

David Rudd

The animal figure in Astrid Lindgren's work

At the age of 78 Lindgren began her campaign of writing to the newspapers, her correspondence subsequently being collected in a book called *Min ko vill ha roligt* ("My Cow Wants to Have Fun") (1990) – the original letter being about a lovesick cow that goes in search of a bull, rather than suffer artificial insemination. This led Lindgren to look at other farming methods, and to the eventual passing in 1988 of the "Lex Lindgren", for the more humane treatment of animals.

Animals certainly feature extensively in Lindgren's works, but she is not someone that can easily be pigeonholed when it comes to animal rights. She is certainly no advocate for vegetarianism: animals are hunted and served as food in quite a few of her books. Thus Matt and his robbers hunt elk, which Lovis roasts, smokes and salts. Lindgren simply seeks to promote a world where cruelty and unnecessary violence are absent, whether against human or animal. So readers might be surprised to read of Bill in *The children of Noisy Village* (1961) talking about blowing birds' eggs stolen from nests (Pippi has a similar collection), or putting a chicken's egg into an owl's nest, to see how the mother will react.

But this story about Bill tells us precisely what Lindgren is about: making us rethink the way we categorise things. So mixing a chicken with an owl is an interesting experiment – as Lisa, the narrator, comments: "Wasn't it strange that the mama owl couldn't tell the difference?" (Lindgren 1988, 31) And, in confounding categories, Lindgren queries the whole way we conceptualise animal and human, and what it means to be put into either of these boxes. This, of course, was exactly how she caught the public imagination with her tale of the lovesick cow, anxious to avoid a bovine sperm bank.

Querying the divide between animal and human

So, when I talk about the "animal figure" in Lindgren, it is not just about the animal *per se*, but about the figurative use of the term "ani-

mal", making us rethink our whole notion of what it means to be human. In *The children of Noisy Village* this idea is made quite explicit in "A grandfather is fun, too", where Lisa, the narrator, comments that "Britta and Anna don't have a dog, or rabbits /--/. But they do have a grandfather" (ibid, 32). And, at the end of the chapter, Lisa exclaims, "I would rather have him than a dog" (ibid, 35).

And we should remember that the line between animals and humans has never been fully clear. Historically, Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist who drew up our standard classification of animals, had the orang-utan as human, whereas feral children were classified as animals. More recently, Peter Singer queried whether some humans had less right to life than some animals; and Jacques Derrida (2002, unpagged), in striving to capture the essence of humanity, eventually came up with just one quality, "bestiality", something that animals lack. It is certainly the case that those who wish to assert their superiority are often the least human, like the Nazis or the Ku-Klux Klan, downgrading others to animals ("pigs", "dogs", etc). In her books, though, Lindgren celebrates animals alongside humans, and often, as I said earlier, queries the divide. When Jonathan in *The brothers Lionheart* rescues a mare from the cruel clutches of a Tengilman, it is significant that the latter refers to his horse as "it", whereas for Jonathan the horse is a "she"; Jonathan actually justifies risking his life for the rider and the horse in Derridean terms: "there are things you *have* to do, otherwise you're not a human being, but just a bit of filth" (Lindgren 2000, 136).

Pippi also queries the divide between human and animal, regularly being described in animal terms: "as /--/ a monkey" (Lindgren 2003a, 37), or with hair "like a lion's mane" (ibid, 130), trying to fly like a bird (in Swedish, "pippi" is also a child's word for a bird) (ibid, 70), or be like "a sardine in a tin" (ibid, 113). She also eats in a way conventionally considered animal-like. In fact, Maria Nikolaeva (2000, 117) has suggested that, because Pippi speaks about "eating raw meat" she belongs to nature rather than culture – a point to which I'll return.

Other characters are also seen in animal terms. In *Ronia, the robber's daughter* the links are particularly strong, with Matt being described as "an angry bear" (Lindgren 2001, 83), his robbers as "wild goats" (ibid, 74), and Borka "like a wild bull" (ibid, 31). Of course, the two leaders later engage in a "wild beasts' match" (ibid, 164). But as animals, they hunt food, just like the bear that takes a mare's foal; as Birk says to Ronia, "Those are the kind of things that happen in Matt's Wood and in every wood" (ibid, 120).

Dwelling at the gates of difference

However, it would be wrong to surmise that Lindgren sees children as merely creatures of nature, standing apart from society. This is where I disagree with Nikolajeva that Pippi is part of nature; for it is of note that elsewhere, Pippi, though playing at being a monster, still shouts to the children, “Now I’m going to cook you for dinner” (Lindgren 2003b, 292). In other words, she is both raw and cooked, deliberately querying categories.



© Lindgren, Astrid. *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1973 (*The brothers Lionheart*).

She “dwells at the gates of difference”, to use Jeffrey Cohen’s phrase (Cohen 1996, 7) in his theorisation of the “monstrous”, as do many other Lindgren characters: mythical creatures like the dragon with red eyes, the Tomten, and “Herr Liljonkvast /--/ from the Land of Dusk” (Metcalf 1997, unpagged). Then there are the adventures that occur in-between worlds, like Nangiyala in *The brothers Lionheart* (1973). One might even note the continual fascination with birds, occupying that space between land and air, and often linked to humans through metamorphosis. It’s a fascination that persists in her characters playing on rooftops, on the line between culture and nature. Pippi Longstocking, though, bestrides more categories than most, whether of nature/culture, animal/human, male/female, civilised/wild, white/black, or order/disorder. She is, in the more theoretical use of the term, monstrous. As Cohen puts it:

Monsters are our children. They /--/ ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. (Cohen 1996, 20)

Rosi Braidotti pursues this theme, seeing monsters as “the in between, the mixed, the ambivalent /--/ both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration” (Braidotti 1994, 77), helping us understand “difference”, which is why Pippi, in particular, has fallen foul of political correctness, or of anyone who would try to categorise her.

Her parentage itself is unusual, having a heavenly mother (an angel) and a very down-to-earth father (a pirate). She thus personifies the carnivalesque: the high brought low, suggesting a mix of the godlike and the human. Pippi’s life, “spent /--/ sailing the seas” (Lindgren 2003a, 17), also suggests someone betwixt and between, not belonging to any nation, and not especially belonging on land any more than on water (she lives between land and sea at Villa Villekulla, too). She even walks underwater at one point and, at another, wants to “practise walking on /--/ water” (ibid, 377). She is also equally at home in the air or, in another episode, in fire. In Braidotti’s phrase, she is a “nomadic subject”: she can go anywhere, knowing no boundaries, forever in-process, becoming, having “relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity” (Braidotti 1994, 22).

Pippi is often said to live alone, but she does not, of course, for she has two companions: a monkey, Mr Nelson, who is dressed in hu-

man clothing, as pirates' monkeys often are; and then there's Pippi's horse, less anthropomorphised, and lacking a name. However, even if less anthropomorphic, the horse is still between categories, living on the porch of Villa Villekulla, because, in Pippi logic, "he'd be in the way in the kitchen, and he doesn't thrive in the parlour" (Lindgren 2003a, 16). There is no question of him living in a stable. And her horse provides one of the most famous images of Pippi, challenging the normal representation of the horse in literature. As Lynda Birke notes, horses are usually an "icon of power /--/ muscled, hard and fit; they are also male /--/ invariably well equipped with muscle [and] well endowed" (Birke 1994, 122). But in carrying her horse Pippi effectively undermines this, as she does most males who wear their masculinity so overtly, like the strongman, Adolf.

False divides: animal/human, adult/child

I have already mentioned the way that Lindgren queries the division between children and animals in *The children of Noisy Village*, but it occurs in Pippi too. For example, when the children are playing "turnupstuffers", Pippi's term for someone "who finds the stuff that turns up /--/ anything that's lying on the ground" (Lindgren 2003a, 23, 24), they find a man sleeping on a lawn: "That's lying on the ground /--/ and we've found him. We'll take him!" When Tommy and Annika ask what they'll do with him, Pippi replies: "We could use him for lots of things. We could keep him in a little rabbit hutch instead of a rabbit, and feed him dandelion leaves" (ibid, 24). Once again, Pippi queries our standard way of looking at things: why cage rabbits and not people? And the answer, of course, is that humans *have been* treated as caged animals – most obviously in the Holocaust (when the book was conceived, Nazism was at its height). It is also significant that it is males who are usually the butt of this challenging of categories, like the self-important man who wants to purchase Villa Villekulla, not realising that he's already in the presence of its owner. He is dismissive of both women and children – and Pippi ironically concurs, commenting, "Children ought to be shot. /--/ But it wouldn't do, because then there would never be any kind old gentlemen. And we couldn't do without them, could we?" (ibid, 146). The divide between adult and child is shown to be false.

Pippi is also aware of the false divide between animal and human, as when she weeps for a hungry shark, despite the fact that it tried to eat Tommy (ibid, 212). A more realistic example occurs at the end of *The children of Noisy Village*, where Bill throws back a crayfish because

it “had such sad eyes”. Karl calls him stupid, as this crayfish will now inform the others (ibid, 123). Rather than anthropomorphise the crayfish, though, we have the process of anthropomorphism being demonstrated, showing how any contact with life can trigger a sympathetic response. Pippi is the same when, while playing at being a monster, she spots a dead baby bird, which reduces her to tears, although she hides this from the other children.



Lindgren, Astrid. Pippi Långstrump. Ill. Ingrid Vang Nyman. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1966. © Saltkråkan AB, Lidingö. Bilden återges med tillstånd. (Pippi Longstocking).

These episodes are particularly of note because, in a critique of Pippi, Kik Reeder has suggested that

Pippi isn't a girl at all, even a tomboy, but a boy in disguise. Astrid Lindgren has simply equipped Pippi with all the traits we have come to think of as male. She never cries; she is aggressive and unafraid, she has a monkey and a horse for pets but doesn't even own a doll, she stands up to all authority and she wants to be a pirate when she grows up. She is extremely generous with gifts and parties but when necessary she can dole out punishment to a bunch of bullies. In other words, Pippi acts like a “real” man. (Reeder 1978, 49)

Reeder seems to exhibit precisely the type of categorisation that Lindgren repeatedly questions: is it males that are “extremely generous with gifts and parties?” Don't girls also want pets, perhaps horses

especially? And isn't there the implication that to be a more normal girl Pippi *should* own a doll (albeit she has something far more animate in Mr Nelson, "dressing [him] in his little costume" (Lindgren 2003a, 41). Reeder is certainly wrong about Pippi not crying. And even the notion that Pippi is aggressive wants challenging, for this is exactly what Pippi seeks to put an end to, dispelling the aggression of the bullies, the real "real" men. While we're dealing with Reeder's claims, it's also worth noting that Pippi's monkey and horse are not described as pets, either. She seems to live with them in a far more democratic way, with Mr Nelson, for instance, sometimes going off and doing his own thing.

Later in the article Reeder states that, "Tenderness, consideration for others, and richness of feeling ought no longer to be demerited as 'silly' and 'feminine'" (Reeder 1978, 50) – a point I wouldn't dispute, but I would maintain that Pippi clearly models these qualities. As for the stereotypical behaviour that Tommy and Annika show (which Reeder laments) I'd suggest that they deliberately represent a norm against which Pippi can react. Not only does she query categorisation but also points out how language contributes to this – as in her view of school, which she recognises as a place where "fixity" sets in. Pippi, though, stands outside the symbolic order, and has no intention of becoming enslaved by it. But neither is she responsive to Blake's saying, "I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man's" (Blake 1988, 203). For Pippi avoids any system, continually looking at things from different angles, conducting her own "as if" thought experiments, showing how we can "trace paths of transformation of our lives here and now" (Braidotti, 1994, 6).

Exploring difference

So, although Lindgren was influenced by the progressive movement in education, seeing learning by experience as important, Pippi is nothing else if not a thinker. In fact, what is seen as "telling lies" is also a way of exploring difference – or, more clearly *différance*, in the Derridean sense of tracing otherness.

Her newly made up word, "squeazle" demonstrates this. Having invented it she then decides to work out what it could apply to – trying out its onomatopoeic potential as she imagines the sound of mud between your toes as you walk (Lindgren 2003b, 162), but decides that "squelchy" already does this. She then, illogically, goes to the shops to ask for one, surmising it might be food, then that it could

be a weapon. The notion of a newly invented word already having currency in the world is contradictory – as she keeps finding out – for whatever she is presented with must already have been named: language pre-exists us, and we have to accommodate to its coordinates. But not Pippi, who transgresses cultural categories. Eventually, then, when they discover a beetle that neither Tommy nor Annika can name (it isn't a cockchafer or a may-bug or a stag-beetle), Pippi imagines she has discovered new semantic space – and squeezes her “squeazle” into it, without challenge. It might have been Adam that God initially allowed to name the animals, but it's something that Pippi has decided she also can do (besides walking on water).

As others have noted, Pippi won't accept anything, not even language, and especially written language, simply because she's been told it. Thus when the rich, old Miss Rosenbloom asks Pippi how she spells “seasick”, Pippi replies “S-e-e-s-i-k”. The woman retorts, “Oh /--/ the spelling book has different ideas”, to which Pippi responds: “It's jolly lucky, then, that you asked me how I spell it” (ibid, 175).

Pippi simply does not accept the order of language, its foundation in the paternal metaphor. Rather than the arbitrariness of signification, which draws on the fact that language depends on the lack of the real thing, Pippi, standing apart from the Symbolic (which precisely cuts experience up into arbitrary signifiers – into categories), wants to hold on to the Real. Her beetle, she can therefore insist, is “squeazlish”. Just so, at school, she won't accept the arbitrary relation of the letter “i” to the picture of an island. As Pippi says, “It looks to me like a short line with a fly-speck over it” (ibid, 48). However it is significant that the “s” for snake bothers her less, for she can see a resemblance in shape. In English one can make a case for the “i” representing the patriarchal father, which Virginia Woolf described as like a shadow lying across the page, “a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it” (Woolf 1977, 107–8), but this doesn't work in Swedish. The word “island” is also a pun on “I-land” in English but not, of course, in Swedish (where the original word was actually “hedgehog”). Yet my main point about signification stands; and it is thus also worth noting that Pippi turns this “i” into a fly-speck; in other words, into “a piece of shit” – which, neatly, is what Lacan advises us all to do, to avoid being seduced by imaginary desires (Žižek 1999, 17). Indeed, Pippi sees all schooling in scatological terms, as “fartification” (her name for “multiplication”).

Before finishing, I'd like to address the issue of cannibals and the racism that the books are accused of, for, once again, it seems that if you want to confound categories, cannibals are an obvious choice: beings who "beckon from the edges of the world", providing "horizons of liberation" (Cohen 1996, 18), besides confounding the divisions between human and animal, nature and culture; rather than, as Reeder sees them, figures of fun who are "adoring of whites" (Reeder 1978, 47). Clearly, if there were any real association between these cannibals and colonial power, there might be problems – but Pippi's father is expressly a pirate, thus also an enemy of the colonisers. He sits between categories just as does Pippi, with her dream of being a Cannibal Princess: "I shall have a cannibal of my own to polish me all over with shoe polish every morning. All I'll have to do will be to put myself in the passage at night together with my shoes" (Lindgren 2003c, 356). Notions of hierarchy and privilege are set up only to be undermined. When asked, "D'you think the black will look well with your red hair?", she responds, "If not, it's easy to dye hair green" (ibid, 357). Besides confounding the colour classification of humans, this is clearly a witty reference to *Ann of Green Gables*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Reeder, in suggesting that "a revision of the Pippi books would seem both necessary and timely" in that "her publishers might soon find that their little gold mine has become obsolete" (Reeder 1978, 50–1), is not only wrong, but the pigeonholing exhibits the very thing that Pippi continually challenges with her "as ifs", imagining societies where people have no arms, or where they walk backwards, or sleep upside-down with their feet on the pillow. She is the "harbinger of category crisis" as Cohen (1996, 6) puts it, the nomadic subject par excellence, pointing out the arbitrariness of the way our world is ordered. She breaks down social, class, colour and gender barriers, and, significantly, those between humans and other animals. Like all trickster figures, she flaunts her animal side, and thus avoids the Derridean bestiality that characterises her adversaries. As the teacher says to Pippi, after she has dealt with a man for whipping his horse: "You did right /--/. We should be kind to animals – and to humans too, of course" (Lindgren 2003c, 296). There are no privileged categories in Lindgren's world, fictional or factual. Even cows can want to have fun!

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