

Shakespeare in Fluff

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Abstract

Shakespeare in Fluff is a book that portrays rodents in staged Shakespearean performances. In doing so, *Shakespeare in Fluff* not only taps into a popular internet trend of anthropomorphized animals, and a particularly youth-oriented genre of nonhuman creatures performing Shakespeare, but raises more general questions about the use of animals in human entertainment.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there exists a wealth of animal Shakespeare on the internet. The online audience's desire to humanize their pets, evidenced by popular accounts such as @WeRateDogs on Twitter and communities such as those on the Doggo Bamboozled Facebook page, is also manifest in Shakespeare-centric artifacts like Susan Herbert's 2004 book of paintings, *Shakespeare's Cats*, and my own personal favorite, the subject of this note, *Shakespeare in Fluff*. This little gift book sits as part of a larger genre of animal Shakespeare appropriation that navigates between a contemporary desire for animal stories, fueled by Disney and the Internet, and an implicit acknowledgment of a long history of animal rights violations on behalf of human entertainment.

Released in 2016, *Shakespeare in Fluff: Comedies, Histories & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies and unto this Impression Are Added Furry Animalls of Various Kindes* is a small, hardback, sixty-four page book that imagines small fluffy creatures—hamsters, guinea pigs, chinchillas, ferrets, and what appears to be an opossum—in various productions of Shakespeare plays. The images are credited to photographer Jude Edginton. Possibly because rodents are more compliant subjects than cats, *Shakespeare in Fluff* offers not paintings, but photographed subjects in costumes on Elizabethan style stage settings. Chinchilla Ophelia, for example, sits upon a table, surrounded by flowers against a facsimile of the Globe playhouse (fig. 1). No less theatrical is the backdrop to *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which a lustrous guinea pig Antony, wearing a golden laurel wreath, sits upon a blue velvet against a backdrop of the Great Pyramids of Giza (fig. 2). The majority of the images are, however, set in a miniature Globe, with attention to costumes, such as the ass's ears that Hamster Bottom wears in the fluff production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (fig. 3).

Shakespeare in Fluff is clearly the product of someone who enjoys both Shakespeare and household pets. The images in the book are set against quotations designed to approximate the feel of a folio, and the extensive title pays homage to early modern book titles. The marketing page for the book on Pan MacMillan's website emphasizes Shakespeare's universality, reminding us that "millions of us have been moved to laughter and tears by his timeless poetry" before proudly announcing that "finally, we're able to experience these moments through the medium of small furry animals." Underpinning this delightful endeavor is an implicit affirmation of Shakespeare's value to the natural world beyond the human. The tongue-in-cheek insinuation here is that Shakespeare invented the human so effectively, that his work is seamlessly adaptable to accommodate the structures of the nonhuman world.

A surprising preponderance of human-animal Shakespeare relations suggest that *Shakespeare in Fluff*'s assumption is not entirely misplaced. The idea of animals' perspective on Shakespeare is not entirely new—Rick Chafe's award winning 1984 novel, for example, *Shakespeare's Dog*, viewed young Shakespeare's courtship of Anne Hathaway and emergence as a writer through the eyes of Hooker, his family dog, and in 1996, the children's cartoon *Animaniacs* produced a short performance of *Hamlet*. The 2005 animated movie *Romeo and Juliet: Sealed with a Kiss* is a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's play, set on a deserted arctic landscape and performed by seals and walruses. The film adapts the tragic ending for its juvenile audience to illustrate the themes of forgiveness and personal growth—a common trope in children's entertainment, and no less visible in the bigger-budget appropriation of Shakespearean tragedy, *The Lion King*. These endearing appropriations participate in a larger human desire to share the inner lives of our pets and make them like us. Anthropocentric appropriations of Shakespeare also serve to resist less savory associations of the bear-baiting pit that performing Elizabethan animals elicits and elide the ethical questions that might arise in conjunction with these performing rodents.

Shakespeare in Fluff differs from many of the popular representations of animal Shakespeares in that it freely acknowledges the theatricality of its endeavor. Perhaps because it is not overtly aiming at an adolescent audience, *Shakespeare in Fluff* does not promote the popular Internet fantasy of anthropomorphized creatures (fig. 4), but instead presents small, docile animals positioned solely for our entertainment. What is delightfully striking about the rodents of *Shakespeare in Fluff* is the photographer's inability to position them, or to elicit any semblance of an emotional response—in spite of the variance in backgrounds and costume, they all look exactly the same. *Shakespeare in Fluff*, then, appropriates Shakespearean cultural capital in order to strip it away and remind us that above all else, Shakespeare (and possibly hamsters) exist for our pleasure. *Shakespeare in Fluff*, then, occupies the dual position of appealing to our animal-

loving impulses, while subtly drawing our attention to the unsettling history of animal abuse that characterized Elizabethan theatre.

References

Shakespeare in Fluff: Comedies, Histories & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies and unto this Impression Are Added Furry Animalls of Various Kindes. 2017.
Boxtree/Pan Macmillan.