



Shakespeare: A Creative Interpreter of Bird Imagery With Ceaseless Imagination

Dr. Ulupi Shankarbhai Patel

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare, a great dramatist, a genius poet and a multidimensional human being, dealt with various subjects like birds, animals, plants, insects, fish, reptiles, fairies, witches, ghosts, sports, superstitions and falconry so many other also. This paper will focus on Shakespeare's use of myths and beliefs regarding birds from different cultures, representing the essence.

According to G. Wilson knight, "Birdlife is very significantly used in Shakespeare"; Shakespeare introduced nearly 60 species of birds in his works. Their symbolic and moral meanings seem to correspond at times to the personal, at other times to the political, social, spiritual and religious levels.

We have learnt that 'Literature is the mirror of the society and it reflects all minute details of society'. Almost all civilizations and cultures showed special love and affection for birds. Birds and human have deep rooted age old relationship. Even when the word ornithology was not coined, man was too much fascinated by their colourful plumage and melodious chirping.

In many ancient cultures, such as the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, we find the flight of birds; common in iconography and oral traditions. Birds are important in ritual and healing; and feared for their links to witches and other malicious forces and later the entrails of sacrificed birds. Bird behaviour is linked in different cultures, and so naturally a comparison between birds and human being takes place regarding their nature, behaviour, peculiarities and reactions to the situation.

A number of ancient sources available to the readers and playwrights of Elizabethan times were truly immense. These sources could be reached both as original texts in Greek and Latin, and in French and English translations. Popular indirect sources were translations of Italian Renaissance literature based on ancient prototypes. In this article we are going to discuss some important myths regarding different birds. A brief analysis is attempted, how Shakespeare used various mythical sources to intensify the situation in his plays.

Pelican

Shakespeare has aptly introduced the Egyptian mythology regarding the bird Pelican (Henet Goddess) associated with the afterlife. In *Richard II*, John of Gaunt puts pelican as the mother or the Christ, who nourish their dear ones with their own blood. Pelican is found in the *Physiologus*, an early Christian work which appeared in the second century in Alexandria, Egypt. The Pelican is also depicted as a goddess because it was considered the "mother of the king" (Hart 125).

Gaunt

O, Spare me not, my brother Edward's son,
For that I was his father Edward's son;
That blood already, like the pelican,
Hast thou tapp'd out, and drunkenly carous'd.
My brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning
soul—
Whom fair befall in heaven 'mongst happy
souls!—
May be a precedent and witness good
That thou respect'st not spilling Edward's
blood.

(King Richard-II.2:1:125-129)

Raven

Ravens are perhaps the most common bird symbol in the mythologies and religions of ancient cultures. They assume a variety of roles, ranging from messengers of deities and sages to oracles and tricksters. They play a vital part in many creation myths and are typically associated with the supernatural realms lying beyond the ordinary experience. What is so striking about these black-feathered creatures and why does the sight of them send a wave of shivers down one's spine? Studying the folk lore of different cultures may untangle the motives underlying the superstitious beliefs and religious faiths.

Speaking of European cultures and Christian religion, over the centuries ravens have become symbols of something absurd, having an evil character. In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* the ominous atmosphere is pricked by the raven's croak foreboding "the fatal entrance of Duncan." In *Othello* the raven flies "o'er the infected house." Both of these quotes have clear evil connotations.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was a powerful source of inspiration for William Shakespeare. At the same time, mention of other sources of ancient literature is contributory to the understanding of Shakespeare's attitude and interpretation of the ancient literary tradition.

Shakespeare writes about raven in reference with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Very interestingly he symbolizes the transformation of raven from silver feathered bird into a pitch black, bad ominous, carrion eater bird in *Cymbeline*.

Philomela

Shakespeare has referred to the most famous Greek myth about Philomela- Nightingale. In his poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, he expresses,

Come Philomel, that Singst of ravishment;
Make thy sad grove in my disshevell'd hair.
As the dank earth weeps at thy languishment:
So I at each sad strain will strain my tear,
And with deep groans the diapason bear.

Here implies that the bird's song is desolate because it is bewailing its lost virginity.

Procne and Philomela were the daughters of Pandion, King of Athens. Procne was married to Tereus, King of Thrace. Procne wished to meet her dear sister Philomela. To fulfil Procne's wish, Tereus sails to Athens and escorts Philomela to Thrace to visit her sister and nephew. During the long journey, Tereus falls in love with Philomela and rapes her. To conceal his heinous crime, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue. On the completion of the journey, Tereus informs Procne about her sister's death. Somehow Philomela turn out to be successful to send a message about her fate. Both the sisters take revenge on Tereus. Tereus tries to kill the sisters, but Zeus, the King of gods, intervenes and turns them all into birds. Tereus- a Hoopoe, Philomela- a swallow and Procne- a nightingale.

In England, the peasantry salute the cuckoo with the following invocation:

Cuckoo, cherry-tree,
Good bird tell me,
How many years have I to live.

The allusion to the cherry-tree having probably originated in the popular fancy, that before the cuckoo ceases its song, it must eat three good

meals of cherries. Pliny mentions the belief, that when the cuckoo came to maturity, it devoured the bird which had reared it; a superstition several times alluded to by Shakespeare. Thus, in *King Lear* (1:4) the Fool remarks—"The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long, That it's had it head bit off by it young."

Vulture

The vulture is mainly used by Shakespeare in relation to the Promethean myth, where "Prometheus tied to Caucasus" (TIT 2 1 17) has his immortal liver eaten endlessly by an eagle, and not a vulture which does not prey on living animals. The confusion in this myth between the vulture and the eagle must come from the translations of the earlier versions from the Greek and Latin.

If Shakespeare, while writing these lines, was thinking about a bird he may have encountered, or which his contemporaries were familiar with, the only hypothesis, as with the Griffin is the White-tailed Eagle. It is the largest bird of prey to be found on the British Isles. For the most part, it lives on carrion and is sometimes called the Sea Eagle as it scavenges mainly along the coast.

A very powerful evocation of this large bird of prey, is found in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1:3:81) "Let vultures gripe thy guts," not only vulture is in the plural, but the verb used by Shakespeare is "gripe" which was also a name for the Griffin.

Prometheus was the wisest Titan. Prometheus was known as the protector and benefactor of man. He gave mankind a number of gifts including fire.

Phoenix

The phoenix is the type of the mythical bird, and Sebastian, amazed at the wonders of Prospero's island and trying to assess them, compares them to two of the most famous travellers' tales.

Shakespeare was very much influenced by Pliny for the natural world. Pliny's description and use

of myth and beliefs is well read by Shakespeare. Shakespeare not only read Pliny but tried to understand those myths from different countries and various cultures.

Pliny gives us the best description of the phoenix. The bird is as big as an eagle in colour yellow, and bright as gold, namely all about the neck, the rest of the body in deep red purple; the tail azure blue, intermingled with feathers among of rose carnation colour: and the head bravely adorned with a crest and panache finely wrought, having a tuft and plume thereupon right faire and goodly to be seen.

Shakespeare adopted more concerned qualities of the bird.. The phoenix is the proverbial symbol of rarity. Phoenix is found in both in *As You Like It* and in *Cymbeline*:

She calls me proud, and that she could not love me,
Were man as rare as Phoenix. 'Od's my will,
Her love is not the hare that I do hunt;
(*As You Like It* 4:3:16-8)

If she be furnish'd with a mind so rare,
She is alone, th' Arabian bird; and I
Have lost the wager.
(*Cymbeline* 1:7:16-8)

The phoenix was said to live for 500 years - "long-lived" (SON 19 4) - in Arabian deserts, hence his name of "Arabian bird". At the end of its time it consumed itself by fire and rose renewed from its ashes. In *King Henry VI* phoenix is presented in different manner. Here the phoenix is in the 'aspiring' tradition. The bird may suggest man's proud assertion of vitality outreaching death, while Duke of York expresses,

My ashes, like the phoenix, may bring forth
A bird that will revenge upon you all;
(*King Henry VI- III* 1:4:40-41)

The examples chosen for this paper are few compared to the enormity of the material in question. They are only meant to demonstrate the extent to which each of Shakespeare's plays is

infiltrated with the themes, characters, and stories of Classical literature on many levels.

Different poets from different cultures have exhibited their feelings in their literature. All of us may agree with the fact that our fore fathers would have seen more species of birds than are visible today, including ones that have become rare, or uncommon or perhaps extinct. So, in literature birds do not remain present as a mute symbol of Nature's creation but render apt meaning to the interpretation and transformation of the society. In conclusion, it should be observe that the mother earth is tired of extortions committed by human being on her.

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Author's Profile

Dr. Ulupi Shankarbai Patel, Ph. D.. Associate Professor. Smt. Sadguna C.U. Arts College for Girls, Ahmedabad.