

The Beasts' Confession

Jonathan Swift

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WHEN beasts could speak (the learned say
They still can do so every day),
It seems, they had religion then,
As much as now we find in men.
It happened when a plague broke out
(Which therefore made them more devout)
The king of brutes (to make it plain,
Of quadrupeds I only mean),
By proclamation gave command,
That every subject in the land
Should to the priest confess their sins;
And thus the pious wolf begins:
Good father, I must own with shame,
That, often I have been to blame:
I must confess, on Friday last,
Wretch that I was, I broke my fast:
But I defy the basest tongue
To prove I did my neighbour wrong;
Or ever went to seek my food
By rapine, theft, or thirst of blood.

The ass approaching next, confessed,
That in his heart he loved a jest:
A wag he was, he needs must own,
And could not let a dunce alone:
Sometimes his friend he would not spare,
And might perhaps be too severe:
But yet, the worst that could be said,
He was a wit both born and bred;
And, if it be a sin or shame,
Nature alone must bear the blame:
One fault he hath, is sorry for't,
His ears are half a foot too short;
Which could he to the standard bring,
He'd show his face before the king:
Then, for his voice, there's none disputes
That he's the nightingale of brutes.

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The swine with contrite heart allowed,
His shape and beauty made him proud:
In diet was perhaps too nice,
But gluttony was ne'er his vice:
In every turn of life content,
And meekly took what fortune sent:
Enquire through all the parish round,
A better neighbour ne'er was found:
His vigilance might seine displease;
'Tis true, he hated sloth like pease.

The mimic ape began his chatter,
How evil tongues his life bespatter:
Much of the cens'ring world complained,
Who said his gravity was feigned:
Indeed, the strictness of his morals
Engaged him in a hundred quarrels:
He saw, and he was grieved to see't,
His zeal was sometimes indiscreet:
He found his virtues too severe
For our corrupted times to bear:
Yet, such a lewd licentious age
Might well excuse a stoic's rage.

The goat advanced with decent pace:
And first excused his youthful face;
Forgiveness begged, that he appeared
('Twas nature's fault) without a beard.
'Tis true, he was not much inclined
To fondness for the female kind;
Not, as his enemies object,
From chance or natural defect;
Not by his frigid constitution,
But through a pious resolution;
For he had made a holy vow
Of chastity, as monks do now;
Which he resolved to keep for ever hence,
As strictly, too, as doth his reverence.

Apply the tale, and you shall find
How just it suits with human kind.
Some faults we own: but, can you guess?
Why? – virtue's carried to excess;
Wherewith our vanity endows us,
Though neither foe nor friend allows us.

The lawyer swears, you may rely on't,
He never squeezed a needy client:
And this he makes his constant rule,
For which his brethren call him fool;
His conscience always was so nice,

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He freely gave the poor advice;
By which he lost, he may affirm,
A hundred fees last Easter term.
While others of the learned robe
Would break the patience of a Job;
No pleader at the bar could match
His diligence and quick despatch;
Ne'er kept a cause, he well may boast,
Above a term or two at most.

The cringing knave, who seeks a place
Without success, thus tells his case:
Why should he longer mince the matter?
He failed because he could not flatter:
He had not learned to turn his coat,
Nor for a party give his vote.
His crime he quickly understood;
Too zealous for the nation's good:
He found the ministers resent it,
Yet could not for his heart repent it.

The chaplain vows he cannot fawn,
Though it would raise him to the lawn:
He passed his hours among his books;
You find it in his meagre looks:
He might, if he were worldly-wise,
Preferment get, and spare his eyes:
But owned he had a stubborn spirit,
That made him trust alone in merit:
Would rise by merit to promotion;
Alas! a mere chimeric notion.

The doctor, if you will believe him,
Confessed a sin, and God forgive him:
Called up at midnight, ran to save
A blind old beggar from the grave:
But, see how Satan spreads his snares;
He quite forgot to say his prayers.
He cannot help it, for his heart,
Sometimes to act the parson's part,
Quotes from the Bible many a sentence
That moves his patients to repentance:
And, when his medicines do no good,
Supports their minds with heavenly food.
At which, however well intended,
He hears the clergy are offended;
And grown so bold behind his back,
To call him hypocrite and quack.
In his own church he keeps a seat;
Says grace before and after meat;
And calls, without affecting airs,

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His household twice a day to prayers.
He shuns apothecaries' shops;
And hates to cram the sick with slops:
He scorns to make his art a trade,
Nor bribes my lady's favourite maid.
Old nurse-keepers would never hire
To recommend him to the Squire;
Which others, whom he will not name,
Have often practised to their shame.

The statesman tells you with a sneer,
His fault is to be too sincere;
And, having no sinister ends,
Is apt to disoblige his friends.
The nation's good, his Master's glory,
Without regard to Whig or Tory,
Were all the schemes he had in view;
Yet he was seconded by few:
Though some had spread a thousand lies,
'Twas he defeated the Excise.
'Twas known, though he had borne aspersion,
That standing troops were his aversion:
His practice was, in every station,
To serve the king, and please the nation.
Though hard to find in every case
The fittest man to fill a place:
His promises he ne'er forgot,
But took memorials on the spot:
His enemies, for want of charity,
Said he affected popularity:
'Tis true, the people understood,
That all he did was for their good;
Their kind affections he has tried;
No love is lost on either side.
He came to court with fortune clear,
Which now he runs out every year;
Must, at the rate that he goes on,
Inevitably be undone.
Oh! if his Majesty would please
To give him but a writ of ease,
Would grant him license to retire,
As it hath long been his desire,
By fair accounts it would be found,
He's poorer by ten thousand pound.
He owns, and hopes it is no sin,
He ne'er was partial to his kin;
He thought it base for men in stations
To crowd the court with their relations:
His country was his dearest mother,
And every virtuous man his brother:
Through modesty or awkward shame

(For which he owns himself to blame),
He found the wisest men he could,
Without respect to friends or blood;
Nor never acts on private views,
When he hath liberty to choose.

The sharper swore he hated play,
Except to pass an hour away:
And well he might; for to his cost,
By want of skill, he always lost.
He heard there was a club of cheats,
Who had contrived a thousand feats;
Could change the stock, or cog a dye,
And thus deceive the sharpest eye:
No wonder how his fortune sunk,
His brothers fleece him when he's drunk.

I own the moral not exact;
Besides, the tale is false in fact;
And so absurd, that, could I raise up
From fields Elysian, fabling AEsop;
I would accuse him to his face,
For libelling the four-foot race.
Creatures of every kind but ours
Well comprehend their natural powers;
While we, whom reason ought to sway,
Mistake our talents every day:
The ass was never known so stupid
To act the part of Tray or Cupid;
Nor leaps upon his master's lap,
There to be stroked, and fed with pap:
As AEsop would the world persuade;
He better understands his trade:
Nor comes whene'er his lady whistles,
But carries loads, and feeds on thistles;
Our author's meaning, I presume, is
A creature BIPES ET IMPLUMIS;
Wherein the moralist designed
A compliment on human-kind:
For, here he owns, that now and then
Beasts may degenerate into men.