

## On the Image of Animals in A Midsummer Night's Dream

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### Abstract

The sixteenth-century play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare has been reckoned as one of his prestigious comedies worldwide. The drama not only exhibits the Renaissance playwright's humanistic concern for humans' pursuing happiness in terms of marriage, but also portrays different kinds of animals that are involved in human activities. With a careful examination and reference to the symbolism of certain animals, it is discovered that the main two types of animals in the comedy, fantastic animals and realistic animals play a significant role in creating dramatic effects, displaying the characterization and revealing hidden political and ecological themes.

### Keywords

Animals; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Significance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Animals are ubiquitous in the literature world, and it might be fair to say there is a long-standing affinity between animals and literature. The earliest European epic *Beowulf* depicts a heroic event triggered by a fire-breathing dragon, and in the story of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, animals feature often in the life of Adam who is given the task of naming the animals. For centuries the man of letters' passion for animals has not faded away, and there continuously appear such seminal literary works as *The Metamorphosis* (1915), *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Moby Dick* (1981). Impressed by the description of animals by modernist or postmodernist writers who endeavor to reveal the inequality constructed by the human-animal binary opposition, one might easily forget the valuable legacy of Renaissance animal literatures. The period of English Renaissance, unlike the following times when there was a strict divide between human and animal, found it was customary to "regard most creatures as having morals, emotions, and even reason" [1]. For literary animal studies, an examination of Renaissance literature is thus conducive to tracing the development of literary representation of animals. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (hereafter *Midsummer*), one of William Shakespeare's most popular and widely adapted plays with a rich performance history both in the UK and worldwide, in this regard is a good example showing the overflowing of animals in Renaissance imagination. The pervasive presence of animals in Shakespeare's *Midsummer* has been affirmed in Boehrer's *Shakespeare Among the Animals* and Jeanne Addison Roberts's work where they both focus on the human-animal transformation and posit that "human nature is in constant danger of corruption from the bestial and/or female other" [2]. Though learning the moral lesson through examining the transformation, there are still some other crucial animals in the play left unnoticed and therefore this article continues to study the image of animals in a comprehensive way so as to figure out the role animals play in *Midsummer*.

## 2. FANTASTIC ANIMALS

In Literature and Animal Studies, fantastic animals are suggested to stand out as one major type of animals, which is opposite to real animals when making a categorization. The category of fantastic animals would include “well-worn mythic animals like unicorns, dragons, and phoenixes, as well as human-animal hybrids such as mermaids, centaurs, and werewolves” [3]. Against the backdrop of fairyland, a host of mythical animals is not rare in *Midsummer*.

The serpent, among mythical animals in the play, pops out from time to time. Although the term “serpent” and “snake” can be used interchangeably today, greatly influenced by the well-known devil serpent in the Garden of Eden, serpents are associated more with negative traits. In the Christian tradition, no one has to apologize for the association of a serpent with sin, malice, death and asthenia. The serpent in *Midsummer* is a continuum of such tradition. In human communication, the word “serpent” is expected to be a deterrent. For example, when suspecting Demetrius murders Lysander, Hermia berates him with cold words: “Could not a worm, adder, do so much? For with doubler tongue than thine, thou serpent, never adder stung” [4]. To emphasize that he is far more malicious than any kind of vicious snake, Hermia resorts to synonym for snakes, like “worm” “adder” and “serpent”.

The serpent does not only functions as a language trope of evilness but makes its existence in the play as well. When Hermia falls asleep after losing her way with Lysander in the wood, she dreams of a serpent in her dream and cries out “Help, me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best/to pluck this crawling serpent from my breast/Ay me, for pity. What a dream was here/Lysander, look how I do quake with fear/Methought a serpent eats my heart away/And you sat smiling at his cruel prey”[4]. From Hermia’s description, we can know little about the appearance, size or whatsoever of the serpent but its behavior. The serpent is said to initially crawl across the breast of Hermia but later without any interference from Lysander, it succeeds in eating away the heart of Hermia.

Since the time of Freud, the serpent has been a common phallic symbol representing penis and sexual drive. The juxtaposition of serpent and a woman’s luring breast in the dream, to Freudian understanding, stresses the relationship of the dreamer to sexuality and male figures. On this line of thought, in view of the fact that Hermia resolutely declines Lysander’s suggestion of sleeping together and urges him to “lie further off yet, do not lie so near” [4] before she goes to sleep, it is safe to say the serpent in the dream is a carnation of Lysander. The serpent dream thus is motivated by the reality, and meanwhile betrays the wishes of Hermia, as Freud suggested that “dreams are the royal road to the knowledge of activities of the unconscious mind”. In the terrible dream, Hermia’s begging her lover to protect her from any harm, might be interpreted as her wish to adhere to chastity. Additionally, instead of resting on the breast, the serpent goes to bite Hermia’s heart away, which echoes with the emotional trauma Hermia is going to suffer from Lysander’s transferring his love to Helena later. In the dream, while Hermia is under attack of the snake, Lysander who is supposed to be a reliable protector, however, turns his back, sits calmly and grins happily, showing a sense of indifference and pleasure. The eccentric reaction of Lysander in the dream happens to identify with the subsequent oddity of enchanted Lysander. In this regard, the serpent not only declares Hermia’s uneasy mind and her vow to be chaste, but serves as an omen of a dark prospect of Hermia.

Apart from the serpent, another fantastic creature, the mermaid is also worth discussion. In the British folktale, mermaids are also an emblem of unluckiness, both foretelling disaster and provoking it, and in Elizabethan period, mermaids are further understood as “the dangerous and destructive possibilities of uncontrolled sexuality”[5]. However, the image of mermaid in *Midsummer* does not comply with that negative stereotype. In telling Puck where he could find the magical flower, Oberon refers to a mermaid which can help Puck pinpoint the target location, and instead of skipping the trivial mermaid rapidly, Oberon recounts the creature in detail by

saying the mermaid makes “the rude sea [grow] civil and certain stars [shoot] madly from their spheres”[4]. It seems that the mermaid is the leader of the ocean, who has the command over her territory. If not taking the historical background into consideration, it might be reasonable to say the mermaid signifies any queen, Mary I or Queen Victoria, but in light of the fact that “in Renaissance typologies of the monstrous, the hybrid bodies of mermaids signify a feminine identity that defines reproduction” [6], the mermaid in the play is greatly likely to denote Elizabeth I, the so-called Virgin Queen. During the reign of Elizabeth I, with the English fleet defeating the Spanish Armada, England secured the maritime hegemony, so Shakespeare’s depicting the mermaid’s positive influence on the sea might be seen as his compliment on the queen’s marvelous achievement.

A similar conclusion that Shakespeare is showing confidence in his country, would be arrived at from a careful text analysis of *Leviathan*, a mythical sea monster which is used as “a symbol of a foreign force”[7]. In the drama, before Puck sets off to fetch the flower, Oberon warns him to return before the *Leviathan* can swim a league. Facing such reminding, Puck responds that he will put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes. The irrelevant answer is suggesting that the intention of mentioning *Leviathan* is more than giving a time warning but an expectation of defeating the powerful foreign force in the contend for maritime hegemony. Puck’s response, indeed, is so informative that on the one hand, it resonates with the refreshed idea that the Earth is spheroidal, which is inspired by the first circumnavigation of the Earth by Ferdinand Magellan around the year 1519, and on the other, by using the modal word “will” rather than “can”, the playwright, with the mouth of Puck, actually exhibits his great confidence in England’s would-be success in exploring the globe.

Through the scrutiny of fantastic animals, like the serpent, the mermaid and *Leviathan*, it is found that these animals not only contribute to moving the story forward, but serve as a helpful clue to make readers further perceive the characterization and the hidden political theme.

### 3. REAL ANIMALS

Compared with mythical animals, as far as number is concerned, real animals occupy an overwhelming part in the drama. Biologically, animals are divided into vertebrate and invertebrate, among which the former includes fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals, while the latter mainly comprises arthropods, annelids and coelenterates.

In the second act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, plenty of vertebrates appear, such as lion, bear, wolf, bull, monkey, ape, ounce and boar. Some of them, however, are exotic to Britain, the island country. For example, lions are no natives to Britain and ounces are snow leopards living in the Asia. On the contrary, the setting of the play Athens, or rather Greece, is richer in biodiversity and therefore the multitude of animals depicted in the play corresponds to the common cognition, thus both making the story more authentic and playgoers more immersed in the scene. The list of the animals, not only shows the great playwright’s insight in handling the details, but also delicately serves for the plot development and characterization. Even without a close examination, it is not difficult to notice that the majority of animals listed above are meat-eaters in the wild and stand for strength, violence plus danger. In this regard, Oberon’s expectation that Titania would fall in love with any one of these violent animals is worth pondering. As Oberon chants, “The next thing then she, waking, looks upon/Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull/On meddling monkey, or on busy ape/She shall pursue it with the soul of love” [4]; “Be it ounce, or cat, or bear/Pard, or boar with bristled hair/In thy eye that shall appear/When thou wak’st, it is thy dear/Wake, when some vile thing is near”[4].

Distinctly, by numerating these animals, Oberon means to revenge on Titania by wishing the fairy queen to lose her heart to such demeaning and derogatory creatures as boars with bristled hair. What’s more, the meddling monkey together with the busy ape which are both restless and

inconstant is in great contrast to the constancy and blind-love of spellbound Titania, which is beneficial to enhance comic effects in a sense. In view of the intention of humiliating Titania, one cannot help considering why Oberon does not solely numerate disgusting and ugly animals but simultaneously mentions powerful animals like lions. In most cultures, it is not rare to discover animals of strength are the metaphor for man, while docile animals like rabbits are the byword for woman. So, we can learn those beasts not only work as a tool of fooling Titania but represent masculinity. If Titania falls in love with lions, bears or wolves, it is not easy for her to control the animal, which could help Oberon defend the dominance of males over females. Oberon's patriarchal ideas is nothing subtle in the play, if one pays attention to the authorial tone in his interrogations: "am not I thy lord; why should Titania cross her Oberon"[4]. Consequently, these selected powerful animals are of great aid in helping readers further understand the patriarchal theology of Oberon.

Among vertebrates, the ass also holds a considerably important place in the play. In a prank of Puck, the head of the weaver, Bottom is transformed into an ass' head. The intent of such transformation, is understandable if we consider both the word "bottom" and "ass" happen to be the equivalent of buttocks literally. Nevertheless, the significance of turning Bottom into donkey rather than other objects, inferred by the writing feature of Shakespeare, is bound to go beyond the simple word-play. Besides learning that donkeys are usually considered as stupid, clumsy and slow, it is necessary to have a reference to *The Golden Ass* (late 2nd century AD) by Apuleius where the protagonist Lucius, after he is accidentally transformed into an ass, is constantly involved in love affairs. So, the function of the donkey is not limited to the amusement effect aroused by the mockery of clownish Bottom by turning the one who is over-confident in his talent and wisdom into a donkey-like man, but hints at the sexual experience the parodied character, Bottom is going to have.

In *Midsummer*, the transformed Bottom obviously owns both humanity and animality and it is no wonder that an aura of eroticism pervades the interaction between Bottom and Titania. Evidences of it are hidden in Titania's continuous saying that she will purge Bottom's mortal grossness and have him to her bower and lament some enforced chastity. The way how Titania and Bottom get along with each other evidently forms a sharp contrast with that of Lysander and Hermia who epitomize secular lovers in adherence to feudal ethics of suppressing sensual passion. In fact, the portrayal of Bottom and Titania exactly caters to the humanism which stresses on the values of human beings, the liberation of personality, the practice of *carpe diem* and etc. Distinct from a common anticipation that spellbound Titania would fall in love with a certain beast, the play goes toward a harmonious path where the anticipated fairy-beast conflict does not arise at all, and two types of creatures benefit from each other; that is Titania earns the company of Bottom, while Bottom could get what he wants from Titania at will.

The concord between humans and animals could be illustrated better with an insight into a moth, the most representative invertebrates in the play. As an attendant of queen Titania, the fairy moth is an inhabitant in the form of insect in the fairyland which is featured with varieties of flagrant flowers and lovely birds and where the moth gets on well with the queen and other fellows like Peaseblossm. Though with few words in the play, it can be sensed that the moth who always follows the step of her partners, is depicted as an innocent child and seems to enjoy her life in the fairyland greatly. Such enjoyment does not cease even after the arrival of the newcomer Bottom who passionately making acquaintances with the moth when he first arrives. To some extent, Bottom's quick adaption into the fairyland is likely to demonstrate his appreciation for the nature as well as the state of living harmoniously with natural objects. However, while valuing the ecological idea that humans are supposed to get along well with animals, it might be unreasonable to neglect the fact that the moth, first attached to the queen and later Bottom, is tightly bound in the subject-object relationship and fails to get away with the identity of being the subaltern. In consequence, the episode of Bottom mirrors the light of

humanism, and at the same time reflects the deficient ecological idea that humans are superior to animals.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Animals, regardless of fantastic or real ones, truly play remarkable parts in three aspects, namely dramatic effects, characterizations and themes. In terms of dramatic effects, some animals represented by serpents and the ass, work as the linguistic device to arouse humor and irony as so to make the comedy appealing. As for characterizations, the serpent and wild beasts help mold the images of Hermia and Oberon through the revelation of their deep inner thoughts. With regard to themes, the political implication of England's taking the lead is sensed from the imagery of mermaid and simultaneously the idea of humanism plus the limited ecologism is illustrated by means of the ass and the moth.

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