Written by Romeo Vitelli, Ph.D. Thursday, 25 July 2013 09:00

For <u>George Spencer</u>, the legal woes that led to his execution began with the birth of a piglet in 1642.

Life in 17th century New England was hard enough for servants, but Spencer's odd physical appearance made him even more suspect. Described in historical accounts as ugly and balding, he also had "butt one eye for use, the other hath (as it is called) a pearle in itt, is whitish & deformed" which gave him an even more sinister appearance. Spencer was also notorious for his use of profanity, vulgar behaviour, and generally being a "habitual troublemaker." Perhaps even more unforgivably for the time, he was also an open atheist and only read the Bible when ordered to by his employer. Still, despite being charged with assorted crimes, the worst punishment he ever got was a flogging. It was this flogging that likely led to his moving to the New Haven Colony

in what is now Connecticut.

Not that George Spencer managed to keep out of trouble for long. Between his sinister appearance and his reputation for immoral behaviour (the exact nature of the "immorality" he engaged in being left up to the fevered imagination of his neighbours). Regularly accused of various illegal and depraved sexual acts, it was probably not surprising that he had difficulty keeping a job for long.

And then came the birth of the piglet in question...

Belonging to one of Spencer's former employers, the piglet was described as being a "prodigious monster" with only one eye. When spectators commented on how much the piglet resembled Spencer, the accusations began. While sex between humans and animals has always been illegal in most places, what made it a capital crime was the strange belief that such a "crime against nature" could produce bizarre hybrids with human and animal traits. Though no actual cases of such hybrids were ever reported, enough examples of deformed livestock and children happened to keep the rumours alive. People accused of bestiality were prosecuted just as harshly as witches and the animals believed to be "tainted" by the crime were executed along with them.

In George Spencer's case, he was accused of fathering the one-eyed piglet after having sex with one of his former employer's pigs. As far as his Puritan accusers were concerned, the piglet's deformity was deemed an "act of God" to reveal Spencer's crime. Though there was no

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evidence besides the piglet in question, Spencer was thrown into prison pending his trial.

George Spencer continued to insist he was innocent but a magistrate then told him that he would be treated mercifully if he confessed to the crime. Seeing how harshly other prisoners were treated, Spencer eventually confessed though he quickly retracted his confession when he realized that he still faced execution. Insisting that he had only confessed to please the magistrate, Spencer remained in prison. After other magistrates visited him, he was persuaded to confess once more. He also confessed to lying, being openly contemptuous of the colony's laws and profaning the Lord's Day (which he had reportedly called "the ladyes day"). Spencer had his limits though and flatly denied engaging in homosexual acts with other colonists or the local native tribes.

When he finally came to trial, his confessions were used against him as evidence though he retracted them all under oath. There were still no witnesses, mind you, and the New Haven colony's demanded two witnesses for any capital crime. The judges neatly solved the problem by using Spencer's confessions to name him as one of the witnesses while the deformed piglet was listed as the other.

After the judge declared himself "aboundantly satisfied in the evidence", George Spencer was found guilty of violating <u>Leviticus 20:15</u>, i.e., "If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he is to be put to death, and you must kill the animal.". Though Spencer continued to protest his innocence, and there were still no real evidence against him, he was sentenced to death. On April 8, 1642, the piglet was killed with a sword while Spencer was hanged. He was the first white settler to be executed in Connecticut.

Though cases of zoophilia continued to be prosecuted throughout New England, only one other incident involving the birth of a deformed animal resulted in a criminal trial. Occurring in New Haven five years after George Spencer was executed, a servant named, appropriately enough, Thomas Hogg, was charged with molesting a sow belonging to his employer. In Hogg's case, he was charged following the birth of a piglet that "had a faire & white skinne & head, as [Thomas Hogg] is" according to one source. While Hogg denied the charge, his previous convictions for indecent exposure worked against him. After being imprisoned for buggery and exposure, the court decided to investigate further in a rather novel way.

Taking Hogg to his employer's barnyard, he was instructed to fondle several of the sows, including the one he had allegedly molested. According to official records, the other sows

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ignored him while the sow in question showed a "working of lust" which was so extreme "that she powred out seede before them." Hogg was later sentenced to be whipped and imprisoned for "filthynesse, lyeing & pilfering" but the bestiality charge was dropped due to insufficient evidence.

Bestiality continued to be prosecuted harshly though it stopped being a capital crime by the end of the 17th century. The last major case in New England in 1681 led to the accused being convicted of "vile, abominable, and presumptuous attempts to buggery with a mare." He was whipped, forced to sit on the gallows with a rope around his neck, branded in the forehead with the letter "P" (for pollution), and banished from the colony where he lived. For the most part, bestiality cases were prosecuted more harshly than sodomy (homosexuality) offenses during that same period.

Despite the harshness surrounding bestiality convictions, there were no more cases using deformed animals as evidence of guilt as more scientific views of heredity became accepted. The decline of religious fervour in New England also saw a drop in bestiality convictions (along with most other "morality" cases) due to the difficulty in proving the charges.

If the old fears about sex with animals creating hybrids have faded from public attention, they haven't disappeared completely in other parts of the world. In 1999, the birth of a stillborn, deformed lamb

reportedly looked like a human being led to accusations that the lamb was the product of bestiality. Though the local agriculturist established a scientific explanation for the lamb fetus' strange appearance, local traditional doctors tried to settle the question of bestiality using "throwing bones" (a form of divination). The owner of the animal in question decided to go with the scientific explanation and refused to allow the traditional doctors to proceed.

Another case in Nigeria last year involved the birth of a lamb, a "monster baby that looked half-human". News of the birth drew thousands of spectators from across the country who also demanded that the sheep's owner be questioned and, if convicted of bestiality, executed. As one spectator reported, "This is an abomination in our land. To see a sheep give birth to a half human being is a mystery and that shows how terrible some people are. It is unimaginable that some people will be having intercourse with animals.". I haven't been able to find out anything about how the case was resolved though we will likely be seeing more cases like it in future.

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The spirit of George Spencer lives on.

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