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# Shakespeare's midsummer fairies: Shadows and shamen of the forest

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Shakespeare's Midsummer Fairies: Shadows and Shamen of the Forest

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two	3
Ecocriticism; or the Initiation in the Forest	3
Chapter Three	15
The Roots of Eco-Awareness in Literature: The Pastoral	15
Classical Beginnings: Virgil's <i>Eclogues</i>	16
Medieval Dogma and Its Critique	19
Renaissance Revival of Classical Forms: The Pastoral Returns	21
Festive Comedy and Saturnalia: Forest as Spa-Vacation	25
Fairy Doctors	27
An Ecocritical View of the Pastoral and the Picaresque	32
Chapter Four	36
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> as Ecocriticism	36
Animism	37
Inter-relatedness: Dreams of the Shaman	44
The Rogue-Hero	51
Bottom as the Picaro on a Shamanic Journey	51
Puck as the Picaresque Shaman	53
Works Cited	58

# Shakespeare's Midsummer Fairies: Shadows and Shamen of the Forest

Patricia Roy

## ABSTRACT

Recent interest in environmental crises has inspired literary critics to consider how the history of ideas shapes our current ecological debates. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sets the stage for assessing how Renaissance attitudes towards nature have influenced current ideologies. While the play appears to be a fantasy, it reveals a relationship with nature, both physically and figuratively. The play's excursion into the woods shows an attempt to heal human relationships. Shakespeare's use of the imagery of nature argues in favor of the green world, for it is a world inhabited by shadows and shamen – or, as Shakespeare calls them, fairies.

A key element for ecocritics concerns the apparent silence of nature in literature and other cultural forms. Christopher Manes' article, "Nature and Silence," alerts readers to nature's lack of voice as a symptom of humanism, especially of theories such as the Great Chain of Being, which place nature in a subordinate role to humans, giving *homo sapiens* the dubious power to speak for nature. I wish to present Shakespeare's fairies as the speakers of the forest and of nature's values, according to the Early Modern period. By liberating fairies from demonic associations, Shakespeare's forest appears to us as inviting and healing. Furthermore, I argue that the pastoral tradition, which informs the Early Modern attitude towards nature, is superseded by picaresque and shamanic figures

within the text. These elements allow for a subversive understanding of nature and our relationship to it.

If humans adapted to their environment by developing consciousness, what has been the effect of that consciousness on their environment? Shakespeare's forest and fairies help to confront this issue because they restore human awareness to a healthy state of consciousness. By showing fairies in this light, Shakespeare provocatively proposes that humans "mend" their relationship to their surroundings as well as their own human relationships.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Recently, ecologically conscious consumers and their constituents, literary critics among them, have begun checking the labels and reading the reviews of the ideas to which they subscribe. While consumers attempt to heal the planet with the power of their dollars, literary ecocritics assess the damage done to nature in literature and report on sound practices when they find them. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sets the stage for this kind of assessment. The play contains both fantastic elements and healing power. It also demonstrates an intermingling of both pastoral and picaresque elements and characters. Shakespeare's use of the imagery of nature affirms the green world, a world inhabited by shadows and shamen – or, as Shakespeare calls them, fairies. These fairies become the voice for several competing discourses, including the festive drama of the green world, the pastoral idealism experienced by the lovers, the picaresque adventures of the mechanicals, and the animistic magic of Puck.

By liberating fairies from demonic associations, Shakespeare is able to empower the voice of the forest. However, this liberation is undercut by the containment of subversive elements, especially Titania and the sexuality that her body and discourse represent. Despite this containment, other subversions are less controlled. I will argue that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents opposing interpretations of the relationship between humans and their environment that favor picaresque and shamanic rather than pastoral understandings of ecology. To contextualize this discourse, I will examine not only the play's relationship to pastoral and picaresque traditions, but will portray the play

as a festive drama, employing natural imagery to evoke the holiday atmosphere familiar to traditional interpretations of nature. While the festive elements derive in part from a pastoral tradition, the play makes room for picaresque figures and shamen who mildly mock the “mortal fools” who are too unaware of their surroundings to fully recognize the forces of nature and culture with which they interact.

## Chapter Two

### Ecocriticism; or the Initiation in the Forest

Understanding the need for an ecological awareness of literature underlines Lynn White's article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." He begins his essay with what is becoming a trope in ecocritical scholarship, an example of how human history impacts our environment. He relates a conversation with Aldous Huxley in which the famous author laments the changes to his childhood landscape:

. . . now it was becoming overgrown with unsightly brush because the rabbits that formerly kept such growth under control had largely succumbed to a disease, myxomatosis, that was deliberately introduced by the local farmers to reduce the rabbits' destruction of crops. Being something of a Philistine, I could be silent no longer, even in the interests of great rhetoric. I interrupted to point out that the rabbit itself had been brought as a domestic animal to England in 1176, presumably to improve the protein diet of the peasantry. (3)

An ecological awareness assumes, as White so aptly explains, that "all forms of life modify their contexts" (3). In literature, we see the constant struggle of characters to achieve their aims by modifying their situations, sometimes heroically, other times tragically, and still other times comedically. In *MND*, the fairy magic, a product of both human imagination and natural elements, modifies the situations of the lovers in ways that affirm peaceful relationships between friends, lovers, even between fathers and



daughters. The fairy magic of Shakespeare accomplishes this modification with both humor and romance. Because the healing of the lovers is so salubrious to them, a change occurs within Athens as well: Theseus and Hippolyta speak to one another as lovers and Egeus' ridiculous claim on Hermia's life is forgotten.

White is concerned with the artifacts of human intellectual history. He sees the emergence of empirical approaches to nature as damaging in ways that we have only recently begun to detect and address. To understand this development, White examines "fundamental medieval assumptions" (8), especially those deriving from a Christian ideology. He writes: "The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture" (9). This revolution stressed humanity's dominion over the rest of the natural world as a biblical imperative. Furthermore, the anthropocentric Christian God underscores humans' transcendence of nature and a rejection of animism.

Animism, as Christopher Manes explains, is the voice of the natural world. This voice relies upon a shamanistic – not scientific – engagement with the natural realm in order to be "heard" by humans. Terri Windling, in her online article on shapeshifting in art and world myths, discusses how the shamanic journeys of the heroes of myths often feature a journey both into madness and into the forest. While there, the hero (a Celtic Merlin or Irish warrior such as Suibhne) lives like an animal, and learns the language of animals and how not to be afraid of them. In the example of Merlin, the magician emerges from his trial in the forest having learned how to access the full strength of his power. Windling also cites the work of Mircea Eliades, who describes the education of the shaman as a combination of ecstatic experience, pertaining to the dreams and visions

of the shaman, and traditional lore, pertaining to the cultural meanings of spirits, myths, genealogies, and the techniques of the shaman. Both Manes and White would argue that the defeat of shamanism, the desire to separate humanity from earthly concerns, and the rise of technological sophistication effectively silence nature – not by cutting out its tongue so much as by cutting off our own ears: “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (White 10).

Within its own history, the Christian worldview supplies a corrective -- St. Francis of Assisi. Heretically, the saint preached a lesson on the virtue of humility, embracing all animals and plants as part of God’s creation. Rather than perceiving non-human creatures and objects as emblems, the saint saw them as brothers and sisters, like Christ who took on humble flesh and suffered in this world (13). In this recognition of the universality of suffering, humans can overcome extreme (and fallacious) positions of perceived objectivity. Ecocritical discourse must be one of shared suffering and joy, one of compassion and wisdom.

Only when nature speaks and is heard does the opportunity for compassionate wisdom arise. Christopher Manes suggests in “Nature and Silence” that not only are new ethics required, “but [also] a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective” (17) must be employed. Manes repeats the call for humility, reminding us that it is not superstition or irrationality that listens to nature but an orientation towards experiencing nature with sophisticated, not selfish, self-awareness. A return to animism as a way of understanding the non-human world severs the Great Chain of Being, and decentralizes

literacy and Christian exegesis. Without a divine purpose, animals may speak for their own purposes. Rather than see evolution as progress away from nature and towards a spiritual and anthropocentric ideal, as in the Great Chain, Manes perceives evolution as having no goal (22), preferring instead the biocentric model of deep ecology. To do this, we need to “dismantle a particular historical use of reason, a use that has produced a certain kind of human subject that only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences” (25). To learn the new language suggested by Manes, we must engage in contemplation of nature. I interpret this as a direct call to artists, poets, and other knowledge-builders to direct their creative energies towards ecological practices in both imaginative and scholarly arts.

While White and Manes argue that ecology is a subversive science, Neil Evernden accurately points out that ecology is often concerned with preservation, perhaps even a resistance to change. He suggests that the true subversion in ecological science relates to the premise of inter-relatedness (93). In “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place and the Pathetic Fallacy,” Evernden defines this premise as a “radical intermingling of parts of the ecosystem. There are no discrete entities” (93). By undermining the subject-object relationship of most science, ecology recognizes that evolution only occurs when species and organisms change as a result of interaction with the biosphere (4). According to this theory, organisms, species, and systems can become so entwined that subjectivity is blurred. Evernden asks, “What do you do with creatures such as lichen, composed of two kinds of organism . . . ? The algal component provides photosynthetic ability, the fungal component structure and nutrient uptake. The two are mutually dependent on each other. What is a lichen? A plant? A co-operative?” (94). We might ask: in the ecosystem of a

work of literature, when creatures or species (characters, imagery, setting) interact, what is the potential for symbiosis? Typically, in an ecocritical analysis, elements that mutate, adapt, and react to their context are favored. Art gives us a chance to see what it would feel like to belong to a different world. By living vicariously in this way, audiences are as much a part of the “definition” or territory of plays as the written text. This view of ecology is particularly relevant to drama, since it is only through the dissolution of the invisible fourth wall of the theater that a play can be seen and made real (even if that viewing occurs within the mind of a reader).

This process is essentially the creative one described by William Rueckert in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Rueckert likens poems to green plants, which both manufacture and store energy:

Some poems – say *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, *Song of Myself* – seem to be, in themselves, ever-living, inexhaustible sources of stored energy, whose relevance does not derive solely from their meaning, but from their capacity to remain active in any language and to go on with the work of energy transfer, to continue to function as an energy pathway that sustains life and the human community. Unlike fossil fuels, they cannot be used up. (108)

The imagination, when engaged with the creation of poetry, enacts a kind of literary photosynthesis, manufacturing creative juice for the rest of humanity to partake. For Rueckert, educators of literature become extremely important in the circulation of this energy, for as this energy is used, it is renewed, having interacted with the imaginations of more and more organisms. If Newton is correct and energy can neither be created nor

destroyed, then the great works of literary (and ecological) energy must be recycled to avoid inertia.

At this point, when discussing community and responsibility for energy, whether natural or ideological, I would suggest that ecological discourse often raises issues that are uncomfortable to human beings, especially when they relate to human freedom, for underlying the theories already discussed, rests the assumption that humans are not free to destroy the planet. Several critics have argued this point, but it is not always clear whether they mean that humans are not free morally or actually – an important difference. If humans are simply immoral if they destroy the planet, then this means that they can still choose to do this. If we suggest that humans cannot actually make choices that would destroy the planet, then we are suggesting that the *hubris* of humankind is checked by the forces of Nature. As Rueckert and other ecocritics suggest, our tragic flaw is our anthropocentrism (113). By insisting that the “face” of God is a human one, we privilege all human creations and values by arguing that animals and plants are naturally subjected to the judgment of God and humanity. Does accepting the deep ecology model – one in which all species are considered of equal importance – suggest that the fate of humanity is determined? Humans like to think we are in control of our lives – ecology suggests that we may have to accept other species as part of our own fate. This is a difficult idea for people who see their own image in a creator God.

This assumption becomes even more problematic when rebellious characters in literature are contained by traditional and outdated values. This is true in the case of Titania, who, in defying the will of her lord, defies the value system imposed upon her by a more or less human, and male, hierarchy. Since Oberon conflates natural law with his

own sovereignty, the play appears to suggest that it is “natural” to subject women to the dominion of both men and their laws. In this sense, it would seem that ecocritical theories, which aim to uphold “natural” laws, would be unable to support radical characters, even if they exhibit the highest ecological idealism. These patriarchal ideas of what is natural often lead to exploitation, not only of women, but also of nature. For example, according to Annette Kolodny in “Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction,” the image of the land is often gendered female. This gendering, because of its association with the subjugation of women, allows for exploitation, rape, and ownership of land and nature. Depicted as feminine, the land becomes “the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose and painless and integral satisfaction” (171). In some ways, this reading of the language of nature-writing recalls the rhetoric of the pastoral, with its high praise of both land and the shepherd’s lady love. However, Kolodny rightly exposes the victimization of nature through sexist language and argues that it will not allow readers to fully engage with an ecological rhetoric. It thus becomes important to reveal the problems of nature imagery as well as its merits.

Joseph Meeker attempts to articulate how ecological stories might be written. In “The Comic Mode: The Biology of Comedy,” Meeker distinguishes between tragedies and comedies, indicating that both offer a *mimesis* of human action, but differ in how each show the relationship between human action and the environment. In this article, and in his book *The Comedy of Survival*, Meeker exploits the differences between tragedy and comedy in a way that favors the restoration and healing of comedy. Since Meeker’s analyses are particularly relevant to my own, I wish to examine his arguments closely.

Meeker begins “The Comic Mode” with a comparison of two interpretations of the classical tale of Oedipus. In Sophocles’ tragedy, Oedipus is “a creature of suffering and greatness” (157), doomed, despite his nobility of mind and character. In raucous contrast, American novelist John Barth’s depiction of the same tale, *Giles Goat-Boy*, “emphasizes the ridiculousness of Oedipus’s situation and suggests that the hero is slightly dense for not avoiding the mess he’s made of his life” (157). The comparison helps demonstrate the rarity of tragedy, especially in our time. Tragedy relies upon the belief that “man exists in a state of *conflict* with powers that are greater than he is” (157, emphasis mine). In contrast, comedy is a more prevalent literary form. According to Meeker, comedy emerges not from kings and nobles, but from the common folk. As such, comedy tends to ridicule high idealism and “cultural systems of morality” (158). Meeker sees this tendency in comedy as part of our biology – the instinct to survive critiques behavior that will almost certainly lead to destruction.

Seeing comedy as essentially immoral and perhaps even as pessimistic may be another uncomfortable view, yet perhaps not if we examine the assumptions upon which most tragedies rest. Tragedies, concerned as they are with the greatness of individuals, usually men (Oedipus, Hamlet, King Lear), assume that morality involves rising above the normal conditions of life, transcending one’s nature. For ecocritics this is problematic since it valorizes non-adaptive behaviors (such as gouging out one’s own eyes to symbolize moral blindness or calling one’s mother a whore to praise the father). It also privileges men and masculine-gendered traits (courage in battle, stoicism, celibacy, “reason”).

Comedy, on the other hand, recognizes weakness and welcomes flawed characters back into the fold. Meeker suggests insightfully that “Comedy is a celebration, a ritual of renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair” (159). In Meeker’s seminal work, *The Comedy of Survival*, he illustrates this point by recounting the deeply emotional natural experience he had in Denali National Park in Alaska. He describes himself and his wife watching through binoculars a caribou mother give birth to a calf, only to have it immediately eaten before her eyes by a bear. The scene demonstrates powerfully how the emotions of tragedy are present despite outcomes: “Every impulse known to mammalian motherhood was evident in that caribou as she wrestled with her own emotions and with the choices available to her. She circled the scene, now lowering her head to attack, then backing off nervously at the futility of it. [ . . . ] Her anguish was evident in every move she made, alternately pacing, prancing, threatening, retreating, cowering, shivering, shaking her head in disbelief, staring” (13). It would be impossible to see such an event or even read about it and not be deeply moved by the emotions of tragedy -- pity and fear: “Watching from a safe distance, our agitation seemed almost as great as that of the mother caribou. The distance between us and the scene of death was closed by our empathy” (13). But is the story a tragedy? The caribou mother did not suffer from a tragic flaw unless the timeliness of the birth can be considered her fault. After an agonizing assessment of her situation, she rejoined the migration, moving back into the flow of life. Meeker attributes this to a fundamentally adaptive, comic (though in no way humorous) way of seeing the world. Tragedy encourages us to see the world as a punishment for hubris and misdeeds, thus polarizing good and evil and forcing us into unrealistic choices. Are we to believe



that the bear is the Devil? If this were the case, we would be calling for vegetarianism among all animals, including ourselves. The caribou cow did not succumb to her grief and anger; she did not die in battle with the bear for her now-dead calf. Instead, she moved on, courageously. Comedy provides a place for the grieving to return to, while tragedy locates blame and goes to war.

Comedy, then, is not populated by heroes but by humans and creatures, familiar enough to identify with. The Greek god, Comus, whose name is perhaps the root for comedy, underscores the association with common folk, “the ordinary sexual fertility of plants, animals, and people [. . .].” (Meeker 16). Most of all, comedy affirms actions which return people to sense and balance. Meeker provides Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* as an example of the anti-heroism of comedy. Through their sex-strike, the women of Athens are able to end the war, simply by relying on the natural instincts of their husbands. While this would not commonly be regarded as heroic action, the strike strategically ends strife and restores normal life (17).

But what is normal? Is the patriarchal Athens of *MND* “normal” with its repressive laws and unexplainable male bonding and potential for death? Or is “normality” found in the fairy realm, the woods of Athens, crowned with idyllic flowers, love-phrases, and fantasies? According to Meeker, the distinction depends on whether one takes a pastoral or picaresque view of nature. Pastorals, like tragedies, view city life negatively, favoring an escape to the lovely rural landscape of shepherds and maids – a fantasy. While many pastorals indicate a restorative quality in nature, as do the pastoral elements of *MND*, they also imply a transcendence of the actual reality of the natural setting. Meeker, instead, favors picaresque writings -- adventure tales of rogues, usually

commoners -- who survive in the environment that they find themselves in. The picaresque's resiliency and adaptiveness make him attractive in the context of Meeker's argument. Although they are unconventional, I will argue that both Bottom and Puck exhibit characteristics of the rogue. Furthermore, both characters undercut the pastoral elements in ways that bring healthy closure and "normalcy" to the idyllic dreams and shaping fantasies of the play.

Lastly, Scott Slovic's work fittingly returns attention to the human psychic experience of nature. Indeed, what is nature-writing in the end, but a human endeavor? In "Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience," Slovic reminds us that writing is an activity of the mind becoming aware of itself in relation to things it perceives as other: "by confronting "face to face" the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its "otherness," the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions [. . .]." (352). These excursions into nature – as we see in Thoreau's *Walden* and *Journals*, as well as in Shakespeare's festive comedies – are attempts to learn something about the self. This process expresses a tension between the "correspondence" a writer (or a character) feels with nature and the opposition or polarity that nature presents (354). Not all excursions into the woods turn out to be a picnic, but it is often through a confrontation with what is other in nature that the human sees more clearly. While this may seem very one-sided, given the "silence" of nature as suggested by Manes, it is actually a dialectical relationship. Through the recognition of the otherness of nature, writers have found ways to fine-tune their own perceptions. This increased perception improves writers' abilities to know nature and its complexity intimately, and to accept humanity's relationship to it. As Slovic states, with

this awareness, “the man belongs to the place without the place belonging to the man” (363). I believe that *MND* presents characters who, with their differing levels of perception, travel into the woods deliberately, for their own purposes, yet emerge changed, healed, perhaps more fully aware of themselves by having been touched by the fairy-forest’s magic.

## Chapter Three

### The Roots of Eco-Awareness in Literature: The Pastoral

Joseph W. Meeker, Glen A. Love, and other critics have identified the pastoral as the classical form from which many of the early discussions of nature and proto-ecocritical works developed. The pastoral mode begins with Theocritus' *Idyls* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. B.C. In this work, Theocritus creates several forms which later became refined by Virgil in his *Eclogues*. In both classical texts, we see such tropes as the lovelorn shepherd pining for his love, the pastoral elegy, singing matches between rival poets, and an overall emphasis on beauty and love ("Pastoral" 603). Most critics agree that the depiction of the natural world in the pastorals is highly idealized, describing only the ripest fruits, the softest grass, and most lovely maids. As nature-writing, this dreaminess cannot be ecologically real. As Thomas MacFarland observes in, *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy*, although the pastoral resembles a natural setting, it extracts any strife or harm (22). This is because the pastoral setting is an escape from a perceived corruption in the civilized world. Frank Kermode comments: "Quiet wilderness of the country is better than the cultivated and complex life of the hurrying city and court" (qtd. in MacFarland 29). In this way, MacFarland depicts the pastoral as an artificial space created for the superimposition of city life and values. The result is a "bucolic fantasy" featuring childhood's happiness with the world as an abundant playspace (MacFarland 30). Despite the fantasy, within these texts we discover the foundations for our beliefs about nature today. In order to develop an ecocritical history, critics are tracking a path through the

sunny hills of pastoral tropes to discover how they represent both material and intellectual reality.

### Classical Beginnings: Virgil's *Eclogues*

Virgil's *Eclogues* begin and end with allusions to the city and government. In the first Eclogue, Meliboeus laments that he must leave "our native place, our homes, / The fields we love [. . .]." (3). In this initial poem, nature is depicted as "home," the familiar landscape one longs for when away. Meliboeus refers to the wars and class struggles that have forced him to give up his fields, sending him off to far places, such as Africa, Scythia, and Britain. He pines for the loss of his land, which he fears will now be enjoyed by "Some godless barbarous soldier [. . .]." (9). Even as this nostalgia idealizes the natural setting, it claims it as a "common" space, too good for the privileged soldiers who will inherit it at the cost of the shepherds. This displacement of people from the land is a familiar rhetoric, one that tends to evoke sympathy for the loss of an idealized, bucolic past. The corruption of this world comes from the city, with its politicking and polluting populace.

It seems evident that this work offers the beginning of an ecological (and economical) awareness, an awareness reinforced by the language of comfort used to describe this rural setting: "And rest yourself awhile on these green fronds; / The apples are ripe, the chestnuts are plump and mealy, / There's plenty of good pressed cheese you're welcome to" (9). This kind of language, found throughout the work, contrasts the nutrition and production of the land with the death and displacement caused by

government and war. *MND* features strikingly similar language with its references to “apricots and dewberries” to be fetched for the “mortal,” Bottom. The play also uses these images to contrast with the “fruits of war” between Titania and Oberon. If the wood of Athens is a pastoral realm, then it serves to provide Bottom and fairies alike with such pleasures as: “. . . purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries; / The honey bags steal from the humble-bees” (3.1.162-163). Moreover, just as in the classical pastorals, the corruption of the soldiers, in this case Oberon and Titania, is not enough to convey a sense of complete despair. Despite the winds, “contagious fogs,” rotten corn, disease and unseasonable weather, the fairy bower remains an idyllic playspace, draped with petals of eglantine and musk roses.

Eclogue II features the trope of the lover’s lament. In it, we see a rhetoric that predicts the sadness of Helena and the desires of Titania. Corydon, who loves Alexis, complains that his love “has no pity” (11) in lines that recall Helena’s “You do me mischief. Fie, Demetrius!” (2.1.239). Helena is similar to Corydon even in her estimation of her own beauty. While Helena insists, “Through Athens I am thought fair as she[referring to Hermia]” (1.1.227), Corydon suggests, “Nor is it that I’m bad-looking” (13). Neither lover gives unqualified praise of his or her beauty, but the suggestion of beauty in grief actually heightens our expectations for ideal beauty in these lovers and emphasizes that “it’s just not fair” to be beautiful and loveless. However, neither lover is beyond self-reproach. While Helena compares her lack of beauty to a bear, Corydon calls himself a yokel. Both characters see their all-consuming passions as placing themselves in the awkward position of the hunter. Corydon laments: “Let me dwell here lamenting in the forest. / The fierce lioness follows after the wolf, / The wolf pursues the goat, the

wanton goat / Seeks out the flowering clover in the field, / And Corydon, Alexis, follows you” (15). Desire literally consumes Corydon. While this “food chain” may appear to be “natural,” Corydon “laments” it for the love-chase is a hungry pursuit. In *MND*, Helena reminds Demetrius that she was not made to woo, but that if he will run she will follow: “Run when you will. The story shall be changed: / Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase, / The dove pursues the griffin, the mild hind / Makes speed to catch the tiger [ . . .].” (2.1.230-233). In her case, her chase inverts order and degrades her. Inversions also appear in Eclogue VIII when Damon sings: “. . . What is it that / Lovers can hope for? Griffins and mares will mate, / And in the next age the timid doe will come / Down to the stream to drink along with the dogs” (63), and also later, “Let wolves run away from sheep [ . . .].” (65). The inversion of natural order seems to be most keenly felt by these gentle lovers who so easily attach themselves to natural imagery.

Corydon, in Eclogue II, also resembles Titania when he offers himself to Alexis: “O come and live with me in the countryside” (13). Titania’s invitation to Bottom similarly beckons: “The summer still doth tend upon my state, / And I do love thee. Therefore, go with me. [ . . .]. And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep” (3.1.149-153). Furthermore, Corydon attempts to impress Alexis with gifts brought in by the Nymphs, “baskets full of lilies [ . . .]. And I myself / Will gather chestnuts as an offering, / And also downy peaches, and waxen plums [ . . .]” (14-15), in a manner reminiscent of the ministrations of Titania’s dutiful fairies. However, Titania’s love for Bottom may also be an inversion of nature, recalling the griffins and mares of Eclogue VIII. Titania, like Helena, is degraded by the association with an “animal” lover, despite the restoration made possible through this diversion. Some scholars have even suggested

that Titania can be likened to Pasiphaë, who indecently loves a bull in Eclogue VI. I will argue that while this indiscretion degrades Titania, it empowers Bottom, who is a closer literary relative to the shepherds than is the fairy Queen.

### Medieval Dogma and Its Critique

The medieval period introduced Christian notions of morality to natural imagery. Although pastorals seem to “disappear” during the medieval period, the intellectual developments of this era are important to consider when pastorals resurrect during the renaissance. In his introduction to *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England*, Bruce Boehrer articulates the “absolute anthropocentrism” that developed from the imposition of Christian themes. This view is based upon three premises. The first is that humans differ from other creatures. Secondly, this difference makes humans superior to all other life on earth. Finally, this superiority renders nature an “exploitable resource” (Boehrer 6). Boehrer cites well-known scriptural passages that seem to allow for these premises, both from Genesis: “God created man in his own image [ . . . ]” and “Be fruitful and multiply [ . . . ].” (7). He also cites Lynn White’s assertions that Judeo-Christian thought encourages distinctions, superiority, and exploitation and relates these premises to St. Augustine’s interpretation of God’s image (7). Man’s superiority, and therefore God’s, is contingent upon the mind. Furthermore, St. Augustine assumes that this divinely-ordained capacity to reason prevents humans from being tamed, unlike animals. Boehrer sees this as equating “human hegemony with



humankind's exercise of reason" (8). Ecocritics are provocatively suggesting that humans have created God in their own image and are calling for a deconstruction of this idolatry.

A variation on this medieval theme operates within Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. Although not a pastoral, this beast fable is certainly an important and influential work relative to the development of ecological literature. As Lisa J. Kiser writes in her essay, "Chaucer and the Politics of Nature," Chaucer uses natural imagery to explore "the limitations of human knowledge; an interest in the uncertain relationship between textual representations and the events or objects they purport to describe; a celebration of the diversity of human perspectives on the world; and [. . .] an understanding of how nature had been theorized in a variety of medieval traditions" (43). Kiser feels that even though the poem certainly anthropomorphizes its animal characters, Chaucer never loses sight of the implications of this subject-object positioning for non-human nature. The poem catalogues human traits through the persona of the different species of birds. In doing this, Chaucer "overtly coerces" the reader into interpreting the birds in a particular way. Kiser argues that such a superficial analogy reveals an awareness that nature may have its own meanings beyond the obvious interpellation of human consciousness (48). The poem contrasts with dominant discourses on the superiority of humans by revealing instead the arrogance of an anthropocentric ideology (Kiser 50). This view prefaces the development of an acceptance of nature as a meaning-making system in its own right. It is also the view that Shakespeare will develop in early modern England.

### Renaissance Revival of Classical Forms: The Pastoral Returns

In the renaissance, the “rebirth” of interest in classical writings and art led to imitations of ancient forms, and the pastoral is a prime example of such an imitation (“Pastoral” 605). The renaissance featured the development of the Mantuan style of pastoral, which tended both to moralize and satirize aristocracy through the use of rustic characters. Sidney’s *Arcadia* and Spenser’s *The Shepherd’s Calendar* reflect a taste for a lofty Italianate style (“Pastoral” 604). Shakespeare’s *MND* reflects the pleasure of the material reality of the countryside experienced in Virgil’s *Eclogues* while only mildly imitating the Mantuan style through the satire of the rustics. In some sense, by including fewer references to Christian thought and allegory than Spenser, Shakespeare more closely conforms to the Virgilian pastoral style, while creating a less hierarchical work.

Spenser’s works conforms closely to the description and definitions of art and nature in Edward William Tayler’s *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature*. In this work, Tayler reflects on these two very prevalent topics in renaissance literature as an expression of that age’s appreciation of order (16). In Virgil, coming slightly before Christianity, we see less inclination to moralize and compartmentalize the terms art and nature. In the renaissance, Spenser and others seem ready to reflect Seneca: “For Nature giueth not vertue, it is an art to be made good” (qtd. in Tayler 21). To the renaissance mind, art “improved” or “completed” nature (21). This reinforces the idea, seen in Spenser, that nature is static while art is dynamic and changing. Art is viewed as progress.

Shakespeare seems to take a different approach. His natural world in *MND* is experiencing a cold war between Titania and Oberon, which halts the progress that nature would normally experience. The play does assert the need for change and suggests that some kind of art – the love potion – might be useful in motivating positive action. But even the love potion is closely tied to a natural origin and is mostly a euphemism for human (or, as Meeker will describe, mammalian) emotion and love. The “natural” corrective of love creates a means to its own end, and *MND* ends with greater optimism concerning love than does *The Calendar*.

Throughout Virgil’s *Eclogues* the joys and skills of singing and verse are celebrated. This esteem for poetry permeates the English renaissance pastorals of Spenser, especially *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. But while Virgil’s songs praise the material beauty of nature, Spenser’s idealized landscape conflates classical and medieval values of nature. According to William Allan Oram, Spenser’s eclogues combines the allegory of the shepherd as Christ amid his flock with the tradition of love laments and singing contests found in Virgil. In *Edmund Spenser*, Oram describes both the Virgilian and Mantuan styles of eclogues. Virgil is concerned with the material reality of the world; his descriptions focus on the pleasures and discomforts of the shepherds’ life. Conversely, the Mantuan style, named for Baptista Spagnuoli from Mantua, is concerned with Christian transcendence. In the Mantuan model, the pleasures and discomforts of Virgil become emblems for good and evil. Spenser combines these forms in a most typical renaissance fashion.

The organization of Spenser’s *Calendar* imitates both the annual calendar and the maturation of humankind. “January” begins the poem cycle with a morose reflection

upon the lack of growth and love. It presents Colin Clout as the inexperienced youth who must “gain new sanity by singing, working through the obsessions that blind [him]” (Oram 45). Colin does not learn this lesson; instead, he feels old and frustrated both with his art and his love life and expresses his frustration by breaking his pipe. While Shakespeare’s *MND* expounds upon the merits of the imagination, Spenser’s *Calendar*, in part, shows how the imagination creates melancholy, stunting maturity.

“February” expresses the debate between Virgilian and Mantuan pastoral modes. Cuddie, identifying as he does with his shivering sheep and his animal nature, represents the Acadian sensibility, while Thenot, with his moral principles, expresses the Mantuan sentiment. Thenot’s instructional tale, a warning to the youthful Cuddie, does more than reflect the “wisdom” of his age, but it also demonstrates his unchecked anger. Just as the destruction of the oak tree in the tale removes the shelter from the briar, the anger of the bitter old man undoes himself. The long-winded morality lesson is cut off by impatient Cuddie, who does not see himself as the briar. As Oram suggests, the dialogue is between two characters who are incapable of seeing each other’s point of view.

The juxtaposition of themes in “February” and “March” exploits the follies of both youth and age. “March” introduces the playful characterization of Cupid as the “boy” of love. The two shepherds, Willy and Thomalin, reflect on the passing of winter and the emergence of “Flora” who is both the goddess of flowers and, as the gloss notes, “a famous harlot” (29). The shepherds’ ignorant invocation of a not-so-innocent “maid,” coupled with Thomalin’s description of his attempt to strike or capture Cupid, underscores the innocence of youths in love. Here, the budding spring and the shady bough in which Cupid so expertly hides mask the adult sexual themes hidden from the

shepherds deep within the recesses of summer and fall. Foolishly, Thomalin tries to capture or control Love, but is rewarded with a wound, which “. . . hit me running in the heel: / For then I little smart did feel, / But soon it sore increased; / And now it rankleth more and more [. . .].” (28).

Both the blindness and madness of love inscribed in Spenser’s *Calendar* are also reflected in *MND*, particularly in the lovers but also in Titania and the rustics who kiss a wall and “no lips at all.” Throughout both the pastorals and *MND*, within the melancholy and despite the idealizations, there exists an awareness that this passion is passing, for it is attached to the ideals of youth. This is seen most clearly in Spenser and is appropriated and reworked in Shakespeare. In Shakespeare’s *MND*, blindness is employed temporarily to reveal hidden desires, aggressions, and fears.

Shakespeare reworked another common theme found in Spenser, the pastoral vision of Queen Elizabeth I. Spenser’s “April” functions as an ode to the “queen of shepherds all” (32). Furthermore, Spenser’s language asserts Elizabeth’s right to the throne and to her sovereignty over the land: “The flower of virgins: may she flourish long / In princely plight! / For she is Syrinx’ daughter without spot, / Which Pan, the shepherds’ god, of her begot” (32). Here, we see the accession of power and dominion of the land through traditional hegemony. Syrinx would be King Henry VIII, while the ordaining god of shepherds is a reference to Christ. In *MND*, Elizabeth is depicted as the “vestal virgin” whose escape from Cupid’s arrow releases the potential for love into the natural world in the form of a flower, yet leaves her “fancy-free.” However, most, if not all, of the Christian overtones found in *The Calendar* are not present in *MND*, making Shakespeare’s references to Elizabeth primarily a nod to the Queen as a source of

imagination and love. She is the maiden whose attractiveness to Cupid creates the occasion for the love-juice to be created.

Finally, in “June,” Colin reappears to lament further the loss of Rosalind. Colin has removed himself from the fields (and his duties as shepherd, no doubt) to pine in the hills for his lost love. As in Virgil’s first Eclogue, Spenser writes of a shepherd’s displacement – but with a critical difference. As Oram suggests, “Virgil’s Meleboeus has been dispossessed by political forces: he is a casualty of Augustus’s resettlement of Roman soldiers after the civil wars and would like nothing better than to return home. Colin is self-exiled; his decision to leave the valleys for the hills derives from inner dissatisfaction” (55). Significantly, Shakespeare’s characters move away from the city and back again in a form that more closely resembles the festive comedy or Saturnalian pattern than Virgil’s and Spenser’s pastorals. Unlike Colin, Shakespeare’s characters enter the pastoral realm to flee their former lives, to find their loves, or to practice their art, such as it may be.

#### Festive Comedy and Saturnalia: Forest as Spa-Vacation

According to Glen A. Love, pastorals and festive comedies both rely upon the idyllic pleasures of nature for their themes. If pastorals and festive comedies provide a definition of nature as a place of healing retreat, ecocritics would want to investigate the changes that the natural world encourages as well as to interrogate the assumption that nature is a holiday experience for humans. Northrop Frye and C.L. Barber both assert that the restorative nature of comedy derives from its use of Saturnalian pattern and from

its transformations in the green world. Frye discusses how comedy completes tragedy, arising from the tragic sacrifice of a God-man who is restored to life in the comic mode. In natural terms, comedy imitates the seasonal pattern in which winter gives way to spring; the sacrificial hero does not really die but is rejuvenated in a ritual of cathartic comedy. The resurrection of the hero/heroine corrects the dysfunction of a disordered “normal” world by restoring characters to that world as changed individuals. This sense of wholeness and completion is the pleasurable result of successful comedy and provides us with an ideological model on which to base ecocritical theories in relation to Shakespeare.

Barber presents the structure of Shakespeare’s comedies as emerging from a Saturnalian experience. As popular entertainments of the day, theater and holiday both allow for inversion of social norms, bringing release and clarification. The holidays in “Merry England” celebrated the cycle of the year, reflecting the relationship between nature and society. When Misrule dominated, the servant ruled the master, and the Fool became a hero. In spite of the negative accounts of the festivals by some of the more puritanical moralists, the pleasure of the May Day festivities seems to have pervaded all aspects of society regardless of class, gender, or residential area. As Barber notes, “May-game wantonness has a reverence about it because it is a realization of a power of life larger than the individual, crescent both in men and in their green surrounding” (24).

Both pastorals and festive comedies feature a retreat from a “normal” world that is perceived as corrupt and/or destructive. What is peculiar to festive comedies is that they most often assume a return to the now-healed normal world as a part of the plot. While pastorals are a means of escape, festive comedies imply healing and return.

Pastorals, despite their idealization, are set within the day-to-day activities of the shepherds; festive comedies are holidays, diversions from the norm. Festive situations cannot endure; once they have served their purpose and the characters have been healed, the vacation comes to its happy end.

### Fairy Doctors

If the excursion into the woods is a healing retreat, then fairies are the holistic healthcare providers. The role of fairies in Shakespeare's works has always been a topic deserving special notation. As Minor White Latham indicates in *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare*, both Shakespeare and Spenser deviate from much of the contemporary discourse of fairies in order to show them as beneficent creatures. Considering the history of fairy lore, this deviation remains remarkable. Given the rise of ecological discourse, this conscious distinction between the "good" and "evil" inhabitants of the forest provides scholars with ample material to explore how fairies represent both their natural habitat and the values that they embody.

In order to evaluate how effectively Shakespeare's fairies and forest restore the human characters, we must first explore how Shakespeare has rescued the fairy tradition from negative associations. To present the fairies of the forest as benevolent creatures "inspires" the forest with a compassionate voice heard seldom, if at all, in Shakespeare's time. By recovering fairies from a long association with demonology, Shakespeare gives the fairies the power to heal. Standish Henning, Lou Agnes Reynolds, Paul Sawyer, and, more recently, Mary Ellen Lamb investigate the ways in which Shakespeare recovers



fairies from their associations with devilry and witchcraft. This is important work, for if we cannot trust the spokespeople, we cannot hear their translation of nature's text.

Henning relates Shakespeare's diminutive fairies to an earlier work, Reginald Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). According to Henning, Shakespeare would have been familiar with the "solemn nonsense" of Scot's work and was mocking it slightly by imitating Scot's depiction of tiny witches who "can go in and out at awger holes, & saile in an egge shell, a cockle or muscle shell, through and vnder the tempestuous seas" (qtd. in Henning 485). These tiny witches, who can "raise haile, tempests, and hurtfull weather" (4850), recall Titania and Oberon's debate: "Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, / As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea / Contagious fogs which, falling in the land, / Hath every pelting river made so proud / That they have overbourne their continents" (2.1.88-92).

Puck's brief speech as he applies the love-juice to Lysander also indicates an awareness of these witches who "alter men's minds to inordinate loue or hate" (qtd. in Henning 485):

Churl, upon thy eyes I throw

All the power this charm doth owe.

[*He applies the love juice.*]

When thou wak'st, let love forbid

Sleep his seat on thy eyelid. (2.2.84-87)

Henning suggests that Shakespeare was amused by *The Discovery* and combined the idea of the miniscule witches with his understanding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the story of Medea to create diminutive creatures who, inspired by benevolence instead of

malevolence, create the same magic as their dubiously motivated models. Whether or not Shakespeare read and was amused by Scot's treatment is less important than the fact that these two works – separated by eleven years – exist as contemporaries. Scot clearly represents the “traditional” view, encouraged by a religious outlook that imperialized, ridiculed, and yet feared folk traditions. Such traditions often focused on local wit and wisdom, relying upon canny elders. Because these elements are not part of the dominant power structure, these people and ideas represent the shadow side of early modern culture.

When modern readers want to assert that the fairies, most of all Puck, are evil, they turn to Puck's description of the night in act 5:

Now the hungry lion roars,  
And the wolf behowls the moon,  
Whilst the heavy plowman snores,  
All with weary task fordone.  
Now the wasted brands do glow,  
Whilst the screech owl, screeching loud,  
Puts the wretch that lies in woe  
In remembrance of a shroud.  
Now it is the time of night  
That the graves, all gaping wide,  
Every one lets forth his sprite [ . . . ] . (5.1.360-376).

This description could easily have been a sop to placate a religious society careful to control idolatry and vestiges of “heathenism.” To me, the catalogue of “evils” is little

more than a child's list of nightmares and spooks. In fact, the description may actually just be a time-marker; without stage lighting and effects, the language must convey "night" – and the effectiveness of this description is contingent upon the audience's understanding. The depiction of frightening animals and spirits is as hollow as a robbed grave and cannot seriously invoke fear at this point in the play, especially since they most likely refer to the hilarious roaring lion and the man in the moon from the mechanicals' rendition of *Pyrmus and Thisbe* in the previous scene. This puckish speech perhaps reveals Shakespeare's own skepticism about the presence of external evil, calling up a list of baddies that we know cannot hurt us. Oberon reinforces this assertion in act 4, when he indicates that he has often "made sport" with the morning. Clearly, these fairies are not to be confused with demons.

In their work "Folk Medicine and the Four Fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer recover fairies from evil associations by casting them as fairy doctors. The article points to the strong early modern interest in the medicinal use of plants and finds that, by the use of this imagery, Shakespeare imbues his fairy characters and their natural remedies with beneficial, medicinal properties. Reynolds and Sawyer's points are well taken, but we can develop them even further. Not only do the four attendant fairies – Cobweb, Mustardseed, Peascod and Mote -- represent fairy medicine but all the actions in the forest also act therapeutically upon the lovers. The inversion of love-roles and the dreams of the lovers depend upon Oberon's extensive knowledge of the herbal lore of his world. As Oberon himself states: "Fare thee well, nymph [Helena]. Ere he do leave this grove / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love" (2.1.245-6). By applying the remedy to Demetrius, he heals the courtship of

Helena and Demetrius, who recover from the very undignified situation in which Helena throws herself at her lover. The love-juice also inspires dreams that reveal hidden desires. By revealing Demetrius' repressed love for Helena, the love-juice will potentially cure the other troubled relationship: Hermia and Lysander would be free to marry because Egeus' agreement with Demetrius would be cancelled. Even the "administration errors" of Puck serve to further coordinate healing responses in the lovers. Their inversions reveal hateful fantasies and paranoia, which must be purged before the lovers can return to Athens. Previously in Athens, not only does Demetrius sublimate his love for Helena to maintain an agreement with Egeus, but Hermia represses her anxieties about being "nothing but 'low' and 'little'" (3.2.326); Helena tries to forget that "they have conjoined all three/ To fashion this false sport; in spite of me" (3.2.193-4); and Lysander evidently keeps a lid on his wandering eye. In the restorative atmosphere of the forest, under the spell of the fairy medicine, the lovers exorcize their internal demons, acting out feared scenarios in order to awaken to a renewed sense of security and hopefulness.

Like Henning's article, Mary Ellen Lamb's work also discovers a relationship between size and benevolence as well as a conflation with classical allusions in the characters of the fairies. However, the main power of her work resides in her discovery of a relation between the traditional use of fairies as scapegoats, excuses for sexual crimes and theft, and Shakespeare's benevolent fairies. According to Lamb, before Shakespeare's portrayal of fairies, if a woman did not want to reveal the identity of an illegitimate baby's father, she could claim a fairy visited her and thus escape ridicule. The same excuse could conceal a rapist (especially if he were a powerful person who

could repudiate the claim and thus denigrate the victim) or the source of shady money. In this way, fairies had become linked with sexual indiscretion, robbery, and violence and the woods or “wilderness” was also associated with these practices. But whose fault is that? Fear of the woods comes from the presence of bandits and trepidation of being lost and vulnerable, not from the environment itself. Human worries are our own problems, just as ecological crises arising from our own wastefulness require our own “tailoring.” In some cases, fairy-pranks redressed the complaints of society, especially those of the poor and disadvantaged by righting the wrongs of the rich against the poor. For instance, Robin Goodfellow saves a young woman from rape by shape shifting into a horse that carries away the offensive lecher (Lamb 300). Lamb sees Shakespeare’s work as containing the subversive political agendas of fairies by making them aristocrats. By rejecting the motif of violence, however, Shakespeare promotes his fairies’ benevolence, and by extension, the benevolence of the forest. Both Henning and Lamb show how Shakespeare alters his sources in ways that recover the fairies’ influence over human imagination and link them to the more peaceful principles of his society.

#### An Ecocritical View of the Pastoral and the Picaresque

In Chapter Five of *The Comedy of Survival*, “The Pastoral and the Picaresque,” Joseph Meeker recalls the tradition of classical, medieval, and renaissance nature-writing and pastoral in his search for a literary understanding of ecology. What he finds is similar to what has been shown here – that the pastoral life is a fantasy alternative to the degradation and corruption of the city. The plagues and pollution of medieval and

renaissance Europe seemed to encourage an escapism, which appears in the pastoral-like *Decameron*, in which the wealthy are able to escape the plague in the refuge of a garden (Meeker 53-54). This escape to the garden also reenacts a symbolic return to the Garden of Eden and to moral innocence and purity. Meeker sees this pastoral trend as linked to contemporaneous nostalgic ideas about the natural world. Furthermore, the utopian ideal of pastorals emanates from a desire to [re]create a “perfect” moment in time and then freeze the frame. This is exactly what does not happen in nature. Nature, in direct contradiction to the pastoral view, is not simply the raw material from which art is made, but a process, or art, in itself. Meeker asserts that the utopian impulse in pastoral literature ignores real or natural suffering (55). As evidenced by the example of the caribou, suffering certainly does occur.

What happens when the utopia fails? The pastoral mode does not have a reply – it hardly admits the question. Failed utopias have enormous consequences for society and nature since in these visions the land is so often humanized, sometimes feminized as well. As humans discover corruption in their own world, the fluctuations within a sustained ecosystem do not support idealization and stasis. The land can neither be virginal nor corrupted because the ideals informing these judgments do not account for adaptability. For Meeker, the solution to the problems posed by the ideals of tragedy and pastoral lies within the picaresque.

According to Meeker: “The picaresque world is a natural system in which humans are one of the animal species. The picaro suffers from no conflict between society and nature simply because he sees society as one of the many forms of natural order” (58). Picaresque stories, particularly the Spanish novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, feature characters

who attempt to survive in this world without relying upon ideals to govern their behavior. In this vision, nature is not an abstraction of human imagination, nor is it a storehouse of raw material for human use; nature is an evolving organization of forces around which the picaro must maneuver in order to survive.

“Picaresque nature is not a garden but a wilderness” (Meeker 59). As poet and scholar Gary Snyder has indicated, wilderness defies space-based notions, for there are “Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners [ . . . ] . the visible hardy stalks and stems of vacant lots and railroads, the persistent raccoon squads, bacterias in the loam and in our yogurt” (qtd. in Wallace 7). Wilderness is a behavior. Picaresque worlds recognize multiplicity and diversity as the results of the interdependence of species (Meeker 59). If Shakespeare’s fairies represent wilderness, then they approach Meeker’s definition and Snyder’s description, for like the mice and spiders that creep in during the night, they enter the palace of Theseus to sing, dance, and bring their blessings.

The picaresque hero, or picaro (very seldomly, picara), generally lacks status. He is often low-born, poor, foolish, or, alternatively, street-smart, and sometimes a thief. In order to survive, the picaro cannot rely on principles or high birth, but he must learn to be an opportunist. If the picaro is alone, it is not because he abhors the rottenness of Denmark or lies pining in the hills for his love, but because he simply has learned to accept his position and survive anyway (Meeker 60). If strife can occur in the picaresque world, then the picaro must negotiate through it by adapting to circumstances. Because the picaro is often a compassionate creature, he does not adapt by killing everyone in his way. Rather, he employs deception as a defensive strategy, usually through disguise

(Meeker 61). These disguises very often involve shape-shifting into animals. In the animal's form, the picaresque learns and sometimes escapes danger, but he never transcends his own animal nature (Meeker 62). The virtue of the disguise is that it helps the character evolve, although it does not represent the totality of the character's identity since this identity is in flux. Therefore, the picaresque's actions reflect the ability of human consciousness to imagine and articulate intelligent responses, creating realities, not fantasies.

For Meeker, the search for ecological literature must eventually turn away from pastoral visions and seek out picaresque worldviews as models of how humans might live in the world and not above it. While Shakespeare's *MND* has traditionally and correctly been seen as influenced by pastorals and has been labeled a festive comedy, the play also exhibits picaresque characters, such as Bottom and Puck. Both anti-heroes exist as happy 'loners' whose status and willingness to adapt help each to succeed in their objectives. Furthermore, through these characters, Shakespeare may be critiquing the fantasy-pastoral, undercutting the romantic sentiments with mild satire. I will show that the true "heroes" of this drama do not conform to tragic or pastoral notions but play the part of the rogue.



## Chapter Four

### *A Midsummer Night's Dream as Ecocriticism*

The beginning of my analysis criticized the human position in the human-nature relationship. By examining the dimensions of ecocriticism and the origins of our current ideas about nature, I have attempted to appreciate the often silent voice of the natural realm. To explore *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a part of the literary ecology, I have culled from the ecocritics, the pastorals, and other related texts a series of values and elements that, when organized as a system, have helped me to examine this text within the larger system of ecocritical discourse. Focusing on animism, which is emphasized so strongly by Lynn White, Christopher Manes, Bruce Boehrer, and Lisa Kiser, I will explore the terrain and listen for the voices of nature in Shakespeare's play. The lessons to be learned through an attention to the examples of animism are humility and compassion, as expressed by Manes, White, and Meeker. Since this play features fairies as speakers for the forest, I wish to discuss their power as similar to that of the shaman. The awareness gained through the vision-quests of the shaman lead to recognition of the inter-relatedness of humanity and nature that Neil Everenden identifies, of which *MND* provides many examples. By uncovering the connections between the elements of the play, we can discover problematic assumptions and relationships, especially in the character of Titania. These relationships help to identify the rogue, or picaresque characters, who rebel against problematic hierarchies and sustain life within the system, despite its flaws. At this point, I will closely examine Bottom and Puck as examples of

subversive, roguish characters. Finally, the goal of an ecocritical assessment of a canonized work must be a reflection on how that work has contributed to the definitions of its own genre and themes. If the assumption of Meeker's ecocriticism is that comedy supports life processes in much the same way as the wilderness is maintained – not through space-based definitions and government legislation but through the behavior of organisms adapting to the changing circumstances of their ecosystems – I will reveal *MND* to be a work contemplating its own “life” as both a dramatic work and a reflection of life processes as a whole.

### Animism

In “Shakespeare’s Beastly Buggers,” Bruce Boehrer suggests that the play “is patently about bestiality” (41). For instance, he argues that the bestial relationship between Titania and Bottom is used to punish Titania for her disobedience to her lord Oberon. To make this point, Boehrer adduces the classical myth of Pasiphaë already alluded to. Boehrer also critiques the dominance of patriarchal figures (Theseus and Oberon) and the heterosexual imperative of marriage. He argues that the play depicts animal life as crude, immoral, and “beneath” those who come from fine breeding. While Boehrer’s points are well-taken and supported by sound research, his theories, similar to those in Stephen Orgel’s *Imagining Shakespeare*, do not take into account the significant differences between Pasiphaë’s ultimately tragic story and Shakespeare’s lighthearted comedy. For while Pasiphaë’s lust certainly is indecent Shakespeare both mocks and softens this desire.

While Boehrer is correct in identifying Titania's sensuality as pitiable, as Oberon tells Puck, this euphemistic transformation allows Bottom to "get away with" an illicit affair with the queen. In classic picaresque-fashion, Bottom does not moralize about his situation. After being compelled to remain with Titania, he accepts his fate and adapts quite admirably, enjoying the attentions of the queen and her fairies, feeling so comfortable and relaxed that he takes a nap. While we laugh at his ignorance, he is not so ignorant as to misunderstand Titania's affection as anything of a reasonable nature: "Methinks mistress you should have little reason for that" (3.1.137). This emphasizes a key point for Bottom; he alone is aware of his interactions with the fairies. To the lovers, the magical fairy world is completely invisible, silent. Their love blindness and idealism prevent them from seeing anything beyond the strife that they experience in the woods. Bottom, on the other hand, at least partially recognizes what is happening around him. Through the animal transformation, Bottom is able to see something that he could not otherwise see. Although the understanding is incomplete, he is inspired nonetheless to create a ballad of his "dream." Bottom might be an ass (in more ways than one), but he is not the raging bull of the classical allusion to the Minotaur. Despite his assertion that his disposition is for playing "a tyrant" (1.2.24), he is, by his own description again, "such a tender ass" (4.1.25). Bottom has a donkey's head, instead of a bull's visage, where his own should be. However, he speaks and sings as well as he has ever done, and presumably walks on two feet. Bottom's animism is a role, a temporary one, in which a play upon words helps to invert power within the play.

In this sense, Bottom is the unwitting actor because he is not even aware of his "translation," as Peter Quince calls it: "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me [.

. .].” (3.1.115). Bottom does not require the ass-head to be a fool, but once the head is applied, his status soars. Not only is he hailed by fairies, his fair treatment inspires his own genteel behavior, kindly acquainting himself with the fairies, jesting with them slightly, calling them “Monsieur.” All of this accentuates the way appearances mislead because sight is blinded by judgment and expectation. There is a distinct “fakeness” to the ass-head. When Oberon has achieved his objective, he instructs Puck to “take this transformed scalp / From off the head of this Athenian swain” (4.1.63-64). The “transformation” is not so much a metamorphosis as a costume change – perhaps even a wardrobe malfunction. In fact, the malfunctions of the players costumes and lines are key elements of their plot. While there is no doubt that Bottom is still a ham actor, we see in act 5 that his acting succeeds where it fails, for it shows the absurdity of tragic situations in art. Therefore, Bottom’s transformation becomes a picaresque, not pastoral vision of the poet. In his dream, he interacts with Titania and her train, the Muses of his inspiration, but cannot fully recognize or express it. It is a common enough complaint among poets. This would seem to place humans in a relationship to nature in which humans can only grasp a part of the significance of the inspiring natural experience.

Bottom reminds us of the hubris of tragedy and overly romantic love. He is more like us than we want to admit. This is made clear by the way he foils Theseus’ rationalism:

*Theseus*: I never may never believe  
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.  
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is the madman: the lover, all frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear! (5.1.2-22)

Theseus would never become a man-beast (in fact, it is his job in another myth to slay the Minotaur), but he is both an imaginary character and the creation of a poet, whom he chides with his disbelief in “antique fables.” However, he is an antique fable – one who is upstaged by the man-beast that he would seem to critique. In addition, Theseus is, like Bottom, the lover a fairy – and he is apparently less aware of that fact than is Bottom.

Some of the language in the play does present Bottom as a “monster” and a “hateful imperfection” but these are the taunts of the characters, who are destined to view him through their own judgments and agendas. The audience is likely to take into account the gentle and courtly words and behavior of the bower in evaluating Bottom. The episode recalls Kiser’s assessment of *Parliament of Fowls*, which, like *MND*, demonstrates an awareness of how characters assume roles, and how people apply values to the natural world without fully understanding them.

This same argument can be made in reference to the sensual language between Titania and Bottom. Shakespeare softens the imagery with an infusion of flowers and plant images. Titania likens herself to ivy which gently wraps around the oak – a sensual image but certainly not indecent. The queen’s desire prompts her to stick flowers in Bottom’s hair and bestow him with very pretty, romantic favors. In addition, the use of flower and plant imagery suggests that the fairies of this realm are possibly diminutive in size, making the physical act of love between Titania and Bottom difficult at best. The romantic entwining of poetic plant life and phrases is all we hear of their sexual experience. Conversely, Titania’s very name indicates a statuesque, even imposing, figure, a titan of classical mythology, and she has also purportedly had an affair with a presumably tall and majestic mortal, the hero Theseus. If Titania’s size is so ambiguous, her relationship with Bottom appears as the romantic escapade of a fairy tale. Oberon’s pity and Puck’s jokes reveal their own jealousy and humor, and not shock and shame for a disgraceful indiscretion.

Other instances of animism perform similar ironic functions. Helena compares herself to at least two animals in the play: “I am as ugly as a bear” (2.2.100), and “Use

me but as your spaniel” (2.1.205). Helena’s immaturity and reliance upon pastoral romanticism cause her to resent and exploit her “creaturely” nature. She berates her beauty with one reference and invites domination of her body and will with another. Her chasing of Demetrius – like the hind that chases the dog – offends Oberon enough to make him reverse the situation, with interest. Hermia’s nightmare of the serpent is a similar misrepresentation of animal imagery. Some scholars suggest that the serpent is Lysander, eating out her heart, but Lysander’s dalliance has only just occurred.

According to Freud, dreams come from our own desires and fears; therefore, the snake (perhaps a phallic symbol) represents Hermia’s own fears – of sex, of losing her heart, perhaps of her own treachery in leaving Athens in stealth. Ultimately, the snake, as a fabrication of her mind, is an example of how human meanings are grafted onto non-human life to our own degradation. Like Helena’s assumptions about the beauty of a bear and the uses of a dog,<sup>1</sup> Hermia is ready to name both Demetrius and Helena, at separate times, as the snake in the grass, or “thief of love” who stole her boyfriend. To Demetrius, Hermia asks, “And hast thou killed him sleeping? O, brave touch! / Could not a worm, an adder, do so much?” (3.2.70-71). Hermia also accuses Demetrius (who has already suggested that he would throw Lysander’s body to his dogs) of double-talk and murder. His words to her are vile and lack compassion, but, by her own admission, Hermia’s lack of patience. We see also that Hermia is quick to use her dream symbol as an emblem of fear. Even Demetrius realizes this: “You spend your passion on a misprised mood” (3.2.74). The degradation associated with these animals only has meaning for foolish and

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the hunting use of spaniels as flushers and their distinctive playful stance, the suggestion of being treated as a spaniel carries a very sexual reference.

frightened lovers. In this context, it is hard to see human meaning as anything more enlightened than the animals conjured by the lovers' poetry.

This is also true of the inflated love language of Lysander, Thisbe, and Demetrius. Once the potion has been applied, Lysander wonders aloud to the blonde Helena, "Who will not change a raven for a dove?" (2.2.120). Of course, he will be the one to change the dove for the raven by the end of act 4. The comparison has little meaning, except to present the possibility that Lysander thinks about cheating on Hermia. If indeed one could in the end love the raven more than the dove, then the stereotyped tropes associated with these species are revealed as tricks of the human mind, unrelated to true love. As if to emphasize the superficiality with which humans interpret their "creaturely" habits, Thisbe speaks insipid, clichéd lines comparing her lover's parts to flowers: "Most radiant Pyramus, most lily-white of hue, / Of color like the red rose on triumphant brier [. . .]." (3.1.88-89). Not surprisingly, in the performance before the Duke, the nervous actor gets line wrong, admiring Pyramus' lily lips and cherry nose. The mix-up not only inverts the meanings within the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play, but also the inflated comparisons of Demetrius: "O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine! / To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne? / Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show / Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!" (3.2.137-140).

In addition, the comparisons of Lysander show racist hostilities when Lysander pushes Hermia away, calling her an "Ethiope" (3.2.256). What matters to Lysander in this embarrassing moment is the fantasy of race-specific traits. By being blind to his true love for Hermia, stripped of his personal vision, he can only see the cultural values of his



time. Since this “hateful imperfection” of his eyes will be reversed, we can perhaps assume a critique of the culture’s racism as well.

The lovers’ retreat into the woods, like Thoreau’s, becomes both a contemplation of values and a healing dream. By inspiring thoughts of violence and false hatreds, Shakespeare critiques the values that separate lovers, animals, and people, causing them to dream up false comparisons. The goal of the play, as with most festive comedies, is to heal the characters peacefully. The play does this by giving the characters a space to purge their disturbing dreams before they settle into their respective marriages.

#### Inter-relatedness: Dreams of the Shaman

The myriad ways in which the worlds and plots intermingle in this play are limited only by the imagination of the reader. I choose to focus on how human and natural forces construct meanings in the play. Through an examination of the fairies, who are a construction of both natural imagery and pure imagination, I wish to reveal how the theme of inter-relatedness is expressed in the play. Furthermore, I wish to show how the setting of the forest engages an interaction between picaros and shamen, merging the wild but ultimately adaptive qualities of the picaro with the similarly wild and imaginative responses of the shaman.

Interpreting the fairies as representatives of nature in this light is not without problems. First, the human-like personalities of the fairies might appear to be a projection of human consciousness onto nature, once again silencing it in favor of a human voice. Still, these spokespeople for the environment live in a place in which

flowers create magical illusions; the moon casts a “watery eye” upon the world; and the inhabitants take their names from nature – Mustardseed, Cobweb, Peaseblossom and Mote (moth). By investigating the nature of the fairies, I hope to assess the ways in which Shakespeare both contains and maintains subversions relating to human responses to the natural world. I shall start with Titania, Queen of the Fairies, solely because her relationship to the natural world has been most discussed, and problematized, in recent scholarship.

Louis Montrose explores the “shaping fantasies” of the woman as queen, lover, and mother in Elizabethan England and in the women of *MND*. As Montrose indicates, Queen Elizabeth’s presence in the content and context of the play interrogates sexual identity and power. Titania, both as fairy queen and surrogate mother to the changeling, both embodies the feminine principle and recalls Queen Elizabeth. Titania resembles Elizabeth as the powerful female who both loves and instills fear. Titania loves Bottom as a lover and dotes upon him as a child, possessing him jealously, recalling Elizabeth’s flaunting and enticing sexuality, her maternal tendency towards England, and her jealous habits concerning the love lives of her courtiers. If Titania represents the embodiment of female sexual and maternal virtue, her identification with the land lends power to the nature she inscribes.

Lamb also interprets Titania as both a mothering and loving principle but finds this principle not only embodied in the queen but operating throughout fairyland, thereby allowing us to see the feminine principle as one emerging from the forest as a whole. Lamb links fairies to the tales of childhood and the education received from women.

Stories of Robin Goodfellow and others provided women with a locus of control over the children in their care:

As the primary caretakers of children, women – especially rural or lower-class women – were the primary transmitters of common culture to the children who would grow up to write pamphlets, plays, and other literary works. To many adult males who transcribed narratives of fairies and Robin Goodfellow, the space of this common culture [was occupied] mainly by women and the children these authors once were. (Lamb 302)

Lamb also suggests that the forest (or the body of Titania) represents erotic longings denied in the patriarchal society. She makes a strong case suggesting that going to “see the fairies” referred to “illicit sexual encounters” (303). This puts Lysander’s “pretty riddles” about “one heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” (2.2.48) and Demetrius’ threat to do Helena “mischief in the wood” (2.1.237) into a context of sexual gratification and license. Bottom’s encounter with Titania acts out the fantasy of sleeping with the queen, literalizing an illicit liaison between lower and upper classes (Lamb 303). As indicated earlier, while the actual sex between Titania and Bottom may be ambiguous, it is the poetic possibility that remains potent within the play.

Titania’s tryst with Bottom also invokes the maternal as “Bottom literally takes the place of the changeling child in Titania’s affections” (Lamb 304). Titania keeps Bottom in her bower where she dotes upon him, sending her fairies to “fetch thee jewels from the deep” (3.1.152). Lamb posits that Titania’s commanding and maternal presence, coupled with Bottom’s passivity, implies “the structure of the early childhood

experience of the body' (qtd. in Lamb 304). The bower scene conflates the three images of woman – as queen, lover, and mother – in the body of Titania:

Out of this wood do not desire to go.

Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.

I am a spirit of no common rate.

The summer still doth tend upon my state,

And I do love thee. (3.1.146-150)

A command from this queen implies both sex and mothering just as a matriarch or female shaman would symbolize for her people all aspects of womanhood.

To bring the discourse back to nature, we can regard Titania's body as a physical manifestation of the forest's growth. Titania's procreative potential provides the creative force behind the fairy plots and meteorological changes. Her dotage over the changeling and her refusal to relinquish him present a picture of the over-grown garden. Without proper tending, Titania's generative energy has waxed out of control. Her long speech before her "jealous Oberon" expresses this point: "Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, / As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea / Contagious fogs . . ." (see 2.1. 88-100). The watery and rotting abundance in the air dampens the spirits of the "human mortals" and prevents them from chanting their hymns to the Moon, who, in scorn, "washes all the air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound" (2.1.104-5). The seasons become entangled like weeds, producing snow and roses, ice and summer buds at the same time. The imagery suggests things growing to the point of decay and out of step with nature's course, giving credence to the rhyme, "flowers out of season, sorrow without reason."

Oberon's response to Titania's observations indicates that she and Oberon both contain the power that creates this weedy scene: "Do you amend it, then. It lies in you" (2.1.118). If Titania is the unweeded garden or the life of the forest, then her changeling is her offspring. In order to maintain the fruitfulness of a garden, gardeners "dead-head" the tops of their flowering plants, pick ripe fruit and berries, and transplant offshoots. In an earlier scene, one of Titania's fairies remarks: "I serve the Fairy Queen, / to dew her orbs upon the green" (2.1.8-9). Later, Titania will command her fairies to tend to chores, suggesting that there is a disease or pest control problem in the garden: "Some to kill cankers in the muskrose buds" (2.2.3.). Oberon's attempt to take the child makes him the gardener who must curb the tendency of the mother plant to grow "wild" and perhaps become susceptible to "corruption." Titania's own body circumscribes her power as fairy-woman, and its potential is the domain of her husband. *MND* is certainly not a modern feminist play by any fancy critical footwork. But this green space of healing is not meant for gratifying the queen; rather, her wishes must be suppressed in order to allow for the continued growth of the changeling and the land. From this perspective, Titania resembles not so much the suppressed Hippolyta – as many critics insist -- but the equally jealous Egeus, who must similarly give up his daughter to the maturation process and to the choices she must be allowed to make. Although, the emotions pale in comparison, the act of letting both the child and Bottom go reenacts the ultimate choice of the caribou mother in Meeker's story. As ecocritics, we would perhaps prefer to have Titania knowingly choose to relinquish both, thus preserving her agency. However, this moral power, sadly, Shakespeare does not allow her, but the action is the same.

If Oberon could speak to us today from under the shadow of Shakespeare's "leaves," he might tell us that it's good to be the king of the fairies. Not only does he have a vivacious wife, but he has dallied with various beauties of classical myth: "amorous Phillida" (2.1.65) and "the bouncing Amazon" (2.1.70) Hippolyta. Both his sexual escapades and his interference with the lovers on their erotic behalf suggest the exuberant, springtime lust that abandons rules, overlooks bonds and betrothals, and seeks copulation despite concerns of law and order. Nature is the bower of love in whatever form it comes.

More than just a playboy, Oberon's vast knowledge of herbal lore allows readers to interpret him as a kind of shaman. Indeed, he is often costumed to represent this image in contemporary productions. This is appropriate in light of his many uses of the forest within the play, making him the keeper of the forest. His desire to train the changeling to be his henchman suggests that he serves as game warden to the forest. Coupled with his role as gardener, Oberon's will and knowledge shape how we experience the fantasies of the play. He is the master of visions, sending forth both the audience and the players under his sway on dream quests to learn the mysteries of their own "natures." As shaman, Oberon oversees the enactment of ritual in act 5 when the fairies arrive to bless the marriage beds. The song, accompanied by dance, is written in couplets and carries a strong cadence, much like a chant. Furthermore, the words read like commands with the forcefulness of authority: "To the best bride-bed will we, / which by us shall blessed be; / And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate" (5.1.392-395). Oberon's power to create and bless outweighs Theseus' power to punish and make war. Theseus' pronouncements in act 1 prove to be empty; they are reversed – perhaps, because they are

edicts that anticipate destruction. In contrast, everything Oberon pronounces comes true: Titania surrenders the boy; Demetrius chases Helena; and, in the final scene, the lovers are blessed.

Although we hear of Oberon visiting locations outside the text, the play restricts his mobility within the boundaries of the setting. Just as Titania is limited by the bounds of her curbed sexuality, Oberon remains primarily within the bounds of his own kingdom. If Shakespeare contains Titania's creativity and Oberon's rule, he does not contain Puck. That "merry wanderer of the night" is the only character temporarily to leave the time-space of the play: "I'll put a girdle round the earth / In forty minutes" (2.1.175-76). Puck bends both the laws of physics and the imagination to obey Oberon's will, to cause the mischief that will resolve the struggles within the play. Throughout the play, Puck is the source of change: he is the one who circles the globe in search of the flower; he applies it; and he invokes the visions that inspires "Bottom's dream." I suggest that Puck, not Titania or Oberon, is the real creative energy of the forest because he most fully embodies the quality of "play" within the play. I would insist further that Puck stands at the entryway of our initiation into the forest and the land of fairy, shadowing (in the sense of "following" or "imitating") our experience.

It is Puck who becomes a player in human dreams. When we first meet Puck – the first fairy to speak in the play – he recounts his legendary antics, describing how he shape-shifts into the "likeness of a filly foal" (2.1.46), a "roasted crab" (48), or a "three-footed stool" (2.1.52). While his charades fool the fools, he imitates our own folly, poking fun at our own bungling selves. In this way, Puck represents the part of human nature that is able to laugh at itself, seeing the unimportance of ruined beer and sore

buttocks. As a shape-shifter, he also represents the generative energy of nature, its ability to create form, seemingly out of the air, at will. This is why nature in this play is a synonym for magic.

### The Rogue-Hero

#### *Bottom as the Picaro on a Shamanic Journey*

Bottom and Puck both represent the intersection of the wildness of the picaresque drama and the shamanic experiences of the forest. As Meeker explains, the picaresque figure rebels against ideals and adapts to his, or less often, her environment. The shaman is one who has survived the ordeal of the forest and has incorporated that knowledge into a larger knowledge that is shared with the community. Bottom acts as a picaro in contrast to the lovers who perform the roles of pastoral dreamers. Both Bottom and the lovers are on a shamanic journey while in the forest, whereas Puck represents both the journey and the instruction that the shaman presupposes.

Like the picaro, Bottom lacks status. His role as the tailor and ham actor in a hapless crew of mechanicals makes him the object of ridicule. He is, however, blissfully ignorant of this scorn. This does not mean that he is a stupid character; in fact, while the lovers and Titania are swayed by the absurdities of love, Bottom remains pragmatic. He realizes that idealism is not a workable framework and expresses this to Titania when he tells her she has no reason to love him at their first meeting: “Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that” (3.1.137). In addition to his lack of status, Bottom is a



compassionate creature because he understands that kindness is the technique of survivors. He wants prologues to be written so that the ladies will not be frightened. Frightening ladies could get them all hanged, which should severely limit their ability to survive; thus, caution and gentleness seem a fitting remedy. He is also courteous to the fairies, cautioning them to be careful with the honeybags, etc. Since Titania has made it clear that he will attend her whether he wants to or not, he easily adapts and makes the experience enjoyable. Like other picaros, Bottom is not concerned with goals; specifically he is not concerned with “escaping” his fairy prison. He is not Odysseus at the mercy of Circe or Calliope. He does not employ a superhuman intellect to escape but uses an ordinary intelligence to stay where the living is easy and the company is hospitable. He experiences this setting not as a dreamscape of nightmares or demonic fairies but as a bright and friendly visit. The difference is caused by his perspective of humility and gentleness.

Bottom’s experience is also shamanic. By undergoing the transformation inspired by Puck, Bottom inhabits the strange world of fairy. His ass-head comically depicts his “totem,” much as the animals of shamanic myths come to be associated with the heroes who interact with them. Through his unawareness of the ass-head, Bottom perhaps invokes the double entendre of the ass more meaningfully than if he had been aware of it.

To a lesser extent, the associations with animals made by the female lovers also represent shamanic journeys, although their pastoral ideals prevent them from accepting the lessons as easily as Bottom does. For Hermia and Helena, their dreams of snakes and bears and dogs represent the fears and self-loathing that they must at least face in order to

emerge from their ordeals with enough maturity to enter the adult sexual bonds that they desire so eagerly.

*Puck as the Picaresque Shaman*

Puck is picaresque as well because he lacks full status as a fairy. His status has been the subject of endless debate, as the works of Latham and Lamb indicate. In Latham's work, the critic explains why Puck is not a fairy, associating the words "puck" and "pooke" with demonic figures. More recent definitions of fairies have perhaps changed how we categorize Puck, but the question of his nature remains. Most likely, he is a country spirit, hence the associations with brooms and housecleaning (Latham 231). The first scene in which he appears suggests that Puck is a newcomer to fairyland, since the fairy Puck meets is not too sure who he is. Later, when Puck expresses fear of the dawning day, something that would ordinarily indicate a demonic status, Oberon assures him that "we are spirits of another sort" (3.2.388), thus suggesting that fairyland is safe from demonism. Puck's ignorance of this suggests that his relationship with Oberon and Titania is recent – that he has been *made* one of them. This sanitization, according to Latham, would seem to strip him of any demonic power, especially when he becomes the servant to Oberon (222). However stripped Puck may be of associations with demons, he is still the charismatic spell-caster whose playful pranks cause the shamanic shape-shifting of Bottom and the others. His power to transform himself into animals and his ability to inspire play in others promotes the comedic action of the play.

I have already suggested that Puck is the real star of the show. While Bottom may get more laughs, Puck's role as both viewer and player gives him a more profound meaning than that of the ham actor. Mary Ellen Lamb has suggested that the fairies represent the aristocracy. I feel that Puck's characterization disrupts this assertion and provides a place within the play for an ecocritical debate. This subversive place concerns Puck's status in relation to the other fairies. Puck, simply, is a servant; he is not an aristocrat. If his service to Oberon is not clue enough, then his manners are. He is not what we would call well-bred; he delights in mischief and coarse jokes. Furthermore, his appearance at the end of the play with a broom reinforces his association with the laboring class. In most community theaters, the actors strike their own set; they are not elite movie stars who slip out of costume and into cast-party revels without so much as a glance at the "disorder" they leave behind. This would also be the case for the modest-living early modern actors, who would perhaps be required to come out to thank the audience, sweep the stage, and dim the lights. Puck's status maintains an inversion; the servant shall indeed have the final word. Typically reserved for the leading role – or, in the case of tragedy, the most nobly born character left alive – the final speech prioritizes the playwright's agenda. In Puck's case, Shakespeare reiterates his theme of restoration: "If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended," (5.1.412-13). Puck repeats the word "mend," insisting, "if you pardon, we will mend" (5.1.418-19), and again, "Give me your hands, if we be friends / And Robin shall restore amends" (5.1.426-27). The speech indeed earns Puck the epitaphs "gentle" and "honest" with its offer of friendship.

Why is this important to ecocriticism? In a play riddled with inversions, in a setting turned upside down by debate and topsy-turvy seasons, we see a world unable to maintain itself. Like our own world, Athens, before the meddling of the fairies, is an ecosystem out of kilter. While Puck may not be the Fairy King, he is the agent of Oberon's will, as well as his and our own. Therefore, Puck inhabits both the human and the green realm, releasing us from our assumptions concerning the real or possible. Puck provocatively suggests, like a shadow, that anything is possible within the dual realms of the imagination and nature. Rather than challenge nature, the imagination – humanity's evolutionary adaptation – should create alternatives to feuds and wars fought for oil and habitat destruction. In representing both realms, Puck's actions prevent tragedy and death. As a voice from the forest, Puck's message speaks of the inter-relatedness between city and forest, humanity and nature. These supposed binaries are mended or knit together by a crafty tailor.

The land of Fairy offers a space for assessing the role that distinctions play between culture and nature in affirming or reforming society's normative practices. It becomes an unconscious dream state, highlighting the complexity of distinctions between culture and nature, and other binaries, such as patriarchal and matriarchal power, but it also locates creative power as emerging both from our imaginations and from that outdoor world that so fascinates us. As Lamb, Reynolds, and Sawyer assert, Shakespeare recovers fairies from demonology, rebellion, and violence. By maintaining their ability to work magic, fairies become agents of nature and create peace and love from discord. Fairy magic, performed auspiciously on the eve of May,<sup>2</sup> under a moonlit sky, offers an

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<sup>2</sup> The word "midsummer" is misleading; May Day and Midsummer were both holidays associated with fertility and revelry. Shakespeare conflates the two holidays probably to emphasize these associations.

alternative to Theseus' ridiculous law and lack of creative choices. Shakespeare joins the imagery of fairy magic and medicine with the restorative power of the imagination, perhaps adding an even more practical application of the power of the green world than Barber and Frye have indicated in their analysis of the play as festive comedy. Clearly, patriarchal Athens cannot offer viable solutions: only misery if Hermia marries Demetrius, death if she defies her father, or sterility and a life not on her own terms if she chooses "To live a barren sister all your life, / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (1.1.72-3).

If the actions of the fairies represent dreams of unconscious wishes and fears, the fairies also represent the "shadow" side of humanity. This playful and picaresque counter-culture makes up the rules as it goes along, imitating the shape-shifting of a dreaming mind. Whether "real" or "imagined," fairies become agents of the imagination, revealing the solutions that each character most desires or the entanglements that each would most avoid. If we see these shadows as mouthpieces or agents of nature, as well as of human consciousness, an interesting relationship emerges. Nature becomes a land of dreams, but also literally a space that nurtures peace between opposites. As the fairies watch, laugh, and correct the lovers, we view the world from the forest's perspective; conversely, nature observes our lives with fond amusement just as lovers blind themselves to the petty faults of their beloved, and as mothers caress and sooth the troubles of their young. The forest provides comic restoration by joining "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" (4.2.7) under the auspices of the imagination. Ecocriticism argues that our relationship with nature exists because we perceive ourselves as separate from it; this separation creates a longing for nature similar to the pre-Oedipal longing to return to

the mother. Intuitively, we know that our sense of self is defined in relation to this “other”; therefore, it cannot truly be separate from us, except in our thoughts, because we are encompassed by our environment. Shakespeare’s *MND* provokes us to turn our gaze inward towards our genuine intentions and our repressed anxieties. Perhaps, by connecting to our own nature, by giving voice to the “shadows” that “slumber here,” our inner healing will engage us in a new attitude towards nature and the source of our inspirations.

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