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Dreaming of Serpents and Asses: Shakespeare's Ovidian Animal Dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

This article investigates Shakespeare's use of animal dreams – dreams of or by animals – in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It argues that the Ovidian model of human-animal transformation, in which animal states and animal imagery describe, amplify, or symbolise aspects of human character, is fundamental to understanding Shakespeare's use of animal dreams in this play. The article further contends that Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* successfully adapted Ovidian animal symbolism for early modern culture by filtering it through religious and demonological references. The article falls into four parts. Firstly, it investigates the representation of animals, dreams, and animal dreams in classical culture and particularly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The article then goes on to investigate Hermia's dream of a serpent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, combining close reading with examinations of early modern dream books and with cultural historical insights into the representation of serpents in Christian iconography. Then, the article proceeds to a discussion of Bottom's oneiric transformation into an ass, drawing on classical source texts, demonological treatises, and early modern animal symbolism. The article concludes with a (re-) consideration of the dramatic functions of Shakespeare's Ovidian animal dreams in the context of the moral and aesthetic imperatives of Renaissance culture.

Keywords

Ovid; animals; dreams; comedy; demonology; mythology

One of the tales recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* is that of Alcyone and Ceyx, later adapted by Chaucer in *The Book of the Duchess*. In Book XI, Alcyone tirelessly begs the gods to reveal to her the fate of her husband, who has not returned from his latest sea voyage. Unbeknownst to her, he has drowned. Eventually, Juno is so moved by Alcyone's prayers that she asks Iris to request that the god of sleep send a dream figure in the shape of Ceyx to reveal the latter's misfortune to the bereft wife. The god of sleep charges his son Morpheus with the mission because he is the one best able to imitate human forms:

No other is more skilled than he in representing the gait, the features, and the speech of men; the clothing also and the accustomed words of each he represents. His office is with men alone: another takes the form of beast or bird or the long-bodied serpent. Him the gods call Icelos, but mortals name him Phobetor. A third is Phantasos, versed in different arts. He puts on deceptive shapes of earth rocks, water, trees, all lifeless things.¹

In this passage, Ovid describes a taxonomy of dreams, with each category being tended to by a different god: Morpheus is best able to express the shape of man, Icelos (or Phobetor) adopts the shapes of animals, and Phantasos can represent inanimate things like fruits, flowers, rocks, streams, and earth. Icelos, or Phobetor, is thus the god of animal dreams. The main purpose of this passage seems to be the description or categorisation of different classes of dreams. To Ovid, it must have seemed important. The inclusion of animal dreams, too, must have seemed important to him. In a work that is concerned with transformations of various kinds (including transformations into animals), the concept of animal dreams and the allusion to Icelos/Phobetor – whose appearance to sleepers as an animal-like dream figure is itself a transformation – evoke precisely the possibilities of myth, fable, allegory, hybridity, or monstrosity that Ovid, and the Greek mythology upon which he draws, use to interrogate human behaviours.

Ovid's use of animal and dream imagery to illuminate aspects of human character, including through human-animal transformations or approximations, also inspired Shakespeare, who accessed the *Metamorphoses* both in its Latin original and in Arthur Golding's English translation of 1567.² Shakespeare fully exploits the dramatic and symbolic potential of animal and dream imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), where Hermia has a dream about a serpent, Bottom is transformed into an ass, and Snug performs the part of the lion in the mechanicals' metatheatrical *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The present article sets out to investigate Shakespeare's use of animal dreams – dreams of or by animals – in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, arguing that the Ovidian model of human-animal transformation or hybridity, in which animal states and animal imagery describe, amplify, or symbolise aspects of human character or behaviour, is fundamental to understanding Shakespeare's use of animal dreams in this play. The article will further contend that Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* successfully adapted Ovidian animal symbolism for early modern culture by filtering it through religious and demonological references.

While critics in the burgeoning fields of cultural dream studies and animal studies have extensively discussed Shakespeare's plays from different theoretical angles and with the help of different methodologies, the topic of animal

¹Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Miller, 2:165. For Arthur Golding's early modern translation of this passage, see Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. 145v.

²On Shakespeare's reading of Ovid, see Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 7–9.

dreams – dreams of, by, and because of animals – has been neglected, in particular with regard to the mediation of tropes of animals and dreams from classical antiquity to the Renaissance. The present article builds on some of the excellent recent work on dreams and animals but carries on where it left off. Specifically, the article sets out to plug remaining gaps by attending to the literary and dramatic effects of animal dreams and by analysing the processes of adaptation that they underwent: most notably, the transformation of Ovidian tropes into early modern dramatic devices. Recent decades have seen the emergence of a body of work that investigates the cultural, material, and ideological significance of discourses and representations of animals. This has included volumes by Julia Kindt (2021) and Patricia

A. Johnston et al. (2016) which examine animal symbolism and human-animal relations in classical cultures.³ In early modern studies, furthermore, scholars including Karen Raber and Erica Fudge have investigated the relationships between animal and human bodies in Renaissance culture, the symbolism of animals in different art forms, and the early modern debates around rationality and cognition, while critics including Bruce Boehrer, Jeanne Addison Roberts, Rebecca Ann Bach, and Laurie Shannon have explored cross-species connections specifically in Shakespeare's plays.⁴ But while Shakespearean examples such the serpent in Hermia's dream and the transformation of Bottom have formed part of these investigations, their distinct dream frames have not been sufficiently examined in the context of metaphorical and characterological function, nor have they been contextualised within early modern intellectual climates and classical artistic influences. In recent years, early modern dream cultures (like Renaissance animal studies) have seen a spike in scholarly interest, inspired by the wider discovery of cultural and intellectual history as methods of investigation, including in literary studies.⁵ Dreams in Shakespeare's plays were comprehensively studied first by Marjorie Garber, who argued in 1974 that dreams evolve from being mere devices in the early works to being a form of 'metamorphosis' and 'identity' in the late plays.⁶ Shakespeare's dreams have since been revisited with a greater focus on cultural historical contexts and literary sources.⁷ The links between dream worlds and animal symbolism, however, have remained neglected. The classical inheritance of Shakespeare's dreams and animal symbolism, too, has remained underappreciated even as the general influence of classical ideas on the Renaissance and Shakespeare has been explored in various mainstream studies over the past

³Kindt, ed., *Animals in Ancient Greek Religion*; Johnston et al., ed., *Animals in Greek and Roman Religion and Myth*.

⁴Raber, *Animal Bodies*; Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*; Fudge, ed., *Renaissance Beasts*; Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals*; Boehrer, *Animal Characters*; Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*; Bach, 'The Animal Continuum'; and Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal*. For a comprehensive overview of the history of scholarship on animals in Shakespeare, see Raber's excellent review essay 'Shakespeare and Animals'.

⁵For examples of studies of early modern dreams, see Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*; Wiseman et al., ed., *Reading the Early Modern Dream*; and MacCarthy et al., ed., *Cognitive Confusions*.

⁶Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare*, 13.

⁷Fretz, *Dreams, Sleep, and Shakespeare's Genres*; and Brown, ed., *Reading Dreams*.

few decades, with Jonathan Bate, in particular, having attended to Ovid's influence on Shakespeare.⁸ Bate's study has shown that Renaissance Ovidianism was a combination of high-brow and low-brow references and of classical and native culture; as Bate argues, this was in part because 'a newly unapologetic delight in the poetic and erotic qualities of the *Metamorphoses* came to compete with the predominant medieval practice of moralizing and even Christianizing them' and because the process of 'Englishing' involved not only the words but also the 'atmosphere' of Ovid.⁹ The present article redresses literary-historical imbalances in scholarship by exploring the ways in which, within this clash between the old and the new, Shakespeare's animal dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* combine classical Ovidian allusions with native Christian and demonological iconographies. In fact, it was the mediation of both classical and Christian images of animals and dreams into Shakespeare's time that allowed the playwright in turn to 'oneiromediate' animal imagery for purposes of character representation and reflection on human nature.¹⁰ By using animal dreams involving hybridity, transformation, and symbolisation, Shakespeare successfully adapted Ovidianism in the light of the aesthetic and moral imperatives of Renaissance drama. In addition, he created a comedically apt vehicle for exploring themes of sexuality, witchcraft, and folly within the licensed space of a dream.

In order to (re-) consider Shakespeare's dramatic adaptation of Ovidian animal dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the article falls into four parts. Firstly, it investigates the representation of animals, dreams, and animal dreams in classical culture and particularly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Secondly, the article examines Hermia's dream of a serpent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, combining close reading of the play with examinations of early modern dream books and with cultural historical insights into the role of serpents in Christian imagination and iconography. Then, the article turns to a discussion of the most iconic dream animal in this play, namely the transformed Nick Bottom. In this part, it elucidates Shakespeare's use of animal dreams by drawing on classical source texts, demonological treatises, and early modern animal symbolism. The article concludes with reflections on the dramatic effects of Shakespeare's animal dreams within the frameworks of both comedy and wider sixteenth-century culture. Thus, the article will explore how the Ovidian model of human-animal connections, in which animal states and animal imagery describe, amplify, or symbolise aspects of human character or behaviour, shapes Shakespeare's use of animal dreams

⁸See, for example, Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy*; Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*; Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*; Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*; Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*; Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*; and Martindale and Taylor, ed., *Shakespeare and the Classics*.

⁹Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 25, 29.

¹⁰I am indebted to Anthony Guneratne for coining the term 'oneiromediation' in his remarks during the conference 'Dreams and the Animal Kingdom in Culture and Aesthetic Media', Saarland University, 23–25 September 2021.

even where these dreams are loaded with Christian and demonological meanings.

Animals and Dreams in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Many of the central events of Greek mythology that Ovid recounts construct ontological or metaphorical links between humans and animals. Many Greek gods and other mythological figures even adopt the shapes of animals. Among the most famous examples is Zeus's self-transformation into a white bull to abduct Europa. The metamorphoses of Zeus (Jove or Jupiter for the Romans) and other gods in Greek mythology seem to insinuate that love and desire can turn us all into beasts. Shakespeare, as an avid reader of Ovid – whose rich literary and artistic precedents gave him the opportunity to exercise himself in the art of *imitatio* – was certain to have grasped this analogy.¹¹ In *The Winter's Tale* (1609), he has Florizel assure Perdita:

The gods themselves,
Humbling their deities to love, have taken
The shapes of beasts upon them. Jupiter
Became a bull and bellowed; the green Neptune
A ram and bleated; and the fire-robed god,
Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,
As I seem now. Their transformations
Were never for a piece of beauty rarer,
Nor in a way so chaste, since my desires
Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts
Burn hotter than my faith (4.4.25–35).

Florizel here attempts to reassure Perdita that the gods' beastly metamorphoses were driven by beastly desires but that his love for her, nurtured by her most rare beauty, is more honourable than the gods' salacious intentions. Aside from gods masquerading as animals, Greek mythology is also ripe with human-animal hybrids: the Chimera is a fire-breathing monster composed of the parts of lion, goat, and snake; Medusa has snakes for hair; and the Minotaur is half man and half bull. In addition, many classical myths entail human-animal transformations: Circe turns Odysseus's fellow sailors into pigs; Io is turned into a heifer; Alcithoe and her sisters become bats as punishment for mocking and scorning Bacchus. In all of this, though, animal shapes always remain closely linked to the human. In Ovid's rendition of these myths, too, animals are not treated as an independent entity but are represented to shed light on aspects of humanity, whether it be as cunning disguises, as punitive transformations, or as amplifiers of human animality. The tension between the original human state and the newly acquired animal state, and between the physical change and the psychological continuity, is one of the focal aspects of human-animal

¹¹For a discussion of the Renaissance art of imitation, see Burrow, *Imitating Authors*; and Greene, *The Light in Troy*.

transformations. In fact, Ovid narrates many stories of human characters who are changed into animals that share or symbolise one of their original (human) qualities: Io, transformed by Jove into a heifer to hide her from his wife Juno, apparently retains her beauty even as a cow.¹²

Bate has contended that Ovid was the ‘author in whose work [Shakespeare] found the things that made him a poet and a dramatist: magic, myth, metamorphosis, rendered with playfulness, verbal dexterity, and generic promiscuity.’¹³ When Shakespeare wrote his first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* (1592), he even brought a copy of the *Metamorphoses* onstage, as if to pay homage to his greatest artistic influence. Shakespeare’s interest in Ovid was, above all, in how his tales and their mythological protagonists reflect the human condition and the emotional and sexual entanglements of life, including marital conflict, jealousy, desire, abuse, and vengeance. It was the same interest that attracted Shakespeare to Ovid’s human-animal transformations and approximations, because Ovid always suggest a fundamental nexus between the characters’ animal shapes and their original human states. When Arachne, in Ovid’s Book VI, proved too talented a weaver – and too hubristic a woman – in the eyes of the gods, she is appropriately changed into a spider by Minerva.¹⁴ Ovid does not present her animal state as distinct from the human state; rather, Arachne’s animal form retains and even amplifies characteristics of her original human state. This principle applies to many of the other metamorphoses retold by Ovid: even though the bodies of his mythological figures change, their spirits usually do not. In Book I of the *Metamorphoses*, Lycaon, who served Jove the roasted flesh of his own son, is changed into a wolf and consequently retains the murderousness that characterised him in human form: ‘He turns into a wolf, and yet retains some traces of his former shape [...] There is the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same gleaming eyes, the same picture of bestial savagery’.¹⁵ In Book XIV, King Picus, who used to rely on a woodpecker for the purpose of divination, is himself turned into a woodpecker by the sorceress Circe because he rejected her romantic advances.¹⁶ Like the example of Lycaon, whose animal shape fully embodies his earlier savagery, the case of Picus demonstrates that Ovidian human-animal metamorphoses can lead to intensified passions: having been transformed, the enraged Picus savagely stabs the bark of a tree.

In addition to retelling human-animal transformations, Ovid also uses animal imageries as metaphors or similes to describe human acts and behaviours. In Book VI, King Tereus’s rape of Philomela – the story which inspired Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* – is compared to the sight of the ‘the ravenous

¹²Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Miller, 1:45.

¹³Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, 1.

¹⁴Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Miller, 1:277–9.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:19.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 2:327–8.

bird of Jove' snatching a hare and to that of a wolf capturing its prey: 'She trembled like a frightened lamb [...] torn and cast aside by a grey wolf'.¹⁷ In *Titus Andronicus*, the rape takes place offstage and is not described; Marcus later refers to the perpetrator as a 'beast' and 'monster' (2.4.34, 44). In the poem *Lucrece*, though, Shakespeare does use animal imagery to describe Tarquin's rape of Lucrece: Tarquin is first referred to as a 'grim lion' fawning over his prey (lines 421–2) and later as a 'wolf' seizing a 'lamb' (line 677), while the trembling Lucrece is compared to a 'new-killed bird' (lines 456–7). Shakespeare's *Lucrece*, like *Titus Andronicus* and Ovid's tale of Philomela, is a compelling account of the animal force of male desire. Later in Ovid's more disturbingly vivid account, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue to guarantee her silence, prompting a comparison to 'the severed tail of a mangled snake[which] twitches convulsively'.¹⁸ Tereus's effort, however, is ultimately unsuccessful because Philomela weaves a tapestry that tells her story to her sister Procne. Philomela also does not have to wait long for her revenge to be exacted. Procne, who is married to Tereus, concocts the horrid plan of killing her son Itys and feeding his flesh to her husband. As she drags her son away to be slain, she is described as 'a tigress drag[ging] a suckling fawn through the dark woods on Ganges' banks'.¹⁹ In the end, the gods transform Tereus into a hawk, Procne into a swallow, and Philomela into a nightingale (known for its song of lament). In a moment of Ovidian poetic justice, Philomela, who has lost her tongue and thereby her ability to speak and sing, thus becomes a bird known for its beautiful song.

As part of his interest in alterations of human and animal beings, Ovid also explores dreams as avenues to transformation. The imaginative ability of dreams to form and reform identity, and to dissolve and recreate states and identities, comes to the fore in Book VII. Here, Aeacus, king of Aegina, gives his account of how a plague destroyed his people. The cause of the plague lies in Jupiter's extramarital affair with the nymph of the island, named Aegina. Seeking reprisal, the jealous Juno sent a plague against the people of the island. In a vivid account of the consequences of the supernaturally inflicted plague, Aeacus tells of how unburied corpses started piling up, prompting him to call on Jupiter either to give him his people back or to kill him, too. Observing an army of ants hard at work on a sacred oak tree, he asked that Jove supply him with such an army of people. That night, the king had a dream:

Before my eyes the same oak-tree seemed to stand, with just as many branches and with just as many creatures on its branches, to shake with the same motion, and to scatter the grain-bearing column on the ground below. These seemed suddenly to

¹⁷Ibid., 1:325.

¹⁸Ibid., 1:327.

¹⁹Ibid., 1:333.

grow larger and ever larger, to raise themselves from the ground and stand with form erect, to throw off their leanness, their many feet, their back colour, and to take on human limbs and a human form.²⁰

The following morning, Aeacus's son Telamon woke him to tell him that overnight the city had been peopled afresh. In that sense, Aeacus's dream is both vatic and psychological: it foresees Jove's intervention, but it also constitutes a nightly reflection of waking thoughts and daytime wishes. In addition to blurring the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, the dream problematises the border between illusion and reality when it concretises into the king's waking reality. In fact, the king's circumstances change through, and contemporaneously with, the dream; thus, the dream's shaping power is not limited to the king's imagination but extends to his physical reality. For Ovid, the dream here becomes a space as well as a means for the dissolution and reformation of states. As with the other transformations in Ovid, though, this episode does not lead to any radical physical break with the original state. Rather, the metamorphosis is as much symbol as it is reality, with the animal state serving as an amplifier of a human quality: namely, the industriousness of which Aeacus is in dire need as he seeks to rebuild his country.

As in Ovid, the metaphorical use of animals in Shakespeare's works often does not have a lot to do with the animals themselves. Instead, Shakespeare's characters frequently deploy animal comparisons to make misogynistic, racist, and other insults: wives are 'froward and unable worms' (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 5.2.169); Othello is a 'black ram' (*Othello*, 1.1.88); Richard III is a 'bottled spider' and '[p]oisonous bunch-backed toad' (*Richard III*, 1.3.242, 246). Recent scholarship has explored how Shakespeare also uses lion metaphors to convey the tyrannical and the majestic (or forgiving) powers of kingship, evokes hunting rituals to signify social division in *As You Like It*, and employs piscine imagery to describe sexual aggression in *Measure for Measure*.²¹ Most of these human-animal comparisons reduce animal characteristics to one single trait which is then used for the purpose of character representation. The use of animals as appendages of humans, whether it is dramatically, metaphorically, or existentially, appears logical against the backdrop of the anthropocentric worldview in Shakespeare's time, which was defined by ingrained theological and humanistic traditions, including a divinely created chain of being. This way of thinking also pervades Golding's translation of Ovid. Golding's 'Epistle' sets out his intent to interpret Ovid's fables '[t]oo shew how they and all the rest may stand a man in sted'.²² In it, he denies that '[o]ur noble soule [...] | Is common too vs with the beasts' and chastises

²⁰Ibid., 1:387. For Golding's early modern English translation of the dream, see Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sigs 90v–91v.

²¹See Raber and Dugan, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Animals*, part 5: 'Animal Boundaries and Identities'.

²²Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. B1r.

humans who turn out ‘woorse than beasts, because they doo abace theyr owne degree’.²³ Golding here draws on the medieval practice of giving Ovid a Christian moral application (his ‘Epistle’ would have constituted Shakespeare’s main point of contact with his interpretative tradition). From Golding’s hermeneutic perspective, Ovid’s book teaches (in Bate’s words) ‘the transience of all earthly things and the unique constancy of God’.²⁴ As a case in point, Ovid’s tale of Echo becomes for Golding a representation of ‘[t]he lewd behauiour of abawd, and his due punishment’, while the story of Arachne’s transformation moralises that ‘folk should not contend | Ageinst their betters, nor persist in error too the end’.²⁵ Golding’s interpretation of Ovid is thus interested in the lessons that mankind can draw from his stories, including from the animal shapes and the human-animal transformations. While Shakespeare’s own treatment of Ovidianism almost thirty years after the publication of Golding’s *Metamorphosis* continues to subscribe to the practice of interpreting animal shapes and transformations so that they say something about humanity or the human condition, it nevertheless also marks a shift away from allegorical reading and towards a greater interest in Ovid’s aesthetics – what Charles Martindale calls the ‘amoral’ Ovid, usually with a ‘strongly erotic character’.²⁶ In fact, Shakespeare no longer deploys human-animal transformations and analogies with the intent of moral instruction but with the intent of dramatically compelling characterisation. Entering current conversations in early modern studies about the recreations and recontextualisations of Ovid, this article proposes that Shakespeare’s Ovidian animal dreams in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* crystallise the shift away from moral allegory and more towards an aesthetics informed by the new genres and media in which and through which Ovid’s work was presented.²⁷ While classical art and poetry had lavishly explored the imaginative and creative potential of animal symbolism as a marker of real or imagined human qualities, Shakespeare’s comedy of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in its pursuit of dramatic and cultural rather than verbal or literal translation, aptly reframed Ovidian animal symbolism as a theatrically self-conscious dream world.

Like animal symbolism, dreams have long constituted means of understanding, uncovering, denigrating, or portraying one’s self or the selves of others. In Shakespeare’s time, they were also recognised as creative realisations of non-normative thoughts and desires. In one of the most frequently discussed Elizabethan dream accounts, the astrologer Simon Forman records a dream about Queen Elizabeth I in which he saves the monarch from a group of quarrelling

²³Ibid., sig. A2v.

²⁴Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 135.

²⁵Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. A3r.

²⁶Martindale, ‘Paradise Metamorphosed’, 311. For the different hermeneutic traditions of reading Ovid, also see Shulman, ‘Crossroads of Myth’, 83–4, 95–103; and Martindale, ‘Paradise Metamorphosed’, 307–12.

²⁷For a recent study of the recreation of Ovid in early modern print, painting, and applied arts, see Enenkel and de Jong, ed., *Re-inventing Ovid’s Metamorphoses*.

men and directs some sexual jokes at her.²⁸ Both a latent erotic content and a desire to climb the social ladder are evident in his dream. Forman's subjective interest in his own dream departs from the traditional type of oneirocriticism found in manuals like Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica* and Thomas Hill's *The Pleasante Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreams* (1559), which provide their readers with generic explanations and interpretations of dreams; these interpretations are sometimes prophetic, sometimes moralising, and sometimes cautionary, but they operate almost always on a fairly general level. Forman's interest in his personal dreams illustrates the growing association of dreams with self-knowledge in the Renaissance.²⁹ It was precisely this nexus between dreams and selfhood that turned dream devices into an attractive tool for Shakespeare. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare chose the trope of animal dreams, with its potential for transformation, allegory, unshackled imagination, and creation of licensed spaces, to explore questions of personal and public identity in contexts of alterity, change, and crisis. It is in this dramatic device that the play's Ovidianism is supremely apparent, with Hermia's sexual fears being concretised through the serpent in her dream, and sexual fantasy and asininity becoming visualised through Bottom's oneiric transformation. Bate has contended that Ovid's work supplied Shakespeare with the starting point for the use of '[t]he fiction of external forms [that] makes a complex condition easier to comprehend'.³⁰ When it comes to the animal dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as I will show, Shakespeare combines his Ovidian starting point

– namely, the mythological transformations and the animal symbolism that bespeak human traits and predicaments – with early modern oneirocritical, iconographical, scriptural, and demonological references. In doing so, he collapses the gulf between humans and animals through pagan-mythological as well as Christian allusions and successfully adapts Ovidianism for a cultural context different from Ovid's.

Dreams and Serpents in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

'Here come two noble beasts in: a man and a lion' (5.1.215–16) – that is how Theseus comments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he watches the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and witnesses the tailor Starveling entering as moonshine and the joiner Snug as a lion. Theseus's words ridicule Starveling's unsuccessful disguise (he carries a lantern to emulate moonshine), but the reference to 'two noble beasts' may also imply similarities between the mechanicals (deemed socially inferior by the snobbish duke Theseus) and the beast whose role Snug attempts to perform. After all, this is the play in which another character, the weaver Nick Bottom, has '[a]n ass's

²⁸Rowse, *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age*, 20.

²⁹Also see Fretz, *Dreams, Sleep, and Shakespeare's Genres*, 82–6.

³⁰Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 135.

nole' fixed upon his head by the fairies (3.2.17). Bottom, like Snug, is one of the play's dream animals.

It is apt to consider *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the lens of oneiric animal representations because Shakespeare's self-styled dream play is replete with associations between man and animal that touch on metamorphosis, theatricality, and fantasy. What is more, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is perhaps Shakespeare's most Ovidian play in a broader sense, as well. In Ovidian fashion, the lovers' minds are transfigured just as love itself is metamorphosed in the forest, and characters are metatheatrically translated into actors. In addition, some of the play's characters are modelled on mythological figures evoked by Ovid: Puck is a Cupid, the fairies are translations of Ovidian nymphs, and Titania is derived from the many goddesses of the night in the *Metamorphoses* (namely, Diana, Latona, Circe, and Pyrrha, who are always referred to as the daughters of Titan).³¹ Within this Ovidian intertextuality, Shakespeare offers us moments where the human is translated into the animal or where the animal stands for the human. When Oberon explains the workings of the fairies' magical love potion, he states gleefully: 'Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, | On meddling monkey, or on busy ape, |[Titania] shall pursue it with the soul of love' (2.1.180–2). In these lines, Oberon envisions a scenario in which human love misfires and targets beasts. The scenario later materialises when Titania falls in love with the transformed Bottom. The teeming forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is moreover inhabited by 'snakes with double tongue', '[t]horny hedgehogs', and '[n]ewts and blindworms' (2.2.9–11) as well as 'ounce[s]', 'cat[s]', 'bear[s]', 'pard[s]', and 'boar[s]' (2.2.36–7). This is the same forest into which the mortal characters escape to pursue their loves, only to remember it as a dream world at the end of the play. When the lovers wake up from their sleep in 4.1, the fairies have not only magically arranged for their romantic conflicts to morph into perfect harmony but have also erased most of their memory in the process. The confused lovers here liken their memory fragments to a dream experience. Lysander claims that he is '[h]alf sleep, half waking' (4.1.146) and attests that he 'cannot truly say how [he] came [t]here' (147), while his former love rival Demetrius remarks: 'It seems to me | That yet we sleep, we dream' (191–2). When Bottom, who has likewise been put to sleep by Puck, awakes from his moonlight tryst with Titania, he finds himself restored to human form and remarks: 'I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was' (4.1.201–3). Even the audience is invited to view the play as a dream should they be displeased with the performance (5.1.414–20). The animals (or human-animal hybrids) in the forest thus form part of an explicit dreamscape.

Shakespeare's animal world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like Ovid's in the *Metamorphoses*, is an extension or amplifier of the human world. That the play's animal images highlight the characters' defining traits or qualities

³¹See also Laroque, 'Ovidian Transformations', 24; Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 136.

becomes apparent from Hermia's nightmare about a serpent eating her heart away. In 2.2, Lysander and Hermia have run into the forest in order to escape the demand of Hermia's father that she marry Demetrius. They fall asleep in the forest, and when Hermia wakes up, she 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 ate my heart away,
And you sat smiling at his cruel prey (2.2.151–6).

Hermia's dream dovetails with the play's wider, metaphorical notions of dreams and provides a blueprint for understanding the wider animal imagery in the play's dream world. Since the serpent is a phallic symbol and has since Biblical times signified treachery, the dream can suggest the threat that Lysander's sexual desire poses to Hermia's more spiritual idea of love. The language in the scene indicates that Hermia is concerned about losing her virtuous and romantic image of Lysander to a version of him that is driven by sexual motivations. This is despite her lover's best efforts to disguise his more carnal intentions in riddling and Petrarchan rhetoric (see 2.2.51–8). The gulf between Lysander's suspected sexual intentions and Hermia's romantic idea of virtuous, marital love here mirrors the conflicts seen in sixteenth-century sonnet sequences, such as Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), where the cunning sonneteer seeks to persuade the virtuous, resistant, and (in his eyes) cruel mistress. In Sonnet 71 of *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, Astrophil confides: 'So while thy beauty draws the heart to love, | As fast thy virtue bends that love to good. | But ah, Desire still cries, Give me some food!' (lines 12–14).³² The volta in the sonnet's last line ('But ah, Desire still cries') suddenly subverts the earlier concern with love and virtue and abruptly reintroduces the notion of indomitable sexual desire. The poet's carnal needs, in short, must be satisfied regardless of any romantic or spiritual aspirations. To gain access to Stella's coveted body, Astrophil resorts to rhetorical flourishes as well as syllogisms, as in Sonnet 63, where he insidiously lures Stella into a linguistic trap by exploiting the grammatical rule that 'in one speech two negatives affirm' (line 14).³³ When Lysander argues that Hermia should not deny him a 'bed-room' because '[his] heart unto [hers] is knit, | So that but one heart [they] can make of it' (2.2.57, 53–4), he replicates the techniques of persuasion seen in the period's sonnets. But Hermia remains suspicious of Lysander's intentions and wants to keep a safe distance between them, especially while she is in a state of sleep and therefore vulnerability: 'Lysander riddles very prettily [...] Lie further off, in human modesty', she retorts (59, 63). Shakespeare's use of

³²Braden, ed., *Sixteenth-Century Poetry*, 374.

³³*Ibid.*, 370–1.

the serpent image as part of Hermia's dream certainly speaks to these sexual fears that psychoanalytic critics, in particular, have seen articulated in the play.³⁴

As an adaptation of earlier cultural and artistic renditions, Shakespeare's use of the serpent image must also be read intertextually, though. Alongside dragons, toads, worms, and insects, snakes and serpents have long symbolised sin and vice. As the natural philosopher and divine Edmund Topsell writes in the bestiary *The Historie of Serpents* (1608), '[e]ver since the deuill entered into the Serpent [in the Garden of Eden], it became hatefull to all'.³⁵ People in Shakespeare's London would have been exposed to plenty of images of and references to serpents, often linked to Eve and the fall and reverberating with the moral warnings found in the Bible. The serpent was a central icon in the bestiaries published all over Europe (including Topsell's in London), which functioned as handbooks of moral behaviour, drawing on the belief that the natural world was a lesson in ethics created by God for the edification of Christians.³⁶ Meanwhile, the 1562 *Whole Book of Psalms*, which introduced congregational singing to England and contained the best-known English verse of the time, used snakes and serpents to evoke man's fall from Eden and to warn against evil temptation and deception, as in Psalm 58: 'This wicked sorte from theyr birth day haue erred on this wise: And from their mothers womb alwaie, haue vsed craft and lyes. | In them the poyson and the breathe, of serpents doo appeare'.³⁷ Thus, the serpent's association with deception was clearly established in Christian iconography, being depicted as a symbol for sin even on Protestant pottery.³⁸ Some of the most impactful cautionary representations of the Eden serpent would have been found in churches. For example, Norwich Cathedral features a temptation boss, made in the early sixteenth century, showing a serpent with the upper torso of a boy (or very young girl); and the church of Saint Neot in Cornwall depicts a creation scene on its stained glass (completed in 1532) which shows a serpent with the face of a man.³⁹ When Shakespeare introduced serpents into the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the serpent in Hermia's dream, but also the physical serpents that are said to inhabit the forest (see 2.1.255; 2.2.9) – he would inevitably have associated the play's *selva oscura* with the Garden of Eden.

Shakespeare's introduction of the serpent into a dream would have resonated with Christian oneirocriticism, as well. Early modern dream interpretation manuals are at least partly informed by the Biblical significance of the serpent. Thomas Hill's treatise declares that '[t]o be assaulted of Serpentes, signifyeth euill', while the explanation of 'Serpentem' in the medieval dreambook

³⁴Holland, 'Hermia's Dream', 73–4; Faber, 'Hermia's Dream', 179–90.

³⁵Topsell, *Historie of Serpents*, 19.

³⁶For an overview of medieval bestiaries, see Hourihane, ed., *Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, 507–9.

³⁷Sternhold and Hopkins, *Booke of Psalmes*, sig. L4r.

³⁸Walsham, 'Eating the Forbidden Fruit', 63–83.

³⁹Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches*, 87, 143–4.

Somnia Danielis reads: ‘To see an addre assayle thee bytokinth that thin enemies shuln overcome the’ (to see a snake attack you means that your enemies will defeat you).⁴⁰ The serpent is also a bad omen in pagan oneirocriticism – the other major influence on early modern dream manuals. The 1606 translation of Artemidorus’s treatise reads: ‘The Serpent signifieth sicknes, and enmity, and towhom he shall appeare, they shall governe him, and the enemy and sicknes shall handle us’.⁴¹ In keeping with these cautionary dream interpretations, the serpent in Hermia’s dream, too, connotes danger or suffering. Even if we consider Hermia’s dream purely from an intrinsic perspective, we find that it is profoundly negative in its prolepsis of Hermia’s imminent loss of Lysander, whose affections for her are to be transferred to Helena thanks to Puck’s misapplication of the love potion. To Hermia’s mind, moreover, the image of the serpent does not only signify libidinous or otherwise anti-romantic threats but also mortal dangers. When she (falsely) accuses Demetrius of having murdered the vanished Lysander, she compares Demetrius to a ‘worm’, ‘adder’, and ‘serpent’ (3.2.70–3). In this moment, Hermia becomes her own dream interpreter, reading the image of the serpent not as a symbol of the metaphorical taking away of Lysander’s romantic feelings but as a sign of the physical taking away of Lysander’s life. In doing so, Hermia shows herself an apt student of classical authorities, concurring with the commonplace explication of serpent dreams as indicators of enmity. Demetrius’s futile protestations of innocence only supply Hermia with additional reasons for conceiving of him as a double-tongued adder and add to the comic touch of Hermia’s misinterpretation.⁴²

The case of the serpent in Hermia’s dream reveals one of Shakespeare’s strategies for transposing Ovidianism both into the early modern Christian setting and into the medium of drama. Through the serpent’s connotations of sexuality, temptation, and betrayal, Shakespeare adapts what François Laroque calls Ovid’s ‘encyclopedia of the vagaries and monstrosities of love and desire’.⁴³ Like Ovid’s animals, Shakespeare’s serpent reflects human desires. In the context of Lysander and Hermia’s exchanges about faithfulness and sexual consummation immediately before they lie down to sleep, and in the light of the imminent transfer of Lysander’s affection to Helena, the oneiric serpent becomes a symbol especially of the fickleness and the vagaries of love. Hermia’s dream also adds to the play’s broader exposition of the bestiality of desire, seen elsewhere in Helena’s invitation to Demetrius to ‘use [her] as [his] spaniel, spurn [her], strike [her], | Neglect [her], lose [her]’ (2.1.205–6) and in her later affirmation that she is ‘ugly as a bear’ (2.2.100).
Shakespeare

⁴⁰Hill, *Pleasant Arte*, sig. D2r; Fischer, *Complete Medieval Dreambook*, 134.

⁴¹Artemidorus, *Judgement, or Exposition of Dreames*, 73.

⁴²Misunderstanding and misreading are conventional themes of early Shakespearean comedy as well as of Plautine and Terentian comedy. See Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, 152–6.

⁴³Laroque, ‘Ovidian Transformations’, 23.

seems keen to dispute Golding's belief that the human soul has nothing in common with beasts.⁴⁴ In doing so, he is more Ovidian than Ovid's translator, intent on exposing the animality of human behaviour. But in another way, Shakespeare himself becomes a translator of Ovid, for he filters the Ovidian trope of human-animal approximation or transformation through early modern religious texts and contexts and reworks it into a dream device that aptly suits his celebration of theatre, fantasy, and imagination.

Dreams, Asininity, and Sexual Demonology in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

When Titania's fairies, earlier in the same scene where Hermia's dream occurs, cast a protective charm on their queen to ward off evil, they sing: 'You spotted snakes with double tongue [...] be not seen' (2.2.9–10). 'Spotted' here carries the meaning of tainted moral character. It is a further example of how the serpentine imagery in the play is determinedly negative and of how it underscores, in keeping with the long Christian tradition that informs it, ideas of temptation and deception. But this moment ironically also sets the stage for the appearance of another animal in the dreamscape of Shakespeare's play: namely, Bottom, who is given an ass's head and soon becomes Titania's love interest. Bottom's physical asininity echoes the phallic symbolism of the serpent in that the ass was recognised as a prodigiously priapic animal – and had been so since ancient times in Greek, Egyptian, and Hindu cultures.⁴⁵ This nexus between asininity and phallic endowment is also emphasised in one of Shakespeare's likely sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, translated into English by William Adlington in 1566, revolves around the protagonist Lucius's metamorphosis into an ass. Apuleius takes the ass as an emblem to expose certain behaviours of man, including the exploitation of slaves who are reduced, like Lucius, to being little more than beasts. There are important similarities between Lucius's and Bottom's transformations. Like Bottom's metamorphosis, orchestrated by fairies, Lucius's transformation is preternatural, being the result of a magical experiment gone wrong. Like Bottom's change, furthermore, Lucius's altered shape adds a salacious touch of bestiality to his sexual encounters, as in Book X, where a woman falls in love with him and wants to have sex but is left wondering 'how she, who was so yonge and tender, could be able to receive [him]'.⁴⁶ The transformed Bottom oozes the same sexual appeal as Apuleius's transformed Lucius, as when Titania commands her fairy attendants '[t]o have [her] love to bed, and to arise [i.e., cause an erection]' (3.1.162). Influenced by cultural connotations as well as by direct sources, the transformed Bottom thus adds to the same sexual subtext as Hermia's serpent.

⁴⁴Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. A2v.

⁴⁵Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces*, 23–4.

⁴⁶Apuleius, *The Golden Asse*, trans. Adlington, 109–10.

Two years after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom's sexuality and his transformation by fairies were parodied by Shakespeare in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597). In 5.5, Falstaff is asked to dress up as Herne the Hunter for his midnight rendezvous with Mistress Ford; this entails wearing a buck's head with antlers that ironically denote the cuckold's horns he unsuccessfully sought to put on Page and Ford. But Falstaff's transformation into a male deer, like Bottom's into an ass, also denotes destructive libido. To underline this, Shakespeare has Falstaff allude to the metamorphoses retold by Ovid: 'Remember, Jove, thou wast a bull for thy Europa: love set on thy horns. O powerful love, that in some respects makes a beast a man, in some other a man a beast [...] I am here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i'the forest' (5.5.3–5, 11–12). The parody of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues when Falstaff is pinched by children disguised as fairies who deplore his externalised animal lechery in their song (5.5.94–102).⁴⁷ Falstaff's undoing, visualised in the removal of his (phallic) antlers which signifies his impotence, concludes with his verbal echoing of Bottom's transformation: 'I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass' (5.5.119; compare with *MND*, 3.1.114). This scene in *Merry Wives* is a valuable interpretive lens that further crystallises Shakespeare's linking of animality and lechery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Like Ovid's tales of human-animal transformations, Shakespeare's dream animals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offer a 'dark Philosophie of turned shapes', to borrow the phrase that Golding had used to describe Ovid's metamorphoses.⁴⁸ Bottom's change into a human-ass hybrid, like Hermia's dream of a serpent, dovetails with a wider subtext of arbitrary desire in the play. This theme depends to a large degree on Shakespeare's treatment of the fairies and their love potion, which makes the human characters fall in love with whomever they meet first after waking up. Here again, Ovid's influence is discernible because a kind of Ovidian supernaturalism is in fact inherent in Shakespeare's fairies: like Ovid's divine and mythological figures, the fairies can be read as external projections of human predicaments. In the same vein, the fairies' love potion underlines the fragility and arbitrariness of interhuman relationships in the play: Titania randomly falls in love with Bottom, Demetrius with Helena (whom he previously despised), and Lysander with Helena; Theseus entertains amatory but short-lived dalliances with Perigouna, Aegles, Ariadne, and Antiopa (2.1.77–80); and even the fairies Oberon and Titania engage in extramarital liaisons. Against this backdrop, the animal imagery in the play's dreamscape insinuates, in Ovidian fashion, that love may be little more than primal and arbitrary desire in disguise.

In Shakespeare's animal dreams, direct and linear influences such as Ovid and Apuleius collide with the ideological and cultural forces, exchanges, and

⁴⁷*Merry Wives* even throws in a reference to Puck at 5.5.4. In the play's quarto, the character Evans in fact performs the role of Puck in this scene. See note to 5.5.41, p. 279.

⁴⁸Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. A2r.

pressures of his time. It is this process that ultimately explains Shakespeare's creative combinations of Ovidianism and religious and demonological animal symbolism. In fact, many of the animals alluded to in the play are associated with the devil and with sexual demonology. Cases in point are the play's owls, worms, and serpents – the Eden serpent, in particular, is traditionally equated with the devil (see, for example, Rev 12:9, 20:2). Shakespeare's integration of these creatures into the play's world of transformations, illusions, and deceptions is particularly apt given their resonance with cultural fears about demonic delusions and hallucinations; as the Jesuit theologian Francisco de Toledo had warned his readers, the devil could in fact delude 'by offering to the senses real things, but not what they seem, being condensed air, such as serpents, dragons and other animals, which they move; [and] by affecting the senses and imagination so that things are seen which are not, as in dreams'.⁴⁹ The Dutch painter Cornelisz van Oostanen depicts this animalside of demonology in his work *Saul and the Witch of Endor* (1526). In the right half of the painting, witches are sitting on goats while cooking and drinking. Above them, three naked witches are seen flying on a goat, a broomstick, and a horse's skull, respectively. In the left half of the painting, a half-naked witch sits on an owl throne within a magic circle, busy with magic arts, while a satyr keeps the magic book open. The owl is a particularly intriguing emblem in this context, because it is central not only in demonology but is also recognised as a 'bird of evil omen' by Ovid.⁵⁰ The owl is an important symbol in one of the most famous Ovidian myths: it sits above the bedstead of Tereus and Procne as the two spend their first night together after their marriage and conceive a child.⁵¹ Described in Golding's translation of this passage as a 'messenger of yll successe and lucke', the owl acts as a warning of the monstrous events that will unfold later: namely, Tereus's rape of Philomela and Procne's egregious revenge, as part of which she murders her son.⁵² Shakespeare's own allusions to owls in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as in Puck's song where they form part of a wider demonic imagery of opening graves and returning spirits that threaten to undercut the comedic ending (5.1.362–81), illustrate the conflation of Ovidian and demonological references in the play's animal symbolism.

Alongside his representation of owls, Oostanen's depiction of naked witches and satyrs – human-animal hybrids (half man, half goat) with a large endowment and known for their aggressive lewdness, salacious bestiality, and almost permanent state of erection – further suggests some of the sexual aspects of witchcraft that are also implicit in parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *The Historie of Four-Footed Beastes* (1607), Topsell describes the

⁴⁹Cited in Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 127.

⁵⁰Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Miller, 1:277.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 1:319.

⁵²Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. Golding, sig. 75r.

satyrs' 'rough-hayre and lust to women' and speculates that 'it may be that Deuils haue at some time appeared to men in this likenes [of satyrs], as they haue done in the likenes of the *Onocentaure* and wilde Asse, and other shapes'.⁵³ Shakespeare himself brought a satyr onto the stage in 5.5 of *Merry Wives*, where the Welshman Evans appears disguised as one, directing the fairies who pinch the cervine and horned Falstaff for his lechery (5.5.36.1). There are strong parallels between the satyr and the asinine Bottom: both of them are human-animal hybrids associated with sexual puissance, and both of them are introduced by Shakespeare in contexts where the Ovidian themes of lust and bestiality are explicitly foregrounded. The satyr and the transformed Bottom thus bespeak the bestial nature of desire in the same way as the gods' transformations retold by Ovid.

Shakespeare's conflation of Ovidianism and demonology also extends to the fairies. Apart from arguably being translations of Ovidian nymphs, the fairies also harbour echoes of more demonic creatures. Fairies were in Shakespeare's time discredited as fellows of Satan by both Protestant and Catholic writers concerned that the belief in third kinds of spirits challenged traditional, binary Christian cosmology. In his bestiary, Topsell claims that 'stories and opinions of Phairies [...] arise from the praestigious apparitions of Deuils, whose delight is to deceiue and beguile the minds of men with error'.⁵⁴ Echoes of this view can be heard in Shakespeare's play, too. When Peter Quince first describes the changed Bottom, he conceives of the orchestrators behind his metamorphosis as devils or demons: 'O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted. Pray, masters' (3.1.99–100). His fearful outcry is anchored in the cultural understanding of demonic illusions or transformations in Shakespeare's time. In most cases, natural philosophers and demonologists deemed human-animal metamorphoses to be either satanic illusions or manifestations of melancholic disease.⁵⁵ Reginald Scot recounts the alleged example of a sailor in Cyprus who was transformed into an ass by a witch who 'perceive[d] him to be a lustie young fellow, a stranger, and far from his country', and determined to 'destroy him'.⁵⁶ Scot goes on to argue, however, that 'a man cannot be turned into the body of a beast by a witch'.⁵⁷ The reason for his scepticism is that the devil's powers were preternatural rather than supernatural, limited to the manipulation of natural processes such as

⁵³Topsell, *Four-Footed Beastes*, 12. In *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), the demonologist Reginald Scot reported the opinion that the devil most commonly transforms himself into a goat, which corroborates the possibly devilish nature of the half-goatish satyr. Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, 69.

⁵⁴Topsell, *Four-Footed Beastes*, 454.

⁵⁵For reviews of some of the most important early modern texts dealing with demonic dreams and illusions and with their ability to deceive, tempt, seduce, mislead, or corrupt, see Fretz, *Dreams, Sleep, and Shakespeare's Genres*, 34–6; Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, 72–5, 86–91; Maus de Rolley, 'A World Within', 71–88. See also John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–13), where the physician explains Ferdinand's lycanthropy as a melancholic hallucination: 'In those that are possessed with't there o'erflows | Such melancholy humour, they imagine | Themselves to be transformèd into wolves' (5.2.8–10).

⁵⁶Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, 72.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

sense perception. As the English physician and writer on witchcraft John Cotta noted, the devil ‘doth [...] not, nor is able to [...] infringe or alter [Nature’s] inviolable decrees in the perpetuall and neuer-interrupted order of all generations; neither is he generally Master of vniuersall Nature, but Nature Master and Commaunder of him’.⁵⁸ The devil, in short, was not capable of making or remaking human bodies. Scot’s retelling of a story derived from the French philosopher and demonologist Jean Bodin nevertheless reveals that the antecedents of Bottom’s metamorphosis are not just informed by pagan sources but also by Christian-demonological discourses.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare certainly plays with the demonological and epistemological ambiguity around witchcraft, illusion, dream, and metamorphosis, which would easily have reached him by osmosis. But it would be difficult to argue that Bottom’s transformation is not intended to be real. Bottom’s changed shape is observed not only by his fellow mechanicals but importantly also by the fairies and by the audience. Whilst it is true, moreover, that Bottom is physically only part-transformed – his head is changed but the rest of his body remains human – he notably does turn asinine in a wider and more existential sense, as well. For example, Bottom’s speech and behaviour gradually become more animalistic. While he initially continues to speak and act like the Nick Bottom we first encounter, he later acquires the urge to have his head scratched, comments that he must go to the barber because he is ‘marvellous hairy about the face’ (4.1.24–5), and develops an appetite for ‘dry oats’ and ‘a bottle of hay’ (4.1.32–3). Bottom’s physical half-transformation may have practical and dramatic reasons, rooted in medieval religious drama. In the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century mystery plays, a tradition arose that represented the Eden serpent as having human aspects. The reason for this lay in the need to employ representational strategies that could plausibly facilitate dialogue between Eve and the serpent.⁵⁹ The same principle applies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, because Bottom, too, has to converse with Titania and the fairies while he is in his transformed state. Bottom’s half-transformation is further justified by the limitations of the early modern stage, because a metamorphosis cannot be staged as credibly as it can be narrated in epic poetry. None of that dilutes Bottom’s asininity, however. Rather, it shows that Ovidian and demonological ideas are always filtered through dramatic imperatives; they constitute raw material from which Shakespeare crafts characterological and dramatic effects.

Desire is not only the human urge foregrounded by Shakespeare’s oneiric animal symbolism. Shakespeare’s play also draws on another commonplace connotation of the ass, in addition to that of its sexual potency: namely, that of stupidity, folly, or vanity. Topsell’s bestiary highlights this cultural

⁵⁸Cotta, *Triall of Witchcraft*, 34.

⁵⁹Bonnell, ‘Serpent with a Human Head’, 255–91; Muir, *Biblical Drama*, 69, and note 30, 206.

meaning of the ass when it describes it as a ‘silly beast’.⁶⁰ When writing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the fable of Midas, recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and dramatised by John Lyly in his 1591 comedy *Midas*, is here likely to have been one of Shakespeare’s inspirations. Book XI of Ovid’s epic poem relates a musical contest, adjudicated by the mountain god Tmolus, in which King Midas foolishly prefers his master Pan’s rustic fluting to Apollo’s refined harping. As a punishment for his tone-deaf judgement, Apollo gifts Midas with ass’s ears: ‘Human in all else, in this one feature was he punished, and wore the ears of a slow-moving ass’.⁶¹ Like Midas, the asinine Bottom has poor musical taste with a penchant for the rural, as he comically attests (with echoes of Midas) in his response to Titania’s offer to have music performed for him: ‘I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let’s have the tongs and the bones’ (4.1.28–9). Bottom consistently acts this foolish-asinine part throughout the play, even before his physical transformation. For example, he is an inept speaker, as is evidenced by his malapropic use of language (1.2.95–6, 3.1.77, 4.1.207–8). He is also an inept lover. When he wakes Titania with his singing in 3.1, the fairy queen instantly declares that she is ‘enamour’d of [his] note’ and ‘enthralled to [his] shape’ (131–2), before concluding ‘I love thee’ (134). But Bottom responds coyly and cluelessly in the face of Titania’s assertive advances: ‘Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays’ (135–7). Bottom also repudiates Titania’s ensuing compliments that he is ‘wise’ and ‘beautiful’ (140). Thus, Bottom’s translation into a supposedly priapic animal does not turn him into a womaniser; in typically Ovidian fashion, Bottom’s body changes but his mind does not. The result is that Bottom comes to embody the ass’s two main properties: he adopts the physical characteristics of the priapic animal whilst retaining – and now also externalising – the silliness attributed to the ass. That also leads to a change to the conventional erotic dynamics found in Ovid: by making the mortal object of desire a fool and confining the dalliance to the world of dreams, Shakespeare defuses the violent expressions of love known from the *Metamorphoses* and renders them fit for the genre of comedy. In that way, asininity and dreaming work hand in hand to reinvent Ovidianism for early modern drama.

Animal Dreams and Dramatic Effects

In 4.1, Bottom has a double awakening: he wakes from his physical sleep and in doing so he also awakes from his dreamlike romance with Titania. Since the fairies have erased his recent memory, Bottom has mentally been returned to 3.1, when he was rehearsing for *Pyramus and Thisbe*, due to be performed

⁶⁰Topsell, *Four-Footed Beastes*, 21.

⁶¹Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Miller, 2:183.

on Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding day. As he wakes up, his first words are: 'When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer. My next is "most fair Pyramus"' (4.1.198–9). It is an apt reminder that Shakespeare's play, more than being a dream or a representation of a dream, is above all a comedy, and that dream and theatre in this play cannot be separated from each other; Shakespeare gives us animality wrapped in a dream, but he also gives us animality and dreaming wrapped in a comedy. When analysing Shakespeare's Ovidian animal dreams in the play, therefore, the demands and imperatives of comedy and of Elizabethan staging conventions must not be neglected. In addition, the ideological pitfalls that Shakespeare had to navigate when adapting Ovidianism must be borne in mind; these include the fact that Ovid's interconnection of 'literary form, cultural fantasy, and sexual violence', unless significantly adapted, would have been met with moral outrage on the early modern stage.⁶² The animal dream allows Shakespeare neatly to address these sensibilities and imperatives. Not only does it deliteralise the play's themes by introducing additional symbolic frameworks, but it also provides a comic lens through which the lovers' adventures (and mishaps) in the forest can be contemplated. Profiting from its association with frivolity in early modern culture, the animal dream facilitates Shakespeare's light-hearted, comedic adaptation of both Ovidian and demonological material.⁶³ This is true especially for the theme of sexuality. While the ass was viewed as an animal purportedly blessed with sexual potency, the dreamer's nocturnal journeys into the world of latent thoughts and desires, too, were commonly linked to erotic temptations. For example, the belief in succubi (demons in female form) and incubi (demons in male form), who were thought to have intercourse with unsuspecting sleepers, was widespread and may have 'originated as an explanation for erotic dreams and nightmares', as Levin writes.⁶⁴ The Church of England clergyman Philip Goodwin, who sought to provide guidance for the interpretation of dreams in the light of scripture, expressly cautioned his readers against becoming 'bewitched, beguiled, befooled, besotted in Dreames, imaginations that be meer seductions, sinfull conceptions, certain illusions'.⁶⁵ For Goodwin, erotic dreams constituted either devious impulses arising from the subconscious mind or stratagems deployed by the devil to seduce and deceive Christians into committing sins. His treatise includes a whole section on what he terms 'Filthy and defiling dreames'.⁶⁶ But while discourses of witchcraft and sexual

⁶²Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*, 10.

⁶³For the ass's association with foolishness and laziness from classical antiquity until the Renaissance, see Wyrick, 'Ass Motif', 433–6. For the presentation of dreams as frivolous phenomena, see Nashe, *Terrors of the Night*, sigs C3v, C4r. The nugatory, deceptive, and ephemeral qualities of dreams are also frequent topoi in Renaissance poetry. In Thomas Wyatt's sonnet 'Unstable Dream', the poetic speaker bemoans how his dream allows him to 'embrace' the 'succour' of his beloved (line 8) only to deprive him of her presence in the morning: 'Such mocks of dreams they turn to deadly pain' (line 14). Braden, ed., *Sixteenth-Century Poetry*, 51.

⁶⁴Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, 46.

⁶⁵Goodwin, *The Mystery of Dreames*, 93.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 86–149.

temptation may have been morally dangerous, clashing with orthodox teachings about pious behaviour and morality, they mattered profoundly to Shakespeare and other writers because they were dramatically and poetically compelling. Many early modern dream poems exploit precisely those nocturnal and oneiric expressions of love and passion that were denounced by Puritans like Goodwin. In Thomas Campion's lyric 'Sleep, Angry Beauty', the persona observes that his sleeping lady 'close-ey'd weepes', and concludes: 'Dreames often more then waking passions moue' (lines 9–10).⁶⁷ In Abraham Cowley's poem 'The Innocent Ill', the persona muses: 'Awake all men do lust for thee,

| And some enjoy thee when they sleep' (lines 18–19).⁶⁸ Hermia's and Bottom's dreams suggest that Shakespeare, too, understood metaphors of dreams and animals as licensed spaces within and through which he could explore erotic, sexual, and other aspects of identity. Since dreams were recognised as licensed spaces where taboos were no longer objectionable and where even untoward wishes could be fulfilled, they were a logical choice for Shakespeare when he sought to marry the Ovidian-inflected themes of sexual and romantic aberration to the precepts of comedy. In dressing up the play's ideas of loveless eroticism or arbitrary desire as the audience's fantasies (see Puck's epilogue) and Bottom's bestial adventure with Titania either as the imagination of a foolish weaver or as the practical joke of mythical fairies, the playwright cleverly navigates the prudish views of some of his contemporaries. He also showcases his ability to adapt the literary efforts of Ovid and to augment them through the medium of drama, including by moving the disruptive or offensive potential of Ovid's human-animal transformations into the realm of a metatheatrical dream. But in metaphorising Ovidian eroticism Shakespeare is not in fact anti-Ovidian, because Ovid's own tales of salacious eroticism and violent sexuality are, after all, myths of gods. Rather, Shakespeare transforms Ovidian myth-making into early modern dream-making, thereby responding to the cultural sensibilities of his time and tailoring his material to the aesthetic and imaginative possibilities of drama and metatheatre.

In the process of using animal dreams to encompass and concretise aberrant discourses and fantasies, the transformed Bottom becomes a walking metaphor. The image of the changed Bottom is a screen onto which Shakespeare projects that which makes the play's characters tick, including their sexual, romantic, and intellectual asininity. But as a dream animal, the metamorphosed Bottom is also a talking (and singing) metaphor. Ironically and unwittingly, Bottom identifies his metamorphosis before anyone else, asking his horrified companions: 'You see an ass-head of your own, do you?' (3.1.111–12). There is no suggestion that he knows what has happened to him, because he voices his suspicion that the other mechanicals want to 'make an ass of [him], to

⁶⁷Campion, *Booke of Ayres*, sig. E2v.

⁶⁸Cowley, *Poems Miscellanies*, 146.

fright [him], if they could' (3.1.114–15). While he is in his changed state, he also wakes Titania with his song about a cuckoo (3.1.118–29) and converses with both Titania and her fairy attendants. One immediately noteworthy feature of Bottom's speech is that it contains truths: unbeknownst to the character himself, his observation that he is being made as ass of is just as true as his song about the cuckoo, which expresses a general truth and boasts added prophetic veracity in that Bottom goes on to cuckold Oberon. As indicators of cognitive and rational abilities, Bottom's speech and song are attributes of humans rather than animals (who were described as having only physiological and vain dreams).⁶⁹ Bottom's dreaming ultimately reflects his human-animal hybridity: as a half-human, Bottom remains capable of intelligent discourse but, as a half-animal, he also has a dream that amounts to a vain, libidinal fantasy. Despite here echoing commonplace assumptions about rationality and cognition, and about the boundaries between humans and beasts, Shakespeare was never in thrall to the ideas of his time, though; instead, he chose to adapt them as creative devices to suit his dramatic vision. For example, Hill's interpretation of the dream about 'hau[ing] a heade like to a dog, horse, asse, or any other four footed beast', namely, that it 'portend[s] seruitude, bondage, and care of mynde wythe heauines', is not relevant to Bottom's dream.⁷⁰ The same goes for Hill's reading of a dream about 'a man chaunged or transformed into a beastes lyknes' as signifying reprehension by one's master or lord.⁷¹ The mechanicals, who witness Bottom's transformation, will be ridiculed by Theseus for their amateurish acting, but that cannot be what Shakespeare had in mind. Hill's interpretation of the dream of having a head of 'lyke any kynde of birde', which signifies 'a notice of peregrination, and iourninge about', is more helpful to understanding Bottom's dream, even if it does not literally describe the fate of the transformed weaver.⁷² The idea of a peregrination, in fact, is a useful way of thinking about the dramatic rationale behind Bottom's dream. For Bottom, metamorphosis marks the beginning of a journey that culminates in his defence of the dream as 'a most rare vision' capable of instilling him with higher knowledge 'past the wit of man' (see 4.1.201–10).⁷³ Gradually, Shakespeare thus elevates Bottom's understanding above that of the other mortal characters in the play and positions him as an emblem for creative, imaginative, and theatrical practice.

Animal dreams are the main vehicle for the transformations we witness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is also through them that Shakespeare's marrying of two cultural traditions of metamorphosis becomes most apparent. On the one hand, Shakespeare flirts with the demonological view that human-animal

⁶⁹For the kinds of dreams that animals were thought to be having, see Le Loyer, *Treatise of Specters*, sigs B3v–B4r.

⁷⁰Hill, *Pleasant Arte*, sig. K8v.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, sig. O7v.

⁷²*Ibid.*, sig. K8v.

⁷³For discussions of Bottom's dream and its instructive value, see Fretz, 'Multisensory Dreams', 168–76; and Waldron, 'Shakespeare, Synaesthesia, and Phenomenology', 403–17.

transformations are illusions or delusions – this theme is also preserved in the play’s concern with artistic illusions such as theatre and metatheatre. On the other hand, Shakespeare relies heavily on the Ovidian model that depicts physical metamorphoses, amplifies human vices and virtues, and postulates change as the driving and defining force in the universe. This productive collision of two traditions is seen in Hermia’s dream of the serpent, which is informed by Biblical symbolism and Christian iconography but is at the same time Ovidian in its function, marshalling the combined Christian and pagan references to construct a commentary on the intuitions of Hermia, the behaviour of Lysander, and the impulses and compulsions of other characters in the play. Aspects of Bottom’s metamorphosis, too, are decidedly Ovidian: the physical transformation, the supernatural or preternatural agency, and the externalisation of Bottom’s mental asininity. This Ovidianism is balanced by the more fictive and illusory qualities of Bottom’s translation, which rest on its theatricality and its allusions to sexual demonology. Hermia’s and Bottom’s animal dreams thus illustrate Shakespeare’s adaptive technique of filtering Ovidianism through early modern intellectual and cultural webs of meaning and making it fit for the material demands and limitations of the theatre. It was this strategy of adaptation that ensured Shakespeare’s successful reinvention of Ovidianism for Renaissance comedy.

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