

Alzabos and Hyenas

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 09 Mar 1999

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Nigel Price — 09 Mar 1999, 19:15

Let me offer a deeply obscure and probably irrelevant footnote to the recent discussion of alzabos and hyenas.

In searching through my copy of the Longman edition of Spenser's "The Faerie Queene", looking for an entirely different reference, I was interested to read Professor A C Hamilton's note to FQ III,vii,22,8-9, relating to Spenser's description of the hyena-like creature that the witch sends after Florimell. The two lines of the poem read:

But likest it to an Hyena was,
That feeds on womens flesh, as others feede on gras.

On which Hamilton comments:

"In medieval lore, the Hyena dug up graves to eat the carcasses, and was used by witches. The Geneva (Bible) gloss to Ecclesiasticus 13.19 cites it as a beast that lures men to devour them. Rowland (1973) 113 notes that it could typify sexual perversion. Spenser associates the beast with lust in women and towards women; cf Lust that 'fed on fleshly gore' (IV vii 5-8)."

The only translation of the Deuterocanonicals that I could lay my hands on was an old NEB, which has the hyena in verse 18 of Ecclesiasticus 13, but the numbering of the verses may well have been different in the Geneva Bible. Anyway, the NEB translates Ecclesiasticus 13.18 thus:

What peace can there be between hyena and dog,
what peace between rich man and pauper?

I was amused to see that the preceding verse asks a similar rhetorical question, but this time featuring, yes, you guessed it fellow lycophiles, a wolf:

What has a wolf in common with a lamb,
or a sinner with a man of piety?

So...a beast that "lures men to devour them." Sounds like an alzabo to me.