

## A Complementary Response to Anthony Brian Taylor\*

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This article provides a useful, scholarly account of the reception of Actaeon's dogs in Elizabethan literature via the mediation of Golding. Taylor rightly concludes that Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* was extremely important both for Elizabethan poetry in general and for Shakespeare in particular. Taylor is also right to underline the importance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the general culture. Partly through the accessible vernacular of Golding's translation the *Metamorphoses* may as readily resurface in a popular ballad or in a dictionary used by generations of schoolboys as in a courtly entertainment. It is likewise important to remember that when an Elizabethan writer read the *Metamorphoses*, his reading did not take place within a contextless vacuum, but was part of a complex of receptions, including allegorical exegesis (although this aspect of Ovid's reception has arguably been overemphasised). A gloss in a dictionary or a note in Regius or another popular edition becomes a vital part of "Ovid" and what he "meant" for readers at the time. Paradoxically Shakespeare, because he was not the most orthodoxly learned of readers, may have been less dependent on conventional scholarly views than others. Indeed the pattern of his career suggests that, with Seneca or Ovid, he may have started with an orthodox view of the character of their works only to modify it by a more independent reading later on. *Macbeth*, which Shakespeare probably prepared for by reading a couple of the plays in Latin, represents a more thorough-going engagement with Seneca than, say, *Richard III*. The same may be true of Shakespeare's reading of Ovid,

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\*Reference: Anthony Brian Taylor, "Arthur Golding and the Elizabethan Progress of Actaeon's Dogs," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 207-223.

which moves from the stylish but partly decorative allusions in the early plays to a profound recreation and appropriation of an Ovidian mixed mode in the late romances.<sup>1</sup>

Golding, we can agree, was part of the furniture of Shakespeare's mind. But just for that reason we have to be circumspect when formulating the relationship in specific cases. Taylor's account of *Othello* 5.2.372-73 may be vitiated by its excessively intentionalist framework. In this passage, according to Taylor, Shakespeare "is thinking of Golding" and of the traditional allegorical associations of Actaeon's dogs, first with traitors without and secondly with disruptive passions within. But the use of the word "fell" or the presence of a "Spartan" dog (regularly a type of canine ferocity) does not prove the conscious reference to Golding's Ovid which would be needed to justify Taylor's ingenious reading. Intertextuality may provide a more useful exegetical framework for the modern interpreter than either "allusion" or "source."

It is not necessary to try and uncover tenuous verbal correspondences in order to establish Golding's importance for Shakespeare. His presence is simultaneously more submerged and more diffuse than Taylor's analyses of the plays he mentions would suggest. For example, if we take *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the reasonably certain confirmation of Golding's presence in the play might be used as evidence not only to prove that Shakespeare read and retained much of Golding (which we know already), but also to provide the basis for an exploration of the influence of "Ovid" (incorporating Golding and the exegetic tradition) on the play as a whole and an anchor for the possibility that the role of the legend of Actaeon in the play is not confined to references to his dogs. Taylor quotes Pistol's warning to Ford that he should take care not to be cuckolded by Falstaff:

Prevent,  
Or go thou like *Sir Actaeon*, he,  
With *Ringwood* at thy heels. (2.1.112-14)<sup>2</sup>

Taylor has shown that the name Ringwood had become common currency via such works as "New Mad Tom of Bedlam" and he suggests that the reference to "Sir Actaeon" strengthens the case for specifying Golding as a source because in his *Metamorphoses* Actaeon is called the

*unluckie Knight*. Taken by itself this is not an entirely convincing argument because mythological figures were commonly referred to in this way. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Diomedes is referred to as "Sir Diomed" (4.5.109). Although Taylor's brief in this article is limited to the subject of Actaeon's *dogs* it might have been interesting to cite the explanation of the Actaeon story which Golding provides in the prefatory epistle to his translation.

All such as doo in flattring freaks, and hawkes, and hownds delyght  
 And dyce, and cards, and for too spend the tyme both day and nyght  
 In foule excesse of chamberworke, or too much meate and drink:  
 Uppon the piteous storie of Acteon ought too think.  
 For theis and theyr adherents usde excessive are in deede  
 The dogs that dayly doo devour theyr followers on with speede.  
 (Epistle 97-102)<sup>3</sup>

This might almost have been a thumbnail sketch for another "unluckie knight"—Falstaff himself—even though the two obvious allusions to Actaeon in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* serve only to connect the hunter with potential cuckolds. But this common association (based on the fact that Actaeon was transformed into a stag and thus had horns) is only one of the ramifications of the Actaeon myth. As we have seen, the dogs may be interpreted allegorically either as treacherous servants or as self-consuming passions.

Both of these interpretations could be related to Shakespeare's treatment of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The self-important knight lords it over his adherents like a huntsman in charge of a pack of dogs, dismissing them summarily in the following words:

Rogues, hence, avaunt! Vanish like hailstones! Go!  
 Trudge, plod, away o' th' hoof, seek shelter, pack!  
 (1.3.76-77)

Immediately after he has left we learn that Pistol and Nym are just as disloyal as the "hound" followers in the first allegorisation of the legend to which Taylor refers. Pistol wishes Falstaff as bloody an end as Actaeon—"Let vultures gripe thy guts" (1.3.80)—and Nym and Pistol declare their intention of betraying Falstaff's projected amours to Ford and Page respectively. Taylor himself provides added evidence for an identification

of Falstaff and Actaeon by compiling various instances where the characters of Nym and Pistol are associated with dogs.

The image used by Mistress Ford when considering the best way to deal with Falstaff's importunities is suggestive of the second common interpretation of the Actaeon myth mentioned by Taylor, implying as it does that Falstaff will fall victim to his own self-consuming desires and be hoist with his own petard:

How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease.  
(2.1.62-65)

This image is echoed in Falstaff's rueful account to "Brook" of the tribulations his wooing has involved:

. . . And then, to be stopped in like a strong distillation, with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease. Think of that—man of my kidney—think of that—that am as subject to heat as butter, a man of continual dissolution and thaw. It was a miracle to scape suffocation. And in the height of this bath, when I was more than half stewed in grease like a Dutch dish, to be thrown into the Thames . . . (3.5.104-11)

This speech is also a reminder of another point of contact between Falstaff and Actaeon—both are punished via water—and by adding the theme of metamorphosis to his reiterated complaint Falstaff makes his resemblance to Actaeon seem even more pointed in the following speech from Act 4:

If it should come to the ear of the court how I have been transformed, and how my transformation hath been washed and cudgelled, they would melt me out of my fat, drop by drop, and liquor fishermen's boots with me.  
(4.5.88-92)

Actaeon is also prevented by *pudor* from returning to his *domum et regalia tecta* after having been metamorphosed.

Herne is the ostensible model for Falstaff's assumption of antlers, but his soliloquy shows that the classical rather than the English analogues are uppermost in his mind. His first thoughts are of Jove because he too metamorphosed himself to further his success in love. The

comparison seems to give him confidence and he begins his speech with a swagger:

Now the hot-blooded gods assist me! Remember, Jove, thou wast a bull for thy Europa; love set on thy horns. O powerful love, that in some respects makes a beast a man; in some other, a man a beast! (5.5.2-6)

But as he continues Falstaff appears to sense that his fate is of a different order; his comment "When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?" (5.5.11-12) suggests that Falstaff has remembered that mortals are rarely in control of their metamorphoses and his claim that he is "a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i'th'forest" (5.5.12-13) serves to link him once more with Actaeon, a victim of a goddess' power rather than with the triumphant, shapeshifting Jove. If we are indeed meant to think of Actaeon as well as Herne then Falstaff's enthusiastic reaction to being met by both women, "Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch. I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk" (5.5.23-25) becomes an ironic forecast of his failure, and is consistent with a strand of offal imagery associated with Falstaff at different points in the play. Mrs Page vows that "revenged I will be, as sure as his guts are made of puddings" (2.1.28-30), Ford refers to him as a "hodgepudding" (5.5.152) and Falstaff himself reacts to his dunking in the following way:

Have I lived to be carried in a basket like a barrow of butcher's offal, and to be thrown in the Thames? Well, if I be served such another trick, I'll have my brains ta'en out and buttered, and *give them to a dog for a New Year's gift.*  
(3.5.4-8)

As Falstaff makes his *début* in the Henry IV plays it is interesting to observe that he is compared to a deer at the end of *1 Henry IV* when he is pretending to be dead. Hal observes:

Death hath not struck so fat a deer today,  
Though many dearer in this bloody fray.  
Embowelled will I see thee by and by.  
Till then in blood by noble Percy lie. (5.4.106-09)

The verb "embowelled" alludes to embalming but also suggests the ceremony of disembowelling a deer. As Falstaff is not really dead this

early identification of him with a deer is an appropriate prelude to the comic reworking of the story of Actaeon in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Another important feature of the Actaeon legend is the idea of trespassing on tabooed territory—the hunter crosses the divide between the worlds of humans and gods with terrible results.<sup>4</sup> An echo of this way of viewing the legend may be found in Falstaff's brush with "fairyland," although, as in another retelling of the Actaeon legend, the story of Faunus in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* of *The Faerie Queene*, the punishment is very mild—apart from a few pinches and the mortification of being caught out in his folly, Falstaff comes to no real harm.

At Falstaff's first entrance Shallow's complaint and Falstaff's response may be taken as constituting a comic equivalent to Actaeon's misdeeds:

SHALLOW Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge.

SIR JOHN But not kissed your keeper's daughter? (1.1.104-06)

The very ludicrousness of such a comparison is eloquent of Shakespeare's attitude towards Ovid's story in this play. He adapts the *Metamorphoses* in a way which minimises its troubling aspects and turns its violence into comedy. Falstaff's complacent account of Mistress Page's apparent favour towards him contains faint but disconcerting resonances from Ovid's account of Actaeon:

SIR JOHN I have writ me here a letter to her—and here another to Page's wife, who even now gave me good eyes too, examined my parts with most judicious oeillades; sometimes the beam of her view gilded my foot, sometimes my portly belly.

PISTOL Then did the sun on dunghill shine.

NIM I thank thee for that humour.

SIR JOHN O, she did so, course o'er my exteriors, with such a greedy intention, that the appetite of her eye did seem to scorch me up like a burning-glass! (1.3.51-60)

The eye contact between Diana and Actaeon becomes particularly significant if the epiphanic potential of the story is emphasised. Although the water sprinkled by Diana on her victim is the apparent cause of his metamorphosis Ovid's choice of vocabulary implicates her gaze as a

submerged but perhaps more convincing explanation for Actaeon's change. We are told that "in latus obliquum tamen adstitit oraque retro / flexit et, ut vellet promptas habuisse sagittas" (3.187-88), "she stood turning aside a little and cast back her gaze; and though she would fain have had her arrows ready . . ." (Loeb translation). The verb *flecto* is frequently used to describe the action of bending a bow as when Apollo sees Cupid "adducto flectentem cornua nervo" (1.455). Because Diana's wish for her arrows immediately follows the use of this verb her glance is involved with a means of punishment. In the light of this emphasis upon the destructive force of Diana's scrutiny the alleged intensity of Mrs Page's examination of Falstaff seems a little sinister. The fact that it alights on different parts of his anatomy in turn might recall Actaeon's gradual metamorphosis: "She sharpes his eares, she makes his necke both slender, long and lanke. / She turnes his fingers into feete, his armes to spindle shanke. / She wrappes him in a hairie hyde beset with speckled spottes" (3.231-34). Diana, as well as mistress Page, is associated with the sun, "Such colour as appeares in Heaven by *Phebus* broken rayes . . . Such sanguine colour in the face of *Phœbe* gan to glowe / There standing naked in his sight" (3.216-20).<sup>5</sup>

If it seems implausible to compare Mistress Page to Diana a glance at Golding's translation, whose robust and earthy qualities are excellently demonstrated by examples quoted in Taylor's article, may help to justify the parallel. In place of Ovid's "vincla duae pedibus demunt" (3.168), we have "Two losde hir buskins from hir legges and pulled of hir hose" (3.197) and the grimly portentous words Diana addresses to Actaeon, "nunc tibi me posito visam velamine narres, / sit poteris narrare, licet!" (3.192-93) become, in Golding's translation, more pettish and taunting, "Now make thy vaunt among thy Mates, thou sawste *Diana* bare. / Tell if thou can: I give thee leave: tell heardly: doe not spare" (3.227-28). Taylor praises Golding's treatment of scenes of action or descriptions of the countryside but suggests that "Golding had little appreciation of Ovid as the pagan poet of the flesh—his interest is liable to pall rather quickly when faced by elaborate descriptions of beautiful youths by pools or nymphs in flight before gods." In saying this Taylor is perhaps describing Golding in an unnecessarily deprecating way, even though he is eager to convince us of his importance. At the beginning of his

article we are told that Golding emerged from the “impoverished poetical milieu of the 1560s.” But although the way in which he portrays Diana and other “romantic” figures may be unorthodox it is this very robustness which constitutes part of his charm. He is not filled with awe by his classical subject matter but instead feels quite happy to call a nymph a “blab” (4.287) or Narcissus a “foolische noddie” (3.521). We might recall Chaucer’s Manciple, that “boystous man,” who turns Ovid’s tale of Apollo and Coronis into a fabliau and makes it clear that he has no truck with pandering to aristocrats (or gods) asserting, with all the bluff independence of a self-sufficient *bourgeois*:

Ther nys no difference, trewely,  
 Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,  
 If of hir body dishonest she bee,  
 And a povre wenche, oother than this—  
 If it so be they werke bothe amys—  
 But that the gentile, in estaat above,  
 She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;  
 And for that oother is a povre womman,  
 She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.<sup>6</sup>

But Golding is more than a wayward, if engaging, original—he is a poet. In the following translation of the song Polyphemus sings to Galatea we sense the fresh enjoyment of the natural world that Taylor attributes to his *Metamorphoses*, but also a rhythmic beauty which would seem to refute Taylor’s claim that Golding’s metre is invariably inflexible and ungainly:

More whyght thou art then Primrose leaf my Lady *Galatee*,  
 More fresh than meade, more tall and streyght than lofty Aldertree,  
 More bright than glasse, more wanton than the tender kid forsooth,  
 Than Cockleshelles continually with water worne, more smoothe,  
 More cheerefull than the winters Sun, or Sommers shadowe cold,  
 More seemely and more comly than the Planetree too behold,  
 Of valew more than Apples bee although they were of gold:  
 More cleere than frozen yce, more sweete than Grape through rype ywis,  
 More soft than butter newly made, or downe of Cygnet is . . . (13.930-37)

We might compare this piece with yet another passage from Chaucer, the Miller’s description of Alysoun:



Therto she koude skippe and make game,  
 As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame.  
 Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,  
 Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.  
 Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt,  
 Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt  
 . . . .  
 She was a prymerole, a piggesnye . . . .<sup>7</sup>

Golding's translation of Polyphemus' song is not materially different from Ovid's Latin as far as the content is concerned although it seems so like a "native" production. By contrast on another occasion Golding's taste for associating women with natural phenomena makes him elaborate Ovid's "excipiunt laticem Nepheleque Hyaleque Rhanisque/ et Psecas et Phiale funduntque capacibus urnis" (3.171-72) into "Then *Niphe* nete and cleene / With *Hiale* glistring like the grash in beautie fresh and sheene, / And *Rhanis* clearer of hir skin than are the rainie drops, / And little bibling *Phiale*, and *Pseke* that pretie Mops, / Powrde water into vessels large to washe their Ladie with" (3.200-04). Diana's Englished attendants might remind us that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* owes something to the tale of Actaeon, for they do not seem worlds away from Titania's fairy followers.<sup>8</sup>

The question of Golding's possible influence on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* raises another point about Shakespeare's attitude towards the translation. While it may be reasonable to conclude that Shakespeare never lost his affection for Golding's book, that does not preclude the possibility that he could see its potential for comic readings. Ovid's text can and has been variously received; his tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe* could be a romantic one, in pathetic style, of young love thwarted, or its potential for obscene or untragic possibilities could be explored. The mechanicals' play is, we grant, not simply a parody of the Golding version, but that version may have helped to suggest approaches that a sceptical, elusive and many-minded playwright might have been able to exploit. It is important to remind ourselves that Shakespeare, if no scholar, was, at least by modern standards, a competent Latinist who was certainly not dependent upon Golding for his reception of Ovid.

The 1560s may not have been the “drab age” portrayed by C. S. Lewis<sup>9</sup> but Golding’s naivety must have been apparent to Shakespeare from the viewpoint of the sophisticated 1590s. It may even be possible to separate the influence of Golding from that of Ovid in Shakespeare’s work—that of Golding being predominant in such “English” plays as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and, despite its Athenian setting, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a justification of this theory see S. A. Brown’s forthcoming Ph.D. thesis *Some Aspects of the Poetic Reception of Ovid’s Metamorphoses*.

<sup>2</sup>Shakespeare quotations are from *The Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986). Italics are ours.

<sup>3</sup>The song which the “fairies” sing to Falstaff at the end of the play (5.5.93 ff.) is a similar condemnation. The resemblance of this song to one in Lyly’s *Endimion*, written in 1591, makes an interesting parallel because it includes a criticism of Corsites’ intrusion onto tabooed territory and accompanies his transformation into a leopard. However as the words of this song first appear in an edition of 1632 its composition may postdate *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

<sup>4</sup>Shakespeare’s awareness of this theme in the Actaeon legend is established by the following speech from *Titus Andronicus* when Tamora responds to Bassianus’ ironic comparison of her with Diana:

Saucy controller of my private steps!  
Had I the pow’r that some say Dian had,  
Thy temples should be planted presently  
With horns, as was Actaeon’s; and the hounds  
Should drive upon thy new-transformed limbs,  
Unmannerly intruder as thou art. (2.3.60-65)

<sup>5</sup>Shakespeare may have imported the idea of scorching from a neighbouring tale, that of Semele who was a victim of Juno’s jealousy. We are told that Semele’s “corpus mortale tumultus / non tulit aetherios donisque iugalibus arsit” (3.308-09). It is quite possible that Shakespeare, who was extremely familiar with Golding, would have associated groups of stories, such as those concerning the house of Cadmus, together in his mind.

<sup>6</sup>*The Manciple’s Tale* 212-20, quoted from *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1957).

<sup>7</sup>*The Miller’s Tale* 3259-64, 3268.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the presence of Actaeon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* see Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis & the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 262-63. One specific point of contact is the epithet "Titania" which is used to describe Diana in this tale.

<sup>9</sup>C. S. Lewis uses this phrase to describe the style of the mid sixteenth century in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1954).