

Spenser's Monsters: A Response to Maik Goth and to John Watkins*

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Recently, Maik Goth has argued that Spenser's animal-human monsters in *The Faerie Queene* owe much to the poet's endorsement of Prometheus's creation of humankind from animal parts and that this aspect of an ancient myth participated in Spenser's version of Sir Philip Sidney's belief that the right poet can comprehend an alternative nature and incorporate features of its world in literary images that move a reader to virtuous action. In particular, Spenserian monstrosities such as Duessa seen as a grotesque witch—complete with fox's tail, bear's paw, and eagle's claw—and the Sphinx-like dragon of Book 5 realize the chimera aspect of Sidney's pronouncement in *An Apology for Poetry* that the inspired poet makes "things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like" (Sidney 100). While some monsters, such as Duessa and Error, are disgusting, Goth suggests that their function is positive. Goth implies that Spenser could have adopted George Chapman's opinion, expressed in *The Shadow of Night* (1594), that "*Promethean Poets [...] created men [...] [w]ith shapes of Centaurs, Harpies, Lapithes*" so that men "[w]hen almost savage [...] growne, / Seeing them selues in those Pierean founts, / Might mend their mindes, asham'd of such accounts'" (qtd. in Goth 189-90).

*Reference: Maik Goth, "Spenser as Prometheus: The Monstrous and the Idea of Poetic Creation," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 183-207; John Watkins, "Spenser's Monsters: A Response to Maik Goth," *Connotations* 20.2-3 (2010/2011): 201-09.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debgoth01813.htm>>.

John Watkins in “Spenser’s Monsters: A Response to Maik Goth,” claims that such creatures, rather than mending readers’ minds, reflect Spenser’s disillusionment with humankind in *The Faerie Queene*. Judged from Pico della Mirandola’s Neo-Platonic viewpoint, they register humankind’s “power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life” (qtd. in Watkins 202). Judged from a Reformation Protestant perspective, the creatures condense the will inherited from Adam, the “infected will” that Sidney refers to as the curse that prevents humankind, including the poet, from ever “reaching unto” the “perfection” that “our erected wit make[s] us know” (Sidney 101). In this context, Watkins quotes both Luther’s and Calvin’s opinion that fallen men and women are monstrous (cf. 204).

Shakespeare illuminates both Goth’s argument and Watkins’s response to it. He does so in terms of the type of monsters Sidney mentions in his account of poetic creation. Goth cites Duke Theseus’s speech at the beginning of act 5 of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an account of the creative act in which Spenser indulged, an act that closely resembles the dynamics Sidney describes:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.12-17)¹

Several commentators on this comedy have argued that Shakespeare alludes to certain ideas in Sidney’s *Apology* and claimed that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* amounts to the playwright’s own Defense of Dramatic Poetry.² Including Theseus’s speech among their evidence proves problematic, however. Goth never mentions the fact that Theseus skeptically dismisses the poet’s activity as an imaginative illusion, similar to the lunatic’s vision of devils and the lover’s of Helen’s beauty in a swarthy complexion. Theseus, although ridiculing this activity, does not seem to refer to any function of the “things unknown” created by the poet.

And yet Shakespeare makes an otherworldly vision a dramatic reality in Oberon's eloquent remembrance of how the ravishing harmony of song once caused him to see a deity usually invisible. Oberon asks Robin Goodfellow whether he remembers that once

I sat upon a promontory
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music? (2.1.148-53)

Hearing the song, Oberon sees

Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal thronèd by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passèd on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
(2.1.156-64)

Oberon sees Cupid's arrow then fall upon the pansy, making it a magical agent for manipulating falling in love. This visionary capacity articulated by Oberon suggests a possibility considered neither by Goth nor by Watkins.

Surprisingly, Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* associates this capacity with the play's monster. "My mistress with a monster is in love" (3.2.6), Robin Goodfellow tells Oberon. This monster is the part-human, part-animal Bottom, an ass-headed chimera created by the poet dramatist Shakespeare. That Bottom has the capacity for—in his own words—"a most rare vision"—is suggested by his saying, upon awakening from sleep, "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was [...] [M]an is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the

ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (4.1.203-06, 208-12). When Bottom says that his dream "hath no bottom" (4.1.214), he implies that the dream is vertical; it ascends into a spiritual world, giving him a vision of a beautiful supernatural being, who loved him as he loved her. Half-awake Bottom may comically garble the senses recording his dream, but the overt allusion to 1 Corinthians 2:9, which concerns Paul's assurance that those who love God shall through their senses know his wisdom, suggests that it is a rare vision that can be taken seriously (cf. Laird 38; 42). The monster may not have the poet's capacity to give a local habitation and a name to this supernatural vision (Bottom plans to get Quince to convert the reported dream into a ballad).³ But Shakespeare does depict Bottom at least half-way through the process of poetic creation conveyed most fully in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Oberon. Shakespeare thus in this play provides a rejoinder to Chapman's idea, which Goth's essay supports, that Promethean poets created monstrous men so that readers, seeing themselves in the poet's images, "[m]ight mend their mindes, asham'd of such accounts." The monster Bottom's strangely eloquent reverie generally draws admiration from audiences. In this respect, it also represents an alternative to Watkins's claim that literary monsters represent a warning concerning humankind's infected will.

The obvious monster in *The Tempest* is the harpy played by Ariel: a chimera with the upper torso and head of a woman and the body of a giant bird that appears to Alonso and his courtiers. Only the king hears the harpy's words, which sound as thunder, wind, and surf. Nonetheless, Alonso understands from them that he is being punished, mainly through the loss of his son Ferdinand, for his sins in depriving Prospero of his dukedom and then apparently of his and his infant Miranda's lives. "O, it is monstrous, monstrous!" (3.3.95), Alonso pronounces concerning his remembered crimes. His new insight partly derives from his sight of the monster who tells him of them. Shakespeare may have reinforced this sight in original performances of *The Tempest* by giving monstrous shapes to the spirits that

suddenly take away the banquet offered to Alonso and his courtiers. In this case, Shakespeare seems closer to Chapman's opinion that Promethean poets can mend readers' minds through the images of monsters. While that does not immediately happen to Alonso (he at first despairs), the ultimate effect of the harpy upon the king of Naples is beneficial, and thus in keeping with Goth's generally positive account of the effect of monstrous representation. Alonso gives up Prospero's dukedom and begs his pardon.

Regeneration also occurs within the other monster in *The Tempest*: puppy-headed, fish-finned Caliban. Trinculo and Stefano call Caliban a "monster" no fewer than thirty-one times in the play. Considered initially, monstrous Caliban appears to conform to Watkins's point that literary monsters sometimes represented severe Protestant assumptions about the depravity of humankind. Caliban's evil surfaces in his never-repented desire to rape Miranda and in the savagery of his desire to knock a nail in sleeping Prospero's head. Luther and Calvin in Watkins's presentation emphasize the monstrousness of humankind; Shakespeare in *The Tempest* on the contrary stresses the humanness of the monster Caliban. Caliban's capacities for speech and learning (1.2.335-41, 356-61); for fertile poetic utterance (2.2.165-70); for the comprehension of beauty and for reasoning (3.2.98-103); for dream, imaginative vision, and for the appreciation of kinds of music, even refined music (3.2.136-44); and for service all mark him a man rather than a monster. In the removal of the jester Trinculo from beneath Caliban's cloak, Shakespeare stages Caliban's separation from the disruptive jesting voice heard in act 1, scene 2 of *The Tempest*. Caliban ultimately realizes his human rather than his animal nature when he says,

I'll be wise hereafter
And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass
Was I to take this drunkard for a god,
And worship this dull fool. (5.1.298-301)

The word “grace” here means more than “favor” or “pardon.” The word carries the spiritual overtones that Luther and Calvin would have understood.

In his essay titled “Of a Monstrous Child,” Michel de Montaigne judges that “[w]hat we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man” (538-39, esp. 539). Montaigne’s judgment suggests that, unlike Sidney for whom monstrous forms are mainly the poet’s business, he and his contemporaries believed that sometimes God’s nature produced them. Shakespeare in at least two plays provides a commentary on monstrosity that illuminates Maik Goth’s and John Watkins’s arguments. In particular, the playwright accentuates the pedagogical functions and normalcy that early modern literary monsters could represent.

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NOTES

¹Quotations of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* come from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

²See Dent 128-29; Weiner 332-33, 334-35, 348; and Hunt 233.

³Bottom intends to sing this ballad at the end of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” but audiences never hear it.

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