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Lying with the Beast: Confronting (One's Own) Animality in the Fairy Tale Tradition

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'Who am I, therefore?' (Derrida)

In his essay titled ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),’ Jacques Derrida describes the moment in which he is ‘caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat’ and his subsequent embarrassment and ‘trouble repressing a reflex of shame’ at being indecent in front of his pet (3, 4). Following this encounter, Derrida reflects ‘Before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed like a beast that no longer has the sense of its nudity? Or, on the contrary, like a man who retains the sense of his nudity? Who am I, therefore?’ (5). In this moment, the boundary between man and animal collapses, as Derrida’s encounter with his cat becomes an unsettling confrontation in which he is compelled to acknowledge his own animality. This Derridean notion of an ‘animal gaze’ and its relationship with the vulnerable, naked object human body is crucial to understanding the extent to which the fairy tale form is preoccupied with animality. Focusing on the archetype of the ‘beastly husband’ and his gaze, this essay seeks to reveal how writers destabilise the threshold between humanity and animality through female characters who are forced to confront their own animality when literally or figuratively naked before the beast. This dynamic will be explored through the act of lying with, or refusing to lie with, ‘beastly husbands’ in three key texts: ‘Bisclavret’ (c. 1155-1170) by Marie de France, ‘The Pig Prince’ (c. 1550-1555) by Giovanni Francesco Straparola, and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (1756) by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Firstly, the essay will explore the fear and shame associated with becoming the object of the animal gaze, and then it will examine how nakedness before the beast forces (self-)confrontation. Lastly, the essay will consider how lying with the beast can lead to the (self-)reconciliation between animal and man. Ultimately, it is argued that to confront the beast is to confront oneself, and those who do so willingly and without shame will be rewarded.

To become the object of the animal gaze is to face the shame of one’s own animality, and this threat to the integrity of humanity is represented by the attempts of female partners to

evade or reject the gaze upon their often naked bodies. In ‘Bisclavret,’ Marie de France recounts the moment when Bisclavret reveals to his wife that he is a werewolf, describing how ‘[t]he lady heard this remarkable revelation and her face became flushed with fear,’ in which the triadic alliteration of ‘face / flushed / fear’ mirrors the lady’s increasing fear at the threat that Bisclavret’s animality poses to her (65). Following this revelation, Bisclavret’s wife asks him whether he undresses or remains clothed, an inquiry that Peggy McCracken interprets as ‘a question about animality and humanity . . . [a]nimals are not usually ashamed to go about undressed, humans often are’ (215). Although McCracken overlooks the role of the gaze in this dynamic, the significance of her observation lies in how the wife’s shame leads her to prevent Bisclavret from returning to his human form by hiding his clothes (65). In this action, Bisclavret’s wife, faced with the possibility of confronting her own animality, expels her husband from the domestic sphere, ensuring he cannot gaze upon her potential nakedness by confining him to his animal form in an attempt to preserve her sense of humanity. Similarly, in Straparola’s ‘The Pig Prince,’ the narrator reveals the eldest daughter’s instinctive disgust at the prince to whom she is betrothed, hinting that her revulsion stems from her inability to confront her own animality. The narrator describes how ‘he jumped around her and endeavored to show some sign of his affection by pawing and nuzzling her. But as she felt him soiling her dress, she pushed him aside’ (53). The verbs in the description ‘he jumped around her and endeavored to show some sign’ communicate the urgency with which the pig attracts her attention as he forces her to confront his animality, revealing how such confrontations are characterised by a distinct sense of intention. Her reaction to this—‘she pushed him aside’—however, reveals not only her disgust, but represents an attempt to avert his gaze as she resists the transgressive intimacy and removes him from the immediate space she occupies. Where Bisclavret’s wife removes her husband from the domestic space, the eldest daughter in ‘The Pig Prince’ likewise averts the animal

gaze in an attempt to preserve the boundary between human and animal. If Straparola contrasts the disgust of the maiden's eldest daughter with the compassion of her youngest in confronting the pig, Leprince de Beaumont shifts the focus almost entirely to Beauty's acceptance of the beast. Although Leprince de Beaumont also depicts Beauty's fear before the beast, describing how she 'could not keep herself from trembling,' she privileges Beauty's willingness to confront the beast even if she repeatedly refuses his hand in marriage (811). Despite 'firmly believ[ing] that the Beast was going to eat her that night,' a metaphor for Beauty facing her own animality, the narrator relates how 'she had come of her own accord' (810, 810). In this way, Leprince de Beaumont communicates Beauty's willingness to confront the beast, and by extension her own latent animality, through her self-sacrificial gesture, which allows the beast to gaze upon her.

Significantly, the intimate space of the bed, the principal site of (self-)confrontation between the animal gaze and human nakedness in which woman lies with beast, becomes not a site of reconciliation and transformation, but one of resistance and repression as women attempt to eliminate the threat of their own animality. Bruno Bettelheim observes that 'the male's anxieties that his coarseness will turn off the female are juxtaposed with her anxieties about the bestial nature of sex,' highlighting the menacing spectre of bestiality present in this tale type (298). In 'Bisclavret,' Marie de France reveals how '[Bisclavret's wife] was greatly alarmed by the story, and began to consider various means of parting from him, as she no longer wished to lie with him' (65). Crucial to understanding the conflict of this tale, the clause 'she no longer wished to lie with him' communicates the wife's inability to confront both his, and her own, beastliness, with the irony of the double meaning in the verb 'lie' pointing towards her self-deception and inability to face her own animality. Similarly, in Straparola's 'The Pig Prince,' the narrator describes the moment 'when the time for going to bed arrived, the [eldest daughter] said to herself, "What am I to do with this foul beast? I

think tonight, when he falls asleep, I'll kill him"' (53). In this sentence, the description of the intelligent pig as a 'foul beast' represents the eldest daughter's attempt to establish a sense of difference between herself and the pig; however, this is undermined by the ironic '"I'll kill him"' that betrays her own animalistic barbarity, as the she attempts to destroy the threat that the pig's gaze poses to her humanity. Here, the bed becomes the site of a failed (self-)confrontation between the animal gaze and the naked human body, a space in which the animal and the human collide but are not reconciled, as women engage in a self-denial that prevents the acknowledgement of their own animality. Although Beauty does not explicitly lie with Beast, maintaining a relative degree of distance from him throughout Leprince de Beaumont's tale, the narrator emphasises the sanctity and safety of Beauty's bedroom, a space in which she can escape the gaze of the beast. The narrator describes how '[b]efore [Beauty] went to bed each night, the Beast would always ask her if she would be his wife, and he seemed deeply wounded when she refused' (812). In this way, Beauty not only refuses the Beast's hand in marriage but also effectively denies him access to her bedchamber, the space in which she would be most exposed to the beastly gaze, thereby preserving the integrity of her humanity.

If the bed or the bedroom functions as a particularly consequential space in which the animal gaze and the (naked) human body are placed in confrontation, it can simultaneously offer the possibility of reconciliation between the human and the animal. As Suzanne Magnani observes, 'animal-human hybrids are especially disturbing because they challenge the limits of our own identity,' however, they also force us to confront and reconcile our animal identity with our human self (107). Although Bisclavret's wife refuses to confront her own animality by lying with her beastly husband, it is significant that '[the courtiers] found the knight sleeping on the king's own bed. The king ran forward to embrace him, and kissed him many times' (68). This description lends itself to a homoerotic reading whereby the king

confronts his own animality by '[t]ak[ing] him into [his] bedchamber,' that is allowing him into the space in which the animal gaze confronts the human body in its most exposed form. In this way, the king's embrace of the wolf, and Bisclavret's subsequent transformation, reveal how the bed, and the wider space of the bedroom, not only mediates the confrontation between human and animal but also becomes a space of reconciliation, where difference between animal and human collapses through the king's self-confrontation and acceptance. In contrast to Bisclavret's avoidant wife, however, Meldina in Straparola's 'The Pig Prince' embraces the pig and her own animality by lying with the beast. The narrator describes how '[the pig] got up and licked her on the face, neck, bosom, and shoulders with his tongue, and she returned his caresses and kisses so that he felt ignited by a warm love for her' (55). The pig's 'lick[ing]' of her apparently naked and erogenous 'neck' and 'bosom' that is 'returned' by the bride creates an image of mutual sexual passion that subverts the hierarchy of the 'animal gaze' as Meldina is able to 'look back' following her self-confrontation and acceptance of her animality. In this vein, Meldina 'ask[s] [the pig] to lie near her and put his head on the pillow' in bed together, physically reducing the space between man and animal and thus collapsing the division that separates them (55). Where Bisclavret's wife creates more space between Bisclavret and herself, maintaining the hierarchy and superiority of the 'animal gaze' through her avoidance of confronting her own animality, Straparola eliminates the space through which the gaze operates by placing man and animal in bed together, demonstrating that they are ultimately one and the same. If Straparola subverts the distinction between man and animal in this way, Leprince de Beaumont also reduces this literal and figurative space between them when her narrator describes how '[Beauty] threw herself on his body without being horrified by his looks,' significantly 'return[ing] her gaze toward her dear Beast' (813, 815). By throwing herself upon Beast's body, and in a sense lying with him, Beauty diminishes the psychological and physical space through which the gaze operates,

actively confronting and embracing her own animality. By returning the Beast's gaze like Meldina, Beauty turns the encounter between human and animal from a site of confrontation into one of reconciliation, in which the boundary between human and animal collapses, culminating in the beast's transformation.

Drawing upon Derrida's theory of the 'animal gaze' and its demand that one confronts one's own animality, this essay demonstrates that female characters in fairy tales are very much preoccupied with their animality as they attempt to avoid the gaze, are compelled to confront it, and can ultimately reconcile themselves with it. In these texts, the act of lying with the beast—that is allowing the animal to gaze upon one's naked body—represents the moment in which women are forced to confront their own animality and the boundary between man and animal dissolves. This essay has focused on how the figure of the 'beastly husband' compels female characters to confront their own animality; however, further research might examine how this confrontation is further complicated by the gender dynamic of the gaze or dual animal-human nature of the 'beastly husband' archetype and their transformations that female self-confrontation brings about.

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