**‘Good to Think [With]’: Spenser’s Animals Against Materiality**

**Abstract**

This essay is concerned with Spenser’s animal figures—in *The Faerie Queene* and *Amoretti* 67—and the kinds of thinking they afford, with attention to emblematic, natural historical and scriptural detail. In it, I interrogate a critical propensity (especially compelling in Spenser studies) to distrust figuration, particularly allegory and anthropomorphism, in the context of literary animals. Rather than equating the ‘literal’ to the material or immediate and reducing figuration to anthropocentricism, I argue instead that we might read Spenser’s animals *against* materiality, that is, both in touch with and resistant to the creatures they invoke or name. Taking as case studies Gryll, the transformation of Malbecco and Spenser’s trembling deer, I show how the fluctuations between vehicle and tenor, mimetic and conceptual, within a range of animal figures kindle unexpected and contradictory interpretive possibilities for each, more critical and speculative than usually imagined. I suggest in conclusion—by way of the murder of protean Malengin—that literalism, greeted at times as a caring countermove to the hostilities of allegory, is found to be an inadequate interpretive response, scarcely distinguishable from dogmatic forms of abstraction.

1. ***Good to Think With***

In a much quoted and commonly misread passage from 1962*,* Claude Lévi-Strauss—dwelling on the mixture of opposition and integration in the activity of thinking—concluded that

“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 not chosen because they are ‘good to eat’ [*bonnes à manger*] but because they are ‘good to think’ [*bonnes à penser*]”. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 162)

This extract, concerned with the operation of animals in a symbolic system as a means of connecting material and spiritual registers, has proved stimulating to scholarship on Spenser, allegory, and animals. Joseph Lowenstein, for example, invokes (in a landmark essay on cross-species kinship) Lévi-Strauss’ construction to claim that the poet ‘is not much interested in animals as such, but is more than a little interested in animals *not*-as-such’. His pithy assertion understands ‘*bonnes à penser’* as marking the ‘special utility’ of beasts in ‘the classificatory work of culture’, viewed as compatible with the ‘epistemological utility’ of animals in *The Faerie Queene* (Lowenstein 2007, 246-7). Lowenstein is surely right to notice in Lévi-Strauss the link between animals and thinking, as well as the use of animals in organizing systems (‘relations conceived’). Yet it seems peculiar to restrict the labours of thought to classification alone. Why must ‘good to think [with]’—the ‘with’ is invariably and importantly implied—explicitly distinguished from ‘good to eat’, shrink to a mode of thought that absorbs under classes its objects, and claims thereby to have wholly incorporated the object into another, higher category?[[1]](#footnote-1) And why, subsequently, must Spenser’s animals be limited to representing or inviting this kind of thought?

Lévi-Strauss refers in fact not to classificatory, but speculative thinking, which is both founded in *and* cuts againstclose attention to animals (‘empirical observations’). Animals, as the object, are essential to the production of thought—thinking cannot take place without them. The ideas and relations constructed by speculative thought spring from attention to animals (and other objects), take flight from them, and are reembodied as objects, and so on. This sounds a lot like the shuttling between thing and idea, or object and concept, that constitutes the operations of allegory/allegoresis. Now, following Lowenstein, we could read Lévi-Strauss’s explanation as purely classificatory, as an account of how concepts or ideas are falsely identified with objects; in this case, animals are brutally displaced by the mental productions of the subject. The philosopher T. W. Adorno named this violent, but commonplace classificatory mode of thought, in which we pretend either that a thing is exhausted in our idea of it, or that our thought yields entirely to a thing, ‘identity thinking’ (Adorno 2007, *passim*). But this is not necessarily what thinking must be like, and nor is it necessarily what Lévi-Strauss describes. Speculative thinking instead foregrounds difference—the continual negotiations between the experience of an object and the formation of a concept in which each relies on and reconstitutes the other. These negotiations might be calculating and manipulative, but might equally be curious, pleasurable, and open-ended. In brief, animals cannot be thought (or read or written) without a mediating subject, just as a subject cannot think without an object, but this need not mean that the relation between the two is destined to be one of domination.

The subtitle of my chapter, ‘animals against materiality’, registers the tension sustained by the implicit preposition in ‘good to think [*with*]’, in which ‘with’ equally implies nearness and apartness. Spenser’s animal figures are both like andunlike the material creatures they invoke or name: they are *against* materiality, which is to say both *in touch with* and *opposed* to it. It would be foolish to submit that *The Faerie Queene* does not conjure animals to prompt sublimating, or classificatory thought, but short-sighted to suggest that they are not invoked in other ways besides, even at the same time. This chapter is interested in those other ways. I do not wish, therefore, to eschew the cognitive potentials of Spenserian animals in favour of something more like kinship or companionship or care (though these are fascinating in their own way), but to probe further the possibilities for thought awakened by animals that do not end in or confine themselves to classification (on kinship, see Lowenstein 2007; Hillman 2023).

1. ***Animal Figuration***

In the chapter’s first part, I introduced the idea, via Lévi-Strauss, that thinking need not be identical to thoroughgoing classification and suggested that the animals of Spenser’s art might both exhibit and exploit the tension between subject and object that constitutes the formation of ideas and systems. In this second part, I show how the implicit assumption that thinking is always harmfully abstractive—dominating in some way—begets a fantasy of access to animals in themselves (i.e., as the thing-in-itself), which manifests in literary study as a strange mistrust of figuration, especially anthropomorphism and allegory. This critical attitude must be interrogated, I argue, for two reasons. First, for its (deceptive) enshrinement of the ‘literal’ as equal to the concrete, the sensuous particular, or the immediate; second, for its relegation of figuration to something like anthropocentricity, characterized by instrumental abstraction. This is unsettling and inaccurate in its implication that there is nothing salvageable about figuration (or, indeed, abstraction), which must be exchanged for other less intrusive approaches. Just as thinking need not be classificatory alone, figuration need not be equal to abstraction, although it does involve it. It is instead better understood, as Spenser’s allegoric animals show, as a formal expression of the mediation between concept and object that thinking entails because it both imitates and alters. Rather than delivering either concrete immediacy—animal ‘life’ or pure being of some sort—or unyielding concept, figures variously foreground mediation, or the movement between vehicle and tenor, and so force reflection upon the dialectical processes of thought and concept formation.

To turn from abstracts to particulars, scholarship on animals in early modern literature appears at times to conceive of their treatment in one of two conflicting ways: (1) by ‘ignoring’ via ‘making figurative’ OR (2) by ‘taking seriously’, via interpreting animals ‘as animals’ and not ‘as symbols of something else’ (Fudge 2006, 4). Erica Fudge, for example, cites with disapproval Edward Topsell’s *Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607), which affirms that beasts contain ‘a tipe or spark of that great wisedome whereby things were created’ and are thus repositories of ‘deuine knowledge’; her complaint is that animals are ‘prompts to the abstract’ (Fudge 2006, 106-107; Topsell 1607, sig.A4r). Yet the choice encouraged in *Brutal Reasoning* between literal/concrete and figurative/abstract presents a puzzling argument. Fudge deftly illustrates how the animal is inseparable from the human, and how the human has, therefore, been ferociously constructed and elevated as a category ‘isolated, transcendent and complete unto itself’ in ways that depend on the suppression or elimination of the animal. And yet we are instructed to approach the animal ‘as animal’, thereby making it a category as falsely isolated and autonomous as ‘the human’. The point is that ‘inseparability’ cuts both ways; to divide animal from human entirely would merely make the one revert to the other, invisibly reproducing rather than wrestling with the genuine difficulty of their mutual entanglement.

Similarly inconsistent logic supports the claim that anthropomorphism ‘reiterates the centrality of humans in the natural order’, a suspicion more broadly evident, as Kellie Robertson demonstrates, in recent ecological criticism that likewise views the figure as marked by narcissism and power (Fudge 2006, 109; Cf. Boehrer 2010, Stenner 2020). Strangely, but tellingly—as Robertson notes—this contemporary critical sentiment towards figuration echoes Enlightenment thinkers who *were* overtly anthropocentric (Robertson 2017, 342-3). For Hobbes and Sprat, for example, anthropomorphism, and ‘specious *Tropes* and *Figures*’ more broadly, were signs that nature was fouled with expungable traces of the human subject (Hobbes 1839-45, 3.678; Vickers 1987, 171; on the ambivalence of these pronouncements, see Preston 2015). In their writings, the very supposition that nature might be immediately accessible to humankind is itself the signature of human dominance; the presumption of absolute objectivity whereby one can somehow know the object without oneself. That thinkers both for and against anthropocentrism several centuries apart should coincide in their distaste for tropes suggests that figuration cannot be productively hypostasized in either direction. Anthropomorphism is thus fettered neither to the controlling nor the clumsy intrusion of the subject—both of which are allied in being avertable—but declares the necessary relation between subject and natural world, both divided from and dependent on one another.

It is especially tempting with Spenserian allegory, so habitually and *humanly* deadly, to cast animals as non-figurative, stirringly opposed to the poem’s usual mode (on allegory and violence, see Teskey 1996). They become in this regard instances of ‘singular significance’, directly conveying the pathos of being in their refusal to be symbolically activated (see Barrett 2016, 10-11). Following this line of argument, we appear to surrender attempts to interpret animals, and our form of engagement is something more like care, or love, that indexes the impediment to interpretation. Yet, as I have argued above, it is near impossible to think of animals ‘in themselves’ at all and, consequently, tough to cast Spenser’s animals as genuinely singular and unsignifying (except as its own interpretive choice). I endeavour in this chapter to approach Spenserian animals as dynamic instances of figuration, operating between the bounds of either complete instrumentality or vital immediacy. Their frequently felt resistances to the poem’s apparent symbolic economy might be taken not for a *refusal* to signify, but instead for a bid to signify differently, to open the possibility of transforming the symbolic totality. In this light, animal figures are not only available for classification in an existing system, but also cue contradictory ways of constructing imaginable arrangements. And this figurative capacity of drawing together and moving between the actual and potential, between what is and what might be, is viable precisely because Spenser’s animals are not merely ‘themselves’, but also not themselves, entwined with the activity of thinking and interpretation.

An example to illustrate. Book II concludes with the notoriously ambivalent, paratactic appeal to ‘Let *Gryll* be *Gryll* […] But let vs [the Palmer and Guyon] hence depart’ (II.xii.87.8-9). The uncertain grammar of ‘let’, both command and entreaty, foregrounds the twofold quality—judgement, surrender—of this perplexing close. As a command, the statement is a ruthlessly efficient reduction of the miserable, re-formed man into an emblem of ‘beastly man’: it shrinks him to a concept that relies on absolute identity between ‘hog’ and ‘incontinence’. As a plea it suggests something more like irreducibility because no further sensemaking is possible: ‘Let *Gryll* be *Gryll*’, let him be what he is independent of us, for we cannot understand his response in terms of our system. In the first instance Gryll is exhaustively conceptual, totally absorbed into maxim; in the second he is tautological, as if excluded from meaning at all because unrelated to anything or anyone else. This is a cleverly constructed *impasse* precisely because it preserves the illusion that Gryll is either in the poem as incontinence or out of it. But to recognize that Gryll both is and is not Gryll, is and is not allegoric, affords us the critical opportunity to stay with this contradiction and unfold its implications. What else might it mean to be Gryll, to reject his change, to remain in the home—now ruined—in which he was found? The Palmer’s swiftly following parallel request is, therefore, crucial, and desperately cunning: ‘But let vs hence depart’. His injunction effectively divides the two protagonists from Gryll, disentangling them from the contradiction and claims of the previous line, and drawing the narrative to abrupt completion. The Palmer’s hurried departure struggles to enforce the feigned equivalence between concept (incontinence) and object (Gryll) as the single end of thought and so instructs the reader to flee the better possibility that clings to the abstraction they erect. But Gryll’s reproach (he ‘miscalls’ the Palmer) resounds through the poem and serves to remind me of his figurative vitality. Not altogether an emblem, no longer a beast, and not quite a man, he seems to cry out with somewhat common voice for those other unnamed ‘men’ around him, angry at and unsettled by their compelled transformation. The lonely redundancy of ‘[l]et Gryll be Gryll’ might obscure it, but this fleeting moment of connection and possible collectiveness born from antagonism is a more just and, for me, unforgettable note on which to conclude Book II than the Palmer’s feeble remark (imperfectly rhymed) that weather and wind will serve.

Gryll shows us how poetic figuration can afford contradictory kinds of thinking at once, and how much is at stake in staying with these contradictions, in refusing to resolve them arbitrarily. Spenserian allegory both kindles and curtails utopian possibility and this formal tendency shapes my approach: I am less interested in discovering (producing) allegorical husks with rigid ideological kernels, but seek besides to reliquefy them, to trace and analyze the unresolved dialectic of object and concept in Spenser’s brutal conceits. This critical mediation between the mimetic and the significative, showing how each pole resists and renews the other, should help demonstrate the enormous potential for thinking animal figures. This is not quite the same as what Lowenstein describes as ‘utility’, with its suggestion of a clear and determined purpose, but more like a sort of testing, folding into a single figure contradictory prospects that cannot easily be eliminated, but that can be considered with and against one another as we interpret the animal. As the previous example implies, I am especially drawn to animals that figure or facilitate a transitional moment or state. These instances, usually preceding some form of decisive cut (be it reification, synthesis, metamorphosis, or death), are highly charged, as the ideological intentions and speculative possibilities ingrained in form are made most palpable and open to readerly invention.

What follows proceeds in two parts, each of which attends to different examples of animal figuration in Spenser’s poetry. The first considers the deliberately ill-fitting or unfulfilled animal evocations that accompany the conversion of Malbecco from man to idea, showing how they figure suspended reformative potential, rather than representing his degeneration. The second, longer portion traces brief and elaborate versions of the wary hind simile in both *The Faerie Queene* and the *Amoretti* as an alarmingly fitting expression of the troublingly ambivalent experience of love, or amorous union. The two parts pursue specific arguments but jointly establish that animal figures tend to surface—whether as pieces of rhetoric or provisional narrative players—at the margins and limits of experience that prove particularly difficult to think about, for example: jealousy, despair, love, trauma. The supple ways in which they render these experiences sensuous allows us to make sense of states previously unavailable to thought. Their dense and conflicting expressive possibility is founded in the interaction between mimetic, natural historical, emblematic, scriptural, and other forms of detail. The combination of clashing, colluding and creative relationships they bring into focus makes them a flickering pause in the movement of thought. Spenser’s animal figures can thus be seen to summon poetic possibility unrealized by narrative, to invite, reflect on, reject and reform our usual modes of classification, and to crystallize the dialectical tensions that sustain his poetry. Their promise, as I have argued, is dependent on their figurativeness, on their being *against* materiality in both senses of the word.

1. ***Unlike a Goat, or the Case of Malbecco***

The metamorphosis of Malbecco is a unique scene of concept-making in *The Faerie Queene*. He is neither changed from without by some character or god, nor tacitly transformed by the reader (as Gryll might be in some circumstances), but himself contracts, as a part of the narrative action, into a one-dimensional, gnawing thing: *Gealosy*. Paul Alpers poignantly describes Malbecco’s change as no change at all, ‘but a terrible remaining of what he is’, which is partly true (Alpers 1982, 389). It could be said that his hermeneutic constriction, or inability to interpret in more than one way, settles into ontological constriction, or inability to be in more than one way. But before he alights on his final form, Malbecco suffers an astonishing profusion of beastly possibility (Burrow 1988, 114). These hints of animality emerge only partially and unsuccessfully, either because they prove badly suited to Malbecco or because they are uncertain and quick to recede. The carefully damaged invocations work to establish Malbecco’s exclusion from animal life—something that humankind is typically seen to share in, to be continuous with, following Aristotle, in most orders of being. Here, the animal figures offer glimmers of regenerate potential lost to the unfortunate man. The episode shows, consequently, how the bitter end of his moral and spiritual degeneration is not material, or beastly—as one might expect, and as is often the case, following Bruce Boehrer—but is instead ideal (Boehrer 2015). Malbecco becomes an *idea* so flatly singular, or identical to itself, that it cannot be distinguished from pure *matter*. His change thus shows us the complicity between materialism and idealism when each attempts to deny the other, while the animal figures flicker into half-life only between the two extremes, in the course of his conversion, as species of vanishing possible lives.

The first instance of animality occurs as Hellenore and the satyrs march home, weary from dancing, and Malbecco is drawn into detailed comparison with the band of goats:

Which when *Malbecco* saw, out of his bush  
  Vpon his hands and feete he crept full light,  
  And like a Gote emongst the Gotes did rush,  
  That through the helpe of his faire hornes on hight,  
  And misty dampe of misconceiuing night,  
  And eke through likenesse of his gotish beard,  
  He did the better counterfeite aright:  
  So home he marcht emongst the horned heard,  
That none of all the *Satyres* him espyde or heard. (x.47)

The comparison falls flat. Malbecco’s physical movements (nimble, on all fours), facial features (beard) and emblematic social status (‘horned’ cuckold) too fully flesh out the simile, and cheat it of surprise, of the difference required to uphold it. Mimetically, he does ‘the better counterfeite’ than simile itself, which is, after all, the figure that limps (Temple 1984, 83). And yet, despite being so like the group as to effectively disappear into it, he is also horribly alone, ‘emongst’, but not a part of the herd. The protracted comparison fails on two counts. He is at once too much the same and too separate from the rest, and the stanza does not extend but withholds their company. The rift widens in the succeeding stanza in which Malbecco miserably witnesses his wife have riotous sex with a satyr. Once ‘yoked’, though ‘vnfitly’, to Hellenore, Malbecco is now alone (ix.6.2). The coming true of his name, *mal becco*, is accomplished not only through his exemplary cuckoldry, but equally through his exclusion from the herd: he is not goat enough. From (symbolic) ‘horns on hight’ to being butted into the ground with (actual) ‘hornes on euery syde’ (52.3), he ‘emongst the rest crept forth in sory plight’ (52.9) in a cruel reversal of his original creeping in. The terrible separability between animal and man prepares us for his loss of humanity which is, after all, part beast.

Fearful of death and flying the herd, Malbecco is next ‘like as a Beare’ looking to smuggle honey when it is attacked, unexpectedly, by a pack of dogs. While the violent satyrs might be reasonably likened to snarling hounds, one cannot help but protest that Malbecco is not much like this hungry, lumbering creature. In contrast to the goat simile, this one is nastily inexact—livelier than what it seeks to describe—and so expels Malbecco from its grasp. The man runs on, runs ‘with him selfe away’ (54.6), his self being the last of his possessions, which he objectifies and to which he cleaves in desperation. As he persists in flight, he is compared to a shade escaped from Limbo (54.8-9), afforded uncertain ‘wings’ and ‘nimble feet’ (55.2-4), and equipped with a ‘snake’ of self-loathing in his mind (55.9). The mention of Limbo shrouds him in eerie deadness and compounds his split being: he is repeatedly divided from himself (cf. ‘with’ his life and ‘himselfe himself loath’d’; 53, 54, 55). It is difficult to discern whether the fleeting animal qualities are granted to or denied him. The wings might equally belong to the wind; his deficient goat-ness, previously discussed, reduces the transformative effect of the nimble feet; the snake is unelaborated and lurks in a subclause with all the distance of simile. Possibilities surface in hopeful starts and bursts only to be snuffed out; Malbecco’s ‘self-murdring thought’—terminally classifying—extinguishes all speculative potential (57.1). Once more, as with the goat, the negated animalities forewarn us of his change. By the time we discover him feeding on ‘todes and froges’ in 59.2, both amphibians and Malbecco are thinly emblematic, a hackneyed rehearsal of Ovidian Envy in *Metamorphoses* II (Ovid 1567, fol. 27v.; Cf. Irish 2021, 851).

This extraordinary trajectory is achieved through the meticulous use of animal figuration. The first simile—‘like a Gote’—was oversaturated, and bore a mimetic relationship to narrative in addition to its symbolic function; the concluding mention of ‘todes and froges’ is brittlely symbolic. Figuration has thinned out, drained of its relational capacity: narrative hardens into abstraction in a startling insistence on equivalence, or identity. There is a great deal of difference, of course, in a reader’s perceived cue to abstract from the narrative and a narrative representation of turning into an idea. Malbecco’s peculiarly grotesque insubstantiality, incapable of thought (‘self-murdring’), reveals the complicity between unalloyed idea and unreflected matter. He that ‘can neuer dye, but dying liues’ grows into the ghastly mirror-image of Adonis in his garden, that ‘mote he liue, that liuing gives to all’ (III.vi.47.9). Yet Malbecco gives life to none, and the faltering animal figures are lost to him. Rather than signaling the path to degeneration, as one might expect, the flickering animalities evoke regenerate potential, other lives, withheld from *Gealosy* ‘resolu’d’ (58.2). Jealousy, formed of the unremittingly self-classifying subject, remains one of poetry’s eldest adversaries and the unrealized bestiary of this episode is nothing less than the subtle persistence of poetic possibility. Thus, the airiness of animals in the Malbecco episode—their near, but non-realization—lends them spiritual dynamism. In contrast, the concrete animality of the figured deer is what facilitates its capacity to express conflicting but ineliminable aspects of love.

1. ***Like Wary Hind, or Love’s Knot***

What Socrates says of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, is equally true of love: ‘To specify what sort of thing it is would by all means be a task for a god…but to say what it is like would be briefer and is something a human being could do’ (Plato 1993, 246A). Twice in *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), and in the *Amoretti* besides, Spenser takes the latter approach. The original conclusion to Book III is a complex attempt to discover the experience of love, and one of its moves is a comparison of Scudamore to a thirsty deer as he hurries to embrace his lately released beloved. I compare, in this section, the deer of Book III (masculine lover) to the fleeting ‘hynd’ simile of Book IV (ambiguous referent) to the deer of *Amoretti* 67 (feminine beloved). Each case of cervine figuration conjures a thirsty female deer that occupies a peculiar ontological position, fluctuating between ‘deer’ and ‘game’, with feet both in and out of the progress of the hunt. They are trembling deer, and breathless. These qualities both thicken the figure’s vehicle—make the deer more proximate—and reflect on the operation of the figure. The figure *trembles* in referential and expressive terms as its vehicle hovers between the breathlessness of escape and the breathlessness of death, poised on the edge of the hunt that remains at risk of resuming. Spenser repeatedly draws this kind of deer, I suggest, to deliver the deeply ambivalent experience of amorous reconciliation, particularly for the beloved. His deer figure is extraordinarily plastic and turned to variable ends. In *The Faerie Queene*, its double-edged denotative power, capable of illuminating both lover and beloved in opposing ways, allows it to exhibit the internal asymmetries of love. In the *Amoretti* it provides a powerful instance of Spenserian mystification in attempting to present love’s vicious contradictions as *already* *reconciled*. Yet despite the poet’s effort to stage conflictual relations (hunter-prey) as reciprocal and unified, the trembling deer figure (even if inadvertently) exposes the falsity—the longing for rather than accomplishment of—of this resolution.

The use of the hind is familiarly Petrarchan and reassuringly scriptural, yet strange in Spenser’s art. The first instance is in some regards the most straightforward—it refers quite plainly to the male lover, but why? Here is Scudamour, hopeless and prostrate, on seeing Amoret return with Britomart:

Straight he vpstarted from the loathed layes,  
  And to her ran with hasty egernesse,  
  Like as a Deare, that greedily embayes   
  In the coole soile, after long thirstinesse,  
Which he in chace endured hath, now nigh breathlesse. (44)

Scudamour’s ‘hasty egernesse’ looks forward (narratively) and backward (temporally) to his adventure in the Temple of Venus in which he firsts meets Amoret and is rebuked for being ‘ouer bold’ (IV.x.54.2). In that moment, Scudamour is the hunter-lover. His martial aspect thoroughly outweighs the amorous and we oddly and unnervingly do not witness him at any point falling in love. In Book III, he remains the lover, and is more evidently in love, but becomes the deer (and prey), a creature typically in the position of the beloved and cast by literary convention as female.

The image of the deer plunging into a pool of water signals both appetite and relief, breathlessness, accentuated by the triple cesurae culminating in an especially rapid final clause. Yet a breathless deer that has suffered a chase might suggest both respite and death. This murderous counterimage lingers in the simile’s penetratingly Spenserian verb, ‘embay’. ‘Embay’ appears on three prior occasions in Book III: to describe ‘Sweet Love’ who dips his ‘golding wings’ in nectar and ‘pure Pleasures well’; to portray Amoret’s heart, steeped in her own fresh blood (xi.2; xii.21); and to relate the nymph Chrysogonee’s conception, both celestial marvel and solar rape. The fourth and final use of ‘embay’, the deer that ‘greedily embayes’, is thus ambiguously tied to the contradictory motions of the experience of love: possibly redemptive, habitually violent. Canto twelve’s unexpectedly male deer clearly points to Scudamour who, conceivably hunted by the anguish of love lost, hastens into the bliss of love found. Yet this surprising referential allegiance distracts from Amoret’s recent trials. She has been pierced and paraded and she, too, has ‘chace endured’. It is hard to banish the suspicion that the mysteriously male deer conceals the prospect that Amoret remains the prey and has merely exchanged one hunter for another. Perhaps, more charitably, the deer moves into nearness with them both, anticipating their embracement in which they seem ‘growne together quite’ (45, 46). In any event, the deer as like love is riven, stretched between the lovers, and split between the promise and peril of relation. It shows how the (excised) narrative reunification might provide a fragile repose from rather than a complete resolution of the contradictions of love.

In Book IV (1596), the same simile styles their first (recollected) encounter:

but I which all that while

The pledge of faith, her hand engaged held,

Like warie Hynd within the weedie soyle,

For no intreatie would forgoe so glorious spoyle. (IV.x.55.6-9)

This brief comparison is markedly perplexing in referential terms. Both Scudamour (‘I’) and Amoret’s ‘hand’ are syntactically described by ‘warie Hynd’. It might be that the ‘spoyle’ is the cool soil that is Amoret, and that Scudamour the watchful deer will forgo neither. According to Judith Anderson, this reading, which aligns with the previous example, ‘makes better sense’ (Anderson 1994, 657). Yet it is complicated when we discover a few stanzas later that the tearful entreaties for release come from Amoret herself (57.1-5). Scudamour’s strident assertion, ‘[b]ut forth I led her through the Temple gate’, exposes the aggressiveness of his actions, his assault (57.6). In this light, Amoret’s ensnared hand becomes a synecdoche for her whole person, which resembles a frightened hind forced out of its marshy refuge. The simile’s brilliance lies, therefore, in its syntactical and significatory distribution. The doe is on the one hand fearfully suspicious (of being caught), and on the other gloriously relieved (of having escaped); both feelings might ring true of the creature in this circumstance, but they are shared between two referents. And this mutuality is no cause for celebration but is instead disconcertingly uneven. Unlike the first, this deer is split explicitly between an object and subject. Yet the clasped hand, as object, is not equal to the ‘I’, or masculine subject, despite the simile’s synthetic magic. This comparison succeeds Book III’s eager deer in compositional terms (1590, 1596) and its second incarnation—though diminished to a single line—more plainly embeds the jagged, gendered violence of the relation it occasions.

The issue here is not so much the deer’s allegorical capture—its classification—as it is the poem’s struggle to imagine the hind outside the paradigm of the hunt. Even having fled, the possibility of the hunt resuming lingers on. The hunt, though a dangerous form of relation, does not replicate the predictable brutality of allegory understood as capture in the service of absolute clarity. The hunt entails the deer ‘as deer’ and cannot foresee its unfolding, its conclusion in either death or flight. This is how the wary hind can afford both Amoret’s distress and Scudamour’s victory. The distinct animality particular to the paradigm of the hunt is critical to the operation of the figure. The experience of love’s union, Spenser seems to suggest, is like that of a deer not quite mid-chase, but in and out of the hunt, trembling between the breathlessness of liberation and extinction (Cf. Allen 1968 for a different account of hunt imagery).

In 1595, one year before the hind of *The Faerie Queene* IV, Spenser’s *Amoretti* was published and the female deer appears once more, in sonnet 67. The sonnet’s distribution of power, its weird shift in relation, remains discomposing; scholarship that accounts for this turn through biblical allusion and liturgical symbolism—Anne Lake Prescott’s 1985 essay being crucial—has enhanced the poem’s texture, but has not exhausted its tension (see Prescott 1985 for a detailed account of scriptural and liturgical contexts; Cf. Bernard 1980, DeNeef 1982, 67.Indeed, Kat Addis’s chapter in this volume sharply analyzes the harmful socio-ontological hierarchies perpetuated in this poem. I will restrict my discussion to the poem’s discontenting resolution that extends my argument about Spenser’s thirsty deer, straining between extremities, as love-like.

So after long pursuit and vain assay,

When I all weary had the chase forsook,

The gentle deer return'd the self-same way,

Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brook.

There she beholding me with milder look,

Sought not to fly, but fearless still did bide:

Till I in hand her yet half trembling took,

And with her own goodwill her firmly tied.

Strange thing me seem'd to see a beast so wild,

So goodly won with her own will beguil'd. (*Amorett* LXVII.5-14)

Sonnet 67 presents an elaborate use of the image and includes as its speaker the huntsman (or huntsman-like), previously implicit. Although the chase is forsaken, the seeker abides, and the deer returns ‘the self-same way’ of the hunt. That the thirsty creature returns to drink while the hunter remains compounds the moment’s intermediacy—she is manifestly in and out of the hunt. Her passage through ‘the self-same way’ foreshadows her ostensibly willing submission: mimetic detail anticipates a semantic shift and twists the shape of the hunt, its *dominating* relation, into a *reciprocal* one. And yet, ‘the gentle deer’ unwittingly recalls Amavia from *The Faerie Queene* (1590), discovered near death by Guyon, ‘[a]s gentle Hynd, whose sides with cruell steele/ [t]hrough launched’ (II.i.38.6-7). It is hard to believe that the hunt is ended, that this deer is safe. The sonnet’s only caesura, in line 10, is deafening: ‘not to fly, but fearless’. The wary hind of *The Faerie Queene* is abruptly made ‘fearless’and a pause stands in for explanation, falling not quite midway, but faintly askew, as if alerting us to the sleight of the *volta*. The sensory disparity between quivering deer and firmly tying huntsman is decidedly discomfiting, and despite the claims of line 10, savours of fear. She is ‘*yet* half trembling’, more likely with old dread than new desire, and is syntactically subsumed by the hunter as her form shivers between the instrument (‘hand’) and his use of it (‘took’). If the grammatically ambiguous ‘trembling’ belongs to both huntsman and hynd, as many readers have noticed, there is no guarantee that it means the same thing for both lover and beloved.

The finishing couplet cinches the hunter’s victory, echoing for emphasis the role of the deer’s ‘own will’. The hunter’s metonymic hounds ‘beguiled of their prey’ (4) vanish into the deer ‘beguiled’ of her own will. The reversal is made even more wonderful, more breathtakingly reconciliatory, if we look to Pliny’s description of deer in Book VIII of the *Natural History*:

And on other occasions when running away from pursuit they always stop and stand gazing backward: when the hunters draw near again seeking refuge in flight…  In other respects the deer is a simple animal and stupefied by surprise at everything - so much so that when a horse or a heifer is approaching they do not notice a huntsman close to them, or if they see him merely gaze in wonder at his bow and arrows.

(Pliny 1938-62, VIII.113-114)

One the one hand, the deer’s return and perceived ‘milder look’, initially rather human-like, might be less dazzling than it appears; it might be entirely ordinary and deer-like. On the other, the deer’s *surprise*, ancient and proverbial, is ingeniously transferred by the final couplet to the speaker-hunter; he is overcome by strangeness as the deer is ‘goodly won’. The exchange of action and reaction—she self-hunting, he surprised—cunningly evokes a kind of communion, a sharing in traits, without having to fully elucidate it. And yet foregoing details grate. The deer is received by the human speaker in answeringly human ways: she thinks, she beholds with milder look, she fearlessly seeks not to fly. Many of these observations are necessarily conjectural and the hunter discovers in the creature what he has placed there himself. Soon after, the speaker begs our astonishment in the face of ‘a beast so wild / So goodly won’, but we have barely seen a wild beast at all, and neither, more crucially, has he. Her trembling flesh, felt rather than seen, is the only estranging *animal* instant of the poem, caught in the hunter’s grasp and couched between his weighted glance and well-placed stupefaction. This is the kernel of non-identity, of inassimilable and ineliminable objectivity at the heart of love’s forced reconciliation. Her trembling flesh expresses the difficulty, even impossibility, of constituting a genuinely harmonious relation.

The *Amoretti*’s extended representation of the thirsty deer strives to resolve its precarious mediations—its conceptual *trembling*—between relief and death by insisting at once on the presence of the hunter and the dissolution of the hunt. It longs for love to manifest as mutual submission, two distinct subjects united, yet preserved. Yet for all its ingenuity, the sonnet shows that this ideal reconciliation—heterogenous, unforced—properly belongs to the realm of possibility. It is a *wish*,falsely presented in the guise of accomplishment, and this false aspect of reconciliation—gilded contradiction—is the ascendent form of Spenserian violence with which readers are so familiar. We would do well to remember that this third comparison originates, not as like a deer, nor like wary hind, but ‘Like as a *huntsman*’ (1). The first two more compressed similes expose the conceptual trembling of the thirsty deer, both in and out of the hunt, moving between the breathlessness of freedom and of death as like the fluctuations of love. The final elaborate analogy endeavours fiercely to resolve this conceptual tremor, to actualize the hunter as impeccably reconciled to the hind, lover to beloved. In so doing, various rhetorical strategies finely express rather than explicitly pronounce this reconciliation, but the figure’s shuddering contradictoriness cannot be willed away. It contracts, instead, to ‘half trembling’ flesh—half because reduced from richly conceptual to solely fleshly quiver—a part that gives the lie to the whole. Spenser’s cervine figuration is thus neither coldly abstract nor warmly sensual, but sensitively attuned to the deer’s situation as object, its possible instinctual and appetitive responses, and its sentience, which it delicately (perhaps unwittingly) links to the barbed reciprocity of love.

*Amoretti* 67’s ‘Like as a huntsman’ might ask that its readers believe in its miraculous resolution—receive the deer as Christlike, or as Christian love—but it also shows what we must neglect in order to do so. Indeed, the returning deer, with her own will beguiled, appallingly recalls, in addition, Spenser’s *Vewe of the Presente State of Ireland,* written around the same time.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Spenser’s chilling colonial dialogue, nearly every wish for and conception of Irish ‘submission’, on over fifteen occasions, is described as a kind of coercively obtained *self-submission*. This puts the beloved in a frightening position. If Christian mercy and miracle inhere in the deer as a figure for love, then so, too, do the effects of colonial ruthlessness and cunning. Thinking with and against the trembling deer figure—not for its literality, but for all it makes possible—unseals its animality, its multiple relations and its strange facility for suspending in our minds, without solving, the asymmetries of love. Thinking the deer does not facilitate the classification of love as either good or bad, nor its itemisation into certain types, but instead helps make various possibilities of love imaginable. The enduring undecidedness of *The Faerie Queene’s* deer and the deeply wishful quality of the *Amoretti*’sfigure collectively intimate that love’s predicament and its promise are closely tied in it being an overwhelmingly speculative relation.

1. ***Animals Against Materiality***

In canto nine of *The Faerie Queene*’s Fifth Book, the iron groom of Justice, Talus, seizes and slaughters Malengin, and provides in so doing a cautionary lesson in pursuing the literal-material alone. Malengin’s gift of mutability, of becoming various animals in escaping adversaries, is the opposite of Malbecco’s flight in which no beasts are properly realized. As he twists from fox to bird to hedgehog, conjuring not only a variety of creatures, but evoking figuration itself (as Erasmus said of Proteus), Malengin exemplifies the ties between animal life and representational power with which this chapter is concerned (Erasmus 1963, 16). But Talus responds, relentlessly and unchangeably, with his thrashing flail. With the mythic Proteus—see *Georgics* IV.396-414, for example—the objective is to wrestle and arrest the old god in order to draw from his changefulness some aspect of truth or knowledge. In the case of Malengin, Talus is concerned neither to grapple with him, nor to learn from him, but batters him indifferently into pieces ‘as small as sandy grayle’ (19.4). Consequently, Malengin, once every animal and no animal, is crushed into carrion and will eventually end up as those beasts that feed on him. The iron man ensures, in other words, that he is only ‘good to eat’, or mere material. The literalism that is greeted at times as a caring countermove to the hostilities of allegory or figuration, is found in this episode to be cruel, an inadequate interpretive response from which no new knowledge is made possible at all. For Talus, Malengin must only be classified as ‘Guyle’, a thin and limited concept, and guile must only be destroyed in a way that returns it to the dully material. This is a more severe (and triumphant) version of what the Palmer attempts to do with Gryll.

The ways in which Malengin’s murder demonstrates the purposeful annihilation of mutable potential, shown through shifting animality, is at odds with both the regenerate animal glimmers in Malbecco’s frenzy, and the doubleness of the deer figure, oscillating between contradictory positions. I hope to have shown, with those examples, some ways in which Spenser’s animal figures invite most care and offer most provocation when they are *against* materiality in the twofold sense of being in close touch with *and* opposed to it. This is when they are especially good to think with. It is the critical mixture of both a regard for and the surpassing of ‘animals as animals’, of the literal (which is already abstract insofar as it communicated in language), that lends Spenser’s beasts mimetic *and* conceptual liveliness, and makes them more than objects of or obstacles to classification, or allegory’s renowned violence. His animal figures show instead how the poem cues and admits a rich variety of thinking, including forms more critical andspeculative than it is usually afforded.

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1. ‘Object’ indicates an entity distinct from but in dynamic relation to ‘subject’ rather than something pejorative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leah Veronese-Clucas’s wonderful paper, ‘“In vain I seeke and sew to her for grace”: Petition in the Amoretti’at the British and Irish Spenser Seminar (Oxford, 2022) gestured, too, to this connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)