

**Rational Souls and Animal Bodies: Race, Religion and Cross-Species Sympathy in John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Evenings at Home* (1792-1796)**

Throughout the enduringly popular miscellany *Evenings at Home* (1792-1796), John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld repeatedly impress upon their young readers the importance of establishing accurate definitions.<sup>1</sup> As Michelle Levy notes, within *Evenings at Home* children are taught to enquire into “the reality behind names” (134) in the hope that linguistic clarity will lead to ethical awareness. In “Things by their Right Names,” for instance, children learn that what they dignify with the title of a “BATTLE” (1: 152) may be no more than an act of “bloody murder” (1: 150). Elsewhere, the pursuit of precise definitions has ontological, as well as moral, implications. This is apparent in “On Man,” which consists of a conversation between two of *Evenings at Home's* recurring characters: a boy named Charles and his father. Having received “the definition of a horse” on an earlier occasion, Charles asks his father how “a Man [is] defined” (3: 1).<sup>2</sup> It quickly transpires that, unlike a horse, humans cannot be identified by their physical characteristics alone. If they are to be distinguished from other mammals, the father states, “the *mind*” must also be taken into account. Having set these parameters, the conversation soon arrives at a conclusion: “Man is an animal possessed of *reason*, and the only one. This, therefore, is enough to define him” (3: 2).

Similar definitions of human exceptionality echo throughout the children's literature produced in the late eighteenth century. In Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* (1788), readers are instructed that “it is reason which exalts a man above a brute” (105). Often, such assertions of superiority are accompanied by a more explicitly religious message: “[o]ther creatures only think of supporting themselves,” Wollstonecraft writes, but “man” is able to “imitate [God] . . . by cultivating his mind and enlarging his heart” (10-11). Likewise, Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories* (1786) features an interlocutor who asserts that animals “have not reasonable souls, like the human race,” before adding that

“they fall short of human reason beyond comparison” (67, 68). This message is reiterated in religious terms when a character is informed that “Providence has . . . given mankind dominion over [animals],” causing them “to yield subjection to the Lords of the creation” (174). While *Evenings at Home* is less explicit in its religious convictions, its declarations of human superiority are also underpinned by the biblical notion of dominion. When the adult interlocutor of one dialogue asserts humans’ “right to make a reasonable use of all animals for our advantage” (4: 150), his authority derives from the biblical injunction that humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 1.28).<sup>3</sup>

These repeated reminders of what it means to be human constitute an attempt to teach children their place in the world in both intellectual and religious terms. As Andrew O’Malley notes, “irrational children” were frequently associated with “the lower orders of creation.” Under the influence of John Locke, educators sought to socialize children: to elevate them above the “brute creation” and to ensure that they lived up to the definition of a rational, Christian human being (O’Malley 141-42, n. 46). As the examples above indicate, the notion of human superiority was frequently founded upon the possession of reason: a quality that was pitched against the lesser faculty of instinct. The former was heralded “as the distinguishing feature of humanity” while the latter dictated the behavior of non-human animals (Fudge 3). This opposition is summarized by Keith Thomas, who states: “man could choose, whereas animals were prisoners of their instinct, guided only by their appetite and incapable of free will” (32).

As “On Man” indicates, Aikin and Barbauld subscribe to the reason/instinct opposition as a means of defining the species boundary, using it to construct a fundamentally anthropocentric understanding of the world. Acknowledging this complicates recent critical work on the “cosmopolitan and egalitarian” worldview of

*Evenings at Home* (McCarthy 325).<sup>4</sup> As Ursula K. Heise explains, theorisations of cosmopolitanism typically “provide a shorthand for a cultural and political understanding that allows individuals to think beyond the boundaries of their own cultures, ethnicities, or nations to a range of other sociocultural frameworks” (60). Undoubtedly, this stance is reflected in *Evenings at Home*. For instance, the survey of human life offered in “A Globe-Lecture” is underpinned by a lesson in cross-cultural tolerance that sees Aikin and Barbauld informing their young readers that “[w]e are too apt to look at the differences of mankind, and to undervalue all those who do not agree with us in matters that we think of high importance” (4: 144). It concludes by emphasising that regardless of where in the world they live, humans possess “a common nature” and thus “must necessarily agree in more things than we differ” (4: 144). However, as Heise notes, cosmopolitan thinking that overcomes geographical and political boundaries by focussing on “a shared humanity” inevitably does so to the neglect of “nonhuman species” (60, 61). This exclusion is implicit within *Evenings at Home*, in which humans are set apart from other forms of life by their possession of reason.

Relatively little critical work has been undertaken on the depiction of animal life within *Evenings at Home*.<sup>5</sup> However, as Heather Klemann has recently demonstrated in relation to Mary Wollstonecraft, the presence of animals in children’s literature provides a valuable perspective on “Enlightenment debates over the limits of human rationality” (1). Focusing on the pivotal role played by the reason/instinct opposition, the first half of this article focuses on the longest piece in *Evenings at Home*: a narrative entitled “The Transmigrations of Indur.” With its depictions of sympathetic, cross-species relationships, the story provides an opportunity to interrogate Aikin and Barbauld’s construction of human sovereignty. Its attentive examination of the particularity of non-human life demonstrates the fragility of the hierarchical opposition of reason and instinct, undermining the confident declaration of human superiority found in “On

Man.” But while Aikin and Barbauld’s appreciative, even reverential, response to the natural world makes it possible to imagine the kind of eco-cosmopolitanism that Heise envisages, “The Transmigrations of Indur” ultimately proves an isolated example.

Pursuing the markedly more pragmatic and inflexible forms of anthropocentrism that persist throughout *Evenings at Home*, the second half of this article examines how maintaining the distinction between reason and instinct threatens to undermine the liberal ethos of Aikin and Barbauld’s writing for children. My discussion explores how the orientalist setting of “The Transmigrations of Indur” is taken up in references to India and Hinduism throughout both *Evenings at Home* and John Aikin’s *The Arts of Life* (1802).<sup>6</sup> There, sympathetic identification with non-human animals is viewed more critically, in terms that draw upon Orientalist understandings of non-Western and non-Christian identities as inherently “other.”<sup>7</sup> Within these works, Aikin and Barbauld echo contemporary Enlightenment thinkers such as Erasmus Darwin, who characterized expressions of sympathy for non-human subjects as “erroneous:” a symptom of foreign effeminacy by which the non-human and the non-European are disturbingly conflated (Darwin 141). In their failure to abide by the biblical concept of dominion, these non-Christian subjects are depicted as lacking in rational thought, casting doubt upon their identification with Western notions of human identity. In this way, the reason/instinct opposition is granted further definitional powers: not only does it divide humans from animals, it narrows the definition of the human on racial and religious grounds. By exploring these distinctly un-cosmopolitan sentiments, this article provides a new critical perspective on the fault-lines within the “dissenting project of rational Enlightenment” in which Aikin and Barbauld participated (Bradshaw 353).

### **Rational Souls and Animal Bodies**

Set within a fantastic, oriental past, “when Fairies and Genii possessed the power they have now lost,” “The Transmigrations of Indur” traces the progress of an Indian Brahmin’s soul as it transmigrates from one animal body to another (2: 1).<sup>8</sup> In an earlier publication, Aikin and Barbauld had conceded that “Eastern tale[s], with their genii, enchantments, and transformations” are liable to be censured as “absurd and extravagant” (J. and A. L. Aikin 122).<sup>9</sup> The story’s presence in *Evenings at Home* can be accounted for by the text’s capacious form. Its introduction claims that its contents are the work of various guests to the home of the fictitious Fairborne family, and that they are presented in “the promiscuous order in which they came to hand” (1: 3). This seemingly arbitrary organisation produces various contradictions throughout *Evenings at Home*. In the case of “The Transmigrations of Indur,” the supernatural elements of the oriental tale seem to militate against the rationalist agenda more typical of the work as a whole. However, the story compensates for this by providing readers with a detailed, scientifically-informed examination of non-human life. In this respect, “The Transmigrations of Indur” is underpinned by a fundamental tension: the imaginative excitement and potential for sympathetic engagement that it offers readers is undercut by a more disinterested mode of narration, in which non-human animals are clearly differentiated from rational human subjectivity.

The story’s eponymous protagonist is a Brahmin who possesses a “gentleness of disposition and humanity towards all living creatures” as well as “an insatiable curiosity respecting the nature and way of life of all animals” (2: 1). When he sees an injured monkey about to be attacked by “a large venomous serpent” (2: 2), Indur rescues the monkey, receiving a fatal bite in the process. As death approaches, he is addressed by a fairy named Perezinda. She explains that she is “[o]bliged to pass a certain number of days every year under the shape of animal” (2: 3-4) and that she had been in the form of a monkey when the snake attacked. Although she cannot save Indur’s life, to thank him

for his assistance she offers to grant “any wish [he] shalt form respecting the future state of existence to which [he is] hastening” (2: 4). His wish is as follows:

In all my transmigrations may I retain a rational soul, with the memory of the adventures I have gone through; and when death sets me free from one body, may I instantly animate another in the prime of its powers and faculties, without passing through the helpless state of infancy. (2: 4)

The story then follows Indur as he experiences life from the perspective of an antelope, a wild-goose, a dormouse, an elephant, a whale, a bee, a rabbit and, finally, a dog. This pattern of circulation aligns the story with the genre of eighteenth-century “it-narratives” and, as in that fictional mode, the protagonist’s mobile identity is replete with sympathetic potential.<sup>10</sup> In Adam Smith’s influential eighteenth-century formulation, imaginative sympathy promises to extend the limits of one’s subjective experience but remains hindered by the physical body: “our senses,” Smith writes, “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person” (9). Within Aikin and Barbauld’s tale, Indur’s transmigratory existence plays with the boundaries of sympathetic identification. Freed from the confines of his human body, Indur is able to experience the sensory lives of other animals, transcending what Smith describes as the physical barrier of one’s “own person.” However, this fluidity is undermined by Indur’s desire to “retain a rational soul”—the “immaterial essence” that, in Aristotelian thought, is unique to humans (Fudge 8).<sup>11</sup> This contradictory impulse signals the limits of sympathetic identification within Aikin and Barbauld’s tale: Indur wishes to experience life as an animal, but he does not want to *become* that animal. In this respect, the story highlights what Lynn Festa has termed “the agonistic element to sympathetic exchanges,” by which the “pleasures of sympathetic affect” clash with “the desire to uphold the singularity of the self” (6).

Indur's desire to preserve the inviolability of his species identity is underlined by the fact that he will "animate" the animals he inhabits: a term that implies he will bring life to previously unconscious matter, evoking a mechanistic, Cartesian understanding of animal life, while leaving his human identity intact.<sup>12</sup>

The persistence of Indur's rational soul thus diminishes the prospect of depicting animals "as subjects" rather than "as objects" (Cosslett 30). Nevertheless, the story suggests that Indur's status as a reasonable human being is not as secure as it initially appears. When he is reincarnated as "a majestic Elephant" (2: 14) the narrative describes how he "surveyed with pleasing wonder his own form and that of his companions" (2: 14). Despite the ease with which Indur casts a proprietorial gaze over his new body, the distinction between Indur and his animal host is soon placed under pressure. Having made "depredations on some fields of maize," Indur and his "companions" are captured by the humans to whom the land belongs (2: 16). The story describes in some detail the method by which wild male elephants are seized: after they have been corralled into an increasingly narrow temporary structure they are isolated from one another, before tame female elephants are sent out to "[inveigle] the males to follow them to the enclosures" (2: 17). Similar accounts of this process appear in a range of contemporary natural history texts, from Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1788) to Thomas Bewick and Ralph Beilby's *Natural History of Quadrupeds* (1790) (Buffon 19-20; Beilby 158-59). Its presence in Aikin and Barbauld's tale is thus an understandable pedagogic decision, marking a generic shift by which Orientalist romance is displaced by natural historical veracity. In explaining the elephant-capturing process, the story comes to focus on the sexual desire of male elephants, throwing Indur's agency as a rational actor into doubt and blurring the distinction between the human and non-human. This is most evident in the account of Indur's capture:

*Indur* was among the first who was decoyed by their artifices; and with some others following heedlessly, he got into the narrowest part of the inclosure, opposite to the passage. Here they stood awhile, doubting whether they should go further. But the females leading the way, and uttering the cry of invitation, they ventured at length to follow. When a sufficient number was in the passage, the bars were let down by men placed for the purpose, and the elephants were fairly caught in the trap. (2: 17-18)

*Indur*'s response to the female elephants signals a moment of profound uncertainty. As Chi-ming Yang notes, narratives of transmigration extend “the question of likeness between self and other” by suggesting that one can “actually [become] the other” (26)—a possibility which is prevented in Aikin and Barbauld's tale by *Indur*'s retention of a “rational soul.” At this moment, however, this guarantor of *Indur*'s humanity appears to fail: how else are readers to interpret the fact that *Indur* allows himself to be “decoyed by [the] artifices” of the female elephants? The “rational soul” that he wished to retain has been submerged by an instinctive, elephantine desire. “[H]eedlessly” following the herd, *Indur*'s autonomy as a human being is lost amidst animalistic imitation—a point underlined by the shifting pronouns Aikin and Barbauld deploy, as the “he” of *Indur* is absorbed into the plural “they” of the elephants over the course of the paragraph. In this instance, *Indur*'s “rational soul”—the property that confirms his humanity—is overwhelmed as he succumbs to the impulsive appetites of animal instinct.

The hierarchical disorganisation that results from *Indur*'s apparent metamorphosis is exacerbated by the description of the female elephants. Their deceptive “artifices” and “[cries] of invitation” resemble the “coquetish arts” (97) that Mary Wollstonecraft denounces in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).<sup>13</sup> Women who employ such “arts,” Wollstonecraft argues, resemble domesticated animals: both



have been estranged from their “natural” state and have become “artificial” beings in the process (Ruston 32).<sup>14</sup> Aikin and Barbauld appear to be thinking in similar terms when they describe how the elephants have been “bred to the business” of ensnaring the males. The anthropomorphic terms they employ suggest that the elephants’ training has alienated them from their “natural” animal condition, placing them in the same uncertain territory as Wollstonecraft’s “artificial” women who have been taught only “to please” (*Vindication* 87, 93).

With its blurring of human and animal identities, the subversive potential of this moment stands in marked contrast to the more functional role that animals typically played in the period’s children’s literature. As Christine Kenyon-Jones notes, writing about animals enabled authors to teach children their “place in the social hierarchy, where beings of all kinds . . . are ranged according to the will of God” (57). Traces of this conventional perspective are evident in “The Transmigrations of Indur.” For example, when Indur is reincarnated as a bee the narrative describes the “delight” he felt at “this useful and active way of life,” noting that that he “was always one of the first abroad at the dawn, and the latest home in the evening” (2: 26). Aikin and Barbauld introduce their young readers to the pleasure of being a productive member of the social fabric, drawing upon the tradition of the moral fable and of earlier works such as Sarah Trimmer’s *Fabulous Histories*, in which the “ingenuity and industry” of bees offer a lesson in social responsibility (152). Trimmer’s didacticism is taken to further extremes when the bees’ “strong attachment . . . to their sovereign” prompts a mother to remind her son that it is “[his] duty to love [his] king” (155).

Aikin and Barbauld are far less explicit in drawing what Trimmer describes as “instructive lessons” from the behaviour of animals and insects (155).<sup>15</sup> Rather than conforming to the fable tradition, in which the bees would function as “mere stand-ins for human types” (Howard 663), Aikin and Barbauld remain attentive to the particularity

of their behavior. As in the account of the elephants, the story attempts to offer a naturalistic depiction of non-human life while retaining the integrity of Indur's humanity. This ambition is apparent when he observes the bees constructing their cells:

*Indur*, though endued with human reason, could not but admire the readiness with which he and the rest formed the most regular plans of work, all corresponding in design and execution, guided by instinct alone. (2: 26)

Aikin and Barbauld reinstate the barrier between reason and instinct with the uncanny effect of making Indur both a rational observer of, and an active participant within, this scene—a paradoxical state of affairs that seems to rule out any possible slippage between Indur's identity and that of his insect host. Elsewhere in *Evenings at Home*, Aikin and Barbauld expand on the workings of instinct, describing how it directs animals “to an useful end, but an end which the animal knows nothing of” (3: 6). In this formulation, animals are denied the self-consciousness and self-reflective powers typically possessed by humans. It is this scientific register, rather than the anthropomorphism of the fable tradition, which characterizes the account of the bees in “The Transmigrations of Indur,” with the effect of emphasising their fundamental otherness. In this respect, the story mirrors the kind of natural history writing which, Eileen Crist suggests, renders non-human beings “natural *objects* . . . upon which inexorable forces act, steering them to behave in certain ways” (1, 6). But while such anthropocentric perspectives seem to confirm the “unbridgeable hiatus between humans and animals,” this is not necessarily the case in Aikin and Barbauld's story (Crist 1). Indur's detached observation of the bees is underwritten by, but also disruptive of, the hierarchical relationship between reason and instinct, which pivots around the word “though:” “*though*” Indur is “endued with human reason” (and thus superior to the bees) he “could not but admire” the regularity

of their work. The volition conferred by reason is suspended by—and even made subordinate to—the spectacle of instinct.<sup>16</sup> In this instance, it is Indur who is directed by “inexorable forces” that steer him to behave in a certain way, thus levelling out the hierarchical relationship initially implied by the word “though.” In this instance, the captivating spectacle of animal instinct disrupts the text’s assumption of anthropocentric superiority.

### **What Animals are Made For: Beefsteaks, Brahmin, and Erroneous Sympathies**

Aikin and Barbauld’s narrative of transmigration blurs the barrier between reason and instinct; in doing so, it begins to reveal the narrow parameters by which the human is defined within *Evenings at Home*. The failure of its Hindu protagonist to maintain his rational self points towards an Orientalist conflation of Western notions of reason and Christianity. This viewpoint emerges with greater clarity elsewhere in the work of both Aikin and Barbauld, where the compassion for animals that Indur exhibits is treated with increasing scepticism.

“The Transmigrations Indur” offers glimpses of this less sympathetic perspective on non-human life when it describes the many deaths its protagonist experiences. His existence as a bee is terminated when the keeper of the hives extracts the bees’ honey: an act he performs by burning brimstone beneath the hive, killing Indur and his apian companions in the process. In *The Calendar of Nature* (1784), Aikin had protested against the cruelty of this method of obtaining honey, calling instead for the use of “fumes which will stupefy but not kill [the bees]” (73). Aikin augments his compassionate appeal by quoting from the poetry of the “humane” James Thomson: in this instance, lines from *Autumn* (1730) invest Aikin’s prose with pathos and emotional immediacy.<sup>17</sup> Such sentimentality is entirely absent in “The Transmigrations of Indur,” which merely offers a disinterested description of the process before noting that “*Indur*

was amongst the dead” (2: 27). This pragmatic tone frequently emerges in Aikin’s other writing on the treatment of animals: a tendency illustrated in his 1802 work, *The Arts of Life*. There, the topic of meat-eating illuminates the cultural and political significance of Aikin and Barbauld’s depictions of the East.

Framed as a series of letters from Aikin to his young son, *The Arts of Life* offers a series of lessons to boys on the cusp of adulthood. It provides an account of the history of humanity which leads Aikin to reflect upon the origins of agriculture and its implications for diet—a subject that turns his attention to the habits of the “antient Pythagorean” and “modern Brahmin,” both of whom subsist “solely upon vegetable food” (70). As proponents of transmigration, these figures were frequently evoked within the eighteenth-century’s nascent discourse of animal rights.<sup>18</sup> In *The Cry of Nature* (1791), for instance, John Oswald yokes together vegetarianism, Hinduism, and political Jacobinism. Praising the “merciful mythology of Hindustan,” Oswald argues that the Hindu belief in “eternal metempsychosis” is the cause of their “humane conduct towards the inferior orders of animals” (6-7). As Timothy Morton notes, for thinkers such as Oswald “[t]he vegetable diet provided an image of social progress” (25). For Aikin, however, it represented a regressive step towards the early stages of human society: in the stadial understanding of historical progress described *The Arts of Life*, primitive vegetarianism was abandoned when humans learned to supplement their diet with “sustenance . . . derived from the animal creation” (70).<sup>19</sup> Thus, although the “modern Brahmin” may exist in the historical present, his lifestyle renders him anachronistic, aligning him with the “antient Pythagorean” while reinforcing the contemporary notion that India was “in a state of intellectual stagnation” (Marshall 3). Aikin’s critique of the “modern Brahmin” continues as he suggests such figures are prone to an excessive sensitivity that leads them into error: “I am convinced,” he continues, “that man has as good a right to kill beasts for his food, as they have to kill one another” (*Arts* 70). Aikin’s

characterisation of the “modern Brahmin” is echoed in the writings of his friends, Joseph Priestley and Erasmus Darwin. In the former’s *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations* (1799), Priestley labels Hinduism’s “tenderness for animals” a “superstition and weakness, derived from their doctrine of transmigration” (7). Such views were subsequently reiterated in Darwin’s *The Temple of Nature* (1803). Darwin describes how the “erroneous sympathy” of the Indian “Gentoos” led them to “[refuse] to eat the flesh of cows and of other animals to . . . save themselves from death” during a famine (141). In contrast to the radical egalitarian of John Oswald’s *The Cry of Nature*, thinkers such as Priestley, Aikin and Darwin view the “modern Brahmin” as the self-sabotaging victim of his own compassion—an individual who is unable or unwilling to perceive animals as resources to which, according to the biblical notion of dominion, he is entitled.

Aikin’s pragmatic stance in *The Arts of Life* is underlined when his discussion of animal welfare sees him turn once more to the poetry of James Thomson. In this instance, however, the allusion is purely ironic: Thomson is evoked only to demonstrate the gulf between sentimental aesthetics and everyday reality. After informing his son that he will not “[dwell] on the cruelty of a butcher’s shop,” Aikin notes: “You may find some very pretty lines to the purpose [of vegetarianism] in the poet Thomson, who, however, could eat his beef-steak with as good a relish as any man” (70, 70-71). This light-hearted tone is a long way from the earnest appeal to the “humane” Thomson in *The Calendar of Nature*. In this example, Aikin strips Thomson’s poetry of its sympathetic function: it may be “pretty,” but it is no guide for ethical living. Moreover, Aikin suggests that Thomson is aware of this and has the capacity to distinguish between his art and his lived experience: regardless of his poetic sentiments, he can enjoy his beef-steak “with as good a relish as any man.” By contrast, the “modern Brahmin” is unable to disentangle theory from practice. His belief in transmigration clouds, rather than enlightens, his judgement

and confirms his exclusion from the shared social identity of meat-eating Christian men. His outsider status is exacerbated by his unwillingness to exercise his “right to kill beasts for his food.” By rejecting this “right,” the Brahmin also rejects the dominant position that humans occupy in Aikin’s hierarchical conception of the natural world: his racial and cultural otherness is disturbingly recast as a threat to his species identity.

In *The Arts of Life*, Aikin strips transmigration of the ethical and political potential that it offers to thinkers like John Oswald. This rationalist demystification stands in stark contrast to “The Transmigrations of Indur,” where the positive depiction of transmigration is licensed by the tale’s historically distant, fantastical setting. Indeed, when *Evenings at Home* refers to transmigration in the historical present, it is treated with the same sceptical attitude found in *The Arts of Life*. This is evident in the short dialogue “What Animals Are Made For,” which sees Aikin and Barbould turn once again to the figure of the “modern Brahmin” to explore the relative rights of humans and animals. In doing so, Aikin and Barbould substantiate the uncomfortable parallels between non-European and non-human subjects implied in *The Arts of Life*.

“What Animals are Made For” is a dialogue between a father and his daughter, Sophia. Sophia’s initial question, “Pray, what were flies made for?” leads her father to reflect upon the providential interdependence of non-human life (4: 147). As the dialogue progresses, Sophia begins to comprehend that human beings must trust in God and let nature take its course:

S. It is no charity, then, to tear a spider’s web in pieces in order to set a fly at liberty.

P. None at all—no more than it would be to demolish the traps of a poor Indian hunter, who depended upon them for his dinner. They both act as nature directs them. (4: 154)

Darren Howard has argued that this dialogue resists a hierarchical model of the food chain in favor of an ecological mode of thought in which humans and non-humans are treated as morally equivalent (664-65). But while the story may refuse a relationship based upon “difference and domination,” its dismantling of hierarchical structures is not as comprehensive as Howard suggests (665). As in *The Arts of Life*, the young protagonist is taught by her father that her status as a human being grants her dominion over other beings: “[w]e have a right to make a reasonable use of all animals for our advantage, and also to free ourselves from such as are hurtful to us” (4: 150). However, as the dialogue progresses, the notion of human superiority is complicated by the parallel between the “Indian hunter” and the predatory spider. The hunter stands outside of the exclusively human “we” to whom the father figure refers, belonging instead to the “they” comprised of spiders and other non-human animals. Instead of exercising their will, the beings that constitute this group act “as nature directs them,” suggesting that the behavior of the “poor Indian hunter” is motivated by animal instinct rather than human reason. Far from being non-hierarchical in its outlook, this dialogue creates a graded notion of the human, which places its Christian interlocutors above their non-European counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

The role of racial and religious identity in defining the human comes to the fore at the dialogue’s conclusion, which turns once more to the figure of the Brahmin. Sophia’s father offers to tell his daughter “a story” which focuses on a “venerable Bramin, who had never in his days eaten any thing but rice and milk, and held it the greatest of crimes to shed the blood of any thing that had life” (4: 154). One day, the Brahmin witnesses ants being devoured by a “little bird,” which is then consumed by a sparrow-hawk. In turn, the sparrow-hawk is killed by a falcon, which is subsequently pounced upon by a lynx. Finally, a “huge tyger” emerges from the vegetation and feeds upon the lynx (4: 155). Having witnessed these events with increasing horror, the tiger’s

proximity to the Brahmin causes him to “[make] off in great terror,” at which point he meets “an English soldier, armed with his musket:”

[The Brahmin] pointed eagerly to the place where the tyger was making his bloody repast. The soldier levelled his gun, and laid the tyger dead. Brave fellow! exclaimed the Bramin. I am very hungry, said the soldier, can you give me a beef-steak? I see you have plenty of cows here. Horrible! cried the Bramin; what! I kill the sacred cows of Brama! Then kill the next tyger yourself, said the soldier. (4: 156)

This anecdote concludes the dialogue without further comment, as if its significance requires no explanation. While this is typical of the volume’s pedagogical approach, by which “children discover their own moral knowledge,” the implied meaning is far from clear (Levy 133). The most obvious interpretation is that the “venerable” Brahmin’s decision to abstain from the consumption of flesh is fundamentally misguided: nature is indifferent to his compassion for the lives of animals and his refusal to consume flesh does not remove him from the food-chain—a point that is brought home when the proximity of the tiger fills him with terror. As in *The Arts of Life*, the Brahmin’s concern for living creatures is made to look unnecessary and excessive. While this point is made in a comical manner, the depiction of the Brahmin’s docility has a deeper and more troubling political resonance that becomes apparent when this story is considered in the context of *Evening at Home* as a whole.

“The Wanderer’s Return,” from the fifth volume of *Evenings at Home*, sees a similar characterisation of the Hindu inhabitants of India: their “gentle and effeminate . . . disposition” means that they have “always fallen under the yoke of their invaders,” the eponymous protagonist states (5: 46). Informed by Aikin and Barbauld’s Unitarian



religious principles, the story offers a biting critique of Britain's military presence in India. The wanderer recalls how his travels there "forced [him] to blush for [his] countrymen, whose avarice and rapacity" have "laid waste this fair land, and brought on it all the horrors of famine and desolation" (5: 46). What Penny Mahon describes as the "radical antimilitarist" tendency of *Evenings at Home* is rarely more apparent, but the ideological clarity of this moment only renders the conclusion of "What Animals Are Made For" all the more puzzling. There, the English soldier's actions appear to be a necessary corrective response to the Brahmin's sensitivity and vulnerability. But if the soldier is a saviour rather than an "invader," he is an ambiguous one. His desire to transform the "sacred cows of Brama" into beef-steaks represents a blinkered pragmatism which makes no concession to the beliefs of the country in which he finds himself. Aikin and Barbauld juxtapose the ignorance of the soldier with the excessive sensitivity of the Brahmin, whose religious beliefs prevent him from asserting his human "right" to use "animals for [his] advantage" (4: 150). Indeed, the story hints that the Brahmin's inflexibility in this matter will seal his fate when "the next tyger" attacks. Read in this way, the moral of the story appears to be that humans who fail to acknowledge their superiority over other animals are doomed to relinquish it. Hindu attitudes toward meat-eating are out of alignment with God's will, as expressed in the biblical concept of dominion; as a result, the Eastern subject occupies a tenuous position in this anthropocentric, and markedly Christian, understanding of what it means to be human.

### **Conclusion: "Still am I man?"**

To conclude, I turn to two responses to "The Transmigrations of Indur:" Maria Hack's 1821 novel for children, *Harry Beaufoy; or The Pupil of Nature* and a poem by Charles Sneyd Edgeworth—the younger half-brother of the educationalist and novelist Maria Edgeworth. Demonstrating the impact that "The Transmigrations of Indur" had on its

readers, these works draw attention to the anxieties generated by its account of non-human life. As I will demonstrate, both Hack and Edgeworth respond to Aikin and Barbauld's tale by reasserting the primacy of human reason.

In Maria Hack's *Harry Beaufoy*, the eponymous character reads "The Transmigrations of Indur" to his mother, who lauds the "skill with which the writer has introduced so many curious particulars, respecting the habits of different animals" (136-37). Yet amidst this admiration, Hack feels compelled to remind her protagonist of the story's moral purpose. Turning from the book, Harry is "attracted by the humming of a bee," which causes him to declare that "Indur with all his knowledge, could not have been more sensible of the importance of laying up a store for the winter" (137-38). This, in turn, prompts a corrective response from his mother: "You are mistaken, Harry. This industrious little creature is not endued with prudence and foresight; for these are qualities belonging to rational beings [...] [T]he actions of animals which are not endued with reason, are referred to a feeling called *instinct*" (138). Harry's anthropomorphic identification with the bees is thus curtailed by his mother's commentary, which intervenes to remind him of the division between "rational beings" and non-human life.

A similar reminder of species difference is offered by my second example. Charles Sneyd Edgeworth first read "The Transmigrations of Indur" aged ten; a decade later he composed a poem re-telling the tale in rhyming couplets (Fyfe 276). A manuscript copy of this poem exists amongst the papers of Maria Edgeworth, and it was later published in *The New Year's Gift and Juvenile Souvenir* (1830)—a periodical for children edited by Pricilla Maden Watts. In its published form, the poem conspicuously diminishes the fantastical elements of Aikin and Barbauld's story, abandoning what the prefatory note refers to as "the machinery of the Indian fairy, Ruzinda [sic]" (Edgeworth 216). While this decision has ostensibly been made "for the sake of brevity and simplicity" (216) it can also be attributed to the periodical's suspicion of imaginative

fiction—something Watts refers to in her Preface, where she quotes from Maria Edgeworth’s *The Parent’s Assistant* (1796) to justify her “studied rejection” of anything which is not “useful knowledge” (Watts vi).

Like the original tale, Edgeworth’s poem concludes with Indur returning to his human form. Strikingly, however, the verse re-telling imposes the kind of moral lesson that is absent from Aikin and Barbauld’s original:

Still am I man?—may waking Indur deem  
 His Transmigrations but a chastening dream?  
 Corrected now, his wayward fancies o’er,  
 His weak presumption shall offend no more.  
 The Omniscient Ruler can alone dispense  
 The gifts of reason, and instinctive sense . . .  
 To Man alone, a thinking soul is given  
 By the omnipotent decrees of Heaven;—  
 Indur no more shall Heaven’s best gift refuse,  
 But learn from Reason, Reason’s power to use. (228-29)

At the conclusion of Aikin and Barbauld’s prose narrative, it is noted that Indur returned to his former “innocent life,” where he “cherished the memories of his transmigrations” (2: 34). By contrast, the published version of Edgeworth’s poem imposes a religious moral on the story, labelling Indur’s experiences of transmigration “a chastening dream” that corrects the “wayward fancies” that caused him to reject the “decrees of Heaven.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the poem deviates from the original tale by representing Indur’s initial wish as an active refusal of reason. Ignoring his explicit desire to “retain [his] rational soul” (2: 4), the poem depicts Indur’s metamorphoses as a transgressive turn towards “instinctive

sense”—a choice that upsets the divine gift of “a thinking soul,” which is the unique property of “man.”

As I have suggested, in *Evenings at Home* the frequency with which Indur falls under the sway of his animal hosts’ instinctive powers dilutes the authority of human reason. The slippage between reason and instinct can be viewed as a by-product of the story’s fanciful premise, rather than the consciously transgressive gesture it becomes in Edgeworth’s poem. Nevertheless, the nature of his poetic response, and its publication in *The New Year’s Gift*, suggests some anxiety that the original story might encourage an excessive level of identification with non-human life. Rather than a laudable impulse of the sympathetic imagination, the poem implies that the desire to identify with ostensibly lesser beings has its origins in “wayward fancies:” pagan impulses that constitute a betrayal of one’s humanity. In this instance, Edgeworth’s condemnatory language echoes what Erasmus Darwin terms the “erroneous sympathy” (141), and Joseph Priestley the “superstition and weakness” (7), of those non-Christian subjects who adhere to the doctrine of transmigration. Similar criticisms are apparent in Aikin and Barbauld’s satirical treatment of the “modern Brahmin” in “What Animals Are Made For” and *The Arts of Life*. Within those pieces, a belief in transmigration is ridiculed as an anachronistic superstition; correspondingly, sympathy for non-human life is considered little more than an enfeebling sensitivity by which humans are estranged from reason: the very quality by which they are defined.

In its refusal to censure the beliefs of its protagonist, “The Transmigrations of Indur” can be seen as anomalous: a point that is confirmed by the desire of subsequent readers to introduce a more explicitly corrective moral, as Hack’s novel and Edgeworth’s poem demonstrate. While Aikin and Barbauld confidently state that man is “an animal possessed of *reason*, and the only one” (3: 114), “The Transmigrations of Indur” suggests that the rational self might falter in the face of extreme identification with non-human

others. Elsewhere in their work, Aikin and Barbauld guard against this possibility by suggesting that for children to become fully human they must learn to assert their biblically-ordained dominance over animals; it is, as they note in “What Animals are Made For,” a human’s “right to make a reasonable use of all animals for our advantage” (4: 150). Those humans who fail to assert this right for religious reasons—such as the “modern Brahmin”—are troublingly placed on the margins of humanity. While recent critics have suggested that *Evenings at Home* embodies “the transformative potential of rational discourse,” Indur’s many transformations ultimately reveal the exclusions harbored within “rational discourse” itself (Levy 140). While “The Transmigrations of Indur” encourages children to develop knowledge of, and empathy for, the non-human world, reading the story within the wider context of *Evenings at Home* also reveals the limits of Aikin and Barbauld’s cosmopolitan educational project.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The authorship of the pieces within *Evenings at Home* remains open to discussion. Perhaps the best guide is provided by Aikin's daughter Lucy, who attributes just fourteen of the work's ninety-nine pieces to Barbauld (McCarthy 323-24, 629 n. 47). However, Michelle Levy speculates that Barbauld may have played a bigger role in the composition of *Evenings at Home* and proposes that we should look beyond the attribution of individual authorship and understand the work as the expression of the "collectively held views" of Aikin and Barbauld (131). Within this article, I follow Levy's suggestion and refer to pieces in *Evenings at Home* as the joint work of both Aikin and Barbauld.

<sup>2</sup> Charles discovers the definition of a horse in the second volume of *Evenings at Home*, in a piece entitled "A Lesson in the Art of Distinguishing" (2: 121-36).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 1:28. For a discussion of the biblical notion of dominion, see Thomas (17-25).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Aikin's cosmopolitan vision, see Daniels and Elliott.

<sup>5</sup> Notable exceptions are provided by discussions of *Evenings at Home* in animal-focused monographs such as Christine Kenyon-Jones's *Kindred Brutes*, Tess Cosslett's *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction* and David Perkins' *Romanticism and Animal Rights*. A thorough account of *Evening at Home*'s treatment of animals is offered by Darren Howard in "Talking Animals and Reading Children."

<sup>6</sup> As Sharada Sugirtharajah notes, Hinduism is a contentious term that "some scholars see . . . as a nineteenth-century Western construct while others contest such a claim." Either way, it is clear that "the notion of a monolithic Hinduism emerged in the colonial era" (xi).

<sup>7</sup> Applying Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to children's literature, Perry Nodelman observes that "the discourse of the other" serves the purpose of Western acts of self-definition—a process he paraphrases as: "I define who I am myself as a European by seeing the Oriental as everything I am not" (32).

<sup>8</sup> The doctrine of transmigration—the notion that the soul passes from one body to another, either within or across different species—is referred to in the writing of both Aikin and Barbauld, most famously in the latter's poem, "The Mouse's Petition." For an overview of recent approaches to the poem, see Murphy.

<sup>9</sup> These comments appear in the essay "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror."

<sup>10</sup> As Liz Bellamy notes, "[a] significant subsection of the [it-narrative] genre focuses . . . on metempsychosis and the transmigration of the soul, drawing on the classical tradition of transformation narratives" (121).

<sup>11</sup> The tradition of British Protestant Dissent to which Aikin and Barbauld belonged was by no means unified in its thinking about the nature of the soul. William McCarthy outlines the evolution of Barbauld's thought, describing how, in later life, she came to conceive of the relationship between soul and body "in dualist terms that posit a material body animated by a spirit-mind." McCarthy places this line of thought in opposition to Joseph Priestley's more starkly materialist understanding of human life (526, 525). For further disputes within the Dissenting tradition, see Thomson.

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<sup>12</sup> As the *Oxford English Dictionary* states, one definition of the verb “animate” is “to give life to, make alive or active” (“Animate, v.” Def. 5. II).

<sup>13</sup> An even more anthropocentric version of the coquetry of female elephants is offered by the Quaker children’s writer Priscilla Wakefield. She describes them as “sly deceiver[s]” who perform their role “with the address, dexterity, and allurements of Dalilah [sic]” (254).

<sup>14</sup> This idea is stated clearly in the introduction to the *Vindication*, where Wollstonecraft describes how orientating female education around “libertine notions of beauty . . . [makes] mere animals of them” (74). For a discussion of this subject, see Ramos.

<sup>15</sup> It was the absence of such socially conservative patriotism that caused Trimmer to subject *Evenings at Home* to a “stinging critique” (Levy 146-47) in *The Guardian of Education* (1802-1806).

<sup>16</sup> As Aikin and Barbauld note elsewhere in *Evenings at Home*, “the economy of bees may justify us in believing extraordinary things of the sagacity of animals. The society of bees goes further than that of beavers, and in some respects, beyond most among men themselves” (1: 82-83).

<sup>17</sup> In the section that Aikin quotes, Thomson offers an emotive rendering of the process of extracting bees’ honey using brimstone, describing how “the dark oppressive steam” leaves them “robb’d and murder’d” (73). On Aikin’s use of Thomson’s work, see Major (226).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the relationship between transmigration and animal rights see Granata.

<sup>19</sup> On Aikin and stadial history see Daniels and Elliott (114-19).

<sup>20</sup> Aikin and Barbauld’s “poor Indian hunter” is a probable allusion to the Native American “poor Indian” of Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Man” (1.99 / p. 275). With his pagan beliefs, Pope’s “Indian” is a figure of otherness, who challenges the poem’s insistence “upon the categorical difference between man and nature” (Willan 71). In a similar manner, Aikin and Barbauld’s “poor Indian hunter” represents an outsider figure whose status as a human is cast into doubt by his identification with “nature.”

<sup>21</sup> Rather than “wayward fancies,” Charles Sneyd Edgeworth’s 1806 manuscript version of the poem refers to “wayward errors” (fol 15), emphasizing Indur’s transgression.