Belting the Beast: Trans-animality in *The Faerie Queene*

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Abstract: Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is populated by hundreds of animal figures, many of whom are informed by a vast inherited tradition of medieval bestiary animal symbolism. Taking these bestiary motifs into account and drawing from current trans and animal studies theory, this article shows how book three's hyena-beast calls attention to the porousness of species boundaries and collapses animal-human hierarchies. This reading highlights the poem's ambiguous attitude towards the bestial nature of both its animal and its human characters, and gestures towards a Spenserian eco-poetics which emphasises the possibilities for mutuality and collaboration to be found in the shared creatureliness of animals and humans.

> *"Hyena is said to be a beast of double nature, Male and Female, they will hearken at the Cottes of shepheards, & learne the proper name that a man is called by, and calling him, when the man is come forth, they will straightway kill him."*
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> —Thomas Hacket, *The secrets and wonders of the world*

Fr. Thomas Hacket's 1585 translation of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* is one of countless possible sources for the highly developed tradition of animal symbolism inherited by Edmund Spenser. As the expansiveness of Spenser's symbolic menagerie makes clear, this tradition provides a useful shorthand with which to construct multilayered allegorical figures. One such figure who has yet to be fully understood is the hyena-like beast summoned by the hag in book three of *The Faerie Queene*. Nearly fifty years ago, Arthur Marotti

identified the beast as representing lust's "feeding and destroying" nature (84). The present article aims to complicate Marotti's reading to encompass the complete depth of symbolic language at Spenser's fingertips. Illuminated by medieval and Renaissance understandings of the hyena's double nature, the hag's beast animates the porousness of apparently stable ontological binaries such as male/female and human/animal. By collapsing the assumed one-way hierarchy of man-over-woman-over-animal, the beast reveals possibilities for pleasure and mutuality between species in what trans studies scholars such as Myra J. Hird and Mel Y. Chen call "trans-animal" collaboration. My exploration of the beast takes as starting point a trio of medieval bestiaries to show how pre-Spenserian visual representations of the hyena troubled categories of sex as well as species. Reading book three, canto seven of *The Faerie Queene* with this trouble in mind, I show how Sir Satyrane, the beast, and the giantess Argante form a trans-animal triad, allegorically bleeding into each other in a series of encounters that indicate the violence and the (possibly perverse) pleasure of exceeding the species boundaries often understood to be natural law. I conclude by turning to the odd figure of Gryll (*FQ* 2.XII.86–87) to explore how trans-animality might be used to interrogate more extensively the possibilities for mutuality in Spenser's anthropological and ecological allegories.

Bestiary Hyenas

In simple terms, the medieval bestiary was intended to reflect the natural world as an extension of God's creative imagination. As Emma Campbell indicates, this task often entailed "encompassing the ambiguity and even deviancy of creaturely life from a Christian moral perspective" (235). Such is the case of the hyena. A creature who feasts on corpses and whose unusual genitals seemingly defy categories

of sex,[20] the hyena was often used by medieval thinkers to distinguish that which was tasteful, proper, and moral from that which was abject, foreign, and immoral.[21] However, the visual depictions of hermaphroditic or ambiguously sexed hyenas found in the bestiaries often had the reverse effect, blurring lines rather than clarifying them. Indeed, this section will show that by the time it made its way to Hacket and Spenser in the late sixteenth century, the hyena's double nature had come to signify a crossing of the boundary of sex and had consequently revealed the permeability of the animal and human spheres.

Medieval bestiaries indicated the doubleness of hyenas in a variety of ways, but two representations are particularly interesting in the context of this article; the first is the hermaphroditic hyena, and the second is the belted hyena. A representative hermaphroditic example can be found in the thirteenth century Aberdeen Bestiary, which conceives of the animal as "sometimes male, sometimes female" (11v). In a visual acknowledgement of its sexual mutability, the Aberdeen hyena is shown to have both a circumcised penis and a rear-facing vagina. Like most bestiary hyenas, it is also chewing on a corpse. Ravenously troubling the boundaries of sex and death, this hyena seems to embody precisely the perverse "feeding and destroying" lust identified by Marotti. However, it is not the only conception of the hyena that was available to Spenser.

In the thirteenth-century Northumberland Bestiary and the twelfth-century Worksop Bestiary, we find two hyenas who appear to be wearing belts. Like the Aberdeen hyena, these two beasts are depicted as corpse-eaters with ambiguous genitals who destabilise male/female and living/dead

20 The clitoris of the female spotted hyena is elongated and contains a urogenital canal through which the hyena copulates, urinates, and gives birth. The presence of this pseudo-penis makes it difficult to determine any one hyena's sex, particularly for the untrained eye. See Glickman for more.

21 These distinctions often mobilised the hyena for antisemitic purposes. See Campbell, "Visualizing the Trans-Animal Body" and Leah DuVun, "The Hyena's Unclean Sex: Beasts, Bestiaries, and Jewish Communities." *The Shape of Sex*, Columbia University Press, 2021, pp. 70–101.

binaries. However, the Northumberland and Worksop hyenas also problematise more clearly the distinction between human and animal. It is unusual to see a bestiary animal dressed in clothing. In fact, in both bestiaries, the hyena is the only animal represented as wearing a clearly identifiable article of clothing. These belted hyenas therefore seem even more uncanny in their proximity to humanity than their unbelted Aberdeen counterpart. And indeed, there is a distinctive blurring of lines in Northumberland and Worksop; a mingling or exchanging of human and animal flesh as clothed hyenas consume unclothed humans. Furthermore, the garment that destabilises the hyenas' animality also obscures their genitalia: both belted hyenas have clearly identifiable vulvas, but their penises (or lack thereof) are rendered ambiguous by their belts. The human/animal division thus subsumes the male/female one, and the literalised double nature of these clothed, belt-bisected hyenas calls attention to the fragility of "insistent human ontologies" (Chen 13). In short, these belted hyenas represent a transing not only of sex, but also of species.

A Spenserian Trans-Animal Trio

Called into being by the concupiscent rage of the hag's spurned son, Spenser's beast seems at first to be a straightforward expression of destructive heterosexual masculine lust. In fact, Spenser tells us outright that the beast is hyena-like specifically in that he "feeds on wemens flesh" (3.VII.22.9). We are told nothing about the state of his genitals, but Spenser does indicate that the beast is "monstrous" and "mishapt" (3.VII.22.4). These adjectives echo descriptions of the villainous sorceress Duessa's deformed genitals in book one (1.II.41.1; 1.VIII.46.7), and may have indicated sexual abnormality for readers familiar with natural history texts like Hacket's. However, a clearer visual connection with the complexly signified medieval hyena emerges when Sir Satyrane belts the beast with Florimell's girdle.

As the product of a violent sexual encounter between a satyr and a human woman (FQ 1.VI.22–23), Satyrane "emphasizes bestial potentialities" which must be tamed

in order to become a well-adjusted human being (Horton 628). Indeed, he appears at first to invert the bestiary hyena, reinscribing the line between beast and human even as he embodies their synthesis at a genetic level. However, perhaps due to their close yet inverse symbolic relationship, Satyrane must discard his sword—and thus the civilising influence of his knightly training—and battle the beast on equal terms before victory can be achieved (3.VII.33). Because of his genetic closeness with the beast, the knight cannot clarify or reinstate the human-animal hierarchy without first interrogating its blurriness, and this interrogation leaves Satyrane open to his more bestial impulses. Satyrane taps into his own animality during the fight in a moment construed poetically as both an embrace and a grapple:

> So him he held, and did through might amate:
> So long he held him, and him did bett so long,
> That at last his fiercenes gan abate,
> And meekely stoup unto the victor strong.
> (VII.35.1–4)

The pronouns "him" and "he" slip between Satyrane and the beast across these four lines, eliding the distinction between the two characters and emphasising the animality of Satyrane's attack. Moreover, in this context, the verb "bett" likely implies beating, but it might also connote the more animalistic act of biting (*OED*). Similarly, the verb "amate" can either mean "to befriend" and "to equal"—as Spenser uses it in *FQ* 2.IX.34.4—or to "dismay, daunt…[or] quell" (*OED*). Based on this verbal ambiguity, we can understand Satyrane's defeat of the beast either as a forceful reaffirmation of his own humanity, or, more interestingly, as an act of trans-animal intimacy constituting a tacit embrace of his own animal instincts. If we assume the first possibility to be true, we must acknowledge that the taming of the beast can paradoxically be achieved only through Satyrane's complete and willing embrace of his animal self—that the two must be intermingled before they can be separated. If we assume the second possibility to be true, we must acknowledge that the taming of the beast is not a violent defeat at all, but rather an act of willing surrender arising out of a recognition on

the beast's part of the kinship between itself and Satyrane. In either case, it is clear that there is a possibility for shared pleasure (however fleeting) in breaking down the "rigid separation between human and nonhuman organisms" and in embracing the animal as equal (Hird 238).

When Satyrane binds the beast with "the golden rib-band, which that virgin [Florimell] wore / About her slender waste" he reproduces the medieval image of the belted hyena (VII.36.1–2). Yet unlike the bestiary hyenas, Satyrane's belted beast does not appear at first to collapse the human and animal, but rather to reinscribe their separation. Girdled with an emblem of chastity and "trembl[ing] like a lambe," the beast's deviant and destructive lust has seemingly been tamed and he has been subjugated back into his ostensibly proper, lower place in the human-animal hierarchy (VII.36.6). However, we must consider that Satyrane's victory (if it is a victory) is short-lived. As soon as the beast is bound, the giantess Argante bursts into the poem, facilitating the beast's escape and signifying either the resurfacing or the escalating of Satyrane's animality. Born while copulating with her twin brother, Argante is one half of a devilish, hyena-like hermaphrodite (VII.48.5–9). Indeed, her animality is so extreme that she "suffre[s] beasts her body to deflower," mingling animal DNA with her own and making explicit the collapsing of human-animal boundaries implicit in Satyrane's combat with the beast (VII.49.7). Forced to decide between a tamed, bound, and bounded animality and an unbounded, dangerous animality, Satyrane opts to try his luck with the latter. For a moment, the two combatants appear to be equally matched, but Argante eventually overcomes the knight and begins to take him away to serve her in sexual thralldom. However, Argante is soon frightened into dumping her prey by the chaste lady knight Palladine, and Satyrane is befriended and tenuously re-civilised by the Squire of Dames (VII.44–61). Ultimately, Satyrane's rapid and relatively ambiguous back-and-forth movement between the chaste/human and the perverse/animal constitutes a poetic reiteration of the trans-animal ontological anxiety embodied by the bestiary hyena. Each

time he crosses the boundary between human and animal, Satyrane smudges the dividing line, inching closer towards a full intermingling of the two as embodied in the bestiary beast.

Trans-animality, Allegory, and the Human

What are we to do with this anxiety? Should we try desperately to reinforce the boundaries between human and animal and risk blurring them even further? Or should we immerse ourselves fully in the pleasure of trans-animal exchanges and encounters and risk becoming monstrous? The beast/Satyrane/Argante episode offers no clear answers to these questions. Instead, we must turn to Gryll, one of Spenser's briefest yet most memorable characters for a solution. Gryll is not, strictly speaking, a trans-animal figure as his engagement with animality involves a self-contained metamorphosis rather than a cross-species mingling. Nevertheless, he represents one of the poem's most explicit attempts to reinscribe boundaries between man and beast. Gryll makes his one and only appearance in the final stanzas of book two, when he is re-transformed from swine to human after the Palmer reverses the sorceress Acrasia's magic. He is not happy to return "from hoggish form to naturall" (*FQ* 2.XII.86.9), and his complaints trigger the following exchange between Sir Guyon and the Palmer:

> Saide Guyon, "See the mind of beastly man,
> That hath so soone forgot the excellence
> Of his creation, when he life began,
> That now he chooseth, with vile difference,
> To be a beast, and lacke intelligence."
> To whome the Palmer thus, "The donghill kinde
> Delightes in filth and fowle incontinence:
> Let Gryll be Gryll, and have his hoggish minde;
> But let us hence depart, whilest wether serves and winde." (XII.87)

It is clear from this stanza that Gryll is a warning against losing sight of the essential dignity bestowed upon man by virtue of the "excellence / Of his creation." He is thus designed to clarify the human-animal hierarchy by embodying

the absurdity of their collapse. However, Gryll's unwavering commitment to trading his intelligence for a life of "filth and fowle incontinence" means that even the allegorical embodiments of temperance (Guyon) and right reason (the Palmer) are forced to grant him his beastliness. Importantly, Guyon and the Palmer's decision to "let Gryll be Gryll" does not imply a restoration of Acrasia's magic, but rather a resigned acceptance that Gryll will retain his "hoggish minde" while in human form. In other words, the decision is a meta-poetic acknowledgement of the paradox typified by the medieval bestiary hyena: we can try to use animals in order to distinguish ourselves from that which is base and bestial, but such symbolic moves usually end up proving that we are not all that different from our fellow creatures after all.

The only thing to do with our ontological anxiety, then, is to "let Gryll be Gryll." We must accept our own creaturely double nature, and perhaps even seek out positive opportunities for interspecies encounter and collaboration. This is not to say that we should all join Satyrane in embracing the beast or become like Gryll and wallow in animality. Instead, we should pay attention to what animals can teach us about being human. As a final example, consider the Redcrosse Knight's "angry steede" and Una's "palfrey slow" in the opening few stanzas of the poem (*FQ* 1.I.1.6; I.4.7). Although these horses offer insight into the temperaments of their respective owners—the immature Knight of Holiness is impulsive and headstrong, while guiding Truth is slow, steady, and perhaps falling slightly behind—they do so by acting in accordance with their animal instincts. In other words, the horses elucidate the poem's anthropological allegory by being their bestial selves. To be sure, this remains an anthropocentric way of thinking—Spenser was, after all, as caught up in a chain of hierarchical taxonomies as we are today. However, as this article has shown, conceiving of *The Faerie Queene*'s human-animal allegorical pairings as porous exchanges rather than one-way projections of the human onto the animal enables us to better understand both the depth of Spenser's animal symbols and their oftentimes ambiguous relationship to the poem's broader allegorical

project. Furthermore, such a reading opens the door for a more expansive understanding of Spenser's compassionate eco-poetics as epitomised in his "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty":

> […] look on the frame
> Of this wide universe, and therein reed
> The endless kinds of creatures which by name
> Thou canst not count, much less their natures aim;
> All which are made with wondrous wise respect,
> And all with admirable beauty deckt. (30–35)

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