

A Vernacular Story of Wolves:
Reevaluating Topsell's Natural Historical
Discourses

TAKAHASHI Misako

Abstract

In early modern England, where wild wolves roamed no longer, it was reading that made wolves accessible to the English once again. Not only literature proper, done by renowned literary masters of the age and adorned by beastly metaphors, but also works of natural history provided them with animal-ridden discourses. Encouraged by the developing science of the era, or natural philosophical studies, writers examined all living creatures and composed prose on the findings, so that books on animate nature were widely produced and appreciated. Among such writings is a tome executed by the English divine Edward Topsell (1572-1625), *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607). In spite of its popularity in the period, the work is often undervalued in the light of modern science. This paper hence attempts to reevaluate *Historie* in a literary sphere by focusing on its discourses of wolves--the animals compared to false prophets in the Holy Book.

Historie was one of the first natural historical books ever written in the vernacular. At the time of its publication, the number of books printed in English was increasing, and works of natural history were no exceptions. Encouraged by the fashion of the age, Topsell aimed to publish several books on nature, commemorating all the living creatures of God, for people's better comprehension of the Word.

While his *Historie* is sometimes underestimated as a mere translation of Conrad Gessner's *Historiæ Animalium* (1551-58), a minute observation of the chapter on wolves reveals differences in structures where Topsell diverges significantly from Gessner. What the structural disagreement makes clear is that the clergyman, in contrast to the Swiss philologist who is mainly concerned about lexical quality of creatures, endeavours to highlight the discourses and stories of animals themselves. In his storytelling of wolves, emphasised is their ravenous nature; vivid descriptions of deathly scuffles between starving wolves and their hapless prey, dramatised and animated by the use of rhetorical devices, typify such narratives.

However, it is the group of stories picturing human-wolf confrontations that truly capture the cleric author's perspective towards this predatory quadruped. In these narratives, humans are saved from the canine villains by the almighty

power of God; even the ravaging wolves become powerless before Him. The miraculous stories of human preservation that ultimately celebrate the Omnipotent are again enriched by Topsell's rhetorical techniques, and even more, by his impassioned psychological depictions of the characters. His style of retelling stories can be dramatically imaginative and lively. It is therefore plausible that, together with religious teachings, *Historie* offers entertainment in the vernacular, and it is above all in this respect that the work deserves to be reevaluated in a literary context.