A Bear Necessity? : The significance of the ursine protagonist in the year of 1611

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Having approached with some trepidation what I perceived to be a dark and obscure corner of literary criticism, I discovered to my surprise a cabal of zealous bear theorists holed up and busily engaged in impassioned debate. Where I initially thought I would have to scratch around for meanings, an overwhelming wealth of interpretations already lay strewn around the literary scene like hastily abandoned sandwiches at an unfortunate woodland picnic. And amongst the theories of symbolism and allusion, word play and metaphor, a renegade had emerged in the form of Teresa Grant, who was stating her radical but unnervingly plausible case for the use of live bears in a number of theatrical productions in and around the year of 1611.

So my essay takes as its starting points these two precepts: 1) The proliferation of 'competing discourses' (Laird) in the bear debate and 2) The question of whether 'the bear' was ever real. I ask whether the extant body of multifarious interpretations can be resolved to a unified scheme free from conflict (adding my own interpretation for good measure), and, having reached my own conclusion as to point two, I examine the implications of that conclusion for existing and future interpretations of the bear plays of 1611.

We might well start out by asking what Shakespeare perceived to be the nature of bears. Clues exist in a number of his plays. In The Merry Wives of Windsor, Slender boasts 'I have seen Sackerson [a 'celebrity' bear] loose twenty times, and have taken him by the chain. But, I warrant you, the women have so cried and shrieked at it that it passed' (1.1.274-6). In Twelfth Night, Viola describes Orsino (Italian for 'little bear') as 'A noble duke, in nature as in name' (1.2.22). And in King Lear, Gloucester identifies himself with a baited bear: 'I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course' (3.7.53). Even within the works of this one author, the bear is represented as wild and fearsome, 'noble', occasionally powerless but nonetheless brave and enduring. And Biggins,

'citing passages in five other Shakespearean plays... notes that for Shakespeare bears typify ferocity and remorseless cruelty, a metaphoric equation also found in the writings of contemporaries such as Edmund Spenser and Thomas Nashe'.

(Hunt, Bearing Hence)

It is clearly a versatile metaphor, and within The Winter's Tale itself, this versatility is exploited to its full potential. The famous stage direction, 'Exit, pursued by a bear' (3.3.57) is, I believe, explained away fairly simply. Terry Nyquist, in his excellent and thoroughgoing study of bears, highlights one of the more popular cultural myths which circulated long before and during Shakespeare's time:

Like the ground hog in North America, the bear is a prognosticator who appears on 2 February to forecast the end of winter weather. When the bear appears during a storm, winter will be shorter and the arrival of spring earlier than in years when the weather is fine. (Bristol 159) Bristol goes on to point out how well this fits with The Winter's Tale. We surmise that Mamillius' sad tale of spirits and goblins is a Halloween story, that Hermione gives birth to Perdita a short time later, and Antigonus arrives on Bohemia's shores in the dead of winter
just minutes ahead of a terrible storm. "The skies look grimly / And threaten present blusters" frets the Mariner (3.3.3-4). And just as Antigonus remarks, "I never saw / The heavens so dim by day" (3.3.54-55), the devouring bear emerges'.

Indeed, even the most fervent member of the real-bear lobby wholeheartedly agrees, and explains another tantalising reason why this symbolism might be useful in the context of the play:

As far as weather-forecasting goes, the bear is the European groundhog. In folklore, he emerges from hibernation at Candlemas (February 2) to check the weather. If the sky is blue and clear, he knows winter is unfinished, and returns to the warmth of his den; if it is stormy, as in The Winter's Tale, spring has sprung, he stays out for the season, and starts to look for food. Winter and tragedy turn to spring and comedy with this moment. Furthermore, the coincidence of Mucedorus being given at court on Shrove Sunday is surely not a coincidence at all. In Carnival celebrations in France at this time of year, the bear's part was the best: the bearskin costume allowed its bearer disguise and a broad licence to misbehave. Shakespeare, alive as he was to the many possibilities of festive traditions, wrote his bear's part for an animal whose traditional appearance, in a somewhat darker manifestation, was due that very weekend. These traditions raise the alluring possibility that the play that E. K. Chambers noted was given at court on Shrove Sunday 1611 (that year the very day after Candlemas) was the first performance of The Winter's Tale. (Grant 2002)

But the play contains many other references to bears, and the most striking allegory is that of the bear as 'an embodiment of Leontes' savage cruelty' (Biggins 13). Leontes claims Paulina 'hath beat her husband, And now baits me!' (2.3.90-92). He notices that Mamillius 'does bear some signs of me' (2.1.57-8), and commands a lady-in-waiting to 'Bear the boy hence' (2.1.59). Later, Perdita wears a 'bearing-cloth' (3.3.119), and the Shepherd repeatedly identifies her as a 'bairn' (3.3.70). Hunt explains:

In the authoritative First Folio text of the play, the word appears "Barne", a form that encourages the detection of additional wordplay involving the phrase "bare 'un"... In this instance the pun... becomes even more apparent, mainly because a virtually perfect homonym is isolated for pronunciation in the initial distinct word of the almost elided two-word phrase "bare 'un".

However, Hunt disagrees as to the use of Antigonus' bear as seasonal harbinger. Instead, he sides with Stephen Dickey who concludes that (suggested) violence involving bears would have proved highly comical to audiences in 1611:

Granted this cultural attitude, Shakespeare invites contemporary playgoers to apply their generic perspective on bearbaitings to the scene involving Antigonus, Perdita, and the bear. They may have laughed heartily at the sight of whip-bearing performers running for their lives from the raging, blind bear loose in the bear pit and so also have laughed predictably at the spectacle of a bear chasing Antigonus.

Yet he cannot bring himself to take Grant's idea seriously, instead preferring to believe that:

the bear chasing Antigonus off the stage was a suited actor rather than a tame animal from nearby Paris Garden.
Antigonus' lines, 'This is the chase: I am gone for ever' (3.3.56-7), invite an astrological interpretation. The earliest folklore tells of bearish constellations and the myths surrounding them, and astronomer Anne Wright tells us:

Several of the bear myths associated with Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, involve a chase ... they reflect the fact that the Great Bear endlessly wheels around the northern sky dome ... in pursuit of the Pole star.

Another popular belief, espoused by Palmer, Nyquist and Bristol amongst others is that the bear in all its manifestations represents Russia and, more specifically, Ivan IV 'The Terrible'. Wright asserts that 'Mother Russia, The Great Bear, is ruled by the Ursa Major constellation', and Nyquist adds that

Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts were quite familiar with Russia, Ivan the Terrible, and horrific stories of his exploits with bears. Indeed, political references to bears were often synonymous with Ivan IV's Russia and Shakespeare may have modelled Leontes' delusional rage and temper on Ivan and his reign.

Palmer (332) says:

when Ivan died in 1584, succession disputes rocked the empire, due in part to the emperor's violence against his own children. In 1674 a historian concluded that Ivan killed his son "upon no other provocation than that of his violent temper".

Apart from his symbolic association with bears, Ivan had literal connections too:

He often disposed of rape victims by having them hanged, strangled, buried alive or thrown to the bears... Novgorod’s archbishop was first sewn up in a bearskin and then hunted to death by a pack of hounds.. [he was notorious for] rough-and-tumble practical jokes with bears (Bos/BestoffRussia)

And he clearly suffered from mental disturbances similar to those of Leontes:

Ivan's married life had become unstable, underlining his egocentricity, insecurity and manic temperament... [He] had alternately violent fits of temper and feelings of remorse, while blasphemy and superstition succeeded his pious moods... [and he suffered from] mistrust, sadism and uncontrolled rages. (Bos)

But there is one interpretation of the bear that seems to have gone unnoticed so far, and that is the allusion to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Dudley’s personal crest featured very prominently a bear motif, and when Elizabeth I awarded him the Order of the Garter, the bear was carried over and incorporated into the design. I believe it is very likely that Shakespeare would have known him personally (though not necessarily been loyal to him), as Dudley established the Earl of Leicester's Men, whose leading actor was James Burbage. In turn, Burbage

'may have given William Shakespeare his first opportunity in theatre, and they remained friends from there on. His son Richard would be Shakespeare's principle actor, taking on all
the most famous roles'. (PBS).

Furthermore, I believe that Dudley's association with the bear motif would have been familiar to a large part of society. In addition to the publicity he would have inevitably received when he was awarded the Garter, he would have been particularly well known figure within the theatregoing community because of his patronage of the Earl's Men. And within educated, literate society, I believe he received further significant publicity through Geoffrey Whitney's Choice of Emblemes (1586). The book bore a dedication to him, and the bearish crest was printed in full on its second page. This would have had undoubted sway in renaissance society, as many scholars confirm.

The book was the primary vehicle for Alciato's Emblematum Liber, a book which had 'enormous influence and popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries... It began a craze for emblem poetry that lasted for several centuries' and 'A Choice of Emblemes is of central importance in the history of the reception of Alciato in English' (Barker). And in general, Emblem books exercised an enormous influence on literature and the visual arts... [they] influenced poets and creative writers in all the major European languages, they were used in the classroom, in rhetoric, and in heraldry (Rawles).

Furthermore:

While emblematics of four hundred years ago may sound a rather esoteric subject... they are in fact of widespread interest as a form of communication that can still be traced today, for example, in modern advertising... Most spectacularly they were heavily exploited as a tool of royal propaganda. (Saunders)

Their use in 'modern advertising' is indeed evident (appendix 1). But in my opinion, it was more a case of 'royal propaganda' which led Shakespeare to compare Dudley with the bearish Leontes. After all, both were very publicly alleged to have blood on their hands as the result of a royal love triangle, Dudley having been accused of murdering his wife, one way or another:

Dudley's reported relations with Elizabeth go far to account for Lady Amy's alleged depression... it was plainly hinted that Dudley had ordered Anthony Forster to throw Lady Amy down the stairs... If the court gossip, reported by the Spanish Ambassador, is to be credited, Dudley, in his desire to marry the Queen, had talked of divorcing or of poisoning his wife. De Quadra, indeed, wrote home, at the time that the news of her death reached London (11 Sep), that "They [ie. the Queen and Dudley] were thinking of destroying Lord Robert's wife... They had given out that she was ill, but she was not ill at all; she was very well and taking care not to be poisoned... The Queen, on her return from hunting [on 4 Sep], told me that Lord Robert's wife was dead or nearly so, and begged me to say nothing about it". (Tudorplace)

Eventually,

She was found dead of a broken neck at the bottom of a stair case, and many pointed the finger at Robert. For a long time people had been saying he meant to kill her so that he would be free to marry the Queen. (Tudorplace)
Dudley's bear crest also carried the royal motto: 'Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense' (evil be to those who think evil), an extremely poignant maxim in light of the events which befall Leontes up to the point at which the bear makes its appearance, possibly providing an 'emblematic' summary to the first part of the play.

I will now move onto the second subject of this essay, and attempt to distinguish hard fact from cogent rhetoric in the debate surrounding Teresa Grant's assertion that the bear was real (2002). In Polar Performances, Grant presents what I consider to be a watertight case for the existence of two polar bear cubs in London in 1611. The Polar explorer Jonas Poole's diary records on 30 May 1609:

We ... espied three white bears. We went aboard for shot and powder, and coming to the ice again, we found a she-bear and two young ones: Master Thomas Welden shot and killed her. After she was slain, we got the young ones, and brought them home into England, where they are alive in Paris Garden.

And in 1623, when the bears would have been fully adult and of typical baiting age:

at an entertainment for the Spanish Ambassador... "they turned a white bear into the Thames, where the dogs baited him swimming" (Grant 2002)

In the intervening years, documents in the Public Records Office at Kew clearly show that Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn,

were issued with a royal warrant on March 20, 1611, to keep two white bears, a lion and other beasts. (Grant 2002)

Gabriel Egan points out serious errors in Grant's argument, and Grant herself is at a loss to repel the attack (appendix 2). But no matter, for despite the fact that Henslowe does seem to have been a commercial rival of Shakespeare, and regardless of any veto James I might have had over the use of the bears, the dispute is literally academic, since the 'premiere' of The Winter's Tale was, according to E.K. Chambers (above), held on the 2 Feb 1611 - nearly seven weeks before Henslowe received the warrant.

Henslowe's other potential rival, Ben Jonson, also seems to have borrowed the bears even earlier than Shakespeare for his masque Oberon (1 Jan 1611). For this the bears were required to pull a chariot carrying the young prince Henry, but any fears about safety are quickly dispelled:

Only if the bears could satisfy three conditions might James have permitted Henry to act in such company: if they were well-guarded; if they were well trained; and if they had proved previously that they could be trusted on stage in human company. We know that Jonson's bears were "on either side guarded by three Sylvanes, with one going in front" (Grant 2002)

And there is even evidence to suggest the bears had 'proved themselves previously', in a revamped version of Mucedorus:

On the night of Shrove Sunday, 1610... Mucedorus (1598) had been presented before the
court at Whitehall, but with additions to its original text. The additional scenes involved the Clown, "Mouse", and his disconcerting experiences with a white bear... The refreshed Mucedorus was one of the hits of the seventeenth-century stage. With seventeen different imprints between 1598 and 1700, it was the most reprinted of all plays in the period, a feat for which its silly romantic story and stiff outdated verse cannot be responsible. Mucedorus's popularity is explained by its reputation as the first "real bear" play. (Grant 2002)

But none of this constitutes absolute proof that bears were used, and Grant's critics remain both staunch and condescending in their rebuttals.

Gurr shrewdly remarks that "even a real bear, we recognise, cannot be real except in stage terms, or the players would have to find a new Antigonus for every performance" (424). (Hunt)

I suggest this is a little too melodramatic to be taken seriously. Antigonus is not killed in front of the audience, and even a live polar bear cub would patently not kill an actor. In fact, modern day experts on polar bear behaviour have confirmed that even young adults would be at least manageable, and at best highly trainable (appendix 3). Perhaps the bear-keepers would have employed similar tactics to those used in the bear houses:

The bear's teeth were not sharp, so they could not injure the dogs; they have them broken short. (Picard 247)

Henslowe himself was an acknowledged expert on keeping and handling bears (Gurr 1994), and would have been familiar with their temperament and with rudimentary training techniques. For a long time the bear pits and theatres stood side by side and in the case of The Hope theatre actually merged.

As to whether the theatre could accommodate bears 'artistically', I think this is also plausible. In Shakespeare's eyes, the playhouse was after all a place of "infinite doings" and dissemblings, of play and possibility, and in the presence of what we are told is an awesome power that can "o'erthrow law, and . . . plant and o'erwhelm custom" (WT 4.1.8-9) (Laird 1994)

Ackroyd (2005) points out that 'the play [Winter's Tale] was closer to a musical comedy than any previously written by him' and that 'many of the scenes rely on spectacle as much as sense' (458). And while masques and plays are normally considered to be separate entities with separate conventions, Briggs (10) insists that 'drama was...attaining an unprecedented force and flexibility' in Shakespeare's London. It was certainly in James I's character to spare no luxury, especially in his pursuit of a reputation as cultural innovator (Briggs 10, 150). And tame, trained bear cubs seem quite unremarkable, given this mind boggling report of what might be expected from a 'play' in 1584:

There is a round building, three stories high, in which are kept about a hundred large English dogs, with separate wooden kennels for each of them. These dogs were made to fight singly with three bears, the second being larger than the first and the third being larger than the second. After this a horse was brought in and chased by the dogs, and at last a bull, who defended himself bravely. The next was that a number of men and women came forward from a separate compartment, dancing, conversing and fighting with each other - also a man who
threw some white bread among the crowd, that scrambled for it. Right over the middle of the place a rose was fixed, this rose being set on fire by a rocket. Suddenly lots of apples and pears fell out of it down upon the people standing below. Whilst the people were scrambling for the apples, some rockets were made to fall down upon them out of the rose, which caused a great fright but amused the spectators. After this, rockets and fireworks came flying out of all corners, and that was the end of the play.

(Greenblatt 181)

The reasons for including live bears in a play would presumably be less intellectually demanding than the metaphorical/allegorical interpretations already discussed. Grant is reluctant to attribute their use to 'simple titillation' (2004) although I don't see why not. For the most part, 'traditional' interpretations still work if a real bear is used. Yet the real bear allows for some additional meanings of its own.

One possibility is that the unexpected sight of a live bear would evoke feelings of disorientation and confusion which might help us empathise with Leontes' near-psychotic delusionment. This is reminiscent of Orgel and Laird's 'case for textual incomprehensibility' (Laird 1994), although neither subject the bear to much scrutiny, nor subscribe to the 'real bear' theory.

Another option is that Shakespeare wished to recreate the potential comic effect of live bears described by Dickey (263).

Observers' testimonies about their pleasure, amusement, and contentment suggest that, were an Elizabethan audience to specify what genre of spectacle it was seeing at the Bear Garden, the answer might well be "a comedy".

In Groats-worth of Witte the embittered Robert Greene accused Shakespeare of plagiarism. 'Eighteen years later, Shakespeare was extracting matter from the dead man's most popular work, making the whole plot more fanciful and more unreal' (Ackroyd 2005). Perhaps the bear device was a further attempt to strip Pandosto of its last remaining shreds of artistic integrity, in a final humiliation to the rival playwright who dared to poke fun at Shakespeare.

The last word in the real bear debate may as well lie with the current management of the Globe (appendix 4), as they seem to commit as far as is reasonable and possible given the evidence available. I cannot pretend to be any more sure than they are, but if I were to be forcefully pushed off the fence I would like to come down on the side of real bears (figuratively speaking of course!)

As for meanings in general, I think that while examining potential interpretations can be useful, to conclude that Shakespeare intended all or even most of them is to overestimate the concept of genius. Often genius lies in its simplicity, and I like to think that Shakespeare may have simply been taking advantage of an opportunity to treat those who saw the first few performances. I also suspect he was more concerned with the 'here and now', with paying the rent (having in mind James' lavish court commissions), than how theatres and their critics would struggle to reconcile differences in staging conventions four hundred years into the future.

On a final note, it seems ironic that Shakespeare may have felt the need to invoke the bear
itself as a symbol of brutality, when the creature he was trying to portray, the human being, was far better equipped with innate cruelty - and not afraid to use it in pursuit of 'entertainment' in the bear houses of 1611.

Appendix

1) Refers to the signboard of 'The Bear and Staff' public house, situated on Bear Street in central London. The street leads off Leicester Square, itself named after Dudley Earl of Leicester.

2) Refers to an exchange via internet bulletin boards and direct e-mail correspondence I received from Teresa Grant, in which Egan notes Grant's assertion in 'Polar Performances' that Henslowe was in control of the Globe theatre, and was Shakespeare's manager. This is in fact incorrect and Grant has now acknowledged these errors.

3) Refers to e-mail correspondence I received from Dr Nils Oritsland, Polar Bear specialist at the Polar Research Institute of Norway, who has owned, trained and studied polar bears which he hand-reared from cubs to adults. It is his stated opinion that young polar bears could very feasibly have been trained to perform in theatrical productions and would not have posed a high risk to the actors.

4) Refers to e-mail correspondence I received from The Globe's operations director who confirms that while bears may well have been used in Shakespeare's time, no firm documentary proof exists today in the Globe's own archives.

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