

## “THE DOG IS ME AND I AM MYSELF”: CANINE THESPIANS IN *SHAKESPAWS*

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare has been linked with a number of unexpected items, animals, and concepts in the centuries since his plays were written. This note explores intersections between Shakespeare and dogs, with a particular emphasis on the film *Shakespaws*, where dogs “perform” scenes from Shakespeare. While thespian canines may seem unusual, there are numerous instances where dogs and other animals appear in Shakespearean scholarship and other aspects of the Shakespearean world.



In 2016, Emory University presented a “Year of Shakespeare,” which featured innumerable speakers, symposia, performances, and exhibitions (Emory 2016). Among these was “A Goodly Commodity’: Shakespeare and Popular Culture,” an exhibition that was reconfigured several times at the Woodruff and Oxford College Libraries. It was designed to provide stress relief for anxious students, as well as entertainment for school children, families, and other library visitors who might be amused by the range of Shakespearean games, advertisements, household items (including a toasting fork, a shower curtain, and a Shakespearean volume to read in the loo), puppets, Barbie dolls, and other tchotchke from Victorian times onward that played with Shakespearean allusions. The exhibitions were surrounded by Shakespearean advertisements, including many mentioned by Esther French, Douglas Lanier, and Shawn Rocheleau in their discussions of commercial uses for Shakespeare (French 2017; Lanier 2012; Rocheleau n.d.). Much to the dismay of my colleagues and students desiring neatness and order, all of these items were returned to my office in 2017, where they have remained in enormous heaps, although the numerous contributions borrowed from my retired colleague Harry Rusche have been returned to his home. The contents of the exhibition demonstrate common ways that Shakespeare marketing occurs; namely, the items tend to combine Shakespeare with something or someone else, presumably in the hope that merged references will increase interest. Often the juxtapositions are unexpected, such as a 1953 Peter Pan Foundations, Inc., advertisement that quotes Shakespeare in order to market its “hidden treasure” bra “for the extremely small bust,” or the Belgian Sabena Airlines 1955 advertisement that riffs on *Two Gentlemen of Verona*’s “who is Sylvia” as a way to encourage people to wonder “who is Sabena” when they contemplate air travel. From the early

twenty-first century condom advertisement asking “to be or not to be?” to the Fairbanks Lard advertisement a century earlier that quotes *Henry IV* while illustrating pigs marching to the refinery, these disjunctive juxtapositions capture viewers’ attention in the hope of selling merchandise.

One of the most popular exhibition items in this category, which continues to attract attention from my undergraduates, is a DVD entitled *Shakesparws*, which is marketed as being “for dogs, by dogs,” offering “quality time for you and your dog.” The cover copy invites viewers to “watch the four-legged ensemble cast wag, pant, and paw their way through canine adaptations of The Bard’s classic works” (*Shakesparws* 2008). Ninety minutes long, the film presents one half hour of key Shakespearean lines, voiced by human actors, and one hour of “quiet time,” during which soothing orchestral and choral music accompanies images of the canine performers, which were apparently left over after editing the main scenes. Throughout the production, a variety of animals wearing hats and other bits of costuming provide models for the videographer, as they sleep, lounge, or display their tongues for the camera. Occasionally, they engage with relevant props or make up, so that they can enact iconic scenes, such as Lady Macbeth’s “Out damn spot” speech and Henry V’s receipt of the Dauphin’s gift of tennis balls. Human purchasers of the film are encouraged to put the DVD on a loop, so that their pets can enjoy these canine actors without interruption.

The project apparently arose when Seamus Mulcahy, director of *Shakesparws* and a professional actor, was engaged to dog-sit a rescued, injured chihuahua, who reminded him of Richard III. Deciding that there was much to recommend a film that might appeal both to pets and their owners, he began creating this film showing dogs “performing” Shakespeare, a process that included auditioning approximately one hundred dogs. All the voices are supplied by human actors, and lengthy biographies are supplied for each of the animals involved, some of whom have extensive professional backgrounds, while others are treading the boards for the first time. Mulcahy’s plan was to produce something that could be played for dogs who were lonely in isolation, then shared with human householders when they returned to their homes.

It may not have contributed to the decision to create this production, but since the producer and many of the humans involved are actors, they may know that there is a lengthy history connecting the worlds of Shakespeare and dogs. A number of prominent Shakespearean performers, including David Tennant, Helen Mirren, and Patrick Stewart have received significant publicity for their relationships with dogs (Sharnaz 2020; O’Sullivan 2016; Solis 2020). Judi Dench’s decision to perform CPR on her goldfish, moreover, could spark one of the sequels promised, but not yet delivered, by the film company (Pasquini 2020). Many prominent Shakespearean scholars also form deep ties with their animals (dogs, cats, and others), as social media and many conversations at academic Shakespeare meetings indicate. Relationships between Shakespeareans and dogs are further suggested by Harvard Shakespeare scholar Marjorie Garber’s 1996 volume *Dog Love*, and by her proposal at the World Shakespeare Congress in Los Angeles that same year that the stereotypical canine sobriquet “Bowser” could be an anagram for renowned Shakespearean editor Fredson Bowers, who also authored the 1936 volume *The Dog Owner’s Handbook*. Garber expounds at length on

close connections between dogs and both Shakespeare and Shakespeareans, arguing, for instance, “that, in the late twentieth century the twin guarantors of ‘humanism,’ conceived as a set of fast-vanishing values, are these very same two entities: Shakespeare and dogs” (297). She further notes “Naming your dog after a character in Shakespeare is probably an occupational hazard among *Shakespeareans* and other literary types” (299). Garber remarks on the many times dogs appear in Shakespeare’s plays and in the lives of those involved with Shakespearean performance or scholarship. As these correspondences suggest, the correlations between Shakespeare and dogs presented in this film may not be as idiosyncratic as they might initially appear.

Mulcahy was performing in *Henry V* when he conceived of *Shakespaws*, hence the inclusion of the tennis ball scene. His Shakespearean knowledge base not only supported the choice of a number of noteworthy scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*, however, it also supported the inclusion of several moments likely to amuse Shakespearean aficionados, such as the use of a stuffed dog to represent the Man in the Moon’s dog from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in this production filled with live animals; the unexpected appearance of a pillow for Othello (a four-year old pit-bull named Bentley) to place over the doomed Desdemona (a male Maltese named Nico); and the choice of the “with my tongue in your tail” line from *The Taming of the Shrew*, which has special resonance in this canine context. Dogs may or may not appreciate Shakespeare, but dog-loving Shakespeareans may well be suckers for photogenic dogs in Elizabethan costumes moving to familiar lines.

Much of the most interesting and relevant material for those drawn to the film because of the dogs were located on The Dog Film’s now-deleted website ([www.thedogfilm.com](http://www.thedogfilm.com)). Included here were lengthy biographies of the canine performers, generally including age, breed, professional background, hobbies, food preferences and any history in animal shelters. The site also provided photographs as well as detailed snapshots of each dog’s personality and behavior during auditions and on the set. In addition, there were links to sites promoting animal welfare, such as the Humane Society, articles suggesting the kind of “down time” for dogs that the film encourages, and information about keeping dogs psychologically healthy, how to identify breeds, and ways to adopt canine companions. Mulcahy and his crew seem devoted to enhancing the lives of both dogs and the humans who live with them throughout the creation and dissemination of this film.

*Shakespaws* makes no pretense at being great Shakespearean drama. It does, however, report that the film can serve as an entertaining introduction to these plays for small children. It also presents itself as company for dogs and an amusement for adult humans. As Garber suggests, links between Shakespeare and dogs can readily be found. Accordingly, there may be room for scholars interested in Animal Studies to investigate a host of unlikely Shakespearean presentations involving animals, whether in *Shakespaws*, *Romeo and Juliet: Sealed with a Kiss* (2005), or Animal Planet’s *Romeo and Juliet: A Monkey’s Tale* (Holden 2007). Whether or not the cast of *Shakespaws* capture their scenes in a skilled theatrical fashion, therefore, the

DVD indicates that interlocking Shakespeare with unlikely partners is a marketing trend that is likely to continue.

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