

Jessica Vega

12/8/18

LIT-507-X1283

Professor Robinson

### Elements of animals and nature in Renaissance Literature

Only since the 1990s have scholars in English Renaissance Studies shifted their focus from a human-centric approach to a humanistic field of study. While animals and nature predominate as tropes in Renaissance literature, only recently have scholars reexamined the significance of their placement within sixteenth-century poetry and prose. The works of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* all exhibit animals and nature as important representations of God's favor or disfavor, and as depictions of human relations with one another and with religion. Rebecca Ann Bach's text helps to highlight how significant the correlation between man, nature, and animals were during the Renaissance era. She states that:

“Humans, like other living things that we too easily call ‘animals’ were called ‘creatures’ in the English Renaissance, and so were the beasts, birds, and fishes; everything in the world was God’s creation...the mortal body did not divide humans from other creatures...” (Bach 3).

In other words, for many Renaissance thinkers and for English Renaissance society as a whole, humans and animals were not that different from one another; thus, the representation of animals and nature were just as integral as the depictions of humans and socio-religious relations. This concept is further highlighted in Erica Fudge's book, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*. Within *Brutal Reasoning*, Fudge notes that, “the

animal emerged as humanity's other; as the organism against which human status was asserted.” (Fudge 2). Representing animals as a part of humanity and as a measure of human ideals and vices, also helps to cement their various applications and illustrations in Renaissance literature.

The animals and depiction of nature hold a far more intricate disposition than what can be viewed on the surface. The most evident of these qualities can be seen in relation to religion and God's favor. However, within *The Faerie Queene*, this aspect also takes on a socio-political dimension. As noted by Kevin Curran within his article, “Renaissance non-humanism: plants, animals, machines, matter,” this new wave of study can be seen as “part of a ‘new humanism, one that finally acknowledges Man's inescapable enmeshment within a larger ecology of organic...agents.” (Curran 315). Thus, the subject of animals and nature are used in Renaissance literature, not only to explore their status within man, but also to help explore man's relationship religion, God, and even other humans and religious groups.

The concepts of nature and animals were not viewed in the same way during the Renaissance as they are today. In order to fully conceptualize the correlation between animals, nature and the religious elements that they represent, it is imperative to understand the role and views that Renaissance society had in regard to these concepts. Some of the more common elements, especially regarding the sheep, lion, and snake are prevalent in the Bible and also fictionalized religious works. The use of these animals to symbolize goodness and purity in written works and plays of the Renaissance is therefore purposefully done in order to convey the virtues of a scene, the character, or the religion itself. Conversely, negative animal traits such as the serpent, are utilized to portray villainy, or in the case of several Renaissance works the evils found in the opposing religions of Catholics and Protestants.

Nature was another concept which influenced Renaissance society greatly. During the Renaissance there were a great many pastoral poems that highlighted the beauty and essence of nature. These poems help to emphasize the aesthetic value that Renaissance readers felt in regard to nature. However, this tribute was not simply concerned with the external aspects of nature. There were many veiled interests in Renaissance society's enthusiasm towards nature itself. As noted by Kevin Curran, "the prospect of a return to nature was encountered with intense nostalgia." (Curran 315). Robert Watson's *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* further explores this ideology. Not only do the pastoral poems and other nature-centric works of the Renaissance help to illustrate this sense of nostalgia but it was also a desire for certainty, and divine grace in addition to a reverence towards nature. Watson also notes that, "[a]s the persistent references to the Garden of Eden suggest, the movement back to nature was partly a code for a drive back toward some posited original certainty" (Watson 3). In focusing on nature, the Renaissance was able to fuse elements of nature with that of human ideals, virtues, and outlooks. In this manner, they were thus able to link the concept of nature with that of God, the divine, as well as metaphysical concepts like truth and social representations (Curran 315).

Rebecca Ann Bach's and Fudge's aspects concerning the intelligence and role of animals appear to hold true for both *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene*. When Eve is first confronted with Lucifer in the guise of a talking serpent within *Paradise Lost*, she expresses wonder at meeting an animal with human reason and tongue. However, she specifically notes that she is unsure of the measure of animal reason as illustrated in the following quote, "[w]hat may this mean? Language of man pronounced by tongue of brute, and human sense expressed? The first at least of these I thought denied To beasts...the latter I demur for in their looks much reason, and in their actions oft appears [emphasis mine]." (Milton 2103). What this quote illustrates,

that though Eve is unsure of the extent of an animal's emotional and cognitive intelligence, she does not outright dismiss it either. In fact, she explicitly states that in their looks and in their actions, it appears that animals have as much reason as humans. This excerpt helps to illustrate the human and animal bond and how the divide between the two was not as strict as it initially appears. *Birds and Other Creatures in Renaissance Literature* further expounds upon this by explaining how the belief in human nature, "did not differentiate that nature from other kinds of creaturely nature." (Bach 4).

After Adam and Eve ate the apple, it is also important to note that both nature and animals become inhospitable towards each other and towards man. This is especially noticeable in Book Ten when the consequences of their actions are being discussed by God and the Angels. The effects of their tribunal are felt throughout the mortal realm:

"And teach us further by what means to shun  
 Th' inclement seasons, rain, ice, hail, and snow,  
 Which now the sky with various face begins  
 To show us in this mountain, while the winds  
 Blow moist and keen, shattering the graceful locks  
 Of these fair spreadings trees." (Milton 2140).

As soon as God's favor is lost, nature no longer is as supportive, spring-like or serene. Instead it becomes a harsh and unforgiving mistress. This same chaotic change can be seen in the way that the animals treated each other, and man as illustrated with the following quote, "Beast now with beast gan war, and gowl with fowl, / and fish with fish." (Milton 2132). Thus, the unification of nature, animals, and man can be seen not only as a symbol of God's favor, but humanity's sense of self and peace within the universe at large, and how the two natures of man and animal are

united. This concept further illustrates the sort of symbiotic play between nature, animals, and humans.

*Utopia* seems to understand this notion of harmony between man, animals, and nature to some extent. However, instead of equating the loss of God's favor with the discord of the natural world, Sir Thomas More highlights their relationship solely within the world of humans. As further expounded upon in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, though animals are not given the same rights as the human citizens of Utopia, More makes sure to emphasize that the animals are being treated well. More explores the relationship between man and animals through a more practical method that is reminiscent of the William Hogarth's *the Four Cruelties*, instead of through a traditional Renaissance religious lens. This can be illustrated within the following excerpt where More explains why citizens do not partake in the slaughtering of animals:

“Bondsmen do the slaughtering and the cleaning in these places: citizens are not allowed to do such work. The Utopians feel that slaughtering *our fellow creatures* gradually destroys the sense of compassion, which is the finest sentiment which our human nature is capable [emphasis mine]“ (More 607).

What this quote helps highlight is not only how advanced More's thinking was for the time period, as it predates *The Four Cruelties* by almost two hundred years, it also helps to illustrate the symbiotic nature in human and animal relations, by demonstrating the great care and concern that Utopians have for their fellow living beings. The categorizing of humans and animals were all considered part of God's creation, so in essence they were all considered “creatures”(Bach 3). More thus depicts how the cruelty towards animals can closely be linked to and evolve to human cruelty. In other words, More helps to highlight the concept that because human and animal are linked together in mortal form it is not right for respectful citizens of Utopia to participate in

such barbaric acts, and civilized Europeans should emulate the morally superior Utopians in this regard.

Both Thomas More's *Utopia* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* depict animals and humans living a respectful coexistence. However, within both narratives the description of the animals and their relationships with humans is of secondary concern. Unlike *Utopia* and *Paradise Lost*, however, the imagery within *The Faerie Queene* deals heavily with animal and religious symbolism. Within *The Faerie Queene* the description of animals and their relationship with humans takes up the foreground.

It is not unusual for the concepts of animal and nature to be associated with religious symbolism. The correlation between socio-religious symbolism and the representation of animals and nature goes back to early religions. In ancient Greece, deities were often seen as personifications of nature, and often took animal form. Zeus often took different, often animal forms in order to seduce his many paramours; among which he took the shape of a bull and a swan. Regardless, he was most often associated with thunder and the sky. Gaia, was the personification of the earth, a concept which still exists in popular culture today as Mother Earth. In Egyptian mythology, deities were often combined with animal counterparts. For example, Bast had the features of a cat and Anubis had the likeness of a jackal. Ingvild Saelid Gilhus touches upon this correlation perfectly in his text, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas*. Gilhus notes that, “[i]n religions, animals appear as the third party in the interaction between gods and human beings, often as mediators.” (Gilhus 2).

Even in Christianity, elements of nature and animals are prevalent. The sheep and the lion are two of the most common elements of nature and animals found within Christianity. Even the same animal can be used in contrasting ways. For example:

“[w]hen Christ is described as a lion, his wrath, manliness and rulership appear in the context of his saving power, while in relation to satan the lion describes his wrath and rulership in the context of evil. Some animals tend, to a higher degree than others, to have a fixed range of metaphorical meanings in Christian discourse, for instance the lamb and the dove” (Gilhus 11-12).

Thus, it is not surprising that these elements can be found within Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* given the strong socio-religious overtones that are intertwined within the work. At times, the representation of these animals and depictions of nature are correlated to the positive portrayal of Protestantism, in addition, to English rule. Conversely, the negative depictions of the Irish and Catholicism are parallel to the dark representations of animals and nature.

Furthermore, during the time *The Faerie Queene* was written, there was a strong tension between Catholicism and Protestantism; both religions stem from Christianity, and thus use a lot of the same imagery as one another. The tensions between both religions was enough to shake the nation, as well as, cause stress with the foreign relations of other countries, such as the Catholic dominated populations of Scotland and Ireland. Even before the reign of Henry the Eighth, there was much contention between the two religious groups. Though this division arose primarily due to a difference of values and a differing opinion in the dissemination of religious knowledge, as the years went by, the strain between Catholicism and Protestants continued to grow. This is especially evident with the translation of the bible.

As noted by Andrew Dickson, the translation of the bible, “helped ... increase[d] literacy rates, meaning that more people had access to education and new thinking. But the political consequences for Europe were violent, as war raged and Protestant and Catholic nations and citizens vied for control.” (Dickson). After the demise of Henry the eighth, England went through further strife with power shifting between Protestants like Elizabeth and Catholics like, Mary of Tudor. Regardless of the tensions, religion was a major force in Renaissance England, so much so that many works of the time period were influenced by the concept of religion, like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. Thus, it is not surprising that Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* main focus is that of religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants. The depiction of animals and nature help to enforce the contesting views between both religions, as well as, the divine and profane in correlation with man, animals, and nature.

One of the most paramount scenes from Book One that illustrates the strong animal imagery is the Una and her relationship with animals and nature. Of all the characters within the poem, her relationships with the animals and nature is a significant aspect of her persona. When Sansloy tries to take advantage of her, nature itself comes to her defense in the form of Faunes and Satyres. Of particular note is also the strong bond between Una and the lion that comes to her aid in Book One. Immediately upon meeting each other, the lion acts as a guardian of sorts towards Una. The immediate taming can be seen in the following verses:

“It fortun’d out of the thickest wood  
 A ramping Lyon<sup>o</sup> rushed suddainly,  
 Hunting full greedy after salvage blood;

Soone as the royall virgin he did spy,  
 With gaping mouth at her ran greedily,  
 To have attonce devourd her tender corse:  
 But to the pray when as he drew more ny,  
 His bloody rage asswaged with remorse,  
 And with the sight amazd, forgat his furious forse.  
 In stead thereof he kist her wearie feet,  
 And lickt her lilly hands with fawning tong,  
 As he her wronged innocence did weet.  
 O how can beautie maister the most strong," (Spenser Book One, Canto 3).

Not only does this excerpt demonstrate the strong bond between humankind and animals, it also highlights the high moral capacity of the lion. The lion, as illustrated in the passage above, takes pity upon Una. Not only does he save her in this scene, but later within the narrative, the lion gives his life in trying to protect her. Una's bond with nature and animals also resonates a serene relationship between man and nature in *Paradise Lost* before Adam and Eve ate the apple. In both cases, there is a sort of harmonious state that comes from the peace between man, animals, and nature. With the loss of this peace and God's goodwill, discord and violence take the center stage. This latter nature is especially enforced within the villains of *The Faerie Queene*.

Whereas both *Utopia* and *Paradise Lost* do not make many allusions to the negatives of other religions or cultures, Spenser takes great pains in depicting the negative qualities of Catholicism and of the Irish in particular. There are many negative portrayals within the narrative of certain characters that possess animalistic qualities or are accompanied by an animal associated with a negative connotation. These negative depictions of animals and nature are

largely absent from *Utopia* and *Paradise Lost*, with the sole exception of the serpent in the latter work. It is also interesting to note that in the majority of those two works, the animals are portrayed solely as animals; they are not meant to symbolize goodness, purity, corruption or evil (the sole exception, again, being Lucifer in the guise of the serpent and how the chaos from eating the apple creates discord with nature and among animals). *The Faerie Queene*, however, embraces this literary tactic full-heartedly, not only in relation to religion but also in regard to the socio political atmosphere of the time.

Joan Fitzpatrick highlights this aspect within her article, “Spenser’s Nationalistic Images of Beauty: The Ideal and the Other in Relation to Protestant England and Catholic Ireland in *The Faerie Queene*: Book One.” Within the article, she notes how the negative animalistic qualities are applied not only politically towards a certain group, but also towards a particular gender. As noted in the article, “Error bears the tail of a serpent but 'th'other halfe did womans shape retaine' ... so presumably she has the breasts, face, and hair of a woman. The serpent that tempted Eve was often represented with the face, and sometimes the upper body, of a woman” (Fitzpatrick 18). This description, not only illustrates Error with the villainous and monstrous nature of women, but also the dark side of the Catholic Church, in particular Irish Catholic mothers.

This concept is further expounded by Fitzpatrick as an English fear of Irish childbirth and cannibalism. This is especially seen during the parade of sin and also within the character of Duessa. Duessa, as noted by Fitzpatrick, is not only Una’s opposite but also a “whore who symbolizes Roman Catholicism.” (Fitzpatrick 16). Not only does Duessa represent the falsehood of the Catholic Church, but her description, especially of her womanhood, is described as monstrous. Furthermore, she is shown riding on a beast in a similar manner that Una does with

her lion companion. Unlike the bond between Una and the lion, however, their bond is shown to be unholy.

The sin parade in Book One of *The Faerie Queene* is infamous for the negative depiction of the sins and their animal-mounts and fully exhibits the dual negatives connotations found in Christianity's view of similar animals. Each of the seven sins are described in great detail as are their animal-mounts. The association between the sins and their mounts are meant to convey a negative between villainy and the monstrous side of nature. While many of the sins are shown riding a variety of animals that are in tune with their own personal sins, like Lechery riding upon a goat and Gluttony riding upon a swine, the most interesting of the sins is Wrath as his mount is a lion. The differences shown between Wrath's lion and Una's lion are particularly eye-opening as they represent two very different moralities despite being the same animal. The introduction of Wrath and his mount below help to contrast the differences between the two.

“And him beside rides fierce revenging Wrath,  
upon a Lion, loth for to be led;  
And in his hand a burning brand he hath  
The which he brandisheth about his head,  
His eyes did hurle forth sparkles fiery red,  
And stared sterne on all, that him beheld.  
As ashes pale of hew and seeming ded.” (Spenser 825).

What is especially interesting to note from the description above, is how different the relationship between Wrath and his Lion is from Una's bond with her lion. Though they are the same manner of animal, the spelling of their common species name is notably different. The reason for this might be due to Spenser trying to differentiate between the two creatures.

Furthermore, the spelling of Lyon denotes a more classical rendition of what the lion is supposed to represent. As noted by Elizabeth Furlong Alkaoud, “Spenser's use of the lion [is used as an] icon for justice and love in his epic” (Furlong 9). Thus, by ensuring that both forms of the lion are spelled differently, Spenser is able to make sure that there is no confusion regarding which lion is good and which is a mount for evil.

Like Duessa’s bond with her beast and Error’s serpentine qualities, these animalistic characteristics serve as a contrast between Una’s bond with nature and animals, and even the way that those aspects are illustrated within *Utopia* and *Paradise Lost*. Within *Utopia* and *Paradise Lost* nature is illustrated as an extension of God. When God is shown as being content or pleased, nature is depicted as mirroring that serenity. *The Faerie Queene* in contrast, does not illustrate nature or animals in the same manner. Instead, the forces of evil have just as much control over the elements and animals as the forces of good do.

The examples of animals and nature within *Utopia*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Faerie Queene* all depict animals and nature in a complex fashion that helps to promote the symbiotic bond between divinity and other humans, as well as in regard to the relationship between man, nature and animals. Within *Utopia*, Thomas More takes great pains to depict how humanely animals are treated and how by treating animals in a kind manner, helps to ensure that humans do not fall to their baser natures. It also shows that though there is a division between the two, More helps to emphasize the shared nature between humans and animals. *Paradise Lost* helps to enforce how animals and nature are extensions of God’s favor, as well as how animals and humans possess a similar shared nature. This is especially shown through Eve and how, though she does not know for certain if animals can reason, based on their mannerisms and emotions, she feels like that they can and do. *The Faerie Queene* delves further into the role of animals and

nature within its narrative. While the epic demonstrates the goodness and purity of nature, especially in regard to the Protestant religion and England, it also depicts nature and animals as extensions of villainy. Thus, *The Faerie Queene* helps to illustrate the dual role of animals and nature within Christianity and serves as a visual moral scale for the reader. This method is meant to represent the faults of other nations and religions, as well as, to correlate the views of certain creatures with particular religious and socio-political views. These concepts regarding the roles of animals and nature help to depict a bond between not only the divine, but with humans as well. Though the depiction of animals and nature within the three texts vary, they still possess a similar role within the texts. The animals and depictions of nature are not only used to highlight their roles with humans, but also the views that Renaissance England had towards other cultures, religions, and with God himself.

## Works Cited

Bach, Rebecca Ann. *Birds and Creaturely Hierarchies in Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare, Descartes, and Animal Studies*. Routledge, 2018.

Curran, Kevin. "Renaissance Non-Humanism: Plants, Animals, Machines, Matter." *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2010, pp. 314–322. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/24419842](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24419842).

Dickson, Andrew. "Key Features of Renaissance Culture." The British Library, The British Library, 27 Mar. 2017, [www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/key-features-of-renaissance-culture](http://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/key-features-of-renaissance-culture).

Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas*. Routledge, 2006.

Fitzpatrick, J. "Spenser's Nationalistic Images of Beauty: The Ideal and the Other in Relation to Protestant England and Catholic Ireland in The 'Faerie Queene', Book 1." *Cahiers Elisabethains*, no. 53, pp. 13–26. EBSCOhost, [ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eds\\_wah&AN=000073297500003&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eds_wah&AN=000073297500003&site=eds-live&scope=site). Accessed 23 Oct. 2018.

Fudge, Erica. *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press, 2019.

Furlong, Elizabeth. "What the Lyon Ment: Iconography of the Lion in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser's." *Rice Scholarship Home*, Rice University, 1 Jan. 1984, [scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/15797?show=full](https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/15797?show=full).

Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Volume 1, Ninth Edition, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, pp. 1945-2175.

More, Sir Thomas. "Utopia." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W.W. Norton & Company, 2012, pp. 569-645.

Shugg, Wallace. "The Cartesian Beast-Machine in English Literature (1663-1750)." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1968, pp. 279–292. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2708581](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2708581).

Spenser, Edmund. "The First Booke of the Faerie Queene." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 1, ninth edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, pp. 781-934.

Watson, Robert N. *Back to Nature The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.