

A 'monster with human visage': The orangutan, savagery, and the borders of humanity in the global Enlightenment

History of the Human Sciences

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/0952695119836619

journals.sagepub.com/home/hhs**Silvia Sebastiani**

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Abstract

To what extent did the debate on the orangutan contribute to the global Enlightenment? This article focuses on the first 150 years of the introduction, dissection, and public exposition of the so-called 'orangutan' in Europe, between the 1630s, when the first specimens arrived in the Netherlands, and the 1770s, when the British debate about slavery and abolitionism reframed the boundaries between the human and animal kingdoms. Physicians, natural historians, antiquarians, philosophers, geographers, lawyers, and merchants all contributed to the knowledge of the orangutan, while also reshaping the boundaries of humanity: when the human/animal divide narrowed, the divide between 'savage' and 'civilized' peoples crystallized, becoming wider than in any previous period.

Keywords

boundaries of humanity, Enlightenment science of man, orangutan/chimpanzee, savagery, scientific, intellectual and political controversies

Introduction

To what extent did a spatially, chronologically, and conceptually limited question such as the nature of the orangutan contribute to the global history of the 18th century? How did it connect with the conceptualization of humanity, and in what ways did it

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take part in the shaping of human history? Historiography has emphasized the European matrix of the Enlightenment ‘science of man’, which questioned the paradigm of human uniqueness by redefining humanity’s separation from beasts (Fox, Porter and Wokler, 1995; Moravia, 1970; Nash, 2003; Thomas, 1983; Tinland, 2003[1968]). My goal here is to focus on the global space of intellectual exchange, and to show how the debate about the boundaries of humanity pivoted around the ‘orangutan’, between the 1630s, when the first specimens reached Dutch, and later English and French, menageries, and the 1770s, when distinctions were made between different kinds of apes. Across this period, physicians, natural historians, antiquarians, philosophers, geographers, lawyers, and merchants, all paid attention to the comparison between humans and apes. Their concurrent conceptions of animality and humanity derived from the many connections that had been established between different parts of Europe and other regions of the world, as manifested in the global circulation of great apes as well as people.

The orangutan question arose in European medical circles with the intensification, in the second half of the 17th century, of the practice of comparative anatomy. This branch of medicine, devoted to the study of human and animal bodies through comparison, was influential in shaping Enlightenment philosophical and natural controversies (as Buchan and Andersson Burnett’s article in this issue also indicates). But the orangutan question cannot be reduced to the medical circles that brought attention to it. Orangutans were displayed in public sites and attracted a large number of ‘curious’ audiences. In London, they were regularly promoted by newspapers and exhibited in new places of sociability, such as coffeehouses. Comparative anatomy underwent a process of politicization in the 1770s, in connection with British debates about African slaves ignited by the Somerset case (1772). This milestone in the abolitionist campaign held that chattel slavery was not supported by common law. Paying particular attention to Britain and its global connections, I will examine each of these issues, from the scientific controversies on the nature of the orangutan, through their public exhibition, and to the ensuing debates about slavery that reframed the human/animal divide.

In this context, the humanization of the orangutan went hand in hand with the animalization of the ‘savage’. This category embraced Africans and Amerindians, but it could also be applied in the very heart of Europe to the poor or the ‘wild’ boys and girls found in forests. I would push this point even further, and suggest that the animalization of the ‘savage’ was construed through the humanization of the ape: when the human/animal divide narrowed, the divide between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ peoples increased and crystallized.

Travelling orangutans: The many routes to Europe and the Dutch way

This amazing monster with its human visage, human manner of groaning and shedding tears, does exist . . . I saw several of each sex walking erect . . . The Javanese say that they are able to speak, but do not choose to do so, lest they be compelled to labour: this is ridiculous, by Hercules! They are called Orang-Outangs which means men of the forest, and

it is said that they are born out of the lust of women of the Indies who mate with apes and monkeys to satisfy their detestable desires. (Bontius, 1658: 84–5)

The 18th century has been labelled the ‘century of the orangutan’ (Meijer, 2004). ‘Orangutan’ (spelled in a number of ways) is a term of Malayan origin meaning ‘man of the wood’ – ‘oran’ means man, while ‘utan’/‘hutan’ means wood/forest. The word entered Europe in the 1630s, probably through Dutch merchants, and was adopted in the following decades by Dutch and later English physicians, such as Nicolaes Tulp (1593–1674) and Edward Tyson (1650–1708). Until the end of the 18th century, the term ‘orang-utan’ was employed as a generic noun for labelling all the great apes then known: it designated both the Asian ‘orang-utan’ from Borneo and the African ‘chimpanzee’ from Angola, which are today classified as two different kinds of anthropoids. In the period under examination, other terms were used synonymously, such as pygmy, Indian satyr, pongo, jocko, barris, drill, smitten, Quoias Morrou, salvage, and also, from the late 1730s, chimpanzee (Barsanti, 1990; Blanckaert, 1991). At the same time, no clear-cut distinction had even been made between apes and monkeys.¹ This lexical confusion, which combined modern and mythical terminologies, as well as European, Asian, and African vocabularies, is crucial for understanding this discussion and its geographical scope, which extended as far as America. The border between the ‘orangutan’ and the ‘wild man’, bound by their very names, was anything but clear.

The ‘orangutan’ reached Europe via different routes of commerce – either from the East Indies, where the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) had built its commercial empire, or from south-western Africa, where the British operated in parallel with the Dutch and the Portuguese. The ‘discovery’ of the great apes coincided with the large-scale involvement of the British in the slave trade, which increased dramatically with the end of the Royal African Company’s monopoly in 1698. It also corresponded to the first significant encounter with sub-Saharan West Africans, who came from roughly the same region as the chimpanzees (Davis, 2006: 73–4; Jordan, 1968: 216–65, 491–511). Late 17th- and 18th-century sources often betray a shift from geographical proximity to typological and essential similitude, leading to the overlap between Africans and apes. This association was further strengthened by the fact that chimpanzees and slaves were conveyed via the same commercial networks and were part of the same global market of slavery.

It is not my aim to give a full survey of the anthropoids that reached Europe alive, but to focus on the definition and location of the different debates they engendered. The first published description of a live anthropoid in Europe is signed by the Dutch physician and burgomaster in Amsterdam Nicolaes Tulp (immortalized by Rembrandt in the celebrated *Anatomy Lesson* explaining the features of a human cadaver to an audience of students). Tulp devoted a chapter of his *Observationes Medicae* (Medical Observations), published in 1641, to what he labelled ‘homo sylvestris’ or ‘orang-outang’, also identified as an ‘Indian Satyr’, on the basis of the authority of Pliny, Aelian, and the 16th-century Swiss physician Conrad Gesner. ‘Although it lies just outside the field of medicine’, Tulp wrote that its ‘human appearance’ made this creature an interesting case for the anatomist (Tulp, 1672[1641]: 270). His account, often quoted by historians of science, was based on the direct observation of a female orangutan (probably in fact a chimpanzee coming

from Angola), brought to the Netherlands in 1630 by Dutch traders and held in the menagerie of the Prince of Orange Frederick Hendrick, in The Hague. While providing a survey of its physical features, muscles, and skin, the anatomist also paid attention to its behaviour and manners, stressing its habit of using cups for drinking, and pillows and blankets for sleeping, ‘just like the most educated men’ (ibid.: 272). Tulp conflated what he had seen with what he had read from ancient sources about the ‘man of the woods’ inhabiting the northwest interior of Africa and parts of India, salaciously repeating that the males of the species had ‘ardent’ and ‘shameless’ sexual desires for women (ibid.: 286). ‘By including these stories with his empirical observations, Tulp authenticated both the historical and the empirical types of information presented’, as Sarah Sutton has summarized (Sutton, 2012: 111). This shows that early modern experimental science was grounded in both observation and textual commentaries, undermining our presumption of a clear-cut distinction from ancient philology.

The full-page engraving accompanying Tulp’s text became an icon and was constantly copied, reprinted, and readapted in travel literature as well as in scientific treatises throughout the 18th century (Sutton, 2012: 107–11). It portrayed a ‘gendered ape’ (Schiebinger, 1994a), with pendulous breasts, sat in modest attitude, with closed eyes and covering her sex (Figure 1), in contrast to the males’ supposed sexual excess described in the text. Almost nothing is known about its production, but this illustration, which is also printed on the cover of the book together with two human cases, is meaningful. It stresses the crucial part played by visual representations in the process of making, legitimating, and communicating knowledge, while raising important questions about their scientific status. The engraving highlights the new role played by images in decentring the locations of knowledge from scientific to public places.

Before Tulp’s publication, attention had been given to the orangutan in private correspondence. Willem de Groot, the brother of the celebrated Hugo Grotius, described this same ape in a letter of 1630 as a ‘monster, man or beast I cannot say’, with human visage, mild, emotional, and capable of understanding Dutch – a point denied by Tulp. He sent this account with a drawing, now unfortunately lost, to the Du Puy brothers in Paris, well known for being at the centre of French libertine and erudite networks in the 1630s. They in turn reported the news to the ‘archetype of all antiquarians’ (in Arnaldo Momigliano’s words), Peiresc, who used his own African connections through the Mediterranean to gather information on ‘these animals of a third kind, between man and monkey’.² This episode is in itself significant, as it allows us to identify parallel scientific and commercial networks interested in the orangutan. It also shows that the debate on its nature and behaviour took place in different localities as early as the 1630s.

The network built by the merchants and physicians of the VOC was to become the major source for European knowledge of the Asian orangutan. Bontius’ *Historiae naturalis et medicae Indiae Orientalis* (Natural and Medical History of the East Indies), published by Willem Piso in 1658, encapsulates a series of topoi which paved the way for debate on the orangutan for over a century. The fact that its presumed author was a learned physician, who served the Dutch East India Company at its headquarters in Java and presented himself as an eyewitness, gave particular authority to his description. Bontius’ natural history depicted the orangutan as a biped with human visage, capable of emotions, sadness, and modesty, possibly born out of the copulation between

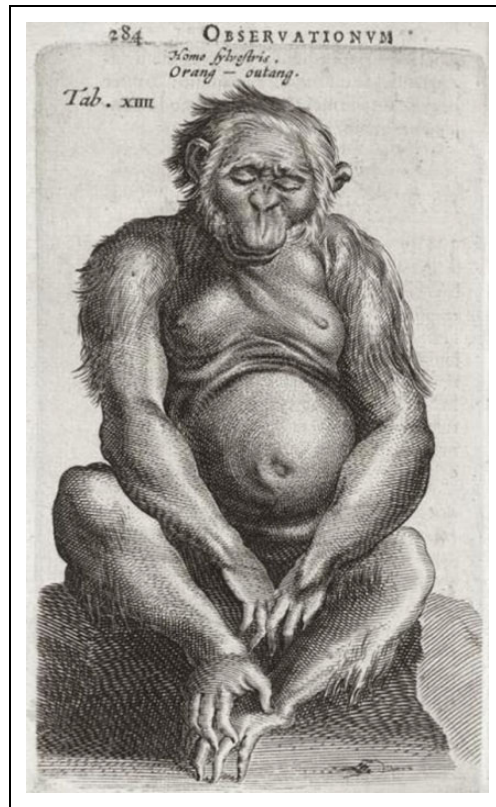


Figure 1. N. Tulp, 'Homo Sylvestris - Orang-Outang' (1641).

apes/monkeys and lustful 'women of the Indies'. Its supposed proximity to humans made it an 'amazing monster' – monstrosity here delimiting the sphere of humanity. The passage quoted in the epigraph above also stresses a possible connection with forced labour, even if it dismisses as whimsical the 'indigenous' idea that the orangutan could talk.³

This description corresponds to what could be read in the travel literature of the period, and I suspect, following Harold Cook's suggestion, that it was Piso who added this chapter on the orangutan to fill what appeared to him to be a lacuna in Bontius' text.⁴ If my hypothesis is correct, this means that by the 1650s, the orangutan's reputation was so established that no natural history of the East Indies (or Africa) could avoid the topic, popularized by travel literature and included by Tulp in the study of human medicine. Travelogues had conveyed an image of African and Asian apes walking erect, living in society, building shelters, burying their dead, undertaking various domestic tasks, as well as being sexually attracted to women, with the result that they appeared not so dissimilar to other 'wild men'. Even language was not necessarily a divide. The idea that apes' mutism could be a rational choice was advanced by different peoples. Spaniards held them to be 'absolutely a race and kind of people', who refused to speak to avoid being made to 'worke, and live under subiection' – as Richard Jobson, traveller in Ethiopia and

Gambia in the 1620s, put it in one of the earliest formulations (Jobson, 1623: 185–6). A century later, Peter Kolb made the same claim about the people at the Cape he called ‘Hottentots’ (Kolb, 1731[1719]: Vol. 2, 120).⁵ The consequence of this discourse was two-fold. On the one hand, it construed a manifest parallel with the idea, present in travel literature and natural histories, that ‘savage’ peoples were lazy and reluctant to work. On the other, it suggested a kind of primacy of the orangutans, which, through the expedience of silence, succeeded in avoiding enslavement and preserving their own liberty, precisely when the number of enslaved Africans was dramatically increasing.

From the slave ship to the coffeehouse: The new curiosity of London

Nor have the discoveries of the *Indies* more enriched the world of old than those of *Anatomy* now have improved both *Natural* and *Medical* science. (Tyson, 1680: 1–2)

In 1698, Edward Tyson, member of the Royal Society and of the Royal College of Physicians in London, dissected and meticulously described a young chimpanzee that he called ‘orang-outang’ or ‘homo sylvestris’, following in the footsteps of Tulp and Bontius (or Piso). Tyson was by then a very well-known anatomist, known for his dissections of other animals, including a porpoise, an opossum, and a dolphin, the accounts of which were published in the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*. As Andrew Cunningham has suggested, since the late 17th century the anatomist was also a dissector (and vivisector) of animals of all kinds, while comparative anatomy was integral to the practice of ‘natural history’ (Cunningham, 2010, ch. 5). In the ‘Preliminary Discourse’ to his treatise on *Phocaena, or the Anatomy of a Porpoise* (1680), quoted in the epigraph above, Tyson asserted comparative anatomy as the foundation of the other sciences, claiming that its achievements equalled the major maritime discoveries. While criticizing those who looked only at the dusty volumes of the past, instead of ‘searching the Book of Nature’, Tyson declared that the new ‘Natural History of Animals’ should be physiological and anatomical as well as medical, and could not ‘be writ without Zootomy’. His conception of comparative anatomy consisted in the study of the ‘scale of nature’ in all its gradations, from the ‘amphibious or Hermaphroditical Nature of Animals’ up to ‘Man and Intelligent Beings’, in order to locate the ‘boundary between Divinity and the Creation’ (Tyson, 1680: 4–5). This was still his intellectual framework twenty years later, when he dealt with the orangutan.

Published in 1699, *Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmy Compared With That of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man. A Philological Essay Concerning the Pygmies, the Cynocephali, the Satyrs, and Sphinges of the Ancients* combined ‘modern’ anatomy (in the findings of his dissection) with ‘ancient’ philology (in his discussion of ancient sources). It also exhibits a vocabulary oscillating between modern and ancient terms: Orang-Outang, the exact translation of the Latin *Homo sylvestris*, was considered by Tyson to be a synonym for pygmy, the mythological dwarf figure of the ancients, also called cynocephalus, satyr, and sphinx. Its body was compared to those of a monkey or an ape and that of a man (Gould, 1985; Nash, 2003: ch. 1).

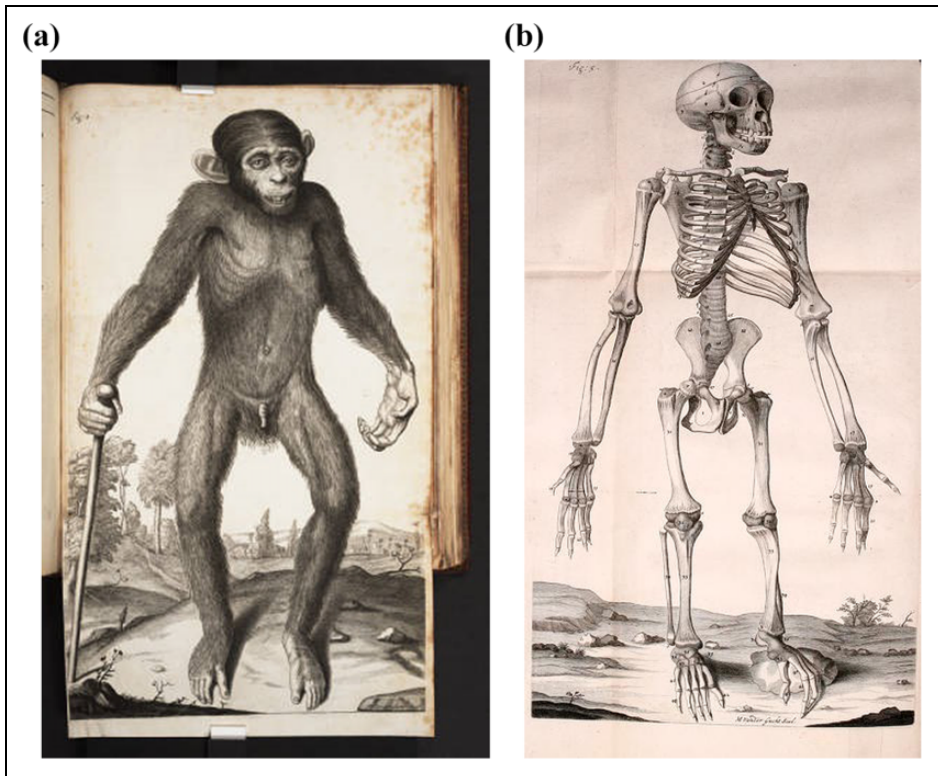


Figure 2. E. Tyson, *Orang-Outang* (1699), graved by Michael van der Gucht, after the drawing of William Cowper. (a) 'Represents the Fore-parts of the Orang-Outang or Pygmie, in an Erect Posture'; (b) 'Represents the Skeleton or the Bones'.

In his highly detailed comparative survey, Tyson arrived at the conclusion that the orangutan/pygmy presented more anatomical similitudes with humans than with the monkey/ape. He counted 48 points in common with humans, as against 34 points of divergence. Even its brain, in contrast to what might have been expected, proved very similar to its human counterpart. Described as a biped, supported by a cane, the orangutan epitomized the 'intermediate Link between an Ape and a Man' in the great chain of being, connecting together 'the lowest Rank of Men, and the highest kind of Animals'. In this apparently innocent passage, the human species loses its unity and becomes divided into men of different ranks, lower and higher (Tyson, 1699: 5, 94). These similitudes were highlighted by the plates accompanying the text, which helped to fix the anthropomorphic dimension of the orangutan (Figure 2).

Furthermore, Tyson attributed human characteristics to the pygmy and endowed it with emotions: it appeared to be a 'mild', 'modest', 'gentle and loving' creature, which, like a child, cried and made noise with its feet in order to express its 'passions of joy and grief' (Tyson, 1699: 7, 25, 52, 57). He also reported, on the basis of 'infinite Stories', orangutans' attraction to women, and their prolific acts of intercourse (*ibid.*: 47). At this

stage of the comparison, however, the anatomist reintroduced the classic distinction, dating back to Aristotle and reasserted by Descartes, between rational man and the sensitive animal, between the soul and the body. Despite having organs of speech, orangutans could not speak; and while they had a brain almost identical to that of men, they were unable to think. The consequence of this argument was that orangutans were apparently equipped with useless organs, in contradiction of Aristotelian biology. By stressing its physical proximity to the human being, Tyson's analysis ended up providing arguments in favour of the humanity of the orangutan (Wokler, 1976).

Tyson's dissection transcended the *milieus savants* and attracted a growing audience among the 'curious' public, fed by the prominence given to it by London newspapers and the places of its exposition. Indeed, it is crucial to underline the public dimension of science, which in the 18th century also implied entertainment and curiosity – a transformation that historians of science have emphasised in the last thirty years (Schaffer, 1983). Consider how the *Flying Post* advertised this new curiosity in May 1698:

The Monster, that was exposed at *Moncrief's* Coffee-House, in *Threadneedle-street*, near the *Royal-Exchange*, died on *Saturday* in the Evening, and is dissected by the learned Dr *Tyson*, Lecturer for the *Viscera* in *Surgeons-Hall* and Physician for *Bridewell* and *Bedlam*, who designs to publish an Account of it, for the Satisfaction of the Curious; with Cuts, describing the Anatomy of it; Which, together with the view of its Skeleton, and the Skin stuffed, so as all its Lineaments and Proportion may still be seen, will tend as much or more to the information of those that come to see it, than when it was alive.

The Account given of it by those that brought it over is as allows; That it came from *Angola* in *Africk*, and was sold to the Captain amongst a parcel of Slaves. (*Flying Post*, 21–24 May 1698, original emphasis)

This announcement could simply be read as the entry of a new 'monster' in a society already full of exhibitions of monstrosity for the curious (Fontes da Costa, 2000; Guerrini, 2010). But that would be to miss its true significance. The text tells us that the 'monster' was exhibited at Moncrief's Coffee House in London, initially alive, but also after its death as a stuffed skin and skeleton. In so doing, it shows the crucial role played by these new places of sociability in the spectacularization and humanization of the orangutan through the language of civility and politeness that was starting to characterize the emerging urban consumer society. The second important aspect underlined in the notice is that the animal was dissected by the leading physician Edward Tyson, who described its anatomy in a publication with engravings under the imprint of the Royal Society. This shows that the coffee houses were becoming one of the stages upon which the Royal Society practiced its public scientific demonstrations, reaching out to a much wider audience (Fontes da Costa, 2009). Third, the journal advertises that the skeleton and stuffed skin of the ape has been stored for the purpose of satisfying public curiosity.⁶ Taken together, the scientific observation and the public show made the orangutan as much a product for consumption as for science.

The last part of the notice adds the very interesting information that the ape came from the coasts of Angola and was sold 'amongst a parcel of Slaves'. This assertion suggests that, in the very year in which the monopoly over the slave trade was abolished in

Britain, the chimpanzee travelled through the circuits of slavery. It thus confirms the profound entanglements between science and the ‘infamous commerce’. Historians have only just started to explore how naturalists exploited – and depended on – the networks of the slave trade to gather specimens and amass their collections. Slave ships became a ‘site of natural history’, playing a crucial role in circulating natural knowledge (Delbourgo, 2007, 2017; Murphy, 2013: 637–70; see also the articles by Hodacs and Persson and Van Gent in this issue).

Forty years later, in September 1738, the sensational arrival of ‘Madame Chimpanzee’ in London repeated the same scenario. Every London newspaper reported on the event. Information about ‘her’ exposition at Randall’s Coffee House in Lombard Street was spread through advertisements and announcements, while comments by visitors pervaded the press. The *London Magazine* advertised the affair, adding further information about the routes of chimpanzees to Europe:

A most surprising Creature is brought over in the *Speaker*, just arrived from *Carolina*, that was taken in a Wood at *Guinea*; it is a Female about four Foot high, shaped in every Part like a Woman excepting its Head, which nearly resembles the Ape: She walks upright naturally . . . and feeds herself with her Hands as a human Creature. She is very fond of a Boy on board, and is observed always sorrowful at his Absence. She is clothed with a thin Silk Vestment, and shews a great Discontent at the opening her Gown to discover her Sex. She is the Female of the Creature, which Angolans call *Chimpanze*, or the Mockman. (*London Magazine*, 21 September 1738, original emphasis)

As with Tyson’s ape, this new curiosity was introduced by stressing that ‘she’ arrived on board the vessel *Speaker*, belonging to Captain Henry Flower, who made four voyages in a short period between West Central Africa and South Carolina.⁷ Taken in Angola, the chimpanzee arrived in London via the New World, following the triangular trade route of slavery – an aspect which, to my knowledge, has been passed over by historians. The second part of the notice, which has, in contrast, prompted interesting comments by some scholars (Brown, 2010; Rousseau, 1991; Schiebinger, 1994a), describes this ‘most surprising animal’ as walking ‘upright naturally’, eating in a human manner, dressing in silk and showing ‘great Discontent at the opening of the Gown to discover her Sex’, a clear sign of ‘her’ innate sense of modesty and sensitivity. The pronoun ‘she’ makes clear the humanization of the ape, portrayed in the social practice of tea drinking, like a lady in polite society. The notice also adopts and advertises the Angolan term ‘chimpanzee’ that Captain Flower introduced to English. The alternative ‘Mock-Man’ is significant in stressing the mimetic relation between the ape and ‘man’. The entrance of the word chimpanzee into European languages did not lead to finer distinctions between the African and the Asian ape, but rather overlapped with existing terminology until at least the 1780s.

Images were, once again, central to the process of humanization of the ape. A copperplate engraving of the chimpanzee was produced by Jean Baptiste Gérard Scotin II, after a drawing by Hubert-François Bourguignon Gravelot, two of the major French representatives of the rococo style, further contributing to its mediatization. The engraving is dedicated to Sir Hans Sloane, President of the Royal Society, who took a great deal

of interest in the examination of the new curiosity, fully endorsing the idea of a strong relational continuity between the ape and the human (Rousseau, 1991). Other agents of the propagation of Enlightenment science, such as Thomas Boreman, a very successful publisher of natural histories for young readers, did the same. In his 'Account of a Female Chimpanzee', he provided a description of her loving character and great affability, inviting an appreciation of the female ape especially through the lens of sensibility, while also stressing that her modesty and chastity were accompanied by refined table manners (Boreman, 1739: 23–8; Brown, 2010; see also Rítvo, 1985).

Boreman grounded his picture in Tyson's scientific credentials. The *Anatomy of the Pygmy* was the direct source of his 'natural history' of the 'pygmy or chimpanzee', which he preferred to other sources of information, including 'indigenous' reports – as Londa Schiebinger showed twenty-five years ago (Schiebinger, 1994b). On the basis of his dissection, Tyson had attributed to adult orangutans/chimpanzees a height of only two feet (and for this reason he had called them 'pygmies'), whereas the Angolan who procured Madame Chimpanzee by killing her mother claimed that the latter was five feet tall. Boreman took Tyson's side, judging the anatomist's reasoning rooted in 'learning' and 'much labour', while he dismissed the information furnished by the local observer as unreliable. He was wrong. But his questions about the commensurability of 'indigenous knowledge' are extremely instructive for reflecting on the construction of scientific authorities and the reliability of science in a global world:

Whether the Negro-man, who reports this, understood our measure, or was faithful in his account? Or whether to get a better price for the young, he did not paint the old one to be such a huge fierce beast? Or to imagine his own courage and skill in killing the one and taking the other? (Boreman, 1739: 25)

Even in the age of empiricism, Boreman placed confidence in the learned European, who had never seen a specimen in its natural habitat, rather than in the 'local' observer (Schiebinger, 1994b).

Tyson also became the direct source of the two major and concurrent European attempts to classify the natural world during the Enlightenment, which I can only hint at here: Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, published in 36 volumes between 1749 and 1788, and Linnaeus' *Systema naturæ*, first printed in 1735 and continually expanded up to the twelfth edition, in three volumes, in 1766–68. In his *Nomenclature of Apes* (1766), Buffon followed Tyson point by point, concluding with him that despite their almost identical appearance, the divide between men and apes was immense and unbridgeable as it did not depend on the body, but on the mind and on the soul, which were prerogatives only of humans (Wokler, 1976). At the same time, however, he stressed the 'affinity' of the sexual organs – corresponding to 'agreements of temperament' – between Africans and apes, confirming the prolific '*mélanges*' between them, thereby weakening de facto their incommensurability (Sebastiani, 2015).

On the other hand, Tyson was central to Linnaeus' definition of the *Troglodyte* or *Orangutan*, which the tenth edition of the *Systema Naturae* (1758) placed under the genus 'homo', alongside the *Homo sapiens*. In almost all his writings, Linnaeus stressed how difficult it was to distinguish a man from an ape on the basis of scientific principles

and measurable data. In a letter of February 1747 to the German explorer in Russia Johann Georg Gmelin, he even suggested that naturalists should ‘call man ape and viceversa’ (Koerner, 1999: 87ff). Apes and orangutans thus became data to be used in tracing the borders of humankind and of savagery, even among authors writing about America – where there were no great apes at all.⁸

Orangutans in support of slavery

We ought to decide that the Oran Outangs are men. And, indeed, it appears to me, that they are not so much inferior to the Americans in civility and cultivation, as some nations of America were to us, when we first discovered that country. (Monboddo, 1774: 347–8)

The celebrity that orangutans and chimpanzees gained in coffee houses and in the press familiarized a wide European public with the image of sensitive and educated apes capable of social feelings and compassion. The humanization of the orangutan, however, went hand in hand with the animalization of a part of humankind, the African *in primis*, becoming a leitmotif of proslavery arguments.⁹ The English planter Edward Long did not miss the opportunity to contrast apes’ fine table manners with Africans’ coarse ones, insisting on their consanguinity (Long, 1774, 2: 358–70, 375–6, 383; see Jordan, 1968: 491–3). His *History of Jamaica*, published in London in 1774, illustrates in the most virulent way that the association between Africans and apes had become a commonplace in 1770s England, following the Somerset case. The ruling of the Court of King’s Bench in 1772 marked a turning point in which the orangutan became part of the dispute as the alter ego of the African slave. By establishing that masters could not force slaves to leave England against their will, the judgement led to the banning of slavery in England and Wales – although slaves continued to be present, and notices of slave sales still occupied considerable space in newspapers. A similar but more radical ruling was pronounced in Scotland six years later, in 1778, by the Court of Session. The case was brought by a slave, Joseph Knight, against his Scottish master, John Wedderburn, one of the largest landowners in Jamaica, whose fortune was built on the sugar trade. The judgement resulted in the suppression of slavery in Scotland (Cairns, 2001–02; Rothschild, 2011: 91–6).

Long’s *History of Jamaica* should be placed squarely within this context. Beyond being a planter, its author was a judge of the Vice Admiralty Court in Jamaica – the court that, in the British colonies, dealt with maritime issues and prize money. In 1772, the year of the Somerset ruling, he published his virulent opposition to it in an anonymous pamphlet: *The Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King’s Bench, in What is Commonly Called The Negroe Cause*. Rejecting Lord Mansfield’s judgment, the pamphlet argued that ‘the art of washing the Black-a-moor white’ was against Scripture as well as the English constitution (Long, 1772: iii, emphasis in the original). Taken together, Long’s ‘history’ and ‘reflections’ defended slavery by reducing Africans to ‘merchandize’, while instituting a close parallel with the more sensible and educated orangutans.

In Edinburgh, the Scottish philosopher and erudite philologist James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, who was one of the judges called to deliberate on the Knight case, opposed the judgement in the name of Roman law and by recurring to Aristotle's idea of natural slavery (Cairns, 2012a). Master of a black servant named Gory, Monboddo maintained that the principle of slavery was also supported by religion and had contributed to the greatness of the most admired ancients, as he reasserted in his two monumental works: *Of the Origin and Progress of Languages* (1773–92) and *Antient Metaphysics* (1779–99).

It was Monboddo who argued, more than anybody else (as the epigraph above illustrates), for the humanity of the orangutan. The orangutan appeared to him an exemplification of man in his primitive, savage stage, literally a 'wild man of the wood'. By stressing the historical distance between the savage and the civilized man, Monboddo maintained that the distinguishing features of the human species were not present from the outset, but were acquired and evolved over time. Following in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,¹⁰ he considered *perfectibilité* as the only essential and distinctive characteristic of humanity. Monboddo's pro-slavery stance as a judge was connected to his work as an Enlightenment philosopher: apes and slaves belonged to the primitive stage of development and were associated with savagery (Sebastiani, 2013, 2015). The second edition of the first volume of the *Origin and Progress of Languages*, published in 1774, which was enriched by two chapters on orangutans based on Tyson's work, stressed this parallel by stating that 'we' – that is, modern and enlightened philosophers – 'ought to decide that the Oran Outangs are men', as Pope Paul III had done with the Amerindians in his famous bull in 1537.

Monboddo engaged with different theories. He used and discussed Tyson's findings, responded to Buffon, corresponded with Linnaeus and took Rousseau as his model. In his view, orangutans belonged to the human species, as they shared with humans the same physical characteristics, including the organs of speech (larynx, pharynx, and tongue). They walked in an erect position, instead of on all fours, as many feral children did. They used sticks as arms, built huts, knew the use of fire and the value of iron (in contrast, he argued, to Amerindian peoples), and buried their dead: in a word, they lived in society. They were modest, sensitive, and friendly, as Tyson's pygmy and Mme Chimpanzee had shown. In addition, they carried off black women, using them as slaves and as instruments of pleasure, as attested by ancient sources and travel literature, and confirmed by modern science. To think that beings so similar to each other could belong to different species contradicted every law of nature. Whereas Buffon based his definition of the species (including the human) on the fecundity of the offspring, Monboddo, by stressing the issue of perfectibility, gave less importance to experiments in cross-breeding – the 'innocence' of which was then under discussion in scientific circles (Wells, 2018: 123–48).

Monboddo also positioned himself as a witness and observer of the boundaries of humanity by citing two famous cases of 'wild' children: Peter the 'Wild Boy', found in the woods of Hanover in 1724, and Marie-Angélique, the 'Savage Girl of Champagne', captured in 1731 (Monboddo, 1768: iii–xviii; 1779–99, Vol. 4: 403–8. See Douthwaite, 1994–95, 2002: 11–69). In a visit to Paris in 1765, Monboddo had two crucial encounters that he later recounted in detail: he met and interviewed Marie Angélique, who, unlike Peter, had learnt to speak and succeeded in becoming a 'civilized' woman. He also

viewed Buffon's stuffed orangutan (in fact a chimpanzee), held in the *Cabinet du roi* (Hammett, 1985: 212). Orangutans and wild children provided proof of a profound discontinuity in human nature, which progressed 'from mere animality to full humanity'. Monboddo could thus conclude 'Man himself was originally a wild savage animal, till he was tamed, and, as I may say, *humanized*, by civility and arts' (Monboddo, 1774: 144, emphasis in the original).

By stressing the parallels between the animal features of the 'savage' and the human characteristics of the orangutan, also capable of *perfectibilité*, Monboddo opted for an inclusive definition of 'man'. Far from dissolving the boundaries between the human and the animal, he felt it necessary to include the ape in the human species precisely in order to preserve the divide (Wahrman, 2004: 136ff). As an ardent advocate of ancient meritocracy, he saw in the orangutan not the egalitarian society of Rousseau, but rather 'a natural gentleman emerging from the undifferentiated herd' (Garrett, 2006: 183).

Whereas Long made of the association between black slaves and apes a permanent and indissoluble link, Monboddo included the orangutan within the borders of humanity, at the stage of savagery. He pushed that border in defence of slavery, even arguing that to be slaves was the 'most proper' condition for peasants, who, like cattle, 'ought to be annexed to the soil, and bought and sold along with it'. At a moment in which Scotland was also discussing the emancipation of Scottish colliers and salters, kept in a condition of bondage, this argument was particularly provocative.¹¹ In Monboddo's view, it was 'undeniable' that men were 'different by nature' and fitted for diverse tasks, and so slavery was the most rational choice for social order, as well as political economy. By linking the questions of slavery and servitude together, his pro-slavery argument dismissed the issue of skin colour, considered a mere accidental mark that made no distinction among men.¹² In stressing the civilizing role played by the Egyptians, 'a nation of Black men with woolly hair', Monboddo rejected the parallel between the ape and the African. His pro-slavery argument was rooted in an aristocratic view, whereas the humanity of the orangutan marked the historical distance travelled by human beings from their original conditions (Sebastiani, 2015; Wokler, 1988). Long and Monboddo illustrate that when the boundaries between humans and apes were lowered, the distances within the realm of humanity increased. A new hierarchy was then established: one that distanced, more radically than in any previous period, 'civilization' from 'savagery'.

Epilogue

In 1779, when the first volume of Monboddo's *Antient Metaphysics* was published, the Groningen physician Petrus Camper published the findings of his dissections of several (Asian) orangutans in the *Philosophical Transactions*. Eighty years after Tyson, Camper's 'Account of the Organs of Speech of the Orang Outang' debunked the anatomical 'solution' to the question of the supposed structural identity between man and ape. Not only was the erect position unnatural to the orangutan, which was instead a quadruped, the voice organs were also different from humans. Orangutans *did not* speak, because they *could not* speak, and the reason lay in the 'texture of their organs' in their larynx (Camper, 1779). By maintaining that the orangutans' organs of reproduction were more

similar to those of dogs than to those of men, Camper also contradicted the accounts of sexual intercourse and reproduction between humans and apes. He founded his own authority on the increasing number of Asiatic orangutans brought to the menagerie of the Dutch Stadthouder in the 1770s, through the global networks of the VOC. The conclusions he drew proved the incommensurability between man and ape, no longer based on Tyson's and Buffon's dualism, but on structural and measurable data.

Ironically, by inventing the facial angle, Camper linked the skulls of Africans to those of the orangutans, at least from an aesthetic perspective (Blanckaert, 1987). But he also showed in public dissections that there was a huge divide separating the ape from the 'black man', which was no less vast than that existing between an ape and a 'white man' (Meijer, 1999). In so doing, he insisted upon the pre-eminence of humankind as a whole, while re-animalizing the orangutan. Camper's argument was considered decisive by British activists of the anti-slavery movement in the 1770s and 1780s, such as the abolitionist campaigner William Dickson (Dickson, 1789: 68). However, the orangutan – either elevated to humanity or cast back to animality – remained at the centre of multiple and controversial discourses at work within a broad European and imperial framework (Blanckaert, 2014).

The question of the divide between humans and apes did not end within the period delineated in this article, but has been continuously reframed up to the present. I can do no more here than to invite a re-examination of the historical patterns of scientific objectivity in Europe (Daston and Galison, 2007) through engagement with the question of the humanity or animality of the orangutan in the 18th century.

In concluding, it must be observed that the intellectual history of Europe is comprehensible only within a global history of colonial encounters. These encounters were asymmetrical insofar as vernacular knowledge was disqualified, while European knowledge became 'universal'. It is no coincidence that one of the key forms of knowledge these encounters produced concerned defining the borders of humanity. Distinguishing the orangutan from the chimpanzee and the ape from the 'savage man' was a product of the imperial, colonial, and commercial encounters between Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. This was not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity. Debates about the boundaries of humanity intersected with arguments about slavery. These intersections, both global and intellectual, remind us that concepts such as 'savagery' and 'humanity' were far from settled in the 18th century. Indeed, while it has been observed that savagery often could be used to consign non-European peoples to an inferior status, drawing the boundaries of humanity more widely could have the same effect. If the 18th century was genuinely the 'century of the orangutan', we can also say that it was the century in which defining the boundaries of humanity became a global question. Exploring that question today illustrates how easily its boundaries became entwined with the claims of science, the interests of commerce and slavery, the networks of empire, and the status of savagery.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

This article was developed from a book I am writing on the boundaries of humanity in Enlightenment debates. I am grateful to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where I have spent the academic year 2017–18. My special thanks go to the many colleagues who have enriched my project with their comments and observations, and in particular to the editors of this special issue, Linda Andersson Burnett and Bruce Buchan.

1. In his *Dictionary of the English Languages* (1755), Samuel Johnson defines ‘Monkey’ as ‘an ape; a baboon; a jackanapes. An animal bearing some resemblance of man’, while he described the ‘Ape’ as ‘a kind of monkey’.
2. Momigliano (1990: 54). Peiresc spoke about ‘*cez animaux d’un troisieme genre entre l’homme et le singe*’ in a letter of 9 January 1634 addressed to Pierre and Jacques Du Puy. See Hamy (1897) and Barsanti (1990). This aspect deserves further investigation, however. On Peiresc and his antiquarian network, see Miller (2015).
3. Jacobus Bontius (1592–1631) reached Batavia in 1627 as a physician of the VOC, where he died in 1631. His manuscript notes on medicine were published posthumously in 1742 in Leiden, while his notes on natural history, including the chapter on the orangutan, appeared for the first time in 1658, as an appendix to Willem Piso’s *De Indiæ utriusque re naturali et medica*. See Cook (2007a, 2007b, ch. 5).
4. Harold Cook maintains that the chapter on the orangutan with its fanciful woodcut representing a woman covered with hair is not present in Bontius’ manuscript with drawings, but is one of several additions made by Piso, who also arranged the order of the entries according to his own plan (Cook, 2007b: 222). Furthermore, it is very unlikely that Bontius could have seen orangutans first-hand from his location in Java, which he does not seem to have ever left, as orangutans did not live there, but in nearby Borneo and Sumatra. I thank Harold Cook for having raised these matters in conversation.
5. Both Jobson and Kolb called these apes ‘baboons’, on which see Barsanti (1990), who also records a number of other examples on this topic.
6. The skeleton of the chimpanzee dissected by Tyson is still preserved in the Natural History Museum in London.
7. The 1738 trip was Henry Flower’s fourth; see *Slave Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, available at: <https://slavevoyages.org> (Voyage ID 76952). Flower had already tried to import a living chimpanzee to London in 1733, but it had died during the long trip. See Atkins (1735: 109).
8. Cornelius de Pauw, for instance, included a chapter on the ‘Orang-Outang’ in his *Philosophical Researches on the Americans* (1769: Vol. 2, 47–83), in order to shed light on two *Homini sylvestris*: the great ape and the Amerindian. Reference to the ‘Oranootan’ is also made by Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1955[1787]: Query XIV, ‘Laws’, 252–3), in which he confirms the sexual union between apes and black women.
9. For a development of the argument expressed in this section, as well as the historiographical references, see Sebastiani (2015).

10. It is not possible to develop here Rousseau's argument about orangutans, but see note 10 of his *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755) and the comments by Wokler (1978), Wokler and Frayling (1982), and Moran (1993).
11. This was recorded by James Beattie in a letter to Beilby Porteus (17 December 1779), in Forbes (1824: Vol. 2, 226). On the debate about slavery in Scotland, see Cairns (2012b) and Whyte (2006). A partial emancipation of Scottish colliers and salters was established in 1775 by an Act of Parliament, while their freedom was ratified in 1799. See Whatley (1995, 1999).
12. Monboddo (1779–99: Vol. 3, 144–5n); 'Negroe Cause, 15.1.1778', MS, Advocate Library, Edinburgh, Session Papers, collected by John MacLaurin, Lord Dreghorn, Vol. 49, p. 12. See also Cairns (2012b). Here the direct polemical target of Monboddo was David Hume, who considered black people to belong to an inferior race, while nonetheless condemning slavery. See Sebastiani (2013: ch. 1 and 4).

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