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The Swan's Nest: Shakespeare and the birds of *Cymbeline*

William Shakespeare's late play *Cymbeline* set in ancient Britain and Renaissance Italy, artfully uses bird references and illusions to weave a narrative chiefly concerned with sight, seeing, and perception. Shakespeare uses bird imagery to connect the natural world and social hierarchies and to establish how birds act as divine messengers and portents. However, most importantly, he uses it to reflect his characters' intentions, origins, and possible futures, resulting in a layering of identities that is both complex and easily recognizable to the audience.

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is richly constructed with classical references to the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Ovid, and the bible, to name a few. As done in the bible, Shakespeare similarly draws on literal and symbolic bird references to communicate sophisticated concepts of self-awareness, perception, and understanding. Drawing the audience's attention to the importance of seeing through another's eyes or via a different perspective, that of a bird illuminates the dangers many characters face due to their tendencies to fall prey to false or incomplete sight.

Evidence of Shakespeare's knowledge and interest in birds is made quite apparent through the dozens of examples of bird references and illusions in his dramatic works. In his essay *Of Men and Birds; Prolegomena to the Birds of Shakespeare*, Grundy Steiner argues that

“Shakespeare’s ornithology naturally offers a preponderance of tradition over observation” (xviii). While his extensive exposure to classical literature is significant, one should not discount his interest and participation in sportsmanship activities such as hunting and hawking as they provide a practical authenticity to his analogies. Steiner notes, “Shakespeare is largely a child of his age – an age that inherited Greek myths and Aesopic fables and remembered the traditions of the medieval bestiaries, hence, could assume human reason and emotion in birds and use them as examples of moral behaviour” (xvii). Shakespeare has Iachimo incorrectly reference the tale of “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when he says, “She hath been reading late / The tale of Tereus: here the leaf’s turned down / Where Philomel gave up” (Cym. 2.2.44-46). This allusion to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is very purposeful. It connects Iachimo to Tereus, a sexual predator who hunts, rapes, and mutilates his wife’s sister Philomela. It also illuminates Iachimo’s misperception of the events in the story, which attempts to minimize Tereus’ assault on Philomela while attempting to make her seem complicit.

At the end of Ovid’s tale Procne and Philomela are transformed into birds to escape Tereus’ wrath for taking their revenge. Procne is transformed into a nightingale who sings a mournful song of grief for what she has done to her son. At the same time, Philomela is transformed into a swallow with a red throat, and Tereus, the Thracian King, is transformed into a hoopoe. Procne, Philomela, and Tereus’s transformations illuminate a connection between human characters and their avian counterparts. As Ovid states, “but badges of murder remained on their breasts in the blood-tinged plumage.” (Met. 6.6.669-670), marking each bird for their crimes. Shakespeare’s reference to Ovid’s tale reminds the audience that birds can represent human morality, intention, and consequence.

Shakespeare superimposes the hierarchy of birds in the natural world alongside the social rankings within Cymbeline's court. Shakespeare aligns many characters with specific birds, thus revealing a natural class system like in Geoffrey Chaucer's dream poem, *The Parliament of Fowls*, where Nature oversees a yearly meeting of anthropomorphic birds where mates are chosen for the coming year. Geoffrey Chaucer clearly refers to a hierarchy among the birds when he states, "The birds of prey took up the highest place, and then below them set the lesser birds" (16). Early in the play, Innogen says, "O blessed that I might not! I chose an eagle / And did avoid a puttock!" (Cym. 1.1.140-141). Innogen's declaration compares her husband Posthumus to an eagle and her stepbrother Cloten to a puttock. This classification is significant on many levels. Innogen chooses her spouse with love in mind instead of remaining loyal to her father's wishes. Her ability to see the deficiencies in Cloten's moral character foreshadows their later interactions in the play, indicating she has a clearer sight than her father when judging a man's disposition. As James Edmund Harting comments in his work, *The Birds of Shakespeare, or the Ornithology of Shakespeare*, "The name "Puttock" has been applied both to the Kite and the Common Buzzard, and both were considered birds of ill omen" (28). Shakespeare's deft choice to align Cloten with the puttock is indicative of Cloten's evil nature and impending death.

In stark contrast, Posthumus' association with the eagle denotes a connection with the divine; James Edmund Harting comments, "The eagle was considered as the emblem of majesty" (23). Posthumus' link to the eagle and the god Jupiter are made apparent later in the play. It is important to note that Innogen could perceive his intrinsic worth before Jupiter's intervention, as it draws attention to Innogen's ability to see what others cannot. Chaucer also draws an association between royalty and the eagle when he writes, "There sat the royal eagle, who can

pierce the sun itself with his imperious look” (17). Belarius draws a parallel connection between nobility and eagles when he states, “The sharded beetle in a safer hold / Then is the full-winged eagle. O, this life” (Cym. 3.3.20-21). The sharded beetle refers to Arviragus and Guiderius, princes unknowingly disguised and kept safe from harm in the wilderness. Shakespeare employs the motif of borrowed garments to visually communicate transformation, deception, and disguise throughout the play. Arviragus and Guiderius wear pastoral mountain clothing as unwitting disguises due to Belarius’ familial deception. On the other hand, Posthumus repeatedly dons Italian garments to convey a visual shifting of allegiance. When the second captain observes Posthumus dressed in Italian garb, he says, “ A leg of Rome shall not return to tell / What crows have pecked them here. He brags his service / As if he were of note” (Cym. 5.3.92-94). This reference to the crow serves a dual purpose. It draws the audience's attention to how easily allegiance and importance can be counterfeited by borrowing garments. It also condemns Posthumus’ duplicitous actions as beneath his station by associating him with the crow, known as the carrion eaters. Shakespeare draws attention to the idea that a disguise can be both a conscious and unconscious deception, revealing how easily one thing can look like another resulting in a false perception. An excellent example of this can be seen when Innogen awakes to find a headless body lying next to her. By perceiving the garments as belonging to Posthumus, she incorrectly assumes that it is him instead of Cloten. This misperception is both poignant and comical as it refers to an early conversation between Innogen and Cloten when she says,

To be but named of thee. His meanest garment  
 That ever hath but clipped his body is dearer  
 In my respect than all the hairs above thee, (Cym. 2.3.133-135)

Innogen's comment implies that she has more affection for her husband's clothing than her stepbrother, Cloten. In this scene, Innogen creates an incomplete picture constructed by the transference of affection from her husband's clothing to Cloten's mutilated corpse.

While Posthumus, Cloten, and many other male characters in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* are akin to birds from the natural world, Innogen is the only character associated with a mythological creature. Iachimo compares Innogen with the phoenix when he says, "She is alone th' Arabian bird" (Cym. 1.6.17). Shakespeare's choice of the phoenix is apt as it has allegorical connections to perfection and resurrection. As Valerie Wynne notes, "the phoenix, a mythical bird that symbolizes perfection because only one was thought to exist at any given time. Believed to reproduce itself asexually and be reborn from its own ashes" (181). The analogy of the phoenix serves not only to reveal Innogen's future in the play but to highlight the extent of her chastity and inherent goodness. Like Philomela and Procne from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Innogen undergoes a transformation into Fidele via the donning of borrowed garments to escape her precarious situation predicated on the results of Iachimo's deception. As Cyrus Hoy argues in his essay, *Altered States: Ovid's Metamorphoses and Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres*, "The metamorphoses that Shakespeare's principal characters undergo mark the crucial stages along the way to their dramatic fates. Here the transformations are spiritual and psychological, not physical as in Ovid" (293). Innogen's transformation into Fidele is mainly psychological, as she puts on masculinity in tandem with a servant's livery. Innogen is assumed dead after taking the cordial from the queen when Aviragus finds her. This misperception is extended to the reader and theatre audience via the stage directions that note, "Enter [from the cave] Aviragus, with Innogen [as] dead, bearing her in his arms." (Cym. 4.2.194) and is further cemented when

Aviragus says, “The bird is dead” (Cym. 4.2.196). The stage directions and Aviragus’ observation evokes strong emotional responses necessary to facilitate her reappearance later in the play as one who has been miraculously resurrected. At the end of the play, when Iachimo’s deceit is revealed and Innogen’s virtue and chastity are proven unquestionable, she forgives Posthumus for all his grievous insults upon her character. This merciful act prompts Posthumus and Cymbeline to choose forgiveness over revenge, ultimately bringing about the play’s restorative conclusion. Once again, Innogen’s ability to see a different way through a situation is proved invaluable.

Shakespeare also uses bird references in *Cymbeline* to explore the theme of male predatory behaviours. Iachimo’s pursuit of Innogen’s chastity is comparable to poaching, essential he is commodifying sex. This is best exemplified when Iachimo tells Posthumus, “You may wear her in title yours, but you know / strange fowl light upon neighbouring ponds” (Cym. 1.4.91-92). Iachimo’s reference to lustful strangers that may seduce Innogen represents a real threat to masculine security and feminine virtue, that of the cuckold. As Bruce Thomas Boehrer argues in his work *Shakespeare among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England*, “No animal image is more commonplace to English Renaissance culture, and at the same time more distinctive of that culture and its European contemporaries, than the horns of the cuckold” (71). Iachimo exploits Posthumus’ insecurities by verbalizing a reality where Innogen’s chastity and virtue are suspect. Posthumus quickly falls into this trap revealing the fragility of his masculine ego. This imagined scenario provokes a fear of inverted power dynamics that essentially unmans Posthumus. Boehrer notes, “The cuckold functions as a peculiar case of reverse coverture” (89). While suggesting a possible power imbalance, it also

creates an unsavoury connection between two men, the cuckoo and the cuckold. Iachimo does demonstrate some ability to reflect on his actions when he notes, “May bare the raven’s eye. I lodge in fear; / Though this a heavenly angel, hell is here” (Cym. 2.2.49-50). This moment of introspection reveals that he views himself as a bird of prey, fearing being caught by those “above” him. His clear sight of himself at this moment makes his actions even more reprehensible as the reader knows how cowardly, yet resolute, he is to win the wager against Posthumus.

Cloten’s pursuit of Innogen represents a real physical threat compared to Iachimo’s imagined one. As Cynthia Lewis argues in her essay *With Similar Proof Enough’: Modes of Misperception in Cymbeline*, “In *Cymbeline* characters not only play “games” – another frequent message but they are “game,” the natural food of fortune” (348). Essentially, Cloten is hunting Innogen to punish her for rejecting him. He makes his intentions very clear when he says,

With that suit upon  
my back will I ravish her – kill him, and in her  
eyes. There shall she see my valour, which will then  
be a torment to her contempt.” (Cym. 3.5.137-140)

His twisted plan, which includes raping Innogen while being dressed in Posthumus’ clothing, showcases an overlaying of psychological, physical, and sexual violence tied to visual perception. With Posthumus’s absence and her father’s disregard, Innogen is left with little protection, pursued by two licentious men who wish to inflict harm upon her.

The fear and anxieties surrounding the concept of the cuckold appear in many of William Shakespeare's plays, which suggests that it was a topic of interest to the Renaissance theatre audience. Boehrer notes, "Put simply, the dilemma of the cuckold is that by marrying, he has in a sense absorbed his wife's defects of character" (74). This fear of losing control, coupled with the shame and embarrassment tied to one's manhood, creates a comical situation that is deeply distressing for men and threatening for women. Boehrer also argues, "Masculinity itself might be an unattainable fantasy, an ideal of self-containment and self-control of which the indices – wifely chastity and masculine libido – are always beyond one's management" (98). Shakespeare uses the image of a pond to symbolize ownership within marriage. In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo says, "strange fowl light upon neighbouring ponds" (Cym. 1.4.92) to draw Posthumus' attention to the possibility of being cuckolded. In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare uses similar imagery when Leontes says, "And his pond fished by his next neighbour" (WT. 1.2.193). In this instance, Leontes has constructed a hysterical delusion to explain his anxiety and impotence when seeing his wife Hermione conversing with his close friend Polixenes. Posthumus and Leontes are driven to unwarranted jealousy by their inability to see their spouse as they are instead of what they fear them to be. As a result, Innogen and Hermione are both blameless women victimized by their husbands. Posthumus and Leontes are two examples of husbands in Shakespeare's late plays that are negatively altered by their insecurities. As Cyrus Hoy suggests, "Husbands are transformed by jealous rages to thoughts of murderous revenge, only to recognize the unworthiness of their suspicions and to repent of the misery they have caused" (305). The main difference between Posthumus and Leontes is that Iachimo planted the seeds of doubt in Posthumus' mind, whereas Leontes fabricated this destructive delusion all on his own; in either case, misperception and

false sight is the source of the misunderstanding. In *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, masculine insecurities lead to a mutation of the sight that twists spousal affection into something monstrous.

*Cymbeline* contains numerous bird references that relate to sight and perspective. These references illustrate how different characters see themselves and the situations they find themselves in. By utilizing the motif of birds and a bird's eye perspective, Shakespeare creates a visual bridge for the audience, allowing them to simultaneously visit ancient Britain and Renaissance Italy. Innogen is a complex character whose keen perception, coupled with a tendency for willful blindness, two seemingly opposing traits, provides her with the clearest sight in the play. An excellent example of this can be seen when Innogen says, "I tremble still with fear, but if there be / Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity / As a wren's eye, feared gods, a part it" (*Cym.* 4.3.302-304). Her self-association with the wren fits her current predicament; she is like a small bird, unlikely to be able to protect herself. This insightful analogy showcases Innogen's ability to correctly see herself and her situation. Cynthia Lewis argues, "Innogen in particular appreciates the crucial role that perspective plays in understanding. Her male disguise, in fact, lends her a new angle from which to interpret experience" (346). Innogen's willful blindness is tied to her unchanging feelings for Posthumus and, to a lesser extent, her father, two men who have treated her poorly. She can look past their faults and failures to exemplify mercy and forgiveness. Innogen's honest, feminine virtue is strongly contrasted with the evil manipulations of her stepmother, the queen. *Cymbeline* goes as far as to blame his late wife for his blindness to her character when he says,

Mine eyes  
 Were not in fault, for she was beautiful;  
 Mine ears that heard her flattery, nor my heart,  
 That thought her like seeming. (Cym. 5.5.62-65)

Cymbeline's attempt to blame the queen for his misperception of her moral character and actions due to her physical beauty reveals an inability to see clearly even after the truth has been revealed. He may have learned to be merciful from his daughter's example, but he has not learned any humility which would allow him to understand the limits of his sight resulting from his inherent shallowness.

Shakespeare uses the Roman soothsayer, Philharmonous, as a dramatic device that links foresight to ornithomancy, the reading of omens from the actions of birds. His prophecies serve to incorporate both Christian and patriotic themes into the play. Philharmonous acts as an intermediary between the verbal and the visual, the past and the present, and the divine and the mundane. When he says, "I saw Jove's bird, the Roman eagle, winged / From spongy south to this part of the west" (Cym. 4.2.347-348). This foreshadows Jupiter's descent into Posthumus's dream and the translation of empire from Rome to Britain and further west to the New World. Later in the play, the Soothsayer says, "For the Roman eagle / From south to west on wing soaring aloft" (Cym. 5.5.469). This proclamation is tied to the ancient art of augury. It suggests that Britain will prove worthy of her Roman tutelage while aligning the idea of foresight with the interpretation of bird's flight patterns. The soothsayer's reference to the Roman eagle draws the audience's attention back to Innogen's earlier comparison between Posthumus and the eagle.

Shakespeare brilliantly uses the iconography of Jupiter and his associations with the eagle to frame his male leader characters, as well as the action and ultimate resolution in *Cymbeline*. Virginia Mason Vaughan notes in her text, *Shakespeare and the Gods*, “Jupiter’s temple, in other words, is the site of sanctification for the play’s two central plots: Innogen’s marriage and Cymbeline’s rebellion subsequent reconciliation with Rome” (45). Jupiter can be seen as the presiding deity in *Cymbeline* as the play begins and ends with his presence. Jupiter’s strong ties to the eagle work seamlessly with the play’s many other bird references and analogies. As Steiner notes, “Symbolic value, however, can be seen in countless representations of birds from all over the world, many of which involve the notion that birds reflect the presence of either a deity or of the human soul” (vii). Jupiter’s appearance in the final act of the play includes his own reference to the eagle when he says, “Mount eagle, to my palace crystalline” (*Cym.* 5.4.83). This pronouncement suggests that eagles can be seen as both instruments and vehicles of the gods. Shakespeare explores the duality of Jupiter as represented by Posthumus and Cloten. Vaughan argues, “Posthumus, it would seem, is akin to Jupiter, the king, while Cloten, the vile rapist, is like Jove, the sexual predator” (46). The interchangeability between Posthumus and Cloten is made even more poignant through Innogen’s false identification of the headless body she finds wearing her husband’s garments, as it suggests that one thing can easily be made to look like another. Jupiter’s dualistic nature as king and predator mirrors Posthumus’s transformation from a loving husband to a murderous scorned lover, resulting from deception and misinterpretation.

William Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* expertly uses bird references and illusions to weave a narrative predominantly concerned with sight, seeing, and perception. It provokes the audience to think about the importance of viewing a situation differently while suggesting that forgiveness

and mercy are sometimes more important than clear sight. Shakespeare's bird imagery connects the members of Cymbeline's court to the natural and heavenly world while revealing a great deal about each character's morality and place within the narrative while synchronously warning about the inherent dangers of false or incomplete sight.

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