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Shakespeare et le monde animal

Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 In the title of a book published in 1973, Terence Hawkes spoke of “Shakespeare’s talking animals”. Language and communication are not, by far the only features which, for the playwright, served to differentiate men from animals. As the son of a Stratford glover, who, in his young days, must have attended the slaughter and suffering of beasts while being made an apprentice in the treatment of their skins, Shakespeare developed a personal sensibility and a particular attention to animals.
- 2 Animals occupy a prominent place in the canon, both by their presence on stage (one may here think of Crab, Lance’s dog in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or the bear in *The Winter’s Tale*) and in the reminiscence of the medieval world of heraldry and of the bestiaries, of hunting and sacrificial rites. In the *historiae animalium* of Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, Conrad Gesner or Edward Topsell, but also in the contemporary emblem books, Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights found many examples for his animal imagery as well as for various proverbs and ironical fables. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* were another important source for the ass Bottom, the wolf Shylock, Orsino comparing himself to Acteon, Macbeth’s curish murderers, Lear’s ‘pelican daughters’ as well as Caliban, the fish-man of *The Tempest*. Desdemona and Othello, according to Iago, “are making the beast with two backs” and their “unnatural” love threatens Venice with a whole generation of monsters. But through its masks and many disguises, theatre encourages such metamorphoses, for laughs, but also in order to frighten the spectators or to give them food for thought, as in the case of De Flores’s dog face (in Middleton’s *The Changeling*) or the animal-coded names of the characters in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*.
- 3 Is man “the paragon of animals” as Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a fit of bitter irony? Beyond feelings of real compassion for the suffering, sentient beast which serve to illustrate melancholy or *taedium vitae*, animals are presented as possible models for man. In *Henry V*, the archbishop of Canterbury claims that honeybees “teach / The act of order to a peopled kingdom”, while, for Cleopatra, the beauty and bounty of Antony is encapsulated in the image of the dolphin showing “his back above / The element”. The contributions gathered in the first section of the present

volume explore the complexity and variety of such imagery by looking into the politics of human-animal hybridity (Andreas Höefele) and the gendered uses of hybrids (Natália Pikli and Manon Turban).

- 4 The word “beast”, which has 75 occurrences in the canon, differs from the word “animal” (only 8 occurrences) which etymologically refers to the breath of life (*anima*) responsible for motion. This raises the issue of taming and domestication, and thus that of the opposition between socialised and savage creatures. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Lord, who returns from a hunting party, takes loving care of his dogs while feeling nauseated by the sight of the drunken beggar Christopher Sly: “O monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies!” Shakespeare proves attentive to the singularity and diversity of individuals more than to the species or category to which they are supposed to belong, so that his animal kingdom leads to a dizzying multiplication of appellations as well as to great linguistic virtuosity. The second section of our collection investigates the way animal matters audibly surface in the linguistic flesh of early modern plays. Bruce Boehrer revisits the relationship between George Gascoigne’s *Noble Arte of Venerie* (1575) and Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (1598) to uncover the proximity of the comedy’s vision of inter-species relations and the environment with that of later tragedies. Hunting is also central to both Kevin Quarmby’s close study of evocations of rural hunting practices in *1 Henry IV* and Jennifer Allport Reid’s discussion of the discourses of sacrifice and ceremonialism in Shakespeare’s Roman tragedies. Katherine Cox’s essay invites us to hear how the animal matter incorporated in musical instruments is metaphorically reanimated in Shakespeare’s plays and poetry while we are made to hear and reflect upon the voice of speaking animals in Florence Krésine’s discussion of Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat*.
- 5 The last section, devoted to beastly metaphors, allows an insight into visual culture and the symbolic uses of animality. Charlène Cruxent offers a description of the many animal references in Oh Tah-Suk’s 1999 production of *Romeo and Juliet* while Nora Galland, takes us through the interconnections between animal-related insults and issues of race, sexuality and bestiality. Finally, Jean-Jacques Chardin delves into the emblematic tradition and shows how animals in emblem books are often pictured in such a way as to gaze back at the reader, thus generating a form of introspection akin to a meditative exercise in which the category of the human is deeply questioned.