

## WAS SHAKESPEARE A DOG LOVER?



I'm not sure how relevant the next article is as far as classes are concerned. All I would say is that pupils are fascinated by animals and by conspiracy theories (in this case about whether Shakespeare's work was really by Marlowe or not). It's a good story...!

Did Shakespeare have one dog, or several dogs? And if so, what breed? And how kind was he as a master to them? Did he take them to rehearsals, walking them over London Bridge to get to the Globe, or leave them at home?

These are burning questions for all dog-lovers throughout the dog-adoring kingdom where he once lived and worked (and perhaps prepared food for his pets), as he pondered questions, such as how Romeo (the young dog!) should best approach Juliet.

London, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, like any modern city today, was probably not the ideal place to keep a dog, especially if Shakespeare was living in lodgings in Silver Street with Mrs Mountjoy as his landlady. Would he have taken his pet to work with him, or left it to be fed by some "greasy Joan" who would "keel the pot" once the brute had finished its meal? (cf *Love's Labour's Lost*)

Having no family with him, however, he might well have valued the faithful companionship of a canine friend (in the absence of any other surreptitious friendships) to see him through the long hours of night, while he scribbled lines for the cast to use the following morning. Anne (née Hathaway) probably had more than enough to do bringing up the family without having to see to William's dogs as well. He would have missed them too much, surely (the dogs, not the twins)? And on tour they would have been useful as guard dogs and protectors generally, from plague victims, press-officers, scurvy innkeepers, over-zealous constables and under-enthusiastic spectators. In short, a boon.

An interest in dog species emerges particularly in Macbeth, where Macbeth addresses the murderers: "Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men As hounds, and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs, Shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves are clept All by the name of dogs." We should not, from this, imagine that Jacobean England was a place of catalogues as we know them, and start to picture Shakespeare leafing through a pets' catalogue before setting out for work: 'catalogue' here means list. This 'catalogue', however, from a modern point of view strikes us as rather meagre, in terms of choice. No poodles, Chihuahuas, Afghan hounds or shiatzu. Where are our Jack Russell terriers, our boxers, our pit bulls? Shoughs and water-rugs, however, sound interesting; more interesting perhaps, in terms of affection given and returned, than demi-wolves.

Spaniels are fourth down the list, below mongrels and if Shakespeare kept spaniels, he is nevertheless scathing about them elsewhere too. "The hearts that spaniel'd me at heels, Do discandy, melt their sweets," says Anthony scornfully in Antony and Cleopatra. And in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Helena gives evidence that, had the RSPCA existed in Shakespeare's day, she or Demetrius might have been prime candidates for prosecution for the crime of spaniel neglect. "I am your spaniel .... The more you beat me, I will fawn on you, Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, Neglect me, lose me." In fact this play gives more scope than most for allowing dogs to appear on stage had Shakespeare's troupe ("Never act with children or animals" goes the modern adage) wished. Certainly he could have had some well-trained dogs barking in the "tiring room" for interesting sound effects.

#### **Theseus**

**And since we have the vaward of the day,  
My love shall hear the music of my hounds.  
Uncouple in the western valley; let them go.  
Dispatch, I say, and find the forester.**

**Exit an ATTENDANT (*with dogs barking at heels*)**

**We will, fair Queen, up to the mountain's top,  
And mark the musical confusion  
Of hounds and echo in conjunction. (*dogs barking loudly in the tiring room or wings*)**

#### **Hippolyta.**

**I was with Hercules and Cadmus once  
When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear  
With hounds of Sparta; never did I hear  
Such gallant chiding, for, besides the groves,  
The skies, the fountains, every region near  
Seem'd all one mutual cry. I never heard  
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder. (*Redoubling of dogs barking*)**

NB my italics for hypothetical stage directions.  
'Midsummer N's D'

On the whole, though, dogs and curs appear more as insults in the canon generally ("you dog! You scurvy lord" – "O be thou damn'd, execrable dog" etc. are pretty typical of the references generally to dogs). "It's a dog's life!" seems to sum up the contrast generally offered in most

plays: humans may be virtuous or vicious but dogs, unless they are fawning, or setting on bears, or hunting, are here in this world to *suffer*.

It is when we look more closely at King Lear, that we notice an abundance of dogs (and suffering) all over the place and I wish to examine here why they might be of special importance in this particular play. In an England which seemed to accept as natural the infliction of casual violence on dogs, this play appears to reserve more sympathy than usual for these four-legged victims.

We can tell a lot about the characters from their attitude to dogs. Regan, for example shows us her inhuman strain of cruelty as she stocks Kent:

**Kent.**

**Why, madam, if I were your father's dog, You should not use me so.**

**Reg.**

**Sir, being his knave, I will.**

We also partly measure Lear's progress, morally, in his attitude to dogs, from:

"Lear. 'My lady's father'? My lord's knave! You whoreson dog! you slave! you cur!"

to a more reflective:

**"Lear. Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?**

**Glou. Ay, sir.**

**Lear. And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office."**

Lear's pitiable state reduces him finally to a pathetic level beneath even a dog.

**Edg. [aside]**

**My tears begin to take his part so much They'll mar my counterfeiting.**

**Lear.**

**The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me.**

**Edg.**

**Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs! Be thy mouth or black or white,  
Tooth that poisons if it bite; Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim...."**

Cordelia's compassion, too, is measured by attitudes to dogs:

**Cor.**

**Mine enemy's dog, Though he had bit me, should have stood that night Against my fire...."**

Similarly, the Fool, in his cryptic, revelatory fashion, suggests an opposition between the poor, suffering "ditch-dog", that Edgar is to become, who "drinks the green mantle of the standing pool" as opposed to "Lady the brach (who) may stand by th' fire and stink". In the Fool's words, "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipp'd out" as if, in ironic terms, the human-inhumanity axis (towards dogs as well as towards humans) is an important process in the arrival at truth.

This cruelty allows Lear, who is driven into madness like a rabid dog, ("hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey") to admit lucidly at last, "Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flatter'd me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there." Kent, too can be measured partly in terms of dogs. He perhaps comes to symbolise the faithfulness one associates with trusted dogs, yet he nevertheless distances himself from the flattery Lear connects with dogs in his furious outburst to Oswald, as he condemns courtiers who, "Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks With every gale and vary of their masters, Knowing naught (like dogs) but following. A plague upon your epileptic visage!"

And Edgar too is in a similar way to being transformed to a level similar to or even worse than a dog's: "Into a madman's rags, t' assume a semblance That very dogs disdain'd; and in this habit Met I my father with his bleeding rings..."

Why then, so many dogs: named (Tray, Blanche and Sweetheart) and unnamed; pampered (My lady Brach) or spurned (ditch-dog)? Well, this is a play, which, besides exhibiting cruelty and flattery, is determined to reduce man to a state of nature where he is equivalent to animals. Man's rationalism stands for little in the Lear universe and provides no answers to the big questions ("Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all?"). Appearances, too, are utterly misleading. Lear, as we know, gets it all wrong. In fact the only faculty anyone can trust in such a world is, like a dog, the sense of *smell*.

"Do you smell a fault?" asks Gloucester ironically at the very beginning of the play, as he too neglects the instinctively, visually obvious, and trusts the untrustworthy bastard Edmund. "Let him smell his way to Dover," says one of the sisters callously after they have put out Gloucester's eyes. Sight is obviously accentuated in the play ("See better, Lear, and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye") but it is the sense of smell which finally predominates, as Lear in rabid madness achieves a grotesque lucidity through his canine sense. "The first time that we smell the air we cry That we are come to this great stage of fools..." or, "Give me an ounce of civet, sweet apothecary to sweeten this hand, it smells of mortality", or more simply, "Faugh! Faugh!"

At this stage Lear's reason has given way, but his canine sense of smell is working overtime. In the end, then, the play reduces men to the level of dogs, unflatteringly, but it suggests too that animals, and here dogs, have a primal, instinctive sense, which we must not neglect in our own make-up. Dogs have their allotted place in creation's hierarchies, but we are not so far removed from them, and at times our blessed, God-given reason cannot compare with the lower, brutish sense of smell.

As a post-script I should add that a quick comparison between the concordances of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare quickly and definitively establishes one important difference between the two writers. Marlowe refers to dogs, but I do not think he distinguishes between species, as Shakespeare so markedly does. This should help lay to rest the intriguing speculations that Marlowe forged his own dramatic death, with the help of Ingram Frizer, Skeres and Poley at Dame Bull's tavern in Deptford on Wednesday 30th May 1593, and later wrote Shakespeare's plays .

"Kit" Marlowe, the *enfant terrible* of the theatre world, was on bail at the time, after having been arrested at the home of his patron, Thomas Walsingham. Life for Marlowe, so this

particular conspiracy theory runs, was getting hot; he was a spy, a notorious atheist and a homosexual (not least, he studied at Cambridge – that radical hotbed !). In short, he had enemies, who were waiting to nail him once and for all. After a quarrel over the "reckoning" or bill, Ingram Frizer stabbed him in the eye with a dagger, killing him instantly, but at the subsequent inquest no body was produced, unusually, and Frizer's plea of killing in self-defence was accepted extremely easily. Having gone to ground, Marlowe, so goes the conspiracy theory, would surface later and make a deal with a clever but literarily limited actor hack from Stratford, so that he, Christopher Marlowe, could continue writing his brilliant plays, but now under the pseudonym of William Shakespeare.

Thus runs A.D. Wraight's thesis, in *Shakespeare – New Evidence 1996*. Yet it is clear from the evidence of the *plays* that Marlowe's busy life at home and abroad left him no room for a love of, and interest, in dogs. Not so Shakespeare. As for pet-attitude, we would hope that William Shakespeare treated his water-rug or shough with the patience and love of a Cordelia rather than a Regan.