

Lear's Soiled Horse

DAVID EVERETT BLYTHE

IN HIS FOURTH-ACT EXCHANGE with Gloucester, Lear rails against libido:

Die for adultery? No,
The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.

DAVID EVERETT BLYTHE has published on Shakespeare and Ruskin and has an essay, "A Stone of Ruskin's Venice," forthcoming in *John Ruskin: Twelve New Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (Routledge & Kegan Paul).

Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.
To't, luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers.
Behold yond simp'ring dame,
Whose face between her forks presages snow,
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure's name.
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.
(IV. vi. 111-22)¹

In rising from lesser to greater creatures, these bestial images also move from a natural promiscuity in the wren and fly to the artificial provocation of the dame and "soiled horse."

The true force of the last image—"soiled horse"—has been missed by modern editors. Hardin Craig, for instance, interprets the phrase as meaning "turned out to grass," while Alfred Harbage glosses it "pastured."

The agricultural term "soiling" actually refers to the practice of keeping horses or cattle confined and fed primarily with fresh pasture cuttings. "Soiled" derives from the Latin *satullare*, "to satisfy, satiate," and is related to *satullus*, "filled with food," and to *saturare*, "to fill, glut, cloy, satiate." In the *Georgics* Virgil recommends the strengthening of bulls or stallions by just such an enclosed feeding: "aut intus clausos satura ad praesepia servant" (III. 214).² Being "soiled" brings a horse to an unmanageable sensual excitement, and no other image in either classical or modern literature so typifies aroused sexuality as that of a pent-up and ruttish stallion—the soiled horse.

An image of this same kind of lust-resultant satiety occurs in Posthumus' outcry at Iachimo's claimed intimacy with Imogen: "Perchance he spoke not, but, / Like a full-acorned boar, a German one, / Cried 'O!' and mounted" (*Cymbeline*, II. v. 15-17). As with "soiled horse," the right implication of "full-acorned boar" has been misunderstood. The Pelican edition's "full of acorns"

is merely tautological. The Arden edition's J. M. Nosworthy expresses puzzlement because Iachimo bears no outward resemblance to a fat swine. The characteristic emphasized here is not massiveness but lust—a sexual arousal whose relentless oppression "full-acorned" is meant to tell. Posthumus' boar, like Lear's "soiled horse," has been (in Gloucester's phrase) "lust-dieted" (IV. i. 67)—a term denoting the very biochemistry these animal images express.

The usual annotations for "lust-dieted"—"having provision for indulging his appetites" (Riverside), "whose lust is gratified" (Signet), "whose desires are feasted" (Pelican)—likewise fail to show that metabolic causality between *gula* and *luxuria* explicitly drawn in *Lear* (see, for instance, I. iv. 242-46, with its strategic pairing "Epicurism and lust"). Like Lear's "soiled horse," Gloucester, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund are, or have been, fed to an inflamed sexuality, a physical rankness which in them involves deterioration of moral consciousness.

That this is the intent of "lust-dieted" is confirmed by the language of sensuality and gourmandizing in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The known interaction of *gula* and *luxuria* (cf. Chaucer's "Parson's Tale" [l. 836] or Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* [I. iv. 24]) is told in the Antony-associated phrases "lascivious wassails" (I. iv. 56) and "amorous surfeiter" (II. i. 33) and is the basis for Pompey's image of Antony as a soiled horse:

*Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts,
Keep his brain fuming. Epicurean cooks
Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite,
That sleep and feeding may prorogue his
honor,
Even till a Lethe'd dulness.
(II. i. 23-27; italics added)*

Antony's tragedy is that of a "lust-dieted" man whose heroic capacities have been enervated by lethal superfluity.

Like Hamlet's censure of ungoverned sensuality, Lear's terrific denunciation of libido in IV. vi distinguishes men from beasts in terms of moral consciousness. For Hamlet, men whose "chief good and market of . . . time" is sleeping and feeding are *as* beasts ("Bestial oblivion." IV. iv. 33-40), while for

Lear, men of an expired morality are far *worse* than beasts (see I. iv. 281-83 or I. iv. 310-11).

Shakespeare's most urgent expression of this idea is Lear's intensely sexual image of the soiled horse who, no matter how sensually incited, yet possesses an appetite less "riotous" than a lecherous person feigning virtue.

¹ *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Alfred Harbage (London: The Penguin Press, 1969).

² (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940), p. 168.