THE HORROR OF NATURAL HISTORY AND SPENFER’S BESTIARY OF EXTREMOPHILES

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This essay investigates a sea voyage in Book II of Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene, to which scholars have seldom paid much attention. I argue that the aquatic life forms the Knight of Temperance encounters on his journey shows Spenser’s investment in natural history, a leading force in the scientific culture of his day. By deploying original research, I assert that a careful examination of this passage shows Spenser’s theorization of extreme life, thereby anticipating our modern scientific focus on extremophiles, temperate environments, and the search for extraterrestrial life. This paper ends by proposing that a philosophical conundrum lies at the core of discovery, leaving humans once again questioning their status in the universe.

No one would argue with the fact that much has changed since Edmund Spenser composed an epic poem that solidified England within a national literary tradition. But one facet remains the same: science continues to rely on myth to describe elements of the natural world for which we do not have answers. Myth remains embedded in scientific inquiry. Consider, for example, the following statement from NASA on the Goldilocks zone, a climate that is neither too hot nor too cold, allowing for water to remain liquid and therefore to sustain life:

The Goldilocks Zone seemed a remarkably small region of space. It didn't even include the whole Earth … In the past 30 years, however, our knowledge of life in extreme environments has exploded. Scientists have found microbes in nuclear reactors, microbes that love acid, microbes that swim in boiling-hot water. Whole ecosystems have been discovered around deep-sea vents where sunlight never reaches and the emerging vent-water is hot enough to melt lead. The Goldilocks Zone is bigger than we thought.¹

Despite our advancements in modern technologies, it is telling that scientists deploy a fairy tale to describe the undefined boundary where environments harboring undiscovered life forms need to be “just right” to live. A temperate environment was just as relevant to the culture of the 1590s as it is to the scientific research today; while the latter refers specifically to regulated temperatures and the former to governing impulse behaviors, moderation remains central to
delineations of life and life forms as we know it. I invoke this brief, if presentist, vignette for two reasons. First, myth and fantastical narratives continue to pervade our study of the natural world, even if they remain cleverly hidden from view by scientific jargon. Second, as I will argue in this essay, the overlap between mythos and ratio—myth and reason—is concomitant with exploring less-familiar aspects of the natural world. Human reactions to unfamiliar natural phenomena skew toward affective responses of surprise, horror, or curiosity, and that moment of shock engendered by discoveries of extreme life, as will become clear, is precisely the location where my inquiry into the Faerie Queene begins.

Sir Guyon’s expeditions in Book II of The Faerie Queene have led scholars to conclude that the knight’s quest for temperance is contradictory at key moments in the text. In fact, the virtue’s very entry in The Spenser Encyclopedia qualifies Guyon’s practice of self-restraint with the admission that the titular knight’s actions—especially in his destruction of Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss in Canto 12—undermine his ability to suppress his innately passionate responses in moments of emblematic importance. Those areas of symbolic significance have acted as the pressure points for studies on the Faerie Queene since the first edition of the poem was published in 1590, leading to an exhaustive repository of scholarship and critique on Guyon’s behaviors—from his resistance of temptation and ultimate collapse in the Cave of Mammon, to his scholastic and affective enlightenment in Alma’s castle, and, most especially, to his ultimate destruction of the Bower and subsequent liberation of hybrid man-beasts, whose lust Acrasia uses to imprison them.

The Bower’s decimation has gained a massive amount of attention from scholars, largely due to the fact that the scene offers the final climax to Book II, while also providing a rich tapestry of metamorphosed life forms. Notably, what little attention life forms have received is
typically concentrated on this happy, talking beast tradition modeled after the widely circulated Circe myth. But by paying special attention to animals gifted with speech, scholars unintentionally undermine the entire goal in the spate of animal studies and posthumanist discourse: to subvert the traits and characteristics of *Homo sapiens* in the hopes of proffering a de-hierarchical ontology of non-human life forms, from the quadrupedal lumbering of horses and dogs, to the creepy-crawly slithering of legless reptiles. This essay, however, will examine some less-considered beasts in Book II, sea animals whose presence scholars have bypassed because they lack the capacity, or because they outright refuse, to interact with the Knight of Temperance on his journey to the Bower.

Thematically, Guyon’s voyage has long been compared to the epic tradition of *The Odyssey*, wherein Ulysses must prevail through endless tribulations before ultimately achieving his goal of returning home. While such analyses are important for schematic mapping of a work as extensive as Spenser’s, relegating Guyon’s face-off with the sea monsters to an Homeric replication does not do justice to the role those creatures play as non-human life forms in the text. In discounting these scenes that seem a familiar trope, readers miss the poet’s re-imagination and reification within the foundational textual tradition. I argue that this very refiguring takes place in Guyon’s voyage by sea from the Castle of Alma to the Bower of Bliss in Canto 12 of *The Faerie Queene*, which alters the way we view Spenser—not just a pious didact, but a poet responding to the milieu of natural history embedded in his literary culture. Therefore, I suggest that a new perspective emerges when we see Spenser as a poet who clearly contemplated life forms and forms of life, as evidenced by the vast archive of humans, flora, fauna, and everything in between in his massive poem. I read these sea monsters—some so massive that they appear to carry the entire sea on their backs—as extreme life forms: a category
of life that, for the human, appears to exist on the fringes of probability. This essay will argue that what we might otherwise mistake for allegorical personification—the nomenclature of which usually implies moral significance—is actually a combination of folkloric and scientific reality in 1590. As I will demonstrate, Spenser uses this mishmash of mythological and real-life creatures to contemplate the collapse between the mythological lore of his literary past and the descriptive scientific reality of his intellectual present and future.

By focusing specifically on these aquatic life forms in Spenser, I situate my argument within a scholarly debate on posthumanism and animal studies that remains fairly new to early modern literary studies. Recently, Spenserian critics have commented on the scarcity of scholarly attention paid to Spenser’s conception of the human-animal divide, especially with respect to the proliferation of posthumanist discourse in the last decade of scholarship. Spenser in particular is an important avenue of study in posthumanism, even though questioning the status of humanity is as conventional as it is compelling. This urgency has led Spenserians to pay more attention to the paucity of animal studies in The Faerie Queene, an allegory that, according to literary critic Joseph Campana, acts as a “system for the incitement and distribution of life, one in which the entanglement of literary form, life form, and form of life is especially apparent.” Though recent scholarship in posthumanism has retooled ideas of the human and has urged us to look beyond it, Ayesha Ramachandran argues that Spenser exhorts his readers “to look insistently at [humanity], around it, under it, and inside it.” Ramachandran writes that Spenser’s poetry pushes us “to worry less about deconstructing taxonomies and hierarchies, but to attend with care and caution to the things we cherish”; her argument, however, does not allow for the fact that our cherished humanity—especially as it is realized in Book II—is automatically entangled in the taxonomies that humans use to label non-human life forms. As I will argue, Guyon’s sea voyage shows us
that those taxonomical categorizations are at the center of Spenser’s poetry and at the center of humanity itself.

If the key premise of posthumanism seeks to undercut assumptions about humanity and its accepted animal hierarchies, then something similar can be said of early modern humanists and natural philosophers. The sixteenth century was a time of vast European exploration and discovery, and early modern intellectuals spent their time rethinking old values and superstitions that had long been established as fact. Particularly, Renaissance natural history offered a new way of looking at the world. As a discipline that was a complex blend of fact, whimsy, and Aristotelian philosophy, natural history also maintained a devotion to taxonomy, description, and classification, thereby challenging the premise that devotion to the former inevitably precludes attention to the latter. Natural history, by historical definition, defies boundaries and resists categorization, making Spenser’s use of it that much more pertinent for this essay. For scholars such as Brian W. Ogilvie, early modern natural history—which exploded as a practice in the mid-sixteenth century—became a “cultural form” in its own right, giving “meaning to experience.” It created a cultural practice of describing what would later change the course of history and the advancement of knowledge: empiricism.

By drawing a parallel between early modern naturalist description and empiricist experimentation, I do not suggest that the road to the latter is linear by way of the former. It is important to note that natural history, as it existed in sixteenth-century Europe, was a hodgepodge of folklore-superstition that Thomas Harriot—in his *Brief and True Report of the New Foundland of Virginia* (1590)—and Conrad Gesner—in his *Historia animalium* (1551)—sought desperately to correct. Thus, it would be remiss to propose that scientific accuracy was the main goal of these early modern naturalist projects; instead, the stakes of early modern
naturalism show humanism in full force and turn our attention to how seriously these naturalists took the legitimacy of testimony and source material. As Harriot’s title suggests, early modern natural history was inextricably tied to Europe’s unprecedented expansion into the Americas, where new discoveries prompted Europeans to think beyond what Susan Scott Parrish adeptly labels “the natural.” In particular, Gesner’s novel contribution was to catalog animals that had never been exposed to European eyes, including beasts absent from classical sources, and those that trickled down by word-of-mouth testimony and eye-witness account from the far north of Europe, the Americas, and the East Indies. Gesner’s efforts—which were copied and duplicated widely across Europe—offered a significant departure from medieval bestiaries, works that were largely controlled by the Church and portrayed highly stylized illustrations of animals to give them emblematic meaning. Gesner was widely influential in that he wrote to his readers not only what he believed as truth, but also why he believed it, thereby ushering a new method of intellectual thought and making my reading of Spenser all the more necessary. I take seriously this emerging culture of observation; in its use as a viable tool for discovery, natural history becomes the main impetus for a closer look at Guyon’s sea voyage—a space where human and non-human collide.

As a new “cultural form,” this science of describing created a mindset that sought to resolve the disparity between what naturalists saw in nature versus what they read in books; it also endeavored to employ a careful inquiry into terminology and classification previously accepted blindly as fact. It is tempting to label natural history as not terribly intellectual or rigorous because of its limitations in explaining the world’s phenomena; however, according to Ogilvie, the culture of early modern naturalism runs deeper than a sense of belief and “includes practices that implicitly (rather than explicitly) grant meaning and pattern social reproduction.”
This intervention suddenly becomes rather critical to studies in Spenser and early modern literature at large. For the poet does not indolently regurgitate themes from antiquity. Rather, he paints Guyon’s sea-journey so that it may act as a flashpoint for a deeper contribution to natural philosophy. In his refashioning of Homeric themes, Spenser artfully revises Guyon’s voyage as granting, in Ogilvie’s words, “meaning to natural history as an activity.” Thus I contend that Spenser purposefully pens this temptingly conventional voyage in order to contemplate a scientific inquiry that most resembles dialetheia—a philosophy based on the premise that both a thought and its direct negation can exist as truth simultaneously.

Guyon’s horrific encounter with the sea monsters brings to bear a critically important conceptualization on this canonical text. My intent is to offer an important point of departure from existing scholarship on early modern animal studies and natural history: I investigate fully the collapse of boundaries between the mythological and the rational elements of the narrative. A careful study of early modern natural history and contemporary philosophy, I argue, offers a singular point of entry to examine thoroughly this voyage and the commentary it affords to literary studies. More importantly, my examination of dialetheia and extreme life forms will illustrate the crucial link between the dramatically shifting landscapes of science, religion, and temperance—the human virtue associated with moderating extremes and most responsible for separating man from beast.

I

Similar to Book II of The Faerie Queene, this essay is ostensibly about temperance, what the OED defines as “the practice or habit of restraining oneself in passion, desire”; but my investigation of temperance will give way to a narrative where an observant onlooker discovers several species of fish that live in an extremely volatile, intemperate environment.
temperance harkens back to a commixture of classical Aristotelian and Platonic theories of spiritual harmonization and the golden mean, whereby moderation acts as a stand-in for virtue in general; as J. Carscallen writes that Spenser used Aristotle’s concept for his model, which he defines as the “harmonizing of appetite with reason so as to hit the ‘mean’ or ‘mark’” and “the aspect of virtue by which the spirited element in the soul keeps the appetites under the control of reason, and thus the whole in harmony.” Implicit in these definitions is the ultimate setting of boundaries and the subsequent suppression of excess—whatever form that excess may take. Thus, to discuss (in)temperance is ultimately to construct a heuristic model of boundary crossing—a logic that makes itself known both consciously and unconsciously.

It may seem counterintuitive to begin an essay informed by posthumanism and animal studies and immediately turn to Guyon—not only a human but also the supposed paragon of temperate humanity; however, to fully appreciate the philosophical boundary collapse, Guyon’s relationship to the virtue must be made clearer. To start, readers often question Guyon’s behavior; for example, Carscallen sees Guyon as “failing in temperance, as being intemperately temperate, or as being temperate but sinfully proud of the fact.” What Book II ultimately shows is Guyon’s frail position as human amid a maelstrom of vice, temptation, and dangerous creaturely life. For Maurice Evans, frailty is to be expected; he writes that Spenser substitutes Guyon to describe “normal human behavior through his moral abstractions.” If indeed The Faerie Queene’s purpose is to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline,” as Spenser writes in his letter to Sir Walter Ralegh, one might expect to see Guyon falter, as he does in the Cave of Mammon, but ultimately complete his epic journey with careful fortitude, having learned from his errors. But Guyon is as frail in Canto 12 as he is in Canto
7—the literal mid-point of his quest—especially when he encounters those species of gargantuan fish and other myriad sea life on his way to Acrasia’s island.

The perilous sea voyage offers “mongst thousand dangers, and ten thousand Magick mights,” as the boatman steers past grueling territory, from the “Gulfe of Greedinesse” to the “Idle Lake” (1.9, 3.4, 17.2). Compared to the “goodly frame of Tempeaunce”—otherwise known as Alma’s Castle, or the “human body as ruled by the soul”—with which the speaker opens Canto 12, Guyon and his Palmer are in danger of falling prey to the “wandring Islands” that contain “not firme land” (1.1, lines 7, and line 4). For Spenser, this “goodly frame” is “grounded, and fast settled / On firme foundation of true bountyhed,” the fixity of which illustrates the stark contrast to the islands “which to and fro doe ronne / In the wide waters” (11.5–6). In Spenser’s allegory, Book II’s titular virtue falls prey to non-fixity and unstable ground—directing our attention to hazy borders and unknown depths—which the sea imagery helps to display. The crew passes the Whirlepoole of Decay and Labryinth, and they sail into a tempest, which brings “the three thereat / … such horrour” (22.6–7). Their “horrour” leaves the three men of the crew with a “liuing sence dismayd,” or appalled by their living senses (22.2 and line 9); caused by the “outragiously” violent storm and the “huge Sea monsters,” their fear is engendered first by the extreme conditions of their environment and secondly by the very creatures who are capable of thriving in a habitat so hostile to human life. A. C. Hamilton notes in his annotations that the “billows [which] rore / Outrageously” suggest an “intemperately” prone environment, “hence violence that goes beyond all bounds” (22.1–2). In Hamilton’s example, intemperance equals unmitigated violence and trespassing the limits of a virtuous perimeter, both of which appear strikingly similar to Guyon’s “tempest” when he destroys the Bower at the end of Book II (83.4). By contrast, temperance, in what Guyon should personify,
cautiously traverses the stratified limits of religious and secular law, encountering temptations
but ultimately resisting them. If such a virtuous perimeter were impenetrable, then the need for
caution would be eliminated. I read “going beyond all bounds,” therefore, as a marker of
extremity, which both the environment and its inhabitants betray. Going “beyond all bounds”
suddenly becomes a major point of contention to an otherwise conventional passage. Similar to
current scientific discussions of microbes, a temperate environment and extreme life forms now
enter the fray.

Guyon continues headlong into the storm, and so the spectacle continues:

The dreadfull Fish, that hath deseru'd the name
  Of Death, and like him lookes in dreadfull hew,
  The griesly Wasserman, that makes his game
  The flying ships with swiftnesse to pursue,
  The horrible Sea-satyre, that doth shew
  His fearefull face in time of greatest storme,
  Huge Ziffius, whom Mariners eschew
  No lesse, then rockes, (as travellers informe,)
  And greedy Rosmarines with visages deforme.

All these, and thousand thousands many more,
  And more deformed Monsters thousand fold,
  With dreadfull noise, and hollow rombling rore,
  Came rushing in the fomy waues enrold,
  Which seem'd to fly for feare, them to behold:
  Ne wonder, if these did the knight appall;
  For all that here on earth we dreadfull hold,
  Be but as bugs to fearen babes withall,
  Compared to the creatures in the seas entrall (24–5).

Again, boundaries play an important role: the separation between human achievement on land
and human fragility on water calls into question the limits of Guyon’s status as an ideal
nobleman, which the awesome mass of creaturely life, living just below the surface, throw into
stark relief. The fish apparently deserve “the name / Of Death” and show themselves alongside
the “griesly Wasserman” that “pursue” the “flying ships with swiftnesse.” Diverse and equally
terrifying species abound in these stanzas: a “Sea-satyre” shows “His fearfull face,” while a “Huge Ziffius” and “greedy Rosmaries” appear with “visages deforme.” Multiplicity signals excess, as the sheer scale of each individual animal combines with “all these, and thousand thousands many more, / And more deformed Monsters thousand fold.” Here, size matters. According to the narrator, all the animals “here on earth we dreadfull hold” might as well be “but as bugs” compared to those life forms that lurk below the “fomy waues enrold,” giving an astonishing importance to what lies beneath the choppy surface of the ocean. Extreme life for Spenser is concerned with what exists beyond Guyon’s conception of “natural” limits. If animals on Earth “be but as bugs,” sea life outnumbers and outperforms human life on land, which signals to Guyon’s worldview as it capsizes.

In perusing Guyon’s temperance, his behavior is cast alongside these sea creatures of massive scale. While one might be tempted to read Guyon’s humanity, not as an inventory of superiorities but as a collection of vulnerable traits—as Laurie Shannon does for King Lear—it is much more pressing to situate the blurred line between myth and fact as a commixture of mythological and scientific creatures in these stanzas. The demarcation between mythological lore and scientific reality in this passage is virtually non-existent. The wasserman, a sea monster hybridized with humans, swims alongside the Ziffius, which appears in Pliny’s Naturalis Historia as the Latinate xiphius—a creature now known as the swordfish. The sea-satyrs shows his “fearfull face” and wades alongside the rosmarinum, or dew of the sea, presently known as the walrus. The list continues, and the “thousand thousands many more” multiply:

Most vgly shapes, and horrible aspects,
Such as Dame Nature selfe mote feare to see,
Or shame, that euer should so fowle defects
From her most cunning hand escaped bee;
All dreadfull pourtraicts of deformitee:
Spring-headed Hydraes, and sea-shouldring Whales,
Great whirlpools, which all fishes make to flee,
Bright Scolopendraes, arm'd with siluer scales,
Mighty *Monoceroses*, with immeasured tayles (23.1–9).

The “Spring-headed Hydraes” recall the Greek mythological creature that Hercules slays, but they tread alongside more familiar “sea-shouldering Whales.” The “scolopendraes” and “monoceroses,” for all their “silver scales” and “immeasured tayles,” are other extant Latinates from Pliny: the former is defined as a centipede, while the latter appears to be nothing more than a real-life narwhal. Although it is nearly impossible to prove for sure whether or not Spenser engaged with Gesner’s text and illustrations, the poet’s deployment of *rosmarinum*, *xiphius*, *monoceros*, and *scolopendra* appear in Pliny’s natural history, very strongly indicating Spenser’s engagement with the text Gesner used as his primary source.35

The new method of observation led to a general fascination with newly discovered creatures that were strange to European eyes.36 Guyon is ill-equipped to handle the pressure that his aquatic neighbors maneuver with aplomb. As he is exposed to “the natural” elements, which feel anything but natural for him, Guyon must grapple with his comparative lack of resources. This moment, too, shares parallels with the cultural force of natural history texts. As Beate Oeschner avers, with the proliferation of natural history texts and zoological manuals, a “certain feeling of unease” emerged to readers who reacted in expressions of “astonishment, fascination, and fear.”37 In his trip to the Bower, Guyon’s horror resembles precisely that “feeling of unease,” and my examination of natural history and philosophy shows that an important link exists between our impulse to discover and catalog and our reaction to reckon with the shock and horror at what we might find. If natural history ushered a new epoch centered on observation-based techniques and provided early modern naturalists with what Keith Thomas calls a “novel way of looking at things,” then Guyon’s horror is recast in terms of this science of describing.38
The narrator certainly describes the fish as “dreadfull” and “griesly,” which Thomas calls “unfashionable,” but he does so to describe Guyon’s mental anguish and thus highlights the underpinnings of the emerging natural philosophy. It is crucial to note that, although the narrator describes these creatures as a threat, they have no direct conflict with Guyon; rather, they are neutral figures, at which Guyon gawks. The knight views these gargantuan animals as threatening, unusual, and ominous because, as Thomas writes, newly discovered life forms “blur the crucial categories of ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ around which so much popular thinking revolved.” Indeed, the sea creatures convey horror to Guyon because they seem to defy “the natural” to *Guyon*. The new forms of knowledge natural history made available allow the mythological accounts of life forms to collapse into realistic conceptions of animals.

The sea monsters themselves have been interpreted variously, though not with much attention or substance and certainly not through a presumption of truth. In his *Spenser Encyclopedia* entry, René Graziani interprets the sea monsters as an “inner menace of disordered lower nature … meant to push Guyon into wanting to take things easy … [to] create a need for rest and pleasure.” Likewise, Evans casts the aquatic creatures as “a test of [Guyon’s] moral and physical stamina, in the face of the varied distractions and appeals with which sloth can confront him.” In the text, the Palmer theorizes that the creatures are Acrasia’s magical trickery and are a figment of the knight’s imagination, “illusions which can blind the eye of reason and be mistaken for reality,” according to Evans. In this reading, the Palmer’s rationalization refuses to acknowledge the existence of massive creatures and underscores Katherine Eggert’s theory of disknowledge, a reactionary movement to scientific discoveries that ran rampant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These sea animals, the few times they are mentioned in critical essays, are constantly cast in the shade of terrifying monsters belonging to their own mythos,
even though the term “sea-monster” was used in the 1590s to convey the remarkable size of 
fishes or cetaceans, a clade we now categorize as dolphins, porpoises, and whales.⁴⁵

But again, these critical interpretations of Spenser’s sea monsters ignore natural history 
as a cultural force. To be fair, it would be highly contentious to claim that Spenser was, indeed, a 
naturalist, but the poet’s status as a Protestant thinker affords a compelling avenue to pursue his 
engagement with natural history.⁴⁶ As Erica Fudge has influentially argued, the Protestant 
Reformation’s influence on empiricism was “massively significant”; more recently, Patrick 
Wolloch has claimed that Protestantism was “instrumental in eradicating medieval zoological 
beliefs, paving the way for a more rationalistic and secular science.”⁴⁷ Generally, the Protestant 
faith supported empiricism, which, as Wolloch argues, saw nature as a “revelation of God,” the 
research of which was considered a “religious duty.”⁴⁸ Viewed in this light, the “sea-monsters” 
are not the mythical monsters so ingrained in folklore and medieval adventure narratives: they in 
no way directly threaten or tempt Guyon, though they certainly have the capacity, and they are 
neither named personifications of vices—such as the dragon Error, or the miserly subterranean 
cave dweller Mammon—nor are they given an abstraction to mark them as such.⁴⁹ In contrast to 
the mythic hero, Guyon does not fight and destroy the sea monsters by which he is horrified.⁵⁰ 
The aquatic life provide a threat insomuch as Guyon is scared of them, but that is more due to the 
knight seeing the “dreadfull fish” as a logical issue than anything else. The central role that 
human-animal conflict plays is precisely where the sea creatures in Canto 12 differ from the 
more sinister mythical creatures appearing in chivalric romances. Spenser, in engaging with 
contemporary natural history, had in mind newly discovered animals, the likenesses of which 
were heavily circulated via cheaper publications of the woodcuts, called the Icones (see 
Illustrations 1.1–1.3).⁵¹ In this study, I do offer one caution: whether or not the creatures really
exist is tangential to my study of early modern natural history; to suspend disbelief in this study is to appreciate what Stephen Bamforth calls the “discourse of wonder” that so enraptured early modern naturalists.\(^5^2\) Guyon’s horror, then, is refigured as the knight calling into question the very fabric of his cosmos.\(^5^3\)

As I previously stated, boundaries are absolutely crucial, especially since Bamforth argues that the demarcation “between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ is not fixed” in early modern philosophy.\(^5^4\) This tenet might explain why the “thousand thousands” swim alongside “ten thousand Magick mights” and why the “spring-headed hydraes” coexist beside the walrus. Magic and scientific reality are concomitant in Spenser’s poetic reimagining of the Homeric tradition. If Guyon in his uncertainty emulates the reaction of early moderns, whereby explorers were “missing the ‘kind’ or ‘genus’ to which [the life form] should be related,” then the knight is unable to situate the strange shapes in relation to what Tristan Dagron calls the “conformations of other, more familiar beings.”\(^5^5\) This upheaval in Guyon’s worldview tilts on its axis from a “discourse of wonder” to a discourse of horror—a philosophical problem in its own right.

II

The first portion of this essay explains the historical presence and ramifications of natural history within sixteenth-century culture and how Spenser responds to them in his poetry. For the remainder, I consider how Spenser anticipates modern philosophers and contemplates this logical issue on display in Canto 12. In this instance, our traditional readings of allegory could benefit from a reinterpretation in light of the current impulse to de-center the human.\(^5^6\) Gordon Teskey’s term “interpretive play” has been useful for many critics in an allegory as polysemic as *The Faerie Queene*, though it does not speak to the cultural force that natural history imposed, nor does it capture the contradiction embedded within this study of temperance.\(^5^7\) And as Campana
McAdams has recently argued, “Neither personification nor allegory need be imagined as merely devices for distributing humanity,” which I take to mean that allegory and personification are not devices purely for determining what the human is or does.\(^{58}\) The voyage to the Bower still serves a symbolic purpose—it reveals the fissured exterior of the ideal human as he faces strange life forms—but I propose to read these sea monsters as precisely what they are, not an externalized virtue prescribed onto them by Guyon’s misdeeds. Thus, my reading does not conflict with these previous readings; rather, it accommodates them by acknowledging polysemic interpretation through the lens of early modern natural history and philosophy.

Guyon, stilted by his horror, sees only the “dreadfull Fish” in front of him, thus signaling his inability to comprehend the order of nature; he is confronted with something he cannot understand, viewing the “thousand thousands” as nature’s mishap.\(^{59}\) Charles T. Wolfe argues that the fulcrum of early modern metaphysics is most evident in the fissure between a human’s supposition of the natural world and his confrontation with a starkly contrast reality; in Wolfe’s words, there is “a concern with Nature ‘missing its target and producing non-viable forms, a concern in which metaphysical considerations of genus, form and essence, necessity and accident collide with emerging biological science producing what one might call an ‘ontology of the biological world.’”\(^{60}\) Nature’s mishaps, Wolfe continues, “challenge the idea of nature as something law-like—as a source of order, a cosmos.”\(^{61}\) It is here that we begin to see how the “ontology of the biological world” functions for Guyon. His horror, recast as an impotent reaction to the aquatic life before him, is more than fear; it is an eruption of orthodox Western philosophy.

I read Spenser as refusing to engage in the dominant narrative mode of portraying monsters, similar to Michel Montaigne before him.\(^{62}\) This rupture is what philosopher Eugene
Thacker calls a “logical impossibility” for classical Aristotelian logic, the foundational bedrock of Western philosophy. This noticeable cleft in metaphysics allows contemporary philosophy to bridge—through dialetheism—my current inquiry into logic, life, and temperate climates. Similar to life forms and temperance, dialetheism defines itself by “conceptual limits … [concerning] the limits of our concepts,” according to philosopher Graham Priest. These “limits of our concepts” reveal themselves in Guyon’s encounter with the sea monsters, which I prefer to label extremophiles, since they convey the contradiction at the heart of our biological conceptions of life. Because, as Thacker writes, “biological science … relies on its own principle of sufficient reason, namely that life and logic bear some basic relation to each other,” extremophiles are “examples of living contradictions, a living instance of the inverse relationship between logic and life.” In short, extremophiles are dialetheic thought in action.

Because the concept directly opposes Aristotle’s Law of Non-Contradiction and is defined in part by limits and boundaries, dialetheia is a handy term for this discussion regarding the descriptive science and Spenser’s treatment of temperance. Like Spenser’s displayed philosophy of temperance, Priest’s philosophy of dialetheism is concerned with crossing metaphysical boundaries, the limits of thought where “boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed” anyway. This definition bears striking resemblance to Guyon’s horror: the animals in the sea should not exist because they thrive in an extreme environment so hostile to life on land, yet they exist anyway. Orthodox logic such as the Law of Non-Contradiction, as Priest argues, is only a theory for how logic works: “there is no a priori guarantee that [the LNC] is correct,” and thus there is no reason to discount dialetheia as a valid method if inquiry. Because it is possible to think of a negation to a fact, that negation exists by virtue of it already being thought; two thoughts contradictory to one another can sit side by side comfortably—or
uncomfortably, if you have a finite view of the world similar to the Knight of Temperance’s—marking for us, as Priest writes, “an ontological turn in philosophy.”

Dialetheic contradiction exists at the heart of life forms, especially those which scientists have deemed extremophiles. Spenser anticipates Thacker’s *Horror of Philosophy* series in Guyon’s voyage; the knight confronts life he previously thought impossible and must deal with the reality that what should not exist as a category of life, in fact, does. Viewed in this light, the sea monsters become the 1590 equivalent of extremophiles, an anthropocentric term that scientists Charles Gerday and Nicolas Glansdorff define as organisms thriving “under conditions that from a human perspective are clearly ‘extreme.’” Confronted with one thought (God’s creation is perfect) and its direct contradiction (this anomaly somehow exists in the same world as I do), Guyon anticipates Thacker’s premise that “this thought that cannot be thought,” and all he can do in response is freeze in horror. Extremophiles are a great boon to the modern scientific community, extremophiles simultaneously pose a problem for orthodox philosophy; according to Thacker, they are “forms of life living in conditions antagonistic to life,” or what we have to be considered to be life as we know it. Even though biological science relies on the premise that logic and life should be in direct relation to one another, extremophiles exist to undermine that relation. Put differently, “these living contradictions” are the mythical monsters that come to life before Guyon, and they force the period’s dividing line between *mythos* and *ratio* to collapse.

Extremophiles act as the litmus test for how to categorize what constitutes life while also affording the possibility of the impossible. Thacker considers extremophiles “alive according to our existing criteria of ‘life’ and yet, according to those same criteria … they should not be alive.” Their status as life forms directly contradict the laws of classical Aristotelian logic, an
ethos of the new science that early modern intellectuals were so eager to see ushered into contemporary thought. It for this this reason that I advocate for extremophile over “monster,” a term that, according to the OED, does not exist in reality; a monster is a “mythical creature,” “malformed … usually to a degree incompatible with life … any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.”

It is my contention that, in his portrayal of temperance, Spenser preempted the twentieth-century discovery of these extreme life forms lurking in “nuclear reactors,” “acid,” and “boiling-hot water”; and as studies in early modern natural history have shown, the fantastical creatures in zoographic texts were as good as real to readers because Gesner eschewed superstition and deployed an observational science. Similar to Thacker, Spenser contemplates the horror of philosophy when he includes the diverse group of fish in Canto 12. Because Guyon fails to comprehend what he sees, the “discourse of wonder” for early modern natural philosophers is a discourse of horror in Book II. It is through Guyon’s clash with extremophiles—and our subsequent study of them—that the root cause of Guyon’s horror is revealed as the discourse of horror at the center of Western philosophy.

III

What do dialetheism and biological extreme life have to do with temperance? By nature, and in nature, dialetheic thought crosses boundaries, while temperance attempts to maintain those boundaries. Temperance, along with its bedmate logocentrism, are the *sine qua non* for notions central to rationality and consistency. But the world—since it contains, as Priest says, “non-mental and non-linguistic inhabitants”—cannot be contained by the parameters of human virtue. Viewed in this light, the extremophiles’ lack of speech thus becomes even more emblematic—since they are a part of the natural world, and fall outside the perimeter of Aristotle’s Law of Non-Contradiction and Guyon’s philosophy. To apply temperance to a
world—where extremophiles not only exist but also flaunt the categories that men have so carefully created—is futile. The obsessive desire for uniformity and constancy in the psyche of Western philosophy provides the basis for Guyon’s state of mind as he exits the Castle of Alma, but those manmade constructions fall by the wayside as Guyon embarks and discovers the startling menagerie of extremely proportioned life forms swimming before him.

This conflict is where dialetheia becomes important to temperance. Because dialetheism accommodates and encourages multiple, even contradictory, readings also speaking to the ontological turn in both metaphysics and science, it threatens to replace the humanistic heuristics of virtues; it endangers the established worldview, an outcome running parallel to that of natural history’s impact on Europe. Moments of dialetheic possibility challenge human institutions, such as virtue, logocentrism, and the empiric foundations to rational thought. What is a logic game for Thacker and Priest is the crux of a cultural institution under duress for Spenser. It is for this very reason why I advocate including extremophile as a useful term within literary and posthumanist critiques; the term extremophile allows for simultaneous polysemy while it also speaks to the inherent contradiction at the core of our “non-mental,” “non-linguistic” universe. The border between mythology and rational knowledge in *The Faerie Queene* collapses to the point where the real and the mythical are indistinguishable from each other, making it difficult to determine fact from fiction. Those two contradictory ideas—myth and reason—coexist simultaneously, even if they must do so uncomfortably. Perhaps this concept is the reason why the syllabic excess in the first line of stanza 83, where Guyon destroys the Bower, is allowed to coexist within the Legend of Temperance; why Guyon is both the Knight of Temperance and a “pitilesse” “tempest”; why, in searching for the naturalized border of temperance, Guyon confronts extreme life forms that make him question the very basis of life as he understands it, or
as Thacker elsewhere would call it, “life-for-me.” It is when we search for the golden mean—or perhaps, the Goldilocks mean—that we find the ultimate tipping point, one which simultaneously contains a “just-right” “life-for-me” and the seemingly contradictory boundlessness of life-for-them.

From life forms to poetic form, what transpires in the Bower’s destruction is categorically intemperance in action; notably, the first line of stanza 83 scans irregularly. What should be a measured line of iambic pentameter, which would uniformly reflect five iambs of meter in an unstressed-stressed rhythm, looks more like the following:

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  x / | x / | x / | x x / | x /
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But all those pleaunt bowres and pallace brave

Here, the extra syllable—the “es” in “bowres”—tips the careful reader to the purposefully unbalanced measure of the line. Uniformity unravels as it becomes subject to the dialetheic possibility of an intemperate Knight Temperate. Though one must contend with a poet whose style and conventions are intentionally archaic, it is meaningful that—in a book composed around the conceit of measured virtue, within a canto where most narrative action is suspended and deferred—Spenser opts for the extra syllable in “bowres” when he had readily available, by his own convention, “bwr” (1.8.37.1) and “bowrs” (1.8.41.6). As Guyon completes his quest, excess abounds. In his revenge, the figuration of temperance exceeds its own limits. Guyon, as a poetic figuration of a temperate life form, himself exceeds the bounds of his sole titular characteristic. Much like the extreme life that Guyon encounters, he—as the intemperate Knight of Temperance—is a life form that contains categorical contradictions. His actions represent the direct negation of his narrative purpose; Guyon—similar to the negation of a positive statement, an affront to the Law of Non-Contradiction—should not exist, but he does anyway.
In Spenser’s refusal to collapse the vowels of “bowres” to “bowrs,” the poetic form mimes the action of the narrative; Guyon’s travels are relatively uneventful and measured, until an uptick in excessive behavior—or, in the case of poetic mimesis, excessive syllables—threatens to throw his ideation into complete imbalance. This imbalance, I argue, is a product of his encounter with the “thousand thousands many more.” Faced with the possibility that the impossible can, in fact, exist, survive, and thrive, Guyon’s worldview is upended in much the same way early modern culture was when zoographic texts circulated across Europe. The measured form of the canto is thrown into disarray by Guyon’s destruction of the Bower, the primary goal of his entire quest. We might read Canto 12, then, as a state of inaction, the balance of which is unseated by the immeasurable violence that takes place in one stanza and one stanza alone. If temperance is the virtue that defines Book II, then the imbalanced poetic form betrays that attempt to be virtuous. Since the Legend of Temperance ends in imbalance, how should we now engage with areas of the text where literary critics have supposedly addressed this virtue? That answer can be found in moments appearing as a “natural” occurrence—moments to which scholars have paid little critical attention because they appear conventional at first glance—and should be recast in light of my argument.

This reading insists on taking seriously the idea of Spenser’s extremophiles as a fully realized metonymy for the philosophical fissure natural history instigates. It is through this philosophical fault line that Spenser preempts Priests’ and Thackers’ metaphysical understandings of logic, life, and ultimately living contradictions—extreme life forms that are tempting to categorize as modern constructions. When Spenser writes Guyon’s sea journey in the Homeric tradition, he pays homage to the poetry that precedes him, but he adds the stakes of his own cultural moment. In Canto 12, Spenser combines mythological creatures with real animals
that Gesner’s works vetted with careful research; his poetry thus gestures toward the blurred boundaries natural history incited as a cultural force in early modern Europe. In Canto 12, the uncertainty between fact and myth, temperance and intemperance, the extreme and “the natural,” exemplifies first Guyon’s embodiment of intemperance in the Bower’s destruction and, in turn, a culture on the brink of a new philosophy.
NOTES

The following notes are based on an amended version of Chicago Manual of Style, as practiced by SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900.


A special issue of *Spenser Studies* speaks to this debate. See Ayesha Ramachandran and Melissa E. Sanchez, “Spenser and ‘the Human’: An Introduction,” *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, ed. Ramachandran and Sanchez, 30 (2015): vii–xv. The deficit in posthumanism and early modern studies has been attributed to the fact that the two do not speak to each other; when they do, those conversations are overwhelmingly about Shakespeare, leaving “the less fortunate effect” of a wide range of materials excluded from a narrative of critical importance (Ramachandran and Sanchez, p. ix). Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano have greatly contributed to bridging early modern and posthumanist studies. See Campana and Maisano, *Renaissance Posthumanism* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016).


Ramachandran and Sanchez, p. ix; and Ramachandran, p. 5.

Sanchez, p. 23.


Bamforth, p. 124.

Parrish, p. 35.


Carscallen, pp. 681-2.


Edmund Spenser, “Letter of the Authors,” in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 713–8, 714. All references to *The Faerie Queene* are from this edition; unless otherwise stated, all direct quotations are from Book II, Canto 12, and citations will appear parenthetically followed by stanza and line numbers.

Carscallen, p. 681.

Dees, p. 656.


I have the following, the preeminent the Latin lexicography, to thank for these insights. See *Lewis and Short: A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955); s.v. “xiphius,” p. 2017.

See Ogilvie, pp. 238–9.

See *Lewis and Short*, s.v. “monoceros,” p. 1161; “scolopendra,” p. 1646; and “rosmarinum,” p. 1600.


38 Thomas, p. 52.

39 Thomas, p. 77.

40 Thomas, pp. 77–8.


42 Evans, p. 344.

43 Evans, p. 344.


48 Wolloch, p. 105.


51 Gesner’s woodcuts made it to England by at least 1560 [See Sachiko Kusukawa, “Patron’s Review: The Role of Images in the Development of Renaissance Natural History,” Archives of Natural History 38, (October 2011): 189–213, p. 203]. For further commentary on woodcut iconography, see Ogilvie, pp. 238 and 256; Adrian Jones, “Natural History as Print Culture,” Cultures of Natural History, pp. 75–90; Sarah Blake McHam, Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013); Senter, p. 84; David Freedberg, The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the

52 Bamforth, pp. 126 and 111. For the role of curiosity contributing to natural history, see Katie Whitaker, “The Culture of Curiosity,” in Cultures of Natural History, pp. 75–90.

53 For this effect in the history of philosophy, see Tristan Dagron, “Nature and its Monsters in the Renaissance: Montaigne and Vanini,” in Monsters and Philosophy, pp. 37–59, 44; and Bamforth, p. 113.

54 Bamforth, p. 113.

55 Dagron, p. 43.

56 For Ramachandran’s thoughts on posthumanism and allegory, see “Humanism and Its Discontents,” p. 14 and 12.

57 Teskey, p. 16; Dagron, p. 40.


59 It was common to label these strange life forms as accidents of nature. See Wolfe, Introduction in Monsters and Philosophy, pp. xi–xiv, xii.

60 Wolfe, pp. xi–xii.

61 Wolfe, p. xii.


64 Graham Priest, Beyond the Limits of Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.

65 Thacker, SSC, p. 103.

66 Priest, p. 3.

67 Priest, p. 4.

68 Priest, p. 295.

70 Thacker, *SSC*, p. 15.

71 Thacker, *SSC*, p. 102

72 Thacker, *SSC*, p. 102.

73 Thacker, *SSC*, p. 102.


76 Ibid.