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Quadrupeds, Birds, Reptiles, Fish and Insects

Emma Phipson

Excerpt

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THE ANIMAL-LORE
OF
SHAKSPEARE'S TIME.



INTRODUCTION.

Few subjects have more frequently occupied the attention of man than that of his own relation to the animal life around him. The classic writers delighted to note the various points of contact and the joint ownership of qualities which man and animals possessed. In the time of Shakspeare this question of kinship seems to have been studied with renewed interest. Montaigne labours long and earnestly to prove the "equality and correspondence betwixt us and the beasts." In Essay liv. he refuses to allow to man the sole possession of any faculty, or to debase the intelligence of animals with the name of instinct. He draws illustrations of the employment of such mental attributes as prudence, ingenuity, foresight, memory, from many beasts and birds.

"Why," he writes, "does the spider make her web streighter in one place and slacker in another? why now make one sort of knot, and then another, if she has not deliberation, thought, and conclusion? We sufficiently discover in most of their works how much animals excel us, and how unable our art is to imitate them. We see, never-

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theless, in our more gross performances, that we employ all our faculties, and apply the utmost power of our souls; why do we not conclude the same of them? Why should we attribute to I know not what natural and servile inclination the works that excel all we can do by nature and art? Wherein, before we are aware, we give them a mighty advantage over us, in making nature, with a maternal sweetness, to accompany and lead them, as it were, by the hand to all the actions and commodities of their life, whilst she leaves us to chance and fortune, and to seek out, by art, the things that are necessary to our conservation, at the same time denying us the means of being able, by any instruction or contention of understanding, to arrive at the natural sufficiency of beasts; so that their brutish stupidity surpasses, in all conveniences, all that our divine intelligence can do. Really, at this rate, we might with great reason call her an unjust step-mother; but it is nothing so, our polity is not so irregular and deform'd. Nature has been generally kind to all her creatures, and there is not one she has not amply furnished with all means necessary for the conservation of his being."

A little further on, he writes—

"All this I have said to prove the resemblance there is in human things, and to bring us back and joyn us to the crowd. We are neither above nor below the rest. All that is under heaven (says the wise man) runs one law, and one fortune."

The Rev. J. Kirkman has recently shown, in an essay written for the New Shakspeare Society, how, in almost every one of Shakspeare's plays, the tone of the drama is reflected by the animal life introduced. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*—

"the season and atmosphere of exuberant life, joy, and fun, show almost all creatures but serpents under their genial light. There is a very delight even in naming things, because of their song, their beauty, their innocent, or quaint, or industrious ways. It is exactly the opposite condition of things that rules in *King Lear*. Here the darker purpose of the play, which throws its shadow over human nature, shrouds in its gloom animal nature as well. A greater number of animals are mentioned in *King Lear* than in any other play, and with scarcely an exception the references are unfavourable. Their cruelty, treachery, and deceit are dwelt upon, and withal the terrible fact of the similar villainy of man. We have to ask," Mr. Kirkman continues, "what beautiful or sad law was it that was like the igneous rock ever

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beneath us, cropping up through all sedimentary strata here and there, often commanding attention by the height and sharpness of its peaks? Mr. Darwin would answer infallibly, without a moment's hesitation, I would venture to predict, 'Because of the common nature of man and his lower progenitors in the scale of creation.' I mean, without any allusion to Shakspeare being of 'Darwin's views,' Darwin would state on biological grounds precisely the same fact in nature as Shakspeare has worked out on moral or psychological principles." (*New Shakspeare Society's Transactions*, 1879.)

The question has been asked,—How is it that the number of animal metaphors and similes in Shakspeare's works so greatly exceeds that of any other of his brother dramatists? The answer is to be found mainly in his larger sympathy with nature; but it may be that his deeper study of the problems concerning man's origin and destiny, led him thus closely to connect man with his fellow-denizens of the earth.

However great the interest in external nature felt by our forefathers may have been, the scientific knowledge they possessed was still but slight. Natural history, according to Pliny, was the authorized version of the gospel of nature. The most absurd theories and statements concerning animal life put forth by this classical authority remained uncontradicted down to the time of Shakspeare. The method of interpreting natural phenomena which was founded by Lord Bacon, of substituting patient observation of facts for reliance on speculation and tradition, gave a fresh impulse to the study of natural history.

Another source from which writers of this time derived their notions of animal life was the Bible, which, recently translated, was eagerly read from one end of the country to the other. Unfortunately, this rather retarded than advanced their knowledge of the subject. The crude notions of the ancient Hebrews about beasts and birds, the very names of which were sometimes changed by the translators, were accepted as undoubted truths, and many

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errors were thus perpetuated. Guillim, the quaint old herald, quotes texts to prove the correctness of his descriptions of various animals, in the same way that modern writers quote the investigations and experiments of Darwin or Huxley.

The myth-making tendency of the human mind has also had an effect on man's study of nature. What Mr. Tylor calls "myths of observation," arose from a laudable anxiety to account for certain known phenomena. When fossil ammonites were found in the solid rock, miles away from the sea-shore, how was it possible to explain their presence better than by the statement that they were snakes turned into stones by the prayers of some local saint? Huge bones of fossil mammals, far exceeding in size those of living men, were obviously the limbs of some giant warrior slain in combat. These theories once started, poetry and imagination were ready to clothe the bare statement with ornament, and legends of early heroes, Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Southampton, and their compeers in might, grew with rapidity, and were universally believed.

It does not follow that all the absurd notions connected with animals that are found in the works of this period were generally credited at the time an author wrote. These fanciful theories were often merely adopted as metaphors and similes; but at the same time writers would not care to be behind the age, and would not willingly use expressions which could only provoke ridicule on the part of their readers. For example, the nightingale is invariably spoken of in the time of Elizabeth as of the feminine gender, while in our own day the knowledge that it is the male bird which sings is reflected in the poetry of our time.

Opportunities for the study of the habits of animals were by no means frequent. Although menageries have existed from the earliest times, they were chiefly used

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as places of temporary confinement for such wild beasts as were likely soon to be required for sport or war. Instances where animals have been kept for the purpose of observation are rare. Aristotle gained the materials for his work on animals in great measure from the large collection formed by Alexander the Great during his expedition made in search of conquest into distant countries. Pliny had an opportunity of drawing from life in his descriptions of beasts and birds, as there were several private collections made by wealthy Romans of his time; that he did not fully avail himself of this chance is evident from the strange mistakes and absurdities that crowd his pages.

The first English menagerie, according to Mr. Bennett (*Tower Menagerie*, 1829, p. xii.), was at Woodstock, in the time of Henry I. This collection, which consisted of lions, leopards, and other wild animals, was transferred to the Tower of London in the reign of Henry III. There it remained till it was superseded by the establishment of the Zoological Gardens in the Regent's Park. Paul Hentzner, in an account of a journey into England in 1598, gives a list of the various animals which formed the Tower menagerie at that date:—

“On coming out of the Tower we were led to a small house close by, where are kept a variety of creatures, viz. three lionesses, one lion of great size, called Edward VI., from his having been born in that reign; a tiger, a lynx; a wolf excessively old—this is a very scarce animal in England, so that their sheep and cattle stray about in great numbers, free from any danger, though without anybody to keep them; there is, besides, a porcupine, and an eagle. All these creatures are kept in a remote place, fitted up for the purpose with wooden lattices, at the queen's expense.” (*Dodsley's Fugitive Pieces*, vol. ii. p. 244.)

Fynes Moryson, in the account of his tour through Europe, 1591, describes a menagerie on a small scale at Prague in Bohemia.

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“The Emperour hath two inclosures walled about, which they call gardaines, one of which is called *Stella*, because the trees are planted in the figure of starres, and a little faire house therein is likewise built, with six corners in forme of a starre. And in this place be kept 12 cammels, and an Indian oxe, yellow, all over rugged, and hairy upon the throate, like a lyon; and an Indian calfe; and two leopards, which were said to be tame, if such wild beasts may be tamed. They were of a yellow colour, spotted with blacke, the head partly like a lyon, partly like a cat, the tayle like a cat, the body like a greyhound, and when the huntsman went abroad, at call they leaped up behind him, sitting upon the horse like a dog on the hinder parts, being so swift in running, as they would easily kill a hart” (*Itinerary*, p. 15).

In Italy, again, Moryson meets with a similar collection:—

“The Duke of Florence kept fierce wilde beasts in a little round house, namely, five lyons, five wolves, three eagles, three tygers (of blacke and gray colour, not unlike cats, but much greater), one wilde cat (like a tyger), beares, leopards spotted with white, black and red, and used sometimes for hunting, an Indian mouse (with a head like our mise, but a long hairie taile, so fierce and big, that it would easily kill one of our cats), and wilde boares.” (Page 151.)

This last-named animal may have been an ichneumon, sometimes called Pharaoh's rat.

Herrera, in his *History of America* (vol. ii. p. 348), gives an account of a menagerie in Mexico, far exceeding in magnitude any European collection. When the Spaniards visited Mexico, about the year 1500, they found a zoological garden sustained by Montezuma with right royal magnificence. This menagerie contained many varieties of beasts, birds, and serpents. These last were fed sometimes on human diet; persons sacrificed were afterwards given to the snakes and alligators. According to Herrera, five hundred cocks were daily given to the eagles, and three hundred men were appointed to attend in the house of birds. There were also large ponds for salt and fresh water birds, the water of which was frequently renewed. These birds were

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kept chiefly for the sake of their feathers, which formed an article of commerce of considerable importance.

The universal fondness for hunting, hawking, and other field sports, gave rise to a great number of technical expressions connected with the chase, which perpetually occur in the writings of the Elizabethan dramatists. Guilim, in his *Display of Heraldry*, 1610 (p. 15), gives a list of phrases, many of which are in use at the present day:—

“The tayl of a hart is termed the tayl; of a buck, roe, or any other deer, the single; of a boar, the wreath; of a fox, the brush, or holy water sprinkler; of a wolf, the stern; and of a hare or coney, the scut. You shall say that a hart harboureth; a buck lodgeth; a roe beddeth; a hare seateth or formeth; a coney sitteth; a fox is uncased. You shall say dislodge a buck; start a hare; unkennel a fox; rowse a hart; bowlt a coney. A hart belloweth; a buck groaneth; a roe belleth; a hare beateth; a coney tappeth; a fox barketh; a wolf howleth. You shall say a herd of harts, and all manner of deer; a bevy of roes; a sounder of swine; a rowt of wolves; a riches of marternes; a brace or lease of bucks, of foxes, or hares; a couple of rabbits or conies.”

Mr. Daniel, in his *Rural Sports*, 1812 (vol. ii. p. 480), quotes from *The Book of Saint Albans* a long list of nouns of multitude:—

“A sege of herons and of bitterns; an herd of swans, of cranes, and of curlews; a dopping of sheldrakes; a spring of teales; a covert of coots; a gaggle of geese; a padelynge of ducks; a bord or sute of mallards; a muster of peacocks; a nye of pheasants; a bevy of quales; a covey of partridges; a congregation of plovers; a flight of doves; a dule of turkies; a walk of snipes; a fall of woodcocks; a brood of hens; a building of rooks; a murmuration of starlings; an exaltation of larks; a flight of swallows; a host of sparrows; a watch of nightingales; and a charm of goldfinches. A pride of lions; a lepe of leopards; an herd of harts, of buck, and of all sorts of deer; a bevy of roes; a sloth of bears; a singular of boars; a sounder of wild swine; a dryft of tame swine; a route of wolves; a harrass of horses; a rag of colts; a stud of mares; a pace of asses; a baren of mules; a team of oxen; a drove of kine; a flock of sheep; a tribe of goats; a sculk of foxes; a cete of badgers; a riches of martins; a fesynes of ferrets; a huske or a down of hares; a nest of rabbits; a clowder of cats, and a kendel of young cats; a shrewdness of apes; and a labour of moles.”

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CHAPTER I.

THE Monkey order is generally spoken of in mediæval times under the three broad names of ape, **Quadrupeds.** baboon, and monkey or marmoset, though **Monkey.** various kinds are described by the early explorers of Africa and South America under the native names.

The chief sources from which we derive our information respecting the different species of animals found in various parts of the globe are the collections of travels made by Hakluyt and Purchas. The Rev. Samuel Purchas published the first volume of his work in 1613, and the last four volumes in 1625. He gave to his compilation the long title of *Purchas his Pilgrimage; or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places*. He appears to have been more credulous than Hakluyt, or perhaps he took a stronger interest in natural history, for to him we are chiefly indebted for strange adventures and marvellous descriptions of animal life.

One of the most intelligent of the pilgrims whose peregrinations are recorded in this collection was Andrew Battell, an English sailor, who was taken prisoner by the Portuguese and sent to Angola, on the West Coast of Africa, where he lived nearly eighteen years. This writer gives a tolerably correct account of the largest

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species of ape, known in modern times as the Gorilla.
He says:—

“The largest of these ape monsters is called *Pongo*, in their language, and the lesser is called *Engeco*. This pongo is in all proportion like a man, but that he is more like a giant in stature than a man; for he is very tall and hath a man's face, hollow-eyed, with long haire upon his browes. His face and eares are without haire, and his hands also. His bodie is full of haire, but not very thicke, and of a dunnish colour. He differeth not from a man but in his legs, for they have no calfe. Hee goeth alwaies upon his legs, and carrieth his hands clasped on the nape of his necke, when he goeth upon the ground. They sleepe in the trees, and build shelters for the raine. They feed upon the fruit that they find in the woods, and upon nuts, for they eate no kind of flesh. They cannot speake, and have no more understanding than a beast. The people of the countrie, when they travaile in the woods, make fires where they sleepe in the night; and in the morning, when they are gone, the pongoes will come and sit about the fire till it goeth out, for they have no understanding to lay the wood together. They goe many together, and kill many negroes that travaile in the woods. . . . When they die among themselves, they cover the dead with great heapes of boughs and wood, which is commonly found in the forrests.” (*Purchas*, vol. ii. p. 982.)

The engeco here mentioned is possibly the Chimpanzee. The gorilla was known to the Carthaginians. It is mentioned under this name in a Greek translation from the *Periplus*, or circumnavigation of Hanno the Carthaginian.

A Portuguese resident in Brazil, whose observations on that country are also recorded in Purchas's collection (vol. iv. p. 1302), gives a curious account of an ape king.

“The *Aquiqui* are very great apes, as bigge as a good sized dog, blacke, and very ugly, as well the male as the female. They have a great beard onely in the lower chap. Of these come sometimes a male one so yellow that it draweth toward red, which they say is their king. This hath a white face, and the beard from eare to eare as cut with the scissers; and it hath one thing much to be noted, namely, that he goeth into a tree, and maketh so great a noise that it is heard very farre off, in the which he continueth a great while without ceasing, and for this, this kind hath a particular instrument; and the instru-

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ment is a certaine hollow thing, as it were made of parchment, very strong, and so smooth that it serveth to burnish withall, as big as a duckes egge, and beginneth from the beginning of the gullet, till very neere the palate of the mouth betweene both the cheekes, and it is so light that as soone as it is toucht it moveth as the key of a virginals."

This species has been identified by modern travellers as the Mycetes, or Howling Monkey. According to some writers, the peculiar cry from which it derives its name may be heard at a distance of two miles.

Antonio de Herrera, in his description of the West Indies (*Purchas*, vol. i. p. 966), tells us that—

"throughout all the mountaines, either of these ilands of the firme land, or of the Andes, there are infinite numbers of *micos*, or monkeys, which are a kinde of apes, but very different, in that they have a taile, yea a very long one. And amongst them there are some kindes which are thrice, yea foure times bigger than the ordinarie; some are all blacke, some bay, some grey, and some spotted. Their agilitie and manner of doing is admirable, for that they seeme to have reason and discourse to goe upon trees, wherein they seeme to imitate birds."

John Leo, in his account of travels in Africa, says that the native name for the small kinds of apes which have tails is *Monne*, which may be the origin of the English name monkey; those without tails are called *Babuini* (*Purchas*, vol. ii. p. 847).

Another traveller, Wilson, who returned from Guiana in the year 1606, reports (*Purchas*, vol. iv. p. 1261), that "there are many monkie, great and small, blacke and greene, which sorts are called Marmosites."

Small monkeys seem to have been rather fashionable as pets, as well as forming a necessary part of the outfit of the itinerant showman. Ben Jonson has several allusions to them :—

"'Tis like your clog to your marmoset."

(*The Poetaster*, iv. 1.)

"He past, appears some mincing marmoset,
Made all of clothes and face."

(*Cynthia's Revels*, iii. 2.)