What Are Fairies Doing On Midsummer Night's Eve?

By Henry Russell

Walker Percy, echoing the Pensées of Blaise Pascal, notes that modern man, insofar as he rejects the integrating illuminations of the Christian faith, will find himself schizophrenically veering between angelism and bestialism. Either he imagines himself a purely reasonable and moral spirit who lives above the ugliness of a sordid world, or he accepts himself as Caliban revelling in the all-too sullied flesh. In a predictable conformity to this powerful ontological schizophrenia, modern theatrical interpretation of Shakespeare, especially of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, developed angelism long ago with directors who envisioned the wood of the Fairies as a pastoral realm representing the free play of the imagination. This tradition seems evident as early as Henry Purcell and Thomas Betterton's opera adaptation, *The Fairy Queen*, with as R.A.Foakes notes, "songs by Coridon and Mopsa, a nymph, Phoebus Apollo and a Chinese, and numerous dances."

Operatic spectacle, which increasingly emphasized a balletic prettiness, including a female Oberon – lest any disconcerting masculinity enter this world – was spurred further by Mendelssohn's marvellous music of 1843. The movement away from dancing fairies to Sino-Byzantine symbols of a dream state, which emphasized Puck as a stage manager, in Granville Barker's 1914 staging or Benjamin Britten's eerie sense of peril shifted the emphasis from the pretty to a more sinister Freudian vision of the world of imagination and unconscious. Later, even as the Forest of Arden became beach umbrellas, the Forest of Athens became an overt world of art. This strain of thought is well summarized in Thomas McFarland's *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy*.

The freest (or the most thoroughly bound) staging of all was Peter Brooks' 1970 excursion into the complete schizophrenia of angelism living cheek-by-jowl with the bestial. His trapeze-swinging circus artists translated not only the Forest, but the city of Athens itself, into the world of art for art's sake. But his "vision" of Shakespeare's art postulated that at the bottom of the imagination lies nothing but a Freudian lust of the flesh after all as Bottom is literalized as a priapic ass mating with a Titania turned pseudo-Pasiphae. Thenceforward the forest could become the jungle, following the lead of Jan Kott's conception in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*.

At least Brooks was right when he saw the interpenetrating nature of Athens and the woods. He did not fall prey to a too-easy dichotomizing of them, which is certainly inviting. After all, Athens appears first as the realm of masculine law represented by Theseus and his sword-conquered bride, Hippolyta. This seems a strong contrast to the chaotic forest where Titania is in rebellion against Oberon and where young "lovers" go to escape the rigors of Egeus' marital domination. The severe law of Athens that says Hermia must marry Demetrius (or die or be a sterile nun) contrasts sharply with the woods where lovers may lie close and unobserved upon a swelling bank. The logical, concerned advice of Theseus contrasts with the wildly mischievous Puck who deliberately misleads the lovers. The humans contrast as well with the fairies in their essential being. They never see, with one bottomless exception, the fairy creatures who surround them, lead them, mislead them, love them, and eventually set right their world. Oberon and Titania seem to act on pure will rather than upon precedent or moral constraint. What they imagine, they fulfill, with magic juices or sheer resolve. So there is a reasonable temptation to see the play's pattern as an excursus from order into disorder to enjoy the holiday world of free love and imagination – whether pretty or sordid – only to return to repression and an arbitrary order. In such a reading the life and play of the rude mechanicals' would be not too far off the mark – love and art are only a farrago of self-gratifying play and Bottom-less egotism, an attractive trifle that is somewhat ridiculous like Pyramus and Thisbe – which kills itself in its own passions.

However, just as obvious are the ways that these polarities are shown to be only apparent. Hippolyta may be at least temporarily as uneager to submit to a husband's authority as Titania is to yield her Indian boy to Oberon. But Theseus, who in the play is a noble lover and wise kingly figure of justice was, as the literate viewers knew, the rather dashing sexual adventurer of Plutarch's *Lives* who makes Lysander and Demetrius look like tame lap-dogs. Indeed we are told of his history, albeit briefly, and accusations are further laid that Titania may have been a lover of Theseus, as Oberon of Hippolyta, in some unspecified old day and manner. If Athens is presented to us as a place of law for lovers, those lovers just as surely resist the law. Having resolved intellectually that since "true" love never did run smooth and that such customary "crosses" must be borne, Lysander and Hermia immediately agree to run away to the lawless wood. There they met their own lawlessness taken to its threatened extreme, the danger of which is hinted at when Lysander offers to sleep "innocently" beside Hermia and she refuses. Were he a different sort of man, the kind an Elizabethan audience knew well, her refusal would be of little use without a law behind it. Puck lets us know most fully that outside the laws of love anything might happen. Eros could lead to the most unlikely affections, especially when there is so little physical difference between the women.

Conversely, the woods are shown as a norm, a place of ordered love. Oberon's dominion is effectively exercised. Through his power Titania is brought to give him the Indian boy, by way of her excursus into loving an ass

who controls neither his mind nor his members and who is unfit to be her consort even if he will give in to her every whim. Titania's unruly love for the Indian boy, one that denies him entry into the adult male world through Oberon's tutelage, and therefore threatens to warp his growth, is paralleled by her unreasoned "love" for Bottom. Thus, the deception teaches her a needed if harsh lesson and Oberon can thereafter operate from sympathy and merely request the boy. Moreover, Oberon ultimately uses the unruly Puck for ordered purposes, making him restore all as it should be by nature, giving Demetrius, small bargain that he is, to Hermia.

Most decisively, at the end of the play the Fairies literally rule over the city of Athens and marriage itself. They physically enter the city with no hesitation or doubt, enter the palace and the bedrooms, blessing the marriages, thus performing juridical, ecclesial and sacramental acts, showing full power over the natural and the supernatural realms.

Clearly, the relations between Athens and the wood are extensive, deep and complex. Moreover, they involve interpenetrating monarchy, law and the order of love – forces which are much larger than reason versus imagination, or reason versus self-centered and bestial lust. The Post-Enlightenment interpretation has often read the play, whether admittedly or not, as an old fashioned Psychomachia where parts of the Soul, reduced to the mind, play out their characteristic roles against each other. The reality I would suggest is a reflection of the richer allegory of the two cities of Saint Augustine that interpenetrate and yet can lead to opposite goods. The city of man is life lived as if earthly pleasure is a sufficient end in itself. The city of God is ours when we live as if earthly things are meant for the sake of the spiritual in and beyond them. Thus, they are separate but inseparable, opposing but supporting, attached now but severed later. Similar to the relations of wood and city. The mixture of Christian England and an Athens riddled with Christian *topoi* is a normal convention of medieval drama, which sees the central redemptive story of the Bible as present in all times and places. The use of folklore fairies is no farther a stretch from this Biblical story than interpolations of classical stories into Christian texts or Christian interpretations of classical texts in ways that show the parallels of moral and psychology for these pre-Christian wisdom books. Such mixture is not chaotic or contradictive but parallel.

Actors at Shakespeare's Globe in London.

The central movement of the play's love plots is from an Old Law to a New Law, the familiar *typos* based on the Old Testament giving way to the New. The plot explicitly acts out this *typos* when Theseus moves from supporting the justice of Egeus' claims over his daughter Hermia under the old law of Athens to his new declaration of marriage by the elective affinity of the lovers. This change occurs, significantly, in the forest while on the hunt, not in the city. It is signalled by Theseus' revealing and anachronistic question, "St. Valentine's Day is past, begin these woodbirds but to couple now?" Here 8th century BC Athens meets Christian England and the Roman Christian St. Valentine specifically and centrally. Beyond this, Theseus' loving interpretation of the lovers' intentions, that they have come out to welcome him and his lady, is a charitable and chivalric interpretation that partakes of the New Law's spirit, rather than that of mere justice. Yet, Theseus' move to such grace has already been anticipated by Oberon's giving over of his rough justice and power and asking Titania for the Indian boy he could easily have taken. Her response shows no trace of resentment, indicating that she sees the lesson's point and fully and harmoniously responds to it.

Not only is the place strategically chosen; the day is too. All days exist within the Church Calendar, not merely a secular or local calendar. The *Columbia Encyclopedia*, as late as 1950, notes that Midsummer Day and Midsummer night are names given to the feast of the nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24) and the preceding night (St. John's Eve, June 23). In Shakespeare's day, St. John was the only saint to be honoured on his birthday rather than the date of his birth into the life of God (i.e. on the day of his death). Why? Because his birth, halfway through the year to Christmas, celebrates the coming of the forerunner who announces the New Law's entrance to the world. Thus, the announcement of Theseus comes on the day dedicated to him who announces the New Law, thinly disguised in the English terms of Midsummer and announced in the wood of the English fairies. But what kind of an England is this? Is it one full of fairies who show us only the sinful faults of Athenian Christians,

saying they are inevitably bound to chaos and bestiality? Here the problem of the fairy identity becomes clearest, and perhaps suggests why stagings have been so unsuccessful at capturing their essence. The reason might lie in the sheer layered symbolization of their conception by a relatively young playwright attempting the near impossible, a job he can barely be said to achieve even in the full maturity of *The Tempest* and Ariel.

The problem seems to be that the fairies are typological figures that shadow forth both the roles of Adam and Eve as the sources of human failure, and yet also figure the rule of a higher spirit world over the contingencies of man's realm. In the first role they are, as Titania herself tells Oberon in 2:1 the "parents and original" of the familiar list of a world turned upside down:

> ...The winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge have sucked up from the sea
> Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
> Hath every pelting river made so proud
> That they have overborne their continents.
> ...and the green corn
> Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard.
> The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
> And crows are fattened with the murrion flock;
> The nine-men's-morris is filled up with mud,
> And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
> For lack of tread are undistinguishable.

In this world Christmas is non-existent, as she goes on to tell us "The human mortals want their winter cheer;/ No night is now with hymn or carol blessed." The seasons have interchanged themselves so that "hoary-headed frosts/ Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose" in an ultimate disorder and "this same progeny of evils comes/From our debate, from our dissension./ We are their parents and original." Any ear that is trained in the accents of the Christian world cannot help but hear the evocation of Adam and Eve as parents of this disordered Post-lapsarian world. That they are figures of rule who themselves disagree about proper rules comes as no great shock then, since Adam and Eve stood in just such a joint role as rulers of all earth but also servitors of a higher law which they argue about before they both transgress it.

It then seems odd, on the face of it, that these same fairies who unleash catastrophic upheaval onto man and nature should, in the end, bless bride-beds and mend the flaws of nature. Yet, who, other than those of the same nature as Adam, are most involved in redeeming the children of Adam? In the first instance, Christ who is both man and God, who did not sin as Adam did, even if here presented as a male and female pair rather than Christ as hypostatic union. In the second instance, we might remember that the redemption required a pair, both a god-man and the Blessed Lady. Finally, we might recall how deeply any human is also automatically a participant in the world of the spirits and in his own salvation. Thus, in a manner quite consistent with the medieval typology, even of the mystery plays, the characters can be both/and, not the either/or of Post-Enlightenment. This problem, of representing the transcendental world onstage, is one that Shakespeare himself never thoroughly solved, certainly not for the modern taste, not even in his most mature works like *The Tempest* with its God-like Prospero and its angel-like Ariel, or in *Cymbeline* or *A Winter's Tale* where he attempts to literalize resurrection. Here the typological mindset is necessary, since he neither could nor wanted to place God on stage as *Everyman*'s author does. The Renaissance and post-Henry VIII Church of England would not accept such shenanigans, as being beneath the dignity of their theology. Thus Shakespeare presented his audiences with the art-mode of the eternal Catholic world, where anyman is and must be an imitator of either Christ or Devil, of New Adam or Old Adam, where any law points to new or old law, where all spirit is under the rule of God's spirit. These are the powers that stagings have reduced to mere imagination or, worse, the beast.

Robin Goodfellow himself tells us that the time of the play's ending is one when "Every one lets forth his sprite/In the church way paths to glide" and that the house of Theseus is a "hallowed house." Oberon's song tells us that

> "To the best bride-bed will we,
> Which by us shall blessed be;
> And the issue there create
> Ever shall be fortunate.
> So shall all the couples three
> Ever true in loving be,
> And the blots of nature's hand
> Shall not in their issue stand."

They consecrate the beds with their field dew. But of course, only a priesthood can consecrate marriage, and only the power of baptism can remove "the blots of nature's hand". These remarks are either the rankest blasphemy or the clearest indicators that Shakespeare wants his audience to understand his fairies as representing both priestly power and the spiritual power that flows through such a priesthood.

Puck's Epilogue asks pardon of the audience and promises amendment, adding the monition that "And, as I am an honest Puck,/ If we have unearned luck/ Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue/ We will make amends ere long." These remarks are usually held to be a call for the audience's patience and forbearance toward the play, a kind of genial wheedling of their applause as Puck asks for their hands. Certainly it makes perfect stage sense to play them so. But unfortunately a few questions arise beyond that – how are the cast going to amend now that the play is over? What on earth will they do ere long that is of any use to the audience to whom the words are addressed? Will they get better by the next performance? Or give everybody's money back? And what audience ever cared a fig for the viewers of the next per-

formance? And can we imagine anyone ever getting his money back? No. These words are actually addressed to an eternal now which audience and cast alike face. The serpent's tongue may be the hisses of a displeased audience, but it is also the great serpent whose tongue, without great unearned luck – that of the Incarnation and of Grace – would devour all the sons of Adam and Eve. Yet beyond luck, the amends of a life lived according to the New Law is also required ere long: love, prayer, penance, order. These both audience and cast can join hands in offering, as the play reaches out and envelops the audience in its action. If the duke, the young lovers, the fairy king and queen and the rude mechanicals all attempt to come to grips with the real order of love in the play, then so must the audience, that set of English equivalents to nobility and rude mechanicals.

Thus the interpretations of the fairy world as sharing the beautiful and frightful power of the imagination, as well as the surging, chaotic and even animal power of *eros*, with its glorious or shameful possibilities, are not wrong but merely inadequate and synecdochic. Neither an angelist art-for-art's sake nor a post-Freudian reduction of the passions to sex are in any sense broad or liberal enough to capture the power of Shakespeare's conception. His fairies are stand-ins for the Incarnation of the ecstatic power of the love of the Transcendent God in a world of matter, for the absolute of eternal law seen through the vaporous screen of human will, for miraculous blessing in the presence of the domestic world. Small wonder then that staging eludes us. As Bottom so perfectly puts it, "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! ... it hath no bottom"(4.1.205-09).

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A Preface to *Othello*

By Stephen Petersen

Othello, like Hamlet, is an arbiter of the law. Whereas Hamlet rightly seeks to set Denmark, his proper kingdom, aright, Othello fails to straighten disorder within his heart and, as its chief executive, effectually introduced disorder into Cyprus. Othello cannot perceive Desdemona as the gift of grace[1] but regards his possession of her as earned by the sufferings and successes of his past. Reliance on the law on the part of this commander "all in all sufficient" (4.1.366) renders him subject to the law. (Hamlet abandons the law for grace during his pirate adventure.) As sovereign, Othello may, according to such facts as he may ascertain, examine, try and execute his wife. That man's sovereignty is illusory and, finally, useless in respect to any soul but his own, is borne out by the pernicious ignorance Othello (and humankind together) exhibits as sovereign. This demonstration – that man is not to be saved by resort to his wit and skill – is at the heart of Shakespeare's contrasting of law and grace in Othello. The audience sees the great power of the law – its irresistible imperial sway – weep for redemption.

Law is the realm of just rewards for man's works: justice is to give each his due. Grace is the realm of sacrificial love which superabundantly supplies the insufficiency of man's works: it offers all where nothing is due. Othello's is the tragedy of clinging to too long and too confidently for the former. But the audience sees both at work. His military prowess has made Othello supreme in Venice in effect and on Cyprus in fact but insofar as the heart and its capacity to love and to be loved are involved, Othello's great military exploits and their consequence in fame and power stand useless in saving him from the hellish Iago. In the nine months of his courtship with Desdemona, Othello renewed his heart's acquaintance with the motherly tenderness that nurtures in contrast to war which destroys. As the figure or agent of Grace, Desdemona begins in Othello the work of transforming his heart to love. After his birth, Othello had been enslaved and had continued to fight until this time of a second birth suggested by the "nine moons" of his courtship. (1.3.84)

But the devil Iago snatches the seed before it could bear the fruit of self-denying love. Othello persists in attributing the beneficence that comes to him through his wife to his desert of her as a great commander. It is this, the "services done the Signiory" that will "out tongue" complaints against his deserving her rather than protestations of his love for her. Scapegoating the "divine Desdemona" (2.1.73) when Iago is able to lay bare the emptiness of Othello's merit (by urging Othello to take a legal stand on it), Othello attempts to destroy her: the degraded woman again[2] becomes the picture of the one whose love will be proven in death and whose beloved is redeemed by that death. Othello refuses the death of self necessary truly to love another and requires Desdemona to take it for him.

In this tragedy, salvation is offered but not accepted. Desdemona as