

The Hyena's Cave

Jeremiah 12.9 in Premodern Bestiaries

Abstract

The premodern bestiary tradition portrays the hyena as a creature that annually changes its sex. While the *Greek Physiologus* interprets it as an allegory of sexual aberration, the various versions of the *Latin Physiologus* read it as a symbol for religious duplicity. Since the late twelfth century, the bestiaries transform the hyena into a signifier of the abominable *par excellence*. Throughout the bestiary tradition, the interpretation of the hyena draws on a quotation from the *Book of Jeremiah* where God compares his land to a hyena's cave (Jer. 12.9).

1. For the medieval Latin and German bestiaries, see Henkel; Schröder; for the medieval Latin and French bestiaries, see Kay. For a translation, introduction and commentary of the early Latin texts (*Physiologus versio Y, Physiologus B*), see Curley. For the hyena, see Kay 70–73.

2. For a chronology of the various Latin bestiaries, see Kay 157–62.

From the Aesopian fables to the film and musical *The Lion King*, the hyena has always had a dubious reputation (Glickman; Brottman). The premodern bestiary tradition is no exception, portraying the hyena as a creature that annually changes its sex.¹ While the *Greek Physiologus* interprets it as an allegory of sexual aberration, the various versions of the *Latin Physiologus* read it as a symbol for religious duplicity.² Since the late twelfth century, the bestiaries transform the hyena into a signifier of the abominable *par excellence*. Throughout the bestiary tradition, the interpretation of the hyena draws on a quotation from the *Book of Jeremiah* where God – deploring Israel's moral decline – compares his land to a hyena's den: “Is not my inheritance to me a hyaena's cave?” (Jer. 12.9). Yet only the Septuagint refers to a hyena in this context. The Hebrew text talks more generally about a ‘speckled’ creature, and the Vulgate identifies the latter as a ‘speckled bird’ rather than a spotted hyena.

1 The Greek Tradition: Sexual Aberration

The earliest document hinting at the sexual ambiguity of the hyena are two Aesopian fables. Each of them consists of a zoological statement, a brief narrative and an interpretation. The first fable states as

a fact that the hyena is a sexual shapeshifter and tells a story about a male hyena going to copulate with a female partner:

The Hyenas

They say that hyenas change their sex each year and become males and females alternately. Now, one day a male hyena attempted an unnatural sex act with a female hyena. The female responded: 'If you do that, friend, remember that what you do to me will soon be done to you.' (Aesop 249, no. 340)

The 'unnatural sex act' the narrator mentions seems to refer to anal intercourse. The male hyena desires to mount the female partner. Although this is a heterosexual sex act, it bears a strong homosexual implication. The female advises the male to reconsider since the very same sex act might soon be performed on him in turn. At that time, he will be a female himself – yet while he is wondering what it might be like to be mounted, he is still a male. Leaving the realm of sexuality, the conclusion of the fable compares the hyena to a judge who should be aware that he might once be judged himself: "This is what one could say to the judge concerning his successor, if he had to suffer some indignity from him." The second fable begins with the same statement but then tells a different story:

The Hyena and the Fox

They say that hyenas change their sex every year and become alternately male and female. Now a girl hyena, fancying a fox, reproached him bitterly for rejecting her advances and driving her away from him when she had wished to become friendly with him. 'It's not to me you should complain,' retorted the fox, 'but to your own nature, which gives me no way of knowing whether you would be my girlfriend or my boyfriend.' (Aesop 250, no. 341)

In this case, the punchline draws on the idea that the male fox cannot be sure whether he is having an affair with a male or a female hyena, since the hyena changes its sex annually. Consequently, the conclusion reads, "This relates to the sexually ambiguous man."

In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle challenged the common belief that the hyena changes its sex (Glickman 508–13). In his *History of Animals*, he explains that the alleged sexual ambiguity of the hyena results from a misperception of its peculiar anatomy. Aristotle

claims that both the male and the female hyena possess three organs that are located under the tail. The first one is a genital (either a penis or a vagina), the second the anus and the third a specific orifice which is unconnected to either the uterus or the intestines. According to Aristotle, the resemblance of this appendage to the vagina explains the misapprehension of the hyena as being a beast that is either both male and female or changes its sex regularly:

What is recounted concerning its genital organs, to the effect that every hyena is furnished with the organ both of the male and the female, is untrue. The fact is that the sexual organ of the male hyena resembles the same organ in the wolf and in the dog; the part resembling the female genital organ lies underneath the tail, and does to some extent resemble the female organ, but it is unprovided with duct or passage, and the passage for the residuum comes underneath it. The female hyena has the part that resembles the organ of the male, and, as in the case of the male, has it underneath her tail, unprovided with duct or passage; and after it the passage for the residuum, and underneath this the true female genital organ. (*History of Animals* 6.32.579b; quoted from Glickman 509)

He makes the same statement in his book *Generation of Animals*:

Much deceived also are those who make a foolish statement about the [...] hyena. Many say that the hyena [...] has two pudenda, those of the male and of the female [...] and that [...] the hyena mounts and is mounted in alternate years. This is untrue, for the hyena has been seen to have only one pudendum, there being no lack of opportunity for observation in some districts, but hyenas have under the tail a line like the pudendum of the female. Both male and female have such a mark, but the males are taken more frequently; this casual observation has given rise to this opinion. (*Generation of Animals* 3.6.757a; quoted from Glickman 509)

As Aristotle points out, the widespread misinformation about the sexual abnormality of the hyena results from a lack of thorough observation. Aristotle's reference to the assumption that the hyena "mounts and is mounted in alternate years" seems to respond to the sources that also inspired the Aesopian fables about the hyenas (see Aesop 249).

Nevertheless, the early Christian tradition readily adopted the superstitious belief that the hyena is sexually ambiguous (Boswell 137–43). This is where the Bible comes into play. The so-called *Epistle of Barnabas*, a Christian text from the first century, claims that the hyena changes its sex and thus signifies a sexual predator. Referring to the dietary laws of Moses, the author equates the hare, the hyena and the weasel with various sexual practices such as oral and anal intercourse and the change of sexual roles:

You shall not eat the hare (cf. Lev. 11.5). Why? So that, he said, you may not become a boy-molester or be made like these. For the hare grows a new anal opening each year, so that however many years he has lived, he has that many anuses. Nor should you eat the hyena, he said, so that you may not become an adulterer or a seducer,³ or like them. Why? Because this animal changes its gender annually and is one year a male and the next a female. And he also rightly despised the weasel (cf. Lev. 11.29). You shall not, he said, become as these, who we hear commit uncleanness with their mouths, nor shall you be joined to those women who have committed illicit acts orally with the unclean. For this animal conceives through its mouth. (Boswell 137–38)

3. The word φθορεὺς ('seducer') hints back at the word παιδοφθόρος that is used for the 'boy-molester.'

The Mosaic prohibitions indeed refer to the hare and the weasel; however, they do not at all mention the hyena. The writer of the epistle mistook the swine (ἕν) mentioned in Lev. 11.7 for a hyena (ὑαίνα) – probably since both words are quite similar and etymologically related. In addition, the alleged sexual practices are not part of the biblical text but taken from different sources. The misreading of the hyena's anatomy in combination with the misreading of the biblical text results in the perpetuation of a zoological myth that perfectly serves the Christian damnation of non-heterosexual and non-reproductive sexuality.

In the second century, the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria confirmed the alleged sexual perversion of the hyena. Like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, he refers to the Mosaic prohibitions and insinuates that the hyena is prone to excessive sexuality. In his *Paedagogus*, he writes:

Consider, for instance, how the all-wise Moses somewhat

symbolically repudiated fruitless sowing, saying, 'You shall not eat the hare or the hyena.' For he did not wish men to partake of the qualities of these or to taste such wickedness themselves, since these animals are quite obsessed with sexual intercourse. (Boswell 355–59, here 356)

Then he gives the well-known explanation for the hyena's immorality that is easily transmitted to those who eat the hyena:

The hyena, on the other hand, is alternately male and female in succeeding years – by which [Moses] suggests that those who abstain from the hyena will not be very prone to adultery. (Boswell 356)

Clement is aware of Aristotle's objections to the traditional superstitions about the hyena but draws a different conclusion from the philosopher's explanations. Clement claims that the particular appendage of the hyena Aristotle talks about proves its inclination to lust and fornication including homosexual penetration:

Since this animal is extremely lewd, it has grown under its tail in front of the passage for excrement a certain fleshy appendage, in form very like the female genitalia. This design of the flesh has no passage leading to any useful part, I say, either to the womb or to the rectum. It has, rather, only a great cavity, whence it derives its fruitless lust, since the passages intended for the procreation of the fetus are inverted. This same thing occurs in the case of both the male hyena and the female, because of their exceptional passivity. The males mount each other, so it is extremely rare for them to seek a female. Nor is conception frequent for this animal, since unnatural insemination is so common among them. [...] 'The ungodly, moreover,' as the Apostle says (Rom 1.26–7), 'he gave up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature; and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working that which is unseemly and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.' (Boswell 356–57)

In order to emphasize his depiction of the hyena, Clement introduc-

es a second biblical reference, quoting two lines from Saint Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* that condemn male and female homosexuality (Rom 1.26–27). Finally, Clement offers a third biblical quote, this time referring to the prophet Jeremiah:

When Jeremiah – or the Spirit speaking through him – used to say, 'The cave of the hyena has become my home' (Jer. 12.9; cf. 7.11), loathing the food of the dead bodies, he was referring in a subtle parable to idolatry; for the house of the Lord should truly be free of idols. (Boswell 357)

At this point, Clement switches from the literal to the spiritual meaning of the hyena. On the literal level, the hyena stands for the sexual appetite it can induce in a person eating its meat. On the spiritual level, however, the hyena is a parable for idolatry. Clement thus metaphorically transforms the sexual sin attributed to the hyena into a religious sin – yet without dismissing the sexual meaning. In Clement's view, sodomy equals idolatry as in turn procreative sexuality equals orthodoxy.

The quote from the *Book of Jeremiah* is the single authentic biblical reference to the hyena. It only exists in the Greek version of the bible (*Septuagint*). The prophet complains about the deplorable state of Israel. He claims that the wicked prosper while the righteous wither. God responds to his complaint with an elaborate monologue about Israel's decline. He first reproaches the prophet for being impatient, then presents an allegory of Israel's hostility against him, and finally promises to renew his people if they are willing to serve him again. The first portion of the allegory talks about the wild beasts besieging the land, the second about the devastation of the vineyards and fields. The hyena occurs in the first section as one of the wild animals depriving God of his heritage:

I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given my beloved one into the hands of her enemies. My inheritance has become to me as a lion in a forest; she has uttered her voice against me; therefore have I hated her. Is not my inheritance to me a hyaena's cave, or a cave round about her? Go ye, gather together all the wild beasts of the field, and let them come to devour her. (Jer. 12.7–9)

The Greek bible uses the word 'hyena' (ὑαίνα) in order to translate

the Hebrew word *šāvūa'* (צבוע), which means 'speckled creature' (Frey-Anthes; McKane 268–73). While the Greek bible identifies this creature as a spotted hyena (it remains unclear whether or not this interpretation is correct), the Latin bible offers a different meaning by translating the Hebrew word as 'speckled bird' (*avis discolor*).

In the second century, another theologian, most likely also from Alexandria, composed the *Greek Physiologus*. This book presents a premodern zoology combining descriptions of beasts, trees and stones with allegorical readings. While the descriptions draw on ancient natural history, mostly borrowed from paradoxographical sources, the interpretations refer to the tradition of Christian hermeneutics. The beasts collected in the *Physiologus* include imaginary creatures such as sirens, centaurs, phoenixes and unicorns, yet most of them are animals that in fact exist in Africa such as the hyena. However, the depictions of the real beasts are as fantastic and bizarre as the descriptions of the monsters. There are four different redactions of the *Greek Physiologus*.⁴ The chapter on the hyena is documented in the first, third, fourth and fifth family of the first redaction; the text is identical except for an omitted sentence in the fourth family. According to the canonical edition by Francesco Sbordone, the relevant chapter reads as follows:

On the hyena

The law says, 'You shall not eat the hyena or anything like it' (Deut. 14.8). The *Physiologus* has written of it that it is male-female, that is, at one time male and at another female. It is therefore an unclean animal, because of this sex change. This is why Jeremiah says, 'Never will the den of the hyena be my inheritance' (Jer. 12.9).

You must not, therefore, become like the hyena, taking first the male and then the female nature; theses, he says the holy Apostle reproached when he spoke of 'men with men working that which is unseemly' (Rom. 1.27).

Physiologus spoke well about the hyena. (Boswell 142)⁵

The *Greek Physiologus* makes the same argument and refers to the same biblical quotes as Clement of Alexandria. It also reads the hyena as an allegory for homosexual men (Rom.) that are considered unclean (Deut.) and ungodly (Jer.). The hyena's shift from male to female sex is interpreted as an allegory of a man first penetrating a

4. For the different redactions of the *Greek Physiologus*, see Kaimakis, *Der Physiologus nach der ersten Redaktion* 72 (hyena); Offermanns, *Der Physiologus nach den Handschriften G und M* 88 (hyena).

5. For the Greek text, see Sbordone 85–86; Schönberger 40–41 (text), 117–18 (commentary).

woman ('active' role) and then being penetrated himself by a man ('passive' role).

2 The Early Latin Tradition: Religious Aberration

While the Vulgate version of the *Book of Jeremiah* replaced the hyena with a bird, the Latin versions of the *Physiologus* stuck to the hyena. They all share the belief that the hyena changes its sex and quote the same biblical lines in order to prove the uncleanness of the hyena. However, they do not reiterate the notion that the hyena is a signifier of homosexuality. Their interpretation of the hyena refers to religious rather than sexual misdemeanor.

The *Physiologus versio Y*, which played a minor role in the Latin tradition and had no impact at all on the vernacular versions, reads the hyena as an allegory for effeminate men, which behave like men while attending mass but adopt female nature as soon as they leave church:

On the Hyena or the Brute

The Law said, 'Thou shalt not eat the brute, nor anything similar to it' (cf. Lev. 11.27). This animal is an *arenotelicon*, that is, an alternating male-female. At one time it becomes a male, at another a female, and it is unclean because it has two natures. Therefore, Jeremiah said, 'Never will my heritage be to me like the cave of the brute' (cf. Jer. 12.9).

Thus double-minded men are compared to the brute. They have the nature of men, that is, courage at the signal for gathering the congregation together, but when the assembly is dismissed they take on womanly nature.

Physiologus spoke well. (Curley 52–53)⁶

6. For the Latin text, see Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus Versio Y* 129.

The text adopts the references to Leviticus and Jeremiah but drops the reference to Saint Paul, since it dismisses the sexual interpretation. Instead, it offers a religious reading that addresses courage as the "nature of men" and, as one can conclude, weak-mindedness as "womanly nature." Thus, the hyena signifies the duplicity and hypocrisy of people that only pretend to be religious.

The most influential version of the Latin tradition is *Physiologus B*, an extended branch of *Physiologus versio Y*. The chapter on the hyena presents two additions. The first concerns the distinction be-

tween the 'hyena' and the 'brute': "There is an animal which is called the hyena in Greek and the brute in Latin" (Curley 52). The second addition is inserted after the second paragraph:

The sons of Israel are like the animal since in the beginning they served the living god but later, given over to pleasure and lust, they adored idols. For this reason, the Prophet likens the synagogue to an unclean animal. Whoever is among us eager for pleasure and greed is compared to this unclean brute since he is neither man nor woman, that is, neither faithful nor unfaithful. The Apostle said: 'The root of all evils is enslavement to idols' (Eph. 5.5; 1 Tim. 6.10). Solomon said of these without doubt, 'A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways' (Jac. 1.8). The Saviour said to them in the Gospel, 'You are not able to serve two masters, God and mammon' (Matt. 6.24). (Curley 53)⁷

7. For the Latin text, see Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus*, 34–35; also see Baxter.

This addition considerably differs from the *Greek Physiologus* as well as from the Latin *Physiologus versio Y*. It offers a religious reading of the hyena as a signifier of infidelity. This accusation aims against both Jews committing idolatry and Christians favoring money over God.

The Latin *Physiologus B* was the source for various medieval versions. One of them is the *B-Isidore*, which inserts quotes from the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Sevilla into the text. In the case of the hyena, the *B-Isidore* adds the myth of the prophetic stone: "Etymology. The hyena has a stone in its eyes called the hyena, which, if someone holds it under his tongue he is thought to predict the future" (see Morini 44).⁸ Another medieval version related to the *Physiologus B* is called *Dicta Chrysostomi*, since it was traditionally ascribed to Saint Chrysostom. This version presents a shortened and somewhat confused redaction of the chapter on the hyena. It confounds the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, misreads *belua* (beast) as *fulica* (coot) (see Lauchert, *Geschichte* 285), and treats the latter as a different species. In addition, the *Dicta Chrysostomi* relates the hyena to the infidelity of the Jews and the coot to the infidelity of the Christians:

There is another animal, which is called the hyena in Greek and the beast [*belua*] in latin. The law says about it, 'Thou shalt not eat the brute, nor anything similar to it' (cf. Lev. 11.27). The prophet Isaiah said, 'My heritage is to me like the cave of the hyena' (cf. Jer. 12.9). Physiologus explains that this

8. Morini provides the Latin text (and an Italian translation); the relevant passage reads: "Ethim[ologia]. Hiena lapidem in oculis habet nomine hienam, quem si qui sub lingua sua tenuerit futura predicere creditur."

is because it has two natures. At times it is male and at others female, and hence it is an impure animal. The sons of Israel are to be seen as similar to it in that first they worshipped the living lord but later, abandoned to lust and sensual pleasure, they worshipped idols; and whoever now cultivates avarice, which is enslavement to false images, is comparable with this beast. The same applies for the unclean coot, which is said to be neither man nor women, that is, neither faithful nor faithless. Salomon said, 'A double-minded man is instable in all his ways.'⁹

9. For the Latin text, see Wilhelm 24–25; English translation partly from Kay 70.

The *Dicta Chrysostomi* is the source of two early German translations of the *Physiologus*. The *Althochdeutscher Physiologus* (*Old High German Physiologus*), written in the eleventh century, offers a simplified version of the *Dicta Chrysostomi*:

Ein tier heizzit igena un ist uuilon uuib, uuilon man, unde durih daz ist ez uile unreine. solihe uuarin, di der erist Crist petiton un after diu abgot beginen. Daz bezeichnenet di der neuuedir noh ungeloubige noh rehte geloubige nesint. Von diu chat Salomon "Di dir zwiualtic sint in iro herzin, die sint ouh zwuualtic in iro uuerchin."

An animal is called hyena. At times it is male and at others female, and hence it is an impure animal. Those are similar to it who first worship Christ and later idols. This animal signifies those who are neither faithless nor faithful. Salomon says about them, "They who are duplicitous in their hearts are also duplicitous in their deeds." (Maurer 93; my translation)

The text focusses on Christian idolatry and hypocrisy and omits the allusions to Jews. The references to Leviticus and Jeremiah (respectively Isaiah) are replaced by an alleged reference to Salomon, which in fact is a quote from the *Epistle of James* (Jac. 1.8).

The *Millstätter Physiologus*, a Middle High German translation from the early twelfth century, presents a versified version of the *Dicta Chrysostomi*:

Ein andir tier ich funden han, chriesken heizzet ez Hinam.
Danne ist in der alten e gescriben: "die Hinam solt du niht
[zeliden

noch ezzen ir geslehte.” Esaias, der vorsage, sprichet rehte:

“Diu holde des tieres Hine, daz ist min erbe.”

Danne zelt Phisiologus, daz ez zwei geslehte habes sus;

undirstunden ist ez der er, da nach diu si ein vrist, da von ez

[unreine ist.

Dem tiere gelich sint diu israheliscen chint.

Si bettoten ze erist an got herist.

Darnach durch glust unde durch huor uoboten si dei apgotir.

Diu Hina die gir bezeichinot, swer noch uobet dirre werlde

[apgott.

Di Fulica ist ein unreiner vogel, si ist ze frume niht ze loben.

Dem vogel der ist gelich, der enwedir ist geloubich noch

[ungeloubich.

Also Salomon gesprochen hat: “swelch man ist zwivilhaft

an sines muotis gedanchen, der ist unstæte an allen guoten

[werchen.”

I found another beast, which is called the hyena in Greek. It is written in the old law: “You should not chop the hyena nor eat her kind.” The prophet Isaiah rightly says, “The den of the beast hyena is my heritage.” Moreover, Physiologus says that it has two sexes; sometimes it is a he, sometimes a she, therefore it is unclean. The children of Israel are like this beast. They first worship the mighty God, then they seek the idols because of their lust and desire. The hyena signifies the lust of those still seeking the idols of the world. The coot is an unclean bird that a pious person should not praise. They are like this bird who are nor faithful nor faithless. So Salomon said, “A double-minded man is instable in all his ways.”

(Maurer 18–21; Schröder 82–85)

The German translation closely follows the Latin text. It also distinguishes between the hyena as a signifier for the idolatry of the Jews (the ‘children of Israel’) and the coot as a signifier for the duplicity of the Christians.

3 The Later Latin Tradition: The Abominable

Since the late twelfth century, a new Latin bestiary tradition of English origin emerged. This redaction, the so-called Second-family bes-

10. This book was also known as *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* or *Polyhistor*. – In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder writes on the hyena: “It is the vulgar notion, that the hyæna possesses in itself both sexes, being a male during one year, and a female the next, and that it becomes pregnant without the co-operation of the male; Aristotle, however, denies this. The neck, with the mane, runs continuously into the backbone, so that the animal cannot bend this part without turning round the whole body. Many other wonderful things are also related of this animal; and strangest of all, that it imitates the human voice among the stalls of the shepherds; and while there, learns the name of some one of them, and then calls him away, and devours him. It is said also, that it can imitate a man vomiting, and that, in this way, it attracts the dogs, and then falls upon them. It is the only animal that digs up graves, in order to obtain the bodies of the dead. The female is rarely caught: its eyes, it is said, are of a thousand various colours and changes of shade. It is said also, that on coming in contact with its shadow, dogs will lose their voice, and that, by certain magical influences, it can render any animal immovable, round which it has walked three times” (296 [8.44]).

tiary, incorporates additional material into the *B-Isidore* (which is in turn referred to as the First-family bestiary). One of the main sources of the Second-family bestiary is the book *Wonders of the World* (*De mirabilibus mundi*), written in the third century by the grammarian and compiler Gaius Julius Solinus, who in turn drew on the *Natural History* written by Pliny the Older in the first century.¹⁰ The Second-family bestiary was frequently copied; around fifty manuscripts have been documented so far (Kay 159–60). While the religious interpretation of the hyena including the reference to Jeremiah 12.9 remains the core of the portrayal, the additional material dominates the chapter. It presents the hyena not only as a sexually ambiguous creature and a symbol of idolatry and religious duplicity but also as a signifier of the abominable par excellence. The hyena of the Second-family bestiary lives in graveyards, digs up human corpses and devours them. It imitates vomiting humans in order to attract, kill and devour dogs. It freezes and silences dogs by staring at them as well as casting its shadow on them. It also imitates the human voice in order to attract, kill and devour humans. It cannot bend its rigid spine. In addition to these features, the hyena is paired with the one-toothed “crocotta,” which supposedly is the monstrous offspring of a male hyena and a female lion and has similar characteristics like the hyena:

Hyena and Crocotta

There is an animal called the hyena, living in the tombs of the dead and eating their bodies. It is its nature that it [is sometimes male], sometimes female, and for that reason it is an unclean animal. Because its spine is rigid, it can not be turned about gradually as a unit, only by a twist of its whole body. Solinus reports many wonders relating to it. The first is that it haunts sheepfolds and circles homes at night, and with persistent listening it learns the vocalization that can produce an imitation of the human voice, so that at night it can attack a man summoned by the ruse. And it feigns human vomiting, and with simulated weeping <can> thus eat the dogs attracted <by the sound>. If by chance hunting <dogs> should touch its shadow while it follows them, they cannot bark, having lost their voices. The same hyena digs up graves, searching for buried bodies.

The children of Israel, who from the beginning served the living God, are like this beast. Given later to riches and riotous living, they worshipped idols, and for that reason the

prophet compared the synagogue to the unclean animal, saying, My inheritance is become to me as a hyena in its den. (Jer. 12.8) Thus, whoever among us is a slave to riotous living and avarice are compared to this beast, since they are neither men nor women, that is they are neither faithful or unfaithful, but are, without doubt, those about whom Solomon <sic> said, *A double minded man is inconstant in all his ways* (Jas 1.8). And about whom the Lord said, *No man can serve... God and mammon* (Matt. 6.24).

This beast has a stone in its eyes called the hyena, which, if someone holds it under this tongue he is thought to predict the future. In truth, any animal that the hyena looks at three times cannot move. For that reason, some proclaim that <hyenas> have knowledge of magic.

In the region of Ethiopia <the hyena> copulates with the lioness, whence is born a monster named crocote. Like <the hyena> it imitates human voices. It tries never to alter its gaze, but to stare unswervingly. Its mouth has no gums. <The crocote> has one continuous tooth which, so that it is never dulled, closes naturally like little boxes.¹¹

11. Clark 130–33, also including the Latin text; quotation marks omitted.

Altogether, the Second-family bestiary portrays the hyena as a kind of morbid creature. By associating it with tombs, corpses, vomit, blood, murder, and dark magic, it transforms the hyena into an outcast and pariah, a monstrous and repulsive being that should never be touched.

In the thirteenth century, the bestiaries enter the encyclopedic *Books of Nature* such as Thomas of Cantimpré's *De natura rerum* and Alexander Neckam's *De naturis rerum*. The chapters about the beasts are very similar to the Second-bestiarium tradition. However, the *Books of Nature* omit the biblical references and instead rely on the authorities of natural history. Naming Aristotle, Pliny, Solinus, and Jacques de Vitry as his sources, Thomas of Cantimpré writes on the hyena (4.53):

As Pliny and Solinus say, the hyena is an animal that always lives in the tombs of the dead. It has two natures, male and female. Because its spine is rigid, it cannot be turned about gradually as a unit, only by a twist of its whole body. It haunts the horse stables, as Jacques and Aristotle say, and with persistent listening it learns the name which it can produce

imitating the human voice, so that it kills a man summoned by the ruse. By faking sobs, it also feigns human vomiting. In the same way it seduces and devours dogs. If hunting dogs should touch its shadow while it follows them, they cannot bark, having lost their voices. It can change its color at will. If it looks at an animal, it freezes. This beast holds a precious stone in its eyes or, as some say, on its forehead. The hyena is as big as a wolf. The hair on its neck is like the hair on the neck of a horse and it has rough hair on its spine. As Pliny says, the hyenas are born in Africa.¹²

12. My translation; for the Latin text, see Boese 138–39. For Alexander Neckham's similar portrayal of the hyena, see Wright 232.

In the fourteenth century, Konrad von Megenberg translated Thomas of Cantimpré's book into German. Konrad coins a new German word for the hyena, calling it the *grabtier*. This name hints at the hyena's habit of living in the tombs of the dead: *Yena mag ze dāutsch haizzen ein grabtier, wan sam Plinius und Solinus sprechent, daz tier wont in toter lāut greber* (Konrad von Megenberg 167). The following depiction of the hyena is almost identical with the Latin original. In contrast to the bestiaries, the *Books of Nature* are biological rather than theological treatises. As for the hyena, they are only interested in its biological and behavioral characteristics – not in their allegorical meaning. Nevertheless, the depiction of the hyena still breathes the air of uncanniness that has accumulated from the *Greek Physiologus* to the late medieval *Books of Nature*.

4 Conclusion: The Ark of Heteronormativity

The notion that the hyena is sexually ambiguous – transsexual, homosexual or hermaphroditic – persisted throughout the ancient and medieval bestiary tradition. Thus, the hyena served as a premodern signifier for what is nowadays often called *queer*. Even though the Latin tradition from *Physiologus versio Y* to the Second-family bestiary prefers the religious to the sexual meaning of the hyena, the latter remains present in two respects. On the one hand, the religious interpretation is based on a sexual characteristic; on the other, Latin versions such as the *Dicta Chrysostomi* argue that the idolaters abandoned themselves to “lust and sensual pleasure.” The queerness of the hyena is linked to sexual excess, religious perversion, and morbid behavior. The hyena never completely lost the connotation of homosexuality that is characteristic for its portray-

13. Boswell 143; the quote is from Bernard's *De contemptu mundi*.

14. The first manuscript was produced in the twelfth century in the Benedictine monastery of Göttweig in Austria (New York, Morgan Library, ms. 832, f. 4r), the second in the fourteenth century in the Cistercian monastery of Fürstenfeld in Bavaria (München, BSB, clm. 6908, f. 79v); see Boswell tables 9 and 12. The third manuscript was produced in the twelfth century, possibly in the Augustinian Canons monastery of St. Florian (Wien, ÖNB, cod. 1010, f. 67r), see Kay plate 11.

15. Digital reproduction available at [this link](#).

al in the *Greek Physiologus*. John Boswell states that in the twelfth century, Bernard de Cluny “could assail homosexual relations with the simple observation that a man who thus ‘dishonors his maleness’ is ‘just like a hyena’” (“Mas maris immemor, o furor! O tremor! Est ut hyaena”).¹³ He also presents two miniatures from Latin bestiaries showing two hyenas embracing each other (Sarah Kay recently added a third example).¹⁴ Each of these manuscripts, two from the twelfth and one from the fourteenth century, contain the *Dicta Chrysostomi* version that lacks the notion of homosexuality. The sex of the depicted hyenas is indeterminate; “but given their alleged degeneration from male to female, [their desire] may well be understood as homosexual” (Kay 71; in Kay’s example, male genitalia were later on added in red ink in order to clarify the sex). As it seems, the influence of the *Greek Physiologus* persisted in the pictorial tradition even if the illustrated manuscripts belong to the Latin bestiary tradition.

Fig. 1: *Fürstenfelder Physiologus*, 14th c. (München, BSB, clm 6908, f. 79v, detail).¹⁵



There are more examples. In the early fourteenth century, the Italian theologian Cecco d'Ascoli writes in his encyclopedic poem *L'Acerba* that the hyena is a sodomitic beast since it changes the sexual role: "Muta 'l sexo, animal sodomito" (Morini 607). Even zoological studies of the nineteenth century still portray the hyena as a sexually ambiguous animal. In his widely read *Animal Life*, first published in the 1860s, Alfred Brehm hints at the unsettling sexual activity of the spotted hyena. He writes: "It has always seemed to me as if this peculiar and most repulsive screaming should express a certain lust of this animal. At least the laughing hyena would then similarly behave in some other way so that one should assume this."¹⁶

16. Brehm 450–57, here 458: "Mir hat es immer scheinen wollen, als wenn dieses eigenthümliche und im höchsten Grade widerwärtige Geschrei eine gewisse Wollust des Thieres ausdrücken sollte; wenigstens benahm sich die lachende Hiäne dann auch in anderer Weise so, daß man dies annehmen konnte" (my translation; these lines were omitted in the English edition of this book).

In the later Middle Ages, the biblical references and allegorical readings were eliminated when the bestiaries entered the encyclopedic *Books of Nature*, due to their primarily physiological interest. Nevertheless, the issue of the biblical role of the hyena re-emerged in the seventeenth century. In his book *History of the World*, published in 1614, the English writer and explorer Sir Walther Raleigh wonders whether Noah took a pair of hyenas into his ark. God had told Noah to choose a pair of each species of animals: "And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive" (Gen. 6.19–20). Nevertheless, space was limited: "The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits" (Gen. 6.15). Saint Augustine writes in *The City of God* that the ark was of sufficient size since animals which are not part of the regular cycle of reproduction need not be included. Augustine distinguishes between two kinds of non-reproductive animals: those generated by decaying matter such as flies, and those that are the infertile offspring of different species such as horse and ass. He writes,

Then, as to those animals which have sex, but without ability to propagate their kind, like mules and she-mules, it is probable that they were not in the ark, but that it was counted sufficient to preserve their parents, to wit, the horse and the ass; and this applies to all hybrids (Augustine 468 [15.27]).

Raleigh agrees with Augustine. In a lengthy paragraph of his book,

he argues that the ark was “of sufficient capacite” indeed. Regarding the animals of “mixt natures,” he comments:

But it is manifest, and vndoubtedly true, that many of the Species, which now seeme differing and of seuerall kindes, were not then *in rerum natura*. For those beasts which are of mixt natures, either they were not in that age, or else it was not needful to præserue them; seeing they might bee generated againe by others, as the Mules, the Hyæna’s, and the like: the one begotten by Asses and Mares, the other by Foxes and Wolues (Raleigh, 94–95 [1.9]; see Glickman 521).

Raleigh claims that the hyenas were dispensable since they could easily be reproduced by interbreeding wolves with foxes. According to Augustine and Raleigh, the ark can be seen as an allegory of heteronormativity since it housed only those animals in the boat that are reproductive. The hyena, however, allegedly eludes the reproductive circle and is therefore denied a place in the ark of heteronormativity.

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