

Author Jordy Rosenberg's bold take on an old legend — Jack Sheppard

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In *Confessions of the Fox*, the Tower Menagerie features in the story and is a powerful allegory. Its significance lies in conveying that Jack Sheppard and Bess Khan are, figuratively speaking, human members of an animal menagerie.

Historically The London Tower Menagerie was established to house wild and exotic animals given as gifts by Roman emperors and medieval kings. Later, colonial traders sought to exhibit what they perceived as “exotic” peoples from colonized regions in so-called “living dioramas,” presenting them as degrading entertainment. These human zoos were created in Europe with overt colonial aspirations (Nicholson, 2021).

Set in Georgian England, *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) by American writer Jordy Rosenberg repurposes the legendary eighteenth-century English rogue Jack Sheppard as a trans* male character—an identity encompassing a-gender, bigender, and gender-fluid experiences (Raymond, 1994). Jack becomes part of a human menagerie, provoking the curiosity of onlookers because of the way he is—or is not—legible within normative gender categories. He comes to understand himself as an outsider to conventional perception; it is precisely his singularity that attracts voyeuristic attention. Jack thus represents the human analogue to the Tower's menagerie exhibits.

As a child, Jack's mother perceives him as an unmanageable beast—neither a “proper” girl nor a “proper” boy. Living in poverty, any hope of success through carpentry apprenticeship collapses. Although considered unattractive, Jack is nevertheless taken on as indentured labor: “A bargain's a bargain” (Rosenberg, 13). He becomes bound to the master Kneebones, a captivity not unlike that of a caged animal.

Jack's lover and companion-in-arms, Edgworth Bess Khan, is biracial—South Asian and Anglo—and the daughter of a lascar sailor. Early in the novel, Bess recounts her childhood to Jack through the metaphor of a Fen Tiger, whose parents unsuccessfully sought refuge in London. Bess becomes an unapologetic sex worker and a skilled thief, much like Jack himself. Despite the dangers of their world, she finds comfort in their partnership as accomplices and political allies.

Bess's racialized body, like Jack's slim and ambiguous frame, draws the attention of the Centinels—literal “watchmen” who prey on those who appear destitute or who frequent prostitutes. Such surveillance disproportionately targeted lascars and others from the East Indies, whom authorities believed had brought the Plague to London.

Jack and Bess survive amid London's squalor as though they were metaphorical circus performers. They attend the Tower Menagerie in search of a figure known as the Lion-Man, rumored to be involved in producing a “manly” elixir derived from ingredients imported from South Asia. The Lion-Man is pursued by the rogue constable Jonathan Wild, who is revealed to be Jack's nemesis. Wild functions as a villain throughout the novel; while Jack often manages to evade him, escape is never guaranteed.

Eventually, Wild captures Jack and imprisons him, exhibiting him much like an animal in a zoo. Spectators pay to gawk at and voyeuristically consume Jack's supposed “strangeness.” His

body becomes an object of spectacle, reinforcing the novel's critique of institutionalized surveillance and dehumanization.

Prior to their visit to the Tower Menagerie, Jack observes Bess studying images of "sexual chimeras." Seeing these images causes Jack to perceive himself as an oddity. Later, Jack consults Evans, a fraudulent surgeon who had previously employed Bess's services as a sex worker. Evans explains what would now be described as top surgery, but only after cynically lecturing on hermaphroditism—defined as possessing both male and female genitalia—and declaring Jack's body abnormal, and therefore inhuman.

Jack is labeled an "aberration" (Rosenberg, 132). Yet the notion of the chimera suggests duality rather than monstrosity: something formed from multiple sources, perceived as impossible only because it resists dominant frameworks of reality. The chimera becomes a conceptual tool for managing the fantastic and the unfamiliar.

Ultimately, the novel unfolds as a resistance narrative. Jack and Bess exist in "togetherness" (Rosenberg, 111), both politically and sexually, resisting social norms. In a fantastical sense, Jack—assisted by Bess—transcends oppression, imagined as a lion with wings. Bess first gives Jack a strap-on, a horn, symbolizing transgression and becoming. Over time, she teaches him to transgress more fully (hooks, 1994), supporting him through the deception necessary to access surgery and later witnessing his painful recovery. Jack emerges as a sexual chimera who has undergone transformation. Together, Jack and Bess unite in defiance of society's judgment.

Works Cited

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