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Sillages critiques

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Bêtes de scène

Obscene beasts: the stage behind the scenes in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Bêtes obscènes : la scène cachée du Songe d'une Nuit d'Été

MATHILDE LA CASSAGNÈRE

Résumés

Français English

Mettre en scène une bête sauvage, « ob-scène » au sens latin (hors scène, rejetée comme irreprésentable) est une périlleuse entreprise. C'est pourtant le défi que se lance une troupe d'amateurs pour jouer devant la cour de Thésée, duc d'Athènes, la tragédie gréco-romaine de *Pyrame et Thisbé*, pièce dans la pièce du *Songe d'une nuit d'été*, dont une scène clé nécessite l'apparition d'un lion féroce. Hélas ! En dépit du grand soin porté par la troupe aux répétitions et à la fabrication des costumes, la représentation, et plus particulièrement la scène du fauve, est un désastre qui fait rugir de rire l'assistance. Il s'agit là d'une démonstration prophétique de ce que Bachelard écrira bien plus tard dans *L'Eau et les rêves*: « Un fantôme [en l'occurrence un fauve] qu'on décrit avec complaisance est un [fauve] qui cesse d'agir ». Par le biais de *Pyrame et Thisbé*, Shakespeare insère donc une mise en abyme inversée et ironique de sa propre pièce, *Le Songe*, où se bouscule une foule d'animaux qui, eux, n'ont rien de ridicule : bestiaire fascinant jamais en scène à proprement parler, non plus que tout à fait hors-scène, à l'instar du serpent (« she », féminin dans le texte original) dont n'est donnée à voir que la « peau émaillée » dont il « s'est dépouillé » (2.1). C'est donc sur une scène parallèle et subliminale, une Autre Scène, qu'évolue le bestiaire infiniment varié du *Songe*, et que se joue une confrontation sous-jacente entre l'humain et l'animal qui est en lui. Il s'agit ici d'analyser quelques stratégies — qu'elles soient conscientes ou purement intuitives, ancrées dans leur temps ou étonnamment modernes — par lesquelles Shakespeare met en scène, dans *Le Songe*, cette confrontation intime, en même temps qu'il nous plonge dans de vertigineuses réflexions sur le théâtre.

Mimesis, the art of imitating the real world on the stage, is all the more difficult if this real world consists of a beast—a wild, dangerous, supposedly “obscene” animal in the Latin sense:

literally off-stage. Such is the challenge faced by the amateur company of mechanicals who are producing the love tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* play within the play featuring a fearful lion. For all the efforts the mechanicals have engaged in the project, their rendition of the lion is such a failure that it has the on-stage spectators roar with laughter. This is a fairly convincing anticipation of Gaston Bachelard's statement in *Water and Dreams*, "a ghost [a beast in this particular instance] complacently described loses its effect." Thus, through the mechanicals' theatrical misadventure, Shakespeare ironically includes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a "how-not-to" guide for *mimesis*, a reversed *mise en abyme* of his own challenging conception of a play teeming with an unstageable and infinite variety of creatures great and small, wild and tame, familiar and fantastical, its presence all the more haunting as it is never staged strictly speaking. Neither staged nor completely off-scene, the bestiary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, emblemized by the "enamel skin" shed "there" by the elusive "snake" (2.1.254), is featured on a subliminal and simultaneous scene, a sub-stage as it were, an Other Scene, involving humankind in a liminal confrontation with its own animality. This paper aims to explore the strategies—whether rooted in the Elizabethan worldview, or amazingly modern—through which Shakespeare stages this inward confrontation, while involving us in vertiginous reflexions on the theatre.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : La bête irréprésentable, la bête dans la langue, scène, hors-scène, obscène, Autre Scène, l'animal intime : monstres, hybrides, centre indicible, rencontre de la bête, au-delà du Symbolique, entendre l'animal, entendre le Réel

Keywords : Unstageable beast, beast within speech, obscene, scene / un-seen, sub-stage, Other Scene, animal within, night-mare woman, asinine man, encountering the beast, beyond the Symbolic, hearing the animal, hearing the Real

Texte intégral

To stage or not to stage the beast

- 1 *Mimesis*, the art of imitating the real world on the stage, is all the more difficult when the real world is a beast—a wild, dangerous, and "obscene" animal in the etymological (albeit contested) Latin sense: *ob-scaena*, off-stage, not belonging on the human stage¹. To stage a creature "never numbered among men" (3.2.67) is the challenge faced by the amateur company of mechanicals who are producing the tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play within a play (or metaplay) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which will entertain Theseus, duke of Athens, on the night of his wedding to Hippolyta, queen of Amazons. Quince the carpenter, Bottom the weaver, Flute the bellows-mender, Snout the tinker, Snug the joiner and Starveling the tailor, are indeed confronted with the problem of staging the lion which, after attacking Thisbe, leaves her blood-stained tunic on the ground, leading Pyramus to wrongly believe that his beloved is dead, and to take his own life. For all the efforts the mechanicals have engaged in the project—and with which the main play regularly keeps us to date—Snug's rendition of the lion in front of Theseus' court is such a failure that it has some of the on-stage audience almost roar with laughter. This is because—to paraphrase Gaston Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*—to be active, a beast cannot wear motley. A beast complacently staged loses its effect on the spectator². In place of the intended lion, the mechanicals are staging a motley fool of a beast—an amalgamation of lion, fox and goose—, unwittingly reversing what should have been the lion's fearful impact:

THESEUS: A very gentle beast, and of a good conscience.

DEMETRIUS: The very best at a beast, my lord, that e'er I saw.

LYSANDER: This lion is a very fox for his valour.

THESEUS: True, and a goose for his discretion.

DEMETRIUS: Not so, my lord, for his valour cannot carry his discretion, and the fox carried the goose. (5.1.225-31)

Over-figuring the lion amounts to “disfiguring” it—to use Quince’s paradoxically appropriate lexical blunder³.

- 2 Through the amateurs’ theatrical misadventure, Shakespeare thus ironically included in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a how-not-to guide for *mimesis*, a reversed *mise en abyme* of his own challenging conception of a play teeming with an even less stageable bestiary of creatures great and small (lion, bear, bull, crab, mouse, worm, glow-worm, snail, butterfly, bee, moth, spider, beetle), wild and tame (leopard, boar, wolf, owl, snake, ape, cat, dog), familiar and fantastical (monkey, donkey, hedgehog, nightingale, crow, ox, horse, mare, filly-foal, centaur, minotaur, headless bear, leviathan, mermaid). Whereas the sole lion on the tragic stage of the metaplay is laughable, the comedy of the main play conveys a powerful bestiary of infinite variety, its presence all the more haunting as it is never staged strictly speaking—with one (debatable) exception later discussed. On the one hand, as Theseus puts it, the “palpable gross play” (5.1.358) staged by the mechanicals, with a lion to match. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s main play and its elusive, disturbing bestiary emblemized by the “enamelled skin” of the snake imagined by Oberon, king of the fairy world, as he muses about his estranged wife Titania’s bower: “There the snake throws her enamelled skin” (2.1.254). Intangible as it is, the bestiary is however featured “There,” on another stage which may be the third location of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: an invisible, subliminal stage or, so to speak, a “substage”—an alternative scene involving humankind in a liminal confrontation with its own animality. This paper aims to explore some of Shakespeare’s strategies—of their time or ahead of it—to stage this inward confrontation while raising vertiginous questions about the theatre, a major form of what is supposed to distinguish us humans from other animals: art.

1. The beast within

- 3 Interestingly enough, the Elizabethan theatre itself offered propitious ground for the obscene, substage bestiary. To begin with, the playhouses were located on the outskirts of London, out of bounds of the civilized world, “next to the brothels, prisons, and lunatic asylums. Land was cheaper here, but the playhouses also benefited from being just beyond the city line, which meant they were able to operate largely without regulation” (Lehrer 215). What’s more, the playhouse stage and the bear baiting arena were similar performance venues that shared the same audiences (Höfele 10-11). Shakespeare may have been using his contemporaries’ mental association of the playhouse with these disturbing spaces to build up his subliminal bestiary. The entertainment provided by the bear-baiting arena consisted in unleashing dogs on an animal chained up to a stake—a bear, or a bull, or even an ape fastened on a horse’s back. Bears, dogs and horses are regularly mentioned in the main play’s dialogues which even contain the odd reference to bulls and monkeys—for instance in Oberon’s curse on Titania:

The next thing then she waking looks upon—
Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On meddling monkey, or on busy ape—

She shall pursue it with the soul of love. (2.1.179-82)

- 4 None of these creatures will materialize on the main stage. Bull, bear and dog will return, but *in absentia* again, this time in Theseus' plan of a hunt and in Hippolyta's memory of one:

THESEUS: We will, fair queen, up to the mountain's top,
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

HIPPOLYTA: I was with Hercules and Camdus once
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear
With hounds of Sparta. [...]
[...] I never heard

So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

THESEUS: My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind, [...]
Crook-kneed, and dewlapped like Thessalian bulls. (4.1.108-21)

- 5 But the human characters are not content with comparing animals (hounds) with others (bulls). More essentially, it is themselves whom they most often equate with animals, which is hardly surprising, considering the Elizabethan belief in the chain of being where humankind was the link between the animal realm below and the angels above. During the four young Athenians' love *imbroglio* by night in the wood (a pointedly uncivilized setting), desperate Helena wishes she were Demetrius' dog:

I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you. (2.1.202-6)

Rejected by Demetrius, she feels as repulsive as a bear:

[...] I am as ugly as a bear,
For beasts that meet me run away for fear.
Therefore no marvel though Demetrius
Do, as a monster, fly my presence thus. (2.2.100-3)

- 6 Demetrius, competing with Lysander for Hermia's love, admits he would unleash his dogs upon his rival as if he were wild game: "I had rather give his carcass to my hounds" (3.2.64). "My hounds" may well be understood as a metaphor: "my devouring jealousy." Does not Hermia, offended, call Demetrius a dog? "Out, dog; out, cur. [...] / Henceforth be never numbered among men" (3.2.66-7). As a result of these exchanges, the morning hunt planned by Theseus at the break of day is a disturbing echo of the nocturnal love chase⁴. These similes and metaphors, transforming the humans into beasts, bring out a disturbing porosity between the two, which testifies to the Elizabethan phobia of regression into bestiality⁵.
- 7 The Elizabethan vision of humanity as different only in degree, and not in nature, from the animal, is an interesting echo of most mythologies, which feature half-human half-beast hybrids on a regular basis. It is no wonder, then, that the mythological subtext meshes with the substage. The lurking Minotaur (queen Pasiphae and the Cretan bull's offspring), though never explicitly mentioned, can be sensed metonymically through Theseus' presence on the stage and through other, subtler clues⁶. References to other such monsters are more or less explicit in the entertainments intended for Hippolyta and Theseus' wedding but finally (and understandably) rejected as improper to the occasion: "the battle with the centaurs" (5.1.44), which broke out during another wedding (Pirithous and Hippodamia's,

incidentally attended by Theseus) where all the women were raped by the bestial creatures; and “the riot of the tipsy bacchanals / Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage” (5.1.48-9), in which Bacchus’ fierce servants, clad in lions’ skins, savagely tore Orpheus apart. The filigreed manifestations of such hybrids betray the beast hidden within human nature.

- 8 It is true that potentially hybrid creatures appear on the main stage: shape-shifters specialized in animal transformations, such as Titania’s fairies Moth and Cobweb, and Oberon’s jester, Robin, inspired from a devilish creature in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* with a goat’s body, a lion’s head, and a dragon’s tail⁷. But nothing in the text suggests that these characters morph on the stage. On the contrary, the lullaby scene makes it clear that when we see them, Moth and Cobweb are animals only by name: the mission entrusted to them is to “kill cankers” (2.2.3), to “keep back / The clamorous owl” (2.2.4-5) and “long-legged” spiders (2.2.21) from their queen Titania whom they show no intention of betraying; always staged by her side, they would not metamorphose into the very animals they are determined to keep away from her. Recent productions have emphasized Robin’s bestiality on the stage⁸; but so doing, they may have “complacently” staged the “motley” creature instead of letting the words of the text do their work on the spectator. The text does call up Robin’s animal avatars, but always *in absentia*, in the “when” and “sometime” of substage happenings,

I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;
And sometime lurk I in a gossip’s bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab [...] (2.1.42-48),

or in a game of cat and mouse with the mechanicals, which will take place only after the jester has exited the stage:

I’ll follow you, I’ll lead you about a round,
Through bog, through bush, through brake, through briar.
Sometime a horse I’ll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire,
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn. *Exit* (3.1.101-6)

- 9 Much more powerful than feats of stage-setting, the poetry of such passages stimulates our spectators’ imagination and makes us co-producers of the substage in its “every turn.”

2. Serpentine habitation

- 10 Every turn of the “mazed world” (2.1.113) of the wood may have been traced by many a passing serpent, as countless clues of snake-life in the “mazes in the wanton green” (2.1.99) give ample reason to believe. When Hippolyta evokes, in 4.1, her mythic hunting party with Camdus and Hercules, something is hidden under the manifest content of her narrative: in the mythical subtext, the beast bayed by the three hunters was not a bear as she claims (4.1.112), but a snake. The figure of the snake is more obviously conveyed—but still off limits—in the scene of Hermia’s dream; we narrowly miss it as Hermia, on waking, briefly oscillates between the life-like intensity of her dream, in which she seems to be almost touching the beast, and a return to the real-life stage from which the serpent just slipped away: “[...] help me! Do thy best / To pluck

this crawling serpent from my breast! / Ay me, for pity. What a dream was here?" (2.2.151-3). "Was," already gone and out of reach; but "here," a haunting presence. "Methought a serpent ate my heart away" (3.1.155): was it the enamel skinned creature of Oberon's vision?

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamelled skin. (2.1.249-55)

11 On the surface, luxurious vegetation, "dances and delight"; but underneath it all, the snake awaits. The lush, unpredictable wood of which only a small fraction can be staged, with, at its heart, Titania's deceptively charming bower where one is lulled asleep by the song of the invisible nightingale, is roamed by slithering predators, one of whom seems to have mutated into something much bigger than itself.

12 For the winding wood is a snake itself, or more precisely the shed skin of a leviathan-sized snake in which the characters meander and lose their way. And in this world where "things [...] befall preposterously" (3.2.120-1)—etymologically back to front, thereby inside out—, the snake inhabits the characters as well, as suggested by a text whose sonorous effects and images keep transforming the humans into virtual serpents. On waking from her dream, Hermia hisses: "Lysander, help me! Do thy best / To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!" (3.1.151-2). In the next scene she bumps into Demetrius, Lysander's rival for her love, whom she blames for his adder's cruelty:

[...] hast thou killed him sleeping? O brave touch!
Could not a worm, an adder do so much?
An adder did it, for with doubler tongue
Than thine, thou serpent, never adder stung. (3.2.63-73)

13 Lysander's return invalidates Hermia's accusation, but he is now in love with Helena and, to Hermia's horror, speaks snakes in his turn: "[...] vile thing, let loose, / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent" (3.2.260-1). The substage serpentine world of the wood is thus an intimation of the frightful, subhuman world the characters carry within themselves.

14 To Freudian readers, this latent serpentine topography can be none other than the Other Scene⁹. The Other Scene defined, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as "the scene of action of dreams" (Freud V: 536), a "psychical locality" (*ibid*) so to speak prophesied by Theseus' meditation on the "local habitation" given to "things unknown" by "the poet's pen":

[...] as imagination bodies forth
The forms and things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.14-17)

15 This is the locus where the unseen, unspeakable drives of the unconscious ("things unknown") are at work—"things" which the creative imagination ("the poet's pen") captures in the network of words, thus displaying them as beasts in the poetic space. As for the machinations of this "psychical locality" or "local habitation," they are staged in the lullaby scene set in Titania's treacherously delightful bower. The first fairy's enchanting song, very much like an exorcism, aims to reject the nightmarish beasts which could disturb Titania in her sleep:

You spotted snakes with double tongue [...],
 Newts and blindworms, do no wrong;
 Come not near our Fairy Queen [...].
 Weaving spiders, come not here;
 Hence you, long-legged spinners, hence;
 Beetles black, approach not near;
 Worm nor snail do no offence. (2.2.9-23)

16 The repeated negations function as a regular ritual of repression to reject the beasts in a no-scene, in the “not-seen”: “Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen” (2.2.10). None of these creatures will crawl out onto the visible stage, and yet the incantation is undermined by a double irony. First, though the negations conjure *off* the nightmarish creatures, the words denoting the creatures conjure them *up* and give them a verbal existence: “the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed” (Freud XIX: 235). Ironically, the exorcism builds up, while repressing it, a nightmarish bestiary of phallic figures, one of which will return in Hermia’s nightmare at the end of the same scene, while others (as noticed by Peter Holland in the Oxford World’s Classics edition) will resurface a few years later in *Macbeth*, in the witches’ cauldron¹⁰.

17 The second irony lies in the interpolated chorus which both mimics and refers to the melody of Philomel, the mythic nightingale—a bird otherwise known for coming out only in the twilight in order to remain invisible:

Philomel with melody,
 Sing in our sweet lullaby;
 Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla lulla, lullaby.
 Never harm
 Nor spell nor charm
 Come our lovely lady nigh.
 So good night, with lullaby. (2.2.13-9, 24-30)

18 But the melodious bird summoned to shut off the nightmarish bestiary opens up as well a world of bestial violence, for she is “Philomel,” the mythic female nightingale whose story—“Tereus, Procne and Philomela,” told in Book 6 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—is part of the rich mythological subtext of the play: Philomela, initially a young princess, was secluded and raped for many years by her brother-in-law Tereus who cut off her tongue and passed her off as dead to prevent her from denouncing him to Procne (his wife, her sister); the severed tongue crawled like a snake in a pathetic attempt to reach its mistress; finally, Procne and Philomela reunited and literally flew from the rapist as they respectively turned into a swallow and a nightingale¹¹. The fairies’ chorus thus makes us hear the enchanting music of the nightingale as the other side of an unspeakable horror. Is not the chorus, therefore, in its intense ambiguity, a prophetic insight into the essence of the Freudian Other Scene, in which nightmare, seen from the viewpoint of the dreamer’s unconscious, is the fulfilment of unacceptable desires (such as those discussed *infra*, in “Encountering the beast”)¹²?

19 Moreover, a horrendous twist of the subtext cannot be omitted, which makes the women vie in bestiality with Tereus. When Procne eventually discovers the atrocious truth about Philomela and reunites with her, the two sisters get their revenge by slaying Itys, the son Procne had with Tereus, to serve him as a meal to his father “in a bubbling cauldron” (Ovid 242) worthy of *Macbeth*’s weird sisters’. After Tereus has “gorged himself on a dish of the fruit of his own loins”, the two “tigresses” (*ibid* 242) sadistically reveal to him whom he has had for dinner¹³. Woman is wolf to man.

3. Woman is wolf to man

20 She is a snake as well. In Titania's glade, "the snake throws *her* enamelled skin" (2.1.255), muses Oberon. The snake, here a female, casts off her skin. Titania, the queen, casts off her robes to go to bed, and uncovers something. Something Oberon leaves unsaid, but which the play makes us hear: violence and animality. In yet another twist of this reversible world, Titania implicitly becomes one of the creatures she fears. This moulting (literally) of woman into animal predator comes as no surprise in a play of the Renaissance period when the medieval belief (actually dating back from Plato) that woman was literally inhabited by an animal, died hard: the "animal" was the uterus which made woman slave to her passions, therefore closer than man to the animal in the Chain of Being. As François Rabelais put it in *The Third Book of Pantagruel*,

Certainly Plato does not know into which category to put women: rational animal or irrational beast; for Nature has placed within their bodies, in a hidden intestinal place, an animal (an organ not found in men) [...] from the sharp pangs and painful throbbing of which (since that organ is all sinews and quickened sensitivity) their whole body is convulsed, all their senses ravished, all their emotions heightened and all their thoughts confused [...]. Plato is right to call it an animal, recognizing in it as he does its own proper motions (Rabelais 534).

21 Woman may well be a latent projection on the stage of the Elizabethan phobia of—and fascination for—woman's animality, for it confronts man with his own animal half:

Les œuvres élisabéthaines nombreuses qui reflètent une profonde méfiance à l'égard de la femme se fondent sur une même croyance dans son essentielle animalité [...]. Aussi, lorsqu'on a besoin de reprendre contact avec les forces vives de l'être, c'est vers la part animale de la femme que l'on se tourne — c'est cette part qui ressurgit à travers les masques rigoureux derrière lesquels on cherche à la dissimuler (Marienstras 76).

22 The women of the play are thus the hosts of a secret animal they carry, hidden within, behind the "mask," and whose hunger craves to be satisfied. Known as "the mother" to Shakespeare's contemporaries (Hoeniger 320-3), this cyclothymic animal manifests its submerged presence in Titania's fierce determination to become a mother (albeit a surrogate one) by adopting an Indian child whose education she refuses to share with Oberon (2.1.120-45). In her fierce craving for motherhood, Titania fights with tooth and claw to keep the child wholly to herself, slave as she is to the animal whose mouth is known to anthropologists as the *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina which has "featured in diverse cultures for a very long time" (Rees 51). The animal submerged within the refined figure of the fairy queen is exhibited in the disastrous metaplay of the mechanicals as the figure or the lion. Derisive as it may be, this beast is a split-off fragment of the woman's "animal" to be reunited to the fierceness of the beautiful Titania—and even to the lion's victim, the most harmless (or so it seems) Thisbe, as implied in Bruce Thomas Boehrer's study of "Bestial Buggery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*":

[In 1.2] Bottom proposes to impersonate a woman [Thisbe] by speaking monstrously; then he further confirms his passion for histrionics by offering to act the other monster in *Pyramus and Thisbe* as well—the lion [...]. For Bottom [...], femininity presupposes monstrosity, and thus the lion becomes the one character in the play with whom Thisbe has most in common (Boehrer 142).

23 As for Hermia and Helena's inner animal, it is aroused by love frustration and

jealousy. Hermia, bacchanal-like, threatens to scratch out Helena's eyes: "I am not yet so low / But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes" (3.2.297-8). Ironically, she eventually falls so low as to become a crawling thing: "I can no further crawl" (3.2.444). And let us not forget Hippolyta's subtext life. Before she was captured by Theseus and forced to marry him, she was the queen of the Amazons, the formidable all-female nation of warriors equated with centaurs due to their at oneness with the horses they ride—as shown by the Greek etymology of the name *Hippo-lyta* ("stampeding horse"). The Amazons have always been portrayed as liminal beings: half-human half-animal, essentially other, living on the edges of the world. Their space is included in the substage of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hippolyta only appears at the beginning and the end of the play, two extremities one may consider as the border of the Amazonian world. Since the second half of the 20th century, some productions have made Hippolyta's latent animality explicit by staging her initial appearance as a caged beast¹⁴. The other women of the play are, at times, Amazonian as well, starting with Hermia and Helena in their past friendship recollected by the latter in an analeptic speech which conveys them as birds "warbling of one song" (3.2.206)—the Amazons are known for their osmotic relationships. In another such nostalgic moment, Titania reminisces about the symbiotic bond she shared with the mother of the Indian child she wants to keep all to herself (2.1.125-34). As for the singing "mermaid on a dolphin's back" remembered by Oberon (2.1.150), she may have been an ocean-dwelling Amazon. Little has been said about Lysander's "widow aunt" mentioned only once, at the beginning of the play, and to whose house the young man offers to elope with Hermia: "I have a widow aunt, [...] / From Athens is her house remote seven leagues [...] / There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee" (1.1.157-61). This mysterious house, off-limits, never to be found by the lovers and in which no wedding will take place, could very well be an old Amazon's lair.

24 It should come as no surprise, then, that from the patriarchal Elizabethan point of view, the "shrews" must be tamed: they are night-mares one must bring back from the liminal world onto the stage where the ceremonies of marriage will civilize them—"The man shall have his mare" (3.2.463), Robin promises. According to Boehrer,

A Midsummer Night's Dream is about bestiality because the social arrangements it promotes [...] assume that human danger is in constant danger of corruption from the bestial and/or female other, and that it must therefore be continuously and rigorously policed. [...] as a result all of the play's romantic couplings are in an important sense zoophilic (Boehrer 126, 129).

25 However, let us not forget that behind this manifest promotion of shrew taming, the play conveys the latent message that woman is no more of an animal than man, if only because one of the main characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a male hybrid (Robin), inspired from one of the many mythical subtexts which feature beastly women and men in equal measure, like the similes and metaphors of the hypertext itself. And chiefly, what happens at the heart of the play is the closest we get to seeing a beast actually intrude onto the main stage, in the shape of a half-animal half-*man* monster: Bottom the weaver "with the ass head," Bottom the butt of Robin's biggest prank.

4. Encountering the beast

26 Interestingly enough, Bottom's transformation into an ass takes place at the only moment when the stages of the main play and of the metaplay overlap, in the sense that this one event is set on both simultaneously: it occurs when the mechanicals, who

cannot rehearse *Pyramus and Thisbe* on a proper stage (a separate space exclusively devoted to the play within a play), have to make do with a clearing in the wood of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is the space of the main play: "this green plot [main stage] shall be our stage [metastage], this hawthorn brake [main stage-space] our tiring-house [metaplay-space]" (3.1.3-4). And it turns out that this overlap at the exact centre of the play—in the fifth scene (3.1) out of nine—creates a temporary instability and opening for the third space, the substage, to emerge so to speak in a theatrical quake, bringing to the surface an amalgamation of subtext creatures where woman and man merge in animality. Many references have been found in the entrance of Bottom with the ass-head: the most often mentioned are Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (where Lucius, a witch apprentice, is accidentally transformed into an ass) and king Midas, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, given donkey's ears by Apollo in punishment for his bad musical taste. Within the maze of the wood, Bottom the ass may also be interpreted as a parody of the Minotaur¹⁵; or even as a masculine, asinine version of Philomela, if one listens to his song as a parodic echo of the lullaby sung to Titania by the fairies in the previous scene¹⁶. But on hearing Bottom's grotesque song (most likely interspersed with involuntary braying), Titania is all ears as well, and "foolish" enough to fall in love with him: "I pray thee [...], sing again. / Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note" (3.1.130-1). In her turn, she thus becomes a (feminine) parody of Midas, the king with an ass's ear for terrible music. And when she orders her attendants to "Tie up [her] love's tongue [and] bring him silently" (3.1.191), she sounds like a female version of Tereus when he cut off Philomela's tongue during his bestial deed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The incestuous potential of the Tereus-Philomela reference could even be an oblique revelation of another monstrosity: Titania's submerged incestuous desire for the Indian child she has adopted¹⁷. Truly enough, Titania gives up the child at the moment she falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom—whom she lays down on a bed of flowers ("sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep," 3.1.150) in the same way as she "crown[ed] [the child] with flowers" (2.1.27); Bottom whose "fair large ears" are "her gentle joy" (4.1.4), just as the Indian boy was "all her joy" (2.1.27).

27 Whether Bottom be a dream-fulfilment of Titania's monstrous fantasies, or of his own dream to become a phallic monster, the obscene undertones of their passion are no doubt enhanced by the gross potential of Nick Bottom's name¹⁸. Since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, many a production has exploited these bestial elements to stage the encounter as an explicitly zoophilic scene, featuring a clearly phallic Bottom and an overtly lustful, sexually rapacious Titania¹⁹. However, raising these bestial innuendoes and puns to full explicitness on the stage somehow betrays Bottom's text, in which he does not share Titania's enthusiasm: to her declaration, "I love thee" (3.1.134), he responds by a Cartesian and lucid, "Methinks [...] you should have little reason for that" (3.1.135-6). The sole desire he expresses is to socialize and eat with Titania's attendants. Furthermore, Shakespeare characterizes this odd couple in a staged chiasmus which blurs the contours of their monstrosity: Bottom is beastly in appearance, but he behaves like the gentleman he always tried to be; conversely, Titania is sexually aroused, but her appearance has not changed and she does not look the part of the animal she acts like²⁰. This ambiguity on the stage is meant to cause in the spectator a reaction suspended between unease and laughter, or anxiety and pleasure, with all the possibilities comprised in between these polarities—a reaction represented on the stage, diverse as it should be, by the different characters witnessing the scene. By Bottom's friends' horror: "O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted. Pray, masters; fly, masters. Help!" (3.1.99-100). By Robin's hilarity: "what fools [...]! Those things do best please me / That befall prepost'rously" (3.2.115-21). By Oberon's initial amusement ("This falls out better than I could devise," 3.2.35), and subsequent "pity" for Titania ("Her dotage

now I do begin to pity," 4.1.46). By Titania herself, polarized between the love she feels during the encounter and her disgust after the spell has worn out: "How came these things to pass? O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!" (4.1.77-8). And by Bottom's own strange lack of reaction in the heat of the moment, but afterwards his sense of wonder at a happening both unreal as a dream and yet real as an unforgettable *jouissance*: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was" (4.1.207-10).

28 An outright beastly staging of Titania and Bottom's encounter would deprive the spectators of this vast range of possible reactions, leaving little room for their imagination, filling the "serpent's skin" for them. This space into which the spectator is invited is another dimension of the substage, where the spectator's imagination is allowed to enact its fantasies as she/he meets the beast. Robin sets the example: as he settles to watch the rehearsal of *Pyramus and Thisbe*—which makes him a momentary figure of the spectator on the stage—he comments, "What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor— / An actor too, perhaps" (3.1.74-5). This encourages the audience to enact their wonderings, interpretations and dreams on watching Titania's encounter with the ass. The play definitely opens this space for the audience at the end of the scene which finishes on the word "silently": "Tie up my love's tongue; bring him silently" (3.1.191). The transition towards the next scene then consists in a major ellipsis which puts to silence the supposed climax of Titania's encounter with the beast, for 3.2 opens on another location of the wood and on a conversation between Oberon and Robin. The cut between 3.1 and 3.2, at mid-point of the play, is meant to be the interval—all the more so as Robin gives an expository recapitulation of the action (3.2.6-34). When the play thus falls silent in between the two scenes, a vacuum opens in the text and performance for the audience to step into.

29 This silence in the Symbolic Order (Lacan's phrase for verbal and other systems of representation) is a manifestation of the Real which Lacan defines as the angst-provoking, indescribable unknown, "forbidden to him who speaks as such" (*Ecrits* 319). We have, Lacan explains, "an appointment [with the Real] to which we are always called," but this "essential encounter" is nearly always "missed," because human existence is rooted in the Symbolic Order (*Seminar XI*: 53-55). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we are given a rare opportunity to encounter the beast at the heart's core of the play, in a locus beyond language, beyond the stage, in the silence of the Real.

5. "Lion fell" and "roaring lion": from Cartesian disfigurement to poetic transfiguration

30 To this silent appointment with the beast in the main play, one may oppose the mechanicals' decision to make the lion in the metaplay speak to the audience, in order to avoid frightening the ladies; so doing, they denature the animal's essence as a synecdoche of the Real by "stuffing" it with the Symbolic (and human) material of speech:

SNUG (*as Lion*)
 You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
 The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
 May now perchance both quake and tremble here
 When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
 Then know that I as Snug the joiner am
 A lion fell, nor else a lion's dam;

For if I should as Lion come in strife
 Into this place, 'twere pity on my life. (5.1.217-24)

31 This leaves no working space for the on-stage spectators' imagination who are left with little choice but to jeer at the disfigured animal. This is indeed a disfigurement on more than one score. It is not only Shakespeare's visionary intuition of the Lacanian Symbolic Order and its inevitable distortion of the Real, but also a prophetic parody of what was about to take place in the coming Cartesian age—humankind's divorce from the natural forces. The lion's disfigurement by the mechanicals (a carpenter, a joiner, a weaver, a tailor, a bellows-mender and a tinker) is indeed a vision, some thirty years ahead, of Descartes' "animal-machine" (*The Discourse on the Method* 45-48), a concept born of the binary, dualistic thinking which would split the animal from the human—breaking, in the process, the chain of being—and regard the animal as an automaton without a soul and, in theory, perfectly replicable by skilful artisans.

Western dualism by no means begins with Descartes, but it is he who laid the foundation for its modern radicalization. Human and animal, just as soul and body, mental and physical, come to be thought as much more strictly separate, mutually exclusive categories than before [...]. In looking at Shakespearean animals we must take a step back, seeking to attune ourselves to a mode of thought prior to the rigid Cartesian segregation of man and beast (Höfele 25).

32 As a prophecy of the "Cartesian segregation of man and beast," Snug's lion may well be the exception to the Shakespearean rule. On the metastage, the man in the "lion[']s fell" (5.1.222) is the hilarious (and yet sad) embodiment of humanity's obsession with itself—of man's condescension to nature in his purpose to gut it from its mysteries and stuff it with reassuring explanations and so-called knowledge. The man in the lion is the striking opposite to the mysterious, beautiful and empty serpent's skin on the main stage. As a speaking disfigurement of the natural forces, he is the antithesis of Robin's last appearance in the main play.

33 At the end of act 5, Theseus declares, after the pronouncement of all the weddings and to conclude the day's festivities: "Sweet Friends, to bed. / A fortnight hold we this solemnity / In nightly revels and new jollity" (5.1.359-61). All seems well that ends well on hearing this rhyming couplet which should wrap up the play—all the more so as it is spoken by the powerful ruler of the city, and as all the characters *exeunt* after the pronouncement. And yet, "Enter Robin Goodfellow with a broom," as if pushing forward the residues of the play, as if what was behind the scenes, beyond speech, came forward for an unexpected encore. And what comes forward is more to be heard than to be seen: instead of the iambic pentameters or prose heard until now, Robin's voice utters an incantation in trochaic tetrameters saturated with sonorous effects which sound more like animal calls and sounds than human language. Who better to lead this sonorous bestiary than the roaring—and no longer speaking—lion, back in power after his disfigurement on the metastage:

Now the hungry lion roars,
 And the wolf howls the moon,
 Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
 All with weary task fordone.
 Now the wasted brads do glow
 Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
 Puts the wretch that lies in woe
 In remembrance of a shroud. (5.1.362-9)

34 In a 1970 interview, Ted Hughes (notably known for his stunning animal poems)

used the following image to convey what he believed to be the drive behind a poet's creativity: "We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin" (Faas 199). "Goblin" (3.2.399) and "Hobgoblin" (2.1.40) are precisely Robin's other names in the play. Even though Hughes was not talking about Shakespeare when he gave this interview, his metaphor uncannily illuminates the strange denouement of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A denouement which captures the "something missed," insofar as Robin's animality finally manifests itself not under our eyes but in our ears, as this essentially sonorous bestiary, an audible fade-in fade-out of animal cries: "the hungry lion roars [...], the wolf howls the moon [...], the screech-owl, screeching loud..." A series of sound transfigurations which makes us "see a voice" (5.1.191)—to use another of the mechanicals' ironically appropriate lexical blunders—, inviting us to reconsider the way we watch the play and to fully understand the example set by Robin in act 3: "What, a play toward? I'll be an *auditor*" (3.1.74).

35 Our sense of hearing heightened by this realization, we will perceive the bestiary better than before: we will hear the subliminal howlings and ululations in all the characters' voices as assonances in /u:/ invade their speech, especially via "moon" and all its derivations ("moonlight," "moonbeam," "moonshine"), a sound often combined with the semivowel /w/ as in the verb "woo," "wooed," and its obsessive variation "wood." We will perceive the sound of snakes slithering deep in the grass, of spiders and beetles pitter-pattering underfoot: the lullaby of Titania's fairies, beside mimicking the warbling of the nightingale, amplifies and makes audible, through a delicate interplay of consonances and alliterations, microcosmic sounds usually hardly perceptible by the human ear—

Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence;
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail do no offence. (2.2.20-3)

36 These animal sounds, vibrating and reverberating throughout the song and the lines of the whole play, combine into a harmony—a "combination of simultaneous notes to form chords" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*)—, unlike the lexical field of animality which is inevitably arranged linearly, in syntactic sequences, in the manner of a melody—"arrangement of single notes in musically expressive succession" (*id.*). The harmony of sonorous effects is thus sensed at a subconscious or gut level, whereas the lexical melody is made sense of as the syntactic units unfold, somehow like musical phrases, consciously perceived from the distance of the intellect. Therefore, while the melody will only be heard at a surface level, the harmonic vibrations of fricatives, plosives, liquids and vowel sounds will resonate from the depths of the substage and do a deeper, more powerful work on the perceptive "auditor."

"The serpent's tongue"

37 While—and probably because—our perception of the main play's animals is not visual, we are made to imagine that, unseen, *they* see us. In "*Histeron proteron* dans *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," Jonathan Pollock remarks, about the characters lost in the wood:

la forêt nocturne, du moment qu'elle entrave la vue, tend à se peupler de regards. Le promeneur fourvoyé [...] interprète chaque lueur, chaque

phosphorescence, chaque scintillement comme un regard. Dans les bois, comme dans le rêve, on est plus regardé que regardant, on se fait tableau, on est objet d'un regard autre (Pollock 230).

38 This commentary may as well apply to us, the play's audience, whose impossibility to see the bestiary heightens our sense of being watched by a gaze which could be a staging—or more precisely a substaging—of the pure, primitive “gaze” which, Lacan tells us, “pre-exists” the “eye” of the conscious human subject (*Seminar XI*: 72). According to this idea (borrowed from Maurice Merleau-Ponty), the human subject becomes an object for he/she is indeed “looked at from all sides” by “the gaze,” which is “prior to his eye” (*ibid*) and always “eludes” it (*id* 73). “There is always a gaze behind. But [...] where does this gaze come from?” (*id* 112-113).

39 This opens a new dimension in the substage of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a dimension which circumscribes the audience “from all sides,” as if reversing the structure of the Elizabethan playhouse where it was the audience area which circumscribed the stage. Where does the gaze come from indeed? Is not what we are searching for, in this animal gaze, ourselves as hidden from ourselves? Aren't the animals among the audience as well? Is this not what is implied in Robin's last words, as he addresses himself directly to us just before the curtain falls?

Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long,
Else the puck a liar call.
So, goodnight unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends. (5.1.424-9)

40 “Give me your hands”: an invitation to merge our spaces. And this apology meant to avoid—or to negate—our hisses (“to s'cape the serpent's tongue”) thus transfigures us into snakes, we who took off our coats before the performance, just as “the snake throws her enamelled skin.”

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Notes

1 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* reminds us of the dubious etymology of the word. Yet, the disputed *ob-scaena* is tempting due to its relevance to the focus of this paper. In adopting it, I am following the example of Elizabeth Costello, animal activist and eponymous character of J. M. Coetzee's 2003 novel: "*Obscene*. That is the word, a word of contested etymology [...]. She chooses to believe that obscene means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things [...] must remain off-stage" (Coetzee 168). However, another—and perhaps less contested—Latin etymology serves my purpose as well: the entry "obscène" of the *Dictionnaire culturel en langue française* tells us the word may derive from *scaevus*—"left-sided" in augural vocabulary. In this case as well, the animal is off-centre, out of focus to the eye which beholds the scene—the two dictionaries provide the undisputed etymology of "théâtre" and "theatre," the Greek *thea* which means "to behold."

2 My translation and adaptation of Bachelard's point about the depiction of ghosts: "Un fantôme, pour être actif, n'a pas le droit aux bigarrures. Un fantôme qu'on décrit avec complaisance est un fantôme qui cesse d'agir" (Bachelard 25).

3 Quince, stage-director of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, explains to his cast confronted with the extra difficulty of impersonating the moon, that "one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine" (3.1.55-7). By "disfigure" he obviously means the contrary.

4 As Pierre Iselin puts it in his analysis of Hermia's words upon waking ("Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double," 4.1.188-9), "La chasse amoureuse ("fond chase"), métaphore obsédante de la nuit, se réalise sous ses yeux étonnés en un spectacle cynégétique ; les peurs nocturnes se sont évaporées ; les rivaux de la nuit sont allongés côte à côte ; ni le lion ni le serpent n'ont survécu au jour, et le cauchemar est dissipé. Pourtant demeure le doute, tant les images rémanentes de la nuit se sont imprimées sur la rétine" ("La vision double dans *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" 388).

5 In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, E. M. W. Tillyard shows how some of Shakespeare's characters exemplify this fight against the beast within. Due to its place between the angels and the animals in the chain of being, humanity is torn between the aspiration to rise above its condition and the pull of lower, bestial instincts. In *The Tempest* for example, "Prospero learns his lesson. He cannot transcend the terms of his humanity. In the end he acknowledges Caliban, 'this thing of darkness, mine': man for all his striving towards the angels can never be quit utterly of the bestial, of the Caliban, within him" (Tillyard 35).

6 See Yves Peyré's exploration in "Les mythes effacés du *Songe*," as well as Sophie Chiari-Lasserre's meticulous tracing of Ariadne's thread in "Les labyrinthes du *Songe*." Evidence of this thread also drew Patricia Parker's attention in her investigation on "The Name of Nick Bottom."

7 As explained by Angela Hurworth's "Mischief-making in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (212).

8 Jean-Marie Maguin refers to some of these productions in "La nuit du *Songe*" (300).

9 In his famous article, "Hermia's Dream," Norman N. Holland's develops a thorough psychoanalytical interpretation of the phallic beast dreamt by the young Athenian.

10 "Fillet of a fenny snake, / In the cauldron boil and bake: / Eye of newt, and toe of frog, / Wool of bat, and tongue of dog, / Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting, / Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing, / For a charm of powerful trouble, / Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble" (*Macbeth*, 4.1.12-9).

11 "Her tongue was still voicing her sense of outrage and crying her father's name, still struggling to speak, when Tereus gripped it in pincers and hacked it out with his sword. As its roots in the throat gave a flicker, the rest of it muttered and twitched where it dropped on the blood-black heart; and like the quivering tail of an adder that's chopped in half, it wriggled and writhed its way to the front of its mistress' feet. Even after this crime, though the story is scarcely believable, Tereus debauched that bleeding body again and again [...]. You could picture the fugitives' bodies suspended on wings. And they *were* suspended on wings. The one, transformed into a nightingale, made for the forest, the other flew up to the roof as a swallow" (Ovid 237, 243).

12 In “Wish fulfillment,” Freud sees “a dreamer’s relation to his wishes” as “a quite peculiar one” which inspires in him both “pleasure” and “anxiety”: “he repudiates them and censors them [...]. So that their fulfilment will give him no pleasure, but just the opposite [...] in the form of anxiety [...]. Thus a dreamer [...] can only be compared to an amalgamation of two separate people” (Freud XV: 216).

13 “[Procne] dragged off Itys, just like an Indian tigress dragging a suckling fawn through the forest thickets [...]. ‘Mother, mother!’ he screamed, as he tried once more to embrace her. But Procne picked up a sword and stabbed her son in the side of his chest without turning away. Though the blow on its own was enough to murder the child, Philomela then used the weapon to cut his throat. While his limbs were warm and retained some vestige of life, they tore him apart. The chamber was running with blood as the pieces bobbed in a bubbling cauldron or loudly spluttered on skewers. This was the feast to which Procne coolly invited her husband” (Ovid 241-242). In his earlier tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare already used the bestiality of this subtext as the source for the ordeal of Lavinia, Titus’ daughter, who is raped and has her tongue and hands cut off by Demetrius and Chiron. Titus avenges the horrendous deed by serving their heads as a dish to their mother Tamora. The reference to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is explicit in Marcus’ words on discovering his mutilated niece (“But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee / And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue,” 2.4.26-7), and when Lavinia herself turns Ovid’s books over with her stumps to help her father understand what happened to her: “Lavinia, wert *thou* thus surprised, sweet girl, / Ravished and wronged as Philomela was, / Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?” (4.1.51-3).

14 “While traditional theatre productions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* showed a Hippolyta perfectly content with the marriage, [...] John Hancock’s production for the San Francisco Actor’s Workshop in 1966 brought Hippolyta on as a captive animal wearing black body make-up and a leopard-skin bikini in a bamboo cage, her lines snarled with biting sarcasm” (footnote 1.1.1, Oxford edition of *AMND*).

15 As suggested by François Laroque in “Shakespeare et la stratégie du Labyrinthe” (99).

16 See David Wiles in “The Carnavalesque in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (70).

17 A desire intuited by André Green in *Sortilèges de la séduction* : “Le nouvel objet de son désir, le page indien adopté, se charge de plus en plus de la potentialité incestueuse du désir maternel” (22-23).

18 A potential fully explored by Patricia Parker in “The Name of Nick Bottom.”

19 In his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, R. A. Foakes refers to Peter Brook’s famous 1970 production with the Royal Shakespeare Company as a pivotal event in the staging history of the play (23-25): Bottom “carried off, to the parody of Mendelssohn’s wedding march, a phallus crudely mimed by a fist thrust up between his legs” (23), marked the end of the traditional treatment of *AMND* as a play for children.

20 Shakespeare’s Globe’s 2013 production renders this subtlety by making Michelle Terry’s yet demure Titania suggestively caress the entire length Bottom’s long, long ears and extensive tail, and her fairies focus their gaze—and apply their helping hands—mainly below his waist. Meanwhile, Pearce Quigley’s Bottom undoubtedly appreciates all this attention but keeps politely pushing back the wandering hands. On waking up after the encounter, he pauses with extreme embarrassment and chastely covers the top of his pants as his “dream” attributes come back to him: “methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had” (4.1.203-5).

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