

The Tropical Empire: Exotic Animals and Beastly Men in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

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IN *THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU* (1896), H. G. Wells spares none of his characters. If there are no fully human characters in this post-Darwinian novel, then there are also no heroes in this story of imperial collapse working against the grain of those standard adventure tales that had gained popularity in nineteenth-century England. Typically, such colonialist stories featured upper-class or aristocratic heroes bringing progress and civilization to their perceived animal-like primitive Others in the outposts of a growing empire. Unlike the idealized heroes of British adventure fiction, the upper-middle-class characters of this narrative are coded as degenerates, failing to establish productive relations with any of the non-European natives or the lower-class members of British society in the tropics. In this analysis of *Moreau*, which is often studied as a science fiction¹ work that stages a cross-species conflict between a vivisector and

¹ There is an abundance of criticism on *Moreau* as a science fiction. Besides focusing on the evolutionary theme of the human-animal relationship, such readings often situate the novel in the context of anti-vivisection debates of the period. Some of the most informative examples are Roger Bowen's 1976 article "Science, Myth, and Fiction in H. G. Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau*," Darko Suvin's *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and Power*, Jill Milling's "The Ambiguous Animal: Evolution of the Beast-Man in Scientific

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his grotesque Beast-Folk, I argue that the portrayal of British sailors in this narrative deserves more critical attention for the twinned purpose of understanding their class-inflected animalization and involvement in the overseas trade of exotic animals.

Gothic studies critics of *Moreau* have produced thought-provoking commentaries on the racial and gendered implications of degeneration encoded here. The arguments of Kelly Hurley in *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin-de-siècle* (1996) and Cyndy Hendershot in *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (1998) first drew my attention to the recurring topic of degeneration in the Gothic studies strand of Wells scholarship. Like Hurley, Hendershot has incisively examined the ways in which the first-person narrator, the scientist, and his assistant are all figured as decadent Englishmen, struggling to maintain their masculinity and imperial authority in a tropical outpost. Hurley and Hendershot offer useful insights on the treatment of race and gender in *Moreau*, but their readings do not tie the central human-animal problematic to the critique of animal trade that is conveyed in the novel. By focusing on the representation of British sailors who are associated with such trade, I build on the analyses of these scholars. In what follows, my goal is to link the animalization of British sailors to the role played by them in the reification of exotic animals in the tropics. Initially, exotic animals of this story are not just objects of scientific research or aspects of an anarchic feminized nature. First and foremost, they are presented as trade goods. I argue that the novel employs animal representation paradoxically, both to critique the capture and commodification of exotic animals and to sustain alienating views about animals and human animality, and this is most clearly revealed in the portrayal of the representatives of British commerce and imperialism.

Imperial Menagerie

The paucity of criticism on the narrative function of the sailors is surprising, given that the first quarter of the novel focuses exclusively on their encounters with the shipwrecked narrator Edward Prendick. The opening five chapters urge us not to read the central setting of the story—an unnamed tropical island in the South Pacific—as a self-contained space. Most critics misread the novel in exactly this way. For example, in her 2003 article “The Unholy Alliance of Science in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*,”

Creation Myths,” and Roslynn D. Haynes’s “The Unholy Alliance of Science in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.”

Roslynn Haynes claims that “it is clear from the outset that Moreau embodies several stock characteristics of the alchemist. Thus he lives in such rigorous seclusion that he even intends to deny the shipwrecked Prendick access to his island (itself a physical symbol of his isolation), and his work is conducted in the strictest secrecy in a locked laboratory” (56). Haynes continues, “Moreau, like Frankenstein, has cut himself off from the humanizing influences of society” (57). The main problem with this reading is that it conflates the island with the scientist inhabiting and governing that island. To claim that Moreau “cuts himself off from the humanizing influences of society” is to overlook the link that the novel subtly draws between his scientific project and imperial commerce. Moreau has severed his ties with the metropolitan centre of the Empire, but the tropical island that he rules is not sealed off from the British network of trade that surrounds and shapes the island. It is worth noting that although Moreau isolates himself culturally and intellectually from the scientists in London, he maintains an economic connection with the British sailors during his eleven-year stay on the island: once a year, the sailors supply the scientist with a shipment of animals acquired from tropical territories, animals whom he eventually tries to humanize. For this reason, the science-based reification of animals dramatized in this novel should not be read in isolation from the existence of imperial commerce in the tropics.

The connection between the sailors and the scientist is significant because it foregrounds the way in which unregulated overseas trade is implicated in helping the Frankensteinian figure carry out his gruesome experiments on a range of exotic animals. Even before the animals are physically humanized by Moreau, they are first and foremost transformed into trade goods by specific market forces that have already penetrated tropical outposts of the Empire. Due to his participation in this tropical marketplace, Moreau is a composite figure—not just a vivisector and an imperial administrator of an island but also a buyer of wild animals. His transaction with the *Ipecacuanha* sailors suggests that his experiments are dependent on the economic practices that encircle the island, practices that are in particular related to the hunting, trading, and shipping of animals across the tropics. In chapter 14, Moreau gives an account of his arrival at the island eleven years earlier. He tells Prendick: “I remember the green stillness of the island and the empty ocean about us, as though it was yesterday. The place seemed waiting for me. The stores were landed and the house was built. The Kanakas founded some huts near the ravine. I went to work here upon what I had brought with me” (128). Commenting on this passage, John Hammond argues that “Moreau enters this unspoilt

Eden as an intruder, destroying the natural order with his wanton experiments and despotic regime” (5). Also implicit in the quoted passage is the idea that Moreau brings about the intrusion not only of science but of surreptitious trade into a supposedly paradisaic space. Moreau does not go to work upon what might already prowl in the “green stillness of the island” but upon the animals he had brought with him, meaning the ones he had purchased prior to humanizing them on the island.

Despite their contempt for the scientist and his assistants, the British sailors play a major role in displacing undomesticated animals from their indigenous habitats to introduce them to the island governed by Moreau. How does the image of captive animals on their ship relate to the role of imperial menageries in the wider cultural context of nineteenth-century England? In *The Animal Estate: The British and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, a wide-ranging and fascinating study of the commodification and containment of exotic animals in the zoos and menageries of nineteenth-century England, social historian Harriet Ritvo states that “exotic captives” were at once “emblems of human mastery over the natural world and of British dominion over remote territories” (205). Exhibitions of exotic animals in popular public spaces were, she puts it pithily, “shows of power” (217). Keeping this cultural backdrop in mind, one may claim that at least prima facie the imperial menagerie on the *Ipecacuanha* is an illustration of human dominion over undomesticated animals that originate outside England.² Specifically, the captives on board such as the puma and the llama function as spectacles of British mastery over exotic animals. However, instead of replicating jingoistic notions about the triumph of Englishmen over exotic animals in foreign realms, this narrative shifts the focus from the issue of power to that of governance. Put differently, *Moreau* is less interested in presenting exotic captives as proof of British conquest and acquisition and more interested in imagining the decline of self-governing communities led by Englishmen such as the captain and the scientist in the tropics. In this section, the captivity or the property status of exotic animals is not an issue per se. Rather, at stake is the lack of governance, the fact that no external authorities are monitoring or regulating the exchange of animals enacted between the sailors and the scientist in the outposts of the Empire.

² Kurt Koenigsberger discusses the “menagerie as a site of genesis and management of English stories about the empire” (x) in his book-length study on the relation of collections of imperial beasts to narrative practices in England. For more on this fascinating topic, see his *The Novel and the Menagerie: Totality, Englishness, and Empire*.

The depiction of the sailors is significant not only for revealing the confluence of maritime commerce and science in displacing animals from their indigenous habitats in a surreptitious manner but also for underscoring the treatment of exotic animals as commodities in the imperial period. On the *Ipecacuanha* Prendick takes an interest in the animals that are being transported across ports such as Arica and Callao in the South Pacific: “What are these beasts for? Merchandise, curios? Does the captain think he is going to sell them somewhere in the South Seas?” (79). From the tight-lipped Montgomery, Prendick receives no clear answer, yet his questions point to the commodification of animals in which Montgomery as a trader and the sailors as cargo carriers are involved. Far from opposing the capture or commodification of animals, Prendick unreservedly thinks of exotic captives such as “a huge puma” and “a solitary llama” as trade goods meant for human use, goods that are perhaps intended for sale to public or private collectors of exotic species (76). In her discussion of imperial menageries of England, Ritvo informs us that in the nineteenth century big cats such as lions and tigers had been of special attraction to people interested in exotic species from the tropics. Referring to the lion, she further notes, “the abject captivity of the king of beasts provided the most conclusive evidence in the zoo [or the menagerie] of the human triumph over nature” (223).

In this section of the novel, Prendick no doubt serves as an ideologue of the sort of fetishizing interest that nineteenth-century British society took in exotic animals in general and the feline captive in particular. It is apparent later on that Prendick feels a mixture of fear, irritation, and pity toward such exotic felines as the vivisected puma and the Leopard-Man in chapters 8 and 16. Having borne witness to the unnecessary suffering Moreau inflicts on the Beast-Folk, Prendick expresses his disapproval of the scientist and concern for the Beast-Folk: “Now they stumbled in the shackles of humanity, lived in a fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand; their mock-human existence, begun in an agony, was one long internal struggle, one long dread of Moreau—and for what? It was the wantonness of it that stirred me” (145). Indeed, Prendick criticizes Moreau for his “irresponsible, utterly careless” treatment of the Beast-Folk (145). Nevertheless, at this stage of the narrative Prendick uncritically accepts the absorption of exotic animals into an imperial network of trade. For Prendick as for the sailors, exotic captives are nothing more than goods, objects of exchange possibly meant for human entertainment or education. The fact that Prendick at this point does not think of the exotic captives as

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sentient beings is indicative of the extent to which he is insensible to their suffering caused by forced displacement and confinement.

On one level, the description Prendick gives of the human-animal relation on the *Ipecacuanha* suggests that the sailors have successfully subdued the animals held on the ship. Far from appearing dangerous, the puma, as Prendick tells us, is “crouched together ... a black heap in the corner of its cage” (82). On another level, this sense of human triumph is punctured by images of containment: “a huge puma,” Prendick reports, “was cramped in a little iron cage far too small even to give it turning room ... and a solitary llama was squeezed in a mere box of a cage forward” (79). These observations do not invite us to read Prendick as voicing the sentiments of an animal advocate or an anti-vivisectionist of the period—sentiments that may be at odds with the impulse to commodify or to instrumentalize animals for the benefit of imperial commerce or scientific research. Rather, the indirect targets of these deflating observations are the sailors, those representatives and functionaries of British commerce and imperialism. To some extent, through his mention of “a little iron cage” and “a mere box of a cage” Prendick enlists sympathy for the exotic captives. But more to the point, Prendick reveals his own doubts about the extent to which lower-class men can be trusted to further British dominance and commerce in the tropics, given that their ship is not even suitably equipped with cages in which exotic animals could be securely contained. By drawing attention to the moral and material decline of the sailors, Prendick evinces his own class-specific anxieties about the danger they may pose to the progress of the Empire. Needless to say, this multivalent narrative cannot be reduced to the perceptions or anxieties of its narrator. Despite the apparent flimsiness of the cage that Prendick anxiously observes, it is indeed sufficient to contain the puma on the ship. By contrast, chapter 17 shows that the more sophisticated restraints devised by Moreau fail to deter this tormented animal from escaping his laboratory.

On an allegorical level, *Moreau* suggests that just as the *Ipecacuanha* cages barely contain the exotic animals and just as the scientist fails to humanize the Beast-Folk, so too British cultural influences attain only partial success in taming the animal propensities of the sailors, given their rampant drinking and bullying of “the black-faced man” (78). Instead of authorizing British expansion in the tropics, Moreau erodes confidence in the imperial enterprise by associating the representatives of British maritime commerce with disorder and decay. Thus, for instance, when the *Ipecacuanha* captain attributes the litter on deck to the presence of exotic captives and the non-European man on board, his eagerness to

chuck them overboard reads less as sensible safeguarding of his crew and more as senseless scapegoating of human and nonhuman Others. Looking at the litter on deck, Prendick notes, “Certainly, I never beheld a deck so dirty. It was littered with scraps of carrot, shreds of green stuff, and indescribable filth” (79). But instead of endorsing claims of the captain, his account implies that had the sailors not been guzzling down alcohol then most likely order, efficiency, and cleanliness could have been maintained on their ship. In this way, through a suggestive reversal, British sailors rather than exotic captives are identified as sources of chaos as well as filth soiling the deck of the ship. In chapter 21, the reversion of the Beast-Folk combined with the disintegration of the sailors presents another reversal of the human-animal hierarchy: the sailors are neither masters on sea nor the dominant predators on land, and, as such, their anti-humanist representation undermines the spirit of maritime expansion in the tropics. Before paddling out to sea, much to his “horror” and “repulsion,” Prendick sees some of the “Beasts” approaching the shore to feast on the “wretched remains” of the sailors (171). This image relates to an early example of predation, described in chapter 1, in which two ship-wrecked men—a sailor and a passenger like Prendick—roll overboard and fall prey to “the sharks that followed” their dingy (74). In each case, animals are imagined as the dominant predators while the sailors are relegated to the bottom rung of the food chain. By contrast, the image of sharks in specific recalls a popular episode from *The Coral Island*, a juvenile adventure story published in 1857, in which the author Robert Ballantyne relates a bloody encounter between three British boys—the only survivors of a shipwreck in the South Pacific—and a shark that attacks their boat. Like *Moreau*, *The Coral Island* is a robinsonade centred on themes of survival and conquest, involving confrontations with exotic predators like the shark. In chapter 7, the shark is presented as “the first great danger that had befallen [three boys] since landing on this island” (79), the point of which is to celebrate their courage and solidarity in overcoming the attacks of a sea “monster” (77). Like *The Coral Island*, *Moreau* portrays exotic animals as obstacles and threats that Englishmen may need to overcome in the tropics. However, the upbeat message of the former adventure story is reassessed and subverted when *Moreau* imagines Englishmen as falling prey to exotic animals, inverting the conventional order of power in human-animal relations.

Here it is worth recalling the symbolic use to which exotic animals are put within another literary work of the imperial period. In the famous section 118 of *In Memoriam*, Lord Tennyson appeals to such exotic animals as the ape and the tiger, which were not indigenous to British soil, as

symbols of the base nature that he enjoins his readers to overcome as part of their human identity. Like *In Memoriam* (1850) and *The Coral Island* (1857), mid-Victorian texts produced at the height of the British Empire, *Moreau* reduces exotic animals to brutal and amoral qualities in order to posit them as the adversaries of British men, as is seen in scenes in which the sailors and the scientist succumb to sharks or Beast-Folk. Hence, in this narrative what undergoes a process of transvaluation is not so much the symbolic construction of the animal as “red in tooth and claw”³ as the popular perception of imperial trade in exotic animals. Indeed, the novel undermines confidence in overseas trade of exotic animals by staging the downfall of the agents of such trade: the sailors and the scientist. The association of the sailors with waste and decline as opposed to wealth and progress reaches its nadir in the penultimate chapter, eerily subtitled “The Reversion of the Beast Folk.” Following the deaths of Moreau, Montgomery, and M’Ling, Prendick is stranded on the tropical island with the Beast-Folk reverting to their animal origins. Unable to make a raft on his own, our hapless narrator spends months in desperation, “hoping and praying for a ship” to rescue him from the creatures on the island (168). Eventually a boat appears near the shore “westward of the ruins of the enclosure,” and Prendick discovers that “the men in it were dead, had been dead so long that they fell to pieces when [he] tilted the boat on its side and dragged them out. One had a shock of red hair, like the captain of the *Ipecacuanha*, and a dirty white cap lay in the bottom of the boat” (171).

Here the juxtaposition of the sailors’ decomposing bodies and the enclosure ruins may be read as an allegory of the impermanence of imperial commerce and science in the tropical territories. On one hand, British sailors fail to return to the metropolitan centre of the Empire with material capital in the form of exotic animals or exotic produce such as “copra” (72); on the other, Moreau fails to route back intellectual capital in the form of published findings to his former community of scientists in London. In no uncertain terms, Prendick criticizes Moreau for his “curiosity, his mad, aimless investigations, [which] drove him on; and the Things [which] were thrown out to live a year or so, to struggle and blunder and suffer, and at last to die painfully” (145). In imagining this double whammy, the

³ Here I allude to section 56 of *In Memoriam*, in which Alfred Lord Tennyson coined the catchphrase “Nature, red in tooth and claw” to denote the callousness of beasts such as apes and tigers that prey upon one another. Like his mid-Victorian predecessor, Wells predominantly associates animality with violence, treating it as an adversary of humankind. He calls into service exotic animals to represent the beastly nature he wants his post-Darwinian audience to abjure.

novel refuses to offer reassurance to its readers about the economic success or cultural dominance of the British in the outposts of the Empire. Decaying bodies of sailors alongside the enclosure ruins present a spectacle of decline, one that cuts across determinacies of class and profession, forecasting the end of the tropical Empire in an apocalyptic vein.⁴ Through such spectacles, this cautionary tale tries to unsettle the popular understanding of imperial menageries, consisting of exotic captives, as shows of power over nature and foreign realms. In addition, as we shall see, this narrative subverts British self-definition through its emphasis on the animality of the sailors and of the narrator. *Moreau* drives home the point that the danger Englishmen encounter in the tropics is not just external to them in the form of exotic animals “red in tooth and claw” but also within them.

Beastly Men

In this section, I reflect on the political agenda underlying the depiction of the sailors’ animality. Understanding what is at stake in foregrounding the animality of the sailors becomes clearer through an examination of the relationship they bear to M’Ling, repeatedly described by Prendick as a “black-faced man” (78, 79, 80). In chapter 3 this non-European man is assaulted by a pack of crewmen and their captain on the *Ipecacuanha*. In recent years, this multilayered narrative has been read in light of the debates that have emerged in the field of animal studies.⁵ One of the main tasks of animal studies is to interpret representations of animals in ways that do not reduce actual animals to symbols of abstractions or surrogates of people. Lest I incur the standard zoocritical charge of failing to read the animal qua animal in case of M’Ling, my reading of him as a non-European native proceeds from the premise that he is an overdetermined character. He is presented as “the black-faced man,” especially in the section of the novel I analyze. He is not just a human constructed of “a bear, tainted with dog and ox” (135) by the scientist but also consistently anthropomorphized by the narrative itself, even as it points to his animal qualities. Until

4 It is not uncommon for the theme of apocalypse to be stressed in Wellsian criticism; see Elaine Showalter’s “The Apocalyptic Fables of H. G. Wells” and Kevin Mills’s monograph *Approaching Apocalypse: Unveiling Revelation in Victorian Writing* for more insights on this topic.

5 For readings of *The Island of Moreau* primarily from an animal studies perspective, see Philip Armstrong’s chapter “Gulliver, Frankenstein, Moreau,” in *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, and Carrie Rohman’s chapter “Facing the Animal,” in *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*.

the end of chapter 13, the midpoint of the novel, Prendick as well as his implied readers are unaware of the fact that the non-European servants of Moreau are actually animals he has humanized. For this reason, on one level, the delayed decoding of the novel invites us to read M'Ling as a racial Other of the British characters.

That the non-European M'Ling is meant to be read as a missing link between animals and humans on the ladder of evolution is suggested from the get-go by his actual "standing on the ladder" (78), an interstitial space that simultaneously marks him off from the captive animals on the deck and the humans Prendick and Montgomery in the cabin. The missing-link theory of evolution, as Hendershot notes in *The Animal Within*, served as a scientifically sanctioned justification for imperialism in late-nineteenth-century British society. By defining non-Europeans as intermediaries between the animal and the human, and by stressing their proximity to an alleged animal ancestry, the missing-link theory lent support to the colonial mission, that is, to the treatment of non-Europeans as the natural inferiors of their white masters, who were elevated to the top rung of the evolutionary ladder (126–29). It can be argued that in their brute treatment of M'Ling British sailors operate as products of this social Darwinist strand of evolution which not only naturalized differences among the British and their racial Others but also normalized violence against the latter by defining them as less than human.

However, the crucial thing to note is that *Moreau* is neither in support of the influential missing-link thesis nor of the sailors' mistreatment of the interstitial "black-faced creature" (79). Rather, *Moreau* offers counter-colonial representations of British identity through its emphasis on the sailors' unprovoked aggression toward the non-European man. Focusing on the treatment of race in this novel, Hendershot points out that Prendick "support[s] fin-de-siècle racial theories ... by already preconceiving of any native as potentially animalistic" (128). This point should be developed further, for it is interesting to note that Prendick does not excuse assaults on M'Ling as justifiable reactions of Englishmen toward their racial Other. Rather, in a gut-wrenching account of the abuse M'Ling undergoes, Prendick equates the sailors with the staghounds by describing both of them as "brutes" (80, 85), and in doing so he relegates the seamen as well as their canine companions to the bottom rungs of the evolutionary ladder. Notably, the juxtaposition of the loutish sailors and the black-faced man makes him appear more civilized. Observing the docile manner in which M'Ling conducts himself, Prendick recognizes that he does nothing to provoke the sailors; still, along with the "grisly staghounds," they exult in seeing

their captain deliver a “tremendous blow between the shoulder-blades” of the black-faced man, causing him to collapse on the deck “like a felled ox” (80). Granted that the discourse of imperialism⁶ depended on maintaining iron-clad boundaries between the British self and its imagined animal-like racial Other, the emphasis on the sailors’ savagery destabilizes such essentialized identities. To put it another way, the portrayal of the seafaring bullies, depicted as sliding down the evolutionary ladder, is subversive insofar as it defamiliarizes the notion of a civilized, rational British self.

This defamiliarization of British identity collapses the sense of difference upon which claims of imperialism rested—claims that conventionally relied upon the dual mechanism of disavowing the animality of the British self and projecting it onto its racial Others. Even so, the collapse of essentialized differences between the sailors and the black-faced man does not free the latter from the stigma of the animal: M’Ling, despite his conformity to British speech, clothes, and manners, is unnerving to the sailors and the narrator. The deceptively simple sentence, “He was dressed in dark-blue serge, and had peculiarly thick, coarse, black hair” (78), illustrates what one might call the ambivalent syntax of the narrative perspective. “He was dressed in dark-blue serge,” Prendick informs his upper-middle-class readers, noting reassuring signs of conformity to British dress and ideology in the black-faced man. Yet in the next breath, momentary reassurance granted to his readers is undercut by the observation that M’Ling had “peculiarly thick, coarse, black hair ... He turned with animal swiftness” (78). Such contradictory statements suggest that however reassuring the black-faced man might appear in following the footsteps of his British masters, in evolutionary terms he is still stalked by an animal ancestry which sets him apart from the civilized narrator. The great irony of *Moreau* is that this complacent self-definition of the British gentleman is brought under fire by numerous textual details that reveal his animalistic tendencies.

6 In undermining the discourse of imperialism and in sketching anti-heroic portraits of the sailors and of the shipwrecked protagonist, *Moreau* revises generic conventions of popular nineteenth-century adventure tales, such as *The Coral Island* (1857) set in the South Seas by Robert Ballantyne, which promoted colonialist aims. For a detailed study of the discourse of imperialism and the construction of the imperial subject in adventure fiction, see *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject* by Andrea White. Commenting on the representation of cross-cultural encounters in adventure stories, White claims that such stories typically essentialized and emphasized differences between the adventurer-narrator and his imperial Others, “in order to promote, celebrate and justify the imperial project” (64).

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Essentially, the ambivalence of the narrative perspective discourages us from arriving at the one-dimensional conclusion that M'Ling is more or less a source of anxiety or disgust for the narrator. Deploying a Freudian approach to the novel,⁷ Hurley has argued that "Prendick finds M'Ling uncanny, but the emotion is also tinged with disgust" (41) that is "symptomatic of a particularly violent denial of his doubling relationship with M'Ling, as a particularly intense version of the recognition/repression dynamic of uncanniness" (42). This reading overstates the extent to which M'Ling nauseates Prendick whilst it makes the valid point that the narrator denies his kinship to animality that he has in common with M'Ling. Prendick makes no secret of his own revulsion at "the grotesque ugliness of this black-faced creature" (79), but his self-distancing comments on M'Ling function as a red herring. Such comments fail to deflect attention from the more urgent question addressed at this stage of the narrative—the question of the animality inherent in lower-class Englishmen. Indeed, what is at stake in this scenario is not so much the animality of a racial Other as that of a group of lower-class Englishmen. From mid-to-late nineteenth century, as numbers of the urban poor rose alongside anxieties about social unrest, a theory of urban degeneration was used to characterize the lower classes of London. It was thought that the dark, crowded environment of the city had bred a new type of degenerate, "menageries of sub-races of men and women," especially in the East End (Greenslade 38).

Post-Darwin, in the reports of social reformers such as William Booth and Henry Mayhew, the lower classes were often connected by analogy to other species, an analogy that also provoked fears about the decline of British imperial power. Just as the lower-class members of London were often homogenized and animalized in nineteenth-century discourses drawing on evolutionary language, so too the British sailors of *Moreau* are treated as a monolithic group and identified closely with grisly staghounds. Deploying Prendick as a mouthpiece, this narrative invokes the evolutionary language of middle-class reformers, the language of depravity and

⁷ Besides Hurley, Nick Redfern provides a psychoanalytical reading of the novel in his 2007 article "Abjection and Evolution in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*." He applies the concept of abjection, theorized by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, and claims that "the narrator, Edward Prendick, enters a realm of the abject encountering the perverse Dr. Moreau and his menagerie of Beast Folk, and provoking in him a profound anxiety on his return to London where he finds he is unable to isolate himself from the terrors of late-Victorian society" (17). As interesting as this approach happens to be, it pays no attention to the role of class stereotypes or imperial menageries portrayed in *Moreau* that give rise to the experience of abjection.

savagery to describe the alcoholic and aggressive behaviour of the sailors. Sailing across unknown seas in a ship manned by sozzled bullies, Prendick arguably seems less secure with the drunken representatives of the Empire than with the docile non-European man. Prendick in fact expresses concern rather than contempt for M'Ling when the captain and the crew treat him as an object of "admirable sport" (80). Distancing himself from the violence of the seamen, Prendick refers to the non-European man as their "victim" (80). Ultimately, what is provocative about the attention drawn to the sailors' savagery is that it locates the source of violence, not necessarily in the already supposed animality of a racial Other but, rather, in the animality of lower-class Englishmen.

In exposing the animality of the sailors, this section of the novel also ironizes the enactment of pollution behaviours on the British ship. Outraged to find M'Ling on the companion hatchway of the quarterdeck, the captain spits out an ultimatum to Montgomery: "If he comes this end of the ship again I'll cut his insides out, I tell you. Cut out his blasted insides!" (81). Unlike Prendick and Montgomery, the self-designated "king" of the ship perceives M'Ling to be a physical and spiritual contaminant (86), frantically calling him "'an ugly devil!" and "'a mad devil!" (81). It is not far-fetched to think that the sailors associate the animal-like attendant with the threat of pollution, an association that is reiterated when the captain decides to expel M'Ling as well as the exotic animals from the ship. My reading of the sailors' pollution behaviour is informed by the ideas social anthropologist Mary Douglas shares in her best-known book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Commenting on the symbolic systems that underlie "ideas of defilement" or "dirt-avoidance" in secular European communities (36), Douglas claims that "pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (37). In other words, the avoidance of "dirt" is not necessarily "a matter of hygiene or aesthetics" (36). Rather, what is labeled unclean and "may be labeled dangerous" within a culture (40) "is matter out of place" (36), an anomalous form which "does not fit a given set or series" constructed by the symbolic practices of a specific culture (38). Such anomalous forms are displaced or abjected by members of a community through pollution behaviours that are designed to reconsolidate normative definitions (40).

In light of these ideas, M'Ling may be read as matter out of place, since he does not conform to a number of normative definitions. He is described as "a misshapen man, short, broad, and clumsy, with a crooked back, a hairy neck, and a head sunk between his shoulders" (78). Exceeding

multiple identity markers, M'Ling is apparently neither a primitive black-faced man nor a modern civilized Englishman, neither an animal nor a human, neither a man nor a demon, but, rather, is described as muddling all of these categories and as fitting into none of the social classes—lower, middle, upper—gathered on the ship. His exclusion from the hierarchical class structure of the personnel and passengers on the ship is conveyed through the access he is denied to the forecabin and the cabin. Drawing attention to such spatial divisions, chapter 3 shows that M'Ling is accommodated neither at the front of the ship in the forecabin, a space that is occupied by the lower-class crew, nor at the back of the ship in the cabin, a section that is reserved for upper-middle-class passengers like Prendick, Montgomery, and the captain. By showing how unwilling the captain is to make room for M'Ling in the forecabin or the cabin, the novel underlines his hostile behaviour toward the non-European man.

For the crew and the captain, what is especially menacing about M'Ling is his unrestricted mobility, the fact that there are no spatial demarcations, no enforced rules of separation, protecting them from coming into physical contact with him. Overseas trade, as far as the sailors are concerned, exposes them not only to forbidding elements and beasts in the tropics but also to “cannibals” (85). Failing to see any difference between M'Ling and the captive animals, the sailors label both as unclean creatures that could sully their bodies (81). Suspicious to the hilt, the captain assumes that M'Ling is an unfettered cannibal who is eyeing their bodies as sources of meat. “‘This ship,’” the captain declares, “‘aint for beasts and cannibals and worse than beasts, any more’” (85). Here the use of the plural is telling, since it marks Prendick as one of the potential cannibals to whom the captain refers. The force of this reference depends on the opening scene of chapter 1, in which Prendick was, reluctantly, prepared to partake in cannibalism at the expense of an unnamed sailor. In recounting this scene, Prendick admits that he had “crawled along the boat” like an animal (74), intending to help Helmar by grasping the leg of the sailor whom they were going to kill to eat. Cannibalism is avoided, however, because Helmar and “the sailor stumbled with the swaying of the boat, and the two fell upon the gunwale and rolled overboard” into the sea to be eaten by sharks (74). By chance, Prendick survives this incident. By expelling potential cannibals like Prendick and M'Ling along with exotic captives from the *Ipecacuanha*, the captain thus expects to restore order and cleanliness on board and to insulate himself as well as his “clean, respectable crew” from the threat of spiritual as well as physical defilement (81).

That the purification of the British self is a pressing concern of this novel is signaled not just by the above statements of the captain but also by the memorable name of his ship. The Tupi-derived name *Ipecacuanha*, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, refers to “a South American small shrubby plant, which possesses emetic, diaphoretic, and purgative properties.” This name no doubt encapsulates the desire for purgation that lies at the heart of this novel. Overall, the novel demonstrates the impossibility of purging animal qualities from the British self. *Moreau* indeed articulates a profound ambivalence toward the question of the animal both within and without the British self, an ambivalence which at once discloses as well as disavows the entanglement of the British with the animal part of their identity. It is clear enough that the desire for disentanglement⁸ from the animal is articulated by most of the British characters, from the sailors through the scientist to the narrator. However, the *Ipecacuanha* sailors are portrayed by Prendick in the most unsympathetic manner and sharply satirized in light of their alcohol-induced antics. Their pollution behaviour is ironic in that it shows their success at expelling captive animals and potential cannibals from the ship but at the same time reveals their failure at containing their own animality. One could read this failure as delivering a powerful blow to late-nineteenth-century “Bio-Optimism,” a phrase Wells used as a title of his scathing essay, published in 1895, in which he discredits specifically those popular progress-oriented accounts of evolution that denied the prospect of degeneration occurring in British society, accounts that promoted “the hopeful belief that life must steadily improve, move ever upwards from the slime toward nobility” (Kemp 12). Raising objections to such complacent interpretations of evolution, Wells repudiated his “trust in education as a means of redemption for [members of] decadent families” (208). The sailors of *Moreau*, in view of Wells’s loss of faith in education, may be read as a cautionary example of the failure of culture in overcoming degenerative tendencies in people. In presenting a critique of bio-optimism in narrative form, *Moreau* promotes the

8 My invocation of the term “disentanglement” alludes to its use by Robert P. Weeks in his short essay “Disentanglement as a Theme in H. G. Wells’s Fiction.” This essay is useful in that it emphasizes that the theme of degeneration in Wells’s fiction is continuous with the desire for disentanglement from the webs of nature or “a world enclosed by a network of limitations” (440). Referring to *Moreau*, along with other male representatives of science in Wells’s evolutionary stories, Weeks argues that such stories are “dominated by the image of man driven by a profound, and, at times, an irrational desire to escape. Although the network appears at first to be impenetrable, the hero finally succeeds in disentangling himself ... but ultimately he experiences defeat in the form either of disillusionment or of death” (440).

This novel invokes nineteenth-century discourses that were used in England to emphasize the proximity of lower-class persons to animals on the evolutionary continuum.

ideology of the animal as a violent force intrinsic to the human through its focus on the beastly behaviour of the sailors. Like Tennyson, Wells equates animality inherent in people with savagery and degeneracy, reducing it to a conception of a nature “red in tooth and claw.” Deploying Prendick as a mouthpiece for his pessimistic take on human animality, Wells thus expresses a clear desire for “whatever is more than animal within us” (174). Even more explicitly than Prendick, Moreau expresses his contempt for animality, claiming that it is “the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst forth suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear” (130). Determined to eradicate the animality of living creatures, Moreau declares: “I will conquer yet! Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, “This time I will burn out all the animal; this time I will make a rational creature of my own!” (130). Statements of this sort, conveying a desire for disentanglement, are premised on the assumption that animality is invariably and naturally a source of unruly emotions and thus antithetical to the constitution of a rational and civilized British self.

This desire for disentanglement is undermined by the novel as it shows the impossibility of overcoming animal traits in all characters, including Beast-Folk and their British masters. In his account of the sailors, Prendick evinces his own class-specific anxieties about the danger they may pose to the progress of the Empire by drawing attention to their evolutionary backslide.

By attributing the bestial view of sailors to a leisure-class narrator, this novel invokes nineteenth-century discourses that were used in England to emphasize the proximity of lower-class persons to animals on the evolutionary continuum. But instead of maintaining rigid boundaries between the classes by suggesting that the sailors are innately distinct from characters such as Prendick and Montgomery, this narrative shows that these upper-middle-class Englishmen are just as prone to degeneration as the bestial seamen. To begin with, the argument that erupts between the captain and Montgomery—over the question of where M’Ling belongs on the ship—suggests that these men do not see eye-to-eye on how to treat a racial Other amidst them. At one point, when the sailors bully M’Ling, Montgomery defends his animal-like “attendant” (81). By chapter 15, the distinctions that are initially posited between the sailors and Montgomery are blurred: Montgomery not only drinks to excess like the sailors but, as Prendick tells us, “sometimes he would ill-treat [M’Ling], especially after he had been at the whiskey, kicking it, beating it, pelting it with stones or lighted fusees” (135). M’Ling is not only more self-controlled than the

sailors but also more domesticated than his master. Indeed, Prendick takes care to note that M'Ling is "docile" (135). Routinely, M'Ling chops firewood, prepares as well as serves food, and "discharges all the trivial domestic offices that were required" (135). The differences between M'Ling and the Englishmen are striking. It may be argued that *Moreau* mobilizes such differences to stress that the threat to British imperial power is not located in some racial Other. Surely, M'Ling is not responsible for the actions of his master or that of the sailors.

Rather, this novel suggests that Montgomery and the sailors indulge in idle pleasures that are antithetical to their own betterment and to the advancement of the Empire. Through their downfall, *Moreau* communicates a deep-seated skepticism about the expansion of the Empire, showing that none of these Englishmen are able to build a civilization in the tropics or retain their humanity in adverse conditions. On the contrary, far from civilizing or humanizing the Beast-Folk, Montgomery accelerates their reversion by giving them alcohol. Such ironic moments echo and extend Wells's ideas in "Zoological Retrogression" (1891). Published five years prior to *Moreau*, this essay argues that "there is a good deal to be found in the work of biologists quite inharmonious with such phrases as 'the progress of the ages,' and the 'march of mind.' The zoologist demonstrates that advance has been fitful and uncertain; rapid progress has often been followed by rapid extinction or degeneration" (167). Just as this cautionary essay refuses to forecast a glorious future of progress or "permanent ascendancy" of human beings over "Nature" (168), so too *Moreau* refuses to feed fantasies of endless expansion to its metropolitan readers by foregrounding the decline of Englishmen of all social orders, including Prendick.

In the initial chapters, Prendick tries to distance himself from the sailors by criticizing their cruel treatment of M'Ling and by emphasizing that he is "an abstainer" from birth (91). However much Prendick tries to deny his doubling relationship with the sailors, the boundaries separating him from other Englishmen, including the sailors, Moreau, and Montgomery, are blurred as the story unfolds, showing that all of them are prone to degeneration and none of them contribute to the expansion of the Empire. Soon after Moreau and Montgomery die, Prendick admits that he "became one among the Beast People in the Island of Doctor Moreau" (162), although he does not turn to alcohol to cope with the adversities he faces. Marooned on the island for nearly a year, Prendick begins to lose touch with his humanity. He says, "I too must have undergone strange changes. My clothes hung about me as yellow rags, through whose rents showed the tanned skin. My hair grew long, and became matted together. I am

told that even now my eyes have a strange brightness, a swift alertness of movement” (168). Initially, whereas *Ipecacuanha* sailors were likened to the staghounds on board, Prendick is linked to his “inseparable Dog-Man” on the tropical island (165). This parallel destabilizes classist assumptions registered in discourses about degeneration in nineteenth-century England, discourses that often relied on evolutionary language to characterize members of the lower class as being closer to animals. This novel insists that the leisure-class narrator is no less prone to degeneration than the sailors. Even though Prendick finds a “friend” in the Dog-Man (169), this docile creature is mauled to death by the Hyena-Swine. In fact, Prendick sees the Hyena-Swine “gripping the quivering flesh [of the Dog-Man] with its misshapen claws, gnawing at it, and snarling with delight.” Before killing off this Beast-Man, Prendick remembers that “its lips went trembling back from its red-stained teeth, and it growled menacingly” (169). The repellent image of the Hyena-Swine epitomizes the idea of an animal “red in tooth and claw,” representing living creatures that prey upon others. Prendick, unlike Moreau and Montgomery, manages to flee the claws and fangs of Beast-Folk like the Hyena-Swine. Yet, the problem of his own animality continues to hound him. Prendick no doubt is confronted by his own animality, his own biological drives and instincts that cannot be perfectly mastered, and as such the novel paints him as what Tim Youngs calls “the white ape” figure of *fin-de-siècle* British fiction, a “creature exhibiting a dangerous and bestial vitality” (22). Although this white ape escapes the dangers that surrounded him in the tropical island, he is unable to repress or abject his own creatureliness: you may get the man out of the tropical jungle, so the novel suggests, but you cannot get the ape out of the man. To make matters worse, returning to London does not insulate Prendick from the sort of threats he encountered earlier, for he is now bewildered by the creaturely men and women he claims to see in the urban jungle.

Conclusion

Through its disclosure of the animality of Englishmen, this narrative sounds a subversive note against racially inflected theories of evolution that facilitated empire building at the expense of those defined as less than human. Operating in a counter-colonial mode, *Moreau* exposes animality inherent in all of the British characters belonging to different social orders. In doing so, this narrative equates animality with either savagery or degeneracy. One may conclude, then, that the novel sustains alienating beliefs about the animal, due to its alignment of the animal with the brutal and the feral (Puma, Leopard-Man, Hyena-Swine, as well as other Beast-

Folk of that ilk) on the one hand and the docile and the stupid (M'Ling, Monkey-Man, Dog-Man) on the other. By associating creatureliness within and without the human with brutality, intractability, and stupidity, *Moreau* falls short of enacting an affirmative reevaluation of the animal, and the upshot of this narrative limit is that it falls into the trap of imagining the human-animal relationship as "red in tooth and claw." For the shipwrecked narrator, to encounter the animal is to encounter an exotic adversary, a dangerous beast in an unknown outpost, an obstacle to British progress and settlement in an inhospitable tropical island. Stated simply, according to the pessimistic vision of the novel, animals and humans, especially imperialist Englishmen, cannot coexist in a state of equilibrium. Instead, the two are inescapably pitted against one another in a cross-species struggle for survival.

Closely examining the portrayal of the sailors also tells us that this novel tries to identify impediments to the growth of the Empire, not necessarily as located in some racial Other but rather in the undisciplined animality of the sailors. By foregrounding the violence of the sailors toward exotic animals and the animal-like attendant, *Moreau* presents a critique of useless pollution behaviours enacted on their ship. In a related vein, while the first five chapters of the novel stage the lack of consensus between the upper-middle-class Englishmen and the sailors over the treatment of human and nonhuman Others, the rest of the narrative records ways in which Prendick as well as Montgomery are unable to manage their primal instincts in response to the Beast-Folk. Like the lower-class Englishmen, Prendick as well as Montgomery are unable to abjure the animal part of their human identity, because of which the novel suggests they act in violent ways on the tropical island. But showing the savage nature of all those in charge of imperial menageries is not quite the same as wanting to put an end to the capture and commodification of exotic animals. Treating exotic animals as commodities or as objects of scientific research is not a problem per se for this novel, even though it repudiates unnecessarily cruel treatment of animals and criticizes both the scientist and the sailors for conducting surreptitious trade in exotic animals. Given that Prendick sees animality in all people upon his return to London, this novel insists that beastliness is located not just in foreign realms in the shape of exotic animals or cannibals but also in the human inhabitants of contemporary England. *Moreau* suggests that fighting off exotic animals in the tropics and guarding against human animality in all places are desirable yet futile pursuits.

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