



A Reading Of The Fairy World And The Forest In A Midsummer Night's Dream In The Light Of Ecocriticism

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ABSTRACT: My paper endeavours to explore the fairy world and their realm, the forest, presented in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the perspective of Ecocriticism or Environmentalism, which welcomes multiple perspectives, and in so doing throughout the paper I would like to zero in on the fairies and the forest respectively. I wish to present Shakespeare's fairies not merely as the supernatural beings but as the speaker of the forest and of nature's values. By liberating the fairies from demonic association, Shakespeare's forest appears to us as inviting and healing. From the perspective of Nature, the body of Titania can be regarded as a physical manifestation of the forest's growth, and in particular, of a picture of over-grown garden, whereas Oberon appears to be the gardener. Puck, on his part, as a shape-shifter may be interpreted as the representation of the generative energy of Nature; it's ability to create form, seemingly out of the air, at will. The forest can also be represented as a true alternative of a city like Athens which fails to solve the problem of love affairs among the youth. Besides appearing as a sanctuary where the lovers get justice and happiness, the forest also appears to be a saviour of fertility in the lovers, particularly in Hermia. This paper, therefore, will deal with these issues in details with a view to reading the fairy world and the forest in the light of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Fairies, Forest, Ecocriticism, Nature, Deep Ecology

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, a superbly shrewd and serious writer like Shakespeare closely observed the prevailing belief of the Elizabethan people in supernatural creatures like Fairies, Witches, Goblins and this prevailing belief, in particular, gave him adequate impetus to introduce a number of supernatural beings into his plays. Shakespeare's use of the supernatural creatures like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to all intent and purposes, catered to the interest of the audience of his time. However, Shakespeare's employment of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has variously been discussed and one of the best discussions of the fairies is Ernest Schanzer's article 'The Moon and the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' (University of Toronto Quarterly Vol-24, Number-3, April 1955, pp-234-246) Schanzer writes, "We are given three wholly distinct kinds of fairies", thereby categorizing the fairies in terms of their respective role. Be that as it may, I would like to put light on these fairies and the forest, where they basically roam, from a different perspective. I wish to present Shakespeare's fairies as the speaker of the forest and of nature's values. Shakespeare's employment of the imagery of nature corroborates the green world, a world inhabited by shadows and shamen or as Shakespeare calls them fairies. By liberating the fairies from demonic association, Shakespeare's forest appears to us as inviting and healing. These fairies, therefore, become the voice of various competing discourses such as the festive drama of green world, the pastoral idealism experienced by the lovers and the animistic magic of Puck. In order to drive home, the point that the fairy world and the forest may be interpreted from the perspectives of Ecocriticism or Environmentalism which welcomes multiple perspectives, let us focus on the fairies and the forest respectively.

First of all, I start with Titania, Queen of the Fairies, and she, both as a fairy queen and surrogate mother to the changeling, represents the embodiment of female sexual and maternal virtue. Moving to a different dimension, from the perspective of Nature, we can regard Titania's body as a physical manifestation of the forest's growth. Added to this, her dotage over the changeling and her refusal to relinquish him showcase a picture of over-grown garden. Without proper tending, Titania's generative energy has, in fact, waxed out of

control. Her long speech delivered before her 'jealous Oberon' brings this point to the fore: "Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, /As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea /Contagious fog..."(Act-2, Sc-1, Line-88-100). If Titania stands for the unweeded garden or the life of the forest, then her changeling appears to be her offspring. For the sake of maintaining the fruitfulness of a garden, gardeners "dead-head" the tops of their flowering plants, pick up ripe fruits and berries and transplant offshoots. In this play, Oberon's exertion to get the child from Titania, places him in the post of the gardener who must curb the tendency of the mother plant to grow 'wild' and perhaps become susceptible to 'corruption'. As ecocritics we, therefore, can interpret Titania as a mother figure and an over-grown garden and these two figures, no doubt, have close connection with Nature. In this respect it can be said that Titania's suppression in the hands of Oberon is a quintessence of Nature's exhaustion in the hands of man.

Besides his vivacious wife, Titania, Oberon has dallied with various beauties of classical myth: "amorosa Philida"(Act-2, Sc-1, Line-65) and the "bouncing Amazon" (Act-2, Sc-1, Line-70) Hippolyta. Both his sexual escapades and his interference with the lovers on their erotic behalf connotes the exuberant, spring time lust that abandons rules, overlooks bonds and betrothal so, and seeks copulation despite concerns of law and order. Nature, therefore, appears to be the bower of love in whatever form it comes. Moving to a different dimension, Oberon smacks of crucial importance because of his extensive knowledge of herbal lore which invites the 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, placing him in the position of the keeper of the forest. His willingness to train the changeling to be his henchmen suggests that he serves as game warden to the forest. Oberon's knowledge about the flower called 'love-in-idleness' acts as a miraculous medicine which corrects the lovers and brings unfathomable happiness in the hearts of the lovers. Thus, it is Oberon who adds punch and power to the glorification of natural herb's effectiveness.

Next to Oberon, Puck occupies an important niche in the play. Throughout the play Puck appears to be the epicentre of change. He is the one who, being ordered by Oberon circles the globe in search of the flower, 'love-in-idleness'. So, if Oberon is credited for the knowledge of the flower's magic, Puck also deserves due appreciation for the application of it. He, applying the love-potion derived from the magical flower, executes what Oberon desires. Puck's action, therefore, seems to be an incarnation of Oberon's will.

It is Puck who seems to be the real creative energy of the forest because he most fruitfully embodies the quality of a 'play within a play'. As a shape-shifter, he also represents the generative energy of Nature; its ability to create form, seemingly out of air, at will. This is why Nature in this play is synonymous to magic.

The forest, a notable part for the ecosystem, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be viewed from a different perspective of Ecocriticism. In the play we see the heavy knots regarding the love affairs of four Athenian youths namely Demetrius, Lysander, Helena and Hermia. In the course of the play, we see that in the labyrinth of the forest all the lovers become utterly confused and face a peculiar experience in the hands of the supernatural creatures. However, the ethereal beings of the forest or for that matter the fairies intervened and helped them form correct pairs, thereby bringing sheer joy and happiness in the minds and hearts of the lovers. The forest, therefore, plays a crucial role in unknotting the knot of love affairs which the civilized city like Athens fails to do. Thus, the forest can be interpreted as the representation of Shakespeare's belief that it is the lap of Nature (wilderness) not the civilized city that can bring reconciliation and happiness among the youth, thereby evoking a sense of going back to the wilderness. Here, in fact, we get a latent hint for the eulogy of today's concept of 'Deep Ecology'.

Now the question may arise -why these discussions are important to ecocriticism? In a play riddled with inversions and topsy-turvy seasons, we are introduced to a world unable to maintain itself. Before the meddling of the fairies Athens, like our own world, appears to be an ecosystem out of kilter. Although Puck is not the Fairy King, he certainly is the agent of Oberon's will as well as his and our own. He, therefore, inhabits both the human and the green world, releasing us from our assumptions concerning the real or possible. In representing both realms, Puck's action prevents tragedy or death. As a voice from the forest, Puck's message speaks volume of the inter-relatedness between the binaries such as city and forest, humanity and nature. The realm of the fairies offers a space for evaluating the role which distinctions play between Nature and Culture in affirming or reforming society's normative practices. Highlighting the complexity of distinctions between Nature and Culture and other binaries like patriarchal and matriarchal power, it becomes an unconscious dream state and also locates creative power as emerging both from our imagination and from that outdoor world that so fascinates us. As Lamb, Reynolds and Sawyer assert, Shakespeare recovers fairies from demonology, rebellion and violence. The fairies with their ability to work magic become agents of Nature and create peace and love from dissension. Furthermore, Shakespeare mingles the imagery of fairy magic and medicine with the

restorative power of the green world than Barber and Frye have indicated in their analysis of the play as festive comedy.

If the actions of the fairies are considered to be dreams of unconscious fears and desires, the fairies can also be regarded as the shadow side of humanity. Whether 'real' or 'imagined' fairies emerge as agents of the imagination, thereby providing viable solutions to the problems of the lovers. However, if the shadows are seen as mouthpieces of nature as well as human consciousness, and interesting relationship comes to the fore. Nature becomes a land of dreams, but also literally an arena that nurtures peace between opposites. As the fairies notice, laugh and restore happiness in the minds of the lovers, we begin to view the world from the forest's perspective; conversely Nature observes our lives with due affection just as love makes lovers blind to the faults of three beloved and as mothers give shelter to their young offsprings who create troubles now and then. It is the forest which by joining "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" (Act-4, Sc-2, Line-7) under the auspices of the imagination provides comic restoration. All told, it is pertinent to say that the forest and the 'shadow' (fairies) that 'slumber here' offer us a scope to view Nature with a different attitude.

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