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Article abstract

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# Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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*The amateur actors in A Midsummer Night's Dream are compared several times with the fairies who inhabit a forest outside of Athens. This article will investigate the significance of the analogy by exploring commonalities between discursive elements in folklore, physiology, and philosophy that regard imaginative faculties as a powerful force. When contextualizing Shakespeare's representation of acting and writing within early modern assumptions about the nature of the imagination and its relation to popular stories of monstrous births, fairies, and witches, we can see that A Midsummer Night's Dream portrays theatre as a medium containing subversive political and erotic energies that potentially can alter the socio-political landscape.*

*Dans A Midsummer Night's Dream, les acteurs amateurs sont plusieurs fois comparés aux fées habitant la forêt voisine d'Athènes. Cet article examine la signification de cette analogie en explorant les points communs que partagent les discours tenus sur le folklore, sur la physiologie et sur la philosophie : tous considèrent les facultés imaginatives comme de puissantes forces. Lorsque l'on situe les représentations proposées par Shakespeare de l'acteur et de l'écrivain dans le contexte des idées de son époque sur la nature de l'imagination et sur sa relation avec les histoires populaires de naissances monstrueuses, de fées et de sorcières, on constate que A Midsummer Night's Dream représente le théâtre comme un art porteur d'énergies politiques et érotiques subversives, lesquelles peuvent éventuellement modifier le paysage sociopolitique.*

Shakespeare drew heavily from popular culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yet it is remarkable that the play concludes with an action that notably contrasts with most early modern folklore. Titania, Oberon, and their troop of fairies bless the marriage beds of three noble couples. This blessing is to protect their future children from birth defects and from “blots of Nature's hand [which] / Shall not in their issue stand: / Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar, / Nor mark prodigious.”<sup>1</sup> With the words and intention of this blessing, the fairies are performing in a way opposite to what would be expected from them

1. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, Arden Shakespeare, 1991) 5.1.395–98. Hereafter, references to act, scene, and line from this edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be placed within parentheses after quotations.

in early modern popular culture; fairies were notorious for stealing healthy babies and replacing them with their own sickly changelings, and not for protecting them. However, scholarship to date has paid little attention to the implications of this strange ending to the play, or to its disruption of popular culture. The significance of this reversal of folklore is compounded by the play's continuous comparison between fairies, authorship, and acting. The term "prodigious" in these lines also evokes another element of folklore having to do with birth defects: the early modern preoccupation with prodigious births. The Renaissance held a fascination with prodigious or monstrous births in popular ballads, natural philosophy, physiology, and theology. Although important studies have been done on monstrous births recorded in Renaissance theology and medical literature,<sup>2</sup> little attention has been paid to the overlaps in beliefs and ideations between changelings and monstrous births, or to how this affects a reading of a play such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which evokes both of these folkloric ideas. This article will on the one hand argue that changelings and monstrous births are symptomatic of a larger anxiety about the politics of primogeniture, and that Shakespeare's representation of monstrous births, changelings, and fairies reveals an underlying uncertainty about the production of healthy and legitimate children in a feudal, patrilineal society. On the other hand, this article, by examining folkloric understandings of the imagination as it emerged in stories of monstrous births, fairies, and witches, and how such ideas from popular culture intersected with Renaissance medicine, politics, and psychology, will show how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be seen as portraying authorship and creativity as politically-charged endeavours that are potentially subversive of the complex nexus of hierarchies that structured the Renaissance world.

The fairy blessing in act 5 is of particular significance since Shakespeare associates the behaviour of fairies with his own profession: authorship and the theatre. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, actors, fairies, and lovers inhabit the same locale of the forest outside the rigid laws of Athens. Theseus emphasizes the connection between these categories when he declares that he "never may believe [...] fairy toys" since "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" (5.1.2–3 and 7–8). The imagination is the thread that links

2. See Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) and A. W. Bates, *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

stories of fairies, madness, love, and poetry. Furthermore, the play several times makes explicit correlations between actors and fairies. While watching the “rude mechanicals” rehearse their play, Puck exclaims that he will be “An actor, too” (3.1.76). The distinction between fairies and playacting is also blurred as Theseus claims “The best [actors] in this kind are but shadows,” evoking Puck’s description of Oberon earlier in the text as the “king of shadows” (5.1.209 and 3.2.347). The epilogue again asserts the association between actors and fairies: Puck discusses the possibility that “we shadows have offended,” simultaneously referring to both fairies and actors (Epilogue, 409). Why does Shakespeare invite such an explicit comparison of his own art of writing and acting with that of popular folklore, steeped in sinister stories of fairies who steal children, and also with sexual taboo, as manifested in the complex and illicit desires of the lovers in the forest? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to explore the multifaceted understandings of the imagination which existed in the divergent discourses of early modern physiology and popular culture and how these relate to fairy lore.

Though the comparison to shadows suggests that actors as well as fairies are delusive, shape shifting, and illusory, many critics have noted that the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not so sinister and dangerous as they are in Renaissance folklore. Minor White Latham argues that early modern fairies can be “tyrannical and dangerous beings, even in their jokes.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Dianne Purkiss posits that Shakespeare’s fairies are different from tradition: “sweet fairies of the *Dream* are indeed the remote ancestors of every wholly benign fairy, right down to pink-clad Sugar Plum fairies in tights. In taking the sting of death out of fairies, Shakespeare robs them of their complexity.”<sup>4</sup> Even though Purkiss argues that Shakespeare’s depiction of fairies began the later trend of benevolent fairies, it may have been prudent for Shakespeare to take the “sting” out of fairy lore. This is because overt references throughout the play, which link playacting and fairies, invite comparison and produce thereby a self-referential commentary upon his own art and self. In contrast, I contend

3. Latham does qualify this description, however, by arguing that fairies did not harm people as frequently as they could have (considering the powers fairies were meant to wield). Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 136.

4. Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 181.

that while Shakespeare's fairies are indeed less overtly menacing than some of their counterparts in popular culture, the many overlaps and commonalities between stories of fairies, witches, and monstrous births in early modern culture demonstrate how Shakespeare does not entirely distance the text, and by proxy the theatre, from the more ominous facets of popular lore.

The fairies in the play are also aristocratic, and Mary Ellen Lamb argues that they are consequently separated from popular culture and "pose no social or political threat."<sup>5</sup> However, fairy land was also a monarchy in popular culture, and yet it was still disruptive to the socio-political ideology of hierarchical politics because it engendered fantasies of social climbing: peasants in folkloric stories often would find fairy gold or join the aristocratic fairy entourage.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when contextualizing Shakespeare's fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within the intersection of discursive understandings of the imagination, they are not stripped of the complex political, social, and sexual agency that fairies represented in the popular imagination.

### 1. Fairies and the maternal imagination

Though Latham and Purkiss argue that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* distances fairy lore from its sinister origins, the play alludes to darker themes within folk tales. The conflict between Titania and Oberon is primarily based upon possession of a stolen child: the changeling. As K. M. Briggs claims, "The thing that everyone knows about the fairies is that they covet human children and steal them whenever they can. No account of fairies is complete without the mention of this practice."<sup>7</sup> John Aubrey, recalling his childhood in the country, explained that the elder women of his community believed that "the Fairies would steale away young children and putt others in their places."<sup>8</sup> Bessie Dunlop, who was charged with witchcraft in 1576 in Scotland, confessed in her trial that she was visited by "the queen of the fairies Elfame" who attempted

5. Mary Ellen Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.3 (2000): 309.

6. Purkiss, 112–15 and 124–33.

7. K. M. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 115.

8. John Aubrey, "Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme," in *Three Prose Works*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1972), 203. Quoted in Lamb (281).

to bargain for her unbaptized baby.<sup>9</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not explicitly show fairies stealing healthy babies and replacing them with their own sickly children, but it is revealed that Titania, the queen of fairies, does indeed have a penchant for stealing children, since she has "A lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king" (2.1.22). However, Titania provides a reason for her deed: she claims that stealing the boy was a benevolent act of loyalty to his dead mother who was her votress. Nevertheless, it is significant that the child is described as being "stol'n" from a king, as it suggests that fairies could potentially disrupt a socio-economic system based upon patrilineal lineage. It is also notable that Titania "never had so sweet a changeling," implying that this was not the first time Titania had stolen a child (2.1.23).

By introducing a changeling into the narrative, the text raises questions concerning what it means for a play to link the acting profession with creatures who kidnap babies and disrupt patrilineal politics and the production of legitimate heirs of a king. Though fairies were notorious for stealing infants, they were also agents of transformation since they could transform healthy babies into sickly changelings and transfer wealth to the poor, and were most likely to appear during times of transition such as birth, adolescence, loss of virginity, marriage, death, and burial.<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare emphasizes their transformational nature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For example, Puck, who is described as both "an actor" and "shadow," has the power to metamorphose people into animal/human hybrids; he transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. One pamphlet published in 1639 describes several monstrous births and evokes legends of transformation that include the story of Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, who was once a man but was "chang'd" into a "Fairie elfe."<sup>11</sup> Though the pamphlet was published more than forty years after *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written and performed, it still draws attention to the many commonalities and similarities between fairies and monstrous births in early modern culture, and how such stories inform popular attitudes about the nature of the imagination in early modern culture. An understanding of these connections can reveal why Puck associates acting and the theatre with his ability to transform.

9. Purkiss, 105 and 107.

10. Purkiss, 116–57 and 86.

11. L.P., *A Monstrous shape. OR A shapeless Monster* (London: 1639), 1v.

Monstrous births and the sickly changelings left behind by fairies were popular stories that helped society explain and make sense of birth defects, illness, and child deformities. There was precedent for these beliefs found in classical literature and myth since monstrous births feature in several classical texts.<sup>12</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, has many instances of prodigious births or rebirths. Indeed, Theseus was the slayer of the Minotaur, a monster whose bull's head resembles Bottom's transformation; moreover, the Minotaur's mother Pasiphaë gave birth to him because she "play[ed] the Harlot with a Bull, and in hir wombe" she "[bore] A Barne, in whome the shapes of man and beasts confounded were."<sup>13</sup> Helen Hackett points out that human copulation with animals as well as excessive lust was also believed by Renaissance medical writers to cause monstrous offspring:

Theseus, of course, was famous not only for his sexual intemperance, but also as the vanquisher of just such a monstrous birth, the Minotaur, a bull-headed man who was the progeny of the lustful Pasiphae and a bull. Bottom—half-man, half-ass—looks like a comic version of the Minotaur, and like the offspring of such a bestial union. He is consistently referred to in the play as a monster.<sup>14</sup>

12. D. Felton explains that "the early Greek cosmos filled quickly with a wide variety of monstrous creatures during the process of creation." Hesiod, for example, describes some of the offspring of Gaia and Ouranos as being monstrous Cyclopes, who were giants with one eye in the middle of their foreheads, and Hecatoncheires, creatures with one hundred hands and fifty heads. See D. Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 106–07.

13. Ovid, *The xv. bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis*, trans. Arthur Golding (London: 1567), 97v.

14. Helen Hackett, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *A Companion to Shakespeare: Vol. 3: The Comedies*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 350. Monstrous births were also believed to be induced by excessive lust on the part of parents, particularly if their lust caused them to copulate during the woman's menstrual cycle. Hackett discusses how these ideas can be found in Ambroise Paré's *On Monsters and Marvels* and Aristotle's *Master-Piece*. These beliefs underlie Theseus's opening complaint about the need to wait for four days and four nights for his wedding to Hippolyta. Hackett explains that there was an idea, "inherited from Aristotle, that the menstrual cycle coincided with the lunar cycle, and that most women had their periods at the end of the lunar month." Both the dark moon and menstruation were also associated with sleep, dreams, and the occult. See Hackett, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*," 349, 347–48.

Hence, references to Theseus as well as changelings in the forest of Athens show how Shakespeare draws from both elite and popular as well as classical traditions of monstrous births. Moreover, *Metamorphoses*, which was translated into English during the sixteenth century, also lists numerous examples of gods who rape or deceptively seduce women while assuming the form of an animal. Similarly, Oberon's love potion causes Titania to believe she is in love with Bottom: a man with the head of an ass.<sup>15</sup>

While it is thus evident that monstrous births were of interest to both popular and educated cultures alike, monstrous births, in particular, were positioned at the cultural intersection of several discursive debates about the nature of the imagination. As Marie-Hélène Huet explains, "no theory was more debated, more passionately attacked or defended, than the power of the maternal imagination over the formation of the fetus."<sup>16</sup> The imaginations of mothers, according to Michel de Montaigne, one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance, were of such force that they could affect a fetus:

[...] we know by experience that women transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of the children they carry in their womb; witness the one who gave birth to the Moor. And there was presented to Charles, king of Bohemia and Emperor, a girl from near Pisa, all hairy and bristly, who her mother said had been thus conceived because of a picture of Saint John the Baptist hanging by her bed.<sup>17</sup>

Montaigne refers to a story in which a woman gave birth to a black child because, he argues, she looked at a painting of a Moor in her room. Montaigne's second example of a child covered with hair was still being discussed in 1651 by Nicholas Culpeper in *A Directory for Midwives*, a popular midwife book published thirteen times. In a chapter titled "Of Imperfect Children" Culpeper suggests the excessive hair was caused by the mother's imagination, who

15. In the coupling of Titania and Bottom, Shakespeare may also be alluding to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, where a noblewoman lusted and had sex with Lucius while he was in his donkey form. See Apuleius, *The xi. bookes of the Golden Asse*, trans. William Adlington (London: 1582), 181v–183r.

16. Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

17. Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Power of the Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), 75.



contemplated the image of “John the Baptist clothed in Chamels-Hair.”<sup>18</sup> Although monstrous births were often attributed to moral or theological sins,<sup>19</sup> the belief that woman’s imaginative faculties could be affected by artistic images so as to influence their pregnancy was powerful enough that Elizabeth, the wife of Henry VII, gave birth to a child in a room hung with plain tapestries in 1486.<sup>20</sup>

Beliefs in monstrous births countered Aristotelian theories, which limited women’s agency in reproduction since, according to Aristotle, male seed was the active force that shaped passive matter provided by the woman.<sup>21</sup> Sid Ray argues that the “emphasis on male agency suggests some anxiety about the woman’s influence, especially among aristocrats. If the mother was not pure, her body did become a kind of Trojan Horse; it gestated another body that diluted, or worse, infiltrated aristocratic blood and authority.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in stories of monstrous births women’s imagination usurps the male reproductive power. Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* posits that if a woman “at the time of her conception, thinke of another man present or absent, the child will be like him” and that “Moles, Warts, Scarres, Hare-lips, Monsters” are caused “by force of a depraved phantasy in them.”<sup>23</sup> According to Huet, the act of childbirth reveals the physical symptoms of the mother’s innermost thoughts and hidden desires:

Instead of reproducing the father’s image, as nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother

18. Nicholas Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives* (London: 1651), 140.

19. Crawford, 1–26.

20. Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1995), 97.

21. Aristotle argued that “the female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape.” Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1943), 185.

22. Sid Ray, “‘So troubled with the mother’: The Politics of Pregnancy in *The Duchess of Malfi*,” in *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*, ed. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 25. In discussing representations of pregnancy in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ray explains that the “female body, not unlike the Trojan Horse, was imagined as an empty receptacle in early modern culture” (25).

23. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: 1621), 124.

at the time of conception or during pregnancy. The resulting offspring carried the marks of her whims and fancy rather than the recognizable features of its legitimate genitor. The monster thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous power of the female imagination.<sup>24</sup>

The maternal imagination had the ability to erase the politics of primogeniture through its monstrous conceptions.

When considering the discourse of maternal imagination in Renaissance thought, it is notable that the fairies in act 5 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggest that they have the power to circumvent women's aptitude to cause various birth defects in their pregnancies. This is particularly noteworthy since there were many parallels between fairies and women throughout folklore. Fairies were associated with femininity insofar as house fairies occupied traditional female work spaces performing domestic chores. Also, fairy stories often focus upon traditional women's concerns such as birth and childcare.<sup>25</sup> Wendy Wall calls attention to Puck's association with women, reminding us that after "waxing lyrical about screeching predators and demonic spirits, Puck describes his nocturnal mission as an odd hallowing."<sup>26</sup> In the play he claims that he is "sent with broom before / To sweep the dust behind the door" (5.1.375–76). There was furthermore an assumption that stories about fairies were often transmitted by serving women.<sup>27</sup> Like early modern women who were believed to be more unruly and carnal than men, fairies were notorious for having sex with mortals. Furthermore, Puck is marked as a figure who metamorphoses into various animals when he takes the "likeness of a filly foal" or when he declares "Sometime a horse I'll be, sometimes a hound, / A hog, a headless bear" (2.1.46 and 3.1.103–04). Women too were associated with beasts in folklore surround-

24. Huet, 1.

25. Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 94–126 and Purkiss, 106.

26. Wall, 94.

27. Wall, 102. For example, Reginald Scot demonstrates the view that fairy beliefs were passed on through women when he lists fairies along with witches, elves, Robin Good-fellow, and other supernatural entities as terrifying "bugs" commonly passed down in childhood by "our mothers maids." Thomas Hobbes also discredits fairy lore by suggesting that they are stories often told by women, "rising from the Traditions of old Wives, or old Poets." See Scot, 152–53 and Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651), 387.

ing monstrous births. Laura Gowing argues that in “the literature of monstrous births, women become the conduit by which bestial features or body parts—in some cases, whole animals—found their way into human reproduction.”<sup>28</sup> The belief that women could create animal-like offspring or monsters due to the force of their imaginative faculties demonstrates the preoccupations concerning women’s creativity which was credited with the ability to disrupt the boundaries between human and animal, and this constituted a threat to the organization of patrilineal society which made the production of legitimate heirs necessary. Like changelings, who are not entirely human and who disrupt patterns of succession and heredity right, monstrous births indicate that the womb and imagination could be conceived as hidden spaces outside of patriarchal society that could directly threaten the political body. As agents of transformation, fairies and women’s imaginations represent permeable boundaries, inasmuch as they are bodies that do not maintain ontological distinctions. Significantly, the play indicates that fairies, and hence their correlation with authorship and creativity, can be as powerful as the maternal imagination in shaping reality, if not more so—in the fairies’ assertion that they have the ability to ensure women do not create prodigious births. Although the “rude mechanicals” perform a play according to what they believe the aristocracy will approve of, this ending of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* underscores theatre’s potential to transform and affect the socio-political world, regardless of Theseus’s assertion that poets have an imagination that is comparable to madmen and fairy toys—a statement that minimizes the significance of imagination, and by extension, the theatre.

Like pregnant women with vivid imaginations who can disrupt patriarchal authority, fairies are feminine forces that are also disorderly agents of metamorphism and transformation. Notably, Shakespeare’s text features recurring references to the moon, a feminine body that signifies change and flux. Fairyland was often perceived as a feminine domain, since therein the queen was generally portrayed as the centre of power.<sup>29</sup> Regina Buccola maintains that the “majority of theatrical and popular representations of fairyland in early modern England depicted a queen who had either sole sovereign authority or

28. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 131.

29. Regina Buccola, *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 71.

dominance over her partner.”<sup>30</sup> Purkiss notes that many standard stories about men’s encounters with fairies, and particularly with the fairy queen, reflect a sense that the man is entering a realm that is not his own, a woman’s world.<sup>31</sup> In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the feminine space inhabited by the fairies reflects their ambiguous ontological status: the forest is distinct from the civilization and tyrannical laws of Theseus, where the “father should be as a god” and where Amazons are conquered and married into acceptable patriarchal relations (1.1.47). In contrast, dreams, lovers, magic, and theatre (as manifested in the form of the “rude mechanicals”) all exist in the forest outside of social institutions and norms. Like fairies which existed in liminal spaces, in the dreamscape, taboo sexuality thrives as Hermia defies her father and ruler to elope and Helena pursues her love interest Demetrius in the forest rather than being courted herself. Eroticism also transgresses class boundaries as the queen of the fairies falls in love with Bottom the weaver. Though contact between aristocratic fairies and mortal peasants was not uncommon in fairy lore, desire is literally bestial in the passion between Titania and Bottom, attested to by Bottom’s donkey head. Social boundaries and laws dissolve in the dreamscape of the play.

## 2. Science, the imagination, and reason

Similar to monstrous births which evoked anxiety concerning women’s imagination, fairies in folklore were associated with dreams rather than rational thought.<sup>32</sup> In early modern English scientific discourse, Francis Bacon and later Robert Burton argue that the imagination and dreams were generated from

30. Buccola, 71. In her analysis of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 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. Buccola, 74.

31. Purkiss, 133–34.

32. Fairies and dreams corresponded together in folklore since nightmares were sometimes considered to be fairy-like spirits that plagued sleeping humans. For example, in Drayton’s *Nymphidia* the queen of fairies was “[i]n elder Times the *Mare*,” an old English demon responsible for bad dreams and whose name survives today in the term “nightmare.” Michael Drayton, *The Battaile of Agincourt [...] Nymphidia, the Court of Fayrie* (London: William Lee, 1627), 118, and Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 228.

the same cognitive faculty and were distinct from reason.<sup>33</sup> The imagination and irrationality were also associated with woman due to early modern understandings of female physiology. Not only was it believed that women had more potent imaginations due to their presumed cold and moist nature;<sup>34</sup> the womb was an organ often associated with irrationality. For example, Plato describes the “discontented and angry” irrational womb as “wandering in every direction through the body.”<sup>35</sup> Though Plato had held that the womb was a site of irrationality or disorder, this belief did not achieve hegemony, particularly since Galen did not believe the womb wandered throughout the female body. Nonetheless, Robert Hoopes argues that the Renaissance privileged and emphasized reason, often conflating it with knowledge and virtue.<sup>36</sup> Hamlet, for example, declares “What piece of work is a man—, how noble in reason.”<sup>37</sup> In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Theseus’s assertion that “cool reason” is preferable to a poet’s “airy nothing” is situated in contrast to the forest where characters are represented as often sleeping and dreaming on stage, and in this dreamscape illicit desires are explored—just as secret thoughts and desires of the mother can be hidden inside her womb (5.1.6 and 16). *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is arguably the most erotic of Shakespeare’s plays. Young lovers are interchangeable throughout the night, and the bestial desire between Titania and Bottom is further echoed in Helena’s pronouncement that she would willingly be Demetrius’s “spaniel” (2.1.205). Huet argues that monstrous

33. Bacon argues that “in matters of Faith & Religion, we raise our Imagination aboue our Reason, which is the cause why Religion sought euer accesse to the Minde by Similitudes, Types, Parables, Visions, Dreames.” Burton also links the imagination to the mental state of dreaming when he argues that “Phantasie, or Imagination, [...] is an inner sense, which doth more fully examine the Species perceaued by common sense, of things present or absent, and keepes them longer, recalling them to minde againe, or making new of his owne. In time of sleepe this faculty is free, & many times conceaues strange, stupend, absurd shapes.” Francis Bacon, *The Tvvo Bookes of Francis Bacon. Of the Proficience and Aduancement of Learning, Diuine and Humane To the King* (London: 1605), 47r; see also Burton, 35.

34. Ian Maclean explains that “Imagination is thought to be stronger in women because cold and moist objects are subject to metamorphosis.” Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 42.

35. Plato, “Timaeus,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, trans. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 1210.

36. Robert Hoopes, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1962).

37. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 2.2.269–70.

births often indicate taboo desires since the story of the girl covered with camel hair “suggests the mother’s unspoken bestial desire.”<sup>38</sup> The desires that manifest in the domain of fairies transgress social and political norms like the secret bestial desire of the mother of a monstrous birth, which threatens the power of the father.

It is significant that Shakespeare compares authors to fairies who suggest that they have more agency than the maternal imagination, for many male authors in the Renaissance figured themselves as pregnant women in the throes of childbirth. For example, Sir Philip Sidney claims he is “great with Childe to speake, and helpesse in my throwes, / Byting my tongue and penne, beating my selfe for spite: / Foole, saide My muse to mee, looke in thy heart and write.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in “Elegy 2: To His Mistress Going to Bed,” Donne imagines himself as a woman in childbirth stating “Until I labour, I in labour lie,” then later compares himself to a midwife: “Then since I may know, / As liberally as to a midwife, show / Thyself.”<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Harvey argues that Renaissance male authors’ use of birth metaphors reflects the changing status of midwifery, which became a new frontier for exploration for male scientists.<sup>41</sup> Pregnancy would have been particularly mysterious for men, since fathers were barred from the birth chamber for up to a month, although many women in the community could visit.<sup>42</sup> Authors may have been drawn to the mysterious nature of childbirth and also early modern physiology, which understood the maternal imagination as a powerful force. The imagination was a mysterious, liminal space where reality changed, where new forms were created and entered into the world whether in the form of textual production or children. The mind, like the space of the womb, was potentially secretive and disorderly—away from the logic of power. Perhaps in a socio-political world where monarchical authority was in theory meant to regulate the flow of ideas, the possibilities of authorial agency within the unregulated, private, creative space of the mind offered an appealing metaphor for authors such as Sidney and Donne who lik-

38. Huet, 21.

39. Philip Sidney, *Syr P.S. His Astrophel and Stella* (London: 1591), 1.

40. John Donne, “Elegy 2: To his Mistress Going to Bed,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12–13.

41. Harvey, 76–115.

42. Gowing, 151 and 172.

ened their creative agency to pregnancy and childbirth. The internal space of the mind, like the pregnant belly, remained in many ways an opaque mystery until presented to public view. Theseus discusses the imagination in terms that could equally be used to describe wombs, which “bodies forth / The forms of things unknown,” like the poet who “Turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name” (5.1.14–17).<sup>43</sup>

The cultural understanding of cognitive processes which is demonstrated by both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and stories of monstrous births was not isolated from other strands of early modern society, and resembles theories of creativity put forward by Paracelsus, the influential sixteenth-century physician and alchemist.<sup>44</sup> Bacon complained that “the Schoole of Paracelsus, and the Disciples of pretended Naturall Magicke, haue beene so intemperate, as they haue exalted the power of the imagination, to be much one with the power of Miracle-working faith.”<sup>45</sup> Paracelsus and his followers indeed believed the imagination was a powerful, quasi-divine force which could shape and affect the corporeal world:

Thoughts are free and are subject to no rule. On them rests the freedom of man, and they tower above the light of nature. For thoughts give birth to a creative force that is neither elemental nor sidereal. [...] Thoughts create a new heaven, a new firmament, a new source of energy, from which new arts flow. [...] When a man undertakes to create something, he establishes a new heaven. [...] For such is the immensity of man that he is greater than heaven and earth.<sup>46</sup>

43. Hackett, “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*,” 354.

44. For more information on the English reception of Paracelsus in the late sixteenth century see Elizabeth Lane Furdell, *Publishing and Medicine in Early Modern England* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 6–11.

45. Bacon, 46r.

46. Paracelsus, “Dignity of Man,” in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, trans. Norbert Guterman (London: Routledge, 1951), 119. According to Arthur Edward Waite, Paracelsus wrote a treatise titled *De Virtute Imagination*, which only survives in a fragmented form. Nonetheless, in a note, Waite explains that the remains of this treatise describe how “The whole heaven, indeed, is nothing else but an imagination [...] Man, however, is altogether a star. Even as he imagines himself to be, such he is, and he is that also which he imagines. If he imagines fire, there results fire; if war, there war ensues; and so on in like manner. This is the whole reason why the imagination is in itself a complete sun.”

Resembling the mother's ability to form the child in her womb through her creativity, for Paracelsus the imagination also shapes corporeal matter. William Newman contends that Paracelsus and his followers believed "human creative power was practically unlimited."<sup>47</sup> In discussing the nature of the imagination in the seventeenth century, Burton cites earlier physicians such as "Wierus, Paracelsus, Cardan, Mizaldus, Valleriola" who "thinke, the forcible Imagination of the one party, moues and alters the spirits of the other."<sup>48</sup> The belief that the mind was capable of influencing and shaping the material world demonstrates that, for many early modern thinkers, there was a fragile distinction between external and internal realities. Perhaps that is why treason was defined in 1571 not only as an act but also as something that was imagined. In Elizabethan law, a traitor was defined as an individual who attempts to "compass, imagine, invent, devise, or intend" harm to the monarch.<sup>49</sup> Chief Baron Bridgman, who later explained the law to the jury trying the regicides, stated that "Treason [...] is in the wicked imagination."<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Imagination and authority

The imagination evokes political concerns as well in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The text continuously explores the nature of the imagination and cognitive processes in relation to authority particularly through the actions of the fairies. The play's emphasis upon cognition can be seen in the flower, "love-in-idleness," that Oberon uses to drug Titania. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, love-in-idleness and *pensée* were other words used to describe a

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Paracelsus, "The Archidoxies of Theophrastus Paracelsus," in *The Hermetical and Alchemical Writings [...] of Paracelsus the Great*, ed. Arthur Edward Waite (London: James Elliot and Co.), 7n.

47. William Newman, "The Homunculus and his Forebears: Wonders of Art and Nature," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy G. Siraisi (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 323.

48. Burton, 127.

49. "An Act whereby certain offences be made treasons (Second Treasons Act of Elizabeth, 1571: 13 Eliz. I, c.I)," in *The Tudor Constitution: Documents and Commentary*, ed. G. R. Elton, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 73.

50. "The Lord Chief Baron's Speech," in *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, ed. T. B. Howell, vol. 5 (London: T. C. Hansard, 1816), 988.



pansy.<sup>51</sup> R. W. Dent discusses the association during the Renaissance of pansy with the French word *pensée* meaning “thought,”<sup>52</sup> a connection also stressed in *Hamlet* when Ophelia claims “pansies” are “for thoughts.”<sup>53</sup> In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, pansies—and their link with thoughts—are associated with sexual disorder, as the flower causes Titania to fall in love with a commoner whose head has been replaced with that of a donkey. Thoughts are also potentially threatening to authority in other instances in the text. Theseus, the head of patriarchal law, also associates desire and love with thoughts, or (as previously mentioned) at least thoughts shaped by the imagination as opposed to “cool reason”:

I never may 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 (5.1.2–8)

Theseus dismisses the lover’s stories, claiming that imagination is a realm not to be trusted or believed. Yet, Shakespeare himself clearly identifies with these categories as actors, lovers, and fairies overlap in the forest. Significantly, Alison Shell contends that “even in a play with so much to say about the faery world,” it was difficult “to get away from the notion that imagination was reprehensible—a suspicion which, [...] is partly a religious one.”<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, Louis A. Montrose argues that “Bottom’s capacity to apprehend the story of the night and Theseus’s

51. *OED Online*, s.v. “pansy, n. and adj.” (Oxford University Press, June 2015), accessed 14 August 2015.

52. Dent quotes Randle Cotgrave’s dictionary (1611), which links the term pansy with *pensée*. Cotgrave claimed *pensée* means “A thought, supposall, conieclave (*sic*), surmise, cogitation, imagination; ones heart, mind, inward conceit, opinion, fancie, or iudgement; also, the flower Paunsie.” Similarly, Cotgrave defines *Menues pensées* as meaning “Paunsies, Harts-ease, loue or liue in idlennesse; also, idle, priuate, or prettie thoughts.” See Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (London: 1611), and R. W. Dent, “Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 90.

53. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.5.170–71.

54. Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 71.

incapacity to comprehend it” demonstrates how “Shakespeare’s professional theatre implicitly repudiates Theseus’s attitude towards the entertainers’ art.”<sup>55</sup> Though Theseus supports the theatre by inviting actors to perform at his wedding, he and his “manager of mirth,” like the Office of the Revels, determine and control symbolic and interpretative ideas of his subjects (5.1.35). Like Theseus, Queen Titania also simultaneously desires and silences Bottom, the amateur actor (5.1.35). The “rude mechanicals” themselves shape their play in response to what they believe their upper class spectators will enjoy (3.2.9). Though they comically worry that ladies will not understand the difference between a real lion and an amateur actor pretending to be one onstage, they nonetheless exclaim in unison that offending aristocratic ladies onstage may “hang us, every mother’s son” (1.2.73).<sup>56</sup> Although Theseus dismisses acting, poetry, and fairies, the fairies do alter the socio-economic order at the conclusion of the play. Demetrius is still under a fairy love spell when he marries Helena.<sup>57</sup> The text suggests that ideas from the imagination, and by implication the theatre, can influence and affect society just as taboo thoughts escape a woman’s mind and affect the external world with her monstrous progeny.

It was believed that the imagination could harm political as well as natural bodies. For example, according to Montaigne, the imagination was of such power that it “should give fevers and sometimes kill such as to allow it too much scope, and are too willing to entertain it.” The force of the imagination is also of

55. Louis A. Montrose, “A Kingdom of Shadows,” in *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 234.

56. The actors’ fear of offending aristocratic ladies may comically reflect the realities of authors such as John Lyly, who, as Hackett notes, “appears to have suffered nearly four years of nonperformance of his plays at court before the Queen deigned to bestow her favour on him again in 1588.” Hackett suggests that the numerous erotic dreams of Elizabeth in literature during this period are the “logical culmination of such a trajectory,” and that “the vanishing point to which the courtly lines of perspective all tended, was some form of intimate contact with the Queen, a fantasy which was impossibly unrealisable.” Shakespeare also portrays an erotic encounter with Bottom, the actor, and the queen of the Fairies. Helen Hackett, “Dream-Visions of Elizabeth I,” in *Reading the Early Modern Dream: The Terrors of the Night*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin, Michelle O’Callaghan, and S. J. Wiseman (New York: Routledge, 2008), 52.

57. This confusion between reality and dream in relation to fairies can be seen in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. After Arthur has woken from an erotic dream of the Fairy Queen he “found her place deuoyd, / And nought but pressed gras where she had lyen.” Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki, 2nd ed. (Harlowe: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), book 1, canto 9, lines 13–15.

such magnitude that, according to Montaigne, young girls can transform into boys.<sup>58</sup> Describing a story of a king who watched a bull fight and grew horns that night, Montaigne posits that such a story demonstrates that the act of seeing can serve as a powerful stimulant for the imagination.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, from this perspective, the visual experience of theatre could be an unsettling prospect for those in power. Though Bacon does not attribute such power and agency to the imagination, he nonetheless perceives an unstable and complex relation between the power dynamics of imagination and political realities. He cites Aristotle stating “that Reason hath ouer the Imagination that Commandement, which a Magistrate hoth ouer a free Citizen; who may come also to rule in his turne.”<sup>60</sup>

Not only was the imagination politically charged; Hackett notes that dreams also had a complicated relation to power:

Both real dreams and the literature which imitates them tend to be multi-layered, containing images whose superficial forms hints at deeper, more complex meanings which are not always readily interpretable. As such they lent themselves readily to the veiled expression of ambivalence towards or criticism of Elizabeth and her régime. Elizabethans were well acquainted with dream theories reaching back to classical times which recognised that dreams may be meaningless—perhaps just random wanderings of the mind, perhaps provoked by a physical cause like indigestion—or profoundly meaningful. Such meanings, in turn, were often of the nature of prophecies and warnings.<sup>61</sup>

While dreams could be understood as meaningless or as providing veiled critiques of authority, like the maternal imagination, dreams were also seen as potentially shaping or affecting reality through the belief that they could be prophetic or serve as profound warnings.<sup>62</sup>

58. Montaigne, 69.

59. Montaigne, 69.

60. Bacon, 47r.

61. Hackett, “Dream-Visions of Elizabeth I,” 45.

62. Hackett argues that dreams could serve as an “admonition and revelation of political dangers while at the same time safely disclaiming any such intent, purporting to be merely an idle fantasy. Dream, then, gave a certain freedom to express divergent views about Elizabeth. The association of dream with night

The fairies and their association with the imagination and dreams overlap into Theseus's domain and the centre of power as they bless the marriage beds of the three aristocratic couples, charming them so that their children will never have a "mole, hare-lip, nor scar / Nor mark prodigious (5.1.397–98). Though fairies were understood as threats to children, Oberon claims that the fairies can ensure the progeny of the three aristocratic couples will have no physical abnormalities or any characteristic that could be associated with monstrous or prodigious births. Similarly, in folklore, fairies could be both harmful and helpful. Though fairies were believed to kidnap healthy babies and replace them with sickly infants, many village healers "claimed to be in touch with the fairies."<sup>63</sup> The healing aspects of fairies are emphasized in the text in Titania and Oberon's blessing in act 5, and also by the fairies named Cobweb, Peaseblossom, Mustardseed, and Moth, whose names invoke the ingredients of common household remedies for healing ailing bodies. In one part of England, Midsummer's Eve was believed to be a restorative time when a person could be free from illness for a year if they observed certain rituals during the holiday.<sup>64</sup> In the play, fairies and creativity are potent yet morally ambiguous forces who nonetheless can heal physical and political bodies, as they restore political and sexual order in Theseus's domain and bless the offspring of the nobility from monstrous births. The fairies, and by proxy the theatre, are registered as a potentially subversive though nonetheless regenerative force or a blessing to those who wield power.

#### 4. Witchcraft and fairy lore

In order to clarify how Shakespeare represents theatre's paradoxical relation to power, it will be necessary to explore how his use of fairy lore overlaps with early modern notions of witchcraft. Oberon asserts that the fairies are distinct from ghosts or "Damned spirits" (3.2.382–88), yet Puck later claims that fairies "run / By the triple Hecate's team" (5.1.369–70). Hecate was an ancient goddess associated with witchcraft and sorcery. Though A. W. Bates

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and fantasy meant that such freedom often encompassed erotic licence: an opportunity to express desire for the Queen." Hackett, "Dream-Visions of Elizabeth I," 46.

63. James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 58.

64. Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer, "Folk Medicine and the Four Fairies of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10.4 (1959): 516.

argues that “monstrous births were never considered supernatural,”<sup>65</sup> the 1640s saw a number of pamphlets that associated monstrous births with witches and enchantments. One anonymous pamphlet, for example, posits that throughout history the phenomenon is usually caused by witchcraft.<sup>66</sup> Although popular pamphlets before the 1640s do not necessarily assign a connection between monstrous births and witchcraft, Shakespeare portrays such a connection in *The Tempest*, as the “foul witch Sycorax” purportedly gave birth to Caliban, who is repetitively referred to as a “monster” and described as a “devil,” a “moon-calf,” and a “strange fish.”<sup>67</sup> While such beliefs about fairies and monstrous births register early modern concerns with the imagination and dreams in relation to health and birth defects, such ideas corresponded with stories of witchcraft as well. Consequently, such cultural associations complicate the analogy Shakespeare makes between actors, poets, and fairies. Magic, according to Linda Woodbridge, was a prevalent influence structuring unconscious mental processes throughout the early modern period.<sup>68</sup> In Renaissance culture, magical thinking surfaces in various cultural forms such as in stories of fairies, monstrous births, occult philosophy, and witches. This demonstrates that such beliefs did not operate in isolation but rather overlapped into each other, and influenced widely accepted platitudes in society. Indeed, in post-Reformation England, fairies, witches, and demonic exorcism were all associated with Catholicism.<sup>69</sup>

65. Bates, 14.

66. Anon., *A Certain relation of the hog-faced Gentlewoman called Mistris Tannakin Skinker* (London: 1640), A2v–A3r. Some examples of pamphlets that associated witchcraft with monstrous births can be found in Anon., *Signes and wonders from Heaven* (London: 1645), 4, and Anon., *A Declaration of a strange and Wonderfull monster* (London: 1646), 4.

67. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. David Lindley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.2.258, 2.2.28, 2.2.85, 2.2.113, and 2.2.25. For a discussion of Shakespeare’s representation of monstrous births in *The Tempest* see chapter 2 in Chris Laoutaris, *Shakespearean Maternities: Crises of Conception in Early Modern England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 94–153.

68. Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 11–13.

69. Keith Thomas explains that “[a]mong Protestant contemporaries it was certainly a platitude to declare that the practice of magic was an inheritance from the Popish past, when such goings-on were believed to have been infinitely more extensive.” See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 325. Similarly, Sharpe argues that “although Catholicism was never fully equated with witchcraft,

Like fairies and monstrous births, witches also functioned in various ways as a dire threat to the health and safety of children. Scholarship, to date, has not discussed how witches compare with fairies in the play, and how this can further shed light on the complexity of Shakespeare's identification of the theatre with fairies. Reginald Scot in *A Discoverie of Witchcraft*, published in 1584, critiques and refutes beliefs that witches "can make a woman miscarrie in childbirth, and destroe the child in the mothers wombe"; that they "[steal] awaie sucking children, and hurt their mothers" and can "infeeb[le] a child."<sup>70</sup> The figure of the witch embodies anxieties surrounding motherhood, infanticide, and monstrous births: anxieties that bear a resemblance to tales of fairies who were believed to kidnap healthy babies and replace them with sickly

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for the English Protestant theologian of the time the two were in many ways closely associated: at the very least, both were seen as dangerous and possibly destructive superstitions" (Sharpe, 16). Catholicism and fairy lore were also associated together: Buccola suggests that "Catholicism as an institution came to be feminized in early modern popular culture. The same held true for the set of superstitions closely aligned with 'the old faith,' fairy beliefs." One example of how fairy beliefs overlapped with Catholicism was lore concerning infants who died before baptism. It was thought that after death, these infants were subsequently transformed into little fairies and were associated with mysterious, flickering lights and lonely, desolate locations; Buccola explains that this "conception of the unchristened infant's soul's being released into a liminal spiritual space is simply a pagan, fairy-affiliated version of the Catholic understanding of what happened to babies who died before they could be baptized." See Buccola, 46 and 50. Not only witchcraft and fairy lore but demonic possession was sometimes associated with Catholicism. Gillian Woods, in *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), explains that in *King Lear*, the faked demonic possession of Edgar, pretending to be Poor Tom, is sourced from Samuel Harsnett's anti-Catholic text, *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), which argues that the Catholic practice of exorcism was fraudulent and theatrical: "Exorcism had itself been cast out of the Church of England" (110); nonetheless, "the *Declaration's* explicit anti-Catholicism draws on a key sectarian logic: Catholicism is superstitious, theatrical and hellish" (110). According to Woods, Edgar disguised as Poor Tom also uses "the language of possession [...] sourced from romance and fairytale" and that Edgar "inhabits a world governed by fairytale's emotional extremes" (159). A local example which links exorcism with folklore can be found in "the covert community in Denham." (137) Woods explains that this community described "devil's names [...] from a more local and literary and oral landscape, collectively familiar to the inhabitants of Denham. While dramatists may have sometimes utilized Catholic aesthetics nostalgically to structure a fictive distance, here Catholic priests appropriated names which sounded fictional to give the exorcisms a meaning that could be collectively understood as a folkloric 'truth'" (137). Catholicism itself was sometimes associated with the imagination, or at least fiction: Woods contends that "many anti-Catholic writers not only condemned Catholics as outright liars, but also associated them with the production of 'idle' fictions" (16).

70. Scot, 10, 480, 58.

changelings. Indeed, Scot even reports that there were beliefs circulating that maintained witches “can put changelings in the place of other children” and this would conflate the threatening figure of the witch with that of the fairy.<sup>71</sup> Though fairies could be benevolent and helpful to mortals, and could help them find gold or lost items, there were many overlaps between witch and fairy lore. King James, for instance discussed how witches confessed in courts that “they haue ben transported with the Phairie [...] and there saw a faire Queen.”<sup>72</sup> Fairies and witches embodied concerns about legitimate bodies, political and familial. Both witches and fairies constituted specific threats to infants and children. Similar to witches, Titania, the fairy queen who steals children, is a manifestation of early modern anxieties concerning motherhood, primogeniture, and infanticide.

Witches were a symbol of disruption to patriarchal hereditary rights in a manner comparable to fairies who could replace rightful heirs with their own sickly, monstrous progeny. For example, some people (according to Scot) believed that witches could steal men’s semen to create illicit offspring.<sup>73</sup> In popular lore, bodily fluids may be stolen, reflecting how witches embody deep anxieties about men being unable to control their lineage, on which the economic system of primogeniture was based. Like the figure of the cuckold who was abused in festivals and ridiculed in popular ballads, witches, fairies, and monstrous births highlight the underlying apprehensions of a fragile system of economics and politics based upon women’s chastity.

Anxieties concerning men’s ability to control or regulate their reproductive powers were also implicitly political. For example, according to patriarchalist thought, political and familial authorities were originally invested in fathers. Consequently, kingly power was fatherly in origin. Robert Filmer, who wrote *Patriarcha* (published posthumously in 1680), is the most famous patriarchalist, but he did not introduce such ideas to England; patriarchalism was not only common in early Stuart years but was a burgeoning concept during the Tudor

71. Scot, 67.

72. King James, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh: 1597), 74.

73. Scot refuted the notion that the “Divell, in likenes of a prettie wench, lieth prostitute as Succubus to the man, reteining his nature and seede, conveith it unto the witch, to whome he delivereth it as Incubus” (75).

period.<sup>74</sup> However, stories of changelings and unruly maternal imaginations, or beliefs that witches could steal semen, disrupt paternity and demonstrate the ways in which the popular imagination perceived a tenuous or unstable aspect to a system of economics and politics based upon the authority and lineage of fathers.

Witches and fairies also challenge early modern axioms concerning silence, obedience, and chastity which were, in theory, meant to define ideal femininity.<sup>75</sup> For example, Titania's domineering attitude towards Bottom, her declaration that she has "forsover [Oberon's] bed and company," and her refusal to submit to his requests indicate Regina Buccola's contention that fairy land was a matriarchal domain (2.1.62). References to Titania's kidnapping of children also position her in opposition to ideal femininity and motherhood. Chris Laoutaris argues that "[r]epresentations of witchcraft began to "incorporate elements of the domestic culture" which, drawn from "the material relics of feeding and nurture in the home, such as pots, urns, cauldrons, spoons, chalices, plates and serving ewers [...] presents witchcraft as an inverted or corrupted form of maternal nurture."<sup>76</sup> Witches are figures that are the antithesis of good motherhood. Witches harm rather than nurture, poison rather than feed, commit infanticide or cause monstrous progeny rather than give birth, which associates them with infanticide, miscarriage, kidnapping, and the debilitation of children's health. Shakespeare drew from such traditions in *Macbeth* when the witches include ingredients in their cauldron such as "poisoned entrails" and "Finger of birth-strangled babe," associating them with poison, harm, and infanticide rather than nurture, feeding, and childbirth.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Lady Macbeth

74. See J. P. Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640* (London: Longman, 1986), 27 and Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes Especially in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 43–44.

75. Louise Jackson argues that the "witch was the stereotypical opposite of the good wife. She was the woman who was trying to act entirely independently of male control, asserting her own powers, sexual and otherwise. [...] The witch was a warning to women as to what would happen if they behaved in a way which could be counted as subversive." Louise Jackson, "Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women's Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England," in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldbridge (London: Routledge, 2002), 357.

76. Laoutaris, 163.

77. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Robert S. Miola (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 4.1.5. and 4.1.30.



emphasizes her connection to witchcraft as she employs analogies of violent infanticide and fantasizes about “dash[ing] the brains out” of her breastfeeding baby.<sup>78</sup> In addition, she conjures “spirits” and “murd’ring ministers” to fill her with cruelty and to “Come to [her] woman’s breasts / And take [her] milk for gall,” thus resembling demonic familiars in folklore who sucked blood from a witch.<sup>79</sup> This grotesque mimicry of maternal nursing highlights the figure of the witch as embodying monstrous motherhood, which threatens the boundaries between humans and animals. Similarly, critics have noted that Titania behaves like a mother to Bottom,<sup>80</sup> a hybrid figure who is both human and animal. The intermixture of human and animal in the figure of both the witch and Titania is particularly significant since, as Erica Fudge argues, all areas of early modern culture, whether theology, humanism, or science, represented animals as the antithesis of the human.<sup>81</sup> Yet, as Laoutaris explains, English accounts of witches “in particular dwell upon the near-maternal relation between a witch and her familiar.”<sup>82</sup>

Titania and Oberon certainly bear this similarity to witches who embody monstrous motherhood since they are parent figures of stolen children. Their domestic dispute over their alleged affairs with mortals manifests popular lore in which fairies were promiscuous and engaged with sexual relations with mortals,<sup>83</sup> while also highlighting them as disorderly parent figures who transcend the boundaries of acceptable sexual and economic practices based upon primogeniture. Discussing the effects of their debate, Titania claims that floods, rotten crops, diseases, and violent seasonal changes are their own monstrous

78. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.7.58.

79. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.5.38, 46, and 45–46. For more information regarding familiars in folklore see Sharpe, 62–64.

80. For example see Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 140–41, and Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare and Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 108–09.

81. Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Houndsmill: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 4. Calvin demonstrates this view in his theology when he argues that when people are drunk, “Gods image is defaced in them, and they become lyke doggs and Swyne, and Asses.” Jean Calvin, *The Sermons of M. Iohn Caluin, vpon the Epistle of S. Paule too the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (London: 1577), 269.

82. Laoutaris, 163.

83. See Purkiss, 89 and 94; and Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 123–29.

offspring: “this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dis-sension; / We are their parents and original” (2.1.115–17). Titania’s use of the word “parent” reminds the reader or spectator of their status as literal parents of the stolen Indian child; while the mention of their ability to raise storms, cause diseases, and destroy harvests resembles King James’s belief that witches “cure or cast on diseases” and “can rayse stormes and tempests,” as well as beliefs refuted by Scot holding that witches can transfer “corne or grasse from one feeld to another.”<sup>84</sup> Similar to witches who destroy crops and are sexually promiscuous and threatening to children, Titania and Oberon also induce storms and ruin crops. The destruction of harvests due to unruly domestic fights would have been particularly pertinent to a Renaissance audience. In fact, food riots and other forms of social protest were occurring during the 1590s due to bad weather and poor harvests, and this was the time in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written and performed.<sup>85</sup> An allusion to contemporary hardships is provided by the name of one of the actors, Robin Starveling.<sup>86</sup>

Though Titania demonstrates compassion for the people who are suffering as a result of her and Oberon’s dispute, the fairies later transcend critical boundaries between themselves and animals as Oberon intoxicates Titania with a love potion in hopes that she will desire an animal such as a “lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, / On meddling monkey, or on busy ape.” Puck ensures that her desire is bestial by replacing Bottom’s head with that of an animal so that when “Titania waked” she “straightway lov’d an ass” (2.1.180–81 and 3.2.34). Puck himself transforms into various animals to frighten the “rude mechanicals,” confusing the distinctions between the categories of animals, fairies, and humans.

The witch also was a figure who confused the boundaries between humans and animals. Scot discusses popular beliefs that witches “can transforme themselues and others into apes, owles, asses, dogs, cats, &c.”<sup>87</sup> Also, witches, as grotesque mother figures, nourish animals and demons from their bodies rather than human children, threatening humans’ place in the Great Chain of

84. King James, 46 and 3v (“The Preface to the Reader”); and Scot, Aivjv.

85. Montrose, 219–20, and Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwood, 1989), 55–56.

86. Patterson, 56.

87. Scot, Biiijr.

Being with their maternal capacities. Like witches who nursed their familiars, Titania's desire for Bottom, a man with a donkey's head, represents monstrous motherhood and taboo intimacy between human and beast. This scene also depicts class transgression, since it portrays intimacy between an aristocratic woman and a "commoner." Titania is not only domineering with Bottom, telling him "Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no," but she enacts a mother-child relation with him as she silences him, provides food, and puts him to bed (3.1.146).<sup>88</sup> She commands her fairies not only to "Tie up [her] love's tongue" and to "bring him silently" (3.1.194) but also to feed him various fruits and later offers him nuts before telling him to "Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms" (4.1.39). Similar to the witch who nurses familiars in the form of animals, Titania silences and cuddles Bottom in her bower, demonstrating a perverse and monstrous manifestation of maternity.

Titania's resemblance to popular representations of witches demonstrates the fairies' associations with witchcraft as well as sexual and gender disorder. Though critics have argued that Shakespeare portrays fairies as far more harmless than their counterparts in popular culture, when contextualizing fairies in early modern folk traditions, they are not entirely distant from their more sinister origins. This is an aspect of the play that needs more critical attention. Though the play does not overtly portray fairies as a threat to children, fairyland nonetheless is the locale in which the play explores theatre and authorship in relation to authority, power, and patriarchy.

### 5. Political disorder

Political subversion in the play is most apparent when Oberon couples the queen with a lower class clothier, a profession associated with political radicalism and subversion. Significantly, Bottom is a weaver, an occupation that gained a notorious reputation for political rebellion. The common trope of weaver as political dissident is also reflected in *Henry VI, part 2* where, contrary to the historical record, Shakespeare made Jack Cade, the rebel leader of a revolt, into a "shearman—a clothing worker involved in the garment-finishing process—and his lieutenants mostly weavers or other 'handicraftsmen' in allied clothing

88. Montrose describes this relation as being both a parodic fantasy of "infantile narcissism and dependency" and "of upward social mobility." Montrose, 217.

industries.”<sup>89</sup> Christopher Hill argues that during the civil war it was believed that all clothiers were rebels.<sup>90</sup> Hill notes that Gerrard Winstanley, who promoted the Diggers in print, “came to London as a clothing apprentice in 1630, and set up for himself in 1637” and “the strength of the Fifth Monarchist movement in the fifties was among cloth workers and other craftsmen.”<sup>91</sup> Midsummer’s Eve was also the holiday and feast day of St. John the Baptist who was, according to R. B. Dobson and D. M. Smith, “more or less [the] universal patron saint of every tailors’ guild in late medieval England.”<sup>92</sup> Montrose explains that “among artisans, weavers in particular were associated with Elizabethan food riots and other forms of social protests that were prevalent during the mid-1590s, the period during which *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was presumably written and first performed.”<sup>93</sup> Annabel Patterson argues that “Shakespeare would have seen the social and cultural signs of unusual, economic distress; and he might even have noticed how frequently weavers were featured in the more public and violent protests.”<sup>94</sup> In 1595, almost all of the riots took place during Midsummer.<sup>95</sup> One of these riots involved one thousand artisans and apprentices (including silk weavers) and “took several days to suppress, and concluded [...] with the execution of five persons.”<sup>96</sup> Another riot, which occurred during Midsummer of 1595, “was initiated by a silk-weaver who reproached the mayor for misgovernment, and was rescued from confinement in Bedlam by the intervention of the crowd.”<sup>97</sup> Yet the play, which was performed during this volatile period, shows a monarch and weaver coming together in a bestial

89. Richard Wilson explains that “Shakespeare changed the occupations of the rioters, who appear not as medieval peasants but Renaissance artisans.” Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 31.

90. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), 23.

91. Hill, 112 and 97.

92. R. B. Dobson and D. M. Smith, *The Merchant Taylors of York: A History of the Craft and Company from the Fourteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (York: Borthwick Publications, 2006), 36.

93. Montrose, 219–20.

94. Patterson, 56–57.

95. 1595 saw at least thirteen disturbances in London and its suburbs, of which twelve occurred during Midsummer. See Patterson, 56.

96. Patterson, 56.

97. Patterson, 56.

relationship. While discussing Elizabethan representations of erotic dreams of queens, Hackett suggests that the “main wish-fulfilment performed in these dreams seems to be a transgression of the invisible boundary that separates the Queen (or Princess) from the commoner.”<sup>98</sup> In the case of Shakespeare’s text, such a dream dissolves the boundary between a queen and the political dissident as well.<sup>99</sup>

Political dissidence in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* can also be seen, according to Shell, in Catholic nostalgia present in “the epilogue [which] describes the liturgical practice of asperging” as the fairies bless the palace.<sup>100</sup> Shell contends that theatre and Catholicism were associated together in that “the Catholic Mass, where bread and wine were said to become the body and blood of Christ through the process of transubstantiation, was seen as nothing more than a stage-play, while the liturgical formality and ceremonial grandeur of Catholicism made broader comparisons with the theatre easy to sustain.”<sup>101</sup>

The play not only suggests political and religious subversion in its representation of Catholicism, actors, and fairies; the coupling of Titania and Bottom also evokes the story of the fairy queen found in the various English transcriptions of the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune* dating from the fifteenth to the early sixteenth century. In these manuscripts, Thomas, after having sex with the fairy queen seven times, is commanded to join her in fairyland, where she tells him not to speak to anyone at court but her.<sup>102</sup> Afterwards, however, Thomas

98. Hackett, “Dream-Visions of Elizabeth I,” 53.

99. Although *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* seems to clearly distance Elizabeth, the virgin queen, from Titania in Puck’s claim that Cupid was unable to hit an “imperial votaress,” who remained “In maiden meditation, fancy free” (2.1.163–64), Hackett nonetheless claims that a “possible dream-persona of Elizabeth is Titania. By the mid-1590s when *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was written, the figure of the Fairy Queen was firmly associated with Elizabeth: examples include not only *The Faerie Queene* and *Endymion* (in which Cynthia was followed and served by fairies), but also entertainments presented to Elizabeth on her summer progresses, such as at Woodstock (1575), in East Anglia (1578), and Elvetham (1591)” Hackett, “Dream-visions of Elizabeth I,” 59–60.

100. Shell, 16.

101. Shell, 40.

102. See James A. H. Murray, ed., *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune: Printed from Five Manuscripts* (London: N. Trübner & Co. 1875), 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. The editors of these ballads claim that their first three ballads about Thomas are from the fifteenth century. In the first ballad he is commanded to serve the fairy queen for seven years in fairy land, and is

becomes a famous prophet. This legend surfaced in ballads about “Thomas the Rymer” and his prophesies (which were often political in nature) that were published throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>103</sup> The story indicates that the act of silencing Thomas leads him to become even more vocal and prophetic in articulating and possibly influencing future events. Similarly, Titania silences Bottom, but afterwards he claims to have

had a most rare vision [...] The eye  
of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not  
seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue  
to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream  
was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream (4.1.203–14).<sup>104</sup>

Like the story of Thomas, the relationship with the fairy queen initially silences Bottom, but then provokes immense authorial agency. Hence, authority initially influences and shapes authorship in the play, while it also enables creative endeavours—some of which are subversive to the very political structures the writer is blessing. Indeed, the maternal imagination can be seen as functioning in a similar capacity. Although the mother is within a patriarchal framework and her pregnancy is necessary for patrilineal lineage,

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then whisked away upon the back of her horse. In the second ballad she tells Thomas to kiss her and that he may “gang hame and tell / That ye’ve lain wi a gay ladee,” wherein he agrees to follow her wherever she goes. Similarly, the fourth ballad portrays Tam Lin who was kidnapped by the fairy queen and is rescued by a mortal girl named Janet. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge, eds., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads Edited from the Collection of Francis James Child* (London: A.P. Watt & Son, 1904), 63–69.

103. For example, Karen R. Moranski argues that in the popular ballad *The Whole Prophesie*, Thomas Rymour relates the battle of Flodden and the story of the Red Lion, King James IV. Moranski suggests that “prophesy, as a language that can destabilize existing power structures and presage an overturn of authority, was particularly appealing to the Scots, and *The Whole Prophesie* expressed their hopes for a Britain ruled by a Scottish king.” Karen R. Moranski, “The Son Who Rules ‘all Britaine to the sey’: *The Whole Prophesie* and the Union of Crowns,” in *Prophet Margins: The Medieval Vatic Impulse and Social Stability*, ed. E. L. Ridsen, Karen Moranski and Stephen Yandell (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 174 and 176; and *The Whole Prophesie of Scotland, England, & some-part of France, and Denmark* (Robert Waldegrave: 1603).

104. Prince Arthur also has an erotic dream of the fairy queen, which is a profound experience for him in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, book 1, canto 9, lines 13–15.

her pregnancy is the site where, paradoxically, repression, illicit desires, and disorder to the social structure can thrive. Both the maternal imagination and the theatre simultaneously bless and threaten power, and flourish under the limits of authority.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* responds to such conflicting societal forces in its representation of theatre and dissent. Patterson argues that:

Shakespeare's play evidently staged its own resistance to social pessimism, and especially, perhaps, to the argument that festival liberty leads to violence. [...] By invoking the dangerous Midsummer season in his title, by featuring a group of artisans as his comic protagonists, by making their leader a weaver, by allowing class consciousness to surface, as we shall see, in their relations with their courtly patrons, and especially in the repeated fears expressed by the artisans that violence is feared from them ("Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords" [3.1.15–17]), he faced his society squarely; and instead of the slippage from carnival to force, he offered it a genuinely festive proposition.<sup>105</sup>

Shakespeare simultaneously registers social criticism and assuages fears that theatre and festival could descend into violence. Nonetheless, the play's portrayal of the complicated relationship between theatre and power is compounded by the numerous references to starvation, hardship, and food riots as well as the placement of these allusions in a fairy story, since fairies were often interested in the poor, and encounters with fairies sometimes demonstrated fantasies of social climbing.<sup>106</sup> As Patterson notes, "Bottom is not only the bottom of the social hierarchy as the play represents it, but also the 'bottom' of the body when seated, literally the social ass or arse."<sup>107</sup>

Though not all references to fairies were political, and Queen Elizabeth herself was identified as their queen, they were also used as symbols of political dissidence by the dispossessed. Lamb argues that "[a]llusions to the fairies in

105. Patterson, 57.

106. Purkiss argues that "early modern people sought out fairies [...] as a way of getting rich—and the quicker the better." Purkiss, 124.

107. Patterson, 66.

matters of property functioned more explicitly as a weapon of the weak to intervene in the unequal power relationships supported by the juridical systems and values of the dominant culture.”<sup>108</sup> Fairies were sometimes used to describe various forms of social protest. In the medieval era, for example, Jack Cade was declared by his fellow rebels as the “Queen of the Fairies,” and they secured an area which they referred to as fairyland.<sup>109</sup> Not only did stories of fairies sometimes overlap with peasant resistance; in the early modern period, there was an association between fairies and property theft,<sup>110</sup> an act, like stealing children, that disrupts the structure of power that the dominant culture relied upon. Hackett suggests that within the play the “disenfranchised, mechanicals and women, stand in alliance as those most open to the inexplicable and poetic.”<sup>111</sup> Bottom’s most “rare vision” of the fairy queen, for example, demonstrates a relation between actors, poets, and tradesman with fairies. Similarly, Hippolyta, the defeated Amazon, argues that the lover’s stories may hold some truth “howsoever, strange and admirable” after Theseus disparages their imaginations as “fairy toys” held also by poets and madmen (5.1.27).

Though fairies in folklore complicate early modern gender and class hierarchies, and fairies were associated with witchcraft,<sup>112</sup> they are nonetheless difficult to define within clear parameters of good or evil since they sometimes bring good luck to people or alternatively may pass death or illness to everything they encounter.<sup>113</sup> The fairies nonetheless prove to be potentially disruptive forces to Theseus’s laws in Athens. The figure of the monster, according to Margrit Shildrick, is a “deeply disruptive force” that provides a relation with “the standards of normality that proves to be uncontainable and ultimately unknowable.”<sup>114</sup> The play does not constitute an overt endorsement of political radicalism and social disorder, but it does demonstrate a preoccupation with

108. Lamb, 289.

109. Lamb, 291.

110. Lamb, 289–92.

111. Hackett, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 354.

112. Purkiss notes that fairies are often friends of the poor and sometimes offer fantasies of social elevation. Purkiss, 114–15.

113. See Katharine M. Briggs, *The Vanishing People: A Study of Traditional Fairy Beliefs* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1978), 39.

114. Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE, 2002), 1.



the nature of the imagination and dreams in relation to authority, power, and social norms. Shildrick argues that the “monstrous is never simply negative because it is never fully outside, but always a figure of ambiguous identity” and that “we cannot finally locate the monster as wholly other. Though it remains excessive of any category, it always claims us, always touches us and implicates us in its own becoming.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the monstrous Other overlaps into the identities of the author and actors: the fairies’ troublesome nature is not distinct from the theatre itself. Though the actors comically attempt to shape their narratives to please (or at least not offend) the dominant power structure, they are continuously compared to monsters who have the ability to disrupt the entire socio-economic system of patrilineal lineage. Hence, the fairies may initially appear less sinister and threatening than their counterparts in folklore; however, they are not entirely stripped of their subversive energies in the play. The imagination, like fairyland in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is potentially monstrous and dangerous to the socio-political order, yet it is also a locale which can influence, and to some extent, heal society. More importantly though, in Bottom’s resemblance to Thomas the Rhymer we see how the very constraints that are imposed on the imagination can in fact provoke and stimulate the authorial agency that power attempts to curb. Authorship and theatre, with their subversive potential to reshape the socio-political world, nonetheless thrive *within* limitations set by the authorities.

115. Shildrick, 5–6.