

# MONSTROUS ACTS

## BESTIALITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

*Erica Fudge explores a shift in attitudes towards bestiality in the sixteenth century and how this impinged on wider issues concerning human status.*

**I**N 1670 THOMAS RIGG OF Hadmore in the North Riding of Yorkshire appeared before a Justice of the Peace. His deposition reads:

Upon Sunday last being the 22nd day of May betwixt nine and ten of the clock in the morning, as he and Elizabeth his wife were going through Gillimore town field ... they espied one Christopher Sunley of Gillimore aforesaid being upon a mare with his arms clasped about her loins, and jumping at her with his body, in beastly and unseemly manner for the time they were going about twenty yards. And saith that when he came off her he looked down betwixt his legs, then looking about him he espied this informant and his wife, whereupon he went to the other side of the mare, and laid him down.

The Riggs were not the only people to find their walks interrupted in the seventeenth century. In June

A pig-man said to be born to a sow in Brussels in 1564. From Paré's *Of Monsters and Prodiges* (1573).

1656, for example, John Sweedale of Easby had a similar experience. He stated that:

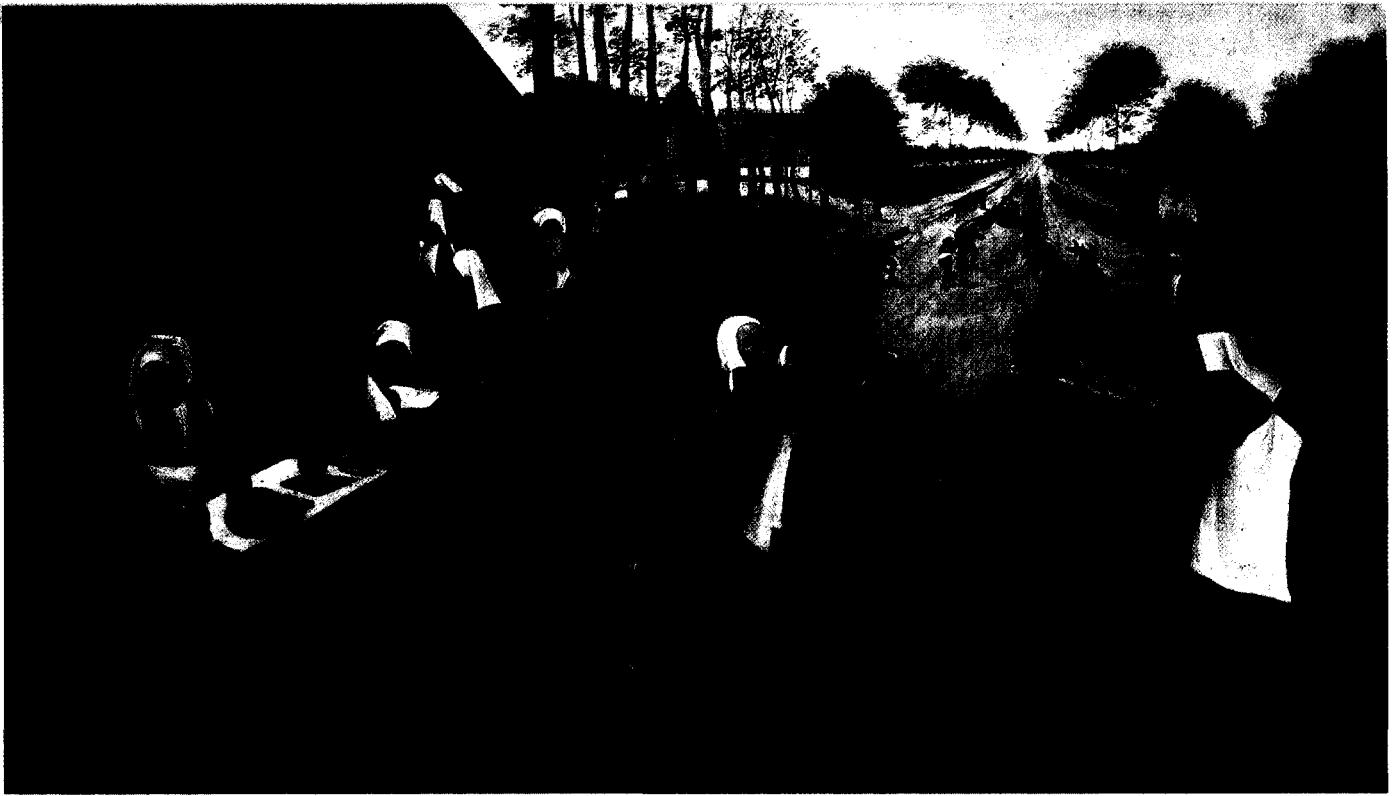
On Saturday last as he was going to look at some horses belonging to the Lord Eure that pastured in my lands around Easby for fear they should get into the corn, he saw William Clarke of the same town, labourer, about the hour of ten of the clock at night standing very near a mare, and coming near unto him perceived him (to the best of his judgment) committing buggery with the said mare, being William Ripley's. He saith the mare is of a chestnut colour, and that this fact was committed in a place called Burrow Green, belonging to the Lord Eure. When this informant came first up to and spoke with this

said William Clarke and asked him what he was doing for he had a wife of his own, the said William Clarke prayed him for God's sake, to keep his counsel, and he would not stay two days in England.

When Clarke himself was questioned – he obviously had not left the country – he stated that he was, as Sweedale had deposed, in Burrow Green, but that he was

... looking at the thighs of a mare behind, to see whether the ox had hipped or gored her behind or not, for as his master's draught was going down a hill that same day in the afternoon he saw one of the oxen hip at the said mare which was then in the draught, but denies that he committed buggery with the said mare.

Clarke's denial of the accusation made against him was not surprising.



Across Europe peasants and animals lived intimately (often under the same roof) and interdependently for centuries (Brueghel the Younger c.1564-1638).

Since 1533 bestiality had been a felony without benefit of clergy, and anyone convicted of the offence would 'suffer such pains of death and losses and penalties of their goods, chattels, debtors, lands, tenements, hereditaments'. The 1533 statute presented the offence as 'that detestable and abominable vice', and used the term 'buggery' to describe it. A later statute of 1548 added an additional clause advising that:

No person be received for witness or to lay or give evidence against the said offendor ... [who] should take any profit or commodity by the death of the said offendor if he were attained or convicted of the said crime and offence.

This addition can only be regarded as a protection against wilful accusations made for gain. Buggery was too serious an issue to be threatened lightly.

The particular danger of an accusation of bestiality was not only the threat of execution, however. In legal

documents the terms vice, crime and sin were all used to describe the offence, and the slippage in the language hints at the variety of ways in which people living in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understood bestiality. There is more to this than just committing an illegal act. For Edward Coke, the sev-

After the statute of 1533, bestiality – 'that detestable and abominable vice' – was punishable by death.

enteenth-century systematiser of the common law, bestiality was 'a detestable and abominable sin, amongst Christians not to be named.' It was beyond words; outside of the propriety of godly conversation. Going even further than this, Michael Dalton wrote, in his advice

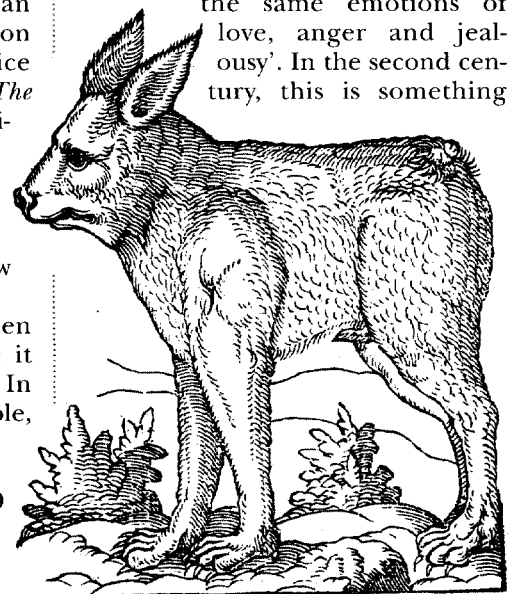
manual on the common law, *The Country Justice* (1618), that bestiality was 'a sin against God, Nature and the Law'. That is, in committing the crime, the offenders did not merely break the law of the land, they also broke the law of God, and of the natural order.

Bestiality had not always been regarded as the serious offence it became in the sixteenth century. In the second century AD, for example,

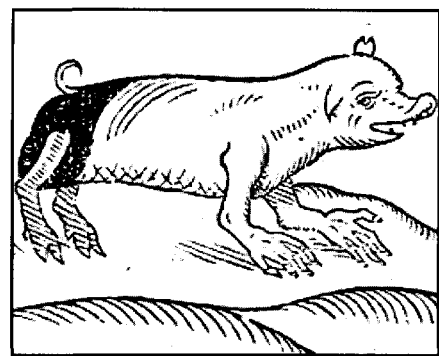
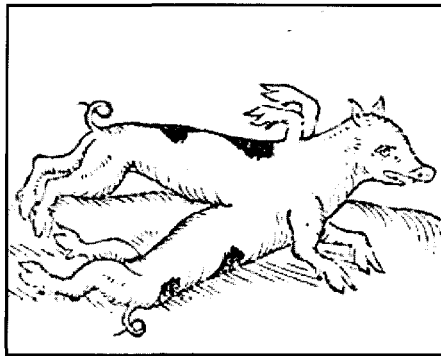
The dog said by Edward Fenton in 1569 to be the prodgeny of a bear and a mastiff who were penned together in London's Bear Garden.

in *On the Characteristics of Animals* Aelian recorded a number of human-animal relationships: 'at Soli in Cilicia a dog loved a boy of the name of Xenophon; at Sparta another boy in the prime of life by reason of his beauty caused a jackdaw to fall sick of love'. He tells a similar tale of the 'groom who fell in love with a young mare, the finest of the herd, as it might have been with a beautiful girl, the loveliest of all thereabouts'. There is no moral concern here about these cross-species relationships, rather it is a celebration of humanity's place in the natural order. In her book *The Beast Within* (1994), Joyce E. Salisbury argues that in Aelian we can trace the ancient idea that 'animals were not very different from people. They suffered

the same emotions of love, anger and jealousy'. In the second century, this is something



**Supernatural: the monstrous pig near Charing Cross, from a broadsheet of 1562, was seen as a warning from God.**



that was not regarded as a threat to humanity.

Early Christians abandoned Aelian's celebration of human-animal relationships and turned instead to the biblical injunctions against bestiality, such as that found in Leviticus 18.23: 'Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therein'. However, in the earliest penitential manuals, wherein priests found listed appropriate penalties for a variety of sins, punishment for bestiality was remarkably light. In the seventh-century Irish Penitential of Columban, for example, is written: 'If anyone practices masturbation or sins with a beast, he shall do penance for two years'. The Penitential returns to the subject later, and the sin, again, holds an interesting place:

If a layman commits fornication with a beast, he shall do penance for a year if he has a wife; but if he has not, for half a year. So also shall he do penance who, having a wife, practices masturbation.

Less sinful for a single man than a married one, and no more dangerous than onanism, bestiality is hardly to be perceived as having the dangerous status it was to come to hold in 1533. So why was there a change in attitude to bestiality?

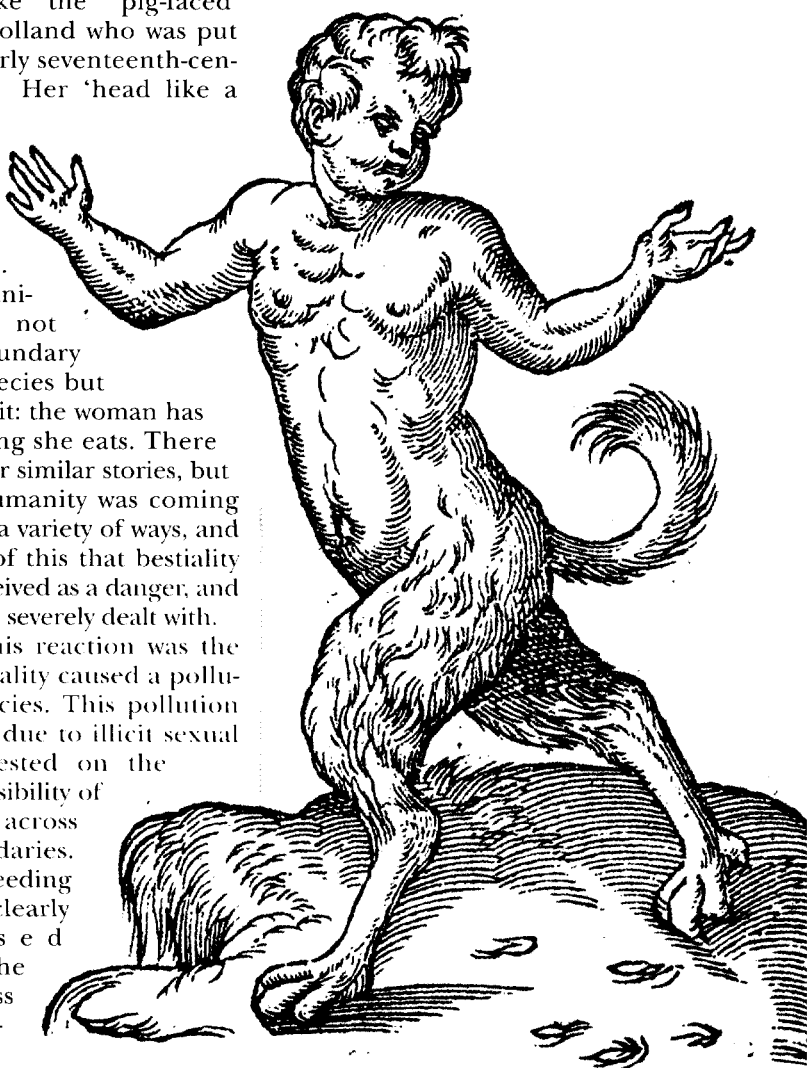
The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time when many of the previously held assumptions about humanity were coming under threat. Colonialists were bringing back stories of monstrous races which appeared to confirm medieval ideas, and which upset many of the established perceptions about the final work of the Creation. The Reformation had caused a new interrogation of the self, and a new emphasis on what it was that made a human human, while the New Science saw bodies investigated in a way that compromised the distinction between human and animal. In the light of changes such as these to the category of the human, animals were moving ever closer; gone was Aelian's sense of the wonder of nature, instead beasts became a threat.

The tales of the 'animalisation' of humans that can be traced in the early modern period come in a variety of forms. For Robert Gray, in a sermon given before members of the Virginia Company in 1610, the New World natives 'wander up and down like beasts, and in manners and conditions differ very little from beasts'. These humans were portrayed as hardly human, and this was a reason offered by colonialists for their colonial practices: the natives could not own the land because they were not fully human. In the Reformed religious ideas of William Perkins an animal was a creature that lacked a conscience, but how to prove that humans had consciences remained a problem. On a more popular level, were cases like the 'pig-faced' woman from Holland who was put on display in early seventeenth-century London. Her 'head like a swine' was said by one ballad to be due to her over-indulgence in bacon. Here, eating animals does not cement the boundary between the species but actually undoes it: the woman has become the thing she eats. There are several other similar stories, but the status of humanity was coming under threat in a variety of ways, and it was because of this that bestiality came to be perceived as a danger, and one that must be severely dealt with.

Central to this reaction was the belief that bestiality caused a pollution of the species. This pollution was not merely due to illicit sexual contact, but rested on the belief in the possibility of reproduction across species boundaries. Animal cross-breeding was already a clearly recognised occurrence: the mule, a cross between a donkey and a horse, had

been around for thousands of years. But the similarities between the horse and the donkey meant that this was particular blend did not seem outside of nature. However, more extraordinary crosses were also said to have taken place. In his 1569 work, *Certaine Secrete wonders of Nature*, a translation of the French text by Pierre Boaistuau, Edward Fenton records a dog whose parents were a bear and a mastiff. He writes that this cross-breed came from the

**One story about a woman giving birth to this creature, half-human, half-dog, recurred as a cautionary tale against bestiality for nearly a century.**





For New World colonisers, dehumanising the natives was a necessary step towards subjugating them. (John White, Indian ritual dance, c.1570-80).

Bear Garden, London's baiting arena:

where the dogs and the bears do lie in little cabinets or vaults of wood, one fast by another: and being in their heats, those that do govern them, will not stick oftentimes to put a bear and a dog in one house together, when being pricked with their natural impressions, they convert their cruelty into love: of which conjunctions are engendered oftentimes creatures like unto this, although very seldom.

Fenton also notes Aristotle's belief that 'the Indian dogs be engendered of a dog and a tiger'. With such a belief in the possibility of reproducing across the boundaries of individual animal species, it is not a great leap to assume the possibility of human-animal cross-breeds. This view of the possible outcome of bestiality was not a new one. In the second century AD Aelian recorded the 'strange union' of a human groom and a mare that produced a foal, and in the thirteenth century William of Auvergne wrote of the possibility of women reproducing with bears. The threat of bestiality which can be traced in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings, therefore, does not present new evidence. Rather, at the heart of these discussions of bestiality – in legal depositions, popular and 'scientific' writings – is a new fear about the status of humanity. As Salisbury has said of the penitential manuals, 'When there was no threat of blurring the lines between species, there was no need to regulate strictly the distinctions.' By implication,

where there was a perceived threat regulation became more strict. The statute of 1533, in this sense, represents a change in the perception of the boundary which existed between humans and animals. By the early sixteenth century a new understanding had emerged.

This is exactly what Fenton recognises. He tells the story of

... a child who was conceived and engendered between a woman and a dog, having from the navel upwards, the form and shape of the mother, so well accomplished, that nature had not forgotten anything unperformed, and from the navel downwards, it had the form and

figure of the beast who was the father, who (as Volateranus writeth) was sent to the Pope which reigned at that time there, to the end it might be purified and purged.

Ambroise Paré tells the same story in *Of Monsters and Prodigies* (1573) which he says took place in 1493, and the tale appears again in William Turner's *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697), where it is dated to 1556. Whatever the origin or date of the story it is significant that it is reproduced across a century. From Fenton's discussion of numerous natural eccentricities, through Paré's medical text to Turner's book of wonders, the human-animal

A new understanding had emerged, by the early 16th century, of the boundary between humans and animals.

mal cross-breed has a wide-ranging appeal. It is scientific, as Paré would have understood the term, and it is also a wonder.

The way in which these writers depicted the product of a bestial relationship places these creatures within the wider cultural understanding of prodigies: that is, of things that exceed nature. The important difference between the prodigious monster and the product of a bestial relationship was that the monster could only be explained by recourse to the supernatural. A bestial relationship, on the other hand, was, paradoxically, wholly natural. But the representation of prodigious monsters reminds us of the anxieties about the natural world that were particularly prevalent during the early modern period.

Monstrous births were recorded in ballads, broadsides, religious tracts and medical treatises, and held both

popular and learned attention. Often presented with lurid illustrations, works detailing these aberrations of nature offered meaning where there seemed to be no explanation, and in many the meaning was clearly supernatural: the monster was

a warning from God who was presented as the author of the oddities. Fenton argued that

It is most certain that these monstrous creatures, for the most part, do proceed of the judgment, justice, chastisement and curse of God, which suffereth that the fathers and mothers bring forth these abominations, as a horror of their sin.

In 1562, for example, the birth of a monstrous pig near Charing Cross is reported in a broadsheet. After a lengthy description and illustration the author notes

These strange sights, the Almighty

Hunting, shooting and fishing: pursuits affirming man's position at the top of the chain of being, from the Bradford Table Carpet, late-16th century.



God sendeth unto us that we should not be forgetful of his mighty power: nor unthankful for his so great mercies. The which he showeth specially by giving unto us his holy word wherby our lives ought to be guided and also his wonderful tokens wherby we are most gently warned.

This paragraph is reproduced almost verbatim in another broadsheet of the same year describing another monstrous pig, this time born in Hampstead.

It was not only animals, however, that could be meaningful when thinking about the disturbance of nature. In 1595 at Oteringham in Holderness, for example, a mother gave birth to a healthy daughter, and then two days later to a monster:

The head whereof was like a cony [rabbit]: The hands was like a mole: The body, legs, and feet like a woman, having also the privities like a woman

The display in the church porch of the monster was a reminder of God's ever-present justice.

This extraordinary event was regarded as 'a thing ... sent of God to fore-warn us of our wickedness'. The local gentleman who recorded the event in a letter added a further moral explanation for the birth:

Let no man think that such things do come by chance or fortune, but that they are appointed to be messengers of ensuing plagues which are like to fall upon us, except with repenting hearts we turn unto our God and forsake our wicked ways.

The monster represents humanity's fall away from purity and truth into corruption and sin. Where the first Fall saw Adam exiled from Eden, this one sees humanity lose its superior human status altogether. This monster can only be described as a human-animal.

The readings of these, and other prodigies, are supernatural. In the words of Paré, these monsters embodied God's attempt to display 'his immense power ... to those which are ignorant of it'. The appearance of what was unnatural was impossible for nature to produce, and could only be explained with recourse to God. He alone could create the new, the unique, which, in turn, symbolised His power which was displayed for a reason: monstrosities show how He 'may either punish men's wickedness, or show signs of punishment at hand'. The appearance of a deformed creature, in this interpretation, was a warning to humans from the Almighty. But this was not the only explanation available to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, and both Paré

and Fenton noted that a monster could also be produced through 'the confusion and mingling together of the seed': through the mixing of the species. Explanation for these latter creatures did not require recourse to God, only to nature itself. Instead of merely contemplating the power of the Almighty and His creation, humans were asked to look closely at themselves, and at some of their assumptions about their own place in the created order.

But the two types of monster – the supernatural, and the dangerously natural product of a bestial relationship – were not always wholly dis-

tinct. The monstrous product of a bestial relationship could, like the prodigious birth, hold moral meaning. William Turner records such a case occurring in c.1674:

At Birdham near Chichester in Sussex, about 23 years ago, there was a monster found upon the common, having the form and figure of a man in the fore-part, having two arms and hands, and a human visage, with only one eye in the middle of his forehead: the hinder part was like a lamb. A young man of the neighbourhood was supposed to have generated this monster by a bestial copulation, and that the rather, because he was afterwards found in the like beastly act with a mare; upon discovery whereof, he fled out of the country. This young monster was nailed up in the church porch of the said parish, and exposed to public view a long time, as a monument of divine judgment.

The young man may have escaped the punishment of his neighbours for his heinous crime, but his offence did not go unrecorded. The



The rabbit-headed monster born at Oteringham in Holderness in April 1595 was interpreted as an indicator of humanity heading towards the abyss.

product of his bestial relationship was sent by God to express the horror of the act. The body of the half-human-half-sheep monster is natural, but it holds a more abstract meaning. It is the product of a sexual relationship, like all other animals (including humans), but it is also a 'monument' of God's anger at such an abuse of nature. Its display in the church porch reminds the congregation of God's ever-present justice, but it also reminds them of the fragility of their own status. Nothing in life, it would seem – not even the human – should be taken for granted.

It is for this reason that legal depositions have a constant interest in the details of the sexual act. Without it no crime was deemed to have been committed: as Edward Coke wrote, 'there must be *penetratio*'. The possibility of cross-breeding hinges on this.

In 1647 William Bayly of Bingley said that he 'stood still a long time' watching John Walton commit buggery with a mare, so that 'he might the more and fairly depose the truth therein'. The implication is that Bayly waited to observe actual penetration. This observant citizenship was not always, however, the case, and other accusers were clearly asked by the attendant Justice of the Peace if they had seen actual penetration. In 1642, for example, Nathaniel Clegge of Netherton in the West Riding of Yorkshire was called to a cowshed by Richard Broadbent where Edward Wilton, the cow-keeper, 'stood very suspiciously to commit buggery' with a cow. Having told this story, however, Clegge goes on to add that 'the said Wilton [was] standing then with his back toward him' and that he therefore 'could not discern whether he did actually commit buggery with the said kine'. In another case from 1664 Matthew Ward of Eskwick in the East Riding of Yorkshire deposed that he saw 'a grey mare standing within the middle ditch of Brigg-close and William Milner

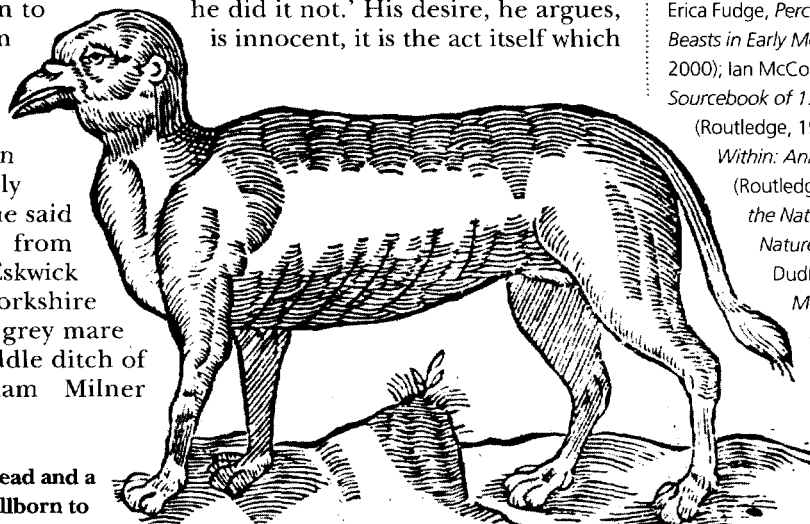
This monster with a bird's head and a dog's body was said to be stillborn to an Antwerp woman in 1571.



You are what you eat. The pig woman (1640) was alleged to have got her sow's features from eating too much bacon.

standing astride the ditch behind the mare with her tail in his hand'. His deposition goes on: 'being asked whether he saw the privy member of the said William Milner out or no he saith he did not'. Ten years later in Grindleton William Bowne declared that he saw John Cromlington 'to have gotten the said mare into a deep ditch and had put a slip upon her head, and himself standing upon the bank of the said ditch with his yard drawn, and making several attempts to enter her body with his said yard, but doth not certainly know whether or not he entered her body'. Execution could hinge on this fact.

Ironically, the significance of proving penetration was something which seemed to work in the favour of John Swallow of Hoyland in 1678. He confessed that he had 'thought to have buggered' his master's grey mare, 'but God gave him grace that he did it not.' His desire, he argues, is innocent, it is the act itself which



is the crime. The reason for Swallow's distinction is that the act, as opposed to the wish for the act, will produce that which threatens the human. It is the act which will uproot, as Michael Dalton put it, 'God, Nature and the Law': all things which create the status of humanity. This is where Swallow sees the real crime being committed.

Bestiality, then, is not only to be regarded as a mainly rural crime which involved only individual humans and animals; its significance in early modern England must be understood as being far more wide-ranging. A bestial relationship had the potential to upset the very fragile order of nature which placed humans at the top of the chain. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers presented cross-breeding as a supernatural warning but also as a natural possibility. Where prodigious monsters – such as the deformed pig of Hampstead – warn of human sinfulness and corruption, the appearance of the monster in Birdham questions not only human purity, but human status as well. If it is so easy to pollute the species with cross-breeds, where does the stability of the species lie? From this perspective it is no surprise that bestiality was so heavily punished in the early modern period. It was an act against God, nature and the law which revealed the fragility of humanity itself.

#### FOR FURTHER READING:

David Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (Zone, 1998); Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Macmillan, 2000); Ian McCormick (ed), *Secret Sexualities: A Sourcebook of 17th and 18th Century Writing* (Routledge, 1997); Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1994); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes to Nature 1500-1800* (Penguin, 1984); Dudley Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Routledge, 1993).

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