

The Lion as Iconography, Myth, Hierarchy and Literary Text

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Abstract

In the religious iconographies, literary structures and conceptual hierarchies the lion occupies a predominant place in the world since the sixth century BCE. Aware of the importance of the lion in imagining knowledge, power and hegemonic spaces, ancient Indian, Athenian, Egyptian and Greek mythologies on the one hand, and the Bible, Renaissance paintings and Shakespearean texts on the other hand, dexterously employed representations of the lion to elucidate significant aspects of divine and human behavior. Ancient mythologies have attributed almost divine power to the lion, but occasionally its power could be vanquished by a superior strategy, heroic force or divine intervention. In the classical Greek and Indian traditions the lion stood for indomitable power that could be used either to redeem the self or purify society, but this image of the lion has expanded to include other representations. Already in the Bible the lion has allegedly begun to represent the wrathful justice of God. One of the first labors of Hercules in the Greek tradition is to smother the life of the invincible Nemean lion

with his bare hands, while in the Indian tradition goddess Mahamatya riding a lion, rids the world of evil. The manipulative icon of the lion and its close cousin the tiger worked well for writers to elaborate themes of power and revenge. Fascinated by the rich representation of the lion, Renaissance painters, like Rubens, attempted to integrate the primordial struggles of the carnivore with the heroic response of human beings within the rubric of dramatic Renaissance painting. Shakespeare too uses the divine and biblical meanings of the lion, from a modern Cartesian point of view, in an age when literary borrowings were not seen plagiaristic. He unhesitatingly employs the image of the lion in more diverse and ingenuous ways than the classical or biblical texts. Every aspect of the lion and its behavior becomes significant for Shakespeare to elucidate human nature and motive. The raging power of the lion and its vulnerability/invulnerability are exploited within the tragedies and comedies to illustrate a point. Perhaps this prompted Nietzsche to remark that Shakespeare's works do not reflect the oeuvres of a single writer but that of many. It is not possible within the limited framework of this paper to undertake the analysis of other significant creatures that inhabit the religious and literary spaces of the old world order and Renaissance texts.

In recent times there has been a keen interest in postmodernist and deconstructionist methods to understand the recurring patterns, overarching paradigms and hegemonic strategies used by artists and writers in creating frescoes, engravings, paintings, religious stories, classical myths and literary texts. The present study attempts to understand some important classical and literary texts and their imagined edifice of power, endurance and revenge. It is not misplaced to state that ancient and medieval writers invariably anchored their

stories and motifs in the imagined cosmological worlds and linguistic paradigms they created. They were imbued with the mission to represent freedom and self-esteem, if not survival, through the actions of their characters who normally rose above the efforts of ordinary men in moments of crisis or intense emotional upheavals. The image of the lion occupies a central position in both religious and literary texts of the pre-Christian, Christian and Renaissance worlds where writing attempts to engender religious, cultural or political reform. The writers are usually aware of their moral obligation and social responsibility and use stories of heroism or monumental struggle to represent ethical behavior or exemplary character. The image of the lion is, therefore, used in such literatures to represent both heroism and victimization. It is also used to cleanse the world of radical evil and make virtue triumph over desire. These myths and stories invariably, placed on a higher pedestal than the daily affairs of ordinary men, allow writers and painters to freely extract a didactic message, plan an indubitable stratagem, or allow divine intervention to resolve an impasse.

Lion in Pre-Aryan Texts

The early representations of the lion can be found in pre-Aryan religious iconography of India where the ferocity of the carnivore fused with the destructive yet purifying power of the female principle decides the outcome of battles between demons and gods. The fusion of the animal instinct with divine female principle releases an almost lethal and invincible power that even the gods dread. Yet the representation of the lion when fused with the female principle establishes an ancient cosmology connecting the disparate world of gods and men.

The lion in pre-Aryan mythology has been used in diverse ways. The image of a

woman riding a ferocious lion vanquishing enemies is a common representation in the iconography of Vedic literatures, especially in the *Devi Mahatmaya* where the goddess destroys enemies while riding a lion. *Devi Mahatmaya* (*devimahatmyam*) or “magnanimity of the goddess” as the Sanskrit term implies gets metamorphosed into the goddess Durga vanquishing the forces of evil. Therefore another name of Devi Mahatmaya is Durga Saptashati believed to have been written by Rishi Markandeya in Sanskrit around c 400-500 CE. The story adapted from the Vedic folklore attempts to justify the claims of Vedic gods as legitimate receivers of Vedic sacrifices in lieu of preserving the cosmic realms of things. This episode is located in the Himalayas, which demarcates and connects the boundary between the godly and human realms.¹

The *Devi Mahatmaya* narrates the story of Mahisasura or the buffalo demon that has created anxiety in the divine realm of the gods as he has appropriated all the Vedic sacrifices and does not share it anymore with the gods. The gods in turn have become weak, powerless and vulnerable. They are at their wits ends. They go to the Himalayas to invoke the extremely gentle, fierce, “most beautiful,” and “higher than the highest—the Supreme Queen” Devi Mahatmaya.² She symbolizes the intensity of the female principle both in love and hate. The gods ask Visnu and Siva to help them. All the gods then get together and in their anger emit a brilliance or tejas which when combined becomes like a flaming mountain lightning up the sky. The woman emanates a brilliance from the “pores of her skin” which spreads as a “a halo of light.”³ But each tejas is also separate which creates a part of the body of the beautiful woman. Each god enriches this woman with a special weapon such as Siva gives her his trident, Krsna gives her a discus and Himalaya gives her a lion to ride. The eyes of the goddess are filled with anger as she rides a lion to destroy the armies of Mahisasura. The hungry lion eats all the dead warriors.

The end of book 82 recounts the destruction of the army of Mahishasura thus:

66. In one moment Devi brought destruction on the great army of the Asuras, even as fire on a heap of wood and grass.
 67. And the lion, shaking his mane, sent forth a mighty roar, and drew, as it were, the breath of the enemies of the gods out of their bodies.
 68. And the Amazons of the goddess fought against the multitude of the Asuras, and overcame them, and the deities praised the Amazons and rained flowers upon them.⁴

As she tramples on the warriors she laughs a most uncanny laughter, drinks wine and catches Mahisasura’s neck with her foot stabbing him with her trident. She then cuts off his head. Then the Devi proclaims,

36. “Roar! O foolish one! roar for a time! After I have drunk wine, and you have been killed by me, the gods shall roar.”
 39. And the Asura, thus showing half his real form, fell, with his head cut in two, by the mighty sword of the goddess.⁵

The gods ecstatically praise her for restoring order in the three realms and requests her to return whenever they want her again. After the goddess has destroyed the demons in Book 84 the gods praise her thus:

4. Thou art good fortune to the pious: thou art bad fortune in the house of the evil-minded: thou art wisdom in the hearts of the wise: thou art purity to the good: thou art modesty (tempering) the splendor of great families: we are bowed before thee: be propitious to us!
 5. Why do we continually celebrate thy beauty, which is past imagination:

why thy great bravery, which brought destruction on the Asuras; why these exploits of thine, in all the battles fought between the deities and the Asuras?

6. Thou art the cause of all the worlds, thou art the cause of the three gunas, yet thou art not recognized as having any inherent faults even by Hara, Hari and the other deities; thou art the boundless one: thou art the abode of all things: all this world is but a part of thyself, for thou art the supreme nature, the undeveloped.⁶

The goddess even forgives the demons who are purified by the weapons that have touched them. She then vanishes leaving us awed at what she has done, something that even male gods could not do.

The story could be an attempt to unify the male pantheon of deities into a mother goddess cult or female principle. The sustained image of the beautiful woman as a goddess and a warrior-protector riding a lion in *Devi Mahatmaya* could have its origin in the folk traditions of India, as it is not possible to find it in Sanskrit texts preceding it.

The ritual of the killing of the buffalo demon continues in the post-Devi Mahatmaya texts where Shiva's son Skanda kills the Mahisasura. Later references to the goddess Durga killing the Mahisasura could be a variation of the original story. The iconographic representations of the killing of Mahisasura depicted on terracotta plaques found in Nagar Rajasthan may have an earlier origin than the narrative represents.

Both the existence and continuance of lion as a vehicle for mighty gods and goddesses show the important position the virtues of the lion occupies in

unifying the myth of the human and divine into one cosmic whole. Though the purpose in the Mahatmaya is larger than the representation of the lion itself, the lion nevertheless is the central symbol of retribution and revenge. These representations find their way into Christian and Greek symbolism of revealing divine power, wrath and human triumph. Hale Wortham sees a more universal pattern in the story of Devi Mahatmaya slaying the demon. He writes,

There have been various interpretations of this myth. Some have referred it to the constellations. They have identified Virgo as the goddess Devi: they have seen Mahishasura in Centaur, and in Leo, the lion upon which the goddess rode to the conflict. Others have looked upon the legend in the light of a 'Solar myth.'⁷

Lion in Egyptian, Greek and Renaissance Myths

Similar to the pre-Vedic myths, the Egyptian myths too represent the lion as power, courage and revenge. The Egyptian goddess Sekhmet and Menhit are presented with leonine traits. The sphinx is the offspring of Orphus and Chimacra and it has the body of a lion with the head of a woman. This must have its origin in the Indian Vedic myth of unifying the male pantheon with the female principle of the goddess Durga. Amongst the Greek written texts especially of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Hercules must subdue the Nemean lion as part of his twelve labors to atone his patricide.⁸

The lion represented as evil but also as a victim is harnessed in the service of heroic deeds that Hercules must perform to rid his own life of evil and insanity. The Greek mythology represents the Nemean lion as a huge and invulnerable creature that is the offspring of Echindna and Typhon. Since no weapons can

penetrate his strong skin, Hercules strangles him with his bare hands and then takes out the pelt wearing it around his body to make him invincible.

The fascination of early renaissance painters and writers in pitting human strength against beastly power and making human strength prevail over beastly power was to represent heroic victory and underscore a moral lesson. Baroque painter Paul Rubens is the first to integrate the sweeping vigor of wild beasts and human response within the visual vocabulary of dramatic painting.⁹ Rubens was fond of depicting virtues in painting combining courage and physical strength of the classical hero Hercules with the potency and patience of the biblical hero Samson tearing the jaws of a lion. His grisly sketch of eastern hunters on horseback fighting lions in “Lion Hunt” might have a precedent in Leonardo da Vinci’s frescoes or Lorenzo Zacchia’s engravings. Both Hercules and Samson enter into a mortal combat with a lion and defeat it with their bare hands. Hercules strangles the lion while Samson tears apart the lion’s jaws. These superhuman feats are translated into Macedonian numismatics where Alexander represented his political suzerainty by depicting himself on coins with the head of Hercules.

For the renaissance painters it was equally important to make the moral world prevail over the beastly instinctive world. Perhaps a physical struggle in their paintings, symbolizing the spiritual, was the best way to transfigure and represent the imaginative spaces they created.

Lion as Dream, Vision and Literary Text

There are innumerable references to the lion in the Bible and it is often represented as a gargantuan beast protecting the faithful and destroying the

heathen. The lion is therefore represented as one of the functions of God, a beast filled with divine intelligence and divine revenge. The image of the lion functions as dream, vision and a revealed text authenticating the divine and inspired nature of the book. The image of the lion also gets transformed into a roar authenticating speech and a warning to the heathen. The roaring lion could also represent the freedom of speech and a desire to publicly authenticate true knowledge.

Even within the lion iconography the Bible distinguishes between a majestic lion and a ruthless one symbolized by Christ and Satan respectively. The lion image gains further strength when identified with the metaphor of “a pride of lions” which gives it more ferocity and invincibility. The image acquires political overtones when the lion is identified with the “lion of Israel” that will not only create a nation for the Jews but also protect the newly formed nation from the selfish designs of other nations. The lion image incorporates the traditions of Africa and India where it symbolizes alertness, strength and retribution. In the Bible the lion becomes a prophetic voice that represents the tribe of Judah authenticating the written word of the Bible.

The lion also represents a riddle of life and alchemy of words, which could convert baser characters into superior ones. The power of the lion expressed through the unity of tribes and nations is represented through the powerful image of the lion of Judah. God becomes the great lion who is a wise father, protecting his people. Those who rebel against his command will be forsaken. At times even Christ is fearful of the divine wrath of the lion symbolized in death. He implores God to save him. The solemnity of the lion symbol should not be trifled with or ridiculed. Though the Bible distinguishes the dignified quality of the lion and the cunning of the lion, above both is the great lion king, God himself who

guides and controls the most powerful virtue of omnipotence.

In The Book of Daniel, Daniel has both a “dream” and a “vision” on his bed, a dream he later writes down (7:1-7).¹⁰ Why does he write down his dream? So that he may not forget? Or does he want to give authenticity and validity to the figment of his imagination? Daniel sees “four great beasts” coming out of the sea, each different from the other but the “first was like a lion and had eagle’s wings” (7:4). Then the wings of the lion are “plucked” and he is made to stand up on his “feet” like a man and a “man’s heart” is given to it. Obviously the metaphor of a lion as courage and upright virtue is complete. It is a written text of a dream, which now possesses an actuality and artifact. The beast becomes a king with a kingdom (7:17). This is an attempt to validate the claims not only of Daniel but also of the tribe to which he belongs—a beast that is a king must also have a kingdom. A dream becomes a collective identity representing power, virtue and dominion.

Authority requires legitimacy and speech is the most important instrument of this legitimating process. In the Bible the lion of Zion, roars and through his roaring authenticates speech. In Amos 1:2 “the Lord roars from Zion” and this section concludes with the phrase “a lion has roared” (3:8). The roar of the lion sends the fear of God in people who have gone astray and makes them return to him. The roar of a lion is also a warning for the heathen to escape, but if they do not the lion will kill them. Perhaps another reading of this text could be that we should not stumble into trouble unwarily. The roaring lion also represents the desire to speak, to publicize or to say.

Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey? Does he growl in his den when he has caught nothing? (Amos 3:4)

Definitely the text creates a clear purpose and a definitive plan. The roar or speech is not without reason.

Not only is God represented through the lion image but also Christ as well. Christ is also symbolized as a lion “controlled, majestic” while Satan is a ruthless and stealthy lion (Exodus 15:11). A lion attacks an animal, which has wandered away from the herd or flock. Being in the house of God affords protection to the person:

if I am delayed you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living god, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

The lion gains in ferocity and strength if it unites with others of its kind. A pride of lions acquires the power to attack beasts larger than the lion such as water buffalos or wildebeest. A lion attacks many times from many sides, grips the throat of the animal and kills by strangulation. It begins eating the animal even before it is dead. The lion sleeps with his eyes open.

The Bible creates a political space for the Jews by ensuring protection. God will act as a lion to Israel and become a young lion to Judah and tear up nations to pieces and walk away. No one shall rescue them.

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. (Hosea 5:14).

And again: “So I will come upon them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk by the path. (Hosea 13:7)

The description retells the Mahatmaya stories and the Greek myths of Nemea. The power of the carnivore unleashed by a Christian god seems to replay old non-Christian myths, both expanding and transforming ancient representations of the lion. The Rastafari movement describes Haile Selassie as this lion. The lion inhabits Africa and India but the Bible incorporate it as a Christian symbol representing alertness, strength and retribution.

The representation of the lion also attempts to legitimize the written code of the Bible. The image of the lion of the Tribe of Judah is one such representation:

Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep! See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.' (Revelation 5:5)

The lion of the tribe of Judah has opening the scroll and the seven seals represent an idea borrowed from pre-Christian traditions. Opening the scrolls symbolizes written knowledge and opening the seven seals represents authoritative knowledge. Perhaps this is the first attempt to legitimize a written code in the Christian tradition.

The religious process of salvation has always been compared with the chemical process of alchemy and represented both a riddle and alchemy. In Judges 14:14 we have a riddle for Samson, which suggests that sweetness comes out of the dead lion. Honeybees have built a nest inside the dead carcass of a lion and now provide honey to Samson to eat. The lion has always been represented as alchemy. A green lion eating the sun suggests how alchemy transforms baser metals into gold. The figure of the red lion with the philosopher's stone suggests the completion of the alchemic process and the attainment of the magnum opus

or the integration of the self.

The rise of a tribe or a nation is also symbolized and represented through the image of the lion. This results in the satisfaction enjoyed by the lion. The Tribe of Judah will rise to power, will become formidable and enjoy the fruits of its success. No one will dare to take away what the lion of Judah has seized. The lion of Judah is a crouching lion, not an attacking lion. This implies that a crouching lion relaxes and enjoys what he has procured. Others may be jealous of the lion of Judah but dare not attack or confront him.

You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? (Genesis 49:9)

Job entreats God to end his misery invoking the predatory image of the lion. He complains that even the lion tears up its victim and ends his misery. Why does God prolong his misery by afflicting him with sores?

If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion and again display your awesome power against me. (Job 10:16)

God is seen as a powerful lion that integrates within himself the social functions of a wise father and a protector. He represents the fraternal and protective functions thus:

Then even the bravest soldier, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a fighter and that those with him are brave. (2 Samuel 17:10)

God will allow a man to follow a counsel if it is good for him but will cancel another if it is not good for him. Ultimately it is not the counsel of men but the wisdom and help of God will not receive his protection.

Undoubtedly those children who rebel against him he would withdraw his protection. God has withdrawn from his sheep who roar like a lion upon him and do not follow him. “My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest. She roars at me; therefore I hate her.” (Jeremiah, 12-8). Christ aware of the power of God, which often symbolizes death and punishment, entreats God to deliver him from death. In this light we can see Christ overcoming a greater deliverance by overcoming death. The unicorn or the wild buffalo could represent the demon buffalo in Indian mythology. The Bible refers to the unicorn or wild oxen in the following verse:

Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen. (Psalms 22:21)

The leonine power of God is seen as inextinguishable. Even if a careless or profligate talks it would not diminish the power of God. A careless man will not be persuaded by reason and would often say strange things:

The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!’ (Proverbs 26:13)

The Bible represents God as ‘lion providence’ and a most abiding giver of things. Even the roaring lions find food according to the providence of God. The ferocious lions find meat not through roaring but the provident hand of God. The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God. (Psalm

104:21). The protective power of God is further clarified through the lion image. Whether the danger is overt or covert God will protect you:

You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. (Psalm 91:13)

Though Satan may be a cunning lion God is the lion ‘king of kings’ and he would be able to overcome the cunning and duplicity of Satan. The machinations of Satan can be overcome by faith and vigilance:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Peter 5-8-9)

Renaissance and Elizabethan Representations

The Renaissance and Elizabethan studies have opened up new areas of understanding Shakespearean hermeneutics by interpreting the flora and fauna in texts and understanding their larger historical, iconographical and symbolic representations in histories, comedies, tragedies and sonnets. At the same time Foucauldian analysis has opened up a discourse of “discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series and transformation” that raise the contentious questions of historical analysis and procedure.¹¹ In Elizabethan texts, especially in Shakespeare’s tragedies, histories and comedies the representation of the lion is quite unique. On the one hand the lion represents power, nobility and ferocity, while on the other it symbolizes evil, ugliness and sacrifice. Shakespeare partakes of the classical Greek and Christian traditions in diversifying the

concept of the universal lion in literature using the chronographia of the night in which predators roam. It is possible to see diversification and discontinuity of the representation of the lion in Shakespeare from the pre-Christian, classical and biblical traditions as he brings disparate symbolism to explicate human intentions and weaknesses.

Shakespeare unhesitatingly employs the image of the lion in more diverse and ingenuous ways than the classical or biblical texts. Perhaps this prompted Nietzsche to remark that Shakespeare's works do not reflect the oeuvres of a single writer but that of many people. His plays give rise to the question of man's place in the world and his relationship to nature. He identifies man with virtue and reason, which breaks down under intense emotional pressure; and he connects the lion with implacable vengeance. Occasionally nature can be destructive under duress reminding us that we share a lot in common with the savage world of beasts. However the virtues of the lion as representative of strength, courage and generosity may not be misplaced.¹² Shakespeare attempts to reveal the motives of kings and extraordinary men through the predatory image of the lion but always retains its intensity. Expressions of madness, revenge and despair are all united in the forceful image of the lion roped in from different traditions and symbolisms. The representations of the lion also transmogrifies into a monster in *King John* which closely resembles the Egyptian sphinx that has a woman's face with a lion's body: "I would set an ox-head to your lion's hide, And make a monster of you." (*King John*, II. i. 292).¹³

In his tragedies, histories, comedies and sonnets Shakespeare has deliberately employed the power of the lion to convey different aspects of the tragic flaw in his characters at the same time ridiculing those who pretend to possess Herculean power. Depending on his purpose and intention Shakespeare employs

either the biblical or classical notion of the lion to elucidate the thematic content of his text or develop character. For example Shakespeare presents the biblical images of Hotspur, such as "a crouching lion" "valiant as a lion," (*I Henry IV*, III. i. 151 and III. i. 165) quite approvingly while the pagan representations of the lion in the heraldic are dismissed as "skimble skamble stuff" (*I Henry IV*, III. I. 152).

Shakespeare employs the power of the attacking lion to describe valor and courage. These images are profitably employed in *Julius Caesar* early in the play when Caesar boldly proclaims that both he and danger are lions "litter'd in one day" and since he is the "elder" of the two he is "more terrible." (*Julius Caesar*, II. ii. 46-47) When the Norweyan Lord mounts a counter attack both Macbeth and Banquo are not dismayed and together they hunt like eagles capturing sparrows or lions ensnaring hares (*Macbeth*, I. ii. 35). In *Lear* too Shakespeare captures the intensity of a lion's actions in the following phrase:

Wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.

(*King Lear*, III. iv. 92)

When Hamlet sees the ghost of his father seeking revenge the former quickly identifies himself as a sacrificial victim, a Nemean lion, who may possess an almost invincible body, but lacks the adamant determination of the Greek hero Hercules (*Hamlet*, I. iv. 38-83). Hercules is fired by a madness to atone the sins of his past as he labors through his twelve acts to find sacrificial victims. In fact Horatio reminds Hamlet not to pursue the supposed ghost of his father as the authenticity of the ghost cannot be verified. Moreover we remember that both Horatio and Hamlet had once studied at University of Wittenberg, famous for the protestations of Martin Luther. Lutherans reject a belief in purgatory and prayer for the dead by asserting *sola scriptura* (scriptures alone) and *sola fida* (by faith

alone). They see the concept of purgatory as predominantly a Latin vestige of the Roman Catholic Church. But Hamlet has other problems. When in Act One Scene IV he confronts the ghost of his father seeking revenge he is unable to fulfill his paternal duty and cannot rise to the same height as Hercules. Instead he confesses that,

My fate cries out
And makes each petty artere in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve
Still I call'd.

(I. iv. 82-84.)

John McCloskey suggests that references to animals might represent the moral derangement of the world in which tragic characters enact their parts.¹⁴ The lion also turns satanic, possessing the negative attributes of cunning and an unforgiving nature. In *III Henry VI* Clifford's father was killed by Rutland's father, so Clifford wants to kill Rutland: Rutland entreats Clifford not to kill him:

So looks the pent-up lion o'er the wretch
That trembles under his devouring paws;
And so he walks insulting o'er his prey,
And so he comes, to rend his limbs asunder.
Ah, gentle Clifford, kill me with thy sword
And not with such a cruel threat'ning look.
Sweet Clifford, hear me speak before I die:
I am too mean a subject for thy wrath,
Be thou reveng'd on men, and let me live.

(I. iii. 12-20)

Clifford on the contrary possesses no majesty but only seeks revenge.

Shakespeare uses the metaphor of a lion as a social strategy to regain lost reputation where someone might beat an inferior to influence a superior. In *Othello* Cassio confesses to Iago that the former has lost his reputation because Othello has scolded him before his juniors for drinking and fighting: "I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." (II. iii. 263-65) Iago sees the beating of an inferior to influence the superior as proverbial; but tells Cassio:

You are but now cast in his mood, a punishment more in policy than in malice, even so as one would beat his offenseless dog to affright an imperious lion. (II. iii. 272-75)

Cassio sees his own "indiscreet" behavior as "fustian discourse" responsible for his rebellion (II. iii. 279-280). He blames the wine as the "devil" responsible for his crime (II. iii. 283). Here Shakespeare underscores two important themes; one of the "imperious lion" and the other of intoxication as devilish (II. iii. 275). Shakespeare sees a convoluted logic in the affairs of men and sees the combination of social power and individual misdemeanor as destructive. Shakespeare employs the symbol of the haughty and domineering superior to undermine the small misconduct of juniors through the representation of the imperious lion.

The representation carries the element of awe and fear so central to a tragic act and the cathartic effect that it works. Shakespeare attempts to translate inaccessible and inscrutable motives of important men into literary terms and this helps him to draw his representations of the lion from diverse sources

without regard to continuity or unity. Rubens represents the awesome struggle of the beast for survival when in the grips of a mad classical hero. The grand struggle between the Nemean king of beasts and Greek superman looks both majestic and heroic and may not carry the same effect had Hercules grappled with a lesser beast. Hercules frightens even the gods as he dons the invincible lion pelt, removed with the sharp claws of the lion himself, and then presents himself to them wearing it.

Shakespeare also uses the Nemean lion-Hercules myth to ridicule false notions of valor and Elizabethan family values of birth and lineage. In *King John*, Act II Scene 1 Austria and Philip the Bastard parry each other's brave assertions and insinuations through the inverted use of the Nemean lion's pelt in the following lines:

Aust. What the devil art thou?

Bast. One that will play the devil, sir, with you,

And 'a may catch your hide and you alone.

You are the hare of whom the proverb goes,

Whose valor plucks dead lions by the beard;

I'll smoke your skin-coat and I catch you right.

Sirrah, look to't, i'faith I will, I'faith.

Blanch. O, well did he become that lion's robe,

That did disrobe the lion of that robe!

Bast. It lies as slightly on the back of him

As great Alcides' [shows] upon an ass.

But, ass, I'll take that burthen from your back,

Or lay on that shall make your shoulders crack. (134-46)

Bastard tells Austria that he is no Hercules and that he is not wearing a Nemean lion's coat. Instead the Bastard ridicules Austria calling him a hare and an ass. Richard the lion-hearted king continues to capture the imagination of Bastard and he is seen by Shakespeare as a noble warrior, unmatched in courage, an archetypal king who remains undefeated even in death. King Philip of France calls him one who "robb'd the lion of his heart, /And fought the holy wars in Palestine" (*King John*, II. i. 3-4). By implication the Bastard assumes the title of the classical Greek hero Hercules though with a slight difference.

In the original Greek myth Hercules has killed his wife and children and now atones for his grief through the 12 labors of which overpowering the invincible Nemean lion is the first. The Greek myth attempts to restore family and connubial virtues decentered by a tragic flaw in the Greek hero, whereas in Shakespeare the Bastard who is not officially considered a part of the legal family hierarchy of the Elizabethans believes in family values and the duty of protecting family honor and avenging its loss. This is undoubtedly a Renaissance attack on both the disease and sickness of imperial succession and conservative Elizabethan family values. However, even in the inverted image of the classical myth, the lion continues to be a victim. Towards the end of the play Bastard once again employs the image of the lion in the den perhaps referring to the Nemean lion that is cornered and killed by Hercules in its den. However here Bastard is suggesting King John to be brave and not fear his enemies, especially the Prince of France who will not dare attack the "lion in his den." (V. I. 57). Little does Bastard realize that equating King John to the 'lion in his den' is to seal his own fate as the vanquished Nemean lion.

Hamlet has a task to perform. He must not only cleanse Denmark of the evil that pervades it but also to kill Claudius, the murderer of his father. The inversion of

the Greek metaphor forces Hamlet into the role of the Nemean lion, who has accepted defeat from the very beginning. Given the fatal flaw in his tragic character, Hamlet cannot become Hercules to valorize the virtue of fortitude and redemption. There seems to be a stoic acceptance of his fate and a total lack of desire to change it.

Shakespeare builds the classical reference quite subtly. In Act One, Scene II, Hamlet develops the inverted classical metaphor of heroism and virtue by comparing his father to Hyperion and Hercules and himself and Claudius as opposites of Hercules. In fact he feels suffocated by the influence of his father and seeks his independence by not doing what he is expected to do.¹⁵ Later in the play in Act Five Scene I he states,

Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew, and dog will have his day. (291-92)

Hamlet is asserting his freedom from his father's dominating personality. To give a touch of biblical tragedy to Hamlet's character Shakespeare even suggests him to play a sacrificial Christ-like role. In Act Four Scene 5 lines 42-66 Ophelia in her madness confuses Hamlet with Jesus. It must be remembered that in the Greek myth Hercules has killed his wife and children in a fit of madness and his labors are an attempt to redeem himself. Shakespeare connects the idea of madness in Greek mythology and the concept of sacrifice in the Bible to Hamlet's own madness and sacrifice.

Here Shakespeare is not extending a cultural and religious tradition but using both to support the rationale of a literary tradition in the service of a didactic literature. By inverting the Greek representation of the Nemean-Hercules myth

Shakespeare is both using the Greek representation and at the same time revealing a discontinuity and a rupture with it.¹⁶

The classical and biblical virtue of bravery in both life and in battle is again called forth in the symbolism of the lion in *Richard the Second* where the raging lion and gentle lamb represent war and peace. Delineating the virtues of the Prince of Wales Shakespeare in Act II Scene I lines 173-75 writes,

In war was never lion rag'd more fierce,
In peace was never gentle lamb more mild,
Than was that young and princely gentleman.

The possession of these two very opposite traits in the same person may prevent him to confront an issue squarely or to help him realize his desire.

In *Richard the Second*, Act V, Scene I, lines 26-35 the Queen rebukes the dying Richard for not putting up a brave fight against Bolingbroke even if it ultimately means defeat. Even a lion that is wounded and vanquished,

thrusteth forth his paw
And wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage
To be o'erpow'r'd" (V. i. 29-31).

Why not King Richard should put up a strong fight like the lion or the "king of beasts" that he is (V. i. 34)? However to this admonition King Richard replies, somewhat ironically, that he would not mind being a beast if he could then be "a happy king of men" (V. i. 36). Apart from the hierarchical distinction between men and beasts there is a further distinction between a brave lion who is the king

of beast and a weak Richard who is no longer the king of men. The social and political imagery in the representation of a dying lion is not lost upon the reader.

Queen. What, is my Richard both in shape and mind
Transform'd and weak'ned? Hath Bullingbrook depos'd
Thine intellect? Hath he been in thy heart?
The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw,
And wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage
To be o'erpow'r'd; and wilt thou, pupil-like,
Take the correction, mildly kiss the rod,
And fawn on rage with base humility,
Which art a lion and a king of beasts?
K. Rich. A king of beasts, indeed—if aught but beasts,
I had been still a happy king of men (V. i. 26-36).

Shakespeare further develops the representation of the lion to include the eastern concept of time as a web that far supersedes the power and intensity of the lion symbolism. In Sonnet 19 Shakespeare writes,

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets.
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:
O, carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,

Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet, do thy worst, old Time; despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.¹⁷

Time is seen as the great devourer that even devours the conventional devourer of men and beasts the lion. Time possesses the power to “blunt” the “lion's paws” and forces the earth to “devour her own sweet brood.” It further destroys the fierce tiger, burns the phoenix and makes the seasons fly away. The poet forbids time not to devour his love and takes solace in the thought that his love will survive in his writings.

The Representation of the Lion in Comedies

Shakespeare's fascination with the Nemean lion-Hercules myth continues in the comedies as well. Both in seriousness and jest Shakespeare inverts the Nemean-Hercules myth to reveal the role of a victim.¹⁸ In *Love's Labor Lost* Act IV, Scene I Boyet reads a letter in jest referring to the roar of the Nemean lion as food for his rage and fodder for his den. *Hamlet* is an excellent example of the hero as a victim who instead of fighting the Nemean lion becomes the sacrificial lion himself.

In the comedies too Shakespeare uses the image of a lion as social discourse and biblical power. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare writes,

Let Lion, Moonshine, Wall, and lovers twain
At large discourse, while here they do remain.

The. I wonder if the lion be to speak.

Dem. No wonder, my lord; one lion may, when many asses do.

(V. i. 150-54)

Obviously even in the Shakespearean comedies the symbol of the lion as superior force, intelligence and authority continues to dominate allowing the playwright to elucidate the idiosyncrasies of human behavior.

Conclusion

The simple representation of the lion in early cave paintings and oral myths nearly five centuries before the Christian era has become more complex over the centuries, expanding to symbolize different aspects of human, divine and social endeavors. The depiction of the lion or its near cousin the tiger, as predator, vengeance, divine retribution, symbol, icon, myth or strategy has interpenetrated global cultures, religions, ideology and literary texts both in the East and the West. It is possible to see its representation in other religious narratives (such as the Buddhist or Islamic), empire narratives (Japanese, German, Ottoman, British, Russian or American), oral narratives (such as Assyrian, Egyptian or Native American) and modern narratives (such as animations, comics or musicals).¹⁹ Though some of these concerns might be interesting to explore but they do not constitute the focus of our present investigations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Kathleen M. Erndl, "Sakta," in *The Hindu World*, eds. Sushil Mittal & Gene Thursby, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 149.
- 2 B. Hale Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, Volume 17, No 2, April 1885, Book 81, Verse 62, p. 229.

- 3 Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *ibid.*, p. 233, Verse 23.
- 4 B. Hale Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *ibid.*, p. 236.
- 5 B. Hale Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *ibid.*, p. 230.
- 6 B. Hale Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *ibid.*, p. 240.
- 7 B. Hale Wortham, "Translation of Books 81-93 of the Markandeya Purana," *ibid.*, p. 223.
- 8 Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric trans.*, Hugh G. Evelyn White [1920] Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, rpt., 1977. Hesiod writes, "but Echidna was subject in love to Orthus and brought forth the deadly Sphinx which destroyed the Cadmeans, and the Nemean lion, which Hera, the good wife of Zeus, brought up and made to haunt the hills of Nemea, a plague to men," (p. 103).
- 9 J. Burckhardt, *Recollections of Rubens*, trans. M. Hottinger, London 1950, p. 142.
- 10 All future references from the Bible are taken from the New International Version of *The Holy Bible*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990). They are marked in parenthesis in the main body of the text.
- 11 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 21.
- 12 Eve Twose Kliman, "Delacroix's Lions and Tigers: A Link Between Man and Nature," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (September 1982), pp. 446-7.
- 13 All future references from the plays of William Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition ed., Dean Johnson et al., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) and are marked in parenthesis within the main body of the text.
- 14 John C. McCloskey, "The Emotive use of Animal Imagery in 'King Lear,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 13, No. 3 (Summer 1962), p. 321.
- 15 Dillon Andrews, "The Prince, the Lion, and Hercules: Another Strand of Tragic Destiny in Hamlet," *NDQ*, 58, No. 3 (1990), pp. 152-58.
- 16 See Kawai Shoichiro, *Hamuletto wa Hutotteita or Hamlet was Fat*, (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 2001), pp. 222-227. Kawai argues that the Herculean task was not only revenge but also to rid Denmark of evil. Hamlet's hesitation to kill Claudius is also linked to Hercules's indecision to choose between the goddess of pleasure and the goddess of virtue. This may be connected to the influence of stoicism.
- 17 William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, 1995 rpt., (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 86.
- 18 Robert Grams Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).
- 19 Here it is possible to include Walt Disney's animation and musical *The Lion King* and its connection with Shakespeare's *Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*. In this connection also see Harrison, G. B, ed. "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." *Major British Writers*, (Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc.: New York, 1959); Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet." *Elizabethan Essays*. (Haskell House: New York, 1964); Brandes, Georg. "The Classic Tendency of the Tragedy." *William Shakespeare, A Critical Study*. 1898. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co:

1963; Taymor, Julie. *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*. (Hyperion: New York, 1997). Japanese poet Takamura Kotaro (1883-1956) represents the lion licking his wounds (kizu o nameru shishi) to represent the negative images of wild beast captivity in the United States and calls for joyful release into the wild. See Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Poets and The Nature of Literature*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 244.