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Monstrous Little Voices

New Tales from Shakespeare's Fantasy World

Edited by Jonathan Oliver and
David Moore

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MONSTROUS LITTLE VOICES



New Tales from Shakespeare's Fantasy World

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MONSTROUS LITTLE VOICES



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In memory of
Lisa Anne Jardine, CBE FRS FRHistS
(1944 – 2015)



Note from the Editor

THE DEDICATION TO this volume honours the memory of Professor Lisa Jardine, who passed away in October 2015 after a lengthy battle with cancer.

Professor of Renaissance Studies at UCL and founder of its Centre of Interdisciplinary Research in the Humanities, Lisa had a list of appointments, honours and awards from institutions around the world too long to list here. A Fellow of both the Royal Society and the Royal Historical Society, she was a world authority on the renaissance who spoke eight languages, ancient and modern, an impassioned political advocate and a regular guest on TV and radio. She was also the lecturer for Queen Mary University of London's Shakespeare course in 1997-1998, when I studied under her.

My enduring recollection of that course—aside from her clearly prodigious knowledge of the subject, and her passion and candour—was her enthusiasm for teaching Shakespeare in a modern context. We studied revisions and updates; we examined Shakespeare's language in his own time, and ours; we interrogated his politics. I remember she taught *Romeo & Juliet* almost entirely off the Luhrmann film, and spent half a lecture looking at a shot of a guardsman weeping silently at Princess Diana's funeral to discuss emotion and eloquence.

I'd barely thought of Lisa for years when I heard the news, and while I have no particular superstitions about coincidence,

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the fact I was working on this volume at the time struck me as timely. I can't say if Lisa would have approved of the book you're holding, but I hope so. She wanted to give Shakespeare to today's world, and I believe Foz, Kate, Emma, Adrian and Jonathan have done that, and done it some justice to boot.

Her voice—never little, and rarely monstrous—will be missed in the world.

David Thomas Moore
November 2015



Prologue

Venice, 1598

THE REVELS IN the fairy court of Oberon are, it's said, less glamorous than those of his wife's bower, but more wild. But it was early yet; a hunter's moon glowered over a copse in the woods overlooking Venice, throwing bloody light over a few satyrs wooing nymphs, a band of ogres playing heavy drums and goblins capering through a riotous gavotte. Later, the wine would flow and there would be duels and a hunt.

The King of the Fairies, reclining in a couch of bones and roses, had yet to join the festivities. He drank deeply of dark, bitter wine and watched his courtiers as he listened to his emissary Nightshade's report.

"So the Medicis make war?" asked Oberon, staring into space. He wore an antlered form tonight, twice the height of a man and half-bestial. The revel promised to be savage.

"'Tis true. Ferdinand, the younger, sues the elder for the Tuscan throne."

"Aye, and Ferdinand's wife is Aragon's niece, and so Pedro will rattle his sabre and offer hot words, though in truth he cares not whose throne it is."

"And Francesco the Duke is wed to Orsino's niece," said the younger fairy, the crimson moon glittering in his featureless

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black eyes, “and so Illyr joins the debate.” He smirked. “Both brothers, it’s said, trouble the Wizard of Milan, but neither has had satisfaction.”

“And France?”

“Oh, Henry’ll none of it. He grants his lords to fight on this side or that as takes ’em, to seek honour and glory.”

The King threw up his hands, heedless of the wine splashing from his goblet. “Then will all the world fight?” he asked.

The goblin leaned back on his haunches and grinned. “Is’t not the nature of mortals to war?”

“Aye,” said Oberon darkly, holding out his cup to be refilled by one of his buzzing attendants. “Well, my thanks for your report, good Nightshade. You may return to your duties.”

“My lord...” ventured the fairy, nervously.

“Yes, fairy?” The King arched an eyebrow, surprised at his servant’s temerity.

“It seems to me... the Serenissima will find common cause with Aragon. And your Queen still resides in Illyria, where she woos Orsino...”

“Aye?”

“My king, it were best if the fairy courts did not take part in a mortal war.”

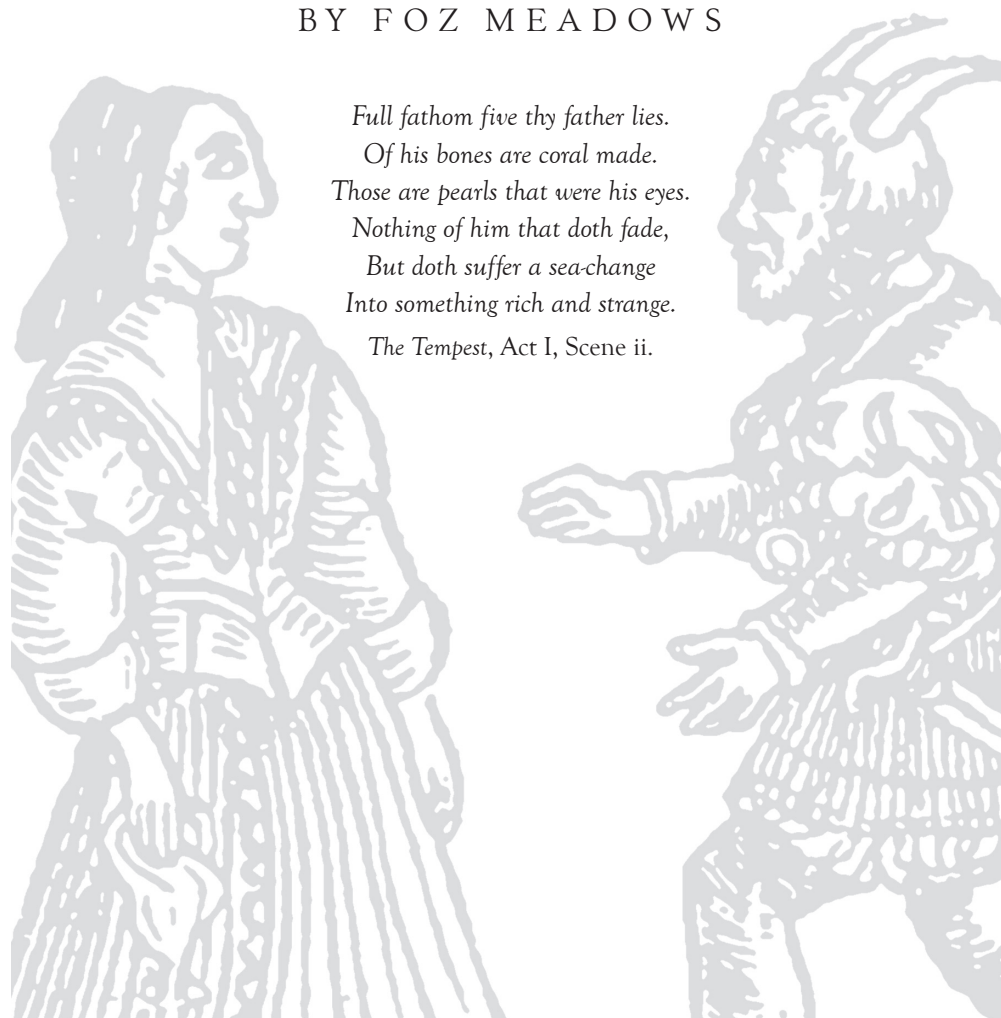
“Hmm.” Oberon mused for a moment. “You’re right. Choose a dozen fairies of good character and send them to the mortal courts as emissaries. Give a message of peace.”

He tossed his newly-refilled goblet on the moss, stood and sighed. “I will go and speak to my wife.”

CORAL BONES

BY FOZ MEADOWS

*Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
The Tempest, Act I, Scene ii.*



Act I

My Father Lies



Naples, 1580

“HE MAKES YOU sleep, you know,” said Ariel, then. She—it was she, that day—kicked her airy heels against a convenient boulder. “When he tires of you. He makes you sleep.”

“I know,” I said. And then, when her faint expression saddened, “Don’t all good children sleep? Don’t all living creatures?”

“They do,” said Ariel. “But not like that.”

FEVER WRACKS ME as storms do ships. I cannot stay ahead of it; delirium blows me in narrowing circles, over and up and back again, yet doesn’t unmoor my body from its bloody pulse of pain. Miscarriage, the physician says, is a betrayal as wife, as *woman*, yet I feel more betrayed than betrayer. Or perhaps, like Caliban, I am merely the monstrous, wild creature that they say I am, as red of tooth as I am of hair—red, red. The sheets are red, and I twist against them, fevered and rimed with sharp, sweet salt that doesn’t know the sea.

“Will she live?” asks Ferdinand. He stands out of sight, but not beyond hearing. Is that his design, or by accident?

“She might,” the physician hedges. “The womb’s waters ought to protect against the incursion of foul humours during pregnancy, but in this state, with the waters gone”—I feel, more than see, the wave of his hand—“she is vulnerable.” He lowers his tone, but not his volume. Coughs. “Though it pains you to

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hear it, my lord, there is some correlation between women who eat scantily in childhood and women who struggle to bear in turn, and after being raised on an island—”

“Raised by a sorcerer, Ceasare. Raised by a duke and a wise man both.”

“A wise man who, by his own admission, cannot conjure food, no matter his pure intentions. My lord, I mean no slight to the Princess Miranda, but though she is surely beautiful, she is slim-hipped, small. She has no fleshy reserves with which to fight this fever, and if it continues to burn, I fear the worst. And even if she survives”—gently, over Ferdinand’s gulping—“you must consider the high likelihood of her future barrenness. Early miscarriage is often a predictor of such things, in my experience.”

“Barrenness? Truly?” Ferdinand’s voice is angry, blanched, and in that moment, I hate him as I have never hated anyone, not even the cruellest court ladies.

Those are pearls that were his eyes, my Ariel once sang, and through my rage I laugh at the thought, for my woman’s pearl was all in Ferdinand’s eyes; my chastity was the oyster he prised open in his pursuit of it, and now I fade, fade, fade to nothing, fevered and thin and red.

“She stirs! Ceasare, look!”

“I see her, my prince. Ah! Let me fetch some water.”

They press the cup to my lips. I do not drink.

“I SUPPOSE IT makes sense.” I drew my child’s knees to my chin, considering the problem. “After all, it would take an awful concentration to put every fish in the sea to sleep, and every ant and bird and mouse—unless it’s done in groups?”

Ariel shook her head. Her form was modelled on mine, though her hair moved with the buoyant lethargy of kelp in a current, coiling slowly around her face; or my face, rather. Ours.

Coral Bones

“Does father sleep, then?” By my own logic, I supposed he must, though I’d never caught him at it.

“He sleeps when you sleep, so that you won’t wake him.”

“Wake him?” I wrinkled my nose in puzzlement. “How could he wake before he’s ready? Sleep doesn’t work like that.”

“Natural sleep does.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Shall I prove it?”

“If you can,” I dared.

(I often dared, then.)

BETWEEN ONE BLINK and the next, they leave. Or maybe more than a blink; my awareness, like my flesh, is shivershaken, unreliable. I stare at the ceiling: vaulted stones and painted angels. Will I ascend in death?

Something stirs beside the bed, a gust of air solidifying out of light and shadow.

“Miranda?” The voice is mine, but not-mine.

Ours, then.

“Ariel?”

I turn my head, and there she is—or there I am—or there we are, though her copy of me is unfevered and whole, her languid halo of bright red hair like fire around her (*my, our*) face.

“Oh, child.” A pale hand hovers across my brow. “I am so sorry. I shouldn’t have left you here. I abandoned you.”

“It’s not your fault. I wanted to come. I thought—” My throat goes dry, and I break off, sweating and shuddering at a fresh burst of pain. “I never thought it would be like this.”

“How could you have known? You knew nothing of men.”

I close my eyes. “I knew a little.”

“A little,” Ariel echoes softly. “But still. Not enough for this.”

* * *

Monstrous Little Voices

AT MY CHALLENGE, Ariel became a leopard—or the shape I knew as leopard, without reference to an original—and invited me onto her back. Her pelt was soft, but translucent, blue-limned like a fire lit with salt-warped wood.

“Be silent,” she said, her voice a low rumble, and bore me up through the warm air, through the island’s green heart, until we found a colony of sleeping mice curled in a tree-knot. To my surprise, they stirred when I stroked them, waking with tiny squeaks.

The mice themselves delighted me, though I was sorry to have distressed them. I said as much to Ariel, who flew us back to the beach, assuring me that, once we’d gone, the mice would resetttle themselves. No magic required.

“WHY HAVE YOU come here, Ariel? Why now?”

“At first, I was busy. Fairy business. I was on that island for a long time, child. I had to return to Titania’s court, to make my obeisances, pardons, pledges. I had to report and explain my absence. But after that—” She falters, looks aside. “After that, I was ashamed. And hopeful, too, just a little; I thought you might adjust, given time.”

“I could adjust, perhaps. But as *they* will not, I cannot—or if I did, there’d be no point to it.”

She doesn’t ask who *they* were. There’s no need.

“Do you love him?” Ariel asks, softly.

“Compared to what?” It comes out harsher than I intend, a pant of rage as pain saws through me. My father impressed on me the value of feminine virtues, and when the ship came—when Ferdinand came, and I finally had an audience—it was surprisingly easy to embody them, as though my flesh and feelings both had only awaited their function. But the world in which it was easy was a small, unvarnished one, as utterly distinct from my present state as shells from sapphires. If such a woman truly

Coral Bones

exists, she is not me, nor have I met her like, here in this place where my every move is scrutinised for the failings of barbarism. “Compared to how I once loved my father? Compared to how I should love myself? I do not.” Tears slip down my cheeks. “I do *not*, and now it’s all too late.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Ariel kneels, or gives her airy form the semblance of kneeling. “You can leave this place, Miranda. Go where you will.”

“As a woman alone? One marked as spurned, or barren, or runaway from her lawful lord, and whose father in any case would drag her home again? Such choices you offer! Pearls to make a pauper rich.” My lucidity slips like a lady’s veil, restored by the cooling brush of Ariel’s hand.

“What if,” she says, and stops. On the island, I had no true glass, but this past year, I’ve grown enough accustomed to the sight of my face to recognise its expression now as one of fear, and grief, and defiant apology. “What if they thought you dead?”

“NATURAL SLEEP, LIKE natural life, is precarious,” said Ariel, alighting on the sand. Her leopard-voice was a rumbling purr. “Remember that, Miranda.”

“I will, but what does precarious mean?”

Ariel paused in the act of washing a paw. She twitched an ear, then popped back into our shared girlshape, toying with a curl. “It means unsafe, and subject to change. Like a sandbar moved by waves.”

I nodded; I was an expert on sandbars. Then, unbidden, a strange thought came to me. “The mice moved when I touched them,” I said. “Do I not move in my sleep?”

“You don’t,” she said. “No matter the provocation, you stay still.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s... comforting, I suppose.” My skin felt strangely cold. “Is it comforting, Ariel?”

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Her eyes were mine, yet older than mine. "That depends," she said.

"On what?"

"On the provocation."

"THERE IS A spell," says Ariel, when I say nothing. "A glamour of sorts, though a little more complex. All who know you here will think you dead of your childloss fever—which I can cure, in either case," she adds, quickly. "You will live, Miranda. I owe you that much. But if you wanted—"

"Yes," I say. I exhale relief like poison. I don't know where I'll go, if Ariel will take me there or merely provide me with a chance at departure, but I cannot stay here. My island was not wild, compared to this.

There are such monsters in a palace.