The Picture of Nature in Seventeenth-Century English Aesop’s Fables

“Who painted the leon, tel me who?”¹

1.

Critical attention to Aesop’s fables in early modern England has usually focused on the political uses of the tales. Most of the stories in the Aesopic collection are about inequitable power relationships, usually prey and predator or slave and master, and they have always served as a means to explore power relations and put forth partisan positions and arguments. Annabel Patterson, Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, and Mark Loveridge have shown that the printed fables (and the life of Aesop, the hunchbacked African slave, that accompanied most editions of the tales) performed these functions during the early modern period, from the end of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries.² The political edge of the fables is particularly pronounced in the late seventeenth-century Aesops, which were published within a period of political conflict for an audience with an appetite for political analysis, allegory, and opinion. Both of the men responsible for the late seventeenth century Aesops (John Ogilby and Francis Barlow) were involved with contemporary politics, even if their commitments were as much shaped by professional and commercial opportunities as they were by principle or ideology: Ogilby was a royalist polemicist, and Barlow published a set of prints supporting the Whig cause during the Popish Plot and its aftermath. While it is probably true, as is often said, that the fables have not received critical attention equal to their level of popularity and ideological importance in early modern culture, the quality and thoroughness of existing studies offer an excellent grounding in the cultural importance and impact of the verbal texts of Aesop’s fables in early modern England.

I emphasize verbal texts, because these critics pay virtually no attention to Aesopic illustration. As I will discuss below, only some Aesops were illustrated – but the tradition of English and continental Aesopic illustration is nonetheless important, and both Ogilby’s and Barlow’s Aesops, certainly the most significant English Aesops of the early modern period, are generously illustrated. The unspoken presumption in the criticism seems to be that the pictures have little to say that is not already said in words: that they are, that is, illustrations in the sense
that they are pictorial elucidations or embellishments to texts whose primary dimension is verbal. This presumption seems counter-intuitive, given the prominence, expense, and success of the illustrations in many Aesops: even the most superficial evidence suggests that contemporary audiences valued the illustrations, and raises the possibility that they saw in the images things that weren’t available in the verbal texts. I will argue in this essay that the illustrations do indeed deserve analysis as a distinct form of representation, and that they certainly offered meanings that were independent of the words they accompany. I will also argue that the realm of knowledge to which these meanings belong is quite distinct from that which the verbal meanings do: that is, while the verbal texts express political values and opinions, as is traditional to the fable genre, the illustrations are not about politics in a partisan, ideological, or theoretical sense. Instead, the illustrations are primarily concerned with defining and depicting animals, especially animals in nature – topics that we understand, with the aid of hindsight, as political, but that were not directly part of the debates over the structure of political institutions, the qualities of political subjectivity, or the contours and breadth of religious tolerance, with which the verbal texts of the fables engaged.

If it seems odd to say that the illustrations to seventeenth-century Aesops are not about politics even though the texts are, it is even more odd to say that the verbal fables – the majority of which feature animal characters – are not about animals, even if the illustrations are. But Erika Fudge, whose work on the representation of animals in early modern culture is widely respected, argues just that: “the real animal,” says Fudge, “is clearly absent from Aesopic works.” Fudge’s reasoning is sound: the animal characters in the verbal fables are types of human, which is why they can talk, often walk upright, and have relations with each other that are more social than natural. In consequence, the animals in the verbal texts of Aesop are ontologically empty as animals: the more they make sense as human beings, the less they make sense as animals. But in the few critical assessments of the illustrations, the opposite is held to be true: that is, the illustrations are thought to convey more richly, and more generously, an understanding of animals as animals, rather than as masks for human beings, than do the texts. For example, Martin Kemp, whose recent book The Human Animal in Western Art and Science surveys some of the same territory as Fudge’s work, but who focuses on visual rather than verbal evidence, argues the opposite case to Fudge’s about seventeenth-century English Aesops. He writes that Aesopic illustrations had the potential to convey the “outer and inner dimensions” of animals
better than works in other media and genres, and that they challenged the Cartesian division between animals (as brutes without reason or sentiment) and humans (who are defined by their thinking and feeling capacities).

Neither and both of these critics are right: in the early modern *Aesop*, the animal is conspicuously both absent and present. It depends where we look: Kemp, an art historian, is focused on the images, while Fudge, a literary and cultural critic, draws her evidence from the words. In early modern illustrated *Aesop*, the two forms of evidence say quite different things about animals. In the verbal texts, the animal actors function as humans that lack that which constitutes the human: they are missing human moral capacity, human reason, and human social and political intelligence and experience. The tales reveal what the animals lack as humans, and thereby frame for the human reader the superior capacities humanity, as a class of being, possesses. Generically the animals in the tales are allegorical figures, which means that we can’t believe them to be real (not real lions, or foxes, or crows, that is). To do so would be to misconstrue the way that they signify, and disturb the dynamic by which they are to be read: allegorical figures have to be read beyond what they seem to be to what they are not (e.g., the lion king of the jungle cannot be read as the lion king of the jungle, which in any literal, “factual” way wouldn’t make sense; the figure signals something, and what that something might be is first and foremost constrained by the fact that it cannot be that which it appears to be). So Fudge is quite right: there are no real animals in *Aesop*, and the verbal texts are about almost everything that it was presumed that humans are that animals aren’t. In the visual texts, though, as Kemp suggests, animals do make an appearance. Whether or not these are real animals in the sense that Fudge means – or indeed, that the Wife of Bath means when she asks, with reference to one of the Aesopic fables, who painted the lion – that is, animals as they know themselves – the illustrations to Ogilby and Barlow’s *Aesop* do represent animals as animals, rather than as stand-ins for humans.

As I will discuss at greater length in the following pages, the genres the illustrations draw upon – natural history illustration and landscape composition – treat animals as components within a world named nature. The Aesopic illustrations with which this paper is concerned borrow the conventions of the representation of the natural from those genres, and propose a non-allegorical and empirical mode of reading for their viewers. The texts lead us to ask “what does that animal stand for? What does this animal lack that I have? How can I do better than
what that animal character does? What can I learn from this creature’s mistakes?” But the pictures suggest that we should ask instead “what does that animal feel like to touch? What is that animal doing? Where does that animal live? How big is that animal? Could that animal hurt me? How could I use that animal?” The texts’ questions lead to bigger questions about moral conduct and political justice in human society, while the illustrations’ questions lead to bigger questions about the state of nature, and man’s relation to it. The illustrations to late seventeenth-century Aesop’s therefore orient their viewers towards what are emerging as the most important epistemological questions of the modern era: what is nature to man, and man to nature? And, is a non-allegorical relationship with nature possible? In the real world outside of these works, the possibility of a non-allegorical relationship with nature has already been subsumed by the anti-allegorical relations established between nature and capital in mercantile imperialism, and between nature and property in political theory: capital and property do not have to regard nature as the sign of anything in order to do what they have to do. The illustrations in seventeenth-century Aesop’s therefore can be seen as offering us a strangely dilated moment in which it might have been possible to imagine a nature that afforded us no surplus in economic, ontological, or even theological terms. That this moment passed us by before it even happened is only one of the many deep ironies of the preposterous structure of our enlightenment epistemology: we never know in time, in more ways than one. Nevertheless, we can use hindsight to remember a past that we didn’t have, one sliver of which is revealed in the pictures with which this essay is concerned.

2.

It may surprise readers that early modern Aesop’s, especially those used by children, were not normally illustrated. Of the more than one hundred publications of the fables between the advent of printing in England and 1700, only a handful were illustrated: very early editions published in England did have illustrations, but after 1500 there were none until 1639, when two new editions were published. One was Henry Peacham’s, and no copy of it survives; it is likely that it was illustrated, probably with emblematic woodcuts similar to the other editions of this and earlier years and to Peacham’s other work. The other was William Barret’s translation and versification of the fables, which included 113 woodcuts Edward Hodnett accurately calls “comically inept small copyings, without art or invention.” For the most part, then, early
modern *Aesops* did not have pictures. The collections of fables published by Ogilby (first in 1651) and Barlow (first in 1666) – expensive folios directed at adult audiences, generously illustrated with high-quality etchings designed by distinguished artists and executed by some of the best engravers working in England at the time – were very different kinds of books than the many versions printed before them, and their illustrations were an important part of their appeal and interest.

John Ogilby’s 1651 edition of *The fables of Aesop paraphras'd in verse, and adorn'd with sculpture* is prefaced with a verse that states the importance of the illustrations in the volume:

> Examples are best Precepts; And a Tale  
> Adorn’d with Sculpture better may prevaile  
> To make Men lesser Beasts, than all the store  
> Of tedious volumes, vext the world before.7

The “sculpture[s]” in Ogilby’s *Aesop* were full-page etchings by Francis Clein (or Cleyn), a German artist who settled in England in 1623. Clein was an accomplished artist who fulfilled commissions in virtually every medium and for most conceivable functions during his career, which ended with his death in 1658. In 1665, Ogilby produced a folio edition of this work; the larger format required larger plates, and Ogilby employed Wenceslaus Hollar to “transmute Cleyn's leaden images into golden ones” (Hodnett, *Barlow* 143). Hollar re-did 57 of 80 plates, and the rest were copied from Clein by Dirk Stoop. In 1668, Ogilby followed up on the success of this volume with *Aesopics: or, A second collection of fables, paraphas'd in verse, adorn'd with sculpture* which included 50 new fables and 38 new illustrations, half by Hollar, and most of the other half by Francis Barlow. The first volume was published again in 1668, and both volumes were re-issued in 1673 and 1675.

All the illustrations in Ogilby's *Aesops* were derived from *De warachtighe fabulen der dieren* (Bruges, 1567) by Marcus Gheeraerts the elder. Gheeraerts was a Flemish painter and printmaker who lived in London from 1568 until his death, in or after 1586. Gheeraerts’ Aesopic illustrations are distinguished from their predecessors by their much higher levels of realism in the depiction of the creatures, and of naturalism in the representation of the animals’ relationships to their environment and to each other.8 The realism of Gheeraerts’ animals was influenced by zoological texts produced in the sixteenth century, which were copiously illustrated with images “cum εικονibus ad viuam ipsorum effigiem.”9 For mammals (which
feature in *Aesop* more than other animals, with birds as a close second) the standard source for an artist such as Gheeraerts was the works of Conrad Gesner, whose *Historiae Animalium Liber I* was devoted to four-footed, live-birthed, animals. The illustrations in Gesner’s work were widely disseminated in many redactions published by Gesner, in dozens of works by other naturalists, and in prints that provided templates for the decorative arts, and which were used to design embroidery patterns, tapestry-work, and paintings (on walls, ceilings, and furniture). The illustrations in early modern natural histories were key to the quality and tenor of the knowledge about nature that these works advanced. As Brian Ogilvie shows in his book *The Science of Describing*, sixteenth century naturalists developed “new habits of observation and a new vocabulary to express them,” a “*habitus*” that defined the practice of naturalists and the standards by which their performance would be judged. Pictures were essential to the construction of this habitus: they were both the consequence of trained observation, and evidence of the ethos and quality of the naturalist. Leonhart Fuchs, the German botanist, argued that “nature was fashioned in such a way that everything may be grasped by us in a picture,” but crafting these pictures required that naturalists and artists establish conventions of representation that supported their scientific projects and enhanced the quality and breadth of natural historical discourse. In sixteenth century zoological illustrations, these conventions include emphasis on *differentiae*, or salient characteristics that distinguish one animal from another (the stripes of the tiger and the spots of the leopard, for example); a corresponding lack of emphasis on redundant or common features; elimination of background or environmental information, and the depiction of individual specimens in isolation, rather than with others of its kind, or animals of other types. Gheeraerts drew on some of these conventions to heighten the realism of his creatures for the audience of his *Aesop*. The salient *differentiae* are highlighted: the fur, features, and distinctive physiognomical structures are represented in great detail. Likewise, redundant features are downplayed; mammals have four legs, for instance, and to make note of all four in illustration would be to belabour an obvious point. Because Gheeraerts’ animals are also presented within naturalistic landscapes, as I will discuss in the next few paragraphs, he does not isolate the creatures, and he does include background. But by asserting the realistic qualities of the animals that he portrays, Gheeraerts drew the illustrations away from the allegorical tradition to which the texts belong and towards the quite different register of natural history. In construing his viewers as “observers” of nature, able to appreciate the qualities of illustration generated by the
habitus of the naturalist, Gheeraerts framed his readership as what Barlow would later call “the more Intelligible and Scientifick part of Mankind.”

In depicting the scenes and settings for the fabular animals, and their interactions with other animals, Gheeraerts drew on his aptitude in landscape art. Objects in the distance are lighter, smaller, and less detailed; the distribution of light is natural; the composition appears clipped from nature, rather than shaped by art. Like precepts of zoological illustration, theories of the depiction of landscape (which could include animals and humans) were also non-allegorical: the representation of nature in landscape, like the representation of animals in natural history, was explicitly related to scientific and empirical theories of the appearance of phenomena, their observation by human beings, and the best ways to communicate those observations. Although landscape painting was not practiced in England in the sixteenth century and most of the seventeenth, continental examples circulated, and the theory was in place. For example, Henry Peacham’s *Art of Dravving* (1606) offers a description of how landscape painting was conceived in relation to theories of natural phenomena and of optical perception:

> If you laie your Landskip in coloures, the farther you goe, the more you must lighten it with a thinne and aiery blew, to make it seem farre off, beginning it first with a darke greene, so druing it by degrees into a blew…your eie may easily been deceived in remote thinges, that is when the bodies appeare to your sighte farre bigger then indeede they are, by the corruption (as wee saie) of the Medium: as for example, the Sunne and Moone at their rising or Setting, you see, seeme farre bigger then when they are mounted ouer our heades in the Zenith: the reason is the thicknesse or corruption, as I sayd, of the ayre or Medium.

As theorized by Peacham, and as practiced by Gheeraerts, landscape art has much in common with representation in natural history: it strives to produce an image of the world from the point-of-view of science, and to cast its viewers as observers of nature.

Gheeraerts’ illustrations of Aesop’s fables reflected changes in the conception and practices of art that were taken up in northern European painting, drawing, and designs for print in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What makes them remarkable in the context of the argument of this essay is the difference they establish between text and image in the fable genre: because they refer to different concepts and structures of representation than the texts do, Gheeraerts’ illustrations define the potential for an increasing divide between the visual and the
verbal aspects of the tales. If the verbal were to be refreshed and renewed, made ready for a new or even emergent market, then it would have to reflect the topics and practices of allegory and satire, especially political ones. If the visual were to be similarly refreshed and renewed, particularly for the kind of audience Barlow defines in his dedicatory epistle, it would have to reflect the topics, practices, and viewpoints of natural history and landscape painting, both of which stage representation in empirical and non-allegorical terms. The precedent established by Gheeraerts would be developed further by Barlow in the most significant illustrated *Aesops* of the early modern period.

Barlow’s 1666 *Aesop, AEsop's Fables with his life*, is a polyglot edition that includes French and Latin prose, English verse, and 112 etched illustrations, under which the English text is inscribed;¹⁸ in 1687 an enlarged edition appeared, adding 31 plates to the life of Aesop.¹⁹ Barlow was a well-known artist specializing in nature scenes who called himself “a Well-wisher to the Art of Painting” in his letter to the reader in the first edition; John Evelyn called him the “famous Paynter of fowle Beastes & Birds.”²⁰ He designed sets of natural history plates that continued to be reprinted into the eighteenth century “and were an important source for artists and craftsmen of succeeding generations.”²¹ Barlow based about half of his Aesopic etchings on Gheeraerts’ compositions, and another quarter on the full range of sources available to him, including other Aesops and emblem books;²² the last quarter was original designs. But all of Barlow’s illustrations, whatever their sources, share the qualities established by Gheeraerts for Aesopic illustration: the animals are realistic, in the terms established by the conventions of zoological images, and the scenes are naturalistic, in the very similar terms developed from the conventions of landscape painting. Hodnett remarks that Barlow is like a “scientist” whose animal studies reflect the observation of “all of the precise factual data that are the starting points of scientific observation.”²³ Barlow's landscapes conform to the conventions described by Peacham and the compositional practices exemplified in the work of seventeenth-century northern European landscape painters. According to Hodnett, “Barlow followed Gheeraerts, and perhaps outdid him;”²⁴ in outdoing his predecessor, and in aiming for an audience committed to the advancement of “ingenious Arts and Sciences,”²⁵ Barlow concentrated on the features that drew the illustrations of Aesop’s fables further from the allegorical mode of the words the pictures accompanied, and closer to the values of representation espoused by early modern naturalists and landscape painters.
I would like to turn now to one of Barlow’s fables, entitled “The Hunted Beaver,” which offers a rich text for the development of our understanding of how the images in seventeenth-century *Aesops* could offer different modes for reading, and different meanings to be read, than the verbal texts they accompany. Although not common in English *Aesops*, the beaver’s tale does appear in several continental collections; the story is also traditional to medieval bestiaries, to emblem suites, and to most of the classical sources that these genres have in common. The emblem story and the fable are the same as the tale of the beaver in bestiaries: the beaver, hunted for its “castoreum,” which was used as medicine, bites off its testicles (both male and females were thought to have testicles) and throws them aside (or at an oncoming hunter), knowing that it will then not be valuable to hunt; the next time the hunter comes for it, it shows that it lacks that which makes it valuable, and the hunter turns away. In the *Aberdeen bestiary* (c. 1200), the (translated) moral of the story is “Thus every man who heeds God’s commandment and wishes to live chastely should cut off all his vices and shameless acts, and cast them from him into the face of the devil. Then the devil, seeing that the man has nothing belonging to him, retires in disorder. That man, however, lives in God and is not taken by the devil.” The moral of the beaver emblem in the Augsburg collection of 1531 is “From this creature’s example you will learn not to spare material things, and to give money to the enemy to buy your life.” The fabular story of the beaver was specifically rejected in early modern natural history; Gesner, for example, counters the story of the self-castrating beaver on the basis of what is presented as empirical evidence from dissection combined with the authority of the ancients. Edward Topsell translated the passage in his 1607 publication, *Foure-footed beastes* as follows:

> But this is most false [i.e., that the beaver bites off its own testicles]…first, because their stones are verie small, and so placed in their bodie as are a Boares, and therefore impossible for them to touch or come by them: Secondly, they cleaue so fast vnto their back, that they cannot be taken awaie but the beast must of necessitie loose his life; and therefore ridiculous is their relation, who likewise affirme, that when it is hunted, hauing formerlie bitten off his stones, that he standeth vpright and sheweth the hunters that he hath none for them, and therefore his death cannot profit them, by meanes whereof they are auerted, and seeke for another.

Earlier in his account, Gesner rejects the etymology of the creature’s name that is also traditional to the bestiary, fable, and emblem versions of the beaver: in Topsell’s translation, “the reason
why the Graecians call it Castor, is not as the Latines haue supposed, because it biteth off his owne stones…but of castrando, bicause for the stones therof it is hunted and killed.”  

By the time that Barlow crafted his beaver illustration (more than a hundred years after Gesner’s account, and more than fifty years after Topsell’s translation was published) the separation between the allegorical method of the fables and the empirical method of science was wider and deeper than it had ever been before. Knowledge of the beaver, for example, as an animal in nature, rather than as an allegorical figure, was further developed in the seventeenth century, as scientists obtained specimens from North America and anatomized them. In Claude Perrault's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux*, the account of the dissection of a beaver “taken in Canada” includes a report of the anatomist’s search for the source of the castoreum: “To inform us of the Truth, we stript our Beaver of its skin.” They found the organs deep in the animal’s body, proving again, as Gesner and Topsell stated, that the myth of the beaver was exactly that – a myth.

Nevertheless, in Barlow’s 1666 publication of “The Hunted Beaver,” the poem by Thomas Philipott retells the traditional fable, and states the moral:

Beavers by Eager Hunters oft persu'd
Cause nature with Castorium had Indu'd
Their pregnant Testacles, they by instinct
Knowing to what cause their persuit is linckt
Byte of the Bagg which does the Drug comprize
And baile their Lives by that rich Sacrifice.

*Thus we're oft safe by temporary Loss,*
*To Keepe his gold [who] would not part with Dross* (39).

In the 1687 version, Aphra Behn writes:

The hunted Beaver knowing what sweet Prise,
Would make him to the dogs a sacrifice,
Bites of the prey, and ends the eager strife,
And with the loss of treasure bails his life.
Morall: Who would not part with momentary Toys,
To purchas to themselves eternall joys (39).

Both poets stick to the traditional outlines of the story; while Philipott takes the meaning rather
literally in his conclusion, and Behn nudges the moral towards a theological truism, both stay within the bounds set by the story of the hunted beaver, in fable, emblem, and bestiary. In re-iterating the story of the self-castrating beaver, Philipott and Behn presume that the fables will be read allegorically, and that the animal surface will be broached as the reader discovers the human depths to the tale. (When the skins of real animals are “stript,” in contrast, what is revealed is the inside of the animal, as Perrault so vividly tells us.) As Fudge maintains, then, the real animal is absent from the story of the beaver in the seventeenth-century version of “The Hunted Beaver,” and its effectiveness as a piece of written work depends on the ability and willingness of the reader to look beyond the timeless and simple animal story to the contemporary and complex political allegory contained therein.

Unlike Philipott and Behn’s stories, Barlow’s illustration to “The Hunted Beaver” is distinctive and original (Figure One).35 In most illustrations of the beaver in bestiaries, emblem books, and fable collections before Barlow’s, the beaver is depicted as a creature about the stature of a medium-sized dog with a long or mid-length snout – it is indistinguishable, in fact, from other mid-sized mammals, such as the dog and the fox. In some of the pictures the beaver has a long bushy tail, much like a fox’s, but in most it appears to have a flat tail. Although this tail is often vaguely drawn, it sometimes appears textured as if scaled or hatched. The webbed hind feet are never illustrated. The beaver is rarely depicted as near water, and never in water. Even those published after the mid-point of the sixteenth century do not seem to absorb the key features displayed in natural historical illustrations, and none of the examples published after 1567 show the influence of Gheeraerts’ combination of scientific realism and painterly naturalism. In contrast, Barlow’s illustration highlights the salient features of the beaver, as they are emphasized in both the verbal and visual representations in natural histories (see Figure Two for one of Gesner’s many reproductions of the illustration of the beaver first published in his Historiae Animalium I (1551)). These include the tail, the shape of the body, the form of the skull or head, and the large incisors.36 In Barlow’s illustration the tails of the two beavers are ovoid, flat, and textured with a brick-like pattern, much as is Gesner’s; moreover, Barlow has managed to isolate this feature in the representation of the beaver on the left, whose body has disappeared under the water. Barlow’s beavers are not shaped like dogs, but have shorter legs and longer trunks and resemble more closely the badger or the otter, both of which beavers are compared to in natural histories. Barlow is the first Aesopic illustrator to depict the short snout of
the beaver, noted as a distinguishing characteristic by naturalists. The beaver's large front teeth are clearly visible in Barlow's etching and, although the animal might plausibly be turning to his own testicles, the teeth-baring seems as much toward the dogs as it is toward itself.

In Barlow’s illustration to “The Hunted Beaver,” the illusion of depth in the modeling of the tree and of the background landscape reflect the techniques used in landscape painting and prints of the period, as Peacham summarizes, in which objects in the distance are significantly smaller and lighter than those in the foreground. Barlow's beaver is also depicted as a creature set within an environment which is composed of a set of interacting, material, parts, reflecting both the verbal descriptions common to the works of naturalists, and the principles of composition in landscape and “nature” painting such as that for which Barlow was famed. The beavers in “The Hunted Beaver” are depicted in a marsh or swamp (the animal's real habitat, as described by naturalists), distinguished by cattails at the edges, and marsh birds (such as the heron) flying above. The second beaver is slipping in to the water, which is a characteristic behaviour of this animal in its habitat. The teeth-baring beaver is interacting with dogs in a fashion that might resemble to us a cat more than a beaver in nature, but it is interacting nonetheless. Barlow's placement of the hunter so that he is only just entering the frame is a nice touch that enlarges on the animal drama, and enhances the sense that the composition is cut from nature, rather than crafted by the artist.

Barlow's illustration for “The Hunted Beaver” draws on a range of pictorial genres common to empirical disciplines. He drew on scientific accounts (both visual and verbal) to emphasize the salient features and characteristic behaviours of the animal, and thereby constituted his beaver as a distinct creature in nature, and the viewer as an observer interested in, and capable of, a scientific or empirical view of animals and of nature. He put the beaver within a landscape that belongs to it, and which was also composed according to scientific precepts of the appearance of things, and the scientific understanding of optics and human vision. This illustration, and Barlow's other designs for his Aesops, is hardly related, in either form or substance, to the story of the beaver as it is told in the traditional tale, and repeated in the English, French, and Latin texts included in his publications. In inviting a different mode of reading than the allegorical method appropriate to the story, Barlow's illustration also puts forward a different world to be read: that of nature, rather than culture, of animals, rather than humans, and of an environment composed of interactive, organic parts, rather than a structure of
a society. As one of the earliest forms of the visual representation of nature from an empirical standpoint to be circulated in England, Barlow's illustrations to Aesop's fables deserve greater attention both in terms of their importance to literary history, and for the form they give to what would increasingly become a philosophical, ideological preoccupation: the nature of nature itself.

But the fable of “The Hunted Beaver” – visually and verbally – also reminds us of the material context in which the problem of nature was raised in the latter part of the seventeenth century: that is, it reminds us of the importance of the beaver to the expanding mercantile economy. That beaver is not a creature in nature as it was known by contemporary Europeans: by the late middle ages *castor fiber*, or the European beaver, was too rare to warrant hunting, and by the seventeenth century, ‘beaver’ referred to *castor canadiensis*, or the North American beaver. Although there are records of the sale of Scottish beaver skins as late as 1350, by that time they were so rare that the pelt cost up to a hundred and twenty times as much as a lambskin (Outwater 5), and by the sixteenth century “only the remote reaches of Siberia and Scandinavia had ponds still abundant in beavers” (Outwater 6). In the sixteenth century Europeans began to trade for North American beaver pelts with native peoples. In the early seventeenth century beaver skins were imported into England by French, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and colonial English traders, supporting the rising fashion of beaver hats. In 1638 Charles I incorporated the guild of "bever-makers" and prohibited the importation of hats, in order to support the domestic felting industry. The trade occasioned year-round habitation in North America, military and mercantile relationships with aboriginal peoples, and extensive travel into territory previously unknown to Europeans. It also profoundly shaped relations between the European nations in the period, and would do so well into the nineteenth century, when the North American beaver also became scarce. It is a matter of fact, not exaggeration or hypothesis, that the beaver (or the beaver pelt) was essential to the construction of the modern western world.

In the context of the early modern European trade in beaver pelts, the allegorical and fabular story of the self-castrating beaver in the oft-repeated tales, and the empirical and natural image of the beaver in Barlow’s illustration may seem equally quaint, even playful and whimsical. The fact of the trade in beaver pelts points to the ironic belatedness of the emergent questions, what is nature to man, and what is man to nature: the volume of trade, the gap between the resource and the commodity, and the foreignness and distance of the animal's origin.
all mean that those questions have been passed by before they could even be posed. The illustration to Perrault’s account of the dissection of the beaver at the Académie des sciences (Figure Three) may stand as a picture of the beaver within the mercantile economy. The beaver in the lower half of the picture is copied from Gesner’s; like many illustrations in many natural histories, it is not original or a “likeness from life,” but duplicates, according to the needs and talents of the copyist, an oft-published image that first appeared in print in 1551. It repeats the representation of salient features that are emphasized in Gesner’s illustration, but it also repeats an image that was likely recognized by the reader of Perrault's work: the reader is not constructed as an “observer” who occupies the habitus of the naturalist, but as an initiated member of an educated and experienced circle who recognizes the image and therefore securely orients himself to the generic and pictorial conventions of the work. The landscape Perrault’s beaver sits in is not at all authentic to the beaver; the animal seems to be sitting in a field, on high ground, and with no source of water nearby, none of which correspond to the beaver's habitat. The lower half of the illustration is not natural in the sense that Barlow’s are, but artificial: like a theatrical backdrop, the landscape suggests that there is space there, and that it is exterior, but that the details are not important enough to get right. The “real” beaver in Perrault’s engraving is manifest in the severed parts displayed on the trompe l’oeil sheet of paper above the figure of the beaver: the real beaver is a dead beaver, known by its anatomized parts. We now have three beavers in play: on one side we have the apocryphal emblem of self-mutilation and denial, and on the other we have the inscribed fragments of the salient features of the dissected commodity; in between, we have Barlow’s illustration of the beaver in nature. In this context we might say that Barlow’s images tried to insert themselves between the baroque and self-absorbed hermeneutics of allegory, and the raw, banal, reality of death and commodification; they imagined a world in which the observation and representation of the world outside ourselves without anthropocentric prejudice, proprietary interest, and dissectional motive was conceivable. They had no chance, of course: but that such a world was and is impossible does not entirely obviate the power of images such as Barlow’s to affect us, and to make us want what our own wants ensure that we cannot have. Barlow’s Aesopic illustrations are witness to a certain fantasy about the nature of nature itself, one that we will see again in Romantic poetry, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of the sublime, and in twentieth-century ecocriticism and associated literature. In this sense the ontogeny of Barlow’s illustrations contributes to our
understanding of a conception of nature that is as persistent in modern industrial society as it is fantastical.

3.

To return to the epigraph of this essay: in the “Prologue” to her tale, Chaucer's Wife of Bath epitomizes her argument that history would be different “if wommen hadden writen stories” (699) with the question, “Who painted the leon, tel me who?” (698). The Wife refers here to one of Aesop's fables, in which a lion and a man come upon a painting (or sculpture) of a lion being killed (or having been killed) by a man. The man points to the image, saying that it shows that man dominates even the most powerful and noble of the beasts. The lion responds that the picture or sculpture would be different if a lion had made it. In Caxton's 1484 translation, the man is fatally deceived by the painting, which shows Samson defeating a lion. The lion says “yf the lyon could make pyctour good and trewe/hid had be herin paynted/how the lyon had had victorye of the man” (Fable xv, Lenaghan 132) and then fights the man and casts him in to a pit, saying “now knowest thow alle the trouthe/which of vs bothe is stronger” (133). In Ogilby's 1651 Aesop, the story is set during a “Cessation” of hostilities between men and animals, when bears call at skinners' shops without fear, and panthers “behold themselves on stately Pedestals.” The man (a forester in this and other seventeenth-century versions) and the lion meet, and the lion declares they will settle their differences verbally: “Let us dispute and it [our strength] by Logick trie.” When the forester shows the lion a sculpture in which a lion's head is laid upon the bosom of the man who has slain it, the lion says “This is no sufficient proof.”

Could we, as well as you, our stories cut,

We might, and justly, put

Your lying heads beneath

Our conquering foot,

From partiall Pens, all truth hath been for ever shut. (Fable L, Book 2, p. 23).

Aphra Behn's verse for the story of “The Forrester and the Lion” (Barlow, 1687) offers a conventional version of the story, but the moral differs from other English Aesop:s:20

The Image of a man the Lyon spy'd,

Conquering the Royall Best, when he reply'd,
Coud we but paint youd find less victorys won
O're us by men than we o're feeble man.
Morall: So Bullys boast when they pretend to've done
Acts which they never durst adventur on (211).

In this interpretation of the story, the Lion is a “bully” who boasts what might happen if he were able to do something he cannot. Behn's version puts the Lion back in his place, and asserts the dominion of man over animals and the importance of the power of representation to that relationship. As Elliott Visconsi argues, Behn associates animals with barbarism, and barbarism with republican or Whiggish forces in politics: the rule of law and order requires that the Lion be reproved, and that his access to means of representation be restricted. In Behn’s version of the story, nature is doubly figured as both the sign the allegorical Lion presents, and the underlying truth to which it refers: on both levels, nature is mastered by culture in unambiguous terms. Because the story itself concerns artistic representation, we might also say that the potential for an image of nature in something other than anthropocentric terms is overwritten by the moral to the tale.

But Barlow's illustration to “The Forrester and the Lion” (Figure Four) once again offers a different story. In it the sculpture that the two creatures have seen depicts a lion, on its back, hopelessly defending itself against a man dressed in centurion's clothes, and holding a sword pointed at the lion's belly. In a powerful detail, the soldier holds a shield in which the lion's face is reflected back to the lion, so that he sees a man-made image of himself even as he dies. The power of man over beast that this image represents has rarely been more strongly figured forth. But the man and the lion who see this sculpture are depicted in the foreground of the image, much larger and more centrally positioned than the sculpture. This lion – the real lion within the fiction of the picture – has his paws upon the chest of the soldier and appears ready to go in for the kill. The positions of the man and the lion in this part of the image reverse their positions in the sculpture; the man is helpless and the lion is powerful, the man is the victim, and the lion is the would-be conqueror. In another exceptional detail, the man's hair is styled as a lion's mane; as the moment of his death approaches, what we see is his similarity to the lion, not only as a fellow animal, but as a potential victim.

Barlow's illustration to “The Forrester and the Lion” means something quite different than Behn’s verse. Barlow’s representation of the relationship between the Lion and the Forrester
espouses a more skeptical philosophy than Behn’s: in the illustration “bully” is a relative term, not a character description, and dominance is precarious. Barlow’s image reflects the questions that the Lion raises in the fable as it shows both the representation that the Lion and the Forrester saw, and the picture the Lion imagines, of the Lion defeating the man; Behn’s verse, on the other hand, rejects the questions the Lion raises. The verse forecloses the possibility that nature can be represented in something other than terms that show it conquered; the illustration pits nature against culture, with nature, at least for the moment, on top. In neither the verse nor the illustration is the “real animal,” as Fudge calls it, present: but Barlow, at least, has given credibility to what the fabular Lion claims to be true: that the question the Wife of Bath asks, “Who painted the leon, tel me who?” matters to the lion, and not just to the man.

In “What Do Pictures Want?”, W. J. T. Mitchell cites the Wife of Bath’s tale as an example of the perennial question, what do women want? “The right answer turns out to be maistrye, a complex middle-English term that equivocates between ‘mastery’ by right or consent, and the power that goes with superior strength and cunning” (35). Mitchell goes on to transfer the Wife’s definition of woman’s desire to his subject, the picture: what pictures also want is mastery, “to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture” (36). Mitchell does not make note of the Wife’s reference to the Aesopic story of the lion and the man, even though the Wife’s keen identification with the object of representation, or the “picture” of the lion, provides a neat bridge between pictures and women that would support his argument. But his description of what pictures want is an uncannily apt description of what it seems Barlow’s illustration of the “The Forester and the Lion” asks for. The doubling of the figures in the illustration destabilizes the relationship between subject and object in the field of representation, and the illusionistic play between what is natural and what is artificial confounds the division between reality and representation. This image transfixes or paralyzes precisely because it opens up the threat that the beholder will be turned into an image. It is an empty threat: as Mitchell points out, pictures are forms of the subaltern, whose demand emerges “in an intersubjective encounter compounded of signs of positive desire and traces of lack or impotence” (39); the picture cannot change places with the beholder, for the very reasons that it is a picture in the first place, and that produce its desire to not be a picture. But representation’s threats are always hollow, are they not? And that fact has never diminished the danger that it poses to the security and integrity of the viewer,
reader, or perceiver.

In general, what do Barlow’s Aesopic pictures want? Both formally and thematically “The Forester and the Lion” is about representation, about what pictures are, could be, and want to be. But most of Barlow’s images are not concerned overtly with the conditions or effects of representation; predominantly, they present apparently unmediated and unselfconscious images of nature. So what does the picture of nature want? Images of nature are made to be looked at as if they are real, or as if they complete the image of the real that exists in the imagination of the culture to which they belong – hence their appeals to scientific models of observation and to the visual vocabulary of empiricism in the late seventeenth century, for example. But as we have seen with Barlow’s image of the beaver, their presence is a form of resistance to what is, in fact, real, whether that is the delusional anthropomorphism of the self-castrating beaver tale, or the trade in beaver pelts, the dissected beaver, and the Beaver Wars. I would argue, then, that what pictures of nature such as Barlow’s want is that we pretend to believe they are true and represent what is real. Mitchell says that one form the desire of a picture can take is to ask the beholder for something it needs “to complete its work” (50). What images of nature need to complete their work is the faith of their beholders, the reciprocation of the desire to sustain the fantasy that nature itself is real. In this sense they are similar to other kinds of images (for instance, those that do not belong to empirical modes) that also implore us to believe, in order that they may be true: images of the crucified Christ, for example, perform exactly this precarious tightrope act, imploring us to believe in them, that they may indeed become true. Barlow’s illustrations to Aesop’s fables articulate our desire for nature to become true as powerfully as any other form of representation in their place and time, and in doing so they remind us of how essential the image of nature has been, and remains, to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and the meanings we make within it.

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4 Kemp focuses especially on Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s illustrations for Jean de La Fontaine’s eighteenth-century fables, but also points to Barlow’s edition, which he says is “notably effective” in expressing the “outer and inner dimensions” of animals (*The Human Animal in Western Art and Science* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago P, 2007), 129). Edward Hodnett, in his books on Barlow and on the English Aesop, repeatedly praises the naturalism of Barlow’s drawings and designs for his Aesopic illustrations (*Aesop in England: The Transmission of Motifs in Seventeenth-Century Illustrations of Aesop’s Fables* (Charlottesville, VA: Published for the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia by the University Press of Virginia, 1979) and *Francis Barlow: First Master of English Book Illustration* (London: Scolar P, 1978)).

5 Caxton's 1484 edition is decorated with 186 copies of woodcuts from a French *Aesop* (which were themselves copies from a German version (Robert Lenaghan, ed., *Caxton's Aesop* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967), 23). The illustrations to Caxton's translation were published with the text again in 1497 and in 1500, both times by Richard Pynson.

6 Hodnett, *Aesop*, 9. Barret’s work was entitled *The fables of AE sop With his vwhole life*. The illustrations to this volume were published again in 1650, 1651, and 1691 in *Aesops fables, with their moralls in prose and verse grammatically translated*.

7 *The fables of AE sop paraphras’d in verse, and adorn’d with sculpture, by John Ogilby* (London: Printed by Thomas Warren for Andrew Crook, 1651). This verse was repeated in all of Ogilby’s Aesopic works.

8 Hodnett makes numerous comments on the naturalism of Gheeraerts’ scenes and creatures (*Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder of Bruges, London, and Antwerp*. (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker and Gumbert, 1971), but the claim is self-evident when Gheeraerts’ illustrations are compared with others from the period. Gheeraerts’ *De warachtighe faulben der dieren* is available on-line at http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Renaissance/Facsimiles/DeDeneFabulen1567/index.htm.

9 “With pictures that are likenesses from life;” (Pierre Belon, *L'Histoire des etrange poissons*
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marins (Paris: Regnaud Chaudière, 1551). This is a very common statement on the title-pages of sixteenth-century natural historical texts; it was rarely true, understandably, for zoological texts.

The four volumes of Gesner’s Historiae Animalium were published by Froschauer in Zurich between 1551 and 1558.

Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The Influence of Continental Prints, 1558-1625 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1997) makes frequent reference to Gesner’s work as source for motifs in English decorative arts, and to the works of Edward Topsell, the English clergyman who translated and redacted Gesner’s *De quadrupedibus*, and copied or had copied the illustrations.


15 Barlow, “To the honourable The great Fautor and Promoter of all ingenious Sciences, in which Himself is so great a Proficient, Sir Francis Pruijan, Knight,” b’.

16 Svetlana Alpers’ classic study of Dutch landscape painting *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1989; first published by the University of Chicago P, 1983) discusses these characteristics, and also adumbrates the profound connection between natural history, mechanical science, and fine art in the early modern period; Brian Ogilvie’s recent book, *The Science of Describing* shows through its title allusion the extent to which it is indebted to, and develops, Alpers’ thesis.

17 Henry Peacham, *The art of drawvng vvith the pen, and limming in water colours more exactlie then heretofore taught and enlarged with the true manner of painting vpon glasse, the order of making your furnace, annealing, &c. Published, for the behoofe of all young gentlemen, or any els that are desirous for to become practicioners in this excellent, and most ingenius art* (London: Printed by Richard Braddock for William Iones, 1606).

18 The STC and EEBO list editions of this work in 1665 and 1666. The copy of the 1666 edition that is digitized in EEBO is a made-up copy that is mostly comprised of the 1687 version (with verses by Behn). P. Hofer (“Francis Barlow’s Aesop,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 2(1948): 288) says that all the copies dated 1665 and 1666 are from the same edition and issue; Hodnett (*Barlow*, 167) says the printing ran over the time forecast, and that the work was not on sale until 1666.

19 *AEsop's fables with his life in English, French & Latin the English by Tho. Philipott Esq.; the French and Latin by Rob. Codrington M.A.; illustrated with one hundred and twelve sculptures by Francis Barlow* (London: Printed by William Godbid for Francis Barlow, 1666); *AEsop’s
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*fables with his life in English, French and Latin newly translated; illustrated with one hundred and twelve sculpture; to this edition are likewise added, thirty one new figures representing his life, by Francis Barlow* (London: Printed by H. Hills, Jun., for Francis Barlow, 1687).


21 O’Connell.

22 Hodnett, *Barlow*, 56.

23 *Barlow*, 182-183.


25 Barlow, “To the honourable The great Fautor and Promoter of all ingenious Sciences, in which Himself is so great a Proficient, Sir Francis Pruijan, Knight,” b’.

26 Hodnett (*Aesop*) records the beaver's fable in editions published by Sebastian Brant (Basel, 1501), and in those published by Virgil Solis (Frankfurt, 1566, although this is also dated 1567 in some reference works), Christopher Plantin (Antwerp, 1565), and Bernard Salomon (Lyons, 1551). These latter three all derive from an earlier emblem published by Salomon in 1547 (81), so Brant's is the only illustration of the beaver that is unique to the fable collection within this set of examples.

27 The “Alciato at Glasgow” project (on-line) includes examples of 18 different emblem books that include the tale of the hunted beaver. The beaver is not included in George Wither's English emblem collection, but it is in Geffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes*, which was published in Leyden in 1586.

28 The beaver is one of the twenty or so animals that appears in most bestiaries. The version of its story in the Aberdeen Bestiary ([http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/)) which was written and illuminated in England around 1200, is typical (translated from the Latin): “There is an animal called the beaver, which is extremely gentle; its testicles are highly suitable for medicine. Physiologus says of it that, when it knows that a hunter is pursuing it, it bites off its testicles and throws them in the hunter's face and, taking flight, escapes. But if, once again, another hunter is in pursuit, the beaver rears up and displays its sexual organs. When the hunter sees that it lacks testicles, he leaves it alone. Thus every man who heeds God's commandment and wishes to live
chastely should cut off all his vices and shameless acts, and cast them from him into the face of the devil. Then the devil, seeing that the man has nothing belonging to him, retires in disorder. That man, however, lives in God and is not taken by the devil, who says: ‘I will pursue, I will overtake them...’ (Exodus, 15:9) The name castor comes from castrando, ‘castrate’” (Folio 11r, “Translation”).

29 Ibid.
30 “Alciato at Glasgow.”
31 Edward Topsell, *The historie of the foure-footed beastes* (London: printed for William Iaggard, 1607), 47. Topsell’s text abbreviates Gesner’s, and he imports illustrations from other of Gesner’s works, but what he does translate is faithful to Gesner.
32 Topsell, 44.
33 This was published in Paris in 1671, with a second volume in 1676; the English translation was published in 1688 as *Memoir’s for a natural history of animals containing the anatomical descriptions of several creatures dissected by the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris. Englished by Alexander Pitfeild* (London: Joseph Streater). Perrault’s account of the dissection of the beaver was previously published in his *Description anatomique d’vn cameleon, d’vn castor, d’vn dromadaire, d’vn ovrs, et d’vne gazelle* (Paris: Frederic Leonard, 1669).
34 Perrault, *Memoir’s*, 86.
35 Hodnett says that this illustration resembles Virgil Solis' version (1566), but I do not see the similarity beyond some basic compositional features. The hunter with the two dogs and the raised horn is conventional to hunting scenes in emblem and fable collections; see, for instance, Gheeraerts’ illustration to the fable of the hunted stag (p. 122) and Salomon’s emblem, “Le veneur et le castor” (1547).
36 These features are still considered the *differentiae* of the beaver; for instance, the on-line *Visual Dictionary* has photos of the tail, the head, and the feet of the beaver, in addition to a photo of the whole animal, and a photo of a beaver dam.
37 In Topsell’s version of Gesner’s account of the beaver, it is described in its environment, “both in the water and on the land” (45), building dams and shelters (“When they haue thus brought their wood togither, then dig they a hole or ditch in the banke side, where they vnderset the earth to beare it vp from falling, with the aforesaide timber: and so they proceed, making two or three
roomes like seuerall chambers, one aboue another, to the entent that if the water rise they may
go further, and if it fall they may discend vnto it” (46), eating its favourite foods (47), and
interacting with other animals within its habitat (such as the otter, who “the Beuer holdeth...in
subiection” (45)). Curiously, Gesner and Topsell repeat one of Aristotle’s fantasies about
beavers, which is that the elder beavers are used as timber sledges by younger ones, and
therefore have hairless backs. Certainly mythical and apocryphal elements mingled with
observation-based information in sixteenth-century naturalism, especially with regard to exotic
creatures such as the beaver. The role of mythological and “wondrous” creatures in early modern
naturalism has been explored most richly by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park in Wonders
38 In their survey of landscape painting in England, Henry V. S. Ogden and Margaret Ogden
write, “aside from the illustrations in the Aesop editions, landscape does not occupy a prominent
place in the illustrations to literary texts” (English Taste in Landscape in the Seventeenth Century
39 A piece of doggerel verse from 1690 (by one P. D.) called "The antiquity and honours of the
skinner and furrier crafts" expresses the importance of skinners and furriers to the “Common
Good” – and, incidentally, to printing and bookmaking:

Printers assisted by the Pellet, make
Their Ink expressive, and the Type to speak.
You to the Joyner, give cementing Glue,
Y’assist the Painter, and Book-Binder too,
The Cordiner, and Saidler deal with you.
So from your Art, vast Quantities arise,
Of Skins for transport, Wool for Factories,
And thus it’s evidently understood,
How greatly you advance the Common Good,
And what, a mighty Branch of Revenew,
Doth to the Prince from Skinners Craft Acrew.
Sure all Incroachmnets on you to prevent,
Were greatest Wisdom in a Government.
The moral is the same as the one published with Phillipot's verse in the 1666 version, and it reflects the Latin and French versions of the story in that edition. It is not the same as earlier versions of the moral for this tale. But it should be noted that there is a steady movement away from the conclusion of the story as told in Caxton's version (in which the lion kills the man) towards this kind of moral, in which the lion is disciplined for his effrontery.

In her article “John Locke, Natural Law and Colonialism,” Barbara Arniel shows the debt of late seventeenth-century political theory to Hugo Grotius’ concept of natural law, which holds, among other things, that those who violate natural law can be punished, and war can be waged against “men who are like beasts” (584). As Visconsi shows, Behn’s articulation of these concepts in her works that are set in the Americas, *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter*, is quite clear.