EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Titania and the Things that Go Bump in the Night

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In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), Titania, Queen of Fairy, faces an environmental emergency. She is, she confesses, partially responsible for this (2.1.81-117).[1] Due to a 'debate' or 'dissention' between Titania and Oberon over a child, Oberon has disrupted every fairy dance for a whole year with 'brawls'. Without the stabilising influence of the fairy dances, the climate has undergone a complicated systemic collapse which Titania calls a 'distemperature'. High winds have brought dense fogs, which in turn have caused the rivers to overflow. The moon (which has links to tidal floods) has filled the air with rheumatic diseases. Sheep pastures and fields of wheat have flooded, and the dead sheep are being eaten by crows. The seasons have become muddled, and roses are dying in sudden frosts. The field games and mazes of the rich are filled with mud, the prototypical ploughman has no work and no food and humans have even stopped singing hymns and carols.

If this 'distemperature' sounds rather like a poetic explanation for our own twenty-first century climate emergency, it is because Shakespeare experienced something very similar himself. In the 1590s the northern hemisphere was undergoing one of the worst decades

In memory of E. Charles Nelson (1951-2024).
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[1] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1995; repr. 2008) <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198129288.book.1>.

of the little ice age.[2] Temperatures at that time were a degree cooler than temperatures in the 1990s, the growing season was shorter and there were four failed harvests in England.[3] Within the setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this distemperature is temporary. Some of the characters remember a golden age of environmental harmony before the action of the play. In the springs of Helena and Hermia's childhood they would lie amongst the primroses outside Athens for secret conversations (1.1.215), mirroring the conversations that Titania had with her votaress, not in the woodland but still fearlessly outside 'in the spicéd Indian air by night […] on Neptune's yellow sands' (2.1.124–6).

Shakespeare could have played the effects of the distemperature in various ways: it could have produced further drama, or comedy, or tragedy. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, just like Whiteley has pointed out for the disordered environments of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, the distemperature makes the environment of the text into a 'dark ecology'.[4] Robert Watson has insightfully suggested that we can see in the play a system being newly invaded by parasites – the sheep have murrain, and even the roses have cankers.[5] The woodland has become haunted by snakes, bears, lions, slow worms, wild boar, crows, bats, spiders, wolves and owls.[6] Far from a pastoral arcadia, the woodland itself has become an antagonist.[7] Within the play, Puck finds Hermia not reclined on the primroses as in her childhood but lying 'on the dank and dirty ground' (2.2.81), and he attacks the fleeing Mechanicals with 'briers and thorns' (3.2. 28–30). Even more interestingly, as this paper will argue, by the time of the action of the play, several of the female characters, including Titania, seem to feel the threat of becoming enmeshed in the darkness. They

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[2] Geoffrey Parker, 'History and Climate: The Crisis of the 1590s Reconsidered', in *Climate Change and Cultural Transition in Europe*, ed. by Claus Leggewie and Franz Mauelshagen (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 119–55 (pp. 142–46) <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004356825>; Helen Hackett, '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Comedies* ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 338–57 <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996553.ch18>; Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 90–6.

[3] Fagan, chap. 3; Robert Markley, 'Summer's Lease: Shakespeare in the Little Ice Age', in *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*, ed. by by Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen L. Raber (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 131-44; Todd Andrew Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 120–2.

[4] Giles Whiteley, 'Shakespeare's Dark Ecologies: Rethinking the Environment in Macbeth and King Lear', in *Shakespeare's Things: Shakespearean Theatre and the Non-Human World in History, Theory, and Performance*, ed. by Brett Gamboa and Lawrence Switzky (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 134–50 (pp. 136–8).

[5] Robert N Watson, 'The Ecology of Self in *Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ed. by Dan Brayton and Lynne Bruckner (Surrey: Routledge, 2011), pp. 33-56.

[6] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), pp. 181–4.

[7] Stanley Wells (ed.), *William Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 25.

have started reacting against the environment in ways which today could be anachronistically related to 'eco-anxiety' ('a broad range of negative emotions related to climate change and environmental threats').[8] This anxiety goes well beyond concern about the weather and has changed the characters' relationships with the nonhuman world. Titania's fairies, for example, are now actively at war with venomous and loathsome creatures on her behalf.[9] They exploit various animals for their food and clothing, literally tearing apart bees for wax and honey and, at Titania's command, fairies attack not just cankers on flowers but also bats and owls (2.2.2–7; 3.1.159–60). Other characters in this play also recognise the women's fear. To stop Helena following him, Demetrius threatens to leave her 'to the mercy of wild beasts' (2.1.227). The Mechanicals are so concerned that their performance of a lion will upset the ladies in the audience that they discuss it twice (1.2.67–75; 3.1.25–42). Titania's lullaby is another example of women's eco-anxiety, and, as we shall see, even lists all the ill-omened creatures that have invaded since the distemperature, and which now must be kept away from Titania. This is ultimately to no avail since Oberon comes in and, again ostensibly exploiting Titania's fear, wishes for her to be awoken by 'some vile thing' like a lynx, wildcat, bear, leopard or wild boar (2.2.36–7). This vile thing ends up being Bottom the ass who has already scared the Mechanicals (3.1.99–100).

1. Titania's fear of snakes in the night

People in Europe have not always feared snakes. In Roman Pompeii, as elsewhere in the classical Mediterranean world, at the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E. snakes were venerated. Household shrine artwork routinely included the *agathoi daimones* (good spirits), depicted as a pair of serpents with crests and beards, surmounting eggs or pinecones. These seem to have represented the spirits of the place (*genii loci*) and to have been propitiated in rituals alongside the household Lares. There is also evidence that real snakes were kept for rituals and medical practices in Roman temples to the higher gods of good fortune and healing like Asclepius. And, just like today, snakes were also

[8] Yumiko Coffey and others, 'Understanding Eco-Anxiety: A Systematic Scoping Review of Current Literature and Identified Knowledge Gaps', *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 3 (2021), 100047 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2021.100047>; compare Jennifer Flaherty, 'All Is Mended? Activism and Eco-Anxiety in Bright Summer Night', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 40.3 (2022), 347–63 <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2022.0033>.

[9] Harold F. Brooks, *The Arden Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Bristol: Methuen & Co., 1979), pp. cxxv–vi; David Raymond Cheney, 'Animals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' (unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of Iowa, 1955), pp. 100–7.

kept as household pets as Seneca, Martial and Pliny tell us.[10] People in Europe continued to think about and interact with snakes throughout the medieval and early modern periods, when they used them to prepare the theriac medicine.[11] However, snakes often seem to have become demonised in Christian cultures.[12] This was the case in early modern Britain. The Elizabethan *Geneva Bible* even glosses the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) with a reference to Wisdom 2. 24, inviting readers to imagine this serpent to be a form or agent of the Devil.[13] Despite Britain only having one venomous snake (the adder, *Vipera berus*), whose bite is rarely fatal to humans, viper hunters regularly killed snakes in an attempt to make areas more agreeable for local people.[14] British naturalists and travellers in this period often wistfully commented on the absence of snakes from Ireland and other smaller islands.[15] Shakespeare himself generally uses the snake as a negative symbol of treachery, envy and horror.[16] A good example of fear of snakes is in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* 3. 2.[17] In this text, The Duke of Suffolk murders the Duke of Gloucester. In response Henry VI accuses him of being a treacherous serpent. Shortly

[10] J.M.C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life & Art* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Archaeology, 1973), pp. 223–36; Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapters 8, 10; Daniel Ogden, *The Dragon in the West: From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 55–57; David Orr, 'Snakes on Pompeian Household Shrines', in *The Natural History of Pompeii*, ed. by Wilhelmina F. Jashemski and Frederick G. Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 350–56.

[11] Kathleen Walker-Meikle, 'Toxicology and Treatment: Medical Authorities and Snake-Bite in the Middle Ages', *The Israel Journal of the History of Medicine and Science* 22 (2014), 85-104 (p. 85); Wilfrid Bonser, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: The Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963), p. 283; Karen Bloom Gevirtz, *The Apothecary's Wife: The Hidden History of Medicine and How It Became a Commodity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024), chap. 3.

[12] H.J. Lenders and Ingo A.W. Janssen, 'The Grass Snake and the Basilisk: From Pre-Christian Protective House God to the Antichrist', *Environment and History* 20.3 (2014), 319–46 <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734014X14031694156367>.

[13] *The Bible: That Is the Holy Scriptures Conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament Translated According to the Hebrewe and Greeke* (London: Christopher Barker, 1594).

[14] Cromwell Mortimer, 'VI. A Narration of the Experiments Made June 1, 1734 before Several Members of the Royal Society, and Others, on a Man, Who Suffer'd Himself to Be Bit by a Viper, or Common Adder...', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 39.443 (1735), 313–20 <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstl.1735.0069>; Ron Brockers, *Viper Hunters! Portraits of a Vanished and Forgotten Profession*, Herpetological Volumes, 4 (no loc: European Snake Society, 2018), pp. 67–74; 127–28.

[15] D. Sutton, 'Hector Boece: Scotorum Historia (1575 Ed.)', *University of Birmingham*, 2010, sec. 0.37 <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/boece/> [accessed 11 June 2016]; John Lesley, *The Historie of Scotland*, ed. by James Dalrymple and E.G. Cody (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1888), p. 64.

[16] Karen Raber and Karen L. Edwards, *Shakespeare and Animals: A Dictionary*, Arden Shakespeare Dictionary Series (London; New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022), pp. 385–8.

[17] John Jowett et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Shakespeare*, Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

afterwards, the commons rise against Suffolk, arguing that they would not be expected to stay quiet if an actual serpent was menacing the king as he slept (*2 Henry VI* 3.2.261–9). The scene culminates when Henry VI exiles Suffolk, who leaves after uttering a curse that his accusers should never know a touch softer than a lizard's sting, or music sweeter than a serpent's hiss (*2 Henry VI* 3.2.329).

A Midsummer Night's Dream reflects this same cultural ophidiophobia. If we put together mentions of 'snakes' 'serpents' and 'adders', these are the most commonly referenced animals in the play. This is even if we ignore the 'blindworm' (slow worm) which the influential naturalist Gessner also believed to be a kind of venomous serpent (2.2.11; 3.2.71).[18] Many, but not all of the references to snakes in the play are paranoid accusations that characters are acting like serpents. In the lullaby charm sung to Titania by her fairy attendants, the very first creatures to be banished for the night are 'You spotted snakes with double tongue' (2.2.9), a plausible euphemism for Oberon.[19] Hermia later accuses Demetrius of being a snake when she believes that he has killed Lysander: 'And hast thou killed him sleeping? O brave touch! / Could not a worm, an adder do so much' (3.2.70–1). And later to discourage Hermia, Lysander turns the metaphor back on her: 'Hang off, thou cat, thou burr; vile thing, let loose / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent' (3.2.260–1).[20] La Cassagnère finds even more snakes than this, reading the meandering and deceptive woodland landscape of the play as serpentine in itself, and suggesting that Puck's reference to 'the serpent's tongue' implies that by the end of the play, the serpent has even found its way into the audience.[21] The most discussed reference to snakes in the text is where Hermia, who has fallen asleep in the wood, wakes in terror that a snake is attacking her (3.1.151–6). In this scene Shakespeare may have particularly drawn on the dream-interpretation work of his sixteenth century contemporary, Thomas Nashe.[22] The snake in Hermia's dream could reflect her subconscious fears of sex or betrayal.[23] It could have been inspired by the phrase 'to nourish a snake in one's bosom'

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[18] Conrad Gessner, *Historiae Animalium, Liber V* (Frankfurt: Ioannis Wecheli, 1587), 36r–v; Raber and Edwards, p. 69.

[19] Raber and Edwards, p. 387.

[20] Claude Fretz, 'Dreaming of Serpents and Asses: Shakespeare's Ovidian Animal Dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare* 19.3 (2022), 1–27 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2022.2073385>.

[21] Mathilde La Cassagnère, 'Obscene Beasts: The Stage behind the Scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Sillages Critiques* 20 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.4413>.

[22] Hackett and Holland, pp. 3–21.

[23] Maurice Hunt, '*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the School of Night: An Intertextual Nexus', *Essays in Literature* 23.1 (1996), 3-20 (p. 3); La Cassagnère; Holland, pp. 13–16; Jeanne Addison Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild* (London: University of Nebraska

based on one of *Aesop's Fables*.[24] And there is yet another reason why Hermia and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the commons in *2 Henry VI* might have been concerned about encountering snakes at night, a time when English snakes are now less commonly active.[25] Sixteenth-century translators and commentators discussed a poem called *Culex*, which they falsely attributed to the Roman author Virgil. [26] In this poem, Virgil is sleeping outside, and is saved from an angry speckled snake by the warning of a gnat. A particularly interesting variant of this story, which explains why sleeping people are at special risk from snakes is found in Alexander Neckam's thirteenth century *De Naturis Rerum*. In this version, the snake is not threatening to bite Virgil, but to enter his mouth as he snores.[27] Bartholomaeus Anglicus recorded a similar belief in his thirteenth-century Latin *De Proprietibus Rerum.* This was translated into English by Stephen Batman a decade before Shakespeare wrote a *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> And such Serpents and adders lye in awaite for them that sleepe: And if they find the mouth open of them, or of other beasts, then they créepe in, for they love heate and humour that they finde there.[28]

He also adds (343v) that serpents which do make it to the stomach can be tempted out with milk. Other recipes for shifting serpents from the belly use arnament or urine. Gessner gives a comparable account in book 5 of his Latin *Historiae Animalium* (1587), which Edward Topsell later translated into English as *The Historie of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* in the seventeenth century.[29] Pliny the Elder provides possible references to

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Press, 1991), p. 81; Angela Schumann, '"But as a Form in Wax": An Ecofeminist Reading of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Colloquy* 30 (2015), 42–60.

[24] Cheney, pp. 75–78; cf. *Arthur Golding's A Moral Fabletalk and Other Renaissance Fable Traditions*, ed. by Liza Blake and Kathryn Vomero Santos (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), pp. 236–37; Raber and Edwards, pp. 385–6.

[25] Trevor John Clark Beebee and Richard Griffiths, *Amphibians and Reptiles* (London: Collins, 2000), pp. 148; 158.

[26] Joseph J. Mooney, *The Minor Poems of Vergil* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1916), pp. 8–34, 79–92; Richard Danson Brown, *The New Poet: Novelty and Tradition in Spenser's Complaints* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), pp. 40–2.

[27] Alexander Neckam, *Alexandri Neckam: De Naturis Rerum Libri Duo*, ed. by Thomas Wright (London: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863), p. 190.

[28] Stephen Batman, *Batman Uppon Bartholome His Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum* (London: Imprinted by Thomas East, 1582), 343r; cf. M.C. Seymour, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus*, volume 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 1127.

[29] Gessner, 6v; Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-Footed Beasts, Serpents and Insects* (London: E. Cotes, 1658), p. 613.

medicines like these in the first century.[30] English and Welsh medical texts provide additional remedies from at least the fourteenth through to the seventeenth century.[31] Thomas Lupton described this tradition in *A Thousand Notable Things of Sundry Sorts* (1579). He adds that if a snake does enter a sleeping person's body it can be ejected with garlic, but added the sensationalist spin that people afflicted had to avoid sex, otherwise they could poison their partners.[32] One term for the common lizard or smooth newt, first recorded in eighteenth century Ulster Scots was 'man-creeper'. This was later recorded in nineteenth century Gallovidian Scots as 'man-keeper'.[33]

Stephen Batman also described many other remedies, some for snake bites and others to deter snakes. These include snake slough itself as a remedy for ailments including difficult pregnancy and labour and, interestingly, nightmares.[34] If the main characters had only been less anxious of snakes, they might have found some help from their skins. But then again, if the main characters were not anxious of snakes, they may not have had as many nightmares in the first place.

2. Titania's lullaby: A fairy bug spray

Titania's eco-anxiety reaches its height in Act 2 Scene 2. After a quarrel with Oberon in the scene before, she is wisely concerned about making her sleeping place safe. She sets her attendants tasks to harry the local wildlife and requests a fairy song to help her fall asleep. The modern reader might expect a traditional pastoral song and dance here, or perhaps something akin to Oberon's four beautiful rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter: 'I know a bank where the wild thyme blows' which almost directly precede

[30] Pliny, *Natural History, Volume VI: Books 20-23*, ed. by W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1951), sec. XXII. 32 <https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938>; Pliny, *Natural History: Volume VII: Books 24-27*, ed. by W.H.S. Jones and A.C. Andrews (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1956), sec. XXV. 55 <https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938>.

[31] Ramona Morris and Desmond Morris, *Men and Snakes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 82; Diana Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical Texts: Volume One: The Recipes* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020), pp. 180–81; 377; 522 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32568488/> also compare the use of Irish water in the twelfth century James Francis Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera: Topographica Hibernia et Expugnatio Hibernica* (London: Longman, Greed, Reader & Dyer, 1867), V, p. 65.

[32] Thomas Lupton, *A Thousand Notable Things* (London: John Charlewood for Hughe Spooner, 1579), p. 132.

[33] *The Comical Pilgrim; or, Travels of a Cynick Philosopher*, 2nd edn (London: Printed for S. Briscoe, 1722), pp. 91–92; John MacTaggart, *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia* (London: Printed for the author, 1824), p. 392.

[34] Batman; cf. Jon Coe, 'Deuddeg Rhinwedd Croen Neidr', *Studia Celtica*, 33 (1999), 291–334.

and juxtapose this scene (2.1. 249–56). This is especially the case because Titania associates herself with the pastoral tradition when she claims that fairy dances stabilise the seasons, and one of her attendants claims to provide dewdrops to the cowslips, Titania's 'pensioners' (1.2. 9-15).[35] But Shakespeare provides a very different kind of fairy song to send Titania to sleep. Based on the lulling language in the chorus, these verses can be identified as belonging to the traditional English lullaby genre:[36]

> [*First Fairy*] You spotted snakes with double tongue,
> Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen.
> Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,
> Come not near our Fairy Queen.
> [*Chorus*] Philomel, with melody
> Sing in our sweet lullaby.
> Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby.
> Never harm
> Nor spell nor charm
> Come our lovely lady nigh.
> So good night, with lullaby.
> *First Fairy* Weaving spiders, come not here.
> Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence.
> Beetles black, approach not near.
> Worm nor snail, do no offence.
> [*Chorus*] Philomel, with melody
> Sing in our sweet lullaby.
> Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby.
> Never harm
> Nor spell nor charm
> Come our lovely lady nigh.
> So good night, with lullaby.
> (2.2.9-30)

The two lines following the song: 'Hence, away. Now all is well. / One aloof stand sentinel' (2.2.31-2) were originally included as part of the performance, but this is usually

[35] Todd Andrew Borlik, 'Shakespeare's Insect Theatre: Fairy Lore as Elizabethan Folk Entomology', in *Performing Animals: History, Agency, Theater*, ed. by Karen Raber and Monica Mattfeld (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), pp. 123-40.

[36] Kathleen Palti, 'Singing Women: Lullabies and Carols in Medieval England', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110.3 (2011), 359–82.

now accepted to have been a mistake.[37] Although these lines fit with the metre and rhyme scheme of the chorus, they have a less elevated mode and do not fit with the contents of the song by either addressing an animal at the beginning of the line or wishing Titania good sleep.

The clearest analogy for Titania's lullaby is the 'Eye of newt and toe of frog' potion making scene in Act 4 Scene 1 of *Macbeth,* and comparing the two helps us to analyse the text more productively. The potion making process takes almost a hundred lines and the poetic metre changes several times before it is ended (or perhaps fulfilled) with the entry of Macbeth, but the beginning 38 lines most closely parallel Titania's lullaby:

First Witch Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed. (1)
Second Witch Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whined.
Third Witch Harpier cries ''Tis time, 'tis time.'
First Witch Round about the cauldron go,
In the poisoned entrails throw. (5)
Toad that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i'th' charmèd pot.
All Double, double, toil and trouble, (10)
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
Second Witch Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake.
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog, (15)
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.
All Double, double, toil and trouble, (20)
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
Third Witch Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,

[37] Holland, pp. 169–70n; Peter J Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 28–32 <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674865839.c6>; William Shakespeare, *A Midsommer Nights Dreame* (London: For Thomas Fisher, 1600); William Shakespeare, *A Midsommer Nights Dreame* (James Roberts, 1600); William Shakespeare, *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London: Isaac Jaggard, and Ed. Blount, 1623).

Witches' mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravined salt-sea shark,
Root of hemlock digged i'th' dark, (25)
Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Slivered in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe (30)
Ditch-delivered by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab.
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron
For th'ingredience of our cauldron.
All Double, double, toil and trouble, (35)
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
Second Witch Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good. (*Macbeth*, 4.1. 1-38)[38]

In both performances, the characters take it in turns to sing or intone solos, and then all of them perform the chorus together. Titania orders a 'roundel and a fairy song' (2.2.1), while the witches 'Round about the cauldron go' (4).[39] Both sets of verses have the same rhyming, catalectic (seven syllable) trochaic tetrameter in the verses with minor alterations in the choruses.[40] Shakespeare appears to have intended the trochaic metre to have an ominous tone, and the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* regularly use it elsewhere to cast their spells. It may have been used to set the mood because it is such a contrast to the blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) of other characters.[41] Within each set of verses, the characters directly address a series of ill-omened animals. So, for example the first fairy stanza commands: 'Newts and blindworms, do no wrong / Come not near our Fairy Queen' (11-12) and the first proper witch stanza has: 'Toad… Boil thou first i'th charméd pot' (6-10). Sometimes the magic of the charms actually evokes

[38] Jowett et al.

[39] Jennifer Linhart Wood, *Sounding Otherness in Early Modern Drama and Travel: Uncanny Vibrations in the English Archive* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 81–4 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12224-9>; Jowett et al.

[40] The witches' chorus completes the lines into eight syllables (assuming we read 'fire' as two syllables), while the fairy chorus has one doubled line of defective trochaic octameter: 'Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby' (19; 30) and one line which is split in the Oxford edition: 'Never harm / Nor spell nor charm' (16-17; 27-8) producing trochaic and iambic dimeter.

[41] Abigail Rokison-Woodall (ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Arden Performance Editions* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. xxxv.

the creatures being addressed into the play, as for example with the hissing alliteration in *Macbeth*'s 'Fillet of a fenny snake' (12) and the sibilance of 'Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence' (21) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[42] These sounds contrast wickedly with the soothing everyday sounds of the choruses, the cauldron boiling and brewing: 'Double, double, toil and trouble / Fire burn and cauldron bubble', and the fairies lulling Titania to sleep: 'Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby'. Both charms would have been disquieting for audiences already culturally conditioned to be suspicious of small animals. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* these animals are the nonhuman characters who live outside of the jurisdiction of Athenian law in the forest of Titania, and who represent the power of night rule.[43]

By the time Shakespeare was writing, the animals in these verses had had long associations with witchcraft and hell.[44] About half of the animals mentioned (snake, slow worm, newt, hedgehog) are shared between the two poems. Comparable lists of animals are also evoked in the charms and curses of other Renaissance plays, as for example in the verse to awaken Tophas in Lyly's *Endymion* (1588), the third summoning charm in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609), and Caliban's curse in *The Tempest* (1610–11).[45] Most of the animals on these lists are 'imperfect'. The writers of anti-witchcraft manuals associated these imperfect creatures with witchcraft because unlike the perfect creatures, which are only born through sexual reproduction, they thought demons could spawn imperfect animals from inorganic material.[46] The few ill-omened perfect animals

[42] La Cassagnère; Alexander Leggatt, 'Shakespeare and the Borderlines of Comedy', *Mosaic*, 5.1 (1971), 121-32.

[43] Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 180; 213.

[44] Cheney, pp. 100–107; Marged Haycock, *Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Crefyddol Cynnar* (Swansea: Barddas, 1994), pp. 156–64; Kott, pp. 181–4; Richard Morris, *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, 29 (London: Early English Text Society, 1868), l. XV3. 273-4; Doris Adler, 'Imaginary Toads in Real Gardens', *English Literary Renaissance*, 11.3 (1981), 235–60; Lenders and Janssen.

[45] *The Cambridge Edition to the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) <https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/> [accessed 29 April 2023]; F.W. Fairholt, *The Dramatic Works of John Lilly* (London: John Russell Smith, 1858), op. 3. 3. Other poems are also comparable including the 'Dirge for Fidele' in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, which protects against lightning, thunder, exorcisers, witchcraft, ghosts, and all things ill , as well as Robert Herrick's poem 'The Nightpiece: To Julia', which wards off will-o'-th'-wisps, snakes and slow worms. Jowett and others, l. IV. 2. 263-82; Robert Herrick, *Robert Herrick,* ed. by Douglas Brooks-Davies, Everyman's Poetry, 12 (London: Dent, 1996), p. 60.

[46] Heinrich Kramer and Montague Summers, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1948th edn (London: The Pushkin Press, 1928), sec. II. 1. 8; Thomas A Fudgé, *Medieval Religion and Its Anxieties: History and Mystery in the Other Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe:*

included seem to all be nocturnal. Roger Ascham, in a useful explanation for this, associates nocturnal animals with 'spirits and thieves' in his sixteenth-century *Toxophilus*.[47] Accused witches often identified species from both lists as their familiars during trials (esp. frog, toad, bat, dog).[48]

The main thing which makes the two sets of verses feel so different is partially the purpose that the magic is put to in each case. In *Macbeth*, the creatures' worst qualities are being acquired 'For a charm of powerful trouble' (18). In each case what is ostensibly the strangest and most dangerous part of the animal is acquired, including, for example, the 'Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf' (22).[49] And the culturally sinister animal ingredients are accompanied, according to racist logic, by ingredients made of culturally othered, sinister humans from foreign countries including 'Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips' (29). The witches even go so far as to command the cauldron and fire in their chorus: 'Fire burn, and cauldron bubble' (21). Each ingredient brings out the strangeness of the others, creating a mesh of weird which spreads from the cauldron making the whole world strange, and ultimately enmeshing other characters in the play too.[50] But Titania's lullaby seems to have the opposite purpose. All the creatures addressed are all animals, with the exception that 'You spotted snakes with double tongues' (9) might plausibly be an allusion to Oberon.[51] The purpose of the magic here is rather to resist enmeshment: 'Come not near our Fairy Queen' (12). Interestingly, this implies that the witches in Act 4 of *Macbeth* actually have a higher regard for the animals than the fairies in Act 2 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The witches wish to be enmeshed with the power and dark associations of the animals they are using in their potions. They unsurprisingly also accept

Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 417–20; Roya Biggie, 'Beetle. Sycorax's Beetles: Legacies of Science, the Occult, and Blackness', in *Lesser Living Creatures of the Renaissance: Volume 1, Insects*, ed. by Keith Botelho and Joseph Campana (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2023), pp. 174–92; Greta Olson, *Criminals as Animals from Shakespeare to Lombroso* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), VIII, pp. 99–101.

[47] Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus* (London: Edouardi Whytchurch, 1545), p. 18.

[48] Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp. 25–31; Christopher Clary, 'Familiar Creatures: Witchcraft, Female Bodies, and Early Modern Animals', *Early Modern Culture*, 11.1 (2016), 65-77; Fretz.

[49] It is sometimes claimed that these sinister ingredients are actually the disguised names of plants, used by early herbalists to put off rivals, see for example: Mariel Tishma, 'More than "Toil and Trouble": Macbeth and Medicine', *Hektoen International*, 11.4 (2019). This is plausible for some of the ingredients, but most of the identifications suggested by modern critics have little support from contemporary sources, and some are impossible because they describe non-native plants never imported into England in the Elizabethan period, which Shakespeare would have had no way of knowing about, as for example the identification of 'adder's fork' as an *Erythronium* sp.

[50] Whiteley.

[51] Raber and Edwards, p. 387.

animals as companion familiars (46-50). The fairies meanwhile have created the magical equivalent of a bug spray. This is not the song of a group of nature spirits in harmony with the local wildlife. Titania's lullaby is actually antipastoral: The hedgehogs are 'thorny' the snakes have 'double tongue', and the spiders are ominously 'weaving'.[52] The rejection of the beetle in particular is interesting because, as Biggie has shown, Shakespeare, along with other writers in his time, associated beetles (much like snakes) with blackness and the magic of women, Egyptians and racial minority groups.[53] Just like with the snake slough, Shakespearean audiences might have accepted the power of beetles to be available to Titania, and Oberon's scheme might have had a very different outcome had she allied herself with this power instead of being disgusted by it.

But the fairies' reaction against the strangeness of their animals is not entirely convincing. Shannon highlights some examples of where the fairies identify themselves as being part of the nonhuman empire of the night, as for example Puck's speech starting, 'Thou speak'st aright; / I am that merry wanderer of the night' (2.1.42ff.). It seems natural that they should be aligned with the dark forces of the forest just as Theseus rules the city during the day.[54] Borlik has further argued that the fairy dances in the text might have been reminiscent of Catholic rituals forbidden during the Reformation like the rogation days (beating the parish bounds).[55] Fairies even sometimes take on the traditional characteristics of witches.[56] At the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is revealed that Titania and Oberon have stolen a child, and at the end of the play it is revealed that the fairies have control over birth-defects just like witches. Some charms existed specifically to protect children against fairies for this reason.[57] They even run, 'By the triple Hecate's team' – with Hecate being the traditional goddess of witchcraft (*MND* 5.1.375). Titania herself also operates within the anti-patriarchal paradigm of witches when she forsakes the bed and company of her husband, loves and almost mothers the monstrous half-animal Bottom, and treats him in a dominating way, even though as a

[52] Olson, VIII, pp. 100–1.

[53] Biggie.

[54] Shannon, chap. 4.

[55] Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature*, pp. 121–23; Michael Hattaway, '"Enter Caelia, the Fairy Queen in Her Night Attire": Shakespeare and the Fairies', *Shakespeare Survey*, 65 (2012), 26–41.

[56] Lisa Walters, 'Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, 39.1 (2016), 115–46; Hattaway; Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson* (Routledge, 2006), pp. 104–5.

[57] Katharine Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck*, 2003rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 1959), pp. 99–110; 242–44; 248–50; Jesse M Lander, 'Thinking with Fairies: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Problem of Belief', *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (2013), 42–57.

woman under Elizabethan patriarchy she might have been expected to be subordinate. But of course, just like Macbeth's witches, fairies are often queer in their gender.[58] Early modern English children were often dressed in the same kind of unisex smock and raised predominantly in all-female environments. This is the time that, according to Erasmus and Scot, nurses were likely to be teaching them fairy-lore.[59] Fairy beliefs were commonly held by both sexes until the boys were 'breeched' and taken to be educated and punished into being men.[60] Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* just like Ariel in *The Tempest*, is written as if he is still in this stage, a perpetual mischievous child, never to be shaped into a man. When the play was first performed it seems that often, although not always, gender-neutral child actors of various ages might have played the minor fairy roles.[61] Most of Titania's attendants for example just had to say a couple of lines each and then sing the lullaby. Titania meanwhile, would have been initially played by a male actor, and seems to have been something of an icon to working men, with Jack Cade styling himself 'Queen of the Fairies' in his fifteenth century revolt.[62] And gender play has remained a feature in more recent performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Quentin Crisp, for example, remembers her euphoria at being allowed to play a fairy long before coming out as transgender. And in Joe Dowling's 1993 show the backup dancers for Titania's lullaby were in drag.[63]

Shakespeare ultimately made the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into subjects suitable for a comedy.[64] Perhaps he felt confident in doing so because he himself did not believe in fairies. Reginald Scot portrayed fairy belief as risible, belonging to old Catholic belief-systems, still sometimes current among the uneducated and in rural areas, and

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[58] Ezra Horbury, 'Early Modern Transgender Fairies', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8.1 (2021), 75–95 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8749596>.

[59] Wendy Wall, 'Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 52.1 (2001), 67–106.

[60] Horbury.

[61] Seng, pp. 28–32; Borlik, 'Shakespeare's Insect Theatre: Fairy Lore as Elizabethan Folk Entomology'; Hattaway.

[62] 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), 277–312.

[63] Richard Paul Knowles, 'Shakespeare, 1993, and the Discourses of the Stratford Festival, Ontario', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.2 (1994), 211–25 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2871218>; Wood, pp. 76–77; Daniel Lauby, 'Recovering Transgender Shakespearean Performance in Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992)', *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 14.2 (2023), 45–63 <https://doi.org/10.18274/bl.v14i2.317>.

[64] Briggs, pp. 40–47; Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'The Habitation of Airy Nothings in A Midsummer Night's Dream', in *Geographies of Embodiment in Early Modern England*, ed. by Mary Floyd-Wilson, Garrett A. Sullivan, and Gail Kern Paster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 243–61; Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*, pp. 104–6; Lander.

Erasmus, himself a Catholic, thought of fairy belief as a lower-class knowledge which maids transmitted to children.[65] But fairy belief was not extinct, even in the cities. Tricksters sometimes duped people by pretending to be in contact with fairies and some Protestants, especially the hotter sort, accepted fairies to be disguised demons. Shakespeare treats the belief gently. When he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the first and second-generation urban migrants in his audience might have had some nostalgia for fairy-lore as a belief of their parents and grandparents. Most early modern demonology scholars thought that spirits needed to weave bodies for themselves out of air in order to take corporeal form, but the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are so benign that when Titania plots to sleep with Bottom, she plans to 'purge thy mortal grossness so' (3.1.151) rather than steal something from him in the manner of a traditional succubus.[66] These fairies have humble powers connected with the moon, wind, fog and dew.[67] They even draw something from entomology since they are so small, and are responsible for looking after flowers and placing dew drops and are named things like 'moth' and 'cobweb'.[68] Perhaps most importantly, as Fretz has argued, some of the characters actually resemble the classical deities of *Metamorphoses* more than traditional fairies, with Puck acting as Cupid, and Titania like one of the goddesses of the night (Diana, Latona, Circe or Pyrrha).[69] The fairies of the play have been de-clawed. The disavowal of darkness in Titania's lullaby is especially comparable to the scene where Puck's complains to Oberon that dawn is coming, when all 'damnéd spirits' go to their 'wormy beds' (3.2.382–4) at which point Puck is corrected by Oberon: 'We are spirits of another sort' (3.2.388). However, before the end of the play, Titania does get an opportunity to embrace a darker, wilder side.

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[65] Floyd-Wilson, 'The Habitation of Airy Nothings in A Midsummer Night's Dream'; Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. by Brinsley Nicholson (London: Elliot Stock, 1886), sec. VII.2; Wall; Lamb, 'Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in A Midsummer Night's Dream'; Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in the Faerie Queen: Renaissance Elf-Fashioning and Elizabethan Myth-Making* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2004), pp. 16–29; Hattaway; Brian Cummings, 'Among the Fairies: Religion and the Anthropology of Ritual in Shakespeare', in *Humankinds: The Renaissance and Its Anthropologies*, ed. by Andreas Höfele and Stephan Laqué, Pluralisierung & Autorität, Bd. 25 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 71–89; Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 127.

[66] Floyd-Wilson, 'The Habitation of Airy Nothings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'.

[67] Mary Thomas Crane, 'Meteorology, Embodiment, and Environment in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream', in *Geographies of Embodiment in Early Modern England*, by Mary Floyd-Wilson, Garrett A. Sullivan, and Gail Kern Paster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 134–51.

[68] Borlik, 'Shakespeare's Insect Theatre: Fairy Lore as Elizabethan Folk Entomology'.

[69] Fretz.

3. The Fairy Queen's anti-anxiety medicine

At the dramatic high point of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, four lovers find each other in the forest. In the darkness of the night the famed rationality of the city of Athens has faded away, and the humans' minds have been invaded by misunderstandings and strong emotions just as the setting has been invaded by the distemperature.[70] At face value it appears that Lysander and Demetrius have been drugged and that their honest love for Hermia has been subverted by the power of 'love-in-idleness'. This seems to have reflected real concerns of the time period. At the beginning of the play Egeus claims Lysander has 'bewitched the bosom of my child… by moonlight' (1.1.27–30), and audiences may well have been sympathetic to this accusation: Shortly after Shakespeare wrote, using love magic became punishable by imprisonment and then, for second offences, by death under the *Witchcraft Act* of 1604.[71]

But there is actually an alternative, more sophisticated reading for this scene. When Demetrius humorously claims to be acting according to reason under the influence of the eyedrops (2.2.121–127), and to have 'as in health come to my natural taste' (4.1.173) this might actually have been partially true. It has been suggested that the virtue of the flower here is truly as a medicine, to neutralise the hormonally-fuelled infatuation which he had temporarily felt for Hermia.[72] This finds some support from early modern medical knowledge. In the early modern period medicines were often made of single herbs (simples) which could then be ground up (to make a powder) or made into teas (infusions) or simmered in wine (decoctions) or boiled off (distillations). We might expect herbs which make someone fall in love to be listed in the herbals as aphrodisiacs ('provoking venery') or at least to heat the humours in the body. Love-in-idleness didn't have either of these reputations. The herbals considered it to be a temperate or slightly cold herb and recommended it for breaking fevers and 'inward inflammations or heates'.[73] In fact,

[70] Shannon, pp. 212–14.

[71] Floyd-Wilson, 'The Habitation of Airy Nothings in A Midsummer Night's Dream'; Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'Potions, Passion, and Fairy Knowledge in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare in Our Time: A Shakespeare Association of America Collection*, ed. by Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2016), pp. 184–8; Matthew M Thiele, 'Mischief in the Wood: Pastoral, Domestic Abuse, and the Environment in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Journal of the Wooden O*, 19 (2019), 104–21; *Statutes of the Realm, Vol 4, Part 2 (1586-1625)* (London: Printed by Command of his Majesty King George III, 1819), sec. 1 James 1, c.12.

[72] Robert N Watson; James D Mardock, '"I Wot Not by What Power": Fairies, Predestination, and Genre in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Etudes Anglaises* 4, 2018, 442–56; Cummings.

[73] Henrie Lyte, *A New Herball, or Historie of Plants* (London: Ninian Newton, 1586), p. 166; John Gerard, *The Herball* (London: John Norton, 1597), p. 705.

Culpeper regarded it as a 'gallant antivenereal'.[74] And the French term recorded in the herbals was (as it continues to be) *pensée*, which also means 'thought'.[75] This is a surprising ingredient for a love potion.

We can understand the use of the fairy medicine on Titania in much the same way. Titania falls asleep to the antipastoral lullaby quoted in the last section. But when she wakes up, it is to a pastoral verse celebrating the beauty of songbirds:

Bottom The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill;
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill.

Titania What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?
[…]
Bottom The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plainsong cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer 'Nay' (3.1.118–21; 123–6)

Previous readings have often taken Titania's relationship with Bottom the ass to be a kind of corrective rape.[76] This would correspond with the allusions to sexual violence elsewhere in the play, as well as our modern fears of date-rape drugs. But if we consider the fairy eyedrops to be functioning more like a herbal medicine for eco-anxiety, we again see the scene from another perspective. Whilst Titania's fairies gave every animal a negative attribute in her lullaby, in Bottom's morning song, each songbird is described positively. The thrush has a 'note so true', the wren a 'little quill', and suddenly the 'beetles black' of the lullaby are answered by the 'ousel cock so black of hue' (the blackbird). The eyedrops provide Titania with an opportunity to explore whether her anxiety and suspicion of the nonhuman might actually conceal repressed fantasies. She

[74] Nicholas Culpeper, *Complete Herbal* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995), p. 124.

[75] Walters; R.W. Dent, 'Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 15.2 (1964), 115-29 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867882>.

[76] Hunt; Kevin Pask, *The Fairy Way of Writing: Shakespeare to Tolkien* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Roberts, p. 45; Regina Buccola, *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), p. 76; Jason Gleckman, '"I Know a Bank…": *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Fairies, and the Erotic History of England', *Shakespeare* 10.1 (2014), 23–45; and compare Lamb, 'Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

has not only her partner's implicit permission, but even a plausible magical obligation to explore her interest in 'vile' things (2.2.40).[77] We could even read Titania as a willing participant in this scene: It is convenient that the 'sentinel' fairy (2.2. 32) did not notice Oberon approaching, convenient that the Fairy Queen could be bewitched with a simple herb known to girls (2.1.168), and especially convenient that Bottom happened to enter the scene first the next morning. All these aspects provide Titania with a perfect excuse to disavow her sexual activities. And under the effects of the remedy, the Fairy Queen is able to calm her anxiety and seek out re-enchantment with nature. Rather than being offended by Bottom's simple song of the beauties of birdsong, Titania is now in a place where her mind is open to new experiences: 'Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note' (3.1.131). She seems also to take more pleasure in the world around her. Just before she was given the medicine, she sent out fairies to fight against cankers, bats and owls (2.2.3-6). But after taking the medicine she instead considers sending her fairies on forays to seek out local woodland delights: bumblebee's honey, glow-worm light, butterfly wings and squirrels' nuts, and she also offers Bottom other natural sweets: apricots, dewberries, grapes, figs and mulberries (3.1.155-165; 4.1.35).

This alternative reading can actually be extended even further. Timothy Morton has outlined dark ecology as a method of queer ecological criticism which accepts the grief of living through environmental catastrophe and allows us to identify with and feel fascination for the monstrous elements of the world around us.[78] Titania's changing attitudes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* as she moves from feeling eco-anxiety to becoming a half-donkey's lover, provides a productive case study. The loss of inhibitions, caused by Oberon's eyedrops as well as the possibilities of the fairy grove seem to open other characters up to new ways of relating to their environment and the creatures around them as well.[79] This is not just in the physical transformation of Bottom into the ass which he perhaps always was.[80] His companions are chased away by Puck and as they run they themselves become 'as wild geese' and hunted 'russet-pated choughs' (3.2.20–1). This last example is a metaphor of the perceiver rather than a true transformation, but as Watson has shown, there are many others like it, including a few lines later when Hermia

[77] Kott, pp. 181–84; Roberts, p. 44; Bruce Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), chap. 1 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230602120>; compare *Twilight | ContraPoints*, dir. by Natalie Wynn, 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqloPw5wp48&> [accessed 13 March 2024].

[78] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 181–97.

[79] Watson.

[80] Rebecca Ann Bach, 'The Animal Continuum in A Midsummer Night's Dream', *Textual Practice*, 24.1 (2010), 123–47 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360903471714>.

banishes Demetrius: 'out, dog; out, cur' and calls him 'thou serpent' (3.2.65, 73). And Demetrius is not the first human to become a dog – he has already memorably been invited by Helena to 'use me but as your spaniel; spurn me, strike me' (2.1.205).[81] And when Theseus and Hippolyta return to the story in Act 4, they spar about their mutual admiration for the Cretan breed of hunting hound (4.1.102-25). Another of the most developed relationship metaphors in the play also comes from Act 3, where Helena remembers her childhood with Hermia when the two were 'like to a double cherry', 'As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds / Had been incorporate', 'union' 'two seeming bodies with one heart' (3.2.208–12). Between the marital metaphors, the possible euphemism of 'sides' for loins, and the scene's strong imagery, these lines can be read as having a queerplatonic or homoerotic sentiment.[82] This is further encouraged by the very next scene, when Titania imagines herself encircling Bottom in a very similar way:

> So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
> Gently entwist; the female ivy so
> Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
> O how I love thee, how I dote on thee! (4.1 41–4).

In this last case, the play presents us simultaneously with an act of love between a politically subversive working man and a royal, between the Fairy Queen and a donkey, and between two plants.[83] Not all of these episodes were enjoyable for the characters involved, but they all allowed the characters to momentarily imagine themselves and each other as wild things. This exploration is not unique to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare appears to have been fascinated with experimenting with the boundaries between human and non-human in several of his plays.[84]

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[81] Melissa E Sanchez, '"Use Me But as Your Spaniel": Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities', *PMLA*, 127.3 (2012), 493–511.

[82] Alan Sinfield, 'Cultural Materialism and Intertextuality: The Limits of Queer Reading in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*', *Shakespeare Survey: Shakespeare and Comedy*, 56 (2003), 67–78 <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521827272.005>; Sanchez.

[83] Watson; Walters; Boehrer, *Shakespeare among the Animals*, pp. 41–44; Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*, p. 99.

[84] Bruce Boehrer, 'Shakespeare and the Character of Sheep', in *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, ed. by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 58–76; Erica Fudge, '"The Dog Is Himself": Humans, Animals, and Self-Control in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*', in *How to Do Things with Shakespeare: New Approaches, New Essays*, ed. by Laurie Maguire (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 185–209; Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert, and Susan Wiseman, 'Introduction: The Dislocation of the Human', in *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Susan Wiseman, Erica Fudge, and Ruth Gilbert (New York, Secaucus: Palgrave Macmillan Springer, 1999), pp. 1-8.

But this reading is against the grain of the text. As a Shakespearean comedy, the canonical ending to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* involves a reversion of power to the patriarchal establishment. Love-in-idleness is not a typical fairy medicine in that it actually has its own 'remedy' (3.2.451). This is 'Dian's bud', and Oberon describes its effect in another trochaic tetrameter charm: 'Be as thou wast wont to be / See as thou wast wont to see' (4.1.70-2). The bud works exactly as advertised. Titania wakes and declares 'Methought I was enamoured of an ass… O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now' (4.1.76-8). So much for the Fairy Queen's re-enchantment with nature. In Act 5 the four lovers, plus Theseus and Hippolyta are married. Oberon and Titania are reconciled, with the changeling boy now in Oberon's care. Oberon, Titania and their attendants once again perform a fairy dance, Oberon sings another charm, and now the future children born to the couples are protected:

> And the blots of nature's hand
> Shall not in their issue stand.
> Never mole, harelip, nor scar,
> Nor mark prodigious such as are
> Despiséd in nativity
> Shall upon their children be (5.1.400–5).

The fairies here have once again become tutelary spirits.[85] The distemperature has been resolved and humans will no longer be oppressed by 'the blots of nature's hand'. The choice of 'mole' and 'harelip' as examples here suggest that Shakespeare has in mind that the fairies will police the boundaries between human and non-human, an idea perhaps reinforced by Puck appearing with a broom in the last scene to literally sweep out the dust from the human house (5.1.380-1).[86]

On first impressions this is a hopeful resolution to the distemperature plot and a beautiful ending to the play. It is perhaps no wonder that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues to appeal today in a time of renewed eco-anxiety, when people are once again realising the limits of humanity, and, like the Shakespearean ploughman, feeling like passive objects in the face of an environmental distemperature. But if we interrogate the resolution in more depth it starts to look rather dull: Wouldn't it be boring to live in a world without snakes or beetles or hedgehogs? The ending also seems naïve: The fairy

[85] Cesar Lombardi Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959; repr. 1968), pp. 137–8.

[86] Watson; although compare Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*, p. 123.

characters here have been literally domesticated – brought into the domicile to serve human interests like humble brownies. This is part of the traditional folklore of the fairy, but it feels demeaning and unrealistic that all these characters have been reduced into service to the humans of Athens despite their great power and freedom at the start of the text. How long will this new status quo really last? It is in the nature of fairies to threaten children rather than bless them, and Titania's fairies might find that their new responsibility to protect human interests conflicts with their old commitment to care for the nonhuman world. Perhaps Shakespeare privately admitted some problems with the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to himself; his sonnets often include the theme that clouds can be expected whenever there is good weather, so he might have recognised his own wishful thinking.[87] There was a temporary amelioration in the climate at the start of the 1600s, but after this the little ice age continued its plot through the seventeenth century, regardless of the fairy dances.

Today, the dark ecologist reading of this play leaves audiences, just as they started, doomed to an environmental crisis. But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does also allow readers to explore two other philosophies beyond the unrealistic domestication of everything wild.[88] First, there is the dream of banishing or exterminating the ill-omened animals. If Titania's lullaby had been a stronger charm, perhaps *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could have ended in Act 2. But on the other hand, previous human analogues like the use of the pesticides Paris green and DDT have caused unacceptable negative side-effects. Shakespeare may have understood some of these dangers. The speech which Titania gives cataloguing the distemperature of the seasons highlights the complex interrelated nature of the environmental crisis: high winds caused thick fogs; thick fogs caused rivers to rise; rising rivers flooded the fields, and so on (2.1.81-117). The second alternative philosophy is that, if only more people could learn to see like Titania did through the corrective-vision of fairy medicine, perhaps they could fall in love (only a little less enthusiastically) with the wounded world and the wild creatures within it. Humans could live more happily if they could overcome more of their anxieties about the environment. The Fairy Queen is, in some ways, most true to herself once she has overcome her fear of the things that go bump in the night.

[87] Markley, p. 135.

[88] After the example of Robert N. Watson, 'Tell Inconvenient Truths, but Tell Them Slant', in *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching*, ed. by Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt, and Lynne Bruckner (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 17–28.