

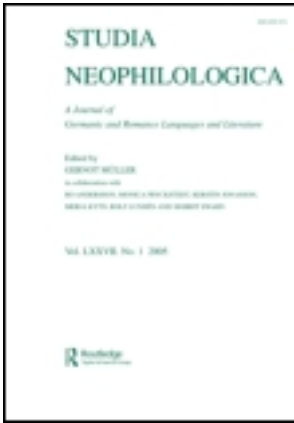
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The Woods as Heterotopia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

LAUREL MOFFATT

What have the woods to do with Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?¹ For the lovers, the woods represent an escape from Athens and, hence, from the certainties and constraints of the “sharp Athenian law” (I.i.162-3). Although the woods are immediately valued by the lovers as a means of escape, their notion of its worth differs from what the woods truly offer. It is by traveling in the woods that the lovers are able to reconcile with one another and Athens, and marry, not illicitly, but rather, in an Athens renewed by what has happened in the woods.² And it is upon entering the woods, so to speak, that the audience sees the rich reality of this shadowy place and its role in engendering the harmony at the play's end. The woods are an antithesis of sorts to Athens, the place of philosophy, law, constancy and absolutes. In this way the woods function as what Michel Foucault terms a heterotopia. According to Foucault, heterotopias are real places that function “like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”³ The woods serve as an escape from Athens, yet, simultaneously, the woods and the events occurring within them (namely the workings of the fairies and their effect on the imagination) have much to do with Athens. The concord experienced in Athens at the end of the play is a direct result of the fairies and their magic, both of which bring health to the lovers' love.

When the scene shifts from Athens to the woods, the fairies are the first onstage. Just as the first act is set in Athens with mortals and their ruler, Theseus, so the second act begins in the woods with the fairies and their rulers, Oberon and Titania. The duke of the very concrete Athens has as his counterpart the woods' “king of shadows” (III.ii.348). Although described as merely shadows, Puck, Titania and Oberon emphasize to the audience the substantial existence and effect of the fairies on mortals. Puck, for example, says to a fellow fairy that he is a “merry wanderer of the night” who takes on the likeness of other things in order to “jest” with Oberon and fool mortals (II.i.43–50). So protean but substantial a shape-changer is he that “The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale/ Sometime for three-footed stool mistaketh me” (II.1.51–52).

Critics have interpreted the fairies in a wide variety of ways. Some have seen Puck and the fairies as non-existent (except within naïve imaginations);⁴ others have argued that the fairies are malicious characters who bring darkness and deviance to the play;⁵ and still others have viewed the fairies as tools of popular culture used by “subordinated subgroups.”⁶ None of these views seems adequate. For a start, those who define the fairies as malign do not take into consideration the blessings the fairies give to the mortals at the end of the play. Further, those who understand the fairies to be non-existent, or existing only as tropes (the first and last critiques) neglect the fact that Puck describes his jests in full view of an audience: to the audience, that is to say, he is not just a figment of the imagination but seemingly alive and well and capable of speaking onstage. The words that determine the sense of Puck's existence are, of course, “beguile” and “likeness.” They rather clearly suggest that Shakespeare goes beyond common fairy lore by emphasizing at once the existence of Puck within the play and his ability to take on the likenesses of other objects in order to beguile both fairies and mortals. He entertains Oberon with his imitation

of other things and, as well, fools mortals by tricking them through his self-transformations.

What, then, is the role of Shakespeare's fairies in the Athenian woods? At first, they seem only to cause disorder. Following Puck's description of the harmless pranks he plays on mortals, Oberon and Titania reveal their greater impact on the natural world. Chaos is come again, it seems, because of the quarrels between the fairy king and queen. While it has been argued that the nature of their disagreement is essentially a political power struggle, it is nonetheless true that the disagreement is familial rather than political.⁷ The royal pair war with one another over the matter of a being described as both a "little changeling boy" and also the son of a mortal.⁸ This Indian boy has characteristics of both the mortal and the spirit world. Like the changeling of ambiguous being who is both fairy and mortal, the woods are a place of shadows and harsh reality. The consequence of Titania and Oberon's argument is a world where "rheumatic diseases do abound" and "the seasons alter" (II.i.90,92). Frosts fall on roses in full bloom and all the seasons war with one another so that "the mazed world/ By their increase now knows not which is which" (II.i.97-98). The discord in the fairy world displays itself in the mortal and natural worlds (II.i.115-117). Whereas Puck's effect on mortals is cause for laughter, the effect of the fairy discord is cause for distress. The disaster in the natural world described by Titania would have brought to the minds of Shakespeare's original audiences the events of the early 1590s when similar hardships occurred in England.⁹ It is as if Shakespeare's audience is allowed to glimpse the secret causes for events such as everyday domestic incidents (failed recipes and general clumsiness) as well as the stranger and more disastrous disorder in the natural world that results in sickness of both body and land.¹⁰ The rivers flood their banks, crops fail, disease spreads, and frost graces the boughs where blossoms should.

Just before her description of the devastation in the natural world, Titania mentions a cause for this chaos when she laments that she and her attendants have not met "since the middle summer's spring," to dance their "ringlets to the whistling wind," without Oberon's "brawls" disturbing their "sport" (II.i.82,86-87). Oberon has consistently prevented Titania from dancing. The idea of the dance is of great significance for both current and Renaissance audiences, although for different reasons. While current critics have for some decades shunned the "Tillyardized" idea of order and harmony, in favor of discussions of "the diverse and semiotically complex practices of dancing," it was nonetheless an accepted notion in the sixteenth century that the act of dancing represented order and harmony.¹¹ As Sir John Davies' *Orchestra* states, "Concords true picture shineth" in dancing, and "in thys Art [...] divers men and women" dance different parts, "Yet all as one, in measure doe agree,/ Observing perfect uniformitee."¹² However unfashionable it may be to make this point, the truth remains that, for Davies as for many of his contemporaries, dancing operated as an ordering principle, locating all its participants in their rightful ranks and places. Now, the keeper of order and leader in the dance is of course love. When love is absent, the music fails, the dancing stops, and *discordia* without *concors* is all that is left. The latter is apparent in Titania's description of the unrest in the natural world, as well as in her mention of the fact that, because of her argument with Oberon, "No night [is] now with hymn or carol blessed" nor do mortals have their "winter cheer" (II.i.101-102). According to Titania's testimony, the world has become a sad, disjointed place ever since the fairy dances ceased.

There is no immediate promise of reconciliation between the fairy rulers. Instead, Oberon vows to "torment [Titania] for this injury," to punish her for refusing to give him the changeling (II.i.147). Oberon's promise of punishment sets the stage for more evidence of disorder. He plans to affect Titania's fancy by administering a potion to her eyes and fancy since it is often what the imagination "sees" that dictates the reason that follows.¹³ As is well known, the imagination was supposed to serve as a mirror accurately recording sensory impressions to the mind.¹⁴ In *A Treatie of Humane Learning*, for

example, Fulke Greville describes the imagination as “a glasse” which “ought to reflect true height, or declination” so that the understanding can clearly understand what the senses receive from the outside world.¹⁵ What should take place does not, of course, always occur. As Greville phrases it, the power of the imagination “hath her variation.” And, as he goes on to explain, despite the purpose of the imagination to record accurately to the mind what the senses receive, no imagination succeeds in doing only that. Some imaginations are fixed in their “variation,” others are not, but all imaginations are tainted or influenced by affection. Therefore, the pictures received by the sense become either more “foule or faire” than they are in reality.¹⁶ Greville then explains that the imagination is not able to accept what the senses report but only what “th’affections please/ To admit.”¹⁷ The affection thereupon determines what the imagination receives from the senses and transmits to the mind; and it is what the imagination perceives as lovely that the physical eyes then see as lovely. Oberon’s manipulating the imagination can thus be malign, as shown by Oberon’s intention to mar Titania’s fancy. However, Oberon’s ability to manipulate the imagination is significantly benevolent as well. The fairies show the audience the magic of the imagination, its power to mar but, more important, its power to mend.

Oberon, who plotted mischief a few lines before, now plots to mend matters between Helena and Demetrius after noticing the signs of her love and of his disdain. Things are not as they should be between Helena and Demetrius, rather “Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (II.i.231). The indecorous situation demands to be corrected. Since things are topsy-turvy in the woods, Oberon decides that “Ere he [Demetrius] do leave this grove/ Thou [Helena] shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love” (II.i.245-6). With this statement Oberon reveals his intention to restore love and order to the relationship of the young lovers, a microcosmic restitution with more general consequences.

Yet restitution is deferred: further indecorous transformations show the imagination’s power to mar before the audience sees the imagination’s power to mend and perfect. Puck unwittingly anoints the eyes of Lysander with the flower juice rather than those of Demetrius. To explain his former love for Hermia and present fixation on Helena, Lysander speaks the language of reason even while being beguiled. While Lysander sounds logical and reasoned, the audience knows that Lysander’s fancy is affected and so overtakes his reason. Even though Lysander professes “the will of man is by his reason swayed,” the audience knows that the will can also be swayed by fancy, especially since Lysander only professes this love after Puck mistakenly anoints his eyes with the potion (II.ii.121). While his love for Helena may seem reasonable, this “love” provides the audience with an ideal opportunity to see the drastic effects of fairy magic – and of the imagination – on mortals.

The second major and more ludicrous transformation occurs among the mechanicals when Bottom acquires the head of an ass. While this addition is fanciful rather than malign, the transformation does achieve Oberon’s malicious aim in altering Titania’s fancy, since Bottom is the first creature she sees, and hears, upon awakening. When the mechanicals spy the transfigured Bottom for the first time Quince immediately responds: “O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted. Pray, masters; fly, masters: help!” (III.i.99–100). In this transformation or translation, the transformed becomes bestial rather than beatified, and inspires revulsion rather than reverence in the witnesses, except to infected eyes. The reaction of the mechanicals neatly contrasts the reaction of Titania. Bottom awakens her with the sound of his singing. She then admits that her “ear is much enamoured” with his singing, her eye is “enthralled” to his shape and his “virtue” moves her to swear her love for him (III.i.131–135). Through such an infection of the fancy of a mortal or a fairy, things can go terribly awry, leading the queen of the fairies to be enamored of the basest of base men (or Bottom). Through the transformations of the imaginations of Lysander and Demetrius, and of the visage of Bottom, the audience sees the fairies’ deployment of the imagination’s power, and hence, their power over

perception. They can change mortal and fairy perception, such as what is perceived to be lovely, as well as what the audience sees on stage, in this instance, Bottom's changed appearance. The audience, along with the fairies, is treated to a more comprehensive view or vision of the richly layered reality of the play.

The action within the woods thus demonstrates the ability of shadows and dreams – the phantasmal – to reflect and affect reality. Oberon and Titania's arguments disorder the natural world of Athens; and, when Oberon decides to mend the sight of the lovers and make amends with Titania, the world of Athens is again affected. Oberon instructs Puck to correct his earlier mistakes by crushing into Lysander's eyes an herb whose "virtuous property" takes all "error" from his sight, in order that, when he awakens, the events of the night in the woods "Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision" (III.iii.368–369, 372). In Lysander's case, the errant herbal juice placed in his eyes led to his eyes then wandering from Hermia. After his sight is mended he is made to think that the events of the night were just a dream. However, it is this assumed "dream" that both confuses and restores his sight. When Puck applies the tincture, he re-orders the disorder and promises, "all shall be well." The remedy is specifically for Lysander and Hermia but the restoration of their love becomes a symbol of a re-ordering more widespread than one for just two lovers. After all, Puck vows that "all shall be well" and that "every man should take his own."¹⁸ The "dream" of the woods then ends with music and dancing. Oberon calls for music by which the mortals are to sleep and the fairies dance (IV.i.80–86). In playing music and dancing, Oberon and Titania signal a change in the state of affairs in the woods and in Athens. As Oberon explains to Titania, since they are "new in amity," they will "tomorrow midnight solemnly/ Dance in Duke Theseus' house, triumphantly" where "the pairs of faithful lovers [will] be/ Wedded with Theseus, all in jollity" (IV.i.86–91). This is a restoration of the order lacking earlier in the play when Titania describes the chaotic events of the mortal, natural world. Along with the disease of the land and a confusion of the seasons, there also was a dearth of dancing and music, symbols of an ordered and harmonious world (I.ii.98–102). The restoration of love among the mortals at the hands of the fairies culminates in the reconciliation of the fairy queen and king. This then leads to a restitution of order that extends beyond the woods to Athens and results in a various *discordia concors*.¹⁹ Thomas Nashe describes dreams as the refuse of the day; he also finds that there is "no such figure of the first chaos whereout the world was extrought, as our dreams in the night. In them all states, all sexes, all places are confounded and meete together."²⁰ Shakespeare plays with two ideas of dreams by both expressing distrust of dreams yet also using the apparent dream of the woods as the place where lovers, actors and fairies all meet and mingle, and where order is restored. What first appears to be jumbled and confused shows itself to be ordered and of great significance for the world outside the woods. In fact, the magnitude of the *discordia concors* brought about by the work of the fairy world becomes apparent when Theseus and his hunting party arrive in the woods. The restoration and harmony of opposites within the natural world is symbolized by "the musical confusion/ Of hounds and echo in conjunction" which Theseus and Hippolyta hope to hear. More importantly, it is symbolized by the mended relationships of the four lovers that the ducal couple witnesses instead, a mending that Oberon had promised at the end of the dream in the woods (IV.I.109–110).

It is not just the woods that perform an ordering function. Foucault also lists the stage as a heterotopia that juxtaposes in one place several sites "that are in themselves incompatible."²¹ In the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the stage, like the woods, or the "dream" of the woods, brings together figures as disparate as mortals, fairies and hobby actors, all of whom are called "shadows" in Puck's epilogue, and thereby both fairies and actors. Puck also links the action of the woods to the action of the play as a whole with the reference to dreams. The woods experience is termed a "dream" by the lovers and the mechanicals, although it is the reality of the events in the woods that restore and reorder life in Athens and turns potential tragedy into comedy. For Puck then to apply

the term “dream” not just to the events in the woods, but to the play as a whole, suggests that the audience may interpret the play in the same way that the lovers interpret their in the woods experience. Upon waking from the “dream” of the woods the lovers find that they are able to see differently from the way that they had before. They are able, for a moment, to stand in the two worlds of dreaming and waking, of the woods and Athens. Hermia finds that she sees “things with parted eye,/ When everything seems double” (IV.i.187–188). Sleeping and waking, in the woods and out of the woods, the lovers recognize that it is “by some power” (though they know not what power) that they are brought to a more ordered relational state. And it is by this same power that they are able to see partly into the sylvan reality behind the newfound Athenian concord. However, in the end they decide that they are indeed awake, that their waking state is reality and that the entire experience in the woods was a dream. But what kind of dream the lovers do not say. Puck, however, alludes to the idea of dream as truth when he equates “dream” with “vision” in his epilogue (Epilogue 4,6). Hippolyta is perhaps the only mortal character in the play that apprehends both the fanciful, imaginative nature of the events of the woods alongside their reality. After hearing the lovers’ stories of their night in the woods, she decides that because “their minds [are] transfigured so together” their story “grows to something of great constancy;/ But howsoever, strange and admirable” (V.i.24, 26 – 7). The strangeness of their story does not diminish its constancy or truth, nor does its constancy erase its wonder for Hippolyta. She is able to understand their tale with “parted eye,” just as the lovers could upon first awakening. So too, in his invitation to consider the play as a dream, Puck hints that the audience should be able to see the play as both a fanciful “weak and idle theme” as well as a dream vision, an event both “strange and admirable,” and “something of great constancy” (V.i.26-7). And in so seeing and understanding the play, the audience, like Hippolyta, the fairies and the play itself, marries mental opposites and brings about a “gentle concord” (IV.i.142).

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NOTES

- 1 Thanks are due to Dr. A.D. Cousins of Macquarie University for his patient perusal and critique of the drafts for this article, and to Dr. Michael Mack of Catholic University of America for the aid he gave in the initial investigation of this topic.
- 2 This is similar to an idea of Frank Kermode regarding the power of the garden in “The Argument of Marvell’s *Garden*,” *Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. William R. Keast, New York, 1962, p. 295.
- 3 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, 1986, p. 24. The idea of the heterotopia is also used to describe the paradox of Venice in Peter Platt’s article, “‘The Meruailouse Site’: Shakespeare, Venice and Paradoxical Stages” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, 2001, pp. 121–154.
- 4 Andrew Weiner, “‘Multiformitie Uniforme’: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *ELH* 38, 1971, pp. 329–349; and C.L. Barber, “May Games and Metamorphoses on a *Midsummer Night*” *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*, New York, 1959, p. 143.
- 5 David Bevington, “‘But We Are Spirits of Another Sort’: The Dark Side of Love and Magic in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Siegfried Wenzel, Chapel Hill, 1978, p. 82.
- 6 Mary Ellen Lamb, “Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, 2000, p. 284. In her essay, Lamb “respond[s] to recent critiques by demonstrating the possibility of political agency in a host of early modern practices involving fairies and Robin Goodfellow” and “considers the emergence of a concept of popular culture through the literary representation of fairies and Robin Goodfellow in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” p. 278–279.
- 7 Some new historicist criticism finds that the disagreement between Oberon and Titania symbolizes a political power struggle between popular culture and the elite, and between feminine and masculine culture. An example of this approach is written by Skiles Howard in “Hands, Feet, and Bottoms: Decentering the Cosmic Dance in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44, 1993, pp. 325–342.

- 8 II.i.120, 135. He is also the matter over which critics spill a large amount of ink. The basis of Margo Hendricks's article on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the question "what are we to make of the Indian boy?" The article is entitled: "'Obscured by dreams': Race, Empire, and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, 1996, p. 37–60. Jan Kott states that the character of the Indian child is "the most intriguing puzzle" in the play, and writes about this character in "Bottom and the Boys," *New Theatre Quarterly* 9:36, November 1993, p. 307. William W. E. Slights in "The Changeling in *A Dream*" *SEL* 28, 1988, pp. 259–272, links the indeterminacy of the changeling to what he sees as the indeterminate meaning of the play.
- 9 *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A New Variorum Edition*, ed. Horace Howard Furness, New York, 1963, pp. 249–253.
- 10 R.W. Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, 1964, pp. 115–129. Dent states: "For this night on which we can see fairies, we are allowed to understand, playfully, the cause for otherwise unaccountable phenomena. It is in such context, too, that we hear the play's only reference to Theseus' well-known infidelities preceding his 'true love' marriage to Hippolyta; these too are charged to fairy influence (although Titania discounts the charge). In short, aspects of the inexplicable past, familiar to the audience, have been imaginatively explained as fairy-caused," p. 118.
- 11 David Mikics, "Poetry and Politics in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Raritan* 18, 1998, pp. 99–119. Mikics looks at the current trends in literary interpretation and finds that new historicism "has largely abandoned the earlier critical interest in coherence and harmony...Current work on Shakespeare rarely attempts an explanatory account of a given play in light of its whole critical and literary-historical legacy." Instead, critics such as Skiles Howard, (though not specifically mentioned by Mikics) use plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "to illustrate the way that sovereign power...imposes its will" (119). Howard finds that interpretations of dancing as a symbol of order have been "Tillyardized" and that such interpretations are a "bland celebration of 'harmony'," p. 327. E.M.W. Tillyard, in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, New York, p. 101, states that "the created universe was itself in a state of music, that it was one perpetual dance."
- 12 Sir John Davies, "Orchestra," *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger, Oxford, 1975, section 110, p. 119.
- 13 Dent explains that "From the play's beginning we are reminded of the commonplace that although the eyes are integrally involved in the process of inspiring and transmitting love, nevertheless 'love sees not with the eyes'; instead, the eyes 'see' what the lover's imagination dictates," pp. 118–119.
- 14 William Rossky writes of the importance of the accuracy in the report of sensory evidence by the imagination to the mind in his essay "Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic," *Studies in the Renaissance*. ed. M.A. Shaaber, vol. 5, New York, 1958, pp. 49–73.
- 15 Fulke Greville, "Treatie of Humane Learning," *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1938, lines 61–63.
- 16 Greville, lines 64–68.
- 17 Greville, lines 69–71.
- 18 III.iii.47, followed by lines 43–44. Italics mine.
- 19 It is this *discordia concors* that Leon Guilhamet understands to be the end or "action" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Guilhamet's thoughts on this matter may be found in "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the Imitation of an Action," *SEL* 15, 1975, p. 257–272.
- 20 Thomas Nashe, "The Terrors of the Night," *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, Oxford, 1958, p. 356.
- 21 Foucault, 25.