

WHY THERE WAS NO CENTAUR IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON
THE VULGAR AS A COGNITIVE CATEGORY IN ENLIGHTENMENT EUROPE

The second paper that I gave in the seminar of the *Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University* was designed to provide the other fellows, staff members and guests with some background knowledge on the project on Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Pandechion Epistemonichon* that I had been pursuing during tenure of my fellowship at the *Italian Academy*. This research project grew out of my dissertation research. I wrote my PhD dissertation under the supervision of Professor Helmut Zedelmaier at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and Professor Lorraine Daston at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. The book I have been writing on the basis of it is tentatively entitled *How Did a Centaur Get to Early Modern London? Observation and Reading in the European Study of Nature, ca. 1550-1750*. It enquires into the relationship between observation and reading in the study of nature in the early modern period and brings some fundamental but hitherto neglected epistemic and cognitive categories to the fore: plenitude (*copia*) and credulity (*credulitas*), amongst others. I chose to present in some detail an episode that is especially well suited to illustrate my approach.

A curious rumor circulated in eighteenth-century Europe. A live centaur had allegedly been sighted in London. In the seminar, I analyzed the circumstances under which this rumor came into being, expanded on how learned authors at the time reacted to it, and thus used it as a starting point for an enquiry into a more general problem: why did eighteenth-century naturalists invest so much energy in criticizing the belief in the existence of creatures such as the centaur and similar staples of the humanist natural history of the Renaissance?

Our intuition seems to suggest that enlightened naturalists could not but be critical of such seemingly bookish creatures simply because unlike their Renaissance predecessors they valued observation more than reading. However, the changes that occurred over the course of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries at the level of scholarly reading practices were in fact no less significant and consequential than were those in the observation department. What is more, an enquiry into the reasons for the development sketched above should go beyond an analysis of changes that occurred at the level of scholarly practices.

In order to understand more fully why intellectuals from the late seventeenth century onward argued so forcefully against the possibility that certain creatures exist or ever existed, one has to take cultural factors into the equation. A dramatic change was on its way at the time concerning how learned naturalists related their own, disciplined ways of seeing and reading both to that of the *vulgus*, the common man, and to that of earlier generations of scholars. Their vehement criticism of “idle”, ceaseless curiosity and of the “credulity” of those considered to be as yet unenlightened was intimately connected to a then widespread notion of the vulgar as a cognitive category.

The example of the centaur allegedly seen in London is well suited to show how former ‘scientific’ knowledge could under these circumstances sink down to “vulgar” knowledge – and thus the very type of knowledge against which learned authors came to define their own,

disciplined, knowledge and ways of knowing. The development sketched above therefore was not a matter of reading versus observation, nor was it one of the moderns versus the ancients. The loss in status of the texts of the former ancient authorities alone cannot account for the fact that the way in which learned naturalists dealt with centaurs and several other canonical objects of Renaissance natural history changed so dramatically from Ulisse Aldrovandi to his successors in the mid-eighteenth century. After all, not only the authors of Greco-Roman antiquity testified to the existence of many of the creatures that eighteenth-century intellectuals would consider as nonexistent, if not laughable. A large number of early modern authors published accounts of strikingly similar beings that had allegedly been sighted during their lifetime.

If one subscribed to the arguments of the eighteenth-century intellectuals themselves, the matter would quickly be settled: the old book-knowledge, full of false facts based on “credulity,” had to be brushed aside and replaced by carefully assessed eyewitness accounts. This dichotomy between early modern erudition and enlightened empiricism – that is also present in a considerable portion of the secondary literature – does not, however, do justice either to the complexities of early modern learned knowledge, or to that of the mid-eighteenth century.

In order to be able to paint a fuller picture of the changes sketched above it seems vital to distinguish between the different empiricisms and ways of reading that characterized the study of nature at a specific time and in a specific place. Furthermore, cultural factors such as the power exerted by the cognitive category of the vulgar have to be taken into consideration. Along these lines I shed some more light on what the intellectual gulf that divided his eighteenth-century successors from the eminent Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi and his contemporaries consisted in.