

# **Beastly Humans, Humane Beasts: The Blurring of Human-Animal Boundaries in Fairy-Tale Retellings for Adults**

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**Abstract:** The goal of this study is to examine how fairy-tale retellings for adults blur the boundaries that separate humans from animals. Uninhibited by the restrictions imposed on children’s literature, these retellings take the genre back to its subversive origins, depicting a more complex and intimate human-animal relationality. Drawing on Ann-Sofie Lönngrén’s more-than-anthropocentric reading strategy, the essay mobilizes a metonymic approach that attends to fairy-tale animals as animals rather than as metaphorical stand-ins for humans. By applying this approach, the study traces the literal presence and relations of humans and animals in these retellings, making visible the dynamics of embodiment, agency, and entanglement that are obscured when animals are reduced to metaphor. This method resists the speciesist tendency to reduce fictional animals to their symbolic functions in the service of human meanings. The corpus consists of adult retellings of “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” from Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow’s six-volume anthology series. These tales are selected for their shared motif of human disregard for territorial borders – of trespassing: Jack steals treasures from the giant’s castle, Goldilocks breaks into the bears’ home, and Little Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods. This study demonstrates that these retellings blur human-animal boundaries by reconfiguring how characters are depicted through anthropomorphization or zoomorphization, or by fusing them through consumption or copulation. These narrative strategies create various forms of hybridity that denaturalize the categorical distinctions humans use to separate themselves from animals and expose the constructedness of these boundaries.

**Keywords:** posthumanism, Human-Animal Studies, speciesism, fairy-tale retellings, human-animal boundaries

## Introduction

Animals<sup>1</sup> have always lent themselves to the service of humans. They till our land, keep us company, and serve as our food. Crucially, this use of animals extends from the appropriation of their corporeal bodies to the deployment of their metaphorical utility in signifying practices. This is evident in animals' constant presence in literature where they fulfill a symbolic, allegorical, or metaphorical function (Freccero 2022, 289). Across different cultures, animals abound in myths, fables, folk tales, and remain especially persistent in fairy tales.

However, despite this abundance, animals in literature are typically examined for their figurative role – as stand-ins for humans or abstract concepts rather than as representations of themselves (Baker 1993, ix; McHugh 2001, 6; Tiffin 2007, 252). This inclination to examine fictional animals metaphorically rather than as animals in their own right not only “[rules] out one whole area of potential meanings” but is also “consistent with the far wider cultural trivialization and marginalization of the animal” (Baker 1993, 138). The idea that fictional animals' most worthwhile aspect is their capacity to signify human values and experiences reflects an anthropocentric tendency rooted in the humanist notion that the human's place is naturally at the center of all things, essentially superior to animals (Badmington 2011, 374). This ideology is founded on the boundaries – on the categorical distinctions underpinned by binary oppositions constructed to differentiate the human from the animal: culture/nature, reason/instinct, mind/body (Simmons and Armstrong 2007, 18).

Examining fairy-tale animals as animals rather than just metaphors reveals their capacity to unsettle human-animal boundaries. After all, Silvia Storti describes fairy tales as “a world where incest, sodomy, rape, bestiality and cannibalism are commonplace” (2021, 176). As narrative sites where such extreme bodily and relational transgressions take place – populated by humans, animals, and in-betweens like ogres, shapeshifters, and animal brides and bridegrooms – these stories stage kinship, desire, and metamorphosis in ways that destabilize the ontological division between humans and animals.

However, this is not how fairy tales are widely known today. According to Jack Zipes, fairy tales in the oral tradition were often considered subversive – dangerous even – by religious and political authorities and only when writers

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1 The term “animal” is used as shorthand for “non-human animal.”

began recording them did the genre take the form through which it would later become institutionalized; by the nineteenth century, increasingly “pristine” and “tamed” versions were being published specifically for middle- and upper-class children (2012, xi). In order to make them child-friendly, fairy tales were sanitized, purged of explicit sexual and violent human-animal entanglements. As moral binaries were reinforced, animals were reframed into didactic metaphors, reinstating an anthropocentric logic: animals remain pervasively present in fairy tales, but primarily as symbolic representations of human values and vices.

Fairy-tale retellings for adults reopen the earlier disruptive possibilities. Uninhibited by the restrictions imposed on children’s literature, they often take the genre back to its subversive origins, depicting a more complex and intimate human-animal relationality. These retellings complicate this entanglement to the point of threatening the lines that separate humans from animals. Thus, the aim of this study is to uncover some of the ways such retellings blur human-animal boundaries and the kinds of hybridity that emerge from this destabilization.

In pursuit of this goal, this essay works toward Ann-Sofie Lönngrén’s “more-than-anthropocentric” reading strategy by mobilizing its metonymic component: “following” the fairy-tale animals’ iterations as animals rather than solely as metaphorical stand-ins for humans (2021, 41). Recognizing that literary animals have long been read metaphorically – exemplified by traditions such as the beast fable – this approach instead traces animals’ literal presence and entanglements with humans, foregrounding their respective yet interdependent embodiment, agency, and desires through a metonymic relation grounded in “similarity, presence, and closeness” (Lönngrén 2021, 41). This attention to relational proximities makes visible how roles and identities begin to seep through the species boundary – what this essay refers to as hybridity. By acknowledging fairy-tale animals’ capacity for self-signification, this method both resists the speciesist tendency to reduce them to their symbolic functions in service of human meanings and illuminates how the resulting forms of hybridity destabilize human-animal distinctions.

To apply this approach, this essay turns to the work of Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow. These prolific, multi-award-winning American editors spent almost a decade (1993 to 2000) collaborating on a six-volume anthology series of fairy-tale retellings for adults. Their call for contributions was answered by writers from various genres, making each book a collection of diverse reimaginings of classic tales. This study examines six retellings of the following fairy tales from

the aforementioned series: “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk.” These stories are chosen because they share the common motif of human disregard for territorial borders – of trespassing: Jack steals treasures from the giant’s castle, Goldilocks breaks into the bears’ home, and Little Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods – a known domain of non-human creatures such as fairies, witches, and animals. The analysis traces how these retellings unsettle species boundaries by reconfiguring human-animal relations and staging identity crossings that materialize as forms of hybridity.

### Analysis

Children’s fairy tales are populated by anthropomorphized animal characters: they speak, wear clothes, and feel human emotions. Aimed at young audiences, this serves several purposes. The incongruity and playfulness engage and entertain the child, making the moral or literacy lesson easier to remember, and the animal stand-in creates emotional distance when the message of the story is quite painful (Ayimbetova 2022, 129). Fairy-tale retellings for adults also employ anthropomorphism in depicting their animal characters. With a mature audience and a more nuanced tale to tell and message to impart, the anthropomorphization of the characters is done in more sophisticated ways. In some cases, animal characters are reconfigured not only to have human traits but also to have their animality toned down: less instinct, more reason; less nature, more culture. From a posthumanist perspective, these ontological adjustments can be a way to underscore how animals are similar to humans, thereby rendering human-animal boundaries more permeable (Jaques 2015, 12).

One way this reconfiguration is achieved through the conversion of animal characters’ physical, mental, or psychological attributes into more human-like traits. This is done in varying degrees. The giant and the bears retain their physical appearance in all the chosen retellings, one iteration of the wolf blends in as a human but has to hide the telltale aspects of his physique, and the other wolf is completely anthropomorphized as a man. The conversion of mental and psychological attributes also varies and is dependent on the retelling’s theme, plot, or setting.

Several of the chosen retellings are set in urban areas or, at the very least, villages populated by townspeople. In “Little Red” by Wendy Wheeler, the wolf is converted into an urbane self-professed man of culture who drives a

black Studebaker in twentieth-century Chicago. He goes by the name Josef Volker, owns a jewelry store, and dresses himself in “black pinstriped suit and red tie, [...] white silk shirt, [...] polished shoes” (Wheeler 1993, 139). However, since the conversion does not make him fully human, he struggles with his hybridity. The literal darkness in him betrays the prim and proper façade: “My swarthyness usually pains me; I have even plucked the black hair from the backs of my hands” (Wheeler 1993, 131). The feral instincts also prove to be difficult to overcome. When a shopgirl catches his eye, he thinks to himself, “I fought the appetite that flared in me, tried to become totally the cultured man I truly am” (Wheeler 1993, 133). He tries to subdue his wolfish proclivities by immersing himself in human culture. He not only shaves his beard twice a day, tweezes the stray hair on his eyebrows, but has also “read the complete works of Shakespeare, I’m a self-taught student of philosophy, I attend the opera and know all the words to ‘La Donna e Mobile’” (Wheeler 1993, 142). However, he gives in to his nature occasionally, justifying it by saying, “As long as you don’t allow your appetites to rule you, these small adventures add piquancy to life” (Wheeler 1993, 137). His shifting behaviors favoring either culture or nature, and his depiction as being both civilized and savage at the same time, blur the human-animal divide.

In contrast to Josef Volker’s inner struggle with his hybridity, the bears in Michael Cadnum’s “Bear It Away” are confronted by an external force when they attempt to cross the distinction borders and become more human-like. In this retelling, the bears’ physical appearance remains the same and they “still sleep half the year” but one day, “something profound had happened to bear nature” (Cadnum 2014, para. 7). When a bear steps on a person’s toe, it “offered effusive apologies,” and another holds the post office door open for someone (Cadnum 2014, para. 7, 9). Eventually, the “bears are writing essays, offering opinions on the likelihood of rain, [...] making excellent neighbors. [...] reading haiku, [...] laughing at our human jokes” (Cadnum 2014, para. 10). In this story, the bears renounce their feral nature, gain a higher level of cognition, and are bestowed the desire and ability to get involved not just in the consumption but also in the creation of culture. However, this blurring of boundaries does not sit right with the unnamed golden-haired girl in this retelling. When she has had enough of bear laughter and bear songs, she hatches a plan to drive the bears back to the woods: “I wanted to teach the bears why they shouldn’t weave rugs and write plays, and give them a lesson” (Cadnum 2014, para. 12). To her, bears are better

mauling people than stocking up on rhyming dictionaries; better a wild bear than a hybrid one curtsying wearing a bonnet.

Another animal character that retains its physical characteristics but whose desires are converted to resemble those of a human, is the giant in Nancy Kress's "Stalking Beans." Giants are typically depicted as having a monstrous appearance and appetite for human flesh. However, in trying to determine whether giants are anthropophagi ("creatures that eat humans, regardless of the eater's species") or cannibals ("creatures that eat the same species as themselves"), Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. acknowledges their taxonomical ambiguity, writing that giants "are complicated because of their quasi-human status" (2021, 15). Kress's retelling reinforces this in-betweenness. "Stalking Beans" introduces an older Jack suffering from financial and marital problems after he and his wife fell from being gentry to peasants. His wife desperately wants a child, but he cannot bring himself to touch her. The giant barely makes an appearance in the story; he does not need to. Knowing Jack's pain and struggles is knowing the giant's. Instead of craving infants' flesh, the giant also badly wants a child and suffers the inability to satisfy his wife. After Jack's dues are paid with the treasures he has stolen from the giant, Jack discovers his affair with the giant's wife has resulted in the conception of a child. The pressing question afterward is: What will the giant do when he learns the baby is not his? Although the story does not explicate the giant's preference for human flesh, he still utters a part of his well-known line when he suspects Jack is in his castle: "I smell blood [...] I smell human blood!" which means he will be able to tell that the baby is human (Kress 1993, 102). In the end, it can be inferred that the baby and the giant's wife are both well while Jack exerts no effort to claim his child due to fear and selfishness: "It might wake and cry. If it squalled too loud, I would have to drop it and run, or put my hands around its neck until it was quiet again, or let it fall down the beanstalk to make good my own escape" (Kress 1993, 104). This depiction of a child-abandoning Jack and a foster-fathering giant blurs the human-animal distinction to such an extent that it prompts the question: Who is the human and who is the savage animal here?

The giant is not the only one who gains a human family member; the other retellings also portray human and animal characters as a family unit. In "Little Red," the wolf Josef becomes a step-father to Regina – the red hat-wearing girl in this version – after convincing her mother to leave her negligent husband. His taking up the roles of husband and stepfather is partly motivated by his desire to quell the animal in him: "They will start me on a new road of

respectability and propriety. I will conquer my appetites and be the man I've always known I could be" (Wheeler 1993, 144). Conversely, in Lisa Goldstein's "Brother Bear," Quick – the golden-haired girl in this version – chooses not to return to her tribe to become a bear's wife:

She did not go back to her tribe that day, or the next. Her love for the bear grew, and was returned. She understood that she had married him, the way men and women in her tribe sometimes married. (1995, 129)

Another iteration of Goldilocks also becomes a part of the bear family in "Goldilocks Tells All" by Scott Bradfield. Goldy gets lost in the Enchanted Forest as a kid, and when she stumbles upon the bears' home, they take her in and she becomes their foster-daughter. Papa Bear tells Goldy, "We gave you a bed to sleep in [...] We gave you food to eat and clothes to wear. [...] I tried to be a good foster-father, Goldy..." (Bradfield 2014, para 47). Expectedly, these hybrid families, just like any other, have their own set of complications. However, what these relationships highlight is that humans and animals are similar enough to be kin and, in line with posthumanist ideas, that humans "perhaps never were utterly distinct from animals" (Badmington 2011, 374).

Another way that fairy-tale retellings reconfigure the depiction of their characters is through inversion: instead of just converting aspects of characters' respective portrayal, their roles are reversed. In "I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood" by Kathe Koja, the wolf is fully anthropomorphized: "His name was Jude. He was a man of business and affairs" (1993, 151). Conversely, the unnamed red-caped girl is zoomorphized as she is consistently compared to animals:

Her face was as a bird's; that avian arch to nose and startled eyes,  
round eyes and black as sparrow's, as a crying guinea hen's. [...] her voice as high as the birds she resembled... [...] She's simple.  
Mad as rabbits. (Koja 1993, 148-50)

Also in this version, it is the girl, together with her grandmother, who lives in the woods: "Her teeth showed slim and broken when she smiled, they said it was from eating nothing but the roots she dug from the forest where she lived" (Koja 1993, 148). On the other hand, Jude, a travelling man of commerce, is

staying in a tavern close to the forest, awaiting the magistrate's visit, hoping he could do business with him.

In the beginning, the story seems like another version in which the little girl (the prey) falls victim to the hungry wolf (the predator). Jude observes the young girl with cunning eyes, sees the beauty beneath her impoverished appearance and becomes completely smitten by her. When his first attempt to seduce her has failed (he has offered her money), he grabs the opportunity to walk her home into the woods when she cries, "A beast! [...] He waits for me, beyond on the path!" (Koja 1993, 157). He takes advantage of her as they go along the path, and only once they reach a half-cave, half-cottage does he realize who the actual beast is. This is where the story reveals the inversion: the little red-caped girl lures men like him into the forest; the prey is the wolf, and the grandmother is the beast in the woods. And implied by the condition of her teeth - "not broken but immensely worn" - the red-caped girl partakes in the kill (Koja 1993, 160).

The intricate depiction of the characters through multiple layers of inversion - the wolf turned into a predatory man turned into prey, and the little girl turned into an impoverished creature living like an animal turned into predator accomplice - creates a kind of hybridity that allows both characters to be predator and prey, and human and animal all at the same time, thereby leading to the collapse of the lines that divide these dichotomies.

Children's fairy tales are typically used as vessels for morals and values: Be wary of strangers; respect others' properties; wit and ingenuity are valuable skills. However, as Hellen Tiffin observes, the sole focus on the human aspects of such tales

draws attention to our habitual allegorizing of stories we take to be only 'ostensibly' about animals; our blindness to their actual presences as co-beings on the planet; and our determined conversions of their presences into absence. (2007, 256)

The animal characters in children's fairy tales, despite their overwhelming presence in them, are oftentimes rendered absent as they are simply used as a means to create moral and cautionary tales for young human readers. Meanwhile, free from the need to moralize these tales, fairy-tale retellings for adults become a site where relationships between humans and animals can be explored with more depth and complexity - as relationships between subjects rather than symbols.

As much as humans try to draw a line and separate themselves as a species and distance themselves from nature and the wild, there exists a pull that entices them to cross the line, to “search for an understanding of what we share with beasts even as we try to discover what makes us human” (Tatar 2017a, xxvii). This desire to reunite with nature is realized in some fairy-tale retellings by fusing human and animal characters.

One way that this fusion takes place is through copulation. Cultures around the world have traditional stories about animal brides and bridegrooms where the animal spouse is either a shapeshifter or a human cursed to become an animal (Tatar 2017a, xi, xvii). In these stories’ child-friendly versions, the animal spouse typically turns (back) into its human form prior to marital bliss: the swan’s feathery garb is taken and hidden away, the beast is shown true love, and the frog receives a kiss. However, in fairy-tale retellings for adults, the transformation (back) into human form is not a requirement for the consummation of marriage or love affair.

In “Little Red,” Josef Volker – not completely wolf, not completely human – has an affair with Helen, the mother of the red hat-wearing girl Regina. His black wolf fur that he incessantly needs to shave constantly reminds him of his hybridity, which only serves to intensify his desire:

Though it was only two in the afternoon, my beard was already heavy enough to scratch her. It gave me a moment of chagrin to see the red abrasions on her skin, then I decided I liked leaving my mark on her, and nuzzled her again. (Wheeler 1993, 135)

This does not bother Helen at all; on the contrary, this seems to excite her as “[h]er pulse leapt in her neck” and he wants to “kiss her there, open my mouth and feel her heartbeat against my teeth” (Wheeler 1993, 135-36). Meanwhile, in “Brother Bear,” Quick, the golden-haired girl, becomes a wife – in all senses of the word – to a bear whose only anthropomorphized quality is rudimentary language:

She woke to feel a rough hand on her back and she turned to face him. Not a hand, paw. The bear had been stroking her yellow hair.

“Quick,” he said. He continued to stroke her, her small breasts, her belly, her golden fur below that. He growled low in his throat.

[...]

The bear growled again. [...] His great paws moved to her skin, and he caressed her more softly than before. She felt herself opening to him, the way she had opened to a boy in the tribe after her first blood came.

[...]

He entered her with great tenderness. His growling became louder: he sounded fierce, even angry. She clung to him, terrified and exhilarated at the same time. (Goldstein 1995, 129)

Accounts of interspecies copulation may be unsettling as they violate biological and ethical norms. They may cause shock and revulsion, leaving a feeling of contamination – as if a line has been breached. When discussing human-animal sexual acts in storytelling, Tatar states that:

Verbal and visual depictions of erotic pursuit throw us into a hermeneutic crisis precisely because they invoke cultural anxieties about defining and maintaining the lines we draw between nature and culture, between brute beasts and caring humans. (2017a, xxv)

This “crisis” causes disorientation as such depictions go against what has been considered a firmly established boundary. The disgust, shame, and discomfort it evokes are rooted in this divide; in the belief that humans and animals are too different to ever be in this kind of union. Jack from “Stalking Beans” expresses a similar sentiment when he sees the giant’s bedroom. In traditional versions of Jack and the Beanstalk, it is unclear whether the giant’s wife is a giantess herself or just a very tall human. In some versions, she is described as “a great big woman” but some illustrations depict her as having a giant’s features. In “Stalking Beans,” it is implied that she is a big female human; according to Jack: “She is taller than I am by perhaps a foot, and outweighs me by thirty pounds” (Kress 1993, 92). Accordingly, when Jack sees the giant’s bedroom, he is in disbelief realizing just then how different the giant truly is:

He must be gargantuan, different from Maria not just in degree but in kind, as she is not from me. The bed stretches the length of my father’s tilyard. [...] How can Maria, lying in that enormous bed, be large enough to...I don’t want to know. (Kress 1993, 96-97)

Human sexuality is characterized by dualities: “tenderness, affection, and compassion on the one hand and violence, aggression, and rough-and-tumble play on the other” (Tatar 2017a, xxv). The elements on the latter side are aspects that human relate more to animals than to themselves; the side of sexuality that involves wild, erratic behaviors driven by a huge insatiable appetite. It is what Josef Volker, the wolf in “Little Red,” is struggling with: He tries to restrain the proclivities of a wolf with the sophistications of a man. He thinks that by tuning himself more to business and the arts, he will justify his occasional submission to his nature – to the wolf’s appetite – by having a set of cultivated tastes:

I do take pride in my store. [...] My business is the confirmation that I can deal successfully with the wealthy, the cultured. I’ve spent most of my life perfecting that knowledge. Yes, I have *petites amours*, but they are the prerogative of a sophisticated man. (Wheeler 1993, 137)

It is not unreasonable to believe that Jude, the wolf in “I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood,” is also a businessman for the very same reason, as he also has unbridled lust for women. Being able to switch between these modes – especially being both at the same time – exemplifies the fragility of the divide between human and animal, and culture and nature. A human’s sexual union with an animal consort adds another layer of contestation over these boundaries. Animals, “[a]s our dark doubles [...] stand for everything we disavow in ourselves – ferocity, bestiality, and untamed urges” (Tatar 2017a, xxvi). Thus, the sexual act with the animal forces the human to acknowledge that there (still) exist in her the feral impulses she thought had long been dispelled by culture. It leads the human to realize that she was never “purely human” based on how she defined it in opposition to what an animal is. It is therefore in this sense that “our animal brides and animal grooms function as mediators between nature and culture, enabling us to think through our relationship to ‘otherness’” (Tatar 2017a, xxvii).

This mediation sometimes culminates in assimilation. Quick from “Brother Bear,” after she learns she is with child – cub – “wondered if she were turning into a bear-woman. She studied her arms and legs for fur, ran her fingers over her teeth for sharpness, but nothing seemed changed” (Goldstein 1995, 130). However, the transformation is not in physical appearance. Apart from the comfort of partaking in the bears’ everyday lives, her body has also acclimated to the bears’ annual hibernation and reproductive cycle:

The days become colder, and the bears' fur grew thicker and heavier. One day when she woke she saw that they still slept. She poked and prodded each one in turn but could not rouse them. She burrowed into the warmth of Brother Bear and went back to sleep.

She slept for a long time, waking only to eat some of the food the bears had stored for winter. It was a strange and confused time. [...]

When she awoke fully it was warm outside. [...]

She started to roll over but was stopped by something in the way. She looked down and saw that her stomach had rounded out, grown huge. [...] [S]he would give birth to a bear cub. (Goldstein 1995, 130).

More seasons have passed and Quick and Brother Bear have one more cub; a total of two bear cubs whose fur is as golden as Quick's hair. However, their offspring are not the only human-animal hybrids produced by their union. When towards the end of the story Quick is found by her original human tribe, a man recognizes her as she more or less looks the same as the day she has gotten lost in the forest – only older. He exclaims, "Quick not dead! Quick not dead!" to which she answers: "Quick dead. [...] Quick Gone. [...] Quick bear" (Goldstein 1995, 132). Quick's declaration may not be supported by observable biological changes but it articulates an ontological crossing: hybridity becomes relational – a matter of identity, rather than just reproduction or genetics.

Another way in which human and animal characters are fused is through consumption. It is telling that the fairy tale versions intended for a young audience are sanitized of explicit sexual content but retain the threat posed to children of being eaten. Maria Tatar highlights the importance of food – its presence but more significantly, its absence – in the formation of narratives involving vulnerable children. She explains, "The peasants of folktales may have to worry about famines, but children in fairy tales live perpetually under the double threat of starvation and cannibalism" (2017b, 268). In addition to these threats is predation, as interspecies consumption is also a common motif in fairy tales – perhaps even more common than cannibalism, depending on whether one considers giants and witches human or not. The predator-prey dichotomy provides an important distinction because it indicates who eats and who is eaten. From an anthropocentric perspective, humans stand on top of the food chain as apex predators who "have seen it as their right to kill and eat other species and they

regard any violation of that order as ‘unnatural’” (Tiffin 2007, 244). Humans’ great fear of being eaten stems from such belief that they should be the consumer, not the consumed (Tiffin 2007, 247) – a fear that historically fueled narratives of man-eating beasts as threats that must be eliminated. Therefore, a fairy tale in which at least one human character is the prey, the eaten, is in itself an unsettling of the established boundary between humans and animals.

Consumption in fairy-tale retellings for adults are more complicated. With the existence of hybrid characters, it is much more difficult to discern who is prey and who is predator; who is human and who is animal. In “I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood,” the wolf is a man with beastly motives who, in the end, is eaten by a frail girl and her grandmother, who live like animals in the woods. From the story’s description of the older woman moments before Jude is eaten, it is hard to say if the girl and her grandmother are actual monsters – which is to say, non-human:

And its eyes are a woman’s; are hers, that same round glossy darkness though informed by some tremendous age. Naked in the dimness, hair like her granddaughter’s, matted thick but longer still, waving like the gray moss on the trees as she advanced. (Koja 1993, 160)

They may be simply humans who have resorted to eating human flesh due to extreme poverty. The story does refer to the grandmother when it says, “There is only one beast in the woods” so, if one is to consider them non-human, then they are predators for eating Jude. However, there really are no indicators that they are not human aside from the girl’s appearance, specifically her face, always being compared to birds, which could mean a pointed nose, prominent cheekbones, or sharp chin – nonetheless, still inconclusive. Thus, if one is to consider them human, then they are cannibals for eating Jude. But then again, is Jude completely human if he is an iteration of the wolf? As Jaques observes, “one’s status as human or animal can be merely a matter of perspective” (2015, 47). In this case, the only certain thing is the uncertainty and the near indiscernibility about who plays which role. On top of that is the act of consumption itself, where one is eaten and absorbed and made a part of another. This fusion seems to not only blur but completely erase the lines that separate humans from animals. In the words of Maggie Kilgour, the horror of cannibalism – which can also be applied to predation on humans – is that it is where

the body is made symbolic, the literal the figurative, the human reduced to mere matter. In fact cannibalism involves both the *establishing* of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them and makes the two one. (quoted in Tiffin 2007, 247)

Meanwhile, the act of consumption in “Brother Bear” offers much clearer dynamics. Towards the end of the story, Quick loses consciousness after her old human tribe finds her and attacks the bears. When she wakes up, she does “to the smell of meat. She looked around; the tribe had removed the bear’s skin with knives and was carving the flesh” (Goldstein 1995, 133). Then one of the elders speaks: “Brother Bear. [...] Our tribe and your tribe now one tribe, our flesh now one flesh. We thank Brother Bear for his fur and meat, as he thanks us for ours” (Goldstein 1995, 133). This illustrates the union of two species: a kind of hybridity that is the human flesh sustained by animal meat. The human-animal interconnectedness is greatly summarized in the penultimate paragraph of the story:

Quick understood. Because she had bound herself to the bear for life, because she had had his children, her tribe and the bear tribe were tied together forever. Hunter and hunted, eater and eaten, they would be one flesh for the lives of their children, and their children’s children, without end. Each would eat of the other; their abundance toward each other would never fail. (Goldstein 1995, 133)

Similar to Tiffin’s perspective on the consumption of pigs’ meat, the consumption of meat from any non-human animal positions those animals as the ones who “‘produce’ us; their ‘meat’ contributing to the construction of our flesh” (2007, 251). For even though this fusion maintains the human’s position on top of the food chain, the realization that human’s survival and daily sustenance is dependent on the consumption of animal meat, forces one to rethink the anthropocentric notion of human supremacy.

## Conclusion

By applying a metonymic approach, this study traces the literal presence and relations of humans and animals in fairy-tale retellings for adults. This reading

strategy makes visible the dynamics of embodiment, agency, and entanglement that are obscured when animals are reduced to metaphor. In doing so, it reveals how these retellings offer complex representations of human-animal relationality that thrive in interconnectedness. This study shows how these tales blur human-animal boundaries: by reconfiguring how human and animal characters are depicted through conversion or inversion, or by fusing them through copulation or consumption, thereby creating multiple forms of hybridity that contribute to the decentering of the human subject.

When the depiction of animal characters is converted to resemble their human counterpart, it not only highlights their similarities and kinship but also grants the animal characters agency and subjectivity. Suddenly, they have a name, a background story, and motivation behind their actions, rather than being solely a means to propel the narrative or to deliver the moral of the story. Through inversion, human and animal characters take on each other's roles, revealing the arbitrariness of the dichotomies where the differences between humans and animals rest. By fusing the human and animal characters through copulation, the former are forced to confront their primal side and compelled to acknowledge the similarities they share with the animal and accept that they are not so different after all. Lastly, consumption highlights the dependency of humans on animal meat. It also unsettles the eater-eaten dichotomy, especially in instances when it is the human that is incorporated into another through consumption. These strategies denaturalize the categorical distinctions humans use as boundaries to separate themselves from animals and expose the constructedness of these lines that can be blurred, altered, or completely erased.

Examining depictions of human-animal relationships in fiction is important because this is where many people encounter animals more frequently. As Steve Baker observes, in an age where humans are far-removed from nature, they are "more familiar with animals in representation" than real ones (quoted in Tiffin 2007, 254). If cultural representations are one source of dichotomous thinking about humans and animals, then narratives that destabilize these binaries offer an imaginative site for rethinking species hierarchies. By attending to fictional animals as animals rather than mere symbols, literary interpretation resists the anthropocentric tendency to erase animals' presence by reducing them to metaphor. In this sense, fairy-tale retellings do not simply revive old stories; they open conceptual spaces for contemplating alternative ways humans might relate to animals in lived reality.

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