

Bestiality and Female Lust in the Roman and Chinese Novel

The Roman novel *Metamorphoses* and the Chinese novel *Guwangyan* (“Preposterous Words”) each portray a sexual encounter between a human woman and a donkey. In this paper I will compare the depictions of bestiality and the narrative structures that frame each episode. I will argue that both novels reflect male anxiety about the female body in their own societies; here, women obsessed with bestiality strive to seize dominance in not only sex but also daily life, and thus are threatening to the male-dominated society.

In both works, unlike what Bakhtin would call the “classic body,” which is “ready-made” and “completed” (1984: 25), the bodies of the women are full of holes. They tend to leak, and the bodily liquid threatens to transgress “borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1984: 4).

Both Bu Duoyin in *Guwangyan* and the *matrona* in *Metamorphoses*, by having sex with a donkey, violate the rule of marriage and the boundary between human and animal. Apart from this, the *matrona* violates her high social position with this sexual act.

In both works, the *matrona* and Duoyin play the dominant role in their respective sexual relationships. The novels clearly establish the economic power of these women.

In *Metamorphoses*, the *matrona* is described as “powerful and rich.” She “paid” to see Lucius, and she “bargained” (10.19) with Lucius’ keeper to have sex with him. Duoyin, too, turns her economic status into sexual status. She is the owner of her dog and the guardian of her neighbor’s donkey, her sex partners. Both women derive sexual dominance from their economic status.

In both novels, the *matrona* and Duoyin are sexually aggressive. As Amy Richlin argues of the women with excessive desire in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, they act male (2014: 145). Their extreme agency and aggression during sex threaten the norms of male-dominated society.

Both women show extreme impatience during their sex with animals, and they actively participate in the sex act. In *Guwangyan*, the author uses the character 忙 (“in a hurry”) three times in a row in book 12 when describing how Duoyin seeks to have sex with her dog, in order to show her impatience. Later, when she has sex with the donkey, she “takes hold of” its penis in a hurry (忙捏住了), and “sends it into” (送入) her body. Likewise, the *matrona*’s impatience and activeness are shown by how hastily her eunuchs prepares the room for sex for her (*Metamorphoses* 10.20), and by a series of active verbs (*Metamorphoses* 10.21).

In both stories, the sex produces no positive results—not even a quenching of the sexual drive. In the case of the *matrona*, even sex with a donkey cannot satisfy her, though Lucius spends a night that is *operosa et pervigili* (“busy and sleepless” 10.22) with her. This encounter leads to death: after the sex with the *matrona*, Lucius is ordered to have sex in public with a female criminal before she is cast to wild beasts. Lucius finally runs away for fear that when the wild beasts enter the arena during their sex act, he himself will not escape death (10.34-5). In the case of Duoyin, the consequences are even worse: she gives birth to puppies and later dies during her sex with the donkey (Book 12).

Because their work produces both horror and pleasure, sometimes simultaneously, both Apuleius and Cao Qijing start their stories with an invitation, with promises of enjoyment and a disclaimer of gossip. Both prefaces claim that their stories are distant: Apuleius terms his work “Greek-ish” (1.1), while Cao sets his stories in the “previous dynasty” (Book 1). Both contain a promise of entertainment: Apuleius promises his audience that they will be “made happy” (*Metamorphoses* 1.1), while Cao says that his stories can help to kill time and dispel sleepiness (Book 1). Both present some kind of disclaimer: Apuleius claims that he is African, a non-native speaker, while Cao claims that his story is a “nonsense” (妄言, Book 1). With these

prefaces, the audience is invited by both authors to participate in their voyeurism. But at the same time, the readers can feel safe: these are Milesian stories happening in Greece, or capricious words about the previous dynasty. When the women are engaging in bestiality, when the husbands are cheated, we can sit back and enjoy the action without ever coming too close to these horrors.

Bibliography

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