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Oberon and Masculinity in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Athens is a patriarchal domain ruled by Theseus, where the “father should be as a god” and Amazons are conquered and married (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1.1.47). Scholarship typically interprets the forest outside of Athens as a comparable patriarchy ruled by Oberon, the king of the fairies. For example, Louis Montrose asserts that “Oberon and Theseus [...] work toward a common goal: to restabilize, if only temporarily, the patriarchal ordering of the public and domestic domains” (203). Mary Ellen Lamb posits that “patriarchy is restored as Oberon overcomes Titania’s brief rebellion against his wishes” (309). From this critical perspective, Titania’s refusal to obey Oberon is the action of a rebellious and unruly wife against her husband’s authority. Hence, in his drugging of Titania, Oberon parallels Theseus, who “wooed” Hippolyta with his “sword,/And won [her] love, doing [her] injuries”: two instances when a restoration of order comes about by causing “injuries” to female queens (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1.1.16–17). Alan Sinfield argues, for example, that because Titania challenges Oberon’s privilege, it is “Titania who has transgressed and must be punished” (75). Yet recent developments in the study of folklore have demonstrated that, for an early modern audience, fairy land would have been recognized as a domain where the *queen* had exclusive sovereign authority, or was at least a figure who dominated her partner, the fairy king (Buccola 71). Consequently, a consideration of the gender politics of popular culture beliefs should crucially refigure the experience and the interpretative qualities of the play. For example, Regina Buccola argues that an early modern audience would have been familiar with “the unquestioned centrality” of the fairy queen’s authority and would have been particularly amused by the drugging of Titania largely due to the anticipation of her sobriety and return to control (74). This article argues that Oberon can be perceived as the rebellious subject, a perception that is enhanced by his lack of conformity to early modern understandings of masculinity. Indeed, Oberon even resembles early modern assumptions about women. Thus, the power dynamics of the world of Titania and Oberon provide a more complex representation of gender and sexuality than criticism has heretofore acknowledged.

An early modern audience would most likely have been familiar with an omnipotent fairy queen who captured human babies, provided mortals with healing powers, and detained mortal men as sexual hostages (Buccola 60). The sexually domineering nature of the fairy queen can be found in the various English transcriptions of the romance of Thomas of Erceldoune dating from the fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century. In these manuscripts, Thomas, after having sex with the Fairy Queen seven times, is commanded to join her in fairy land, where she takes his “speche” and can

Dominatrix Titania for the beginning of the play is a fun concept, and very of the moment for Millennial Feminism, it would be another great way to bring her down and add emphasis to the horrors of this world.

nice
buzz
quote
for
design

This
confirms
that Puck's
flower is
equivalent
to a sword.

The o
we're
goes
If the
wher
show
stron
her fi
wher
Ober
fight
make
drugg
quite
and a
subst
fable

answer nobody at court but her.¹ Hence, given this character's preeminence, Titania does not rebel against Oberon; rather Oberon attempts to usurp many of these roles typically assumed by the fairy queen in popular lore. He initially demands the "stol'n" changeling boy from Titania. The age of the boy is unclear; however, once he secures the boy from Titania, he further instructs Puck to lead the boy to his "bower" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 4.1.58–60). Such a location contains erotic undertones, since Titania led Bottom to her own bower as a willing sexual captive, where he is informed "Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no" (3.1.127). Oberon further attempts to usurp Titania's authority through trickery and manipulation: when he is unable to overtly assert his will against Titania's rule, he resorts to drugging her. Oberon's actions, rather than resembling or paralleling Theseus, bear a closer resemblance to Renaissance perceptions of women as disorderly, unruly, and untrustworthy.² James I articulates common early modern attitudes of ideal masculinity, which blends king and father as analogous and complementary male roles, when he asserts that "I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife" (272). In contrast to a king or father who exercises order over their kingdom or household, John Knox, in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*, argues that female authority "is the subuersion of good order, of all equitie and iustice" (9). Knox further argues that any woman in a position of political authority and rulership is a "traitoresse" (53). Later, Joseph Swetnam in *The Araignment of Leuud, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* asserts that "women are crooked by nature" (1). Although these may represent extreme and misogynistic views, we see with Shakespeare how Oberon is able to exert control as a husband and king only through deception of his wife, illustrating how he does not conform to ideal models of masculinity in the Renaissance. Furthermore, Oberon is treasonous; he induces political and sexual chaos as he drugs the queen, causing her desire for a lower ranking man with an ass's head. Under early modern law, he could be designated a sodomite or at least as causing sodomy. The first English sodomy law, established during the reign of Henry VIII, punishes with death those found guilty of "the detestable and abhominable vice of buggery commyttid with mankynde or beaste" (Goldberg 3). Though the definition of buggery in the Renaissance does not provide specification about a particular sexual act, nor does it specify whether same-sex erotic behavior would fall under this category, Oberon's drugging of Titania was intended to cause her to pursue "with the soul of love" a "lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, / On meddling monkey, or on busy ape" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.180–81). When she falls in love with a human instead, Puck quickly ensures Titania's love is bestial by transforming Bottom's head into the head of an ass. Sodomy in the early modern period was a general notion of debauchery linked to politically dangerous behavior (Bray 16). The coupling of Titania with Bottom carries a marked political charge, since Bottom was a weaver, and this trade had gained a notorious reputation for political rebellion (Montrose 180).³ Hence, it would be more historically accurate to perceive Oberon's actions not as a husband asserting authority and restoring patriarchy, but instead as an unruly subordinate creating chaos within a matriarchal realm.

Fairy land is also one of several female-governed communities mentioned within the text: the play commences with a reference to the defeat of Hippolyta and her *Amazons* (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1.1.16–17), Hermia is informed that she must enter a *nunnery* if she does not obey her father's commands (1.1.69–78), Titania was worshiped in *India* by a votress of her order (2.1.123–24), and Lysander plans to escape with Hermia to his wealthy, widowed aunt who presumably governed her own household (1.1.157–59). Not only does Shakespeare provide numerous references to female-governed spaces; he also demonstrates what occurs to men when they are immersed within them. For example, Bottom is silenced and dominated by Titania, Demetrius is aggressively pursued and chased by Helena, while Oberon causes disorder within Titania's realm.

This lines up with what Theseus does Hippolyta

There is another reading of this in which the drugging is equivalent to Theseus' more violent actions. Especially to a post #metoo audience drugging could almost be perceived as worse than the physical violence.

In the realm of the fairies Oberon commits treason, which an audience living under a monarchy is huge.

Is there something we can do to Bottom to associate them strongly w/ Trump's critics? I know you want to keep them a weaver, but can they be dressed in rainbow, maybe an AO shirt or hat?

Is it
overkill if
we
somehow
have the
dismantling
of all
of these
places?
We
already
get
Titania
and
Hippolyta.
a. Can we
somehow
give
allusions

The men increasingly correspond to notions about early modern women, which held that women were naturally unruly subjects who needed to be governed to ensure that they remained obedient. A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is, in this regard, somewhat characteristic of Shakespeare's plays, insofar as it portrays fluctuation in gender roles. Yet unlike Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which demonstrates a somewhat philogynistic view of women, or *Titus Andronicus*, which articulates sympathy for violence inflicted against women, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* instead interrogates gender categories in relation to power.⁴ When comparing the domains of Theseus and Titania, matriarchal and patriarchal modes of power oscillate back and forth throughout the play as well as gender roles, destabilizing male/female categories. Initially in the text, matriarchy is subdued, as Amazons are conquered by Theseus; then patriarchy is confounded, as Oberon's love potion thwarts the rule of Egeus and Theseus; then again is matriarchy subverted as Oberon drugs Titania. These contrasting models of power create complex layers of gender confusion and distortion in a manner not unlike Shakespeare's other comedies, where characters such as Viola from *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind from *As You Like It*, or Portia from the *Merchant of Venice* were performed by boy actors playing the parts of female characters, who pretend to be men in the stories. Such dizzying multilayered oscillation between male and female bodies bears some resemblance to the fluctuations between masculine and feminine political bodies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the resulting confusion of gender roles and definitions of men and women. The transgressions of Theseus's and Titania's regime are returned to some sort of balance at the end of the play, insofar as in Shakespeare's comedies gender disorder may be partially remedied with marriages. Or as Hymen declares at the end of *As You Like It*, "Peace, ho I bar confusion./'Tis I must make conclusion/Of these most strange events" (5.4.123–25).

The figure of Oberon, examined through the political lens of Titania's matriarchy, serves as a figure of masculine disorder, where he is more aligned with rebellious and disorderly women in the play such as Hermia, who defies the orders of Theseus and her father by running away with Lysander, or Helena, who aggressively pursues her love interest into the forest. Shakespeare portrays complex layers of power dynamics, as the play depicts a back-and-forth oscillation of authority and rebellion between the two worlds of Athens and fairy land. A better acknowledgment of the folkloric views concerning the fairy queen's authority should reorient the view of power relations in the play and offer a different model of the play's engagement with gender and sexuality.

Notes

¹See Murray 12–13. Thomas has even less agency when he appears in oral popular ballads such as *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Tam Lin* collected in the early nineteenth century. In these ballads, Thomas kisses or has sex with the Fairy Queen, is commanded to serve her for seven years in fairy land, and is then whisked away on the back of her horse. Similarly, Tam Lin was kidnapped by the Fairy Queen when he was three years old and can be rescued only by a mortal girl. See Sargent and Kittredge 64–69.

²For example, though Robert Burton claims both sexes can be treacherous, "No penne could write, no tongue attaine to tell [. . .] Of womens treacheries the hundreth part" (680).

³A similar attitude toward clothiers can be seen later in the century in the English civil war (Hill 23).

⁴For example, the plot of *The Winter's Tale* rests on the fidelity and virtue of Hermione. When mourning Hermione's "sainted spirit," the once tyrannical Leontes "remember[s] Her and her virtues" and "cannot forget [his] blemishes in them." Furthermore, he laments that he had not at all times heeded the good advice of a woman, Paulina, who had fiercely defended Hermione (Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* 5.1.57, 5.1.7–9, 5.1.51–52). In *Titus Andronicus*, the male relatives of the raped and mutilated Lavinia express absolute solidarity with her. Rather than directing blame or disgrace toward her, after discovering that she had been attacked and had her hands cut off, Titus exclaims "Give me a sword, I'll chop off my hands too" (3.1.72).

Opening the door for playing with gender presentation. Whether it be with costuming, staging, physicality, etc...

What does this say about Helena? is she butch?

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