

# Beasts and Sovereigns\*

The Zoopolitical Imagination of FromSoftware's *Demon's Souls*,  
*Bloodborne*, and *Elden Ring*

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## Abstract

Game development studio FromSoftware's work over the last thirteen years has been much concerned with kingship and rule—what it means to be a lord, and what happens to the land when lordship fails. *Demon's Souls* (2009), the *Dark Souls* trilogy (2011, 2014, 2016), *Bloodborne* (2015), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), and now, *Elden Ring* (2022), each ask these questions in their own way, and each provide distinctly varied answers. But across all of these games—and especially across the 'un-trilogy' of *Demon's Souls*, *Bloodborne*, and *Elden Ring*—the question of the *sovereign* is always tied to the question of the *beast*: that which rules over society and that which cannot live within it. This paper uses the discourse of the *political animal* inaugurated by Aristotle, and taken up by subsequent philosophers Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Derrida, to illuminate the work of deconstruction that FromSoftware's games perform. Through the constant shifting between the figures of the beast and the sovereign, and the torsion and ultimate destruction of this dialectical opposition, FromSoftware seeks to inaugurate a new ethico-political regime, one wherein the cyclical, consumptive violence of power is set aside in favour of a multiplicity of lines of flight beyond.

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## Beasts and Sovereigns

Since my graduate studies, I have been much interested in the figure of the *beast*, and the “couple, coupling, [and] copula” it forms with the figure of the *sovereign*.<sup>1</sup> I have also devoted thousands upon thousands of words over this same period to the deconstructive work performed by FromSoftware’s *Souls* games, games which, I have argued, deliberately invoke the tropes and trappings of western fantasy—inspired by the likes of *Sorcery!*, *Rune Quest*, *Dragon Pass*, and of course, *Dungeons and Dragons*<sup>2</sup>—while introducing a *torsion* or *tremor* to the implicit metaphysics of the genre, which is also to say, to the implicit metaphysics of the west proper.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, and most plainly in the three *Dark Souls* games—*Dark Souls* (2011), *Dark Souls II* (2014), and *Dark Souls III* (2016)<sup>4</sup>—FromSoftware deploys the rhetoric of western sovereignty in the figures of the fire and the sun, only to subvert these figures through an injection of *difference*—the dark—and later through a proliferation of *multiplicities*.<sup>5</sup> FromSoftware stages a resurgence of the philosophical *cave* (the kiln, the deep, the night, the womb), the groundless ground, the void, the boundless, the supersaturated nothing, deliberately choosing for this primordial reality to be something hidden, something forgotten, that only through play is disclosed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 30. For my original research on the “zoopolitical imagination,” see my paper “The Zoopolitical Imagination: Animality, Sovereignty, and the Subject,” April 12, 2017, <https://www.steinea.ca/2017/04/12/the-zoopolitical-imagination>.

<sup>2</sup>See Marty Sliva, “Inside the Mind of Bloodborne and Dark Souls’ Creator,” *IGN*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/02/05/inside-the-mind-of-bloodborne-and-dark-souls-creator-ign-first>, and James Mielke, “‘Dark Souls’ Creator Miyazaki on ‘Zelda,’ Sequels and Starting Out,” *Rolling Stone*, October 5, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/dark-souls-creator-miyazaki-on-zelda-sequels-w443435>.

<sup>3</sup>Compare *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), which I have counted as *mechanically* in a continuity with the broader ‘Soulsborne’ sequence, but which operates in a distinct metaphysical or cosmological realm—an explicitly Buddhist one. See Nic Reuben, “Sekiro, Samsara and From Software’s cycles of death,” *Eurogamer*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.eurogamer.net/sekiro-samsara-and-from-software-s-cycles-of-death>, for a direct reading of *Sekiro* along these lines, and Paolo Xavier Machado Menezes, “The Downward Spiral: Postmodern Consciousness as Buddhist Metaphysics in the *Dark Souls* Video Game Series,” (master’s thesis, Portland State University, 2017), [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds/4161/](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/4161/), for an application of a Buddhist metaphysical framework to FromSoftware’s oeuvre as a whole.

<sup>4</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Dark Souls* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2011), Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2014), and Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls III* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>The rhetoric of the sun yokes together the terms *visibility*, *knowledge*, *reason*, *truth*, *power*, *presence*, *being*, and *reality*—that Platonic table of values. See my “Praise the Sun: The Metaphysics of Dark Souls from the First Flame to the End of Fire,” Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, Western University, London, ON, June 3, 2020, <https://zenodo.org/record/4603500>.

<sup>6</sup>This primordial reality is cyclicity (*samsāra*) and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The linear, luminous power of Gwyn’s sunlight spears splits the grey stasis of the everlasting dragons, only to reveal the dark as backdrop of the new scene, the unground of disparity that terrifies Gwyn, and so must be controlled, *ringed* about with a sign, and eventually (or perhaps originally) with a city, to ward off the passing of the ages and the weakening of power by very disparity that which made it so. See here also the

This is a total work,<sup>7</sup> not only carried out in the narratives and metaphysics of FromSoftware’s games, but in their mechanics<sup>8</sup> and ecology<sup>9</sup>—and, as I will argue in this paper, through a specific set of characters and their stories, those titular beasts and sovereigns.

Two recent studies helpfully situate us with respect to the question of the *beast* in video games: Tom Tyler’s *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* (2022) and Jaroslav Švelch’s *Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity* (2023).<sup>10</sup> In the former, Tyler locates the origin of the problematic deployment of animals in games in the etymological fusion that is the word *game*. From Old English, “*gamen* or *gomen* was a broad term used to indicate amusement, merriment, joy, and the like, as well as jests and jokes.”<sup>11</sup> In the late Middle Ages, the word “came to be associated with that particular kind of entertainment that involved chasing, catching, and killing animals, which is to say hunting, and was used to refer specifically to those wild beasts who were the hunter’s quarry.”<sup>12</sup> ‘Game’ developed a double meaning, both *act* and *object* of the hunt. In modern video games, animals have, in turn, been reduced to generic objects of player action, perhaps most directly in Nintendo’s *Duck Hunt* (1984).<sup>13</sup> This gamic construction of the animal replicates a metaphysical divide between human and beast that goes back as far as recorded history, a divide that Tyler argues is fundamentally violent and consumptive in nature.

Likewise, Švelch locates the monster in a similar position, citing *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) in the first line of his introduction: “A dungeon without monsters would be dull stuff.”<sup>14</sup> Like animals, monsters in games help to “keep up the flow of gameplay by offering adequate doses of challenge,” functioning as “targets of player action—dynamic obstacles that can be surmounted by perseverance, wits, or hand-eye coordination.”<sup>15</sup> A monster is both “an attraction, showcasing

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meontology of the Kyoto School that begins with *nothing* where western ontology begins with *something*: Bret W. Davis, “The Kyoto School,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 9, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/>.

<sup>7</sup>A *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as in Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 1851, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>Eric Stein, “Tactile Thematics: From Power to Skill in FromSoftware’s Souls Games,” Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 19, 2020, <https://zenodo.org/record/4603488>, and “The Dark Sigil Will Guide Thee: The Hollowing Mechanic in FromSoftware’s Souls Games,” Northeast Popular Culture Association Annual Conference, Online, October 23, 2020, <https://zenodo.org/record/4603519>.

<sup>9</sup>Eric Stein, “The Fire Fades: Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware’s Dark Souls,” International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Orlando, FL, March 19, 2020, <https://zenodo.org/record/4603492>, and “Pure Vessels: The Insect and the Other in Dark Souls and Hollow Knight,” Insect Entanglements, Centre for Environmental Humanities, University of Bristol, Online, June 19, 2020, <https://zenodo.org/record/4603508>.

<sup>10</sup>Tom Tyler, *Game: Animals, Video Games, and Humanity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022) and Jaroslav Švelch, *Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

<sup>11</sup>Tyler, *Game*, 2.

<sup>12</sup>Tyler, *Game*, 2.

<sup>13</sup>Tyler, *Game*, 2. “*Duck Hunt*, then, is a game about game.”

<sup>14</sup>Švelch, *Player vs. Monster*, 1.

<sup>15</sup>Švelch, *Player vs. Monster*, 2, 4.

the artistry of the creators and the graphical possibilities of the machine” and an object “appear[ing] in order to kill [the player]—or to be killed—and then disappear again, [as] flickers of automated agency in a rudimentary game world.”<sup>16</sup> Symbolically, monsters are multivalent, used in one moment for oppression, in another for indictment, and in yet others for estrangement or transgression.<sup>17</sup> In all such uses, just like Tyler’s animals, monsters are positioned in a “simplistic and anthropocentric” way as “expendable and calculable enemies,” yet more violence and consumption directed against metaphysical *others*.<sup>18</sup>

Both Tyler and Švelch advocate for a change to this state of affairs, a change that we might generally describe as a decentering of the human subject, the playing subject, the *consuming* subject. This is precisely what I contend to be the total work of FromSoftware’s games, the delocation of the sovereign subject (of sovereignty, of subjectivity), Étienne Balibar’s “citizen-subject,” that “internal center of thought whose structure is that of a sovereign decision.”<sup>19</sup> To talk about beasts in games we must also talk about sovereigns, about the “*unheimlich*, uncanny reciprocal haunting” between.<sup>20</sup>

Let us return to the primal scene of this haunting. In his *Politics*, Aristotle famously asserts that “man is by nature a political animal,” the *zoon politikon*.<sup>21</sup> Human beings have a “social instinct,” Aristotle claims, and consequently, to be *apolitical* is to go against human *nature*—“he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is self-sufficient, must be either a beast or a god.”<sup>22</sup> Here is the original scission between human and beast, human and sovereign. In society humans find their end, their *telos*—“man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.”<sup>23</sup> The poles of human politics are the beast-without-law and the sovereign-above-law—humanity finds itself in the middle.

Eighteen-hundred or so years later, Niccolò Machiavelli takes up this scene, but introduces to it a stich, a twist, a crossing-over.<sup>24</sup> In *The Prince* (1532), Machiavelli writes that “there are two ways of fighting—one by the law, the other by force.”<sup>25</sup> While the “first method is appropriate for men, [and] the second for beasts,” the law is “frequently not sufficient, [and so] it is often necessary

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<sup>16</sup>Švelch, *Player vs. Monster*, 2-3.

<sup>17</sup>Švelch, *Player vs. Monster*, 3.

<sup>18</sup>Švelch, *Player vs. Monster*, 7.

<sup>19</sup>Étienne Balibar, “Citizen Subject,” *e-flux* 77 (2016): 1-11; 1.

<sup>20</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 17.

<sup>21</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Volume One: From Plato to Nietzsche*, eds. Andrew Bailey, et al., 177-242 (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), 1253a1.

<sup>22</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a30, 1253a27.

<sup>23</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a31.

<sup>24</sup>For a structural and critical reading of such crossings, see Alexander Galloway, “On the Bias,” *ASAP Journal*, March 27, 2023, <https://asapjournal.com/graphic-formalism-on-the-bias-alexander-r-galloway/>.

<sup>25</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Volume One: From Plato to Nietzsche*, eds. Andrew Bailey, et al., 346-375 (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), 364.

[for a prince] to have recourse to the second.”<sup>26</sup> A prince that is not only good but *capable* must “understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man.”<sup>27</sup> The prince, centaur-like, must “make use of both natures,” becoming more than animal and more than human, which is to say, becoming *sovereign*.<sup>28</sup>

A little over one hundred years later, Thomas Hobbes takes this peculiar couple, the beast and the sovereign, and fuses the two back together—but now with a new arrangement. In his *On the Citizen* (1642), Hobbes repeats and extends a proverb of Plautus: “Man is a God to man, and Man is a wolf to Man. The former is true of the relations of citizens with each other, the latter of relations between commonwealths.”<sup>29</sup> Under the law, benevolence; outside the law, predation. Following this logic, Hobbes goes on to write in *Leviathan* (1660) that law is *not* a natural end for humankind, because true human nature is the war “of every man against every man.”<sup>30</sup> Humanity’s wolfish hunger must be circumscribed and curtailed by the *artifice* of the state—by Leviathan, beast and sovereign in one, a new, “artificial man.”<sup>31</sup>

Reading this philosophical tradition in his lecture series *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009), from which this essay takes its name, Jacques Derrida draws our attention to the “lines of force” that continue to mobilize this pairing after more than two millennia, this pairing first split, then twisted, and then joined once more.<sup>32</sup> There is a constant shifting between beast and sovereign, sovereign and human, human and beast—a constant shifting of the *border* between, the metaphysical demarcation that determines which beings belong in which categories, which beings belong *period*.

The wolf is a mask—in French, *loup*, a black velvet mask worn by women at masked balls—that allows the one who wears it “to see sovereignly without being seen”; simultaneously, “the face of the beast” can be seen “under the features of the sovereign.”<sup>33</sup> In this duplicity, it is “as though, through the maw of the untameable beast, a figure of the sovereign were to appear.”<sup>34</sup> This is the “fantastic, phantasmic, insistent, recurrent altercation between man and wolf, between the two of them, the wolf *for* man, man *for* the wolf, man *as* wolf *for*

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<sup>26</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 364.

<sup>27</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 364. The prince’s true virtue is not to be *virtuous* (i.e., moral, just), but to act with *virtù*, that is, virtuosity in response to opportunity.

<sup>28</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 364. Machiavelli remarks that this lesson “has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse. The centaur brought them up in his discipline; just as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures/”

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Volume One: From Plato to Nietzsche*, eds. Andrew Bailey, et al., 413-490 (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), 424.

<sup>31</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 413.

<sup>32</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 2.

<sup>33</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 6, 18.

<sup>34</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 18.

man”—*homo homini lupus*.<sup>35</sup> Such is “the story of politics, the story of the origin of society, the story of the social contract.”<sup>36</sup> And in this story, as Derrida shows, “stealthy as a wolf” (*à pas de loup*), that “there is no wolf,” “the wolf is not here,” “there is no such thing as the wolf”—humanity is predator and prey, its very own ghost, the cause of its own haunting (or hunting).<sup>37</sup> Sovereignty *is* devouring, Derrida argues; “its force, its power, its greatest force, its absolute potency,” is a “power of devourment (mouth, teeth, tongue, violent rush to bite, engulf, swallow the other, to take the other into oneself too, to kill it or mourn it).”<sup>38</sup> The human is the beast; the human is the sovereign.

This is where we once again take up the analysis of FromSoftware’s games, looking this time to two of their games of which I have written little, and one new, of which I am now only writing for the first time: that is, *Demon’s Souls* (2009), *Bloodborne* (2015), and *Elden Ring* (2022).<sup>39</sup> Where the *Dark Souls* trilogy makes thematic the question of the sovereign, this alternate un-trilogy makes thematic the question of the beast, taking up the *other side* of the suture, as it were, the “onto-zoo-anthropo-theologico-political copulation” wherein the “beast becomes the sovereign who becomes the beast.”<sup>40</sup>

First, in *Demon’s Souls*, we enter the realm of Boletaria, a kingdom that has been engulfed by a colorless fog and plagued by demons that steal the souls of humanity—that is, steal humanity’s *raison*, a triple signifier for Derrida: *raison* (rationality), *avoir raison* (right), and *avoir raison de* (overcoming).<sup>41</sup> The player is told that Old King Allant is to blame, having awakened the Old One, a “great beast,” and so bringing about the demon plague. After defeating the Old King, the penultimate boss of the game, the player learns that Allant had not merely awakened the great beast but had made a pact with it, becoming a demon, a beast, himself. Below the Nexus, the hub of the gameworld, the player finds the true Allant, laying within the eldritch innards of the Old One itself, now reduced to a monstrous and feeble vision of his former sovereign glory. A pitiful, horrific mass, barely able to wield the once fabled sword now fused to one of its limbs, the true king is revealed to be nothing but a failing organ of the beast. The final boss of the game, King Allant barely makes for a fight at all, a sovereign defanged.

Allant and the Old One are not the only vehicles for this narrative. If players take the time to talk to non-player characters (NPCs) in the Nexus, complete an optional quest, and read the item description for the reward received for doing so, they will learn that the God of this world, supposed divine guarantor of both

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<sup>35</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 9.

<sup>36</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 5.

<sup>38</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 23.

<sup>39</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Demon’s Souls* (PS3: FromSoftware, 2009), Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Bloodborne* (PS4: FromSoftware, 2015), and Hidetaka Miyazaki and Yui Tanimura, *Elden Ring* (PlayStation; Xbox; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2022).

<sup>40</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 18.

<sup>41</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 7.

souls and sovereigns, is nought but the great beast itself: “the symbol of God was nothing more than the image of the Old One.”<sup>42</sup> Intelligence and magic, personified by an NPC, Sage Freke, and associated with demons and the Old One, and faith and miracles, personified by another NPC, Saint Urbain, and associated with God, are demonstrated to be one and the same: the beast and the sovereign; the beast *is* the sovereign.

Next, in *Bloodborne*, we find ourselves in the city of Yharnam on the eve of the Hunt. Regular folk lock themselves in their homes and burn incense to ward off beasts, while hunters prowl the streets in search of prey. The first enemy the player encounters is a monstrous werewolf, which will typically savage all but the most dextrous of players. Shortly after, in Central Yharnam, the player will encounter a mob of hunters gathered around a crucified and burning beast. Alternately engaging in combat with monstrous creatures and murderous huntsmen, the opening hours of *Bloodborne* are a blood-soaked, harrowing nightmare.

But in a subsequent area, an NPC, Retired Hunter Djura, calls out to the player, warning them not to trespass in a place “burned and abandoned by men.” Old Yharnam, he says, “is now home only to beasts,” and they “are of no harm to those above. Turn back.”<sup>43</sup> If the player ignores his words and proceeds, he will open fire with his gatling gun, making for a tense descent through the buildings, dodging beasts within and bullets without. If the player makes it through this area, however, and leaves Djura alone, they will be able to return to him after progressing the story and make peace by choosing to “spare the beasts of Old Yharnam.”<sup>44</sup> He responds regretfully: “There’s nothing more horrific than a hunt. In case you’ve failed to realize. . . The things you hunt, they’re not beasts. They’re people.”<sup>45</sup> Following this conversation, if the player chooses to betray the retired hunter and kill him anyway, he indicts you with his dying breath: “It’s you. . . You’re the beast. Just think about what you’re doing. It’s utter madness. . .”<sup>46</sup> Another character, the Afflicted Beggar, says something similar after transforming into an Abhorrent Beast: “You hunters have got more blood on your hands . . . Hunters are killers, nothing less! You call me a beast? A beast? What would you know? I didn’t ask for this.”<sup>47</sup> In *Bloodborne*, then, we witness the collapse of the human-beast dichotomy, an implosion of the dialectic. Echoing Derrida: there is no wolf, the wolf is not here, there is no such thing as the wolf, *homo homini lupus*.

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<sup>42</sup>Demon’s Souls Wiki, “Talisman of Beasts,” *Wikidot*, <http://demonssouls.wikidot.com/talisman-of-beasts>. Popular lore theorist VaatiVidya neatly weaves together the threads of this twist in his video “Demon’s Souls Story: The Defilement of God,” *YouTube*, May 26, 2021, <https://youtu.be/Jv12rzo1fN0>.

<sup>43</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Retired Hunter Djura,” *Bloodborne Wiki*, <https://www.bloodborne-wiki.com/2015/03/old-hunter-gyula.html>.

<sup>44</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Retired Hunter Djura.”

<sup>45</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Retired Hunter Djura.”

<sup>46</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Retired Hunter Djura.”

<sup>47</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Afflicted Hunter,” *Bloodborne Wiki*, <https://www.bloodborne-wiki.com/2015/03/blind-man.html>.

Just like *Demon's Souls*, as the plot progresses, and so long as the player pays careful attention to item descriptions and environmental details, undertakes optional quests, and exhausts the dialogue of NPCs, a broader cosmological—and indeed, *archaeological*—context emerges. Yharnam was built on top of Old Yharnam, which was in turn built on top of the ancient civilization of Pthumeria, and it on top of a labyrinth yet older. There in the depths the Pthumerians communed with the Great Ones, celestial, eldritch beings akin to the great beast from *Demon's Souls*. Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen, the final boss of *Bloodborne's* Chalice Dungeons, the sovereign of that buried kingdom, made a “blood contract” with the Old Ones, and so bore for them a child.<sup>48</sup> Such contracts and research into the mingling of the blood of humans and Great Ones carried on with the school of Byrgenwerth, the school of Mensis, the Choir, and the Healing Church—all of which leads to the scourge of the beast that turns the people of Yharnam into monsters: the beast and the sovereign; the beast is the sovereign; sovereign and beast are man.

Finally, in FromSoftware's latest, *Elden Ring*, we see again the question of the beast made thematic. In the Lands Between, the shattering of the Elden Ring at some time past has left the realm in disarray. Queen Marika the Eternal is vanished, and only her children remain, decimating the land with their ambition. As the player progresses through the game, they meet a four-armed princess, the empyrean Ranni, and her faithful wolf-man companion Blaidd. As an empyrean, Ranni is one possible successor of Marika's eternal Golden Order, and all such successors, the player learns, are given a “shadowbound beast” like Blaidd to aid them in their trials, but also to ensure the potential sovereign's allegiance to the Greater Will, outer god of the Order. In progressing Ranni's questline, the player learns that she is set on a course against the Greater Will, a “dark path” to “betray everything, and rid the world of what came before,” which is to say, to rid it of its subjugation to an uncaring, otherworldly being.<sup>49</sup> Blaidd remains loyal—“I'm part of her being. Her very shadow,” he says—until almost the end when he is at last overcome by the Greater Will and forced to fulfil his purpose.<sup>50</sup> The beast must control his sovereign, and the player in turn must put the beast down to protect her.

Regardless of whether or not the player chooses to follow Ranni's quest, they will eventually be forced to battle with Gurranq, the Beast Clergyman. A terrifying cleric and sworn opponent of death, Gurranq, for much of the game, is a merchant who will teach the player Bestial Incantations, feral expressions of faith in the Golden Order. During the late-game battle with him, the player discovers that Gurranq is none other than Maliketh, the Black Blade, shadowbound beast of Marika herself, and protector of the Rune of Death. Reading item descriptions connected to Maliketh reveals that Marika used him as “a vessel to lock away

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<sup>48</sup>Bloodborne Wiki, “Ring of Betrothal,” *Bloodborne Wiki*, <https://www.bloodborne-wiki.com/2015/04/ring-of-betrothal.html>

<sup>49</sup>Elden Ring Wiki, “Ranni the Witch,” *Fextralife*, <https://eldenring.wiki.fextralife.com/Ranni+the+Witch>.

<sup>50</sup>Elden Ring Wiki, “Blaidd,” *Fextralife*, <https://eldenring.wiki.fextralife.com/Blaidd>.



Destined Death,” giving she and her demigod children immortality, and the Golden Order its strength.<sup>51</sup> But as these texts also reveal, Marika betrayed Maliketh, allowing a piece of the Rune of Death to be taken by Ranni and used by her to slay Godwyn the Golden (Marika’s son) in his soul, and she her own flesh, freeing her to carry out her designs against the Greater Will.<sup>52</sup> In these two sovereigns’ stories, beasts are deployed as both lines of force and lines of flight—means of reinscribing the power of the sovereign, and means of shattering it.

The last detail of *Elden Ring* that firmly situates it in the un-trilogy with *Demon’s Souls* and *Bloodborne* is the nature of the Greater Will itself. The Greater Will is an Outer God, the preeminent god of the Lands Between, but just one of many such celestial beings at large in the cosmos of the game. Various NPCs and demigod bosses that the player meets are dedicated to these eldritch beings, and the player can even become a servant of some of these themselves, unlocking alternative endings to the game. Like *Demon’s Souls*, like *Bloodborne*, the “double and contradictory figuration of political man” discloses the reality of the “state *as animality*, or even bestiality . . . either a normal bestiality or a monstrous bestiality itself mythological or fabulous.”<sup>53</sup> An eldritch, uncanny being or beings—the Old One, the Great Ones, the Outer Gods—serves as the monstrous ground of human sovereignty, while in turn potentiating the becoming-beast of its sovereign subjects. The state exists in a constant state of war against its own subjects, and indeed, in a constant state of war against the artifice of its own institution.<sup>54</sup> The beast gives the sovereign its power, while haunting that power, threatening its authority, in every instance of its use.

If the *Dark Souls* trilogy is a critique of the metaphysics of sovereignty, the sequence of *Demon’s Souls*, *Bloodborne*, and *Elden Ring* makes for its voracious, beastly shadow. These gamic fables position beasts at their centers, displacing subjects and sovereigns alike in order to make explicit the conditions of human “politicity” as such, the “being-political of the living being called man.”<sup>55</sup> Wherein our real lives there is no wolf, only other humans, FromSoftware mobilizes actual beasts to help reveal the complex structures of sovereignty that philosophers have been analyzing and attempting to understand—to varying degrees of success—for over two thousand years. In so doing, FromSoftware uses their games to enter into political discourse through a side door, making the ethical claim that, contra La Fontaine, the reason of the strongest is *not* always best. Like the pensée of Pascal upon which Derrida meditates, when the sovereign is not “able to make what is just, strong,” the sovereign makes “what is strong, just.”<sup>56</sup> Such is the beast in the sovereign.

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<sup>51</sup>Elden Ring Wiki, “Remembrance of Maliketh the Black Blade,” *Fextralife*, <https://eldenring.wiki.fextralife.com/Remembrance+of+the+Black+Blade>.

<sup>52</sup>Elden Ring Wiki, “Cursemark of Death,” *Fextralife*, <https://eldenring.wiki.fextralife.com/Cursemark+of+Death>.

<sup>53</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 26.

<sup>54</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 27.

<sup>55</sup>Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 25.

<sup>56</sup>Pascal, cited in Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 8.

Since *Dark Souls II*, FromSoftware has sought to present *another* path altogether, a path beyond power and violence, a path “beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of dark.”<sup>57</sup> The “grand betrayal” of the nihilistic dualisms between beasts and sovereigns, sovereigns and humans, humans and beasts—the torsion and ultimate destruction of such dialectical oppositions—is the subtle metaphysical ploy these games unfold.<sup>58</sup> In *Elden Ring*, after all these years, after all these hours played, FromSoftware once again retraces this thematic, reduplicating these narrative structures to the very limits of intelligibility so as to elaborate a manifold of political possibilities for worlds to come. Perhaps, then, we, like Ranni, must pursue a *line of flight*<sup>59</sup>—a path beyond “certainties,” a path of “impossibilities,” yes, but a path free from the scorching light of the sun, a path that takes us on a “thousand year voyage under the wisdom of the Moon.”<sup>60</sup> *What could possibly await us?*<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Dark Souls II Wiki, “Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin,” *Wikidot*, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/bosses:aldia-scholar-of-the-first-sin>.

<sup>58</sup>Dark Souls III Wiki, “Fire Keeper,” *Wikidot*, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:fire-keeper>.

<sup>59</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1980, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). We cite Deleuze and Guattari here, at the end, as we escape the earth for the *stars*—to loose them from the gravity of power and so loose fate.

<sup>60</sup>Elden Ring Wiki, “Ranni the Witch.”

<sup>61</sup>Dark Souls II Wiki, “Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin.”

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