey place, on Mount Hope aforesaid, neare the ferrey, then and there thou didest tye her head unto a bush, and then and there, wickedly and most abominably, against thy humaine nature, with the same mare then and there being felloniously and carnally didest attempt, and the detestable sin of buggery then and

45. See Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 1-22; and Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America*, pp. 7-12.

there feloniously thou didest committ and doe, to the great dishonor and contempt of Almighty God and of all mankind, and against the peace of our sovereign lord the Kinge, his crowne, and dignity, and against the lawes of God, his majestie, and this jurisdiction.<sup>46</sup>

In effect, the court had summed up for Saddeler the fundamental grounds of the culture's revulsion against his 'detestable sin.' Whatever challenge bestiality posed for the king's dignity, it was obvious enough that this crime represented a monstrous assault on 'the dignity of humane nature.' And despite the formulaic quality of such language, a near-incoherent astonishment is redundantly evident in the sputtering then-and-there insistence of the charge. The court seems determined to drive home the point that Saddeler had not merely endangered his own humanity; his sin was also an affront to 'all mankind,' and specifically to that part of mankind that had ventured its destiny in New England.

As if to revive Bradford's old fear, the court also allowed the image of America as Satan's hunting park to emerge in its accusation that Saddeler had been 'seduced by the instigation of the divill.' But where his act occurred was as loathsome as how or why it was committed. Saddeler had succumbed to the devil's promptings not in a plain field or upon a hill but 'in a certaine obscure and woodey place'—at Mount Hope, a site that only a few years earlier had been the haunt of King Philip and the Indians whom, in the hysteria of a bloody war, the people had been encouraged to regard as bestial and demonic.<sup>47</sup> Against this background, Thomas Saddeler seemed no mere frontier rakehell, to be lumped in with ordinary fornicators and drunkards. He dramatically symbolized the precarious condition of English civility, let alone essential humanity, in an alien environment.

46. Shurtleff and Pulsifer, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, 6: 74. And see Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 278

47. See Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, p. 88; and the rhetoric favored by William Hubbard in *The Present State of New-England. Being a Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New-England* (London, 1677; repr. with introduction by Cecelia Tichi, Bainbridge, N.Y.: York Mail-Print, 1972), passim. Although the court's reference to the devil's 'instigation' is another instance of formulaic language, the formula here seems especially apt.

Even so, by 1681 the court was less willing to seek a full catharsis by following Leviticus to the letter. Saddeler was not hanged, but he had to endure a public whipping, the indignity of appearing on the gallows wearing a noose about his neck, and a branding on the forehead with a 'P' for pollution. Finally, he was to take his embarrassing presence out of the colony.<sup>48</sup> Some of Saddeler's neighbors surely hoped that, like a good scapegoat, when he left he would take away a goodly measure of the colony's pollutions with him. But the very consciousness of the need for such purification was in itself enough of a curse to negate the benefit of the purge.

In fact, by this time it may have seemed that New England, compared to Old, was peculiarly plagued by this evil.<sup>49</sup> The crime was not unknown in England, where it had been a capital offense since the sixteenth century. But English court records indicate that prosecution for bestiality was a relatively rare occurrence.<sup>50</sup> Roger Thompson has suggested that bestiality was 'statistically insignificant' in the New England court records as well.<sup>51</sup> Statistical significance, however, is not always a sure reflection of cultural significance. And with New England's smaller population and less dense settlement (aside from its superior pretensions to moral discipline), a handful of cases within a few years, as in the 1640s, was enough to raise the suspicion that the colonists were for some reason strangely susceptible to this form of degeneracy. In the year after the Saddeler case, an English writer who was no friend of the reigning orthodoxy in New England suggested as much when he charged that 'there be some of the Brethren that do love to em-

48. Shurtleff and Pulsifer, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, 6: 74-75; Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 278.

49. Other bestiality cases, not all resulting in conviction, are cited in Murrin, "Magistrates, Sinners, and a Precarious Liberty"; Marcus, "Due Execution"; Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name"; and Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America*, p. 128. See also Sewall's *Diary*, 1: 64; Kenneth Silverman, ed., *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 210; and Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, p. 73.

50. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 39, 119. And see F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Disorder* (Chelmsford, Eng.: Essex County Council, 1970), pp. 197, 318.

51. Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, p. 75.

brace their likeness, (to wit a Beast;) choosing rather to have familiarity with a Beast or a handsom Boy, than use their own Wives.<sup>52</sup>

William Bradford was probably right in ascribing the greater evidence of bestiality in Plymouth to the magistrates' diligence in bringing the guilty to trial. And it is possible that the Puritans' intense biblical-mindedness, especially in their reading of Leviticus, encouraged them to detect and prosecute crimes that justices in England were more inclined to ignore. Two years after Samuel Danforth inquired into the cry of Sodom, a writer in England remarked that 'such crimes as these are rarely heard of among us.'<sup>53</sup> Rarely heard of does not mean rarely committed. Bestiality may indeed have been a common practice among young men in England's rural areas, as Thomas Granger hinted when he confessed that he had acquired the habit from a man who, in turn, had picked it up among keepers of cattle in England.<sup>54</sup>

Yet Bradford was in no position to make a transatlantic comparison of court records, nor was he much concerned with questions of statistical significance. He simply suspected that bestiality had not loomed so ominously over the community in England, and he had dared to broach, if only to try to deny, the idea that a demonic influence in the American environment had made the difference. For the time being, he could take shelter under more appealing explanations. But the question of whether America belonged to God or the devil would remain to torment the guardians of English culture in New England until a 'disafforestation' that was mental as well as physical had assigned due place to New England's bestial passions. The persistent cry of Sodom in the wilderness was

52. J.W., 'Letter from New-England Concerning Their Customs, Manners, and Religion,' in George Parker Winship, ed., *Boston in 1682 and 1699: "A Trip to New-England" by Edward Ward and "A Letter from New-England" by J.W.* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), p. 8 (original pagination).

53. Gabriel Towerson, *An Explication of the Decalogue* (1676), quoted in Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 119.

54. Christopher Hill speculates that buggery and bestiality may have been familiar practices in the English countryside in 'Jolly Rogers,' a review of B. R. Burg's *Sodomy and the Perception of Evil: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean*, in *New York Review of Books*, May 12, 1983, p. 42. See also Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name," p. 277; and Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America*, p. 128.

prophecy that the task might prove impossible. Throughout the seventeenth century, thanks to men like Thomas Granger, Thomas Hogg, Benjamin Goad, and Thomas Saddeler, the complete success of cultural transplantation remained far from certain.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.