

# Aesop's vomit: or, stomach problems in early modern England

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## ABSTRACT



This essay tracks ideas about the stomach in early modern England and the perceived dangers that its actions presented to the status of the human. The argument moves from the depiction of the belly in early modern drama with its reflection on the vulnerability of human control; through medical ideas about eating and diet and the transformation of food into matter for use in, or expulsion from, the body; and, finally, it ponders the representation of Aesop's digestive system in *The Life of Aesop*, a text from the first century CE that accompanied collections of beast fables into the seventeenth century. The essay argues for a re-evaluation of the human in the light of concerns about the stomach, eating and the processes of digestion that can be traced across a range of early modern texts.

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When Nicholas Wood, 'the great eater', stepped up (or sat down) to perform his colossal feats of public consumption in the early seventeenth century his audiences were witnessing an idealisation of human power over the non-human world. All the creatures presented to him were brought under control by the actions of his jaws and his belly.<sup>1</sup> The ballad 'A Wonder in Kent' from c.1630 celebrates Wood with mock grandeur as a 'champion' overcoming a mountain of food and presents him as a man 'of such power, / that he within an houre / a good fat Hogge he did devoure'. The final stanza of the first part of the ballad sums up his magnificence:

His mighty paunch doth harbour all,  
Sheepe, Hoggs or Calves, tis like a stall,  
A Parke it is likewise for Deare,  
And Conneyes gray, or silver haire  
a storehouse tis besides

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whereas he hides  
 all kind of fruits that him betides  
 Cheese, Buttermilke and Whey,  
 he bringeth in that way,  
 thus he brings all quite to decay.<sup>2</sup>

The verse presents Wood as unchanging even as he brings destruction to the endlessly available world around him. It offers an image of dominion without bounds, but it does this to arouse laughter. This is a conception of the human that can never be achieved; it is mocked even as it is staged.

It is notable that the ballad-writer does not read the great eater as a prompt for a carnivalesque celebration of the material. Wood is, in fact, presented in a way that is very different from the ‘grotesque realism’ that Bakhtin traced in Renaissance culture which offered a ‘deeply positive’ representation of what he terms ‘the bodily element’. Far from representing ‘the material bodily principle’ in ‘a triumphant, festive’ way,<sup>3</sup> the ballad portrays the great eater as embodying the realisation that performances of heroic over-eating are, in reality, evidence of mock-heroic over-reaching. Ingestion emerges, not as an action of domination that marks out consumer from consumed. Rather, it evidences a desire that cannot be fulfilled.

This essay proposes that the ballad reflects what can be traced in numerous other early modern representations of eating and digestion. All of them voice an anxiety about the nature and status of the human that is focused on the demands and workings of the stomach. To track this the essay will explore the belly and the problems it caused. It will, like the guts in Helkiah Crooke’s 1615 discussion of the body, be ‘necessarily gired and rouled into manifolde Convulsions’.<sup>4</sup> In it we will encounter excrement, beings with no bellies, the need for bodily bridling, too many cooks, regurgitation and more. The argument will move from the depiction of the stomach in early modern dramatic texts with their reflection on the vulnerability of human control; through medical ideas about eating and diet and the dangers inherent in the transformation of food into matter for use in, or expulsion from, the body; and, finally, it will turn to ponder the digestive system in *The Life of Aesop*. This text from the first century CE accompanied collections of beast fables into the seventeenth century, and I suggest that the strange correlation that can be found in it between vomit and truth can be understood as another iteration of what I am calling the stomach problems of early modern England. Through all its gires and convolutions, then, this essay suggests that tracing ideas about the belly that were circulating in the period reveals a culture thinking anxiously about what it was to be a human, and Aesop’s vomit has a role to play in this. Indeed, reading this moment in *The Life of Aesop* within the context of these stomach problems allows us to see it as an apt opening to the fables, those moral stories peopled by beasts.

## 1. Consumers

As Hamlet feared, human flesh in the early modern period was understood to be sallied, sullied, and solid.<sup>5</sup> It was a gross material that encased, and too often overwhelmed the human. As the Elder Brother put it in John Milton's *Maske at Ludlow Castle* (1634):

when lust,  
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,  
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,  
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,  
The soul grows clotted by contagion,  
Embodies, and imbrutes, till she quite loose  
The divine property of her first being.<sup>6</sup>

Lust, a response to the temptations of the world, can, metaphorically at least, make the soul – our immortal essence, the possession of which distinguishes us from beasts – become flesh. It leads us to turn into wholly embodied beings, imbruted (made animal) by our failures. It is a vicious circle: our fleshy desires lead to what might be termed our wholesale enfleshment.

This process, this being overwhelmed by bodily lusts rather than dwelling in the realm of the immaterial and rational, is represented in a number of different ways in the period. Early modern manuals on drunkenness, for example, developed concepts found in classical culture to understand the impact of excessive alcohol consumption on the human: George Gascoigne wrote of such imbibing as ‘that Circe, or Medea, which can Metamorphose, & transforme men into ougly mishapen monsters’.<sup>7</sup> In his *Maske* Milton followed this, presenting Comus as the son of Bacchus and Circe, and those who were tempted to drink from his glass as not only embodying their souls but also losing their human faces and gaining animal heads, their divine likeness stripped from them as they became intoxicated and threw over their reason. A different representation of this same idea can be found in a number of plays from the period, but in them it is not drunkenness that is the marker of human failure. Rather than concentrating on such clear breakdown of restraint, these plays turn to eating which, in Elsa Richardson’s words, is ‘seemingly the most mundane of acts’.<sup>8</sup> What emerges from this focus is that the stomach, a necessary part of the human, seems to undo what it is that makes the human human.

Falstaff is, perhaps, the icon of early modern drama’s excessive consumers, with Hal channelling his father and describing him as ‘that bolting-hatch of beastliness’, a kind of malicious older brother of Nicholas Wood.<sup>9</sup> However, I want to turn to a couple of other perhaps less obvious depictions of the dangers of eating and the overwhelming power of the stomach to make my point here because in them we can find not the excesses of the great eaters – those extraordinary outliers – but the failures of prosaic consumers.

Indeed, it is the recognition of the prosaic nature of the failures they represent that makes them significant. They embody a dominant idea in early modern English culture which regarded all consumers, not just the great eaters, as inherently and irrevocably imbalanced. As Robert Burton put it in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*:

We are not here as those Angels and celestiall Powers, and Bodies, Sunne and Moone, to finish our course without all offence, with such constancy, to continue for so many ages: but subject to infirmities, miseries, interrupt, tossed and tumbled up and downe, carried about with every small blast, often molested & disquieted upon every slender occasion, uncertaine, brittle, and so is all that wee trust unto.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of this sense of postlapsarian human imperfection and imbalance, then, eating was of huge significance to everyone.

So, in the first of the prosaic depictions, John Webster presents his audience with a woman with a sexual secret. Physical signs of the Duchess of Malfi's pregnancy are hidden behind her clothing so that Bosola the spy complains:

A whirlwind strike off these bawd farthingales [petticoats]!  
For, but for that, and the loose-bodied gown,  
I should have discover'd apparently  
The young springal cutting a caper in her belly.

He wants more evidence: 'I have a trick may chance discover it' he says, and hopes to gain his proof by giving the Duchess 'apricocks'. He knows that where the Duchess' apparel shows her capacity to disguise reality – to apply a rational solution (choice of clothing) to a bodily problem (pregnancy) – her desire for the apricots will do something very different. 'How greedily she eats them!' Bosola notes. But it is not only her greed (her giving in to her bodily lusts) that is revelatory: having gobbled the apricots, the Duchess says:

This green fruit and my stomach are not friends:  
How they swell me! ...  
O, I am in an extreme cold sweat! ...  
Lights to my chamber. O, good Antonio,  
I fear I am undone!

Her fear is warranted: 'So, so, there's no question but her tetchiness / And most vulturous eating of the apricocks, are / Apparent signs of breeding', says Bosola.<sup>11</sup> It is not her womb so much as her stomach that has given her secret away. Her extreme cold sweat – a bodily manifestation, uncontrollable by any willed action – is a product of the fulfilment of her desires.

A year after *The Duchess of Malfi*, and in the very different setting of the City of London, Ben Jonson once again brought together pregnancy, eating

and secrets but this time in comic fashion and inverting the model presented by Webster. In *Bartholomew Fair* rather than eating revealing pregnancy, female appetite is enabled by gravidity. Win-the-Fight Littlewit and her husband John wish to go to the fair to eat pork, but Win's puritanical mother, Dame Purecraft, and her hypocritical advisor, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, need to be convinced as they see only the sinfulness of such longings. The solution is that Win will play into what Lori Schroeder Haslem has termed the age's perception of the 'biologically natural' desire of pregnant women for meat.<sup>12</sup> This pretence convinces Dame Purecraft that her daughter must be allowed to go to the fair: 'Truly, I do love my child dearly, and I would not have her miscarry, or hazard her first fruits, if it might be otherwise'. But, having eaten her fill of pork, Win's belly, like the Duchess', overwhelms her. She has, she says, a 'very great' need to evacuate,<sup>13</sup> and, as Haslem puts it, 'the mock miscarriage occurs not because – as Dame Purecraft feared – Win is denied pork but because she indulges in eating it'.<sup>14</sup> Her lie is made visible; the truth will out, and the stomach and its actions override the intention of the human who is no longer so much possessed of a belly, as possessed by one.

As Haslem's reading of *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Duchess of Malfi* shows, these moments replicate the ways in which medical ideas of the early modern period connect 'the female's sexual function ... with the human body's digestive function'. Each play, she writes, 'advances a more negative attitude – one grounded in a rhetoric of the maternal body as diseased and in need of a purgative cure'.<sup>15</sup> The stomach thus becomes a focus for female failing. But it is not just women whose bellies mark them as beastly. While their possession of wombs distinguishes the Duchess and Win from men, all humans possess stomachs and, as such, underpinning the misogyny of the plays is an idea about physicality itself that uses the perception of the particular vulnerability of women as an emblem for a general human frailty.

Support for this conception of the stomach and an expansion of its meaning can be found by returning to *A Maske at Ludlow Castle*. In this text we see, once again, a connection being made between female sexuality and consumption: this time, however, it is not pregnancy but the threat to the Lady's chastity that is the focus. Yet, even as this gendered danger is what marks her out as vulnerable, Milton's Lady takes on the role of an 'Everyman' figure, as she is the representative of humanity we watch encounter the dangers of the world. In this text those dangers are emblematised in the contents of the 'crystal glass' that Comus offers 'to every weary traveller' who enters the woods, but in Milton's *Maske* we do not watch as our representative indulges and then repents his failures as happens in the morality plays of the previous century, rather we witness the opposite: the Lady refuses Comus' advances ('I would not taste they treasonous offer'), but is still held captive by him.<sup>16</sup> That is, she will not consume, but she is taken

against her will in spite of this. In this, the Lady also distinguishes herself from the Duchess and Win and the power of the stomach that is represented through them. For the two earlier works it is desire that leads to greed that leads to being overwhelmed; for the later text, there is no desire or greed, and yet there is still loss of self-determination.

In her reading of this paradox Debora Shuger proposes that the model for human vulnerability staged by Milton can be linked to another aspect of sexuality, but this time to the singularly male experience of the wet dream in which the fragility of rational control is revealed when lust is enacted while reason sleeps. Citing Augustine's discussion of the issue in his *Confessions*, Shuger writes: 'Wet dreams are birdlime. The metaphor, based on the shared "stickiness" of the substances in question, likens the soul's bondage to carnal compulsion to the plight of a bird held down by lime-twigs, its wings useless'.<sup>17</sup> Her reading of *A Maske* thus underlines how female vulnerability could model something else: Milton's Lady, a role first performed in Ludlow Castle by a fifteen-year old girl, becomes, like the Duchess and Win before her, a representative of postlapsarian humanity. But Milton's text brings something new to the fore: the Lady, like the Duchess and Win, lives in a world of temptation, but unlike them she is capable of self-control, and yet she is still trapped, despite her strength of will. The apparently unfair logic that underpins this takes us back to the embodied and imbruted nature of the human – what Shuger calls our 'carnal compulsion'. As Stephen Orgel asks in his reading of Milton's work, 'Are we at fault for being thirsty after a long journey in hot weather?'<sup>18</sup> The answer is yes and no: *A Maske* proposes, like Burton, that we are fallen and so are inherently likely to make poor decisions (our desires can be and too often are dangerous). But it also suggests that we are bodies and are sometimes unavoidably and naturally overwhelmed by that corporeality. The call of the stomach thus marks out the human as doubly corrupt. We want to eat, and we sin; we need to eat, and we sin. It is both the mind and the body that cause our undoing; and, whether giving in to desire or answering a corporeal need, the actions of the stomach can, as the Duchess of Malfi knew, undo us.

It is not overstating it to say, therefore, that such depictions represent the ambiguous place that the need to fill the belly holds in early modern thought: it is necessary and yet sinful. Indeed, its ambiguity goes further than that. Eating was not only viewed in negative terms in early modern thought: it could be construed as a positive experience. In 'Providence', his verse outline of God's ordered universe, for example, the Anglican poet and pastor George Herbert saw consumption as part of the divine construction that he depicts. This is not Nicholas Wood's excessive enactment of appetite, it is a rather different recognition that eating can be the proper use of God's creation: 'The beasts say, Eat me', Herbert writes, and to refuse their request would be to refuse the deity. For Herbert, consumption is an act of worship,

but it must be restrained: he writes of God's 'permission' which 'curbs sin's stealing pace and theft'. The duty of the human, he argues, is to 'hear / Thy skill and art' and attend to God's will rather than their own: in short, it is to eat with recognition of humanity's inherent failures and consume with care.<sup>19</sup> The same emphasis on moderation is at the core of Milton's *Maske*, in which the Lady's restraint is a weapon in her debate with Comus and is voiced in her celebration of only necessary consumption in a world of plenty.<sup>20</sup>

Despite offering such opportunities for virtue, though, the dangers of eating are always present: as Michael Schoenfeldt writes, the stomach 'demands to be filled at least a couple of times a day',<sup>21</sup> and in early modern England there were numerous ways in which that demand was understood to threaten the human. Not only might the actions of the belly reveal secrets that reason would disguise, Eleanor Barnett has shown how eating was 'intricately connected to soteriology' by Protestant thinkers. It could, she writes, 'physically impact on the clarity of the spirit, which was conceptualized as a semi-physical substance that experienced and governed corporal processes based on the commands of the soul'.<sup>22</sup> Like lust, food could embody and imbrute the eater, and this potential for enfleshment was widely understood as the reality of life after the perfect order of the human had been destroyed by the Fall. What remained was a kind of chaos of bodiliness that needed to be controlled, and this is where the dietetic and medical materials take up the period's stomach problems.

## 2. Cooks

Thomas Cogan introduced his 1584 *The Haven of Health* in a way that reveals clearly how these concerns about human status were central to medical regimens in the period:

Now, what a reproch is it, for man whome God hath created after his own likeness, and endued with reason, whereby he differeth from beasts, to be yet beastlike, to be moved by sense and serve his bellie, to follow his appetite contrarie to reason? for as much as by the verie order of nature, reason ought to rule, & all appetites are to be bridled and subdued.<sup>23</sup>

What follows in this text is, in part, an outline of how to bridle the beastly belly, and eating well is a cornerstone of his regimen. In addition, Cogan recognises the difficulty of this endeavour when, in the opening of his discussion of different foodstuffs and their value to the individual, he writes:

For such is the state of man and beast touching the body, that the spirites, humors, yea, the sound substance of all parts doe continually wast and weare away: So that unlesse by nourishment other like be restored, of necessity the whole must shortly be consumed.<sup>24</sup>

Like a drink on a hot day, food is necessary to the human who is different from animals in their possession of an immortal soul, but simultaneously the same as them in their need to eat. We have reason, but without nourishment we will ourselves be consumed.

Alongside this living paradox, within the framework of humoral medicine that was core to Cogan's (as to the period's) understanding of the body, achieving a balance required scrutiny of the nature of the food consumed as what was eaten was, like the eater, made up of different humours which could impact the eater in negative or positive ways. So, for example, Cogan writes of figs that 'if they be new, [they] are hotte and moyst' and so a person who was too cold and dry might benefit from eating one; whereas someone with 'the liver and spleen inflamed' should avoid them 'By reason of their sweetnesse'.<sup>25</sup> Such directions are commonplace in this period,<sup>26</sup> and texts like Cogan's outline the humoral composition of a foodstuff and what qualities it would bring to the eater. The thoughtful reader – a truly rational human – would select the appropriate food for their own humoral make-up.

But control of one's diet was an idealisation of the experience of eating: not only was there a danger that inevitable human lusts would intervene but, as Shigehisa Kuriyama has shown, even something that was good for the eater might also include its opposite: 'If it contained the nutriments needed to replace the natural deterioration of the body, it also contained superfluities, which could harm or destroy the body'.<sup>27</sup> Everything, it seems, could be potentially dangerous. Thus, even water – 'the chiefest of all liquors ... [and] first drink appointed by God to all manner of creatures' – could be hazardous to some, such was the impact of the Fall. Cogan writes: 'to them that are feeble, old flegmaticke or melancholie, it is not convenient: for it destroieth natural heat, it grieveth the breast, and taketh away the appetite of the stomacke, and is verie hurtfull to all the sinowie members'.<sup>28</sup> Yet another paradox of the human is made visible here: the *removal* of the demands of the belly (taking away 'the appetite of the stomacke') which might in other contexts be regarded as a positive act of control is here regarded as a movement towards destruction.

All in all, what emerges from the medical writing of the period is a recognition that the aim for perfect humoral balance, like the dream of the enactment of disembodied reason, and the domination of the great eater, was destined always to failure: as Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl put it in their classic study *Saturn and Melancholy*: in humoral medicine, 'Complete health was ... an ideal, approximated, but never in fact attained'.<sup>29</sup> Eating the wrong thing, and even eating the right thing, like eating too much, or too little, could undo the individual's brittle equilibrium, and so impact not only physical health (the good working of the body and its processes) but also what we might term the character of the eater



because poor choices in consumption might not only reveal secret pregnancy, they might also change who you are: ‘Rammes mutton I leaue to those that would be rammish’, Cogan writes.<sup>30</sup> What these discussions of eating draw our attention to, then, is the fact that, far from being merely an engine fuelling the machine of the human, in pre-Cartesian ideas, as Jan Purnis has stated, ‘The guts were ... ascribed a fundamental role (so to speak) in cognitive processes ... that we associate with the mind and with being human’.<sup>31</sup>

In this context, it is not surprising that ordering of the diet was not the only focus of medical writers in the period: the good working of the stomach was also key. Here the attention turns from thinking about what is put into one’s mouth (the rational choices that should be exercised in food choice) to thinking about how the body deals with what is put into it. And yet, far from moving the focus from individual choice to bodily (i.e. impersonal) process, what is significant is that depictions of the actions of the body open up yet again questions about human choice and vulnerability. There is no escape from stomach problems.

The image of the human body as a castle was clearly established in the early modern period, and the most frequently cited example is Edmund Spenser’s representation in the Castle of Alma in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>32</sup> In Spenser’s work Arthur and Guyon are taken on a tour of the castle, which includes a visit through the ‘stately hall’ where the Steward ‘hight *Diet*’ oversees the diners. This leads them, inevitably, to the kitchen in which many under-chefs are ruled by ‘The maister Cooke ... cald Concoction’ who oversees the actions of digestion.<sup>33</sup> As Schoenfeldt has shown, this mode of representation of bodily processes is not only to be found in poetry, it is also in medical writings of the period.<sup>34</sup> Thus, in his *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* of 1615 Helkiah Crooke takes up the architectural imagery, and in the Third Book turns to ‘the Parts belonging to Nutrition or Nourishment’ which are housed in the ‘lower Region’. Like Spenser he presents this as the ‘kitchen of the house’, and the stomach, he writes, is ‘the Cooke-roome, where Diet is the Steward, Appetite the Clark, and Concoction the maister Cooke’.<sup>35</sup>

Through such representational strategies, these works allow the bodily processes an agency that manages to maintain and support a sense of the reason of the eater despite the actions of digestion being wholly corporeal: that is, they avoid the dangers that are posed by wet dreams. This is done by embodying digestion in a figure of particular expertise.<sup>36</sup> In the architectural vision of the body what is presented is a well-organised household, with the lord overseeing the activities of all of his servants (the master is always male). Thus, just as Herbert saw God’s order present throughout His creation, so the image of the body as castle can be used to present the head of the household (literally the head, the site of reason) ordering his whole

domain in which, by implication, the expertise of the steward, clerk and master cook reflect the over-arching power and control of their ruler. The workings of the belly thus become the delegated action of a rational agent and the dominion of reason is maintained. Good digestion can be equated with good thinking.

But there is an alternative way of reading this extended conceit of the digestive process because in it the human body seems, even if metaphorically, to be peopled in a way that suggests that the subject himself might be subject to the activities of troops of internal workers. That is, the personification of digestive and other bodily processes allows for the possibility of rebellion, for a complete overthrowing of the agency of the master. I am reminded here of Sir Philip Sidney's message to Elizabeth I when the French marriage was being discussed in 1579: 'These [subjects] therefore as their soules live by your happy government, so are they your chefe, if not sole strength'.<sup>37</sup> This is dangerous: Sidney is telling Elizabeth that she needs her subjects; that she is subject to them just as they are subject to her. Relying on the support of the other is potentially undoing the self. The relationship between the individual and their stomach, and in particular, their stomach's need for and response to food, was similarly double-edged; it could allow for the display of control, but it could also reveal the inevitable loss of that control. As the representations of the Duchess of Malfi and Win-the-Fight Littlewit showed, once one had chosen to swallow, one was at the mercy of one's digestive system. And as the Lady revealed, even if one had chosen not to swallow, one's agency could be (even if temporarily) overpowered.

In his 1612 *Little World. Or, A Lively Description of all the partes and properties of Man* Robert Underwood presented a rather different picture of digestion. Like Spenser before him, and Crooke after, he saw the body in architectural terms, but in his dream vision, during which the narrator is taken on a journey through the house that is the human body by God, Underwood depopulates the stomach. Rather than a bustle of workers, what he presents are the actions of something akin to an automated process.

And first, the *Kitchen* seated was,  
 as nethermost of all,  
 Whereby it might receive such things,  
 as from above did fall:  
 By *Vessels*, fitting for the same,  
 which long there, did not stay.  
 For things that bad, and noysome were,  
 this *Kitchen* did convay  
 By *Gutters, Holes, and Channels* so,  
 that every thing was seene  
 Within this *Kitchen* for to be  
 both handsome, sweete, and cleene.<sup>38</sup>

In this vision, the cooks have disappeared, and what has taken their place are vessels, channels and holes. Underwood's body has become less a well-staffed household and more a smooth-functioning machine for digestion.

The difference between Underwood's and Spenser and Crooke's depictions might easily be put down to the brevity of the Underwood's work (it is a 45-page octavo text, while Crooke's is a folio of over 1000 pages). But that very brevity might be doing important work. Underwood's succinct depiction of the stomach sidesteps the potential danger inherent in the imagery of the body as populated building. This kitchen, devoid of humanised agents, presents the stomach as simply the place for processing food. I am not suggesting that this is Cartesianism before Descartes but am reading Underwood's description as erasing the problem that is thrown-up by the presence of the master cook in other renditions of the body as building trope. And that problem is a common one that goes beyond the use of this particular imagery: it stretches across the theatre, poetry, medical works, and theology. The persistent view is that, in a fallen world, and in a Galenic body, the human is and always will be, as Burton put it, 'molested and disquieted' by forces beyond its control, and what discussions of the actions of digestion show is that some of those forces are also itself. What is human is always fleshy; and the stomach, like what is consumed, can have a very disruptive agency.

And so it is horribly logical in the light of these anxieties that, at the denouement of *Bartholomew Fair*, after Win's eating has led to the birthing of a very different bodily product than her pregnancy suggests, we find ourselves in the company of a group of characters whose very humanity appears to have disappeared. The dramatis personae have, during the action, been regarded as equivalent to beasts by Jordan Knockem, the horse-courser, who continually applies animal medical treatments to human bodies; Bartholomew Cokes' naivete has led to his being stripped of that which might mark him as human in that he is almost denuded of his clothing by conmen;<sup>39</sup> Dame Overdo is drunk, her reason drowned in alcohol; and Ursula, the pork vendor, has accidentally almost turned herself into meat by scalding herself instead of the pork. And we, the audience who have paid to watch this, sit alongside this group of fully embodied and imbruted beings to watch a play within a play performed by puppets who are, ironically, apparently the only creatures at the fair whose bodies need no food and who have, therefore, a kind of self-possession that everyone else lacks. As such, the puppets, like Nicholas Wood, offer their audience a comic glimpse of what ideal humans look like. But they are Wood's diametrical opposites: where he is the (mock) hero with an all-conquering belly, they are the (impossible) self without stomach; beings without digestive systems to undo them.

But this is not the only way humans were invited to remember their status in early modern England, and I want to turn finally to propose that the

stomach problems of four hundred years ago gave readers an understanding of a moment from a text written over a millennium earlier, a moment that is somewhat opaque when viewed through modern eyes. In doing this I am offering not only another cultural iteration of some of the ideas about the belly that have already been outlined, I am also suggesting a way of thinking about how the beastly body and the beast fable might be connected. I am, in short, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, turning from eating animals to thinking with animals.<sup>40</sup> To do that we need to experience yet another bodily evacuation.

### 3. Vomit

The collection we call *Aesop's Fables* was central to the humanist education system of the early modern period; that is, it was at the heart of the process that was meant to produce the most human of humans. Indeed, the second-century grammarian Aulus Gellius called those who 'earnestly desire and seek after' such education '*maxime humanissimi*', and his ideas persisted.<sup>41</sup> It may seem ironic, to say the least, that beasts should teach humans how to become fully human, but a way of understanding this paradox can be found in the text that was included at the start of many of the collections of fables available to readers in England, including Caxton's 1484 English translation, and the c.1570 version printed by Henry Wykes that I use below. This text is the *Life of Aesop* which purported to be the biography of the fables' author. In her influential account, Annabel Patterson read the *Life* as being 'one of those rare myths of origin whose own structure implies a coherent philosophy of literature larger than itself'.<sup>42</sup> Here, I focus on what the *Life* might tell us not so much about the nature of the written word as about the creature who writes.

At the start of the *Life* Aesop is described as possessing qualities that would have made him at home in *Bartholomew Fair*. He is mute, and 'so foul & so diffourmed' that he can barely be regarded as being properly human. Indeed, we are told in the opening line of the *Life* that, 'forasmuch as his lord to whom Esope was bound, supposed that he was not profitable, he sent him to labour in the fields & to digge and delve in the earth'.<sup>43</sup> He is not of the house but of the land; more like a beast than a man. However, Aesop's failings do not hold him back. Indeed, it is his apparent lack of the qualities that are deemed to be human by the world he lives in that provide the foundation for his status as speaker of the moral truth and writer of tales inhabited by beasts: in this origin myth, this connection is made in his stomach.

*The Life of Aesop* begins with the story of how, while checking on the work going on in his fields Aesop's master is presented with 'the first fruite of the field'. He requests that this bowl of figs be taken back to his house for him to

eat once he has ‘returned from his bayne’ [bath]. However, Agatopus, the slave who is given the task of taking the figs to the house, decides to eat them with a fellow who has hatched a cunning plan to get them off the hook when the figs are, inevitably, found to have disappeared. When their master returns they will tell him that Aesop has eaten the figs ‘and because he can not speake he shal not excuse him selfe, & therefore he shalbe wel beaten’.<sup>44</sup> Their reason seems flawless; they can eat and their actions remain unknown if they blame a being without language.

The plan appears to work: the master ‘was muche angry’ at the discovery that the figs had gone and the explanation for their absence is given as planned. Aesop is brought before him and ‘the lord commanded to dispoile him, & take of his clothes for to have beaten him’. Aesop the mute, deformed human, is now to be reduced in status even further: like a worse than beast, he will be naked. But what Agatopus and his fellow slave have not recognised is what, much later, the Duchess and Win will come to learn: that the belly can make meaning. They have forgotten, in short, their being simultaneously in possession of, and possessed by their stomachs. Aesop, on the other hand, knows this – he has accepted his beastly status. ‘[B]y signes because he could not speak, [he] prayed his lord to geve hym space to excuse him’, and the excuse comes via the medium of a ‘vessell full of whot water’. Water, we know, has agency: it can change the drinker, and this power is visible here once again, although in a different way from that experienced by Cogan’s readers. Aesop drinks the water, then puts his fingers down his throat and vomits, and so reveals the contents of his stomach to his master, ‘which was onely water, for ye day he had tasted nothing but water’. This is a statement of truth that cannot be challenged; the belly does not lie. Aesop then signals that Agatopus and his fellow should be asked to do the same and, as we might now expect, their deception is revealed by their bellies: ‘they vomited out the water & also the figges together’. Aesop is saved, and his punishment becomes theirs.<sup>45</sup>

What is visible at this moment in the *Life*, I suggest, is the same set of ideas that can be traced in the dramatic, dietetic, medical, and theological writings of early modern England. But where they focused on the danger of consumption and being overwhelmed and undone by the stomach, the story of Aesop’s vomit presents us with a creature whose moral nature is evidenced by (not in spite of) his belly. It is his stomach that has enabled Aesop to express the truth and it has done this, crucially, at the service of his will. He chose to put ‘his finger in his mouth’, he has not evacuated against his wishes, like the Duchess and Win did.<sup>46</sup> And this is not the same as the Lady’s self-control which is manifested in a refusal to consume, even as she is caught by the world against her will. Aesop is a different kind of being from all of them. The author of the fables knows that truth is utterly embodied and for this reason he is not at the mercy of his stomach. In fact, his stomach saves

him. In his late twentieth-century analysis of this moment in *The Life*, Louis Marin claimed that ‘Agatopus is the beastly one’, but ideas circulating in the early modern period challenge this reading.<sup>47</sup> For Montaigne, writing under the influence of classical philosophy, the capacity to lie successfully relies on having a good memory which is, in turn, a product of reason.<sup>48</sup> In this schema, as in this moment in *The Life*, only humans can tell falsehoods, and truth resides with the beasts.

It is in this context that we can, perhaps, reconsider the apparent paradox of beast fables having a role to play in becoming *maxime humanissimi*, and suggest a solution that goes beyond them being useful for the purposes of parsing Latin and practicing one’s linguistic skills, which is what John Brinsley suggested in his 1624 edition of *Esops fables* – an edition that, tellingly, does not include *The Life*.<sup>49</sup> The biography of Aesop introduces the beast fables in a way that suggests that readers might encounter them as a means by which to revisit their own status. It opens up for scrutiny the relationship between reason and corporeality in a way that does not reject, veil, or dismiss that relationship. Rather, it acknowledges and engages the body’s power. From such a starting point it is utterly logical that what follows are fables in which animals (those wholly fleshy beings) are the source of moral truth. It is true, as Jill Mann has noted, that the beast fables in themselves are not where morality is explored; the moral is exterior to them, found in the promythium and the epimythium that bookend each tale.<sup>50</sup> But that moral frame emerges out of the animal story just as Aesop’s statement of truth emerges out of his stomach. The two are not separable. The presence of beast fables at the heart of the endeavour to create the most human humans should be taken as a reminder that, perhaps, another way of understanding the human – as belly as well as brain – was present in early modern England but it was feared rather than embraced by most readers, spectators and writers.

Montaigne called Aesop ‘that great man’ at the end of ‘Of Experience’, the essay in which he contemplated his own eating habits.<sup>51</sup> Montaigne was not writing about this moment in *The Life* when he referred to the fabler, but the connection between those two things (Aesop’s greatness and eating) is apt. What Aesop showed his early modern readers, if only they would see it, is how to live with and through their beastly bellies. Following his lead might have solved many of their stomach problems.

## Notes

1. ‘Creature’ is used here to denote all the non-human created world: what Julia Reinhard Lupton has termed ‘a theological conceptualization of natural phenomena’. Lupton, ‘Creature Caliban’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51.1 (2000), pp. 1–23 (p. 1). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902320>.

2. Anon., 'A wonder in Kent: / Of the admirable stomacke of one Nicholas Wood, dwelling at Harrisom in the Coun- / ty of Kent. The like of him was neuer heard, / As in this Ditty is declar'd', (1630?), on English Broadside Ballad Archive: <https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20270/image> [Date accessed: 11 April 2024].
3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 19.
4. Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia a Description of the Body of Man* (1615), p. 103.
5. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006), 1.2.129. See the footnote (pp. 205–6) for detail of the variation in the word choice.
6. John Milton, 'A Masque at Ludlow Castle', in Jason P. Rosenblatt (ed.), *Milton's Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2011), lines 463–9.
7. George Gascoigne, *A delicate Diet, for daintiemouthde Droonkardes* (1576), np. Other manuals from the period that present being drunk as a kind of metamorphosis include Thomas Young, *Englands Bane: Or, The Description of Drunkennesse* (1617) and Thomas Heywood, *Philocothonista* (1635). Young was Milton's tutor when he was a child.
8. Elsa Richardson, *Rumbles: A Curious History of the Gut* (London: Profile, 2024), p. 7.
9. William Shakespeare, *I Henry IV* (1598), in Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds), *The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 2.5.455.
10. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624), p. 11.
11. John Webster, 'The Duchess of Malfi (1613)', in David Bevington, Lars Engel, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Eric Rasmussen (eds), *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York and London: Norton, 2002), 2.1.70, 151–5, 158–64; and 2.2.1–3.
12. Lori Schroeder Haslem, "'Troubled with the Mother": Longings, Purgings, and the Maternal Body in *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Modern Philology*, 92.4 (1995), pp. 438–59 (p. 445), <https://doi.org/10.1086/392266>.
13. Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), in Bevington et al., 1.6.60–61 and 3.6.118.
14. Haslem, p. 447.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 439.
16. Milton, lines 65, 64 and 702.
17. Debora Shuger, "'Gums of Glutinous Heat" and the Stream of Consciousness: The Theology of Milton's *Maske*', *Representations*, 60.1 (1997), pp. 1–21 (p. 2), <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.1997.60.1.99p0032n>.
18. Stephen Orgel, 'The Case for *Comus*', *Representations*, 81.1 (2003), pp. 31–45 (p. 38), <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2003.81.1.31>.
19. George Herbert, 'Providence' (1633), in John Drury and Victoria Moul (eds), *George Herbert: The Complete Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2015), lines 21, 33, 36 and 39–40.
20. As the Lady says of 'innocent nature': 'she good cateress / Means her provision onely to the good / That live according to her sober laws, And holy dictate of spare Temperance' (Milton, lines 764–7).
21. Michael Schoenfeldt, 'Fables of the Belly in Early Modern England', in David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (eds), *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of*

- Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 243–61 (p. 244).
22. Eleanor Barnett, 'Reforming Food and Eating in Protestant England, c.1560–c.1640', *The Historical Journal*, 63.3 (2020), pp. 507–27 (pp. 508 and 519). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X19000426>. A different physical link between salvation and eating is traced by Laura Seymour who argues that 'When eating, early modern people are uniquely vulnerable. Their open mouths provide literal gateways for devils to enter; their souls teeter on the balance between piety and greed'. Seymour, 'The Feasting Table as the Gateway to Hell on the Early Modern Stage and Page', *Renaissance Studies*, 34.3 (2020), pp. 392–411 (p. 392), <https://doi.org/10.1111/rest.12618>.
  23. Thomas Cogan, *The Haven of Health* (1584), sig. ¶3r.
  24. Cogan, pp. 21–2.
  25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
  26. See, for example, David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450–1800* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 9–26.
  27. Shigehisa Kuriyama, 'The Forgotten Fear of Excrement', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38.3 (2008), pp. 413–42 (p. 430), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-2008-002>.
  28. Cogan, pp. 215 and 216–17.
  29. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964), pp. 11–12.
  30. Cogan, p. 116.
  31. Jan Purnis, 'The Belly-Mind Relationship in Early Modern Culture: Digestion, Ventriloquism, and the Second Brain', in Evelyn Tribble, John Sutton, and Laurie Johnson (eds), *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare's Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 235–52 (p. 242), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203796160-23>.
  32. Schoenfeldt calls it 'notorious': p. 249.
  33. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene, Book Two*, ed. Erik Gray and Abraham Stoll (Hackett Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2006), Canto 9, stanzas 27–31. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/strath/detail.action?docID=327818> [Date accessed: 16 May 2024].
  34. Schoenfeldt, *passim*.
  35. Croke, pp. 94–5.
  36. Ken Albala has written of the master cook of (real) Renaissance kitchens: 'While he was head of cooking operations, he was not in charge of purchases, maintaining the larder or wine cellar, or even ... the menu. His job, plain and simple, was to cook'. Albala, 'Professional Cooking, Kitchens, and Service Work', in Albala (ed.), *A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 117–34 (p. 124).
  37. Sir Philip Sidney, *A Discourse of Syr Ph.S. To the Queenes Majesty Touching Hir Mariage with Monsieur* (1579), in Albert Feuillerat (ed.), *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), Volume III, p. 52.
  38. Robert Underwood, *Little World. Or, A Lively Description of All the Parties and Properties of Man* (1612), p. 5.
  39. On clothing and human nudity as marking human lack in early modern ideas, see Laurie Shannon, 'Poor, Bare, Forked: Animal Sovereignty, Human



- Negative Exceptionalism, and the Natural History of *King Lear*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 60.2 (2009), pp. 168–96, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.0.0076>.
40. Claude Levi-Strauss, ‘The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are “good to eat” but because they are “good to think”’. *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 89.
  41. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, cited in Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 126.
  42. Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 15.
  43. Anon., *The fables of Esope in Englishe* (c.1570), sigs. Avr and Aiiir.
  44. *fables of Esope*, sig. Aiiir.
  45. *fables of Esope*, sigs. Aiiiv-Aiiir.
  46. *fables of Esope*, sig. Aiiiv.
  47. Louis Marin, *Food for Thought*, trans. Mette Hjort (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 50.
  48. Michel de Montaigne, ‘Of Liars’, in Donald M. Frame (trans.), *The Complete Works* (London: Everyman, 2003), pp. 25–30.
  49. John Brinsley advised ‘the painefull Schoole-master’ to ‘First, cause your scholar, by reading this translation, to tell you in euery fable what the matter of the fable is. Secondly, to what ende and purpose it was invented, what it is to teach, and what wisdome hee can learne out of it. Thirdly, how to make a good report of the fable, both in English and Latine, especially in English. Fourthly and lastly, to make right use of it, for all matters concerning Grammar, as for construing, parsing, making and proving the Latine; and so for reading forth of English into Latine’. Brinsley, *Esops fables translated grammatically, and also in propriety of our English phrase* (1624), sig. A5r.
  50. Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 28–9.
  51. Montaigne, ‘Of Experience’, in *Complete Works*, p. 1043.

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