

In the air

Animals in literature. No. 19: The Stag

Ariel Wagner-Parker

kulturrissimo: First of all, Professor Hirsch, we would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to talk to kulturrissimo about an animal you have made your speciality: the stag. Could you perhaps start by telling us what led you to dedicate your life to stags?

Prof. Hirsch: Yes, I can. Enemy of mine got gored to death by a stag. Fell off his horse during a hunt, got lost and somehow managed to get into the path of the poor terrified creature. And the rest, as they say ...

k: But that's dreadful!

Pr. H.: Not at all. Loathsome individual. Plagiarized my paper on „Hound names in Classical literature with special reference to Ovid.“ And ill-treated his wife and kids too. Most appropriate death, if you ask me.

k: Yes, well. Anyway, you got interested in stags.

Pr. H.: Did indeed. Mainly stags in literature, the arts and so on. I'm not a naturalist; don't know much about them as animals beyond the usual stuff, you know: hoofed mammal of families of Cervidae, Moschidae and Tragulidae; found everywhere except in Africa and Australasia; usually in or around woodland; stags the male of the species, also called bucks; ladies known as hinds or does; antlers; stag with twelve or more points called a stag royal – like the one in Landseer's „Monarch of the Glen“; colours range from champagne to rusty red.

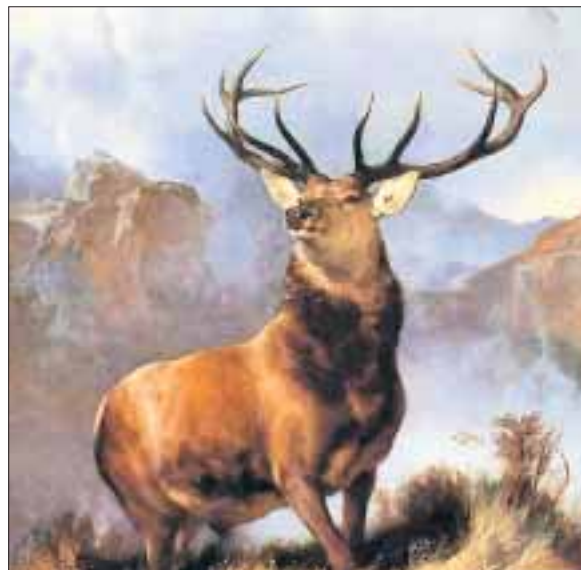
k: Could a stag ever be blue?

Pr. H.: Not unless you painted it. Or made it unhappy. Ha ha ha!

k: Yes quite. Professor, where did you first come across stags in a literary text?

Pr. H.: In our friend Ovid, actually: the famous tale of Actaeon, grandson of Cadmus. You know the one: prince has been out hunting with his mates and by chance, happens upon a sacred grove where the goddess Diana is bathing in a spring. Her maidens quickly gather round her, but she's much taller than they are – this is heroic literature – so poor old Actaeon can't help seeing her naked. Of course Diana enters into a terrible rage and turns him into a stag. He rushes off, terrified, but his own hounds pick up his scent, catch up with him and tear him to pieces. Bit gruesome really. Ovid lists all the hounds' names; it was my study of their symbolism and origins that bastard Cerf stole.

k: Ironic really. Could you tell us how stags have been depicted by writers over the centuries?



Sir Edwin Landseer: „The Monarch of the Glen“, 1851. Oil on canvas.

Pr. H.: Well, stags have always been associated with forests and woodlands and perception of them has been coloured by the ambivalent attitude humans have always had towards the forest: on the one hand, you've got the haven of sylvan liberty, freedom from injustice and oppression, as in Robin Hood's Sherwood, or Shakespeare's Forest of Arden; on the other, a dark, threatening, transgressive place, full of unknown dangers, where humans venture at their peril.

k: You find both elements in fairytales ...

Pr. H.: You do indeed, with the beasts of the forest functioning either as animal-helpers or opponents to be fought and overcome. A full-grown stag with a complete head of antlers is a pretty awe-inspiring animal and potentially dangerous if disturbed by humans. Yet obviously stags are also associated with hunting and as such are often portrayed as victims. There are several instances of this in Aesop; in the best-known one, a stag sees his antlers reflected in a pool he's drinking at and thinks how beautiful they are compared with his weedy little feet. Just then the hunt draws near. The despised trotters carry him off to safety, while his antlers get stuck in a thicket. The hunters catch up with him and ...

k: ... another dead stag!

Pr. H.: Well that's what usually happens, isn't it? There's another harrowing description of a stag being killed by hounds in „Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.“ I'll spare you the details ... But I do know one or two stories where stags are not portrayed as victims. There's one by „Saki“ I particularly treasure called „The Music on the Hill,“ in which a stag becomes an instrument of nemesis! Sylvia – note the name – has come to live on her husband's country estate, a wooded place of savage wildness.

He advises her to respect the Great God Pan while staying in His country. Exploring the orchards and woods, she comes across a grove with a statue of the young god Pan. She's annoyed to see a bunch of grapes placed there as an offering and throws it away. Her husband tells her gravely that this was unwise and warns her to stay out of the woods and avoid horned animals.

Next day, she is tempted into a copse by the sound of wild flute music. As she follows the sound, the piping gives way to huntsmen's horns and suddenly she sees a stag surging up the hill towards her. She draws aside, but the stag comes on; and as the wild piping shrills around her again, it drives its antlers into her breast.

k: Goodness, professor, you really do have a taste for the ghoulish! But tell me, are stags always associated with violence in literature?

Pr. H.: Well, Sir BricheMER the Stag doesn't have too good a time in Reynard the Fox and Shakespeare kills off a few stags as well ...

But in mythology, it's another story. Stags are made to represent a whole range of different ideas. A stag trampling a serpent underfoot symbolizes the victory of spirit over matter, or good over evil; in Christian iconography, stags represent piety, religious aspiration; for the Chinese, a stag means happiness and pecuniary gain.

k: Pecuniary gain, I see. One last question: what associations would be called to mind by a roaring blue stag with antlers?

Pr. H.: Roaring ... well, he must have been drinking. Blue ... must be seen by moonlight. Oh I know: Sir Walter Scott, Lady of the Lake ... „The stag at eve had drunk his fill/When danced the moon on Moonan's rill.“

k: Professor Hirsch, thank you for a truly ... staggering interview.