
Posthuman bears: Sight, agency, and baiting in Early Modern England

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Abstract: In Early Modern England it would have been common to see a bear in major towns. Bears were baited in arenas for entertainment and spectacle in ways that deprived them of agency while simultaneously bolstering human exceptionalism. However, looking closely at bears from cultural, social and biological perspectives, it becomes increasingly clear that there was more to these encounters than first meets the eye. Bears would have been cared for, as well as exploited by, their companion bearwards, and accounts of bear baiting emphasise how some bears were blind for the sport. Reading these encounters with a posthuman lens, attentive to asymmetrical power relations and attuned to shifting categories of the human, this essay demonstrates how bears and bearwards were at once companion species, even as the exploitation of bears brought into question the types of agency and encounter at work in the baiting arena.

ENCOUNTERS

In his now seminal address *The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)*, Jacques Derrida turns his intellectual prowess to an unlikely little creature – his cat. Finding himself naked before his cat in his bathroom, he notices the curious effect of the cat’s “insistent gaze”. Derrida feels a peculiar *malaise*, instigated by the benevolent yet pitiless, surprised yet cognisant animal, who has “the gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid blind person” (DERRIDA 2002, 372). Ruminating on his feeling of shame when being looked at, Derrida considers the nature of relations between human and nonhuman animals in the context of Western modernity, including ethics and ontological difference. Inspired by his encounter with his cat, he dwells on sight to introduce a sensory dimension to the enquiry into the human/animal distinction. In response to Derrida, Donna Haraway suggests that the cat’s gaze made the philosopher realise that he was “in the presence of *someone*, not of a machine reacting” or an automaton as René Descartes had suggested about animals in the 17th century.¹ Nevertheless, Haraway argues, while Derrida did not fall into the trap of “making the subaltern speak” by giving his cat speech, he does not seriously consider an alternative way of engaging with the nonhuman animal. What Haraway is looking for is an encounter that sets human and nonhuman as companion

1 HARAWAY 2008, 19, my emphasis. The reference to animals as machines is an echo of Descartes. See COTTINGHAM et al. 1985, vol. 1, 139–141.

species (HARAWAY 2003). This is an encounter between species that would risk “knowing something more about cats and *how to look back*, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and *therefore* also philosophically and intimately” – a project that is truly posthuman in scope (HARAWAY 2008, 20).

Haraway argues that Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species because his *looking* did not fully engage with the responsivity of the other. The human part of a companion species has a responsibility to become curious about what the animal “might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back” (HARAWAY 2008, 20). Such curiosity has the power to destabilise the modernist category of “Man”, restricted to (usually) white, wealthy, educated, Western males, and therefore excluding women, the poor, people of colour, and disabled people, as well as nonhuman animals. It is precisely this notion of companionship that posthumanism seeks to explore in an era when humankind is increasingly divorced from the realities of animal suffering. As Bénédicte Boisseron remarks, “domestication has enabled creatures who act like us [...] but who may not think like us or share a similar *Umwelt* [...] to share our daily life”, especially because animals cannot speak, and thus “can be thought only in terms of ‘what if?’ – What if they did judge us?” (BOISSERON 2018, 171). Likewise, much ink has been spilled trying to fathom what really happens in the human psyche, in our biology, and in social transactions, when we engage with animals as beings, as property, or as companions (LEDUFF 2003; HEARNE 2007; DECKHA 2021). But what would happen if the animal looking back were not a cat waiting for her daily feed, but rather, a bear? What would Derrida’s response have been if he had looked not into the eyes of *Felis silvestris catus* but of *Ursus arctos*? This is not a wild, foraging bear, or even one found in a modern zoo, but rather the tamed brown bear. For this thought experiment it is necessary to go back in time to the Early Modern period when it would have been normal to see or hear a bear walking through one of the major English towns.

In modern-day Britain, we tend to think of encounters with megafauna such as bears in isolated terms. Bears either haunt the enclosures of zoos or remind us of a bygone era in which bears had considerably more space to roam away from human habitation. Despite having probably become extinct by the early Bronze Age in Britain, bears were a common sight in English towns in the Early Modern period as a consequence of the popularity of bear baiting (O’REGAN 2018; 2020). Baiting entailed setting dogs upon a bear tied to a stake; bears were thus intrinsic to a variety of social and economic interactions as baiting rivalled commercial theatre as a spectator sport. Contemporary accounts record that animals such as bears, bulls, horses, and monkeys were brought into arenas and set upon by dogs, and not always with the aim of killing the animals involved, although a great number of dogs were killed in fights with larger fauna.² Much of our evidence for bear baiting in this period comes from travellers’ accounts, the rare diaries of bearwards (those who owned and baited bears), and the archaeological record, which provides evidence that bears were exploited from the Medieval to Victorian periods for baiting, skins, or for use as commercial products such as bear’s grease. It is likely then, that walking the streets of Early Modern England one may have stumbled not only across a cat or a dog, but also a bear.

The encounters generated by bear baiting in Early Modern contexts force further reconsideration of the nature of relationships between bears and humans in urban, performative contexts. The urban ecologies in which these animals existed and fought were the end points on long routes of animal trade, which are not yet fully understood (DAVIES in print). In London the Bear Garden was a popular arena for the sport and attracted tourists in the same fashion as royal palaces, St Paul’s Cathedral, or the menagerie at the Tower of London (SCOTT-WARREN 2003, 70). However, as Przemysław

2 See the Box Office Bears website for further details and analysis: <https://boxofficebears.com>; last accessed 26 September 2022. See also HÖFELE 2011, 1–2, 12. An earlier study of baiting in Early Modern England is provided by DAIGL 1997.

Pożar notes, “the stench of animals and their carcasses can all be seen as aspects of London’s sinister or ‘disturbing’ side, especially when viewed against ‘the instability of the category of the human’” (POŻAR 2021, 101–102). On the reverse side of this coin, many bears would have been intimately acquainted with the sights and sounds of human habitation in Early Modern England, although some were blind and deprived of their visual senses for baiting. In terms of encounters the blind bears render Derrida’s visual model for ethical enquiry with the nonhuman significantly more complex as a methodology for evaluating human/animal relations. The primacy of the visual is a particularly humanist perspective, bolstering the dominance of vision in human culture, which restricts the possibilities of encounter to normative sensory experiences. These encounters force us to think beyond Derrida’s shame, especially when violence, disability, and exploitation are integral components of what it means to be posthuman or a companion species.

COMPANION BEARS

Using the word “companion” to describe the relationship between humans and bears in Early Modern England is not to suggest that these two species shared a cosy relationship similar to that enjoyed by many humans and domesticated pets today. Rather, the term is a posthumanist one that reveals our increasing understanding of the social, cultural, and biological interactions that inflect human/nonhuman relations, many of which lead to asymmetrical power relations. As Cary Wolfe notes, humans and animals “may share a vulnerability and passivity without limit as fellow living beings, but what they do *not* share equally is the power to materialise their misrecognition of their situation and to reproduce that materialisation in institutions of exploitation and oppression whose effects are far from symmetrical in species terms” (WOLFE 2010, 95). This is true of Early Modern baiting, which provided an arena in which to articulate notions of human superiority over others (FUDGE 2000, 8). The decline of the bear’s status as a cultural symbol, combined with the reality of their treatment in the arena, meant that the conditions in which they were kept and baited deprived them of agency in fundamental ways.³

Although not all Early Modern accounts of bear baiting refer to blind bears, most do convey the brutality of the sport. The mid-16th-century Italian traveller Alessandro Magno described a baiting in vivid detail. In this case the bears are not described as blind, but the account reflects bears’ low status and brute strength. Writing about an arena in London, he recounted how over two hundred dogs used for baiting bulls were kept in small kennels separated from each other, while bears and bulls were kept in other houses around a central arena. Magno describes how, on Sundays, everyone watched the dog training, firstly attacks on a horse and monkey in the ring with five or six young dogs, before moving to the more experienced dogs. He offers a positive review of the activities: “In this sport it is *wonderful* to see the horses galloping along, kicking up the ground and champing at the bit, with the monkey holding very tightly to the saddle, and crying out frequently, when he is bitten by the dogs”. Then they bring out the bears and bulls: “After they have entertained the audience for a while with this sport, which often results in the death of the horse, they lead him out and bring in bears – sometimes one at a time, sometimes all together. But this sport is *not very pleasant to watch*. At the end, they bring on a fierce bull and tie it with a rope about two paces long to a stake fixed in the middle of the ring. This sport is *the best one to see* and more dangerous for the dogs than the other: many of them are wounded and die. This goes on until evening” (BARRON et al. 1983, 143–144; all emphases my own). Like the gladiators or wrestlers of their day, bears and bulls took the brunt force

3 For a book-length argument tracing the outline of the bear’s decline as a cultural symbol, see PASTOUREAU 2011.

of this sport and would have fought repeatedly over long periods of time, even as dogs were used as cannon fodder for the spectacle.

Behind the spectacle of baiting, contemporary records suggest that special care was made to ensure that bears were ready to fight again another day. A typical bear used for baiting would have been kept well enough to enable it to fight continuously over long periods of time, reflecting its high socio-economic value. Because of the brutality of baiting, bears would have needed the constant care of their companion bearwards, especially when travelling between cities or counties. A good example of this is one contemporary inventory that records the oil used for applying to and caring for a blind bear, which featured as an outgoing cost in a bearward's "diary" from 1608 (DAVIES 2021). Studies of modern remains of captive bears in Europe and South East Asia have shown that captivity causes dental problems, perhaps due to chewing bars, and there are high levels of osteoarthritis and skeletal pathologies, which may in part be due to age or activity levels (O'REGAN/KITCHENER 2005). Consistent rounds of dogs set in the Early Modern baiting arena put bears under constant stress, especially as the instinctive reaction for bears feeling threatened (by humans at least) is to flee unless they are caring for or protecting offspring (KROFEL 2019, 190). The baiting arena removes the possibility of flight, and capitalises on bears' innate strength, which would have forged the appearance of a bottomless source of able-bodied stamina, in which the bear could choose to fight and survive. Bear baitings thus revealed an undercurrent of radical inequality that is brought into relief by a central tenant of crip theory – that "like compulsory heterosexuality [...] compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there is actually no choice" (McRUER 2006, 8).

If personal accounts or reflections on the nature of the relationship between bears and their bearwards existed, they have been lost to time or are yet to resurface. However, knowing that these companion relationships must have existed forces us to think deeply about the posthuman implications of such partnerships. This relationship was a form of radical inequality, beginning with capture or birth in captivity, transportation (possibly over long distances), and finally the baiting arena (CUYTEN/CONVERY 2019). Elizabeth Baldwin has suggested that one John Seckerston, the innkeeper of the Bear Inn in Nantwich, was both a bearward and a bear-breeder, who had four bears in his stable at the time of the 1583 great fire that destroyed most of the town (BALDWIN 1998, 98). Seckerston, or his associates, travelled widely with bears, perhaps even tracing routes as far as Lancashire, Bristol, and Coventry (BALDWIN 1998, 96). If these accounts provide only a snapshot of a broader practice of travelling with, and baiting bears, the bears of England's fighting pits were kept, cared for, and simultaneously brutally exploited by humans across the country.

Descriptions of bear baiting from Early Modern England clearly demonstrate the gap that exists between humans and nonhuman animals in terms of companion species. This is particularly striking for such a totemic species as the bear. Writers have equated bears with gods, princes, leaders and advisors, warriors, and even sexual icons across the centuries in ways that encourage us to believe that they are like us (PASTOUREAU 2011). This anthropomorphising is an integral component of human conceptions of bears, and thus of companion species. The anthropocentric circuit that guides much modern, Western thinking about animals, or the "mechanism underlying our current means of determining the human-animal distinction", is described by Giorgio Agamben as the "anthropological machine" (CALARCO 2008, 92). According to Agamben this machine, which is the scientific and philosophical discourses that distinguish human from animal, differs over time. He highlights a distinction between the function of this machine in the premodern and modern periods. On one hand, the modern machine is post-Darwinian. It isolates the animal aspect of the human animal to exclude select agents from the category of humanity. According to Agamben, the ape-man, and later in the 20th century the Jew, are humans who are excluded as "not (yet) human" (AGAMBEN 2004, 37). On the other hand, the premodern anthropological machine, from Aristotle to Linnaeus, works in

a symmetrical way, but in inverted form: “Rather than animalising certain aspects of the human, animal life is humanised. Human beings who take an essentially animal form are used to mark the constitutive outside of humanity proper – the infant savage, the wolf-man, the werewolf, the slave, or the barbarian” (CALARCO 2008, 93). Both machines have at their centre a zone of indifference, a space of exception or caesura, which allows for the constant rearticulation of human and animal according to context.

Are the bears of Early Modern baitings an example of a modern or premodern anthropological machine? Perhaps they are both, in ways that epitomise the Early Modern period as a transformative moment in how humans and animals have shared companionship. The bear is the premodern animal humanised. This is evident not only in the custom of naming celebrity bears, such as Robin Hood, George Stone etc., which mirrors the act of colonial acquisition – but also in how baiting was set up as a spectacle in arenas not dissimilar to contemporary theatres, in which bears were the key protagonists (DE SOMOGYI 2018). However, we can also trace through Agamben’s model the ways that bears signal the operation of the modern anthropological machine. Through Early Modern baiting the humanised species that trod the pages of medieval fables and stories like the *Roman de Renart* begins to be disassembled (for the Reynard cycle see OWEN 1994). Early Modern bearwards and those in the trade rebuilt bears as fighting machines, as the animal aspect of the humanised bear excludes the bear from the human realm – a shoring up of traditional distinctions between human and animal, religion and science, and nature and culture that are the key markers of Early Modern Humanism (LATOUR 1993, 1–16; DESCOLA 2013, 1–88).

The impulse of Humanism bolstered the figure of Man by contrasting him with the animal, a process that in large part mirrored the biblical model of animals being placed into the charge of humans by God’s command at the time of Creation (Genesis 1:28). Both the humanist and the biblical models build a hierarchy of life in which humankind holds dominion over the nonhuman – a model exemplified in acts of animal baiting for entertainment. A recent response to the humanist model, termed posthumanism, seeks not only to reconfigure animals as a catch-all category in relation to the human, but also to question the principles that underlie models of human/nonhuman distinction, such as those outlined in Agamben’s anthropological machines. Wolfe defines posthumanism as “the necessity for any discourse or critical procedure to take account of the constitutive (*and* constitutively paradoxical) nature of its own distinctions, forms, and procedures”. The posthumanist lens is thus distinguished from the “reflection and introspection” associated with the critical subject of Humanism, and must therefore take account of nonhuman animals not only in terms of dominion and rationality, but also of encounter, ethical enquiry, and companion species (WOLFE 2010, 122). We have already seen how such companionships in Early Modern England might be more profitably explored through thinking in posthuman terms. As we shall discover below, this process is highlighted more explicitly in the case of blind bears who, deprived of their sense of vision, nevertheless fought back.

BLIND BEARS

The baiting of blind bears in Early Modern arenas presented a posthuman challenge to the principles of Early Modern Humanism that enabled the deprivation of bears’ status and thus their subjugation by the common man. The bears of Early Modern baiting therefore articulated a problem with definitions about where to draw the line between human and nonhuman, and thus how to ascribe agency. Whereas Derrida’s thought of shame was instigated by the gaze of his cat – that is through sight –, in the case of Early Modern bear baiting this field of encounter was not always possible. Deprived of vision, blind or blinded bears offered audiences an altogether posthuman spectacle in multiple ways.

Blind bears disrupted the belief that if they look back at us, bears are like us.⁴ The unequal relations captured in accounts of bear baiting in which bears are reduced to blind entertainment fodder rupture well-trodden cycles of normative anthropocentrism – if they cannot look back, bears cannot be like us.

The spectacle of baiting blind bears encoded the bear in the patterns of violence instigated by the humans who owned them. In one account of Elizabethan-era bear baiting given by the German lawyer and traveller Paul Hentzner, the bear demonstrates an impressive capacity to fight back even when deprived of his field of vision. Although escape is not an option, the bear's ability to continue to fight his opponents with "force and skill" is worthy of note: "There often follows that of whipping a blinded bear, which is performed by five or six men, standing circularly with whips, which they exercise upon him without any mercy, as he cannot escape from them because of his chain. He defends himself with all his force and skill, throwing down all who come within his reach, and are not active enough to get out of it, and tearing the whips out of their hands, and breaking them" (HENTZNER 1797, 30). Hentzner's travel account sharply contrasts this turbulent scene with a description of the crowd in the arena, which is full of people leisurely smoking tobacco, drinking ale and wine, and eating fruit and nuts. Despite the contrast between the actions of human baiters, human onlookers, and the bear itself, this account nevertheless portrays the baited bear as in charge of his own agency. The bear reacts, throws down its opponents, and even tears the whip out of their hands in an unexpected reversal of baiting roles. But for viewers of the fight, and readers of Hentzner's account, the true fate of the bear lies in the juxtaposition of real peril for the humans who get too close to the bear, and an underlying familiarity with the theatricality of the fight.

The key to understanding the conceptual challenge that blind bears created is the juxtaposition of the commoner with the bear. Both are categories subjugated by the exclusive humanist Man. In a pamphlet called *Worke for Armourers* published in 1609, the writer Thomas Dekker observed with some distaste a similar spectacle of bear baiting with dogs in which a blind bear was whipped. In contrast to Hentzner's travel account, Dekker focuses on the moral dimension of the baiting by using religious metaphor to transform the bear, called Hunkes, into the figure of the sinner. Although the ethical universe in which he watches the spectacle is very different to our own, he nevertheless stresses that the people who torture Hunkes are people like ourselves – colliers, carters, or watermen – workers from the streets of London: "No sooner was I entered [the Bear Garden] but the very noise of the place put me in mind of Hell: the bear (dragged to the stake) shewed like a black rugged soul, that was damned... the dogs like so many devils inflicting torments upon it... At length a blind bear was tied to the stake, and instead of baiting him with dogs, a company of creatures that had the shapes of men, and faces of Christians (being either colliers, carters or watermen) took the office of Beadles upon them, and whipped monsieur Hunkes, till the blood ran down his old shoulders".⁵ Dekker's mystifying gaze on his fellow human company registers the bear baiting in quasi-religious terms through a comparison with the devilish dogs. However, it is noteworthy that Dekker's world seems upside-down when, instead of baiting the bear, the crowds take on the role of torturers or executioners. In Agamben's terms, the animal aspect of these human workers is isolated to exclude them from the category of humanity purported by Humanism. Julie Sanders observes that the mastiff dogs in Dekker's description play the role of the devils in a morality play, with the closing vision of Dekker's statement humanising and aging the bear called Hunkes (SANDERS 2014, 59). Hunkes simultaneously embodies the trope of "disability as a metaphor for deviance or moral failing", which marginalises alterity through negation (SENIER 2017, 277). Alongside the hybrid devil-dogs, Dekker positions the Christian men who whip Hunkes as part-men, part-creature – a dehumanisation that

4 HÖFELE (2011, 115–170) has shown that images of cruelty produced similar reflections in the work of writers such as Montaigne, Foxe, and Shakespeare.

5 Adapted from DEKKER 1609, sig. B1v– B2r, and quoted from SANDERS 2014, 58.

animalises the crowds of human onlookers. This is a move that resembles Agamben's model for the modern, post-Darwinian anthropological machine that isolates the animal aspect of the human and excludes them from humanity. To whip a blind bear so must imply a certain animalisation of the human, as an implication of an awry morality.

The act of naming bears, which was common practice in Early Modern England, brings into question the extent to which blinding bears could have been a response to increasing humanisation. In contrast to the animalisation of the human crowd, the process of naming the bear Hunkes incorporates a humanisation that resembles Agamben's premodern anthropological machine (in which animal life is humanised). But whipping a blind bear represents a gross act of inhuman cruelty. Likewise, in a contemporary letter from Edward Barrett to Edward Alleyn about animals for the Royal Game, dated 11 June 1610, the author describes how one "Littell Besse of Bromly" fought over twenty double and single "courses" with the best dogs in the country. Some of the dogs she killed outright but "the moste parte shee sent haltting awaie".⁶ This humanisation and gendering of a baited bear helps to articulate the instability of the category of the human in accounts of Early Modern baiting. In both accounts, bears are named and thus humanised through a process of mirroring human culture. But it is Dekker's account – the one that humanises Hunkes – that evokes a feeling of pity when comparing the bear at the stake with London's "poor wretches" being led to the whipping posts: "Yet me thought this whipping of the blind bear moved as much pity in my breast towards him, as y(e) leading of poor starved wretches to the whipping posts in London (when they had more need to be relieved with food) ought to move the hearts of citizens, though it be the fashion now to laugh at the punishment".⁷ Dekker states that he was moved to feel pity at the sight of the blind bear being whipped. Might he have been moved further to feel shame if, like Derrida, he had been able to meet the gaze of the nonhuman animal?

The types of encounter afforded by bear baiting demonstrate the importance of sight and the gaze for defining what kind of agency is at work. For Derrida, the gaze is a trigger for ethical encounter between him and his cat, but the case of blind bears introduces a dilemma to this visual mode of enquiry into the distinction between human and nonhuman. A blind bear makes what it can of the situation in which it finds itself, yet its agency is prescribed by human baiters. The bear cannot see and perhaps has to rely on its olfactory senses, which are vastly superior to the human sense of smell, but the baiting arena did not allow humans to put their own sense of smell to the test as a form of encounter. There are, of course, many sensory ways of encountering nonhuman animals, but blindness does not allow the bear to look back, as Haraway would like it to do, to present the human onlooker with the posthuman question of what the nonhuman is feeling, thinking, or making available through that encounter. This stretches the notion of companionship to its limit, and reinforces the dark undercurrent of exploitation in the partnership between human and bear, in which the bear's agency, and ability to challenge human command, is deliberately forestalled.

CONCLUSION

What is posthuman about a bear that lived and fought in the arenas of Early Modern England, a bear so deprived of agency that the easiest comparisons for some observers were with London's "wretches"? Bears were integral to Early Modern theatre economics and animal trade. They were bears that lived long lives and, perhaps often, fought back. They were companion species, who relied on a cross-species

6 The Archive of Dulwich College (London), "MSS 2 Dulwich Letters of PH and EA as Masters of Royal Game, 1598–1626", 013. Transcription provided by Callan Davies.

7 Adapted from DEKKER 1609, sig. B2r.

partnership with bearwardens and a different species *umwelt* (perspective) to survive (VON UEXKÜLL 2010, 45; LEWIS 2022). The descriptions of bears included in this discussion demonstrate that writers in the Early Modern period did not have fixed conceptions of what it meant to be human or animal. Using Agamben’s anthropological machines as tools to examine the distinctions between humans and nonhumans, it quickly becomes clear that bears straddled multiple categories in the minds of observers. They were humanised through naming, animalised alongside lower status humans, and ascribed super-human, but altogether bear-like, characteristics such as strength, stamina, and perhaps courage, which brought into question the more rigid conceptions of able-bodiedness and species difference that defined the humanist agenda.

In a study of surface encounters with the nonhuman, Ron Broglio asks whether the Humanities – a human endeavour traditionally for humans – can be “hospitable enough to give itself over and recognise our lives as entwined with other beings?” (BROGLIO 2021, 138). Those who work to uncover the records of humans and animals involved in bear baiting and to understand the lives of animals, know that we must recognise the entanglements in which bears were caught up – social, economic, and biological – which were at once exploitative, cruel, and violent. By looking at animals, and allowing them to look back, the Humanities can be hospitable enough to show that our entanglements are deep and entrenched. But even if bears cannot look back, understanding their lives helps to uncover the diverse ways that they were ascribed agency by bearwardens, writers, and onlookers. The Early Modern bears that we study will never benefit from the pursuit of better knowledge about their lives, but perhaps in the process we will strengthen the histories we tell about animal agency and cruelty, entertainment practice, and the social worlds in which bears have wandered.

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